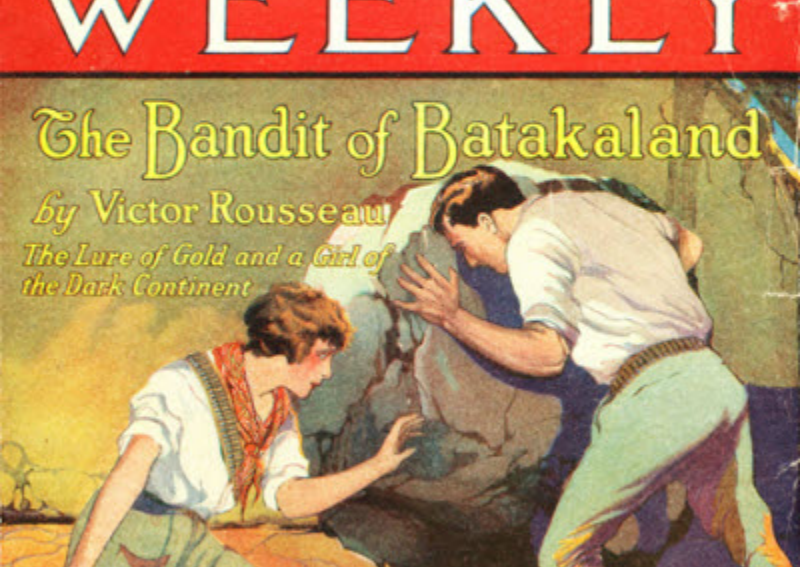
ARGOSY ALL-STORY WEEKLY



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ARGOSY-ALLSTORY WEEKLY

VOL. CXL CONTENTS FOR JANUARY 28, 1922 NUMBER 2

FIVE CONTINUED STORIES

ONE NOVELETTE

LONG COMPLETE STORY

SIX SHORT STORIES

THE FRANK A. MUNSEY COMPANY, 280 BROADWAY, NEW YORK, and TEMPLE HOUSE, TEMPLE AVENUE, E. C., LONDON

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ARGOSY-ALLSTORY
WEEKLY

VOL. CXL SATURDAY, JANUARY 28, 1922 NUMBER 2

The Bandit of Batakaland

Part I

by Victor Rousseau

Author of "While Dorion Lives," "The Big Muskeg," "Wooden Spoil," etc.

CHAPTER I.

A JOB WELL LOST.

IT was not often that a subordinate employee obtained the ear of Theodore Eltzmann, president of the New Krugersdorp Gold-Fields; but Dean Gervaise was to have it. Dean realized as he entered Eltzmann's office that the interview was likely to prove no less strenuous than he had anticipated.

Eltzmann was interested in a score of other ventures, but the New Krugersdorp was one of the richest of the Johannesburg mines—not the most sensational, but the most solidly prosperous and substantial.

Eltzmann, a flabby white man with a bald head and flaming rim of hair-scrub, looked up from his desk and grunted. He took up a cigar box, extracted one, then flung a couple across his desk toward his visitor.

Dean ignored the action, which, in any one but Eltzmann, would have been indescribably contemptuous. But Eltzmann's bad manners were famous even in a city renowned for them. Looking at the man before him, Dean was conscious of a sort of respect which the magnate's history, rather than his looks, warranted.

Born in Whitechapel, Eltzmann had gravitated to South Africa at the time of the first gold discovery, and by sheer unscrupulous ability had fought his way to the leadership of the cosmopolitan band that dominated the City of Gold. In his youth he he had been actor, auctioneer, bartender, and many other things, ranging alphabetically to pugilist, which might have been black-lettered, for he had been the champion featherweight of the gold-fields in the first days; and, if zebra-hunting can be called an occupation, Eltzmann's amazing career had involved all the letters of the alphabet in its flamboyant history.

Just now Eltzmann was severely the mining magnate. He grunted again.

"Sit down, Mr. Jarvis," he snorted. "What's this damn nonsense about?"

"You sent for me," answered the young American, deciding to let Eltzmann take the initiative, which the latter did, from habit.

"You bet I sent for you when the superintendent tells me you're going to play a damn fool trick like that about the assays. I gave you Mr. Winter's job at the head of the department when he left last January, because I had good reports of you, and I like to help good men to rise. I said to meself, 'That's a promising young man, and if he knows his job and is faithful to the company I don't give a damn who he is or where he comes from. If he shows he's going to stick by us, we'll stick by him, and take care of his future.'"

All which speech, as both knew, was merely Eltzmann's way of sparring for an opening. Eltzmann had never heard of Dean's name until the day before, and he was perfectly aware that Dean was aware of it.

He shifted the cigar aggressively to the other corner of his mouth.

"D'jever hear of the New Krugersdorp going back on a faithful servant?" he demanded. "Or T. Eltzmann? Why, there's niggers—black niggers past work and drawing their three pounds pension a month, just because they done their duty by us. We stick together. You got to learn that, young man!"

All the while he spoke in a wheedling and, at the same time, bullying tone, Eltzmann was sizing Dean up out of the corners of his little eyes. He had not quite determined which category of fool he came in, or if he was holding up the company.

"Well, what's it all mean?" continued Eltzmann with a rising inflection. "What's back of it? Your best friend is the New Krugersdorp, Mr. Jarvis, let me tell you that."

"Gervaise, please."

"I don't give a damn what your name is!" roared Eltzmann with mock ferocity. "You just go straight back to Mr. Klein and tell him you seen me and you made a mistake. That's all. What?"

Dean was speaking quietly, but his manner compelled attention. "I did not understand that underhand work would be required of me, Mr. Eltzmann, and I had no reason to suspect it of a company like the New Krugersdorp. I won't do it. That's final."

Eltzmann choked a series of guttural explosions that sounded like the waking up of a gas engine. Two or three times he tried to speak, moderating his voice each time until he hit the keynote.

He threw up his hands and let his head loll over his shoulder, like a man tired of fools. He rolled his eyeballs upward.

"Well, well, I'll have to explain it all to you, Mr. Jarvis, I suppose," he said. "I don't know what you mean to insinuate against the New Krugersdorp. It sounds like a socialist newspaper, what you was saying. I s'pose you know I ain't the only stockholder in the company? And I s'pose you might have heard I made my pile when you were about as high as that desk, and it wouldn't matter a tinker's damn to me if the New Krugersdorp went to pot tomorrow, which it couldn't do, because our deep levels ain't more than tapped yet, and they're good for the next hundred years?

"All right, then. Now try to get it out of your head that I'm hiring you for to be underhand, as you call it. We got investors here, likewise in England, France, America, and all over the world. We got widows and orphans who's got to live, the same as us. They got to draw their dividends.

"We've never been a flash-in-the-pan mine, with a pocket here and another one nex' door, and living on the tailings out of the one till the nex' one was found. We're Old Reliable. We run a steady fifteen pennyweight to the ton minimum, year in and year out; sometimes more, sometimes a lot more. But we never run below fifteen pennyweights. We're known by that, same as a good soap's known by its trade-mark.

"That's our advertisement. The Old Reliable Gold-mine. Never less than fifteen pennyweights, and mostly more. We couldn't afford to assay less than that. The stockholders would think we was petering

out. All right. I see you understand me so far.

"Last month we started crushing on that Witwaters property. You're an engineer. You know that's where the vein in the banket runs a bit thin. And you know it spreads again on the other side, where our best deposits ain't hardly been touched yet. And just because last month's crushing, when that Witwaters stuff was thrown in, don't go above thirteen, you refuse to set your name to the assayer's report for the half-yearly statement.

"You know, and I know, it was an accident. We know it don't mean that there's anything wrong with the property. But they won't understand it in London. The little stockholders won't. And them widows and orphans are ready to howl the roof off if their shares goes down a point or two.

"We can't afford to set that pack of wolves against us, just because we threw in that Witwaters crushing. If it wasn't for that we'd touch sixteen and a half to the ton. And now you come along with your damn principles, and say you ain't going to sign your own report!"

He ended in a whine and a snarl. Eltzmann was really very much annoyed over the whole matter, and he had a strong sense of being unjustly used.

"I will sign my own report," answered Dean. "I won't sign another man's. Of course it's a pity you threw in that Witwaters stuff. But you can explain that perfectly well in your half-yearly report."

"Damn it, that's just what we can't do!" exploded Eltzmann. "D'jer think them widows and orphans would believe that explanation, or any sort of explanation when their shares began to drop? You can't talk money back, can yer? They're devils, them fellers. That crushing's going to be forgotten. We're going to run the assay up to a straight fifteen and say that owing to the by-products not having been utilized up to the time of printing the total result can't be known; but, anyway, it touches fifteen. And you're going to sign!"

He thumped his pudgy fist upon his desk, pursed out his lips and glared at Dean viciously.

"You're going to sign that report!" he shouted. "What d'jer think I hired you for? I don't know who's putting you up to this game, but I tell you this much—they won't help you, once you've done their dirty work for them."

"That 'll be enough along that line, Mr. Eltzmann!" shouted Dean, banging his own fist upon the desk in turn.

The mining magnate, suddenly reduced to reasonableness, looked at Dean thoughtfully. He had miscalculated him. He knew, of course, that he was one of those honest fools one was perpetually meeting, but he had been misled by his quiet manner.

Eltzmann got up, puffing, and put his pudgy hand on Dean's arm.

"Look here, old man, for Heaven's sake don't put us in a hole like this!" he pleaded. "It ain't as if I was asking anything wrong of you. Doctoring up a report ain't the same thing as cooking one. You know it 'll give them damn widows and orphans a false idea of the property if we don't show our fifteen pennyweights. It 'll be as good as lying. We ain't never misrepresented nothing about the New Krugersdorp, Mr. Jarvis."

He pawed at Dean's arm, looking up at his face anxiously. In fact, Eltzmann was largely at Dean's mercy, and he knew it. He could not understand his attitude. The mine was as rich as ever, and it seemed preposterous that the New Krugersdorp could be held up like that by a subordinate employee, one of whose duties happened to be the signing of his name to a report on the monthly assaying.

He knew that nineteen men out of twenty were purchasable, but that only one in twenty could be approached direct. His first thought had been that Dean was holding up the company. He had sent the superintendent to see him, and the superintendent had beaten a hurried retreat as soon as his meaning penetrated Dean's skull. The report had made Eltzmann wary. But now anxiety overcame prudence.

He took Dean by the coat-lapels, and a knowing smile came over his face.

"I see you ain't no greenhorn, like I thought you was, Mr. Jarvis," he said. "How about two hundred pounds? Will that ease her a bit?"

The frankness of the bribe staggered Dean. He really had a good deal of respect for Eltzmann's achievements, and he had been proud of the prestige of the company with which he was associated.

He simply shook Eltzmann loose from him and flung him back into his chair. He turned toward the door. Next moment he heard a bell ringing outside. Eltzmann had pressed it for assistance, and now came dancing before him, with both fists in a fighting position—a very little game-cock of a warrior.

"You keep your 'ands off me!" he bellowed, falling into his native Cockney in his excitement, and feinting at Dean's face with left and right. "Come on, you gutter-snipe! I'll teach yer a few things! Come on!"

The transformation of the magnate into the pugilist was so ridiculous that Dean felt all his resentment subsiding. And just as he was engaged in warding off what looked like a serious attack the porter entered—a six-foot Irishman, with a body like a beef, and arms like wire cording. It was the traditional alliance between muscle and brain. Men like Eltzmann and men like Sullivan need each other.

Eltzmann leaped adroitly back behind his desk. Featherweight champion though he might once have been, he could no longer have stood up to anything his own size or age. Dean felt an amused contempt for the little man's gallery play.

"Throw that loafer outside!" gasped Eltzmann. "'Arf a minute. I got something to say to him first. You go and get your pay, Jarvis!" he sneered. "I don't need you no longer, you impident dog, and you'll find nobody else don't neither. Johannesburg and you 'ave parted company, and you'd best make tracks for somewhere else before you're broke and bumming round the hotels. Tried to 'it me, Sullivan, so 'elp me, he did! I've given him something he'll remember me by. Put him out if he don't go quiet!"

But Dean went quietly enough, and Sullivan, sizing him up with a shrewd glance, was sensible enough not to attempt to quicken his exit. In such matters the stupid Irishman was as good a judge of a man as his master. Dean's contempt for the sniggering little rogue in the chair held his tongue speechless.

CHAPTER II.

AN ADVENTURE OF THE NIGHT.

BUT Dean discovered quickly enough, as Eltzmann had said, and as he had himself suspected, that Johannesburg and he had parted company—at least, so far as getting a position was concerned. Here he was, a competent mining man, with an engineer's certificate, and able to hold any of a dozen skilled jobs; yet nobody wanted him.

Rock-drillers were getting seventy pounds a month, and the supply was not equal to the demand in that time of boom; but, when in desperation Dean applied to the Sparsfontein, which was at odds with Eltzmann, he found that even here rock-drillers were not needed. And of course it was impossible to get into personal touch with the big men.

His capital soon dwindled. It went below two hundred pounds. Then a spell in hospital, from fever, found Dean weakened, disconsolate, and with only a hundred and fifty to his credit.

Still he stuck it out resolutely, principally from pride. Besides, Johannesburg was practically the only place for him, for outside the Rand there were only isolated companies scattered through Mashonaland, running a few stamps apiece, and having their own men. The impulse that had brought him to South Africa to try his luck as an engineer after he was mustered out from the training-camp two years before had been sound enough; but one could not have foreseen the Eltzmann incident.

He had been living at Clark's, and spending money as freely as most of the young men with whom he associated. But he had made neither lasting nor useful ties. One seldom does in a place where the population is as shifting as the Bechuana sands. Now he removed his few sticks of furniture to a couple of rooms in a ramshackle tenement in an ancient street that skirted the line of the gold-mines, whose great mounds

of snow-white tailings stood up like truncated pyramids as far as the eye could see.

Dean persisted in the belief that if he could get speech with some mine-owner all would be well with him. But either he underrated Eltzmann's influence or his efforts had grown half-hearted, for they proved fruitless. Dean was forced to acknowledge Eltzmann's power.

At last he realized that he was fighting a losing battle with every day's delay. He resolved to leave Johannesburg.

There had been reports of a new gold strike in Batakaland, a territory across the Limpopo, of which Dean had heard vaguely. A miniature rush had set in. Dean resolved to try his luck there.

On the day of the decision he saw an advertisement in the *Star* for an experienced, competent man, English or American, to take charge of a new mining property in the Batakaland district.

Dean called at the place named—Rigg's Hotel—and sent up his card with the same sinking feeling that he had grown accustomed to since the Eltzmann episode. Nor was his hope materially increased by the appearance of a little, dejected man, who came down the stairs, evidently one of the rejected applicants.

"My, my, that Mr. Wimborne's rough!" he soliloquized. "I dunno what he wants. I was six years manager of the Rietfontein South, and he turns me down flat!"

He passed on, shaking his head. Presently another man came down the stairs, also wearing a much dejected atmosphere. Then a clerk who was seated at a desk called to Dean:

"Mr. Wimborne will see you, sir," he said. "First flight up, No. 15."

Dean went up the well-carpeted stairs and knocked at the door of the room indicated.

"Come in!" cried a sharp voice.

Dean went in, to see a man of about forty-five standing before the window. A tall man, with an ash-white face and a long, drooping fair mustache, who looked at him quickly and let his eyes shift all round his face without actually meeting his.

"Mr. Gervaise, eh?" he demanded, picking up the card Dean had sent and twiddling it between his finger and thumb. "You came in answer to our advertisement?"

"To the advertisement which appeared in the *Star*."

"Yes, that's ours," said Wimborne. "We don't advertise for other people."

Dean summed the man up as a bully. He had the air of the type of office man who has risen under humiliations, and spends the rest of his life "getting back." But Dean only swallowed and said nothing. He had learned a lot during the few weeks past.

"Well, what experience?" demanded Wimborne.

"Three years as mining engineer, six months as assayer," Dean answered, withholding the name of the mine that had employed him until he could bring forward more favorable facts.

"Can you ride, box, and shoot?"

"Pretty well."

"Can you control men? There's a pretty tough gang in Batakaland. Can you make a gang of niggers do what you want them to? Can you hold your own against white men who try to bluff you? Can you obey orders faithfully, irrespective of the consequences? I won't ask if you are a drunkard. I'll take a chance on that."

Dean swallowed harder. Wimborne's manner was almost intolerable. Yet there he was, an applicant for a job, and at the other man's mercy so long as he chose to remain one. Absolute necessity, poverty, and the sense that comes of being temporarily down restrained the retort upon his tongue.

But his rising anger made him slow to answer, and he remained silent for a moment or two, while the Englishman watched him with his cool, quiet insolence, as if studying the impression of his remarks.

"Where did you hold these jobs?" he asked a moment later, without waiting for Dean's answer to his former questions.

"With the New Krugersdorp. I came to this country three years ago, after I was mustered out."

"You're an American, then?"

"From New York State."

"Well, that won't matter—much."

"It matters this much," Dean blurted out. "You can call down for the next application. Mine is withdrawn."

For a moment Wimborne's shifty eyes caught Dean's and measured him. Then of a sudden the telephone began to ring.

"Now I didn't mean to offend you," said Wimborne with sudden humility. "Just wait a minute till I've finished, and we'll talk it over. Have to talk straight. You don't realize the class of men we get."

He crossed the room to where the telephone hung on the wall. The instrument was spluttering excitedly, and Dean became aware of a suppressed excitement on the part of Wimborne.

"Warrant? No, sir!" he exclaimed. "I tell you we're dead right. And there's no need of one. I wouldn't care anything about extradition papers. We can't get them, anyway. No, Mr.—"

Suddenly he seemed to remember Dean's presence, and stopped short on the name.

"My advice is to go easy, wait till nightfall, and then secure him," he continued. "He won't slip out of the net if I know you, sir."

A little more to the like purpose, and Wimborne hung up the receiver. He turned to Dean with the former insolence of manner, and then seemed to remember.

"Yes, Mr. Gervaise, we get all kinds and conditions of applicants," he continued, "and we have to talk straight to them. Have you any connections of importance in your country?"

"My brother is employed in the War Office."

"And is he influential?"

"Why, he's head of his department, and pretty close to the Secretary," answered Dean, wondering what this had to do with the application.

"That's very satisfactory," said Wimborne. "You see, Mr. Gervaise, when we get a promising applicant we like to know that he's somebody with a sense of responsibility. Your statement is quite enough. Now, where were you last employed?"

The shifting eyes were all about his face, and yet never met his own. Dean was trying not to show the intense dislike he had acquired for Mr. Wimborne.

"I was with Mr. Eltzmann as assayer," he answered.

"And how did you happen to give up that position?"

"I had some difficulty with him. I don't think it was my fault. I'm sure it wasn't."

"Sacked, eh?"

"You might put it that way. Or you might say that we were mutually unsuitable for each other."

But there was no humor in Mr. Wimborne's composition. The Englishman studied the carpet thoughtfully.

Presently he looked up. "You parted on bad terms with Mr. Eltzmann, then? He doesn't like losing his employees, I know. Perhaps it might be as well to tell me just what happened. It may have a bearing on your application."

Dean thought it might have. He had never spoken about the cause of his discharge. He knew that sort of thing did not pay. Now he did so, avoiding laying the blame on Eltzmann, however, so far as possible.

As he spoke he saw Wimborne's restless eyes wandering about his face again. Wimborne seemed to have made up his mind already, and to be waiting for Dean to finish, as a matter of form. Dean finished lamely —inconclusively, he thought.

There was a silence of nearly half a minute. Then Wimborne shot a quick glance at him. "Where are you to be found, Mr. Gervaise?" he asked.

"I'm living in the suburbs. I have a box at the post-office—No. 1343. I look in every morning," said Dean with a sinking heart.

"Thanks. We'll let you know if we are able to make use of your services," answered Wimborne.

Dean was glad to get out of the room. At the bottom of the stairs he saw his successor waiting—a tall, lank, confident Dutchman. He saw his own dejected face in a mirror. He looked exactly as the two former applicants had looked.

Back in his miserable rooms he flung himself down in his chair, and wearily went over the interview in his mind again.

In spite of Wimborne's insolence, he knew that he would have taken the job. It

was not likely that he would have met Wimborne in Batakaland. And there had been hints of an exciting life that had appealed to him.

Then the ghost of that assaying affair had risen up to rob him of what he felt might have been a chance of the position. Of course the company that Wimborne represented, whatever it was, would never antagonize Eltzmann.

The ending of the application had been exactly like the ending of every previous application. The only difference was that he had managed to secure an audience with the principal man, as he inferred Wimborne to be. The first reference to Eltzmann had finished his chances.

Dean must have headed the secret black list that every mining company carries. He had not the least intention of going to the post-office to look for any letter. He resolved to strike for the veldt next morning. He would go to Batakaland. The gold strike was two weeks old, and discouraging reports had already succeeded the first enthusiasm, but there was still an exodus in that direction.

Dean racked his brains to remember what he knew about Batakaland. He seemed to recall that it was a territory which had been in dispute between the British and Portuguese governments — a pestiferous, fever-stricken swamp in the bush-veldt, which no man in his senses, nor any government would want to own, except for its gold.

He had also a vague recollection that it was under no government, both nations having agreed to withdraw their forces pending arbitration.

He began to pack his things. The furniture was not worth selling, and he decided to make a present of it to his successor, but he had a few books which he meant to put into storage, in case he ever came back to Johannesburg.

The battered suit-case he would leave behind him. His trunk, containing certain civilized things that he might need again some day was in storage already. Dean had a large English carry-all, of leather and canvas, and this, he decided, would comfortably contain all that he would need upon the railroad journey, and for beginning his new career.

He carted his stuff into the living-room, as it might have been called by courtesy, went back to his bedroom, flung off his coat, and lay down on the bed. In a few minutes he was sleeping as peacefully as if his troubles had never begun. And, in fact, once his decision was made he felt infinitely relieved. He even forgave Eltzmann.

He was awakened at an uncertain hour of night by the sound of distant shouting. At first the noise mingled with his dreams. Then, as it grew more insistent, he opened his eyes and sat up. The moonlight, streaming through the window, showed that his watch had stopped a little after midnight.

Somewhere along the Reef a riot was in progress. Dean went to the window and looked out. Johannesburg lay before his eyes, deserted. From where he was he could see across the tops of the low shanties opposite him the clock tower of the post-office, fronting the great Market Square, the hands a meaningless streak, viewed sidewise on the luminous dial. On either side of him rose a great heap of tailings. Beyond these were the shaft-heads of the mines, stretching away at half-mile intervals for a score of miles each way, perfectly distinct, like giant sentinels.

About these were the malodorous native compounds, where negroes of fifty tribes, recruited by labor agents from the savage interior, worked, shirked, learned the vices of the white man, and met by arrangement to fight pitched battles at unexpected times.

It seemed that some such fight must be in progress now. Of late the police had put a stop to these combats, which they were able to anticipate through an espionage system; consequently they would flare up at unreasonable hours, to the annoyance of residents along the Reef.

Dean yawned and was about to go back to bed when the distant tumult swelled out again, nearer at hand. Then he saw a mob of men and boys, scum of the goldfields, who had swarmed out of the slum district at the sight of the police, in the anticipation of a night raid on some shebeen.

A moment later Dean perceived the police. Constables in uniform were posted all round the decrepit block in which he was living. There were half a dozen of them visible from his window, and this meant that there were at least a dozen in all.

The mob, which now came streaming toward the block, was yelling and hooting in derision at a squad of policemen who were emerging from a house at the corner, after a quest which had plainly been unsuccessful. If they had been looking for some fugitive from justice their air showed plainly that their search had miscarried. In the way of the police all over the world they took it out on the spectators. They charged with their batons, and the street urchins fled before them, halting at a safe distance to pick up stones and fling them. The inevitable innocent bystander was dumped, protesting loudly, into the police-wagon.

The police were unpopular along the Reef, and the raid seemed to be one of considerable magnitude. This was no night surprise on the cheap brandy stored in the cellar of some Polish Jew. Dean decided that it was probably a case of illicit gold buying, one of the most serious crimes.

Then he realized that the houses in the block were being systematically searched. The police forces outside were reenforced by an entire platoon, which marched briskly up the street, a sergeant leading them.

Brickbats and catcalls met them. The mob dispersed before the threat of drawn revolvers, assembled again, and howled. And now a cordon ringed the entire block. Dean realized that his rooms would be searched among the others.

It was a nuisance. It banished hopes of sleep. The police were in the next house but two by this time, and the pandemonium was increasing every instant. Dogs were yelping, men swearing, angry viragoes screaming out of windows in wraps and nightcaps. This was hardly even a gold-buying case. It was something of greater magnitude still—possibly the discovery of one of those political plots on the part of the disaffected labor element in the mines that had been stirring the country.

Dean turned from the window in disgust. To find himself looking into the muzzle of a revolver, held in a hand that hardly trembled, by the youngest girl criminal that ever disguised herself in a man's clothes.

"Hide me!" she said desperately as the tumult outside the house increased. "Hide me, or I'll blow your brains out!"

CHAPTER III.

THE FUGITIVE.

SHE was confronting Dean from the open door between his two rooms. Dean remembered that he had closed it before he went to bed. Glancing for a wavering instant past the apparition of imminent death, he saw that the window of the next room, which he had left slightly open, was now open to its full extent. Across a narrow alley was the flat roof of a house. That way the intruder must have come.

"Something of a long-jump performer!" remarked Dean to the girl pleasantly.

She paid no attention to his words. She looked as desperate as any girl of twenty-two or three might have looked under the circumstances. Her hair, which had been coiled carefully under the large cap on her head, had loosened, and one long strand had fallen down and hung shimmering like gold about her shoulders. Her eyes were gray and resolute. Her white skin was tanned brown by the sun and showed the fairness of its texture at the edges of the brown triangle formed on her throat where the loose shirt lay open.

She wore a ragged coat, a pair of corduroy riding-breeches, and high riding-boots.

The revolver was now aimed dead at Dean's eyes. The small, white finger was pressing ominously against the trigger.

"What are you going to do?" asked the girl with intense restraint. "Be quick!"

"I haven't decided," answered Dean. "I don't like your way of asking a favor."

"You'd better decide within ten seconds. Are you going to do what I say, or are you going to make me fire?"

"I might hide you as an act of grace. But you're a wretched, mean, despicable sneak-thief, you know, and that doesn't prejudice me in your favor by any means."

His words seemed to sting her. She let

the revolver muzzle waver for just an instant, and that was the instant Dean had been looking for. He ducked, shot out his left arm suddenly, caught her right by the wrist, and turned the weapon aside.

"Now shoot as much as you like," he announced.

She struggled as furiously as a trapped wildcat, hissing with fury, while her eyes blazed rage and desperation. Time and again she all but broke from him. At last, feeling both her wrists held in an unbreakable clasp, she ceased her efforts in sullen resignation.

"I suppose you mean to give me up, you coward!" she panted.

"Oh, not necessarily," answered Dean. "Probably. Constitutionally, I'm on the side of the law. I may listen to what you have to say first, if you're quick and concise about it, because there isn't much time. But I have an inborn objection to being held up at the muzzle of a revolver. Especially when it's to ask a favor. And more than ever to oblige a sneak-thief."

"How dare you call me that!"

Dean said nothing, but let his eyes travel up and down her. She was wearing his coat, his shirt, his trousers, and his riding-boots. And on the floor of the adjacent room there was a glimpse of feminine apparel.

"I'll pay you for your clothes!" cried the girl, reddening. "Don't you suppose that I have money enough to buy the things I need? And to buy men, when I have to?"

The police were in the next house now. Dean could hear them stamping through the thin wall, and the voices might have been in the same room. The crowd was baying immediately beneath the windows. A shower of stones, flung at the police cordon, smashed against the thick window-pane, adding several more cracks to those already in existence there.

"If you mean to hide me there's money for you," said the girl hurriedly, succeeding in freeing her hands from Dean's grasp at the sacrifice of the revolver. "Here! Here! And here!"

She pulled out of Dean's trouser's pocket an amazing handful of gold sovereigns, which certainly had not been there the evening before. The sight of her eager face quickened Dean into amusement.

"How much?" he demanded.

"Fifty pounds down. Fifty more if I go free. You know I keep my word!"

As she spoke the girl pulled at the inside of the other pocket, producing a little wad of five-pound notes. From the care with which it was tucked away it was clear that she had intended to depart in his attire.

She threw it on the bed. "There are ten here," she said. "You'll have them when the police are gone. Now, are you going to hide me?"

The police were hammering at the front door of the house. Dean glanced out of the window, and saw that the street beyond the cordon was packed with a howling mob as far as he could see. He looked about him; the room seemed as bare as a board.

Footsteps were on the stairs. The tenants in the rooms below were yelling with anger. A pitcher flung by an irate housekeeper came flying up the stairs and smashed upon the landing outside Dean's door. The girl looked at Dean in despair.

Dean ran into the next room and brought back his carry-all.

"It's a bare chance—slip into that!" he said, laying it on the floor.

She obeyed him with alacrity. He tucked her in and folded the canvas cover loosely over her. Then he ran back and brought his books, his clothing, suit-case, heaping everything in a pile upon the floor, and scattering it until there remained no trace of the female form beneath.

The police were running up the flight that led to Dean's room. There came a banging on the door.

"Open at once! Open in the king's name!" shouted the sergeant outside. "Open or I'll break in the door. There's a man living here," Dean heard him add to one of the constables. "Plug with your shoulders if he don't open!"

Dean had just settled the pile, just tucked back the wisp of yellow hair that unexpectedly appeared beneath the carry-all. Suddenly he remembered the feminine attire upon the floor of the next room. Quick

as a cat and almost as noiselessly he darted in again, snatched it up, and bundled it beneath his blankets. Outside the sergeant was shouting again.

"What's the matter?" Dean called in a sleepy voice. "If you bust in my door I'll call the police, you loafers!"

"It's the police right here!" the sergeant yelled. "You open right away or it's the jail for you the rest of the night, me lad!"

Dean turned the key, grumbling, and the sergeant and three men rushed past him, their pistols in their hands.

"Look in there!" shouted the sergeant, pointing toward the door that opened into the sitting-room. "Go cautious! He's desperate! Who lives here with you?" he demanded of Dean.

"Whadyermean?" growled Dean in a rage that was only partly simulated. "I hired these rooms. What d'yer mean by breaking in here? I ain't done nothing!"

The constables who had investigated the next room came back baffled. The sergeant stepped to the door and cast a look inside.

"Where d'you work?" he asked Dean. "What's that pile of goods on the floor? Getting ready to flit by moonlight, eh?"

"Well, what abaht it?" retorted Dean in his best Cockney. "You ain't no blooming bailiff, are yer?"

The impersonation had seemed to him in keeping with the poverty-stricken surroundings. But hardly were the words out of his mouth when Dean regretted them. For he realized that the book which the sergeant had picked off the pile and was examining was one whose possession hardly jibed with his newly acquired accent. It was *Principles of Strain and Stress in Arch Construction.*

"I work for Mr. Eltzmann at the New Krugersdorp," said Dean, trying to effect the transition into the personality of an ambitious mechanic. "My name's Jarvis, and I got a job as assaying clerk for him yesterday. You go and ask him if you don't believe me. And I ain't flitting—I'm moving in."

The sergeant swept the carry-all with a quick glance, sending Dean's heart into his mouth as he picked up the pile of clothes and let it fall again.

"Come along, boys!" he called. "There's nothing here. Sorry, Mr. Jarvis. You're not the person we're looking for."

They went out, their heavy tread shaking the rickety floors. Their appearance at the house door was the signal for a renewed outburst of derisive jeering from the mob. Dean pulled away the pile upon the carry-all.

"You can come out now!" he said sternly.

The girl came out, a little crestfallen, a little defiant.

"You've earned your money," she said in a low voice. "You've earned it well."

He did not know how to take that. She seemed undeniably grateful, and yet she still treated him with a sort of contemptuous condescension, like Wimborne. It might have been his surroundings, though. He tried to carry on the game.

"I never worked so hard for such good wages before," he remarked, wiping his forehead.

She did not answer him, but tossed the bank-notes upon the bed.

"I suppose you'll let me stay a little while until those men are gone, even if it isn't in the contract," she said, looking disdainfully toward the window, from beneath which came the sound of the charging police, and the yells of the retreating mob.

Being human, Dean wanted to take out his accumulated chagrin and humiliation upon the last person who had treated him like a dog. And he still felt sore over the revolver incident.

"Well, since I've gone so far I don't mind going a little further," he answered. "It isn't often that I have the pleasure of harboring a young woman criminal."

The angry red rose into her cheeks. Dean was mystified that this woman, hardened, as was plain enough, and "wanted" very badly indeed, should be still capable of blushing.

"I paid you to hide me, not to be insolent!" she answered sharply. "And I'll take my revolver."

Dean gave it to her. "Let's call it even," he said. "Will you let me know your name? Mine is Dean Gervaise."

"My name doesn't matter. You have

performed a service and I have paid you for it. That is enough."

"I don't think your manner is very gracious, even to a servant."

"It is good enough for an Englishman!"

"It happens that I am an American," Dean answered. "Also, my luck has run quite out. Yesterday I was insulted because I'm not an Englishman. Now I'm insulted for being supposed to be one. I've guessed that about my luck for a long time, though. I infer that you are Dutch?"

"I'm English!" cried the girl angrily. "According to your laws. But I will never acknowledge it. I hate England with a hate that will last as long as I live!"

Dean's lingering resentment faded as he watched her angry emotion. He thought he understood. Many of the English settlers, deserted, as they conceived it, by their government when the Dutch received self-government, were more bitter against England than the Dutch themselves.

"Well, let's bury the hatchet," said Dean. "I'm glad that I have been able to help you. If there is anything more that I can do for you—I'm not very busy just now—"

She looked him over shrewdly and thought for a moment or two. "That wasn't true, then, what you said to the sergeant about having gone to work for Mr. Eltzmann?" she asked. "I mean, you're out of work?"

"Unfortunately. And I was thinking of starting for Batakaland to-morrow morning—this morning, I suppose it is now."

She started. "Batakaland, you say?" she cried. "Would you work for me, then? You're a poor man, that's plain, or you would never be living here. You've got to think about getting something to do. Suppose you were to arrive in Batakaland with more money than you dreamed of having? Suppose I paid you two hundred pounds for a month's work?"

"Honest work?"

"Yes."

"I'd jump at it."

"You'll do it?"

"What is it?"

"Help me and a—a friend of mine across the border to Batakaland."

She put aside her contemptuous manner, and became frankly pleading.

"My name is Lois Ashton," she said. "I'll trust you with that—and it is my real name. I owe you a great deal for having saved me to-night. I know that there was good will in what you did for me, and that it was not entirely on account of the money. You need have no scruples about taking it, or the two hundred more that I will pay you.

"I'm sorry for the way I treated you. But I thought you were an Englishman, and it was like a lash across the face to have to ask aid of an Englishman. Now I want you to help my friend and myself across the Batakaland frontier. It is not I whom the police were looking for. I came here from Batakaland to help him. He had been in prison—on the breakwater at Cape Town. He was innocent. They framed up a charge of illicit gold-buying against him—those who hated him—because they coveted something that he possessed and would not sell to them. He had broken with England, so England would not help him. And they sent him to labor among convicts and negroes for ten years—he, an Englishman and a gentleman!"

Dean noticed how, unconsciously, she seemed proud of England, despite her avowed hatred.

"That was five years ago. He escaped. He got word to me to meet him in Johannesburg. We were together to-night when some one betrayed us. We just had time to escape through the back door. We had to separate. That's all. He has got clear, because the police followed me instead. He will be hiding in a place we have arranged, along the Reef.

"Now I want you to help us to Batakaland. We cannot make arrangements for the journey ourselves without arousing suspicion, but you can do it for us. Everybody is going there. The roads are full of transport wagons. The police will watch the coaches, and they'll watch at all the towns, but they can't watch all the wagons along the roads. There are too many of them. They'll never suspect that we are traveling that way. Will you do it?"

Dean watched her eager face.

"Let's understand each other," he said. "In the first place I should like you to understand that I never had any intention of taking your money. Secondly, if I help you it will be out of comradeship, and not at a price. But my sympathies are with law and order. Will you pledge me your word that your friend is innocent of the charge against him?"

"Absolutely innocent—I would swear it," she answered.

"Then I will do my best to help you. Now—about the plans. You have a wagon and oxen?"

"No. You'll have to buy them for us. And a couple of good saddle horses. You can get them on the Market Square in two or three hours."

"That will mean three hundred, if a penny. How much have you?"

"Two hundred and fifty more in my—in your coat-pocket," she answered.

"If you like to give it to me, I'll go out and buy what I can as soon as the market opens."

"Wait!" she said. "Come to the window! I want to look at you. I trust you, but I have met with so much treachery, and I must be sure."

She looked into his face intently.

"Yes, I trust you, Mr. Gervaise," she said. "I should have known that you were a gentleman."

Dean looked out. The police cordon had been withdrawn. The mob had disappeared, and only a few still hung about in the shadows, on the chance of another raid. It was beginning to grow light.

"You will stay here till I come for you with the wagon," said Dean. "You had better resume your own clothes. That will be simplest. Anything that you require for the journey can be bought along the Reef. The thing to do is to get away as quickly as possible."

Lois came quickly to him as he opened the door.

"I thank you, Mr. Gervaise," she said earnestly. "I have faith in you, and I shall wait for you. But if anything happens to me, and I am not here, you must save my friend. If I am taken you will not look for me, but go through Middleburg and Belfast and through the pass of the Murchisons nearest the Portuguese border, looking for him along the road. That is the plan; that is the way each of us was to take if we became separated. We were to return singly, to avoid the danger of capture."

"How shall I know him?"

"A tall man—an Englishman—a gentleman. He has a scar from an Afghan saber across his cheek. There are not many men who walk the roads, not many gentlemen who have bled for their country and have been made convicts." She spoke with intense bitterness. "That is why he holds his purpose dearer even than me—the purpose for which he is returning. He is my father."

She pressed two rolls of notes into his hands. "You were going without the money," she said.

CHAPTER IV.

MAKING AN ENEMY.

DEAN left the house and made his way toward the Market Square. He had not been there long before it began to lighten perceptibly. The east grew golden. Dean bought a cup of coffee at a stall to warm himself, and looked about him for the first signs of business.

The great square occupied the very heart of the town. It was filled with transport wagons, beneath whose snowy hood Boers and their wives, and often a sturdy brood, snored upon their mattresses of *rimpi* strips. The oxen, lean-flanked longhorns, lay fastened on either side of the central *duesselboom*, and waited for sunrise.

It came. Kaffirs, Sesutos, Zulus, Pongos, men of a score of tribes rose yawning from the ashes of the fires to light a new blaze of ox-dung, on which to set the morning coffee-pot. Without this matutinal awakener each boy knew that his master would not stir from his repose unless to seize the *sjambok* of hippo hide and lay it about his shoulders. Soon a score of little fires were twinkling all over the square. Johannesburg awoke.

Baskets of garden produce, sacks of

mealies were unloaded. Wooden stands were set up. Early buyers drifted in, and the square grew alive with bearded Boer farmers and their white *mutjied vrouws.* Children swarmed among the hoofs of the oxen. Horse-breeders, who had encamped outside the town, came trotting in, leading horses, which they tethered upon lines. Dean soon found himself amid an animated crowd.

Oxen were being auctioned in number, but the rush to Batakaland had boosted prices in everything. Dean had hoped to secure six. He found himself lucky to get four at a high price. He picked up a Cape cart, a cross between a wagon and a van, for fifteen pounds. He engaged two "boys" from among the crowd that preferred open-air service at a smaller wage to the mines, with their high pay and tuberculosis—a Hottentot driver at four pounds a month, and a Matabele "leader" to run ahead with the oxen, cook, and perform miscellaneous services, at two pounds ten. As in business life the man who did the most work got the smallest wages.

Two sacks of mealies for the natives, food, flour, salt, coffee, and a few tinned goods completed the outfit. The Cape cart already contained a *kartel,* or frame bed of antelope thongs. Dean had his own blankets, as well as a *kaross* of jackal skins, which he had purchased in the days of his employed magnificance. He bought another blanket on the chance it would be needed, and then found that Lois's money would provide only for one horse at current prices.

His own money was in the bank, and it was impossible to wait for the bank's opening.

His attention was caught by a fine chestnut mare, with a blaze on her forehead. He got her for fifty pounds, and picked up a man's and woman's saddles, second-hand. This left him with only two or three pounds in his pocket, and he still needed a rifle. However, second-hand Martinis were a drug on the market, and he crossed the square to a pawnbroker's, where he obtained one, with a hundred cartridges, for thirty-five shillings. Then he returned to his newly acquired boys.

The Matabele youth was squatting among the oxen, but the wizen old Tottie driver appeared to be the center of an animated debate. His shrill invectives filled the air, and Dean perceived when he came up that he was in altercation with a big, bearded Dutchman, who was calmly untethering Dean's horse.

"*Hier is de baas!*" screamed the Tottie as Dean entered the group. "*Dat mann, hy zeg dat is hes paert, baas!*"

"Says it's his horse, does he?" repeated Dean. "How do you make that out?" he continued, addressing the stranger.

The other waved his arm superciliously, as if his statement settled the matter; but, finding that Dean blocked the way, condescended to an explanation.

"I bought that mare half an hour before you did, *Engelsmann,*" he said aggressively.

"Yah, you're lying, Van Leenen!" shouted one of the bystanders derisively.

The farmer who had sold the mare to Dean took him aside. "Mr. Van Leenen bought that mare before you," he said nervously. "He was here half an hour before you came. It was a mistake. My boy put the wrong horse aside for him."

"I was here half an hour before he arrived, or anybody else," retorted Dean.

Meanwhile Van Leenen, having untethered the mare, was preparing to lead her away. As Dean stepped forward to stop him a bystander touched his shoulder.

"Van Leenen's pretty close to the company in Batakaland," he said. "If you're bound for there you'll find he's a dangerous man to cross. I'd let him have the mare and take your money."

"The company be damned!" shouted Dean, in tones loud enough to evoke ironical applause from the two or three who heard him. He caught the bridle and wrenched it out of the Dutchman's hand.

"No more words now!" he said. "Get out of here or I'll make you!"

Van Leenen seemed almost nonplused by Dean's attitude for a moment, as if he had always taken what he wanted without question. He glared at him; then he turned to a small Hottentot who had hung at his heels and snatched a short *sjambok* out of his hands. He raised it above his shoulder.

"*Voetzak,* you *verdommte rooinek!*" he shouted. "*Voetzak,* or I'll take the hide off your bones!"

The lash descended in a whistling cut that would have laid Dean's cheek bare. Dean dodged it, but the tip of the thong caught his leg and drew blood. The next instant Dean's fist had struck Van Leenen in the mouth, and the big Boer went toppling over.

Instantly a cheer went up, a circle was formed about the two, and they fought their quarrel to a finish in the dust of the Market Square, amid a huge concourse of cheering spectators, who came running up from all sides to see the impromptu mill.

"I'll fight you for the mare, eh, *Engelsmann?*" snarled Van Leenen.

Dean nodded and squared up to him. Next instant the Dutchman flung his whole bulk against him, hitting out furiously right and left. Dean, unprepared for the suddenness of the maneuver, received a stunning blow across the back of the neck that sent him flying head over heels among the oxen, amid derisive laughter from Van Leenen's supporters.

Thinking that the issue was thus decided, Van Leenen smiled, and began to lead the mare away. He had hardly gone two paces, however, when he saw Dean in front of him again. His eyes bulged with astonishment. He dropped the bridle and doubled his fists once more.

Before he could repeat his trick Dean, dust-stained and now mad with fury, ran through his guard with a succession of terrific right and left punches that drew blood and teeth, and sent Van Leenen staggering this way and that, while his arms opened and closed like a pair of pincers.

If he could get his enemy within his clutch he could crush the life out of him, or at least break his back. Stooping, with head bowed to avoid Dean's terrific blows, Van Leenen groped for his enemy. Dean gave him no chance. He put every ounce of shoulder muscle into a final blow at the vicious, grinning, bloody face above him. Van Leenen went to earth.

His head struck a wagon-wheel with a crack that sounded like a pistol-shot. The Boer's eyes closed in unconsciousness.

"*Allemachtig!*" muttered a spectator beside Dean. The Dutchmen, dumfounded at the fall of their champion, stood silent and downcast. And then a storm of cheers broke out that could have been heard as far as the Reef, and men crowded round Dean, pumping his hands.

"Good boy! Good boy!" they shouted.

He pushed them aside. The sudden popularity was the last thing that he wished. He watched Van Leenen's partisans picking him up. He mumbled, opened his eyes, and they lit upon Dean's face with a glance of deadly hatred.

"Take care of that fellow!" said one of Dean's new friends. "He'll stop at nothing to get even with you. He's the biggest bully that ever waited for what was coming to him."

Dean went up to the fallen Dutchman and put out his hand. "Sorry," he said tersely. "But you shouldn't have tried to jump my mare."

Van Leenen staggered to his feet, spat, and put his hand behind him. "I'll make you pay for this!" he swore viciously.

"No time like now," responded Dean.

But Van Leenen, still scowling, limped away, accompanied by a smaller compatriot, with a black beard, fringed with gray, who placed his arm about his big companion with an air of affected solicitousness, and turned to glare at Dean in turn when they had moved outside the ring.

"And that man Smit is only second to Van Leenen in power for mischief," said the one who had warned Dean. "They're both hand-in-glove with—"

Dean did not wait to hear any more. It was clear that Van Leenen had been humbled to the dust, and if his chance came, he would keep his promise of revenge. But Dean hardly thought about the matter.

He took his mare from the trembling, awe-struck Hottentot. "What's your name?" he asked.

"Tietjens, *baas,*" replied the old fellow.

"We'll start for the north right away, Tietjens," said Dean. "Get that stuff on the wagon!"

Then he found another man standing in front of him. He had a dim impression that he had seen him before.

"Fine fight you put up, young feller, me lad," he said. "I hadn't the heart to stop you, especially when I saw you were knocking spots off that Dutchman. But I was wondering what Mr. Eltzmann will think about it. You weren't by any chance mistaken, were you, when you told me that you were working for the New Krugersdorp? I watched you buying that stuff, and I wondered what the New Krugersdorp would want with it."

He pointed to the team and cart, also to the supplies that Tietjens was loading.

"It may be you were mistaken about that job now?" he continued with clumsy sarcasm.

The man was dressed in ordinary clothes, but Dean recognized him for the sergeant who had interrogated him in the small hours of the morning.

"If I was you," said the sergeant meaningly, "I'd just let your leader bring on those oxen of yours, and we'll walk back to that shanty where you live and have another look there."

Dean felt his blood freezing. Lois would be captured—and she had believed in him! She would think that he had betrayed her.

"I'm not going back," Dean answered. "I'm starting for the north immediately."

The sergeant smiled. "And you only moved in yesterday," he said. "And there's that job with Mr. Eltzmann. Are you sure you're starting right away, young feller?"

"Dead sure," said Dean.

The sergeant flicked his boot with his short cane. "That's where you're wrong," he remarked. "Not so loud now. We don't want to let the whole crowd in on this deal, do we?"

Dean was thinking with all his might. He realized that he had given himself away. He could not keep the sergeant from visiting his rooms with him; the only possible thing to do was to go with him quietly, and trust to overcoming him there.

"All right; I'll go with you," he said.

The sergeant smiled again.

"Between you and me, old man," he said in a confidential whisper, "I've had you covered all the time." Dean saw that his hand had never left his coat-pocket. "So it's just this: slip me that revolver of yours and let's walk there quietly, unless you prefer to be pulled in here. It's all the same to me."

"You think I've got that criminal in my rooms?"

"I dunno," the other answered. "Till you started to act suspicious just now, I didn't. I thought you'd simply lied to me last night. Now I'm not sure. You've bought a pretty good outfit there, and you've changed your mind about Mr. Eltzmann pretty quick, not to mention the fact that he sacked you weeks ago for making false assays. So we'll just take a friendly stroll together, and nobody 'll be the wiser."

Dean nodded, and instructing Tietjens to bring the wagon on behind them, crossed Commissioner Street with the policeman, and they proceeded toward the Reef together. The chaos of Dean's thought had not resolved itself into any plan when they reached the house.

"You'll walk ahead," said the sergeant.

Dean went up the stairs, feeling his heart beating with vicious resolution as he approached his door. At no cost did he mean to let Lois be taken.

He opened the door. There was nobody inside the bedroom. The sergeant was on his heels. Deliberately Dean walked into the sitting-room, planning to turn and spring for the man's throat. But there was nobody in that room either.

CHAPTER V.

IN THE BUSH.

THE sergeant took it badly. He was under the impression that Dean had been making a fool of him, and said so. Dean did nothing to discourage that point of view. He received the revolver which the sergeant reluctantly surrendered, carried down his blankets and carry-all, and ordered Tietjens to take the northward road.

After a few minutes, when he had satisfied himself that the sergeant was not following him, he allowed his speculatnons to have free play. He guessed that Lois had grown afraid in his rooms, and had gone

to rejoin her father, planning to meet him along the Reef.

He reached the end early in the afternoon, but there was no sign of the fugitives. He outspanned for the night, and the next morning walked back the entire distance, even reentering his empty rooms. There was nothing in any of the newspapers about either the attempted arrest or a recapture of a fugitive from justice. Dean guessed that the whole affair was being hidden by those responsible.

Reluctantly he took up his journey toward Batakaland. Each day he kept a sharp lookout along the way, hailing every pedestrian who might tally with Lois's description of her father. But by the time he reached Middelburg he had abandoned hope.

Thenceforward he set himself with dogged pertinacity to the carrying out of his orders. He would take the route indicated into Batakaland, then sell the wagon and team, and hold the money at Lois's disposal, should she ever claim it.

Three weeks followed. The *trek,* which was at first through settled country, soon traversed the high veldt. Tietjens, the Hottentot, took charge of everything, and proved a first-class servant. Dean's defeat of Van Leenen seemed to have imbued him with enormous respect for his master.

"But you *pas op* when we get across the Limpopo, or he'll get you, *baas!*" he said. "You've made a piccanin of him—Van Leenen, who was so big"—here he puffed up his cheeks and throat till he looked like a great yellow frog. "He's a bad man, *baas,* and he won't forget."

After three weeks of journeying along dusty roads they descended into the bush country. They were approaching the main pass of the Murchisons, which rose in the distance, a long, irregular line of blue along the horizon. The oxen were becoming thin, for it was nearing the end of the dry season, and green grass was only to be found along the half-dry river courses. Sometimes they had to rest for a day or two, when they came to pasturage.

The land was a brown desert, covered thinly with spears of parched, yellow grass. For days they encountered nobody, except an occasional party of Kaffir girls, drawing water at the pools in the dry river-beds to carry in their calabashes to some of the native villages perched on the *kopjes.*

On the evening before they were to enter the pass of the Murchisons, which now towered all about them—great hills of fantastic shape, covered with huge, bare boulders, among which the baboons barked angrily at the sound of the cart-wheels—Tietjens came to Dean.

They had halted an hour before sundown, and this being lion country, had spent the hour of daylight building a thick fence of thorn bushes, with a fire at the entrance, to keep out unwelcome marauders.

"*Kom hierso, baas!*" he said, pointing along the road.

Dean went with him for a distance of about a quarter of a mile back along the way they had come. Tietjens pointed to the side of the wagon-road.

Dean saw that a wagon had drawn out of the way and crossed the veldt toward the stream by which they were encamped, but lower down. The sharpness of the tracks showed that it had passed only a little time before.

Tietjens bent down and pointed out some footprints in the sandy soil. They were those of two booted men and a woman. There were also the imprints of bare feet.

"When did they pass this way, Tietjens?" asked Dean.

"Not more than two hours ago, *baas.* See, the edge of the *spoor* is clean! They follow us five, six days," continued the Hottentot, though how he arrived at this conclusion Dean could not imagine. "But they don't want to catch us. They watch where we go. Now they camp at the lower drift, two miles down the *spruit.*"

"Well?" asked Dean.

"Why didn't they take this road, *baas?*"

"I guess that's their own business."

"I think I'll go and see after supper, *baas.*"

Dean offered no objection. The thought flashed through his mind that the woman might be Lois, but he dismissed it as inherently impossible. It was probably a traveling party of Bush Boers, engaged in hunting.

Dean had shot his first game that afternoon—a fine waterbuck. After supper, smoking a pipe under the wagon, with his *kaross* drawn over him, he felt at peace with all the world.

Tietjens had watered and fed the oxen and ensconced them in their enclosure. Mpisi, the Matabele boy, was humming a love song to his one-stringed instrument beside the fire. Overhead the Southern Cross dipped brightly toward the horizon. Peace was everywhere.

It was good to get away from the hive of Johannesburg for this. Dean knew it was the spell of the veldt that had got him. Once a man has smoked native tobacco, drunk *dop,* and worn *veldschoen,* says the proverb, the veldt has him, body and soul. Dean had done all three.

And the past struggle in Johannesburg seemed like a bad dream that was gone forever. This freedom was the essence of real life. But—Lois!

He fell to dreaming of her. He had seen her in his mind's eye many a night during the long *trek* through the bush. He let his fancy wander until his dreams became unconsciousness.

He was awakened by feeling himself hauled roughly from beneath the wagon. He tried to scramble to his feet, and the cold muzle of a revolver was pressed against his cheek. He looked into the brutal, sneering face of Van Leenen, and from Van Leenen's into that of Smit, the black-bearded man whom he had seen on the Johannesburg Market Square, helping Van Leenen away.

"Well, you damned *Engelsmann,*" sneered Van Leenen, "I've got the mare at last, and I've got you. What, *mam?*"

Dean said nothing. Smit went through his pockets and took his revolver.

"Got no tongue, eh?" Van Leenen inquired viciously. "We'll find out presently. Mbulu, get those oxen inspanned and *trek* on to the pass," he added in Zulu to a surly faced Kaffir, who came up, leading Dean's animals, which he began to fasten to the *duesselboom* of his Cape cart.

While Van Leenen kept Dean covered Smit assisted the native, throwing everything into the cart, including even the cooking-pot. The oxen started, the cart rolled away, and the native, leaping into the seat, plied the lash vigorously, until the creak of the wheels began to die away in the distance.

Van Leenen shot out a great fist in an unexpected blow that struck Dean between the eyes, sending him to the ground half stunned. He grinned complacently, and as Dean, maddened with fury, tried to gain his feet, he and Smit slung a rope about him and began to truss him. In a few moments Dean was bound hand and foot. Van Leenen kicked him savagely.

Then, at the Boer's command, a second native, appearing, began to drag Dean at the end of the rope through the scrub.

The pain of the journey aroused Dean effectively. The thorns, hooked backward—it was *waacht-een-beetje,* or "wait-a-bit" thorn—tore his clothing and fastened their recurved points in his face and hair. The blood was trickling down his face and arms when the party emerged from the scrub into a little open space near the sandy bed of the stream.

Dean heard a groaning near by. Then he saw Tietjens.

The upper clothing of the Hottentot had been cut into strips by a heavy *sjambok,* which had gone clean through his ragged shirt, crisscrossing the flesh beneath with bloody weals, and making a hideous diamond pattern all over the man's body as the torturer, with devilish malice, had changed the whip from the right hand to the left.

"Well, we've got him, Swartz!" called Van Leenen.

The cackle of a half-human voice answered him, and the creature addressed came forward out of the scrub, still wielding the bloody whip. Swartz was a Bushman, one of the dwarf aborigines from whom the Totties are supposed to be themselves descended by a cross with the Bantu. He was about four feet six inches in height, with a yellow, wrinkled monkey face, tiny, tightly curled tufts of wool growing sparsely upon his yellow scalp, and enormously long arms, like a monkey's, knotted with muscle.

Tied to a tree not far from Tietjens,

Dean saw his mare. She recognized him, and uttered a little whinny. The incident sent a scowl across Van Leenen's face.

"Shoot the swine!" growled Smit, glancing at Dean. "What are we waiting for, Dirk?"

Van Leenen grinned. "I've got something better than that," he answered.

He whispered in the other's ear. Smit smacked his lips and nodded. "But we can't wait till sun-up," he objected.

"He'll be there," grinned Van Leenen. "Besides, they might hear the shot and get suspicious. She told us only to take the mare away, so that he wouldn't be able to warn the police.

Smit roared with laughter. "It 'll mean a clean five hundred apiece for us, if we don't bungle," he answered. "You were right, Dirk, when you wouldn't give them up in Johannesburg. We'd have got nothing there."

Van Leenen turned upon Dean. "You'll get your medicine now, you damned horse-stealer!" he shouted, gnashing his teeth as he remembered his humiliation at the other's hands, and aiming a shower of kicks at him. "Tie them together, Swartz!"

The ends of the ropes that fastened the two men were bound together, and they were dragged roughly down to the edge of the stream and tied to an acacia that grew near the edge of a large pool in the sandy bed. Then, with a parting kick, Van Leenen turned away and proceeded up the bed of the river, accompanied by Smit, and followed by Swartz, leading Dean's mare.

The pool occupied the center of the river. On either side of it ran tracks of wheels and prints of horse-hoofs and the pads of oxen, some clear and well-defined, some blurred, with the lapse of weeks or months. It was a drift where animals and wheeled vehicles passed from bank to bank, and the tracks had been made during the dry season of five months past, now drawing to a close.

Dean could not understand why they had been left there, nor the look of frantic terror in the eyes of the Hottentot, as he struggled vainly to free himself. At last Tietjens abandoned the effort in despair, and lay gasping and writhing in his bonds, staring out across the water to where the trunk of a fallen tree was dimly visible beside the further bank.

"What's the matter, Tietjens?" asked Dean.

"He wait till dawn comes, *baas*," whispered the trembling Tottie. "Then the buck comes to drink. He knows that. Every morning he wait there. Sometimes he get a big buck, sometimes a hare, sometimes a girl who's dreaming of her lover beside the pool instead of filling her calabash. He won't come till the dawn makes him hungry. He's watching us. He doesn't understand. Bymeby he come nearer, he look at us. Then he think we're wounded bucks. Ah, the damn devils! The damn devils!"

"What are you talking about?" muttered Dean, infected by his companion's fear, and feeling his bonds for a place at which to begin the fight for freedom.

The sky showed the first tracings of dawn. The moon's light paled, and there was the whisper of the dawn breeze among the trees. At that moment the tree-trunk disappeared without a sound. A moment later it reappeared on the side nearest them.

But now it had evolved into the hideous, blunted snout, and gaping, grinning jaws, armed with terrific teeth, of a monster crocodile.

CHAPTER VI.

IN BAD HANDS.

THE carven face stared into theirs, some twelve feet distant, the malignant eyes unwinking and expressionless. The crocodile had scented them, but it was not sure what manner of prey this was, why it was double, and why it did not move. Whatever processes of thought went on within the rudimentary brain, the monster itself lay perfectly immobile, its hideous snout stretched out, the grinning jaws apart, the great tail touching the water's edge.

It would understand at the first movement of either Dean or Tietjens that the mysterious Providence which sends crocodiles their daily food had been good to it.

Dean knew that, but he struggled madly

in his bonds. Death in such a manner was fearful enough to rob him of all reason. The fear that gripped him was the fear of primeval man in the clutch of the dinosaur. It transcended all self-control. The sweat rolled down his forehead, and he writhed and twisted while the cords cut deep grooves in his flesh.

He could not make the slightest impression upon his bonds. Tietjens, beside him, had accepted what he believed to be inevitable, and his yellow face turned gray as he looked, fascinated, into the orbs of the huge saurian. The infernal grin upon the distended jaws was like the mirth of incarnate evil.

The monster understood at last. It advanced slowly toward them, and the great tail swished the sand. The claws drew themselves across the pebbly margin of the stream, making fine tracings in the sand. The beast stopped within six feet of them.

Suddenly, with the speed of a cat, the enormous body hurled itself upon them.

At the same instant a dark shadow flashed between the monster and its victim. The crunching jaws met, biting through bone and sinew. But it was the black, naked body of Mpisi, the Matabele boy, on which they closed.

Mpisi had made his escape upon the arrival of Van Leenen and his companion, and had dogged them through the bush, intent on rescuing his master. With the fidelity of his savage race, he had given his life for him.

More, in his death agony he flung him the knife he carried and, bare handed and defenseless, fought the monster devil of the pool. The naked, black, defenseless body and the scale-armored one met in unequal battle.

It could not be for long, and it could have but one ending. Mpisi's struggles grew fainter, the frantic cries grew into whimpers. Lashing its huge tail, the crocodile carried the writhing body of its victim down to the depths of the pool. The waters closed above its head, rippled, and grew still.

Dean was aroused out of his stupefaction by feeling Tietjens slit the ropes that bound him. He rose to his feet, dazed and staggered by Mpisi's fate. Tietjens caught at his arm.

".We must loop, *baas!*" he said. "Maybe those devils come back to see if crocodile take us."

And, as Dean's stupefaction died away, a blinding rage succeeded it. "Yes, we'll loop, Tietjens," he answered, "but we're going after them. Are you coming with me?"

He pointed up the river. The Tottie's wrinkled face became more monkeylike. A snarl of rage burst from his throat.

"*Ja, baas!*" he chuckled. "We'll follow those devils, *baas*. Sooner or later we get them. Bushman no match for Hottentot. I didn't know Swartz was with them, or they would never have caught me. *Ja, ja,* we'll slit their throats, *baas,* and then we'll put them beside crocodile pool, eh, *baas?*"

"Something of the sort," answered Dean.

They were both unarmed, and the chance of getting even with Van Leenen was incredibly small. But Dean was thinking of the girl. He had no doubt now that she was Lois, who had in some way fallen into Van Leenen's power, and he was determined to do what he could to save her.

They made their way cautiously along the bed of the stream. The sun rose, and the night sounds of the bush died away. Presently they came upon the place where the party had outspanned. The fire was still smoldering, and the fresh wheel-tracks ran across the drift along a smaller road, one which, coming from a divergent point, ran toward the pass in the Murchisons, which was the main way across the Limpopo.

The road ran up-hill. Presently they could see the two wagons—Van Leenen's and Dean's—not far away. They seemed to be making good time. A wagon travels about as fast as a man can walk. It was hopeless to think of making an attack until night. Their only chance would be to seize a rifle from the wagon and hold up the ruffians.

"We'll have to wait till night, Tietjens," said Dean.

"*Ja, baas!* At night we get 'um. No need to hurry, *baas*. We get 'um for sure. Then we slit their throats while they sleep, but not enough to kill them. Then we find

pool with big crocodile, or nice, big ant-hill, *baas!*"

Suddenly the Hottentot bent down and, with a series of guttural clicks, began examining the ground. He pulled at Dean's sleeve, pointing backward.

Dean accompanied him to the bank of the stream which they had just left. Here was a smaller road, hardly more than a trail, branching away westward. Tietjens showed Dean the tracks of a horse's hoofs.

"Swartz!" he said viciously. "He ride your mare, *baas.*"

"How do you know it's Swartz?"

"Look, *baas!* Her forefeet far apart. When heavy man ride your mare her feet come together—so. Swartz ride her."

"Where does this road run?" asked Dean.

"Pietersburg. Fifty miles."

"Pietersburg! There's a police detachment there. Then he's gone to get the police. That's part of Van Leenen's game. He'll get there soon after noon."

And he began to think out the situation. This must be what Van Leenen and Smit had meant in their exchange. They had planned to betray Lois and her father—not in Johannesburg, where they would have had to share the reward, but here, with no other claimants.

If a police detachment came in response, they would probably not start till late afternoon. There was no hurry. Van Leenen had his victims secure. Then they should be on the scene by the next morning—earlier if they hastened.

It would be necessary to do whatever could be done soon after nightfall.

They followed the two wagons all day, keeping under cover of the bushes beside the road. The vehicles outspanned for four hours at noon, and resumed their journey at a snail's pace. They had not covered more than five miles in all when the sun set. By that time, Dean calculated, the police detachment should be already on its way.

Dean waited, consumed with feverish impatience, until it was dark. When the glow of the camp-fire was a luminous flare in the night they went slowly forward until they could make out the figures of the two Boers beside the fire. A little distance from them sat a third man, evidently Lois's father. He sat with his head in his hands, resting wearily.

Tietjens, at Dean's side, was mad with excitement. Is was all Dean could do to restrain him from leaping forward. Dean meant to wait until the men had dozed, or at least, grown sleepy; he could afford to take no chances.

Then he saw Lois leave the wagon and go toward the pair. She was dressed in the clothes of a prospector or transport rider—riding breeches of khaki with leggings, and absurdly small boots beneath them; a flannel shirt open at the throat, and a stout, stained khaki coat. On her head was one of the wide-brimmed South African hats, with a blue puggaree around it, and one side pinned up to the crown.

She went up to Van Leenen. In the stillness Dean could hear every word.

"When are we going to *trek?*" she asked. "We outspanned nearly all the afternoon, and the oxen are still fresh. We are so near the border, and we can cover a dozen miles by midnight."

"We'll start to-morrow," answered Van Leenen in surly fashion.

"We must get on, I tell you," said Lois more loudly. "This is the most dangerous part of the whole journey, with Pietersburg and Leydsdorp so near us. You told me you would push on as fast as possible."

"We can't, *Meisje,*" mumbled Van Leenen. "The oxen will not stand it. There is no danger. We start at sun-up, if I choose. If I do not choose, we stay."

The tall man rose wearily and went forward. He spoke a few words in a low tone. Dean heard Van Leenen's snarling answer.

"You are planning to betray us!" cried Lois suddenly, swinging upon him.

Instantly Van Leenen caught her by the arms while Smit flung himself upon her father, bearing him to the ground. Dean saw Lois struggling wildly, heard her screams—and leaping forward, struck Van Leenen to the ground.

Tietjens thrust a rifle into Dean's hands. Before Van Leenen could rise, before Smit had recovered from his astonishment Dean had both the men covered.

"Hands up!" he commanded briefly.

The hands went up in an instant. The faces of the two Dutchmen were an extraordinary medley of terror, surprise, and rage. Between them and Dean the Tottie danced and shrieked.

"*Schiet hem! Schiet de skellum!*" he yelled, pointing a monkey claw at Van Leenen derisively.

"You keep those natives in the enclosure!" commanded Dean; and Tietjens went to obey, just in time to keep the two Kaffirs from breaking for the bush.

Dean turned to Lois, who had stood thunderstruck beside her father.

"Well, I've kept my promise, Miss Ashton," he said. "These men attacked my wagon last night and fastened my man and myself together beside the crocodile pool. We were saved by the devotion of a native boy, who gave his life for us. They also thrashed my man brutally, as you may see."

The girl's eyes blazed. "Did you try to murder Mr. Gervaise?" she cried to Van Leenen.

"He's lying," snarled Van Leenen. "He's a damned spy. You saw the policeman that he brought back with him."

"The policeman," said Dean quietly, still keeping the captives covered, "was the one who entered my rooms that night. He recognized me on the Market Square and insisted on returning with me. These men are planning to betray your father for a reward. They have already sent their man Swartz on my horse for the police, who will be here in a few hours."

"He's lying again!" snarled Van Leenen, but without conviction.

"You told me Swartz had stolen the mare and run away!" cried Lois.

"I am here to fulfill my promise, Miss Ashton, if you and your father wish—" Dean began.

Suddenly Smit darted from beneath the threat of the rifle and leaped into the wagon.

An instant later there came a crack from the interior, and a bullet, shot through the canvas, skimmed Dean's cheek.

But quicker still was the Hottentot. With a howl of rage he was scrambling into the wagon like a great yellow ape, and a quick rush-and-tumble followed. Van Leenen, leaping at Dean, as the rifle ceased to cover him, fired from the hip. The bullet flew wild; Dean brought the rifle-butt smashing down on the Boer's head, and Van Leenen fell, half stunned.

Tietjens, meanwhile, had brought Smit to the ground, where the two lay, clawing at each other's throats. Smit was already growing blue in the face.

"Let him go!" shouted Dean. "After the natives! Quick!"

The two boys, who had watched the fight in stupefaction, were now dashing from the enclosure when Tietjens caught them.

"*Baas! Baas!*" screamed the Hottentot. "Let me *sjambok* them! Only a little bit! *Meisie,* see what he did to me," he added to Lois.

"Get the whole crowd together and splice one to each wagon wheel!" ordered Dean. "And you can go easy with Van Leenen," he added as the Dutchman sat up sullenly with a half-bewildered look. "Just tie his hands together and fasten him by the middle. Give him a drink first!"

Then for the first time he wondered at the apathy of Ashton. But looking at him he saw that the man was deathly ill, pallid as a ghost, emaciated from his sufferings, worn by the long flight.

"Sit down, Mr. Ashton," he said as Tietjens began his work of fastening the two blacks and the two whites, one to each wheel of the vehicle. "Now, Miss Lois, I'll ask you and your father to make your decision. If you prefer to trust yourselves to these men they shall be untied and we'll continue our journey. If you believe my statement that I did not intentionally bring that policeman back with me I offer you and your father my services until you are clear of danger. These men will be released in a few hours by the police, whom Swartz is bringing from Pietersburg. Make your decision, please."

For an instant the girl's eyes burned on Dean's face. Then:

"We'll go with you," she said decisively.

(To be continued NEXT WEEK.)

On the Brink of Eternity

by *Joseph Gollomb*

AS Joe Merritt, third assistant warden, climbed the dimly lit road to the prison, he was oppressed with a sense of trouble to him inexplicable. Any one else could have told him that it was partly due to the cheerlessness of his week-end leave from which he was returning. It was a feeling natural to this man of fifty-two who, on his short holiday to the big city, realized more than ever that the only people who really cared whether he lived or died—and they were no kin to him—were behind prison bars. This, together with the peculiar reticence he had noticed of late in Sam Braby, a "lifer," his "trusty" for fourteen years, his best friend and the only human being he thoroughly understood, should have helped Joe Merritt analyze his "premonition."

But Joe was not strong on self-analysis. He felt clearly but two things in life—his duty as a warden and his sense of right toward his prisoners. But he felt these things as unwaveringly as only a strong simple nature can; and he was clear in his conscience about both.

Nevertheless his stout old heart leaped painfully when suddenly the big siren over the prison sent a long complaining hoot through the night. A few shots followed; but they were desultory and probably only guesses in the dark. Search-lights woke on the river wall of the prison; but they were desultory, too. It was an alarm as yet, not a pursuit.

"Gawd give it isn't Sam!" Joe prayed in his heart as he began running toward the prison.

But it *was* Sam Braby who had escaped. The new guard at the gate—Joe guessed that *all* his "trusties" had been at once deprived of their trusts—shouted the news as he let him in, and added:

"The warden wants you should see him at once!"

Joe found his superior pacing his office, his assistant, Burke, also there. As Joe entered the warden wheeled on him, his eyes cold and censorious.

"Well, Joe, your friend has put one over on us!" he cried. "Thanks to your touching faith in him he's pulled off the neatest little getaway in the world! You've given him and a lot of other rats such a free run of the place that I ought to be thankful it's only one that broke out, I suppose. What you got to suggest, Warden Merritt? He's got two hours' start, and damn if *I* know where he's headed!"

Joe's deep-sunk, washed-out gray eyes avoided his chief's. The stoop of his powerful shoulders grew more pronounced. His fingers unconsciously broke the leather visor of his cap.

"I'll go look for him, chief," he muttered, turning to leave.

"Well, I guess you will!" the warden snorted. "You're the only one who enjoyed Mr. Braby's confidence," he added with heavy sarcasm. "I don't want to ask you to betray your friend. But may I inquire where you mean to start looking?"

It was not the warden's sarcasm that weighed on Joe. He knew the other to be a fair man at heart.

"I think he's headed for New York," he said, his voice troubled. "If he isn't caught before then I'll find him there. I'll have to ask for indefinite leave on duty, sir."

"What's your hunch?" the warden demanded sternly. He had at that moment less patience than ever with Joe's notions of honor regarding the secrets his wards confided in him. "Did you have any knowledge that he would attempt—"

"You've no call to ask me that, chief!" Joe interrupted with the sincerity of a man whose honesty is compelled only by himself.

The warden glared, the more so as he felt Joe was right.

"Then how do you know he's headed for New York?" he demanded.

Joe rubbed his square gray face ruminantly.

"He got a letter lately from 'Slim' Howatt, his old pal here who got 'turned out' over a year ago," he answered slowly. "'Slim' is second engineer on a tramp freighter plying between New York and some port in Australia. Ever since Sam got the letter—it was full of what a new free world Australia is—Sam's been dumb with me. Slim's ship is in New York now. It's the Adelaide, I think. Sam may be headed there."

"Well, you head for there yourself, Joe Merritt!" the warden stormed. "It's up to you to get Sam back here—where's your gun?"

"Don't need any," Joe muttered.

The warden turned a stormier red. "Look here, Joe! You've disobeyed long enough my order to carry a gun!" He yanked out his own revolver and slid it along the table to his assistant. "You stick that in your pants, man, or I'll have you on the carpet!"

Joe's hand did not move. "A gun will be no use, chief, unless you want him back here dead," he persisted.

"I don't care how he gets here, so long as he comes back!" the warden shouted. He turned to his other assistant. "Go with Joe, Phil Burke. Follow him as long as it seems to lead you any nearer to Sam Braby. Make him follow you if you think you've a better lead. You're in command, Phil. If you two come on Sam Braby, let Joe talk to him first. If *he* can't bring him back, then you use your persuader on him, Phil Burke! You certainly possess no prejudices!"

"Right, chief!" Burke muttered.

As he and Joe Merritt took their places in the automobile that whisked them out of the prison yard, Joe brooded on the problem of Burke's presence. Neither man, on a hunt like this, would trust the other. Each would distrust, not the other's honesty, but his way of going about to get Sam Braby back.

Joe knew Burke to be an honest man, but hard. He had no feeling for or against Sam Braby or any other convict. They were to him just so many crude automatons. If one of them balked, a sledge hammer would set it working again. If Sam Braby should hesitate for an instant to obey Burke's command to double-quick back to prison, Joe knew that Burke would not hesitate to shoot. Joe also knew that no revolver would ever induce Sam to return.

Something inexpressibly leaden weighed on Joe's very limbs as he hunched over the wheel of the automobile speeding toward New York. It was the despair of a man deep in middle age when the whole structure of his life is toppling and he feels no strength with which to begin again.

Sam Braby gone! Sam Braby to betray his trust! Sam Braby to undo his work of years in convincing the prison administration that the human way with prisoners is the paying way! No more to have Sam Braby to smoke a cutty pipe with!

But Joe's heart was tough. His shoulders squared and the lines of his mouth hardened like seams in a granite wall. He was summoning all there was in him for

the coming struggle. Which meant that least of all he would spare himself.

II.

THE John T. McCloskey, tugging a string of scows from Haverstraw to New York, was a good half mile from either shore at the time the prison siren blew. So that the one buffer that trailed in the water from the last coal barge seemed a superfluous precaution; especially as on the deck immediately above it sat the new barge watchman, smoking his pipe and keeping a sharp lookout in the dark. His hand rested negligently on the rope loop by which the wooden buffer hung from the barge.

Suddenly he felt that rope jerk. Whipping his pipe from his mouth he darted a look at the lights in the cabin of the barge ahead. No one was on deck. Stooping over the side of the barge he whispered:

"Sam?"

An answering jerk was the only reply. But in the black murk of the river he caught a glimmer of white at the end of the buffer. The watchman slipped a rope over the side of the barge, and as something white began to emerge from the water he let down a black tarpaulin. It was wrapped in this tarpaulin that a dripping figure fell to the deck and lay for a while exhausted. Then, guided by the watchman's touch, the figure crept along to the tiny cabin at the bow.

Here the watchman closed and locked the door, blanketed the shuttered windows and lit a candle. Its light showed Sam Braby, huddled dripping and shivering in the tarpaulin. Life had seared heavy lines in his gray face and had burned all complexity out of it. There was a crude honesty written there, so obvious were the few hungers it had left in the man. Just then his hunger was to express something.

"Slim—I—it's dam' white of you to—to—" he croaked in a whisper.

The watchman, a young fellow in dirty dungarees, his face alive with impatience, shoved a glass of liquor toward Sam and laid out a suit of coal-soiled clothes.

"Forget it! And get into these after you've rubbed yourself dry."

Sam gulped the drink; closed his eyes in utter need for a breath of rest, and shook his head with frustration of the things he wanted to say. He dried himself slowly as one to whom every movement was like a hill to climb. When he was dressed in the clothes the watchman had provided, he tried again.

"Slim, what makes it hard is knowin' how much you're riskin'—an' how little I can ever do for you—"

Slim laid his pipe down and stood over him, his clean-shaven, stubborn mouth working with feeling.

"Waste no time, mate, talkin'!" he said impatiently. "The third day I was in 'stir' I tried to bust my head against the wall, didn't I? It was you who stopped me and bucked me up, wasn't it? It was you who got Joe Merritt to be good to me, wasn't it? It was both of you that helped me live through those five years. Well, I'm free now, an' married to my girl, and there's a kid at home. I've been on the big seas; and I live in a world so new that it's wild. If not for you—and mebbe Joe Merritt—I'd be rottin' in the prison graveyard now. And you talk— Hell, man, lie down till I make you some ham an' eggs!"

He turned quickly to the little galley stove and larder. He had been at work some minutes cooking when he became uneasy at the silence from Sam Braby. He found him with his close-cropped head in his hands, the figure of utter misery. Touched, Slim came around to him and put his hands on his shoulders.

"Not a worry in the world, Sam!" he whispered heartily. "Eighty days from date I, Slim Howatt, do promise to deliver one Sam Braby to my wife and kid in Sydney, Australia, twelve thousand miles from anybody that ever knew him but me. All fixed, old-timer, like a launchin'! So what's the worry?"

"Joe Merritt!" Sam whispered.

Slim found the argument a hard one. "Not his fault, Sam!" he pleaded. "He was on leave when you broke out."

Sam shook his head.

"No use, Slim!" he said heavily. "I'm going through with it all right! But I'm

payin' for it! I'm doing Joe Merritt dirt! Joe Merritt! Me!"

"Well, didn't everybody else do you dirt?" Slim demanded. "Didn't Alderman Cooney and his gang do you dirt when they framed you up for life? Didn't their 'stool,' Magrudo, try to blow your head off from behind? And wasn't you sent up for murder when it was self-defense? Everybody, everybody does you dirt an' you go weepin' because you grab a bit of freedom before you die!"

"Joe Merritt hasn't done me dirt!" Sam repeated tonelessly. "The only man who stood for us and by us and with us and who never's been done dirt by any one except by me!"

Slim sat down dispiritedly. "Oh, can it!"

Sam sensed the depression he was spreading. Rousing himself he came over to Slim.

"Sorry, Slim. Didn't mean to give you the willies! Guess I'll feel better with that chow inside me—"

Slim jumped to his feet. "You bet you will!" he cried cheerfully, hustling to the galley stove. "And to-morrow you'll land in little ol' New York, the dirtiest lookin' barge-hand that ever wore hand-me-downs and coal dust. For a coupla hours you'll lie low. Then you'll sneak down to the dock in the dark and I'll come for you in a little dory. And once aboard the smutty little tramp I tell you you'll be snuffin' salt spray till we hit Sydney—Sam, you'll want this!"

With a quick change of manner he took a revolver out of his jeans and gave it to Braby. Sam hesitated; then shoved it into his own pocket.

"Thanks, Slim!" His manner was grave. "Anybody but Joe Merritt 'll make me use it."

"And Joe Merritt?" Slim asked quickly.

"Sha'n't use it on Joe."

"But they'll set Joe lookin' for you!" Slim stormed. "He knows more than all of 'em where to look. Whatcha gonna do? Go back after all, and take me along?"

Sam stopped him.

"You'll not be in this even if I have to go back to free you from the mess!" His tone was as good as another man's bond. "But as for me, Slim, I'm having a breath of bein' free. And I'm never going to breathe prison air again!"

III.

DISTRUSTING each other in the way they did, both Joe Merritt and Burke, each for his own purposes, found means of getting rid of the other for a time in New York. The pretense they agreed on was a canvass of a number of men who had been in prison with Sam Braby.

What Burke really did was to look up next day what tramp freighters from Australia lay in the harbor. He found among them the Adelaide, which Joe Merritt had mentioned to the warden as Slim Howatt's ship. He then arranged with the harbor police to place a guard aboard her, telling the captain that it was river thieves they were after. Burke meant to take no chances with Joe Merritt's humanitarian methods of hunting escaped convicts. Then he waited for Joe to come back.

Joe's errand characteristically was nearer the truth. He went to the house of Slim Howatt's sister. But he waited for Slim outside. It was not till late the next afternoon that he saw Slim, his once prison pallor now a sea bronze. But it turned a shade paler at sight of Joe Merritt.

"Why, old Joe!" he cried with an enthusiasm only slightly exaggerated. "What a surprise!"

"'Tain't a surprise, Slim." Joe shook his head. "Where's Sam? I want to talk to him."

A steely look came into Slim's eyes.

"What *are* you talking about, Joe Merritt?" he began; but Joe cut him off.

"No need of stalling between us, Slim. It's only natural you should help Sam. But I want to talk to him."

Slim dropped his mask.

"If I was helping Sam break out why would I give him away?"

"Because I'm entitled to a chance to talk to Sam."

"You mean to take him back."

"That 'll depend on Sam."

"I'll never give a pal away!" Slim said.

"I'm not asking you to. And you've no choice, Slim. I'll stick with you till you take me to Sam. If you take too long to do it Phil Burke will join me—not that I want him—with a gun in his pocket. Then the choice will be out of your hands and mine."

Slim hung poised on an impulse to run and lose Joe. But those who knew and loved Joe rarely did the violent thing with him.

"Suppose I could bring you to Sam," he asked after a struggle. "Who would it be up to whether he went back to the pen?"

"Sam."

Slim searched Joe's lack-luster eyes.

"Joe, I can't see myself pulling any rough stuff on you," he said slowly. "Any more than I can see you going back on Joe Merritt's word. But, Joe, if *you could* go back on your word I could see myself using my gun on you, wife and kid notwithstanding! Listen!"

He told him where Sam would meet him that night on the river front. According to arrangements Slim would wait in a dory in the river till he saw Sam dodge past the lone lamp-post at the end of the dock. Then he would row in and take him aboard the freighter which would weigh anchor in the early morning.

"And remember, Joe," Slim ended. "If you do any more than just talk to Sam I'll feel free to do something I'd never dream of doing otherwise."

Joe nodded absently and the two men parted.

Joe Merritt went down to the dock Slim described and found it alive with construction work. Near the lamp-post Slim spoke of was a paymaster's shanty with a solid door pierced by the little semioval window through which pay envelopes were distributed. Joe showed his badge, and gave the construction boss a vague idea of his errand there. In return he got possession of the key to the then empty shack. Then he met Burke at their hotel and the two men waited for nightfall.

Neither told the other much about his errand. Joe did tell Burke that he had learned that Sam Braby might try to make the Adelaide that night by way of the dock.

"But Phil," Joe warned him, "I am to get first whack at Sam. That's the chief's orders and that's my condition. If you break in before I'm ready for you I'll do all I can to let him get away. Get me?"

"Got you, Joe," Burke growled. "Get me, too. I'll do anything you want me to except let Sam Braby escape alive!"

At night the lamp-post at the end of that wharf was the only point of light on that piece of dark river-front. It shed a yellow glare on the whitewashed head of a thick stringpiece. Otherwise there was not even moonlight. Except for the sleeping lights of several small freighters in the middle of the river, the dark seemed sullen and sinister.

Joe and Burke crept through the shadows till they reached the paymaster's shack. Joe turned to the other.

"You get in the shack and keep a lookout through the pay window," Joe whispered. "I'm going to speak to Sam when he comes."

"Without a gun?"

"You've got all the gun we'll need."

Burke looked at the shack distrustfully. But he saw that through the little window he could command the lighted stringpiece perfectly with his revolver. So he stepped inside. It was Joe who closed the door on him, turning the key in the lock.

"What d'you mean?" Burke whispered hoarsely. "Open that door!"

"Quiet!" Joe muttered. "He's due any moment. You can keep your gun stuck out of the window and nobody'll be the wiser, it's so dark. When I want you I'll let you out fast enough!"

"Listen here, Joe Merritt!" Burke whispered. "I've got my gat pointing out. If you or Braby pull anything I suspect I'll pull something, too! Hear?"

Instead of answering Joe Merritt shrank against the pay window until his back was against the muzzle of Burke's revolver. From his manner Burke guessed that he had seen something. Suddenly Joe moved forward and Burke saw.

Into the glare of lamplight, his face smudged but otherwise ghastly pale against the whitewashed stringpiece, appeared Sam Braby dressed in engineer's overalls.

"Sam!" Joe called out.

Braby whirled on the balls of his feet, the revolver in his hand pointing at the voice. Joe Merritt stepped forward till he was within six feet of him. Braby, about to pull the trigger, spoke.

"Stop, Joe!"

Joe Merritt stopped. Sam's revolver muzzle was pointed straight at Joe's chest; but it was not that which made Joe halt.

"Come back with me, Sam," he said sternly.

Braby looked down for an instant at the black water on the brink of which his toes were poised.

"Can't, Joe," he growled. "Don't stop me, 'cause I mean to use this gat if you do."

Joe shook his head.

"You know that never went as an argument with me," he said doggedly. "Ain't got one myself and I won't listen to yours. We're talking man to man, Sam."

"No, Joe! No use appealing to the man in me. I appealed to the gang that framed me. To the judge that sent me up for life. To the Governor. I'm through appealing. I've put in fifteen years for plugging a man who tried to plug me first. Now, Joe Merritt, I mean to get a taste of freedom—"

"And shut the door a lot tighter on every other con!" Joe broke in. "You don't need to be told what your break means to the others. I've been able to make things a bit easier because none of you chaps have ever taken advantage of any ease-up. You know what a job I've had getting little favors for the boys. Well, they've put all my 'trusties' back in their cells because of your break. I want you to think of everybody, Sam, before you help yourself so much."

Sam Braby shut his eyes.

"No use, I tell you, Joe!" he snarled. "No use reasoning with me! I'm mad! Mad for a breath of freedom! Look, Joe!" His voice changed to pleading. "Look at the little I ask. I want to go to a wild country where I won't ask anything but just free air to breathe. I don't ask for comfort. I don't ask for anything but a chance to work with my hands for myself. I'll break rocks. I'll fetch and carry. I'll work like a con. All I ask is a chance to forget iron bars, Joe!"

"The boys you left in 'stir' will beg for less than that, Sam—and they won't get it, if you leave 'em in the lurch!"

Sam groaned.

"Haven't I paid enough?" he pleaded. "Haven't I suffered enough to pay for something that's been framed on me?"

"I'm not the judge, Sam! I'm only third assistant warden with less power than ever—if you leave!"

"Damn you!" Sam cried in a rage. "You've got to be judge! You can't duck being judge, Joe Merritt. You're judging me now for leaving the boys in the lurch. Well, judge or no judge, I'm not going back—"

"Drop that gun, Sam Braby, or I'll fire!" came Burke's harsh voice from the dark.

Joe Merritt moved a few inches to the left and Sam Braby shoved his revolver muzzle in his direction.

"We're quits now, Joe!" Braby yelled. "I've done you dirt and you've trapped me—"

"Don't!" Joe shouted as Sam turned to dive into the river. "He won't shoot you!"

He spoke the truth, for he had deliberately moved so that if Burke shot he would hit not Sam but him. Sam laughed.

"I don't believe you any more, Joe—"

"Get out of the way, Joe!" yelled Burke, his line of fire obstructed.

"Stand still, Joe!" came Slim's voice from the dark river. "I've got you covered!"

"Sam Braby, you're making Slim, his wife and baby pay for your break!" Joe cried sternly, without budging.

For an instant Sam Braby reflected. Then a cry of despair, the wail of a creature's leave-taking of life, broke from his lips. Twisting his revolver about he pointed it at his temple. There was a flash, a report. On Braby's white temple there sprang to sight a black blotch from which a thin red stream issued.

Joe Merritt caught a glimpse of a bewildered look on Sam's face as he slowly collapsed to the stringpiece. But before

Joe's hands could reach him the convict's body fell sidewise into the black water.

Joe fell to the stringpiece in his efforts to catch it. For some moments he lay there, stunned by the swift ending. He could not see anything but the vision of that blanched face and the sudden black and red gash in Sam's temple. He had seen men die before, Joe told himself, but never any one who leaped so swiftly from full life to the very brink of eternity.

There came to Joe at that moment the feeling that, as Sam had said, he could not shirk judging his friend. And stern as his sense of duty was toward his job as warden he told himself that Sam had paid his full due when he put the revolver to his temple and fired.

So thoroughly did he feel that Sam had expiated his escape that he did not allow himself to question the faint splashing he heard in the dark water below him. Even, if by some miracle Sam's bullet missed its intended mark; if the bewildered look on Sam's face meant surprise that consciousness should still linger; even if the sidewise fall of the body did mean a slight effort of the muscles to avoid striking the pier, nevertheless Joe felt that his duty had been carried out fully. It was not seemly for any human being to peer over the brink of eternity to see whether another was really and utterly extinct.

Slowly Joe rose and released Burke from the shack.

"Well, that's one way I don't mind letting a con escape," Burke said slowly. "Poor devil! He's done the right thing by your boys, after all, Joe! We'll drag the river first thing in the morning."

Sympathetic as Burke was for him, Joe was glad that it was the Avon, of which Slim Howatt was engineer, instead of the Adelaide, as Joe had told the warden.

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THERE WERE OTHERS

"OH! don't you remember that evening last June,
When together we walked by the shore,
While the band played a ravishing popular tune,
And a sweeter one as an encore?

"Oh! don't you remember that little dark nook,
And the nothings I breathed in your ear?
And don't you remember the strolls that we took,
Unknown to your folks, on the pier?

"Oh! don't you remember I said I adored
The girl who was then by my side,
While sympathy woke a reciprocal chord
We swore would remain till we died?"

"Ah, yes! I remember distinctly—and yet,
Though what you have told me is true,
Well, really so many admirers I met.
Which of them—excuse me—were you?"

La Touche Hancock.

Fortune Unawares

Part II

by J. Allan Dunn

Author of "Salt of the Sea," "The War Cloth," etc.

WHAT HAS ALREADY HAPPENED

NED KENNEDY, who tells the story, while at college becomes the intimate friend of En Sue, a young Chinese student, who, like many of his countrymen, is an inveterate gambler. In the course of a fight springing from crooked playing which En Sue detects Kennedy saves the former's life. En Sue's gratitude knows no bounds, and he gives Kennedy a little godling of good luck in remembrance.

The wanderlust takes Kennedy to Shanghai, where he is found by Li Yuen, En Sue's aristocratic and wealthy father, who offers him a job as keeper of a lighthouse on a reef in the South China Sea, which he accepts as a preparation for something better. Toward the end of his year as light-keeper a great storm comes up, and in the midst of it a small boat is wrecked on his reef. Going down to the water he discovers two dead men in the boat, and in the hand of one a large and beautiful ruby, the value of which will be many thousands of dollars. He is tempted to keep it as his own, but his conscience tells him it does not belong to him. Endeavoring to decide what he shall do, he goes to sleep with the ruby clasped in his hand.

CHAPTER VI.

THE PRAHU.

I OVERSLEPT next morning, for the first time since I had been on duty at the light. For a moment I seemed to be aswim in the heart of the big ruby, still dreaming. The red light from the sunrise was pouring in through the eastern window of my living-room. I jumped out of bed and ran to my lamps. It would never do to have my relief come up and find me derelict in duty, wasting oil. That attended to, I went out on the gallery to see if I could sight smoke, and as I emerged I heard voices.

They were highly exultant and unintelligible, savage. The tide was making, the reefs barely awash, and in the blue water lay a high-sterned *prahu,* crowded with men, its great sail of matting being lowered by a jabbering crew, the morning shining redly on the weapons they carried. It was a Malay craft. The men were Dyaks or from the Bajau settlements of northern Borneo. *Perompaks*—pirates—killers! They were five hundred miles or more from home, and what the devil were they doing at the light?

The first voices I had heard were directly beneath me. And now they lifted to a yell that was echoed from the *prahu.* I caught sight of two of them, naked save for a G string, their dark bodies cicatrized

on the back, their heads wrapped in yellow turbans, dragging, not my boat, but the other one, across the rocks to a channel.

This I saw swiftly, and then an arrow streaked from the *prahu*. It was lucky for me that the distance was great. It was nearly spent, but it got me in the shoulder and hung there for a moment, dropping as I darted back into the lantern. The thick glass shut off sound, but I saw a flash from the *prahu*, and the next moment a bullet spanged against the toughened panes and starred the glass, without penetrating. The gun was obsolete, and the cartridges home-made of black powder, or the missile would have gone through.

But I wasn't going to stand for a horde of murderous savages destroying the property in my charge. I looked on them as wreckers with some nefarious idea of wiping out the light and profiting by it. It never occurred to me that they might be after the ruby, tracing up that boat and guessing that its occupants might have sought refuge at the light. I imagined that they had taken the boat merely as a means of getting ashore without risking the flood tide sharks, for when I reached my living-room and spilled a box of cartridges loosely on the floor I saw them using it as a ferry between the *prahu* and the rocks, one load of them spilling out on the reef and coming across the pools, shaking spears and bright krisses; one in advance with the gun he had fired; their faces contorted, mouths wide open and shrieking, evidently bent upon charging the light.

Now, the light had two stories proper besides the lantern and gallery. It was circular, and the windows, facing east and west, were curved. So were the doors, two of them, one for ordinary use, giving on the iron ladder that was cemented into the base rock, and the other for taking in supplies. My boat was slung on davits, and the fall ropes were tied off outside the door. The height of the steel stilts was thirty feet.

I seemed fairly safe unless they could batter in my door and rush me. But I was not disposed to stay idle. The doors both faced north. The big one, for supplies, was not really a door, but a curved batten of timber that shifted in grooves to the right. I put my table under it and slid it aside until I had opened a long slot of three inches in width, a fine loophole.

I didn't shoot to kill, at first. I was after the chap who had starred the glass. His seemed to be the only gun among them. But I saw axes, and I knew I had to be quick. The gunman was splashing through a puddle, swinging his weapon above his head, and now through the slot their barbaric yells came plainly. He paused on the edge of a channel, preparing to jump it, when I drew bead and fired. He had hold of the gun by the lock, and my bullet went smacking through his hand and knocked the weapon from it. I had thought to maim both him and the gun. He stopped with a howl as the gun fell into the channel. A flight of arrows answered. I heard them pecking at the timbers, and one actually went through the opening, though well above my head.

My man stared into the channel, and, loath to lose the weapon that was both his pride and his authority, dived for it. I don't think he ever came up. I was too busy to be certain, but I found the gun there at low tide with the hammer put out of commission, an old Snider. I think a shark got him. I have reasons for that belief—and hope.

Two more fell before the rest swept beneath my sight and angle of fire. I could feel the tremble of the ladder as they swarmed up it. More were coming from the *prahu*. The axes would soon splinter the door.

I sprang down and pulled the table to one side, shifting from rifle to automatic for the closer work. As I flung back the smaller door the low brow and sleek black hair of a *perompak* lifted, unturbaned. I shot him through the top of his head, and saw the blood stream as he slanted slowly backward—and still rose, carried on by the man under him. I dropped to the floor on my elbows, wormed to the threshold, and looked down into the glaring eyes of the second man, free from his fellow's corpse now, a wavy kris between his wedge-teeth, an ax in his free hand.

My bullet must have traversed the length

of his body. I saw his brown flesh pinch just above the right nipple. The shock of the powerful charge knocked him clear, and I visioned him falling, spread-eagled, astonished, to the rocks as I potted the next. I think that shot got two of them. It disheartened the rest, and they scrambled down, seeking safety underneath the building.

The bowmen had kept firing, and doorposts and lintel bristled with the shafts. One slender shaft lay between my garment and my shoulder. It had ripped the skin, I found later, but otherwise I was unharmed. I emptied the clip at the rest of the crowd, who stood back hesitant after the fate of the scaling party, and reached back for my rifle. I stood back in the gloom at an angle from the opening, and let them have it.

All this time the tide had been rising, and, save for the immediate rocks of the base, the water was well over the rocks. The ruck of them were up to the knees in the wash. The wind was blowing strong and the footing was not easy where the waves broke. Two more shots and they broke. I thanked the Lord for my rifle practise. It had been altogether too hot a reception for them, and some one from the *prahu* yelled to them to return. The victory was not all mine, as I found out presently, but I shouted as the men underneath the tower broke to join the rest. One of them I dropped, and he went sliding off a bunch of weedy rock into deeper water. As he dipped I saw a triangular fin show, disappear, and then there was a swirl in the water.

The pirates were yelling again, but now with terror. The sea was alive with sharks. They had scented blood; some of them had tasted it. The odor and the flavor of it had gone trailing with the tide, and the maddened sea-tigers were gathering for the feast.

As the baffled *perompaks* struggled back toward the little boat and the *prahu* they were forced to plunge armpit deep in places. Across the shallows the sharks flung themselves, snapping, tearing, slithering over the reefs with bellies exposed as they turned, their bristling mouths agape. The horrid ravening of that slaughter was too sickening for me to witness in cold blood. I had been blood-mad before, but I shut the door against the sight and leaned on the wall before I reloaded my rifle and went up into the lantern-room.

It was almost over. The boat had swamped with them as they had all tried to crowd in it. Heads were bobbing in the deep water between the edge of the main reef and the *prahu*. One by one they disappeared. The great sail went up, sweeps were put out, and the high poop of the *prahu* swung toward me as with wind and oars it fled from the slaughter. Everywhere shark fins showed, ranging criss-cross, seeking the last fragments.

Far off to the west was a brown feather of smoke. The packet was on its way with my relief. They must have sighted it from the *prahu*. That and the sharks, besides my bullets, shared the successful repulse, for the *perompaks* knew that the packets carried arms in those seas.

An hour later the steamer was in plain sight, and I started to dress for its reception and my departure. The sharks were still cruising.

CHAPTER VII.

A BOOBY TRAP

BACK in Shanghai, passing rich, with most of my year's wage unspent, I put up at the Hotel American once more, this time in a larger room with bath next to the top floor, at the rear, overlooking the native quarter. I paid a visit to a Chinese tailor, than whom there were few better, none cheaper nor quicker, and got measured for a suit of good English serge, not caring to appear before En Sue in what I had. After more shopping I returned to the hotel, changed, and went out to get in touch with Li Yuen. Somehow I had expected word at the hotel, but there was none. I did not think it best to go out to his villa unannounced. It was barely possible that he was away, and so I made inquiries at the headquarters of a company in which I knew he was still the presiding if not active genius.

He had gone away on a steamer to Honolulu. But he was expected back on the steamer that arrived, according to the schedule, within forty-eight hours. They did not tell me, but I knew why he had gone—to meet En Sue midway on his homeward journey. The gap suddenly seemed long on my hands. I had looked forward with eagerness to seeing both of them again. What would come from that meeting I did not know. I dragged out that afternoon and went to bed early. The ruby was still on my mind; I could not get it out of it. It had come so opportunely, at the very end of my year—almost as a reward. Twenty-four hours later and I would have missed it. What would my relief have done?

"Said nothing about it and quit his job," came the answer out of some chamber of my brain—a voice that was backed by no conscious will. It was actually as if there were two wills within me, the arguments came so pat until I was jaded by the contest and slid into troubled sleep. Next morning, after breakfast, I took out the thing in my locked room, and again felt the hypnosis of that quivering pool of red in the hollow of my palm. It seemed alive with temptation. And the sub-voice whispered persistently:

"Find out what it is worth, anyway. Go and see Lung Hi."

That seemed a bridge between the banks of pro and con, and I resolved to cross it, though I waited until the afternoon before I went round to the bazaar. Lung Hi's face creased in what might have been meant for a smile as he nodded toward the back room.

"You get pistol back all light?" he asked.

"Yes, Lung Hi. Did you get paid? I don't want you to lose that year's interest."

"I get paid—plenty. What you want now? Mo' money?"

"I don't think so. I want you to look at something. Tell me how much it is worth."

Lung Hi's back room from which doors opened into mysterious regions, probably domestic, was lit only by a hanging lamp with a tin shade, an incongruous thing amid all the brocades that hung from the walls and were piled up on the shelves. The lamp was right over the table at which Lung Hi and I sat across from each other, he with a bland expression on his face, not expectant of anything but some curio I had picked up.

"Plenty thin you look," he said. "Plenty well, too. Maybe you hungly?"

"Not this time," I answered, and spilled the ruby on the black top of the teak table.

Lung Hi stiffened, and his breath came in with a gasp. I saw his lips part from his teeth and close again while some veins in his fat neck swelled suddenly. When his eyes lifted they reminded me of En Sue's, brilliant, piercing balls of polished obsidian.

"Where you get this?" he asked.

"That's another story, Lung Hi," I said. "That comes later. How much do you think it's worth?"

He had a tentative finger stretched toward it, but did not touch it; almost as if he feared it might burn him. I knew then it was no ordinary stone, and something of triumph leaped in me. Lung Hi got up and took from his shelf an ebony box, from which he produced a pair of jeweler's scales. These he set up, and almost reverently lifted that glowing crystal to place it in one pan, while in the other he piled his little weights, blocks of metal first, then little thin squares of platinum, smaller and smaller. All through the operation he seemed to hold his breath till the final adjustment. Then he slid out the ruby between us and put away his scales. When he turned back from the shelf he had regained his normal poise, apparently.

"That one velly fine, top-chop luby," he said. "Velly fine. Him all same pidgin-blood. He weigh eighty-nine one-quahty calats. Heap big."

"How much is it worth?"

But he was not through. He took up the gem between calipers and peered at it every way through a goggle-glass he got from his pocket. Once more he put it down on the table.

"That funny kind of thing, that big stone. Too big luby, diamond, bling too much money. Suppose some one he see,

he want velly much, no want no one else have so fine stone, then he pay velly much. I don' know how much. Maybe ten-twenty thousand dollar, I think. Maybe two times that much. This kind stone he got no plice. Wo'th what you get. Savvy?"

"How much would you give me for it, Lung Hi?"

The words were out of my mouth before I willed them.

He sat back and faced me squarely. "Nothing."

I gaped at him like a fool. "Nothing?"

"Much betteh that stone I not touch. Too damn ha'd to sell. Too much talkee-talkee. Too much stoly along that stone, I think. Where you get?"

"If you won't offer me a price on it I'm not going to tell you its history," I said.

"All light. Much betteh you show that luby along your fliend."

"What friend?" I knew he meant Li Yuen, but I was petulant.

"I think you plenty savvy what fliend. Betteh you show him."

His face changed suddenly, his eyes set, his brow deep-furrowed, motionless, yet suggesting a sudden rising restrained by caution. I looked up. A tall Chinaman had come into the room—the tallest I have ever seen. His face, with protruding cheek-bones above dark hollows, was waxy yellow, the hue of an opium-eater's; and his eyes matched the ruby on which they gazed. Which door he came through I do not know. His felted feet had made no more sound than a cat. One skinny, long-fingered hand, with tapering, untrimmed nails, was poised over Lung Hi's shoulder like a claw.

Still Lung Hi sat motionless, but fear had crept into his face. I saw his eyelids quivering. A drop of sweat ran down his cheek. The claw swept down upon the ruby. But I was quicker. I got the gem, and by sheer force of habit, I suppose, after all those conjuring tricks of mine, swiftly palmed and passed it to my other hand, leaving the one I had picked it up with closed, fingers up, on the table. Those long nails tapped smartly on the teak. Lung Hi shuddered.

The tall man withdrew his hand and spoke swiftly, imperiously, to Lung Hi. I had the ruby in my pocket now, exchanging it for En Sue's gun. I did not credit Lung Hi with the interruption, but I could see he was servile to this man. I knew something of secret societies, and I imagined that here was the Master of the Lodge. But it was my affair.

"What does he want?" I asked Lung Hi. He answered as if his mouth was parched.

"He speak he like look at that luby. I think, if you please, you let him look."

It was a childish thing to do, but I opened my fist and showed it empty.

"What ruby?" I asked.

The tall man's face turned to a replica of one of those hideous demoniac masks the Chinese carve.

"It isn't in the other hand either," I went on, and carelessly displayed the gun, open-palmed, for a second, so he could see the dragons of the jade handle. His lips twisted back, displaying stained teeth, and then his face changed back to its waxlike complacency. Without a word he turned and went out through the shop.

"What kind of a fool stunt is this, Lung Hi?" I demanded.

He was shivering now, shaking like a jelly, though he tried to control himself. But he would not give me a direct answer.

"Betteh you go now," he said. "Quick—damn quick! Betteh you show that luby to Li Yuen damn quick." He lowered his voice at the name and got up, patently anxious to get rid of me.

"I'll tell him about it," I said, and left.

It was broad daylight, and I did not have very far to go, but I was in danger. I goose-fleshed to the sense of it. I saw side-glances shot at me, curious, cruelly rapacious, as I walked down the center of the narrow streets at a good clip, my hand on my gun in my side pocket where the ruby still lay.

But I got back to the hotel without incident, though once two men tried to jostle me and I only escaped collision by leaping back. A little crowd of tourists were coming out of a bazaar, and I joined them, asking them my way to the hotel, then only two blocks away. The first thing I did was to go to my room and pack the gem

away in the lacquer box. I went downstairs and got a cigar-box from the stand. In this I placed most of my currency, covering the jewel in its case, and nailed down the lid in front of the affable clerk.

"Put this in the safe, will you?" I asked him. "I might spend too much first night ashore."

He laughed, and I watched him go back into the big steel safe behind the desk, and tuck away my box in a partition back of a compartment door. He gave me the key of the inner drawer.

"Only key there is," he said. "Don't lose it, or you may have trouble getting your cash when you want it."

I felt better when I lost sight of it, and grateful to the American system of the hotel and the good American firm that had made that safe. The key alone wouldn't do any one much good with the double combination of the outer doors.

"No one but myself to apply for it," I said, "key or no key. You have my signature."

He laughed carelessly, used to the storing of things by guests, thinking me overfussy about a few hundred dollars.

After dinner I stayed around the hotel lobby. I don't think that I was afraid. It is hard for a man to gage himself in such matters, but I aimed at discretion. I did have a sneaking idea that I should like to see the big safe closed for the night with all the doors possible between the ruby and any transgressor, but I imagined that, as long as there was a clerk on guard, the outermost doors would not be actually locked.

Most of the house servants were Chinese, some of them might be subordinates in the secret society I suspected of existing. I did not fancy that any of them had been in the lobby when I had made my deposit. If one of them, or more, was in the know about my possession of the ruby they would be apt to think it on my person. In that case—

I caught sight of a bulletin board where notices of sorts were stabbed to the green baize background with big-headed thumbtacks. I strolled over to read the announcements and I got an idea that sent me once more to the desk, where I got what I wanted without trouble. Soon after that I went up to my room. There was only one floor above me, and this was given up, as usual, to quarters for the help and for other domestic offices. It was not going to be hard for an active man to lower himself to my window. The catch was of the inadequate type that can be slipped from the outside with a thin blade. My door had a bolt beside the key, and the transom, working on the ordinary angle-rods, was big enough to allow a man to climb through. I did not expect any attempt through door or transom, and thought it more than likely that my imagination was conjuring up an entirely false idea concerning the possibility of any attack.

I sat reading for a while, and then a tap came on my door. It had been given by a slick Chinese boy who appeared with a metal pitcher of ice-water which he offered to pour into my empty room carafe.

"I didn't ring for ice-water," I told him.

"I loom-boy fo' this flo'," he answered. "All my gentlemen they like ice-wateh, all same Melican hotel back in States."

I let him pour out the ice-water, gave him his tip, and filled myself a glass as he left the room. Then I poured the contents of the glass down the wastepipe of the basin in the bathroom and emptied the carafe, leaving the ice to melt and drain. That sort of service was too good to be true. I fancied I had seen signs of interest in the boy's face when I poured out the tumblerful.

It was eleven o'clock. At midnight I changed to my pajamas, set En Sue's pistol handy beneath my pillow, added to the length of the drop-cord of the electric light above my bed by attaching string enough to allow the end to trail on the bed, made my final preparations to receive any visitor that might arrive, and turned in.

I did not intend to sleep, and I kept myself awake without much trouble by reviewing the events so far connected with the ruby, stopping only at the final analysis of what I was going to do with it. I hesitated about doing that. I think I was afraid to lift the lid of my heart, and peering too closely, find the contents dirt.

There was no moon. From the bed I could see the window only as a gray rectangle, lighter than the rest of the wall. The night was warm, but I had closed the sashes and locked them. The window looked down upon and over the Chinese part of the city, but I could view nothing of this from where I lay; nothing but the gray, transparent oblong.

From time to time I closed my eyes, though not with drowsiness. About two o'clock I opened them to see the window no longer blank. A pair of feet appeared —naked feet—gripping rather than twisted about a rope. Then the silhouette of legs and body in Chinese costume, a head, two arms that were lowered as my visitant's feet lodged on the window ledge and his hands got busy with the catch that held the sashes. There was the slightest grating sound, and then the lower sash was pushed up, swiftly but silently, with little pauses of caution when I was conscious that the eyes of the figure were keenly regarding me as I lay motionless, looking through my lids that were closed to the narrowest of slits. The end of the drop-cord was between my fingers, invisible in the gloom.

The Chinaman started to glide into the room, barely arresting the motion as he poised for just a second, seated on the broad sill. Then his bare feet hit silently the matting of the floor.

"*Ay-yah!*" It was an involuntary yell of pain and astonishment. I chuckled as I pulled the cord and lit up the room just as the hands of my would-be looter grabbed at the rope and he hauled himself out of the window, climbing frantically hand over hand. I caught one glimpse of a chagrined, twisted face as I got quickly but cautiously out of bed, gun in hand, and investigated; serene in the knowledge that my visitor had one or more of those lusty thumb-tacks I had got from the clerk jammed home in the soles of his feet. It proved later that he had picked up five from where I had strewn them under the window and before the door in a most effective booby trap, two dozen in all with a good inch of pointed shank apiece. The idea had come to me while idly looking at the bulletin board in the lobby. The shock and the light had routed the ruby-stealer. The fact that he would come on naked feet was a foregone factor.

After that I went to sleep.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE BLOOD OF BUDDHA!

EN SUE was unchanged. So much do we make of outward appearance. I knew that he had progressed, as, indeed, in minor fashion, I had; but his features, schooled by himself, muscled by many generations which had realized that the face primitive was a book to be read by enemies as well as friends, and therefore provided a lock of self control for the covers thereof, showed nothing, not even increase of age; though it had been four years since we met.

I have often been inclined to think that true friendship only exists between men. Attempted camaraderie between men and women is bound, sooner or later, to be qualified by the question of sex. If the sex feeling is reciprocated, love may be born, and that is a far different thing from the friendship between man and man. To many the idea of a friendship between me and a Chinaman of so-called yellow skin, and with a mind that must infallibly reason along different lines than mine, may seem far-fetched, the situation impossible; but such reasoners are stay-at-homes and know-littles.

There are only two kinds of men, white and yellow, and the color of their skin has nothing to do with this classification. Certainly some contact was established between En Sue and myself whenever we were near each other, read or wrote of each other; and it was a very comfortable thing. We were opposites in many ways. He had acquired, or inherited, perfect poise, control of imagination and nerves. Such things I admired in him and, possibly, he envied me my impulses and impetuousness. One does not care to analyze so fine a thing. We were friends. His grip, cool and hard as steel, proved how glad he was to see me.

The steamer had docked early in the

morning, while I was still asleep. After breakfast I was on the point of issuing out to make inquiries when the automobile rolled up to the Hotel American and the same deferential secretary of Li Yuen came into the lobby to invite me to the villa.

I had an idea that Li Yuen and En Sue might offer me some opportunity of making good by using their influence to secure me a really good employment. That it would be done delicately I did not doubt any more than I doubted that the year's job in the lighthouse had been a test. If I had thrown it up after the first month, Li Yuen would not, I fancy, have been altogether surprised. That had been a compliment of his, not to offer me any sum of money. You must remember that I was a derelict, on the beach; a man of wasted opportunities and to all appearances a fizzle. But Li Yuen saw some sparks of independence and decency and helped me to fan them into flame. But that same independence now made me glad that I was arriving with the ruby.

It was pouched in my money-belt, sticking into my stomach, underneath my clothing. And the jade-handled automatic was handy. I did not think that any one would dare attack me in Li Yuen's car, but it was better to be well up to windward, and there is a big chunk of satisfaction in the feel of a weapon that you know how to use. Mind you, I had not yet made up my mind what I was going to do with this wine-colored pebble. Li Hung had hinted it might be forth forty thousand dollars. That was a big lot of money. It had come up to me out of the night and the sea. Two men had died for it. How many before them it was hard to tell. If the stone had been long-mined without doubt there were trails of intrigue, of love and death and hatred and barter that would make up a history gruesome and romantic. I remembered the story of a ruby called the Eye of Siva. It was said that for every murder committed for its sake the Eye became deeper in its perfect coloring as if some concentration of the victim's blood entered subtly into it.

So perfect was the courtesy of Li Yuen and En Sue, his son, that the day passed as if I had been an old friend of the family and one to whom they were highly indebted. There was no talk of business, no suggestion of it. Twice I tried to lead up to my experiences in the lighthouse and twice the subject was tangented away. After *tiffin* En Sue led me to rooms adjoining his own. My clothes were there brought from the hotel.

"It is not meet for a friend to lodge at the house of a stranger," quoted En Sue in his quaint, humorous manner. "We will share these suites."

He opened a door into a bathroom with the little plunge tiled in green and the ceiling skylighted with panes that could be easily slid open to the air and sun. The furnishings of the rooms were Chinese in character, but modified by modern inventions that had been adapted with perfect taste. En Sue was dressed now in Chinese costume, blouse, and close trousers of rich brocaded silk, a lithe, effective, picturesque figure. I felt incongruous, and said laughingly that if I was to live in a Chinese house I should have to dress so as not to jar the unities. He returned the laugh with a brief flash of his teeth, and when I emerged from my dip, I found, laid out upon a lounge, the complete outfit of a Chinese gentleman. I put it on and was surveying the result in a mirror when I saw the face of En Sue appear over my shoulder. I turned and he surveyed me gravely, arranging more dexterously the folds at my ankles where the trouser ends were gathered.

"It would not take much change to have you pass for a real Chinaman," he said thoughtfully. "It is getting cool. Let us go out into the garden."

There the next meal was served and once again we sat on the balcony between the feathery bamboos and beneath the great lanterns of oiled silk with the perfume of the flowers and the sounds of the night coming up to us. When the faint minors of the hidden orchestra commenced, I felt more than ever like Aladdin in my oriental clothes and with the great ruby pressing against my skin. It had been the successful endeavor of En Sue and his father to show that, as their guest, they held no curi-

osity to my affairs, even balking my own attempts at mentioning them until several hours had passed and proved their genuine hospitality. The talk had tended in many ways to suggest the actual power of Li Yuen, and I thought I discovered certain clues as to En Sue's destiny. It was to be incorporated, in no minor capacity, with the New China, the republic.

But now I was resolved to talk about my own affairs. Lung Hi had advised me to show the jewel to Li Yuen "dam' quick!" I plunged into the story of the arrival of the ship's boat and went through the whole adventure without interruption, in a silence broken only by the faint strains of the *gekkens*. But I was eminently conscious of the tension of Li Yuen and En Sue. They made no motion, their faces were away from each other, both looking out across the garden at the sickle moon.

Somehow I got a suggestion that I was telling them a tale they both knew well, and I faltered, as a story-teller will in a club when he sees the suppressed smile of the man who assures him the story is new. Yet I felt fairly certain that they could not know the circumstances. Even if they had learned in some mysterious way of the visit of the *prahu* they could know nothing of the arrival of the coffin-boat and the two dead men.

I found I was both right and wrong. They knew what I was talking about, but not the details. I ended with my nocturnal visitor and the thumb-tack reception accorded him. Then there was quite a pause, with the far-away music now ended and only the frogs in the lily pond saying "*Ung-ung-kerbung!*"

"Is the ruby still in the safe?" asked En Sue presently.

I fished under my silken blouse, unbuttoned the pouch in my belt and produced the gem, laying it on a stand of teak inlaid with black marble. There was only the soft light of the oiled lanterns and the moon, but the ruby glowed as if a pulse was beating in the red heart of it. There were no coruscations, no brilliant rays to make an aura as with a diamond, no hardness; it was a pool of wine, or of blood, living, transparent blood.

For a little while we gazed at it, inanimate but strangely suggestive of something actually living. Then Li Yuen took a square of silk from his sleeve and, using it as a glove, delicately picked up the ruby. He examined it for several minutes, I think, before he passed it to En Sue, who made a shorter though close inspection and finally returned it to the tabouret.

"How much did Lung Hi estimate this at?" asked En Sue.

"A possible forty thousand," I replied.

"It is worth not less than two hundred and fifty thousand dollars," said Li Yuen.

A quarter of a million dollars. I felt the blood flood to my face and knew that both were watching me.

"You might be able to get more," went on Li Yuen. "That was a minimum figure."

There was another pregnant pause, and I knew that I was being weighed in the balances of Chinese honesty. In that minute I lifted the lid of my soul's casket, with a voice whispering in my ears, "A quarter of a million! Perhaps more! Think of the fleshpots!" Some devil of perversion prompted me to ask: "Do you think you could get a quarter of a million for me?"

"Without doubt." To the sense of tone there was no change in his accents, but perhaps I tuned the vibrations by my conscience. I hope so.

"It did not belong to the men from whom I got it," I heard myself saying. "Neither does it belong to me. They killed each other; it is likely they killed the original owner. But it belongs to his heirs. I want to find them or him. The ruby is not mine."

Under the faint but clear light I saw the faces of my two friends change, not by shift of feature, by smile or glance, but as the shade of a lamp will show brightness when the wick is upturned. And I was very conscious of an atmosphere of well-being and content.

"An honest man is rarer than rubies," said Li Yuen, his voice charged with infinite approval. "As to the original owner, my son, that is a matter for much talk. Talk that will lead back into the centuries. Nearly twenty centuries."

I began to listen with all my ears. My ruby had a real history.

"It is said," continued Li Yuen, "that when Gotama Buddha, the Prophet—Siddhattha Gotama, the Enlightened One—lived in the solitudes of Ururela with the three brothers, the hermit-philosophers, and their scholars, that he soon converted these three, and Kassapa, the elder, became as a strong staff in the hand of Buddha Gotama. When one night the jungle caught fire, on the hillside Buddha preached against over-consideration of the senses which, like a burning flame, seems something that it is not, which produces pleasure and pain but passes swiftly, leaving only destruction in the end.

"And Gotama took a silver bodkin and pierced his flesh so that, when he withdrew it, a drop of blood was bright upon the end of the bodkin. This he did to show how we should subdue pain. And Kassapa received the bodkin and placed it in a napkin. But, later, when he opened the linen to show the precious relic, there was no stain of blood upon the cloth but a great stone that flamed. And this wondrous jewel, born of the veins of Gotama, was known as the Blood of Buddha."

He stopped talking and lightly touched the great ruby.

"That is the Blood of Buddha," he said quietly.

CHAPTER IX.

THE FACE AT THE BARS.

I WONDERED at the big difference in valuation between that of Lung Hi and this of six times his appraisement. If the gem was relic as well as jewel it might make some difference, but hardly as much as that, I thought, and suggested my ideas.

"Lung Hi urged me to show it to you," I said. "Why did he set the price so low?"

"Because Lung Hi has never seen a stone like this before," answered Li Yuen. "He may have heard of its existence, but I doubt if he recognized it. The man who looked over his shoulder probably did. I fancy that was Shang Wa."

"And who is he?" I queried. "He looked like an opium-eater."

"Probably morphine," said Li Yuen. "That has supplanted opium in modern China very largely. But morphine has not yet got the better of Shang Wa. He is the emperor of all the river pirates. Some day they will take Shang Wa out into the sunshine and give him the punishment of Ching Hi, the Death of a Thousand Cuts. Age, or increasing morphine, or failure to keep up his bribes will trip him. I am sorry he saw the ruby. I don't fancy we have heard the last of Shang Wa. I should not be surprised if he has already had a finger in this game, or has at least heard something."

"Meaning the attack of the *prahu* on the lighthouse?"

"Exactly. I think they followed the open boat to get the ruby. I think the Dyaks were after the ruby before those two men you found dead secured it. And there was some one back of the Dyaks. Not necessarily Shang Wa, but he may have heard of it through the free-masonry of the pirates. Now that he has picked up the trail at this end he will not want to leave it. But he shall not get the ruby, if you care to leave it in my keeping."

Now this may seem a foolish thing, but I had no hesitation, only relief at the suggestion.

"I wish you would," I said, "until I can find the owner—the last owner—provided he obtained the stone legitimately."

"No one," said Li Yuen, "knows one-tenth of the history of that stone. It is certain that armies have fought for it, women intrigued and princes been murdered for it. It has been bought and sold for much gold and more blood.

"It flamed through India. Once it was in Persia. The dynasties of China owned it for many centuries—Han and Wel, T'sin and Suy T'ang and Sung. Genghis Khan owned it. So did Kublai Khan. Marco Polo wrote of its glory. The Tartars took it when they raped the Chinese Empire. It was given up to them by one of the Jews who came to China in the eleventh century. Richard Cœur de Lion took it from Saladin after the Siege of Acre and lost it again in his captivity.

"Once it rested at Lhassa. It was long

the pride of the Ming dynasty. In later centuries it has not been so easy to trace it. It left China some two hundred years ago and came back again in the middle of the nineteenth. It was stolen—or looted, as you prefer—when the Allies swept into Peking. A Russian secured it, and, like a fool, showed it to his mistress, and she was murdered for it. There is a certain man of my race who would give an enormous price for it—would cheerfully kill for it. It is with this man that Shang Wa would deal if he secured the stone. He would not dare to keep it for himself even if he wanted to. But Shang Wa likes other things better than inanimate jewels. And he fears T'ang Seng, who has a deep purse and a long arm.

"I can tell you the last owner of the Blood of Buddha, an American so wealthy that he can afford to indulge any whim. Without doubt he acquired it for money alone, legitimately, in a clean bargain from a dealer in Amsterdam, to whom it had likely been pawned. This American is named Dean—Raymond Dean. You may have heard of him?"

"I have. He developed oil in Utah. He is a Californian, and, according to the papers, his wealth is unlimited, present and future."

En Sue spoke.

"He started a few months ago on a tour of the world in his steam-yacht, refusing to give his itinerary because he said he was going where the fancy carried him. The Blood of Buddha was not the only unusual gem he bought. He is a monomaniac on the subject, a jewel-worshiper. The collection traveled with him. He claimed it was safer with him on his yacht than in any vault, and it is known that he had a fanatic delight in handling and gazing at his gems. They were his fetishes."

A glimmering of things began to come to me.

"What was the name of his yacht?" I asked.

En Sue picked up a silk-stitched tablet of rice paper and dipped a brush into a tiny bowl of ink. He made a few dexterous marks on the top sheet and handed me the tablet. Below the letters I had deciphered on the side of the open boat he had written a completed word, thus:

Z- -- --E-- -- -A

ZULEIKA

A jumble of possibilities leaped into my brain. Who and what was T'ang Seng, the Chinaman with the deep purse and the long arm who wanted the gem so badly? Why did he want it? Was he a fetish worshiper like the Californian, Dean? Had he learned of the presence of the Blood of Buddha aboard the Zuleika, and had that long arm of his despatched the Dyaks to waylay the yacht that was known to be in the South China Sea? How then did the men in the boat get away with it? I was certain neither of them was Dean until I considered how a man might revert to primitive type, exposed in an open boat with hunger and thirst and storm always opposing him. There had been no food in the boat. No water keg. The rains might have kept the two alive. Was one of them Dean, escaping with his ruby from the *perampoks?*

If the last conjecture was correct and Dean dead, why was not this jewel truly mine? Why should I trouble to seek the heirs of Dean, spending my own money in the search? Suppose he had no direct descendants? I was in a whirl again, for all my uttered desire to restore the stone to its rightful owner. Who could say who ever really owned it, since the disciple of Gotama Buddha, Kassapa? And that tale was a myth. The ruby had a grisly history. Generation upon generation of owners had passed to bone-dust and gases, and still this thing remained unchanged, bidding for the awakening of all the lusts and passions. It was the emblem of murder and of sudden death.

I looked at it, blinking bloodily, in a sudden revulsion.

"I wish you would take charge of it and hide it," I said to Li Yuen. He smiled very slowly, a smile of understanding and of wisdom.

"You trust me?"

"Surely."

"Then I will put it away. When you return with En Sue, later to-night, I will

show you where I have placed it. That I have yet to think of. You will have to change your clothes a little and En Sue will change your face. It will be better for you to go together down to the river-front."

I turned toward En Sue for the explanation. Though there had been no oral communication between Li Yuen and his son, I knew that they knew each other's thoughts, not by mental transference, but because, given like conditions, they reasoned so closely along the same lines that their conclusions were practically identical.

"We will go among the lodging-houses and gambling-rooms," said En Sue, "and see if we can get in touch with some of Shang Wa's associates. Father thinks they will have heard something of the ruby and the Zuleika, and what they know we can learn."

We changed our clothes to others of cheaper, well-worn material, and En Sue demonstrated an art of make-up beside which the best efforts of the modern stage are puerile. His paints were applied with the brush. They contained oil and were remarkably plastic. Granted that the skin of an oriental is of a tint far easier to imitate than that of a Caucasian, the results were marvelous. Over my own tan, En Sue built up and reduced by cunningly suggested shadows and high lights the countenance of a Chinese. My aquiline nose was the only stubborn feature, and that he covered with a tuft of cotton and strips of adhesive so that I looked as if I had had the bridge smashed and had sought medical aid. Altogether I was a decidedly repulsive looking coolie, which was the result En Sue desired. Seeing that I knew but a smattering of Chinese dialect, such as would be used in the river-section, my battered mug and the pain I might be supposed to be stolidly bearing would serve to keep me out of any conversation that might be going forward.

It was little use arriving before midnight in that quarter of the city where the river-coolies, porters and petty thieves consorting with bolder smugglers and robbers, gathered to swap booty, make plans, eat, drink, and smoke opium or swallow morphine, and we had ample time to leave the car before we reached Shanghai proper and slink along the darker, narrower streets until we emerged on the river where the sampans, junks and barges were lined along the wharves, each the home of a river family.

"I am going to take you to Wuk Cha's place," En Sue told me. "Sooner or later some of the men we are after will show up there. You can watch the fan-tan players there all night without any one talking to you, and if I have to do any outside scouting, it will be a good rendezvous. Perhaps Shang Wa himself may come. If he does, and I am away, you will be able to recognize him. Mark the men he talks to in that case."

This he whispered to me before we dived into the warren of go-downs and barracks. Working through to Wuk Cha's, we crossed a courtyard, flagged and slightly sloping to a central drain. Along one side was a row of primitive stoves set up for community cooking, jabbering groups alongside of each, waiting for the food to be prepared when they would carry it off into the houses, built for the most part of two low stories with here and there dark and mysterious arches piercing them. A few lanterns made spots of color by the stoves, but the shadows were thick. One of these archways, guarded by iron bars, seemed our objective. On either side of it the buildings were taller than the average, three-storied, with substantial looking trellis work guarding the windows. There were dim suggestions of faces back of the trellises, faces which would be painted to elaborate masks of white and crimson, the black hair slickly pomaded and decked with ornaments, the eyes the only suggestion of life. But they were only wraiths in the gloom as we stood before the gate while En Sue appeared to be giving some sort of password that would admit us.

The courtyard was full of weird smells from the pots and pans on the stoves. Here were no delicacies of chicken and bamboo sprouts, of mushrooms and savory herbs, but the combs and claws of ancient hens with other discarded parts of their anatomy, little gobs of pork, odds and ends of fish, and, of course, the inevitable rice and

millet. The eating-places served more savory food, but these amateur cooks were the hangers-on and fed accordingly.

Suddenly there was a controversy at one of the stoves, a pan containing crisping pork was tipped and the contents caught fire, sending up a swift glare that illumined the house to the left of the arch and brought out the faces of the courtesans as a jumping flame will pick out the features of the portraits on a library wall.

I saw a face, pale, wan, beautiful, pressed close to the grating of a second-story window. There were two hands also that clung to the iron grille. All was revealed and lost in a second, jumping out from the shadows and then back to a gray oval.

But I could have sworn those eyes were blue, and that here was a girl of my own race. The hair was covered with a Chinese head-dress, and my glimpse had been lightning swift, but the contour of her feature seemed to me convincingly American, or at least European. And eyes and mouth had joined in an expression of utter sadness.

It was so startling that I almost spoke to her in English. I believe I should have so answered that unconscious appeal and instantly placed myself as a spying foreigner, a rôle among that pack of wolves and jackals exactly equivalent to that of a bleating kid, had not the gate to the archway swung back and En Sue touched me on the arm with a word or so in Chinese that evidently meant "Come on."

I knew that there were Occidental women degraded enough to dwell in the dens of the Orient, but they were hardened types. Their faces would be plastered with paste of honey and rice powder, ruddied on cheeks and lips. The face that I had seen was innocent of all cosmetics. As it had leaped at me from the darkness, so it seemed to have stamped an image of innocence on my brain, inconceivable as such a thing appeared in such sordid surroundings.

We were now too close to our destination to chance further talk in English. Under the arch it was dark, yet it was filled with a huddle of figures, silent, none too savory, through which we pressed a way toward a swinging lantern of oiled paper, red with black ideographs upon it. I dismissed the face of the girl. It was not the first time I had seen seeming Madonnas who were calloused Magdalens. Doubtless she had, for some reason, not applied the paints that would turn her face to an open signboard of her profession.

En Sue passed under the lantern ahead of me, shouldering aside a husky coolie who seemed eager to make an exit. This drew his attention so that he did not see what I saw, darting swiftly by into the archway; the lean form and the waxy face of Shang Wa. He gave me a swift glance as he went by, the look of a ferret, but I was confident he had not penetrated my disguise. I reached forward and touched En Sue, forming the syllables of Shang Wa's name with my lips, jerking my head backward to indicate the direction he had taken. Instantly En Sue turned and followed him, giving me a look from those obsidian eyes of his that plainly held the command to follow orders. And I slouched into Wuk Cha's.

CHAPTER X.

WUK CHA'S.

IMAGINE the Chinese equivalent for the Barbary Coast of San Francisco or the levee resorts of the lower Mississippi. Imagine Wuk Cha's as at once the most popular and the most lawless place in the district and you may, even if you have never crossed seas, get some idea of the atmosphere into which I penetrated. Circumstances may not make the man, but they certainly mold him, and river-rats are river-rats the wide world round.

One big room had been screened off by crudely carved and gilded wood into three parts. The first was a social meeting-room where groups gathered about the small tables to sip *samshu* and to smoke. The middle portion was the restaurant and the inner a gambling-room where you could get a run for your money in anything from fly-loo to fan-tan. Here the lotteries were declared and wagers laid on all sorts of obscure events.

Back of all this were rooms for smokers

of yen-hop, for morphine-swallowers, for conferences between the headmen of the district in their nefarious doings. Murder and sudden death might happen back of those double-doors and none the wiser, surely none the informer. As I slouched in through the first two rooms, seeking a fan-tan game, since En Sue had specifically mentioned it, who never mentioned anything casually, I thought of the second-floor back of Pop Crandall's protected gambling-house where I had saved En Sue's life and won the gratitude of himself and his father.

The players were hunkered down with the onlookers standing all about them, watching the fortunes of the throw. I edged in to the outskirts of the little crowd, my chin deep in my neck, my hat well down to my ears, a sulky, stolid onlooker. And I waited till my nerves began to get jumpy.

En Sue was not disguised. Of course he had been away for many years, and had been back in Shanghai less than twenty-four hours; but he might have been recognized. It was plausible that Lung Hi, seemingly friendly to me, undoubtedly conscious of the power wielded by Li Yuen, had told me to take the ruby to Li Yuen to get clear of the matter himself; but Shang Wa must know that I had gone to Li Yuen's that afternoon, suspected that I carried the ruby with me. He might have spied upon the coming back to Shanghai of En Sue and myself. That ferret look of his might well have meant something after all. In that case—

I had the dragon-handled gun with me. I could kill some of them, but I could not fight my way out. My best safety lay in the probability that they would not kill the bird that bore the crimson ruby until they were sure I had it on my person. But there were certain methods of torture calculated to extract secrets that are not adapted to Occidental nerves.

I had stood in the edge of the lookers-on. Gradually, very dexterously, I had been forwarded by the shiftings of the crowd until I found myself in the very front row, my feet almost touching the spine of one of the squatting players. And I was conscious of steady pressure from the rear. Were they planning to precipitate a row by making me interfere with the gambler behind whom I stood, when it came his turn to make the throw?

There was another phase to it that I was ashamed of even as it became a thought. The ruby was with Li Yuen. I had come down here disguised as a coolie with En Sue. He had left me. What easier thing than to pick a brawl, with or without excuse, to have my dead body thrown into the river at flood tide with the head a pulp. The ruby was worth a quarter of a million dollars. Without doubt its story gave it a fabulous value that might be used by, say a man like Li Yuen, to accomplish many things that money could not influence. Had I walked into a trap?

I tingled under my paint with disgust at my doubts. But the tingling spread, a nasty prickly sensation that ran up the skin under my spine. I had experienced the same feeling when I was on the way to the hotel from Lung Hi's with the ruby. Danger was in the air and I felt that I was the objective. A man *sing-highed* something into my ear, evidently expecting an answer, another hustled me with his elbow, the player ahead of me turned round with a snarl and a volley of clanging syllables.

I slid my hand under my blouse to where the automatic was tucked into my belt. Now the player sprang up and a knife showed in his hand. I was in a tight place and I could see no way out. Back of me was the crowd in the room with two crowded rooms between them and the arch with its barred gate. If the knife was raised I'd have to shoot, and that would be the end. The satisfaction of taking along three or four of that riff-raff with me was a poor one.

I have never known why they suspected me. They may have smelled me; it is more likely that I made many tiny mistakes of pose and walk and gesture, insignificant in themselves but arousing doubt in the aggregate. I do not think they believed me white or they would have murdered me without delay, but they knew me for an outsider and resented my presence. So might the gangsters of New York, the

apaches of Paris, resent the intrusion of some one who intruded into their haunts, wondering his reason; for this warren of huddled houses, lacking utterly in grace of form or cleanliness of interior, was the East Side of Shanghai, its slums, between the city wall and the Hwang-pu River.

The player stood hesitant, teeth bared and point ready, a wild beast waiting the final impulse to strike. The whole room was on trigger, as my finger was. I was in the center of a circle that waited my first move before they pounced upon me. They were intent as a terrier at a rat-hole, and I was their bait. There were few among themselves they trusted in that den of thieves and cut-throats, and I was a spy, potential or possible. I was goose-fleshed with the imminence of my own butchery, more angry than actually afraid, I think; angry at my own helplessness. They would have me by neck and elbow, with that menacing, crooked blade in my back, as much for the cruel sport of it as anything else—unless a miracle happened.

And, in a sense, it did. If not the miraculous, then surely the marvelous. There was a sudden hubbub back of me, in the immediate room and those beyond; not the bubbling over of hatred that I feared, but an expression of wonderment, plain even to my ignorance of their words. The venom died out of the face of the player with the knife, and his eyes rounded at something over my shoulder. I felt the tension of danger relax, and I shifted about with those surrounding me to gaze at the inexplicable thing a juggler was performing.

I have seen roses fall from a ceiling in Cairo, mango-trees bud and blossom and bear under the manipulations of a Hindu fakir, tricks of Japanese jugglers and Chinese conjurers performed with little apparatus and in broad daylight; but in all these I have seen some basis for their possibility. Here was no mango-tree growing, but a man.

There were two of them, one squatting on the floor and batting at a gong, sending out ripples of sound that grew to waves until we swam in a sea of rhythmic noise that controlled the beating of our pulses and who shall say what else of our make-ups? For the other man was swiftly elongating.

He had thrown off his outer garments and stood sheathed in green, the bright green of young corn. His face was coated with some green pigment; he looked like the ancient jinns must have looked when they appeared at rub of ring or lamp. He was head and shoulders above the crowd in a minute and stretching rapidly. Now he was a seven-foot giant, now eight, now nine. The low ceiling lifted with him, or seemed to dissolve as he towered to a colossal height, looking down on us with his green face set in a frown, like a jade mask. And all the time the drum was vibrating. The thing was unbelievable, but it was happening before our eyes. And there was some portent of the supernatural about it, a conviction of power that this enlarging giant might let loose at will.

Flowers, strongly scented tuberoses, fell from his hands far above us, and the crowd surged in to catch the favors. I moved forward with them, willy-nilly, and then, as the swift patter of the gong diminished in volume but not in speed, a voice spoke directly into my ear; spoke in English in a whisper so close that it seemed as if the lips that formed it must have brushed the orifice.

"Go swiftly while none notice. Beyond the gate En Sue will join you. The word is *Chaiyin.*"

I knew that voice and I went obediently. As I passed unmolested into the middle room I glanced back. The one figure still squatted over the gong. The crowd still gazed far upward, with extended hands, to where flowers were falling from a great height. They saw the green giant, but I saw, standing beside the musician, tossing into the air white petals from a basket, dressed in green, but of ordinary height beneath the low ceiling, the man who had spoken to me—Li Yuen's secretary—who had visited me in the Hotel American. The beater of the gong was Li Yuen's chauffeur.

They had followed us when we left the car, doubtless by En Sue's orders, a bodyguard in the background, coming forward

to save my life. I was duly grateful, and again mentally prostrated my own poor wits before the forethought of En Sue and his father. Later I asked the former how the trick had been played, suggesting hypnotism.

"Hypnosis is hardly the term," he replied with a twinkle. "Hypnotism, according to scientific dictionaries, is a species of catalepsy. I don't believe Meng Fu has ever heard of mesmerism. You must remember that a juggler's audience is always ripe for wonders. I thought you were a bit of a dab at such things yourself."

Me, with my bag of hardly acquired parlor tricks! But I never found out how Meng Fu produced the illusion.

CHAPTER XI.

"RED" AND "WHITE" TREASURE.

NO one stopped me as I emerged from Wuk Cha's. The outer rooms were practically empty, and I had to dodge some newcomers hurrying in to see the juggler. They seemed to take me for a messenger speeding to apprise friends of the unexpected treat. Some of them hurled inquiries at me, but I dived into the archway, wondering whether the keeper of the gate would have left his post. But he was an old man, nearly blind, to whom all things save food and sleep were vanities. I gave him the word and he clicked the gate open. The Thieves' Kitchen still contained its meed of cooks and cookees about the stoves, but no one noticed me as I stood in the shadows. I looked to the window where I had seen the girl's face, but it was vacant, the bars showing clear against the pale yellow of its illumined interior. The other jaded houris of that sordid place had also left their casements. Here and there a *gekken* tinkled or a shrill laugh sounded.

En Sue was not visible, and I wedged myself in the corner of a house projection where I could watch the gate. It might have been fifteen minutes, it seemed an hour, before he materialized out of the gloom and I glided to meet him.

We retraced our way in silence to the river-front, where the native shipping lined the banks, faint lights showing here and there from poop and mast. The young moon barely served to break up the jumble of shipping into separate forms. En Sue turned sharply to the right and led the way to where the high stern of a two-masted junk overhung the bank, its big sea-rudder raised to deck level. Its matting lugs were lowered and clumsily furled about the sail battens. En Sue clambered aboard and I followed. Forward, built on the prow, was a deck-house fitting into the upcurve of the bows. From this, as we stole, felt-footed, along the planks, came light, the murmur of low voices and the reek of tobacco.

The foremast of a junk is stepped so far forward that the boom of the lug projects across the bows. There are no head sails proper; all are lugs, and there may be as many as five masts on the flat-bottomed, lee-sliding craft. The lowered foresail matting served us as a screen, and let us get so close to the open-doored deck-house that every syllable was distinct, though I could understand none of them. But I found one peeping-place, and En Sue another, and we gazed at as villainous a collection of cut-throats as ever assembled together.

The night was warm, with no air moving. Inside the cabin about a dozen men were crowded in a space destined for half that number. They were all naked to the waist, and I saw the sweat crawling on their yellow skins and semishaven heads. Two or three were smoking and others were chewing betel nut — their lips and teeth scarlet with the juice. All were drinking from the contents of a bamboo-covered jar.

Almost all of them had scars on their bodies and arms, or slashing their fierce features into greater repulsiveness. Two only were talking, one who seemed to relate a story and one who listened. The listener was Shang Wa. The giver of information was a lascar. He was drunk almost to the point of collapse. His body swayed on his hips and his head nodded and rolled about on his neck while his bloodshot eyes were glazing as the stuff he had swallowed mastered him. Several times Shang-Wa recalled him from stupor or incoherence with

a sharp command. We lay there for a long time while the man babbled, seeming now to boast, now to cringe, so far as I could judge.

He finished at last, appearing to end with a request. Shang Wa nodded, and a man gave the wax-faced leader a metal cup. The drunkard, who was left-handed, or ambidextrous, raised the draft in a yellow fist and Shang Wa leaned forward a little. In the light of the lantern I saw Shang's knife sink into the story-teller's body as if thrust into so much fat pork, clear to the hilt.

The lascar gave a grunt and slumped forward, the rice-wine slopping from the vessel that his fingers still gripped. Shang Wa calmly cupped him under the chin and upheld him for a moment while he withdrew the smoking blade.

The lascar was not the only victim. As at a signal, three others were deftly seized, each by two men, at the sides or back of them. With elbows pinioned, their heads were drawn back and their exposed throats suddenly gaped red. The cabin was a shambles. Shang Wa stepped calmly out on deck as En Sue burrowed beneath a fold of the matting, and I followed suit. We could see no more, but we heard the drag of the dead bodies, the low exclamations of the butchers, and then four sullen splashes beyond the bows. The tide would carry the corpses down to the estuary of the Yang-tse-kiang, twelve miles away, to strand on the mud flats.

I visualized their journey very clearly while my shoulder blades contracted to the imaginary drive of a knife that I momentarily expected. Shang Wa snapped out some orders. I heard the pad of naked feet going aft. Then came a tug at the sail from tautening halyards. The junk was going to leave her moorings. It was a case of jump before we were entangled and discovered at a disadvantage. I felt En Sue squirm clear, and gun in hand, I did the same. There was a shout as we dropped on our feet and made a crouching rush for the rail. A thrown knife missed my head by inches. Two figures loomed up ahead and others leaped in as they dropped the halyards and the heavy matting fell once more.

There was a crack and a spurt of flame from En Sue's gun and one man went down. Some one grabbed my left wrist and started to twist my arm. I swung in toward him and my pistol muzzle jarred on his ribs as I pressed trigger. Then En Sue and I went over the rail together, bearing the last one to oppose us with us into the yellow river. He fell backward and we dived cleanly, swimming under water. When we came up, tide swept, four bobbing heads were after us, a knife in every mouth, naked arms gleaming as they flailed the water. Fast as we swam they came faster.

(To be continued NEXT WEEK.)

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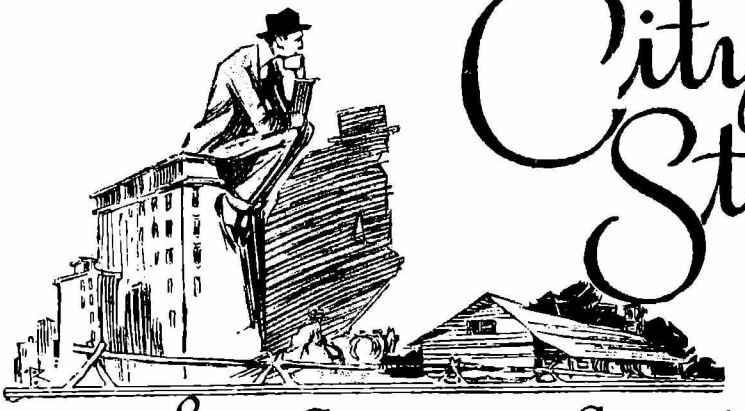
"AS YOU LIKE IT"

TWO drooping eyes,
Two pouting lips;
Two angry teeth
Bite finger-tips.
Two ruddy cheeks
Flush more and more;
Two dainty feet
Chastise the floor.
The maid is mad.

Two merry eyes,
Two laughing lips;
Two rows of pearls
Touch finger-tips.
Two cheeks aglow
With love galore,
Two fairy feet
Trip o'er the floor.
The maid is glad.

John B. Taylor.



City Stuff

by Courtenay Savage

"IT 'll take at least a thousand to swing it." Kirk spoke doubtfully, as if such a sum was too great to be considered.

The girl, Mary, on the bench beside him, sighed, shrugged her shoulders, and looked out across the park lawn toward the Drive, where, through the trees, the lights of passing automobiles twinkled like fireflies from a land of enchantment.

"How much have you saved?" she asked presently.

"Saved? Why—maybe fifty or sixty dollars. You can't save in New York. It costs so much to live."

"I've got nearly three hundred dollars in the bank," she rebuked him; and while no mention was made of it, they both knew that her salary was considerably less than the sum he received weekly.

"Three hundred!" he repeated sharply. "Well, suppose I worked my head off, overtime, and all that, and saved all I could—you know, did without things—how long do you suppose it would take before we could get out of here?"

"Well, if you saved ten dollars a week, that would be five hundred dollars in a year."

"And we need a thousand."

Which brought them back to his original statement without in any way solving the problem before them. They sat there for several minutes, silent, brooding—the girl excited, as she always was when they talked of their plan to leave the city, the man searching through his mind for an idea that would bring them the thousand dollars.

"Come on," he said finally, "let's get a soda and go home. We don't have to start saving right this minute, and I'm thirsty."

They rose and strolled through the nearest entrance toward an ice-cream store. When they had given their orders the girl leaned across the small table and smiled.

"Wait until you taste my home-made ice-cream," she promised. "I'm not the best business woman in the world, but I *can* cook."

"Gee"—the mood of depression slipped suddenly from him—"it's going to be great! After all, there's nothing in this city stuff. You don't get a chance really to live here. Now, you take that farm my uncle left me—forty acres—ten of it the richest land you ever knew. A peach of a wood lot, and all one side of the hill covered with an old orchard. I'm warning you the house doesn't amount to much, but in a year we'll have earned enough to fix it up right—and then we'll be living."

"Yes," she agreed eagerly.

"And I think I'll get Holstein cows—and I can't make up my mind about chickens—I'll have to see about a good laying breed. You'll soon learn to take care of the—"

"Learn?" she interrupted him. "Why, Kirk, you seem to keep forgetting that I was raised on a farm, and never left the place until I was nearly twenty. I'll wager you I know as much about farming as you do."

"Yes, I do keep forgetting. You see, you don't look like a farm."

"Neither of us does," she laughed.

She was quite right, and the boasting of their rural knowledge would have astonished a casual hearer, for the mark of the city was on them—on their rather tired, sophisticated faces, on their clothing, on their speech. They were both under thirty, but they had lived in the city during the most impressionable years of their lives—and the city had taken them for its own.

However, they were not satisfied with their lives in town.. They had been engaged for a year now, waiting for an advance in Kirk's financical position so that they might marry. And while the promised raise had come, it did not give them the income they thought necessary. It was then that Kirk had begun to think of the farmland he owned, and which had been run by a tenant for two years.

He had hesitated before speaking to Mary about the possibility of living on a farm, for she had often told him how happy she had been in breaking away from the small town of her youth. However, he had finally summoned the courage to tell her of his idea, and to his amazement he had found her a ready listener.

"It's not that we're failures," he had told her that night in the boarding-house parlor—they lived in the same boarding-house, that is how they had met. "We're not failures, but just the same, do you remember when we went to school, and they told us the story about Cæsar thinking it better to be the head man of an Iberian village than second fiddle in Rome? Well, that's my idea. Let's get out where there's a real chance of making good."

That was his theme—"the chance to make good."

"Don't you—don't you suppose that you could make good in the city?" she had asked on one occasion.

"I might, in time," he had agreed sagely, "but why work your head off? Why slave? No, I think I'd rather work with my hands on the farm."

She had understood, for she too was satiated with the monotony of their life—being a clerk by day, and calling a boarding-house a home by night. And evening after evening, as they had talked of their plan, it was always just as to-night—their dreams shattered when they realized that they needed funds to start the new life.

"If we could only go now," she said softly.

They were both silent. Kirk was thinking that the fall days were approaching, and that, even if they had capital, it was a poor time of year to migrate to the country.

"By George!" he exclaimed savagely—and he leaned across the small marble-topped table—"I'm going to get enough money in the next few months so that when it gets to be spring we *can* go."

His eyes flashed with a challenge. He was defying her to say that they would not be able to go. There was a brilliant resolution in his manner that thrilled the girl. He made her think of stories she had read of men who went forth to battle for their homes and their loves.

"I know you can do it if you set your mind on it," she said sweetly.

He smiled. On the way home he explained to her that he was going to do a great deal of thinking, and make up his mind just how he could earn extra money to add to his savings. Incidentally, he told her that she should be the custodian of the bank-book.

True to his word, Kirk spent the days that followed in thinking deeply. He was employed as a correspondence clerk by a large mail-order house, one of those commercial organizations that can sell a paper of pins or furnish a house with equal ease. It was his duty to answer letters of complaint, more or less routine work. Mrs. Somebody, of Backwoods, Idaho, would write that her paper of pins was rusty when received, and, after examining her original order, it was Kirk's duty to send her a polite note, make out a fresh order, and ask her to return the damaged goods. It

was quite a mechanical proceeding, but it kept him busy.

Kirk, in his search for extra money, looked first about his own department. He quickly decided that there was slight chance of his ever making extra money there. He and his fellow clerks had so much work to do each day—and did it. Even if they put in an hour overtime it would not make any great addition to the efficiency of their output.

He canvassed the rest of the establishment, and found that the advertising department was short-handed, and that several members of that section carried home each evening copies of old catalogues which had to be carefully checked over, and on which prices had to be corrected according to the latest list of price quotations for goods. It was not difficult work, but it took time, and one had to be very accurate. Also there was a dollar an hour overtime. Kirk went to the head of the advertising department, and asked for some catalogue work.

The man looked at him with a puzzled frown.

"What's the idea—want to work into this department?"

"Well, not exactly, but I'd like to make the extra money, and I can do the work."

"You think so?" It was the end of a busy day, and the head of the advertising department was tired.

"I'm sure of it," Kirk said softly, and there was something so impressive about his manner that the other decided to take a chance.

"This is what you do," he instructed Kirk, but before asking for the work Kirk had made himself familiar with the details of what would be required of him—a fact that pleased the man to whom he had applied.

So for every night in the next three weeks Kirk and Mary sat beside the small table in Mary's room—the light was better there, as there were two burners—and worked over the catalogue. They changed the price of rubber gloves from forty-one cents to thirty-four, and the price of silk blouses from three dollars and twenty cents to two ninety-five. Also they noted the difference in freight changes on plows, and called attention to the fact that the best grades of harness were lower than they had been in years.

They liked the work, especially that section which dealt with farm implements, for their imagination carried them forward to the day when they would be buying these for themselves.

They laughed over their toil, too, for it did not seem to them that the descriptions of the plows and hay-forks were as good as they might be. Kirk found out that they had been written by a young man who had never been on a farm, but who earned fifty dollars a week writing advertisements for the mail-order catalogues. Mary said that they sounded just like that.

When Kirk handed back the corrected pages of the catalogue, all nicely marked for the printer, he mentioned to the head of the advertising department that he did not think much of the descriptions of the farm implements.

"No?" the other said slowly, and his thoughts were: "Well, what's this fresh young man got to say?"

"No, sir. I think you could make them sound better. They're all right, but I've been a farmer, and I know how to talk language they understand."

"Thank you, I'll remember that. There is no more extra work for the present. When we have any, I'll let you know."

It was Kirk's dismissal. When he got outside he wondered if by any chance there was additional work to do, but that it had not been given him because of his comments.

"Gee," he considered, "I should have had sense enough to keep still."

Such was the first extra contribution to the farm fund. It amounted to less than sixty dollars, which, when Kirk considered it, was a discouragingly small sum when one needed a thousand dollars.

The Christmas season came. Business at the office was rushed, but they were not required to work overtime. Kirk saw an advertisement in a daily paper for extra salesmen in a novelty shop. He went to the shop, and was engaged to work in the evenings from six to eleven. The wage was

two dollars a night. Later he admitted that he had earned it, for the selling of Christmas favors, ornaments, and cards was strenuous.

He was very tired when that extra labor was over, also a little discouraged. He had added another twenty dollars to the fund, but even with his Christmas bonus from the firm, and the weekly savings from his salary, he had been able to amass less than three hundred dollars.

With the first of the year, however, came a raise of three dollars a week, also a chance to make a lot of money. This chance took the form of a letter addressed to each employee of the big corporation. It said that cooperation was the greatest business asset of the age, and believing that each employee was in a position to make a constructive criticism regarding the department in which he or she was employed, the company was offering an unlimited number of prizes for the best practical suggestions as to how the business might be more efficiently conducted. These suggestions were not to come from the higher executives, but from the workers.

Kirk read the letter with a bounding heart. A thousand dollars! Just what he needed! Then he read it again, thought carefully, and tossed the letter on his desk. He understood now. All they wanted was a suggestion. Every one of his fellow workers had received one of those letters, and those about him were buzzing with excitement, as though they had already earned the money. But Kirk realized that it would have to be a real suggestion, and that an idea worth a thousand dollars could not be plucked out of the air. Of course, the matter was worthy of a great deal of thought, but at the minute he had two stacks of letters to answer.

That night he talked over the prize offer with Mary.

"Of course, every darn fool is going to say that we ought to have black ink instead of blue, or that it would be better to use some other kind of a waste-basket, but that kind of a suggestion isn't going to win any prize. They're going to pay over the money the minute a suggestion is accepted—but I'll bet they won't pay out much."

"And in the mean time we have saved money, haven't we?"—encouragingly.

"Yes, we have, and I'll be getting more extra jobs, and so save more. Of course, that raise of mine isn't tremendous, but every three dollars helps."

She nodded and smiled. Then she hurried to show him an article she had found in a magazine about a woman who had raised and sold broilers and so made a thousand dollars a year. She had been calling his attention to numerous articles of a similar type, the success stories of farm dwellers. She felt sure, so she told Kirk, that they could make good with their venture.

Kirk, however, was more interested in the present than the future. He needed capital, and until he got it there was little likelihood of their cutting the city bonds that held them. And the only way to get capital was to work for it. He continued his search for the tangible methods of making immediate money. He knew that the house must be working on the summer catalogue, and went again to the head of the advertising department, reminding him that he would be glad of any extra work.

Mr. Woodbury looked at him wonderingly, and without comment handed him a batch of proofs to be corrected. He remembered Kirk as the fellow who had said that the farm-implement advertising was badly written.

Kirk changed that winter. He developed an interest in the affairs of his department. This interest had come to him through an odd circumstance. That fall, when they had first made up their minds to leave the city, he had chafed under the knowledge that he was not free to go. Time had dragged. Then he had discovered that if he kept busy, very busy, the days passed quickly.

Gradually this paying attention to business lent a tone to his work. It opened up new avenues of thought, fascinated him, made him almost happy. He began to systematize his work, to sort over his daily batch of mail, and by grouping the letters answer them in less than the usual time. Often he would require the services of a second stenographer to finish his dictation. Kirk was hardly conscious of the extra

work he was doing, but he set a pace for his department.

And gradually, very gradually, the bank account grew. He watched the advertisements offering night work, and was continuously busy. He began to realize, however, that no effort he could make would bring enough money to allow them to go on the farm that spring. When the first promise of summer days crept into the air, he and Mary sighed and figured—but it was no use. Kirk grew very tired.

It was this fatigue that fathered the grumble on his lips one morning, when he asked the stenographer to get him the original order of a special complaint. Instead of writing, this customer had called, and it was Kirk's duty to talk with her. He waited five minutes before the girl came back.

"I'm sorry to be so long," she explained, "but you know I had to go down-stairs to the order-department file."

"All right." He tried to be pleasant. After all, it was not the girl's fault. He hurried to the outer office to interview the customer.

He was more than ordinarily tired that evening. Mary was visiting a girl friend, so instead of addressing several hundred envelopes as he had planned, he declared a holiday and went for a long walk. As he strolled his mind was a confused jumble of his hopes, his fears, and the current affairs of his daily existence. A trick of memory carried him from thoughts of his bank account to the talkative woman who had told him she was from Rocky Fork, only two hours' ride from Cedar Rapids, and that she'd called to see the company because she always bought her goods from them, and also to say that the handle on the last ice-cream freezer was split. He remembered her as being funny now, but at the time he had been impatient because of the time she was taking up—first the time he had wasted waiting for her original order to be brought from the file, and then at her conversation.

He sighed. His roving mind thought of the office filing system; how he gave a girl a batch of letters each morning, and how she presently brought them back to him with the original order and any other previous correspondence. He had always known that the original orders were filed down-stairs, but he had never realized before how long it took to get at them. Why the dickens didn't they keep the orders, or copies of them, up in the filing-cases of the correspondence department? Then—

He stopped short. Why—that— For many minutes he stood looking into a store window, staring, but unseeing, for his mind was occupied with a sudden thought. Presently he turned and went quickly home. He drew a pad of paper from his desk and began to write. Before he went to bed that night he had outlined a plan for a filing system in which there were several carbon copies made of each order—one copy to be filed in the complaint department. It was an elaborate system, with the orders filed numerically, and every piece of correspondence stamped with the number of the order to which it referred. As he studied it Kirk saw that it was a time-saver, and that it would mark their records more permanent. If through accident a copy of an order was lost, there would still be others. The next morning he had his suggestion typed and sent it to the office of the president.

He waited anxiously for his reply. The hours went by, so did the days—and the weeks. They kept on filing in the old way. Kirk and Mary went to the park on Sunday afternoons and looked at the swelling buds. They decided that they would spend their vacation at the farm, and that it was just as well they were not to start this year, for in another twelve months they would have even more capital with which to buy cows, chickens, and farm tools. They were not content to wait, but they were resigned. Then, one afternoon, the president's office-boy came to Kirk's desk with a letter. It was quite short and to the point.

> Enclosed you will find the company's check for one thousand dollars. Your suggestion for improving our filing system has been given serious consideration, and we realize its worth as an efficient time-saver. We congratulate you, and ourselves, and trust that you may have further practical suggestions to offer.

Kirk leaned back in his chair and wondered if he had read correctly—or if his

money lust had made him suddenly insane. No—there was the check! He had won! They were free to go away from the city—to go back to the farm.

He closed his eyes, expecting memory to flash him the familiar vision—the farmhouse, the trim barns, the orchard on the hill—the things he had dreamed of. But a fellow clerk asked him a question, and he had to open his eyes. The phone on his desk buzzed. As he answered the call an excitement filled him. He hung up the receiver and went out into the hall. Not waiting for the elevator, he ran up two flights of stairs. He had been asked to report at the office of the president of the company at once. Nervously, hesitantly, he entered the big room.

An hour later he came out. The president followed him to the door; so did the head of the advertising department.

"It may not be so easy at first, but I think that you have the necessary capacity for work—so go to it," the president assured him. "As we suggested, I don't think you ought to break away from the present work at once, but you can take part of each day, and start revising those farm implement ads. The new salary starts Monday—and don't forget, you can always come and talk things over with me."

Kirk promised to remember, and as he shook hands tried to stammer some word of thanks, but with poor success.

He went slowly down to the familiar desk which he would soon be leaving, saw that it was after five o'clock, and so, after straightening a few papers, he set out for home. He waited at the corner for a car, but there was a block of traffic, and he started to walk. His step was light, his head seemed to touch the clouds. His was the exhilaration of the man who has succeeded. He had made good, won a thousand dollars and a promotion. He was no longer a clerk—he was an employee of importance. He walked along familiar streets, but they seemed different. The city was very beautiful to-night, brilliant, smiling. It is always so to the conqueror.

When Kirk reached the boarding-house he ran up the steps to Mary's room, knocked, and entered.

"Mary, Mary"—his eyes gleamed with excitement—"Mary, the president of the company sent for me this afternoon and told me I was to work into the advertising department. He said that he was sure there was a chance for me to make a big success. He wants me to work into the new position gradually, but the new pay starts at once; they raised me nearly twenty dollars, to sixty a week. And Mary, that isn't all—they've accepted the suggestion for the filing system. Look—the check for a thousand dollars. We can get married at once."

The girl had been sitting by the window. She rose and stood before him, wide-eyed, hands clasped above her heart.

"Kirk—a check for a thousand, the money you need for the farm."

"The farm!" For a minute a vague questioning played about his face—an expression that ended in a frown.

"Farm," he repeated slowly. "Farm, nothing!" Then, with a sudden outburst: "Say, this going back to the farm stuff is all right in stories, Mary, but in real life when you make good with a wallop you don't go back to the country. In a few years, when I grow really rich, we'll fit it up as a summer place, but nix on back to the farm now. We'll stay right here, where you can have all the things the city can give if you've got the money to buy. The city—that's the stuff. Why—" He stopped suddenly, engrossed in the changing expressions that lit Mary's face.

"You mean we *aren't going back to the farm?*" she demanded slowly.

He hesitated. He did not want to go there now—but—neither did he want to dash Mary's air castle to the earth. Kirk was not selfish. If Mary was going to be disappointed it would cloud his happiness.

"No—not back to the farm—that is—why—" He stumbled over the words.

"Oh, goody!" She flung her arms about his neck. "I never did want to go back to the farm, Kirk. I used to read all those articles and stories just to try and make myself enthusiastic—but I just *love* those little new apartments, and I'm going to take the money I've saved and buy myself a trousseau right from the Avenue shops—city stuff."

The Princess of Diamonds

by Jack Bechdolt

Author of "Sourdough Blood," "Broken Chains," etc.

A NOVELETTE—COMPLETE IN THIS ISSUE

ON that same day, which chanced to be the thirteenth of July, two things happened, and though they were staged three thousand miles or more apart, they have a direct bearing on this story.

A man, known to a number of people as Mark Quiller, sat on a bench in Pioneer Place, Seattle, close beside the big Indian totem pole that makes that square a little different from any other city breathing-place. He sat in the sun, which was mild enough to be very pleasant, waiting the return of a man whose acquaintance he had made on the steamship Cottage City on the southward voyage from Alaska ports.

This Mark Quiller was sandy haired, tall, wiry in build, and pleasantly homely in face. He would have been freckled had he not tanned a deep bronze from outdoor living. His eyes were blue, a color that inspires confidence, and his smile was ready and whole-hearted.

While he waited, Mark Quiller picked up a discarded newspaper and glanced over it with the eager interest of a man who has been out of the busy world for a very long time, wandering in places where every chance scrap of newspaper, magazine or book is worth almost as much as a small gold nugget.

The paper was the "Sunday Magazine" section of one of the Seattle newspapers, and the first page caught Mark Quiller's attention and engaged it so thoroughly that he forgot where he was, whence he had come, why he was on that park bench, and what the next few minutes might reveal of his future, all of which were, up to that minute, things of surpassing interest to him.

The newspaper page contained a syndicated article reproduced from the same matrix that had first cast the metal for a New York newspaper. Its striking feature was a half-length portrait of a young woman who was sufficiently attractive, even after the half-tone process of engraving and printing to catch any man's eye.

Above this portrait of the woman, which had been embellished with a startling, pictorial frame, large red letters exclaimed:

POOR LITTLE PRINCESS OF DIAMONDS!

For All Her Millions There's No Rest for Daughter of the Late Professor Alva Dane.

DID KING OF DIAMONDS' SECRET DIE WITH HIM?

"Yes," says his Heiress. "No," Cry Business Men Who Seek to Probe the Mystery of Midvale Park Laboratories. "Let Me

Alone!" Wails Princess Who is Barricaded Against the World in Palatial Island Bungalow in Westchester.

Beneath the portrait which first caught the eye of Mark Quiller was the further legend:

Miss Eleanor Dane, sole heiress of noted physicist who for two yea.s threatened to upset the world's diamond markets with his laboratory-made gems. She has been forced into exile by the relentless curiosity of men desirous of following in her father's footsteps.

Like many articles of this kind there was a great deal of art and exclamation and not very much information. What it had to say could be put into a paragraph.

Professor Alva Dane, after forty-six years of obscurity and the genteel poverty of a man dependent on the salary of a teacher of physics in small schools and academies, had startled the world with the announcement that he had discovered how to produce synthetic diamonds in commercial quantities.

Diamonds had been made in the laboratory before, but never as Dane claimed to make them, large enough to compete with the products of Kimberley and Brazil. Alva Dane did more than talk; he made the diamonds and built a plant at Midvale for their manufacture. And every investor who put a dollar into his enterprise received returns ranging from a dollar and a half to two dollars. There had been the usual cry of fraud, and governmental investigations; but these only established the fact more firmly that Alva Dane made diamonds that could not be differentiated from the natural stone, and his millions multiplied and the public clamored to give him its dollars to work magic upon.

Then he died.

His daughter was sole heir. She closed the business, paid every claim, and was begging to be forgotten while Dane's would-be emulators besieged her to sell her father's secret formulæ. That was all, except the mention that Alva Dane had also a son, Kirk, a wanderer and ne'er-do-well, who had run away from home when sixteen. The will specifically cut off Kirk Dane from inheritance.

Mark Quiller read through this information three times with interest unabated. He was beginning for the fourth time when the man he waited for, his steamer acquaintance, slapped him on the shoulder with shouted joviality.

"Got it all fixed up," the interrupter shouted. "We sail for the River Plate tonight, and join the expedition up-country. Now you'll get some of that action you've been pining for, kid!"

Quiller blinked at him as though he were a stranger. He was a recent acquaintance, though you would not think that to have seen them the last five days discussing this and that possibility of seeking adventure and gain in the wild places of the earth.

Quiller rose to answer him, grinning whimsically, but even as he grinned the thought he had in mind crystallized into a purpose.

"You tell 'em, boy!" said Mark Quiller. "I'm not pining for action any longer. Go to the River Plate if you want to—and may all the gods be good to you. I've changed my mind. Got other fish to fry."

The island stood in the middle of a lake in the Westchester Hills. It was about three-quarters of a mile long, perhaps a half mile wide, and covered with a pleasant forest of native hardwood, a forest that showed evidences of skilful care, for it lay like a park, free of underbrush, and cleared here and there in order to give some fine old oak or maple better pictorial effect.

Day and night the clean little beaches were patrolled by armed guards, whose duty was to enforce the no trespass notices.

But there were few to trespass. Large estates abutted on the lake shore on all sides save at the far end, where a little crossroads post-office and settlement, Farina, touched the beach. The little town gave the only access to the lake, and since it was ten miles off any railroad, and as far off trunk highways, there were few visitors.

Dane's island, in the middle of Lake Alma, was the ideal place for anybody who wished to be left alone.

The bungalow where Eleanor Dane made her home was all that the most particular city dweller could ask of a wilderness camp. Its architecture was of the California type,

a low building of overhanging eaves, numerous wings and broad verandas, a building that seemed to cuddle down into the land and become a part with it. Its shingle roofs were stained in quiet weathered tones, its cedar walls varnished. A private water system, a private electric plant, and a handsome low shed that housed a swift motor-boat completed the establishment.

Eleanor Dane stood on the broad porch at the front of her home, facing two men who had just risen from their wicker lounging chairs.

The only heir of the late Diamond King was much more worth looking at than the poor newspaper portrait which the man Mark Quiller was examining at that moment in Pioneer Place, Seattle, thousands of miles distant.

She was at first sight not unusually large for a woman, but this was because of her perfect proportion. A closer observer would notice that she slightly overtopped the taller of her visitors. She made a striking, vital figure, a woman of gold, golden haired, with face and neck tanned tawny. Her eyes were gray, but had little flecks of gold when you saw them closely. She wore riding breeches of a rich golden bronze, and cordovan riding boots, and an almost masculine shirt of white silk, open at the throat.

The men who waited on her words were dissimilar and yet alike in one thing. Their eyes had the disconcerting habit of blankness, meeting the glance and saying nothing—hard eyes, unpleasant eyes.

Bruce Rand was heavy set, a little thick about the middle and about the neck, with long, powerful arms and hands that were hairy and crook fingered. He had a jaw as ugly as a granite boulder, and a short-cropped mustache that hid whatever his mouth might have to say. He wore the tweed knickers of the country gentleman.

Walter Pindar, who had brought Rand to Dane's island because he claimed some acquaintance with Eleanor Dane, was lean, rangy, long-necked, long-armed, with the habit of stooping. He dressed with native bad taste. He had been the trusted superintendent of Alva Dane's wonder-working laboratory at Midvale.

It was to Bruce Rand that Eleanor addressed her words, and though her voice was musical and well-modulated, it had also the hint of finality.

"I have paid no attention to your letters, Mr. Rand, because there is no more to be said on the subject."

"Now see here, Miss Dane! Don't let's start that way. I made you a generous offer, but if you don't consider it's the right figure—"

Eleanor Dane stopped him with protesting hand.

"We are not discussing figures at all. In fact we have nothing to discuss—"

"Nothing to discuss!"

"I warned you when your launch landed that you were wasting your time. You insisted on this interview, not I, and it did seem best to get this thing settled for all time. I repeat we have nothing to discuss. My father's formulæ, whatever they were, are not for sale. So far as I knew they no longer exist. It that—definite?"

"Definite, but—"

"But you don't believe me?"

Rand did not answer, but his hard brown eyes looked steadily into her gray ones, and his look said it.

The other man, Pindar, broke in excitedly: "And I tell you, Miss Dane, somebody's fed you the wrong dope on that formula. It's in that red book, the little red book, the book that was in your father's private papers and it's worth millions—millions and millions! My God, when I think of the mountain of jack that book is worth—"

Eleanor answered him in level tones: "I know of no such red book."

"But I tell you I seen the book! Many's the time. And the old professor told me himself. 'In here is my secret, Pindar,' he says. 'There's a lot would give their heads to know this formula, but they never will!' He told me that himself—"

"I know of no such book" Eleanor repeated.

"Well—well, look here, now; how's this for a proposition. Would you leave us look through his papers, and if we found it—"

"Oh, forget it!" Rand said disgustedly. Then to Eleanor: "You insist, then, you have no secret for sale?"

"I certainly do. My father's formula died with him."

"It's the last time I'll make an offer—"

"I am very glad of that, Mr. Rand. I shall not consider it necessary to let you visit the island again—"

"Now don't be rash," Rand urged, and just the hint of a threat suggested itself in his manner. "Think over your decision—"

"My decision stands. There is no secret for sale." Eleanor added hastily: "There is *no secret*."

"Ah!" Rand exclaimed. "And if there was a secret—if there was a little red book?"

"It would not be for sale."

"Why?"

"That," said Eleanor, "is my own business." Her hint of dismissal became very broad. She said, speaking with some evidence of feeling, "I think your launch is ready for you."

Rand grunted and turned his back on her. His companion would have lingered to argue, but the big man caught him by the arm. It was Eleanor's voice that halted them as they left the veranda.

She spoke with a cool studied deliberation. "Oh, Mr. Rand—"

"Yes!" Rand turned back eagerly.

"There is something else after all. Several weeks ago I had occasion to dismiss a servant. She was a good maid, but she showed a little too much interest in boating—especially after dark. I had her references looked up—and found they had been forged. I had her watched—and learned where she went. I wouldn't try that again, Mr. Rand."

"I don't know what you're talking about, I'm sure," Rand answered stonily.

"Perhaps not. Perhaps it was some other person altogether who was unduly interested in my private affairs here. But I thought it only fair to announce that spying into other people's business is apt to be embarrassing — even dangerous — to the spy. Of course, Mr. Rand, if you are not interested—"

"Good day," Rand said briefly, and turned his broad back on her a second time.

Rand said no more, and discouraged Pindar's efforts to talk until the launch which had brought them from the village had left the island behind. Then, as he and Pindar sat together at the stern, and the villager who ran the boat was busy with his engine, and out of earshot, he announced grimly: "You're right, Pindar—and that girl investigator of ours was right. The thing exists—and she's got it, there on the island!"

"Didn't I tell you," Pindar exclaimed; "didn't I always tell you. It's there, and Great Sacred Cat, it's worth millions to us—if we can get it—"

"We'll get it."

"Yeah! How?"

Another grunt emphasized by Rand's impatient shake of the head.

"But I know one thing," he exclaimed suddenly; "I'm done *talking!*"

Eleanor Dane, standing on the broad veranda watching the launch diminish with distance, lost her defiant poise. Her shoulders drooped. Her eyes betrayed her hesitation, her uncertainty, even a little fear. She shivered.

Her brown, slender hands clasped before her in a curiously wistful gesture, and when she spoke it was as in prayer.

"There's a way out—some way. There's somebody who can help me—somewhere. Things will come out right—must come out right—or there is no just God."

The July day smiled. The lake sparkled in the sun. Chipmunks and squirrels scampered through the undergrowth, and birds hurried about their business. It was a place of beauty and comfort and sane, normal, healthful living, guarded by its isolation, by the lake itself, and by the armed gardeners who patrolled the beaches, and yet Eleanor Dane was afraid, and she alone knew how big and how dangerous was the thing that menaced her.

II.

About fifteen miles across the hills from Lake Alma lay another and much larger

lake, whose shores had been built up with houses and cottages of pretension and cost. Oriole was one of those summer resorts common to Westchester, not quite suburban, and not exactly wilderness, a compromise within commuting distance of New York for men who owned high-powered automobiles. Bruce Rand made his summer home there.

Rand was classified under the rather vague terms of "Broker" and "Wall Street man."

He maintained a small office in the city in the financial district, but he was not a trader in stocks.

He was known as the organizer of several daring commercial ventures exploiting foreign concessions. He had figured several times in the news in connection with sensational business adventures carried out without nice regard for international law.

The man was rated many times a millionaire. His residence at Oriole was the show-place of the community. His wife easily maintained a social leadership, but Rand, and especially the business side of the man, was always a little vague and blurred of outline—a figure of some mystery.

One thing was noticeable about him, he usually got what he wanted.

Two weeks from the day Rand was unpleasantly dismissed from Dane's island, on a warm, sultry evening, a little two-seated roadster automobile of a cheap, popular make rattled briskly up the graveled drive to the big gates guarding Rand's estate. The gate-keeper, who had been admitting a select lot of limousines containing Mrs. Rand's guests, halted the car. Its driver, a cheerful, sandy-haired, homely young man handed him the business card of a representative of the local telephone company.

"Somebody up here sent for the trouble man," he explained.

He was instructed that the trade drive was on the first turn to the left, and to ask for Mr. Orkin. The car rattled on into the dark.

It did not turn into the trade drive. Instead it pattered briskly up the main drive and halted on the dusky edge of the crescent before the brightly lighted entrance to Rand's home, at the end of a row of parked cars.

Several chauffeurs stared suspiciously when they heard the song of an engine as discordant in that company as the voice of the peacock among nightingales; but they saw nothing wrong with the young man who walked composedly from the car and across the porch to the big door.

If his clothes had worn shabby and shiny, in that light they were not noticeable, and his manner defied investigation. He went about his business unhurried, assured, like an invited guest.

To the servant at the door the young man handed another card announcing Mr. Percival Fulton Osgood, Secretary to the Board of Trustees, the Mount Bedford Hospital.

"Please tell Mrs. Rand," he said, "that a matter of most pressing importance in connection with the building fund is my excuse for calling her from her guests at such a time."

He was ushered beyond the grille door and left to wait in a small reception-room.

Five minutes later Mrs. Rand, the stranger's card in her fingers, swept into the pleasant little room. There was no caller there.

The butler was sent for. The alarm spread, and servants of the house and the gardeners who watched the grounds began to search for an intruder, working quietly and with the efficiency of a little army.

Bruce Rand was not with his guests. He was closeted in a small room off the library at the first floor rear of the house. There was a servant in the library, posted to turn aside any guest who might wander that way. The French windows of the room itself opened upon a small terrace, and on the terrace were posted other men whose duty it was to be sure nobody disturbed the owner of the house.

It was from this room that Bruce Rand directed most of his important affairs.

With Rand was Pindar, the former superintendent of Professor Alva Dane's laboratory, and a man named Frank, a squat, powerful, ugly brute with a dished nose and a tattered right ear.

Frank rated as personal secretary to Bruce Rand, and went almost everywhere that Rand went. Probably he could not spell his own name; at least had never been known to; but in almost any sort of fight he doubtless could give a very good account of himself. Rand needed the attendance of a man like Frank.

It was to Frank that the peculiar financier was addressing his remarks.

"I don't like this way of doing business," Rand said. "You know it. I only do a thing that way when there isn't any other—"

"And there sure isn't," said Pindar.

"What's the matter with that way?" Frank growled. "You want something. A dame has got it. All you got to do is tell me what it is and where it is and forget about it. That's all, just forget about it. I'll do the rest—"

"Understand this," Rand interrupted. "If you do it that way, you do it on your own. I wash my hands of you if you fail. If you get caught at it, don't look to me for help!"

Frank nodded. "I get you, chief. Same as the usual arrangement. But I won't get caught. Why should I? Why, it's easy! A girl, alone on an island wit' a couple Swede gardeners and a woman maid. And all I got to do is bust in and grab off what's in that wall safe. You said that was in the big room, didn't you?"

"In the big room," Pindar nodded. "As near as we can learn, what we want is in that safe. Listen, Frank, a book, see? A kind of small, red-covered book, thin, like one of these account-books—"

"And that's all I got to bring back?"

"That's all."

"Hell!"

Rand warned him sternly. "Don't go out of here thinking you've got a cinch. You haven't. This Dane girl isn't any fool. She's got money to work with, too, and that island's as well watched as my own place. If you can't get it into your thick head that you're taking a big chance doing this, I don't want you to try—"

Frank's ugly mouth spread into a grin of confidence. "Listen!" he said scornfully. "If the price is right—"

"The price is ten thousand for you—"

"Well, that's fair enough. Ten thousand for one little book. And if any square-head gardener, or anything of that sort, gets between me and ten thousand—well, God help him!"

"Oh, damn!" Rand cried irritably. "There's just the trouble. This fat-head would murder a whole town for ten thousand, and think himself overpaid! We don't want violence. It's dangerous!"

"It is indeed. Violence is dangerous—also in decidedly bad taste."

The speaker was not Rand, nor Frank nor Pindar. He was a stranger to them—a sandy-haired man with a homely face that might have shown freckles had it not been tanned so deeply, and he seemed to materialize in that guarded sanctum of Rand's as if from the thin air.

The apparition left Rand and Pindar stupefied. It seemed to turn them into inanimate clay. They could only stare.

Frank, who had less imagination, was on his feet and at his throat like the well-trained watch-dog he was.

Frank's left arm encircled his neck from behind, tipping back the head. His right pinned the stranger's hands. It was child's play for Frank to snap back that head until the spine cracked. He glanced briefly at Rand. "How about it—croak him?"

Rand came out of his stupor of surprise.

"Wait," he said sternly. "Let him talk. Take your arm off his neck. Ease up. But better search him for a gun."

The bruiser obeyed reluctantly. He searched their visitor, who submitted without objection while his freed hand caressed his throat and neck a little anxiously.

Frank laid a small packet of letters, a faded photograph, a locket, a cheap watch, and seventeen cents in small change on the table before Rand. "Now what?" he growled.

"Let him talk, that is if you've got anything to say for yourself?" Rand glared at his visitor.

"Anything to say? A lot. I came three thousand miles for the pleasure of talking to you, Rand. But call off your dog, first. He doesn't have to break my arm while I talk—and talk is all I'm asking of you."

"Let him alone, Frank. Now—you—what do you mean breaking into a man's home like a thief?"

"I've told you that. I mean to talk to you—"

"But how—how in hades—"

"Did I get in? Ah! Looks as if somebody'd left a window open, doesn't it? But don't blame those chaps out there. They're watching the terrace all right, only they didn't look for visitors from above, and I came down the Virginia creeper from the second story. All this trouble just to see you!"

"Why?"

"There's a little newspaper clipping, there on top of those old letters, will tell you that."

Rand picked up the scrap of paper indicated, a clipping that showed signs of considerable wear, as though it had been carried long and far in a man's pocket. He glanced at it and found it familiar:

> KIRK DANE, the son of the late Professor Alva Dane, of Midvale, New York State, will find out something very much to his advantage by addressing this advertiser; last heard of five years ago in Metlakatla, Alaska; if you know him pass this on. X. Y. Z., care New York *Planet*.

"Well," Rand said with a sharp glance upward, "what of this?"

"Your advertisement, I think."

"Guess again—"

"No, I don't have to guess again. I know. So I've answered it in person—"

"If you did answer it, which I don't believe, you were told to call on a lawyer in the city, not here—"

"Ah, but I didn't answer it that way. It's not my way. I talk to principals only. Now, are you interested in Kirk Dane?"

Rand considered. "I might be," he admitted.

"Just glance over those letters and things, will you?"

Pindar already had yielded to curiosity, and his trembling hand was forcing the packet on Rand. "It's him!" Pindar whispered.

A packet of old letters, the newest dated seven years ago, an old-fashioned jet brooch mounted in gold, the cheap watch, initialed on the inner case, last of all a passport dated some years back and identifying Kirk Dane, an American citizen. Rand studied them with signs of growing interest.

"Satisfied?"

"It seems to be your name, but—"

"Open one of those letters. See who signed it."

Rand glanced over the letter, the scrawl of a sister written to a runaway brother, a letter retailing the news of home, and signed "Eleanor."

He rose and thrust out his hand.

"I'm glad to see you, Mr. Dane. Sit down."

III.

RAND looked hard at his unconventional caller, and the caller returned his stare with blue eyes unperturbed.

"Now, what I want to know," Rand growled, "is why in merry hell you couldn't answer this advertisement in the regular way? And suppose you did find out who's behind it—though how you did that I can't figure out—just exactly why do you come into this place like a second-story man and run the risk of being shot for one?"

"That," said the caller, smiling pleasantly, "is my own business for the present—Oh, don't look sore, I'll tell you in due time! But first let's get down to brass tacks. Let's discuss just why you advertise for Kirk Dane. No—I'll tell *you*, and you can corroborate me!"

Rand gasped. "Well, you brought your nerve with you!"

"I always do. Now, you want to find Kirk Dane, because—but how about these—er—gentlemen. Are they—do you share your confidences with them?"

"This is Walter Pindar. I suppose you know who he is?"

"Only by hearsay. Superintendent of my father's plant, I am told. Of course you know I left that happy home when I was sixteen. And this other—gentleman?"

"Oh, Frank's all right!"

"He is indeed! None better, in his peculiar specialty." The young man grinned and rubbed his throat, so recently in jeopardy of Frank's strangling arm. "I can talk freely then—"

"That doesn't seem to cost you any trouble—talking freely."

"Oh, I can do other things beside talk. I think I proved that already. All right, Rand, to business. My father, Alva Dane, invented something that made him millions. You think you could make some more millions out of it, if you had it. But you haven't it. That's the whole case, isn't it?"

Rand grunted non-committally. "Well, what about it?"

"My father died and left the whole works to Eleanor, who's a good girl, I dare say, but apparently opinionated. You tried your damnedest to buy the formula for artificial diamonds—'the Diamond King's Secret,' as the newspapers like to call it—and Eleanor won't sell. I gather, in fact, that she was ill-advised enough to tell you to go jump in the lake, or words to that effect.

"Now, how to get that formula and pile up some millions of your own? You remembered that there was a son, Kirk Dane. Ran away from home when he was a kid—a bad lot. And the will cut him off with a dollar. If you can find Kirk Dane, and he happens to feel sore on the Dane family, which seems reasonable, maybe you could do a deal together. Maybe, between you, you could figure out how to separate Eleanor from that little red book where the old man buried all that he knew about artificial diamonds. That's about the way you figured it, wasn't it, Rand?"

"Well?" Rand merely glanced without expression into the tanned face across the table.

"Well, just this; I think perhaps we can do a deal. In fact that's why I'm here, to show you a lot simpler and safer way to get what you want from Eleanor Dane than the plan you were discussing when I came in. That was a rotten poor plan, Rand. Violence! Tut, tut!"

"Say!" rumbled Frank. "If this guy's been piping off all we was saying, how about—"

Rand made him a sign to be still. "Go on," he said to the caller.

"I never thought much of the old man, Rand. He never cared a damn for me. We fought until I was sixteen, then I ran away and hoed my own row. That was when Eleanor was a weedy, long-legged little thing of five. I suppose when she got older it appealed to her as romantic to have a runaway brother, and she used to write to me quite a lot. Eleanor thinks I'm something of a hero, as you might notice by those letters. And I'm dead sure of one thing, if the prodigal brother comes back to her now, inside of two weeks he can talk her into doing anything he says with that little red book the old man left. If he can't do that, it won't be any trouble at all to lift the book and hand it over to you—for a consideration. And serve the old man jolly right for what he did to me! That's my proposition."

Rand swept the various letters and trinkets into one heap and bent his attention upon them. One by one he read the letters, examined the papers and trinkets.

Once he looked up. "Let's see your right forearm," he commanded.

The visitor slipped off his coat, rolled up his shirt sleeve and displayed an old tattoo mark. Then he loosened the shirt collar and exposed a shoulder that bore trace of a former scar.

Rand nodded his satisfaction. They tallied with the description he read. He thought for some time. "How much?" he asked, finally.

"Fifty thousand."

"You're crazy!"

"Oh, no, I'm not. Fifty thousand—and no bargaining about it. Of course, if you want to be crude, here's Frank ready to murder a whole town for ten. But that's dangerous, and you know it. And that book's worth millions to you—"

"Twenty-five thousand," Rand bid.

The tanned face set stubbornly. "I'll give you two minutes by that watch to make up your mind, Rand. Fifty—or nothing."

"Fifty goes—when I get the book," Rand decided suddenly. He reached out his bag hand. "That's a bargain, Kirk Dane."

The hand was ignored. The visitor's next words left them frozen with astonishment.

"Not Kirk Dane," he said calmly. "The right name is Quiller, given name Mark."

IV.

"MARK QUILLER," the visitor repeated; "let's get that straight."

Rand's collar seemed to choke him. He loosed it with shaking fingers and the blood flooded and ebbed from his face.

Pindar sat with his long arms before him, stretched ludicrously, held in thrall by the sight of his own fingers, or so it seemed.

Frank leaped suddenly to his feet and got the slack of the visitor's coat in a savage, twisting grip that pulled him from his chair. Frank was growling very much like a savage dog.

"Rand!" Quiller gasped. "Rand!"

"Let go!" Rand commanded, rousing suddenly. "Frank! You damn bruiser!"

Frank obeyed reluctantly, and Quiller sank back in his chair.

"Listen to me," he said sternly; "let's start right. I'm not Kirk Dane, and never was—but I convinced you, didn't I?"

"Well, what of it?"

"I'm coming to that. But I wouldn't have you think Kirk Dane was such a rotten lot he'd betray his own sister for a price. No, not even Dane. He's dead, and better off that way, so let's have some regard for his reputation.

"Kirk Dane was a wild, good-for-nothing kid. We spent more than a year together in Alaska, on a damnable little barren island where we were marooned. He died and left me there alone five months longer before a schooner came. In a year's time, when two men are alone like that they know just about everything there is to know about each other. That was the way with me and Dane. I know Kirk Dane and his family from the cradle up. I know him even to the scar and tattoo marks which I have imitated. I know him well enough even to forge his handwriting. But bad as he was, I don't believe he'd double-cross his sister."

Rand began to speak, and his mounting anger made his speech thick. "You—whoever you are. Breaking into my house, lying to me, you've got a hell of a nerve—"

Quiller's exclamation interrupted him.

"Good," he said, pleased as the cat that's caught the canary. "Good! You're convinced of that, are you. You see it!"

"Nerve!" Rand began again.

"That's exactly what I started out to prove to you, Rand. That's the reason I came in here as I did—fooled you as I did. I have got nerve. It's my stock in trade. Taking long chances is my profession. But before I can talk business with you I have to show you, don't I? As I would any business man. You acknowledge I've got nerve, do you?"

Rand, still bewildered, angry, and ready to be dangerous on slight provocation, assented to the question with profanity.

"All right, then," Quiller said briskly. "If you see that, you can see that there's just one man in the world capable of going to Eleanor Dane and convincing her that her lost brother Kirk has returned—for, remember, just one man knows that Kirk Dane is dead, or how he died, and that's me. And just one man has the brains, and the daring, and—er—the beautiful lack of scruples necessary to go through with a piece of work like that—and that, also, is me—"

"Just who the devil are you?" Rand asked irritably.

"I've told you my name. I've showed you a sample of what I can do. The rest doesn't matter. Still, if you insist on further references— Rand, do you remember the copy of the secret treaty between Russia and the Powers in 1913, the copy sold to oil interests in this country that helped them clean up ten million overnight? I got that treaty, Rand. Or, if that doesn't satisfy you as a reference ask Silas Hodge who handled his business with Pancho Villa in 1915—or the name of the man who knew a week ahead just what the Senate committee was going to do about the Western water-power grants when all the money Hodge had was tied up in that Cascade consolidation—"

"There's one thing about you—you don't hate yourself," Rand sneered; but for all that he was plainly impressed.

"I know my own value," Quiller admitted modestly. "And that reminds me—if

I handle this thing for you, Rand, I do it on my own conditions. First, two weeks' time. If I can't get the information in that time, I'll never get it. Second, I am to be left completely and entirely alone. No interference of any sort. Third and lastly, I don't ask one cent advance from you. You pay me when you get Alva Dane's little red book of formulæ or not at all. And the price—to you—will be one hundred thousand dollars."

Rand's voice rose in an angry shout: "Hell's bells! You said fifty thousand—"

"Not I. That was Kirk Dane's price. Mark Quiller costs more, Rand, but he's the only man who can put something worth millions in your hands without fuss or scandal. I'll give you five minutes to take it or leave it. and then I really must be going."

V.

THE early August morning gave promise of heat in plenty, but at this hour the day was unspoiled.

The lake was as still as a great bowl of silver, and the sun's early rays gilded trees and grass with pale gold. Little wisps of night mist straggled off the water. The gravel beach, the bedewed leaves, everything had a new-born look.

The big doors of the boat-house unfolded and the bows of a black varnished speed boat, keen as a razor, pushed into the lake. Eleanor Dane handled the boat alone. This was the happiest moment of her long day.

The girl wore only a silk bathing-suit of one piece and the cape that wrapped her from chill. Arms and legs were bare. Her yellow hair was confined under a close-fitting rubber cap.

The shining engine of the speed boat purred an even, comfortable song as she started at half speed into the wide lake. Even at half speed the boat made short work of the mile run. It was one of those almost incredibly beautiful, glistening, fragile-seeming toys that conceal the marvel of giant-powered engines. It skimmed the lake like a glistening dragon fly.

Eleanor shut off the spark, swept the boat in a wide circle, and let it drift.

She threw aside the cape, and rose, a gleaming figure in blue-green silk, fitting like another skin, and stepped onto the little decked space at the bow. A moment she poised, breathing deep. Then her arms rose, hands palm to palm. Her feet spurned the varnished plank and her body bent in a beautiful arc. The dive left scarcely a ripple. For half an hour or more she swam and floated, playing in the water, circling the drifting boat. Finally tired, she climbed in again and started the machine.

She tore the close-fitting rubber cap from her head and loosened the golden plume of hair to the breeze of her flying. Her fingers on spark and gas played with the strength of modern magic, capriciously alternating the toy between idling and an express-train speed that tore a wave from either bow with the rasp of fretted water and whipped the loosed hair in a glittering cloud behind her. And moments at a time, in these wild bursts her hands would leave the wheel and her arm toss high in the intoxication of speed and life.

It was the one completely happy hour of her anxious day and she crowded it to the last second.

The speed boat was running in circles, ever widening. Its outer arc sent it flashing past the island shore and left a drenching wave smashing onto the little beaches. The inner arc brought it ripping past the dense green woods of the mainland, flashing like some mad comet with the roar of an open exhaust and a great fan tail of boiling water.

At times the craft was almost close enough to touch projecting bows from the forest. Close enough so that a moment's inattention in the hand that guided it would send it smashing on rocks or drift logs.

There was no warning at all when a green canvas canoe shot out of the little cove where it had been hiding and started to cross the speed boat's bows with scant seconds for thought.

Eleanor had but one brief glimpse of the mad craft, a glimpse that showed a man, with paddle upraised as if the thing rushing down on him had made him stupid with panic.

Her hands sent the speed boat's bow

yawing. At the same moment the paddle dipped and the canoe shot ahead, following that menacing bow and courting destruction.

The canoe was too light to send even a tremor through the flying monster that rode it down. There was a brief flash of wet green canvas in the boiling wake, and almost with the comprehending of it the speed boat was far out in the lake before the engine was stopped.

Eleanor's face was white, but her eye and hand was steady in the emergency. The speed boat circled back toward land, where a paddle tossed on the widening circle of disturbed water.

For a moment a man's head rose above the surface and a hand seemed to wave in futile gesture before it went under.

Eleanor was on her feet and had dived almost as fast as the eye could follow movement.

It was no simple thing, when she had caught that inert body, to get it to the speed boat and boost it over the low gunwale. She was well exhausted when she had done this and started the boat back to Dane's island.

Eleanor Dane sat at a little wicker table on the broad veranda of the bungalow. A breakfast, scarcely touched, was before her. Outwardly she was calm enough, but the shock of the accident played tricks with her nerves still.

And it was a queer accident. That thought kept recurring to worry her. Lake Alma seldom saw any craft save her own speed boat or the launch from the village. She had more than a woman's idle curiosity about the man who had been carried into her home for attention. Olga, her middle-aged maid, crossed the veranda with a handful of papers and trinkets.

"Miss Eleanor, I think you should see these."

"What is it, Olga?"

"That man's. Papers—and things we found when we took his clothing to be cared for. Will you look at them, please—"

A gesture of instinctive repugnance. "Oh, no, Olga! Not his private papers! He is our guest!"

Olga's face was serious, her manner mysteriously pressing.

"But you must look at them, Miss Eleanor! They—concern you."

"Concern me!" Eleanor's hands accepted the little pile—a cheap watch, an old-fashioned locket of jet and gold, a bundle of letters and papers, still dripping water.

It needed but a moment's inspection to bring the girl to her feet and her gray eyes were wide with excitement. There was a look on her face so strange that Olga moved hastily nearer, her hand half outstretched as though she feared the effect of this further shock.

Olga had no reason to be afraid. Eleanor steadied herself quickly enough. "Is he—still—still—"

"Unconscious? Yes, miss."

"Take me to him, Olga. Quickly!"

The man whose folly had been so close to costing his life under her speed boat lay on a bed in the maid's room. His sandy hair, still wet, stuck out grotesquely around a bandage on his skull, a flesh wound, the only souvenir of the smash. His tanned face had drained a sickly gray and his eyes were closed, but he breathed normally.

As Eleanor Dane bent over him, the maid Olga behind her staring mightily, his lips moved slightly, whispered a name, and repeated it. It was her own name.

The girl stripped back the cover from him, baring an arm and shoulder. She examined quickly the faded scar of an old wound in the shoulder, the tattoo mark on the forearm.

She knew suddenly that she was dizzy and weak. She sat on the bed beside him, and the room seemed to dance. But even in this momentary distress consciousness of unbelievable happiness, of hope born again when she had ceased to hope, dominated every thought.

Her lips pronounced her brother's name. "Kirk! It is—Kirk—come back—to help me."

The man in the bed, daring one swift glance under lowered lashes, was conscious of a shock even greater. He could not altogether repress a groan.

With all his nerve and training Mark Quiller could not stop that moment of remorse at his first sight of the girl. "How could I know she would be—like this!"

VI.

THE living-room of the bungalow was its largest apartment, a beautiful room and doubly beautiful in the dusk of that close August night, when electricity had been discarded for the softer glow of candles. The room was not ceiled, but rose to the attic of the building, giving an effect of unusual height and spaciousness. Tall French windows opened from its two outer walls onto the verandas.

The walls were finished in tinted rough plaster and wood stained to soft weathered tones. At one end of the room a huge fireplace of rough fieldstone emphasized the camp aspect of the place. But there was much of comfort and luxury there too, in the soft, beautiful rugs and hangings, in some excellent paintings, in the silver candelabra and well-chosen vases, in the comfort of many good chairs and lounges, and best of all in the old square piano where Eleanor sat idling, improvising, reminiscing, the candlelight making a halo of her yellow hair.

Mark Quiller sat at a little distance, sunk in a wicker lounging chair back in the shadow, where he could watch the girl's face without betraying too keen an interest. The thing Quiller had come to do had to be done that night. It was the last night of his two weeks' contract with Bruce Rand. He knew that to succeed called for all his daring and skill.

Ten days Quiller had played a part without rest or let up throughout their twenty-four-hour spans. The impersonation he undertook was too ticklish a venture—and too much depended upon it—to afford the luxury of a few minutes' relaxation from the rôle during those ten days. In effect he had put himself in a state of mind which made him actually the man he claimed to be—Kirk Dane. If a man can be said to have a personality when sleeping, then even sleeping he was Eleanor Dane's brother.

That had been ten days of torturing hard work. Hard enough for a man to sink his identity and take another's with such finished performance that even his private thoughts began at times to take the morose, impatient, cheaply cynical tinge of the thoughts of the man who had died in his arms on the Alaska island.

Harder than that, to conceal the hopes and fears, the effect of the capricious uncertainty of a dangerous game that held on and held on and was neither lost nor won. And added to these difficulties, the final difficulty which he fought hardest of all, the fear that was growing on him, fear of this woman's appealing beauty. That was a fear Quiller dared not even put a name to. Women did not appeal to him as a rule. He had never been afraid of their charm.

Adventure appealed, excitement of any sort. His wandering life had been filled with that to the exclusion of other things. He often referred to himself as a hunter of big game—the biggest game of all, his own kind. His wits were his weapon. And this adventure, with its prize richer than any he had gone after, with the excitement of unusual handicap and the lure of a mystery, had drawn him irresistibly from the moment he learned that luck had made it possible for him to do what no other man dared.

But the unforeseen had interfered in spite of all his planning. How could he know the girl would be like this? All his skill and hard work had not won the game.

Eleanor had welcomed home her lost brother with every outward sign of rejoicing and love. She had taken him to her heart. And still there were reservations.

Kirk Dane had his sister's affection, but not his sister's confidence. Quiller had not expected instant success. A brother separated so long that his sister knew him only by dim recollection, and had made of him very much a legendary hero, should not look for too much at once. To get her confidence he had used a vast amount of patience and a vast amount of skill, improvising from his memory of all the talk he had with Kirk Dane in their year of exile incident after incident that reassured the

girl he was what he claimed to be—her brother.

Quiller had a sensitiveness to the moods of others that was almost uncanny, and that faculty, like second sight, kept him warned off the one topic of burning importance, the whereabouts of Alva Dane's red book that contained his secret of making synthetic diamonds—a secret hard-headed Bruce Rand thought worth a hundred thousand dollars cash the moment he placed it in Rand's possession.

Of the secret itself, of just how the obscure professor of physics had managed his rise from poverty to riches within less than three years, so that he died possessor of millions, Quiller thought not at all. To him the secret was only a secret, the means of making more fortunes, perhaps—but fortunes did not interest him. Getting the thing, against all odds, interested him.

In ten days when they walked, swam, boated, read, and talked together, living under the same roof in almost constant companionship, he had kept that goal before him resolutely. Yet he purposely kept their talk off Alva Dane and the fortune he had made so spectacularly, using Kirk Dane's well-remembered grievance against his father, his sulkiness and irritability as his excuse for avoiding the topic.

Quiller planned that Eleanor Dane should volunteer the information he wanted, unasked.

Eleanor's fingers, wandering among the ivory keys, drifted into a few bars of "Annie Laurie" and stopped.

The man in the chair chuckled reminiscently.

"Eleanor, remember the house we lived in on Alder Street—or are you too young, I wonder? There was a piano in the stuffy little front parlor—and mother used to play that same song in the evenings—and a nasty pug dog we owned used to howl!"

She bowed her head. "I remember!"

"A funny world, Eleanor. Mother's gone—and father. The pug dog and piano and house, too, I suppose. But here's you and me, after all these years, together again—and 'Annie Laurie.' You and me left out of all the muddle, and I don't suppose we'll see much more of each other—"

"Kirk! What do you mean?" Her voice trembled.

"Can't stay on forever, you know. A man's got his work to do—even a wanderer like me. And you have your own life to live, with the money father left you. A queer life, cooped up on an island! Not my idea of fun—but that's your affair not mine—"

"I want it to be your affair!"

He raised a hand in hasty protest.

"Nope. Don't want to know. No ill feelings about it, Eleanor. I don't begrudge you. You deserve every cent of it. But you know how the old man and I hit it off—like oil and water! And I can't talk of him without—well, saying things that might hurt you. So I have no curiosity. Don't care how much he left you, or what you've done with it all, or why you bury yourself in this little hole. Hang his money!"

Eleanor leaned forward, hands clasped on her knees, a new resolution showing in her glance. She said slowly, after evident hesitation: "But, Kirk dear, I want to tell you—now. I—there's something you should know—about father and the money. I want you to listen and help me. Will you help me, Kirk?"

It was coming! Surely as he knew the sun would rise again Quiller saw he had reached his goal. A hundred-thousand-dollar prize waited just beyond reach of his hand. The girl was going to tell him what she alone knew; what Bruce Rand would give a fortune to know.

He managed to nod his head and shrug indifference.

"Yes, I'll help—*you*," he said slowly.

"I'm glad, Kirk, good old Kirk! Come here—sit by me, dear. I want you to know all about it."

If Quiller's face was white, if he trembled and his eye avoided hers, she did not seem to see it. Eleanor had risen and led him to a deep-cushioned chair, forcing him into it and perching herself on its arm. He suffered the closeness of her warm young shoulder against his through set teeth. In his triumph he was afraid—afraid of the girl's caress—afraid of his own strength to hold to his purpose.

"I want you to know all about father and just how he made that money. I want you to understand his intention and his method, so you can understand him." Eleanor caught his hand eagerly and repeated: "I want you to understand our father, Kirk—and love him, just a little!" She stopped and looked up with a shade of annoyance.

Olga, the maid, had entered the room; she hesitated and spoke.

"Miss Eleanor, if you please, would you see about something important. The men say it is very important."

Eleanor frowned, rose slowly.

"Back in a moment, dear," she smiled at Quiller.

Quiller felt the flash of irritation, unreasonable anger at the interruption. His nerves were taut. But reason told him that the delay was trifling, and he smiled philosophically.

Plenty of time, four hours before midnight, and he had promised Rand his report of success or failure by midnight of this day. Time to find out all he had come to learn; time to persuade the girl either to sell her father's secret or, failing that, to get the secret itself and deliver it to Rand; time to claim his hundred thousand.

The thing was done, or as good as done. Quiller smiled and stretched deeper in his chair. This was a moment that paid for many an hour and many a day when luck had broken against him.

Not far behind his chair was one of the French windows, closed. There came a sharp tap against the glass that roused him. The tap was repeated, and as he turned to look he saw dimly by the candlelight a face pressed against the pane. The face disappeared at once, but he needed only the glance to recognize it.

Frank, the man with the ugly dished nose and frayed ear—the strangler and bruiser—Bruce Rand's doer of dirty work, was out there in the shadows, waiting for him.

VII.

QUILLER rose with a leisure calculated to deceive any person who might be watching him, strolled to the long window, opened it, and after momentary hesitation stepped into the dark.

The night was warm, and a thickening in the atmosphere was drawing a veil across the stars, blurring them. There was promise of an electrical storm.

He went alert, one hand pressed in his coat pocket, where it held an automatic pistol. He did not trust Frank. The man's sudden appearance on the island, after Rand's promise he would be let play his game alone, meant trouble.

A hand touched his arm, halting him. The hand seized his elbow and guided him through the dark away from the bungalow. He knew his guide was Frank, though he could not see him.

Five minutes walk, and they halted.

"What the devil do you mean, coming here?" Quiller whispered venomously.

Frank's whisper answered without emotion: "Bruce Rand sent me. You made a mess of things, didn't you?"

"That's a lie."

"You never got that book!"

"I had my hands on it just now when you blundered in. I will have it inside the hour, but you've got to keep out of this. Get your ugly face off this island. If you don't, how can I do anything—"

"Hell, you're just stalling!"

"Am I?" The barrel of the pistol in Quiller's pocket pressed hard against Frank's middle. "It's loaded," Quiller said bitterly. "Suppose I take you back to the house my prisoner and ship you over to the sheriff at Farina in the morning?"

"Try it! What I'll tell that girl about you will make you damn sick of the job—"

"Or I might finish you here. My finger isn't very steady on the trigger—"

Frank coughed.

The dark about them thrilled with unseen life. A half-dozen pistol barrels prodded Quiller. He heard the breathing of six men, the faint rustle of their clothing and knew they stood close about him, summoned by that cough.

"You'll make a lot leakier corpse than I will." He could guess the triumphant grin with which Frank said it.

Men on the island, seven including Frank! Men who were armed and ready

for trouble. Quiller's anger turned to alarm. "What do you mean by this?" he demanded.

"These boys is working for me—for me and Rand," Frank answered. "Maybe you'd like to listen now to what Rand told me to tell you? Yes? Well, Rand says he'll give you until eleven o'clock, and if you take his advice you'll acknowledge you're a flivver and beat it now while the beating is good. They's a boat you can have to row away in. I'll see you get to it safe. But if you're fool enough to stay, Rand says remember eleven o'clock is the limit—"

"Our agreement was midnight."

"He's allowing one hour for you to reach him," Frank went on. "If you show up here at eleven o'clock and you've got that book he wants, we'll take you to Rand. Otherwise—"

"Otherwise, what?"

"Never you mind!" Frank chuckled. "Only Rand ain't taking any more chances of falling down on this job. He's double-shooting the turn to-night, and when you're through messing around with your slick damfoolishness and play acting there's going to be something stirring on this little island! Take my tip and beat it now—"

"Thanks. You can go to hell, Frank." Quiller's thoughts raced angrily. His hundred thousand was at stake; his success at stake. Neither Rand nor any other man was going to double-cross him out of what he had earned by grinding hard work and risk of his neck. As he decided quickly on a course Frank spoke again. It was as if Frank had some uncanny way of guessing what he was thinking about.

"The telephone," Frank said dryly, "ain't going to help you any. We fixed that. And if you think that girl's two Swede gardeners and you is going to chase us off here, go ahead and start something. You'll know a lot better after you try. Me and Rand has doped out all the moves in this game, kid. You'd better run along whilst you can—"

"I'll manage my own affairs, Frank." Quiller's fingers itched to do the bruiser deadly harm, but he knew that other itching fingers were on triggers that menaced his own safety. "I'm going back to the bungalow," he said. "I'll have that book by eleven o'clock. You'll keep Rand's promise?"

"Say, what d'you think me and Bruce Rand are—double-crossers?" Frank whispered, outraged at the slur cast on his probity.

Quiller did not say what he thought. He turned away from the ring of pistol barrels and went unmolested to the bungalow.

For all his anger, he had a new respect for Bruce Rand. Rand meant in deadly earnest to have Alva Dane's formula for synthetic diamonds—the secret of quick riches—and it was plain he was not a man to be trifled with. The presence of Frank and six armed men on the island—how they had managed to land undiscovered he could only guess—that was proof enough that Rand meant exactly what he said.

But still he knew he could win. Where Rand depended on brute force Quiller depended on brains. Brains were going to triumph in this game; had already triumphed. By eleven o'clock he would be in position to teach Bruce Rand a lesson!

VIII.

ELEANOR entered the room almost as Mark Quiller stepped in from the dark. He explained his absence glibly. "Air's getting a little close. Let's keep this window open."

Eleanor gave no sign of hearing. He wondered at the abstracted look in her face. Quiller went back to the big chair. There was no time to lose about his mission. First he must restore that atmosphere of brotherly affection, of mutual trust, and the exchange of confidences which Olga's damned interruption had dispelled. "Eleanor," he cried affectionately, "what's up? You look tired to-night. Heat too much for you?"

He waited for her to return again to her place on the chair arm. He ventured to reach out his hand in invitation, touching her fingers.

Eleanor only looked at him queerly. She said abruptly: "An odd thing has hap-

pened. Our telephone to Farina has gone dead."

Quiller's thoughts flashed to the men out there in the dark and Frank's boasts. He only said lightly: "Temporarily disconnected? You know that's what they say when you can't pay your bill promptly."

He waited for her to smile.

"It's not funny, Kirk. You don't understand. I depend upon that telephone—"

"Everybody does, sis. Phones make folks lazy. But there is always some other way of sending messages—the speed boat. Or I could swim to Farina with one, if it's any accommodation—"

Eleanor's look stopped his tongue. He saw that the girl was more upset than she cared to say. She understood the advantage of that private telephone line to the sheriff's office at Farina just as well as he did. That was part of the elaborate guard she had thrown around the secrets of the late Diamond King—a part of the mystery of Alva Dane—and the failure of the safeguard upset her. He saw that Frank's act of destruction would make his own delicate task more difficult. Eleanor was worried; ready to suspect even him; out of the mood for confidences.

But he had no thought of giving up the game.

"Don't stare at me that way," he cried with a burst of Kirk Dane's irritability. "Say something. What is there about a dead telephone that makes you look as if you were seeing ghosts?"

"Kirk, dear, you can't understand," she said wearily.

"You said something! There's a lot I don't understand, Eleanor. I don't understand, for one thing, why you, a girl with money, insist on burying yourself alive in this dreary place where you never have decent companionship. And there is a lot of nonsense I read in a newspaper about the 'Diamond King's' mysterious secret and how you are hiding from the world, that I don't understand at all. I supposed it foolish lies—and blessed if it doesn't seem to have the color of truth! None of my business? All right—only, if I could help you—"

"Kirk!" The exclamation was a reproach and a warm reassurance of her affection. "It is your business. I know you would be glad to help me, only—"

"Eleanor, has the telephone anything to do with what the newspapers call the Diamond King's secret?"

"Everything in this place has something to do with father's secret, Kirk. Everything I have done has been done to keep that secret safe from the world. I want you to know all about that affair and I want you to help me. Truly, Kirk, I need you so!"

Impulsively she crossed the room, pausing before a framed portrait that hung on the wall—a portrait of her father. Quiller watched her, worked up to excitement and wonder.

She lifted the picture from its hanger, and behind it he saw the face of a small wall safe such as women often use for keeping jewelry.

So this was where it was—the thing he sought—Alva Dane's mysterious red book! Behind that steel door was the formula for making artificial diamonds, the formula that earned Dane his millions, the secret Rand thought worth a hundred thousand. Quiller's nerves tingled. He was conscious he had been staring at the girl with an eagerness that told too much.

Was it the look in his face or her own indecision? Eleanor hesitated. She replaced the picture. "Not to-night, dear," she said apologetically. "A few minutes ago I meant to tell you the whole story. Now, I don't know just why, I am worried; and it is a long explanation. I want to feel surer, Kirk; more certain of myself—"

Quiller tried desperately to win her over. "Oh, don't bother! I can see what you're thinking. Because father hated me he wouldn't want me to know about his business. Well, I'm not asking to know, am I? Don't want to know. Let him keep his damn mystery!"

Eleanor came closer, standing by his chair and looking into his face, her own face deeply troubled. In her distress she was more lovely than he ever imagined, more appealing.

That hidden fear of her, the fear he tried to deny, made him wince.

"You won't understand me, Kirk. You deliberately twist my words about!"

Her hands locked fingers before her in that curious, wishful gesture. Her wide eyes implored him. "I do want to tell you. I mean to tell you. But it's a dreadful thing, Kirk. I have kept it to myself so long. I—am almost afraid—to tell you—even you—"

"Why, Eleanor?"

"Yes, afraid, Kirk. And somehow, to-night, now—I'm silly, Kirk, but I am upset. The air is close; perhaps I'm tired—"

Quiller rose to make his last try. The supposed Kirk Dane spoke with dignity, a quiver of hurt affection in his voice.

"Keep the secret, Eleanor. It is father's affair—and yours. You must guard it for him—only if you knew, dear, how I want to help you, to help you now, to-night. If you knew how your suspicion hurts me—" He stopped on exactly the right note.

"Please, Kirk!" Eleanor's hands were on his shoulders. There were tears in the eyes she raised so close to his face. "I am going to tell you, to ask you to help me. Father would want it that way. But—but not to-night, Kirk. I am too tired. Why, to-morrow all this worry will seem so foolish and futile! And we'll talk it all over, and you'll find a way out of this mess for me. Good night, dear."

Quiller was terrified.

He saw her lips near. The woman who had scarcely touched his hand before was in his arms, offering her kiss. A woman, the only woman whose beauty ever had moved him! He tried in vain to fight against emotion, to keep his head clear. She pressed lightly toward him, warm, fragrant, desirable. He no longer saw her face, but he felt his arms tighten about her savagely, felt her satin lips against his own.

In the second he knew he had gone too far, that passion had betrayed him.

This was no brother's kiss!

An instant's folly had wrecked everything. He turned cold.

He tried to dissemble, releasing Eleanor with an awkward pat on her shoulder, murmuring something reassuring.

Had she suspected?

She did not show it if she had.

Her face was pale and her eyes troubled, but so they had been the moment before. She smiled as though the smile cost an effort.

"Good night, Kirk," she whispered. "To-morrow—we'll talk it all over then."

He watched her cross the long room, striving to hold Kirk Dane's pose. He saw her final backward glance and pale smile and answered with his own smile, whispering, "Good night."

Then she was gone, and he stood shaking, not daring to think.

He was dimly aware of disturbance in the night. Thunder had been muttering, and now a sharp little puff of icy air, the forerunner of a storm, came through the open window.

He looked at his watch. Only nine; two hours yet.

She had not told him, but he knew where the thing was that he wanted. He would allow five minutes more to make sure Eleanor did not return. He began walking about, glancing often at the creeping hands of the watch.

He kept his thoughts on the wall safe. Once he had known a safe expert. This man showed him a trick of manipulating a safe dial and listening for the almost inaudible click of tumblers in the lock. He had learned the trick to pass idle hours. He must depend on it now.

Five minutes gone, at last. He extinguished the candlelight in the room, listening thoughtfully for noises in the house, calculating the chance of possible interruption.

The velvet dark was murmurous with distant thunder as he lifted the portrait from the wall and caressed the steel door with his fingers.

Ear pressed against the safe he turned the dial and listened. He worked with a patience that needed every bit of his resolution, fighting down the impulse to hurry.

He was not skilled at this delicate manipulation. The work might take hours—hours while every minute counted!

So intent was his concentration he had no idea of what time had elapsed when, suddenly, the almost impossible did happen. The door of the safe swung open.

And as it swung open his eyes were blinded by light.

The ray of an electric torch caught him squarely and held him, groping and helpless.

"Stay just as you are. I've got a pistol and can use it. Don't move."

Eleanor Dane's voice!

Quiller blinked at the glare of the torch, holding his pose like a piece of sculpture.

"Armed?"

"In my coat-pocket, an automatic."

"Throw it on the floor. Careful, now!"

He obeyed.

"Now," Eleanor said quietly, her voice curiously hard and even, "we'll have a little chat. Since you are not my brother Kirk, just who are you? I already know what you want."

IX.

QUILLER said nothing. He was breathing hard, thinking fast.

The cool, even voice, with scorn like acid dripping from every word, went on again:

"My brother! A splendid idea, wasn't it? A brave undertaking, fooling a woman by an assumed name. What rare courage!"

He stood in the pitiless glare of the flashlight, his face white, eyes steady, taking her lashing with teeth clenched, determined he would show nothing to give her the satisfaction of knowing how she hurt him.

"Oh, I'll admit you fooled me. I was desperate enough, silly enough with loneliness and trouble to swallow your amazing lie. I wanted to believe it—with all my heart and soul I wanted to believe in you!" She laughed a discordant note. "When a woman feels like that is it such a wonderful victory to deceive her? Well, you succeeded. You did very well—until you kissed me—"

She stopped with a catch of her breath. He felt, without seeing, that her anger was flaring higher.

"You silly fool, did you think that an accident? Do you suppose I didn't test you—with a kiss? I'm a woman; do you think I can't use a woman's weapons? And you, you blundered into my trap—blundered in like any man—"

In spite of himself he winced and a stain of red came over his face. She cut him in his vanity and that hurt. He prided himself on his cunning and skill and she outwitted him! It hurt, and he knew she saw his hurt and reddened more.

For the moment his fingers itched to harm her.

Eleanor asked sharply, "Where is my brother Kirk?"

"Dead."

She studied his face.

"He's dead," Quiller repeated. "I was with him, more than two years ago, on an island in Alaska, when the end came. I am not lying."

She sighed, a broken respiration, eloquent of the loss of all hope. He hated her so for the hurt she gave him that he was almost glad at her despair.

"Your name—the real one?" she demanded. He told her. "Now your story. I'll hear that before I call in the men. Be careful to make it the truth—this time."

Quiller forced a grin to acknowledge her hit. "All right—the truth this time," he agreed. "But if you don't mind, must I stand here like Lot's wife, a pillar of salt while I spin the yarn? It's rather long and this pose is a hard one—"

"I think we might both sit down." He knew she was wondering how to manage to keep him covered and find chairs.

"Why not light candles?" he suggested helpfully. "My gun is on the floor. If I took a match from my pocket you'd not suspect me of any tricks, surely?"

"You may find a match."

Quiller searched his pocket leisurely and brought out a match.

"If I could remember just where those candles are," he said, puzzled.

As he turned about with knitted brows her torch left his face, flashing across the room to discover the candles.

In that moment of inattention Eleanor's hands were caught and held fast.

Quiller's cruel grip on her wrists released her pistol and flashlight. Then it was the girl who was helpless, standing in the glare and held by the pistol.

Quiller chuckled grimly.

He said with gentle sarcasm, "Next time you hold a man under a gun, remember this evening. Eternal vigilance is the

price of victory, as somebody or other said before my time. Now I think we can have a light."

His right hand held both pistol and flashlight, still keeping the girl in thrall. With his left, using the thumb-nail, he snapped the match into fire and handed it to Eleanor. "The candles are just behind you, on the table," he remarked.

"Now, stay just where you are, Miss Dane." He dropped the flashlight. The pistol he kept trained on her as he backed toward the wall safe. His free hand reached in the open door, discovered a small packet of papers and a book, the red-covered book that Pindar had told about. He dropped the prize into his coat-pocket and moved toward the window, facing her all the time.

The window behind him lighted with a pallid, blue flash and tardily came the rumble of thunder, still distant.

Eleanor Dane's look stopped him there at the window. In her eyes was something he had never seen but once. That time it was the eyes of a poor devil who had embezzled five hundred dollars from his employer in order that his wife might undergo a necessary surgical operation. Quiller had brought him word his wife had died and the shortage was discovered. The next moment the man had blown out his brains.

That was the look in Eleanor's face now, the identical despair. Involuntarily he shuddered.

"Before you go do one thing. Kill me." She might have asked in that same way for a glass of water.

"I'm not a murderer!"

"No-o. I suppose not. Yet as soon as you go I'll kill myself. I'd rather you did it."

"What damned nonsense!" He was shocked and afraid. He believed she would do what she said. That other experience made him believe. He dared not leave her this way. Common decency forbade.

In the moment he turned the tables on her all resentment at her scorn had gone. As soon as he paid back that hurt she gave him he was almost sorry. He thought so much less of victory than of the fun of getting it.

"See here, Miss Dane, stop that and stop short! You're no fool. You've done nothing to kill yourself about—"

"Have I not? I've failed." She said it with a faint twisting of the lips meant for a smile. It was a smile more eloquent than words. "I've failed," she repeated.

"Failed? Who says so? You were beaten at a game I have played oftener than you, that's all. What of it? What do you lose? Only the secret of making money—and you have all the money you need! You have refused millions for that secret and declared you will never use it. Why worry if somebody else uses it? If it's the question of money—"

"Money! Do you think that's what I'm losing? The cheapest thing in life—the most contemptible. Do you think I would kill myself about money?" She spoke with breathless intensity. Her passion stained the white cheeks a new red. She was beautiful in a way he had never seen, a strange, radiant beauty of desperation—as a candle might flare in final brilliance before snuffing out.

"What else but money?" Quiller puzzled. "What do you lose?"

"I lose my promise. The promise I vowed to keep. The promise that the thing my father did should end with him. I held them off, all of them, lying, evading, running away at last to hide from the clamor. I gave up freedom that is dear to me to keep safe what you have there in your pocket. I prayed for the way out. A few days ago I thought my prayers were answered—when you came. I thought my brother had come back to me—and it was only you! I fought the world alone, and failed. How can you understand what I have lost? But I'll tell you this, I do not mean to live—a failure!"

No sane man could doubt her. Whatever she had lost it was so dear to her she had nothing left to live for. Knowing that look of old, that accent of utter despair and weariness of life, Quiller knew she could not be left alone.

If he left her it was to murder her as surely as if his own hand fired the shot.

"Have you failed?"

Quiller's exclamation was unstudied, involuntary.

Strangely excited he found himself moving toward her, repeating in that curious excitement that throbbed with a new meaning, "How do you know you have lost? How do you know? Look at me, Eleanor. Look at me! What—what if you—*had—won!*"

X.

An overmastering emotion made Quiller's words living, compelling things, and they brought Eleanor's dejected figure up straight as if electrified. She did not comprehend his madness, but she knew from his tone she could hope again.

Quiller's speech broke into a laugh, an odd laugh, a trifle hysterical.

With a hand that shook he tossed his pistol at her feet. The packet of papers and the precious red-bound book followed.

"You have won," he repeated.

"I—don't quite—understand—"

"I don't understand either, Miss Dane—except that perhaps I'm the world's most colossal fool—and I like it! Yes, I like it if the folly is big enough. And this folly is! I owned a fortune when I had that stuff in my pocket. Bruce Rand—you know him?—promised me that. I never had a fortune to throw away before. It gives one rather a thrill."

"You mean I—can—keep these—keep them?"

"You see for yourself. There they are. I mean just that. Keep them—and welcome."

"But—I have no fortune to offer you. I can't pay—"

Quiller said with dignity, "I don't trade in things like that."

Admiration struggled with her unbelief. There came a look into her eyes worth his lost fortune.

He explained further, much as if he was arguing it out with himself. "You see, I—I live on excitement. That's my way. Adventure. I've knocked about a lot, most anywhere where things were happening. The fun of it all is getting my own way, I think that must be it—figuring out the method, taking the risks, laying against big odds. Always, when the game is won, the prize seems cheap—compared to the fun of getting it. As for the fortune—" His gesture of scorn matched her own scorn of the dollars.

"Well, I won this game. That pays me in full. Now I'm going to say good night. I'm going to leave your island and—" He became deeply thoughtful. "No. I'm not going to leave just now. There are seven men waiting out there in the dark. Armed men. A bad lot. Rand sent them to loot the house in case I failed. I—guess—I'll have to stay; to stay and beat them at their own game. That's it! We'll beat them. We'll get away together. Eleanor, will you trust me? You must trust me! I mean it. This is serious; seven of them out there against us, and we have to work fast!"

Eleanor's eyes were bright. She nodded. "I'll trust you." She gave him both hands, gripping his hands tightly. "I don't know why, but I do trust you. You are—splendid!"

Quiller flushed and turned his head away.

"You're splendid," she repeated. "Always I hoped you might be—like this. I prayed that you might be! Brave—and loyal!"

She went on hurriedly: "I trust you absolutely. I'm going to prove it. I want you to know what it is I'm guarding; why it means so much to me—"

"I don't ask that—"

"But I want to give it. It's all the reward I can give you, my confidence. This secret—"

His upraised hand stopped her. The startled glance he turned toward the window kept her silent. Some sound from the dark, real or fancied, interrupted his interest. Quiller remembered the seven men who waited out there.

His eyes flew to the cheap watch he carried. Five minutes after nine.

His heart stopped for a moment. The watch had said nine five long ago—hours ago. He knew before he pressed it to his ear that it had failed him.

"The right time, quick!"

She examined her own watch.

"A quarter of eleven."

Brilliant lightning flooded the room and

dimmed the candle flame to a dull glow. The crash of thunder followed close.

The breeze burst through the open window and puffed out the candles.

Rain drummed down like machine-gun fire, and to Quiller it seemed that the dark about them quickened with unseen life—life that meant death to them.

XI.

QUILLER seized the girl's wrist and drew her closer. "You must trust me, now," he whispered.

"I do trust you."

"Our one chance is to get away. If we can reach that speed boat—"

"We will!"

"We'll try," he amended grimly. "Remember there are seven of them—the gang Rand sent. Their one idea is to get that book, at any cost. That crowd is watching every move we make; has watched all evening, I don't doubt. At eleven o'clock, if I don't show up with what they sent me for, they'll come after you. They'll be coming now—but the storm may help a little. You have your pistol?"

"Yes."

"One thing I'd give a lot for, then—more cartridges."

"I have plenty in my bedroom. Wait here—"

"No, I'll go with you. Better to slip out the side door at the end of that corridor. They won't expect that—"

Hand in hand they went quickly across the long room, opened a door softly and slipped through.

Quiller lingered to close the door behind them. As it was closing came another brilliant tongue of fire from the clouds, picking out every detail of the big room in ghastly radiance. It exposed two men, stooped low, advancing cautiously through the open window.

In Eleanor's room they found ammunition for the pistols. The red book and bundled papers Quiller thrust into his pocket. They were ready to venture.

"Two against seven," Quiller murmured. "Bad odds—"

They were hurrying down the corridor. A strange sound stopped them, strange but curiously familiar; at another time it would have caused a smile.

A man was snoring.

"Lund, the gardener," Eleanor whispered. "Ostrom is patrolling the beach tonight."

Quiller doubted if Ostrom was on duty now. Probably Frank had disposed of him. "Would Lund fight for us?" he whispered.

"I am sure of him."

They pushed into the gardener's room, flashed the torch in his face and brought him to consciousness, blinking stupidly.

"Get into trousers and come with us," Quiller whispered. "Seven men after Miss Dane. We're trying to reach the boat-house."

Eleanor asked: "You'll help me, Lund? It may be dangerous—"

The man's answer was to draw on his trousers with an alacrity more eloquent than his slow tongue. He seized the rifle at his bedside and nodded readiness.

From the big living-room, audible above the storm, came a crash of furniture, and following that the noise of breaking glass. They heard a door slam.

The corridor ended at a modest side door, a servant's entrance.

The three of them stepped into the night and instantly huddled together, helpless in the blinding illumination of lightning.

The darkness following was inky and riotous with an ear-splitting thunderclap.

In that chaos of sound no shot could be heard, but Lund lurched from beside Quiller and fell on his face.

The lightning had betrayed them to one of Frank's pickets.

Quiller thrust Eleanor behind a sheltering box-tree, forcing her to crouch there. He felt his way back to Lund.

The gardener lay motionless. He had ceased to breathe. Quiller's exploring hand found the warm blood flowing from his neck.

Eleanor, huddled behind the tree, knew only that something was wrong. Her eyes tried vainly to pierce the dark, and then came again the brilliant, flickering play of Heaven's search-lights.

She saw Quiller kneeling above the

stricken Lund, and saw him pitch forward across the gardener's body as a spiteful red flash came out of a near-by thicket.

She crouched forlorn, bereft of all emotion by the shock of witnessing these sudden fatalities, insensible to the pounding rain that drenched her.

Quiller had pitched forward like one dead, just a thought ahead of the rifle shot, warned in time by the lightning. The bullet buzzed harmlessly over him.

He continued to lie dead, hopeful that the man who fired would come out to verify his luck. The flickering lightning showed both bodies beaten sodden by the rain.

Quiller was not mistaken in his plan. The man came. His foot crunched the gravel, and as he stooped over his kill Quiller's hands met in his throat with the savagery of a steel trap.

Suddenly a hand touched Eleanor, waiting in ignorance of all this. She gasped. A voice whispered, "It's me—Quiller. Only six of them left now. Hurry."

They dodged down a path lined with shrubbery. When the lightning flickered they plunged into the woods for shelter. To reach the boat-house they must circle, striking a cross path that lengthened the way.

"Almost there!" Eleanor gasped. Echoing her encouragement a whistle shrilled. From the bungalow, alive with lights now, a shout answered the whistle. "Hello?"

"Making for the boat-house, Frank—both of 'em!"

The shout came from the whistler, who had discovered them.

"Run for it!" Quiller prompted. Suddenly he collided with the solid wall of the boat-house hard enough to send him reeling. His hands found the big door. It was locked.

"I have the key," Eleanor cried.

As if Frank had the management of the storm, the sky burst into flames, flash crowding flash until the world lay plain, every wet leaf glistening an unearthly green, more distant tree-tops plainly seen tossing against the black sky. The man and woman huddled against the big door were a plain mark, and from the woods about came bullets that thudded and splintered the planks about them.

Quiller, kneeling, returned the fire while Eleanor's fingers twisted the key and the big door swung open. In a moment they were in the speed boat, the water gate was open, and the shining engine had answered to spark and gas.

They swept into the lake, full speed. From either bow a wave curled back, and the driving rain stung their faces as they tore through the storm. Quiller bent over the wheel. Eleanor crouched close beside him.

"Made it!" he shouted. "By all that's holy we made it! We put one over on Frank—"

Eleanor smiled, turned for a last look at Dane's island, and screamed, clutching Quiller in hysterical fear. She saw not the island, but on the afterdecking of the speed boat a crouching figure, ready to spring on them.

Frank had left his fellows to fire on the pair opening the boat-house door. He had slipped to the side of the building and to its low roof. When the boat shot out he had dropped to its deck. As Eleanor screamed the man sprang.

His hurtling body swept Quiller from the wheel. They went down on the floor of the cockpit, locked together. In a moment they had heaved up again, struggling against the coaming. Their interlocked bodies rolled forward, onto the perilously narrow decking of the boat's knife-like bow. There was no rail to guard them there.

Eleanor groped for her pistol, hoping the lightning would show her where to aim. As she felt for it she knew it was gone. She had laid it on the ground to have both hands free when she opened the boat-house door.

The sky blazed and showed her the two men at death grips. Quiller was under, but one hand grasped Frank's throat. Frank's fist rained blows into Quiller's face, and the white skin broke into a red scar. They rolled, within an ace of slipping off the narrow deck, yet somehow managing to cling there.

Eleanor stared helpless while flash fol-

lowed flash. Then came inspiration. The boat had plowed on without a hand to guide it. She saw dimly where it headed and seized the wheel.

The storm, once Frank's ally, was hers now. It showed her what she sought. The boat was roaring at top speed. When she shut off the spark it still surged on, driven by its devil's impetus. It crashed more than half its length across the almost submerged reef the lightning had revealed.

They were spewed out by the shock of collision. When Eleanor came to the surface she prayed that Quiller had been spared. The answer came from near by. He was calling her by name.

Then Eleanor and he swam with ease toward the mainland beach.

XII.

THE storm was gone by and the world had become still. The faint stir of trees sent little showers of sputtering drops and the lake washed softly against the sand.

The air was clear and colder, and the fire Quiller had built on the beach gave a grateful warmth. In the east a gray light spread, the stars paled and the fire lost its brilliance. The sky warmed toward lemon yellow and the underside of a cloud turned to gold. A bird stirred and gave a sleepy cry. Quiller stretched. "We can go on now. There won't be any more bother."

"Frank?"

"Frank is through." Quiller explained no more, but he knew the truth of his statement. Frank had gone down close beside him, stunned by the shock of collision.

Eleanor might have read his thoughts. She shivered.

When she spoke her voice was resolute. "You have that stuff you took from the safe?"

Quiller handed her the papers and that precious red book.

Eleanor tossed the bundle into their camp-fire. Some of the material was water-soaked. She saw that all of it was finally destroyed.

Quiller could stop his lips, but he could not keep the questions from his eyes. When she had finished, Eleanor answered him. "I learned to trust you to-night—to trust more than my life to you. I have just proved it. You told me my brother Kirk is dead—and this is how I believe you. Quiller! I am free!"

There was music in the words, a glad, triumphant note he had never heard in her voice. She went on, prodding at the ashes of the red book: "I'm going to tell you why this secret was worth so much to me. It's only right you understand the value of what you have done for me"—she stopped to recognize his protest and overrule it—"and it will make me happier to tell it. My friend, this thing Rand tried to buy and then to steal from me has no value in dollars and cents, though it was worth more than life to me. It was my father's good name, the good name of an honest, decent family, nothing more."

Quiller looked more puzzled than ever.

"Let's start at the beginning. Men supposed my father a genius, a marvelous success, a man who made millions almost overnight. The truth is he was only a failure—a pitiful failure when he had reached an age that puts it beyond a man's power to retrieve his failures. He came within a little time of winning a man's greatest success, the name of an honest, honorable man, a man who would welcome mediocrity rather than do one wrong act. He came within an ace of maintaining the tradition of generations of the Danes for honesty and courage—and he failed—because he loved his daughter too well! He loved me!"

Her eyes filled with tears. She shook her head resolutely and went on, ignoring them.

"All his life my father was a teacher in schools and academies. Perhaps you know what that means? Perhaps you know the miserable existence of a man of culture and pride forced to depend on a teacher's miserable earnings! Forced to keep his family on that pittance!

"For years he experimented in his laboratory, for he had an ambition—the desire to solve the secret of synthetic diamonds for the market. The thing has been done in rubies. Others began the work with diamonds—the German, Dr. Werner von Bol-

ton, and the Frenchman, de Boismenu. But these men could make only tiny diamonds. They were not salable. My father, following their investigations, hoped to build a fortune by his work.

"He was a man of culture, of quick intelligence, of high ambitions for those he loved. My mother was dead. His son had bitterly disappointed him. His affection concentrated on me. He set his heart on leaving me well provided for — and year after year he failed until his heart broke.

"In his desperation he was tempted. He had but a short time to live, so the doctor had told him. He pretended to discover the secret he had honestly tried to solve. He announced he had made in his laboratory large, synthetic diamonds. He lied to the world—"

"But the experts!" Quiller exclaimed.

"The experts! How could they see the fraud? They followed the steps of the tried formulæ to the point where all had been baffled. There the process became 'secret.' But the diamonds that came from it were genuine — they were natural diamonds! The stones were bought for the purpose—"

"Then what? How! Your father made millions—"

"Not so many millions, but a fortune. He invited investment, and the public fought to buy his notes—for he sold only short-time notes, not stock. And the notes were repaid at an interest of fifty to a hundred per cent. But not by making diamonds! I told you he was a man of intelligence and wide interests. There was an actual profit in part of this mad finance, made by lucky investment in the stock market. And the rest, my dear friend—the rest—"

Quiller interrupted. "I see! Good God, the old Miller confidence game, paying off one investment with the money taken in for another!"

Eleanor nodded. "I think, toward the end, he was mad—quite mad! Then I did not know. I did not know until he was stricken, and dying. He confessed it to me. Instead of the fortune he had nothing to leave me but chaos — certainty of discovery and disgrace. And yet there was a way out. His death. He died before the rolling snowball of his financial madness crushed out all hope of recovery. I sold our home, the laboratory, all we had; took the money from the bank, every cent I could scrape—and thank God, there was enough. I paid back every obligation!"

Quiller understood. He saw now—saw the daughter alone with the guilty secret and the responsibility of saving her father's good name by sacrificing all he had hoped to give her. One woman against the wolf pack, she had held off the money-mad promoters who, dazzled by Dane's madness, fought to buy his secret, and failing that, to steal it.

Eleanor had one more explanation to make.

"That book Rand wanted, the book I have guarded, had no formulæ in it. It was my father's record of his cash transactions, the juggling of funds, the purchase of diamonds abroad, the explanation of the whole swindle. And I kept it solely for the eyes of my brother Kirk. My father's will cut off Kirk from inheritance. But I meant to share with him what little is left from the smash. When I was a little girl I idolized my brother. I love him now. But I knew, too, that Kirk Dane, with his mind inflamed by newspaper stories of my father's millions, would never believe the truth unless I proved it. I kept that proof, at the cost of freedom and comfort, to convince my brother. Your news ended my trust. Kirk is dead—and I am free. Poor Kirk—poor, poor Kirk!"

Quiller dared not look at the tears in her eyes. He stared silently across the misty lake, his jaw set.

Her voice roused him. "And now, what shall I do?"

"You ask me?"

"I trust everything to you."

"Travel. Get away quickly, without attracting attention. In a year the world will forget you—and Alva Dane's diamonds. But go at once—"

"And will you help? Will you—go—with me?"

"Good God, no!"

Mark Quiller's refusal was abrupt to point of rudeness.

Eleanor took his hands in hers.

"You will go," she said confidently, her eyes shining. "You won't desert me now!"

"No. No, I tell you! I'm a tramp. A ne'er-do-well. An unscrupulous adventurer. A rotten lot. You must let me go away, now! Eleanor, don't tempt me, I tell you! Don't tempt me to say things I may be sorry for. I beg of you—"

"And I beg of you!" Eleanor answered firmly. Her cheeks were flushed now—flushed more rosy than the morning light could stain them. "I beg of you, help me. Help me, always. And—and if you say anything, Mark Quiller — anything you please, I promise now you'll never be sorry."

Quiller struggled still.

"Eleanor! For your own sake, let's part now—good friends!"

She shook her head firmly. "We'll not part—not until honestly, in your own heart, you can say you are tired of me—"

"Eleanor! I'm not fit—"

"But I'm the judge of that. I find you fit. Do you say it truthfully, that you are tired of me—now?"

Quiller could no more hide his love than he could stop the sun from rising. And the sun rose, discovering his arms about her as if he meant never to let her go.

(The end.)

The Blood Call

Part III

by *Kenneth Perkins*

Author of "The Bull-Dogger," etc.

CHAPTER XIII.

TRILLES DEALS A COLD DECK.

IN order to carry out Jug Trilles's frame-up to the letter, the proprietor spread the word around that there was to be a fist-fight, and that members of the audience were requested not to use guns. Any and all, however, were cordially invited to participate with their fists whenever they felt so inclined.

The proprietor chose his biggest barkeep and walked over to the booth where Quade was waiting for his tamale. Juan Scaly followed at a distance, hiding as best he could behind the dance-girls, men, tables, and the paper-garlanded uprights. A man armed with a loaded six-shooter was stationed at the little door at the back of the booth to prevent Quade's exit in that direction. The barkeep, following the prorpietor, carried a tray with a bottle of wine and the chicken tamale. The husks of the latter had been opened, and the dish was steaming, pungent with its hot corn meal and minced and peppered chicken.

"Well, here's your order, pard," the proprietor announced jovially. "And any-

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thin' more I can do for you, just let me know."

The waiter placed his tray on the table deliberately and walked behind Quade's chair. Quade turned to look at him; saw that he was unarmed and apparently nervous. He stood smirking with puffy lips while his hands nervously twined a dirty napkin. Quade turned to his dish. A waiter with a dirty napkin was nothing to get excited about. But it was that little napkin which did the work.

As Quade leaned forward to his tamale the waiter whipped the cloth, which was now like a thick cord, around Quade's neck. The latter, unable to get to his feet, reached up with his hands, grabbed the waiter's head, and hauled him around till he fell crashing on the table. While Quade's arms were up the proprietor snatched the revolver from his holster and leaped to the dance floor. The waiter tried to scramble to his feet, but was floored with a right hook timed on his mouth.

Juan Scaly immediately vaulted up to the booth, followed by two others. They swung furiously, and Quade, grasping at his empty holster, was sent sprawling to the corner of the booth by Juan's furious onslaught. But he was on his feet before the men could pounce on him. He swung carefully at one of the three faces, so that a man fell heavily against the wall, splintering the board partition. Juan Scaly was knocked backward into the audience, which had now surged up to the booth. The third, finding himself alone with the stranger, turned and vaulted into the protection of the mob.

In the moment's respite Quade shoved the table toward the open side of the booth, and leaped behind it, holding his chair in readiness for the Mexican's next onslaught. Quade's position behind this table was particularly advantageous—unless some one started to shoot a gun or hurl a knife. For fist-fighting he found himself in a veritable little fort.

For a moment the men in the crowd hung back, crouching low and watching Quade's towering figure, his bleeding face, and the long, ironlike arms displayed through the shreds of his shirt.

Jug Trilles walked out into the center of the dance floor and, taking advantage of the moment's silence, called out: "What's all this here rumpus? I'd like for to know—as deputy sheriff I'd like to know!"

Juan Scaly and the others recalled that Trilles was supposed to order the fight stopped in vain. At that moment there was no fighting, and it looked as if Trilles would have to fire at Quade at a moment when the latter was doing nothing. Trilles obviously could not do this with a very clear conscience. The men realized, therefore, that in order that their original plan work they must resume the fight. Three of them, including Scaly, leaped again into the booth. And another smashed down the partition between Quade's booth and the one next to it. This would enable two more men to jump for Quade's back.

The little deputy sheriff shouted hoarsely for them to stop, but this time his voice was drowned in the howling of the mob. And before the next moment of quiet Trilles's part in the frame-up was seriously complicated by some one coming up behind him, placing his hand on his shoulder and saying: "You're wanted outside—it's the chief's orders."

Trilles turned around dazed and looked into the face of one of Chief Taurog's servants. Accordingly he left the fight at its most furious climax and rushed out to the door of the buffet. There he saw Kirbie dressed in the costume of a Spanish dancing-girl, waiting for him.

"What and the hell!" was all he could gasp as he saw the girl's flashing, excited eyes, her gold bodice and dancing-skirt.

"You're to deliver Quade over to me, Trilles," Kirbie ordered. "Father sent for him."

"But we got him cornered—all as I have to do is to pot him."

"Taurog wants him brought to the crater," Kirbie insisted.

"You sure did ball up my little game, gal, but if the chief has spoke he has spoke."

Trilles led her through the buffet into the dancing-hall, where the shouting and howling was at its height.

"I'd like for you to note how that thar

wildcat fights," Trilles said, pointing to the booth where Quade had again beaten off the attack by the use of a broken chair. "It ain't goin' to be too easy to ax him up to the crater."

"I want the fight stopped, and I'll ask him up," the girl said.

"I can't stop the fight without I shoot him," Trilles said. "That's the way I arranged the fight. Damme, if I tell 'em to stop they'll go at it again like a bunch of mad dogs. Let me shoot him outright, miss. Give me the word, and I'll do it—saving you all the trouble."

The girl thought a moment. She recalled with a sudden panic that Taurog had said if Quade were killed in public Taurog would be blamed, perhaps hanged. And here was Taurog's chief lieutenant offering to do the killing!

"No, no!" she cried hurriedly. "You must not shoot him. My father would be blamed. He must not be! There is only one way. I'll play the game myself. You understand, Trilles, what I'm going to do: I'm going up there to get Quade myself. I'm going to get him into my confidence and then entice him to the crater."

"It's the only way, gal. Otherwise, we'd have to shoot him."

"Whatever I do now is to get his confidence, you understand that?"

"Go get him, miss, go get him! The chief has spoke!"

Trilles led the girl through the mob. The people whom she elbowed were the only ones who noticed her, and they scarcely realized how important was this entrance of Kirbie into the Dead Cow Saloon, where she had never been before.

Trilles took her into the dark corridor behind the booths, where one of the gunmen was waiting outside Quade's door. Trilles entered the door next to it, and found himself in the booth next to Quade's. Three men were in there, crouching near the opening which had been smashed in the partition. They were waiting for Juan Scaly to lead the next attack. Trilles ordered them out, pulled the curtain across the booth, and called Kirbie in. Kirbie entered, leaned to the the smashed opening, and looked into Quade's booth.

It was her first good view of him. She saw a man who had at that moment transformed himself into a heroic figure. As he waited for the next attack, the glory of the combat—the rough-and-tumble primitive fight—was in his eyes. His black hair was rumpled and hung down over the bleeding forehead; rivulets of sweat and blood trickled down the cut cheek, but there was a grin of delight on the mouth, and a tilt of almost gleeful defiance to the head.

A curious thrill swept over Kirbie. She had been waiting for years to find another man whom she could love and worship as she worshiped her foster-father. She had been hoping that some day a man would come along who would not be like the other men of the range—big men with a belittling fear; men who were afraid to meet Taurog in any kind of a fight. And here at last the man had come. But it was a man who had sworn to kill the foster-father whom she loved. The one heroic perfect man had come—and he was her direst enemy!

Kirbie did not delay her plan by thinking on any of these thoughts. All the time that she was watching his face she was waiting for him to look down at the opening. Her plan was definite and she carried it out to the letter.

Jim Quade meanwhile was thankful for the moment's respite from the furious fighting. He had gotten his second wind, and the feel of his fist smashing against the jaws and teeth was a glorious thrill for him. But he knew that he could not last. Scaly was down there, crouching and malignant, like a puma about to spring up at him. He could see a hideous yellow fire burning in the Mexican's tight eyes, and he knew that another onslaught, with two more fresh men, would go hard. The hall was insufferably close—sweat and beer-suds and cheap perfume and thick clouds of tobacco smoke did not favor many rounds of fist-fighting. Then, any minute, Quade expected gun-firing to begin. Scaly was directly below him now, backed by two bestial-looking fighters. Behind them was the ring of men five deep, and at a greater distance the dance-girls, their faces drawn

with fright, though vividly rouged. Scaly put one hand on the floor of the booth, ready to vault. In his other hand he held a knife. Quade had to watch him, and at the same time he had to watch for his companions who were armed by two-by-fours. The fight might end now in defeat, he realized. Then there was that little smashed opening in the partition—he recalled he must watch that, too, during this next mix-up. He glanced down at it.

A beautiful naked arm was thrust through the opening, and in the fragile hand there was a revolver, the butt of the handle pointing up toward Quade.

Quade wiped away the sweat and blood that kept dripping into his eye. Yes, it was true—as perfect an arm as a man had ever seen—the roundness, the olive skin, the dimples so shadowy that he thought it unreal. But the revolver was there glistening, harsh, brilliant—as brilliant as the jade bracelet on the slender wrist.

As Scaly and his two fighters sprang up into the booth Quade backed to the partition, leaned down, and his right hand closed like a vise about the girl's arm. His left hand grasped the butt of the gun.

It was with this gun that he met Scaly's attack.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE PERFECT HAND.

TO the crowd on the dance floor it was evident that the fight was about to be finished. Old Jug Trilles had drawn the curtain across the compartment next to the booth, where Juan Scaly and his two companions had leaped to fight Quade. This act on the part of Jug was most significant, and every one expected to hear the report of his six-gun, following the original plan. Jug was in a way the matador of the fight. According to the age-old office of the matador—who is supposed to advance on foot when the bull-fight is about over and deliver the final and fatal thrust—Jug Trilles was supposed to finish up Quade, who was acting the part of the doomed bull.

But no shooting came from the direction of the curtained booth. Instead, the crowd saw a very incomprehensible thing happen in Quade's own booth. Juan Scaly held his hands up, one of which contained a knife. But he did not bring them down or make the slightest movement to bring them down. And his two companions held up their hands at arm's length, one of them dropping the big two-by-four which had been destined for Quade's head. The big club fell rattling to the floor, and no speaker's gavel ever won a quicker and more deathlike silence from an audience.

Jim Quade was crouching so that he was partly hid behind the table. But the crowd could hear his voice:

"All right—step down, gentlemen, and do a little fandango on the dance floor."

Juan Scaly and his two thugs backed away to the edge of the booth, and, their hands still upraised, stepped down to the floor. Quade clung to the girl's arm, which the overturned table still hid from the crowd. But he held his left hand up, showing the long black barrel of a .44.

Below the booth the crowd surged back, milling like a herd of panic-stricken steers. In another moment a huge circle of space was cleared on the dance floor, as the gamblers and guests crashed against the farther walls. Half of the crowd, including most of the dance-girls and the negro band players, fled from every available exit.

Quade then pulled the girl into his booth and, still holding her, viselike, he drew the curtain so that they were alone.

"What did you do it for?" he asked.

"Do what?"

"Help me?"

"Because you were losing."

"I wasn't losing. This position was just what a man would want; back against the wall—fists and chairs—never had such a wonderful time in my life."

"That is why I didn't want to see you lose."

Quade looked into the girl's face: the delicate features were flushed, the green eyes radiant with excitement. Before he freed her he swung her around so that she fell into a chair before him. She kept her eyes on him—never glancing from the bruised, bleeding face.

As she felt a fear growing upon her she stammered: "I have come to help you escape. Jug Trilles is in the next booth. He is wounded, but he has a gun, and a lot of men who have guns are backing him. They're after you."

"Just why did you take the trouble to come here and explain all that to me?" asked Quade.

"You ask—why—why did I come here?" the girl murmured in her confusion. She still gazed relentlessly up to his bruised face

"Why?"

"I belong here," she said evasively.

"Who are you?"

"A dancing-girl. I said I belong here."

Quade looked again into the green eyes, which, because of their almost imperceptible slant, were piquant—almost mocking.

"You'd better hurry," the girl said. "Come with me—we'll escape."

"What did you mean when you said you belong here?"

"I'm one of the dancing-girls. This is a dancing dress—these slippers—this shawl—"

Quade put his hand on her silken hair, tilting her head back so that he could stare mercilessly at her eyes and cheek and crimson mouth. He looked down then at the hands. He had fallen in love with that beautiful arm—now he saw where his fingers had left four smirches of blood across the velvet wrist.

"Why are you lying?" he asked.

"Lying!" The girl's lips tightened.

"You are not one of the dancing-girls," Quade said with unmistakable assurance. "And you do not belong here. Like as not you have never been inside this saloon before in your life."

"If you want to waste time arguing that out now, you will find yourself stretched on the table with a few gun wounds. Jug Trilles is gathering his men. Do you want another fight of twenty men against one?"

"I wouldn't mind it—not if I could have you wishing for me, saying you don't want to see me lose, and all that stuff—as you said just now."

"If you trust me I will help you out of here. We'll get two bronchos."

Quade went to the smashed opening in the partition from whence the girl had come. Yes, there was Jug Trilles, waiting and alone. And in the doorway a group of white, expectant faces. Jug seemed to be taking it easy. He was even puffing at a cigar. His left hand was in a sling, and his right hand held the cigar. The trigger-guard of his revolver swung from the little finger of this same hand.

When he saw Quade he held his hand up to the ceiling, dropping his cigar in his excitement.

"I wasn't doin' nothin', mister!" he cried. "I'll go out if you wish, mister. I was just in here actin' peaceful-like and smokin'!"

The faces in the little door disappeared, and Jug backed out, still holding up his hand with the revolver dangling from the little finger.

Quade laughed and turned to the girl.

"I don't quite get the reason—even yet—for your being so friendly."

"Why not?"

"I suppose you're goin' to say you've fallen in love with me?"

"Of course. You're a big fighter, handsome, invincible."

"Oh, yes, yes. I see, you're one of these primitive women who falls in love with fighters—even if they give 'em a beating."

"Until you came there was not a man in the country who would dare to oppose Smoo Taurog. I'm told that you have come into this range to pick a fight with him. You are the first man! I always wondered ever since I was a little girl if there would ever be a man who would oppose him. At last one has come!"

"Who sent you to say all this?"

"Nobody."

"You just happen to be in love with me—eh?"

"I saw you fighting—yes, I am in love with you."

"I hate to call a beautiful woman a liar."

Quade took hold of her bare, slender shoulders, and lifted her up to him as if she were a doll.

"I can say what you said without lying. I am in love with you."

He saw the lips tighten again and felt the shoulders writhing under his touch. He laughed and remarked dryly: "Dance-hall girls don't shrink away and shiver when you touch 'em with your hands."

"I'm not shrinking. I love you."

Quade pressed her to him, still laughing. He held up her head and kissed her violently. Then he saw that her hands were clenched and her fists and arms tense and trembling with their eagerness to fight.

Finally he freed her, and watched her straightening her lace shoulder-straps—mere black wisps which were torn and dangling midway to her elbows. Her hands trembled and her eyes blazed, partly with excitement, partly because of Quade's roughness, but for the most part because of her ferocious, pent-up anger.

"Now, then, have you learned your lesson, little sage-hen?" Quade laughed.

"No, I haven't! I love you!" the girl shot back. "I love you, and I am going to save you. There will be another big fight—this time with guns. You've got to come with me!"

"Who sent you to get me?"

The girl's eyes blazed again with a new fire: "If you aren't afraid of ten men—how is it that you are afraid of me?"

"Afraid of *you?*" Quade threw back his head and laughed uproariously.

"Then you've got to believe me and come with me," she went on hurriedly. "I am going out to get two bronchos. When you hear a whistle they will be outside in the little corral just across that dark hall. The men will think I am running away from you. They will wait in the hall to fire at you, but if you fire into the dark they will run. Cowards, all of them. You can open this door and then vault through the window into the corral."

"All right, little sage-hen. You are playing with me, I know that. But I'm in love with you, and I'm going to come along and ride with you. A ride under the stars is worth it—whatever your game is. Only get this first: if you are leading me to some sacrifice—after my swearing that I'm in love with you—"

"I'm not."

"Well, if you are—"

"I'm not!"

"All right. Let it go at that."

He reached for her again, but she slipped to the door. As she opened it she was caught by that inexorable, viselike grip and she felt herself drawn bodily into another smothering embrace, kissed and again released. Then, maddened with anger, she fled into the dim hall.

Upon meeting Jug Trilles she explained the entire method of the "escape." Jug was to keep his men out of the hall. As soon as Quade fired—according to the girl's directions—Jug was to take his entire gang to the other side of the saloon, while Quade and the girl escaped.

"But why not finish? I can easily pot him. I can surround him with a dozen men."

"Taurog will be blamed for the murder," Kirbie insisted. She reminded Trilles of Taurog's warning. "We've got to get him to the crater."

"Yes, I reckon that's the safer way," Trilles admitted. "We can frame up any old game once we get him in the crater."

Jug immediately called his men about him and led them out into the street. The crowd followed them, and they had no sooner reached the side of the saloon opposite the corral, where Kirbie had stationed her two mounts, than a succession of shots rang out. A crowd of people had still remained in the dance-hall, waiting for something to happen behind the curtain of Quade's booth. Now they scurried to the exits on the first sound of gun-shooting, and stampeded into the street.

As soon as Jug Trilles had gathered his men behind the saloon, two little bronchos galloped out of an empty lot a block down the street. The rider of one was Quade, and by his side rode Kirbie, bare-headed, her hair streaming, her shoulders bare and showing the marks where Quade's smirched hands had gripped her.

The mob let out a surprised cry and some of the men leaped to their horses. Other mounts were unhitched from the snubbing-posts in front of every saloon on the street, and in a few minutes a parade of horsemen, led by Jug Trilles, clattered out of town after the two fugitives.

Jug and Juan Scaly finally gained on the rest of the pursuers. By the time the posse had sped pell-mell into the desert the fugitives were well ahead in the dark with Trilles and Scaly close on their heels. A half a mile out Trilles reined in his horse.

"The gal's goin' to entice him to the crater," Jug explained. "So all as we have to do is to steer this gang of rough-riders behind us on the wrong trail, then you and me will follow 'em ourselves."

"Why not shoot him now, *señor?*" the Mexican objected. "He will escape before I am avenged!"

"Stay in your saddle and keep your shirt on!" Jug commanded. "Leave Smoo Taurog get him! The chief's goin' to say good evenin' to him as soon as he passes into the crater gorge. The chief—he'll do this thing like it ought to be done."

"But the *señorita*—" Juan insisted.

"She can handle him!" Jug said. "The hell-bender said he loved her—damn him!"

"Yes, damn him! The gringo!" Juan repeated. "If her hatred is strong enough she can handle any man. And if he's in love—ah! How easy! From this night on—I am her slave!"

CHAPTER XV.

NELL GAMBLE.

TAUROG waited in his crater house during the small hours of the morning. He waited like a spider in the center of his web, while his housekeeper, Nell, fat, grouchy, slovenly, poured his wine and lit his cigarettes.

Nell Gamble had as usual applied a flaring Indian red to her lips. Her brown cheeks were also rouged, but this only served to accentuate the almost dirty color of her complexion and the brown, thick, bark-like skin of her neck. She was not a very prepossessing picture, but she seemed to fit perfectly in that background of adobe walls, Hopi blankets, and tobacco smoke. She herself contributed to the smoke with her cigarette, which was stuck underneath a bluish down lip.

Nell Gamble could not enjoy herself, because of a continual fear of Taurog's dog. The giant cur lay with his nose in his forepaws, watching every movement of the woman suspiciously from his retreat in the empty fireplace. His ears stiffened at every creak of her slippers, and Nell gave a wide berth to this fireplace with its bones—bleached ribs, a shoulder blade and the jawbone of a horse.

From time to time Taurog got up and paced the floor. Finally he stopped and gazed out of the narrow slit of window which opened toward the gorge—a black cleft in the starlit walls of the crater. Then he swore at himself for his impatience. Kirbie could not possibly have had time enough to bring Quade back. He must allow her hours—perhaps until morning. She must have time, he argued, to make love to Quade—perhaps get him drunk. What methods she would use he did not know—and he cared less. But even with the best of luck he could not expect her for an hour or two more.

When she saw him gazing out at the gorge the Mexican woman broke in upon him as if he had thought out loud: "How do you know the girl will come back with him?"

Irritable and moody, Taurog wheeled around. "How do I know? Because she's a slick one, that's why. Ain't a tenderfoot ever seen her that didn't fall for her."

"But she's not so slick that she can obey every order you give her. And this order is impossible. She cannot bring your enemy to you. The man wouldn't dare enter the gorge to the crater. When they see the black walls and the pitch dark beyond they are all afraid. The girl cannot bring him. She isn't a witch woman."

"Fat, listen to me. It don't take witch women to handle some men. You seen how she was dressed! With that thar bodice in gold and all? Damme if she didn't look like the Queen of Spain goin' to a bull fight!"

"I've seen prettier women in Mexico," Nell mumbled.

"You've what?"

"I've seen them prettier in Mexico. To be a great beauty you must have a mustache."

Taurog burst out into a guffaw.

"Well, if a mustache is a sign of beauty on a woman, you'll win any contest held absolutely anywheres—so long as it ain't north of the Rio Grande."

"You treat me right, Taurog. Don't you make fun of me. You treat me right."

"Shut up, Fat. You're jealous, and I'm in a bad mood. Pour me a drink and shut up."

The Mexican said nothing for a few moments. She puffed vigorously at her cigarette till it lighted brilliantly, receding almost as far as the lip to which it seemed glued. Taurog lapsed again into his irritable waiting.

"You don't talk about the girl's beauty as a father would talk about the beauty of his daughter."

Taurog gulped on his drink and stepped over to her. "Now what the hell! Are you lookin' for a 'cow-hidin'?"

"A father wouldn't send his daughter into the arms of a stranger."

"Well, I ain't her father, so shut up, or I'll bash you one in the mouth."

"You talked of loving me once—now you talk of beating me like you beat that girl's mother."

"Then profit by her experience and cork up. Thar ain't no one ever said I ain't acted the part of a good father to Kirbie. She says so herself."

"No father would send his daughter into such danger. Your love for her is not the love of a father, but the love of a man for a woman."

"Say, where do you get this stuff of passing judgment on me?" Taurog seized her wrists and yanked her up from her chair. "You damned, jealous hell-cat."

"I won't say any more, *señor!*" the woman cried piteously. "You are my master!"

But Taurog's irritability had overcome him. He cuffed the woman on the ear and brought her cringing to her knees. "You keep out'n my affairs, you dam' buckin' she-ass!" he snarled. "I'm tired of you jealous greasers!"

"You are my master, *señor!*" the Mexican wailed. "And I will worship you and honor you."

Another cuff with his fist and the jack-dog leaped up from his corner, eager to kill any one that fought with its master. It came to the end of its chain before reaching the woman.

Taurog stalked out into the hall, leaving the woman smiling at him. The cigarette had been smirched against her mouth and it made her smile look like a leer.

Taurog thought no more of her, but certain parts of the conversation still troubled him. After all, Kirbie might not be successful. If she brought his enemy as far as the gorge there was a big chance that he would not dare to go further. The gorge would repel the bravest of men. While he was still puzzling over just what would be the surest course to pursue, two riders galloped into the crater and mounted the path up toward his house. Taurog ran down the stone steps to meet them.

It was a little pinto and a white horse that stumbled up the steep incline. When their riders reined in before the door, the horses' lathery barrels heaved and sank with painful breathing. A small hunched man with mouse-like eyes dismounted from the pinto. Taurog noticed the arm hanging in a sling and knew that the rider was Jug Trilles. The other rider, slim, stoop-shouldered, hang-dog, was Juan Scaly.

"We cut across the plain," Trilles said. "Kirbie's on her way, and she's got the hell-bender with her. He thinks she saved him from a scrap in the Dead Cow. We couldn't have made it here in time, except-in' that they're only jog-trottin' along. The guy's in love with her. Get that, chief, and maybe you'll shoot straighter when you aim at him. He's actually in love with the gal—our gal! And he told her so. I heard it! Was listenin' in the next booth!"

Taurog smiled grimly, and felt a thrill—a thrill of enormous relief from the tensity of the last hour.

"I been thinkin' over this here game," he said. "And I'm of the opinion that we're countin' too much on the gal. She ain't no witch." He found himself using the term suggested by his jealous housekeeper. "When the hell-bender gets up to them granite pillars at the gateway, he's goin' to squirm a bit in his saddle. What

if the gal got to the gorge and then warn't able to entice him no farther?"

"You've hit on a point thar, chief, sure enough," Trilles said. "We might lose him yet. Ain't no man ever seen that thar gorge without his liver tickled him. It's a powerful ornery lookin' gorge."

"Now I figure this, Jug," Taurog explained. "To make the thing dead sure, I'm goin' to station some men at certain points out thar. They'll be hid, and when Quade and the gal comes along, they'll stay hid. Me and you and Juan Scaly here will be among them, and we'll stay quiet until Quade goes into the gorge, then we'll follow him in and introduce ourselves. Now if he turns yellow and don't go in, we'll close in on him from all sides and git him anyways."

"It's a good plan, chief," Trilles said. "Ain't no use givin' that hell-bender a chance to get away this time."

Juan was sent to the bunk-shed, where two stablemen were awakened. Trilles summoned Pedro, the Mexican gunman, who served as bodybuard and man servant in Taurog's house. Horses were saddled and the posse took the trail through the gorge just as a tremendous blue moon was flooding the plain with a new twilight.

At the mouth of the gorge there was a precipitous rise of ground which Taurog and his posse of five men climbed in order to obtain a better view of the plain. The trail to Lava cut across the prairie like a white chalk line. Against this glaring background of alkali Taurog could see two tiny dots moving slowly toward him.

"Kirbie and the hell-bender," Trilles affirmed. "They'll be here in less than a quarter of an hour. Seems like they've cut the jog-trot down to a walk. Like as not he's tellin' her he loves her. Damned shag-gutted wart!"

Taurog said nothing. He was busy planning his campaign.

A furlong from the opening of the gorge, where the dry bed of the torrent spread out into a field of rocks, there was a huge bowlder with a silhouette like the profile of a burro. A hundred yards to the south of it was a giant sojuaro cactus lifting its scrawny arms into the air. Between this bowlder and the cactus the trail into the gorge passed. A furlong farther down was a small clump of piñon-trees.

Taurog commanded his posse to dismount, and then gave one of the stablemen orders to take the six horses into a ravine below the little rise where the men stood.

"I'm goin' to stay up here, hidin' in the bear-brush," Taurog said. He called the second stableman to him. "You and Pedro will hide behind that thar bowlder that looks like a jackass. Juan Scaly, you bein' thin, can stick behind that thar cactus. If you lay low, keep off your sombrero and gather up the rattle-weed about you, you will be hid. Trilles, you hide in that clump of piñons. Now bear in mind, men, that you're to let the bird pass through the gorge if he has a mind to. Thar ain't to be no shootin' if he goes in with the gal. But if he figures he won't take a chance on enterin' the gorge and turns around to ride back, then—bingo!"

"We get you, chief," Trilles said. "Bingo's the word. Damned seed wart—makin' love to our gal!"

CHAPTER XVI.

THE GORGE.

WHEN Kirbie had ridden half-way across the plain with Jim Quade, she stopped at a little jacal, rudely constructed of adobe walls and a roof of mesquite thatch. A broken-down old prospector lived here, and under the protection of Taurog, extorted money from travelers. His method was not an unusual one in those parts. A few yards from his jacal was a well dug into the remnants of an old riverbed. For a compensation he offered to water the burros of passing prospectors. Drinking water, supposed to have been filtered, was offered to the men themselves—men who were returning from the desert, ignorant of the fact that Lava, where water could be bought at one-tenth the price, was scarcely five miles away, and that Mule City was just beyond the mirages and towering crags of Jackpot Mountain.

Kirbie knocked at the door and called out a shambling tramp of a man, with a

face boiled red, and a patch over one eye. When he recognized Taurog's girl his string of abusive epithets turned into a wheedling welcome, and he shambled back to light a jack-lantern.

Quade followed into the shack. It was a stuffy little place, redolent of cold bacon, greasy pots, and still warm with the air of the desert day which had been imprisoned there through the eight hours of night. The walls were cluttered with canteens, iron pots, latigos, and harness equipment. The table was piled with salt and flour sacks, canned goods, and jugs of molasses and "snakebite."

"I want this man to have a drink of whisky," Kirbie said. "He's been in a fight, and we haven't had a chance to stop and clean him up—because there's a crowd following us."

"I seen Jug Trilles and Juan Scaly tearin' past on the way to the crater," the old profiteer said. "They was goin' like mad—maybe they was—"

"Never mind," the girl said. "Pour him a drink, and then get me a basin of water and some strips of cloth."

The old fellow bore into Jim Quade with his one bloodshot eye. "Be you one of our men?"

"What do you mean by that?" Quade asked.

"Of course he is," the girl cut in. "He's my man—I got him out of a fight at the Dead Cow!"

"Did Jug and Scaly help you fight?"

"Not exactly," Jim laughed.

"Why not?"

"Go in and get some water," Kirbie said impatiently, "and I'll tell you all about it later."

"Funny, Jug and Scaly was ridin' so fast," the old fellow mumbled as he toddled into the next room.

The girl immediately turned to Quade, telling him to sit down and rest. She turned up his sleeves and brushed back his wet hair with her hands.

"How long do you figure on staying here?" Jim asked.

"Until I've dressed up your wounds a bit."

"They don't amount to a scratch. Aren't you afraid the crowd from Lava will be catching up to us?"

The old man returned before the girl could answer. She dipped a towel into the water and turned Jim's face up, washing it of its smirches of blood, and carefully avoiding the cuts and bruises. These she sponged clean. She then took his hands, sponged the split knuckles and bandaged them up with strips of cloth. A cut on the forearm where a flying chair had hit him was washed with whisky and water.

"Why didn't you-all use your gun afore you got beat up thataway, stranger?" the old man asked.

"He can beat his fights without gun-shooting," the girl said.

"Fist champeen—like Taurog—aye?"

Another drink for Quade and their host and Kirbie said that they must be going.

"Might you'll be catching up to Jug if you hurry," said the old man.

"We aren't going after Jug," the girl said. "He's against us."

"Against you! What the—"

But the girl had ushered Jim to the door and hurried him off to their mounts.

For a while they rode on in silence, jogging easily onto the long flat trail. It was Jim who broke the silence when they were well out on the plain.

"Well, little sage-hen, you're still putting up a good front."

"What does that mean?"

"You're still pretending th you're violently in love with me."

"I'm not pretending."

"Oh, yes, you are. Look over here. The moon's coming up, and from now on I'm going to ride close to you like this, and see if I can't discover something in your look that 'll explain things."

"What is there to explain?"

"Look into my face and admit that you're lying."

The girl did not look up, despite the fact that Jim had grasped her reins, and taken hold of one of her hands.

"All right, then, let's hear you tell the lie again," he laughed.

"I'm in love with you because you're the greatest fighter that ever came into this country."

"That's fine. That has a good ring to it. It's an exciting game we're playing anyway—even though it is only play. Isn't it?"

The girl did not deny this as quickly as she had denied his other accusations. Instead she turned to him suddenly and asked: "Why is it you're out gunning for Taurog?"

"Revenge."

"For what? You didn't look to me like a man who would go out of his way to satisfy such a thing. Revenge is a small thing."

"Not the kind of revenge I'm going to get," Jim said.

"It's a small passion—a belittling thing—not something to inspire a great heroic fighter—"

"There you go again — on your same tack."

"Revenge is the sort of thing you link up with Mexicans."

"That depends what the revenge is for. If you beat up a Mex, he comes back at you with a knife—like that fellow in the Dead Cow. They all do it. 'A knife for a fist'—that's the Mexican's code of honor. I'm satisfying something else; it has nothing to do with myself."

"You're going to kill Taurog because of some wrong done to some one else?"

"Yes."

"That seems more like what I dreamed of. Who are you fighting for?"

"My brother."

"What did Taurog ever do to your brother?"

"Why, are you on Taurog's side?"

"I'm on your side. Tell me—"

"He killed my brother. Taurog was caught rustling—"

"Rustling! You—" The girl checked herself.

"Yes? What were you going to say?"

"Nothing. Only from what I understand Taurog is a cattle king. He owns four big ranches just on the edge of this desert. He's the richest man in this county. Why would he be rustling?"

"This was ten years ago. Taurog got his wealth by bleeding little ranchers; killing off sheepmen; swelling his herds with stolen mavericks; swiping calves that heeled to their mothers, and cutting the mothers' hoofs so that they would not follow their young. The Quade ranch down here went to pieces—because of him."

"Those are lies you have heard. Taurog is an honest man—a man respected and feared by every one in this county."

"He is feared by every one but me."

The girl was trembling with her anger. Yet she knew that to give her anger scope would have betrayed her. On the other hand she was absolutely incapable of carrying on her rôle of the adoring dance-hall girl any longer. She rode on in silence for a while, and then: "Why is it you are blindly following?"

"Well, now, that gives me another chance to say in earnest what you've been saying in pretense: I'm in love with you."

"If you think I've been pretending, how is it you dare to follow me here into the desert?"

"The desert's not a dangerous place. Give me a wide scope here so that I can see who's attacking and I'd have a good chance. This gun you gave me is the best balanced killer I've ever had in my hand."

"Is there any other reason you're following me?" the girl asked insistently.

"You helped me out of a tight fix back in Lava."

"But you could ride away now—alone."

"Well, if you want to know the truth, I'll tell you: I've been under the impression that you were sent to get me."

"Yes? That's a curious explanation for your following me."

"Not at all curious. Particularly when you stop to consider just what person I think sent you after me."

"I don't see how that would explain."

"Taurog sent you to get me."

"Why do you think that?"

"Your anger when I accused him. And also the fact that we're ridin' westward across the desert — a general direction which I was given to understand was the direction of Taurog's nest in a crater gulch. And one other little clue: the old water-wizard back there said he had seen Jug Trilles and Juan Scaly ridin' like mad across the plain."

"And yet for all that you think it is worth while riding with me?"

"Of course. The very fact that Taurog sent you means that we are riding back to him. Now I came all the way from New York to find Taurog and kill him. What could be simpler than to have you take me to him?"

"Oh, you're following me so you can find Taurog?"

"That's one reason. The main reason is that I'm in love with you. And I've decided after the account with Taurog is settled I am going to take you away with me as my wife."

"You would marry a woman who, according to your suspicions, is leading you to your death?"

"That adds a tremendous element of romance to the love affair. Falling in love with a woman who is leading you to your death—doesn't that sound romantic? It makes my love for you flame up with a fire ten times more consuming—and dangerous. Think of the old sirens and all that stuff. Sailors jumping into the sea and drowning. My grandmother told me about a bird named Ulysses, who insisted on listening to the sirens. He tied himself to the mast and listened to them—think of that torture! He listened and loved—and loved as long as he could—knowing that if he went too far he would be killed!"

It was at this point that the two riders reached the clump of piñon-trees on the right side of the road. A quarter of a mile ahead the crater loomed up like a fairy castle, blue in the moonlight. Black, jagged lines cut into the face of the wall, and directly ahead of them the gorge gaped open like a gateway to a pitch dark inferno.

The two horses slowed to a walk as they began the steep rise to the mouth of the gorge. A few moments' ride during which both were silent, and then they passed the sojuaro cactus on their left hand, gaunt, ungainly, like a gray giant brandishing its arms at them. Directly on the opposite side of the trail was a bowlder with a profile like a pack burro.

"This would have been your chance," Quade said with a sigh of relief as they passed the cactus. "That sojuaro there would have hidden a sniper. Why didn't Taurog post a man there and wait for us?"

"Where?" the girl asked, reining in her mount.

"I thought I saw something move underneath those cactus arms."

The girl wheeled about and stared anxiously at the sojuaro. "You say you saw something there?" she asked.

"A coyote, perhaps," Quade laughed. "Must have jumped out and scurried down behind that bluff."

The girl turned her horse and they continued their ascent.

"There could have been nothing there," she said to herself. "That was not in the plan. Father told me nothing of that. He was to be inside the crater!"

She turned about and stared into Quade's face just before they were to pass from the full glow of the moonlight into the blackness of the gorge. He looked at her and saw the curious expression. The moonbeams struck directly into her eyes, dimmed the blackness of the hair, and cast a witch-like glow over the oval face. The girl drew her horse in and reached out for the rein of Quade's mount.

"I can't understand," she said, "how it is you would dare to go into that black gorge with me."

"I've been seeing a new light in your face," Quade answered. "And I heard a new ring to your voice. When you were telling me those lies—that you loved me—that I was a great fighter, and you worshiped a fighter, and all that—I heard a note in them which made me believe in you."

He pressed his horse over to her, and she clutched at its mane as if to keep it out of the shadow of the gorge.

"I'm going to tell you this, before I follow you in there. I've seen you just a short while. First I saw your arm—a round, olive-colored thing with a delicate bracelet and a huge black revolver held out for me to protect myself. There's a meeting of a man with a woman which will stick in one's mind. I can't forget that arm. I never will. I fell in love with you then. And when I saw you I fell in love for good and all. I'm telling you this—I'm offering you

myself. I'm offering you my life. If you tell me again that you love me—and I can hear that same ring in it, I'll trust you with everything—my life in the bargain. You can take me in there, and I'll know that you're doing it to hide me from the mob of gunmen at Lava chasing after us."

The girl let go the mane of his horse, and covered her face with her hands.

"I can't! I can't!" she burst out crying. "I'm not going to take you in there! I'm going to tell you everything."

"Tell me that you love me."

"I hate you!" she cried passionately. "I hate you—as I would hate the worst enemy in the world! You've come to kill the man who has been a father to me all my life—the man I love and honor. You have dragged his name in the dirt—and disgraced it! You've dared to stand up and say you'll fight him. You've come to kill him, and I hate you!"

"Why did you tell me this just before we went into the gorge?"

"Because I can't go through with this miserable trick. It's murder. I knew I could not go through with it from the very first moment I saw you—"

"Then you did love me?"

"No, I did not!" She threw back her head defiantly, and Quade could see the fierce light in her eyes. "It was a lie. Every word I said was a lie. I hate you as if you were a rattle-snake, and if you are ever seen around the range I won't lift a finger to save you!"

"You've saved me just now. If I had gone into the gorge—"

The girl cut off his mocking laugh. "If you had gone into the gorge you would have been killed as soon as you rode through to the crater bed." She pointed to the crater and went on in a low tone: "Taurog is there waiting for you. He will kill you on sight. And if you don't go now I will not stop him—I would watch you shot dead at my feet, and I would—"

Quade interrupted. "At least you've given me my life now. I'm going to remember that—when I see you again. When I've finished with Taurog I'm coming for you. I'm going to make you my wife—and—"

"You are going to—"

The girl gasped in astonishment at his words and was speechless. But before Quade could answer again, she dug her heels into the flanks of her horse and wheeled about. Her mount fairly stood upright on its hind feet and then dashed madly into the rocky bed of the gorge.

CHAPTER XVII.

THE JACKASS BOWLDER.

QUADE'S first thought was that he must not let the girl out of his sight. But then he realized that this was a ridiculous desire. Just because she had disappeared into the blackness of the gorge did not mean that he would never see her again. There was plenty of time for his courtship. What he must consider first was his affair with Taurog.

The girl, he recalled, had warned him that if he entered that gorge he would be killed. It was a foolhardy step to take—to follow her blindly into the trap that had been set for him. He decided that he must play the game now with extreme care. He must play so that he would get Taurog before Taurog could get him. To do this he concluded he must bide his time. If he followed the girl then, he argued, it would be suicidal; and the death of his brother would go unavenged. He decided to wait until morning and light, when he could meet his enemy under more favorable conditions.

Quade gathered his mount, turned, and rode leisurely down the trail. The giant cactus and the piñons assumed a different meaning for him now that he was alone. Theye were the first hiding-places which the desert had afforded since the ride from the water-hole, and Quade now reproached himself for his temerity in following the girl into this dangerous situation. The blue haze of the moon now seemed to turn every shadow into the silhouette of a man with a sombrero. A shadow cast by the big bowlder was particularly distinct in this impression: the rock itself looked like a burro's head, and on its back was a tiny sharper figure of a man.

Quade held his horse in by a tensing of the thighs. He did not propose to get within range of that rock. The shadow was a perfect representation of a man's, but it was immovable. Probably a tree stump. Yes, undoubtedly a tree stump, or perhaps a cactus. It was unbelievable that the girl had tricked him in this way.

"I believe what she said," Quade thought, "that she could not lead a man to a sacrifice. She said that so I could believe it. And she said she hated me—passionately," breaking into a smile. "Damned if I'll believe that yet!"

He rode on slowly, cautiously, his heart thumping at every beat of the horse's hoofs. When he passed the big rock he looked over his shoulder without turning his head. He could see it through the corner of his eye, and he thought he saw something else, rather inexplicable. The shadow of the man in the sombrero had moved around the rock like the point of a sun dial.

Quade crouched somewhat lower over the withers of his horse and rode on toward the cactus and the piñons. He recalled that, while coming up the trail, he had seen something at the base of that giant cactus moving. Now he peered sharply at it, the rim of his sombrero shading his eyes from the moon. Yes, a man was sitting down there at the foot of that sojuaro, there was little doubt. All that could be seen of him was his torso and bare head, as immovable as a rock. The rest of his figure was hidden by the rattle-weed. Perhaps it was a rock.

"It *must* be a rock!" Quade thought. 'The girl would not have led me into a trap like this—after what she said. She would not warn me of the gorge—and then let me stay out here surrounded by renegades. I don't believe that is a man."

Yet, despite this belief, Quade's hand moved slowly toward his holster. With every undulation of the horse's back his hand went down an inch until it rested on the flap.

Quade argued that when he was within firing distance he could very soon find out if that were a man or a rock at the base of that sojuaro. One movement of the hand, a movement which would accomplish everything in a single flashlike stroke—unbuttoning the holster, drawing the gun, firing. An easy way of clearing up the doubt concerning that one question. But not a safe way.

If it did happen to be a man, he would be conclusively dealt with. But Quade was thinking of the shadow behind the bowlder he had passed. He could not deal with that shadow quite so easily. If this thing underneath the sojuaro cactus were a man, then there was a man behind the bowlder where Quade had seen a shadow. And more than likely there was a man hiding in the pitch dark shadows of the piñon trees across the trail. Quade knew that if he advanced within range and shot at the man sitting by the cactus, he himself would be shot in the back by some one behind those piñons.

Before Quade came within range he decided he could not pass that cactus and that clump of piñons. He glanced around again as cautiously as before. A little distance from the trail there was a fissure in the stream-bed—the work of some ancient rivulet. As Quade's eyes scanned the creek-bed he turned his head for a last look at the big bowlder. This time he could see the figures of two men standing, one on each side of the rock. He looked around quickly at the cactus. The thing he had seen at its base was not there. Instead, there was a tall, lanky image a distance of ten feet in front of it. Another figure looming bluish in the moonlight was standing just outside the clump of pines.

"Yes, the girl tricked me—after all," Quade said. "And she acted her part to perfection. Damned if any man living could have thought she was acting during those last few minutes."

He realized he was completely trapped, but without giving the slightest indication that he had noticed anything, he rode on unconcernedly for a distance of about five yards. Suddenly he disappeared from the back of his horse, by dropping headforemost from the saddle. He landed on his hands, the reins still through his arms. Springing up, he darted toward the little fissure which he had seen in the walls of the creek-bed. As he ran he kept his horse between himself and the men near the bowl-

der. He did not turn to look until he had reached the protection of the rocky walls. When he glanced back he saw four men following, keeping as well as they could behind the protection of intervening rocks.

From a small rise on the other side of the creek-bed another man walked down. He seemed like a giant—partly because of the moonlight, partly because of his own height accentuated by riding-boots and a tall-peaked sombrero. He was not lanky, but thick-set, with tremendous shoulders and a huge bull-like neck stooping somewhat to the forward thrust of the big head.

Quade watched from behind the protection of his pinto, and was thrilled with the picture of this giant walking toward the cleft in the rock—Quade's hiding-place. When the men approached to within fifty feet, they crouched, then dropped to their hands and knees, clinging to the protection of the bowlders. Quade moved back into the dark safety of his fissure. He groped his way until he came up sharp against a perpendicular wall. There was no further retreat, he knew now. If there had been another exit to that little cleft the men would have ample time to guard it before he could climb to it.

One thing was absolutely certain, Quade thought, as with enormous relief he lit a cigarette: his enemies could not get him in the position he now occupied, unless they wanted to sacrifice as many men as Quade had bullets.

CHAPTER XVIII.

KIRBIE AWAKES.

KIRBIE rode through the gorge and ascended the steep winding path to Taurog's house, which she reached about twenty minutes after leaving Quade at the mouth of the gorge. The place seemed deserted, and except for the baying of Taurog's hound the stillness was unbroken. Kirbie had expected to find her foster-father waiting to receive her and to take care of the man she was supposed to have enticed into the crater. No stableman was ready to unsaddle her mount. Pedro did not answer her call. She hurried into Taurog's den, and there found the housekeeper, Nell Gamble.

"Where is Taurog?" Kirbie asked.

Nell lifted up her face, and when Kirbie saw the bruises she started back, frightened.

"That's all right," Nell Gamble said tonelessly. "My eye is swollen, I know. He hit me—Taurog hit me—and he's going to pay!"

Kirbie went to the woman, who drew back angrily from the caress intended for her. "I'll pay him. He struck me just like he used to beat your mother."

"Nell, you've been drinking," Kirbie said quietly. "Don't talk like that."

"You don't believe it—do you? You think I've been fighting with one of the mozos. Well, it was Taurog did this. Taurog, who said he loved me, and who once promised he would wed me."

"Where is he? Why isn't he here waiting for me?"

"I'll get even with him for striking a woman. If God didn't punish him for beating your mother, He won't punish him for beating me. But I will! I'll tell everything I know about him."

"Come now, Nell. You should have gone to bed long ago. You should not touch this drink—it is for men. You are out of your head and—" The girl paused a moment, and the tone of her voice changed: "Did you say—that he—beat my—mother?"

"I'll tell you worse than that!" the Mexican woman cried convulsively. "I'll tell you what you should have known long before: Taurog is a renegade. These ranches that he owns are only a pretext. He is a gunman, and the whole country is afraid of him—because they know he is a killer."

"But concerning my mother," Kirbie interrupted. "You say—"

"Yes, yes, it is true. Ask Cow McGinnis, who is wounded. He knows everything, and he will tell the truth. He will tell you how your father and mother were in the desert. Your father was prospecting, and they were famished for water. Taurog found them, and he saw that your mother was beautiful. Taurog will boast of it when he is drunk. He cries out in his drunken-

ness how your father died for thirst. 'And I could 've saved him!' Taurog boasts. 'But the man feared for his wife and tried to shoot me. I didn't shoot him!' Taurog will laugh when he is hot with red-eye. 'I only poured out what was left of my water and let it trickle into the sand where his face lay!'"

"But my mother—"

"Your mother he took home with him. That was in the summer. In the fall she was delivered of a child—you! But she always hated Taurog, and she would not return his love. He made a slave of her, beat her, and she died even while you were a child."

For a moment Kirbie stood immobile in the room. The gauntlets she had taken from her hands fell to the floor, but she kept her eyes resolutely on the face of the Mexican woman. All the light of the room seemed to have gone out except at one point—and there it focussed with a strange intensity upon the bruised, tear-stained face. Then Kirbie came to herself. She walked to the window, peered out into the huge moonlit bowl of the crater, turned and left the room.

She went directly to the upper room of the house where the wounded gunman, who had been brought from Lava earlier in the night, was lying. Cow McGinnis was still awake and talking excitedly to the Indian servant delegated to watch over him. Kirbie sent the servant out.

"I want you to tell me where Taurog is," she said to McGinnis.

"He's went," the gunman replied; and then asked hurriedly: "Did you-all get Jim Quade to come here?"

"I brought him as far as the gorge—then I left him."

"He wouldn't follow you any farther?"

"No, he wouldn't. That's what you can tell every one. Tell Taurog Jim Quade was brought to the gorge, but he would not enter."

Cow McGinnis grinned—his first grin that evening.

"Fine business! Taurog—he knows. He's wise! You brought the hell-bender just where you should orter bring him. Wise old Taurog!"

"It's Taurog I want to find now. I've heard something about him, and I want to find out how true it is."

"Shoot. You can count on Cow McGinnis for anything, lady."

"You've been here with Taurog many years. You were here when my mother was here."

"Yes, I remember her—beautiful."

"Do you remember how Taurog treated her? Was he ever cruel?"

The face of the wounded man froze to the immobility of a graven image.

"Answer me, McGinnis. How did Taurog treat my mother?"

The grim, pursed lips, the parchmentlike skin, wrinkled up to the high cheek-bones. The pale eyes betrayed no sign of a response.

Kirbie went to the man, clutching his shoulders, falling on her knees beside his bed.

"McGinnis," she cried, "you must answer me. By refusing to answer you are letting me believe what I do not dare to believe. Why don't you answer?"

"Taurog will kill me!" McGinnis whimpered. "I'm a wounded man—I can't fight—I can't oppose nobody—even you. Let me alone, lady! I'm weak."

"If you won't answer me that, tell me how my mother fell into Taurog's hands?"

"The desert brought them together—the desert which clutches you and chokes you—like Taurog clutches and chokes them that goes ag'in' him."

"And my father?"

"He was in the desert, too—huntin' for gold. He died."

"Taurog killed him?"

"He died of thirst," the man snapped out. "I didn't say Taurog killed him—did I now? Don't accuse me of sayin' that. I'm feelin' faint."

"You have said enough to make me believe. Nell Gamble has told me everything."

McGinnis looked up, his pale hollow eyes suddenly widening.

"Taurog will kill her. He will kill me for what I've said."

"Taurog is going to be punished," Kirbie replied in a low cool voice. "Jim Quade is

going to bring him to judgment before God."

McGinnis stared incredulously. His lips parted so that the yellow gums showed. "Jim Quade!" he whispered. "Your enemy—*our* enemy! The bird that potted me!"

"It is Taurog who is my enemy."

"Then you didn't bring Jim Quade? You said you left him at the gorge, and I said everything was jake."

"Yes. Thank God, I have not betrayed him!"

"But why did you bring him to the gorge?" the man asked in his bewilderment. "It's there at the gorge that Taurog laid in wait for him."

"What do you mean?" Kirbie sprang to her feet. "What are you saying? Where is Taurog now? He should have met me. He should have been here waiting for me!"

"Taurog took his men to the gate—Pedro, Trilles, Juan Scaly and two mozos, with their guns and horses. He hid them in the piñons and among the giant rocks so that the man you was bringin' could have no chance of goin' back."

"They hid among the rocks at the gate?" the girl gasped. "And then—"

"Then you brought him. He is in their hands now. But why is it you are asking these things? He was your enemy, but yet you—"

The gunman did not finish. Kirbie ran out of the room and McGinnis heard her running down the steps. He lifted himself up in bed so that he could look down from the window of his room. Kirbie was urging her horse down the narrow, dark trail to the bed of the crater. There McGinnis caught sight of her galloping across the little moonlit field of rocks and disappearing into the shadows of the gorge.

CHAPTER XIX.

KIRBIE CALLS FOR A SHOW-DOWN.

THE walls of the gorge reverberated with the beating of the horse's hoofs as Kirbie rode down into the open plain. The early morning wind had already sprung up from the desert, and as Kirbie came out of the gorge it struck her with a pungent tang of sage and tar weed. She dug her heels into the pinto's flanks when the trail flattened and the moon, which was now directly overhead, brought out the white bed and all its rocks, chuck-holes, and weeds as distinctly as if it were day.

A moment later she reached the granite burro and could see the pronged sojuaro etched black like a burned tree. Midway between the rock and the cactus Kirbie saw the crouching forms of five men. She wheeled off the road, trotting across the rocks to join them. The little red dots of their cigars were hanging in front of them like roving fireflies. Three of them were seated on bowlders, and these three got up when they saw her coming.

Taurog went to her as soon as she was recognized.

"You done all right, gal!" he shouted. "We seen you comin' to the gorge with that there hell-bent killer. Even though you didn't get him to go in, you led him right into our hands."

"Where is he?" the girl asked quickly. "You haven't—"

"He's all right. He stayed out of our range, but we got him cornered in that there crevasse. He can't hit us from there, and all we have to do is to bide our time."

"For what?"

"For the sunrise."

"And then?"

"And then we'll plug him. That's what. You see, if we tried to git him now, with only that moon overhead, we'd be aiming in the dark, whereas he can see us too damned clearly. Then when the sun comes up we can see him as well as he's seein' us—and I'll have Scaly here pot him from above, while four of us pot him from the mouth of the crevasse."

"Then it's settled that when the sun comes up you're going to kill him outright?"

"Sure thing. But why are you talkin' so funny? They's a note in your voice like as if it was makin' you shiver. The guy's got to stretch. You know that."

"Yes, yes. I know that. I am not talking funny."

Taurog turned to his gang and laughed.

"It's like a woman," he said. "Now that we've got the guy in the hollow of our hand, she's getting squeamish. They sure do make a fuss about takin' life—these here women-folk."

"I'm not making a fuss. It's just that you're going to kill him. You're keeping him there, waiting till sunrise—just so you can make the killing sure. But when that's done—how are you going to explain? You said they would hang you—"

"Explain? What the hell!" Taurog shouted, puzzled. "You are goin' to do the explainin'. You're goin' to say he follered you from Lava and started in actin' pestiferous. Then we come along and pot him. Ain't that easy to explain?"

"It's up to me, then?" the girl asked with a curious change to her voice.

"Say, look here, gal—let me take a look at you. You're tremblin'."

"Give her a swig," Trilles advised. "And tell her to go home. She hadn't orter be here when the killin' comes off."

"No, no; I'm not going. I want to stay here. I want to wait till the sun comes up."

"Look here, gal—you ain't losin' your hate for the hell-bender, are you? He swore he'd get me—me who's been your protector and kind of like a regular dad to you all these years?"

The girl did not answer for a minute. The men took their seats again on the bowlders. There was a short silence, and then Kirbie faced Taurog.

"Are you still thinking you are a father to me?" she asked.

"Why ask a ridiculous question like that now?" he rejoined with a surprised laugh.

"Before this you have been a man that I have honored and loved."

"What the hell do you mean—'before this'?"

"I went home just now and saw Nell Gamble."

"Oh, *that's* what got you! She acted ornery. I was out of my haid waitin' for you—the suspense and all. She plagued me, and I cuffed her one. That's all."

"You beat her."

"Women has got to be beat once in a while."

"How do I know some time you won't beat me?"

"You're a lady, born and bred a lady. I've brought you up like one. No man will beat a lady."

"Then what kind of women is it that you beat?" the girl asked with a cool, incomprehensible defiance.

Taurog emitted a string of oaths. Then, without answering her, he rejoined his group of men. He lit his cigar stub with a trembling anger.

"Damned little catamount. She's pickin' a quarrel with me right before we've got some shootin' to do. And all over that Mexican squaw. Next time Nell Gamble butts in between me and Kirbie I'll cowhide her so's she can't do any more whinin' and blubberin'!"

The men said nothing. They smoked steadily, every now and then lighting a match. When Juan Scaly lit his cigarettes the flare would illumine a swollen battered face, and a cut mouth which drooped belligerently as he puffed up the flame. Jug Trilles's face, when a light singled it out, was dry, wrinkled, crafty, the brown eyes furtive and seeing everything and everybody in restless twinkles—like the eyes of a rat. Smoo Taurog's face was revealed gray, inscrutable, the big bristly jaw set, the slitlike eyes catching the flame and burning like steel at white heat.

The girl stood apart from the rest, watching the sky in the east. After brooding for a long while she too sat down on one of the near-by rocks. In the long, silent hour she could hear small, indistinct voices: the scurry of a chaparral cock; the howl of a coyote. Just before the first faint streamers of gray appeared against the eastern hills she heard Smoo Taurog's voice break in harshly: "Might you better go up above the crevasse now, Scaly. The dawn will be comin'!"

Tensely the girl waited for the breaking of day. Every step of that desert sunrise evoked a thrill of horror, as if the coming of light was in reality the coming of death. As the gray smirches in the east burned pink, and a huge band of light suddenly burst across the sky, the girl's heart commenced a sudden steady pounding. She

watched the band of light, and then saw another, and another, radiating from a point in the east like the sticks of a great fan—the color of beryl, an almost imperceptible green. On the horizon where the handle of the fan might have been were little wisps of crimson light like Arizona garnet.

The girl looked below her as the desert changed color from its misty gray to purple. Her eyes swept the entire horizon until she saw again the crater whence she had come. The first rays of the sun caught its jagged rim, and the light crept down the walls. Etched black and gray in the dusk, they seemed like giant images with feet buried in lava and rocks and ancient volcanic cinders. The cliffs broke out suddenly vivid in the growing light, showing their streaks of red and pink where the rain-wash had painted them.

Smoo Taurog stood up, his figure transformed from a grotesque shadow into an animate, hulking brute. He waited until the light rolled across the desert and the first rays of the sun fell upon the highest prong of the sojuaro cactus where it caught the single white waxlike flower.

"It's time now, men," he said.

The girl ran to him. "Wait before you do this thing," she said.

"Now, look here, little lady," Taurog objected, "this is no place for you to be giving advice. This is a business for men."

"But you are not acting like men; you are acting like brutes."

"Damned if I thought the girl would lose her nerve!" Taurog laughed. "You better be ridin' back to the crater, and let us perform the ceremony according to our own ways."

"I am not losing my nerve," the girl objected. "I am losing my respect for you. You have always posed as a great man and a brave one. You have always made me think that you are afraid of no one, and that every one is afraid of you. Here is one man you *are* afraid of. You dare not get him with your own hand. You are after him with four men. That is not the deed of a great leader—of the man who has made me honor him these many years."

"If you want to stay here, gal, you've got to cork up!" Taurog said impatiently. Some of her words reminded him of his glorious boast at the Dead Cow Saloon—that he would beat Quade with his fists. He looked at his present plan in the light of that boast, and the comparison was not pleasant.

"Now git!" he snapped at Kirbie. "There's goin' to be a ticklish little game played, and I don't want for to be interrupted by a woman callin' to me concernin' her scruples."

"You are not going to kill him," the girl said with icy finality to her tone. "You got me to ride up here with this man so that people would say you had a cause to kill him. You are banking on my telling a lie—that the man insulted me. What if I chose not to swear to that story? Where would your game be then?"

"Somethin's got into you, gal—somethin' since I last seen you. Say! You ain't in love with that there murderer?"

"Whatever has happened, understand this: I am not going to swear to that story. If there is a trial for the murder of Jim Quade you cannot count on me."

"Look here, woman! What's got into you? Don't you love me no more? Ain't I been a father to you and all like that? What sort of a bug's got into your ear, anyway?"

"If you want me to honor you," the girl said coolly, "you've got to show me that you aren't a coward."

"Hell! There ain't no one ever yet accused me of being a coward."

"They will after this murder. If you want to get Quade you must do it another way. There is a better way—a way that will make all your men honor you as they have done in the days gone by."

"If you think I'll let the bird go after I got him cornered thisaway, you're mistaken."

"You don't have to let him go."

"Then what's your game?"

"Capture him—tie him up if you want. Bring him to the crater. Then get all your men to come and see a fair fight. Challenge Jim Quade to a fight man to man—"

Old Jug Trilles broke in excitedly,

"That won't do, chief. Don't try any of that show business. Don't let the girl tickle your vanity thataway."

"You are invincible. I have always believed it," Kirbie went on. "Fight him man to man, and show us all. Show the people of Lava what sort of a fighter you really are. Invite them all to the crater—and make a celebration of it. Your name—"

"Don't do it, chief," Trilles interposed again. "We got him where we want him now. Don't go showin' off to the womenfolk. It never pays."

"If the girl don't back us up with her story—" Taurog began.

"I will not back you up!" the girl said coolly.

"Even if I were to hang—eh, gal?"

"No."

The men stared at each other, and Taurog stepped to the girl with upraised fist. He checked himself, then began fingering the cylinder of his revolver with thick, steady fingers. They all saw a new blaze in his eyes. What he was thinking they could not guess. His anger at the girl seemed to have been counteracted by a new passion.

It was the passion of pride. All Lava watching him fight with his bare fists and beat up a man who had challenged him—that would be a glorious ending to the game. He drew Trilles apart and talked with him a moment in a low voice.

"Look here, Trilles," he said; "what the gal says has got to be considered. She's showin' her womanish nerve when she says she won't stand for us killin' Quade in cold blood. It's like all women. They'll get you down and then they want some tears and slobberin'. They can't finish up anything they start."

"Don't listen to her, chief. We can finish our own fights."

"But she's in on it too thick," Taurog objected. "She brought the bird here, and if she won't swear to it that he was actin' ungentlemanlike, where's our excuse for pottin' him?"

"You're right thar, chief. Might we'd both hang!"

"And thar ain't no man ever stood up ag'in' my punch yet, is there?" Taurog asked, holding up his fist.

"I'll say not, chief. You've killed a man with that punch. But you know this here hell-bender—"

"I know! I ain't goin' to take a chance. Don't worry about that. I ain't goin' to take a chance no more than I would now by goin' in there and pottin' him cold-blooded. The way we'll manage this game will be like this: We'll invite every man jack that lives for miles around to come and see a fist-fight. Then the bird and me will mix it. I can wallop him any day, but in case it goes hard on me—"

"You expect me to pot him in front of a mob of witnesses— No, chief; that won't work, either."

"I don't expect you to pot nobody. What you'll do will be to stop the fight—that is, in case I don't win out; see? We won't neither of us be armed—him or me."

"How am I goin' to stop it?"

"Some way so's you won't get blamed for murder."

"But there *will* be murder—eh, chief?" Trilles asked suspiciously.

"Damn right. But I guarantee you won't be blamed."

Trilles burst out into his old man's slobbery laugh. He wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.

"Go to it!" he said as he followed Taurog to the crevasse. "So long as you can 'fix it.' And I reckon you're the best fixer ever seen in these parts!"

"Mosey up and get Juan Scaly," Taurog ordered. "They ain't goin' to be no gun-fightin'. Trilles, you and Pedro go in, hold up your bandannas, and ask for a parley. Tell the hell-bender that you got a proposition to offer him."

"He won't give himself up, chief!" Trilles said with a new panic.

"He don't have to give himself up. Tell him that him and me is goin' to meet with bare fists. All he has to do is to consent."

"I reckon he'll do that, chief," Trilles laughed, unfastening the bandanna from his leather neck.

(To be concluded NEXT WEEK.)

His Name in the Paper

by John Holden

BEFORE the momentous day on which his name appeared in a newspaper for the first time, Ralph Bertram had no more idea of being a hero than a mud-turtle has of being a toe-dancer. He was so timid, in fact, that only occasionally could he muster up sufficient courage to ask Alice Wilson to dance or skate with him, though he loved her so intensely that the mere sight of her half a block distant was sufficient to confuse his thoughts so that he hardly knew whether he was coming or going.

One cold winter's day, after his work at the bank was finished, Bertram was standing outside the town post-office, ostensibly waiting for the mail to be distributed, but really waiting for Alice to come out. If she were alone he meant to ask if he might see her home. For weeks he had been trying to muster up sufficient courage to do this, but always she was with another girl, or he could not decide on just the right words to use, or something else was the matter. This time he meant to do or die.

Presently she came out. But not alone. Two other girls were with her. She had that week's copy of the Westville *Gazette* in her hand and she seemed excited. She looked wildly up and down the snow-covered sidewalk.

Then Bertram got the greatest surprise of his bashful young life. Alice Wilson sighted him and came straight toward him. She seized his hand and congratulated him, and her two girl friends did likewise. She praised him extravagantly. She averred that she had not credited him with sufficient courage to do it. She called him her hero, and in sixty seconds she and her friends had heaped enough laudation on Bertram's dazed head to swamp a matinée idol.

"Your name heads the list on the front page!" This was the one understandable sentence that Bertram could glean from the drumfire of her remarks.

"What list?" Bertram was bewildered. He did not know what Alice was talking about.

His divinity turned to her friends.

"As if he doesn't know what list!" she stated.

"Yes; hiding his light under a bushel of blushes." Other remarks of a similar embarrassing nature were made.

"Perhaps you haven't seen your name in the paper as yet." Alice opened the latest copy of the town's weekly which she had just taken from her post-office box, and with a daintily gloved finger indicated to Bertram a short but heavily headlined article.

Bertram read it, and its meaning struck him with the stunning force of a well-directed brick.

"Well—I'll—be—hanged!" he gasped.

Alice paid no attention to this pessimistic prognostication.

"We never dreamed that you would en-

ter for such an important contest," she said. "I do hope you'll win."

In a hazy way Bertram realized that he must tell Alice the truth—that he had never nursed the ambition credited to him in the newspaper, that he did not expect to win a contest of any kind, that he had no hope of becoming a champion in any line of endeavor.

But his bashful tongue refused to function. He blinked and he gulped and he tried to think of the right way to frame his speech, but words refused to come. To be fussed over by the girl that he adored temporarily paralyzed his faculties. The moment of opportunity, during which he might have repudiated the article and stepped gracefully down from the false pedestal upon which she had placed him, vanished.

"Well, best o' luck, Mr. Bertram."

"Hope you'll win."

"See you again."

And, as quickly as they had descended upon him, Alice and her sister sirens were gone, leaving Bertram tingling with new and vivid emotions.

At home, however, his tingling was replaced by cold chills as he realized that the journalistic error which had brought him temporary prominence would in the end make him the laughing stock of the town unless he acted quickly. He read again that he was an entrant in the coming race, to be held on the opening night of the new indoor rink, for the skating championship of Westville.

Of course he had not really entered the contest. He had never even thought of doing so. He was not a particularly speedy skater. He knew several town fellows who could beat him. He could scarcely hope to make a decent showing in such a race, let alone win it.

But by failing to repudiate the article the minute that Alice Wilson showed it to him, he had allowed her and every one else to think it was authentic. He must repair that mistake as quickly as possible. So he telephoned Alice, and in a weak, quavering voice stated that he wished to tell her something.

"Couldn't you tell me just as well down at the mill-pond to-night?" she replied. "I know you'll be there to practice for the big race, and I'll be there, too. I'm in a dreadful hurry just now."

Bertram meekly complied with her request.

He went to the mill-pond, but he did not take his skates. He feared that Alice or some one else might ask him to exhibit a little of his speed before he had an opportunity to repudiate the newspaper article, and that would never do. He did not have much speed to exhibit.

To Bertram's dismay he found Alice skating with a gentleman whom he particularly disliked, one Horace Duckworth, a boisterous fellow who had a penchant for playing rude, practical jokes. She insisted that Duckworth should take her to him.

"Where are your skates?" she asked. "I wanted to have the honor of skating with the man who's going to win the town championship."

Bertram saw that Duckworth was grinning at him. He did not want to make his humiliating confession where that fellow could overhear him.

"Well—er—you see," he began, and then paused. A bolder lover would have grasped Alice's arm and maneuvered her out of Duckworth's hearing, but Bertram was not that kind of a fellow. He did not know what to do.

Duckworth interrupted.

"Bertram is just kidding us about entering a race," he said with a laugh. "Bertram can't race. Why, I can beat him myself and I wouldn't think of entering. But it's a good scheme to get the ladies interested in you, eh, Bertram?"

Alice turned upon Duckworth.

"What an outrageous thing to say!" she exclaimed. "Of course you're going to race, aren't you, Mr. Bertram?"

In a flash the thought came to Bertram that if he admitted the correctness of Duckworth's contention that he did not mean to race Alice would thereafter have about as much regard for him as for an angle-worm. So he hedged.

"Why—er—I haven't got my racing skates yet," he stammered.

"Too bad! Better get them soon. Look! There are some of the other contestants. Let's go and watch them, Mr. Bertram, so you'll see what you have to beat. Come on, Horace."

Bertram watched three or four of the legitimate entrants for the championship with a sinking heart. The wild idea had come to him that, by strict training during the three weeks that preceded the big race, he might be able to make a showing in the contest that at least would not disgrace him. But as he noted the speed with which the others whizzed down the stretches of the pond he felt slightly ill. Well he knew that he could not learn in three weeks to skate as fast as that. True, the men lost considerable of their speed in rounding the two sharp turns on their long skates, but he could not fly around a sharp turn without changing his stroke either.

Duckworth continued to hang around. Bertram would not tell Alice that his entry was a mistake while that overbearing fellow was present—in fact, he dreaded to tell her at all—so that in the end he left the pond without having repudiated the newspaper article.

Then, as he walked homeward, the horror of his predicament burst upon him in all its awful dimensions. Twice he had failed to deny his entry to Alice Wilson, therefore he must actually start in the race or admit that he possessed a yellow streak. And if he started he would doubtless be beaten so badly that thereafter he would be the laughing stock of the town.

In his despair Bertram walked about the deserted streets of Westville, striving with all his might to think of a way out of his predicament. Presently the uncompleted indoor rink loomed before him. He entered it and looked at its small interior, where the town championship would be decided.

Suddenly, as he looked, an idea came to him. He walked all around the inside of the rink, and then he actually whistled.

At the breakfast-table next morning, before going to the bank where he was employed, Bertram amazed his mother by a request that he should be allowed to flood their back yard and turn it into a skating-rink.

"Why, Ralph, what's the matter with you?" she questioned in an alarmed manner. "Isn't there enough ice for you to skate on at the mill-pond, not to speak of the new indoor rink that will be finished soon?"

"Yes; but I'm going into strict training for the skating race that is to be held there on the opening night, and I want to do it in secret."

So Bertram flooded his back yard, bought a pair of long racing skates, and settled down to an arduous training grind.

He appeared at the mill-pond, too, but not once did he indulge in a work-out there with the other aspirants for the local championship. In fact, he grinned cheerfully as he watched them fly down the quarter-mile stretch of the long and narrow pond and slow up around the two sharp turns. He skated often with Alice Wilson. He answered all her questions in regard to his training by stating that he wished to spring a surprise on her the night of the race. He seemed to think that he really could win it, too, and much of his old bashfulness vanished before his newly acquired self-confidence. On several occasions he boldly took her away from Horace Duckworth. On a particularly reckless evening he escorted her home and actually summoned up the courage to ask her to marry him!

"But, Ralph, your position at the bank won't permit you to support a wife," she objected.

"It won't right now, that's true enough," Bertram replied. "But I'm not going to be an underpaid clerk always, you bet. Brainy guys like me are bound to get ahead. Pretty soon I'm going to ask for a raise in pay, and I'll get it, too."

"Brainy, did you say?" Alice looked at him curiously. Bertram had indeed changed greatly during the past few days.

"You wait till the night of the race and you'll see whether I'm brainy or not," he replied.

Alice was silent for a moment.

"Do you know what Mr. Duckworth told me?" she remarked presently. "He said that you never really entered for the race at all; that some of the town jokers handed your name in for fun, just to see what you'd do."

"Did *he* hand it in?"

"He didn't say so, but I imagine he had something to do with it."

"Do you think that's a nice trick to play on anybody? Hold a person up to public ridicule by putting his name in the paper?"

"I can't say that I do."

"I don't think so either," went on Bertram. "But just the same, it's going to turn out all right in this case, because otherwise I might never have got up courage enough to propose to you."

"I haven't accepted you yet."

"No; but I have an idea that you may when I show you that I'm not the insignificant clerk you always thought me."

Womanlike, Alice changed the subject back to the matter of Bertram's entry in the race.

"I should think you would have stated that you didn't enter when the newspaper first came out," she said.

"I wanted to, Alice," Bertram confessed, "but to tell the truth, I was so confused when you made a fuss over me that I missed the proper opportunity to repudiate it, and afterward I didn't want to because Duckworth was on hand and I knew he'd laugh at me. So I just went ahead and figured out a way to win the race, and, by jinks, I'm going to do it!"

"How do you know you are?"

"I've got a hunch; just like the hunch I have that some day I'm going to win you for keeps."

"Well, I hope you win—the race," said Alice.

In due course the evening of the great event arrived. Bertram was early at the rink. He donned his racing suit and his racing skates, and he listened with some amusement to the remarks of his competitors when they viewed the indoor sheet of ice for the first time.

"Gee, but ain't it small!" said one. "Lots different from skating around the big mill-pond."

"You said it," assented another.

After a while the mayor of Westville opened the rink with an appropriate speech, and the contestants were ordered to the mark for the start of the Westville championship at one mile, or twenty times around the course. There was the sharp bark of a pistol, a scrunching of steel on ice, and the dozen competitors were off.

Up the side of the rink they flew, Bertram not in the lead, but not in the rear either. He was eagerly watching for a certain development at the end of the rink, and as the racers ahead of him swung around that sharp angle he grinned.

For each and every one of Bertram's competitors did something at the first corner and every other corner that Bertram did not do—they swung wide and had difficulty in getting around on their long skates. This was because they had neglected to train on a *small course*. The mill-pond, where they had practiced had one sharp turn every quarter-mile; here there was a sharp turn every sixty-six feet. Outdoors, they could go like the wind on a straight-away course; but indoors they were outclassed by the man who for three weeks had trained on a very small course in a back yard and therefore had learned how to round the sharp corners with a minimum of effort and without altering his stroke in the least.

After the first few laps the result was never in doubt. Bertram won easily against men who doubtless could have beaten him on the mill-pond.

After the race Bertram accompanied Alice Wilson home.

"Of course I was just joking when I said I was clever," he told her. "It was sheer accident that enabled me to discover that the other fellows were not devoting enough practice to the trick of skating around sharp corners at full speed, and that if I could learn to do that in three weeks I would have a huge advantage over them. I'm really not half smart enough to win you, but just the same I hope to when I get a better job at the bank."

Alice smiled wistfully and gave his hand a little squeeze.

"I don't object to your hoping," she said. "And, talking about a better job, the president of your bank was at the rink and I overheard him say that you showed more pep and initiative than he thought you had, and he meant to make better use of it by giving you more important work."

Beauty and the Blind Man

by Peter Ward

MORE than one settlement worker had stopped at sight of Beppe, clasped her hands and exclaimed, "What a beautiful child!" One of them wanted to adopt him, but the sight of his blowsy mother, living in a squalor so perfect as to seem the result of careful study, sent her away nauseated and heartsick. When Beppe was four an artist saw him, took him to his studio, and made a low relief of his head in white against pale blue. Copies of this plaque litter the art stores at Christmas, and it is a great favorite in girls' schools. To look at that small cherubic head one would never think that its beauty had killed a man.

Two men fought for Beppe—one a stepfather as wicked as any that ever figured in a fairy tale, the other Buoso, the blind beggar. Buoso was as perfect of his kind as Beppe was of his—a gaunt, gray headed man with white rolling eyes and a countenance the pathetic stillness of which could only be likened to that on the visages of men who have come out of the war with painted masks for faces.

His station was on one of those side streets which feed the great arteries through which flow the ebb and tide of office workers. All day long he sat with his back to the cold granite base of a thirty story office building with his hat between his crossed legs and a tin sign on his breast advertising his affliction. Buoso did very well for a beggar; the stream which he fished brought him many workers, who give most readily, and occasional rich men who gave most liberally.

But every afternoon at four, when the pitch of the traffic rose a note, and the feel of the air told him that the sun had gone down behind the opposite cliff of buildings, Buoso's face relaxed a bit in its stillness; he stretched his legs and turned his face as though he were peering into the crowd for a familiar face. If the bank clock struck a quarter past four and Buoso had not found what he wanted, he began to fidget—he frowned and rubbed his knees and forgot to touch his forehead when a coin clinked in his hat.

He was waiting for Beppe, and on the afternoon when the train of events began which made the stuff of this story, Beppe was late. It was not until the bank clock had struck the half that Buoso heard the light quick step in the crowd. A maze of fine wrinkles appeared suddenly in the old man's face, changing it from a mask to a countenance full of life and fine feeling; he put out his hand.

"Ah, *pichino*," he said; "you are late."

The boy put his hand within that of the beggar and dropped into place beside him. The old man bent his body and the lad sat within the crook of it; for an instant Buoso's hand wandered hungrily over the boy's face.

"I came as quickly as I could," said Beppe; "we had a row at my house. The mother came home and she could not get up the stairs, and when Tony Basso's mother came to help her, they both fell down. Oh, it was a fine time! Finally a policeman came and took her up."

Buoso listened to the peal of angelic laughter that ended the story with only appreciation of its beauty. Moral standards become a bit twisted in a state of chronic poverty; a drunken mother is rare among Italians, but even so, the beggar saw only the amusing side of the story, and smiled as he thought of the cheering crowd, the shuffling feet of the woman, and then the *bump, bump* as she came down the stairs.

"Well, *pichino*," he said, "you must not keep the old man waiting another time. Be kind to the unfortunate and God will reward you."

Beppe did not pause to think of this moral proposition; his mind was bent on playing the game which of all those he played in the city streets he loved best.

"Tell me," he said, "what is in the street."

"First," chuckled the beggar, "there is in front of me a big automobile with glass around it, and I will wager, *ragazzo,* that there is in that automobile a vase with flowers in it."

A tiny pressure of the lad's hand told him that he was right.

"Behind there is a small wagon with one horse, and on the wagon there are some boxes—two, at least. Beyond that is an empty wagon with three horses, and somewhere near here is a wagon with greenery on it. In the middle of the street there is a mounted policeman."

He broke off to touch his forehead and say, "God reward you, miss. It is a week since you have passed."

The child looked up at him.

"How did you know it was a week since she had passed?" he said.

Buoso smiled and touched his nose while the wrinkles came and went about his eyes like the changing wimple of smooth running water.

"My nose, *pichino,*" he said. "When I cannot see people and remember them by their faces, I remember them by their footsteps. Her I know by the scent she uses. I remember perfumes, Beppe, as you remember chins, noses, and eyes. I can hear the policeman's bridle clink, and before you came his horse stamped. I can smell the greenery, and I heard the boxes scrape as some one put them on the little wagon. As for the big wagon—three horses have twelve feet, and twelve feet do not sound like eight."

"Yes," said Beppe; "but the flowers in the automobile?"

"Ah, Beppe," chuckled the old beggar proudly, "the door closed, and I knew it was filled with glass. Then a lady passed, and my nose told me that she was rich, and I have been told that there are always flowers in the carriages of the rich. God bless you, sir."

He touched his forehead again as a coin fell into his hat. Buoso took up the battered felt, emptied the contents into his hand, and fingered them rapidly. He got nimbly to his feet and put on his hat.

"He is a big man," he said, "and puts his feet down heavily. He wears soft heels, but one foot turns out as he walks and makes his shoe scrape. He gives me something every other day. Come, *pichino,* my day is done. The sun is gone, and this cold building is hard on my old back"

Buoso could almost have made his way unaided in a strange city; he could have walked straight back to his lodging as he walked from it in the morning; but it pleased him to shuffle with his hand on Beppe's shoulder, and to pause at every curb and say, "Is it safe, Beppe? Is it safe?"

Buoso lived in one room at the end of an alley bounded on one side by a damp brick wall and on the other by a moldering board fence. The beggar unlocked the door, and the lad preceded him into Buoso's home—a single room with two windows looking out upon a forest of clothes poles; but since Buoso was blind, the windows were not washed. But the floor was free from dirt and the place smelled fresh; whatever the beggar could smell or touch was clean.

Beppe knew his part—he took a tin wash

basin from the table and filled it with water at the tap in the alley. The old man washed his face and hands carefully, and Beppe threw out the water into the alley. Buoso dried his hands, then walked without hesitation to his chair and sat down. Beppe jumped to his knees and then began that part of the game which the boy did not understand, but which he tolerated because the rest of the play was such fun.

Slowly, as one puts off a pleasure so keen as to be almost painful, Buoso touched the light cloud of silken hair, then the long fingers wandered over the smooth forehead, caressed the low ridge over the eyes, and then slipped quickly down the lovely curve from eye to chin. Again and again the beggar's fingers made that quick movement while the old man's hand trembled from pure joy, and the net work of fine wrinkles brought an infinity of meaning into the old face. He fingered delicately the rounded chin and throat and the curving full lips; his fingers hovered over the lad's eyes as though he would sense their clear color.

"Buoso," said the boy suddenly, "have you ever seen a circus parade?"

"No," said Buoso, whose finger-tips slipped to Beppe's throat as the boy began to speak; "what is that?"

The lad looked up at him with a child's never ending curiosity about a cripple.

"Haven't you ever seen an elephant?" he said.

"How should I see an elephant," chuckled Buoso, "who sees nothing. But as I come to think of it I may have seen a circus parade as much as I see anything. I remember once there was talk of such a thing, and on that day there was such a crowd that more than one person stepped on my legs."

"And what was it like?" asked Beppe; "what was the circus parade like to you?"

"All noise," said Buoso, "and funny smells."

"But every day," persisted Beppe, "you tell me just what is in the street. Tell me what was in the parade."

"First, *ragazzo,*" said the old man, as he covered the boy's hand with a grip light but firm enough to tell him all that passed in Beppe's mind; "first there were many horses with people riding them, for I could hear the leather creak. A man like me must make other people see for him, and I do not know exactly all that passed, but I know that when a crowd says 'Oh!' it is something big, and when the crowd laughs it is something funny. There must have been many big things in this parade, for the people said 'Oh!' more than once, and laughed a great many times. After the riders came a great many horses hitched together, for I heard the chains dragging, and then a big wagon with wheels covered with wood. It must have been a high wagon, for I heard a woman's voice on the top of it, and that voice was high in the air. There were many such wagons, and on one of them a band.

"Then the people began to say 'Oh,' and I said 'Oh' with them, for a beggar must do what the crowd does—when it laughs he must laugh, too. That is better than whining. Then came many wagons with strange animals in them—strange because people do not draw in their breath at the sight of a horse. I could smell all these animals, and I thought what torment it must be to be shut up in a dirty cage. There were many other things in the parade, but no one told me what they were; but at the end there was a wagon with a fire in it and noisy music. That is what a circus parade is to me."

Buoso felt the lad look at him, and felt his amusement in the movement of his fingers.

"And you did not see the elephants?" asked the boy.

"How could I see them, *ragazzo?* Am I not blind?"

"And you do not know what one is like?"

"I could guess."

"Go on, then!" cried Beppe, clapping his hands. "Tell me what an elephant is."

"First he is big," said the beggar; "but he puts his feet down easily. He walks *hunff, hunff, hunff, hunff.* A horse throws his feet at the ground, but these walked along like great cats."

"Yes, but what are their heads like?" asked Beppe; "and their bodies and tails?"

"Heads like horses," said the beggar; "big horses."

Beppe threw back his head and laughed. "And tails like horses?"

"Yes. And probably they neigh as horses do, and have hair all over their bodies, and I think that the man who drives them puts a bitt in the elephant's mouth."

This was too much for the boy—he laughed until he rolled in the beggar's arms. Buoso listened to the clear sound with his finger-tips on the boy's lips.

"Laugh, *pichino,*" Buoso then said. "Yes; laugh at the old man. But when one is blind, he does not see elephants and other things as clearly as most people do. But there are some things that he does know, and one is that you have been eating sweets. You washed your face, but there is one speck left."

"And you don't know what snow is?" said the boy, who never tired of getting the blind man's impression of the world; "and rain, and buildings, and everything?"

"Snow?" said Buoso; "yes. It is cold and small. I love snow — especially the first that comes. Snow makes a fine Christmas, and then people give to the poor. Christmas time is fine with all the greenery in the streets, and a little bell ringing by my place where they are collecting money for dinners for the poor. That little bell rings all day long. Yes, I know what snow is. It comes down and touches your face with a hundred tiny fingers—just as I touch your face, Beppe."

The old man drummed lightly with his finger-tips on the lad's cheeks.

Beppe thought for a minute and then said: "Yes, but what is the color of snow?"

"The same color."

"The same color as what?"

"As everything. Beppe, there is no color for me, and I never saw color, for I was born blind. Things are only cold or warm, hard or soft, or I like the smell or I do not. So I think that things are hard color or soft color, cold color or warm color, and so on. Buildings are sometimes cold color and sometimes warm color. I go along the street, and sometimes I feel nothing but the warm, and then I pass a great building with people coming in and going out, and then I feel only the cold color."

"That is the sun," said the boy triumphantly. "When the sun gets behind the building you feel the cold color, and when it is in front you feel the warm."

"Oh, is it?" said the old man in quiet amusement. "Is that it?"

"Yes," said the boy, jumping off his knees, "and it is time that I went home."

"To be sure," said Buoso, with a last passionate fingering of the boy's face, "and now that you are going, I will tell you what an elephant is like. I told you he had a head like a horse, but he has not—his head is long and smooth and round; at least his nose is. I told you what I did because I wanted to hear you laugh, and because I must teach you not to make fun of your elders too soon. No one ever told me what an elephant is like, *pichino,* but as I sat by the curb something touched me, and I put out my hand. The big feet were going *hunff, hunff, hunff,* and I touched something that was round and smooth and blew breath on me, so that it must have been a part of the face. And since he is so big his head must be far from the ground, and this that touched me must be a long nose. It was smooth, so I think he has not hair on him like a horse. A man spoke to him, and his voice was high above me, and the voice went away with the big feet, so I think he rode on the top of a big elephant. And if he is smooth all over, I do not think he has a tail like a horse either."

Buoso lay back in his chair and laughed while the lad was silent. Beppe's pride was a bit touched, and he tried to save himself by saying: "Yes, but what is a camel like?"

"You are the winner," said the beggar; "all I know is that he is not so big as the other, and that his feet spread like sponges when he walks. That is all I know of camels. But it is time for you to go to see what has become of the mother. Do not keep me waiting again to-morrow nor the next day nor the day after that nor any day as long as Buoso is above ground." He touched the boy's face again and Beppe slipped out. Buoso lay back in his chair listening to the patter of his feet in the

alley with the fine wrinkles playing over his face and his hands in the air as though he were still touching the smooth curve from eye to chin.

Every man has somewhere in him the craving for beauty; as Matthew Arnold said the hairy progenitor of man—probably arboreal in habit—had somewhere in him the need for Greek poetry, else that poetry would never have come to exist. Buoso had been denied the beauty of color—he could not see the changes in the sky. He lived for the most part in a sink of odors; everything that he touched outside his own abode was grit or grease, and the roar of traffic was a discord of jarring sounds. Beauty had come to him one day when Beppe had stumbled into his lap, and touching the boy's face he had found the answer to all his pent up craving for loveliness.

As he sat now with his hands in the air and the sound of the boy's footsteps becoming only a memory, little by little the wrinkles vanished from his face and it became again the stony mask. He sighed and rose, and with firm steps set about preparing his supper. He would eat without tasting his food, sleep, and only begin living again when he heard that quick, short step in the roar of traffic.

II.

Beppe did not come the next day. As the bank clock struck four the old man turned his head and the wrinkles began to play about his eyes and mouth. The clock struck the quarter and the half, and still Beppe did not come. Buoso's head drooped, and he rubbed his knees and fumbled with the laces of his shoes. He forgot to touch his forehead when the coins fell into his hat. When the flood of office workers had passed him, and the only traffic left in the streets consisted of mail trucks, he rose and stumbled across town. He paused at his own door, thinking that by a miracle the lad was waiting for him inside; he flung open the door, and the complete desolation of the place struck him like a blow.

The beggar spent a sleepless night and was late in getting on his station the next morning. Beppe did not come; he waited until the bank clock struck six and then went toward home. For the first time he stopped at every curb and waited for help to cross the street. At home he sank into his chair, feeling terribly old, and for the first time painfully conscious of his blindness. Hitherto it had been a thing in the course of nature no more to be blamed than cold weather or rain, but now that his treasure was gone, he felt that if only he had his eyes he might find it again.

Beppe did not come the third day, and Buoso spent a mournful night in his chair. In the morning he did not go to his place against the office building; he pulled out the box from under his bed and counted the money tucked away in the corner of it in a leather bag. He would have liked to buy Beppe outright from his mother, but he made only enough from his begging to keep soul and body together, and the amount which he had squeezed out of his earnings was just enough to give him a decent burial with a fair string of empty carriages following his coffin.

He captured a small boy at the end of his alley—one who knew Beppe and knew where the lad's mother might be found. The boy led him through a maze of alleys, and then up the worn pair of stairs down which Beppe's mother had fallen. When the lad had left him he tapped on the door with his stick; he got no response, but could hear the woman's heavy breathing. Buoso pushed the door open and entered—the feel of the place was distasteful to him, but he knew that Beppe's mother was kind to the lad, and that Beppe never went hungry. He tapped on the floor with his stick, heard her move.

"Saints preserve us!" she yelled as she awoke and saw the blind man.

"It is only Buoso," said the blind man; "where is Beppe?"

"Beppe?" she said. "He is not here. Beppe does not live with his poor mother any more." She burst into alcoholic tears.

"Where is he?"

Her hazy mind became suddenly suspicious—she saw in the old man a spy from the school authorities, an agent of the So-

ciety for the Improvement of the Condition of the Poor.

"And why?" she said, "do you want to know? What have you to do with Beppe? He is my son—my only son, and he must care for his poor old mother who has slaved for him and toiled—"

"Hush!" said the beggar, stamping his foot, "I want to know where the boy is."

"Then go find him!" answered Beppe's mother. "I don't know where he is."

All of Buoso's unhappiness turned to rage; he put out his hands and made two sure steps toward the woman. His white eyes rolled and his face became dark. Beppe's mother shrieked.

"Be quiet!" said Buoso, and at the sound of his voice she ceased screaming.

"Now will you tell me where the child is?"

"His stepfather has him—I do not know where the boy is. Pietro came back after he had been gone two years—I did not want to have anything to do with him, but he say the boy and took him away with him. I do not know where he lives, and I do not think any one does but Pietro himself and the boy."

"You let Beppe go—you let him out of your sight?"

"What could I do? Pietro was the best friend of Beppe's father, and when he died —may his soul be out of purgatory by now —he said that Pietro should be the boy's guardian. I do not know where he is or what he is doing with the boy. You know that I cannot interfere with a man like Pietro—it is best to let sleeping dogs lie." She made a movement as of a throat being cut. "Seven men, according to gossip, have crossed Pietro, and none of them live."

Buoso bent his head in thought. He was sure that the woman was lying to him—if she had wanted to keep the lad she could have done so, for even that law within the law, which works so powerfully with Roman and Neapolitan immigrants, would not give the boy to Pietro as long as his mother lived.

"I think he is making a man of Beppe," she went on; "he must be teaching him a trade."

That could only mean that Pietro was making a pickpocket or some other sort of thief out of Beppe. Buoso bent his head in grief, for he knew that if this were the case Beppe would be kept close so that his face would not become too well known.

"Then he will not come to see me," sighed the old man. He felt no horror at Beppe's future — he had known many a pickpocket who had given to him with religious regularity. Like all men who love beauty, his love was a bit selfish—he thought only that he had a short time to live, and in that short time he would no longer "see" Beppe. He felt about with his stick for a chair and sat down.

"Does the boy ever come to see you?" he said wearily, and passed his hand over his eyes.

"Sometimes — not often. Pietro sends him to me on an errand now and then."

"The next time he comes you must let him come to me!" said Buoso earnestly. "God will reward you for it, for we must be kind to the afflicted. I will bless you if you send him to me; if not I shall curse you all my days, and after my death my curses will reach you from out of purgatory."

"Saints preserve us!" said the woman, crossing herself. "I will tell him to come to you."

But it was three mournful days before Buoso heard the quick, light step through the roar of traffic.

"*Pichino!*" he cried, and seized the boy's hand in his own trembling one.

"Only for a minute," said Beppe as the old man's hand wandered hungrily over his face. "Pietro sent me to the mother, and I must get back to him soon."

"Beppe," said Buoso, "tell me where I may find Pietro."

"I cannot tell you that," said the boy; "he made me swear never to tell."

"Ah, but the old beggar would never tell a soul," said Buoso coaxingly; "and what has a brave man like Pietro to fear from a blind man like me?"

"I don't dare to tell," said Beppe; "he made me swear on the knife not to tell where he lives."

The boy was already fidgeting to be

gone; Buoso held one arm tight and put his finger-tips on the lad's cheek.

"Tell this Pietro," he said tremblingly; "tell him that I must see you a short time every day. Tell him that I will pay as much as a blind beggar can pay. I have not long to live, and unless I see you I shall be under ground soon! It is not kind to torment an old man. You need not come here—I will see you in my room or in Pietro's room, where he can hear every word that passes between us. I will live in the gutter and pay him all I can. *Pichino!*"

The boy stood dumb before this display of emotion—he did not know what kind of a game this was, but whatever it might be he did not like it, and shifted uneasily from one foot to the other.

"I will tell him," he said, "and I must go now. But first give me what the mother said you would give me for her."

Buoso understood, and smiled bitterly. The woman's pious intention had not lived long. He emptied the handful of small coins from his hat into the boy's hand.

"You will tell me what Pietro says," said the old man earnestly; "you must promise to come and tell me what he says."

"Yes," said Beppe hurriedly, waited for the trembling touch on his cheek and hurried away. There was one ray of hope in Buoso's mind as he stumbled across town; perhaps Pietro would be moved by his appeal and let the lad come to him as before. But that hope died as he waited almost a week without hearing Beppe's footsteps. The old man's face became stonier than ever—he went to his station only in the afternoon, and then only because he feared to miss the lad. Every man takes some pride in his work—even a beggar. Buoso had loved to count up his coins at the end of the day and reckon how much a certain trick of face or voice had brought him. All that was gone; he did not touch his forehead when a coin clinked in his hat, he cut his day by three-quarters, and spent the rest of the time mourning in his chair.

When Beppe did come finally, Buoso felt from the touch of his hand that the boy was in a hurry to be gone, but before he or the lad spoke, Buoso's fingers had followed that swift curve from eye to chin.

"What did Pietro say?"

"He said nothing at first," said Beppe, "and then he laughed when I told him how your voice had trembled. Then he swore, and said that my time was too valuable to be spent with an old faker like you, and that I was to keep off the streets. He sent me to my mother, and I came here to you. If he knew it he would beat me."

Buoso struggled to his feet, spilling the coins out of his hat. Beppe darted away, and without stopping to wait for those kind people who went for his scattered coins, Buoso hurried home.

Buoso's mind was made up—he could not let the boy go without a struggle. Once home he sank into his chair for a moment, then rose and walked to his bed with sure steps. He drew from under it the wooden chest, and opening it, weighed the bag of coins in his hand. In his world there was not much that money could not buy; if he had been rich enough he could have bought Beppe outright from his stepfather, but he knew that the price of the lad was far beyond him. He sighed, put the leather bag back, and took from another corner of the box a bone-hilted knife. He went back to his chair, and rolling up his sleeve, felt the gaunt muscles of his right forearm and shoulder, then ran his thumb along the edge of his knife.

III.

Buoso went to see Beppe's mother twice more, and each time he took a few coins from the leather bag. He saw Beppe again as the result of the first visit, but it was only after a week of unhappy waiting. He heard the boy's step one evening as he sat in his chair sharpening the knife on the side of his shoe. When he had put the weapon out of sight he sprang to the door and flung it open. Beppe stumbled at the threshold and said: "Oh, Buoso, you have no light!"

"Why should I, *pichino*," said the beggar as his trembling hands found the lad's face, "when I live in darkness all the time? What is more, I shall not turn on the light, for I want you to see what it is to live in darkness as I do."

Buoso had another reason back of that—he wanted to find out where Pietro lived,

and he was sure that Beppe would not tell him outright. He must find it out by indirect means—by the almost imperceptible movements of hand and head by which he had learned to read Beppe's mind and heart. If the room were lighted, the boy's attention would wander; as it was he climbed to Buoso's knees a bit awed and quiet at the still darkness.

Buoso put one arm about him and drew his head against his breast and covered one of the boy's hands with a grasp light yet firm enough to feel every tiny movement of the small fingers. Buoso knew that Pietro lived in the general direction of the cathedral; so much Beppe's mother had told him, but beyond that he knew nothing.

"*Ragazzo,*" he said, "tell the old man something."

"What?"

"Where Pietro lives."

"Oh," said Beppe, as his fingers closed in fear, "I dare not tell. You know he made me swear on the knife never to tell."

"Not even to me, who can do him no harm?"

"No."

"As if," chuckled the beggar, "I did not know already! As if the old Buoso did not know where Pietro lives just as he knows that there are flowers in the automobiles of the rich and what an elephant is like!"

Beppe raised his head, but Buoso drew it back again to his breast.

"Where then?" said Beppe. "Where does Pietro live?"

"Will you tell me if I am right?" said Buoso; "will you answer 'Yes' when I tell you where he lives?"

"I will tell you if you are right," said Beppe, with his mind intent on the rules of this new game; "but only when you tell me just where he lives. If I said 'Yes' and 'No' to other questions, then I would be telling you where he lives."

"Well," said Buoso, as he tightened his grip on the boy's hand so as not to lose any of its movements, "he lives toward the cathedral, and not so many steps from here, either."

Beppe did not know that his hand closed a trifle and that his head moved, but the beggar knew it.

"Let me think," went on the blind man. "Leaving my room you cross the street that has the car-tracks on it, then the one that has no car-tracks, then the street that has a photographer's case on the corner." As he spoke he had fallen into a rhythm, and Beppe thinking of his journey toward Pietro fell into that rhythm and nodded as he checked the streets off in his own mind. After Buoso had spoken of the street on the corner of which stood the photographer's case Beppe's head was still and the blind man knew that the house he sought was in the block beyond that street. It could be on but one side of the avenue, for on the other a car-barn filled the whole block.

"As far as the door is concerned," said the beggar, "perhaps I do not remember correctly, but you cross the street after you touch the photographer's case and on the opposite corner is a saloon and next to that is a door that opens on some stairs. And then," he went on, falling again into the rhythm, "you pass the first door, the second door, the third door, the fourth door—" He was counting just a fraction of a second behind Beppe's nodding head—the boy was still after he had named the fourth door, and Buoso was certain that the entrance he sought was the next.

"There you are, *pichino!*" he said. "It is the fifth door after you pass the stairs. Did I not say that I knew where Pietro lived?"

"What is the use of having eyes," said Beppe, "when a blind man knows as much as most men who can see?"

"Ah!" said the old man, letting the boy's hand go and releasing the slight pressure that held the small head against his shoulder. "I once heard a man talking on a street corner, and he said, 'They have eyes, but they see not.' If he had known me, *pichino,* he would have said, 'He has not eyes, but he sees.' You may be sure that I will never tell another soul where Pietro lives and do you not tell him that I know. He might be angry with both you and me. I will swear that you have a fine place to live in—a better one than this. Pietro is a great man, and he must have many rooms. Isn't that so?"

"No," said Beppe, "he has one—like yours here. It is a dark place like this."

"And is there a light in it?"

"Yes, an electric one. I can just reach it when I stand on a chair. Sometimes it swings out of my way and turns around and around so that I cannot get the black button."

"You can just reach it when you put a chair against the wall," said Buoso.

"No! The light is in the middle of the room on a long cord."

"But surely there are other lights in the room."

"No."

"I don't think it is such a fine place then," said the beggar scornfully. "If I had my eyes I would have a dozen, fifty, a hundred lights, and I would have them all burning at once just to see them shine."

The boy was silent at this prospect.

"But when the light is turned off at night," went on the old man, "other lights must shine in through the windows and make the place like day."

"Oh, no!" said the lad quickly. "The windows are blocked up, and since it is on the ground floor there is no skylight. When the light is turned off it is as dark as—as dark as a closet."

"And so the room has but one light?" chuckled Buoso. "What a stupid man Pietro must be not to take advantage of his eyes and have many lights! It is silly to have only one hanging over his bed."

"No, no, no!" laughed Beppe. "The light is not over the bed—the bed is in the corner."

"Then it must be over a table. A light should be over something so that a man can read or look at things by it."

"The middle of the room is clear," said Beppe. "I could play hop-scotch there."

"Then the bed is in the left-hand corner?"

"No! In the right as you come in."

"Well, I give it up, *pichino*. You must forgive me, for a man who has been long without his eyes does not grasp things as readily as one who has seen things all his life. He must make others see for him, and even then he does not know very much, for there are very few who will tell him what they see. The saints will bless those that do. In our blind heads we build up a world out of what people tell us."

"There," said the boy, putting his hand on the wrinkled face, "I will tell you just what is in the room. As you come in the door there is a bed in the corner which is opposite from your vaccination side—"

"The right," said Buoso.

"And across from the door near the wall is a table with a box under it. All around the room are boxes, but there are no chairs but one, and that always stands by Pietro's bed. He keeps cigarettes and matches on it. The boxes are tight up against the wall. Have I made you see it?"

"Yes, *ragazzo*, but where do you sleep?"

"I put a blanket on the boxes and make myself a bed there. Pietro locks the door and turns off the light and I stay there all night most of the time. It is fine."

"Oh, then the door has a lock?"

"Yes, Buoso. How stupid you can be! What door has not a lock?"

"Never mind that. This door has a lock then, on the outside—"

Beppe threw back his head and laughed.

"This lock is on the inside!"

"And Pietro keeps the key in his pocket like a wise man."

"No, no, no! The key stays in the lock."

"And do you always sleep there?"

"No. Sometimes I go to my mother and stay there all night long."

"Well, Beppe," said Buoso, "thank you for telling me all this that I cannot see for myself. I shall have just so much more stored in my head to help me through life. I cannot read and I am curious—so that when I find some one who will tell me something, I ask him all about it. I will keep you no longer, or the mother will not let you come again."

He touched the lad's face with a swift, fleeting caress and opened the door for him.

IV.

THAT night Buoso slept well and the next day he went to confession. After that he went to see Beppe's mother for the second time, and then went begging with some

of his old zest. Even so, it was an unhappy week until a knock came on his door and a child's voice said, "Beppe's mother says Beppe is at her house." Buoso slipped a coin in the messenger's hand, sighed deeply, put on his hat and laid his tattered overcoat on his arm, and set out toward the cathedral. He walked with his stick trailing along the curb—crossed a street that had car-tracks on it, crossed one that did not, and then swung in until he touched the photographer's case. Beyond that he touched the bulging front of a saloon, then a stairway, and counting three doorways from that, turned in. At the end of a passage he found a door, he tried it and found it locked. He tapped with his stick and a voice from within said, "Yes?"

"It is I," said Buoso, "Buoso, the blind beggar, with a message from the *maestro*."

The *maestro* might be any one from the boss of the ward to the head of a secret society—in any case, Buoso knew that the word would catch the ear of Pietro and win him admittance. He heard a bed creak and feet crossing the floor.

"What is the news?" said Pietro from within.

"I cannot shout it in the street," said Buoso; "this is not news to be scattered over the city. Let me in."

He heard Pietro cross the floor, heard the click of the button which turned on the light, and then a lock turned and he heard the door swing open before him. Buoso took two measured steps straight ahead, took off his hat and felt the warmth of the light above him. He knew that he stood in the middle of the room and the plan of it was absolutely clear in his mind—a table in front of him, a bed in the right-hand corner, and boxes against the walls.

"The news, Gianni," he said, "is that—"

"Gianni!" said Pietro. "I am not Gianni; I am Pietro."

"Body of God!" said the beggar. "What an affliction is mine that should lead me to you instead of leading me whither I meant to go. I must have lost count of the streets, or was it of doorways? Where I made the wrong turning I do not know, but it is certain that I have come to the wrong place. Let me think but a moment and get my plan clearly in mind, for I must find Gianni to-night."

The beggar stood still, moving his lips and checking off his fingers as though counting the turnings. Pietro watched him for a time, then Buoso heard him go back to his bed and light a cigarette. The beggar wrapped his coat about his left arm.

"But now that I am here, Pietro," he said, "there is a matter about which I would talk to you. I am an old man, Pietro, and blind. There is one thing that I love—only one thing that I enjoy while you enjoy fifty."

"Yes?" said Pietro sleepily.

"That is Beppe, your stepson. He used to come to me every day, and when he was with me it was almost as if I could see. Since he has stopped coming I have wished that I were dead. I sent word to you that I would pay as much as a beggar could pay if you would let him come to me, but since then I have not seen him at all. You said that the boy was too good for an old faker like me."

"How much could you pay?" said Pietro.

"I beg enough to feed me and lodge me and clothe me, and I put something by each week so that when I die I shall have a decent burial. I could give very little."

"Nonsense!" laughed the other. "A man with a face like yours ought to be rich. I know—you beggars are the richest of us all. I will swear you have a pile of gold in the bank as big as my head. What was it about Romano—that man with the withered arm? When he died they found he had thousands in the savings bank."

"I know nothing about him," said Buoso, shaking his head. "I know that I keep body and soul together and not much more. It is not my business what you do with the boy—I am no spy from the school board wanting to know why Beppe is not with the other children, for he is of school age. All that I want is to see him as I used to see him—once every day. I have not long to live, and God will prosper you if you are kind to those who are afflicted. I was born blind—the boy is my sight—my music—my—are you listening?"

"Yes," yawned Pietro, "but you cannot see the boy. No one has enough money to

take him from me. I need him and I do not want his face to be seen in the streets—it is too easily remembered. What a brute you are to come and ask me to give up my son. Do you not think that I love the boy?"

A dark flush passed over Buoso's face at the bantering tone, but he answered patiently: "I do not ask you to give him up—I ask only to see him as I used to see him. He need not come to me in the street; I will see him in my room or here where you can hear every word that passes between us."

"No."

Buoso backed toward the door.

"Is that your answer to me?"

"Yes."

"You are a man with nerves of steel and a heart of iron," sighed Buoso with his head drooping; "one cannot talk to you as he would to any other man." His left hand had crept behind him; he turned the key softly in the lock and slipped it into his pocket. He took two swift, sure steps to the middle of the room, whipped out his knife, and broke the light above his head into a thousand fragments. His enemy caught a glimpse of the blade before the light broke; the next instant he was in darkness, and the beggar had taken two swift steps to the bed and struck. The knife whizzed past Pietro's ear and buried itself in the bed-clothes.

The beggar leaped back to the middle of the room—put up his hand and touched the jagged socket above his head. He stood with his ears straining; he could hear his own heart beating fast, and in another corner of the room he heard Pietro's heavy, broken breathing. The seconds ticked slowly by—Buoso sensed something new; he could feel from the presence of a person whether or not that person pitied him; he could feel that any one was happy to see him, but this was something new, a strange element tingling in the air. Then he remembered that his own breath came as Pietro's was coming whenever he put out his foot and trod on emptiness.

Pietro, the great knife-fighter, was afraid, and the old man knew it and chuckled.

"Pietro," he said, "have you changed your mind? I am asking such a little thing—it is silly for a man to lose his life over a five-year-old boy. You are a great fighter, Pietro, but in the dark I am your equal, and you know it. Will you bargain with me?"

"Body of God!" said the other. "What a devil you are! Yes, let us consider. Who would have thought that an old blind man would fight!"

Buoso heard his breath become easier and sensed the relaxing of his enemy's muscles.

"I still offer to pay you what I can," said Buoso, "it is not much. I will send you every day all that I make above my living and the bit that I put by to bury me."

"But when the boy is with you," said Pietro, "you ought to beg more. If you were a wise beggar you would put him in front of you and shuffle along with your hand on his shoulder. Whenever he saw a woman he could put out his cap. Buoso, you would be rich within a few years."

"You mean that you would be rich," said the old man, "for I am sure that Pietro would get the lion's share of anything the lad did. No, I will not beg with him—that is not why I want him."

"Very well," said Pietro, moving in his corner, "I agree to let Beppe come to you every day as he did before. Who wants to risk his life fighting with a blind man in the dark!"

"It is a bargain, then," said Buoso, trembling, "and I am to see the boy every day as before?"

"Yes."

"Beppe!" cried the old man, letting his arm drop and speaking as though the boy were in the room, "*pichino!*"

But the feel of the place tightened again; he heard the scrape of Pietro's footsteps; the beggar jumped, but not quickly enough to miss the point of his opponent's knife. It slit his coat in an ugly upward cut. The old man put out his hand and touched the door—in the sudden rush of rage that came over him he struck blindly again and again.

"Judas!" he choked, then swallowed his anger and bent his head. He could hear Pietro's breathing and he knew that

the other was frightened again. The picture of the room was blindingly clear in his mind and he felt the presence of his opponent in the corner by the bed. Buoso wrapped his coat more carefully about his left arm and started on tiptoe toward Pietro. The other retreated from him, striking and cursing, while the old man followed with his head bent and his intense ears gathering in every telltale sound.

There was something terrible in the slow, sure footsteps of the blind man; Pietro felt it and screamed suddenly, "Help!" But when he lifted his voice, Buoso drowned it with his own shouting, "Help for Buoso, the blind man! Help!" In the sudden stillness that followed the shouting Buoso heard the creak and scrape of wood.

"Pietro," he said, "the table will not save you!"

He leaped back to the center of the room, got his bearings by the dangling light socket, then bent and ran in toward the table. His knife touched cloth and then flesh and Pietro screamed.

"Devil!" he yelled, jumping off the table. "Help!"

Buoso cried with him and stamped on the floor with his feet, then in the succeeding stillness heard the breathing of his man and leaped toward him.

"Buoso!" chattered his enemy. "I promise! I will give you the lad, I will give you anything if you will let me go! Keep away from me, you blind devil; keep away!"

His voice rose to a panicky scream; his hands touched the wall and he turned and struck at it as though he would beat his way out.

"Judas!" said the beggar. "Judas!"

A rat ran along a beam in the building—the pattering of the footsteps confused Buoso, and when he struck again he missed. In the street, too, he heard a confused sound and a police whistle, and he knew that he must finish soon. He strained every sense to hunt his man, found him by the sound of his hands on the wall, caught Pietro's knife in his coat, and struck. The other fell to the floor with a sobbing groan, and Buoso, still holding Pietro's knife in the folds of his coat, chose his spot and struck again. Then he leaped to the middle of the room.

"Help!" he shouted. "Help for Buoso!" He unlocked the door as the first hands were laid upon it, and shivering at the smell of blood in the room, told his story to those who poured in—among them a sergeant of police.

"I came here," he said, leaning for support against the door-frame, "to see this man about his stepson—he is making a criminal of the boy. He attacked me—a sightless man. I defended myself as best I could, for I carry a knife to help me against those who would rob even a blind beggar. I called for help—any one will tell you that. God must have guided my arm, for at the first stroke I broke the light so that he could not see me. Why should an old man like me attack a great fighter like Pietro?"

Perhaps the police were too glad to have a professional bad man out of the way to press the inquiry, and even if it had been pressed it is hard to see where Buoso could be caught. At any rate, he still begs at the base of the office building and every day at four he rubs his knees and turns his head as though he were scrutinizing the crowd for Beppe. Every day the boy comes and will come as long as the old man is above-ground, for since Pietro's death Beppe lives with his mother, and his mother has a deadly dread of those white, rolling eyes.

The Purple Prisoner

by *Dixie Willson*

ONE afternoon Carrie Bain Cartright died.

Her relatives were scattered quite around the world, and of them all, only Bert Bain appeared in Key West, at her late home, when the will was read. Present, also, was the housekeeper's son, Dan Balder, an English sailor, representing the interests of his mother, who had returned to London.

The will was a shocking surprise to both of the men.

"I leave money for burial with Harvey Selton, my attorney," it read. "My small personal property will be given Martha Balder, my housekeeper. A purple diamond, my entire remaining estate, which is in the tray of my safe box, is to become the property of Hildegarde Wright, the only child of my sister Margaret."

"I thought"—remarked Bain with ill-concealed disappointment—"I thought my aunt had—rather a fortune."

"Indeed she *had*," agreed the lawyer! "she *had!* I have seen that jewel. It is one of the very few colored diamonds in existence, and is almost priceless. Your aunt told me that its possession had been her longest and greatest desire, and when she realized her coming death—all her little pile went to gratify that wish! Miss Wright is most fortunate!"

"No doubt," returned Bain dryly.

And then lawyer and nephew observed that Balder had quietly left.

Harvey Selton, as attorney, made an immediate turn into the library for the safe box. Bain followed. The broken lock and empty insides gave them a pretty good understanding of Balder's feeling.

This was distinctly a blow to Bain, who had planned, very simply, to possess himself of the purple stone, and let Hildegarde Wright, a cousin he had never seen, follow up if she could. Now the thing was complicated. He had first to get Dan Balder, which he left town at once to do—his first and only clue being that Balder had bought a ticket to New York.

Hildegarde Wright was a dreamer. She'd never had any joy but dreams—and she simply made the most of them.

It was a drab little life she'd had—beginning with her father's death and her cash-girl job when she was twelve; and from that to notions; from notions to ribbons; to gloves; to hats. Day in and day out, nothing but that, with a movie or a Sunday in the park now and then.

She lived in Mrs. Bobb's boarding-house—in a plain little room, with a white iron bed, and a corner window, and dreamed.

Early one morning fat Mrs. Bobbs came bustling down the hall and knocked at her door.

"Hildegarde!" she called excitedly. "You got a special delivery!"

Hildegarde sat up in bed, and waited a minute to be sure she had really heard it, then admitted Mrs. Bobbs with the very official-looking letter.

She turned it over, half frightened, half curious, before she ripped it open and read the typed page. Then Mrs. Bobbs heard a breathless little cry, saw Hildegarde's eyes grow startled, her face flood crimson, saw lips quiver, sudden tears overflow, and then she doubled up like a little jack-knife in the middle of the floor, her hair falling babyishly around her sobbing shoulders.

In alarm Mrs. Bobbs picked up the letter herself and read:

MY DEAR MISS WRIGHT:

As the attorney of your late aunt, Carrie Bain Cartright, I am pleased to inform you that of her estate you are left a purple diamond valued at five hundred thousand dollars. Awaiting your reply as to its disposition, I beg to remain,

Very truly yours,
HARVEY SELTON,
Attorney at Law.

Mrs. Bobbs folded the sheet and mechanically dropped it in her pocket.

"Lord A'mighty, Hildegarde!" she gasped. "You're rich, ain't you?"

Hildegarde looked up, eyes wet but shining.

"Why—yes—Mrs. Bobbs." Her voice trembled like a new little bird's. "Why—yes—I—*am*."

Like a flood of sunshine in a night the true wonder of it came over her. Springing to her feet she began straightening out her tangled yellow hair with her comb.

"Oh, Mrs. Bobbs, just think!" she cried. "It is true! You saw it, Mrs. Bobbs! I'm going to Key West myself this very day!"

The breakfast-table was abuzz with the news when Hildegarde, radiant and still aquiver, came into the room. The household looked at her with new eyes, addressed her with new graciousness, and quite made itself foolish in eagerness to serve her cream and toast and sugar.

"It's *won*derful, my dear!" gushed Miss Penroid, the French milliner. "I'm simply *crazy* to see you dolled up like you'll be when you come back! Though I don't suppose you'll live *here*, of course. But I always did say you had ought to wear clothes!"

Hildegarde listened and smiled, and thanked them, and shook hands, all the time trying to realize that she was she. Then she phoned the store, and took a ten-o'clock train for Key West.

And the next morning in Mr. Harvey Selton's office she heard the sequel!

The theft had occurred, of course, after Selton's letter to her. The matter had been followed up immediately, authorities notified, *et cetera, et cetera*. There was really nothing else to do. Mr. Selton regretted that she had not received his second letter in time to save herself the trip. He hoped it hadn't really inconvenienced her.

Remembering that Dan Balder was a sailor, Bain declined to think that finding him in New York would be difficult. A sailor, though he may turn by incident, is always sailor by instinct; though a sailor's wharf-rat streets are crooked and dark they are not long, and not wide; though they may reach the world around—cut off in New York and take up in London, cut off in London and take up in Shanghai—every one is still just the connection of another, just a winding continuation of itself, and a sailor's blood takes him along just that one way! Bain felt perfectly sure that Balder would be a quick find.

Early in the game Bain decided he himself must become a sailor. He was wise enough, too, not to be a "shiny" one. With second-hand trousers and middy, with a carefully oiled tattoo of eagle and flag, a dusty face, the beginnings of a beard and a bottle of whisky, Bert Bain went down along the shabby streets to the East River wharves, took a thirty-cent room at Teky's place, and slouched out to soak in the smell of the street.

He had no trouble picking up a "pal"—a Scotchman, whose capstrip gave him out as being of H. M. S. St. James, and whose name was Timmy McTimmy, he said.

From Timmy Bain picked up an education in sea phrase and customs, and by midnight felt himself the riffraff product of a lifetime voyage. About two of the morning they left the kegs of the wharf-shed where Timmy was bunking, and strolled along up the cobblestoned way. Lights were flickering half-bright, weary-eyed girls were shadowed in doorways, and sailors, arm-in-arm, were rocking up the street.

Presently they turned into a short alley, felt their way down three crooked steps, pushed open a loose-hung door, and found themselves in the basement of Cady's "Beggar's Hole." The air was thick with smoke and dirt and dark.

They waited a few minutes, accustoming themselves to the place. The candle on the table nearest them went suddenly out. Two chairs scraped the floor, and in the smoky light they saw two men shoot fists across the table and clinch. Three or four at other tables stood up. A girl screamed a curse. The fighters panted on for a short second. Then, like a quick rifle crack, a chair struck the floor, and one of the men plunged out of the door.

For a moment there was a surprised silence. Then the three or four who had stood sat down again. The girl laughed, and called for a drink, and the games murmured on.

Behind the table the fallen man came to his feet, breathing raspingly, and holding one wrist against his bare chest.

He was a rough fellow, not a sailor, hatless, shirtless, with ragged, ill-fitting coat and trousers. His face was a snarling mask, and in one pocket of his coat the smooth shine of steel against rough cloth announced a knife.

Timmy went over to the table, righted the fallen chair and sat down. Bain followed. The man who had fought still held his wrist tightly between thick and ugly fingers.

"Who got you, Cass?" Tim questioned.

The man spat on the fingers over his wrist, and slumped into a chair.

"Got me—hell!" he snarled. "No one ain't got me—but one bloody Englishman's going to be got hisself afore morning!"

His glinting little eyes narrowed till his brows shagged over them. He leaned across the table, snapped his lower teeth against his upper, and told them with animal greed of the purple diamond Balder had shown him.

"It's big as me fist," he rasped, "and burns like a piece o' hell! He's drunk or he wouldn't 'a' showed it—but he'll be more dead than drunk when he shows it again!"

His two hands, one still clasping the other, came down on the table—hot, thick blood oozing through the twitching fingers. His lips, alive with the pain of it, moved in ugly lines, but said nothing.

After a minute that seemed a year, Cass rose. Unconscious of what he did, Bain rose, too, and as Cass stepped toward the door, Bain took a step after him. But Cass lurched suddenly back till his ugly face came so close that Bain felt the angry heat of it.

"No white-livered sea-duck don't foller me neither!" he said through his teeth.

Bain's next conscious sensation was the slamming of the door, and Cass was gone.

"Wha's up, mate?" questioned Timmy. "How's you and Cass growling so?"

"He's going for Dan Balder, Tim," Bain almost whispered. "We must go after him!"

Timmy, possessed of that too-rare quality which will let a man serve and question nothing, led the way out.

The street was well filled, but a short half-block ahead Timmy made out Cass going toward the wharves. A pointing thumb gave the news to Bain, and keeping just close enough so the shadows didn't lose their man, they followed.

It was four minutes after three when Cass, with Bain and Timmy stealthily close, came to the tracks at the river's edge, crossed them, and turned down behind a freight-shed. It was dead black here, and the two were forced to listen before they dared follow.

Instantly Cass had found the right place. Suddenly, not five feet away from the corner where Bain and Timmy were hiding, came a thud—the sound of a silent tussle, quick, desperate breathing, a muffled cry, a panting hush. Then Cass stumbled within an inch of Bain's feet, dragging Dan Balder's body after him!

A lantern shaded with red flannel hung on a peg at the shed corner, and this Cass brought down. On the side of it toward Balder he slid the flannel up, and in the yellow-white light, began to search him. Scarcely breathing Bain and Timmy waited.

At first the search was calm and deliberate. Then Cass grew more excited, and

dug from pocket to pocket in growing fever. Then, losing control of himself entirely, his iron fingers began to pull the clothes, tear open the shoes, and scratch the chest. But he found nothing, and when he was sure he would not he rose, kicked the lantern over and out, and went away.

Bain stepped close to the body and struck a match above the face.

"It's Balder all right," he whispered, "but no use to go over him after that search!"

"No," Tim agreed; "there's no gem of no kind could live on him after that!"

The two went back again to the Beggar's Hole. They neither wanted nor intended to go back there, but they did, and four o'clock found them seated again at the table where Balder had first exposed his purple prisoner. They said little for a time. Cady, who kept the place, lit the candle between, and brought them each a drink. But for a drunken sailor asleep on the floor, the place was deserted.

Then Bain told Tim the story. It wound up his nerves as he talked, and his fingers and thumbs pressed in the candle tallow that ran down the bottle side—pinched queer shapes, and melted them out again.

"And I want that purple diamond!" he finished. "It *ought* to be mine, and I'm going to have it! I got a sight of it once, and it's like a man would die to own! Balder had it here an hour ago. It must be on him somewhere!"

Timmy offered nothing. Bain's fingers punched nervous patterns in the tallow, then suddenly he rose.

"I'm going back there," he said. "Maybe Balder wasn't dead!"

Timmy rose, too, and pinched out the candle.

"I would go back if I was you," he said. "Maybe Balder isn't dead. But here"—and he drew a blunt-nosed automatic from his trouser-band—"I'd be goin' back heeled."

"Thanks," said Bain, and took it. Out on the street again Timmy went one way, Bert Bain another.

The tallow of the candle was still puddled warmly around the bottle, its colder drops lacing up the sides, and Bain's finger-prints tracking all over it, when the door pushed open, and in came the emotionless face and queued head of a Chinaman.

Seeing no one, he opened the door wide, and turned to lend strength to a very limp, very white-faced sailor, who, once in, sank into a chair, and pointed weakly to the table Bain and Timmy had just left.

"That's it. That's the one, Fey Ong," he said. "Look close to the bottle."

Already Fey Ong's face was over the table, his fingers hurrying with a match. The instant the wick flamed up his sharp eyes caught the finger-prints marked over the tallow. A breath hissed through his teeth.

"Some one been here first!" he whispered sharply.

Weak as the sailor was he brought himself to the table, looked with fevered eyes, and saw the finger-prints. Sight of them seemed to take almost all of his remaining strength. He swayed, and closed his eyes while his fingers crept, half afraid, across the table.

"But maybe—" he said slowly. "But—maybe—"

Then he jerked forward. He tore at the tallow, and pulled it in a lump away from the bottle side. One breathless instant and the light of joy came over his pain-white face as he broke the waxen shell away from a wonderful, burning, blazing drop of purple fire!

"Just where I pushed it in," he laughed, "when Cass grabbed me.

"We'll—always keep it—in safe places—like this—Fey Ong," he went on in a weakening voice. "Here—Fey Ong—put it away—and then we'll—"

Utterly senseless he fell across the table as the stone rolled into Fey Ong's hand. The Chinaman's yellow fingers flashed together swiftly a second. Then he bent his shoulder under the middle of the unconscious man's body and bore him out into the gray end of a passing night.

Hildegarde Wright managed to return to Mrs. Bobbs's boarding-house in the silence of early morning. When the others there had said good-by she had seen her returning self in their eyes as plainly as in a mirror—

trailing up-stairs in clinging silks, with the maid she would have to pack and unpack her new possessions! Now, coming back to be smiled at, discussed, questioned, and felt sorry for, was more than she was willing to face. The sting was sharp enough when felt alone.

She had given up her position in the store—she must find another. Well, she would pack her things, leave a note, simply saying she would send for her trunk, and find another place to live. That would be much easier than making explanations. With her light shaded, she worked quietly around the room, disarranging her little belongings, and planning bravely to herself. The note written and left on her locked trunk, she slipped down-stairs and out into the chilliness of two o'clock. Across the street was a strip of park, where she sat to think it all over.

As she contrasted her expected homecoming with what had really happened, she grew bitter and was filled with resentment. The theft of the jewel had played havoc with her dreams. Her resentment gave way to tears, which in turn were dried by the fire of determination. She would go after the thief and get the diamond for herself.

"I have ten—forty—sixty-two—ninety-seven—" She counted swiftly. "A hundred and eleven dollars to hunt it with! Dan Balder is a sailor—and I will find some way—"

And then the adventure of it began to prickle her toes and ears and eyes and fingers and her thoughts and her heart, till it seemed she couldn't wait for morning. Five racing minutes she planned, and then she ran across the street, unlocked Mrs. Bobbs's door, and slipped up to her room again.

Down on her knees before the trunk, in the dark, she snapped the padlock, propped open the tray, hunted hastily through its lace and gingham. Then, with an excited smile, she tiptoed to the window, where, in the light of a street lamp, she could see the playing colors on the pearl handle of the trim little gun she fingered, and the pretty engraving of her name across its silver plate.

Pointing it at a window across the street, she touched the trigger, wrinkled her eyebrows, and clucked her tongue in an imitation game of shoot.

"I've had him four years and never had a chance to use him yet!" she said to herself in an excitement-punctured whisper, as she slipped "him" into her pocket, restored the trunk to order, and crept out again.

Somehow Bert Bain had not thought that, when he got to the shed again, Dan Balder's body, dead or alive, might be gone. But he found it *was* gone. As he stood looking blankly at the marks in the path where Balder had been, a night watchman came out of the shed and joined him.

"Lookin' fer the Englisher?" he asked.

Instantly alert, but afraid to be eager, Bert nodded.

"Chink took 'm away," the watchman went on. "Old Fey Ong, who's got that there lunch wagon."

"Was he dead?" questioned Bert.

"Mighty near," the other told him. "The Chink carted him bodily. Wanted to go to the Beggar's Hole, he said."

Without thanks or question, Bain turned heel over the tracks, through the streets, and went for the third time this night into Cady's cellar. Cady, quite alone, was looking through a pan of sawdust and dirt for possible money swept from the floor. From the doorway Bain stared at the emptiness of the place.

"Anybody been here?" he asked.

Cady laughed. "Well, I do guess so," he replied. "What a bob picked out of my table just now 'd make John D. Rockefeller hisself think somebody 'd been here! A thunder and lightning diamond as 'd buy Texas! Some honest place I got, when fellers use my candle grease for safety depositin'! He leaved it in there while a bunch o' others did murder fer it—then come back and picked it out as pretty as pickin' flowers."

Cady looked up for Bain's comment.

"By the Lord Harry!" he cried when he saw the expression on the face before him. "And you is one of the ones as is after it, too!"

"Yes, it's mine! He stole it from me!" Bain excitedly explained.

But Cady interrupted with his coarse laugh. "Yes, he stealed it from everybody as hasn't got it. I hear 'em all! Cass says he stealed it from Cass—and Bissop says he stealed it from Bissop, and—"

Bain pulled the ever-persuasive roll from his middy, and repeated without further dispute that the gem was rightfully his. He peeled off a green fifty, which brought answer much more glibly than if it had been the question its appearance made unnecessary.

"Well, Dan Balder he lost his senses after he got his rock again," Cady said, "and then the Chink carried him up to his lunch wagon two blocks, and dumped him in and got in after and pulled shut."

From where he stood Bain could see the Chink's blue wagon up the street. No one at all was on the street. Bain sauntered up toward Fey Ong's wagon. Its sides were closed, one little window specking its square rear end. A foot-high tin chimney grew out of the flat top, and across its sides Chinese words and American prices were queerly combined.

Bain wondered if Dan Balder really was inside. And he wondered if really the diamond could have been in the very candle tallow his own fingers had mushed. It was almost too sickeningly simple to believe. He leaned against the frame of a doorway and tried to plan what to do if Balder was there, or if he wasn't.

But luck certainly did seem all his way. As he hesitated a slim door in the blue wagon pushed open. Fey Ong himself came out, looked hastily around, rammed his hands in his coat sleeves, and trotted around the nearest corner up the street where the other Chinamen lived. Bain lost no time in getting in where Fey Ong had gotten out.

The place reeked with a warm odor of stale chop suey and coffee. On the bed—dead, senseless, or asleep—was Dan Balder. Bain's fingers opened and closed nervously as he stepped through the curtained door and bent over Balder's motionless body. Then a sudden flood of daylight swept into the place as, from outside, Fey Ong drew up the sides to open for his day's business.

Over the oilcloth counter he smiled, as Bain started to his feet and faced about defensively.

"You wish coffee?" he inquired.

Bain stepped into the street.

Fey Ong, smiling still, brought narrowed eyes close to the other's face.

"No one see you go *in*," he said in a soft, unruffled voice. "You call 'gain—no one see you go *out* also."

Four policemen coming to their points of duty for the day crossed the street, greeted Fey Ong genially, and requested coffee, which he busied himself to supply as Bert Bain walked away.

Hildegarde's first thought in her search for Dan Balder was his mother. A long letter to Martha, in London, told the whole story. Hildegarde knew good old Martha did not want her son sneaking through life a thief.

Martha wrote all she knew of Dan's possible whereabouts, enclosed his picture, and hoped and prayed Hildegarde would find him soon. With letter, picture, and twenty-five dollars Hildegarde went to the police.

"I'll look, too," she told the sergeant, "but of course it would be hard to find him alone. Dear me," she added wistfully, "I've worked every day of all my life! How I would love to have a pile of pretty clothes just once—and a— But I forget, and hope out loud," she finished, sweetly nervous.

The big sergeant smiled.

"I've done duty for less than a pile of pretty clothes," he said.

So Dan Balder became hunted. Cass, Bain, and Bissop—a third sailor who wanted that stone—hunting from the inside; the law hunting from the outside; and Hildegarde.

Bain managed a look in the lunch wagon's back window one night which proved that Balder was no longer there; but he knew perfectly well that Fey Ong knew how, why, and where he had gone.

Cass and Bissop, knowing nothing of the Chinaman's part in it, kept a close line on

the outgoing ships, and their movements proved that the Englishman had not gone away. So it was certain that he was hidden among the Chinese somewhere. But this was where Bain had to stop—because Fey Ong's face was a perfect mask to Bain's approaches—his ears deaf to Bain's questions, and, limit of limits, his eyes blind to Bain's money.

Fey Ong had been bailed out of jail once by Balder, Tim remembered, which probably was responsible for a deep-rooted loyalty that now made him absolutely unreachable.

Not only Fey Ong, but the rest of the yellow men on the crooked Chinese street, met Bain's questions and saw his money with expressionless eyes. Bert Bain knew that Balder was somewhere behind those doors, with that priceless jewel, but there seemed no way to touch him with finger or fact.

Timmy tried, too, but it was all the same. There was no penetrating those thick Chinese skins. An unfruitful month went by.

Of course, for Hildegarde a month had gone by too. The police had made a thorough search of outgoing ships, and of the wharf district, and the last note they could get on Balder was his fight with Cass in the Beggar's Hole.

A tramp sailor had told of Cass following up, killing him, and throwing his body in the river. Though the body had not been found, Cass had disappeared, and finally they seemed rather to accept this as the finish.

The big sergeant told Hildegarde frankly that he thought further search useless, and she as frankly melted into disappointed tears. She had so wanted that pile of pretty clothes. Her hundred and eleven dollars were gone; her dreams were all gone too. Would she just have to swallow her heart and go back to work again? The sergeant wished he could dry her tears, but they'd followed every possible clue and failed. And goodness knows he couldn't give her a purple diamond or the corresponding fortune!

But an unexpected bulldog spirit lived inside of Hildegarde, despite her daintiness. Right in the midst of her tears that spirit decided to stop crying and go on finding Dan Balder till it did find him, sergeant or no. She wiped her eyes and told him so.

"Well, little lady," he said admiringly, "go right ahead! But you'll have to be some slick!"

"Do you think I can't be 'some slick'?" she questioned defiantly, the tears still wet on her lashes.

The sergeant had no choice but to presume that she probably could be.

Six weeks passed. Bain had scarcely slept a night, so wrought up was he at the very absurdity of it all. Balder and the diamond were within a stone's throw, and he knew it. He knew all the while that it was just like the night he had punched candle tallow that had the very jewel inside of it. Just as sickeningly simple as that.

But it seemed that nothing short of a planned riot in Chinatown was going to get him inside those doors. And a riot, both for reasons of law and of profit division, Bain did not wish to afford.

Cursing, he had to stop before the silent, maddeningly expressionless inhabitants of little Chinatown. No white person ever got inside those Chinese doors but Buddy.

Buddy was twenty years old. Very little, she was, and very sweet. Her eyes were the color of a smile, and her hair, though always tangled over her ragged blue dress, was glinting warm and fragrant, like gardens in the sun.

Buddy had no folks. She called old Mackie Pell "grandad," and lived with him in a shack of a house-boat on the sand by the river. Mackie had another old sloop, and for years he had let the Chinamen of the little streets sit on this sloop and fish to their heart's content. They loved and trusted old Mackie Pell, and when Buddy came to live with him they loved and trusted Buddy too, and she went wherever she pleased in their shops and houses, fed their fat, round babies, and asked and found out anything she wanted to know.

Then one day Tim saw a policeman or

two lingering carelessly around Chinatown, and in his sage way he managed to "get a tip" that *they* were seeking Balder too; that they were seeking him for Hildegarde.

Bert Bain knew that Hildegarde, with the law, could search a Chinaman's house, where he couldn't. He got excited, knowing he must manage something before she did, now that she too was wise to the thief's whereabouts. Bain knew, of course, that she would never suspect him—she did not even know him. Once the diamond was in his hands, she'd have lost her trail. But Bain realized that he must work fast.

Tim thought of Buddy. She could find out where Balder was in that Chinese camp. So Bain went down to Mackie Pell's house-boat to see her.

Mackie Pell, and another fellow whom Buddy introduced as Mackie's friend, were grunting over a game of seven-up, so Bain took Buddy out on the sand, and there he told her all about it.

It was a pity he didn't know how little he needed to fear opposition from Hildegarde and the law. The presence of police in the Chinese street was quite accidental. They hadn't a thought of searching the place, and hadn't the slightest reason for thinking Balder there. They had, in fact, given the thing up.

But little idea did Bain have that Hildegarde was out of the running. With the one idea of pushing his own chance as fast as he could to beat her to it, he offered Buddy one hundred dollars for information as to which Chinese house Balder was hiding in.

The story made her cheeks pink with excitement, and Bain observed that she was very lovely.

"I'll give you two hundred dollars," he said, patting her fingers.

"I been round Chinatown a lot," she said, "but I never thought of lookin' for a sailor there."

There was something sweet about her eyes.

Bain laughed.

"You're damn pretty," he told her. "I'll give you three hundred dollars if you find him."

"A' right!" promised Buddy, greatly excited now. "I'll go look, and I'll tell you where he is for three hundred dollars."

Bert Bain waited all afternoon for her to come back. When the lights of boats streaked the river, and the reds and greens and blues of signals shone out, up and down the shore, she came. He heard her ragged shoes scuffing through the sand, and went up to the house-boat door to meet her. Mackie Pell's friend was with her, coming along behind, carrying a big green cabbage. Buddy had a corn-cob pipe for Mackie, and through the holes of one pocket hung the string of a new tobacco sack.

"I been spendin' my three hundred dollars," she laughed as she dropped her cabbage on the table.

"You found him!" Bain exclaimed, his voice queer in its anxiety.

"Sure I did," she replied. "He's all alone in the back room o' Wo Teng's laundry. Looks out o' the window all the time. You can talk to him easy as pie."

Feverishly Bain drew three ready hundred-dollar-bills from his blouse, which she took with eager fingers and sparkling eyes and tucked away, as he ran out across the sand.

An hour later he came plunging back again. He pushed open Mackie Pell's front door roughly. Buddy, drawn up to the table close in the circle of lantern light, was keenly studying a fashion magazine.

"Hello!" she greeted. "Find him a' right?"

His reply was short and sharp.

"Where's my diamond? Balder said you took it! Don't try anything!"

"Why, yes, I did take it," she answered. "It's here in my pocket. I'm not tryin' anything."

Her stubby little fingers scooped into the depths of her calico pocket then, brought it out, and her left hand held it at arm's length.

Bain's eyes narrowed with consuming greed as the wonderful jewel played a million reflections in the lantern light. Buddy watched it too, and laughed as it danced in her fingers. Then she closed it in her hand tenderly and caressed it with her cheek.

"I feel as though I was holdin' a star," she said.

Bain reached for her hand, and gripped the slender wrist cruelly. His fingers closed around it, into her flesh, till the knuckles were angry white.

Then, from her other pocket, her right hand brought a little gun and put the nose of it against Bain's wrist.

One instant the fighting hands flashed under the lantern light. Then Mackie's friend stepped into the doorway.

Paralyzed, Bain saw a flashing ray of light shining on a police sergeant's badge! And his crazy eyes saw something else, too.

On the pearl handle of the little gun the girl held at his wrist were the engraved letters of a name—Hildegarde Wright.

Doubles and Quits.

Part IV

by Elizabeth York Miller

Author of "Folly's Harvest," "Diana the Hunted," "The Greatest Gamble," etc.

CHAPTER XXVI.

WHAT AMY OVERHEARD.

A FRANK-FACED and very cheerful-looking young man—as though he had not a care in the world—waited patiently with some others of his sex inside the stage door of the Augustin Theater.

As far as one could judge "The Rajah" had made an instantaneous success and was in for a long run. To-night was the second night, and the passage leading to the dressing-rooms was heavy with the scent of flowers, brilliant with unshaded electric lights, and hectic with excitement.

The cheerful young man liked it all. It made him feel important to be here, waiting for one of the prettiest and cleverest girls in the show. He didn't even except the star. Loraine Drew was it in Teddie Butcher's opinion. Until this evening he hadn't rightly known that he was in love with her, but he knew it now, and he meant to tell her so. Lucky he hadn't yielded to his mother's persuasions and proposed to a certain girl—a very nice girl, too, and he liked her well enough—who had formed one of the house party at Lochdroome Castle.

He waited, most patiently indeed, until it seemed that every blessed member of "The Rajah" company must have passed out, and the black-coated fraternity had dwindled until he, alone, was all that was left of it. Loraine hadn't answered his letters or his telegram. She hadn't said she would go out to supper with him. But he knew she was careless about such matters.

Viewing her from the stalls that night he had been reinchanted.

A temporary relief from the boredom of waiting was provided by a tall, fair girl

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of his acquaintance, who was among the last to leave. A friend was with her and she tossed her head superciliously at Teddie Butcher.

"Hello, Leslie," he said cheerfully. "Good work. The show looks like a winner."

"And you look like a loser," she retorted.

Her reply bothered him. It was undignified, abrupt and savored of the rude. What had he done to Leslie Allison that she should flash back at him like that?

Then finally the girl for whom young Mr. Butcher had been waiting nearly three-quarters of an hour appeared at the end of the passage in the company of Simon Punter, the stage manager.

There were several reasons why Mr. Butcher and Mr. Punter were the merest nodding acquaintances instead of being fast friends—reasons on both sides—and Loraine Drew was one of them. Teddie snobbishly despised the little hook-nosed man as a social inferior, and Simon Punter despised all young gentlemen of independent means who wasted their time hanging about stage doors.

"I see your friend is back again," sneered Punter to Loraine, otherwise Amy Marshall. "Have you got a date with him?"

By this time Amy was quick-witted enough to grasp the smallest hint. Simon's remark gave her a clue as to the identity of the fair-haired boy who looked toward her so eagerly.

Not because she was attracted by Teddie's charms, but because the ill-concealed and growing admiration of Punter irked her, Amy replied that she had an engagement to sup with the youth, whereat the stage manager turned back with an exclamation of disgust.

Teddie grasped both of her hands in a vigorous welcome.

"What cheer! Aren't I glad to be back again in dear old London! You're simply topping, Loraine, and I've never seen you looking so well. Where shall we go? Ciro's? I say, old girl, didn't you get my wire?"

"Yes, I got it all right," Amy replied, somewhat carried off her feet by the young man's exuberance. "But I hadn't made up my mind to accept your kind invitation, so I didn't put on an evening frock."

The youth's face expressed his keen disappointment.

"Oh, I say! And I've been standing here for ages with a draft blowing down the back of my neck. You haven't got the heart to throw me over," he protested. "It doesn't matter if you aren't dressed. We can go into the grill-room. I'm as hungry as a bear, and you must be, too."

In the end she allowed herself to be persuaded. After all, she was Loraine Drew, an Augustin Theater chorus girl, and there wasn't the least bit of harm in Loraine's going out to supper with a charming young man. Nor, if it came to that, was there any harm in Amy Marshall's doing it, had inclination prompted her?

So far, however, she had steered carefully past even small temptations. Under Simon Punter's tutelage her whole heart and soul were concentrated upon perfecting herself in this profession which had been so unexpectedly thrust upon her.

Old Sponger had done Mr. Punter one injustice. She knew that in the old days he had supplied Loraine with the drug which had been her undoing, but what Old Sponger didn't know was that he had done so only under protest and mainly because he could not endure to see Loraine suffer. In his queer way Punter had been in love with her, but he had a wife and two children to think about. When Amy stepped into Loraine's shoes, he marveled at the sudden change, but he did not question it, and no one was more eager than he to advance her interests. She owed a great deal to his kindness.

Teddie Butcher had his car waiting, and as Amy allowed herself to be handed in, something in the young man's manner told her that Teddie Butcher would shortly be hers if she chose to take him. How far had matters gone between him and Loraine? She was soon to discover, for during the drive to Orange Street he made a bold attempt to kiss her.

She shrank away with a sharp exclamation of annoyance, and Mr. Butcher narrowly escaped getting his face slapped.

Obviously he was perplexed by her re-

ception of his affectionate overture, but he laughed awkwardly and tried to pass it off as a joke.

"What's the matter? Why this sudden coldness?"

"I don't care to be kissed; that's all," Amy said in a quiet, friendly way.

"I say, it's not that dashed little Jew, is it?" he asked.

"If you mean Mr. Punter, it isn't. Besides, he's married. It's—some one who's dead," she added with a soft quiver in her voice.

"Oh, you mean old Alec," Teddie Butcher said.

Evidently Alec was the name of Loraine's sweetheart who had been killed in the war, and it soon became apparent that he and Teddie had been friends.

"Do you know," the boy went on earnestly, "I don't believe Alec would mind if he knew. The stage is no life for you, Loraine. Alec hated the idea of your taking it up. I say, won't you marry me? I care for you—well, something awful. I made up my mind about it in Scotland. You know the mater's been awfully keen on making another match for me, but there isn't a girl in the world for me but you—"

"Oh, dear, *please* stop!" Amy cried. "I—I'm not the girl you think I am."

"I know all about that," he said impetuously. "Leslie Allison wrote a lot of stuff and nonsense about you. I know you used to have to take drugs because of your ankle. It worried me dreadfully, but—"

"I don't take drugs," Amy interrupted sharply. How often during the past two months had she been obliged to defend Loraine Drew's reputation from this unpleasant insinuation.

"I don't believe you do," he said. "And, anyway, it wouldn't make any difference to me. I love you."

It was so grotesque that she wanted to laugh. What if she were to tell him that this was the very first time in his life that he'd ever set eyes on her? The temptation to do so was very real.

Just then the car drew up before the famous restaurant, thus cutting short their conversation on what was to Teddie Butcher an interesting topic.

It was the first time that Amy had been to Ciro's, but she suspected that Loraine had known the place well, and so was careful to make no comments which might betray her.

The Dutch bar leading to the grill-room seemed a fascinating spot with its oak beams, blue and white checked curtains and famous caricatures. In Witcham Amy had formed a slightly erroneous opinion of what people spoke of loosely as "night clubs." Certainly nothing could be more decorous than this. The grill was sparsely filled with members and guests, acting folk for the most part, hungrily disposing of what was to them the principal meal of the day. Amy herself had come to appreciate something to eat at eleven o'clock at night, for lately rehearsals at the Augustin had been furious and prolonged.

As she sat with Teddie Butcher, who maintained his cheerfulness in spite of the dash of cold water she had chilled his hopes with, she suddenly found herself listening to the conversation of a group of three men at the next table.

With a look and gesture she silenced her companion.

The man at the next table who was doing most of the talking was quite young, but his hair was gray and a gravity dwelt in his eyes which did not belong to youth. He had seen things, he said, in comparison with which the horrors of war paled. The other two men were older and the conversation of all three, as well as something in their appearance, stamped them as members of the medical profession.

"And poor Stevenson died," one of the older men observed. "He was a good lad, and I for one predicted great things of him."

The young man with the old eyes nodded.

"It wasn't only the dying, although that was bad enough. They simply went down like flies. Only I'm wondering how many of the poor devils we buried alive. I nearly buried one myself."

A sob rose to Amy's lips and the boy opposite her leaned across with an anxious question.

"Let me listen, please," she whispered. "They—they're talking about an epide-

that happened at Quentin Prison recently. I knew a man who died of it."

The young doctor was telling his grim story now.

"It was about the worst day. I'd hate to say offhand how many we buried that day. Stevenson was one of them, I remember, and there were three warders. The governor was down, and I was half dead myself. You couldn't do a thing for the sick except drag around and give them a little water. We'd run out of medical supplies—out of pretty nearly everything. It was the nearest thing to hell I ever expect to see in this world. The feeling of not being able to escape was the worst—"

"What about the fellow you nearly buried?" one of the other men asked.

"Oh—him? Well, I'll stake my living oath he was a corpse all right when I shoved him into the quicklime pit. Ghastly hole it was, too, but I remember I had a strong inclination to lie down in it myself to save some other poor devil the trouble of dragging me there. Anything to save work. I had a shovel and began covering this corpse like mad. His face bothered me. It was such a decent face. He didn't look the sort of chap who ought to've had an end like that."

"You mean it wasn't a criminal face?"

"Not in the least. Delicate, refined—but, gad, I never want to see another with such a lost dog expression. I'm wondering sometimes if it wouldn't have been better—however, suddenly my corpse shoots up an arm at me."

The other men laughed grimly. The woman at the next table pressed her hands to her heart and stared with unseeing eyes at a particularly hideous caricature hanging on the wall opposite her. Teddie Butcher was listening now; he, too, was interested.

"And I suppose you pulled him out?" supplemented one of the young doctor's friends.

"Yes, I pulled him out, and the two of us staggered into the shade and laid down to die all over again. I think I died twenty times that day, but just as I was going off comfortably this chap I'd been reckless enough not to bury would drag himself up and find another tin of water somewhere, and what I couldn't drink just then he'd pour over my face and neck. I got quite cross with him about it, but I suppose he thought one bad turn deserved another. I'd pulled him back to the so-called land of the living, and he meant to do the same by me."

"What became of him? Did you ever get to hear his story?" one of the other men asked.

"Well, no—not exactly. He was a reticent chap. I believe he was the only prisoner I talked with in Quentin who didn't try to impress me with the fact that he was the victim of injustice. They were all 'innocent,' every blamed one of 'em, except this fellow. He never volunteered a thing about himself. After we both got well we worked together quite a lot. One of these days I hope to see him again. I gave him my address and told him to look me up some time. After all we'd been through together—well, you know how it is. Chap who's been in prison often has a rough time when he comes out. I'd give Marshall a leg up any day, no matter what he'd done. Decent a chap as you'd ever want to meet. A gentleman, if you'll excuse the expression— Hello, what's the matter here?"

A young woman at the next table had fainted.

CHAPTER XXVII.

AMY BREAKS A PROMISE.

WHEN Amy came to herself again she was in the anteroom, and the young doctor with the old eyes was bending over her while Teddie Butcher and an attendant from the ladies's cloak-room hovered in the background. She clutched the young doctor's coat with frenzied hands, as though fearing he would somehow escape before she could question him.

"You're all right, my child," he said gently. "It is a little close down here, I'm afraid. We must get you into the air. Your friend says he has a car outside—"

"Don't go—don't leave me—I want to ask you something," Amy cried.

It was rather embarrassing for the young

doctor, for her determined hold on him almost dragged him into her arms. He threw a suspicious glance at Teddie Butcher. Had she reason to fear that innocent-seeming youth?

"I won't leave you," promised the doctor, managing with a little difficulty to extricate himself.

"I heard you talking about Quentin Prison. That man—you said his name was Marshall—was he reported dead?"

"I believe he was," the doctor replied, beginning to get a little light on the cause of this pretty girl's distress. "Did you know him? Was he a friend of yours?"

"He is my husband," Amy replied unthinkingly.

Teddie Butcher started and the young doctor whistled softly.

"Shall we take her home?" he suggested to Amy's unhappy escort.

The boy nodded, and together they assisted Amy up-stairs and out to the car. Teddie gave the address of Loraine's studio.

He had never been so completely bowled over in his life. Loraine married! And to a man who had been in prison, too. He had known her, the real Loraine, casually for several years, and very well of late. He thought he knew pretty much all about her.

He was silent during the drive to Chelsea, while Amy asked the doctor a few questions, but after that first slip she made no further mention of her relation to the prisoner who had falsely been reported dead. The doctor's name she learned was Sanders.

When they reached the studio she dismissed Teddie Butcher, kindly but very firmly.

"You will forgive me, I know, for not asking you to come in, but I want to see Dr. Sanders alone," she said. "I am sure you will understand that this is a matter of great importance to me—and, thank you very much for—for everything, Teddie."

She brought out his name shyly. He was a good boy, and even in this short time she had conceived a great liking for him. Also, she feared, that on Loraine's behalf she owed him an apology and an explanation. It was quite plain that Loraine had dallied with the idea of taking his attentions seriously. Amy now realized that Loraine had been something of a heroine in giving up this young man, because she was unfit to marry him and knew that it could only end in ruining his life.

Dr. Sanders felt himself to be somewhat on uncertain ground. He could see that Amy's escort was not any too pleased to be cast off in this fashion, but her tragic earnestness could not be denied.

Poor Amy! There was her promise to Loraine—the pact they had made between them, that the old life of each should be dead. If either failed to carry through the change of identities with success, she was not to interfere with the other. Loraine had said they were "to play the game." If Amy Marshall still lived, she lived as Mrs. Peter Tremlett; and Loraine Drew was a chorus girl in musical comedy.

Teddie Butcher gave a limp shake to the hand the girl held out to him.

"I suppose it's all right to leave you like this," he muttered, casting a dark look at the ill-at-ease doctor.

"You may be sure it is all right," Amy replied firmly.

Teddie got into his car and drove off.

"I'm afraid our young friend isn't any too pleased," Dr. Sanders said as he followed Amy.

She said nothing until they reached the studio. Then she replied to his remark as though she had been turning it over in her mind all the way up.

"Of course he doesn't understand," she said. "He didn't know I was married. There was really no reason why I should have told him, because, you see, I believed myself to be a widow."

"And has it been a painful surprise to learn that you are not?" the doctor asked with just a suspicion of sarcasm.

"Painful!" She gave a gasp of indignation.

"I beg your pardon most sincerely. Please forgive me. But isn't it just possible there has been a mistake? This man may not have been your husband. There may have been more than one Marshall in Quentin."

She appeared to be very calm as she settled herself on the couch and motioned the doctor to a chair.

"Now please tell me about him," she said. "Was he tall and thin and rather dark, with just a little gray in his hair at the temples?"

The doctor nodded.

"But young?"

"Yes, I should say quite a youngster, really. Not more than twenty-five."

"He is nearly twenty-six. Did he *never* say anything about himself?"

The doctor thought for a moment. "No, not directly. But he was worried because he got no letters, and of course none were allowed to be sent out."

"How long ago did you leave Quentin?"

"Only a fortnight ago."

"And this man, Marshall—was he alive and well then?"

"Yes," the doctor replied. "Except for a tendency to bronchitis he was all right. I gave him permission to grow a beard and advised him to keep it during the winter. I believe he was to be released shortly. You see, I was only a volunteer on the medical staff, not a regular official, and that's why I'm unable to give you more detailed information about this man. I know nothing of his history, what he was in for and all that. He didn't talk about himself."

"No, he wouldn't," Amy said, her eyes aglow with that light which never was on land or sea. "Dr. Sanders, will you do something for me—or rather for Dick? You said you liked him."

"I like him immensely, and anything I can do—"

"But first I must tell you what he was too proud to tell you himself—my husband was an innocent man and the victim of as cruel a plot as ever an evil brain conceived. Oh, if only I could tell you everything! Then it would be easier for you to understand what a strange position I am in. But I cannot. It involves other people. I want you to telephone to Quentin for me and find out when this man is to be released. You could do that, couldn't you?"

"Easily," the doctor replied. "I might be able to get through to-night and I'll let you know the very first thing to-morrow morning."

Amy scarcely knew how to thank him. She made an excuse to go into the next room to get a card with her name and address—Loraine's card, of course—but it was as much to collect herself as for anything else. She was shaking so with nervous excitement that her teeth fairly chattered, but the young doctor thought her wonderfully self-composed.

For a long while after he left she sat on the couch, staring into space, trying in imagination to pierce the gray walls of Quentin Prison and visualize the man who was so dear to her and whose sufferings had been so cruel. She was confident that he could only be Dick. What blessed chance had led her to that grill-room and to overhear the doctor's grim story?

She must get word to Dick the very moment she heard from Dr. Sanders again. He mustn't go to Witcham, but come straight to her here, and when he was rested a little perhaps that kind young doctor would help him to find something to do.

Amy was up and dressed the next morning long before Old Sponger arrived. It was Sunday, and since she could not expect to hear from the doctor so early, she went to the early service in Chelsea Old Church. In the dim light she knelt and prayed, over and over again the same little prayer, "Oh, God, make it true and send him back to me."

In a sense she was numbed by the possibility of such good news, and scarcely knew whether she was awake or dreaming.

At ten o'clock Dr. Sanders appeared. He looked so grave that Amy's heart died within her.

"Oh, what is it—what have you come to tell me?" she cried.

The doctor took her cold hands and patted them.

"My dear child, it is nothing, really. Only Marshall was released Friday morning, and the governor says he very likely went back to his own home, which was in Witcham. There was some one else who inquired for him yesterday, a man in a motor-car. The Mayor of Witcham, according to the governor. He explained that Marshall was formerly in his employment."

"Mayor of Witcham?" Amy repeated.

The news of Peter Tremlett's election to that office had not reached her. "Could it have been a man by the name of Tremlett?"

"Yes," said the doctor. "That was the name. It slipped my mind just for the moment."

Of course it seemed to Amy that Peter Tremlett must have known all the time that Dick had not died. Had he, in such circumstances, dared to marry the woman who was supposed to be Dick's widow? What, then, had happened to Loraine Drew?

"I am going to Witcham," Amy said a little defiantly. Somehow it seemed to her that she was doing a wrong thing. Hadn't she promised Loraine not ever to interfere? But this was a situation in which all promises must go by the board; and besides, it scarcely seemed possible that Peter Tremlett would dare to commit biganiy since he would be most surely found out.

"Of course you must go," the doctor agreed.

"I have all day to-day and until to-morrow evening," she said hurriedly. "There's a train which gets in about dusk. That would give me this evening to make inquiries. Oh, if only Witcham weren't so far away!"

She had her living to think of even more now than ever before, since there was a great hope in her heart that she had something very wonderful to live for. What a blessing she had managed to hold her own at the Augustin, and wouldn't Dick be simply speechless with surprise when she told him that she was "on the stage." No doubt he wouldn't like it very much, but that couldn't be helped. She was earning good money and Punter had promised to give her an "understudy" shortly, which would mean double her present salary. She must stick to it until Dick got on his feet.

He was alive—her man had been miraculously spared to her!

But beneath the tumult of joy ran a strong undercurrent of apprehension.

Always, again and again, she had to remind herself sharply to be prepared for heart-breaking disappointment. *There might have been a mistake.* She herself—in her present rôle—was a living witness to the fact that almost incredible things can happen in this world.

The man might not be Dick; he might for some purpose of his own be masquerading as Dick in order to get money out of Tremlett.

However, it was foolish to torment herself in this fashion.

After she had assured the doctor that he could do nothing more for her at the moment, she hurriedly began to make ready for her journey. But in the midst of this she halted, reminded by her conscience that it decidedly was not "playing the game" if she presented herself at Witcham in the guise of Amy Marshall without ascertaining if the real Loraine Drew had carried through her agreement to marry Tremlett.

Then Amy had a brilliant inspiration. Among the possessions left behind by Loraine were heaps of theatrical and fancy dress ball things. An hour after Amy had begun to investigate these more thoroughly than ever before, an old lady left the studio building in Lawrence Street.

She was a slim old lady, wearing a cloak over her dark coat and skirt and a pair of smoked spectacles. Besides the glasses she wore a rather thick veil, which could be thrown back if the light were not too strong for her eyes.

The white wig, originally intended to adorn some beauty of an early Georgian Court, helped to give an appearance of age when worn in conjunction with the smoked spectacles and the plainest hat in Loraine's collection.

A few little smudges here and there, judiciously applied with Indian cosmetic from the make-up box, gave a suggestion of wrinkles.

So disguised Amy started on her journey to Witcham.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

THE LIES OF LORAINE.

MRS. PETER TREMLETT had instituted many customs which were strange to Witcham. For one thing she seldom rose before ten in the morning and generally had her breakfast in bed, a

Peter, who had to get to the mills fairly early, was relegated to a bed in his dressing-room next door.

It was rumored—perhaps "gossiped" is the better word—that Mrs. Tremlett's breakfast consisted of tea and toast which she never ate, and a small wine-glass of sherry. The former Amy Marshall's habits were a source of wonder to Witcham.

Some said that she had never really got over her first husband's tragic end and that she had been bullied into marrying Peter; others condemned her as a heartless little wretch who all the time had had her eye on Tremlett's fortune.

Mrs. Tremlett had got up for breakfast on the Saturday morning because she was interested in the curious thing which had happened the night before and wanted to tell Dorcas about it, and find out if there was any further news of the supposed madman who had appeared so dramatically to call down his imprecation upon her and Peter.

On the Sunday she reverted to her ordinary mode of life, and it was nearly ten before she rang for her breakfast tray.

On it was a solitary letter, which must have come by the late post last night. The envelope, of a cheap quality, was addressed in a firm, masculine hand to "Mrs. Richard Marshall, the Stone Cottage, Mount Street, Witcham." On the upper left-hand corner was written the additional four words, "Please forward if necessary."

A postal clerk had drawn a pencil across the original address and substituted underneath, "Mrs. Peter Tremlett, 'Pinehurst,' Witcham Mere."

When Mrs. Tremlett opened the letter she knew that it was not intended for her, but for the woman whose identity she had assumed. However, it was not in the least wrong that she should open it. They had pledged each other to make a sweeping change of identities and all that came to her in Amy Marshall's name was hers to deal with as though she were Amy.

A little smile touched her lips as she drew forth the rather bulky contents of the envelope. She was wondering how Amy had fared, particularly with that nice boy, Teddie Butcher. No harm if they made a match of it, and decidedly amusing to think how annoyed Leslie Allison would be.

Then the smile faded as Loraine began reading the following:

> My beloved Wife:
>
> No word from you in all this long time. At least, none has reached me, but I know that isn't your fault. Yet I am greatly tormented by the fear that you've heard a rumor of my death. I believe I was reported dead, but of course the error would have been corrected.
>
> Oh, my darling, it's such a long story—

And it was. Loraine followed it to the end, where Dick told his wife that he was to be released on the 10th of October, and that he knew if she got this letter in time and were it humanly possible for her to do so, she would be at the gates of Quentin Prison to meet him.

That Other Girl's husband was not dead.

Loraine sat up in bed with a bewildered expression. Pressing her hands to her forehead she tried to remember the details of Peter's conversation concerning the man who had appeared out of the shadows of the garden Friday night. Peter had seemed to sneer at her because she didn't remember the fellow.

"You have a short memory," he had said.

Could that man have been Amy Marshall's husband, and had Peter recognized him?

He came into the bedroom at that moment, and Loraine slid the letter under her breakfast tray.

"If you don't hurry we'll be late for church," he said.

"I'm not going this morning," his wife replied.

"And you didn't go last Sunday," Peter said sternly.

"Perhaps I may not go next, either," she retorted.

"You'll ruin me! What will people say if you continue to go on like this?"

"What will people say?" she mimicked hysterically. "As though I cared. Let them say what they like."

Tremlett caught one of her delicate wrists in a heavy grasp.

"Perhaps you might be made to care,"

he threatened. "What if I was to cast you out of this house, eh? I took you in literally from the streets when you were starving. I've given you everything a woman could possibly want, and you mock and shame me. That's gratitude. It's come to this between you and me, Amy, that we've got to have it out. I'll stand no more of your mad goings-on. Either you behave yourself, or out you go into the streets from which you came. Then we'll see, my fine lady—"

Loraine interrupted with a peal of malicious laughter.

"These silly threats don't bother me. If you do 'cast me out,' you'll have to provide for me. And I'm not at all sure I should go."

"What if I were to—to tell you that you're not really my wife, eh? I mean to say that our marriage wasn't regular?"

Again she laughed. Now she understood quite well who that mysterious "madman" was; Peter had given himself away.

"If you were to tell me that," she replied when she could get her breath from laughing, "I should say that you were lying. I'm your legal wife, Peter Tremlett. Make no mistake about that."

He was so infuriated now that he did not care what he said.

"If Dick Marshall was to come back from the dead, you'd be in a prety fix, wouldn't you?" he demanded heatedly.

Loraine leaned back with closed eyes, considering just how to answer this.

"If Dick came back from the dead," she repeated slowly, "I think I could persuade him to leave me to you, my dear husband. For, you see, I was never married to Dick Marshall."

She was so infuriated with Tremlett's threats that she did not care how she libeled Amy's fair name. After all, it was her name, now, to deal with as she chose.

Tremlett stood staring down at her. If she spoke the truth, if it were true she had never been Marshall's wife, then he—Peter—had been made a colossal fool of by this changeling woman.

"Now, you'd better go, or you'll be late for church," she taunted.

She was not afraid of him, although he stood over her, his big hands twitching suggestively, and murder gleaming from his shifty black eyes.

He did not dare trust himself to speak again, so he turned and left the room.

But there remained the evil atmosphere he had created. It marked another step in the downward progress of Loraine when she took Dick's letter and deliberately tore it into tiny bits.

If her conscience troubled her she answered it by saying that Amy believed her husband to be dead, and very likely by this time was beginning to hope for consolation with another.

CHAPTER XXIX.

BENEATH MASKS.

AMY reached Witcham by the same train which had brought poor Dick on Friday evening. It was dusk—the pleasant, peaceful dusk of Sabbath, with the church bells summoning to evening service. She felt as much a stranger in the town as had Dick, and was guiltily conscious of having no right to be here at all. Her disguise, however, was very good, and surely Loraine could not object when she knew how tremendously important it was. Nor would any one guess that this slim, gray-haired old lady, bent a little under her cloak, her features quite altered by the smoked spectacles, could be Amy Marshall. And did it matter, so long as she revealed herself to no one but Loraine?

She went into the Station Hotel, ostensibly to have something to eat, but mainly with the purpose of gathering a little information.

Witcham was always ready to give both hospitality and information to the stranger. She told the waitress who served her that she was stopping overnight on her way to the north, in order to look up a distant connection—a Mrs. Dundas, who used to live in Witcham Mere. But possibly Mrs. Dundas was dead by now.

"Oh, no, madam," the waitress replied. "Mrs. Dundas still lives in Witcham Mere."

"Oh, I am pleased to hear that!"

claimed the little old lady. "There was a child, a niece, who used to live with my cousin. If I remember correctly, her name was Amy. I suppose she'd be grown up by now."

The waitress gave a short laugh. "Amy Dundas has been married twice. She's now the wife of Mr. Tremlett, our newly elected mayor."

"Really!" said the little old lady.

"And cutting such a dash," the waitress went on. "They had a dinner party the other night, the like of which has never been seen before, I'm told. People say that Mrs. Tremlett has changed a lot from what she was as a girl; but one thing is certain, she's changed Mr. Tremlett. He was the most close-fisted man in Witcham before he married her. Her first husband—But perhaps I'm talking too much, madam."

"Not at all," replied the little old lady, catching in her breath. "Her first husband, you were saying—"

"Well!" The waitress drew in her breath, too. "I hope, madam, that whatever ill you hear of him, you won't believe. My brother worked with him at Tremlett's. My brother's name is Angus Cash, and he's worked up to be Mr. Tremlett's secretary. Mr. Marshall—that was Mrs. Tremlett's first husband—was accused of stealing some money, and they sent him to prison. He died there. You may have heard there was a terrible epidemic at Quentin a few months back. My brother swears that Mr. Marshall was innocent. No one will ever know the rights of it, I'm afraid, but my brother says—"

And for what her brother said, and her own eloquent defense of Dick, the waitress received a tip of half-a-crown. Never in her life before had she been given more than sixpence, and the little old lady left the Station Hotel having established a reputation for generosity that was unparalleled.

Now, one thing was certain: if Dick had returned to Witcham—and where else would he go to seek his wife?—he would have learned that, believing herself to be a widow, she had married Peter Tremlett. Amy could imagine without any difficulty how such news would affect Dick. It would seem to him that her much-vaunted love had stood no test. The sheer cruelty of such an act was detestable, and now Amy realized that she should never have allowed Dick's memory to be so outraged. As she hurried along in the gathering twilight she peered into every man's face, hoping against hope that she might run into Dick by accident.

A man she did run into was Peter Tremlett coming out of his own gate. He turned and stared after her for a moment. Perhaps, in spite of her disguise, there was something familiar to him about the little old lady.

Amy walked past the house, conscious of Tremlett's scrutiny, her heart beating fast with fear. Had he known her? At the corner she ventured to glance around. He had gone on.

With grave misgivings she turned back and entered the grounds of Pinehurst. Only the imperative need to find Dick gave her sufficient courage to run the gantlet not only of Tremlett—who might return any moment—but of Dorcas.

A man servant came to the door, and showed her into the drawing-room, where she waited while he went to tell Mrs. Tremlett that a "Mrs. Sponger" wanted to see her. In giving this false name, Amy had tried to think of one which would convey a subtle meaning to Loraine. It had the desired effect, for in less than a moment Mrs. Peter Tremlett hurried into the drawing-room, wearing an apprehensive expression.

At first she did not recognize Amy, but obviously she was relieved to find that Mrs. Sponger had no connection with her dead life.

"You wished to see me?" she inquired. Strange old ladies were not infrequent callers at Pinehurst since Tremlett had altered his mode of living. Generally they came to beg either for themselves or some charity in which they might be interested.

Amy took off her smoked spectacles.

"Don't you know me?" she whispered.

The other woman's face turned the color of chalk.

"For God's sake, kid, what are you doing

here? Didn't you promise me—" she cried in a shaking voice.

"I know. But, oh, Loraine, when I tell you, I'm sure you'll understand. It's about Dick, my husband."

"We can't talk here. Come up-stairs to my sitting-room. Any moment *he* might come in."

"Mr. Tremlett has gone out. I passed him just now," Any replied.

"It doesn't matter. He might come back."

Amy followed her as she led the way up-stairs. The house was very quiet, and they met no one. When they reached Loraine's sitting-room she turned the key in the lock.

"You promised not to spoil my game," she began heatedly. "You haven't played fair. It's simply madness for you to turn up like this."

Amy's lips quivered. "I'm sure no one would know me," she faltered. "You did not know me yourself until I took the glasses off. Don't scold me, Loraine. It's a matter of life or death to me. Last night I learned quite by accident that my husband isn't dead. He was released from Quentin on Friday morning, and a man I know rang up the prison for me. The governor told him that Dick had gone to Witcham. He also said that Mr. Tremlett had motored over to make inquiries, so Peter must have known that Dick didn't die."

Loraine made an impatient gesture. Obviously she wanted to get rid of Amy as soon as possible.

"It sounds an improbable story. But what do you want of me?"

"Don't you understand? If Dick came to Witcham he'd hear that I had married Mr. Tremlett," Amy said in a despairing tone.

"Well? What then?"

"Oh, Loraine, surely you're not so hard-hearted that you can't see what this means to me! I loved my husband so dearly. We were everything in the world to each other. I think he would have come here and tried to see you, believing, of course, that you were I."

Loraine shook her head.

"You must be quite mad. You know as well as I do that if Dick Marshall were to come to Witcham somebody would be sure to recognize him. Nothing escapes Witcham. I've lived here long enough to find that out. The whole town would have rung with it by now."

"They mightn't have known him. You see, everybody thinks he's dead, and the doctor who told me about him said he had grown a beard."

"Well, I'm sure I don't know how I can help you," Loraine replied. "It's very sad for you, of course, and if anything happens I'll let you know. But meanwhile I must remind you of our bargain. I don't even want to know how you've got on, or anything. I'm not interested in Loraine Drew. She doesn't exist for me, and Amy Tremlett, as I am now, doesn't exist for you."

"But my husband does," Amy retorted passionately.

"Find him then," the other woman said. "But don't expect me to get into touch with him for you. Now I really must ask you to go. I'm so nervous at the very idea of your being here that I can scarcely control myself."

"Loraine, if you hear from Dick, will you give me your solemn word of honor—"

"Yes, yes! I'll send the letter on to you. Only go—for God's sake, go!"

Some spirit of the evil one had entered Loraine. What could she have feared, really, from the discovery that she was not the woman Peter Tremlett believed himself to have married? He could never get away from the fact that she was his legal wife; much less so if the truth were known, for now he must believe that his marriage was bigamous.

Yet a sudden fear of losing her position took possession of Loraine. She was in a veritable state of panic when, having safely conveyed Amy to the front door, they encountered Peter just letting himself in.

"Good evening, Mrs. Sponger," Loraine said hurriedly. "So glad to have seen you."

"Good evening," Amy replied in muffled tones. She brushed past Peter without looking at him.

Again he turned and stared after her as she hastened down the drive with a curiously youthful gait for one of her supposed years.

"Well," Loraine demanded sharply of her husband, "are you coming in or not?"

"Who is that woman?" Peter asked.

"You don't know her."

"But I do. At least, I've seen her somewhere. She's uncommonly like you."

Loraine managed an uneasy laugh.

"As a matter of fact, she's a distant relative of mine."

"I didn't know you had any living relatives except Mrs. Dundas," he continued. "And why didn't you introduce me?"

"Good gracious, what a fuss you're making! How should I know you'd care to meet a stuffy old woman whose sole topic of conversation is her health?"

"But where does she live? 'Sponger,' I think you called her. I never heard Mrs. Dundas mention any one of that name, nor have you before."

Loraine swished angrily away from him, but he followed her, and in desperation she invented first one story and then another to account for her elderly caller, until his suspicions were fully aroused. Peter had sharp eyes. He had not actually penetrated Amy's disguise, but he knew that it was a disguise.

CHAPTER XXX.

DICK RECOVERS.

FOR a few days after his release Dick Marshall was quite as mad as he had seemed to Loraine that night he appeared before her and Peter. The shock of what he supposed to be Amy's faithlessness temporarily unhinged his reason.

When he first heard that she had married Peter Tremlett he was shocked, but at the same time ready to make allowances for her. It seemed to him that she must have been forced into the marriage by stress of circumstances which were too powerful for her to resist; but he could not bring himself to believe that the union had resulted in happiness for her. Peter Tremlett had stolen first his honor and then his wife. When Dick played the spy that night it was because he could not resist the desire to see Amy again. He hoped, perhaps, that he might get a chance to see her alone. The house and grounds were a revelation to him; he had never known Peter Tremlett in the guise of a rich man squandering his money.

And Dick had seen Amy, but not alone. He had peered through the blinds to behold her presiding over that resplendent dinner table, and later on he had seen her and Tremlett alone together in the drawing-room—Amy with a cigarette in one hand and a glass of sparkling wine in the other—an Amy that Dick could scarcely believe existed. Perhaps if he had seen her closer, or at great length, he would have discovered what Elspeth had—that the woman was not Amy at all. His vision, however, had been hasty and limited, but he thought he had seen far too much. His gentle young wife was a changed being, and she was not in the least unhappy with Peter Tremlett.

So Dick, stung into madness, had flung his fiery curse on them and then vanished into the mists of the night. He had shown himself, and he had gone. Let them continue to be happy now, if they could. Had he been armed with any weapon he must have killed them both.

Two hours later he found himself wandering on the hills above Witcham, gazing down on the lights of the sleeping town which harbored the traducers of his honor—the man who had sent him to prison, and the woman who had betrayed the very name of love.

That night he slept in an empty barn, and the next day he tramped twenty miles south. Witcham would know him no more. He was indeed a dead man.

There were still a few shillings in his pocket, and he clung mechanically to his little satchel of belongings. The farmers' wives gave him food in return for such odd jobs as he was strong enough to do. There was something about the tall, sad-eyed man that wrung their pity.

He came slowly to a more sane frame of mind as he worked his way south. The mists cleared from his brain, and there

was left now only a deadly hatred for the man and woman who had betrayed him.

In Reading he got a temporary job as an outside porter in the famous biscuit factory. There he worked for three weeks, living almost on nothing because he seemed to require so little.

There had been no purpose in his mind at all, beyond going on from day to day. The problem of life meant nothing to him. Yet, he was alive, and the active occupations, mostly outdoors, had toughened him. His health was improving by leaps and bounds, and physically he was as fit as he had been a year ago, before illness and misfortune joined forces to destroy him.

His drastic experience at Quentin had given him the combination of a friend and an idea. The brave young student just about to take his full medical degree had been more than kind to Dick Marshall. He had been genuinely interested, and it was no empty offer of assistance he made to the unfortunate prisoner whose fate for the time being was his own. They had been brothers under the black scourge, and Dick had acquitted himself as one worthy to be called a man, whatever fault it might have been which sent him to prison.

So much for the friend, young Hugh Sanders, who with his equally brave colleague had volunteered for service in that walled city of death.

And through this friend Dick had conceived his idea.

Sanders and he had talked of many things, and Dick heard a great deal about the work which needed to be done among the poor of London. It was not always easy to find the right sort of helpers in the missions, particularly men with hospital experience.

"Why don't you train for a nurse, or even for a medico?" Sanders had remarked one day. "Only, of course, there's the money question when it comes to studying for a degree. But there's any amount of room for male orderlies, and I could get you in at St. Matthew's."

It had been on the tip of Dick's tongue to say that he had a wife, and very likely by this time a child, and must find something to do by which he could support them, but he refrained. It was impossible to speak to any one at Quentin about Amy. So he had thanked Sanders and gratefully accepted the address which the student jotted down for him. Some day, perhaps, when justice had been accomplished, he would be in a position to look up the man who had offered to befriend him.

In lodgings in Reading, the temporary job ended, it seemed to Dick that the day had come, but not in the way he had anticipated.

He was just a derelict, not a man properly standing on his own feet; just a drifter, with no aim in life and no steady occupation. It was dangerous to be like that at twenty-five; dangerous to himself and to the community.

He had no pride to bury. It was with the hope that in time he might attain a measure of self-respect that Dick decided to look up Hugh Sanders.

His clothes were rather shabby and his boots reduced by much tramping, but he had saved a little money and he possessed the gift of neatness in small matters. Though thin, his boots were well polished, and his linen might be slightly frayed, but it was clean, even though he washed it himself and borrowed the landlady's flatiron to press it out.

Toward the end of November he reached London and presented himself one foggy night at the bachelor abode of Dr. Hugh Sanders.

CHAPTER XXXI.

RIDING TO A FALL.

PETER TREMLETT went to the trouble of looking up the record of Amy's first marriage to satisfy himself that everything had been regular and in order. The astonishing statement which Loraine had thrown recklessly at him, to the effect that she had never been Dick Marshall's wife, had done more to alienate her from him than all the rest of her conduct put together. There was something repulsive about a woman, in his opinion, who could so brand herself, even if she meant it as a sort of poor joke.

Of course Tremlett discovered that Amy and Dick had been properly married; equally, of course, he did not know that his own marriage was perfectly legal. The thought that he could get rid of Loraine, if he wanted to, filled him with unholy glee. There was another side to the picture, however. He was a man of consequence in Witcham—the mayor, in fact—and he had his eye on higher things. A community is exacting as to the private lives of its public men. Peter Tremlett did not wish to be held up to shame for anything that he had done.

Yet disaster seemed likely to overtake him, whichever course he pursued. His wife was disgracing him by her outrageous conduct, and now that the novelty of her pranks began to wear off, people were criticising. She seemed to enjoy challenging the prejudices of Witcham and to be wantonly bent on ruining Tremlett.

Some said she was driving him to drink. However that might be, it is certain that on several occasions he had been observed slightly under the influence of alcohol. It was known that she herself "drank like a fish," and soon it became rumored that she had other questionable habits.

At first the rumor was only a whisper. People scarcely dared voice what was in their minds. They said to one another that Mrs. Tremlett was "queer"; there must be something to account for it; she wasn't "normal," and so on.

In the midst of this Peter was deserted by his sister. Poor Dorcas had lived a life of misery ever since her brother's marriage. Loraine treated her as a sort of superior servant, laughed at her provincial ways, and tormented her generally. The gentle Amy whom Dorcas had looked forward to as a sister had turned into a demon of malice and selfishness.

So one day, about three weeks after the big dinner party, Dorcas packed her trunk and left Pinehurst. Incidentally she left Witcham. There was an elderly relative of hers, a retired cotton-spinner in Leeds, who needed a housekeeper, and he offered her the position.

In his queer way, which was not at all like other people's, Peter was fond of his sister. Her leaving his house had a depressing effect upon him. It left him entirely at the mercy of his wife. He began to lose his grip on things and found that his former tenacity of purpose was slipping away from him.

Tremlett dated his misfortunes from the day of his marriage, but in reality he needed to go further back in the calendar than that. He should have turned back to a certain bleak day in March when, knowing that Dick and Amy Marshall were struggling in the grip of adverse circumstances, he deliberately planned to ruin their lives. That was the moment when Peter Tremlett's downfall started.

Amy had avenged her husband's wrongs in a way she could never have anticipated. She, who at one time believed that no fate could be hard enough for such a man as Tremlett, would have been amazed had she known how drastically he was being punished.

He now most definitely hated his wife, but he could not crush her as he had fondly expected to do. She wielded an uncanny power over him that fairly sickened him. From a sober, industrious citizen, possessing merely the vice of extreme stinginess, he had become an immoral spendthrift. It was said that his mills could not stand the strain, and prudent people who owned stock in Tremlett's sold out their shares.

The climax came quickly. It was nearly Christmas, and Peter found he needed money—quite a lot of money. For the first time in his long career the local banks refused him a loan. It was pointed out that he had no security for the sum he wanted. The mills were already mortgaged up to the hilt, and Pinehurst had been mortgaged to cover the enormous expenses of the improvements he had made. Bills were still coming in for furniture and pictures and old plate which he had ordered in a wholesale fashion. Not a day was without its batch of duns.

And all the time Loraine was running up bills on her own account. Her wardrobes were packed with costly lace and fur garments, some of which she had never even troubled to try on. Yet she scarcely bought a thing in Witcham, which was irri-

tating to the local tradespeople. Her market was London or Paris, and she ordered by post, frequently demanding articles to be sent on approval, which subsequently she either forgot to return or was too indifferent to write about.

It soon became clear that Tremlett's political life was finished before it could scarcely be said to have begun. And he was in desperate straits for money.

This picture is rather grim, but the reverse was far worse.

There was Loraine's side of it. The girl who had stood on the Chelsea Embankment contemplating self-destruction was a better Loraine than the one who had become the wife of Peter Tremlett. That girl, at least, had seen clearly where her sins were leading. The Loraine who was now Mrs. Tremlett had deliberately stifled her conscience, but the kindest thing to say about her is that beyond all doubt she was insane at this time, although it was some time later before her malady was pronounced as such.

Peter Tremlett came home from the mills the day after his round of the banks had netted him nothing, having done something which if discovered would bring him within the pale of the law. He had raised five thousand pounds by pledging securities which he held in trust for the widow and orphans of his former partner who had died some ten years ago, but he made a virtuous resolution to turn over a new leaf with the new year.

Economy was to rule once more at Pinehurst, and his wife would find herself existing on what she would probably call a niggardly allowance. If necessary, Peter determined he would advertise that he was not to be held responsible for her debts; and always, of course, he dallied with the fascinating idea of getting rid of her altogether by announcing the fact as he assumed it to be—that she was not his legal wife. It would be easy enough to prove that Dick Marshall, wherever he might be now, was alive at the time of the Tremletts' marriage.

Loraine was in her own sitting-room when he returned home that evening. Drugs had set their inevitable seal upon her beauty at last, and also upon her general appearance. She wore her costly clothes as though they were rags. The front of her lace tea-gown was peppered with holes where lighted cigarette ash had fallen, and her hair was untidily bundled into a boudoir cap. She lay stretched on the couch, smoking and reading a cheap novel, when her husband appeared. No doubt she would come down to dinner just as she was to shame Peter in front of the servants. In these days, of course, they dined in the evening at Pinehurst.

She looked up laughingly when Peter came in, her eyes heavy with the noxious poison she fairly lived upon. It was no secret to him now that she was a drug fiend.

"Hello," she said listlessly. "Aren't you home rather early?"

Peter walked over to the fireplace and stood looking down at her with his habitually gloomy expression. To-day it was gloomier than usual. Those embezzled securities worried him; this was a dreadful season of the year, because shortly accounts must be balanced, and there was reason to believe that the mills were not strong enough to stand that ordeal. Their most dependable commercial traveler had gone over to a rival firm and taken his custom with him. A fire-insurance policy had been allowed to lapse, and ten days later the inevitable conflagration had happened, wherein several hundred pounds' worth of damage was done. Altogether, Peter Tremlett felt that he was having a very thin time of it. He mentioned these things to his wife—with the exception of the embezzled securities—and she laughed at him.

"Remember the man who cursed us that night," she said.

Peter started. Of course he knew now that she really had not recognized Dick Marshall, but it gave him a turn to hear her refer to the incident so lightly. He himself had almost forgotten the curse, but this was a poignant reminder. Tremlett was a thorough hypocrite for all of his churchgoing, and at heart believed in nothing, but suddenly his soul shook with superstitious dread.

"Hold your tongue!" he cried angrily.

"I believe in curses," she went on, as though she had not heard him. "You and I are riding for a fall, Peter—neck and neck. I wonder which of us will crash first? By the way, I hear that my devoted Aunt Anna is very ill and not expected to recover."

Peter was speechless for a few seconds, between surprise at his wife's news and indignation with her; then he burst forth:

"And all of that money might have come to you if you'd behaved decently to Mrs. Dundas. She meant to leave it to you when you married me, but you sneered at her and snubbed her, and now I'm told she has left half to charities and half to that servant of hers, Elspeth McQueen."

Loraine sat up with an inquiring look.

"I wasn't obliged to toady to her just because she might leave me money. I have all the money I want—"

"Good God, and haven't I been telling you over and over again that I'm on the verge of bankruptcy—and worse? Yes, worse. This very day I've raised money on property which doesn't belong to me. Before the new year is fairly started I may find myself in prison, and you won't have a shilling to your name."

The thought of Mrs. Dundas dying and leaving her money to Elspeth and charity nearly drove him frantic. If only he could get his hands on her fortune he would be saved.

He had made the one appeal to Loraine which impressed her. Until now she had not believed that he was in such difficulties.

"Is that really true?" she whispered.

"You'll not have long to wait to find out how true it is. And when you're wondering where you're to sleep and where your next meal is coming from, perhaps it may cheer you to remember that I was ruined by your extravagance, and that you didn't so much as lift a finger to help me when it was in your power. Anna Dundas made her will all over again, leaving everything to you when you married me, and she only changed it because you treated her so shamefully."

"I didn't treat her shamefully," Loraine retorted. "I only said I couldn't stand her beastly little dogs, and that she looked a frump in crimson velvet. Both of these statements were perfectly true. I asked her if she'd chosen that particular color to match her complexion—and of course she got wild about it."

Peter was scarcely listening. He caught hold of his wife's arm.

"Amy, perhaps it's not too late. She isn't dead yet. Can't you pull yourself together and go over to her? She might be touched if you showed a little devotion, since she's well aware of the fact that you know you've nothing to gain by it. At the last moment she might change her will again. It's a hobby of hers. It's only decent you should go to see your aunt when she's probably on her death-bed."

Loraine was tempted to sneer at his concluding remark—Peter, trembling with cupidity, yet at the same time finding it impossible not to add that tag.

But in the main she found herself sharing his point of view, although belatedly. Mrs. Dundas could not take her fortune with her, and it looked as though her supposed nicce would soon be needing money.

"I'll go," Loraine said. "But I should not be a bit surprised if that Elspeth woman tries to prevent me from seeing Aunt Anna."

"You must insist," Peter advised excitedly.

He was nearly beside himself with hope.

(To be continued NEXT WEEK.)

The Lottery

by T. F. T. West

WHILE the wind held in that quarter the schooner Cormorant was a prisoner in the coral lagoon, and there was nothing to do about it. The breeze had risen during the night, and it blew briskly during the long, bright day, promising sure disaster to even as handy a craft as the island trading vessel should she try to slip through the tortuous tidal race into the blue Pacific.

The Cormorant's crew of half a dozen Kanaka boys lounged contentedly on deck in the shadow of an awning, and on the beach of the nameless little island two white men and a woman idled away the hours.

The fronds of coca palms, tossed by the breeze, chafed dryly, with an irritating monotony of sound. The white horses of the sea thundered their hooves on the reef outside, and little waves lap-lapped on the clean sand.

"What a hole!" Ward Kelly shuddered. He lounged in the shade above tide water beside Conrad Orcas, the castaway trader of Luana Island. "Wonder you didn't go raving mad with the loneliness. What's it been—eighteen months?"

"Eighteen months, three weeks, and two days. I kept a calendar—"

"Aye. A man would. Something to do, at least. A week of it would finish me!"

Orcas shrugged philosophically. He was a stoutly built, black-haired chap, and he had not yet shaved the heavy beard grown during his exile. He was barefoot. The sleeves of the shirt he wore had been torn out, and it lay open at the neck. Wherever his skin showed it had tanned a rich, red bronze.

He shrugged, and his gray eyes continued to follow the graceful movements of Enid Rand, his affianced wife, who strolled farther down the beach. Kelly's eyes also followed Enid. As they talked the two men stared unconsciously, as if watching Enid were the most natural thing in life.

"Well," said Orcas with deliberation, "a man doesn't go mad in a case like this—not if he amounts to anything. He gets used to things. And it wasn't so bad. There was food to be got every day, not difficult but interesting, especially the fishing. There was swimming, and sometimes a big turtle to catch. One or two sharks to lend excitement. And then there were my neighbors."

"A shy lot!" Kelly exclaimed. "I've caught an occasional glimpse of a face looking out of the bush, nothing more. Don't seem to fraternize even with our Kanaka boys."

"Yes, a shy lot. Timid, like children among strangers. Not more than twenty, all told—the descendants of a few Rari-

tanians, cast away a hundred years or more ago. But no harm in them. And when you come to know them—well, they were human beings, and company."

Kelly's lips twisted scornfully. "Give me a good, smart hunting-dog by preference!"

Conrad Orcas's bronzed skin seemed to glow a little redder. He said with careful patience:

"You're new to the islands. You'll learn better—in time. Folks are folks—all human beings under the skin. And these people—"

He left the sentence unfinished, and for a moment stopped watching Enid to study the effects of his words on Kelly.

"Of course, I want you to know I appreciate your finding me," he went on. "It was more than decent of you, all this trouble, all this time spent hunting for a needle island in a haystack of ocean, a lot of bother wasted on the slender chance of a message in a bottle. It was the sporting thing to do, and more than that. It was damn decent, Kelly!"

Ward Kelly shrugged. "Thank Enid," he said flatly. His tone indicated that the topic was distasteful. "She's the one who held on when I would have put about and chucked the thing as flat failure. She kept insisting we would find you. Kept me up to the mark. Yes, if you've got to be grateful, give your gratitude to the woman who deserves it!" He finished the speech with a bitter emphasis.

"The love of a good woman!" Orcas marveled. "Can you beat it? After eighteen months, after there seemed no hope that I might live, keeping her promise, standing by like this!"

He watched Kelly's face with sidelong glances, appraising Kelly's blond good looks. Kelly's glance still turned down the beach to the woman just disappearing among the foliage. "Some way I can't realize that she is going to be my wife—after all this."

Kelly stirred, starting as if the words had stung him. Enid had disappeared, and he looked straight before him at the lagoon and the open sea beyond the reef. His lips had tightened and the muscles along his square jaw twitched. He said finally, with an effort and in a voice flat and emotionless: "Yes, you're lucky—a damned—lucky—man!"

"You love her!"

Orcas said it sharply, accusingly, with a suddenness that surprised Kelly as it was meant to do.

The new trader at Luana sprang to his feet, glaring down at his castaway predecessor he had sailed so far to rescue. Whatever he meant to retort was left unsaid, for Orcas cried sternly:

"Sit down. Yes, you will—that's better. Look at me and tell the truth. You love Enid Rand—you know it damn well. It wasn't any love of me brought you here—it was hoping you'd prove to her I was gone for good—gone out of her life, leaving a clear field for you. That's the truth, isn't it?"

Their eyes met and held. Kelly was pale. Orcas, leaning on his elbow, bent forward, his face close to Kelly's. "Isn't that the truth?" he demanded.

"Yes—damn you." Kelly waited a moment, struggling for better control of himself. "Why not?" he went on finally. "Why not? I come to Luana a stranger, to succeed a man lost at sea. I meet the one unmarried white woman on the island, Enid Rand, owner of the plantation her father started. She—she is—you know what Enid is. There isn't another like her in the world. And the man she was engaged to marry lost at sea.

"I loved her, and I'm proud of it. And—look here, Orcas, you might as well know the truth—if I had had another month, one more month, I might have won her—married her. Mind you, I don't accuse her of forgetting. I don't say she didn't love you either, but you were gone a long time—and who knows, perhaps I am the better man. Anyway, I don't deny it. Another month and she might have been promised to me.

"But no! That damn message of yours, in a bottle, kicking around the Pacific for a year, here, there, all the way to Cape Horn and back, for all we know, Fate had to throw that up, of all places, on Luana beach, where a boy finds it. A message in

a bottle to remind Enid of her promise, to smash my chances!

"Somebody had to search for you. Enid would have gone alone otherwise. I came because I love her. And you can understand now, that every damn mile we sailed, every minute we sailed, I hoped you were dead. Yesterday when we saw you waiting for us on the beach, for just a moment I could cheerfully have killed you. Unpleasant, but—at least that's the truth."

"Aye," Orcas nodded thoughtfully. "I don't doubt it. You see, I loved Enid Rand myself. I know how you feel. I don't even hold it against you. It's fate, Kelly—blind, senseless, inhuman—working in the dark, shaping our lives for good and evil, happiness and hell, pulling the strings that make us caper.

"I loved Enid, and fate lost me overboard from the Morning Star in that gale and tossed me up here to rot on a beach. You loved her, and just when you might win her—I'm willing to concede you might stand a chance, it's only human—fate tosses my message at her feet and reverses our positions. Now there's a mess to stump a philosopher!"

"For God's sake, don't talk about it!" Kelly groaned, his head plunged between his hands.

"Aye, but I want to talk about it, man! I think it's only fair we do talk about it. Here we are, two men and a most damnably desirable woman. You love her. Given time, she might have learned to love you. I loved her and, given this proof of her devotion, I cannot decently love her less. She was pledged to take me, and just when she might forgivably have broken that promise fate steps in and throws the dice again! Well—"

"Have done!" Kelly broke out in the voice of a tortured man. "That's all there is to it. Have done!"

"Ah, but that's not all. There's still yourself, Kelly. There's you to be considered—"

"Me!"

"Aye. I'm not forgetting I owe my rescue—my life, you might put it—to you. Oh, I understand. How easily you might have lied to her, how easy to alter the Cormorant's course at night, to look and keep on looking for a pin-point in the ocean—an island without a name, and my own location more than doubtful—and pretend you never found it! But you played fair. Some men are that way, inherently honest—"

"I was tempted often enough!" Kelly confessed. "But—but—"

"I know, that sense of fair play born in a man! You tried to cheat, and you could not. It's that I'm considering in this muddle of ours. It's worth some consideration if we're going to be fair."

"Fair!" Kelly exclaimed. "There's nothing fair about it. We've found you—that finishes me. You put it best—it's blind, unreasoning, inhuman fate playing with a man—and laughing in the dark when he gets hurt."

Orcas slapped his knee. "That's it—that's life as I see it here—and many's the long night I've had to study it all out. It's fate that sets the stage, chance that gives us our lines, luck that bosses our pitiful performance. The lottery of life—what a play! If only the actors were puppets and didn't have feelings to get hurt. If only—Look here, Kelly, I'm man enough to give you back your chance. If life is a blind gamble I'm still grateful enough to your honesty and decency to try to do a man's bit. Will you take back your chance and try again?"

"What! What—the—devil—do—you—mean?"

Kelly stared, and in his look was a pitiable suggestion that in his heart hope was reborn.

"I mean," Orcas said solemnly, "I'll pay my debt to you by risking all fate handed me. I offer you the chance to gamble—to tempt your luck again."

II.

KELLY rose slowly, and Orcas rose as he did. Kelly was staring wide-eyed, and his tongue wet his dry lips. There were beads of sweat on his face, though the breeze, in the shade of the palms, was cool enough.

"Well?" he questioned unsteadily.

"It's this way," explained Orcas gravely,

"I'm willing to leave it again to fate—or luck, or whatever you want to call that thing that pulls the strings. I'll gamble my rescue and Enid with you, because I feel the chance is due you for playing fair. There's no need for two of us back there on Luana. Let the loser stay here—"

"In this desolate hole! This lonesome, God-forgotten pin-point in a lonesome sea!"

"Are you afraid, Kelly? Afraid of this place and the lonesomeness?"

"What sane man wouldn't be?"

"And yet you love Enid?"

"More than anything in life—"

Orcas nodded gravely. "Very well, there you are! If you mean that you'll take the risk; gamble exile against the chance of winning her. Are you man enough to risk it?"

Kelly stared slowly about the beach, at the swaying palms of the little island, at the empty ocean and emptier sky that enclosed it all. The muscles of his face twitched slightly, but his voice was steady as he said, "It's a go. What's your game?"

"Suppose we make it short and sweet?" Orcas suggested. "Stake everything on one turn? A penny if you have one to toss—or a black stone and a white. There's a gamble for you—civilization and a woman—against this!"

"But suppose I win, Orcas? Her promise to you, her coming after you—after that you can't expect her to forget—to let you drop out of her life so easily. Will she let you go?"

"Don't worry about that. There's one sure way—and very simple. Suppose I tell her there's a native girl with a prior claim—a woman I don't care to leave—"

"What!"

"No, there isn't one. But it's a simple lie—and so very efficient. Satisfied? Well, then, what game shall it be?"

"Are you playing a game? Let me play!"

The men whirled at the voice of Enid Rand so close on the beach, below their little shelter of vegetation.

Kelly stammered for words, but Orcas answered readily. "Yes, a little lottery game. Settling a question between us. Kelly, why not let Enid hold the lots?"

While Kelly still gasped Enid demanded, "What question are you settling?"

Both men eyed her—a slender, tall, brown-haired woman with deep brown eyes. She stood illumined in a shaft of light filtering through the shade from the palms, the wind whipping her white skirt close about her, a radiant, desirable figure, a prize any man would fight for.

Orcas answered with his slow, unruffled readiness: "The question of who gets the post at Luana. Kelly, like the decent chap he is, says since I'm rescued it's up to him to quit and give me back the old place. I protest he has won it. We're ready to let chance settle it. If you don't mind, Enid, suppose you be Fate's agent. Find a black pebble and a white one. Wrap them each in a leaf. Then let us draw. Who gets the black stone — er — loses. Agreed, Kelly?"

Kelly drew a deep breath. "Yes."

Their eyes sealed the bargain while Enid, close by, searched the shingle for the two stones.

Presently she came to them, her hands behind her.

"I have two pebbles, each wrapped in a leaf," she said. "One is black for the loser, the other white. Now, who will chose first?"

"I'll take my chance," Orcas answered promptly.

Enid extended her hand, in its palm the two leaf-wrapped pebbles.

"Choose." Her voice had an undercurrent of excitement. She breathed more rapidly.

Orcas glanced again at Kelly, whose eyes were intent on the lots in Enid's hand.

"Lady Luck, be good to me!" he said with a queer, twisting smile, and chose his lot.

While they watched he stripped away the leaf. The pebble was black.

"God!" Kelly gasped shakily, and turning strode quickly down the beach.

III.

THE moon shone on an empty lagoon.

So it might have been since time began—and always would be. The Cormorant,

gone with sunset and the shifting wind, left no mark on the lagoon's mirror.

Orcas stared into the silvery mystery beyond the reef, and beside him, her eyes intent on his face, stood a slender brown woman, in her hair red hibiscus bloom.

"I do not understand," she said in her native tongue.

"Does it matter, Atuna? Yet, if you must know, I once loved the strange white woman who came on the ship. Then the sea and the gods brought me to you. And I loved you. But the white woman came, and I had promised to make her my wife—"

"But you do not love her now!"

"No. I love you. But I had promised her—promised to love her always. And when she came for me, I would have kept my word, except the gods sent this other man, who loves her, and we let Fate decide."

"It is very strange," said Atuna, shaking her head.

"But I love you. That you can understand?"

"That I understand."

"And that's enough. Fate has been very, very kind to us."

IV.

ORCAS'S words were echoed on the deck of the Cormorant, dreaming across the moonlit sea.

"Fate has been good to us," sighed Kelly, his arm about Enid's shoulder, pressing her close to him.

"Yes," said Enid, then suddenly drawing away: "No! I want you to know the truth, to hear my confession now. I did it because I love you. You shall say if it was wrong. When you two talked I listened from the thicket.

"I knew you would talk of me, knew it as surely as if you had told me. And I had to know what you were saying. I heard your bargain before I held the lots and—because I love you, because I knew when you told Orcas you loved me that for all the pity and duty I owe him I can never, never keep my promise; that I can never love him as a wife should—I made certain he should lose. Had you chosen first your stone would have been white."

"I—I don't understand, Enid—"

"Because, dear, I prepared four stones. Two white ones I held in my left hand, two black in my right—white for you, black for Orcas. You could not lose! It wasn't Fate, it was my love for you!"

"Nevertheless," Kelly declared as he held her close, "that is Fate, and Fate has been very, very kind."

And so again, unconsciously, he echoed the words of the man who had drawn the black pebble.

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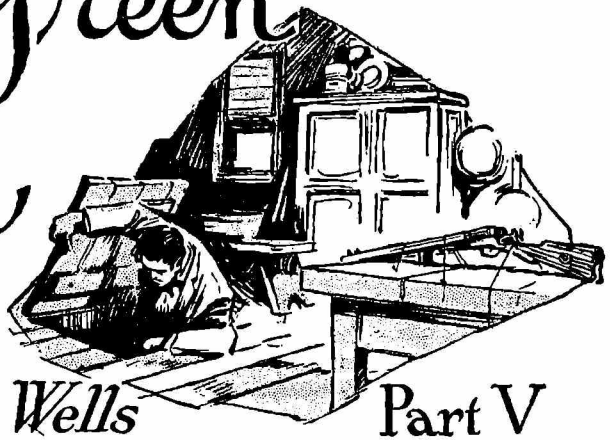
TO MY MOTHER

I NEVER saw thee! Yet thy face,
More beautiful than October's moon,
Smiles into mine; and thy embrace
Enfolds me like the afternoon
That floods the hills where I was born
With quiet gold, and seems to mourn
The garishness of early day.

I never saw thee! Yet thy love
Has followed me through hell, and then
Has drawn me back to see above
The mists of hate, the sun again.
Oh, stay with me that I be now
As great, as true, as brave as thou!
Oh, Mother, it is I who pray.

Lieutenant Walter A. Davenport.

The Green Stain



by Carolyn Wells

Part V

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

CHAPTER XVI.

IN GREENVALE.

"FOR the love of Mike, Zizi, what are you doing here?" exclaimed Pennington Wise, nearly struck dumb with astonishment at sight of the girl.

"I ask you that?" she returned, looking at him with equal amazement.

"Well, anyway, I'm glad to see you." He smiled at her with real pleasure. "I've had a long, horrid and most unsatisfactory quest for the elusive L. N., and I haven't found him yet."

"Any hope of it?"

"Nothing but—I mean no expectation or certainty, but always hope. Now, what's your lay? Why, Zizi? Tell me why you're here, or I'll fly off the handle!"

"Well, wait till we can sit down somewhere and talk comfortably. I haven't had a room assigned to me yet."

"But tell me this: you're here on the Varian case?"

"Yes, of course. Are you?"

"I am. Oh, girl, there must be something doing when we're here from different starting-points and for different reasons!"

"I'm here because of some revelations of Mrs. Varian," Zizi said.

"Mrs. Varian!" Wise exclaimed. "I say, Zizi, go to your room, get your bag unpacked and your things put away as quick as you can, won't you? And then let's confab."

Zizi darted away; she arranged to have a bedroom and sitting-room that she could call her own for a few days, and in less than half an hour she was receiving Wise in her tiny, but pleasant domain.

"Now," he said, "tell me your story."

"It isn't much of a story," Zizi admitted, "but I came here because this is where Betty Varian was born."

"Up here, in Greenvale, Vermont?"

"Yes, in a little hospital here."

"And what has that fact to do with Betty's disappearance?"

"Oh, Penny, I don't know! But I hope—I believe it has something!"

"Well, my child, I'm up here to investigate the early life of Mrs. Lawrence North."

"Then we are most certainly brought to the same place by totally different clues, if they are clues, and one or both of them must prove successful! Who was she, Penny?"

"As near as I can find out, she was a widow when North married her. Her name

This story began in the Argosy-Allstory Weekly for December 31.

then was Mrs. Curtis. Her maiden name I don't know."

"Well, what's the procedure?"

The procedure, as Wise mapped it out, was to go to the hospital first and see what could be learned concerning Mrs. Varian's stay there twenty years ago.

They had no difficulty in getting an interview with the superintendent of the institution, but as Wise had feared he was not the man who had been in charge a score of years previous.

In fact, there had been several changes since, and the present incumbent, one Dr. Hasbrook, showed but slight interest in his caller's questions.

"The hospital is only twenty-two years old," Hasbrook said, "so the patient you're looking up must have been here soon after it was opened."

"You have the records, I suppose?" asked Wise.

"Yes. If you care to look them over, they are at your disposal."

As a result of this permission, Wise and Zizi spent several hours looking over the old and not very carefully kept records of the earliest years of the little country hospital.

"The worst of it is," said Zizi, "I don't exactly know what we're hoping to find, do you?"

"I have a dim idea, Zizi, and it's getting clearer," Wise replied, speaking as from a deep absorption. "Here's something."

"What?"

"It's a list of births for a year, the year Betty Varian was born, and—oh, Zizi! The very same night that Mrs. Varian's baby was born a Mrs. Curtis also bore a child!"

"Well?"

"Oh, don't sit there and babble 'What?' and 'Well?' Can't you see?"

"No, I can't."

"Well, wait a bit. Now, let me see. Yes, Miss Morton—h-m!—Miss Black—"

"Pennington Wise, if you've lost your mind, I'll take you to a modern sanitarium. I don't want to go off and leave you here in this little one-horse hospital!"

"Hush up, Zizi, don't chatter! Miss Morton—h-m!—"

Zizi kept silent in utter exasperation. She knew Wise well enough to be sure he was on the trail of a real discovery, but her impatience could scarcely stand his mutterings and his air of suppressed excitement.

However, there was nothing to do but wait for his further elucidation, and when at last the closed the books and looked up at her, his face was fairly transfigured with joyous expectancy.

"Come on, girl," he cried; "come on."

He rose, and as Zizi followed, they went back to the superintendent's office.

"Can you tell us, Dr. Harbrook," Wise asked, "where we can find two nurses who were here twenty years ago? One was named Black and one Morton."

This was a matter of definite record, and Hasbrook soon informed them that Miss Black had died some years ago, but that Miss Morton had married and was still living in Greenvale."

"Thank Heaven!" murmured Wise as he took the address of Mrs. Briggs, who had been Miss Morton.

To her house they went, Zizi now quite content to trudge along by the detective's side without asking further questions. She knew she would learn all in due time.

The pretty little cottage which was the home of Mrs. Briggs they found and went through the wooden picket gate and up to the front door.

"Something tells me she won't be glad to see us," Wise whispered, and then they were admitted by a middle-aged woman who answered Wise's courteous question by stating that she was Mrs. Briggs.

She looked amiable enough, Zizi thought, and she asked her callers to be seated in her homely but comfortable sitting-room.

"I am here," Wise began, watching her face for any expression of alarm, "to ask you a few questions about some cases you attended when you were a nurse in the Greenvale Hospital."

"Yes, sir," was the non-committal response, but Zizi's quick eye noticed the woman's fingers grasp tightly the corner of her apron, which she twisted nervously.

"One case especially was that of a Mrs. Varian. You remember?"

"No, I do not," Mrs. Briggs replied, but it was after a moment's hesitation, and she spoke in a low, uncertain voice.

"Oh, yes, you do." And Wise looked at her sternly. "Mrs. Frederick Varian, a lovely lady, who gave birth to a girl child, and you were her attendant."

"No; I don't remember any Mrs. Varian." The voice was steadier now, but the speaker kept her eyes averted from the detective's face.

"Your memory is defective," he said quietly. "Do you, then, remember a Mrs. Curtis?"

This shot went home, and Mrs. Briggs cried out excitedly, "What do you mean? Who are you?"

"You haven't been asked anything about these people for twenty years, have you?" Wise went on. "You didn't think you ever would be asked about them, did you? Your memory is all right. Now, what have you to say?"

"I have nothing to say. I remember a Mrs. Curtis, but she was not my patient."

"No; Mrs. Varian was your patient. But Mrs. Curtis figured in the Varian case pretty largely, I should say!"

Mrs. Briggs broke down. "I didn't do any harm," she said. "I only did what I was told. I obeyed the others who were in greater authority than I was." She buried her face in her apron and sobbed.

"That's right, Mrs. Briggs," Wise said kindly. "Tell the truth, and I promise you it will be far better for you in the long run than to make up any falsehoods."

"Tell me what happened," the woman said eagerly as she wiped her eyes. "Oh, sir, tell me? Did Mrs.—Mrs. Varian's little girl live to grow up?"

"Mrs. Varian's little girl?" Wise repeated with a strange intonation and a shrewd shake of his head.

"Yes, Mrs. Varian's little girl," the woman insisted obstinately. "They took the child away when it was four weeks old. Mrs. Varian was quite well and happy then."

"Of course she was, but were you happy?"

"Why not?" The words were defiant, but Mrs. Briggs's face showed some fear.

"Come now, Mrs. Briggs, tell me the whole story and you will get off scot free. Keep back the truth or any portion of the truth, and you will find yourself in most serious trouble. Which do you choose?"

"Where are the Varians? Where is Mr. Varian?"

"Mr. Varian is dead. You have me to reckon with instead of him. Oh, I begin to see! Was it Mr. Varian's scheme?"

"Yes, it was. I told you I had no choice in the matter."

"Because he paid you well. Now, are you going to tell me, or must I drag the story from you, piecemeal?"

"I'll—I'll tell."

"Tell it all, then. Begin at the beginning."

"The beginning was merely that the Varians were spending the summer here in a little cottage over on the next street to this. Mrs. Varian was expecting a confinement, but hoped to get back to the city before it took place. However, she was not well, and Mr. Varian brought her to the hospital for consultation and treatment. I was her nurse, and I came to know her well, and—to love her. She was a dear lady, and as her first babies had died in infancy she was greatly worried and anxious lest this new baby should be sickly or, worse, should be born dead.

"Mr. Varian was the most devoted husband I ever saw. He put up with all his wife's whims and tantrums—and she was full of them—and he indulged and petted her all the time. He was quite as anxious as she for a healthy child, and when they discovered that she must remain here for her confinement, he sent to town for all sorts of things to make her comfortable and happy.

"Well, the baby was born, and it was born dead. Mrs. Varian did not know it, and when I told Mr. Varian, he was so disappointed that I thought he would go off his head.

"Now there was another case in the hospital that was a very sad matter. It was Mrs. Curtis. She, poor woman, was confined that same night, and her baby was born, fine and healthy. But she didn't want the child. She was so poor she scarce could

keep soul and body together. She had three little children already, and her husband had died by accident only a month before. How to care for a new little one she didn't know.

"It was Nurse Black who thought of the plan of substituting the lovely Curtis child for the dead Varian baby, and we proposed it to Mr. Varian. To our surprise he fairly jumped at it! He begged us to ascertain if Mrs. Curtis would agree, saying he would pay her well. Now, Mrs. Curtis was only too grateful to be assured of a good home and care for her child, and willingly gave it over to the Varians. But Mrs. Varian never knew.

"That was Mr. Varian's idea, and it was an honest and true desire to please his wife and to provide her with a healthy child such as she herself could never bear.

"I think Mr. Varian was decided at the last by the piteous cries of Mrs. Varian for her baby. When he heard her he said quickly, "Take the Curtis child to her, and see if she accepts it?"

"And did she?" asked Zizi, her eyes shining at the dramatic story.

"Oh, she did! She cried out in joy that it was her baby and a beautiful, healthy child, and she was so pleased and happy and contented that she dropped off into a fine, natural sleep and began to get well at once. When she wakened she asked for the child, and so it went on until there was no question what to do. The whole matter was considered settled—"

"Who knew of the fraud?" asked Wise.

"No one in the world but Mrs. Curtis, Mr. Varian, and we two nurses. Mr. Varian paid the poor mother ten thousand dollars, and he gave us a thousand dollars apiece. The authorities of the hospital never knew. They assumed the dead child was Mrs. Curtis's and the living child was Mrs. Varian's."

"And the doctors?"

"There was but one. I forgot him. Yes, he knew, but he was a greedy scamp, and Mr. Varian easily bought him over. He died soon after, anyway."

"What living people know of this thing?"

"Why, you say Mr. Varian is dead?"

"Yes."

"Did Mrs. Varian ever learn the truth?"

"No," Zizi answered, emphatically, "she never did."

"And Nurse Black is dead, and the doctor is dead—why, then, nobody knows it except Mrs. Curtis, of course."

"She, too, is dead," Wise said.

"Then nobody knows it but we three here. Unless, of course, Mr. Varian or Mrs. Curtis told."

"Mr. Varian never did," Wise said. "As to Mrs. Curtis, I can't say."

"Oh, she'd never tell," Mrs. Briggs declared. "She was honest in the whole matter. She said that she didn't know how she'd support her three children, let alone a fourth. And she was glad and thankful to have it brought up among rich and kind people. She never would have let it go unless she had been sure of their kindness and care, but we told her what fine people the Varians were, and she was satisfied."

"Were there adoption papers taken out?"

Mrs. Briggs stared at Wise's question.

"Why, no; it wasn't an adoption, it was a substitution. How could there be an adoption? Mrs. Varian thought it her own child—the authorities of the hospital thought the living child was Mrs. Varian's. The matter was kept a perfect secret."

"And I think it was all right," Zizi defended. "So long as Mr. Varian knew, so long as Mrs. Curtis was satisfied, I don't see where any harm was done to anybody."

"I don't either, miss," said Mrs. Briggs, eagerly. "I'm gratified to hear you say that, and I hope, sir, you feel the same way about it."

"Why, I scarcely know what to say," Wise returned. "It depends on whether you view the whole thing from a judicial—"

"Or from a view-point of common sense and kind-heartedness!" Zizi said. "I think it was fine, and I'm only sorry for poor Mr. Varian, who had to bear the weight of his secret all alone through life."

"Oh, Zizi, that would explain the pearls!" Wise cried.

"Of course it does! He had to leave them to a Varian, and Betty wasn't a Varian. Oh, Penny, what a situation! The poor man!"

"And it explains a lot of other things

Wise said thoughtfully. "Well, Mrs. Briggs, we'll be going now. As to this matter, I think I can say, if you'll continue to keep it secret, we will do the same, at least, for the present. Did you never tell anybody? Not even your husband?"

"I never did. It was the only secret I ever kept from my husband; he's dead now this seven years, poor man, but I felt I couldn't tell him. It wasn't my secret. When I took Mr. Varian's money I promised never to tell about the child. And I kept my word. Until now," she added.

"You had to tell now, Mrs. Briggs, if you hadn't told willingly and frankly, I could have brought the law to bear on your decision."

"That's what I thought, sir. Please tell me of the child? Is she now a fine girl?"

Wise realized that up in this faraway hamlet the news of Betty Varian's disappearance had not become known.

"I've never seen her, but I'm told she is a fine and lovely girl. Her mother is a charming woman."

"I'm glad you say so, sir, for though I was sorry for her, she was a terror for peevishness and fretting. Yet, after she got the little girl she seemed transformed, she was that happy and content."

Back to the inn went Pennington Wise and Zizi.

"The most astonishing revelation I ever heard!" was Wise's comment as he closed the door of Zizi's sitting-room and sat down to talk it over.

"Where do you come out?"

"At all sorts of unexpected places. Now, Zizi, have you realized yet that Lawrence North married that Mrs. Curtis?"

"You're sure?"

"Practically; he married a widow named Curtis, who formerly lived in Greenvale, Vermont. I've not struck any other. And, besides, it connects North with this whole Varian case, and I'm sure he is mixed up in it"

"But how?"

"That's the question. But here's a more immediate question, Zizi. Are we to tell Mrs. Varian what we have learned from the nurse up here?"

"How can we help telling her?"

"But, think, Zizi. Have we a right to divulge Frederick Varian's secret? After he spent his life keeping it quiet, shall we be justified in blurting it out—"

"Oh, Penny, that's why Mr. Varian and Betty were at odds! She wasn't his child—"

"She didn't know that—"

"No; but he did, and it made him irritable and impatient. Oh, don't you see? He was everlastingly thinking that her traits were not Varian traits nor traits of her mother's family, and he couldn't help thinking of the child's real mother. Oh, I can see how altogether he was upset over and over again when Betty would do or say something that he didn't approve of."

"Yes, that's so. But, Zizi, here's a more important revelation. The reason Frederick Varian was so opposed to Betty's marrying was because he found himself in such an equivocal position! He couldn't let her marry a decent man without telling him the story of her birth. Yet he couldn't tell it! He couldn't tell the young man without telling his wife, and to tell Mrs. Varian, at this late date—oh, well, no wonder the poor father, who was no father, was nearly distracted. No wonder he was crusty and snappish at Betty. And she of course was in no way to blame!"

"Wouldn't you think Mrs. Varian would have suspected?"

"No; why should she? And, too, her husband took good care that she shouldn't. It's a truly marvelous situation!"

CHAPTER XVII.

THE LAST LETTER.

WHEN Wise and Zizi returned to Headland House they found Dr. Varian there on one of his brief visits. Deciding that it was the best course to pursue, the detective took the physician entirely into his confidence. The two were closeted in the library, and Wise related his discoveries regarding the Vermont hospital.

"It is astounding! Incredible!" exclaimed Varian. "But if it's true, and it must be, it explains a great many things.

As a doctor I can understand these things, and, looking back, I see that Betty never had any traits of either parent. Not always are children like their parents, but I've never seen a case where there was not some sign of heredity, some likeness to father or mother in looks or character. But Betty showed none such. She was a dear girl, and we all loved her, but she was not in any way like Fred or Minna. To be sure, I never thought about this definitely, for I had no reason to think of such a thing as you're telling me. But, recollecting Betty—for I've known her all her life—I can see where she is of a totally different stamp from my brother or his wife. My, what a case!"

"Do you blame Mr. Varian?"

"Not a bit. He did it out of the kindest of motives. He was not only a devoted husband, but a willing slave to his wife, even in cases where she was unreasonable or overexacting. He petted and humored her in every imaginable way, and when the third baby was expected the poor man was nearly frantic lest it should not live and Minna could not bear the disappointment. And so when, as it seems by a mere chance, he had an opportunity to provide her with a strong, healthy, beautiful child, I for one am not surprised that he did so, nor do I greatly blame him. As you represent it, the poor mother was willing and glad to consent to the arrangement. An adoption would have been perfectly legitimate and proper.

"Fred only chose the substitution plan to save Minna from trouble and worry. He was impulsive, and he stopped at nothing to please or comfort his wife. So I can easily see how he decided, on the impulse of the moment, to do this thing, and if, as you say, Minna took to the child at once, and loved it as her own, of course he felt that the plan must be kept up, the deception maintained."

"It accounts, I dare say, for the slight friction that so frequently arose between Betty and her father—for we may as well continue to call him her father."

"It does. I suppose when the child exhibited traits that annoyed or displeased Fred, he resented it, and he couldn't help showing it. He had a strong clannish feeling about the Varians, and he was sensitive to many slight faults in Betty that Minna never gave any heed to."

"It's an interesting study in the relative values of heredity and environment."

"Yes, it is; and it proves my own theory, which is that their influences average about fifty-fifty. Many times heredity is stronger than environment, and often it's the other way, but oftenest of all, as in this case, the one offsets the other. I know nothing of Betty's real ancestry, but it must have been fairly good or Fred never would have taken her at all."

"And it was, of course, his clannish loyalty to his family name that would not let him leave the pearls to Betty."

"Yes, they have always been left to a Varian, and Fred could not leave them to one who was really an outsider."

"It also explains Mr. Varian's objections to Betty's marriage."

"Oh, it does! Poor man, what he must have suffered. His was a high-strung nature, impulsive, and even impetuous, but of a sound, impeccable honesty that wouldn't brook a shadow of wrong to any one."

"I suppose what he had done troubled him more or less all his life."

"I suppose so. Not his conscience—I can see how he looked on his deed as right—but he was bothered by circumstances. And it was a difficult situation that he had created. The more I realize it, the sorrier I feel for my poor brother. To make his will was a perplexity. His lawyer has told me that when he left the pearls away from Betty, he said, 'I *must* do it! I *have* to do it!' in a voice that was fairly agonized. The lawyer could not understand what he meant, but assumed it was some cloud on Betty's birth.

"I dare say Fred was not bothered about his money, for he knew if he died first Minna would provide for Betty. But the pearls he had to arrange for. Oh, well, Mrs. Wise, now then, viewed in the light of these revelations, where do we stand? Who killed my brother? Who killed the maid, Martha? Who kidnaped Betty and Mr. North?"

"Those are not easy questions, Dr. Va-

rian," Wise responded with a grave face, "but of this I am confident—one name will answer them all."

"You know the name?"

"I am not quite sure enough yet to say that I do—but I have a strong suspicion. I think it is the man who wrote the blackmailing letters to Mr. Varian."

"The man we call Stephen? It well may be. They referred to a robbed woman. Now, my brother never robbed anybody in the commonly accepted sense of that term, but it may mean the mother of Betty. Could the doctor in the Greenvale Hospital, that attended the two women that night, be trying to make money out of the matter?"

"I was told he died some years ago."

"But these letters are not all recent. And, too, he might have divulged the secret before he died, and whoever he told used it as a threat against my brother."

"It's hardly a blackmailing proposition."

"Oh, yes, it is. Say the doctor, or the doctor's confidant, threatened Fred with exposure of the secret of Betty's birth. I know my brother well enough to be certain that he would pay large sums before he would bring on Minna and Betty the shock and publicity, even though there was no actual disgrace."

"Well, then, granting a blackmailer, he's the one to look for; but on the other hand, why should he kill Mr. Varian, when he was his hope of financial plunder? Why should he kidnap Betty? And above all, why should he kill Martha and abduct Lawrence North?"

"The only one of those very pertinent questions that I can answer is the one about Betty. Whoever kidnaped her did it for ransom. That is evidenced by the letters to Minna."

"If they are genuine."

"Oh, they are—I'm sure. She had another while you were away."

"She did! To what purport?"

"Further and more desperate insistence of the ransom—and quickly."

"The regular procedure! If it is a fake, they would do the same thing."

"Yes, and they would also, if it is a real issue."

Wise went at once to find Minna and see the new letter.

It was indeed imperative, saying in part:

> Now we have Betty safe, but this is your last chance to get her back. We are too smart for your wise detective and we are in dead earnest. Also Betty will be dead in earnest unless you do exactly as we herein direct. Also, this is our last letter. If you decide against us, we settle Betty's account and call the whole deal off. Our instructions are the same as before. On Friday night, at midnight, go to the edge of the cliff and throw the package of money over. Tie it to some float, and we will do the rest. That is, if you act in sincerity. If you are false-minded in the least detail, we will know it. We are wiser than Wise. So take your choice and—have a care! No one will be more faithful than we, if you act in good faith. Also, no one can be worse than we can be, if you betray us!

The somewhat lengthy letter was written on the same typewriter as had been used for the others, and Wise studied it.

"There's nothing to be deduced from the materials," he said. "They're too smart to use traceable paper or typing. But there are other indications, and I think, Mrs. Varian, at last I see a ray of hope, and I trust it will soon be a bright gleam and then full sunshine."

"Good!" Zizi cried, clapping her hands. "When Penny talks poetry he's in high good humor—and when he's in high good humor it's 'cause he's on the right track. And when he's on the right track—he gets there!"

Then they told Wise about the strange communication from the girl who knew lip-reading, and the detective was even more highly elated.

"Great!" he exclaimed. "Perfectly remarkable! Where's Granniss?"

"Gone to Boston to see a moving picture concern. He may have to go on to New York. He hopes to be back by Saturday at the latest."

It was Minna who answered, and her face was jubilant at the hope renewed in her heart by Wise's own hopefulness.

But she determined in her secret thoughts to throw the money over the cliff on Friday night, whether the detective agreed to that plan or not. What, she ar-

gued to Mrs. Fletcher, whom she took into her confidence on this matter, was any amount of money compared to the mere chance of getting back her child? She urged and bribed Fletcher until she consented to help Minna get out of the house on Friday night without Wise's knowledge.

It was now Tuesday, and after much questioning of every one in the house as to what had taken place in his absence, the detective shut himself alone in the library, and surrounded by his own written notes, and with many of Mr. Varian's letters and financial papers, he thought and brooded over it all for some hours.

At last he opened the door and called Zizi.

"Well, my child," he said, closing the door behind her, "I've got a line on things."

"I do hope, Penny, you'll watch out for Mrs. Varian. She's going to throw the money over the cliff on Friday night without your knowledge or consent."

"She can't do that."

"She can't without your knowledge, I admit. But she can without your consent. Her money is her own, and you've no real authority that will let you dictate to her how to use it."

"True, fair queen!"

"Oh, Penny, when you smile like that, I know something's up! What is it?"

"My luck, I hope. Ziz, do you remember you said you had a green stain on your frock like the one on Martha's hand?"

"Yes. Why?"

"Is it there yet, or did you clean it off?"

"It's there yet; I haven't worn the dress since."

"Get it, will you?"

Zizi went, and returned with the little frock, a mere wisp of light, thin material, and handed it to Wise.

He inspected the stain, which was visible though not conspicuous; then he sniffed at it with such absorption that Zizi laughed outright.

"Pen," she said, "in detective stories they always represent the great detectives as sniffing like a hound on a scent. You're literally doing it."

"Not astonishing that I should, little one, when you realize that this green stain is a beacon to light our way."

"What is it?" Zizi's big black eyes grew serious at Wise's tone.

"The way out; the exit; the solution of the mystery of the secret passage."

"Oh, Penny, tell me! You'll be the death of me if you keep the truth from me. I'm crazy with suspense!"

But Zizi's curiosity could not be gratified just then, for Fletcher came to say that Minna desired the girl's company.

Minna Varian had come to depend much on Zizi's charm and entertainment, and often sent for her when feeling especially blue or nervous.

Zizi had been waiting for an opportunity, and now as the nurse left her alone with Mrs. Varian she gradually and deftly led the talk around to Betty as a baby.

"Tell me what you thought when you first saw your little daughter," Zizi said in her pretty, coaxing way. "How old was she?"

"About an hour or so, I think," Minna said reminiscently. "And my first thought was, 'Oh, thank God for a healthy, beautiful baby!' She was so lovely and so strong and perfect! I had hoped she would be all right, but I never looked for such a marvel as came to me!"

"And Mr. Varian was as pleased as you were!" Zizi said gently.

"Oh, yes; but"—Minna's face clouded a little—"I don't know how to express it, but he never seemed to love Betty as he did our first children. He admired her—nobody could help it—but he had a queer little air of restraint about her. It lasted all through life. I can't understand it—unless he was jealous—"

"Jealous?"

"Yes. Of my love and adoration of the child. Silly idea, I know, but I've racked my brain, and I can't think of any other explanation."

"That doesn't explain the Varian pearls—"

"No; nothing can explain that! Oh, nothing explains anything! Zizi, you've no idea what I suffer! I wonder I keep my mind! Just think of a woman who never had to decide a question for herself, if she

didn't want to—who never had a care or responsibility that she didn't assume of her own accord, who had a husband to care for her, a daughter to love her—"

The poor woman broke down completely, and Zizi had her hands full to ward off the violent hysterics that attacked her at times.

Meantime, Pennington Wise, convinced of the origin of the green stain on Zizi's frock, was starting forth to prove his conviction.

Armed only with a powerful flash-light and a good-sized hammer, he went out to the kitchen and through that to the cellar. He went straight to the old well. Testing the rope as he did so, he let the bucket down as far as it would go. Then, with monkeylike agility, he began to clamber down, partly supported by clinging to the rope, partly by getting firm footholds on the old stones that lined the well.

Scarce had he started when he experimentally drew his hand across the stones, and by his flash-light perceived a green smear, the counterpart of that on Zizi's frock. Also the counterpart of that on Martha's hand.

Yet, the dead girl could scarcely have been in the well! So, he concluded, her assailant must have been! However, he went on investigating.

He examined every crack and crevice, running his fingers into the sticky green moss that covered the stones, but without result. With his hammer he struck at the stones, and listened carefully to detect the hollow sound that would indicate a passageway. He went over the walls of the well inch by inch, working until the perspiration beaded his brow and he felt stifled by the dank air and the odor of sea moss. At last he stood in the bottom of the well, slippery and muddy, and almost admitted his failure. Yet he could not and would not give up. He made another thorough examination, again without result.

He worked feverishly, knowing how much depended upon it. But his very eagerness was perhaps in the way of his success. At last he mopped his brow and decided he would have to give it up for the present and make another trial. He started to climb out of the well, but it was more difficult than his descent, because the mud that clung to his shoes slipped on the damp moss.

To climb more easily he thrust his hammer through the belt of his trousers. It slid through and fell with a plump into the soft mud. In an attempt to recover it his feet slipped, and he found his legs dangling in the air, while he clung with three fingers to a narrow ridge of stone. The whole weight of his body pulled on the stone, and he was strangely startled to see that he was being slowly lowered.

The stone to which he clung was revolving as upon an axis! He held on desperately and was slowly lowered, as the stone swung over, until his feet touched the bottom of the well. He stepped back a pace and looked up. Quite by a lucky accident, the opening in the wall of the well had been discovered. He saw a streak of light shine through, and he shot his flash-light upon the hole.

Below the hole made by the stone upon an axis—which was a solid steel bar imbedded in the stone itself—were others which he now saw could be easily removed. He proceeded to pry them out.

When all that were loose had been either pulled out or pushed in, he found there was an aperture large enough to permit a man's body to pass through, and without hesitation he scrambled through it.

His flash-light showed him that almost from the start the hole widened until it became a fair-sized tunnel. Crawling along this for a hundred yards or so, he heard the splash of water, and soon he no longer needed his flash-light, as daylight streamed in through a narrow fissure in the rock.

It was fortunate for Wise that it did, for just ahead the tunnel descended sharply, and at the bottom what was evidently the surf was surging in from the ocean.

It was quite dark below, and being unable to progress further, Wise backed out of the tunnel, which wasn't wide enough to turn around in, and reaching the well again he ascended to the surface.

He went to his room, looked with satisfaction on the numerous smears of green and brown that disfigured his suit, which

he had taken care should be an old one. No one knew what he had done, nor did any one know his destination when, half an hour later, he set off for the village. He went to the inn and inquired where he could get the best motor-boat that could be hired.

A suitable one was found, and its owner agreed to take Wise on an exploring expedition at the next low tide. This would not be until the following morning, so the detective went back to Headland House. Then he concentrated all his efforts and attention on the subject of the moving picture film that had been said to portray Betty Varian.

"Rod Granniss vows that it was really Betty," Zizi insisted.

"He ought to know," said Wise. "A man in love with a girl doesn't mistake her identity. Besides, it's quite on the cards, Zizi. Say Betty is confined somewhere—say she is let out for a little exercise, in care of a jailer, of course—say there's a movie camera taking a picture of a crowd—they often do pick up stray passers-by, you know—and Betty somehow got into the picture—"

"Oh, the jailer, as you call him, wouldn't let her!"

"More likely a woman in charge of her. And, maybe a woman not averse to taking the few dollars those people pay to actors who just make up a crowd. Well, say that happened, and then Betty, not daring to speak aloud, made her lips form the words, 'I am Betty Varian,' in the hope that among the few thousands of lip-readers in the country one might strike twelve!"

"Nobody could be so clever as all that, Pen!"

"She might be, on a chance inspiration. Anyway, how else can you explain it?"

"Why, anybody might have said that, who wasn't Betty at all."

"But why? What would be the sense of it? And why would such a thing occur to anybody but Betty?"

"If it's true, then you can find her! Surely you can track down a moving picture company!"

"Oh, it isn't that! It's tracking down the place where Betty is confined—and doing it while she is still alive. You see, Zizi, those ransom letters are true bills, and the villains have nearly reached the end of their patience."

"Then why don't you approve of Mrs. Varian's throwing the money over the cliff?"

"I may advise her to do it by Friday night—if nothing happens in the mean time."

"But look here, Penny," Zizi said after a thoughtful moment; "if your theory is the right one, why didn't Betty scream out 'I am Betty Varian!' and take a chance that somebody in the crowd would rescue her?"

"It would seem a natural thing to do, unless the girl had been cowed by threats of punishment or even torture if she made an outcry when allowed to go for a walk. I'm visualizing that girl as kept in close confinement, but not in any want or discomfort. She is most likely treated well as to food, rooms, and all that, but is not allowed to step out of doors except with a strict guard and under some terrible penalty if she attempts to make herself known. With Betty's love of fresh air and sunshine, she would agree to almost anything to get out of doors.

"Then, too, if she merely formed those words without a sound, the chance of their being read by a lip-reader was really greater than the chance of doing any good by crying out aloud. Had she done that, whoever had her in charge would have whisked her away at once, and no one would have paid any attention to the slight disturbance."

"It's all perfectly logical, and, oh, I hope Rodney gets some clew to the place where the picture was taken."

"I hope so, Ziz, but they've probably moved Betty away from there by now."

"Did you find out, Penny, what that stain on my frock was?"

"I did."

"Well?"

"Yes, my dear, you've struck it! You got that stain while you were down the well."

"Oh!" Zizi's eyes lighted up. "Of course I did! Those damp, mossy stones.

Just how did the same stain get on Martha's hand?"

"That is a part of the solution of the whole great mystery."

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE TRAP.

IN a small but powerful motor-boat Wise went on his voyage of exploration. The man who managed the craft was a stolid, silent person, who obeyed Wise's orders without comment. But when the detective directed that he go round the base of the headland and skirt close to the rocks, he grumbled at the danger.

"Be careful of the danger," Wise said. "Steer clear of hidden reefs, but go close to the overhanging cliff, there where I'm pointing."

Skirting the cliff, at last Wise discovered what he was looking for—a small cave, worn in the rock by the sea. The floor of this cave rose sharply, and it was with difficulty that Wise managed to scramble from the boat to a secure footing on the slippery wet rocks.

"Look out there," said the imperturbable boatman. "You'll get caught in there when the tide comes up. "I never noticed that hole in the wall before. It must be out o' sight 'ceptin' at low tide."

"Stay where you are and wait for me," Wise directed. "If I'm not out here again in half an hour, go on home. But I'll probably be back in less than that."

"You will, if you're back at all! The tide will turn in fifteen minutes, and in half an hour it 'll be all you can do to get out!"

Disappearing, Wise began his climb up the floor of the cave, and at a point just above high water there was a fissure in the cliff which admitted air and some light. At this point the cave ran back for some distance, though still on a rising level. During the winter storms the ocean evidently had worn this tunnel in the rock.

Wise at once realized that this nature-made tunnel ran on for some distance until it ended in the old well.

Using his flash-light when necessary, he made his way, until he reached the pile of stones which he himself had pushed out from the well and found to his satisfaction that he had indeed come to the well, and that his solution of the mystery of a secret passage into Headland House was accomplished.

"But what a solution! The difficulty and danger of entrance or exit by means of that rock tunnel and that old well could scarcely be exaggerated. Moreover, all such entrances or exits must be made at the lowest ebb of the tide. But the cave was roomy, not uncomfortable, and the tunnel, though cramped in places, was fairly navigable.

There was plenty of room in the cave quite above reach of the highest tide, and the whole matter was clear and simple now that he saw it all, but he marveled at the energy and enterprise that could conceive, plan and carry out the various attacks.

Whoever the criminal or the master criminal might be, he had come up through that tunnel and well on the several occasions of the kidnaping of Betty, the murder of Martha, the abduction of North. Wise remembered the letter that had been mysteriously left on the hall table—also the night the library had been entered. Clearly, the man came and went at will.

The way between Headland House and the outer world was not easy of negotiation, but it was a way, and it was passable to a determined human being. Wise was back inside the prescribed half-hour, and the uninterested boatman took him back to the harbor without question or comment as to his enterprise.

That afternoon Wise called Minna and Dr. Varian into the library and closed the door. Zizi was also present, her black eyes shining with anticipation, for she knew from Wise's manner and expression that he was making progress and was about to disclose his discoveries.

"I have learned a great deal," the detective began, "but not all. At least, I have found the so-called secret passage, which we all felt sure must exist."

He described the cave and the tunnel as he had found them, and the outlet into the old well, so carefully piled with loose stones that it would escape the observance

of almost any searcher. He told briefly but graphically of his exit from the well for a distance, and of his later entrance from the cave, and of his procedure to the well.

Zizi nodded her birdlike little head with an air of complete understanding. Dr. Varian was absorbedly interested and profoundly amazed, while Minna looked helplessly ignorant of just what Wise was talking about.

"I can't understand it," she said. "But never mind that—I don't care, if you say it's all so. Now, where's Betty?"

"That we don't know yet," Wise said gently, "but we're on the way at last to find out. As I reconstruct the crime now, that day that Betty returned for her camera she must have done so under one of two conditions. Either her errand was genuine, in which case she surprised the criminal here at some nefarious work, or—which I think far more probable—she came back pretending it was for her camera, but really because of some message or communication which she had received purporting some good to her, but really a ruse of the criminal, who was here for the purpose of abducting the girl."

"For ransom?" asked Dr. Varian.

"Yes, for ransom. Now, he would naturally attack her in the hall. Perhaps she threw herself on the sofa, clung to it, and was carried off, still holding that yellow pillow, unconsciously, or he may have used it to stifle her cries. There were two men involved, of that I am sure. When they had partly accomplished their purpose, Mr. Varian appeared at the door, and one of the men had to intercept his entrance.

"I rather fancy the killing of Mr. Varian was unintentional, or possibly self-defense, for these ruffians did not want to kill their blackmail victim. They may have parleyed with the father to pay them to release the girl, and when he showed fight, as he would, they did also, and as a result Mr. Varian met his death.

"However, that is mere surmise. What we know is that Betty was carried through the kitchen where the pillow fell, still holding one of her hairpins, probably caught during the struggle, and she was carried down the cellar stairs. During this trip her string of beads broke, and they were scattered about. As we never found but a few, and those were under furniture or cupboards, I gather the villains picked up all they could see, lest they should be found as evidence."

"Which they were!" said Zizi.

"Which they were," Wise assented. "Then they carried that girl, whether conscious or chloroformed I can't say, down to the cellar, down the old well, through the tunnel to the cave. There they could wait any number of hours until the tide served, and take her away in a boat without attracting the notice of anybody."

"Most likely at night," Zizi put in.

"Most likely. Anyway, Mrs. Varian, that's my finding. It's all very dreadful, but horrifying as it is, it opens the way to better things. To go on, there can be no doubt that this same villain, and a clever one he is, returned here at night for plunder and on other errands.

"He came and left the letter found so mysteriously on the hall table. He came to rob the library safe, thinking the ransom money was in it. And he was spied upon and discovered by the maid, Martha, so that he ruthlessly strangled her rather than face exposure."

"And then he abducted North!" Dr. Varian cried. "And it's easy to see why! North had doubtless also spied on him, and somehow he forced North to go away with him, perhaps at a pistol's point."

"Now our question is—"

"Two questions!" Zizi cried. "First, who is the criminal? Second, where is he keeping Betty all this time?"

"Yes; and we know a great deal to start on." Wise spoke thoughtfully. "We know, almost to a certainty, that it is the man whom we call Stephen, because he wrote threatening letters signed 'Step.' We know he is diabolically clever, absolutely fearless, and willing to commit any crime, or series of crimes, to gain his end, which is merely the large sum of money he has demanded from Mrs. Varian, and which he had previously demanded from Mr. Varian, as blackmail."

"Why should he blackmail my husband?" Minna asked tearfully.

"There is not always a sound reason for blackmail, Mrs. Varian," Wise replied. "Sometimes it is an unjust accusation or a mistaken suspicion. Anyway, as you have often declared, Mr. Frederick Varian was a noble and upright man, and his integrity could not be questioned."

"Now, then," said Dr. Varian, "to find this master hand at crime. I am astounded at your revelations, Mr. Wise, and I confess myself utterly in the dark as to our next step."

"An animal that attacks in the open," Wise returned, "may be shot or snared. But a wicked, crafty animal may only be caught by a trap. I propose to set a trap to catch our foe. It is a wicked trap, but he is a wicked man. It will harm him physically, but he deserves to be harmed physically. It is a sly, underhand method, but so are his own. Therefore, I conclude that a trap is justified in his case."

"You mean a real, literal man-trap?" asked the doctor.

"I mean just that. I have already procured it and I propose to set it to-night. This is Thursday. As matters stand now, our 'Stephen' is assuming, or at least hoping, that Mrs. Varian means to accede to his last request and throw the money over the cliff to-morrow, Friday night. Now I feel pretty positive that Stephen is not so confident of getting that money safely as he pretends he is. He must be more or less fearful of detection. I'm sure that he will return to this house to-night by his usual mode of entrance, and will try to steal the money. Then he will disappear and he may or may not give up Betty."

"You think he'll come here? To-night?" Dr. Varian was astonished.

"I do."

"Then we'll be ready for him! I fancy between us, Mr. Wise, we can account for him and his accomplice."

"Too dangerous, doctor. He would kill us both before we knew it. No, I'm going to set my trap. If he comes he deserves to be trapped. If he doesn't come, there is certainly no harm done."

"Where shall we hide the money?" asked Minna nervously.

"It doesn't matter." Wise's face set sternly. "He will never get as far as the money."

Hating his job, but fully alive to the justice and necessity of it, Wise set his trap that night.

It was a real trap, and was set up in the kitchen in such a position that it faced the cellar door. It consisted of a short-barreled shotgun which was mounted on an improvised gun-carriage, made of a strong packing-box.

This contrivance was fastened carefully to the kitchen wall about twelve feet in front of the cellar door, and when the door should be opened, the trap would be sprung and the shotgun discharged.

A steel spring fastened to the trigger, and a strong cord running to a pulley in the ceiling, thence to another, and finally to a pulley in the floor, and on to the door-knob completed the deadly mechanism.

The tension of the spring was so carefully adjusted that an intruder might open the door a foot or more before the strain was carried to the trigger. This insured a sure aim and a deadly shot.

Wise tested his trap thoroughly, and finally, with a grim nod of his head, declared it was all right.

He had sent the servants and the women to bed before beginning his work, and now he and Dr. Varian seated themselves in the library to await developments.

"As I said," Wise remarked, "Stephen may not come at all or he may send an accomplice. But I expect him to come himself."

"Have you no idea of his identity, Mr. Wise?" the doctor asked.

"Yes; I have an idea. If he does not come to-night I will tell you who I think he is. But we will wait and see."

They waited, now silent and now indulging in a low-toned conversation, when at two o'clock in the morning the report of the gun brought them to their feet and they raced to the kitchen.

The roaring detonation was still in their ears as they strode through the hall, and the smell of powder greeted them at the kitchen door.

The cellar door was open, and on the floor lay a man breathing with difficulty.

Dr. Varian dropped on his knees beside him, and his professional instinct was at once uppermost, even as his astonished voice exclaimed:

"Lawrence North!"

"As I expected," Wise said, "and well he deserves his fate. Will he live, doctor?"

"Only a few moments," was the preoccupied reply. "I can do nothing for him. He received the full charge in the abdomen."

"Tell your story, North," Wise said briefly. "Don't waste time in useless groaning."

North glared at the detective.

"You fiend!" he gasped, gurgling in rage and agony.

"You're the fiend!" Varian said. "Hush your vituperation and tell us where Betty is."

A smile of low cunning came over North's villainous face. He used his small remaining strength to say, "That you'll never know. You've spiked your own guns. Nobody knows but me, and I won't tell!"

Alarmed, Wise tried another tone.

"This won't do, North," he said. "Whatever your crime, you can't refuse that last act of expiation. Tell where she is and die the better for it."

"No!" gasped the dying man. "Bad I've lived and bad I'll die. You'll never find Betty Varian. There are standing orders to do away with her if anything happens to me, and"—he tried to smile—"something has happened!"

"It sure has," Wise said, and looked at him with real pity, for the man was suffering torture. "But I command you, North, by the blood you have shed, by the two human lives you have taken, by the heart of the wife and mother that you have broken—I charge you, give up your secret while you have strength to do so!"

For a moment North seemed to hesitate.

A little stimulant administered by the doctor gave him a trifle more strength, but then his face changed. He turned reminiscent.

"Good work," he said, it seemed exultingly. "When I first found the cave, a year ago, I began to plan how I could get the Varians to take this house. They little thought *I* brought it about through the real estate people—"

"Never mind all that," Wise urged him. "Where's Betty?"

"Betty? Ah, yes—Betty—" His mind seemed to wander again, and Varian gave him a few drops more stimulant.

"Get it out of him," he said to the detective. "This will lose all efficacy in another few moments. He is going."

"Going, am I?" North was momentarily alert. "All right, doc, I'll go and my secret will go with me."

"Where is Betty?" Wise leaned over the miserable wretch, as if he would drag the secret from him by sheer will power.

The other's will power matched his own.

"Betty," he said. "Oh, yes, Betty. Really, my wife's daughter, you know—my stepdaughter—I had a right to her, didn't I—"

"'Step'!" Wise cried. "Short for stepfather!"

"Yes, of course; my wife didn't mean to tell me that story—didn't know she did—she babbled in her sleep, and I got it out of her by various hints and allusions. Mrs. Varian never knew, so I bled the old man. My, he was in a blue funk whenever I attacked him about it!"

"Where is she now?" Wise hinted.

"No, sir, you don't get it out of me. You caught me, damn you! Now I'll make you wish you hadn't!" And Lawrence North died without another word.

Baffled and spent with his efforts, Wise left the dead man in the doctor's care and returned to the library.

He found Zizi there. She had listened from the hall and had overheard much that went on, but she couldn't bring herself to go where the wounded man lay.

"Oh, Penny," she sobbed, "he didn't tell! Maybe if I had gone in I could have got it out of him! But I c-couldn't look at him—"

"Never mind, dear, that's all right. He wouldn't have told you, either. The man was the worst criminal I have ever known. He hadn't a drop of humanity in his veins. As to remorse or regret, he never knew their meaning! Now, what shall we do? Is Mrs. Varian awake?"

"Yes; in mild hysterics. Fletcher is with her."

"Dr. Varian must go to her, and after that doubtless you can soothe her better than any one else. I'll get Potter and Dunn up here, and I fervently hope it's for the last time!"

"Penny, your work was wonderful! You were right, a thing like that had to be trapped, not caught openly. You're a wonder!"

"Yet it all failed when I failed to learn where Betty is. I shall find her. But I fear, Zizi—I fear that the evil that man has done will live after him, and I fear for the fate of Betty Varian."

Zizi tried to cheer him, but her heart, too, was heavy with vague fears, and she left him to his routine work of calling the police and once again bringing them up to Headland House on a gruesome errand.

These things done, Wise went at once to North's bungalow in Headland Harbor. He had small hope of finding Joe Mills there, and as he had foreseen, that worthy had decamped. Nor did they ever see him again.

"I suppose," Wise said afterward, "he was in the cellar when North was killed; but I never thought of him then, nor could I have caught him, as he doubtless fled away in the darkness to safety."

"Then it was a put-up job, that scene of struggle and confusion in North's bedroom that day he disappeared?" Bill Dunn asked Wise.

"Yes. I felt it was, but I couldn't see how he got away. You see, at that time North began to feel that my suspicions were beginning to turn in his direction, and he thought by pretending to be abducted himself he would argue a bold and wicked kidnaper again at work. At any rate, he wanted to get away and stay away, the better to carry on his dreadful plans, and he chose that really clever way of departing. The touch of leaving his watch behind was truly artistic, unless he forgot it. Well, now to find Betty Varian."

"Just a minute, Mr. Wise. How'd you come to think of looking for that cave arrangement?"

"After I began to suspect North I watched him very closely. I had in my mind some sort of rock passage, and when I took him out in a boat, or Joe Mills either, when we went close to that part of the rocks where the cave is, I noted their evident efforts not to look toward a certain spot. It was almost amusing to see how their eyes strayed that way, and were quickly averted. They almost told me just where to look!"

"Wonderful work!" Dunn exclaimed.

"No," Wise returned. "Only a bit of psychology. Now to find Betty."

But though the detective doubtless would have recovered the missing girl, he had not the opportunity, for love had found a way.

By the hardest sort of work and with indefatigable perseverance, Granniss had gone from one to another of the various officials, mechanicians and even workmen of the moving picture company he was on trail of, and after maddening delays caused by their lack of method, their careless records and their uncertain memories, he finally found out where the picture of a crowd in which Betty had appeared was taken.

And then by further and unwearying search, he found an old but strongly built and well guarded house where he had reason to think Betty was imprisoned.

He didn't wait for proofs of his belief, but telegraphed for Pennington Wise and Sheriff Potter to come there at once and gain entrance.

Rod's inexperience led him to adopt this course, but it proved a good one, for his telegram reached Wise the day after North's death, and he hurried off, Potter with him.

The house was in Vermont, and while Potter made the necessary arrangements with the local authorities, Wise went on to meet Granniss.

"There's the house," said Granniss, and Wise saw the rather pleasant-looking old mansion. "I'm dead sure Betty's in there, but I can't get entrance, though I've tried every possible way."

But the arrival of the police soon effected an entrance, and armed with the knowledge of North's death as well as more material implements, they all went in.

Pretty Betty, as pretty as ever, though

pale and thin from worry and fear, ran straight into Granniss's arms and nestled there in such absolute relief and content that the other men present turned away from the scene with a choke in their throats.

If Granniss hadn't found her!

The news of North's death brought the jailers to terms at once. They were a man and wife—big, strong people—who were carrying out North's orders "to be kind and proper to the girl, but not to let her get away."

The moving picture incident had occurred just as Wise has surmised. On her daily walks for exercise Betty was sometimes allowed to get into a crowd at the studio near by, and frequently she had tried her clever plan of silent talk. But only once had that plan succeeded.

Yet, once was enough, and Granniss said, "Look here, you people, clear up all the red tape, won't you? Betty and I want to go home!"

"Run along," said Wise. "There's a train in an hour. Skip!"

Their arrival at Headland House, heralded by a telegram to Zizi, had no unduly exciting effect on Minna Varian.

Dr. Varian watched her, but as he saw the radiant joy with which she clasped Betty in her arms, he had no fear of the shock of joy proving too much for her.

"Oh, mother," Betty cried, "don't let's talk about it now. I'll tell you anything you want to know some other time. Now, just let me revel in being here!"

Nor did any one bother the poor child save to ask a few important questions.

These brought the information that Betty had been decoyed back to the house that day by a false message purporting to be from Granniss, asking her to return after the rest left the house, and call him up on the telephone. This Betty tried to do, using her camera as an excuse.

But she never reached the telephone. Once in the house she was grasped, and the assailants—there were two—attempted to chloroform her. But chloroforming is not such a speedy matter as many believe, and she was still struggling against the fumes when her father appeared.

North held Betty while the other man, who was Joe Mills, fought Frederick Varian, and, in the struggle, shot him.

This angered North so that he lost his head. He almost killed Mills in his rage and fury, and seizing Betty, made for the secret passage.

On the way her string of beads broke, the pillow which they used to help make her unconscious was dropped on the kitchen floor, and then she was carried down the well, through the tunnel and cave and away in a swift motor-boat.

In a half-conscious state all these things were like a dream to her.

"A dream which must not be recalled," said Granniss with an air of authority that sat well upon him.

"My blessing," Minna said, fondling the girl. "Never mind about anything, now that I have you back. I miss your father more than words can say, but with you restored, I can know happiness again. Let us both try to forget."

Later a council was held as to whether to tell Minna the true story of Betty's birth.

The two young people had to be told, and Dr. Varian was appealed to for a decision regarding Minna.

"I don't know," he said, uncertainly. "You see, it explains the pearls—"

"I'll tell you," Granniss said. "Don't let's tell Mother Varian now. Betty and I will be married very soon, and after that we can see about it. Or, if she has to know at the time of the wedding we'll tell her then. But let her rejoice in her newfound child as her own child as long as she can. Surely she deserves it."

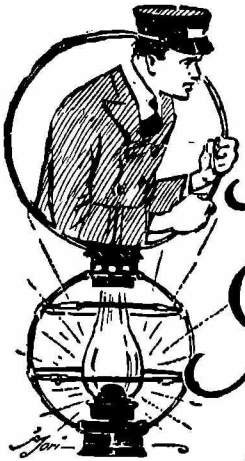
"And you don't care?" Betty asked, looking at him wistfully.

"My darling! I don't care whose daughter you are—you'll soon be my wife, and Granniss is all the name you'll ever need!"

"Bless your sweet hearts," said Zizi, her black eyes showing a tender gleam for the girl she had so long known of, and only now known.

"And bless your sweetheart when you choose one!" Betty said, her happy heart so full of joy that her old gaiety already began to return.

(The end.)



Not Exactly As Expected

by Loyal R. Baker

THE crack daily limited of the Intermountain and Ocean Railway picked up speed and moved rapidly westward from Addington, where it crossed the river, with a fast schedule to maintain and seemingly bent on maintaining it. Trains of the I. and O. were noted for being on time; to a man the train crews swore it was the best road ever built, and its trains could make the best time under any condition. Didn't their capture of the mail contract, after a fight almost to the death with the splendidly equipped Inland Central, prove this? Each man was proud of the reputation for being "On time." It was their watchword.

Rapidly the rich Iowa farm lands and comfortable homes slipped by as the I. and O. train sped onward. And the conductor, John Essington, whom the boys all called "Dad," started his regular round of the train to collect tickets or fares from such passengers as had been picked up at the last station.

In the first coach Dad found a passenger who had every appearance of being sound asleep, a big, heavy-set fellow, with dark eyes and heavy, closely cropped black mustache.

"H'm," mused Dad, "wasn't on before we reached Addington, so he can't be so very sound asleep."

He tapped the fellow on the shoulder. No move of any kind resulted; if anything the passenger slept all the more soundly, judging from the snores which now became audible.

"Well, well, sounds like he hasn't slept for a week," and Dad chuckled as he finally shook the passenger back to life.

"Ticket," he requested as the other raised up on the seat.

"Why, you've already got my ticket," and he started to slump back again.

"No, I haven't already got your ticket, but I want it now," said Dad, angered at this apparent attempt of the other to get off without paying.

The passenger evidently saw that the conductor was all business, so he took a pass from his pocket and presented it.

"Well," said Dad, highly chagrined at this, "why didn't you show it in the first place?"

But the stranger only scowled and didn't answer.

"Let me see," continued the conductor, pencil in hand, taking a record of the pass. "Edward Jenkins. Name sounds familiar. Why! Of course it does! You're the Inspector Jenkins who was on the Inland Central several years ago! Sure, I remember you now! But you didn't have a mustache then, did you?"

"I don't remember," returned the other.

"Well, I do," went on Dad. "I always thought you pulled some mighty coarse work when old Bill Stone was let out, and

I've kept you in mind. Yes, sir, you didn't have a mustache then, but you sure did swear to a pack of lies to get Bill."

"Say, shut up!" shouted Jenkins. "You're in your second childhood, old fellow, but you'll have to keep your mouth closed. Get me?"

"Yes, I get you all right. And I feel sure you're here right now on some more of your dirty work." With that Dad moved on.

This chance meeting with Jenkins worried the old fellow not a little. With the details of the Bill Stone incident clearly in mind, he felt sure that Jenkins had come to the I. and O. for more of the same kind of work.

"Too bad," said Dad to himself; "some of our boys are sure to be caught. They are straight as a string, but that fellow and his underhand ways would get the Lord himself in bad."

But the stop at the next station and the routine of his duties took his mind from Jenkins and kept him busy until the train reached the division point of Crocker, the end of his run.

After reaching Crocker, on time to the minute, Dad started up the platform toward the office to check up and turn in his receipts as usual. Almost the first person he met was young Billy Henderson, a big, good-natured fellow, who was engaged to be married to Dad's daughter Daisy, and conductor in charge of the train to the end of the line.

This meeting with Billy was nothing unusual. In fact it was almost a regular thing for Billy to meet him at the platform and sing out, "Hello, Dad. What kind of a trip did you have?"

And Dad invariably answered, "Fine, my boy, got through in good shape," and passed on.

To-day, however, after replying to Billy and continuing toward the office the face of Jenkins crossed his line of vision. Jenkins was just passing through the restaurant door.

Dad stopped in his tracks.

"That boy should know the kind of passenger he is going to have," he said to himself, "and I'm going to tell him." And with that he retraced his steps toward the head of the train.

"What's wrong, Dad; did you lose something?" queried Billy on the return of the other.

"No, Billy. What I came back for is to tell you to be on your guard and mighty careful this trip. There's an inspector on, a big, heavy-set fellow, close cropped mustache, dark eyes, blue necktie, tan shoes, and has a black leather grip. He isn't at all particular what kind of methods he uses to get something on a fellow. Pulled some mighty raw stuff on one of my old friends a few years ago. Watch him."

"Say, Dad, thanks. I'm mighty glad you told me. I'll watch out for him."

"All right, my boy. Just be careful, that's all. His name is Edward Jenkins, and he is traveling on System Pass No. C16237. Good luck." And with a feeling of relief he again turned toward the office.

Billy made a careful note of the pass number in his leather memorandum book.

With a final, "All aboard" from the conductor the train pulled away from the Crocker depot on the minute and continued its westerly journey.

Being one of the limited trains its stops were few, the first after Crocker some forty miles away. This give Billy Henderson a good opportunity to check his train closely and carefully at the beginning of the run. This day he meant to be unusually careful.

The warning of the older conductor kept ringing in his ears.

"It's a shame," he thought, "that such sneaks as that are allowed to live in the same country with decent people. I know he must have worried Dad. I'd just like to give him a taste of his own medicine."

Then he started through the train to take up the tickets. The first coach showed no inspector, the second was likewise devoid of this obnoxious passenger, but in the third and last of the day coaches, which was at that particular time otherwise empty, he came to view, hat pulled down over his eyes and smoking a big black cigar. Billy knew him at a glance from the description Dad had given him.

"Ticket," said Billy as he came up to where Jenkins was sitting.

The other looked up with a scowl.

"Had to run to catch the train, conductor, so I didn't have time to get a ticket. What 'll I do?"

"Why, pay cash, of course. What did you think?"

"Oh, I didn't know," and he leered at Billy in a knowing way.

"Well, you ought to know. Where are you going?"

"To Norton City," replied Jenkins.

"Three twenty-five including tax," said the conductor.

"All right, then, here it is," and Jenkins handed out the exact change.

Billy took the money and turned to start back to the first coach, his check of the train being completed.

"Hold on there," yelled the passenger, "I want a cash fare receipt for that money. What do you think you're going to do, get away with that kind of stuff?"

"Say," said the other, "where did you get the idea that I'd give you a cash fare receipt? I wouldn't even give you a pleasant look."

This, of course, was just what Jenkins wanted, though it surprised him. A conductor accepting money for fares and not giving receipts, and pocketing the money! Well, he sure would turn this fellow in! And this pleased him enough to argue further.

"But I'm entitled to a receipt for my money," he said.

"Forget that receipt stuff, stranger," replied Billy.

"Don't you ever issue cash fare receipts?"

"Mighty few, mighty few. And if you want to finish that cigar you'd better go up to the smoker." With that Billy left the coach.

A grin spread over the face of the other.

The next day at Norton City, before he was yet out of bed, Billy was called by a company messenger.

"You're to report at once to headquarters," was the news. "Better hurry, because the boss looks wild."

"All right, coming," and his feet hit the floor.

"Looks wild," he muttered to himself, "perhaps he is wild. I've seen them that way before now."

However, he proceeded with his toilet, had a good breakfast, and reached headquarters without undue delay.

He was called into the inner office immediately on his arrival. There were several others in the room. In addition to his immediate superiors some of the higher officers of the company were present. Evidently important business on hand! And, yes, there in one corner sat our old friend Jenkins.

Billy was no sooner in the room than the other door opened and in came the president of the road.

"Gentlemen," he began, "be seated."

Then turning to Billy, a stern look on his face, "You are Conductor William Henderson?"

"Yes, sir," returned Billy.

"Did you ever see this man?" indicating Jenkins.

"Yes, sir."

"Well, Mr. Henderson," went on the president, glancing occasionally at a memorandum in his hand as though for facts, "this man, a confidential inspector of ours, reports that he boarded your train at Crocker, yesterday, paid a cash fare, and rode to Norton City with you. He also reports that you failed to give him a cash fare receipt, even after he insisted on it. We have ascertained definitely that Mr. Jenkins was in fact in Crocker yesterday, and that he did come to Norton City on your train. Also our audit of your receipts shows that you didn't turn in the cash fare he paid. Mr. Henderson, this is such a flagrant case of dishonesty and theft that we have decided to make an example of it, and in addition to an immediate discharge we will ask the courts to punish you for theft. Before we do so, have you anything to say?"

The smile on Jenkins face by this time was that of a self-satisfied fiend.

"Would it help me to say anything, sir, if you have already made your decision?" asked Billy.

"No, I don't think it would."

"Then, what do you want me to say?"

"Well, do you admit that Mr. Jenkins rode your train yesterday?"

"Yes, sir, he did."

"Did you turn in cash fare for him?"

"No, sir, I didn't."

"Then, Henderson, I'm sorry for you, but there is nothing else but to use you as an example, and we'll make it a strong one while we're at it."

"But, sir, did Jenkins say he paid a cash fare?" asked Billy.

"Yes, three twenty-five, and you refused him a receipt."

"And you didn't find the cash for this in my returns?" went on the conductor.

"No, nothing."

"Well, perhaps he really didn't pay anything."

"Ah! It's possible. But do you mean to say that you are carrying passengers for nothing! That's as bad!"

"No, sir, I don't if I know it. But Jenkins didn't need any fare if he was riding on a pass, did he, sir? You might see if he has System Pass No. C16237."

"What!"

"You see, sir, in making my returns last night I neglected to turn in my record of passes. Here is my memorandum book containing that information, sir," and Billy handed him the book.

The president turned to Jenkins. "Hand me your pass."

Jenkins handed it over, attempting to speak. "But—" was as far as he got.

"Say, Jenkins," began the president as he noted that the number on the pass and that in Billy's book were the same. "Well, I won't even try to say it. Words can't express my opinion of you. I never would have believed a man could stoop so low. Get out and don't ever let me hear of you again. And don't try to alibi—a blind man would know that Henderson couldn't get the number except from the pass itself. Get out!"

And Jenkins went, still attempting to make an explanation.

"My boy," and the president again turned to Billy, "I'm glad. Yes, sir, I'm mighty glad." And he took Billy by the hand. "But we are all liable to make mistakes occasionally, remember that."

"Yes, sir," said Billy.

WHY, INDEED.

LADY, you're in the sere and yellow leaf,
For so the period's styled,
Why are your skirts so very short and scant,
As if you were a child?

Lady, your hair is getting gray and thin,
And it is somewhat wild,
Why do you wear that little sailor hat,
As if you were a child?

Lady, your teeth are absolutely new,
I saw it when you smiled,
Why do you throw your head about and laugh
As if you were a child?

Lady, you're in the sere and yellow leaf,
Time will not be beguiled,
Why are your ways and manners just the same
As when you were a child?

La Touche Hancock.