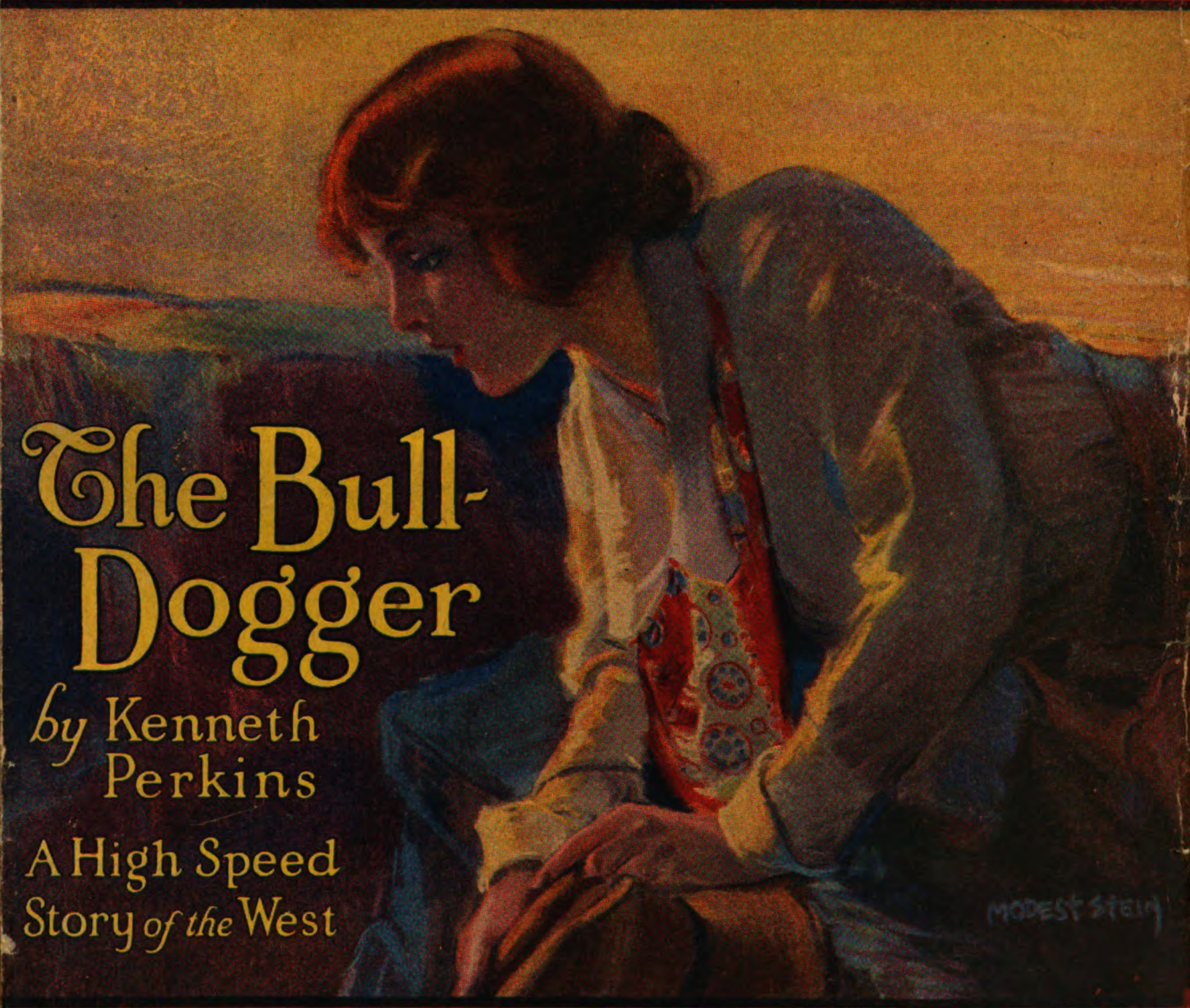
ARGOSY ALL-STORY WEEKLY



The Bull-Dogger

by Kenneth Perkins

A High Speed Story *of the* West

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ARGOSY-ALLSTORY
WEEKLY

VOL. CXXXVIII SATURDAY, NOVEMBER 5, 1921 NUMBER 2

The Bull-Dogger

Part I

by Kenneth Perkins

CHAPTER I.

BUSTIN' IN.

AN alert, well-dressed, sunburnt young man swung off the platform of a street-car, edged his way through the crowded sidewalk, and hurried up the steps of the city hall. He circled through the swinging-door, and entered the first of a long string of rooms occupied by the files, clerks, desks, and deputies of the sheriff's office.

"I'm looking for a man by the name of Shad Harmon," he announced at the information desk. "Was told back in Texas that he had a job here."

"You mean Saul P. Harmon—deputy?"

"Like as not he's spelling his name out now. Shad was his name when we punched up the old drags out West."

Shad loafed at a desk in one of the inner offices, a handkerchief tucked around his wrinkled old neck to save the last stand of a wilting collar. His sleeves were rolled back over thin, leathery arms, and his latest claim to city life was a pair of crooked spectacles. Shad had changed since the old days, but he immediately recognized the sharp, blue eyes of the man who was brought to his desk, and no one could ever forget those two big bones of the stranger's shoulders.

For a moment Shad chewed on the cold stub of a cigar, while the office-boy and the two stenographers stared.

"Let me think now—yes, I remember! Your name's Joe Winborne. You gave me a beatin' once because I took a pot at you. I'd have gotten you except for a little touch of stigmatism."

"You weren't much at throwing a gun, Shad," the stranger laughed.

"That's why I'm civilized. A man's got to see straight or else civilize himself. Now I take it you are still rolling the old dogies back in Texas. Your eye looks sharp."

"I'm looking sharp now. Rounding up something else. You got to help me."

"Somebody murdered somebody?"

"Worse than that."

"You're lookin' for to wipe out some old score?"

"That's about it."

"In this town?"

"Looks that way."

"Well, now, see here!" Shad took out his butt and spat, then turned to the two stenographers. "You hear what this gentleman says? He's lookin' for somebody. Now, when I hear those words, I know just exactly what my next step is to be: right here and now I resign from my job as deputy sheriff. I've kept law and order in this city for old man Driscoll for five years, and I got a good name as a peacemaker. But when this here Joe Winborne, who was foreman out to Texas Donnel's outfit ten years ago on Thunder Pass—well, when he tells me he's lookin' for some one in *my* city, and the city and county expects me to keep him apart from such as he's lookin' for, I says once and for all, says I, thank you gentlemen, but I resign."

"You aren't going to be asked to keep us apart," Winborne said. "You're going to bring us together."

"Did you bring a six-shooter into these here offices of the city hall?" Shad asked apprehensively.

"Don't need a six-shooter for this."

"Bare hands—eh? Who is it?"

Joe Winborne looked around at the faces of the two girls, who seemed to sense a thrilling drama in this situation of a cattle-puncher coming into the heart of a big city "looking for his man." Winborne suddenly turned red as a beet.

"I'd like to tell you about it—alone."

Shad sent his people out, motioned the cowman to a chair, and lit the little wet stub. When the door was closed behind his back, Winborne took out a ragged envelope from his hip pocket, opened it, and produced a photograph.

"That's what I'm looking for."

Shad shoved his crooked spectacles into place and examined the faded, tobacco-stained little picture. It was of a laughing twelve-year-old girl. The harsh sunlight threw dimples into sharp relief and gave a suggestion of freckles, a big hair-ribbon, and pigtails.

The deputy sheriff threw back his gray little head and burst into a hilarious guffaw. Joe Winborne reddened, doubled his fist, and then checked himself with an indecisive laugh.

"You remember?"

"Donnel's daughter. The old rancher down there to Thunder Pass. You was foreman."

"Righto. I'm huntin' her down."

"What's she done? Has she inherited a fortune—eh?"

"Hell, no! None of that horse-opera stuff! I wish that was the case. Her dad went busted back there ten years ago."

"The herd was climbin' up, as I reckerlect."

"It grew patchy. Donnel wasn't a good hand at these modern methods of grazing. Texas fever and cattle plague called his biggest bets. He went broke, and I had to get another job. But he said once to me, before he let me out, that if anything should happen to him I was to see that the little girl got treated right. I gave my word on that, thinking it was the easiest thing in the world.

"But things turned out different. I came East, and first thing I knew I heard old Donnel had taken sick, died, and left his daughter with something like a couple of hundred dollars. I traced her here to your town. They told me she'd met you here, and you'd helped her to get a job."

"Haven't seen her for—"

"You can find her."

Shad Harmon squinted again at the photo and laughed. "She didn't look much like this. Do you reckon you'd know her?"

"I knew her then. We were pretty good pals—she a little jane about twelve. I taught her how to ride a bucking burro—the little tomboy! And I taught her how to bridle a pinto—she even rode him bareback when we went out on the hills. Damn little bronc-twirling cow-jane! I remember her—damn if I don't!"

"Let me tell you somethin' that 'll wake you up from your dreaming about a little cow-jane: if you think you're goin' to find a tomboy with freckles and hair-ribbons you're on the wrong trail. When I saw her last she was a slim little thing about twenty years old, with one of these here

soft, pink complexions like you see on yearling babies. And she had her hair done up different, too—can't describe the way these here city folk wear their hair, but they call it somethin' powerful Frenchy. And there weren't any freckles about her eyes that you'd notice. Joe Winborne, you ain't lookin' for a tomboy. You're lookin' for a peacherino—"

"Damme!" the cow-puncher burst out laughing. "Damme if I ever thought of that! It was ten years ago. She ought to be a little queen—what?"

Shad Harmon looked up knowingly. "Just what's the reason you're huntin' for her? You say you haven't any fortune to give her."

"To tell the truth, I'm kind of up in the air about what to say to her. She wouldn't take any money."

"You haven't any legacy?"

"I said we aren't at the horse-opera," Winborne retorted.

"No message from her departed dad?"

"She saw him a long time since I did."

"You're going to marry her?"

"She wouldn't have me. I'm ten years older."

"Then why did you come?"

"I had a feeling she might be needing me. And the promise I made her dad is waiting to be fulfilled."

"Come back in a day or two," Shad said. "I'll try to trace her. But like as not she's left town a year ago—and, say, how do you know she hasn't hitched up with some city man?"

"I had a funny hunch that the West and the prairies and the mountains have been calling her back again and she'd like to go."

CHAPTER II.

M'GRAW, KING OF CATTLE.

JOE WINBORNE'S "hunch" concerning the probability of the sage-plains and mountains calling to Donnel's daughter to come back happened to be the exact truth. That very afternoon when Winborne entered the sheriff's office in search of her, Posey Donnel was returning home with the definite intention of leaving town. Where she was going mattered little. But how she was going was a question of considerable importance.

She trudged up the dark stairs of her little rooming-house, entered her door, threw herself dejectedly into the ragged armchair by the window, counted all her possessions, and arrived at the conclusion that she could afford one more supper and half a breakfast the next morning, and that was all.

If Joe Winborne had found her that night it would have been a joyful banquet the two might have had together, but as it turned out Joe Winborne did not find any clue of her until five days later; and during that time a great many events occurred in the life of Posey Donnel.

Her room was small and dark, but touched up brightly with cushions, a few pictures, and a vase of flowers. Geranium-pots brightened the tiny window, and a basket of ferns hung just above the cracked old washstand. There was an optimistic suggestion about the room, as there was about the lithe, pretty person of Posey Donnel herself. Although she was at the end of her bridge as far as money was concerned, the day had given her a big ray of hope. She had bought a newspaper during the afternoon, in order to study the "Help Wanted" column. On the back page of the edition she saw an article which she read with a certain hopeful excitement:

CHAMBER OF COMMERCE TO BANQUET CATTLE KING

Prize of One Hundred Dollars to be Offered for the Best Singing or Dancing Act Among the Entertainers.

Mr. Dan McGraw, of Arizona, has been in town during the last week and has made many acquaintances among the cattle buyers. Mr. McGraw, although already a powerful figure in the stock industry, is a man not yet middle-aged—a handsome, two-fisted Westerner who has been lionized by social as well as business circles.

There was a lot of significant news in this little article. Posey had eked out her last savings by giving dancing lessons to high school boys and girls at an "acad-

emy" down-town. But this place had closed with the end of winter. She was now without any outlook whatever for work except such wild chances as this prize promised.

After a little vegetable dinner at a restaurant she paid the fifty cents she had saved out of her customary meal for two yards of red bunting and ribbons with which she pieced together a skirt. An old Spanish zarape, which she had kept as an heirloom since the death of her mother, gave the last perfect touch to her costume, and she considered herself ready to compete for the prize.

"Let me see—with a hundred dollars, what would I do?" Posey thought to herself as she hummed on her way down the brilliantly lighted city street. "I would buy a ticket to the West, and I would get a pinto and ride over the old range. And I would ask the mayor or the sheriff—or whoever it is that makes a board of education in the cow country—if I could teach a little school up in the hills. And in the afternoon I would ride over the purple sage and drink in the wind fragrant with mesquite. And by moonlight I would ride out in the cañons and listen to the cowboys singing to quiet their herds. Then at dawn I would be on my way to the schoolhouse in the hills, while little brown owls would stand on every fence-post and wink at me as I passed, and the little gophers would run out and nod good morning."

She turned into a side door of the auditorium where the banquet was to be held, but her thoughts followed the same train. "Yes," she said to herself, "it would be like the rides I used to take with big Joe Winborne, who picked out the trail with his mustang—and I—a tot with pigtails—following him on the little pinto."

In an anteroom of the banquet hall Posey presented herself, as the announcement in the paper had specified. She was to go through a try-out before a committee of men.

There were other applicants—most of them girls. Studying them with considerable interest was a tall, heavy-set giant of a man with a lop-brimmed hat on the back of his head and a huge black cigar wagging in his mouth. This man was eying the prettier girls with a very peculiar intentness.

"You're kind of late signing up," one of the committee remarked to Posey.

"It's a little Spanish dance," she explained.

"You used to give exhibition dancing down there at Hammil's Academy?" another man said. "You'll do without a try-out. We want some professional stuff tonight."

The big man with the lop-brimmed hat came over to look at the promising new arrival. This man was Mr. Dan McGraw, the guest of honor, who had arrived two hours before the scheduled time of his banquet, and who considered it a lot of fun to hang around the stage entrance and look at the girls.

When he came over to Posey she had to tilt her head back to look at him. At first she was frightened because his eyes were of such a deep black. But there were certain features about him which brought visions of the West she idolized—the square face, the handsome chin, the red neck which seemed unused to collar or tie. Two things marked the Westerner—a pair of well-shined jack-boots, and a glimpse of a wampum belt.

"This is my costume," Posey found herself stammering. "And this is my music."

One of the committeemen—a fat, wet-faced man wearing a ribbon and badge on his coat—noticed that the girl had attracted the attention of the guest of honor."

"Meet Mr. Dan McGraw, Miss Donnel," he said. "He's the guest of this banquet. Put on something that 'll please him, and the prize is yours."

"I'll say this—give her the prize right here and now afore the contest," Dan McGraw said. "Damn if she isn't the best little sage-hen I've laid eyes on since I come from Arizona."

"Mr. McGraw is just in town after the spring round-up," the fat man said. "And from what I hear, he's homesick."

Posey looked up with a gleam of excitement in her face. "The spring round-up?" she cried. "How I've longed to see one again!"

"I got the biggest ranch west of Phœnix. Maybe you'd like for to see that?" McGraw said. "I just sold a beef-herd for enough jack to buy me a mine in Californy."

"I lived in the West," the girl replied. "We had a ranch in Texas, and it was there I learned this little Spanish *guaracha* I wanted to dance—"

"There's a reception before the dinner," the fat man interrupted. "We'd better be going in."

"Say, look here," McGraw said, "why can't this little jane come along with us? She can sit next to me during the feed."

"No, I can't," the girl answered quickly. "I am going to try over my dance with the pianist. I don't know any one here—I only came to do my dance."

The banquet hall was crowded with little tables, four men at each. The place grew hot and stuffy toward the last course, and the ceiling, from which hung the flags of every nation, was almost obliterated by the thickening fog of tobacco smoke.

From the long main table Dan McGraw watched the dancing acts without a very close appreciation of their artistic worth. When a large woman stood on the stage and sang, the guest of honor turned his back on her and fell to eating. When his plate was finished he squirmed in his chair, twiddled his thumbs, and longed for a big drag of jackass whisky. He gave no intimation of this longing to any of his present acquaintances, but as far as he could recollect he had not been so long without a drink of jackass since he was born. The wine which was served at the banquet was like lemonade to him. To his utter astonishment the little brown-eyed man sitting next to him was actually getting tipsy on that wine!

But toward the middle of the program something happened which brought him out of the dumps with a jolt. The orchestra struck up a lively Spanish tune, and the curtain discovered a big, dark stage. A spotlight pointed through the dusty air of the hall and singled out a slim, graceful girl, clothed in Spanish costume and wearing a zarape of brilliant scarlet about her flashing shoulders.

As the little figure whirled and danced, McGraw thought back to the country of the purple sage and the little wild towns where Mexican girls danced in smoke-befogged saloons. There was beauty enough in Posey's dance—but McGraw had never been affected by beauty. What he pictured was the lawless merrymaking, the brawling, the sousing, the gambling of his old haunts. He had a desire—as strong a desire as Posey had had that day—to take a train at once back to the cow country.

When the dance was over he shoved back his chair, clapped his huge red hands, and shouted to Posey: "That's as good a dance as I ever seen down to Soggy's Paradise Bar! Ain't no jane can touch you. You're immense, and I'm goin' to take you home after the feed!"

The little tipsy man also left his seat at the main table and turned to the stage, while Posey was bowing to the applause. He leaned over the footlights and tried rather unsuccessfully to modulate his voice to a confidential purr. "I'm the one who offered the hundred-dollar prize—and I'll see that you get it; only you've got to repeat that dance—here on this long table!"

The little fellow leaned back on the toastmaster's table and swept his arm dramatically over it, overturning a number of glasses. The applause dwindled and then swelled again into laughter. It was a good joke—the little brown-eyed man was the richest man there, and when he wanted a laugh he could get it.

"Strike up the song again, and I'll make her come down and give us an encore!" he said pompously.

Dan McGraw turned around like a huge dog who hears a little terrier yapping behind him. The dance had been given for his special benefit, Dan was convinced, and he did not relish any one else growing so enthusiastic.

"It don't appear like the gal's mindin' you," Dan said as Posey bowed herself back to the wings.

"It don't, eh? Well, when I make up my mind to see a girl dance on the table, I generally see her." The little man ran to the stage and scrambled awkwardly up to the footlights, an end of his collar snap-

ping loose and sticking grotesquely out of his dinner jacket. "I've made up my mind!" he cried over the cheers of the crowd. "And I always get to see what I want to see!"

McGraw's eyes bulged, and he took up a glass of the white wine, smelling of it and tossing it off. He peered into the glass with a perplexed frown. "Nope!" he said to himself. "He can't be soft-haided enough to get drunk on that. He must be just plain ornery mean."

The little man in the dinner suit caught Posey just as she reached the wings, and, the crowd cheering him, dragged her by the wrist to the middle of the stage.

"All you gentlemen who want to see this little lady dance on the table say 'Aye!'"

McGraw looked up at Posey, pale from the realization that this mob of men was going to make sport of her.

"Look here, you little sage-hen!" he said, jumping up on the stage. "Look at me." A volume of "ayes" was thundering up to the stage. "Do you want to dance agin or not?"

"I want to go home!" Posey cried. "I'm afraid."

"That settles it!" McGraw took the little brown-eyed, bald-headed man by the seat of his trousers and nape of his neck, and, with an easy swing of his body, threw him down into the audience. The little wizen man fell partly on a chair, partly on the table, which overturned with a clatter of smashed glass and dishes.

The whole room burst into an uproar, every man jumping to his feet.

"I want to see you as soon as you've changed your clothes," McGraw said quietly to Posey. "I got somethin' important to tell you."

Posey fled to her dressing-room, panic-stricken at the outcome of her little dance. But the outcome, thanks to the fact that McGraw was now in a civilized community, was nowhere near so serious as it might have been if this fight had taken place in the cow country from whence he had come. He stepped down to the main table again, expecting to fight the whole roomful of men, but was surprisingly disappointed.

The little brown-eyed, bald-headed man, having been picked up and carefully brushed by guests and waiters, rubbed his head, looked up into the face of McGraw, and suddenly came to himself.

"I guess I'm the one who's going to dance on the table," he said, whereat every one burst again into a laugh. He sat down, and McGraw sat down with him. Both men lifted a glass of wine to each other, laughed, and the entertainment went on.

"Damn if I ain't itching for the range," McGraw said to himself, "where they finish fights!"

As Posey changed into her blue-serge frock, nervously put up her hair, adjusted the trim hat, and dabbed her straight little nose with a touch of powder, she was thinking intently upon what McGraw had said. Perhaps he was going to tell her she would, without a doubt, win the prize. It was an enormous prize, she reflected. For the rest of the time she found herself thinking—not about Dan McGraw, but about the trip she had definitely decided to take in case she won the prize.

She hurried out into the hall, where a waiter met her.

"Mr. McGraw asked me to tell him when you was through changing, ma'am. He wants to see you."

Posey waited while the servant disappeared into the banquet hall. Her heart was beating fast at the thought of the methods of the cattle king.

A moment later McGraw, having peremptorily left the dinner guests to the mercy of another fat songstress, came into the anteroom to meet Posey.

"That was a wonderful little dance," he said. "Never saw anything to beat it—except down there—near the border. And this is what I want to tell you: you belong back there in the sage country, where they's the Eagle Trail Mountains and the Big Horns, and all that; where they's real freedom, and not this city stuff, where you have to wear a collar and black your shoes. Now I'm asking you, why don't you go back?"

"Why don't I go back?" the girl gasped. "You aren't asking—"

"I know. I've only seen you about an

hour and talked with you ten minutes. But what's that?' We don't waste time courtin' back there."

The music drifted in from the direction of the banquet hall, where an entertainer was singing rollicking songs about cowboys "a-rollin' up the herd."

"Look at me with my ranches," McGraw said, "and my prairies, and my mountain ranges covered with cattle! Look at me with the wealth I got to offer you! Damme if I couldn't buy out this whole town if you said it!"

Posey, in her gasping astonishment, recoiled to the sill of the little window at the end of the hall. And again the voice of the singer struck in on them. Some performer who had been advised to appeal to the cattle king guest, had made a good selection of cowboy songs.

"We're rollin' up the steers of ole Texas McGail!
With a ki! Yippi, yi, yi, yip!
And we're rollin' 'em up for the Old Eagle Trail,
With a ki! Yippi, yi, yi, yip!"

"I want to marry you," Dan McGraw said, "and take you back there. You'll be the queen of the cattle-run. You'll have twenty Cholos waitin' on you, doin' your biddin', and twenty Mex ladies for maids."

Posey was fairly stunned at this whirlwind courtship and proposal. While she was trying to struggle voicelessly to answer, the singing on the stage struck in more loudly:

"With a tossin' of their horns and a stampin' of their feet!
A-millin' in the desert and a windin' through mesquite!
It's the life of a cowboy for me!"

Through the sound of the music Posey could hear McGraw's voice: "I'm goin' West to-morry night. You're coming with me!"

The girl, with a supreme effort, formed her frightened, inarticulate words: "I can't dream of such a thing! I've only seen you to-night! A man and a woman must be together a long time to know each other before they become man and wife."

"I've made it too sudden like," McGraw admitted. "Think it over. See me to-night after the feed, and let me take you home."

"No—that would do no good. It would mean only another hour. I can't consider what you've said. It would be the wildest step a girl could possibly take."

The singing was over, and several people came down the hall, accompanying the last performer.

"Can I take you home?" McGraw asked hurriedly.

"No. I am not going to wait until the end. I am going home now."

"Then think it over to-night. You're going to change your mind, and you're going to say you'll come with me. I'll be at the Palace Hotel until four to-morrow. Listen to this: you'll be the queen of the whole cattle-run! The hills will be yours—the big ranch, with patios and fountains—"

But Posey brushed past McGraw just as the others reached the lower end of the hall. She was panic-stricken. She dashed through the crowd by the wings of the stage, walked down the little side door into the auditorium, and disappeared in the street. When the cool night air struck her she felt that she was awakening from a thrilling, feverish dream.

CHAPTER III.

POSEY GIVES UP.

JOE WINBORNE, still searching for the original of the little crumpled photograph he had shown Shad Harmon, called at the deputy sheriff's office the following morning.

"Here's a bit of news," the deputy said, showing Winborne a copy of the morning paper. "The lady you're lookin' for created a rumpus last night at the Chamber of Commerce banquet. Some guy from Arizona was there, fell in love with her because she danced a Mexican jig—and started a fight."

Winborne read hungrily. Posey Donnel! Yes, that was the name. And the name of the cattle king from Arizona was Dan McGraw.

"We can find her now easily enough,"

Winborne cried. "All we have to do is to—"

"But this Dan McGraw—isn't that some name we used to hear about in the old days?"

"Dan McGraw? Can't say that I remember."

"It comes to my mind," the deputy said, "that I heard tell of that place down in the Southwest. It's from Mesquite and Volcano this man comes. Look here at the paper—'McGraw's Ranch,' they call it. There weren't any ranches over on the Volcano cattle-run when I was a cow-puncher. Don't you remember there was a bunch of cattle-rustlers led by a man who was called 'Brandiron' McGraw? Dan McGraw was his name, as I recollect. They terrorized the place from Mesquite to the Sierras. They got bustin' rich, and McGraw got in thick with the settlers and set up a crook for sheriff."

"But the banquet last night," Winborne interrupted, thinking only of his search.

"Sure, this was the McGraw! The man the banquet was for. He seems good at gettin' in thick with people. It's hard to size him up. Look at the way he's horned in on the Chamber of Commerce doings. But as I remember every catleman down that way feared and despised him. Only he was too well intrenched to oust. They left the range to him and his gang of outlaws. When I left, McGraw had turned civilized."

"But how about the girl?" Winborne asked. "It looks as if we ought to be able to get her address."

"I got in touch with the Chamber of Commerce—the fellow that put on the shows last night—and he said Posey used to work in a dancing academy in town. The academy's closed down, but we've got the address of the proprietor. How about your hunting him up? His name's Alex Hammil."

Winborne found the address of Alex Hammil within the half-hour—a flat above a row of retail stores. The only success he had, however, was to interview a huge woman in curl-papers and a kimono. Mr. Alex Hammil, her husband, had just gone out of town, and would not be back until the following morning.

"Maybe you can give me the information I want," Winborne said. "I want the address of a girl who gave dancing lessons at your husband's establishment—a girl by the name of Posey Donnel."

"Say, look here," the fat lady exclaimed, "you're the second man who's come askin' about her to-day. What's the girl done—robbed a bank?"

"Who else asked for her?" Winborne asked, with an intuitive fear that Dan McGraw had tried to start a fight the night before because of his infatuation for her, and might be on the same search.

"I heard his name, but can't remember. A big man, handsome, except his face was red, and he wore a funny-looking hat with a floppy brim."

"Would you know his name? Was it McGraw?"

"Sure, that was it. And my husband give him the girl's address. I heard 'em talkin' in the hall."

"And what's the address?" Winborne cried hurriedly.

"Lordy! How do I know? I don't have nothin' to do with my husband's affairs. He's crazy. You never can tell what he's up to."

"Where did he go?" Winborne asked.

"Out of town. You couldn't find him."

"Where can I telegraph to him?"

"You couldn't get him that way. He's just gone out to East Windfield. Will be back in the morning."

"He'll stay overnight at East Windfield?" Winborne asked.

"Likely. Grand Hotel, maybe. You never can tell. He's always gaddin' about."

Winborne did not wait for more. He left the flat determined to get the address of Posey Donnel before another day was up.

That morning Posey had a glass of milk and muffins at a little chop-house around the corner from her rooming-house. At noon her last fifteen cents went for an ice-cream soda and a paper. In the paper she read that the hundred-dollar prize she had hoped for was awarded to the girl who had sung the cowboy songs. She remembered some of the words of the songs, and they set her thinking along some very definite lines. She could not go back West now,

and have her little schoolhouse on the mesa, as she had dreamed. But there was McGraw.

Curiously enough, when she tried to think of the huge figure of McGraw she could not visualize him; she constantly evoked the picture of another man—big like McGraw, and with the same clean-cut jaw and sharp eye. When she tried to picture McGraw she pictured the foreman of her father's ranch—the man whom she had played with as a child ten years ago. For this reason it gave her a thrill to think of McGraw. But the other man—Joe Winborne—had gone out of her life, and she had no reason to expect ever to see him again. McGraw had come offering her everything she wanted.

She spent that afternoon wondering where she would eat her dinner. It was a new wonder with her, and it started a little panic. She had never realized what a dreadful thing it was to be without dinner. Even in the middle of the afternoon she was faint from the two scanty meals she had eaten. Then there was to-morrow to worry about, and the day after that. Monday she could look again for a position—but that was too late to think about.

At five she felt fairly starved. It was a funny thing, she laughed to herself, to be actually starving in the heart of a big city, as if she were a maroon on a desert island. It was still funnier to think that one of the richest men in the city had asked her to be his wife. It was a joke. She decided to take it as a joke, and not as a tragedy.

McGraw was, to all appearances, a very good catch. In that city at least his reputation was of the very best. Of course, no one knew very much about him, except that he had certain business interests in town. What sort of a man he was in the West no one knew. No one cared. The best calling-card a man could wish for in the society of an American city was a check-book. And McGraw was a handsome cattle king besides.

Posey Donnel persuaded herself that, since Dan McGraw looked like her greatest idol—Joe Winborne, one time foreman of the Donnel Ranch in Texas—she had sufficient reason for falling in love with him. And once she had persuaded herself of this, she did fall in love with him. Emotions are unstable when one is hungry.

But as soon as she fell in love with him she became mortally afraid. To go to his hotel, telling him she had changed her mind about his proposal, was the last thing in the world she proposed doing. She stayed for a while in her little room, and then realized that McGraw would find her address and come for her. To avoid this she left her room late that afternoon, walked the streets for a while, and then, dead tired and faint with hunger, entered the same restaurant where she had been that morning.

She singled out a table in a remote corner, near the kitchen. What she was going to do she did not know. She had no money to buy anything to eat; her only desire was to sit down and rest and brood. She told the waitress she could not eat for a while; her appetite had failed her. This excuse would do for a while. But after she had been there almost an hour the waitress came with a suggestion: maybe some one else " would be wantin' the table."

Posey laughed. The humor of her not being able to pay for a meal revealed itself to her again.

" He said I would have twenty servants doing my bidding," she thought to herself, " and twenty Mexican girls for maids!"

Dan McGraw had obtained Posey's address early that morning. It was customary with McGraw to let the women come to him—before he put himself out to bow to them. But after waiting all day at his hotel for word from Posey, he decided that it would be best to continue his whirlwind courtship of the preceding night. Four o'clock came—the time he had set as her limit to " change her mind." He planned to go West that night at twelve o'clock, and it was now imperative that he take advantage of all the time he had. He called at her rooming-house, and learned from the landlady that Posey had gone out, probably to the little chop-house around the corner, where she was in the habit of eating.

Posey saw the Westerner enter, and again

she thought of Joe Winborne. McGraw was a striking figure and a handsome one as he took off his lop-brimmed hat and looked around the little restaurant. He found Posey broken, defeated. She knew that he had won, and for a brief flash of a second she thought that she loved him. He might be another man like Joe Winborne. He was heroic in his way, and he reminded her of that hero of her childhood. Yes, she had made a decision.

"You're coming with me?" McGraw asked finally.

"Yes—I—"

He rushed on: "You're a sport—the best little sport I ever heard of in the East or West. And I'm going to repay you for it. If there's anything in Arizona you want, from a bull-ring to a gold-mine, you'll get it. And you'll have guitars playin' all day in the patio where there's pepper-wood and palms. You'll be the queen of the cattle-run. Now, about the weddin'—"

The words struck ominously like a gong. Posey's heart sank within her. Her immediate wish was to postpone the marriage until the latest possible date.

"I'm going to give you your choice," McGraw said. "We can get married here—to-day if you wish. It 'll be a quiet weddin'—just the two of us, and an old bullwhacker, Beefy Cull, who works on my ranch. He's here with his wife and daughter. We can have the weddin' to-night."

"No, no," Posey said, startled. "Not to-night. Can't we think it over a little—make plans—"

"Sure thing. All the better. I said I was going to leave it to you. The other way is this: You and the two ladies, Beefy's wife and gal, can come along West. I understand it's best for a bride to have a tender along, actin' as a chaperon till the day of the weddin'. There'll be you three ladies and us two cow-gents. Now, when we get to Mesquite we'll have such a weddin' as has never been pulled off since the days of Solomon. The spring round-up is just ending in a big celebration. We'll combine that with our weddin', and it 'll be the ripsnortingest time ever seen on the range."

"That 'll be when?" the girl asked.

"Well, let's see—how about makin' it next Wednesday—four days? I'll telegraph ahead for them to make the plans. It 'll be the wedding of a cattle king and his queen—jambourees, shindigs, a feast lastin' a week, bull-throwin' contests, bronco-twirlin', racin'."

The girl's eyes showed the first suggestion of a glow.

"Four days!" she said. "Yes, that would be better to have the wedding then—rather than now."

"And to-night I'll have a diamond ring for you. And, say, we'll have dinner together now at the best chow-hall in town—what? And to-night on the two o'clock train you and me and Beefy and his women folks—we'll all leave for home."

CHAPTER IV.

A TICKET FOR THE COW COUNTRY.

WINBORNE exhausted every possible means that day to communicate with the proprietor of the Hammil Dancing Academy. Telephone, telegraph, a hurried trip to East Windfield, where Hammil had gone, availed him nothing. It was not until ten o'clock the following morning when Alex Hammil returned to his flat in the city that Winborne was able to get Posey's address.

When he reached the street where Posey lived his heart was thumping—a curious thing for Joe Winborne. The fact was he suddenly experienced something very akin to stage-fright, and he felt big and awkward and hot. He decided it was absolutely necessary to get a shave before going to see this girl, who was now, according to Shad Harmon, a very charming lady. His hands also felt big and clumsy, as they hung out of his sleeves, and he concluded his nails needed manicuring.

An interminable wait at the barber's, where he got a shine, massage, shave, manicure, and shampoo, and he was ready to make the call.

The gloomy old rooming house in a part of the city inhabited by the respectable poor did not extend a very cordial invitation. Joe Winborne forgot about the alluring picture Shad had painted of the girl,

and thought only of the photograph. Reassured with this vision, he pulled at the jangling little bell, and was admitted into the dim, musty sanctuary of the hall.

"Miss Donnel ain't here," the little old lady said in answer to his inquiry.

"When will she come back? I can wait."

"She ain't comin' back. She's went."

Winborne stared at the little pudgy lady. Everything darkened so that all he could see was that one pompous little figure clothed in an elaborate nondescript wrapper. Once gorgeous, it was faded and dirty about the wrists and the hem of the skirt which brushed the frowsy carpet.

"I'm an old friend of hers," Winborne finally managed to say. "Came all the way from New York to find her. Been hunting now for a long time."

The landlady looked him up and down, and her first somewhat queenly and suspicious reserve gave way to the much more inveterate desire to gossip. "You're from New York! Now, this little Miss Donnel—dear little thing she was!—I was given to understand she come from down South—Texas, or some place like that."

"Yes, it was in Texas—I met her there. Do you know where she's gone? I would like to follow her."

"Oh, then it's the West you're from, and not from New York! Perhaps you know of a place they call back there—let's see, yes—Arizona?"

"Yes, I know of Arizona. But when did Miss Donnel leave this house?"

"I'll tell you all about it," the old lady hurried on to say. "She's gone to Arizona."

"There are a lot of places in the West."

"McGraw's Ranch—the address is Mesquite."

"McGraw!" Winborne cried desperately.

"He's the man who was here last night," the old lady said. "A big man—as big as you, only thicker and handsome like. He wore a floppy hat and frock coat. There was another man with him who wore the same kind of a hat and boots like farmers wear. And there was two ladies with 'em—a fat one and a little one."

"How do you know that it was McGraw?"

"Miss Donnel introduced him to me—his name was Dan McGraw."

"*Miss Donnel* introduced you!"

"She said she was going West, and they was to be married at McGraw's Ranch."

"When did she go?" Winborne gasped.

"The whole party was to leave last night at twelve. They stayed here a long time and talked about cows and such. The fat old lady talked with me, and the little lady talked and jabbered, and they was all jabbering about—"

"And the address—what was the address?" Joe Winborne cried.

The landlady was taken back with the new note in his voice. Maybe this was a detective after the bridegroom—the frock-coated, handsome, terrifying Dan McGraw.

"It was to Mesquite they was goin', mister. That's all I know. Honest, that's all they told me. They was goin' to Mesquite, where they was to take a buggy or coach or horses or somethin' up into the hills to what they called McGraw's Ranch. And I'll tell you quiet like, it's my opinion that—"

Winborne did not wait for the old lady to finish. He clapped on his hat, ran down the front steps, and hurried to the station, where he bought a ticket for Mesquite, Arizona.

Two hours later—twelve o'clock noon—Joe Winborne was aboard his train.

CHAPTER V.

TAURUS COMES TO THE WEDDING.

THE cattle-shipping station of Mesquite was an assortment of bleached shacks strewn along a broad, glaring main street. When Joe Winborne arrived, after a tormenting four days' journey, he embarked immediately on the Deadwood stage, which traversed the sage plain to the west, rattled over a long road up into the cattle range and into the hills of Dan McGraw's limitless domain.

"I take it you're goin' up to the weddin'?" the stage-driver said after they had been a half-hour on the road. He was a

stocky little man with an iron-gray beard and close-set eyes.

"You sized me up right, there," Joe rejoined. "I'm one of the wedding guests."

"Well, I hear as how every one on the range has gotten a invite. Every granger and Indian and Cholo for miles around is up there guzzlin' on his red-eye. Why, damme if old McGraw ain't even asked the sheepmen to come! That's what got me! When I heard tell as how Dan McGraw axed the sheepmen of the range to come and celebrate his weddin', I knowed then that it's goin' to be the biggest show ever pulled off in these hills. But look here, ain't you a mite late?"

"Can't say exactly. When did the bride get here?"

"She come yesterday, and the doings started on time this morning—bronco-twirling, maverick races, stage-coach racing. They's hundreds of cowboys up there yipping and yelling and guzzling!"

"How about the marriage?"

"Well, that's the marriage itself."

"But the ceremony?"

"Oh, *that* part of it—with a parson, you mean. Well, as I'm given to understand, the parson is goin' to hitch 'em up late tonight. They's a full moon, and old Dan McGraw figures he'll have the ceremony out in the open, with a herd of steers as witnesses—and, of course, the weddin' guests. I reckon I'll take in the feed tonight and see the last rites of the weddin' myself. Wouldn't miss it—not if some one give me a hundred dollars for to make a trip to Mesquite with this old wagon."

A three hours' ride brought them to a little saloon-town, Volcano, built on a rise which overlooked the desert and the foothills of McGraw's Range. The horses were watered and a new passenger taken on.

He was a stubby little man, his big head all out of proportion to the little body. A slouch-hat punched full of sweat-holes was stuck to his head with the aid of a buckskin thong knotted back behind a cauliflower ear.

Winborne burst out laughing as the man climbed into a back seat. "Who's your friend?" he asked.

"He ain't nobody—only a sheepman," the driver answered. "Ain't no cause my makin' you acquainted with him. Sheepmen and Injuns ain't supposed to be interduced to cow-gentlemen."

He put his huge boot on the brake, releasing it from the ratchet-bar, and turned back to the new passenger. "Where you goin', Shorty Mossop?"

"I'm goin' to do some bettin'—all the money I got. That's where I'm goin'."

"Well, you ain't goin' very far, are you?"

The coach rattled down the broad, dusty road of Volcano, and was again out on the desert.

"They's been some tall bettin' goin' on durin' the weddin' ceremonies," the driver explained to Winborne.

"There's goin' to be a bull-doggin' contest," Shorty Mossop called out to them from the back seat. "And McGraw's coverin' any bet put up."

"Are you givin' us a steer, Shorty?" the driver asked. "I'd admire for to put up a little of my own jack."

"I ain't tellin' nobody nothin'," Mossop snapped.

"If it's McGraw's man-killin' bull that's goin' to be bull-dogged—"

"That's what it is, and he's gored two punchers already."

"I'll bet on the bull," the driver affirmed. "Who's goin' to throw it?"

"A Injun gentleman by the name of Mr. I. X. L. And I'm bettin' every cent I got and every cent of my sheep-herders and every cent what my sheep brought me up to Mesquite."

"On which are you bettin', Mr. Mutton-man?"

"Come to the weddin' and find out."

A little before sunset the stage-coach squeaked up a final stretch of rocky road and reached the first corral of McGraw's Ranch. Winborne looked down into a big basin of the hills, where he could see an endless vista of steers, corrals, and dust-clouds. The ranch-house and its surrounding sheds were soon dimly visible, gaily decorated, and the yards and courts alive with a mass of people—cow-herds, Indians in brilliant red blankets, half-breeds, squaws, buckaroos.

The stage clattered down into the big yard, but attracted little attention, as every one was hurrying toward the farther end of the ranch, where the last of the day's athletic events was to take place in one of the bull-pens. Shorty Mossop swung down to the ground and scurried away like a rabbit into the crowd. Winborne turned to the stage-driver:

"Do you know where I can get two little cow-ponies—good at rough traveling?"

"'Most anybody around here will sell you a couple of mounts like that for a good swig of whisky."

"Will *you* sell me a couple?"

The driver studied him sharply out of his clear, twinkling eyes. "Two broncs for rough traveling—and quick traveling?"

"All the better. I'll give you a hundred dollars if you get a couple and have 'em tied to this snubbing-post, say, a little after sunset."

"For a hundred dollars I'd get you two thoroughbreds!" the driver said.

Winborne paid the man and then disappeared in the mob.

It was a howling, victorious crowd. Every stockman, now that the round-up was over and the herds had been sold, was roaring with his wealth, and every cowboy was ripe for a tremendous barbaric celebration. Let it be anything—wedding or raid, stampede or rodeo. The whole mob was eager to join in with the ranchers from the Jackpot, the Circle-J, and the Triple-T in glorifying the name of Dan McGraw, who was taking a wife.

Winborne followed the jam to one of the largest of the bull-pens which had been decorated with paper roses and garlands. On one side of the pen a platform had been knocked together and covered with red, white, and blue bunting, corn flowers, and cactus-blossoms.

In this royal box Winborne saw the monarch of the scene, Dan McGraw, and with him his bride—the little girl from the city, dressed in a blue-serge frock, her head bare, her blond curls shining like gold in the slanting rays of the sun, and her big gray eyes afire with excitement at the wild panorama at her feet. Her hands, which she waved and clapped, hysterical with joy when they were free, looked as if they would melt away in the big hot grizzly paw of the bridegroom.

Dan McGraw was over six feet of huge bone and beef-red muscle. His sombrero had been set off with a wampum band; his new check suit struck a livelier note in the scene than the red blankets of the squaws. A wilted collar and a tie as red as his face, a purple shirt, and jackboots with glittering chains and rowels that kept hooking into the bunting—this was the bridegroom's costume.

McGraw's foreman—a hulking, white-haired gent—stepped out in the ring, and the buckaroos, who had quieted down somewhat, feeling a breath of suspense sweeping over them, listened to the announcement.

"The last ceremony of the day, ladies and gents!" the foreman yelled, baring his silver hair to the setting sun. "The last rites of this here weddin' will be a rastlin' contest between Dan McGraw's man-killin' bull and Mr. I. X. L., the half-breed Injun!"

The usual yipping and howling greeted the announcement.

Winborne shoved his way through the crowd and climbed up to the fence of the pen so that he could hear the foreman's next words.

"Now, then, ladies and gents!" Cull wheezed through the megaphone of his enormous hands. "They ain't been no bets put up on the Injun, because in days gone by too much money has been raked offen the bull. Yet I ask you, gents, how can you have a bull-throwin' match without you have bettin'? Now, then, gents, Mr. McGraw's givin' you-all one more last chance to bet on Mr. I. X. L., and the odds will be ten to one on ole Taurus, the man-eater!"

Only a moment's silence followed this announcement; and then gradually the whole company burst out in a roar of laughter. From the roof of the dipping-vat Winborne saw a stubby man swing himself to the ground, elbow his way through the gang, and climb over the fence of the pen. The ugly little fellow crossed over to McGraw's box and stood in front of him, his

hat on one side, revealing a cauliflower ear, his black shirt unbuttoned, his bowleggedness accentuated by canvas leggings and big, upturned shoes.

"I'll take you up," he said when the laughter had quieted upon his handing the foreman a roll of bills. Beefy Cull handed the roll to McGraw, and the latter, wetting his huge red thumb, counted it.

"From what I can make out, Mr. Shorty Mossop," McGraw laughed, "you're betting every cent you just got from your patchy sheep."

"Righto."

"I heard up to Volcano that your ranchhands has been grumblin' for their pay. How about them?"

"Told 'em I knowed of a bet where I could get big odds and a sure thing."

"You call bull-dogging my man-killer a sure thing?"

"I wouldn't bet other men's money on it without I felt sure. Do I look 'kookoo'?"

"No," McGraw shouted back, throwing the bills at the little sheepman. "Any bird who bets ag'in' my bull ain't kookoo. He's got the D. T.'s, that's all."

"Are you backing out, McGraw?"

McGraw laughed back: "Your men 'll pull off a necktie party for you, Mr. Shorty Mossop, if you throw away their wages what 've been pilin' up all season."

"You're backin' out, McGraw!"

"You had one ear cut off to mark you for a cattle-rustler. Better take care o' the other."

"I kinder reckoned ten to one was a high bet, McGraw."

The cattle king came to himself, and blushed darkly through his sunburn. His prospective wife had heard the remark. A good part of his subjects had heard it. "Let Beefy Cull hold the stakes," he shot out. "Give 'im your bills, and I'll cover 'em ten to one."

During this interlude the banjos had stopped their twanging and the horns their hooting, but as soon as McGraw accepted the bet a deafening fanfare of howling and clatter announced the entrance of the bull. Shorty Mossop, unable to climb to the top of the box where Dan and his bride were sitting, darted across the ring in a cloud of dust and scrambled over the fence.

The bull, who had chased him part way across, stopped, confused at the hooting and the circle of brilliant colors. He champed at the dust, his head lifted, his tremendous shoulder muscles and withers quivering with excitement. After a moment's pawing he wheeled, like a horse "turning on a dime," and bolted back for the dry dipping-vat whence he had come. But old Cull, the veterinary and foreman, had slammed and bolted the gate to the runway, so that the bull found himself imprisoned in the small ring of hooting, jeering faces

This was the setting for the challenger's entrance. Mr. I. X. L., when he jumped clumsily into the pen, was greeted with considerably less enthusiasm than his adversary. One reason was that I. X. L. was a little chunky half-breed—a mixture of low-caste Yuman and white, with a bad name as a "sheep-biter" because of his petty thieving. The bull was worth something, but no one would have given a tamale-can for Mr. I. X. L.

The Indian had already transformed himself into half beast by Circe's most famous potion—known on the range as alkali hooch. Neither god nor man thrilled much to the picture—a squat, ugly face, a mop of jet hair, a torn shirt, and a pair of army pants which sadly needed leggings or topboots to be considered either Indian or American, ancient or modern. So he walked out, sulkily scuffing up the dust with his big gnarled toes, spreading out his legs, and waiting.

Old Taurus himself, the magnificent, the invincible, the man-killing, saw this ugly deformity grinning at him. The bull tensed its muscles so that the black tendons above the flank and shoulder stood out like chunks of iron. The withers and back hunched up and the tremendous head was lowered. In a sudden flurry of dust the huge beast and the man met.

Trumpets brayed out, and Dan's henchmen screamed hoarsely in delight at their master's favorite pet. Sombreros and campaign hats went up in the dust-clouds. Dan McGraw himself jumped up and fanned the

air with his big arms and sombrero, yelling lustily for the beast on which he had bet the biggest bet of the week.

"Here's where you get yours, Pocahontas!" he roared out as the little Indian emerged from the cloud of alkali, clinging to the huge horns of the bull and grinning viciously.

The bride herself felt the glory of the combat, even though it was life against life. There was nothing of the revolting cruelty of the Spanish bullfight; it was more like a wrestling match than a prize-fight. And yet it was hair-raising enough when the bull began to drag the chunky Indian around the ring, and the clouds poured up from the pen like steam from a caldron.

"The buzzards 'll be flappin' their wings for you to-night, old Minnehaha!" Dan guffawed.

Posey laughed and cried in her excitement. This was the greatest thrill of them all—a huge torso of blocked black muscles, buck-jumping, lowering its giant head, snorting, bellowing. She could see the fire in the bulging eyes; she could feel the ground shake as the beast leaped up into the air and came down with all its weight into the dust, in a vain attempt to pound at the horrible thing clinging to its head. And all the while the platform where the girl stood seemed to shake as the bull lurched by and fence-rowed like a bucking horse.

Chief Calmody, the sheriff, scratched his gray head and suggested mildly that it was time to rope old Taurus or the Indian might get mussed up. "He can't throw that there bull!" the old chief said ingratiatingly as he stepped up beside the bridegroom.

Dan replied: "I' lose the price of my beef-herd if he did!"

"Ain't nobody ever could!" the sheriff wheedled again, hoping that Dan would get his point and put a stop to the combat. "That there is the cow, they tell me, what once jumped over the moon."

But the fight went on just the same, even though every one there could see that all the Indian could do was to hang on for dear life as the bull dragged him about the pen. The girl caught sight of his face. The smile had gone from the wrinkled brown mouth, even though the lips were parted—parted enough so that she could see the teeth coated with alkali dust and set together grimly.

But no one else noticed this part of the glorious fight: the ranch-hands in general, being a bad lot, favored the bull and watched for signs of weakening in the giant muscles—signs that did not come. Most of the squaws and cow-girls, for some unaccountable reason, favored the human being.

But after all, when the bull won and the man who had staked his life lost, it was no great matter—except of course as a triumph for Dan McGraw.

"I guess you've won, Dan!" the veterinary shouted when the man and beast had quieted after one last cloud-churning tussle.

"What has happened?" the bride cried, the light of her enthusiasm suddenly fading from her eyes.

"Taurus has another notch on his horns. The Indian's crushed to death!" Cull explained.

Dan threw up his hat and yelled a lusty triumphant yell, in which every man there joined. The bride turned her face away, and in turning it she looked into the red, laughing face of her groom. The sight in the pen may have been horrible, but not so horrible to the bride as the look of triumph and laughter on the face of McGraw.

In that sudden miraculous flash she knew what kind of a man this man was whom she had promised to marry. A hatred for him crept swiftly into her heart—a hatred which she knew could never be quenched.

And Joe Winborne saw this look on her face, and understood.

(To be continued NEXT WEEK.)

Rufus the Renegade

by Edwin L. Sabin

TAKING the two dogs for a field trial, so to speak, we went out to Franklin's ranch the evening before the quail season opened. Then in the early morning it was clear work, when the birds were feeding out of the brush. We two parties marched on in rivalry, about one hundred and twenty-five yards separated, the dogs ranging before. And that was a pretty sight; Crosby's speckled pointer, breeding in every line of his clean muscular frame, and Irwin's red Irishman, his fringes floating, all his movements spelling youth, grace and rippling energy.

But this was California, and these crested valley quail demand the utmost of a dog. They don't act like the staid Bob White. They use their legs as much as their wings —run at top speed through the brush and rise rods from where scented. And again they'll lie very close, especially in the heat of the day, and needs must be kicked out of a clump. All this torments a dog, constantly deceives him, puzzles him, and finally he doesn't trust his nose. Besides, the country is likely to be waterless, thick, thorny and teeming with rabbits.

Irwin, with Franklin yonder, got into a covey first, as evidenced by the report of his gun. We heard him shouting at the setter. Crosby grinned.

"Wild. He's having trouble. That dog of his is—" But at the moment Speckled Mike stiffened, his nose out, his whip tail straight; and creeping on with scarcely a waver came to a frozen stand at the edge of a barley field. The quail rose with lusty whir; Crosby fired and killed his bird. Mike dropped to shot. A single rose and Crosby nailed him also. He reloaded.

"See my dog?" he prompted of me in my capacity as judge. "Dead bird, Mike. Fetch, boy!" Mike followed his nose and retrieved. "Dead bird. Go seek." Mike found the second.

Irwin was whistling frantically. Crosby laughed again when we sighted the red setter at full tilt, eager, anxious and overrunning.

"After a rabbit, I'll bet a dollar."

We all came together at the end of a field. Irwin was hot and sweating, the Irishman's tongue was hanging far.

"Well, do you want to quit?" Crosby challenged.

"Quit? Why?"

"You're outclassed, Jack. We've been watching your dog. Mine's working perfectly."

"Rufe will settle down. The day's young yet."

"So's the dog," Crosby jeered.

"Yes, so's the dog," Irwin granted. "Young, and full of pep, but the longer he works the better he'll get. He has a heart. Your pointer's stanch, I'll admit. Old and

stanch, and a cold-blooded proposition. Give me a dog with a heart."

Rufus looked up as if understanding, his brown eyes, ashine, saying, "What a good time we're having," his doggish mind conscious of no bar sinister upon his enthusiasm. And my own heart somehow was with him; his youth, his spirits and bubbling affection appealed. The pointer was too cold and methodical and pottering.

As the sun mounted we took to the brush, where it was low and interspersed with bare sod free of cactus. The season's hatch were now lying close, but the old birds were on the run, nagging the cautious pointer. The Irishman, however, impetuous and pressing forward, followed up, and up, trailing his bird, and when he finally set, the quarry was pretty certain to rise just about where located by him.

Rufe, we might see, was exhibiting better control also; his edge had been worn off. And when we nooned at the ranch-house, Irwin met the good-natured banter with stubborn loyalty.

Guns had been booming all the morning, while scores of hunters beat the coverts. The battle had lulled at midday; it resumed about three o'clock, and summoned us to ransack a stretch of hill slopes with a cactus draw between, as yet unmolested.

We traded parties this time; Franklin took his gun and went with Crosby and Mike, and I, equipped with Irwin and Rufe, of which I was glad. But by luck we three had only our labor for our pains. On the other side of the draw Mike was finding birds. The interest that drifted over got on the red setter's nerves. He ranged faster and faster, doing his best; whined wistfully when he gazed across at the cracks of the guns; several times almost bolted, to join the fun and emulate the pointer. He kept Irwin calling and tooting, and now and then we were on the jump to reach him before he should break.

On a sudden break he did, into the high brush, out of gun-shot. We could see him bounding like mad over the clumps.

"After a rabbit, Jack," I warned.

"Believe he is!" He shouted, whistled, but Rufe didn't or wouldn't hear. We ran. Irwin panted angrily.

"If I get near enough I'll sting him with a load—I'll teach him a lesson."

"No, don't!" I implored. "Make him timid and he'll never be any good."

The last we saw of Rufus was at the top of the hill slope. He had paused—then his nose and tail straightened and he began to run; a bunch of quail rose before him, and he broke after, completely out of his head. He vanished.

We stopped, puffing. Irwin swore.

"Let him go. And good riddance. He can come back when he gets ready. I'll not chase him up."

The other party rounded the foot of the draw; arrived, with Crosby grinning.

"What 'll you take for your dog, Irwin?"

"Five dollars."

"Give you a dollar and a half."

"That's about all he's worth, too," said Franklin.

"He needs a thorough working over," Crosby advised. "You make a pet of him, Jack. A hunting dog can't be a family dog."

"Well, Rufe's a part of the family," Irwin answered. "I've never laid whip on him. It would break his heart—a blow from me. I hate to see a dog cringe. Maybe I'm too easy."

"Break his heart!" quoth Crosby. "I'd break his head. Are you going to look for him?"

"No!"

"All right. Let's go in. We've birds to spare, and my dog's tired."

We returned to the house. In the morning the Irishman was still absent. Irwin was worried, although in his dudgeon he tried to conceal it. Rufus seemed to be a sore topic with him now; disappointment, more than anything else, I conceived, for he had loved his dog. There was a little-traveled road at the other side of the ridge upon which Rufe had vanished. Franklin proposed that some of us get into his machine and scout along it to find the dog or persons who might have seen him while the rest tramped the brush.

Crosby volunteered to do the tramping. We others piled aboard, and from the main road struck into that lesser trail which, Franklin said, threaded among the hills and

debouched several miles beyond at an old bean field.

We had driven about two miles, speaking nobody, when we arrived at a poor camp, beside it: a rickety wagon, two equally forlorn horses tethered out, a dingy tent, three ragged children playing in the dust, a wan, slatternly woman sitting upon a camp-stool holding a child of eighteen months in her lap, a bearded, lean man engaged in cutting brush for the fire—and, lolling contented in the shade of the wagon, Rufus!

That was the last straw. The humiliation was complete, and Irwin threw away all restraint.

"The confounded worthless vagabond! I'll either give him away or shoot him. Why—damn it!" He was out of the machine first; whistled peremptorily. And the red setter, whose ears had pricked instantly, roused in earnest at the familiar notes. "Oh!" Irwin muttered. "Humph!" For Rufus was tied.

The camp group stared at us.

"Where 'd you get that dog?" Irwin demanded doubly wrathful.

The bearded man straightened and rubbed his chin. He had honest mildly blue eyes and a voice with a drawl.

"Is that yore yaller dawg, stranger?"

"I rather think he is, or was," Irwin retorted, "as these other gentlemen will agree. Want him, do you, before I shoot him? What did you expect to do with him? His name's on his collar and so is mine."

"We didn't aim to steal him, mister," quavered the woman. "You-all are lookin' for him, I reckon?"

"Exactly, ma'am. And we've found him, such as he is."

"We ain't harmed him none," spoke the man. "See hyar? He's friendly. He don't need shootin'." And he went over, stooped and uttered a word, at which the shameless Rufus gamboled upon him and licked his face—with an eye, nevertheless, upon his former master in glint of apology.

"Set daown, set daown," the man invited. "I'll tell you about that dawg. He's an awful good dawg. You oughtn't shoot him. What kind you call him? Some kind o' haound, I reckon."

"He's a no-'count, full-blooded Irish setter," Irwin rapped out, visibly cross. We sat where convenient.

"Want to know! Irish setter, hey? I never did see one like him. Bird dawg, must be."

"He is—or supposed to be."

"Wall, I'm sorry I kept yore dawg, stranger; but you see it was this way. Me and my old woman and kids are travelin' through; ain't in no hurry, and jest for luck we turned off on this hyar road, to see whar it went to. But the baby tuk sick day before yisterday, and seemed like there warn't nothin' she could eat that 'd set right. I'd seen a lot o' these hyar quail, and I jest thought if I could shoot a few and make broth out o' them, why, mebbe the baby 'd thrive on that, for it 'd be powerful nourishin'. The pore little tike was plain starvin' to death. So I got out my gun—I'll show it to ye. Fetch me my gun, Bobby," he called. And the eldest of the children lugged a gun out of the wagon and brought it. "'Tain't much of a shootin' iron," the man explained.

And it wasn't. We saw an ancient Zulu—an old musket, bored for a shotgun; muzzle-loading, long-barreled and clubby.

"I used that in Missouri on squirrels," said he, not unfondly. "She's a strong shooter; I've killed deer with her, for she slings buckshot fine. But when it comes to these hyar pa-tridges—gosh, strangers, but they don't give a feller much chance! I cain't see 'em on the ground, account the brush; and fust thing I know they're up and away 'fore I cain pull trigger on 'em. I kep' a trampin' and tryin', and on a sudden I see this hyar dawg. That was about five o'clock yisterday evenin'. He was standin' stiff, starin' at somethin' ahead of him; and he acted so sort o' paralyzed that I says, 'Rattler, shore!' You see, I thought it was a rattlesnake charmin' him. He mought have been thar an hour; I dunno. Anyhow, he acted like he couldn't move; and when I went in to him he jest cast me a glance over his shoulder, much as to say, 'Help me, mister.' Yep, I reckon he'd been thar in that brush a plumb hour."

"Darn his skin!" muttered Irwin with sulky glance at Rufe.

"I sort o' stole up behind him, to shoot that 'er snake, and fust thing I knowed a quail got up right under his nose and a hull batch follered, little way beyond; and durned if they didn't skeer me. Seemed like the dawg was surprised, too, for he dropped right flat on his belly and he lay thar till I told him he needn't. Mighty keerful he was, too. 'By ginger, that's a quail haound,' I thinks, for I didn't find no snake. 'If you're a quail haound," said I to him, 'you go git 'em and I'll shoot 'em.' The quail hadn't flew fur; I'd seen 'em settle daown ag'in. And when I spoke to the dawg and says, 'Go find 'em!' blamed if he didn't understand—he's a powerful smart dawg, mister; for he went ahead, leadin' me, and purty soon he got to actin' stiff and pecoolar ag'in; and when he stopped, without me sayin' nothin' at all, I aidged on, lookin' whar his smeller was p'intin', and I see quail—I see two runnin', and I see one squatted under a bush, jest about to run. I got *him*. I—"

"Sitting? On the ground!" we reproached.

"Yes, sir. What 'd I keer whar I got him, when my baby was dyin'? I knowed I couldn't ha' hit him on the fly. Then another hull passel rose, and that dawg, daown on his belly, looked at me, askin' why I didn't shoot ag'in. O' course I had to reload. Wall, fust I couldn't find that quail; knowed jest whar he was, but he wasn't. But that thar dawg, here he come, to help me, and durned if he didn't snoot that quail out and pick him up and fetch him to me in his mouth. Smartest dawg I ever met. Would you sell him, stranger?"

"I don't know," said Irwin, now smoothing Rufe's sleek head. "He's a vagabond. Ought to be shot. Well, what next?"

"Why, we went to huntin', him and me. All I did was to foller whar he led. And when he stiffened up and begun to trail, I trailed behind him, and when he stopped, I snuck in—couldn't budge him; he was froze; and I reckoned thar was quail mighty clost. Couldn't see 'em this time; and all of a sudden, when I was peerin', ready for bus'ness, a slather of 'em riz, and I whaled away into the thick of 'em and daowned two! Yes, sirs; this gun certainly throws shot permiskus. Sic', Tige!' said I; and he faound both them birds and fetched 'em to me."

"'Sic', Tige!' That's good," Franklin commented. Irwin continued to stroke Rufe's head.

"Wall, I called him off, and him and me we legged it back to camp, and I skun them birds—"

"Skinned them!"

"Yes, sirs; skun 'em and drawed 'em, and my old woman set 'em to simmerin'; and we gives the baby a tin cup o' the soup, and that soup went right to the spot, seemed like. Fust bite the baby 'd et in two days! We hain't fitted out with much meat excep' bacon and salt pork, and we're plumb tired o' rabbits. There was somethin' about that quail soup that the baby hankered for. 'All right,' says I to my wife. 'That dawg and me 'll git the quail as long as the baby 'll eat 'em and you'll cook 'em.' Says she, 'Do you reckon Gawd sent that dawg to help you? He's a miracle, pop.' And I says, 'Thar he was, waitin' for me in the brush. How he come thar I don't know, but we cain thank Gawd, anyhow. I guess He tuk pity on me for bein' sech a pore shot. He could see I warn't gittin' nary quail for the baby.'"

"What did you do? Tie the dog up?" Irwin asked.

"Yes, sir. I see his name on his collar, so I quit callin' him Tige; and I see the owner's name, too, which I reckon is yourn; but I couldn't turn him off without feedin' him, and I didn't know whar he belonged—and seemed like whoever owned him wouldn't mind if I jest gathered in a few more quail while I had him handy. I 'lowed somebody 'd know him. I didn't calkilate to steal him. If you don't want him, mister, I'll be mighty glad to keep him. What 'll you take?"

"Did you get more quail?"

"I was jest about startin' out. Them quail are ham fat. But they ain't for we-uns; they're for the baby. That baby's perked up wonderful. Drinkin' milk, naow, and gittin' real sassy."

"She's goin' to get well," said the mother. "Her stomick's waked up. That was all the matter; stomick sort o' logy. Will you

sell us the dawg, mister, please? You ain't figgerin' on shootin' him!"

Irwin fondled Rufe's contented ears, and he had a pondering look in his face. I thought that he was about to yield.

"Sell you, Rufus? Would you like to stay on, Rufus, you worthless old hound? You deserve to be shot at sunrise."

Rufus whined deprecatorily. His eyes beseeched lovingly.

"He'd be awful well treated," drawled the man. "Why, them kids love him half to death. We'd set a lot o' store by him. 'Pears like you don't want him, but I'll tell you what I'll do. I'm a pore man; if I warn't I wouldn't be travelin' this way. I'll give you a dollar and four bits for this bird haound, 'cause I reckon he's cost you that already."

Irwin laughed easily. He untied the cord from the neck of Rufus.

"No," he said. "I'm sorry, but I couldn't part with Rufus. My wife—you see, my wife likes him. In fact, I've refused—"

"Give you two dollars."

"Nope. My wife wouldn't let me sell him, I'm afraid."

"Give you five. That's all the cash I cain rake up."

"There you are, Jack," Franklin prompted. "You said you'd sell him for five. I heard you."

"A go, is it?" exclaimed the man hopefully.

"A dog like this is valued by breeders at one hundred and twenty-five dollars and up." Irwin smiled. "You see, he's a registered dog and a trained dog, and his father and mother were listed at three hundred dollars each. He'll bring three hundred dollars in a year or two."

Man and woman cried out.

"That dawg's valued higher'n a good hoss, stranger! You ain't jokin'?"

"But I," Irwin resumed, "wouldn't part with Rufus for five hundred dollars. Fact is, money can't buy him. I'm mighty glad he helped you out, though. How are you fixed for quail?"

"Wall, got one yit, unteched. Mebbe I mought pot more; I dunno. The dawg did the findin'."

We had stopped on our way when sighting a covey running across the road. Now Irwin emptied his pockets, we others emptied ours; and we piled up twelve birds, for the early morning shooting had been rather easy.

"Will that stock you?"

"Thank ye, thank ye! Yes, siree! See that, ma? Reckon the baby 'll be ready for bacon and pork by time she spells off'n these."

We rose. The children were beginning to bawl at the sign of losing their "bird haound." Irwin spoke.

"Do you figure on coming back this way some time, sir?"

"In the spring. Yes, sir; shorely do."

Irwin scribbled on his card.

"Here. You look me up in town and I'll give you a pup from that dog."

"A pup out o' that thar dawg?"

"Yes."

The man's homely face was transformed. Such a beaming!

"Do you hear, kids? Now shut up. Stranger, if I could have a pup out o' that thar dawg—why, I declar' I'd be so set up—I reckon I'd git to be a shooter on the fly."

"You shall have him, I promise you," said Irwin.

We drove away with Rufus, who appeared glad indeed to be relieved of his duties.

"Pity the dog didn't work that way with you," Franklin remarked. "I've a hunch he can beat that pointer when he has the notion."

"Rufus?" Irwin laughed gently, Rufus half on his lap. "Oh, it was simply a joke with him—that match. And he's no meat butcher. He did settle down once, you remember, just to make good. But we had quail enough and the sport got tame, and he quit us and our foolery and went where he was really needed. Then he got to work."

"He'll have a fine head when it fills out," said I.

"Head!" Irwin snorted. "What's a head without a heart? And Rufus has a heart, I've told you. That's why I love him. Eh, Rufus?"

The Super-Swing

Exploits of the Shadowers Inc.

Part II

by David Fox

Author of "The Man Who Convicted Himself."

WHAT HAS ALREADY HAPPENED

THE Shadowers, Inc., an association of seven crooks who are specialists in as many kinds of crime, have organized a discreet detective agency and have solved the difficult Punderford case. No other clients appear for some time and they are becoming discouraged when Robert Frost, employed as a butler by Phineas Sneed, a very wealthy recluse, presents his master's card and asks them to call upon the latter to investigate the receipt of a threatening anonymous letter. They find Sneed a sour, timid old man reluctant to help them beyond giving them the letter. He is especially unwilling to allow them to examine a safe which he claims to have invented and which he admits has been tampered with. He also refuses to give them any information concerning the mechanic who installed the safe and who has since supposedly died. As they are leaving his apartment the Shadowers discover that it conceals a dictaphone and observe a dark, forbidding woman, apparently the butler's wife, enter Sneed's room without knocking. The Shadowers decide that there is more mystery about Sneed than he has called them in to investigate.

CHAPTER IV.

"O-FOUR-TWO-SIX."

"SUPPOSE we take the letter into consideration first, for after all, as Cliff says, it is the main key to the problem," Rex suggested. They were seated once more about the council-table in his private office, and to Lucian Baynes and Henry Corliss, who had joined them, had been recounted the gist of their conversation with their new client. "We can compare notes afterward as to any curious facts which may or may not have come under our individual notice and then decide which of us is to assume charge of the case."

"That goes without saying, doesn't it?" Henry glanced at Cliff as the latter produced the letter, and taking it from the envelope, he spread it on the table before them. "Hope I'll get a look in as alienist when Cliff finds the nut who wrote that letter. Read it to us, old man."

Cliff complied and then observed:

"I'd like to know what you all think of it before I express an opinion. I want to see if one peculiarity about it strikes you as forcibly as it does me."

George Roper shook his head.

"I've worked every graft and played every con game going in my time and I flatter myself that I've learned to be a pretty fair judge of human nature. Offhand, I wouldn't say that the fellow who

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wrote that was altogether a nut. It is worded in a hifalutin style, but people are sometimes unconsciously dramatic when they are laboring under strong emotion, and there's another way to look at it, too. What if he had wanted to make it read like the work of a crank in case it fell into other hands than Sneed's, but was convinced that the old man himself would know very well what it meant and who had sent it? I'm confounded if it don't ring true to me, as though the writer were sincere; however he might have been mistaken in bringing his accusations and threats against Sneed."

"Did the old man smoke while you were there?" Henry asked as he took up the letter and sniffed it audibly.

"No. There wasn't the slightest odor of tobacco in his rooms," Rex replied quickly.

"Then our letter-writing friend must have a varied and inconsistent taste," the chemical expert declared as he passed the letter to Lucian. "You're rather a connoisseur, Luce. You can't escape that smell of rank Virginia tobacco; it is stronger on the envelope than on the sheets of paper, but the whole thing is permeated by another blend, too. It's something more delicate and yet quite as penetrating. Do you get it?"

"My olfactory sense may not be as well developed as yours, but I certainly do get it, Henry!" Luce made a wry face as he dropped the envelope and held the inner sheets gingerly to his nose. "Yes, by Jove, it is the purest Russian and of a grade that I thought couldn't be obtained nowadays! The chap probably kept a box or two of rare cigarettes in the same drawer with this writing-paper, but by preference smoked that other unspeakable stuff. Hello!"

His eyes had fallen upon the handwriting and he read the letter carefully twice through to himself while the others watched him. At length he glanced across the table at Cliff.

"Here is another inconsistency. I wonder if this is what you meant, my dear fellow? The bottom of the page ends with the sentence, 'For every hour spent in that hell you shall suffer,' and the word 'suffer' is repeated at the top of the next page. That is one of the fundamental rules of our English cousins in commercial correspondence, and is as essentially national a touch as is the peculiar formation of some of the letters, particularly the 'e,' yet the phraseology is distinctly American. I should say that the writer was an Englishman, educated over there, but long enough in this country for our form of speech to have become second nature to him. Was it that to which you referred?"

Cliff smiled.

"You and Henry have both approached it and by clues which I hadn't discovered, but your final conclusion is wrong, I think," he replied. "There isn't necessarily any inconsistency between the phraseology and the form of writing, or the two widely different kinds of tobacco. George, would you say that the letter was composed by some whining old dotard?"

"Hardly!" George chuckled dryly. "All the sentences are clipped short except the second one, in which the thought of his real or fancied wrongs ran away with him. He may have stuck in a phrase or two at the end to make it appear to others than Sneed like the work of a crank, but the letter as a whole wasn't studied, and I should say it had been written on the spur of the moment by some strong-willed fellow in a violent passion."

"Exactly!" Cliff crowed exultantly. "I admit that I am still a good deal of a tyro at deducing personality from handwriting, but unless all the signs in those books on the subject which Rex got for me are wrong these words were written by an elderly man to whom penmanship was rather a task."

"And you claim there is no inconsistency—" Henry was beginning, but Rex cried:

"I see, Cliff! You mean that letter is the work of two people, an elderly man who wrote at the dictation of a younger, stronger one!"

"That would account for the tobacco, of course," Henry agreed. "Say that the young fellow smoked the Russian cigarettes and the old man the common domestic variety."

"I wonder that didn't occur to any of

us but Cliff!" exclaimed Luce. "The writer was English and the other American. It is just a supposition, but if we assume that some young man of Sneed's own social position keeps an English valet and prevailed upon him to write that letter we will have a working basis even though it is a trifle too much to take for granted."

"No. That was my idea. Do you see how the pen fairly plows through the paper on the upward strokes and how wavering and uncertain it is on the downward ones?" Cliff pointed to a line here and there as he spoke. "That is not the free hand of one lately accustomed to much clerical work, and yet the formation of the characters is typical of the old-fashioned London clerk, as Luce says. Following the theory he just brought forward, let us say that this valet has formerly occupied a superior position, but had fallen in some way upon evil days. Don't smile, George!"

"Oh, I'll grant you that an Englishman wrote that, elderly if you like and a former clerk; but why the valet? You'll be saying next that he wrote it under compulsion!"

"Something very like it!" Cliff retorted. "He wasn't exactly forced to do it, for the writing doesn't indicate fear, but it does show hesitation and reluctance and a certain amount of emotion. Man-servant or not, I think he was influenced by the younger, stronger character and persuaded against his better judgment."

"Well, we are agreed on one point, at least," observed Rex. "Two had a hand in this affair, one dictating and one writing. Henry has told us their taste in smoking tobacco and Luce deduced their respective nationalities, while from the phrasing of the letter George claims that the American is young, strong, impetuous and of violent passions, and from the chirography Cliff has found that the Englishman is elderly, emotional and of weaker will. So far, so good, but we haven't heard a word from you, Phil. What is on your mind?"

Phil roused himself with an effort from his own train of thought.

"Oh, I heard what you fellows have been saying, all right, and I know from the last case we handled that it isn't bunk by a long shot, but when it comes to a guessing game like that you'll have to count me out! I couldn't tell from that letter whether one guy or ten had a hand in writing it, and if you had their photographs in front of you where would you go from here?"

"Gad, but you are a pesimist—" Cliff was beginning, but Rex interrupted him.

"Nevertheless, we've all had the floor and it is Phil's turn. I have been observing this unusual concentration of his and I thing he has a suggestion to make. Out with it, Phil!"

"No, it's just a request." The younger man leaned forward earnestly across the table. "Whichever of you fellows take charge of this case, for the love of Heaven let me work on it in my own way until I have satisfied myself about something. It is a point no one could handle but me, and I don't even see any definite connection between it and that letter as yet, but it could't be just coincidence! Unless I'm away off, old Sneed is the biggest liar and fraud in creation and he has made an enemy who, as that guy says, would 'stop at nothing' to get back at him. And Sneed knows it, too! You can laugh, but I tell you that old boy is in fear of his life!"

"Oh, come, Phil, that is a bit too much!" Luce drawled. "He wouldn't have come to a practically unknown organization like ours if the affair were as drastic as that. Granted that he wants to avoid notoriety, any man would chance it by going to the authorities for protection rather than be murdered in his bed!"

"Not if it would put him deeper in Dutch himself than the guy would be who is after him!" Phil objected. "Mind you, this is only a wild guess on my part and if it should turn out to be right that enemy of his may have misjudged him, but you haven't seen that apartment of his, Luce. Rex can tell you that it is protected like a fort!"

Rex nodded.

"There were several unique features about it. George got a few of them, but I wondered if you and Cliff did, Phil."

"I'm not blind, or deaf, either!" the expert on safes retorted. "I might as well have been, though, for any word that could be heard from one room to another of that

apartment and for a very good reason; the walls were padded! Did you notice how thick they were? When we were talking to Sneed, and Cliff came, Robert sounded a buzzer in the living-room to announce him, but the old man didn't call out 'come in,' for he knew his voice wouldn't be heard with the door closed; he crossed over and opened it, and he was careful to find out that Cliff was really our handwriting expert before he ordered the butler to admit him. He told us about the attempt to rob him, but he wouldn't let us see the safe until Rex threatened that if he didn't we would throw up the case."

"I discovered, too, that the walls were padded when I looked out of the reception-room window at the stream of traffic on the avenue and realized that not a sound rose from it. I tried then to open the window, but it couldn't be done; the sash was sealed tight," Rex remarked. "George discovered later that there was a dictaphone concealed in the wall of that room, behind a fake electric light button."

"I found out something else that may have escaped you fellows before we entered the apartment itself." George chuckled reminiscently. "Lord, how it took me back to the good old poolroom days! When Robert showed us up to that private entrance hall and stopped to unlock the door he sounded the knocker twice. It couldn't be heard within, of course, with the walls padded, but I think it had some electrical connection that announced our coming, for Robert purposely fussed a lot with that key before he got the door unlocked, and in the mean time I saw a perfectly good peep-hole open in the carving on one of the panels and an eye appeared, the woman's, I think. Rex was too much interested in that little window high up in the wall and what it looked out on to notice—"

"It didn't 'look out on' anything, if you remember," Rex interjected. "That and the one in the library which opened on the roof court—if Robert is to be believed—were for purposes of ventilation and light only. If the old chap kept a harem the zenana couldn't be more carefully secluded! Robert got nervous, too, when I asked him about that first window; his hand trembled so that he could scarcely unlock the door, and Sneed wasn't any too pleased later when he learned that Robert had explained to us the way in which the apartment was laid out. He as much as ordered us not to question his servants any more. By the way, Phil, did you ever in your late profession come across a safe that was installed like his?"

Phil shook his head.

"No." He spoke with an odd repression. "I've heard, though, that a similar mechanical contrivance was possible, but put to a far different use. Don't ask me any more now, you fellows! Let me work in my own way and you can go as far as you like with that letter—"

His speech ended in a gulp and he sat staring with protruding eyes at the envelope of the anonymous letter which he had picked up idly as he talked and was turning over and over in his hands. They clenched now until the stiff paper crumpled between them, and suddenly he sprang to his feet.

"I've got it! It wasn't a coincidence after all! Look here. I told you fellows a minute ago that I didn't see any definite connection between the letter and the point I wanted to investigate, but I see it now! I've got the proof! Sneed's enemy didn't write that, if Cliff guessed right about his age and character, and he couldn't have dictated it, not in that language, but the warning comes from him all right, or somebody who has taken up the grudge for him!" Phil hesitated, his eager face flushing, and then he burst out, "Gee, I know this sounds like awful nerve when you all think I am just a roughneck yegg, good enough perhaps to crack a crib, but not there with the headwork—will you give me a chance to boss this job? Luce got the dope on the last case from a lump of dried mud, because he was the only one who knew where it came from and what it was used for; now I am the only one of us who stands a show of finding the guy for whom that letter was written, and I could use nearly all of you and save time right from the start! Will you give me my chance?"

"What do you say?" Rex asked slowly as he looked around the table. "Phil knows

we don't think he is a roughneck, he is just as expert in his line as any of us are in ours."

"More expert than I am in mine," Cliff said generously. "I don't want the leadership in this case, but I would hate to give up working on this letter now—"

"I wouldn't want you to!" Phil cried. "If you would stick to it and tell me every hint you can dope out of it I wouldn't ask any more of you!"

"You all took my word for it in the last affair when I told you I was the only one who could handle it, and you were willing to follow my directions blindly," Luce reminded them. "Phil even went away out of his line to get some information, and he did as much, if not more, than any of us. Now if he can tell us what connection there is between the attempted robbery and the anonymous letter, and what made him so sure all of a sudden that such a connection existed I am ready and willing to take my instructions from him."

"And I." George nodded. "I am beginning to understand now, Phil, why you were so insistent about finding out who built that safe and what had become of him. You had heard of Sneed's invention before, hadn't you? The letter speaks of the dead returning; maybe you have reason to suspect that this 'Jules Dumois' or 'Dupuy' is a pretty lively corpse!"

"Henry?" Rex turned to the rotund medical expert inquiringly, and the latter shrugged.

"Oh, let Phil take the ship, by all means! He thinks he knows what he is getting at, anyway, and as he says, where do we go from here if we depend solely on what can be deduced from the letter? It won't give us the names and addresses of the two men who concocted it, and from what you have told me Sneed isn't likely to give you any more information than he can help, for fear of giving his own hand away. We can't go through the city with a fine-toothed comb looking for a young American with an elderly English pal, or advertise for them, and if Phil can locate them by going at the case from another angle, let him tackle it."

"But are you sure that you can?" Rex turned doubtful eyes on their colleague. "You said that you had absolute proof—"

"I have." The careless, happy-go-lucky note was gone from Phil's voice and he spoke with grave seriousness. "I am not going to tell you why or how I came to know about it, but there is a certain—well, call it a code number, that came into my mind the minute I caught a glimpse of the mechanism which controlled that safe of Sneed's. Whether he has ever heard that number or not I don't know, but somebody evidently thinks that he has, and the letter must have been too vague to suit them. They wanted to make sure he would know who was on his trail and that it wasn't any bluff, so before the letter was mailed they jotted this little reminder down in the corner. It is so faint that you can hardly see it, and I only noticed it myself a few minutes ago. Sneed was probably too upset to get it, and it might not mean anything to him if he did, but I—I know the code!"

He smoothed the envelope flat upon the table and pointed to one corner. There, so lightly penciled as to be barely discernible appeared the number, "0426."

"It is agreed, then," Rex said after a pause. "Phil, the case is yours!"

CHAPTER V.

THE MAN ACROSS THE HALL.

"IT'S mighty fine of you boys to give me this chance!" Phil looked with sparkling eyes about the table at his fellow Shadowers. "I needn't tell you that I will do my level best to make good and prove that you didn't pick a bloomer when you trusted me to run this investigation. Of course, I don't know how much of a hand I'll be at telling other guys what to do, for I worked alone in the old days from the time that I turned my first trick, but if you will all just work with me and advise me when I get in a hole I am sure we can't fail!"

"We won't!" George asserted confidently. "I don't suppose you have thought out yet any special work for each of us to do?"

"You're just the fellow for one lead I want followed up," Phil replied. "You were once in the show business, weren't you?"

"'Show business'?" George repeated in surprise. "I ran a shell game with a circus in my early days, and worked the carnival circuits with every fake device for enticing kale from the pockets of hayseeds that was invented at that time. But why—"

"Coney Island closes for the season at the end of the month, but there are bound to be some busted concessions down there that would be glad to sublease right now and get out from under," Phil remarked. "You ought to be able to pick up a fortune-telling booth or something of that sort for a song. I wish you would, and get in with as many of the show people in the amusement parks as you can. I want to get a line on a woman known as 'Jen' who used to be in the carnival business—slack wire stuff was her specialty, I think. She had a husband called 'Cap' who worked the same circuit with her, but I don't remember what his graft was if I ever heard. Try to get track of them, will you?"

George's ministerial features lighted with a smile.

"My son, you have given me a stunt after my own heart!" he exclaimed enthusiastically. "I don't think I have lost any of the old patter, and the sound of the barker's spiel will be music to my ears again! When do I start?"

"Go down this afternoon and look the ground over; mix with the bunch and locate a concession as soon as you can. When you're fixed let us know where and what kind of stunt you are pulling, and if you do get on the trail of the woman and her husband phone Ethel right away."

"'Cap' and 'Jen,'" George ruminated. "Are those the only names you knew them by? What do they look like?"

"I don't know them; never saw them in my life; as a matter of fact, I've only heard them spoken of." Phil seemed to be choosing his words with unusual care. "They are a pretty decent, hard-working couple, I gathered; and the woman especially is the open-hearted kind who would take anybody in who was sick or in trouble. That's all I can tell you about them, and I know it is mighty little dope to go on, but I don't want to pass up any chance, no matter how slim."

"If there're still in the game you needn't worry. People in that line of work—whether it's circus, carnival, or amusement park—are all like one big family, and I am almost sure to find some one who can put me on their track." George rose. "If I am going to do this thing in character I will just have time to climb into some clothes fit for the part and get down there and look about a little before the afternoon rush starts. Any further instructions?"

Phil glanced half deprecatingly at Rex, but the latter shook his head smilingly.

"No, this is your show. I haven't any suggestions to offer, but on the contrary, I am waiting to take my instructions from you, my dear fellow!"

"It seems like rotten cheek, when you brought us all together in this organization! You're the real leader." Phil flushed again. "If you don't feel like doing what—what I thought of asking you to do later, Rex, why don't mind giving me the office."

"No, I'm playing the game all the way through. Going, George?"

"Yes. You will hear from me as soon as I have arranged to take up my new vocation. I'll wager I coin money at it, too, so even if Sneed doesn't show the proper appreciation for our efforts in his behalf I at least will not be out of pocket! See you later."

"I wonder how he deduced that Sneed was a miser," Cliff remarked when the panel had closed behind the other's attenuated figure. "Of course, George had an opportunity to study him at first hand longer than I did this morning, but I would like to see a specimen of the old boy's handwriting."

"I meant to bring you one," Phil declared. "I think I have about got his number, but if you can dope out anything more from his hen-tracks I'll be mighty glad."

"Then I'll get to work on this letter at once." Cliff moved toward his own office. "I want to study it in connection with some of those reference books of mine and

you'll find me here whenever you bring the other specimen."

With a nod to the rest he disappeared, and Lucian Baynes stirred in his chair.

"When Henry told me who had sent his card to us in my absence, Rex, I took the liberty of looking in your files before your return and I found that you had listed Sneed as a collector of curios," he observed. "None of you who called on him have mentioned such a collection. Does it really exist?"

"Yes, of a kind, but I doubt whether it comes within your scope, Luce. The walls of his living-room are covered with weapons; not firearms, but swords and spears and knives. There is no attempt at arrangement, and from a casual glance I should not say that any of them were of especial value. I fancy he picked up here and there whatever struck his eye. Odd sort of taste for a feeble old man who seems to be anything but bloodthirsty, to say the least."

"It is just an example of atavism, I suppose," Luce drawled with a shrug. "That arch-murderer Bennington had a hobby for hunting and classifying butterflies, if you remember, and Mrs. Neil, who wrecked all those banks, put most of her money into a collection of embroidered church vestments. I would like a peep into that living-room of Sneed's, but I don't suppose you have planned any course of action for me yet, Phil?"

"I have, though, and one that you ought to take to like a duck to water!" Phil chuckled. "For the time being you are not a member of the Shadowers, but a gentleman of leisure, traveling for your health. That English accent of yours will come in good if you can keep it up. Go to the Burlingame, engage a suite of rooms and get in solid with the management. You know what I mean; live quietly, but tip everybody like a prince and scrape acquaintance with the proprietor if you can. I want to know all about those rooms of Sneed's being remodeled, what excuse he gave for leasing that whole top floor for himself alone, and whatever you can find out about the installation of that safe. Do you get me?"

"I do!" The drawl was gone from Luce's tones. "I might even ingratiate myself with Sneed. I think I see a way—"

"You won't have a chance to meet him!" Phil stated. "What do you think he has shut himself up away from everybody for? I don't believe that even the proprietor has been in those rooms since they were fixed over, and it would take a fire to smoke the old weasel out, but there's no harm in trying. Get a lot of baggage with fancy labels, think up a classy monaker and sail in with the moss-grown swells over there. Don't phone us from the hotel, of course, but keep in touch with us."

"I'm off!" Luce paused in the aperture leading to the outer office. "By the way, Henry's cheerful face isn't known at the Burlingame, either. Couldn't he call on me if you have any further instructions—"

"Henry is going out of town for a day or so," Phil interrupted, adding as Luce turned to depart, "This is a mighty personal question, Henry, and I wouldn't ask it if any of the rest of us could possibly get away with what I want done. Rex might swing it because he has never been sent up, but I need him here. In your days of fake medicine did you ever operate unsuccessfully in this State?"

Henry drew his plump form up with dignity.

"My son, I have been the guest of the government at Joliet and various other resorts of the Middle West, if that is what you are driving at, but I never extended my mission of healing to New York. The high-priced specialists had got in ahead of me here at my own game."

"Then you wouldn't be identified up at Sing Sing? There's a new warden, anyway, and he has changed most of the staff. Do you suppose you could be a welfare worker looking up the record of a former con for the sake of some dying buddy of his whom you have reformed?"

"Why couldn't I be a relative?" Henry suggested. "I needn't be dying to want to know what has become of my unfortunate brother or son!"

"Because you don't know the name he was sent up under, much less his real one. This pal has lost track of him and only learned that he was serving a term up there

about three years ago for burglary." Phil's tone had lowered and he did not meet the eyes of his two companions as he added, "The yeggs he trailed around with called him the 'Gull.'"

"Do you happen to know what he looked like?" Henry worded his question delicately. "It might help if I knew his approximate age and a few other little details that his dying pal would naturally have disclosed in talking about him."

"He was young, under thirty," replied Phil slowly. "He had sandy hair and he would have been freckled, I guess, even in stir. There wasn't anything of the hardened crook about him, but he was a dreamy kind of a nut and easily led."

"What if he is there still and the warden trots him out for me?" Henry rubbed his bald head uneasily. "I'm not much up on this welfare business, and if he should swear that he never heard of this buddy he's supposed to have had the warden might get leery. Not that there is anything out against me, and I admit it would be a novel experience to visit a pen of my own free will, but I am not over-anxious to bring myself to the personal attention of the authorities."

"The Gull isn't there now," Phil said briefly. "Your reformed second-story man heard that he had been pardoned, and mind, he never knew of any trick the Gull actually turned. He was just in with the wrong crowd and liked to talk as big as the rest of them. That's the line to take, see?"

"His pal may have reformed, but he needn't have become a snitcher!" Henry remarked. "I'm going to get real fond of my protégé before I reach the Big House. What does he want to find the Gull for? Is he going to leave him some of his wealth? He must have done pretty well at his game before he turned over a new leaf or a smug reformer like me wouldn't take so much trouble to pander to his last wishes."

"Oh, he could just have liked the lad and wanted to see him once more. That's only a detail. The main thing is to bluff the warden into showing you the records and to find out if you can what has become of the Gull."

Henry rose somewhat heavily to his feet.

"I am going out first and locate some mission, or whatevery they call it, where these welfare birds hang out," he announced. "One or two of them came my way at Joliet, but I didn't encourage them. Now I want to see them in their natural habitat and get the line of talk one of them would be likely to hand the warden. I'll get up there on the first train to-morrow morning, and I ought to be able to pull off that interview and return by evening. You'll hear from me as soon as I get in."

"Henry is growing cynical, I am afraid," Rex remarked when he and Phil were alone together. "It is evident that you know what you are doing, my boy, but I confess I don't quite follow you. Second-story workers and side-show people are queer fish to be in the same net with Sneed. We mustn't forget that he is our client and whatever mystery surrounds him is his own affair as far as we are officially concerned. Don't let your interest in the safe blind you to the main issue."

"I'm not!" exclaimed Phil. "I am only going at it in my own way to find out who wrote that letter. With Cliff working on it now and Luce as close to old Sneed as he can get, I knew I could spare Henry and George to follow up those old leads, but I want you to try something entirely different. We all know that you—well, you don't belong to us. Luce has a classy veneer, all right, and Cliff was a college man, but you've come from the real people and you've still got swell friends. I'd bet that you even know some of the society dames and financiers to whom you sent the Shadowers' announcements!"

Rex laughed.

"I was careful to choose people who wouldn't know or recognize me in case they required our professional services! But I don't want to use any of my old acquaintances if I can help it, Phil. I *do* belong to you of my own choice, and I've turned my back on them and their world."

He was still smiling, but there was a note of pain in his voice and the younger man flushed.

"I didn't mean to bring up anything I shouldn't, Rex, but it struck me that if you wanted to—to appear again in your old

crowd you might be able to find out a little more about Sneed and the kind of life he must have led before he shut himself up like this. A man with all his money wouldn't have buried himself alive the way he has without some good reason, and I want to find out what that reason is. I am dead certain it isn't only because of the enemy I told you about; it goes back further than that. I want to know everything I can learn about his life during the past—well, say ten years. Even if he didn't go in for society his wife may have done so when she was alive, and anyway among the men who butted up against him in the financial world there ought to be one or two who knew him more or less intimately. Do you understand?"

Rex noddedd.

"I'll have to go after the old codgers, for if he has been out of the game for a decade or more the younger element won't recall him. The financial as well as the social world has a short memory, Phil. You won't expect to hear from me for a day or two?"

"No. Take your time; I may not show up here at the office again before you have all reported, but I'll communicate with Ethel or whoever else happens to be in, of course. When will you be able to get on the job?"

"At once." Rex took up his hat and stick. "I suppose it is no good to ask you what your own program is?"

"I'm not sure myself!" Phil replied candidly, with a laugh. "It all depends on what I run into. Good luck, Rex."

Yet when he was alone the smile faded from the young man's lips and an introspective look took its place as he rose and with hands thrust deep in his pockets paced rapidly to and fro. It would seem that his thoughts boded ill for some one, for his face darkened and now and then he muttered wrathfully to himself, but when at last he strode to the panel leading to the anteroom and slid it aside he called out in his usual cheerful tone:

"Hey, Ethel!"

The little secretary shifted her wad of gum.

"Anything doing?" she asked with interest. "When I got back from lunch Mr. Corliss told me he thought the ball had started rolling again, but when I asked Mr. Powell just now about it he said I should take my orders from you. I'll sure be glad to do something besides stall book-agents!"

"We have another little job on hand, and I am supposed to be running it, but I don't know how it will pan out," Phil responded. "There is something you might be able to do, but I don't want to get you into any trouble or draw the attention of the bulls to our organization. When you were caught with the goods that time they didn't take you down-town, did they?"

"Police headquarters, you mean?" The blond head shook energetically. "No, and I'm not afraid they will now, no matter what you want me to pull off for you, Mr. Howe. Just give me the dope and you needn't worry about my dragging you people into the line-up!"

"You're quite certain no one down there would spot you?" Phil insisted somewhat uneasily. "You see, that is what I want you to do, Ethel; pay a little visit to headquarters and make some inquiries for me. Think you could make yourself look homely and shabby and sickly?"

"I don't know about the sickly part, but clothes 'll make the difference in the rest," Ethel replied in matter-of-fact honesty, but she looked a trifle startled, nevertheless. "I wasn't mugged that time and I don't see how any of the dicks in Center Street would know me, but what's the lay? I'm game for it, only I want a straight story if I'm going on the carpet before the main guys."

"You'll have to have more than that; you will need an address and not a phony one, either. Where are you living now?"

"With an old dame Mr. Powell found for me when he got me out of Lefty Jane's hands. She goes out sewing by the day—"

"What does she think you do?" Phil interrupted.

"Address envelopes, piece work, for an advertising concern. Mr. Powell didn't want her to get wise that I was working for him. We've got a dinky little flat down in the Chelsea district."

Phil grinned irrepressibly.

"Must be lively for you, Ethel! Rex will have you going to night-school next!"

"And I'll tell the world I'd go if he wanted me to!" Ethel flushed. "If it hadn't been for him I would still be piking along working the shops instead of getting a chance at a swell game like yours, even if I'm not on yet to how you put it over, beyond the fact that we're all phony dicks! I'll take a tip from Mr. Powell whenever he hands one to me! But what am I supposed to be when I show up at headquarters, and who am I trying to get a line on, Mr. Howe?"

"Your own name and address will be all right. You are a working girl out of a job and staying with an old friend. You'd better have come from some Western city, though, in case you don't put your story over slick enough and they try to look you up. You've got an uncle named Jim Peterson whom you lost track of about six or seven years ago, and just lately somebody told you he'd been doing time for smuggling dope, and only got out last winter. Of course, you are sure he must have been innocent—you know the old gag, Ethel—and you would like to find him if they can help you, because he always said he would take care of you. Have you got that straight?"

"If I could think that fast and all new stuff I'd write a book, Mr. Howe!" she exclaimed admiringly. "Sure I've got it, and I'll be Little Orphan Annie with bells on!"

"Don't pull it too strong!" Phil warned. "It's only a flier, you know. When you come back on the job here all I want you to do is to stall an old gentleman named 'Sneed' if he calls up. Tell him we are working on his case and will communicate with him later."

"So he is the fall guy now, is he?" Ethel laughed. "All right, Mr. Howe. You can depend on me. Say, that man who moved into the office across the hall is kind of funny. You know, the one who breezed in this morning for a window-pole?"

"How—'funny'?" Phil paused with his hand on the door-knob, for there was a puzzled note in the girl's tones. "Have you seen him again?"

She nodded.

"I came up in the elevator with him when I got back from lunch and he bowed real pleasant; not a bit fresh. He kept looking at me and then away again quick, as though he wanted to say something, but couldn't make up his mind. I took my time about opening the door here, and he didn't close his after letting himself in. I could sort of feel that he was looking at me. He sure isn't any dick, but he seems mighty interested in us. Want me to kind of encourage him?"

"Not yet, until we see what his game really is. Watch your step at headquarters, Ethel. Good-by."

He had purposely treated as of no moment her information about their new neighbor, but he glanced curiously at the half-opened door of the other office as he passed, conscious of a quick step within. He had reached the elevator when the door behind him closed and the same firm, springy tread followed down the hall just as the car descended. Phil took in the tall, bronzed, broad-shouldered figure which Ethel had likened to that of a "movie Westerner" in one hasty but comprehensive look, and then ostentatiously turned his back, although when the street level was reached he was careful to let the other precede him and noted the free, swinging stride with which he set off eastward.

Phil himself turned west, to the rather dubious tenement quarter near the river where he had rented a room from a former pal for professional purposes and where, truth to tell, he felt more at home than in the dignified bachelor apartment in which Rex had insisted that he install himself. There, as he donned a shabby pair of old trousers and a reveled sweater all thought of the stranger was forgotten in his plans for the immediate future, but when he issued forth into the street once more some sixth sense borne of the old days warned him of offensive surveillance.

In a doorway between two dingy shops across the way stood the broad-shouldered figure of his fellow passenger in the elevator and Phil slunk hastily past. He had plainly not been recognized in his present rough attire, but one fact was certain: as George

Roper had hinted half in jest, the Shadowers were being shadowed.

CHAPTER VI.

THE SOUND UNHEARD.

THE demure young girl in the cheap, black gown and modest straw turban who timidly descended the wide, shallow stairway at police headquarters and ventured out once more into the sunshine was a shade more pale beneath the cleverly applied coating of powder than when she had entered half an hour before. In spite of her vaunted daring, Ethel had felt none too easy in her mind at venturing into the very citadel of her natural antagonists, and the unexpectedly searching inquiry to which she had been kindly but very firmly subjected by the inspector in charge had not tended to allay her inward nervousness.

Her mission would seem on the face of it to have been futile, for there was apparently no record of the further proceedings of one Jim Peterson from the expiration of his term on the previous winter, and vague promises of future aid in her search had been all that was openly vouchsafed to her. Eyes less keen than those of the little ex-shoplifter would have missed the quick, significant interchange of glances between the official and a subordinate at her mention of her uncle's name, and ears less sharply attuned would not have heard the low, peremptory order which was given as she took her departure from the bureau.

But Ethel had not spent the last two of her twenty years in skilfully outwitting the authorities for nothing. Whether she had made a favorable impression or not with her story it was evident that the whereabouts of Jim Peterson was no secret, and she shrewdly suspected that her claim of relationship might be investigated. If a plain-clothes dick were sent to interview him, and she could manage to trail along to his destination it would not be necessary to return to the offices of the Shadowers and admit her first failure in their service.

Walking to the corner she crossed the street and halted suddenly before a candy-store window as though her attention had been arrested by the delectable display within, but the heavy plate-glass reflected as in a mirror the burly figure of a young police detective who had left headquarters in her wake. For a moment her heart stopped with the thought that he might have been detailed to shadow her, but he passed without a glance and plodded off westward with a purposeful air. His brand-new suit of civilian clothes sat awkwardly upon him, and he bore himself with the unmistakable tread of one still walking his beat.

Ethel sniffed and wrinkled her small nose in contempt.

"He's some green dick!" she murmured to herself. "It ought to be easy."

The plain-clothes man did not look back, but crossed Broadway, empty of traffic in the Sunday noontide, and continued west to the river-front and then downward with the slim, black-clad figure unobtrusively but tenaciously bringing up the rear. A forest of smokestacks towered above the covered wharves on the right, and a multitude of odors rose from the heaps of merchandise piled upon the sidewalk behind the screening barricade of which Ethel adroitly dodged when her unconscious quarry showed signs of halting in his pace, for the district was as obviously unfamiliar to him as it was to her.

Finally he stopped before a low, mean shop sandwiched between a warehouse and a fruit-stand, its unshuttered, fly-specked window showing a meager display of sailors' supplies, and after a brief inspection he knocked upon the side door. An interval passed during which Ethel discreetly effaced herself behind a stalled truck; then the plain-clothes man rapped more loudly, and at length the door opened and a girl appeared.

She was a few years older than Ethel, and her thin face would have been pretty but for its habitually lowering expression, which did not lighten during the short colloquy that ensued. No word reached the listening ears of the Shadowers' secretary, but she saw the other girl's start of surprise and vigorous shake of the head before she shrugged, and turning, disappeared. In a few moments her place was taken by a huge

man of middle age whose massive shoulders filled the narrow doorway, and whose sandy beard bristled redly in the sunlight.

He gesticulated vehemently and seemed to be working himself up into a rage as he replied to the detective's questions, and Ethel did not wait for the end of the interview, but noting the number beside the dingily lettered " J. Peterson " over the door, she dodged around the corner and made for the nearest elevated station.

At the same moment Lucian Baynes, from a hotel booth not far from the Burlingame, was endeavoring to get the Shadowers' office on the wire. Clifford Nichols was alone and deeply engrossed in his study of the anonymous letter when the insistent ringing of the bell at length penetrated his consciousness, and with an exclamation of annoyance at the interruption he rose to reply.

" Is Phil there?" Lucian asked.

" No. I haven't heard from Henry or Rex, either, and even Ethel seems to have deserted the shop." Cliff's tone was distinctly aggrieved. " Are you coming over?"

" Cawn't do it, deah old thing!" Lucian drawled with an exaggerated accent, and then added, chuckling: " Who said the old birds in that hotel were dead ones? I've been invited to sit in and let a retired Senator and three friends teach me the famous American game of poker! I hope Sneed doesn't kick at the expense account we turn in when this case is over! Incidentally, I have just been smoking a cigar with the proprietor, and I've found out several things. Tell Phil that old Sneed is practically a recluse; none of the hotel employees ever enters his apartments except the waiter who takes his meals up from the restaurant, and he receives no callers but a chap named ' Hodge,' who is supposed to be his lawyer. I didn't want to seem too persistently interested, but I gathered that his disposition has only soured during the last few years, since he had his rooms done over and shut himself up in them. The proprietor didn't know I was pumping him; he merely cited Sneed as one of the eccentric characters with whom he came in contact, and I flatter myself that I drew him out rather neatly."

" Huh!" Cliff snorted. " I don't see how that is going to help us make any headway! I am at a standstill with the letter, and I'm worried about Ethel. I didn't know Phil meant to use her, and I only hope he hasn't sent her off on some hair-brained stunt that will land her in trouble. The kid is so plucky she would try anything if she thought it would be helping us. You haven't heard from Rex, have you?"

" No. Tell the rest of the boys, though, that if they want to communicate with me at the hotel they must ask for ' Mr. Lester Ballyntine.' I'll drop around when there is anything worth while reporting, and don't you worry about Ethel! That young woman has a remarkably cool head on her shoulders, and she'll come through all right, whatever she's up to! See you later."

Shaking his head dubiously, Cliff was hanging up the receiver when the entrance door of the suite opened and a tall, lanky individual appeared in gorgeous array. The handwriting expert had to look twice before he recognized the usually funereal George in a checked suit and startling waistcoat, with a huge, off-color diamond in the center of a crimson tie and a rakish imitation Panama in his hand. From the corner of his mouth a fat cigar tip-tilted, and its fumes caused Cliff to back hastily away.

" Good Lord! Where did you get that outfit? If you're not a human side-show in yourself—"

" That, my boy, is the intention!" George interrupted complacently. " Behold Zadkiel the Great! I am blending astrology with astronomy in an effort to rend the veil of the future for the hoi polloi, and I have dropped in for my robes and horoscope charts. Outside of business hours I am a prosperous good fellow, and going strong already with the other show people in Joyland. If you can send me any trade, you'll find me just inside the entrance to that amusement park, in a black-draped booth adorned with the signs of the zodiac; I've done myself up in style!"

" You have!" Cliff conceded with a grimace. " Fortunately it is Sunday or your connection with our highly dignified firm might give rise to comment among the other tenants in the building!"

George chuckled.

"I was rather an eyeful for one of them; that new fellow in the office across the hall!" he remarked. "Don't know what he was doing there to-day, but his door was open and he gaped at me like a fish as I passed. I must hurry and gather my paraphernalia together for my grand opening this afternoon."

He had turned toward Rex Powell's sanctum to cross it to his own, but the opening of the door arrested him and Phil entered briskly. He was clad once more in his usual dapper fashion and carried himself jauntily, although his face was drawn and there were tired rings around his eyes.

"Well, fellows, how goes it?" he demanded. "Got any fresh dope from the letter, Cliff? George, you look as though you had started something."

"I have!" George nodded. "Cliff's refined taste is shocked by the scenery, but as I was just telling him, it appeared to make a hit with our new little playmate across the hall."

"You mean the one who has just opened up that office? You haven't been talking to him, have you?" There was a new note in Phil's tones which caused Cliff to glance sharply at him, but before he could speak, George demanded in quick concern:

"No. Why? He looks all right to me. What's wrong with him?"

"Nothing, except that whatever line he pretends to go in for, it's a blind; his real business is with us."

"What do you mean?" Cliff exclaimed. "He borrowed a match from me in the elevator this morning and seemed to be a pleasant chap enough. Don't get jumpy, Phil; our consciences are all clear."

"Maybe so, but he tried to trail me yesterday." Phil told of the encounter, and added: "I'm pretty sure he is going it alone on his own hook, and his work is so raw that we needn't worry, only it is important for us to know why he's after us. Be sure you tell Rex about it when he comes in if I am not here. Say, where is Ethel?"

"Never showed up," responded Cliff. "I've got a message for you, though, from Luce."

He was launched upon the delivery of it when Ethel breezed in upon them. She looked warm and uncomfortable in the shabby black gown, and her mop of yellow hair was curling in moist ringlets about her powder-streaked forehead; but she nodded a cheery greeting and then demanded of Phil without preamble:

"Has my uncle got a beard like a house a fire and a build like a heavyweight champ?"

"He would have, I guess, if he let his beard grow and filled out that big frame of his!" Phil replied. "Bully for you, Ethel! Where did you see him?"

"Where he lives. The main guy at headquarters acted like he fell for my bluff, but he was leery about giving me my uncle's address till they found out the whole thing was on the level. As soon as I made myself scarce they sent a green dick straight down to ask my uncle about this niece who was trying to wish herself on him, and all I had to do was to follow."

"Do you mean to say that you have had the audacity to present yourself at police headquarters on a fake errand and then deliberately trail a detective in broad daylight?" There was a trace of respectful awe in Cliff's tones. "My dear Ethel, is there anything you wouldn't undertake?"

"Not much, but that plain-clothes bull was easy," she replied modestly. "It is a good thing, though, that I didn't give my real name and address at headquarters like you told me to, Mr. Howe, for I could see by his actions, even if I was too far off to hear what he said to the dick, that Uncle Jim wasn't adopting any nieces; not to-day!"

She told him in detail of her morning's exploit, and gave him the address she had obtained, adding as an afterthought:

"Who was the girl? She had red hair like him, and she sure looked as if she had a grouch against the world. If there is any dope you want me to get for you I'll go down to-morrow and make friends with her, if I have to pull a faint in front of her door!"

"I believe you would!" Phil agreed. "However, I'll handle that end of it now that you've found old Jim for me. You

just stay on the job here and take any reports that come in. I'm proud of you, Ethel! You're certainly the goods!"

Cliff had gone back to his study of the letter, and George was busily engaged in sorting costumes and appurtenances for his new venture in chicanery from the varied collection in his studio when Phil took his departure.

The door of the office across the corridor was closed, and although he paused for a moment, listening, no sound came from within. The man who had elected to spy upon them must be in dead earnest to have gone to such elaborate detail in order that he might keep them under espionage; but why? In whose interest had he established himself there? They were engaged upon no other case than that of Sneed, and it was inconceivable that this stranger could be connected in any way with their eccentric client.

Phil thrust this lesser problem from his thoughts, and making his way to the Burlingame, he sent up his card to Sneed. After an appreciable interval the bellman reappeared and conducted him up to the private entrance of the suite where Robert received him. The old man's manner was as deferential as before, but there was something almost furtive in his attitude, and his faded eyes did not meet those of the visitor.

They proceeded up the stairway to the great carved door leading to the reception-room. It was open, and as they crossed the threshold Phil looked vainly for the peep-hole of which George had spoken.

"Mr. Sneed has not received any more anonymous letters since yesterday, has he?" Phil asked.

"Oh, no, sir. There has been no further annoyance." Robert hesitated and then added in a lowered tone: "Excuse me, sir, but you'll be as quick as you can, and you won't excite him? Mr. Sneed is all upset over this, and he's apt to get another of his attacks, though he wouldn't like my speaking of it. He's not quite himself today."

Before Phil could reply the butler turned as though afraid he had said too much and led the way to the door of the living-room, which he threw open.

"Mr. Howe, sir," he announced, and closed the door once more.

Sneed rose from his chair, and as he came slowly forward, Phil had to check the exclamation which leaped to his lips, for the change in the older man's appearance from the previous day was startling. He had seemed shrunken and frail before, but now his wrinkled face had taken on a grayish pallor and his small, deeply sunken eyes glowed feverishly.

"You have news for me?" His thin voice cracked. "What have you found out?"

"Nothing definite as yet, Mr. Sneed. There has hardly been time, but Mr. Nichols is working on the letter," Phil replied reassuringly. "Has any further attempt been made upon your safe?"

"Certainly not, or I should have communicated with you! If you and your colleagues are still attempting to connect last week's intruder here with the writer of the letter, I can only warn you once more that you are wasting your time."

"We are willing to risk that." Phil took the chair which had not been offered and smiled with perfect self-possession at his fuming client. "The head of our firm told you yesterday that we might ask questions which would seem to you to be away off from the affair we are investigating for you, Mr. Sneed; but we have got to get at the facts in our own way. It is pretty evident from what you told us that the person who broke in here did so while you were out of town on Sunday, when only your man Robert was home, and they would scarcely have tried it in the daytime unless they knew your plans ahead."

"Impossible!" Sneed retorted. "No one knew of my plans."

"You motored, I think you said, and the car was waiting while you had breakfast." Phil did not heed the other's dissent. "You keep your own automobile, Mr. Sneed?"

"I do not, sir! The taxi service is good enough for me, as I leave my apartment so rarely; but when I motor out of the city I engage a touring car."

"Always from the same company, Mr. Sneed? Do you ask for any particular driver?"

"They know that I require a careful one, but I have always found them reliable. I fail to see—"

"The car you had last Sunday was ordered ahead for you?" Phil persisted.

"I ordered it myself on Saturday; but all this is mere quibbling! Undoubtedly the attempt at burglary was made during the night, and Jane forgot to dust the library in the morning; that was why the finger-marks were left until I discovered them." Sneed paused, and added pointedly: "Is there anything further that I can tell you?"

"Only whether you noticed or not that there was something more on the envelope of that letter you received yesterday than just the address, stamp, and postmark?"

Phil spoke carelessly, but his eyes did not leave the face of the elderly man, and he saw the uncontrollable start with which his question was received.

"'Something more?'" Sneed moistened his withered lips nervously. "What more could there be? I thought I had examined it thoroughly—"

"There were faint pencil-marks down in one corner, Mr. Sneed; a series of numbers. I do not pretend to say that they were necessarily made by the writer of the letter; but we wished to know if they suggested anything to your mind." Phil's tone had deepened in gravity. "The numbers are o-four-two-six."

If he had expected any manifestation of surprised recognition on the part of the other he was doomed to disappointment, for Sneed merely shook his head and repeated the numbers absently, adding:

"No. They are, of course, not the combination of my safe, if that is the inference you have drawn, and they mean nothing to me. I am at a loss—"

He caught himself up abruptly, and his jaw sat like a steel trap while his whole frame quivered with sudden rigidity. No sound had reached Phil's ears, but it was plain that the other was listening intently and an expression of mingled rage and apprehension swept his wizen features. Then, with an effort, he pulled himself together.

"My dear sir, your handwriting expert will have to do better than that." The words came raspingly as he sought to cover the pause. "Those numbers could have been penciled on the envelope as a memorandum by any one who handled it either before or after it was mailed. I must confess that I am disappointed at the lack of progress your firm has shown; but I suppose I must be patient. I—I trust you will let me know the moment that any real results have been obtained."

His manner so plainly indicated dismissal that Phil rose.

"You will hear from us, Mr. Sneed. I hope that I have not detained you?"

"Not at all!" the other disclaimed hurriedly. "Sorry that those numbers—what were they, 'two, six,' something—are of no value as a clue. Robert will show you out."

But Robert was long in coming in answer to the summons of the bell which Sneed had pressed, and it was obvious that his impatience to see the last of his visitor was mounting almost beyond his control. Once more that keen, listening look crossed his face, this time with an intensity of apprehension which seemed bordering on inward frenzy, and his hand shook as he jabbed again and again at the bell.

"Confound that fellow! He must be in his dotage!" he muttered. "Gets slower and more deaf every— Oh, there you are at last, Robert! Don't try to make excuses; I've been ringing for ten minutes! Show this gentleman out!"

Robert bowed his palsied head and stood aside silently to allow Phil to precede him from the room; but not before a veiled look had passed between him and his employer that in one revealing flash conveyed an unmistakable message and a warning.

With a final word Phil took his departure; but while he waited in the public corridor of the floor below for the elevator, he turned over in his mind the curious episode he had just witnessed. Though he himself had not heard it, some sound must have reached Sneed's ears and those of his old servant which filled them with alarm. Surely it could not have come from within the apartment, whose padded walls would have nullified the echo of a pistol shot! What

secret knowledge was shared between master and man which the former would not impart even to one of the detectives upon whom he had called for protection and assistance? Did it have any bearing upon the anonymous letter and the attempted burglary, or was there a double mystery here?

Still deep in thought, Phil passed out of the hotel; but on a sudden impulse he halted and scanned the faces of the chauffeurs waiting beside their taxicabs in the string which bore the crest of the Burlingame. The first man was the most youthful, with a broad, smiling countenance that promised loquacity, and giving the address of his bachelor apartment, Phil entered the cab.

Sneed had purposely ignored his question as to the name of the motor car company he patronized when ordering an automobile for an out-of-town trip, and it had occurred all at once to Phil that the preceding Sunday had been a stormy one. The eccentric old man was admittedly in frail health, and left his rooms but seldom. On the occasion of their first interview he had explained his absence from home at the time of the supposed attempt upon his safe by mentioning that he had gone to look at some property; but had that been the sole object of the expedition he would surely have postponed it until a more propitious day. What urgent errand had taken him forth, defying wind and rain?

Arriving at his destination, Phil added a generous tip to the fare, and at the chauffeur's profuse thanks he remarked with a laugh:

"I'll wager that is more than my uncle gives you, if you ever drive him from the Burlingame! Do you know Mr. Sneed?"

The chauffeur grinned.

"I sure do! He ain't the gentleman to leave a dollar go without it gives him a pain, and that's a fact, if you'll excuse me for saying so, sir."

"Go as far as you like!" Phil was still chuckling. "The boys from that company where he gets a touring car now and then must call it a day when they have him for a fare!"

"The Marlton Service people? One of them had him out for seven hours in the rain last Sunday, and all he got was two bucks for himself. He showed it to us fellows in the line, and he sure was a sore guy! Lots of the fares we get at the Burlingame are like that, though; I s'pose that's why they can afford to live there! Thank'ee, sir."

The Marlton Service Company's garage was only a few blocks away. Waiting until the taxicab had rounded the corner on its return trip to the hotel, Phil hastened there and entered the office.

"Five-passenger touring for next Sunday?" the manager repeated in answer to his tentative inquiry. "Where do you want to go, sir?"

"Over to Jersey," Phil hazarded. "I'll be out about six or seven hours."

"It 'll be around thirty dollars, I guess."

"That's more than you charged my friend, Mr. Sneed, of the Burlingame Hotel last Sunday." Phil took a long shot. "He didn't mention that you made any rate for him, either."

"We don't, but that was an easy trip out on Long Island, and he stopped for three hours or more at the Winton Sanitarium. I'll make it twenty-five for you, though, sir, since you've been recommended to us."

Promising to let the manager know his decision, Phil left. Returning to his rooms, he sought the suburban telephone book. A protracted perusal of the "W's" listed under the headings of the various townships was unproductive of result until he came to Shoreville. There a line leaped out at him which caused him to drop the book with a low whistle. The Winton Sanitarium for the Incurably Insane!

CHAPTER VII.

CONCERNING THE "GULL."

WHEN Rex Powell left the offices of the Shadowers on Saturday afternoon following the conference with Phil, his way led far from the path chosen for the others. A warm week-end in early September was not the most likely time to expect to find a highly eligible young bachelor drifting about in town without a house-

party engagement, and it was with small hope of success that he presented himself at an aristocratic apartment in that section of the East Sixties which was immediately adjacent to the avenue, and sent up to Mr. Gideon Ormsby a card that bore the name of Randolph Pinckney.

But Mr. Ormsby was at home, and his smiling little Japanese servant admitted the caller to a cool, spacious living-room, where a huge young man in comfortable negligee advanced in cordial greeting.

"Thought you were off for the other side two or three weeks ago, Rannie!" he exclaimed as they shook hands. "What keeps you in this blistering town?"

"I might ask the same of you!" Rex laughed. "In fact, Gid, I was ready to give myself odds that you would be dated up for the week-end, and it was only on a chance that I looked in."

"Jolly glad you did! I was to have gone down to the Prescotts', but Edna had a bad motor spill a couple of days ago, and they called the party off. You used to know them years ago, I think? Matzu, crack some ice!"

"Yes, I knew the Prescotts," Rex remarked musingly. "It's so many years since I have been in this part of the world, except for flying visits, though, that I have made no attempt to keep up with the old crowd. I believe you are the only one who even remembers me."

"That isn't true, old man, but it would serve you right if I were, for not settling down instead of gadding off to the ends of the earth. Here's how, anyway!"

Rex took a long draft of the iced drink which Matzu offered him, and setting the glass down with a sigh of satisfaction, he asked:

"What do you say to a little quiet dinner at one of the roof-gardens?"

Ormsby grimaced.

"It would be 'quiet' enough except for some blatant cabaret! How about running out instead to the country club? You've never been there, but we can get a corking dinner and cut the dance afterward if you like. It is infested with a lot of old boys from Wall Street; but I don't mind admitting that I've picked up a tip or two there that were worth while, and we can breeze back to town any time we wish."

Rex, remembering his mission, fancied that he, too, might pick up a worth-while tip concerning Sneed if he could meet some of the latter's former allies or antagonists of the Street, and acquiesced with enthusiasm.

A run of an hour in Ormsby's fast little roadster brought them to a pretty white clubhouse with wide-spreading verandas, nestling in a valley surrounded by low, rolling hills, and the voluntary ex-patriot from society ran the gamut of what introductions were necessary before he found himself seated with his host at a little corner table on the terrace.

"It will be all right out here until they light the lanterns and the mosquitoes begin to gather," Ormsby remarked. "I thought you might have preferred the grill."

Rex shook his head. He was taking a chance of which his companion little dreamed in venturing into this select assemblage among which there might appear at any moment some one who had cause to remember not the scion of the Pinckneys, but the Rex Powell of some nefarious exploit of the immediate past. Better for him the comparative seclusion and semi-darkness of the terrace than the gaily illuminated grill.

The dinner was all that Ormsby had claimed for it, and afterward as they sat smoking over their coffee, and the tables emptied near them, a little circle of older men gathered about the young broker and his guest. At first Rex took little part in the conversation, which from golf and yachting gradually but inevitably turned to the latest market reports. The man next to him, a stout, elderly retired financier, had just described a memorable coup of the old days when under cover of the general hum of comment Rex remarked to him:

"An acquaintance of mine was inside on that deal, as I remember; an old, old chap named Sneed. Did you know him?"

"Phineas D.?" the other laughed dryly. "I have reason to! He nicked me for fifty thousand, once! In his time he was one of the keenest operators on the market."

"I hear he has become quite a recluse since he retired; but then he never cared very much about the social game." Rex felt his way carefully.

"No. He came originally from the Pennsylvania coal hills, you know, and brought his wife with him. She had helped him a lot in the hard, early days, I understand; but she was a plain little woman, without any of the social graces, and it was fortunate that she had no aspirations in that direction. She died fifteen years ago or more."

"There were no children?"

The financier shook his head.

"No, Mr. Pinckney; I never heard of any. Sneed lived around at hotels after her death, and seldom appeared at the clubs where we'd put him up. I'm blessed if any of the old crowd knew what he did with himself outside of trading hours, or cared particularly. He always kept by himself, and after one or two rebuffs the other chaps let him alone; but he has dropped out of sight altogether during the past few years. Hello! Here's Wallie Palliser!"

Rex stiffened and edged his chair slightly away from the glow of the nearest lantern. Waldo Palliser was a millionaire thread manufacturer, and one of the five hundred to whom a circular announcement of the Shadowers had been sent. If he might sometime require their services it would be ruinous to have him recognize the guest of this evening as a private detective.

"Mr. Pinckney was asking about Phineas Sneed," Rex's informant observed when the introduction had been performed and the latest comer had settled his long, spare frame into a chair opposite. "You knew the old fellow; he was rather a mystery, wasn't he?"

Palliser nodded, and his eyes rested curiously upon Rex.

"That is odd," he remarked. "Haven't thought of him in years, and this is the second time I have heard his name mentioned this week."

"Really?" Rex spoke with assumed carelessness; but every nerve was suddenly alert. "He used to be quite a power in the Street; but I never knew much about him personally. He was recalled to my mind just now by a deal which was discussed, and I wondered what had become of him."

"Oh, he's probably living in some old morgue of a hotel, bloating over his money!" Gideon Ormsby put in with a laugh. "He never cared for anything else in his life!"

"You're wrong, there, Gid." Palliser lighted a cigar and settled back in his chair. "He had a fad or hobby—call it whatever you like—that was the strangest sort of thing in the world for a man of his type to be interested in; but it amounted to a passion. He used to collect weapons—swords and spears and knives of all kinds and ages. It didn't matter to him whether they were valuable in themselves or not as long as each had a history, and the more gruesome the better. Funny for a bloodless money-grubber, eh? I've known him to let a deal slide that he had worked on for weeks, on the chance of being able to gather in at any price a common kitchen knife with which some dago had stabbed another. It was quite by accident that I discovered this peculiar penchant of his, and in spite of his astuteness I always thought he was a little bit cracked. There isn't any other mystery about him, I fancy."

"You never can tell." Ormsby shrugged. "Maybe he murdered his grandmother, or something! I'd be willing to wager that if the early lives of one-half of our retired monuments of wealth and respectability were to be discreetly investigated the rattling of the skeletons would sound like machine-gun practise!"

He laughed at his own jest, but Palliser repeated thoughtfully:

"'Discreetly investigated?' Have you fellows heard of a new organization called the Shadowers, that claims to do that very thing—dig out family skeletons and give them decent burial without recourse to the police? Perhaps none of you have been so honored; but they had the consummate cheek to send me one of their circulars a month or so ago, and I was interested in spite of myself, for the wording was unique."

"Never heard of them." Ormsby drained his coffee-cup. "Some new wrinkle of a

private detective agency, I suppose. They're good fellows to keep away from."

"I rather think that these are of a different caliber," insisted Palliser. "I'd be apt to give them a trial if I found myself in need of any investigating of a confidential nature, as I told young Raeburn the other day. He was enormously interested. That circular alone would inspire confidence if a chap were in any difficulty."

"Is Raeburn?" A lean, bronzed, middle-aged engineer spoke up from across the table. "You mean Gerald Raeburn, don't you? I ran into him in Africa a year or two ago. Likable fellow and a thoroughbred; but I always thought something had hit him pretty hard in life; he had the look sometimes of a man who had been through hell."

"Oh, come, Holten!" Palliser laughed. "He's knocked about a lot and he has the poise of experience; but he's a lucky chap; he's struck a mighty good thing of it now."

"Mines?"

Palliser nodded.

"They're floating a new company to put it on the market. It was he, by the way, who spoke of Phineas Sneed; asked if he were still in the game. This is no wildcat proposition of his, but the real thing, and he stands to make his pile before he's forty."

The first strains for the opening dance sounded from the orchestra in the ballroom, and after a few desultory remarks the little group broke up; but not before Rex had accepted an invitation from Holten, the engineer, to motor out for golf the following day. For some reason he felt interested in the young man who looked as though he "had been through hell," who had asked about Sneed's financial activities, and more than all, had himself evinced an "enormous interest" in the Shadowers.

But the engineer could tell him little the next day. He had known Raeburn as a sort of gentleman adventurer in a country where antecedents were not too closely inquired into and had taken him at his face value; but Holten was a keen judge of men, and the fact that he rated Raeburn a thoroughbred served to abate Rex's curiosity. If the young mining operator's interest in the Shadowers had been anything more than an idle, impersonal one he would doubtless come to them himself in time, and meanwhile the problem upon which they were then engaged remained unsolved.

When they returned to town together in the late summer twilight, Rex invited the engineer to dine with him at a quiet restaurant which catered to the staid, older aristocracy, where by appointment Gideon Ormsby joined them. They had almost finished their meal when the latter glanced up and exclaimed:

"There's the old chap now, of whom you and Palliser were talking last night, Rannie! I haven't seen Sneed in a public restaurant before in years."

Grateful for the palm which half-screened his corner seat from the rest of the room, Rex looked in the direction indicated and almost choked.

(To be continued NEXT WEEK.)

A DERELICT

ACROSS the shadowed sea at twilight hour,
A ship comes stealing in the wake of day.
No sail-clad masts above her low hull tower,
No captain's voice, no sailors to obey:
A derelict—nothing more.

Across Life's twilight sea a ship comes sailing,
A shattered wreck, it drifts upon the stream.
About its seamed sides lost hopes are trailing,
Ambition gone, and blighted each fair dream:
A derelict—nothing more.

E. Carl Litsey.

Fare Limit

by *Marc Edmund Jones*

IT was almost like going home! Barbara drew up her shoulders so that a quiver of ecstasy might the longer vibrate each and every tiny vertebra of her spine. The wholly delicious thrill traveled swiftly from a single clinging curl, not quite eradicated by the damp of a New England dawn, to the tiny tip of a freshly whitened boot, affectionately smeared with a spatter of genuine New England mud.

Then the sun burst triumphantly through a bank of fleecy cloud over distant New England hills. Shining directly through the window of the car, it managed somehow to get in behind a much-to-be-marveled-at morning complexion, revealing the glorious transparency of a New England skin. A long intake of breath followed the thrill.

And it was not the first thrill, nor the first intake of breath following—for this was the beginning of the second week of Barbara's two weeks' vacation. It was her seventh day in New England.

She sighed.

Suddenly there was a fearful clatter, and the motorman of the little car began violent gymnastics in the front vestibule. Startled erect, Barbara realized that something had caught the safety guard beneath the front of the car; that he was putting weight upon a lever designed to lift the contrivance back into place.

The mechanism failed to work, however. One of the wooden slats, pressed forcibly down upon the rails, caught an obstruction and snapped. The clatter increased. The motorman applied his air and brought the car to an abrupt stop.

The man across the aisle yawned, rising. His eyes drifted to Barbara's, and she noticed that they were brown—she had thought them blue.

"Deucedly annoying," he suggested, smiling slightly.

She turned away, annoyed not at the delay, but that he should have ventured to speak to her. But as he hurried out to help the motorman she giggled softly to herself. Here she sat, in resentment, while her whole idea of a tour of New England by trolley had been that perhaps—well, there was always the chance that one might meet some one—anyhow, it was more romantic than anything that possibly could happen in her New York existence.

"Oh, it's good—it's good to be alive!" she exclaimed involuntarily.

"Isn't it, though?"

Smiling again, the man from across the aisle was back, hands soiled.

And she had not realized she had spoken aloud! But they two were the only passengers. This was very early in the morning. After all, she hadn't spoken to a single soul in a week—except hotel clerks and waitresses and conductors, and others who didn't count.

"Yes," she said gravely, coloring because she had actually answered him.

"Uh—" He hesitated. Obviously the grease on his hands bothered him. "Then

you wouldn't mind my sitting on this side?" He gestured to indicate the seat in front of her.

"If there's no danger of our combined weight overbalancing the car—"

Both laughed.

It was a one-man trolley, of late design, and arranged so that the motorman could operate the safety doors with his air-brake lever, while at his hand was the fare-box for coins and the register. Pulling to the top of a slight hill, he stopped the car and came back.

"Fare limit," he explained.

"How much this time?" Barbara asked.

"I have it," the man from across the aisle explained, reaching into his pocket quickly.

"No, no!" Barbara put her hand upon his shoulder to stop him. Somehow it did not seem so terrible to touch him; more, she liked the feel of the rough cloth of his coat beneath her fingers. "It's—it's all right. I don't mind your speaking to me" —somehow the words tumbled out of her— "b-but you mustn't pay my fare."

"Seven cents," interposed the motorman-conductor.

Barbara produced the proper coins from her bag, then settled back. How odd it was to cover miles and miles of the country—hundreds of miles, all told—and to pay for the transportation in driblets of five, seven, ten, twenty, forty, sixty, and seventy cents at a time. Fare limit! Sometimes the two words—and it was always just that, fare limit—would appear on the trolley post; sometimes the conductor would utter them.

But it had been glorious fun. Not always had the connections been particularly good. Several times there had been just one town and one hotel where she could spend the night.

Lunch, supper—these had been at varying hours, in accordance with trolley schedules. Mostly soap and water had been available only at a night's stopping-place. At other times she had used paper towels, even an old newspaper to dry her hands. And the supper that one night at the fare limit just beyond Middleport, in the lunch-wagon! She would never forget the four Hamburger sandwiches and the big cup of coffee, and fried onions. Could she ever forgive herself? But it had been glorious fun!

Mostly the people had interested her. It had amused her to think of herself as taking dictation; sometimes overhearing scraps of conversation, at other times imagining just what might be said. Even now it was a delight to reconstruct some of the bits of drama in memory: "So I says t' sell th' heifer, ma; but he says as how I allus pay th' interest on th' mortgage." . . . "'Ud yo' b'lieve it, but atter we ground th' valves th' ol' boat 'ud make more'n fifty an hour, an' twenty-two miles 'n th' gallon." . . . "It's a fact, Mabel; she caught 'im wit' th' goods, his arm about th' brazen creature." . . . "And how do you get that way, Bill, when the stock pays eight per cent on par?"

Day dreams! Barbara took to looking out the window; at fields, still glistening, iridescent in the early morning. She sought to justify herself. Her mother, the only parent she had known, had often called her fanciful; up to her death the old lady had sought vainly to bring Barbara "down to earth." But was not a girl entitled to her dreams and visions? What had practical life offered Barbara?

She hated the big city, with a big hatred which she imagined overwhelmed and dwarfed her being—a hatred to which she never gave a thought when there was anything else to think about. The jostle and haste of the metropolis frightened her, but only at the times when she felt lonely and thrown in upon herself. Principally her grievance was the language of the New Yorker as she met him in business—

Oh! The man from across the aisle was speaking to her!

"You said, you know"—he was smiling; he was always smiling—"you said you didn't mind my speaking to you. And so"—hesitation—"I wonder if we couldn't have a little conversation?"

She colored. "We don't know each other at all."

"Can't people who don't know each other have a little conversation, and in that way really become acquainted?"

"But what is there to talk about, when we don't know each other?"

"Well"—he shrugged his shoulders—"there's the weather."

"Foolish! What can you say to me interesting on that subject?"

He glanced out of the window, toward the east, and then up at the sky. "Look how the sun flecks the base of each little cloud. I don't think anything in the heavens equals a cirro-cumulus formation at daybreak or sunset; do you? Don't you like a mackerel sky?"

"I ought to have my dictionary," she remarked. "I'd need one if I took dictation from you." She laughed.

"You're a stenographer?"

She nodded. "Dignified with the title of private secretary."

"I see. And never heard of cirrus clouds, or nimbus, or cumulus—"

She shook her head, but glanced out of the window with new interest. Then she fell to thinking about him. Now that she had revealed the fact that she was a stenographer she felt that he might tell what he was—it seemed only a friendly bit of reciprocity. And she wished that she had sufficient courage to ask him; but of course it would never do to betray that amount of interest.

She remembered vividly seeing him for the first time the night before. Quite a pretentious interurban electric line had brought her into Alling, from which this smaller line was now taking her. He had boarded the car—it was an express, with printed tickets like a steam railroad—some fifteen miles out, and had taken a seat in front of her.

Of course, she had studied him; had noticed and liked the contour of his head, the fit of his clothes—for all that they were rough and obviously old—and a certain competency suggested by the way he used his hands. He had carried, and treasured, a mysterious package which had awakened her curiosity because of its odd shape and the fact that it was wrapped in newspaper. She had guessed at the color of his eyes, and had been wrong.

At the hotel she had caught just a flash of him. It was the only possible house in town, so that was not surprising, but to find him on this car so early in the morning— Oh, for the courage to ask him his business, and the purpose of this trip!

She felt that she liked him, and was put to it to decide why. Then it struck her, all at once, so that she laughed.

"Penny for your thoughts!" He had been patient during her abstraction.

"I was trying to think what it was about you that was different," she confessed. "Now I realize it's the way you speak."

He was frankly puzzled. "You mean—"

"I've been in New York City five years," she hurried on, for fear she would become confused. "I've never learned to like it, and particularly I hate the way they talk."

"But all New York people—"

"I know they're exceptions, and it's not only the way they talk, but the way they act; in the subway, and in business—most of them, I mean—" She stopped for breath. "When I started out on this trip I thought I would escape the kind of people I've met so much in the city, but any that I thought—I thought I'd"—she blushed shamelessly—"let speak to me, why, I could tell that they were from New York by the way they talked, and—and as I kept getting farther and farther away I thought I'd meet people that weren't from New York, until—" She stopped.

"Until you met me?" he suggested.

She became fiery. "I didn't mean just that."

He saw her confusion, and after a moment sought to put her at her ease. "Have you heard about the man that was 'hoyt' at 'Hurt' Street?"

Her eyes widened. "'Hoyt' at 'Hurt' Street? Oh, that is just exactly the way they say 'hurt' at 'Hoyt' Street, isn't it?"

"And you heard about the two policemen talking after the death of Caruso?" He grinned and went on with the story.

"'What do you think of Caruso's verse?' says one.

"'Caruso's verse? I didn't know he wrote anything.'

"'Naw! I don't mean the voice you write, but the verse you talk with.'"

Barbara laughed. "Did that really happen?"

"Probably not, but it's possible. Anyway"—on sudden impulse he climbed around the end of his seat, occupying the other half of hers—"it's not so many New York people that transpose their 'er's' and 'oi's' and throw their 'r's' out of the window. Mostly the careless speakers of the city are marked by a peculiar drawl which gives a lingering accent to unexpected syllables—"

"You know," she interrupted—for she had only been half listening to him—"I'm glad you're not from New York, now that we have got to talking together."

"But I didn't say—"

She giggled. "Sometimes I try to be a feminine Sherlock Holmes, Mr. Man, and—and I bet that's right."

He turned to study her. "How do you deduce the fact? The manner in which I speak proves nothing."

"You got on the car at a little place about half an hour the other side of Alling—"

"I might have been visiting, or stopping there on business."

"And you're starting out this morning very early indeed on a car which does not take you so very far the other side of Alling—"

"Which also might be business. I might be a salesman covering this territory intensively."

She smiled. "You don't look like a salesman, but that isn't the principal thing from which I make my deduction."

"And that is?"

"When you got on the car last night you carried a package very carefully. If you had come from a distance either it would be wrapped in something other than a newspaper, or"—triumphantly—"you would still have it. But you're riding this morning without even a traveling bag, and so it's easy to deduce that you belong somewhere near Alling."

He started to say something, then checked himself and changed the subject. "You say you're on a trip, and that you are from New York. Do you belong near here, or why are you on this car this early in the morning yourself?"

"Oh!" She settled more comfortably in the seat. "I'm touring New England by trolley, and I'm on my way for a visit home."

"Home?" Why should that surprise him? "Your home is—"

"Berkeley Cove; and if the trolley schedules fit in all right, I'll be there tomorrow afternoon early."

"Your folks, then—"

"Are all dead. Father died before I was born, and mother just before I went down to New York to work."

"But you have relatives—"

She giggled. "Not a one! You'll think I'm foolish, Mr. Man, but all my life I've had dreams and fancies, and always I've been afraid to do things for fear people would think me silly. This summer, especially when I had to keep postponing my vacation until this late, I decided I would do just what I wanted to do, and so—"

"You're going back to the scenes of your childhood?"

"Not at all. I've never been in Berkeley Cove."

"Then—"

"My grandfather was an old sea-captain. Many times grandmother used to tell me about him. And she used to describe the old house—one of those funny old-fashioned New England square brick houses perched on a knoll of land just above the Cove, overlooking the sea and buffeted by every storm that came along.

"There was the long, dark hallway—I can just see her now telling me about it—with the front parlor and the back parlor on one side, the library and dining-room on the other, the kitchen in the basement, and—" Barbara's eyes sparkled. "Do you know, my grandmother said that the shades in the front parlor were never raised in the ten years before grandpa's death, because no company came in that time important enough to be shown into that particular room."

He laughed. "And you're going back without knowing a soul—"

"That makes it all the more fun. You see, I've learned that this week is 'Old Home Week' at Berkeley Cove, and perhaps dozens of people my grandparents knew, and grown people who were children

when my mother was small and lived there— Just think of all the things I can imagine and dream about while I'm there!"

"You won't feel lonely?"

"Not a bit." She folded hands over a knee and looked up into her companion's face. She was telling him so much about herself, revealing so much of herself, and he—

"Can you be sure, even, that the old house is still there?"

"It was there when we sent my mother to the Cove for her health just before her death. She boarded three doors down across the street, and wrote me about the family living in it—an old couple."

"Well!" He hesitated, then looked at her frankly. "I wish I were going to Berkeley Cove with you, for your Old Home Week!"

She turned away, not sure how to take it. The next instant she realized that the car had stopped and that the motorman-conductor stood over them.

"Fare limit," he explained.

The interruption, it developed, spoiled the conversation for any further revelations. Within half an hour they were at the terminus of the electric road, a collection of small homes surrounding a single store.

Her companion picked up Barbara's bag. "You have come the entire distance so far by trolley?" he asked.

"Except about thirty miles three days ago—there was a trolley route on the map I had, but it had gone bankrupt." She smiled. "I promised myself not to use a steam train on the trip, and when I started to walk with the bag I got two lifts—a farmer's wife and a Ford delivering fancy groceries."

"You know there's no trolley out of here?"

"But there's a bus across the State line to Morrilton—"

"In the afternoon." He still held her bag, and shifted it to the other hand. "Will you have lunch with me? We can probably sit on a couple of barrels in the store there."

"Only if you'll let me pay for my own," she said.

But the lunch was only mildly successful. They purchased bread, butter, sardines, dill pickles, ginger ale, and various sorts of sealed packages of crackers—an indigestible mess—and found amusement in camping upon the porch of the store.

Subconsciously, however, Barbara resented his failure to volunteer some little bit of information about himself, at least—not wholly realizing that this was a sign of her own growing interest. Here was her man without that certain New York taint she dreaded; here was every open opportunity for romance. But he had not played fair. And she had gone almost the limit in telling him of herself—everything but her name, in fact!

Almost with relief she bade him good-by upon the approach of the motor omnibus, a dusty vehicle of the type growingly familiar upon Eastern American roads. Already there were a number of passengers, picked up from other points. The driver stopped just long enough to close the door after her. Her last view of her former companion was in a cloud of oily smoke and dust.

"Where to, lady?" asked the driver.

"Morrilton!"

"It 'll be a dollar and ten cents to the State line."

She paid the amount. "You don't go into Morrilton?"

"Oh, yes!" The driver turned to his wheel, depressing the throttle with his foot.

With no further opportunity to question him, Barbara took a seat, and after a moment turned to the man nearest her, obviously a salesman. The morning had taken away her reticence in the presence of strangers.

"Is it another fee to Morrilton from the State line?"

He laughed. "No; they carry you free from that point."

"Free?"—incredulously.

"Yes! The Morrilton authorities refused a franchise to the bus people when the street-car line down this way failed to go through; but if the buses carry people free they can't do anything to them, and it's only a mile or so from the State boundary; so it's an easy solution."

All at once something struck Barbara. "You're from New York?"

"Of course! You can't miss folks from the little old place, can you? And you're from New York, too, I bet."

Barbara nodded.

"It's sure a wonderful old spot." He became enthusiastic. "In my travels all over the globe I've never found anything just like old New York. Don't you just swear by it all the time?"

With a woman's perversity Barbara turned away suddenly. "I hate it!"

In Morrilton she found there was a choice of two routes to the shore, where the trolleys made connections all the way up to Berkeley Cove and the chain of more popular resorts farther north. At first tempted to make sure that her map was correct, she yielded to a growing disinclination to talk to any one else on this day.

If only the "man from across the aisle" had revealed more of himself! How was she to know that he was not simply amused; was laughing at her fancies and at her frankness beneath his mask of friendliness?

She chose the route upon which the first car departed. After a hot and uninteresting hour and three-quarters, with four fare zones at ten cents each, she found herself in a small mill town spread lazily upon both sides of a small, mildly turbulent stream. There was a little bridge, and she walked across. Some distance beyond she found the tracks and overhead wire of the trolley to the sea. There was a small booth with a bench for those waiting. She took a seat, in her present mood preferring to wait for the car—sure to come in time—rather than to seek information.

But for more than an hour she sat alone. And there was no sign of a car in either direction. At length a mill-worker approached, an old man.

"When is there a car east?" she asked.

He looked at her curiously. Then he pointed down. "Look at them rails, miss!"

She glanced at the steel. It was terribly rusty. Had there been a rain-storm here recently? And the grass seemed to be growing all over the track in spots—

"Why, that line went busted six months ago, miss! Tried to charge the working men fifteen cents for a three-mile run. Just think of that!"

Barbara's heart sank. If she went back to Morrilton now, to take the other route, she would never arrive at the coast by night. And she had picked the town—Good Harbor—and the hotel—Haven Inn—and—and—

All at once an automobile drove up and stopped. It was a little blue runabout, somehow vaguely familiar, but she had no time to stop to cudgel her memory since the driver, a whiskered farmer, waved for her to get in; and in a manner which plainly told her to waste no time.

"If yo' want a lift," he mumbled, "that car don't run now."

"You—you're going toward Good Harbor?"

"Git in," came the mumbled tones.

As she sank into the seat, her bag at her feet, the little car shot forward at a furious rate. It struck Barbara as odd that a farmer of this type should drive so fast and so skilfully. But she had little opportunity to study him.

Then as she rode she realized she was hungry; also she noticed that it was getting dark rapidly; that the afternoon had flown, and that most of the evening had passed by while she waited beside the abandoned right-of-way. She leaned over, touching the farmer.

"Are you taking me to Good Harbor?"

He slowed up, but only slightly, making signs which she interpreted to mean that he was deaf. Alarmed, she wondered just where he might be going, then reflected that he had started along the road toward the coast, that he had followed the trolley tracks for quite a distance. If not to Good Harbor, she would arrive surely at some shore town.

It was genuinely dark when he drove up to a door and left her with the bag as unceremoniously as he had picked her up. She grasped that it was a hotel, however, and entered.

"What place is this, please?" she asked.

"The Haven Inn, Good Harbor. You wish a room for the night?"

She giggled. This had been her destination all along.

In the morning she arose refreshed, filled with the thought that this was the last day of her journey north. Before supper-time she would be in Berkeley Cove, in the midst of the Old Home Week celebration. She had breakfast leisurely, learning that the first trolley left at ten. After breakfast she stepped out on the porch. Then she gasped, for there at the curb was the blue runabout—no mistaking it—and seated at the wheel the man who had ridden on the trolley with her in and out of Alling.

He jumped up and came to her.

"Can you ever forgive me, Miss Trolley-Trotter?"

"I don't quite understand," she gasped.

"I was the farmer last night. It—it was an awfully amateur make-up, and I was afraid you would see through it."

"But I don't understand! The car—"

"Is mine. When I got on the interurban going into Alling I had had a breakdown and was carrying a busted bit of gear-housing to get it welded while I got the new parts I needed."

"But you rode with me to Morrilton—"

"That was an impulse." His eyes twinkled. "It was going to take all morning to weld that gear-housing, and—"

"And then you came all the way after me last night—" Accusing.

"Another impulse."

She studied him. "You're not telling me the truth!" Then somehow she felt that it would be all right to ask questions. "What brings you to this part of New England? What are you waiting here now for?"

He glanced away. "If I confessed to being a journalist, and said that your telling me about the Berkeley Cove Old Home Week suggested the idea of going—and that I wanted to motor you the rest of the way—would you believe me?"

"I don't know!" She, in turn, did not meet his eyes.

The rest of his confession came after they had arrived at the old seaport; after they had visited, together, the old common with its dignified town hall and ivy-covered churches; after they had gone to the home of her grandfather, the sea-captain, to find it boarded up with a sign "For Sale"; after they had listened to speeches from the town-hall steps, had joined in community singing, had purchased old fashioned pink lemonade and new-fashioned orange-drink.

They were on the beach, and it was night, with the moon faint in the fog. Fitfully springing up now and then were the fires upon which the great stones had been heated. In the pits were the clams and the corn; layer of wet seaweed, layer of clams, layer of seaweed, hot stones, layer of seaweed, corn in its husks, layer of seaweed—

"You have to eat an awful lot of sand," she said.

"May I finish my confession?" he asked.

Her silence was assent.

"I've followed you on this trip from the beginning. I'm not a journalist, but a business man. I started out just on the chance of meeting you. You'd never even look at me in the city."

"You're"—this was tragedy—"you're not from New York!"

"I overheard you telling the janitor's wife about taking this trip when she was relieving the elevator-boy for lunch, and—"

"You overheard me— You mean at the apartment where I live?"

"New York! New York!" His tone was banter. "How the New Yorkers do live to themselves!" He became intense. "For three months, Miss Holmes, I've lived in the same building, on the same floor. You have passed me in the hall, and never looked up."

"Oh!" She straightened. "Now I know where I've seen that blue runabout. In front of the apartment-house!"

"Listen!" He took her hand.

It was dark on the beach.

"Yes?"

"When I left you this afternoon—remember, for that three-quarters of an hour?—well, I took an option on your grandfather's house—on the chance of something happening—"

"What do you mean?"

"Now tell me something!" His grasp of her hand tightened.

"What?" A numbing sensation was creeping over her.

"What's your first name?"

The Key to a Kingdom

by Herman Howard Matteson

CHAPTER I.

THE THIRD BONBON.

A NONDESCRIPT train of box cars, flats, and one or two compartment-cars was pulling slowly into Nikolsk of far-eastern Siberia. An American soldier, wearing a fur parka cap that enveloped his head and the greater portion of his face, paced back and forth along the track. He shifted his carbine from one shoulder to the other, and whacked his free hand against his breast. The cold was intense.

The train came to a grinding stop. The door of a car opened, and a girl in a modish coat beckoned to the American.

"*A moi, soldat!*" she said in a quick, nervous whisper. "Hurry!"

Mechanically the soldier came to port arms and stepped to the platform of the coach.

A slender gloved hand reached out to him and dropped three chocolate-covered bonbons into his palm.

"Three bonbons," she said. "The two little ones, you eat. The third, *Monsieur le Soldat,* please put in a little box, packed well, and mail to me. The name, and the address, *Monsieur le Soldat—*"

From the direction of the tiny station three Russian soldiers came running.

"The name," whispered the girl, "is Palome Narcisse. I will write it down."

The gloved hand fumbled at the front of her coat. The coach door burst open. An Irtysh officer seized the girl by the shoulder, and drew her roughly within. She gave the American an appealing look, the door closed after her, and the train went jerking ahead only to stop a little further on.

Private Spencer Purvis, meditating upon the strangeness of the whole proceeding, but dwelling more upon his memory of the girl's trim figure, beautiful face, and brown eyes, dropped the three bonbons into the pocket of his overcoat and resumed his beat. Palome Narcisse— The name was French. She had spoken both in English and in French, but with an accent that was neither.

He had the name, Palome Narcisse. The address he did not have, and probably would never have, for soldiers had taken the girl from the coach, and were conducting her toward the headquarters of the Russ general in command of Nikolsk town.

The train, minus the pretty passenger, pulled out toward Vladivostok. Back and forth paced Private Spencer Purvis, his hand occasionally straying to the side pocket where reposed three bonbons, only two of which, the smaller ones, he might eat. The third was supposed to be mailed to Palome Narcisse, to an address which she had been unable to give him. Even had she given the address, now, under arrest, with the tedious Russian system assuring protracted

confinement, that address would have been useless. To gain access to the girl for a further word, now that she was prisoner, was simply out of the question.

Then there transpired that which divorced all thought from the fate of Palome Narcisse, beautiful and appealing as she was. A long train of box cars that had been waiting in a siding for the passage of the Vladivostok train, backed into the station. Orderlies came running from American headquarters shouting commands right and left. A squad of Russ soldiers turned out, relieving the American sentries. The American unit was to entrain at once for Vladivostok, where they would board a transport and sail for Seattle. Home!

Packed into a straw-strewn box car, Spencer Purvis listened intently while an American soldier, who had been a sentry near the railway station, told of the excitement. A telegram had come from Moscow. The "Cowsacks," as the American called all Russians indiscriminately, had made a pinch, the swellest little jane he'd lamped since he left Seattle. The little jane had stolen something from somebody at Moscow—something very valuable. They had grabbed the little jane, taken her to headquarters, given her the third degree, called in a woman to search her. The little jane had stood pat. She had admitted nothing, and upon her person the woman had found nothing. Swellest little jane—

A sergeant came through the box car, telling off the men detailed to kitchen police. Spencer Purvis was one of the unlucky, or lucky.

In a little cubby-hole partitioned off from one end of a box car that was being used as a kitchen, he faced a very mountain of spuds that he was to peel. He hung his overcoat upon a nail and picked up the sharp-pointed paring-knife.

Then he thrust his head from the door. He had the place all to himself. He took from his coat pocket the three bonbons.

He turned the largest of the three over in his hand. It had been tampered with. The bottom bore the appearance of having been opened, then sealed by being held to the heat of a stove or lamp.

Something very valuable, stolen by the little jane from some one in Moscow. The big, freckled hand of Spencer Purvis closed down about the bonbon, nearly crushing it.

Something valuable the little jane had stolen in Moscow. Purvis cocked his head dubiously as he estimated the insignificant capacity of the third bonbon.

He wondered if by any magic the inside of that bonbon could hold something worth ten thousand dollars. Ten thousand was his figure. That would buy a good purse seine boat, and gear, and would set him up for life in his home on the Puget Sound. With a purse seine boat and gear, why, then he could speak to Lennie Gibson. Of course Lennie, since the death of her father, was worth many times ten thousand. She owned fish-trap locations, tug-boats, canneries. Lennie Gibson and Thatcher James, since the death of their fathers, founders of the firm, were worth half a million each.

Ten thousand dollars. It wasn't much, but with it he would set up for himself and ask Lennie to marry him. And Lennie would say yes, he was sure.

Again he looked furtively from the door. With the sharp point of the paring knife he cut the bottom from the bonbon. The bonbon was a mere shell, lined with cotton, in the midst of which lay a marvelous pearl, shaped like a human eye, almost as large as one.

Purvis tucked the pearl back into its nest, restored the bit of shell, and thrust the bonbon into his pocket, having wrapped it carefully in his handkerchief.

General Orloff sat upright and then stood at gallant attention when two orderlies entered the room. Between them was a slender, dark girl, garbed in indisputably expensive and correct Parisian clothes. Surely this delicate girl, obviously gently bred, was not a thief. But the war had brought some great surprises. The telegram from Moscow described her exactly, features, complexion, brown eyes, her coat, and the kind of fur with which it was trimmed.

Taxed with the theft of a valuable pearl from one Mme. Flurion, whose husband was chief of the medical staff of a large Red Cross hospital, the girl merely smiled and shook her head.

Then a woman was called in, and the girl was searched. Nothing was found.

But the wording of the telegram, the authority of the name signed to it, left the commandant no alternative. Palome Narcisse was locked up in a little shed built of heavy timbers, barred at the single narrow window. The old peasant woman who had been called in to search the prisoner's person remained within the hut as a guard.

A second telegram arrived in answer to one sent to Moscow by the commandant. The second wire instructed the commandant to hold the prisoner until the arrival of guards who would return with her to Moscow. The pearl was of extraordinary value, worth a hundred thousand francs.

But this did not represent the total value of the gem. As a result of certain circumstances the jewel was worth millions, was veritably the key to the treasure of a principality.

From her prison Palome saw the trains pull out. American soldiers were entraining.

Then, the second morning of her imprisonment, Palome, peering through the grate, was unable to discover the fur parka hood of a single American. They were gone, the entire unit.

Palome paced her cage.

She came to a sudden pause before a cracked mirror fastened to the wall. Folding in the neck of her gown, she tried to catch her reflection in the glass. Holding her hands up to the light, she studied them with wide, staring eyes as if she feared the appearance of some guilty stain. Again before the mirror, scrutinizing the skin of her face and neck, she stared as if at an apparition.

The pearl—it meant her very life. Had the riches of the world been balanced against the pearl, Palome Narcisse would have chosen—the pearl.

Mother Bresik alternately smoked a black pipe and dozed in the corner.

Upon her knees, Palome studied the brass lock. The door was of planking, two inches thick, unpainted. A tall candle sputtered upon the table.

Wetting her handkerchief from a pail of water standing in the corner, Palome held the flame of the candle to the wood below the lock, blowing the tongue of fire gently against the wood, dabbing the smoldering wood with the wet handkerchief when it threatened to burst into flame.

For hours, starting back whenever Mother Bresik stirred upon the stool, the girl burned away at the heavy door. Finally a hole showed through the wood. The sentry's beat seemed to lie along the rear of the hut, toward the station, returning in front of the hut. Skilfully Palome timed his passing lest the flicker of light through the door betray her.

Finally the wood was burned through. The merest touch would dislodge the brass lock and permit the door to swing open.

As the sentry passed the rear of the hut, Palome stole forth. Keeping the hut between herself and the soldier, she ran swiftly, noiselessly. She gained the railway track in the western border of the town, and hurried on, stumbling through the snow. It would soon be light. Discovery of her escape, pursuit would follow.

A train came grinding slowly along, loaded with a field artillery outfit that was being shipped to Vladivostok from some point farther east than Nikolsk. More Americans were going home.

Palome caught the guard of a flat-car, climbed aboard, and hid herself in a pile of baled hay.

There she remained while the train entered Vladivostok, while a section of the cars, her flat-car included, was sidetracked on a dock before a great transport.

Soldiers were constantly passing, repassing, and all were talking about home. The Eighty-Fifth had left before, she heard a soldier say. Now there were no Americans left at Nikolsk, Ninguta, or Harbin.

He, the American soldier, had gone, then, and with him the pearl.

Watching her chance, she slipped from the flat-car, entered the ship through a wide side hatch which was open for the entrance of soldiers leading horses and mules.

Finally she found a place behind piled bags of oats, bales of hay and straw. Also there were water-taps from which water was drawn in buckets for the animals.

After a time, she heard the shrill whistle of the bo'sun's pipe. They were casting off. The big transport moved. It was on its way to Seattle.

When it grew still, Palome crept from her nest between tiers of piled sacks, nibbled a handful of the oats, cupped her hand beneath a water tap and drank. Then she crawled back to her hiding-place, curled up in the fur-trimmed coat and went to sleep.

CHAPTER II.

THE GADFLY SAILS.

IN the eyes of two—Lennie Gibson and Thatcher James — Spencer Purvis returned to Puget Sound a hero. Spencer hadn't done a single thing of note, but Lennie knew that he would have acquitted himself with distinction had the opportunity occurred. To Thatcher James, Spencer was a hero for the simple reason that he had been "over there," an experience his own frail physique had made impossible for him.

But Lennie began to worry over the returned soldier. He seemed distrait and moody. He had nothing to tell of his experiences in Siberia, and what little he would relate he did gruffly, ungraciously.

Lennie, who, save for a year away to school, had lived all her life on remote Cypress Island, who was as natural and unaffected as a red geranium in a kitchen window, had no gifts of dissimulation, so, rather bluntly, she asked Spencer if he had become interested in some girl "over there."

He shook his head, negatively; but his face reddened and his eyes shifted guiltily.

Her brown eyes hard, her lips drawn into a thin line, Lennie told Thatcher James that what was the matter with Spencer was a woman. The heart in Thatcher James's thin breast gave a hopeful leap. All his days he had loved Lennie. His father and hers had been partners for life, together building a name and a fortune, and now these two were heirs to the vast holdings of Gibson and James. What could have been a more appropriate alliance than one between Thatcher James and Lennie Gibson? So he had always argued, but in vain.

Three hundred yards from the Gibson house on Cypress Island stood the little cabin of Spencer Purvis. In the bay before the cabin rode Spencer's dory and a little catboat. Hanging to the cabin walls was the gill net that he had put away when he went to war. Since Purvis had been mustered out, two weeks before, at Camp Lewis, the net still hung in place, and the dory and the catboat rode at anchor.

"I'm kind of sick of fishing," Spencer told Lennie. "No use this fishing game any more unless a man has got capital. If I had ten thousand dollars—"

There, abruptly, he paused. Lennie had ten thousand dollars. But, knowing the pride and sensitiveness of this big boy with the freckled hands and thatch of reddish hair, she forbore to offer it.

Alone in his cabin, Spencer would take out the wonderful pearl, turn it this way and that against the light. Long since he had thrown away the hollow shell of the bonbon, and now carried the treasure about his neck in a little leather bag.

For a month, since the transport had left Vladivostok, he had pondered the question of how he could turn the gem into money, do it safely, and leave no clue behind. He thought that he had argued himself into the belief that the pearl was his. Luck had sent it to him, and he would be a fool to give it up. Besides, he didn't know who did own it. A girl called Palome Narcisse had stolen it. The pearl was his.

Day after day he weighed the problem—how to dispose of the pearl. First, though, he must learn its value.

In the early morning he lifted the anchor of the catboat and sailed away. Toward evening he berthed the craft in Seattle harbor and made his way up-town, pausing to stare into the windows of the jewelry stores.

One particular window displayed a pearl necklace on a carelessly arranged black velvet. Spencer craned his neck to make out the price tag.

But he could not decipher the price. Swallowing hard, he entered the store, and stood teetering from one foot to the other before the counter.

A clerk, making swift appraisement of the fellow's vast bulk, the thickness of his

wrists, the colorful stag shirt which he wore Chinaman fashion outside his tarpaulin trousers, came forward, nodding patronizingly.

Spencer's face turned red.

"A hick for a wedding ring," thought the clerk.

"I kind of figured—that is—"

"I know," said the clerk sapiently, "Wedding or engagement, or both?"

He began to lift trays of rings from the showcase for inspection.

With a blunt forefinger Spencer poked the rings about, plain band, rings with diamond settings.

"I kind of thought," hesitated Purvis; "that is, do folks buy pearls ever in rings and so forth?"

"Not often," said the clerk. "Pearls, if they are good, run into money fast."

Then, because the clerk was a garrulous soul, and had ideas of how to handle a customer whose extreme limit of purchasing power would be no more than forty dollars, drew a piece of thin paper from beneath the counter. On the paper were four or five lines of typewritten copy.

"Easy money," said the affable salesman, "if you should meet this pearl rolling up-hill anywhere. Two thousand reward, no questions asked."

Spencer's jaw fell open as he scanned the lines. The Pacific Coast Jewelers' Protective Association had been advised of the theft of a large, eye-shaped pearl. Two thousand dollars reward was offered by the owner for its recovery. If offered for sale, members would promptly report the circumstances to headquarters.

Mumbling that he didn't aim to buy then, but just look around, Spencer walked blindly from the store to the water-front, hoisted anchor and sailed for Cypress Island.

Within his cabin, Spencer sat studying. After a time he hauled out the little leather sack and removed the pearl.

His shotgun hung from the wall, suspended from a pair of deer's antlers. Just above the antlers, in the edge of the roof, was an unopened box of shotgun shells.

Spencer took down the box, removed a shell, pried loose the top wad, and spilled out the powder and shot. Into the shell he thrust the pearl, replaced the wad, and put the box back.

Old Barney Dan, general roustabout in the Gibson and James cannery, was an old sailor who knew the Pacific as a woman knows her flower-garden.

"Barney," said Spencer casually, "they get a lot of pearls in the South Seas, don't they?"

"Yeah," answered Barney. "South Seas, Ceylon, Persia Gulf."

"Any great trick to fetch 'em up, Barney?"

"If you hain't afraid of sharks, and can fetch up bottom in four fathom of water, and can hold your breath two minutes—no."

Spencer Purvis sat staring at the cabin wall. If he could get to the South Seas, actually dive for pearls, bring up a pearl, no matter how perfect, how valuable, who could prove that he hadn't actually found it upon the floor of the ocean; that it was not his in truth and in fact? The South Seas—

Palome Narcisse, a bit wan from her stowaway experience—she would have starved on the oat diet had she not boldly crept forth at night and appropriated food from a tray sent from the galley for the night hostler—inquired her way to a jewelry store the instant she escaped from the unloading transport. At once, upon the advice of the proprietor, she filed with the Jewelers' Association a description of the gem and the reward offered.

She learned that all returning Siberian troops had been or were being mustered out at Camp Lewis, a cantonment near both Seattle and Tacoma.

At Camp Lewis she had no great difficulty in identifying the unit that had been at Nikolsk. That outfit had been discharged. She sought and was granted a look at the roster, giving the names and descriptions of the men.

The man to whom she had given the three bonbons had been an immense fellow, fully six feet. But of six-footers on the Pacific Coast there is a plentitude. Palome noted the names and addresses of

forty odd men who might answer the description.

Then she began the hunt, looking up Allen in Walla Walla, Benedict in Portland, Enwright in Bellingham. None of these was the big, freckle-faced soldier to whom she had intrusted the jewel.

She got to the last page of her memorandum: Morrow of Everett, Norris of Wenatchee, Purvis of Cypress Island.

The launchman of Anacortes whom she hired to take her to Cypress Island knew all about Spencer Purvis, Lennie Gibson, and Thatcher James. He had heard that Spencer and Lennie had quarreled, and Spencer, plumb disgusted, was going to the South Seas. Then the man described Spencer Purvis. At last!

Suggesting subtly that she was an acquaintance of Lennie Gibson, that she wished to surprise her, the launchman landed his passenger on the far side of Cypress, indicated the trail that led to Strawberry Bay where the settlement and fish-trap were. When the girl offered him an extravagant price for what food he had on board and a pair of blankets, he stared.

Palome smiled and handed him the money. He landed the blankets and the tinned stuff for his passenger, and *chugged* away, shaking his head dubiously.

Where the trail dipped over a hilltop, and she could catch sight of the roof of a large house, Palome hid her equipment in the bush. Then she crept on.

Besides the large house, a small cabin was perched upon the bank.

Cautiously she approached this cabin, which lay nearest the trail opening. She came finally to where she ventured to rise and peer into a window. A soldier's khaki was hanging from a nail in the wall, beside it a college pennant.

Alert to catch the sound of approaching feet, she entered the cabin. The fly-leaf of a book bore the name, " Spencer Purvis."

Everywhere she searched, in the drawers of the dresser, beneath the mattress of the bunk, everywhere.

She dared remain no longer. She would steal back into the wood, make herself comfortable for the night, and renew the search should opportunity permit.

Stealthily she hurried up the trail.

Behind the screen of a climbing rose at the end of the veranda of the big house, a girl stood, a pair of binoculars in her hand. Hate and jealousy had thinned the red lips, narrowed the brown eyes. One hand, clawed as if to strike, she held before her. The other clutched the glasses.

" It was a woman! I knew it! Now I begin to understand!"

Lennie Gibson entered the house, paced back and forth nervously a time or two, emerged, took the path leading away to the left. Pausing before a dwelling almost as large as her own, she called, " Thatcher! Oh, Thatcher!"

Thatcher James came to the door and walked down the steps to her side.

" Thatcher "—Lennie looked over her shoulder—" I want to ask a favor. And keep this to yourself. I'm worried about Spence. A lot of soldiers have nervous breakdowns, you know. Don't let him have the Gadfly, under any circumstances, for that trip to the South Seas, unless you go along. I'm worried."

A spasm of pain shot across Thatcher's pale, gentle face. It was always Spencer Purvis Lennie was worried about.

" All right, Lennie," he answered in a low voice. " All right."

Abruptly he reentered the house.

The Gadfly, sixty-foot yawl, stanch and spick, lay at the wharf before the Gibson house. The roomy craft had been provisioned, and Spencer Purvis had put aboard an assortment of trinkets, cheap jewelry, some bolts of red cloth that he said would be useful for trading to the islanders.

At this season of the year, save for the wearing monotony, the two men would comprise ample crew. They would sail her four on, and four off, both standing by should they run into a gale.

Thatcher had moved his personal effects into the 'midships cabin they were to occupy. Spencer brought down his blankets, shotgun, and a box of shells.

At two bells that night, nine o'clock, they would go out with the ebb.

Now it was six, time for the last dinner to which they had been invited by Lennie.

As the two men came up the path, Len-

nie, a pair of binoculars in her hand, slipped into the house.

Twice during the meal, on a pretext that she must go to the kitchen, Lennie, with night slides pulled on the glasses, swept the space between the opening of the trail and the Gadfly.

Over the dessert she told Spencer and Thatcher that they were both to come back to the house just before sailing time; that she would have a batch of doughnuts and a cake for them to add to the galley stores.

At ten minutes to nine the boys appeared, and Mrs. Browning, Lennie's housekeeper, handed them the delicacies.

"Lennie just couldn't stand it to say good-by," explained Mrs. Browning. "She told me to say good-by for her, and bid you good luck, and a breeze that's fair."

When the little ship's clock struck two bells, Thatcher James threw off the headline and the spring, and the Gadfly slid away into the darkness. At the point of Eagle Rock they caught the gale off the Bay of Georgia. Spencer hauled in the mainsail and the jigger, and the Gadfly was off for the Southern Seas.

CHAPTER III.

THE STOWAWAY.

THERE is no rig of sailing craft more easily handled than a yawl, and the Gadfly, in whose construction Thatcher James had spared no expense, was as fine a craft of her type as the Puget Sound could boast, with accommodations for eight or ten persons and equipment that was luxurious.

Out of the Straits of Fuca the two men sailed the Gadfly, both standing by in the whipping winds of Cape Flattery, then settling down to alternate watches of four hours as they caught the steady, open ocean gales and the pull of the Japan stream.

By the third day out the wind had settled nearly astern. With sails winged out and the tiller lashed, they both slept. Many days, and some nights, when the moon neared fullness, the Gadfly plowed steadily on with no hand at the tiller.

Thatcher James had elected himself cook. Rattling pots and pans in the snug galley, he would often pause to peer through the cabin space and the open companionway to where Spencer Purvis indefatigably studied charts and the government pilot book of the South Seas.

Pearls, pearls—Spencer could talk nothing but pearls. Among the hundreds of islands, there were scores where pearl shell abounded; the pilot book said so. They would make some of the promising islands, traffic with the natives, trading calico, knives, pinchbeck jewelry for pearls. And he intended to do some diving himself, Spencer said. If a Murk could fetch up bottom in four fathoms of water, he could too. It was all luck. In one dive a man might bring up a pearl equal in value to the wages of twenty years' toil. Sharks! A man had to take some chances. A man never got anywhere shying off at the first sign of danger or grief. The good things of the world were for the strong, bold hand that dared reach and take them.

Thatcher stared at a coffee pannikin he was washing while he ruefully meditated this philosophy. The good things of earth were for the hand bold and strong. And he was neither bold nor strong, but only puny, and rich with the dollars that his father had earned.

He scrubbed and rubbed, keeping the galley spick and span. The soul of order, as Spencer was the soul of disorder, Thatcher had a place for every knife, fork, and dish.

Through the forward end of the galley work-table projected a pipe, on top of it a tiny pump, the pipe connecting with the storage tank of fresh water. Beside the pump, from a nail, always depended the galvanized iron cup used for drinking purposes.

Thatcher was on watch. Spencer was in his bunk sleeping profoundly. Thatcher lashed the tiller and came below for a drink of water. The galvanized cup was standing upon the table.

The circumstance was trivial, but he stood thoughtfully regarding the handle of the pump.

Spencer had been sleeping a couple of hours. An hour before Thatcher had been

below for a drink. They were pulling into warm latitudes now. This, with an excess of salted food, provoked thirst. He had hung the cup back upon the nail. Now the cup was standing upon the table.

He was dead certain that Spencer had not tumbled out for a drink. Surely he would have noted the fact, for he had been sitting beside the tiller, commanding a view of the entire cabin and the door space of the galley.

The pump, the work-bench, the cup upon the nail, Thatcher reflected, were not in line of vision from the cockpit.

It was strange, that cup getting itself from the nail to the galley table; confoundedly strange.

Again it was Thatcher's watch on deck, while Spencer slept. The tiller lashed, Thatcher sat upon the slide hatch above the companionway, his feet dangling, while he looked astern at the Gadfly's wake.

From the galley there came a faint creaking sound. The handle of the pump had been lifted and lowered.

Thatcher leaned over and looked into the cabin. Spencer was in his bunk. Again the handle of the pump worked.

They had a stowaway, hidden in the forward compartment where there was food in abundance, but no water.

A stowaway!

Removing his high, laced boots, he tied the tops with a string, suspended them from the edge of the hatch so that the feet showed in the top of the companionway.

He lifted his head and peered over the combing. His ruse had worked. Reassured by the boots hanging in the companionway, the stowaway had ventured forth.

It was a girl, dark, beautiful, somewhat bedraggled, her garments wrinkled from being housed in cramped quarters, but beautiful.

One slender hand patting the dark, brown hair into order, she stood in the galley door looking down upon the sleeping, gigantic form of Spencer Purvis.

That look upon the girl's face! Was it hate, or was it the animal-like ferocity of the woman scorned?

She glanced up through the companionway and took a step forward. Staring intently at Purvis's face, she leaned toward him slowly, bent her head as if listening for some unconsciously whispered word.

She knelt beside the bunk. Spencer's great, freckled left hand and arm hung over its side.

The girl stretched out one hand, lifted Spencer's, then fitted her thumb and fingers against the thumb and fingers of the sleeper.

Thatcher had heard old Barney Dan tell of the sailor superstition believed by every tar that had ever made the South Seas or the Malays, that if one wanted to learn a sleeper's secret, just put thumb to his thumb, fingers to his fingers, and that after a moment the sleeper would talk and tell.

What secret had Spencer Purvis to tell, and how would this obviously gentle, superbly beautiful girl know the old sailor belief?

But the charm failed to work. Spencer turned uneasily, lifted his left hand away from the girl's gentle clasp and let it fall upon his breast.

Still kneeling, the girl ran her slim hand beneath the mattress, even ventured to feel beneath Spencer's pillow. Standing, she searched the cabin with her eyes, opened a locker and peered within.

The Gadfly gave a lurch to some errant swell. With a catlike spring the girl was in the galley. Thatcher James could hear the hatch door close behind her.

A stowaway, a beautiful stowaway was trying to make Spencer Purvis tell a secret. Lennie Gibson, knowing something, suspecting something, had set Thatcher James to watch.

Thatcher James would watch all right, but no word would he ever tell, no matter what he saw. The gentle soul of James flared against Lennie Gibson, and his pale face flushed.

Thatcher James pondered. Would he, or would he not speak to Purvis concerning the presence of a stowaway? He would not. He had been made enough kinds of a fool of already. Anyway, would it really be news, the fact that a pretty girl, with marvelous deep brown eyes was stowed in the forward compartment? Thatcher could only hark back to Lennie Gibson's solici-

tude, jealousy the actuating motive, for the answer.

Again Thatcher rigged his little stage for the comedy, or tragedy. The shoes hung in a manner very lifelike in the open of the companionway, and Thatcher lay stretched along the afterdeck.

And again the stowaway came forth. A moment she stood over the sleeping man. Then she proceeded to a hurried but thorough search of the cabin. She explored lockers, picked up Purvis's boots and gave them a shake. She took down the box of shotgun shells, poked the shells about with the tip of her finger. She turned the pillows, the mattress in James's bunk, and went through all the pockets of the garments hanging upon the walls. One by one she took down the rolled charts from the rack, looked through the holes, and shook them.

Upon the starboard side of the cabin was a pull-down desk. The girl laid hold of the lid, gave a pull, but the thing stuck. She gave a harder pull. With a loud, wrenching sound the thing came away and dropped with a bang to the length of the supporting chains.

She clasped her hands to her bosom, turned, stared into the owlishly blinking gray eyes of Spencer Purvis.

In that instant, Thatcher James, peering over the combing, knew that he had done Spencer a great wrong. Upon the freckled face of Purvis, if ever upon a human countenance, there showed surprise, chagrin, guilt. Whatever circumstances lay behind this extraordinary situation, Thatcher knew that Spencer Purvis had had no knowledge of the presence of the fair stowaway.

The girl stood staring, and Purvis stared back.

"I—you—you see," stammered Spencer.

Fully clothed, save for boots and coat, he flung his feet out of the bunk.

The girl's bosom was storming up and down, and she had grown a trifle pale. The hand shook that she thrust out toward Purvis, the expectant palm uppermost.

"Give it me," she said in a voice that trembled.

"It's yours, is it?" demanded Purvis coldly.

"Assuredly it is not yours," she replied evasively.

"First cable station we hit," he countered shrewdly; "suppose we wire Moscow."

The girl started back, her face paled. The look she turned upon him, her expression of mingled terror and pleading, he could not withstand.

"Look here, young lady," said Purvis in a tone designedly brusk and businesslike, "you just tell me a bang-up good reason why I should turn over the thing to you—provided I've got it. Who are you? Where you come from? Honest, now, isn't it as much mine as it is yours?"

Her eyes widened, stared. "I am called Palome Narcisse," she said. "Whence I come, *n'importe*. Who I am"—she smiled tremulously—"who I am—"

She spread her little hands in a Gallic gesture. "The—the thing, it is yours as much as it is mine. But I must have it. I must. I will."

This, he knew, could proceed only from a motive greater than greed.

"Tell me why you must have it."

"No! Never! I cannot. I'd die first! Never!"

She crouched back against the bunk and flung up her arms as if fending off a blow.

"Well"—the big fellow looked about uneasily—"if you won't, you won't."

Then, pulling on his boots, Spencer called loudly: "Hey, Thatch, we got a passenger. Come on down and get acquainted."

Thatcher James, who had slid into his boots, came down the companionway, bowed gravely, accepted the little hand that the girl offered him. By not so much as the lift of an eyebrow did Thatcher James show surprise at finding a girl in the cabin.

Spencer Purvis began to grin. Admiration for this little girl drove out every other thought. Moscow, Nikolsk, the Puget Sound, aboard the Gadfly, now the wide Pacific— Some girl!

"We'll let down the slide partition, make up the after cabin for Miss Palome Narcisse," said Purvis.

"In turn"—she looked brightly from Purvis to James—"I will work my way."

She stepped into the galley and began to prepare the midday meal.

Always watching, seizing every opportunity to search the ship, yet craftily dissembling, Palome talked frankly with Purvis and James. The latter, completely at a loss to understand what "the thing" was that he had heard the girl and Purvis discussing, knew of no reason why he shouldn't tell the object of the voyage.

"Pearls," she exclaimed, turning to look at James's face. "Pearls! The big man would trade, would dive for pearls?"

She shook her head a bit incredulously, but pulled the chart toward her. Spencer, who had mounted the companionway, stood looking at Palome.

"Pearls," she repeated; "why, these are some of the best grounds for pearl shell."

She indicated an outlying portion of the Marquesas.

Purvis stared. How did this little girl know so much about pearls? And she had spoken the truth, as verified by the government pilot book itself, the Marquesas, portions of them, were rich hunting grounds for pearl.

"That island there, near Napuka," she said, pointing, "is a good place. We are on the course now for Napuka. Why not try there?"

"You seem to know the South Seas," offered Purvis suspiciously.

She dropped her gaze, blushing slightly.

"In the South Seas," she said softly, "I was born."

"What island, what group?" demanded Spencer tactlessly.

Her lips trembled. She arose.

"I don't know what island," she said, as she made toward the galley.

Purvis studied the chart, the pilot book. Napuka, fairly upon the course, would be the first island that they would sight. The pilot book said that pearl shell abounded there.

"Let's hold right on for Napuka, and try it," said Spencer.

"Suits me," answered James briefly.

Every instant that she could seize, Palome continued the search for the hidden pearl. But the thing was hidden well. She could not find it.

Hour after hour she studied, planned, schemed.

The fronded tops of the coco palms of Napuka showed in the offing forty miles away. In three hours, or a little more, they would fetch down the atoll of Napuka. Immediately north of Napuka showed a second clump of palm, on a lesser island.

Palome mounted the companionway.

"The natives are savage on Napuka," she said. "Better to land on the smaller island north, then, later, try Napuka."

Unflinchingly she looked Purvis fairly in the eyes.

"All right," he said, "north island it is."

He put the tiller over a trifle. Palome went below.

The Gadfly was about a league offshore when she called the men to come and eat. Then she insisted upon remaining at the tiller, explaining that there might be reefs to avoid.

It was less than half a mile to where the surf broke over the coral. To the left was a smooth space, marking the opening into the lagoon. Toward the opening she turned the craft.

Making the tiller fast, she stepped forward, filled a dish with kerosene, lifted it and doused the fluid all over the cabin roof.

CHAPTER IV.

THE ESTABLISHMENT.

At thirty Dr. Adolphe Gende was the most famous plastic surgeon in Paris. He was a veritable Prometheus of science, and his power in his profession gave him the audacity to scorn the laws of man and God. No humanity inspired the scalpel and lancet of Gende. Always he was on the other side.

When Roi Chemin, as famed in crime as Gende in surgery, became so well known and so much photographed that he could no longer follow his evil profession, he thought of Gende and the latter's magic. Every gendarme in Paris knew the face and squeaky voice of Roi Chemin, "King of the Road." But Gende, with his instruments as so many fairy wands, could give him a new face and voice.

For ten thousand francs Gende performed the operation—ten thousand francs gained by slitting the throat of a miser, as the doctor well knew.

New skin was grafted on the rogue's fingertips, paraffin injected into the tissue of the bridge of the nose, making it prominent and hawklike, and a strip of tissue removed from the mouth to make Roi's squeak a roar.

Unluckily for the two men of genius, a little laundress employed by Gende, with sufficient reason for hating him, told the police. When a hot poultice was applied to the nose of Roi Chemin it became grotesquely hideous.

The French penal colony in New Caledonia won the two to citizenship, and there Roi Chemin died, but Gende escaped and lived to make Papeete, Tahiti. Contact with civilization was too close here, and Gende left Papeete to roam the south seas.

The man who had helped him escape from New Caledonia was Barbru, so called for a red beard he wore to conceal a scar. He walked with a pronounced limp, which marked him. Gende did a resection of the muscles of his leg and almost eradicated the humiliating limp. Thenceforth Barbru was the servile creature of Gende.

The skill of the doctor became famous, and his habitat, a remote island of the Marquesas, the mecca of the maimed, the halt, the leprous, and those afflicted with elephantiasis. Gende used the secrets of the surgical confessional ruthlessly, making slaves and bondmen of those unlucky enough to be confidential.

From his island home Gende often gazed across the channel to Napuka, a few miles south. Napuka was a potential kingdom, and Gende hoped to become its monarch. In the waters of its lagoons was the richest store of pearl shell in that part of the archipelago.

Much as Gende desired Napuka he coveted Mme. Davey, wife of the English planter, a great deal more. To this end he secured places in Davey's service for two of the unfortunates who had become his slaves, and through them planted the seeds of mad suspicion and jealousy in the Englishman's mind.

One day, believing his wife in love with Gende, William Davey crept into the pandang shrub, removed his shoe and stocking and placed his great toe against the trigger of a thirty-thirty rifle.

But when Gende went to Napuka, lying condolence on his lips, he was met by Paipai, a tattooed and ancient Marquesan, with twenty spearsmen at his heels, and threatened with the roasting of a "long pig" if ever he set foot upon Napuka again.

Mme. Davey had gathered up the store of pearls, taken a boat at Papeete, and sailed for France.

In his youth Paipai had been a famous diver for pearls. When he had tested the probity of William Davey he had laid in Davey's hand a marvelous gem, the Ra'i Mata, or Eye of Heaven, which he insisted was none other than the god spirit of Napuka that had turned itself into a pearl. With solemn ceremony he presented the pearl to Davey, only it must never depart from the island of Napuka.

Unaware of what she was doing, Mme. Davey took it to Paris, and Paipai, discovering its loss, vowed that until it was returned no white foot should invade the shores of Napuka. The island would be as it was in the olden days, with Paipai as its king.

Months and years went by, filled with the scheming of Gende to gain possession first of the eye of heaven and then of the island of Napuka. And always, through the Parisian newspapers, Gende kept in touch with Mme. Davey. She had become Mme. Flurion, wife of the greatest surgeon in France, whom Gende hated.

Then the war, and M. Flurion in charge of a hospital in Russia, with *madame* making herself famous as a war-worker.

For hours and hours Gende and Barbru planned and plotted. Barbru often sailed off in the ten-ton schooner, and returned with various young persons. None of them would do until, at last, he brought back a beautiful girl, all white, about seventeen.

"Palome Narcisse she is called," he said. "Great luck! I found her about to throw herself into the sea."

The girl flung herself at the feet of Gende and pleaded that her secret be not bared.

A foundling, brought up by a native woman in a neighboring island, Palome was a little savage. But Gende gave himself to the task of educating her. He drove her remorselessly until, after two years, she had acquired an education few girls ever achieve. She had worked and studied and obeyed, for this devil man knew her secret and would tell it if she faltered for an instant.

At last she was prepared.

"You will go to Paris," said Gende, "then Moscow. Then you will return to this island, and you will lay in my hand the pearl called Ra'i Mata."

"I will go to Paris," she repeated, "and then to Moscow. I will return here and lay in your hand the pearl called Ra'i Mata."

With several trunks, an extensive wardrobe, and a large sum of money in her possession, the girl called Palome Narcisse took the steamer from Papeete, bound through Suez to Bordeaux.

CHAPTER V.

THE PEARL ONLY.

WITH Palome's shrill cry and the sharp crackle of the burning canvas, the broad seat in the cock-pit flew off, and a perfect fury of a girl flew at Palome Narcisse, knocked her aside, seized the tiller, and throwing the yawl up into the wind in order to save the mainsail from the flames.

One thrust of the tiller brought the Gadfly over. Then the second stowaway sprang to the locker, got out one of the copper extinguishers, and turned the stream into the base of the fire.

In the same moment Thatcher James came running with a second extinguisher. A few spurts, and the flames were smothered out.

Spencer Purvis stood staring at Lennie Gibson. A degree of surprise at the discovery of a second lady stowaway on board was inevitable, yet it seemed the measure of the astonishment of the big, freckled fellow approached the minimum.

Privately, an hour later, he attempted a ponderous dissertation to Thatcher that was really funny.

"You can see what this new woman idea is fetching us to, Thatch; stowing on ships and so forth."

For a moment Spencer stared at Lennie Gibson. The girl's face flamed. To the limiting border of the open neck of her blouse her skin burned with the lurid hue of shame and humiliation.

Spencer looked at her a moment, turned as if a sudden thought had struck him, and pointed to the burned patch of canvas.

"I'll pay the damage, Thatch," he said. "In a way of speaking, it's my fault."

Into the shamed consciousness of Lennie Gibson, who, for love of a man, jealousy of an unknown woman, had let herself into a preposterous predicament, there obtruded for the first time an element of cold calculation, a sudden realization of a sense of value.

Was it worth while to make a fool of one's self for the sake of another so unworthy? Her nature and the nature of Spencer Purvis were antagonistic and would never be otherwise. Pride was at last throttling romance.

Thatcher's sensitive soul, quick to catch the revulsion that had swept over Lennie, too innately honest to take any unfair advantage, at once made ready to martyr itself once more.

"Lennie," he said earnestly, "it is only fair for you to know that this—this mix-up isn't any love business between Spence and this girl. That much I know. It's something else."

Lennie Gibson laid her hand upon Thatcher's arm.

"Honest old Thatch," she said tenderly, "it isn't the slightest concern to me what it it. Honest. Just the same, though, I'm glad I stowed away."

She gave Thatcher's arm a pat. Suddenly the six foot six of cabin head room seemed entirely inadequate to accommodate the five foot six of Thatcher James.

Aloft, in the cock-pit, Palome Narcisse, still a bit pale, was looking Spencer Purvis fairly in the face.

"I didn't count on those fire extinguishers," she said. "I expected that you would

run for the pearl, jump overboard, swim for shore. In that case, before you reached shore, I should have had the pearl."

Spencer grinned. She would have had the pearl!

Had Spencer Purvis known that she could swim for three minutes under water he would have withheld the grin.

"So you figured we'd jump ship, and swim it, eh? Well, that would have been all right for me, but Thatch can't swim only just so-so."

"If you haven't changed your mind," said Palome, nodding at Spencer Purvis, "the best landing-place is through the opening in the lagoon."

She pointed to where the foaming breakers fell away to smooth water.

Spencer put the Gadfly about and headed for the opening of the lagoon. Half-way across the lagoon he dropped the anchor. A crescent beach lay before them. There was no sign of habitation or of life.

Palome had worked her plan shrewdly. Failing to get the pearl into her actual possession she had brought the holder to the place where, she reasoned, every advantage lay with herself. While this portion of the isle was deserted, primordial, two miles away through the pandang shrub lay the cluster of huts known as the Establishment.

"It will seem sort of nice to set foot on land once more," Thatcher was saying to Lennie. "Let's camp a day, anyway, on regular dirt."

They swung the dingey from its davits, and in half a dozen trips had established two camps ashore. Lennie started a fire to prepare the evening meal.

Palome stood staring out at the Gadfly. Unless Spencer Purvis was very subtle that pearl still rested in its hiding-place aboard the Gadfly. She was certain that he had not brought it ashore.

Adolphe Gende was just getting to the bottom of a pile of Paris newspapers, many of them six months old, the most recent of the lot bearing a date of five weeks before.

By degrees, since his escape from New Caledonia, Gende had acquired from Paris, under an assumed name, books, a microscope, instruments, chemicals, reagents.

Here, at all hours of day and night, Gende studied, schemed, held a bubbling test-tube in the blue flame of a spirit lamp, or spied upon life's secrets through an oil immersion lens.

The arrival of the packet of newspapers had, for the time, declared a recess in his studies. Eager to know the news of the continent, yet reluctant to lay aside his work, he sat beside his reading-table, the papers upon his knees while he stared at the rack of many colored test-tubes he had left.

Without a doubt he had made a discovery of the first importance—a cure, a specific for the dread leprosy.

For many years it had been known that of all drugs but one had any appreciable staying effect upon the death march of the plague, the oil of chaulmoogra, or the East Indian plum. Gende had discovered, he believed, and isolated the alkaloid of chaulmoogra, which would be as superior to the crude oil as strychnia sulphate is infinitely more potent and certain than a decoction of the crude plant, Nux Vomica.

But that would wait. The news.

And upon the first page was the story, very nearly correct as to details, of the theft from Mme. Flurion of the famous pearl known as the "Eye of Heaven."

With a spring Gende was out of his chair, pacing the floor, grimacing at the walls, clenching his small hands.

She had got the pearl! The girl had got the pearl.

Ah, what a thing was power. Under his threat to destroy, utterly and forever destroy her, this tender, gentle girl had attempted and succeeded in an enterprise that would have given pause to Barbru himself.

Gende stared off in the direction of Napuka Island. With the Ra'i Mata in his possession, Gende would command, and the fanatical savages, Paipai and the rest, would do his bidding. With the Ra'i Mata in his possession, Napuka Island, with its fertile fields of taro patch, now long neglected, would thrive again. The forests of waving coco palm, the incomparably rich spread of pearl shell, were his. It was a kingdom! Napuka Island potentially was worth millions of francs.

Brave little girl. He would set her free. She had earned it.

Gende turned a page, picked up a second newspaper, and again read.

At arm's length he held the sheet. His eyes started. His lips snarled.

Arrested! The thief of the Eye of Heaven had been apprehended, held by the military authorities at Nikolsk.

Fool! Bungler! Fool and dolt!

Now what if the girl called Palome Narcisse, fearing his terrible wrath, should never return to the South Seas?

For a moment fear twisted the evil face. Then he smiled coldly.

If alive, Palome Narcisse would return to the island of the Establishment.

The door opening upon the screened porch of his house creaked, and the faint sound of a footfall came to Gende's quick ears.

With a bound he was into the laboratory, out of the line of the light from the reading-lamp. His hand settled upon the handle of a heavy revolver that he kept always in a drawer.

There was a timid knock. The door opened. It was Palome Narcisse.

Gende stepped into the room.

"You've got it! Surely—"

She shook her head. Then, terrified by the glare of this terrible man, she told her story.

"You say it is here on this island," he summed up, "in the keeping of an American soldier to whom you intrusted it?"

He turned his head, glanced down at the newspaper. With the hue and cry raised after the thief of the Ra'i Mata by Mme. Flurion, by M. Flurion, her famous and influencial husband, it was no situation into which the crafty Gende would ever intrude.

"It is idle to appeal to me," said Gende. "You say that you know the pearl is in the possession of this American. Then get it. That was your task. Get the pearl; bring it to me."

He pointed to some sheets of paper upon which he had made a calender.

"You remember my orders," said Gende. "Also you recall the limit of time. It is almost up. The pearl here in my hand. There is no other answer."

Her head upon her bosom, the girl called Palome Narcisse left the hut of the king of the Establishment, and went through the trail in the pandang to the beach, where the passengers and crew of the Gadfly had pitched their camps.

To one side stood the little shelter tent where Spencer Purvis and Thatcher James were both sleeping. In the nearer tent was Lennie Gibson.

Palome looked into the tent. Lennie was breathing evenly, deeply.

Somewhere aboard the Gadfly, in a cunningly chosen hiding-place, rested Ra'i Mata.

Noiselessly the girl moved down the slope of beach to the water's edge. Slipping out of her clothing, she made a compact bundle of them. Holding the bundle above the water with her left hand she struck out, swam as silently as a sea otter to the Gadfly and climbed on board.

Descending to the galley she reappeared with a knife and began sawing away at the cable.

Lennie Gibson, who had been awake during the entire time of Palome's absence from the tent and had craftily simulated sleep when she returned, crept to the flaps, followed the dim figure to the water's edge, and into the water.

While Palome Narcisse was working away with the knife at the tough rope, Lennie Gibson was climbing the sea ladder.

Prone upon the afterdeck, lifting her head cautiously above the combing, Lennie watched. The cable came in two. The Gadfly turned lazily in response to the pull of the ebbing tide, floated slowly toward the lagoon opening, and on out into the open sea.

CHAPTER VI.

THE MAN WHO THINKS.

WITH the momentary stupidity that possesses the sound sleeper upon awakening, Spencer Purvis lay staring out through the opening of the shelter tent. Something seemed to be missing.

Reluctantly he rolled from the blankets and thrust his red head into the open.

Something was missing. The Gadfly had broken from her moorings, had gone adrift. He gave Thatcher James an ungentle thrust in the ribs.

The two men hauled the little dingey down the slope, thrust it into the water and rowed to the lagoon opening. There was no sign of the Gadfly.

They rowed back into the lagoon and beached the dingey. Spencer was thinking. He shoved the boat back into the water and rowed out to what had been the Gadfly's mooring spot.

In the clear water the Gadfly's abandoned anchor was plainly visible, the length of galvanized chain, and a bit of rope cable made fast to the chain. The free end of the cable had been haggled in two with a dull knife.

With a somewhat silly look of chagrin he rowed back. Thatcher had started a fire, set up the camping triangle and put on the coffee-pot.

"She didn't go adrift," said Spencer; "she was cut away."

Without looking up from his operations over the cooking iron, Thatcher nodded his head.

"Both the girls are gone," he said. "I noticed that the tent flaps were wide open."

Spencer settled his cup of coffee into the sand beside him, balanced a biscuit upon a dead ostrem shell and began tracing out a chart upon the earth.

Spencer sat staring down at the lines and crosses that he had made in the sands. The Gadfly had drifted south, toward Napuka. The precious pearl, Ra'i Mata, was on board. Had Palome known that it was on board? Would she find it?

She would have time to search, and still search until she found the treasure. But Lennie Gibson, why had she joined forces with the little dark beauty? Had she?

Into Spencer Purvis's meditations, fraught as they were with a feeling of defeat, of having been outgeneraled, outwitted and beaten, there obtruded an indefinable sense of worry, of some impending danger. In the event of a sudden blow, he comforted himself, Lennie Gibson knew how to sail the yawl.

But was Lennie on board? And if so, in emergency, exactly what would be Lennie's attitude toward the little girl called Palome Narcisse?

Spencer gave his head a toss, sprang to his feet. What was it to him what became of Palome Narcisse, the girl who had made a fool of him, just so long as she didn't discover the hiding-place of Ra'i Mata, and make away with it?

"Well," said Spencer, avoiding Thatcher's searching look, "they're gone. So's the Gadfly. I—Lennie can sail her. She won't pile up, long as Lennie is on board."

"If I only knew that Lennie was all right," returned Thatcher concernedly, "I wouldn't care a whoop about ten Gadflies. I—let's do something, Spence. I can't just stand here. Let's have a look; see what there is on this island."

Spencer agreed. He would go to the westward and explore, seek the cliff side from whence he could gain an unobstructed view to the south. Thatcher James started along the open beach to the east and north.

But the cliff that lay west of the camp site was not so easily reached as it had appeared. The indistinct trail that opened into the pandanus grove and which promised to lead cliffward, suddenly veered inland. Presently, as Spencer discovered the cliff no longer lay ahead, but to his left.

A little further he went along the trail until suddenly the tangle of pandanus and the scarlet hibiscus gave way to a cultivated open. This was a taro patch, shaped something like the figure 8. A man bent over the short-handled hoe, grubbing the stubborn wire grass from the roots of the taro.

This man had the nearer portion of the field to himself. Through the narrowed portion of the patch, and at the extreme further end, two men and a woman were at work.

As Spencer's foot rustled one of the broad leaves, the man straightened up and stared at the intruder.

Obviously a half-caste, the man was stalwart in build, with pleasing, regular features. But his expression was vacant.

Then Spencer discovered the reason. The man was almost blind. Slowly, but surely, trachoma was lowering two opaque curtains over the corner of his eyes. The difference

between light and dark he could tell, and the vivid green of the taro against the reddish earth, but little else.

"Morning, mate," greeted Spencer cordially.

In a flash the man's handsome countenance was transfigured. He smiled, reached forth a broad, brown hand.

"Morning," he returned. "Fine thing to hear white talk. My father was white sailor man. He used to say it, 'mate'!"

He centered his almost sightless eyes upon Spencer. Little by little, dimly, he was able to discern the visitor's features, the ruddiness of face, the redness of the young man's hair.

In turn Purvis was appraising the gigantic mold of the half-caste, the breadth of shoulder, thickness of wrist.

"They call me Meitai-Ima," said the man leaning a little further toward Spencer. "It means 'man of strong arms.' My white sailor father was a big man, and strong. And you?"

The man's brows wrinkled as he strove with all his might to discern the features of the white man. He put forth his hand, felt the texture of Spencer's flannel shirt, even ran his palm over one side of the visitor's face.

"If it could be that you are a *metao-enata*. If it could only be."

The great hand trembled that settled upon Spencer Purvis's shoulder.

"If it could only be that you are a *metao-enata*."

"*Metao-enata?*" repeated Spencer. "I'm not just clear, mate, what that might be. But if it will help, I'm just fisherman, sailor."

The fellow hung his head, dropped his hand from Spencer's shoulder.

"*Metao-enata* is 'one who thinks' what you call it, 'a doctor.' Oh, I have hoped. You understand—"

The fellow cocked his head, listened for the sound of any footstep that might be near.

"No one near," said Spencer encouragingly; "no one nearer than the far end of the field."

"If only you could have been a doctor. You understand"—the fellow lowered his voice to a cautious whisper—"you understand, I begin to doubt—and fear. He said in a year I would see if I was faithful and worked. I have worked, oh, so hard! All my goods he has. My beautiful wife, she's but a girl, she, too, works there like a slave. Sometimes, a month and I do not see her. He said a year. It is two years. And now he says one year more, if I am faithful, and—my girl-wife—"

The man of strong arms in sudden paroxysm laid hold of the tough hickory handle of the hoe, bent it in his naked hands as if it had been a reed.

"He?" exclaimed Spencer. "Who is he?"

"The *metao-enata*," coldly answered the man of strong arms; "the doctor, Adolphe Gende. Devil!"

Then in speech so rapid, impassioned, that Spencer could scarcely follow, the fellow told his story, and, in part the story of others, victims all of the *metao-enata*, the man who thinks: Dr. Adolphe Gende.

Gende had promised the fellow if, with his girl-wife, he would become a bond slave for a year, that in a year, he, Gende would remove forever the curtain that was lowering over his eyes. And now Gende put him off, saying that the time had not come to strip away the curtains with a keen knife-edge.

"Every day," said the man of strong arms, suddenly calming his excited speech, "every day we of this island that have Polynesian blood in our veins, we say for the little girl a *hakoni-ani*. That is a prayer, something for Heaven to hear. Yes, every day we pray for her."

And then he told Spencer the story of the girl called Palome Narcisse.

"What hold the *metao-enata* has upon little Palome I cannot say. Her secret and Gende's—who can tell? Blood is hot in the southern seas, passions fierce and strong. Who can say? Whatever is the secret, if she fail, Palome Narcisse were better dead. Aye, mate, for Palome Narcisse to fail to bring hither the Ra'i Mata she were better dead, ten times dead. I know. I have heard his voice when he spoke to her, the voice of Dr. Adolphe Gende."

Swaying slightly, Spencer stood looking

into the almost sightless eyes of the man of strong arms.

"Say, mate," said Spencer, "where does this Gende cabin up when he's at home?"

The fellow pointed. Down the trail and to the right the visitor would see a hut with a screened veranda.

Straight across the path and into the trail strode Spencer Purvis. Once in the open of the Establishment he went swiftly across the clearing, tore open the screen door and entered.

At sound of the rude intrusion, Gende glanced up angrily from a book that he was reading. The scream of terror gurgled futilely as the great hand of Spencer Purvis settled about Gende's throat.

When the doctor's eyes grew red and his lips grew blue, Spencer dropped him into the chair, where he fell, inanimate as a wet sack.

"Now," said Spencer, the fingers of his right hand clenching, "now about the little girl called Palome Narcisse and the Ra'i Mata. What are you holding over that little girl? Come now, speak!"

Slowly Gende sat erect in the chair. From the doctor's eyes, pin-points of destroying fire, there darted an ophidian look of unspeakable malevolence.

"You would wish to know the secret of Mlle. Narcisse?" he said huskily. "Ponder well, *monsieur!* You really wish to know? Ponder it well, *monsieur,* for if you really wish to know I will tell you."

A sudden flare of shame reddened the cheeks of Spencer Purvis. The man of strong arms, what he had said—what might not the secret be? Whatever it was, however monstrous, it was her secret.

"Never mind the secret," growled Purvis. "Let that pass. Just this, though, any harm that comes to her—you understand?"

Purvis reached over as if again to fasten his clutch about the doctor's throat. Without a move the doctor watched the great hand draw near.

"Perfectly, I understand," said Gende. "And you, do you understand? Would it not be droll, M. Fire-Eater, if you were to kill me, and then you were to go to the beautiful Mlle. Narcisse and say, 'He is dead; the monster, Gende, is dead.' How droll would that indeed be, for the beautiful Mlle. Narcisse, when she learned that you did not jest, within an hour would also lie dead, slain by her own slender hand. How droll!"

Spencer Purvis stood glaring down at the doctor, who glanced back with the insolent assurance of power.

Smiling triumphantly as Purvis withdrew the threatening hand, Gende lifted a forefinger.

"The pearl, Ra'i Mata, laid in this hand—that is the order given to Palome Gende. And still that order stands. She must bring the pearl, or—*monsieur* might ask Palome Narcisse the alternative. To that, however, I now add a second consideration. And it touches *monsieur* himself. What that consideration is I will make known to *monsieur* later. Now, go!"

He pointed to the door, and Spencer Purvis departed. Into the trail he hurried, and on toward the camp.

He would brave every peril of sea and wind to find the Gadfly and deliver the pearl into the hand of Palome Narcisse. Then—

Once upon the open beach he broke into a run. Pausing before the tent, he stared at the flap that was folded back. There, pinned in place where he would see, was a note from Thatcher James:

> I found an outrigger canoe up the beach. I thought perhaps I had not better delay, so I put out to see if I could find the Gadfly. The girls might need us.
>
> THATCHER.

Back along the beach ran Spencer Purvis, over the trail and through the settlement to the sand where several canoes were beached. Selecting the stanchest, he thrust it into the water, and without a word to the half-dozen native onlookers, paddled away swiftly to the south.

The tide was flooding strongly. Stubbornly he paddled on against the breasting sea that flung him back a boat's length for every two that he gained.

One moment the sun was red, the next instant it was dark. There was no twilight.

And still he paddled on toward the south,

laying his course by two stars that he recognized from the position that they held upon the chart.

CHAPTER VII.

A PAGAN PRAYS.

THE instant the Gadfly had cleared the lagoon opening, tossing and rolling to the stronger outside current, the girl ran lightly along the deck and plunged down the companionway, apparently indifferent to any peril that might threaten the unguided derelict.

The Gadfly went twisting and tossing on. There was no sign of a breeze, but only the ominous, dead calm of a tropical night. The tide, however, at the full strength of the ebb, bore the yawl on at a rate of fully two knots an hour.

Palome began to search, at first calmly, then feverishly. From the lockers she tore the contents, flung them upon the floor, and wadded them beneath the bunks.

Lennie, who had crept cautiously into the cock-pit, gazed through the open companionway upon the little dark girl. Palome's lips moved, she muttered to herself. Two spots of red began to burn upon her cheeks. Once, when she turned, the tiny galley light at her back, Lennie noted that the girl's eyes glowed like moistened matchheads in the dark.

Lennie shuddered. This little dark beauty, aroused, would be tigerish.

Everywhere Palome searched. She went through the pockets of the garments hanging in the clothes locker, felt over the linings and the seams for secret hiding places. She ripped open the mattresses and pillows. On hands and knees she felt over every inch of the carpet of the cabin floor.

Flinging her arms, shrilling some savage cry in the Polynesian tongue, she raved back and forth the length of the cabin.

Suddenly she calmed herself. Standing in the midst of the cabin she lifted her hands.

"The pearl. I must have it. *I will.* Listen, white man's God, and mine."

She broke into a raucous, derisive laugh. Help her, a pagan, the white man's God? He would never help the pagan, Palome Narcisse.

Very well; Palome Narcisse, pagan, had many gods.

Wide she flung her arms. Standing thus, she chanted the words in a voice that carried both appeal and threat.

"Hopoi maitai, haere-mai pohe! Hopoi maitai, haere-mai pohe!"

"Help me, or let me die."

Her arms dropped to her sides, and she bowed her head.

Suddenly electrified into action, she tossed the extra blankets and bed linen from the lockers. Alternately she repeated her pagan's prayer and denounced the thieving American who had stolen from her the Eye of Heaven.

She invaded the galley, opened the tea, coffee, and sugar canisters, spilling the contents recklessly.

"He stole it! The pearl! Ra'i [illegible]! The Eye of Heaven! I must have it! I must! He stole it!"

By degrees there came to Lennie Gibson, watching, listening from the cock-pit, a veritable sickness of soul as she supplied in fancy the prologue to the drama. Spencer Purvis had stolen a pearl from this girl. Somehow, by that inexplicable hardness of heart that dominates, upon occasion, a woman the most gentle, Lennie could feel no pity for Palome Narcisse, but only anger, abhorrence toward Spencer Purvis. What opportunity could Spencer Purvis have had to steal a jewel from this girl, what opportunity save one supplied by personal intimacy?

Spencer Purvis had fallen far below the measure of a man.

In a shuddering whisper, Palome repeated again the name of the white man's deity. Lennie pressed forward and thrust her head and shoulders into the open companionway.

Palome Narcisse, twisting, turning before the little mirror fastened to the cabin wall, caught the reflection of the face framed in the companionway. With an animal-like scream of rage, she sprang at Lennie, seized her by the shoulders, and dragged her to the cabin floor.

"Did you see!" she raged, clawing for Lennie's throat. "Hear? If you did—"

Bound about by Lennie Gibson's strong, young arms, Palome's paroxysm of rage dissolved as suddenly as it had come, and she lay sobbing against Lennie's bosom.

Still the Gadfly drifted on. The ship's clock struck eight bells, marking the beginning of the early morning watch. With a suddenness truly uncanny to an Occidental, it was day.

Lennie's gaze was troubled. In all probability, she reasoned, the Gadfly would float fairly upon the island south, and there become the plaything of whatever errant back eddies might set out from its crescent-shaped shore-line. There would be dangerous rocks. Through the glasses she could make out the long rollers from the open foaming upon the jagged reefs.

Lennie unwrapped the reef bands from about the boom, removed the cradle, and tried with all her strength to hoist the mainsail. There was no wind, but any instant, she reasoned hopefully, there might be.

Her elbows upon her knees, her face in her hands, Palome sat upon the coaming, oblivious, unconcerned over any hazard that sea and shore might offer.

In response to Lennie's call, Palome stepped forward upon the deck, took in the slack at the pin-rail as Lennie, by degrees, managed to hoist the sail.

Then, when there came a breath of fitful breeze, Lennie contrived to wear the ship away a distance to port. Another half-dozen gusts and the Gadfly would have been in a line to clear the eastern point of the island ahead.

Then the breeze died.

Lennie scanned the shore through the glasses, seeking some opening in the lagoon that would afford them harbor. At one point she held the glasses focused for a long time. Then she turned to Palome.

"You take a look. I see men upon the beach—many men. What do you make out, Palome?"

Palome turned a grateful countenance upon Lennie Gibson. This cold American girl had called her by her name.

"They're launching boats of some sort, aren't they, Palome?"

Slowly Palome nodded her head.

Then the girl laid down the glasses, reached her hand timidly, touched Lennie's arm.

"Please understand me," said Palome pleadingly. "Not for myself do I ask it now. Do you know where Ra'i Mata is hidden, the pearl? If you do—"

Palome pointed toward the shore. A dozen outrigger canoes containing a dozen men each were making swiftly toward the helpless Gadfly, the sun flashing upon the wet paddles as they swiftly, steadily dipped.

"If you know where the pearl is hidden—"

To Lennie's ears came the guttural chant of the canoemen as they urged on the slim craft. There was something ominous in Palome's simple words, the pointing of her slim finger toward the outriggers.

"If you know where the pearl is hidden—it is the Ra'i Mata, the Eye of Heaven, the sacred tabu pearl of Napuka. Show you the pearl to old Paipai, he will crawl to kiss the hand that holds it. Without the pearl, Paipai—"

Palome leaned, whispered a word in Lennie's ear. Lennie's face went as white as the clean mainsail idly flapping overhead. But in an instant something of the grim, square-jawed determination of her father showed upon her face.

"That is Paipai and his band?" she demanded. "You are positive?"

Palome nodded her head. She was very certain.

Lennie glanced helplessly at the flapping sail. An instant she stood in thought, sprang down the companionway, returned with Spencer's double-barreled shotgun resting across one arm, a box of shells in the other.

A hawser's length away the flotilla of canoes was dividing to right and left. An old man, hideously tattooed, stood in the stern of the largest craft, shouting orders to the natives.

"You speak their language, you have said. Tell them to sheer off. The first to lay a hand upon the gunwale of this yacht I will kill. Tell them so."

For the girl standing against the hatch, thrusting shells into the breech of the gun, Palome felt a sudden respect, admiration.

Cupping her hands to her lips, Palome

called shrilly, "*Vaka memae! Vaka memae!*" (Canoes keep off!) "*Pahoe pepena mate!*" (This girl will kill!)

But Paipai, shrieking back defiance, ordered his men to attack right and left.

Firing as rapidly as she could reload, Lennie singled out one canoe, then another. Paipai and a dozen of his men were wounded by the first burst from the double-barreled gun. Paipai's hideous face streamed with blood. But wounds inflicted by small bird-shot are superficial. The old savage knew something of the white man's arms, and shouted encouragingly to his band that the gun was an "*iti*" and not a "*nui.*"

As the canoes drew still nearer the craft the fire became more deadly. Two islanders flopped into the water, to be picked up by craft astern.

A native was climbing the forestays. Lennie dropped him with the right hand barrel. A second attempted to swing to the jib-boom. Lennie snapped the left barrel, but it missed. The cartridge was dead.

She ejected the shells, the dead one flying past her shoulder down into the cabin where it rolled beneath a bunk.

The two last shells in the gun, Lennie lifted the weapon to her shoulder. A spear glanced from the boom. The swinging haft struck her across the temple, and she sagged down in a heap upon the cock-pit deck.

Forward, astern, over the sides poured the islanders. In a moment Palomē's wrists were bound with strands of pandanus fiber. Then the natives bound the wrists of the unconscious white girl, and both captives were lowered over the side into a canoe.

Paipai, strutting about the narrow confines of the Gadfly's deck, was telling his band that this was just such a white man's boat as he had always wanted. Two white captives were all very well, but the boat was the thing of importance.

Palome and Lennie, who presently recovered consciousness, were placed in the two compartments of a double hut before which a spear-armed warrior was stationed.

Through the thin thatch wall that separated them the girls called back cheer and encouragement, one to the other, a mutual distrust dissolving before a common peril.

Before the prison hut Paipai and his men were gathering for council. Seated in a circle upon the earth they spoke briefly. Then one sprang to his feet, and with much gesticulation of spear brandishing, made an impassioned appeal. Another followed, and a third.

Palome, sitting by the low-flung door of the hut, listened.

When the powwow had ended, and the natives had gone their several ways, leaving only the armed guard before the jail hut, Palome sat staring into space.

Three days. So far as it mattered with herself, why, it might as well end in one day or three. Three days they had yet to live. This white girl, Lennie, had the soul and heart of courage. She deserved consideration. It was no use to tell her now the verdict of the council of Paipai and his savages.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE MEASURE OF A MAN.

ABOUT midday an old *vahine* of Paipai's household brought to the hut breadfruit, roast pig, and green coconuts. She beckoned to the girl to come forth. When Palome appeared in the open the woman pointed for her to enter the apartment assigned to Lennie, as the girls, to save the reduplication of cooking dishes, were to eat together.

Palome spoke a word in the Marquesan tongue. The old *vahine's* face brightened. What island did the white girl of island-speech come from?

"Haka Heatu," said Palome.

The *vahine* shook her head. Very bad. Paipai hated the folk of Haka Heatu as deeply almost as he hated white people from away over there.

While the girls were attempting to eat, the old *vahine* sat just without the hut, occasionally leaning forward to peer in inquisitively or say a word to Palome in the native tongue.

But the food was as ashes to their lips. From having been very hungry they now were not hungry at all, only thirsty. Each drank the cool milk from a green coconut.

Lennie sat with her hands folded in her lap. Palome studied her. Should she tell Lennie what was in store? What would be the good? Why not write *finis* at the concluding chapter of her tragedy of life, in characters noble and unselfish?

No, Palome decided, she would save Lennie what anguish of mind she could, and only tell her at the very last.

A native approached the hut, speaking first a few braggart words to the guard, then to the old *vahine*. He dropped to his knees, leered gloating at one girl, then the other. Withdrawing, he spoke further to the woman, to the guard, and went strutting away.

Palome paled, her resolution not to tell until the last faltering. Was she doing right not to tell? Palome had heard that white folks from over there when about to die communed with their God in prayer. How many minutes or hours were required to placate the white man's God?

The hideous fellow, drawing lots with the other islanders, had won the honored place of spear thruster, executioner.

But there were other things that it might be her duty to relate.

In a low, even voice Palome told Lennie Gibson her story. She had been raised, she told Lennie, from infancy, by Mother Ninkiva on the Island of Haka Heatu.

Three years before a big man with a red beard had come to Haka Heatu and had told her that she must come to the island of the Establishment.

Palome, uttering a quick, dry sob, hid her face in her hands for an instant. Then she continued.

"I went, and gladly went. Anyway, for Gende knew my secret, I would have had to go. The Dr. Gende was kind to me, firmly kind as one is to a wilful child. Books, music, clothing, everything I had, for two years. Then my master grew stern. I was to go to Paris, Moscow, steal the Ra'i Mata from Mme. Flurion, fetch it to Gende, on pain of—

"I hated myself. Mme. Flurion took me in, treated me as a daughter, I repaid her by stealing Ra'i Mata, flying. But the white man's talk along the wire followed me. I gave the pearl to the white soldier, hidden in a bonbon. I told him my name. As I would have written an address to which I wished the Ra'i mailed, a soldier seized me. I was imprisoned. I escaped. I followed. My heart was bitter. It was wrong. The pearl was only loot stolen from a thief. It was his as much as mine. Had I told him my secret he would have given up the Ra'i, but I could not. I could not tell. Do not blame him, Lennie. In his heart is much of good, very much. I know it. It was as if the circumstances challenged his young manhood to hazard and adventure. Do not blame him, for no longer do I."

The old *vahine* thrust in her head to speak a word.

"I must go now, Lennie," said Palome gently. "The *vahine* says I must return to the other side."

Palome took both Lennie's hands in her own.

"Lennie," she said in a voice so low that Lennie could hardly understand, "if by any chance you see him, the soldier boy; if you should see him and I should not, tell him I forgive, if there is anything to forgive. Will you tell him that?"

In Lennie's face there had been a touch of hardness, but at Palome's word it fled, and a tear rolled down her cheek.

Suddenly contrite, Lennie flung her arms about Palome, drew her toward her, offered a kiss of reconciliation, but Palome angrily threw her off, crept swiftly from the low door, and entered her own side of the hut.

With the coming of night Palome began cautiously tearing away some of the pandanus fibers. Little by little she enlarged the opening, sliding swiftly to the opposite side of the room when she heard the guard's naked feet shuffling across the hard-packed earth without.

When the guard resumed his pacing, Palome continued to pull away at the fiber.

Again the guard appeared, called to Palome to stand, move about to enable him to see that she was there. Palome, walking across the room, called to Lennie the meaning of the order, who in turn arose and moved about.

By degrees the guard lengthened his beat.

"Lennie! *Sh-sh-sh!*"

Lennie crept to the aperture that Palome's hands had made in the hut partition.

"Listen, Lennie. When the guard is farthest away, slip from the hut, run this way."

Palome lifted Lennie's hand, pointed the direction.

"Run, Lennie, quietly; but run. You will come to the beach. Always there are outrigger canoes. Lennie, don't argue, but go. Once out of the lagoon, paddle with the current, paddle for your life. Everywhere, but on this island, the Marquesans are friendly. There will be no danger. Go."

Palome clutched Lennie's hands.

"Now," whispered Palome, "he is walking away. Now. Good-by."

Lennie crept from the hut, arose to her feet, and sped away in the direction of the beach. The noise of her flying feet was lost in the hubbub and thump of the drum and the drone of chanting voices.

The guard, reluctant to leave the scene of the incantation, returned to the hut, thrust his head in, ordered Palome to stand and move about. Then he moved slowly to the opening of the second compartment. By a miracle of dexterity, nimbleness, the noise of her scrambling covered by the chanting, Palome dove through the opening in the partition, and a second time, in response to the command of the guard, arose and moved about.

Palome crouched against the wall, clasping and unclasping her hands.

Again the guard paced by. He had relinquished something of his watchfulness and had not looked into the hut for some minutes. If only Palome could be sure that Lennie had gained the beach, put forth in an outrigger, she would have welcomed a discovery of the ruse that she had worked.

Once more the guard passed. Now he was returning. Before the hut he came to a pause. Upon his knees he was crawling to the low-flung door.

Palome shrunk back against the wall. She could hear the scratching of the fellow's hands in the doorway. There sounded a dull thud, a noise like the striking of a splicing iron upon a rope's end. Then a brief rustling, and a weak groan.

"Palome! Palome! Lennie!"

It was the whispering voice of Spencer Purvis. Before he had called the name of Lennie he had twice called the name "Palome." He had called her first! He had first thought of her. He had risked his life, had come for them, but he had called her name first. Oh, the glory of it!

"Yes," she whispered gladly, "it is I, Palome."

She found his reaching hands. She was drawn forth from the hut. Together they had run a dozen steps, when he came to a stop.

"Wait here! Lennie! Just a minute!"

She clutched his thick arm.

"She is gone, an hour ago, escaped!"

Swiftly they won the beach. In an outrigger canoe Spencer swept them toward the center of the lagoon. The Gadfly lay just ahead.

In an instant they were on board, and Spencer had set the canoe adrift with a thrust of his foot, placing the canoe paddle in the cock-pit of the yacht.

With a slash of his knife he severed the hawser. Leaning over one rail, then the other, Spencer paddled with all his prodigious strength, and the Gadfly slowly made the lagoon opening and drifted on into the open sea. Outside the lagoon there was a breath of breeze that stiffened as it veered to the north.

Side by side in the cock-pit, speaking never a word, Spencer and Palome watched the dim outline of Napuka Island drop swiftly astern.

Two safe miles off, Spencer relinquished the tiller to Palome, went below, and lighted the swinging lamp. She could hear him feeling about on the shelf above a locker.

Presently, beads of sweat showing upon his pale face, he stood in the companionway holding the lamp.

"It is gone, Palome," he said. "The pearl is gone. I had hidden it in one of the shotgun shells. It is gone—all the shells are gone."

Deaf to her hurried account of the gallant resistance offered by Lennie, who had fired and fired so long as the ammunition held out, he stood whispering to himself. "It is gone! The pearl is gone!"

Suddenly mindful of the fact that a sin-

gle shell had failed to explode, Palome lashed the tiller and went below. High and low she searched. In the cabin of the Gadfly was not a single shell, for the tribesmen of Paipai, believing that the trinkets were strong devil-devil charms, had carried away every exploded shell that lay in the cock-pit or upon the cabin floor.

Steadily the Gadfly bore on. Again Spencer and Palome sat in the cockpit. A ribbon of soft rose lay along the horizon, promise of day.

Spencer took both Palome's hands in his own.

"Palome, little girl, listen. I'm never going back to Puget Sound. I'm going to stay here, always, and make it up to you for what I have done. Palome, little girl, you know what I've learned in the last hours? Want me to tell? You do? Listen, then—I love you."

A glad cry escaped her lips. In the soft, brown eyes shone the light of love's transfiguration. She reached her arms to him, whispering, "My lover! My lover!"

But even as he gathered her into his arms and drew her lips toward his, she uttered a scream, tore herself from his grasp.

"Oh! Oh! My lover! My lover! Never may you kiss Palome, never! My lover! No! No! For I am a leper!"

CHAPTER IX.

PEARL OF GREAT PRICE.

HALF-WAY across the space that separated Napuka from the island of the Establishment the Gadfly picked up an outrigger canoe bearing Thatcher James and Lennie Gibson.

Escaping from the prison hut, Lennie had descried a dim shadow moving about on the water.

It was Thatcher James, in a canoe, searching for her. All unaware that the death penalty had been pronounced over herself and Palome Narcisse, Lennie and Thatcher paddled swiftly away, leaving Palome to a fate of which neither dreamed.

Touching the counsel given Lennie by Palome to paddle away to the south, Thatcher stubbornly disagreed.

"We'll go straight back," he said decisively. "We'll hire some of those islanders to go at once to Papeete with a message to the commandant. A French cruiser will soon straighten things out here, and get us back the Gadfly."

So they had paddled on. Making five miles to their one, the Gadfly overhauled them.

Briefly, withholding only Palome's secret, Spencer told the story.

"You don't remember anything back of the island, Haka Heatu, Palome?"

She shook her head.

"As far back as I can remember I played in the surf, chased the land crabs on the beach with the children of Mother Ninkiva. Mother Ninkiva told me that I was a white girl, but told me naught else. I wore the short lava-lava skirt. I learned to dive for pearl shell, pounded with an *akau-toa*, the bark from which the islanders make their cloth.

"I was standing upon a coral jut, about to dive for shell, when the big man with the flaming beard came down the beach. A long time he stood staring. Then he laughed. From his pocket he drew a little mirror, patted me upon the shoulder, and bade me look.

"By twisting my body, moving the glass, I finally saw the telltale white spot upon the skin, the leper's mark. I would have killed myself.

"Dr. Gende would cure me, the red-beard promised—surely cure me. I went with the man of red beard, and the little doctor took me into his house, clothed me, gave me books to read, and once a week some brown drops of the oil of the wild plum-tree.

"But that is not the cure. That only makes the body ready for the cure. What the cure is no human soul knows but Adolphe Gende. That Gende has withheld until I bring and lay in his hand the Ra'i Mata. With the pearl in his possession, Paipai and his men will crawl to Gende's feet. Whoever holds Ra'i Mata, that man may be king absolute of the rich Island of Napuka."

Palome lifted her hand, laid it upon her shoulder.

Spencer Purvis began to crack his great hand, to clutch with them at some hateful image hovering before him.

Palome shook her head.

"No, my lover. No. How can we make him tell if he will not? If you should kill him the secret dies with him."

Plainly visible now were the two shelter tents upon the shore of the island of the Establishment. The Gadfly beat in at the lagoon opening.

Lennie and Thatcher were still below. Spencer glanced toward shore where the ship's little dingey still lay drawn up on the sands. The Gadfly drew too much water forward to approach nearer the shore, and they were without a tender.

Suddenly Lennie ran on deck and stretched out her hand.

Palome stood staring down at Lennie's clenched hand, a hand that slowly opened, revealing a great pearl that flashed and scintillated in the morning sun like a thing of life, the Ra'i Mata, the Eye of Heaven.

"Under the bunk," sobbed Lennie hysterically, "I found it, in a shotgun shell."

A strange silence hung over the cluster of huts of the Establishment as Palome and Spencer walked swiftly from the trail across the taro patch.

At the door of Gende's house, Palome turned, lifted her hand as a sign that she wished him to remain without.

Then she lifted the latch of the screen door, entered, one tightly clasped hand pressed against her throbbing bosom.

A minute passed, another. No voice sounded within the house of Dr. Adolphe Gende.

Another minute. Palome appeared in the door, her shoulders drooping.

Spencer advanced across the veranda and looked within the room.

Dr. Adolphe Gende, grinning sardonically, lopped over the arm of his chair, lay quite dead, the broad blade of a native knife buried to the hilt between his shoulders.

Now the murmuring voices drew near the Establishment. Shouting, gesticulating natives ran ahead of a man with a flaming red beard, the half-caste man of strong arms, a white man, and a white woman.

"I kill him," said the Man of Strong Arms proudly. "I kill him."

Palome stood staring at the white woman. It was Mme. Flurion, from whom she had stolen Ra'i Mata—Mme. Flurion and her eminent husband, Dr. Flurion, the great French surgeon.

"He tells me," said the Man of Strong Arms, pointing to Dr. Flurion; "he tells me the curtain should have been taken away from my eyes a year ago—two years ago. Now, because the curtain was left, I shall never see only dimly. So I come and kill him."

"There she is," said Barbru to Mme. Flurion, and nodding toward Palome. "That's your girl. The sharks didn't get her. That was Gende's lie. I stole her when she was a *pahoe,* and farmed her out to Mother Ninkiva."

Haunted by the face of the girl who had stolen Ra'i Mata, perplexed by the inability of the police of three countries to recover the pearl, recalling the powers attributed to the gem by the natives of Napukā, Mme. Flurion, at the close of the war, had induced her husband to make a vacation journey to the South Seas.

There, she had recovered more, far more than even the fabulously valuable Eye of Heaven.

Spencer Purvis was seated upon a boulder, staring out to sea. What an overwhelming responsibility was his. Gende dead, and with him his secret of the cure of the dread leprosy. A merciful numbness seemed to come upon him, and he sat, still looking into space.

Within the hut formerly occupied by Dr. Gende, Dr. and Mme. Flurion sat beside the table. The bodice of her dress stripped away from her shoulder, Palome was upon her knees before the doctor.

The doctor laid down the glass through which he had been looking.

"Nonsense, my dear little girl," he said. "You have no leprosy, and never have had. That is simply Tinea Desquamans, a trifling cutaneous inflammation due to the poison of a tropical plant pollen. You have no leprosy, never have had. You are as pure and clean as the water of a mountain rill."

At the sound of some one scrambling up the rocks, Spencer turned his head. It was Palome Davey.

She came up beside him, her dark eyes shining gloriously.

" My lover, I am clean as the mountain rill, and as pure. He says it that knows, the great Dr. Flurion."

Slowly she placed her arms about his neck. Then she advanced her red lips until they rested upon his.

The Gadfly, Dr. and Mme. Flurion on board, Thatcher James and Lennie Gibson, who, when they reached Papeete, would become Mrs. James, warped out of the lagoon and bore away to the south. From the deck there was a great waving of hands and handkerchiefs, and from the cliff side Spencer and Palome waved back.

" Listen, my lover," said Palome. " When we were married by the captain of the ship that brought *madame,* my mother, and the doctor hither, we said a little prayer, you and I, to your white man's God. Now, Palome, who was a little savage, will have no God but the God of my lover. Tell me of him, lover."

Spencer Purvis, whose strong point decidedly was not theology, hemmed and hawed. Then he took Palome in his arms and kissed her.

" The importantest thing, Palome," he said, " about my God, is that He is constructed all of love."

(The end.)

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THE VILLAIN THINKS OUT LOUD

I'M a wicked, wicked villain in the pictures,
And I certainly can swing a hefty fist;
I pursue my sinful way—there are no strictures,
And I work my villainy just as I list.
There is never any doubt about my morals,
For, the guy who writes the script—he sees to that;
When the fans see fit to pass around the florals
Why, they never do a thing but leave me flat.

Oh, I shake a mean revolver—in the fillem,
I'm a tested A-1 fiend in human guise,
And if any dare to cross my will I kill 'em,
That's the simple code of ethics I advise.
If there's any dirty work to do, I do it,
Women of a certain type, they are my tools,
And if trouble can be brewed, why, I just brew it,
Whether it's to bust a heart or swipe the jools.

That, of course, is on the screen; but when I'm finished,
When I've wiped my make-up off and gone on home,
Then my bump of wickedness is soon diminished,
For I'd get a rolling-pin bounced off my dome
If I pulled that villain stuff around the missis;
I must lay away the gun and hide the knife;
That is, if I want to know what peaceful bliss is,
For no villain is a villain to his wife.

I've been married long enough to know discretion,
And I rather like this mundane sort of life,
So I watch my step, at home there's no transgression,
For no villain is a villain to his wife.

Lyon Mearson.

Wolf of Erlik

Part III

by J. U. Giesy *and* Junius B. Smith

Author of "Black and White," "The House of a Hundred Lights," "The Ivory Pipe," etc.

CHAPTER X.

THE DRUMS.

HADDON and Bryce carried the trunk into the house and set it in the room Connie and I used. She had gone into the room with Lotis, and, presumably at least, Dual still slept. Garston drove the car around to the shed in which it was kept, and put it away, remarking that it had been missing on the way out from the station and he would have to look it over the next day. He came back and joined Jim and Haddon and me on the porch, and we talked. Haddon asked him about the big black, and he scowled.

"I don't know much about him," he said. "I rode down there once or twice. Those blacks are a surly bunch. You'd have thought I was trespassing on their lands, rather than they on ours. I spoke to the sheriff about them, with an eye to driving them out, but Lotis wouldn't have it. She seemed to see farther into this affair than I did, right from the first. For that matter, it all seems impossible to me yet. I don't believe I could swallow it at all if it wasn't for knowing what that Tartar hound tried to lead her into in the past, and my complete respect for Semi Dual's word. He doesn't speak lightly, so I suppose it must have been Khan who looked in through that window last night. Both he and Lotis say so, but—good God!"

For a time there was silence, and then Haddon spoke: "Bryce and I were down there to-day, and the big boy ran us out."

And Garston considered that once more in silence before he replied slowly: "Well, I don't know but you were wise to leave."

"Gosh!" said Jim. "I feel like just before the battle, mother. Gordon, unless we mind our step it's curtains for the firm of Glace & Bryce. What's that play where th' guy yells 'There's some devil fighting here!' just before he gets stuck?"

"'Faust,'" I told him. "Shut up."

He grinned and lighted a cigar. Nothing ever served to subdue him for long. He was a creature not much given to nerves. And yet, despite his seeming levity, I am inclined to think that, along with the rest of us, he felt a trifle subdued.

Because, as we sat there in the light of the late afternoon, we were really in a sense on guard. Both our party and that of Khan, of whatever it consisted, were very much, I thought, like two opposing armies, each in its chosen position, each waiting for the other to make some move. And if I read aright Dual's attitude in the matter, he who was in all seeming our

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leader was determined that his opponent should move first.

The thing, after all, would seem then to have narrowed down to a battle of wits, as it were. At least, the weapons to be used, rather than anything of a material nature, were thoughts—the dynamic lances and swords and spears of the human mind. He held them as much things as any other manifestation of force, as I knew, and certainly I had seen them produce some weird effects already—change a pair of axes into seeming serpents that time Lotis had been with us in Semi's own quarters; cause a dagger in the hands of a slender girl to appear a tongue of leaping flame that seared both reason and any semblance of caution out of the brain of a man; and—so far as I knew—it had been responsible for making the face of a man pressed close to a window seem, last night, the head of a wolf staring in through the pane.

They are strange things, thoughts—the things that set into motion by the ionic vibration of the convolutions of the brain—and we live in a sea of them. Sometimes I have even caught myself wondering in how much the things *we think* we think are the variants of other thought waves impinging against our mental perceptions, and how much wholly our own—if a man is not frequently caught up in a strong current of concentrated thought and swept off in its direction, quit unconscious of the fact that he is being so borne along.

And if you'll look closely at that notion, you may perhaps see how such things as the places of prayer—brain centers, as it were, automatically thinking thoughts inspired by the will of another, creating a very maelstrom of mental force projection—might well contrive to set up some such current that should carry the minds of men to shipwreck, and so serve the ends of those behind the movement—of such creatures as Otho Khan.

There was that remark of Jim's about taking horses and riding up to the mountains in search of the Mongol's hang-out, of the afternoon. More than once I have wondered if it were Bryce individually speaking, or merely his lips automatically responding to some spindrift of the current set up against us by the Mongol's plans. But that's running ahead of the story, and of course I did not suspect, as I sat there with my companions, until Haddon asked a question: "And what did the sheriff say about it?"

"Give me a cigarette," said Garston, and put out a hand for Haddon's case, and ignited one of the paper rolls before he answered: "Why, from the way he talked, I rather thought he'd be glad to clean them out if I asked him. Of course, I'd have had to ask him directly before he could make a move, and I'm not sure even yet but I wish I had. He said if I needed any help all I had to do was to let him know, and we let it go at that. Damn it, it would have been a lot better than this living on your own property in a state of siege."

I glanced at Haddon. It was in my mind that the situation was getting badly on Garston's nerves. Haddon shrugged. "Well, buck up," he advised. "It can't be so long now till the enemy makes a move. The stage seems to be set for the big show."

"That's it," Garston made gloomy rejoinder. "I can't seem to fit into the picture. I can't seem to grasp it. I can't understand the man who brought you out here. And darn it all, I can't even understand my own wife. And at the same time I'd gamble my eternal soul they're both sincere."

"You'd better believe they're sincere," said Bryce. "We had a talk while you were away, and Dual says we gotta be on our guard."

"On guard against what?" Garston demanded bruskly.

Jim eyed him. "Well, in your instance, Garston, I'd say mainly yourself. You're getting sort of peckish. The way I dope it, Dual's trying a little watchful waiting on Otho. He's making that guy bring anything he feels like starting to him. I've seen him play that sort of trick on more'n one occasion, and believe me, m' son, it works. The hardest guy in the world to fight is th' one that doesn't do a thing you can get hold of, but just gets ready and then holds it, and makes you feel him out."

"Oh, hell!" Garston got up suddenly, tossed away his cigarette, and went into the house.

Haddon shrugged again. Bryce continued to smoke.

"Just the same, I think you called the turn on Semi's tactics, Jim," I said at last.

"Somewhat Fabian, eh?" smiled Haddon. "The man's an enigma to me, I admit. He is the greatest theorist and at the same time one of the most practical individuals I ever met."

Jim grunted. "Which is all right, too, Mr. Man, provided always that your theory's correct to start with."

Haddon frowned. He jerked his head toward the living-room door through which Garston had disappeared. "If we've any real weakness in our ranks—that's where it is. And the worst of it is that if I were a devil bent on smashing up such an opponent as the girl herself, it's the point where I'd strike.

"Dual's right when he says all this stuff is nothing more than a certain use of certain laws. The argument is reasonable. It appeals. Consequently it follows that no matter what they pull, it's going to be based on natural law to begin with, and there are certain fundamental principles in life by which we may assume they as much as any other form of life are swayed. They know of them, of course, and why, since they hold nothing under heaven holy, should they not try to turn them to their ends the same as anything else? Those things, as I size them up, are hunger, physical and mental exhaustion, fear, hate, and sex attraction, which we denominate passion on the physical side, and, on a mental basis, love—"

"And self-preservation," said Bryce.

"I was coming to it, old chap," Haddon accepted. "That's true—and it affects both the physical and the higher phases of life. Now, as I take it, these necromancers, sorcerers, devil-worshipers, or whatever they are, have put themselves in a position where in so far as they are concerned the physical existence is about all there is.

"Death for them is death, and nothing else, if we're to accept our friend Dual's words. Well and good. Self-preservation for them then becomes the highest motive in life, since in the day that they die, as the Psalmist puts it, 'in that very day his thoughts perish.' Well and good again. They've raised self-preservation to the *n*th degree of importance, since anything else means to them a literal blotting out—"

"Just what are you getting at, if you don't mind my asking?" Jim inquired.

Haddon grinned. "Wouldn't that explain Khan's attitude in regard to Mrs. Lotis Garston? If a man can no longer think beyond self-preservation, the maintaining of his physical welfare and existence, is he capable of assuming that another might prefer actual physical death to the continuance of a certain phase of life? Isn't he banking on that in the final equation to—as Dual suggested this afternoon—whip her back to her knees, cowed, rather than resist him to the bitter last?"

"My Gawd!" said Jim, while I felt a strange thrill of understanding run through me. "An' if he is—is he overshooting the mark?"

"What do you think?" Haddon countered. "The woman is fey, as the Scotch would put it—she is exalted, as I see it. She feels that the destiny of her nation, her race, is in her hands, and frankly I'm not sure but it is. There's an intangible atmosphere of menace lurking about here, which I can't exactly define. But I can feel it, and—I'm getting to a place where I'm ready to believe it is a thing built up of inimical thought. One can feel the damned things boring into the brain. Well—there goes the sun! Watchman, what of the night?"

"Oh, Pip"—Jim got up—"you're as cheerful as a hearse."

We went inside. Lotis, Connie, and Garston were talking together. Dual was standing in front of a phonograph at the other end of the room. He was fond of music, as I knew, and I was not surprised when he selected and put on a record and started the machine.

In a moment the sound of singing filled the room. It was one of the great chorus numbers from "Cavaleria," as I remember, ending in a massed admonition: "Let us think of the Lord!"

It died, and after it there was silence until, as usual, Bryce capped the climax with a comment: "An' I reckon that's good advice in the present circumstances."

Dual smiled slightly. "In any circumstances, Mr. Bryce."

Chang appeared and announced supper from the dining-room arch. We filed out for the meal and took our places. Conversation became general for the moment as the food was served.

Garston began a half-humorous relation of some of Andy's comments on the ride to the station that morning, which Lotis suddenly interrupted: "Hark!"

Silence followed her word. We were all on edge, more or less, and that single admonitory caution was enough to cause every tongue to pause.

Into that pause there cut a dull-toned throbbing—a steady, deep, rhythmical thing, like the distant beating of a heavy drum. It crept into and filled the room, till it seemed that the very air we breathed was set athrob by the thing—that not only were we hearing it with our ears, strained now for its falling and rising cadence, but that we actually drank it in.

It was insistent. It rose and fell like the slow beat of unseen waves of sound beating on an invisible beach. But it never ceased. It went on and on. There was an odd quality about it, such as I had never heard before in my life. It repelled, and yet in some subtle, inexplicable way, at the same time, it called.

I saw Lotis glance at Semi. Her breast swelled, lifting her bust beneath the masking fabric of her dress.

"What is it?" Connie questioned in a whisper.

And Haddon answered: "Tomtoms, Mrs. Glace. I fancy they're in the negro village. I've heard them in the West Indies more than once. They are frequently a concomitant part of a sort of dance. Thrum, thrum, thrum—" His words died and gave place to the voice of the drums. He turned and glanced at Jim, and I knew as well as though he had spoken that he was thinking of the big black they had seen in the morning.

Thrum, thrum, thrum—as regular as the beating of our hearts, as we sat there, as the ticking of a clock. It was eery—there was a vague note of menace in their voicing as it carried to us through the night. There was a primitive note about it that seemed to get into the blood, and in some strange, not-to-be-understood way, actually fall into step with the rhythm of the pulse—or rather to regulate that rhythm to itself, whipping it with a lash of sound, stroke on stroke as it sank and rose, so that in the end it was as though the thud of the drums, the hammer of the heart-beats, became intermixed and blended in the brain, till it was hard to tell whether it pulsed with the thrust of the leaping blood or the tempo of the drums.

On and on, without cessation—on and on. There crept over me a strange sensation; a feeling of being caught up, seized, held helpless in a strange vortex of sound. On and on in a deadly monotony of unending repetition—on and on. It was growing actually painful. It was no more a thing of one sense alone.

I glanced at Bryce, and saw him sitting motionless, the edge of the table gripped by one heavy-fingered hand. I turned my eyes to Haddon, and found him also motionless, tense. Connie shuddered. Her eyes turned toward me, wide-lidded.

And suddenly I understood. That deadly repetition of a short series of rising and falling notes—there was the same hypnotic quality about it that lurked in any other monotone. By an effort I steadied myself and considered the point.

Thrum, thrum—

Drums they might be, beating in a negro village, as Haddon said; but they were more than that. They were the drums of the devil; of the cohorts of evil. They were the drums of Otho Khan, the Legionary of the Dark Star, beating the advance. And even as the realization came upon me, the slender girl at the end of the table opened her lips. Words crossed them:

"My friends, in the name of the Long Suffering One, defend yourselves. Nak—Tougchi of Otho Khan—the fingers of his mind and those of his creatures, of the black worker of unclean wonders and them with him, are thrusting against my brain."

Our eyes turned to her. She was sitting rigid, her eyes wide as they were always wide when she faced those things born of the interplay of forces we were less able to understand, translating them to our comprehension in a measure at least through the medium of her tongue.

"Resist them," she went on. "They are gathered together in the place of the drums. Their minds are being gathered up by the mind of Nak and his unclean priest—they are being knit together—made as one. And it is against us the thoughts of it are turned. They are seeking to break a passageway into our minds—to reach to our souls and affright them. Their minds are become in this hour the mind of Nak and Otho Khan. It is giving off numbing force. They are turning it upon us. May God veil His face from them for ten thousand times ten thousand years. Stand firm!"

Thrum—thrum—the voice of the drums. They were beating, beating. It was like the sound of some monstrous club—some battering-ram woven out of sound. It was beating, beating against our brains, even as the girl there, with her dark hair and eyes, had told us—it was seeking to break them down, numb them with its damned hypnotic suggestion—or at least to tune them to the rhythm of the thoughts behind them—the force of the things born in evil minds. My breath clogged—I felt my muscles tense as though to resist some test in a physical fashion. And all at once I felt that—there was something in the room.

Lotis was panting. I watched the rise and fall of her white throat above her gown in something like fascination. In a way it seemed to me that she struggled against something, to be felt even though it were not seen. And I sensed it, too. I can't find other words to express it. There was nothing to see or hear or touch, save the ordinary objects all about me, and the throb of the drums—and yet it was as though we sat there enveloped in some clogging influence—some deadly lethargic vapor, caught up and hurled toward us, wave upon wave, with each fresh propelling pulse of sound.

I struggled against it. I put out a hand and took that of my wife and held it. This—this, I found myself thinking, was the power of thought. We were caught in, beaten against by a consciously directed current of it, which we might either resist or yield to. And if we yielded—then unseen, unrecognizable save in its effects, but none the less deadly, it would carry us to a purposed doom. Thought. Never again might one tell me that thoughts were not things.

I looked at Garston. His face was white. There were drops of moisture on it—beads of perspiration. His lips were parted. He stared dully before him. His expression was that of one caught in some dazing spell.

"Ed—" Lotis spoke his name in a voice of pleading.

He lifted his head slowly.

"Ed—think of God."

"The Angel of Jehovah encampeth round about them who fear Him. What, then, is the hand-beat on the head of a drum?"

Dual spoke calmly, almost, it seemed, without emotion. His words fell steady, in nowise shaken.

Garston turned his dulled eyes to him. He passed a hand across his face, and laughed in a somewhat nervous fashion, sat up sharply in his chair.

I looked at Semi. He sat as he had sat from the beginning—but there was a spark, a leaping fleck of light, in the depths of his gray eyes, and on his firm lips there rested a half smile.

It was like a dash of cold water in the face of one half asleep. What was the hand-beat on the head of a drum? In a manner the question seemed to tear away the entangling coils of thought from about me. What was it—what, after all, but the beat of a hand on the head of a drum? Illusion—it was all illusion.

I tore myself loose from the last clinging tentacle of thought that had held around me. I took a long, deep breath. I became conscious of an utter silence. It baffled me for a minute, filled me with a sense of something lacking. And then I knew what it was.

The drums were no longer beating. Their voice had died, and it was as though

with the cessation of their rhythmic measure we were lost in a soundless void. And it was into that utter stillness Garston's wife spoke in sudden warning: "They come!"

CHAPTER XI.

A DUEL OF MINDS.

"WHAT'S that?" Garston stood up at his end of the table, staring at her. "What do you mean—who's coming?"

"They who were gathered together where the drums beat—they run toward us like a pack of wolves. They are led by the black worshiper of devils, and"—her lips curled in what seemed scorn—"Nak lurks behind them."

"Do you mean you—see them, Mrs. Garston?" Haddon asked.

"My mind sees them." She turned toward him. "The drums have wrought them to a frenzy. If perchance they can, they will destroy us by one quick thrust, now that, as they hope, they have weakened us by their concentration upon us, while Nak stood in their midst and chanted the prayers for the dead."

Haddon fumbled for his automatic. "You mean they're going to attack the house?"

"Aye. It is so their thoughts run before them." Lotis rose slowly to her feet.

The thing struck me as unbelievable. That they would attempt to rush us, would resort to plain, every-day material force, was the last thing I had expected; but—there was no mistaking her words, and Haddon and Bryce were up. I rose also.

"I say, Garston, have you any guns?"

Haddon looked to see that the magazine of his was full as he asked the question. No doubt but he meant to fight.

But Lotis shook her head slightly at Garston before he could answer.

"They will not be needed, Mr. Haddon," she said. "Come and await them." She turned and walked into the living-room in a strangely deliberate fashion, stopped beside a small wicker basket on the table—a work basket—took from it a ball of pure white yarn, crossed to the door, opened it, and went out onto the porch; and I noted that her eyes were no longer wide, but somewhat narrowed, and that there was a little smile on her mouth.

We followed. There seemed nothing else for it.

"Close the door and remain in the shadow," she directed, seeming, save for the oval of her face, little better than a shadow herself in the deeper darkness cast by the roof above us.

Bryce complied and left us standing there facing nothing save the empty, moonlighted expanse of the rolling terrain.

"Well—where?" he began, and broke off at the suddenly upsurging rush of a mass of human forms across the top of a bit of rising ground before us.

It was dark, that body of men—a black, forward-sweeping crowd. And it came silently, swiftly, moving with amazingly little noise. Bare feet were the reason, I suspected—feet that ran with no more than a whisper of footfalls in the dust and sun-dried grass. They bore straight down upon us like the shadow of some cloud, wind-driven under the round wheels of the moon. Only as their mass came closer could one pick out the individuality of racing bodies, the play of moving limbs.

Before them ran a giant—a huge hulk of a man. He seemed clad in a sort of robe that flapped out behind his shoulders like the wings of some dark bird, beating the air beneath them, and made his great size a doubly weird and monstrous thing.

Connie pressed close against me.

"Good Lord!" Haddon gritted softly.

"Wait," Lotis stayed him. "This thing is to me. For did not Nak tell me that it was not in the mind of Otho Khan that I should be destroyed? Mr. Bryce, will you open the door again?"

"But—"

"Quickly!"

Jim complied. Light streamed out. It ran over the porch and down the steps in a golden flood, to mingle with the silver of the moon.

And Lotis stepped into its yellow path. She stood there, straight and slender, head thrown a little bit back. Her voice rose.

"Hai! Nak, Tougchi of Otho Khan, who runs behind the pack like a jackal waiting for scraps of offal, bid its leader stop and thyself stand forth!"

But it was scarcely needful for her to cry Nak to check the rush of his party. The thing had been partly at least accomplished by the opening of the door, the outpouring of the stream of light, with its tacit message that they were cheated out of the advantage of any surprise in their attack.

They lost pace, as it were, faltered, and as Lotis's words whipped across the space between them and herself, they came to a jostling pause. In the light of the cloudless moon they stood there. The sound of their breathing became a panting. I saw they were negroes, in so far as I could judge.

"Nak! Must I call thee twice?" Lotis spoke again and addressed the giant negro. "Well, black servant of Otho Khan, where is his lieutenant?"

How she was so certain that Nak was with them I never knew, unless, as she had already said, she felt him, sensed his presence; but certain it is that as she asked the question the huge black half turned his head behind him, and that a man's voice answered:

"Nay, thou needst not call me even once, traitress."

The mass of men gave way, and a shadowy shape strode through them and advanced toward where Lotis stood. As it came nearer, it assumed the guise of a man wrapped in some dark muffling cloak.

He neared the bottom of the steps, and Lotis threw up her arm in its rigidly, palm-forward, arresting gesture.

"Stop!"

Nak halted. It came to me that things were not going exactly as he had hoped. Already his plans had miscarried, in that his attack had been held up at the instant it was being driven home. But he carried it off badly nonetheless. He bowed.

"Nak hears and obeys, Lotis, sometimes called Little Flower," he said in an ironical tone which Lotis ignored.

"What," her voice came again in question, "is the meaning of this? I am surprised at thee, Nak—yet not in the manner thou didst hope. Didst rate me so poorly, then, that ye thought to take me offguard and overwhelm me by a mere rush of man bodies—which, failing to take me unawares, paused at the hint of a light, not knowing what might lie behind it? Thought ye, Nak, to conquer me by means of such a force?"

"They will advance again, and I give the word, thou foolhardy one," Nak rejoined, with the sound of a snarl of rage in his throat. "You are playing with fire, sorceress—take heed lest ye be burned. Know you not that I have it within my power to call other forces to my aid—aye, to summon the legions of the air to do my bidding and I have need of their assistance?"

"Say ye so?" Lotis's words whipped back.

"Aye! Dost doubt it? Then behold!" The man stooped suddenly and caught up a bit of sun-dried weed-stalk from the ground at his feet. He had been held up, balked. It must have been in his brain that the men behind him had weakened in their morale—that they could best be strengthened by a demonstration of his powers, I think. At least it is the only explanation I can offer of what followed.

He caught up the brittle stem of the dead plant, and as he straightened he broke it in two in his hands. Lifting them to the moonlighted heavens, he waved them, and cast them from him—and as they left his grasp they were no longer bits of vegetation—they became two spots of faintly luminous light—light that seemed to spread, to quiver, contract, draw into itself, solidify—assume the shape of evil-visaged men. They stood there on either side of him who had called them into being, close to the foot of the steps, and Nak stood between.

A whisper of outrushing breath came from the press of human bodies behind him. It was a thing between amazed unbelief and a startled groan. They stood like dark statues without motion—staring, staring at the two apparitions that glowed on either side of Nak as with inward flames.

I felt a cold chill shake me, even though

I knew I was beholding no more than a further demonstration of the powers of the human mind. For the thing was uncanny, and the things beside Nak seemed real beyond any doubting. They were like men incrusted in a shimmering armor. They shone; they sparkled under the moon in a sort of silvery glitter.

And then Lotis laughed. The sound bubbled out of her throat. "Thou trickster," she said tauntingly, "thou builder of moonbeams—thou callow standard-bearer of Otho Khan—thou Mongol follower at heel—think ye to affright me with the pretty toys of thy brain? A sign, Nak—thou hast given me a sign. And I answer it thus—"

Swiftly she unrolled a bit of the ball of yarn she had taken as she passed through the living-room, and broke it off. She extended it before her. It was a thread of white wool one instant, and the next—it was a serpent, a writhing thing of flame in her hands!

"Thou sayest I am playing with fire!" she cried. "And thou sayest truth, Nak—for once the truth falleth from thy tongue. Here is my answer. Take it!"

She flung the serpent from her. Full into the face of one of the thought-forms Nak had materialized she flung it, and it took hold—or seemed to. Even as a snake flung into the face of a man, it seemed to fasten upon the face of the thing before her and hang there swaying by its fangs.

At the contact the creature of the Mongol's brain was shaken. It quivered, seemed to slowly expand. It became again no more than a nebulous cloud of luminous light—faded, more and more—dissolved—trailed away on the air of night like a thread of vapor—was gone—it and its fellow. For the two forms faded out at once.

"And as for thy men—thy jackals—" Lotis's hands were plucking off other bits of yarn. She began hurling them from her. And each, like the first, became a writhing thing of flame as it left her hands. The air grew full of them, twisting, darting, writhing shapes of fire thrown out beyond her toward the huddled press of men.

"As for thy men, Nak—let my serpents deal with them. Let them take care lest my serpents bite them and make of them food for worms."

It was as though the dark mob shuddered, not singly but altogether—as though it were possessed of a single form. It gave back, swayed, yielded, broke utterly apart and fled, panting, mouthing, crying out as it split asunder and ran, leaving Nak standing there alone before her under the moon. It vanished over the rising ground, and Lotis spoke again:

"Where now, Nak, are thy false angels—and where thy men?"

He answered her hoarsely. "Thou she-devil—thou sorceress—may Erlik seize thee!" he screamed. "May thy bones rot and thy flesh! May the worms make of thee a corruption!" Suddenly he leaped toward her.

Dimly I sensed the flash of Haddon's gun rising.

And then—Lotis cast the ball of yarn straight at Nak. It passed over his shoulder and fell behind him as she held the end of the woolen strand. It curled about him and—it burst into flame. Half up the steps he came again to a stand.

Her laugh came tauntingly once more. "Hold, Nak—for the fingers of my mind have seized and are pressing your brain—else why stand ye now thus ringed with fire? Thou yellow dog—thou art beaten—and ye know that thou art beaten—and that there remains naught for thee save to slink back with a report of thy failure to thy master, whose soul is foredoomed to Erlik, and say to him—to Otho Khan, who taught her—that she against whom he sent thee is yet strong, and that though she held thee within her power, with the ability to slay thee, she spared thee in order that thou mightest return and say to him these things."

"Thou art a fool," said Nak; "and strong though thou be, think not but he who made thee—him thou once called master—is stronger than thee or Nak, his servant! Wherefore tempt not too greatly his strength."

"Go!" Lotis said, and lifted her arm, pointing. "Get thee back to him and say that to-night thou wast beaten by a girl whose fingers held some bits of string, which

became serpents at her bidding, because once Nak faced her he was not strong enough to combat the will of her brain—wherefore those who came with him to destroy saw things it was not best they should have seen; saw Nak beaten down before her; saw the serpents destroy the things he had formed to renew their courage, because Nak was no longer able to hold the balance of his mind. And say to him to teach thee better before he sendeth thee again. Get thee gone, thou lick-heel—thou yellow snake—thou one already damned—thou worm!"

"I go," he answered thickly, and retreated down the steps. Turning his back, he went swiftly off across the level stretch before the house, a darkly moving shape that topped and disappeared beyond the ridge of rising ground.

And as he vanished Lotis turned and walked into the house, to sink limply into a chair and grip fast hold of its arms.

Bryce closed the door after we had entered. "Well—anyway, we've won the first battle," he declared.

Lotis turned her eyes toward him slowly. She was pale, panting. Momentarily she appeared on the verge of collapse.

"I'm afraid it was little more than a skirmish, Mr. Bryce," she replied. "They—they are still feeling us out—testing our strength. If—if we liken this struggle in which we are engaged to a battle, then this was a sort of demonstration of force."

"And it was forced back," Jim persisted. "You certainly had the whole works nicely hypnotized. When I saw that Nak party take that stick and make them—those—"

"Thought forms," said Lotis.

"Well, whatever they were, I knew it was a trick, but just the same it gave me a cold chill, and then bingo—you began to fling around snakes."

Lotis smiled faintly. "You are right, Mr. Bryce—both Nak's demonstration and mine were, at least in a measure, tricks—mentally projected pictures. That is why, when he saw my little snakes and realized the effect they would have on his ignorant negroes, it broke the concentration that was holding his false angels together, and they disappeared. Still"—she frowned slightly, knitting her brows in a perplexed fashion—"I am surprised that he should have sought to employ so material a force as a mob."

"Don't you think," Haddon suggested, "that he may have had a double purpose? Isn't it possible that he felt that even if they didn't succeed in rushing us, some of those men might get hurt, and the whole thing, in so far as they were concerned, be converted into a blood feud between them and us?"

"I think, Mr. Haddon," said Dual, who had not spoken since we left the table, but had acted the part of a spectator throughout the entire encounter, "that you are very possibly right. It would be quite in keeping with the Mongol's plans to engraft a variety of guerilla warfare of a purely material nature upon all else. Wherefore are we victors, in that no one was injured and the attacking party has become imbued with a wholesome respect for the powers they now know Mrs. Garston to possess. My child"—he approached the chair in which she was sitting and stood behind her—"thou art weary."

"Aye. He was strong—Nak, Tougchi of Otho Khan, was strong," she answered him slowly. "His mind and mine grappled one with the other. And the force of his was like a sword seeking to beat down mine before it."

"Lotis!" Garston took a swift step toward her. "You don't mean he nearly beat you?"

Her eyes widened swiftly in her white, white face. Into the latter there crept an expression of startled horror. "I—" she began, and turned swiftly to Semi. "Master—he was strong. It was all I could do to beat down his mind and destroy the forms it had created. But I beat him—I beat him!" Her voice quivered as tense as a breaking string. "Nak and his creatures fled before me. I—"

"Peace." Dual's hands came down and framed her face, swept upward across her temples. "Peace, Lotis—when one is weary, should he trouble his soul with problems? Nay, rather cast all doubt from thee and rest ye—sleep." His eyes bent upon her. He leaned above her. "Sleep—Lotis—thou weary one—sleep—rest."

The breath seemed to sigh out of her as he spoke. She relaxed. Her body sank down in all its slender length.

"Come," Semi then addressed Garston; "carry her to her room, nor seek to disturb her with any further question. For the time her labors are ended. I shall watch through the night."

Garston took her up. She lay like a child in his arms. He carried her to the door of their room and through it.

"And this is the modern twentieth-century world," Haddon said as they disappeared.

"You bet. And that's why what they'd have called witchcraft a couple of hundred years ago is simply hypnotism now," said Jim. "She certainly handed it to Nak."

"And it nearly wore her out." Haddon turned on Semi. "Mr. Dual, are these fiends exhausting her completely? Is she going to break?"

Into the eyes of the man he questioned I saw leap the strange pin-point of light they sometimes held in their depths. "Nay, not so, Mr. Haddon," he said in a way that made me feel sure he was no more than voicing the results of his study of Lotis's own astrological chart. "She is a sword of flame in a fragile scabbard. Yet I think not that either sword or scabbard shall be destroyed. If there be any weakness about her it is not of the spirit, but of the flesh. Hence it is not the spirit of her that is weary, but the flesh that did its bidding, and in so doing drove back the forces of evil to-night at no little cost to itself."

"I ain't denyin' that," Bryce declared quickly. "It must have took some punch to put over that stunt."

"It is an old trick," said Semi Dual, "and one employed for ages by those who knew the art. The sorcerers of Dai Nippon use it, the magicians of other lands—call it mass hypnotism or conscious thought-form projection, as you please, it is a deliberate employment of mentally transmuted force. There is a duality in all things, Mr. Bryce, even in the serpent she chose as her weapon. On the material plane its meaning is material, wholly of sin and death, but on a higher plane it stands as the symbol of that wisdom which, rightly employed, shall lead to a higher life, and man interprets it according to the light within him.

"Hence were the men of evil driven this night before it, and she who used it to confound them, and those who stood behind her, preserved—even as the same force called Nak's thought forms into being and enabled her to destroy them. For all force, being one, the results of its employment depend wholly upon the manner and purpose for which it is used.

"This, then, my friends, is the dividing line between what we call evil and good, the dual aspect of the eternal quality by which men may become ennobled, uplifted, or by their own acts utterly destroyed."

"Utterly!" Bryce echoed. "How about this now—Otho Khan at that rate?"

Dual rose. "Otho Khan," he said slowly, so that each word took on its fullest meaning, "was created by, and may not too long defy, the laws of universal force."

He was as calm, as unmoved by the deadly forces that played like unseen lightnings about us as I had ever seen him. There was that quality which had first induced the girl now sleeping the sleep of exhaustion to call him Master, about him as he stood there. It came to me that in standing back, in permitting her to meet the issue of this night unaided save by his supporting presence, he had been but as one about to engage himself in a conflict—one trying the strength of the weapon given him to use—that if, as she said, Otho Khan had been testing the strength against him, then Semi Dual also had made a test—had weighed and appraised anew the metal of her he likened to a sword. The thought was arresting. In what guise would the Mongol sorcerer next move? And all at once there came again the sound of drums.

CHAPTER XII.

ATTACK.

"THEY'RE at it again," said Haddon with a thin smile, and shrugged.

Thrum, thrum—the voice of the drum. The night grew full once more of the rhythmic beating sound.

He paused a moment and went on: "If we were down there now I suppose we'd find them holding a sort of devil dance around a fire. But between you and me, after what they got up here this evening, they're a good deal like boys whistling through a wood. Naturally the big chap is trying to whip them back into line. He'll work spells, mumble incantations, make ju-ju against the thing that made 'em run. He's got to save his face somehow, and I fancy he's at it. There's a lot for both him and that chap Nak to explain about the failure of their plan."

"Well," said Bryce, "that's up to them. And here's a funny thing. When they started them drums earlier this evening it rather got on my nerves, but now—it ain't nothin' but a sound."

I nodded. I felt the same way about it. The ceaseless thudding was as plainly audible as it had been before, and yet in some subtle fashion it had lost its first effect. Save for the slight annoyance of its continuation it no longer disturbed me in the least. It had become no more than the concomitant accompaniment of a primitive racial dance. I could even picture mentally the scene called up by Haddon's words—a fire, and the dark bodies of men and women leaping about the flames in time to the tempo of the drums.

"One my explain that, Mr. Bryce, by the fact that their thoughts are fastened no longer upon our affairs, but on their own," said Semi Dual. "Nak or their leader, or both, are working not upon us but them. They will dance themselves into a frenzy—the result of which will be a sort of physically induced auto suggestion, out of which they will emerge when the accompanying exhaustion shall have passed with their courage in a measure renewed. It is one way in which the lower grades of devil-worshipers of all races bring about their results. The dance produces for the time being an intense mental excitement, an actual erythema of the brain, inside the duration of which the individual may do and say strange things."

Haddon laughed. "And that's bringing it down to an actual physiological basis."

Semi Dual's lips twitched into a slight smile. "Why not, Mr. Haddon, since all creative force is one and man himself is no more than the thought form projected from the creative mind?"

"Eh?" Haddon stared. "The same sort of thing as Nak evoked to-night, only more enduring, do you mean—actually—or comparatively speaking?"

"Actually. And again why not, since as it is below so it is above, and the microcosm is but the tiny cosmos?" Dual replied.

"Whoa!" Bryce exploded. "Micro means mightly little. Come along, Haddon, let's go to bed before he gives me grounds for calling you a germ."

He was irrepressible, as always, and even Semi smiled again. "It is as well," he agreed. "After all, we gain little by discussion. Man is—in the eternal scheme of things—a light set within a lantern. And it is within his power to elect whether the light within him shall be even like the brain shapes Nak called into being, shall become as though it had never been, or burn with a steady radiance that shall dispel the darkness of illusion from his mind. Good night, my friends."

He turned toward the door of his room. Bryce and Haddon sought their own. Connie and I went into ours.

But I could not sleep. Long after the soft breathing of my wife told me she had sunk to slumber I lay listening to the throbbing of the drums. They did not disturb me. Rather they became merely a background against which my brain built pictures, relived all that had been up until now—recalled Lotis from the time I had first seen her until to-night when Bryce had opened the door at her bidding and she had stepped into the pathway of the yellow flood of light, had called Nak from behind the attacking ranks of his brain-slaves, to his confounding, and ran on into the future in vague conjectures of what was yet to be. No, I could not sleep.

In the end I gave it up and rose. Moving slowly, I opened the door of our chamber and passed out. Save for the moonlight now streaming into it from the west, the living-room was dark. But there was a thread of light beneath Semi's door. I stole toward it and rapped.

"Come."

I opened the door and went in.

He had doffed the garments of every-day modern man—the gray suit, the soft dove-colored shirt of silk, the shoes he had been wearing—and put on again his white and purple robe. Seen so with the light of the lamp behind him, he seemed more than ever the Master Lotis called him. It came to me that before I rapped he had been sitting there a silent watcher, in a posture of repose. A watcher—yes, surely a watcher indeed—he whose strong mind reached out and read the meaning the meaning of the very stars. I voiced Haddon's remark of hours before. "Watchman, what of the night?"

And he answered, "The wheel turns and the potter thumbs his clay, my friend. And some of it shapes into useful vessels, and some of it into shards."

The wheel turns. It was like him who spoke so of the round of human life to say that. And I thought it hinted at a knowledge far beyond any I possessed—based on the predications he had himself deduced from his study of those astral charts upon which I knew he had worked.

I sat down. "Tell me," I said. "I could not sleep."

Into the silence that followed my words came the throb of the drums and then he spoke. "That which is written upon the wheel one may read with the eye of knowledge. He is a fool who seeks to stay the wheel in its course. For what is written is written by the hand of Him by whom the wheel was set into motion and toward whose ends it works. Wo unto him who stands in its path, for him it shall crush."

"Khan?" I suggested.

"It is in my mind that before this matter is ended I and the Legionary of Evil shall stand face to face, yet not before other things have come to pass."

He spoke with a calm assurance that gave me pause. He expected to stand face to face with the Mongol necromancer—even as Lotis to-night had faced Nak. At least that was how I interpreted his words. And—that would be a meeting worth seeing and one in which the Legionary of Evil, as Semi called him, would need all of his unclean arts. I found my heart beating with a quickened pulse.

"And those other things?" I asked.

"Man," he said, "being given knowledge beyond certain things, were like a child set in the midst of living coals—or like one affrighted rushing upon destruction through seeking to evade his doom. In naught is the wisdom of the Creator more manifested than in the veil He has hung between man and the future, that veil on which is written 'Sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof,' my friend, yet which as man's wisdom increases, is steadily unrolled before him like unto an infinite scroll."

I gave it up in the major sense. "At least," I said, "what of her you call a sword of flame?"

"She approaches the supreme test," he told me. "Wherefore I have bidden her rest."

The supreme test. Again I sat silent and sensed the throb of the drums. The supreme test. His words hinted at vague, unknown things. But they said to me more. They spoke to me of a knowledge that inspired them—carried with them, as it were, the assurance that whether he chose to speak plainly of those things that were to be or not, he himself was aware of their nature, was convinced that they themselves were the steps by which he would be brought at the last face to face with Otho Khan. And then—

The thought gave me a certain comfort. "She will pass it," I declared.

"Aye," he said, "and the better if she knows not of it in advance."

So that was it. The supreme test was to be a test indeed in that whatever it was, it would be of a nature to affect Lotis herself directly—a thing which, if she knew of it in advance, might lead her toward the moment when it should come upon her, shaken, and unnerved by its contemplation. And because of that Semi Dual was withholding all knowledge of it from her, and from the rest of us.

I looked again into his face. It was inscrutable. It told me nothing more than his words. And I was so blind as I sat there that, in spite of all I knew and had

seen of the situation since we came to this place, I felt no least suspicion as to the nature of the test to which he referred.

Still there was a confidence inspiring something about the very calm in which he seemed wrapped, a calm, born of knowledge as I now felt assured. In his words, his expression, his entire demeanor, there was that subtle quality of the man who quietly awaits the approach of an individual or an event he personally knows he is strong enough to meet. It seemed to radiate from his very presence—that subtle aura of strength. It steadied me. I got up.

"Very well," I said. "At least I feel better for our talk. I'll go back to bed now and see if I can catch a nap. Good night."

"Good night, Gordon," he responded, half closed his eyes and settled back in his chair with folded hands.

And it was so I left him, sitting, his face turned away from the lamp light as I retraced the way to my room.

And I slept until morning. The sun was bathing all the world in its golden glory when I opened my eyes and realized the night was passed. Another night, and this was another day, I thought, as I rose and began to dress before waking Connie. And I wondered what this latest day would bring forth.

That it would bring forth anything at all there was nothing to indicate save my own knowledge of the reason for our presence in this house. I heard the muffled sound of Chang's banging his kettles and pots. I heard Haddon's voice addressing Bryce. Everything was commonplace enough. In fact, there was an element of the commonplace in the whole thing from first to last that was hard to harmonize with those periods when the play of almost transcendental forces blazed forth.

Breakfast passed with nothing worthy of mention in either events or talk.

Lotis appeared very much herself and smiling. Her sleep seemed to have done her good. Indeed, I fancied that if anything she greeted us all that morning with a renewed confidence similar in a way even if not due to the same causes that had given me a kindred feeling. In fact, when Bryce asked her after breakfast if she had heard the renewed sound of the drums, she shook her head.

"I heard nothing. Did they start them again? I suppose they were trying to overcome the effect of my little snakes," she said and laughed.

In fact, of all our party, Garston was the only one who might have been said to seem in any way depressed. And as far as that was concerned, he really said nothing. Perhaps that was what gave the impression. He was more than usually silent and took little part in our talk.

After some half-hour spent in the living-room he referred to the need for looking over his car and announced his intention of attending to it at once.

Haddon and Bryce volunteered to help him, and the three men went out.

I heard the sound of the motor, turning over, as the machine was run out of the shed that served as a garage.

Now and then the voices of one of the three drifted in from the rear of the house.

Connie and Lotis were talking together on the living-room couch, where they had established themselves.

Dual had returned to his room to rest, I supposed.

I found a book and settled myself to read. The work proving of an interesting nature, I confess that I completely lost myself. Otho Khan and all his works of any kind whatever—demonology—necromancy—the endeavor to set up one of his places of prayer here in this corner of the nation, slipped for the time being completely out of my mind.

By degrees, though, the sound of the women's voices attracted my attention. It was a chance word that first told me they were discussing the afternoon before we left home—the afternoon when, as Connie had declared, Lotis appeared to her.

I became aware that Garston's wife was explaining how the thing was done.

"I—felt that I had to see you, Connie darling," she said. "And—I really hoped that after you knew, you would come—and you did—and I never can thank you. But I'm so glad to have you here. There are two ways in which the thing can be

done. One may do it for himself after he has learned, or another may do it for him —some one he trusts enough to allow him to control his mind. It begins as an ordinary hypnosis under those conditions. The one to whom you have surrendered your mind puts your objective brain asleep, and then sends your other mind anywhere he wishes, and—you can hear and see things as plainly in that condition as though you were in the flesh. Everything is equally as real. I saw you that afternoon as plainly as I do this morning. Myself I began in the second way after I went to live with Otho Khan at the time of my father's death. As you know, I thought him my friend. And I let him send my consciousness anywhere he wished. Afterward he taught me how to do the same thing myself, but—you can see how before that he had gained the complete mastery of my mind."

"He tricked you in that as in everything else," I cut in. "The man's a fiend —and he had plenty of reason for wanting you in his hands."

She nodded. "He meant to use and destroy me. I—thought of that the day Nak came to me in the mountains. I thought of it and knew that in all he said he was speaking with a lying tongue, save in the threats he uttered. And I knew then he would carry out if he could. I—listen!"

All at once she broke off and sat in a strained attention.

"Ed," she said, "do you hear him?"

"Why—no, I don't," I returned, conscious that in the interval between her bid for silence and her question no slightest sound of voices had reached my ears.

Lotis's lips parted. Her eyes widened swiftly. She rose—not suddenly, but slowly, the motion starting at her hips, running up the slender length of her torso, extending downward through her thighs in a sort of increasing muscular ripple that brought her to her feet at last.

"Lotis!" Connie exclaimed softly.

But Lotis paid her no attention. For a moment after she had risen she stood leaning a trifle forward with a strange, a dreadful sort of startled horror beginning to form in her face.

And then she began running, darting across the living-room and into the hallway that led to the rear and through it.

"Ed!"

She was calling Garston, not loudly, but in an odd muted fashion.

"Ed!"

I moved to follow. Connie hurried to my side. Together we ran into the hallway and emerged through a rear door.

Lotis stood there beside the machine. Its hood was raised. Several of its plugs had been taken out and lay on the foot-board. But of the men who had been at work upon it there was no sign. They had disappeared.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE SWORD UNSHEATHED.

"ED." Garston's wife whispered the word as we joined her and turned. "He isn't here," she said dully. "He is gone. They are all gone."

"Sure," I agreed. "They're all gone. At that rate they've gone somewhere together."

Because frankly at the moment it appeared to me as the most probable explanation, and I never dreamed what had actually occurred.

"Where?" Lotis turned her head slowly, sweeping the rolling country with wide-lidded eyes.

I followed the direction of her glance. I saw nothing save the horse stable and the corral beyond it.

"Where could they have gone?"

"I don't know," I confessed. "But—"

"Chang!" she interrupted my stammer in a half scream. "Chang!"

"Yes, Missee Glarson." The Oriental's features appeared in the kitchen window.

"Where are they—where are Mr. Garston and the other gentlemen?"

"Him lide off lil time," Chang said promptly, blinking his thin lids.

"Rode off—where?"

Chang appeared to consider. "Him lide af'er man wha' took one horse," he declared at length. "I think maybe so him mean for steal 'im. Misser Glarson say 'damn he hide,' an' run for horse; Misser

Blyce, Misser Haddon, him run, too—catch horse an' ride like debbil. Not come back yet, I not know."

"When—when did they ride away, Chang?" Lotis panted.

"Maybe half-hour."

And even then it was hard to understand, hard to believe, that Garston, Bryce and Haddon were gone, that our party was cut in half; that we who had been warned to be instantly on guard; had been, as it were, caught napping; had fallen victims to the machinations of that devil worker, Otho Khan; had been tricked by so simple a ruse as the sending of a seeming prowler to steal a horse out of the corral in broad daylight. Yes, the thing was so fiendishly simple, and at the same time so diabolically clever that even as Chang made his statement and stood watching us out of his emotionless brown eyes, I found it hard to believe. For what owner of property would not seek to retrieve it if he beheld one taking it off? And Jim and Haddon had gone to help him regain it, of course. I found myself balking the accepting of the thing as other than it seemed.

Not so Lotis, however. She was deathly white as she stood there, and I noticed that she swayed. For a moment her lids closed, quivered. And then her voice came brokenly:

"Otho Khan! It is thus he strikes at my soul." Her head went back. She lifted her face to the cloudless sky above it. "Allahou—God!"

And in that instant I think she forgot all—everything except her loss and the possible means of retrieving it, of course.

She turned and reentered the house.

"Come," Connie urged as I lingered, scarce knowing what was the proper course.

I yielded to her prompting, and we passed inside.

Lotis moved before us slowly, like one feeling her way. I saw one of her hands groping along the wall of the passage, as though it were serving to guide her. She reached the living-room and passed inside it.

Dual stood there. We were on her heels and I saw him. He had left his own room and had come out. It was as though he were waiting for Lotis's coming, I thought.

She went toward him, still in that strange, almost mechanical fashion, and before she reached him she paused.

"Master," she said. "He has beaten me. Otho Khan—may Erlik seize and devour his soul; may God see that he suffers the torment of the damned in hell—he who worships Satan has taken my husband while I sat talking in this room. And not until he was within the accursed one's clutches did my soul speak to my brain saying that he was lost, so that I rose and went outside and found him gone, and the men—Bryce and Haddon—with him, and learned that my soul had not lied to me in that Otho Khan had sent one to lead them into a trap of his setting. Thus is it, Master, that the servant of Satan has carried out the threat Nak, his tougchi, made against me on the mountain. Master—he is crushing my brain. In the name of the Compassionate One—help me!"

She choked suddenly. Her hands went out toward the man before her, and the gesture was a gesture of supplication.

"Peace—child." He reached her in a single stride, catching her fragile shoulders into the grip of his strong, yet gentle, hands. "Peace and those things ye pray for are to come upon Otho Khan. For and they are to come to pass; there must be not only a reason, but a means. Peace, thou troubled one, thy test has come upon thee."

"Test?" she faltered, still in that deadly monotone she had used from the first, which some way seemed more wholly dreadful than any cry of anguish, any evidence of hysteria would have been.

"Aye, test! That test of thy strength which has been ordained since the instant in which the Mongol servant of all evil was by thee defied; that test he has designed to place upon thee if thereby perchance he may beat thee down, break thee, bring thee suppliant to him on thy knees; that test, that choice."

"Choice?" She put up her hands and caught hold of his arms.

"Choice, aye, Lotis. Think ye not that thy husband is a ransom for thee in what this Sheik of the Silent Towers plans; the whip by which he has it in mind to scourge ye again into a subservience to his designs?"

Looking into his face she answered, "Bone of my bone, and flesh of my flesh. He has stolen my mate, and it is so he thinks to once more trap my soul and slay it. Nak—Nak, tougchi to Otho Khan, him of the yellow shirt, spoke truth when he said that in giving myself to a man I had cut my strength in half. Aye, he the deceiver, the unclean one, the trickster, the liar and cheat, spat forth the truth from his blasphemous mouth. And they are thrusting the fingers of their will into my brain and seeking to destroy my power to resist them through him, since in gaining him, to whom my heart is as a flower given to hold in the hand, it is as though they held a part of me already and have but to crush that part which remains. They are strong, Master—very strong—"

"Sword of Flame!"

Dual spoke the words calmly, and yet as they fell from his lips there was something about them which affected me strangely; some subtle quality not of the senses so much as the brain, the mind. They were like the clarion call of a bugle; like a draft of heady wine.

And as he spoke Lotis started back, freeing herself from his hands. Into her face there crept such an expression as I hope I may never live to see on the face of a living being again. It was anguish such as I had never seen. It was horror, passing all pain. It was realization. It was renunciation. And it was more than that; more than I have the power to name.

While it passed across her features she stood as straight, as slender as a reed, and then she seemed to fold together, rather than sink down before him on her knees. Her hands came up and caught her temples between her palms. She shuddered with bowed head.

"Allah, Allah, Allahou! It is finished," she not so much spoke as intoned—for the sound of it was the cadence of a moan. "It is finished, Master. A test! A choice! Yet no choice indeed for her ye so name; her who thou hast saved from the clutches of the Mongol devil; whom thou hast in so saving made wife and mother; her who knows what Otho Khan plans; those things he seeks to bring about in his places of prayer, wherein he looses against all righteousness, the dark swarm of thoughts in the brains of evil men; her who knows the prayer they utter for the triumph of evil over all goodness in the world of man; no choice for her, since it is not a choice for her alone, though her soul should be given to Erlik, or suffer the torments of hell for a thousand years. But a test which sets the name of names upon her lips. Master"—she lifted her head to where he stood before her—"they are strong; Nak and Otho Khan are strong, and their wrath is turned against me, and I have not any longer the strength with which to resist them—"

Inwardly I gasped. It was a dreadful thing to see her kneeling there, confessing her weakness in a voice out of which seemed to have been wrung all feeling, all power for feeling or any gentler emotion—a voice of dead anguish wrung dry of tears. It was a dreadful thing to hear her admit that Otho Khan, the Mongol sorcerer was possessed of a greater power—that she was beaten down before him, and knew it—to see her kneeling there before Dual confessing her lack of strength.

This, then, I thought was what he had meant when I had spoken with him the night before, and he had said that this girl was approaching the supreme test. And with that thought came another: he had known! I could not doubt it; he had known that this ordeal was coming to pass; in his own inscrutable way he had waited.

He had said, too, that before this thing was ended, Otho Khan and he should stand face to face, but whatever he knew, whatever he planned, he had withheld it because he deemed it best. In a flash I saw it. With a whirling brain I asked myself if, after all, this dreadful moment were but a step in the course of the whole complex matter; but another example of the way in which He whom Dual called the Inscrutable One, moved.

And yet, even as all this passed through my mind, Lotis rose slowly and once more stretched forth her hands. "Thou hast called me a sword, and if there be any way in which ye can use me to drive this Wolf of Erlik to his lair and slay him, take me and do with me as thou wilt."

Connie sobbed beside me.

I felt my own breath clogging in my breast.

"Aye," said Semi Dual. "I have called ye a sword, and thou art indeed a sword, forged to a purpose, and tempered. And I say to ye now that he who loses all for righteousness' sake shall find it returned again to him." He extended his arms and took her hands into his.

"Thou meanest?" she said, and caught a sibilant breath.

"Nay," he denied, "let not the sword question him who holds it, since so may it best be used, and they of the damned find its point an irresistible thing on which their minds shall be impaled."

A glance passed between them. The face of Lotis subtly altered, and I thought that she understood.

"Allahou, I am ready to thy purpose," she said, stepping back again a pace from him. "I resign my soul to thee. Take it and thrust it into the darkness of their minds. Let it thrust deep, Master—deep."

"Lie ye down then and compose thy limbs, Sword of Flame," Dual directed.

She smiled, actually smiled, as she turned and walked from him across to the couch and reclined upon it. And as she folded her hands the smile still lingered upon her lips.

"In the name of Oom, who encompasses all things, sleep!"

Lotis closed her eyes. Her body relaxed in all its slender length, all semblance of life fled from her. I could not see that she breathed. Dual crossed and stood beside her.

"Sword of Flame, I have taken thee into my grasp; thou hast the strength of ten thousand of such as Otho Khan, or Nak, his servant, or any other of the creatures of him who was hurled from Heaven to dwell in the depths of hell. Against the darkness of their souls thou art become as a piercing ray of light. Out of thy scabbard I draw thee. Thou are ready?"

"Aye, Master." The words were a whisper on her lips.

"Then—seek them forth."

Connie's fingers were gripping into the flesh of my arm. We were like spectators. I glanced at her and knew she understood; that this was the very thing of which she and Lotis had been speaking before we knew that Garston and Bryce and Haddon were lost; that Semi Dual was literally drawing the conscious part of the woman out of her physical form and sending it out a flaming thing to contact the minds of Otho Khan and his agents and learn the full scope of their plans.

And the thing was between them. For the time being I am positive that though we stood there watching, we were as though we had not been. Brain of the man and the woman were centered wholly upon the work in hand.

Absolute silence came down in the room. Dual waited, standing without motion. The woman lay before him. I noted a tendril of her dark hair, loosened and resting against the whiteness of her cheek. A little breeze fanned in through the open window above the couch and whipped the vagrant strand of living silk into a gentle stirring. And that was all. I watched in a breathless fascination, Dual the Master, the sunlight of the outer world beyond him and the body of the seemingly lifeless girl on the couch. And there was nothing else; nothing on the surface that is; but under that I could feel. I hardly know how, the stirring of undreamed forces, the lightning play and pass of the vast, incalculable issues as it were through which the consciousness of the girl was moving, mingling as a thing freed momentarily from the restraining bonds of the flesh.

Into my mind there crept a recollection of Semi's words concerning the duality of existence. She was here and she was not here. Her body, the beautiful tenement of her soul, lay before me, but the tenant was somewhere else.

Her lips moved. She spoke in a strangely mechanical fashion:

"It is dark—there is a dark cloud. It is a cloud of thought. It is flung over the world and I cannot see plainly. It is a cloud of evil thoughts born from the minds of many, thinking the self-same thought; from the minds of men praying to Erlik for the triumph of evil. It is like to a dun-colored smoke. The eyes of my soul cannot

pierce its pall. It hangs before them like a curtain, and all beyond it is dark.

"Otho Khan is behind it. He covers himself with it as with a cloak. But I can feel his thoughts within it and the thoughts of Nak, his tougchi. It is they who are weaving the thoughts of their followers into the cloud that blinds me. It is like a wall against which my soul beats like a rampart."

"Thrust in! Thrust in! The hand of my soul is behind thee; thrust into it deeply," Dual made answer. "Shall darkness stand before light?"

"Oh, dear God, help her!"

I knew that Connie had spoken; that she had staggered to a chair and sunk into it limply, unable to longer support herself on her feet.

"It yields," said Lotis. "It is become as the fog of the sea when the sunlight strikes upon it. It grows thinner before me, it rolls up, and within it there are horsemen; I see my beloved. He rides with bound hands, and beside him are his companions, the men called Bryce and Haddon. Nak, the servant of him who worships Satan, is with them, and certain of his men; there is a Hindu, one long sought as a stirrer-up of dissension, but never found; there are Mongols, slaves of his and Otho Khan's bidding. They are moving toward the mountains—"

"Say on," Dual's voice prompted. "What else, O Sword of Flame?"

CHAPTER XIV.

'THRUSTING IN.

"IT is as Chang told us," she said. "They are speaking together and I can look into their minds. One was sent to lead them in pursuit after he had stolen a horse, and riding over a rise in the ground, they came upon other men who awaited them with ropes which they cast about them, dragging them from their horses, and leading them to the village of the blacks, where Nak awaited; now he is taking them to a place of which he knows—"

It had been simple indeed. Garston, Bryce and Haddon had ridden into the trap.

"Nak is laughing at them," Lotis continued; "he is goading them with taunts. I can look into their minds. That of my beloved is filled with thoughts of those things I have told him, which he found it hard to believe. He is dismayed to think with what ease he was led into their trap, but he is not afraid. And the thoughts of the man Bryce are red thoughts of rage, like that of a trapped creature. But the mind of Haddon is directed steadily upon one point. He is thinking of escape. He is foolish, for Nak reads the thoughts that are his, and calls a Mongol horseman to ride beside him, with a weapon in his hand, and looks at him, and laughs in his face.

"'How now, spy of Washington?' he speaks to him. 'Is it not in your mind that you had been safer to have kept your hands out of this? See you not that your thoughts are to me as a written page? My man will shoot you at the first move you make. It is an old trick, baiting a trap with a living bait; one we of the East drink in with our mothers' milk, and you are a man grown with hair showing on your upper lip. You should have watched more carefully after you saw the shroud and the knives. Behold, I shall show you another!' And he leans over and lays a kerchief upon the horse in front of Haddon, and he maketh it seem to expand till it is a shroud indeed—and he strikes a knife through it into the flesh of the horse so that it flinches and rears, and once more he laughs.

"But the man Haddon is brave. And he answers, 'Keep your hell tricks to yourself, you damned imp of Satan; your gunman is enough! You've got us; three fools who didn't have sense enough to keep out of your net, but you were singing a different tune last night after your dogs ran away and left you to get home by yourself.'

"And the man Bryce speaks also. 'Hold on, Nak; lend me that handkerchief a minute till I blow my nose.' Allahou—they are men; they are brave. The Wolf of Erlik hath seized them and they spit in his face; yea, even into his fangs bared to rend them.

"And because they are brave, Nat scowls. 'Thou also shall sing yet another tune as ye say it,' he makes answer. 'Lis-

ten, dog of the government and ye who wouldst pollute a shroud of the Hassani, thou shalt pray God for death ere this is finished, and he shalt not hear thee. And before ye die ye shall cry to Erlik—aye, thou shalt lift thy voices to him—to the end that he shall give thee surcease from the pain of the flesh at the price of thy souls. On thy bended knees ye shall appeal to him. I, Nak, swear it.'

"But the man Bryce speaks again. 'Interesting if true. You've got us, Nak, but why act so set up about it. I can't see that it counts. When it comes to fighting your way, we're nothing but a lot of dubs. What you ought to have done was get the girl that used to work with Otho Khan, or the big man that busted up George Pitrininski and took her out of your cherished devil worker's hands. If you'd grabbed them now—'

"Peace, fool!' Nak cries, and strikes him with the knotted whip he keeps to the goading of his horse.

"Yet the man Haddon takes up the matter. 'He's right, you know, Nak; before you make us kiss Erlik's big toe, you want to remember our friends.'

"And it seems that his words lash Nak to a frenzy, for he screams aloud in his anger, 'By Erlik himself, we are not forgetting them, government prowler. The girl is already broken in our taking of this man,' and he points to my beloved. 'Think ye we would have troubled with you had it not been for him? He is her weakness.'

"And—and—ah—my beloved lifts his head and turns it toward him. 'You're right,' he saith. 'I was her weakness; her *one* weakness, and, thanks to you, it is removed. Numerically, you've cut our party in half, but—you've grabbed off the wrong end, my friend of the devil. It's the other part that holds the sting.' He speaks so, my beloved, and he speaks truth, and the truth that he utters gives me back my strength. His words are like wine to my spirit; they are like acid poured into a raw wound in Nak's brain—"

"Peace," said Semi Dual, "seek not to look into his mind at this time; these things are of the surface. Thrust further into the cloud; seek its source; the place wherein is Otho Khan."

"Aye, Master, I hear and obey thee. The cloud is thick beyond me. It is like the smoke of a fire in the mountains. It is between me and them, but I shall pierce it. It gives way before me; I am on the mountain at the spot where Nak appeared to me. There is an opening in its side before me. It is the lair of the wolf; the cloud of his dark thoughts issue from it, like smoke from the ground. It is the place from which Nak appeared to stand before me, and to which, after leaving me, he returned. There are many footprints in the dust before it; the footprints of many who have passed within it and have not yet returned."

"Thrust in and report to me what lies within it." Dual spoke in direction, and there came again a silence.

I leaned back against the jamb of the door. A quiver shook me, not of fear, but rather of impatience. It was as though my very soul was racked for the consummation of this thing; this demonstration of the undreamed powers that lurk in the human brain. For not for one single instant, as I stood there, did I doubt the truth of what the lips of Lotis uttered. There was a cave. It was the lair of the Wolf of Erlik. Into it Semi Dual was thrusting the subliminal self of the girl who lay before him. I stiffened.

Once more words were falling with the precision of a printed tape from Lotis's tongue:

"I am within the cave, Master. For a time the thought cloud withheld me. It is strong. Its force is the force of the current of a dark stream. It is the force of many minds tuned into unison like an engine. But I am like to a strong swimmer. I am not sure if the place be a cave really or the entrance to a mine. There are timbers supporting its walls, as it seems. They fall away, they widen, I am come into a larger place, a room, as it were, dug out of the ground. It is large and there is light within it; the light of many torches. Yet there must be a vent to the chamber, for the air is pure.

"The light falls upon the faces of many

people, men and women gathered together within it. They are of many races. They are the people who have dwelt upon the land left me by my father. They have left their homes and gathered here together by the bidding of Otho Khan. This—now I understand—this is the Temple of Erlik; the shrine of Otho Khan's Place of Prayer. He has gathered them within it. He—he is here.

"I can see him. He is clad in robes of black and scarlet. There is an altar, and a figure, like the figure of some obscene god. The giant black who led the party of Nak against us in the night stands beside it. He is nude. His naked body glistens in the light of the torches, like a figure of black bronze. He holds a sack of goat-skin and an earthen jug in his hands.

"And Otho Khan, the servitor of Satan, kneels before the idol, and before it he has unrolled his shroud. It lies white between him and the image. He is praying to Erlik and the people within the chamber are praying with him. He is taking their thoughts and weaving them into a cloud. He rises and makes obeisance to the idol. He is chanting the prayers for the dead in hell, and those in the chamber are chanting with him; their thoughts pulse in time to the chanting. Master, he is playing upon them as on an instrument of evil.

"It is finished, and now Otho Khan throws off his robes and kneels naked before them, and the black advances and kneels, facing him, and opens his sack. It contains earth. He piles it in front of Otho Khan and pours water upon it, and it becomes as clay of the potter. And Otho Khan takes it and molds it.

"He has made an earthen image of a goat. He stands it before him, he is stroking it with his hands, and it moves. It turns its head and looks at him who has made it—O God of long suffering—it is alive! It takes a step—that thing of mud—

"And there comes a woman, a negress. She wears a scarlet robe. She leaps forth in front of the idol and hurls her garment from her, she dances; she flings her arms and bends her naked body faster and faster; there is a froth upon her mouth. The eyes of all are upon her; she falls.

"And the black takes a knife from the altar and strikes off the head of the goat, and blood gushes from it and it falls down, and the woman rises and dips her hands in the blood of the goat, and smears the face of the idol, and the giant black lifts his voice and cries aloud:

"'Behold, the sacrifice in which this goat created by Otho Khan through the powers bestowed upon him is given back to the bestower of power as a sign of a greater to come, wherein shall be offered up to him the goat without horns!' And a murmur runs through the crowd. They turn their eyes widely upon Otho Khan. They have beheld him create life, and he is become to them as a god—Master—"

"Peace." Dual stayed her. "Seek not to look either into the brain of Otho Khan at this time; let it remain centered upon those things which are his own, for the rest let it not disturb thee; thou knowest how it was done. The dead alive create nothing, though at times they work illusions to the confusing of mortal minds. Were it harder to make a bit of earth dampened with water appear as a goat than to form a serpent of flame from a bit of string? This were but a form of the dance of the Black Virgin, the unholy rite of the Voodoo worship, which the servitor of Satan has seized upon to the carrying out of his plans. Peace, and seek ye those plans in the brain of the giant black, to whom they are doubtless known."

Voodoo—the dance of the Black Virgin—the Black Virgin—sacrifice—the goat without horns. The words ran brokenly through my mind a part and parcel of the picture raised up by Lotis's words to which I had listened; that picture of the unclean rites over which Otho Khan, servitor of Satan, presided in that foul Temple of Erlik underground; that dreadful obscene reality on which the eyes of her soul had looked, while Otho Khan knelt before the eyes of his slaves and further enslaved them through the hell-inspired trickery of the goat he had made of mud.

All at once it seemed to me that in part I understood the subtlety back of Dual's caution to the girl soul he was so strangely employing, not to look into his mind; not

to let him sense her presence; to seek elsewhere for his plan. For Otho Khan—be he what he might—had sometime been a man, he was of human birth. He was mortal, nay, he was less than mortal—an inhuman monster. But no matter what he was, he could not do two things at one time.

Now, as Lotis had said, he was busy; concentrated wholly upon turning against us the force of his horribly compounded artificial brain, that sexless, amorphous, composite thing he had built up to serve him, out of the minds of the men and women he had perverted, played upon with his diabolical cunning; of whose inherent weakness he had taken advantage until they had become partly, because of him at least, damned.

He was too busy building that smoke screen of their thoughts against us, welding the power of their brains into a weapon for our utter destruction, to do more than sense vaguely the counter-thrust Dual was making against him, if at all—to suspect how his own devices were being torn asunder by Semi's slender Sword of Flame, whose almost waxen lips were speaking:

"I am looking into his mind; it is a thing of unspeakable loathing, in which the thoughts writhe like serpents caught in a filthy slime. They are red thoughts—of sacrifice—slaughter—the blood of the slain—the blood of the goat—the goat without horns—that is to be brought before him. I can see it—the goat—it has a face—the face of—a—man—it is—it is—it is the face—of my—beloved—"

"Enough!" Dual bent swiftly above her.

It seemed that my heart stopped beating. The giant black had called Bryce and Haddon friends of the goat—human sacrifice! Haddon himself had said such things were sometimes done by the Voodoo priesthood, and Dual had asked him particularly concerning what had occurred at the time.

Connie uttered an inarticulate sound between a scream and a groan. I glanced toward her. She was pallid, wide-eyed, gasping, gripping the arms of her chair with her hands. I half staggered to her.

"Enough," Dual repeated. "Sword of Flame, I am drawing thee back—yet keeping thee in my hand. I am giving thee back power of motion and understanding in thy body—return."

Her form stirred. She sat up on the couch, put up her hands and once more gripped her temples. "Oh, God—thou Name of Names, that such things should be as I have seen," she intoned. "Master, I have told thee truly; must I drink this cup? Is there naught that can dash it from me?"

"Aye," Dual said slowly. "Thou hast told me much and thereby thou hast placed much within my hands. Not yet hath Otho Khan turned his mind wholly on thee as it is in my mind he shall after a time. And in that time thou must harken to him; thou must seem to resist him, yet yield to him slowly; for did not Nak say to ye in the mountain that thou shouldst close the eyes of thy beloved, wherefore this sacrifice shall not occur until Otho Khan knows that ye stand before him in the unholy shrine of his false worship as a witness.

"It is so he means to crush ye, and thy beloved has become the lure by which he will call thee, knowing that thy thoughts shall be upon him, and his on thee, and in that time thy soul must strike into his eyes as a light that blinds him, once he has brought thee to him as against thy will."

For a moment more she sat staring into his face with widened eyes, and then she answered:

"Allahou, thou are mighty. Master, the meaning of thy words flows out of them and enters my mind. In that time my soul shall throw itself upon him—aye, even upon Otho Khan. My soul shall be locked with his—and it comes to me now that in that hour my weakness, upon which he counts, shall become as a fountain of strength. Hai! I am ready. I shall seize this Wolf of Erlik—in the Temple of Erlik's worship—and I shall hold him."

There came the sound of a horn. A dust-covered car slid past the window and stopped in front of the house with a whine of brakes. Lotis rose slowly.

Footsteps mounted the steps to the porch and were followed by a rap.

(To be concluded NEXT WEEK.)

"No Professional Jealousy"

by Louis Weadock

THE moving-picture business is a great business for relatives. It is thickly populated with men and women who have come in through doors held open from the inside by fathers, mothers, husbands, wives, sisters, and brothers. The assisted immigrants have prospered not only in the artistic but in the business department—the law of heredity providing that at least one member of a family of actors shall be endowed with good business sense, or a good job, which is the next best thing.

This exaltation of the family spirit makes the going a little heavy for unmarried orphans. Many of them have found it impossible to enter the temple. Yet they may console themselves with the thought that their exclusion implies not so much a lack of merit on their part as a congestion of traffic at the pass-gate of the family entrance. Far better for them if they had less talent and more relatives, for within the sacred precincts even the second cousin is recognized and the brother-in-law is made an equal among men.

Kendall Kipp, the police reporter of the Los Angeles *Gazette*, was one of the few men eligible to admission to the moving-picture business, who had not availed himself of his family prerogative. No one had a better right than he to be in the film field, for he was the only brother of Maxwell Kipp.

To say that Maxwell Kipp was in the moving-picture business would be like saying that Christopher Columbus had been in the exploring business. Maxwell Kipp, in his line, which was Westerns, *was* the moving-picture business. His pictures sold so much better than those of his rivals that there was hardly a producer in Hollywood who would not have been glad to get him away from the Planet Film Corporation. His close-clipped curls, his firm, not to say solid jaw, his ivory forehead were flashed nightly on the silver screen from Siskiyou to Singapore.

His press-agent wrote that line, but Maxwell Kipp suggested the idea. One of the things which Maxwell Kipp did best was to suggest ideas. He was such an important star that his suggestions were usually adopted. The only man of his acquaintance who consistently rejected his suggestions was his brother. This did not lessen Maxwell Kipp's faith in his own infallibility, but it made him sorry that his brother had so little sense. Against his brother he harbored a smoldering resentment because the reporter resolutely refused to leave the newspaper business and go to work for him. He could not understand Kendall's reluctance to supplant the creative young artist of the romantic school who did the press work for Maxwell Kipp.

What little time he snatched from his duties as police reporter, Kendall Kipp de-

voted to the fabrication of the great realistic American novel. He feared that his closely wrought style would not lend itself to the celebration of his brother's ivory forehead. And he looked so much like his brother he felt a certain repugnance to the prospect of penning eulogies of features which were almost exactly similar to his own.

In vain the actor pointed out to him that anybody in the moving-picture business would be proud to give a job to the brother of Maxwell Kipp. He intimated that any job Kendall accepted would last for life, he being of the opinion that to fire a brother of Maxwell Kipp would be a sacrilege comparable only to firing Maxwell Kipp himself. But the reporter laughed and stayed in the newspaper business, being fired and hired and fired and hired again, not making much money, but liking his work and fortifying himself with the thought that the novel was bound to be finished if he lived long enough.

His brother called him "the darnedest fool and the shortest-sighted man in the world." This superfluity of epithet was occasioned by the reporter's perversity in sticking to a hard job when he might easily have had a soft one.

Just now the eminent actor was making his own job as soft as he could by eliminating from it all work. Instead of going to the studio of the Planet Film Corporation where one of his pictures was approaching completion, he stayed in bed. His bedroom was a stately apartment of magnificent dimensions in his big house, which was one of the show-places of Hollywood. From a distance the house resembled a railroad-station of the better class; it was furnished like a museum; but Maxwell Kipp's pride in it was touching to behold.

The discontented master of all this grandeur was lying under silken coverlets when his brother, who had dandruff on his collar, and who needed a hair-cut, came into the room, blinking behind horn-rimmed glasses.

"I've never seen you looking better," said the visitor. "Why aren't you acting?"

His brother turned upon him eyes filled with anguish.

"I've got so much rheumatism that I can't sit on my horse," he moaned. "If I can't sit on my horse I can't act, can I?"

"Not so well as you can on foot," his brother agreed, helping himself to one of the actor's monogramed cigarettes. "I've been hearing some queer stories about you, Max."

The actor regarded him tolerantly.

"I suppose you have," he said; "I'm used to having people talk about me. What are they saying now?"

"They're saying that you're lying down on your job," answered his brother bluntly.

The actor adjusted his silk lounging robe before he answered.

"Really?" he asked, as if he were not quite sure of the meaning of the coarse expression. "Lying down on the job."

"That's a fine English accent you've picked up," remarked his brother. "I wonder what they'd think of it back home in Akron."

The man in the lounging robe flushed.

"That isn't fair, Ken," he remonstrated. "I didn't mean to use it on you."

"They say you're using worse on Bloom."

The actor, forgetting his rheumatism, sat up in bed.

"Look here, Ken," he said warningly, "I don't try to run your business. Don't you think you'd better let me run mine?"

"Don't you think you ought to run it on the level?"

Max shook his fist. "What do you know about my business?" he demanded.

"Not a darn thing," admitted his brother; "but I know that it isn't square to pretend to be sick so that the man that's paying you your salary will get disgusted and cancel your contract."

"I've got three offers," boasted the actor, "every one of them better than the contract I've tried to buy from Bloom. You shouldn't try to judge me. You don't know Bloom. He's impossible. He doesn't understand me. I can't do my best work for him. I owe it to myself to do my best work. I owe it to my public to give the best that is in me—"

"The next stop is Akron," interrupted his brother.

"I forgot," confessed the star, with a smile that granted forgiveness rather than gave it. "I'm really sick of the Planet bunch. If you knew them you wouldn't blame me. Bloom won't let me go. Maybe if I'm sick long enough he'll change his mind."

"I heard that if you're sick long enough he'll go broke. I don't know enough about your business to know whether you're treating Bloom right or not; but I know you're not treating yourself right."

The actor sneered.

"Try not to worry about how I treat myself," he said patronizingly. "I don't have to hang around a police-station for forty dollars a week."

"I'm writing a novel," rejoined his brother patiently. "There is a lot of material around a jail. Look at the men that wrote in jail—Cervantes, Bunyan, Raleigh—"

"Any of them on afternoon newspapers, my boy?" smiled the actor, welcoming the chance to turn the conversation.

"Don't let's start that," said his brother. "I didn't come out here to fight with you."

"How I have misjudged Kid Balzac," sighed the actor. "Maybe you'll tell me why you did come out?"

"I want you to do me a favor."

The actor beamed.

"Anything, my boy, anything," he said heartily. "Write your own ticket."

"Thanks."

The actor was not satisfied that his brother fully understood his willingness to grant favors. He raised himself in bed and thrust his arms above his head in a gesture that was one of the most effective in his box of tricks.

"Ken," he said solemnly, "I'd split my last dollar with you and you know it. You've made me feel badly, you know you have; you've made me feel badly here." He lowered his right hand and placed it in the general locality of his heart as if to indicate beyond question that part of him that his brother had injured most. "You've made me feel badly because you've never let me do enough for you. Ask what you like. I only hope you'll ask enough."

He folded his arms magnificently.

His brother edged his chair closer to the bed.

"Max," he said, "I want you to read a scenario I've written."

The actor's face fell. He had not expected this.

"I'd rather give you a thousand dollars than read a thousand words," he said frankly; then seeing the disappointment in his brother's face he went on: "but I'll read it, Ken; I'll read it. I'll read it as soon as you leave."

"You'll read it while I'm here," declared his brother boldly.

"You don't trust me, Ken? You don't trust your brother? Give me the damned thing."

He had the actor's constitutional antipathy to the written word. When he saw the formidable mass of manuscript that the reporter drew from his pocket he could not repress a groan.

"Who's going to play it?" he asked, with a return of his professional manner.

"I don't know."

"You don't know?" echoed the man in bed, amazed. "You write a scenario and you don't know who's going to play it?"

"I'm free-lancing," explained his brother with a touch of pride.

The actor was not impressed.

"That's one of the best ways I know of starving to death," he said; then with his accustomed facility for linking himself to any and everything asked: "is there a part in it for me?"

"There may be," said the reporter modestly. "There's a part in it something like the parts you play."

"Then I don't want it," cut in his brother, putting the abhorred thing from him; "I want something new—something different—something that will show them that I'm not a one-part actor—"

"Don't misunderstand me," begged the other. "When I said that it was something like things you have played I only meant that you win all the fights and punish the villain and get the girl in the last reel—"

"Of course I do. Certainly. Why not? What else do you think I'd play?" the other demanded indignantly; then moaned: "I suppose it's highbrow. Everything you

write is highbrow; highbrow and full of long words. You'd better read it to me. Wait till I light this cigarette. All right. Let's go."

With an expression of saintly resignation on his face he leaned back among his pillows. His brother retrieved the manuscript from the floor and began to read:

"Our hero is an honest, likable cowpuncher, unselfish—"

"Ahem," said a deprecating voice in the doorway.

"Just a minute, Ken," interrupted the actor, whose face now reflected dynamic suffering rather than static resignation. "Come right in, Mr. Bloom, come right in. This is my brother, Mr. Bloom. He's cheering the invalid with one of his, one of his—"

He finished his sentence with his eyebrows as if unable to find words with which fittingly to describe the literary effort from which he had been so fortuitously delivered.

"I was reading my brother one of my immortal masterpieces," said its author lightly.

"So?" queried Mr. Bloom.

He spoke in a soft, friendly voice which the reporter liked; a voice that he expected from Mr. Bloom, for Mr. Bloom was a soft, friendly little man, although just now he was not at his best; his absorption in his own troubles making him but indifferent company.

"So?" he repeated approvingly. "I should think a smart young fellow like you could make a good living writing masterpieces. Is it a movie?"

"It's a movie," volunteered the actor, his face drawn with pain. "My brother is an author."

Mr. Bloom received this intelligence with equanimity.

"Authors," he asserted, wagging his head, "is the only business where most of the good ones is dead."

He turned with unaffected interest to a representative of an art the practitioners of which are confident that most of the good ones are living.

"I hope the boy is better this morning," he asked anxiously.

"It's gone into my right arm," groaned the boy with a look which seemed to say that it was only by the exertion of his unconquerable will that he was enabled to bear the agony. "Who let you in?"

Maxwell's tone was so supercilious that his brother would not have blamed Mr. Bloom had the little man thrown something at him. The reporter was puzzled, too, by his relative's reference to his right arm. Before Mr. Bloom had come in that right arm had been waving in the air like a brakeman's.

"That's too bad—the butler," answered Mr. Bloom. "He told me you said you didn't want to see anybody, even me, but I knew he got it wrong. I knew you told him you didn't want to see anybody except me."

"What can I do for you?" asked the actor grudgingly.

Mr. Bloom's voice trembled as he answered:

"Mr. Kipp," he said solemnly, "you can do me the favor to get well."

Mr. Kipp laughed, a hollow laugh which seemed to be wrung from his agony.

"Listen to him, listen to him," he implored his brother. "He wants me to get well."

"That sounds reasonable," said the reporter.

His failure to appreciate the enormity of Mr. Bloom's request made his brother look at him suspiciously.

"You're like the rest of them," he said shortly. "No sympathy from anybody. You're both lucky that you don't know what it is to be sick—"

"I know," said Mr. Bloom gloomily. "I am sick now, all the time—sick in my heart. The overhead at that plant will drop in any day and smother us. If you would only please be so kind as to come back to work—"

"Work," yelled the actor, turning a wrathful face upon Mr. Bloom. "How can I work when I'm sick?"

"Please," entreated the little man, avoiding the actor's angry eyes; "please, I don't ask you for horseback acting. All I ask is sitting down acting in easy chairs for the close-ups in the post-office after the robberies. In one day we can finish."

"Why don't you do it?" the reporter asked.

"Why don't you mind your own business?"

"Don't fight," pleaded Mr. Bloom.

"You keep out of this," the actor warned his brother.

The reporter turned his back upon him and addressed himself to Mr. Bloom.

"How badly do you want this acting done?" he asked.

The man in bed laughed contemptuously.

"He doesn't want it done badly. He wants it done well. That's why he's waiting for me."

"He needn't wait for you any longer," said Kendall ominously.

"Don't tell me he won't do it at all," begged Mr. Bloom.

"I'll do it," announced the reporter.

The only comment from the bed was a sardonic laugh.

The reporter grabbed little Mr. Bloom by the shoulders.

"Look at me," he commanded. "No, wait till I get these glasses off. Now look. What do I look like?"

"You look like a man that needs a shave," came from the bed.

Mr. Bloom did not appear to have heard. Standing on his toes he was peering into the reporter's face.

"You look just like your brother," he said slowly; "just as alike as two thieves in a pod—"

"You lie," thundered the man who held him motionless. "Base liar, you lie."

Mr. Bloom essayed a sickly smile.

"Before my body I throw my warlike shield," declaimed the man who towered above him.

"Please, I ask you, don't throw nothing," begged the unhappy Mr. Bloom.

"Silence," boomed the other whose chest was heaving and who took his right hand from Mr. Bloom's trembling shoulder to flourish it in the air. "Silence, caitiff."

"The name is Abraham," murmured the little man with an ingratiating smile.

To the man in bed he whispered hoarsely:

"Your poor brother is having a fit."

"I am a fit," proclaimed the other, taking a long stride toward the bed and thrusting an accusing forefinger almost into the eye of his puzzled brother. "I am a fit."

"Say," queried the invalid, "have you gone off your nut or do you really think you can act?"

"Think I can act? I know I can act. What's more, I'm going to act."

"You'd be great in a two-reel comedy."

"I'm so glad you ain't having a fit," said Mr. Bloom. "Now that I notice it, you got acting motions just like your brother—"

"Nobody can tell me I'm as bad as that," protested the star.

His brother ignored him, turning again to Mr. Bloom.

"I look just like my brother," he said. "I've got all his tricks. Take me to your studio. Make me up. Shoot your close-ups of me. That 'll finish your picture."

"You would finish any picture," snarled the star.

"It would save my life," said Mr. Bloom fervently. "This tieup is costing me thousands of dollars—"

"Your troubles are over," the other told him. "You've seen that I'm not such a terrible actor. Come on. Let's get to the studio. I'll do what I can for you till Max is well enough to work—"

There was a hasty scrambling among the bedclothes and the actor jumped out upon the floor.

"Max is well enough to act now!" he cried. "I'm suffering the tortures of the damned, but I'll go through with it; yes, I'll go through with it to the bitter end if it kills me—"

"The death rate from rheumatism is remarkably low," said his brother, "and the trains are still running to Akron."

The star had the grace to look sheepish.

"May I ring for your valet?" asked the reporter.

"You may quit trying to make a monkey of me," snapped the star. "I'm in a hurry. I'll dress myself."

He hobbled into the adjoining room.

Upon Mr. Bloom's face there appeared an expression of beatific content.

"Mr. Kipp," he said earnestly, "you've saved me thousands of dollars. If ever you

should want a regular job acting, which I hope you won't, come to me. I'll *make* a place for you if I haven't one.

"One actor in a family is enough," responded his benefactor. "I never could be as good an actor as Max. I'll stick to my writing."

"What's that movie priced at that you was reading to him?" asked Mr. Bloom with a swift transition to a business-like briskness.

Kendall Kipp hesitated, reluctant to set a price upon his immortal masterpiece. After a pause he answered:

"Five thousand dollars," wondering whether this was too much or too little.

Mr. Bloom made a wry face, but held out his hand.

"Give it to me," he said imperiously.

"You want to read it?"

"No," said Mr. Bloom decisively, "I don't want to read it; I want to buy it."

THE CONFESSION OF A SENTIMENTAL POET

I'VE written scores of verses to
Full many a fair and dainty maid,
With eyes of heavenly, azure hue,
Brown, hazel, black as ace of spade,
In fact, of every earthly shade,
And dubbed them angel, siren, fairy;
But I am more than half afraid
My loves are all imaginary.

I've raved about a certain L
Until I can almost persuade
Myself that all I've said is true,
Instead of just a trick I've played.
The name (a single trick of trade),
Had far more rimes than—well, say Mary,
And so I use it. Why evade?
My loves are all imaginary.

I've prated love till I am blue,
And never yet have I betrayed
The fact that 'twas for revenue
Those jingling verses all were made,
Supply demand, and get well paid,
Demand for verses, tender, merry.
A hypocrite? Do not upbraid—
My loves are all imaginary.

ENVOI.

Some poets, true, can serenade
The maids they love, so gay and airy,
While I do naught but masquerade.
My loves are all imaginary.

Sam S. Stinson.

Trailing Back

Part IV

by *Charles Alden Seltzer*

Author of "Riddle Gawne," "Drag Harlan," etc.

CHAPTER XIV.

HERE COMES THE SHERIFF.

REDMOND paid no attention to the fallen gunfighter; his interest now seemed to be definitely centered upon the men who had been with the other.

It had seemed to Martha that Redmond should have shown some interest in Pennington, if only to the extent of determining if he had killed the man. That he did not even look at Pennington after he fell indicated that he had shot to kill and had faith in his marksmanship. Martha shivered, cringed against the wall of Mother Baird's house and pressed her hands tightly over her eyes.

When she again gazed at the men of the group that had been with Pennington she saw they were all standing motionless, watching Redmond, who was confronting them, his six-shooter dangling loosely from his lowered hand. There was a smile of derision on Redmond's face.

But when he spoke his voice was cold, savage:

"Any one else got notions about this lady?"

There was no answer. Martha noted that not one of the men lifted his eyes to Redmond's; they looked at the ground at their feet, or at the prostrate figure of Pennington.

"The ace is played; I reckon there's nothing left but deuces," sneered Redmond.

As the taunt seemed not to provoke any of the men to action, Redmond stepped close to Martha.

"We'll be goin' now," he said.

He walked to the hitching-rail where some time before he had left his own horse and Martha's, paying no further attention to the men, who, as soon as Redmond had moved, had crowded around Pennington's motionless body.

There was movement now, and sound, in striking contrast to the silence of a few moments before. Men were running down the street; dogs were barking; voices rose loudly. As Martha walked toward her horse she heard a man near her say:

"Pennington's bullet went into the ground at his feet. He was dead before he got his gun out. An' he started to draw first!"

Martha was trembling when she got into the saddle; she was still trembling after she and Redmond had ridden a mile. Twisting in the saddle she could see some men still congregated at the spot where the shooting had occurred. She shuddered as she again faced the trail.

This story began in the Argosy-Allstory Weekly for October 15.

She knew, though, that Redmond would have avoided the killing; that he had not sought trouble with Pennington. She did not blame him, but that fact did not lessen her repugnance for the deed.

And so she avoided Redmond's glances as much as possible, riding silently beside him where the width of the trail permitted; following him when the trail grew narrow. In that manner they traversed a level and reached a shelving ledge of rock surmounting a mammoth valley.

"Legget's Basin," announced Redmond shortly, as he halted his horse for an instant on the ledge.

Martha looked out and down, awed to silence. The faint exclamation of astonishment that reached her lips was stifled by a breathless gasp.

A mighty force seemed to be at work in the girl as she gazed into the gigantic abyss below her. She had a grotesque impression that she was shrinking to dwarflike proportions, and that the world at which she gazed was growing so large that it would presently engulf her. She felt infinitely small and unimportant, as though she were an atom perched precariously on the top of an exceedingly high mountain.

Titanic forces had fashioned the basin. Her first impression was that it was merely a vast hollow, desolate of everything save the wild growth of any virgin land; but as she continued to gaze down into it she saw timber, hills, plains, valleys, rivers, and green brown mesas.

There were mountains at the farther edge of the basin, their peaks thrusting against a purple haze, rimming the stupendous gulf, crowning the colossal gash in the face of the earth.

She saw fleecy clouds swimming around the crests of some bastioned hills far out in the big valley, a lone eagle winging his slow way seemed to ride them; there were vast forests dark and mysterious behind the blue haze of distance.

"It's ninety miles across from here," she heard Redmond saying.

She had no doubt of that; if he had told her the basin was twice that size she would have believed him.

Looking downward, she shrank back appalled. Save for a narrow trail that seemed to have been merely scratched in the rock, and which went winding downward sharply, the wall of the basin at her feet was precipitous, dropping sheer to a slope. Lower down were other sheer walls, other slopes, projecting levels, mammoth crags, ridges, gorges, painted cliffs, darkly red. It was wild, rugged, seemingly impassable, and she wondered why men would persist in tempting Providence by living in such places.

For she had seen that men did live in the basin. At a distance of several miles from her she saw a cabin, and west of it another. They looked like dots.

She saw Redmond watching her.

"It ain't as dangerous as it looks," he said. He pointed to the narrow ledge that seemed to be scratched in the rock wall.

"That's the regular trail," he added. "It's used by everybody who goes in or out of the basin on this side. Nobody's ever been hurt goin' or comin', durin' the day. There's been some accidents at night. If you don't want to try it I'll take you back to Loma."

Of course after that challenge she felt she had to make the downward trip, and the smile she gave him was defiant, if slightly grim.

"All right," he said instantly. "You keep close behind me. Don't try to guide your horse. Drop the reins and hold onto the saddle-horn. If you keep lookin' up you won't get dizzy."

Small consolation, that. He might have been advising her to buy a pound of tea, so matter of fact was his voice and so lacking in concern was his expression.

They were two hours reaching the bottom of the basin. And then it seemed to Martha that there had been justification for Redmond's apparent lack of concern over the downward trip. The slopes they had traversed did not seem to be nearly so dangerous from where she now viewed them. Yet she was glad she would never have to ride down here again.

In another hour they were dismounting at the gate of a small corral.

A cabin stood in the shade of some timber near a narrow stream of water, spanned

by the corral at whose gate she was dismounting. Several other buildings were clustered around the cabin; and Martha got a glimpse of a little garden before she started to walk toward the cabin, following Redmond, who stalked on, not seeming to be interested in her.

Martha got her first glimpse of Redmond's mother at the cabin door; and she stood at a little distance, doubtful of her reception, feeling keenly the embarrassment of her position, until Mrs. Redmond smiled at her.

There was no mistaking that smile. It expressed good will and a disposition to withhold judgment of every kind until complete explanations had been made.

Mrs. Redmond left the door and walked to where Martha stood.

"Larry has told me who you are," she said; "and what you have come for. You are very courageous, and welcome."

That was all until later, after she had met Mary Redmond, a tall, slim, sunbrowned girl of seventeen with gray eyes and a firm mouth that reminded Martha of Redmond's.

Redmond remained in the cabin only an instant after Martha entered; and after greeting Martha, Mary vanished.

Mrs. Redmond had her son's keen, steady eyes. They held the same expression of calm serenity.

Mrs. Redmond's mouth was firm, like Mary's, and her lips were thinner. There was about her convincing signs of a character that did not yield to petty annoyances; evidence that the big problems of life were worked out calmly, without rancor, if it transpired they were adverse; with well-governed satisfaction if they turned out favorably.

Her hair had once been brown, like Mary's; it was now generously sprinkled with glistening threads of white. Little wrinkles at the corners of her eyes testified to her ability to see the humor of things.

Just now her eyes were grave. She had helped her guest remove the stains of travel, had made her feel that the welcome she had given her had not been merely a polite formality; and was now sitting in a chair facing her.

"I've been trying to persuade Larry to give up the idea of vengeance for what has been done to him," she told Martha. "It is more than three years since Tim Owens was killed, and even if Larry is innocent, the law is satisfied.

"But Larry is bitter. He doesn't say much, but he feels strongly. I tried to keep him from going to your brother's place, but I am glad now that he did, because he has brought you here. Perhaps between us we can prevent any further trouble."

Thus with a word did Mrs. Redmond establish a bond between herself and the girl who had ridden far to talk with her. It seemed to Martha that she had done the right thing in coming to Mrs. Redmond, and whatever strangeness there had seemed to be in her action Mrs. Redmond's attitude had made it appear entirely natural.

Mrs. Redmond did not feel bitter because her son had been punished for a crime of which she thought him innocent. She had betrayed an inclination to help Martha to straighten out the differences between the two men; she had paid Martha the compliment of assuming without question that good would result from her coming.

Martha talked. She told Mrs. Redmond the story of Redmond's visit to the K Down, of her conversation with Sneddon and Craim, of her decision to get Redmond away from the K Down before her brother could return; of the ambuscade on the shoulder of the mountain, not omitting the incident of her forcible detention by Redmond. And when she concluded Mrs. Redmond was at her side, stroking her hair and patting her cheeks.

"You're a brave girl," said Mrs. Redmond.

Both women had been so engrossed with their problem that they had not heard a rider pass close to the house. But Redmond, after leaving his mother and Martha together, had gone to one of the bunkhouses where he stood in a doorway awaiting the outcome of the talk between the two women.

From the doorway he could see the Loma

trail, and he had not been standing there very long until he saw a rider coming toward him.

He recognized the rider while the latter was still some distance away, and his eyes glinted coldly as he stepped back to a point just inside the bunk-house, ejected the two spent shells he had used on Pennington and refilled the empty chambers of the pistol with two loaded cartridges.

When the rider passed the ranch-house and rode toward Redmond, the latter was leaning comfortably against one of the door jambs, his right thumb hooked in his cartridge-belt just above the butt of his pistol; the fingers of his left hand gently caressing his chin. There was a faint smile on his face, defying analysis.

The rider was a big man, not tall, but massive, almost ponderous.

He rode a big horse, and the animal resented the weight on his back, for when he came to a halt within a dozen feet of where Redmond stood he tossed his head restlessly, snorted impatiently, pawed viciously at the ground with his fore-hoofs, and otherwise testified to a desire to rid himself of his burden.

The big man betrayed no inclination to dismount. His face was red; there was huge embarrassment in his eyes and respect of a fearsome quality as he looked at Redmond while vainly endeavoring to quiet the animal under him. There was an unmistakable wheeze in his voice when he spoke to Redmond, a queer breathlessness that might have resulted from his ride down the precipitous trail, or which might have come from a divination that Redmond's apparent carelessness of attitude was a delusion and a snare.

"Redmond, I'm wantin' you for killin' Pennington," he said.

He got the horse turned so that the animal faced Redmond; so that he could draw the weapon at his right hip and fire with reasonable facility if the need arose. However, he hoped that wouldn't be necessary, for he well knew that he couldn't match Redmond's swiftness on the draw.

"I ain't forcin' trouble, Redmond," he said, in a voice that was almost apologetic.

"Trouble an' me are on mighty friendly terms right now, Corwin," said Redmond. "If you ain't aimin' to force trouble why are you swingin' your horse around that suggestive?"

"The damned fool's got the figits! He's been actin' that way ever since I got on him."

"Knowed you was comin' after me, I reckon," said Redmond. "That horse has got sense. Him prancin' around that way means he's lookin' for a soft spot for you to fall on when you go to clawin' at your gun. I'd call that mighty considerate of him, an' thoughtful."

"Shucks, Redmond," denied the other; "I ain't had no such a notion. I'm a friend of yourn, I tell you! They was a bunch of the boys in Loma wanted to come along with me, but I told 'em I reckoned I could handle this deal myself without no outside interference. I told 'em you was too sensible to force any trouble; that you knowed the law was too powerful to buck."

"That was sure kind of you, Corwin. When you goin' to start to handle this deal?"

Corwin gulped. Twice he cleared his throat. His face was crimson, big beads of perspiration gathered on his forehead and rolled down his fat cheeks.

"Well, I reckoned you'd respect the law, Redmond," he said at last, throatily.

Redmond's expression had become saturnine, though in the depths of his eyes was a gleam of malicious humor.

"I'm sure a wolf at respectin' the law, sheriff," he said. "Most men would be downright mean at you bustin' in on them this way, tellin' them you're wantin' to take them back to town for killin' a skunk like Pennington. Most men yould have told you straight to your teeth that you an' the Owens gang are too thick, an' that when Bill Dugan an' Judge Pelton had to get out of the country because folks was gettin' suspicious that *they* was too thick with the Owens gang, you stepped right into their place—you an' Judge Corts."

"That 'll all be held ag'in' you, Redmond!" threatened Corwin. The rage that Corwin dared not express had mottled his face. His eyes were malignant, glaring at Redmond from between their puffed lids;

but it was noticeable that he kept his right hand at a respectful distance from the butt of his six-shooter.

"But not havin' the disposition of a sidewinder I ain't holdin' it against you," went on Redmond, ignoring the other's speech. "Nor I ain't mentionin' it. I feel mighty hospitable toward you, Corwin, in spite of you bein' mixed up with that pole-cat Owens gang, an' I'm invitin' you down to visit."

"Suits me here," declared Corwin.

Redmond surveyed him with a cold, unhumorous eye.

"Makes me nervous an' jumpy, though," said Redmond. "If your horse got to spinnin' around, now, so's I'd have a hard time keepin' track of your gun-hand—

"I'd call that plumb considerate," Redmond went on as Corwin swung a heavy leg out of the saddle and slid to the ground.

"That's all right an' regular," he approved as Corwin, reaching the ground, stood with his back to Redmond, awaiting the latter's pleasure.

"Some men ain't got no idea of how to conduct themselves in good company," said Redmond gently. "Say, for instance, that a man asks the sheriff of the county to get down an' visit. Everything bein' peaceable between them, there hadn't ought to be nothin' showin' that would make a man nervous—an' jumpy. I couldn't enjoy you a bit, Corwin, with that gun of yours swingin' that loose an' suggestive. It sure gives me the figits, an' I keep wonderin' if you'd pull it if you got a chance."

"Just easy an' delicate like, Corwin," he went on as Corwin, completely understanding what was required of him, moved his right hand slowly toward the six-shooter at his right hip. "There's guys which can jerk a gun backwards pretty clever; but mostly it ain't done when a man uses only his thumb an' forefinger, takin' hold kind of delicate as though he was afraid the gun would jump up an' bite him. That's it. Now drop it, sort of easy like."

"I'll square this with you, Redmond!" declared Corwin hoarsely.

"Sure—if you ketch me when I ain't lookin'. But I'm seein' things pretty clear right now. Seems to me when your horse was hoppin' around a bit ago I saw somethin' shining on your vest. Looked like a badge. If you don't mind lookin' at me for a minute—

"Shucks!" he added. "It *is* a badge."

Corwin was now facing Redmond and the latter's eyes gleamed with malicious amusement as Corwin glared his hate and disgust.

Redmond had not drawn his gun; he had not even moved a hand toward it. Nor did he draw the weapon now, as he stepped down from the doorway and walked toward the sheriff, halting when within a yard of him.

"I'm borrowin' your badge, Corwin."

"I'll get you for this, Redmond!"

"You ought to have had that notion while you still had your gun, Corwin," taunted Redmond. "The time for notions is when it looks logical to have them."

"I'd be a damn' fool to try to throw a gun with you," sneered the sheriff.

He stood, pouting hideously, while he unpinned the badge and thrust it viciously toward Redmond. The latter took it, slipped it quickly into a pocket and smiled.

"There's a visitor at the house, Corwin," he said. "In your present temper I reckon you'd feel out of place there. Stables are more in your line."

Corwin was not misled. Though Redmond's manner toward him was that of mild, almost humorous tolerance, he was aware that the man was very much in earnest. Therefore Corwin moved docilely toward the stable at Redmond's word; though the nearer he got to the structure the more profane grew his speech.

He seemed to have a presentiment of what impended, for when he reached the stable door he turnd to face his captor.

"Damn you, Redmond! I'll make you hard to ketch one of these days!"

"Depends on how careful you are, Corwin. If you go to proddin' me you ain't goin' to be active enough to make any brags about how fast you can hop around. An' I'm advisin' you to quit cussin' me—it makes me nervous an' jumpy."

Corwin glared, but closed his lips, though his cheeks and neck swelled and grew crimson with the effort.

He was ushered into the harness-room. There he was forced to climb a ladder which brought him into a low, dark loft; the only light being that which filtered through various clefts in the roof.

Still, there was light enough for the two men to see each other; and Corwin scowlingly awaited Redmond's pleasure. Some short pieces of rope dangled from Redmond's left hand. Corwin stared at them.

Corwin stiffened, and for an instant it seemed he contemplated resistance. His body sagged and he sighed resignedly when Redmond's right hand moved slightly at his side and a thin beam of light flickered on his six-shooter.

"I don't feel a heap like triflin'," said Redmond. "Set down on that box behind you an' tie your feet, makin' sure to do a good job."

Cursing again, Corwin complied. Then at Redmand's command he held out his hands, still muttering profanely as Redmond deftly threw a rope around them and lashed them together.

He sat silent and glowered at Redmond as the latter retied the rope at his ankles, and his eyes glared his hate as his captor forced a gag between his teeth and tied his own neckerchief over his mouth.

"Loma is goin' to be without a sheriff for a little while," said Redmond. "Just how long depends on how things work out. I've sort of got tired of watchin' the law perform. I'm goin' to fan her up a few.

'We ain't goin' to neglect you, Corwin. There'll be somebody hangin' around, waitin' to feed an' water you regularly—just the same as though you was a horse, instead of a sheriff.

"You'll have a heap of time for meditation, Corwin. Mix a little patience with it an' you'll get out of this pretty easy. I've got to do some lyin' about you, lettin' it be known that you've decided that the scenery around here has got on your nerves an' you've pulled your freight.

"I don't mind lyin' once about a thing, Corwin; but I sure am a heap reluctant to be caught lyin'. I'd be caught certain if you'd happen to work loose an' get to yelpin' an' fussin' around here. I'd have to sneak around here an' poke holes through your gas-bag. You understand that, Corwin?" he said, gently but significantly.

A few minutes later Redmond was walking toward the bunk-house, where he had left Corwin's horse. He strode to the corral fence, where he had hitched his own animal, swung into the saddle and rode back to the bunk-house. An instant later he rode west, leading Corwin's horse.

A ride of half an hour brought him to a box cañon, into which he vanished. When he emerged a few minutes later he rode to the crest of a high ridge and carefully scrutinized the surrounding country. He had left Corwin's horse in the cañon, after walling up the one open end with several huge boulders.

The sheriff's horse would live regally there for some days, for there was plenty of grass on the cañon bottom, and a small stream of water flowed through it.

Redmond's inspection of the country seemed to have satisfied him, for he rode southward.

His meeting with Martha Moyer had disrupted all his plans. When he had ridden to the K Down he had expected to provoke Moyer to a quarrel, kill him and leave the country. He had arranged with some of his friends to oversee the sale of his stock and land, so that when he finally left the country his mother and sister could follow him.

But his meeting with Martha had changed him, had filled him with an eagerness to vindicate himself. He meant to do just that, in spite of the forces that would be arrayed against him.

He had always been aware of the sinister influence that had been at work in the basin; forces that had finally been directed at him. But like other cattlemen in the basin, he had not been able to locate the chief figures of the lawless organization. He had suspected Egan, and Sneddon and Craim, and the former judge, Pelton, who had sentenced him and who had disappeared shortly afterward with Bill Dugan, the sheriff. But there were a number of other men under suspicion; and it had been whispered that the organization numbered among its members several cattle owners of prominence.

However, while Redmond had been in prison the honest cattle owners in the basin had begun an aggressive campaign against the sinister power. Redmond did not know exactly what had been the result of the campaign, but one effect of the agitation had been the disappearance of Judge Pelton and Sheriff Dugan.

The Owens gang was still active, however, as had been proved to Redmond's satisfaction by the incident in Loma, when he had been forced to kill Pennington, the gunfighter.

Redmond had no doubt that the Owens gang meant to continue to persecute him. He felt, too, that Egan would soon reappear in the basin.

Whatever the mystery of Egan's impersonation of Martha's dead brother, Redmond was reasonably certain it meant no good for the girl, and he was convinced that Egan would defer all action at the K Down until he regained possession of Martha.

Egan would come to the basin in search of the girl, for he was not the sort of man who accepted defeat; and when he came he would again league himself with the Owens gang.

However, Redmond's concern was not for Egan's future activities. Since his arrival in the basin, and during the entire homeward trip he had been prodding his brain in an effort to devise some plan or scheme to keep the girl in the basin once he got her there. She must not be permitted to go back to the K Down; and in order to keep her from going he must instil in her a distrust of the man who posed as her brother. Unless he could do that there was danger that her sense of loyalty would prevail. He must poison her mind against Egan.

And while he had been watching Corwin ride toward him over the Loma trail he had been considering the possibility of turning the sheriff's visit to his advantage. Riding southward now, he smiled as he fingered the badge that reposed in his pocket.

An hour after leaving Corwin he was standing beside his horse talking with a lean, bronzed cowboy with a bold, reckless eye and a whimsical mouth, whose lips carried a hint of waywardness.

He answered to the name "Slim," and his keen gray eyes were agleam with interest as he peered closely at Redmond.

"Let me git this straight, boss," he said in a deep bass voice that seemed to rumble up from unplumbed depths. "You say you got Corwin roped an' hogtied—an' gagged—in the Bar R stable; that you've took away his badge an'—"

"There's times when you're pretty nearly intelligent, Slim," said Redmond dryly.

CHAPTER XV.

IMPERSONATIONS.

AT dusk Redmond and half a dozen cowboys rode out of the timber that skirted the western limits of the level surrounding the Bar R ranch-house. They rode slowly, keeping the stable between them and the ranch-house, that they might not be seen from any of the windows of the latter structure; for Redmond had warned them, and they knew from the gravity of his expression that the occasion was one of importance for him.

The half-dozen men comprised the Bar R complement—sturdy, reliable fellows who had served Mrs. Redmond faithfully during Redmond's absence.

Prominent among them was Slim, whose long face was solemn and troubled. Slim rode beside a short, heavily built puncher whom he occasionally addressed as "Shorty." The other men were young, lithe, capable looking, talking little, listening much. All were hardy, seasoned, soft-spoken, quiet.

When they reached the stable they dismounted. They stood in a group at the door while Redmond entered the harness room and climbed to the loft where he had left the sheriff. He reappeared presently and spoke shortly to the men.

"He's managin' it medium, considerin'," he said, referring to Corwin. "But he ain't lovin' me any more than he did. I reckon we'll get along."

"Along" meant the bunk-house. The dusk had deepened when the seven filed inside the low building, so that they had difficulty in seeing one another. They draped

themselves in various parts of the room, some sitting on the edges of bunks, others dropping to benches that were strewn around the interior. Slim arrayed himself on a rough table, his long legs dangling; Shorty sank to a stool, took off his hat and mopped his face with a handkerchief, though the others seemed unaffected by the heat.

Redmond peered out of a window at the corral.

"She's still here," he said, referring to Martha Moyer.

Shorty groaned. Twice he cleared his throat before he muttered hoarsely, defiantly:

"Damn yore hide, Redmond; I tell you I ain't goin' to be no jedge!"

"I reckon you're goin' to be Judge Pelton to-night, Shorty," said Redmond.

Shorty groaned again. It was as though he sensed the inexorable will of the other, and knew that in the end he must obey him.

"How in hell c'n I be a jedge?" he wailed as he mopped his forehead. "I ain't a legal guy. I don't look legal."

"For shore you're bogus, Shorty," spoke a lean young puncher who was seated on a bunk edge; "but you hadn't ought to let that stampede yuh. All judges is bogus, ain't they?"

"I reckon you ain't got no harder job than me," remarked Slim. "The boss is dead certain I'm goin' to be Bill Dugan. Hell's fire!"

"I'd ruther be a sheriff any day than a damned jedge!" declared Shorty. "If this thing has got to be, I'll change places with yuh, Slim. I'll be Bill Dugan."

"Yuh never seen no judge of my dimensions, did yuh?" sarcastically sneered Slim. "Sheriffs gen'rally run to length an' judges to width."

"An' brains," chuckled a puncher who sat on a bench. "Judges is supposed to have brains. That's where you'll have the advantage of Slim."

"Boskins, you shut your rank mouth!" ordered Shorty. "Nobody that's got any brains would be a jedge!"

"Then you'll sure fit," said another voice.

"Corwin's fat," argued Shorty, a hopeful note in his voice.

"Call Corwin a sheriff?" inquired Slim, scornfully. "Well," he added; "there ain't no use arguin'. I give in to actin' as Bill Dugan, though I'll have to hate myself while I'm doin' it. But I ain't goin' to be no judge!"

"Shorty," said Redmond. "I've figured this thing out all around. I reckon it's the only way we can keep her here."

Shorty sighed; then groaned again.

"All right," he said resignedly. "I'll be a damned jedge. But it's yore fault if I queer the deal!"

Half an hour later the seven filed out of the bunk-house door. An early moon shone on them, pitilessly revealing the metamorphosis of Shorty.

A black, double-breasted frock coat of ancient cut, crisscrossed with innumerable wrinkles in which dust had collected and could not be removed, encased him tightly, so tightly that the seams were ready to part. One button was all that could be fastened, so Redmond had advised Shorty to wear the garment open; and Shorty's big chest stood out formidably.

They had taken away Shorty's six-shooter and cartridge-belt, leaving him with a minus feeling that made him continually and involuntarily brush his right hand over his hip with a movement of grotesque awkwardness, like a grizzly brushing away a fly that persisted in settling on his ear.

Shorty had become extremely self-conscious. The moonlight shone upon his crimson face; it reflected his abashed gaze and the terrible fear that had seized him.

"That girl's goin' to know I'm a whizzer—see if she don't!" he declared as the group halted just outside the door of the bunk-house. "There wasn't never no damn jedge ever looked like me—an' I know it!"

"Cussin' don't go, Shorty!" some one warned.

"An' stop pawin' at your hip that suggestive," another advised. "She'll think you've got the figits."

"That's right," said Redmond grimly; "you boys have your fun outside here. If one of you cracks a grin inside the house you'll be needin' mourners!"

There was no humor in the incident for Redmond. He was playing this game seri-

ously; it was a part of his plan—the only plan he could think of—to keep Martha at the Bar R. It was his first move in his campaign to poison Martha's mind against the man who was posing as her brother.

His face was grave as he walked to the front door of the ranch-house, opened the door and paused on the threshold.

Mrs. Redmond had lighted a lamp, which stood on a little center table in the room; and when Redmond paused in the doorway his mother was sitting on a sofa in a corner, Mary Redmond was standing near the door that led from the front room to the room adjoining it, and Martha was seated in a chair near Mrs. Redmond. She was facing the door through which Redmond had entered, and when she saw him her cheeks reddened and her eyes drooped from his.

His hat came off; he smiled at her.

"You look a heap rested, ma'am," he said. His gaze rested inquiringly upon his mother, and when she gave him a look that was eloquent with quiet reassurance, he knew the friendship for which he had hoped was in process of accomplishment.

His eyes quickened; but they instantly narrowed when his mother spoke.

"Larry," she said, "Miss Moyer has been telling me about Pennington. Of course I know it wasn't your fault—Miss Moyer has told me that. But it seems that you might have merely wounded him."

Redmond did not answer.

"That means more trouble, of course," said Mrs. Redmond. She looked anxiously at him. "Mary says she thought she saw Corwin near the bunk-house this morning. What did he want?"

Redmond glanced quickly at his sister. Her slow wink at him indicated that she had not told her mother all she had seen.

"Corwin," said Redmond. "Yes—I reckon Mary saw him. He was wantin' to know about Pennington. He seemed satisfied when I told him Pennington forced it on me. He rode west. Said he was figurin' on takin' a little *pasear* for his health—he's been too active."

Thus he dismissed the woman's fears. He now gazed at Martha. His eyes were steady and grave.

"I've been west, too, ma'am," he said. "I didn't want to keep you waitin', so when I struck here this mornin' I rode to where the boys were workin'. There's a new sheriff in this county—the man named Corwin that mother was just talkin' about. He don't know anything about what happened between me an' Tim Owens. Bill Dugan was the sheriff when Tim Owens was killed, an' a man named Pelton was judge.

"Right after I went to prison Bill Dugan an' Judge Pelton pulled their freight—left the country. I didn't know that when I agreed to let you come here; but I knew I had to make good on my promise to let you have a talk with both of them, so's you could judge for yourself about that Tim Owens deal.

"I found out where Pelton an' Bill Dugan were. This mornin' I rode after them. They're outside, waitin' to talk with you."

Martha got up, her eyes shining with eagerness.

"Yes," she said; "have them come in, please. Or shall I go out to them?"

Redmond thought of Shorty, and how the light in the room would increase his nervousness. He was on the point of suggesting that Martha go outside to meet the masquerader when Mrs. Redmond spoke.

"It is dark now, Larry; bring them in here."

Redmond went out. When he again appeared at the door with Slim and Shorty behind him, and the other conspirators in the background, shoving forward so that they might not miss a word or a gesture of the two impersonators, Martha was standing near the center table. Mrs. Redmond stood near her, peering eagerly forward. Mary still stood at the door at the far side of the room.

When Slim entered, followed by the reluctant and perspiring Shorty, Redmond contrived to catch his mother's eye. His brows drew together; he winked and shook his head negatively. Instantly he knew his mother had caught the significance of his action, for her face became an expressionless mask.

Redmond said nothing until all the men were inside. Then he looked at Slim.

"Dugan," he said, "this is Martha Moyer, of the K Down. Mint Moyer is her brother. She has come here to listen to what you have to say about the killing of Tim Owens."

Slim reddened, paled, shuffled his feet, opened his mouth, closed it and smirked foolishly at Martha. Immediately behind him Shorty uttered a low groan and mopped his face with an already moist handkerchief.

Desperately striving for speech, his throat swelling, Slim at last forced words outward.

"Tim Owens is dead," he said.

"Yes?" said Martha, encouragingly.

"Mint Moyer killed him," added Slim hoarsely.

Martha grew very pale. She swayed slightly, but instantly became rigid, and resolutely kept her gaze on Slim.

"How do you know that, Mr. Dugan?" she said in a surprisingly steady voice.

"I saw Mint Moyer shoot Owens!" declared Slim.

"Then you lied at the trial?"

"I reckon I lied, ma'am."

"Why did you lie?"

"Well—me an' Mint Moyer was friends. We had a grudge ag'in' Redmond an' wanted him to get blamed for the killin'."

There was no word said for a moment. Martha was watching Slim, scorn ineffable in her eyes.

"I think that will do for you, Mr. Dugan," she said at last, coldly, steadily. "I do not wonder that you ran away. Get out of my sight, please!"

Slim slipped out of the doorway, leaving Shorty in a conspicuously advanced position. He felt supremely isolated; as though he had been deserted by all his friends, as though they had shamelessly shifted to his shoulders the blame of a cowardly crime. He shrank from appearing as a self-acknowledged scoundrel to this clear-eyed young woman, who was already watching him accusingly. But he succeeded in meeting her gaze for an instant before Redmond's voice broke the silence that had followed Slim's exit.

"Miss Moyer, this is Judge Pelton. He wants to tell you why he pronounced sentence upon me."

Shorty glared at Redmond. He longed to tell the young woman that he didn't want to do any such thing; he yearned to tell her that the whole business was a farce and that he was an unfortunate whom an unkind destiny had selected for a sacrifice.

But with Miss Moyer's penetrating gaze upon him, and with a consciousness that Redmond stood directly behind him, he felt he must proceed to follow his instructions.

"It ain't no fun bein' a jedge, ma'am," he said.

"Probably not," said Martha evenly.

Martha's voice was discouraging. Shorty experienced a chill of apprehension. It seemed to him that the keen-eyed girl knew he had come here to lie to her and that she was awaiting his first reference to the trial to expose him. Of course he didn't want to be exposed, for he had promised Redmond and he wanted to go on with the impersonation. But he was suddenly afflicted with a fear that he had overestimated his ability and that he would spoil everything by an incautious word.

As he stood nervously twisting his hat in his hands his gaze rested on Mary Redmond. The girl's face was grave, but her eyes were alight with mirth.

Shorty was disconcerted, indignant. Mary Redmond knew him of course, but she had no business laughing at him.

He looked at Mrs. Redmond. The lady's lips were tightly compressed; her eyes were alight with a cold indignation. Shorty could look for no help or sympathy from that direction.

"Well?" prompted Martha impatiently.

Shorty's brain had stopped functioning. He stared at Martha helplessly, with an ingratiating smile.

"You came here to confess something," she said.

"Sure. It was about the trial, wasn't it?" he said, his eyes vacuous with the total stoppage of all thought.

"You came to tell me why you sentenced Mr. Redmond," she reminded him.

"Sure."

"Well, tell me, please."

"Bein' a jedge," began Shorty. Then he paused, oppressed with a conviction of the unreality of his presence in the ranch-house. It seemed to him that this must be

a dream, that he would never have the courage to stand here and lie to the young woman, that his brain was playing him a trick.

"Bein' a jedge," he said again. He simply had to repeat that. It was a sort of mental prop upon which he hung his hope of being able to play the part that had been forced upon him. Once he forgot he was supposed to be Judge Pelton he would be lost.

"Being a judge," encouraged Martha.

"Sure—bein' a jedge," said Shorty. He could go no further. He had forgotten Redmond's instructions. In this dire extremity his thoughts went to a thing he had said before in the bunk-house. He felt the necessity of saying something, and as his fear of discovery dominated all else he instinctively sought to defend his position.

"I reckon I don't look legal," he said.

"I am not interested in your appearance," Martha told him, coldly. "Please tell me why you sentenced Mr. Redmond."

Martha's manner aroused Shorty's resentment. He again began to think lucidly.

"Not interested in my appearance, eh?" he said belligerently. "I reckon that's because I ain't all slicked up like some of them dude jedges you've seen back East."

Shorty didn't like the young woman as well as he thought he did; despite his objection to his judicial attire he had thought he must look rather impressive in it. He had opened his lips to say something vitriolic about young women who comment disrespectfully upon the appearance of members of the judiciary branch of the government, when Redmond spoke sharply to him:

"Pelton, tell Miss Moyer what she wants to know!"

Shorty bristled. "I'm tryin' to tell her!" he declared. "But she's been talkin' so much that I ain't been able to get a word in edgeways.

"If you've got to know, young woman, I sent Redmond to jail because the gang that Mint Moyer run with wanted to get him out of the way!"

"Why did they want to get him out of the way?"

"Because he was interferin' with their business."

"What was their business?"

"Rustlin'."

Martha's eyes flashed. "Do you mean to say that you sent Mr. Redmond to jail knowing he was innocent?"

"I reckon that's what I done," admitted Shorty, doggedly.

"I think that is all," she said coldly, with a glance of disgust that brought a crimson flood surging above Shorty's collar. "You may go, Judge Pelton. You are a disgrace to the manhood of the country!"

Shorty went out. With the other men he vanished into the moonlit darkness surrounding the ranch-house.

For an instant Martha stood where she had stood all along, looking at Redmond.

"I am sorry for some of the things I have said to you," she said. Then she turned to Mrs. Redmond. She smiled, though her lips quivered. "That seems to settle it—doesn't it?" she said.

Mrs. Redmond led her from the room, while Redmond, frowning, stood at the open door staring out into the moonlight. Mary had vanished.

It was some time before Mrs. Redmond reappeared; and then she walked slowly to the door, took Redmond by an arm and led him outside. There, with the moon shining upon her face, she said softly and reproachfully: "Why did you do that, Larry? You have hurt her terribly!"

"She had to know it some time, mother. An' it's only the truth. It was what Bill Dugan an' Judge Pelton would say to her if they were half as square as Slim an' Shorty."

"I believe you, Larry."

"You think she'll stay here—now?"

"I'm sure of it. She doesn't like her brother any too well, and she has a horror of all crime. She would give her brother up to the law if she thought him guilty, though she broke her heart doing it. She is a wonderful girl, Larry."

"You like her, eh?" he said, a leap in his voice.

She seized him by the shoulders and twisted him around until the moonlight shone into his eyes.

"Why, Larry!" she said at something she saw there.

He gazed steadily at her.

"I reckon you know, now, why I didn't kill Moyer," he said.

CHAPTER XVI.

LAYING A TRAP.

FOLLOWING his talk with his mother Redmond walked down along the corral fence to a point near the bunk-house. He could hear the men inside the building. They were talking and laughing in subdued tones, though occasionally one voice rose higher than the others. Redmond had no difficulty in recognizing the voice as belonging to Shorty.

Shorty was expressing his resentment over being compelled to enact a rôle he had disliked.

"I ain't denyin' it!" he declared wrathfully. "She sure had me locoed for a minute or two. Didn't know my own name. Couldn't recollect whether I was a jedge or a one-eyed coyote. Clean forgot what the boss told me.

"But I'm done, I tell you! This here country can go plumb to hell before I do any more actin'. I ain't never been no wolf with women, but I ain't slow to admit that I want 'em to think I measure up to man's size, anyway.

"That there female had me figured down scandalous. I stood about as high with her as a sidewinder in a gopher town. 'You're a disgrace to the manhood of the country!' she tells me, lookin' me straight in the eye. An' for a minute I'll be damned if she didn't have me believin' it. I sure did! Me, as has always been square! Why, when she looked at me like that—"

Redmond did not hear any more because he had walked away toward the stable.

He had not been amused by the incident because the success of the stratagem had meant much to him, but more to Martha.

He paused near the stable door and looked back at the bunk-house. The men had lighted a lamp, and he could see their heads bobbing as they laughed at Shorty. The kitchen window of the ranch-house was also illuminated. The rest of the house was dark.

Redmond had a vivid recollection of Martha's eyes as she had faced him for an instant after Shorty's departure, when she had said to him, "I am sorry for some of the things I have said to you."

That, of course, meant that she was sorry she had accused him. The tragedy in her eyes when she had faced him had given him some idea of how the apparent evidence of her brother's guilt had affected her. Though he knew she could not possibly feel toward Egan as she would feel toward a real brother, he was certain that at this instant she was enduring much, suffering much.

Redmond's lips tightened with sympathy. His ancient hatred for Egan was intensified by the thought that had it not been for the man's trickery the girl would not now be enduring the mental torture that must inevitably accompany her conviction of the guilt of the man she thought was her brother.

When he had decided to return to the basin without killing Egan he had known that he would have to fight the sinister power that had once defeated him, and that the power would array all its subtle strength against him.

He knew, too, that he would not have to fight alone. Before they had convicted him of the killing of Tim Owens he had many friends in the basin, among them men of prominence in the community who had assured him they would stand with him in his efforts to rid the country of the element which had conspired against him.

They had not been able to help him at the trial, for the evidence had been against him, and Judge Pelton had shown a disposition to rule against him at every opportunity. But secretly they had done what they could; and Jim Denby, a ranchman on the lower branch of the Rabbit Ear, near the center of the basin, had sent a message that he had only to say the word and he would organize a vigilance committee to rescue him from the law that seemed determined upon his elimination from affairs in the basin.

Redmond had preferred to let his enemies have their way, intending afterward to revenge himself upon Egan. But now,

as he stood near the stable door, his thoughts went to Denby, and he decided to ride to Denby's place in the morning, to plan an aggressive compaign against the rustlers.

He was through with Corwin for the moment. He entered the stable, climbed the ladder in the harness room and confronted the sheriff, who had stretched himself out on the floor.

Redmond released him and stood for some minutes in the darkness, waiting until Corwin rubbed his aching muscles. When the sheriff began to recover his power of speech and movement he became profane.

"Easy, Corwin," warned Redmond coldly. "So far this thing has been a joke; but from now on I mean business.

"I'm handin' you back your badge—havin' no further use for it. An' while I'm here I'm tellin' you plain that you ain't takin' me in for that Pennington deal. The next time the Owens bunch sets you onto me you tell them you're too bashful to monkey with me. I'm sure mighty tired of the kind of law you represent, an' if you come pokin' around me any more I'm sure goin' to down you, rapid. I reckon you hear me?"

"My hearin's good!" muttered Corwin.

"That lets me out," said Redmond. "I reckon a man with ordinary intelligence could understand that I ain't talkin' just because I happen to be able to.

"Just step back a little while I slip down the ladder, Corwin, so that if you've got any notions I'll be able to sort of anticipate them."

He descended, moved to the door that opened from the stable to the harness room, and stood, watching the sheriff as the latter clambered down the ladder.

Then as Corwin emerged from the stable, preceding him, he passed over Corwin's pistol, which he had taken from him that morning and which he had concealed in the harness room.

"Here's your gun, Corwin," he said. "You'll notice she's empty. You'll find your horse in that box cañon where you an' me had a talk one day before you got foolish an' hooked up with the Owens gang. I reckon you won't be surprised to find no cartridges for the rifle on the saddle; the chief reason for them not bein' there was because I sort of anticipated that you'd be a little nervous when I turned you loose.

"That's all, Corwin. I'll be hangin' around somewhere while you're hittin' the Loma trail."

He stood near the stable door for a time—until Corwin disappeared in the darkness. Then he made his way into the timber west of the level.

He was not visible when Corwin rode down the trail toward the northern rim of the basin; but after Corwin reached a ridge where he was faintly outlined in the flood of moonlight, Redmond reappeared. He watched until Corwin began to mount the hazardous gorge trail that led to the mesa south of Loma; then he started to walk toward the bunk-house.

He had not gone very far when he heard a sound that seemed to come from the west—a light, rapid drumming, riding the slight breeze.

He slipped into the shadow of a giant cottonwood at the edge of the timber grove and waited while the sound grew louder; until he caught a glimpse of a rider who flashed with whostlike swiftness past a clearing near the edge of the river.

But swiftly as the rider passed, Redmond's keen eyes had noted the salient details of his appearance.

"Buck Baker on Denby's big gray," he said.

He stepped out of his concealment and started across the level toward the bunk-house, knowing that the rider would stop there before going on to the ranch-house if his errand had brought him to the Bar R.

He had not gone very far though when the rider saw him, for he changed his course, and without slackening speed came directly toward Redmond. When he was within a dozen feet of Redmond he brought the big horse to a sliding halt, creating a cloud of dust that completely enveloped him, and out of which he presently strode with whizzing spurs and a low greeting:

"Howdy, Redmond?"

He was a young man, lean, bronzed, reckless-eyed. He looked Redmond over with one quick, intent glance.

"Fit as a fiddle, eh?" he laughed lowly. "Prison didn't feaze you. Didn't slow up that tricky gun hand, either—not any! We got word about that Pennington deal this afternoon. Bud Lucas was in town when it happened. Plumb slick shootin', Bud allowed. Bud's a judge. When Bud was leavin' town Corwin was just startin' after you. I reckon he didn't come."

"Spanked him an' sent him home to his maw," said Redmond. "After warnin' him that if he come here again I'd lose my temper."

"Same ol' Redmond!" laughed Baker. "Not a bit different!"

His eyes grew suddenly serious; his voice grave

"Forgot what I come for," he said. "I was so tickled to see you.

"Denby sent me," he went on. "Things is goin' to break for law an' order at last, seems like. After they sent you to jail Denby began to fret. If the rustlers was gettin' so plumb sassy that they'd frame up a man for murder an' get a sheriff an' a judge to work with them, Denby thought it was time to get busy.

"He hired a Texas gunman to throw in with the Owens outfit. Conklin, his name is. It took Conklin more than a year to get thick enough with the gang for them to trust him, but he finally done it. But even after they let him join they didn't let him into any secrets. Not until now.

"Yesterday they talked open in front of him, framin' up for to-night: They're plannin' to run off a bunch of Denby's stock to-night, drivin' them beyond the south rim of the basin, where they've got a cache. Jim is achin' to have you throw in with him. We figure to ketch them with the goods on an' deal them some of the kind of law they handed you. I'm to hit the breeze right back, takin' your message to Jim."

"When they figurin' to hit the herd?" asked Redmond.

"Just before daylight. Conklin wasn't sure about that—mebbe they'll change their plans. The main point is that we know where they aim to strike."

"Denby got plenty of men?" was Redmond's next question.

"Scads of men," returned Baker. "Some from the Pig Pen, the Two Diamond Bar, the B Bar B, an' our own outfit. I reckon the Circle D could take care of the Owens outfit all right, but it don't do any harm to have enough."

"I'm keepin' my outfit close to home," said Redmond.

"What's this I been hearin' about Moyer's sister comin' with you to the Bar R?" asked Baker slyly.

"She's here."

Baker whistled softly. "I didn't know you was aimin' to get your revenge that way," he said, puzzled.

"She's straight, Buck."

"Shucks; I'm takin' that back, Larry. But I reckon I don't savvy you, no way." He stared, almost reverentially, at the darkened ranch-house.

"So she's in there," he said. "Well, now! Accordin' to the word that was brought to us to-day she's a hummer. Don't favor Mint none. I ain't wonderin' that you ain't lettin' your boys pull their freight away from the home ranch. Damn it, Redmond! You're figurin' on Moyer comin' for her!"

"Some folks can think—give them time," said Redmond dryly. He was moving toward the bunk-house. "I'll be with you right away," he called back softly.

When he appeared in the doorway of the bunk-house Shorty was in the midst of a profane denunciation of the "boss." He broke off suddenly and stared at Redmond, amazed at the light in the latter's eyes.

"Boys," said Redmond; "Buck Baker's out here. He's brought me a message from Jim Denby. I'm goin' over to Denby's with Buck. You'll tell my mother in the mornin'.

"Nobody's doin' a lick of work until I get back. Boys, I can't tell you right now why I'm askin' you to do this, but I don't want any of you to get out of sight of the ranch-house—an' Miss Moyer. If Mint Moyer comes nosin' around here, run him off!"

"Shorty, you an' Slim are makin' yourselves scarce. Hit town for a few days—before mornin'. I reckon if Miss Moyer sees you hangin' around here she'll be

mighty suspicious that she's been fooled about that trial you was tellin' her about. She'll sure make you hard to ketch!"

Redmond's gaze swept the faces of the men.

"So-long," he said shortly. Then he was outside, running toward the corral. A few minutes later he rode swiftly past the bunk-house, the door of which was now filled with the men who had recently aided him in his conspiracy against his enemy, and who were now watching him, amazed at his briefness and the rapidity of his movements.

They saw him join the waiting rider; saw both horsemen race down the river trail.

Then Shorty spoke.

"Our boss is suddenlike," he said admiringly. "But he's got a heap of sense. Town, he says—before morninn'. Me an' Slim. I reckon you guys can think it over. I was jest achin' to be a jedge—all along—knowin' 'town' was waiting for me!"

CHAPTER XVII.

THE SHERIFF'S STORY.

AT ten o'clock the same night a big horse, dusty, jaded, halted at the long hitching-rail in front of Pete Goin's gambling-house, the Low Card, sagged to a comfortable position, drooped his head and heaved a heavy equine sigh of relief. He had come sixty miles since late morning.

His rider slipped off, stiff-legged, saddle-weary, and stood for an instant while he looped the reins around the hitching-rail. Then he turned and gazed into the windows of the gambling-house.

The windows were illuminated; a huge oil lamp over the door threw a strong glare into the rider's face, which was strong, large featured.

The man was Bill Egan. He was tall and heavily built. His hair was tawny, abundant. His eyes were deep-set and rimmed by lashes that had once been the color of his hair, but which now had a faded, washed-out appearance. The little finger of his left hand was missing and his left leg seemed to drag slightly as he walked toward the door of the Low Card.

There was a scowl on his face as he halted in the open doorway of the building. He stood for an instant blinking against the lights of the room, then walked to the near end of the long bar, turned his back to it and carefully scrutinized the faces of the occupants of the room.

There were perhaps a dozen men at the tables in the rear, playing cards, and they apparently took no notice of the entrance of the stranger.

But presently the proprietor, playing at a table, cast a careless glance toward the front of the room. His eyes quickened, but he kept on playing for a few minutes; then he quietly got up from the table, walked behind the bar, approached the stranger and smiled.

"Sort of thought you'd drift in, Moyer," he said significantly.

"They struck 'town then," said Egan. "When?"

"Last night. First I knew of it was when Lanky Boynton came in and told me him and the girl was at Mother Baird's."

Egan's eyes lighted with a jealous fire; his face crimsoned.

"Both of them at Mother Baird's?"

"Well, I reckon I traveled a little too fast there," laughed Goin. "Seems I heard Boynton mention that Redmond put up at Kane's. Makes some difference," he insinuated as he noted the fire die out of the other's eyes. "What's she doing here with him?"

"Rukus at the K Down," said Egan. "Redmond went there lookin' for me. Told her the bars was down. She sneaked away, met Sneddon an' Craim on the trail. Sneddon told her to get Redmond away, advisin' her to take him through Conklin's Pass. I come up just after," he lied. "We cut across the hills an' laid for him in the pass. Missed him the first shot, bein' over-anxious. That was the only chance we had. He ducked behind a ridge an' beat us at our own game. He got Craim."

"Dead?"

"We got Craim back a ways before he cashed in. We stayed with him overnight, but finally had to plant him. Then me an' Sneddon hit the trail here."

"Where's Sneddon now?"

"His hoss broke a leg thirty miles back. Told him my hoss could carry two. But Sneddon hung back. Said he'd hole out where he was until I turned up. Sneddon's plumb scared of Redmond."

Goin smiled grimly. "In Sneddon's shoes I'd be mighty retirin' myself," he said. "Redmond ain't no fool, and I reckon he's able to pick out the men that sent him up. And, Lord, but he's a gunslinger from away back! Slicker than ever!"

"Did Redmond throw a gun here?"

"Shucks!" exclaimed Goin. "I forgot you wasn't here. He plugged Pennington twice before Pennington could bat an eyelash!"

"Pennington!"

The big man's face paled. His mouth opened, his shoulders sagged. But when he saw that Goin was watching him intently he smiled thinly.

"Pennington forced Redmond's hand," said Goin. "But he didn't have a chance. An' him the slickest gnuman we've had—excepting you. You're faster than Pennington was, Moyer. I reckon you'd have a chance with Redmond. But you'd not be wanting to make any mistakes!"

Egan drew out a handkerchief and wiped his face with it. Perspiration stood out in glistening beads on his forehead.

"A little of your forty-rod, Goin," he said with a mirthless, strained smile. "Seems like I ain't had a drink for a month!"

Goin placed a bottle and two glasses on the bar. He shoved the bottle toward Egan and watched the other fill a glass, his eyes gleaming with derision as he noted that the big man's hands were unsteady.

Egan took three drinks before he stopped. Between drinks he stared at the top of the bar, darkly scowling at it. Goin apparently paid no attention to him, though in reality he watched covertly, concealing his contempt.

He knew, though, that the other was dangerous. He was lightning fast with a weapon, and he had proved that when cornered he would fight with desperate recklessness. But Goin knew there was a cowardly strain in him; that his impulses were of the advantage-seeking kind; that he lacked the courage to face an adversary on an equal footing.

"Where's Redmond now?" asked Egan.

"Last I seen of him he was riding the level toward the basin trail. Your sister was with him. She'd told Pennington and the bunch that she knowed her own mind and that she was going with Redmond of her own accord."

"They were headed for the Bar R, I reckon?"

"Looks mighty like it," declared Goin. "Seems she'd sort of overplayed her hand—if she was just getting him away from the K Down. Seems it wasn't necessary for her to take him all the way home, just to keep him from meeting up with you. If she was my sister—"

He paused and stared at the door.

Corwin was standing on the threshold. He was breathing fast, his face and neck were red as though from terrific exertion, and his little eyes were ablaze with a queer mixture of rage and disgust. Those, however, were evidences of an inward emotion that he was trying hard to conceal.

Outwardly, he was calm and unharried, affecting an official imperturbability that he hoped would mask his distressed feelings. On the way out of the basin after Redmond had released him he had decided there was no valid reason why he should advertise what had happened to him. The story would do him little credit.

Pete Goin had almost forgotten that Corwin had gone to arrest Redmond for the murder of Pennington; and now he shot a question at the sheriff:

"Where's Redmond?"

"Redmond ain't been found yet, Pete."

"I reckon he won't be," laughed Goin.

Corwin's eyes glittered with resentment. He tried to stare Goin out of countenance, but ceased the attempt and scowled when he noted Goin's crooked grin, which was characteristic and which had always seemed, to Corwin, to express Goin's derisive attitude toward pretense of all kind.

Corwin had never liked Goin because of that very thing. It had always seemed to him that Goin knew what he was thinking, that the man could anticipate his every impulse, could read his mental processes. The

suspicion had tortured Corwin, had made him feel guilty. It was as though Goin, wielding a merciless scalpel, could expose his every weakness—and did so, meanwhile mentally deriding him.

Just now he felt as though Goin knew what had happened to him and was subtly poking fun at him, taunting him.

"Meanin' what, Goin?" he demanded.

"Aw, hell, Corwin; I reckon you know what I mean. You went after Redmond, didn't you? Why didn't you bring him back?"

"Goin', I don't know as I've got to make any explanations to you. If I want anybody to help me do the sheriffin' in these parts I'll call on you. Until I do I want you to keep your trap shut!"

"Well," persisted Goin; "you went after Redmond, didn't you?"

"Goin," said Corwin, staring malignantly at his tormentor; "I went after Redmond this mornin', didn't I?"

"You did."

"An' I'm just gettin' back. Where do you suppose I've been all the time?"

"I give it up," laughed Goin.

Thus had Goin always insinuated against his ability. He felt that he must make some sort of an explanation, merely to keep Going quiet.

"I reckon most folks *would* give up!" retorted Corwin. "The man who goes after Redmond don't have no picnic exactly. I reckon you know that.

"Well, I'm tellin' you what happened—since it seems you've got to poke your nose into my affairs."

Corwin had returned to town more than an hour before he crossed the threshold of the Low Card on his present visit. He had not advertised his arrival; in fact, he had stealthily entered his little room in the rear of the sheriff's office and had sat there for a long time in the dark attempting to invent a plausible story for his failure to arrest Redmond.

He knew that whatever story he told must be believed, for there was none to deny it, and if it should be denied there was always the expedient of perjury, which had been invoked on more than one occasion by his colleagues—by his predecessor, for example, and by Mint Moyer, who now stood before him. All he had to do was to stick to his story and they would have to believe him.

When Redmond had paused just outside the stable to warn him, Corwin had had time while listening to glance toward the bunk-house. He had noted that there were several men inside the building, but he had recognized two only, Slim and Shorty. Therefore he could be certain of the presence of those two if it came to a point where he had to mention names. And now it seemed he must mention names.

"You recollect I went into the basin after Redmond this mornin'?" he went on, speaking to Goin. "Well, from the butte trail I seen a man standin' in the door of a bunk-house. Of course I couldn't be a heap certain at that distance, but I thought the man looked like Redmond, an' so I was careful about exposin' myself to him.

"I reckon it took me about an hour to get down to the level—for I had to do a lot of sneakin' behind the brush. But when I got down there an' got off my horse an' sneaked around the bunk-house, there was Redmond, standin' just like I'd seen him from the buttes."

"Sure," said Goin dryly; "Redmond had been standin' in the door for an hour."

"Mebbe he'd gone away an' come back again," sneered Corwin. "There's guys that can stand twice in the same place, I reckon."

"Go on, Corwin," said Egan. He was deeply interested.

"Well, as I was tellin' you, I snuck up on him, an' before he could bat an eye-winker I'd stuck my gun into his stummick.

"'Get your sky-hooks up, Redmond!' I says. 'I won't stand for no monkey business! The law says you've got to answer for killin' Pennington, an' I'm here to see that you do it!'

"Redmond didn't like it a heap. I seen his eyes sort of chill. But I reckon he saw it wasn't any use to buck me, so he puts up his hands. I lifted his gun—yes—took it plumb off him. Then I asts him if they's any of the boys around. He said there wasn't. 'All right,' I says, 'I'll take a look.'

"So I roped his hands behind him an' marched him into the stable, aimin' to keep him there while I took a look around.

"I'd got him inside the stable an' was tyin' his feet so's he couldn't get away while I was snoopin' over the place, when—*bang!*—somethin' hit me on the back of the head. I reckon you can see the lump right here!"

He raised his hat and showed an abrasion on the back of his head. In reality he had received the bump through a fall in the stable loft after Redmond had left him the first time, and he was now much pleased over it, for it enabled him to prove the truth of his assertion that some one had struck him from behind.

Goin and Egan looked at the abrasion.

"Well, I didn't know a heap for a while," Corwin continued. "But when I come to I was hogtied. I got loose just in time to see Redmond ridin' away with Slim an' Shorty.

"By the time I got my horse they'd vamosed. Not havin' no gun it looked sort of foolish for me to go galivantin' after them; so I come back to town, got another gun, an' here I am. But I'm hittin' the trail at daylight after them three sneaks. I've got to learn them that they can't monkey with the law in these here—"

"I reckon your trouble has come hunting you," said Pete Goin, lowly, mockingly, interrupting.

Goin was looking toward the doorway, as was Egan. Corwin wheeled, to see Shorty and Slim standing in the opening. Their faces were wreathed in smiles—their eyes bright with anticipation. "Town" had always intrigued their interest.

(To be continued NEXT WEEK.)

On Solid Ground

by Jasper Ewing Brady

"DO you want to earn ten thousand dollars?"

"Do I want to—" Then something in Jimmie Ferguson's brain snapped. It was the same feeling he had had over a year ago, a few moments after the army doctors in a base hospital in France covered his face with a cone-shaped contraption, moistened with a sickeningly sweet fluid, and told him to breathe deeply.

"I'm doing it," weakly replied Jimmie. "Let's go." And he went. Then the doctors had gone to work and when Jimmie came back to earth, some part of his anatomy was missing and with it a shrapnel fragment he had received in an encounter in the air with Fritz. Jimmie had looked at the medico and in a quavering voice, said:

"Say, doc, that was some trip! I'll say it was—some trip!"

Now, months after the war had closed, Jimmie Ferguson, ex-first lieutenant United States army, sat opposite a well-dressed, keen, lantern-jawed individual in one of Gotham's luxurious bars, and to his listening ears came the sweet refrain:

"Do you want to earn ten thousand dollars?"

"Do I *want* to? Say, friend, it's not a question of 'wanting' to earn *any* amount of money; it is a case of down-right necessity. What's the game—murder, abduction, blowing a safe, or arson?"

"None of those," laconically replied the stranger, beckoning to a waiter. "Have something?"

It was before the "Perfect 36" came across and there was joy water still to be had in New York, but Jimmie smiled and said, "Ginger-ale for mine."

The stranger nodded and murmured:

"Same for me. That's another point in your favor."

"Another, eh? You apparently know something of me!"

"Something, Mr. Ferguson—everything! That's the reason I sat down here and engaged you in conversation."

"I suppose I ought to be astounded, but I'm not. Now let's get down to cases. What crime do I have to commit to earn ten thousand dollars?"

"No crime, Mr. Ferguson."

"What risk am I to take?"

"None, whatsoever."

"Then—what?" Jimmie's goat was beginning to bleat.

"Marriage," quietly replied the stranger.

Jimmie put down his glass and, laughing heartily, exclaimed:

"Marriage! And you call that neither risky nor criminal? Go on, man, in most cases it's both!"

The stranger smiled indulgently and continued:

"I can appreciate your sense of humor, Mr. Ferguson. It struck me the same way at first; but now it's different."

"You interest me," said Jimmie, not knowing whether the stranger was serious or just a plain nut. "Who is the girl, and why am I so honored?"

The stranger lighted a cigar and then gave Jimmie an engraved card, reading:

FREDERICK H. BOLTER
Attorney at Law
60 Nassau Street **New York**

"You will note I am a lawyer and you can easily find out my standing."

"Bolter?" thought Jimmie, and then he said aloud:

"Say, I had a pal once in France named Edward Bolter—aviator, belonged to my squadron—shot down in the Argonne just before the war stopped. Any kin to you?"

There was a wistfulness in the lawyer's voice as he gently answered: "Yes, my younger brother. It was on account of letters he had often written me about you that caused me to look you up for this—er, what shall we call it—adventure—or mission?"

"Both. So you are Ed Bolter's brother? A braver man nor a better soldier never lived—or died."

"Thank you. Coming from you I appreciate the compliment, Mr. Ferguson."

"Now, I *am* interested in your proposition. Let's hear it," said Jimmie, lighting an old brier pipe.

Speaking very earnestly, Bolter said:

"Out in a good-sized Middle Western city there lived a man named David Rothwell. His wife died twenty years ago when his daughter, Rosalie, was born. Rothwell's love and endeavors were centered in two things—making money—and his daughter. He succeeded in the money part and when he died, he was worth, in round numbers, a million and a half, all well invested and netting an income of seventy-five thousand dollars annually. All this went to his daughter, Rosalie."

"Lucky Rosalie," drawled Jimmie, wondering where this tale was leading to.

"Wait! You may not think her so lucky when you hear the provisions of the will. Rothwell was a loving father, but a very peculiar man. He was intensely patriotic, and when the United States entered the

war, he had two great regrets. The first was that he was too old to go himself, and next, that he had no one, no son or near male relative to represent him in the fighting."

"Bully for Rothwell!" ejaculated Jimmie. "He wasn't peculiar—just plain Roosevelt-American, I'd call him."

"He was all that, Mr. Ferguson. He moved to New York with his daughter Rosalie, and did all he could for the government. Almost a year ago he died, and when his will was read it contained a most peculiar provision."

Jimmie sat up straight, laid down his half-smoked pipe, and listened with intense interest. He felt something was coming his way. It was. Bolter continued:

"David Rothwell devised his entire estate to his daughter Rosalie with the proviso that within one year from date of probate, she should marry a soldier and a gentleman. If she did not, beyond enough for her living, the property was to be divided equally among some distant relatives."

"That was *some* will, Mr. Bolter—and Miss Rosalie—how did she take it?"

"She didn't like it. Rosalie Rothwell is a peculiar young woman. She has been engaged once and nearly engaged several other times. But each man was a disappointment to her and she averred she never would marry."

"And papa proceeded to put her in an awful hole, eh? Marry a soldier or lose a million and a half! Wow, that's a price on patriotism to the *n*th degree! How much longer has Miss Rosalie to comply or lose?"

"This is Thursday—her time is up next Monday morning at ten o'clock."

"But what has all this to do with me and earning ten thousand dollars?"

Bolter leaned across the table and spoke in a quiet, even voice:

"A little over a month ago Miss Rothwell came to me to act as her counsel in the matter. The will was legal and straight in every respect and there was no getting around that proviso. It was marry within a month, as I have indicated, or her income would drop from seventy-five thousand to five thousand a year."

"I've had drops like that," grinned Jimmie, "in an airplane. And, believe me, they jolt you good and proper."

Bolter nodded and continued: "Miss Rothwell has an unusually keen mind and she has a way out of her predicament and here's where you come in."

"Shoot, Mr. Bolter! I'm ready for a tail spin."

"Marry Miss Rothwell Saturday evening, and ten thousand dollars is yours."

"Say, Mr. Bolter, what is this—a joke? Marry a woman I've never seen. She doesn't know me from the sight of sole leather and—"

"Just a minute," interrupted Bolter, taking a red-covered memorandum-book from his pocket. "She commissioned me to find the soldier and gentleman and, remembering my brother Ed's praise of you, I determined to look you up. Three weeks ago the papers noted your return and discharge from the service, and since then I have a pretty fair idea as to what you have been doing."

"Shadowed, eh?" said Jimmie with a rather unpleasant tone in his voice.

"Call it that if you will. I have also learned a good deal of your past." Here he consulted the memorandum book and continued, refreshing his memory from its pages: "You are a Western man—an orphan—of an excellent family. You have punched cattle and railroaded. When the war broke out you did not wait for the draft, but promptly enlisted. Aviation was your choice and the record you made is an enviable one. That little affair at Château Thierry, where you were wounded, gave you the Croix de Guerre. Later, after recovering, St. Mihiel brought the Distinguished Service Cross of the United States army. Your discharge came and you returned to civilian life."

"One would think you were a secret service man, Mr. Bolter."

"No, but in matters of this kind, a man must of necessity be careful. I picked up your trail at the Aero Club banquet ten days ago, and the rest was easy."

The lawyer closed his book and, after replacing it in his pocket, continued:

"Since coming here you have tried for

employment, but haven't been very successful. You very properly declined to give exhibition flights on the ground that you would not commercialize your military record. You haven't a plethora of money; right now I imagine your cash capital is under ten dollars. How near am I?"

"Four dollars and thirty cents, to be exact," grimly replied Jimmie, "but that isn't any reason for you or Miss Rothwell to imagine I'd tie myself up for life to save a woman a million and a half dollars!"

"Pardon me," rejoined Bolter, "you don't tie yourself up for life—merely a year."

"Say, let's get this over with. I can feel an air pocket under me."

"I can understand that, Mr. Ferguson. Miss Rothwell's proposition is this: She will pay you ten thousand dollars to marry her at ten o'clock Saturday morning. One thousand will be paid when you agree, and the balance as soon as the ceremony is performed. Miss Rothwell will be heavily veiled, and you are not to see her face. There is a train leaving for the West at eight fifteen that evening; you are to take it and go to the Pacific coast and there remain for one year. At the end of that time, your wife will secure a divorce in Reno and you will have earned the ten thousand dollars. There will be no publicity whatsoever—you are simply selling one year of your time for a stated sum. The provision of David Rothwell's peculiar bequest will have been carried out, and things will be exactly as they are at this minute. Come, Mr. Ferguson, ten thousand dollars will give you a good start in life!"

Jimmie Ferguson had listened with amazement to Bolter's proposition. It seemed incredible to him, and he exclaimed:

"Say, you talk like a crazy man, Bolter! What's behind all this?"

"May be this will speak sanely," replied the lawyer, showing Jimmie a thousand dollar bill. "This is yours now and nine others will be given you after the wedding!"

"What's to prevent me seeing Miss Rothwell after I marry her? Suppose I double-cross you and don't leave town on the eight fifteen train?"

"Why, you are an officer and a gentleman—your word is sufficient."

"Officer and gentleman," murmured Jimmie under his breath, nodding. "Yes, I am —or, was—that."

He thought hard; true, he did need money and ten thousand would give him a great start in the West he loved so well. And after all, the lawyer was not proposing anything dishonorable. Jimmie Ferguson never had been a lady's man. He had few living relatives and fewer women friends. There were no youthful entanglements that might crop up to haunt him. There was no reason why he should not accept the proposition and help the girl retain her million and a half. Finally he made up his mind and, looking straight at the lawyer, said:

"Very well, Mr. Bolter, I'll accept the proposition. But, mark you, if there is any shenanigan back of this wild scheme, I'll make you think a shrapnel hit you!"

"Fine!" exclaimed the lawyer. "There is nothing beyond what I have told you, Mr. Ferguson. The wedding will take place at the Hall of Records at ten o'clock Saturday morning. You will please be on time. I'll make all the arrangements."

"Sure, I'll be there all right. I learned promptness in the army."

"Very well, then," said the lawyer, arising. "Here is the first payment of one thousand dollars."

Jimmie arose, took the bill, and fingered it lovingly. "Can I take you any place?" continued Bolter. "My car is outside."

"Thank you, no," answered Jimmie. "I want to walk on solid ground and get used to the idea."

"Just as you please, until seven o'clock, day after to-morrow—then *adieu*."

"So-long, Mr. Bolter," and Jimmie watched the tall, well-groomed form of the lawyer disappear through the door on the Broadway side murmuring: "And they say New York is dead."

A few minutes later Jimmie swung up the Great White Way, stopping at a bank to get his bill changed, and then continuing until he reached the Claremont, where he had a substantial meal. His mind was in a whirl. Here he was, James B. Fergu-

son, formerly first lieutenant United States Army Flying Corps, officer and gentleman, engaged to marry a girl he had never even seen! It must be a dream, but the feel of the roll of bills in his inside pocket dispelled that thought. It was real. "Ah, no, what's the use of thinking about it?" he murmured. "I've given my word, and that's enough."

The next day he made his preparations to leave for the West. The wedding might not come off; the entire thing could easily be a crazy hoax, but, wedding or no wedding, Jimmie Ferguson was going to get out of New York as soon as he honorably could. The thousand dollars would insure that. He was half tempted to try and find Rosalie Rothwell and see what she was like, but he had given the lawyer his word. He did inquire about Bolter and found him to be an attorney of high standing, both in the community at large and before the bar.

Saturday came and Jimmie arrayed himself in a new business suit; he had his breakfast, and promptly at ten o'clock he presented himself at the Marriage License Bureau at the Hall of Records. The lawyer received him graciously and the license was soon procured. A heavy veil concealed the bride's features, and Jimmy did not pay much attention to her costume. He wanted to get the affair over with, and be on his way. He did notice, however, that the bride's voice was sweet and musical. But he thought nothing of this, because many telephone girls have the sweetest of voices as they say, "Number, please?" The sweetness, however, ends with the voice over the wire. They then proceeded to Bolter's office, where the remainder of the wedding party was waiting. There was a clergyman; Bolter and his secretary for witnesses, and—the bride.

As soon as the minister had said: "Those whom God hath joined together, let not man put asunder," Jimmie Ferguson bowed and left the room. Bolter followed him, and in the hall gave him an envelope, saying as he extended his hand:

"There's the nine thousand dollars, Mr. Ferguson, and I wish you luck."

Jimmie took the envelope, grabbed his hat and coat, and left in a hurry. He wanted to get away from it all, and he was glad when his train pulled out for the West. Seated in his section he did a heap of thinking and, as many men do, he unconsciously felt of the third finger of his left hand. On it he usually wore a quaint old gold ring he had picked up in France. It had a deep cut fleur-de-lis in a large bloodstone, but to-night the ring wasn't there!

Jimmy quickly felt in his overcoat pocket for his gloves. The ring had been too large and once or twice it had come off his finger as he removed the glove. This must have happened at Bolter's house. In the coat-pocket he found only one glove—the left one was gone. He was worried because he really valued the ring—not intrinsically—but as a keepsake. He wired Bolter from Albany and at Chicago received his reply.

"Have been unable to locate glove or ring."

Then Jimmie made up his mind the ring was lost and went on his way westward. Three days later he dropped off the Santa Fe Limited in Los Angeles. He had close to ten thousand dollars in his pocket, which he promptly deposited in a bank and then proceeded to have a good time for a month.

Then he began to think of his future. While ten thousand dollars is a good round sum, it was not a fortune, and Jimmie determined to keep it as a nest-egg. Naturally, his arrival was noted—several of his old army comrades, yet in the service, were stationed at San Diego, and once again Jimmie renewed his acquaintance with the airplane. Many times he made flights between Los Angeles and San Diego, and one day as he landed, he was introduced to Mr. G. H. Gilson, of New York. Gilson was a manufacturer of airplanes—he had made many for the government during the war, and he believed in the future of the airplane, both for pleasure and for commercial purposes. It was his intention to establish several large demonstration-fields—one near Los Angeles. He had heard of Mr. Ferguson's brilliant war record and also had conceived an idea that he had marked business ability.

Jim looked at the distinguished Easterner with an inquiring eye.

"It's all right about the military record,

Mr. Gilson, because that is public property —but where do you get that 'business ability' stuff? Up to now I haven't had much experience in business."

"No?" smiled Mr. Gilson. "You deprecate yourself, Mr. Ferguson. My attorney, in whose judgment I have every faith, speaks very well of you. Said he had transacted a piece of business with you and that you were highly honorable and efficient."

"*Your* attorney!" exclaimed Jim. "And who might he be, may I ask?"

"Certainly. Frederick H. Bolter, of New York. You know him, don't you?"

So that was it. Bolter! The man who had driven him into the masked marriage with Rosalie Rothwell.

Jimmie smiled as he replied: "U-m! Yes. I do know Mr. Bolter, and we did have one business deal together. But my part was somewhat of a quiescent nature. Bolter attended to most of the details."

He was wondering just how much Mr. Gilson really knew of his connection with Bolter's scheme. But the Easterner's face was non-expressive of any untoward knowledge. Each day Jim had been forgetting his marriage—in fact, it never occurred to him except when he drew money from his bank. Then he remembered his veiled bride, and the conditions attendant upon his marriage. It was a matter of indifference to him, and he would be glad when the year was up, though there was no real reason why he should care. When the year was up the incident would be a closed one. Jim's thoughts moved rapidly, and Gilson interrupted them.

"Now, Mr. Ferguson, I am willing to give you charge of this field at four hundred per month to start with, and a share in the profits. Will you accept it?"

"Will I?" replied Jim. "Let's get busy right away!"

"Good!" ejaculated Gilson, and thus Jimmie Ferguson received a real start in life. He loved airplanes and he knew them from tip to tip and from propeller to rudder. The drone of the motor was sweet music to Jim's ears and now he had a real job. There were five machines in the hangars, and before long, the Southern California Flying Field was widely known. Jimmie had four instructors, and numerous mechanics, and all of them former members of the aviation section of the army. Never a day went by but what Jim climbed in his special machine and mounted into the blue. Every trick taught him by his army experience he did—and new ones. The air was his element and his daily rides were revels of joy.

Business soon came in gratifying amounts. Jim was making money. Young, red-blooded America wants speed and excitement. The automobile used to furnish it, but the airplane had displaced it.

Jim took charge of the field early in December, and two months later it was the mecca of the winter tourists. It was a short motor or trolley ride from Los Angeles, and there was always something doing.

Don't for one minute think that the male element monopolized the flying-field. On the contrary, there were plenty of women who took lessons and they had just about as much nerve as any man ever possessed.

Jim's life was a very busy one, but he wasn't a recluse, and many an evening he spent an hour or so in the various hotels, mingling with the guests. Naturally, he was well known, and more than one young lady said things to Jim, which, had he been a lady's man, or a marriage-seeker, might have led to tangible results. But Jim's heart never was stirred—Dan Cupid could not penetrate his armor, try as he might. This fact was commented upon by more than one fair lady. Why shouldn't the women comment on him and wonder why he couldn't be touched? He was six feet tall, slender, well built, muscles of steel, eyes as blue as the sky toward which he daily climbed, and his hair was tawny as a lion's mane. The aviator's costume was a fit setting for him. He was a typical man-bird, but a human one, and he chided the dear ladies and went on his own even way until—

It was a beautiful afternoon, there had been a rain the night before and the air was clean and sweet, and the sky as blue as a turquoise. There were four planes in the air and Jim was standing near his own machine watching the machine-birds when he heard a voice inquiringly say:

"Mr. Ferguson?"

Quickly he turned and found himself gazing into two dancing black eyes. They were wonderful eyes, and they were located in a perfectly adorable head, which was crowned by a mass of dark hair. Those eyes had long, sweeping lashes—there was a beautifully formed nose and mouth and snow-white teeth. An adorable dimple appeared with each smile and the voice was well modulated and musical.

Five feet four, of perfect figure encased in a neat costume of puttees, baggy breeches, and a leather coat—while in her hand swung a leather aviator's cap. She was ready for a flight, and after one glance, Jimmie Ferguson was ready to fly to the end of the world with her. Some men—nay, most of them, are struck that way and they don't know it. Jim was. He bowed gravely in answer to her inquiry.

"I have a letter for you from Mr. Gilson."

Jim took the letter and read:

> This will introduce to you Miss Corinne Everett, who is an intimate friend of my family. She is spending the winter in California, and, like all high-spirited young ladies, she has the flying bug. I wish you would give your personal attention to Miss Everett, as I know of no other man in whose care I would trust her.
>
> Sincerely,
> G. H. GILSON.

That was all, but it was a-plenty—the mere introduction would have been sufficient, and Jimmie Ferguson would have done the rest.

"So you want to fly, Miss Everett?" asked Jimmie, smiling.

"Yes," she replied: "Is that a strange desire in this rushing day and age?"

"No. On the contrary it is a very natural one. I see you are all ready."

"Oh, yes. I've been watching for some time and saw the other machines go up, and then I came to you. I knew you at once from Mr. Gilson's description of you."

"You flatter me, Miss Everett." Jimmie was almost blushing and certainly his heart did beat a little faster as he helped his fair charge into the back seat of the plane. She somewhat objected to being strapped in, but Jimmie insisted. He wasn't taking any chances with this dainty bit of femininity. He took his place and, before having the mechanic whirl the propeller, he turned and said:

"It isn't usual to go up very high or stay up very long for the first flight."

"But this isn't my first flight."

"No?"

"Oh, dear, no! I've been up several times. Go up as high as you like and stay up until you want to come down."

Jim turned and nodded to his mechanic, there was a sputter or two and then the swift, staccato roar of the perfectly tuned engine and they were off. In graceful circles Jim sent his bird up and up until the barograph registered nine thousand feet; then he headed due west and at the rate of one hundred miles an hour he let his machine go. Out over the blue dancing Pacific, a turn to the south, and presently, Santa Catalina was just beneath them, an emerald speck on the shimmering waves. Jim glanced back once or twice and all he could see was a tip of her nose, peeping out from under the broad goggles.

Corinne nodded and smiled her enjoyment. Back toward the main land, over San Pedro and Long Beach—then Los Angeles and on to the flying field. They had come down to five thousand feet, and Jim shut off the engine and made a long, easy volplane to the ground. He landed as light as a feather—with hardly a tremor as the plane stopped in front of its hangar.

"That was simply glorious!" exclaimed Corinne as she removed her goggles and head-dress and allowed Jim to help her out of the plane. "And, oh, Mr. Ferguson, you *do* know how to run that machine!"

"Thank you, Miss Everett. Machines are almost human, and sometimes, like humans, they become crotchety."

"Do they?" she laughed. "One would never believe it from this one."

There was pride in Jim's voice as he replied: "No, this bird is quite well tamed. But tell me, when do you want your first lesson in driving?"

"Lesson? Oh, yes! Let's see—you know I enjoy flying, but I don't believe I am very keen on driving a plane."

"Not drive an airplane? Nonsense, Miss Everett! It is very easy and perfectly safe as long as you don't lose your head."

"I dare say, Mr. Ferguson. But we'll come to the driving point gradually, and I'll go up again to-morrow, if I may."

"Surely. Any time," said Jim. "It would give me great pleasure to drive you back to the hotel in my car."

"Thank you, I shall be glad to have you."

There were a number of women and girls sitting on the broad hotel veranda when Jim drove his roadster up to the steps and assisted Miss Everett to alight.

"I wonder if I might call and see you to-night?" asked Jim as he bade her good-by. He was a quick mover.

"Certainly, Mr. Ferguson. I shall be delighted. I am out here alone and haven't met many people yet. Come about eight o'clock."

"Thank you, I shall."

Jim watched her as she ran up the steps and disappeared within the big office, and it was a happy chap who drove away, counting the minutes as hours until eight o'clock that night.

He was on time, and when he saw Corinne Everett dressed in rich but simple white, his heart almost stopped beating. Jimmie Ferguson was hard hit—there were no ifs, ands or buts about it, and he realized it. Corinne Everett, in the airplane costume, was entrancing, but in this shimmering white creation, she was ravishingly beautiful, and more than one woman looked at her with envious eyes. She was sitting writing at a desk and did not see Jim as he approached, nodding as he did so to one or two other acquaintances. Jim, too, looked very distinguished in his well-fitting Tuxedo.

"Am I interrupting some loving episode to a favored one, Miss Everett?" he said as he came to the opposite side of her desk.

"Oh, Mr. Ferguson! Not at all—it is simply a description of my wonderful flight this afternoon. I have just been writing Mr. Gilson, and have told him how fortunate he was to have you managing his business affairs on this coast."

"You flatter me, Miss Everett."

"If the truth be flattery, then I do, Mr. Ferguson. But how impolite I am—sit down, won't you? I have finished my letter."

"Thank you, but don't you think these lights are too bright? It's warm and pleasant outside this evening and we can hear the music better from there."

Corinne Everett looked at him a moment, her eyes danced and her lips twitched with a faint suggestion of a knowing smile as she arose and said:

"Perhaps you are right, Mr. Ferguson. I'll just mail this letter and get a wrap. I won't be gone a minute."

Jim never took his eyes off of her as she walked to the elevator and disappeared. He was so intent with his thoughts he had to be spoken to twice by an acquaintance before he stumblingly replied:

"Oh, I—er—I beg your pardon! How are you, old chap?"

Corinne was gone three and a half minutes, but to waiting Jim it seemed hours, and when she came back, she wore a lacy mantillalike thing, which only accentuated her charm and beauty.

Why describe that first evening together? It was the old, old story of a man and maid. Both knew it; both realized the feeling and both knew their lines of life had irrevocably joined themselves. Conventions, perhaps, restrained the head from being too precipitate when the heart would have dictated otherwise, but at eleven o'clock, when Jim Ferguson and Corinne Everett said good night, they realized that this was the beginning. The end was in the lap of the gods. And several people who saw them walk through the office shook their heads in a knowing way.

The next morning Jim and Corinne again kissed the white clouds, and that evening he renewed his suit. The natural course of events followed and, before long, the porch chatter had them engaged. Don't for one instant think Jim had smooth sailing in his courtship—ah, no! There were several other young men who were assiduous in their attentions to the Eastern beauty, but Jim used the same tactics with them as he had in fighting the Hun—he zoomed right at them and won for himself a clear field.

Then came *the* great evening. In the simple, yet beautiful, words of a soldier—a fighting man, Jim told Corinne of his boyhood; his struggles for an education; the early loss of his father and mother, and everything that had happened up to the time he entered the army.

"You don't have to tell me about your military career—I know that, Jim, and I am proud of it."

When a woman is proud of a man, it generally means more than a platonic interest, and thus emboldened, Jim took her small hand in his two strong ones and said:

"Corinne, I love you!"

That was all, and it was enough. Two arms stole around his neck and he heard:

"Oh, Jimmie, and I love you!"

Then followed the usual talk of two people so much in love with each other they couldn't see, and at eleven o'clock he bade her a formal good night at the elevator. There had been a less formal farewell under the palms, and in reply to Jim's earnest plea, Corinne had said:

"To-morrow evening, Jim, dear, I'll name the day. To-night I just want to be happy in the thought you are mine—and I am yours, and the wonderful years we are going to spend together."

When the elevator had borne her upward, Jim turned and walked to the desk to have a good night word with Mr. Dudley, the clerk on duty.

Just then some late arrivals came to the desk and Jim stood aside to allow them to register. Unconsciously, he was watching the clerk and the people at the desk when he saw a slim, white hand writing on the register and on the fourth finger of this hand, was a dull gold ring, with a blood stone setting, with a deep cut fleur-de-lis, engraved on it. Jim rubbed his hand across his eyes and looked again, and saw that a piece of the blue enameling was worn off of one side. There was no doubt about it. The ring had been his, and after the bell-boys had taken the guests to the elevator, Jim moved over and looked at the register and there his heart sank as he read:

Miss Rosalie Rothwell, and maid—New York.

To his tortured mind there wasn't a shadow of a doubt that this woman was his "veiled bride."

God, what a feeling of despair seized him! He had taken a good look at Rosalie as she passed him. She was good looking; oh, yes, all of that! But her looks were not of the gentler kind—there was a boldness about her; something different from the dainty, beautiful Corinne, who, at this moment, was probably contemplating the happiness of her love for him and his for her. Just a short while ago he had told her there never had been another woman in his life. He hadn't lied, but under the spell of her charm and beauty, he had forgotten his marriage, it had gone by like an ugly dream. Then, just as the cup of happiness was about to be quaffed, here comes this Rosalie Rothwell—his wife!—and she would be for, at least, seven months more. Why in God's name had she come there, of all places?

It was a sad and puzzled Jim Ferguson who sat in his room long after every one else had retired. His thoughts ran riot.

"Damn that man, Bolter!" he soliloquized. "If I hadn't listened to him, I wouldn't have been in this fix. But, on the other hand, if I had declined his proposition, I shouldn't have been here—I shouldn't have met Corinne—I shouldn't—oh—hell! What's the use?" With this he tumbled into his uneasy bed.

As a usual thing, Jimmie had generally arrived at Corinne's hotel about nine o'clock in the morning. She was always ready and accompanied him to the flying field. But the next morning he did not show up, and Corinne waited until nine thirty and then motored over to the hangars.

"Where is Mr. Ferguson?" she asked one of the attendants.

The man pointed upward and Corinne looked and saw a tiny speck acting like a thing possessed.

"There he is, miss," said the man, "and he's sure been doing some hair-raising stunts up there. He beats 'em all!"

It was true, Jim Ferguson was doing things to make ordinary mortals hold their breath. He side-slipped; did several Immelman turns; he looped the loop a number of times; dropped into a tail spin, righted

himself and again arose; then a nose dive and seemingly coming out just in time to avert a crash.

"How long has he been up?" asked Corinne with anxiety in her voice.

"About an hour 'n' a half, miss."

"Did Mr. Ferguson—er—seem to be all right when he made his flight?"

The man scratched his ear as he replied:

"Well, miss, he did seem a little bit worried about something. He was quite short in his talk, an' that's unusual for Mr. Ferguson."

"He hadn't been—been drinking, had he?" There was genuine anxiety in Corinne's voice and manner as she propounded this question.

"Drinkin', miss? Why, Law' bless yer soul, no! One of Mr. Ferguson's favorite sayin's is, 'Booze an' gasoline makes a bad cocktail!' He never drinks!"

There was relief in Corinne Everett's heart when she heard this man's statement. But there was something radically wrong—Jim had broken his standing engagement and should be made to suffer for his shortcomings.

"Will you please say to Mr. Ferguson as soon as he lands that Miss Everett will expect him at her hotel this evening at eight o'clock?" And with that she turned and left, while the man shrugged his shoulders and muttered to himself, "Some skirt!"

But what of Jimmie Ferguson? When he awakened that morning after a few hours of uneasy sleep, his mind was a seething riot. Was ever a man so unluckily placed as he? Was he to lose Corinne on account of that foolish marriage in New York? What would she say when she knew of his affair? And know it she must. She was a churchwoman; he knew that, and wondered if she could be brought to marry a divorced man. His only consolation was that his marriage to Rosalie Rothwell was in name only. Why hadn't he waited before proposing to her?

"Fool! Fool!" he called himself. But as he seemingly danced from cloud to cloud, he made up his mind firmly to one thing—he would settle the affair that day once and for all. He hadn't sought out Rosalie Rothwell—he hadn't ever seen her—but she had seen him. He had kept his part of the bargain, and she should keep hers. Was her coming an accident or had she some ulterior purpose? There was one way to find out and he took it.

His work on the flying field occupied his mind until nearly three o'clock and, changing his clothes, he made a bee-line for the hotel. He had received Corinne's message and was glad he was not to see her until that evening. He prayed she would be in her room and not see him that afternoon and his prayers were answered.

"Miss Rothwell is in, and will see Mr. Ferguson in her suite—414," the telephone girl said in answer to his query.

"Suite 414!" That startled him because he knew from frequent phone conversations he had had with Corinne that her room was 412—just next door! Whichever way he turned he found a mocking grin of fate.

Luck was with him, however, because Corinne was nowhere in sight when he gently rapped on the door of 414. It was opened by rather a plain-faced maid, who bade him enter.

"Miss Rothwell will be with you presently," she said, relieving him of his hat. Jim walked over and stood by the window, wondering whether or not it wouldn't be the wisest thing for him to jump out.

"You wished to see me, Mr. Ferguson?"

He turned and was face to face with Rosalie Rothwell, and right next door, not over twenty-five feet away, was Corinne Everett. What a situation!

Miss Rothwell was arrayed in a stunning semi-negligee, and beyond question, she was attractive—physically. She smiled as she held out her right hand to him. Jim couldn't help taking the hand and in so doing—that fleur-de-lis ring danced before his eyes like a thing possessed.

"Yes, Miss Rothwell, I did—you see—" He now was at a loss what to say—how to proceed. What if it was just a coincidence her being there? Suppose there were two Rosalie Rothwells? The lady relieved the situation by saying:

"Sit down, Mr. Ferguson. Was it this ring that startled you last night when I came in?" She fingered it as she spoke, and sat in an easy-chair.

"Yes, it was that ring," gasped Jim as he dropped in the settee near the door. "Where, may I ask, did you get it?"

Rosalie Rothwell looked at him and smilingly replied:

"I believe it belonged to my husband. He dropped it the night we were married."

Ye Gods! The very walls seemed to be tumbling about Jim Ferguson's head as he heard this woman's words. He arose and paced the room while Rosalie looked on with an expression akin to amusement. Now she took command of the situation.

"I welcome this opportunity, Mr. Ferguson, to have a little chat with you. You now know who I am, and I always have known who you were. The same train that bore you out of New York carried me, and during all these months Rosalie Rothwell has been right here in California."

"You have been here—for five months?" Jim gasped. "Why, I saw you arrive just last night!"

"At this hotel, yes, but I have been staying at the Sinclair, and every day I have seen you. You see, there is ten thousand dollars invested in you; I only had a very brief glance of you the night of your marriage. And, really, that glance was not entirely displeasing."

She smiled at the remembrance of the veiled wedding, while inwardly Jim groaned.

"Well, I've been here all along and I've watched you. You know I have the means to gratify my slightest wish. You really furnished me the means, and, oh, I am grateful!"

Jim could only sit and listen—speech had left him. "I haven't caused you any embarrassment by being here. I have used my maiden name when I might have been "Mrs. James Ferguson" all the time. But yesterday impulse seized me—I always act on impulse. I did that when I married you."

"Jumping cats! Would this torture never end?" thought the luckless Jim.

The woman's voice was smooth and dulcet as she continued:

"Then I began to figure that my existence was rather barren. I was bored with it, and you were a real man—you fitted into my scheme of life. I had money enough for two and I made up my mind to come to this hotel, and—at least—have a chat with you."

When she spoke of money something within Jim's mind broke, and for a moment he saw red.

"Money!" he snapped. "Do you women think of nothing but money?"

"Well, a million and a half isn't to be sneezed at," laughed the woman.

"See here," said Jim. "Let's get this over with. All the money in the world wouldn't make me live with you! You made a bargain and so did I. I have been living up to my part of it and you must live up to yours. Bolter promised it."

The woman laughed at him.

"Bolter? Oh, yes, you mean my lawyer. Clever man, too. But, understand, Mr. Ferguson, there was nothing in writing."

"You mean you don't intend to carry out your end—to get a divorce when the year is up?"

Again the mocking laugh.

"I get a divorce? Certainly not!"

"Then, by Heaven, I will!"

"On what grounds, pray? I haven't furnished you any nor shall I. Any action you might take would only rebound against you and you would be the laughing stock of the country."

The woman was right. Jim Ferguson was in one deep hole. He might have known nothing good could have come out of his acceptance of Bolter's quixotic and nonsensical proposition. He was up against it good and hard. There was no light any way he turned.

"And I believed in fair play in women!" This time he laughed and it wasn't a pleasant laugh to hear.

"Come, Mr. Ferguson," Rosalie cooed at him, "am I so distasteful as all that?"

"Good God! It's not a question of your looks—"

"What then," she interrupted, "another woman?"

Jim stood near the door as she said this and answered:

"Another woman has nothing to do with it—"

"I wouldn't say that, Mr. Ferguson, because I have eyes. I have seen, as every

one else has, your devoted attention to Miss Everett."

Jim fiercely interrupted.

"We will leave Miss Everett's name out of the question."

"I thought so," replied the woman. Her eyes snapped as she continued: "Corinne Everett, nor no other woman is going to take you away from Rosalie Rothwell—not in this life!"

Jim was beside himself; he prayed this mocking creature with the smiling face might be turned into a man for a moment, so he could chastise him, when the outer door opened. Jim was behind the door as it opened and could not see who stood there, but he heard a voice say:

"Oh, I beg your pardon. I made a mistake in the room." It was Corinne's voice.

The world seemed to stop for Jim Ferguson right then and there. He thanked God he was behind the door, and hoped Corinne would go without seeing him, but Rosalie Rothwell kicked the fat in the fire by saying:

"Don't apologize, Miss Everett. Come in, won't you? We were just speaking of you."

"Of me?" said Corinne, coming slowly into the room. "Who is with you?"

Then she turned and saw poor Jim Ferguson behind the door. His face was drawn and pale and his muscles twitched.

"You!" gasped Corinne, her eyes almost bulging out of her head. "You!"

Jim was wild—desperate. Two women, one claiming to be his wife, and the other waiting for the coming of eight o'clock that night to name the day when she would wed him. What could he say? Nothing. But Rosalie Rothwell could, and did speak.

"Miss Everett, it is well you made the mistake you did as it will save Mr. Ferguson from seeing you again."

"Just what do you mean?"

"A few months ago Mr. Ferguson married Rosalie Rothwell in New York, and now he is sick of his bargain!"

"Married—in New York?" gasped poor Corinne. "Oh, Mr. Ferguson! And I thought—you told me I—"

"Corinne, please let me explain?" pleaded the thoroughly badgered Jimmie.

"Explain what? You don't deny your marriage, do you?"

"No, but—"

"That's all I care to hear, Mr. Ferguson. I hope you are man enough never to deny it." She turned to the other woman and said:

"Miss Rothwell, I thank you. My obligation to you is great." And without a glance at the miserable Jim, she swept out of the room. To him she looked sixteen feet tall.

Now all the pent-up wrath in Jim burst forth. He advanced toward the other woman as if he would strangle her. But the real man held him back.

"You miserable creature! You've not only wrecked my life, but that innocent girl's as well. I would not live with you if you were the last woman on top of God's green earth!" And, grabbing his hat, he slammed out of the room, followed by a mocking laugh and the words:

"I wouldn't have you on a bet! You've proved what kind of a man you are!"

A blue streak went through the office, and for an hour afterward Jim drove his racing car like a mad man. Inevitably, he wound up at the flying field.

"Where's my plane?" he snapped at a mechanic.

"In the hangar, sir, with the magneto off. Had to send it back to town for a new armature."

"Damn!" exploded Jim. He wanted to get away where he couldn't see people. His brain was a tumult. There was a big biplane on the ground and, climbing in the front seat, he told the mechanic to turn the engine over. With a roar, he was off. Had he looked in the back seat, he would have seen a bundle covered by a coat. But Jim Ferguson wasn't looking any place except straight ahead. He didn't care where he went. He wanted to get away. When he was up five thousand feet, the bundle back of him moved; a hand stole out, slowly it came forward between Jim's arm and his body. He felt it, and the plane gave a sudden dip, but he quickly righted it and looked down. And, oh, he saw such a beautiful little hand and *on its fourth finger he saw a dull band of gold with a fleur-de-lis*

deeply cut in a blood-stone. As quickly as he could with safety he brought the plane to the ground and stopped away over at the far edge of the field.

Then the bundle came to life and Jim Ferguson found himself gazing into the dark eyes of Corinne Everett.

"How did you get here?" he gasped.

"I came direct from that room. I knew this was where you would end up and I fixed it with the mechanic about your plane. I wanted to see you."

"Yes, but I don't understand—after what happened—why should you want to see me? Where did you get that ring?"

"It belonged to m-m-my—hus-husband—" Corinne stammered.

"Say," cried Jim. "Who are you?"

"I was Rosalie Rothwell—now I'm Mrs. James Ferguson. Oh, Jimmie, you were magnificent in spurning the other woman!"

"But the other woman—who is she?"

"She is Estelle St. Claire, an actress."

Then it dawned on him—a scheme! He had been made a fool of. He climbed out of the plane and started away.

"Jimmie, aren't you going to give me a chance to explain?"

There was a world of pathos in the girl's voice and it acted as an immediate brake to his locomotion, and while his head surged with resentment his heart said, "Whoa, Jimmie, don't do anything you will regret! You love this girl—all the circumstances in the world never could change that fact. While an explanation seems impossible; still a woman's mind is susceptible to a great many queer quirks. You never can tell what motive animates the female of the species in any course of action. They just do things—that's all. Now, Jimmy Ferguson, it looks to me as if it was your duty to listen. Otherwise, you may belong to the species damphool!"

The badgered young man stopped; turned and in about ten quick steps he was back at the plane looking up into a pair of divine eyes.

"Well, I'm listening!"

"Oh, dear, Jimmie don't look so severe. Please smile a little!"

Could he withstand this plea? He could not, and a smile did break over his face. Its effect on the girl was instantaneous.

"There, now that's better. Perhaps it was mean of me to play this trick on you, but, Jimmie, I wanted to be sure of you!"

"Sure of me?" he asked wonderingly.

"Yes, sure of you, Jimmie Ferguson. Mr. Bolter told you I had been engaged once, and nearly engaged several other times, didn't he?"

Jim nodded.

"Well, that was true, but every man I had ever known lacked something in his make-up, which, to my mind, would go to make a perfect husband. Do you get that, Jimmie Ferguson?"

Again a nod.

"Then Mr. Bolter told me what his brother had written of you—one letter was received after the young man was killed. And an investigation was made of you. Mr. Bolter aroused my interest when he told me of his interview with you. The day of the wedding—*our* wedding, Jimmie—I had a good look at you and then—well—then I just had to come out here. Your ring I had with me all the time. You lost it at Mr. Bolter's home."

"But this other woman had my ring."

There was a peal of girlish laughter.

"As I told you, she is Estelle St. Claire, a very clever actress. I hired her to play the part, and as soon as you came to her room, the maid notified me, and I was in her bedroom all the time you were showing your temper about not living with her. If you hadn't done that I'd have fainted."

Jim was wavering—he was but human.

"Another thing, Jimmie, the Gilson Airplane Company is owned by me; that is, I control fifty-five per cent of its stock, and you are its next general manager. Your tryout was twofold—as a husband and a business men. I'm satisfied on both points."

Jim felt if he had any more shocks that day he would faint, and to end it all he reached up his hands and said:

"I am not sure whether your first name is Corinne or Rosalie, but it's a dead, immortal cinch your last is Ferguson! Come down on solid ground!"

And she did.

(The end.)

The Seventh Man

Part VI.

by Max Brand

Author of "Trailin'" "The Guide to Happiness," "Tiger," etc.

A Sequel to "The Untamed" and "The Night Horseman."

CHAPTER XXXV.

THE ASPER.

NINETY miles of ground, at least, had been covered by the black stallion since he left Rickett that morning, yet when he galloped across the plain in full sight of Wilsonville there were plenty of witnesses who vowed that Satan ran like a colt frolicking over a pasture. Mark Retherton knew better, and the posse, to a man, felt the end was near. They changed saddles in a savage silence and went down the street out of town with a roar of racing hoofs.

And Barry too, as he watched them whip around the corner of the last house and streak across the fields, knew that the end of the ride was near. Strength, wind, and nerve was gone from Satan; his hoofs pounded the ground with the stamp of a plow-horse; his breath came in wheezes with a rattle toward the end; the tail no longer fluttered out straight behind. Yet when the master leaned and called he found something in his great heart with which to answer.

A ghost of his old buoyancy came in his stride, the drooping head rose, one ear quivered up; and he ran against the challenge of those fresh ponies from Wilsonville. There were men who doubted it when the tale was told, but Mark Retherton swore to the truth of it.

Even then that desperate effort was failing. Not all the generous will in the heart of the stallion could give his legs the speed they needed, and he fell back by inches, by feet, by yards, toward the posse. They disdained their guns now, and kept them in the cases; for the game was theirs.

And then they noted an odd activity in the fugitive, who had slipped to one side and was fumbling at his cinches. They could not understand for a time, but presently the saddle came loose, the cinches flipped out, and the whole apparatus crashed to the ground. Nor was this all. The rider leaned forward, and his hands worked on the head of his mount until the hackamore also came free and was tossed aside. To that thing fifteen good men and true swore the next day with strange oaths, and told how a man rode for his life on a

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horse that wore neither saddle nor bridle, but ran obediently to voice and hand.

Every ounce counted, and there were other ounces to be spared. He was leaning again, to this side and then to that, and presently the posse rushed past the discarded riding-boots.

There lay the rifle in its case on the saddle far behind. And with the rifle remained all the fugitive's chances of fighting at long range. Now, following, came the heavy cartridge-belt and the revolver with it. The very sombrero was torn from his head and thrown away.

His horse was failing visibly—not even this lightening could keep it away from the posse long—and yet the man threw away his sole chance of safety. And the fifteen pursuers cursed solemnly as they saw the truth. He would run his horse to death, and then die with it, empty-handed, rather than let either of them fall a captive.

Unburdened by saddle or gun or trapping, the stallion gave himself in the last effort. There ahead lay safety, if they could shake off this last relay of the posse, and for a time he pulled away until Retherton grew anxious, and once more the bullets went questing around the fugitive. But it was a dying effort. They gained; they drew away; and then they were only holding the posse even; and then, once more, they fell back gradually toward the pursuit. It was the end, and Barry sat bolt erect and looked around him; that would be the last of him and the last scene he should see.

There came the posse, distant but running closer. With every stride Satan staggered; with every stride his head drooped, and all the lilt of his running was gone. Ten minutes, five minutes more, and the fifteen would be around him. He looked to the river which thundered there at his side.

It was the very swiftest portion of all the Asper between Tucker Creek and Caswell City. Even at that moment, a few hundred yards away, a tall tree which had been undermined fell into the stream and dashed the spray high; yet even that fall was silent in the general roar of the river. Checked by the body and the branches of the tree for an instant before it should be torn away from the bank and shot down-stream, the waters boiled and left a comparatively smooth, swift-sliding current beyond the obstruction; and it gave to Barry a chance, or a ghost of a chance.

The central portion of the river-bed was chopped with sharp rocks which tore the stream into white rags of foam; but beyond these rocks, a little past the middle, the tree like a dam smoothed out the current; it was still swift, but not torn with swirls or cross-currents, and in that triangle of comparatively still water of which the base was the fallen tree, the apex lay on a sand bar jutting a few yards from the bank.

The forlorn hope of Barry was to swing the stallion a little distance away from the bank, run him with the last of his ebbing strength straight for the bank, and try to clear the rocky portion of the river-bed with a long leap that might, by the grace of God, shoot him into the comparatively protected current.

Even then it would be a game only a tithe won, for the chances were ten to one that before they could struggle close to the shore the currents would suck them out toward the center. They would never reach that shelving bit of sand, but the sharp rocks of the stream would tear them a moment later like teeth.

Yet the dimmest chance was a good chance now.

He called Satan away from his course, and at the change of direction the stallion staggered, but went on, turned at another call, and headed straight for the stream. He was blind with running, and he was numbed by the long horror of that effort, no doubt; but there was enough strength left in him to understand the master's mind. He tossed his head high, he flaunted out his tail, and sped with a ghost of his old sweeping gallop toward the bank.

"Bart!" shouted the master, and waved his arm.

And the wolf saw, too. He seemed to cringe for a moment, and then, like some old leader of a pack who knows he is about to die and defies his death, he darted for the river and flung himself through the air.

An instant later Satan reared on the bank and shot into the air. Below him the teeth of the rocks seemed to lift up in hunger, and the white foam jumped to take him. The crest of the arc of his jump was passed; he shot lower, and, grazing the last of the stones, he plunged out of sight in the swift water beyond. There were two falls, not one, for even while the black was in the air Barry slipped from his back and struck the water clear of Satan.

They came up again struggling in the last effort toward the shore. The impetus of their leap had washed them well in toward the bank, but the currents dragged them out again toward the center of the stream where the rocks waited. Down the river they went, and Black Bart alone had a ghost of a chance for success. His leap had been farther, and he skimmed the surface when he struck, so that by dint of fierce swimming he hugged close to the shore, and then his claws bedded in the sand bank.

As for Barry, the waters caught him and sent him spinning over and over, like a log, whipping down-stream, while the heavier body of Satan was struggling whole yards above. There was no chance for the master to reach the sand bank, and even if he reached it he could not cling; but the wolf-dog knew many things about water. In the times of famine, long years before the days of the master, there had been ways of catching fish.

He edged forward until the water foamed about his shoulders. Down came Dan, his arms tumbling as he whirled, and on the sleeve of one of those arms the teeth of Bart closed. The cloth was stout, and yet it ripped as if it were rotten veiling, and the tug nearly swept Bart from his place. Still, he clung; his teeth shifted their hold with the speed of light and closed over the arm of the master itself, slipped, sank deeper, drew blood, and held. Barry swung around, and a moment later stood with his feet buried firmly in the bank.

He had not a moment to spare, for Satan, only his eyes and his nose showing, rushed down the current, making his last fight. Barry thrust his feet deeper in the sand, leaned, buried both hands in the mane of the stallion. It was a far fiercer tug-of-war this time, for the ample body of the horse gave the water a greater surface to grapple on, yet the strength of the man sufficed. His back bowed; his shoulders ached with the strain; and then the forefeet of Satan pawed the sand, and all three staggered up the shelving bank, reeled among the shrubbery, and collapsed in safety.

So great was the roar of the water that they heard neither shouts nor the reports of the guns, but for several minutes the bullets of the posse combed the shrubbery as high as the breast of a man.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

THE EMPTY CAVE.

THROUGH ten months of the year a child of ten could wade the Asper, but now its deep roaring that set the ground quivering under Barry gave him perfect assurance of safety. Not one of that posse would attempt the crossing, he felt, but he slipped back through the shrubbery close to the bank to make sure. He was in time to see Mark Retherton give a command with gestures that sent reluctant guns into the holsters.

Fists were brandished toward the green covert on the farther side of the river, so close, such an unreachable distance. One or two rode their horses down to the very edge of the water, but they gave up the thought, and the whole troop turned back toward Wilsonville; even the horses were down-headed.

Back in the covert he found Bart lying with his head on his paws, his eyes closed, his sides swelling and closing till every rib seemed broken; yet now and then he opened one red eye to look at Satan. The stallion lay in almost exactly the same position, and the rush and rattle of his breathing was audible even in the noise of the Asper; Barry dropped prone and pressed his ear against the left side of the horse, just behind the shoulder. The fierce vibration fairly shook his head; he could *hear* the rush of the blood except when that deadly rattling of the breath came. When

he raised to his knees the face of the master was serious, thoughtful.

"Satan!" he called, but the river must have drowned his voice. Only when he passed his fingers down the wet neck, one of Satan's ears pricked, and fell instantly back. It would not do to let him lie there in the cool mold by the water, for he knew that the greatest danger in overheating a horse is that it may cool too quickly afterward.

He stooped directly in front of Satan and swept up an arm in command; it brought only a flicker of the eyelid, the eyelid which drooped over a glazing eye.

"Up!" he commanded.

One ear again pricked; the head lifted barely clear of the ground; the forelegs stiffened with effort, trembled, and were still again.

"Bart," shouted the master, "wake him up!"

The voice could not have carried to the wolf through the uproar of the waters, but the gesture, the expression brought home the order, and Black Bart came to his feet, staggering. Right against the nose of Satan he bared his great teeth and his snarl rattled. No living creature could hear that sound without starting, and the head of Satan raised high. Still before him Bart growled, and under his elbow and his chest the hands of the master strained up.

He swayed with a snort very like a human groan, struggled, the forelegs secured their purchase, and he came slowly to his feet. There he stood, braced and head low; a child might have caught him by the mane and toppled him upon his side, and already his hind legs were buckling.

"Get on!" cried Barry.

There was a lift of the head, a quivering of the tensed nostrils, but that was all. He seemed to be dying on his feet, when the master whistled. The sound cut through the rushing of the Asper as a ray of light probes a dark room, shrill, harsh, like the hissing of some incredible snake, and Satan went an uncertain step forward, reeled, almost fell; but the shoulder of the master was at his side, lifting up, and the arm of the master was under his chest, raising.

He tried another step; he went on among the trees with his forelegs sprawling and his head drooped as though he were trying to crop grass. Black Bart did his part to recall that flagging spirit. Sometimes it was his snarl that startled the black; sometimes he leaped, and his teeth clashed a hair's breadth from Satan's nose.

By degrees the congealing blood flowed freely again through Satan's body; he no longer staggered; and now he lifted a forepaw and struck vaguely at Bart as the wolf-dog leaped. Barry stepped away.

"Bart!" he called, and the shouting of the Asper was now so far away that he could be heard. "Come round here, old boy, and stop botherin' him. He's goin' to pull through."

He leaned against a willow, his face suddenly old and white with something more than exhaustion, and laughed in such an oddly pitched, cracked tone that the wolf-dog slunk to him on his belly and licked the dangling hand. He caught the scarred head of Bart and looked steadily down into the eyes of the wolf.

"It was a close call, Bart. There wasn't more than half an inch between Satan and—"

The black turned his head and whinnied feebly.

"Listen to him callin' for help like a new-foaled colt," said the master, and went to Satan.

The head of the stallion rested on his shoulder as they went slowly on.

"To-night," said the master, "you get two pieces of pone without askin'." The cold nose of the jealous wolf-dog thrust against his left hand. "You, too, Bart. You showed us the way."

The rattle had left the breathing of Satan, the stagger was gone from his walk; with each instant he grew perceptibly larger as they approached the border of the wood. It fell off to a scattering thicket with the Grizzly Peaks stepping swiftly up to the sky. This was their magic instant in all the day, when the sun, grown low in the west, with bulging sides, gave the mountains a yellow light. They swelled up larger with warm tints of gold rolling off into the blue of the cañons; at the foot of the nearest slope a thicket of quaking aspens was struck by a

breeze and flashed all silver. Not many moments more, and all the peaks would be falling back into the evening.

It seemed that Satan saw this, for he raised his head from the shoulder of the master and stopped to look.

"Step on," commanded Barry.

The stallion shook himself violently as a dog that knocks the water from his pelt, but he took no pace forward.

"Satan!"

The order made him sway forward, but he checked the movement.

"I ask you man to man, Bart," said the master in sudden anger, "was there ever a worse fool horse than him? He won't budge till I get on his back."

The wolf-dog shoved his nose again into Barry's hand and growled. He seemed quite willing to go on alone with the master and leave Satan forgotten.

"All right," said Barry. "Satan, are you comin'?"

The horse whinnied, but would not move.

"Then stay here."

He turned his back and walked resolutely across the meadow, but slowly, and more slowly, until a ringing neigh made him stop and turn. Satan had not stirred from his first halting-place, but now his head was high and his ears pricked anxiously. He pawed the ground in his impatience.

"Look there, Bart," observed the master gloomily. "There's pride for you. He won't let on that he's too weak to carry me. Now I'd ought to let him stay there till he drops."

He whistled suddenly, the call sliding up, breaking, and rising again with a penetrating appeal. Satan neighed again as it died away.

"If that won't bring him, nothin' will. Back we got to go. Bart, you jest take this to heart; it ain't any use tryin' to bring them to reason that ain't got any sense."

He went back and sprang lightly to the back of the horse, and Satan staggered a little under the weight, but at once, as if to prove that his strength was more than equal to the task, he broke into a trot. A harsh order called him back to a walk, and so they started up into the Grizzly Peaks.

By dark, however, a few halts, a chance to crop grass for a moment here and there, a roll by the next creek, and a short draft of water, restored a great part of the black's strength, and before the night was an hour old he was heading up through the hills at a long, swift trot.

Even then it was that dark, cold time just before dawn when they wound up the difficult pass toward the cave. The moon had gone down; a thin, high mist painted out the stars; and there were only varying degrees of blackness to show them the way, with peaks and ridges starting here and there out of the night very suddenly. It was so dark, indeed, that sometimes Dan could not see where Bart skulked a little ahead, weaving among the boulders and picking the easiest way. But all three of them knew the course by instinct, and when they came to a more or less commanding rise of ground in the valley Dan checked the stallion and whistled.

Then he sat canting his head to one side to listen more intently. A rising wind brought about him something like an echo of the sound, but otherwise there was no answer.

"She ain't heard," muttered Dan to Bart, who came running back at the call, so familiar to him and to the horse. He whistled again, prolonging the call until it soared and trembled down the gulch, and this time when he stopped he sat for a long moment, waiting, until Black Bart whined at his side.

"She ain't learned to sleep light yet," muttered Barry. "An' I s'pose she's plumb tired out waitin' for me. But if something's happened— Satan!"

That word sent the stallion leaping ahead at a racing gait, swerving among rocks which he could not see.

"They's nothin' wrong with her," whispered Barry to himself. "They *can't* be nothin' happened to her!"

He was in the cave a moment later, standing in the center of the place with the torch high above his head; it flared and glimmered in the great eyes of Satan and the narrow eyes of Bart. At length he slipped down to a rock beside him, while the torch, fallen from his hand, sputtered and whispered where it lay on the gravel.

"She's gone," he said to emptiness. "She's lef' me!"

Black Bart licked his limp hands, but dared not even whine.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

BEN SWANN.

SINCE the night when old Joe Cumberland died and Kate Cumberland rode off after her wild man, Ben Swann, the foreman of the Cumberland ranch, had lived in the big house. He would have been vastly more comfortable in the bunk-house playing cards with the other hands, but Ben Swann felt vaguely that it was a shame for so much space in the ranch-house to go to waste, and besides, Ben's natural dignity was at home in the place even if his mind grew lonely.

It was Ben Swann, therefore, who ran down and flung open the door, on which a heavy hand was beating. Outside stood two men, very tall, taller than himself, and one of them a giant. They had about them a strong scent of horses.

"Get a light," said one of these. "Run for it. Get a light. Start a fire, and be damned quick about it!"

"And who the hell might you gents be?" queried Ben Swann, leaning against the side of the doorway to dicker.

"Throw that fool on his head," said one of the strangers, "and go on in, Lee!"

"Stand aside," said the other, and swept the door-knob out of Ben's grip, flattening Ben himself against the wall. While he struggled there, gasping, a man and a woman slipped past him.

"Tell him who we are," said the woman's voice. "We'll go to the living-room, Buck, and start a fire."

The strangers apparently knew their way, even in the dark, for presently he heard the scraping of wood on the hearth in the living-room. It bewildered Ben Swann. It was dreamlike, this sudden invasion.

"Now, who the devil are you?"

A match was scratched and held under his very nose, until Ben shrank back for fear that his splendid mustache might ignite. He found himself confronted by one of the largest men he had ever seen, a leonine face, vaguely familiar.

"You Lee Haines!" he gasped. "What are you doin' here?"

"You're Swann, the foreman, aren't you?" said Haines. "Well, come out of your dream, man. The owner of the ranch is in the living-room."

"Joe Cumberland's dead," stammered Ben Swann.

"Kate Cumberland."

"Her! And—Barry—the killing at Alder—"

"Shut up!" ordered Haines, and his face grew ugly. "Don't let that chatter get to Kate's ears. Barry ain't with her. Only his kid. Now stir about."

After the first surprise was over, Ben Swann did very well. He found the fire already started in the living-room, and on the rug before the hearth a yellow-haired little girl wrapped in a tawny hide. She was sound asleep, worn out by the long ride, and she seemed to Ben Swann a very pretty picture. Surely there could be in her little of the father of whom he had heard so much—of whom that story of the killing at Alder was lately told.

He took in that picture at a glance, and then went to rustle food; afterward he went down to sleep in the bunk-house, and at breakfast he recounted the events of the night with a relish. Not one of the men had been more than three years on the place, and therefore their minds were clean slates on which Swann could write his own impressions.

"Appearances is deceivin'," concluded the foreman. "Look at Mrs. Dan Barry. They tell you around these parts that she's pretty, but they don't tell you how *damned* fine-lookin' she is. She's got a soft look, and you'd never pick her for the sort that would run clean off with a gent like Barry. Barry himself wasn't so bad for looks, but they'll tell you in Elkhead how bad he is in action, and maybe they's some widders in Alder that could put in a word. Take even the kid. She looks no more'n a baby, but what d'you know is inside of her.

"Speakin' personal, gents, I don't put no kind of trust in that houseful yonder. Here

they come in the middle of the night like there was a posse after 'em. They climb that house and sit down and eat like they'd ridden all day. Maybe they had. Even while they was eatin' they didn't seem none too happy.

"That loose shutter up-stairs come around in the wind with a bang, and Buck Daniels comes out of his chair as fast as powder could blow him. He didn't say nothin' .Just sat down lookin' kind of sick, and the other two was the same way. When they talked, they'd bust off in the middle of a word and let their eyes go trailin' into some corner of the room that was plumb full of shadow. Then Lee Haines gets up and walks up and down.

"'Swann,' says he, 'how many good men have you got on the place?'

"'Why,' says I, 'they're all good!'

"'Huh,' says Haines, and he put a hand on my shoulder, 'just how good are they, Swann!'

"I seen what he wanted. He wanted to know how many scrappy gents was punchin' cows here; maybe them three up there figures that they might need help. From what? What was they runnin' away from?"

"Hey!" broke in one of the cow-punchers, pointing with a dramatic fork through the window.

It was a bright spot of gold that disappeared over the top of the nearest hill; then it came into view again, the whole body of a yellow-haired child, clothed in a wisp of white and running steadily toward the north.

"The kid!" gasped the foreman. "Boys, grab her. No, you'd bust her; I know how to handle her!"

He was gone through the door with gigantic leaps and shot over the crest of the low hill. Then those in the cook-house heard a small, tingling scream; after it came silence, and the tall foreman striding across the hill with the child high in his arms. He came panting through the door and stood her up on the end of the table, a small and fearless creature.

She wore on her feet the little moccasins which Dan himself had fashioned for her, but the tawny hide was not on her—perhaps her mother had thrown the garment away. The moccasins and the white nightgown were the sum and substance of her apparel, and the cow-punchers stood up around the table to admire her spunk.

"Darned near spat pizen," observed Ben Swann, "when I hung into her—tried to bite me, but the minute I got her in my hands she quit strugglin' as reasonable as a grown-up, by God!"

"Shut up, Ben. Don't you know no better'n to cuss in front of a kid?"

The great, dark eyes of Joan went somberly from face to face. If she was afraid, she disguised it well, but now and then, like a wild thing which sees that escape is impossible, she looked through the window and out over the open country beyond.

"Where was you headed for, honey?" queried Ben Swann.

The child considered him bravely for a time before she replied:

"Over there."

"Over there? Now, what might she mean by that? Headed for Elkhead—in a nightgown? Any place I could take you, kid?"

If she did not altogether trust Ben Swann, at least she preferred him to the other unshaven, work-thinned faces which leered at her around the table.

"Daddy Dan," she said softly. "Joan wants to go to Daddy Dan."

"Daddy Dan—Dan Barry," translated Ben Swann, and he drew a bit away from her. "Boys, that man-killin' devil must be around here; and that's what them up to the house was runnin' from—Barry!"

It scattered the others to the windows, to the door.

"What d'you see?"

"Nothin'."

"Swann, if Barry is comin' to these parts, I'm goin' to pack my war-bag."

"Me, too, Ben. Them that get ten thousand 'll earn it. *I* heard about the killin' at Alder."

"Listen to me, gents," observed Ben Swann. "If Barry is comin' here, we ain't none of us goin' to stay; but don't start jumpin' out from under till I get the straight of it. I'm goin' to take the kid up to the house right now and find out."

So he wrapped up Joan in an old blan-

ket, for she was shivering in the cold of the early morning, and carried her up to the ranch-house. The alarm had already been given. He saw Buck Daniels gallop toward the front of the place leading two saddled horses; he saw Haines and Kate run down the steps to meet them, and then they caught sight of the foreman coming with Joan on his shoulder.

The joy of that meeting, it seemed to Ben Swann, was decidedly one-sided. Kate ran to Joan with a little wailing cry of happiness and gathered her close, but neither big Lee Haines nor ugly Buck Daniels seemed overcome with happiness at regaining possession of Joan, and the child herself merely endured the fond caresses of her mother.

Ben Swann made them a speech. He told them that anybody with half an eye could tell they were bothered by something; that they acted as if they were running away. Now, running in itself was perfectly all right and quite in order when it was impossible to outface or outbluff a danger. He himself, Ben Swann, believed in such tactics. He wasn't a soldier; he was a cow-puncher. So were the rest of the boys out yonder, and though they'd stay by their work in ordinary times, and they'd face ordinary trouble, they were not minded to abide the coming of Dan Barry.

"So," concluded Swann, "I want to ask you straight: is him they call Whistlin' Dan comin' this way? Are you runnin' from him? And did you steal the kid from him?"

Lee Haines took upon his competent shoulders the duty of answering.

"You look like a sensible man, Swann," he said severely. "I'm surprised at you. In the first place, two men don't run away from one."

A fleeting smile appeared and disappeared on the lips of Ben Swann. Haines hastily went on: "As for stealing the baby from Dan Barry, good heavens, man, don't you think a mother has a right to her own child? Now go back to that scared bunch and tell them that Dan Barry is back in the Grizzly Peaks."

For several reasons this did not completely satisfy the foreman, but he postponed his decision. Lee Haines spoke like one in the habit of giving orders, and Swann walked slowly back to the cookhouse.

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

THE NEW ALLIANCE.

"AND so," said Lee Haines, when he joined Buck Daniels in the living-room, "there goes our reenforcements. That whole crew will scatter like dead leaves when Barry breezes in. It looks to me—"

"Shut up!" cut in Daniels. "Shut up!"

His dark, homely face turned to the larger man with a singular expression of awe. He whispered: "D'you hear? She's in the next room whippin' Joan for runnin' away, and never a yap out of the kid!"

He held up a lean finger for caution, and then Haines heard the sound of the willow switch. It stopped.

"If you run away again," warned Kate, her voice pitched high and trembling, "munner will whip harder, and put you in a dark place for a long, long time."

Still there was not a sound of the child's voice, not even the pulse of stifled weeping. Presently the door opened and Kate stood there.

"Go out in the kitchen and tell Li to give you breakfast. Naughty girls can't eat with munner."

Through the door came Joan, her little round face perfectly white, perfectly expressionless. She did not cringe, passing her mother; she walked steadily across the room, rose on tiptoe to open the kitchen door, and disappeared through it. Kate dropped into a chair, shaking.

"Out!" whispered Buck to Lee Haines. "Beat it. I got to talk alone." And as soon as Haines obeyed, Buck sat down close to the girl. She was twisting and untangling her fingers in a dumb agony.

"What has he done to her, Buck? What has he done?"

It was a maxim with Buck that talk is to woman what swearing is to man; it is a safety valve, and therefore he waited in silence until the first rush of her grief had passed.

"She only looked at me when I whipped her. My heart turned in me. She didn't cry; she wasn't even angry. She just stood there—my baby—and looked at me!"

She threw herself back in the chair with her eyes closed, and he saw where the trouble had marked her face. He wanted to lean over and take her in his arms.

"I'm going mad, Buck. I can't stand it. How could he have changed her to this?"

"Listen to me, Kate. Joan ain't been changed. She's only showin' what she is."

The mother stared wildly at him.

"Don't look like I was a murderer. God knows I'm sorry, Kate, but if they's Dan's blood in your little girl it ain't my fault. It ain't anything he's taught her. It's just that bein' alone with him has brought out what she really is."

"I won't believe you, Buck; I don't dare listen to you!"

"You got to listen, Kate, because you know I'm right. D'you think that any kind of teachin' could make her learn how to stand and keep from cryin' when she was whipped?"

"I know."

She spoke softly, as if some terrible power might overhear them talk, and Buck lowered his voice in turn.

"She's wild, Kate." I knew it when I seen the way she handled Bart."

"Then I'll have her tame again."

"You tried that once and failed."

"Dan was a man when I tried, and his nature was formed. Joan is only a baby—my baby. She's half mine. She has my hair and my eyes."

"I don't care what the color of her eyes is. I know what's behind them. Look at 'em, and then tell me who she takes after."

"Buck, why do you talk like this? What do you want me to do?"

"A hard thing. Send Joan back to Dan."

"Never!"

"He'll never give her up, I tell you."

"Oh, God help me! What shall I do? I'll keep her! I'll make her tame."

"But you'll never keep her that way. Think of Dan. Think of the yaller in his eyes, Kate."

"Until I die," she said with sudden quiet, "I'll fight to keep her."

And he answered with equal solemnity: "Until Dan dies he'll fight to have her. And he's never been beat yet."

Through a breathing space he stared at her and she at him, and the eyes of Buck Daniels were the first to turn. Everything that was womanly and gentle had died from her face, and in its stead was something which made Buck rise and wander from the room.

He found Lee Haines, and told him briefly all that had passed. The great battle, they decided, had begun between Kate and Barry for the sake of the child, and that battle would go on until one of them was dead or the prize for which they struggled lost.

Barry would come on the trail and find them at the ranch, and then he would strike for Joan. And they had no help for the struggle against him. The cow-punchers would scatter at the first sign of Barry, at the first shrill of his ill-omened whistling. They might ride for Elkhead and raise a posse from among the citizens, but it would take two days to do that and gather a number of effective fighters for the crisis; and in the mean time the chances were large that Barry would strike the ranch while the messenger was away. There was really nothing to do but sit patiently and wait. They were both brave men, very; and they were both not unpractised fighters; but they began to wait for the coming of Barry as the prisoner waits for the day of his execution.

It spoke well for the quality of their nerves that they would not speak to Kate of the time to come; they sat back like spectators at a play and watched the maneuvers of the mother to win back Joan.

There was not an idle moment from breakfast to dark. They went out to gather wild flowers on the western hill from the house; they sat on the veranda, where Kate told Joan stories of the ranch and pointed out the distant mountains which were its boundaries, and explained that all between them would one day be her own land; that the men who rode yonder were doing her work; that the cattle who ranged the hills were marked with her brand. She said it all in small words so that Joan could un-

derstand, but as far as Buck and Lee could make out there was never a flicker of intelligence or interest in the eyes of the child.

It was a hard battle every hour, and after supper Kate sat in a big chair by the fire with her eyes half closed, admitting defeat, perhaps. For Joan was curled up on the couch at the fartherest, dimmest end of the room, and with her chin propped in both small hands she stared in silence through the window and over the darkening hills. Buck and Lee were there, never speaking, but now and then their eyes sought each other with a vague hope. For Kate might see that her task was impossible, send Joan back, and that would free them of the danger.

But where Kate left off, chance took up the battle and turned the scales. Old Li, the Chinese cook, had not seen Kate for six long years, and now he celebrated the return by hanging about her on a thousand pretexes. It was just after he had brought in some delicacy from the kitchen, leaving the door a little ajar, when a small ball of gray fur nosed its way through the aperture and came straight for the glare of the fire on the hearth.

It was a small shepherd puppy, and having observed the faces of the men with bright, unafraid eyes, it went wabbling on to the very hearth, sniffling. Even at that age it knew enough to keep away from the bright coals of wood, but how could it know that the dark, cold-looking andirons had been heated to the danger-point by the fire? It thrust out a tentative nose, touched the iron, and then its shrill yelp of pain went startlingly through the room. It pulled the three grown-ups out of their thoughts; it brought Joan scampering across the room with a little happy cry.

The puppy would have escaped if it could, for it had in mind the dark, warm, familiar corner in Li's kitchen where no harm ever came near, but the agile hands of Joan caught him; he was swept into her arms. That little wail of helpless pain, the soft fluff of fur against her cheek, wiped all other things from Joan's mind.

Out of the window and across the gloomy hills she had been staring at the picture of the cave, and bright-eyed Satan, and the shadowy form of Bart, and the swift, gentle hand of Daddy Dan; but the cry of the puppy blotted the picture out. She was no longer lonely, having this small, soft body to protect. There sat her mother, leaning a little toward her with a glance at once misted and bright, and she forgot forthwith all the agency of Kate in carrying her away from that cave of delight.

"Look, munner! He's burned his nose!"

The puppy was licking the injured nose industriously and whimpering the while. And Joan heard no answer from her mother except an inarticulate little sound somewhere deep in Kate's throat. Over her child mind, vaguely, like all baby memories, moved a recollection of the same sound coming deeply from the throat of the mother and marvelously soothing, reassuring.

It moved a fiber of trust and sympathy in Joan, an emotion as real as the sound of music, and with the puppy held idly in her arms for a moment she looked curiously into Kate's face. On her own, a faint smile began in the eyes and spread to the lips.

"Poor little puppy, munner," said Joan.

The hands of Kate trembled with desire to bring Joan closer to her, but very wisely she merely stroked the cringing head of the dog.

"Poor little puppy," she echoed.

CHAPTER XXXIX.

VICTORY.

THE entrance of the puppy, to liken small things to great, was the coming of Blücher in Kate's life, for the battle turned, and all in five minutes she had gone from defeat to victory. She sat by the fire with Joan sleeping in her arms, and the puppy in turn in the arms of Joan. It was such a foolish trick of chance that had given her all this, she was almost inclined to laugh, but something of tragedy in the faces of Buck and Lee Haines made her thoroughly serious. And she readily saw the truth. For after all, a child's brain is a small affair; it holds so much and no more.

One instant the longing for Dan was all that Joan could think of; the next she had

no room for anything more than the burned nose of the puppy. If there were other phases to this matter—such as Buck Daniels had pointed out—fear that in some future crisis the blood of the father might show in the child — Kate pushed such thoughts away. She was too full of the present happiness.

Now, while she sat there in the firelight, she sang softly into the dreams of Joan, and watched the smile of sleep grow and wane faintly on the lips of the child as the rhythm of her singing lifted and fell. One-half of her mind was empty, that part where Dan should have been, and a dozen times she checked an impulse to turn to him in the place where he should be sitting and invite him with a smile to share her happiness.

When her eyes moved they only fell on the gaunt, intent face of Buck or the leonine head of Haines. Whistling Dan was gone, and if he ever came again her fear of him, her fear for Joan, would be greater than her love. Yet Dan being gone so finally, she knew that she would never be truly happy again. Her spring of life was ended, but even now she was grateful for the full richness of those six years with Dan; and if she turned from him now it was only because a mighty instinct commanded her and a voice without words drove her: Joan must go on to a normal, womanly happiness.

Dan Barry lived from day to day, glutting himself with a ride in the wind, or the whistle of a far-off bird, or the wail of a mountain lion through the night. Each instant was to him complete, but the eye of Kate looked far away and saw the night when this daughter of hers should sit holding an infant by such a fire, and her heart was both empty and full.

It was no wonder, then, that she heard the first sound long before either Haines or Buck Daniels, for her mind was on guard against dangers which might threaten her baby.

The sound was a slipping, scratching noise on the veranda; then a breathing at the front door. Kate turned, and the men followed the terror of her eyes in time to see the door fall open, and a broad paw appear in the interval. The snaky head of Black Bart thrust into the room.

Without a word Daniels drew his gun.

"Wait!" commanded Kate. Joan awoke with a start at the sharpness of this voice. "Don't shoot, Buck. See that bit of paper under his throat. He's bringing a message."

"Bart!" cried Joan, slipping to the floor from her mother's lap; but when she ran toward the wolf-dog, that tremendous snarl of warning stopped her short. Bart slunk toward Kate.

"Look out, Kate!" cried Haines. "The black devil means murder."

"Don't move, or he'll go at your throat," she answered. "There's no danger to me. He's been ordered to go to me, and he won't let even Joan touch him. See!"

He had glided past the amazed, outstretched arms of Joan, and went straight to Kate and stopped beside her, obviously expectant. She reached for the slip of folded paper, and as her hand approached he crouched a little, growling; but it was only to caution her, apparently, and though he distrusted the hand, he allowed it to unfasten the missive.

She untwisted the note, and read aloud:

> "Kate, send Joan back to me, or I come for her. Send her with Bart."

It seemed as though the wolf-dog understood the written words, for now he moved toward Joan, and she, with a cry, dropped the squealing puppy and caught the great head of Bart in her arms. The puppy wailed, sitting down on his haunches, and quivering with grief.

"Daddy Dan wants me," explained Joan with bright eyes. "He's sent for me. Go quick, Bart!"

The big animal lay down to facilitate her mounting.

"Joan!" called Kate.

The child hesitated and turned toward her. Her mother had taken up that light revolver which Dan had taught her to use so well, and now, as she leveled it at the wolf-dog, Bart laid his fangs bare in silent hate. The weapons of Buck and Lee Haines were ready, and now Bart raised himself a little and commenced to drag gradually forward to leaping distance.

"Drop your gun, Kate," cautioned Buck. "For God's sake, drop your gun. Even if you hit him with a bullet, he'll be at your throat. Unless you kill him with the first shot, he'll have you. Drop your gun, and then he'll go at us."

But Joan knew perfectly well what those gleaming bits of steel meant. She had seen Daddy Dan shoot and kill, and now she ran screaming between Bart and danger.

"Munner!" she cried. "You bad, bad men. I won't let you hurt Bart. They won't hurt you, Bart," explained Joan, turning, much mollified, to the great wolf-dog. "They're just playin'. Now we'll go." And she started toward the door, with Bart slinking in front and keeping a watchful lookout from a corner of his eye.

"Are you going to leave the poor little puppy, Joan?" said the mother, keeping her voice steady, for all the force of the two men could not help her now. It rested with her wit.

"I'll take him with me," answered Joan, and caught up the howling puppy from the floor. His wails died out against her breast.

"But you mustn't do that, honey. He'd die in this cold night-wind long before you got there."

"Oh!" sighed Joan, and considered her mother with great eyes.

Black Bart turned and uneasily tugged at her dress.

"Will you take good care of him, munner? Till I come back?"

"But I don't know how to take care of him, dear. If you go he'll cry and cry and cry until he dies."

Joan sighed.

"See how quiet he is when you hold him, Joan!"

"Oh!" muttered Joan again. The distress of the problem made her wrinkle her forehead. She turned to Kate for help.

"Munner, what 'll I do?"

"You'd best stay here until the puppy is strong enough to go with you."

She kept her voice well under control; it would not do to show the slightest emotion, and now she sat down and half turned away from the child. With her eyes she flashed a signal at the two troubled men, and they followed her lead. Their center of vision was now upon the fire. It left Joan, to all appearances, quite out of notice.

"Oh, that 'll be a long, long time, munner."

"Only a little while, Joan."

"But Daddy Dan 'll be lonesome up there."

"He has Satan and Bart to keep him company."

"Don't you think he wants Joan, munner?"

"Not as much as the poor little puppy wants you, Joan." She added, with just the slightest tremor: "You decide for yourself, Joan. Go, if you think it is best."

"Bart, what 'll Joan do?" queried the child, turning in dismay toward the wolf-dog, but as soon as he saw the puppy in her arms he greeted her with a murderous snarl.

"You see," suggested her mother, "that Black Bart would eat up the poor little puppy if you went now with him."

At this alarming thought Joan shrank away from Bart, and when he followed her anxiously she cried: "Go away! Bad dog! Bad Bart!"

He caught the edge of her dress and drew back toward the door, and this threw Joan into a sudden panic. She struck Bart across his wrinkled forehead.

"Go away!"

He slunk back, snarling at the puppy.

"Go back to Daddy Dan." Then, as he pricked his ears, still growling like distant thunder: "Go tell Daddy Dan that Joan has to stay here a while. Munner, how long?"

"Maybe a week, dear."

"A whole week?" she cried, dismayed.

"Perhaps only one or two or three days," said Kate.

Some of her tenseness was leaving as she saw victory once more inclining to her standards.

"One, two, five days," counted Joan, "and then come for me again. Tell Daddy Dan that, Bart."

His eyes left her and wandered around the room, lingering for a vicious instant on the face of each, then he backed toward the door.

"He's clear of Joan now, Kate," whispered Buck. "Let me shoot!"

"No, no! Don't even look at him."

Then, with a scratching of sudden claws, Bart whirled at the door and was gone like a bolt down the hall. Afterward for a time there was no sound in the room except the murmurings of Joan to her puppy, and then they heard that most mournful of sounds on the mountain desert, the long howl of a wolf which has missed its kill and hunts hungry on a new trail.

CHAPTER XL.

THE FAILURE.

WHEN Black Bart returned without Joan, without even a note of answer about his neck, the master made ready to take by force. First he went over his new outfit of saddle and guns, looking to every strap of the former, and the latter, revolvers and rifles, he weighed and balanced with a meditative look, as if he were memorizing their qualities against a time of need.

With Satan saddled and Bart on guard at the mouth of the cave, he gathered up all the accumulation of odds and ends, provisions, skins, and made a stirring bonfire in the middle of the gravel floor. It was like burning his bridges before starting out to the battle; he turned his back to the cave and started on his journey.

He had to travel in a loose semicircle, for there were two points which he must reach on the ride—the town of Alder, where lived the seventh man who must die for Grey Molly, and the Cumberland ranch, last of all, where he would take Joan. Very early after his start he reached the plateau where he had lived all those years with Kate, and he found it already sinking back to ruin, with nothing in the corrals, and the front door swinging to and fro idly in the wind, just as Joan had often played with it.

Inside, he knew, the rooms were empty; a current of air down the chimney had scattered the ashes from the hearth all about the living-room. Here must be a chair overturned, and there the sand had drifted through the open door. All this he saw clearly enough with his mind's eye, and urged Satan forward. For a chill like the falling of sudden night had swept over him, and he shrugged his shoulders with relief when he swept past the house.

Yet when he came to the long down-slope which pitched into the valley so far below him, he called Satan to a halt again, and swung to look at the house. He could hear the clatter of the front door as it swung; it seemed to be waving a farewell to him.

It was all the work of a moment to ride back, gather a quantity of paper and readily inflammable materials, soak them in oil, and scratch a match. The flames swept up the sides of the logs and caught on the ceiling first of all, and Dan Barry stood in the center of the room until the terrified whining of Black Bart and the teeth of the wolf-dog at his trousers made him turn and leave the house.

Outside he found Satan trembling between two temptations—the first to run as far and as fast as he could from that most terrible thing, fire; and the second to gallop straight into the blaze. The voice of the master, a touch quieted him, and Black Bart lay down at the feet of the master and looked up into his face.

By this time the fire had licked away a passage through the roof, and through this it sent up a yellow hand that flicked up and down like a signal, or a beckoning, and then shot up a tall, steady, growing, roaring column of red. No man could say what went through the mind of Dan Barry as he stood there watching the house of his building burn, but now he turned and threw his arms over the neck and back of Satan, and dropped his forehead against the withers of the black. It troubled the stallion. He turned his head, and nosed the shoulder of the master gently, and Black Bart, in an agony of anxiety, reared up beside Dan and brought his head almost up to the head of the man; there he whined pleadingly, for never before had he seen the master hide his face.

A deep, short report made the master stand away from Satan. The fire had reached a small stock of powder, and the shock of the explosion was followed by a

great crashing and rending as an inner wall went down. That fall washed a solid mass of yellow flame across the front door, but the fire fell back, and then Dan saw the doll which he himself had made for Joan; it had been thrown by the smashing of the wall squarely in front of the door, and now the fire reached after it—long arms across the floor.

It was an odd contrivance, singularly made of carved wood and with arms and legs fastened on by means of bits of strong sinew, and Joan prized it above all the rosy-faced dolls which Kate had bought for her. For an instant Dan stood watching the progress of the fire, then he leaped through the door, swerved back as an arm of fire shot out at him, ran forward again, caught up the doll, and was outside rubbing away the singed portions of brows and lashes.

He did not wait until the house was consumed, but when the flames stood towering above the roof, shaking out to one side with a roar when the wind struck them, he mounted Satan once more, and made for the valley.

He wanted to reach Alder at dark, and he gaged the time of his ride so accurately that when he pulled out of the mouth of Murphy's Pass the last light of the day was still on the mountains and in the pass, but it was already dark in the village, and a score of lights twinkled up at him like eyes.

He left Satan and Bart well outside the town, for even in the dark they might easily be recognized, and then walked straight down the street of Alder. It was a bold thing to do, but he knew that the first thing which is seen and suspected is the skulker who approaches from covert to covert. They knew he had ridden into Alder before in the middle of the night, and they might suspect the danger of such another attack, but they surely would not have fear of a solitary pedestrian unless a telltale light were thrown upon his face.

He passed Captain Lorrimer's saloon. Even in this short interval it had fallen into ill-repute after the killing at Alder. And a shanty farther down the street now did the liquor business of the town; Captain Lorrimer's was closed, and the window nailed across with slats. He went on. Partly by instinct, and partly because it was aflame with lights, he moved straight to the house at which he had learned tidings of three men he sought on his last visit to Alder.

Now there were more lights showing from the windows of that place than there were in all the rest of Alder; at the hitching-racks in front horses stood tethered in long double rows, and a noise of voices rolled out and up and down the street. Undoubtedly, there was a festival there, and all Alder would turn out to such an affair—all Alder, including Vic Gregg, the seventh man.

A group came down the street for the widow's house; they were laughing and shouting, and they carried lanterns; away from them Barry slipped like a ghost and stood in the shadow of the house.

There might be other such crowds, and they were dangerous to Barry, so now he hunted for a means of breaking into the house of the widow unseen. The windows, as he went down the side of the building, he noted to be high, but not too high to be reached by a skilful, noiseless climber. In the back of the house he saw the kitchen door, illumined indeed, but the room, as far as he could see, empty.

Then, very suddenly, a wave of silence began somewhere in a side of the house, and swept across it, dying to a murmur at the edges. Barry waited for no more maneuvers, but walked boldly up the back stairs and entered the house, hat in hand.

The moment he passed the door he was alert, balanced. He could have swung to either side, or whirled and shot behind him with the precision of a leisurely marksman, and as he walked he smiled happily, with his head held high. He seemed so young, then, that one would have said he had just come in gaily from some game with the other youths of Alder.

Out of the kitchen he passed into the hall, and there he understood the full meaning of the silence, for both the doors to the front room were open, and through the doors he heard a single voice, deep and solemn, and through the

doors he saw the crowd standing motionless. Their heads did not stir—heads on which the hair was plastered smoothly down—and when some one raised a hand to touch an itching ear or nose, he moved his arm with such caution that it seemed he feared to set a magazine of powder on fire. All their backs were toward Barry, where he stood in the hall, and as he glided toward them, he heard the deep voice stop, and then the trembling voice of a girl speak in reply.

At the first entrance he paused, for the whole scene unrolled before him. It was a wedding. Just in front of him, on chairs and even on benches, sat the majority of adult Alder—facing these stood the wedding pair with the minister just in front of them. He could see the girl to one side of the minister's back, and she was very pretty, very femininely appealing now, in a dress which was a cloudy effect of white; but Barry gave her only one sharp glance. His attention was for the men of the crowd. And although there were only backs of heads and side glimpses of faces, he hunted swiftly for Vic Gregg.

But Gregg was not there. He surveyed the assembly twice, incredulous, for surely the tall man should be here; but when he was on the very point of turning on his heel and slinking down the hall to pursue his hunt in other quarters, the voice of the minister stopped, and the deep tone of Vic himself rolled through the room.

It startled Barry like a voice out of the sky; he stared about, bewildered, and then as the minister shifted his position a little he saw that it was Gregg who stood there beside the girl in white—it was Gregg being married. And at the same moment the eyes of Vic lifted, wandered, fell upon the face which stood there framed in the dark of the doorway.

Dan saw the flush die out, saw the narrow, single-purposed face of Gregg turn white, saw his eyes widen, and his own hand closed on his gun. Another instant; the minister turned his head, seemed to be waiting, and then Gregg spoke in answer: "I will."

A thousand pictures rushed through the mind of Barry, and he remembered first and last the wounded man on the gray horse who he had saved, and the long, hard ride carrying that limp body to the cabin in the mountains. The man would fight. By the motion of Gregg's hand, Dan knew that he had gone even to his wedding armed. He had only to show his own guns to bring on the crisis, and in the mean time the eyes of Vic held steadily upon him past the shoulder of the minister, without fear, desperately.

In spite of himself Dan's hand could not move his gun. In spite of himself he looked to the confused, happy face of the girl. And he felt as he had felt when he set fire to his house up there in the hills. The wavering lasted only a moment longer; then he turned and slipped noiselessly down the hall, and the seventh man who should have died for Grey Molly was still alive.

CHAPTER XLI.

THE WILD GEESE.

TWENTY-FOUR hours from Alder to Elkhead, and beyond Elkhead to the Cumberland ranch, is long riding and hard riding, but not far after dark on the following night Joan lifted her head, where she played with the puppy on the hearth, and listened. There was no sound audible to the others in the living-room; they did not even mark the manner in which she sat up, and then rose to her feet. But when she whispered "Daddy Dan!" it brought each of the three out of his chair.

Still they heard nothing, and Buck and Lee Haines would have retaken their chairs had not Kate gone to the window and thrown it wide. Then they caught it, very far off, very thin and small, a delicate thread of music, an eery whistling. Without a word she closed the window, crossed the room, and from the table she took up a cartridge-belt from which hung the holster with the revolver which Whistling Dan had taught her to use so well. She buckled it about her.

Lee Haines and Daniels, without a word, imitated her actions. Their guns were already on—every moment since they reached the ranch they had gone armed—but now

they looked to them, and tried the actions a few times before they thrust them back into the holsters.

It was odd to watch them. They were like the last remnant of a garrison, outworn with fighting, which prepares in grim quiet for the final stand.

The whistling rose a little in volume now. It was a happy sound, without a recognizable tune, but a gay, wild improvisation as if a violinist, drunk, was remembering snatches of masterpieces, throwing out lovely fragments here and there and filling the intervals out of his own excited fancy. Joan ran to the window, forgetful of the puppy, and kneeled there in the chair, looking out. The whistling stopped as Kate drew down the curtain to cut out Joan's view. It was far too dark for the child to see out, but she often would sit like this, looking into the dark.

The whistling began again as Joan turned silently on her mother, uncomplaining, but with a singular glint in her eyes, a sort of flickering, inward light that came out by glances and starts. Now the sound of the rider blew closer and closer. Kate gestured the men to their positions, one for each of the two inner doors, while she herself took the outer one.

There was not a trace of color in her face, but otherwise she was as calm as a stone, and from her an atmosphere pervaded the room, so that men also stood quietly at their posts. They had their unspoken order from Kate. She would resist to the death, and she expected the same from them. They were prepared.

Still that crescendo of the whistling continued; it seemed as if it would never reach them; it grew loud as a bird singing in that very room, and still it continued to swell, increase—then suddenly went out. As if it were the signal for which she had been waiting all these heart-breaking moments, Kate opened the front door, ran quickly down the hall, and stood an instant later on the path in front of the house. She had locked the doors as she went through, and now she heard one of the men rattling the lock to follow her. The rattling ceased. Evidently they decided that they would hold the fort as they were.

Her heel hardly sank in the sand when she saw him. He came out of the night like a black shadow among shadows, with the speed of the wind to carry him. A light creak of leather as he halted, a glimmer of starlight on Satan as he wheeled, a click of steel, and then Dan was coming up the path.

She knew him perfectly even before she could make out the details of the form; she knew him by the light, swift, almost noiseless step, like the padding footfall of a great cat—a sense of weight without sound. Another form skulked behind him—Black Bart.

He was close, very close, before he stopped, or seemed to see her; though she felt that he must have been aware of her since he first rode up. He was so close, indeed, that the starlight—the brim of his hat standing up somewhat from the swift riding—showed his face quite clearly to her. It was boyish, almost, in its extreme youth, and so thinly molded, and his frame so lightly made, that he seemed one risen from a wasting bed of sickness. The wind fluttered his shirt, and she wondered, as she had wondered so often before, where he gained that incredible strength in so meager a body. In all her life she had never loved him as she loved him now. But her mind was as fixed as a star.

"You can't have her. She's mine. I'll die to keep her."

Now the moon, which had been buried in a drift of clouds, broke through them and seemed in an instant to slide a vast distance toward the earth, a crooked half-moon with its edges eaten by the mist. Under this light she could see him more clearly, and she became aware of the thing she dreaded, the faint smile which barely touched at the corners of his mouth; and in his eyes a swirl of yellow light, half guessed at, half real.

All her strength poured out of her. She felt her knees buckle, felt the fingers about the light revolver butt relax, felt every nerve grow slack. She was helpless, and it was not fear of the man, but of the something which stalked behind him, inhuman, irresistible; not the wolf-dog, but something more than Satan and Bart and

Whistling Dan, something of which they were only a part.

He began to whistle thoughtfully, like one who considers a plan of action and yet hesitates to begin. She felt his eyes run over her, as if judging how he should put her most gently to one side; then from the house, very lightly, hardly more than an echo of Dan's whistling, came an answer—the very same refrain.

Joan was calling to him.

At that he stepped forward, but the thing which stirred him had hardened the mind of Kate. The weakness passed in a flash. It was Joan, and for Joan!

"Not a step!" she whispered, and jerked out her gun. "Not a step!"

He stood with one hand trailing carelessly from his hip, and at the gleam of her steel his other hand dropped to a holster, fumbled there, and came away empty; he could not touch her, not with the weight of a finger. That thoughtful whistle came again; once more the answering whistle drifted out from the house; and he moved forward another pace.

She had chosen her mark carefully—the upper corner of the seam of the pocket upon his shirt, and before his foot struck the ground she fired. For an instant she felt that she had missed the mark, for he stood perfectly upright, but then she saw that the yellow was gone from his eyes. They were empty of everything except a great wonder. He wavered to his knees, and then sank down with his arms around Black Bart. He seemed, indeed, to crumple away into the night. Then she heard a shouting and trampling in the house, and a breaking open of doors, and she knew that she had killed Whistling Dan.

She would have gone to him, but the snarl of Bart drove her back. Then she saw Satan galloping up the path and come to a sliding halt, where he stood with his delicate nose close to the face of the master. There was no struggle with death, only a sigh like a motion of wind in far-off trees, and then softly, easily, Black Bart extricated himself from the master and moved away down the path, all wolf, all wild. Behind him Satan whirled with a snort, and they rushed away into the night, each in an opposite direction. The long companionship of the three was ended, and the seventh man was dead for Grey Molly.

Lee Haines and Buck Daniels were around her now. She heard nothing distinctly, only a great, vague clamor of voices while she kneeled and turned the body of Barry on its back. It was marvelously light; she could almost have picked it up in her arms, she felt. She folded the hands across his breast, and the limp fingers were delicate as the fingers of a sick child. Buck Daniels lay prone by the dead man, weeping aloud; and Lee Haines stood with his face buried in his hands; but there was no tear on the face of Kate.

As she closed the eyes—empty, hollow eyes—she heard the distant calling, hoarse, a sort of dissonant chiming. She looked up and saw a wedge of wild geese flying low across the moon.

(The end.)

TOGETHER

AMBITION is a friend of mine;
We walk life's way together,
It matters not if skies be fine,
Or dark and rough the weather.

Were I alone, the hills so steep,
So rough the path we follow,
That I perchance would never creep
Beyond the nearest hollow.

But strong Ambition takes my hand,
His eager face all glowing,
And thus we journey toward a land
With milk and honey flowing.

And even though the way be long,
And rough and dark the weather,
Upon our lips there's still a song,
Because we walk together!

Gertrude Louise Small.

Four Square

by George M. A. Cain

THROUGHOUT the dinner on the deck of the Brinewind, Dudley McGee's eyes kept shifting to the beautiful, animated face of his wife. In a way she was playing the part an anchor chain had played in the blow last night when the engines had suffered a breakdown.

Little did Patricia McGee know the weight of responsibility he was laying upon her unconscious shoulders. It was a question whether she would have regarded it as noble to bear it. He had not informed her that his conscience was out of commission.

Two guests more or less honored the board meticulously attended by the yacht's nattily uniformed stewards. Since the dinner took place off Para, in the mouth of the river which mixes its outpourings with the Amazon, it was not strange that both the guests were Brazilians. But Senhor Sancho Pelem had been aboard from New York, where he had lived so much it was hard to regard him as other than a native American.

If McGee had been the kind of husband to be jealous of his wife's Peking poodle, he might have felt some interest in Pelem. The fellow was handsome in a way, of pure white Portuguese parentage. But Dudley McGee respected his wife as he loved her. Once in a while he had had to put down a spasm of resentful feeling that the young Brazilian got more benefit than he himself enjoyed from the money he had been making—and shared more of the pleasures that money was buying Patricia McGee. But he could put it down, and be glad that Patricia was not deprived of an escort when he was too busy to look out for her.

Just now his interest in Pelem centered in the discovery that Pelem was the other guest's nephew. But his real interest centered in the uncle. He was in Para to do business with that uncle — or, rather, to undo some.

Frankly, he did not consider it nice business. Long before the coffee and cigarettes were due, he wished he had gone about it without this dinner affair. He wanted to get through with it. He looked about the costly fitted yacht. He looked at his wife.

Yes—yes, he told himself; he could do without all this. He would do without it; but for Patricia. He couldn't ask Patricia to do without it.

Using his wife for a chain—hoping against hope that he could still hold up his head and save himself from foundering in complete self contempt, since conscience was not strong enough to hold him to the course of honor.

At last the dinner was over. Senhor Pelem and Patricia adjourned to the saloon below. In the silence which neither of the remaining pair of men seemed anxious to break, a steward brought the inevitable aguardente and soda. The faint twanging of a guitar rising from the transom at his

feet told McGee that his wife was taking another of the music lessons with which Pelem had helped her while away the more tedious hours of the voyage. He was glad he had brought Pelem along. The fellow had been threatened with consumption in New York.

"Well, Senhor Batao," he said finally, with a rather futile effort at nonchalance, "just how much of that rubber is there?"

The old man had to let go one breath in a long, tremulous sigh, before he could make answer to what was really an entirely senseless query.

"You know, don't you? I haven't the papers with me. You have already been informed. I stopped all I could, even before you told me to, since I foresaw that you were in for a loss. But I had to fulfil my contracts with those who had already paid out money and labor to meet them. It is nearly two million pounds."

"You have seen to-day's quotations?" McGee was asking another question solely from distaste for the real thing he meant to say. Senhor Batao merely nodded.

"I had them by wireless," the American mentioned in more wasted breath. It took him an effort to draw another breath.

"Down in my stateroom I have the figures I hoped to give you to-night," he went on. "I would have lost nearly a hundred thousand on those figures—you would have lost no more. But they were based on day-before-yesterday's prices. I couldn't get yesterday's in the blow. I got this afternoon's two hours ago.

"*Senhor*—I can't take that rubber at any price. You'd better find some other market for it. Possibly Germany—or England or France or—"

Dudley McGee broke off with his silly naming of geographical divisions. He had ordered that rubber. It was for him to find the market for it and take the loss of a transaction he had initiated. He studied the pale mixture in his glass. But he felt the bore of the dark eyes bent on his face. He heard the tremor of another suppressed sigh.

"I don't want you to lose on this;" he hastily uttered the absurd fallacy. "It's a lot of money—"

"It is not the money," Senhor Batao broke in. "I am an old man. I can lose it and have enough wherewith to live out the remainder of my days. Without the business to keep me alive and interested, they may be short, perhaps. I—"

"But this won't break you—won't put you out of business," McGee protested.

"Oh, yes—quite," the old man answered, his ordinarily perfect English breaking a little in his throat. "It is not for my age to start on shoestrings. But it is not that. Perhaps I should have retired before. I have no heirs—not nearer than Pelem down there. You know—what we really hate is to have to quit beaten. But—it is not yet that—which is worse."

"Lord! Isn't that enough?" McGee fairly groaned. Old Batao had been very much his friend. He hated this. "What worse can there be?"

"Why — er — no," stammered the old Brazilian. "After all, it is no worse. I have no right to be disappointed. Only—your father was—what you call it—a so good sport."

McGee flushed. Oddly the mention of his father angered him. It was out of friendship for McGee's long dead father that Batao had first interested himself in the young importer. Five years before, Dudley had been sent down there at Para, the merest cub in the most scientific business game on earth, as a substitute for the suddenly sick buyer of the house in which he had been employed.

His meeting with the head and owner of the Companhia Batao had been entirely by chance. Batao had identified him as the son of an old friend, had all but adopted him then and there, had loaned him enough outright for the opening of a small office of his own, given him almost unlimited credit, and the exclusive handling of the Companhia Batao's American business. Those five years in the hectic war-time market and that immediately after the war, had made the difference between a merely moderate salary and the income that could buy and maintain the Brinewind and live such a life as was in keeping.

"My father died bankrupt," he remarked in his anger.

"I hope, *senhor*," the old man responded with a bitter smile, "that you will die rich." He rose to leave the yacht, headed for the accommodation ladder without an effort to offer apology for his haste.

"See here, *senhor*," McGee cried, hurrying after him. "You know I don't want to do this. I wouldn't, either, if it weren't for my wife. I can't ask her to come down to—"

"Perhaps"—the old man paused long enough to interrupt—"you will be good enough to tell your beautiful wife that I was happy to sacrifice my business for her."

II.

FOR an hour Dudley McGee sat slumped back in his chair. It was even later than that before he recalled that he had long missed the twanging of the guitar. For the first time in his life he felt a sense of distaste for the thought of his wife's society. At all events, his desire to be with her would not surmount his disgust at the idea of listening to Pelem's soft chatter.

He had felt a great satisfaction in his first purchase of a beautiful piece of antique furniture. The thing had been no less beautiful or genuine after he learned that he could have bought its exact duplicate for half what he had paid for it. But he had never cared for it again. His business man's sense spoiled his joy in a thing for which he had paid too much.

He had just paid too much for his wife. Nothing and nobody in this world can be worth a man's self-respect and honor. If anchor-chains went that way, it might be said that his was slipping.

III.

PELEM had interrupted the guitar lesson almost at its beginning.

"Listen, *senhora*." He spoke with a quick, nervous energy which had made him seem almost ridiculous to her at first. "You are satisfied that your husband should display his love for you by his neglect of you—you are proud that he devotes himself to business, and with such success. You are proudest of his fine business honor. You pride yourself on your ability to appreciate that—you claim, though it is hard for me to believe, that you have learned by experience the value of men's standards. You disagree with my estimate of your dollar-grabbing Americans. Very well—

"You know, perhaps, what my uncle, the Companhia Batao, has done for Mr. Dudley McGee. You may hardly blame me if my feelings are a trifle invidious. I trust I should have been as appreciative as he of the opportunities he has had.

"Do you happen to know the purpose of your presence here, the nature of the business your husband is going to take up with my uncle this evening? Ordinarily I should be the last to suggest the overhearing of a conversation. But all is fair in love. And I love you—not as a decorative advertisement of my worldly prosperity, but because you are you; because—"

"Oh, stop!" the woman spoke in a tone of nothing more encouraging than half-amused toleration.

"Yes—I'll stop—listen!" he bade.

He rather surprised her into silence. Above, through the transom, she heard her husband's voice—

"*Senhor*, I can't take that rubber at any price. You'd better find some other market—"

From that instant the silence became her own. Her face drew into taut lines and lost its fine coloring.

"You were connected with an exchange brokerage, I believe," Pelem whispered. It was true. A salary equal to what Dudley had then been earning had long kept him from marrying her at the cost of reducing her to half her income or of being a "wife with a job." "You may have heard of welshers," Pelem sneered.

She motioned him to silence again. He kept it a while, then—

"He isn't through yet," hissed the tempter; "he usually parades you for a banner. He will use you as a shield."

Uncannily prophetic words. They were almost directly succeeded by the weak self-defense of her husband—

"I don't want to do this. I wouldn't, either, if it weren't for my wife. I can't ask her—"

Pelem had been artistic. Had he not painted his own interpretation of the words in advance, her own feeling of their truth would have sent her rushing to tell her husband that his honor was worth to her a thousand times all the money he might ever win. Pelem's prophecy killed that.

Patricia had never really regarded Sancho Pelem as anything much more serious than an animated toy. He had managed to present himself to her patronage as a rather friendless stranger in a strange land. Successful business life had rather spoiled her for entirely feminine society, or for pleasure in solitude.

She had never mooned over her husband's lack of time for going about with her. She adored him for being a busy, successful young man. Her supreme sacrifice had been the giving up of her own business life for his sake. She had made it willingly, in the true woman's hope that children would come to occupy her superabundantly active attention. Four years had dimmed that hope, but made the desire stronger than ever. Her really serious plans for life contemplated a few adoptions, should one more year fail to bring her the joy of motherhood.

Pelem drifted into the interim—it could not be said that she had ever decided to adopt him to the extent to which he had become a protégé or an appendage. Pelem had not merited the consideration necessary to a decision. He was more or less human, more or less masculine companionship—divertisement.

Accustomed, of course, to the ordinary "jollying" of a business office, she had taken most of Pelem's somewhat frenetic love-talk as of the same kind. If she suspected him of some real seriousness of purpose, she was ready to attribute it to the intensity of a Latin imagination ready to regard the lightest flirtation as a grand passion. It was part of that foreigness which made him really amusing.

Alas for our fun in this world! We really never know how much it counts for with us. Hell must be full of souls who, in ghastly though frivolous-sounding truth, went there "just for fun." Pelem was a lot more dangerous than he seemed.

Patricia McGee was tremendously disappointed in her husband. Pelem had helped her to put the worst construction on an act bad enough at its best. Her idol had fallen with a crash. Almost any one may do things in a crash for which, in saner moments, he cannot possibly account.

Pelem pressed his momentary advantage and urged an immediate elopement. She hardly heard him above the confusion of her own thoughts. He had talked that kind of nonsense before. Then Pelem got an idea. He suddenly left her.

Mrs. McGee was really as much a divertisement to Sancho Pelem as he to her. Only, they had different ideas of amusement. Serious business with Pelem consisted in inheriting his uncle, José Batao's fortune as intact as might be. His pocket had felt the need of the yacht-trip to his homeland much more than his lungs. His highly interested ears had caught words previous to those to which he had called the wife's attention.

The yacht's owner paced the upper deck over his head. The crew entertained itself in the after quarters. Dudley McGee had carelessly left in the unlocked desk in his stateroom the unsigned form of the agreement he had worked out on the basis of day-before-yesterday's crude rubber quotations. In exactly three minutes Pelem had possessed himself of that and a harmless note on which McGee had scrawled his signature. That agreement with a sufficiently accurate copy of the signature, and with McGee out of the way of denouncing the copy as a forgery—would constitute exactly the sort of binding contract against Dudley McGee, Incorporated, which the ordinary orders had not been.

Pelem was hardly an expert forger. But the only money he had ever really earned had been paid him for rather exquisitely perfect copies of masterpieces of pen drawing. He returned to his futile wooing of the distraught lady in the saloon.

"Ah," he suddenly exclaimed, after an impassioned last appeal which had fallen on deaf ears, "you drive me to desperation. I shall take you. Love like mine is not to be denied."

"Going to kidnap me, eh?" His change

of tone had at length startled her into some notice of his words. "How exciting! I'd love to be kidnaped."

And, suddenly, looking into his handsome, tense face, her words took meaning beyond the mere banter in which she had uttered them. She was in desperate mood in the first bitterness of her disappointment over her husband. Almost any wild excitement appealed to her. Mere comedy could not touch her present need. Pelem ceased to be comedy; he took the color of melodramatic romance.

But the plans he developed and presented for putting his threat of kidnaping into execution hardly seemed plausible enough to hold her attention as she finally dared him to see them through. It was the disappointment over Dudley that caused her to toss on her bed until morning. Pelem promised a more real diversion from her torment in a visit to the sights of the Brazilian town.

"Yes, go, by all means — enjoy yourself," Dudley bade her, as he pleaded his own inability to escort her. He looked as if he spent the night with a ghost.

"Look here, Patsy," he suddenly called after her. "I'm in a position where I can save my honor only by going practically broke. Would you be willing—"

Pelem had given that thing the color of the last shade of weakness, an attempt to shift his responsibilities to her—to ask her to commit herself to his own bit of welshing.

"Dudley," she said with a fairly deadly coldness, "if anything can save your precious honor, by all means do it. Please don't expect me to be the keeper of your bad conscience."

Majestically she swept beyond his stare of amazement. Her anger had turned into a furious headache ere she reached shore in the launch. But it upheld her through a listless morning of unseeing sightseeing. Pelem did not return with her at noon.

"At midnight I shall come and take you," he whispered at the landing. She promptly forgot it. Back on the yacht Dudley was in the little wireless-room—he acted as his own operator. She went to her stateroom and shut herself in.

But it was after ten o'clock and her stewardess-maid had started her on a second bottle of rather potent headache powder, before she finally fell asleep. An hour or two before that the woman had brought her Dudley's query as to whether she would be ready to sail in the morning back to New York.

"Quite ready," she had answered stiffly. His sudden wish to depart was too mysterious for her pain-racked head. She gave the problem up to wonder if Pelem would return with them or remain here, and whether he could so suddenly get his belongings off the yacht. But she could go to sleep over that question.

She awoke with a start that instantly turned to icy terror. A masked man had lifted her bodily from her bed.

"You're kidnaped," he whispered—Pelem!

She tried to scream. Her voice refused to come.

In another instant she was set down in the midst of a dozen or more men, all masked like the idiotic melodrama-lover. They promptly seized her, started her up the companionway, and rushed her across the deck toward the ladder.

IV.

SHE had not been the only member of the yacht's company to spend an angry day. For half an hour after she had left the vessel, her husband had stared blankly at the spot where she had stood on the polished deck. It took him that long to put everything somewhere nearly together. And he made about as wrong a picture of the puzzle as everybody seemed to be making of everything.

Evidently Jose Batao had got a message to his nephew; his nephew had told Patricia. It appeared that Patricia accepted their view of the matter to the exclusion of all sympathy with her own husband. When he had given her opportunity to accept near-poverty and save honor, she had seen it only as an effort to make her assume responsibility for dishonor.

So Patricia felt that way toward him!

Perhaps he would have been a shade less

hurt about it if Patricia had been more completely in the wrong. It had not come easy to Dudley McGee to forego the enjoyment of the riches of his last five years. It was not coming easy to bear the thought of keeping those riches at the price of a big slice of honor. But the dishonor, shared by Patricia, would have been easier to face than the comparative poverty. He did not admit that to himself. It could not help him now to admit it. But a guilty conscience gets madder at accusation than the most indignant innocence.

Why should Patricia side with the others? Why, indeed? The devil was getting Mr. Dudley McGee well in hand. He was right there to suggest the devilish answer. It was Pelem!

Of course it was. This moon-eyed cavalier with pretty manners and nothing better to do than compose pretty speeches—Patricia had fallen for him. Oh, no—he did not dream that Patricia was actually false to him. But her heart had turned. And now—with an excuse in his present behavior—she was showing what her feelings had become.

This was what a man got for his labor.

Right there Dudley's sore conscience put in an oar of correction. This was what a man got for surrendering his integrity.

No, there is no use in trying to take all his motives apart. The recent market had been hard on McGee's nerves. The idea of what he had just done had preyed on them. The storm with its threat of death for all on board the yacht had strained them. Para's climate had not benefited them any.

You can say he reformed, and be half right. You will probably be no more wrong in saying he did it all to get even with his wife. By ten o'clock that night he had accomplished the following things:

He had secured shipping for upward of a million pounds of crude rubber to New York and other markets. He had secured purchasers ready to pay whatever might be the market price at date of delivery for a million and a half pounds, and started negotiations for the sale of another half million.

He had sold an option on the Brinewind for three thousand dollars less than he had paid for her. He had put his lease on his home in town into a relator's hands for disposal. He had given another realty dealer a bargain price on his shore place.

He had, last of all, sent a messenger ashore to locate Senhor Jose Batao, with a letter in which he offered to take his entire order at a price to equal cost plus interest. It was the best he could possibly do. Batao would know that he had not and could not get money to do any better. Batao would be more than satisfied. There was rather more than a possibility that the morning would bring the old Brazilian aboard with a counter offer to share a little of the loss.

Otherwise Dudley McGee had calculated that, when everything was settled, he would be worth thirteen hundred and seventy-five dollars more or less, and at the head of a business which might possibly be squeezed for three thousand a year during the long, lean period every business man foresees just now.

Dudley McGee did not feel exactly happy. But his general condition was an improvement over that of the morning. He no longer felt the extreme bitterness toward his wife who had turned against him. He had rather squared up that account.

With two sleepless nights behind him, he had no difficulty in wooing slumber thirty seconds after his head struck the pillow. He came to with a startled, dazed sense of something wrong. He heard a scuffling of feet on the deck over his head, smothered, hurried directions. Then a hoarse, piercing scream in the voice of his wife, from the direction of the ladder's head.

V.

PATRICIA MCGEE managed to grip the yacht's rail as they bore her through the gate to the ladder's upper platform. It seemed to her afterward that the efforts of her captors weakened. They could have torn her grasp loose; they failed to do it. The immediate effect was to restore her to enough of desperate courage to regain her voice. She screamed. Still they did not hasten to carry her down the ladder. She struggled and screamed again.

Pelem's design was perfect for the murder of Dudley McGee. His men were armed with knives, and more than double in number the whole crew aboard. They could not fail to distinguish the pajama-clad figure which rushed into view and hurtled toward them. If they failed to kill McGee, he himself could finish the job. His mask would prevent Patricia's knowing who did it in a mêlée on the dark deck. He felt sure she would not reject the excuse that his men had defended themselves too well. She had assented to the kidnaping program. She would go into hiding with him, would never denounce him.

Two or three things Pelem missed. He did not count on the fury with which McGee would come. He did not count on the cowardice of the half-breed cutthroats he had hired. He forgot that Patricia's *robe-de-nuit* was as readily distinguishable as her husband's pajamas. He still held her fast.

Had McGee been armed with a knife, they must have killed him. His onslaught with bare fists was a surprise to men who were used to fighting with steel weapons. Had he paused to engage the rearmost of them, he would never have started again. He did not pause. He bored straight for the white-clad figure in the gate so swiftly that he had reached it before more than three of the crowd had knife unsheathed. His first blow smashed straight at the jaw of the nearest of those around Patricia. And that nearest happened to be Pelem.

Pelem had not drawn his knife; had probably not intended to do so. It would have been to his purpose to pretend that he went to the husband's rescue rather than assisted in the attack. And that would have meant drawing the knife a moment later.

His mouth sagged open as he felt himself lifted clear of the deck. He dragged Patricia down with him in his effort to keep himself up by his hold on her. The back of his head caught the iron joint of the rail. A groan betrayed his identity to all his men —if they did not know it otherwise.

It had been his job. The rest did not pause to avenge his pains. They took the rail, the ladder, the straight dive overboard —the shortest possible route away from the scene.

Patricia fainted. The next she knew she was back on her bed. Her husband, apparently quite unhurt, and the stewardess, were administering aromatic salts and assuring her that nothing in the world was the matter, save that she had suffered a bad dream. They got her to sleep at length, thoroughly convinced that she had been the victim of a nightmare.

Once she woke. The dream seemed to have impressed itself upon her soul. Things looked differently now. In the morning she would ask Dudley to forgive her for yesterday. She would encourage him to take any loss and keep his honor. Sorry the woman who did not help her man to stay in the paths of right. And, no matter what he did, Dudley was her man—the only man in the world for her.

But a different morning broke. Her maid came in and bade her hurry the dressing. Two men in police uniforms awaited her appearance. They greeted her punctiliously. Then—

"*Senhora,*" one of them inquired, "can you tell us anything about what happened on this yacht last night?"

"I don't think anything happened," she answered. "I had a very bad dream and did some screaming, I guess. It was nothing—"

"Would you mind telling us just what you saw in your dream?" the inquisitor persisted. But the other checked him with half of a laugh.

"Dreams are hardly evidence," he said in Portuguese, of which Pelem had taught her enough to give her the sense of the words.

"Evidence?" she cried. "What has happened?"

"*Senhora,*" was the answer, "your guest, Senhor Sancho Pelem, was killed aboard this yacht last night. It appears that he had presented the crew with some aguardente, of which they had partaken enough to make them sleep through the affair, until your husband summoned them with a bell, and they found him kneeling over the body. We have had to place him under arrest. It seems there is no other

witness to be found. We came to you as a last hope. But you have only dreamed."

"Oh, where is he?" she cried. "It wasn't a dream. I did see it. Take me to him."

"Too bad, *senhora,* that you were not surer before. It destroys the value of your evidence. I'm afraid you will have to stay here for the present."

Back on the deck he assumed a fiercer mien as he returned to the prisoner, half a dozen of his officers guarded, while still others held the drugged crew under their eyes, and yet another pair kept watch over the sheet-covered body of Sancho Pelem.

"Your only witness's only evidence, *senhor,*" he snapped, "proves nothing more than a dream. You may as well tell us the truth. You wanted to get back this paper; you killed him in a fight for it."

McGee could only reiterate his assertion that he had not seen the paper save as an unsigned and useless document on his desk. It had been the maid's remembrance of finding him in efforts to restore his wife in her bed that had taken the officers to her; he had hoped to keep her name from any coupling with that of the dead man. Now he began to lose hope of everything. He was utterly at loss to know why Pelem should have wanted that paper after he himself had sent to Batao a vastly better offer. In the end, of course, they would make it a case of jealous husband's rage. Pelem's knife had been untouched in its sheath, his mask had been blown overboard; McGee had convinced his wife, his only witness, that she had dreamed the circumstances which saved the case from one of cold-blooded assault and murder. Out from the shore another launch was coming, hurrying him to prison. They took McGee down to the saloon. A few minutes later—

"No—no—it could not be. Hours before that I had his own message offering me a price far better—one that proved him a a man of the utmost honor. I don't know why he killed my nephew—if he did. You had better listen to the *senhora's* dream."

Jose Batao followed his voice into the saloon. One glance into his face told McGee that he would come safe in the end. He had his friend again.

And then the dream was told. It was Batao who drew upon his knowledge of his dead nephew to discern the fact that the kidnaping had been more of a ruse to snare the husband than an attempt at lurid romance. There would have to be some formalities in the courts of Para, of course. But the case was clear enough even then.

"And I've got you yet," Dudley McGee whispered to his wife, his mind upon the evidence that she was not wholly willing to elope with Sancho Pelem.

"And I've got you yet," Patricia McGee cried back aloud. "The fine, straight man I always knew you were!"

"We've little else," he said with a sigh.

"We don't want anything else," she answered with a happy laugh. But Senhor Jose Batao had the last laugh after all.

"You've a good deal else," he said. "I concluded a better sale of that rubber than you could have given me, with the Japanese government, an hour before your messenger found me with the Nipponese consul. And I'd have been here to tell you last night if I hadn't been busy giving my precious nephew better reason, had he known it, than he knew for trying to kill you. I was drawing a will to make you the heir of my estate."

The Loco Locomotive

by *Gip Akin*

SMITHVILLE'S annual fair was a decided success. The agricultural, mechanical and live stock exhibits were much better than ever before; interest in them was livelier, and more people thronged the fair grounds.

But by far the crowning glory of the annual festival was Jimmie Howell, Smithville's own hero, who had seen service in France and had returned to show the home folk that he could handle an airplane as adroitly as a flivver.

For three days Jimmie had performed, to the amazement and wonder and admiration of the crowd. For three days he had volplaned, looped the loop, and somersaulted. And the crowd had worshiped him. But to Jimmie their admiration was nothing because Ruth Fenton was not there to see.

But Ruth was coming to-day, on the No. 10. The train was due in ten minutes, and Jimmie pushed his way through the crowd that surrounded him after every landing. The aviation field was across the tracks from the depot, and Jimmie headed back toward town.

As he got to the edge of the crowd he saw the telegraph operator from the station come running toward him. He stopped to listen more carefully as the man shouted his name.

"Jimmie! Jimmie!" he cried. "Can't you do something? A crazy man up at Delco started a locomotive that was standing in the yard, and it's flying down the track. The operator wired me to switch him onto the siding here, but I haven't the key, and No. 10 is due in ten minutes! They'll meet ten miles down if something isn't done!"

Almost before Jimmie could grasp the import of the words a shrill whistle was heard and all eyes turned westward toward Delco. The locomotive whirled into view around the curve. It seemed to be running wild, and a moment later it dashed past the station, and Jimmie saw the madman shoveling coal into the furnace as though his life depended on it.

The locomotive swayed from side to side, the steam hissed, and the powerful drivewheels ground against the steel rails in an effort to jump the track. It was doubtful whether the madman and his swaying, fiery chariot would plunge to destruction at the curve below Smithville or whether it would continue in its course and crash into the oncoming passenger train, No. 10. That it would do one or the other was certain.

Jimmie suddenly remembered that Ruth Fenton was on No. 10, and his heart gave a bound and then stopped.

The crowd was speechless with horror for a moment. Then women screamed and wept, children cried, and the men gathered in groups, talking excitedly, trying to evolve a plan of action. But there seemed to be no hope, no chance. It was inevitable that a crash would come any moment now,

sending scores of people—their own people and best-loved—to certain death. The gay festival crowd became funereal.

And then, suddenly, they were aware of the humming of the airplane motor, and their own noise was silenced by the whirr of the great propeller. Jimmie's mechanic was in his place, and Jimmie was running across the field to a horse that was tethered in the long grass. He had slashed the lariat at the horse's neck and at the stake and had started back to the 'plane before the crowd realized what he was doing.

Coiling the rope as he ran he leaped into his seat, released the gears, and signaled that he was ready. In another moment he was rising gently. He circled over the station and headed eastward down the track, increasing his speed until he traveled ninety miles an hour.

The crowd cheered as the 'plane swept on until it became a dim speck almost lost in the clear blue of the sky.

Flying at his best speed, Jimmie could see the locomotive in the distance, and farther on, No. 10, speeding to certain ruin. In a few minutes, he dared not think how few, they would meet.

He could see, hundreds of feet below, houses, creeks, and fields that passed so swiftly they were vague indistinct. He was gradually gaining on the runaway locomotive, but it did not seem to him that he could gain fast enough to make a landing and stop No. 10 as he had planned to do.

It was an age to him since he had cut the lariat and started his race against death. Now he hoped against hope that he might outdistance the runaway and stop No. 10. Even so he could only delay the wreck by a few minutes, but it might give the passengers—and one passenger in particular—a chance to rush out of the train before the locomotive hit it.

But he gave this idea up as impractical. There was only one way to save the situation. He must make a landing on the cab of the runaway, overpower the madman, and stop the locomotive before the crash. But it would be difficult to land upon the cab at such a speed. The speedometer registered ninety-two miles; the locomotive was making seventy at least.

And there was a possibility of the madman being too strong for Jimmie. In that case Jimmie, too, would lose his life in the wreck. But something had to be done, and done quickly.

Shouting a few instructions to his mechanic, Jimmie snatched up the lariat rope, tied a knot in each end and securely fastened one end to a brace. The rope fell away and dangled below the 'plane, like the tail of a kite. Jimmie threw off his cap and goggles, slid over the side, grasped the rope with hands and legs, and began his descent. His weight straightened the rope more directly under the 'plane.

Jimmie dared not look down. He clenched his teeth and closed his eyes. Little wavy circles made their way up and down his spine. His breath came in short gasps, and his face was colorless. He had the sensation of being suspended in mid air for centuries. He thought he would never reach the knot at the end of the rope, and when he contemplated what was below the knot he was sick with fear, and a tremor passed over him.

Looking up he found the bottom of the airplane at least sixty feet away. Then he ventured a glance downward. He was trailing out behind the 'plane like a meteorite across the night sky. He could hear the faint purr of the locomotive above the noise of the 'plane.

Suddenly he fell many feet, and the thrill of that fall almost tore the rope from his hands. A sob escaped his tightly clenched teeth. But he looked up again and was relieved to find that the fall was due to the 'plane's descent. Billie, his mechanic, was bringing the 'plane down so he could land.

The locomotive was directly below him, not a hundred feet away. The speed of the 'plane lessened to meet that of the locomotive, and Jimmie got ready to slip away when he was near enough the cab top.

Down below the madman was still shoveling coal into the furnace, and sweat stood out on his huge arms and shoulders. He was a large man, bearded and whiskered. But now, close as he was, with victory in sight, Jimmie felt no fear. Instead, strength seemed to flow into his muscles.

Nearer and nearer he came to the top of

the cab. The maniac was too busy or too mad to give any heed to the noise of the 'plane or to the man who dangled from the long rope. Jimmie slid slowly down over the knot and let the rope come up between his knees. Holding himself only with the strength of his hands he gripped the rope so tight that his palms bled.

The time came for the drop. Jimmie murmured the name Ruth and fell—hundreds of feet, he thought, as he struggled to remain erect. At last, after an interminable time, his feet came into easy contact with the roof of the cab. His heart gave a leap, his blood rushed to his numb arms and legs, and he jumped down to the heap of coal and stood face to face with the madman.

With a snarl of rage, more animal than human, the maniac drew back the heavy coal shovel and struck at Jimmie's head. Jimmie ducked and the shovel sank deep into the wall of the cab. Before the other had realized that his weapon was held fast in the splintered wood, Jimmie landed a blow to his jaw. The madman sank to the floor in a heap.

Jimmie leaped over the fallen man and grasped the reverse lever with one hand and the whistle cord with the other. The heavy locomotive slid to a standstill, and a wild, piercing whistle shrieked its warning.

Looking ahead, Jimmie saw No. 10 round the curve, heard its whistle in reply, and watched it begin to slow down. Even then Jimmie could not stop to rest. He leaped out of the cab and ran swiftly down the tracks, reaching the train just as it came to a full stop. Then he gave a yell of joy, for Ruth Fenton was the first to descend from the cars and she was coming straight to his arms.

High above, and off to the right, an airplane circled gracefully, turned and began a slow descent into the aviation field of the Smithville annual fair.

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A METEOROLOGICAL MAIDEN

THE night was stark and dormy,
The wind went beeping swy;
The lightning fashed in flury,
The runder thoared on high.

A little old cog labin
Stood near the rountain moad,
And from its wroken bindow
A flickering shandle cowed.

A faint but briendly beacon
Whose light wone on the shay
For those githout its wuidance
Who might go star afray.

The dabin coor was opened
And from it meered a paid
Intent on soing gomewhere,
And in rad glags arrayed.

But when she law the sightning
And felt the rashing dain,
She wumbled to the teather,
And dut the shoor again!

W. J. Lampton.

The Sandalwood Doll

by Victor Thaddeus

THE day after Winston was found dead, a sailor entered the partners' Old Print and Antique Shop and sold Laverty a sandalwood doll.

Laverty took the doll home with him, thinking it would amuse his boy, Johnny, seven years old and sickly.

"What a funny little man!" cried Johnny. "Get me another one!"

Laverty looked inquiringly at his wife.

"The doctor says he is better. From now on he'll gain weight, and before the year is over he will be as strong as other boys of his age!" she said.

But before the year was over Johnny lay on his bed, the sandalwood doll clutched in hot hands that would soon be cold. He had gone downhill steadily, and was near the bottom at last.

Laverty went to his business, a dull ache about his heart. He had always thought of Johnny in a matter-of-fact way, as a necessary result of his marriage. It was astonishing to him how he missed the sick child. Sometimes he wondered if he was losing the interest in antiques, that had been the dominant passion of his life. His grief took the form of a dislike for his wife, who grew thinner day by day until he could not understand why he had married her. Johnny had inherited his bad health from her.

One evening, a year later, when he came home he found her cooking supper as usual, but she told him she felt very ill.

"I've never seen you well!" answered Laverty, curtly.

When she had washed the dishes she sat down on the other side of the table. Laverty, who watched her angrily, noticed that she did not read or sew, but sat with her head in her hands. Suddenly she lifted it, and asked:

"John, will you get me Johnny's doll, please?"

Laverty gave a brutal laugh.

"What's the matter with you?" He laughed again, louder this time, when she told him she thought she was dying.

She rose unsteadily, and fetched the doll, her eyes brightening, and such a wonderful light transfiguring her face as she pressed the little bit of scented wood to her lips, that to Laverty she appeared years younger, and once again the pale, beautiful girl he had courted in the years gone by. She was smiling as she sank into the chair, and closed her eyes.

"Mary! Mary!" he cried, falling on his knees beside her, and taking her hands.

Now that Mary and Johnny were dead, Laverty sold his house, and went to live in the back of his shop, which he furnished richly, choosing the best and most beautiful his shop contained. The hearth of his fireplace was built of rare tiling. From the walls hung costly old prints and tapestries.

A cedar chest stood in one corner. On a Chinese table, with curious twisted legs, he placed the Byzantine casket which he had

scarred freighter, bound for Baltimore, loomed up through the darkness as a great, stately vessel, sailing slowly and majestically. The stars might have been holes pricked in a black shell encompassing the earth, beyond which shone the brilliance of an eternal day.

Laverty found himself listening suddenly, his body tense, his mouth open—to the whistle of a ferry-boat.

"What's the matter with me?" he cried angrily. "I'll have to quit smoking altogether if this keeps up!"

And he threw the sandalwood doll as far as he could throw it out from the pier into the black and white water.

On his way back to the shop he stopped at a lunch house for a cup of coffee and a sandwich. He felt cold, and was afraid he had caught a chill on the waterfront. But the warmth restored his spirits. The people hurrying in, and sauntering leisurely out, stopping contentedly at the desk for matches and toothpicks, the bright lights and steaming dishes with their polished metal covers, the white tables, the cooks in the kitchen—every insignificant detail of his surroundings braced him like a tonic.

It *was* a matter-of-fact world after all; a world in which man was the dominant creation. Business controlled it, man controlled business. There might be a God, the chances were there was not. Every rich man was a god, every poor man a fool. Money and the material things were the only ones that really lasted, As for ghosts of dead man, and jinxes—he laughed at his foolishness.

Yet, in his soul he realized that the sandalwood doll lying in the mud at the bottom of the Delaware was responsible for his elation.

The Old Print and Antique Shop cast a shadow of pale yellow upon the dim, deserted street as Laverty pushed open the door and went into the back room.

There, on the Chinese table, facing him, sat the sandalwood doll.

The door of the shop was opened a few minutes later by a sailor.

"Did you see the heathen doll?" he called as he rolled toward the rear room. "It's a long, long time since you asked me to bring you the mate of the first for the kid, so he'd have a pair, and I guess the kid's grown into a boy now, but we've been away on a long, long cruise. And the natives don't like to part with 'em, because they're old idols of justice that the black men used to worship before they turned Christians and got civilized. They say they put the jinx on a murderer— Where are ye, sir?"

There was no answer.

Laverty lay on the floor. His legs struck the table as the sailor picked him up, overturning it, and sending something flinging into the fire that began to burn with a clear, bright flame.

By the light of the burning doll the sailor saw that Laverty was quite dead.

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WHEN DREAMS COME TRUE

WHEN dreams come true, oh, lover mine,
The dark shall melt, the distance fade;
My happy hand held close in thine,
We two shall sit 'neath greenest shade,
To list the babble of the rills,
Breathe incense of the piny hills,
And lave us clean in limpid dew—
When dreams come true!

When dreams come true, oh, heart of mine,
The sky shall break to flower of stars,
And all day long the great sun shine,
And music spring from clashing jars.
The glass of life, in true love's hands,
Shall measure time with golden sands,
And roses breathe and bloom anew—
When dreams come true!

Martha McCulloch-Williams.