ARGOSY ALL-STORY WEEKLY

Honor

by Edwina Levin

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ARGOSY-ALLSTORY WEEKLY

VOL. CXXXV | CONTENTS FOR JULY 30, 1921 | NUMBER 6

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(Classified Advertising Continued on Third Cover.)

ARGOSY-ALLSTORY WEEKLY

VOL. CXXXV SATURDAY, JULY 30, 1921 NUMBER 6

Honor by

Part I

Edwina Levin

Author of "The Devil's Riddle," etc.

CHAPTER I.

A TEMPTING PROSPECT.

IT was the "Honorable's" habit, no matter what the activities of the previous night, to rise early. Yet the sound of running water in his bathroom was always unwelcome, and the rasp of shades being lifted by the cat-footed Sing Lu never failed to fill him with disgust toward the morning, which dared so to arrive out of time.

Now, as always, he wrinkled his nose discontentedly against the odors of Mott Street, and drew a silken quilt over his head. For, though brought up in the highways and byways of the lower East Side, he never could quite accustom himself to the odors of Mott Street. There was a significant pause; and as a small boy waits for his mother's second call of mornings, so the Honorable waited on Sing Lu, who, after the business of the windows, would stand silent at the foot of the bed for fully three seconds, collecting his English before speech. The Honorable as unfailingly kept his eyes tightly shut in the interim.

There it was:

"Velly good hot baf, all leady."

A pair of furious arms flung the covers off a silk-clad body; a pair of rageful brown eyes stared at the smiling, imperturbable Sing Lu. One not so well accustomed to the ways of the Honorable as was Sing Lu might have expected an outburst. But no outburst ever came from the young man who treated his servitors courteously—or dismissed them. This violence of movement was as near as he ever got to unleashing his emotions. Even the rudely annoying police had not been able to exasperate him into forgetfulness of his air of excellent breeding.

It was this cool, smiling and unruffled manner, together with a meticulousness of dress and speech, which had earned for him the title of the Honorable. Nobody knew who started it, or when; but long before he was out of his teens it had become the only name by which he was known.

This morning, as every morning, his look of fury was quickly replaced by one of unutterable content, as the brown eyes wandered about. This room, together with the big one adjoining, expressed the Honorable's nature. His love of luxury and beauty. Also his unerring taste were set

forth in the Oriental-American apartment to which he was wont to retire when taking a vacation from police curiosity. The beautiful inlaid teak-wood and black walnut furnishings were in perfect harmony; the rich Chinese rugs, with gold embroidered table runners and screens, blended exquisitely with hammered brass lamps, bronzes, and tall, rich-hued vases, delicate crystals, priceless pictures, and rows of books.

This was his nest—his idyl.

"Velly walm wallel get velly cold." The Chinese boy's voice brought the Honorable out of his pleasant loitering, and back to the realization that Sing Lu would not move from the foot of his bed until he was on his way to the tub.

Not that Sing Lu was inclined to be mutinous or dictatorial; but he had learned by experience that he would be blamed should the Honorable drop off to sleep again. Hence, that patient, smiling immovability.

With fury returning, the young man leaped to the floor, and, snatching a bathrobe, went into the tub with a splash; whereupon Sing Lu began methodically to put the room in order.

"The Nest," as its luxurious owner called it, was as carefully hidden as though it had been in the heart of an African jungle. Looking boldly out on Mott Street it, nevertheless, sat safely above the shop of one whose motto and religion was, "See nothing, hear nothing, say nothing." And the Honorable paid splendidly for the rooms he occupied; as well as for the protection he enjoyed by the grace of his landlord, Chow Wang.

When, after a while, the Honorable came out of the bath, shaved and exuding the pleasant odor of scented soaps, his brown hair brushed sleekly back, his nails shining, his tall, well-set-up figure swathed in a richly quilted robe, the bedroom was in order. And as he passed into the magnificent living-room, Sing Lu wheeled in an inlaid tea-wagon, upon which, beside a steaming breakfast, lay the morning papers.

Whereupon, the Honorable proceeded to enjoy his melon and the news at the same time.

Glancing casually at the headlines on the front page, he turned immediately to the society sheet.

Now it would seem that one of his profession would find little, if any, interest in the social columns; yet it was this part of the paper which he always opened first, and perused most carefully.

Next came the doings of the law; for aside from other reasons, a curious mental quirk had given him the deepest interest in legal matters; whether connected with crime, or with intricate suits, and curious findings of the courts. So deep-seated was this interest that he had read law for years, and had even taken one of the brief courses offered by various New York night schools, poring over dry law books with the avidity of the habitual novel-reader.

In his rare encounter with court matters he was always his own lawyer, refusing to accept counsel offered him by the State. In fact, had his reputation been as excellent as his knowledge of law, he might easily have passed the examination and been admitted to the bar. This knowledge, however, had served him well upon those occasions when he had need of defense. As a lawyer, he was no bungler.

What made the Honorable almost hopeless from the police view-point was that, though having no intimates to let his secrets out, he had friends by the score. Old men upon whom he had put warm coats; old women with whom he had chatted sympathetically; often leaving a crumpled bit of paper in soiled palms. And children everywhere. When he chose to hide for a while, it was useless to try to find him.

He was not, however, in hiding now. It so happened that he had been entirely inactive for months past.

In fact, a certain magnificent home on Fifth Avenue, whose locks had proved futile affairs under his slim, well-kept hands, had been relieved of the rich contents of a "secret" vault which the lady of the house had, much to her husband's disgust, installed; and the Honorable had had some difficulty upon his occasion in clearing himself. To be exact, he had not actually succeeded; the courts had merely failed to convict on the evidence which he had managed to discredit and twist into absurdity,

and a suspicious police had had its eyes on him ever since. So, though in no sense uneasy, he had felt it advisable to let them cool their heels.

Meanwhile he had read and luxuriated, and played discontentedly about town. To one of his nature, inaction was unbearable. It was the game more than the jack-pot that he loved. Again and again had he made a daring raid to walk out with some worthless bauble, leaving priceless treasures behind. On the other hand, when he did essay to replenish his exchequer, it was done magnificently. He held in contempt pickpockets. Petty thieving was an abomination in his sight. And house-breakers and safe-blowers were to him what coal-heavers and plumbers are to artists.

Like a restive horse chafing at the bit until he should feel the sting of the whip which would unleash him, the Honorable now searched the society news for some promising adventure.

And presently he found it! Smiling appreciatively he followed the details of a charity ball to be given at the Vanastor Hotel, where all those willing to pay ten dollars might see New York's Four Hundred on parade in the Heliotrope Room.

Of course he would attend. Not that the Four Hundred was a sight for him to see; but where wealth foregathered for charity, there, if possible, the Honorable might be found.

For so vain is human nature that these folk must needs wear their most beautiful jewels upon these occasions when the common herd will be there to gaze upon them. And more than once had the Honorable taken from some such brilliant affair a trinket worth perhaps fifty or a hundred thousand dollars.

Scarcely had he finished reading the elaborate description of the forthcoming ball before his laret mind was beginning to cast about for ways and means. To secure a ticket was an easy matter. To escape the lynx-eyed detectives was another problem.

He considered first the arrangement of the hotel, with its convenient entrance on Thirty-Third Street—the ladies' dressing-room coming first along the short, narrow passage; then the cloak-room, and the men's immediately beside it. And beyond and to the right, the Heliotrope Room, where the ball would be held. It would be an easy matter for him to stand for a while in the passage by the ladies' check-room as if waiting for some one, and step quickly inside upon the entrance of a diamond necklace or string of pearls. It was, however, the problem of stepping out and away from the police which occupied him.

He must find some absolutely untried method. He always did find untried methods; each one differing so entirely from the last, that an unimaginative police force, expecting him to repeat himself, had proved so utterly helpless in the face of his originality. They never knew what to expect of him.

Now sipping his coffee with leisurely enjoyment, the Honorable turned the pages of his paper, his mind but half occupied with the printed words.

Suddenly he sat alert. His brown eyes snapped. Before him was the announcement, "Policeman's Ball to be held at the armory on Saturday, March 24."

The same evening as the Vanastor ball! And the Vanastor was just across the street from the armory!

Sinking back in his chair he broke into a soft laugh of complete satisfaction. How perfectly they were playing into his hands, these policemen friends of his! The whole thing was so simple that it seemed impossible that no other than he should think of it. A frown of annoyance crossed his face at this possibility.

To be at both balls! *And to make the police furnish his alibi!*

He pushed his plate away from him, lighted a cigarette, and stretched out his long, lithe form in a very ecstasy of content, while Sing Lu wheeled the remains of his breakfast away.

This would be real sport. They would know—those stupid police—that it was his work. They always recognized his work. This time he would make it so clear that there could be no shadow of doubt. And still they themselves would be forced to clear him. They must be made to swear that he had been at the policeman's ball—*all evening.*

This last, of course, was a detail to be worked out. Because naturally it would occur to them that he might easily have left the armory, crossed the street, and got back from the Vanastor in a very brief period, providing he had timed things just right. But the point was that somebody at that policemen's ball must testify that he had *not left the building* for even a few minutes. Somebody whose word would be unquestioned.

Here was a problem indeed. But the Honorable loved problems.

His eyes grew dreamy and indistinct through the smoke from his cigarette as he took up each point, rejecting, accepting, cementing all together into a flawless plan.

The sudden ringing of a bell brought him to his feet. And with one leap he disappeared into a large closet in which hung an array of men's suits. A dresser was in one end of it, with an electric light above. Closing the door, and pressing a button, the closet moved upward. When it came to a stop, there was, in its place below, another closet filled with richly embroidered Chinese robes. This double-decked elevator closet was the Honorable's own idea; and it had served him many times before, when the police had tracked him to Chow Wang's curio store, and had insisted upon going through the building. Always that bell had sounded as the officers of the law ascended the stairway; and always the police upon examination had found only the smiling Sing Lu, and such clothing as a Chinaman might wear when resting from his labors.

Through the speaking-tube which he had installed, the Honorable was able to distinguish every word that was uttered in the apartment below.

"I tell you he come here last night. I seen him come in and never come out neither," said the rough voice of Larry Sanders, a policeman whose beat was on Mott Street.

"This ain't the first time you've brought me in here to find nothing but a Chink smilin' around, and a lot of Chink duds hanging in the closet," irascibly answered another voice, which the Honorable did not recognize. "And what's the good of it, anyhow? What if he does live here. That don't prove he's the master crook."

"I tell you he lives here," protested Sanders. "And it proves his living a double life and ain't just a poor actor which he claims to be."

"And I tell you you're a nut," scoffed the strange voice. "Don't nobody live here but a Chink. If a white man lives here where's his clothes?"

Meanwhile as they were tramping around, looking under beds, behind sofas, and in every impossible place for some evidence of the fastidious crook's occupancy, this young man, with the swiftness of a lightning-change artist, was getting into his street apparel.

"I tell you he lives on Eighth Avenue," continued the strange officer.

"I tell you he lives here," insisted Larry. "Look at them noospapers."

"Me likee lead pictus in papel," Sing Lu remarked.

"Let's go up on the roof," snapped the stranger.

The Honorable stepped out in the attic, sent the elevator down into place again, where, if necessary, it would be once more shifted by the watchful Sing Lu; then ran lightly up a ladder to the roof, and dropping the trap door into place, stepped onto an adjoining roof as the two policemen began scaling the ladder.

CHAPTER II.

ENSNARED.

A CASUAL observer seeing the Honorable come up out of the subway at Madison Square, would not have guessed that he was a most disgruntled young man. Such, however, was the case.

Though a past master at the art of dressing hurriedly, he nevertheless loathed it; felt half put together, as it were. And it was distinctly annoying to be routed out of one's own quarters in the midst of one's dreams and plans.

Of course he might have sat still and let the inquisitive officers come in. They could have done nothing but stand and look at him; and then get out. He might even have

indulged himself in some well-chosen sarcasm at their expense. But that would have been foolish; the "Nest" would have been uncovered; it would no longer have furnished a safe retreat. And the Honorable never did anything foolish.

Even subconsciously he acted with purpose. As witness his taking a local to Twenty-Third Street. He had not definitely thought of any reason for doing this.

Now, standing above ground, he surveyed the surroundings—then knew what he had come for. Here he would most likely find tickets for the policeman's ball.

Across the street was an old-time enemy, Mr. O'Grady by name, who wore the blue coat and brass buttons of the city's defense, and who had long entertained an ambition to catch the Honorable red-handed at something—anything, and deliver him over to the chief.

A deep-seated sense of humor caused the Honorable's eyes to rest speculatively upon his enemy. O'Grady would have tickets to sell—why not buy of him? The vague irritation lurking in his brown eyes disappeared completely; and into them came one of amusement as the fertile imagination back of them pictured O'Grady's shock when he would be asked by the Honorable for a ticket for the policeman's ball.

If only he could make O'Grady swear to his alibi the morning after! That would indeed be the perfect achievement.

With the Honorable thought generated action. He started across the street—then stopped so suddenly that the driver of a big car became blasphemous. The Honorable neither saw the big car; nor heard the language of its driver.

A dainty index finger attached to an exquisitely white hand and a tapering, diamond-encircled wrist held him. The finger was pointing up Fifth Avenue; the wrist led to the most exquisite profile the Honorable had ever beheld. It reminded him of nothing feminine; but of the face on a rare old cameo which it had been his good fortune to collect. O'Grady also pointed up Fifth Avenue. Clearly she was asking a direction.

Something bumped against the Honorable, almost knocking him off his feet; and his eyes were drawn rudely away from the enchanting profile to the irate eyes of the man in the car.

"Do you think you can get out of the way?" sarcastically inquired the latter. "I wish it wasn't against the law to kill people who stop in the middle of the street and never look what's coming."

The Honorable smiled appreciatively. "I beg your pardon," he said with disarming courtesy, and moved on without further conversation with the man who had deliberately bumped into him.

She was now picking her way toward the Fifth Avenue Building. The Honorable followed hurriedly.

It was no wonder if the unexpected happened. When a man has worked out a few definite rules of conduct, tried them, and found them good, he should know better than deliberately to outrage them. The Honorable admitted this afterward.

He had evolved three commandments with appendages:

Have no partners to turn State's evidence, or break under the third degree.

The man who shares his secrets with another takes Fear for a walking companion.

Keep away from women, who, since the world began, have been the downfall of man.

Many a clever chap serving time had been caught in the folds of a woman's skirts.

Be leisurely.

A hasty mind is frequently a confused mind, and may easily fall into error. Also a leisurely man has the appearance of an aimless one; and aimlessness attracts no attention.

It will be seen, therefore, that in hurrying after the beautiful profile, the Honorable had forgotten two of his own laws.

And in so doing he had instantly brought upon himself the attention of Officer O'Grady, who felt that the Honorable in a hurry meant something. Just what, he did not know; but he decided to find out. Glancing up at the big clock on the Metropolitan Building he saw that his relief would be along in about three minutes. In fact, he ought to be in sight. He was. Officer O'Grady motioned violently with his stick, and his relief hurried across to him.

" Faith and it's three minutes till time for yez to take me place, Dan; but I've got me eyes on a crook, and if you'll be so kind—"

" Shure and I will," returned Officer Daniel Blake, a big fellow soon to be O'Grady's son-in-law.

Without further waste of words, O'Grady dodged in and out among the traffic, crossing against the whistle. He hurried along in the direction he had given to the lady of the profile and the diamond and turquoise bracelet. A few seconds' rapid walking brought him in sight of her—and, as he had expected, of the Honorable!

How that girl did walk! He had advised her to take a car up to Fifty-Ninth Street; but she had informed him that she liked walking. The Honorable was keeping discreetly behind her. He never turned once to look back, which showed that he was deeply occupied. Unconscious of his pursuer, he was taking in the details of the slim, tailored figure ahead of him, the trim ankles and beautiful, ungloved hands, one of which carried a gold mesh-bag. He noted the sheen of the brown hair softly coiled upon the nape of a white neck.

He had no plan. In the smaller details of life the Honorable left things in the hands of the gods and policemen. It was only in matters of adventure and finance that he made careful outline of conduct.

He did not propose speaking to the girl. He did not propose anything. He merely followed her, taking in her beautiful outlines with a deep sense of pleasure. Everything about her back appealed to the Honorable's exotic nature.

He felt that he would like to have a closer look at her face. To this end he hurried along, passed her, and stopped on a street corner as if waiting to cross. She came on toward him; then lifting her eyes suddenly looked him full in the eyes.

Instantly the Honorable's heart dropped clean down into his boots and oozed out at his toes. He had a distinct feeling that as she walked on up the street she kicked it ahead of her like a football.

He was cold as ice. Never had he dreamed that a pair of feminine eyes could have such an effect upon a man! They were brown—deep, dark brown—large and wide open, with long black lashes, and in the far reaches of them lurked a twinkle. He was sure of it. They were friendly eyes—eyes, too, that clearly could not be cruel or unkind. Yet they were criminal; guilty of highway robbery upon the public thoroughfare. Altogether, they held every imaginable light and meaning.

Down the street he saw vaguely a policeman's uniform. That policeman hurriedly turned his back, wondering what had happened to stop the Honorable's pursuit of the diamond bracelet. Mr. O'Grady had noted the curious change which had all at once come over the Honorable's face—a sort of mental and physical collapse as it were.

He had seen many times such change take place in criminals in court—it was fear! Stark fear. There was no mistaking it. Yet it couldn't be. Had he not seen a district attorney, noted for breaking men, harangue this smiling, courteous young crook hour after hour, without producing the slightest effect?

Nor was O'Grady wrong in his snap-shot judgment of the emotion which gripped the Honorable. The latter was, in fact, more afraid than he had ever been in his life before. For knowing himself thoroughly, accustomed to quick decisions, never indulging in self-deceptions, the Honorable knew what had happened to him.

He was in love, deeply, overwhelmingly, and all in an instant. He had always known that if it came it would be like this. For which reason he had kept clear of women. Never had he indulged himself in street flirtations; though many a pretty little girl had looked with admiring eyes upon his slim, well-groomed person.

It was outrageous. Why should a man against his will be victimized by a force within himself? And the most outrageous part of it was that he had fallen in love with a girl whose very name he did not know; whom he had never seen before, and probably would never see again.

The Honorable's heart pounded furiously as he hurried after her. It occurred to him that she had kicked his heart back into his bosom and that it was fearfully upset

over its amazing experience. From this you will see what an imaginative person was the Honorable. Which accounted for his success in an unimaginative world.

All at once the girl dashed into a fashionable dressmaking-shop—and was lost to him. After all, he would not see her face again. It was as well. For how could any one love a woman for any length of time if he never saw her?

He had, of course, a clear picture in his mind of her profile, her figure, her hair, her hands and the back of her neck; and another clear picture of her eyes; but no front face view. And how could one fit a pair of eyes into a profile so as to make a proportioned picture? Oh, well, there could be no harm in his waiting until she came out! He walked on a little distance, and pretended to take a deep interest in a haberdasher's window. But he was nervous and restless.

These also were emotions new to the Honorable.

He strolled on up the street, not failing, however, to keep an eye on that dressmaking-shop. Once or twice he saw an unpleasant blue bulk; but his mind was not occupied with the police.

A little girl coming gaily down the street hesitated at sight of the Honorable. He, too, hesitated. Children always hesitated at sight of the Honorable. The little girl stopped. He stopped also; and they smiled embarrassedly at each other. They hadn't anything to say; they had stopped instinctively, each feeling that there was a friend. For if the Honorable had made it a rule of life to avoid young women he had not extended this rule to little women. They liked him, and he liked them, and he was known to hundreds of little girls and boys scattered over New York.

"Want a soda?" asked the Honorable with the same embarrassment that a small boy might have shown in propounding such a question. He had none of the grown-up attitude toward children; but met them with the same feeling of naive friendliness with which they met each other.

"No, thank you," returned the little lady primly. It was not her custom to have sodas with strange men.

"I was thirsty," he smiled apologetically, "and I thought maybe you were, too."

She melted. Everybody melted before the Honorable's smile.

"I would enjoy one," she said with dignity, "but I'm in a hurry. I have to go to the library for a book for my big sister, and she's an awful old cross-patch, and will scold dreadfully if I don't just fly back."

"I never had a big sister," returned the Honorable sympathetically, "but I know they must be a dreadful bore."

"Yes, indeed; but I don't mind her, except sometimes. What's your name?"

"Bill."

"Bill what?"

Now this was a question that had been asked by lawyers and judges. There was just one person in New York City who knew the Honorable's real name—and that person had no confidants.

"Just Bill to my friends," he answered. And the way in which he said it implied that she being one of his friends, no further name was necessary. "What's your name?"

"Jane Watson. Where do you work, Bill?"

"I am an inventor," he returned, "and have my own workship, and am my own boss."

She looked doubtful upon this information, wondering perhaps who paid the salary of an inventor who was his own boss.

"I tell you, Jane," the Honorable went on, "as long as you can't have a drink with me, take this and buy yourself one when you have delivered the book to your big sister; and while you're drinking it, say 'This is one on Bill!'" He extended a half-dollar to her.

For a moment she eyed it, torn between desire and propriety. The primitive emotion won. And the half-dollar was transferred from his well-kept hand to her small pink palm.

"Come and see us some time. We live on Park Avenue," and she gave him the number. "Mama will be glad to see you, only I warn you that my sister will fall in love with you sure if you have lots of money. We haven't much, and papa says we're awful expensive."

"I think I better not come," protested

the Honorable. "Excuse me, I see a friend down the street. 'By, Jane."

His eyes had lighted upon a trim tailored figure coming out of a certain fashionable dressmaking-shop, and he left his new friend with great lack of ceremony.

He kept close upon the heels of his new-found love. Twice he passed her and paused on a corner to look her squarely in the face. But somehow she always managed to present merely her profile to him. And each time this inspired him with a desire for another look. It never occurred to him to speak to her. He was simply obsessed to see her eyes lifted once more to his face.

She passed him both times, however, unseeingly. He followed her into Park Avenue, and right up to the door of a magnificent apartment-house, before which stood a purple-uniformed doorman.

With a sense of world collapse the Honorable stopped. In passing through those doors she had indeed passed out of his life. He turned wearily away—and his brown eyes met and clashed with the blue ones of Officer O'Grady.

"Hello," he said to the officer. "Aren't you off your beat?" Even as he spoke he wondered at that curious human angle which made folk hold conversation, no matter what happened. Though the world should fly in pieces, and men be torn apart, as long as the gift of speech remained to them, they would talk to cover their real emotions.

"My beat is wherever you happen to be, begorra," returned O'Grady.

"Has the police force honored me with a special watchman?" inquired the Honorable with friendly sarcasm.

"Don't flatter yourself," growled O'Grady, feeling much disgruntled at having had his long walk for nothing. "But when I seen you set your eyes on them blue sparklers says I to myself, 'O'Grady, it will be a feather in your cap if you catch that bird!'"

"Blue!" exclaimed the Honorable. "For an officer of the law, supposed to have powers of observation, you are not a howling success, O'Grady. The sparklers, as you call them, are not blue, they are brown! A beautiful deep, dark brown."

He walked calmly away, leaving an astonished policeman to stare after him.

"Shure, and is he losing his sinses?" muttered O'Grady. "Whoever heard of brown—" He broke off suddenly as the recollection of a pair of brown eyes floated before his mental vision. "Mother of Moses!" he exclaimed. "He never even seen the bracelet. He was chasin' a skirt or St. Patrick didn't save Ireland."

CHAPTER III.

HIS SIDE AND HERS.

AS he turned into Forty-Second Street, it occurred to the Honorable that the gods had been playing with him very much as he had played again and again with the police. The grim humor of the thing appealed to that subtle something deep within him which always made him see the curious quirks and tipsy angles of life. That he should have fallen in love with a girl who lived in one of those guarded houses where he had been wont to enter upon occasions, as an uninvited guest, was one of Fate's little satires.

He had some months previous gone into this selfsame apartment-house, passed that same purple-uniformed doorman, and, on coming out, had brought with him a rare old vase, carefully wrapped and tucked under his arm, in careless fashion, so that the doorman might see. He had, furthermore, ordered that doorman to call a taxi for him, and had driven off, leaving a half-dollar in the hands of the man who had assisted him to get away with a two-thousand-dollar haul.

He had, of course, known that the vase was there, and had gone purposely for it, leaving untouched many other treasures.

Nor when the theft was discovered had the purple-uniformed guard recollected the aristocratic young man who had walked out with a package under his arm and been sent away in a cab by himself. The doorman, like the police, being unimaginative, expected thieves to enter by way of fire-escapes; to wear loud, or shabby clothing; and glance furtively out of their eyes, as they dodged and slipped about. That a

fine-appearing, high-bred young man might walk coolly in, perpetrate a robbery and walk out under his very eyes, even commanding his assistance, was a thing that never would have occurred to him.

And now she had gone in there! The rarest of all the rare treasures therein contained. But he could not walk in and take her out under his arm.

Well, after all, was not the joke on Fate. Had this lovely girl been one of his own class, he might have done something foolish. He realized it. Admitted it. As it was, he would probably never see her again. Certainly he would never speak with her—never be subjected to further ensnarement by the lure of her voice.

At thought of her voice he began to wonder what it would be like. A deep, sweet contralto, it seemed to him, must fit with that face. He unreasonably wished he might have heard her speak just once. If only he could have been close enough when she was talking with O'Grady. A feeling of rage swept over him toward that creature of law. He had not been annoyed by O'Grady's following him—in fact, had merely shrugged it off; but a sense of deep resentment swept over him at recollection of the fact that O'Grady had heard her speak.

No matter; he was free now to pursue his way of life without fear of ensnaring skirts.

But his way appeared suddenly barren. His ready imagination pictured it as a great sun-baked desert, over which he wandered digging for gold—gold for which, after all, there was no special purpose.

His little jokes on the police were vapid and futile. His daring encounters had no thrill in them. The wealth which, from time to time, he carried away—of what use was it? What would he do with it? What did anybody do with wealth? He had all that he desired in the way of luxurious living quarters; and life was not otherwise so terrifically expensive down in Mott Street. What then was the aim and end of his brilliant dashes into society?

He was peculiarly alone. Many a cold and poor home had been made warm and brightened by his money, his sympathy; and more than once had he played Santa Claus to the needy in his district. There were men and women who, committing no crimes themselves, would perjure themselves to protect him. Yet, in all the world he had not one who was his very own. Not one who was dependent upon him; or who would grieve if one day the police got him.

This had not occurred to him since he had reached man's estate. He had, in fact, desired nothing better than the exclusiveness of his own society, his own fertile imagination. Now this imagination appeared as child's play. By its aid he saw himself an old man in his handsome Nest, with the smiling imperturbable Sing Lu, his only companion. And Sing Lu was as remote and self-contained as was the Honorable. He saw himself wandering about the streets of New York—always alone. Alone in his daring encounters; alone in court; alone with his hardly got wealth—and alone in death!

Why had he never thought of this before?

It was a curious fact that however deeply the conscious mind may be occupied with a subject, the subconscious one goes on carrying out those plans which the conscious mind had previously decided upon. So it was that while the Honorable considered the futility of his existence, he went busily on with the details of the Vanastor ball.

Going into a saloon he bought a two-quart sealed demijohn. What the demijohn contained has nothing to do with this story; which, to be exact, occurred in the spring of 1916 B.P. But the demijohn itself, sealed as it was, formed part of the plan which the Honorable had been working out when so rudely interrupted by Larry Sanders and his friend.

Having his purchases wrapped, the Honorable, still in the throes of his own wretched reflections, went out. And with the weight of all the centuries upon him, he once more took the subway back to the Nest.

Upon entering his abode which had so filled him with content that morning he noticed that it was merely a pile of expensive junk.

He passed the smiling Sing Lu without

a glance, and went into a little workshop wherein he had in times past indulged his imagination in small inventions.

When he sat down upon his work bench, he assured himself that things could not have turned out better. But he knew at the moment that he was lying to himself, for the Honorable was like every other young man in every other walk in life, whatever his race or place. He felt the same sick emptiness in his stomach; the same heavy overfulness in his chest; the same oppression of spirit, as Joel Johnson of the farm felt, or as Glenister Van Smythe of the avenue felt, when under the hand of life's oldest and greatest force—that force which was before reason, before will—which is a part of God's plan.

His arms ached to enfold her. He wanted to see her face upturned to his own; her big, beautiful brown eyes tender for him; her lips waiting. Those wonderful, improbable eyes, that held every emotion—contradicted themselves—were cruel and tender, grave and gay, childlike and grown up, all at once. And these eyes had never seen him! They had looked at him; but merely as one looks at a passer-by, without actually seeing.

If the Honorable had been as vain as he was daring, he might have suspected that the girl of his heart had not looked at him merely as one looks at a passer-by. In fact, she was at the moment telling her aunt, Mrs. George Cummings Prothro, about him.

Her lovely face was alight with enthusiasm and excitement, she had burst into her aunt's room without the ceremony of knocking. "Aunty, dear," she cried, almost coming out of the slow drawl which was her manner of speech, "the handsomest young man followed me from the Fifth Avenue Building clear up to Mme. Le Verne's."

"Mildred!" exclaimed her aunt, a haughty woman with a young face and white hair, "I do hope you haven't—" She broke off. "How did you know that he was following you?"

"First I saw him hurrying across Twenty-Third Street—"

"Lots of people hurry across Twenty-Third Street," smiled Mrs. Prothro, who was in the hands of her maid.

"But this was *different*. He was looking *at me*."

"Were you looking at him?"

"Of course not. But one can see without looking. And, anyway, I stopped on the corner of Twenty-Fifth Street just to make sure. And he stopped. Then when I started walking again, he started. At Thirty-Second Street he passed me, and stood on the corner waiting for me to pass him. I looked at him that time; and, really, aunty, he's the most adorable thing I have seen in New York."

Mrs. Prothro was that rare creature, a born New Yorker. She had married Mildred's uncle, George Cummings Prothro, a wealthy Southerner, who had added to his millions in New York. "Perhaps, my dear," said Mrs. Prothro, inspecting her coiffure in her dressing-glass by the aid of a hand-mirror, "in the South one may judge a gentleman by his appearance; but in New York it can't be done. I hope you haven't been guilty of anything foolish."

"Meaning what, aunty?" dimpled Mildred. She sat on a rose draped *chaise longue* watching the progress of her aunt's toilet.

"Well, I know that Southerners are given to speaking informally to strangers."

"Not on the street, aunty."

"Yes, on the street. Why, I have seen your Uncle George speak in the most matter-of-course manner to a perfectly strange woman in an elevator."

"How shocking!" Mildred mocked. "But, really, aunty, our young ladies do not address strange young men informally in the streets. You see, there's a difference."

"I never can quite discover the fine lines of demarcation that Southerners make in the matter of informal conversation. More than once your uncle has horrified me by speaking to some one without license. And the astonishing part of it is that nobody ever seems to resent his familiarity."

"You see, even New Yorkers instinctively know the difference I'm telling you about, aunty. If Uncle George was to accost these same women on the street they would resent that. Merely expressing a casual thought to one standing at one's elbow is nothing. But I don't want to argue about that. The point is, my young man—"

"Your young man!"

"I may as well call him mine, as he is the sweetest thing I've seen in New York. And of course I sha'n't see him again."

"Of course you shall," retorted her aunt. "I know the breed. He'll be waiting for you the very first time you set foot out of this house."

"Oh, do you think so?" She was unable to keep the joyous anticipation out of her twinkling brown eyes. "He *did* wait outside Mme. Le Verne's, and followed me right to our door. I suppose that sour-faced old Jenkins down there scared him away, or he might have come right on in."

"Mildred," Mrs. Prothro's tone was severe, "if you were a New York girl, I should feel no concern; but your curious view-point disturbs me; and I want you to promise that if you see this obnoxious person you will neither look at nor speak to him."

"All right, I promise," sighed Mildred, rising and strolling out to the music-room.

When Mrs. Prothro entered all ready for inspection, Mildred was playing a sentimental love song.

"You haven't told me about your dress, Mildred," she reminded her niece.

"It's a dream," returned Mildred. "I wonder if *he* will be at the ball."

As if her thoughts were telepathic, *he* was at the same instant wondering if *she* would be there. She hoped that he would. He feared that she would.

The Honorable was not afraid of the house detectives; not afraid of the police officers; but he was deeply, intensely afraid of this slim, brown-haired, brown-eyed girl, with her intriguing profile. He felt that he would be sure to bungle should she appear on the scene.

Nevertheless, possessed of that ruthless turn of mind which having started in a given direction must drive on, he continued with his preparations for the balls—preparations which were both curious and mystifying.

With a sharp knife he had carefully cut a three-inch square from the side of the two-quart sealed demijohn, which was set upon the work-table before him. He now proceeded to file into the glass bottle incased in its wicker covering. Presently the liquid began to ooze out, whereupon he carried the demijohn to the sink, drained it of its contents, then going back to the table, once more began the tedious business of filing out a three-inch square of the glass.

Finally the piece was lifted out and a square hole appeared in the side of the bottle. Having completed his task, he went into the living-room for a smoke, and to further develop his plans.

But those plans were now so mixed up with an enchanting profile and deep, brown eyes that he finally gave it up, and went out on the street in self-disgust.

CHAPTER IV.

LOVE FINDS THE WAY.

THERE was in the Honorable's make-up certain elements which might have made of him a great financier had the fates not left him at the age of seven upon the streets of New York.

His mother had died at his birth. Or, so he had been told by one of the old women; and his father, a shiftless ne'er-do-well—though whether a crook, the Honorable did not know—had managed to get under the hoofs of a big horse and so had passed out of the Honorable's life. He had often wondered what his mother was like; and if his father had not been, in spite of everything, a gentleman. His own instincts, in such contrast to his environment, gave ground for this notion.

The very driving power of him, different from the general air of aimlessness and shiftlessness, which sat upon this part of the city, gave him a sense of aloofness and superiority.

To-day, however, he felt as aimless, as purposeless, as the great masses about him. He tried to read law, but it had lost its charm. He tried to plan for the forthcoming ball. He could do nothing but try the impossible feat of fitting two big brown eyes into a profile.

Yesterday afternoon and evening he had assured himself how glad he was that matters had turned out as it had. He could go on living in peace and content without fear of women. He had reminded himself

over and over of how the possibility of her presence at the ball had filled him with fear. Was not this proof of the dangers attendant upon feminine entanglements? Well, then—

But this morning he told himself that he would see her once more. After all, there could be no harm in that. Nothing could make him more miserable than he was. He had already reached the very summit of human wretchedness; perhaps the sight of the girl might ease matters somewhat. It really was rather absurb to be in love with a woman whose two eyes one could not fit properly into her face for the very good reason that a profile can contain but one eye.

And there was the matter of her voice! He would just like to satisfy himself upon that point. Was it contralto? And did she speak rapidly? Or with that gentle swing which was the more pleasing to him? Did she have an accent? If so, what was it? East, West, North, or South? Of one thing he was certain; it could not be New York.

Anyway, there was no sense in trying to read with that cat-footed Sing Lu sneaking in and out in a most annoying fashion. From the double-decked closet the Honorable took a hat—and set forth in quest of a voice.

Accustomed to sure deductions, he knew by the fact that she had inquired for one of the most fashionable of New York's dressmakers, that she must be a stranger in New York; had perhaps lived here but a short time. As such, it was within the possibilities that she would be forced to ask another question in the street, in which case he would be on the ground. Or, suppose she should drop her purse.

A sudden vision came to him of that exquisitely wrought gold mesh-bag with jeweled top, which his quick eyes had noted involuntarily, and for once, without thought of its intrinsic value. His eyes lighted as he pictured himself delivering the expensive bauble to her. Would it be possible to get all the inflections of a voice in the two words "Thank you"?

It occurred to the Honorable that he was becoming senile.

Meanwhile, that never-sleeping mind of his, which drove relentlessly forward with whatever plans he had formulated, sent him to the Vanastor, where he bought a ticket for the charity ball. Also it sent him back to Madison Square for that other ticket which he had neglected to purchase on the previous day.

There again was his enemy, O'Grady. And once more he was in conversation with a pretty girl. This time she was small and fair and plump; and the Honorable recognized Mary O'Grady. She was showing her father the few remaining tickets she had on hand.

The Honorable smiled whimsically and waited for Mary to hurry away from her father toward a possible customer. He had seen her of course many times talking with O'Grady. In fact, that officer of the law had not been above a fatherly boast as to his relationship with the pretty, blue-eyed girl when, upon one occasion, the Honorable had accused him of a flirtation. The enmity between these two had always been more or less of a friendly nature; and it was not unusual for them to joke with each other. Though the Honorable did not underestimate O'Grady's ambition to deliver him over to the district attorney.

Miss O'Grady, having wandered to the opposite side of Madison Square, looked up suddenly into the smiling face of the Honorable.

"Ticket for the policeman's ball?" she asked with coy eagerness.

"Are you going to be there?" inquired the Honorable.

She blushed furiously. "Of course."

"And would you give me a dance?"

Her blue eyes flashed with coquetry; but she answered, "Of course not."

"Why not?" His pleasant voice held a pleading note.

"I don't know you." But her tone said plainly, "Though I'd like to."

"Then I sha'n't go." He turned away with an air of dejection, and left her staring amazedly after him.

She was just on the point of running in pursuit with the ticket when he turned back as if having all at once changed his mind.

"Give me the ticket," he said, "I don't

believe you'd be so cruel as to let me be a wall-flower all evening."

"Don't you know anybody?" she asked.

"Nobody that I want to dance with," he returned.

She melted under the battery of his smile. "Well, I might save *one* for you."

"I want them *all*."

"Oh, but I couldn't. I'm engaged, and my young man would be awfully mad."

"It 'll do him good," said the Honorable cunningly, "to see that some one else appreciates your charms."

This appealed to Miss O'Grady's logic. Also the Honorable's fine presence and handsome person appealed to her feminine sense of fitness. Furthermore, his flattering manner caught her vanity.

"Well," she demurred, "maybe if you're there I'll give you two or three. Dan's too sure of me anyhow. And besides I saw him talking with a girl I hate the other day."

"I tell you," said the Honorable with his most confiding smile. "Give him the first four; then give me the next seven."

"Oh, he'd quit me if I did that."

"Not if he loved you."

"I believe he'd kill you."

"I'll risk it."

What woman would not have liked this? Her blue eyes flamed, and her Irish spirit fared forth to meet his daring. "I'll do it."

"I'll be there at ten o'clock. All the dances after that are mine."

"You robber!" she laughed. "The more you get the more you want."

"Of course. Is it a go?"

"All but 'Home, Sweet Home.' You know, I have to give that to Dan."

"All right. Shake on it."

And Officer O'Grady's daughter shook hands with the Honorable, forming a pact with him which was tantamount to an agreement that she would swear to his alibi on the morning after the Vanastor ball.

After an exchange of lingering looks the Honorable turned away with the two tickets nestling incongruously against each other—one to the policeman's ball, the other to the millionaires' dance.

He now turned toward Park Avenue. This time he did not walk, but took a car.

Some two hours later when Miss Mildred Prothro descended into the street, her brown eyes swept it in recollection of her aunt's prediction of the previous day. It had not been her intention to cross; but a few minutes later she was carefully picking her way past the center parkway. And with heightened color and pounding heart she brushed, unseeingly to all outward appearance, very close to the Honorable—

Now when Mildred had promised her aunt that she would not speak to the attractive stranger she had not counted upon the workings of Fate. Her promise had been given in all good faith.

Just what it was that blinded her to one of those treacherous gratings on the sidewalk in which it was so easy to get a French heel caught, she never knew, then or afterward; but certain it is that when her pretty heel sank into the narrow groove she twisted her ankle and fell to her knees with a cry.

Several pedestrians were there to help her on the instant; but the Honorable was ahead of them all. He carefully extracted the heel and lifted her to her feet. Nor was it her fault, nor his, if he was compelled to keep his arm around her because of her inability to stand.

After one variant step she consigned herself to his protection.

"I'm afraid you'll have to call a taxi to get me back home," she gasped.

And sure enough her voice was a low, sweet contralto. Also she spoke with a pleasant drawl, and her accent was Southern. The Honorable had a sense of entire satisfaction.

"I can carry you across to your place," he said, trapped as no district attorney could have trapped him, into admitting that he knew exactly where she lived.

"Oh, no, I couldn't think of letting you do that!" Her wondrous eyes turned up to meet his own were full of pain.

His arm still held her.

"But, really, you know," he protested, "you can't walk, and I'm afraid the chances for getting a taxi are not very good. You ought to get home as quickly as possible and take off your shoe. And it's such a short distance—"

" I'm too heavy for you to carry."

" But I'm strong."

" All right."

Slipping an arm around his neck she permitted herself to be lifted in his arms. And so, as a knight of old, he bore his lady away from his rivals!

Never had the Honorable dreamed that the feel of a woman's arm about one's neck could be so entrancing. Her warm breath was on his cheek. She was laughing and talking in little gasps of pain and embarrassment. He did not hear what she said; but every tingling nerve of him responded to the warmth of her. Past the purple-uniformed doorman he went, into the elevator, and up to the magnificent apartment maintained by the Prothros.

This time the gods were with him. Mrs. Prothro was out. They were admitted by a solemn-faced butler, and the Honorable carried his burden to a big divan in the self-same drawing-room from which he had extracted a priceless vase.

A sudden determination came over him to return that vase.

He knelt before the divan, and began unlacing his adored one's shoe, while one of the maids went for hot water and towels, and another telephoned the doctor.

(To be continued NEXT WEEK.)

A Matter of Five Minutes

by Richard Barry

A REARRANGED five minutes may disrupt the schedule for the advance of a victorious army; it may seal the fate of an empire. In five minutes many a destiny has been changed. It was a mere matter of five minutes that spelled the difference between liberty and the electric chair for a certain man once. However, it will require a little more than five minutes to explain just how it happened.

I.

JIM PRENTICE, district attorney, was the lone and stormy petrel of the administration of the city that year. Of all his party's ticket he alone had been elected, and by the barest plurality. Thus over him and antagonistic to him were an alien mayor and an alien police commissioner.

In his own force he could count on only two of the assistants he himself had appointed, and of these he felt he already had reason to suspect one, while in the other he knew that honesty did not entirely compensate for stupidity.

He had been in office three months, and every move he had made to check or expose the notorious grafting of the police department—or the dominant portion of it—had been checkmated, craftily and effectually. Not once had he found a detective on whom he could implicitly rely.

Some of the courts were honest, but he

must have legal evidence to secure their aid. Whence could this evidence come? Though the law had clothed him with exemplary powers to call on all and sundry for assistance, he felt as powerless as any unordained citizen.

Prentice had been betrayed by his own telephone operator. He changed his office-boy almost once a week, and yet had not been able to get one capable of holding out against the blandishments, the bribes, and the threats of his secret enemies.

When he discovered that his secretary, who had been with him for years, was secreting tissue carbons of all his correspondence he felt as if enmeshed in a net from which there was no escape.

The ruling political bosses were sneering at him, and the whole city laughing in his face. The newspapers permitted hardly a day to pass without holding him up to scorn and derision as a spineless creature. What every reporter knew to be true the district attorney could not legally prove. Supinely he could only observe the phosphorescence of the city's putrid sore.

The facts were that the town was wide open, and that there was such an orgy of "collection" as had not been known in many years. One of the newspapers found the brazen effrontery to publish the details of the alleged annual graft to the insiders—a figure running into millions.

In the forefront of this saffron flood rode the inspector of the town's ripest and juciest district, a bloated and sinister figure of brutal might—Holma.

After Prentice had been in office a month Holma caused a baccarat-roulette room to be opened in a house directly across from the building in which the district attorney occupied an apartment. This forthwith became an open shame. Convenient to several of the best hotels, the runners would drive up, at all hours of the day and night, with carousing guests. At times even the upper curtains remained undrawn.

Prentice, looking from the front window of his apartment, could see a roulette game in full operation, with a free sideboard in the distance. This was too insolent. Personally, and assisted by "Honest Joe" Karney, one of the policemen reputed to be "on the square," he raided the house and caught, among others, "Portuguese Pete," long known as a trusted henchman of Holma and said to be one of his most valued partners.

For the moment it looked as if Prentice would turn the tide, but within a week all his evidence had been purloined from his files, Honest Joe had been sent to pound the sidewalks of the farthest suburb, and Pete, released on bail, disappeared from the country with all the material witnesses. There was nothing to do but *nol prosse* the case.

It seemed as if Holma had staged this little affair just to show the district attorney that his claws were cut and his teeth pulled. After that the inspector stuck his knife into the juicy melon up to the hilt. In the following two months he openly boasted, among his cronies, that he took in as his own personal share fifty thousand a week.

Meanwhile the district attorney, baffled, apparently incompetent, knew not where to turn for help. Pride prevented him from stating frankly to the press the ignominy of his position. For a time he thought of appealing to certain rich men for a private fund with which to go after Holma, but he realized that this would become known and would react politically.

Except for his wife, and the safe in his office, to which he alone had the combination, he felt he could trust no one.

II.

One afternoon a card came in.

"Jacob Cornish," Prentice read. The name meant nothing, and ordinarily he would have turned the man over to an assistant. Yet, for some unaccountable reason, he admitted the caller to his private office without preliminary.

In later years, when he told the details of this story, Prentice frequently said that each move he made was apparently the result of luck alone. Neither reason nor habit guided him. Surely it was luck that gave him the chance to see Cornish, who, had he talked with any one else first, probably would never have reached his goal.

Cornish proved to be a common type of "gentleman" gambler—a smooth, shifty, neatly dressed, half furtive, half bold fellow, who, before he would say a word, insisted that the door be locked and the windows closed, while he ransacked the chairs and desks with his cane to be sure no dictaphone was attached.

Now appeared the first tangible evidence, directly implicating Holma, on which Prentice had been able to lay his hands; for, even if he had been able to hold Pete and the others in that affair, he had had nothing that linked them with the elusive inspector. Here it was different. Cornish was one of Holma's innumerable secret partners, and for several years had been running a gambling-house with money advanced by the inspector with whom he had divided the ill-gotten gains.

Cornish poured forth a flood of the very evidence for which the district attorney had been ineffectually searching ever since he came into office—the evidence which all his assistants and all his detectives had been unable or unwilling to get.

And it had walked into the office! It had dropped like manna from heaven!

Until he learned the cause of this sudden and startling treachery in his opposing forces, the first break he had discovered in the impregnable wall of Holma's defenses, Prentice was loath to believe in his good fortune.

But the gambler made it all plausible. He and Holma had fallen out over a woman. She had preferred Cornish, and Holma had sworn to get even. So, the day before, he had driven up to the house Cornish leased with his money, and, personally heading a van-load of policemen with axes, had broken in, raided the place, destroyed fifty thousand dollars' worth of furnishings—his own—and had driven Cornish onto the streets, after taking from his pockets every cent of ready money he possessed.

It was a superb gesture for Holma to make, for he grandiloquently had told the newspaper reporters, most of whom had heard that he was Cornish's partner, "Gambling is through now. The lid's on." And the papers had been filled for two days with the virtue of Inspector Holma—"a rough diamond, the very man needed for his difficult job."

The uncrowned king scorned even to put Cornish in jail, but let him roam the streets while he denied him a livelihood and laughingly sent word to the woman that when she got tired of starving she could find asylum in the refuge from which she had strayed—Holma's attentions.

So the gambler stood ready to squeal. His price? Nothing. He wanted only revenge. If he could do to Holma a tithe of what Holma had done to him he would be content.

For the next three hours Prentice was absorbed in getting down on paper—he trusted no stenographer, but wrote himself—the gambler's confession. As he lingered over it a great joy came to him, for he realized that here at last lay to his hand the weapon the lack of which heretofore had rendered him impotent.

This confession would break Holma, and would probably send him to prison. It gave Prentice the chance more than to fulfil that threat made, in anger, ten years before. More—far more—it would set him right in the eyes of those voters who had honored him with their suffrages.

The gambler signed the long statement, and Prentice locked it in his safe, of which he alone had the combination. Then he made an appointment with his caller for the next day, and bade him good night. At the door Cornish turned and came back to the desk. From his hip pocket he produced a revolver and laid it before the district attorney.

"There, Mr. Prentice," he said, "is my gun. I want you to keep it. It is the only weapon I have, except—"

He fished through his pockets and brought out a penknife, which he placed beside the revolver. "Except this knife," he added. "They won't help me, and I am leaving them with you for your protection."

Prentice knew what he meant, but he had not expected this final show of nerve. He reached forth his hand warmly.

"You are a brave man, Cornish," he said, "but I think you need have no fear. However, as it is illegal for you to carry this gun, I will look after it for you."

The gambler was depressed, but determined.

"I am a marked man from now on—you know that," he insisted. "I was shadowed as I came here. Even now Holma knows where I am. I'll be picked up when I leave this office, and I'll not be lost for a minute. He knows what I came for, and he knows me. He knows I mean business. And I know him—"

"Don't fear."

"I know him better than you, Mr. Prentice."

"You know nothing worse of him than I know."

"I know he's a murderer. He's killed two men and got away with it."

"I know that, but I can't prove it. Can you?"

"No. But it's true. And why not a third?"

"He won't dare. Not now."

"Huh! How little you know Holma! He's run amuck so long in this town he thinks he owns it."

"He has something yet to learn."

"If you can't prove the first two, you'll not be able to prove the third."

The district attorney was reassuring.

"Nothing will happen to you," he insisted. "Go home and stay there, and come see me in the morning."

The gambler lingered a moment. Then he put his idea plainly in words.

"If anything happens," he hesitantly went on, "you know—if anything happens to me—I'd advise you, Mr. Prentice, to get there within a few minutes. If not, they'll have a gun planted on me, and you'll never be able to prove anything. Every cop in town will swear it was self-defense; that I fired first."

Prentice laughed at the other's alarm.

"You are overwrought," he assured his new ally. The thing is too public now. You are walking in the spotlight. Holma needs the shadow for his dirty work."

Cornish shook his head despondently.

"Besides, you are under the protection of the district attorney."

Cornish smiled cynically, but he was too polite to express what he knew was the police derision of that high office.

"I want you to do me one favor," he said.

"Certainly. What is it?"

"Give me your private telephone number—your house number. I may need it."

Prentice gave it—Maroon 17—and the gambler left.

III.

His home being demolished, Cornish made his way to a ground-floor apartment not far away. Here dwelt the woman who had been the brimstone for this flaming ordeal. He announced his intention of not leaving until morning.

Just before one o'clock, however, a bathhouse rubber he knew arrived with a message that Holma wanted to see him at a near-by hotel. Cornish refused to go, and the woman approved.

"He says he'll come across," the rubber insisted. "He'll square it wit' ye on yer own terms."

Cornish said he'd go. The woman tried to dissuade him.

"I'd better see him," he insisted. "Here is the one last chance to get out of this mess clean. If Holma means what he says I'll take a hundred thousand apiece for you and me, with steamer fares to Buenos Aires, and blow the town. Prentice has my confession, but it won't get him anywhere if I've ducked. And he'll not be able to land me if Holma don't want him to. On the other hand, if I don't settle to-night it means open war with Holma, and that means one killing—maybe two. I'll go."

"It's a trap," the woman insisted. "Make him come here."

The rubber, who was listening, broke in:

"He won't do dat. Said meet him at de hotel—half-way."

"That's fair enough," Cornish replied. "Tell him I'm coming."

The rubber slipped out with his message. Cornish kissed the woman good-by. He was half out of the door, when he came back.

"I almost forgot," he said. "It's Prentice's private number. Take it."

He repeated the number—Maroon 17. She jotted it down on a card, which she slipped inside her bosom. Then he went.

At twenty minutes before one Cornish passed the mouth of an alley near the hotel for which he was making. A succession of flame flashes leaped out, and he fell with three bullets in him. Presently Holma, in full uniform, turned over the body, and saw that life was extinct.

For a moment Holma paused, fingering a revolver from which three bullets had just been fired. By all the rules of the game, he should have planted the gun on Cornish then. This final little act of treachery would have been the basis for technically rendering his account with the law closed. However, he did not plant the gun. Rendered superbly insolent by a quarter of a century of unapprehended grafting, there suddenly occurred to him an ingenious idea by which he could surround his name with an even greater fear, ergo respect, than that which he enjoyed at present.

He would tell the roundsman at the corner to take the body to the station-house. There, later, Holma would make the plant in practical publicity. This would naturally be retailed throughout the force and in the underworld, and would add the final flavor of terror to his name.

Who would dare oppose a man so brazen, such a tyrannical master of life and death? Under the influence of this terror he would make his final clean-up. And retire, perhaps to Europe, perhaps to the stock-farm he already possessed up-State—a multi-millionaire.

Why should he hesitate? Why should he fear? Was not the force practically his to do with as he wished? Had it not stood back of him, defiant and undeviating, for these many years? Had he not been always its willing servant, and was he not now its despotic master, with every sinister cross-wire of its vast system—so potent for good or ill—his to command.

Nor did he fear nor hesitate. He lacked even a premonition. Pocketing the revolver, he casually strolled to the corner, where he met a roundsman.

"Something in the alley," he said nonchalantly. "Take it to the station."

He then turned his steps toward the ground-floor apartment a block away, for he intended to give the boys at the station-house at least half an hour to identify the body and spread the news.

The door opened in answer to his ring, and he stepped inside to face a woman with fear-haunted eyes and tightly drawn mouth. His smile was jovial, and he tried to conceal its lurking leer.

"Well, Maud," said he, "you don't seem glad to see me."

She backed against a wall, holding her clenched hands tensely behind her.

"Jake just went out to meet you—at the hotel—you must have passed him. Which—wh-which way did you come?"

She nervously tried to appear cordial.

"Never mind Jake—" He waved a hand bruskly as if to brush aside something of no consequence. "I'm here, ain't I? Got something to say to me?"

She tried to smile, though the attempt was pitiful.

"Why, yes, Frank; but Jake went to say it to you. He had a proposition—from both of us."

"From both of you, eh?" The burly man glowered. "There's no proposition now except one from me to you. The question is—are you ready to hear it?" He paused and looked at her intently, with that hypnotic stare under which both men and women usually quailed.

But he could not control the bravado, the exultation that leaped from his eyes; he could not restrain his hands from instinctively reaching forth for her, and—as it were—across the dead body of the other man.

Without words, a premonition of the dread fact surged over the woman. Pathetically she leaned forward and almost wistfully urged, as if in argument to prevent a deed already accomplished:

"Didn't you know Jake and I were married at the city hall this morning?"

For a second he quailed. She could see that it was news to him. He "covered" every bureau except the marriage licenses, and here something had been put over on him. Then a wave of brutality surged through him.

"Married?" he muttered with an oath. "Then you'd better forget it, for you're a widow this night."

A low moan broke from her, but she rallied with surprising alacrity, and regarded him with suspicious sharpness. "Frank, this is another trick of yours." She looked him straight in the eyes.

"Phone the station and ask Sergeant Keller. Get it direct from him."

For a moment she feared that she was fainting, but by an almost superhuman effort of the will she kept her senses and moved slowly toward the door to her bedroom. He stood stolidly in the middle of the room, and gave her the number—Copper 3141.

She disappeared in her room, closing the door behind her, and slipping the lock. A private desk-phone stood on her dressing-table. She called into it with staccato tenseness—Maroon 17.

A moment later she unlocked the door and reappeared in the living-room, where she crumpled in a limp heap at the feet of Inspector Holma. He dashed some water in her face and revived her. As she regained consciousness she thrust him from her and sank into a chair, sobbing.

He moved toward the door. Suddenly she called out hysterically: "Don't leave me!"

He returned and made as if to pet her.

"Don't touch me!" she shrieked, and shrank from him.

He looked at her calmly and grunted. Huh! Women! How illogical—never to know their own feelings! Finally he said:

"Guess I'll leave you now, Maud, but I'll be round in the morning. Did all I could to save him. I heard that some of the boys he squealed on were out for him, and I started myself to prevent it. No use. They beat me to it."

"She looked up. "Is that true, Frank?"

"So help me God!" He raised his hand with the motion he always used in court. Again he started toward the door. His time was up, and he must get on to write the finish to the tragedy. Again she held him.

"Tell me—tell me—what you know?" she implored.

Swiftly he resolved that to keep himself right in her eyes he would have to plant the crime on some one.

Whom should it be—"Dopey" Sim, who had tried to double-cross him two weeks ago; or "Slim" Gudgeon, who already knew too much about the Portuguese Pete affair?

"Tell me! Tell me!" she insisted.

And while his mind was busy planning the plant and striving to make a story, on the spur of the moment, that he could authenticate later, at the same time striving to leave her as soon as possible, she was consumed with a single thought—to hold him there at any cost. This duel went on—

IV.

CORNISH had been shot at 1.03. At 1.17 that morning the private telephone in the bedroom of the district attorney tinkled faintly. Prentice did not stir, but Mrs. Prentice, usually a sound sleeper, heard it. She never was able to tell why she heard that ring. Both always declared it was luck. She woke her husband.

"Jim," she urged, "you had better answer that phone."

"No," he replied drowsily, turning over; "the boys are calling me up too much late at night. Teach 'em not to call. Let him wait till morning."

Mrs. Prentice would not be gainsaid. She shook her husband sharply. "Jim," she insisted, "I have a queer feeling that you should answer that message. Something tells me it is important. Do get up."

Sleepily protesting, Prentice took the receiver from the hook and called, "Hello!"

Distinct and clear as a bell, in a woman's voice, came the message: "Go instantly to the Winsted Street police station."

Annoyed at the sharpness of the tone and the lack of explanation, Prentice demanded: "Who is this?"

"You will never know," was the reply; "but if you do not go as quickly as you can you will regret it to the day of your death."

A sharp click told that the mysterious informant had hung up.

Not yet certain of what he was going forth to seek, and only obeying an uncanny feeling about an "inner voice," Prentice hastened into his clothes and descended to the street. He looked about eagerly for a conveyance. None was in sight. The po-

lice station was a mile away, and no car-line went direct. He started walking rapidly. A few blocks away a lone cab stood by a curb. He called, but the cabman refused to move, explaining, in no particular good humor, that he had a fare.

Prentice went up to him and announced peremptorily: "I am the district attorney, on the State's business. I order you to take me in that cab to—"

He had no chance to finish. The cabman replied insolently: "I don't give a cuss who you are. My fare's bigger 'n any of you."

Prentice asked where this mighty fare could be seen.

"In there!" drawled the cabman.

He pointed to a club. Prentice dashed inside, determined to find some one who would recognize him. At a card-table, immersed in a game, sat a justice of the Supreme Court of the State. This must be the cabby's mighty fare.

The supreme bench granted the prayer of the district attorney for the loan of the cab. Prentice was soon outside and on his way to Winsted Street.

A few minutes later he entered the station-house. Everything seemed normal. The night sergeant sat behind the desk, apparently drowsing, as is the immemorial privilege of night sergeants. A roundsman lolled in the corner.

Outwardly the station-house appeared as it might almost any night of the year. There was a muffled whispering from the cells in the rear, and a snore from the turnkey. Otherwise all was decently still.

Advancing to the desk, Prentice asked: "Has anything happened here to-night?"

"Not much," replied the sergeant mechanically, then looked up with an especial query. Some note of command in Prentice's voice had penetrated his thick skull.

"Who are you?" he demanded.

"The district attorney."

"Quit yer kidding!"

In another moment that sergeant was well convinced of the identity of his late caller. He glanced sharply, but under cover toward the roundsman, who instantly began a movement toward the back of the room.

"Hold on there!" Prentice spoke quietly. "Don't either of you move an inch until I am through with you, or I'll have you before the grand jury on charges to-morrow."

A thin, cynnical smile spread over the roundsman's face. The sergeant blinked.

Prentice saw both expressions. "Remember," he added gently, "my personal testimony still goes in this town, even if I can't find another soul to go on the stand for me."

The roundsman stopped. The sergeant sat back. Prentice looked over the room as well as he could without moving. He glanced in the direction toward which the roundsman had started to go.

"Let me see the docket," he demanded.

The sergeant handed over the book, saying: "Nothing to-night, Mr. Prentice—only the regular bums and street cases."

The written record bore out this assertion. For just a moment Prentice was almost convinced that he had come on a wild goose chase. Then he detected a flicker in the sergeant's eyelids, and, in a flash, the cumulative suspicions of the night crystallized within him.

"No murder?" he asked.

"Nothing like that."

Prentice made one vigorous step toward the rear of the room. "What's there?" he called sharply, realizing that the roundsman was striving to cloak his view.

"Oh, that!" exclaimed the sergeant, with languid ease. "Just a bum—he's all in—croaked, I guess. Waiting for the doc."

In an instant Prentice had darted toward a dark object in the shadows behind. He struck a match and looked into the features of the gambler who had been with him all the afternoon.

It was Cornish, drilled with three bullets—and dead! Then, swift as thought, Prentice leaned down over the body and rapidly frisked it. His hands searched into all the pockets, into every fold of the clothes, down into the boots, and about the floor. There was not a vestige of a weapon! The gambler had been killed unarmed.

V.

THERE was a little boudoir clock beside the desk-telephone in the apartment of Mrs.

Cornish. When she phoned she had glanced at it. The hands stood at 1.17. As soon as Holma left she looked at it again. The time was now 1.22. That was the best she could do—five minutes.

The rest was on the lap of the gods. She collapsed on the bed, and presently was convulsed with low moaning, which trailed off into soft sobbing. Meanwhile, Holma was on his way to the station. Bravado had first deterred him from planting the gun. Next the woman had held him. But now there must be nothing further to postpone this essential act.

It happened that a block away he encountered two of his collectors. Five minutes earlier or five minutes later he would not have seen them, and he would have been at the station before Prentice. But —it was another link of the luck in the fatal chain being woven about him—these henchmen called him into a saloon, to a secreted room, to settle a question of accounts.

The stuss-rooms of a certain district, it seemed, had rebelled against Holma's levy of fifty per cent on their profits, when he had previously been content with only thirty-five, and he was obliged to spend precious minutes in bullying a sense of his authority into the two cowed, but bewildered and much-impressed henchmen.

First it was bravado. Then the woman. Now greed. Each, in its turn, had stayed him from the course of safety. Which was the ruling passion? Each had held him more than five minutes. Had he put aside thought of either he might yet have been saved, but—

Prentice entered the station at 1.53. Holma strolled in at 1.58. A little matter of five minutes—that was all!

The district attorney was wiping the blood from his hands on his pocket handkerchief when the outer door opened to admit the inspector of the district. Prentice stepped back a few feet into the shadow. The sergeant and the roundsman came to quick attention. The sergeant started to speak. The roundsman attempted to make an illuminating gesture.

The inspector, however, was evidently preoccupied and in one of his sullen moods. For the first time in the evening he seemed a bit anxious to hurry, and three little beads of sweat showed on his forehead.

"Where is it?" he demanded gruffly.

Again the sergeant started to utter his warning, but something clave the tongue to the roof of his mouth. He merely jerked a pudgy thumb toward the rear of the room.

Holma strode to the body and turned it over with his foot, so the light would fall on the mutilated face. Then he glanced down a minute at his former partner, who, in death, would be a living example enforcing obedience on all the underworld.

In his way he was glad and relieved. This would be his last deed of violence; no need of one after this. His soft picking could proceed apace now, with no murmur of dissent to stay his hand. With a grunt of final satisfaction he kicked the dead man.

Then he reached in his own outer pocket and drew forth a revolver, which he grasped by the middle, and leaned down to slip it beside Cornish's inert fingers.

A strong hand grasped his wrist. The revolver fell to the floor. The district attorney picked it up, broke it, saw that three chambers were empty, and thrust it in his pocket.

Frank Holma looked into the face of Jim Prentice. Deadly hate surged through him. Prentice dropped his wrist and passed him, toward the door, with alert but easy tread.

A sick fear succeeded the hate in Holma, and his face turned instantly the color of ashes. Instinctively he clenched his fists and started for the other. Then the training of a lifetime came to his aid, and, with a desperately bitter effort, he summoned a ghastly smile.

"You're messing around a bit late, aren't you, Mr. Prentice?" he asked, with an accent between a leer and a sneer.

"No, inspector," replied the district attorney as he reached the door. "I was lucky enough to be five minutes early—so I could save you the disagreeable necessity of searching that body. You needn't bother. I've gone over it myself, and there is no weapon on it."

Prentice bowed. "Perhaps your evidence will interest the grand jury," he said, as he stepped out toward his waiting cab. "I wish you a pleasant sleep. Good night."

Silent Martin

Part II

by *Captain Dingle*

Author of "Gold Out of Celebes," "The Clean-Up," "No Fear," "To Make or Break," "Three Palms Cay," etc.

PRECEDING CHAPTERS BRIEFLY RETOLD

MARTIN GRAY, a stranger, settles in Agua Fresca, a small settlement in Magellan Straits. He does no work, but seems to have money and is generally suspected of being a fugitive from justice. No one knows anything about him, however, except a man named Ralton, who partly through his knowledge and partly through his threat to sell his fourteen-year-old daughter, Frances Ralton, to whom Martin is greatly attached, to an aged and dissolute Chilean, blackmails Gray to the limit. Finally Gray is at the end of his resources, whereupon to get him out of the way Ralton, with the aid of Mike Ryan, a saloon hanger-on and bully, and a beachcomber named Phillip Henry, frame him and get him arrested for the robbery of the store of the town magnate, Josiah Nix.

CHAPTER VI.

SANDY'S STORY.

MARIA STODDER was not home, nor was Frances in the house, and a small Chilean servant told Martin that they had left for Punta Arenas with Frances's father that morning. The news was like a blow to the heart, until, in wistfully scrutinizing the vacant room where he stood, Martin saw signs which gave him hope. Scattered about the place were the few cheap, yet cherished, toys the girl owned; and on the table stood a small, exquisitely worked trinket box, his own present to Frances on her last birthday.

Surely, he thought, whatever her destination, she would never have left that had she been going away altogether. He picked the box up, and the Chilean maid, fearful lest he perhaps harbor evil designs upon it, hastened to assure him:

"Missy coming back to-morrow. You no take that away!"

Martin's overwrought feeling found vent in a laugh. He left the house, and the maid was glad to see him go, for his laugh was not a natural one. But his heart sang as he walked away, and as he strode through the street, insensibly turning toward the shore, all the bitterness of the morning, all the rage at the black accusation against him, evaporated in the elation brought by the belief that Ralton's threat to take Frances away had been an idle one.

He wandered along and came to a beached boat, about which some men were working, and the ring of the adze, the dull thud of calking-irons, the rip of planes filled the cold, clear air with music of industry. These men were his erstwhile companions, his friends; but now one-time friendly faces were either averted from him or turned to him with dark suspicion. He lingered by,

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feeling as never before the need for a companionable word, yet unwilling to beg for it; and for the first time he realized the full and awful force of the calamity that had befallen him.

"Get on with yer job, damn ye!" cried a heavy voice, and the stressed note in it forced Martin to glance at the speaker. He saw the bent back of a calker, the man who had spoken, and near him, rolling threads of oakum for the calker, a ragged furtive youth whose face seemed frozen in the very act of uttering words. As he caught Martin's eye he flashed a look which remained an enigma, but Martin felt sure he had been cheated of something he ought to hear.

This youth, a bit of orphaned jetsam of the Straits, known only by the name of Sandy, had not long graduated out of that class of youngsters to whom Silent Martin was self-elected godfather. He had been admitted into the charmed circle, without ever becoming one with the rest, for his ill-nurtured body had nursed a soul as badly fed, and it was not until he grew too old to be included in those merry picnics that he seemed to understand the disinterestedness of his friend's supervision. But once he realized this, he was devoted to Martin with the devotion of a dog; even pride had come to him in a sort, and when he had started to work he had gently declined to accept presents either of clothes or money, preferring to support himself as best he could. And Martin, smiling softly, had allowed the lad to do this, at the same time putting many little things in his way that would have passed him by otherwise.

And this youth was the only human being among that crew of busy workers who even attempted to give the accused man the solace of the spoken word, and the attempt was brutally frustrated. Silent Martin turned away dumbly, but something deep within him urged him to throw off his attitude of resignation and assert himself. That the thought was no freak was evident in the peculiar smile that wreathed his features as he took to the beach. Some long gone by episodes in his life recurred to him now, and the memory appeared to please him vastly. Before he had reached the point abreast of the hulk he was chuckling deep in his chest, and his gray eyes snapped with suddenly fanned fires. The sight of a man close by, carrying a rifle on his arm, brought him back to earth, and he bowed his head again, relaxed into his slower stride, and said aloud though to himself:

"Steady, old hoss! Steady as you go, Martin!"

The voice but not the words entirely carried to the guard, and that puzzled worthy stared at the man he was set to watch. Afterward, when he was relieved, he had a strange tale to tell of the going mad of Silent Martin.

Until the afternoon Martin wandered aimlessly. At first he felt resentment, then curiosity concerning the imminent arrival of the police from Punta Arenas. He did not go near his house, he took no food; he felt he neither needed food nor cared to enter the house; but toward five o'clock he was impelled, perhaps by the strange force that governed his life, to be at home when the police came for him.

Midway to the house Sandy ran up to him, panting from fast running, flinging backward glances of fear to the shore, and seized Martin by the arm.

"Please, I got to tell you," he chattered, and Martin stopped him until he grew calmer. Then he bade him speak, and the lad exclaimed in a torrent of words, with many a fearful look behind, that he knew who the thief was who had robbed Nix's store.

"You do, hey?" smiled Martin, still soothing the boy. "They say it was me, Sandy."

"They be liars! I know it! I see 'em comin' out—"

"They? More than one, hey?"

"Yes. Only one done it, but there was others outside. 'Twas that feller Ralton! He swiped the money!"

"Are you sure?" demanded Martin, gripping the boy's arm fiercely.

"'Course I be. I ain't blind, if they do say I'm cracked! I be going to be on hand, too, when them policemen come fer you, Mr. Gray. They ain't goin' to take you away on no such trick as that."

Martin only heard Sandy's assertion of certainty. The rest was wasted on empty air, for he wrestled hard with a sudden and stupendous problem. The fact that Sandy's evidence would count for little, on account of the contempt in which he was held, scarcely occurred to him then; what weighed, about equally balanced in the scales, was how this revelation must affect his little friend. What effect would her father's condemnation have on Frances? Would his own vindication be worth the cost of seeing her droop beneath the weight of her father's fault?

At this point the worth of Sandy's evidence came before his mind. He had kept tight hold on the lad's arm, never knowing the pain he was inflicting in his stress; and now he asked sharply:

"Did you see the other two? Do you know them?"

"No, sir. I couldn't make 'em out in the dark, but I see Ralton all right. I ain't mistook, neither."

So against his own denial, and Sandy's loyal defense, would be pitted the denials of Ralton and his accomplices. There was no doubt as to the identity of the other two, for they had all three spoken to him last night—Ralton, Henry, and Ryan. Again the spectre arose of Frances, a target for the sidewise glances of all the smug, self-righteous folk who would cheerfully visit the father's sin upon the daughter; and in an instant his decision was taken. His grip tightened on Sandy's arm until the lad cried out and writhed with the agony; and there was nothing of softness or kindliness in the voice that barked:

"Sandy! Did I ever hurt you?"

"No, sir," lied Sandy, squirming. Martin suddenly realized the pain he was inflicting now, and his grip relaxed. He said:

"I don't mean like this, boy. Have I ever struck you, or shown you anything but kindness?"

"No, sir. I never had nobody kind like you."

Sandy started whimpering, but Martin went on with no lessening of harshness in his tone:

"Listen. You are to forget everything you have just told me. You are to forget you saw Ralton last night. You are never to speak a word about it unless I say so. Understand? And mark this, Sandy, I'll kill you if you utter one word I've told you not to. Now repeat what I've said."

The lad shot a terrified look up into Martin's face, and saw nothing there but a fierce resolve. He shivered, hung his head, and recited in an awed voice, "I ain't to say nothin' about what I seen. I ain't to tell nobody what I told you. I never seen Ralton, nor nobody. 'Tis all a lie, s'help me good Gawd!"

The addition of the oath was Sandy's idea for showing his absolute adherence to Martin no matter what his commands; the lad's intensity worked a change in the man. He laid a hand gently on the lad's head.

"No, Sandy, it isn't a lie. It's just because I want you to say nothing at all that I threatened you. I want you to be my friend still; but I will do as I said if you disobey me. It isn't all for my sake. Some day I'll tell you about it. Now cut along home. If you come to my place this evening, before I'm taken away, I'll give you the little ship you like so much."

"Yes, sir," said Sandy, subduedly, and slouched off like a whipped dog.

Martin resumed his walk homeward, and he wondered, smiling grimly, if he would find his house in the hands of the law. Almost as bad was the actual fact; for he neared the door to meet Josiah Nix, puffing pursily, turkey-red of face.

"Gray, I've waited for you all day!" he cried angrily. "Been trying to get away, hey?"

"No," returned Martin curtly. "What is it?"

"Matter o' business, matter o' business. How about that loan?"

Martin stared at the man. The loan mentioned was the five hundred dollars he had borrowed on the security of his home to give to Ralton. In his extremity he had been forced to go to Nix; but he had forgotten the matter in the newer troubles that had assailed him. Something in the situation struck him with its humor, and he laughed outright.

"D'you think I'm going to repay that out of the money I stole last night, Nix?

Isn't it a new idea to dun a criminal waiting arrest? I'm afraid your case is hopeless."

"Damn your impertinence!" sputtered Nix, "I'll see whether it's hopeless or not. I get principal and interest from you within an hour, or I foreclose and take your place and effects. You've got the money all right." Martin shook his head wearily.

The man before him, pompous and purse-proud, mean-souled and paltry in principle, could not conceal the emotion that gripped him. Even in his desire to break the man he hated, he yet held on tightly to the governing motive of his daily existence, and he could not rest for thinking of losing both his loan and his hoard together. Something he must and would recover. And inwardly he felt assured that he was pursuing the shrewd course in making this attack; for he believed that, to retain his few belongings, Martin would go to any length, and once let him produce the cash and the case of the robbery was settled, since by no other means, according to Nix's warped judgment, could he raise cash. If he repaid that loan, it being known widely that he was penniless yesterday, it must be certain that he was the thief.

Martin chafed under the cunning regard of those little piggy eyes; but he disappointed Josiah Nix badly.

"No use, Nix," he said. "You must foreclose, I suppose. I'll take out my personal effects at once. I couldn't raise the price of a pound of nails."

"You take out nothing!" roared Nix, shaking a pudgy fist in Martin's face. "Everything but what you stand in is in the bond!"

"Surely not—not my—"

"Everything! You have an hour."

Nix watched keenly, hoping yet that the thought of losing all those cherished little possessions would force Martin to reveal hidden resources. But there were no such resources, as Martin well knew.

"I—I can keep that ship model, and that frame, can't I?" he asked humbly, pushing open the door and indicating the objects with outflung hand.

"Yes, if your produce the cash! You have an hour," retorted Nix, and strode away from the house. He paused to call back, "And I have the place watched. Don't think you can steal anything away."

He departed, and the fear was born in him that Silent Martin perhaps was not the thief after all. For surely, he pondered, the threatened loss of everything would prove too strong to combat, and to save his treasures he would pay the loan if he had the money, no matter how he got it.

"He has got it!" he muttered fiercely. "He's sparrin' for time. The police 'll bring him to the scratch all right."

But Martin had no intention of coming to time. He entered the house, his home yet for an hour, and began deliberately to pack a bag with the most valued of his smaller effects. He muttered the while he packed, looking out now and then to see if Sandy was coming. Opposite the house a man loitered, and he knew him for one of Nix's toadies; knew that he was watching over him. Sandy appeared soon after Nix had gone, slinking along furtively, glancing in apprehension at the watchful loiterer, until Martin saw him and shouted cheerily:

"Come, Sandy, you're late. Here's your ship, lad."

He handed the little craft out, and Sandy took it as if he handled the work of angels. His doglike eyes glistened, and he gazed up in speechless thanks to the giver. Then he went away, clutching his treasure; and the man across the road started after him, shaking a stick and calling on the boy to stop.

CHAPTER VII.

CAPTAIN STURGIS.

SANDY responded in surprising fashion. He took to his heels and ran like a deer, and the man who called on him to stop poised his heavy stick to throw at the boy's legs. In the instant when the stick quivered in aim, Silent Martin reached the man, and the stick clattered to the ground; and the startled fellow gaped in fright, as a pair of sinewy hands fastened on his throat.

"Leave the boy alone! Leave him

alone!" gritted Martin, his face convulsed, his fingers tightening in frenzy. The sensation of flesh under his physical grip seemed to arouse a long quiescent devil in Martin, and his blazing eyes were those of a potential homicide. The futile chattering of the man's teeth, the wide, glassy stare of fearful eyes, the impotent squirming of the anguished body, only added fuel to Martin's wrath, and murder was very imminent when a powerful hand fell on his arm, shaking him savagely, and a gale-nurtured voice roared in his ear:

"Avast there! Belay the damned foolishness, Gray! Here, what—darn ye, man! Cut it out, I tell ye!"

Another hand fell, and Martin felt himself launched headlong against the wall of the shed beside which the struggle raged. The shock forced him to relinquish his gasping victim, and as soon as he recovered his balance the strong hands gripped him again, and set him firmly on his feet. He looked up into the ruddy, stern face of Captain Sturgis, and in the moment of surprise his recent victim seized the opening to make himself scarce as fast as his tottering legs would allow.

"Now what's it all about?" demanded the old seadog, keenly scrutinizing the man he had saved from committing a real crime. "Tell me."

"There's nothing to tell you," returned Martin, sullenly.

"There is, too. What was the lad doing? Stealing?"

"No. He was saving his own property, that's all. I stopped that rat with the stick from meddling."

"Yes, and would have stopped his wind, too, if I hadn't hove in sight, Gray. See here, man, I'm your friend," stated Sturgis warmly, "and you'd better give me the facts. If you don't, I can't help you, and I want to. Expecting arrest, ain't you?"

"Yes," snapped Martin. "How did you know?"

"Easy. I'm sent to arrest you. Sworn in special for it. Heard about your trouble in Punta Arenas, so I pulled some strings I hold. Been wondering, I can tell you, man, why you never sent in my bill. Sniffed something wrong, 'specially when I heard about the pranks of a couple of your precious friends from here. Now tell me all about it, else I'll just have to pull you in and take you according to orders. Come now. Open up."

"I didn't send your bill because I never finished the job," replied Martin gloomily.

"Why? Tired of it?"

"No, scared!"

Sturgis peered hard into Martin's haggard face for a moment; then seized his arm in a determined grasp and urged him back toward his house.

"Huh! You scared! Of what? Come on home. You and me's going to have a full and plenty talk, my friend. Old Bill Sturgis don't let a good man go adrift for no damned nonsense. You're going to open up right now and loosen your jaw-tackles. Come on."

Martin led the breezy old fellow to the house, and told him, with a harsh laugh not good to hear, as they entered.

"Have to cut it short. I won't have any right in here half an hour from now."

"Oh, don't cackle like a fool hen, Gray! You're not in the stone frigate yet by a jugful, and won't be if I can help you get to windward of it."

"The frigate's got nothing to do with it, Sturgis. The shack's to be taken for debt, and the taking's due in thirty minutes."

Sturgis glanced around the place, took in all its many attractions which appealed strongly to his own tastes, then peered straight at Martin and asked with assumed carelessness:

"Who's got the rope round you, Gray?"

"Nix."

"Huh! Same fat old lubber as sent for me, hey?"

"Yes."

Bill Sturgis glared furiously at the man he had come to arrest, and yelled:

"Nix! Yes! Oh! Hum! For the love of old Neptune's runaway daughter, open up! What's biting you? Can't you understand yet that I want to lend you a hand, you darned oyster?"

"You can't do anything for me, Sturgis; much obliged," replied Martin gloomily. "The debt's legitimate, and the crime's apparently proved in the minds of those who

want to fasten it on me. What else is there to happen?"

"This!" The old seaman shook a great, red, hairy fist under Martin's nose and growled like a sore bear, "I'm coming to live down here pretty soon. I like to live near men, or at least one man. You're the only two-legged animal I've seen who looks or talks like a man. Damn my eyes! That ain't right either. You did look and talk man-fashion, but now you're bleating like a bloomin' goat. Anyhow, I've taken a fancy to you, Gray, and that's enough. I ain't going to let you play the giddy ass. If you won't open up and talk to me, by the Great Horn Spoon, I'll set to and whale the oakum out o' you!"

Silent Martin laughed softly, yet avoided the angry eyes boring into him. He felt instinctively that he was with a real friend; and his heart urged him to confide in him. But to do so utterly meant revealing things which he was suffering much to conceal.

"I'm afraid I haven't got much oakum left in me," he said a trifle bitterly. "I couldn't struggle with you anyhow, Sturgis. I believe you're my friend, but I've nothing to tell you."

"How'd ye get into Nix's claws? Can you tell me that?"

"No. It's entirely my affair."

"Jumpin' mackerel!" snorted Sturgis, raising both hands skyward in despair. "Then can you tell me this, you lump o' wood! Did you swipe old Nix's cashbox?"

"No!"

"Oh, you chatterbox!" groaned the old skipper. "'No,' says you, and shuts up tight. Perhaps you know who did, hey?"

"Yes."

"Then tell me, you tongue-tied lummox! How d'ye expect me to haul ye off the shoals if you don't heave me a line?"

Martin shook his head wearily and remarked, "I can't tell you who took the money. Anyhow, I won't. I can say this, though, without hurting anybody: If I could do it I'd pay Josiah Nix dollar for dollar all he lost."

Sturgis opened his mouth to howl wrathfully, but stopped. He regarded Silent Martin for a long minute as he might regard some queer fish of the sea. The man was a puzzle to his honest soul; yet he detected beneath the veneer of stubbornness that great spirit, long-suffering, patient, generous, which characterized Martin in the eyes of every friend he had ever made, and they were many.

Here was an accused man making a statement which would be accepted as a tacit confession of guilt by most people, since surely no one would want to repay that which he had never had; yet through the maze there shone the light of innocence. Sturgis abandoned all hope of persuading Martin to talk at greater length; he shut his teeth with a snap, took it upon himself to judge the accused guiltless, and left the house with a sharply snapped command:

"Stay here. I'm coming right back."

Left to himself, Silent Martin went back to his packing with methodical deliberation. Through all his recent turmoil, the paramount thought had been, would he see Frances again before they took him away. And as the hour drew near when he must leave Agua Fresca, the bitterness welled afresh within his breast. For an instant he was impelled to go outside and blurt the truth to the first man he met. But he smothered the impulse when the picture of his little friend rose before him, and to his imagination her solemn little face was marred with the knowledge of her father's fault.

He cast aside every outside consideration and hurried to finish his packing. He had no idea where he could leave his small belongings in security, and small as they were, simply his clothes and trifles of no value to others, he wanted to hold on to them; but somehow he felt sure that he might give them into Sturgis's keeping with easy mind.

He was ready, standing in the doorway, when the skipper returned, and the old fellow's first words staggered him.

"You can unpack, you talkative cuss. I'm your landlord now, and the rent ain't too high, either. I ain't taking you to the clink, old-timer, so rest easy."

"Why—what have you done?" stammered Martin.

"Just amused myself makin' a balky mule move. You're the mule. Listen, I've

bought the plaster Nix held on your gear; and the fat swab's been lickin' my boots. Faugh! I hate the greasy lubber! He thinks I'll be a good man to be in with when I live here, so he agreed to drop the charge against you if you undertake to make good his loss. Now I'm willing to gamble a bit more on you, Gray—Silent Martin, Esq.—on your hard-headed honesty, loyalty, dumb foolishment, whatever it is—and I'll pay him myself, leaving you to pay me. Then you can go away, take a ship, and—"

"Thanks, but I can't go away," Martin interjected, with the old stubbornness vibrant in his voice. "You needn't bother to pay him; and you've got money's worth in this place, so you won't lose anything."

Amazement, more complete than ever, sat on the face of Sturgis. His keen eyes snapped, and his great chest rose and fell spasmodically. Twice he tried to speak, but only incoherent sounds issued from his quivering lips. Not until he laid heavy hands on the man before him did his voice obey his brain; but while he shook Martin savagely he roared:

"Can't go away! Can't go—blast the man! What will ye do if I take ye to jail? Ain't that going away? Why, confound you! Of all the dumb, misunderstandable, awkward lummoxes, you take the biscuit! Here"—he gave another shake that made Martin's head roll on his shoulders. Martin made no effort to avoid the attack. He knew it was induced by friendship, and he felt, too, that his attitude was calculated to irritate the old seadog—"here! I ain't sailed the seas forty years to be licked at last by a wooden-headed lunatic! You're stubborn. So'm I. Set down there!" He slammed Martin hard down into the whale-rib chair, and stood before him with folded arms. "Now, you're going to loosen up before you get out o' that chair. It ain't too late to take you down to Punta Arenas yet; then what about goin' away? Hey? Talk, you dumb fool! What's the maggot that's bitin' yer brain?"

Martin sat where he was put, but he raised his head, and in his face was a smile, not all bitterness, something of the smile he wore when first arriving in Agua Fresca. He ignored his inquisitor's questions, and said quietly:

"Sturgis, I wish you were thirty years younger. I can't fight with an old man. So go as far as you like. I'm helpless in your hands."

"Fight? Oh, you can talk fight, can you?" sneered Sturgis. Then his voice and expression softened. He placed a hand firmly but gently on Martin's shoulder, and said, "Never mind fighting, old son. Just go along the lines that Bill Sturgis is old enough to be yer daddy. Now, boy, tell me yer troubles. I ain't got a son o' my own, worse luck. He died."

There was a slight, very slight, break in the old man's roaring voice, and Martin detected the humid mist stealing into those snapping, wind-defying eyes. His own soul shrieked for the relief of the given confidence; his stubbornness weakened under the influence of this gruff, iron-handed old seaman who refused to accept rebuffs in his efforts to help.

Much of his trouble was of an intimate nature, it ought to remain for ever a secret to others, but unaccountably the feeling persisted that here at last was a man who, in his own defection, might well prove a friend to Frances in her need. The thought decided Silent Martin. He took the old man's free hand in a hard grip, and said quietly:

"Lock the door, Captain Sturgis. Take a pipe of 'baccy. But wait. Perhaps you won't want to have the door locked."

"Why, in the name o' goodness?"

"Because you'll be locked in with a murderer!"

CHAPTER VIII.

DON FILIPE APPEARS.

FOR a moment Sturgis stared at Silent Martin, then laughed outright: a roaring, unbelieving, body-shaking spasm of merriment.

"Who's the murderer? You? Gray, you're crazy as a loon! Don't ever tell me a tale like that. Why, man alive, you couldn't murder a rat that 'd eaten yer last cracker. Yer too darned soft-hearted."

"All the same, it's true," replied Martin, simply. "A murderer and fugitive from justice; jail-breaker and runaway, forced to hide like a sneak, scared to step outside the boundaries of these paltry little ports at the tip of the world."

It was a long speech for Martin to make, and when he had finished Sturgis was regarding him rather differently. When he had insisted upon hearing Gray's troubles, he had never bargained to hear anything like this now suggested; but he was resolved to aid his new friend to the extent of his no small power, and now he just nodned and snapped out:

"Cut loose then. Speak up!"

Martin gloomed at the fire for several minutes before he seemed to decide to unburden himself of his secret. Old Sturgis left him alone, but watched him intently, not yet willing to utterly believe the astounding announcement of so deep a shade of guilt. He was mildly shocked when Gray laughed presently, for the laugh was that of a man embittered; but still waited in patience for the words that came in the wake of the laugh.

"I don't know why I am telling you this," said Martin, rising and beginning to pace back and forth. "I suppose I'm just foolish, as you have told me. But here's the truth, for what it's worth, and you can make the most of it. It's short enough.

"It was up at Santa Cruz. I heard a woman's name flung about by a boozy ruffian, and I knew the woman." Silent Martin shivered as he spoke. "I took the thing up, and we fought. Oh, it was just one of those dirty barroom fights; except that I had a motive other than bad whisky. The soak was too drunk to do well, and I hammered him badly. It might have stopped there, but when the fellow got sober, he yelled about the town that what he had said was truth, and that he would find me out and pound the truth into my ears. Everybody heard him; everybody heard me curse him when I knew he was repeating the foul insult to the woman's name.

"Cutting out the preliminaries, Sturgis, we met and got to grips again. Men heard me say I'd kill him. I choked him and pitched him over a cliff. He was never found, and I was locked up. The man was too well known for the thing to be hushed; besides he had plenty of friends, lots of money. I had neither in that port. But while waiting my trial, I heard some news which simply forced me to get out of the place—news of the woman.

"I escaped by burrowing with my naked fingers under two walls. Then I stole a boat—" Martin stopped abruptly, and in the firelight his face was working hideously. Sturgis stared in wonder. He could not imagine an event which would affect such a man in such a manner. But he kept silent, and Martin resumed, "Sturgis, I rowed from Santa Cruz to this place. Rowed without food, without water; rowed through hell in a pampero that put the fear of death into my blood and has made me a coward in sight of the sea ever since. I—well, I got here, verified the news, and here I must stay until—until somebody either dies or agrees to something which is life itself to me."

The silence fell between the two men, until in the red and black of the fire-glow it seemed a tangible thing. Outside there was a subtle whine in the wind; tiny particles of sand pattered against the window in the sharper gusts; the timber frames of the building creaked and the vault of the wide chimney hummed.

"Who was the tough you killed?" Sturgis asked at length.

"A waster from the Islands — Sim Rance."

"What! That scab-skinned seal-stealer? Gawshamighty! You done the earth a good turn, Gray."

"Perhaps. The earth thinks otherwise, though," Martin smiled wearily.

Sturgis regarded his companion closely, as if pondering the wisdom of putting the question next in mind; then asked:

"Who was the woman? Is she here? Why must you stay in Agua Fresca?"

"Neither question concerns you, Sturgis," retorted Martin sharply, and the older man grunted as if struck. He concealed his disgust, however, and asked further:

"Anybody know of the little affair up there? Anybody here?"

"Ye-es," hesitated Gray. "There is somebody, somebody who matters. Here, too."

"I see daylight," growled Sturgis. "Who is it? I'll get busy and fix him so's you can move about."

"You can't fix him. It's my private affair entirely. As for my movements, I came here because I wished to come here. I don't want to move anywhere else, at least, while matters stand as they are. Thanks all the same."

"Huh! Some fool notion about extradition, I s'pose?"

"Yes—that's it, of course," agreed Martin, but his face belied his words, and the old seaman was not deceived.

"All right," he growled. "Keep yer blessed secrets. You'd better have a deep think, and let me know when I come back what you're going to do. I'll stay here to-night, anyway. To-morrow I'll see about paying Nix his money, and you can decide how you're going to pay me. My advice is that you get away from this place. You can earn money; a man of your sort can make money anywhere; and maybe things won't be very easy for you here after this little turn-up."

"Don't bother," Martin said shortly. "I shall stay here. You won't pay Nix, either. I'll work on at my carving, and pay him myself. D'you imagine things can be any harder now than they have been before?"

"You're a high-falutin' idiot!" retorted the old skipper. I s'pose you're too independent to live in this shack, now I own it."

"I'll rent it from you, if you like," was all that Martin would say to that.

For a breath Sturgis glared and snorted. Then a grim smile worked through the harshness of his weathered old face, and he said as he turned the door-handle:

"Plain fool! Blood and bones, ye're the dumbest loon I ever see. But," he muttered as he left, "I like you, Silent Martin!"

Left alone again Martin stood a while considering; then with uncertain fingers began to unpack his bag. His lips muttered without sound as he replaced his few poor effects; but the trouble in his face was lightened a little by the simple thought that he might remain in this place that had become dear to him.

He thought he heard voices outside, and paused in his work; thinking it was the wind, he resumed, and he was startled sharply when the voices sounded close by and the door was thrown open to the accompaniment of a jarring laugh which held the note of triumph rather than mirth. The laugh was suddenly cut short; and Martin looked at the intruders and made out Ralton, flushed, bright-eyed, but expressing surprise and chagrin. Over his shoulder peered a dark, evilly handsome face. It was the face of a cultured devil rather than of a man, Martin was convinced in that brief glance. High forehead, eagle nose, pointed beard, and sensuous lips—

Martin's swift examination of the man was interrupted by a face which now appeared at Ralton's other side—a woman's face. It was the sort of face one would expect to find beside that dark masculine one opposite. All the intense fire of tempestuous life burned there; but the fires were shaded by a veil of subtle repression which rendered the beautiful features soft and tender. Only in the fiery points deep down in those limpid pools of her eyes, and in the tiny curl of the red lips parting to reveal gleaming teeth, might experience detect ineradicable signs of her trade: the signs of the adventuress, the tigress if need be.

His scrutiny was made in a flash. All these points were taken in by Martin in a breath. The group stood in the doorway in momentary silence, and it was evident that an unforeseen condition confronted them. But Martin gave them no thought; for in the dimness behind the group he saw a smaller figure, and before words came to the others Frances rushed in, crying out to him:

"Oh, Martin! They said you had gone to prison! How can they make such jokes? I was frightened to death."

He slipped his arm about the child's shoulders, and reassured her with low-spoken words which soon brought smiles through the welling tears. Frances turned to her father, and shook a small finger at him archly.

"If you play games with me like that again, I shall run away and live with Uncle Martin," she cried.

Something drew Martin's eyes to the group in the door again; and his blood burned and chilled in swift changes at the faces his eyes lighted upon. If ever demon dwelt in man, it lurked then in the dark face of the stranger. His black eyes flashed with lascivious fires; the sensuous lips quivered vividly between beard and mustache; the thin nostrils dilated. And with a violent shudder Martin realized that the man's intense regard was fastened upon his little friend, Frances.

Instinctively his arm pressed the girl closer, and the soft laugh with which she responded warmed his heart, gave him an accession of strength which made him feel himself more than a match for any foe that might appear. He was conscious that he was under a sharp scrutiny from the heavily lidded eyes of the strange woman, but gave no glance at her; for Ralton had stepped inside, taken Frances by the arm, and was saying:

"Come, Frances. We're intruding. Don Felipe, we're a bit too early." And of Martin he asked, with an assumption of indifference, "What time are the police taking you away, Gray?"

Martin saw through the man at once. With the cunning of a mean nature, Ralton had heaped humiliation upon him in this visit. In the belief that Martin was at that moment under arrest, he had brought Frances to witness her friend's disgrace. And to add all possible pain to the interview he had brought with him Don Filipe, the Chilean rake, and his present mistress, Carlotta Montez, notorious in three capitals, presumably the last woman in the world for any decent parent to associate his daughter with.

Martin felt the shudder run through the small maid in his arm, and rage blazed within him at sight of the vulpine glare of Don Felipe. His anger blinded him to something he might otherwise have noticed with pleasure; he failed to see the flash of furious jealousy which made for a moment an evil thing of the lovely face of Carlotta Montez.

"I am not leaving here, Ralton," he said quietly, in reply to the question.

"Not leaving—but the police are due now to take you," returned Ralton.

"You're mistaken. I'm remaining in Agua Fresca, Ralton."

Frances quivered with delight, and seized his hand. But to Ralton those words opened up a long vista of awful possibilities, and he was uneasy. None knew better than he that Josiah Nix's store had never been robbed by Martin Gray. But the evidence, so cleverly staged, had seemed without flaw; and now, if the accused were not to be taken in charge, what did it mean? Was it possible that the real criminal were known?

The thought worked a change in his attitude toward Gray. In the event that such a terrible possibility became fact, no man would stand more in need of a friend than Ralton. And his eyes searched Martin's face for light which was denied him. He altered his tone, yet tried to carry out his assumed rôle of superiority.

"Oh, glad to hear it," he said. "Then we won't stay. I thought of renting the place, y'know," he lied clumsily. "Don Felipe has bought Charton's old sheep-ranch house to live in. Going to be neighbors, y'see?"

He uttered words without apparent motive. What he said had no bearing on the situation. It seemed as though the man's plans had gone adrift to such an extent that he knew not what to say. But he was aware of the growing impatience of his two companions, and repeated, "Come, Frances, we'll go."

"Yes, come, Frances," Don Felipe echoed, and his voice was silky and musical with the timbre of careful training. "Come along, little one; Carlotta shall show you the pony I've got for you."

"I don't want to go. I don't want a pony," cried Frances emphatically. "I want to visit my friend and I hate you and your pony and your bad woman!"

Felipe laughed softly, but his eyes glittered. Carlotta bit her lip until the blood showed darkly beneath the delicate skin, but there was gratification rather than resentment in her eyes.

"Frances!" cried Ralton angrily. "I won't permit you to speak like that. Don Felipe is right. This is no place for you. I want you to come with me right away."

"Yes, little girl, you'd better go," whispered Martin, smiling down at the flushed, small face in which something of the awakening woman gave dignity to the impetuous anger of the child. "Don't be afraid, Frances. I'm not going away. I shall be near you and we'll soon get back to the old times again. Don't anger your father."

"I'll go, if you want me to," replied the girl quietly, "but I won't go to live in that old sheep-ranch. I hate black men!" she added, with a delicious little flash of contempt toward Felipe that made Martin smile and brought dark fury to the face of the Chilean. There was no mistaking her meaning, for she looked boldly at the Chilean as she uttered "black men," and only the habit of years enabled him to restrain his rage.

He swiftly assumed a smile which revealed flashing teeth, and bowed. The girl called out her farewell to Martin and left the place, full of dignity in spite of the awkwardness of limb which was the inevitable sign of her imminent transition into adolescence.

Silent Martin did not see the others leave. He turned again to his rearrangements, ignoring them; but he experienced a queer sensation just before the door closed, as if he were under the hot regard of a pair of burning eyes, almost as if he heard a seductive voice whispering close to his ear. And, when the sound of footsteps had died away outside, a faint eddy of air within the room enwrapped him with a lingering, insinuating perfume that caused him to shake his head in contempt, for he recognized in it the sensuous fragrance that had entered his door with the person of Carlotta Montez.

CHAPTER IX.

TWO WOMEN.

ANOTHER person in Agua Fresca seemed deeply concerned in the situation of Martin Gray. Maria Stodder spent a restless night after the news was circulated that no arrest would be made, but that Silent Martin had lost his home for debt. She felt a little uneasy regarding the identity of the man who had taken over the mortgage in order that Josiah Nix should not turn out Martin; she even felt a tinge of jealousy, for she fondly imagined that she alone had considered befriending the disgraced man. What her motives were might be guessed at from her self-communion while dressing in the morning.

"A passel of hyenas, that's what they are!" she muttered, tugging a formidable iron instrument out of a curl twenty years too youthful for her face. "After his money, they are. But I'll beat 'em to it."

She dabbed the curl into place, simpering into the cracked mirror, showing her teeth in order to ascertain the style of smile which would least reveal their imperfections. And as she selected saucy ribbons, and encased her solid frame in corsets only adapted to the soft curves of young womanhood, she mused, "I wonder just what Mr. Gray is. He's a wise old owl, I'll be bound. Makes out to have lost all his money, yet he don't go away. Gold mines, or stocks, one or the other, I know. Ah, if other men were as clever as him!"

She drifted away into dreams which caused a smile of exquisite anticipation to pucker her face. Her small eyes almost vanished between tight-screwed lids, her dry, thin lips pursed as if about to administer a kiss capable of blighting a baby's young life; she took her umbrella and marched from the house, with her head erect and her eyelashes dropping superciliously for the benefit of whomever she might meet, and as she wended her way toward Martin's house she told herself, "And why not, I should like to know? He ain't so young, and I ain't so old, neither."

She found Martin utilizing the time of waiting for Captain Sturgis in finishing an exquisite wood model of a group of seals, which he had once packed up and afterward unpacked. He remained seated when she entered in response to his invitation succeeding her knock at the door; but when he realized that his visitor was not gruff old Bill Sturgis he rose slowly, bending toward her no very cordial expression.

"Oh, good morning, Mr. Gray, I'm so glad to see you all right, and those ruffians who said you were a—oh, excuse me, but, anyhow, I want to say that my house is yours any time you want a lodging, and—" She went on like a machine gun, spilling words bewilderingly, until Martin saw through her object and halted her with:

"Hold on! Don't waste breath like that. I'm staying here—and I'm very busy."

For an instant all the vinegary temper that lay under the smooth exterior threatened to erupt and spoil Maria's carefully studied effect; but before too late she remembered those gold mines, those stocks and things, which her imagination had created, and she simpered in reply:

"I'm so glad! I knew your stealing that money was only a big story. And of course you're busy this time of day. But you'll need somebody to do for you now, and I'll bring some lunch down for you at noon. Good-by!" She uttered the "good" in a high note, and dropped coquettishly on the "by," waving a cotton-gloved hand at his unappreciative back.

"Please don't bother," he called after her. "I want no more attention than I did before; and certainly I want no intrusion."

Maria Stodder stopped in her tracks, horrified. Then the thin features snarled, and she took no care now whether good or bad teeth showed. However, gold mines and stocks, vague though they were, exerted a strong enough spell over her to conquer her anger, and she walked away without retort, persuading herself that any man must act like that after such a perturbing experience as Silent Martin had recently passed through.

Justice once during the walk home she emerged from her veil of thought. Midway from Martin's shack to the one street whereon she dwelt she met in full career a stranger—a gorgeous creature seemingly descended from a land of fashions and figure effects to dazzle Agua Fresca. The stranger was a woman, red-lipped, limpid-eyed, with a simple plan of dress which shrieked at all the world to notice the svelte perfections of the body it covered.

The woman's action in walking alone was sufficient to force attention; for her slim shoulders were set back, accentuating her firm chest and perfect bust, her round waist swayed slightly as she swung from hips modeled after Venus Victrix, and as her small feet flashed beneath her short skirt one caught more than glimpses of high insteps, slim ankles, silk-clad, and the swelling lines of hose vanishing into a filmy cloud of snowy gauze petticoat.

Maria turned rudely, caring nothing for the rudeness, and stared after the astonishing vision. Carlotta Montez passed on as if no such creature as Maria Stodder existed; and the spinster resumed her homeward walk, muttering:

"Hussy! Who's she, anyhow? One of them fast women, I'll be bound. Fat lot she'll find down here!"

Carlotta Montez pursued her calm progress toward the front, and none might know the tumult that dwelt within her breast as she came in sight of the humble home of Silent Martin Gray. She knocked on the door, and there was a delay before Martin opened it, showing a face less cordial than before. But when he saw his visitor, sensed that intoxicating perfume in which she seemed to move, his pale face flushed and he stammered:

"Good morning, madam. Can I do anything for you? Show you anything?"

The woman looked at him with quizzical intentness, appraising him, and at his question she seemed to be helped out of a slight difficulty. With a smile as guileless as Frances might wear, she nodded, and replied in a voice like celestial chimes:

"Yes, of course, Mr. Gray. I came to look at some of your exquisite woodwork. May I?" And she intruded a shapely foot inside the room.

Martin stood aside, opening wide the door, and for once in his recent life felt awkward and at a loss. He was not by any means unsophisticated. Like other men of the sea he had sowed oats as wild as the next man's. Women to him had come under two very simple heads—good women and not so good. He knew very well that this visitor was one of the not so good, yet there was that about her which forced courtesy and a degree of respect only awarded customarily to her sisters of the

other class. And, he shuddered imperceptibly at the thought, the glance she swept him with from under those long, languorous lashes, was less directed at the carver of wood than at the man.

"I haven't much to show you just now," he blurted out, determined to confine the talk to business. "In a week or so I'll have something finished. The mail steamer called last week, and cleaned me out. This is all I have," he said, lifting the board on which disported his group of seals.

"Charming!" she cooed, touching the piece lightly with her gloved hand. Her eyes roved about the interior, yet seemed to see nothing of what she claimed to be the object of her visit. Rather she seemed to be scrutinizing the character of the man by means of his surroundings; and presently her gaze dwelt directly on him again.

"You'll let me buy that when it's finished, won't you?" she smiled. Then her eyes looked far away again, and her face was less beautiful by reason of the feline flash that came from them as she demanded without further preamble, "Tell me just what your interest in the Ralton girl consists of, Mr. Gray."

Martin's lips set hard, and his eyes glittered coldly. So this was the real object of the surprising visit. Instinctively he armed against an expected adversary, prepared to go to extreme in defense of his little friend. And the woman appeared to detect something of his thoughts, for her sweetest smile flashed again as she added, "Whatever your interest is, mine is that of a friend of hers. That's the reason I ask you."

"Frances didn't seem overwhelmed with joy when you took her away last evening," he retorted, meeting her cleverly controlled gaze with gray eyes steady and cold as ice.

"Ah, that is my misfortune," she answered with a charming sigh. "I hope before long to persuade our delicious little lady of my affection. Meanwhile, what are you to her, or she to you?"

"That can hardly be replied to in bald words, madam. It is enough for you to know that she is such to me that I will take excellent care she comes to no harm at the hands of you or your paramour!"

Carlotta laughed, but a hint of weariness crept into her merriment. For a fleeting instant tiny lines crept about her eyes and lips; but she did not resent his words, only replied gently:

"Then we should be able to meet on common ground, my friend. If there is anything on earth I am sure of it is that no woman shall usurp my place while I live."

"You talk utter nonsense!" ejaculated Martin. He, the real friend, taking the place of parent almost, had been blind to the fact which was obvious to others, that Frances had broken the chrysalis of childhood and was emerging, wings trembling for flight, one might say, into young womanhood. "What absolute nastiness!" he cried angrily. "A child—just a pretty child—and you speak of her as one capable of becoming a rival? Madam, you're mad!"

Carlotta regarded him out of half-closed eyes, her blood-red lips rounded as if to whistle. Then she laughed again, not without a trace of contempt, and answered him:

"Perhaps. But I would suggest you use your eyes. The child, as you term her, is about to burst forth into an amazing womanhood. Don't be fooled. Don Felipe isn't a novice. I tell you he's wise as the devil in such things. But I won't look on and see this new development without a fight. That is why I again ask you, what is your interest in Frances Ralton? I must know all parts of my ground."

Martin went over to his desk and took out the picture that sometimes stood on it. This he showed to the woman, remarking simply:

"That was her mother." And after a pause, he added very quietly, "I loved her."

Carlotta glanced at the photo, but was drawn more sharply to the man, at whom she stared in blank curiosity. Evidently such men, or men capable of harboring such quiet sentiments, were not of her world. She seemed, however, reassured about Frances, for when she spoke there was friendliness in her voice.

"I see," she said. "Sort of benevolent deputy papa, eh? Well, that's very good. You and I shall become friends quickly." She darted a sharp look at his serious face,

then looked again at greater length at the picture. After her scrutiny had satisfied her, she rippled out into low, throaty laughter and said with a crooning note in her voice that made him shiver, "She's rather colorless, don't you think? I wonder if you never met a woman of the other type. Have you ever been drawn, against the protest of your very soul, by leaping blood that is pure flame, by eyes that offer you black depths of unspeakable ecstasy, by caresses which drag the red heart of you to your hot lips to scorch in a kiss for which you would gladly be damned? Have you?"

The woman stopped, and her breast stirred the silk of her dress visibly; but her face was serene and smiling, for she saw Martin Gray writhe under the lash of cunning words. When he released his lip from his biting teeth it was bloodless; his forehead drew down in a scowl of protest. Then the woman went to the door, crying out:

"I simply had to try you, my friend. When a man of your stamp tells me he hasn't noticed a girl breaking into womanhood I always wonder about his real sex. But now I know you. There is no doubt about you, friend Martin. Silent Martin, don't they call you? Splendid! It's a perfect name for you. Wise old owl!"

With an airy farewell she was gone.

CHAPTER X.

THE SHEEP FARM.

WEEKS went by, bringing neither fortune nor disaster to Martin; but they brought him to a realization of the impossibility of his position. His concern for Frances had in a measure been lightened of fear since his interview with Carlotta Montez; for, whether he approved of the woman or not, he discerned clearly that she had constituted herself a vital barrier between Don Felipe and Ralton's girl. Jealousy sheer and stark might be her motive, it undoubtedly was her motive, but that fact only made her surveillance the more effective. And after those first few uncertain days, Silent Martin knew it—knew that his little friend was at least in no immediate peril.

The knowledge allowed him to think of himself the more seriously. It became more and more apparent that he could not endure the life he was now living in Agua Fresca, notwithstanding the championship and close camaraderie of old Captain Sturgis. First it was Maria Stodder who made his life a torment with her insistent intrusion with offers of favors which he knew very well were not disinterested; then the Montez woman appeared far too frequently for his peace of mind, and the visits succeeding that first one were marked with increasing evidence of the disquieting fact that she was playing him like a fish, with her manifold fascinations for bait.

So long as she confined her visits to daylight he only felt annoyed and vaguely uneasy; when she began to drop in on him after dark, and became so intimate in his house that she ordained the amount of light to be used, not by any means erring on the side of extravagance, he rebelled. Rebellion went from a spark to a blaze when Maria Stodder, the next time she saw him, sourly hinted to him that talk was rife concerning him and Don Filipe's woman. It only required a visit from Sturgis to bring the thing to a climax.

"Why, you bloomin' old graven image!" roared the old mariner, entering like a gale of wind. "Silent an' sly; quiet to men an' a hell-roarer with the women! Oh, boy! Damme if I know whether I know ye or not."

"Shut up and don't act like a fool, Sturgis," retorted Martin savagely, and his tone stopped the flood of chaff on the seaman's lips and brought a look of doubtful appraisal into his eyes. "I'm quitting this house," added Martin gloomily.

"Hey? Quittin'? Goin' away from here? Sounds almost like you'd recovered some sense."

"I'm not going away from here until I've paid Nix and seen Ralton's girl out of the reach of harm."

"Oh, scissors!" grunted Sturgis, beginning to stump up and down as if he were again on his own quarterdeck. "Goin' away and you ain't goin' away! Ain't loony, are ye?"

"I don't know. I'm quitting the house,

but I want to rent quarters on the Harbinger if you'll let me. I'm too darned popular here, though Lord knows why, unless Nix has put people to dog me so that I can't get loose."

"Huh! Ain't puzzled about that, nor I ain't, Gray. Some fool bird's spread the yarn around that you got a pile o' money somewhere. 'Course you ain't, and if you have it's no business o' mine. Sensible to hang on to it, I say. But about the ship, old fellow, I was goin' to offer you a job takin' care o' her for me on wages. I'm thinkin' o' fittin' her out again, and there's plenty o' work a sailor can be doin'. Sure, go on board with yer dinky little carvin' tools. I'll make the wages right, and you'll have lots o' time to amuse yerself with yer own little jobs. Then when old jellybelly Nix is paid off I'll have something else to offer ye. I'd make ye a dicker now, if you wasn't so blasted independent. Why can't ye let me settle with him, and you pay me back? This ain't no sort o' life for you, man."

"I know that, Sturgis, and if I'd let anybody help me out it would be you. But I have a stronger reason for staying here than either Nix or that Santa Cruz business. You'll know all about it in good time. I'll take the job on the hulk, though, and much obliged. When can you go on board and show me what you want done first?"

"Oh, you're a sailor man, ain't you? Start right in on any work one man can handle that's in line o' fittin' out, see? You'll find everything belongin' to her in the 'tween-decks: spars, riggin', even the boats. How much more do you owe Nix?"

"I haven't paid him anything. I won't, until I take him the whole amount he lost. Then I'll take care to have the real thief there, and other witnesses, too, so that I can ease my mind of something that's heavy on it now."

Martin took his few belongings to the hulk that same night, and in the morning Agua Fresca enjoyed a thirty-minute thrill when his house was found vacant. Josiah Nix suffered agonies, until Sturgis told him with brutal lack of respect where Martin was. The rest of the community went about their business when, about noon, Silent Martin was seen striding along the shore from abreast of the ship and striking off toward Center Mount, behind which lay the sheep farm recently taken up by Don Felipe, and which was the temporary home of Frances.

Martin had never been to the place since the Chilean took up residence there, but he knew it well. Now, as he approached the boundary fence, he doubted the wisdom of his visit, for his memory of that evening when Felipe's dark face peered at him over Ralton's shoulder warned him that it was an enemy's camp he went to. But he was determined to see Frances and assure himself of her well-being before isolating himself utterly in the Harbinger, and he struck off again, beyond the fence, through a coppice of stunted pines, back of which he knew lay a piece of barren land where he would not be likely to meet anybody until he came within hailing distance of the house.

At a small corral he heard voices, and at once he felt a surge of resentment in his heart; for one of the voices was that of Frances, and it was ringing with merriment. It was as if something had burst in between the child and the man who thought himself ordained to watch over her. That she was happy away from him hurt Martin, until the first shock passed; then the passionate devotion that controlled his life came to the rescue, and he smiled as he approached the sound of the voices.

At first he saw nobody. There was a small herd of guanacos, those queer beasts like a hybrid of camel and deer, and as they trotted into view a tiny, awkward baby guanaco staggered after them with weird contortions of long, misfit legs, and again Frances's laugh rang out in glee. She came into view running after the baby animal, and behind her walked Carlotta Montez, her beautiful face lighted with a smile which held nothing just then of seduction or calculated wile. It was the smile of a woman long accustomed to wear a mask, who for once experiences a moment of happy freedom, isolated beyond possibility of interference.

Sight of Martin shocked her back into her customary pose. For a brief instant

anger flamed in her face; then she presented to him a smile of mocking greeting, and advanced. But Frances saw him, too; and before the woman reached him the girl had flung herself upon her old friend in an ecstasy of welcome.

"Oh, I'm glad; I'm glad!" she cried, and kissed him with childish ardor. Then her eyes clouded and she released herself from his arms, blushing as he had never seen her blush before. A subtle quality crept into her hot face, and Martin stared amazed. A low, sarcastic laugh rippled from Carlotta, and in a flash he recalled what she had said to him about Frances.

His eyes narrowed as he regarded the girl more intently. For a moment he fought against his convictions, but in the end he was compelled to see in the child-woman the signs he had watched for so long. At last he knew that Frances was no longer a child, but a sweet bud of womanhood, endowed by heredity with an early maturity, and now he scrutinized her face the more closely for those other signs he had waited for.

Mentally he compared her with that treasured picture at home, and his thoughts ran troubled with doubts. Frances began to glance up at him curiously, when minutes passed by and he still remained staring at her face.

"Do you always stare in that way?" asked Carlotta, softly, but with an uncovered sneer. Martin ignored her entirely, and completed his scrutiny with a sigh of relief. Then he turned away for a few seconds, and muttered soundlessly but intensely:

"Thank God she's escaped it! Her mother's beauty, yes, that will surely come to her; but her weakness? No! Frances is never going to break a man's heart through moral incompetency. Thank God!"

The doubt resolved, he could meet his little friend on the old terms again, and she recovered her old spontaneity of spirits when his grave face lost its doubts and lightened in a rare smile.

True, there remained an indefinable something, which, while not precisely constituting a barrier, yet intervened like a golden mist between them, through which each saw the other as in those days of untrammelled camaraderie, yet glorified and amplified by the new knowledge that life had imparted to both.

But settled fears on the one hand, and dulled curiosity on the other, permitted them to remember that somebody else must be recognized. Martin became violently perturbed when he realized that Carlotta Montez had so far mastered her volcanic spirit that she still stood regarding him and Frances, smiling, not yet angry, for all that she, the mistress of the place, had not yet received either greeting or explanation of the reason for his visit from the visitor. He retained Frances's hand in his, and made his bow.

"I beg your pardon," he said. "I am forgetting my manners."

"You're forgiven, my friend," laughed Carlotta maliciously. "One doesn't look for manners in Agua Fresca. Besides, one doesn't often have the opportunity of seeing such a flower as our little friend in process of transformation from bud to blossom. I think I read you right. You are forgiven."

"Thank you, ma'am. I'm taking up residence rather out of the way for visiting, and I wanted to be sure my little chum was in good hands and comfortable before I left."

"Oh, didn't father tell you?" cried Frances, excitedly. "I am to go to school in Buenos Aires for a year while father is away. Isn't that lovely?"

"School? A year?" repeated Martin slowly, staring down at the piquant little face now all aglow with anticipation. "Father going away, Frances? Where?"

"Don Felipe is sending Frances to school," remarked Carlotta. "Can't you understand? He's interested in your friend," she said with cunning insinuation. "An education is a good asset for a woman, or girl, who seeks to hold the fancy of such as Don Felipe. He's sending her father away, too. On business, you know," she drawled, peering at Martin from under languorous lids. "The little mannikin Phillip Henry is going, and the whisky tough, Mike Ryan."

"Never mind those people," snapped

Martin. "Why Buenos Aires? Why is Frances to be sent that far away?"

"Didn't you know?" cooed Carlotta. "That's Don Felipe's home. He's Chilean, of course, but Chile is unhealthy for him just now. Oh, you need not fume and flash," she laughed when Martin colored and clenched his fists in fury, "your little protégée is safe for a year, anyhow. Don Felipe is going away, too, with the others. He's in the business, you know."

"What business?"

"Oh, it's a state secret, my dear friend," mocked Carlotta. "But why talk of such things? Your little friend is in line of being made a lady; the horrid man who arouses your jealousy is going far away for a time; she is therefore safe. Have you, then, nothing to say to me, who is also your good friend?"

"Oh, Uncle Martin, Carlotta has been so good to me," cried Frances. "And she is to take me right to Buenos Aires. I didn't like her a bit at first," the girl confessed with innocent candor, "but I think she's lovely now. You must like her, Uncle Martin, for she's all you'll have when I'm away."

Martin flushed again at the girl's bright tones; even the woman colored slightly under the tribute to herself; but the prospect opened up was not without its objections, for Don Felipe's absence, while leaving his mind clear about Frances, indicated to Martin that his own position might not be so tranquil with that awfully clever woman alone in his neighborhood.

"I'll like her well enough, Frances," he smiled. "I don't dislike the lady at all. I'll come and see her sometimes, when you're gone." He turned to Carlotta, whose dark eyes glowed with somber light like fires cloaked under a screen of black gauze. "When is Frances to go? I will come again before that time."

"But why must you go now?" purred the woman, hiding her chagrin at his coldness. Other men had not confined themselves to mere liking with a proviso, when given the opportunity to cultivate intimacy with Carlotta Montez.

"I have work to do," answered Martin. "I have to make up a debt, you know."

"Oh, yes. I remember. Well, my foolish, foolish friend, so foolish as to be quixotic, if you will insist on paying for another's fault, I have nothing to say. But come again. Come on Friday, for Frances goes on Saturday, and I go, too, for just two weeks. Afterward you shall not find your work so exacting, I promise you. You shall not be in so great a hurry to leave me then, hah!"

The woman smiled radiantly, and gave no hint that she saw either the disquiet of Martin or the wide-eyed disapproval and doubt of Frances. She took the girl by the hand and accompanied Martin to the fence, sending him on his way with a mazy recollection of having seen a velvet paw with iron claws, a smiling mouth which held the sharp teeth of a she-tiger.

He plowed along homeward in a turmoil, unable to fathom the reason for such a woman's sudden interest in him. Old Sturgis's explanation of the curiosity of others, that they believed he had money, scarcely applied in the case of Felipe's woman, for obviously she had plenty of means. He failed to reach a solution, and was shaking off the doubting mood, when he suddenly crashed into a man in the path, and the voice protesting was the alcoholic voice of Mike Ryan.

(To be continued NEXT WEEK.)

A LESSON FROM LIFE

A TRUSTWORTHY memory, oft we are told,
Is a blessing to all, whether youthful or old;
But I've found there's an art that's more valuable yet—
Not how to remember, but when to forget!

Allene Gates.

Paper Ghosts

by Maxwell Smith

HE was at that stage where he listened, waited—listened, waited—all the time. Expectantly, dreadfully—anxiously, in trembling—afraid that he'd be disappointed, afraid that his fear would materialize—praying that it would come soon; praying, too, that it would be deferred, that the haunt would come no more.

Waiting, listening, waiting—always. He would have fled, closed his ears and his eyes to shut out the terror that had stolen upon him so softly out of nowhere and was mangling his senses; he would have fled had he not been fascinated. .

Once he had tried that—running away. And he had shrieked with relief when the terror had followed him; when, after weeks of frightsome suspense, it had found him.

It had him—like that! So he had returned home, yielding to what was unescapable, to wait and listen, wait and listen—and, when it came, to look.

There lay the greatest agony—an agony of anticipation that had become exquisite even while it numbed him with fear—when after that fluttering *ssshrrrrsh* told him that another message had fallen, he nerved himself to turn and look.

Cowering in the chair before the gas logs that were cold—which never had known flame, because gas cost money—cowering in the rickety chair which was tawdry and ancient as the other furnishings, in keeping with the dinginess of the walls, he seemed a strange, unnatural figure. His body slouched into the shabby leather, inert; yet there was in his attitude an impression of latent energy, of muscles keyed up and aching for movement, but held in check and paralyzed by the brain which groped with horror and fright.

His hands, reached out and gripping the arms of the chair, showed that. They were not limp, but tensed, like the hands of a man straining as though he were about to lift himself, as though physically they would combat the will that chained them.

His flesh quivered from these manifestations that pursued him. His mind shrank from them, too. but while it was repelled it was attracted. He was enthralled by this fright, bound mentally to listen and wait. Because he already was half-way there, he did not realize that he was on the road to madness.

His face, with the lines etched by year upon year of scheming devotion to making a dollar count for more than a dollar, had a new, a more recent, glint. He still clung to his dollars, worshiped them as ever, but—but with the avarice there now mingled a grinning, unhealthy look born of the ceaseless waiting and listening.

His lips, flabby and distorted in that fixed grimace of blended anticipation and terror; his eyes, dilated and staring at the cold logs in the grate; his head, bent forward from the back of the chair against

which his shoulders sagged as he waited, waited; these were evidence of the state to which he was now reduced.

These messages, which fluttered almost to his feet to rebuke and terrify him, had become to him as a drug to an addict. When days went by—weeks—and none made its appearance, his condition grew pitiable.

When he finally heard that *ssshrrrrsh* heralding the mysterious arrival of another of the silent accusations, he said, like Job, "For the thing which I greatly feared is come upon me"; then rejoiced over its coming. His warping brain was for the instant soothed.

Like a drug-fiend taking his poison, Nathan Roach absorbed the shocks which were driving him mad.

Timidly the girl hesitated on the threshold of the bare, uninviting room. She would have been pretty but for the weariness that strangled her expression. Her slim shoulders drooped, her fingers twitched nervously into her patched gingham apron. The visitation that had descended upon her uncle bore doubly upon her. Besides the dread occasioned by the haunt, she was oppressed and frightened by his unending listening, listening.

Her light step on the bare floor made him stiffen. He settled back with an audible sigh of—of disappointment. That was it—disappointment and cheated desire. Her step was nothing like the sound he awaited, the *ssshrrrrsh* which alone could bring him brief peace that would surmount his fear.

As she peered through the gloom—the winter day was done, but there was no light in the room, because light cost money—her eyes were compassionate. She never had been particularly fond of her uncle; only in a perfunctory, automatic way. He never had given her reason for affection. Not that he had been cruel or unkind—except in so far as he denied her and his son the things which his money would have bought.

"Uncle!" Her voice was the merest breath; she was afraid to raise it in the presence of the tragedy unfolding before her. "Supper is ready."

Nathan Roach did not move. He wanted to stay where he was. A message was near—he felt it. Despite the uncanny nature of its delivery, its tumbling out of nowhere with awesome suddenness, his every nerve screamed at the torment of delay.

It was weeks now, weeks since one had come. He was on the ragged edge, near the end of his power to contain himself. He had to know soon—now—whether there was to be another. It was killing him, this waiting—waiting—and listening.

The girl stepped into the room.

"You haven't eaten at all to-day, uncle," she broke in again gently on his harassed thoughts. "Joseph is home. Supper is ready. Please come."

She touched his arm with diffident sympathy. She harbored no resentment on account of his having made a household drudge of her—as he had of her mother and his first wife. Long ago she had got past any feeling on the subject. Lassitude had fallen upon her as she had grown accustomed to her lot; to the scrubbing and washing and mending and cooking; to eking out to the last the scant necessaries which he bought wherever he could buy most cheaply.

Again she urged him to supper, and he stirred, gathering himself heavily to his feet.

He did not speak to her. She did not expect him to speak. Usually when he had anything to say it was a complaint—that the poor food was going too rapidly; and food cost money; that a lamp was burning to high; kerosene cost money—that the cook-stove and the pot-bellied stove in the hall which constituted the heating plant of the house were being fed too much; wood and coal cost money.

It was characteristic of him that as he preceded her through the hall he stopped to see how high the fire was in the stove and that the draft was shut off. So characteristic that the girl did not notice.

Joseph was in the dining-room as they entered. There was a watchfulness in his manner also, intent as that of Nathan Roach, but it contained nothing of fear. His eyes fastened immediately on his father. They were eager as the elder man came within range of the single oil lamp

which from the table flung merciful shadows to cloak the shabbiness of the room.

And in the son's glance there likewise was anticipation. He chuckled softly, and his face lighted with satisfaction, not pleased but malicious.

"You're looking bad," he said. The harsh tone that did not belong to one of his years held a jubilant note. "Had another visit from the ghosts?"

"Hush!" The girl motioned to silence him.

His face turned to her and a tenderness transformed it.

"Why hush, Flora?" he asked lightly. "He sees 'em, doesn't he?" He laughed, and, taking her by the elbow, pressed her into a chair. "Besides," he added, "he likes 'em. Don't you, father?" The last was a jeer.

Nathan Roach stared at his son, that same flabby smile on his lips. He was used to this antagonism. It had grown more and more manifest as the boy had advanced in years. But Joseph would learn.

Meanwhile, what difference did it make if Joseph chose to talk like that of ghosts—ghosts that dropped messages apparently from the sky? Joseph would learn, too, the value of money. He was always talking money, but not yet with the proper conception. He wanted to spend money—wanted Nathan Roach to spend money. He'd get over that.

As they settled to the sorry meal that was typical of Nathan Roach's penuriousness, Joseph considered his father balefully. He was a good-looking boy, but anger and rancor combined to mar his countenance. His eyes were charged with unconcealed venom. He hated his father—for cause, he believed.

"Hash made out of the scrapings of the last week," he snarled; "potatoes that were sprouting when you got them; and this"—he held up a slice of the coarse, dirty-looking bread, made by Flora out of the cheapest flour, then threw it before his father—"with coffee that is acorns or anything that isn't coffee. We're to call that supper!"

Nathan Roach barely heard him. He was thinking of his ghosts; the boy's protest was nothing new.

"Sh, Joe!" Flora's face was troubled. Her cousin was louder to-night, his expression more bitter. Some day, she knew, the conflict between father and son must reach a head; the conflict which the father practically refused to recognize. She leaned toward her cousin and whispered: "He doesn't hear you, Joe. Anyhow"—she gestured despairingly—"you know how useless it is. You've said it all before. You—"

"And I'm going to say it again," interrupted Joseph violently. He stood up and shoved the dish of hash, the potatoes, the bread, and the pot of foul coffee in front of his father. He pounded the table so that the dishes danced. "Eat the whole damned mess—all of it—and I hope it chokes you!"

Nathan Roach blinked. He never exhibited temper. The haunt was the only thing that had penetrated the blind placidity of his nearly sixty years. His imperviousness to taunts and condemnation for his niggardliness heightened his son's anger. If Nathan Roach only had shown some feeling, he might have won some of the boy's sympathy—for he was indeed a pathetic creature in his money madness.

"Why don't you say something?" yelled the boy. He bent over his father so threateningly that Flora sprang to her feet and pulled him away.

"Let him alone, Joe," she pleaded. "He is dreadfully worried—frightened—he does not know—"

Again the boy's face softened as he looked at her. His arm went over her shoulder and he smiled.

"We're coming to a show-down, Flo," he said quietly. "You're working yourself to death looking after this—this barn of a house. He's killing you as he killed my mother and your mother—by keeping you shut up in this hole—working, working all the time, without amusement, without proper food. He's got money enough—always has had money enough—to hire help, to furnish this place and make it fit to live in, to get you clothes, and provide the things that would make you feel like a human being. Yes"—his tone changed as he turned to his father—"he's got money

enough, and, by Heaven, some of it is going to be used! We're coming to a showdown!"

Sitting loosely in his chair, Nathan Roach looked up at his son, a frown of perplexity adding to the wrinkles on his forehead. He found it hard to pay attention to what the boy was saying. To do so distracted his mind from the crazy anticipation of a further ghostly manifestation which was at once a horror and a rapture to his bedeviled nerves.

But the vehemence of the utterance dragged him out of his abstraction. He saw that he must reason with Joseph; show him where he was wrong—that dollars were to be kept, not thrown away on food and clothing and housefurnishings—on frivolities.

The grin that was now habitual remained on his face. His voice was patient—but as he spoke he listened, listened, not to what he was saying, but for what must come soon—soon—

"You don't understand, Joseph," he began. "When you are older—"

Then it came!

Above him there was a faint fluttering. His voice died away. In the lamplight his face became ghastly with its mouthing and distending eyes.

He seemed to shrivel, huddling with arms contracting against his body and hands drawn close to his face in an instinctive motion of protection.

He did not hear the girl's shriek. He did not hear his son's laughter. He heard only that fluttering overhead while his heart stopped beating and he strove to articulate.

A sheet of dun-colored writing-paper flapped against his face and lodged there, held by his twitching hand. With a scream he clawed it away, but it fell on the table so that the boldly written words he knew were there leered up at him—

> Money . . . Money . . . Money—Mathilde [his first wife], Helen [his sister and Flora's mother].

The identical message had been deposited mysteriously at his feet a score of times in the past year. After a few had come he had abandoned himself to fright when he failed completely to find explanation, even a clue to their source. Gradually he had settled into the attitude of waiting and listening which every so often witnessed such harrowing climaxes, leaving him shaken and shivering, but for the time being mentally relieved.

This was the first message to fall in the presence of any one but himself. It alarmed the girl no less than it did him. Until now she had tried to persuade herself that her uncle was suffering from some weird hallucination, and that he himself was the author of the written messages which he from time to time produced with the statement that they had been cast at his feet by some invisible agency.

She had believed that his miserliness had affected his brain so that he imagined the two women whom drudgery had sent to early graves were haunting him.

Given ocular evidence of this seeming materialization out of thin air, however, the girl was chilled. Unable to move or speak, she swayed and had to hold fast to the table when she attempted to go and comfort the stricken man.

Not so with Nathan Roach's son. The effect upon him went to the other extreme. Ever contemptuous of the haunt, he rocked with laughter at the spectacle of his father, crouched, nervously abject but grinning.

"They're after you, dad," he mocked, "and they'll get you if you don't watch out!" An unholy light was in his eyes. He chuckled throatily as he flipped the paper closer to his father. "Read it, dad—read it again. And think that there'll be another name soon unless you loosen up—*Flora's name!* What 'll you do when there are three, you old miser, if you throw fits like this when there are only two?"

His cousin's sobbing halted him. He caught her hands, and his countenance rekindled.

"Don't worry, Flo," he whispered. "There's nothing to be frightened over. It is only our mothers"—he raised his voice for his father to hear—"calling on him to do you justice."

He stepped round the table and seized his father by the arms, half lifting him from

the chair. He stared into the glaring eyes.

"What are you going to do about it?" he demanded fiercely. "Are you going to provide for Flora—or are you going to the bughouse?"

Nathan Roach struggled loose. He stood up, whimpering, his hands swinging stupidly. His greed of money overcame the fear that was in him. He glanced from his son to the message on the table.

Cunning took possession of his features. The haunt had passed again, and it had not harmed him. What did it matter? It did not hurt him. It meant nothing. He cackled hideously.

It *did* mean something: if it did not exist he would not experience that terrible joy of waiting and listening—listening and waiting—and that poignant agony of reaction when at last the moment arrived.

"You'll understand some day—" He started his usual reply.

His son took him by the neck and shook him as a dog worries a rat.

"Joe!" The attack startled the girl to action. She tugged at him, begging him to let his father go. "You're killing him!"

The warning forged through the boy's fury. He released his grip. His father fell back into the chair, gasping and tearing at his collar.

"No; I won't kill him. Killing is too easy. There's something worse than that coming to him, Flo—when the ghosts are through!"

The girl had her arms about her uncle, and between sobs was speaking soothingly, gently to him. All her womanly sympathy was awakened by the pathetic old man whose neck showed the impress of the son's fingers.

"You're a fool, Flo," said Joseph disgustedly. "Let him alone. What's he done for you that you should bother about him?"

"He's ill, Joe—ill mentally," she censured. "You must promise—"

"He's not so ill as he's going to be," said Joseph savagely, "when the ghosts get through with him."

Whistling a cheerful air, he stumped from the room.

His father had largely recovered from the shock when Joseph returned five minutes later. Nathan Roach was in the period of exhilaration which followed the appearance of the haunt. He was in effect under the influence of dope, enervated but mentally stimulated by the termination of the racking suspense.

Flora was still beside his chair, caressing his head and speaking softly in encouragement. Of the two, she was the more agitated, but she stifled her fear to comfort him.

She looked reproachfully at Joseph. It was not right of him to assail his father, to find gratification and amusement in this strange persecution. She hastened to head him off before he could begin another attack.

"Please, Joe, let him alone. Can't you see that you're accomplishing nothing? He is—"

"Sure, I'll let him alone," he interrupted with a shrug. His rage apparently had subsided. There was a twinkle in his eye, and he smiled at her. "How about supper, dad?"

His speech was friendly, but the girl discerned in it a trace of contemplative malice. She saw the hardness return, hardness and contempt, as his gaze rested on his father. At that instant she learned also to be afraid of Joseph.

There was a brutality in that way he had of looking at his father. He seemed to form a sinister background to the—the ghosts.

Was Joseph, she wondered, a little mad? Had the grievance he nursed against his father—the refusal of Nathan Roach to care properly for his family out of his adequate means—tainted the boy's mind?

Nathan himself—she admitted it for the first time—was deranged. His money mania in itself had been an abnormality. This past year of haunting memories of the wife and sister he could have maintained in luxury, but instead had ground down to the grave, had accentuated the mania that was in him, though it had not shaken him from his parsimony.

Yes, undoubtedly, Nathan Roach was out of his head. See him now—his hands

slowly stealing out to take that paper which had fallen—whence?

See the gloating in his face—and the dread! He was deathly afraid of it, yet he could not resist the attraction that lay in its malignant mystery.

But Joseph—this was a new and startling aspect of him. As she paused, studying him, there was a menace in the smile he cast on his father—a threat withheld only because it was unnecessary to execute it.

Sometimes, when he railed to her against Nathan Roach, he spoke of his mother and of her mother. He had seen them wilt and fade under the slavishness that was imposed upon them. He had seen his mother die when she should have continued ripe in life and laughter. And though then he had not been able to comprehend, the like tragedy which had crushed her successor, Flora's mother, had shown him why his own mother was gone from him.

A drudge—his mother had been a drudge. His aunt, compelled by circumstances to accept shelter from Nathan Roach, had been a drudge. Into her place three years ago, when but fifteen years old, Flora had been forced by his father when she should have been harkening to the spring-time that was her due.

It was then that the smoldering resentment in the boy had flamed forth. He was eighteen—just beginning to understand that his father was wealthy; to understand the injustice that had been done his mother and Flora's mother.

Himself, he had been at work since he was fourteen; put to work by his father as soon as he could leave school—by the father who took his meager earnings to add them to the hoard. The boy had not minded that; he did not rebel at having to work.

But when his aunt gave way as had his mother, he had vowed that Flora should not follow them; that she should be saved from the dismal, monotonous slavery of that cheerless home. For two years he had begged his father, fought with him, while day by day the girl pined and kept closer and closer to the house, while her pride and spirit dwindled because she would not go abroad in the miserable garments that were all she had.

He had fought his father, asking nothing for himself, only that his cousin be provided for, lifted from the slavery that was breaking her heart as it had broken two other hearts. All he had gained for his pains was the declaration that he " did not understand . . . some day he would know that money was to be kept—not spent."

Then, a year back, the messages had begun. And Joseph had made fun of them. On that first occasion, when Nathan Roach had been little more than puzzled—hardly frightened—by the sudden dropping of the chiding sheet of paper as he sat before his fireless hearth, Joseph had begun to laugh. When the second came, a week or two afterward, his mirth was as uncontrollable as his father's fear was great. He helped the latter seek a reason for the haunt, but all the while he laughed.

Often, as the months went by and the messages continued, he rallied Flora about them, allaying the fear that was creeping upon her, and strengthening her belief that Nathan Roach was the victim of an imagining which he tried to convince himself was real by himself producing the messages and maintaining that they had tumbled out of the beyond.

During that year he did not argue so much with his father. There was a lull in his demands that Nathan open his purse-strings; a lull until this night, when before the eyes of all three another paper had descended from over the head of Nathan Roach.

Joseph put a hand on his father's arm.

" Come, dad. Supper's cold. Sit in the parlor a while till Flo warms it up."

Nathan Roach looked up with that wooden grin. The wrinkles increased on his face. He struggled to adjust himself to this abrupt change in his son's manner. He didn't quite get it. A few minutes ago—why, then Joseph had been furiously denunciatory; Joseph had jeered at and goaded him.

But it was the nature of the man to think most optimistically in line with his own idea, his mania. Joseph at last had

seen the light! That was the conclusion at which the miser grasped. His senses, excited but nevertheless dulled by the haunt, were receptive to any such suggestion concerning his son.

He nodded and hugged the paper to his breast.

"You understand now, don't you, Joseph?" he mumbled. His face brightened, and he seized the boy by the wrist. Queer he never had seen it this way before. "Your mother and Flora's mother—my dear wife, and my dear sister"—he was maudlin over this interpretation that had just come to him—"tell me that I'm right; that we must save, save, always save."

"Yes"—the harshness was back in Joseph's voice, and he darted a glance at the girl—"they say for you to save. Let me help you to the parlor till Flora fixes supper over again."

While he raised his father to his feet the girl looked on with renewed perturbation. She was not deceived by this swift shift of front on Joseph's part. Rather she observed in it further evidence of his determination to overcome his father. His gaze was agate, though he smiled. In his glance she read confirmation of her fear.

"Let him stay here, Joe." She held back her uncle as Joseph was leading him away. "I—I'll only be a minute warming things. Let him stay."

Joseph frowned at her. That was something he had never done before, and it strengthened her misgiving. He shook his head and pursed his lips in signal to her to let him have his way and be silent.

"No. I want to talk with dad about—about making more money. We'll come when you call. Dad understands," with irony that escaped the older man, but not the girl—"don't you, dad?"

"Joe, I want you—"

"All right, girl; it's all right." Nathan Roach cut her short. Her place was in the kitchen. His boy wished to talk about making money; it was no time for a woman to interfere—a woman who belonged in the kitchen. "Get the supper ready, girl."

"Get the supper, Flo," echoed Joseph, and she detected the exultant, ominous, vengeful tone.

He removed her grip on his father, pressing her hand fondly, reassuringly. Hopelessly she watched him lead her uncle to the front of the house. Her hand, where he had touched it, was cold; her feet were leaden; her head was in a whirl, so that despite her presentiment of more horror imminent she was helpless to intervene.

Had Nathan Roach not been in a condition of mental chaos, absorbed in correlating his discovery that the messages of the past year favored his miserliness, with the further discovery that his son had come round to his view-point, he must have seen how inordinately solicitous was Joseph. Telling his father that they must find additional ways of economizing, the boy assisted him with every appearance of filial devotion to his chair in the parlor. He lit a lamp. The smoky light from its worn-out burner did little more than add to the shadowed barrenness of the room.

"There, dad, you're comfortable now." He stopped by the table behind his father and tilted the shade of the lamp, leaving the half of the room about the fireplace in a deeper gloom. As he considered his father's huddled figure, his face expressed all and more of the malignance which so shortly before had revealed to Flora the extent of his hatred.

"I'll see how Flo is getting along," he said jerkily. "I'll be back—right back."

"No, no!" Nathan Roach half turned, eager to revel in the delight of having his son offer a plan to save in place of spending. "Tell me now—"

"When I come back." Joseph hurried from the room.

His father resumed his staring at the cheerless hearth. He sighed. Better to let Joseph have his way. It sufficed that the boy had eventually become sensible. He gave his thoughts to the ghosts. He chuckled.

Now he could begin all over again—waiting and listening. He'd have Joseph to keep him company. Waiting and listening for these commands from the spirits of his dear wife and his dear sister to save, save, save!

Joseph entered the kitchen quietly, his face alight with a different passion. He

intended to surprise his cousin—to take Flora into his arms and, while he broke the great news to her, tell her also of his love.

Keyed to the highest pitch as she was, though, she heard his step. Her face was grave. Shaking her head, she warded him off. Her gaze was doubtful, questioning; she could not wholly disguise her fear.

Hands outstretched, he stood as she had halted him. His eyes took on an expression of pleading, his countenance was one of blank bewilderment.

"Flo, dear"—his voice came low and vibrant—"we'll have money soon. A little longer—a few months—and you and I—"

The intensity of his manner startled her again. She knew that it was for her that he had combated his father; that he had real affection for her. But she had never looked upon him with more than sisterly love. She had never dreamed of such a situation as this.

She could not mistake his meaning, the love so plainly evident. Before it she was abashed, frightened, mute. An hour ago she might have felt some surge of response—before he had behaved so brutally over his father's extremity. An hour ago—

Her seething thoughts broke sharply from her. She recalled Joseph's insistence that Nathan Roach should rest in the parlor. She connected that with Joseph's declaration that they would soon have money.

"Where is he?" she whispered.

Even at the height of his love for her, Joseph could not repress his feelings toward his father.

"Watching for ghosts, I guess," he sneered. He moved a step nearer, laughing almost inaudibly. Quaking with a desire to rush from his presence, to escape the sound of his mirth, she retreated.

"We'll have money soon, Flo." His rapture returned. A quick step, and his arms were about her. "Money, Flo—money for you and me."

She struggled to be free. Faintly she heard him:

"We'll be married, sweetheart, and we'll live—*live*—on the money he has kept from us!"

He held her closer and kissed her. To the girl this moment was appalling. She was weak and dizzy from fright. Joseph was mad! He must be mad. Didn't he say they would spend Nathan Roach's money? They would do that only when Nathan Roach was dead!

They were both mad—the father from scheming to keep the dollars he had hoarded; the son from scheming to lay hands on treaty and devotion in his eyes and voice those dollars.

The atmosphere of the place froze her blood. This was the end—Joseph speaking of marriage. It made it impossible for her to live longer in this house. Joseph knew that she could not marry him; that she did not love him in that way. He knew there was some one she did love—that she would have left this bleak and forbidding household ere this had she not been afraid to leave Nathan Roach alone with his son.

Or—she paused—did Joseph know that? He must. He must have seen her go out under the kindly cloak of night which hid her shabbiness, to meet the man of her heart, who had found her again, his sweetheart of school days. Joseph must have heard the whistle that caused her to steal out into the darkness. Joseph—

She laughed shrilly. Then her brain steadied, while she met his glowing stare so close to her.

"Let me go, Joe, till I 'tend to the supper—it's burning." She managed a smile which sat ill on her tired, white face. Her hands reached up to his cheeks, and she choked back a sob.

But for the madness that had hovered over the household since Nathan Roach's ghostly messages had begun, she would have had courage to face this situation. She could not tell Joseph the truth.

For a year, though she had not realized it fully until to-night, she had watched Nathan Roach going mad. But fear of him was nothing compared to her new dread of Joseph. In truth she did not actually fear she old man—she pitied him. She pitied her cousin, too; but on this night of revelation there was evidenced in him a fiendishness. He seemed to be imbued with a deadly purpose in respect to his father.

"We'll be married when we get the money," he repeated. He kissed her and let her slip from his arms.

Busying herself with the food on the stove, she collected her thoughts. When she turned he started to embrace her again, but she repulsed him. Yet she wanted to know more of his intention. She could not conceive how he planned to get Nathan Roach's money—unless he killed him.

"Why do you say we'll have money?" she asked, aiming to obtain his entire confidence. "You and I?"

"It's taken a long time, Flo—a long time." He dwelt on it with a satisfaction that shocked her, rolling each word on his tongue, his eyes dancing with victory; "but he can't hold out—he's through. He—"

A blood-curdling scream resounded from the front of the house. Joseph matched it with a shout of glee.

"There he is!" he cried. "Hear him! The ghosts are after him again—and this time they'll get him!"

The scream was repeated. As it faded into a wailing moan Joseph stood listening, his head cocked on one side, his throat muscles moving with silent mirth. From the corners of his eyes, starry bright, he looked at the girl.

"Hear him—listen!" He crowed as he made out the whimpering moan of his father. "They've got him this time! We'll have money—his money! But wait! There's another to come—another! He's only seen two. There are three there for him. Three!" He held his sides, laughing silently. "Paper ghosts for the miser!"

A horrible suspicion came over her. She pressed her hands to her heaving bosom, from which it seemed her heart would batter a way out. Sick and faint at the thought of what might be taking place in that front room, where Nathan Roach again was beset by the haunt, she still contrived to hold herself together. Now was her chance. If she could stop this infernal business—"

"Joe—" She touched his hand. What a frightful caricature of Nathan Roach he was in that position, listening—listening not for ghosts, but with a godless joy to his father's affliction! Her flesh crept, but she forced herself to go on: "Tell me, Joe, how we are to get the money." Money! She loathed the word.

He tried, but he was unable to give her his full attention—there was that moaning to listen to!

"He's crazy, Flo—crazy now—a lunatic. His money has made him mad." He chortled a while.

She waited, shuddering.

"I made him mad," he continued, grinning. "*My* paper ghosts. There!" He had another paroxysm of laughter as Nathan Roach's voice rose in a wild terror-stricken crescendo! "Ho-ho-ho! He's getting his fill of ghosts. We'll have the courts declare him insane, and the administrator of his estate will provide for you—for us.

"I did it, dearest, because—because I couldn't bear to see you go on like this, dying by inches as your mother and my mother died."

"I'm going to your father, Joe," she said.

"Let him alone," said Joseph. "He's crazy. When he talks of ghosts they'll put him away—sure."

He attempted to prevent her getting away, but she eluded him and ran through the hall.

As she had done earlier that night, the girl hesitated on the threshold of the parlor. The moaning had ceased. Nathan Roach was sprawled in his chair, his arms dangling, his head lolling on his chest. To right and left lay the paper ghosts—the third between his feet. Back of him the lamp was giving off a thin stream of smoke which some random draft caused to swirl about is head.

The stillness was gruesome. Timorously she went a step into the room. The lamp sputtered, and she stood watching a ring of smoke rise from its chimney to sway in the current of air and, the circle unbroken, float over by the motionless form in the chair. Her impulse was to call for assistance before disturbing her uncle—he was so quiet—but she made her dragging feet go on.

She touched him. He did not move. She shook him lightly. His arm waggled loosely, the fingers almost trailing the floor. A

shriek withered on her lips as she started back. He had not moved. It was she who had put motion into that arm!

"Quiet now, old boy—dear father!" Joseph spoke from behind her. "Lots of ghosts to-night—a shower of ghosts!"

He advanced with catlike tread, grinning at Flora. In his hand were several sheets of paper like those which lay around his father. At the table he stopped.

"Want some more ghosts, father, dear?" he queried venomously. He winked at Flora and took an ivory ruler from his pocket. "Ghosts made to order! Ghosts which we, Flora and I, will say never happened—say you imagined—when we put you in the bughouse!"

Laying the paper on the table, he stroked it vigorously with the ruler.

Shifting the lamp to illuminate the wall about the grate, he whisked a sheet of paper from the table and slapped it on the wall. The friction in it, generated by the ivory ruler, caused it to cling. Another and another he plastered there, and against the faded wall they were hardly visible.

"It wasn't so easy at first, father. I had to hide them behind things. But you made it easy when you got scared and quit hunting. Remember how I helped you search for an explanation?" He stepped away to admire his handiwork. "Now wait until the electricity leaves them so they fall—you old fool! Wait and listen."

Oppressed by a horrible sensation that this really was the end, the girl moved to her uncle's side. She bent over him.

One of the papers slipped an inch, then fluttered to the floor.

"That was too fast, dear father," crooned Joseph. "But watch the others—watch your ghosts at work!"

Flora straightened.

"He'll watch no more, Joe," she said without emotion. "Your father is dead!"

"Eh?" A baffled expression crossed his face. He wrestled a minute with what she had said. "Dead!"

He looked at her dazedly. His face became terrible to behold, twisting with rage. "Dead!" he shouted. "You mean that the old fool has cheated me?"

His mood changed so swiftly that she doubted whether she had heard him shout. His arms, upflung in fury, dropped like plummets to his sides. His face—*crinkled*. Pain was in his eyes—pain and a shocking, paralyzing, double realization. He had killed his father, and he himself was—was—

His lips drew tight and bloodless. His eyes—Heaven! how blank they were and then how brightly animated by terror—shifted from the body of his father to the girl. A racking sound burst from his throat. He was fighting with all his power to retain the reason that he knew was slipping from him.

Fainting, the breath crushed from her by the fearsome oppression of this room of death and madness, the girl watched him. She wanted again to cry aloud, to stop him as he backed toward the door. She could do naught but stand there, her brain stagnated by the awfulness of the scene.

Hands pawing as though he would thrust back the specter that was closing in upon him, he hesitated in the doorway. In his eyes alone was there still a glint of reason—the final struggling spark; his mouth was working and wet, his expression void.

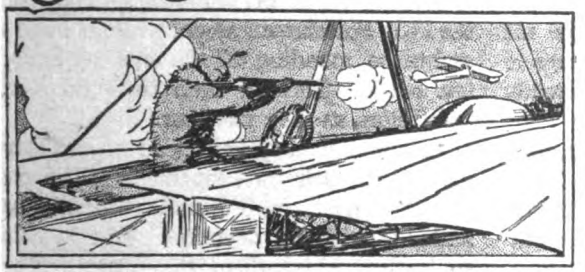
"Joe!" So does one whisper in the presence of the sacred dead. It was the only effort she was capable of making to halt him.

His head perked up. He grinned emptily while his eyes reflected the ultimate, hopeless, strangling, battle for supremacy of that last gleam of sanity. He attempted to speak to her. His throat moved convulsively, his tongue lolled between his lips. He babbled—and, babbling, fled! That was her closing memory of him. She never saw him again—alive.

Her own senses near the breaking-point, the girl who was to be sole heir to the wealth of Nathan Roach continued to stand staring at his body. She giggled. He looked so funny—that way—so like a—like a—

Outside the house a whistle sounded. She pulled herself together. Her throbbing, bursting brain cooled. With a sob she ran into the God-given serenity of the night and the love that was to erase these haunting hours of blackness from her mind.

Herdsmen of the Air



by Kathrene and Robert Pinkerton

Part III

CHAPTER XII.

A NEW ENTRY.

IT was a dreary camp that Raeburn and the pilots made on the barren grounds that night. They had been so confident, and so successful, had driven the herd so well and so easily, they were stunned by the disaster that had descended upon them from the apparently empty sky.

They knew that if Withington sent his planes back in the morning, and there was no reason why the swifter Staffords could not keep out of danger if they were careful, they might as well abandon further attempts to hold the herd. Another ten minutes like that of the previous afternoon and the deer would be scattered so far it would be impossible to round up more than a few hundred at the most.

After Paul's outbreak they tried to talk of the attack and to make new plans, but it was of Chet that they thought, of the pure courage he had wasted so prodigally.

Jimmie Sinclair glided to the earth two hours after his departure, and his pale, hard face and unintelligibly muttered answers told how hard he had been hit.

He and Chet always had been known for a comradeship that had been noteworthy in a group where loyalty had been boundless, and the other four were forced to silence in the little Scotchman's presence. They loved Chet, but Jimmie adored him.

Jimmie did not speak while he ate the supper they had kept warm for him. When he had finished he lighted a cigarette, looked at the black vault of the sky, glanced at his wrist watch and returned to his machine.

The others watched him in silence. Though they knew how useless his search for Chet would be out there in the darkness, they did not protest his going.

"There's only one thing to do," Ross said when the sound of his motor had died away. "The moon wil be up at three o'clock, and we can see to work soon after. We'll get the Eskimos, scatter them along the south side of the herd, and do the best we can. Meanwhile, we need some sleep."

David Raeburn, who had remained silent ever since Jimmie's return, now spoke for the first time.

"I'l stay awake," he said. "I couldn't sleep anyhow. I'll call you when the moon comes up.

The old fur trader lay in his sleeping bag and watched the stars. Sleep would have been impossible for him, and through the long hours he was torn by conflicting emotions. His heart was alternately softened by the loyalty and devotion and sacrifices of the boys who had been his son's com-

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rades and hardened by the thought of the viciously cowardly work of the Withington Company.

In those hours he cared nothing about the success of his enterprise. He prayed only for vengeance.

He had a warm breakfast ready for the pilots when he called them. They ate quickly and went at once to their planes to warm up the motors. One had already started to bark when Ross shouted:

"Come here!" he called. "You, too, Mr. Raeburn."

He was inside his cockpit when the four ran up. An electric light flooded the instrument board, but his face was in darkness and they had no warning of what was coming.

"Fellows," he sobbed, "we're going to win! We're going to win! But we're going to pay. Chet and Jimmie! Both of them! Chet, then Jimmie! Oh, damn the Scotch heart of him!"

"Ross!" Harry Palmer cried. "What's the matter, old chap? Come! Buck up!"

The three pilots climbed quickly up the side of the fuselage. They had never known their flight commander to display such emotion, and they feared he had broken under the strain.

As they stared at him they saw that he was looking at a piece of paper he held beneath the light.

"Listen!" he cried, and this time there was something electrifying in his voice. "I found this on my ignition switch. Jimmie put it there before he left."

"But what is it?" Gerald interrupted.

"A note. Listen! He says:

"DEAR ROSS:

"Get after the deer in the morning. You needn't be afraid of those fellows again. I'll be in their hangars in three hours. They'll pay five to one for Chet."

For a moment the pilots did not move. The significance of what they had heard stunned them. Little Jimmie, loyal to the end, had gone out alone to do this thing!

Even in his blind desire for vengeance he had not forgotten the main issue. If he had told of his plan he knew they would have accompanied him, or have prevented his going. One course would have left the caribou to scatter. The other would have meant a return of the syndicate planes. Now, in one stroke, he was avenging Chet and assuring victory.

Each man glanced at the clock on Ross's instrument board. They saw that it was useless to think of following. They saw the little Scotchman, alone, without hope of assistance, standing off the entire Withington outfit. Perhaps even then they had killed him, as they were sure to do.

As one man they leaped down and started toward their own machines. The past was the past, and Jimmie Sinclair had sealed it with his devotion. But in doing so he had given them the future. They could do no less than grasp the victory he had made possible.

The four machines rose and separated. For an hour they flew back and forth over a wide stretch of the barren grounds, but nowhere did they find a trace of Chet or his wrecked plane.

Long before dawn they gathered at the camp of the Eskimos. The natives were badly frightened and sullen, and Raeburn was forced to the limits of his patience and understanding of the savage mind to induce them to return to work.

When at last they understood what had happened they consented hesitatingly, and their faces no longer beamed as they climbed into the cockpits of the planes.

Raeburn remained with those who could not be taken and the four pilots flew away in search of the deer. They found them—found a ragged, frightened remnant of the great herd which had moved so smoothly the days before. It was fifteen miles away, to the southwest. The remainder had split and scattered. With this part they knew they must be content. It would fill the fall ships and save Raeburn from ruin.

Again the Eskimos were stretched out in a long line and the little markers dotted the snow beside the deer.

Ross took Raeburn with him on the last trip. When they saw that the natives were placed so that the herd could be turned east and slightly north, toward the fencing, they decided to scout far to the west and begin to round up the scattered bands of caribou in that direction.

"If Jimmie is successful," Ross said as he switched on the ignition and then went around to crank his motor, "we can win through."

Raeburn, already seated in his place in the cockpit, had been watching the sky to the south.

"If he wins out," he agreed quietly.

As the motor started the old man suddenly straightened in his seat and shouted. Ross could not hear him above the roar of the exhaust, but as he climbed into his place he saw Raeburn's outstretched arm and looked. Against the bright southwestern sky were five tiny dots.

Numbed by the knowledge of failure, speechless with a rage that multiplied itself because it was so futile, the two sat and watched the oncoming planes. They knew that in five minutes the widely scattered herd would be driven irrevocably in every direction, that Jimmie Sinclair had failed even though he had undoubtedly given his life in the attempt, that Withington had struck again and that complete defeat was theirs.

For two full minutes Ross did not take his eyes from the oncoming squadron. The specks grew larger. The opposition pilots were not flying so fast or so high as the day before, and the very method of their approach indicated that they had learned caution and that they were determined to finish their work.

As they reached the line of Eskimo herdsmen and began to dip downward, Ross suddenly opened his throttle wide. In the Royal Flying Corps he had been known as one of the sanest and coolest of pilots. His fellow warriors of the air had often said that he never lost his temper even in the heat of the most vicious conflict.

Now he was a berserk. He roared upward, straight toward the diving planes. They were a mile away. Each could fly rings around him. He had no weapon. He had not even the right to risk the life of the man in the seat behind him.

Yet Ross did not consider any of these things. He only knew that final, bitter defeat was at hand; that the faith of Mary Raeburn, the vision of her brother, the stout old heart of her father, the loyalty of his own comrades, all were doomed. He did not know what he was doing. He wished only to fling himself upon the descending planes.

Red as was his vision, Ross did not remove it from the five machines that were diving toward the herd. He was only half a mile away now, and they were still three thousand feet up, dropping in a compact group, when he suddenly wiped his goggles with his furred gauntlet and stared again.

There were six planes where the instant before he had seen only five.

At that moment the group of white-winged machines seemed to explode in mid air. They ceased diving and scattered in a circle, and inside that circle, darting here and there, diving and zooming with a speed that made the Staffords appear to be stationary, was a yellow old LC4 training plane.

Ross flew straight on, wholly unconscious of his own machine. He could not understand what was happening. He could not cease to marvel at the speed of the yellow old buss.

And then, in a dive, a wing-slip and a sudden loop backwards, he recognized the uncanny hand of Jimmie Sinclair at the controls. He had seen such maneuvers too often in battles with the Huns to fail to recognize them now, and as he realized what it meant he saw the LC4 dart alongside an opposition plane.

It held its position there despite the white-winged machine's frantic efforts to get away, and then the Stafford turned its tail to the sky and dived straight to earth.

Instantly the LC4 whirled away in pursuit of the other four planes. In thirty seconds they had passed beyond the southern limits of the herd. The danger to the fortunes of David Raeburn vanished in that moment. The Staffords were in terrified, disordered flight.

But the LC4 was not content with its quick victory. It darted after the four planes, poised for an instant above them and dived. A Stafford dropped swiftly before it, banked, looked, and strove frantically to get away from the yellow demon behind, and still the LC4 hung on.

The other three rose rapidly and wheeled away, and the LC4 let them go, never once turning from its pursuit of the one plane.

The chase carried them quickly away from Ross, but before it had begun he had been close enough to recognize Chet's bus, and he was certain Jimmie was at the controls.

Those two facts alone told him enough. The unbelievable had happened. His two comrades were still alive and success had been assured. The explanation of it all could wait. There was other work to do, and he turned back to the herd.

A mile high, he and Raeburn flew over it. He was unable to see that the battle had had any effect on the deer. They were still widely scattered, but were being rounded up by the three planes which continued to patrol the northern and western sides, and by the Eskimos on the south.

Ross turned back toward the scene of the battle. His own work was now with the Eskimos, moving them forward, and in his elation he wanted to find Jimmie and Chet.

But, though he searched the sky through a half circle of the compass, and though he saw the three fleeing Staffords far to the south, he could not find the LC4 or its quarry.

He knew Chet and Jimmie—knew their reckless disregard for anything except victory in a fight, and in sudden fear that disaster still clung to the heels of victory, he opened his throttle wide and roared on into the south.

He flew for five minutes, searching far ahead, and he did not see a Stafford rise from the ground beneath him and come up under his tail.

Then it darted alongside, and Ross and Raeburn looked across into the grinning faces of Chet Warren and Jimmie Sinclair.

CHAPTER XIII.

WINGED VICTORY.

WHEN Jimmie Sinclair left his companions out on the barren grounds he had only one thought. He would fly back to headquarters, get a rifle, automatic pistol and ammunition, and then turn southward down the coast to the syndicate headquarters.

His plan of attack was simple. He would fly high, shut off his motor, and glide to the earth a mile from the buildings. He knew the moon would be up by that time.

On foot he would go forward to the hangars. There was every reason to expect they would be unguarded. Then, after he had wrecked the planes and motors, or, at least, had put them out of commission for some time, he would find a hiding place and wait for the pilots to come out.

He expected they would come out in a group, and yet, cold and calculating as was his plan, it was not in the little Scotch pilot to ambush them. He intended to confront them openly and fight. Beyond that he had no plans.

Fierce as was Jimmie's desire for vengeance, red as was his vision, his grim purpose could not deaden him to the pain of his bereavement. From the moment he and Chet Warren had first met in the aviation school in England, the one a slow-speaking, steady-eyed young cowman, the other a high-strung, volcanic veteran of two years in the trenches, they had been drawn together in a comradeship that had become famous in the flying corps.

Jimmie was a natural airman, Chet a natural fighter. Between them, for they almost always hunted in pairs, they were the undoing of many a Hun formation. They had not been separated since those first days in the aviation school, and now that Jimmie knew Chet had fallen he was possessed of only one ambition and one desire.

He reached the Raeburn hangars in thirty minutes' flying. Though it was a little after midnight, he was surprised to find the machine-shop brilliantly lighted. The moment his plane came to a stop he leaped out and ran in.

The great, empty, windowless hangar also was ablaze with light, and as he closed the door he stopped in amazement. Before him was a plane, a smoke-stained, yellow old LC4 training plane, and working upon it were Barney Sloat and all six of his mechanics.

But Jimmie did not see them. A head had been raised above the edge of the cockpit and a pair of gray eyes had looked into his.

"Chet!" he cried.

For a moment he was silent, and then there poured from his lips a steady stream of low-toned, passionless profanity — profanity gleaned from Glasgow streets and public houses, from the lips of the countless soldiers whose only means of expressing strong emotion was by blasphemy.

"What's it all about, Jimmie?" Barney asked.

"Chet! We thought he'd crashed out there. I've spent the night looking for him."

He babbled on, incoherently now, almost hysterically.

"Shut up, Jimmie," Chet said sternly, and yet with a certain gentleness. "We haven't time for that or anything else, now. Grab a wrench."

Jimmie saw that not one of the eight men about the plane had ceased work for an instant. Something about their intent attitudes and quick movements as well as in Chet's words told him of an imperative demand for haste.

"What 'll it be?" he asked.

"Help Chet," Barney said, and Jimmie climbed up beside his friend.

"I beat it straight home," the Arizonian explained without lifting his head from his work. "I saw they were going to quit, but I knew they'd be back to-morrow sure. Barney told me he'd get this Liberty motor in the best possible shape, and he'd had six days to do it in.

"So I came on home. I knew our only chance was in having speed enough to stick close to those fellows, and the way I figure it, five minutes will be enough to drive them away for good."

Jimmie glanced over the plane. He saw the huge twelve-cylinder motor already lowered into place, though the hoisting chains were still attached. He saw three of the mechanics stringing new and heavier braces, and Barney himself was watching every detail of the work.

Hour after hour the eight men toiled on. Daylight came and they were not ready for a test. Chet glanced anxiously at the gray light that streaked in through a crack in the hangar doors and then walked around the plane.

"She'll have to go as she is, Barney," he said. "We can't wait."

The chief mechanic turned upon the pilot angrily. No man knew better than he that the old LC_4 could not give what would be asked of it. He was about to break forth in denunciation and ridicule when he caught Chet's glance.

It was level and it was steady, and it told Barney that the Arizonian not only understood the chance he was taking, but that he was resolved upon it.

"But let me test out the motor?" he pleaded.

"You've tested her on the block," Chet answered. "She'll stay in or she'll shake herself out. The only way to learn what she'll do is to try it. Fill up the tanks and slide her out."

He ran over to the pilots' sleeping quarters, and when he returned the plane was outside. He motioned Jimmie into the front seat, and then placed two automatic shotguns in the rear compartment. A mechanic turned the propeller a few times and then called:

"Contact, sir?"

"Contact!" Jimmie cried as he switched on the ignition.

The motor snorted and then settled into a steady roar. The plane vibrated to the wing tips and Barney and his six mechanics dug their heels into the snow and expended the last of their strength in holding the machine back.

Then Jimmie waved his arm, the mechanics let go, and the old ship dashed away and almost immediately took to the air.

"The young fools," Barney cursed softly as he and the mechanics watched the plane turn westward. "She can't stand an hour of straight flying, and the first stunt they pull she'll pancake with them."

Because they were men who had seen brave deeds done quietly, and death met simply and modestly, they paid a silent tribute to this spectacle of pure, fighting courage.

"Anyhow," one of the men said at last, "Sinclair will get the last second out of her."

"He will," Barney agreed. "But no one can put strength into a plane where the designers never intended it."

Straight as an arrow, and mounting steadily all the time, Jimmie headed the trembling old bus out over the great white desert. He had started with his throttle half open, and gradually he pulled it back. Once he tugged at it gently until it had gone as far as it would, but with the sudden leap of the plane and the sudden increase of vibration he again shoved it forward.

Chet, in the rear seat, was loading the weapons and arranging fresh shells in loops he had tacked around the edge of the cockpit. Each shell was loaded with buckshot that ran twelve to the ounce and load, and Jimmie and Chet knew exactly how many of those bullets would, on the average, strike inside a thirty-inch circle at thirty, forty, fifty, and sixty yards.

In their spare moments following that encounter with Balshaw at the supply station, when they had found a rifle insufficient for their needs, they had experimented with shotguns and buckshot. Now they were to have the opportunity to put their theory to a test.

His two weapons loaded, Chet turned to a survey of the sky. He knew that Jimmie would get the last bit of speed and the last bit of life out of the shaking frame, and that his only task was to be ready with a quick aim and trigger finger in their brief moment of fighting existence.

In fifteen minutes they sighted the herd, and a little later Chet made out the five syndicate planes far to the south and at about their own level. He touched Jimmie on the shoulder and pointed, and the pilot began to climb.

He opened the throttle wider, for he saw that the other planes would reach the herd first. But still he climbed to get the altitude for his first dive.

It was when they did dive and appeared so suddenly in the midst of the syndicate planes that Ross first saw them. And it was only a few seconds later that Jimmie, risking everything in a steep bank, came alongside a Stafford, and Chet literally sprayed buckshot on the cockpit less than thirty yards away. Almost immediately the pilot fell forward upon his joy-stick, and the Stafford plunged earthward.

As Jimmie turned toward another, Chet touched him on the shoulder and pointed to a plane that had been the first to turn in flight. He had recognized Balshaw, and Jimmie was on his tail in an instant.

Balshaw evidently knew what was coming. He had caught a glimpse of Chet's face, and he had seen his comrade fall. He was stunned, too, by the amazing speed of the yellow old ship around which he had flown rings so easily in their first encounter, and he scuttled away in sheer panic.

Diving, wing-slipping, looping and zooming, he fled into the south. His three companions, seeing that he had been chosen as the second victim, simply opened their throttles wide and left him to his fate.

Twice Jimmie risked shattering his plane by steep and sudden banks, and each time Chet emptied a magazine. But still Balshaw darted and swooped. To gain speed, he lost altitude rapidly, and when at last, close to the ground, he saw that escape was impossible, he dived, straightened out close to the snow and shut off his motor.

The Stafford made a humpy landing, but it came to a stop at last, uninjured.

Jimmie had followed in that last dive. The spirit of combat had seized him completely now. He was bent only on gaining a position which would permit Chet to fire with success. He jerked the throttle wide open, dropped like a meteor after Balshaw, and then, when close to the ground, jerked back on his joy-stick.

A Spad would have stood it. The machines Jimmie had flown in France would have submitted to anything he could do to them.

But the worn-out LC4, driven by a force nearly three times as great as had ever been intended for it, was not equal to the strain. She responded to the controls, straightened out level with the ground, and then both wings crumpled.

She was one hundred feet above the ground, and though she dropped like a

stone, her momentum carried her forward. She struck squarely on both runners, bounced high into the air, struck again, flashed ahead, turned sidewise, and then rolled over and over, spilling out Jimmie and Chet.

The two pilots tumbled and slid across the snow, but when they stopped each bounded to his feet. Chet ran back a few yards and picked up one of the shotguns, to which he had clung until the last moment. With one gloved finger against the trigger, he turned toward the Stafford, only a few feet away.

Balshaw had climbed out of his machine the moment it had come to a halt, and both arms raised above his head, had run away from it. When he saw the pursuing plane collapse he wheeled back, but Chet, his weapon ready, was at his heels.

"Climb down!" the Arizonian commanded as Balshaw raised himself up on the step.

The syndicate pilot obeyed.

"Now beat it!" Chet ordered, and he waved toward the empty, white prairie to the south.

"But—" the man cried in terror.

"Beat it!" Chet repeated. "Come on, Jimmie. There's a chance to catch up with the rest of them."

Balshaw hesitated and then started toward the syndicate headquarters, nearly two hundred miles away.

"We can't catch them!" Jimmie protested, even as he began to climb into the cockpit.

Chet looked at the three specks fading in the southern sky.

"Guess not," he agreed, "but it sure would have been a surprise for them if we could have got among 'em with one of their own planes. Here comes Ross. Let's go meet him."

He ran around to the front and cranked the motor, and it was thus that, in a Stafford, they came alongside Ross and grinned across at the flight commander and Raeburn.

Ross signaled to them to descend, and both planes landed close to the wrecked machine. Ross walked over and looked at the huge twelve-cylinder motor and the crumpled wings. Raeburn, too, surveyed the wreck, but without understanding what had caused it.

Then, because his emotions would not permit speech, he turned his back on the three pilots and stared across the barren grounds.

"My boy was like them," he whispered, and for the first time since the fatal word had come from the front the father understood the full glory of an airman's death.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE BACKLASH OF DESIRE.

MELVILLE WITHINGTON, dressed for a flight, walked across to the syndicate hangars, in front of which his little Spad stood waiting for him. As he was about to climb into the cockpit the mechanic who stood at the propeller looked upward.

"They're coming back," he said.

Then he stared again and began to swear softly.

"There's only three of them!" he exclaimed at last.

"Three!" Withington repeated, and he climbed down and searched the sky.

He did not speak again, but stood leaning against his machine as he watched the three specks that were rapidly growing larger.

The doors of the hangars opened and a half dozen mechanics rushed out. They stared for a moment and then all began to talk at once.

"They got two more!"

"And all they had was slow, worn-out busses."

"That's what they get for bucking a bunch of aces."

"Balshaw got his."

"Creighton, too."

"And Woolly yesterday."

"Shut up!" Withington snapped.

He, too, had recognized the returning pilots, not only by the machines, which were now close enough to be distinguished, but by the manner in which they flew.

The mechanics drew away, but continued a low-voiced speculation.

"I said from the start it was bad business," one of them declared in a tone which reached Withington. "Those other fellows aren't Germans. They're white men, like we are."

"Look at 'em come down!" exclaimed another. "They're scared yet."

The three planes had taken a long slant for the south end of the field, and while one dropped to the ground the other two circled to await their turns.

The moment the first machine came to a stop not far from the Spad the pilot climbed out and ran forward.

Withington did not go to meet him. He waited calmly until the airman, fumbling with his hood and goggles, had stopped before him.

The man's face was white and his hands were trembling. His eyes were blazing, too, and when at last he loosened his goggles he flung them at Withington's feet.

"There, damn you and your dirty work!" he cried with sudden passion. "Do it yourself if you want any more of it done!"

"Stop that, Raistrick!" Withington commanded sharply. "Did you succeed?"

"Succeed!" Raistrick cried in a fresh burst of rage. "Does that look like we succeeded?" and he swept an arm toward the other two planes. "Yes, we succeeded, all right. Half of us did. Woolly yesterday and Ned Balshaw and Joe Creighton to-day."

"But the herd!" Withington interrupted. "Did you scatter it?"

The pilot stared for a moment as if he had not comprehended. Then he burst into a torrent of abuse.

But Withington was already walking away to meet the pilot of the second machine.

"What happened?" he asked as the man climbed out.

"They rung in a new plane on us, sir," was the answer. "Or a new motor in an old plane. There were two men in it, one of them the fellow who crashed Woolly yesterday with a wrench. He had a shotgun. Must have been buckshot. He shot Creighton in the air and Joe dropped like a stone.

"Then they took after Balshaw. We turned and streaked it."

"You didn't do anything to the caribou?" Withington demanded.

"Couldn't. That fellow would have had us sure if we'd stayed."

Withington turned away without another word. As he started toward his living-quarters the pilot called after him:

"Balshaw saved his hide, all right."

Withington wheeled instantly.

"You mean they didn't kill him!" he exclaimed.

"No, he quit. Those two didn't seem to care about the rest of us. They took after Ned and hung to him every move he made. They're wonders, those fellows.

"When Ned saw he couldn't get away from the shotgun he dived and landed. The last I saw of him he was climbing out of his bus and running away from it with his hands in the air. I'll bet he was yelling 'Kamarad!' all right."

For the first time since the three planes had been seen approaching, Withington lost his self-control.

"The yellow little cur!" he cried. "He gave himself up without a struggle, eh? Quit cold!"

"You'd quit yourself if you had those two devils on your tail," the pilot replied.

"Keep quiet! Don't you see what this means? That yellow pup will tell everything he knows. They'll put the screws on him and he'll spill everything."

Withington hesitated a moment and then he began to issue commands.

"Get after these planes," he called to the mechanics. "Fill up the tanks and see that they're in shape. Nordahl"—and he turned to the second pilot—"go in and get a bite to eat, you and Orchardson, when he lands.

"Then both of you get back there as soon as you can. Take a rifle and an automatic, each of you, and land near where they have Balshaw. He'll be out there around the edge of their herd somewhere. They won't have time to stop and take him to headquarters.

"And get him! Understand? Get him! Bring him back here before they get a chance to make him talk. Do it any way

you wish. Shoot your way in, and out, or tie white flags to your wingtips and let them think you're coming to get the bodies of those fellows who crashed. But get Balshaw! Understand? Get him!"

"Go get him yourself," Nordahl answered as he turned toward the pilots' quarters. "I'm through with it.

"Besides, if you want any caribou yourself you'd better start after them. We split their herd yesterday, and they're rounding up only part of it and letting the rest go. They're scattered out southwest."

"You refuse to obey orders!" Withington cried.

His black eyes were dangerously bright. His voice was as sharp and hard as the bark of his Spad's motor.

"That kind of order, yes," Nordahl replied evenly.

The superintendent of the Canadian Meat Products Syndicate hesitated a moment and then turned toward his living quarters.

"Send Orchardson in to me after he has had something to eat," he called over his shoulder.

When the pilot entered the office a half hour later he found Withington the cool, hard, quick-thinking employer he had always known. The flashes of chagrin and temper the other two airmen had seen had not left a trace.

"Well, we bungled that, didn't we?" Withington began.

"They did it for us. They put a twelve-cylinder motor in one of those old ships and had fifty miles more speed than we had."

"And they're close to their fencing with the deer?"

"They'll have everything inside wire by to-morrow noon. I watched things pretty closely when we flew up this morning. We were high enough to see. They know how to handle the deer, those fellows."

"How many have they?"

"I couldn't estimate at that height. The herd was scattered. But they had enough."

"Hundred thousand?"

"All of that."

"You couldn't see their fences yesterday?"

"Sure. Their headquarters, too."

"Damn Balshaw!" Withington shouted. "Then you fellows scattered their herd when they had it inside their fifty-mile limits?"

"I don't know anything about the limits, but we were less than fifty miles from their headquarters."

Withington quickly regained control of himself, but he was silent for a moment. He had issued positive instructions that the Raeburn herd was to be stampeded before it was within fifty miles of the coast. Balshaw had done the scouting, and Balshaw, as flight commander, had laid the plans.

Withington had told him to be certain that the attack was made before Raeburn had the deer close enough to his line to raise a question. Now the syndicate was open to a legitimate charge of invading the other company's strictly defined territory. Outside that the war might be as ruthless as he could induce his pilots to make it.

When he spoke again, however, he was as cool as usual.

"They'll be ready to start butchering day after to-morrow?"

"Easily."

Again Withington was silent for a moment. Then he straightened in his chair and said crisply:

"Orchardson, you're in charge of the pilots now. Our supply stations are fully equipped. The Indians are all here. I'll be busy with other things for a few days and I'll leave it up to you. How many mechanics can fly?"

"Two."

"Tell them they're pilots now. Begin this afternoon to carry the Indians out to the upper station. Forget the rest of this business and go after the caribou. Turn that herd you split off from theirs yesterday down this way and move it along as fast as you can."

He waved a hand as a sign of dismissal and began to write on a sheet of paper he had drawn toward him.

"And tell the men to warm up the Spad," he said as Orchardson opened the door.

He wrote rapidly for a few minutes, read what he had written, and with the aid of a book, rewrote it in code.

He then turned to a safe in a corner of the office, whirled the combination and opened the door. From an inner compartment he took a thick package of paper currency, counted off some bills and thrust them into a pocket. Five minutes later his Spad rose from the snow and sped away toward the south.

Though the mechanics kept flares burning on the landing field until midnight, the Spad did not return. Not until nearly noon the next day was the roar of its motor heard. When it landed, and Withington stepped out, two mechanics ran up to push it into the hangar. As they were about to grasp the wings they turned and looked northward.

"There comes Balshaw, sir," one of them exclaimed as he pointed.

Withington glanced up to see a Stafford, flying low, approaching from the north. It swooped down until it was no more than a hundred feet from the earth and then straightened out and came on directly over the hangars.

"Is he crazy!" exclaimed a mechanic. "I never knew Ned to waste time getting down."

The next instant the plane roared across the hangar roof and dipped toward the Spad, out on the landing field. Withington and the mechanics dodged instinctively.

Then it rose as it passed overhead and they caught a glimpse of a grinning face and a waving arm. As they stared they saw a small object tossed from the cockpit. It struck the snow, and the plane zoomed and went straight on southward.

"That's Ned's plane," a mechanic said as he turned to Withington.

"Yes, I recognized it," the superintendent replied. "Go see what he dropped."

"It's a letter," the man said a moment later as he handed it to his employer.

Withington tore open the envelope, which had been wired to a broken piece of casting, and read:

> This isn't a bad old bus. I kind of hate to give it up. I need it for a day or two. Then I'll let your prize cootie fly home in it. He's perfectly well, but he hates to tear himself away from us.
>
> CHESTER WARREN.

Withington smiled as he finished reading the note. He looked at the plane, now a speck in the southern sky, and smiled again.

It was not a smile of amusement. For him there had been no humor in Chet's words. He had not even considered them impertinent.

His smile was one of satisfaction, of content, and he continued to smile as he walked away.

Later the word drifted out through the kitchen to the men's quarters that the boss was feeling better than he had for a week, and that he had actually whistled as he washed up for lunch.

Eearly in the afternoon Withington ordered, not his Spad, but a two-seater Stafford, and flew away toward the Raeburn southwest supply station. After circling over it he landed some distance away and waited. In a few minutes he saw Martel coming toward him, walking carefully on the hard crust.

"What news?" the man asked.

"Rotten. They killed two men and captured Balshaw."

"They did! What happened to the deer?"

"We scattered only part of them. But don't you see what Balshaw is going to do to you? To save his hide, he'll tell everything. He knows I've talked to you."

"How long has he been with them?"

"Since yesterday."

"And you waited this long to come for me?" Martel cried angrily.

"I had something else to do first. But I told you I'd take care of you, and I'm here. Come on."

"Did you get any of their fliers?"

There was a note of vindicative hope and of savage hatred in Martel's voice, and Withington glanced at him quickly.

"So that's it!" he taunted. "I thought you had a grouch against the old man.

"No, we didn't get any of them. They're devils, those fellows, and now they stand ace-high as heroes. That little trick we tried of sending in a piece of landing runner looks small. Those fellows are probably wearing wreaths right now, pinned on them by Mary Raeburn."

Withington studied Martel's face as he

talked. All his life he had learned to play on the greed and hate of others. He had become a master of his instrument, and he saw that, instead of a disgruntled employee, he had a man inflamed by jealous hatred.

He had come only in a belated fulfilment of a promise. Now he saw that, through his delay, he might have lost a valuable ally, valuable because his passion, if cleverly worked upon, would take him to any lengths.

"So that's it!" he sneered. "Well, I've got their fliers blocked now. They won't look so big when I get through with them. Come on."

"What do I get out of it?" and Martel's face was livid because he saw that the other understood.

"Get out of it? You get a chance to save your hide from the fliers for one thing. And if we work it right," he added slowly, "you may get what you want. Mary Raeburn is a vixen, but she's a damned good-looking one. And you're a fool if you let them come up here and take her from you."

CHAPTER XV.

FUR LAND WISDOM.

ROSS and Raeburn knew there was no time for the story of how Chet and Jimmie had appeared so miraculously in the Liberty-motored LC4. The herd was still widely scattered, and though there was no longer danger of another attack by the syndicate planes, their own work was unfinished.

Ross turned back at once to his own plane. As he passed the Stafford he called to Chet:

"Where's the fellow who was flying this bus?"

Chet pointed toward the south, where a man could be seen disappearing over one of the swells in the rolling white prairie.

"You didn't tell him to walk home!" Ross exclaimed.

"I let him think there was nothing else for him to do," Chet grinned.

"But that is murder!" Raeburn exclaimed.

"Oh, I didn't intend to let him get away," Chet answered easily. "We want to talk to him anyhow. He knows a lot we might be interested in."

"Why not take him to headquarters and lock him up?" the old fur trader suggested.

"Not in any bus I'm flying," Chet replied quickly. "He's not the kind you can trust. I was going to head him over to the south end of the fence after a while. We can leave word with the men there to relay him on. There's no danger of his running away."

"Do that," Ross said. "And then you two go on in and get some sleep. The rest of us can handle this from now on."

It was a busy day for the four pilots who remained with the herd. Ross and Raeburn worked for a time, and then, when they saw that the other three planes and the Eskimos could keep the caribou slowly but surely moving toward the wide mouth of the Y, they turned to the gruesome task which remained.

At the fencing crew's headquarters they picked up tools and a few sticks of dynamite. They had little trouble in finding the man Chet had shot down that morning. Because there was nothing else to do, and the body must be saved from the wolves, they blasted a grave in the frozen ground and left his machine beside it as a monument.

After a two-hour search they found the plane Chet had brought down with a monkey wrench. It lay fifteen miles to the northwest.

The falling machine had killed half a dozen caribou. Then the closely packed herd had passed over all.

Had it not been for the thought of the Eskimo sacrificed to the same fate, and the knowledge of how nearly Raeburn had come to sharing it, they would have had only pity for the mangled remnant of a man they buried.

It was nearly sunset before they found the body of the Eskimo and had given it as fitting a burial as they could. Then they had only time to fly over the herd, the leaders of which were already between the ends of the Y, and go on to headquarters before dark.

That night Mary, her father, and the

six pilots gathered at the supper table for the first time in a week. Mary had been busy every day hauling supplies to the fencing crews. The night Chet had returned for the Liberty motor she had camped far out along the fence, and had only reached headquarters a short time before the pilots had arrived with the news of victory. The history of a week had to be unfolded for her.

All talked at once as they gathered at the meal Sam had prepared in honor of their triumph. Each story was told in the jargon of the air, in words which often bewildered Raeburn, but which were clear to Mary. She had puzzled through Tommy's letters and had been with the pilots long enough to understand the terms.

Because she knew these words often were used purposely to cloak the emotions of the speakers, her fierce, loyal little heart opened to these youths whose courage and daring and ingenuity had brought success to her father's enterprise.

There was no horror for her in the description of how Chet's monkey wrench had sent one syndicate plane crashing into the midst of the terrified caribou, or of how his shotgun had brought down another. She had been born and bred in the far north, she possessed in extreme measure that fierce feminine partisanship, and she saw in the deaths of the opposition pilots only just retribution.

The story of the drive and of the battles in the air continued long after the meal had ended. Raeburn shared the exultation of the fliers, and for a time all eight abandoned themselves to the rapture of their hour of triumph.

Even when Raeburn's calmer mind turned to the work still at hand, he could not bring himself to mar the ecstasy of the moment by introducing the business of the morrow, and it remained for Ross to turn the talk to more practical things.

"Who's going to the government wireless station at Port Nelson with word to send in the ships?" he asked suddenly.

"That's already decided," Chet replied quickly. "It's either Jimmie or me. We're the only ones who have a bus that can make the trip."

"You mean the Stafford?"

"Sure."

Ross glanced at Raeburn. The calm impudence of the suggestion brought a grin to their faces.

"But that's their machine," the old fur man objected.

"We won it, didn't we?" Chet countered, and then he added triumphantly: "Besides, we need it. If we had all the caribou in Canada inside that fence they wouldn't do us any good unless we had the ships to take them out, would they?"

"No, but—"

"And you said yourself that not a minute should be lost in getting a message out. The ships must come up here and load and be out before the Straits freeze over."

"Yes—"

"Well, then, we've got to use the Stafford. We haven't a bus that's fit for the trip without a lot of work. And I'll drop a note to Withington telling him we'll return it when we're through."

"All right," Raeburn capitulated with a laugh. "I guess you've earned its use for a few days. I'll write the message in the morning."

"Oh, boys!" and Chet turned gloatingly to the others. "To be in a real bus again!"

"But how about our planes?" Raeburn asked Ross anxiously. "We still need some."

"Barney will fix up a couple. By working all night he can install two fresh motors."

"Who's going to bring Balshaw in?" Chet asked.

"I will, with the dogs," Mary offered. "I always come back light, and you will be too busy."

"You can if Jimmie goes with you," her father said. "The man's going to be a nuisance. I don't see why one of you boys can't drop him near their headquarters."

"You bet we won't!" Chet answered fiercely. "He's a prisoner of war. Besides, I'd like to put the screws to the little skunk. Maybe he can tell us what Withington is after in trying to buy you out."

"You couldn't believe a word he said," Jimmie objected.

"And he wouldn't know anything," Ross

added. "Withington isn't the kind that takes a man like Balshaw into his confidence."

"We could make him tell one thing!" Mary cried. "And that is, who killed Henry? It was plain, deliberate murder. Surely, father, you are not going to let that go unpunished, even if we are up here in the barren grounds."

"I doubt if any one knows that except the man who did it, and he'd never admit such a thing," Raeburn said. "But here is what we'll do. We'll shut him up and tell him we're going to send him out in a ship, a prisoner held for the murder of the cache guard. That may scare him."

"And in the mean time we'll all have to turn butchers, won't we, Mr. Raeburn?" Ross asked.

"Yes, and it will take every man, white, brown, sailor, landsman and airman," was the answer. "The hard work has just begun. Here is what there is to do."

Quickly he outlined the future operations. He had figures galore at his tongue's end, and as he dealt in thousands of tons of meat, tens of thousands of caribou, tonnage of ships, the first possible closing of Hudson Straits, the six pilots were sobered by their realization of the gigantic nature of the next week's work.

When he had finished Ross turned to his fellow airmen.

"Chet," he said, "you take the message to Port Nelson to-morrow and wait for the reply. Jimmie, you've always been crazy about dogs. You can go with Mary. You'll find Balshaw along the fencing somewhere.

"Barney should have two motors installed by morning. Mr. Raeburn and I will need one bus. You take the other, Harry, and help the Eskimos at the rear of the herd. Gerald and Paul can report to Barney. He'll have work with the gas cars on the railroad and the loading machinery."

"Say!" Jimmie exclaimed. "How about that guard out at the southwest supply station?"

"That's right," Chet added. "We clean forgot he was on earth."

"We ought to get him in to-morrow, Mr. Raeburn," Ross suggested, and he had become suddenly serious. "We intended to relieve all three of those men. Then the storm held us here, and immediately afterward we had to start the drive. We brought in the other two while we were getting gas at their stations, but no one has been near Martel for twelve days."

Ross displayed more agitation than was his custom, for his suspicions had centered upon Martel. But Raeburn misunderstood the flight commander's anxiety.

"You needn't worry about George," he said. "He has plenty of grub and he's stuck out that sort of thing before."

Ross did not answer. It was not that Raeburn's faith convinced him, but the only fact he could offer to support his suspicions was that of Martel's manner the night of the last party.

He also understood that his own love for Mary had made him more observant and more intuitive than the others. He resolved, however, to send the first available plane to the southwest station.

The next morning all the men at the Raeburn headquarters were at work before dawn. Barney, true to his promise, turned out two planes with fresh motors. In one of these Harry Palmer flew away to help the Eskimos with the final herding. The other was requisitioned by Ross for supervising. As he was about to depart, Raeburn appeared in his flying clothes.

"Father!" protested Mary, who was getting her dogs ready. "You're not going out this morning! You promised me you'd stay in and nurse that cold."

"Just for a little while," he answered. "I want to see how things are going."

"He shouldn't," and Mary turned to Ross for support. "He's overdone and he is tired out, and he has one of his awful colds. I know. I've seen him do just that sort of thing before."

But her father was already climbing into the cockpit.

"Never mind," Ross said reassuringly. "What we'll see this morning will be a tonic."

The two men grinned at each other. Then the roar of the motor drowned Mary's protest and they were off.

Barney and his entire force started at once to groom the Stafford for its six-hundred-mile, one-stop flight. Though Chet stood beside them, fuming with impatience, it was noon before Barney would let the plane go, and the Arizonian could start down the coast with the word that would send the ships north.

Meanwhile Ross and Raeburn were watching the deer moving steadily between the long, converging lines of fence that ended at the huge main coral. From their point of vantage they saw, spread out beneath them, the indubitable proof of a success which seemed too colossal to be true.

To Ross it was a quick, decisive victory. To Raeburn, because it was the culmination of a dogged struggle, first against the illimitable forces of the barren grounds, and then against the avarice of man, it meant far more than he could ever have expressed in words.

Ross shut off the motor and turned to his companion.

"We've won," he said quietly. "Nothing they can do now can stop us."

"Perhaps," the older man admitted. "But fur land has taught me one thing, lad. Never shut your eyes until the fur goes out."

Ross did not answer. He had caught sight of Mary's dog team standing by the fence and he started toward it.

But even as he did so he smiled at the thought of this man whom life had never permitted to anticipate success, little dreaming that within a day he would have to bow to the deeper wisdom of fur land's battle lore.

CHAPTER XVI.

CONFIRMATION.

MARY, Jimmie Sinclair, Ross, and Raeburn stood beside the fence watching the deer pass.

"It's like looking at a river," Jimmie exclaimed in awe. "You can't believe each one of these sets of antlers means a living, breathing thing. If you pick one out and try to follow him you're lost. Why, there's millions of them!"

"You won't have to drive again this fall," Mary added. "There are more here than we can butcher."

"No," her father said slowly. "I've been estimating and I don't think there will be any more than enough to fill our old ship and the two we have sent for."

"And we must make another drive! Why, daddy, you must be wrong! We couldn't begin to butcher all we have here now."

"We won't butcher them all," the old fur trader said with a finality that made the other three glance at him quickly. "We won't butcher more than one in four. The others will go back to the barren grounds."

"Go back!" Ross and Jimmie exclaimed together.

Raeburn had turned so that he faced all three. He had thrown back the hood of his flying suit and his massive gray head was held high.

In every inch he looked the part of a conqueror of the north, of the man who has bent the wilderness to his needs, and yet in his eyes was a light that betokened none of the qualities which had been necessary in the stern warfare he had waged for thirty-five years.

It was the light from the soul of a prophet that flashed so incongruously beneath the shaggy brows, from the soul of an idealist, from the heart of a man who was possessed of a great vision, and there was something in the quality of that light which held the three young people silent and wondering.

"That," he began at last, and he waved an arm at the thousands of caribou that were crowding past, "is a vision I have had for many years. Long before I saw the way, long before I believed this would be possible, I dreamed of it, hoped for it, planned for it.

"It used to stagger me sometimes, just thinking of the limitless numbers of these deer, of the measureless sweep of these white plains, of the food that was going to waste, that has been going to waste for centuries.

"I saw the Indians and the Eskimos slaughtering the caribou in a very frenzy,

killing five times what they could eat or care for. I knew that a caribou becomes full grown in three years, that constantly these great herds were replenishing themselves.

"And always I marveled that such a thing should be here in a land where it could not possibly do the world any good.

"It was that thought that came to me often, and that began to grow with the other, and at last it took shape. To me it became a duty as imperative as finding a way to get this meat out to a hungry world, and I knew that when the time came, if I should be permitted to achieve my vision, I must stand between man's inherent greed and the destruction of this last of the world's great natural storehouses.

"It has been done before. Once the western plains in the States were black with buffalo. They might have been there to-day, a great source of food, but for man's senseless greed. Instead, those herds were slaughtered that man might get a dollar for each hide. Thousands and tens of thousands of meat rotted there year after year. No one had the vision or the courage to halt it.

"Now it would be the same with the caribou. Man, drunk with the fullness of nature's resources, could clear the barren grounds."

He paused and looked at the deer that rolled past in unbroken flood. He had been transported while he talked. The elation of his spirit held the three motionless.

"I could kill every one of those animals," he began again. "I could fill six ships and still have enough to be frozen and held through the winter for more ships in the spring. I could go out and drive in more and fill a dozen ships, and next year, and the next, I could do the same.

"I could make more money than ten men would ever need. In five years I could retire with many millions, and in doing so I would strip the country, leave it an empty waste. There are millions of caribou in this land, and in a few years I could leave it as bare as the moon."

He turned and faced them. The prophet had vanished suddenly. The hard-headed organizer and executive had returned.

"So I have decided to take only the bulls and not all of those," he said. "Nothing less than three years old. I'll kill some of the older cows."

"But does your grant—" Mary began.

"It is not what my grant permits," he interrupted almost sternly. "Look at the Indian hunters. Year after year, generation after generation, they comb the same bit of bush, and always there is a harvest. If white men had been the hunters, the fur trade would have died a hundred years ago.

"I haven't the right. No man has the right to defeat nature. Through the centuries she has provided nourishment for these animals and patiently waited for man to come and take the increment. Do you think that one man or one group of men should strip her bare to fill their own pockets?"

He stopped and looked at them, his eyes alight. Although a few minutes before they would have stretched out youthful, greedy hands for all that victory had brought to them, the three were now swept away by the fire of his speech.

"When I got that grant," Raeburn continued, "no restrictions were placed upon me. But I shall never profit by that fact."

"Why did they give it to you?" Mary demanded. "And why did you take it?"

"Because they were fools not to see what this meant, and because I was a fool who lost his head when they would not see it.

"I went to Ottawa to get the right to kill caribou for the market. They laughed at me. I had no friends and no influence and they would not take me seriously.

"Then, because I kept hounding them, because I wouldn't let them rest, they gave me the grant to get rid of me. I had intended to impose restrictions upon myself, but I was angry, and when the grant was made out I kept silent. I've often been sorry since then."

He stopped and leaned against the fence. The fire had gone out of his eyes and out of his voice, and he began to cough.

"Dad!" Mary cried in quick alarm. "I knew you shouldn't have come out here to-day. Now you'll be sick in bed just when

you're needed most. Ross, take him back this minute. It's all nonsense his having come out at all."

Raeburn protested, but Mary quickly overruled him. As she and Jimmie started on with the dogs to get Balshaw, Ross helped her father into the machine and flew away to headquarters.

The prisoner was brought in as Ross and Raeburn finished going over the final arrangements for butchering and shipping. The old fur trader realized more clearly than any one else what busy days were ahead of them, and through his experience the year before, had worked out each detail.

"Jimmie is watching Balshaw outside," Mary announced as she entered the living-room. "What shall we do with him?"

"It's too bad Chet isn't here," Ross grinned.

"He's frightened and he's mean," Mary continued. "I think he'll talk."

"But what can he tell us?" her father objected. "Nothing we can depend on."

"At least we can ask him who committed that murder," Mary protested.

"But we do know who is responsible, and Withington is the man who is going to pay. But bring him in."

At the first sight of the furtive figure which entered with Jimmie, Raeburn discounted anything that Balshaw might tell him. More to satisfy the others, he began his questioning.

"It's your kind that makes me sorry I have decent instincts," he said. "I only wish I could turn you out to the fate you deserve; turn you loose on the barren grounds without food or shelter and let the wolves and an empty stomach do the work I wouldn't soil my hands in doing.

"But, after all, you're only another man's tool, the sort of cowardly fool that does another man's dirty work. How much did he pay you for it?"

Balshaw licked his lips. He did not like to be in the same place with the Raeburn pilots, but he liked less the idea of returning to Withington, who, he knew, was capable of offering him up as the criminal. In the question he saw a sudden ray of hope.

"He told us he'd divide three thousand among us six when we'd driven you out," he said.

"Why did he want to drive us out?"

"Why—why—" Balshaw began, and then he stopped.

It was plain that he was dejected because he did not have the information they wanted, the price of possible protection. At last he finished weakly:

"I don't know."

"I thought so," Raeburn sneered. "You're the kind that does the dirty work without knowing why. Your kind gives Withington his chance. But who killed the guard at our station?"

Raeburn had shot the question suddenly. Balshaw started and then recovered himself quickly.

"I didn't know that any one—"

"Don't lie!" Raeburn interrupted. "I saw you knew it. Remember! I can still do the thing I'd like to do."

"I didn't know," Balshaw said quickly. "But I guessed, and I have some proof. And if I tell you," he asked with sudden cunning, "do you see that I get out of this country safe?"

"Go on," Raeburn ordered. "I make no promises now. It depends on what you tell us, and it's the only chance I give you."

Balshaw looked around the circle fearfully. He did not like the terms, but there was no alternative.

"Well," he began at last, "we pilots didn't do it. We fought you in the air, but that's all any of us did. It was that guard of yours down at your southwest station. He and Withington. Withington went down to see him several times. One day he took some dynamite, and he went in a two-seater and not the Spad. He didn't want ony of us to know."

He stopped, overcome with amazement at the reception his words were accorded. Raeburn stood above him, his eyes blazing.

"Take him away!" he ordered. "Lock him up until he can tell the truth. And if he doesn't—"

He did not finish the threat, but his glance swept out of the window and across the limitless plains that surrounded them.

Ross motioned to Jimmie to remove the prisoner. When they were gone he turned to Raeburn.

"I think he is telling the truth," he said quietly. "Perhaps not all he said, but part, at least."

"I won't believe it!" Raeburn stormed. "Not George Martel! Why, I brought him up. Do you, Mary?"

He turned toward his daughter and then stared incredulously. He had found belief in her face.

"I don't know, dad," she said slowly. "But we can wait—"

"We won't have to wait long," Ross finished. "I sent a plane for him and I think it's coming now."

Silently they watched it land, and then Gerald Stark ran across the field alone.

"He's gone!" he exclaimed as he burst into the room.

"Gone!" Raeburn repeated.

"Did you find any tracks?" Ross asked.

"Yes, a few faint ones on the crust. I followed them, and then I found where a plane had landed. After that there weren't any more."

Raeburn dropped heavily into a chair. The truth stabbed deeper because of his implicit faith. It was not that he was a simple old man who did not know treachery and guile. But it was the first time any of his men had betrayed him. Always he had chosen carefully and then trusted fully.

"At least," Ross said, "he's gone over to the other crowd openly now."

"Yes," Raeburn agreed. "He's in the safest place, both for us and for him."

CHAPTER XVII.

DISASTER.

DAVID RAEBURN did not get up for breakfast the following morning. He wanted to, and he had the strength of will to drive his body to its tasks, but Mary proved adamant.

"I know your cold isn't bad now," she agreed. "And it won't be if we get after it in time. A day in bed won't hurt you and it will leave you all the fresher for the work that's to be done."

"I guess we'll have to let her have her way to-day," Raeburn grinned at Ross. "You can go ahead without me. You know what there is to do. Put every man on the job and tell them all they draw double pay until the work is done. Send Una in here. He's the Eskimo who took the first ride in a plane. I'm the only one who can give the natives directions."

"Poor dad," Mary said after she and Ross had left the room. "The excitement is all over and he's gone flat. He feels worse about George Martel than he lets us know. I almost wish that he had not found it out. In a way, I feel to blame. Perhaps I wouldn't—"

She turned away without completing the sentence.

"What is it, Mary?" Ross asked. "Did he bother you?"

"It was nothing," she answered hastily, hardly knowing why she wished to conceal the truth.

Ross studied her face for a moment. From the first he had suspected the cause, and now he saw in her defensive evasion something which made his heart beat faster. But he knew it was not the time to rush defenses, and he turned away to take up his new work at the corrals.

Every available man was on hand, pilots, mechanics, fencing crew, Eskimos, and even the sailors on Raeburn's ship. The work was quickly organized, and by noon it was running smoothly.

After dinner, when Mary had gone down to the pens to watch the butchering, her father got up and dressed and found a window in the living-room from which he could watch the work half a mile away.

He would have liked to be out there, but he soon found himself reveling in this quiet hour of triumph, and he felt that he shared it with Tommy.

He had believed that he had lived completely in the old fur days, seeing in each new outpost a fresh marker of success. But as he visioned the thousands of tons of meat that would go out to a hungry world, he knew that he had been dealing only in the luxuries of life, in soft adornment for beautiful women. Now he was sending life itself to a world struggling in the throes of

readjustment. He was receiving the reward for his three years of sacrifice and resolve.

As the afternoon wore on and Chet Warren did not return with a message announcing that the ships had started, his tranquil mood was marred by forebodings. For all the airplanes had done on the barren grounds, Raeburn still had the earthman's distrust.

Port Nelson was more than three hundred miles away, and a six-hundred-mile journey in the north must always be hazardous.

At the supper table the fliers shared his anxiety.

"Perhaps it's motor trouble and he's had to land," Ross suggested. "Though Barney said he went over the Stafford with a microscope."

"Or maybe he tried stunts over Withington's place and they nabbed him," Paul added.

"And if they did!" Mary cried in sudden consternation. "No message, no ships!"

"Chet's not a fool!" Jimmie exclaimed hotly. "He knew how important that trip was. And he'll get here. I know he will."

Before any one could shove back his chair a plane passed close overhead.

"Get out the flares yourselves, fellows!" Ross shouted. "Don't wait for the mechanics."

He had run to the door while speaking, and the other pilots and Mary were at his heels.

Outside they could hear the plane circling, though they could not see it in the darkness. The men ran across to the hangars, and in five minutes had placed the flares on the landing field. A moment later the Stafford taxied up to the hangars.

Though stiff with cold, Chet climbed out quickly and started at once toward the living-quarters.

"What's the matter?" demanded Ross, who, with Mary, had reached the machine just before it stopped.

"Where's Mr. Raeburn?" Chet asked.

"Inside, at supper," Ross answered. "But what's the matter, man?"

Chet had already started on a run, and Mary, Ross, and the other pilots, who had come up, followed.

They did not ask any more questions. There had been something in Chet's manner that spoke too plainly of tragedy or disaster. They ran on and burst into the room behind him.

Even in Raeburn's presence Chet did not speak. He had drawn an envelope from a pocket and silently he handed it across the table to the old fur man.

Raeburn, too, had sensed something with his first glance at Chet's face. He tore open the message and read it.

Even then Mary and the five pilots did not speak to Chet. Something in Raeburn's face held them silent. The old man stared at the paper, his fingers trembled, and at last he laid the message down. His body seemed to sag, his gray head fell forward, and a groan escaped from lips that seemed powerless to check it.

"Father!" Mary cried. "Tell me, what is it?"

Raeburn only motioned toward the piece of paper, and Ross reached across the table for it.

"Aloud!" several of the pilots whispered.

Ross began:

> "Regret to inform you that it is impossible to get ships to send north. Insurance rates exorbitant and no company will risk vessels against early ice in Hudson Straits. Have tried all ports here and in England with same results. Have not wired before as we have been trying continuously for three weeks. Last chance failed us to-day.
>
> "BARTLETT & GREEN."

"No ships!" Mary moaned.

"Then we don't send out any meat!" exclaimed Ross.

"But there's your ship, Mr. Raeburn!" Harry Palmer cried.

"Yes," was the reply, "and it can't carry enough to pay what I owe."

"But you can butcher these deer and ship them next summer," Ross suggested.

"That's too late," Raeburn answered dully. "I'd be foreclosed before then. We can't wait that long. We're ruined, now."

(To be continued NEXT WEEK.)

The Crape Hanger

by *Lyon Mearson*

STEPHEN GRIERSBY gazed with unseeing eyes at the blue-print in front of him and pondered deeply upon his general state of financial uselessness in the world. He looked back upon the terrifyingly swift years in somber review and could find little encouragement. Thirty-seven years old—and making thirty dollars a week. It wasn't much.

When his father died twenty years before he left Stephen a little farm all cluttered up with mortgages and a ramshackle farmhouse on it that had a Queen Anne front and a Mary Ann back. When the mortgages were foreclosed, which happened almost immediately afterward, all Stephen had left were seven dollars and sixty-eight cents and a headache.

The money was about enough to carry him to New York, which it did with no delay. He managed to land a job driving a truck. It was a good job, too, and paid twelve dollars each and every week. But there was something about the job which Stephen didn't like; there was an esthetic something in his soul which revolted at the thought of being chambermaid to a hefty pair of Percherons—and besides, the firm failed soon after, and he had to look for another job anyway.

That was when the Steel Bridge Construction Company met up with Stephen Griersby and decided that he would do as an office boy. Stephen began to office boy with all his heart, and though he only received eight dollars a week for his labors, yet he realized that he had made a distinct, artistic step forward—if that gets you anything when your board bill is due. Mechanical things had always interested him, and he was in his element here. Officially his job was to fill the ink-wells, sweep the floors, run errands, take in callers' cards, and other such like items of the higher professions, but he was in the midst of creative work, in the midst of blue-prints which he did not understand as yet, but which seemed mysteriously to call him, to draw him to poring over them. His soul was satisfied.

Things were different in those days; out of his eight dollars a week Stephen was able to lay aside two or three, by a strict exercise of frugality and self-denial. This money he soon invested in a correspondence course in bridge engineering, supplemented by whatever he could pick up in the night schools of the city. He was what is called in the theatrical profession a "slow study"; that is, understanding did not come any too easily to him, in regard to his work, but there was this to be said, when he finally did learn something, it was learned, and all the king's horses and all the king's men could not take it away from him.

In due course of time he was made assistant to a junior draftsman, and a couple of years after that he was made a junior draftsman himself. He had finished his course long before, of course—his diploma hung neatly framed in his little box of a room; in spite of this, it was three years be-

fore they made him a draftsman, that is, invested him with the full title of the office; he had before this been doing the work of a draftsman.

So there it was. After nearly twenty years, he was still a draftsman, at thirty dollars a week. He was a good man; everybody admitted that, he told himself. Long ago the firm had learned never to pass on a new design, a new mechanical idea, without calling in Stephen Griersby and letting him put his O. K. on it, or *vice versa.* Many a promising idea had been nipped in the bud by him on account of defects which he pointed out to his employers.

He passed on many sound inventions, many practical new designs—but it is a fact that the great majority of those that had come up for investigation and indorsement were worthless. It is always so; steel construction is highly specialized—many powerful, trained minds have worked on it and pored over it; it was obvious that there was not much to be done in the way of progress, except for the occasional unearthly lightning flash of inspiration—which did not come often.

So his business had become, actually, in addition to his draftsman's duties, to show why new designs would not work.

"That's it," he said to himself, "I'm the official crape hanger." He gloomed over this for a while. It was a little unfair, perhaps, because 'most everything that was new and worth while in use by the Steel Bridge Construction Company had first had its enthusiastic indorsement by Stephen. And most of these men, who had advanced the new ideas, the new methods, were now executives of the company by virtue of these achievements, starting from a point equal with Stephen Griersby and sometimes from a lower stratum.

There was Ben Winthrop, for instance. Ben had been given his first chance for a job by Stephen—he had sponsored him to the company and had helped in his development. Now he had just been elevated to an executive position; he took part in the semiweekly meetings of the executives; he helped pass on new plans, new designs. Ben, as Stephen had to admit to himself without rancor, had never had any too much mechanical ability—in fact, he, Stephen, had to cover up his deficiencies more than once. And then Ben had stumbled upon something—a little idea for a girder flange that, it seemed to Stephen, almost anybody could have thought of. The company liked it—Stephen passed upon it—and there you are. Ben had suddenly shot away past Stephen; the pupil had become greater than the master.

Not that Stephen bore him any ill will; on the contrary, he rather liked Ben and was glad to see him get along. It was merely the fact that here was another youngster shooting past him as if he was nothing but an inanimate mile-stone in the careers of others, never moving himself and simply useful only in showing how far others traveled. It was getting monotonous; and financially it was all wrong.

"My own fault, maybe," he hazarded. "Maybe if I wasn't always knocking other people's work and did a little creating myself—" He trailed off in thought.

"That's it," he ruminated finally. "It's not the crape hanger that gets ahead—it's the creator—the man who constructs and not the man who destroys and tears down. That's what's the matter with me—I can tell in a minute what's wrong with other folks' ideas—but when it comes to having any myself I'm about as useless as an ice-cream concession in the Arctic Circle."

Then there was, of course, the slight matter of the secretary to the president. The secretary to the president in a corporation as big as this is an important job. When you consider that the present incumbent was as efficient as a brand new machine, earned forty dollars a week—which was ten more than you yourself are able to earn—and in addition, when you consider the fact that you love every inch of her—why, believe me, you have something to consider.

Marion Hastings was a very easy girl to look at, with her mass of black hair, raven-black as the wings of the darkest night, her eyes luminous and dark, like twin pools in the moonlight, and the dimples that came and went unbidden in the fairest skin that ever maiden sported who never had recourse to the drug-store for her complex-

ion. Those were the characteristics by which Griersby thought of her. What he said to himself was, "Darned nice lookin' girl, I'll tell the world." Which amounts to the same thing and doesn't eat up so much space.

You mustn't take it for granted that Marion was averse to the suit of Stephen Griersby. She wasn't. If she had encouraged him, it was because she could not help it. She knew him for what he was, and knew that he was worth while to the core. Also, she knew that he loved her deeply and truly. Never mind how she knew—a woman knows more than can be written down on clean, white paper. Nevertheless, for some reason, although he proposed whenever the spirit moved him, which was as often as she would permit, she had never yet given him a decided answer.

"And why should she?" he defended her hotly to himself. "A beautiful, capable girl like her, earning one-third more than I, a man, can manage to make here? The wonder is that she is willing even to talk to a poor dub like me; why, compared to her I look like a zero with the edge rubbed off. Why should she, I say?"

There was no answer to this, of course, so he went on with his thoughts in other fields. He thought about that new steel brace of his, and resolved to work on it furiously, driving his plans to completion without further delay. He had done himself an injustice in saying he never created anything—this new brace was an inspiration that had come to him while poring over plans which incorporated the old one now in use—cumbersome and expensive.

The innovation he had in mind was more ornamental, needed only about half as much material, and by all his calculations would sustain twice the load. He knew it was all right—knew that it would work out in practise. Heretofore, his mind had merely dwelt on this as something he would get at some time—not necessarily now. There was no hurry.

Meanwhile, there was something else he had in mind. To-day he rather thought would be a good time to beard old Parsons, the president, in his den and ask for—not only a raise in salary, but also advancement to a better position. He knew it was coming to him; that he deserved it, yet he shrank from asking, not because he was afraid of Parsons, or any one else; he hesitated simply because he had never asked for a raise before, and also because, as he well knew, business had fallen off for them just as it had for everybody else, and when business is subnormal is no time to ask for an increase. He did not want to lose his job; poor as it was, yet it was his livelihood; he was not starving. He looked with fear and horror upon the thought of being without work. He had been in one place for so long that he had no idea how to look for a new position.

Yet, he recognized the fact that if he wanted to marry he would have to make more money. He wanted to make enough to support Marion—supposing, of course, that he should be so lucky as to get her to say yes—at least, as well as she could support herself; you can't do that on thirty dollars a week.

"She'll never accept me while I'm making less money than she does," he muttered to himself. But what does man know of woman? Perhaps he was right—and then again, perhaps he wasn't.

Last night he had again asked her to marry him.

"Marion, for the forty-seventh time," he smiled dismally, but always with hope somewhere in the back of his frank blue eyes, "will you be my only wife?" She smiled at him—not unpleasantly.

"Stephen," she said, "I thought I said we wouldn't talk about that for a while."

"Why 'for a while?'" he persisted. "Until what?"

She looked at him directly and said no word for a brief moment.

"That's for you to know," she said soberly. "You'll know when the time comes."

"But, Marion," he asked, "you do care for me—just a teeny bit, don't you?"

"A teeny bit," she answered. There the matter rested.

Of course it was a question of money, he reflected. Darn a business career for a woman, anyway! Here was the most beautiful girl in the world—and he was forever being halted in his lovemaking be-

cause she could earn more than he. He felt uncomfortable under her direct gaze; she could see into his thoughts, almost; in fact, it was she who had advised him to ask for more money.

"You're worth much more, Stephen," she said to him in one of their illuminative moments. "Oh, why don't you assert yourself—demand more from Mr. Parsons! Goodness knows, you've saved them thousands and thousands of dollars on worthless or defective inventions. Oh, I wish I were a man!" she burst out petulantly.

II.

"MR. PARSONS wants to see you," announced the office boy at Stephen's elbow, interrupting his thoughts. "Give 'im me love," he added impishly.

In silence Stephen made his way through the outer rooms to the sanctum of Mr. Parsons. He was not excited; did not even wonder what the boss had to say to him. He went there often, and usually it was to give his opinion on some projected piece of work. But if he could get the ear of the president alone, he was of the opinion that this was just as good a time as any to ask for more money.

He knocked on the closed door and, without waiting for a reply, entered. At the head of the committee-table, in the center of the large room, sat Mr. Parsons. Grouped around the table were the executive heads of the business. They nodded to Griersby in a friendly manner—almost all of them had at one time or another worked outside in the main offices with him or near him. They had risen from the ranks. There was John Spencer, whom Griersby knew when he had been an office boy—he had passed him as though he was standing still.

"Hello, Griersby," nodded Spencer.

"Hello, Mr. Spencer," replied Stephen soberly. There's where the difference between them lay now. They called him Griersby—he added the "Mr." to their names now. There was also Bill Flewnes, who had once been his assistant draftsman, and Don McCready, whom he had helped many a time. And here, his first appearance in this assemblage, was Ben Winthrop. For no apparent reason, it galled him to have Ben there. Not that he didn't like Ben; not that other men had not passed him as had Ben—but simply for the reason that he knew that Ben Winthrop had no business there—he was not of that caliber. He shrugged his shoulders, however, and acknowledged their greetings soberly.

"Griersby," said the president, "we are examining a new type of girder—one that will save twenty per cent in building. We'd like to have your opinion on it."

"Old Crape Hanger," murmured Ben Winthrop, "tell us why it's no good." Griersby heard him, but deigned no reply. So he was an old crape hanger, was he? Well, the girder was probably no good—let them go ahead and spend twenty or twenty-five thousand dollars on it before they found out. However, he looked over the blue-prints carefully. He himself knew he did not mean what his thoughts implied—he knew he would let nothing get away from him, and so did they.

The rest went on with their conversation while Griersby examined the print in silence, but in a few minutes, when he spoke suddenly, he noticed that they all stopped their own speech to listen.

"No, I'm afraid it won't do," he shook his head decidedly.

"Why not?" asked McCready sharply. He it was who had advanced the idea.

"Well, for several reasons," returned Griersby. "It's for that Covington bridge, isn't it?" The president nodded.

"Well, a railroad bridge is a bad place for a girder of this closed side type. In the first place, I see that you've figured the minimum possible in moving loads—but it goes far below the minimum in stationary loads. Which means that even your minimum load—and you'll have many away above that—will never dare stop on that bridge. And then, even if that wasn't so, you haven't figured wind pressure on this at all—and in a bridge of this length—well, you know yourself what that will do."

"Oh, nonsense," broke in McCready. "Why—"

"No nonsense about it, McCready," interrupted the president. "Griersby is ab-

solutely right—I rather had those ideas myself, and now that he has confirmed my judgment I don't mind saying so. Glad it happened so, too. That would have cost us a cool thirty thousand. All right, Griersby," he nodded in dismissal to the draftsman. The young lady in the corner, at her typewriter next to the president's desk, smiled at Stephen in a friendly way, to show that she appreciated him. It happened to be Marion.

He smiled back, and shrugged his shoulders. That was all—they were through with him. Now he could go. Without a word he turned on his heel and went out; nobody noticed him; it was as if he did not exist—or as if he were a fixture the same as the chandelier or the table.

Later in the day he received a summons to the president's room again. Wondering what was up this time, he made his way there. Perhaps old Parsons was going to give him that raise without his asking for it. Perhaps he had at last come to the realization that he, Stephen Griersby, was a valuable man in the business. Perhaps—

"Griersby," said the president, stroking the side of his face tenderly and looking at him intently. Probably, thought Stephen, he was wondering how much of an increase would be acceptable. In point of fact, although he was looking at Griersby, he was not seeing him. What he was seeing was the brook at the sixth hole at Sleepy Valley—what he was wondering so intently was whether he ought not to try to carry that brook with a midiron instead of a brassie. Who of us can actually say what goes on behind the candid eyes of anybody?

"Griersby," he said, "you know of course that business is not what it should be and—"

"Never was," put in Griersby mentally.

"And we have to retrench. Our expenses are high—our overhead is a full mashie shot away from the sixth green—er—I mean, is a full twenty per cent higher than we can legitimately carry. War-time conditions are over and labor is easier to get. Consequently, wages must go down, as they always do when the fourteenth hole is—er—when the supply is greater than the demand." He stopped for a moment and let this sink in.

"Good night!" remarked Griersby to himself. "Here's where I get it where old girl Nellie wore the famous beads—in the neck. A raise!"

"In consequence, of course," went on the president, "we have decided to retrench. The wages of the draftsmen, in common with wages throughout the entire staff, will be cut twenty per cent."

"But—" put in Griersby.

"But there is one exception," pursued Parsons. "That is you. I am free to admit that, in your way, I find your services rather—er—satisfactory. Therefore, although all other wages will be cut, your—er—stipend will remain where it is. I thought I would tell you this personally."

"Thank you very much, sir. I appreciate it," Stephen Griersby heard himself saying, with an immense sigh of relief, and he hated himself for it. This fat, sleek, rich man was making him thank him for not cutting his wages—much less give him a raise! At the other end of the room, at her desk, the frank eyes of Marion Hastings regarded him curiously—there was that in them that would have puzzled him had he noticed. But he was too busy with his thoughts to notice anybody's else's eyes, even Marion's.

III.

So there was that! Stephen pondered this gloomily when he returned to his own desk. And, of course, that ended any idea of Marion for a while, he decided; you could not expect a girl to marry you if you were making less money than she—now, could you? The answer, according to Stephen, was clear and distinct. It was *no!*

That was the reason, so far as he could see it, for the slight restraint that seemed to creep into his relations with that fairest of the fair sex. He called on her twice a week, as usual, and took her to the movies, or for a walk—but a slight change seemed to live and grow between them. He could hardly define it, but it was there. It hurt him, too, because as long as he suspected she cared for him he was able to endure anything—even the injustice of his treatment at the hands of old man Parsons.

He worked harder at home now—at his plans; almost frantically he worked to perfect them. That was the thing that would save him—this new idea in a steel brace. He intended to finish his diagrams and blueprints, prove them, and then take them to Parsons. He knew that they would be received cordially. Parsons was famous for that—for his eternal willingness to look at new ideas, new inventions. It was the reason for the success of his company. Occasionally, Stephen missed on going to see Marion; on those nights he would often work until two or three in the morning. She commented on it once.

"Where were you last Tuesday?" she inquired. "Out with a blonde, Stephen?"

He smiled. "Nope. Working."

"Working? On what?"

"You'll see," he smiled enigmatically, "when I get it finished. In the mean time, I don't suppose you'll marry me, will you?" You see, he always tried, anyway. He was a glutton for punishment.

She shook her head slowly, and looked at him soberly, with that direct, businesslike stare that always put him into a little confusion.

"M-m, I rather thought you wouldn't—yet," he said.

"When will you be able to make up your mind?" he pursued.

She did not answer this, and he continued the subject no further. When he left her he went back to his plans and worked until after 2 A.M. Things would be different after this was finished. He was sure of that.

In a day or two he was practically through, with the exception of a few final touches here and there. He took the plans with him to the office, to work on them during his lunch period, always keeping them carefully locked up in the middle drawer of his desk.

Three days later he stayed for a moment or two after his fellow draftsmen had left for the night, to get one more look at the creature of his brain—at this thing which he had evolved full fledged, from his head and his experience. He unrolled the plans—knew them by heart, of course—and glanced at them almost lovingly. They were his pass to salvation.

That was when his house fell down about his ears, nearly killing him. Suddenly, as he looked, a gleam of horror came into his frank eyes—a look of astonished incredulity. He looked closer, and his fears were confirmed!

The way they stood, the designs for the new brace were worthless!

He gasped for breath. The discovery had hit him right amidships and left him dazed and dizzy. He looked again to make sure—but he was certain—he knew so well what he had put into the design. It was a simple mistake—a simple omission—an error in calculating; he had overlooked a most essential thing, in figuring on this brace; that was the reason the old brace, the one now in use, was better. It was the kind of a thing that, if you were a bridge engineer, you might notice at once—or it might be weeks before you detected the weak point.

Nevertheless, it was there, and it rendered his design so much waste paper. With the plans unrolled before him, staring at the wall like a prize-fighter who has just arisen after a knockout and does not yet know where he is at, he sat—and sat—and sat—

Everything was in chaos in his mind; he himself had hardly known how important this invention had come to be to him—how he had looked forward to its consummation and banked everything on its success. In front of the open door looking into the room a figure stopped silently—it was Ben Winthrop on his way home.

Winthrop saw Griersby sitting at his desk with an unfamiliar set of designs before him. Presently the draftsman rose mechanically, shoved the plans into the desk and, without locking it, reached for his hat and coat. Before Griersby turned Winthrop had vanished from the door.

IV.

GRIERSBY began to reconstruct his little world the next day, rising from the ruins like a phenix, whatever that may be. What a fool, a fatuous fool he had been, he reflected, not to notice the fatal error in his calculations! It was so simple—when you saw it; it was just the kind of mistake or

deficiency he himself always spotted first in the plans of others. Just like a painting—usually it's the artist himself who can't see anything wrong with it, whereas the first outsider is generally able to lay his finger on the fault immediately.

He took his plans home with him again and worked hard to remedy the defect. He was on the track of what he wanted, and he knew he would be able to make it practicable.

Three days later the president sent fot him, as usual. Stephen wondered what it was about this time. Probably a new idea they wanted him to pass on—somebody else's idea. Well, he would show them.

They were all gathered in the room as before; the executives seated around the table examining some drawings with the exception of Winthrop, who paced nervously up and down with an attempted air of nonchalance. The president looked up as Stephen entered. The others hardly noticed him.

"Griersby," said Mr. Parsons, "I wish you would give this design the once-over. It looks very good to us."

Griersby took the drawings in his hand to examine them.

"Here's one you won't find fault with, Crape Hanger," said Winthrop with an attempt at lightness, but even Griersby could see that there was some strain in his manner.

"It's an idea of Mr. Winthrop's, Griersby—and it looks like a winner to us. A new brace—"

Griersby gazed at the plans for an instant; his eye caught, mysteriously, he gazed again for a long, mystified moment, a puzzled look in his face.

"Why—" he gasped out, "why—it's—it's my steel brace! What's this—a joke?" he demanded from Winthrop.

"What do you mean—your steel brace?" ejaculated Ben nervously.

"Why—it is copied from my own idea—from the plans and designs I have made," he staccatoed rapidly, the whole thing coming to him suddenly. He remembered now! The other night he had left his drawer unlocked—the plans were in it!

"You copied it from my designs!" he shot at Winthrop. The latter moved a quick step toward him, but took a look at the menacing bulk of Griersby and thought better of it.

"You're off your head, man. You never had brains enough to invent anything—much less anything as good as that," he retorted, turning away.

A cold rage entered the placid heart of Griersby. Here was a man attempting to steal from him the only thing he had—the product of his brain, and in addition to that, insulting him mortally. It made no difference that the design, as it stood, was worthless. It was enough that this man, who had so much, should attempt to take from him the little he had. He turned on him swiftly, with the cold gleam of a mountain cat.

"Why, you dirty crook!" he ejaculated. The room was all attention now, of course—a little drama was being staged before them—an affair of human heart-strings and human brains.

"You dirty crook!" Stephen repeated to the stunned Winthrop, who, to tell the truth, had not expected him to say anything about it at all in all this assemblage—if he had anything to say, he expected it to be said in a calmer vein, in private. Which would have been the case had Griersby followed his usual precedent.

"Before I'd try to steal another man's brains I'd get myself a job as a day laborer, and retain my self-respect. You copied those plans from my own when I left my desk unlocked the other night." He turned to the president, who was listening intently, a bit puzzled. This was a new Griersby. "He took those plans—"

"Never mind that, Griersby," interrupted the president. "We are too busy to listen to your private quarrels. I called you in to inspect this design—"

"Oh, you did, did you?" put in Stephen Griersby with a voice like cold steel. "Well, I don't have to inspect them. I know what's the matter with them—and if *Mister* Winthrop knew his business, instead of trying to get ahead by stealing from men who know theirs, he would have been able to discover it, too. You want to know what's wrong with them, do you? I'll tell you!"

He looked at the roomful of men coldly. He was not afraid of them—he despised them for being where they were. As for Winthrop, he did not look at him at all.

"What's wrong with them," he said calmly, "is simply that they're worthless. After I discovered it I set to work to remedy the defect, and I've managed to do so. As for these plans—why, isn't one of you a decent enough engineer to be able to see that everything has been figured on these plans except what is perhaps the most important—lateral pressure. Look at them—no provision made for lateral pressure at all!" He gazed around the room with scorn in his eyes.

"Engineers!" he added quietly, with a world of contempt in the words.

"By Jove, that's so!" ejaculated Bill Flewnes and Don McCready in the same breath.

"Of course it's so!" put in Griersby. "I ought to know—they're my plans. I want to tell you something else, though," he turned to the president.

"I've been with you people for nearly twenty years. In that time I've saved you hundreds of thousands of dollars, simply by doing for you what I've just done on my own plans—by finding the errors. Yes, by being the official crape hanger. In all that time, what have I got for it? Thirty dollars a week—and a promise not to decrease my salary." He was silent for a moment, but continued before the other had time to speak.

"What must a man do to get his deserts with you people, anyway? Break into your safe—or pound you over the head with a club until you get some sense in your collective heads? Why, you fools! Can't you see that a man who can save you a hundred thousand dollars is worth as much to you as a man who can make you a hundred thousand dollars? In all the time I've been with you I never originated anything—until now. And then it is stolen from me!

"Shall I have to steal to be elevated to a better position? If that's the kind of business this is, why, I'm through with it. You can take your thirty dollars a week and go plumb to hell. To-morrow is Saturday—to-morrow is the day I quit."

He paused and looked around at the semicircle, exaggeratedly calm, but boiling inwardly with a cold flame that could consume in scorn everything it touched.

"If there is no such thing as honest, straightforward business in the world—if a man has to be dishonorable to be recognized—why, I'm through with business for good."

He strode to the door and went out, banging it behind him. They sat in silence for a moment, but in her corner Marion Hastings had sat with a transfigured look on her fine face that Griersby would have given the world to see. The president was the first to regain his composure.

"Miss Hastings," he said to his secretary, "Mr. Winthrop wishes to dictate his resignation to you. Please take it direct on the machine—we'll accept it while we're gathered here."

V.

It was a new Griersby who strode into the parlor of Marion Hastings's boarding-house and found her there alone, waiting for him. He was a man thoroughly alive to himself and the world. He was aroused; he was not to be trifled with, and would brook no interference from anybody. Such a man, ten years before, would by now have conquered the world.

"Hello, Stephen," she said. "Feeling better?"

"No, I'm not, Marion." He looked at her fixedly; she was adorable to-night, he thought—as she always was.

"Marion," he spoke out directly, this new Griersby. "You've been fooling around with me long enough. You've turned me down any number of times—when I had a job. Now I have no job—and I don't know where the next one is coming from. What I do know is that I'm going to settle this thing once and for all.

"I love you, Marion—I don't have to tell you so again—I've told it to you often enough. What I'm going to tell you is that you're going to tell me right now whether you'll marry me or not. I've had enough of this nonsense—"

"Nonsense?" She looked up at him inquiringly.

"Yes, nonsense," he put in bravely, though he was weakening a little bit. "That's just what I mean—nonsense! I want to know—yes or no—whether you'll marry me. And I want my answer quick!"

She looked up at him with laughing eyes.

"Stephen," she tittered, "you're wonderful! Of course I'll marry you. Did you think I'd let you get away?"

"Do you mean it, Marion?" he gasped—all the steel gone out of him in this new wonder. The next few minutes were devoted to proving whether or not she really meant it—and really, the proceedings are hardly our business.

A little later, though, he managed to recover the use of his mouth for talking purposes.

"Marion," he said tenderly, "how is it that you wouldn't marry me when I had a job—even though I was getting less money than you—and now, when I'm out of work—or will be, after to-morrow—you are wil—"

"Stephen," she broke in, "all men are naturally fools. It is their nature, so we can't blame them. Do you think that all a woman cares about is money? Did you suppose that I wouldn't have been perfectly happy to struggle along with you on thirty dollars a week. I'll tell you the reason I said yes to-night; it's because you showed that you had a backbone—that's all. That's what I was waiting for—not the money."

She buried her head as deeply in his shoulder as was possible.

VI.

At ten thirty the next morning the president sent for him. He entered with firm step, looking each of the executives gathered there full in the eye. In some surprise he noted that there was no enmity in the face of any one of them. Winthrop, of course, was among the missing.

"Griersby," said the president kindly, "we're going to accept your resignation from your present position. But what you said last night has struck home, and I want to assure you that this business—any successful business—is not conducted on the lines mentioned by you. If we haven't recognized and rewarded your merit, the fault is ours—but it is also yours in not being assertive enough—until last night, that is.

"We have talked the matter over, though, and you were right." The others nodded at him in a friendly manner.

"You bet," said McCready.

"I'll say so," added Flewnes. "Why, I can recall many instances where you saved us thousands of dollars, Griersby. Good Lord, that last idea of my own would have cost us twenty thousand dollars if you hadn't stepped on it." The others grinned.

"Well, the point of it is, Griersby, that we want you with us—we need your brains as a sort of safety-valve when we run too far ahead with our imaginations. So we've invented a new sort of position for you. From now on you are going to be the official Crape Hanger—no plans will be approved without your O. K. And the salary will start at five thousand dollars a year."

Through a haze Griersby looked at the men there and saw them for what they were, brainy executives who were too busy to recognize a man unless he was able first to recognize himself—and bring himself to their attention.

"That's all right, old man," said the president kindly; "never mind the thanks and all that sort of thing. We owe you more thanks than you owe us. And, by the way, did I understand you to say that you had finished the designs for the brace we were discussing yesterday?"

"Yes—and it's a peach," Griersby replied.

"Well, bring it in Monday," said Parsons. "If it works—and I'm sure it will—we'll vote you five thousand dollars bonus and a royalty on every one made. How about it, gentlemen?"

"Make it ten thousand," suggested McCready heartily, "and I'll vote for it."

"Me, too," put in Flewnes.

"And I," drawled the always meticulously correct Spencer.

"Ten it is," said the president. "Consider the motion carried in advance. We'll show you that we're not all crooks. Gentlemen—*Mister* Griersby!"

Damon and Pythias

by William Holloway

THE brigantine, Ariel, one hundred and fifty tons, copper-bottomed, 100 A-1 at Lloyd's, slipped through the rift in the barrier reef with a bone in her teeth. Henley, sprawling in the shade of a palm, eyed her approvingly as she skimmed across the lagoon, her speed dying swiftly as the jib and mainsail she had been carrying were smartly lowered. Poised against the turquoise and gold sky of the Pacific, she was a picture of infinite allurement to his professional eye.

For, beachcomber though he now was, Frank Henley had been, not so long before, and under a very different name, one of the cleverest navigators in the South Pacific. The change of name had prevented this fact from being known to the denizens of this small island of Malpica, where the Fates, two years before, had cast him on the beach. To the natives of Malpica, as well as to Barrett, the Nova Scotian, who monopolized its copra trade, he was merely a bit of human flotsam and jetsam, tossed up on the shores of this tiny Pacific isle, and left to rot in the sun.

There were two others "on the beach" besides Henley, but neither of them had violated the established and immemorial traditions of the beachcomber's profession. Both Thompson and Potter got drunk when they could and slept off their liquor on the beach, while flies droned across their fiery, unwashed faces; both listened contritely and professed repentance, when the missionary appeared upon his semiannual round; whereas Henley was a fastidious bather, carried his liquor to perfection and answered the missionary's attempt at friendship with contemptuous oaths. It was not that he had any personal dislike to the gray old *padre,* but, rather, the rooted objection to being classed with the two travesties on white humanity with whom he shared the beach.

He was not a beachcomber, even if Malpica, collectively and individually, thought him one. The beach with him had been merely an episode. Some day he would sail away and forget it!

Now, as the Ariel's anchor rattled to its coral-bed, the longing that had possessed him for weeks past crystalized into a sudden resolution. The hour had come and the man—or, to speak in less flowery language, the man and the vessel. He had been long enough on the beach. It was time he made a fresh start in life. If he missed this chance he might have to wait months for another, so far was the island from the regular lanes of travel. But he had no intention of missing it. Involuntarily he clenched a sinewy hand. Not the slightest!

He rose to his feet and stared earnestly

at the brigantine. There was a birdlike effect about her that whispered to him of far horizons. Half closing his eyes, he could imagine her a gigantic eagle, about to unfold her wings and fly with him to crowded cities and unknown lands. He brushed his much-patched duck trousers and threadbare shirt with care, smoothed his tawny hair and beard, and walked down to the dazzling white landing, upon which a boat from the Ariel had deposited a white-helmeted stranger.

The newcomer, who had already shaken hands with Barrett, the huge Nova Scotian, swung sharply about as Henley began to speak. He had a pleasant, dark face and an air of being tremendously in earnest about something known only to himself. "I wouldn't take a man off the beach," he said briefly, "if you paid me his weight in gold."

His keen gray eyes ran searchingly over Henley's face as he listened to a renewal of the petition. "I do need a man; that's true," he said finally; "but I have absolutely no use for a beachcomber on the Ariel." And, turning on his heel, he walked away with Barrett, leaving Henley to contemplate a shark-fin, rippling the water near the brigantine.

The cue for the beachcomber in this situation is a dry, husky sob, followed by profanity, reminiscences of the past and a request for a drink. Frank Henley, on the contrary, refused a glass of gin from Billy Potts, an old Kanaka, who admired him, and spent half an hour walking silently up and down the beach, absorbed in thought, after which he slowly mounted the hill to Barrett's house of white coral.

Barrett, with a vein of poetry unexpected in such a Goliath of a man, had brought various Nova Scotian trees and shrubs to Malpica—most of which refused to grow as they should have grown, despite his labors. Nevertheless, there was a fine, old-fashioned garden in front of the house and a brave display of honeysuckle on the veranda. Henley plucked some of the yellow blossoms as he went up the steps.

In the cool dimness of the veranda, Barrett and his guest, seated at an old lacquerware table, were taking a peg. Both looked up as Henley entered from the outside glare. Despite his threadbare attire the beachcomber bore himself with dignity. Tall, broad-shouldered, his fair skin tanned to an all-pervading brownness, he made a not-unpleasant picture on the shadowy veranda. And the rites of hospitality not being easily disregarded in the South Pacific, it came about very naturally that Barrett motioned toward the bottle.

Henley shook his head. "It's six months since the last vessel touched at Malpica, isn't it, Barrett?"

The trader glanced curiously at the speaker and nodded assent.

"And perhaps six months to wait for the next! Is that right?"

Once more Barrett nodded. He was interested in the man now. The antagonism he had always felt for him because of his position on the beach had given place to curiosity. People are seldom curious about the derelict of the beach, who has no future worth speaking about and a past not worth remembering. But this man— Barrett frowned thoughtfully. He began to wonder what had brought him on the beach.

"It's this way," went on Henley quietly. "I'm tired of this God-forsaken hole and I want to get away. I'm worth three Kanakas and I know the South Seas. You say you need a man. What's the answer?"

"The same as before," answered the stranger briefly. "I have private reasons for what I do. And when I said I'd not take a man off the beach for his weight in gold I understated the case. I should have said his weight in diamonds."

Henley's face hardened; he shrugged his shoulders and stepped to the edge of the veranda, where he stood gazing down at the shark-fins rippling the surface of the lagoon. Barrett, watching, was sure he had no intention of whining. This man, the trader told himself was made of different stuff. He was not surprised an instant later when Henley, pointing downward, asked sarcastically, "Not even if he swam out through those beggars there?"

"The sharks?" asked the other meditatively. "I'd have to take him if he wanted to come that badly." He watched Henley's retreating figure as he slowly crossed the

garden. "A chap like that is out of place on the beach, Barrett," he said with conviction. "He deserves a better fate."

"Exactly," agreed the trader dryly; "a berth on board ship."

"My brother, Donald Leonard, took three men off the beach at Papeete," said the other slowly. "There was a mutiny on the Sea Queen the week after. Do you wonder I bar beachcombers?"

He poured himself another peg, as though the memory disturbed him, and walked to the edge of the veranda. Barrett, lounging at the table, saw his face turn suddenly pallid—saw him clutch one of the veranda pillars with one trembling hand while he pointed downward with the other. "My God, Barrett!" he cried. "Surely, he isn't going to—"

Barrett sprang to his side. There on the blinding white beach below, stripped to the waist, a knife between his teeth, was Henley, watching the ripple of the shark-fins. "Surely to God, Barrett—" protested Leonard.

The trader made no reply. It was none of his business to explain that Henley swam better than any Kanaka on the island, and that he had the shark game down as fine as it is possible for a human being to have it. Even at that, his risk was appalling. But, after all, as Barrett would have told you, the island code decrees that what a man chooses to do with his life is his own business and nobody's else's. Besides, Barrett had been oddly impressed by Henley's plea.

But the other did not notice his silence, for, cork helmet in hand, he was racing madly to the beach, yelling as he went. The Kanakas, standing in the blazing sunshine to watch the greatest sport in the world, parted before his headlong rush, but he was too late. Henley had already slipped into the water and was swimming noiselessly toward the brigantine.

The Ariel's boat still lay beside the landing. Leonard hurled himself into it and pointed gaspingly at the swimmer. There was a mighty heave that almost flung him overboard as the sailors backed water; then the boat began to gather speed.

Henley was clearly in trouble. His blond head, which Leonard had been watching, vanished from sight just as a dark fin rippled the water close beside him, and Leonard shivered. It was his sharp refusal, he told himself remorsefully, that had sent the man on his dangerous errand. Stung by the thought, he watched the lagoon intently. And, suddenly, a curiously blurred spot appeared on the surface of the water.

"Got him!" croaked one of the sailors in matter-of-fact tones, turning the quid in his cheek.

Leonard trembled convulsively. That blurred spot meant blood. The boat was presently in the midst of it—a foul, sickly stain on the clean surface of the water. His hands aquiver, he peered downward in a vain attempt to see what was occurring in the depths below. The reddened water, strangely agitated, boiled about the bow of the boat, then came a quick, tumultuous heaving of the water a few yards away, and the body of a shark floated to the surface of the lagoon, still belching blood from a cut that ran almost its entire length.

Sign of Henley there was none. Not even the keenest vision could have pierced that chaos of crimson water. Leonard was gazing anxiously downward when there came a yell of delight from the Kanakas, followed by a great jabbering and waving of hands toward the Ariel. A bronze head was outlined above the water, close by the brigantine's cutwater. He looked again, incredulous. A dripping figure was clinging to the martingale and slowly working its way up the bow. The boat touched the Ariel's side and its owner flung himself on deck, just as Henley set a wet foot on the planking.

The two men glanced covertly at each other, Leonard breathless with excitement, Henley wringing salt water from his trousers with entire unconcern, and waiting for Leonard to speak.

"However did you manage it?" came Leonard's question.

"An old Kanaka trick!" answered Henley briefly. "You watch the shadow. On a cloudy day the shark wins because you can't see him coming. But on a day like this—" He waved his hand at the blazing sky.

Leonard turned toward a short, stout individual, whose bronzed face was deeply set with weather wrinkles about the eyes. "See what your slop-chest can do for him, Mac," said he.

II.

TEN minutes later, the Ariel, her anchor retrieved from its coral resting-place, swung about, under jib and mainsail, and bore down on the opening in the barrier reef. Dressed in a dry suit of faded duck, Henley stood in the bow, his soul bubbling with happiness.

Behind him was Malpica, where for two years of self-imposed exile he had suffered the torments of the damned. Half turning his head he could see its leafy headlands and the rhythmic sway of its palm-trees. There was not a tree upon the island, not a house, not a stray block of coral, which he did not hate. And now it was all fading behind him like an evil dream! He glanced ahead. The crash of breakers on the barrier reef was growing louder each moment. The world beyond the tiny island was signaling to him.

Presently the Ariel slipped into the opening in the reef and was tossed hither and thither in a cloud of spray. Gulls screamed, the vessel's standing rigging groaned through every dead-eye, the sea flung itself in thunder on the reef. Then, shaking her sails as a dog, after a swim, shakes his ears, the brigantine slipped through the tossing water into the smooth, heaving swell of the Pacific.

One minute the air had been clamorous with the sounds of the reef. The reef and its jagged line of foam had seemed to dominate the world, to be the world, in fact; the next, both reef and island were left behind, the thunder of the reef began to die to a mild disturbance in the air currents, and Henley had regained that outer world from which, for two years, he had been an exile.

"Mr. Leonard wants to see you aft," came the rasping voice of the second mate in his ear. "Step lively, now!"

Henley came to himself with a start. Leonard! It was odd that the name should follow him that way. But there was nothing in it. Of course not! Still it was curious. Had he heard it on the island—but then he had not heard it on the island, so what use to let it bother now. There must be thousands of Leonards in the world. Still it gave a man a bit of a turn.

"Know this part of the world well?" asked the owner of the Ariel a moment later, from his steamer-chair beside the wheel. "I think you mentioned something of the kind." He had laid aside his cork helmet and now wore a white yachting-cap. At his right, MacLean, the Ariel's skipper, smoked a briar pipe and stared doubtfully at the newcomer as befitted a man whose years of experience with sailors had qualified him to pose as a charter member of the Doubters' Club. "If so—how well?"

"Pretty well," was the non-committal reply. It was not part of Henley's policy to talk freely of the South Pacific to any one bearing the name of Leonard.

"Ever hear of a brig called the Sea Queen?"

Henley's temples were pounding madly as he looked over the rail at the long green swell of the ocean. For a moment the stunning surprise of the question almost forced an outcry of betrayal; then, with an effort, he controlled his emotion. "A brig?" he repeated slowly. "It's rather an unusual rig nowadays. And what did you say the name was?"

"What difference does the name make?" interrupted the skipper sharply. "If you never heard of a brig about here—that settles it."

"Might have changed her rig," returned Henley, in matter-of-fact tones. He was regaining his self-control now; at all costs he must appear unconcerned. "The only trouble would be to get hold of a main boom. The yards could be got rid of, and I'm no sailmaker, but I'd guarantee to patch up a mainsail and a gaff-topsail out of her square sails."

Leonard turned a troubled face to MacLean. "We never thought of that, Mac. Is is possible, do you think?"

"Barely possible," was the skipper's reply. He drew slowly at his pipe. "The trouble 'd be the main boom. But it might be managed."

"So you never heard of the Sea Queen?"

Leonard's voice was heavy with disappointment. "I was hoping—"

"The name is familiar enough," Henley admitted. He ran his eyes to the throat of the mainsail and frowned thoughtfully. "Wasn't there some trouble on her?"

"There was," admitted the owner of the Ariel. "My brother, Donald Leonard, bought her a number of years ago in order to make certain investigations in the South Seas. He was a Johns Hopkins man and very well known among scientists; spent a whole year in Hawaii and China trying to find a cure for leprosy; did find a serum, but I see the medical sharps in both England and America have decided against it."

He sighed a little. "It was after this that he decided to take another run through the South Seas with the Sea Queen. When they reached Tahiti they were short of men and Don—that's my brother's name—wanted to take three men off the beach. Jim Ralston, who sailed the brig for him, damned the whole bunch at Papeete. Ralston and Don had been friends for years—sort of Damon and Pythias stuff—and Ralston spent half his time getting Don out of scrapes, caused by foolish kindness. But he couldn't get Don to see it this time, and the men were shipped. A week after leaving Tahiti there was a mutiny, engineered by the three beachcombers, the mates were killed and the mutineers took to one of the boats, to make for a near-by island, leaving my brother and Ralston tied up on board. A storm drove the boat out of her course and when she was picked up near the Marquesas all the men were dead except one, and he died soon after telling the story. Thirst, you know; and there had been a quarrel and he was badly wounded."

"Probably scuttled her," suggested Henley, wiping his forehead.

"That's what the chap said before he passed out. But it appears that Ralston in some way got untied after some minutes and ran on deck with a rifle. He fired twice, but the boat was out of range. Probably he stopped the leak with my brother's help. Don was tremendously strong and active. In fact, he gloried in his strength and endurance. The two might easily have stopped the leak and navigated the brig."

"In calm weather," Henley admitted.

"They were never heard of again," Leonard went on. "But, oddly enough, the second boat—the one the mutineers left on board, after staving it in—was picked up more than two years later; found drifting up and down the Pacific, two hundred miles west of the Marquesas. It had been carefully repaired, but the name had been cut out of the bow. But an old sailor, who had been on the Sea Queen the year before positively identified the boat. And there," ended Leonard slowly, "there you are."

"No signs of shipwreck?" asked Henley. "There are some queer currents about here. And no news? That's odd."

"There's a chance the two of them are alive, marooned on some coral island—there's millions of them in this whale of an ocean," cried Leonard; "and I'm going to scour it foot by foot until I find them."

Henley walked forward with an unconcerned air until he was safely in the shelter of the forehouse. Then he wiped his dripping temples with his hand and gave a gasp of relief. He had come through hell in the last five minutes—a hell whose torments were inflicted by a pleasant, mild-faced man, talking of his brother, Don. How he had managed to stand it he did not know; but he had taken a fair share in the talk with that suspicious fool, MacLean. For the present he felt safe. There was not one chance in a dozen—in a thousand, more likely—that they would sight that infernal island. Meantime, there was the probability of touching at Sydney or some other port where he could get a ship for San Francisco. And once in the good old U. S. A.! His face brightened at the prospect. He had had enough of the Pacific and its damnable islands. Especially of one island—that was not Malpica!

It is wonderful how many rotting hulks dot the islands of the South Seas. The Ariel found two of them in a week, each sunken in the sand of a nameless lagoon, but neither of them brigs. Next week the toll was only one, but Leonard was not discouraged. The Ariel had been following the beaten track. Now MacLean swung her into a very wilderness of water, where tiny

desert islands lift untouched palm-trees to lonely stars. And here, after weeks of slow wandering, came the reward.

Slowly, in the morning light, a vague violet blur on the horizon resolved itself into a small atoll, which heaved a row of palm-trees out of water as though some sea-nymph beneath had thrust her fan above the ocean's level. So far the procedure had been precisely similar to that of dozens of other landfalls. Now there came a difference.

MacLean, peering through his glasses, gave a little cry of satisfaction. "You can't notice it, the trees are so thick; but she's there all right. I can make out both her royal yards. Lord! You'd never see her if you weren't looking sharp." He turned toward Leonard and their hands met in a grasp of triumph.

Henley, standing by the foremast, watched, sick at heart. The island! The selfsame island! Damn it! Was a man never going to get rid of the thing? Every palm-tree on that wretched little atoll was etched on his brain forever. And now he was going to see it all once more! See the damned brig, too! That was the worst of all. That damned brig!

As the Ariel ran down toward the atoll, the missing vessel began to lift from out the thick growth of palm-trees. First her royal yards appeared, then the gallantsail and topsail yards, all dimly visible through the screening foliage. She lay at an angle on the beach of the lagoon, her masts tipped rakishly seaward. In some manner she had swung about so that she partially blocked the narrow opening in the reef.

MacLean, studying the situation through his glasses, came to a quick decision. "We'll have to run a boat in to haul the brig clear before the Ariel can make the lagoon."

So it came about that Leonard, the captain, Henley, and two others of the crew made up a boatload that presently won through the noise and spatter of the reef-opening to the placid water of the lagoon. The Sea Queen, stranded by the stern, welcomed them with a stately tilting of her masts as she rocked to the slow ebbing of the tide.

The solitude was absolute. Lagoon, reef, palm-trees seemed to belong to another world from that which they had been living —a miniature world, which God had set apart and then forgotten. Leonard, springing up the brig's side and calling vainly for his brother, represented the incursion of outside forces foreign to the secret life of the atoll.

The Sea Queen was empty; empty not in the sense of lack of provisions, for her store-room was practically full, her furnishings and fittings, even to the aluminum pots and pans in the cook's galley, undisturbed, but empty so far as human life was concerned. In ten minutes the brig had been scrutinized from truck to keelson and the intruders had gathered in her waist, touched, unconsciously, by the feeling of melancholy which is so strangely keen on deserted vessels. And the Sea Queen, sun-blistered, rain-scoured, gray from weather, was as entirely deserted as it was possible for a vessel to be. Coral insects had turned her anchor into a white hillock at the bottom of the lagoon; barnacles had battered on her sides; her tightly furled sails had begun to unravel in rotting festoons, hideous with crawling life.

"Tide running out; can't do anything to-day," declared MacLean, looking uneasily about him. "There's a storm coming, too, and we may have to scud under bare poles. Suppose we call it a day and get back to the Ariel?"

But Leonard demurred. Now that he was actually on board the vessel, which, he felt sure, held the mystery of his brother's fate, he was not inclined to procrastinate in his search for facts. "Send me a load of bedding and some provisions, Mac," he said quietly; "I'm going to sleep here."

MacLean nodded. "I'll leave Frank with you. He can clean up a bit."

He stepped to the side and called to Henley, who had remained in the boat working needlessly but energetically with a fender, while under his breath he cursed the brig and all upon it. "Come aboard, Frank!"

Whether or not there was something—some all-observant, watchful presence that worked its own will over men for its own

hidden purposes and which men called Fate —Henley did not know. But, as he mounted the side of the Sea Queen, it came upon him with overwhelming force that he was now doing, voluntarily, what he had solemnly vowed he would never do again. In his two years of exile on the Malpica beach, he had comforted himself with the thought that never more, so long as he lived, would he set foot upon the deck of the Sea Queen. Yet here he was doing that very thing! He swore under his breath as he listened to the skipper's orders, while his eyes took in every well-remembered line in the forward sweep of the Sea Queen's bow. Yes! He was on the Sea Queen once more! The Sea Queen! Could you beat that? For a rotten turn of the cards? Now, could you?

III.

THE boat pushed off and the two were left alone on the deserted brig. Leonard, after watching the rise and fall of the oars for a moment, began pacing up and down the quarterdeck, while Henley, broom in hand, attacked the fine white dust which lay thickly everywhere. The exercise distracted him to some extent, for which reason he worked with feverish rapidity. He succeeded so well that long ere the boat returned with its load of supplies, the decks had been swept clean, the rails, bulwarks, the tops of the houses, not to mention part of the standing rigging had been freed from dust, and the Sea Queen had resumed a little of that air of neatness which her graceful lines seemed to call for.

Leonard, tramping ceaselessly up and down the quarterdeck, barely noticed what Henley was doing, so profound was his abstraction. It was not until the bedding and supplies lay on the main deck and the Ariel had begun to get under way again, that he aroused himself.

"What do you think of this, Frank?" he asked. "What could have become of them?"

Henley, who had been working in the waist of the vessel, mounted to the quarterdeck. "Pretty hard to say, sir," was his non-committal reply. "Perhaps a passing ship took them off, and then something happened."

"There would have been a note left," declared Leonard. "My brother would never abandon a valuable vessel, fully equipped, without leaving word. Besides, if another vessel had called here it would have been easy to borrow a man or two to help sail the Sea Queen. That settles one thing—no other vessel is mixed up in this."

"I've run across some pretty shady schooners in this part of the world," remarked Henley. "Maybe one made the island and there was a row. Your brother and his skipper might have been murdered and buried in the sand. After all that time —who can say?"

"Then the brig would have been looted," said Leonard positively. "The brass and silver fittings on this vessel are worth a pile of money, and not one seems to have been disturbed. That settles one question. No outsiders are mixed up in this problem. Now suppose we go below and examine the cabin inch by inch?"

The sky had darkened and a gusty wind had begun to beat in from the northwest. Ere following Leonard down the companionway, Henley swept a glance along the Sea Queen's counter and then across the lagoon to the tossing palm-trees, and lonely days and lonelier nights came back to him. Then, with a shrug of his broad shoulders, he descended to the cabin.

The cabin was a good sized apartment, finished in light wood. In the center, beneath a swinging lamp of antique silver, was a light-colored, polished table, one side draped with a dusty piece of lace of the finest texture. Two swivel-chairs and two ordinary ones, all upholstered in dark green leather, together with a sideboard at one end and a bookcase at the other, made up the remainder of the furniture. Both sideboard and bookcase were fastened to the woodwork by brasswork of great strength. In the bookcase was an unusually good assortment of current literature, mingled with a number of books of a technical kind, common on board ship; the sideboard was covered with a display of cut-glass, held in place by a rack of solid silver.

From the cabin two large and two small staterooms opened. The two smaller, evidently occupied by the mates, contained the

usual paraphernalia of the sailor's life—sea-chest, oilskins, sea-boots, and battered sou'westers, all dusty with disuse. The sea-chests were open and their contents partly removed, showing that the mutineers had ransacked them ere departing.

The two large staterooms were good sized apartments, the Sea Queen having been specially arranged for her owner's cruises. In both of them the best of order prevailed, clothes being duly ranged in place, though rather limited in number, and the little knickknacks upon the walls undisturbed.

Leonard surveyed the first of the two staterooms with eager interest. "This was Don's room, to the right of the companion-way," he said with a quick glance. "It was looted, of course, and so was Ralston's, but they got it in shape after the mutineers got away with the pearls."

"Pearls!" exclaimed Henley with a start. "You didn't say anything about pearls before."

"My brother was a bit of a trader as well as scientist," Leonard explained. "He had purchased a bag of pearls the month before he disappeared. He mentioned it in his last letter to me. And the man found dying in the boat said it was the pearls that caused the mutiny. The mutineers got two thousand dollars in cash and the pearls. That explains why they didn't stay long enough to loot the cabin. They had so much that was more worth while that they left the fittings of the cabin alone. That lamp, for example! It would be pretty clumsy in a boat, whereas the cash and pearls took no room at all."

"Were the pearls found in the boat?" asked Henley.

Leonard nodded. "Luckily it was picked up by a British cruiser, and I got the pearls all right. Now if it had been a trader—" He smiled at the supposition and Henley smiled, too. They were now in the quarters that had been Ralston's and Leonard's, uncovering a brass-bound box, pointed within.

Not a muscle moved in Henley's face as he glanced at a sextant and gold chronometer, lying on a bed of purple velvet. "The skipper's!" he said casually.

Leonard, more curious, lifted the chronometer from its place and haltingly read a curt, official inscription which stated that the chronometer had been presented to James Ralston for gallantry in saving the lives of the crew of a British bark, during a hurricane near Samoa. There was a touch of despair on his face as he laid it down again.

"You've been an officer yourself, Henley, so you know what that means."

"Officer!" said Henley blankly.

"Nonsense, man!" was the impatient rejoinder. "You came on the quarterdeck five minutes ago on the starboard side, instead of on the lee. But what difference does it make? You don't suppose I needed a thing like that to show me what you were? And I'm not asking what you were doing on the beach or any other personal question. I don't care. But I want you to help me. Forget that you're before the mast. What do you make out of this?"

Henley's tensed muscles relaxed. "Of course the last thing a master of a vessel does before he abandons her is to take his chronometer and sextant. They are the tools of his trade—kind of badge of office. He never forgets them under any circumstances. That means that the skipper—Ralston, did you call him?—is dead. And if he is then I'm afraid—"

Leonard frowned thoughtfully; then, moving behind the door, he picked up a waste-paper basket, from which he removed a roll of photographic film, and held it to the light. "A row of blanks!" he exclaimed. "That's odd!"

"Faded out," suggested Henley.

Leonard shook his head. "These have been used and then exposed to light before developing. One roll might be an accident, but there are half a dozen here. What do you make of that?"

Henley shrugged his shoulders helplessly and the two went on deck. The dull haze, which had crept over the copper sky an hour before, had changed into an ebony cloud reaching half-way to the zenith. The Ariel, under storm canvas, was now some distance to leeward. The bedding, piled upon the main deck, was slatting to the freshening breeze. The tiny coral island, lost in the immensity of the Pacific, seemed to have grown suddenly very lonely.

That evening, seated in the cabin of the Sea Queen, Henley and Leonard played cards, while the brig quivered to the ruthless impact of the storm. All question of the relative positions of the two men had been tacitly dropped and they conversed on terms of equality. Henley had refilled the silver hanging-lamp with oil he had brought from the storeroom. There had been soot on the inside of the chimney, as though the lamp had smoked when last lit, and also a thumb-mark, but Henley had washed the chimney with soap and water until it shone. The thumb-mark struck him as disagreeably like a finger-print, but Leonard had not noticed. Leonard, indeed, was so lost in meditation over his brother's strange fate that he found it impossible to give proper attention to the game, so, presently, the cards were laid aside and the two went to sleep on beds Henley had made up on the floor of the cabin.

IV.

NEXT morning, the storm having vanished in the distance, Leonard came back to the subject of his brother's fate, as they stood on the deck of the Sea Queen. "There's just one weak link in your argument that they are both dead," he began, taking up the conversation as though there had been no interruption in their talk. "That is the boat."

Mentally Henley cursed that battered gig. "I don't get you," he said blankly.

"There were crumbs of food under the seats that showed she had been lived in. Therefore one, at least, got away. I don't think it was Don. A man doesn't leave valuable property like this without a mark to show ownership. Don was too methodical for that. Lord bless you! He'd have tacked a notice on the bow to warn off poachers, and stuck another in the cabin. No, sir! Don stayed here. It was Ralston that went."

"Then where is he?" questioned Henley, looking about him. "I don't see any place to hide. You said he was a big man, didn't you?"

"Six feet three! Wait a minute! Here's his last picture!" He fumbled in his coat and produced a pocketbook, from which he selected a small photograph. "The man with him is Jim Ralston. The two were like brothers. In fact, Ralston was a good deal closer to Don than I have been lately; you see, I've been busy on the opposite side of the world. I never met Ralston, and Don wanted me to see just what sort of chap Ralston was. Not bad, eh?"

Henley held the picture to the light, studying the two faces with care. The pose was an arm-in-arm one, Captain Ralston's smooth, keen face looking very boyish by contrast with the bearded features of the owner of the Sea Queen. "Some size!" was his comment.

"Tremendously powerful! Don actually gloried in his strength, but I never knew him to use it wrongly." He was silent an instant. "There is only one inference from the facts," he went on. "If the two could bring the brig here, as they did, they could sail away again. So if both went, they would take the brig, while if one went he would take the boat."

"Then why?" began Henley.

"They had a row—that's the only thing to suppose," said Leonard in a low voice. "I don't say who was wrong, but they had a row and Ralston left. Don stayed here. There's no question about that. And as Don isn't here now it's a safe bet he is dead. I hate to say it, but the thing is so. He may have died in the row. I don't know and I'm not going to guess."

"Perhaps he died a natural death and his friend buried him," suggested Henley.

"Then he'd have a civilized grave and a cross stuck at the head of it. That's what I've been expecting to find all along."

"Maybe there is—on the other side."

"We'll give the atoll the once-over," declared Leonard. "Wait till I get my camera." He ran below, and after some minutes he returned with a folding, high-speed camera, at which he was frowning. "Something the matter with the adjustment," he grumbled.

"Let me try!" Henley took the camera in his hand and made a rapid but capable examination. "It's all right," he said an instant later.

"Rotten things, cameras!" commented

Leonard as they made their way up the sloping white sand to the crest of the atoll. But nowhere during a search of two hours that covered every foot of ground, did they find the slightest trace of the missing man. Presently Leonard halted.

"A dead man doesn't bury himself," said he. "So I think that we should work on the theory that there was a row, that Don was killed and that Ralston disposed of the body. He was the only one who could have. And I think we can give up the chance of drowning. Don was too fine a swimmer for that. So it comes about that we have to figure how the body was got rid of." He turned to Henley. "Suppose you killed a man here what would you do with the body?"

Henley started violently. "Do with the body? Good God!" he exclaimed. "Why, I—I don't know what I'd do. Bury it, I suppose!"

"And let somebody dig it up?" cried Leonard. "Never! That would be just what you wouldn't do. If the thing happened on board ship you might run the body out beyond the reef and sink it in the fathomless depths. But that would be pretty hard to do in the case of a very heavy man, and you wouldn't even try it if you killed the man ashore. Then—"

"Yes?" interrupted Henley, breathlessly. "What then?"

"Did you ever prowl about a coral reef at low water?" asked Leonard. "If you have good luck you can get right down to where the coral is alive. It doesn't live, you know, where the tide uncovers it, so you have to go pretty far out to find the Porites at work. Now where the reef drops a little—there's a very small drop, but still enough—a body could be thrown into the breakers and lost forever. There's just a chance that it might get caught on a projecting ledge and be held there by the current. Let's try and see."

Henley followed slowly after Leonard, his mind a tumult of strange thoughts. Was there anything in the theory? Henley frankly told himself he did not know. He had never prowled about a coral reef at low water as Leonard had suggested. There was a long, tedious slope seaward. If a man wanted a swim he took the lagoon for preference. Getting out to the edge of a coral reef is no joke.

They were knee-deep in water when they reached the edge of the reef, which here struck down at a very sharp angle. The coral was dead where they stood, but not far away it was possible to see the living polypifers. Ordinarily the sight would have held Henley's attention. But now he was watching Leonard's every movement. The man's idea was silly of course, but then—

Leonard was peering down into the clear, translucent water with eager eyes. There was scarcely any disturbance in the ocean at this point, the reef being here in the lee of the heavy swell caused by the storm, so that it was possible to see clearly at a surprising depth.

"Funny thing about coral," he said slowly; "it will grab hold of an anchor in next to no time, but I've seen an anchor pulled up clean after a mighty long stay on bottom. And there you are. What we must look for—"

He drew back an instant and Henley could see a shiver pass through his body. Next instant he was pointing downward. "Poor old Don!" he whispered.

Henley looked down. In the most sheltered portion of the reef, hemmed in by a projecting spur of coral, as sometimes happens when a coral reef is undergoing a process of disintegration, was a small opening on the white sandy bottom of which was something which drew Henley's gaze with a strange fascination. The perspiration started to his forehead. His hand shook. "My God!" he cried softly.

Leonard was staring down at his brother's skeleton with profound emotion. "Poor old Don!" he repeated. Then, "Damn the fish!" he said irrelevantly. "Both feet gone! And one of the hands! Oh, damn the fish!" He was silent an instant; when he spoke his voice had hardened. "Murdered! By all that's holy! Shot through the forehead!"

Peering through the crystal water, Henley could see a small hole in the front of the skull, and a much larger, more shattered breach, toward the back. "Maybe he committed suicide," he suggested.

"You didn't know Don or you would never suppose that," was the scornful rejoinder. "Don believed that no man had a right to take his life. Suicide was the one thing he thought would never be pardoned in the other world. No; it was murder all right; and it was Jim Ralston, who did it. By God!"

Henley was silent. His eyes fastened on the motionless figure beneath the water, he seemed to be awaiting a cue from Leonard. And presently Leonard gave one.

"We'll have to wait until the Ariel gets back. That will probably be a day or two or maybe more. Then we'll have everything done shipshape and in order, photographs taken, sworn statements made, so that we can start after Ralston." He looked at his camera. "I have one more exposure in this roll. Would you mind standing by the edge of the reef so that I can have your picture? It will show you as you were when we made the discovery."

There was a curious look in Henley's eyes as he faced the camera. But he made no remark, contenting himself with standing in an attitude of attention while Leonard focused the picture, after which the two waded to dry land, where Leonard inserted another roll of film in his camera and took pictures of the lagoon with and without the Sea Queen, followed by pictures of the Sea Queen alone. He was anxious to have as full a photographic record of the atoll as was possible. He did not mention the method he had in mind for photographing the skeleton of the murdered man, but from one or two remarks he let fall Henley could tell that he was turning over the problem in his thoughts.

Once on board the brig Leonard betook himself to one of the mate's rooms, where he busied himself in developing the films he had in hand. Henley was glad to escape to the galley under pretense of preparing a meal. He needed quietness to gather himself together. The unexpected events of the morning had shaken even his iron nerve. The whole thing was incredible, or, if not exactly that, it was— He hunted vainly for a word. Then, "Damn the rotten island!" shot from his lips with the explosive force of a bullet.

As he arranged the things upon the cabin-table, Leonard came out of the mate's room. There was a stain of chemicals on his finger-tips. His eyes had a tired look, and the rims were red—probably from working over the chemicals. "Got the three rolls hanging up to dry," he said pleasantly. "To-morrow I'll print."

"Three?" questioned Henley carelessly. "Thought you had only two." And even as he spoke he was wondering that the man did not see through his efforts to appear interested. Surely he was not blind! Surely he must notice!

But Leonard did not notice, and the day passed in aimless speculation regarding the Ariel and when night came the two played cards once more, while the hanging lamp swayed softly in its gimbals as the brig careened to the tide. Next morning the Ariel not heaving in sight, Leonard returned to the cabin to print his pictures, and Henley began cleaning the standing rigging. He had no particular object in doing this, except that the sight of it offended his sense of fitness—that a vague desire to keep his hands busy.

Presently Leonard came on deck again. "Everything in shape!" he announced. "I'll show you some pictures in five minutes." He looked inquiringly seaward. "Hope nothing happened to the Ariel! She ought to be here by now."

"It was a stiff gale; she probably won't make the island till to-morrow or the next day."

"The Ariel travels fast," commented Leonard; "not like this old tub."

The sailor's ingrained loyalty to his ship threw Henley, for the first time, off guard. "Old tub!" he cried indignantly. "Why, I've seen the Sea Queen traveling at a clip that—"

He broke off abruptly. Leonard had made a step forward. There was a revolver in his hand. "You belonged to the Sea Queen? And you said you had never seen her. You must be—" He stared searchingly at Henley's face. "By God! I see it now. Your eyes and forehead always puzzled me. You're Jim Ralston—with a beard. Ralston! And you shot Don!"

The other's blue eyes were steady and

his voice even. "I'm Ralston," he agreed; "and I shot Don."

On the deck of the brig there was a great stillness, with the far-off noise of surf as a slumberous background. Leonard, leaning forward, spoke in so low a tone that an onlooker might have thought the two engaged in casual conversation.

"I'm going to kill you!" he said softly. "And I'm going to call it self-defense. Keep your hands up. But I'm not going to kill you unawares as you killed Don. You have ten minutes to say your prayers. Then I'll shoot!"

While he was talking, Leonard had been busy. Behind Ralston was a rope-end, hanging from a belaying-pin. With his revolver tightly pressed to Ralston's side, Leonard was able to fasten him to the bulwarks. It was really a joke as far as security went, but it was strong enough to help him gain time. For once he had his man momentarily trussed up, he was able to drop his revolver and pick up a coil of rope lying not far away. With this he bound Ralston hard and fast.

"You have ten minutes to do your praying," he said smoothly. "I'll start printing those snaps. Then I'll shoot without warning—as you shot Don."

"Ah, go to hell!" replied Ralston scornfully. He gazed seaward as Leonard went below. Memories of the past when he and Don had roved the South Seas together thronged his mind. Had there ever been such a chap as Don? So honest, so kind, such a real comrade? In fancy he reviewed that starlit night in the Solomons when Don had saved his life at the risk of his own. He could see old Don, wiping the perspiration from his forehead and gazing around at the beaten and terrified group of islanders. How big, how unbelievably strong, old Don had looked that night! That was a man! And then things had changed—he hurried over them—and he had shot Don. Now that he thought it calmly over it seemed an awful thing to do. But he had done it—of his own free will. And he had to pay the penalty. That was just. A man had to pay for everything in this life. And now he was going to pay for that shot.

He heard Leonard's step on the companionway, and, with a fleeting glance at the blue of the sky, he braced himself to meet what was coming. But Leonard's step was unaccountably slow. He reached the top of the companionway and came forward. In his hand he carried half a dozen photographic prints. His face was very pale.

"Last night I forgot to tell you I found a sealed roll of snaps at the back of your bunk. I was hunting around—curious to know why those films were light-struck. I developed that roll of yours. Here it is!" He held out to Ralston a number of pictures. "Damn you! I wish I had shot you before I saw them," he cried furiously.

Ralston nodded. "I understand; I went through it all myself."

Leonard began mechanically to unfasten the rope. "Got it while trying to find a cure, I suppose?"

"The worst kind!" said Ralston. "Sometimes it's a very slow process, but with Don it went on at an awful rate. Maybe the serum helped. He insisted on pictures, as a record of the progress of the disease. He often begged me—"

Leonard held out a picture—the head and shoulders of a man. The long hair and swollen features gave it a curious resemblance to the head of a lion. Next followed a half-length, with a puckered, clawlike hand resting on the swollen cheek, as though it were the talons of some bird of prey. Then came one from which both men instinctively turned aside—Leonard shivered.

He lowered his voice to a whisper. "Then it wasn't the fish that did that out there after all. And the hand, too?"

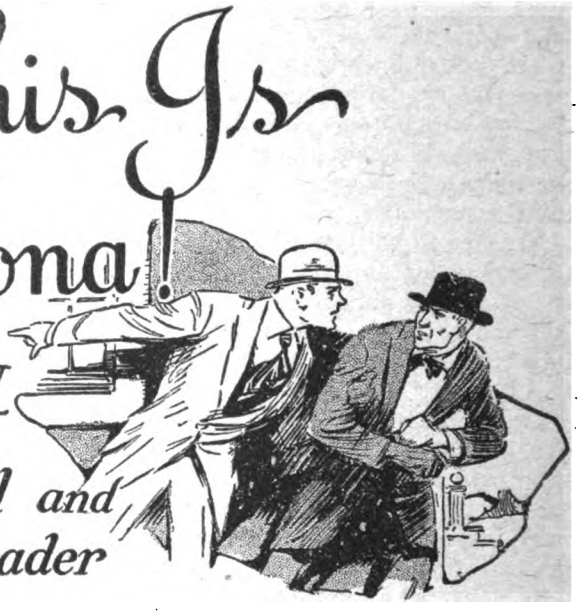
Ralston nodded. "He made me keep away from him, you know. Lived out yonder by the reef. And every day he grew worse. At the end it was indescribable even for leprosy. I knew what he wanted, and I knew he had scruples about doing it himself. So when it got too bad"—he shook his head—"he was sitting out by the surf that day"—he paused an instant—"and I'd do it again," he ended quietly.

"Thank you, Jim; I understand," said Leonard as quietly. And the two clasped hands in a grip of steel.

So This Is Arizona!

Part V.

by C. C. Waddell and Marie B. Schrader



CHAPTER XXII.

NEWS FROM THE RANCH.

INVOLUNTARILY Norman closed his eyes. He knew that he ought to be praying in the brief interval of life which was left to him. But somehow his thoughts did not turn toward prayer. He was conscious more of an intense chagrin over the fact that Wildcat and Muller had outguessed and outwitted him.

"To think that a pair of boobs like that could put it over on me!" was the way his emotion would probably have been expressed if he had formulated it in words.

Then suddenly he was almost deafened by the noise of a report close to his ear. Yet, loud as it sounded, it did not seem possible to him that it could have been the explosion of the bomb. For one thing, he was still all there himself; and for another, he could feel the ledge under him apparently as solid as ever.

He opened his eyes to investigate, and saw Manuel, the pistol in his hand still smoking, leaning out over the edge of the rock to note the effect of the shot he had just fired.

The half-breed had risked precipitating an explosion of the bomb by concussion, and with his quickly aimed bullet had severed the remaining fraction of fuse almost within a hair's breadth of the detonator.

It was a long chance, but it had saved them.

Russell was fairly awestruck at the steadiness of marksmanship which could have accomplished such a result under the circumstances.

"Old Eagle-Eye!" he ejaculated. "Gee, Manuel! If any Gessler ever puts me up for a target with an apple on my head, I'm sure going to pick you out for my William Tell."

Manuel did not seem particularly uplifted by this promise. Having never heard of William Tell, it is highly questionable if he had the slightest idea what Norman meant. Without paying any further attention to his remarkable exploit, he announced impassively:

"Now, we go down to the other level."

As he spoke he was untwisting the rawhide lariat which he wore wound around and around his waist; and when he had got it free he looped one end of it over a stout spike which had been left when the ladder was wrenched away.

It did not quite reach to the ground, but the interval was one which could be safely

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dropped, and so a little later both of them landed whole and unharmed beside the bomb which had so nearly proved their destruction.

Their first idea, of course, was to pursue the miscreants; but after a brief essay at the project they decided to abandon it as futile. In a game of hide and seek of that sort, with all the ramifying passages and galleries to range in Muller and Wildcat had a big advantage; for they were comparatively fit, whereas Manuel was old and Russell exhausted. Besides, the possibilities of the pair for further mischief were slight, and their eventual capture was certain. Hunger would sooner or later drive them to surrender.

Consequently, after debating the pros and cons, Norman and the half-breed concluded to waste no more time, but to make their way directly to the main shaft and to daylight, picking up the remaining bombs as they came to them and carrying them along.

So in due time they arrived at the exit and signaled for the hoist-man to lower the bucket and take them up. But there came no response, although they rang again and again.

"What's the matter up there?" growled Norman peevishly. "Have they all gone to sleep?"

It certainly seemed so. At any rate, nobody replied to their insistent summons; so at last, despairing of an answer, they were compelled to climb laboriously up the long ladder with their ticklish burden of bombs.

But they were even more surprised when they arrived at the top to find the place apparently deserted. Not a soul was in sight; not a single auditor for their thrilling tale of adventure.

At last they discovered a small group of the older miners up at the far end of the camp—the garrulous graybeard, who had pricked Norman's bubble of popularity, among them.

"What's the matter?" demanded Russell of him. "What's become of everybody?"

"More doin's!" The old man shook his head. "You can't never tell what to expect nowadays. A cowboy come gallopin' in here about fifteen minutes ago, and said that Bob Thompson wanted every able-bodied man on the jump. They ain't but just left, Kendall at the head of 'em, and they made us six stay behind to guard the mine. It's a 'tarnation shame, too. I'll let 'em know that I'm jest as able-bodied as ary one of 'em."

"But what's up? Why did Thompson send for them?" broke in Norman impatiently.

"Why, that no one don't seem rightly to know. There was such a hustle and bustle over startin' that I couldn't git no specific details. But I heered Kendall say that 'twas somethin' seriously wrong over at the Newton ranch."

Norman thrilled with a quick anxiety. Perhaps something had happened to Peggy? She might be in danger?

A moment before he had been so weary, so completely tuckered out, that he felt as if he could hardly drag himself another foot; but now he was all on edge again, vital, eager, vibrant with energy.

He turned sharply to the old man.

"Where can I get a horse?"

"There ain't none." The graybeard shrugged his shoulders. "They took every last beast in the corral."

"And the flivver?" cried Russell.

"Oh, Cap'n Kendall used that hisself."

Norman glanced desperately around. A string of mules used for drawing the ore-wagons stood roped along one side of the corral, and outside the fence was a dilapidated buckboard.

In an emergency it is not what you want that counts, but what you can use.

"Any of you men know how to hitch up a mule?" he addressed the group of veterans.

They all vehemently disclaimed the possession of any such talent.

"Do you, Manuel?"

The half-breed backed hurriedly away. He disclosed in picturesque language some things he had heard about that especial bunch of mules.

"I am not asking you about their personal characters. I want to know if you can hitch them up?"

"No, *señor!*"

"Then I shall have to do it myself."

And he did. I am not going to describe the miracle—for that a greenhorn could cut out from that string of sheer cantankerousness a single span of the animals, and on top of that get them into their harness and hooked between the traces, and yet escape alive, is nothing less. I am not going to describe the miracle; I simply state it as a fact. Perhaps it was his profanity that accomplished the result. A mule is particularly susceptible to that form of blandishment, it is said, and one of the first qualifications of a top sergeant is its adept use.

The group of graybeards looking on afterward declared that if they had not heard it they would never have believed that such coruscating epithets could fall from human lips. But they had never been with the A. E. F. in France.

At any rate, the mules were hitched, and in a surprisingly short time, too. Russell sprang to the seat of the buckboard, shouted to Manuel to jump in beside him, lashed out with a heavy whip which he had found in the corral, and away they went, a whirling, kicking, bucking, jolting scramble.

It was a runaway, nothing less. Norman never ceased to ply his whip, and let the galloping beasts practically pick their own road, while Manuel clung to the sides of the swaying vehicle and frantically called on all the saints to save him.

Up and down hill, over gullies and ridges, and around corners, they bumped and banged, sometimes on two wheels, sometimes on none at all. But somehow the crazy vehicle held together and remained upright; somehow its occupants were not tossed out; and at last the distance was covered.

Russell sprang out before the wheels came to a stop and, tossing the reins to Manuel, dashed up the steps of the ranch-house.

In the hallway he encountered Kendall, who, with a grave face, was giving orders to one of his men.

"I'm glad you're here," the superintendent greeted Norman. "We shall probably need you. Thompson found Mr. Newton shot, and has ever since been insensible from loss of blood. He has just now recovered consciousness, and confirms what we have all along suspected—that it was Dave Saunders who shot him."

"And Peggy?" broke in Norman, clutching Kendall by the shoulders. "What of her?"

"Why, Saunders had kidnaped Peggy—carried her away!"

CHAPTER XXIII.

THE YELLOW STREAK.

RUSSELL waited to hear no more. With Kendall following, he pressed on hurriedly into a room on the right, from which he heard the sound of voices. It proved to be the dining-room of the ranch-house, but the furniture was all awry, the table and chairs pushed out of the way, and the back of one of the chairs broken as if there had been a struggle. On the rug was a stain which still showed fresh.

The details he noted afterward, but at the time all his attention was centered on a couch which had been wheeled between the two windows, and on which lay Mr. Newton.

The ranch owner's face as it rested among the pillows was gray and drawn with pain. His right arm and shoulder were bandaged, and he could hardly speak above a whisper. A doctor was hovering over him, and, as Russell came in, was just lifting to the patient's lips a stimulating drink of some sort.

Sheriff Thompson, chewing at his faded mustache, sat in a chair tilted back on its hind legs, and there were one or two other men standing about.

The sheriff nodded to Russell, and then beckoned authoritatively to Kendall.

"Doc says he can talk now, Ned," he said. "You take down his statement, will you, while I ask him questions? I guess that 'll be the quickest way to get at the facts."

Then when Kendall, having found paper and ink in the sideboard, and having seated himself at the table, announced that he was ready, Bob turned toward the couch.

"Now, squire," he said, "s'pose you start right in at the beginning and tell us just how it all happened?"

The wounded man did not reply at once. He seemed to be endeavoring to collect his faculties, and when he did speak his voice was so faint as to be almost inaudible.

"Where do you want me to begin?" he asked. "With the appearance of Saunders on the scene, or shall I tell what happened before he showed up?"

"Better let us have it all," advised Bob. "It takes a bit longer, but it may keep us from havin' to bother you again."

There was another long pause, however, before Newton spoke again—a pause which to Norman, on tenterhooks for action, seemed unending. Still, he knew that it was idle to start any systematic pursuit until they had heard the ranch owner's story. So he forced himself to restrain his impatience.

At last the injured man resumed.

"Well, as you know, Thompson," he said, "we got back from our wild goose chase to the border about two o'clock, and you and the posse had dinner with us. Then, after you left to go over to Kendall's and look into this Rogers's murder, Peggy and I still sat at the table talking over a number of things. I was telling her about our ride to the border, and she was telling me all that had taken place while I was gone.

"Perhaps an hour passed in this way, and we were still sitting there when Saunders came in. We had some words, and—"

"What about?" interjected the sheriff.

"Oh, nothing of any importance. I called him down for being away from the ranch during my absence, and he took it in rather bad part. He said he'd had to leave to look after some affairs of his own, and if I didn't like it I could go to the devil. I saw he was trying to pick a quarrel, and so let the matter drop. You see, I am used to these ugly moods of his. They were hard to put up with, but they didn't last long, and he was otherwise such a good foreman that I always considered it wisest to overlook them.

"Then he started to baiting Peggy.

"'Your friend, Sergeant Russell, won't pester these parts much longer,' he said. 'I understand the boys have struck a mighty fresh trail. He'll probably be kicking his heels at the end of a rope by sundown.'

"She didn't even look up at him, but just went on with some sewing she was doing.

"'That's stale news, Dave," she answered quietly. 'You evidently haven't read the latest editions.'

"'What do you mean?' he growled.

"'Why, only that while you were away from the ranch I sent a messenger to notify each of the search parties that I had been with Sergeant Russell all day yesterday, and could swear positively that he was innocent. So, as I understand, the hunt for him has been called off.'

"Saunders glared at her when he heard that, as if he wanted to wring her neck. He jumped up and knocked over his chair. Then an idea seemed to strike him, and he sort of calmed down.

"'It's your own news that's stale,' he said to her. 'I didn't mean to tell you, but they've got Russell already. And, what's more, they're going to string him up. He's asked to see you before he goes, and they sent me to get you; but we'll have to hurry or you'll be too late.'

"Peggy sprang to her feet at that; then she sat down and picked up her sewing again.

"'Aren't you going?' Saunders asked.

"'No,' said she; 'because I know you're lying.'

"Saunders walked up and down the room for quite a spell, scowling and biting his nails. I felt like ordering him out, but I didn't want to antagonize him, and I thought he would soon come to his senses. At last he stopped in front of my daughter.

"'Peggy, I want to speak to you,' he said.

"'What is it, Dave?' She looked up at him.

"'Come outside, and I'll tell you,' he answered. 'It's something confidential.'

"But she made no move to get up, and I saw his face grow black.

"'Are you coming outside or not?' he demanded."

Mr. Newton's voice had been growing weaker and weaker as he proceeded, and at this point failed him altogether. The doctor stepped hastily forward to give him another dose of the stimulant, and after a moment or two he was able to resume his narration.

"Well," he continued, "Saunders's tone and manner had grown so insolent that I could stand it no longer, and when I heard him say that I told him to get out of the house.

"'Don't pay any attention to him, dad,' Peggy said. 'It's only one of his spells.'

"Then she spoke to him. She wasn't a bit flustered or nervous. She merely told him in her usual friendly tone to quit his foolishness and go on about his business. I don't think either of us were the least bit afraid of him. We had known him so long, you see, and were accustomed to his moods. If we had suspected what he had in mind— But we were all alone in the house, and my guns were in my bedroom, where I had left them when I washed up for dinner.

"Well, he didn't answer Peggy. He just stood there and glared at her, sort of devouring her with his eyes. Then all of a sudden he reached out and grabbed her up in his arms.

"'I love you,' he panted. 'No dude New Yorker is going to take you away from me. You'll either go with me now to Lone Rock and get married, or else I'll carry you away and marry you by force. I know a priest on the other side of the border who will do the job and no questions asked.'

"I was struggling to my feet," Newton went on, "but before I could get out of my chair Peggy had wrenched herself free from him and had got the table between them.

"'Dave Saunders, you're crazy!' she cried.

"'Yes; crazy like a fox,' he answered with a wicked glitter in his eyes.

"Then, before either of us realized what he was up to, he had locked both doors and dropped the keys in his pocket.

"Peggy started to scream.

"'That won't do you any good,' he sneered. 'The cook has gone on an errand, and I've sent all the boys out of the way. There's no one to hear you.'

"We were all three circling about the table by this time. I was trying to get my hands on him, although Peggy kept telling me to stay out of it and let her manage him. Possibly her anxiety lest I would get hurt made her less watchful.

"At any rate, he suddenly leaped the table and caught her. She struggled and beat at him with her fists, but he only laughed.

"Then I closed in, and the three of us wrestled all around the room, knocking over the chairs and banging against the furniture. I thought for a time that, between us, Peggy and I would master him; but all of a sudden I heard her cry: 'Look out, dad! He's pulling his gun!' And a second later he let me have it.

"Peggy, when she saw me fall, collapsed in his arms in a faint. He thought at first she was shamming; but when he found she wasn't, he only muttered: 'Well, that makes it easier for me.'

"Then he stepped over and looked at me. 'I guess I've croaked you all right,' he said. 'Seems like nothing else would satisfy you.'

"I must have lost consciousness after that for a few minutes; for when I partially come to he had Peggy tied hand and foot with strips that he'd cut from the tablecloth, and was wrapping her in a long cloak he got in the hall.

"She was still in a swoon, and he didn't attempt to rouse her, but laid her down on the floor. Then he went to the safe in my office. He'd got hold of the combination somehow, but he was slow in working it, and before he got it open he sprang up and looked out of the window. Evidently he'd heard the sound of some one coming, and wanted to know who it was.

"'Good Lord!' I heard him say. 'If it isn't Thompson and his posse! What on earth is that old fool coming back for?'

"He didn't bother with the safe any more, but rushed back in here, gathered up Peggy in his arms, and ran with her out of the back door.

"That is all I remember," Newton con-

cluded. "My efforts to get up and stop him must have brought on another fit of unconsciousness, for I knew nothing more until I woke up and found myself here on the couch.

"And now what can be done?" The father clenched his hands and moaned over his helplessness. "My Peggy! My poor little girl! You've heard what that scoundrel said, Thompson. He'll carry her off across the border and marry her, whether she's willing or not."

"Oh, no, he won't!" The sheriff had sprung to his feet, his face tense and grim. "Rest your mind easy on that score, squire. He's got a fast hoss, I'll admit; but he ain't got so much of a start on us, an' you want to remember he's carryin' double. Inside of half an hour I'll have a party out after him on every trail leadin' to the border."

Hurriedly then he bestirred himself to issue orders and get his various detachments under way.

A little later, while he was bustling about, he encountered Russell on the porch.

"Hello, there, young feller!" he hailed Norman. "Better be gettin' ready. We'll start right away now, and I've fixed for you to go with me. Got a gun, eh? You'll want one, for that Dave Saunders won't give up without a battle, and he's some shot."

"Why, thanks just the same, sheriff," returned Norman coolly; "but I don't believe I'll go."

"You won't what?" The sheriff stared at him, and his expression of shocked incredulity was reflected in the faces of a dozen other men standing about.

Here was a man who was regarded as Peggy Newton's favored suitor, and yet when given the opportunity to ride to her rescue he turned it down.

The only possible explanation was that he was afraid of Dave Saunders's prowess as a gunman.

Like mist the reputation which Norman had gained for gameness evaporated under that damning refusal.

"No," he repeated; "there are enough of you without me. I guess I'll stay on here."

With eyes averted, they turned away and disdainfully left him to himself.

No one spoke to him, or even looked at him again. He was a pariah and an outcast. They felt he had shown the "yellow streak."

CHAPTER XXIV.

AT MIDNIGHT.

As the sheriff and his party were mounting Kendall came hurrying out of the house.

Some one must stay at the ranch to look after things there, and sorely against his will the superintendent had been persuaded to accept this duty.

He was really ineligible to join in the pursuit, for he was still suffering from a wound which he had received in the service and which rendered him incapable of such exhausting and long-continued effort.

He glanced around, and then discovering Norman where he sat shunned and deserted, came swiftly over to him.

His brows were drawn in a troubled frown, and although he tried to speak in casual fashion, his voice betrayed a note of disapproval.

"I have just heard that you declined to go with Thompson and his party," he said. "Is that true?"

Norman nodded. He was rolling a cigarette at the moment, and he held out his tobacco-bag and papers to the captain.

"Want the makings?" he asked.

Almost indignantly Kendall waved them aside.

"I realize that you have been through a whole lot, sergeant"—his tone was low and he was evidently trying to hold himself under restraint—"and also that you probably feel you would be of little assistance on such an expedition. Nevertheless, I think you are making a serious mistake in refusing to go."

Then, as Norman made no response to his implied suggestion, his patience gave way.

"Hang it all, Russell!" he broke out angrily. "We're red-blooded people out here, and we can't understand such a lukewarm, indifferent attitude. There isn't a man of us who would hesitate a second

about going to the aid of Peggy Newton, not if he were sick abed and had to crawl on his hands and knees. Yet you, who claim to love her, hang back and loaf here, rolling cigarettes.

"I know you too well," he went on less belligerently, "to believe it's a lack of courage that's holding you back. But these miners and cowboys have a different idea. They're whispering among themselves that it's fear of Dave Saunders's gun-play.

"Why, man alive," he protested, "you can't allow such an impression as that to get abroad. You simply would have to leave the country. It would be impossible for you to stay. And if any harm occurs to Peggy, Lord knows what they mayn't do!"

"I see." Norman snapped his cigarette over the railing of the porch and rose to his feet as if reaching a decision.

"Ah!" exclaimed Kendall with relief. "I was sure you would listen to reason. Shall I tell them to bring you a horse?"

"No," rejoined Russell. "I was merely wondering what the chances are here for a bath and some sort of an outfit of fresh clothes."

The superintendent drew back, hardly able to believe his ears.

"Look here!" he blazed out. "I've stood by and defended you, when it was almost as much as my own life was worth to do it. I did so, because I'd known you on the other side and believed you were one hundred per cent—man. But now I want you to know that I wash my hands of you.

"I'm even beginning to question if you're not the crook that Thompson claims you are. This rat, who skulks and slacks and shirks, can't surely be Sergeant Russell—the fellow who made good with me in the Argonne."

He would probably have gone on to say more, but at that instant Russell raised his head, and their eyes encountered.

In spite of himself, Kendall faltered and stopped. There was something in the other's calm, steady gaze that checked his vitriolic comment.

"Don't quit," muttered Norman under his breath. "Keep on bawling me out."

But Kendall, confused and uncertain, was unable to follow his lead; so, with a sarcastic sneer, Norman turned on his heel and went into the house.

As he had expected, his friend immediately followed, and, catching up with him in the hall, laid a restraining hand upon his arm.

"Norman," he urged, "for God's sake, tell me what this means! You seem to be acting a part, if that hint you just gave me stands for anything; but what that part is, or why you are doing it, is certainly beyond me."

He was obviously puzzled, wanting to believe in his old comrade, yet finding it hard to reconcile the latter's actions with any sort of worthy motive.

Russell hesitated a moment, then threw up his head.

"Cap," he said, "what would you do for the woman you love?"

"What would I do for the woman I love?"

"Yes—for that little girl back in Missouri you were telling me about night before last. If it would aid her, wouldn't you be willing to be misunderstood and misjudged for a little while, and to have people call you a cur and a poltroon, even to have your best friend turn on you?"

"Why, of course," assented Kendall. "But I don't see—"

"You don't have to see," interrupted Norman sharply. Then, as the Chinese cook came slipping by with a bowl of broth for Mr. Newton, he raised his voice to a peevish snarl.

"Lord, can't a man ever do as he wants to in this country? I don't care to go with the sheriff, and I'm not going, and there's an end to it. I'm tired and all in; and after I've got cleaned up and had something to eat I'm going to bed and stay there until day after to-morrow."

And apparently determined on this program, Russell started to follow it out to the letter.

It cannot be said, however, that his lot was a happy one. No leper was ever more sedulously shunned. The servants absolutely refused to wait upon him, and the company, consisting of Kendall, the doctor, and

few hands left upon the place, stonily red his existence.

Under the rules of the ranch, no wayfarer—whether he were a criminal, convict, hobo, or even a sheep-herder—could be denied food and a night's shelter; but Russell was compelled to help himself and to look after his own sleeping arrangements.

He accepted his position, though, with apparent indifference. Clothed in some garments of Saunders's which he had coolly commandeered from the wash-line, he appeared in the cook-shack at supper-time, and, quite impervious to the withering glances cast in his direction, piled his plate up and ate with apparent relish.

He made no attempt to speak to any of the others during the meal, but as he was leaving the cook-shack for the isolated shed which he had selected as his bedchamber he swaggered up to Kendall with a touch of bravado.

"Since I got scratched up in your service," he said, "would you mind sending your man Manuel in to help me bandage some of these cuts? I can't quite manage it myself."

The superintendent merely bowed in cold silence. He had caught a warning flicker in his old sergeant's eye which indicated caution, and he followed the cue.

After that, Russell was seen no more during the evening. In obedience to his request, Kendall sent Manuel to his shed; but in a little while the half-breed emerged, and the light inside went out. Evidently the ostracised occupant of the place was off on his promised sleep around the clock.

More puzzled than ever, and finding it even more difficult to believe there could be any favorable outcome to the affair, Kendall sat on the porch smoking and pondering long after the rest of the household had gone to rest.

The ranch-house was completely dark, save for a faint light from the window of an upper room whither Mr. Newton had been moved since that afternoon.

The superintendent was beginning to nod in his chair, and to think that he himself had better retire and quit addling his brains over the incomprehensible problem, when suddenly he roused, startled to his feet by the sound of three successive shots from off toward the south, followed by the setting off of a flare against the sky.

It was the signal to give warning of the descent of a band of cattle rustlers. Some lonely outpost had discovered them at their nefarious work and was notifying the ranch. Already the sounds of commotion could be heard from the bunk-house, as the awakened cow-punchers hurried out and headed toward the corral after their horses.

Kendall sprang down the steps of the porch, and started on a run to join them, but as he rounded the corner of the house a dark figure suddenly rose up beside him and caught him by the arm.

"Not that way!" a voice hissed in his ear. "Back into the house!"

To his amazement he perceived that the man was Russell.

So compelling was the other's tone, too, that in spite of what he felt a call to duty he yielded to the whispered injunction and went back.

As the two slipped silently into the house they heard the drumming of hoof-beats as the cowboys galloped off to repel the invaders.

Russell, with his hand on his companion's arm, guided the latter into the dining-room and over toward the door leading into Mr. Newton's office. He paused at last beside a heavy portière which hung at the lintel.

"Forgive me, cap," he murmured, "for not sooner taking you into my confidence; but I didn't dare run the risk of somebody overhearing us and possibly tipping my hand. I'm playing an awfully long shot as it is; and there's too much at stake to afford even a chance of being double-crossed."

Kendall waited in silence for some fuller revelation. It seemed somehow as if he and his old sergeant had reversed their former positions. Russell was now the commanding officer and he the subordinate.

"The long and short of it is," went on Norman, "that I expect to catch Saunders here to-night."

Kendall gave a half exclamation of surprise, but smothered it in response to Russell's quick pressure on his arm.

"But if you have an idea of the sort,

why didn't you put it up to Thompson? Why did you let the whole bunch go trailing off to the border."

"Thompson's a good old fellow, but as you yourself told me, a bit too thick-headed. He'd have muddled things somehow. No; I let Thompson go, because he was doing just what Saunders expected him to do. Saunders is no fool; I am half inclined to believe, from what I hear of him, that he may be a maniac, but if so he has all a maniac's cunning.

"He wouldn't start at once for the border. He knew that a pursuit would immediately be organized, and that hampered as he was by Peggy he was bound to be overtaken. Consequently he would go to some safe retreat near at hand where he could lie low for a few days until the pursuit is given over and the coast clear for him to make his journey."

"It sounds reasonable," admitted Kendall. "There are hundreds of caves and shafts and prospect tunnels within an hour's ride where he could rest perfectly secure. It would be like hunting a needle in a haystack to try to find him. By Jove!" he added gloomily. "That makes it look even worse for Peggy. You were wrong, sergeant. You ought to have told this to the sheriff. Then, instead of racing off to the border, he could have turned his bunch loose in the hills, and maybe they would have located the scoundrel."

"A fat chance!" scoffed Norman. "Why, they couldn't even run down a greenhorn like me. And you don't give Saunders credit for any shrewdness. He wouldn't just jump into the first lair he came to. He had probably been planning this affair a long time, and had a refuge already fixed, where nobody would ever think of looking."

"Then we might as well throw up our hands," declared Kendall. "The case is hopeless."

"No; for we'll nab him when he comes here to-night, and make him take us to it."

"What on earth makes you think he will come here? It seems to me the last place he would dare to come."

"Ah! But you forget that he didn't succeed in opening the safe," Russell reminded him. "He isn't going off to Mexico empty-handed, not when there is money there to be had for the taking and papers which are no doubt equally valuable.

"Sure, he'll come back all right," Norman reiterated. "The only question in my mind has been, when? But now since this alarm of rustlers has come, I am certain that it will be to-night. This is merely a fake raid, I imagine, for the purpose of drawing all the men away from the house, although it may be a real raid, at that. I am beginning to suspect that Saunders knows more about this rustling business than—"

He broke off sharply, and drew Kendall back deeper into the concealing portières, for a shadow was showing against the window.

A moment later there was a slight rasping sound as the latch was manipulated. The sash was noiselessly lifted, and then a man climbed in over the sill.

CHAPTER XXV.

THE WINNING TRUMP.

HARDLY daring to breathe, Norman and the captain shrank back deeper into the shelter of the curtain, as the intruder, after pausing a moment to listen, made his way toward them. The ease with which the fellow navigated the room, avoiding any contact with the furniture, showed that he was thoroughly familiar with its arrangement.

Also, although he moved with caution, it was evident that he did not anticipate any interference. Probably he felt satisfied that every one about the place who was worth consideration was off after the rustlers. The Chinese cook or the doctor was about all that he need fear encountering.

Passing so close to the two behind the curtain that they could have reached out and touched him, he entered Newton's office and drew down the shades to the window.

They heard him fumbling a moment; then came the lighting of a match. As its tiny flare sprang up, his face was illuminated.

It was Saunders.

Of course they had never questioned the identity of the prowler, and yet actually to see his face brought a distinct shock.

As the match lit up the fellow's swarthy features, Russell almost lost his self-control. His fists clenched. He went tense like a leopard about to spring. Kendall quickly laid a restraining hand on his shoulder. It was not yet the moment for action.

Saunders plainly believed that he had the place to himself, for he was almost contemptuously deliberate in his movements. Shielding the match with his hands, he lighted a lamp which stood upon the table and proceeded at his leisure to rifle Newton's desk.

This concluded, and a little bundle of papers made up, he rose and started across the room.

Then for the first time he showed a touch of apprehension; for he gave a sudden start and jerked free the big revolver strapped across his shoulder.

The next instant, though, he recognized the object of his alarm as only his own wavering shadow cast by the lamp against the wall, and with a derisive chuckle at his own trepidation he dropped the revolver back into its holster.

Across the room he went then to the safe, and after a little difficulty succeeded in manipulating the combination and swinging open the heavy door.

The watchers saw his eyes sparkle as he explored the various drawers and compartments; for Newton always kept a large supply of cash on hand. There were also bonds and other securities of value.

He was still removing these, stacking them up in piles beside him on the floor, when suddenly he was seized by either arm. Noiselessly Russell and Kendall had stolen out from their hiding-place, and had been able, so absorbed was he in his task, to grab him from behind.

Kendall reached over his shoulder and relieved him of his weapons. Then they allowed him to rise to his feet.

He took a quick step backward, but halted as he saw the muzzles of their revolvers flash up to cover him, and heard Kendall's stern command:

"No monkey business, Dave! The game is up."

He faced them defiantly.

"Game's up, eh?" he sneered. "Well, how does it seem to look from your side of the table?"

"It looks like a good long sentence for you," retorted Kendall, "for burglary, for shooting Newton, and for abduction. That is, unless the boys take things into their own hands. Then it will be a short shrift and a quick one."

"Oh, so that's the way you read the cards, is it?" the foreman mocked. "Well, I don't. I've still got a winning trump in my hand. It's Peggy!"

A dangerous glint showed in Russell's eye, and for an instant his finger trembled on the trigger; but he mastered the impulse which had for a moment made him see red.

"It's this way," Saunders went on. "You've got me, but I've got her—got her where she won't get away, and where you can't ever find her. So what are you going to do about it?"

"That sort of talk isn't going to get you anywhere," Kendall frowned. "You may think you can strike some sort of bargain with us—that we will agree to let you off provided you show us where you have Peggy concealed! Well, if you have any such idea, you can put it out of your head. There's nothing doing."

"Nothing doing, eh?" Saunders drawled insolently. "Then we're both of one mind, for this ain't my bargainin' day, neither. You don't seem to quite get me, Kendall."

"No; but every man in the community 'll get you," retorted Kendall hotly, "unless you tell us mighty quick where Peggy Newton is. And if you've so much as harmed a hair of her head, Lord pity you, Saunders!"

It was no idle threat, and the man knew it; but he merely threw back his head and laughed.

"Listen," he said slowly. "If you guys think you can throw a scare into me, you are only wasting your time. Ain't you got sense enough to see that there's only one thing you can do for Peggy Newton, and that is to let me go quietly off with this here swag and get married to her?"

"You're crazy!" ejaculated Kendall.

"Am I? Think a minute. Unless you do as I say, it 'll not be me that harms a hair of her head, but you. She's a prisoner cooped up where she can't get away, and where, as I tell you, she won't never be found. The only soul on earth that knows that place is me, and unless I release her she'll die a lingerin' death of hunger and starvation."

"Yes; and if you don't release her, or tell where she is, do you know what will happen to you?" cried Kendall.

Again the foreman gave a scornful laugh.

"What can you do to me?" he jeered. "Life ain't anything to me, 'less'n I can have her. Fact is, I'd rather die than live and see her married to another man. And that's the worst you can do to me; just kill me, that's all."

"No," broke in Kendall with grim significance. "It might not be so easy as all that."

"Try it!" Saunders flashed back a defiance. "Try it, if you've got the guts to see it through. My old daddy was tortured to death by Injuns right here in these mountains, I'll let you know, and he stood everything they could give him without a whimper. Them was Apache devils, too, remember, while you are only white men.

"So, try it!" His eyes glittered wildly, and he thrust out a challenging jaw. "Cut me into strips, if you want to; burn me over a slow fire; hang me up by the thumbs; spread-eagle me; crucify me; do what you will. And you'll find that the Saunders's breed ain't weakened none since my daddy's time. You'll never get a word out of me that 'll put Peggy Newton into the arms of another man.

"No," he declared; "I've got the trump card, I tell you, and I stand pat. The only way that you can save Peggy Newton alive is to leave me go from here unhindered, takin' what I choose, and free to carry her off and marry her as I've planned. If you stop that in any way, or if you try to foller me or double-cross me, you simply sign her death-warrant."

He meant it. Neither of the men facing him could doubt that for an instant; for as they listened to his passionate declaration both of them realized that they were dealing with a maniac—and with all of a maniac's fixity and determination of purpose.

Involuntarily, Kendall and Norman recoiled as the truth was borne home to them.

Then Russell, as if unable to control himself, sprang forward with a cry of rage. His hands were outstretched as if to clutch their defiant prisoner and fairly tear his secret from him.

But as he rushed forward his foot caught in the rug on the floor, and he stumbled.

He flung out one arm wildly to steady himself, and as he did so struck the lamp upon the table, and as he fell swept it crashing to the floor.

Instantly the room was plunged in darkness.

Saunders, watching, alert for any opportunity, was quick to take advantage of the situation.

Almost before the lamp reached the floor, there was a quick scurry of feet from where he stood, and Kendall, taken aback by the accident, was bowled over like a nine-pin by the man's swift rush.

He scrambled up and fired as the foreman went through the window, but, dazed and shaken by the fall, his aim was wide.

A taunting howl of derision floated back to them from outside; and by the time the two reached the window the fellow had mounted his horse picketed close to the house and was galloping off at top speed.

They fired at random once or twice in the direction of the receding hoof-beats, but more to relieve their own tension than with any hope of results.

"Well, now you have done it!" cried the superintendent bitterly, as the galloping died away in the distance.

"I know," admitted Russell. "I was wrong. But there's no time to go into that now. We must follow at once. Get a couple of horses and let's be off."

But by the time Kendall returned from the corral leading the two mounts Norman had disappeared.

Ned called and whistled, looked for him inside the house and all about, but he was nowhere to be found.

(To be concluded NEXT WEEK.)

by Garret Smith

THIS night of Guy Pratt's undoing was a night to breed insomnia in the blessed dead themselves, let alone a restless neurotic like Pratt, who was beset by sleeplessness at the slightest provocation. Having suffered from several bad sessions of it he had gone to bed early in the hope of being exhausted enough to drop off and make up the loss.

But no. His room reeked under the blanket of July heat and humidity that smothered and seared the city. The elevator groaned patiently up and down back of the partition. From other open windows around the court floated into his, scraps of talk and laughter, phonographic fanfare in many medlied keys, snatches of song; from the street below the monotonous roar of motors punctuated by staccato bits of feline altercation—all the myriad voices of sleepless night.

An hour of it and he was on his feet morosely dressing. He called up another bachelor, Howard Benedict, an old chum of his, and suggested in desperation that they go to the Midnight Frivols as a preventive of a complete nervous blowout. Benedict wasn't enthusiastic. That rotund, ruddy and phlegmatic person was the direct antithesis of his friend. He could lay his blond head on a jagged rock and sleep through an earthquake any time. He was about to indulge in this favorite pastime when the call came. But Howard would do anything to please a pal, particularly as he had found he could sleep perfectly well at the Frivols.

And this he proceeded to do while Pratt fidgeted, fretted, and cursed his frayed nerves. At the close of the show he roused his slumbering friend and they departed, the insomnia feeling that he had netted nothing but the killing of a little torturing time.

"Tell you what, old man," Benedict yawned as they came out of the theater. "You come home with me for the rest of the night. I'm on a quiet side street, walk-up apartment, no noisy neighbors, except a couple of rounders above who've started off on vacation to-day. You can sleep there. Besides, you can hit the hay quicker. We'll be under the covers in fifteen minutes and it 'd be an hour if you went 'way up to your joint. I'm going out early in the morning, but you can sleep late's you please. Come on. I'm too all in to argue."

Pratt hesitated. He was wretchedly tired now. He dreaded the home trip. The suggestion of quiet appealed strongly. So he finally capitulated.

"Well, I probably won't sleep. Never can in a strange bed. But then I couldn't sleep at home anyhow. Might as well try it. Save the ride and have a quieter place to lie awake in."

"Poor, nervous nut!" Benedict growled after he had shown his guest into the spare bedroom beside his own and furnished him pajamas. "Must be the devil and all not to be able to sleep. Watch me."

Thereupon he wallowed into his own bed and in one minute was giving an excellent imitation of a snoring walrus.

Next morning was Sunday. Nevertheless, Benedict, contrary to all custom, arose at six to the prod of an alarm-clock as he was to spend the day at the beach with friends. He dressed hastily, but quietly, then paused before going out at the door of Pratt's bedroom. There was absolute silence within.

"Must have dropped off at last, poor cuss. Well, I'll let him sleep it out."

So he hurried quietly away, never giving his guest another thought. It was late that night when he returned, and he rolled into bed at once, sleeping so late next morning that he had barely time to dress and make his office, without stopping for breakfast.

But as he passed the room Pratt had occupied two nights before he glanced casually through the door, which a draft from the hall had swung half open. He stopped in bewildered amazement. The bed was empty, the bed-clothing tumbled about as though some one had left hastily. That was natural enough. Guy could hardly be expected to act the chambermaid.

The thing that astounded Benedict, however, was that his guest's clothing still lay on the chair at the head of the bed where he had dropped it when he undressed Saturday night.

To see evidence that his guest who, he naturally supposed, had departed some twenty-four hours before, was still in residence, was an amazing thing. When he found, however, after a search in every cranny of the apartment that the fellow, despite the presence of his clothing, had actually departed, it became a phenomenon. When Benedict completed his investigation and out of it saw a vision of a dignified, modest, and immaculate young representative of the New York bar strolling casually about town in a pair of striped pajamas, it became a general alarm.

He dashed to the telephone and rang Pratt's apartment on Morningside Heights. His man Saki answered.

"Mr. Pratt there?" quavered Benedict.

"No. Mist' Pratt not got in yet," parried the cautious Jap. "Who ask for him?"

"When did he go out? I'm his friend Benedict. I must get in touch with him right away."

"He not say when he go out. I tell him when he come in you want touch him."

"Hell's bells!" roared Benedict. "Listen. Have you seen him since Saturday night? He's in trouble and we got to help him. Now can the side-stepping and come across. Are you trying to give me the merry jazz?"

Benedict had suddenly become suspicious that his chum had played a practical joke on him and that Saki was a partner to it.

"I no understand the language which perhaps you speak," replied Saki with dignity.

"Say, maybe this 'll jolt a little sense into your bean. Mr. Pratt came home with me Saturday night and I left him Sunday morning still asleep or supposed he was. This morning I look in his room for the first time and he isn't there, but all his clothes are. Now what's the joke? Have you seen him or is he still running around town in a pair of pajamas and nothing else?"

"Honorable damn!" exploded Saki. "No, I not see him. This gorgeously awful! I go call p'liceman!" And the receiver slammed down.

That sounded all right, but Benedict was unconvinced. He had just thought of something. Pratt was the last person on earth to play a practical joke. But then he was the last person on earth to go forth on the street in his pajamas. Possibly he had developed a perverted sense of humor and put on one of Benedict's own suits.

But careful inspection of his wardrobe showed that not a single item was missing. He had not even added a bed-sheet or quilt as a drapery. There was no loophole of escape from the conclusion that his borrowed pajamas alone stood between Pratt as nature made him and the eyes and jeers of a ribald world.

At that moment the telephone rang.

"Mr. Benedict?" inquired a businesslike voice.

"Yes. Here."

"Police headquarters calling. Call just came in from some crazy Jap. Said he was valet to a Guy Pratt, of the Chadworth Arms, Morningside Heights. Said this man Pratt was doing a shirt-tail parade around town, or something of that sort, and that if we'd call you, you'd tell us all about it. Now, what t'ell?"

Benedict related the circumstances in detail and the Central Office official agreed with profane mirth to put a man on the case and send out a general alarm.

Benedict then routed out the superintendent of the building and, together, they made a search of the house, inquiring in vain for clues from the inhabitants of every occupied apartment. Manifestly he could not have broken into either of the two flats whose tenants were away, though the superintendent went so far as to investigate the locks of each and find them intact. They even searched the areaways and the roof. There was no mangled and pajamaed body about.

Finally, in despair, Benedict went to his office to perform certain necessary duties in perfunctory fashion, keeping himself in hourly touch with the police by telephone.

II.

And in the mean time.

Guy Pratt, when he retired in his friend's room and his friend's by now celebrated pajamas that memorable Saturday night, speedily found correct his prediction that he could not sleep in a strange bed. At first, to be sure, the comparative quiet soothed and rested him a little. The snores of his chum, in the next room, made a lullaby.

But presently he found himself counting the snores tensely, holding his breath when the snorer occasionally missed a beat or two. No other isolated sounds broke the distant monotone of traffic in the square. The general quiet oppressed him. He began to wish Benedict would vary his nasalization with a shriek or a whistle. A good cat-fight would be a relief.

After tossing about for a while and locating with his nervous skin all the unfamiliar wrinkles in the strange bed, he began to think longingly of a drink of water. He got up and, opening his bedroom door, looked tentatively into the little inner hall that was dimly illuminated by a night light.

Opposite him were two doors. One of them he remembered opened into the bathroom. Light streamed out from under both and glowed faintly through the ground-glass with which they were fitted.

The door on the right, he decided, was the one he sought. But as he started for it, he heard Benedict stir. Not wishing to be caught prowling, he snatched the door open with nervous haste and slipped through. For an instant the flood of light dazzled him. Then his vision cleared and he got his bearings.

To his horror he was standing in the outer hall at the head of the public stairs. He had opened, not the bathroom door, but the outer door of the apartment. He sprang to retreat, but a second too late. Even as his hand reached for the knob of the door, which still stood ajar, an errant draft from within caught and swung it to with a click of the spring lock.

Pratt stared at the panels stupidly for a moment and then down at his unconventional attire—unconventional, that is, when taking the surroundings into consideration. It was like one of those nightmares frequently indulged in by modest gentlemen in which they walk abroad in the light of day full of confidence until they suddenly discover when far from home that they have neglected the trifling formality of clothing themselves in anything but their right mind.

He was aroused from his daze by the sound of steps coming up the stairs. Frantically he rang Benedict's bell. When he got no reaction he hammered on the door and shouted madly. Still no action within and the strange steps were coming nearer.

Then in a panic Pratt fled up the stairs toward the room, perching just under the hatch till he heard the rattle of the stranger's key in his lock and the shutting of his door behind him. Then, cautiously, a step at a time, listening as he went for fur-

ther alarms, he crept down toward Benedict's apartment once more.

He found himself a little confused as to which was the right entrance and was about to study the name-plates when the door nearest him unlatched, and a grumbling voice the other side of it said:

"Come in, you crazy rummy, before you wake up the whole building!"

With an explosive breath of relief he dashed into shelter and slammed the door, this time on the comfortable side of him. A dim figure padded down the hall ahead and disappeared into the farther bedroom paying no attention to his embarrassed apologies.

So, the excitement over, Pratt got his drink of water and slipped into bed again. The night was a little cooler now. He no longer heard Benedict's snores. Little by little his nervousness subsided, and just before dawn he fell asleep at last.

It seemed as though he had been unconscious only a minute when he was aroused by a voice.

"Well, you old nut, I'm off," rumbled the voice through his door. "How'd you come to change your mind and spend another night here? No answer, eh? Well, slumber on. I've attended to everything, cut off phone and all. So all you'll have to do is beat it. I've given Buddha to you. You like him so—if not, you can throw him to the cats if you want to. Well, so-long. See you next month."

The speaker went down the hall and out. Pratt was rubbing his eyes and trying to come to. He had a little trouble remembering where he was. Oh, yes. At Benedict's apartment, to be sure. But that voice didn't sound like Benedict's.

Something queer. He was suddenly broad awake. He took his fists out of his eyes and stared straight into the face of the ugliest clay image he had ever seen. It was meant to be a Buddha evidently, but it was a vicious, grinning leering countenance that would have given a devotee a nervous fit. And it nearly gave Pratt one.

In the first place it was not a pleasant object to gaze at on waking from a sound sleep. In the second place it was not there when he went to bed. What was the joke? He recalled now that the man whose voice didn't sound like Benedict's had said something about leaving him the Buddha. No wonder he wanted to get rid of it.

He stared around him in bewilderment, then in sudden alarm. Every detail of the room, the furniture, the pictures on the wall, the bedding, was different from that of the room in which he had retired.

But what alarmed him most was the fact that his clothes were gone. He looked around in a panic, under the bed, in the closet, everywhere. There was not a single article of clothing of any sort anywhere in the room. And all the time the grinning god leered at him mockingly.

He dashed out into the hall and down to the living-room. There the metamorphosis of the quarters in which he had supposed he had gone to sleep, was even more complete. Benedict's living-room was furnished in substantial mahogany of the Grand Rapids school as befitted a stock-broker of moderate means. Here was an artist's studio, fitted up—or down—with dilapidated, worm-eaten pieces of old oak, futurist rugs and draperies that made Pratt a bit dizzy, plus two or three really fine engravings and some good prints, as Pratt knew at a glance, intermingled with what he judged to be studies from an insane-asylum, in various stages of completion. These pictures found their rivals in a variety of statuettes, mostly clay models, also, like the pictures, generally more or less unfinished.

There was just one conclusion to come to. When he retreated in a panic from the public hall through the first door that swung open, he had blundered into the wrong apartment. Then he recalled the strange voice that had awakened him that morning. The words now became pregnant with meaning. Two men had lived there and had gone on vacation. Apparently the first had left yesterday and the second this morning. Pratt recalled that Benedict had told him a pair of rounders lived up-stairs. Evidently one, hearing a disturbance in the hall, supposed his erratic chum had returned for another night and had opened the door for him.

It was all very annoying, but not critical.

There was the telephone. He had no watch with him, but it must be very early and possibly Benedict had not yet started on his Sunday excursion. He picked up the receiver after recalling his chum's number and began a period of watchful waiting on the attention of central. He had exhausted his patience, his vocabulary and a large part of his perspiration before he recalled another scrap of the apartment proprietor's valedictory. The telephone service had been cut off pending the return of the vacationists. That suddenly made the problem of escape without embarrassment a little more complicated.

But there was still the front door. Would it be possible to slip out and down to Benedict's rooms without being caught at it? It was a chance, but he'd take it. There was still the possibility that Benedict had already gone, of course. He went to the front room and estimated the height of the sun. He judged from that and the condition of the street that it was still very early. A clattering milkman across the way confirmed this diagnosis.

Then he looked down once more at his striped attire. The confounded things were designed for the portly Benedict and didn't even fit him. He'd feel a little better in case of an encounter if the wretched outfit were covered up.

He considered the bed-spread as a drapery. That, too, was a futurist affair of flamboyant coloring. He draped himself tentatively after the manner of an ancient Roman at a Saturnalian festival and turned to consider himself in the glass. He met the Buddha's sardonic grin and gave it up. There was nothing else around the place that would not make him even more conspicuous than Benedict's comparatively modest pajamas. He decided finally while the Buddha leered on to make a dash for it in them alone.

So listening a moment at the front door to make sure no one was in the hall he took a deep breath and seized the knob. It refused to yield. He wrenched at it violently several times, but nothing happened. He examined the lock then and acquired light and despair at the same time. The last man to go out had thrown the dead-bolt and it could not be opened without a key. Naturally he had no key.

Quite annoying! He began to see that he was due to have more trouble than he had thought in escaping from this strange prison before the world was abroad to mock him. Thinking deeply he strolled back into the bedroom where he had slept and again almost bumped into the grinning Buddha.

"Cursed thing!" he grunted and stormed out into the hall. "I could think better if that dirty old idol weren't spoofing me at every turn."

Then he bethought himself of trying to arouse Benedict by drumming on the floor over his slumbering head, or where he fondly thought his head slumbered. As a matter of fact Benedict had finished his dressing and departed while Pratt was wasting time over the dead telephone and the dead-bolt. He drummed for an hour or more at intervals while the sun mounted higher, the casual sounds of an awakening city street began their crescendo and the sultry heat of another July day settled over all.

Finally with sweat pouring in rivulets from his lean and pajamaed frame he gave up the drumming method of escape.

Strolling aimlessly down the hall past the bedroom he tried with all his inhibitory faculties to avert his eyes from the clay Buddha, but in vain. The thing fascinated him. He looked. The jocular deity was apparently performing the humanly difficult feat of fixing Pratt with one twinkling eye and staring suggestively out of the window with the other. Pratt instinctively followed the direction of the second eye and beheld a slovenly, middle-aged cook starting breakfast with no apparent enthusiasm in the kitchen of the neighboring apartment across the narrow court.

"A hunch, by gad!" Pratt thought. "She looks Irish and kind-hearted."

He started impulsively forward, but remembered his modesty in time. At that, he crouched low and, approaching the window shyly, rested his chin on the sill, his shameful stripes concealed.

"I say!" he ventured timidly.

The woman turned his way a startled countenance that instantly congealed into roughly hewn ice.

"Ye say, do ye?" she sneered. "An' haven't I heard ye say before now in all keys at all times o' night an' day, ye drunken, roisterin' worth-nothin', ye? If ye'd drink a little less ye might say less an' do more an' give dacent people a chanst to sleep."

"But, madam, you're mistaken," Pratt protested. "I don't belong here. It's a mistake. Let me explain."

"Shure, it's a mistake. Ye don't belong anywhere. Ye needn't be tellin' me that."

"But, listen. I got into the wrong flat. I want to get out."

"Any place ye got into would be the wrong one. If ye want to git out, git an' stay, the divil take ye."

She turned her back squarely on the despairing young man.

"One of thim drunken young artists across the court, ma'am," he heard her explaining to some one inside. "Insultin' a dacent woman wid his talk an' him not even dressed yit, I'll be bettin'."

Pratt turned away. Both eyes of the Buddha bored into his sneeringly as he passed out into the hall again. An hour he walked up and down trying to think, but nothing coherent evolved.

After a little he realized that he was desperately hungry, a feeling accentuated by the kitchen incense that drifted heavenward up the narrow well of the court. He made a raid on the kitchenette, but it yielded nothing except half a loaf of stale bread. He choked down part of this with the aid of a glass of water. Then he needed a smoke. In the studio living-room were an assortment of pipes, but no tobacco. Fortunately, however, there were several ash-trays full of cigarette and cigar stubs. Some of these he crumbled up and stuffed into a pipe. There were matches left in one of the safes and presently he was soothing his frayed nerves with smoke of a dubious aroma. It was a gift from Heaven. And yet Pratt was normally a fastidious man.

After a few moments of collected thought, it occurred to him to try the window on the other side of the apartment. There might be some more reasonable person there.

The bathroom window-sill was opposite his chin anyhow, so no crouching was necessary. He slid the window up and looked hopefully out. Oh, for the luck to face an understanding man this time.

But it was no man he saw. Instead he gazed across into the saucily inquiring blue eyes of a not uncomely young woman who was perched on her window-sill in a red kimono combing luxuriant locks, yellow now, but unmistakably suggesting that they had once been of darker and less intriguing hue.

No tentative introductory remarks on his part were necessary this time.

"Oh, look who's in the front row!" gurgled the Lorelei. "How do you like the show? I don't recall your name, deary, but there's something familiar about the way you look at me. Don't let me keep you standing."

"I beg your pardon," exclaimed Pratt, blushing furiously. "I didn't mean to stare, but I'm in trouble, and I thought maybe you could help me."

"I'm sorry, but I had a party last night, too, and my private stock is all out. Try drinking water. That's what I'm taking this morning."

"But you don't understand. I got in the wrong flat last night by mistake and I haven't any clothes with me. I'd like to ask you to call up a friend for me or let the superintendent of this building know."

"Say, listen, kid. Don't I understand, though? I feel for ye to the bottom of muh warm heart. Wrong flat and lost your clothes? That's nothing. Why, the first fifteen minutes after I woke up this morning I thought I was in the wrong world and had mislaid my soul and body. You'll get over that. I'll toss you over my bromo bottle if you like. That put me back on earth again."

Another blond head appeared in the background at this moment.

"Listen, Gert," said the wielder of the comb. "Here's a night-bird with a brand new morning song. They've snatched his happy home away and snitched his uniform," she trilled. "Sing it again, birdy, for the pretty lady. Take my seat, Gert; I know it by heart."

But Pratt had fled in a rage. He pre-

ferred the grinning Buddha to those two mocking faces of flesh.

This time the little clay god somehow suggested the windows opening on the street. Thither Pratt went with waning hope. Apparently nobody took seriously anything that emanated from this ill-starred apartment.

A crowd of boys had finished breakfast and were having a ball game in the street. Pratt was desperate now.

"Hey, boy!" he shouted several times, until at length one looked his way. "Send the superintendent up here."

"Superintendent, me eye!" retorted the boy, evidently not getting the drift of Pratt's demand. "Go hire a hall and run yer own Sunday-school. We ain't doing any harm."

A man passing at this moment looked up inquiringly and said something to the boy.

"Aw, he's a nut that wants to sleep all day an' balls us out fer playin' in the street."

"No hope there!" Pratt groaned.

The fire-escape went down the front of the building. He speculated on the possibility of climbing down one flight and entering Benedict's front window. What a fool he had been for not doing that when he first discovered his plight and there was no one to speak of on the street! If he tried it now he would only be arrested for house-breaking, being drunk and disorderly or something.

By this time consultation with the grinning Buddha was becoming almost a superstitious rite. He tried it again and got only the suggestion that his last resort was to wait till darkness set in and then try the fire-escape. There was the one other chance that he might hear some one outside in the hall and attract his attention through the door. Or some one more reasonable might appear at one of the neighboring windows during the day.

So he began a perspiring and largely foodless vigil. No one came to the landing in the hall without. No other faces appeared in any near-by window. Several tentative appeals to the street were as abortive as the first, for the mocking boys were in evidence all day long. He consulted Buddha in vain until he acquired an almost frenzied hatred for the malicious monstrosity. Several times he almost acted on the impulse to smash the grinning face, but something restrained him.

But even such a day as this must pass, and finally fell twilight and then darkness. As soon as he felt sure that his descent by the fire-escape would be hidden in shadows he went to the front window and looked down. Foiled again! On the landing in front of Benedict's window, evidently having sought a cool retreat from the apartment beside his, were stationed a pair of young lovers. Pratt settled down on the divan beside the window and watched and listened.

After the first hour of this, if he had not already been a confirmed bachelor, he would have then and there become an arch enemy of the gentle passion. For the couple evidently believed in the fixed-post system. He watched until the street became quiet and the lights in the windows about began to go out. Still no signs of any awakening from love's young dream. How much longer his obstruction remained Pratt never knew, for, exhausted by long lack of sleep, the man who was sensitive to the slightest wrinkle in a pillow at length fell into deep slumber, his head resting on a harsh window-sill.

And when he awoke the street was alive again with the light of another day. He did not know it, but a general alarm had been sent out for him an hour ago and fifteen minutes ago the superintendent of the building and Benedict, on their round of search, had tried the lock of this very apartment and finally abandoned the search of the building in despair. Pratt was as much marooned as ever.

As he reclined, looking dully down at the unsympathetic thoroughfare wherein walked men clad proudly in actual clothes, he heard far down the street a weird but familiar chant.

"Hy, ha ho! Hy, ha ho!" was the way it sounded over and over again as the singer of the chant approached nearer, pausing now and then to scan eagerly the windows of the apartments.

He was a dingy, stooping old fellow, with

a long, gray beard and a face suggestive of long and deep mourning over the evil days that had fallen upon Israel. On his arm hung a bundle of nondescript clothing and the burden of the song that he wailed to generally unresponsive windows was that he would fain buy cast-off clothing.

"Clothing, clothing everywhere and not a rag to wear," chanted Pratt in his turn. "Some people have clothes to sell or give away! Lucky devils!"

Then a sudden inspiration came, this time not born of consultation with Buddha. If this old party bought clothes he would sell them again. He was not collecting them for his health.

Pratt leaned recklessly over the window-sill.

"Hey, you! Come up here," he shouted.

The old fellow, thinking there was a chance to pick up another suit, promptly entered the building.

Not till his victim was on his way did it occur to Pratt that the dead-bolt on the outer door was as firm as ever and that there was no way to admit the collector. He rushed down the hall in desperation and crashed against the door, shoulder on, hoping that he might break the lock. But he might have known that the door opened inward and that the jamb would hold it against his puny efforts.

In frantic haste he examined this obstacle in detail again. His urgent need sharpened his wits and he noticed what he should have thought of before. The hinges of the door were held by metal pins on the inside and, thank Heaven, they were loose. In a moment he had them out and had swung the door from its hinges just as the old clothes man appeared on the landing.

The fellow was evidently a stoic philosopher. For he evinced not the slightest surprise at the spectacle of a prospective customer unhinging a door to admit him. He may not have noticed the fact.

"Look here," Pratt explained with an effort at plausibility. "I need an old suit to do a little work in and thought maybe you might sell me one if you have a near fit."

Again the old clothes man showed his philosophical nature. He should worry if a haggard young gentleman in pajamas three sizes too large for him should tear a door off its hinges in his eagerness to get a second-hand suit of clothes. Business was business.

He sized Pratt up with professional eye and selected from his pile an obvious check he thought would about fit.

The long-pajamaed Pratt snatched it as a starving man would rob a dog of a bone and retired to a bedroom to cover himself. When arrayed he was in trousers that caught under his heels. The coat hung in folds about him and the checks of the ensemble shrieked to high heaven. He had no shirt but that of Benedict's pajamas, which he kept on for that purpose. He had nothing on his feet but Benedict's bed-slippers. He was innocent of collar, cravat, or hat. Yet he had never in his life felt so completely well-dressed as he did at the present moment.

Then another horrible thought dashed his satisfaction. He had not a cent with which to pay for his finery.

He looked beseechingly into the face of Buddha. The image seemed actually to wink at him, but vouchsafed no suggestion. Pratt slowly opened the door on the waiting salesman, lashing his brain for a solution, but thinking of nothing but expedients to gain time.

"How much?" he asked.

"Fifteen dollar," replied the other hopefully, but with a suggestion of tentativeness that was lost on Pratt.

"I'll take it," he said. "Wait here till I get some money."

He went down to the living-room to think. He was desperate. Should he overpower the old man and tie him up while he made his escape? He might lure him into the bedroom and lock him in. He might wheedle him into waiting until he went out to cash a check. For that matter he could take him in a taxi up to his own apartment and get the money. Unpleasant as it was this was the only honest course that presented itself, and he went reluctantly back to propose it, dreading that the old fellow might balk and take his precious suit back.

But as he approached he heard low ap-

preciative chuckles from the bedroom. He found the old clothes man standing in front of the grinning Buddha, showing for the first time a human emotion.

"Pretty funny, ain't it?" he gurgled throatily as Pratt came in. "How much that fellow vort? I like to puy me von. Vere you find him?"

Pratt had an inspiration. He remembered the owner of the Buddha disdainfully renouncing ownership yesterday morning. Why not take advantage of it?

"I'll trade you this one for the suit of clothes," he announced. "There isn't another like it. How about it?"

"I t'ink I do id," agreed the old clothes man.

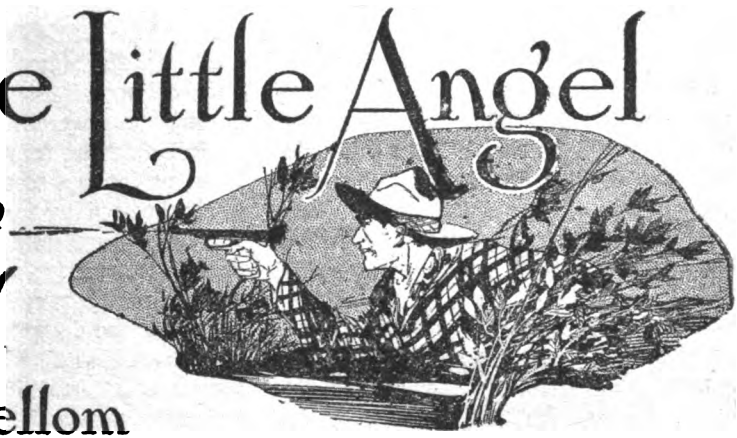
After the Buddha was wrapped and the new owner was safely out of the apartment, he turned and called back triumphantly, "De suit cost me noddings. I find him trowed away in a barrel."

A few minutes later Pratt, having safely eluded staring eyes in the halls, was in a taxi on his way home to real clothing and an assortment of long-delayed meals. And mean time some nine thousand of New York's finest were watching the throngs in search of a pair of animated striped pajamas.

One Little Angel

by

Jim Fellom



THE first great tragedy of little Muggins's understanding was dawning, and she didn't recognize it. All she knew was that her father was fighting with another man, that each was crouching back of a bush, that the sound of their six-shooters was terrifying her.

She huddled, sobbing wildly, distractedly, among the folds of the bedding in the canvas-covered wagon where she had sought refuge as the strange man's opening shots screamed over her head.

It was on the edge of desolate Santa Maria Flat. On three sides it stretched, semi-arid, level as a table, boundless. On its fourth side an old road—prior to the discovery of gold in the country, the only avenue connecting the isolated ranches with the railroad junction far to the north—twisted in and out, skirting a crooked little range of barren granite hills.

The rays of the noon sun were pouring down with suffocating intensity. At this moment there was nothing of life in sight except the wagon-team, a dead buckskin-colored saddle-horse near by, and the two men fighting it out on the scorching floor of the flat.

A few minutes before the stranger had ridden up from the opposite direction. He had reined in his horse to pass a traveler's greeting with little Muggins's father, and, recognizing him as Dan Lindare, had started spurring off again like the wind. Lindare had sent a shot after him, killed the fellow's horse.

Then the fight began. The stranger had picked himself off the ground, shooting. Lindare, not to endanger his little six-year-old daughter, leaped from the wagon and made for the shelter of a small bush some yards away. His opponent had done like-

wise. Volley after volley roared out. Once little Muggins had heard her father's voice, so hoarse and terrible she hardly knew it.

"You dirty home-breaker! Here's whar I settle you!" he had said. But she didn't know what he meant.

They blazed away at each other for ten minutes; then a heavy silence fell. That silence still reigned, and now little Muggins threw aside the bedding and listened fearfully. Presently her father appeared, clambering on the wagon, glaring back at something in the sand she could not see. He was pale. She had never seen such a strange, funny look on his face before. He helped her over the seat, and snuggled her close up to him.

"Did papa's leetle Muggins git skeart?" he asked in odd tones. He fidgeted nervously. "Waal, thar ain't nuthin' to hurt you, honey. We're a goin' to make Calaverite to-night, an' I'm a goin' to git you suthin' purty. What d'you say to that, dearie? A doll, f'r instince," he added, gathered up the lines, and sent the horses plodding wearingly on again.

"A doll like that little girl had yestidday? Was he a bad man, daddy?" She was looking up at him.

"Yes, honey. But he's gone—gone fur good. Thar, now, don't think no more 'bout it. I don't; ain't you got no rocks, Muggins? Jest look at them nags. You got to close one eye to see if they're movin'." He indicated the team, whose efforts had diminished to a dragging walk.

She searched the wagon-seat, found a little three-by-eight-inch canvas ore-sack and shook it. "They're all gone, an'—they ain't none around here, either!" she said, looking over the ground, which at this point was bare of pebbles.

"Waal, thar's a hill ahead an' you kin jump out an' fill the sack, honey. Then ef you belt 'em good an' hard we'll be ramblin' into Sidehill Spring in a jiffy. 'Tain't over eight mile'. We'll camp thar fur an hour, an' eat, then we'll go on, an'—" He broke off, put his hand suddenly to his breast, and bent forward, his breathing rapid and sonorous.

The child stared at him. Her little hand went out and clutched his arm. "Daddy, what's the matter? Are you sick? Oh, daddy! Daddy!" she cried.

He straightened up desperately. "Jest—jest a leetle stumick-ache, darlin'," he panted. "It 'll—it 'll pass. Don't ferget—the rocks, hon. We got to—to travel—fast."

He looked ahead with pain-stricken eyes. The hill was quite close. He wished the camp of Calaverite might have been that close; that Sidehill Spring, even, might have been that close. He prayed that they would meet somebody on this little-traveled road within the next hour at the outside.

There was a bullet-hole in his breast, gaping mortally. Strangling though the day was, he kept his canvas-coat buttoned about him. Little Muggins must not see the stain of wet crimson that showed through his shirt and overalls.

He halted the team at the hill, and little Muggins jumped to the ground. With her small ore-sack in hand, she darted to and fro, picking up splinters of rock, punctuating her work with a quaint rigmarole of a song. A bright-eyed, pretty, frail, tiny thing was the daughter of this big, stricken man, Dan Lindare. Her dress was shabby, her shoes and stockings worn beyond hope of further repair.

But she was happy even as the family of the wagon-tramp must be, always is, through the years of its nomadic, purposeless existence.

And while his little daughter gathered her sackful of rocks, Dan Lindare, swaying and gasping in the grip of his fatal trouble, sat and laboriously wrote a message; scrawling with a stub pencil on a strip of paper-bag spread out on his knee. The message written, he folded it up and held it tightly in his hand.

Presently Muggins climbed up to her place beside him on the seat. "Now we kin go, daddy," she laughed brightly. "I got a hull sackful. See!" She began pelting the horses with the pebbles, mimicking the teamsters she had so often heard—"Hup—Jennie! Doll—You!" The animals started, fell into a brisk trot.

"That's dandy, honey," said Lindare, smiling at her through his agony. "But we oughter have a whip. Listen, Muggins,"

he went on more seriously, "ef we meet ennyone, don't you say nuthin' 'bout—'bout me shootin' at that bad man back thar. Not a word, will you, dearie? You wouldn't want yore dad to git in trouble, would you?"

"I won't tell," she promised. "But they wouldn't put you in jail for shootin' at a bad man, would they?"

"You can't gamble on it. They might. Ennyway, I don't want to resk it, 'cos—" He broke off, wiping the clammy sweat from his forehead. Of a sudden he caught her suddenly, passionately, to his breast, and kissed her once, twice, again and again. "Muggins, whose leetle sweetheart are you, darlin'?" he half sobbed in her ear.

Mile after mile they went. The old deserted road kept winding and winding in and out of little gulch after little gulch. That awful limbo of a land glared pitilessly, had nothing of relief to give save the relief of death. And not a sign of a chance traveler, never more welcome to Dan Lindare than now. Too well did he realize that little Muggins would be facing those twenty odd desolate miles into Calaverite alone, before very long.

A mile from Sidehill Spring he pulled the team to a stop and told her that the pain in his stomach was worse, and he had to lie down. And she wondered when he emptied his pocket on the seat and told her to put the six dollars and eighty cents away in case she would have to do the buying should he get sick.

Then he stretched out, overcome, on the blankets in the bed of the wagon and told her to drive on, that beyond the next hill was the spring, and a camp-ground. Muggins gathered up the money and dropped it into the little canvas ore-sack for safekeeping. And, being the daughter of a wagon-tramp, she took up the lines and sent the team forward, proud of the chance to drive.

Soon she came in sight of the blessed oasis—a green acre of luxuriant foliage on the side of a hill. She reined in the horses on an old camp-site dotted with rock fireplaces.

"We're here, daddy," she cried. "I see a little tent among the trees."

He did not answer, and she looked back at him. His eyes were on her, yearning pouring from them; his hand outstretched, beckoning her to him.

Scrambling over the seat, she dropped down beside him, scanning his drawn, ashen face anxiously. He smiled, took her tiny hand in his own big one, and fondled it against his face. Then he drew her head down and kissed her many times, fiercely.

And when she looked at him again there was a world of hunger, a world of sadness, a world of love in his eyes. He didn't speak. Still pressing her hand against his cheek, his lids drooped, he sighed. Thinking he had fallen asleep, Muggins sat perfectly quiet.

Some minutes passed, then the silence was broken by heavy, unsteady footsteps approaching the wagon. They came up; there was a moment of hoarse muttering, the sound of somebody clambering clumsily on the front wheel, and a strange man's face peered over the seat.

He was drunk. He peered in at Muggins for a few seconds, groggily.

"Wha's goin' on here, sister?" he asked at last, in thick tones.

"My—my father's sick. He's sleepin'—now," she faltered, watching him nervously.

"Sleepin'?" He laughed roughly, dragged himself on the footboard, and craned his neck for a better view of Lindare. "Sleepin' off a jamboree like I bin, is 'bout what ails him. I'm wise to—" He paused abruptly, staring at Lindare. He stared hard, then he climbed over the seat and felt of Lindare's wrists.

Presently he turned and gave Muggins an odd look. She drew away from him, afraid, for the smell of whisky was strong on his breath. Too many drunken men did she remember not to know the smell of whisky—to shy from those who smelled of whisky.

"Don't be skeart," he said. "Whar's your mommer?" She made no answer. "Ain't you got no mommer?" She shook her head.

Sitting unsteadily on his heels, he eyed first the motionless form on the blankets, then the little waif.

"Ain't got no mommer, huh?" he muttered gravely. "You hop off fur a minit,

sister." Noting her hesitation, he added: "I ain't goin' to hurt yore dad. You're campin' here ennyway, ain't you?"

Reluctantly, Muggins climbed out of the wagon. Directly she was gone, he unbuttoned Lindare's coat and saw the great, wet crimson stain. Next, he examined the wound.

"Killed, by Gawd!" he gasped to himself. He pulled the dead man's gun out of its holster, found it full-loaded; smelled of the bore, and nodded knowingly. "Fight. Most likely with that feller who rid through here on that buckskin this mornin'," he muttered.

Catching sight of the folded paper in Lindare's lifeless hand, he opened it out and read:

> It dont matter none who done me up cos hes done fur. But my litle gal is agoin to be left alone. Ef yu got a heart stranger see that she gits in good hans. Some body wholl rare her rite. Do this stranger an may god bless yu and yourn. Her names Mary Laurina Lindare but I call her Muggins. Shes one of gods litle angels. This hull outfit is hern.
>
> DAN LINDARE.

The stranger read the scrawl twice, then he slowly folded the paper and thrust it in his pocket. Something about this tragedy was affecting him queerly. His mind was clearing. More and more sober he became, as sitting there on his heels, he stared at dead Dan Lindare.

"She's one of God's leetle angels," he repeated under his breath.

After a while he began to rummage through the hodge-podge of effects piled in the wagon. He turned out the pockets of Dan Lindare, and shook his head over the fact that there was no money in those pockets. In the end he clambered to the ground and stood, looking Muggins over.

A cool afternoon breeze had sprung up. The child was trembling, weeping silently, in a sort of pitiful, helpless way. She had begun to fear that something terrible had happened, but she was afraid to ask this wild-looking man, who smelled so strongly of whisky. She distrusted him, hoped that he would leave.

Standing there before her in the full glare of the afternoon sun, there wasn't one thing about Rufus Speaker, popularly known as "Whisky Rufe," to recommend him. His face was repugnant, what with its great, bloated features, blood-shot eyes, and ragged, long hair hanging in sweaty strings from under his hat.

In Calaverite he was the notorious town drunk, breaker of pledges, saloon fixture. He had no money, no honor, no friends—nothing, except the wretched squalid rock-hut where he went when the barkeepers kicked him out after midnight. He was a human derelict of thirty-eight, propelling itself around on two uncertain legs, with a brain and a mouth—the one to think of, the other to consume whisky.

Even his presence at Sidehill Spring at this time was whisky induced. By mere chance he had been given the task of monumenting some mining claims for the Calaverite Four-Metals Company. He had been five days doing it, had earned four dollars a day. Twenty dollars would buy considerable whisky.

Little Muggins stood looking at him now, apprehensively. His blood-shot eyes were on her, heavy, coarse, red face, and hands twitching involuntarily. That face and those hands were filthy with accumulated dirt; his clothes symbolical of his character—rags, grimy.

"Whar you from, sister?" he hiccuped at last.

But Muggins did not reply. She remembered her father's injunction to tell no one about their trip or the meeting with the "bad man."

"Waal, whar you goin', then?" taking another tack.

"Calaverite," she said tremulously.

"What you got in that bag?" indicating the little ore-sack she held, containing, besides pebbles, the money her father had given her.

"Rocks. To—to belt the hosses with. We ain't got no whip."

He was silent, stared at her a long time. The wind was whipping her short dress about her, her uncaught yellow curls whisking and dangling into her face. He looked at her stockings, with their holes and rough darns; at her shoes, through which her bare toes peeped. He looked fixedly at them.

Then he threw a glance at the sun approaching the crest of the range, and rubbed his thick, dry lips with a dirty hand and thought of the bottle in his tent.

"I'm a goin' to unhook the team," he said.

She watched him, sobbing quietly. She wanted to get back on the wagon, but shrank from doing it, since even during his work of unharnessing the horse he kept looking over at her every chance he got. Presently he started off for the spring, leading the two animals. He said:

"Come 'long with me, sister. We'll let yore dad sleep. I'm a goin' to fix suthin' to eat."

Hesitating, fearful of disobeying him, she followed, waited until he had watered the horses and staked them out on a patch of grass, and on to a forlorn little teepee-tent back of a clump of willows. There was a scatter of dirty utensils and dishes on the ground before the tent. A mottled burro drowsing close by leveled its jackrabbit ears at them inquiringly.

"You set down on that kyack an' rest," pointing to an empty coal-oil box. She obeyed, trembling the while.

Watching him through her tears, she saw him get out a bottle from under his blankets in the tent and take a long drink. He came out, wiping his mouth.

"So you ain't a goin' to tell me whar you come—" he began.

"I want—my—papa," she sobbed. "I want to—go—back—to—my—papa."

He halted, frowning down at her. His red eyes dropped to her wretched shoes and stockings—lingered there curiously.

"Sure, you'll go back to yore papa, sister," he said after a little. "But me an' you's goin' to have a bite furst. Then we'll go back thar, see?"

Afterward, while he was watching the tiny flame of his camp-fire rise through the dry sage-brush, he got the folded strip of paper-bag out of his pocket and studied the scribbled lines.

"Muggins," he repeated again and again under his breath, and carefully put the paper away.

Supper consisted of beans, fried bacon and flapjacks. As an after-thought, he opened a lone can of peaches which had found its way among his meager outfit through some drunken fancy at the time of purchase which he could not recollect. And he quite forgot to eat for gaping at Muggins as she attacked those peaches.

After the meal he went down to the spring for a pail of water, and looked reflectively at the canvas-topped wagon standing deserted in the camp-site below.

"It 'll be too hard on her, but, hell, she outer say good-by to him. She's sure got that much a comin'," he muttered half aloud. When he got back to camp the higher slopes of the range were golden with the glory of the dying sun. He sighed as he shouldered his pick and shovel.

"Le's go back to the waggin, Muggins," he said in a voice more gentle than he had used to her. She arose and accompanied him buoyantly, wondering that he called her by the same name her father did. He noticed her sudden gay spirits. "Poor leetle devil," he said under his breath. "She ain't got nobody now—nobody that cares," he added.

Then, for the next hour, Whisky Rufe Speaker, outcast, busied himself with pick and shovel, doing for what remained of Dan Lindare what any man should do for another.

The moon had risen, clothing the haggard land in beautiful tints and quaint symmetry of line and shadow. The majestic hush of the desert lay over all, solemn and tomb-like.

Speaker finished and threw his pick and shovel into the wagon. Sitting on the ground beside the grave, crumpled-up and tiny, weeping distractedly, alone, was little Muggins. He looked at her, then he reached a dirty hand down and patted her head gently.

He struck out for the spring and straightway negotiated the bottle cached in his blankets.

"It 'll be hell fur her facin' things alone," he exclaimed, answering a reflection aloud. "What do folks care! What'd I ever git but kicks! An' he calls her one of God's leetle angels."

Presently he began collecting his belong-

ings and packing them into the two boxkyacks. He rolled up his tent and bedding, and loading down the little mottled burro, drove it off to the wagon. There he transferred the outfit to the wagon and tied the animal to lead.

Shortly afterward he harnessed the team. And, though everything was in readiness for a night drive, and he was chafing to be on the way, he made no move to break in on the little mourner's grief. Instead, finding there was no whip in the socket, he strode back to the spring and cut two willow switches.

The moon had been up three hours when they started driving off into the night, leaving a lonely grave in the greater loneliness of Sidehill Spring. There was another driver sitting where, as far back as little Muggins could remember, nobody but her father had ever sat. There was another driver whom she could not call "daddy"; whom she could not snuggle up against; who would not kiss and caress her; who smelled of whisky.

She looked back up that bleak moonlit gulch as the wagon swung into Santa Maria Flat, and sobbed out hysterically for the father she would never, never see again.

"God!" broke from Whisky Rufe. His bloodshot eyes filled—stared unseeingly into the dim distances ahead.

The miles started lengthening out behind them. It began to grow cold, far more often than not, though the desert may swelter by day, the night air nips. Presently he stopped the team, got a blanket and bundled the waif up in it. He noticed she was still holding tight to the little canvas ore-bag.

"I'm glad you got yore sack o' rocks along, Muggins," he grinned. "I got them two willows, but they ain't much 'count. The ends keeps bustin' off."

Save for an occasional sob, she had had stopped crying. "I've got more than half a bag left," she told him.

"That's bully. I reckillect when I was freightin' out of Bakersfield—"

They talked after that. He told her his name finally—told her to call him Rufe. Then he wandered off into stories about Calaverite, manufacturing most of them as he went along, for he soon found himself confronted by the fact that his knowledge chiefly concerned an element of which a child should best be kept in ignorance.

But his attempts were highly successful. She listened, wide-eyed, and it pleased him hugely. Whoever had listened to Whisky Rufe talk? Whoever cared what Whisky Rufe had to say, or had done more than greet his opinions with sneer or rebuke?

And yet here was a little girl drinking in his every word as if he were some famous orator; plying him with questions as if he were a college professor; taking for gospel truth every word he was telling her—every lie he was telling her.

He marveled over this. He couldn't get over the idea of it. It stayed with him, delighted him in an odd way, roused a strange confidence and esteem in his powers. When, during their talk, she told him quite candidly that she didn't like men who drank whisky, he was more distressed than at any time in his career.

Some time later he looked down to find her weeping. The sight roused in him a deep compassion that plagued him miserably, because it was so new to him. Still later, he arranged a comfortable bed for her in the bottom of the wagon, suggesting with a grin that it was time for little girls to be "hittin' the hay." And as he tucked the blankets snugly about her, he patted her cheek, mumbling how sorry he was, that she must not cry any more, that everything would come out all right.

Muggins gave him a wan little smile—this man who smelled so strongly of whisky.

An hour afterward he let the horses fall into a walk and got out the strip of paper-bag and reread Dan Lindare's dying appeal by match-light.

"Ef you got a heart, stranger, see that she gits in good han's. Somebody who'll rare her rite," he repeated softly. Glancing back, he saw that little Muggins was fast asleep. The moonlight, filtering in through the wagon-top, gave her an angelic aspect, he thought. "Hell! Thar ain't no womin in that pesky camp fit to rare her, let alone rare her rite," he growled aloud. He sent the team trotting on again, and thought by the hour.

It was already daylight when Rufe Speaker drew up before his wretched tumble-down rock-cabin on the outskirts of Calaverite. He found little Muggins blinking up at him in sleepy-eyed confusion.

"Here we are, Muggins," he called out cheerily. "Me an' you's goin' up-town direc'ly an' have a rest'runt feed." He climbed off the wagon, lifted her down, then threw open the cabin door, and apologized for its squalid interior.

"I was figgerin' mebby you better stay with me fur a while—that is, ef you'd care to," he said. "We could fix up things fine an' dandy an'—waal, you could be the lady of the house, so to speak. That thar room inside would be yourn. Do you want to stay, Muggins?" earnestly.

She looked down shyly, uncertainly, for a few seconds—then slowly nodded. His dirty, bloated face brightened.

"That's the stuff! You're a goin' to be my leetle pardner, an' I'm your big pardner. How's that?" he exulted. She glanced at him, interested, and again nodded.

Thereupon, with an alacrity foreign to him, he began unloading the wagon, stacking the things temporarily inside the cabin. Throughout, he kept up a running talk on how they would convert the shack into the finest in town, the wonderful times they would have together in this great desert-camp of Calaverite, the prospects of an occasional trip to Reno to see a circus.

But with it all there was a growing fear in his heart. These things could never come to pass. He was a nobody—Whisky Rufe, notorious town-drunk, who owed every other man he met on the street, the butt of the camp, trusted by none, despised by all. This little girl would be taken from him. As soon as her presence in his cabin was learned, the authorities or the church element would come after her. That would be the end.

During the greater part of the night-drive he had thought it over. Had he funds, they might go to some other camp where no one knew them. But he had no funds except the four days' wages still due him. If he reformed— Plainly, it was either whisky or Muggins—and she didn't like men who drank whisky, she had told him.

He was thinking about this as he took the last load out of the wagon. The child was just clambering down, carrying her little canvas ore-bag in which the six dollars and eighty cents her father had given her reposed, along with a lot of small stones she had gathered to fling at the horses.

The man watched her with mixed emotions as she entered the cabin and laid her riches carefully on the window-ledge, for he thought he recognized the sentiment she attached to that pitiful handful of rocks she had collected the last afternoon in her father's company. Then, again, he looked fixedly at her wretched shoes and stockings. Obviously, it was either whisky or Muggins.

Shortly after, they were driving into camp. The sun had risen, and Calaverite was astir. Speaker was worrying.

"Muggins," he said finally, "you won't ferget we're pardners, will you? Ef enny one asks you ef you want to stay with me, you'll say you do, won't you?" He was looking down at her anxiously.

"Didn't you say I was going to be the lady of the house?" she reminded him.

"You sure are. I want you to be, Muggins. But folks might try to—waal, ask you a lot of things, how you met me, an' all that. They mightn't want you to live with me, 'cept of cos you jest tell 'em you want to orful bad."

She looked anxious. "But I do. An' didn't you say I'd be your little pardner, an'—"

He patted her hand, his homely face breaking into a smile. "That settles it, leetle pard. Listen! The best way is not to tell 'em nuthin' 'bout your dad. You kin say you're my niece; kin you 'member that? An' you kin call me uncle. Don't say nuthin' else. I'll do the talkin'."

They put up the team and burro at a stable some distance from the heart of the camp, and went to a near-by restaurant and took seats at an obscure table. But his delight at seeing her eat was greatly marred over the possibility of some customer knowing him, questioning the presence of the child with him, and spreading the fact around the town.

The meal over, he paid the bill out of his last dollar, and started back to the

cabin, taking a trail across lots, and pulling his hat down over his eyes to escape being recognized. Nor did he breathe easier until they were inside the smelly den, and he had made sure no one had followed them.

Then, together, they set to work cleaning house. It was a great day. He declared to himself it was the greatest he had ever known. Within two hours the two little rooms were cleaner than they had been since the cabin had been built, a decade ago. Long before noon they had been converted into cheerful quarters. Together they laughed over the transformation. Then he left, telling her he was going up-town on business for a short time.

But his " business " was, to a large extent, obeying the summons of the thirst-monster, something he had been doing for years. He had had a hard night, he told himself. He was unsteady, and two drinks would set him right. He headed for the nearest saloon, and presently came to one.

A hilarious rounder was just making a staggering exit into the street. He spied Speaker.

" Hullo, Whisky Rufe! How's the ol' bar-towel? Goin' to soak up a few?" he bawled.

Speaker went suddenly cold. He came to a slow stop, the blood mounting into his face. He resented that name—Whisky Rufe. He didn't like the sound of it now. It struck him like it was some vicious trade-mark, branding him a thing to be hooted at, loathed. The fellow's whole greeting stung him.

He walked on up the street, passed the saloon. As he neared the center of the camp he was hearing himself greeted on every hand by the title he had but just learned to abhor. Even as he hurried along, his throat parched with that rabid thirst he had so thoroughly cultivated, it was borne into his mind that little Muggins must not hear him called by that inglorious title. What, indeed, would she think of her " big pardner "?

He went direct to the offices of the Calaverite Four-Metals Company, collected twenty dollars for his five days' work at Sidehill Spring, and entered a neighboring general merchandise-store. He spent a full hour, and all but two dollars of his pay in the store, starting home finally with a great armful of packages. And even as he had done on his way up-town, he passed by every saloon, one after another, resolutely, stopping at the last one just long enough to buy a flask—for emergency, he told himself.

From a distance he saw Muggins's face at the window of the lonely hut. He thrilled with a wild joy. That she should be watching for him! Waiting for him! Eager for his return! He waved his hand at her, and she waved back. God, he was glad he could come back to her, " loaded " with packages, not booze!

She greeted him with glad, expectant eyes. He tossed the bundles on his bed, and with trembling fingers tore open the first and held up two pairs of stockings; the second, a pair of bright, new shoes. He laughed uproariously, as with dancing eyes she took them gingerly from his hand and scanned them in speechless admiration and wonder.

Followed calico dresses of resplendent hues, a sunbonnet, and other articles of wear, several varieties of jellies, and some things for himself.

He probed into the mysteries of her toilet to ascertain just what was expected of him. And the result was that an hour later little Muggins stood before him metamorphosed into what he avowed was the " high-toned-est, purtiest kid in Nevady." Then he dug up his razor, shaved and, retiring to the inner room, issued forth in all the magnificence of bright-blue overalls, yellow-plaid shirt, and red bandana neckerchief.

Two days went by, glorious days in that they served to cement firmly the friendship between this nobody, Whisky Rufe, and the waif, Muggins.

But these days had their awful hours for the man. On the one hand, he was fighting a desperate, slow-winning fight with the thirst-monster; on the other, he had tried to get work, and couldn't. He said nothing to the child about their financial straits. His was the responsibility. But on the night of the second day, she gave him an idea—her father had been in the habit of hiring himself and his team out by the day, hauling.

Early next morning, Speaker went to the stable where he had put up the wagon and team, and told the proprietor that he would leave him the burro as security for the feed bill against the time he could pay him; that he was looking for a hauling job. But the proprietor refused. Knowing the reputation of Whisky Rufe, he began to ask embarrassing questions about the ownership of the outfit, which the man could not answer without bringing little Muggins too prominently into notice.

Speaker retired as gracefully as he could, and tried to borrow enough money to pay the bill and save further trouble. But he could not borrow the money.

He started back to his cabin finally, more worried than he had been in years. Their situation was desperate. At this rate, as soon as their few provisions were gone, he would be compelled to turn over little Muggins either to the authorities or to the church element. It was a horrible thought.

He reached the point on the trail from whence he always got his first view of the cabin. But instead of finding Muggins's face pressed against the window, her arm waving him a glad welcome, he saw a number of men and women just leaving the shack.

One glance, and he had recognized the tiny figure being reluctantly led away.

He halted, aghast. Then with a frightful curse he made for the group on a run. They saw him coming across lots, stopped, and two of the men stepped forward to meet him, one the pastor of the local church, Rev. Peter Sawyer, the other a deputy sheriff. The child also saw him. She screamed out a frantic appeal, and struggled madly to break away from the two women who held her.

He came up, panting, livid with fury. The deputy drew his six-shooter, halted him some yards away and called out:

"Rufe Speaker, you're under arrest!"

Speaker did not hear. He stood trembling.

"Muggins, tell 'em you don't want to go, hon," he choked. "Tell 'em you want to stay with your big pardner, Muggins—your uncle, Muggins!"

"I—I don't want to—to go," wailed the child in a storm of tears. "I want to—to stay with you, Rufe. I don't want to go."

The minister, a kindly man, met the deputy's look with a grave shake of his head. "It's quite evident, officer, that we have been greatly misinformed regarding the relations here," he began. "I can plainly see that—"

"Waal, I ain't bin misreformed, parson," jerked out the other. "This galoot never owned a wagin' an' hosses in his life. The stableman told me he's bin actin' s'picious. To me it's jest a straight open-an'-shet case of robbery, mebby murder, an' kidnapin' to boot. You don't know this bum like I do. You take the kid to your house, parson, 'cos we ain't got no place fur her at the lock-up. We'll arrange—"

"Ef you think I stole that outfit, ask the leetle gal," cut in Speaker, getting a hint of the situation. "Tell him, Muggins," he said, despairingly.

"That 'll do you, feller," blustered the deputy. "She won't say nuthin', an' you know it. You've fixed that. But I'll make you come through aplenty ef I have to go the route with you. So it's Uncle Rufe now?" he sneered.

They led Muggins off a moment later, screaming her protests, sobbing distractedly back to the man who had won a place in her heart second only to that of her dead father. And with her, tightly clutched in her little hand, went the tiny canvas ore-bag containing the very thing which would have spared them this unhappy hour had Speaker but known of it—the price of the feed-bill.

For some seconds, the latter stood crushed, unable to speak, looking after her with hungry eyes, and brushing away the tears he could not control.

He was roused by the deputy, who grudgingly allowed him to go to his cabin for a few articles of clothing. But the interior of that cabin had lost its luster. It seemed, indeed, as if the sun had gone out of his sky. His sins were tumbling back on him. He had been given a glimpse of what might have been: now the old life had him again.

He had no money, no honor, no friends. The sheriff's office would "railroad" him. He was a nobody, a notorious drunk, and his conviction would form a tidy little boost for the present chief of the "county police." Yes, he had seen the last of little Muggins—

his little partner. He locked the door of his cabin, and stumbled, broken-heartedly, away, the minion of the law at his heels.

That same evening after dinner, the Rev. Peter Sawyer said to his wife:

"It's a most unusual case, my dear. Why, this poor fellow is already transformed. You remember him, don't you—the filthy wretch who staggered into my Sunday-school class last month? Well, he's dressed decently now, and if he's drinking at all it's very little. I can't believe that he's guilty. It's the same old story of a man's past record being against him. And there's this child's evident regard for him. I'm going to look into his case. A helping hand is what he needs."

From the adjoining room came the sound of Muggins's weeping, and Mrs. Sawyer shook her head sadly. She said:

"Poor little thing. She's broken-hearted over it. She wouldn't eat, and I couldn't get her to tell me even her name. All she does is just lie on the bed, holding that canvas bag, crying as if her heart would break."

"What's in the bag—she seems to treasure it so much?" he asked.

"I don't know, but I thought I heard the jingle of coins."

The minister got to his feet. "I'm going to talk to her again. She'll grieve herself sick if we're not careful." His wife followed him into the next room. By the light of the lamp standing on the bureau, they saw Muggins lying prostrate on the bed, her curly head sunk in the pillow.

"Muggins," said Mr. Sawyer gently, taking a seat beside her. "I'm going to see Mr. Speaker in a little while. I want to help him and you. But I won't be able to if you don't help me a little. He's in jail, now, because they think he stole the wagon and horses, but if you—"

"He—he didn't steal them," she sobbed suddenly. "They're my—"

By dint of much coaxing and argument, be finally succeeded in getting the story of the tragedy of Santa Maria Flat, the death of Dan Lindare, and the coming of Whisky Rufe Speaker. It was a pitiful story, pitifully told.

"And Mr. Speaker used the money your father gave you to buy you clothes, didn't he?" said the minister, further to satisfy himself on the honesty of the man.

"No," Muggins replied. "I got it in here," indicating the canvas bag she held.

He took the bag from her and dumped it out on the bed, revealing a quantity of stones among her silver horde. He picked up one of them and looked at it curiously. "Why, my dear, this is—" he began.

"It's a rock," she hastened to explain. "We didn't have no whip, an' I picked up a sackful to belt the hosses with."

"To belt the horses with?" he echoed. There was a magic yellow in that rock.

Two hours later a chance traveler from desolate Santa Maria Flat arrived with the news that a man and a buckskin horse were lying dead a few miles south of Sidehill Spring.

But the information carried small interest alongside of the report that Whisky Rufe Speaker, suspected of robbery, had been admitted to bail supplied by no less a person than the Rev. Peter Sawyer.

The following afternoon, the deputy sheriff and a companion, driving out after the body, halted their team at a little hill bordering the road. Half-way up the slope of that hill stood Speaker, Muggins, and the minister. The deputy swaggered up.

"What game are you pullin' off now?" he asked Speaker. The latter, pick in hand, grinned, and mopped his sweaty face. Getting no answer, the deputy strode over and looked at a ledge the man's work had uncovered. He looked a moment, then he straightened, gazing around at the others in blank amazement. "Gee whiz!" he gasped. "It's lousy with gold. Mr.—Mr. Speaker, how'd you come to find it?"

"I found it," said Muggins triumphantly. "I was beltin' the hosses with it. An' me an' you are pardners, ain't we, Rufe?"

"We sure are, honey," said the man who had been a nobody. "An' now, leetle pard, you tell the depity what you told me an' the parson here, 'bout your dad an' the bad man. Go on, like one of God's leetle angels."

And the minister, looking off across Santa Maria Flat, felt constrained to believe that, from every sign, this little girl's lot had been exalted in the passing of poor Dan Lindare.

A Self-Made Thief

Part VI

by Hulbert Footner

Author of "Country Love," "The Owl Taxi," "The Substitute Millionaire", etc.

CHAPTER XXIII.

THE OTHER MAN.

ON the evening of "Monday week" Heberdon was on his way to Greenhill Gardens again. Of the intervening time it is unnecessary to say much. He had got through it by virtue of doubled and redoubled doses of cocaine by day and "sopora"—which one may guess is very much better known under another name—by night. Thanks to the sopora he had not been visited by any more such shattering dreams, but the combined attacks of the two drugs in reckless doses had had a visible effect. In thirteen days he looked older by as many years. At the office they were beginning to glance askance at him.

That afternoon just before leaving, Judge Palliser had sent for him. The judge was in a very bad temper.

"The Managuayan business is off," he said bluntly.

"Why?" Heberdon had stammered.

"The I. F. C. won't have you, that's all."

"Why?"

"Why? Why? Why? They asked you for an opinion on the contracts, didn't they? It took you two weeks to furnish it, and then it showed an utter lack of grasp of the subject; utter! Nice position that puts me into. After boosting you for the job! I don't blame them in the least. I can see it myself. What's got into you I can't imagine. I'll give you a month longer here to get some kind of grip on yourself. If you can't you'll have to go. I can't risk another such fiasco! Run along, now. I've no patience to talk to you."

Heberdon had left his office in a daze. Later, after boosting himself up with the usual means he was filled with a febrile rage not unmixed with terror. Now, on his way out to Greenhill Gardens he was still fulminating inwardly.

"I'll show him! I'll show him! I won't work out the month in that sink. I'll fling my job in his face to-morrow! Thank God I've the wits to take what I want when I want it! I'm glad the thing's done with! I won't have to go up to Marchmont any more. Stupid hole! I'll get ahead of Ida by writing her to-night and telling her it's all off. We'll see how he feels when he has her back on his hands! Then I can spend

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every night with Cora. By Heaven, I'll marry her on the level and set her up as Mrs. Frank Heberdon. That will be a slap in their faces!

"Ought to have done it in the beginning—married Cora—I treated her badly just to save my relations' feelings, and this is the thanks I get for it! I'll make it up to her now. Oh, I'll be sure of her then. I need her! I need her! Cora's worth a hundred of Ida. I'll be safe with Cora. She won't let me go down. She couldn't."

Thus, in spite of any amount of cocaine, the frantic terror was bound to poke its head up in the end.

Another blow awaited him. He dismissed his cab at the curb and rang the bell of No. 23. The old man opened the door, but his usual grim heartiness was missing. He looked disconcerted at the sight of Heberdon. He did not invite him to enter.

Heberdon, horribly sensitive to the shades of peoples' bearing toward him, asked sharply:

"Where's Cora?"

Dissimulation sat very ill on old Jack. He looked off into space as embarrassed as a schoolboy. "Had to go out," he said. "I'm just stepping out to the club myself. Come along with me and have a touch."

Heberdon cast down his eyes to hide the utter confusion there. He could not very well refuse to accompany Jack, and the two walked away from the house sedately enough. Fireworks were whizzing in Heberdon's brain.

"There's another man in the house and she sent her father to get rid of me. Another man! Another man!"

Blighton found a safe subject for conversation in his garden. He had caught the infection from his neighbors. He was aware of nothing absurd in the spectacle of the old free-booter cultivating the soil in his declining years.

"Had two cauliflowers for dinner tonight. First I've raised. They wasn't very big, but, man, the flavor was ambrosial! Guess it's been too hot. I'll try 'em again for fall. You should see my stringbeans. Thick as fleas on a squirrel and still coming! The stalk worms got my squash, though."

Heberdon contrived to make sympathetic sounds even while the rockets went off in his head.

"Damned lying jade! Just like all the rest of them! By Heaven, I'll make her regret the day she lied to me! I'll show her I'm not the man to be trifled with! But I must be cagy—bide my time. Let her think she's pulled the wool over my eyes. Then strike suddenly and terribly!"

Blighton's "club" proved to be a cozy little saloon in a less fashionable suburb across the railway line. They sat down and called for refreshments. But naturally it did not work. Blighton was horribly constrained. He could not bring himself to speak naturally of Cora, and he couldn't think of anything else to talk about. He was concerned, too, for the wild look which Heberdon could not altogether hide, yet his natural delicacy forbade him to inquire into the cause of it.

After two drinks Blighton rose abruptly, saying: "Well, I must get back home and turn in for a needed rest. Early morning's the only time to work a garden. I'll see you on the trolley."

Heberdon allowed him to do so; rode two blocks toward town, and then returned on another car. He hastened back to Deepdene Road. As before, No. 23 showed no light in front, but upon stealing around the house he saw a bright crack edging the lowered blinds of the den up-stairs.

"He's still there," he told himself.

Across the road there was a little open space with trees and shrubbery. Here Heberdon took up his place in the impenetrable shadows.

At length he heard the door of No. 23 open—the door was in the side of the house and out of his range of vision—and caught good-nights and laughter; laughter that turned like a knife in his breast.

"She can laugh while I am suffering the torments of hell," he thought.

A tall, masculine figure strode down the little walk to the street, and turned in the direction of the trolley line. There was a debonair swing to the shoulders; young shoulders indubitably. He walked fast, with a lift in his steps. Across the road Heberdon hurried after him on his toes.

The man in front never thought of turning his head. By and by he began to whistle cantily.

"Damn him! Damn him!" thought Heberdon. "When I'm through with him he won't be whistling!"

At the trolley line the man in front waited, whistling, and swinging on his heels, for a car bound citywards. Heberdon hung back in the shadows watching and scowling.

In the brightly lighted car that they both boarded, Heberdon got his first good look at the other. He saw a boy in his twenties with a high color and a sparkling blue eye. He was tall and strong and exceedingly well-favored; and that he was not altogether unaware of his good looks somehow added to his attractiveness. He betrayed it in the slightly picturesque quality of his dress, and in the hint of a swagger. But there was good sense and good feeling in his face, too; in the eyes prone to light up with friendliness, in the lips turned up ready to smile.

Heberdon became a little dizzy with hatred at the sight; the freshness, the clean blood, the unimpaired vigor. He did not need to be told that this youth enjoyed his meals, slept well o' nights, and loved life. The implied contrast was unendurable; in the murky depths of his consciousness was born the determination to besmirch the brightness and to befoul the clear stream.

Hatred gave him a certain clairvoyance in regard to the character of the other.

"Innocent as a baby! All on the surface. He's to be had for the asking. Anybody could win him with a pretense of friendliness—and a little flattery. I'll make him my own—and then—"

At the Manhattan end of the bridge the young man changed cars, and Heberdon changed with him, but remained this time out on the platform where he could watch him unseen. They changed again to a Lexington Avenue car and rode down to Twenty-Fifth Street. Here the light-hearted youth jumped off and hurried west without a suspicion that anybody in the world had any reason to track him. Heberdon was on the other side of the street. The young man ran up the steps of a house near the corner, one of a long row, and let himself in. Heberdon crossed the street to examine the house. Beside the door-frame there was a little white ticket with "Furnished Rooms" upon it.

Heberdon smiled to himself. "This is too easy!" he reflected.

He went back across the street and marked the light that sprang up in the window of the third floor hall-room. The young man appeared there and pulled down the blind.

"So-long, until to-morrow!" said Heberdon with an ugly smile, and turned home.

Once the hateful spectacle of vigorous and comely youth was removed from his eyes, true to his nature he started busily to reassure himself.

"There's nothing to fear in him! No half-baked cub like that ever obtains a strong hold over a woman. Not a young woman, anyhow. When I've removed him she won't know he's gone. But she mustn't know what's going on. I'll scrape acquaintance with him without her knowing."

Before going down-town next morning, Heberdon returned to the house on Twenty-Fifth Street in the guise of one looking for a room. Of the several vacancies in the house he chose the third floor rear, and paid his rent. He did not see the youth; the door of the hall-room was open and he had already gone for the day. Heberdon explained that he was a traveler who would not often be at home, but had to have a stopping-place. The landlady was well pleased to have such a one.

It need hardly be said that Heberdon did not throw up his job at the office. He had to hang on to somebody, and his repulse at 23 Deepdene Road had the inevitable effect of making him slavishly anxious to please the family lot. He wrote an affectionate letter to Ida to the effect that he was terribly sorry he couldn't come up that night, but the judge had hauled him over the coals for neglecting his business, and he was going to work nights at the office to see if he couldn't catch up, *et cetera*.

Immediately after dinner he carried a bag to his new quarters. Upon being shown up-stairs he observed with satisfaction that there was a crack of light showing under the door of the front hall-room on

his floor. On being left alone he studied out a little plan of action. He left his bag open on the table and slipped an envelope in it; hid the match-safe, and taking a cigarette, went and knocked on the door of the room in front. It was pulled open with a bang. The young fellow was in his shirt-sleeves, a book lay open on his desk.

None could be more friendly and ingratiating than Heberdon when he had an object in view. "Sorry to disturb you," he said. "I'm the new lodger in the back. They don't seem to have left me any matches. Can I borrow one?"

"Sure thing!" cried the youth, diving for his match-safe.

Heberdon lit up—and lingered. "Studying?' he asked, with a nod toward the book.

"No, only reading a yarn to pass the time," was the reply.

"Is it a good one?"

"So-so. I'm not much for reading, I guess. I like to be doing something."

"Same here," said Heberdon.

"Sit down and chin a while, if you're not busy," said the young man with shy warmth.

When Heberdon showed a disposition to accept, he sprang to bring forward the only chair the little room contained. For him there remained the bed to sit on.

"I suppose if we're going to be neighbors we ought to be friendly," remarked Heberdon, taking the chair.

The youth showed two rows of creamy teeth. "Bully!" he cried. "I don't know a soul in the house. When you meet them in the hall they look at you as if you were a pickpocket! I'm Paul Alvey."

"I'm Frank Drury," said Heberdon. He reflected: "If I should meet him later at the Blighton's I can lie out of it. I'll tell Cora I was on a job here."

"Haven't I seen you before somewhere?" asked Alvey.

"Not that I'm aware of," said Heberdon with an innocent air.

"I have it! Didn't you ride in on the car from Greenhill Gardens last night?"

"Why, yes," said Heberdon, affecting surprise. "I don't remember seeing you."

"I was right under your nose," laughed Alvey.

"I got on at King's Terrace," said Heberdon negligently. "I've got a girl out there."

The youth blushed and smiled ingenuously. "I was seeing a girl out there, too. But she's not mine, unfortunately!"

"Nor ever will be," thought Heberdon, lowering his eyes.

They were soon talking like old friends. Heberdon had read his man aright in guessing that he was warm and impulsive. It never occurred to Alvey to examine the quality of the offered friendship; he met it more than half way.

It seemed quite natural for Heberdon to ask, by and by: "What's your job?"

"Hudson Electric Company," was the answer.

"That's the big concern on the river-front, isn't it? What do you do there?"

"Assistant cashier."

Heberdon pricked up his ears. "Perhaps that's my first move," he thought; "to queer him with his bosses." He said carelessly: "Pretty good job, isn't it?"

"So-so. What's a beggarly twenty-five a week nowadays? I've got to pull down a bigger cluster of raisins than that! But I stay with them because they've promised me the first branch office that falls vacant. Only the branch managers are so damn healthy!"

"You're young," said Heberdon.

"Twenty-four," said the other as if he were getting anxious about it. "Besides, a fellow might want to marry," he added self-consciously.

A horrid little pain stabbed Heberdon. His thought was—though he would have died rather than confess it: "What a beautiful young pair they would make!" He said hastily: "What does an assistant cashier have to do?"

"Oh, keep the petty-cash and look after the pay-roll."

"Pay-roll?" said Heberdon.

"Yes. Keep the register of the employees, you know. Post up from the time cards, and make up the envelopes."

"Pay-roll?" repeated Heberdon very offhand. "That must run up to a good bit of money weekly."

"Over seven thousand."

Heberdon thought: "If I could lift that somehow, and fasten it on him!" Then aloud, feeling his way: "I should think making up the pay envelopes would be a job in itself."

"Oh, no, the cashier helps me with it. We used to do it Saturday mornings, but now that the force is increased, we draw the money of Friday, and work Friday night until it's finished."

"I wouldn't like to have the responsibility for such a sum of money in that part of town at night," observed Heberdon.

"That's nothing!" was the heedless reply. "This Friday I'll have it to do alone. The cashier's having his wooden wedding or something."

Heberdon quickly lowered his eyes.

"I expect I'll be at it most of the night," added Alvey with a laugh.

"All alone in that building?" asked Heberdon softly.

"Oh, the locks are strong, and there's a perfectly good watchman."

"Oh, if there's a watchman in call—"

"He's not exactly in call. He sits downstairs just inside the street door. I only see him once an hour when he makes his rounds."

"Isn't the office on the ground floor?" asked Heberdon.

"No, the top; worse luck. After hours it's a case of walk up, four flights."

"I hope your wind is good," remarked Heberdon facetiously. "How do you get in after hours if the watchman isn't at the door?"

"Oh, I have my own key," said the rash youth.

Heberdon thought: "This is beginning to shape up. I'll get an impression of that key. No more questions now. I can return to it later."

"Come into my room," Heberdon suggested. "It's cooler. The breeze is on that side to-night."

Alvey followed him willingly.

They talked for a couple of hours. Heberdon laid himself out to be friendly and sympathetic. Under his subtle questioning he gradually laid the young man's soul bare. It was not very difficult. Sympathy unlocks young hearts, and Alvey was not experienced enough to perceive that Heberdon's was a skeleton key.

In the end they came around to talking of girls, of course. Paul was very earnest on this subject.

"I never understood girls until lately," he said. "Don't laugh! I don't mean that I understand them now, but I know now what they may mean to a man. I used to think of girls as sort of playthings—oh, out o' sight, you know, but just something to have fun with. Just lately I met one that changed all that. She looked at me once, and I lost myself. I don't mean a baby stare; no, sir, this one was grave and simple. She didn't know what she was doing to me. Since then everything is changed for me. This is for keeps, you understand. There could never be another for me like her."

Heberdon turned his head away. "How did you meet her?" he asked softly.

The ingenuous Alvey was delighted to answer the question. "This year I took a trip to Newfoundland for my vacation," he explained. "By sea, you know. She was on the ship. Never will I forget the moment I saw her first. I got on board early, and I was leaning against the rail by the top of the gangplank, looking 'em over as they came aboard, you know. Making up my mind what the prospects for sport would be on the trip. She had her head down as she came up the plank, and I coughed to make her look up. Lord, what a fool a fellow can be till he's been through the fire. It makes me hot all over now when I think of that cough.

"Well, she looked up, and she saw a foolish enough sight I don't doubt. Me looking bright-eyed, you know the way a fellow does. But not at a woman like her. Not twice! She had her revenge on the spot. Those eyes struck me to the heart. I faded.

"She was alone. Oh, what luck! What luck! I bribed the purser to give me a seat beside her at the table. So I was able to be with her from early morn till dewey eve. Eating, walking the deck, sitting wrapped up in the chairs. She let me read to her. That was a cinch, for I could tell her things with my voice, while just read-

ing the words of the book, you know. Oh, those two weeks were better than half a lifetime of paying calls on shore! But one day or a hundred it would have been the same with me. For me the bell struck with that first look."

"Does she — er — reciprocate?" asked Heberdon, inwardly writhing.

"I don't know," young Paul replied simply. "Sometimes I think yes; sometimes I think no. She makes out to treat me like a child, though I'm two years older, really. She is very kind to me. Sometimes I wish she wasn't so kind. She jollies the life out of me, but her eyes are soft. I swear I don't know whether it's the real thing, or just the kindness her tender heart might throw to a dog."

Heberdon breathed a little easier. "Nothing serious has happened," he told himself. As a means of covering his agitation he made a feint of unpacking his bag.

"Have you got a picture of your girl?" asked Paul shyly. His fingers hovered over his inner breast pocket.

A frightful pain transfixed Heberdon. "She has given him her picture!" he thought. "By God, if he shows it to me, I can't hold myself! I know I can't!" Aloud he said hastily: "No, it's in my trunk."

Paul's hand dropped from his pocket. He rose. "Well, I suppose I must go," he said. "To-morrow's a working day."

The time had come for Heberdon to put into effect the little play he had been thinking about all evening. From his valise he drew the plain white envelope he had slipped there. He had to rest his hands on the frame of the valise to conceal their trembling.

"Look," he said with a light laugh, "what a fellow I know, a drug-clerk, gave me to-day."

"What's in it?" asked Paul.

"Cocaine. The joy-stuff, he called it."

Paul drew close, his eyes bright with an unholy curiosity. "Let me see." From the envelope he drew one of the little folded papers and opened it. His hands were steady. "Looks just like talcum powder," he said. "Has no smell at all."

"What did you expect?" asked Heberdon, laughing a little unsteadily. "Brimstone?"

"They say this wrecks men, body and soul!" remarked the youth.

"Oh, of course, if it gets a grip on you," said Heberdon carelessly. "My friend says there's an elegant jingle in it."

"Put it away! Put it away!" cried Paul in mock terror. "This is no sugar for a good young man's tea!"

"This is only half the smallest dose," said Heberdon dreamily. "I'll try one with you just for the thrill."

"No, thanks!" rejoined Paul. "I find life exciting enough without any artificial thrills!"

"They say a man ought to try everything once."

An expression of genuine concern appeared in Paul's honest face. "Take my advice, Drury, and throw the damned stuff out of the window. You look at it like the cat at the canary. If you feel like that about it, it would get you sure. Throw it out of the window!"

Heberdon saw that he had lost. Concealing his feelings, he did, indeed, throw the envelope out of the window.

"Well, good-night," said Paul.

Heberdon did not turn from the window. "Oh, by the way," he said, "I've got to go up to Gansevoort Street at noon to-morrow. That's near your shop. I'll call for you and blow you to a lunch, if you like."

"Fine!" said Paul.

"All right. Expect me at twelve thirty."

When the door closed, Heberdon turned around livid and trembling. His face was distorted like a maniac's. He could not have endured the strain another five seconds. He glided to the door like a cat, and stood there, flinging up his clenched hands in a mute gesture of hate.

CHAPTER XXIV.

THE PLOT.

HEBERDON did not remain at the Twenty-Fifth Street house for the night, but returned to Gramercy Park. In order to get any sleep it was necessary for him to increase the dose of "so-

pora " again, and consequently in the morning to take more cocaine to rouse himself. When he finally started out his brain was like a horse running a race on a treadmill; it galloped but it got nowhere. Every day now it was becoming more and more difficult to think things out to a conclusion.

All morning he was busy with the idea of robbing the Hudson Electric Company. The preliminaries offered no special difficulties. Easy enough to borrow the key while Alvey slept—Heberdon had already satisfied himself that the careless youth left his door unlocked at night—and easy enough, probably, once he was armed with the key, to avoid the watchman on his rounds. He could tell better about that after he had had a look at the building.

But after reaching the office floor how to deal with Alvey was the problem that stumped Heberdon for the time being. Of course he could always bludgeon him, but that would defeat his own purpose. The seven thousand was only incidental; what he desired was to ruin Alvey, and of course if the youth were found lying helpless on the floor no blame would attach to him for the robbery. Heberdon racked his brains for an expedient whereby he might fasten the crime on him.

" Of course I might give him his quietus for keeps," thought Heberdon, " but that would let him out too easy. I want to drag him down first. I want him to suffer. I want him to suffer as I do!"

By noon no expedient had occurred to him. He went to take the youth out to lunch as agreed. His purpose in so doing, of course, was to get the lay of the land.

The Hudson Electric Company occupied its own building on the river front, a busy, teeming, neighborhood by day. On the ground floor there were storerooms and shipping platforms, with the office entrance and elevator at one side. The next three floors were devoted to manufacturing, while the show-rooms and offices occupied the fifth floor. The concern manufactured electrical appliances of all kinds.

On entering from the street, Heberdon's first glance was for the lock on the door. His experienced eye recognized it as one well known to him. It had been invented by a policeman, and was non-jimmyable. Just inside the door the elevator was waiting, and he had no opportunity at the moment to pursue his investigations as to the interior of the building.

On the top floor he was let out into the stair-hall, which by means of a door of wired glass opened into the show-room. This occupied more than half the floor. There were no partitions. The office was at the rear, the cashier's cage in a corner. The cage was not visible from the elevator until you passed through the door of wired glass.

Heberdon thought: " Damned awkward if the lights are turned on. I've got to get the door open and get down half the length of the floor without being spotted. And at that he's protected by a cage."

As he came closer he saw that by some inadvertence the cage had been left open at the top. One could therefore scramble up the side and drop in without any trouble. But what would the inmate of the cage be doing meanwhile?

Alvey welcomed Heberdon blithely—and seizing his hat, joined him outside the cage.

Heberdon forced himself to resume the air of friendly interest. " So this is your joint," he said, looking about. " It's quite imposing. Just the same, I wouldn't care about being here alone at night. Suppose a hold-up man came creeping down among the showcases in the dark?" he added, laughingly.

" Still running on that?" responded Alvey, joining in the laugh. " You can't scare me. The lights will be turned on full, and I've got a trusty gun in the drawer of my desk."

Heberdon thought: " The hell you say!" He appeared to drop the subject. " Well, it's a great place," he said admiringly. " Do they mind visitors?"

" Not a bit of it!" answered Alvey. " Let's walk down-stairs and look in on each floor as we pass."

This was exactly what Heberdon desired.

Out in the hall, Heberdon observed that the stairs ran on up. " I thought this was the top floor," he said carelessly. " What's up there?"

"There's a sort of little bungalow built on the roof," was the answer. "The engineer lives there with his family, and the watchman boards with him."

In this hall in the rear there was another door which Alvey opened. "This is the demonstration-room of the new Keith light. I'll give you a demonstration."

Heberdon attended with a polite interest, thinking meanwhile: "There's no lock on the door. This room would make a possible hiding-place."

As they descended through the various floors, Alvey continued to play the demonstrator. Heberdon observed that none of the doors giving on the stair hall from the work-rooms was fitted with locks. Possibly this was on account of fire regulations. They were double-action doors, swinging both ways.

Heberdon thought: "Easy enough to sidestep a watchman if he wasn't looking for you—wear rubber-soled shoes."

As they passed out of the building, Heberdon observed a push-button high up on the door-frame.

"What's that for?" he asked.

"Rings a big bell in the hall. It's to call the watchman if you want to get in after office hours. They put it up high out of reach of the street kids."

The lunch was a very amicable affair. Heberdon exerting all his self-control, forced himself to listen to more of Alvey's artless confidences. Alvey thought he had never met so friendly and sympathetic a fellow. Alvey did not refer again to Cora. Upon separating, Alvey volunteered to introduce Heberdon to a good cheap restaurant in the neighborhood of their rooming-house, and they arranged to meet there at half past six.

In the mean time something happened to Alvey, for he turned up at the meeting-place like a youth transformed: there was an added shine to his blue eyes, his movements were jerky and spasmodic, he progressed abruptly from fits of dreamy abstraction to bursts of hilarity. Heberdon, affecting to notice nothing, waited with a sick feeling of apprehension to hear the explanation.

There was a mirror beside their table, and though he would not look in it, Heberdon was horribly conscious of the contrast between Alvey's red comeliness and his sallow, lantern jaws. Heberdon played with the scarred, tinned knife at his place.

"If it were sharp! If I dared slash with it—"

As Alvey made no offer to confide the cause of his new joy, Heberdon was finally obliged to ask casually:

"What's happened? You act as if you'd come into a fortune."

"Better than that!" cried the youth. "I got a letter—such a letter! Beyond all expectations! I'm really beginning to think that maybe— Oh, I can't talk about it!"

Further than that he would not be drawn out. Heberdon kept his eyes down. His food was like ashes under his palate.

Alvey was in haste to finish his meal. "Got to bathe and dress," he explained. "I'll give you a pointer, Drury. When you want a hot bath in our house don't wait till bedtime."

"Going out to Greenhill Gardens?" asked Heberdon, with what he intended to be a jocular grin—but it was more like the grimace of a soul in torment.

Alvey was not very perspicacious. "No such luck!" he said. "Got an aunt up in Harlem. Got to do the dutiful up there once a week."

They proceeded to the rooming-house, and went to their respective quarters. Heberdon left his door open. In a few minutes Alvey sailed by, his tall form encased in a bath-robe.

"Me for the suds!" he cried gaily, and went down the stairs.

Heberdon heard the bath-room door slam, and the key turn in the lock. The opportunity was too good to be missed. Slipping along the hall he entered Alvey's little room. The youth's clothes lay on the bed where he had flung them. It was the work of a few seconds to pull out his key-ring, find the key marked with the name of the lock he knew, and press it into the little form of wax that he had ready.

There was something else Heberdon wanted. His trembling fingers sought the inside pocket of Alvey's coat. He drew out a thick, square envelope of a style he

recognized, superscribed in Cora's big, half-formed hand. The faint, alluring fragrance that emanated from it brought her so vividly close that Heberdon turned a little faint and leaned against the bed-head for support. He read:

DEAR BOY:

I've exercised the privilege of changing my mind. I will come and help you "make up the pay" on Friday night. It will be fun doing it together. But I refuse to be admitted to the building and shown up-stairs by a strange man. You say the watchman is away at his dinner from seven till seven thirty. Very well, I will present myself at the door at seven fifteen, and will ring three times. You tell the watchman beforehand that you're expecting one of the girls back to help you, and that you will let her in. I don't suppose he knows all the office girls by sight. And then if he sees me in the cage later it will be all right.

Until Friday,

Yours, C.

Scarcely knowing what he was doing, Heberdon shoved the letter back in its envelope, and the envelope in the pocket. Somehow he got back into his own room, and flinging himself down, pressed his head between his hands and tried to think. But no order would come out of the crazy confusion of his head. All he was aware of was a voice screaming:

"She's going to him there! Alone together in that building! Alone together! Alone together!"

He took a dose of cocaine. Immediately after each dose he still enjoyed a lucid interval—an interval that ever became shorter. He needed it now.

As the false clearness settled on his brain, he went over and over the words of the letter—no danger his forgetting any of it! "Make up the pay," in quotation marks. To Heberdon the quotation marks could have but one significance. Cora had tempted the enamored youth. They planned to lift the seven thousand together. Of course! Of course! That was why she was so particular to have the watchman out of the way!

A crazy exultation took the place of Heberdon's despair. "What a fool I was to torment myself! She doesn't love him! She's using him! Just as they used me in the Union Central affair. He's their latest protégé. God help him!"

Suddenly a baleful ray of light struck athwart Heberdon's brain. He clapped his hands down on his thighs. "By Heaven! Quarter past seven! The watchman at supper! The three rings! They're playing right into my hands! This was all I needed to know! I'll get the money, and get square, too!

"I'll be there ten minutes ahead of her and let myself in with my key. I'll hide myself in the little demonstration-room on the top floor. At seven ten I'll have somebody give the three rings. Alvey will go chasing down the stairs. I'll slip back to the cage and get the seven thou—

"Not finding anybody at the door, Alvey will hang around a bit. I'll sneak on down the stairs. If I hear him coming back I can slide into any of the work-rooms. When she does come he'll bring her up-stairs and I'll walk out with the money. Then let him explain to her—and to his bosses—where the money went!"

Before Alvey came up-stairs from his bath Heberdon was out of the house. His objective was a quiet little hotel in Fourth Avenue where Crommelin lived. Heberdon had met Crommelin several times at 23 Deepdene Road, and was on good terms with him; sufficiently good at any rate for his present purposes.

He found Crommelin in the reading-room of the place, looking a little seedy and dispirited. So much the better. Crommelin himself was astonished at the change in Heberdon's appearance, but he was much too astute to make any comment upon it.

"How are things?" asked Heberdon.

"Rotten! No luck lately."

"I've got a trifling job on," said Heberdon carelessly. "Too small to attract you, perhaps."

"I need coin," rejoined Crommelin simply.

"I'm going to make a little touch at the Hudson Electric Building to-morrow," Heberdon went on. "I've arranged how to get in and all that, but I need a friend for a moment outside. At exactly ten minutes past seven—"

"Daylight?" interjected Crommelin.

"Sure! Just the hour when nobody is looking for trouble. At ten minutes past seven I want you to press the button three times at the elevator entrance to the building. That's all. Press the button three times, and walk on. There's five hundred in it for you. I suppose you know I'm good for it."

"Oh, any friend of Jack Blighton's—" said Crommelin.

"Are you on, then?"

"I'm on," said Crommelin succinctly.

CHAPTER XXV.

THE PLOT IS PUT INTO EFFECT.

UPON leaving Crommelin, Heberdon returned to the Gramercy Park house, consequently he did not see Alvey again. That night he doubled his dose, and again in the morning. Upon this day all restrictions were thrown to the winds. Whenever he felt a shiver of apprehension; whenever that bottomless gulf seemed about to yawn at his feet, he took more cocaine, and he soon lost all account of the amount. No human frame could stand this.

"It doesn't matter about to-day. The lid is off to-day! I can go as far as I like! It's only one day. To-morrow everything will be all right. My mind will be easy. To-morrow I'll begin to brace up in earnest."

He had no breakfast; the thought of food was loathsome to him. Some time during the morning in a lucid interval he started down-town to get the key he needed from Nicholson. Something happened to him on the way, for the next thing he knew he was entering the locksmith's shop. He must have walked the entire distance.

He got the key—for a fancy price and no questions asked, and leaving the place automatically turned in the direction of the office. But he never arrived there. A sort of gray fog seemed to roll over his consciousness, and when it lifted he found himself in a street strange to him — a wide street with tall tenement-houses rising on either hand, but with grass growing between the cobble-stones. "This is a dream," thought Heberdon. On a lamp-post he read the name of the street: Pleasant Avenue. He laughed, and the sound rang strangely in his own ears. The fog descended again.

He next found himself in upper Third Avenue; he knew it by the Elevated road and the big, cheap stores. He was still walking—and desperately weary. He got on a car bound he knew not where. He was sure he knew where the Third Avenue cars went, but he could not quite remember. The next thing he knew he was being roughly ejected at the end of the line. He had wit enough to wait and take the next car back to town.

He had no recollection of getting off the car, but he presently found himself on the Bowery, rolling from side to side of the pavement like a drunken man. Some boys were following him, jeering. He felt no shame, but an immense self-pity. "The poor fellow hasn't eaten all day!" he thought. Entering a lunch-room he forced himself to eat a sandwich and drink a cup of coffee, though the stuff was nauseating. He continued to sit there in a daze until he was invited to leave in no uncertain tones.

He made his way along the thronged sidewalk of Houston Street, bound east. He had a vague notion of calling on his friend the druggist, though he was not in need of his wares at that moment, having several shots of cocaine in his pocket and more at home. Though he had but lately taken a dose, he still felt distressful and was trembling.

"The damn stuff doesn't make me happy any more," he reflected, and the hot tears rolled down his cheeks.

Suddenly he perceived that he had a companion in his walk — the little youth with the big eyes was beside him. He had no hat on, and the crushed-in place on the back of his head was very conspicuous. But Heberdon was not terrified this time; he was too far gone inside; he was conscious only of a fretful irritation.

"What are you doing here?" he demanded. "It's not night, and I'm not asleep, I'm walking the street."

"I'm walking with you," replied the youth.

"Where's your hat? It's not decent coming out like that?"

"Nobody can see me but you."

"You're trying to make out I'm crazy!" cried Heberdon in a febrile rage. "You lie! I know exactly what I'm doing!"

The other made no reply, but simply gazed at Heberdon. There was no particular expression in his eyes. It was just a stare.

"What are you looking at?" snapped Heberdon.

"A lost soul!" was the quiet reply.

"You lie!" said Heberdon again. "I've got half a dozen shots in my pocket and plenty of money to buy more when that's gone — plenty! You'll never see me screeching and hollering for it!"

"It will not be long!" remarked the other.

A white-hot flame of rage leaped up inside Heberdon. Turning, he seized his tormentor with both hands around the throat and shook him like a rat. It was real flesh and blood that he had between his fingers, too; there was an exquisite satisfaction in that.

Suddenly Heberdon received a violent shock. He came to to find himself in the street surrounded by a pushing, swaying crowd, some of whom looked indignant, but the most merely brutishly curious. One of the angry men had a grip on his arm. On the other side of the circle a boy was sniffling, rubbing his eyes and pointing out Heberdon.

"It was him done it," he whimpered. "I wasn't doing nothing. He come along, talking to himself and waving his arms. He grabbed me and tried to choke me. He's looney!"

"Call a policeman!" said the man who had hold of Heberdon.

For an instant Heberdon saw his situation clearly, and turned sick with terror and dismay. He instinctively thrust a hand in his pocket, and pulling out a roll of bills, handed one to the man and one to the boy. The temper of the crowd changed. A rich lunatic was another matter. The man let go his arm, and the circle opened to let him pass. "Bug-house, all right," they said as he fled. He ran across the street, and presently had the luck to see a taxi approaching empty. Hailing it, he flung himself in with a sob of relief.

He had no recollection of dismissing the cab. He found himself over on the west side of town on Canal Street. Happening to look up at a street clock he saw that the hands were pointing to ten minutes to seven.

"It's time to get to work," he said to himself, without any sense of the absurdity of "getting to work" in his present condition.

The river was just ahead of him, and the Hudson Electric Building but a few blocks to the north. As it loomed up a tower-clock somewhere was striking seven. He still had five minutes to spare. He sat down on a shipping platform. He was not worrying about his lapses of consciousness; that was the most significant thing of all about his condition. He seemed to himself to be perfectly free from agitation and self-possessed.

Meanwhile the peace of evening was settling on the river-front. The trucks had ceased to rattle and the gongs to ring. Such few people as live along there were gathered outside the doorways for the sake of the cool air. On other shipping-platforms sat pairs of longshoremen playing drafts on chalked squares with bits of brick for red men and coal for black. Across the street in the wide open space before the pier fronts the horse trucks were now stored for the night, row upon row in a disappearing perspective up the street.

At five minutes past the hour Heberdon strolled up to the door of the electric building and coolly let himself in with his key. The unreal quality of everything prevented him from feeling any excitement or nervousness. He went through with it like a man in a dream. Once inside though it did occur to him that he needed every ounce of his wits for the job ahead, and he paused at the foot of the stairs and took a shot of cocaine. The sense of unreality passed for the moment.

He looked down at his empty hands in surprise. "Why, I've forgotten to bring the satchel to carry the stuff away in," he thought in surprise. "How came I to do

that? I'll have to stuff it in my pockets. Or wrap it in a paper. And I was going home for my gun."

He softly climbed the stairs, his head bent to catch the slightest untoward noise. There was not a sound to be heard throughout the building.

On reaching the top floor he found that the door giving on the show-room had been caught back on a wedge to permit the passage of air. Though it was still bright out of doors, the stairway was some distance from the windows, and where Heberdon stood the light was dim. He ventured to drop to the floor and stick his head a few inches inside the doorway. So far so good. Down at the end of the floor he clearly made out the solitary figure in the cashier's cage counting money. Heberdon gloated a little at the sight. He could not see the man's face because of a shaded electric light which hung before it.

While he looked the man leaned forward to reach for something, and Heberdon got a strange shock. The man looked older than Paul Alvey, different, somehow. Heberdon's faculties slipped. Confusion filled him. He drew back into the hall. What had happened? What error could he have made in his calculations? It *must* be Paul Alvey. Had he not made a date with Cora to come there that night. Heberdon told himself his eyes had deceived him.

Before he could look again the great bell sounded three times in the hall below. At any rate Crommelin had not failed him. Heberdon hastily let himself into the demonstration-room, and softly pulled the door to.

Crouching inside he waited, listening for the footsteps of the man in the cage. He was strangely long in coming. And when he did come it was with deliberate steps—not the haste of a lover. He paused in the hall immediately outside the door where Heberdon was.

"Oh, Patterson!" he called.

It was not the voice of Alvey. Heberdon's head swam again.

A door opened above, and a voice came down: "Yes, sir?"

"Did you hear the bell?"

"Yes, sir. I'll be right down."

"You finish your supper. I'll go. It may be a message for me."

"All right, sir. Thank you, sir."

The door closed above, and the man in the hall went down-stairs with leisurely steps. Heberdon tried in vain to think clearly. He could carry out a pre-conceived plan automatically, but he was quite incapable of meeting a new situation. In spite of the evidence of his senses he clung to the pre-conceived idea.

"It must be Alvey! It must be! I've only heard him talking a couple of times. Maybe he's excited and his voice sounds different. Anyhow the money's there. Get it!"

As soon as the descending figure turned the stairs, Heberdon slipped out of his hiding-place and hastened back to the cashier's cage. It was the work of a moment to scramble up the outside of the wire grating and drop inside. There was no money in sight. Heberdon pulled out one drawer after another in the breast-high desk. No money! In his search he scattered the papers wildly. In the drawer nearest the door he saw the revolver.

No money! His brain reeled again. Suddenly he perceived the safe behind him. Dropping to the floor he laid trembling fingers on the handle. It was locked! That flame of blinding rage shot up in his brain again. They had cheated him! Then the fog rolled in!

He was recalled to reality by hearing an amazed and angry voice cry: "What the hell are you doing in there?"

Outside the cage he saw a tall man with a resolute and outraged face. "Patterson! Patterson! A thief!" the man called loudly.

Heberdon thought instinctively of the revolver he had seen. Jerking out the drawer he snatched it up. The man outside dropped behind one of the office desks for cover. He redoubled his shouts for help. Heberdon flung open the door of the cage and ran out. The man was caught in a corner between the desk and a railing, and Heberdon, running around the desk, pointed the gun at his head.

"Stand up!" he commanded hoarsely. "Put up your hands!"

The man obeyed with alacrity.

"Stand where you are," said Heberdon, "or I'll blow the top of your head off!"

Heberdon began to back toward the stair hall. In his preoccupation with the man in front, he overlooked the possibility of danger from the other direction. Suddenly a pair of strong arms were flung around him, one of which knocked up his pistol arm. The gun exploded harmlessly. The newcomer secured the weapon.

The shock was too much for Heberdon's tottering nerves. As in that ghastly dream it seemed to him that he flew to pieces. He slipped into the bottomless pit at last. He had the sensation of falling endlessly through space. The face of the youth with the big eyes seemed to be pressed close to his own.

"It has come!" the face whispered.

Again Heberdon heard the wild screams he was not conscious of uttering.

"Be quiet!" commanded the man who held him.

"Take him away! Take him away!" yelled Heberdon.

"What's the matter with him?" asked the man helplessly.

"Dope," said the cashier laconically. "Look at his eyes!"

Heberdon with a last instinct of self-preservation struggled to reach the change pocket of his coat. "Let me get it!" he gasped.

"No you don't!" said his captor, taking a fresh grip on him.

"For God's sake let me get it!" moaned Heberdon. "It's not a gun!"

"See what's in that pocket," said the man who held him.

The other searched and drew out the little folded papers. "Just as I thought!" he cried contemptuously. Crumpling them up he tossed them away.

A despairing scream broke from Heberdon.

"Some poor bug who has just wandered in," suggested the watchman.

The other man shook his head. "He was in the cage. He was after the pay-roll. Lucky I locked the money in the safe before I went down-stairs. How did he get in the building?"

"Search his other pockets."

The cashier found Heberdon's key, and hastily compared it with a key of his own. "A key to the street door!" he said grimly. "There's no accident about this. That ring at the door was just to draw me away from the cage. He had a confederate outside."

"Well, he ought to have cut out the dope before tackling a job like this," declared the watchman grimly. "I'll turn him over to the police. Give him a shot for Mike's sake! I can't take him out yelling."

The cashier picked up the stuff where he had thrown it. The watchman partly released Heberdon, and he was allowed to take his dose. A measure of quiet returned to him. He stood shaking all over, his head sunk on his breast.

"There's an object-lesson for you!" said the watchman grimly. "Come along with you!"

"Want me?" asked the cashier.

"You've got your work to do. I guess I can handle this athlete without assistance. I'll whistle for a cop at the door. When you're through your work you'll have to go round to the station-house.

Twisting his hand in Heberdon's collar, the watchman thrust him toward the stair hall. The cashier went back to his cage.

Heberdon's brain was working fairly clearly now. A desperate terror nerved him.

"If they put me behind the bars they'll take my coke from me—my sleeping-powder. He'll come back. It will kill me! I must do something—something! Better be killed at once—"

The watchman was pushing Heberdon down-stairs a step in advance of him. It was his right hand that he had twisted in the captive's collar. He had put the gun in his pocket. Heberdon was on the side of the stairs nearest the hand-rail. On the next to the last flight an idea occurred to him.

"If I flung my left arm up and back I could hook him round the neck and sling him forward—grab the rail with my other hand to keep him from pulling me after—"

The action followed hard on the thought,

It was successful. The watchman, taken unawares, pitched headlong down the stone stairs, Heberdon remained clinging to the rail. The watchman landed in a heap at the foot. But he was not completely disabled. He managed to get to his hands and knees, and to shout for help in a voice hoarse with pain.

Heberdon did not try to pass him, but vaulting over the stair rail, dropped to the landing below. Only one flight remained. He ran out into the blessed free air of the street. The wide, empty thoroughfare offered no cover except among the empty wagons across the car tracks. Heberdon darted across, and bending double, lost himself among the wheels.

Safely hidden, he squatted on his heels and looked back under the wagon bodies to see what would happen. The cashier was the first to appear at the door. He looked up and down the empty street at a loss. The watchman appeared behind him, bent with pain, and supporting himself against the door-frame. He put a police whistle to his lips and blew shrilly. Heberdon waited for no more.

Doubling and twisting around and under the empty trucks, he finally emerged in the narrow lane between the last line of them and the pier buildings. Here, hidden from the street outside, he could run at top speed without interference. The ranks of trucks ended at the Christopher Street ferry. A cross-town car was just starting. Heberdon swung himself aboard and was carried away to safety.

CHAPTER XXVI.

BEGINNING OF THE END.

As soon as the urgent danger passed, Heberdon's brain began to slip again, but with a difference. It was not the fog of apathy that obscured his faculties now, but the poisonous gas of rage. That white-hot flame burned through his brain like an acetylene torch.

"He trapped me! I was a fool to think him so simple! All the time he was drawing me out, and planning how to trap me. Cora helped him! Oh, God, they planned it together—laughing! She wrote that letter just to decoy me, and he left it in his pocket where I would find it! But I'll show them! To-night! First him and then her—unless I find them together."

He went to his rooms and got his revolver. He walked the five short blocks that separated Gramercy Park from Twenty-Fifth Street. It still lacked a few minutes of eight o'clock, and the streets were bright. He let himself into the rooming-house with his key. He bowed to his landlady in the lower hall. Outwardly he was collected enough, and that worthy woman had no idea that it was a madman who passed her, grasping a loaded revolver in his side pocket.

He went direct to Alvey's room and knocked. There was no answer. He tried the door; it yielded. The room was empty —empty and *stripped!* All of Alvey's little belongings were missing, and his trunk had been removed. Heberdon looked around him stupidly, and then returning down-stairs, called the landlady out into the hall. He was still fingering the revolver, and was quite capable of shooting her as a party to the conspiracy against him.

"Where's Alvey?" he demanded.

"Left to-day," she said, with the pleasant zest of one who has a real bit of news to impart. "Most unexpected. Had a sudden business call out of town, he said. Permanent. I guess he must have got a step up for he seemed real pleased. Such a nice young fellow! Paid me an extra week's rent so I wouldn't lose nothing on the room, though he wasn't bound to do it. I always did like Mr. Alvey; so much the gentleman! I always said it. I says to him to-day: 'Mr. Alvey, whenever you come back to town—'"

In the middle of this communication Heberdon turned abruptly and left the house. Then for the first she did suspect his sanity a little. She went out on the stoop and stared after him until he turned the corner of Lexington Avenue. She never knew how close she had been to death. She never saw him again.

Hailing the first taxicab that approached, Heberdon ordered the driver to take him

out to Greenhill Gardens. During the long drive up to Fifty-Ninth Street, across the far-flung bridge and out through the suburbs, he changed one crazy mood for another. The top of the cab was down, and the breeze cooled his burning head. He let go of the revolver.

"Poor, poor Cora! A thief, and the daughter of a thief! She never had a chance! Before I kill her I'll give her one. I'll offer to marry her and lift her out of the mire. Marry her under my own name, too! We'll see what they say to that!"

He dismissed his cab. Old John opened the door to him, but there was no welcome in his grim face, nor any embarrassment either.

"Where's Cora?" asked Heberdon.

"Gone away," was the uncompromising reply.

Things spun around Heberdon's head. "Wh-where?" he stammered.

The old man's face hardened. The veins stood out on his forehead. "I don't know as I've any call to tell you," he said. "You're either drunk or doped. I'll tell you this, though. Before she went she wrote a letter to you, and sent it to the Madagascar. You'll find it there."

He closed the door. Heberdon fumbled with the gun. But even his anger was swallowed up in the chaos that filled him. Turning, he went stumblingly down the walk.

An hour later he turned up at the Madagascar. Next morning the clerks at the desk recollected his visit, and the extraordinary, inhuman look of the man was explained. He got his letter, but dimly conscious of the curious stares upon him, he would not read it there. He strutted out of the hotel, and taxied to Gramercy Park.

Standing alongside his gate-leg table he slit the envelope with the jeweled poniard that he had once designed for another purpose. A whiff of the well-remembered fragrance dizzied him. He could not read the words of the letter until he had snuffed up another of the white powders.

DEAR FRANK:

Perhaps silence would be best, but I feel that I must write you. I wish you to know that I have forgiven you, and that in my heart I will always be your friend, though I never see you again. I loved you in the beginning; you knew that because I could not hide it. Perhaps it would have been better for me if I had. You never cared for me except for my looks, which is the least part of me. You wanted me too cheap. I have my pride, too. Though it wasn't pride that stopped me, but just common sense. You seemed to think that a girl shouldn't have any sense. It annoyed you. I saw that we would be miserably unhappy together. Once you possessed me you would have tired of me. I had no influence over you. In your heart you despised me. I cannot understand a love like that. Nobody will ever know what you caused me to suffer; but, truly, that is all over now, and there is no bitterness remaining. I have learned that there are different kinds of love. Perhaps one cannot build a lifetime of happiness on the blind and passionate kind.

I am going to marry another man—I shall be married to him by the time this reaches you. He is a good and generous boy who loves me with all his heart. There is no doubt about that. He is older than I, really, but he seems years younger. He needs me. And I long to take care of him. Perhaps I shall be happiest so. And I shall have my dearest wish, too, to run straight, to be like other people. I need not live in dread like my poor mother.

You must not think I have been keeping this from you. I didn't make up my mind until to-day. To-day he got the offer of a responsible position in the West. He had to leave within a few hours and didn't know when he could get back. He came and begged me to go with him. I took my courage in my hands and told him all about myself, about my feeling for you, too. He stood up under it. He said, even so, he'd be lucky if he got me. So we are going away to a place where nobody knows us to get a fresh start.

I think of that other woman. She must love you, and perhaps with your better self you love her. With me it was only a kind of excitement. I beg you to go to her and tell her everything. You are going down where the way is steep, Frank. If she loves you she will forgive. And you two can get a fresh start also. It is my dearest hope.

Your friend,

CORA.

Heberdon glanced around the room. Everything within it rocked before his eyes. His face turned hideous with rage and pain. His brain seemed to burst into flames. He clapped his head between his hands and screamed in agony.

"Gone!" he cried aloud. "Gone—with him! In his arms by now, making a mock of me!" A torrent of foul vituperation burst from his lips.

But the pain in his head was insupportable. It beat him to the floor, where he writhed, clawing at the rug. The paroxysm finally passed, leaving him gasping. Another would kill him, he knew. He dragged himself on hands and knees to the stand where he kept the book that hid his store of cocaine. He took another dose on top of the last.

As a flame shoots up before it dies the burnt-out brain responded for the last time to the stimulus. His body seemed to lose all weight. He got to his feet. He walked on air. Like a frog, he puffed up with his old delusions of self-importance. He laughed horribly.

"What do I care? I'll show them! I'll show the whole world how much I care! There is nobody like me! I'll show them what kind of man I am!"

He sat down at the table, and pulling paper toward him, and started to write in characters big and small in lines that ran up and down hill:

To the Editor of the Daily Sphere:

Sir—I am the cleverest crook in America. I collect tribute where I choose. The police are helpless against me. I play with them like ten-pins. Look behind any of the big, successful robberies later and there you will find me. To mention only a few it was I who held up the Princesboro bank single-handed. That was the result of a bet with some of my friends at the Chronos Club. To be sure I didn't get away with the coin on that occasion, because my taxi blew out a tire. But that wasn't my fault.

There was no accident when I held up the money-car on the Flatwick Elevated road. Your paper said it was the work of a gang of three or four, but you lied as usual. I did it single-handed. I prefer to work alone. I can depend on myself. I only got a beggarly seven thousand out of the job, but it was rather amusing; the five men I held up were such a white-livered lot. Five or fifty, it's all the same to me.

By this time you have guessed that it was I who carried out the great Union Central robbery. Right. Equal to the best exploits of Jack Sheppard and Dick Turpin you said. They were picayunes beside me. Did they ever gather in sixty-six thousand at a single haul? Besides, they were hung and I'm very much alive. And I'll do bigger things than this before I'm through. On this occasion I had a girl working under my orders, but the whole scheme was mine from start to finish. I simply lifted the bag of coin out of the taxi, dropped it in a bigger bag, walked into the station and took a train. Really, it was too easy.

There was a man got in my way, a well-known bad character called Dick Alcorne. Around Times Square they're asking what's become of him. Well, I'll tell you. I decoyed him down to Baltimore and cracked him over the head in a house I rented on Jefferson Avenue. He was a low fellow, a dope-fiend, and guilty of every crime. In putting him out of the way I was a public benefactor. His body is buried under a shed in the yard at the address given. Oh, a second body will be found there, too. That's only a little dope-fiend I picked up on the street who helped me. I had to croak him, too. I don't know his name.

As you will perceive by this letter I am a man of education and breeding. My family has been prominent in New York for four generations. Judge Palliser is my uncle, Mrs. Pembroke Conard is my aunt. Besides the Chronos, I belong to several well-known clubs. I'm a man of means. I only engage in these affairs for the fun of it. Men are such fools, particularly policemen and newspaper reporters, that they are beneath my contempt. It amuses me a little to play with them, but as I say, it's too easy. Publish this and let them catch me if they can.

Frank Heberdon.

He stopped writing only because his brain was beginning to blaze again. He enclosed his letter, addressed it, and slipped it in his pocket. Leaping to his feet he caught the edge of the table cover and jerked it from the table. With a savage kick he then capsized the table itself. Looking around he picked up the chair, and swinging it about his head he made short work of everything in the room that was breakable.

"I'll show them! I'll show them!" he cried.

Jamming on his hat he went reeling down the stairs and out into the dark street followed by the astonished gaze of the hall-boy.

Outside the little youth with the big eyes was waiting for him.

(The end.)

At Sawmill Pool

by Frank Halverson

J. QUINCY SMITH was one of those fellows who did not fit into the camp life on Little Slate Run—Jaundice Quincy, some of the boys began calling him after a few days. His nature and actions seemed to dovetail with the appellation. But, of course, he was related to Simmons, the genial host and owner of the camp, therefore the fishermen tolerated him by a tacit avoidance. Because the trip had so far been a failure, J. Quincy grumbled. He felt that he had a perfect right to be peeved at Simmons for bringing him to such a hole as this camp; and despite the fact that he was a free guest, nothing suited him. And when the boys spoke of the big trout in the swirling pool below the sawmill falls, J. Quincy scoffed at the idea.

"Trout live in water," said he grouchily; "not in little streams." Forthwith he launched into a tirade that took in all the mountain streams of the Clearwater section, which, as every sportsman knows, contain some of the best brown trout fishing in the State.

Big fellows lurk in the swiftly moving water that comes with a rapid force down the scooped hollows which separate the chain of hills; deep pools under overhanging ledges of outjutting rock, where the large trout would lie in wait, head against the water, their tails moving with the slightest quiver, resembling a dark shadow in the clear depths.

Splashing and murmuring the fisherman's song, Little Slate Run. in a late afternoon when the sun had gone beyond the western range of hills, was fairly alive with the speckled beauties so dear to a real sportsman's heart.

But the weather or something was not right. The trout would not bite, and J. Quincy vented his spleen on all. He sulked when doing any part of the camp work; he kicked about the food, which he would not help to prepare; his grouch was perpetual, and Bob Simmons, a sportsman true to the core, was sorely tried to keep the even tenor of his way when J. Quincy was in camp.

"God made him," said Bob Simmons, smiling dryly, "but something beyond human control has surely soured him into a pure dill pickle."

J. Quincy Smith had gone out into the darkening shadows that had crept over the woodland camp with the coming of starlight. He had been away for some time. Suddenly, through the stillness there broke a high, piercing scream. It was J. Quincy's voice, quavering a long-echoing "O-o-o-oh!" The call, like a night-owl's hoot, lingered in the hilly nooks to be repeated again and again from the distance.

"Something's put the fear of the Lord in J. Quincy," said one of the fishermen with a satisfied smile.

Simmons sprang to the camp door. Only the murmur of Little Slate Run, purling its joy-song in the night, came to the listeners, when through the starlight, stumbling toward camp, came J. Quincy. His face

was ashen gray; his body shook in a nervous grip.

"G-gosh!" stammered J. Quincy. "Say, w-what k-kind of rattlesnakes have y-you g-got up h-here?"

"Diamond heads," replied Simmons. "Did you meet one of them?"

"I—I d-did," quavered J. Quincy. "I —I—almost s-stepped on it."

"They're bad after dark," cautioned Simmons. "Be careful when you're following the streams. That's where they go. You'll find them in the fine white sand by big rocks, curled up, taking their nightly snooze. The sand will retain the heat from the day, and the diamond heads like a warm bed."

"It d-didn't rattle at all," added J. Quincy. "It s-struck m-me on the boot."

"No harm done," replied Simmons. "Its poison fangs could not penetrate the heavy rubber of your wading boots. But, man, where did you get those trout?"

J. Quincy was holding open the lid of his creel with a shaking hand.

"Caught them," replied he proudly.

"Night fishing, eh?" said Simmons.

"That's the time for the big ones," answered J. Quincy.

Simmons held the trout to the camp light. He examined them closely. A puzzled expression crept over his face.

"They look mighty pale," was the guarded comment. "Brown trout are dark with bright-red mottles. These appear as if they had been caught for two or three days."

"Is that so?" questioned J. Quincy quickly. "It's a lot you know about them. Your knowledge of trout could be kept in a gnat's eye."

Simmons stepped outside of the camp. His face was flushed with unexpressed passion. One of the other fishermen followed him. Simmons was looking at the fishing rods raised against the log building. They were all in their notched positions, standing upright in their supports.

"Blessed if I saw J. Quincy returning his rod," said Simmons. "It's right here. He didn't put it back in the rack because the snake scared him too much for that."

"How did he catch the trout?" asked the brother angler.

"That's beyond me," replied Simmons, mystified.

Little Slate Run gave the fishermen great sport for the next two days. The water went down; the trout were hungry; they bit savagely. The angler's joy was too great to notice J. Quincy or small things.

In the revelry of fishing the boys lived happy hours. It was the gamey fish against the play of the fly-rod and the strength of the slender tackle that made the battle great.

But the big trout in the sawmill pool was still at liberty. He was the wise giant that Simmons was playing for. Every season Simmons came for him, and every time that he had struck Simmons had lost him.

"That trout's a whopper," said Simmons with admiration, "but I'm going to get him."

"If you don't," broke in J. Quincy, "I will."

"You!" exclaimed Simmons. "One flip and your tackle would be ruined."

"Is that so?" shot back J. Quincy. "I guess I've been getting more trout than any one else in this camp."

His assertion was too true. None could deny it. His catches had been the greatest, but no one had ever seen him fishing. He went alone. By himself he left the camp, after first learning which direction the other anglers were going. He usually came in late, but his creel was always full; he always had the limit according to the State's law.

"Well," replied Simmons, "the big one's for me."

And that evening the giant trout in the sawmill pool struck Simmons's hare's ear fly. The bite was easy and gentle, not the quick snap of the younger and smaller trout, but the deliberate splash as the big body flashed for one fleeting instant on the rippled water. A strong, easy pull followed; the rod arched gracefully.

"Ah, ha!" breathed Simmons. "It's the giant. I know its strength. It's lost none of it."

The trout dived to the bottom of the swirl pool, the slight rod offering little resistance in Simmons's trained hand. He followed the fish into the water. The reel

clicked out the line; Simmons waded in deeper, offering the play of the rod against the trout's steady pull. Reaching the gravel bottom, the giant rested. Possibly a minute elapsed, only the tautness of the line proving that the big fellow was fast.

"Come on," urged Simmons, his blood tingling.

The joy of the catch was thrilling him. He knew his quarry, its fighting qualities. The dead weight that quivered his rod was only playing the first stage of the battle. The barb of the hook was possibly hurting the fish.

Likely it was boring its head into the sand, trying to dislodge the gray hare's ear fly that had tempted the trout from its home pool under the overhanging rock, to snap the tempting morsel which seemed so natural on the rippled water. But the lure had a barb like the rose's thorn.

"Come on, my beauty," whispered Simmons as the trout sulked.

He was set for the fight, his nerves were calling for action. Plenty of it would break presently. With his hand on the reel and the spring of the curved rod holding on to the trout, Simmons waited for the drive, for the splurge that the big fish would take in trying to regain his liberty. It would come furiously. Perhaps it would take for the big stone.

Simmons looped several hitches of loose line below the reel, which he could let out rapidly and thereby save his rod and light tackle from ruin in the trout's first drive.

"'Lo, Simmons!"

J. Quincy Smith stepped out of the bushes along the creek's shore like a sly, stalking fox.

Simmons grunted a throaty reply. Of all the miserable luck, J. Quincy was the worst. That he should happen in at this moment, when Simmons was expecting the giant trout to make his first rush, caused a deep, unfathomable spirit of gloom to penetrate the joy-filled breast of the angler. J. Quincy would want to help land the hooked trout; he would likely grab the line and try to lift it out of the water, and thereby break the leader or tear the hook out of the fish's mouth.

Grimly, Simmons contemplated what he would do to J. Quincy. His foot would settle on J. Quincy's southern extremity with all the power that a No. 9 wading boot could muster—that was his quick resolve. After that, he would have it out with J. Quincy— Oh, Lord! what he wouldn't do if he lost that trout through the fellow!

"Are you snagged?" asked J. Quincy.

"Yup," assented Simmons with a growl.

"Bum fisherman," taunted the other. "Amateur stuff, Simmons. Keep your flies on the water if you're fishing for trout. They don't live in trees. If I didn't have a big one in the Fork o' Paths Pool waiting for me, I'd help you to get loose."

J. Quincy moved on up the stream, smiling and smirking until the water birch hid him from view.

"Whew!" gasped Simmons. "That's the best turn J. Quincy ever did me. Such a miserable sportsman! If I ever bring him back here again—"

The line slackened and the bent rod relaxed with a snap. The trout was in action.

"Whew!" gasped Simmons. The deep-brown, silvered body of the trout shot clean out of the water in its first drive. In the gold of the paling sunset it flashed up through the ripples, arched in mid air, its weight resting on the leader, while at the same time its broad tail struck a splashing blow for the line.

"Je-ru-sa-lem's bells!" ejaculated Simmons when he had met the trout's first maneuver.

His action of flipping the tip of the rod down to the water was none too quick, as the sweeping tail almost hit the leader, and had the line been taut the giant's weight would either have snapped some part of the light tackle or wrenched the hare's ear fly loose from the fish's mouth.

"You tricky cuss!" murmured Simmons, following the giant in his first great drive toward the large rocks where Simmons had once before lost him.

The fish was trying to repeat. Simmons did not try to hold him this time. He let him go, using the recoil of the rod as a check. The giant pulled, and Simmons waded into the mountain water until it almost reached to his armpits. The chill only

lent an added thrill to the battle. Onward the trout drove, but Simmons gave him the spring of the rod, so that his tackle would not have too great a strain.

If he had tried to hold him, the giant would soon have been free. It was the trout's game to get a solid pull on the line, and it was Simmons's strategy to frustrate such a maneuver. The forward movement of the trout was a powerful effort, and Simmons let him work by merely retarding his progress, never holding him completely, but easing him along gently.

"Ho, ho, my laddie!" sang out Simmons. The trout had turned from its pulling course and come to the water's surface in a flash of silver. In the rippled sheen it splashed, sending a multitude of scurrying circles to the shore. Like a small water-wheel, the giant turned and tumbled while the rod quivered from the strain.

Simmons held his breath. He fancied an imaginary snap of either hook or tackle. None came. The trout was still fast when his whirlimagig was ended. For a moment it lay on the water, spent from its effort; and to Simmons it represented the acme of all his desire. How he wanted that trout! A giant it was, long, broad, and deep, resting easily but beyond his reach.

"Still fast, Simmons?" J. Quincy Smith was grinning at him from the shore. His small, piggy eyes had seen the trout, his sharp features were alive with a queer animation, and his carrot-colored hair seemed ghastly in the dim light which settled in the wooded hills between sunset's afterglow and shadowy starlight.

"Ye-s," replied Simmons, and his voice was halty.

J. Quincy Smith laughed shrilly. "You are fast, all right, but to a trout you can't land. It's too big for you. Need any help?"

To a fisherman no insult could be deadlier. The venom of J. Quincy's question caused Simmons to grit his teeth. A red flush spread over his face. His blood was boiling. A desire was in him to spring out of the water and chuck J. Quincy's nose into the sand. He almost yielded to the wild urging of the passion-flame that was burning in his heart, but the giant trout had had his rest, and with a straight plunge it sank to the gravel bottom of the shadowy pool, bending the rod nearly double.

Simmons recovered his usual self-control with the trout's renewed fight. But J. Quincy had nearly made him lose it. Only the excellence of his tackle had saved him from missing his prize. Fisherman's luck, pure and simple, had aided Simmons.

J. Quincy slunk away, because Simmons did not heed his taunt. He was too busy. The trout was pulling for the big pine stump with its numerous roots under the water. Often before, when the holding barb had been fastened in his mouth, had it freed itself by snarling the line. Simmons was on to this sly maneuver. He fought his catch with all his skill. The play of his rod was always out toward the shore. There the shallow water whispered in playful gurgles, but the giant wouldn't go that way. His energies were set toward the stump away from the dangerous shallows where the fighting chance would be gone. The giant worked toward the deep water.

Simmons put a stiffer check on the rod. The trout came to the surface. It somersaulted again. The broad tail struck for the line. Simmons parried. Another flash silvered the graying waters.

"Heavenly chimes!" breathed Simmons quickly. "One more striking for the trailing fly."

So it was. The trailer, a gray hackle, bobbing lightly on the surface, had tempted another trout, but its first snap was a miss.

"Please stay off," entreated Simmons. "The giant's enough. Two would make a load for a manila rope. They'll pull against each other like a team of balking horses. I'd lose them. No chance at all."

When the big fellow felt that he could not reach the pine stump it dived to the bottom and rested there.

"Playing 'possum, eh?" quizzed Simmons. He pulled. The trout remained still. Simmons sawed the line up and down, trying to secure a drive from his quarry. No answer came from the giant. It refused to move.

"Ah-ha," said Simmons happily, "you're done!"

He increased the play of the rod; the tautness sagged harder on the trout's mouth, and slowly Simmons felt the dead weight slackening. He reeled in the line guardedly. The big fellow was coming out toward the shallow water that lined the shore. Slowly the giant gave way to the ever-present pull.

In the silence that hovered over the creek while Simmons fought his catch he fancied hearing some twigs break, as if some one was walking stealthily through the bushes. He listened sharply.

True enough, he thought that a dry branch broke with a sharp report, yet Simmons, thrilled with the excitement of his possible catch, was not certain that his nerves were not playing him falsely. Again he listened, but only the night voices of hushed twilight came out of the big stillness of cobalt shadows.

With the true sportsman's joy surging through his veins, Simmons knew that the giant was played out, winded, and done. The battle was nearly over. The resistance on the tackle had almost ceased. The big fellow was coming in answer to Simmons's pull. He was floating.

Simmons reeled him close to the shore. The fish lay passive at his feet. For a moment the fisherman debated how to land him. Should he use the net, or should he try to lift him out with his tackle?

"Even-Steven," decided Simmons. "Fair play against fair play. My tackle against your weight, big fellow."

Holding the giant's head up, Simmons put his left hand in the water to cool it and thereby remove the human feeling that all wild things recoil from when first touched in their native element. When his hand had about the same temperature as the water he slid his fingers over the giant's back. He touched it. A quick splash followed.

A last vicious thrust of the great body, a sideward roll with the broad tail striking Simmons's wading boot, a snappy spring of the arched rod, a jerky recoil, and Simmons knew that the trout was free, the tackle broken.

"Gone again, by jiminy!" exclaimed Simmons.

He waded out and sat down on the shore. His heart pounded. The blood in his veins flushed his face. He sat staring into the gray, fleecy mist that hung like a bridge of thin veil over the murmuring water. Little Slate Run purled its gurgling song in the velvety darkness. Faint shadows crept over the distant horizon from the advancing moonbeams, and still Simmons tarried by the big sawmill pool.

Slowly he rose to stand by the water, a figure of lonesomeness. The excitement of the battle had left him weak and unnerved, but a smile was on his face. The joy of the true sportsman was pictured on his features. He raised his hand and pointed his finger at the deep, dark pool, and to the stillness he said:

"Big fellow, you beat me again. This was the third time. You fought for your life and won it, all honor to you, big fellow! May the gods of sport favor us with another meeting."

With his head thrown back toward the rising moonbeams Simmons found the creek path that led to his camp. Out of the dark distance he saw the shadows dispelled by the arrows of light from the windows. The boys were waiting for him. J. Quincy had likely told them that he was fighting the big giant trout in the sawmill pool; and, being good sportsmen, they had not thrust themselves upon the battle-ground as J. Quincy had done.

A pang of regret entered Simmons's heart. If—that old alibi of all fishermen—ah, no; there would be no "ifs" in Simmons's story. He was too much on the square to belittle the trout for getting away. His skill was not equal to the giant's gameness. In nearing the camp these thoughts were running through his mind. However, if he could have held the big fellow up to the light when he stepped into camp, how great his joy would have been!

A dull report shattered the stillness of the woodland for a moment. Simmons paused in his tracks. The muffled boom had been quite low, the thud breaking back of him from the sawmill pool. He looked at the star-jeweled heavens. Not a dark cloud could he see in the wide, inverted expanse.

"Strange," muttered Simmons; "thunder with no rain-clouds."

Entering camp, Simmons noted that J. Quincy was still out. That was hardly strange, because he was always the last to come in. But to-night Simmons was looking for him. The taunts that J. Quincy had uttered were to be probed, and although he was related to Simmons, this fact alone could not excuse him. He had gone beyond the point of the sportsman's endurance.

"Well, Simmons, how are you?" The hearty greeting came from a big, suntanned man who rose from one of the sleeping bunks. He advanced and gripped Simmons's hand in a viselike manner.

"Ted Robinson," exclaimed Simmons, "the fish warden of Slate Run! Well, I am very glad to see you, Ted. Had anything to eat?"

"Sure," smiled the warden. "I always make myself at home in your camp—"

"Whoopee!" J. Quincy Smith bounded in through the open door. In his upraised hand he held a monster trout. His red face was a riot of excitement, his small eyes sparkling with glee.

"Can you beat it, Simmons?" shouted J. Quincy.

"No; mine got away," replied Simmons after a short pause. "The giant took my hare's ear fly in breaking the tackle."

"Where did you get this one?" The question came from the fish warden quite unexpectedly.

"In the Fork o' Paths Pool," said J. Quincy, his voice dropping from a high, shrill tremor to a mere whisper when he saw the game warden's piercing eyes set on him.

"How?"

The game warden's question snapped like a pistol shot.

"W-with—" J. Quincy's voice quavered.

"With dynamite!" supplied the warden.

"Th-that's a lie," stuttered J. Quincy weakly.

"Is it?" retaliated the warden. "What's this? A lie, too?"

The warden opened the trout's mouth. There, hooked securely, was Simmons's gray hare's ear fly.

"Why, that's my trout, my giant," almost sobbed Simmons. "You killed it foully!"

"Certainly he did," answered the warden. "See the color of that fish? It's ashy gray. An explosive shock burst its bladder and caused it to change from a dark brown to this color."

And the fisherman remembered that all of J. Quincy Smith's fish had looked pale when brought in.

"Yes," replied the warden. "I've seen a few that our foul friend didn't get. They've been floating on the water ever since this camp was pitched. That's why I came up along the stream to-night. I saw you, Simmons, fighting the big fellow, and I also noted that sneak hiding in the bushes. That's when he must have made up the dynamite charge. He undoubtedly tied a stone to the cartridge so that it would sink, and after you had missed your trout he must have tossed it into the sawmill pool."

"I heard the shot," said Simmons, edging closer to J. Quincy. "And now I understand a few other things. One of them is that you've taken my big giant trout foully. You killed him without a fighting chance. The law will have something for you, and, Ted Robinson, if you're my friend, give him the limit. But, John Quincy Smith, the law can never punish you for outraging good sportsmanship. You're a stinking blot to all that's decent. We're men, and therefore—"

Simmons made a quick spring for J. Quincy. He caught him dexterously and tossed him on his back in one of the bunks. Quickly he pulled off J. Quincy's wading boots and heavy woolen socks. Then Simmons continued:

"And therefore we condemn you, J. Quincy, to spend the night with the diamond-headed rattlesnakes. They ring before striking. Go!"

Simmons's foot chaperoned J. Quincy through the camp door with force.

That night J. Quincy's frightened voice wailed dismally from the top of a giant pine near the camp, where he waited for the dawn and the fish warden with fear in his cringing heart.

Baldy Rides a Hunch

by Murray Leinster

BALDY entered the saloon, went straight to the bar, ordered, tossed off a drink, and beamed. For that was before July 1, 1919.

"What's th' matter, Baldy?" asked the man behind the bar. "Yuh look happy. What yuh done? Found a great grandaddy of all th' gol' mines?"

"Nope," admitted Baldy. "Gimme another one."

The bartender complied.

"Somethin's happened," he commented. "Yuh look like you felt doggoned lucky."

"I am that," admitted Baldy. "D'yuh see anything funny about th' way I look?"

"Lots o' things," answered the bartender, "but I don't s'pose yuh want me t' name 'em."

"Look at my eye," said Baldy. "It's twitchin'."

He hoisted and lowered his drink with a single motion.

"I see it's twitchin'," the bartender assured him. "But that glass done a little twinklin', too. What's th' idea of th' twitchin', an' th' booze-h'istin', so early in th' evenin'?"

"I'm lucky," said Baldy proudly. "When this here eye twitches, somethin's goin' t' happen, an' somethin' for my own good. I'm just celebratin' in advance. I don't know what it's goin' t' be, but when this here eye twitches, ol' man Jinx better get outer my way. Why, wunst I was in Denver an' I had a roll, an' was goin' t' get hitched up to a jane in th' chorus of a theater-show. An' my ol' eye started to twitch, so I knew there was good luck comin' my way. An' it did."

"What happened?" inquired the bartender.

"I broke my leg," said Baldy, "an' she lit out with a feller from San Francisco. An' once I was workin' in a mine I had with a feller up Tombstone way, an' we was just about to strike it right. We put every last bit o' powder we had into one big blast, an' my partner touched it off. I had tol' him my eyelid was twitchin' just beforehand, an' there was good luck waitin' for me. An' th' blast went off, shook down our shaft an' buried everything in smothers o' rock so's it would take six weeks to dig it out again. I didn't try to."

"But where was th' good luck in that?" demanded the bartender.

"Why, I wasn't in th' shaft," said Baldy, "an' my partner, he was."

He rolled a cigarette and lighted it, radiating happiness.

"Is there a lil game goin' on anywheres?" he asked hopefully. "This ol' eye, it's twitchin', I'm lucky. Maybe I could horn in."

"Buck Jones an' th' major are havin' a little session," said the bartender doubtfully, "but you better stay out. That ain't

no game for folks with only two eyes an' one gun."

"This here eye," said Baldy, confidently, "it ain't fooled me yet. I'm goin' around lookin' for action. I'll sort o' meander in."

He walked briskly to the door in the rear of the saloon and vanished.

II.

BALDY walked abstractedly up to the railroad-station, standing bare and dark in the moonlight.

"Well," he soliloquized, "y' never can tell. I lost a hundred an' forty dollars, my hawss, saddle, bridle, an' th' claim I been workin' on for a coupla months. An' I ain't got th' price of a feed or a bunk in town t'-night. But th' ol' eye is sure twitchin'. There's luck somewheres waitin' for me."

As if in comment on his meditation, his eye twitched violently. Baldy perked up a little.

"Is that a hunch?" he inquired of himself. "Down heah by th' railroad-station? Meanin' travel? I'll take a pasear over by this here freight train."

He drew near a long line of empty box-cars, still for the moment, while the engine took on water. He heard the splashing as the tender's tanks were filled, and saw the warm glow from the open furnace door. He even caught the murmur of a phrase or two exchanged by the engineer and fireman.

"Now I wonder," said Baldy to himself. "This here door, it's open, an' it looks sort o' invitin'."

His eyelid twitched. That settled it. Baldy clambered into the dark interior of the box-car and settled himself comfortably.

"You got to ride a hunch," he explained to himself, "an' I got one. This ol' eye ain't fooled me yet."

He heard a rustling in the straw with which the floor was littered, and looked up. He had a faint impression of a huge bulk above him. Instinctively, his hand flew to his hip, but before he could jerk out his revolver something struck him on the head and he floated away in a universe of stars, comets, nebulæ, and other celestial phenomena. He had a vague impression, presently, that he was cold, and a similarly hazy impression that some one was searching him expertly. Then his boots were pulled off.

III.

BALDY groaned and tried to spit out a mouthful of hay-dust that had worked itself between his teeth. His head ached horribly and there was a throbbing pain in his forehead. More annoying, however, was the fact that the surface on which he slept was jarring with a rumbling, roaring sound, which Baldy presently recognized as that of a train in motion. He sat up abruptly.

He was alone in his box-car, which was littered with straw to a depth of perhaps six inches. Furthermore, the car was traveling with some deliberation across a landscape that held no attraction for a man as thirsty and infuriated as Baldy was at the moment. Baldy stared out at sage-brush and an occasional clump of cactus with indignation.

"Black-jacked, by thunder!" he said angrily. "An' th' durned scoundrel didn't even leave me my pants!"

It was true. Baldy became acutely conscious that bits of straw were sticking into him from every direction. He began to scratch busily, then found it afforded but temporary relief and rose to his feet. No sooner had he done so, however, before he leaped into the air.

"Owoo-o!" he cried in agony, "it's ticklin' my feet!"

He danced about the car on one foot, trying to scratch the sole that tickled most, and finding it impossible to scratch both at the same time. He suddenly tripped and fell, and discovered that he had tripped upon one of a pair of ancient, worn-out shoes. The uppers were cracked and ragged, and the soles were nearly non-existent, but to Baldy they were a Godsend. He hastily put them on and was able to stand up without suffering. Beside them he found a hat. He clapped that on and thought a moment, clad in a pair of shoes and a hat.

"I'm sure out o' luck!" he reflected dismally. "No clo'es, no money, no gun, no

hawss, an' no claim, an' Gawd only knows where I'm goin'."

As if in reproach, his eye twitched faintly. Baldy cheered up at once.

"Ol' eye's still lookin' out for me," he meditated with something approaching cheerfulness. "I reg'n I'll come out on top after all. But I got to have some clo'es."

He quartered the floor of the box-car and searched busily, presently being rewarded by uncovering a pair of dilapidated trousers and a shirt. They had evidently been discarded by the unknown assailant who had black-jacked him and stolen his clothes. Baldy put them on.

"Anyways," he said to himself, "I got somethin' to cover th' freckles on my chest —but "—and he wriggled a little—"I suspec' I'll be able to do some huntin' later on, to pass th' long winter evenin's."

He went to the door of the box-car and surveyed the scenery again. A house came into view, and then another. Baldy craned his neck and looked out. The train was just entering a tiny town, and was noticeably slowing up.

"Looks like my ol' eye brung me here," said Baldy reflectively, "but it might of been done more gentle. I got to ride my hunch, though."

He made a flying leap from the car door and tumbled over and over in the slanting embankment of cinders that led up to the track proper. Presently he picked himself up and lifted one arm, then the other, then moved his right leg, then his left, and finally his head experimentally.

"All here," he murmured, "but sorter damaged in transit. My ol' eye oughter put a sign on me, 'This side up. Use no hooks!'"

He was a bedraggled-looking object as he limped toward the town. Cinders covered him. His clothes were dirty and torn. There was an unsightly lump on his forehead. Through various holes in the dilapidated hat the polished crown of his completely bald head glistened in the sunlight. Wisps of straw protruded from his shoes and from openings here and there in his garments. To look at him, he was the most miserable of mortals, but as a matter of fact, he was extraordinarily cheerful. The explanation was simple. As he moved toward the town his eyelid began to twitch.

IV.

THE sheriff of Gila County surveyed Baldy with undeniable disgust and hostility. He had come upon the fellow gazing wistfully into the open door of a saloon he dared not enter. Baldy was broke, and broke with a completeness and finality that savored of the ultimate. If the entire State of Arizona had been put up for sale at the nominal price of three cents, Baldy could not have purchased enough sand to stop a watch. He was quite aware of it, and also of the fact that persons clad as he was clad, and bearing all the earmarks of professional trampdom, are not overwelcome anywhere.

"Here, you," said the sheriff. "We ain't got no use for hoboes around here. You take your feet in your han's an' clear out."

"I ain't a 'bo," protested Baldy. "I'm ridin' a hunch—"

"Maybe you call it a hunch," said the sheriff grimly, "but we usually call 'em box-cars. An' you better clear out speedy, *pronto, con aprisa,* not t' mention in a hurry. Git!"

"But—"

A gun twinkled in the sheriff's hand and the dust spat upward close beside Baldy's feet. He jumped.

"All right," he said miserably, "but where'll I go? I ain't got a hawss—"

"Git out th' way yuh come. An' I'm a-watchin' yuh."

Baldy shuffled toward the station again. The freight train had come to a stop upon a siding, evidently waiting for another train to pass. Baldy looked wistfully at the long line of box-cars, but two brakemen appeared, and he dared not attempt to board one. He turned and made his way along the right of way, treading the ties, in shoes that admitted cinders to torture his feet, and wearing a hat that let in the sunlight to sunburn his hairless head.

"Oh, gosh!" said Baldy disconsolately, "this here luck o' mine is a long time comin'. Lord only knows how far it is to th' nex' town, an' maybe they're jus' as bad there. Ef 'twasn't that my ol' eye ain't

fooled me yet, I'd begin t' get plumb discouraged."

He trod onward, dismally, comforted by only one fact. His eyelid was still fluttering energetically, as if bidding him not despair. By this time, however, Baldy realized that he was in for at least a long and cheerless hike upon singularly ungrateful railroad-ties, through a landscape entirely void of attractive features, and he began to wish that if his eyelid actually meant to lead him into a situation from which benefit would accrue to him, that it would begin to take some practical measures. So far, it had cost him his entire stock of possessions, including his clothes. His eyelid might be leading him into fame and fortune, but his head was getting sunburnt and his feet hurt. Further, he was hungry and he was thirsty. He still did not doubt the ultimate good intentions of his prophetic eyelid, still twitching as if in reproach of his doubts of it, but he did wish it would begin to produce according to prospectus. And it might start with a square meal.

Half a mile ahead of him, a gully spread across the railroad right-of-way. Baldy eyed it without approval. A long trestle spanned a yellow, swift-running stream that cut between banks of sandy limestone. The soil on either bank was too sterile to take advantage of the irrigation and there was merely the swift flow of water to be spanned by a wooden bridge, built purely for the railroad-track and a matter of ticklish footing for a person of Baldy's temperament. He had an instinctive distaste for heights. However, behind him there was an unfriendly town harboring a still more unfriendly sheriff. Ahead of him there lay possibly another unfriendly town. None of the plains towns are overly cordial to the fraternity of the brake-beams, and Baldy had all the appearance of a blowed-in-the-glass stiff.

He began to pick his way across the trestle. Below him the stream ran swiftly. Baldy shut his eyes and tried to make his way without looking down, but his foot went between two of the ties and he flopped between the rails with a yell. He picked himself up and began to go forward on all fours, and a whistle sounded before him. At just this moment his eyelid twitched. Baldy stared ahead, paralyzed.

A train was coming for him, full speed. He had not time to run back nor ahead and reach the farther bank before it reached him. Baldy stood erect, and his scalp crawled. If he had possessed any hair upon the top of his head, it would have stood erect, but as it was, his shining dome wrinkled itself into goose-flesh.

Baldy flung himself over the side of the trestle, into the swift-running water below. He landed with a splash that knocked his breath out of him, and came to the surface, sputtering, just in time to see the train rush over the bridge with a vast puff of steam that seemed to express its disgust at having missed him.

"Ol' eyelid," puffed Baldy, struggling to keep afloat, "you better begin to put in some fine work, 'cause I need yuh, right now an' here!"

As if in response to the plea, one of his wildly thrashing arms struck something solid and a moment later he had hauled himself safely out of water upon a solitary and extremely sharp-pointed rock that jutted above the surface in the middle of the stream. He pulled himself to the top of the rock and contemplated his position.

Twenty feet of water separated him from the shore on either side, and Baldy knew that he could not swim that distance. His experiments in swimming had hitherto been confined to a shower-bath, and it had been solely by the intervention of luck that he had struck so near the rock that the current had carried him practically upon it.

"H-m!" said Baldy dismally, as he recognized the fact that he was marooned. "I'd give a lot t' be in a nice, friendly jail right now. This ain't no campin' place at all."

Then something struck his eye, and as it did so his eyelid gave an admonitory signal. A small log had caught in a crevice in the rock, evidently brought down in a freshet of some months before, from an unknown place where trees might grow. There were certainly no signs of wood about the stream. Baldy contemplated the log with a soured vision.

"Somethin'," he observed sourly, "is bound I'm goin' somewhere, an' my eyelid

is eggin' it on, but I'm durned if that's my notion of an ocean-goin' steamer."

His eyelid twitched violently, almost angrily, and Baldy shifted his position with a sigh.

"Oh, gosh!" he said wearily. "Ef I sit here, this durned rock is goin' to slice me up thorough. I might's well get drownded right off as fall off this rock in two pieces, one on each side."

He carefully and painstakingly wriggled down to the log and worked it loose, then embraced it fondly and cast loose. A moment later he was whirling down the stream with the log clasped in a viselike grip, and his bald head glistening like a blown egg floating on the current.

V.

BALDY climbed to the top of the bluff and stared hopefully across the country in the gathering dusk.

Then he groaned.

"Ol' eyelid," he said imploringly, "ef you ain't foolin' me, lead me to somethin' to eat. There ain't a house noways near. They ain't nothin' to eat, nor nothin' to wear, nor nothin' to sleep on but a cactus. You done enough foolin'. Feed me!"

His eyelid twitched deliberately, as if in thought. Baldy hearkened to its promise, but there was something of reserve in his attitude.

He was still wet from the water of the stream, now gurgling down the gully behind him. The lump upon his forehead was beginning to go down, but the top of his head was undeniably sunburnt.

Baldy set out grimly across-country, not knowing where he was going, nor caring very much, only intent on the thought that somewhere in a vast and empty world there must be food. He set out in the direction in which he found himself facing, only taking a glance at the stars now and then to make sure he was not traveling in a circle.

He marched for perhaps an hour and then sat down in despair. He had not only seen no sign of a house, but no sign of anything else that would promise to relieve his situation. And he was hungry. Beneath him, a sharp-pointed rock bored into him. He got up wearily and sat down again, only to rise more quickly than before. He had sat upon the recumbent pad of a small cactus.

"Oh, durn it!" he said disgustedly. "Ef this was a hunch—"

His eyelid twitched, and almost simultaneously he heard a shot—several shots—at a distance. He stood up, and while absently removing the cactus spines from his anatomy, tried to figure out the direction from which the shots were coming and their probable cause. His eyelids began to twitch like mad.

Then he heard a horse's hoofs coming toward him in panic-stricken tempo. They came nearer, and nearer. The horse was almost upon him, and Baldy yelled. The horse shied, and as it did so Baldy saw that it was saddled, but riderless. He made a leap and caught the reins, then sprang on its back.

"Ol' eyelid," he said musingly, "anyways you done got me a hawss to get out o' here with. But ought I go back an' run into that fuss, or keep on where it's nice and peaceful?"

The starlight was fairly bright. At any rate, he could see a dark mass of horses and riders coming toward him, though he could not distinguish men and mounts. As he debated, a red tongue of flame shot toward him and a bullet whined overhead. Baldy debated no longer, but dug his heels into his new-found mount's side and went away from there.

"Oh, Lawd!" he meditated dismally as three more shots rang out behind him and a bullet whizzed by to his right, while another zipped into a cactus with a squashy plunk. "I done got into trouble now. Ol' eyelid, yuh fooled me!"

The men behind him were very evidently anxious to catch him, and their very anxiety made him the more anxious to get away. He felt, somehow, as if they were not in any mood to listen to explanations. He figured out, as he rode, that the man they were actually after must have slipped from the saddle and set his horse running on to draw their fire while he attempted to escape on foot. Baldy, however, was too

closely pursued to attempt any such expedient. He devoted all his energies to increasing his lead, while his mind worked automatically at the congenial task of inventing new and picturesque anathemas for the eyelid that had led him into his present predicament. And in the mean time the bunched men behind him shot vengefully, and their bullets whined all about him.

VI.

BALDY leaped from his horse and grabbed at a cactus-plant. Heedless of the spines that stuck into him, he wrenched off a pad and flung it with all his force at the disappearing animal. The horse gave a leap and plunged away. Baldy, seething with rage and leaving a blue streak of profanity behind him, ducked into a clump of sagebrush and lay low.

"Durn 'em!" he raged. "They got me mad now. I don' mind bein' chased, an' I don' mind bein' shot at, but when they shoot a hole in my saddle an' fill me full o' splinters—"

He abruptly shut up. Half a dozen horses rode madly before him, their riders straining every nerve to catch the now riderless animal that was fleeing madly acrosscountry. They flung themselves past Baldy's field of vision and vanished, cursing the horse that seemed to be gaining upon them.

No sooner had they disappeared than Baldy arose and began to trudge away, filling the air with pointed expressions of his rage against the universe. He walked for an hour, then stopped and pulled a few splinters from himself, walked another hour and pulled more of them. Then he thought he heard a horse's hoofs behind him and ducked madly into a clump of underbrush. He plunged forward blindly, found empty space before him, and half slid, half fell down a twenty-five-foot gully.

When he picked himself up at the bottom, he wept. Misfortune had conquered him. He had lost his false teeth. Wearily, he lay still. When morning came, he might look for them, and he might not. He was exhausted both by his efforts and his mishaps. He slept, but just before unconsciousness overcame him, he was roused to feeble rage.

His eyelid twitched.

VII.

BALDY walked into the saloon, beaming. The bartender looked up from polishing a glass and stared.

"By gummidge!" he said wonderingly. "Baldy, we thought you was dead, or in jail, or somethin'. Where've you been?"

Baldy beamed, poured out a drink, and tossed it off.

"I had a hunch," he explained modestly. "I always ride a hunch."

He lifted his hat and touched his head gingerly. It was sunburnt to a rich red color, like a typical Western sunset.

"Yuh said your eyelid was twitchin'," said the bartender. "Did yuh foller it out?"

There was a huge knob on Baldy's forehead, one eye was nearly closed; his hands were nearly encased with strips of courtplaster, and he limped as he walked, but his general air of pride was undiminished.

"It's a hunch," he said proudly. "I follered it out, an' it took some follerin', but I don't weaken, not me. I hadda lil trouble, but it wound up when I fell down a cliff an' lost my false teeth. When I dug around lookin' for 'em—did yuh ever hear of a pocket?"

The bartender nodded. Everybody has heard of pockets, where from no cause known to man a cache of nuggets and dust may be found upon a hillside—if one is lucky. The usual custom is to trace the pocket by panning out the dirt in a fan-shaped section on a hill until the source is found.

"I was lookin' for my teeth," said Baldy, "an' I stumbled into that there pocket. I took near four thousan' dollars' worth o' dust an' nuggets outer it. It was some pocket. Gimme another one."

He hoisted and downed the drink with a single motion.

"I tell yuh," he said proudly, "when that there eyelid o' mine starts to twitchin', ol' man Jinx better get outer my way. Why, wunst I was in Tucson, now—"

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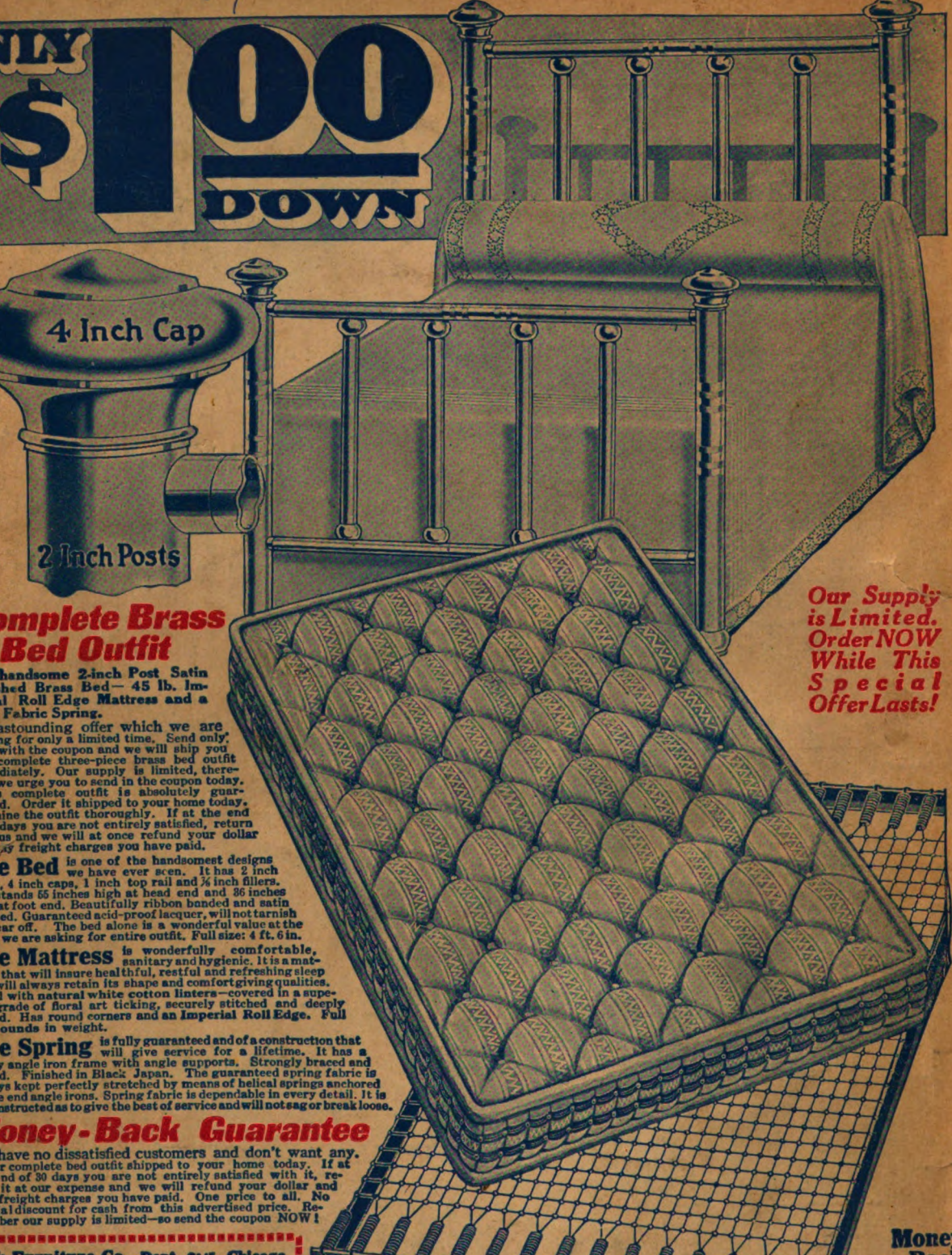

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