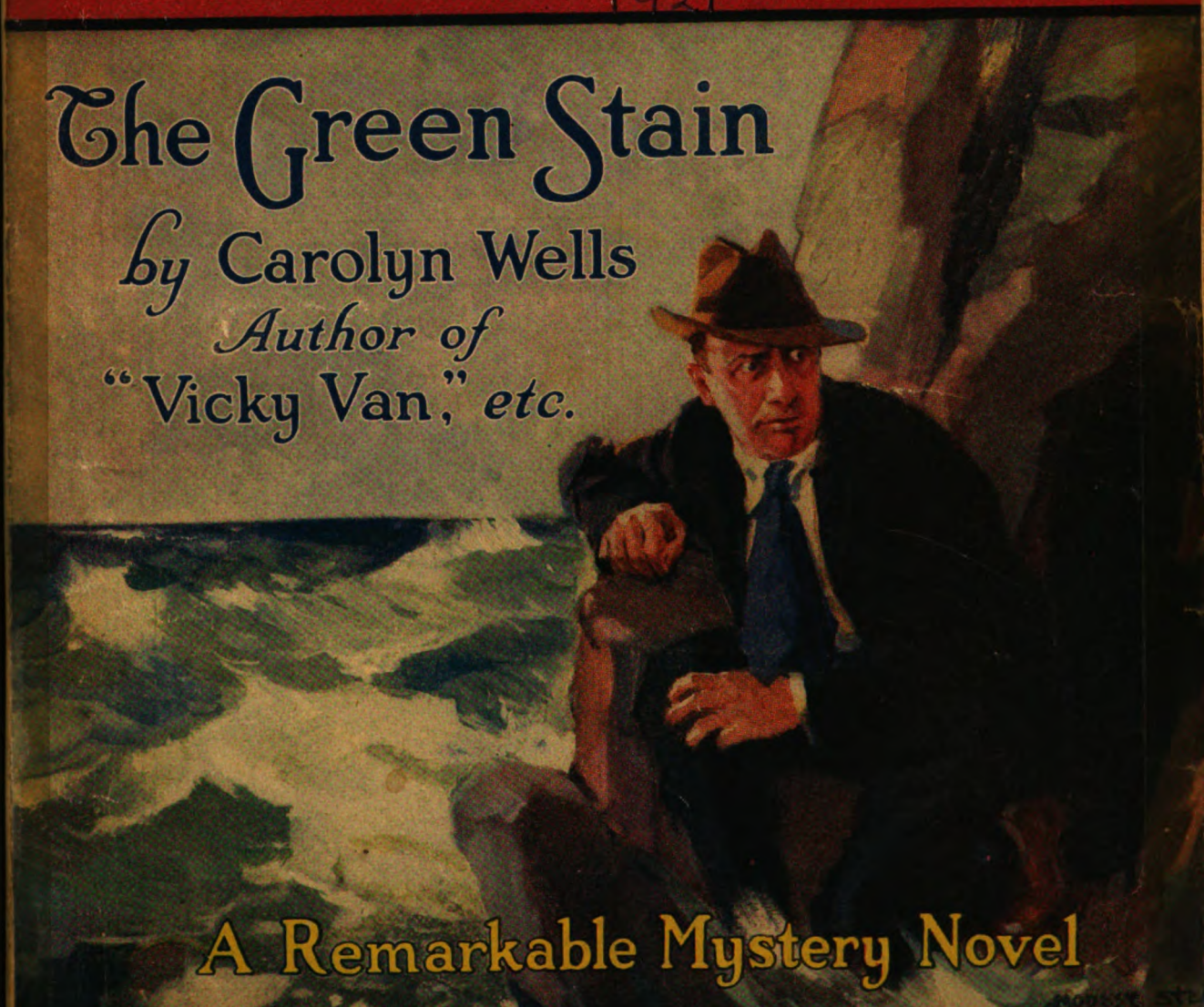
ARGOSY ALL-STORY WEEKLY

1921

The Green Stain

by Carolyn Wells

Author of "Vicky Van," etc.



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By Richard W. Samson

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VOL. CXXXIX CONTENTS FOR DECEMBER 31, 1921 NUMBER 4

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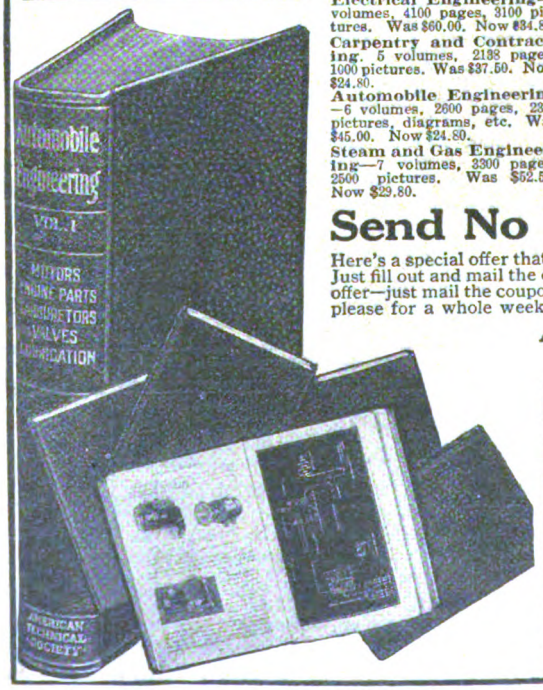

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ARGOSY-ALLSTORY
WEEKLY

VOL. CXXXIX SATURDAY, DECEMBER 31, 1921 NUMBER 4

The Green Stain

Part I

by Carolyn Wells

Author of "Vicky Van," "Tracing the Shadow," etc.

CHAPTER I.

THE HOUSE WITH A SINGLE EXIT.

IT is, of course, possible, perhaps even probable, that somewhere on this green earth there may be finer golf-links or a more attractive clubhouse than those at Headland Harbor, but never hope to wring such an admission from any one of the summer colony who spend their mid-year at that particular portion of the Maine coast.

Far up above the York cliffs are more great crags, and among the steepest and wildest of these a few venturesome spirits saw fit to pitch their tents.

Others joined them from time to time until now the summer population occupied nearly a hundred cottages and bungalows, and there was, moreover, a fair sized and fairly appointed inn.

Many of the regulars were artists, of one sort or another, but also came the less talented in search of good fishing or merely good idling. And they found it, for the majority of the householders were people of brains as well as talent, and by some mysterious management the tone of the social side of things was kept pretty much as it should be.

Wealth counted for what it was worth, and no more. Genius counted in the same way, and was never overrated. Good nature and an amusing personality were perhaps the best assets one could bring to the conservative little community, and most of the shining lights possessed those in abundance.

To many the word harbor connotes a peaceful, serene bit of blue water, sheltered from rough winds and basking in the sunlight.

This is far from a description of Headland Harbor, whose rocky shores and deep black waters were usually wind-swept and often storm-swept to a wild picturesqueness beloved of the picture-painters.

But there were some midsummer days, as now, one in late July, when the harbor waters lay serene and the sunlight dipped

and danced on the tiny wavelets that broke into spray over the near-by rocks.

Because it was about the hour of noon, the clubhouse veranda was crowded with members and guests waiting for the mail, which, as always, was late.

The clubhouse, a big, low building, with lots of shiny paint and weathering shingles, was as near the shore as safety would permit. From it could be had a magnificent view of the great headland that named the place.

This gigantic cliff jutted out into the sea, rising to a height of three hundred feet, and showed a slight overhang which rendered it unscalable. The wet black rock glistened in the sunlight, as spray from the dashing breakers broke half-way up its sides.

The top was a long, narrow tableland, not much more than large enough to accommodate the house that crowned the summit. There was a strip of sparse lawn on either side the old mansion, and a futile attempt at a garden, but vegetation was mostly confined to the weird, one-sided pine trees that waved the branches of their lee sides in mournful, eery motions.

"Can't see how any one wants to live up there in that God-forsaken shack," said John Clark, settling more comfortably in his porch rocker and lighting a fresh cigaret.

"Oh, I think it's great!" Mrs. Blackwood disagreed with him. "So picturesque—"

"You know, if you say picturesque up here, you'll be excommunicated. The thing is all right, but the word is taboo."

"All right, then, chromoesque."

"But it isn't that," Clark objected; "it's more like an old steel engraving—"

"Oh, not with all that color," said Lawrence North. "It is like an engraving on a gray, cloudy day—but to-day, with the bright water and vivid sunshine, it's like a—"

"Speak it right out!" cried Ted Landon, irrepressibly. "Like a picture post-card!"

"It can't help being like that," Mrs. Blackwood agreed, "for the post-cards for sale in the office of the club are more like the reality than any picture an artist has ever made of the Headland House."

"Of course photographs are truer than drawings," North said, "and that card that shows the cliff in a storm comes pretty near being a work of art."

"The difficulty would be," Clark observed, "to get any kind of a picture of that place that wouldn't be a work of art. Why, the architect's blue-prints of that house would come a good deal nearer art than lots of water-colors I've seen in exhibitions. I'm keen on the place."

"Who isn't?" growled Landon, for most of the Headlanders resented the faintest disparagement of their cherished masterpiece, a joint work of nature and man.

The promontory was joined to the mainland by a narrow neck of rocky land, and from that point a rough road descended, over and between steep hills, reaching at last the tiny village and scattered settlement of Headland Harbor.

Headland House itself was a modified type of old world architecture. Built of rough gray stone, equipped with a few towers and turrets, pierced by deep and narrow windows, it had some effects of a French *château* and others that suggested an old English castle.

It was true to no school, it followed no definite type, yet perched on its lonely height, sharply outlined against the sky, its majestic rock foundations sweeping away beneath it, it had the grandeur and sublimity of a well-planned monument.

And, partly because of their real admiration, partly because of a spirit of ownership, the artist colony loved and cherished their Headland House with a jealous sensitiveness.

"Stunning thing—from here," John Clark said after a few moments of smoking and gazing. "All the same, as I stated, I shouldn't care to live up there."

"Too difficult of access," Claire Blackwood said, "but otherwise all right."

Mrs. Blackwood was a widow, young, attractive, and of a psychic turn of mind. Not enough of an occulist to make her a bore, but possessing quick and sure intuitions and claiming some slight clairvoyant powers. She dabbled in water-colors, and did an occasional oil. She was long-limbed, with long fingers and long feet, and usually

had a long scarf of some gauzy texture trailing about her. Of an evening, or even on a dressy afternoon, she had a long panel or sash-end hanging below her short skirt, and which was frequently trodden on by blundering, inattentive men.

Good-looking, of course, Claire Blackwood was—she took care to be that—but her utmost care could not make her beautiful, much to her own chagrin. Her scarlet lips were too thin, and the angle of her jaw too hard. Yet she was handsome, and by virtue of her personality and her implicit belief in her own importance, she was the social leader, although the colony disclaimed any society element in its life.

"Tell us about the Headland House people, Claire. You've called, haven't you?"

This from Ted Landon, who by reason of his sheer impudence was forgiven any unconventionality. No other man at the harbor would have dreamed of addressing Mrs. Blackwood by her first name.

"Yes; I've called. They're delightful people." The words said more than the tone.

"With reservations?" asked North.

"Oh, in a way. They're quite all right—only they're not picture-mad—as we all are."

"Ignorant?"

"Oh, no—not that. Well, I'll sketch them for you. Mr. Varian is a Wall Street man—"

"Magnet?"

"Yes, I dare say. Wealthy, anyway. He's big and Vandyke-bearded. Well-mannered, but a bit preoccupied—if—"

"Yes, we get what you mean," said the irrespressible Ted. "Go on. What about the daughter?"

"I haven't come to her yet. The mother is due first. Mrs. Varian is the clingingest vine I ever saw. I only saw her on parade, of course, but I'm positive that in curl-papers she can whine and fret and fly into nervous spasms! Her husband spoils her—he's far too good to her—"

"What a lot you gathered at one interview," murmured Lawrence North.

"That's what I went for," Mrs. Blackwood returned coolly. "Well, Mother Varian is wrapped up in her blossom child. Betty is a peach—as I know you boys will agree—but I never saw greater idolatry in any mother than Mrs. Varian shows."

"Betty worth it?" asked John Clark idly.

"Rather!" Mrs. Blackwood assured him. "She's a dear thing. I don't often enthuse over young girls, but Betty Varian is unusual."

"As how?"

"Prettier than most girls, more charm, better manners, and—a suspicion of brains. Not enough to hurt her, but enough to make it a pleasure to talk to her. Moreover, she's a wilful, spoiled, petted darling of two worshiping parents, and it's greatly to her credit that she isn't an arrogant, impossible chit."

"Sounds good to me," commented Ted. "When can I meet her?"

"I'll introduce you soon. They want to meet some of our best people—"

"Of course. That lets me in at once. When will you take me?"

"To-morrow afternoon. They're having a small picnic, and they asked me to bring two amusing young men."

"May I go?" asked Lawrence North.

"*Young* men, I said." Mrs. Blackwood looked at him calmly. "You are old enough to be Betty Varian's father!"

"Well, since I'm not, that needn't prevent my meeting her."

"So you shall, some time. But I'm to take two to-morrow, and—what do you think? I said I would bring Rodney Granniss, and Mr. Varian said no; he'd rather I asked some one in his place!"

"Why, for Heaven's sake?" cried Landon. "Rod's our star performer!"

"Well, you see, they know him—"

"All the more reason—"

"Oh, it's this way. Rod Granniss is already a beau of Betty's, and her father doesn't approve of the acquaintance."

"Not approve of Granniss!" John Clark looked his amazement. "Mr. Varian must be an old fuss!"

"I think that's just what he is," assented Claire Blackwood, and then Ted Landon spoke up.

"You haven't described the siren yet. What's she like to look at?"

"A little thing, sylphish, rather—dainty ways, quick, alert motions, and with the biggest gray eyes you ever saw, edged with black."

"Raving tresses?"

"No; very dark-brown, I think. But the liveliest coloring. Red-under-brown cheeks, scarlet lips and—"

"I know—teeth like pearls."

"No; good, sound, white teeth, and fluttering hands that emphasize and illustrate all she says."

"All right, she'll do," and Ted looked satisfied. "I can cut out old John here, and if Granniss is barred, I'll have a cinch!"

"You must behave yourself—at first, anyway, because I am responsible for you. Be ready to go up there with me at four to-morrow afternoon."

"Leave here at four?"

"Yes, we'll walk up. A bit of a climb, but motors can go only to the lodge, you know, and that's not worth while."

The porter's lodge belonging to Headland House was partly visible from the club-house, and it guarded the gates that gave ingress to the estate. There was no other means of entrance, for a high wall ran completely across the narrow neck that joined the headland to the main shore, and all other sides of the precipitous cliff ran straight down to the sea.

From where they sat the group could discern the motor road as far as the lodge; here and there above that could be glimpsed the narrow, tortuous path that led on to the house.

"Grim old pile," Landon said, looking at Headland House. "Any spook connected with its history?"

"I never heard of any," said Mrs. Blackwood. "Did you, Mr. North?"

"Not definitely, but I've heard vague rumors of old legends or traditions of dark deeds."

"Oh, pshaw; I don't believe it!" Mrs. Blackwood shook her head at him. "You're making that up to lend an added interest!"

North grinned. "I'm afraid I was," he admitted, "but if there isn't any legend there surely ought to be. Let's make one up."

"No, I won't have it. I hate haunted houses, and I sha'n't allow a ghost to be invented. The place is too beautiful to have a foolish, hackneyed old ghost yarn attached to it. Just because you were up here last summer and this is the first year for most of us, you needn't think you can rule the roost!"

"Very well," Lawrence North smiled good-naturedly; "have it your own way. But, truly, I heard rumors last year—"

"Keep them to yourself, then, and when you meet the Varians, as of course you will, don't say anything to them about such a thing."

"Your word is law." And North bowed submissively. "Here comes the mail at last, and also here comes Granniss—the disapproved one."

A tall, outdoorsy-looking young man appeared, threw himself into a piazza swing, and asked breezily: "Who's disapproving of me now? Somebody with absolute lack of fine perception!"

"Nobody here," began Landon, and then a warning glance from Claire Blackwood prevented his further disclosures on the subject.

"Don't make a secret of it," went on Granniss. "Own up now; who's been knocking poor little me?"

"I," said Mrs. Blackwood coolly.

"Nixy, Mme. Claire! You may disapprove of me, but you're not the one I mean. Who else?"

"Oh, let's tell him," North laughed; "he can stand the shock. They say, Granniss, you're *persona non grata* up at the house on the headland."

Rodney Granniss's eyes darkened and he looked annoyed. But he only said: "That's a disapproval any one may obtain by the simple process of admiring Miss Varian."

"Really?" asked Claire Blackwood.

"Very really. To call twice is to incur the displeasure of one or both parents; to venture a third time is to be crossed out of the guest-book entirely."

"But, look here, old man," Landon said, "they've only been in that house about a week. Haven't you been rushing things?"

"I knew them before," said Granniss simply. "I've met them in New York."

"Oh, well, then their dislike of you is evidently well-founded!"

But this impudence of Landon's brought forth no expression of resentment from its victim. Granniss only winked at Ted, and proceeded to look over his letters.

It was the first time in the memory of any of the present *habitués* of Headland Harbor that the house on the rocks had been occupied. Built long ago, it was so difficult of access and so high-priced of rental that no one had cared to live in it. But, suddenly, and for no known reason, this summer it had been rented, late, and now, toward the end of July, the new tenants were only fairly getting settled.

That their name was Varian was about all that was known of them until Mrs. Blackwood's call had been hospitably received, and she brought back favorable reports of the family.

It seems Betty was anxious to meet some young people, and Mrs. Varian was glad to learn from her caller that small picnics were among the favored modes of entertainment, and she decided to begin that way.

Next day, she explained, a few house guests would arrive, and if Mrs. Blackwood would bring two or three young men and come herself, perhaps that would be enough for a first attempt at sociability.

This met Mrs. Blackwood's entire approval, and she proposed Rodney Granniss's name, all unsuspecting that he would not be welcomed.

"He's all right, you understand," Mrs. Varian had said, Betty not being then present, "but he's too fond of my daughter. You can tell, you know—and I want the child to have a good time, but I want her to have a lot of young acquaintances, and be friendly with all, while not specially interested in any one. Her father feels the same way—in fact, he feels more strongly about it even than I do. So, this time, please leave Mr. Granniss out of it."

This was all plausible enough, and no real disparagement to Rodney, so Mrs. Blackwood agreed.

"Can I do anything for you?" she asked her hostess at parting. "Have you everything you want? Are your servants satisfactory?"

"Not in every respect." Mrs. Varian frowned. "But we're lucky to keep them at all. Only by the most outrageous concessions, I assure you. If they get too overbearing, I may have to let some of them go."

"Let me know, in that case, and I may be able to help you." And with a few further amenities, Claire Blackwood went away.

"But if I were one of her servants I shouldn't stay with her!" she confided later to a trusted friend. "I never saw a more foolishly emotional woman. She almost wept when she told me about her cook's ingratitude! As if any one looked for appreciation of favors in a cook! And when she talked about Betty, she bubbled over with such enthusiasm that she was again moved to tears! It seems her first two little ones died very young, and I think they've always feared they mightn't raise Betty. Hence, the spoiling process."

"And it also explains," observed the interested friend, "why the parents discountenance the attentions of would-be swains."

"Of course—but Betty is twenty, and that is surely old enough to begin thinking about such things seriously."

"For the girl—yes. And doubtless she does. But parents never realize that their infants are growing up. It is not impossible that Rod Granniss and Miss Betty have progressed much farther along the road to Arcady than her elders may suspect. Why did the Varians come here, where Rod is?"

"I don't suppose they knew it—though maybe Betty did. Young people are pretty sharp. And you know Rod was here in June, then he went away and only returned after the Varians arrived. Yes, there must have been some sort of collusion on the part of the youngsters."

"Maybe not. I dare say Miss Betty has lots of admirers as devoted as young Granniss. Can't you ask me to the picnic?"

"Not this one. It's very small. And there are to be some guests at the house, I believe. The family interests me. They are types, I think. Betty is more than an ordinary flutterbudget, like most of the very young girls around here. And the

older Varians are really worth while. Mr. Varian is a brooding, self-contained sort—I feel sorry for him."

"There, there! That will do, Claire. When you feel sorry for a man—I remember you began by being sorry for Lawrence North!"

"I'm sorry for him still. He's a big man—in a way a genius—and yet he—"

"He gets nowhere. That's because he isn't a genius. But he's a widower, so he's fair quarry. Don't go to feeling sorry for married men."

"Oh, there's no sentiment in my sympathy for Mr. Varian. Only he intrigues me because of his restless air, his restraint, as if he were using every effort to keep himself from breaking through."

"Breaking through what?"

"I don't know! Through some barrier, some limit that he has fixed for himself—I tell you I don't know what it's all about. That's why I'm interested."

"Curious, you mean."

"Well, curious, then. And how he puts up with that hand-wringing, ready-to-cry wife! Yet he's fawningly devoted to her! He anticipates her slightest wish; he is worried sick if she is the least mite incommoded or disturbed; and I know he'd lie down and let her walk on him if she even looked as if she'd care to."

"What a lot you read into a man's natural consideration for his wife!" exclaimed the interested friend.

"But it's there. I'm no fool—I can read people; you know that! I tell you that man is under his wife's thumb for some reason far more potent than his love for her, or her demand for affection from him."

"What could be the explanation?"

"I don't know. That's why I'm curious. I'm going to find out, though, and without the Varians in the least suspecting my efforts. Wait till you see her. She's almost eery, she's so emotional. Not noisy or even verbally expressive, but her face is a study in nervous excitement. She seems to grab at the heart-strings of a mere passer-by and play on them until she tears them out."

"Good gracious—you make her out a vampire!"

"I think she is—not a silly vampire, that the girls joke about, but the real thing."

CHAPTER II.

BETTY VARIAN.

"DAD, you're absolutely impossible."

"Oh, come now, Betty, not as bad as that. Just because I don't agree to everything you say—"

"But you never agree with me! You seem to be opposed on principle to everything I suggest or want. It's always been like that. From the time I was born—How old was I, dad, when you first saw me?"

Mr. Varian looked reminiscent.

"About an hour old, I think," he replied; "maybe a little less."

"Well, from that moment until this you have persistently taken the opposite side in any discussion we have had."

"But if I hadn't, Betty, there would have been no discussion. And usually there hasn't been. You're a spoiled baby—you always have been, and always will be. Your will is strong, and as it has almost never been thwarted or even curbed, you have grown up a headstrong, wilful, perverse young woman, and I'm sure I don't know what to do with you."

"Get rid of me, dad," Betty's laugh rang out, while her looks quite belied the rather terrible character just ascribed to her. One foot tucked under her, she sat in a veranda swing, now and again touching her toe to the floor to keep swaying. She wore a sand-colored sport suit whose matching hat lay beside her on the floor.

Her vivid, laughing face, with its big gray eyes and pink cheeks, its scarlet lips and white teeth, was framed by a mop of dark-brown wavy hair, now tossed by the strong breeze from the sea.

The veranda overlooked the ocean, and the sunlit waves, stretching far away from the great cliff, were dotted in the foreground with small craft.

Frederick Varian sat on the veranda rail, a big, rather splendid-looking man, with the early gray of fifty years showing in

his hair and carefully trimmed Vandyke. His air was naturally confident and self-assured, but in the face of this chit of a girl he somehow found himself at a disadvantage.

"Betty, dear"—he took another tack—"can't you understand the fatherly love that cannot bear the idea of parting with a beloved daughter?"

"Oh, yes, but a father's love ought to think what is for that daughter's happiness. Then he ought to make the gigantic self-sacrifice that may be necessary."

A dimple came into Betty's cheek, and she smiled roguishly, yet with a canny eye toward the effect she was making. But Varian looked moodily out over the sea.

"I won't have it," he said sternly. "I suppose I have some authority in this matter, and I forbid you to encourage any young man to the point of a proposal, or even to think of becoming engaged."

"How can I ward off a proposal, dad?" Betty inquired with an innocent air.

"Don't be foolish. Of course you can do that. Any girl with your intelligence knows just when an acquaintance crosses the line of mere friendship—"

"Oh, daddy, you're *too* funny! And when you crossed the line of mere friendship with mother—what did she do?"

"That has nothing to do with the subject. Now, mind, Betty, I am not jesting—I am not talking idly—"

"You sound very much like it."

"I'm not. I'm very much in earnest. You are not to encourage the definite attentions of any—"

"All right; let Rod Granniss come up here, then, and I promise not to encourage him."

"He shall not come up here, because he has already gone too far, and you have encouraged him too much—"

"But I love him, daddy—and—and I think you might—"

"Hush! That's enough! Don't let me hear another word now or ever regarding Granniss. He is crossed off our acquaintance, and if he persists in staying here we will go away."

"Why, father, we've only just come!"

"I know it, and I came here thinking to get you away from that man. He followed us up here—"

"He was here before we came."

"But he didn't come until he knew we were coming."

"All right—he came because he wanted to be where I am. And I want to be where he is. And you'd better be careful, father, or I may take the bitt in my teeth and—"

"And run off with him? That's why I came here. You can't get away. You perfectly well know there's no way down from this house but by that one narrow path. I suppose you've no intention of jumping into the sea?"

"Love will find a way!" Betty sang saucily.

"It isn't love, Betty. It's a miserable childish infatuation that will pass at once, if you lose sight of the chap for a short time."

"Nothing of the sort! It's the love of my life!"

Varian laughed. "That's a fine-sounding phrase, but it doesn't mean anything. Now, child, be reasonable. Give up Granniss. Be friends with all young people up here, boys and girls both, but don't let me hear any foolishness about being engaged to anybody."

"Do you mean for me never to marry, father?"

"I'd rather you didn't, my dear. Can't you be content to spend your days with your devoted parents? Think what we've done for you—what we've given you—"

"Dad, you make me tired! What have you given me, what have you done for me, more than any parents do for a child? You've given me a home, food, and clothing, and loving care. What else? And what do I owe you for that, except my own love and gratitude? But I don't owe you the sacrifice of the natural, normal expectation of a home and husband of my own! I'm twenty—that's quite old enough to think of such things. Pray remember how old mother was when she married you—she was nineteen. Suppose her father had talked to her as you're talking to me! What would you have said to him, I'd like to know?"

By this time Fred Varian was walking

with quick, short strides up and down the veranda. Betty rose and faced him, standing directly in his path.

"Father," she said, speaking seriously, "you are all wrong. You don't know what you're talking about."

"That will do, Betty!" When Varian's temper was roused he could speak very harshly, and did so now. "Hush! I will not hear such words from you. How dare you tell me I don't know what I'm talking about? Now, you make up your mind to obey me, or I'll cut off all your association with the young people. I'll shut you up—"

"Hush, yourself, dad! You're talking rubbish, and you know it. Shut me up! In a turret of the castle, I suppose—on bread and water, I suppose! What kind of nonsense is that?"

"You'll see whether it's nonsense or not. What do you suppose I took this isolated place for, except to keep you here if you grow too independent? Do you know there is no way you can escape if I choose to make you a prisoner? And if that's the only way to break your spirit, I'll do it!"

"Why, Father Varian!" Betty looked a little scared. "Whatever has come over you?"

"I've made up my mind, that's all. For twenty years I've humored you and indulged you and acceded to your every wish. You've been petted and spoiled until you think you are the only dictator in this family! Now a time has come when I have put my foot down—"

"Well, pick it up again, daddy, and all will be forgiven."

Betty smiled and attempted to kiss the belligerent face looking down at her. But Frederick Varian repulsed the offered caress and said sternly:

"I want no affection from a wilful, disobedient child! Give me your word, Betty, to respect my wishes, and I'll always be glad of your loving ways."

But Betty was angry now.

"I'll give you no such promise. I shall conduct myself as I please with my friends and my acquaintances. You know me well enough to know that I never do anything that is in bad form or in bad taste. If I choose to flirt with the young men, or even, as you call it, encourage them, I propose to do so! And I resent your interference, and I deny your right to forbid me in such matters. And, too, I'll go so far as to warn you that if you persist in this queer attitude you've taken, you'll be sorry. Remember that!"

Betty's eyes flashed, but she was quiet rather than excited. Varian himself was nervous and agitated. His fingers clenched and his lips trembled with the intensity of his feelings, and as Betty voiced her rebellious thoughts he stared at her in amazement.

"What are you two quarreling about?" came the surprised accents of Mrs. Varian as she came out through the French window from the library and looked curiously at them.

"Oh, mother," Betty cried, "dad's gone nutty! He says I never can marry anybody."

"What nonsense, Fred!" She did not take it at all seriously. "Of course Betty will marry some day, but not yet. Don't bother about it at present."

"But daddy's bothering very much about it at present. At least, he's bothering me. Don't let little Betty be bothered, mummy, will you?"

"Let her alone, Fred. Why do you tease the child? I declare you two are always at odds over something!"

"No, Minna; that's not so. I always indulge Betty—"

"Oh, yes, after I've coaxed you to do so. You're an unnatural father, Fred—you seem possessed to frown on all Betty's innocent pleasures."

"I don't want her getting married and going off and leaving us," he growled, still looking angry.

"Well, the baby isn't even engaged yet. Don't begin to worry. And, too, that is in the mother's province."

"Not entirely. I rather guess a father has some authority."

"Oh, yes, if it's exercised with loving care and discretion. Don't you bother, Betty, anyway. Father and mother will settle this little argument by ourselves."

"I'd rather settle it with dad," Betty

declared spiritedly. "It's too ridiculous for him to take the stand that I shall never marry. I'm willing to promise not to become engaged without asking you both first; I'm willing to say I won't marry a man you can convince me is unworthy; I'm willing to promise anything in reason—but a blind promise never to marry is too much to ask of any girl!"

"Of course it is," agreed Mrs. Varian. "Why do you talk to her like that, Fred?"

"Because I propose to have my own way for once. I've given in to you two in every particular for twenty years or more. Now I assert myself. I say Betty shall not marry, and I shall see to it that she does not."

"Oh, my heavens!" Mrs. Varian wrung her hands, with a wail of nervous pettishness. "Sometimes, Fred, I think you're crazy! At any rate, you'll set me crazy if you talk like that! Do stop this quarrel, anyhow. Kiss and make up, won't you? To think of you two, the only human beings on earth that I care a rap for, acting like this! My husband and my child—the only things I live for! The apple of my eye, the core of my soul, both of you—can't you see how you distress me when you are at odds? And you're always at odds! Always squabbling over some little thing. But, heretofore, you've always laughed and agreed finally. Now forget this foolishness—do!"

"It isn't foolishness." Varian set his lips together doggedly.

"No, it isn't foolishness," said Betty quietly, but with a look of indomitable determination.

"Well, stop it, at any rate," begged Mrs. Varian. "If you don't I shall go into hysterics—and it's time now for the Herberts to come."

Now, both Fred and Betty knew that a suggestion of hysterics was no idle threat, for Minna Varian could achieve the most annoying demonstrations of that sort at a moment's notice. And it was quite true that the expected guests were imminent.

But no truce was put into words, for just then a party of three people came in sight and neared the veranda steps.

The three were Frederick Varian's brother Herbert and his wife and daughter. The family was called the Herberts to distinguish them from the Frederick Varian household.

The daughter, Eleanor, was a year or two younger than Betty, and the girls were friendly, though of widely differing tastes; the brothers Varian were much alike; but the two matrons were as opposite as it is possible for two women to be. Mrs. Herbert was a strong character, almost strong-minded. She had no patience with her sister-in-law's nerves or hysterical tendencies. It would indeed be awkward if the Herberts were to arrive in the midst of one of Mrs. Frederick's exhibitions of temperamental disturbance.

"Wonderful place!" exclaimed Herbert Varian as they ascended the steps to the veranda. "Great, old boy! I never saw anything like it."

"Reminds me of the Prisoner of Chillon, or the Castle of Otranto, or—" said Mrs. Herbert.

"Climbing that steep path reminded me of the Solitary Horseman," Herbert interrupted his wife. "Whew! Let me sit down! I'm too weighty a person to visit your castled crag of Drachenfels very often! Whew!"

"Poor Uncle Herbert!" cooed Betty. "It's an awful long, steep pull, isn't it? Get your breath, and I'll get you some nice, cool fruit punch. Come on, Eleanor, help me; the servants are gone to the circus, every last one of them—"

"Oh, I thought you were having a party here this afternoon," Eleanor said, as she went with Betty.

"Not a party—a picnic. They're the proper caper up here. And only a little one. The baskets are all ready, and the men carry them. Then we go to a lovely picnic place—not very far—and we all help get the supper. You see, up here, if you don't let the servants go off skylarking every so often, they leave."

"I should think they would!" exclaimed Eleanor earnestly; I'm ready to leave now! How do you stand it, Betty? I think it's fearful!"

"Oh, it isn't the sort of thing you'd like, I know. Put those glasses on that

tray, will you, Nell? But I love this wild, craggy place; it's like an eagle's aerie, and I adore the solitude—especially as there are plenty of people, and a golf club, and an artist colony, and all sorts of nice things in easy distance."

"You mean that little village or settlement we came through on the way from the station?"

"Yes; and a few of their choicest inhabitants are coming up this afternoon for our picnic."

"That sounds better," Eleanor sighed. "But I'd never want to stay here. Is Rod Granniss here? Is that why you came?"

"Hush, Nell. Don't mention Rod's name—at least, not before father. You see, dad's down on him."

"Down on Rod! What for?"

"Only because he's too fond of little Betty."

"Who is—Rod or your father?"

Betty laughed. "Both of 'em! But, I mean, dad is down on any young man who is specially interested in me."

"Oh, I know. So is my father. I don't let it bother me. Fathers are all like that. Most of the girls I know say so."

"Yes, I know it's a fatherly failing; but dad is especially rabid on the subject. You take the basket of cakes, and I'll carry the tray."

It was nearly five o'clock when the picnic party was finally ready to start for its junketing.

Mrs. Blackwood had arrived, bringing her two promised young men—Ted Landon and John Clark.

Rearrayed in picnic garb, the house guests were ready for the fun, and the Frederick Varians were getting together and looking over the baskets of supper.

"If we could only have kept one helper by us," bemoaned Minna Varian, her speech accompanied by her usual wringing of her distressed hands. "I begged Kelly to stay, but he wouldn't."

"The circus is here only one day, you know, Mrs. Varian," Landon told her, "and I fancy every servant in Headland Harbor has gone to it. But command me—"

"Indeed we will," put in Betty. "Carry this, please; and, Uncle Herbert, you take this coffee paraphernalia."

Divided among the willing hands, the luggage was not too burdensome, and the cavalcade prepared to start.

"No fear of burglars, I take it," said Herbert, as his brother closed the front door and shook it to be sure it was fastened.

"Not a bit," and Frederick Varian took up his own basket. "No one can possibly reach this house, save through that gate down by the lodge. And that is locked. Also the windows and doors of the house are all fastened. So if you people have left jewelry on your dressing-tables, don't be alarmed—you'll find it there on your return."

"All aboard!" shouted Landon, and they started, by twos or threes, but in a moment were obliged to walk single file down the steep and narrow path.

"Oh, my heavens!" cried Betty suddenly. "I must go back! I've forgotten my camera. Let me take your key, father—I'll run and get it in a minute."

"I'll go and get it for you, Betty," said Varian, setting down his burden.

"No, dad, you can't; it's in a closet, behind a lot of other things, and you'd upset the whole lot into a dreadful mess. I know you!"

"Let me go, Miss Varian," offered several of the others; but Betty was insistent.

"No one can get it but myself—at least, not without a lot of delay and trouble. Give me the key, father—I'll be right back."

"But, Betty—"

"Oh, give her the key, Fred!" exclaimed his wife. "Don't torment the child. I believe you enjoy teasing her. There, take the key, Betty, and run along. Hurry, do, for it's annoying to have to wait for you."

"Let me go with you," asked John Clark; but Betty smiled a refusal and ran off alone.

Most of them watched the lithe, slight figure as she bounded up the rugged, irregular steps, sometimes two of them at a time, and at last they saw her fitting the key into the front door.

She called back a few words, but the

distance was too great for them to hear her clearly, although they could see her. She waved her hand smilingly, and disappeared inside the house, leaving the door wide open behind her.

"Extraordinary place!" Herbert Varian said, taking in the marvelous crag from this new view-point.

"You must see it from the clubhouse," said Landon. "Can't you all come here to-morrow afternoon, on my invite?"

"We'll see," Mrs. Varian smiled at him, for it was impossible not to like this frank, good-looking youth.

The conversation was entirely of the wonders and beauties of Headland House, until at last Mrs. Blackwood said: "Isn't that child gone a long while? I could have found half a dozen cameras by this time!"

"She is a long time," Frederick Varian frowned. "I was just thinking that myself. I think I'll go after her."

"No, don't," said his wife nervously. "You'll get into an argument with her, and never get back. Let her alone—she'll be here in a minute."

But the minutes went by, and Betty did not reappear in the doorway.

"I know what she's up to," and Frederick Varian shook his head in annoyance.

Whereupon Mrs. Frederick began to cry.

"Now, Fred, stop," she said. "Herbert, you go up to the house and tell Betty to come along. If she can't find her camera, tell her to come without it. I wish we had a megaphone, so we could call her. Go on, Herbert."

"Stay where you are, Herbert," insisted his brother. "I shall go. It's all right, Minna—I won't tease the child; I promise you. It's all right, dear."

He kissed his wife lightly on the brow, and started off at a swinging pace up the rocky flight of steps.

"I'll fetch her," he called back as he proceeded hastily beyond hearing distance. "Chirk up Minna, Janet; tell her I sha'n't abuse Betty."

"What does he mean by that?" asked Mrs. Herbert of Mrs. Frederick, as she repeated the message.

"Oh, nothing," and Mrs. Frederick clasped her hands resignedly. "Only you know how Betty and her father are always more or less at odds. I don't know why it is—they're devoted to each other, yet they're always quarreling."

"They don't mean anything," her sister-in-law smiled. "I know them both, and they're an ideal father and daughter."

CHAPTER III.

THE TRAGEDY.

HERBERT VARIAN stood slightly apart from the rest of the group, his observant eyes taking in all the details of the peculiar situation of his brother's house. His eye traversed back over the short distance they had already come, and he saw a narrow, winding, and exceedingly steep path. At intervals it was a succession of broken, irregular steps, rocky and sharp-edged. Again, it would be a fairly easy, though stony footway. But it led to the house, and had no branch or side track on any direction.

"Everything and everybody that comes to this house has to come by this path?" he demanded.

"Yes," said Minna Varian, and added complainingly, "a most disagreeable arrangement. All the servants and tradespeople have to use it as well as ourselves and our guests."

"That could be remedied," suggested Varian. "A branch, say—"

"We'll never do it," said Minna sharply. "I don't like the place well enough to buy it, though that is what Fred has in mind."

"No, don't buy it," advised her brother-in-law. "I see nothing in its favor except its wonderful beauty and strange, weird charm. That's a good deal, but not enough for a comfortable summer home."

He turned and gazed out over the open sea. From the high headland the view was unsurpassable. The few near-by boats seemed lost in the great expanse of waters. Some chugging motor-boats and a dozen or so sailing craft ventured not very far from shore. North, along the Maine coast, he saw only more rocky promontories and rockbound inlets.

Turning slowly toward the south, he saw the graceful curve of Headland Harbor, with its grouped village houses and spreading array of summer cottages.

"I never saw anything finer," he declared. "I almost think, after all, Minna, you would be wise to buy the place, and then arrange to make it more getatable. A continuous flight of strong wooden steps—"

"Would spoil the whole thing!" exclaimed Claire Blackwood. Oh, Dr. Varian, don't propose anything like that! We Harborers love this place, just as it is, and we would defend it against any such innovations. I think there's a law about defacing natural scenery."

"Don't bother," said Minna carelessly; "we'll never do anything of the sort. I won't agree to it."

"That's right," said her sister-in-law. "This is no place to bring up Betty. The girl has no real society here, no advantages, no scope. She'll become a savage—"

"Not Betty," Minna Varian laughed. "She's outdoor-loving and all that, but she has nothing of the barbarian in her. I think she'd like to go to a far gayer resort. But her father—"

"Where is her father?" asked Dr. Varian impatiently. "It will be dark before we get to our picnic. Why don't they come?"

He gave a loud halloo, but only the echoes from the rocky heights answered him.

"I knew it!" Minna Varian began to wring her hands. "He and Betty are quarreling—I'm sure of it!"

"What do you mean, Min? What's this quarreling business about?"

"They've always done it—it's nothing new. They adore each other, but they're eternally disagreeing and fighting it out. They're quite capable of forgetting all about us and arguing out some foolish subject while we sit here waiting for them."

"I'll go and stir them up," the doctor said, starting in the direction of the house.

"Oh, no, Herbert. It's a hard climb, and you've enough walking ahead of you."

"I'll go." Ted Landon looked inquiringly at Mrs. Varian.

"Oh, what's the use?" she said: "They'll surely appear in a minute."

So they all waited a few minutes longer, and then Janet Varian spoke up.

"I think it's a shame to keep us here like this. Go on up to the house, Mr. Landon, do. Tell those two foolish people that they must come on or the picnic will proceed without them."

"All right," said Ted, and began sprinting over the rocks.

"I'm going, too," and Claire Blackwood followed Landon.

"We may as well all go and have our picnic on our own veranda," Minna complained, and though Dr. Varian would have preferred that to any further exertions, he did not say so.

"It's always like this," Minna's querulous voice went on. "Whenever we start to go anywhere somebody has to go back for something, and they're so slow and so inconsiderate of other people's feelings—"

"There they go," interrupted Dr. Varian as the two latest emissaries went up over the rocks. "Now the house will swallow them up!"

"Oh, Herbert, don't say such awful things," wailed Minna; "you sound positively creepy! I have a feeling of fear of that house anyway—I believe it would like to swallow people up!"

"Ought we to intrude?" Claire Blackwood laughingly asked of Landon, as they neared the house; "if Betty and her father want to quarrel, they ought to be allowed to do so in peace."

"Oh, well, if they insist, we'll go away again, and let them have it out comfortably. Queer thing, for daughter and dad to make a habit of scrapping!"

"I take Mrs. Varian's statements with a grain of salt," said Claire, sagely. "She's not awfully well balanced, that woman, and I doubt if Betty and her father are half as black as they're painted. Shall we ring the bell or walk right in?"

But this question needed no answer, for as they mounted the steps of the veranda and neared the open front door, they were confronted by the sight of Mr. Frederick Varian, sprawled at full length on the floor of the hall.

"Oh, Heavens, what is the matter?" cried Claire. "The man has had a stroke of something!"

Landon went nearer, and with a grave face, stooped down to the prostrate figure.

"Claire"—he looked up at her with a white face—"Claire, this man is dead."

"What? No, no! It can't be—"

"Yes, he is—I'm almost certain. I don't think I'd better touch him—or should I? It can do no harm to feel for his heart—no, it is not beating. What does it mean? Where's Miss Varian?"

"Think quickly, Ted, what we ought to do." Claire Blackwood spoke earnestly, and tried to pull herself together. "We must be careful to do the right thing. I should say, before we even think of Miss Betty, we should call Dr. Varian up here—"

"The very thing! Will you call him—or shall I?"

Considerately, Landon gave her her choice.

With a shuddering glance at the still figure, Claire said, "You call him, but let me go with you."

They stepped out on the veranda, and Landon waved his hand at the group of waiting people below him.

Then he beckoned, but no one definitely responded.

"I'll have to shout," Ted said, with a regretful look. "Somehow I hate to—" The presence of death seemed to restrain him.

But of necessity he called out: "Dr. Varian! Come here."

The distance was almost too far to for his voice to carry, but because of his imperative gestures Herbert Varian said: "Guess I'll have to go. Lord! What can be the trick they're trying to cut up? I vow I won't come back here! I'll eat my picnic in your dining-room, Minna."

"As you like," she returned, indifferently. "I hate picnics, any way. But for goodness sake, Herbert, do one thing or the other. If you'd really rather not go to the woods, take your baskets, and we'll all go back to the house. It's getting late, anyway."

"Wait a bit," counseled the doctor. "You people stay here till I go up to the house, and see what's doing. Then if I beckon you, come along back, all of you. If I don't break my neck getting up there!"

"Don't go, father!" begged Eleanor. "Let me go. What in the world can they want of you?"

"No—I'll go. I suppose there's a leak in the pipes or something."

Herbert Varian went off at a gait that belied his recalcitrant attitude, and as he neared the house he could see the white faces and grave air of the two that awaited him.

"What's the great idea?" he called out, cheerily.

"A serious matter, Dr. Varian," replied Landon. "An accident—or sudden illness—"

"No!" The doctor took the remaining steps at a bound. "Who?"

For answer, Landon conducted him inside the hall, and in an instant Varian was on his knees beside the stricken man. "My God!" he said, in a hoarse whisper, "Frederick's dead!"

"A stroke?" asked Landon, while Claire Blackwood stood by, unable to speak at all.

"No, man, no! Shot! See the blood—shot through the heart. What does it—what can it mean? Where's Betty?"

"We don't know." Claire spoke now. "Dr. Varian, are you sure he's dead? Can nothing be done to save him?"

"Nothing. He died almost instantly, from internal hemorrhage. But how unbelievable! How impossible!"

"Who shot him?" Landon burst out, impetuously. "Or—is it suicide?"

"Where's the pistol?" said the doctor.

Both men searched, Landon trying to overcome his repugnance to such close association with the dead, but no weapon of any sort could be found.

"I—I can't see it—" Varian wiped his perspiring brow. "I can't see any solution. But this won't do. We must get the others up here. Oh, Heavens, what shall we do with Minna?"

"Let me go down, and take her home with me," suggested Claire Blackwood, eager to do anything that might help or ease the coming disclosure of the tragedy.

"Oh, I don't know—" demurred Varian. "You see, she's got to know—of course, she must be told at once, and then—she'll have to look after Betty. Where is the child? Anyway, my wife is a tower of strength—she'll be able to manage Mrs. Varian, even if she has violent hysterics, which, of course, she will!"

"Command me, Dr. Varian," said Landon. "I will do whatever you advise."

"All right, I'll be glad of your assistance. Suppose you go back to the people down there on the rocks, and then—let me see—suppose you tell my wife first what has happened; then, ask her to break the news to Mrs. Varian. She'll know how best to do it. Then— Oh, Lord, I don't know what then! They'll have to come back here, I suppose. What else can they do? I don't know, Mrs. Blackwood, but your idea of taking Mrs. Varian away with you is a good one. If she'll go."

"She won't go," said Claire, decidedly, "if she knows the truth. If I take her, it'll have to be on some false pretense—"

"Won't do," said Varian, briefly. "We've got no right to keep her in ignorance of her husband's death. No, she must be told. That girl of mine, too—Eleanor. She hasn't her mother's poise, she's likely to go to pieces. Always does, in the presence of death. Oh, what a moil."

"Here's another thing," said Landon, a little hesitantly. "What about the authorities?"

"Yes, yes—" The doctor spoke impatiently. "I thought of that. Who are they, in this God-forsaken place? Town constable, I suppose?"

"I don't know myself," said Landon. "County sheriff, more likely. But Clark's a good, sensible sort. Say we send him down to the village—"

"Oh, must it be known down there right away?" cried Claire. "Before even Mrs. Varian is told? Or Betty? Where *is* Betty?"

"Betty is somewhere in the house," said Dr. Varian in a low voice. "We know that. Now, let that question rest till we decide on our first move. I think, Landon, you'd better do as I said. Go and tell my wife, and, while she's telling Mrs. Varian and my daughter, Eleanor, you can take Mr. Clark aside and tell him. Then—then, I think, you'd all better come back here to the house. We'll send Clark on that errand later—or, we can telephone."

Landon started on his difficult descent, and on his even more difficult errand.

"Can't you put Mr. Varian somewhere —somewhere—" Claire began incoherently.

"I'm not supposed to move a body until the authorities give permission," said Dr. Varian, slowly. "It would seem to me, that in this very peculiar and unusual case, that I might—but that's just it. I've been thinking the very mysteriousness of this thing makes it necessary for me to be unusually circumspect. Why, Mrs. Blackwood, have you any idea what we have ahead of us? I can't think this mystery will be simple or easily explained. I don't—"

"What do you think—"

"I don't dare think! Isn't there a phrase, 'that way madness lies'? Well, it recurs to me when I let myself think! No, I won't think—and I beg of you, don't question me! I'm not a hysterical woman—but there are times when a man feels as if hysterics might be a relief!"

"Then let's not think," said Claire, tactfully, "but let me try to be helpful. If Mrs. Varian is coming here, do you advise that we—cover—Mr. Varian with—"

"With a sheet, I suppose. Do you know where to find one?"

"No. I've never been up-stairs—and then, after all, isn't a sheet even more gruesome than the sight as it is at present? How about a dark cover?"

"Very well. Find one." The doctor spoke absorbedly.

Glancing about, Claire noticed a folded steamer rug on the end of the big davenport in the hall. Fetching that, she laid it lightly over the still form.

"Now, about Betty," said the doctor, coming out of his brown study. "She is in the house, probably hiding—from fear."

"Oh, do you think that? Then let us find her?"

"We can't both go. Will you remain here and meet the others or shall I stay here while you go to look for the girl?"

Claire Blackwood pondered. Either suggestion was too hard for her to accept.

"I can't," she said, at last. "I'm a coward, I suppose, but I can't search this great, empty house—for Betty. And if she were in it, she would surely come here to us—"

Dr. Varian looked at her.

"Then I'll go," he said, simply. "You stay here."

"No!" Claire grasped his arm. "I can't do that either. Oh, Dr. Varian, stay here with me! Think—these are not my people. I'm sympathetic, of course, but I'm terrified—I'm afraid—"

"There's nothing to fear."

"I can't help that—I won't stay here alone. If you leave me, I shall run down the path to meet them."

"Then I'll have to stay here. Very well, Mrs. Blackwood, they'll arrive in a few moments. We'll wait for them together."

And then Varian again fell to ruminating, and Claire Blackwood, sick with her own thoughts, said nothing.

At last they heard footsteps, and looked out to see the little procession headed by the two sisters-in-law.

Janet Varian was half supporting Minna, but her help was not greatly needed, for the very violence of Minna's grief and fright gave her a sort of supernormal strength, and she walked uprightly and swiftly.

"Where's Frederick?" she demanded, in a shrill voice as she came up the steps. "And where's Betty? Where's my child?"

Her voice rose to a shriek on the last words, and Dr. Varian took her by the arm, giving her his undivided attention.

"Be careful now, Minna," he said, kindly but decidedly; "don't lose your grip. You've a big trouble to face. Do try, dear, to meet it bravely."

"I'm brave enough, Herbert; don't worry about that. Where's Fred, I say!"

"Here," was the brief reply, and Varian led her to her husband's body.

As he had fully expected, she went into violent hysterics. She cried, she screamed, then her voice subsided to a sort of low, dismal wailing, only to break out with renewed shrieks.

"Perhaps it's better that she should do this than to control herself," the doctor said; "I wish we could get her to bed."

"We can," responded his wife promptly. "I'll look after that. Give a look to Eleanor, Herbert."

The harassed doctor turned his attention to his daughter, who was controlling herself, but trembling piteously.

"Good girl," said her father, taking her in his arms. "Buck up, Nell, dear. Dad's got a whole lot on his shoulders, and my, how it will help if you don't keel over!"

"I won't," and Eleanor tried to smile.

Claire Blackwood approached the pair.

"Dr. Varian," she said, "suppose I take your daughter home with me for the night—or longer, if she'll stay. It might relieve you and your wife of a little care, and I'll be good to her, I promise you. And, if I may, I'd like to go now. I can't be of any service here, can I? And as Miss Eleanor can't, either, what do you think of our going now?"

"A very good idea, Mrs. Blackwood." The doctor's face showed grateful appreciation. "Take one of the young men with you, and leave the other here to help me."

"We'll take John Clark," Claire decided, "and Ted Landon will, I know, be glad to stand by you."

The three departed, and then the sisters-in-law left the room and went up-stairs, Minna making no resistance to Janet's suggestions.

Left alone with the dead Dr. Varian and young Landon looked at each other.

"What does it all mean?" asked the younger man, a look of absolute bewilderment on his face.

"I can't make it out," returned the other, slowly. "But it's a pretty awful situation. Now the women are gone, I'll speak out the thing that troubles me most. Where's Betty?"

"Who? Miss Varian? Why, yes, where is she? She came for her camera, you know. She—why, she must be in the house."

"She must be. That is, I can't see any alternative. I understand there's no way

out of this house, save down the path we took."

"No other, sir."

"Then if the girl's in the house, she must be found."

"Yes." Landon saw the terrible fear in the other's eyes, and his own glance responded. "Shall we search the rooms?"

"That must be done. Now, I'm not willing to leave this body of my brother unattended. Will you watch by it, while I run over the house or the other way about?"

"I'll do as you wish, Dr. Varian. But if you give me a choice I'll stay here. I've never been in the house before, and I don't know the rooms. However, I want to be frank—and the truth is, I'd rather not make that search, even if I did know the rooms."

"I understand, Mr. Landon, and I don't blame you. I've never been in the house before either—and I don't at all like the idea of the search, but it must be made, and made at once, and it's my place to do it. So, then, if you'll remain here I'll go the rounds."

Ted Landon nodded silently and sat down to begin the vigil he had been asked to keep.

Herbert Varian went first up-stairs to Minna's room. Opening the door softly he discovered the widow was lying quietly on her bed. Janet, sitting by, placed a warning forefinger against her lip, and seeing that the patient was quiet, Varian noiselessly closed the door and tiptoed away.

He stood a moment in the second-story hall, looking upward at a closed door, to which a narrow and winding staircase would take him.

Should he go up there, or search the two lower stories first? He looked out of a window at the foot of the little stair.

It gave west, and afforded no view of the sea. But the wild and inaccessible rocks which he saw proved to him finally that there was no way of approach to this lonely house save by that one and only path he had already climbed. He sighed, for this dashed his last hope that Betty might have left the house on some errand or some escapade before her father had reached it.

With vague forebodings and a horrible sinking at his heart he began to ascend the turret stair.

CHAPTER IV.

THE SEARCH.

DR. HERBERT VARIAN was a man accustomed to responsibilities. More, he was accustomed to the responsibilities of other people as well as his own. Yet it seemed to him that the position in which he now found himself was more appalling than anything he had ever before experienced, and that it was liable to grow worse rather than better with successive developments.

Varian had what has been called "the leaping mind," and without being unduly apprehensive, he saw trouble ahead, such as he shuddered to think about. His brother dead, there was the hysterical widow to be cared for. And Betty in hiding—

He paused, his hand on the latch of the door at the top of the stair.

Then, squaring his shoulders he shook off his hesitation and opened the door.

He found himself in a small turret room, from which he went on to other rooms on that floor. They were, for the most part, quite evidently unoccupied bedrooms, but two gave signs of being in use by servants.

Varian paid little heed to his surroundings, but went rapidly on hunting for the missing girl.

"Betty," he called softly. "Betty, dear, where are you? Don't be afraid—Uncle Herbert will take care of you. Come, Betty, come out of hiding."

But there was no answer to his calls. He flung open cupboard doors, he peered into dark corners and alcoves, but he saw no trace of any one, nor heard any sound.

Two other tiny staircases led up to higher turrets, but these were empty, and search as he would he found no Betty, nor any trace of her.

Unwilling to waste what might be valuable time, Dr. Varian went down-stairs again.

Then, one after another, he visited all the

rooms on the second floor, but found no sign of his niece.

He went again to the room where the women were and beckoned his wife outside.

"Minna is asleep?" he asked in a whisper.

"Yes," Janet replied, "but only because of that strong opiate you gave her. She tosses and moans."

"I dread her waking. What are we to do with her? And, Janet, where is Betty? I've been all over these upper floors—and now I'll tackle the rooms down-stairs, and the cellar. The girl must be found—"

"Herbert! Did you ever know such a fearful situation? And—as to—Frederick—don't you have to—"

"Yes, yes, of course; the authorities must be called in. Don't think I haven't realized that. But first of all we must find Betty—dead or alive!"

"Don't say that!" Janet clutched at his arm. "I can't bear any more horrors."

"Poor girl, you may have to. Brace up, dear; I've all I can do to—"

"Of course you have." His wife kissed him tenderly. "Don't be afraid. I won't add to your burdens, and I will help all I can. Thank Heaven that kind woman took Eleanor away with her."

"Yes; but I dare say we ought to have kept them all here. There's crime to be considered, and—"

"Never mind, they're gone—and I'm glad of it. You can get them back when necessary."

"But it's a mystery. What shall I do first? I never felt so absolutely unable to cope with a situation. But the first thing is to hunt further for Betty."

Dr. Varian went on through the yet unsearched rooms, on to the kitchen, and on down to the cellar. He made a hasty but careful search, flinging open closets, cupboards and storerooms, and returned at last to the hall where Ted Landon sat with folded arms.

"I can't imagine where Betty can be." Varian sank wearily into a chair.

"She must be in the house," said Landon, wonderingly, "for there's no way out, except down the path where we all were."

"There's a back door, I suppose."

"I mean no way off the premises. Yes, there must be a back door—you know I've never been in this house before."

"No. Well, look here, Landon—the authorities must be notified; the local doctor ought to be called in, and all that. But first, I want to find Betty. Suppose I stay here—I admit I'm pretty tired—and you take a look out around the back door and kitchen porch. By the way, the servants will be coming home soon—"

"No, they were to stay out for the evening, I think Mrs. Varian said."

"But those people who went back to the village will, of course, talk about it, and soon we'll have all kinds of curious visitors."

"All right, Dr. Varian, I'll do just as you say."

The younger man went on his errand, and going through the kitchen found the back porch. To reach it he had to unlock the outside door, thus proving to his own satisfaction that Betty had not gone out that way.

But he went out and looked about. He saw nothing significant. The porch was pleasant and in neat order. A knitting-bag and a much-bethumbed novel were evidently the property of the cook or waitress, and an old cap on a nail was, doubtless, the butler's.

He took pains to ascertain that there was no path or road that led down to the gate but the path that also went from the front door, on which he had stood when Betty returned to the house.

He had seen her enter the house, had seen her father go in a few moments later. Now where was the girl?

Back to the kitchen Landon went, and in the middle of the floor he noticed a yellow cushion. It was a satin-covered, embroidered affair, probably a sofa cushion or hammock pillow, but it seemed too elaborate for a servant's cushion. Surely it belonged to the family.

The kitchen was in tidy order, save for a tray of used glasses and empty plates on a table.

Landon picked up the pillow—and then, on second thought, laid it back where he had found it. It might be evidence.

An open door showed the cellar stairs. Conquering a strong disinclination, Landon went down. The cellar was large and seemed to have various rooms and bins, and some locked cupboards. But there was nothing sinister about it; the rooms were for the most part fairly light and the air was good.

Remembering that Dr. Varian had already searched down there for Betty, Landon merely went over the same ground, and returned with the news of his failure to find the girl.

"No way out?" queried the doctor briefly.

"None, except by passing the very spot where we all were when Betty ran back to the house. No other way—at least, no ordinary way. But I've been thinking. It sounds melodramatic, I know, and isn't at all probable—still an airplane might have picked her up. Or she might have fallen into the sea."

The two men stared at each other in tense silence.

"We should have heard a plane," said Varian, pulling himself together, "and the other—it's unthinkable! This won't do. It's a case for the police. How shall we get them?"

"I don't know anything about the police, but if you telephone the inn or the clubhouse they'll tell you. The local doctor is Merritt—I know him. But he couldn't do anything. It isn't necessary when you're here?"

"It's customary, I think. You call Merritt, will you, and I'll speak to the innkeeper."

The telephoning was just about completed when a fearful scream from up-stairs announced the fact that Minna Varian had awakened from her opiate sleep and had returned to a realization of her troubles.

Slowly Dr. Varian rose and went up the stairs.

He entered the bedroom too find Minna sitting up in bed, wild-eyed and struggling, and Janet urging her to lie still.

"Lie still?" she screamed. "I will not. Come here, Herbert. Tell me—where is my child? Why is Betty not here? Is she dead, too? Tell me, I say!"

"Yes, Minna," Varian returned quietly, "I will tell you all I can. I do not know where Betty is, but we've no reason to think she is dead—"

"Then why doesn't she come to me? Why doesn't Fred come? Oh, Fred is dead—isn't he?"

And then the poor woman went into violent hysterics, now shrieking like a maniac and now moaning piteously, like some hurt animal.

"The first thing to do," said Dr. Varian decidedly, "is to get a nurse for Minna."

"No," demurred his wife, "not to-night, anyway. I'll take care of her, and there will be some maid servant who can help me. There was a capable-looking waitress among those who went off this afternoon."

"The servants will surely return as soon as they hear the news," Varian said, and then he gave all his attention to calming his patient.

Again he placed her under the influence of a powerful opiate. By the time she was unconscious the local doctor had arrived.

Varian went down to find Dr. Merritt examining the body of his brother.

The two medical men met courteously, the local doctor assuming an important air, principally because he considered the other his superior.

"Terrible thing, Dr. Varian," Merritt said; "death practically instantaneous."

"Practically," returned the other. "May have lived a few moments, but unconscious at once. You know the sheriff?"

"Yes; Potter. He'll be along soon. He's a shrewd one. My Heavens! Who did this thing?"

Dr. Merritt's formality gave way before his irrepressible curiosity. He looked from Dr. Varian to Ted Landon and back again, with an exasperated air of resentment at being told so little.

"We don't know, doctor," Landon said as Varian said nothing. "We've no idea."

"No idea! A man shot and killed in this lonely, isolated house and you don't know who did it? What do you mean?"

In a few words Varian detailed the circumstances, and added: "We don't yet know where Miss Varian is."

"Disappeared! Then she must have shot her father—"

"Oh, no!" interrupted Landon. "Don't say such an absurd thing!"

"What else is there to say?" demanded Merritt. "You say there was nobody in the house but those two people. Now, one is here dead, and the other is missing. What else can be said?"

"Don't accuse a defenseless girl," advised Varian. "Betty must be found, of course. But I don't for a minute believe she shot her father."

"Where's the gun?" asked Dr. Merritt.

"Hasn't been found," returned Varian briefly. "Mrs. Varian, my brother's wife, is hysterical. I've been obliged to quiet her by opiates. Dr. Merritt, this is by no means a simple case. I hope your sheriff is a man of brains and experience. It's going to call for wise and competent handling."

"Potter is experienced enough. Been sheriff for years. But as to brains, he isn't overburdened with them. Still, he's got good horse sense."

"One of the best things to have," commented Varian. "Now, I don't know that we need keep Mr. Landon here any longer. What do you think?"

"I don't know," said Merritt thoughtfully. "He was here at the time of the—the crime?"

"Yes; but so were several others, and they've gone away. As you like, Mr. Landon, but I don't think you need stay unless you wish."

"I do wish," Ted Landon said. "I may be of use, somehow, and I'm deeply interested. I want to see what the sheriff thinks about it, and I want to try to find, or help to find, Miss Betty."

"Betty must be found," said Varian as if suddenly reminded of the fact. "I am so distracted between the shock of my brother's death and my anxiety over his wife's condition, that for the moment I almost forgot Betty. That child must be hiding somewhere. She must have been frightened in some fearful way, and either fainted or ran away and hid out in the grounds somewhere. I'm positive she isn't in the house."

"She couldn't have gone out the back door," said Landon. "It was locked when I went to it."

"She couldn't have gone out at the front door or we should have seen her," Varian added. "She stepped out of a window then."

"Are you assuming some intruder?" asked Merritt wonderingly.

"I'm not assuming anything," returned Varian, a little crisply, for his nerves were on edge. "But Betty Varian must be found—my duty is to the living as well as to the dead."

He glanced at his brother's body, and his face expressed a mute promise to care for that brother's child.

"But how are you going to find her?" asked Landon. "We saw Miss Varian enter this house—"

"Therefore she is still in it—or in the grounds," said Varian positively. "It can't be otherwise. I shall hunt out of doors first before it grows dusk. Then we can search the house afterward."

"You have searched the house."

"Yes, but it must be gone over more thoroughly. Why, Betty or—Betty's body must be somewhere. And must be found."

Dr. Merritt listened, dumfounded. Here was mystery indeed. Mr. Varian dead, shot, no weapon found, and his daughter missing.

What could be the explanation?

The hunt out of doors for Betty resulted in nothing at all. There was no kitchen garden, merely a drying plot and a small patch of back yard, mostly stones and hard ground. This was surrounded by dwarfed and stunted pine trees, which not only afforded no hiding-place, but shut off no possible nook or cranny where Betty could be hidden. The whole tableland was exposed to view from all parts of it, and it was clear to be seen that Betty Varian could not be hiding out of doors.

And since she could not have left the premises, save by the road where the picnic party were congregated, or by airplane or by falling over the cliff—both of which Dr. Varian refused to consider—there was no supposition but that she was still in the house.

"Can you form any theory, Dr. Varian?" Landon asked him.

"No, I can't. Can you?"

"Only what Dr. Merritt suggests—that Miss Varian killed her father and then hid somewhere."

"But where? Mind you, I don't for a moment admit she killed her father, that's too ridiculous! But whoever killed him may also have killed her. It is her body I think we are more likely to find."

"How, then, did the assassin get away?"

"I don't know. I'm not prepared to say there's no way out of this place—"

"But I know that to be the fact. Here comes the sheriff, Dr. Varian. That's Potter."

They went in the house again and found the sheriff and another man with him.

Merritt made the necessary introductions, and Dr. Varian looked at Potter.

"The strangest case you've ever had," he informed him, "and the most important. How do you propose to handle it?"

"Like I do all the others, by using my head."

"Yes, I know, but I mean what help do you expect to have?"

"Dunno's I need any yet. Haven't got the principal facts. Dead man's your brother, ain't he?"

"Yes."

"Shot dead and no weapon around. Criminal unknown. Now, about this young lady—the daughter. Where is she?"

"I don't know, but I hope you can find her."

And then Dr. Varian told in his straightforward way of his search for the girl.

"Mighty curious," vouchsafed the sheriff with an air of one stating a new idea. "The girl and her father on good terms?"

"Yes, of course," Varian answered, but his slight hesitation made the sheriff eye him keenly.

"We want the truth, you know," he said thoughtfully. "If them two wasn't on good terms, you might as well say so, 'cause it 'll come out sooner or later."

"But they were—so far as I know."

"Oh, well, all right. I can't think any girl would shoot her father. I won't think that—lessen I have to. But, good land, man, you say you've looked all over the house—where's the murderer, then?"

"Suicide?" laconically said the man who had come with the sheriff.

It was the first time he had spoken. He was a quiet, insignificant chap, but his eyes were keen and his face alert.

"Couldn't be, Bill," said the sheriff, "with no weapon about."

"Mighta been removed," the other said in his brief way.

"By whom?" asked Dr. Varian.

"By whoever came here first," Bill returned, looking at him.

"I came here first," Varian stated. "Do you mean I removed the weapon?"

"Have to look at all sides, you know."

"Well, I didn't. But I won't take time now to enlarge on that plain statement. I'll be here; you can question me when and as often as you like. Now, Mr. Potter, what are you going to do first?"

"Well, seems to me there's no more to be done with Mr. Varian's body. You two doctors have examined it; you know all about the wound that killed him. Bill, here, has jotted down all the details of its position and all that; now I think you can call in the undertakers and have the body taken away or kept here till the funeral—whichever you like."

"The funeral!" exclaimed Dr. Varian, recognizing another responsibility for his laden shoulders. "I suppose I'd better arrange about that, for my sister-in-law will not be able to do so."

"Jest's you like," said Potter. "Next, I'll investigate for myself the absence of this girl. A mysterious disappearance is as serious a matter as a mysterious death—maybe more so."

"That's true," agreed Varian. "I hope you'll be able to find my niece, for she must be found."

"Easy enough to say she must be found—the trick is to find her."

"Have you any theory of the crime, Mr. Potter?" Landon asked.

"Theory? No, I don't deal in theories. I may say it looks to me like the girl may have shot her father, but it only looks that way because there's no other way, so far, for it to look. You can't suspect a criminal

that you ain't had any hint of, can you? If anybody now turns up who's seen a man prowling round, or seen any mysterious person, or if any servant is found who, say, didn't go to the circus, but hung behind, or—"

"But if there's any such, they or he must be in the house now," Bill said quietly. "Let's go and see."

The two started from the room, and Landon, after a glance at Dr. Varian, followed them.

"I don't see," Landon said to Potter as they went to the kitchen, "why you folks in authority always seem to think it necessary to take an antagonistic attitude toward the people who are representing the dead man! You act toward Dr. Varian as if you more than half suspected he had a hand in the crime himself!"

"Not that, my boy"—and Potter looked at him gravely—"but that doctor brother knows more than he's telling."

"That's not so! I know. I came up here to the house with him. I was with him when he found his brother's body—"

"Oh, you were? Why didn't you say so?"

"You didn't ask me. No, I don't know anything more. I've nothing to tell that can throw any possible light on this business, but I do know that Dr. Varian had no hand in it and knows no more about it than I do."

"Good land! I don't mean he killed his brother—I know better than that. But he wasn't frank about the relations between the girl and her father. Do you know that they were all right? Friendly, I mean?"

"So far as I know they were. But I never met them until to-day. I can only say they acted like any normal, usual father and daughter."

"Oh, well, it doesn't matter. It 'll all come out—that sort of thing. Now to find the girl."

(To be continued NEXT WEEK.)

The Hurricane Test

by Eugene Jones

JUDKINS BELLEW believed he knew men. That was not his only remarkable trait, but he felt it was the cornerstone on which he had built his success. Now, sitting at his desk as chief engineer and construction boss of the Palm Island Railway project, he watched with pride the approach of the company's steamer, Half Moon.

It signified a great many things to him. The steamer would not have been operating between the mainland and this distant mangrove key except for Bellew. And that fact pointed to another; the whole gigantic scheme was his own! He first had seen the commercial advantages of linking Key West with Florida. And it was his original plans which were slowly becoming a reality,

When he had suggested bridging an arm of the sea his friends had laughed and assured him that no capitalist would invest in so fantastic an enterprise. Yet Bellew had found such a capitalist. He had not sought a Rockefeller or a Morgan, but a cotton king who longed to erect a commercial monument to himself. Again his judgment of men!

Through the open window of his office in the little board shack came the blast of the steamer's whistle. A crowd of workmen had gathered on the dock to meet her. Bellew swept his quiet eyes along the fringe of mangrove bushes, past a clump of palmettoes to where the white line of the concrete viaduct stretched to the horizon. A brass sun glared down on the key until one could smell the melting tar on the bunkhouse roofs. It brought the chameleons and yellow and black lizards to bask; it set the mangrove swamp a-crawl with life. But Bellew, indifferent to the heat, didn't mind. Such a sun meant only one thing to him—more rapid drying of the cement in the molds.

His office was situated on a slight rise—a sandy spot flanked by palmetto scrub and small, twisted water-oak. From here he commanded a view of the whole island.

To the north lay the little harbor, protected from the long swells of the Atlantic by twin breakwaters, while just inside the breakwaters the unfinished railroad trestle reared itself. Bellew knew that a swift, dangerous current swept through the harbor entrance, and so he had constructed the rock walls to keep the sea from gnawing at the under-pinning of his viaduct. He would have closed the harbor entirely had it not been for the Half Moon which must have a place to land the daily supply of provisions and fresh water.

Picking up a spy-glass, he examined the ragged end of the nearest concrete span. Little black dots crawled over its surface like so many ants; a spindling crane swung bucket after bucket of cement from a scow moored alongside; and on the still air came the voices of men intermingled with the chug and rumble of machinery.

With a contented smile, Bellew lowered his glass, turning his attention once more to the Half Moon. Now she was warping into the dock. In a moment several figures jumped ashore and two of them, one of whom the engineer recognized as the captain, started toward the shack on the rise.

When they entered Bellew was seated at his desk.

"Morning, boss!" greeted the skipper (They seemed to like to call Bellew "boss"). "Here's your mail and—a new hand." He turned to the man beside him. "What'd yer say yer name was?"

His companion's smile had a queer twist to it, as if it had been worn threadbare. "Smith 'll do," he replied, "Bust Smith."

Bellew dismissed the captain with a nod. Then to the other: "Sit down; I'll talk to you directly."

For the next five minutes he seemed to give his entire attention to his mail, but in reality he was studying the man who sat loosely in the single wooden chair. Smith belonged to that pathetic family of down-and-outs, which follows at the heels of every construction gang—so much was apparent at a glance. He wore a pair of dirty blue overalls belted at the waist with a piece of rope, a torn undershirt and black sneakers. His arms and face were deeply bronzed, his hands calloused and his hair bleached to sand color by the sun. Big boned, broad shouldered, yet thin to the point of emaciation, he was hardly more than a heroic sized skeleton. His face appeared wedge-shaped, due to the hollows under the cheek-bones, yet it was not a bad face. At some earlier and more prosperous period he might even have been considered good looking. But now he wore that hang-dog, don't-care expression, common among men who have tried and failed and admitted their failure.

All this Bellew had been up against before. Dozens of his employees came to him that way, half starved and sometimes burning with malarial fever. He had seen miracles worked by a few square meals. But there was something puzzling about Smith. It might have been his eyes which were mocking and cynical and rather haggard; or it might have been his utter lack of interest in his fate. He sat on the chair as if some one had pitched him there, gaz-

ing dully at the ceiling, and not even taking the trouble to glance toward the man to whom he had applied for a job.

Presently Bellew leaned his elbows on the desk. "Let's have your *real* name," he requested.

"What?" he mumbled.

"I asked you what your real name was," repeated the engineer patiently. "Who are you? Where do you hail from, and what do you know?"

Smith smiled grimly. "Bust Smith, nobody, nowhere and nothing!" he replied. And, as an afterthought: "I don't really want a job."

"Then be good enough to get out—"

The person in blue overalls waved his arm. "Hold on!" he muttered. "I'm hungry; I'd forgotten that. If you've got anything a no-account, flea-infested tramp can do I'll take a shy at it. Inner man, you know."

"Inner man—"

"Sure! Natural craving for food. My last meal only a sweet and distant memory— Go on, kick me out; you've got a perfectly good excuse!" He stretched and resumed his regard of the ceiling.

Bellew smoked a moment in silence. If he was angry he did not show it. "Listen," he said at length. "Go over to that second shack and tell Jim—he's the nigger you'll find there—to give you something to eat. Then come back."

"Thanks, but I'm not an object of—"

The engineer came to his feet. "You do what I say!" he thundered. "I'm boss here!"

Again that mocking smile twisted Smith's lips. He nodded, hitched up his overalls and went.

It was a full half hour before he returned, and during that time Bellew had completed the reading of his mail. "Did you get fixed up all right?" he asked carelessly.

Smith took the wooden chair. "Name the job," he answered, "and make it stiff if you want to come out even."

"Very well! Give me your history; that's the job. Then we'll be square."

"It isn't necessary—"

"Yes, it is! It's the only way you can earn your dinner!"

The other frowned. "Of course if you put it like that—My name's Smith all right. James, H.—Bust, for short, and because it's more descriptive—I was born of poor but honest parents, worth something over a million. They sent me to Harvard, where I learned how to spend my share of the pittance. Then"—he snapped his fingers and grinned—"Fluey! We went broke. The market, you know. It killed dad, and mother"—his voice softened, so Bellew thought—"well, she died a year later—I've tackled everything from vaudeville to piano-moving and it's no go. I'm as useless a piece of clay as God ever put together. Now, no lectures, please; they don't help."

The engineer drew on his pipe thoughtfully. "Harvard? That was my college. Do you know anything about railroading?"

"I've ridden on a train," admitted Smith.

"Shipping?"

"The Thirty-Fourth Street Ferry marks my longest voyage—except crossing to this jumping-off place. Say, what's the use of this third degree, anyway? I tell you I'm as worthless as a hole in a cruller! Haven't you ever met a real bum before?"

Bellew searched Smith's shrunken face. "So you've settled the matter in your own mind; you're bound to be a complete and teetotal failure?"

"That's it—only I didn't settle it."

"Then who did?"

"My jinx," returned Smith indifferently.

The engineer considered this a moment. "Is there anything in the world you'd *enjoy* doing?" he asked at length.

"Of course! I'd *enjoy* getting into evening clothes with a valet to hold my trousers and a limousine waiting at the door. After that, the theater. God, how I'd enjoy it!" His tense expression faded; he laughed. "A nice pipe-dream for me, eh?"

"Not an impossible dream," returned Bellew calmly. "A while back you asked me if I didn't know a worthless bum when I saw one. Yes, I do. I know them better than you ever will; I hire and fire 'em every day in the year. And Smith, if you want to join the procession, keep right on; but you've got a long way to go!"

"*I* have?"

"Certainly; you're only at the half-way point. There're two perfectly good reasons why every man should work. The first is my reason—because I love it; and the second ought to be yours—because work will get you the valet and the limousine."

Smith leaned forward, his eyes suddenly dark with anger. "What do you take me for? Don't you suppose I've tried every kind of job under the sun?"

"No; you've just dabbled here and there hunting for easy money. First you've got to make good for the job's sake; then the money will come! Listen, people say I'm a rather keen judge of men. Here's my judgment of you—if it's worth anything to you— You're a failure because you've got it firmly fixed in your dome that you must be. Perhaps your first job went wrong, perhaps you had hard luck with the second—and after that you quit. You've got the physical strength and the mentality to come out on top somewhere—*if* you're willing to sweat blood—not unless! It may be here on this key— By the way, did you ever play football?"

"Yes—"

"When you were tackled, did you just drop the ball and cry, or did you hang on? No, I'll do the talking! If you want my opinion, you just hung on! That's the one worth-while thing you learned at Harvard. But for God's sake, man, apply it! Hang on, shut your teeth and dig in your toes!"

Smith got up. "I can't stand the lectures," he muttered, "but it was decent of you to feed me—"

Bellew came around the desk and gripped his shoulders.

"Get this," he snapped, "and get it straight! You're on my pay roll. I haven't any particular job for you, because I don't know what you can do, but there are plenty of jobs on this key. Find one, take your pick; you owe it to Harvard, to your mother, to me for that meal! I'll try you for a month. If you've got the real stuff in you, you'll show it, and if not"—he frowned—"I'll take pleasure in kicking you aboard the Half Moon!"

For an instant the other's expression sobered; then came that mocking, self-deprecatory smile. "You're wrong," he said. "This experiment will cost you money."

"I'm right," gritted Bellew, "and I don't give a damn for the money. Now—get out!"

And so was Bust Smith hired.

II.

Two weeks later, while making his round of inspection, the chief engineer came upon a surprising sight. Beyond the end of the viaduct a big scow lay moored. The harbor at this point was barely four feet deep, and it was the duty of the barge crew to sink boards into the sand until they formed a box, after which a powerful pump sucked out the water preparatory to dumping in concrete.

For some reason known only to himself, "Bust" Smith had honored the scow with his daily presence. The foreman, a bull-headed Irishman, who depended more on his fists than his brains, did not take kindly to the new addition to his gang, and one evening he confided as much to his superior.

"Thot bloke with th' overalls ain't worth his pay, Mr. Bellew. He's thot lazy he wouldn't swim if he fell overboard!"

"Doesn't he do any work, Flannigan?"

"Worrk!" the foreman roared. "Why th' gintlemon av leisure sets himself down an' *smokes;* thot's the worrk he does! An' when Oi tell 'im his own mither would be ashamed av him, he grins loike a hathern idol. Worrk? He don't know the manin' av th' worrd!"

Bellew, while much disappointed, intended to carry out his part of the bargain, and so he directed Flannigan to keep his temper and give the new hand a chance.

This particular morning as the engineer dropped to the scow he saw Smith sitting cross-legged on the deck-house. Now and then he removed his cigaret long enough to issue an order to the crew. Bellew, astonished and indignant, confronted him.

"Where's the foreman?" he snapped.

The other smiled. "You're talking to him, sir. But if you refer to that ignorant son of Erin they call Flannigan, he's helping the niggers where he ought to be."

"What the devil do you mean?"

Smith pointed. Sure enough Mike Flannigan lay on his stomach on the deck beside the darkies who were forcing down the planks with the aid of a mechanical hammer. As he turned his face the engineer saw a dark ring encircling one eye. But he worked on steadily.

"Come here, Mike," ordered Bellew.

Flannigan approached reluctantly.

"Why aren't you bossing this job?"

He motioned toward his successor. "I was, sor, till thot bloke, Smith—"

"Mr. Smith—" put in "Bust" quietly.

"Till Mr. Smith gimme this!" He indicated his eye.

"Why didn't you come to me?"

Mike grinned. "Because, sor, he said you towld 'im to take anny job he wanted. He said he'd fix me other lamp th' same way if Oi didn't git busy with thim niggers!"

Bellew repressed his desire to laugh. "What have you got to say, Smith?"

The self-appointed foreman waved his cigaret. "I watched him and his crew for two weeks; they were doing it wrong, any ass could have seen that. Instead of driving the boards close enough together to be practically water-tight, they were darned careless about it. Result: it took 'em three times as long to pump the box dry and calk it. Mike and I — er — exchanged places yesterday. Before that we'd been turning out two boxes a day; since then we've put in four boxes—and it's only eleven o'clock."

"I see," said Bellew quietly. "All right, Mike, go on up to the filling gang; you don't have to work with niggers. We'll let Mr. Smith continue here as foreman."

And when Flannigan had climbed to shore and out of hearing: "Do you understand what you've done, Smith? You've found a job you can hold down. Of course you're too high and mighty. The next time you decide to climb up a rung come to me; don't take matters in your own hands. Now one more thing: the foreman of this gang is responsible for the barge. You will have to sleep aboard as Mike did, familiarize yourself with the machinery, and give me a weekly report on the number of feet of lumber used, gasoline burned, and general condition of equipment. You're not only a workman now; you have a responsibility— What you discovered showed cleverness; what you will do in a crisis will show your *stuff*. And the crisis will come—it always does in this game."

Bellew left Smith smiling, only the smile seemed a trifle less self-deprecatory. At least so thought the engineer.

The weeks dragged on, hot, brilliant days followed by hot, brilliant nights. As the season advanced millions of mosquitoes were born in the marsh, while the dry sand about the camp became a breeding spot for fleas. But work on the viaduct continued; Bellew drove his men relentlessly. September must see the completion of the trestle across the harbor lest the fall hurricanes undo in a few hours the labor of months. Each morning a red-hot sun swam up out of the Atlantic, and each evening its disappearance was more delayed. The key had no chance to cool; the ocean washing its shores was warm to the touch.

If the intense heat and myriads of insects bothered Smith he concealed the fact. After work he would lie for hours on the deck of the barge, smoking innumerable cigarets and examining the sky through lazy eyes. Bellew found his weekly reports precise in character and showing a marked increase of production. But the engineer still waited; some day a crisis would come—the sort of thing that strips men of all pretense; some day, Bust Smith would find himself confronted by it, and then, well—Bellew smiled broadly; he had a great deal of faith in his own judgment.

III.

A CERTAIN holiday in September, Smith, Judkins Bellew and his chief clerk, Sam Haynes, stood on the dock, watching the Half Moon creep out of the harbor, her decks black with men. With her went the entire construction gang. It was a semi-annual occurrence. Twice a year Italians, Irishmen and negroes united in demanding a free excursion to Key West, where they engaged in a baseball game against the local team, which usually ended in a free-for-all fight. Later, opposing players would

make it up and stagger from one saloon to another until the police interfered. And still later—usually the next afternoon—back would come the Half Moon with a remarkably large cargo of black eyes and loose teeth. The gang invariably sailed away with cheers and returned in silence, but they were happier and poorer for the experience. Which fact served to keep them on the job.

Bellew turned to the man in ragged overalls. "Why didn't you go along?"

Smith shrugged. "What was the use? Baseball bores me and I despise a jail."

"Meaning you would have got drunk?"

"One must in Key West—if one is to enjoy himself!"

The engineer squinted at the sky. "Unless I miss my guess," he said soberly, "it's lucky you stayed; we shall need men desperately before morning. Do you see that cloud yonder?"

"The funnel-shaped one?"

"Yes."

"Well, by to-night the wind will be blowing seventy miles an hour. We may have to take to the viaduct. I've seen the time when the sea swept clean over these keys."

As the day progressed, Bellew became more anxious. The ocean met the shore without a ripple; even the ground-swell disappeared, while the horizon was lost in a faint haze. The sun turned brown and the green of the mangrove bushes was dulled to a sickly shade. Not a breath of wind, not a sound except the whine of mosquitoes and the intermittent popping of the mud in the marsh.

Smith had sought his barge, and lay as usual on deck; Sam Haynes was busy in the company office, while the chief engineer tramped here and there restlessly. Nobody ate much lunch; the sky was too ominous. Toward three o'clock a moan trembled on the dead air, coming apparently from nowhere and ending in silence. Smith, startled from his day-dreams, looked up. Bellew, lighting his pipe, let the match burn out. The heavens were cloudless, yet the sun seemed to be losing its power. No longer did the white of the beach sand blind one; the entire key became jaundiced—a flat and unsavory piece of land slapped on a yellow ocean. No longer did the gulls and pelicans swoop overhead; it was as if some gigantic and unseen evil had struck terror to the very heart of nature.

Smith threw away his cigaret and wandered up to the foot of the viaduct where his employer stood watching the horizon. Perspiration trickled down his face, and the brief walk left him panting. "Feels like a Turkish bath, only more so!" he suggested.

The engineer pointed abruptly to the unfinished span crossing the harbor mouth behind the breakwaters. "See that pier? We poured the concrete yesterday. It's set but it isn't hard yet. If the storm breaks out of the east and forces a current through the cut, there may not be any pier there to-morrow."

"Which would mean you'd lose six hundred feet of viaduct, too."

"Precisely! It's hardly a pleasant prospect—particularly when the stock of this enterprise is already tottering— I'm inclined to think the hurricane can put an end to the Palm Island Railway. To rebuild the span would cost two hundred thousand dollars—and then we'd be just where we are now."

Suddenly that peculiar moan arose again, but this time nearer. Something passed across the face of the sun, leaving the island in yellow twilight. The moan increased to a whine; a whirling shadow leaped from the horizon, its extremities fringed with white, its heart an inky mass.

"Look out!" warned Bellew. "We're going to catch it!"

Barely had the men found shelter behind the viaduct when the storm broke. They could see the path of the wind where it flattened the ocean, tearing from the smooth surface particles of spray. The next instant the air was filled with flying objects. Every movable article on the island soared upward—barrels, boxes, bits of planking, even the roof of the nearest bunk-house. Above the roar came the crash of falling timber, while great strips of tar-paper borne along at sixty miles an hour sailed westward like mammoth buzzards.

The Atlantic did not respond immediately—that first blast of the hurricane held it down—but in a moment the gray water hunched up and rushed at the key, not with the ponderous dignity of the ground-swell, but in chaotic, ten-foot combers. The rock jetties disappeared beneath lines of white froth, while the cut between them resembled a mill-race.

And Bellew, safe behind the viaduct, felt the structure tremble.

A half hour later the two men faced each other in the kitchen, the only surviving building. The engineer's office had gone and with it Haynes. Unable to raise a helping hand, they had seen his body fluttering away before the wind like a piece of newspaper. Now the hurricane had settled into a fifty-mile gale, which was not dangerous in itself; but the damage had been done. The ocean, a mass of foam, thundered on the beach and raced into the harbor.

Even inside the shack Bellew was forced to raise his voice. "The viaduct's going," he shouted, "unless we can block the cut! The current will tear that pier from its foundations."

Smith tried to light a cigaret, but the draft between the boards was too great. "What do you want done?" he asked. "I reckon this is crisis you mentioned."

The engineer, walking to the window, stared out a moment, then returned thoughtfully. "There's one chance in a hundred—" he began.

"Well—"

"The seas won't hurt the pier; the current is what will do the damage. Now, if we sank a scow—"

"My scow?"

"Yes; that's the largest. She's moored under the lee of the point. If you turned her adrift she'd head straight for the cut. You could let your anchor go when you were in the right place—"

Smith lost a little color. "You mean I — there would have to be somebody aboard?"

"Of course. Somebody to drop anchor and open the sea-cocks. The cut's only a hundred yards from the beach and you have your breeches—" Suddenly Bellew stopped to study the man's face. "You're not *afraid,* are you?"

Smith drew his arm across his forehead. "Sure," he muttered. "What do you take me for?"

Bellew made a gesture of disgust, and in that instant he hated "Bust" Smith. Not so much because he was afraid — that merely showed his yellow streak—but because the engineer was forced to admit he had erred in his judgment of a man. "I'll go myself," he said quietly, "and to-morrow you get out of camp, understand?"

Smith wet his lips. "No, that won't do; you're too valuable. You didn't wait for me to finish. I said I was afraid—which shows I'm sane—but considering everything, I'll go—"

"Good!" snapped Bellew. "I owe you an apology. The reason I put this job up to you is—"

"Never mind the reason!" And Smith's lips twisted into that odd, self-deprecatory smile. "I can guess a thousand reasons myself. Besides, it's the only thing I haven't tried. What do they call it—the Great Adventure?"

"Cut it out!" ordered Bellew tersely. "You talk as if—"

His foreman clenched his fists. "No, I won't cut it out; this is the *one* time I've a *right* to talk. Now tell me exactly how you want the scow sunk."

IV.

FROM the beach the engineer watched Smith's progress along the shore. He saw him climb aboard the barge which rode quietly in the lee of the point. Then there was a brief wait while mooring lines were cast off. Presently the cumbersome boat drifted free, caught the first breath of the storm, and swung abruptly toward the cut. One moment she moved along placidly, the next she was tossing like a cork as the combers curled under her square stern. And on her top deck a figure clung to the tiller. Now broadside, now head on, she rushed at the white smother hiding the jetties.

Would Smith be able to steer her sufficiently to avoid the rocks?

Bellew forced his eyes away to lessen the strain. When he looked again he stiffened; not ten feet ahead of the scow the seas were smashing themselves on the end of the breakwater. He saw a particularly big comber hunch the boat upward, and lifting her bow clear, drop her. He could even hear the crash as her timbers splintered. Then a whirl of the current tore her loose. Listing heavily, she swung across the cut. He prayed his foreman had not been carried overboard, would be able to let go the anchor. The yellow haze played tricks with his eyes, and the driving spray blinded him, yet he thought he saw something crawling toward the windlass. The next instant came the rattle of a chain.

"Thank God!" muttered Bellew.

Between the beach and the scow the surf mounted in angry ridges. But the engineer was not worrying about Smith. Every boat belonging to the Palm Island Railway project carried a breeches-buoy gun. All the foreman had to do was to fire the line ashore, wait for Bellew to make it fast to the viaduct, then come in hand-over-hand a good six feet above the water. The only risk was delay; the scow would not remain afloat very long—

"Why the devil doesn't he hurry?" thought the engineer. As the barge was now broadside, the seas mounted to her first deck; very shortly they would be sweeping over her cabin-house. But he could not make out anybody on her. He swore under his breath. "If that ass waits much longer—"

Suddenly he caught sight of something in the breakers. It was tossed into his momentary vision by a comber, only to be swallowed up in the trough. He waited, a terrible suspicion growing. Yes, he saw it again, this time nearer—the figure of a man clinging to a plank. The sweat broke out on his face. Smith was risking the surf and the hidden rocks instead of using the buoy!

"The fool, the fool!" groaned Bellew over and over. "He's throwing away his life."

And indeed it seemed so. A dozen sinister shapes tore the sea to foam, jagged splinters of coral with knifelike edges. Surely no one could pass between them. This waiting was agony! If he might only *do* something! White, trembling, he tried to follow the zigzag course of Smith's body. And even as he stared at the maelstrom his conscience reminded him that he had sent this man to his death. Smith must be a half-wit, a fool, but he was also a human being. And Bellew, waiting helplessly on the beach, called himself a murderer.

He remembered their first talk together—and their last. The foreman had spoken of a "Great Adventure." Was it possible he had planned suicide? No; if that had been the case he wouldn't have said: "Sure, I'm afraid! What do you take me for?"

The seas now broke over the barge from end to end. She was filling rapidly, and the machinery aboard could be counted upon to sink her like a stone. As she lay directly across the cut, her hull must block the disastrous current; but Bellew, leaning against the wind with his eyes searching the white tumble of surf, had forgotten his viaduct.

Great enterprises usually take their toll of human life—Sam Haynes was an example of that—but this tragedy might so easily have been avoided. Why, in God's name, hadn't Smith used the breeches-buoy? And another thought made Bellew shudder; his foreman had been driven into his present peril. Bellew had done that by calling him a coward.

The wind took a shrill note as it hurled itself over the key, which somehow resembled the cry of a drowning man. He raised his eyes to the sky where low-scudding, vicious clouds piled themselves upon each other, and wondered if the God above could see through them.

Suddenly something black darkened the white crest of a wave. It was Smith's body. Between it and the shore a coral reef split the combers. That the foreman was past recognizing his danger, past making the least, futile effort to avoid it, appeared certain. The engineer wanted to cover his eyes, but horror held him rigid. The man and his plank were borne onward at express speed—onward to where the rocks defied the sea. Presently a wave

tossed him high until his breast was clear of water, held him there an instant, then with a roar charged the reef.

Something snapped in Bellew's brain; he stumbled away up the beach, groping with his hands like a blind man.

After a while when he gained sufficient courage to face what lay rolling loosely at the edge of the surf, he returned. He must save the body of course. Dragging the limp bundle of flesh to dry ground he looked for the wound inflicted by the rocks—and found none. The man was breathing faintly.

V.

AN hour later Bellew, entering the kitchen, discovered his foreman sitting in a chair. "How do you feel?" he asked "Want some more whisky?"

"Sure!" grinned Smith.

After handing him the bottle the engineer took a seat. "Now answer me one thing and I'll apreciate it: why in hell didn't you use the breeches-buoy? Why did you try to kill yourself in the surf?"

"What the deuce is a breeches-buoy?" gasped Smith.

"You don't *know?* Why it's—it's—say!" and Bellew leaned forward. "If you didn't know what a breeches-buoy was, *how* did you expect to get ashore?"

The foreman smiled. "I didn't," he said.

For a moment his employer looked at him in blank amazement. When he spoke his voice was gruff. "You mean to tell me you took the barge out, thinking you were going to drown! You figured I was asking you to give your life to save the viaduct?"

"The viaduct was worth two hundred thousand dollars," Smith reminded him.

Bellew left his chair to take a turn up and down the room. Through the chinks in the walls came the noise of the sea, but he knew all danger threatening the concrete structure had passed; somewhere out in the white whirl, below the breakers and between the rock jetties, a splintered, cypress hull diverted the current.

He was usually a rapid thinker, but the bigness of the thing Smith had done could not be grasped in a moment. Of a sudden he felt humbled yet tremendously proud. Again his judgment of a man had been vindicated.

Stopping short, he faced his foreman. "Smith, you must have thought it pretty rotten of me to stay ashore and send you out there. Well, I've got a confession to make; I'd have gone in a minute myself—there wasn't much danger—but as a matter of fact I don't know how to swim."

The man with a blanket wrapped around him nodded. "Don't blame you a bit. Only, I wish to Heaven you'd mentioned the breeches-buoy— And as far as swimming goes"—he chuckled—"you haven't anything on me. I never swam a stroke in my life."

MY ARGOSY OF GOLDEN DREAMS

WHEN happiness appears a distant goal,
When care oppresses, and the weary soul,
Imprisoned in its house of mortal clay,
Craves refuge from the everlasting fray,
Ah, then, where pleasant fiction swiftly streams,
I launch my Argosy of Golden Dreams!

A magic craft—it sails the wide expanse
Of genius, called the Ocean of Romance.
The helm is manned by Fantasy, who steers
Through mystic seas of laughter, love and tears.
Once more the sun on life's horizon gleams,
Thanks to my Argosy of Golden Dreams!

Philip Stiehl, Jr.

Masqueraders All

Part II

by Neil Moran

Author of "Alias Annie's Brother," "Bringing Out Boothington," etc.

CHAPTER XIII.

JIMMY'S "BRIGHT IDEA."

THE Hanovers, a small family of three—mother, father, and daughter—had no idea that their guest had fallen in love, and that an intense love scene had been enacted on their porch.

They knew, of course, that Marion had gone to the dance, because she had told them that she had met an old friend while out riding who had invited her. And not wishing them to know the game she was playing, she had taken the precaution to meet Jimmy a short distance from the lodge, fearing that he would come up and inquire for Miss Greg.

They wondered, then, the following morning why Marion seemed so unusually buoyant at the breakfast-table, and Mr. Hanover, an old friend of the late Colonel Van Buren, dryly remarked: "You seem gay enough this morning to be in love, Marion. Who's this Lothario you went to the dance with last night?"

"An old friend," said Marion, blushing, and startled by the other's remark.

"Seems to me you're pretty close-mouthed about him. That's always a sure sign, Marion."

"About what?" she asked.

"Being in love," replied Mr. Hanover.

"Maybe I am," Marion said. And the way she said it gave the Hanovers cause to wonder.

After breakfast Florence Hanover, the daughter, quizzed Marion and asked her if she had only been fooling.

"About what?" Marion asked.

"Being in love," replied Florence, who was a nice girl, but one destined to be an old maid. "Because if you are, Marion, invite him over. What does he look like?"

"What makes you think I'm in love?" Marion asked, laughing, but inwardly nervous.

Florence placed a hand on Marion's shoulder.

"Because you're so secretive," she replied. "And you're blushing furiously now, Marion, you are."

"Well," said Marion, "what of it?"

"Only this," Florence replied, sitting down and folding her hands in her lap. "You must be careful, Marion. You're a young girl, you know, and sometimes young men have not the best of intentions."

Marion flushed indignantly. "Why, Florence," she exclaimed, "what do you mean?"

Egged on by envy because she had never been able to land a beau herself, Florence

This story began in the Argosy-Allstory Weekly for December 24.

proceeded in placid tones: " There are many bad men in the world, Marion. You know that we girls have to be careful. I could tell you lots of things about men myself. I've had one or two little—" Florence broke off and shook her head significantly, and Marion smiled, knowing that Florence was taking a little undeserved credit to herself.

" Do you mean to insinuate that this gentleman I went to the dance with has not the best of intentions?"

Florence shook her head.

" I couldn't say until I meet him," she replied. " I go so much by face value. I often think I'd make a wonderful lady detective. I'm psychic, you see. I can tell at a glance a good man or a bad one, so—"

Marion burst into a laugh.

" Dear child," she said, " you're amusing. Does your psychic sense tell you that the gentleman in question is not honorable?"

" Somewhat," said Florence, knitting her brows. " I'll be frank with you. I have reason to believe that he is not an old friend, and that you met him only yesterday."

Marion looked up, surprised and off her guard.

" How do you know?" she asked.

" So," Florence exclaimed, " I was right! Marion Van Buren, you've been flirting. I thought as much. When you didn't tell us the man's name it seemed strange. And then last night I noticed that you went down to meet him instead of having him come here. Aren't you afraid, Marion, to trust strangers?"

" Rot!" Marion said, shaking her head. " You're too old-fashioned, Florence. But, come, don't let's quarrel. And if you promise to be real good I'll tell you who he is."

And Marion did. She also explained to her astonished listener what had brought Jimmy Scardon East, and how he happened to be in the Adirondack Mountains.

" Now, for my part of it," she added. " When mother told me about the proposed match I became furious. We quarreled, and I was called a disobedient daughter just because I wouldn't agree to marry a man I had never seen. It was too much of a business proposition to suit me, anyway.

" Then mother had to go to Washington to attend some woman's club convention, and the last thing she said going out the door was to be nice to Jimmy Scardon and his aunt if they came before she returned; also, that if a letter came for her from California I was privileged to open it and read its contents, as it would very likely be from Jimmy's aunt saying when they would come.

" Then a letter did come for mother, post-marked California. The letter was from Jimmy's aunt expressing regret that she could not come because of a severe attack of rheumatism, but that Jimmy was on his way. I didn't know what to do. Then I got an idea. I consulted with Jane Greg, mother's social secretary, whom you've met, and implored Jane to take my place; to be Marion Van Buren while the real Marion Van Buren ran away from it all.

" At first Jane refused. It was out of the question, she said, perfectly ridiculous, and all that. But I never let up until she had finaly given her consent. Poor Jane, she's a dear, and she knew that it wasn't right to force a girl into marrying a man she had never seen, and I think that was the reason why she was willing to help me."

" But what about your mother?" Florence asked, very much surprised over it all. " What was Jane to say to her when she returned?"

Marion laughed.

" What could she say? Nothing, of course, only that I had deliberately gone away and that she had agreed to be Marion Van Buren. Mother could do no more than discharge Jane, and I promised Jane that this would not happen. You see, I had the feeling that it would turn out all right, and it has, but of course I never dreamed of the way matters have shaped themselves. I thought that when mother returned and discovered what had happened, she naturally would be obliged to explain everything to Mr. Scardon, and then he would leave in a rage, believing that he had been fooled. That was how we were to get rid of him.

" Don't you see, Florence, by our scheme we were throwing the whole responsibility

on mother's shoulders? And she deserved it."

"And then you came up here?" said Florence. "Marion Van Buren, you're a natural born schemer."

"I decided to visit you folks," Marion laughed, "to get far away from the scene of action. I instructed Jane not to tell mother where I was unless she got the silly notion of marrying me off to a man out of her head. I also told Thomas, our butler, that when Mr. Scardon came to say nothing about me being out of town, but to call Jane, who would act as Miss Van Buren. Thomas was a bit puzzled, but he's well-trained, you know, and he didn't ask questions.

"But imagine last night, Florence, after all my scheming, to be introduced to people at the dance as Miss Greg. My heart was in my mouth for fear I would meet some one I knew. And now"—Marion danced around the room—"it's all so wonderful and romantic, Florence. Oh, just wait until you see him. He's the handsomest thing you'd ever want to lay eyes on. And the way he makes love, Florence! Dear me!"

"Well, all I can say," said Florence, ever ready to throw cold water on any other girl's love affair, "is that it seems mighty strange he didn't call at your house. I don't want to make you feel uneasy, Marion, but my psychic mind tells me that there's something funny about it all."

"Oh, rot!" said Marion, knowing that envy had caused Florence's remark. "One of these days, Florence, you're going to fall in love, and you'll forget about your psychic sense and everything else, except the man you want."

Florence smiled a pleased smile, very much encouraged over Marion's words. She had almost given up hope that such a day for her was to come in the twentieth century.

"Well," she said, graciously, "I feel sure that I'll fall in love yet, Marion. But I'm awfully particular. He must be an ideal man, very handsome and very brilliant. And I do hope he has a swell name, like Algernon or Marmaduke or something like that. Distinctive, you know. Jimmy is so ordinary."

Marion restrained her resentment. It was jealousy again, she knew, on Florence's part.

"Never mind, dear," she said. "There was a St. Jimmy, or St. James, I should say, and I don't remember a St. Marmaduke or a St. Algernon. Percival Pollyhaven had a fancy name, and you know what happened to him."

"Yes; dreadful, wasn't it?" Florence exclaimed, feeling that she had been outpointed.

At ten o'clock that morning Jimmy, not having received a letter from Rufus Cleghorn, finally got his connection with the Hotel Giltmore. He was informed that Mr. Cleghorn had checked out the night before, leaving no forwarding address. More puzzled than ever, Jimmy wandered aimlessly about the hotel, wondering what had happened to his friend.

Curious and impatient, he decided to telephone to the Van Buren house and ask for the whereabouts of "Mr. Jimmy Scardon." He was told by "Information" that the Van Burens had a private number, and that it was against the rules of the company to give it out. Feeling that Fate was playing against him, Jimmy left the telephone-booth, to do some more aimless wandering.

He declined an offer to play a game of chess with an elderly gentleman, who was one of the many obliged to stay indoors because of the rain. He also refused to sit and talk to the fat widow, who suddenly spied him and dashed over, pushing a box of chocolates under his nose.

Excusing himself on the pretext of writing some letters, he hurried out to the desk and asked the clerk if Mr. Saunders was in his room. The clerk picked up a desk phone, and after calling Peter's room, he handed the phone to Jimmy.

"Mr. Saunders is on the wire," he said.

"Hello, Saunders," Jimmy exclaimed. "Where have you been all morning?"

"Looking for the sunset, or the sunrise," Peter said. "Rotten day, isn't it?"

"Suppose I come up?" Jimmy suggetsed. "There's something I want to tell you."

Peter clutched the phone. He wondered whether Jimmy had received a letter telling

him of his part in the game. If he had he knew the time had come to explain.

"All right," he said, "come up."

After hanging up the receiver he walked over to the window and looked out. He presently heard a knock on the door, and in answer to his invitation to come in, Jimmy Scardon rushed into the room.

It was apparent to Peter that Jimmy was in a bad mood. So Peter concluded that Jimmy had received the letter.

Peter smiled.

"So you received the letter you were expecting?" he said.

"No, I didn't," Jimmy snapped.

"Oh!" Peter breathed. "Well, what is it, then?"

Jimmy threw himself into a chair, and drawing forth a cigaret, began chewing the end of it.

"Give me a match," he said. "I'm nervous, Saunders. Dreadfully upset. I must have a smoke."

"Something worrying you, eh?" Peter asked, striking a match and giving Jimmy a light. "No doubt this rainy day has made you gloomy. What's up, anyway?"

Jimmy puffed away at his cigaret for several seconds, studying the floor. Then tossing the cigaret into an ash-receiver, he quietly remarked: "Saunders, I'm in love."

"No!" Peter exclaimed. "When, how and where? Who is she?"

"A girl, a wonderful girl, Saunders."

"Naturally. But her name?"

"Jane Greg. She's a friend of Marion Van Buren. Surprises you, eh? Well, it did me, too. Now sit still there while I tell you a very interesting and amazing story. Are you prepared for a shock, Saunders?"

"All set," said Peter, wondering what was to come.

"Well, Saunders, I'm the fellow who came East to marry Marion Van Buren. What do you think of that?"

"No!" Peter exclaimed, feigning surprise. You're the fellow her mother wanted her to marry. You're fooling, Scardon."

"I was never more serious in my life," Jimmy replied. "It certainly was some joke on you, Saunders. But don't worry. I don't want the girl. Now let me finish."

And starting at the beginning, Jimmy told Peter the whole story.

"Of course I know how this astonishes you," Jimmy finished. "And please forgive me, old fellow, for not telling you last night and letting you in on the joke. But I had a reason for not explaining then, which I'll lead up to presently. You never dreamed that I was your deadly rival, did you? That obstacle you spoke of?"

"No," Peter said. He decided to keep his secret a while longer. He, too, had a reason.

"Well, you don't seem so surprised," Jimmy grumbled. "I thought you'd fairly bounce out of your chair."

"I'm naturally calm," Peter smiled. "But I understand everything. Well, well, well, Scardon, you are certainly a villain for not telling me last night. But what do you suppose has happened to Cleghorn?"

"Don't know, and I don't care," Jimmy growled. "I know positively that he's not ill. My phone call to the Giltmore this morning proves that. I'm beginning to think now that he didn't even call on Miss Van Buren."

"Ah!" Peter murmured. "So you think that?"

Jimmy suddenly banged his hands together.

"Say," he said, "when did you see Miss Van Buren last, anyway?"

"Oh, some time ago," Peter replied evasively. "But why didn't you tell me who you were last night? What was your reason?"

"I'm coming to that. First let me ask if you know a Jane Greg?"

"Never heard of her."

"Well, she's a friend of Marion Van Buren, and she's the girl I've fallen in love with. Now, listen, Peter, while you hear chapter two."

And Jimmy hurriedly told about the girl he had met in the woods, their conversation, and why he had not spoken of her to Peter.

"But now it's all different," he added. "Now I don't care. For last night when I took her back to Hanover Lodge I proposed to her. She said she didn't think it fair to Marion Van Buren—that I was practically engaged to her, and all that rot,

and—and then, well, I admitted that I had not even called on Marion Van Buren.

"Still, she insisted that Marion was waiting to meet me, and that being an old friend of Marion's she did not want to stand in her way. I was distracted, Peter, for I've fallen head-over-heels in love with this girl, and I know—yes, I know that she's in love with me, but won't admit it just because she's so doggone loyal to her friend. Isn't that a fine state of affairs?"

"Are you really in love with this girl?" Peter asked, somewhat skeptical.

"Positive," Jimmy declared. And the way he said it convinced Peter that it was so. And once again Peter was tempted to tell his story. But something held him back. To have the advantage in the game; to watch the other fellow move was what Peter wanted. It would be time enough for explanations if Rufus Cleghorn's letter came, or if he himself appeared in person.

"Well," Peter said, "you're in a peculiar situation, Scardon. But don't worry. I have a feeling that everything will be cleared up soon."

"But it has to be done noow," Jimmy shouted, springing to his feet. "Now. Right now, do you understand? And you're the man to do it. Go to Miss Greg and tell her that you're the fellow who's engaged to Marion Van Buren. Then that will clear the way for me."

Peter sank back in his chair and stared blankly at Jimmy's smiling eyes.

"But look here," he said, "I can't do that."

"Oh, but you must," Jimmy insisted. "Don't you see what a fix I'm in? Surely you won't deny me this. See Miss Greg. Tell her how much you love Marion Van Buren. Convince her that Marion loves you, and then—leave the rest to me."

Peter began to feel warm around the collar.

"It's too delicate," he protested. "Don't you see how embarrassing it would be for me to—to go to this girl and tell her of my love for Mar—Miss Van Buren? Have a heart, Scardon. A fellow likes to keep those things to himself."

"But what am I to do?" Jimmy exclaimed. "You will be telling Jane the truth. You love Marion Van Buren, don't you?"

"Y-e-s."

"And you're engaged, aren't you?"

"Practically."

"Well, then, what more is there to it, Saunders? Tell the truth, and nothing but the truth. Do this favor for me, and I'll not forget it. Maybe some time I can do something for you, and if that time ever comes just call on me."

"It's a bargain!" Peter cried, struck by a certain idea. "I'll do as you ask. And some time you may be able to help me, Scardon, and I'll remember what you said."

Jimmy grabbed Peter's hand and shook it.

"And I'll remember, too," he said. "But don't forget when you meet Jane to tell her how madly in love you are with Marion Van Buren, and how crazy she is about you."

"Oh, leave it to me," said Peter. "I'll make Jane Greg think that there's nobody in the world like Marion—not even herself."

CHAPTER XIV.

WHAT MARION THOUGHT.

AFTER lunch Jimmy and Peter returned to the latter's room, and Jimmy, impatient and very excited, decided to telephone to Hanover Lodge at once and ask for Miss Greg.

"Maybe she'll invite us over," he said. "You don't mind the rain, do you?"

"Not at all," Peter laughed. "I'm getting into the spirit of the thing now. Try to arrange it. It will kill the monotony here."

Through "Information" Jimmy obtained the telephone number, and several seconds later had got his connection.

"Hello," he said. "I want to speak with Miss Greg."

"This is Miss Greg," Marion answered, having kept a watchful eye on the phone, expecting that Jimmy would call.

"Jane?" he asked pleasantly.

"Yes." Then, just as though she didn't know who it was: "Who's this?"

"Jimmy," he said—"Jimmy Scardon."

"Oh! How do you do, Mr. Scardon?"

Jimmy made a wry face. He thought that she was very formal.

"Oh, I'm all right," he said. "How are you?"

"Very dull. The rain has given me a headache."

"Me, too. It's awfully slow over here."

Marion knew that he was waiting to be invited to Hanover Lodge. But she didn't dare do it. What would Mr. and Mrs. Hanover think if he came and called her Jane or Miss Greg? And what would he say if he heard her referred to as Marion? It would spoil everything, and for a while longer she wanted to keep up the sham.

"Well," he said, wondering over her silence, "its—it's awfully dull over here. I'm with a fellow I'd like you to meet. We have a big surprise for you."

"Can't keep it till to-morrow?" she laughed. "It's such a nasty day to travel, and I have a dreadful headache. You'd find it more monotonous over here."

"We're willing to take the chance," he replied. "May we come over?"

"What is the surprise?"

"Oh, I can't tell you now. But it's a great surprise."

"I believe you're only fooling just to arouse my curiosity."

"No, I'm not—really. Does it interest you?"

"Y-e-s. But let it go until to-morrow. Very likely it won't be raining then. And if it isn't I'll tell you what we'll do. Can you and your friend meet Florence Hanover and me down the road where you and I met that day? Florence said she wanted to go horseback riding to-morrow afternoon, and I promised to go with her."

"We can," Jimmy said, disappointed. "But don't you think we could have some fun this afternoon? It's awfully dull over here."

A laugh sounded in his ear.

"That's the third time you said that. Let the dulness be a penance for your sins."

"Oh, you're acting this way just becaause—well, you know what I said and did last night."

"Perhaps I am."

"Then you're angry with me?"

"No."

"But you didn't approve of it, did you?"

"I told you what I thought."

"Suppose I could convince you that Marion Van Buren doesn't care whether she ever laid eyes on me."

"Oh, but you can't!"

"Why?"

"Because I know. I know Marion, and she wants to see you."

"But I don't want to see her."

"Oh, yes, you do."

"Well, I guess I know what I want," Jimmy grumbled.

"No, you don't. That's the funny part of it. But don't let's quarrel. You and your friend pray for a nice day to-morrow, and Florence and I will be in the woods at three o'clock."

"It's awfully dull over here," Jimmy said, making a last attempt.

Marion laughed.

"It's dull over here, too," she said. "More dull than at the hotel. Why don't you go down and dance with the widow?"

"All right," said Jimmy. "Good-by." He hung up the receiver and turned to Peter.

"That was a long conversation," said Peter. "How did you make out?"

"Couldn't arrange it for to-day," Jimmy snapped. "You see, Peter, that girl is so loyal to Marion Van Buren that she won't encourage my attentions. Can you beat it?"

"Then she refuses to see you?"

Jimmy threw himself into a chair.

"Oh, she said something about to-morrow. She and Miss Hanover are going riding, and we're to meet them in the woods. But she only said that to be pleasant. You simply have to convince her, Peter, that Marion Van Buren is in love with you."

Peter looked up and smiled.

"I'll do my best," he said. "For the present don't let it worry you."

Marion hung up the receiver and turned to Florence, who had been standing behind her.

"Mr. Jimmy Scardon is a little peeved,"

she said. "He and a friend of his wanted to come over to-day."

"Why didn't you have them come?" Florence exclaimed, all excited. "What does his friend look like—do you know?"

Marion shook her head.

"I don't know him. How could I have them call, Florence? I would be obliged to introduce them to your mother and father, and what would they think? You forget that I'm supposed to be Miss Greg."

"I hadn't thought of that," said Florence. "But why don't you tell him who you are, Marion? Go ahead. Call the hotel, and tell him to come over and not to forget to bring his friend."

"What!" Marion cried. "And spoil all the fun I'm having with him! Not yet, my dear. You don't know how I'm enjoying this masquerade. And I'm going to keep it up for a while longer. Promise that you won't tell."

"I promise. But it's awfully slow ever here, Marion, and if he and his friend came it would be so nice."

"Patience," Marion laughed. "We're to see them to-morrow down in the woods. I forgot to ask Jimmy his friend's name. Maybe it's one of those swell names that you like. I hope you'll take to him, Florence."

"I'm awfully particular," Florence whined, and linked her arm in Marion's and they started down-stairs.

At ten minutes of three the following day Jimmy and Peter were riding toward the designated spot. Jimmy suddenly reined in his horse and held up his hand.

"There they are," he said. "Now, remember, I'll introduce you as Mr. Saunders, Peter. I'll say nothing about Marion Van Buren in front of this other girl. But the first chance you get, start to shoot it into Jane's ear. If necessary, wait until we are riding back, and then I'll manage to ride alongside of Miss Hanover. That will give you a splendid opportunity. Ready?"

Peter nodded, and they golloped forward.

"Hello, there," Jimmy called, waving his hat.

Marion swung her horse around. Florence pulled on her reins, causing her horse's front legs to leave the ground. She was almost tempted to fake a runaway and be rescued by Mr. Scardon's friend. As it was, she was so nervous from that one glance she had got of Peter that she almost lost control of her mount. For she saw that Peter was very good-looking, and it went to her head like wine.

Introductions followed, and then Jimmy suggested that they canter along. He and Marion led the way.

"I want to ask you one thing," he said. "Suppose Marion Van Buren was in love with some one, would you then feel that you were standing in her way?"

"How do you mean?"

"Oh, you know what I mean. I know this is getting distasteful to you, but don't you understand, Jane? Why do you turn your head away?"

Marion was smiling. But she didn't want Jimmy to see her.

"Let's not talk about Marion Van Buren," she said.

"Oh, very well," he answered, and for some time rode on in silence.

On the way back he suggested that they change partners. Florence was a little reluctant to part with Peter, but seeing that Jimmy was very good-looking, too, she agreed.

After a few preliminary pleasantries, Peter drew his horse nearer to Marion's, and said:

"Mr. Scardon tells me that you know Marion Van Buren."

"Why, yes," she said, a little startled.

"He also told me that—that Marion Van Buren is standing in his way."

"Oh, he told you that?"

"For a purpose. Let me explain. When I met him at the hotel and learned that he was Jimmy Scardon, of California, I wondered if he was the same Jimmy Scardon of the same place whose aunt wanted him to marry Miss Marion Van Buren, of East Sixty-First Street, New York City."

"You wondered that!" Marion exclaimed. "Why?"

"Because I know Marion Van Buren, Miss Greg."

Marion stared at Peter in blank astonishment. Then she recovered herself.

"Please go on. What else?"

"He admitted that he was the Jimmy Scardon. I was interested, you see, because Marion was just as much opposed to this proposed marriage as Jimmy was himself."

Marion's mouth opened. "Well?" she stammered.

"I have a reason for telling you this," Peter went on quietly, turning and looking her squarely in the face, "because Jimmy loves you, as you know, but he's afraid your loyalty to Marion is hurting his chances. Now, Miss Greg, please don't think that way. While your attitude is to be admired, it's very foolish."

"And pray why?" Marion asked, wondering what Peter was driving at. She couldn't understand why he had said that he knew Marion Van Buren. It was just a deliberate lie.

"Because," said Peter quietly, "Marion Van Buren doesn't care whether she ever lays eyes on Jimmy Scardon. If you must know the truth, and I am only telling you this to clear up a wrong impression, Marion Van Buren is engaged to me."

"What?" Marion cried. "Engaged to —to—" She broke off and stared at Peter, utterly bewildered.

"Of course, it surprises you, Miss Greg. We were keeping it a secret. But I felt that you should know."

Marion stared at Peter's profile. She was dumfounded. And then she thought she saw what the game was. Jimmy Scardon had put Peter up to tell this story for obvious reasons. And what a marvelous liar Peter was!

"It's very kind of you to explain this," she said coldly. "You and Marion are engaged—and, of course, in love with each other?"

"Very much," Peter said, looking at her with earnest eyes.

What a liar he was, Marion thought. Simply astounding!

"Well," she said, believing that she had fathomed Jimmy's little game, "allow me to congratulate you, Mr. Saunders."

"Thank you. And now I trust that this explanation will show you what's what."

"Oh, it's done that, all right. I can't get over it yet. You and Marion Van Buren engaged!"

"Please keep it a secret," said Peter, this time for reasons of his own. "If you should write to Marion, please—please do not mention it. You see, I—well, you understand."

"Of course," Marion said, convinced now that her surmise was right.

They had reached the crossroad to Hanover Lodge, where Jimmy and Florence had stopped.

"What have you two been talking about?" Florence asked. "Why are you so quiet—er—Jane?"

Marion smiled.

"Silence sometimes is golden," she said. "I think we'd better hurry now, Florence."

"Let's take another trot," Jimmy suggested, getting a wink from Peter, which was the signal that Peter had told his story. "Come on—er—Miss Greg. You and I will ride ahead."

"No," Marion replied. "I'm going up to the lodge. We've had a very pleasant afternoon—very pleasant, indeed. Come along, Florence."

"There will be another dance at the hotel to-morrow night," Jimmy said, wondering, as the others did, why Marion was so cold. "Can you girls come?"

Marion shook her head. "I don't care to go. Good afternoon."

She started her horse up the road, and Florence, nodding good-by, followed her.

Jimmy and Peter looked after them, surprised.

"What's the matter with her, anyway?" Jimmy demanded. "What the devil did you say, Peter?"

"Only what you told me to. I thought it went over, too."

"You must have said something that displeased her," Jimmy insisted. "What do you suppose it was?"

"I said nothing that displeased her," Peter retorted. "If you ask me, I think she was jealous because you were riding with the Hanover girl."

"Well, I never did understand women, anyway," Jimmy muttered, starting his horse with a jerk. "It's one hell of a thing to be in love, Saunders."

"You bet it is," Peter agreed.

They rode on in moody silence.

When the girls entered Florence's room, Marion threw herself on the bed.

"What is it all about?" Florence demanded. "Why are you acting this way, Marion."

Marion sat up and looked at Florence with sorrowful eyes.

"Oh, it's dreadful," she said. "To think that he would do such a thing—to get another man to lie for him that way."

"Who?" Florence asked. "For pity's sake, Marion, tell me what it's about."

It took Marion just two minutes to explain what Peter had said.

"I never thought that Jimmy Scardon would resort to such low-down methods," she added. "And as for that other conspirator, Peter Saunders, he's worse. Oh, the way that man lied, Florence! It was really remarkable. He never blinked his eyes once, and he looked into mine with such a truthful expression. Aren't men terrible?"

"It doesn't surprise me," Florence whined. "We girls have to be careful. You can't trust men—none of them. If Mr. Saunders had wanted to he could have invited me to the dance, even though you didn't want to go. But leaving that aside, my psychic sense tells me that Mr. Scardon is not to be trusted. I go so much by face value, you know, and he's so very handsome. And all men like that are usually deceivers, Marion. We girls have to be careful."

"Oh, I wish I had never met him!" Marion cried, springing to her feet. "If he would do a thing like that, he would do—"

"Worse," Florence said. "I quite agree with you, Marion. You're perfectly right. We girls have to be careful."

CHAPTER XV.

THE SHOCK.

THE following day a hack stopped in front of Hanover Lodge, and a girl stepped out, carrying a small traveling bag. She was a very pretty girl, but looked tired and worn out; there were deep circles under her eyes. As she walked up the porch steps her feet lagged and her head bowed. When she reached the top step tears had come into her eyes.

A dog barked inside, and then Marion Van Buren appeared in the doorway.

"Jane!" she cried. "What on earth are you doing here? And why haven't you written?"

Jane Greg tried to smile, and then impulsively she clasped Marion in her arms and held her tight.

"Why, Jane, you're crying!" Marion said. "Good heavens, nothing has happened to mother?"

"No," Jane replied. "She hasn't returned from Washington. I left word with Thomas where I was going. Let's hurry to your room. There is something I want to tell you."

Marion led the way inside. "Here's Florence," she said. "You remember Jane, Florence?"

Mr. and Mrs. Hanover appeared. They were surprised at seeing Jane, but greeted her cordially.

"You look tired," Mrs. Hanover said. "Riding on the train wears one out. Take Miss Greg up-stairs to one of the rooms, Florence."

"Let her come up to mine," Marion said. "We'll be down later."

After they had entered her room Marion closed the door.

"Now," she said, "what's the trouble, Jane?"

"I suppose I'm acting like a silly goose," Jane replied, trying to smile. "But I just can't help it, Marion. When I received your letter I was dumfounded, and decided to come right up."

"But why should you be, Jane?"

"Because—well, for one thing, Mr. Scardon called and saw me."

"Saw you?" Marion exclaimed. "Why, Jane, I don't understand. He told me that he hadn't been near the house."

"He was, Marion. Let me tell you the rest. When I received your letter I thought of going away and never returning. Then I saw that it would not be fair to you. I felt that you should know."

"What?" Marion asked, rising and walking nervously around the room. "That he had been at the house, Jane? Is that it? What do you mean by going away and never returning? I don't understand it. But I'm beginning to lose faith in him already. And, oh, Jane, I'm—I'm so unhappy."

Marion flung herself into Jane's arms. "So unhappy," she repeated. "Why do men do such things? Why do they lie, Jane? Why do they get other men to lie for them? Oh, it's—it's so contemptible, so unmanly."

"I don't know why, dear," Jane said softly. "You met Mr. Scardon up here and fell in love with him, didn't you?"

"I did, Jane. I just couldn't help myself. I knew how it would surprise you. But why didn't you write? Why, Jane?"

"Because I fell in love with him, too," Jane murmured. "And I didn't want to tell you."

Marion sprang to her feet.

"Jane!" she cried. "Is this true?"

CHAPTER XVI.

CROSS-PURPOSES.

JANE bowed her head. "And he fell in love with me, Marion. At least, he told me he did."

"Jane! Jane! Do you know what you are saying?"

"Only too well, dear. Can't you see how he has fooled both of us?"

Marion took a step forward, arms raised, eyes wide and staring. Then she toppled over on the bed and buried her head in the pillow.

"Oh, dear," she cried, "isn't this awful?"

"Let's be sensible," Jane said, reaching over and stroking her head. "It's the only way, Marion. It's cruel, terribly cruel, but it just had to be, I suppose."

Marion looked up.

"I can't understand it yet," said she. "What happened, Jane? He came to the house, and then what?"

"He had with him a letter of introduction from his aunt to your mother. Of course, I met him as Miss Van Buren. I immediately fell in love with him. It's hard to explain why, Marion, but—but you understand, yourself, now. And then I admired him because he said he would not think of forcing both of us into an unwilling marriage. He even said that he would return home, but that if I would receive him as a friend he would be glad to remain. Of course, I agreed."

"And did he stay at the house, Jane?"

"No. He was stopping at the Giltmore, and declined an invitation to remain at the house as a guest. The following night we went to the theater, and when we returned home he made violent love to me, Marion. He just carried me off my feet."

"Yes, he has a way of doing that," Marion remarked. "Please go on."

"Imagine my feelings, Marion, when he called me by your name. I was nothing more than an impostor, a masquerader. But I couldn't confess to him then. No, I wanted him to hold me in his arms, Marion, to kiss me and tell me that he loved me, and he did. It affected me so I began to cry. My false position made it very hard for me."

"Isn't he the wretch?" Marion exclaimed. "And what then, Jane?"

"I felt that everything would turn out all right, and that he would not care whether I was Marion Van Buren or Jane Greg so long as he loved me. I was very happy, Marion.

"The next day he came to take me for a walk in the park, and it was then that he began to act peculiarly. He said he had to go away, and that he could not tell me where he was going, or why, but that he wanted me to trust him. I thought it strange, but I trusted him, and I told him so. Then a friend of his came along, a Mr. Peter Saunders, and—"

"Peter Saunders?" Marion exclaimed. "So you met him, too! He's here in the Adirondacks with Jimmy Scardon. Go on; I'll tell you about him later."

Jane then related the rest of the story. When she finished Marion shook her head.

"They're a pair of rogues," she said, her eyes blazing. "First one makes love, and then the other. Did you see Peter Saun-

ders again after the night that he, too, told you that he loved you?"

"That was the last I saw of him," said Jane. "There's something strange about the whole thing, Marion. I've been wondering ever since what he meant when he said that there was a reason why Jimmy Scardon could never marry me. Do you think he could be married to this Dolly Volly? Mr. Saunders says he's not."

"After what's happened," Marion declared, "I'm ready to think anything. No doubt he makes love to every woman he meets. No wonder his aunt wanted him to settle down. Now, let me tell you the game they tried to play on me."

Marion explained how she had met Jimmy, and the way she introduced herself. "I thought it was such fun, Jane, to keep up the masquerade," she added. And then she recounted the assertions Peter had made. "It's as simple as the nose on your face, Jane—the reason he talked that way. Jimmy Scardon put him up to it, thinking that it would remove my assumed objection. I tell you, they're nothing but two scheming villains. If either of them telephones or calls, we're not at home."

For several minutes they were both silent, each thinking bitter thoughts. Then a knock came on the door, followed by Florence Hanover's voice outside.

"Quiet, Jane," Marion whispered. "We mustn't let Florence know about this." Then aloud: "Come in, Florence."

The door opened, and Florence entered, looking sharply at Jane, who was unpacking her bag.

"You dropped something there," Florence said, pointing at the floor.

Jane leaned over and picked up a theater program. Her cheeks flushed a deep scarlet as she tossed it back into the bag.

CHAPTER XVII.

THE CATSPAW.

THAT afternoon Jimmy and Peter were holding a confab in the former's room.

Jimmy appeared downhearted.

"It looks pretty black for me," said he. "I know you did the best you could, Peter, and I appreciate it. But I'm beginning to understand everything now. I was a chump for not seeing it before."

"What?" Peter asked.

Jimmy cast a disgusted glance around the room. "Why, this girl doesn't care for me, Peter. For all I know, she may be engaged to some other fellow. She saw that I fell for her, and she's just been having a lot of sport with me—making a fool out of me. That talk about Marion Van Buren was only an excuse to stall me off."

"I'm not so sure about that," said Peter.

"Well, I am," Jimmy grumbled. "I'm beaten, Peter. Whipped at the start."

In the silence that followed Peter wondered whether Jimmy had drawn the right conclusion. Was the girl only playing with him, or did she really care? Then suddenly Peter's jaws stiffened, and a determined light came into his eyes.

"Don't give up yet," he said. "Remember, nothing ventured, nothing gained."

"I've done enough venturing," Jimmy growled.

"But not the right kind, Scardon. You played the wrong game. You went at it like a lion. You meet a girl in the afternoon, take her to a dance in the evening, and that same night tell her you love her."

"Of course, you wouldn't do a thing like that," said Jimmy sarcastically.

"At least, I'd allow a day to elapse between the meeting and my proposal," Peter smiled, remembering his own case. "Even then it's quick work, but of course such a thing could happen. It depends upon the circumstances. But you pulled the caveman stuff, and lots of girls don't like that."

"Huh," Jimmy grunted. "What are you doing—speaking from experience?"

"Not at all. My imagination serves just as well. I'm reasoning it out on a percentage basis. Some girls like it, some girls don't. Miss Greg evidently is in the second class. Think it over."

"Perhaps you're right," Jimmy conceded, after a moment's thought. "Thinking it over, Peter, I did act like a madman. But, confound it all, I couldn't help my-

self. I just had to tell her that I loved her. Go on with your reasoning. What do you advise?"

"I wish you hadn't told her that you loved her," Peter mused. "Maybe I could help you then."

"Well, I did," Jimmy muttered. "And I can't go now and tell her that I don't love her, and to please forget what I said, and then do it all over again."

"No, you can't do that, Jimmy. But I have an idea for something much better. Why not make Miss Greg jealous?"

"How?" Jimmy asked, bouncing out of his chair.

"Why not phone to Miss Hanover and ask her if she'd care to go to the dance?"

Jimmy swung around and clouted Peter on the back.

"Peter," he cried, "you're a genius. It's the very thing."

"Seems to me," Peter remarked quietly. "Miss Hanover will jump at the chance. You could see that she was put out when Miss Greg refused your invitation. Start a little competition."

"But suppose she won't come without Jane?"

"So much the better then. If possible, have Miss Greg come, but don't suggest it. Don't even mention her name. You've forgotten about her—understand? But if she should come let her see that you're interested in some other girl. Make her think so, anyway, even if you don't feel it."

"I'll do it," Jimmy said, banging his hands together. "And I'll do it right now."

He walked over to the phone and soon had a connection with Hanover Lodge.

"Miss Hanover, please," he said.

"This is she," an excited voice answered. "Who is it?"

"Mr. Scardon," said Jimmy. "Good afternoon."

"Oh, Mr. Scardon! How are you? Do you want to speak to—er—Jane?"

"No," pleasantly. "It's you I want to speak to."

"Me?"

"Yes. Would you care to come to the dance to-night?"

"Oh," Florence gasped, "I'd be delighted. Do you think Mr. Saunders will be there?"

Jimmy turned and winked at Peter. "Yes, he's here now. Sends you his kindest regards. We'll both call for you at nine o'clock."

Florence was overjoyed. She almost fainted.

"But aren't you going to ask—er—Jane?"

"Just you, just you," Jimmy ranted, getting a negative nod from Peter. "We'll call for you at nine. Good-by."

He hung up the receiver and grinned.

"Well," he laughed, "she said she'd be delighted to come. Inquired about you in very anxious tones. I think little Aggie, or whatever her name is, has a case on you, Peter."

"Rot," Peter said. "But just start a little competition, that's all—a little competition."

Florence immediately ran down-stairs to tell Jane and Marion that Mr. Scardon had called. She found them sitting on the porch.

"Marion," she cried, "Mr. Scardon just phoned, and he's going to take me to the dance to-night."

Jane and Marion looked significantly at each other.

"Is he?" Marion said sweetly. "And are you going?"

"Of course I am. Why not?"

"We girls have to be careful," Marion mocked. "You go so much by face value, Florence. Mr. Scardon, as you said yourself, is so very handsome. And men like that are usually deceivers. Don't you think so?"

"Indeed not," Florence retorted, believing that Marion was jealous. "Of course, there are exceptions to every rule, and while Mr. Scardon is very good-looking, I'm sure he's a very upright gentleman. So sorry that you're not going, Marion. But he didn't even ask for you. He said he just wanted me. Well, good-by. I'm going up-stairs to get my clothes ready. Mother and father said they wouldn't return from Saranac Lake until late to-night. Well, dear me, their daughter expects to be out late herself."

And, with her head in the air, Florence swaggered across the porch and into the house.

"Isn't she the idiot?" Marion exclaimed. "Any man could turn her head. And now she doesn't know how to act because Jimmy Scardon invited her to the dance. But we must stop her, Jane. Can't you see his game? He's going to make love to her now. We must keep her out of his clutches. We simply have to do it, Jane."

Jane shook her head.

"In the face of everything it would seem so," she said. "Yet I can't believe that."

"Oh, wouldn't you!" Marion retorted. "Well, perhaps you don't believe he made love to you, to me, to hundreds of other girls, no doubt. I say that we must stop Florence from going to that dance."

"But she'll want a good reason," returned Jane. "And we promised to keep this matter quiet."

"We still can," Marion insisted. "We need say nothing about either one of the two villains."

"Then how are we going to keep Florence from going?"

"By throwing back at Florence her own words. She said yesterday that she would not trust Mr. Scardon. Of course, you know why she said it, Jane. Just jealousy. She talks that way about every fellow she meets. So here's a good chance to hold her to it. Her psychic sense which she raves about has evidently forsaken her. We'll ask her would she go to a dance with a man she doesn't trust."

"And if she says yes," Jane asked, "what then?"

"Nothing more," Marion replied, heaving a sigh. "We'll at least have done our duty."

It was twenty minutes later when they encountered Florence again. They were going into the house as she was coming out, and she suggested that they all go over to the Gleasons, who lived a mile away.

"I can get back in time for the dance," she said, all smiles.

"And you're going to the dance?" Marion asked, seeing her chance.

Florence nodded. "Of course I am. Why shouldn't I?"

"You remember what you said about your psychic sense," Marion told her. "What does your psychic sense tell you now?"

"About what?"

"About Mr. Scardon."

"Oh, it doesn't say one way or the other," Florence yawned, knowing that Marion didn't want her to go to the dance and believing that Marion was jealous.

Marion persisted. "Remember what you said about trusting him, Florence. Do you still feel that way?"

"Oh, for Heaven's sake," Florence whined, "leave me alone, Marion. To hear you talk you'd think there wasn't a good man in the world. I've never had a man yet treat me except as a gentleman should, and Mr. Scardon and his friend are both gentlemen."

"Well," Marion said, rising and beckoning to Jane, "I'm glad you think so, Florence. Oh, by the way, Jane and I will be leaving in the morning for home."

Florence was surprised. But she was glad that they were going.

"I hope it hasn't been too slow for you up here, Marion," she said. "Mother and father are so quiet, and I'm naturally that way, so that we never have much excitement."

"Indeed, I've had a very pleasant visit," Marion replied graciously. "But mother will be returning now, and I must get home."

"And don't you expect to see Mr. Scardon before you go home?" Florence asked.

Marion shook her head.

"No, I don't expect to see him. Very likely he'll remain up here. But don't forget your psychic sense, dear girl."

After Marion and Jane had gone into the house, refusing to motor over to the Gleasons, Florence sat down for a moment's reflection.

"She's angry with Mr. Scardon," she mused. "And that's why she's going away. But I don't think he cares for her at all. He seems to be interested in me. And yet —I must confess that I like his friend, Mr.

Saunders, better. Dear me, it's so hard to manage two at a time."

CHAPTER XVIII.

A LUCKY SLIP.

AT several minutes past nine that night a machine stopped in front of Hanover Lodge. Jimmy Scardon jumped out and started toward the house. He was about to run up the steps when Florence appeared and ran down them almost into his arms.

"Oh, there you are," he said, making no mention of Marion's name by advice of counsel. "You look stunning in that dress," he went on, raising his voice so that Marion, if she were within earshot, could hear him. And she did. For she and Jane were in the dark window of the second floor front, peering down at the figures below.

Of course Jimmy's compliment got Florence all flustered, and she seemed to be walking on wires as he escorted her over to the machine and assisted her into the tonneau.

There sat Peter, smiling at her. And even though it was dark, and she couldn't see his face well, she managed to get the gleam of his white teeth. She sat in the middle, her heart palpitating, mind awhirl, face grinning, toes wiggling, and everything else that meant joy unbounded. The machine swung around and started down the road.

"It's a wonderful night," said Peter. "Just look at those stars!"

Jane clutched Marion's arm.

"That was Mr. Scardon's voice, Marion. The first one didn't sound like his at all."

"That was Mr. Saunders," said Marion. "Your ears have deceived you, Jane. It was Jimmy Scardon who made the remark about the dress."

"It didn't sound like his voice at all to me," said Jane.

Marion switched on the electric light. She noticed that Jane looked white. No doubt it was from hearing Peter's voice; and she was right. Marion's face was white, too, and when she looked in a mirror, she exclaimed: "Heavens, I look like a ghost. I'm all unstrung, Jane. I'll be glad when we start for home to-morrow."

She was trying to be brave and appear indifferent, and Jane knew it. And Jane, too, was having a little battle herself.

"Yes," she said, "I'll be glad, too."

Suddenly Marion swung around.

"Jane," she said, "I have half a mind to follow them to the dance."

"Follow them?" said Jane. "I thought you didn't want to see him."

"I don't, Jane, I don't. But I think we should keep an eye on Florence. Don't you see what I mean? We can easily spy without being seen. There is a broad veranda which runs around part of the hotel, and by going to one corner of this we can look in at the dance. I'd just like to see if—if he smiles at her as much as he did at you and me."

Jane did not answer. She knew that it was not for this reason alone that Marion wanted to go to the dance. In fact, she considered it a lame excuse. Marion, she believed, for all her stinging references to Jimmy Scardon, was impelled by a woman's desire to see the man she loved, or had loved, once again before she left for home. It was one of those things, Jane knew, that was hard to explain; a strong impulse which cannot be restrained.

She was positive that this was Marion's real reason, for she found that she had the same longing herself; to see Peter once again, if it were only from afar.

Somehow at the moment Peter's words to trust him ran through her mind. She remembered his earnest look, his truthful eyes. It was hard to believe that he had been unfaithful; but in view of everything it was harder to believe that he had played fair.

Yet, a little something persisted within her; something which she could not understand. It seemed as though she heard Peter calling to her to have faith in him. Her heart beat faster, her breath came in short gasps, and then—she rose and held out her arms.

"Marion," she said, "I don't know what has come over me. Let us go to that dance. Hurry."

This time Marion did not answer. She sat staring at the floor as though dazed. She, too, seemed under the influence of a telepathic wave. She was experiencing the same sensations that Jane had passed through. She seemed to hear Jimmy calling to her. She smiled, nodded her head, and then she jumped to her feet and stared, wild-eyed, at Jane. The smile had gone from her face; her hands clenched; when she spoke the tone of her voice was harsh.

"We'd better go," said she. "We must keep an eye on Florence. There's a roadster in the garage, and I'll run it. I'll leave word with the servants where we've gone. We must keep an eye on Florence, Jane."

"We must do that," said Jane, and followed Marion out of the room.

A half-hour later Marion stopped the machine a hundred feet from the hotel on the west drive.

"We'll park the car here," she said. "We must be careful now, Jane. We had better go up the other driveway and look in at the dance from the dark end of the veranda."

She jumped out and turned to Jane, who had stepped on the running-board. The next second Jane slipped and tumbled to the ground.

Marion laughed. But she immediately sobered as Jane moaned.

"Did you hurt yourself, Jane?" she asked, putting her arms around her. "Oh, I'm so sorry. I didn't mean to laugh, dear. Really."

"I don't mind how much you laugh," Jane said, laughing herself, "if I haven't wrenched my ankle. It hurts. Help me up."

She rose, stamped her right foot, and then took several steps.

"Just as I thought," she said, hopping back on her left foot. "I've hurt my ankle, Marion."

"Try again," Marion suggested. "Perhaps it's only stiff."

After another attempt, Jane shook her head.

"I've done it, all right," she declared. "That ankle is weak. Sprained it once. Now what are we going to do?"

Marion looked helplessly around.

"Shall we drive back to the house, Jane? Perhaps something should be done for your ankle right away."

Jane shook her head.

"A rest is the best thing for it," she said. "Suppose you go up and reconnoiter. I'll sit here in the car. And whatever you do, Marion, don't let them see you."

"But I don't like to leave without you," Marion objected.

Jane patted her on the shoulder.

"Don't be foolish," she laughed. "You run along. Remember, we have to keep an eye on Florence."

"Yes," Marion agreed. "We'll have to do that. I'll hurry right back, then, Jane. You're sure you'll be all right?"

Jane nodded, and swung herself into the front seat.

"Don't be long," she said. "And be sure to keep an eye on—on Florence."

With the stealthy tread of a burglar, Marion reached the back of the veranda. She walked up the steps and stopped. With the exception of one couple spooning in the dark, the place was deserted.

Passing quietly along she turned a corner and darted over to a chair and sat down. Her back was on a diagonal line with an open door which led from the ballroom onto the veranda.

Paralyzed with fright for fear that Jimmy Scardon might see her, she sank back in the wicker seat. The music had just stopped, and the buzz of conversation followed by handclapping resounded through the room. There was a short wait, and then the music started again.

Determined to get a look at that roomful of people, Marion half rose and then quickly dropped back in the chair again. A couple had come onto the veranda, passed right by her, and sat down in two chairs ten feet away. Fortunately it was dark, and perhaps more fortunately, the chairs they sat in were turned in the other direction. For in a flash Marion had recognized Jimmy Scardon and Florence Hanover.

At first Marion had the impulse to flee; but to do this might attract attention. If she sat still she would hardly be noticed, and the fact that she was in a very dark spot, shielded from the lights within by a

large porch pillar, made it possible to see the backs of their chairs without being conspicuous herself. With a beating heart she listened to what Florence was saying:

"You dance well, Mr. Scardon."

"Allow me to say the same of you," he replied.

Florence giggled. "Flatterer," she cooed. "All you men are such flatterers." More giggles.

Marion couldn't repress a smile. Florence, she knew, was having the time of her young life.

"But about Miss Greg," Jimmy was saying. "You haven't any idea why she has acted so strangely toward me?"

Marion was listening intently. The laugh Florence gave jarred on her ears.

"Oh, I have a fair idea," Florence replied, in mysterious tones, "but I'm not telling." She had read in a book once always to keep a man guessing. That was the way to hold his interest.

"Then there is some reason?" said Jimmy.

"Curious one," Florence said, emitting an artificial laugh. Then: "Curious man. And they say that women are more curious than men." She had read that in a book, too.

"But if there is a reason," Jimmy said, "don't you think I should know?"

Marion gritted her teeth. Reason, she thought! Just as though he didn't know he had got another man to lie for him. But then, of course, he didn't know who she was.

"But I can't tell you," Florence exclaimed. "We girls have to be careful—I mean loyal. And I can't tell you all of Marion's faults."

"The little cat," Marion muttered.

Jimmy laughed. "She has faults, eh? Well, so have I."

"You certainly have," Marion told herself.

"And no doubt you have faults yourself," Jimmy went on, in sarcastic tones. "You're not going to tell me that you're a perfect woman!"

"Not exactly," Florence replied, somewhat confused. "But of course, if I do say it, I think I am better natured than Marion. And that's the kind of a girl a man wants for his wife. I'd like to argue the point with Mr. Saunders."

"Well, you can't now," Jimmy said, becoming annoyed. "I don't know just where he is. But be a good girl, and tell me why Miss Greg is so distant to me."

His tone had become soft, endearing, and he leaned nearer to Florence, hoping to draw her out. Marion noticed the change in his voice; also the movement of his head; and she dug her finger-nails into the palms of her hands.

"The wretch," she muttered. "He's going to make love to her now. Oh, the villain!"

Florence was beginning to weaken. She felt the force of Jimmy's personality, the power of his voice.

"But I can't tell you a secret," she said, nodding her head nearer to his.

"Oh, yes you can," he said, shaking a finger playfully at her.

"Why do you insist on talking about Marion Van Buren?" Florence demanded angrily. "Don't I interest y—" She suddenly stopped and bit her tongue. In her anger she had spoken Marion Van Buren's name.

"Marion Van Buren?" Jimmy exclaimed.

And Marion's hand closed over her throat as she held it there. The cat, she knew, was out of the bag.

"Who said anything about Marion Van Buren?" Florence asked, trying to regain her composure.

"You did, just now," declared Jimmy. "And why are you so agitated, Miss Hanover?" He rose suddenly, and fell back a pace.

"Is this girl Marion Van Buren?" he demanded, pointing a finger at Florence. "Is she? Speak the truth."

"Yes," Florence said, knowing that it was useless to lie. That slip had given Jimmy a cue. And now Florence was glad she had made it. She saw a way to knock Marion.

"Yes, she's Marion Van Buren," she began, "and—"

"Just a minute, please," Jimmy said, passing a hand across his eyes. He sank

slowly into the chair. "Well, what do you know about that?" he drawled. And: "Marion Van Buren!"

"When you get over the shock," said Florence suavely, "I may be able to clear up the mystery."

Marion sat tense and huddled in her chair. Jimmy was not the only one who had been shocked.

"But how can it be?" he suddenly demanded. "You say that she is Marion Van Buren. But Marion Van Buren is engaged to Peter Saunders. Peter told me so himself."

Marion became alert. The sincere ring of Jimmy's voice, and the remark that Peter had told him that he was engaged to Marion Van Buren raised a doubt in her mind. What did it mean?

"Drop the pretense," Florence laughed. "What is the joke, anyway, Mr. Scardon? Why did you put Mr. Saunders up to—to tell Marion that fib?"

Jimmy became exasperated.

"I tell you," he declared, "that Peter Saunders is engaged to Marion Van Buren. Peter was telling the truth."

"And I insist," Florence retorted, "that the girl you know as Jane Greg is Marion Van Buren. I've known her for years. She told me all about the proposed marriage between you and her, and when her mother left for Washington, Marion came to visit us, leaving Jane Greg, her mother's social secretary, to masquerade as Marion Van Buren. Don't you understand? Marion did not want to meet you. She was opposed to your aunt's and her mother's wishes. And so she ran away."

With a bound Jimmy sprang to his feet and then bounced back in the chair again.

"Is this true?" he hissed, but loud enough for Marion to hear. She had not moved. Breathless, alert, she was listening.

"It's the truth," Florence whined, shaking her head. And Jimmy believed her.

"Then," he asked, turning helplessly to her, "who is Peter Saunders? I met him here at the hotel and he spoke of a Mrs. Van Buren and her daughter. I became interested, and learned from him that they were the same Van Burens I came East to meet. He told me that he was engaged to Marion Van Buren. That is why I had him tell Miss—Miss Van Buren that he was engaged to Miss Van—oh, I'm getting all twisted. I never in my life was in such a mixup. But you understand what I mean. And so Marion Van Buren was playing the same game I was! Oh, jumping horses, but this is—" He turned suddenly to Florence, and grabbed her by the hand.

"Where are we going?" she asked, still unable to understand what everything was about.

"To find Peter Saunders," said Jimmy. "Pardon my French, Miss Hanover, but I don't know what the devil to make of this yet, and if I stay here much longer I'll go batty, that's all."

"But aren't we going to have the next dance?" Florence whined.

"We are not," Jimmy declared emphatically. And Marion smiled. "This is very urgent, Miss Hanover. But rather than have you disappointed, I'll return with you and see if we can't get one of those graceful swirlers for your partner. We'll go around to the front. I want to see if Saunders is in the lobby."

Before Florence could protest, Jimmy had her by the hand, walking—nay, running—down the broad veranda.

As he and Florence disappeared, Marion looked up and gave one long gasp. She was as much bewildered over everything as were Jimmy and Florence. It was a tangle. But through it all shot a ray of hope, a feeling that Jimmy Scardon had been misjudged, and that she had done him an injustice.

She sat still, unable to move, trying to collect her senses, and endeavoring to figure out the perplexities of the whole situation. Who had called on Jane Greg representing himself as Jimmy Scardon? Was it really Jimmy Scardon? Marion felt that it wasn't. But who, then, could it have been? Peter Saunders? She didn't know. How could he have got there? And then in a flash she remembered what Jimmy had just said about playing the same game.

Was it possible, then that he had got some one to masquerade for him the same as she had enlisted the aid of Jane? With

this thought she became half hysterical. A happiness surged through her, a feeling that made her want to shriek for joy. She rose, her mind working subconsciously, her one purpose to get back to Jane. She started forward and then stopped as she heard a light step behind her. She turned. Jimmy Scardon confronted her.

For one dramatic second they stared at each other. Then Jimmy fell back a step and threw out his hand.

"What—what are you doing here?" he demanded.

She did not answer; she couldn't. Her mond was dazed; her tongue stuck to the roof of her mouth. Then mechanically she asked, for it was the only thought that came to her: "What are you doing here?"

"I'm returning to the dance through that door," he said coldly. "I'm looking for some one."

"Please sit down," she said, still in a trance. "I want to talk with you."

"You have not told me what you are doing here," he repeated.

"It seems to annoy you."

"Not a bit. But I'm dreadfully upset. Something has just happened, something that concerns you, and I'm looking for Saunders. But now that you're here, you'll do just as well. Answer me this: Are you Marion Van Buren?"

"I am," Marion replied. "Please sit down. You seem very excited. An explanation is due you, and one, I feel, is coming to me. I was sitting in that chair, and overheard your conversation with Florence."

Jimmy took a step forward.

"What is the meaning of it all?" he demanded. "You here on the veranda! That's surprise enough. But that you're Marion Van Buren is actually amazing. May I ask what you are doing here?"

"You asked that question before; didn't you?"

"I know I did. But I'm still puzzled. I never dreamed of finding you here, and—" He broke off and sank into a chair. Marion walked over and sat in another.

"Before I answer questions," she said, "I want to ask one. I suspect from what I overheard that you got some one to go to my house representing himself as Jimmy Scardon. Is that true?"

"It is," Jimmy replied. "According to the statements of your friend, Miss Hanover, I played the same game you did. It's been one big masquerade. I didn't want to meet you. At the same time I wanted to humor my aunt. Consequently, when I left California I took with me a friend, Rufus Cleghorn, who was to go to your house as Jimmy Scardon. I haven't seen or heard from him since. Now what I'd like to know is, who is Peter Saunders?"

"I'm sure I don't know," said Marion. "That is something we'll have to find out. And now I owe you an apology."

Jimmy was indignantly silent. He believed now more than ever that this girl had made a fool out of him. First, by giving a wrong name, and then by taunting him about Marion Van Buren. It really was humorous. But at the present moment he saw no humor in it.

"I said I owe you an apology," she repeated. "You'll forgive me for giving you a wrong name, won't you? It was all so unexpected when I first met you, that I was really startled. I was wondering whether you had called at my house. And of course, if you had, how could I give you my right name? Don't you see that it would have exposed our plot?"

Jimmy stirred uneasily in his chair. "I hadn't thought of that," he muttered.

"Of course," Marion went on smoothly, knowing that Jimmy was angry, "when Mr. Saunders told me that he was engaged to Marion Van Buren I didn't know what to think."

"Yes," Jimmy said, "it was funny, wasn't it? You thought then that I had got another man to lie for me, eh?"

"I'm sorry, but I did. What else could I think?"

"You might have had a little confidence in me," said Jimmy peevishly.

"I think I'd have forgiven you," Marion went on, "if something else, something startling and, oh, terrible, hadn't come up."

Jimmy turned to her, curious.

"About me?" he asked. "Go ahead. Everything's coming my way to-night."

"You'll understand better when I ex-

plain it," said Marion, pulling her chair a little closer to his. His annoyed expression amused her. "I have to make a confession now," she whispered, "and it's very hard in a way. But I want you to know. That night you took me home from the dance I wrote a letter to Jane Greg telling her everything that had taken place. I told her that—that you and I had fallen in love, and—"

Jimmy turned in his chair, wide-eyed.

"You told her that I—that you—that we had fallen in love?" he gasped. "You—you had fallen in love with me? Is that true? Is it?"

Marion blushed. "I'm telling you," she said. "Don't you believe me?" She looked into his eyes.

"Everything's coming my way to-night," Jimmy murmured, and sank back in his chair.

"It's the truth—er—Jimmy. I wrote that and I meant it. But don't you see what happened? That letter brought Jane immediately, for somebody representing himself as Jimmy Scardon called at my house and made love to Jane, and to make matters worse, she really fell in love with him."

"What!" Jimmy cried, bouncing up in his chair. "Oh, great grief, this is getting worse! So you naturally thought it was I. And then you and Miss Greg compared notes, and—"

"That's exactly what we did, Jimmy. Imagine our feelings. We were heartbroken."

"It's a conspiracy," Jimmy cried. "That's what it is, a conspiracy. That fellow must have been Rufus Cleghorn. He sent Saunders up here to spy on me. There's something funny about it all. The first thing we must do is to find Saunders. I'll demand an explanation."

"Don't get excited," said Marion, smiling at him. "Where did you leave Florence?"

"In there." Jimmy pointed to the door. "She's dancing."

"Then let's go first and tell Jane. She's waiting down the drive in a car. We—we came over, you see, to—er—keep an eye on Florence. You understand, Jimmy, we thought that—er—you were quite a villain."

Jimmy grinned. "Is that all you came over for?" he asked.

Marion rose and held out her hand. "Ask me no questions, and I'll tell you no lies," she said. "Come along."

CHAPTER XIX.

THE PRIDE OF PETER SAUNDERS.

DIRECTLY after Marion had left her, Jane removed her shoe and began rubbing her ankle. She was still rubbing it when she happened to glance around and saw, coming down the drive in her direction, a lone figure in evening clothes.

As the man approached, walking leisurely and tilting back his head every now and then, a familiar something about him, probably his walk, arrested Jane's attention. She watched him with increased interest.

When he came within ten feet of the roadster, apparently unconscious of her near presence, he threw back his head, and for a second gazed at the moon. Startled, Jane crouched down in the seat. She had recognized the man. It was Peter.

On he walked, his rhythmic tread breaking the stillness of the night air. He was within five feet of the machine now, and, breathlessly, Jane remained still. And then, as though the impulse was too strong to resist, she turned her head, and at the same time heard a sigh as Peter was about to pass. Suddenly, seeming to feel her stare, he turned and looked at her. With an involuntary cry he drew back.

"Marion," he exclaimed, and the exclamation didn't one-tenth indicate the surprise he felt. "What—what are you doing here?" he stammered. With a rush he reached the side of the machine.

Jane did not answer. She didn't know just what to say. She felt helpless.

"Marion," he said again. And then he reached out and clasped her hand. "You don't know how glad I am to see you," he cried, and there was joy in his tone. "Just a minute ago I was wondering whether we'd ever meet again."

Still she did not speak. And then, as

though conscious for the first time that he was holding her hand, she drew it slowly away. The movement puzzled him.

"Why did you do that?" he asked. "And why don't you speak?"

"There is nothing I can say," she replied curtly. "I regret our meeting here."

He stared at her, perplexed.

"Regret?" he echoed. "Regret! Why?"

"I'd rather not discuss it."

"But I don't understand," he said, his bewilderment growing. And then he thought he had the reason. Rufus Cleghorn must have told her who he was.

"I think I understand," he said. "You —you have found out something about me?"

A nod was his answer. Now he was sure. He realized that he was in an awkward position.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I apologize. I can do no more. I'm not going to tell you that I was the victim of circumstances. I wasn't. What I did was of my own free will. I wanted to do it. I wanted the chance, and I got it."

"Please go," she said. "Your language is distressing. I can tolerate it no longer."

He fell back as though a whipcord had struck him in the face. He was crestfallen, crushed. Somehow he hadn't expected her to act like this; to make such a big distinction between their stations in life. It was that, he believed, that and the impostor he had been, that had caused her disdain.

He was disillusioned. It was hard for him to realize that this girl, the girl he loved, was grinding him under the heel of aristocracy and wealth. In that moment of anguish the thought flashed through his mind that were he Jimmy Scardon she could have forgiven the trick. But as Peter Saunders, the poor glove clerk, the plebeian who had dared too much, there was an entirely different aspect to be considered. He had no redress. He was an outcast.

"I am sorry," he said, and his eyes closed. "Sorrier than you'll ever know. I felt all along that I was trying for too much. The game was too big. And yet I meant well. The position I placed myself in has turned out in my disfavor. But I did not imagine you would take it this way."

The pleading tone of his voice touched her. She found herself feeling sorry for him, pitying him. And yet—how could she forgive him? It never occurred to her then that she, too, was an impostor; she was only considering Marion's feelings and her own. Should she tell Peter who she really was? She decided that she shouldn't. She believed that under the circumstances he was not entitled to know.

She naturally thought that he had guessed that "Jane Greg" had written to "Marion Van Buren" telling of Jimmy Scardon's ardent love proposal. Or perhaps he imagined that she had met Marion in the Adirondacks, and they had talked it over. She wondered now what was keeping Marion.

"I am sorry, too," she replied. "It is most unfortunate that we ever met. I believed in you, trusted you. And then when I discovered—"

"You immediately condemned me," Peter murmured. "In a way I cannot blame you. It was my fault. I should have known better. But dreamers never know until it is too late."

He turned, and as the light from the moon fell on his face, she noticed how white and drawn he looked. The woman sympathy in her went out to him. For a second she found herself forgiving him, making excuses for his weakness, as she believed it to be.

But there was Marion to be considered. No, she could not condone what she considered an unpardonable breach. She would remain firm, though her heart was breaking.

"I don't understand yet why you are here," he said. "I suppose I have no right to ask. Under the circumstances I am intruding. So I will go. But remember this —that I loved you, that I still do love you, but that you are so far beyond my reach I can never hope to have you care for me even though I felt that you did, not long ago. Good-by."

He wheeled suddenly, and with bowed head started toward the hotel. His going had been so sudden that it was only after he had taken ten paces did she fully realize that he was gone.

And then she wanted to call him back.

What was there about him that made her retain one spark of faith in him? Were it not for Marion she felt that she would have cried out for him to stop and return to her. She sank into the seat and bowed her head. Her slender frame shook with convulsive sobs.

Peter entered the hotel and stopped at the desk.

"Is there a train going South to-night?" he asked.

"At eleven ten," said the clerk, glancing carelessly at a time-table. "If you hurry you can make it."

"Fix up my bill, then," Peter ordered. "And please have a bus ready. I have to get that train."

He hurried up to his room and began packing. It did not take him long to collect his belongings and throw them into his case and traveling-bag. Then clapping his straw hat on, he picked up a lightweight overcoat and threw it over his arm. Giving one final glance around to make sure that he had left nothing of his behind, he switched off the light and picked up his baggage.

He dropped the bags and turned on the light. Going over to a desk he snatched up a pen and a piece of the hotel stationery. He wrote:

DEAR SCARDON:

Am sorry to take French leave, but it is for the best. We may never see each other again, but I'll always remember our pleasant acquaintance. I am nothing more than a poor glove clerk, who was offered the opportunity by your friend Cleghorn to pose as yourself and meet the kind of a girl I had always dreamed of meeting. That is how I met Marion Van Buren. I could never understand why Cleghorn did not tell me who he was. Pride, and the desire to play the game to the end, prevented me from telling you this sooner.

Forgive me for running away. I know I should stay and explain everything to you, but something occurred to-night that makes me want to be on my way to New York. I cannot control this feeling. I want to be home in the little hall bedroom where I live. That's home to me, and has been for the past four years. There I am among friends, my own kind, and I guess, after all, it's best that I should stay with them. I don't know why I am writing this way, but I just have the feeling.

With you and the rest of your class I am nothing but a bold beggar, an interloper, so I am fleeing rather than remain and argue the subject of Rich Man *versus* Poor Man. I trust you will not condemn me too severely.

PETER SAUNDERS.

P. S.—My best wishes that you win out with Miss Greg. I feel sure you will.

As he left the room with the letter sealed and addressed in his pocket, Peter was hoping that he would not encounter Jimmy Scardon. He had tried to explain in that letter just how he felt. He had not even the nerve to face Jimmy.

It took him several seconds to pay his bill, and then he handed the clerk the letter.

"Don't bother sending that letter to Mr. Scardon now," he said. "He's in at the dance. Wait until he comes out."

"Mr. Scardon just passed through," the clerk replied. "He took a young lady into the dance, and then came out and asked if I had seen you. I told him I hadn't, and then he went out the front door."

"Well, just give him the letter," Peter said, fearing that Jimmy might appear. "Is the bus ready?"

The clerk nodded. Bidding him good-by, Peter dashed out through the door.

At that very moment Jimmy Scardon was talking to Marion around the side of the veranda, wondering where Peter Saunders was.

CHAPTER XX.

THE RACE.

WHEN Marion and Jimmy reached the veranda steps in the rear of the hotel, Jimmy suddenly stopped.

"I'm going back for a second to look for Saunders," he said. "Suppose you go down and wait with Miss Greg, Marion? I'll find you."

She nodded, and hurried down the steps. Jimmy started on a run for the lobby.

"Have you seen Mr. Saunders?" he asked, stopping at the desk.

"You just missed him," said the clerk. "He left not more than ten minutes ago."

"Left?" Jimmy exclaimed. "Where did he go?"

"To make the eleven ten train, Mr. Sardon. Here's a leter he left for you."

After reading the letter Jimmy dashed out of the hotel.

"Wonder if that fellow Saunders owes him any money," the clerk mused. "You never know what these society fellows are up to."

Down the path at the back of the hotel Jimmy sprinted. He was the holder of his college record for the "hundred," but he broke all records now. He just seemed to pass through space. Marion saw him coming and hailed him.

"This is Miss Greg," she said, pointing to Jane. "I've just been explaining part of the mix-up, Jimmy, and she's dumfounded. She says that the man who called at our house representing himself as Jimmy Scardon was talking to her here a little while ago."

"Yes, I know," Jimmy cried excitedly, bowing to Jane, who nodded blankly back at him. "It was Peter, Marion, Peter Saunders. He's on his way to make that eleven ten train."

"Peter Saunders?" Marion gasped.

Jane was unable to exclaim. She felt faint.

"Don't ask questions now," Jimmy ordered. "We can discuss it later. That train may be late and we have a chance of getting him if we start right now. He's one of the best fellows who ever lived. Let me take that wheel."

Jimmy jumped into the driver's seat.

"Sit between us," he ordered, turning to Marion. "Hurry. All ready?"

"Yes," they chorused faintly.

A rip—a roar—and the car had started.

"Hold fast," Jimmy shouted. "You're going to have the ride of your lives."

And as he passed the front of the hotel enveloped in a cloud of dust, Florence Hanover, who had come out on the veranda looking for him, recognized her car, and the occupants in it.

"Well, did you ever!" she exclaimed. "What is this—some joke on me?"

Along the road the car traveled, stirring up the dust. Breathless and somewhat nervous, the two girls sat, holding on to each other to give Jimmy's arm room enough to handle the wheel. Grim and serious he looked, as his eyes strained ahead, searching out and avoiding the bad corners with the aid of the front lights.

Once as he swung into another road, the car lurched to one side, and Marion screamed.

"All hell can't stop me now," Jimmy shouted. "Don't be afraid."

Off in the distance the shriek of a locomotive whistle came to his ears, and in desperation he threw the car into first speed.

"We're making sixty an hour," he yelled, raising his voice against the strong wind. "Hold fast!" He gave an even twist to the wheel, and turned into the direct road on the way to the station. "The home stretch," he cried. "Go to it, you son-of-a-gun! T-r-a-v-e-l!"

The wheels of the roadster fairly raised from the ground. Jimmy's eyes kept searching that dark road ahead. He didn't fear traffic so much as a large stone in the road. And stones sometimes were in roads, how or why one never knew. If the machine hit a stone he thought it certainly would be—

"Hear the train," he shouted, forgetting about unpleasant things. "It's nearing the station."

The whistle could be heard distinctly now shrieking through the night. And then suddenly there followed a swishing sound and the clanging of a bell.

"Confound it!" Jimmy cried. "The train's in. And we have two hundred yards to go."

A whistle sounded, a bell clanged, and the exhaust of a pipe letting out steam followed. The train had started.

At the station Jimmy stopped the roadster and jumped out. He made a mad dash for the platform. One hundred feet away the last car was rapidly disappearing as the train picked up speed. He stood staring blankly at it until it had vanished in the blackness of the night. Then turning he walked back to the girls.

"We lose," he said quietly. "I wonder if we'll ever see Saunders again? Now let me read you the letter he left."

After reading Peter's letter Jimmy listened to the explanation Marion gave of the

conversation Jane had had with Peter at the back of the hotel.

"Then that explains Peter's abrupt departure," said Jimmy. "Isn't this a terrible mix-up? There's only one thing now that hasn't been cleared. How and where did Peter Saunders meet Rufus Cleghorn, and why did Rufus bring Peter into the game?"

Marion's arm stole around Jane's shoulder.

"Jane," she said, "don't you understand it all now? Peter Saunders was the man who called at my house. And when he spoke that way to you to-night he evidently thought that this Rufus Cleghorn had told you who he really was. Don't you see?"

Jane looked up and nodded.

"If I had only known," she said. "And all along I thought he was Jimmy Scardon. What must he think?"

"Let us hope that we may find him, Jane," Marion said, "so that he may learn the truth."

When they reached the hotel, Florence, who had been waiting for them, ran down the steps and over to the car.

"Did you enjoy your ride?" she asked sarcastically. "I thought you and Jane, Marion, weren't coming to the dance."

"We made up our minds at the last minute," said Marion. And then she turned to Jane and Jimmy. "Shall we tell Florence about Peter?" she asked.

They nodded, and Marion explained who Peter was and what had happened.

"Well, did you ever!" Florence whined after Marion had finished. "There's something strange about all this, Marion. My psychic mind tells me that much."

Jimmy grinned.

"I wonder if your psychic mind can tell us where we can reach Peter Saunders," he asked. "We've all very anxious to see him."

"He's riding on a train," Florence said. "But—"

"Yes, we know that," Jimmy interrupted. "But where can we reach him in New York or elsewhere?"

"I couldn't tell you that," Florence snapped. "I'm not the least bit interested in him, and what's more, I never was. And to think that he's only a poor glove clerk!"

Florence's stinging remark hurt Jane, and Marion knew it.

"At least, he's a gentleman," said Marion. "And you must admit yourself, Florence, that you thought he was very attractive."

"But I'm awfully particular," Florence whined. "We'd better be going home now, unless you and Jane care to stay at the dance with Mr. Scardon."

Marion shook her head. "We'll go along, too," said she. "We must pack our bags. You'll call for us then, Jimmy, at nine in the morning?"

Jimmy nodded, and jumped out of the machine.

"I'll arrange for a car to take us to the station," he said. "Good night. And, oh, Miss Hanover, I wish you would try to concentrate and see if your psychic mind can't tell us where Peter Saunders lives."

Florence gave Jimmy an indignant glance as she started the car down the road.

"I met a very handsome fellow at the dance to-night," she said, turning to Marion. "Far handsomer than either Mr. Scardon or—or the glove clerk. And if I do say it myself, he seemed to be quite interested in me, Marion."

"I'm so glad," Marion said sweetly. "But remember, dear, that we girls have to be careful."

Twenty minutes later Marion and Jane sat talking in the latter's room.

"It's all been so strange, Jane, hasn't it?" said Marion. "To think that it's turned out just as mother and Jimmy's aunt wished. But with you, dear, it's—I feel so sorry for you, Jane. Tell me, do you still love Peter Saunders?"

Jane nodded.

"I do," she said softly. "I love him dearly, Marion, even though he is only a poor glove clerk. There are better things in store for him, bigger positions, I know it. But what must he think of me, Marion? Oh, it's dreadful. I can just picture him riding along in that gloomy train, heartbroken and discouraged, all because of a misunderstanding. What shall I do?"

Marion rose and crossed to Jane's side. Then impulsively she threw her arms around Jane's neck.

"We're going to find Peter Saunders," she said. "And when we do, I'm going to remind him that the girl he's engaged to is Jane Greg and not Marion Van Buren. Now go to bed and try to sleep."

CHAPTER XXI.

"ALL'S WELL—"

THE following morning Jimmy stopped at the desk and inquired for mail.

"This is getting to be a joke," he said to the clerk. "Since I've been here I haven't received any mail. But I'm still expecting that letter."

"And here it is," said the clerk, smiling. "Just came in time. It reached here before you left, anyway."

With nervous fingers Jimmy tore open the envelope, which was post-marked Chicago. The letter was from Rufus Cleghorn. He made apologies for not having written sooner, explaining that he had lost his nerve to carry out the masquerade, and how he had gone into Tracy's Department Store, and what happened from then on. The last few paragraphs ran:

I have explained everything, believing that you should know, Jimmy. I realize that I did not play fair with Saunders when I forced him to quit, but then, there's no use in crying over spilt milk. Wherever he is now, I don't know. When Marion Van Buren told me that there was no chance to win her, I left the house and never returned.

Several nights later I checked out of the Giltmore and started for home. I stopped off at Chicago, and am still here, but will leave to-night for the coast. I have certainly been repaid for the unprincipled way I acted toward Saunders, for Marion Van Buren was the only girl I ever wanted in my life.

It required an effort for me to write you this letter. I didn't know just what to say without explaining my part, and how I passed the buck to some one else. No doubt I have made matters worse all around. Perhaps you can straighten out the tangle. I am sorry that I did not keep to my end of the bargain. I still consider that I am eight hundred dollars in your debt.

I believe that a finer feeling has been awakened in me through the memory of that girl, and that is why I am making a clean breast of everything. I hope you will forgive me. I only wish I could meet Saunders some time to ask his forgiveness.

Sincerely,

RUF.

"That explains everything," Jimmy muttered after he had finished. "So Ruf got cold feet and had another man do his job! Then when he met Jane Greg he fell in love with her. Well, the poor chump, I can't help feeling sorry for him, but he certainly gave Peter a rough deal."

Then shoving the letter into his pocket, Jimmy dashed out of the hotel.

When he reached the road to Hanover Lodge he saw Marion and Jane walking down to meet the car.

"Great news," he said as they drew near. "Hurry, girls, we haven't much time."

After the machine had picked them up and had swung around, Jimmy handed Cleghorn's letter to Marion.

"Read that," he said, "and then give it to Miss Greg to read."

"Now we can find Peter," Marion exclaimed, handing the letter to Jane. "He works in Tracy's Department Store, Jane, where you and I have gone shopping so often."

But Jane did not answer her. She was devouring the contents of that letter, and for the first time since the night Peter Saunders had left her at the Van Buren house, she was beginning to feel happy. For Peter, she knew, could be easily reached.

It was late that night when they entered the Van Buren house. Mrs. Van Buren had not returned, but there was a letter from her for Marion, which stated that she was leaving Washington the following day.

"How is Jimmy?" she wrote. "I call him Jimmy because I feel that I've known him for years. And then, of course, there is another reason. I am very anxious to meet him."

"Just wait," said Marion, handing the letter to Jimmy. "Wait until mother learns how her darling daughter ran away. Won't she be surprised?"

"She certainly will," Jimmy replied,

"Which reminds me, Marion, that I must send a telegram to Aunt Amy, to try and outrun that letter I mailed. Good Lord, if the letter gets there first I'm afraid the shock will be so great that it will—cure her of the rheumatism."

The following morning Jimmy entered Tracy's Department Store and inquired for the men's glove-counter. He was directed to the third aisle on the left. He stopped at the counter and asked a young man wearing glasses where he could find Peter Saunders.

"Mr. Saunders is on his vacation," said the clerk. "Anything I can do for you?"

"I want to see Peter," Jimmy explained. "Have you the address of his boarding-house?"

The clerk nodded and consulted a little pocket-book. "But I don't think you'll find him home," he said, jotting down the address on a piece of paper, which he handed to Jimmy. "He's very likely gone away somewhere on his vacation."

"I'll try anyway," said Jimmy, and thanked the clerk.

A half-hour later he rang the bell of a house on the upper West Side. A woman opened the door, and in answer to his inquiry, told him that Mr. Saunders had the second floor back.

"I think you'll find him in now," she said. "He came home yesterday afternoon. Are you a friend of his?"

Jimmy nodded.

"Then go right up," said the woman, who was the landlady herself. "Just knock on the door."

Up the steps Jimmy ran two at a time. He was so anxious to see Peter that he stumbled once or twice in his haste. He stopped before Peter's door and knocked. He received no answer. He knocked again.

"Come in," he heard some one say, and recognized Peter's voice. Jimmy threw open the door and paused.

"Scardon!" Peter gasped, rising from a chair. "How did you find me, and why have you come?"

Jimmy advanced and held out his hand.

"Peter," he said, "I received your letter. I want you to believe that I'm your friend."

"I believe you," Peter said, accepting Jimmy's hand. "But there is something else that—"

"Wait," Jimmy interrupted. "I know what you think. You imagined that Cleghorn told Jane Greg that you were only a poor glove clerk, and that she snubbed you."

"Told Marion Van Buren," Peter corrected. "That's what I believe. Yes."

"Told Jane Greg," Jimmy repeated. "That girl is not Marion Van Buren, Peter."

"Not Marion Van Buren!" Peter exclaimed, and falling back in his astonishment, he tumbled over a chair.

"Pick yourself up," Jimmy laughed, "and sit down there and listen to some story. Everybody is now unmasked."

Not once did Peter interrupt Jimmy as he listened to the explanations. He sat in a chair, smoking a pipe, and smiling every now and then as the humor of this and that struck him. His eyes narrowed when Jimmy started to read Rufus Cleghorn's letter, but they slowly softened when Jimmy reached the part in which Ruf expressed his penitence and the way the memory of Jane had awakened finer feelings.

"So Ruf, then, just ran away," Jimmy said, placing the letter back in his pocket. "And now you understand everything, don't you, Peter?"

Peter nodded. By degrees his astonishment wore off.

"Jimmy," he finally said, "does Jane want to see me?"

"*See* you?" Jimmy cried. "Why, if I don't return with you I might just as well not go back myself."

"Then," said Peter, smiling, "I have a favor to ask of you. I was struck with an idea the time you said that if I would tell the supposed Jane Greg that I was engaged to the supposed Marion Van Buren, you would not forget it. The thought occurred to me then that you could help me, Jimmy. I want to become something more than a glove clerk. Now more than ever I want to be somebody in the world, and a fellow in your position, with your connections and influence, can open up the way."

"You mean," said Jimmy, grabbing

Peter's hand, "that I should help to place you in a better position? All right. What shall it be, Peter?"

Peter threw out his hands helplessly.

"That's just it," he said. "I don't know. I have a fair education, and it's not too late to start in at something where I'll have a future."

Jimmy took a turn up and down the room. "I have it," he cried suddenly. "Aunt Amy will be delighted with everything now, and I feel sure that she will turn over some of her business affairs for me to handle. I have to go to work, anyway, you know. I'll need a secretary, and you shall have the position at a good salary."

"You'll make me your secretary!" Peter cried. "Oh, Jimmy, it's too good to be true."

"And what's more," Jimmy went on, in a burst of enthusiasm, "we have to get together, Peter. I'm going to work hard, and so are you. We may even become partners in some enterprise."

"If we do," said Peter quietly, "it 'll never be the glove business."

(The end.)

Perfume

by

Robert Terry Shannon

JARVIS VILLARD'S young wife rose from the untidy dinner table as the door-bell pealed. With a nervous gesture of a blue-veined hand, Villard halted her and got to his feet, still an erect, slender figure despite his seventy years.

"Don't trouble, my dear," he said quietly. "I'm going to take him up to my room to-night."

Agnes Villard's eyes grew rounder. "Ain't you going to take him in the library, like usual?"

The aged man smiled slightly. In passing he touched her hair kindly. "No, child."

Villard went through the high-ceilinged, meagerly furnished living-room, with its perpetual dust and close odor, into his bare hall and admitted a shambling man with a thin, bony face. "Good evening, Hooten," he said mildly.

Bert Hooten smiled furtively, showing his yellow, uneven teeth. "Evenin', sir," he replied deferentially, his eyes roving.

"Mrs. Villard will be engaged downstairs for some time," the older man explained. "I'm going to ask you up-stairs where we won't be disturbed."

Hooten's jaundiced eyes brightened.

"All right, sir. Funny—I ain't never been up-stairs in your house afore."

Villard, at the foot of the stairway, stepped aside for the visitor to precede.

"I mean—it's funny when you stop to think that I was brought up right here in this town; and my father before me," Hoo-

ten remarked. Then, with a tinge of defiance: "Times change, don't they, sir?"

"Inevitably," Villard answered.

At the far end of a hall he unlocked an oaken door, swung it open on creaking hinges. Hooten's loose jaw dropped as Villard, with a match, began lighting long, darkly colored tapers in their wrought-iron sockets on the walls.

Eagerly his straining eyes sought to take in everything; the severe richness of carved table and cabinet and chest; the tall-backed chairs, the shadowy paintings in oil. Long shadows fell across soft rugs and glistening spaces of flooring. His gaze came to the sharply defined features of Villard.

"Gosh!" he ejaculated. "This stuff—I didn't know you had anything like this. You ought to be able to raise a hundred dollars on it, maybe more."

Villard indicated a chair. "Won't you sit down?"

Hooten sat, crossing his long legs. Villard drew a case from his waistcoat, took out a cigaret and lit it with a wax match.

"Hooten," he said, seating himself across the table, "I went down to-day and had a talk with Judge Harkness. I should have done something of the kind years ago—but that's past. I didn't. Harkness tells me there's no way out. You've got me, lock, stock, and barrel, as they say."

Bert Hooten's face clouded.

"I'm sorry you feel that way, Mr. Villard. It's pure business with me. Always was. I been easy; never pushed you for the money. Only this, you can't expect me to keep on carrying your paper forever."

"That's right, Hooten. I can't."

"This house—I hate to sell it out over your head—"

Villard half smiled. "Don't apologize. We won't quarrel. I knew that everything was slipping away — lands and all — for years, but I thought there would be enough to last as long as I did."

"You never was a hand for figures," Hooten said. "You was always a gentleman. You had your fun for a good many years."

"For a good many years—" Villard's lids closed over his dark eyes. "Yes, I saw the world, saw life, Hooten."

"And I grubbed, Mr. Villard. I farmed and I traded and I watched every penny. White trash—that's what they used to call us Hootens. But we—I come up."

"And honestly, too."

Hooten scowled suddenly. "If you're meaning that three hundred acres down in the bottom—"

"That's all past, Hooten. Let us ignore it. There are so many pleasant things in life. Wait a moment."

Villard rose, crossed the room, and returned with a lacquered box from a cabinet. Unlocking it, he placed it on the table and withdrew six or seven crystal bottles of Chinese workmanship, intaglio designed with flowers and vines. From one of them he removed the stopper and passed it in front of Hooten's face.

"Get that?" he asked pleasantly. "It's jasmine. That's not a commercial perfume. And the rest" — he included the other bottles with a sweep of his hand—"ylang-ylang, tuberose, violet, acacia, rosemary — do you begin to see what I mean, Hooten? How easy it is to create the illusion of elegance? That's been life to me; things like this. My vices—they're harmless, don't you think?"

Hooten shook his head slowly. "I reckon I don't exactly understand, Mr. Villard. I don't know anything about your private life, and neither does anybody else in this town. We're just plain folks and—" He stopped, embarrassed.

"Plain, common-sense people," Villard added. "That's what I'm counting on in your case, Hooten. That's why I got you up here to-night. I'm going to talk in language you can understand."

"There ain't much to talk about," Hooten objected. "If you've got the money—"

"Which I haven't. But there are other values in life."

"Money talks."

"You're a smarter man than that, Hooten. You think that's all? Now listen—"

"Mr. Villard," Hooten cut in coldly, "I've got to have my money."

Villard tossed his cigaret out of the window and lit another. "Hooten," he said calmly, "if this had happened ten years ago when my hand was steadier I would

have shot you. Yes, actually. For one thing, you whipped a dog to death. And—you have tried to make love to my wife."

Beneath his sallowness, Bert Hooten grew leaden.

"You're a liar!"

"In Paris forty years ago I should have run you through—had you been decently born," Villard remarked evenly. "But we won't bicker. The game is over for me. I'm through. My blood runs cooler. I am willing to quit—to pass on to the next adventure."

Hooten's colorless lips drew across his teeth. "I don't give a damn what you do."

"Ah, but you do, Hooten. After all, you are a common-sense man. You will listen to a bargain. Think of me as you will—a dreamer, nodding over his perfumes, at the end of his rope—but I have common sense, too. We can come to terms.

"Do you think I care to live after I'm evicted here, a pauper? You know better than that. The humiliation of it, the sheer physical inconvenience would be more terrible than death could possibly be. Here, within my four walls, with my recollections and my isolation it has been tolerable.

"You see my perfumes are magical. The attar of neroli takes me back to Cannes—bergamot to Italy—lavender to England in the springtime. And music—there are endless symphonies in endless combinations of fragrances."

Hooten's turbid eyes were fixed on the graven face of the speaker. "Go on," he said implacably.

"You must have patience, Hooten," Villard resumed. "I'm an old man, and I may ramble, but what I'm telling you fits in. Yes, it all fits in. I want to give you all the necessary information so you'll know exactly how everything is—so you'll understand what I'm going to do.

"I didn't have much money left when I married Agnes a few years ago. Part of it I spent for decorating and furnishing her rooms in the other part of the house. You won't understand it, Hooten, but I had an idea I was protecting her. She was like a flower—and so pathetically weak. Quixotic, wasn't it? I fancied maybe I might have something to leave her when I died; to lift her out of poverty and give her such protection as money can give. Old men, you know, get such ideas.

"Now, if I should die, rather suddenly, there wouldn't be anything to stop you from marrying her, would there? No, not a thing. Your mind, your will, is stronger than hers, much. And should there be a residue to my estate it would be hers and, ultimately, yours. At least, there would be no occasion for any one to examine the various records in our transactions. It is just possible, Hooten, that you wouldn't want that. Now if I should die to-night—"

Hooten drew his breath sharply through his teeth. "You ain't sick!" he breathed.

"I am not afraid of death," Villard went on. His voice had fallen into a monotone and he was speaking mechanically. "I am not afraid of suicide. Believe me, I've thought it all out. I'm no longer a participant in life; not even a spectator. My mind was once quick, alert, resourceful. Now it takes all of my energy to think out a simple problem. But I have a solution, Hooten.

"If I knew that I could leave Agnes safely in your hands there would be no problem; but I can't trust you, Hooten. You are what you are. You might beat her. You'll pardon me, but I remember that dog."

"I wouldn't harm a hair of her head," Hooten said under his breath.

"You might die and leave her penniless."

The high, narrow shoulders of Bert Hooten hunched together. He leaned forward, confidentially. "She'd get my property according to law."

Villard, after a silence, asked: "Would you make her a will, so I could see it, before I—died?"

A crafty light gleamed suddenly in Hooten's eyes.

"Sure I would!"

"I don't know much about such things," Villard went on, "so I'll have to trust you. Now—a will like that, would it be final and absolute? Couldn't you invalidate it by another one later on? In case you changed your mind and divorced her, or something?"

Hooten's eyes drifted away from Villard's for an instant. "You can't change a will once you make it," he said. "I'm telling you the truth."

Villard nodded.

"I guess that's right. If you'll pull out the drawer on your side of the table you'll find a pen and ink and some paper."

Noiselessly Hooten slid out the drawer.

"When," he asked softly—"when did you figure on—on doing it?"

"Why should I wait?" Villard asked in a toneless voice. "You—you don't blame me, do you, Hooten?"

"Course I don't. Only—you don't want to leave no farewell note or anything. It wouldn't be fair to your wife."

"No, I wouldn't do that. I'll just sink quietly, without a trace."

Silence fell between the men, broken only by the scraping of Hooten's pen on the paper. Silently, Villard inhaled the odor from one bottle and then another.

"There it is, all legal and proper." Hooten blew his breath across the sheet to dry the ink and passed it over the table to Villard. "She's brief, but she's all there. I bequeath all my property, real and personal, to Agnes Villard. I even put the date at the bottom."

When he had finished reading it, Villard put the paper on the table. "I suppose there ought to be a witness," he suggested.

"Not by a long shot, Mr. Villard. We want to keep this thing private."

Again Villard nodded. "You're right. During the war they drafted you, didn't they, Hooten?"

"Yes, sir."

"Then we don't need a witness. I seem to remember reading where they took the finger prints of all the soldiers. If you'll just smear a little ink on your thumb and stamp it beside your signature that 'll be enough—and it will be private, too."

Hooten checked a smile. "Sure thing." Deliberately he damped a thumb and left its inky imprint beside his name. With equal care he folded the document and put it into his inside pocket. "I'll put this will in my safe to-night along with my other papers. If anything should ever happen to me they'll find it."

Villard rose to his feet.

"Don't go yet," he said. "Stay a while and chat with me, Hooten. You're probably the last man who'll ever see me alive. I feel a little faint. It's warm in here. The room is close."

Moving across the floor he raised a window; came back and started a small electric fan, set it on the stone hearth from where its upward current created a cooling and pleasant circulation of air out of the window.

"Hooten," he said, resuming his seat, "do you suppose they'll have flowers and perfumes over there on the other side of life?"

"I suppose so, Mr. Villard. Let us hope so."

Villard toyed with one of the ornate little bottles — removed the stopper. "Do you suppose they have any perfume as wonderful as this particular ambrosia?" he queried, extending the bottle at arm's length. "Take a deep breath of this, Hooten—a full breath—and let us hear your verdict."

Bert Hooten's hand touched the bottle; he breathed deeply from its neck. Quickly Jarvis Villard restored the stopper, smiled magnificently.

"You know now, Hooten," he said. "You know now."

With a deft movement he drew the inscribed will from the dead man's coat and spread it on the table. From the head of the stairs he called down to his wife.

"Would you mind, dear, ringing up Judge Harkness? Tell him I want him to come over. In about an hour. Have him come up to my room."

With an arm resting on the mantel, Villard once more removed the stopper from his cherished bottle. A final, calculating glance told him exactly what would happen; the crash of the fragile crystal on the hearth, the blast from the fan that would dissipate the fumes and drive them out of the open window long before Judge Harkness could arrive. For a moment he was young again—a boy sailing out into the blue.

"Prussic acid," he mused, "what an odd perfume!"

The Drifter

by John Holden

A NOVELETTE—COMPLETE IN THIS ISSUE

CHAPTER I.

AN UNEXPECTED OFFER.

IN a Montana grading-camp a group of mule-skinners and steam-shovel laborers were clustered in the semidarkness around a red-hot stove. Outside, a zero wind whistled across the plains and stabbed through the flimsy structure with frost-pointed daggers.

"A mighty poor flop-joint, this, but what can bums expect?"

The speaker was a small man, but he looked as tough as the knot in a pine log. His face was as sharp as a hatchet's, his brow as low as an orang-utan's. His name was Nick Savage, and it fitted him like a rubber glove.

A hobo replied who was as different from Nick as pudding is different from pills. He was rotund and dignified, and he talked in a manner that had won him a distinctive cognomen.

"I would not state that we are bums," he protested. "We do low-grade labor, true—but is it not a fact that all culture is reared upon the efforts of the man who works with his hands?"

"You tell 'em, Harvard!" acclaimed one of the audience.

"Oh, you bolshevik!" labeled another.

"Bunk!" retorted Nick. "Kid yerself that way if you like, Harvard, but you know and I know that we're the riffraff of the world and nothing else."

"Supposing we are, what's wrong with being riffraff?"

The last speaker was a man who commanded immediate and respectful attention. It was evident at a glance that he had once been considerably more than a shovel-stiff. A well-set-up fellow he was, under thirty, with the clean-cut features and firm chin that is supposed to indicate qualities that make for success in the world. He was not a success, however, and his eyes and voice indicated the reasons therefor. The former were too soft and kindly; the latter too lifeless.

"Corbin, you can't honestly say that you like this kind o' life, now can you? You don't really think you're as well off as when you was a teller in a bank or a captain in the army?" There was a quaint quality of respect in little Nick's pinched features as he gazed at the man whom he had followed with a dog's devotion for more than a year.

"In a way, yes," Corbin replied.

"What way?"

"Well, we're not burdened with responsibility, for one thing. The jealousies of social life, the fear of losing what we've got, the struggle to keep up appearances—

we don't have to bother with all that. Life is simple."

"Simple is right," Nick agreed. "Simple and hard, like these hay bunks we sleep in. D'you like yer bunk, Corbin?"

The ex-captain's tone as he replied was as hesitant as it had once been decisive.

"It could be worse," he said. "At least it makes a fellow appreciate a good one when he finds it now and then. Same with the meals and everything else. I've got no kick coming."

"Well, I have," proclaimed Harvard. "I think we are treated like dogs, and the reason we are treated that way is because we stand for it. Some day we workers will have sense enough to organize and demand our rights, and then watch the bosses tremble. You would not be satisfied either, Corbin, only you've lost your ambition. Must have, if you've dropped to this low estate after having been a bank teller and an army captain. I'll bet you've got a story you could tell us."

"I'll say he has," asserted Nick. Tell 'em how you won the croy de gerry, Corbin."

"The *croix de guerre*? Really!" Harvard stared at the usually silent man who had recently come into their midst along with his monkeylike companion, Nick.

"Oh, there's not much to that," said Corbin. "The French general seemed to think he had to give a medal to some one in my company, so, since no one did anything particularly heroic, he handed it to the commanding officer."

"Don't none o' you guys believe that!" cried Nick. "Corbin earned it all right, all right."

"I'm sure he must have," Harvard agreed. "But—about your descent to the status of construction hobo, Corbin. I'll venture to say there is some extraordinary reason for that."

Corbin shrugged his well-built shoulders.

"Oh, no. Just lost my ambition, as you say. Maybe shell-shock had something to do with it. I don't know. Maybe the sight of my buddies being blown to atoms gave me a feeling of what's the use? And then there was—oh, nothing."

"A girl, perhaps?"

Harvard voiced a question that was in the minds of several.

"Well—er—yes," said the ex-captain. "Came back and found her married to the fellow who stayed at home."

For a moment there was a respectful silence; then:

"Damn all women!" exclaimed Nick.

"Not at all," Corbin defended quickly. "A girl has a right to change her mind about so important a thing as marriage. Lots of chaps came back and found their girls gone. They just laughed, and got other girls, and pitched into their jobs, and made good. But me—no. As I said before, I didn't seem to have the ambition. Felt somehow like I had used up all the driving power I once had. Getting up in the world didn't seem to matter much. Maybe I turned yellow. Anyhow, since I've grown satisfied with this kind of life, why should I try to change it?"

"Y' didn't turn yellow!" Nick glared around as though he would like to spring at any one who accepted Corbin's suggestion.

No one did, and for a moment there was silence.

"Well, you may be sure that I am not satisfied," said Harvard. "I read, I study, I want to get up in the world. And what's more, I want to see all other hoboes better their conditions, too."

"You could glom on to a decent job in the city, Harvard," advised Nick. "Why don't you?"

"Maybe I could, and maybe I couldn't. Anyhow, I can save more money here, because board and lodging is thrown in for nothing, whereas in the city one pays almost as much as one earns for just those two things. And there's another reason."

"Spill it."

Harvard hesitated, as though doubting the advisability of imparting his secret to others, then asked:

"Do you know that the Vance Construction Company is a particularly good one to work for?"

"I never heard that," said Corbin.

"It don't look so awful good to me," commented Nick.

"It is, though. Have any of you ever heard of old Mr. Vance, the millionaire owner of this outfit, who lives in a mansion in St. Paul?"

No one had.

"He worked up from laborer to millionaire himself, and he has a hobby for picking out promising men and promoting them. Just loves to do it. He's more pleased when a protégé makes good than when he makes another million dollars. But his requirements are exacting. The man he picks must be of the highest character. He's a church worker and all that sort of thing. Occasionally he hands out Bibles to the men on all his jobs. Tried to close up the dance-halls and soft-drink barrooms along this line, but of course he didn't succeed."

"You're kinda hopin' maybe he'll pick on you for a little of that promotion stuff, huh?" queried Nick.

"In a way, yes," Harvard admitted modestly. "In fact, I wrote Mr. Vance a letter not so long ago, calling his attention to my qualifications."

"Heard from it?" queried Corbin, evidently from a desire to be polite rather than out of curiosity.

"No," said Harvard, "but I'm still hoping."

The talk around the stove drifted to other subjects and gradually subsided to a murmur.

Presently Corbin left the diminishing circle and climbed up into his bunk. He undressed and piled his coarse clothing on top of his insufficient blankets, and snuggled down into his hay bed.

He was aroused before he could get to sleep by the loud voices of two lodgers who had just entered.

"I was in the office and heard nearly every word," one of them was saying. "Some hobo sure is in luck."

"I wonder who?"

"Don't know. That's what I didn't hear. All I know is that Superintendent O'Brien and the timekeeper were discussing a message they'd just received from the big boss in St. Paul, telling them to give this man, whoever he is, the paymaster job up at Two-Dot."

"Chances are it's one of the office men. Those guys get all the good jobs."

"I heard O'Brien say it was one of the laborers."

Corbin saw Harvard, in the next bunk, listening eagerly.

"Guess that means you, Harvard," he whispered. "That's the answer to the letter you wrote Mr. Vance. I'm glad. You're ambitious and smart, and you deserve a good job."

"Thanks, but I'm not so sure it means me," said the ambitious one.

The newcomers were still talking.

"The superintendent said something about coming over to the bunk-house," one of them said. "We'll know then who the lucky guy is." They sat down beside the stove.

Corbin and Harvard subsided into their blankets to await further developments. They came in a moment, as the door flew open.

"Corbin! Sidney Corbin!" It was the loud voice of Superintendent O'Brien.

"Yes, sir." The owner of the name raised himself on one elbow.

The camp boss came over, carrying the bunk-house lantern in his hand, and by its feeble light he peered into Corbin's face.

"Have you ever worked in an office?" he demanded.

"Yes; as bank teller."

"Are you acquainted with Mr. Vance?"

"I never knew there was such a man until less than an hour ago."

O'Brien turned to the man who accompanied him.

"Beats hell, doesn't it?" he commented. "The boss picking a fellow like this?"

"Oh, I don't know," said the assistant superintendent. "Mr. Vance has done queerer things than that. Corbin won a decoration for bravery in the war, so that side kick of his told me. I guess the old man got wise to his record somehow and wants to give him a chance."

"Corbin," said the boss, "according to instructions just received by wire from Mr. Vance, you are to take over the job of paymaster at Two-Dot, which is a pay-station of ours fifty miles up the line."

In the silence that followed this declara-

tion the man who had been addressed could hear murmured ejaculations of surprise and wonder from his fellow laborers.

"Congratulations," said Harvard, without revealing a trace of his disappointment.

"Grab it!" Nick's injunction was sharp and sibilant.

Corbin made up his mind instantly, but he did not say anything for a moment. He reconsidered his first decision, and could see no reason for changing it.

Finally he spoke.

"Thank you, Mr. O'Brien," he said, "but I would rather not accept that job."

CHAPTER II.

A NEW LEAF.

THE superintendent made an impatient gesture. "Why not?" he snapped. "What's the matter with you? Don't you know you're turning down the chance of a lifetime—that thousands of good men back in St. Paul would jump at a chance to become a Vance paymaster?"

"I couldn't make good," said Corbin.

"How do you know you can't?"

"Feel it, that's all."

"You could take a crack at it."

"And waste the company's money if I made a mistake paying it out?"

"Rot! You were once an army captain. That means you were paymaster to your company—merely an incidental duty. This job doesn't require you to do anything else at all."

Corbin shook his head.

"You don't know the kind of man I am now. Wounded, you know—hospital—I've never felt the same since I got out. I don't know but what I might—might steal the money."

"You can't. Paymasters don't handle cash on this job. They sign checks."

"I might sign some and cash them."

"We'll take a chance."

"I'd have to be bonded and go through a long rigamarole."

"Our paymasters aren't bonded."

"I couldn't quit if I wanted to—not right off the bat, I mean, like I can now."

The superintendent turned to his assistant.

"Ever hear such an excuse in all your life?" he exclaimed.

The assistant had not. "Mr. Vance will be sore at us if this fellow doesn't take the job," he remarked.

"Now, listen here!" The superintendent turned to Corbin again. "A paymaster's job is a cinch for any one who knows figures and has ever bossed men. There's good money in it, and a chance of further promotion if you make good. So, what's the use of being a fool?"

"It isn't foolishness to continue a life that I'm contented with," Corbin replied.

O'Brien turned toward the door.

"Think it over," he said. "I'll give you till morning to decide. Good night now—and don't be an idiot."

The two officials walked out. Instantly a babble of excited comment arose.

"For the love of Pete, have some sense!" cried Nick Savage. "It's the chance of a lifetime."

"A paymaster sits in an easy chair all day and does nothing but sign checks," commented another.

"And you an ex-banker at that."

Corbin looked from one to another of his comrades.

"Thanks for your advice, fellows," he said, "but I don't think I want to reconsider my decision. As a laborer, I'm contented. As a paymaster, I'd be in the same old stew I was in before—nerve-racking responsibility, the struggle to hold the job, dissatisfaction because pretty soon I'd get ambitious to hold a still better job, the jealousies of social life, the thousand and one worries of our modern complex civilization."

"Absurd!" cried Harvard. "You're selfish. You're thinking only about yourself, Corbin! What about the rest of us? Maybe it's never struck you that you owe us a duty. Let me tell you!"

Silence fell upon the bunk-house. The thought that Corbin owed a duty to the others was new and startling, and all hands awaited Harvard's explanation.

"When Mr. Vance picked you for a responsible position, he chose you as the

representative of all hoboes, of all the downtrodden unfortunates of the earth who do the dirtiest work for the least money." Harvard was orating like a street-corner socialist.

"Make good, and every drifter in America will stand higher in the estimation of a man who possesses the power to help thousands of us. God knows we need help. Look at this dirty bunk-house—the cracks in the wall—these hay beds. Think of the thousands of men of our class who haven't even got hay bunks to sleep in—of the bread-liners, the paupers. Fail as the representative of this class, and a powerful man may never help hoboes again; succeed, and he may make conditions better for everybody who works for him.

"So you see, this isn't your problem alone, Corbin. It's not a question of what you yourself want. It's what all laborers want; what they must have. You are one of us. You know we are treated like dogs, even though you don't seem to mind it yourself, and we never will be treated any better unless you or me or some other brainy hobo shows the bosses the error of their ways. So think it over, Corbin, before you tell the superintendent that you don't want that job."

For a moment Corbin was silent. The force of Harvard's argument appealed to him.

"You could take the job yourself, Harvard, and help the downtrodden just as well as me," he argued.

"No. If Mr. Vance wanted me to have it he would have ordered O'Brien to give it to me. He doesn't; he wants you."

Others spoke up.

"Better take it, Corbin."

"Harvard sure said a mouthful."

"Every hobo on the grade can stick out his chest and say, 'There's one of us good-for-nothin' bums actin' as paymaster.'"

"Grab it, cap, grab it!" cried faithful Nick.

Corbin wavered.

"All right, men," he said finally. "Since you put it that way, I'll have a try at it for your sakes. But don't be disappointed if I fail. I really don't feel up to such work."

Corbin donned his clothes and, with the applause of his fellows ringing in his ears, made his way to the warm camp office.

"I've decided to take that paymaster job," he said to the superintendent.

CHAPTER III.

ON THE JOB.

A WEEK later Corbin sat at a rough pine desk in a small shack built of plain pine boards, with an outer covering of tar paper held in place by laths. The front part was the construction company's office, where the workers on fifty miles of construction exchanged their time-checks for bank checks.

In the rear, separated from the office by a flimsy curtain, was his living-room, roughly furnished with two bunks, one built above the other, the spare one being for any company official who might choose to spend the night there. Corbin's meals were secured at the only restaurant in the near-by village of Two-Dot, at a place that Adolph Hecker conducted in connection with his dance-hall and soft-drink barroom. The office did not suggest that an efficient worker was in charge. It was unswept, and the desk was littered.

Nor did Corbin look like a competent paymaster. A wrinkle had settled between his kindly eyes, and his face was pale and haggard. A beard was upon his face, and his dress was as careless as it had been in the bunk-house of headquarters camp.

He was scribbling aimlessly on a piece of paper when a knock sounded on the door. He roused himself from his unpleasant reverie and said "Come in," and then he rose and held out his hand in welcome as his faithful follower, Nick Savage, entered.

"Made it at last, boss, though the goin' sure was tough," said the visitor. "How's everything?"

Corbin evaded the last query.

"Do you mean to say you worked your way fifty miles up from headquarters in zero weather just to see me?" he asked.

"Sure. Why not? You don't want to shake yer old pal just because you got a high and mighty job, do you?"

Corbin invited Nick inside the railing and pulled a chair up to the stove for him.

"Not on your life, Nick," he said. "I'm darned glad to see you. You came just at the right time."

"How's that?" Nick looked around in alarm. "Ain't everything goin' right?"

Corbin shook his head. "I'm afraid I can't stick it out, Nick."

"What's wrong?"

"Everything. The cursed figures mostly. Nick, they're a holy fright. Figures, figures, figures! Look at those papers on the desk. Nothing but figures. Man, they are driving me crazy!"

"But you used to work in a bank. The figures were just as bad there, weren't they?"

"Yes, but I had an adding machine—and a different head on me then, Nick."

Corbin continued in his listless tone.

"Fifteen different camps, and all their cursed pay-rolls have to be kept separate. Fifty different rates of wages are paid to fifty different kinds of workers. I'm supposed to check the camp figures. Some of them are wrong, and then when I tell a man he hasn't got as much money coming as his time-check shows—argue, argue, fight, fight! I tell you it's getting the best of me, Nick."

"Rats!" said Nick. "Why don't you do like other paymasters do? Bat 'em over the head with a club when they get fresh. Trouble with you, Corbin, is you're too easy-going."

"Maybe—but I don't want to fight. Had enough of that in France. And then the way they seem to think I ought to get up out of bed at all hours of the night to give them their money."

"You can bet they don't try to get other paymasters up in the middle of the night."

"Listen, Nick." Corbin lowered his voice. "Have you got anything on your hip?"

"Nothing but sarsaparilla."

"Let's have a pull at it."

Nick took from his pocket a bottle labeled "Sarsaparilla," and Corbin took a swallow.

"Hell!" he said, and spat it out. "It *is* sarsaparilla."

"Sure; that's what I said." Nick grinned and added: "You can't drink hooch and hold down a paymaster's job."

"I know it; but one drink from you wouldn't hurt. I've managed to refuse drinks from others so far."

"Oho! Somebody wants to tank you up, eh?"

"Hecker, damn him! The fellow that runs the hotel and dance-hall and soft-drink barroom up in the village."

"Think he's trying to put anything over on you?"

"I know he is. I could help him in his business, Nick, if I wanted to do shady work."

"You won't, will you, Corbin?"

"No; I'll quit first."

"I'm glad to hear that. It's bad enough to see a man like you lose his grips on things, but going crooked—don't do it, Corbin."

"I won't; there's not a chance."

The door opened abruptly, and a giant of a man, bearded and with a menacing leer on his coarse features, strode in and glowered at the meek-eyed paymaster.

"A bank-check for that, and be quick about it!" he snapped, and flung his time-check on the counter.

Corbin checked the figures slowly.

"I'm sorry," he said, "but the timekeeper at Camp Seven who gave you this made a mistake. The amount due you is $15.60, instead of $16.50. Figure it out for yourself if you like."

The giant glared.

"You're a liar," he announced. "I did figure it out with the timekeeper. You give me sixteen-fifty, you shrimp, or there'll be a dead paymaster around here."

With a sigh, Corbin wrote a check for $15.60. He signed it shakily and stood looking at it, obviously reluctant to precipitate a crisis by handing it out.

Nick grabbed it out of his hand.

"Here!" said the little fellow, and thrust the check at the giant. "You take that and beat it, you big stiff! Who in hell do you think is running this office, anyhow?" He pointed to the door. "Git!"

The man started to say something, but changed his mind as Nick's resolute eyes met his and conquered them. He turned without a word and went out.

"There! That's the way to handle rough-necks," Nick proclaimed. "Why don't you hand 'em a little of that stuff, Corbin?"

"I don't like altercations, Nick."

"Well, you've got to have 'em if you're goin' to stick in this office, and, as Harvard said, it's up to you to show old man Vance what a common laborer can do."

"I'll try and buck up, Nick."

"Right-o." Nick picked up his cap. "Well, I guess I'll hike out to the nearest camp and see what I can land. I'll run in again some time, eh?"

"Surely. Come back after you get a job. They'll tell you to start work tomorrow morning, so you'll have nothing to do all afternoon. Wait; maybe I can help you." Corbin scribbled a note. "Take this to the timekeeper at Camp Four and maybe he can fix you up. So-long and good luck."

"Same to you." Hand on door-latch, Nick paused. "I suppose you know that Mr. Vance is on the line?" he asked.

Corbin was startled. "No!" he said.

"I thought sure you knew that—everybody else seems to—so I didn't mention it before. He's inspecting all the camps; leaving little Bibles at all of them, too. Chances are he'll be along here soon; maybe this very afternoon."

CHAPTER IV.

THE THREAT.

AFTER Nick left Corbin made an effort to get his records in order. The little fellow's visit had done him good; Nick's victory over the bully had put a little iron into his will. He straightened up his desk, swept his floor, shaved himself, and was pretty well prepared for a visit from the big boss when a peremptory knock sounded on his door and was followed by the entrance of a strong-featured man.

"Hello, Hecker," greeted Corbin casually. "How's business at the dance-hall?"

"Good enough," said Hecker; "but it might be better if you'd listen to reason."

"I'm reasonable, Hecker."

"All right, then; show it." Hecker tossed a bunch of yellow time-checks on the counter. "Give me bank checks for those and I'll believe you."

Corbin shook his head.

"Sorry," he said, "but you know as well as I do, Hecker, that I can't allow you to cash time-checks and then get bank checks for them here. The rules of the company are strict on that point. A man must bring his time-check to this office himself and get his bank check. I've explained that before. I've warned you not to cash time-checks. Why do you do it?"

"The men keep asking me to."

"There's no reason why they should. They can easily walk down here and exchange their time-checks for bank checks, and then you can cash the bank checks."

"But if I refuse to cash their time-checks and let them get out of my place, they won't come back when they get their bank checks, and I lose their business."

"I can't help that. Rules are rules."

"I used to cash these checks before a pay office was started here."

"I know. The system was all wrong, and that's why the pay office was started."

Hecker fingered his yellow slips.

"I'm to understand, then, that you won't make good on these?"

"Yes."

"The money I paid out on them is thrown away?"

"That's for headquarters to say. You can take the matter up with Superintendent O'Brien."

Hecker reached slowly into his hip pocket and drew something from it which he laid on the counter in front of him.

"There's a pint of the best whisky that was made in America before prohibition," he said, and pulled out the cork so Corbin could smell its intoxicating aroma. "Come on now. Be reasonable and it's a present to you. And it doesn't have to be the only present you'll ever get from me, either—see?"

Corbin pushed the bottle away, though his desire to seize it and gulp down the fiery liquor was strong.

"Sorry, but there's nothing doing," he stated.

The dance-hall proprietor's thick lips twisted into a sneer. "Does it ever strike you that maybe I can get you for this, Corbin?"

"Perhaps."

"No perhaps about it. I can and I will. You'll see. You'll hear from me again, and pretty soon, too." Angrily the man strode out of the office.

Corbin looked out the window after him.

"More trouble," he told himself with a sigh. He turned back to his desk presently and was surprised to see the bottle of whisky on the counter where Hecker had set it down. "That's one way he figures to get me," he muttered. "Well, it won't work, Hecker, old chap."

Corbin's first thought was to smash the bottle. "But that would be silly," he told himself. "It's good medicine, and besides it doesn't belong to me." His next thought was to carry it up to the dance-hall and return it to Hecker. "But why should I walk a quarter-mile through the cold to do that?" he decided. "I'll just put it away out of sight and give it to him when he comes after it."

So Corbin put out of sight a pint of the same kind of liquor he had begged from Nick. He did not succeed, however, in putting it out of his mind.

"Hecker is going to get me and the big boss is going to visit me," he told himself with a grim smile. "It looks like there's going to be something doing around this shack."

CHAPTER V.

DOUBLE TROUBLE.

THERE was nothing doing, however, during the remainder of the morning. Only two men called for their pay, and both were as meek as lambs. Corbin continued his task of cleaning up his office and bunk-room, and when he went to lunch up in the village he had the satisfaction of knowing that things were in reasonably good order for Mr. Vance's inspection.

Inasmuch as he was forced to eat at Hecker's restaurant, because it was the only one, Corbin rather expected trouble of some sort. He gave his order in the usual way, however, and absorbed himself in a day-old newspaper while he waited for it. It was brought to him presently, cooked as usual, and the service was as good as it ever was, too, which was not saying much. He was enjoying his meal when Hecker appeared in the doorway, looked around the interior, and, singling out Corbin, approached him.

"Good whisky I left you, eh?" he said with an oily grin.

"I don't know," Corbin replied. "I haven't tried it. It's down at the shack waiting for you to come and get it."

"I'll bet you're hoping I don't come."

"No, I hope you do come."

"Then, if you want to get rid of it, why didn't you bring it up with you when you came for lunch?"

"To tell you the truth, Hecker, I forgot all about it."

Hecker studied the impassive face of the paymaster.

"Still got your mind made up to hurt me in my business all you can?"

"Not at all; I'm willing enough to help you, provided I can do so without breaking company rules."

"But you won't let me cash time-checks?"

"No."

"All right, then; the fight is on. I said I'd get you, and I'm going to. And don't come whining around afterward about me using unfair methods."

Corbin forced a grin to his pale features. "Just so you don't put poison in my coffee," he said.

Hecker left and joined a group of dance-hall girls who had entered and seated themselves at a near-by table. Corbin looked at the poor drabs who looked so ghastly in the daylight, though good enough in the non-critical eyes of construction hoboes at night, and his feeling of revulsion was so great that he did not enjoy his meal thereafter. They looked at him, too; they

smiled in their usual brazen manner and with the usual barren result; some boldly, others a bit wistfully, as though regretting that they could no longer command the respect of a clean-minded man. Hecker seemed to be telling them something, and they all laughed as Corbin paid his check and left the place.

Back in the pay office an hour passed, and then another hour, and nothing developed. But Corbin felt no reassurance because of that. He was obsessed by a feeling that highly dramatic events were impending; that this was the lull before the storm; that the enmity of Hecker combined with the visit of Mr. Vance would develop a crisis in his life that would either restore him to his old place in the world of men or damn him irretrievably to the hobo ranks to which he had gradually descended. He felt no great concern in the outcome beyond his desire to get the best of Hecker, and even that was not so keen as it might have been. Since it seemed that a storm was inevitable, he wanted it to arrive and blow over quickly. He did not like storms.

It was mid-afternoon when Corbin's first caller appeared; an unusual caller, for women were scarce along the grade. It was a girl; a poor, pathetic creature, with thin features and large, trusting eyes, who looked as much out of place on railroad construction work as a kitten does in a dog kennel. She was poorly dressed in an old but not badly fitting skirt and a man's mackinaw and cap, and in her hand she carried a bundle. She grasped at the counter as though to save herself from falling.

"Goodness!" she said. "I wish you'd let me sit down and rest. I'm all in. I've walked since morning, and I didn't have much lunch, either."

"Come right in." Corbin lifted the wooden bar that kept out ordinary callers and pulled a chair up to the hot stove. The girl sank down wearily.

"Have you been working?" Corbin asked.

Her answer came in jerks. "Yes—down the line—cookee in a kitchen—under the awfullest woman you ever saw. She fired me."

"Have you a time-check?"

"No. I didn't have much coming, and I took this mackinaw and a pair of shoes and some other things, and a dollar in cash, instead of a regular time-check."

"Perhaps you'll tell me your name?"

"Sure — Marie Methven. You don't need to tell me yours; I know it, Mr. Corbin."

A foolish sense of gratification swept over the paymaster because she said that.

"You'll have to find another job pretty soon, won't you, Marie?" he said in a more kindly tone. "Can't live very long on the dollar they gave you. What do you aim to do?"

"Keep on hunting for another job, like I've been doing all day. There's a lot of camps around here that have got women cooks, so I've heard, and maybe I can get on at one of them."

"I'm afraid, Marie, that your information isn't correct. All the camps around here have men cooks."

The girl sighed and shook her attractive head.

"Oh, well," she said. "Let me rest a while and I'll be all right." She leaned over closer to the stove, and suddenly her head dropped as though she had gone to sleep instantly. She checked herself before her head struck the stove, and sat upright again, and smiled sheepishly. "Kinda sleepy," she murmured drowsily. "Be all right in minute or two."

Corbin saw that she was on the verge of a collapse, and he wanted very much to tell her to go into his bunk-room and lie down. But he did not dare to do so. Mr. Vance would be calling at any moment now, and probably he would misconstrue Corbin's motive. From all accounts the president's code of morals was as strict as a Puritan's. He might recognize the fact that his paymaster merely wished to help a girl in distress, but on the other hand he might not. It would be better to take no chances, even with the curtains thrown back so that the bunk-room would be as visible to any caller as the office itself.

"If you are ill, Marie, I could have you taken to the line hospital," he suggested. "There is one not so very far from here."

"No, no, I'm not sick," Marie protested

quickly. "Just dog tired from walking so much."

In a few moments she appeared to be sound asleep in the chair. Corbin pushed the chair back so that she could not possibly fall out of it against the stove, and then he took advantage of the opportunity to study her more closely.

He realized that she was a very pretty girl. This had not been apparent at first because of the rough and mannish manner in which she was dressed, but there could be no doubt about it now. Her complexion, which looked rough and chapped at first sight, was clear and finely tinted when one looked at it more closely. Her features, which had been more or less hidden by her man's cap and the collar of her mackinaw, were regular and beautifully molded. Her mouth was a pathetic little Cupid's bow that would be irresistible were the corners only turned up instead of down. Her eyes were closed now, but he well remembered their soulful expression. He thought about the girl who had proved false to him upon his return from France, and presently he caught himself wondering if, under similar circumstances, this girl would prove false to a fiancé who was fighting her country's battles.

"Poor lost creature," he murmured to himself. "She's in a worse fix than I am, I guess. A drifter like myself, riff-raff just the same as I am; only, being a woman, she can't stand the gaff like even the poorest stick of a man can. Maybe, as the representative of all drifters, I can do something for her by making good on this job."

He eyed his desk with less distaste than he had felt previously. The thought came to him that, with something or somebody to work for—a worth-while girl, say—there still might come a day when he would enjoy responsibility.

Corbin's thoughts were interrupted by the whir of a high-powered motor outside. Peering out his little window, he saw a luxurious limousine—a strange sight in that bare and barren land—with a chauffeur in front and two men behind. One of them was a young, brisk-looking chap; the other was an elderly man with a stalwart frame and a snow-white beard who moved with surprising alertness and a majestic dignity that proclaimed him a master of men. Beyond a doubt it was Mr. Vance, the president of the Vance Construction Company, the man whose amazing order to his superintendent had resulted in Corbin's appointment to the position of paymaster. Corbin sprang to the door and stepped out to welcome his employer.

As he did so, and before either he or the visitors could enter, the girl in the chair awoke to sudden and vigorous life. She looked at the partly open door and the men outside, and from them to the curtained-off portion of the shack; then she grabbed up her bundle from the floor and with it darted behind the curtain.

In Corbin's private room, she eyed the two bunks that were built in there, one above the other, and she noted that the back part of the lower one was so shrouded in darkness that she might hope to hide there successfully. She jumped into it as footsteps sounded in the office, burrowed beneath the blankets, pulled them over her head, and, thus hidden from the casual glance of a visitor, she commenced the curious task of undoing her bundle by her sense of touch alone.

In the office, Mr. Vance stood appraising the little shack with the keen eye of a general.

Corbin gasped, and a sickish feeling came upon him as he noted Marie's absence, and realized what would probably happen to him if his employer found her in his bunk-room.

Mr. Vance did not look behind the curtain immediately. He drew the chair that Marie had sat in a moment previously up to the stove and held out his big, masterful hands to its heat. The young man who was with him stood back deferentially.

"Your name is Corbin, eh?" the president questioned.

The paymaster cast a fearful glance at the dividing curtain before he replied shakily: "Yes, sir."

Mr. Vance looked him over from head to foot.

"Making good on this job?" he demanded.

"I think so, sir."

"Humph! You seem to keep the place tidy enough, anyhow." The great man rose and stepped to the curtain, and Corbin looked at him out of terror-glazed eyes. Mr. Vance flicked back the curtain an inch or two and peered inside for merely a second — then returned to his seat by the stove. "You were just a common laborer before you got this job, weren't you, Corbin?"

"Y-yes, sir." Mingled fear, relief, and wonder caused the paymaster's voice to tremble. The wonder was caused by his employer's question, because he had taken it for granted that Mr. Vance knew all about him before he had appointed him to his responsible position. "I'm very grateful to you for giving me this place," he added.

The old man and his young companion exchanged odd glances that Corbin was at a loss to understand.

"Should think you would be," said the president gruffly.

Corbin wanted to ask why he had been chosen, but the old man's demeanor did not invite questions.

"Paying out much money?" Mr. Vance asked.

"Not as yet. A good many checks come in, but so far they have all been for small amounts."

"Easy work, eh?"

Corbin recollected that the handling of a multitude of small checks had been difficult work, but he saw no reason why he should tell Mr. Vance that. In fact, Corbin's attitude toward his job had changed somewhat since first the girl and then the president had entered his office. The sight of an appealing young woman in distress had aroused his sense of chivalry and compassion, and with it a desire to hold on to his job so that he could help her and other unfortunates, both men and women. The fact that she had made the grave mistake of entering his bunk-room, where Mr. Vance was likely to discover her at any moment, did not change his desire. Every one makes mistakes, he reflected; that is why lead-pencils are equipped with rubber erasers.

Corbin's first contact with the inscrutable master of men who was his employer had further quickened his awakening ambition to make something of himself, not only for his own sake, but for the sake of all the unfortunates whom Mr. Vance might help if their representative demonstrated that they were worthy of being helped.

"This is work that I think I can do satisfactorily, sir," he replied in answer to the president's question.

"Yes, yes, of course. What did you do before you became a construction laborer?"

That was another surprising question. Corbin had taken it for granted that Mr. Vance had learned his bank and army record before offering him the position of paymaster.

"I once worked in a bank, sir," he replied. "I quit that to enter the army, and there I worked up from private to captain."

Mr. Vance's somber countenance relaxed a bit.

"Well, well!" he said. "One never knows what a common laborer has been or can be." He took a little red-edged Bible from his pocket. "Ever read this?" he queried.

"Yes, but not lately, I'm afraid."

Back in the dark part of the bunk-room an amazing thing was happening. The girl whom Corbin had liked at sight, who had aroused his compassion and inspired him with new ambition, had doffed her rough clothes and arrayed herself in the contents of the bundle she had carried. She crept out of the bunk where she had accomplished this swift feat of redressing, and approached the curtain with hesitant footsteps. Her countenance was a study in conflicting emotions, as though her soul was torn by the counter claims of gratitude to one person and obligation to another.

"This will do you good." Mr. Vance handed a little Bible to Corbin, arising half out of his chair as he did so. He twisted it around a bit as he reseated himself so that he was directly facing the curtain that hid the bunk-room from view. Suddenly he sat bolt upright and uttered an exclamation.

"Well, well!" he cried. "I didn't know

you were married and were keeping your wife here, Corbin."

Corbin, too, looked at the curtain, and the sight that met his eyes caused him actually to stagger. Had the devil himself appeared before him wrapped in fire he could not have been more terribly surprised. And the sight that met his eyes was as nothing compared with the dreadful realization that seared his brain as though with a red-hot iron. The wistful, appealing girl who had entered his office in apparent distress, and for whom he had done everything possible, was an impostor, a liar, and a cheat. For there she stood between the parted curtains, still as virtuous-looking as when she entered, but with her beauty hellishly enhanced, not clad in rough garments now, but with the flimsiest and most revealing kind of negligée draped carelessly upon her smooth white shoulders!

Immediately Corbin saw through the trick. This was the fruit of Hecker's threat to get him; this was the means the dance-hall man had employed to get him replaced by a paymaster who might be more amenable to graft. The girl was, of course, one of Hecker's dance-hall creatures sent here in disguise to play this fiendish trick upon the man who had been only too willing to help her.

The realization had a startling effect upon Corbin in more ways than one. As a dirty looking pile of powder turns instantly into a sheet of flame, so did the paymaster turn instantly from an easy-going man of questionable competence into a fiery-eyed dynamo of resolution and energy. Between two ticks of a clock he shed the smothering mantle of indifference that had dragged him down, step by step, from his once proud position to the status of a common hobo. Again he was the man who had led his company across No Man's Land through an inferno of whining bullets and crashing shells.

The will to dare and to do returned to Sidney Corbin. Discarded was his fatal philosophy of don't care; forgotten was the girl back home who had sapped his life of its ambition by marrying a stay-at-home while he fought in France. He would show Hecker—that slimy-souled trafficker in outlawed liquor and women's bodies—that he could not successfully play a vile trick upon Sidney Corbin. He would demonstrate to this Jezebel with the face of an angel and the soul of a reptile that the man she had undertaken to dupe was not so easy as he looked.

Frantically Corbin racked his brain for a way out of his dreadful predicament. A mere denial of the girl's acquaintance would not suffice; the real story, he realized, would not be convincing. Her testimony, and Hecker's, and the false word of all of Hecker's minions, would shatter the truth into fragments.

Mr. Vance's first supposition that the girl was Corbin's wife seemed to be undergoing a change. His suspicion was obviously growing. He turned from his appraisal of the scantily garbed female to bestow a lowering stare upon his trusted employee.

"Sir," he demanded, in a tone that was as cold and sharp as a knife-blade, "are you married to this woman?"

Corbin knew then that there was one way, and only one, out of his predicament.

"Mr. Vance," he replied slowly and deliberately, "to-day is my wedding day."

CHAPTER VI.

ONE WAY OUT.

THE president relaxed and his frown was replaced by a smile.

"Well, well!" He clasped Corbin's hand. "Congratulations, my boy. I wish you all the success in the world." He turned to the girl. "I am sure you would be a prize for the best man on earth, dear. Such a beauty! How in the world did a paymaster of mine come to win you? I wish both of you a long and happy life and all the success in the world."

The girl was evidently too dumfounded by this sudden turn of events to do anything more than utter the first commonplace remark that entered her mind.

"Thank—thank you, sir," she said.

"Well, well! Such a surprise! And you never said a word about it, Corbin, you rogue. Enjoying a honeymoon and not a

word about it to the boss. Well! Had I known I would have brought you a little present—eh, Sid?"

The president turned to the young man who accompanied him.

"Perhaps it isn't too late, sir," the young man suggested after he, too, had voiced his congratulations.

"A good idea. No, indeed, it isn't too late." Mr. Vance stepped to the door. "I'll be back presently," he said to Corbin; and a moment later the big car was rolling away toward the village.

Corbin turned slowly upon the girl, his eyes like daggers, like fingers twitching.

"Well, you did it, damn you!" he gritted.

The beautiful deceiver—in her new garb she was nothing short of beautiful—said nothing. Fear was in her big, lustrous eyes; the expressive eyes that had so artfully portrayed weariness and helplessness when she entered; the eyes that had won Corbin's sympathy in an instant.

"You a sick girl! And I was doing everything I could to help you!" He grasped her by the arm and shook her violently. "Do you know what some men in my position would do to you?"

"I—I couldn't help it," she murmured brokenly.

"You liar! You could help it! You came here deliberately to ruin me. Hecker sent you."

"Yes—but I didn't want to come—didn't know it would get you into any trouble."

Corbin flung her away from him, then stood glowering.

"What do you think is going to happen to you for this?" he questioned fiercely. "You don't suppose you are going to get away with it without paying up in some way or other, do you?"

"N-no." Her answer was almost a moan.

The tense scene was interrupted by a knock on the door, followed an instant later by the entrance of Nick Savage.

"Well, I landed a job, old man," he burst out joyously, then stopped, stricken dumb by the amazing appearance of the girl and the tragic attitudes of both her and Corbin. "Hel-lo," he stammered. "What's the matter here?"

Corbin sprang at his faithful follower and seized his arm.

"Nick, I want you to do something for me, and do it quick," he cried. "Will you?"

"Y-yes—sure."

"Get the village minister. Right now! Drag him here if he won't come any other way. There's going to be a wedding here—a damned tragic wedding—and it's got to be pulled off in the next fifteen minutes, before Mr. Vance returns." Corbin piloted Nick to the door and pushed him out into the cold. "Move, now! Run! No excuses! *Get him here!*"

Alone with his deceiver again, Corbin whirled upon the girl.

"I told Mr. Vance this was my wedding day, and it's going to be!" he cried. "Whether you like it or not doesn't matter. You got me into this and you're going to get me out. You're going to marry me if it's the last thing you do in this world!"

"But—I—I—"

"I—I—hell! You're going to help me make good on that statement, you hussy. I've made up my mind. I'll show that skunk of a Hecker whether he can get the best of me or not. Figured I was a mark, did he? And you, too. I'll show you—both of you!"

"But—afterward—I'm not worthy—"

"I know that, you beautiful devil! You're not fit to marry the lowest dog of a man on the whole line. I'll regret it after I've cooled down, I suppose, but that's not what matters now. All I'm thinking of is that I told my benefactor—the man who gave me this job—that this is my wedding day, and, by all that's holy, it's going to be! I may be a drifter and a bum, but my word is still worth something!"

The girl made no reply. She had been gradually shrinking away from Corbin until she was in a corner and could retreat no further. She flopped down on the floor and huddled there, cowering like a dog that fears the lash.

The footsteps of two people sounded outside. Corbin darted to the window. He feared that it was Mr. Vance and the youth

called Sid; that his desperate plan to redeem his word had failed. But it was not; it was Nick and the minister. They entered.

"Get up!" Corbin dragged the girl to her feet.

"We want to be married immediately," he told the clergyman. "Hurry, please! It's got to be done before Mr. Vance returns."

The minister looked from the excited man to the cowering girl.

"Isn't this — er — a bit unusual?" he queried mildly. "Does the lady wish to be married?"

"You bet she does."

"But, my dear sir, it is necessary that there should be two witnesses."

"Da—I mean, darn!" cried Corbin. "Nick," he ordered, "run out and grab the first person you see. Quick!"

Nick ran, and after what seemed an interminable wait, returned with a laborer.

"Right-o! Let's go!" Corbin shook the girl. "Wake up, you! You're getting married."

The minister looked from one to the other of them as though in doubt as to whether he should proceed. In the absence of any spoken objection from the girl, however, he finally commenced to read the service. He asked Corbin if he would take the girl to be his wedded wife, and Corbin answered firmly that he would. He asked the girl if she would take Corbin to be her wedded husband, and paused to await her reply. Presently it came.

"I—I will," she stammered, and then clutched at Corbin's arm as though she feared that she would fall.

The ceremony was not yet concluded when a motor-car sounded outside.

"Hurry!" said Corbin to the minister. "You've got to finish before they come in."

The minister did hurry. He spoke the last words and put his Bible in his pocket.

"Congratulations to both—" His other words were drowned out by the creaking of the door as it swung open to admit Mr. Vance.

"Well, well!" said the president. "This almost looks like a wedding."

"The minister just happened to be congratulating us," said Corbin. He frowned warningly at the clergyman and the latter took the hint.

"Yes — er — of course—congratulating them," he asserted. "I must be going now," he added, and left without another word, as though anxious to get away from a painful scene.

Nick also seemed to feel that his absence would be appreciated more than his presence, and, with a muttered statement that he would be back some time later, took his departure.

"I am sorry to say that I couldn't find anything in the village that would make a suitable wedding present," commenced Mr. Vance. "So, instead, I'm going to give you something that you will probably value just as much."

He took a check-book from his pocket, did a hasty bit of scribbling with a fountain pen, and stood with a blue slip of paper in his hand.

"I am giving you this little token of my appreciation of your services, Mr. Corbin, for a number of reasons," he stated. "In the first place, I want to help an ex-service man who seems to have had a run of hard luck; in the second, I want your married life to start as auspiciously as possible; and in the third, I wish to mitigate, so far as I can, a disclosure that I fear will come to you as a bit of a disappointment."

"A disappointment?" Corbin felt a sudden chill.

"I fear so. You understand, of course, that your appointment to this responsible position was somewhat extraordinary?"

"It did seem almost too good to be true, sir."

"Unfortunately, Corbin, it *was* too good to be true. In other words, you were not the man that I chose for this job at all. I wired my superintendent to appoint Sidney Corwin, this being the gentleman who is with me at the present time." He indicated the young man he had addressed as Sid. "The telegraph operator made a mistake and made the name Sidney Corbin, so naturally the superintendent thought you were the man I meant."

Corbin slumped down into a chair. Marie stood looking from Mr. Vance to her

husband as though the swift march of recent events was past her understanding.

"But you—you said the man you wanted was a laborer."

"Quite so. Sid was working as a laborer at the time—wanted to learn the railroad contracting business from the ground up—a commendable performance for the son of a railroad president."

"I—I see," said Corbin.

"So I regret that I'll have to relieve you of your duties here, Mr. Corbin. Mr. Corwin will take them over—to-night, after we have had dinner up at the village. In the mean time—"

Mr. Vance hesitated and handed Corbin the check he had been holding.

"Thank you very much, sir. It's more than I deserve." Corbin glanced at the blue slip, saw that it was made out for one hundred dollars, and placed it in his inside pocket. "I'll be here after dinner to turn everything over," he stated calmly.

"Of course, of course. Maybe O'Brien can find something for you to do. I'll speak to him." The president pulled his fur cap down over his ears, went out to his car, and rode back to the village.

CHAPTER VII.

A STRANGE HONEYMOON.

FOR a silent moment Corbin stood and glared at the dance-hall girl he had just made his wife. She shrank away from him and cowered against the wall.

"Well, I did it, didn't I?" he gritted between clenched teeth. "I suppose there ought to be some satisfaction in knowing that I couldn't possibly have got myself into a worse mess."

The girl made no reply.

"God!" Corbin groaned. "Saddled myself with a wife that the lowest skunk of a man on the whole line wouldn't have been fool enough to marry—all in order to live up to my word and hold my job—and then lose it after all!"

He strode up and down the office, hammering his fist into his open palm, like a man on the verge of insanity.

"And I was meaning to buck up and make good again," he agonized. "Now—with a thing like you for a wife—"

He stopped and glared at her, then resumed his terrible pacing.

"And I liked you, too—when you first came in—a tuckered out girl—you devil!" he groaned.

"You beautiful devil from hell!" he went on again after a moment of silent agony that twisted his face into repulsive contortions. "The tool of a snake like Hecker!" He whirled on her. "Why does the Lord give beautiful faces to creatures like you?"

"I—I told you I was sorry," the girl murmured brokenly. Suddenly she burst into a fit of violent sobbing.

"That's good, damn you!" cried Corbin. "I'm glad to see you suffering—if you are."

Her sobbing continued.

"And the joke of it is, I was doing it all for you as well as for myself," Corbin went on, his tongue a pitiless lash. "I only took the job because I wanted to show Mr. Vance that a hobo could make good. I thought he might make things a little easier for all the other drifters along the line if one of us amounted to something. And that includes you. You're a drifter, too. You are one of the world's unfortunates. A joke; that's what it is. A grim joke!"

Suddenly the girl's sobbing ceased.

"You—we—could make good yet," she faltered.

Corbin halted as though he had run into an invisible stone wall.

"*We*—could — make — good!" He repeated her words slowly and with infinite scorn. "*We!* So you think that maybe I'll take you for a real wife just because I was fool enough to go through a marriage ceremony with you. No, thank you—even though you have got a beautiful face and I liked you when I first saw you. I'm going to hell, but not with you. I'm going alone."

Suddenly Corbin thought of the bottle of whisky that Hecker had left in the shack that morning. He dove for it and waved it triumphantly.

"I'm going to hell alone!" he cried. "And this is where I start."

He took a gulp of the raw liquor.

The girl looked at him.

"Please don't do that," she pleaded.

Corbin took another gulp. In his excited state, the whisky was already affecting him. He staggered toward her and glared into her attractive eyes.

"Who—who are you to be telling me to not do anything?" he demanded.

For the first time the girl did not retreat, though her voice was shaky as she replied:

"I—I'm your wife."

Corbin burst into great guffaws of laughter.

"My wife—hah, hah! Some wife!" He uptilted the bottle again. "Here's to m' wife—a wife out o' th' gutter—the worst damn wife that any man—"

"Stop!" The girl's voice was hysterical, but it held a commanding quality. "I won't let you say that any more. I won't stand it. I've stood for too much already. I'm not out of the gutter. I've been weak—and a fool—but I'm not bad. That's why I'm here. I owed Hecker money—he paid my fare out from Helena to work in his kitchen—and he fired me—and demanded that I pay my debt by joining his dance-hall girls—and I wouldn't—and he said I could square it by playing a little game on you—and, like a weak fool, I consented. That's the truth!"

Corbin paused, bottle poised above his lips, and looked out of glazed and bleary eyes.

"Hah, hah!" he burst out drunkenly. "I know your game, but it don't go! Tryin' to get around me—think mebbe y' can kid me into going to work to s'port you—think mebbe you've grabbed a reg'lar husband—that I'll be your slave. But y' can't—it's no go, kid—I'm a fool, but even a fool has his limits."

"I'm telling you the truth!"

Corbin leered.

"Like hell it's the truth! If 'twas, why didn't you say so before—huh?" He shook a shaky finger in her face. "Y' never thought o' that at first, did yeh? No—or you wouldn't 'a' let me call you names like I did—"

"I was afraid of you."

"Yeh—ye'd better be! But y' can't kid me—Jezebel! Nuh—y' can't put any story like that over on me now."

"I swear it's the truth!"

The half-drunken man turned nasty again.

"You're a liar!" he snarled. "Liar—liar—liar!" He uptilted the bottle again.

"Don't!" cried the girl.

"Who says 'don't' t' me?"

"Your wife!"

"Damn m' wife!" He put the bottle to his lips.

The girl snatched at it, and a struggle ensued. Her strength seemed out of proportion to her slim figure. Back and forth they swayed. Suddenly Corbin lost his balance and crashed down on the floor—and lay still as a thin stream of blood trickled down through his hair, and oozed out into a sickening little red puddle on the rough boards.

The girl stood looking down into the unconscious features of her husband. From the shattered remains of the whisky bottle there rose the strong fumes of spilled liquor. Then, sudden and sharp as a rifle shot, the door snapped open, and Mr. Vance strode into the office.

CHAPTER VIII.

CORBIN'S AWAKENING.

MR. VANCE stopped as the unconscious form of Corbin caught his eye.

"Well, well!" he exclaimed. "What's wrong here?" He sniffed the strong odor of whisky and frowned heavily. "Liquor in the company's pay office? Can you explain this, Mrs. Corbin?"

"I can and will. But first let's get my husband to bed."

The man who was to become the new paymaster now entered, and he and Mr. Vance lifted the limp form of Corbin and placed it on his bunk. The former then went after a doctor, and Marie bathed her husband's head. The latter moaned and murmured some words and relapsed into a sort of troubled sleep.

Mr. Vance examined his wound.

"Doesn't look bad," he said, "but one

never can tell. Nothing more can be done till the doctor comes."

They left Corbin on the bunk and returned to the office, where they sat down.

"Now," said Mr. Vance, "how did your husband come to be lying on the floor with a cut in his head and liquor on his breath, while still on duty as a paymaster?"

"Through circumstances that I'll try and tell you," Marie commenced. "He drank the liquor because he was disappointed at losing his job, and because he let his sense of honor trick him into a marriage with me."

"Trick him into marriage?"

"Exactly. When you first saw us I wasn't married to him."

"Then what were you? His mistress?"

"No! Nothing, so far as he knew, but a girl in hard luck who came into his shack and sat by his fire when he asked her to, because he was sorry for her. Really I was sent here by Hecker, the dance-hall man, to get him into a fix by appearing in negligée while a man of your description was here. I didn't know then you were Corbin's boss and could fire him; thought it was just some sort of a funny game Hecker wanted to play on him."

"Then he lied when he said he was married to you?"

"No. He didn't say we were married. He said this was his wedding day. And so it was. Because, as soon as you left, he made me marry him so he could make good his statement to you."

"You mean that Corbin compelled you to marry him?"

"Exactly."

"But nobody can compel you to marry against your will."

Back in the bunk-room, Corbin had regained his senses sufficiently to sit up. His head ached and his mind was still liquor-clouded, but, as he caught fragments of the conversation in the office his mind cleared rapidly, so that when Marie made her reply to the president's last question a full and complete realization of what was going on came to him.

"I know that a girl can't be forced into marriage," his wife said. "The fact of the matter is, I liked Mr. Corbin at sight, and was sorry I had agreed to play a trick of any kind on him, no matter how innocent. So, to get him out of the rotten predicament I got him into, I married him without making any objection. I let him think he bullied me into it, but he didn't. I'm a weak-minded fool in lots of ways, Mr. Vance, but no man could bully me into that."

Behind the curtain, Corbin gasped as he overheard this. He rose, shocked into full possession of his senses now, and crept closer to the curtain, where he could peer out.

"Well, well! An extraordinary story!" ejaculated Mr. Vance. "Corbin, then, married you just to make good a statement he made on the spur of the moment?"

"That's the kind of a man my husband is," said Marie. "That's another reason why I let him bully me into marrying him."

"But, if you were one of Hecker's creatures, do you think you did right when you let a man like Corbin marry you? Can he ever be happy with a loose woman? And if he isn't happy himself, how can he ever make you happy? "

"But I'm *not* a loose woman!" Marie cried. "Hecker himself will say that I'm not. That's the reason I had to agree to play a trick on Mr. Corbin—because I wouldn't pay the debt I owed Hecker by joining his rotten outfit—and, at that, had I known how much trouble the trick would make for Corbin I never would have agreed to it. I'm telling you all this, because I want you to recognize the fact that my husband's word is as good as his bond."

Mr. Vance looked puzzled.

"It would appear to be if what you say is true, and I don't doubt that it is," he admitted. "And yet the fact remains that he had been drinking before he fell on the floor and cut his head."

"He was—yes. But think of the reason he had. He married a woman that he thought was no good in order to keep his word and hold his job, and then he lost his job after all. Don't you think that any man might drink under the circumstances?"

Mr. Vance was non-committal.

Corbin, behind the curtain, wondered what further defense of him would be made

by this girl whom he had treated worse than a dog.

"The reason I'm telling you all this," Marie went on, "is because I want you to give him another chance. He'll never drink again. I'll promise you that."

"How do you know he won't?"

"Because he's got a wife that he will care too much for to ever fool with liquor again."

"According to your own statement he doesn't care for you at all."

"Not at this moment, perhaps. But he did, Mr. Vance, when I first came in as a down-and-nearly-out little kitchen helper, and he will again when he's convinced that I'm straight."

"How do you know he did?"

"I could see it in his eyes; and the way he looked at me when he thought I was asleep and couldn't see him."

"Well, I don't know—"

The president never completed the sentence. At that instant the door flew violently open, and Nick Savage rushed in.

CHAPTER IX.

A HOBO'S TRUE COLORS.

"MR. VANCE!" Nick cried, addressing the visitor. "Say, that's you, ain't it?"

"It is."

"Say, d'you know there's hell to pay on the line? Say, wasn't there a lot of guys at Camp Five that asked you for more pay and better bunks and so on, an' if they didn't get 'em they was a-goin' to do this, that and the other thing to you?"

"There were. What about them?" the president demanded.

"They've broke loose, that's what. There's a guy named Harvard at their head—an educated nut that was always sayin' laborers are treated like dogs and so on down at headquarters camp—an' he's got 'em crazy in the head. There's a bunch of 'em marching here. They're talkin' terrible about how they're going to do you up because you're a capitalist—an' Corbin too, because he makes 'em come here to this office to get their bank checks when they used to get 'em at the stores and hooch joints. Say, you'd better get your gun out if you've got one. An' Corbin too—where is he?"

"The cowards!" Marie flared. "Mr. Corbin is ill and not able to fight, and Mr. Vance is an old man. But I can fight, and I will!"

Mr. Vance remained calm.

"It can't be so serious as all that," he said. "I'm sure there's no reason to feel alarmed."

"I'm sure there is!" cried Nick. "I tell you, you don't know them guys like I do. They've been guzzlin' hooch, an' one or two of 'em have guns—"

It was then that Corbin stepped from behind the curtain. His clothing was disarranged and his hair was still clotted with blood, but despite that it was plain that a great change had come over him. His head was erect and his shoulders were straight. His eyes were no longer soft and yielding; his voice was as commanding as when he had led his company across the bullet-whipped inferno of No Man's Land.

"You are right, Mr. Vance," he said. "There's no need to worry. I know that fellow, Harvard, and how to handle his kind."

"Not the way he is now, you don't," cried Nick. "He's a crazy Bolshevik, I tell you. He's got it in for you special, too, Corbin. Says you tricked him out of this paymaster job, when it was him that by rights ought to 'a' had it."

But the others had gone to the windows and were looking out at a sight that was not reassuring. Some forty or fifty rough-looking men were advancing on the pay office, the big hobo called Harvard at their head. He was walking backward and orating to his followers as he came on, and his words, whatever they were, won him salvos of cheers. He turned and faced the shack as he drew near.

"Leave it to me," said Corbin, and he left the shack and went out to meet the mob leader.

"What do you want, Harvard?" His tone was clear and snappy.

Harvard stared in evident surprise at the change in the demeanor of the man whom

he had known only as a broken and dispirited hobo.

"Nothing from you just yet, Corbin," he replied. "We'll attend to your case later. What we want now is that capitalist bloodsucker you've got in there. Out of the way."

"Wait! You can enter the shack alone, Harvard, but your men must remain where they are."

"We'll enter any damned way we like. Come on, men." Harvard endeavored to sweep by Corbin.

The latter said nothing more in words; just swung his fist at Harvard's jaw.

The mob leader staggered, recovered, and then rushed. Corbin was ready for him. They locked arms and struggled back and forth, then fell together and rolled over and over.

Harvard's followers paused in their rush to the shack to cheer for their champion. Outside the shack, young Sidney Corwin and the company doctor he had gone after, stationed themselves in front of the door and were joined by Nick and Marie and finally by Mr. Vance himself.

The fight went on, first one and then the other of the contestants on top. Then one of them stayed on top. He rose presently, and the man on the bottom rose too. The latter got knocked down again with speed and despatch. He stayed down this time until lifted to his feet by his friends, and Corbin brushed the dirt off his coat with his fingers as he rejoined the group at the shack door. The insurgents gathered around their fallen leader, talked loudly for a while and then less loudly, and after a while they slowly but surely betook themselves elsewhere.

Mr. Vance consulted with the young man he had arrived with in a whisper. The latter nodded and smiled. Then the president stepped up to the victor.

"Mr. Corbin," he said, "you are to remain here as paymaster. I've got another job for the man who was to become your successor. Your work has been quite satisfactory, and I have reasons for believing that it may be even more satisfactory in the future. In case it is, don't forget that there are lots of good positions with the Vance Construction Company. So I'm going to wish you and your brave little wife the best of luck."

"Thank you, sir," said Corbin. "And you're right about my work being better in the future. I've got something to work for now."

Marie could merely smile through her tears.

"And you, sir—" Mr. Vance beckoned to Nick. "Come along with us and leave those love-birds alone. Maybe I can find a good job for you too. Do you think you could learn to drive a motor-car?"

"I'll say I can!" cried Nick. "I could even learn to drive an airplane to-night!"

So good-bys were said all around, and in a moment Corbin and his bride found themselves alone in the shack. He took hold of her hands and looked into her eyes.

"Can you ever forgive me, Marie?" he pleaded. "I was a brute. And I *do* care for you, you know; did the first minute you stepped inside my door. Do you think you could ever learn to care too?"

"I don't need to learn," Marie murmured happily as she buried her face in her husband's shoulder.

(The end.)

NEW YEAR'S EVE

THE world-old hush in the age-old sky,
The soft stars shining clear and high,
And the waiting, waiting, far and nigh.

Then clash on clash through the midnight air,
Then shriek on shriek and blare on blare,
And laughter and sobs, malediction and prayer!

Mabel Martin.

Where All Trails End

Part III

by Theodore Goodridge Roberts

Author of "The Wasp," "Two Shall Be Born," etc.

WHAT HAS ALREADY HAPPENED

VICTOR KENT, sportsman and adventurer, returns from the North woods to Mooseyard to see his fiancée, Flora Scott. At her home he meets a man calling himself Swithen, who pretends to be a millionaire business man. Captain Farley, of the Northwest Mounted, silently in love with Flora, is also present. That night Victor makes up a pack of mail to send out by messenger, allowing others of the settlement to include their letters. Next morning he goes out ahead of the mail-carrier and lies in wait. Soon he sees Swithen on the trail. As the mail-carrier appears Swithen raises his gun to shoot, but Victor fires first, and Swithen drops dead. The third man does not know what has happened. Victor goes back to Mooseyard, prepared to flee for his life. He knows he will soon be hunted as Swithen's murderer, but when he says farewell to Flora he assures her he is innocent of any charge that may be made against him. She trusts him, and insists that he allow her to go with him in his flight. They leave and are married by Father Quinn at a distant settlement.

In a confession he makes to the priest Victor wins the old man's admiration and sympathy. He leaves a letter in Father Quinn's care, which he says will help clear up the charge against him. Then the two proceed into the snow barrens of the North. While they are struggling northward, the death of Swithen has been discovered, and Victor accused. Posses take the trail and a reward is offered. At about the same time a fire completely destroys Father Quinn's church and house, also wiping out Victor's valuable letter and his marriage certificate, and the priest rendered seriously ill. On the trail Victor and his wife fight their way to the caribou pastures, for their food supply is dangerously low.

CHAPTER IX.

BEAVER WALSH, THE TRAPPER.

THE blizzard blew itself out and the sun came up in a clear eastern sky. Flora and Victor made an early start, but were forced to travel slowly, for the many inches of light, powdery snow that the blizzard had drifted over the barren world and heaped upon the stunted evergreens, made the breaking of new trail difficult. Flora tramped sometimes behind Victor and in front of the team, and sometimes behind the straining dogs. At every step her snow-shoes sank deep in the unpacked snow.

About the middle of the morning they came into a rough country crossed with gullies and ravines. The ravines were filled almost to their lips with a tangled growth of alders that in some places protruded well above the drifted snow and in others lay treacherously hidden beneath the surface. Here the sledding was even heavier, and it

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was necessary to stop frequently and rest the dogs. The land sloped off to the northern skyline, and away in that direction spread a forest of stunted trees. Beyond the trees and five miles from the course which they were following lay the Little Kettle River, and in the late spring all these ravines and gullies were roaring watercourses that fed the many feet of melting snow to the churning waters of the Little Kettle.

There were hundreds of acres of pulpwood within their view and hundreds more along the banks of the river. There were mineral deposits in the country also, but none of this wealth was available because of the lack of transportation. The Little Kettle was nowhere navigable, and the river into which it emptied could only be navigated for a short distance from its mouth, and that for only a few short summer months. For years there had been a great deal of talk about the construction of railways that would open up this country for development, and give a road to the miles of valuable timber-land that extended to the north of the valley.

Victor knew the valley of the Little Kettle, and during one of their brief rests he got out his map and located their position to within a few miles. He pointed it out to his wife.

They came to a low hollow, whose sides were thickly covered with bare, wind-broken brush. They had crossed several similar gullies that day, but Victor approached it cautiously, feeling a trail between the bent trunks of the alders which the dogs followed slowly. They were ascending the farther side, which rose at a steep incline, when Flora, who was in the rear, caught the toe of her snow-shoe under the tough, unyielding branch of a hidden sapling. A hot thrust of pain stabbed through her ankle and wrung a cry from her lips as she fell forward, with her face in the smothering snow. She sank far into the drift, for a moment struggling to regain her feet. Victor heard the scream, turned, and was at her side in an instant. Without speaking he bent and untied the thong that held the snow-shoe to her foot. With strong arms he lifted her clear of the snow and began to carry her tenderly up the bank. Her face was bloodless and her breath came hard, but her eyelids fluttered open and she smiled up into his anxious eyes.

"It's my ankle, dear—twisted. It will be all right in half an hour. I didn't break my leg, though I deserved to. Don't let us stop, Victor, or I won't be able to forgive myself. Every moment counts."

They were on the lip of the hollow where the dogs had halted, and he placed her gently on the sled. He laughed with relief as he arranged the blankets about her and placed a folded one behind her shoulders.

"You frightened me for a moment," he said, "but I can doctor a strained ankle, dearest. Don't talk of carelessness—it was sheer bad luck; no one could have avoided that damned trap. And don't worry about time just now. We've got the lead on them, Flora, and thanks to the blizzard, they will will have no trail to follow. We'll keep them guessing for a while. You will have to rest up for a few days; it's no half-hour job. We will find a good camping place before night."

He examined the injured foot, handling it very carefully, for every touch caused pain. He feared that the bone was fractured, but he did not tell his wife this. The joint was swelling rapidly. He opened a haversack and brought out a bottle of arnica. After he had bathed the ankle with snow and arnica he bandaged it loosely in a temporary bandage. Then he raised the foot on a pillow composed of a dunnage-sack and a blanket.

"There is a wood not more than half a mile ahead," he said. "That means a place where we can make camp, and I can fix your ankle properly. I'll drive the dogs carefully—make them watch their step. But I am afraid it will be rough going for all that. We mustn't stop here in the cold any longer. Are you comfortable, dearest?"

"Yes," Flora replied. "Snug and warm. The pain is still bad, but it is the delay that is worrying me. To think that you should lose an hour over this old ankle!"

"A day, or an hour, or a lifetime! What does it matter, dearest girl, while I have you? Time was made for slaves."

He picked a careful trail in the direction

of the dark line of the woods and guided the dogs yard by yard, circling every drift and hummock. The dogs drew the extra weight well and were content to move slowly. Twice he stopped to rest them, but only for a few moments, as they were in the open with no protection from the cold. No more treacherous gullies intervened between them and their objective. They were within a hundred yards of the shelter of the woods when Victor paused and peered intently away to the left, where the valley edged off toward the valley of the frozen river. He saw a white feather of vapor drifting against the cloudless blue immediately above the trees—a formless breath of mist that hung motionless for a moment in the air, then rose and vanished. It came again.

"There is smoke—off there to the left, Flora." He turned to the girl on the sled. "That probably means the cabin of some trapper, and there will be some place where I can make you comfortable while you need to rest. It's not far. We shall be as safe there as anywhere. I think we have given them the slip for a while, dear. We shall be on the barrens soon, where the wind will sweep out our trail each day behind us. The dogs will travel all the faster for a good rest."

They proceeded in the direction of the smoke, and had not gone very far when they came upon an indistinct trail that turned in among the trees. Beyond the outer edge of trees lay the white expanse of a small lake or large pond. At the farther end of the lake a silent, ice-locked stream made an outlet toward the river. They followed the trail along the eastern edge of the lake and came upon a squat log cabin, half buried in the snow and half hidden among the wind-breaking spruces. Two feet of rusty stove-pipe protruded from the roof, and from it curled up the smoke that had guided them. Victor stepped up to the door of the cabin. It was bolted on the outside, but not locked. The owner, whoever he was, was evidently not far afield, for through the tiny window Victor saw a good fire burning on the hearth. He opened the door and stepped inside.

For a moment he could not see in the half-light and shadows made by the twisting flames upon the stone hearth. Then his eyes took in the details of the rough furnishings of the interior. A narrow bunk occupied one side wall; the hearth was at the end opposite the door. There was a small table, on which the untidy remains of a hastily eaten meal lay scattered. Traps hung upon the wall and a rifle lay upon pegs driven into the logs beside the bunk. Two paddles and an ax stood in a corner. Fire-wood was piled beneath the bunk and under the table, and a few pelts were heaped in another corner of the room.

When he had removed the blankets from the bunk and spread an armful of fresh spruce boughs as a mattress Victor lifted Flora from the sled, carried her into the cabin, and laid her tenderly in the bunk. Then he stepped outside again to see to the dogs, and came face to face with the owner of the cabin. He was an individual of a remarkably unprepossessing appearance. His narrow, dark face was half hidden by a tangle of red-brown beard, and from lip to eye and across his low forehead to the edge of his cap ran three pale, diagonal scars. His eyes were too close together, and his shifting, evil glance slipped from the dogs and sled to the smiling face of Victor Kent and then through the open door of the cabin. When he spoke his eyes never met Victor's, but moved restlessly from the sled to the door and back again.

"Where did ye turn up from, pardner?" he questioned. "It seems like ye'd made yerself to home. It ain't much of a cabin, and there ain't much room to spare, so the sooner you tell me what ye're after the better."

"Your name is Walsh, is it not?" said Victor.

"Michael Walsh. And yer own?"

"Well, Mr. Walsh"—Victor ignored the trapper's question—"we must camp in your cabin for the night. We have had an accident—my wife has hurt her foot and must have a comfortable rest. I cannot move her any further to-night. I will pay you well for the inconvenience it will cause you."

"Sure you will. I just came back fer me baccy-pouch. It's on the table there. You might toss it out to me, friend. Then I'll be goin' fer a while. Got me business

to attend to. What did ye say yer name was?"

"I didn't say, but it happens to be John Williamson."

Kent ignored the trapper's insolence of manner and showed no displeasure in his tone or expression. He handed the tobacco-pouch to Walsh and watched him slouch off into the woods on a pair of ill-constructed snow-shoes patched and mended in many places. His face became grave when he turned to enter the cabin once more. He recognized the man as a trapper of whom his guides had told many evil stories.

Sam Trent had described to him the close-set eyes and narrow, scarred face of Beaver Walsh, who trapped somewhere up in the Little Kettle Valley. Sam did not know how he had come by the scars, but he did know how he had gained his name. It was not because of the industry of his character, but because he had once served a term in jail for taking beaver through the ice. That had been ten years ago, when he first came into the district—from where, nobody knew. The main reason that he had not served further sentences behind prison bars was that he had kept to the wilderness trails where he was hard to catch. Every year he sold his furs to an old Indian trapper, who took them in and dispensed with them at the trading-post at Crooker River. The old Indian was afraid of Beaver Walsh, and Beaver Walsh was afraid of the police—Sam didn't know why, but he reckoned it was for some pretty good reason.

"Who is he?" asked Flora from the bunk. "I didn't like his voice."

"He's Beaver Walsh, a trapper, and a bad actor from all that I have heard. But he can't try any tricks with us. He had no gun with him and I'll take care to commandeer his ammunition before he returns. We have the drop on him, Flora."

Captain Fraser Farley sat before his desk and stared blankly at a square of ink-stained, blue blotting-paper while he smoked innumerable cigarets of his own rolling. His quiet, softly lined face showed no sign of the turmoil of his emotions save a little puckering of the brows. On the surface of things there seemed no reason for his hidden nervousness. In the matter of the crime at Mooseyard he had acted with promptness and decision—executed every order from headquarters, and carefully studied the reports of Sergeant Jarvis and Deputy Sheriff Barker. Yet the news from the settlement had broken through the barriers of the quiet regularity of his life and stirred to wakefulness emotions that were foreign to his nature—anger and jealousy. He had loved and dreamed, unreasonably and without hope, for two years, and now his dreams had been suddenly blown to atoms, as though a high explosive shell had landed in their midst.

Of course he had realized practically from the first that Flora would never love him, so he had set a guard on his tongue, and allowed himself to see her only occasionally. Then Victor Kent had come, a big fellow, an easy talker, a man with money, and had won her in a fortnight. Farley had clearly perceived how the land lay on his last visit to the home of the Scotts, but then he had accepted the inevitable, and after a night of melancholy musing resolved to forget those two years and throw all the activity of his mind into his work. Kent could make her happy, he felt sure. He had liked Kent. But the word of their going had swept away all his resignation and waked in him a passion that his inarticulate nature could not express.

His thoughts were interrupted by a knock on the door and the entrance of a constable, who saluted and handed him a telegram. He tore it open and read the few concise lines from headquarters. His face lightened and his whole bearing became alive and active. He took a yellow telegram-pad from a drawer and hastily wrote an answer, which he handed to the constable.

"Tell them to rush this, Morrison," he said.

Farley reread the telegram with evident satisfaction. It ran:

> Captain Collins is on the morning train. He will relieve you. Go to Mooseyard and interview friends of Hiram Swithen. Locate Sam Trent and Joe Sabatis. Then act as you see fit. MYERS.

This was what he had desired, but had not requested or expected—permission to take an active part in the pursuit. He made his plans quickly. He would get to Mooseyard that night, talk with certain men, whose names he jotted down in his note-book, the next morning, and be off with a fast team of dogs before the next evening. His melancholy passed and his anger subsided with the prospect of action.

About half past three in the afternoon he strolled over to the station and joined the postmaster and the station-agent, who were awaiting the arrival of the train that came north three times a week. He had made all preparations for his departure, and knew that a team of dogs would be ready for him when he returned to the barracks. Constable Morrison, who was to accompany him, had been warned. He exchanged greetings with the two men in the little waiting-room, but did not join in their conversation. He was naturally taciturn and seldom at his ease with fluent talkers. He busied himself with his own thoughts, and they continued their conversation after a moment of silence. The train was only a half-hour late that day, and as it drew into the junction, Farley, who had stepped out upon the platform, saw Collins standing on the step of the rear car. The two officers knew each other slightly and shook hands in friendly fashion.

"Well, now that I'm here, Farley," said the newcomer, "perhaps you can tell me why the old man sent me, and what you are going to do with yourself while I'm filling your shoes. Special duty, I suppose. Is it the killing at Mooseyard?"

"Yes," replied Farley. "I leave for Mooseyard to-night with one man. That leaves you two men, and I will show you the ropes before I leave. I'm glad the major gave me the job. It's mine by rights."

"Well, I wish you luck. I expect they've rounded up the man already. Rather strange case—one rich sport bumping off another like that. What do you think was Kent's motive, anyway? Robbery—or jealousy?"

"I'm sure I don't know," replied Farley shortly. "The motive of a crime hardly lies in our province, does it, Collins? That's for the judge and lawyers to discover."

The two men traveled the junction trail in silence. It was dark when they reached the place where the shooting had occurred, so they did not stop to make any examination. A quarter of an hour later they came to a stop before Jones's hostelry. The captain entered in search of supper while Morrison attended to the stabling of the dogs. Bill Jones scarcely seemed surprised at Captain Farley's arrival.

"Thought you'd be comin', sir," he said. "This affair is too big fer Dave Barker and that bunch. Yer room's ready fer you, sir. I suppose you've got a pretty fair idea of what's at the bottom of it all already."

The captain made an impatient reply and continued on to his room. After he had eaten he asked the hotel-keeper a few questions concerning the men whose names he had secured from Deputy Sheriff Barker. He learned that Little Joe Sabatis and Sam Trent had gone to their own homes, where they could be easily found when they were wanted. Archie McKay and George Allen were by this time far away with the posse that had started on their hunt with such vim early that morning.

From Bill Jones himself he gained little concrete information, though he received a great deal of supposition and a few of Bill's own intricately worked out solutions of the mystery.

Later in the evening several men dropped in to learn the latest news from the hotel-keeper, and fill the hotel office with tobacco-smoke and loud talk. The captain had given Morison instructions, and knew the constable could be trusted to gather any gossip that was in the air, so he read his magazine in silence. The only one of the visitors with whom he was acquainted was James Robinson, and the old man was in a surly temper that evening and refused to be drawn into conversation. He came late, accepted the chair which Farley offered him at the farther end of the room from the noisy group, and morosely chewed on the end of a cigar which the captain handed to him. His dour, lined face was flushed with the effect of a few drinks, but

the liquor had served only to deepen his sullen despair and lend a reek to his breath. The only speech the captain could get out of him was characteristic.

"I don't know much about Victor Kent." He spoke slowly and with a hesitating articulation. "Hiram Swithen was either a fool or a cheat. What business had he mucking around here waving his big hands, making big promises, and making fools of a lot of short-sighted dolts who don't know a damn thing about real business? Well, he lost out, captain. I tried to make money out of these mines and to make a real town out of this dump, and I lost out. Can't be done, sir, can't be done."

Fraser Farley became very bored with the surroundings and the company and went to his room before the evening was very old.

When he woke in the morning it was still almost dark. He went to the window and saw that snow was falling. The captain swore gently beneath his breath, and dressed in haste, for the room was bitterly cold. He knew that the storm would necessitate his spending another day in Mooseyard, and decided that it was up to him to perform the unpleasant duty of calling on Edmund Scott. During the morning he worked over his maps, tracing imaginary lines of flight and pursuit, and covering many miles of territory with a ruler and a pencil. By noon the snow had ceased to fall, but low clouds still hung across the sky, threatening further bad weather before night.

At a few minutes past three in the afternoon Captain Fraser Farley reached the door of the International Bank. Business for the day had ended, but the door was not locked, and when he stepped inside he saw the banker still seated at his desk, while a shirt-sleeved junior clerk was packing bundles of paper and bank notes into an open safe in great haste. Edmund Scott stepped forward to meet him with outstretched hand.

"It was good of you to come, Farley," he said simply. "You have come to help me. I need help."

Farley was tongue-tied as he felt the grip of the banker's hand, and read the appeal in his face. He saw the strained lines there and the dark patches beneath the eyes that told of worry and of sleepless nights.

"I will do what I can, sir," he replied. "But I have come to you for information."

Farley felt vaguely uncomfortable. The junior locked the door of the safe, put on his coat and his outer wraps, and with a "Good night, sir," to the manager, left the building. He was evidently in a hurry. When the door had closed behind him, Edmund Scott leaned suddenly forward and placed his hand on the captain's knee. When he spoke his voice was tense.

"Farley, Victor Kent is not a murderer," he said. "I don't believe he shot Hiram Swithen, but if he did it was for some good reason—some reason you or I don't know anything about, but which he understood. I know that Kent is an honest man. I believed what Hiram Swithen told me, but I did not know him. He hypnotized me, Farley. Victor was my friend, and my daughter loved him—loved him well enough to give up everything for him. Farley, you must find them before the others do—the men from Mooseyard. You must be first and find out the truth of the matter. I am not afraid of the truth."

His eyes roamed from the captain's and sought the street beyond the window. He peered up and down, though he could see little through the frosted pane. Fraser Farley could think of no adequate remark. Edmund Scott spoke again.

"I am not afraid of the truth. It is these lies and suppositions, the curious glances and half-hidden sympathy of these people here that are driving me mad. You have been a soldier and can judge men, and you know Victor, so you cannot believe him guilty. I am very glad that you have come."

Farley wished sincerely that he had not come to Mooseyard. He almost believed what the banker said, and it was not what he wanted to believe. He wanted to think that Victor Kent, whom he had once regarded as a friend, was guilty of the killing of an innocent man, and that Flora Scott's love for him was a thing that could be killed by the proof of his guilt. His face was ex-

pressionless, but he spoke gently to the earnest man before him.

"To help him—to save your daughter from disgrace, I must hear all that you know of Victor Kent and Swithen," he replied. "If you would tell me all that you know of your daughter's flight."

"I know nothing." Edmund Scott shook his head sadly. "Flora told me nothing—only left me a line saying that it was all right and that they would come back. And I can't tell you anything about the shooting of Swithen, for I have tried not to listen to the stories that they tell. The whole thing is impossible—madly impossible."

For about half an hour Captain Farley talked with his friend, but he learned very little, and during the whole interview felt extremely ill at ease. When he said good-by he had made no promises, and had not said much to bring peace to the banker's mind.

Returning to the hotel through the late afternoon he noticed the threatening blanket of cloud that bulged low above the quiet world. He saw that the wind was rising. When the blizzard finally came with its sweep of fury-driven snow he was glad that he had not taken the trail that day. He spent another restless night in the Cobalt Hotel. The morning broke clear and the two men made an early start in a northwesterly direction.

As they tramped down the drifted trail between rows of snow-weighted trees, Farley turned to the constable at his side.

"I'm glad to get out of that place, Morrison," he said.

"It is a dead hole, sir," replied the constable, uncomprehendingly.

CHAPTER X.

THE KEEN EYES OF THE LAW.

DEPUTY SHERIFF DAVE BARKER and John Starling, a constable of the Mounted Police, who composed one of the search parties which hunted Victor Kent and the five hundred dollars, weathered the blizzard safely, and the next morning continued on in the direction of Whitewaters. They had a five dog team and a light load and were impatient of delay, so they traveled hard despite the heavy trails. Late in the morning John Starling came to a sudden halt and pointed with the pipe which he removed from his mouth across a rift of unbroken snow to the further edge which was walled by unbroken woods.

"See that, Dave?" he questioned. "Just comin' out of the woods there? Unless my eye is out it is a woman."

"I reckon you're right, son," replied the older man, peering speculatively and with puckered brows in the direction indicated. "It walks like a woman—anyhow, we'll know in a few minutes. I reckon it's one of the squaws from Father Quinn's village. We're close on the river now, as I remember this country."

"We might as well wait here till the old girl comes up. She might know something about the party we're after, and the dogs need breathin', Dave."

So the two men seated themselves on the sled and smoked their pipes, while the panting huskies lay on their bellies in the snow with their tongues lolling out. The indistinct figure took shape and outline as it approached across the snow. It soon proved that John Starling's observation had been correct—it was a woman for whom they waited. She was hurrying, though to the men her progress appeared slow. Soon they made out that she was tall, stooped, and spare of form—an elderly woman. She carried a small pack over her shoulder, and wore garments of Indian make. But *she* was not a squaw, though her skin was very dark—a French-Canadian evidently. She moved as though she were unaccustomed to the use of snow-shoes and found the light drifts hard to navigate. When she entered the outer fringe of the forest and came face to face with the two men who had risen, she stopped in her tracks and dropped her sack in the snow. Her face, that had been vacant of all expression, became alive with a movement of startled, nervous fear.

"Don't stop me," she said in a shrill, cracked voice. "I go to Mooseyard for the doctor. I must be queek. Father Quinn, he ver' seek, and only old squaw to

nurse him. I, Margaret Lalonde, his housekeeper, must not touch him; so I go for real doctor, man doctor!"

Dave Barker restored her property to her, and addressed her in quieting tones.

"That's two bad! I'm mighty sorry to hear that the little missionary has took sick. We won't stop you more than a few minutes, Mrs. Lalonde. I just want to know whether you people in Whitewaters have seen anything of a large man and a girl and a four-dog team, during the last three days. I reckon darn few travelers come up this way, and you'll remember them if you ever set eyes on them. The man's Victor Kent, a murderer, and we're police officers who are out to round him up."

Margaret Lalonde's feeble wits had received two shocks during the previous night, and her vindictive nature had been stirred to a jealous rage against Chief Two Bear and his squaw, Molly. She had nursed the jealousy in silence for a few hours. Then she had resolved to leave the village and find a real doctor. She had heard of one in Mooseyard, and she knew the direction in which the town lay; so she had borrowed snow-shoes, a coat, and a little food from her friends, and left Whitewaters behind her. When the deputy sheriff mentioned the man and the girl and the four-dog team, a crafty light came into her beady little eyes. She had heard Father Quinn give explicit directions to Two Bear the day before regarding this matter. If men came to Whitewaters asking questions about the strange couple, the villagers were to give them no information at all. Therefore, Margaret Lalonde reasoned in her twisted old mind, if she told these men all that she knew, it would mean trouble for the chief when Father Quinn heard of it. She was in a vindictive humor and wanted to make trouble.

"I guess you know something about them," John Starling suggested, noticing her hesitation; "and you better tell us all you know. It won't hurt you, missus, and we want this man bad."

"I will tell you," she said with sudden resolve. "They come at noon two days ago—before the big fire. The big fire come last night when the snow and the wind are blowing, and burn up our fine church of St. Anne and our house—the priest's house. The flame's jump up high and the wind roar—it is one terrible thing to see—and mak' Father Quinn ver' seek. Oh, *Mon Dieu,* it is one bad night!"

The woman seemed to have completely forgotten the subject of the questions, and the wild expression of her trembling face showed that all other thoughts were driven from her mind by the memory of that night's lurid terrors. She would have gone on talking excitedly of the fire had not Dave Barker gently broken in upon her flow of rapidly spoken words. At her first sentence he had exchanged delighted glances with John Starling. His judgment in starting his search in the direction of the Indian village had been early vindicated, and though the recent snows had hidden the fugitives tracks, still they had something to work on. Now he sought more definite information.

"It must have been a bad fire, sure," he said; "but you're in a hurry to get that doctor, and I don't want to keep you longer than I have to. We want to know all that you can tell us about this party that came to your village two days ago. How long did they stay? And what direction did they start away in?"

"The big man and the pretty girl?" replied Margaret Lalonde, the crafty light returning to her eyes. "They come about noon to Father Quinn. The man talk with the priest in hees little room. I think he mak' confession maybe. Then after that Father Quinn marry them and give them blessing—I see all that with my own eyes. I sign the book where they put their name. They sit and talk and laugh. The man want to buy food, but there is little food and no one will sell. They go away to the north. That is all I know. The girl is ver' pretty. She is a fine lady—is it not so?"

"Good!" exclaimed Starling, slapping his gloved hand on his knee, "That's what we wanted, missus. Dave, I can smell these five hundred bucks. That blow last night must have slowed Kent and his gal up considerable, and it ain't going to hurt

our speed near as much as it will their's. Shake, old-timer!"

The two men shook hands. Barker's face lightened, but not with quite the enthusiasm that animated the young constable. He had played the game longer than had John Starling, and he knew its uncertainties well.

"We haven't caught our man yet, son," he said, "though this bit of luck sure seems to give us the drop on them. This Victor Kent is a mighty clever fellow. He's probably got a few tricks up his sleeve yet. Perhaps we can learn more in the village. I'd like to get a squint at that register of the marriage."

They thanked Margaret Lalonde for all that she had told them, and gave her clear directions regarding the most direct route to Mooseyard. She borrowed a few pipefuls of tobacco from the deputy sheriff, and strode between the trees with a feeling of satisfaction in her addled brain. She did not doubt that she had prepared a stew of trouble for somebody, but was not quite sure who that person would be.

Very soon Barker and Starling were on the river, where the snow lay heaped and ridged by the storm of twelve hours before, and ten minutes later they had passed up the lane through the spruce forest and were on the edge of the village. Here Starling drew the team to a halt and they surveyed the destruction that the fire had worked. A few charred timbers tossed in a blackened rectangle already lightly drifted with snow were all that remained of the church and the priest's house.

"It's a darned shame for Father Quinn to strike all this hard luck," said Dave Barker ruminatively. "He worked mighty hard over that there little church of his, and over those good-for-nothing Indians of his, too. They'll be out of luck if he cashes in. I reckon you never met the old man, did you, John? You never came around this neck of the woods before."

"I've heard of the *padre*," replied John Starling. "I hope he's able to talk—and willin'. He might be able to give us a clearer line on Kent's plans than the old dame. She was a bit fussed up. I guess that cabin to the right with the extra big window and the extra wide chimney must belong to the chief of the village. Like as not we'll find the *padre* in there—eh, Dave? Better have a look, anyhow. We don't want to lose no time while luck's comin' our way."

Dave Barker nodded, and with a snapping of his long dog whip roused the team. They drove into the village, where their arrival had already been noted by the inhabitants, who appeared to regard it with stolid indifference. Most of the men had gone out to attend to their traps, but a few boys were lazily clearing up the débris of the fire, and brown-faced squaws moved here and there among the cabins, following narrow foot-tracks through the deep snow from door to door.

When they came to the house of the chief the door was opened by Two Bear himself. He met the intruders with a blank stare and a phrase of guttural French which Dave had difficulty in understanding, and which baffled John Starling entirely. Dave could talk the French-Canadian patois after a fashion, so he asked Two Bear very politely if Father Quinn was improving and if it would be possible for them to see him for a few minutes. He said the matter was very important. Chief Two Bear's eyes became troubled—almost hostile, but he silently drew aside and let the two men enter the poorly lighted interior of his house.

As they passed the threshold they were confronted by Molly, the squaw, whose lifted hand enjoined silence. This was unnecessary, for Dave Barker saw the blanket-covered form of the sick man stretched in the bunk on the opposite side of the room, with his eyes closed—either in sleep or death—and he advanced gently on his moccasined feet. The air of the cabin was pungent with the odor from a pot of herbs that simmered upon the hearth, and the steam that escaped from beneath the lid made a gray mist that drifted into the room. A tin mug, half filled with some gray green liquor, stood on an upturned box beside the bunk. Bundles of dried herbs hung from the roof of the room, and the walls, empty bunks and floor were strewn with a confusion of cooking utensils, traps and bits

of caribou hide. There was one other small room beyond an unclosed door. It occupied a lean-to constructed against one side of the cabin. Dave felt a light touch upon his arm and heard the soft voice of the squaw addressing him in broken English.

"He sleep," she said with laconic insistence. "No talk. He sick—much sick. Get well now, maybe, but no must talk."

John Starling quietly withdrew from the cabin. Dave stood for a few moments respectfully regarding the sleeping priest. His face was hollow-cheeked and flushed with fever, and his breath came rapidly, but he no longer tossed and turned in the madness of delirium. He had ceased to gabble unintelligible names and phrases. Dave shook his head and murmured that "things sure looked bad for Father Quinn."

"I tell you what," he whispered. "I've got a mighty fine medicine right out here in my dunnage sack—quinin. That's what he needs. You know quinin?"

Molly nodded her head eagerly. Her eyes brightened. Her herb teas and other primitive remedies were already showing good results in the reduction of the fever, and she felt confident of her ability to cure her patient in spite of his exhausted weakness, but she was wise enough to realize the value of the assistance offered her.

She had used the medicine before, she said, as he handed it to her. Then he remembered Victor Kent, his duty, and the reward. He drew the old woman aside into the unoccupied room, and asked her what she knew about the white man, and the white girl who had visited the village a few days before. She became suddenly stoic and hard of hearing. Her face became a wrinkled, expressionless mask. She shook her head and muttered unintelligibly. He repeated his question without any other result.

"This Kent is a killer," he said impatiently. "He must be caught or nobody in all this country will be safe. There is a big reward for the man who catches him. If you know anything about him, I will pay you to tell me—pay you real money."

"No savvee," she replied, and her face was angry now. "*Padre* much sick, must go. No can mak' fool talk."

She pushed rudely past the astonished deputy sheriff, and stooped above the hearth, stirring the steaming pot, and mumbling angrily to herself. Dave strolled thoughtfully to the door and let himself out of the cabin. He saw Two Bear slip like a shadow around the corner of a nearby building, and was after him like a shot. When he turned the corner he came face to face with the chief, and also with John Starling, whose expressive countenance bespoke great annoyance.

"You try your French on him, old-timer," he said; "but I guess it won't be any good. They're tight as clams. I've only found two who seem to understand the King's English, and they won't say a word."

Dave questioned the Indian closely for several minutes, but could get nothing out of him beyond the patently untrue statement that he knew nothing at all about the white man having come to the village. He said that he had just returned from a long hunting trip on the evening of the blizzard. Dave lost his temper and ripped out a few hot oaths that made no impression on the stalwart old Indian. Two Bear merely shook his head and gazed at the log wall before him as though it were infinite space.

Dave turned on his heel and strode back to the waiting team, followed by Starling. He slipped on his snow-shoes without a word and headed the dogs toward the wall of the woods. They traveled northward in accordance with the instructions given them by Margaret Lalonde. Starling was the first to speak.

"I guess we can get along without anything they'd have to tell us, Dave," he said. "They've been fixed, and even talk of the reward won't stir them. How was the *padre?*"

"He's a sick man, all right," replied Dave. "Too sick to talk, by a long shot, so I didn't find out anything about that there register with Kent's signature in it. Likely it went up in smoke with the church, though. The chief's squaw is an old fool, but I reckon she knows how to nurse. I left her a bottle of dope to knock out the fever. I'd like to know whether Kent

switched his course after he left the village or not. We've got to keep our eyes peeled, or they'll give us the slip yet."

Constable Starling did not need this admonition. His observant eyes were searching every sheltered place, every bush and hollow where some faint sign of the passing of the fugitives might have survived the storm. John was young, and he had not been long with the force. This was the first important case on which he had been employed and he was anxious to distinguish himself, so his vigilance never slackened for a moment. He did not know Victor Kent, but thought that he must be a dangerous criminal—one with plenty of brains and courage. He admired his nerve, but enjoyed hunting him, nevertheless, as he would have enjoyed hunting a wolf. When he thought of the girl he felt very sorry for her. She must have been a little fool, and she would probably make the hell of a scene when they caught her man.

In Dave Barker's mind the reward held first place, for he was always short of money these days, and with the coming of spring he planned to sink a new shaft upon his claim three miles to the other side of Mooseyard. He was sure that the thread of silver ore that had lured him on for so long must widen out into a workable lode about thirty feet below the surface. His methodical brain worked overtime in a vain effort to reason out the whys and wherefors of the killing of Hiram Swithen, and he looked forward eagerly to the capture of Kent and the consequent solution of the mystery. Toward Kent himself he felt no animosity, but his inbred, reliable sense of duty to the law of the land made him a very dangerous pursuer.

They came to the edge of a low valley where the hemlocks and poplar grew so close together that it was hard to find a passage for the team. Starling was in the lead. Suddenly he raised a gloved hand in the air, and Dave brought the dogs up short and stepped to his side. With careful hand Starling lifted a tangle of bushes that overhung the snow and disclosed the unmistakable marks of the passing of a sled. The tracks were only traceable for about three feet, and even there they were blurred and nearly effaced, but the deputy sheriff did not doubt their significance, and the constable was frankly pleased with himself. Dave nodded.

"Good work, son," he said in approbation. "You're not missing anything. It's only in places like this that we'll find so much as a mark. In the open we'll have to go by guesswork and trust to luck."

"That's O. K., Dave; luck's with us," replied Starling as he resumed his progress through the brush.

Twice during the crossing of the wooded valley they came upon trees whose branches had been broken by the passage of another team—the team that drew Victor Kent's sled. Then on the farther lip of the valley they came upon a short stretch of indistinct trail that chance had sheltered from the snow and the wind. It slanted off in a northeasterly direction, and so without hesitation they altered their course and continued on through more openly wooded country. Both men were impatient with the deep white drifts that made it impossible for the dogs to travel fast, even with the light load that they were drawing. They had gone about nine miles since leaving the village when they came to the spot where Flora and Victor Kent had made camp on the afternoon of their marriage. They examined the trench nearly filled with snow and broken saplings that had once formed a light roof. They pulled out the saplings and dug out the snow and came upon the ashes and charred sticks of a long dead fire, and once more Dave Barker and John Starling silently shook hands. Things were coming their way and they felt very sanguine of success. Dave looked off between the trees where a bar of red sunset burned warmly, and then to the dogs stretched exhausted on the snow.

"Let's call it a day, John," he said. "It's late and the dogs are tired. If you're as hungry as I am supper will look mighty good to you. We've done a darn good day's work, you can bet on that, and here's a camp all ready for us, so to speak, and plenty of fire-wood."

In a little while the odors of cooking bacon and burning tobacco were mingling in their contented nostrils, and they were

refilling their tin mugs for the third time from the kettle of steaming red-brown tea. And a little while later they were snoring by the low, restlessly shifting circle of firelight while the cold stars snapped above their heads. Constable John Starling dreamed of promotion and honor and the spending of a well-earned reward.

CHAPTER XI.

THE SECOND SHOT.

WHEN Beaver Walsh left his cabin he did not go very far away. He walked into the woods till he came to a fallen log, and there he sat down, filled his pipe from the tobacco pouch that Victor had handed to him, and smoked thoughtfully for a long time. Beaver had had a hard winter, and had taken only a few good pelts. He would get very little money in return for those furs when they were sold at Crooked River Camp. Also his victuals were running low, and this combination of circumstances put him in a nasty and dangerous temper.

The stranger who had come to his cabin from where he did not know, had in his possession things that Beaver coveted—rifles, grub, and a woman. Probably his pockets contained plenty of money, too, Beaver imagined. There were four good dogs and an outfit with which he could jump this country and travel fast and far to new hunting grounds. All these things he could take for his own use with one swift stroke, and he was not the man to hesitate over the striking. He wondered what had brought the man and the woman here—whether they had become separated from a large hunting party, or whether they had been out on their own when they met with the accident. He was suspicious of all strangers, and suspicion bred hate.

Victor unharnessed and fed the dogs. Then he prepared their own midday meal and sat on a biscuit box beside the bunk while they ate it. He got his rifles, and the packs and provisions into the cabin and piled them by the head of the bunk where Flora lay. He opened the magazine of Beaver Walsh's rifle that hung upon the wall and found it fully loaded. He ejected the cartridges and proceeded to search carefully among the miscellaneous articles on a crowded shelf above the hearth and on the table. He discovered two boxes of cartridges, and these he stowed away in his dunnage bag. He returned the rifle to its pegs. Flora watched him in silence.

"I am sorry I brought you here"—Victor stopped by the bunk—"but that can't be helped now, Flora. Any more traveling to-night might cause real trouble with your ankle. Beaver Walsh is not dangerous to us—but he is not an ideal host."

He bathed the ankle again with cold water, applied arnica and bandaged it. The swelling had not lessened, and the pain caused by any movement was intense. Victor made a pillow-shaped pad of a sweater and a coat that raised the injured foot above the level of the bunk. While his fingers were busy with these details his brain was occupied with sinister thoughts of the trapper whose appearance he disliked and mistrusted. When he had washed and packed away the tin plates and cups, and put another stick upon the fire on the hearth, he allowed himself a few minutes uninterrupted thought upon the problem. He realized that he had done all that was possible for their protection against any scheme Beaver Walsh might be concocting. He must watch, without showing suspicion, and when the man showed his hand he must be the first to act. Kent was alive at that moment only because when such emergencies had arisen in the past he had made lightning decisions, and got his blows in first. He had no doubt that the trapper intended evil. For his greed had shown in his face when he surveyed the dogs and outfit, and the knavery of his character had proclaimed itself to Victor's keen observation in voice and eye.

To Flora it seemed that a vague atmosphere of danger hung around the cabin. She was not afraid, yet an uneasy restlessness possessed her mind, making sleep impossible, and spinning out the length of the hours of the afternoon. She lay with lowered lids, imagining many things, though she did not doubt that she was safe in Victor's keeping.

About four in the afternoon Beaver Walsh entered his cabin, placed his snowshoes against the log wall beside the hearth, and without speaking, seated himself within the warm circle of light from the fire. The girl in the bunk opened her eyes and studied his scarred profile. She saw nothing there to reassure her. Though the lines of his face were weak and undeveloped, they bespoke sly cunning—the cunning that made such a man a dangerous menace.

Victor stepped to the fire to secure a light for his pipe, and moved his seat to a position opposite that occupied by Beaver Walsh. He continued smoking in silence. It was growing dusk in the cabin, and the firelight made weird, changing pictures on the walls, and set the shadows of the two men to dancing on the rough log floor. Beaver was the first to break the silence.

"Them's fine dogs o' yern, stranger," he said. "I ain't often seen such a fine team in this country. Did ye buy them at Crooked River Camp, maybe?"

"Yes. I got them from the trader at Crooked River Camp," replied Victor. "The trader brought us in with his own team a month ago, when he was out to the railway for the mail. I've been hunting about in that country since then; but the caribou are scarce this year. So I bought this team and started south to find them. And the blow the other night put me off my course. We lost our way badly, I am afraid."

Beaver Walsh nodded his head in agreement and his sly glance flitted like a shadow across the face of the stranger.

"Sure," he said. "I guess ye thought ye knew the country purty well or ye'd not have left Crooked River without a guide. There's many a man has lost hisself in a flurry like that there one, and ended up by gettin' froze to death. Ye're lucky, mister. How long be ye intendin' to stay in the woods? The huntin' is bad this year, and the trappin', too."

"I'll be going out soon," said Victor.

"To Montreal or Toronto, I'm thinkin'. Oh, the woods is all right for ye rich gentlemen and ladies for a month or two, but ye soon get a hankerin' for yer swell houses in the city. It's us poor fellers as makes our livin' in the woods as has to stay put. I ain't always lived here—not by a long sight. I've worked in the city."

Beaver Walsh asked many sly questions and Victor told him many lies, most but not all of which the trapper believed. He was polite, but beneath his surface friendliness there showed a sneering hostility that he was not quite adept enough to hide. Listening to his clumsily cunning questions, Flora lost much of her fear of the man and felt a great contempt for him. She became drowsy. Her eyes grew weary of wavering firelight and fluctuating shadow. She closed them and slept. Victor knocked the ashes from his pipe, stepped silently across the room, bent over the sleeping girl for a moment and listened to her quiet breathing. In that moment he could feel the eyes of the trapper turned upon him in cold calculation, and his lips tightened to a hard line. He could trace the movements of Beaver Walsh's mind—the desires, the vacillating fears, the resolve that would move him puppet-like to action. A wave of anger surged through him and he faced the room once more.

The trapper had risen to place fresh wood upon the fire. With a burning sliver he lighted half a candle that protruded from the neck of a bottle on the table.

Flora woke from her sleep with a fresh twist of pain. She watched the square of frosted light darken, and saw the pale yellow dab of the candle flame. She turned her face to the hearth where the fire now burned more briskly. Beaver Walsh bent above the flame, stirring the contents of a stew pot. She heard the scrape of the spoon against the side of the pot, and the quiet movements of Victor whom she could not see. Then he emerged into the firelight carrying food from his own supplies, a frying-pan and a kettle. In a few minutes slices of pork were browning in the pan and the odor of boiling coffee permeated every corner of the little room. He cut a few slices of bread upon a tin plate and proceeded to toast them one by one, spearing each upon the tines of a fork and holding it above the glowing coals for a few moments. When the meal was ready he looked in her direction and saw that she

was awake. He came forward with the plates and the hot food in his hands and arranged the dishes upon the biscuit box.

"Feel better after the nap, dear?" he asked cheerfully. "Well, supper is ready. When you have eaten that, I expect you will be ready to sleep again. You must be very tired, dear girl."

"I am rested, now, Victor. We can go on again in the morning." She spoke in tones so low that Beaver Walsh, less than ten feet away, could not hear her words, though he probably strained his ears in the attempt. He filled her cup from the kettle of coffee and answered her in a voice as discreet as her own.

"Yes. We shall start in the morning, dearest—very early. When the men from Mooseyard find this cabin—if they ever do find it—we shall be many miles away. Beaver Walsh is not to be trusted, but he, too, is afraid of the police and will not want to bring them into his country. We will change our direction after we have left this lake well behind, and go where the caribou have gone."

Beaver Walsh lifted his stew from the fire to the table and removed the cover of the pot. He gave it a final stir, and a rich aroma of boiled fresh meat came to their nostrils.

"If the lady would eat some of this here stew," he said ingratiatingly, "it would do her more good nor salt meat, I'm thinkin'. It's rabbit. They're mighty scarce this winter, but I snared a couple yesterday, and here they be. It would strengthen her up, maybe."

She saw by Victor's face and a slight nod of his head that he wished her to accept it, so he passed her plate and the trapper filled it from the pot. But she did not eat much of it, though it tasted very good.

Victor ate his share of the food he had cooked and a plate of the stew which he praised very highly to Beaver Walsh, and Beaver drank several mugs of their coffee, sweetened with real sugar and made golden with condensed cream. He also ate a great deal of the stew, and when he had finished his meal he wiped his hairy mouth with the back of his stained brown hand.. He drew back from the table with a heavy sigh and proceeded to relight his pipe. He sat in slovenly comfort before the fire with his broken-legged chair back-tilted and his flat, misshapen feet braced against the chimney. He had removed his moccasins and they lay drying upon the hearth. The flannel shirt he wore was dirty, and mended in many places; his tangled red-brown beard was dirty also, and the nails of his short fingers were like claws.

Upon those fingers he wore several rings; two were plain gold bands and the others were set with large single stones, lusterful, but of doubtful value. The hair on his small head was curled and short, and of the same unpleasant color as his beard.

A leather belt hung upon the wall at his side, and from the sheath attached to it protruded the blackened bone handle of a knife, carved and marked with unintelligible designs. Beaver Walsh reached for the knife with his left hand and proceeded to shave thin slices from a plug of black tobacco which he held in his right. The curved blade of the knife had an edge to it that would have split paper. It was stained with tobacco juice, but bore evidence of frequent and recent grinding. Beaver Walsh returned the knife to its sheath and rolled the tobacco under the heel of his left hand with deliberate care until it suited his fancy. Kent could not see his motions fully from his position to the right and behind him, but he had observed the knife, and also the fact that the trapper used it with his left hand. This point, too, coincided with the description which Sam Trent had given him. Beaver Walsh was a southpaw.

Victor bathed the strained ankle once more that evening. Then he unrolled his blankets and sleeping-bag and placed them close beside the bunk, with one end toward the hearth where the subsiding fire now glowed quietly. Beaver Walsh spread his blankets on the opposite side of the hearth and blew out the candle. Victor heard his uneasy movements for a moment as he settled himself for the night. Through half-closed eyelids he watched the lift and drop of fluctuating firelight upon the background of darkness, but he was intensely wide awake. His every sense was strung to a vibrant tensity of watchfulness. In a

few minutes the quiet breathing from the bunk behind him told him that Flora slept. He deepened and slowed his own respirations till their audible regularity would give the impression to any listener that he slept.

From the other side of the hearth there was not a sound. Victor lay upon his left side, his sleeping-bag spread between him and the uneven floor, and beneath the blanket his right hand gripped the stock of his revolver that was always upon his person now that he played this grim game of mimic warfare, and all men were his potential enemies. It was the weapon that had done for Swithen at the start of the game.

He had little doubt that before morning came he would need to use the gun—to shoot in defense of his wife as certainly as he had shot and killed on the previous occasion. He had read in Beaver Walsh's face the man's capacity for crime, and under the trapper's mask of politeness he had seen the covetings and calculations of the crafty, shallow mind. A beautiful woman, rifles, grub, money—for any one of these things Beaver Walsh would slit a throat, he knew. And here were all these things, and a team of the best dogs in the country with which to travel fast and far should flight prove necessary. So Victor waited and watched and listened while the glow upon the hearth died slowly to a few coals, and the early hours of the night passed away. Once Flora turned in her sleep and moaned softly, but she did not wake. From the other side of the hearth came the heavy snoring of Beaver Walsh. It sounded unconvincing to the ears of the listening man. His own breathing continued gentle and regular, and after a short time, that seemed long, the snoring of the other lost force—then ceased altogether.

For a few moments Victor heard nothing further, and his straining eyes, now wide open and fixed steadily on the uncertain, living darkness beyond the hearth, saw nothing at all. Then there was an almost inaudible movement — the shifting of a blanket, perhaps—the movement of a hand. A dark form took shape on the dim field of his vision and began crawling slowly across the floor. In that fractional second of inaction there came upon him with terrible intensity the realization of the issue that hung upon the sureness of his stroke. He must take no risks of being wounded. Sounds of the gentle breathing of the woman he loved told him that.

Then the spot of light upon the hearth was shut out from his vision by the body of the crawling man. He fired from beneath the blanket—three quick shots that filled the cabin with echoing sound and the sharp odor of powder smoke. No sound came from the man save the scuffing of his limbs upon the floor as he rolled over upon his side. He lay motionless, dimly outlined in the firelight.

Victor was on his feet, but he did not turn to the dead man on the floor, but to the living woman in the bunk. Jerked into sudden wakefulness, she stared with wide, unseeing eyes into his face. Her hand found his and tightened on it convulsively. She cried his name. Still holding her hand he knelt on the floor by the bunk and gently kissed her lips.

"I fired, dear," he said. "It is all right now. We are safe. This fellow was crawling on me with a knife."

"You have killed him?" she whispered, raising herself upon her elbow and peering vainly into the uncertain shadows of the room.

"I think so," he replied. "Doubtless he deserves to have been killed long ago. I had to shoot, anyway, dear, for your protection and my own. This is like war. If I win, we win—this won't matter. You will forget this night. Please lie still for a few minutes, Flora. I will tell you what I find and what has happened."

"Be careful, Victor. Be sure that he is not playing dead and waiting to leap upon you with his knife."

Victor threw his blanket over the top of the bunk so that it hung between Flora and the room. Near one corner it was pierced and singed by the passage of the bullets. He then tossed bark and dry wood upon the smouldering coals, and the yellow flames shot up, lighting the room to a grotesque, ever-changing brightness. He faced about and gazed upon Beaver Walsh stretched dead before the fire.

Near his left hand lay the sheath knife with the blackened handle, its blade gleaming silver in the firelight. He stepped to the table and lighted the stub of candle fixed in the bottle, and then bent to a more careful examination of the body. He did not touch either it or the knife. One of his bullets had entered the man's head, the other two had lodged in his left side just below the shoulder. The gray flannel shirt was wet with blood, and blood stained the floor. He spread one of the dead man's own blankets over both the body and the knife.

With the relief he felt now that the critical danger of the night was passed, there came to Victor's mind again the desire to lengthen the distance between himself and the pursuers from Mooseyard. He replaced the candle with a fresh one, and then removed the curtain from before the bunk. Flora glanced quickly at the blanket-covered form upon the floor and then up into his eyes.

" He is dead, darling," Victor said. " As soon as it is light we shall be on our way again. You must try and get more sleep before sunrise. I will sit here in this chair beside you, within touch of your hand."

" He was a bad man, Victor. I knew it when I first heard his voice out there in the snow. My ankle is much better, and I am ready to start now, if only it were day. But I will try to sleep, and so must you, dear."

He seated himself in the broken chair, wrapped a blanket about his legs, and extinguished the candle. He held Flora's hand until she slept once more. His mind was quiet, and he arranged his thoughts and plans without haste. He recognized the futility of any endeavor to hide the body of Beaver Walsh. Any marks or disturbances of the snow would be investigated by the police, if they reached the trapper's cabin. He resolved to leave things as they were in the room. He knew now that Flora's ankle was not broken, and that the swelling was greatly reduced by rest and treatment, so that traveling would not cause her much pain, and she was more anxious than he to make up the time lost through the accident of the afternoon before. Within an hour he also slept.

The gray light of morning was coming palely through the frosted pane of the window when he awoke. He stretched his cramped limbs and blinked his eyes as the memories of the incidents of the night flashed dramatically before his mind. Flora still slept. He moved quietly about the hearth, relighting the dead fire and preparing breakfast. Flora woke. When the water in the kettle had boiled, and the meal was ready, they both ate heartily. They talked little. Both wished to be on the trail again, and though the cabin had lost for Flora the sinister oppression that had weighed upon her, she longed to leave it behind and see it no more.

Victor fed the dogs their rations of frozen fish. The big, well-fed animals were in splendid condition and spirits and completely recovered from the effects of their heavy labors.

He carried Flora to the sled where he had packed their outfit and blankets and made her comfortable. Then he harnessed the waiting dogs and slipped his feet under the thongs of his snow-shoes. A few minutes later they were driving down the white open of the lake, and Beaver Walsh's cabin was hidden from their sight by the dark mass of the trees.

CHAPTER XII.

WHERE WOLVES HAVE FED.

DAVE BARKER and John Starling ate their breakfast and harnessed their dogs by starlight. They were on their way before the sun rose, and continued on toward the northeast, setting their course by sun and compass all morning. Without knowing it they diverged considerably from the line followed by Victor Kent, but early in the afternoon they again came upon signs of the trail. It was just at a point where the forest died away and a wide expanse of barren rolled out before their eyes to a belt of trees some distance off and to the blue horizon on either side. John Starling used some picturesque language.

" Shut yer potato trap and come on," said Dave. " We can't afford to lose time cussin' hard luck. It may take us the rest

of the day to pick up that there trail again, but I reckon we'll find it all right."

It was harder work breaking a trail across the barren where the recent snow lay deep and unpacked than through the more wooded country; but both men put their backs into the job, taking it in turn to go before the leading dog. They were inured to heavy labor, the deputy-sheriff by half of his lifetime spent in the north, and John Starling by three years' service in France with an infantry battalion.

When at last the open country lay behind them and they had reached the outskirts of the woods, they stopped to rest the dogs and to consider their best mode of procedure.

"It strikes me, Dave," said John, "that the best thing we can do right now is search along the edge of the woods till we find some sign that 'll tell us which way that feller went, then hump it. They may not be far ahead, but there ain't any sense in going dead ahead into the bush when Kent may have turned off to west or south and we be none the wiser. I'll bet he struck these woods somewhere, for speed was what he was after, and he couldn't get that out there in those damn drifts."

"I reckon you're about right, John." The deputy-sheriff rose to his feet with renewed energy. He had filled his brier pipe and now lighted it and gave a light to his comrade. He puffed a moment till the bowl was glowing warmly. "We'll split. You'll go to the left and I'll go to the right, and we won't miss a thing. If we don't strike the trail in half an hour we'll come back here and think up our next move."

"Right, old-timer," replied John, "and if I'm not the first to find the tracks the drinks are on me."

They hitched the dogs to a tree and started off on their snow-shoes in opposite directions, going very slowly and stopping to search every cluster of half-buried bush and every sheltered runway between spreading spruces. Trees soon intervened between them and the sled. Dave Barker worked with methodical care, missing nothing, and at the same time enjoying to the full the fragrant pleasure of his pipe. John Starling came upon every little hollow and tangle of brush with a fresh interest and a renewed expectation.

Peering to his left among the trunks of the trees he thought he saw indications of the trail he sought a few yards off in that direction. The white surface of the snow was disturbed. But when he reached the place his expectations were not realized. The sight that met his startled eyes was a tragic one. He whistled softly.

"Wonder if that was our man," he exclaimed aloud, and there was disappointment in his voice. "No, I don't think so. Kent was armed, and had food. Maybe Dave will know this party."

The hole in the snow that held his gaze was surrounded by the interlacing tracks of foxes and timber wolves, and in its center were strewn the bones and torn clothing of a man. The trampled snow still showed faint, red-brown blood stains. He stood staring down at this unexpected discovery, and shouted lustily for Dave Barker. Inside a minute Dave's answering halloo came to his ears and he began to run back along his tracks to meet the deputy-sheriff. He told him briefly of what he had found, and together they hurried to the hole in the snow. Barker calmly examined the torn and frozen things that had been wrangled over by many scavengers of the forest.

"Guess you can't find out much from that, Dave," said Starling. "It's not Kent anyway, I guess, and that's the main thing."

"Jake Simms, the cracked pedler—that's who it is," replied Dave, turning with unperturbed face from his investigation. "Jake used to do quite a trade around Mooseyard. Dollar watches, and diamond pins and mouth-organs, and fancy cloth for the squaws. I saw him at the settlement in October."

"Well, he's struck his last bargain now. Lost hisself, I suppose, and froze to death in the blizzard. Must have been cracked."

"He may have lost hisself," said the deputy-sheriff thoughtfully. "He sure had no business 'way in here. But he didn't freeze to death, you may bet on that. Look here—the back of his skull was stove in. And some one has been through his pockets, and his pack is gone."

John Starling examined the marks indicated by the deputy-sheriff with fresh interest.

"Some kad did him in all right, Dave. I guess we ain't got time to find out who it was. We'll just have to cache what's left of Jake Simms and report to headquarters when we get in—with Kent. Ain't that right?"

"Sure thing. But I got my suspicions. Beaver Walsh traps somewhere round here—and this looks like a job of his. It wouldn't be his first. Beaver's got a bad record, and he's a hard man to get your hands on. If we could take him now—with the goods—we'd have him for fair; but we're after other game, so I reckon we'll have to let him be for the present. If you'll fetch that extra blanket from the sled, John, we'll fix things up."

John hurried off after the blanket, and during his short absence Dave Barker painstakingly took notes in a regular and readable handwriting. He defined the location of the discovery as accurately as was possible, noted after some cogitation the day of the month, and described the condition of the snow and the nature of the tracks which crisscrossed the disturbed area.

When John Starling returned with the blanket they gathered the clothing and bones in it and hung them high up in the branches of a young maple. The somber light of the late afternoon was merging and dimming into the twilight of early evening as they tramped back toward their team. Dave carried a hatchet, and at short intervals he blazed the trunks of the trees that he might have no difficulty later in finding his cache.

When they reached the sled they made camp right where they were, for it was too dark to make any further search for tracks that day. They turned into their sleeping bags early. Dave Barker slept with his loaded rifle within reach of his hand, and several times during the night John Starling started into sudden wakefulness, imagining that the cries of a hunting wolf-pack still echoed in the air. But all was silent save for the regular breathing of the older man or the shifting of the embers of the subsiding fire. After listening tensely for a few minutes with raised head he would silently curse his foolishness and resume his sleep once more. The wolf tracks in the snow had made an impression upon the minds of both men, though neither had commented upon them at the time.

They had been searching only a short time on the following morning when the deputy-sheriff came on a trail leading still in a northeasterly direction. Slight as it was it revived their hope, and they were off to a good start before the first rays of the sun were striking horizontal bars of cold light between the spruces. The morning was not two hours old when they came upon the place where the fugitives had weathered the blizzard. The deep trench was drifted almost to its edge with snow, and here, too, there were tracks of small animals that had searched in vain for any discarded fragments of food. They did not stop to make any thorough examination of the camp, for they knew all that the deserted trench or the ashes of a long dead fire could tell them. From this point the trail that they followed, though heavy and much drifted, was easily discernible, and presented no difficulties till they came out again into more open country.

Even here they seldom lost sight of the tracks of sled and snow-shoes, for bushes and low hollows broke the force of the wind and there had been no heavy blow since Kent had passed over the ground two days before. John Starling was exultant and his companion optimistic. They drove the dogs as hard as the rough nature of the ground would permit, for they knew that every hour now they must be gaining on Kent, who had fewer dogs and who carried a heavier load. They laid wagers with each other as to the number of days which would elapse before they overtook him. John wagered ten dollars against Dave's five that they would sight the fugitive within three days.

"When they find that we're hot on their heels, maybe they'll leave the team and take to the woods on snow-shoes with what grub they can pack on their backs," said Dave; "and then I reckon we'll have them, son. If Kent was alone, now, I wouldn't

feel so sure. But he tied the noose around his own neck, so to speak, when he took a gal along."

They crossed the open country and reached the fringe of the woods where Victor had perceived the smoke from Beaver Walsh's chimney. No fire burned now upon that hearth to send its guiding thread of gray vapor floating above the tree tops. They turned almost at right angles from their course, where Victor had turned, and wondered what reason he had had for the change.

"Must have been heading for the river," said the deputy-sheriff. "The Little Kettle lies in that direction, only a few miles off. It will be good going on the river. The snow will be packed down a bit."

About a mile further on they came to the pond, traveled half its length, turned in among the trees and sighted the trapper's cabin. They decided that Kent must have spent a night in the deserted building, and John Starling was impatient for continuing the chase along the clearly marked trail without any halt for an investigation of the interior of the cabin. Dave Barker, however, insisted on having a look. With his hatchet he knocked the padlock from the door and they entered together, Dave in advance of his companion. In the half light the blanketed bundle stretched on the floor loomed large. He stooped and lifted the blanket by its nearest corner, and there lay Beaver Walsh, dead, with three bullet holes through him. And there lay the keen-bladed knife with the curiously marked handle. Dave stepped back a pace without removing his eyes from the unpleasant face of the dead man. John Starling looking over his shoulder, noted the bullet holes in head and side and swore softly.

"It's lucky we came in here, old-timer," he said. "He's sure some killer—that Kent."

"You're right," replied Barker quietly, "but I reckon this job saved the government considerable trouble. That there's Beaver Walsh. Beaver's got a bad record, and the police have wanted him for a long time. He didn't get any more than he deserved, John. And look at the knife. He had it in his left hand. He was a left-hander, Beaver was."

"I guess Kent didn't make no mistake that time when he shot to kill."

"I reckon not," replied the deputy-sheriff. "Beaver was after his girl, and dogs and money. But he can't go killing around this way on his own even if he does make a lucky kill once in a while."

Starling passed him his tobacco pouch and Barker filled and lighted his pipe, puffing hard till the smoke came well. Starling also lighted up.

"Why did Kent shoot that fellow Swithen, d'you suppose?" he asked. "He seemed harmless, from all I hear. Was he after Kent's girl?"

Barker blew a contemptuous mouthful of smoke toward the open door.

"Maybe he was," he replied. "And a long way after, believe me, son. But you know what Sam Trent said when he was boozed; and maybe Sam was seeing things and maybe he weren't. I've known Sam a mighty long time, and he ain't no liar. What was Swithen doing there in the brush with a gun if he was so damn harmless?"

"That's sure a puzzler. But I guess we'll find out soon enough when we get our hands on Kent."

They made a thorough search of the cabin, Barker taking copious notes at intervals, resting his note-book upon table or wall or whatever surface was convenient. Rummaging beneath the bunk, Starling held up something which brought an exclamation of excitement from the lips of Dave Barker. It was a worn, patched pedler's pack. They opened it and poured the contents out upon the bunk. Watches, rings, mouth-organs, brilliantly colored handkerchiefs, and packages of playing cards were mingled in an indiscriminate heap—the stock in trade of crazy Jake Simms.

A moment's glance showed Barker that there was nothing of interest in the collection, so he returned them to the sack in disorder, as Beaver Walsh had done a few days before. A few minutes later, in a cavity at the juncture of two logs, carefully concealed with dry moss, Dave found a leather pocket-book in which were folded

a few bills, and a small canvas bag heavy with quarters and ten and five-cent pieces. The pedler had yielded meager spoils. Further search disclosed nothing of interest save a bottle of Scotch, with its seal still unbroken, keeping company with some half-dozen empty bottles. This they set aside for later investigation.

They chose a spot in the narrow clearing which flanked the cabin and dug hard with their snow-shoes till the sweat rolled from their faces. They reached the iron-bound surface of the earth and cleared a grave for Beaver Walsh. They wrapped the body in the blanket and secured it with rope. Then they carried it from the cabin and deposited it without ceremony in its temporary grave. There were no eulogistic speeches made above the corpse of Beaver Walsh.

"Tough old customer," said the deputy-sheriff. "Shootin' was a sight too good for him. He should have swung."

"He'll give the foxes something to bite on," remarked the constable.

"I saw some logs around on the other side of the shack. A few of these will keep the foxes off. The coroner may want to have a look at the body."

They found the pile of short spruce logs that Beaver Walsh had cut earlier in the winter, and recently dug out of the snow for some unknown purpose. They piled them over the body and then shoveled in the snow and tramped it down. Dave stuck a long sapling at the head of the grave. Then they fed the dogs, and securing their own provisions from the sled, returned to the cabin. It was well on in the afternoon by this time, and breakfast was a matter of ancient history, so they hurried the preparation of the meal. They fried salt pork and dehydrated potatoes and ate them hungrily. Then Dave Barker opened the bottle of Scotch and poured two generous shots into two tin mugs. The unpleasant nature of the labor of the past hour was forgotten and their gloomy surroundings unheeded.

"Here's lookin' at you," said Barker.

"Here's luck, and five hundred dollars," was John Starling's toast.

Barker returned the bottle to the place where they had found it. They found a box of nails in the cabin and they boarded up the door and window from the outside.

"We're losing time, but we're seeing life," said Deputy-Sheriff Barker as he harnessed the dogs.

He whipped up the team and soon they were out upon the lake, following the trail of Victor Kent once more. Dave felt younger than he had for years—as young as John Starling—and he set a pace that was hard for the dogs to follow. They had covered several miles before sunset.

(To be continued NEXT WEEK.)

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NO RETURNING

REMEMBER, three things come not back:
The arrow sent upon its track—
It will not swerve, it will not stay
Its speed, it flies to wound or slay;
The spoken word, so soon forgot
By thee, but it has perished not;
In other hearts 'tis living still,
And doing work for good or ill;
And the lost opportunity
That cometh back no more to thee;
In vain thou weepest, in vain dost yearn—
Those three will nevermore return.

From the Arabic.

The Man Who Loved Broadway

by Howard Philip Rhoades

DAVE JEFFREY, the man who loved Broadway, shuffled along disconsolately. His sweetheart was giving him the cold shoulder. It was a raw, drizzly, gray shoulder—far from the glistening ones usually associated with Broadway—but, after all, not a hard one to find early in the morning, before one has had one's coffee—or whatever one has nowadays.

Dave had just passed the spot where the lady from Bucyrus, Ohio, pauses at 8 P.M. to gasp: "Isn't it *grand!*" just before she is bumped into by the thick person from the Bronx, who is hurrying to meet Abe, the same spot where, at nine twenty-three next morning, Rosie, who works for Shubert's, remarks to Ethel: "That late! And I've given him the subway excuse three times now!" Dave had just passed this spot, head down, hands deep in raincoat pockets, when he was hailed by Mort Sands.

"Hey!" yelled Sands. "You're the guy I want to see! But I'm not giving no free ducat to pneumonia by standing out here. Come in, and have a cup of coffee."

They entered one of those places where they fry them in the front window, just to prove they really *are* fried. There, across the marble, Sands asked: "Where you been all the while?"

"Over with Jacobs until recently."

"What you been doing since?"

"Looking around. Several things in view."

Sands nodded. He was as sharp of eye as rounded of form. Twenty years of plugging the show and picture game along Broadway had not been wasted.

After they had ordered enough calories to carry them until noon, Jeffrey felt the question in Sands's eyes, and exclaimed: "I'm in no hury. Things will be better soon. Then there's Randall. I can always go to work for him. Met him in the Astor the other noon, and he told me to come around and see him any time."

Sands nodded again and continued to look at the younger man. At that Dave Jeffrey was a sight for the eyes of middle age. He was yet in the fine morning of the middle twenties, blessed with a clear skin, and searching gray eyes. Furthermore, he was clean-cut, carefully groomed, with a rugged frame, and a face which was strong.

Something about him made Sands smile pleasantly, yet a trifle sadly. Presently he said: "Dave, if you've time, I've something on my mind. You wouldn't care if I got insulting, would you?"

Jeffrey smiled back. He knew Sands's unconventional, whimsical ways. "I'll stand some abuse," he said, "especially if you've something on your mind."

"Remember," went on Sands, with his quiet smile, "when we both worked for Great Stars, Ltd., how you asked me for the desk where you could look down Broad-

way, and confessed you loved the old street?"

Dave nodded. Loyalty to his sweetheart was nothing to be ashamed of, even with the cold shoulder extended.

"How do you feel by now?" Sands asked abruptly.

"Well—I'm still here."

"So's he!" Sands indicated a gaunt, elderly man with deeply puckered brow near by, his dress marking the transition from the natty to the shabby.

As Jeffrey looked Sands said: "An old-timer. Never broke away. Bright and energetic enough once to have made a success elsewhere. But he got in a rut, and never had the courage to get out. Now look at him, with the street full of younger, abler men!"

"Are you telling my fortune?" asked Jeffrey. "Is this the insult?"

"No. Just let me generalize: the average fellow along Broadway is so in love with the street that you couldn't blast him away. Few put it in words, as you have, but they'd rather be a white wing along the Boulevard de Bunk than a millionaire elsewhere."

"What's the connection?"

"I'm going to insult you, Dave; offer you a job off Broadway."

"What sort of a job?"

"I want a good man to take 'The Greatest Lover,' an imported film, through the Middle West. We're going to road-show it."

Jeffrey shook his head slowly. "No, Mort," he said. "I wouldn't want to leave New York. You see, I can go to work for Randall any time—"

Sands leaned forward, his eyes glittering with experience. "Dave," he broke in, "after meeting one of these felows with a good lunch under his belt, and a perfecto between his teeth, who insinuates that he'd fire a lodge brother to make a place for you—did you ever go around and ask one of them for a job?"

Jeffrey admitted he hadn't.

"Try it!" Sands urged as he gulped the last of his coffee. "Meanwhile think over my proposition."

"All right," said Jeffrey as they once more stood upon Broadway. "I don't agree with you. But thanks, anyhow, for the insult."

Later that day, before the wicket at the office of George R. Randall, of Magnafilm, Jeffrey got his card back with the word that Mr. Randall was out. At that moment a thoughtless stenographer near by, who had not heard, called to an office boy: "Give this to Mr. Randall. Quick, he's in a hurry!" And the boy, who *had* heard, stared heartlessly at the departing Jeffrey as he hurried inside.

It turned out such a day all the way through. The shoulder did not grow warmer or brighter, and just before five Jeffrey telephoned to Sands.

"Sure, my boy; still open!" came back the other man's voice. "Wish I had your chance. When I'm an old codger I'll come out and hang around your reception-room—when you've a chain of houses—and give them the old 'I-knew-him-when' stuff while they wait to see you!"

Just how Sands expected him to become a theatrical magnate by acting as traveling representative for a film was far from clear to Dave Jeffrey. At first it was novel to travel through country he never had seen. But presently the ceaseless round of indifferent hotels, strange faces, and constant change began to tell. If Sands wanted to get away from New York why hadn't he come himself?

Jeffrey's final conclusion, as he drifted through a succession of towns, their streets nearly empty, their buildings small, their inhabitants all unknown to him, was that Mort Sands had merely cooked up this mirage of vast opportunity to induce him to take the job.

So through the winter until spring. Still the towns looked colorless, far different from his native New England village, and their smallness and countrified airs made the more acute his longing for New York. He quite forgot his first days in the metropolis, days of loneliness and misery, in his longing just to slip a nickel in the Automat, to be jostled in the subway, or sniff the air of the sea.

For a month he hadn't even been able to find a talkative drummer from the big

town on the Hudson. Then one day, late in April, he shook the hand of a thin man, with dark, shifty eyes, prematurely gray, and with a strangely twisted face, in the office of the Bijou Theater, at Central City.

"What is the name?" Jeffrey asked.

"Eckles," the other repeated with a queer look.

"Didn't I know you in New York?" Jeffrey asked, striving to place the house manager.

"No," replied the other. "I've never been in New York. Started in Milwaukee, then went to Chicago."

"Striking resemblance to a man I used to know," said Jeffrey. But as he couldn't recall a great deal about the other man at the moment, he didn't pursue the matter.

Yet, back at his hotel, he fell to thinking of his interview with Eckles for another reason. He was haunted by the idea that there had been a sudden, inexplicable change in the manner of Eckles as he had talked to him. At the first handshake the man had seemed genial. Then he became reserved, almost resentful, certainly brusk.

But, Jeffrey decided, it may have been his imagination and disappointment at not finding Eckles the man he felt he had known at some time in New York. What did it matter? That evening, after all, he decided he had been wrong, for then Eckles outdid himself in being agreeable. He passed the cigars, inquired as to conditions on the road, and finally took Jeffrey to have midnight supper with him.

"Some fellows I get in here for a week would sour milk," Eckles explained as they left the restaurant. "Just to show you I appreciate good company I'll tell you what I'm going to do. Look here."

He pointed at a tailor's show window. "This fellow," he went on, "is an artist for a small place. If we get the right kind of a week"—he mentioned a figure—"come over and pick out a suit. The choice of the house. We'll know by Wednesday. Barring bad weather I can figure the last half within a hundred dollars always."

The offer of the suit didn't seem to fit in with the vague person back in New York whom Jeffrey was trying better to remember. Or, maybe it did fit in with him. At any rate, the film representative lay awake a considerable while trying to remember and determine.

It was close to nine o'clock next morning when he rose and looked out of his hotel window across the wooded square of Central City. Unquestionably it was the prettiest town he had struck, and the opening of myriad young leaves, and the soft breath of spring heightened the effect. For the first time he was reminded of the old New England town from which he came. Here was an air of leisure and age. The houses were larger, the streets lined with trees, the homes surrounded by lovely gardens.

The warm breeze invited him out. Looking across the square, after breakfast, he chose a broad street lined with great trees which entwined their branches high above its wide expanse. As he entered this impressive way he was pleased by its air of permanence and distinction. He walked its length, out to the point where the green hills rolled in to meet the city. Then he returned, reveling in the big, comfortable homes set well back in spacious yards, and the restful feeling of quiet, luxuriant living.

Then a gate clicked just ahead, and the scenery was even enhanced.

Clad in white, with a drooping summery hat which made one of the masculine sex—especially one in the fine morning of the middle twenties—breathe faster in the desire to see what was beneath, moved a charming feminine figure. She walked with the lilt which indicates springtime of body and soul, on slender, white-clad ankles, altogether with such grace and vivacity as to make Jeffrey banish thought and merely *feel* the delicious abandon of youth in mating time.

He was glad that gate clicked in front of him, and not behind!

He was determined he would follow until he was allowed a glimpse of the face which accompanied this vision in white. The Bijou Theater? Well, he needn't go there until two o'clock. No, he had to go there right now! *She* was entering its lobby.

The girl went in without turning. But here, at the entrance of the lobby, was a mirror which might still hold some trace,

It was a youth who lounged there, inhaling cigaret-smoke, a thin lad with mild blue eyes and chalky face who had been introduced to him as Bob Williams, the house treasurer.

"Mr. Williams, how are you this morning?" Jeffrey greeted cheerily.

A peculiar preoccupation, which Jeffrey had noted the evening before as the youth's chief characteristic, gradually lifted.

"Fine, thanks. Been out looking us over?"

"Yes. Prettiest place I've struck. Mr. Eckles busy?"

"No—er—yes! What's the matter with me? He's busy this minute with Miss Langdon. She just came for her statement."

"Miss Langdon?"

"Yes, the daughter of the lady who owns the house."

"True. Mr. Eckles mentioned to me last night that the owner died recently and left the theater to his widow and daughter. Well, they've a comfortable heritage. It's the best house in town."

Williams nodded.

"And doing a nice business."

The mild blue eyes of the treasurer turned for an instant in a strange, questioning way. Something crept into the lad's face which reminded the other remotely of the resentful reserve Eckles had displayed at their first meeting. But if Williams had such a look he could not repress it like Eckles. His face was franker, but none the less mystifying.

"Yes"—after a pause. Then: "Mr. Jeffrey, haven't you worked in New York?"

"Yes."

"What are the chances for a young fellow there?"

Jeffrey smiled. "I debated that question with a friend just before I came away," he said. "He induced me to take this job, saying there is more opportunity away from New York than in it."

"I've often thought of going," confessed Williams. "'Course I've a fair job here—been with the house two years. Mr. Langdon was a prince, and since his death Miss Eve and Mrs. Langdon have been mighty nice—" He paused oddly. Jeffrey thought he detected a gulp. "But—you know—"

"Yes," said the other. "I—"

A faint flutter caused him to turn. If his heart had palpitated before it stood still now. At least, for the instant in which he looked into the deeply violet eyes, at the cheeks faintly pink, and the pearly teeth which parted for a moment as Eve Langdon smiled sidewise at Bob Williams.

Jeffrey smiled after the slim, graceful figure. Then, suddenly, he happened to glance at Williams. The face of the latter, set upon the departing girl, startled him by its drawn misery. Jeffrey turned before the lad saw. With the word: "Guess Mr. Eckles is free," he went to the manager's office.

As he knocked, and then entered, Jeffrey found Eckles in the middle of the room, hands behind his back, as if he had been pacing the floor. On his thin, twisted face was a serious look which he banished at once. As they fell to discussing business Eckles again waxed cordial, spoke of the suit of clothes which he expected to present to Jeffrey, and ended by taking the film representative to lunch at the hotel.

Later that day Jeffrey himself issued an invitation. He asked Bob Williams, the house treasurer, to dine with him at an out-of-the-way little place down the street. Their time was devoted more to conversation eating, for Jeffrey found, as he had surmised, that his guest had all the small town young man's eagerness for stories of the famed metropolis.

When Williams was asking tales of Broadway from Jeffrey he was bespeaking no unwilling oracle. The picture man warmed to his subject, and one might have thought his sweetheart never had been cruel. But withal he was sincere, and it was this open sincerity which won Williams.

The impression he gained proved to be an important one, for he got Jeffrey out early with a telephone call.

"I was speaking to Miss Langdon about you," he said, "and she wants to meet you. She's interested in going to New York and getting on the stage. She'll be in to see Mr. Eckles at ten thirty, and if you could be in front of the house—but, listen, Mr. Jeffrey, I wouldn't say anything to Mr. Eckles about this."

Here was new food for thought—and cause for delight. Jeffrey thanked him, and was there on time. Presently he was holding a hand, soft and small, and gazing into the violet eyes, less obscured by a smaller hat.

Jeffrey took care that they did not remain long in front of the theater. It seemed a natural move to cross the square and walk up the broad, forested street opposite. As they sauntered its length there was poured out to the man the longings of a young girl, reared in innocence, protected by a good home, now quickened by her young womanhood into a desire to test herself against a world of which she had heard much, and knew little.

He listened with grave nods. He felt older than ever before as she finished. Her charming face and figure had fascinated him. Here was something deeper, more sacred, the very scroll of her heart, given him freely, openly. He was so devoid of conceit as to know that she would thus bare her soul to any man she believed to know intimately the things for which she longed.

Somehow he had a vision of her walking blindfolded—whither? He longed for the right gently and gradually to remove the covering from her eyes, and show her things as he knew them. For who was to guess what the next man might do?

"Of course," she was saying as they approached her home, "mother doesn't approve, for she doesn't understand. Her life has been spent so differently, and she is still stunned and saddened from father's death."

He nodded again, and she went on: "Mr. Eckles is sure I'd be a success. I've been talking it over with him. He's been in New York, and knows a lot of managers. But mother is my greatest problem. See, it's nearly twelve. Won't you stay for luncheon with us? Perhaps you can convince mother!"

Surrounded by such an atmosphere of home as he had not met in a long—a very long time—Jeffrey went through the meal in the cheerful dining-room. Two figures stood out: a saddened, elderly woman with a kind face and white hair on his right, and opposite, a girl of fresh, vivacious charm, awaiting eagerly the moment when he should defend the street of opportunity.

Several times, beyond the glint of the silver, the sparkle of lustrous china and glass, and the soft old mahogany furniture, walled in by bright chintz hangings, Broadway appeared. But it was a ghostlike Broadway, ranging itself in pale, sickly fantasmagoria: gray morning with sodden beggars; midday with suspicious, painted faces; midnight with hysterical, artificial gaiety. The warmer, brighter Broadway, his old sweetheart, would not come.

He was still under the spell of that first real home he had entered in a long while as he said to his hostess: "You don't know what this has meant to me, Mrs. Langdon. It's been months—years—I'd almost forgotten—"

The kindly, white-haired woman smiled understandingly, and shook his hand. When she left them Eve Langdon gazed after her in deep concern.

"Poor mother," she said. "I'm worried about her. The fact that the theater is falling off is preying on her mind. Yesterday I found her before father's picture, crying. I tried to comfort her, and she said: 'To think, Eve, that I'm not managing better. It would hurt him to know how things are going.'"

Jeffrey stirred and looked at her narrowly. "There's been a falling off in the receipts?" he asked.

"A gradual decrease since last fall. The house isn't making half it was a year ago. But, of course, Mr. Eckles says it's a bad season everywhere."

As Jeffrey left he took her hand and said: "I'd like to talk over the matter of your going on the stage before I leave town. Pardon me for not bringing it up this noon. There are times when one can't even speak of the things he loves."

"You love—" she began.

"Broadway's been my sweetheart," he smiled whimsically, "until—

"Good-by," he said abruptly and was off through the clicking gate.

Ten minutes later he leaned over Bob Williams, who was selling tickets in the box-office. "Come to my room at the hotel right after the show to-night," he said.

When they had eaten a supper which he had provided Jeffrey passed the smokes to Williams. Then, after a moment's pause he said: "Williams, I think you're a fellow of square impulses—one who wants to be on the right side of the things which are going to happen."

He noted the hand of the mild-eyed young ticket-seller tremble and his face go a trifle paler through the smoke.

"A man's got the law and two fists to protest himself," Jeffrey went on. "Besides he's trained by knowing just how crooked some people are. But when it comes to woman— Williams, what do you know about this?"

For an instant the other man seemed undecided. He stirred nervously, shook off his ash, and stammered: "This—er—this—"

"What's going on at the Bijou? The theater's income is falling off steadily, Mrs. Langdon's reports show. Now I know enough money's coming in—at least, this week. You've been treasurer under both men. Tell me what's wrong. I'll see you don't suffer for it."

"Do you mean that?" asked Williams, stretching out a trembling hand.

"Absolutely."

"But Eckles—he'll—"

"When I get done with Eckles he'll do nothing. Come, Bob, let's hear it all. I'm due out Saturday, and I've got to work fast."

Bob Williams moved over, very close to the other man and began, in a low voice: "When Eckles first came he complained of my work, and I thought he was going to fire me. Then he got friendly, and began to buy me things—"

"Just as he did me," said Jeffrey. "First he was sore at seeing me, then he thought he'd make himself out a good fellow by the spoils system."

"At first I wasn't suspicious," went on Williams. "Then I heard Mrs. Langdon ask him about the falling off in the receipts. It was too late for me to say anything. If I had he'd swear I was in on it, and point out the things he'd given me. He's had a system of keeping me away from the Langdons, and telling me that they wanted to cut expenses, and he was holding my job for me in the face of objections."

"He's sent them false statements, I suppose," Jeffrey said.

"I think so. He never lets me see them. Well, I've always been pretty poor, Mr. Jeffrey, and these things he gave me looked mighty good. Then I got to suspecting he's crooked. But I couldn't prove it. He's too slick. So I've gone on, afraid not to accept things, hating myself for doing it. Then Miss Eve looks at me and smiles every day—God, I've been rotten!"

The lad was bent, his weak, thin body shaking. Now he raised his head, tears streaming from his eyes. "But that ain't the worst. He's been telling her all sorts of stories about New York. One day when he had half a jag on moonshine, he says: 'Kid, I don't know whether to hold onto my good job here or grab my chicken and beat it for Broadway.' And I listened, afraid to brain him!"

Jeffrey put his arm around the trembling boy and said: "Yes, Bob."

"Then you came. You sounded square, and I decided to have you meet Miss Eve, hoping you'd find out something—and save her."

The picture man shook his hand tenderly. "That's all I wanted, Bob, just to make sure I *was* right. Now sit tight. Don't let on, and don't be afraid."

While waiting for the end of the week Dave Jeffrey did two things. One was to send a wire to New York, and the other to lay off the following afternoon, hire a car, and take Eve Langdon for a long ride in the country.

As they came back to her home he said: "I've been discussing with Mr. Eckles plans for increasing the theater's receipts. I want to surprise him with a plan that I think is very good. So I wonder if you will give me the figures that he sends you showing the gross income for each day this week?"

As she produced them he admonished her. "Remember, not a word. I want to surprise him!"

Just before midnight Saturday, when the Bijou lay dark and still on the almost deserted town square, and when Eckles sat at his desk, Jeffrey walked into the office.

Eckles nervously pushed the paper upon which he had been figuring beneath the blotter. "Though you'd left by this time," he said.

"I did. But I came back for a second good-by."

There was something serious in Jeffrey's tones which induced Eckles to rise to new heights of cordiality. "All set on the suit?" he inquired. "They know where to send it and everything?"

"That isn't what I want to see you about. I'll pay for the suit, Eckles. What I want you to do is square up with Mrs. Langdon."

The other man turned sharply. "What do you mean—square up?" he asked.

The mock geniality had faded from the thin, twisted face, which was set in hard, defiant lines. Dave Jeffrey came back with all the determination of his strong face and rugged frame.

"Don't side-step, Eckles," he said. "I've my own figures of just how much has come in every day. I merely contrast them with the statements which you have been giving Mrs. Langdon, and see that you owe them one hundred and fifty dollars on the week, besides what you've cooked up to steal to-night. Turn it over, and get out!"

The thin, twisted face leered spitefully. "Is it your house? And that word 'steal' is a dangerous one!"

He had risen and was advancing threateningly. Dave Jeffrey merely pointed back at his chair. "Sit down, Eckles," he said. "You're no match for me, and I'm just about running over!"

He grabbed from beneath the blotter the paper upon which Eckles had been figuring. "Fifty dollars to-night, eh?" he said. "Now just cough up two hundred dollars in real money!"

Eckles regarded him with a sneer. "There's still police protection, Jeffrey, against men like you—"

Dave Jeffrey was up, ready to floor him. "Listen," he cried, restraining himself with difficulty, "I was nice and called you Eckles just because your past was no business of mine. But when I found you'd started preying on women, I was done. Now I could beat this money out of you in a minute. But that would only cause a stir, and more trouble for two women who've had enough already. Just take a look at this and dig down!"

He held a wire before Eckles's eyes. It read:

> Sure I remember Twisty Morgan. He only got me for a hundred, but there are several others he made for big money. They'll finance extradition. Where is he?
>
> MORT SANDS.

"I've said I'd heard you were around here," Jeffrey explained. "I can wire it was just a rumor—or you may call the police. Three minutes, Morgan, to do as you please!"

Five minutes later as Dave Jeffrey stood alone in the lobby of the Bijou Theater, looking out over the town square, a member of the police force approached him.

"I'm hunting Mr. Jeffrey."

"That's my name."

"We've a wire from New York saying you know the whereabouts of Twisty Morgan, a forger they want pretty bad—"

"See the man over there, just passing under the light," indicated Jeffrey; "that's he. He's been known as Eckles here. When you've got him in jail call me here, and I'll give you the details."

"Some of Mort's friends must have wanted him sure enough," said Jeffrey to himself as he turned away on another errand, "and I guess it's just as well."

He telephoned Miss Langdon, then sent a taxi for her. She and a higher police officer arrived about the same time. The latter Jeffrey sent on his way with all the facts he knew about Eckles, alias Morgan. Then, after a talk, he and the girl crossed the square toward her home.

They walked up the broad street, while high above its arched trees the moon of midnight sifted silver rays through the lacy canopy.

"Come early for a talk with mother," she said as they reached the clicking gate. "There's one thing we'd both want if it wasn't for—for your—sweetheart."

He started.

"Broadway," she reminded him. "You'd never be able to stay out here and manage our theater for us."

His hand was stealing softly down upon hers when there was a roar which startled them. A belated motor with a strong light was turning into the broad avenue from a side street.

Jeffrey gasped, whispering: "What was that—over there!"

She followed his finger and laughed. "No ghost. Just one of our new street signs—put up to-day."

But it *was* a ghost—a fantom stealing in to be the evergreen memorial of a dead love!

"But what street does it say?" Jeffrey asked.

"Why—this street—Broadway! Didn't you know?"

He thought it a glorious omen as he pressed her close in his arms and whispered: "Broadway is dead. *Long live Broadway!*"

Black Jack

Part IV

by *Max Brand*

Author of "Trailin'," "The Untamed," "Tiger," "The Guide to Happiness," etc.

CHAPTER XXII.

MR. JOE POLLARD.

"MY name's Pollard," said the older man—"Joe Pollard."

"Glad to know you, sir. My name—is Terry."

The other admitted this reticence with a faint smile.

"I got a name around here for keeping my mouth shut and not butting in on another gent's game. But I always noticed that when a gent is in a losing run half the time he don't know it. Maybe that might be the way with you. I been watching and seen your winnings shrink considerable lately."

Terry weighed his money.

"Yes, it's shrunk a good deal."

"Stand out of the game till later on. Come over and have a bite to eat with me."

He went willingly, suddenly aware of a raging appetite and a dinner long postponed. The man of the black beard was extremely friendly.

"One of the prettiest runs I ever see, that one you made," he confided when they were at the table in the hotel. "You got a system, I figure."

"A new one," said Terry. "I've never played before."

The other blinked.

"Beginner's luck, I suppose," said Terry frankly. "I started with fifty, and now I suppose I have about eight hundred."

This story began in the Argosy-Allstory Weekly for December 10.

"Not bad, not bad," said the other. "Too bad you didn't stop half an hour before. Just passing through these parts?"

"I'm looking for a job," said Terry. "Can you tell me where to start hunting? Cows are my game."

The other paused a moment and surveyed his companion. There seemed just a shade of doubt in his eyes. They were remarkably large and yellowish gray, those eyes of Joe Pollard, and now and again when he grew thoughtful they became like clouded agate. They had that color now as he gazed at Terry. Eventually his glance cleared.

"I got a little work of my own," he declared. "My range is all clogged up with varmints. Any hand with a gun and traps?"

"Pretty fair hand," said Terry modestly.

And he was employed on the spot.

He felt one reassuring thing about his employer—that no echo out of his past or the past of his father would make the man discharge him. Indeed, taking him all in all, there was under the kindliness of Joe Pollard an indescribable basic firmness. His eyes, for example, in their habit of looking straight at one, reminded him of the eyes of Denver. His voice was steady and deep and mellow, and one felt that it might be expanded to an enormous volume. A capable man he was, and Terry felt that the mind behind the cloudy agate eyes would have a grasp as strong as the big hands that lay heavily on the table. Such a man would not fly off into snap judgments and become alarmed because an employee had a past or a strange name.

They paid a short visit to the gambling hall after dinner, and then got their horses. Pollard was struck dumb with admiration at the sight of the blood-bay.

"Maybe you been up the Bear Creek way?" he asked Terry.

And when the latter admitted that he knew something of the Blue Mountain country the rancher exclaimed: "By the Lord, partner, I'd say that hoss is a ringer for El Sangre."

"Pretty close to a ringer," said Terry. "This is El Sangre himself."

They were jogging out of town. The rancher turned in the saddle and crossed his companion with one of his searching glances, but returned no reply. Presently, however, he sent his own capable Steeldust into a sharp gallop; El Sangre roused to a flowing pace and held the other even without the slightest difficulty. At this Pollard drew rein with an exclamation.

"El Sangre as sure as I live!" he declared. "Ain't nothing else in these parts that calls itself a hoss and slides over the ground the way El Sangre does. Partner, what sort of a price would you set on El Sangre, maybe?"

"His weight in gold," said Terry.

The rancher cursed softly, without seeming altogether pleased. And thereafter during the ride his glance continually drifted toward the brilliant bay—brilliant even in the pallor of the clear mountain starlight.

He explained this by saying after a time: "I been my whole life in these parts without running across a hoss that could pack me the way a man ought to be packed on a hoss. I weigh two hundred and thirty, son, and it busts the back of a horse in the mountains. Now, you ain't a fly-weight yourself, and El Sangre takes you along like you was a feather."

Steeldust was already grunting at every sharp rise, and El Sangre had not even broken out in perspiration.

A mile or so out of the town they left the road and struck onto a mere semblance of a trail, broad enough, but practically as rough as nature chose to make it. This wound at sharp and ever-changing angles into the hills, and presently they were pressing through a dense growth of lodge-pole pine.

It seemed strange to Terry that a prosperous rancher with an outfit of any size should have a road no more beaten than this one leading to his place. But he was thinking too busily of other things to pay much heed to such surmises and small events. He was brooding over the events of the afternoon. If his exploits in the gaming hall should ever come to the ear of Aunt Elizabeth he was certain enough that that he would be finally damned in her judgment. Too often he had heard her ex-

press an opinion of those who lived by "chance and their wits," as she phrased it. And the thought of it irked him.

Looking back on the affair, it all seemed in the highest degree hazy and unreal. The dreamy heat of the early afternoon had had something to do with it, and there had been a peculiar atmosphere in the hall itself. What had taken hold of him and planted him in front of the roulette wheel? Another might have explained it readily enough as a normal impulse of any normal man. To Terry it seemed that the ghost of his father must have stood beside him and directed his play. How else would he have dared to do what he had done? And how else would he have dared to throw away that big sum of money?

He roused himself out of his musing. They had come out from the trees and were in sight of a solidly built house on the hill. There was one thing which struck his mind at once. No attempt had been made to find level for the foundation. The log structure had been built apparently at random on the slope. It conformed, at vast waste of labor, to the angle of the base and the irregularities of the soil. This, perhaps, made it seem smaller than it was. It seemed a mere shapeless, sprawling mass of timber on the hillside. They caught the scent of wood smoke, and then saw a pale drift of the smoke itself across the stars, like a second Milky Way.

A flurry of music escaped by the opening of a door and was shut out by the closing of it. It was a moment before Terry, startled, had analyzed the sound. Unquestionably it was a piano. But how in the world, and why in the world, had it been carted to the top of this mountain?

He glanced at his companion with a new respect and almost with a suspicion.

"Up to some damn doings again," growled the big man. "Never got no peace nor quiet up my way."

Another surprise was presently in store for Terry. Behind the house, which grew in proportions as they came closer, they reached a horse-shed, and when they dismounted a negro came out for the horses. Outside of the Cornish ranch he did not know of many who afforded such luxuries.

However, El Sangre could not be handled by another, and Terry put up his horse and found the rancher waiting for him when he came out. Inside the shed he had found ample bins of barley and oats and good grain hay. And in the stalls his practised eye scanned the forms of a round dozen fine horses with points of blood and bone that startled him.

Coming to the open again, he probed the darkness as well as he could to gain some idea of the ranch which furnished and supported all these evidences of prosperity. But so far as he could make out, there was only a jumble of ragged hilltops clothed with the inevitable lodge-pole pine behind the house, and before it the slope fell away steeply and jumped down to the valley far below. He had not realized before that they had climbed so high or so far.

Joe Pollard was humming. Terry joined him on the way to the house with a deepened sense of awe; he was even beginning to feel that there was a touch or two of mystery in the make-up of the man.

Proof of the solidity with which the log house was built was furnished at once. Coming to the house, there was only a murmur of voices and of music. The moment they opened the door a roar of singing voices and a jangle of piano music rushed into their ears. To be sure a freshening wind with the noise of the forest in it had been blowing from them to the house, but the practically sound-proof walls of the house were the main reason. The door which Terry pulled to behind him, as he entered behind his host, was six inches thick of heart of spruce.

He found himself in a very long room with a big table in the center and a piano at the farther end. The ceiling sloped down from the right to the left. At the left it descended toward the doors of the kitchen and storerooms; at the right it rose to the height of two full stories. One of these was occupied by a series of heavy posts on which hung saddles and bridles and riding equipment of all kinds, and the posts supported a balcony onto which opened several doors—of sleeping-rooms, no doubt. As for the wall behind the posts, it, too,

was pierced with several openings, but Terry could not guess at the contents of the rooms. But he was amazed by the size of the structure as it was revealed to him from within. The main room was like some baronial hall of the old days of war and plunder. A rôle, indeed, into which it was not difficult to fit the burly Pollard and the dignity of his beard.

Four men were around the piano, and a girl sat at the keys, splashing out syncopated music while the men roared the chorus of the song. But at the sound of the closing of the door all five turned toward the newcomers, the girl looking over her shoulder and keeping the soft burden of the song still running.

CHAPTER XXIII.

AND JOE'S GIRL.

SO turned, he could not see her clearly. He caught a shimmer of red bronze hair, dark in shadow and brilliant in high lights, and a sheen of greenish eyes. Otherwise, he only noted the casual manner in which she acknowledged the introduction, unsmiling, indifferent, as Pollard said: "Here's my daughter Kate. This is Terry—a new hand."

It seemed to Terry that as he said this the rancher made a gesture as of warning, though this no doubt could be attributed to his wish to silently explain away the idiosyncrasy of Terry in using his first name only. He was presented in turn to the four men, and thought them the oddest collection he had ever laid eyes on.

Slim Dugan was tall, but not so tall as he looked, owing to his very small head and narrow shoulders. His hair was straw color, excessively silky, and thin as the hair of a year-old child. There were other points of interest in Slim Dugan; his feet, for instance, were small as the feet of a girl, accentuated by the long, narrow riding boots, and his hands seemed to be pulled out to a great and unnecessary length. They made up for it by their narrowness.

His exact opposite was Marty Cardiff, chunky, fat, it seemed, until one noted the roll and bulge of the muscles at the shoulders. His head was settled into his fat shoulders somewhat in the manner of Denver's, Terry thought.

Oregon Charlie looked the part of an Indian, with his broad nose and high cheek bones, flat face, slanted dark eyes; but his skin was a dead and peculiar white. He was a downheaded man, and one could rarely imagine him opening his lips to speak; he merely grunted as he shook hands with the stranger.

To finish the picture, there was a man as huge as Joe Pollard himself, and as powerful, to judge by appearances. His face was burned to a jovial red; his hair was red also, and there was red hair on the backs of his freckled hands.

All these men met Terry with cordial nods, but there was a carelessness about their demeanor which seemed strange to Terry. In his experience, the men of the mountains were a timid or a blustering lot before newcomers, uneasy, and anxious to establish their place. But these men acted as if meeting unknown men were a part of their common, daily experience. They were as much at their ease as social lions.

Pollard was explaining the presence of Terry.

"He's come up to clean out the varmints," he said to the others. "They been getting pretty thick on the range, you know."

"You came in just wrong," complained Kate, while the men turned four pairs of grave eyes upon Terry and seemed to be judging him. "I got Oregon singing at last, and he was doing fine. Got a real voice, Charlie has. Regular branded barytone, I'll tell a man."

"Strike up agin for us, Charlie," said Pollard good-naturedly. "You don't never make much more noise 'n a grizzly."

But Charlie looked down at his hands and a faint spot of red appeared in his cheek. Obviously he was much embarrassed. And when he looked up it was to fix a glance of cold suspicion upon Terry, as though warning him not to take this talk of social acquirements as an index to his real character.

"Get us some coffee, Kate," said Pollard. "Turned off cold coming up the hill."

She did not rise. She had turned around to her music again, and now she acknowledged the order by lifting her head and sending a shrill whistle through the room. Her father started violently.

"Damn it, Kate, don't do that!"

"The only thing that 'll bring Johnny on the run," she responded carelessly.

And indeed, the door on the left of the room flew open a moment later, and a wide-eyed Chinaman appeared with a long pig-tail jerking about his head as he halted and looked about in alarm.

"Coffee for the boss and the new hand," said Kate without turning her head, as soon as she heard the door open. "Pronto, Johnny."

Johnny snarled an indistinct something and withdrew, muttering.

"You'll have Johnny quitting the job," complained Pollard, frowning. "You can't scare the poor devil out of his skin like that every time you want coffee. Besides, why didn't you up and get it for us yourself?"

Still she did not turn; but, covering a yawn, replied: "Rather sit here and play."

Her father swelled a moment in rage, but he subsided again without audible protest. Only he sent a scowl at Terry as though daring him to take notice of this insolence. As for the other men they had scattered to various parts of the room and remained there, idly, while the boss and the new hand drank the scalding coffee of Johnny. All this time Pollard remained deep in thought. His meditations exploded as he banged the empty cup back on the table.

"Kate, this stuff has got to stop. Understand?"

The soft jingling of the piano continued without pause.

"Stop that damned noise!"

The music pausel. Terry felt the long striking muscles leap into hard ridges along his arms, but glancing at the other four, he found that they were taking the violence of Pollard quite as a matter of course. One was whittling, another rolled a cigaret, and all of them, if they took any visible notice of the argument, did so with the calmest of side glances.

"Turn around!" roared Pollard.

His daughter turned slowly and faced him. Not white-faced with fear, but to the unutterable astonishment of Terry she was quietly looking her father up and down. Pollard sprang to his feet and struck the table so that it quivered through all its massive length under the blow.

"Are you tryin' to shame me before a stranger?" thundered the big man. "Is that the scheme?"

She flicked Terry Hollis with a glance.

"I think he'll understand and make allowances."

It brought the heavy fist smashing on the table again. And an ugly feeling rose in Hollis that the big fellow might put hands on his daughter.

"And what d'you mean by that? What in *hell* d'you mean by that?"

In place of wincing she in turn came to her feet, gracefully. There had been such an easy dignity about her sitting at the piano that she had seemed tall to Terry. Now that she stood up he was surprised to see that she was not a shade more than average height, beautifully and strongly made.

"You've gone about far enough with your little joke," said the girl, and her voice was low, but with an edge of vibrancy that went through and through Hollis. And you're going to stop—pronto!"

There was a flash of teeth as she spoke, and a quiver through her body as she grew tense. Terry had never seen such passion, such unreasoning, wild passion, as that which had leaped on the girl. It seemed to change her with another personality. For the moment she was capable of anything. And though her face was not contorted, danger spoke from every line of it. He made himself tense, prepared for a similar outbreak from the father, but the latter relaxed as suddenly as his daughter had become furious.

"There you go," he complained with a sort of heavy whine. "Always flying off the handle. Always turning into a wildcat when I try to reason with you!"

"Reason!" cried the girl. "Reason!"

Joe Pollard grew downcast under her scorn. And Terry, sensing that the crisis of the argument had passed, watched the

other four men in the room. They had not paid the slightest attention to the debate during its later phases. And two of them —Slim and huge Phil Marvin—had begun to roll dice on a folded blanket, the little ivories winking in the light rapidly until they came to a rest at the farther end of the cloth. Possibly this family strife was a common thing in the Pollard household. At any rate, the father now passed off from accusation to abrupt apology.

"You always get me riled at the end of the day, Kate. Damn it! Can't you never bear with a gent?"

There was such a softening in her that Terry could think of only one thing—a pet dog crossed in his will and grown ferocious and suddenly appeased with a bone. The tigerish alertness passed from Kate Pollard. She was filled all at once with a winning gentleness, and crossing to her father took his heavy hands in hers.

"Dear dad," she murmured. "Dear dad!"

She drew him down into his chair and took the seat beside him. Plainly she did not even remember Terry, across the table.

"I reckon I'm a bad one," she accused herself. "I try to get over tantrums—but —I can't help it! Something—just sort of grabs me by the throat when I get mad. I—I see red."

"Hush up, honey," said the big man, tenderly, and he ran his thick fingers over her hair. "You ain't so bad. And all that's bad in you comes out of me. You forget and I'll forget."

He waved across the table.

"Terry 'll be thinking we're a bunch of wild Indians the way we been actin'."

"Oh!"

Plainly she was recalled to the presence of the stranger for the first time in many minutes, and dropping her chin in her hand, she stared across the table and deliberately studied the new arrival.

He found it difficult to meet her glance. The Lord had endowed Terry Hollis with a remarkable share of good looks and it was not the first time that he had been investigated by the eyes of a woman. Not that he prided himself on it. Indeed, he found it decidedly a nuisance. Horses and men and the ways of men were alone interesting to him.

But in all his life he had never been subjected to an examination as minute, as insolently frank as this one. He felt himself taken part and parcel, examined in detail as to forehead, chin, and eyes and heft of shoulders, and then weighed altogether. In self-defense he fought back, as who will not? And he looked boldly back at her, making himself examine her in equal detail. An older man might have warned Terry that this is a dangerous thing to do. But Terry had no such advice at hand. Seeing her so close, he was aware of a marvelously delicate olive-tanned skin with delightful tints of rose just beneath the surface, so to speak. He found himself saying inwardly: "It's easy to look at her. It's very easy. By the Lord, she's beautiful!"

Others would have seen that long before. Terry did not arrive at the important conclusion until, examining her eyes just as she was examining his, he discovered that what he had taken to be green, might be, after all, a mysterious shade of blue. He had seen it before in the sunset sky, close to the horizon—an elusive color which one could not name. Being so close to her, also, he made other important discoveries. Just what they were he could not put into words. But it made him remember riding into the freshness of an early dawn and being very glad, for no reason, that he was alive in the mountains. There was the same tingle up the spine, something cold and electric.

As for the girl, it seemed that she was not quite sure in her judgment. For now she turned to her father with a faint frown of wonder. And again it seemed to Terry that Joe Pollard made an imperceptible sign, such as he had made to the four men when he introduced Terry.

But now he broke into breezy talk.

"Met Terry down in Pedro's—"

The girl seemed to have dismissed Terry from her mind already, for she broke in: "Crooked game he's running, isn't it?"

"I thought so till to-day. Then I seen Terry, here, trim Pedro for a flat twenty thousand!"

"Oh," nodded the girl. Again her gaze

reverted leisurely to the stranger and with a not unflattering interest. It seemed that in her estimation one acid test had been applied to him, and that he had not been found wanting.

"And then I seen him lose most of it back again. Roulette."

She nodded, keeping her eyes on Terry, and the boy found himself desiring mightily to discover just what was going on behind the changing green of her eyes. He was shocked when he discovered. It came like the break of high dawn in the mountains of the Big Bend. Suddenly she had smiled, openly, frankly. "Hard luck, partner!"

A little shivering sense of pleasure ran through him. He knew that he had been admitted by her—accepted.

Her father had thrown up his head.

"Some one come in the back way. Oregon, go find out!"

Dark-eyed Oregon Charlie slipped up and through the door. Every one in the room waited, a little tense, with lifted heads. Slim was studying the last throw that Phil Marvin had made. Terry could not but wonder what significance that "back way" had. Presently Oregon reappeared.

"Pete's come."

"The hell!"

"Went up-stairs."

"Wants to be alone," interrupted the girl. "He'll come down and talk when he feels like it. That's Pete's way."

"Watching us, maybe," growled Joe Pollard with a shade of uneasiness still. "Damned funny gent, Pete is. Watches a man like a cat; watches a gopher hole all day, maybe. And maybe the gent he watches is a friend he's known ten years. Well—let Pete go. They ain't no explaining him."

Through the last part of his talk, and through the heaviness of his voice, cut another tone, lighter, sharper, venomous: "Phil, you gummed them dice that last time!"

Joe Pollard froze in place; the eyes of the girl widened. Terry, looking across the room, saw Phil Marvin scoop up the dice and start to his feet.

"You lie, Slim!"

Instinctively Terry slipped his hand onto his gun. It was what Phil Marvin had done as a matter of fact. He stood swelling and glowering, staring down at Slim Dugan. Slim had not risen. His thin, lithe body was coiled, and he reminded Terry in ugly fashion of a snake ready to strike. His hand was not near his gun. It was the calm courage and self-confidence of a man who is sure of himself and of his enemy. Terry had heard of it before, but never seen it. As for Phil, it was plain that he was ill at ease in spite of his bulk and the advantage of his position. He was ready to fight. But he was not at all pleased with the prospect.

Terry again glanced at the witnesses. Every one of them was alert, but there was none of that fear which comes in the faces of ordinary men when strife between men is at hand. And suddenly Terry knew that every one of the five men in the room was an old familiar of danger, every one of them a past master of gun-fighting!

CHAPTER XXIV.

THE STREAK BREAKS.

THE uneasy wait continued for a moment or more. The whisper of Joe Pollard to his daughter barely reached the ear of Terry.

"Cut in between 'em, girl. You can handle 'em. I can't!"

She responded instantly, before Terry recovered from his shock of surprise

"Slim, keep away from your gun!"

She spoke as she whirled from her chair to her feet. It was strange to see her direct all her attention to Slim, when Phil Marvin seemed the one about to draw.

"I ain't even nearin' my gun," asserted Slim truthfully. "It's Phil that's got a strangle-hold on his."

"You're waiting for him to draw," said the girl calmly enough. "I know you, Slim. Phil, don't be a fool. Drop your hand away from that gat!"

He hesitated; she stepped directly between him and his enemy of the moment and jerked the gun from its holster. Then she faced Slim. Obviously Phil was not displeased to have the matter taken out of

his hands; obviously Slim was not so pleased. He looked coldly up to the girl.

"This is between him and me," he protested. "I don't need none of your help, Kate."

"Don't you? You're going to get it, though. Gimme that gun, Slim Dugan!"

His hand flicked to the butt of his revolver—and clung there, reluctant.

"I want a square deal," he complained. "I figure Phil has been crooking the dice on me."

"Bah! Besides, I'll give you a square deal."

She held out her hand for the weapon.

"Get any doubts about me being square, Slim?"

"Kate, leave this to me!"

"Why, Slim, I wouldn't let you run loose now for a million. You got that ugly look in your eyes. I know you, partner!"

And to the unutterable astonishment of Terry, the man pulled his gun from its holster and passed it up to her, his eyes fighting hers, his hand moving slowly. She stepped back, weighing the heavy weapons in her hands. Then she faced Phil Marvin with glittering eyes.

"It ain't the first time you been accused of queer stunts with the dice. What's the straight of it, Phil? Been doing anything to these dice?"

"Me? Sure, I ain't!"

Her glance lingered on him the least part of a second.

"H-m!" said the girl. "Maybe not."

Slim was on his feet, eager.

"Take a look at 'em, Kate. Take a look at them dice!"

She held them up to the light—then dropped them into a pocket of her skirt.

"I'll look at 'em in the morning, Slim."

"The stuff 'll be dry by that time!"

"Dry or not, that's what I'm going to do. I won't trust lamp-light."

Slim turned on his heel and flung himself sulkily down on the blanket, fighting her with sullen eyes. She turned on Phil.

"How much d'you win?"

"Nothin'. Just a couple of hundred."

"Just a couple of hundred! You call that nothing?"

Phil grunted. The other men leaned forward in their interest to watch the progress of the trial, all saving Joe Pollard, who sat with his elbows braced in sprawling fashion on the table, at ease, his eyes twinkling contentedly at the girl. Why she refused to examine the dice at once was plain to Terry. If they proved to have been gummed it would mean a gun-fight with the men at a battling temperature. In the morning when they had cooled down it might be a different matter. Terry watched her in wonder. His idea of an efficient woman was based on Aunt Elizabeth, cold of eye and brain, practical in methods on the ranch, keen with figures. The efficiency of this slip of a girl was a different matter, a thing of passion, of quick insight, of lightning guesses. He could see the play of eager emotion in her face as she studied Phil Marvin. And how could she do justice? Terry was baffled.

"How long you two been playing?"

"About twenty minutes."

"Not more'n five!" cut in Slim hotly.

"Shut up, Slim!" she commanded. "I'm running this here game; Phil, how many straight passes did you make?"

"Me? Oh, I dunno. Maybe—five."

"Five straight passes!" said the girl. "Five straight passes!"

"You heard me say it," growled big Phil Marvin.

All at once she laughed.

"Phil, give that two hundred back to Slim!"

It came like a bolt from the blue, this decision. Marvin hesitated, shook his head.

"Damned if I do. I don't back down. I won it square!"

"Listen to me," said the girl. Instead of threatening, as Terry expected, she had suddenly become conciliatory. She stepped close to him and dropped a slim hand on his burly shoulder. "Ain't Slim a pal of yours? You and him, ain't you stuck together through thick and thin? He thinks you didn't win that coin square. Are you going to let two hundred stand between you two? You know what I think about it. But that ain't the point. Is Slim's friendship worth two hundred to you, or ain't it? Besides, you ain't lying down to nobody. Why, you big square-head, Phil,

don't we all know that you'd fight a bull with your bare hands? Who'd call you yaller? We'd simply say you was square, Phil, and you know it."

There was a pause. Phil was biting his lip, scowling at Slim. Slim was sneering in return. It seemed that she had failed. Even if she forced Phil to return the money he and Slim would hate each other as long as they lived. And Terry gained a keen impression that if the hatred continued one of them would die very soon indeed. Her solution of the problem was a strange one. She faced them both.

"You two big sulky babies!" she exclaimed. "Slim, what did Phil do for you down in Tecomo? Phil, did Slim stand by you last April—you know the time? Why, boys, you're just being plain foolish. Get up, both of you, and take a walk outside where you'll get cooled down."

Slim rose. He and Phil walked slowly toward the door, at a little distance from each other, one eying the other shrewdly. At the door they hesitated. Finally Phil lurched forward and went out first. Slim glided after.

"By Heaven!" groaned Pollard as the door closed. "There goes two good men! Kate, what put this last fool idea into your head?"

She did not answer for a moment, but dropped into a chair as though suddenly exhausted.

"It 'll work out," she said at length. "You wait for it!"

"Well," grumbled her father, "the mischief is working. Run along to bed, will you?"

She rose, wearily, and started across the room. But she turned before she passed out of their sight and leaned against one of the pillars.

"Dad, why you so anxious to get me out of the way?"

"What d'you mean by that? I got no reason. Run along and don't bother me!"

He turned his shoulder on her. As for the girl, she remained a moment, looking thoughtfully at the broad back of Pollard. Then her glance shifted and dwelt a moment on Terry—with pity he wondered?

"Good night, boys!"

They answered her cheerily, and she was gone, her head drooping a little to one side, as though the effort of quelling the incipient fight had drained the last of her power of nerve and body.

When the door closed on her Joe Pollard turned his attention more fully on his new employee, and when Terry suggested that it was time for him to turn in, his suggestion was hospitably put to one side. Pollard began talking genially of the mountains, of the "varmints" he expected Terry to clean out, and while he talked he took out a broad silver dollar and began flicking it in the air and catching it in the calloused palm of his hand.

"Call it," he interrupted himself to say to Terry.

"Heads," said Terry carelessly.

The coin spun up, flickered at the height of its rise, and rang loudly on the table.

"You win," said Pollard. "Well, you're a lucky gent, Terry, but I'll go you ten you can't call it again."

But again Terry called heads, and again the coin chimed, steadied, and showed the Grecian goddess. The rancher doubled his bet. He lost, doubled, lost again, doubled again, lost. A pile of money had appeared by magic before Terry.

"I came to work for money," laughed Terry, "not *take* it away."

"I always lose at this game," sighed Joe Pollard.

The door opened, and Phil Marvin and Slim Dugan came back, talking and laughing together.

"What d'you know about that?" Pollard exclaimed softly. "She guessed right. She always does! Oughta be a man, with a brain like she's got. Here we are again!"

He spun the coin; it winked, fell, a streak of light, and again Terry had won. He began to grow excited. On the next throw he lost. A moment later his little pile of winnings had disappeared. And now he had forgotten the face of Joe Pollard, forgotten the room, forgotten everything except the thick thumb that snapped the coin into the air. The cold, quiet passion of the gambler grew in him. He was losing steadily. Out of his wallet came in a steady stream the last of his winnings at Pedro's.

And still he played. Suddenly the wallet squeezed flat between his fingers.

"Pollard," he said regretfully, "I'm broke."

The other waved away the idea.

"Break up a fine game like this because you're broke?" The cloudy agate eyes dwelt kindly on the face of Terry, and mysteriously as well. "That ain't nothing. Nothing between friends. You don't know the style of a man I am, Terry. You're word is as good as your money with me!"

"I've no security—"

"Don't talk security. Think I'm a money-lender? This is a game. Come on!"

Five minutes later Terry was three hundred behind. A mysterious Providence seemed to send all the luck the way of the heavy, tanned thumb of Pollard.

"That's my limit," he announced abruptly, rising.

"No, no!" Pollard spread out his big hand on the table. "You got the red hoss, son. You can bet to a thousand. He's worth that—to me!"

"I won't bet a cent on him," said Terry firmly.

"Every damn cent I've won from you ag'in' the hoss, son. That's a lot of cash if you win. If you lose, you're just out that much hoss-flesh, and I'll give you a good enough cayuse to take El Sangre's place."

"A dozen wouldn't take his place," insisted Terry.

"That so?"

Pollard leaned back in his chair and put a hand behind his neck to support his head. It seemed to Terry that the big man made some odd motion with his hidden fingers. At any rate, the four men who lounged on the farther side of the room now rose and slowly drifted in different directions. Oregon Charlie wandered toward the door. Slim sauntered to the window behind the piano and stood idly looking out into the night. Phil Marvin began to examine a saddle hanging from a peg on one of the posts, and finally chunky Marty Cardiff strolled to the kitchen door and appeared to study the hinges.

All these things were done casually, but Terry, his attention finally off the game, caught a meaning in them. Every exit was blocked for him. He was trapped at the will of Joe Pollard!

CHAPTER XXV.

BLACK-JACK'S CODE.

LOOKING back, he could understand everything easily. The horse was the main objective of Pollard. He had won the money so as to tempt Terry to gamble with the value of the blood-bay. But by fair means or foul he intended to have El Sangre. And now, the moment his men were in place, a change came over Pollard. He straightened in the chair aggressively. A slight out-thrust of his lower jaw made his face strangely brutal, conscienceless. And his cloudy agate eyes were unreadable.

"Look here, Terry," he argued calmly, but Terry could see that the voice was raised so that it would indubitably reach the ears of the farthest of the four men. "I don't mind letting a gambling debt ride when a gent ain't got anything more to put up for covering his money. But when a gent has got more, I figure he'd ought to cover with it."

Unreasoning anger swelled in the throat of Terry Hollis; the same blind passion which had surged in him before he started up at the Cornish table and revealed himself to the sheriff. And the similarity was what sobered him. It was the hunger to battle, to kill. And it seemed to him that Black-Jack had stepped out of the old picture and now stood behind him, tempting him to strike. He struggled with the temptation, though the tips of his fingers itched toward the butt of his gun. A single jerk of his wrist would bring the weapon out, and one brief motion of a forefinger would send Joe Pollard lurching back in his chair. Then a few rapid snap-shots—the first one aimed at the lamp—might he not escape in the darkness?

Another covert signal from Pollard. Every one of the four turned toward him. The chances of Terry were diminished, nine out of ten, for each of those four, he shrewdly guessed, was a practised gunman. Cold reason came to Terry's assistance.

"I told you when I was broke," he said gently. "I told you that I was through. You told me to go on."

"I figured you was kidding me," said Pollard harshly. "I knew you still had El Sangre back. Son, I'm a kind sort of a man, I am. I got a name for it."

In spite of himself a faint and cruel smile flickered at the corners of his mouth as he spoke. He became grave again.

"But they's some things I can't stand. They's some things that I hate worse'n I hate poison. I won't say what one of 'em is. I leave it to you. And I ask you to keep in the game. A thousand bucks ag'in' a boss. Ain't that more'n fair?"

He no longer took pains to disguise his voice. It was hard and heavy and rang into the ear of Terry. And the latter, feeling that his hour had come, looked deliberately around the room and took note of every guarded exit, the four men now openly on watch for any action on his part. Pollard himself sat erect, on the edge of his chair, and his right hand had disappeared beneath the table.

"Suppose I throw the coin this time?" he suggested.

"By God!" thundered Pollard, springing to his feet and throwing off the mask completely. "You damned skunk, are you accusin' me of crooking the throw of the coin?"

Terry waited for the least moment—waited in a dull wonder to find himself unafraid. But there was no fear in him. There was only a cold, methodical calculation of chances. He told himself, deliberately, that no matter how fast Pollard might be he would prove the faster. He would kill Pollard. And he would undoubtedly kill one of the others. And they, beyond a shadow of a doubt, would kill him. He saw all this as in a picture.

"Pollard," he said, more gently than before, "you'll have to eat that talk!"

A flash of bewilderment crossed the face of Pollard — then rage — then that slight contraction of the features which in some men precedes a violent effort.

But the effort did not come. While Terry literally wavered on tiptoe, his nerves straining for the pull of his gun and the leap to one side as he sent his bullet home, a deep, unmusical voice cut in on them:

"Just hold yourself up a minute, will you, Joe?"

Terry looked up. On the balcony in front of the sleeping-rooms of the second story, his legs spread apart, his hands shoved deep into his trouser-pockets, his shapeless black hat crushed on the back of his head, and a broad smile on his ugly face, stood his Nemesis—Denver the yegg!

Pollard sprang back from the table and spoke with his face still turned to Terry.

"Pete!" he called. "Come in!"

But Denver, alias Shorty, alias Pete, merely laughed.

"Come in, nothing, you fool! Joe, you're about half a second from hell, and so's a couple more of you. D'you know who the kid is? Eh? I'll tell you, boys. It's the kid that dropped old Minter. It's the kid that beat foxy Joe Minter to the draw. It's young Hollis. Why, you damned blind men, look at his face! It's the son of Black-Jack. It's Black-Jack himself come back to us!"

He turned and ran down from the balcony, still laughing.

Joe Pollard had let his hand fall away from his gun. He gaped at Terry as though he were seeing a ghost. He came a long pace nearer and let his big, shaking arms fall on the table, where they supported his weight.

"Black-Jack," he kept whispering. "Black-Jack! God above, are you Black-Jack's son?"

And the bewildered Terry answered:

"I'm his son. Whatever you think, and be damned to you all! I'm his son and I'm proud of it. Now get your gun!"

But Joe Pollard became a great catapult that shot across the table and landed beside Terry. Two vast hands swallowed the hands of the younger man and crushed them to numbness.

"Proud of it? God a'mighty, boy, why wouldn't you be? Black-Jack's son! Pete, thank God you come in time!"

"In time to save your head for you, Joe."

"I believe it," said the big man humbly. "I b'lieve he would of cleaned up on me.

Maybe on all of us. Black-Jack would of come close to doing it. But you come in time, Pete. And I'll never forget it."

While he spoke he was still wringing the hands of Terry. Now he dragged the stunned Terry around the table and forced him down in his own huge, padded arm-chair, his sign of power. But it was only to drag him up from the chair again.

"Lemme look at you! Black-Jack's boy! As like Black-Jack as ever I seen, too. But a shade taller. Eh, Pete? A shade taller. And a shade heavier in the shoulders. But you got the look. I might of knowed you by the look in your eyes. Hey, Slim, damn your good-for-nothing hide, drag Johnny here pronto by the back of the neck!"

The four had gathered, grinning, excited, and stood in a close semicircle to watch. Slim bolted at the command.

"Oregon, go call Kate, and don't tell her nothing. Just say I want her to meet somebody."

Oregon disappeared to the left.

"I been trailing him," chuckled Pete proudly. "Played a hunch, and landed it!"

"The best job you ever done. And you been watching all the time? You damn houn', Pete. Why didn't you gimme the word?"

"Saved it for the best time. But it's all up to me, Joe. Didn't I send you after him in Pedro's?"

"You told me he was a sucker, and you knowed he was Terry Hollis?"

Johnny, the Chinaman, appeared, blinking at the lights. Joe Pollard clapped him on the shoulder with staggering force.

"Johnny, you see!" a broad gesture to Terry. "Old friend. Just find out. Velly old friend. Like pretty much a whole damned lot. Get down in the cellar, you yaller old sinner, and get out the oldest Bourbon I got there. You savvy? Pretty damned pronto — hurry up — quick — old keg. Git out!"

Johnny was literally hurled out of the room toward the kitchen, trailing a crackle of strange-sounding but unmistakable profanity behind him. And Joe Pollard, perching his bulk on the edge ofthe table, introduced Terry to the boys again, for Oregon had come back with word that Kate would be out soon.

"Here's Denver Pete. You know him already, and he's worth his weight in any man's company. Here's Slim Dugan, that could scent a big coin shipment a thousand miles away. Phil Marvin ain't any slouch at stalling a gent with a fat wallet and leading him up to be plucked. Marty Cardiff ain't half so tame as he looks, and he's the best trailer that ever squinted at a buzzard in the sky; he knows this whole country like a book. And Oregon Charlie is the best all around man you ever seen, from railroads to stages. And me—I'm sort of a handy man. Well, Black-Jack, your old man himself never got a finer crew together than this, eh?"

Denver Pete had waited until his big friend finished. Then he remarked quietly: "All very pretty, partner, but Terry figures he walks the straight and narrow path. Savvy?"

"Just a kid's fool hunch!" snorted Joe Pollard. "Didn't your dad show me the ropes? Wasn't it him that taught me all I ever knew? Sure it was, and I'm going to do the same for you, Terry. Damn my eyes if I ain't! And here I been sitting, trimming you! Son, take back the coin. I was sure playing a cheap game—and I apologize, man to man."

But Terry shook his head.

"You won it," he said quietly. "And you'll keep it."

"Won nothing. I can call every coin I throw. I was stealing, not gambling. I was gold-digging! Take back the stuff!"

"If I was fool enough to lose it that way, it 'll stay lost," answered Terry.

"But I won't keep it, son."

"Then give it away. But not to me."

"Black-Jack—" began Pollard.

But here he received a signal from Denver Pete and abruptly changed the subject.

"Let it go, then. They's plenty of loose coin rolling about this day. If you got a thin purse to-day, I'll make it fat for you in a week. But think of me stumbling onto you!"

"You didn't," put in Denver. "I steered you."

"I know. And I'm grateful, Pete. Damned grateful! Now we got young Black-Jack with us, we'll skin the world. He can foller me till he knows the game—and then I'll foller him if he's got half the brains of his dad."

It was the first time that Terry had a fair opportunity to speak, and he made the best of it.

"It's very pleasant to meet you—on this basis," he said. "But as for taking up—er—road life—"

The lifted hand of Joe Pollard made it impossible for him to complete his sentence.

"I know. You got scruples, son. Sure you got 'em. I used to have 'em, too, till your old man got 'em out of my head."

Terry winced. But Joe Pollard rambled on, ignorant that he had struck a blow in the dark: "When I met up with the original Black-Jack I was slavin' my life away with a pick trying to turn ordinary quartz into pay-dirt. Making a fool of myself, that's what I was doing. Along comes Black-Jack. He needed a man. He picks me up and takes me along with him. I tried to talk Bible talk. He showed me where I was a fool.

"'All you got to do,' he says to me, 'is to make sure that you ain't stealing from an honest man. And they's about one gent in three with money that's come by it honest, in this part of the world. The rest is just plain thieves, but they been clever enough to cover it up. Pick on that crew, Pollard, and squeeze 'em till they run money into your hand. I'll show you how to do it!'

"Well, it come pretty hard to me at first. I didn't see how it was done. But he showed me. He'd send a scout around to a mining camp. If they was a crooked wheel in the gambling-house that was making a lot of coin, Black-Jack would slide in some night, stick up the works, and clean out with the loot. If they was some dirty dog that had jumped a claim and was making a pile of coin out of it, Black-Jack would drop out of the sky onto him and take the gold."

Terry listened, fascinated. He was having the workings of his father's mind recreated for him and spread plainly before his eyes. And there was a certain terror and also a certain attractiveness about what he discovered.

There was a truth about the principles of his father. Certainly a great deal of wealth was come by dishonestly, and though that did not justify a new crime, it certainly palliated the second offense.

"It sounds, maybe, like an easy thing to do, to just stick on the trail of them that you know are worse crooks than you. But it ain't. I've tried it. I've seen Black-Jack pass up ten thousand like it was nothing, because the gent that had it come by it honest. But I can't do it, speaking in general. But I'll tell you more about the old man."

"Thank you," said Terry, "but—"

"And when you're with us—"

"You see," said Terry firmly, "I plan to do the work you asked me to do—kill what you want killed on the range. And when I've worked off the money I owe you—"

"Hell, boy, you don't owe me nothing!"

"Nevertheless, from my point of view—"

Before he could complete his sentence, a door opened on the far side of the room, and Kate Pollard entered again. She had risen from her bed in some haste to answer the summons of her father. Her bright hair poured across her shoulders, a heavy, greenish-blue dressing-gown was drawn about her and held close with one hand at her breast. She came slowly toward them. And she seemed to Terry to have changed. There was less of the masculine about her than there had been earlier in the evening. Her walk was slow, her eyes were wide as though she had no idea what might await her, and the light glinted white on the untanned portion of her throat, and on her arm where the loose sleeve of the dressing-gown fell back from it.

"Kate," said her father, "I had to get you up to tell you the big news—biggest news you ever heard of! Girl, who've I always told you was the greatest gent that ever come into my life?"

"Jack Hollis — Black-Jack," she said without hesitation. "According to *your* way of thinking, dad!"

Plainly her own conclusions might be very different.

"According to anybody's way of thinking, as long as they was thinking right. Who was the squarest pal that ever a gent had? Who was it that never turned down a gent that was in need? Who was it that never made a bum play or took an advantage? Who was it that never forgot a good turn—or a bad one, for that matter? Black-Jack Hollis. And d'you know who we've got here with us, now? Could you guess it in a thousand years? Why, the kid that come to-night. Black-Jack as sure as if he was a picture out of a book, and me a blind fool that didn't know him. Kate, here's the second Black-Jack, Terry Hollis. Give him your hand agin and say you're glad to have him for his dad's sake and for his own! Kate, he's done a man's job already. It's him that dropped old foxy Minter!"

The last of these words faded out of the hearing of Terry. He felt the lowered eyes of the girl rise and fall gravely on his face, and her glance rested there a long moment with a new and solemn questioning. Then her hand went slowly out to him, a cold hand that barely touched his with its finger-tips and then dropped away.

But what Terry felt was that it was the same glance she had turned to him when she stood leaning against the post earlier that evening. There was a pity in it, and a sort of despair which he could not understand.

And without saying a word she turned her back on them and went out of the room as slowly as she had come into it.

Her father remained behind her, dumfounded.

"Kate!" he roared. "Come back and tell me what you mean by insultin'—"

Terry stopped him.

"Don't!" he commanded. "Let her go!"

Joe Pollard groaned and his whole huge body shook with wrath.

"Now who in hell," he complained, "ever seen a fool girl to match her? Who in hell?"

He turned his appeal to Denver Pete, but Denver paid no heed to him. His keen eyes were glancing alternately to the door through which Kate had disappeared and then back at the stricken face of Terry Hollis.

CHAPTER XXVI.

THE GOLD MINE.

"IT don't mean nothing," Pollard hastened to assure Terry. "It don't mean a thing in the world except that she's a fool girl. The queerest, orneriest, kindest, strangest, wildest thing in the shape of calico that ever come into these parts since her mother died before her. But the more you see of her the more you'll value her. She can ride like a man—no wear out to her—and she's got the courage of a man. Besides which she can sling a gun like it would do your heart good to see her! Don't take nothing she does to heart. She don't mean no harm. But she sure does tangle up a gent's ideas. Here I been living with her nigh onto twenty years and I don't savvy her none yet. Eh, boys?"

The smile which was interchanged among the four was a thing of secret wisdom.

"I'm not offended in the least," said Terry quietly.

And he was not, but he was more interested than he had ever been before by man, woman, or child. And for the past few seconds his mind had been following her through the door behind which she had disappeared.

"And if I were to see more of her, no doubt—" He broke off with: "But I'm not apt to see much more of any of you, Mr. Pollard. If I can't stay here and work off that three-hundred-dollar debt—"

"Work hell! No son of Black-Jack Hollis can work for me. But he can live with me as a partner, son, and he can have everything I got, half and half, and the bigger half to him if he asks for it. That's straight!"

Terry raised a protesting hand. Yet he was touched, intimately touched. In spite of himself he could not control a nervous trembling of his upper lip. He had tried hard to fit into his place among the honest people of the mountains by hard and pa-

tient work. They would have none of him. His own kind turned him out. And among these men—men who had no law, as he had every reason to believe—he was instantly taken in and made one of them. Body and soul they seemed to be with him. Even Denver stood by with a wise and sympathetic smile, as though he took proper credit to himself, as being the source and originator of all this happiness. As for the four followers of Pollard—the men of the gang, as Terry began to feel they should properly be called—they seemed to accept the extravagant speeches of Pollard as the most natural thing in the world. As though there were no other thing which he could possibly do under the circumstances than turn himself over, heart and hand and home, to the son of his former benefactor.

"But no more talk to-night," said Pollard. "I can see that you're played out. I'll show you the room."

He caught a lantern from the wall as he spoke and began to lead the way up the stairs to the balcony. He pointed out the advantages of the house as he spoke.

"Not half bad—this house, eh?" he said proudly. "And who d'you think planned it? Your old man, kid. It was Black-Jack Hollis himself that done it! He was took off sudden before he'd had a chance to work it out and build it. But I used his ideas in this the same's I've done in other things. His idea was a house like a ship.

"They build a ship in compartments, eh? Ship hits a rock, water comes in. But it only fills one compartment, and the old ship still floats. Same with this house. You seen them outside walls? Never was a rifle made would drill them walls. And the walls on the outside ain't the only thing. Every partition is the same thing, pretty near; and a gent could stand behind these doors safe as if he was a mile away from a gun. Why? Because they's a nice little lining of the best steel you ever seen in the middle of 'em.

"Cost a lot. Sure. But look at us now? Suppose a posse was to round up the house—though I got it built out here on the hill so's we can watch all the country under us. But suppose they was to rush the house. They bust into the kitchen side. Where are they? Just the same as if they hadn't got in at all. I bolt the doors from the inside of the big room, and they're shut out agin. Or suppose they take the big room? Then a couple of us slide out on this balcony and spray 'em with lead. This house ain't going to be took till the last room is filled full of the sheriff's men!"

He paused on the balcony and looked proudly over the big, baronial room below them. It seemed huger than ever from this view-point, and the men below them were dwarfed. The light of the lanterns did not extend all the way across it, but fell in pools here and there, gleaming faintly on the men below.

"But doesn't it make people suspicious to have a fort like this built on the hill?" asked Terry.

"Of course. If they knew. But they don't know, son, and they ain't going to find out the lining of this house till they try it out with lead."

He brought Terry into one of the bedrooms and lighted a lamp. As the flare steadied in the big circular oil-burner and the light spread, Terry made out a surprisingly comfortable apartment. There was not a bunk, but a civilized bed, beside which was a huge, tawny mountain-lion skin softening the floor. The window was curtained in some pleasant blue stuff, and there were a few spots of color on the wall—only calendars, some of them, but helping to give a livable impression for the place.

"Kate's work," grinned Pollard proudly. "She's been fixing these rooms up all out of her own head. Never got no ideas out of me. Anything you might lack, son?"

Terry told him he would be very comfortable, and the big man wrung his hand again as he bade him good night.

"The best work that Denver ever done was bringing you to me," he declared. "Which you'll find it out before I'm through. I'm going to give you a home!" And he strode away before Terry could answer.

The rather rare consciousness of having done a good deed swelled the heart of Joe

Pollard on his way down from the balcony. When he reached the floor below he found that the four men had gone to bed and left Denver alone, drawn back from the light into a shadowy corner, where he was flanked by the gleam of a bottle of whisky on the one side and a shimmering glass on the other. Although Pollard was the nominal leader, he was in secret awe of the yegg. For Denver was an "in and outer." Sometimes he joined them in the West; sometimes he "worked" an Eastern territory. He came and went as he pleased, and was more or less a law to himself. Moreover, he had certain qualities of silence and brooding that usually disturbed the leader. They troubled him now as he approached the squat, shapeless figure in the corner chair. He brought his lantern with him with malicious forethought, and was inwardly pleased to see Denver scowl and blink at the light and then raise one hand to shield his bright little eyes.

"What you think of him?" said Denver.

"A good kid and a clean-cut kid," decided Joe Pollard judicially. "Maybe he ain't another Black-Jack, but he's tolerable cool for a youngster. Stood up and looked me in the eye like a man when I had him cornered a while back. Good thing for him you come out when you did!"

"A good thing for you, Joe," replied Denver Pete. "He'd of turned you into fertilizer, ho!"

"Maybe; maybe not. Maybe they's some things I could teach him about gun-slinging, Pete."

"Maybe; maybe not," parodied Denver. "You've learned a good deal about guns, Joe—quite a bit. But there's some things about gun-fighting that nobody can learn. It's got to be born into 'em. Remember how Black-Jack used to slide out his gat?"

"Yep. There was a man!"

"And Minter, too. There's a born gunman."

"Sure. We all know Uncle Joe—damn his soul!"

"But the kid beat Uncle Joe fair and square from an even break—and beat him bad. Made his draw, held it so's Joe could part way catch up with him, and then drilled him clean!"

Pollard scratched his chin.

"I'd believe that if I seen it," he declared.

"Pal, it wasn't Terry that done the talking; it was Gainor. He's seen a good deal of gun-play, and said that Terry's was the coolest he ever watched."

"All right for that part of it," said Joe Pollard. "Suppose he's fast—but can I use him? I like him well enough; I'll give him a good deal; but is he going to mean charity all the time he hangs out with me?"

"Maybe; maybe not," chuckled Denver again. "Use him the way he *can* be used, and he'll be the best bargain you ever turned. Black-Jack started you in business; Black-Jack the Second will make you rich if you handle him right—and ruin you if you make a slip."

"How come? He talks this 'honesty' talk pretty strong."

"Gimme a chance to talk," said Denver contemptuously. "Takes a gent that's used to reading the secrets of a safe to read the secrets of a gent's head. And I've read the secret of young Black-Jack Hollis. He's a pile of dry powder, Joe. Throw in the spark and he'll explode so damned loud they'll hear him go off all over the country."

"How?"

"First, you got to keep him here."

"How?"

Joe Pollard sat back with the air of one who will be convinced through no mental effort of his own. But Denver was equal to the demand.

"*I'm* going to show you. He thinks he owes you three hundred."

"That's foolish. I cheated the kid out of it. I'll give it back to him and all the rest I won."

Denver paused and studied the other as one amazed by such stupidity.

"Pal, did you ever try, in the old days, to *give* anything to the old Black-Jack?"

"H-m. Well, he sure hated charity. But this ain't charity."

"It ain't, in your eyes. It is, in Terry's. If you insist, he'll get sore. No, Joe. Let him think he owes you that money. Let him start in working it off for you—honest work. You ain't got any ranch

work. Well, set him to cutting down trees, or anything. That 'll help to hold him. If he makes some gambling play—and he's got the born gambler in him—you got one last thing that 'll be apt to keep him here."

"What's that?"

"Kate."

Pollard stirred in his chair.

"How d'you mean that?" he asked gruffly.

"I mean what I said," retorted Denver. "I watched young Black-Jack looking at her. He had his heart in his eyes, the kid did. He likes her, in spite of the frosty mitt she handed him. Oh, he's falling for her, pal—and he'll keep on falling. Just slip the word to Kate to kid him along. Will you? And after we got him glued to the place here, we'll figure out the way to turn Terry into a copy of his dad. We'll figure out how to shoot the spark into the powder, and then stand clear for the explosion."

Pollard considered his thick finger-tips gloomily.

"Ain't it a kind of a dirty trick?" he asked. "Suppose he loves Kate by and by—suppose she might get fond of him. He's a clean-cut kid, you know. D'you think I want her to marry another Black-Jack and get her heart broke like Black-Jack broke the heart of his woman? I ain't that kind of a father, Denver. Besides, what does it mean to me to turn him wrong?"

Denver came silently and swiftly out of the chair, his pudgy hand spread on the table and his eyes gleaming close to the face of Pollard.

"Joe," he said softly, "if that kid goes wrong, he'll be as much as his father ever was—and maybe more. He'll rake in the money like it was dirt. How do I know? Because I've talked to him. I've watched him and trailed him. He's trying hard to go straight. He's failed twice; the third time he'll bust and throw in with us. And if he does he'll clean up the coin—and we'll get our share. Why ain't you made more money yourself, Joe? You got as many men as Black-Jack ever had. It's because you ain't got the fire in you. Neither have I. We're nothing but tools ready for another man to use the way Black-Jack used us. Nurse this kid along a little while, and he'll show us how to pry open the places where the real coin is cached away. And he'll lead us in and out with no danger to us and all the real risk on his own head. That's his way—that was his dad's way before him."

Pollard nodded slowly. "Maybe you're right."

"I know I am. He's a gold-mine, this kid is. But we got to buy him with something more than gold. And I know what that something is. I'm going to show him that the good, law-abiding citizens have made up their minds that he's no good; that they're all ag'in' him; and when he finds that out he'll go wild. They ain't any doubt of it. He'll show his teeth! And when he shows his teeth he'll taste blood—they ain't no doubt of it."

"Going to make him—kill?" asked Pollard very softly.

"Why not? He'll do it sooner or later, anyway. It's in his blood."

"I suppose it is."

"I got an idea. There's a young gent in town named Larrimer, ain't there?"

"Sure. A rough kid, too. It was him that killed Kennedy last spring."

"And he dropped Dawson the year before, didn't he?"

"Yep, he's a nice blooming gun-fighter, Larrimer is."

"And he's proud of his reputation?"

"Sure. He'd go a hundred miles to have a fight with a gent with a good name for gun-play."

"Then hark to me sing, Joe! Send Terry into town to get something for you. I'll drop in ahead of him and find Larrimer, and tell Larrimer that Black-Jack's son is around—the man that dropped Sheriff Minter. Then I'll bring 'em together and give 'em a running start."

"And risk Terry getting his head blown off?"

"If he can't beat Larrimer he's no use to us; if he kills Larrimer it's good riddance. The kid is going to get bumped off some time, anyway. He's bad—all the way through."

Pollard looked with a sort of wonder on his companion.

"You're a nice, kind sort of a gent, ain't you, Denver?"

"I'm a money-maker," asserted Denver coldly. "And, just now, Terry Hollis is my gold-mine. Watch me work him!"

CHAPTER XXVII.

KATE.

IT was some time before Terry could sleep, though it was now very late. When he put out the light and slipped into the bed the darkness brought a bright flood of memories of the day before him. It seemed to him that half a lifetime had been crowded into the brief hours since he was fired on the ranch that morning. Behind everything stirred the ugly face of Denver as a sort of controlling Nemesis. It seemed to him that the chunky little man had been pulling the wires all the time while he, Terry Hollis, danced in response. Not a flattering thought, to be sure, but an inescapable one. It seemed to him that Denver had literally picked him up against his will and placed him in this house, in this very room. The power of the man amazed him. That very evening, had he remained silent for a moment longer, the bullets of Pollard's men would have cut short his life.

At that, nervously, Terry got out of bed and went to the window. The night was cool, but crisp rather than chilling. His eye went over the velvet blackness of the mountain slope above him to the ragged line of the crest—then a dizzy plunge to the brightness of the stars beyond. The very sense of distance was soothing; it washed the gloom and the troubles away from him. He breathed deep of the fragrance of the pines and then went back to his bed.

He had hardly taken his place in it when the sleep began to well up over his brain—waves of shadows running out of the corners of his mind. And then suddenly he was wide awake, alert.

Some one had opened the door. There had been no sound; merely a change in the air currents of the room, but there was also the sense of another presence so clearly that Terry almost imagined he could hear the breathing.

He was beginning to shrug the thought away and smile at his own nervousness, when he heard that unmistakable sound of a foot pressing the floor. And then he remembered that he had left his gun-belt far from the bed. In a burning moment that lesson was printed in his mind, and would never be forgotten. Slowly as possible and without sound he drew up his feet little by little, spread his arms gently on either side of him, and made himself tense for the effort. Whoever it was that entered, they might be taken by surprise. He dared not lift his head to look; and he was on the verge of leaping up and at the approaching noise, when a whisper came to him softly: "Black-Jack!"

The soft voice, the name itself, thrilled him. He sat erect in the bed and made out, dimly, the form of Kate Pollard in the blackness. She would have been quite invisible, save that the square of the window was almost exactly behind her. And also, the coppery hair seemed to gather to it a light of its own. He saw one heavy braid gleaming dimly as it dropped across her shoulder. He made out the faint whiteness of the hand which held her dressing-robe at the breast.

She did not start back, though she showed that she was startled by the suddenness of his movement by growing the faintest shade taller and lifting her head a little. Terry watched her, bewildered.

"I been waiting to see you," said Kate. "I want to—I mean—to—talk to you."

He could think of nothing except to blurt with sublime stupidity: "It's good of you. Won't you sit down?"

He found himself modulating his voice as though he had been in Aunt Elizabeth's living-room.

The girl brought him to his senses with a sharp: "Easy! Don't talk out. Do you know what 'd happen if dad found me here?"

"I—" began Terry.

But she helped him smoothly to the logical conclusion. "He'd blow your head off, Black-Jack; and he'd do it—pronto. If you are going to talk, talk soft—like me."

She sat down on the side of the bed, so gently that there was no creaking. They peered at each other through the darkness for a time.

"Why," said Terry, finding it oddly difficult to speak, "have you come?"

She was not whispering. But her voice was pitched almost as low, and he wondered at the variety of expression she was able to pack in the small range of that murmur. "I dunno," she was saying. "I suppose I'm a fool for coming. But I was born to love chances. Born for it!"

She lifted her head and laughed.

It amazed Terry to hear the shaken flow of her breath and catch the glinting outline of her face. He found himself leaning forward a little; and he began to wish for a light, though perhaps it was an unconscious wish. The pure, cold scent of the pines was blowing in, and the heart of Terry lifted. It was like the sense of being raised rapidly through a great space.

"First," she said, "what d'you know about dad—and Denver Pete?"

"Practically nothing."

She was silent for a moment, and he saw her hand go up and prop her chin while she considered what she could say next.

"They's so much to tell," she confessed, "that I can't put it short. I'll tell you this much, Black-Jack—"

"That isn't my name, if you please."

"It 'll be your name if you stay around these parts with dad very long," she replied with an odd emphasis. "But where you been raised, Terry? And what you been doing with yourself?"

He felt that this giving of the first name was a tribute, in some subtle manner. It enabled him, for instance, to call her Kate, and he decided with a thrill that he would do so at the first opportunity. He reverted to her question.

"I suppose," he admitted gloomily, "that I've been raised to do pretty much as I please—and the money I've spent has been given to me."

The girl shook her head with conviction.

"It ain't possible," she declared.

"Why not?"

"No son of Black-Jack would live off somebody's charity."

He felt the blood tingle in his cheeks, and a real anger against her rose. What right had she to probe him with questions? Yet he found himself explaining humbly.

"You see, I was taken when I wasn't old enough to decide for myself. I was only a baby. And I was raised to depend upon Elizabeth Cornish. I—I didn't even know the name of my father until a few days ago."

The girl gasped. "You didn't know your father—not your own father? She laughed again, scornfully. "Terry, I ain't green enough to believe that!"

He fell into a dignified silence, and presently the girl leaned closer, as though she were peering to make out his face. Indeed, it was now possible to dimly make out objects in the room. The window was filled with an increasing brightness, and presently a shaft of pale light began to slide across the floor, little by little. The moon had pushed up above the crest of the mountain.

"Did that make you mad?" queried the girl. "Why?"

What could he answer her?

"You seemed to doubt what I said," he remarked stiffly.

"Why not? You ain't under oath, or anything, are you?"

Then she laughed again. It was charming to Terry—that softly whispering sound. "You're a queer one all the way through. This Elizabeth Cornish—got anything to do with the Cornish ranch?"

"I presume she owns it, very largely."

The girl nodded. "You talk like a book. You must of studied a terrible pile."

"Not so much, really."

"H-m," said the girl, and seemed to reserve judgment.

Then she asked with a return of her former sharpness: "How come you gambled to-day at Pedro's?"

"I don't know. It seemed the thing to do—to kill time, you know."

"Kill time! At Pedro's? Well—you *are* green, Terry!"

"I suppose I am, Kate."

He made a little pause before her name,

and when he spoke it, in spite of himself, his voice changed, became softer. The girl straightened somewhat, and the light was now increased to such a point that he could make out that she was frowning at him through the dimness.

"You say that like you was afraid of my name."

"You see," he explained lamely, "I was not sure that I knew you well enough to—I mean—"

"Never mind."

Her attitude became suddenly more matter of fact. He saw her hand flash as she counted off her points against the other palm.

"First, you been adopted, then you been raised on a great big place with everything you want, mostly, and now you're out—playing at Pedro's. How come, Terry?"

"I was sent away," said Terry faintly, as all the pain of that farewell came flooding back over him.

"Why?"

"I shot a man."

"Ah!" said Kate. "You shot a man?" It seemed to silence her. "Why, Terry?"

"He had killed my father," he explained more softly than ever.

"And they turned you out for that? I know. It was Minter. And they turned you out for that?"

There was a trembling intake of her breath. He could catch the sparkle of her eyes, and knew that she had flown into one of her sudden, fiery passions. And it warmed his heart to hear her.

"I'd like to know what kind of people they are, anyway! I'd like to meet up with that Elizabeth Cornish, the—"

"She's the finest woman that ever breathed," said Terry simply.

The girl caught her breath again, this time with astonishment.

"You say that," she pondered slowly, "after she sent you away?"

"She did only what she thought was right. She's a little hard, but very just, Kate."

She was shaking her head; the hair had become a dull and wonderful gold in the faint moonshine. And it flashed across the whiteness of a bare shoulder.

"I dunno what kind of a man you are, Terry. I didn't ever know a man could stick by—folks—after they'd been hurt by 'em. I couldn't do it. I ain't got much Bible stuff in me, Terry. Why, when somebody does me a wrong, I hate 'em—I hate 'em! And I never forgive 'em till I get back at 'em."

She sighed. "But you're different, I guess. I begin to figure that you're pretty white, Terry Hollis."

There was something so direct about her talk that he could not answer. It seemed to him that there was in her a cross between a boy and a man—the simplicity of a child and the straightforward strength of a grown man, and all this tempered and made strangely delightful by her own unique personality.

"But I guessed it the first time I looked at you," she was murmuring. "I guessed that you was different from the rest."

"You hardly saw me," said Terry. "You hardly looked at me when your father introduced me, you know."

"Didn't I? Say, partner, a girl can see a terrible long ways out of the corner of her eyes, and don't you ever forget it. When I looked at you then I was looking plumb through you, as near as I could. And then at the table I looked at you again. Because I was interested. Your kind don't come my way very often, you see."

She had her elbow on her knee now, and, with her chin cupped in the graceful hand, she leaned toward him and studied him.

"When they're clean cut on the outside they're spoiled on the inside. They're crooks, hard ones, out for themselves, never giving a rap about the next gent in line. But mostly they ain't even clean on the outside, and you can see what they are the first time you look at 'em.

"Oh, I've liked some of the boys now and then; but I had to make myself like 'em. But you're different. I seen that when you started talking. You didn't sulk; and you didn't look proud like you wanted to show us what you could do; and you didn't boast none. I kept wondering at you while I was at the piano. And—you made an awful hit with me, Terry."

Again he was too staggered to reply.

And before he could gather his wits the girl went on:

"Now, is they any real reason why you shouldn't get out of here to-morrow morning?"

It was a blow of quite another sort.

"But why should I go?"

She grew very solemn, with a trace of sadness in her voice.

"I'll tell you why, Terry. Because if you stay around here too long they'll make you what you don't want to be—another Black-Jack. Don't you see that that's why they like you? Because you're his son, and because they want you to be another like him. Not that I have anything against him. I guess he was a fine fellow in his way." She paused and stared directly at him in a way he found hard to bear. "He must of been! But that isn't the sort of a man you want to make out of yourself. I know. You're trying to go straight. Well, Terry, nobody that ever stepped could stay straight long when they had around 'em Denver Pete and—my father." She said the last with a sob of grief. He tried to protest, but she waved him away.

"I know. And it's true. He'd do anything for me, except change himself. Believe me, Terry, you got to get out of here—pronto. You see, you got the makings of a hell-raiser in you. Maybe I shouldn't have said that word?"

"It doesn't matter."

"I guess not," she sighed. "But I mean that I seen the fire in you—just a spark of it, but enough. You got some of your father in you, Terry. Well, you got to get out of temptation. That's why I say, is they anything to hold you here?"

"A great deal. Three hundred dollars I owe your father."

She considered him again with that mute shake of the head. Then: "Do you mean it? I see you do. I don't suppose it does any good for me to tell you that he cheated you out of that money?"

"If I was fool enough to lose it that way I won't take it back."

"I knew that, too—I guessed it. Oh, Terry, I know a pile more about the inside of your head than you'd ever guess! Well, I knew that—and I come with the money so's you can pay back dad in the morning. Here it is—and they's just a mite more to help you on your way."

She laid the little handful of gold on the table beside the bed and rose.

"Don't go," said Terry, when he could speak. "Don't go, Kate! I'm not that low. I can't take your money!"

She stood by the bed and stamped lightly. "Are you going to be a fool about this, too?"

"I—I'm afraid so."

"You ain't got a bit of sense," she said.

"But I would still owe the money, you see, and I'd have to stay and work it off."

"You'd owe nothing. It's a gift."

"Do you think I can take money from a woman?"

"It ain't anything I've earned. It was given to me—and God knows where it come from. Anyway, this is about the only good use it could be put to. If you want to pay it back—why, help some young fellow to go straight, and you'll never have to think about me again and what I've done."

"But your father offered to give me back all the money I'd won. I can't do it, Kate."

He could see her grow angry, beautifully angry.

"Is they no difference between Kate Pollard and Joe Pollard?"

Something leaped into his throat. He wanted to tell her in a thousand ways just how vast that difference was.

"Man, you'd make a saint swear, and I ain't a saint by some miles. You take that money and pay dad, and get on your way. This ain't no place for you, Terry Hollis."

"I—" he began.

She broke in: "Don't say it. You'll have me mad in a minute. Don't say it."

"I have to. I can't take money from you."

"Then take a loan."

He shook his head.

"Ain't I good enough to even loan you money?" she cried fiercely.

The shaft of moonlight had poured past her feet; she stood in a pool of it.

"Good enough?" said Terry. "Good enough?" Something that had been accu-

mulating in him now swelled to bursting, flooded from his heart to his throat. He hardly knew his own voice, it was so transformed with sudden emotion.

"There's more good in you than in any man or woman I've ever known."

"Terry, are you trying to make me feel foolish?"

"I mean it—and it's true. You're kinder, more gentle—"

"Gentle? Me? Oh, Terry!"

But she sat down on the bed, and she listened to him with her face raised, as though music were falling on her, a thing barely heard at a perilous distance.

"They've told you other things, but they don't know. I know, Kate. The moment I saw you I knew, and it stopped my heart for a beat—the knowing of it. That you're beautiful—and true as steel; that you're worthy of honor—and that I honor you with all my heart. That I love your kindness, your frankness, your beautiful willingness to help people, Kate. I've lived with a woman who taught me lessons; she taught me what was true. You've taught me what's glorious and worth living for. Do you understand, Kate?"

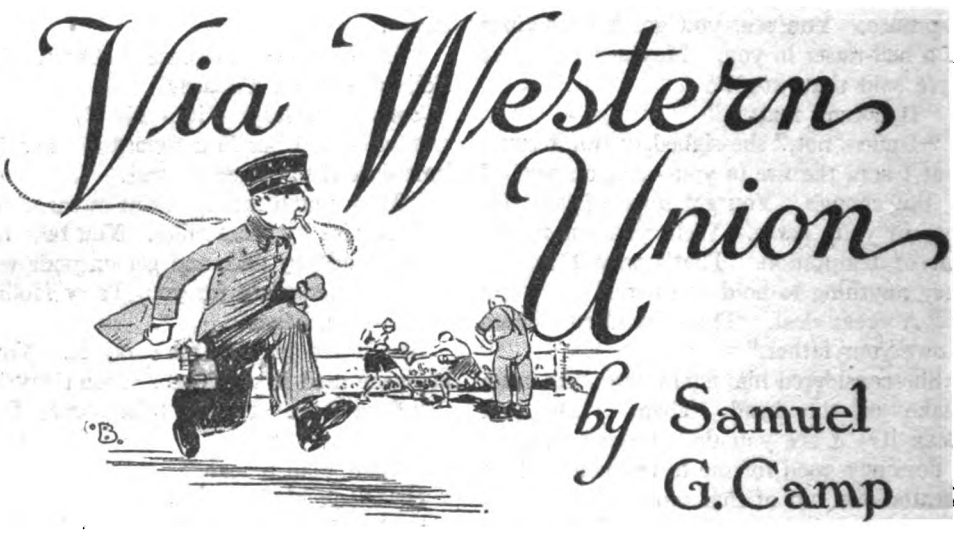
And no answer; but a change in her face that stopped him. His mind became a tumult. He strove to remember what he had said—something that might have offended her. But the words had not come out of his mind. They had been born of themselves, and he could not remember a syllable.

"I shouldn't of come," she whispered at length, "and I—I shouldn't have let you—talk the way you've done. But, oh, Terry—when you come to forget what you've said—don't forget it all the way—keep some of the things—tucked away in you—somewhere—"

She rose from the bed and slipped across the white brilliance of the shaft of moonlight. It made a red-gold fire of her hair. Then she flickered into the shadow. Then she was swallowed by the utter darkness of the doorway.

But Terry remained, looking straight down into the pool of moonshine beside the bed. Because, for some reason, it was easy then to reconstruct her from head to foot just as she had stood there. Oddly enough, he remembered her in beautiful anger, and not when she smiled.

(To be continued NEXT WEEK.)



I SEE where Miss Marguerite Lemoyne is playing at the Rialto this week in "The Poisoned Husband, or Free at Last!" or something. Say, so far as I'm concerned, that's one sample of the art of restless photography which runs for the end book. In a word, I propose to be prominently absent at each and every showing. And I'm a wicked movie fan, at that.

The blow-off was a couple of summers

ago. But the start was during the fall of the year before. At that time I was bossing what is sometimes known as a stable of box-fighters. The fellow who invented the term must have been pretty familiar with the business, for them alleged boxers of mine certainly acted like they'd been brought up in one. And if it hadn't been for themselves, they'd have undoubtedly escaped the disgrace of being called prize-fighters, for nobody else would have ever suspected it.

Two of them were featherweights. The other was a lightweight. Now, as fighters they amounted to about as much as a sulfur match in Sheol; but as food-destroyers, why, they had Babe Ruth, Little Bill Edwards and Flame-o, the Fire-eater, looking like so many dyspeptics.

So I had about made up my mind to leave the fighting business flat on its shoulder blades, and to take up banking or maybe the new and highly prosperous profession of hoochlegging, or something, when along came Archibald Jamison Spaulding, and I decided to stick in the game a while longer.

One day I'm at the gymnasium, watching the two feathers going through the motions, when in blows this strange kid. As soon as he has me pegged he walks over to where I'm standing.

"Is this Mr. Wylie Patton?" he asks.

"I refuse to answer," I comes back, "on the grounds that it might incriminate me."

"Then you must be him," says the kid.

"D'ye mean to insult me?" I says.

"Oh, no," he says. "All I mean is, I guess you must be Mr. Patton. My name is Archibald Jamison Spaulding. I wanta fight."

"Why pick on me?" I inquires. "I ain't done anything to you."

"I mean I wanta fight for a living," he says.

"That's what we all have to do," I remarks. "Go to it, kid."

"Say," he counters, "I've heard a lot about you, Mr. Patton, but I never heard that this Captain Kidd was a relative of yours. I wanta be a professional boxer."

"Personally," I says, "I'd like to be President."

I looked him over. Any way you looked at him, from the top of his egg to the tips of his walk-overs, he was an out and out dead ringer for these handsome goofs that you see in the clothing ads.

"Looks like you must have parked the twin-six and the Russian wolf-hound around the corner," I ventures. "Anyway, I can't see 'em from the window."

He didn't even swing at it. All it got me was a politely inquiring look and a ton of silence.

"So you wanta fight, eh?" I goes on. "I'd have thought that the movies were more in your line."

"I tried them," he says. "But there's no money in it unless you're a star. And you can't get to be a star unless you've got a pull or a reputation."

"And a divorce," I adds. "Of course, everybody's making a million in the fight game. Why, only a couple of hours ago I ordered me a couple of limousines on the half-shell and a sea-going yacht with apple sauce. The waiter'll be in with 'em in a minute. Where'd you get the idea that you could fight?"

"In the A. E. F.," says Archibald. "I played baseball and football while I was in high-school, and I learned quite a bit about boxing while I was in France."

"I don't remember seeing where you won any of them tournaments they had over there," I says.

"I didn't take part in them," says the young fashion-plate.

"Why not?" I asks.

"Where's the use of getting hurt when there's nothing in it?" he wants to know. "If I was getting paid for it, why, that would be different."

You're probably wondering why I didn't give Archibald the air right then. Well, if I'd been wise, I sure would have. For that was the tip-off on Archibald—and in more ways than maybe you might think. But somehow I had a hunch that he had something, and I wanted to see what it was. Well, I'm not the first guy that Old Kid Curiosity has knocked for a long dusty trip.

"If you ain't a boxer you sure sound like one," I tells him. "Suppose you go

to the locker-room and tell Pete to give you a pair of running pants and some sneakers. We'll see what you've got."

So Archibald ambles off to the locker-room, and when he comes back, dressed in the porous-knits, I guess my eyes must have bulged outa my head till they looked the size of tangerines. Or bigger. For Archibald Jamison Spaulding surely shaped up like a million bucks. Yes, on looks, I'd have said that Archibald had everything. However, there's this to be said: in the fight game the Apollo stuff stacks up about as high as the groom at a wedding. Look at Monsieur Dempsey and Mr. Carpentier, for example.

I figured Archibald about the same weight as my imitation lightweight scrapper, Jack Monroe. But right there is where the resemblance called it a day. There was no more difference between this Spaulding kid and Jack than there is between Man o' War and a truck-horse. So far as looks went, anyway.

So I put him on with Jack. And the way that bird starts throwing boxing-mitts at him, why, I guess Jack must have thought that Archibald was a gang! They came at Jack from all angles and no oftener than shots out of a machine-gun. Why, for three days afterward Monroe was cross-eyed and dizzy from trying to keep track of 'em. Archibald never gave Jack a chance to get set, so's he could unhook that old haymaker of his, and with which same sleep-producer Jack's boxing repertoire began and ended. And as for blocking Archibald's punches—well, it looked like Jack must be in the way of being a follower of Hon. William J. Bryan; for, for one blow that Jack blocked the other sixteen hit him.

Yes, Archibald clicked 'em off on Jack like one of these stenographic speed-merchants taps a wicked key on one of the latest model visible-writing machines. But I saw that Monroe was shedding the punches like a duck sheds the national drink.

They weren't hurting him any. Archibald was moving so fast that he was coming out when he was going in. That's about how it was. And the result was the same as if he'd been trying to pull his punches. The only danger that Jack stood in was the chance that maybe he might die of suffocation, for it was only now and then that he wasn't wearing one of Archibald's mitts over his pan.

So I called it off to give Jack a chance to come up for air. And when they went at it again, I tells the young glass of fashion and likewise mold of form:

"That's enough of the fancy embroidery. Now show me whether you can sock. Wade into this bird and knock him for a trip!"

"I'd like to see him do it!" snarls Monroe.

"I hope you get your wish," I says. "Go get him, kid!"

Looking back at it, I can see now that right there was where Archibald J. Spaulding put one over on me. No doubt he thought it was a case of kill Monroe or no job.

Anyway, it took Archibald just eighteen seconds, Eastern time, to knock Jack for a row of dumb-bells and a set of parallel bars which had somehow escaped the revenue agents; and though, as a boxer, Monroe was nowhere, there was plenty of grounds for claiming for him the distinction of having the hardest egg in the business. Despite which, all of a sudden Jack winds up in a corner, loose from his ideas, and with his hard-boiled dome resting carelessly up against a medicine ball.

"Beats all how natural he looks," I remarks.

"Is that what you meant?" asks Archibald with a nod toward the sleeping beauty.

"I'll leave it to him if it ain't!" I says. "Aladdin had nothing on that bird! Let's—er—talk business."

Now, as you probably know, there's two kinds of fight fans. There's the bunch that likes to see what they call a nice, clean, scientific boxing match. Every time that kind of a boxing match comes off a new alcoholic shows up at Bellevue, name of W. J. Bryan. You might call 'em the hit-and-run boys.

Then there's the gang which, if they had their way about it, the contestants would wear machetes instead of mitts, and

every time the card didn't result in at least two deaths and a hospital case, the management would be hung by its red neck till it was dead. They're the babies that this Ibanez, the great Spanish writer, who I learned about from the wife—she's a regular book-cootie—would no doubt call the "Blood and Sand" guys.

Well, before that winter was over, "Kid" Spaulding, which was the ring-name I gave him, was well known to both these varieties of boxing fanciers. And every time the Kid started, the hit-and-run bunch would give him a great hand—and the bloody-murder gang would hand him the long razz.

For that was the kind of boxer Archibald Jamison Spaulding turned out to be. He had more science than Edison. He was faster on his feet than coal burns up at twenty smacks the ton. He could outpoint the proprietor of a rubber-neck bus, showing a bunch of leading citizens of Muggs's Corners, Minnesota, the wonders of the Big Town.

But, though I knew he *could* sock, he never did. Why, many a guy, at a single tea-dance, has won the right to more wound-stripes than all the Kid's opponents put together could lay claim to. And, on the other hand, he never gave the gentleman playing opposite a chance to hit *him*. He simply smothered the opposition, like Gamaliel smothered Jimmy, and the other boy never even got a chance to get started.

Of course, there was a reason. It lay between Archibald's oil-finished pompadour and his classical chin, including the latter. In other words, and to give a new meaning to an old phrase, he fought that way to save his face. Why, if anything had happened to that collar-ad pan of his, Archibald would have considered it in the light of a national calamity.

And there was others who would have voted the same way. Their names ran from Alice to Lucille; from Lucille to Sadie, and thence onward to Zenobia. Archibald was no more popular with the georgette sex than face-powder. His mail had the average movie hero's incoming correspondence looking like one letter from a firm in Tampa, Florida, advertising mail-order cigars. And I probably don't have to say that none of them letters were signed "Jim."

During his recent visit, it appeared that M. Carpentier, France's charming exponent of *la boxe,* enjoyed a considerable amount of popularity amongst the new voters. Well, Archibald Jamison Spaulding could have spotted Georges's three orchestra rows at any matinée, a squad of flappers, and a bumper crop of sub-debs, and beat him by Vassar College.

But I'll say this for Archibald: in spite of all this cheering from the feminine bleachers, which meant no more to him than my right eye means to me, Archibald stuck to his knitting and became no cabaret-hound or parlorite. No, he didn't turn 'em down completely, but he played safe. He scattered his bets, as you might say.

He was a cagey bird, and I figured he was looking out for the main chance, so to say. Well, as things turned out, I was right.

Right away after I took hold of him, I started the Kid in a couple of semi-final affairs, and he won from here to Moose Factory. On points, of course. At that the newspaper boys started giving him a great play, referring to him as the "American pocket-edition Carpentier," the "Apollo, Jr., of the well-known roped-arena," and the like. And in consequence of this free advertising, me and the Kid were soon making more money than a booze-legger—and I gave Mr. Jack Monroe and his stablemates the air. Archibald was all the meal-ticket I needed, and, at the rate we were going, we'd soon be owning a hundred-foot frontage on Easy Street.

Archibald went great guns all that winter. Along toward the last of June, I signed him to go ten rounds with "Whizzer" Browning at one of these open-air boxing concerts. This Whizzer Browning was a boxer of the same stripe as the Kid—faster than a society dame with two divorces, and with more tricks than Houdini. Archibald would have to go some to beat him.

So I took the Kid, and a sparring partner for him, a boy by the name of Nick

Liggett, and we went up to Eddie Dillon's health-farm at Upper Falls, Massachusetts. We had something over a month to get ready. As the Kid had been taking a sort of layoff, owing to a dearth of opponents, we had no more time than we needed—and I didn't propose to lose that fight, for the winner would be on the receiving end of a young fortune.

Dillon's place was a little ways outside the village. And as for Upper Falls itself, why, when the inhabitants were out in full force, you couldn't help getting the idea that four "Way Down East" companies had stranded there all at once and the actors were walking the streets in their stage clothes. On the side, Upper Falls was a summer-resort in a small way. And there was one fairly sizable hotel, which the proprietor, who must have been of an original turn of mind, had nicknamed "The Inn."

Well, a couple of days after we got there, something come up and I had to go back to the city. I was gone three days. When I got back the first person I saw was Nick Liggett. Nick was at the station to meet me.

"Well, Nick," I asks him, "how's things going?"

"Like a flivver with one lung and four flat tires," he comes back. "We're up against it."

"How d'you mean?" I asks.

"The Kid's fell for a gal like Brodie fell off the bridge," Nick informs me. "He ain't done hardly a lick of work since you went away."

"Farewell!" I says. "Who's the jane?"

"Name's Marguerite Lemoyne," says Nick. "She and her old man are stayin' at the Inn. She's a movie actress, and, believe me, Wylie, she's some pip! I'll tell this world she is! I ain't blamin' the Kid—only he hadn't oughta neglect his work. The old guy's name is H. DuPuy Lemoyne. No class to that, hey?"

"Motion-picture actress, eh?" I says. "And the old boy—what's this H. DuPuy Lemoyne's business?"

"Claims to be some kind of a retired broker, or somethin'," says Nick.

"What d'you mean, claims?" I inquires.

"I'll say he's a crook!" says Nick. "He looks the part—and acts it. Little, fat, pompous guy, wears clothes like a race-track tout that's made a killin', and is always glad-handin' everybody and passin' out the old apple-sauce. I've seen him givin' 'em the work around the village. But when he smiles, he don't do it with his eyes—get me? Them peepers of his stay as cold and hard as a miser's heart. No matter what line of dope he's dealin' out, them eyes never change. And if that ain't the sign of a crook I don't know the breed!"

Later on I had plenty of opportunities for sizing up Mr. H. DuPuy Lemoyne for myself. And I'll say right now that Nick had this Lemoyne bird pegged to a T. And I agreed with Nick in every particular. Why, although I had nothing to go on but his looks, I'd stake my oath that that baby would beat his own grandmother outa the savings of a lifetime. Well, it's curious how these first impressions get you—and how sometimes they're right, and other times they're wrong.

And as for the girl—Nick had certainly shot a mean glance there, too. For Miss Marguerite Lemoyne would have undoubtedly caused Howard Chandler Christy to throw away his brushes in despair, and go in for something useful. Yes, I had to admit there was plenty of excuse for the decline and fall of Archibald Jamison Spaulding, as you might say. But what of that?

I lost no time in taking up the matter with Archibald.

"What's this I hear about you and this Miss Lemoyne?" I demands. "What's the idea?"

"The idea," says Archibald, "is that I'm gonna marry her."

"Does she know it?" I inquires.

"No," he says. "Not yet."

"Then how do you know she's stuck on you?" I asks.

"They all are," he comes back.

Maybe you can beat it!

"So you're gonna marry her, eh?" I says. "And then what?"

"Then I'm going into the pictures," he announces. "She's already got a starring contract with the Sun Pictures people, and I'm gonna be her leading man."

"Does she know that?" I asks.

"No," he admits. "But I think she suspects it. She's as much as admitted that I've got most of these movie birds looking like a stage tramp."

"Oh, she has, has she?" I says. "Say, where do I come in?"

"You don't come in," he says. "You go out. I've never considered this boxing as anything but a stepping-stone, and now I'm ready for bigger things."

"I'll tell you one big thing you're ready for," I says, "and that's the biggest trimming of your life if you don't go through with this match with Whizzer Browning—and do it right! I need the money."

"I'll do that," he agrees. "But after that it's all off. I expect to be engaged to Miss Lemoyne by the end of the week. You know, Wylie, she's—she's the finest girl I've ever met! I'm for her. Her father isn't so strong for me, on account of my boxing connections, but I think I can make him see things in their proper light."

"Yes," I says sarcastic. "No doubt the old guy is mighty particular who he associates with. Any guy with a set of morals like his has to be careful. One of 'em might get corrupted, or something, and that would break the set."

"What do you mean?" he asks, indignant.

"Oh, nothing," I says.

And he must have succeeded in making Papa Lemoyne see things in their proper light, for inside of three days the engagement of Miss Marguerite Lemoyne, the rising young picture actress, to Archibald Jamison Spaulding, was announced to all and sundry.

Of course the news was as agreeable to me as double typhoid pneumonia. And, though far be it from me to cause anybody's love's young dream to skid, if there had been any way of breaking the thing up, short of a jailable offense, I'd have—why, I'd have considered it.

Well, to make a short story short, one morning, something over a week after the announcement of Archibald's engagement to the beautiful Marguerite, I was sitting on the piazza of Eddie Dillon's health-farm-house, meditating on how the first hundred years are always the hardest, when Nick Liggett comes running up the walk. The Kid had done a little work and then beat it for the Inn and the Inn-amorata, so to say. Nick had been over to the village for the mail.

Nick comes up the steps three at a time and shoves a telegram at me.

"Take a look at that!" he gasps, winded.

I did. "Jumpin' Jupiter!" I comes out then. "Where'd you get this?"

"It dropped outa Lemoyne's pocket in the post-office," says Nick. "I picked it up and was gonna hand it back to him when I happened to see what it said, and—say, what d'ye make of it?"

"The same as you do," I says. "It's open and shut. Can't mean but one thing. We were right! That guy's a crook, and no doubt the girl's as bad as he is. Nick, here's where I save the Kid from marrying into our best criminal circles—and save my own bacon! I'm gonna get that bird—and get him right now!"

"How get him?" asks Nick.

"You know Judd Brewster," I says; "the old boy over at the village that runs the grocery and claims to be the middleweight champion checker-player of Massachusetts? And I wouldn't be surprised if he was, because, anyway, he's took me for twenty straight games."

"Sure," says Nick. "I know Judd.

"Well," I says, "Judd's a friend of mine, and a deputy sheriff—and here's where we make him a visit!"

We made a record getting from the health-garage to Judd Brewster's grocery emporium. There was nobody in the store but Judd and his kid clerk. Judd was fussing at the cash-register, which was missing a beat, or something. We passed the time of day, and then I says:

"How's the sheriffing these days, Judd?"

"Poor," he says. "Looks like we've been hit by a religious wave or something. All the business I've done in three weeks is one plain drunk and arrestin' Sid Blodgett for beatin' up his wife again. Say, that woman oughta be ashamed of herself! No, I ain't seen any such stagnation in criminal lines in a long while. I'm gettin' poorer by the minute."

"Suppose," I says, "you got a chance to grab a regular big-time crook, one of these swell fake-stock promoters, or maybe an international card-sharp, or something of that sort? Would you take it?"

"Would I take it!" says Judd. "I'd tackle the James boys single-handed and spot 'em Lefty Louie and Gyp the Blood! I need the money."

"Look at that," I says, and handed him the telegram.

Having adjusted his spectacles to the proper notch on his beak, Mr. Brewster absorbs the message.

"Lemoyne!" he comes out. "Say, d'ye know, I've thought all the time there was somethin' irregular about that feller? He's too darned slick to suit me! Yes, sir; I had an idee he was a crook—and this proves it!"

"That makes it unanimous," I says. "What do you make of that wire, Judd?"

"The same as anybody would," he says. "It's from a pal of this Lemoyne's, dated early this mornin', and tells Lemoyne to watch his step, because there's a couple of Boston cops on the train arrivin' here at 3.15 P.M. to-day—and the wire was sent from Boston. Of course, they're comin' here to arrest him. Ain't that the way you understand it?"

"It is," I says. "Now, listen. How long do you think Lemoyne is gonna stick around after getting that message? Maybe he's made his getaway already. If he hasn't, it's up to you to pinch him and hold him for them Boston officers. Am I right?"

"I don't need to have you or no other man tell me my business," says Mr. Brewster. "Let's go!"

Well, Lemoyne was still among those present. We found all three of 'em—Lemoyne, the Kid, and the fair Marguerite—in Lemoyne's rooms at the Inn.

"What can I do for you, gentlemen?" says Lemoyne in his best bedside manner when Nick and me and Deputy Sheriff Brewster had entered the room.

"You can do us, and me in partickler, the favor of considerin' yourself under arrest!" pipes Deputy Sheriff Brewster.

Of course—not to go into the details—all three of the opposition threw a fit, especially Papa Lemoyne. Finally he arrived at the stage of demanding that Mr. Brewster show cause for this outrage.

Judd pulls the telegram on him.

Lemoyne never cracked a smile—he was too far gone—but when Miss Marguerite and the Kid saw that message they proceeded to indulge in a couple of first-class cases of the hystericals.

"Why, you poor, ignorant yokel," howls Papa Lemoyne at the deeply insulted Mr. Brewster, "lemme tell you what that message means!"

And he did; or, anyway, he gives his own version of it.

"What that message means," he goes on, "is this: the man whose name is signed to it, Hecker, is a friend of mine and my daughter's. He's coming to visit us in a day or so—lives in Boston. He's a dog-fancier, and is sending two bull pups on ahead—on the train arriving here at three fifteen to-day, to be exact. That message was merely for the purpose of telling me to look out for the dogs on arrival."

"You oughta write books," jeers Deputy Sheriff Brewster. "That's a nice story. But it ain't good enough for me!"

"At least," says Miss Lemoyne, turning the battery of her eyes on Mr. Brewster, "you won't be so unkind as to refuse to wait until the train comes in, to see whether it's true or not, before you do anything further?"

Mr. Brewster blinks, straightens his tie, clears his throat in a kind of apologetic manner—and lets her win it.

When the three fifteen train came in those bull pups were on it!

At which point it is probably proper to introduce Exhibit A, or the fatal message, which was as follows:

> Take care. Two Boston bulls on train arriving Upper Falls three fifteen to-day.
>
> HECKER.

Somewhere in this wide, wide world there's a Western Union key-tapper with whom I've got a large and able-bodied score to settle for letting that period run wild! And so has Deputy Sheriff Brewster, of Upper Falls, Massachusetts. I mean, of course, the period after the second word.

For a time Papa Lemoyne was gonna sue me and Judd Brewster for false imprisonment, slander, libel, and several other crimes and misdemeanors; but the happy couple must have talked him out of it. There was one thing they couldn't talk him out of—if they tried to—and that was this: from thence onward Archibald was to have nothing further to do with me, on penalty of losing his matrimonial prospects in the Lemoyne family.

So he didn't. Everything—including the affair with Whizzer Browning—was all off.

And that's why I am going to try to struggle along without seeing Marguerite Lemoyne and her fascinating leading man, Archibald Jamison Spaulding, at the Rialto this week.

The Wreck

Part V

by E. J. Rath

Author of "Gas—Drive In," "Good References," "Once Again," "Too Much Efficiency," etc.

CHAPTER XIX.

CAPTURED.

JUST as Sally's fingers were digging into his arm until he was ready to growl a protest, a voice came from the bushes beside the car: "You better get 'em right up in the air—quick."

Sally raised her hands promptly, and the Wreck followed suit, after she commanded him.

Into the back glare of the headlights stepped a man who carried a rifle that looked ready for work.

"One of 'em's a woman," he called, evidently addressing somebody behind him.

There was no answer from the rear. It seemed that the matter of conversation had been left wholly in his hands.

"We'll take the pedigree," said the man with the rifle. "Any relation to the sheriff?"

"Plenty of relation," said Sally, promptly. "We want to see him."

There was a chuckle by way of answer.

"Sure you're lookin' for the sheriff?" he inquired. "I kind of figure he's asleep and don't want to be disturbed."

"You lead me to Bob Wells," said Sally. "I'm going to step right out of this car, and if you start anything with that gun you'll wish you'd never been born."

The Wreck followed her, and they stood beside the flivver, with a rifle muzzle not more than a yard distant from them.

"The lady speaks first," said the man with the gun. "And be careful about your hands."

"I'll talk to Bob Wells and nobody else," declared Sally, firmly.

"Are you speakin' serious?"

"I certainly am. And I'd advise you not to argue about it."

He muttered something that she could

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not hear, yet it conveyed the idea that his mind was in doubt. The Wreck remained passive during the colloquy. He did not need Sally's caution. Whatever might be required of him, he felt that the time was not yet. Beside, he was sure that Sally had the right idea. There was no need for dealing with subordinates when Bob Wells was on the ground. He was quite willing to face the sheriff.

"Lead me to the sheriff," said Sally.

There was a suppressed laugh from the figure that held the rifle.

"I'll lead you," he said. "Come to think of it, I figure you'd better lead yourselves. You just head for that camp-fire and I'll keep walking behind you. And don't forget I'm carrying a gun. Not that it makes any difference to me, but it might make a heap of difference to you."

Sally set off in the lead, stumbling through the brush in the direction of the camp. She was angry enough to shout what she wanted to say to Bob Wells, but she would not spoil the dramatic effect of a face-to-face meeting. The Wreck followed in her wake, grim, yet somewhat out of countenance. They had blundered into something they did not expect, but they would emerge with banners flying, he knew in his heart. In fact, there was a real advantage in having everything settled here and now.

It was a very small, disorderly and informal sort of camp, Sally discovered as soon as she put foot within the glow of dying embers. There were no tent; there was no sign of an establishment that contained even ordinary comforts. But there were two men with rifles in their hands, sitting up in their blankets and studying the strangers with hard eyes.

"Well, who you got there, Lefty?" inquired one of the men on the ground.

"Parties lookin' for the sheriff," observed Lefty, with a somewhat exaggerated wink.

"Just the two of 'em?"

"Just them."

The asker of questions arose to his feet for a better survey of the visitors. He was a large man and his most conspicious feature was a broken nose. Sally and the Wreck came to learn that his companions called him Nosey.

"Where is the sheriff?" demanded Sally, but this time she did not say it with any confidence. A sudden misgiving had assailed her.

"We ain't figurin' to meet up with the sheriff to-day," remarked Nosey.

"This is not his camp, then?"

"No; you might say it isn't."

Sally glanced at the Wreck.

"Well, Henry, I suppose we'd better be going," she said.

He nodded and was turning to lead the way, when he found the muzzle of Lefty's rifle sticking into his ribs.

"You two better set down awhile," said Nosey, who seemed to be a person of authority. "Lefty, you just keep your eye on the lady and gent. Denver, I wanta talk to you."

The third man climbed out of his blankets and followed Nosey. They went beyond earshot. The guard motioned Sally and the Wreck to seats on the ground and placed himself opposite them at a little distance, his back against a tree. The rifle lay ready in his hands.

"I'm afraid we've blundered," whispered Sally.

"What do you make of this bunch?" asked the Wreck.

"Pretty tough, I'm afraid.

"Might have been worse."

"How?"

"Might have been the sheriff."

"That's so," nodded Sally. "But I was all ready for him. Now I don't know just what we're up against."

Daylight was coming rapidly in the untidy camp, and the more Sally saw of the place the less she liked it. There was only one inference, of course; they had stumbled into some kind of a gang, very likely the same gang for which Bob Wells was searching. Fine luck!

Nosey and Denver rejoined the group.

"What's the idea?" demanded the Wreck. "Prisoners?"

"Maybe," said Nosey, who looked thoughtful.

"Well, if it's robbery, you don't stand to win very much."

"What's the game, comin' in here askin' for the sheriff?" asked Nosey. "You friends of his?"

"We know him," said Sally, cautiously.

"That's plain enough. You were callin' him by name awhile back. You workin' for him?"

Sally and the Wreck said "No" together.

"I ain't so sure," mused Nosey. "He might think it was a smart trick, gettin' a woman to help play the game. I reckon you know the sheriff's out around here somewheres with a posse?"

"We heard so," admitted Sally.

"Do you know who he's lookin' for?"

"I suppose he's looking for you, isn't he?"

"Well, you might say so."

"You won't find us the least bit of use to you," said Sally. "You might as well turn us loose. And if we run into the sheriff we won't say anything."

Nosey shook his head incredulously.

"How come you're off the main road, up in here?" he inquired. "What fetched you? No; I figure we ain't goin' to turn you loose right yet."

The Wreck, who had been wonderfully patient through it all, was thinking whether it would pay to claim a community of interest with Nosey and his friends. He suggested it to Sally in a low voice, but she shook her head.

"They probably hate a rival gang worse than the sheriff," she whispered. "Besides, we don't look like a gang. They'd never believe it."

Denver had stirred up the fire, tossed a few fresh sticks on it and was getting breakfast. The leader of the party went off in the direction of the flivver, evidently to make an inspection. Lefty, still acting as guard, sat impassive against his tree, apparently not even indulging in thoughts.

"They can't keep us forever," said Sally.

"But perhaps long enough for the sheriff to catch up," suggested the Wreck.

"That would be bad, although I was resigned to it awhile ago. Now I feel as if we had a chance again,"

"We'll make a break whenever you say."

Sally shook her head.

"This outfit would shoot you if it had to, I haven't the least doubt," she said. "And besides, Henry, do you know that right now I haven't the least desire to make a break? I'm horribly sleepy. I'm not a bit excited over this; I'm too tired. So long as I thought it was Bob Well's camp I was mad, and that woke me up. But now I'm drowsy again. I'm not going to make any break from here until I get some sleep, and I don't care if the sheriff walks right in on us."

Denver motioned that they could help themselves to breakfast. It was not very inviting. All that Sally wanted was a cup of coffee. The Wreck, however, ate heartily.

Sally found a fairly comfortable spot under a tree and stretched herself for a nap. She advised the Wreck to do the same.

"I'll sit alongside of you," he said, "and keep an eye on things."

"Better get some sleep yourself."

"I'm not sleepy. I can't sleep. I'd like to bust—"

"Ss-h," said Sally.

In three minutes she had dozed off and in ten her slumber was deep. The Wreck propped himself against the tree, drew up his knees, folded his arms across them and directed a surly stare at Lefty. The latter, with his rifle at his feet, did not seem to be disconcerted. He did not, in fact, appear to display much interest in the prisoners, beyond an eye to their security.

The Wreck was determined to keep a vigilant lookout for opportunities. After a little while he observed what struck him as a singular phenomenon. The figure of Lefty was undergoing some strange distortion. It shrank, it swelled; sometimes it seemed to float in the air, again to sink into the ground. The image trembled and danced before his eyes, in a queer yet fascinating manner. There were moments when it vanished entirely, only to reappear with illogical abruptness, three or four times as big as it was before. He had been calculating the possibilities of a sudden dash; he believed that Lefty would succumb to swift attack, if only Denver were not hovering about as a potential rescuer.

Yet when Lefty began to assume a variety of shapes and sizes he was not so certain. His elusiveness to the eye was disconcerting.

Then he was conscious that Lefty had assumed normal proportions again. He was strolling around the camp, his rifle drooping from the hollow of his arm. Sally was sitting up, doing her hair with the aid of a little mirror that proclaimed the advance of the feminist movement in Montana. She was smiling at the Wreck.

"Have a good sleep?" she asked.

"Huh? Sleep? I haven't been asleep. Maybe I closed my eyes a minute, but I was just resting 'em."

"Then they've had a good rest, Henry. I've been awake for an hour and they've been closed all that time."

"What time is it?"

"Almost sundown."

He stirred himself and grinned sheepishly.

"What's been going on, anyhow?" he asked.

"I don't know, except that the ones they call Nosey and Denver aren't here. I asked Lefty where they were and he said they'd been gone for hours, and that it was none of my business, anyhow."

The Wreck studied Lefty with an appraising eye.

"We might jump him," he whispered.

Sally shook her head.

"Not with that gun in his hands. I think we'll have to wait awhile."

Later, they asked their guard if they might go to the flivver and get some sandwiches. He seemed interested in the sandwiches and signified that they could go under escort. They went, returning to camp with Sally's parcel of provisions. Going and coming, Lefty followed them. He accepted a couple of sandwiches with a grunt of acknowledgement, ate them with apparent approval, but did not relax his vigilance.

It was dusk when Nosey and Denver rode into camp and dismounted. Lefty grumbled something about being left alone all day and was told to shut up. Then there was a conference. The Wreck and Sally missed most of it, but gathered that Nosey had decided that it would be safer for all hands to remain where they were for another night. Something was said about the sheriff, but they could not catch that part.

"I'll be doggoned if I'll stay here tonight," said the Wreck to Sally.

"Ss-h. We may have to."

"But what do they want of us?"

"I've no idea. I think they're just afraid to turn us loose."

The Wreck addressed himself to the leader.

"What's the idea?" he demanded.

"Shut up."

The Wreck glowered and moved uneasily, but Sally laid a hand on his arm and warned him with a look.

"Any reason my wife and I can't be driving on?" he asked.

"And notify the sheriff?" sneered Nosey.

"Damn the sheriff."

"Sure. Only I don't figure you're goin' to drive on for awhile yet. Besides, we may be wantin' to use the car ourselves."

'And how long do you think we're going to stay here?"

"Just as long as I see fit," said Nosey. "And if you don't keep your face shut, I'll shut it for you."

Again Sally restrained her partner in captivity. The only thing that had a soothing effect was her plea that if anything happened to him she would be left there alone with three unpleasant strangers. They talked things over in low tones while Nosey and his companions busied themselves with getting supper.

"They're worried about the sheriff," she said. "That's plain enough. Bob must be right in the neighborhood somewhere. They don't even dare go out to the main road."

"Well, they're not going to steal my car. That's certain."

"What are you going to do about it, if they make up their minds?"

He was not certain, but he had an idea there would be noise and excitement.

"And a few shots," added Sally. "And then we won't worry about flivvers or anything else. You keep your head on your

shoulders, Henry Williams. I'm not in any great hurry to lose mine."

He growled a complaint about hanging around and doing nothing.

"We'll find a chance yet," she whispered. "They're just as much fussed about this as we are. They don't want us around here, but they're afraid to let go of us. They don't know that we're running away from the sheriff, too, and we'd never be able to make them believe it. We're a pair of white elephants on their hands, but they can't find the answer."

Lefty, who had relinquished guard duty to Denver, brought them some greasy bacon and coffee.

"You'd better fill up," he advised. "You can't tell when you'll be feedin' again."

He did not offer an explanation of this remark, and Sally and the Wreck had a fresh sense of uneasiness. Then the trio of captors entered upon a long consultation. The only person who paid even casual attention to the prisoners was Denver, who sat where he could keep an eye on them and whose rifle was too handy to encourage an attempted break.

Darkness came again, and Sally and the Wreck were ordered to move closer to the fire, where they could be watched more readily. Nosey took the added precaution of tying their feet together. He did not bother about their hands as yet; he merely wanted to be sure that they could not break and run on an instant's notice.

The consultation of the trio continued, at a litttle distance from the fire, where they were beyond earshot of the prisoners. Although it was conducted in undertones, Sally and the Wreck sensed disagreement, and even acrimony. Finally, Nosey brought it to an end with a peremptory gesture.

"You stay here and watch 'em," he ordered Denver. "Lefty and me are goin' down by the main road for awhile. And the first crack they make, let 'em have it."

Denver grumbled about being left behind.

"Somebody's got to do it," snarled Nosey, "unless you're for hittin' 'em over the head now. You do as you're told."

Denver sullenly seated himself by the fire, his rifle between his knees, and watched his companions as they disappeared among the trees. Then he fell to glowering at Sally and the Wreck.

CHAPTER XX.

THE STORM.

PROBABLY an hour elapsed before anybody spoke. The Wreck's soul writhed under the torture of inactivity. Time after time he calculated the chances of a spring at Denver's throat. Even with his hobbled feet he believed that he might achieve a success; but he could not be absolutely sure. On his own account, he was willing to try and abide by the break of the luck; but with Sally to be considered he could not conscientiously bring himself to the point. If anything went amiss with the attempt, she would be in a worse predicament than her present one.

Denver was watchful. Sitting across the camp-fire from the two prisoners, he did not permit their least movement to go unnoticed. And the rifle was always at his hand. The Wreck hoped that he might become drowsy; even an instant's nod would be sufficient. But Denver was apparently a person who could dispense with sleep when he chose, and this was obviously one of the occasions. He was a black-haired, saturnine person, apparently rather stupid, yet smart enough to devote himself single-minded to the vigil that had been ordered by his chief.

Sally and the Wreck made an effort to pass time in conversation, but they felt no freedom of speech in the presence of Denver, who listened but offered to take no part. His presence discouraged talk, particularly, as the one subject they wished to discuss—escape—was prohibited because of his inevitable eavesdropping. But they boggled along for awhile, half-heartedly, because there was nothing else to do, until a deep-toned rumbling noise interrupted Sally in the middle of a sentence.

"Thunder," she remarked, casually. "Wouldn't wonder if we caught a storm."

"Uh-uh," said the Wreck, gloomily.

He could imagine nothing more uncomfortable than sitting there in a downpour. The camp did not even boast a tent.

There was more rumbling from back in the hills, and twice there were flashes in the black skies. Denver added a couple of sticks to the fire and huddled back again, still with the rifle between his knees.

"I suppose we'll get wet," remarked Sally, in a resigned tone. "Well, there's nothing on me that will get hurt."

"Let it rain," said the Wreck.

There was a stirring of leaves on the topmost branches of the trees, followed by an atmospheric sluggishness that became oppressive. The lightning was growing more brilliant and frequent, while the noise from the skies was multiplying itself. Just one more discomfort to be endured, the Wreck reflected; they seemed to have encountered nothing but bad luck since they left the Bar-M.

A fresh roll of thunder, and a second later Sally touched his arm. He glanced toward her, and found that her eyes were watching Denver across the fire.

"What?" he asked.

"I didn't say anything," answered Sally.

There was a faint frown on her forehead which he interpreted as an order not to ask questions. Yet he knew there was something she wanted to say to him. She was still looking at Denver, and the Wreck also looked. The study brought him no enlightenment. Denver sat stolidly and watched them without interest, yet with a diligence that was admirable. Presently the Wreck's attention wandered.

More thunder and another touch of his arm. Sally was still staring at the man on the other side of the fire. What did she mean? The Wreck also fell to staring, although he tried to do it in an unobtrusive manner. Apparently it had something to do with Denver.

An instant later he had a glimmer of understanding. There was a brilliant flash, then an interval of three or four seconds, then a deep bellow that echoed heavily through the woods. Denver's head twitched, his glance lifted itself for an instant toward the tree-tops, then he huddled back and glared again at his prisoners. The Wreck settled himself to watch.

He had not long to wait. A vivid play of light in the skies, a series of rolling crashes. Denver's head twitched again in involuntary accompaniment, his shoulders stirred and there was a restless movement of one hand. Once more his eyes sought the blackness overhead, only to wince when it was gashed with a white, irregular streak.

Sally and the Wreck exchanged glances, the latter making a faint movement of his head, to signify that he understood. Denver was afraid of a thunderstorm. It seemed so absurd that for an instant the Wreck wanted to laugh. Stolid, insensitive to human contact, with a jaw fashioned perfectly for a heavy-weight champion and a physique that matched it, Denver was the ideal bully and bad man. Habitually he wore an expression that told of his inurement to violence. Without fear, he would take his chances with a sheriff or anybody else. But he was afraid of thunder and lightning.

The heavens crashed again, flaring in two different directions. Denver responded automatically, with a twitch that affected his whole body. The pair of watchers saw him tighten a quivering lip. He favored them with a look of defiant suspicion—a warning that they would better keep out of his private affairs. Sally turned her eyes upward.

"It's getting nearer every minute," she told the Wreck.

"Yes; we're going to catch it."

"I only hope it rains, too," said Sally. "The dry storms are the worst."

"You bet they are," agreed the Wreck. "I don't know why, but it's always so."

"And it's always worst in the woods, on account of the trees. Why, I remember—"

The sound of her voice was swallowed up in a roar. Something had been struck, and not very far distant; they could feel a tremor in the ground. Denver's head seemed to shrink between his shoulders and for a second his eyes closed tightly. Then they opened with a jerk of terror as he remembered his prisoners.

"That was close," said Sally, in an

awed tone and with a meaning glance at the Wreck. "I'm afraid we're going to be right in the center of it. If it would only rain!"

"Well, we've got to take our chances," declared the Wreck, solemnly. "What can we do?"

"Nothing," she sighed. "Only—"

Denver was biting savagely at his under lip and the fingers of one hand were drumming nervously on the ground.

"Does it hit much in the woods?" he asked, suddenly. There was a sort of emptiness in his voice.

"More than anywhere else," answered the Wreck. "But it doesn't do any good to run. If it's going to get you it'll get you, as sure as a gun."

"I'm—I'm afraid I'm getting nervous," whimpered Sally.

The skies flared and detonated again and, with a little shriek, she threw her arms around the Wreck's neck.

"Henry!" she cried.

His eyes were stealthily watching Denver and his hand was creeping cautiously toward a stick of split wood that lay near the fire.

"Not yet—wait!" Sally was whispering with her lips close to his ear. "Give him a minute or two more. He's slipping fast."

The Wreck waited. He found it difficult to believe what he saw with his eyes. Denver's big body had sagged loosely and his shoulders were trembling. He was a man on the verge of a panic, but nerveless. His lips twitched grotesquely, his eyes seemed to be staring at nothing. He wanted to shut them, but he did not dare.

"I—I don't like it," he mumbled, in a petulant voice. "I—"

"It's awful!" cried Sally.

"God help us!" groaned the Wreck.

There was a lull, a sudden blast of wind in the trees, then a fresh onset of fury from the skies. Flash and crash were blended in a terrifying ensemble. Sally, still clutching the Wreck, kept her eyes on the man beyond the camp-fire.

His body swayed, his hands clasped themselves in a sudden paroxysm and there was a dull agony on his eyes.

"I can't stand it!" he whined, in a high falsetto.

Suddenly he crossed his arms on his knees and buried his head. He was sobbing.

"Now!" whispered Sally.

The Wreck's fingers had closed on the split stick. He rose swiftly to his hobbled feet, balanced himself, took aim and flung it furiously at Denver's head. Instantly he followed it, leaping clumsily across the fire and hurling himself on the huddled figure.

Denver went over on his back and the Wreck clutched for his throat.

"Grab his gun!" he cried to Sally.

She was scrambling toward it when she saw him roll off the recumbent figure, hitch himself into a sitting posture and begin the task of untying his feet.

"No hurry," said the Wreck. "He's out cold. I don' know whether it was the stick of wood, or whether he just fainted. Get your feet loose before we do anything else."

Sally went to work at the cords that hobbled her. The Wreck cast a contemptuous glance at the flabby inert form of Denver, the bully.

"The big simp!" he said, as he shook his feet free.

"Oh, I don't know," said Sally, working feverishly. "It's horrible when you're afraid like that. You can't help it. I've seen ma when she was just as bad. And we had a cowpuncher once who was even worse, although he was a terrible fighter. And—"

The bellowing storm obliterated the remainder of the sentence. As she stood up, free of her bonds, she shook her head, as though to throw off an unpleasant sensation.

"You can say what you like," she declared, "but it's a pretty mean storm, just the same. I'm not claiming to enjoy it myself."

The Wreck had rolled Denver over on his face and was tying his hands behind his back. He worked quickly and roughly, but he made the job thorough. Then he reached for the cord that Sally held and began tying the big creature's ankles.

"But look what it did for us," said the Wreck, as the storm shrieked at them again.

"Is he hurt much?"

The Wreck began exploring the skull of his victim.

"I can't even find blood," he said. "He had a hat on when I hit him. There's a big welt on top of his head. When he comes to he'll think he was struck by lightning."

"You don't think he's dead, Henry?"

"No!" answered the Wreck, scornfully. "I can feel him breathing. Come on, now. We'd better get out of this."

He picked up Denver's rifle, examined the breech, then threw it across his shoulder. Sally bent over the loose figure and stared at it curiously.

"We all have our weak spots," she said, solemnly. "I'm honestly sorry for him."

"We did him a kindness," averred the Wreck. "He won't worry about the rest of the storm. Come on!"

"Where?"

"We're going to get the car, of course."

He seized her hand and they plunged into the brush that surrounded the small clearing where the camp lay. As they did so, the rain came. It did not begin gently, with widely scattered drops, but came in an abrupt rush, with a roar that resembled the voice of a cataract. Even through the trees it beat down on them from the darkness, carried on the wings of a squall that fairly howled. Almost as abruptly the electric phase passed, so that now the flashes were fewer and dimmer.

They blundered forward, clinging to each other. They stumbled over roots and vines, floundered blindly into trees, forced their way through underbrush that seemed to claw at them. Both were drenched to the skin and gasping for breath before they had gone a hundred yards.

"Seems to me we've gone far enough," panted Sally. "It was only a little way from camp."

"It's right around here somewhere," said the Wreck. "Come on."

He dragged her forward again.

"If we could get some more lightning we could see something," she complained.

"We'll find it," he promised, confidently.

But they had not found the flivver in five minutes, or ten, although they steadily groped their way through the dripping woods, trying to shield their faces against the beating rain.

"We've been going uphill too much," said Sally, who had a sharp misgiving concerning their quest. "The ground was almost level between the flivver and the camp."

"Then we'll go downhill some," declared the Wreck.

They went downhill for awhile, but it was still a blind scramble through the trees and underbrush, with no touch of a flivver to greet their outstretched hands. It was very dark. They could hear distant thunder, but the lightning they could not see. And it rained as though determined never to stop.

"I don't see that that rifle is doing you any good," observed Sally, as they paused to rest. "It's only so much more to carry."

"We may need it," he said, stubbornly.

Half an hour passed. The rain was lessening, although the fact made little difference; neither Sally, nor the Wreck, nor the woods could get any wetter.

"I'm afraid," she said, "that we started in the wrong direction when we left the camp."

"We'll go back to the camp and start over again."

"But you'll never find the camp now, Henry."

"Sure."

There was no use in arguing or trying to discourage him, and Sally knew they might better be moving than standing still, so she suffered herself to be led on another journey through the darkness. The Wreck seemed to be tireless. He plodded and stumbled onward, scorning difficulties, picking himself up whenever he fell, clinging to the rifle, and doing it all with an amazing optimism and even a show of patience.

"Any time you want to rest, just holler," he advised.

Sally promised that she would, but she kept going.

They did not find the camp. Even if they passed within a few yards of it the

chances were against discovery, for long ago, Sally knew, the rain must have obliterated the last vestige of glowing embers. But the Wreck searched stubbornly for hours, it seemed. He would not admit that he was lost, although Sally would have conceded it without hesitation. He seemed to proceed on the theory that groping through the woods was like walking the streets of Pittsburgh—even if you happened to be in a strange neighborhood you would locate your street at last.

"Let's rest awhile," he suggested.

Sally was willing. Her skirt was heavy with moisture and her legs were tired. They found a fallen tree and sat for a long time, during which the moon came out. It did not give them much light, but it had a cheerful aspect. They did not talk much. She felt that the Wreck was chagrined about their failure to find the flivver and did not refer to it. Nor did she even speculate on what they were going to do next, although it seemed to her that their plight was more unfavorable than ever.

"We ought to be getting some daylight in an hour or so," she said.

He agreed with her and suggested that they walk again. There seemed to be no end to the woods. How far they had traveled, or in what direction, Sally had not the smallest idea. She felt quite helpless. The one thing that gave her a measure of confidence was the demeanor of the Wreck. He was undaunted; everything would be all right as soon as it got light enough to see what they were doing.

They were resting again when a noise made by something that moved stirred them both to alertness. It was not far distant, and Sally held her breath as she clung to the Wreck's fingers. Several times the noise was repeated; it was as if some heavy body were forcing its way through the brush.

"Maybe it's one of the gang, she whispered.

"Maybe. Do they have bears here?"

"Not many, I reckon. I never saw one."

"You stay here," he said. "I'm going to see what it is."

"No."

"I've got a rifle, haven't I?"

"I don't care. You'd better stay here."

They heard the noise again.

"I'm going," said the Wreck. "Sit still."

"Henry!"

He was gone, trying to be stealthy about it, but making a din as he plunged forward into the gloom. Sally gritted her teeth and followed him. What was he blundering into now?

She was several yards behind him when she heard a scuffle, then a muffled exclamation from the Wreck. Something was plunging around in the brush ahead of her.

"Henry!" she called sharply. "Henry!"

Then his excited voice floated back to her.

"I've got hold of a horse," he cried. "What'll I do with it?"

"A horse!"

"Yes, a horse!"

"Hang onto it; I'm coming."

She went forward at a run, tripped, fell headlong, picked herself up and resumed.

"He's rearing around," complained the voice of the Wreck. "The damn fool, he's just—"

"Well, you hang onto him," said Sally grimly. "I'll be there in a second. Darn these woods, anyhow."

CHAPTER XXI.

THE SHERIFF'S HORSE.

WHEN she reached him, the Wreck was still struggling with a dark shape that was making desperate efforts to back out of the encounter.

"Let me see," said Sally, pushing herself to the front. "What are you holding him by, anyhow? Why, he's bridled!"

It had not occurred to the Wreck that a horse roaming the woods at night did not usually wear a bridle, but to Sally, who knew about things, it was an oddity.

"Easy now, boy." She had hold of the bridle and was talking in a soothing, professional tone. The effect of her voice and her practised hand was almost immediate. "That's it; gentle, now. And who turned you loose in the woods?"

An instant later she made a second discovery.

"Saddled, too! That's queer. He's broken loose from some place. I suppose the storm scared him. There now, boy; steady. Well, can you beat it? Saddled and bridled, all ready to hand."

She stroked the animal's neck, patted his shoulder and talked gently to him. Presently he responded with a nuzzling against her arm, and then she knew she had him.

"We can't be far from the camp, Henry. He must belong to Nosey, or one of that crowd, of course. A horse might get frightened in a storm like that, but he wouldn't run very far in the woods. Listen!"

The Wreck had not heard anything, but Sally's quick ear caught a familiar sound.

"There's another one roaming around here somewhere," she said. "Listen again."

After a short interval both heard it—a faint whinny from off among the trees.

"Don't move," said Sally. "This one will answer in a minute. They'll get together, or else I don't know horses."

Presently her prediction was realized, but it took another call from the distance before the bridled horse answered.

"Stay right here, Henry. The other one will come to us. You might have that rifle ready, just in case— There may be somebody riding it, you know, looking for this one."

The second horse was advancing more rapidly now. There was another interchange of calls and Sally clung more tightly to the bridle of their captive. The Wreck stood tense, ready to shoot at anything that looked like a man. Sally cautioned him not to be too quick; she did not want any blood-letting unless it was a final alternative.

Out of the brush and into the dim light came a second riderless horse.

"Hold this one," said Sally giving the bridle to the Wreck.

An instant later she had a second captive.

"Bridled and saddled like the first one!" she exclaimed. "Did you ever hear of such luck?"

"What do you make out of it."

"They must belong to Nosey and Lefty. I suppose they left them standing somewhere, maybe, while they got out of the storm themselves, and the poor things got scared and ran away. I don't blame them."

"Well, what are we going to do with 'em?"

Sally peered at him through the gloom, as if trying to see whether he was serious.

"Do with them?" she echoed, in amazement. "What do you usually do with a horse? Kiss it? You big silly, we're going to *ride* them."

The Wreck made a grimace.

"How about my car?" he demanded. "Aren't we going to look for that?"

"No, we're not. Are you crazy? So long as we've got their horses let them keep the car. We don't want to go messing around that camp again to-night. We're liable to get ourselves into trouble again. Don't try to push your luck too far, Henry Williams. We're in big luck now—we've got their horses, two of them, anyhow. And we've got one rifle. What more could we ask?"

He pondered the proposition gloomily. Of course, he could not expect her to understand how anybody could become attached to a flivver. He could not treat the idea of abandonment so lightly; not that it was particularly valuable to him in dollars, but there was a bond of sentiment to be considered. Yet he could see the sound sense at the bottom of her verdict. After all, he was primarily responsible for getting Sally Morgan either aboard a train or back to the Bar-M. The flivver would have to take its chances.

"Oh, all right," he growled.

"Why, of course," said Sally.

"Then which way do we go?"

"We ought to try to hit for the main road, I suppose. That seems the most sensible thing to do. We'll probably be able to get our bearings then. I'd wait till daylight, only I don't think we ought to. I'm afraid we're too near the camp. They'll be out looking for these horses. They can't afford to lose them."

"They've got my car," he reminded her.

"But maybe they can't run it, Henry. It's one thing to ride a horse around this country; but when it comes exploring it in a flivver, well, you've got to be an expert."

He merely grunted at the compliment, for he suspected that she was only joking.

"You'd better ride the one that you caught," she added. "He's all quieted down now. Can you mount him?"

"Certainly I can," snapped the Wreck. "But what are you going to do? You haven't any riding skirt."

Sally laughed in the darkness.

"Don't you worry about me, old timer. I'll ride him. Wait till I shorten his stirrups a bit."

The Wreck had scaled the side of the first captive and was trying to find a comfortable place in the saddle, when Sally made a flying mount of the second.

"You'd better let me go ahead," she said. "We'll just walk while we're in the woods. And don't get yourself knocked off by a branch. Come on."

They set off at a slow pace, Sally giving her animal its head, save for occasional guidance in the direction she thought they ought to follow. The Wreck's horse followed, determined not to be isolated again, so that all that his rider had to do was to balance himself in the saddle and fend off branches with the rifle.

Sally had but a vague idea of whither they should go to seek the main road. It was, in fact, little more than an arbitrary guess; but she stuck to it because it seemed to give them a definite route, if nothing more. She was weary of aimless wandering, and particularly weary of wandering afoot. The Wreck, having no ideas of his own as to their course, was content merely to follow. Given the flivver, he would have developed positive convinctions as to whither they should go; but riding a horse confused him—it forced him to concentrate on the problem of not falling off.

One consideration in Sally's mind was to avoid the camp at all costs, and apparently she was succeeding in that, for after half an hour of riding in a direction that was generally straight they saw no trace of it. The country was rather broken, but she did not mind that, if they could only get out of the woods. With the first faint coming of dawn she was pleased to discover that the trees were becoming more sparse. They had already left most of the brush behind them. A few minutes later, as they rode out into an open space, the light about them was visibly increased.

The Wreck's horse ranged alongside Sally's mount without urging and nipped gently at the shoulder of his companion.

"G'long there," said Sally, good naturedly. "Mind your—"

She broke off into a little cry and reined her horse sharply.

"Henry Williams!" she cried.

"What now?"

She was staring at the Wreck's horse.

"Look—look what you're riding!"

"Huh?" He squinted down through his spectacles at the top of the animal's head, as though expecting to discover, perhaps, that it was an elephant or a camel, rather than a regulation Montana mount.

"It's Bob Wells's horse!" said Sally, in a voice of awe.

And indeed it was, as the Wreck could now see, with a fair amount of early morning light coming over the hills. It was the big black animal that even he, to whom most horses looked alike, had come to associate with the sheriff.

"I'll be doggoned!" he muttered.

Sally sat rigid in her saddle, as though the sight had petrified her. It was Bob's horse, Bob's saddle, Bob's bridle—the whole outfit was there. No wonder she had been able to soothe a frightened animal, back in the darkness. He knew her.

"We've stolen the sheriff's horses!" she gasped.

"Found 'em," corrected the Wreck.

"Oh, Henry!"

"Well, what of it?"

"But— What in the world does it mean? I'm all mixed up."

The Wreck did not have any very clear idea of what it meant, but the discovery was rather pleasing to him. Unconsciously, he assumed a more jaunty pose in the saddle.

"One horse is the same as another to me," he remarked. "You thought they were good enough when we found 'em in the woods. What's the matter with 'em now?"

"But Bob—his horse—and— Why he must have been right close to us!"

"Well, he didn't find us, did he?" re-

marked the Wreck, triumphantly. He even risked his seat by leaning forward and stroking the neck of the black horse.

Sally glanced at her own mount. She could not remember ever having seen the animal before. It was a medium-sized bay, rather easily gaited, but evidently not built for speed.

"We must have all been pretty close together in the woods," mused Sally. "Think of that. Of course, Bob didn't know about us; he couldn't have. But he must have been pretty hot on the trail of that gang. I suppose that's what Nosey was worried about last night, when he and Lefty went down to watch the main road. What I don't understand is Bob losing his horse. He must have been doing some scouting on foot and didn't figure on any storm messing things up. This one I'm riding, of course, must belong to somebody in the posse."

The Wreck grinned down at his mount. In some measure, the black horse compensated for the loss of the flivver.

"I'll bet Bob's just crazy," said Sally.

"Sure."

"Why, if anything happened to that horse—whew! He'd sooner let the whole gang get away than lose his horse."

"Well, he can have it back when I'm through with it," said the Wreck with an airy tone. "I'll exchange it for a flivver any time."

"And the humiliation of it," continued Sally, talking half to herself. "Think of a sheriff going out to catch somebody and having somebody else run off with his horse. Can't you see it, Henry?"

"I can see it fine."

"And there he is, back in the woods there somewhere, with nothing to ride, and probably the gang laughing at him."

"Well, it's a good laugh," agreed the Wreck.

"Why, it's awful!"

"Is it?" He looked at her sharply. "What's the idea? Do you want to go back and hand him his plug and say, 'Here we are. Take us to the hoosegow?'"

Sally shook her head impatiently.

"Of course not. We can't But I'm just trying to make you understand what a frightful fix it is for a sheriff to be in. Oh, he must be simply wild! Just imagine yourself in his place."

"Say, are you trying to get me nervous about this?" demanded the Wreck. "Because you're wasting time, if you are. I can just eat this."

Sally eyed him with a speculative look as he began running his fingers through the mane of the black horse. She had never seen the Wreck looking quite so buoyant. Presently she began to laugh.

"I wish Bob Wells could see you," she said.

"Yes?"

"Oh, you needn't get belligerent. I'm laughing at Bob. He'd just die of mortification. He'd either curl up and die or shoot you, I don't know which,"

The Wreck shrugged and eased himself in the saddle. Then he began laughing himself.

"Well, what do we do next, Sally?"

"Keep moving, I suppose."

"Which way?"

It was getting to be a fine morning as she swung about in her saddle and began studying the country. There were hills all about them, partly wooded, while the open spaces were mostly surfaced with rock. The little valley into which they had ridden was green and lush, but showed no signs of having been used for grazing stock.

"I confess I don't know where we are," said Sally. "There doesn't seem to be a trail in sight and I haven't any idea which way the road lies. But I'm certain we didn't cross it in the night."

"Which way are you headed—Chicago or Bar-M?"

"You're simply bound to ship me off to Chicago, aren't you?"

"Me? I don't care which way you go. Only I thought you wanted to buy—"

"Forget it," said Sally, almost sharply. "Do you expect to get me talking about trousseaus out in the middle of nowhere at all?"

"Well, when people start out to do things—"

"Henry, don't be disagreeable."

"All right, I'll never say another word about it."

"And don't be silly, either."

"After this, you can change your mind as much as you darn please," said the Wreck.

"I wonder now," said Sally, regarding him with a half-amused look. "Do you know I'm awfully patient with you, Henry Williams—and I'll be switched if I know why."

"Excuse me," he said, awkwardly. "It's my nerves again."

She burst out laughing.

"What do you say we ride up to the top of one of those hills and have a look-see?" she said.

"All right."

She led the way again, across the meadow. The Wreck felt suddenly miserable. Somehow, he was always making an idiot of himself, getting her into arguments, irritating her, saying things he had no business to say. Yet he could not understand the philosophy with which she regarded their situation. In her place, he would have been in a frenzy of restlessness, due to thwarted plans. He would have wanted to get to Chicago, even over the dead bodies of sheriffs and hold-up men, if necessary, do his buying and finish up what he started out to do. But here was a person who did not seem to care whether she completed her errand or not. Probably she could not help it, being a woman; but it struck him as peculiar.

Not that he really wanted her to go to Chicago. He thought it was all right for her to be in Montana, so long as he was there, at any rate. He could get along with her better than he could with most people. She was the first person who had called him "Henry," and she had called him "old timer," too—twice. He had an idea that she wanted to be kind to him; she was kind, no mistake about it. In fact, she was mighty good to him. She tolerated a lot of his nonsense and she put up with his nerves, and he was not insensible of the fact. Take her by and large, she had a lot of common sense—nerve, too. And she was cheerful about it, always. He felt mean and ungrateful. Why was he always breaking out with remarks that upset her? He was sorry.

Before he knew it he was saying so, almost shouting it at her as she rode on ahead.

"I'm a crab and I know it," he concluded. "So you'll have to excuse me."

She swung around in the saddle and looked at him in astonishment.

"A crab?" she repeated. "Why, you're not a crab, Henry. I don't think so at all—not one bit. You're all right, old timer."

There! She had said it again. The Wreck squared his shoulders and snatched smartly at the reins.

"Giddap," he said, recklessly. "Get a move on."

They broke into a trot and he did not mind it in the least. What did he care if he fell off?

Soon they were climbing a hillside, the horses slowed to a walk again. It was steep going and rocky, but the sheriff's animal knew his business. As for Sally, she did not seem to be conscious of any difficulties in the ascent. Her head was turning from side to side, as she studied the landscape; she let the bay pick the trail.

When it became too steep for the horses, they dismounted, still some little distance from the summit.

"We'll leave them here," said Sally. "Just throw the reins over his head and he'll stand. I think we ought to go up to the top for a better look."

"Sure," said the Wreck.

"And by the way, Henry, look in Bob's saddle bag and see if there's anything to eat. Unless I'm mistaken—"

The Wreck discovered two bars of chocolate.

"Thought so," nodded Sally. "Bob's never without it. Bring it along,"

They set off up the rocky slope toward the summit.

CHAPTER XXII.

THE WRECK SURRENDERS.

IT was not the highest of the hills, but it was bare at the top, so that it afforded them a panorama that boxed the compass. Sally and the Wreck spent a long time studying the country. There was a

gentle morning breeze and the sun was already warm, a combination of advantages that favored the drying of their clothes. Eventually they found a flat rock and sat there, eating the sheriff's emergency ration.

" I'm sure that streak off to the north," said Sally, " is the main road. You can get three different glimpses of it if you follow the way I'm pointing."

The Wreck nodded his agreement, although he was not certain that he saw what she meant. Sally could see a lot farther than he could.

" So I suppose that's where we ought to make for," she continued, "as soon as we get under way again."

" But we don't want to run into anybody else," he reminded her.

" No; of course not. So I'd suggest that we keep more to the west of the route we took coming in. There's a sort of valley that we ought to be able to get through. It's broken in a couple of places by ridges, but I reckon we can get over them. We'd better keep out of the woods as much as we can; they slow you down."

The Wreck agreed to everything. He was resolved to have no more arguments. If Sally decided they ought to sit on top of the hill for a week, he would agree to that. He even decided to say nothing more about the flivver, unless she brought up the subject herself.

" I've about made up my mind," said Sally, " to go back to the Bar-M."

" Yes?"

" Of course, you won't approve of it. You like to see people finish what they start."

" I don't object," said the Wreck. " It's all right for you to do anything you please."

She studied him speculatively.

" I don't want you to think I'm a quitter, Henry. But I'm not sure that I have any errands in Chicago. Not now, at any rate."

" That's all right."

" And besides, I could hardly go the way I am, without my baggage or anything."

" Oh, I guess you look all right."

She smiled.

" Thank you, Henry. But I look like a fright, just the same. And if you don't mind my saying it, so do you."

" I don't mind. I know it."

He had emerged from his night in the woods with his trousers torn at the knees, a sleeve half ripped from his coat, a hat missing and a general aspect of dishevelment.

" Saddle sore?" she asked.

" No!"

" I think if you could always ride the sheriff's horse, Henry, you'd overcome your prejudice—provided the sheriff happened to be wanting it."

He grinned and munched his chocolate bar.

For a while they talked about Charley McSween and the Underwood ranch, wondering how long it had taken to reestablish communications. They even drifted as far east as Pittsburgh, the Wreck idly speculating as to the doings of the assistant chemist, whom he had left in charge of the laboratory. He was glancing in the direction where he thought Pittsburgh lay when his eye was attracted by a movement of something in the meadow below them.

" What's that?" he asked, pointing.

" Two horses, with riders," said Sally promptly. " And they're following our trail, I do believe."

" I left the rifle hanging on the saddle," he said, sheepishly.

" Let's hustle down and get it. Besides, we want our own horses."

Half running, half sliding, they started down the steep hillside. Sally kept a watch on the meadow, which the two riders were crossing at a brisk pace. It was too far for her to make an identification, but whoever they were, they were unwelcome.

" Keep behind the rocks and trees as much as you can," she advised. " We don't want them to see us if we can help it."

They dodged into cover wherever they could find it, working downhill in a zigzag course toward the spot where they left the horses. When they had gone as far as seemed necessary she called a halt. The horses were not in sight.

" I'm afraid they've drifted down toward the meadow," she said, " where the feeding is good. What do you think we'd better do?"

" Keep going."

"But if they reach the horses first—"

"We've got to take a chance. Maybe it's nobody who'll bother us, anyhow."

She had misgivings on that score, but followed him as he took the lead. A few minutes later when he was several yards in advance, she saw him stop abruptly and make a signal for caution. As she joined him he pointed to an opening in the trees.

"It's your friend and somebody else," he whispered.

The Wreck was right. Bob Wells, dismounted, had recovered his own horse and was subjecting it to a critical scrutiny. He was also examining the rifle that hung at the saddle. With him was a man whom Sally had never seen before, evidently one of the posse.

"Out of luck again," she groaned.

"Oh, they haven't got us yet," said the Wreck, confidently.

"But they will. They know that somebody is on this hill and they'll never give up till they find us."

Presently the sheriff began examining the ground and Sally pinched the Wreck's arm.

"He'll get the trail now, just you see. There—he's looking up. Duck!"

There was a big boulder handy; they stepped behind it and flattened themselves on the ground.

"What'll we do?" asked Sally. "No use going back up hill again. They'll nail us to a certainty."

"We might work around to the side," he suggested. "But—they're coming now."

Up the steep slope they could see the sheriff advancing, his head turning quickly from side to side as he searched for something. There was a gun in his hand and Sally knew exactly how well he could use it. Close at his heels followed the other man. Both were walking.

"Well, I guess this is the finish," she said, grimly. "They can't say we haven't given them a good run for it, Henry."

"Huh. Maybe we're not through yet."

"I'm afraid so. No fighting, Henry. You haven't a chance."

The Wreck was chagrined, but he was not yet in despair. So far as his own case was concerned, it did not matter. He hated to surrender to Bob Wells; he would sooner be a prisoner at the Underwood ranch. But in either case, his own fortunes were relatively unimportant. It was Sally who counted. He could understand exactly how she must feel. Here was the man she was to marry, coming up to place her under arrest—and without being aware of it! The Wreck felt that he had failed at last, unless he could think of something within the next minute or two. If he could only get Sally out of the way—

They could hear the sheriff's voice, saying something to his companion. It had a peculiarly irritating effect upon Sally, who gritted her teeth and scowled. She was not frightened—merely angry.

"Listen," whispered the Wreck, "you stay here."

"Where are you going?" She seized his arm.

"I've got a scheme. Leave it to me. Promise, now."

"We're both in this together. Henry—"

"Let me go," said the Wreck, fiercely. "I know what I'm doing. Are you going to let me go?"

She stared at him earnestly, then released his arm.

"Please be careful, Henry. Please!"

"Sure." He spoke almost jauntily.

Rising suddenly to his feet, he patted her on the shoulder and winked reassuringly.

"So-long, Sally. You stay right here until you're sent for."

He stepped out from behind the boulder. She did not know what he meant, but she watched him with wondering eyes. Why—he was surrendering!

The Wreck's hands were lifted in the air as he strode down the trail. He had not gone half a dozen paces when the sheriff's gun covered him.

"Heigho," said the Wreck, frivolously. "Looking for anybody?"

Bob Wells stared, and as he stared his mouth opened wide.

"Well, I'm a son of a gun!" he gasped.

"Uh-huh," assented the Wreck. "What's the idea?"

"It's the four-eyed dude!" said the sheriff, in a voice of wonder.

"Sure."

From her place of concealment Sally

watched, too astonished to move. What in the world was Henry Williams trying to do now?

The second man joined the sheriff, and both stared incredulously at the spectacled Wreck.

"So it was *you* who stole my horse," said Bob Wells, still in a tone of unbelief.

"Just utilized him," said the Wreck. "He was running loose."

"An *you've* been running a stick-up game!"

The Wreck seated himself comfortably on a rock and grinned. Obviously, he was enjoing himself.

"I decline to answer, on the usual grounds," he remarked. "You needn't keep that gun on me unless you're nervous. I'm not armed. I left my rifle on the horse."

The sheriff was staring in growing amazement.

"Well, I'll be damned," he muttered. "A stick-up man! I used to think there was something queer about you, but I never guessed that. Did you stick up all three parties?"

"No answer, on same grounds," said the Wreck, with a smile.

"I'll have plenty of witnesses, I reckon," said the sheriff. "But, doggone it, you've certainly sprung something on us."

"It's a nice day," remarked the Wreck, gazing up at a white cloud.

The sheriff's eyes wandered and his glance roved the hillside.

"Where's your gang?" he asked, suddenly.

"What gang?" The Wreck's tone was innocent.

"The bunch that are in on this with you?"

"Who said there was anybody in with me? I didn't."

"It happens we know about the rest. Where are they?"

"Well, if I was a sheriff," drawled the Wreck, "and if I thought there was anybody else I wanted, I'd go and look for 'em."

"You may as well come through," said Bob Wells, sternly.

"There's nobody here, at any rate."

"You're a liar."

The Wreck grinned pleasantly and yawned.

"Maybe," he assented. "I suppose they'll say I'm a liar if I tell them about your horse."

The sheriff flushed.

"Who rode the other horse over here?" he demanded.

"Nobody."

"That's a lie, too."

"Some day I'll lick you for that," observed the Wreck, genially.

"What would you be doing with two horses if you didn't have somebody else with you?"

"I'm a trick rider."

Bob Wells stood glowering.

"You're a fresh bird," he muttered. "You're the only four-eyed hold-up I ever saw. And to think of you living over at the Bar-M for a week—two weeks! Pretty smooth, Henry Williams, which I don't reckon is your name."

"Pretty smooth," agreed the Wreck, with a nod.

"What is your name, anyhow?"

"You wouldn't believe me."

"I dunno. I'm pretty nearly ready to believe anything. If I heard you'd done a couple of murders I'd believe that."

The Wreck began playing with a handful of pebbles.

"We'll get your gang anyhow," said the sheriff. "It's only a question of a little while."

The Wreck was humming a tune. Even Sally could hear him from her hiding-place, and it astonished her. Henry Williams had never done anything like that before.

"So you may as well come through," added the sheriff.

"You're repeating yourself," the Wreck reminded him.

Suddenly Bob Wells remembered something.

"Where's that flivver of yours?"

This was news to the Wreck. He had supposed that the flivver was also captive.

"She's in Montana," he said.

"Where?"

"I told you."

"You worked both ways, didn't you?"

observed the sheriff. "Flivver and horseback."

"I'm hearing you say it," said the Wreck.

"Well, you're in for about life, Henry Williams, unless they happen to get you away from me. And in that case—" The sheriff made a significant gesture.

The Wreck smiled again and reached for another handful of pebbles. And just then Bob Wells remembered another thing, and it startled him.

"What became of Sally Morgan?" he demanded.

"Miss Morgan? Oh, she got her train."

"When?"

"Same day she started for it."

"Sure about that, are you?"

"I ought to know, hadn't I?"

The sheriff regarded him doubtfully.

"If I had the least suspicion she didn't," he said, slowly, "I'd shoot you where you sit."

"Uh-huh. Well, she got it, all right."

"I ought to wring your neck, anyhow, just for luck. The nerve of you, passing yourself off for a tourist on decent people, and riding around the country with *my* girl!"

"Some joke," admitted the Wreck.

Bob Wells turned for a whispered consultation with his companion. Together they subjected the Wreck to a long, puzzled scrutiny. It did not appear to annoy him.

"Well, no more nonsense," said the sheriff. "Lead us to your gang."

"Nobody around here, sheriff."

"We know better."

"No," said the Wreck, shaking his head. "I know better."

"Going to make us take a look, are you?"

"I'm not making you. But if you want to waste your time, go ahead."

The Wreck was disappointed. He had been trying amazingly hard to appear convincing, but evidently he had failed. He did not think he had protested too much; he thought he had been doing it about right. But somehow he could not put it over.

His only hope now was that Sally had managed to disappear. He wanted to keep her out of it, at any cost. He had figured that if he went along with the sheriff there would be a chance to escape later. Then he could come back for her. It was not much of a plan, but at least it gave her another chance.

"We'll take him along with us, Jim," said the sheriff. "You keep a good eye on him. And you, Williams—" He paused to give his words effect. "If anybody fires on us, you'll get yours, first of all."

"You're a big fathead," said the Wreck, irrelevantly.

"Get up," ordered the sheriff.

The Wreck obeyed. For an instant he stood contemplating a dash downhill. They might not be able to hit him if he kept dodging, and if he could once make the horses there was no telling what sort of a chase he could lead them. It would give Sally an opporunity, anyhow. But he never had a chance to test the idea.

Out from behind her boulder stepped Sally Morgan, her eyes very bright and her cheeks red under the tan. She walked briskly into the group.

"Hell!" said the Wreck. "Now you've done it."

Bob Wells fell back a pace and gaped at her.

"Sally!" he cried.

(To be concluded NEXT WEEK.)

WINTER

LOW-leaning skies and bitter winds
That drive and swirl the passive snow;
High in the west, one lonely star;
Beneath, gaunt pines 'gainst sunset's glow.

Albert Livingston Cooke.

Shif'less

by Charles Wesley Sanders

OLD SHIPMAN looked up quickly as he became aware that a man was standing in the doorway of his store. Shipman had been counting his day's receipts. He had a pile of silver and a pile of bills in front of him, and there were other bills and other pieces of silver in the open drawer of the cash-register.

It was past ten o'clock, and Shipman knew that it was not a safe hour for a man who was alone in his store, counting money. He would not have been surprised if the man in the doorway had had him covered with a gun and had commanded him to throw up his hands. There had been a right smart lot of hold-ups and robberies recently, as Shipman well knew, so, before he recognized the man in the doorway his hand had clutched the butt of the pistol lying on a shelf directly beneath the cash-register.

However, when he saw who the man was, his hand came away from the pistol and a dry chuckle sounded in his throat.

"Well, Tom Lacey," he said, "where do you-all think you come from?"

Tom Lacey advanced into the room, though there had been nothing invitational in old Shipman's tone. Shipman did not look at him as he came up to the counter and stopped. Shipman's eyes were again busy with the bills and the pieces of silver.

Shipman had not seen Lacey for three years. He remembered him as a rather gangling boy who hadn't had much to say for himself, a typical Lacey. They were a shiftless lot, those Laceys. That was why Shipman had chuckled when he had seen who his late visitor was. The idea of a Shipman grabbing at a pistol to defend himself from a Lacey was ridiculous, though the Laceys were a shootin' crew.

Lacey did not answer Shipman's question. He stood close to the counter, but did not lean against it. His head was up, his eyes were bright, and his lips were molded into a straight line.

"Twenty-three," said Shipman to himself. "And a quarter, thirty-five, forty-five—"

He finished his counting and carefully placed the money in a leather pouch. Then he glanced at Lacey.

"Want something?" he asked.

"Yes."

"Well, name hit, man."

"I want to marry Delpha."

That could rouse only anger in Shipman. If Lacey were joking, Shipman would be angry because any man had the temerity to speak lightly about the apple of his eye. If Lacey were in earnest, Shipman would be angry because a Lacey could dream of marrying a Shipman.

Shipman's hand went to the butt of the pistol again. He eyed Lacey fiercely, and because of his anger he failed to see that Lacey had developed into a fine specimen of manhood, as fine as could be seen in a day's travel in East Tennessee.

"You jokin'?" Shipman demanded.

"I was never more in earnest in my life. I wouldn't joke about anything that concerned Delpha."

"You pore pup," Shipman lashed out. "To think of one of you shif'less, good-for-nothin' Laceys wantin' to marry my daughter. Why, don't you know that she's just been graduated from a business college in the city? Don't you know that she can get a job that 'll pay her more money than the hull Lacey family put together earns? An' you want to marry her. Get out of my store!"

But Lacey didn't get out. He folded his arms across his chest and stood looking at Shipman. Shipman noticed that his right hand was beneath his coat. His eyes on the bulge of the hand, Shipman made a little, tentative movement which brought his own pistol two inches closer to the edge of the shelf. He had expected to see Lacey's hand move as it tightened on the butt of Lacey's pistol. But there was no such movement.

That didn't convince Shipman that Lacey hadn't a pistol in a holster under his coat, however. He knew well enough that he could have his own pistol above the counter in plain view, and Lacey could beat him into action. Them Laceys had always been hell with firearms. For generations, so far as anybody knew, they had ranged the hills and the mountains for game. A lazy, drawling set of shiftless whites they were, but with an unnatural quickness when handling a gun of any kind.

"Why don't you bring out your pistol, Mr. Shipman?" Lacey said with a grim smile. "I'm not stopping you."

Shipman seemed to have swallowed his chuckles. He might, from the sound he made, be choking on one. It was a kind of snarling rattle.

"You got a gun in yore holster," he accused.

With a sneer Lacey threw back his coat. No holster was strapped to his chest.

"I haven't got a gun on me," he said. "You can feel my pockets if you like."

"I wouldn't touch you," Shipman said. "Get out of my store."

Lacey took a cigar from his pocket, bit off the end, and applied a match. He puffed for a moment in silence. Then he removed the cigar and looked at the burning end with half-closed eyes.

"Just what's your objection to me, Mr. Shipman?" he asked.

"Objection?" Shipman repeated. "My Gawd, hain't you a Lacey? Do you think I educated my daughter to let her marry into the most shif'less family in the hull county? I reckon not!"

"You know I've been away for a long time, don't you?" Lacey asked.

"Oh, you been away, but how do I know where you been? Mebbe you been in prison. You couldn't support yorese'f 'ceptin' you stole."

Lacey's face darkened. He took a forward step. Shipman's pistol flashed into view and was pointed at Lacey's heart.

"Another step," said Shipman.

"And a Shipman would be guilty of shooting an unarmed man," said Lacey, the cloud swiftly passing from his face. "Well, a Lacey never did that."

"Get out!" Shipman ordered, but he put the gun back on the shelf.

"All right," Lacey said. "But it's only fair to tell you that I'm going up to your house. Delpha and me are going to elope to-night."

That was the closest a Shipman had ever come to shooting an unarmed man. Shipman's rage left him frothing. It was all he could do to keep from speeding a bullet into Lacey.

"If you come near my house to-night, or at any other time, I'll kill you, whether you are armed or not," he said.

Lacey had gained the door. He turned in the doorway.

"I'm coming armed, pappy," he said coldly. "If we have to shoot this thing out, we'll have to do it. I saw Delpha earlier in the evening, and she said if you refused your permission for our marriage she would run off with me this very night. I'll take her to the minister's house, and in the mornin' we'll be married."

"When you come, come shootin'," Shipman screamed. "The minute yore foot touches one inch of my land, I'm goin' to bore you through. Get out!"

"I'll be at yore house in forty minutes," Lacey said, and stepped out into the night. "Will you be sure Delpha is indoors, out of harm's way?"

"You don't need to give me any advice about takin' care of my daughter," Shipman cried. "I been doin' hit for the last twenty years, an' I guess I can keep on doin' hit."

Shipman put on his coat, slipped the pouch into an outside pocket, turned off the lights, locked the door, and stepped outside also. Lacey was not in sight. Shipman got into the rusty old runabout, which stood at the curb, and sped toward home.

He turned into the drive at a speed which made the stones fly, and stopped the runabout beside the porch of a trim bungalow. His rage increased as he looked at the bungalow bulking itself in the night. Tom Lacey had never lived in nothin' but a shotgun house. Delpha had always known a home. There was the distinction between the two families for you! And Tom Lacey wanted to marry Delpha. It was fair sickenin'.

Shipman stamped up on the porch and put his hand on the screen door. There was a stir at the end of the porch back of the vines.

"Hello, father."

Shipman strode up to the hammock in which Delpha was sitting and confronted her angrily.

"Tom Lacey was at the store a few minutes ago," he said.

"He was here before that," said Delpha sweetly.

"He wants to marry you," Shipman said.

"And I," said Delphia, "want to marry him. Why not?"

Shipman was ready to froth again, but he controlled himself. Since his daughter had come home from the school in the city, he had noticed a difference in her. She was, of course, older in years, and that might have accounted for a little of the difference. But she had immeasurably more dignity. There was a coolness, a calmness about her which had made Shipman look at her keenly more than once when he thought she wasn't looking at him. He had a notion that if he lost his temper now he might make a fool of himself before her. So he dropped into a chair, took a minute, and then said in a low voice:

"You know what the Laceys have always been, don't you?"

"What have they always been?" Delpha asked.

"Idlers and wasters."

"They never had much to waste, had they?"

"You know what I mean," Shipman said, his voice rising a little. "They been good for nothin' ever since anybody can remember. A bit of ground, a little corn and beans, some sweet potatoes, a hawg to kill in winter—that has been all that any Lacey ever wanted. Put the roof of a shotgun house over their heads and they was satisfied."

"Maybe that doesn't include Tom," said Delpha.

"And the way they've always used their women," Shipman went on. "Why, just think of them women. Tom's own mother died of overwork an'—an' the bearin' of children. At one time they was twelve of Tom's family crowded together in that shack they had out on the Mill Pike, an' his mother done the work for the family, what was done. She 'tended the corn an' the beans and the sweet potatoes an' kep' the house, an' even helped butcher the hawg at butcherin' time. The old man—what 'd he ever do? Why, roamed the hills with a rifle in the crook of his arm. Even if the family had nothin', he always had a good rifle. An' them older boys, look at their women. That boy Bob got married not more 'n five years ago, and lookit his wife to-day. Meet her in the road an' she seems like a woman of forty, though she hain't more 'n twenty-five.

"I've give you an education, Delpha. I sent you through the high school here and sent you to the business college in the city, because you said that was what you wanted. Are you goin' to throw away all yore learnin' on a Lacey? Why, in a few years all the prettiness will be gone out of yore face. You will be pale an' dragged out. Them Laceys has always been brutes to their women, an' they always will be."

"Maybe Tom won't," Delpha said.

Shipman's hot anger flooded through him at such an answer.

"Maybe Tom won't?" he repeated. "Is

that all you can say? Well, Tom will. A Lacey is a Lacey, always has been, always will be. I know the breed."

"You've seen Tom to-night, have you, father?"

"I said I had."

"Did you threaten to shoot him?"

"Mebbe I did."

"Did he have a gun?"

"He was afraid to come near me, totin' a gun."

"I made him promise he wouldn't. I knew you wouldn't shoot an unarmed man."

Shipman looked at his watch. Lacey was due in fifteen minutes. Shipman went into the house, came back, sat down on the top step.

"What have you in your coat pockets, father?" Delpha asked coldly.

"I've got what I've got," Shipman said sulkily.

"Two guns," said Delpha.

"Lacey said he was comin' up here," said Shipman. "I told him if he come he better come shootin'."

"And you expect he will?"

"You go into the house."

"Very well."

Shipman looked at her blankly as she went through the door. Her sudden meekness was disconcerting.

"Oh," he said, a light breaking, "you think he can outshoot me, do you?"

"Maybe he won't come shooting," said Delpha.

In that she was mistaken. She was the light of Tom Lacey's world, but it was a fact that Tom Lacey had been born in a shotgun house, and it was a fact that his people were the kind of people Shipman had described. Lacey had been outside that influence for three years, but a man doesn't throw off the effect of environment and heredity in three years. Shipman's taunts had thrown Lacey back into the hard company of his fathers.

Lacey had not gone armed into Shipman's store, but he had gone armed to within a hundred feet of Shipman's store. When he retraced that hundred feet while Shipman had been putting out the lights and locking up, Lacey had kicked over a stone and taken a gun from beneath it. It was not a modern toy gun. It was a big, long-barreled forty-two. Death was in every one of its six chambers. Hit by one of those bullets, a man, Lacey said to himself, would know that something was tearing into him. Lacey also knew with what perfection of marksmanship he could throw a bullet out of that perfect gun.

He felt that he had kept his word with Delpha. He had been meek and mild for her sake. He had stood Shipman's abuse. That had got him nowhere. Shipman had invited him to shoot it out. In spite of what they were in the social scale, the Laceys had never declined an invitation to shoot out anything. Give any one of them a gun and he was an iron man, afraid of nothing.

Tom Lacey was like that when he came to the white-picket gate which would admit him to the walk leading up to the Shipman home. His gun was in the right-hand pocket of his coat. The bottom button of the coat was fastened. He could snatch the gun from the pocket in an incredibly brief time, the button offering just enough resistance to keep the gun from snagging on the pocket.

He pushed open the gate and stepped in on the path. A full moon was near the zenith. There was plenty of light. He saw that Shipman had been sitting on the bottom step of the porch. As Lacey started steadily up the walk, his right elbow crooked so that his hand was an inch from the gun butt, Shipman got to his feet. He had a gun in each hand.

Well, thought Lacey, he wasn't going to take an even break on the draw. Lacey's gun came out, but he held the muzzle pointed down. That muzzle would come up fast enough when Shipman made the movement which should be a preface to the first shot. Lacey had a notion that he would throw a bullet up the walk before Shipman threw one down.

"Come on with hit, Shipman," he called. "You done got the best chance you'll git."

It was Lacey talk without the city veneer, too. But Shipman did not come on with "hit." Instead, he dropped his gun and raised his hands above his head.

"Drop your gun and come up here, Tom," Delpha's voice called.

Lacey had a moment of hesitation. A man can't revert and come back all in a breath. He stood holding his gun.

"Tom!"

Delpha's voice was sharp. There was such a ring in it as Lacey had sometimes heard in Shipman's voice. Lacey dropped his gun and ran up the walk. At the foot of the steps he stopped alongside of Shipman and stared at Delpha standing just outside the screen door.

Delpha held a rifle in her hands, and its muzzle was directed toward the small of her father's back. Shipman's eyes were directed front, and Lacey saw that there was the pallor of fear in his cheeks.

"Pick up his guns and bring them here, Tom," Delpha said sweetly.

Lacey obeyed.

"You can put down your hands, father," said Delpha.

Shipman dropped his hands and wheeled about.

"You-all think you done a right smart of a trick, don't you?" he demanded in a shaken voice.

Delpha came down to the edge of the porch and stared into her parent's eyes.

"Why, father," she said, "you're frightened."

"Frightened?" he choked. "Good Gawd, who wouldn't be frightened? I thought you was goin' to shoot me. If you had, what do you s'pose would have happened to you? You'd at least have been arrested, and it 'd been in the city papers, and—oh, good Lord!"

"Oh, you were frightened on my account," said Delpha. "Well, let's sit down and talk this matter over. You sit here, father. Tom, you sit here by me."

"I don't know as I want to talk things over," Shipman gritted.

"Tom and I will leave, then."

"Oh, talk, then," Shipman snapped.

When they had taken the positions she indicated, Lacey was by her side and Shipman was across from them. There was a sullen, stubborn look on Shipman's face. Tom was smiling, a little grimly. Shipman did not see the smile. He wouldn't look at the damn' snake. Him and Lacey would have a settlement by and by when Delpha wasn't on hand. This wasn't the last of hit, by any manner o' means.

"Father," Delpha said, "do you know what happened when I first went to the city—the first month I was there?"

"Not 'specially," Shipman answered.

"Why, I wrote you that the amount of money we had agreed upon for me for spending wasn't going to be enough," Delpha said.

"And I raised hit fifteen dollars a month," Shipman said. "What has that got to do with all this?"

"When I was there six months, what happened?" Delpha asked.

"Why," said Shipman, his memory refreshed, "you wrote that the former sum would do. You was humorous about hit, I recollect. You said the cost of livin' had gone down."

"Do you know who made the difference?"

"Certainly not."

"It was Tom Lacey."

Shipman's face darkened again from his ready anger."

"Do you mean—" he began.

"I mean that Tom Lacey made me see that I was a fool," said Delpha passionately. "He made me see that I wasn't doing the square thing by you."

"What you was doin' was none of his business," Shipman flared out.

"Well, I don't know," Delpha sighed. "I've come to believe that you never can tell whose business is whose business."

"I hain't seein' much from all this," Shipman stated.

"You will—maybe," Delpha said. "Father, I'd been in the city six months when I met Tom. I met him accidentally on the street. I spoke to him, and he stopped and stared at me with his hat in his hand as if I were a princess or a queen or something. When he was able to talk, he asked me if I would go to a show with him that night. I said I would."

"Picked right up with a Lacey, knowin' what the Laceys have always been," her father sneered.

"Picked right up with a Lacey," said

Delpha. "Correct! That was the creed of the girls I had become acquainted with. They studied as little as they could. They were out of school as often as possible. They went to picture shows and dances whenever they could get any one to take them."

"They wasn't all that way, was they?" Shipman asked.

"No; there were some mighty fine girls among them. But your dear daughter, father, seemed inclined toward the picture show, dancing crowd. In the first six months she was in school she hardly learned a thing. She was from the country, and she was just finding out what a good time a girl away from home could have."

"Well?" Shipman said.

"Have you looked at Tom closely since he came into the store to-night, father?" Delpha asked.

"Don't know as I have."

"Look now, then!"

At first Shipman thought he would be damned if he'd look, but he felt that the eyes of both the young people were fastened on him with a kind of challenge. So he looked at Tom Lacey.

He saw a tall, lean young man, with a lean, strong face, a pair of steady eyes, a firm mouth. Lacey, he saw, too, was well dressed. His clothing was simple, and there was not even a watch-chain sight. Maybe this simplicity had caused Shipman to overlook Lacey's well-groomed appearance.

"What do you see?" Delpha asked.

"I see Tom Lacey, I reckon," Shipman answered.

"You see," Delpha declared passionately, "a man who has made himself over. That's what you see. Let me tell you: One night Tom and I went to a picture show. I was all wrapped up in it as usual. I wasn't paying much attention to Tom. When the show was over, I looked at him and found him fast asleep.

"He took me home. When we got there, I took hold of his coat lapels and I asked him if he wasn't getting enough rest through going about with me. He wouldn't be frank with me at first, but I finally got out of him that the time he was giving to me was the time he had been giving to books. He had started to work in a textile mill at low wages. He was working and studying daytimes and studying at night.

"'Tom,' I said—for I'm not altogether a fool, father—'you have given up your studying at night to run around to dances and picture shows with me.'

"'Why, no,' he said, 'I study after I get home.'

"'How much sleep have you been getting?' I asked.

"'Oh,' he said, 'I don't need much sleep. I get four hours a night on an average.'

"'Why have you been doing this for me, Tom?' I asked.

"He suddenly took me in his arms and—"

"Haven't you gone about far enough with this, Delpha," Lacey broke in. "I don't know that that part of it is any of his business."

Shipman was looking out along the walk as it lay in a flood of moonlight. Delpha said no more for a while. Lacey sat with folded arms, his eyes on Shipman. He rather despised Shipman. The old fellow needed a shave. The marks of his day's and his evening's toil were still on him. He wasn't such a much when you came to look him over carefully.

But Shipman's thoughts were his own. He'd been married. He'd had a girl—long ago. He could remember moonlighted nights, somewhat like this, though moonlight is not the same at fifty as it is at twenty.

"Go on," said Shipman presently, in a low voice.

"He suddenly took me in his arms," said Delpha, and her voice was not so steady as it had been. "He said he had looked up to me ever since I had been a little girl, and he had been a boy—one of the Lacey boys. He had gone to the city because he had wanted to make good for my sake. He was studying so that he would keep pace with me. The superintendent had said there was a foremanship waiting for him after a while. He has that foremanship now, father. And he's going on till he's a superintendent.

"And I asked him why he had let me

interfere with his work and studies; why he had let me drag him around to picture shows and dances when he should have been in his room, doing the things he wanted.

"'Why, Delpha,' he said, 'I aim always to give you whatever you want; to do the things you want me to do. No Lacey has ever done that for his woman. Whatever you say is all right. Whatever you do is all right. You just say what you want and I'll get it for you. I'll never speak an unkind word to you, and you'll never have to work if you don't want to. I love you. I've always loved you. And that's all there is about it."

There was another long silence. Delpha seemed determined to make her father do his part.

"And then what?" Shipman asked.

"Why, I began to study on my own account," said Delpha. "I quit the business school and began to study the things that would help me to be the kind of wife Tom deserves."

"You never told me you had quit the business school," Shipman accused.

"I couldn't without explaining everything," said Delpha. "And you're so unreasonable, father."

"Thasso?" said Shipman.

He sat for a while motionless and silent, staring at the moonlight. Then he got slowly to his feet.

"I'll be back in half an hour," he said. "You be here that long, Lacey?"

"Yes, sir."

Shipman went into the house. In thirty minutes he was back. He was a much improved person. The marks of the day's work were gone. He was shaved, and he wore a mohair suit which he had bought at the beginning of the hot weather. A dark bow tie was neatly fastened in an immaculately white collar. Even his shoes were shined.

"Why, father, how nice you look," said Delpha.

"Oh, I been a pretty good-looking feller in my day," said Shipman.

He stood for a moment longer, flushing and frowning.

"When you-all going to be married?" he asked.

"To-morrow, positively," Lacey answered.

"It 'll be here," said Shipman with finality. "I hain't goin' to have Delpha married no place but in her own home. I —I reckon you will want yore relations to come, Lacey."

"They would like to come," Lacey said. "A Lacey has never been married without our all being there. We kind of stick together in things like that."

"Well, have 'em," Shipman said.

Once more he paused. He seemed to be waiting for something. Lacey and Delpha sat looking at him. Several times his lips moved as if he were about to speak. At last he broke out:

"Hell, Lacey, why don't you stick out yore hand. Do you want me to do hit all."

Lacey stuck out his hand.

A WINTER EVENING

IN the woodland no melodious rally;
Presage of the springtime—not a breath!
On the hill and in the sheeted valley
Silence as inexorable as death.

Yet beneath this numbing coil and cumber,
Hearkening but the word to bid it start—
Leap to life from out its icy slumber—
Somewhere waits the living vernal heart.

Clinton Scollard.

Gold

by

Artemus Calloway

"THE vicious brute!" muttered Gerald Carter as his dark-brown eyes traveled over the bruises displayed by Miguel Hernandez. "And you say—"

"The Señor Penton did it," completed Miguel. "First—he geeve me the terrible blow on the face. Then the mucha bad kick in the side. Afterward—"

Miguel expressed the rest of it with an expressive shrug and feeling gestures. The cook for the little mining expedition had fared badly at the hands of Mark Penton.

Gerald Carter was troubled. Three months before he, Mark Penton, and Arthur Brace had set out from Ceiba for a prospecting trip in the interior of Honduras. With them had come Miguel Hernandez as cook and handy man about the camp. For three months they searched the mountains for gold. And they found it. Not enough to make them wealthy, but sufficient to assure them that success lay ahead. From the tumbling mountain streams they had plucked yellow nuggets and gravel to the extent of something like seven thousand dollars. And besides—higher up on one of the most pretentious of the Pija range—there had been discovered indications of what appeared to be a real vein. Then had come the rainy season, leaving nothing to do but return to the coast and come back at a later date.

Fifty miles from Ceiba, Arthur Brace came down with fever. Carter realized that the sick man could not stand to travel further and, because a flooded tent isn't a comfortable dwelling for a fever patient, had found a little cave where he fitted up a comfortable bunk for Brace and swung his own hammock. Penton continued to occupy the living tent because of his fear of contracting Brace's disease—and also because he didn't want to take his turn at waiting on the sick man. A few feet from Penton's tent stood the cook tent, over which Miguel presided.

Two days after the little party went into camp Penton came over to the cave. Then it was that he showed himself for the treacherous, snarling beast he really was.

"We've got to get away from here," he told Carter after having assured himself that Brace was so deep in delirium as not to understand. "First thing you know *we'll* be down with fever. I don't want it. We've got to move."

"It would kill Arthur," said Carter softly.

Penton swore. "A man's first duty is to himself!"

Carter's face went white.

"That's the speech of selfishness, Penton. And I hope you didn't mean it. However"—Carter frowned—"if you are in

such a hurry to get away, you may go. One-third of the gold we've taken is yours. We'll divide—"

Penton interrupted. "You'll let me have Miguel as guide?"

Carter shook his head. "No. I need him here. You'll have to go alone."

"Not me," muttered Penton. "I don't know the way. I'd never get there."

He walked away, mumbling. And there the matter ended—for the moment. But Penton was determined to make matters as unpleasant as possible. He sulked, mistreated Miguel, struck him—when Carter wasn't looking.

And it was of these things that Gerald Carter was thinking as he stood at the cave entrance and watched Miguel shuffle back to the cook tent. The water was falling in sheets. Miniature rivers tumbled down the mountainside while dark clouds rolled up from the south—a promise of more dampness to come. The pack-burros huddled together under the little tent where Miguel had tethered them out of the rain. From the door of Penton's tent came a wisp of pipe-smoke.

Carter shook his head. He was disappointed in Penton. Back in the States when the three men decided to try their fortunes in Honduras, Penton had appeared to be just the sort of companion for such a venture. But Carter and Brace had soon been disillusioned.

The rain ceased—almost suddenly—but Carter knew that it would soon come again. That within five or ten minutes the flood would again descend.

Inside the cave Brace was tossing on his bunk.

"Water!" he groaned.

Carter stepped softly to the sick man's side, and dampening a sponge, moistened his lips. Afterward he allowed a few drops of water to trickle down the parched throat. Then followed a big dose of quinin.

Brace babbled in his delirium. Babbled of home, of his mother, of many things. Carter felt helpless. Once he had thought of sending Miguel to Ceiba for a doctor, but quickly sidetracked that idea. In the first place he doubted if a doctor would come. Fifty miles through the mountains in the rainy season is no easy task. Besides, Gerald Carter knew that he was doing the very things a doctor would do. He had picked up considerable information regarding tropical fever and its treatment during the past few months.

He walked back to the cave entrance. The rain was falling again. And coming toward him was Penton.

Penton lost no time in getting to business.

"I got a proposition to make."

"Yes?"

The other lowered his voice. "Brace in there ain't got much chance anyway. You know the way to the coast—I don't. Never was good on directions. Miguel can stay here and look after Brace. When we get to Ceiba we can send some one out to bring him in. Then we'll catch a steamer for the States. And we'll only have to divide the gold two ways instead of three. I'm sick of this damned country!"

Gerald Carter's fist landed under Penton's right ear. Penton dropped to his knees, drawing his revolver as he did so. Carter kicked it from his hand.

The men glared at each other. Penton, crouching, watching. Carter waiting.

"Stand up!" Carter's voice snapped like a whip. The other man obeyed.

A moment later Carter brought two canvas bags from the cave. First he divided the contents into three equal parts. Then he dumped two of the parts back into one of the bags, the third portion he poured into the other bag. This he handed to Penton.

"There's your share. I don't care what you do with it. All I ask is that you remain as far away from me as possible. Stay in your tent—go to Ceiba—go anywhere you please. But keep away from me!"

Penton slouched away, taking his gold with him. And an hour later Carter was much surprised to come from the cave and find three natives in front of Penton's tent talking with him. They were ragged, disreputable looking fellows, but each man carried a rifle. And Carter felt strangely troubled. Ten feet from the tent two burros were hobbled, evidently the property of the newcomers.

Twelve miles away there was a small native village. Carter knew that a small force of soldiers was kept there to keep down possible insurrections. The thought swept through his brain that perhaps he'd better slip away and try to secure help. There was no telling what Penton and the brigand-appearing natives might attempt. But this idea was quickly discarded. If Penton intended no harm the soldiers were not needed. If he intended harm, Carter would not be permitted to get away alive. Besides—he couldn't leave Brace at the mercy of Penton and the villainous-looking natives. Carter wished they might have been able to make the native village before Brace became too ill too travel. Medical assistance could not be had there, but there would at least now have been some measure of protection.

Penton walked over to the cook tent and spoke to Miguel. Miguel nodded and followed the white man to his tent. Carter nodded understandingly. Penton intended mischief and Miguel would be frightened or bought over.

Night came. Carter sat by Brace's bed, listening to the sick man's heavy breathing. For the past several hours he had been reasonably quiet. Carter believed the quinin must be taking effect. Occasionally he stepped outside, but heard nothing from Penton. And then—when flesh could stand no more—he fell asleep.

Carter awoke with the morning. The rain was yet falling. He pressed a hand to Brace's forehead. It was moist. The watcher heaved a sigh of relief. The fever was under control. Brace would live!

He rose and walked to the cave entrance. Then he started. The camp appeared deserted! Not a burro was in sight—not a native. He hurried to Penton's tent. It was empty. Penton had gone, and with him the strange natives Carter had seen the afternoon before. Miguel could not be found.

Gerald Carter hurried back to the cave. In one corner he searched rapidly. "Gone!" he muttered. "Got it while I was asleep!"

Then he felt under Brace's bunk.

"A rifle and one pistol left. And I think I'll need them both. Penton will be back as soon as he discovers that I filled a bag with rocks and sand for him to take away last night, while I hid the gold elsewhere. He'll never be satisfied with his share which I gave him yesterday. Just as soon as he looks into the bag he stole from this cave—look out!"

He was worried. He knew it was only a question of time until he would be attacked. And it would be five to one. Well, he would give a good accounting of himself.

And then he heard a shout. He recognized Penton's voice. Carter crept cautiously to the entrance. No one was in sight. Then came Penton's voice again—from behind a rock.

"I've come back to get that gold. Thought you was puttin' something over on me, didn't you?"

Carter laughed, keeping out of the way.

"You come back for a chunk of lead. That's what you'll get."

This time Penton laughed.

"Don't be so sure. I've got help. Natives who'll kill a hundred men for a share of the gold you've got. They're all armed. And if you've got any ammunition it's well hidden. I couldn't find all the guns when I looked through the cave, but I got your cartridges."

Carter smiled. Penton hadn't got all his cartridges. But he said nothing. Penton continued:

"Bring the gold outside and put it down. You'll not be harmed."

"See you in hell first!" Carter's tone was emphatic. He'd fight the five of them. Might as well die with the gold as without it. He couldn't trust Penton.

Penton's rifle cracked. The bullet whistled over Carter's head and buried itself somewhere in the rear of the cave.

Then followed a general fusillade. A native somewhere to the left was using black powder cartridges, as Carter could tell from the smoke which rose foglike only to be beaten down by the rain.

Carter rolled a huge stone to the mouth of the cave and stretched out behind it. Now and again his rifle spoke. Once he heard a gun roar almost directly above and a bullet knocked splinters from his barricade. One of the natives, Carter was sure.

Brace groaned. Carter swore because he could do nothing for the sick man. He had his hands full trying to save both their lives.

Once the rain stopped. And with its stopping the determination of the opposing force appeared to increase. They rushed the cave, but Carter drove them back. His rifle-barrel grew hot. He discarded it for the time being and used his revolver.

For a time there was quiet. Carter's rifle-barrel cooled. He reloaded it. And again the cave was rushed.

The rain came with the attack. Great sheets of water like cloudbursts. From it came sheets of flame as rifles spoke their message of death.

Carter saw a man stumble and fall, struggle to rise and then crumple in a heap. He knew he had one less foe.

And again Carter's fire was too much for his former partner and his allies. They fell back. Once Penton stumbled and Carter thought he must be wounded, but when his rifle spoke from behind a rock a moment later Carter knew that the brains of the outlaws was still in the fighting.

"Water!" mumbled Brace. Carter started to rise, then dropped back as he remembered that he couldn't leave the front unprotected. Brace would have to do without water.

There were longer intervals between the firing now, but Carter could tell that greater care was being taken. More bullets were finding their way into the cave. Some were coming perilously close. Brace's bed was out of range, but Carter expected a bullet to ricochet from the rock walls at any moment and strike the sick man.

Darkness fell. And now Carter knew that it must soon be over. Brace could not live without attention. He would have to do something for him. And then would be Penton's chance. Or even if he shouldn't be caught away from the entrance, he would be surprised by a night attack. The outlaws would be upon him before he knew it. It was only a question of time. And very short time at that.

Then from somewhere out in the dark there was a crack. Carter felt his right arm go numb. One of Penton's bullets had found its mark.

Carter went suddenly weak. The game was up. No need to hold out longer. Perhaps he could make some kind of arrangement whereby Brace might be cared for.

The gun-firing outside increased. Rifles cracked with machine gunlike rapidity. But no bullets were falling inside the cave!

Carter wondered. Painfully he dragged himself to the entrance and peered out. Sheets of flame split the night. Men were cursing. And some were running away while others pursued! Carter swooned.

When Gerald Carter opened his eyes again Miguel Hernandez was grinning down at him.

"What the—"

But Miguel silenced him. "You all right now. Meester Brace him all right, too. Penton dead. Honduras robbers dead, too. Miguel him all right."

"How—"

But Miguel interrupted.

"Penton fool. He think me no mind what he do to me. He ask me join him and other men for to get gold from you. Me fool him. Me say yes. Then me slip 'way to village. Get soldiers. Come back. Soldiers keel Penton and other mens. Meester Carter and Meester Brace no be keeled."

Miguel grinned. "Mucha bad luck for Meester Penton when he kick Miguel!"

And Carter agreed.

THE editor takes this opportunity, in the last number for 1921, to wish all his readers a Happy New Year, and to assure them that, contributing toward this end, Argosy-Allstory for 1922 will carry to them the richest cargo of entertaining stories it has ever freighted.

Classified Advertising continued from page 3, Front Section.

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