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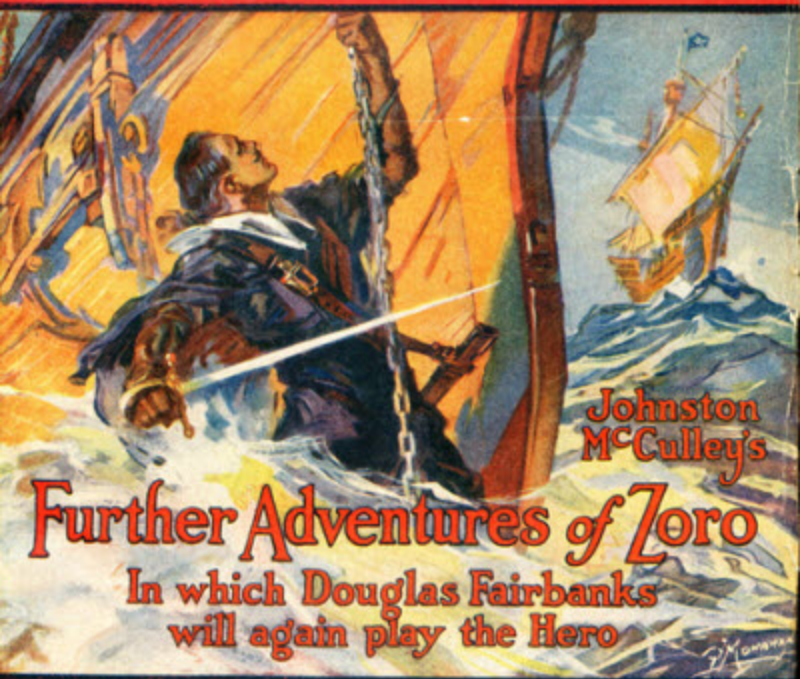

Johnston McCulley's

Further Adventures of Zoro

In which Douglas Fairbanks will again play the Hero

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ARGOSY-ALLSTORY WEEKLY

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SIX SHORT STORIES

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ARGOSY-ALLSTORY
WEEKLY
VOL. CXLII SATURDAY, MAY 6, 1922 NUMBER 4

The Further Adventures of Zorro*

Part I

by Johnston McCulley

Author of "The Mark of Zorro," etc.

CHAPTER I.

LAND RATS AND WATER RATS.

THROUGHOUT a long summer day of more than a hundred years ago the high fog had obscured the flaming ball of sun, and the coast of Southern California had been bathed in a haze.

Then came the night, with indication of a drizzle that did not materialize. For the bank of fog suddenly was split as though with a sword, and the brilliant moon poured down, and the riven mist floated away to let the land be blessed with brilliance and the tossing sea dance in the silvery moonbeams.

Approaching the shore came a sinister vessel, craft of ill omen. She sailed slowly under a spare spread of canvas, as though fearing to reach her destination too soon, and her lights were not burning. The hiss of the waters from her bows was a lazy sort of hiss, but the more suggestive because of that. It was the playful hiss of a serpent always ready to become enraged. Her appearance betokened stealth and crime.

She was low, rakish, swift. No proper seaman commanded her, since her decks were foul and her sides badly in need of protecting paint. But her sailing gear was in perfect condition, and the man at her helm could have told that she answered to her rudder like a love-sick maiden to her swain.

Amidships stood her commander, one Barbados, a monstrous giant of a man with repugnant visage. Gigantic brass rings were in his mutilated ears. His eyes were pig-like—tiny, glittering, wholly evil. His great gnarled hands continually were forming themselves into brutish fists. He wore no shirt, no shoes. His chest and back were covered with thick, black, matted hair.

"By the saints!" he swore in a voice that drowned the slush of the waters against the vessel's sides. "Sanchez! Fools and devils! Is it necessary to shout to the world our villainy? Look at that flag flapping against the mast! Three hours after set of sun, and the flag of the devil still flies! Discipline! Ha!"

"The flag!" Sanchez bellowed. There was no definite order given, but the man nearest the mast was quick to lower the flag. Sanchez looked back toward Barbados, and Barbados grunted and turned away to look toward the distant land.

Sanchez was a smaller edition of Barbados, the evil lieutenant of an evil chief. He was short and thick, and many a man had misjudged the strength of his shoulders and arms and had discovered his sorry error too late. The eyes of Sanchez glittered also, first as he looked at Barbados, and then turned, as the chief had, to glance toward the distant land.

A fair land it was, bathed in the mellow light of the moon. Along the shore uncertain shadows played, like shapeless fairies at a game. And here was a darker streak, where a cañon ran down to the sea—a cañon with black depths caused by the rank undergrowth and stubby trees.

"There!" Barbados bellowed. He pointed toward the mouth of the cañon, where the water hissed white against a jumble of rocks. "We go ashore there, against the cliffs!"

Again there was no regular command, but the course of the pirate craft was changed a little, and she sailed slowly toward the spot Barbados had indicated. The chief grunted once more, and Sanchez hurried quickly to his side.

"We land twoscore men!" Barbados commanded. "Twoscore will be enough. I lead them, and you are to go with me. The others will remain aboard and take the ship off shore again, and return to-morrow night two hours before the dawn."

"*Si!*" Sanchez said.

"'Tis to be a pretty party, by the saints! Rich loot, food and wines, honey and olives, gold and jewels and precious stones! Bronze native wenches for such as like them! And time enough for it, eh? Ha! For some four months we have sailed up and down the coast, now and then landing and raiding to get a few pigs and cows. 'Tis time for a bold stroke! And this—"

"It is arranged?" Sanchez questioned.

"Am I in the habit of rushing in where things are not arranged?" Barbados demanded. "Señor Pirate, do you take me to be a week and silly fool?"

"If I did," Sanchez replied, "I would have more wit than to say so to your face!"

"Ha! Is it arranged? When the Governor's own man arranges it? There is a precious pair, the Governor and his man!" said Barbados, laughing raucously. "Pirates and rogues we may be, but we can take lessons in villainy from some of the gentry who bear the names of *caballeros*, but have foul blood in their veins!"

"The thing has an evil look," Sanchez was bold enough to assert. "I like not a task too easy. By my naked blade, that which looks easy often is not! If this should prove to be a trap—"

Barbados gave a cry of rage and whirled toward him suddenly, and Sanchez retreated a single step, and his hand dropped to the naked cutlass in his belt of tanned human skin.

"Try to draw it, fool!" Barbados cried. "I'll have you choked black in the face and hurled overboard for shark meat before your hand reaches the blade!"

"I made no move to draw," Sanchez wailed.

"There are times when I wonder why I allow you to remain at my side," Barbados told him, folding his gigantic arms across his hairy chest. "And there are times when I wonder whether your heart is not turning to that of a woman and your blood to water or swill. A trap, you fool! Am I the man to walk into traps? Kindly allow me to attend to the finer details of this business. And a pretty business it is!"

"The village of Reina de Los Angeles is miles in the interior," Sanchez wailed. "I do not like to get out of sight of the sea. With the pitching planks of a deck beneath my bare feet—"

"Beware lest you have beneath your feet the plank that is walked until a man reaches its end and drops to watery death!"

Barbados warned him. "Enough of this! Pick the men who are to land, and get ready the boats!"

An hour later the anchor had been dropped, and the pirate craft had swung with the tide and was tugging at her chains like a puppy at a leash. Over the sides went the boats, Barbados growling soft curses at the noise his men made.

"We have nothing to fear, fools and devils!" he said. "But there will be no surprise if some converted native sees us and carries to Reina de Los Angeles word of our arrival. There is many a *hacienda* in these parts where pirates are detested. Silence, rogues! You'll have your fill of noise to-morrow night!"

Without knowing it, Barbados practiced a deal of psychology. These wild men of the sea had before them a journey of some miles inland, and they knew it and hated it, but the pirate chief continually hinted to them of the rich loot at the end of the present trip, and his hints served their purpose well.

Toward the shore they rowed, tossing on the breakers, making for the dark spot where the cañon ran down into the sea. There a cliff some twelve feet high circled back into the land, forming a natural shelter against the land breeze at times and the sea winds at other times.

Through the surf they splashed, half naked, carrying naught except their weapons, and no weapons save their cutlasses. They gathered on the beach and watched the boats return to the ship, shrieking coarse jests at the men compelled to remain behind.

Barbaros took from his belt a tiny scrap of parchment and looked at it closely. With him this passed for a map He called Sanchez to his side, turned his back to the sea, and looked along the dark reaches of the cañon.

"Forward!" Barbados said. "And let there be little noise about it! If we stumble across one of the accursed natives, slit his throat and so silence it."

"And if we meet a wandering *fray* of the missions, slit him into ribbons," Sanchez added, chuckling.

To his wonder, Barbados grasped his arm so that Sanchez thought the bone must break.

"Enough of that!" Barbados cried. "Touch no *fray* in violence except I give the word!"

"You love the robes and gowns?" Sanchez asked, in wonder.

"I love to protect myself," Barbados replied. "It is an ill thing to assault a *fray* if it can be avoided." He stopped speaking for a moment, and seemed to shiver throughout the length and breadth of his gigantic frame. "I had a friend once who struck a *fray*," he added in a whisper. "I do not like to remember what happened to him. Forward!"

Inland they tramped, mile after mile, keeping to the cañons, following an *arroyo* now and then, dodging from dark spot to dark spot, while Barbados growled curses at the bright moon and Sanchez continually admonished the men behind to keep silent.

It was a journey they disliked, but they liked to think of the loot they would find at the end of it. On they went, toward the sleeping town of Reina de Los Angeles. Besides Barbados and Sanchez, few of them had seen the town. Pirates had been treated harshly there when they had wandered inland. But now something had happened, it appeared, that made a raid on the town a comparatively safe enterprise.

An hour before dawn they stumbled across a native, caught him as he started to flee, and left his lifeless body behind. Then came the day, and they went into hiding in a jumble of hills, within easy striking distance of the town. They had covered ground well.

Sprawled on the sward they slept. Barbados, a little way aside, consulted his poor map once more, and then called Sanchez to his side.

"Since we may have to split our force, it were well that you knew more of this business," he said.

"I am listening, Barbados."

"This man who is to meet us to-morrow night at the edge of the town is a high official."

"I have heard you call him the Governor's man."

"Even so. He is to have matters ar-

ranged so that the town will be at our mercy. It never has been raided properly. It will be necessary, perhaps, to steal horses, and possibly a *carreta* or two in which to carry the loot. The town will be wide open for us, my friend."

"There is a *presidio* in Reina de Los Angeles, and where there is a *presidio* there are soldiers," Sanchez reminded him.

"And where there are soldiers there are fools," Barbados added. He stopped speaking long enough to chuckle. "I am not afraid of the soldiers. This man with whom we are to deal will care for the troops."

"I fail to understand it," Sanchez said, shaking his head. "Why should such things be? Do we split the loot with this high official?"

"Dream of innocence, listen!" Barbados hissed. "Listen, and comprehend, else I choke you to death! An emissary came to me in the south from this high official, and through him arrangements were made. Things have happened since last we were in the vicinity of Reina de Los Angeles. The Governor, I know, left San Francisco de Asis and journeyed south with his gallant company. And while he was at Reina de Los Angeles something happened that caused him to hate the town. There even was talk for a time of him being forced to abdicate his high station."

"Ha! More mystery!" Sanchez growled.

"It seems that in the southland there was a pest of a highwayman known as Señor Zorro, and whom men called the Curse of Capistrano. A land pirate, spit upon him! How can a man be a pirate on the land? However, this Señor Zoro did several things worthy of note. From what I have heard, I would we had a dozen of him in the ship's company. We could raid the whole of Mexico, capture the Spanish fleets and attack Europe."

"This Señor Zorro must be quite some man," Sanchez observed.

"I have heard but little, but enough to convince me that I would have him for a friend rather than an enemy. He is a sort of devil. Now he is here and now he is gone. Like a ghost he comes and like a specter he disappears. Ha! You, a pirate, cross yourself!"

"I am afraid of no live man who lives, save perhaps yourself," Sanchez observed. "But I like not this talk of ghosts."

"Here is the jest, fool and friend! It develops after a time that this terrible Señor Zorro is nothing but a *caballero* out to have a bit of fun and protect the weak. There is a waste of time for you—protecting the weak. And other sundry *caballeros* joined hands with him and punished minor officials who sought to steal and deal crookedly. That is right and proper. If a thief, be a thief! If a pirate, be a pirate! But do not play at being an honest man and try to be thief and pirate at the same time."

"Ha!" Sanchez grunted, meaning that he wished the sermon to end and the tale to continue.

"This Señor Zorro, whose real name I have forgotten if ever I knew it, carved his initial with his sword into the cheeks and foreheads of many men. They call it the Mark of Zorro. And when his identity was disclosed his friends stood by him and told the Governor that it were best if he return to San Francisco de Asis and grace Reina de Los Angeles with his continual absence."

"And did he?"

"He did," Barbados replied, "with hatred in his heart for this same Reina de Los Angeles. He did not abdicate, of course. And he craves revenge."

"Ha! Here is where we enter?"

"It is," Barbados replied. "We raid the town and take what we will, and the Governor hears of it, sends soldiers running wildly up and down the coast, and winks at himself in his looking-glass. For the information and protection we get, we hand to the Governor's man at a certain time and place a certain share of the loot. Which we well can afford, since we are to get it so easily."

"If we forget to hand it—" Sanchez began.

"Friend and fool! By the saints! Are you an honest pirate or no? We shall deal fairly. Think of the future. It is not only Reina de Los Angeles. There is San Juan Capistrano, and rich San Diego de Alcala to come after. By that time we have this pretty Governor and certain of his officials in our mesh, and do as we will. Ha! What

knaves! I would rather be an honest pirate than a politician any day!"

The day passed and the dusk came. And once yet again Barbados indulged in curses. For it was a beautiful moonlight night, half as light as the day that had just died, and a man could be seen afar. But Barbados led his wretched company on toward the town, and after a time they came to the crest of a slope and saw lights twinkling in the distance.

Stretched on the ground so as not to form a silhouette against the sky, Barbados looked over the scene. He could see the plaza, fires burning before the huts of the natives, twinkling lights in the windows of the pretentious houses where lived the men of wealth and blood and rank. To one side was the *presidio*, and to the other the church.

Barbados grunted an order to Sanchez and crept forward alone. He approached the end of the village, reached a spot where the shadows were deep, and crouched to wait.

For half an hour he waited, grumbling his impatience. Then there came to him a figure muffled in a long cloak. Barbados hissed a word that had been agreed upon. The figure stepped quickly to his side.

"You are ready?"

"Ready, *señor*," Barbados replied.

"Where are your men?"

"In hiding three hundred yards away, *señor*."

"It were best to strike in about an hour. The soldiers will be sent toward the south on a wild goose chase."

"I understand, *señor*."

"I ride back toward the hills to a *hacienda* to pay a social call. It would not do for me to be here, of course."

"Certainly not, *señor*."

"The way will be open to you. Take your will with the town, but do not use the torch, except it be on the hut of some native. As soon as you have your loot, make for the sea again. The soldiers will be sent on a useless trail."

"It is well arranged, *señor*. We'll strike as soon as the troopers are at a sufficient distance."

"There is something else. You must send a few men of your force to the *hacienda* of Don Carlos Pulido, three miles to the north."

"What is this, *señor?*" Barbados asked.

"A little matter of abducting a woman for me."

"Ha!"

"The Señorita Lolita Pulido, understand. She is to be seized and conducted to the coast and taken aboard ship. She is not to be harmed, but treated with every respect. In four or five days I shall meet you at the rendezvous on the southern coast, and claim her as my share of the loot. Do this well, and that is all the share of loot I ask this time."

"A mere detail," Barbados said.

"If the *hacienda* is disturbed a bit during the abduction, it will not cause the heartbreak of the Governor. This Don Carlos Pulido is no friend of His Excellency."

"I understand, *señor*."

"The *señorita* expects to become the bride to-morrow of Don Diego Vega—curse him! That large house at the side of the plaza is his. When you are raiding the town, Barbados, pay special attention to that house. And should he get a knife between his ribs there will be no sorrow on my part."

"I begin to comprehend," Barbados replied.

"I may depend upon you?"

"*Si, señor!* We attend to the house of this Don Diego Vega and to the don personally. I shall send a small force to abduct the girl and take her to the shore. She will be waiting for you at the rendezvous to the south."

"Good! Watch when the soldiers ride away, and strike an hour later. *Adios!*"

The cloak dropped for a moment as the man from the village straightened himself. Barbados got a good look at his face as the moonlight struck it. He gasped.

"Your forehead!" he said.

"It is nothing. That cursed beast of a Zorro put it there!"

Barbados looked again. On the man's forehead was a ragged "Z," put there in such a manner that it would remain forever. There was a moment of silence, and

then Barbados found himself alone. The other had slipped away through the shadows.

Barbados grinned. "Here is a double deal of some sort, but it need bring me no fear," he mused. "Here would be startling news for all men to know. Wants to steal a girl now, does he? For his share of proper loot I'd steal him half a score of girls!"

He grinned again and started back toward his men. Barbados did not fear the soldiers, and he knew they would be sent away. He could be sure of that. For the conspirator who had come to him out of the dark was none other than Captain Ramón, *commandante* of the *presidio* at Reina de Los Angeles.

CHAPTER II.

PEDRO THE BOASTER.

SERGEANT PEDRO GONZALES, a giant of a wine-guzzling soldier whose heart was as large as his capacity for liquor, was known as "Pedro the Boaster." When there were military duties to be done he was to be found at his post in the *presidio,* but at other times one found him at the village *posada,* sitting before the big fireplace and remaking the world with words.

On this moonlight night, Sergeant Pedro Gonzales crossed the plaza with a corporal and a couple of soldiers, entered the inn, and called in a loud voice for the landlord to fetch wine and be quick about it. The sergeant had learned long since that the fat landlord held him in terror, and did he but act surly and displeased he received excellent service.

"Landlord, you are as fat as your wine is thin!" Sergeant Pedro declared, sprawling at one of the tables. "I have a suspicion now and then that you keep a special wineskin for me, and mix water with my drink."

"*Señor!*" the landlord protested.

"We honest soldiers are stationed here to protect you from liars and thieves and dishonest travelers up and down El Camino Real, and you treat us like the dirt beneath your boots."

"*Señor!* I have the greatest respect—"

"One of these fine days," Gonzales interrupted, "there will be trouble. Some gentleman of the highway will approach you with an idea of robbery, and you'll shriek for the soldiery. And then, fat one, I may remember the watered wine, and be busy elsewhere!"

"But I protest—" the landlord began.

"More wine!" the sergeant shouted. "Must I get out my blade and carve your wineskins—or your own skin? More wine of the best, and you'll get your pay when I get mine, if it is an honest score you keep. If my friend, Don Diego Vega, was here—!"

"That same friend of yours makes merry a little later in the evening," the landlord said, as he went to fill the wine cups. "To-morrow he is to take a bride."

"Pig, do you suppose I do not know it?" Gonzales screeched. "Think you that I have been asleep these past few months? Was I not in the thick of it when Don Diego Vega played at being Señor Zorro?"

"You were in the thick of it," the corporal admitted, with a touch of sarcasm in his voice.

"Ha!" cried the sergeant. "There was a turbulent time for you! Here in this very room I fought him, blade to blade, thinking that he was some stinking highwayman. And just as I was getting the better of it—"

"How is this?" the corporal shrieked.

"Just as I was getting the better of the blade match," Gonzales reaffirmed, glaring at the corporal, "back he went and dashed through the door! And thereafter he set the town about its own ears for some time to come."

"It occurs to me that I saw that fight," the corporal declared. "If you were getting the best of it at any stage, then were mine eyes at fault."

"I know a man," said the sergeant, darkly, "who will do extra guard duty for a score of days."

"Ha!" the corporal grunted. "You do not like plain speech!"

"I do not like a soldier to make mock of his superiors," the sergeant replied. "It were unseemly for me to make remarks, for instance, concerning our *commandante,*

Captain Ramón, but let it be said that he fought this Señor Zorro, too. And Captain Ramón wears on his forehead Zorro's mark. You will notice that there is no carved Z on my face!"

"Ha!" the corporal grunted again. "It were best, sergeant, to voice such remarks inwardly. The *commandante* is not proud of the mark he wears."

Gonzales changed the subject. "The wine!" he thundered. "It goes well on a moonlight night, the same as on a stormy one. But moonlight is a poor business save for lovesick swains. 'Tis no night for a soldier. Would one expect thieves to descend through the moonlight?"

"There be pirates," the corporal said.

"Pirates!" Gonzales's great fist descended and met the table with a crash, sending the wine cups bouncing. "Pirates! You have noticed no pirates in Reina de Los Angeles, have you? They have not been playing around the *presidio*, have they? I am not saying that they know I am stationed here, however—Meal mush and goat's milk! Pirates is my dish!"

"The town grows wealthy, and they may come," the corporal said.

"You fear? You tremble?" Gonzales cried. "Are you soldier or *fray?* Pirates! By the saints, I would that they came! My sword arm grows fat from little use."

"Talk not of pirates!" the landlord begged. "Suppose they did come?"

"And what if they did?" Gonzales demanded. "Am I not here, dolt? Are there not soldiers? Pirates? Ha!"

He sprang to his feet, those same feet spread wide apart. His hand darted down, and he whipped out his blade.

"That for a pirate!" he shouted, and made a mighty thrust at the wall. "This for a pirate!" And he slashed through the air, his blade whistling so that the corporal and soldiers sprang backward, and the four or five natives who happened to be in the inn cringed in a corner. "Pirates!" cried Gonzales. "I would I could meet one this very night! We grew stale from inaction. There is too much peace in the world! Meal mush and goat's milk!"

The door opened suddenly. Sergeant Gonzales stopped in the middle of a sentence, and his blade stopped in the middle of an arc. And then the sergeant and the other soldiers snapped to attention, for the *commandante* was before them.

"Sergeant Gonzales!" Captain Ramón commanded.

"*Si!*"

"I could hear you shouting half way across the plaza. If you wish to meet a pirate, perhaps you may have your wish. Rumors have been brought by natives. Mount your men and proceed along El Camino Real toward the south. Search the country well, once you are four or five miles from the town. It is a bright moonlight night, and men may be seen at a great distance."

"It is an order!" the sergeant admitted.

"Leave but one man at the *presidio* as guard. Return before dawn. Have my best horse made ready, as I ride out to a *hacienda* for a visit. Go!"

"*Si!*" Sergeant Gonzales grunted. He motioned to the soldiers, and they hurried through the door. He sheathed his sword, and when the back of Captain Ramón was turned for an instant he tossed off the wine that had been before him, and hurried after his men. The *commandante* drew off his gloves and sat at one of the tables.

Gonzales led the way across the plaza and toward the *presidio*. He was growling low down in his throat.

"This is a fine state of affairs!" he said. "Ride all night and kick up the dust! Back before dawn with nothing done!"

"But you wanted pirates," the corporal protested.

"Think you they will stand in the middle of El Camino Real and await our pleasure?" Gonzales growled. "What pirate would be abroad a night like this? Could we but meet some—ha! There is a special reward for pirates!"

Even before they had reached the entrance of the *presidio*, he began shouting his orders. Torches flared, and men ran to prepare the horses. Fifteen minutes later, with Gonzales at their head, they rode across the plaza and out upon El Camino Real, their mounts snorting, their sabers rattling.

From the crest of a slope a few hundred yards away, Barbados and his evil crew watched them depart upon their mounts.

CHAPTER III.

SUDDEN TURMOIL.

WHILE the blushes played across her cheeks, Señorita Lolita Pulido sat at one end of the big table in the great living-room of her father's house and watched the final preparations for her wedding.

Don Carlos, her gray-haired father, watched proudly from the foot of the table. Doña Catalina, her mother, walked majestically around the room and gave soft commands. Native servants scurried like rats in and out of the great room, carrying bundles of silks and satins, gowns, intimate garments.

"To-morrow!" Don Carlos sighed, and in the sign was that which spoke of cruelties bravely borne. "To-morrow, *señorita*, you become the bride of Don Diego Vega, and the first lady of Reina de Los Angeles. And my troubles, let us hope, are at an end."

"Let us hope so," said Doña Catalina.

"The Governor himself dare not raise his hand against the father-in-law of Don Diego Vega. My fortunes will increase again. And you, daughter of my heart, will be a great lady, with wealth at your command."

"And love also," the little *señorita* said, bowing her head.

"Love, also!" said Doña Catalina.

"Ha!" Don Carlos cried, with a gale of laughter. "It is love now, is it? And when first Don Diego came wooing, the girl would have none of him, even to better the family fortunes. He was dull, he yawned, and she wanted a man of hot blood and romantic. But when it was learned that he was Señor Zorro— That made a difference! Love, also! It is well!"

Señorita Lolita blushed again, and fumbled at a soft garment upon her lap. There came a pounding at the door, and one of the servants opened it. Don Carlos glanced up to find a man of the village there.

"It is a message, *señor*," he said.

"From whom?" Don Carlos asked.

"From Don Diego Vega, to the little *señorita*."

Señorita Lolita dimpled, and her black eyes flashed as she bent over the heap of garments again. Don Carlos stood up and stalked majestically toward the door.

"I take the message," he said, and he took it, and handed it to Doña Catalina, that she might read it first. "Don Diego Vega is not wed to my daughter as yet. It is not proper that he send her sealed messages."

His eyes were twinkling as he turned away. Señorita Lolita pouted and pretended indifference, and Doña Catalina, her mother, unfolded the message, and read it with a smile upon her lips.

"It is harmless," she announced.

Señorita Lolita looked up, and took the message from her mother's hand. Don Diego Vega, it appeared, wasted no words. His message was read swiftly:

> This man has orders to make a record carrying this greeting of love to you and fetching yours in return.
>
> Thine, DIEGO.

"Ha!" Don Carlos shouted. "Economy is a great thing, but not in words when there is love to be spoken. You should have seen the messages I sent to Catalina in the old days!"

"Carlos!" Doña Catalina warned.

"And paid a native wench royally to slip them to her," Don Carlos continued, shamelessly. "Behind the back of her *duenna!* Page after page, and every word a labor! I could fight better than I could write!"

"Perhaps so can Don Diego," the little *señorita* said.

"Staunch and loyal to him, are you?" Don Carlos roared. "That is proper. Pen your reply, my daughter, and let this man establish his record for the return trip to Reina de Los Angeles. Do not keep Don Diego waiting."

The *señorita* blushed yet again, got up, and swept into a room adjoining.

Don Carlos addressed the messenger: "How are things in the town?"

"Don Diego entertains his *caballero* friends at a last bachelor supper, *señor*," the man replied.

"Ha! Young men only, I suppose?"

"*Sí, señor!*"

"Wine flows, I take it, and the table is piled high with rich food?"

"*Sí, señor!*"

"Ah, well! I shall have my turn to-morrow at the marriage feast," Don Carlos said. "My regards to Don Diego Vega!"

"They shall be given him, *señor*."

The *señorita* returned and handed what she had written to her mother, who perused it and sealed it, and handed it to the messenger in turn. The man bobbed his head in respectful salute, and hurried out. A native servant closed the door behind him—but neglected to drop the heavy bar in place. Because of the unusual excitement, none noticed.

Don Carlos resumed his position at the foot of the table. This was a great night for him, and to-morrow would be a great day. He was happy because his fortunes were on the mend, because the Governor had been forced to cease his persecutions. But he was happy also because his daughter was to have happiness.

Don Carlos and his wife had lavished upon this, their only child, love enough for a dozen. And now both glanced at her as she fumbled at a silken shawl. Her black eyes were sparkling again, though dreams were glistening in them. Her cheeks were delicately flushed. Her dainty hands played with the silks. One tiny tip of a boot peeped from beneath her voluminous skirts. A bride of whom any man could honestly be proud, Don Carlos thought, and with proper blood in her veins and proper thoughts in her head.

"So Don Diego makes merry to-night with his young friends!" Don Carlos said. "I would like to peer in upon him now."

Could he have done so, he would have seen a merry gathering. In the big living-room of Don Diego's town *casa* a huge table had been spread. Don Diego sat at the head of it, dressed in fastidious garments, and *caballeros* were grouped around it. Richly dressed they were, with blades at their sides, blades with jeweled hilts, but serviceable weapons for all that. Wine cups and dishes were before them. They feasted, and they drank. They toasted Don Diego, and the Señorita Lolita, Don Diego's father, and the *señorita's* father, and one another.

"Another good man gone wrong!" cried Don Audre Ruiz. He sat at Don Diego's right hand, because he was Don Diego's closest friend. "Here is our comrade, Don Diego, about to turn into a family man!" he continued. "This scion of Old Spain, this delicate morsel of *caballero* blood to be gobbled up by the monster of matrimony! It is time to weep!"

"Into your wine cup!" Don Diego added.

"Ha!" Don Audre Ruiz cried. "But a few days ago, it seems, we rode after him as though he had been the devil, rode hard upon his heels, thinking that we were following some sort of renegade *caballero* playing at highwayman. Señor Zorro, by the saints! We shouted praises of him because for a time he took us out of our monotony. Then came the unmasking, and we found that Don Diego and Señor Zorro were one and the same!"

He ceased speaking long enough to empty his wine cup and make certain that a servant refilled it.

"Señor Zorro!" he continued. "Those were happy moments! And now he is to turn husband, and no more riding abroad with sword in hand. We shall die of monotony, Diego, my friend!"

"Of fat!" Don Diego corrected.

"What has become of the wild blood that coursed your veins for a few moons?" Don Audre Ruiz demanded. "Where are those precious, turbulent drops that were in Zorro?"

"They linger," Don Diego declared. "It needs but the cause to churn them into active being."

"Ha! A cause! *Caballeros*, let us find him a cause, that this good friend of ours will be too busy to get married."

"One moment!" Don Diego cried. He stood up and smiled at them, gave a little twitch to his shoulders, and then turned his back upon the brilliant company and hurried from the room. They drank again,

and waited. And after a time, back he came, a silk-draped bundle beneath one arm.

"What mystery is this?" Don Audre demanded. He sprawled back in his chair and prepared to laugh. It was said of Don Audre that he always was prepared to laugh. He laughed when he made love, when he fought, as he ate and drank, his bubbling spirit always upon his lips.

"Here is no mystery," Don Diego Vega declared. He smiled at them again, unwrapped what he held, and suddenly exhibited a sword. "The blade of Zorro!" he cried.

There was an instant of silence, and then every *caballero* sprang to his feet. Their own swords came flashing from their scabbards, flashed on high, reflected in a million rays the glowing lights of the candelabra.

"Zorro!" they shouted. "Zorro!"

"Good old blade!" Don Diego said, a whimsical smile playing about his lips.

"Good old point!" exclaimed Don Audre Ruiz. "With it you marked many a scoundrel with your mark, notably and especially one Captain Ramón. Why do we endure his presence here in Reina de Los Angeles? Why not force the Governor to send him north?"

"Let us not mar a perfect evening with thoughts of him," Don Diego begged. "*Caballeros,* I have brought this blade before you for a purpose. We have drunk toasts to everything of which we could think, and there still remains an abundance of rare wine that has not been guzzled. A toast to the sword of Zorro!"

"Ha! A happy thought!" Don Audre Ruiz cried. "*Caballeros,* a toast to the sword of Zorro!"

They drank it, put down their golden goblets, and sighed. They glanced at one another, each thinking of the days when Señor Zorro had ruled El Camino Real for a time. And then they dropped into their chairs once more, and Don Diego Vega sat down also, the sword on the table before him.

"It was a great game," he said, and sighed himself. "But it is in the past. Now I shall be a man of peace and quiet."

"That remains to be seen," Don Audre declared. "There may be domestic warfare, you know. A man takes a terrible chance when he weds."

"Nothing but peace and quiet," Don Diego responded. "The sword of Zorro is but a relic. Years from now I may look upon it and smile. It has served its purpose."

He yawned.

"By the saints!" Don Audre Ruiz breathed. "Did you see him? He yawned! While yet the word 'Zorro' was upon his lips, he yawned. And this is the man who defended persecuted priests and natives, defied the soldiery and made the Governor do a dance! 'Tis a cause he wants and needs, something to change him into Zorro again!"

"To-morrow I become a husband," Don Diego answered him, yawning yet once more and fumbling with a handkerchief. "By the way, *señores,* have you ever seen this one?"

He spread the handkerchief over the wine goblet before him, and as the *caballeros* bent forward to watch, smiles upon their faces, he passed one hand rapidly back and forth across the covered goblet with such rapidity that it was hidden almost all the time, and with the other hand he reached beneath the edge of the handkerchief and jerked the goblet away, letting it drop to the floor. The handkerchief collapsed on the table. Don Diego waved a hand languidly.

"See? It is gone!" he breathed.

"Bah!" Don Audre cried as the others laughed. "At your boy's tricks again, are you? Where is your wild blood now?"

"I am done with roistering and adventure."

"A man never knows when his words may be hurled back at him and cause him to look foolish," said Don Audre. "It is foolish to take everything for granted. For instance—"

He stopped. The sounds of a tumult had reached their ears. For a moment they were silent, listening. Shouts, oaths, the sounds of blows, the clashing of blades

"What in the name of the saints is that?" Don Diego asked.

A trembling servant answered him.

"There are men fighting over by the

inn, *señor,*" he said. "I heard some one shout of pirates!"

CHAPTER IV.

FRAY FELIPE MAKES A VOW.

BARBADOS continued to mutter curses as he watched the sky. Not a cloud marred its face, and the moon was at the full. But here was an enterprise where there was small risk, so he could discount the bright night.

He grunted his pleasure as he saw Sergeant Gonzales and the troopers ride away from the *presidio,* cross the plaza, and continue toward the south. He called Sanchez to him and explained what was to be done at the *hacienda* of Don Carlos Pulido.

"You will take half a dozen men," Barbados commanded. "Do as you please at the place, but capture the *señorita* by all means, and go quickly back over the hills to the mouth of the cañon. Steal horses, and ride. Get there before the break of day! We shall do the same. The ship will be putting in at dawn or before."

"*Sí!*" Sanchez replied. "And do you care for my share of the loot here. There may be small profit at the *hacienda!*"

Sanchez selected his ruffians and led them away around a hill and toward the north, where the *hacienda* of Don Carlos Pulido rested. Barbados whispered instructions to the remainder of the crew. And then they waited, for Barbados wished to make sure that the soldiers did not return.

For more than an hour longer he waited, and then gave the word. Down from the crest of the slope they slipped, breathing heavily, lusting for illegal gain, holding their cutlasses in readiness for instant use. They kept in the scant shadows as much as possible, scattered as they crossed the wider light spaces, made their way slowly to the edge of the town.

There, in the shadows cast by an empty adobe building, they separated, and Barbados whispered his final instructions. They were to look for rich loot, and nothing bulky. He had decided against food and wine, bolts of cloth, casks of olives and jars of honey. Such things could be obtained later at any *hacienda.* Just now he wished to get portable valuables and hurry back to the coast.

Men were detailed to seize horses and have them in readiness. Certain large houses were to be attacked in force after the smaller ones had been disposed of. The inn was to receive special attention, since it was whispered that the fat landlord had hidden wealth.

Down upon the town they crept, and suddenly they charged into the plaza from either side. Into the inn they poured, cutting and slashing at natives until they fled screeching with terror, stabbing at the fat landlord as he called upon the saints.

They took what the landlord had, and gave their attention to the houses and shops. And now bedlam broke loose as it was realized what was taking place. Doors were smashed, terrified men and women were driven from room to room. Things of value were seized. Jewels were ripped from dainty throats and delicate fingers. Silken shawls were torn from beautiful shoulders.

Here and there a man gave fight, but not for long. The pirates outnumbered the citizens, because they traveled in force and the citizens were scattered. Shrieks and screeches and cries stabbed the air. Raucous oaths and fiendish laughter rang across the plaza. And above the din roared the voice of Barbados, the human fiend, as he ordered his men, commanded them, admonished them, led them to an easy victory.

It was quick work, because the descent had been so unexpected. It might have continued throughout the night, until the town was stripped bare, until not a native's hut was left standing. But Barbados wanted quick loot and a get-away. He wanted to reach the coast during the bright moonlight, get the planks of the ship's deck beneath his feet once more. He trusted Captain Ramón, but he feared that the soldiers might return.

Across the plaza the pirates charged, with Barbados at their head. They broke into the church. They filled the sacred edifice with oaths and ribald jest and raucous laughter. They darted here and there, torches held high above their heads, searching for articles of worth.

From a little room to one side stepped a *fray*. His hair was silver, his face was calm. Erect and purposeful he stood, looking across at them. Quick steps forward he took toward the altar, where there were relics he loved.

"What do you here, *señores?*" he demanded.

His voice seemed soft, yet at the same time there was the ring of steel in it. They stopped, their shouting ceased, there was a moment of silence.

"Who are you?" one shouted.

"I am called Fray Felipe, *señores,*" came the response. "Just now I am in charge of this house of worship. How is it that you so far forget yourselves as to bring your tumult here?"

"*Fray?*" one shouted. "Fool and *fray?* Why do we bring our tumult here? For to get loot, gowned one!"

"Loot?" Fray Felipe thundered, taking another step forward. "You would profane this house? You would lay sacriligeous hands on what is to be found here, even as you have voiced sacriligeous tones within these walls? Scum of the earth, begone!"

They surged toward him. "One side, *fray!*" shouted a foremost one. "Respect the black flag and we respect your gown!"

"Spawn of hell! Sons of the devil!" Fray Felipe thundered. "Back to the door, and out of this holy place!"

He scarcely hoped to stop them. There were rich ornaments on the altar, and in the uncertain light the torches shed he could see the eyes of those nearest glittering. And the gem-studded goblet was there!

Thought of the gem-studded goblet gave new strength to ancient Fray Felipe. It was a relic highly prized. Fray Felipe loved it, and cared for it tenderly. There was a legend connected with it. Once it had been touched by a saint's lips, men had said. To have this scum as much as touch the sacred goblet was too much—to have them steal it would be unthinkable.

Once more they surged forward, and Fray Felipe sprang before the altar and threw up his hands in a gesture of command.

"Back!" he cried. "Would you damn beyond recovery your immortal souls? Would you commit the unpardonable sin?"

"Ha!" shouted a man in the front of the throng. "Worry not about our souls, *fray!* One side, else you'll have a chance to worry about the state of your own! We have scant time to spend on a *fray!*"

"What would you?" Fray Felipe asked.

"Loot, fool of a *fray!*"

"Only over my dead body do you take it! I am not afraid to die to protect holy things! But you—you will fear to die, if you do this thing!"

"Slit his throat!" cried one in the throng. "Are we here to argue? The work is not done!"

Once more they surged forward. The light of the torches sent rays of fire shooting from the ornaments on the altar. Their lust for loot consumed them.

Fray Felipe braced himself, seized the nearest, raised him half from the floor, and hurled him back against his fellows.

"The *fray* shows fight!" one cried. "Use your knives, you in the front! A stab between the ribs, and let us go!"

Again they rushed, and Fray Felipe prepared for one more feeble attempt, the one he deemed would be the last. He made the sign of the cross and waited calmly—waited until they were upon him, until he could feel their hot breathing upon his face, until the stench of their perspiration was in his nostrils.

But, even as a man raised a cutlass to strike, there came an interruption. The bellowing voice of Barbados rang out above the din.

"Stop!" he shrieked. There was something terrifying in the sudden and unexpected command. The pirates stopped, fell back. Barbados charged through them and to Fray Felipe's side. The pirate's face showed white in the light of the torches.

"Back!" he commanded. "This *fray* is not to be harmed! Out, fools and devils! There is one rich house yet to be robbed. Let us not tarry here!"

"There is loot—" one began.

He did not complete the sentence. Barbados whirled, and with a single blow he stretched him senseless.

"Out!" he commanded. "This *fray* is not to be touched!"

They backed away from him, rushed back

to gather near the door. They did not pretend to understand this, but Barbados was chief, and perhaps he knew what he was doing. They saw him turn, knew that he spoke to the *fray*, but could not make out his words.

"I had no doing in this," Barbados said. "I assault no *fray* nor priest! I stopped them in time. Had I not remained outside a moment to watch affairs I would have stopped them before."

"You are not wholly bad," Fray Felipe said.

"I am wholly bad, *fray*—make no mistake about it! But I keep my hands off *frailes* and priests!"

He whirled around and rushed to the door, shrieking at his men. Only the soft light of the candles glowed in the church.

Fray Felipe took a step forward and looked after them. He turned back toward the altar, a look of thankfulness in his face.

And suddenly that look changed! Misery took its place. Fray Felipe gave a little cry of mingled surprise and pain, and tottered forward. The precious gem-studded goblet was gone!

He sensed at once how it had happened. When they had charged upon him, before Barbados came, one of the pirates had snatched the goblet away.

Fray Felipe whirled toward the door again, took half a dozen steps, seemed at the point of rushing after them. But he knew they were on the other side of the plaza now, and that an appeal to them would be useless. However, he could try.

He faced the altar again, and the expression of his old countenance was wonderful to see. And then and there Fray Felipe took a vow.

"I go!" he said. "I return with the saintly goblet, or do not return at all!"

CHAPTER V.

ZORRO TAKES THE TRAIL.

BARBADOS had saved the *casa* of Don Diego Vega for the last. He had kept an eye upon it, however, while his men were looting the town, but had seen nothing to indicate danger from that quarter. And now he remembered Captain Ramón's commands, and it pleased him to carry them out.

Don Diego's was the finest house in the village, and seemed to promise rich loot. Barbados placed four of his men outside to guard against the unexpected return of the soldiers, and led the remainder straight to the front door.

They hesitated there for a moment, gathered closely together, then Barbados gave the word, and they rushed through the door and hurled themselves inside, to go sprawling over the rich rugs and carpets and stop in astonishment and confusion. Barbados swore a great oath as he strove to maintatin his balance.

Before them was a wonderful room lavishly furnished. To one side was a wide stairway that led to the upper regions of the house, and priceless tapestries were hanging from a mezzanine. But what engaged the attention of Barbados and his crew the most was the big table in the middle of the room and some score of richly dressed *caballeros* sitting around it.

Here was the unexpected, which Barbados always feared. He came to a stop, thrust forward his head, and his little eyes began glittering. The soldiers were gone from the town, but here were a score of young *caballeros* who were fully as good as soldiers in a fight, and who loved fighting. Barbados had seen such young blades handle swords and rapiers before.

The entrance of the pirates had followed closely upon the announcement of their presence in the town to Don Diego by the servant. And when they tumbled through the door, showing their evil faces in the strong light, the *caballeros* struggled to get to their feet, reaching for their blades, the smiles swept from their faces and expressions of grim determination showing there instead. But the calm voice of Don Diego quieted them.

"Ha!" Don Diego said. "What have we here? *Señores*, it is the night before my wedding, and most persons are welcome to partake of my hospitality. But this happens to be a select gathering of my close friends, and I really cannot remember of having sent you invitations."

"Have done!" Barbados bellowed, his voice ringing with a courage he scarcely felt. "Have done, fashionable fop! We are men who sail under the black flag, terrible alike on land and sea!"

Don Diego Vega threw back his head and laughed lightly.

"Did you hear that, Audre, my friend?" he asked Ruiz. "This fellow says that he and his comrades are terrible alike on land and sea."

Don Audre entered into the spirit of the occasion, as he always did. "Diego, I did not know that you were such a wit," he said. "Have you hired these fellows to come here and give us a fright? Ha! It is a merry jest, one that I'll remember to my last day! For a moment I was ready to draw blade."

"Jest, is it?" Barbados cried, lurching forward almost to the foot of the table. "'Twill be considered no jest when we have stripped you of your jewels and plaything swords and this house of what valuables it contains! Back up against that wall, *señores,* and the man who makes a rash move will not live to make another!"

"I have made a multitude of rash moves, and I still live," Don Audre Ruiz told him. "Diego, it is indeed an excellent jest! I give you my thanks!"

"Pirates!" Don Diego said, laughing again. "In reality, I did not hire them to come here and furnish us with this entertainment. But since they have been so kind, it is no more than right that I pay them!" He sprang to his feet, bent forward with his hands upon the table, and glared down the length of it at Barbados. "You are the chief bull pirate?" he asked.

"I am the king of the crew!" Barbados replied. "Back against that wall, you and your friends!"

Don Diego Vega laughed lightly again. And then the laughter fled his face, and his eyes narrowed and seemed to send forth flakes of steel.

"*Sí!* You must be paid!" he said. "But there are many ways of making payment!"

The sword of Señor Zorro was beneath his hands. And suddenly it was out of its scabbard, and he had sprung upon the table and had dashed down the full length of it, scattering goblets and plates, drink and food.

Off the other end he sprang, and struck the floor a few feet in front of Barbados, who had recoiled and was struggling to get his cutlass out of his belt. The sword of Zorro flashed through the air, describing a gleaming arc.

"Pirate, eh?" Don Diego Vega cried. "You have come to collect riches, have you, Señor Pirate?"

"What is to prevent?" Barbados sneered. "You and your pretty toy of a sword?"

"Ha! You insult a good blade!" Don Diego cried. "The insult shall not go unpunished! Look you here!"

Don Diego Vega whirled suddenly to one side, his sword seemed to flash fire, and its point bit into a panel of the wall once, twice, thrice! Barbados looked on in amazement, his lower jaw sagging. His little eyes bulged, and he looked again. Scratched on the panel of the wall was a Z.

"That mark!" the pirate gasped. "You are Zorro! That mark—the same the *commandante* wears on his forehead—"

Don Diego had whirled to face him again. "How know you there is such a mark on the forehead of Captain Ramón?" he demanded. "So! The *commandante* deals with pirates, does he? That is how it happens that my friend, Sergeant Gonzales, and his soldiers are not here! Ha!"

Barbados blustered forward, his cutlass held ready, striving to regain the mastery of the situation. "Give us loot, or we attack!" he thundered.

"Attack, fool?" Don Diego cried. "Do you imagine that you hold the upper hand here? Up with your blade!"

The last thing Barbados wished to do was to fight a *caballero* under such circumstances. He had the fear of the mongrel for the thoroughbred. But here was a thing that could not be avoided unless his leadership of the pirates suffer.

The *caballeros* sprang from their chairs, drawing their swords, shouting in keen anticipation of a break in the deadly monotony of their lives. They rushed to the right and the left, and engaged the pirates as they rushed forward. Don Diego Vega found himself at liberty to engage Barbados

only, a thing he relished and which he did with right good will.

Barbados fought like a fiend, mouthing curses, puffing out his cheeks, but he did not understand this style of fighting. Don Diego Vega seemed to be wielding half a dozen blades that sang about his head and threatened to bury themselves in his throat. His cutlass seemed heavy, useless, his strokes went wild.

Back toward the wall went Barbados, while Don Diego grinned at him and taunted him, played with him as a cat does with a mouse.

"Pirate, eh?" Don Diego said. "Terrible on either land or sea? 'Tis a jest, Señor Pirate! A thin jest!"

Barbados sensed that the termination of this combat was not to be to his liking. He got a chance to glance once around the big room. What he saw staggered him. Two of the *caballeros* were stretched on the floor, blood flowing from their wounds. But, aside from those two, the *caballeros* were getting much the better of the combat. The pirates were retreating toward the front door. Their heavy cutlasses were of no avail against flaming, darting light swords, especially when the men who handled those swords refused to stand and be cut down, but danced here and there like phantoms.

But Barbados did not have time to contemplate the scene long. Don Diego Vega pressed his attack. Back against the wall went the pirate chief. He crouched, fought his best. But suddenly he felt a twinge of pain in his wrist, and his cutlass left his hand and shot through the air, to fall with a crash in a corner.

Barbados stared stupidly before him and then came alive to his immediate peril. For Don Diego Vega was standing before him, smiling a smile that was not good to see.

"Payment shall be made!" Don Diego said.

His blade darted up and forward, and Barbados gave a little cry of pain and fear and recoiled. On his forehead, it seemed, was a streak of fire. Again the sword of Zorro darted forth, and there was a second streak of fire, and yet a third time. And then Don Diego Vega took a step backward and bowed mockingly.

"You wear my brand," he said. "It is an honor."

Terror had claimed Barbados for the moment. Now he slipped a short distance along the wall, while Diego followed him, and suddenly he shrieked his commands and darted toward the door. Into the plaza tumbled the pirates, with the *caballeros* at their heels.

Barbados shrieked more commands, and the pirates ran with what speed they had. Those left behind in the plaza gathered the horses they needed and the loot, and those coming from the *casa* of Don Diego rushed toward the horses now. For the greater part, those horses were fine-blooded stock and belonged to Don Diego's guests, mounts used to traveling at a rapid rate of speed between some *hacienda* and the town.

Barbados urged his men to haste. Only compact loot could be carried. They sprang to the backs of the horses and dashed away. The *caballeros* pursued on foot until the plaza had been crossed. And then they stopped and gathered around Don Diego.

"There can be no pursuit," Diego said. "They have made away with your horses, my friends, the soldiers are not here, and the only mounts remaining in town are not fit for *caballeros* to ride."

"Yet they must be pursued," said a voice at his side.

Don Diego whirled to find ancient Fray Felipe standing there.

"They have stolen the sacred goblet," Fray Felipe said in a calm voice. "I have taken a vow to regain it."

"The goblet!" Diego gasped.

"Don Diego, my friend, you will help me in this?" Fray Felipe asked. "I have known you since you were a babe in arms. I have loved you—"

"To-morrow I wed," Don Diego said. "But I shall do everything in my power. We'll get horses as soon as possible and pursue. I'll open my purse, and up and down El Camino Real men will go, seeking where these pirates touch shore again. We'll get the goblet!"

"I have more faith in your sword arm than in your purse, my friend," Fray Felipe said. "But do what you can."

The *caballeros* had gathered now. Men and women were pouring from the houses, telling of what had befallen them. Barbados and his men had been merciful, for pirates. They had taken wealth, but they had taken few lives.

Don Diego Vega started back across the plaza toward his house, his friends around him.

"For a moment I was Señor Zorro again," he said. "Those drops of blood you mentioned grew hot for a time, Audre, my friend."

"Glorious!" Audre Ruiz breathed. "I would we had horses and could follow them—even a ship to follow them out to sea. Don Diego, my friend, your bachelor supper is a great success."

"Then let us return and conclude it," Don Diego said. "We have a couple of wounded friends in the house. Let us attend them."

"Let us bathe their wounds in wine," Audre suggested.

They hurried into the house. The frightened servants came forward again and began putting things to rights. The two wounded *caballeros* were in chairs already, and men working to bandage them. Once more Don Diego sat at the head of the table, and the *caballeros* dropped into their chairs, and the servants made haste to fill the goblets. Don Diego put the sword of Zorro on the table before him and proposed that they toast it again.

There came a sudden commotion at the door, and a man stumbled in. Don Diego was on his feet instantly, for he knew the man. He was a leading workman at the *hacienda* of Don Carlos Pulido. A horrible fear gripped Don Diego's heart.

The man was exhausted. He staggered forward, and would have fallen had not Diego grasped him and braced him against a corner of the table.

"*Señor!*" he gasped. "Don Diego—young master!"

"Speak!" Diego commanded.

"Pirates attacked the *hacienda* more than an hour ago, while others were attacking here—"

"Tell it quickly!"

"Don Carlos is sorely wounded, *señor!* Many of the buildings are burned. The house was looted!"

"The *sçñorita?*" Don Diego questioned.

"Do not strike me when I speak, young master!"

"Speak!"

"They carried away the *señorita.* They slew six who would have saved her—"

"Carried her away!" Don Diego cried.

"Toward the sea," the man gasped. "I heard one of the pirates shout that she was to be treated gently—that she was to be the prize of some great man—"

Don Diego Vega tossed him aside, and once more the blade of Zorro was in his hand. His friends were upon their feet and crowding forward.

"A rescue!" Don Audre Ruiz cried. "We must save the *señorita!*"

"They have stolen the bride of Don Diego, the fools!" another shouted.

"Worse than that, for them!" Audre screeched. "They have stolen the bride of Señor Zorro!"

Don Diego Vega seemed to recover from the shock.

"You are right, my friends!" he cried. "This is touch enough to turn my blood hot again. Don Diego Vega is dead for a time; Señor Zorro takes the trail! Audre, get me the best horse you can! You others, wait!"

He dashed up the stairs as Audre hurried through the front door. The others waited, talking wildly of plans for reaching the shore of the sea. Frightened servants stood about as though speechless.

In a short space of time Don Diego returned to them. But he was Don Diego no longer. Now he wore the costume he had worn when as Señor Zorro he had ridden up and down the length of El Camino Real. And in his face was a light that was not good to see.

Don Audre hurried in. "I've got one good horse," he said.

"I go!" Don Diego cried. "I follow them to the sea. The two forces will meet there."

"We are with you in this!" Don Audre cried. "With you as when you were Zorro before. With you, my friend, until we have the little *señorita* safe again!"

Their naked blades flashed overhead in token of allegiance.

Don Diego thanked them with a look.

"Then follow me to the sea!" he cried. "A trading ship is due there in the morning. Mayhap we'll have to take it and trace them across the waves. I go! Zorro takes the trail!"

He dashed to the door, the others following. He sprang into the saddle of the mount Don Audre had procured. He drove home the spurs cruelly, and rode like a demon through the bright moonlight and up the slope, then taking the shortest trail to the sea.

CHAPTER VI.

ZORRO STRIKES.

AT the *hacienda* of Don Carlos Pulido the outer door was opened slowly, stealthily. A villainous face showed. Then the door was thrown open wide and half a dozen men stormed into the room. Doña Catalina gave a shriek of fear and sprang backward, and as the little *señorita* rushed to her, clasped her in her arms. Don Carlos looked up quickly from a garment he had been inspecting and sprang to his feet.

"Pirates!" he roared.

The aged don seemed to renew his youth with the cry. He darted back against the wall, shrieking for his servants and his men, his hand darting to the blade that happened to be at his side. But the surprise was complete, and there was no hope of a victory over the pirate crew. Servants rushed in loyally, to be cut down. Doña Catalina and Lolita crouched in a corner, the aged don standing protectingly before them.

Sanchez made for him, seeing the girl. The pirate laughed, attacked like a fiend, and Don Carlos went down before he could give a wound.

Doña Catalina's shriek rang in his ears. Then there came another shriek as Señorita Lolita felt herself being torn from her mother's arms. Sanchez whirled her behind him, and another of the pirates clutched her in his arms.

"Easy with the wench!" Sanchez cried. "She is to be saved for some great man!"

The little *señorita* struggled and fought, her gentleness gone in the face of this emergency. Horror claimed her and almost destroyed her reason. She had heard whispered wild tales of what happened to women captured by pirates.

Out of the house she was carried, shrieking in her fear. The pirates poured out, too. Some of the outbuildings were ablaze now, and the shrieking, swearing crew was looting the house for what valuables could be carried easily.

Men of the *hacienda* came running, to be cut down with a laugh. More huts were set ablaze. Pirates came running from the house, carrying jewels, silks, satins. Señorita Lolita realized dimly that her wedding garments had been ruined by these men.

"Diego!" she moaned. "Diego!"

Horses were procured, her father's blooded stock, and she was lashed to the back of one. The pirates mounted others, and Sanchez urged them on their way toward the distant sea. He had orders to get there before the dawn, and he feared Barbados too much to disobey his orders.

Señorita Lolita glanced back once, to see flames pouring from the doors and windows of the home she had loved. She thought of the father she had seen cut down, of her tender mother. And then she slumped forward in a swoon, and Sanchez steadied her in the saddle.

Two men of the *hacienda* carried Don Carlos Pulido from his burning home and placed him down at a distance beneath a tree. Doña Catalina knelt beside him, weeping.

"Find a horse!" the aged don commanded one of the men. "Ride like a fiend to the town, and tell Don Diego Vega of this. As you love the *señorita*, spare neither yourself nor your mount! Ride—do not bother with me!"

And so the man found a horse and rode away toward the town, going like the wind, and so the news came to Don Diego Vega.

The *señorita*, coming from her swoon, found that the pirates were traveling at a high rate of speed. Mile by mile they cut

down the distance to the sea. There was an excellent trail used by traders, and Sanchez followed it swiftly.

It was like a nightmare to the little *señorita*. Again she wondered at the fate of her father and her mother. Again, mentally, she called upon Don Diego Vega to save her.

But her proud blood had returned to her now. She curled her pretty lips in scorn when Sanchez addressed her, and would make no reply. Her eyes snapped and flashed as she contemplated him. Her tiny chin tilted at an insulting angle. She was a Pulido, and she remembered it. Whatever fate held in store for her, she would be a Pulido to the end.

And finally, after some hours, they rounded a bend of a hill and saw the sea ahead of them, and the mouth of the dark cañon that ran down into it. Sanchez dismounted them beside the curving cliff. The loot was piled on the sand, the horses were turned adrift. Señorita Lolita was forced to dismount. Her wrists were lashed behind her, and she was compelled to sit on the ground with her back to the cliff's wall.

Some of the pirates lighted a fire of driftwood. Sanchez stood looking out to sea, watching for the ship that soon would be due.

And then came Barbados and the pirates from the town.

"Fair loot!" Barbados cried as Sanchez questioned. "But we were outdone. Some devilish *caballeros* were having a supper, and we stumbled upon them, twice our number. But we have fair loot! And you have the girl!"

"*Sí!* We have the girl!" Sanchez replied.

Barbados walked over to her. "A pretty wench!" he declared. "Small wonder a man wished to have you stolen! Proud, are you? Ha! We'll see what pride you have remaining by the end of the next moon!"

He whirled to look over the camp. "Sanchez," he commanded, "put a sentinel up on top of the cliff. I do not expect pursuit, but it is best to be prepared. I ran across that fiend of a Zorro, and he marked me. But there are not horses enough left in town for himself and his friends, and he would not dare follow alone. Nevertheless, put a sentinel on the cliff."

Sanchez obeyed. A man mounted to the top. On the level stretch of sand before them they could see his shadow in the moonlight as he paced slowly back and forth. Back and forth he went, while Señorita Lolita sat and watched the shadow and shivered to think of what was to come.

Barbados and Sanchez prepared the loot for the ship's boats when they should come. There was an abundance of wine, and the pirates began drinking it. They shouted and laughed and sang, while the little *señorita* shuddered and watched the shadow of the sentinel as it went back and forth, back and forth.

And suddenly she bent forward, for there were two shadows now. Hope sang in her breast. One of the shadows was creeping upon the other.

"Diego!" she breathed. "If it could only be Diego!"

The moon was dropping, was at the point where the shadows were lengthened, grotesque. And suddenly Sanchez gave a cry and pointed to the stretch of sand. Barbados turned to look. The pirates stopped drinking and crowded forward.

There on the sandy stretch a picture was being enacted. They saw the silhouettes of two men fighting, thrusting and slashing at each other. From above came the ringing of blades that met with violence.

The pirates sprang back, tried to look up and ascertain what was taking place there. The shadows disappeared from the sand for a time as the combatants reeled back from the edge of the cliff.

"Above, some of you!" Barbados cried.

They started—and stopped. Down the face of the cliff came tumbling the body of the pirate sentinel. It struck the sand, and Barbados and the others crowded forward to see.

"By the saints!" Barbados swore.

His little eyes bulged. On the cheek of the dead pirate sentinel was a freshly-carved Z.

"Barbados! Look!" Sanchez cried.

He pointed to the body. Fastened to the man's belt with a thorn was a scrap of parchment.

Barbados went forward gingerly and plucked it off. On it were words, evidently traced in blood with the point of a blade. Barbados read them swiftly:

Señores! Have you ever seen this one?

CHAPTER VII.

SEÑOR ZORRO'S DARING.

THERE was a moment of horrified silence, during which nothing was heard save the soft lap of the sea against the shore and the labored breathing of the terrified pirates. And then Barbados swore a great oath and looked toward the summit of the cliff once more.

"'Tis that cursed Señor Zorro, the land pirate!" he shrieked. "Spit upon him! After him, dogs! Bring me his heart on the end of a cutlass blade! Or fetch him alive, if you can, that we may have the keen pleasure of killing him slowly."

Some of the pirates already were struggling to get up the narrow path that led to the top of the cliff, slipping and falling back as the soft soil and gravel rolled beneath their feet.

Sanchez started with them, eager for combat. Barbados, however, lingered behind, seeing to the loot and his fair prisoner. He was very busy about it, for he was not eager to join the others and run chances of matching blades with Señor Zorro again.

Barbados remembered well how he had felt during the fight in the house of Don Diego in Reina de Los Angeles, when he had realized fully that Don Diego was merely playing with him and could have silenced him forever when he willed.

The pirates reached the summit finally, but could see nothing there save a few clumps of brush and a few stunted trees that looked grotesque in the bright light of the moon. They examined the shadows carefully, but located no man. Yet from the near distance came a ringing, a mocking laugh.

They would have pursued, but Barbados hailed them from below, ordering them down to the beach again. The boats were putting in from the ship.

Down to the strand they tumbled, getting ready to store away their loot. They did not bother about the dead pirate, since he was an ordinary fellow who did not count. They guzzled more wine, ran down into the surf to help drag the boats ashore, greeted their fellows, laughed and shouted and jested and cursed in raucous tones.

Barbados turned to where the Señorita Lolita was sitting with her back against the cliff wall, her tiny wrists lashed behind her. She raised her face and looked at him bravely, her black eyes snapping, her lips curled in scorn.

"This Señor Zorro, I have been given to understand, has some concern in you," Barbados said.

"If he has, Señor Pirate, it is time for you to feel afraid," she replied.

"Think you that I fear the fellow? Ha!"

"He is no fellow! He is a *caballero* with the best of blood flowing in his veins, if you can understand what that means —you, who have the blood of swine in yours!"

"By my naked blade!" Barbados swore. "Were you not to be saved for a great man, I'd punish you well for that remark, proud one! Pride of blood, eh? Ha! 'Tis a thing you will be willing to forget, and eager, within a moon's time. When this man of whom I speak—"

"Is it necessary to speak at all to me?" the little *señorita* wanted to know.

Barbados snorted his anger and disgust. For a moment he turned away to issue a volley of commands to the men who were loading the boats. He berated Sanchez for being slow. He glanced up the face of the cliff once more, as though expecting Señor Zorro to come rushing down, deadly sword in hand. Presently he called two of his men to him.

"Take the wench to one of the boats!" he commanded. "Keep her wrists lashed. Make certain that she does not hurl herself into the sea. These high-born wenches have some queer ideas and are not to be trusted at a time such as this."

The two men grasped her roughly and forced her to her feet. The *señorita* gave a little cry, more because of her injured dignity than from pain or fear. Barbados whirled toward them again, anger in his face.

"Easy with the wench!" he commanded. "She is a proper and valuable share of the loot. If she is delivered in good condition then do we share greater in the other things."

Down to the edge of the hissing surf they went, Señorita Lolita Pulido forced along between them. She still held her head proudly, but the light of the dying fire reflected in her face showed a trace of glistening tears that could not be choked back. Still, she had some hope. Don Diego was near at hand! He already had demonstrated his presence. And he would not entirely desert her while he lived. He could be expected to play Señor Zorro now to the end of the chapter.

They lifted her, carried her between them, and put her down into one of the boats. She sat at one side of a middle seat, a wide thwart. Her bound wrists were over the side, and by turning slightly she could see the tossing water less than two feet below her, for the craft was heavily loaded.

The pirates tumbled into the boat and picked up the oars. One thrust her cruelly against the side. Barbados himself sprang in last of all and ordered his men to give way. The other boats prepared for the start also.

On the summit of the cliff Don Diego Vega crouched and watched them. But he was not the easy-going, fashionable, nonchalant Don Diego now. His eyes were narrowed and piercing. His lips were set in a thin, straight line. Don Diego had vanished, and in his place was Señor Zorro, the Fox, the man who had ridden up and down El Camino Real to avenge the wrongs of *frailes* and natives. And Señor Zorro would know how to deal with this grievous wrong, which touched him personally.

The pirate craft was anchored close inshore. It would not take long for the boats to reach her. The moon was sinking and soon would be gone. There would be but a brief period of darkness before the dawn came stealing across the land to the sea.

His *caballero* friends were far behind him, he knew. And they would make for the trading schooner anchored a few miles away, perhaps, instead of coming here. And Señorita Lolita Pulido was in the hands of the pirates, and expected to be rescued.

Señor Zorro realized these things even as he watched the pirates preparing to launch their boats. It did not take him long to make a decision. He crawled backward a short distance, sprang to his feet, and ran to the edge of the cliff in a little cove a few yards away, a spot the pirates could not see from their boats.

He made certain that his sword was fast in its scabbard. He tightened his belt. He went to the edge and glanced down at the hissing sea a score of feet below, where it rolled and eddied in a deep pool close to the rocks.

Back he went again. And suddenly he darted forward, took off at the very edge, and curved gracefully through the moonlight in a perfect dive.

He struck the water and disappeared, but in a moment he was at the surface and swimming away from the treacherous shore. And he found that it was treacherous and the tide an enemy. It pulled at him to drag him down. He fought and struggled against it, and finally won to safety.

The boats were just starting from the land. Señor Zorro, low in the water, swam as though in a contest for a prize, straight toward the nearest of the boats, which was the one in which the *señorita* was sitting a captive.

Señorita Lolita was struggling now to be brave. The pirates were singing their ribald songs and indulging in questionable jests. They swore as they tugged at the oars, cursed the heavy load of loot, and blasphemed because of the work they were forced to do.

The *señorita*, remembering her proud blood, had tried to maintain her courage, but now she felt it ebbing swiftly. There seemed to be no hope. She could not believe that Don Diego could come to her rescue in the face of such terrible odds.

Once she gulped and felt herself near to tears. She leaned backward to keep as far as possible from the pirate sitting beside her. The stench of his body and breath was almost more than she could endure.

Now they were halfway to the pirate ship. Lolita had arrived at a decision. She would be no prey for pirates if she could find at hand the means for taking her own life. She remembered what Barbados had said about her being the prize of some great man, and wondered at it a bit. But suppressed terror occupied her mind and kept her from wondering much. Again she leaned backward, and her bound hands almost touched the water over the side.

The pirates, nearing exhaustion, were rowing slowly now, sweeping their long oars in unison but without their usual force. And suddenly the Señorita Lolita flinched, and almost cried aloud, then struggled to overcome the shock she had felt. Her hands had been touched.

At first she thought it was some monster of the sea, and then that a cold wave had washed them. But the touch came again, and she knew it for what it was—the touch of another hand.

Another touch—and her cheeks flamed scarlet. The *señorita* had had her hands kissed before, and she knew a kiss when she felt it.

She turned her head slowly, leaning outward, and glanced down. And her heart almost stood still.

For Señor Zorro was there, his face showing just at the surface of the water! Don Diego, her husband-to-be, was there, swimming alongside, smiling up at her, within a few feet of the pirates who bent their backs and rowed and never thought to look down.

Fear clutched at the *señorita's* heart for an instant—fear for him—yet admiration for his daring, too. Her blood seemed suddenly hot instead of cold. The touch of his lips had been enough to do that.

He dared not speak, of course, though the pirates were shouting and singing. But his lips moved and formed voiceless words, and the *señorita* understood.

"Courage! I'll be near!" he mouthed.

She nodded her head slightly in token that she understood. And Don Diego Vega smiled yet again and sank slowly out of sight beneath the waves.

The boats were almost to the vessel now. The bright moon shipped a last ray across the tumbling sea and sank to rest. On the deck of the pirate craft torches flared suddenly to guide the boats.

They reached the side. Rough hands lifted the *señorita* and forced her to the deck above. Swearing, sweating men commenced handing up the loot. Barbados howled his commands and curses, Sanchez echoing them. To one side the *señorita* was held by the two men who had guarded her on the shore, awaiting disposition by the pirate chief.

"With speed, dogs!" Barbados shrieked. "We must be away before the dawn!"

The entire crew was working amidships, getting in the plunder and the boats. They gave no thought to bow or stern.

And up the anchor chain and into the bow crept a dripping figure, with a cry for vengeance in his heart—and the sword of Zorro at his side!

(To be continued NEXT WEEK.)

The Nestorian Tablet

by

George C. Jenks

Author of "The Hoodoo Mine," "The Mesh," etc.

A NOVELETTE—COMPLETE IN THIS ISSUE

CHAPTER I.

TWO BAMBOO STICKS.

OF all the sad moments that a man under thirty may have seen, surely there is none more tragic than that in which he feels constrained to tell the girl he loves that he is a failure professionally, commercially and financially, and, therefore, is bound in honor to release her from her promise to marry him. If there is anything more humiliating than such a confession it is not easily conceivable.

Of course, in most cases, the girl promptly declines the release. The fact that the self-alleged failure comes to her in such a straightforward way, prepared to sacrifice his life's happiness rather than to keep her waiting until he shall be in a position to offer her a home equal in luxury or comfort to that which she would give up for his sake, proves to her that he is worth waiting for. Women are like that—especially when their hearts really have been set a-quiver by a touch of Eros's wing.

So, when David Carter sought to spoil his evening with Laura Goughlin, only daughter of Dr. Amos Goughlin, world-famous archæologist, orientalist and explorer, by telling her that he was out of a job and "broke," and therefore had come to give her freedom, she simply would not take him seriously.

"Ridiculous boy!" was her affectionate reproof. "Just because you felt obliged to resign from that importing firm and have not been able to find a similar position in two weeks, you make up your mind that you have become one of the army of hopeless unemployed. And what do you mean by 'broke'? You haven't lost all your money, have you?"

"Oh, no. Of course I have what my father left me. But the income from the estate is only just large enough to make it essential that I earn at least as much more before I can ask you to become my wife. They paid me a good salary at Lin Wung & Co.'s, and, as an expert in Chinese antiques and curios, I was about to sign a two years' contract with them. Then this trouble came up and I was obliged to leave."

Laura gave him one of her mischievous smiles as she said slowly: "I don't see why you should have taken that on yourself, Dave. You were not responsible for the firm's honor."

"No, but I was for my own," returned Dave decisively. "And when I was asked

to allow a fraud to be perpetrated—the selling of what was supposed to be a rare porcelain of the Ming dynasty, but which I knew to be an imitation of a period several centuries later—it would have made me a party to the deception."

"Why?"

"Because, as the firm's expert, I was supposed to have guaranteed the porcelain vase as a Ming product, and the customer would have bought it on my word."

"Did you tell the customer you believed it an imitation? That must have been rather awkward."

"I merely said that I could not guarantee its origin."

"And then?"

Dave shrugged. "The firm lost the sale and I resigned."

The two were sitting on the piano bench in the homelike living room of Professor Goughlin's old-fashioned home near Washington Square. Laura had been playing when Dave, after many inward struggles, came over and gave utterance to his self-abnegatory outburst.

There is not overmuch room on a piano bench for two persons, even when one faces the piano and the other sits the other way. But it is convenient for an interchange of confidences. Laura leaned against Dave's shoulder—perhaps not unaware that thereby she imparted a throbbing warmth to his entire being—while her white fingers rippled over the keys in idle runs and arpeggios.

"I wish you were still dad's secretary—or, rather, associate," she murmured wistfully.

"'Secretary' is the right word," declared Dave. "He paid me a salary as such, and I have often thought, since our break, that I may have been presumptuous when I tried to persuade him to have nothing to do with the Nestorian Tablet in Hsian Fu. But really, Laura, my protest was mainly because I feared it might bring harm to you. The Chinese in those old provinces don't like white 'barbarians,' as they call us, and they are no respecters of sex when they think, or pretend to think, they have a grievance."

"That may be so in those out-of-the-way districts in central and northwest China, where there are no railroads and where white people seldom go," said Laura thoughtfully. "But I could not believe it of my boys in the mission in Chinatown. I have more than twenty in my Bible class, and I am sure they love and respect me. They show it in such quaint ways, too. For instance, when they bring me flowers on Sunday, it is always just a single blossom, usually a lily on a long stem. And their deep bow, shading their eyes with one hand, as if dazzled by the light of my countenance! Oh, it's delicious!"

"H-m! Yes!" grunted Dave. "But do you remember the Chinese in Shensi?"

Laura shivered. "Yes, indeed. That awful night, in the bamboo shack on the outskirts of Hsian Fu, where dad bargained with three evil-looking men for the Nestorian Tablet. Their beady black eyes glistened the way a rat's will in semidarkness. The rice straw wrapped around the stone was pulled partly away, so that you and dad could examine it by the light of the candles the men held. It was all so unspeakably eerie. I can feel again the soft rush of the moaning night wind through the doorway, and the faint odor of poppies from the great fields we had seen that day, and which I remember you said were again defiantly in full flower, to produce opium, after years of government suppression. Why, Dave, lawlessness was in the very air." She paused. "The Nestorian Tablet is very valuable, dad says. The Nestorians were missionaries, weren't they?"

"Yes, and this tablet, which is a wonderful record of what they did in propagating the Christian religion ages and ages ago, dates back eleven or twelve centuries. It is —or was—kept in the Pei Lin, meaning 'the forest of stone tablets.' But though the antiquarian value of the tablet was well known to the authorities of Hsian Fu, they paid little attention to it. That was what first put it into your father's head to borrow it, I believe."

"Yes, *borrow*, Dave," put in Laura quickly. "Of course dad wouldn't *steal* anything—even an old stone no one seemed to care about. He only wanted to make a copy of it for the Metropolitan Museum, and meant to return it to China when that

was done. I've heard him say it has been hard to make a satisfactory replica."

"Yes, I know," nodded Dave. "But he has one now, I understand."

"Yes, the original tablet is in his study. He said at dinner last night he hoped to ship it back to Hsian Fu within a week."

"Glad to hear it," said Dave earnestly. "Those three men that night were members of the Ko Lao Hui, a secret society with as much power and as dangerous in central China as the Camorra is in some parts of Italy. Some of the order had been trailing us for most of our journey from Peking. They could not understand how it was we had a lady with us on such an expedition."

"I could have told them," she said with a smile, "that, because I was interested in a Chinese mission in America, I had always longed to visit China with my father. I came through safely, didn't I?"

"Yes," was Dave's sober assent. "You came through all right." He added tensely, under his breath: "Thank God! But if—"

The door of the room burst open, and a well-built man, with iron-gray hair surmounting a strong scholarly countenance, staggered in and sank on a divan, while he stared about him in the vacant manner of one who might have been rudely awakened from sleep and still was only half conscious.

"Father!" cried Laura. "What is it?"

As she bent over him, taking his cold hands in her warm, soft palms and gazing anxiously into his drawn countenance, his lips moved loosely in an obvious endeavor to speak.

"Father!" she repeated beseechingly.

With an impatient shake of the leonine head, Dr. Amos Goughlin seemed to dispel the paralysis from his lips and tongue, and was able to murmur in a low voice that conveyed anger rather than dismay: "The Nestorian Tablet! It is gone! Stolen!"

"Stolen!" came from David Carter in startled tones. "The Nestorian Tablet! Why, Dr. Goughlin, that would mean—"

"I know exactly what it would mean," testily interrupted the doctor. "It is irreplaceable, and it must be on its way to China within a week."

"A week?"

"Yes. Confound the thing! I have had word from the Governor of Hsian. Strange how those fellows back there find out what we're doing in New York. Anyhow, it's got to be sent back. And now some cheap thief thinks he'll blackmail me. Well, we'll see!"

He had regained control of himself with the celerity that was characteristic of him, and which had helped to make him a great explorer, and rose to his feet with an air of defiance.

As he did so something dropped out of the front of his coat—something that Dave pounced on and turned over in his hands with a look that suggested familiarity with the object.

It was a simple contrivance—two short sticks of bamboo, ingeniously tied together in such a way that the pointed ends were separated from each other by a little more than an inch. On one of the sticks were inscribed a few Chinese characters in India ink.

"What is that?" asked Laura. "Where did it come from?"

"Oh, it's nothing," explained Dave lightly. "Just a Mongolian flute from Shensi. Dr. Goughlin must have accidentally swept it off his table or a shelf as he came out of his study."

But even while he spoke his eyes met the gaze of Dr. Goughlin under his heavy brows. Both had recognized the simple article as one of the devilish instruments of torture with which the dreaded Ko Lao Hui has for centuries maintained discipline and dealt with its enemies in the dark byways of the ancient city of Hsian Fu.

CHAPTER II.

THE KO LAO HUI SPEAKS.

"COME to my study with me, Carter," said Dr. Goughlin curtly, taking the bamboo sticks and scowling at them.

He calmly ignored the fact that, as the result of a dispute arising out of his possession of the Nestorian Tablet—violent on his side and marked by what he called "damned obstinacy" on the part of David

rter—the young man had, six months eviously, ceased to be his secretary. He lked to the door, still tottering slightly, t with his usual dignity, taking it for anted that Dave was following. Then he anced back and saw that his daughter as coming, too.

"You stay here, Laura!" he commanded. I want my secretary and no one else. me on, Carter."

He disappeared, going down the hall that d to his study in the rear of the big, ramling house. Instantly Laura ran to Dave d gently pushed him toward the door.

"Hurry, Dave! You are his secretary ain. You heard what he said. He's anted you all these months, but he's been o proud to ask you. So he just assumes at you never have left him—that you ve been his secretary right along."

"You mean that I am automatically reinated?" asked Dave with a whimsical smile. Perhaps you're right. I hope you are."

"I *am* right," returned Laura with conction. "The trouble is you are both such ght cats that neither will yield an inch. therwise you would never have parted. ow that this dreadful thing has come out he needs you again. He wouldn't mit it, I suppose, but he needs you badly -and so do I, for his sake. You want to me back, don't you?"

Dave did not answer directly.

"Well, I have a great respect and warm gard for the doctor," he said with his arm ound her. "He has behaved like a trump never interfering with our engagement, as any men would have done after firing me. he stern father and all that sort of thing, ou know. Instead, he's allowed me to me here and see you as I did before the w, whether he ever intended to accept e as a son-in-law or not. I suppose he ured that, now I'm out of a decent job, ere's no danger. He has lots of everyy gumption, even if he is an F. R. G. S., esident of the Oriental Research Society, L.D., M. A., and all the rest of the scienic and professional alphabet."

"Here! Carter! Dave! Where the vil are you?" roared the doctor. "Come re, I tell you! My study!"

"By jove, I *am* his secretary," laughed Dave. "Dear old chap! He's got his voice again."

The study was a spacious outbuilding, separate from the house, except for its communication with the hall which ran through the latter from back to front, on the architectural plan so common in planters' residences in the South. There were seven long windows—three on either side and one at the end. The place had originally been a conservatory and "sun parlor" combined. When Laura's mother died, in the girl's childhood, the doctor had gratified a long-entertained wish to turn it into a study, and had used it as such ever since.

"You see, Dave," said the doctor when he had closed the door and pointed to another door at the farther end, leading into the garden, "there is no mystery as to how the thieves got in. It was the easiest thing in the world for them to break the lock of the back gate in the alley and open the outer door of the study."

"But this door is locked and bolted inside," remarked Dave after a brief inspection. "Did you fasten it yourself after the thieves got away? You seemed so dazed when you came into the living room that—"

"I was. They didn't come through the door. That French window over there—look at it."

"I see. It is only about two feet from the ground," said Dave, pushing it open on its hinges. "They took advantage of its being behind you as you sat at your table—that *was* where you sat, eh?"

"Of course!" grunted the doctor. "You've been my secretary long enough to know that I always sit there. The window may have been unlatched. I don't know. Anyhow, a wet handkerchief was pressed over my mouth and nose. That's all I remember, till I realized that the flat packing case over there against the wall had been broken open, and I could see from my chair that the Nestorian Tablet was gone. Then I made my way to the room where you and Laura were."

"And didn't you see the men who came in?"

"Never got a glimpse of them. But it's easy to decide the kind of rascals they were. This lovely toy"—he touched with

a finger-tip the bamboo sticks before him—"*you* know what this is, Dave?"

The young man shivered slightly. "Of course I know it: the blinder they use in Shensi. The two points are just far enough apart to gouge into the corners of the poor wretch's eyes, and he never sees again. One push is enough. And they call *us* barbarians! It looks as if the Ko Lao Hui had been here."

"That's clear on the face of it. I've had threats from them half a dozen times in the last six months, but the curious thing is that they are contradictory."

"In what way?" asked Dave.

"This!" was Dr. Amos's reply as he pushed the bamboo sticks further away with an expression of disgust. "First there came a ball of red paper thrown through an open window to my desk one evening when I sat here writing by lamplight. The ball struck my hand. I opened it and found a brief order in Shensi characters ordering me to have the tablet back in Hsian Fu within a month. There was a death sign at the bottom."

"You couldn't get a look at the rascal who threw it? But, of course, not." Dave answered his own question. He knew the subtle ways of the Ko Lao Hui.

"The next message came through the post office. It was addressed to me neatly in typewriting, in an ordinary plain envelope, and had been mailed in New York, uptown. The paper inside was red. In Chinese I was warned not to let the Nestorian Tablet out of my hands until I received personal permission from a Ta Ko."

"A lodge master of the Ko Lao Hui," threw in Dave. "Have you his name?"

"No. There is not likely to be more than one of them in New York, so his name is immaterial. What surprises me is that such an officer should be here at all, bothering about this stone. It only shows what excitement has been caused in Shensi by our bringing the tablet away."

"You will remember, doctor," Dave could not help saying, "that I strongly advised against borrowing it."

"I know all about that," growled the doctor. "We've thrashed it all out, haven't we? What's the use of bringing it up again? By the way, I owe you six months' salary. I'll give you a check before you go."

"Now, doctor—" began Dave in an expostulatory tone.

"I had four other messages," interrupted Dr. Goughlin, going on with his narration. "Two were red balls which got into my study mysteriously, and the other two came in a businesslike way through the mail. The balls ordered me to return the Nestorian Tablet to Hsian Fu, and the letters threatened me with death if I did. Now somebody has stolen the tablet. Nice mess, isn't it?"

"May I see the notes?" asked Dave. "I suppose you've saved them."

"Yes, here they are," returned the doctor carelessly as he opened the drawer of his table. "Just crank messages. They are always pretty much the same, whether written in Chinese, English, Sanscrit, or Choctaw. Their only importance in this case lies in the possibility of their leading to the miscreants who drugged me and stole that tablet."

David Carter, as a lifelong student of China and her people, was familiar with most of the Chinese dialects, particularly those of Shensi, Shantung, Anhui and other provinces of the northwest, and it was easy for him to read the messages into his native language. In all the red paper balls so dramatically conveyed to the doctor the wording was the same:

> DR. GOUGHLIN:
>
> You have four eyes in your house. But only for a little while. Their light will go out if the Stone of Ta t'sin is not at Pei Lin in the Middle Kingdom before the moon dies twice.

Neither Dave nor the doctor commented on the term "Ta t'sin." Both knew it was one of the many names by which the Chinese call the Nestorian Tablet.

"Now read the other—the one coming by mail," directed the doctor.

"It is practically the same as the red ball," said Dave after a look at the paper. "And yet it exactly contradicts the others, by leaving out the word 'not.' Every one of them has the death sign at the bottom—a rough drawing of a face without eyes.

hastly ideas of a joke these fellows have! hese messages are all the clew you have, h, doctor?"

"They are enough, Carter," replied the octor, gritting his teeth. "The barbarous retches! Trying to scare me by threatning Laura! What more proof do you eed that it is the work of the Ko Lao Hui?"

"Looks like it," assented Dave tensely. But they've given us another lead, so that here shall be no mistake. Look!"

He took the doctor by the elbow and rew him over to the rifled packing case hich had contained the Nestorian Tablet. On the case was a little heap of fine sandy oam, which, with its indescribable but unistakable suggestion of death and decay, esembled, and yet was unlike, the sand of America's own great desert in the Southwest.

"It is loess," whispered the doctor, slowly. "The first I ever saw in America."

"And it is the last word in Ko Lao Hui menace," added Dave, with involuntary olemnity.

CHAPTER III.

SHADOWS.

THE two men stood alternately looking at the little heap of sand and at each other in silence as if both were mutely asking: "What next?" when the whirring jingle of an electric bell came to them sharply from the hall through the open door.

"The telephone!" exclaimed Dr. Amos. "It's ten o'clock. Who wants me at this hour, I wonder? Go and see, Dave."

There could be no question that Dave Carter had been thoroughly reinstated as the doctor's secretary. The order was quite in Dr. Goughlin's usual manner. Like most deep students, he was absent-minded, and threw his commands around in his own household without any thought of what he was doing. He would have talked just the same to Laura.

Dave knew this, and obeyed as a matter of course. There was only one telephone in the house—for the doctor would not be bothered with one in his study—and the instrument stood on a table in the hall. As Dave came out of the study he saw Laura with the receiver in her hand and heard her say over the wire:

"This is Miss Goughlin. Do you want to speak to the doctor? No? You want to speak to *me?* Oh, yes. This is Ching Wah? What is it, Ching? To-morrow evening, at seven?"

There was a pause, during which Dave stared at Laura impatiently. Evidently it was one of her Chinese pupils on the wire. But what did he mean by calling her up at this hour of night—or even calling her on the telephone at all? Dave was not enthusiastic over Chinese missions, with his fiancée as one of the teachers.

"Good gracious!" burst from Laura, still over the phone. "You have heard about the Nest—about the robbery? Why, this is extraordinary. That's what you mean by to-morrow evening at seven. I couldn't understand. Oh, you mean for my father to come, but that I ought to come with him? Wait, please. Hold the wire."

She turned to Dave, and saw that her father had also come from the study and was listening.

"This is Ching Wah, a new member of my Bible class. He is a doctor, and has come to this country to study American methods in his profession, he says. He has traveled a great deal and speaks English and other European tongues. You'll like him, dad. He doesn't live in Chinatown, but practices there as a physician, and knows everybody in that locality."

"Well, well, what is all this leading up to?" broke in the doctor irritably. "What's it all about, Laura?"

"He knows something about the people who stole the Nestorian Tablet from your study to-night. He wants you to come to the corner of Doyers Street at seven to-morrow evening—it will still be light then—and he will have valuable information for you. He wants me to come with you. You would not know him otherwise, and he does not know you."

"All right," interrupted the doctor. "Tell him I will be there, with you and my secretary. Then ring off. I don't want to

discuss this matter by telephone. Meeting on a street corner! That's a dignified thing to do."

"Very well, Ching Wah," said Laura over the wire. "We will be at the corner of Doyers Street at seven to-morrow." Then, like an obedient daughter, she rang off.

"Who is this fellow Ching Wah?" demanded Dr. Amos. "Doubt if he is a doctor—with his street corner tricks. What's he doing in your Bible class?"

"He's a convert, dad. I believe he knows more about the Bible than I do," rejoined Laura reproachfully. She was very earnest in her mission work.

Dr. Goughlin snorted. "Well, it's time you went to bed. Dave, get around about ten in the morning. Good night! I have some work to do."

He marched off to his study and closed the door with a bang. Dave knew, as well as if he had followed him in, that his work consisted in examining the bamboo "blinder," with its India-ink warning and in carefully gathering up the little heap of loess for future reference. The doctor had quite recovered from the effects of the drug that had temporarily taken away his senses, but the loss of the Nestorian Tablet was like a stunning blow from a blackjack or sandbag, and his head swam as he tried to comprehend in what way this Ching Wah could help in its recovery.

Dave said good-night to Laura as soon as her father had closed his door. But a lovers' farewell is notoriously a protracted proceeding, and it was nearly half an hour later when he actually got away and looked for a Fifth Avenue bus to take him uptown.

He lived in one of the numerous hotels off Times Square in the "roaring Forties," and it was a walk of two blocks from the bus to his residence.

Was it only imagination, or was there a shadowy figure dodging along behind him, slipping into doorways when he turned around, and once effacing itself in the blackness of a wooden tunnel in front of a building in course of construction as he stopped suddenly to decide whether or not he was followed? Footpads are common enough in New York, and Dave had no mind to be knocked on the head and robbed if vigilance would prevent it.

He reached his hotel in safety, however, and, after one look up and down the street from the doorway without seeing anything suspicious, went to the desk for his key.

"A package for you, Mr. Carter," said the clerk. "Came about half an hour ago, by A. D. T." He handed Dave a small oblong parcel, wrapped in brown paper and obviously a cardboard box, for it was very light.

"Hope it isn't an infernal machine or a bomb," laughed Dave, as he took it and made for the elevator.

He was not much afraid of anything of the kind, but there could be no harm in exercising ordinary caution. So it was very gingerly that he untied the string and removed the wrapper. As he had surmised, it was a box of cardboard, and he saw the name of a well-known candy firm on the lid.

"Now," he muttered, "it is when you take off the lid that these infernal things usually let go. Wonder if it wouldn't be well to douse it in water before I open it."

He said this to himself with a smile of scorn at his own suggestion. Taking out his penknife, he cautiously cut a small hole in one end. Nothing happened, so he cut another hole in the top, larger than the other, and soon satisfied himself that there were no wires or strings connecting with the lid. Then he pulled it off.

The box was full of red paper, squeezed into a ball. He recognized it as similar to the red balls Dr. Amos had taken from his table drawer, and he knew what it was before he spread the paper open.

Just a few Chinese characters, which he deciphered without difficulty.

Don't go to Doyers Street to-morrow!

That was all.

David Carter read and reread the message. Next he examined the paper closely for anything that might help him to guess at the author.

He knew that there were two opposing forces interested in the Nestorian Tablet. But whether this warning came from the persons who wanted it sent back, or from the others who had told Dr. Goughlin not

to send it, till he had personal permission from a Ta Ko, he could not tell.

There was a third possibility—that it came from the rascals who had stolen the tablet. And the thieves might be either one or the other parties who had sent the doctor the conflicting messages.

Dave knew the subtle ways of the Ko Lao Hui, and he realized that he was up against a particularly complicated Chinese puzzle.

He had just made up his mind to go to bed and forget it—smiling as he thought of his retrieved secretaryship and of Laura's willingness to take him even if he had been "broke"—when his telephone rang. It was Laura's agitated voice that came over the wire in response to his brisk "David Carter speaking."

"Oh, Dave, somebody has just telephoned me not to go to that place at seven to-morrow—you know. What shall I do?"

"You don't know who it was phoned? Not Ching Wah, was it?" he asked.

"I don't think so. I don't believe it was a Chinese speaking, although he mumbled as if trying to disguise his voice. There was no singsong, you know."

Dave hesitated a moment. Then: "Well, you go to bed and we'll talk it over in the morning. Don't say a word about it to any one. Good night! I'll be with you about nine."

"Very well!" was her answer. "But I just *had* to tell you."

"Poor girl!" said Dave to himself, as he switched off his light half an hour later. "Damn the Nestorian Tablet!"

CHAPTER IV.

THE TRYST.

"WHAT do you think we'd better do, Dave?" was Laura's eager greeting, as he swung up the steps and into the hall of the Goughlin home shortly after nine the next morning.

There were two maids in the house to answer the door as part of their duties, but Laura had been looking for Dave herself.

"Have you Ching Wah's address?" he asked, after a moment's consideration.

"No. I only know he says it is not in Chinatown."

"Then we can't get at him—by telephone or otherwise. Rather a pity. He might know who is interested in keeping us away from Doyers Street to-night. Of course I have a strong suspicion. But I should like to be sure. By the way, I had a similar warning to yours last night, only mine came in writing."

"In writing?"

"Yes, in Chinese, and on the same kind of red paper as some messages sent to Dr. Amos. It is all pretty obvious, it seems to me."

"Then we shall go to-night?" she said, quickly.

"Of course. That is, *I* will, and I'm afraid I couldn't stop your father. But I don't like all this mystery, and you will stay away if I can persuade you."

"You can't," she declared, with flashing eyes. "I don't know what these warnings mean, but I'm going to do anything I can to get back the Nestorian Tablet. Besides, I trust Ching Wah."

"I see," was Dave's dry response.

"Don't *you* trust him? He is a gentleman, a fervent Christian and speaks as fluent English as you and I, with hardly a trace of accent."

"Sounds all right," returned Dave. "I shall be interested in meeting him. Is the doctor in his study yet?"

"Yes, he finished breakfast half an hour ago, and went right away from the table."

"Have you talked to him about the tablet, the robbery, and the business to-night?"

"Not in particular," she answered. "I was anxious to know whether he felt any effects from that drug. When he said he was quite well, I saw he didn't want to discuss it, and I said no more. You know dad's rather peculiar ways."

"No one better, I guess," smiled Dave, as he turned away to go to the study. "Go to the piano for a while, Laura," he paused to say. "Nothing like music to compose your nerves."

Dr. Goughlin looked up from his table, on which were the red balls of paper, the

sinister bamboo sticks tied together, and a paper on which lay the little heap of loess. He had been inspecting the sand through a magnifying-glass.

"This is loess beyond a doubt," he said. "Look at it through the glass, Dave."

"Not necessary," was the young man's reply, "if you have done so. We knew yesterday it was loess. The only question was why it was here, and that could be answered, I think, in view of what has happened, by the three short words: Ko Lao Hui."

"Well, we shall find out to-night, perhaps. Of course the Ko Lao Hui means to blackmail me, but I'll pay a reasonable sum to get that stone back. It's the easiest way, even though it is uncomfortably like compounding a felony. What I can't understand is the position of this Ching Wah in the affair. If he can lead us to the stone, as he intimated in his telephone to Laura last night, it looks as if he is one of the thieves."

"It may be," assented Dave, slowly. "Still, if he is a doctor with a more or less large practice in Chinatown, he would have an opportunity of learning a great deal which would not come to him otherwise. One thing is sure, in view of his religious professions, which have led him into a Bible class, he is either perfectly straight or a dangerous hypocrite."

"Well, we'll be on our guard," returned the doctor, as he put the bamboo sticks and other exhibits in his desk. "But keep in mind the important fact that we *must* get back the Nestorian Tablet, if we have to fight, as well as pay, for it."

Tacitly they agreed to drop the subject for the present. The doctor had missed Dave during his six months' absence more than he would confess, and there were appalling arrears of research work that the doctor had found very difficult and fatiguing without the aid of his efficient and always enthusiastic secretary.

Dinner was usually at half-past six in Dr. Goughlin's home, but Laura had advanced it to five o'clock, so that the three were in a taxi on their way to keep their strange tryst with Ching Wah by six thirty.

At Laura's request, Dave, who had dined with her and the doctor, had engaged a taxi to take them as far as Canal Street and the Bowery, from which point they walked to Chinatown. Obviously it would have been unwise to use their own car. The chauffeur was an old employee, but Dr. Goughlin was not the man to make a confidant of one of his servants, especially in such a case as this.

"Stay here with Laura," directed Dave, who had taken charge of the expedition and made no bones of giving orders to the doctor. "Doyers Street is only two blocks away. I'll go and see whether Ching Wah is there."

They were in that part of the Bowery known as Chatham Square. The doctor, taking his daughter's arm, nodded acquiescence and walked slowly toward the corner of Mott Street, around which Dave quickly disappeared.

He was back in less than three minutes, with the information that Ching Wah was not in sight.

"But we are ten minutes ahead of time," he added. "Let's go around there. Even if we do have to wait a few moments, Chinatown is always interesting."

"I wish the Mission were open. We could go in and wait," suggested Laura. "But, of course, if it had been open, Ching Wah would have told me to go there, where he would know I would be perfectly safe."

"You are safe now, I should think, with your father," rumbled the doctor. "You are right, Dave. This locality *is* interesting. But, after all, it is only a distorted copy of the cities we have seen in China. And a copy is always a copy."

"Hope the replica of the Nestorian Tablet is not in that class," observed Dave mischievously.

The doctor had opened his mouth to storm that his copy of the tablet was perfect, just as Dave knew he would, when a smiling, pale-faced young man in a neat chauffeur's uniform, with large goggles on the cap, stepped up to him, and touching his cap with a forefinger, said:

"I beg your pardon, sir. Are you expecting to see Dr. Ching Wah?"

"Yes. Where is he?" was Dr. Goughlin's gruff response.

"Dr. Ching Wah is very sorry, sir. But he has been suddenly called to a case—man hurt, needing immediate attention—and Dr. Ching Wah, as a very humane—"

"How long will he be?" cut in Dave. "How is it *you* are here?"

"I had driven him from home to the corner, and was just going away with the car for an hour, according to his instructions, when some persons who knew him rushed up and begged him to go with them to see a man who would die if he didn't have a doctor at once."

"Were these persons Chinese?" asked Dave.

"All three of them, sir," was the reply. "So is the man who is hurt. The doctor told me to take you into the house where he intended to direct you to the valuable article you have lost, and to assure you that he would be with you at the earliest possible moment. It is a tea house, and there is a private room in which you and the lady will be comfortable in the meantime. May I show you, sir?"

Dr. Goughlin and Dave exchanged suspicious glances. But Laura interrupted to say that she knew the tea house was respectable, and that teachers at the Mission often visited it for a cup of tea.

"All right, Laura," growled her father. "If you know the place—"

"This way, sir," said the chauffeur softly, as he pushed open a door and led them in.

It was a medium-sized room, furnished with the inlaid ebony tables and light bamboo chairs common in Chinese restaurants, and with many pictures and open fans of unmistakably Chinese manufacture on the walls. There was one man in the place, in a short quilted satin robe and felt slippers, whose braided queue was coiled around his head. His yellow, flat face was expressionless as the chauffeur walked through and opened a door at the back.

"That's the waiter. He'll bring you some tea if you desire it," explained the chauffeur, stepping back for them to pass him. "Through this hall and down the few stairs. The room door is open."

There were kerosene lamps on brackets in the hall and on the stairs, but the rather floridly furnished room beyond was brilliantly lighted by electricity.

"What do you think?" the doctor asked Dave. "Looks all right, eh?"

"You have your gun with you?" was all Dave replied, in so low a tone that neither Laura nor the chauffeur could hear.

"Of course," was the guarded reply. "I am not quite a fool. Sit down on that sofa, Laura," he directed aloud. "What's beyond this room?" he asked of the chauffeur.

"The yard, sir. See!"

He opened a door and showed that at the end of another hall was an open door giving upon a paved yard from which the daylight had not yet quite departed.

"You will be comfortable here, sir—and the lady, too. I can promise that Dr. Ching Wah will not be long." He closed the door to the yard and walked to that by which they had entered. "Ten minutes, at the outside, I should say, before Dr. Ching Wah comes."

He touched his cap with his forefinger again and went out, closing the door behind him.

At that instant out went all the electric bulbs, and the room was in pitch-darkness.

CHAPTER V.

DAVE GETS ACTION.

TWO men who had more than once penetrated the fastnesses of a lawless desert region like the loess country of Northwest China, where the notorious "White Wolf" brigands and the deadly Ko Lao Hui between them held whole provinces in abject terror, and where a band of cutthroats might spring murderously out of any ravine along the way, were not likely to be nonplused by the sudden going out of the lights in a strange room, even though it were in the mysterious bowels of a furtive house in Chinatown.

"Don't worry, Laura!" admonished the firm voice of David Carter out of the oppressive blackness. "Sit tight for just a moment. It's probably a short circuit somewhere. They'll come on again directly."

But he was not waiting for the lights.

His accurate sense of direction, fostered by many a blind trail through valleys and over mountains where white men seldom trod, enabled him to move straight to the door leading to the yard.

It was locked — perhaps bolted and barred. Not in the slightest would it yield as he hurled all his weight against it.

At the same instant there came a growl of chagrin from Dr. Amos, who, without speaking, had found the door by which they had entered, but could not force it open.

The gentlemanly chauffeur, going out, had slipped a couple of heavy bolts into their sockets.

"He fooled us!" roared the doctor. "That chauffeur is as big a scoundrel as his employer—Ching Wall, or whatever his name is. Look out, Laura! Stay where you are! And you, too, Dave! I'm going to shoot our way out. I'll get through this door somehow. Then that smirking chauffeur had better look out!"

Dave did not offer any protest. Evidently there was treachery working against them, and it was incumbent for them to get out of the trap even at the pistol's point. He felt for his own automatic in his hip-pocket.

There was a click in the darkness at the other side of the room, followed by a stifled "Damn!" in Dr. Amos's voice. His gun had missed fire.

Simultaneously two pairs of powerful hands seized David Carter's arms, a cloth was stuffed into his mouth, and he felt himself pushed through a doorway into what he judged, by the smell, was an earth-floored passage or a series of cellars—he could not tell which. What he did realize was that the apartment he had just been forced to leave had more doors than the two he had noticed.

For about thirty or forty feet he was hurried along in darkness, going down a few steps twice, until he and his captors were stopped by a door.

It was too dark to see the door, but a loud banging by one of the men with him, followed by a sudden flood of light as the door was flung open, revealed it to him.

He was shoved forward into a large, low room in which was a stifling odor of burned-out opium, easily explained by half a dozen bunks, half hidden by curtains of dirty chintz, along two of the walls, while on several little tables were the small lamps and pipes used by smokers.

Among the few men in the room the first one Dave recognized through the poisonous murk was the pale-faced chauffeur. The next was the raging Dr. Amos Goughlin, tearing a gag from his mouth and glaring around him like a trapped grizzly.

He did not see Laura.

"Here, you yellow scalawags!" bellowed Dr. Goughlin. "What does all this mean? Do you know this is New York City, and that Police Headquarters is only a few blocks away? And you, you grinning ape!"

He made a rush at the chauffeur. But that watchful young man caught his arms and twisted them till he sank back on one of the bunks, overcome by sheer physical anguish. It should be remembered that Dr. Amos was not far from sixty, and no longer retained the resilience and ability to bear pain that he may have enjoyed thirty years before.

"Keep quiet, doctor," said Dave, in French—as the language the enemy would be least likely to know. "Our chance will come."

"That's a cinch," whispered the chauffeur behind him.

As Dave's eyes became accustomed to the murky gloom, he recognized a big Chinaman in a chair by a table at the head of the room as the Ko Lao Hui man who, two years before, had sold the Nestorian Tablet to Dr. Goughlin in the bamboo shack just outside Hsian Fu, and he was not much surprised.

The other Chinese present, of the coolie class, he did not know.

"Door tight?" asked the big Chinaman in Shensi, which to Dave and the doctor was as clear as English.

"Not tight yet," replied one of the coolies. "You want the little missy?"

"Bring her in," was the order. "Then fasten the door."

But for the sinewy hand of the chauffeur on Dave's elbow, and a murmured warning: "Hold your horses!" he would

have throttled at least one of the greasy-looking coolies who held Laura's arms as they led her in. The bare thought of their clawlike fingers grasping her through her thin sleeves maddened him.

Fortunately for Dave's self-control, they released her as soon as the chauffeur had been at the door and held up the key to the big Chinaman to indicate that it was locked. One of the coolies pushed forward a rocking-chair, into which Laura sank gratefully.

At the same moment the chauffeur whispered in Dave's ear: "All set!"

"I get you," was Dave's guarded reply, without looking around.

"You know me?" was the first direct question of the big Chinaman to Dr. Goughlin, in Shensi.

"Of course I know you," snapped the doctor, in the same dialect. "You sold me the Nestorian Tablet. Now you have stolen it from me."

"That all?"—showing his yellow teeth in a sneering grin.

"You or some of your gang have tried to frighten me with messages, signs and symbols, all pointing one way—to get more money out of me."

The grin on the flat face of the big man widened.

"You are thinking the right way," he said. "Money is what I want. But you will get something for it—something you must have, to save you and your daughter from—*this!*" He pounced suddenly upon the table and took from it a pair of pointed bamboo sticks fastened together—the horrible instrument called "the blinder," which he held up before him.

David Carter strained to get away from the men holding him when he heard this. But he did not speak. It would be better to bide his time. He was thankful Laura did not understand Shensi.

"I don't quite see the drift of your words," said Dr. Amos. "What do you mean?"

"The Nestorian Tablet must be on its way to the Pei Lin in a few days. If not, the Ko Lao Hui will do the will of the High Power at Hsian Fu—will punish those who have violated the Sacred Temple by taking away its most precious archives. I am the Ta Ko sent here for the tablet. I do my duty."

"Why, you damned yellow crook—" burst out Dr. Goughlin in English. Then, in Shensi: "You have the tablet! Why don't you send it back? What is your game, anyhow?"

"Twenty-five thousand dollars—to be taken back by me to the Ko Lao Hui, is what you must pay," returned the other coolly. "I will take the money—and the Nestorian Tablet—back to Hsian Fu, and you will hear nothing more about it till you get an official paper from the guardians of the Pei Lin telling you it is there."

"He's lying," remarked Dave quietly in French.

"I know that," returned the doctor in the same tongue.

"What do you say?" demanded the Chinaman sharply. "Speak Shensi."

"If I am to pay you all that money," said Dr. Goughlin, in Shensi, "I must be sure you have the Nestorian Tablet. Show it to me."

"That is easily done," replied the Chinaman, throwing the bamboo sticks on the table.

He made a peremptory sign. Instantly an obsequious coolie dived into one of the empty bunks, and from behind the chintz curtains brought forth a large flat stone, gray with age, but with its scholarly records made by Nestorian missionaries many centuries ago showing plainly in the light of the kerosene wall lamps.

"That's the Nestorian, Dave, beyond question," said Dr. Goughlin in French. "But it's all humbug about their intention to take it back to China. It's just a plain hold-up. They think they can bleed me for twenty-five to begin with, and the Lord knows how much more after that."

"Speak Shensi, I told you," thundered the Chinaman, banging his fist on the table.

Dave had picked up the tablet and was holding it as close to the nearest lamp as he could, gradually backing away from the table. The Chinaman, in hammering on the table, accidentally swept off the bamboo sticks.

He stooped to pick them up.

It was then that Dave, after a swift glance at the chauffeur, who was watching him, brought the heavy stone down on the Chinaman's head with a crash.

"Now, doctor!" shouted Dave in English. "Bring Laura!"

The chauffeur had flung the door wide open, and Dave rushed through, hugging the precious tablet, with Dr. Amos and Laura close on his heels.

Then the door banged shut, and they were racing headlong through the hall in the darkness.

CHAPTER VI.

BREAKING THROUGH.

"THIS way, sir!" It was the chauffeur's voice, and he had taken Dave's elbow. "Straight ahead! I know this house from cellar to roof. Here we are in the room where I locked you in."

"What did you do it for?" It was no time to ask questions, as Dave realized, but he was curious.

"I'll tell you later," replied the chauffeur. "But I wasn't so bad as I seemed. Hold on! We've got to force this door. Better put the stone down."

"No, sir," returned Dave firmly. "It 'll never get out of my arms till I put it in Dr. Goughlin's study."

"What's the trouble?" asked the doctor's voice close behind. "Door locked?"

"Yes, but if we shove, all three of us, together, she'll give," said the chauffeur.

"Let her go, then!" grunted Dave, as holding the stone in one arm, he put his other hand against the door. "I can help!"

It took nearly a minute to burst the door open, but with three men putting all their weight against it, something had to give.

There was a splintering and cracking, and Dave fell flat, but with the tablet still clasped tightly to him.

They had broken through, and Dave caught the fresh coolness of the outside air on his face. The next minute the whole four were in the yard they had seen from the room half an hour or so before.

"This way!" said the chauffeur. "The lady all right?"

"Quite," answered Laura for herself. "Come on, dad!"

"Oh, I'm coming," replied her father gruffly. "Don't worry about me. So long as we have that confounded tablet, I don't care what happens. How do we get out of this yard?"

"Through here!" was the chauffeur's reply. "This dark hall takes us to the foot of a staircase. Then up about fifteen steps, and the front door is only a few yards ahead. But tread quietly. We don't know who might be lurking around. Some of these Chinks never go to bed. You go ahead with the stone," he advised Dave. "I'll come after you with the doctor and lady. But watch your step."

"All right," replied Dave. "Fifteen steps, you say. I'll go to the corner of the Bowery and look for a taxi. And yet, Laura, I don't like—"

"You conceited pup!" suddenly stormed the doctor. "Don't you think anybody can look after my daughter but yourself? You go ahead! And, mind you, don't lose that tablet or I'll break your neck! We'll follow in another taxi."

"Hush!" whispered the chauffeur angrily. "Don't you know there are more than a hundred men and women within earshot? That back tenement has a family in every room. Keep quiet, will you?"

The doctor subsided, and Dave, tiptoeing through the hall, found himself at the foot of the fifteen steps, alone.

"I'd rather have had Laura with me, all the same," he said mentally. "Then I'd *know* she's safe. The doctor's like a big kid! I don't believe he will ever grow up."

It is not difficult to pick up a taxi in the Bowery at night, and Dave secured one before he had walked two blocks on that busy thoroughfare.

He looked around him as he got in with his precious tablet and gave Dr. Goughlin's address to the driver. He did not see anything of the doctor and Laura, but in the hubbub of traffic that was not remarkable.

His cab glided away and turned a corner, headed west. He did not notice, as they crossed Broadway, a few minutes afterward, that another taxi was coming along about a dozen yards behind, and might not

have thought anything about it even if he had. Thousands of taxis are navigating in all directions in New York night and day.

A maid let him in when he reached his destination, and after paying the driver, with a satisfactory *douceur* in addition, he went straight to the doctor's study with the tablet. All the members of Dr. Goughlin's household were accustomed to his going where he pleased, as one of the family.

Placing the tablet in the packing case from which it had been rifled by the Ko Lao Hui, and which still lay, broken open, in a corner, Dave assured himself that the outer door and all the windows were securely fastened. Then he sat down in the doctor's chair at the table to wait.

CHAPTER VII.

SCYLLA AND CHARYBDIS.

DAVE had hardly settled himself when he heard the front door electric bell, and a minute later the maid came in to say that a man who looked like a chauffeur wanted to see him.

"I'll go to him," was Dave's quick response. Then, as his eye wandered to the tablet, and he thought of the possibility of this being a ruse of the enemy, he added: "No, bring him in."

As he had expected, it was the pale-faced man who had figured so actively in the adventures in Chinatown that night, but his visitor had lost his usual aspect of calm assurance and evidently was worried. He shut the door carefully. Then, in a low voice: "You'll have to go back to Mott Street as quickly as you can."

"Where are Dr. Goughlin and the young lady?" asked Dave hurriedly.

"That's the trouble," replied the other. "They are in that house, and they can't get out till you go."

"For the love of Mike!" broke in Dave in an exasperated tone. "Speak plainly, will you? What's your name?"

"Pierce, sir. Will you let me make a little explanation? My taxi is at the door. I told the man to wait."

"Go ahead, but be brief," was Dave's impatient rejoinder.

"I am not a chauffeur," began Pierce.

"I didn't suppose you were," interjected Dave.

"But it's a convenient character for what I have to do. I represent the Chinese government in New York, and am accredited to the Chinese Consulate here. My mission is to get possession of the Nestorian Tablet and see that it is properly shipped to Peking, whence it will be transferred to Hsian Fu and replaced in the Pei Lin. I intended to come to Dr. Goughlin, to make arrangements with him, when I heard that the tablet had been stolen."

"But where are Dr. and Miss Goughlin?" broke in Dave. "That's what I want to know."

"They are quite safe, but are detained until you go there," replied Pierce. "They are with Ching Wah."

"Who is this Ching Wah?" demanded Dave hotly. "Is he a doctor?"

"Yes, and he practices in Chinatown. But that is because he has been seeking the Nestorian Tablet. About the time he discovered that it had been sold to Dr. Goughlin, he learned in Chinatown that it had been stolen."

"Is he also a representative of the Chinese government? Are you and he working together?"

"No. Ching Wah knows that a large reward will be paid by the authorities of Peking, and also of Hsian Fu, for the return of the tablet, and he is trying to beat me to it. Moreover, he is a descendant of an ancient Manchu family that embraced Christianity many years ago—there are several like him in Shensi and other provinces in northwest China—and thinks it a sacred duty to take the tablet back. He is something of what may be called a zealot."

"I know," nodded Dave. "I've met one or two of them. But this fellow who says he is a Ta Ko of the Ko Lao Hui, and who got us into that foul-smelling opium joint—with your help—who is he?"

Pierce smiled a little sadly. "I had to *seem* to help, Mr. Carter, if we were to get possession of the Nestorian Tablet. I knew I could not get it from him by myself, but I figured that if you and Dr. Goughlin once know where it was the three of us could

make a successful fight and bring it away. As for that big Chinaman, he is a member of the Ko Lao Hui, but he's not a Ta Ko. He's one of the lowest riffraff in Hsian Fu. What in America we should call a 'cheap crook.' He heard of the big reward from the government for the return of the tablet, and he had the advantage of knowing that you had it, because he sold it to you. So he smuggled himself into this country, and tried to play both ends against the middle by holding you up for twenty-five thousand dollars, in addition to the reward he expected to get in China."

"Well, I gave him a good crack with that stone," remarked Dave with a grim smile. "I hope his head aches. You say that Dr. Goughlin and Miss Goughlin will be released when I go to Ching Wah? What does he want with me?"

"You are to take the Nestorian Tablet with you."

Dave stared angrily.

"What—give it up to him after all this trouble to get it?"

"Miss Goughlin would be in danger if you refused?" said Pierce quietly. "And the doctor, too."

Dave strode up and down the room, frowning. What should he do? On the one hand, how could he lose the Nestorian Tablet now that he had fought for and got it? On the other, there was Laura! As for the doctor, would he not say that he would take any risk rather than let the tablet go out of his hands except to the government authorities in China who were entitled to it?

"Guess we won't take the tablet," he said at last, swinging around to face Pierce. "I'll go and see this fellow Ching Wah. At the worst, there are the police."

Pierce shook his head. "Wouldn't do! Ching Wah has spies, and the police would never find him—or Miss Goughlin, either," he added ominously.

"That's true, too."

Dave knew the secret ways of Chinatown, and how difficult it was for the police to get hold of any one who had once taken refuge in the network of connecting rooms and queer burrows of that strange district. He made a sudden resolution.

"Go down to the taxi," he said, "and I'll be with you in a few minutes."

"With the tablet?" asked Pierce.

"With the tablet," was Dave's deliberate reply.

Pierce turned away without another word and went down to where the taxi driver was dozing in his seat in the cab.

By the time Pierce had made the sleepy driver understand he was to go right back to the corner on the Bowery where he had been engaged, David Carter came down the steps from the house, hugging a big flat parcel, wrapped in paper, in his arms.

"Here it is," he said quietly as he stepped into the cab, followed by Pierce. "But I won't give it up it if can be possibly avoided."

"Of course not," returned Pierce as the taxi started.

CHAPTER VIII.

PUNISHMENT.

THEY got out of the taxi some three blocks from the corner of Mott Street, and went straight to a gloomy store in which all kinds of Chinese foods, sweetmeats and perfumes were sold. There are many such stores in Chinatown, always well stocked with wares that only a Chinaman could name, and which exude a spicy odor one never meets anywhere else.

An elderly Cantonese, calmly smoking behind the counter, apathetic as most of the Chinese denizens of New York appear to be, but seeing everything with his sleepy black eyes, regarded them without interest as they went in. If he wondered what David Carter was carrying it did not show in his flat, yellow face.

Pierce stepped up to the counter and made a peculiar motion with his fingers. The Chinaman lazily imitated him. Then Pierce said, "Ko," the Chinaman, "Lao," and Pierce "Hui." As Pierce uttered this last word a paneled door opened without being touched at the rear of the store, and the two visitors went through. Five minutes later, after traversing tortuous passages that Pierce seemed to know, and giving certain raps on a door in a dark corner, they

were in the lodge room of the Ko Lao Hui—the only one in New York.

David Carter knew there was such a lodge room somewhere, but he was not prepared for the brilliancy which dazzled him as the door was opened by some unseen agency and quickly closed behind them.

It was long and rather narrow, like most lodge rooms, but not so large as most of those familiar to Americans who are members of secret societies. What it lacked in size it made up in gorgeousness, however, for the walls were entirely hidden in silken draperies embroidered in gold and silver and colorful threads of silk, giving the whole interior an air of Oriental luxuriousness.

Dragons, mermaids, strange animals known only to mythology or demonology, flamingoes, birds of paradise, scarlet poppies, yellow lilies, sunflowers—all these and many more were presented strikingly in their natural hues.

Chairs of ebony, ivory and gold stood at measured intervals, as in any other lodge room, and on a dais at the upper end was a table of ebony and ivory, wonderfully carved and glittering with what looked like real jewels. A brazier was on the table.

It was on this handsome table and the canopied throne chair behind it that Dave's attention was at once fixed, for in the chair, wearing a rich robe of gold-embroidered satin, sat a dignified man who, Pierce whispered, was none other than Ching Wah, the real Ta Ko of the Ko Lao Hui in New York.

Dave had never seen him before. One look now was enough to assure him that this Ta Ko was indeed the fierce zealot Pierce had pronounced him. The wildness in his glittering, restless eyes, the high forehead bulging above them, and the perpetual aimless clutching of the long fingers, made it easy to believe Ching Wah was one who held his religious faith so precious that he might even commit murder for its sake.

"Who are these?" he demanded in a hollow voice as two gigantic Chinamen, facing each other across the room halfway down, motioned Dave to advance. Then, without waiting for or seemingly expecting an answer, he went on: "Have you brought the Nestorian Tablet?"

"Where is Dr. Goughlin and his daughter?" countered Dave, who found Ching Wah's pompous manner rather irritating.

"His daughter?" repeated Ching Wah coldly.

"Yes, you know whom I mean," Dave flung back at him heatedly. "You are a member of her Bible class."

"I am Ta Ko, of the Ko Lao Hui, and I am presiding over this lodge room," was Ching Wah's stern reply. "I do not talk of Bible classes here. Have you brought the tablet?"

"You see it," answered Dave, suddenly tearing off the paper and revealing the gray stone with the ancient inscriptions that had been inspired by the long dead-and-gone Nestorian missionaries clearly showing.

The dialogue had been carried on entirely in English, which Ching Wah spoke fluently. He nodded in recognition of the stone, and in Shensi addressed the two Chinese attendants. They were the only persons in the room besides himself and his two visitors. He told them to bring in the two persons in the anteroom.

The next moment Dr. Goughlin, with Laura hanging to his arm, marched in between the two Chinese guards.

Ching Wah motioned to a divan, and the doctor, after one quick glance at Dave and his companion, sat down without speaking, Laura seemed about to run to Dave, but a whispered word from her father brought her to a seat by his side.

"Dr. Goughlin, and you, the daughter," said Ching Wah, in his monotonously solemn tones, as the two big guards resumed their old stations, "the Nestorian Tablet has been restored to me, to be taken back to its home in the Pei Lin. When I have examined the stone, you will be free to go. I hope this will be a lesson to Dr. Goughlin, and to all other profane Americans, not to lay desecrating hands on the holy archives that have come down to the Manchu men who believe in the Nazarene, and that are a sacred trust to every man in Shensi."

A quick look from Dave and a warning shake of the head from Pierce behind him stifled in his throat an indignant assertion from Dr. Goughlin that the Nestorian Tablet would never be given up, and Ching

Wah continued with unabated pompousness:

"As Ta Ko of this lodge, as well as a representative of the government of the Middle Temple of Hsian Fu, I have to pass sentence on a miscreant who has been false to his vows as a Ko Lao Hui, and also is guilty of an unpardonable sin in seeking to steal, for his own base advantage, the veritable Rock of Ages of the only true faith man ever has known. It is well that you should see what might have been your punishment if the tablet had not been brought here to me to-night." He paused. Then, in Shensi, to the two guards: "Bring him in!"

Much of the pompousness of Ching Wah might be traced to his rather overwhelming estimation of his dignity as the only Ko Lao Hui lodge master in New York, giving him extraordinary powers. But Dave, always a close observer of man everywhere, and, in addition, a deep student of mentality in its many abnormal manifestations, was satisfied that also a religious frenzy had distorted his brain and was answerable for the conviction that any extreme act was justified for the sake of the Nestorian Tablet. In other words, Ching Wah might at any moment develop into a dangerous fanatic.

The two guards went through a doorway on the opposite side from which they had led in Dr. Goughlin and Laura, and a few seconds later came back dragging in the Ko Lao Hui rascal who had tried to get twenty-five thousand dollars as the price of the stolen Nestorian Tablet, and whom Dave had so neatly smashed on the head as he and the others made their escape.

That Dave's blow had been a severe one was evidenced by the white cloth tied over the Chinaman's head. He started when he saw Dave, and favored the young man with a venomous glare from his black eyes. Then he looked at Ching Wah, in his great chair of office and shivered. No doubt he had a premonition of what was to come. His arms were tightly bound to his sides.

Ching Wah was brief in what he had to say. In stern, merciless accents, in the Shensi tongue, he addressed the trembling prisoner:

"Fong Wo, you have falsely pretended to be the Ta Ko of the Ko Lao Hui, and you have brought disgrace on our great order by the theft of the sacred Nestorian Tablet. There is but one penalty for your crimes."

He bent forward and took from the other side of the brazier on the table, where it had been invisible to Dave, the pair of tied bamboo sticks whose grisly purpose he and Dr. Goughlin well knew.

As Ching Wah held up the sticks it could be seen that their points were faintly smoking. They had been lying near the fire, but not in it, so that they would become hot without actually burning.

At a sign from Ching Wah one of the guards came forward, made a deep obeisance and took the bamboo sticks. Then the two dragged the miserable Fong Wo back to the place he had come from.

They closed the door.

There was silence for a few moments. Then an awful shriek, muffled by the intervening door. Ching Wah, raising his hand solemnly, said in English:

"It is done! He will never see again! Thus it would have been with you—father, daughter, and son that is to be—had the Nestorian Tablet not been restored. Bring the tablet to me."

CHAPTER IX.

DAVE TOOK NO CHANCES.

DAVE had held the stone in his arms through it all. At the command of Ching Wah to take it to him, Pierce suddenly shouted, "Now!" and darted for the door behind him. With one tug it was open, and he pulled Dave to it.

"Come, doctor! Bring the lady!" roared Pierce. "Don't look back! Turn to the right in the hallway!"

Dave saw that Dr. Goughlin was running to the door with Laura and that Pierce was staying behind as a rear guard. Dave had rushed through the door into darkness, when a scream from Laura brought him back in a hurry.

Things moved swiftly.

Dave had a confused vision of Ching

Wah, who had swept down from his throne chair, seizing Laura by the arm. Then there was the crack of a pistol, and as Ching Wah fell forward on his face, Pierce took Laura by one wrist, while her father held the other, and came surging through the door, closing it after them with a bang.

"It's all right," said Pierce breathlessly. "Keep going till you come to the first corner on the right. We'll get out another way. I know this place!"

Through the labyrinth of passages and up and down steps went Pierce, showing an occasional light from a pocket flash, and before Dave expected it, they were on the quiet, deserted street. Another five minutes and all four were in a taxicab.

"Wasn't it awful, Dave?" she said. "And Ching Wah! I thought he was so good!"

"He's *good* now," put in Pierce grimly. "But I *had* to do it. It was his life or—" He paused. "If he had managed to keep Miss Goughlin there—"

"That will do, Pierce!" interrupted Dave sternly. "Talk about that another time."

After reaching the Goughlin home they went direct to the doctor's study.

"I'll bring my credentials later, doctor," said Pierce in his businesslike way. "And you can make inquiries at the Chinese Consulate, where they will give you an official receipt for the stone. If there is nothing else now, I'll say good night."

He had not sat down, and was already at the door to go, when Dr. Goughlin, who had taken the stone from Dave, uttered a surprised exclamation:

"Why, what's this? This isn't the Nestorian Tablet!"

"I know that," returned Dave coolly. "This is the replica you have had made. And a mighty good one it is."

Pierce looked startled.

"But—" stammered the doctor.

"All right!" interrupted Dave. "If Mr. Pierce will step out of the room a moment I'll show you something. He can come back in two or three minutes."

After Pierce went out, Dave pushed the table aside, lifted a rug and revealed a trap door, with a secret spring lock.

The edges of the trap were so neatly worked into the pattern of the polished mosaic floor that they were not easily traced. But Dave knew the trick of it and immediately swung open the trap without difficulty, showing a space five feet square.

Lying flat was the packing case which Dr. Goughlin recognized at once as that which had held the Nestorian Tablet, and from which Dave lifted the precious inscribed stone that had come from the far-away Pei Lin.

He closed the trap, adjusted the rug and pushed the table back into place. Then he stepped to the door and called in Pierce. He had been holding the stone all this time. Now, with Pierce, Dr. Goughlin, and Laura all watching him interestedly, he laid the stone on the table and said with a smile:

"There is the real Nestorian Tablet. I wasn't taking any chances. If I had been absolutely obliged to give up a tablet to that crazy Ching Wah he would have got only the replica. And I should have hated to give up even that. Remember, Pierce, when you went out to the cab without me? That was when I changed them."

Pierce looked at the tablet, grinned, seized Dave's hand, and saying: "You're all right!" vanished and went home.

"I shall have to agree with Pierce," grunted Dr. Goughlin as he smiled happily on his precious tablet. "You *are* all right."

"What do you think, Laura?" whispered Dave as the doctor returned to a close inspection of the Nestorian Tablet and took no further notice of them.

She whispered something with a mischievous dimpled smile, and Dave called out, "Oh, doctor, by the way, do I still hold my job as your secretary?"

"Don't bother me," replied the doctor, still absorbed in studying the precious tablet. "Ask another foolish question and I'm damned if I don't do to you what you did to that Chinaman—bang you over the head with the Nestorian Tablet."

"Very well! Good night, doctor! Laura, do you know how to open that front door? I don't believe I can do it."

"Well, it is rather awkward," she agreed shyly. "I'll go down there with you."

(The end.)

The Fear-Sway

Part II

by *Kenneth Perkins*

Author of "The Blood-Call," "The Bull-Dogger," etc.

WHAT HAS ALREADY HAPPENED

A BAD horse named "Crater" is about to be killed publicly in a Western city when Tom Drury, a Texas cowboy, offers to tame it and save its life. He does this because Crater's owner, an attractive young woman, contemplates the horse's death with sadness. Drury succeeds. Because of his courage the girl gives him the horse, and her grandfather, Peter Gaunt, an old frontiersman, interests him in the search for an outlaw, the Gila Monster, who has terrorized the region beyond the desert and dispossessed Gaunt and his granddaughter of their ranch. Drury sets out for the unknown bandit's domain, accompanied by Henry Sugg, the only man who dared volunteer as guide. During the second day of their ride into the desert Drury suspects that his guide is no other than the bandit chief himself, and presently is sure of it when he suddenly finds himself covered with his own gun.

CHAPTER VI.

HENRY SUGG'S GOOD-BY.

A SUDDEN surge of anger came over Drury as he realized how absurdly he had been tricked. "Sugg, are you handing me that gun?" he cried out almost desperately.

"I reckon you know, Mr. Drury," Sugg rejoined calmly.

"What the hell do you reckon I know?"

Both men slowed their horses to a walk. Sugg's bay, feeling his master's knees, came to a stop.

"I reckon you know I won't give you this six-gun, so dismount and stand over there, Mr. Drury, and don't let your hands get too near your belt or your shirt.'

Drury obeyed. His captor then dismounted in turn and went over to him, searched him, and satisfying himself that he had Drury's only weapon, stepped back and with his disengaged hand lit a cigarette.

"Well, the first part of the fight is over," he remarked.

"I'm glad it is only the first, because I sure want some more," Drury shot back.

"Fine. Some other time. And I hope under conditions which will be more to your liking."

Drury tried to stammer in answer, but could only stare into the twinkling eyes and finely chiseled, deeply tanned face.

"Look here, damn you, why are you keeping me like this? I reckoned this would be a finish fight. You are playing with me like a lousy, mewing cat."

"It will be a finish fight," Sugg answered suavely.

"Then what are you holding that muzzle

This story began in the Argosy-Allstory Weekly for April 29.

o my nose that way for? Are you bluff-ng?"

"I am not going to throw it on you, Mr. Drury, because you are too good a man o kill."

Drury replied with a volley of oaths.

"You are afraid to kill me. I don't want bouquets; I want fighting."

"You will get it. I am going to keep you or fighting. As I said, you are too good a an to bump off. When I kill, Mr. Tom Drury, I want an audience. I want men o say 'This is the man who killed Tom Drury—Tom Drury, who was the greatest ronc peeler that ever gentled a horse.' If I killed you now and left you here no one would find you for weeks—months—except, of course, the coyotes, and they would take their time about appreciating you; they generally wait from four days to a week—"

"What the hell are you going to do, Mr. Gila Monster?"

Sugg stepped back, paling.

It was the first time Drury had actually accused him. Until now there had been a chance that Drury only suspected him of being in the Gila's gang. This was the first knowledge Sugg had that his man actually realized he was dealing with the Gila himself.

"Look here, Mr. Man, you must not accuse me like that. Let it be definitely understood that I am not the Gila."

"You lie. You are."

"No, I don't lie. It must not be said anywhere that I am the Gila. The identity of the Gila must at all hazards be kept a secret."

"It is not a secret. I know you yourself are the Gila."

"I am asking you to take that remark back, Mr. Drury."

"No, I will not take it back. You yourself are the Gila. When you say you aren't you are lying."

"Very well, then, you will regret what you've said," Sugg concluded calmly. "I am going to punish you in a very just and definite way." His mouth broke into a beautiful smile. He seemed pleased with the extraordinary patness of his judgment. "Your punishment will be this: I understand that you have just come to the city. No one knows who you are, except that you are supposed to be a Texas cowman. Wouldn't it be just, since you have accused me of being the Gila, that I merely turn around and accuse you of being the same thing? That's an eye for an eye, if ever there was such justice in the history of this range."

"You are going to accuse me!" Drury's face bore an incredulous grin. "A hell of a chance!"

"We shall see."

Drury was disarmed. The gun he had carried, and on which were carved the initials of Jennie Lee's father, together with the cartridge belt and holster of carved and studded leather, was claimed by Sugg as the first and most important part of the victor's spoils. The next was the sombrero, with its band of beaded Hopi legends.

The outlaw, keeping up his constant flow of banter, condescended to leave his victim a surprisingly vital part of his outfit—his food.

"And in case you get thirsty in your long walk," he added, "you can finish up this red-eye of mine." He gulped down a swig and tossed the flask upon the duffel bag which he had untied from the cantle of Crater's saddle. There must have been a reason for the outlaw's leaving this food and drink, for there was enough to last his victim a good long journey home. Drury did not think of this at the time. His ear caught a much more important word in Sugg's last remark.

"You say 'walk'?" he cried voicelessly.

"You must remember that if I left you your gelding you would be able to outdistance me—and in any direction you chose."

The full significance of his plight struck home to Drury as he watched the rider lope off, puffing thin wisps of smoke from his cigarette. Crater, who had been snubbed to the pommel, loped after, preferring the company of the blood bay to remaining behind with the man who had mastered him.

"At least," Drury consoled himself, "if he rides Crater he will be killed."

But Sugg betrayed no intention of trying

to ride him. He galloped leisurely across the plain to the north, until the light mist of alkali slowly turned his form into a gray silhouette and then erased him entirely from view. The little cloud moved away, purpling and fading over the crest of the mesa.

CHAPTER VII.

THE THREE-HEADED HENCHMAN.

RIDING his blood bay and still leading the big outlaw Crater, Henry Sugg covered the thirty miles of desert which lay between the mesa and the mountains. Well over the range, he came into the limitless and desolate plain which was his own domain.

At sunset he arrived within sight of a shake hut and a little corral. In the latter a pinto and two burros were feeding from a hay rack. Sugg waited. As the darkness deepened he took out an old mask of black velvet, which he slipped over his eyes. He tied his felt hat by its leather chin strap to the saddlehorn, and then put on the sombrero which he had filched from Tom Drury, pulling it well down over his ears. It was the big yellow hat with the band of beaded legendary, the most conspicuous part of Drury's outfit when he performed his broncho-twirling exhibition in Cattleoe the previous day.

Having effected these two changes in his costume, Sugg rode leisurely toward the shack, reined in his horse when about fifty feet from the door, and by the use of two fingers breathed out a low, husky, hissing call.

The pinto seemed to know this whistle. He threw up his head, stopped his munching, and cantered down to the end of the corral. Crater and the blood bay neighed a welcome which the pinto answered. A moment later a man came out of the hut.

He was undersized and foxlike, with red, bristly hair and a sunken face which had been badly disfigured by burns. His costume was composed of a ragged, lop-brimmed hat, a black shirt with shoulder holster slung over it, a pair of khaki overalls, and big hobnailed boots.

This hunched, sinister little figure peered furtively into the dark, and when he saw the looming form of the other man, mounted on a blood bay, he slunk immediately to the corral to saddle his horse. He threw a ragged blanket over the chafed, sore back of his mount, and with one movement of his arm swung the saddle from its peg. Then, vaulting onto his seat, he rode down toward the masked figure.

Sugg wheeled his horse and rode down the trail, keeping a distance of twenty yards or more between himself and the ragged pinto and rider whom he had summoned.

A half an hour's ride brought the two over the shoulder of a mountain and into a long, deeply gorged cañon where a tangle of beams and uprights marked the opening of a forsaken mine. Sugg rode through the thicket of mesquite which had grown over the mine's waste and, dismounting, crept to the collar of the shaft, where he repeated the same whistle by which he had summoned his first follower.

Again a horse, tethered near the gallows of the shaft opening, was the first to respond, shying back as far as his rope would permit him and pricking up his ears excitedly. Presently a Mexican shoved up a board and scrambled through an opening just small enough to serve as an exit and entrance to his well-concealed "home."

Saddling and mounting his horse, he cantered down the steep incline of the waste, and when he had reached the trail below he found his master galloping off in the darkness.

In single file the three men crossed the cañon, skirted the hog-back mountain, and entered a granite gorge which, despite the growing starlight, was as pitch dark as a cave. Here Sugg repeated his whistle. The sound, low as it was, hissed and echoed through the great rocky chasm as if it had been uttered within a marble hall. Immediately there was the echo of pawing hoofs, of champing, and then an answering whinny to the neighing of Crater and the bay. The jingle of spurs and the retch of leather came to Sugg from the darkness, as if there were men and horses scarcely a dozen yards away. In another moment a rider appeared. He was a tall scarecrow of a negro

ing a little rangy mustang and wearing torn sombrero, a shoulder holster, and arskin chaps.

Sugg beckoned to the little man who had en the first to join the gang.

"Now, then, Slinkey, you're going to lead is raid," Sugg commanded. "All orders om now on will be given by you. The gger and the Mex will obey you. I'll de along separately, and if there's any arpshooting necessary I'll join in."

"Where are we headin' for, chief?" linkey Drigges asked.

"The Lingo outfit."

"We've already rustled the place clean. Hell, there ain't nothin' left of the outfit exceptin' a rangy crop of calves half eaten up by maggots! What ole Lingo could trape together for a beef herd he sold a day or two ago."

"That's the reason for this raid. He hasn't been able to put his wad in the Cattleoe Bank yet, because of being too late Saturday. He's got his little fifty-dollar bills in a safe, thinking he'll bank 'em tomorrow, and it's up to you to make him admit it."

"Marty Lingo won't admit nothin', chief. And I ain't a good enough talker for to persuade a man he's got a lot of bills hidden away in a house. I'm liable to get stammerin' any minute."

"If you find yourself stammering, whistle," Sugg replied, "and I'll start the shooting."

"I reckon Marty Lingo will mind my whistlin' more'n my talkin'," Drigges admitted.

"You ride up to the main ranch-house at eight. The nigger backs you up. Andres will set fire to one of the corrals—any one, it makes no difference; just one large enough to help the atmosphere—"

"The atmosphere?" Slinkey asked, puzzled.

"Just so Marty Lingo will know he's got to cut out arguing."

"I'll see to it, chief. Eight o'clock, you say—and you'll be on hand in case I get to stammerin'."

A long, easy canter brought the little band to the eastern edge of the plain. Here they trailed up into the hills of drought-resisting forage which marked the transition between the civilized country about Cattleoe and the Gila's kingdom of crime.

The desert starlight soon cast a blue glow over the rolling prairie country, and the gang came precipitously upon the site of Marty Lingo's cattle ranch. Sugg circled the little group of barns, bunk-sheds, and corrals, and disappeared in the chaparral and hog-wallows of the opposite side. Slinkey Drigges, who was acting as his lieutenant, called the remaining two members together. The three men did not make a very agreeable picture as they sat on their horses, leaning on pommels, waiting for eight o'clock to approach.

The trio was as dangerous as it was hideous. Audacity, sneak-thievery, and murder was represented in this three-headed bodyguard of the Gila Monster. The Gila, in fact, had picked his fellow bandits with a canny precision. Each one was a master in his own line, and the three together made a finely balanced posse of criminals equal to any task the master set for them. To meet the Gila and his band was like meeting an animal like the Chimera or Cerberus, which, failing to win the fight one way, could strike twice again.

Probably Slinkey Drigges, an ex-convict, was the cunningest of the three. Although a condemned murderer, his trickery had won him his freedom. In a California penitentiary he had been locked in solitary confinement and clothed in a red shirt instead of stripes, to denote that he had previously attempted to break prison. It was at San Quentin, on the edge of San Francisco Bay, that prisoners were set to work in a jute mill. Drigges, while in his condemned cell, set fire to a piece of cloth and stuffed it through the floor so that it dropped into a storeroom littered with the matted hair and sacking of the mill. In the excitement of a fire Drigges gambled on making his escape. This was how he played his game habitually. He had the cunning, but not the cowardice, of a fox.

Drigges's little red head reached scarcely above the waist of the giant negro, who was called Black Spudds. Spudds was the brawn of the gang. It was said that he had fought a grizzly in Idaho, and had gone into

a Wild West circus under the title of the Bear Bulldogger. This was perhaps merely part of the legend that Henry Sugg liked to foster about his henchmen. That Black Spudds had killed a man in a prize fight, however, was well known. He steered clear of the States of Idaho, Nevada, and Utah, and was gradually heading south, leaving a long wake of brutal crimes.

Andres, the Mexican, was the best shot of the gang, and the interpreter. Half Mexican, half Yuman, he was the most effective agent for keeping the greaser and Indian settlers in a constant fervor of hate against the Americans. It was by means of this big, ever present, ever growing conflict that Sugg, his master, could kill and rob with impunity, and Andres—leader among the Mexicans—was the intermediary.

At the appointed hour this little gang—this three-headed beast—crawled through the mesquite and chaparral surrounding Marty Lingo's ranch, and made its onslaught. It was an onslaught backed by power—the power not only of the six-shooter and of cunning, but of something more invincible: the curious methods of the Gila, which worked up a raid so that its victims would be left helpless with fear, as helpless as some little woodmouse or horror-stricken rabbit which sees a boa constrictor advancing upon it.

CHAPTER VIII.

LINGO BOWS TO THE FEAR-SWAY.

SLINKEY DRIGGES, keeping the giant negro as his own personal bodyguard, sent the other bandit to the rear of the Lingo outfit to set fire to the winter calf-sheds. Then, after dismounting and leaving their two ponies in the bearbrush across the county road, Slinkey and the black walked up toward the main ranch-house.

The latter stayed somewhat in the rear, holding Slinkey's holster and gun, with the understanding that he should advance at the moment he considered most opportune. The contrast in the sizes of the little foxlike Slinkey Drigges and his African had been known to work wonders in other raids.

The usual ranch dog barked at Drigges's arrival. A stumpy, withered man appeared in the yellow light shining from the open front door. Marty Lingo was past middle age, his brown eyes set much too close together in his long, sunburned face. When he saw the hunched tatterdemalion who had stepped up to his veranda part of the anxiety faded from his face. He took on the challenging assurance of a little spaniel who has a bone to guard.

"Who the hell are you?" he asked.

"I'm a peace-lovin' man, Marty," Slinkey Drigges replied with the more subtly challenging air of a friendly cat. "I know you—every one in the county knows you, Marty. But like as not you ain't never seen me before."

"No, I don't reckon I have. What is it you want?"

The ranch people by this time were curious to see the stranger at their threshold, and, accordingly, two women poked their faces over Marty's square shoulders. One was a wrinkled and sun-faded woman, the other old and bleary-eyed. Behind the latter stood a lanky youth with a serious, flushed face, a shock of yellow hair, and an important Adam's apple.

Marty Lingo, the two women and the overgrown youth were all apparently aware of the seriousness of this visit—the proceeds of their winter's hardship, the spring round-up, and the visit to the shipping station with the beef herd were at stake. Every man who came near the ranch that night—and until the money could be taken to the Cattelo Bank—was to be looked on with the utmost suspicion.

"It's been a damned hot day, Marty," Drigges wheedled, "and I'm right tired and dusty."

"Where's your horse?" Marty asked suspiciously. "And if you hoofed it, how is it you got this fur without no grubstake and no gun?"

The two women seemed relieved to have these points brought to their attention, and the lanky youth smirked his disgust at the littleness of Slinkey's body.

"Don't be scared of that little seedwart, Marty!" the youth laughed. "If he wants any trouble I'll twist his haid offen him."

"Oh, I don't want no trouble, mister—I don't want no trouble. I'm a peaceful man, and—"

"Well, who are you? What's your business?"

"What's yourn?" Slinkey snapped back suddenly.

"I'm a cattleman—and I ain't figurin' havin' hoboes callin' on me after dark."

"I ain't a hobo."

"Then what are you?"

Slinkey had a definite answer to this. It was a card which would swiftly show the sort of hand he intended to play.

"I'm a sheepman!" he rasped out. "That's what I am—a sheepman."

"Well, then, damn your scurvy hide, what are you comin' to pay a social call on me for? This is a cow outfit?"

"I'm the flockmaster for a outfit over thar by Mount Diablo. I got sheep all around here, and they're nibblin' away every bit of forage for ten miles all about you—"

"Well, then, damn it, get outen here! I'll grind your bones up with me hands. I'll—"

"And me, too," said the youth, who edged his way in front of his wrinkled old mother. "I'll pull your haid offen you like you was a chicken. I'll—"

"I'm goin! I'm goin'!" Slinkey replied quickly. "But afore I go I want to make a little remark about them sheep of mine. If you-all ack friendly like I'll call off my sheep. I'll find pastures over on the other side of the mounting. But in order that I know you-all are goin' to ack like my friends and agree with me that a peaceful life is the only life, I want for you to give me a little friendly gift—"

"Which will be a broken jaw—"

"Which will be a mashed, lousy carcass left of a damned ornery, nervy pup!" cried the youth.

Marty stepped out of the door to the edge of the veranda, squaring off with double fists, when he noticed something which made him melt palpably. Behind the little foxlike, grinning Slinkey the huge form of a negro loomed in the darkness. This was the psychological moment that Black Spudds had chosen to present himself.

Driggs saw the changed expression on Marty's face, as well as the transformation that was laughably obvious in his whole posture.

"Which will be a broken jaw, eh?" Slinkey mocked. "Which will be a mashed carcass, eh? Hell, no! I'll say which it will be! I'll say it will be some money!"

Marty Lingo paled, and the two women retreated with voiceless cries into the house.

"We want your money, Mr. Marty Lingo," Slinkey repeated. "And we want it just as a little gift. There ain't goin' to be no raidin', no shootin', no nothin'. Just a promise from me that I'll take my sheep off and your range won't be eaten away."

"If them two birds think they'll get our money without a raid and without no fight," the lanky youth cried, tearing himself away from the arms of his old woman, "I'll show them! I'll fight 'em! They's only two of 'em, and we'll fight 'em, Marty. Let's show 'em!"

"No, no! Just a minute, Mr. Man!" Slinkey cried without stepping down from the veranda. "Let me come to an agreement with you first. And you, too, Mr. Lingo. You give me every dollar of the money you got for your beef herd which you sold up to the shippin' station, or I'll show you the next card that a sheepman plays when argufyin' with a cattleman. And if you don't think I will, let this here boy with the Adam's apple chokin' off his wind take another step up to me. Let him do it, and you'll see the kind of game we sheepmen play."

Having snapped out this challenge, the little gunman put his fingers in his mouth and emitted a shrill whistle.

"You ain't sheepmen!" Marty cried. "I know who that nigger is. It's one of the Gila's gang. You're murderers, every one of you, and before you get a cent of my money I'll—"

"I'll show 'em myself!" the youth cried. He shoved away the old woman who had been hanging to him and took a step toward the little mocking bandit. From the indefinite darkness of the chaparral across the county road a flash of light and a sharp report answered the youth's bragging.

Marty saw that neither the little hunched figure on the veranda nor the giant negro behind him had drawn a gun. He saw also that the lanky youth who had defied the challenge of the Gila's ambassador crumpled up in a ridiculous heap upon the veranda.

The two women rushed from the seclusion of the house and kneeled down by the boy.

"Now, then, ma, I ain't hurt—it's only a crease! Go on fightin' the damned—"

Marty, fired by anger as well as the words of his younger companion, shouted out:

"You ain't goin' to get a cent of our money, I tell you! Not without you come over my daid body!"

"Help us with the kid, Marty!" his wife cried frantically. "They's men in the chaparral all around us! Come in before you get dropped at our feet!"

"If you want to fight, take a look first at your barns," Slinkey advised, pointing to the rear of the ranch-house.

A brilliant red light was pulsating above the structure, throwing great wagging shadows across the corrals. Some of the ranch hands from the bunk-house were calling to Marty that his calf shed was burning. Cows were stampeding out into the open.

For a moment the ranch owner found himself vainly yelling out a denial to the little grinning man in front of him, and at the same time trying to think what he could do in the midst of a scene of the wildest confusion.

"I won't, damn you! Shoot us all! The Vigilantes will make you pay for this!"

"Think of your womenfolk, Marty!" his wife called frantically. "Give them what they want. It's better than having the whole place wiped out."

Marty paused in his string of oaths. In the middle of the county road a masked man stood. Marty caught just a glimpse of the big yellow sombrero, the black face, the eyes glittering in the reflection of the burning shacks.

"It's no use!" he cried despairingly.

He realized that his ranch was burning down, his stockmen running every which way, screaming at each other, calling to him, and some, who caught sight of the tableau being posed in the front of the ranch, running panic-stricken for their shotguns.

"Bring out the money, woman!" Marty called, raising his hands. "Don't shoot me, you damned murderers! You'll get what you want. But I'll swear to God this is the end of the Gila and his gang! Old Peter Gaunt and his Vigilantes will ride to-night if there's a man in the county alive to tell them of this damnable trick."

Ten minutes later Henry Sugg again mounted his horse. Still leading the black Crater, he conducted his victorious gang into the mountains behind the Lingo ranch. His men followed him as usual in a widely extended single file, with Slinkey Drigges leading. When well into the fastness of the mountains Sugg, still masked, waited for his lieutenant to catch up to him.

"Here is your share of this loot," he said. "And here is the money to be divided among the other two. Don't follow me any farther, as I have other matters to attend to. To-morrow morning I will meet you—"

"Where, chief?"

"It must be near. I am not riding back into the desert to-night. We will meet in the Eastern Gap."

"The Eastern Gap?" Slinkey repeated. "That's gettin' close to civilization, chief."

"But no one rides through there now—not since the Jackson brothers were bumped off. Go back and tell the men we will meet at the Eastern Gap."

"All right, chief, but—"

"That's all."

Slinkey shook his head, then wheeled his horse and rode back to the rest of the gang. Sugg watched them, little black insect-like figures moving against the bare adobe hillside under the starlight. When he was assured they had completely disappeared he turned his horse and rode down again to the Lingo ranch.

The outfit was still in the wildest confusion. The stray cows were being punched up, bawling calves penned in a corral, and men were still beating down the smoldering remnants of the fire.

Sugg skirted the outfit until he came to a small box cañon on the eastern side, the only opening to which was a dry creek bed which cut directly through the ranch grounds. Under the protection of the thick chaparral, as well as the darkness of night, Sugg was able to sneak into this little gulch. Here he untied the halter of the big gelding he had been leading, lashed him with the end of his latigo, and watched him kick up and then gallop away toward the top of the cañon.

With the assurance that the horse would not wander out of that gulch without passing directly into the corrals of the Lingo ranch, Sugg rode out of the canyon, mounted the steep adobe banks of the creek and again skirted the upper corrals, keeping himself constantly hidden in the brush. When he had approached as near to the outfit as he dared, he took the big yellow sombrero with its brilliantly beaded band and threw it sailing into the air so that it fell directly into the outermost corral.

Having accomplished these two little deeds, he turned his horse for the trail which cut across the grazing grounds lying between the Lingo ranch and the city of Cattleoe.

In Cattleoe he hoped—if his bay was capable of the speed and endurance it had shown in other races—to be the first one to tell Peter Gaunt of the atrocities which had just been committed at the Lingo cattle outfit.

CHAPTER IX.

PETER GETS HIS POSSE.

JUST before Sugg arrived at the Eldorado Hotel, Peter Gaunt was taking his "nightcap" of sherry before going to bed. Jennie Lee was trying to pass away the time in the sitting room of the little suite reading a novel. She knew that she would sleep little that night, particularly after the exciting evening she had spent listening to the conversation of her grandfather and his cronies.

Needless to say the conversation centered about Tom Drury and his vow to rid the range of the Gila Monster. Most of the cattlemen and townspeople who visited old Gaunt that night seemed to consider the vow as the unfortunate boast of another doomed man. Drury would go the way of old Sheriff Horner and of the United States Marshal who had been killed by some of the Gila's henchmen. Days would pass, perhaps searching parties would be sent out, and finally when the incident was all but forgotten, bits of evidence would be picked up here and there. Perhaps a body would be found. Clews might point to some renegade Hopi who had disappeared across the border. It was the same old story.

But this time there was one person who nursed a conviction that Tom Drury would succeed. It was Jennie Lee. Perhaps it was the romantic dreaming of a girl who had seen a man—for her sake—pit all his skill and strength in a life-and-death fight against an outlaw horse. At least Peter Gaunt took that view of her convictions.

It was thus when Sugg rode into town, driving his exhausted horse up to the Eldorado Hotel and asking to see old Peter Gaunt, that Jennie Lee suffered a violent awakening.

The Cholo servant ushered Sugg into the sitting room where she sat.

"This is a great pleasure," the visitor began obsequiously.

She cut him off smoothly: "I suppose you came to see grandfather?"

"Yes, and of course—"

"I will call him."

"I have news about the Gila."

She had stepped to the door, but now she paused suddenly. This word had caught her as effectually as if Sugg had with his usual dexterity flipped a lass-rope over her shoulders.

"The Gila!" she cried, turning. "Then you have news about Tom Drury?"

"Perhaps. The Gila raided Lingo's place to-night. A man was shot—"

"Not Tom Drury?"

Sugg paused in the act of rolling a cigarette. He studied the girl's anxious and beautiful face with every mark of approval. It was the first time she had lifted her face to him so unreservedly. Her brown eyes had darkened almost to black, because of

the dilated pupils; her hair under the artificial light was turned to a silken, Titian red, and her cheeks were softened to a delicate velvet pallor.

"Tom Drury's bragging unfortunately did not succeed in frightening the Gila. Another raid has been accomplished as if nothing had been said."

"But is Tom Drury safe?" the girl demanded.

"You seem concerned in a very peculiar way for the safety of this man. He is a stranger, you must remember. None of us know who he is or where he came from. If I might be so bold—"

"Don't say anything against him—he has shown himself to be a very generous and a heroic man—"

"Not yet—"

"What do you mean by that?"

"How do you or I or any of us know who this man is? A stranger riding into town purporting to be from some out-of-the-way ranch down in Texas? Perhaps. At least before you call him a great man and heroic and generous—and surrender your heart to him—"

"I don't want your advice, Mr. Sugg. I know where to surrender my heart. And I know why you are belittling this man to me."

"Because I am jealous."

"All right, if you want to admit it. I would not have said it."

"But I am. You know that I am jealous of any man who'd so much as smile at you. You know that I am in love with you—that I—"

"You came here to see my grandfather?" she reminded him calmly.

"To see you—first. To ask if you will wait—only a little while before you put all your faith in this—this stranger from Texas. I beg you to wait to take my warning—"

"Sometimes it is not necessary for a woman to wait. Some men are bad at first sight—and some are good. I have my convictions about Tom Drury, and there is no single doubt."

"Perhaps not now. But later, we shall see."

"I will call my grandfather."

When Peter Gaunt came in, his granddaughter did not accompany him.

The old ranger wore a plush embroidered dressing-gown of a style twenty years or more out of date. He was surprised at the dusty, bedraggled appearance of his visitor who on all other occasions had appeared immaculately dressed.

"Looks like you been doing some hard ridin', Sugg," Gaunt remarked dryly. "What's wrong?"

"It's time for you to call the Vigilantes together, chief," Sugg replied. "There's been another raid—and one done as slick as ever—Marty Lingo's outfit."

"The Gila?"

"Undoubtedly. A stocktender told me about it while I was riding on the road from Lingo's to town here. The place was partly burned down. Young Dick Holser was potted—"

"Killed?"

"Don't know that—potted anyway. And Marty Lingo's roll gone."

"Hell! It was his money for his beef herd. He's worked like a slave all winter—and so has his womenfolk!"

"Are you going to let it go?"

"Like hell!" the old man roared. "I'll ride out to-night. That's what I'll do! We'll get the whole gang together—"

"And the sheriff?"

"The sheriff be damned. It'll be the Vigilantes and nothin' else. But what more do you know? Where'll we ride to? It'll be the same old wild-goose chase!"

"Not this time, chief. I think I've got a little clew. While I was riding on the county road below Lingo's place I saw four riders cutting across for the desert mesa. One of 'em was masked and riding a black horse which as near as I could make out was giving him trouble. The stars were shining and I couldn't see anything more except that suddenly the old nag took it into his head to buckjump. Don't know why. Must have been just a low ornery horse. And it sure did do some cake-walking. Damned if it wasn't as bad as the fight that outlaw of yours put up against Tom Drury here in town. The rider stuck on a while and his three companions passed him riding like hell—"

"It was the Gila's gang. He always rides with them three men!"

"Sure it was the Gila! Well, chief, I hid in the brush and watched that horse throw his rider flat and then gallop like mad up toward the box cañon behind Lingo's place."

"And the rider?"

"He started to foot it across the desert toward the big mesa. If his companions don't come back for him he'll be taking a good long walk, I'm telling you. And if you get your Vigilantes together, there is a chance we might get over there to that mesa before sun-up."

"It's a slim chance we could find him," the chief said. "His men will most likely come back for him—"

"They aren't overly fond of him, chief, I'll tell you that. And they know Lingo will be raising a howl all over the country about his money."

"It's a slim chance," Gaunt repeated, "but we'll take it."

"At least we might find the horse he was riding, chief," Sugg suggested enthusiastically. "And who knows but that might give us a clew."

"We'll ride," Gaunt decided. "And we'll comb the whole range this time, all night long, and all day to-morry, and from then on until we get this bird and his whole murderin' cutthroat gang. And I'll tell you this, Mr. Sugg, and you can tell it to every one—that I ain't goin' to bring the outlaw back for a trial. I'm goin' to finish him up proper and turn his body over to the sheriff. There ain't goin' to be no jury nor no judge settin' over this bird. Unless it's a coroner's jury—and the judge will be myself, Peter Gaunt!"

"That's talkin', chief. How about my riding through town and rounding up a posse quietlike for you?"

"Just the Vigilantes. Remember that, Sugg. With clean guns and with cayuses that will stand desert travel. None of their stall-fed saddle horses. Tell 'em to meet out at Donkey Bluffs two hours from now."

Sugg clanged across the floor and hurried out to perform his mission. When he was gone Gaunt immediately called his granddaughter and told her of his decision.

"Grandpa, if you are going to risk your life on this hunt, I am going with you."

Peter Gaunt called his Cholo servant, ordered his riding outfit, rifle, holster, and six-shooter, and started to pull on his jackboots.

"Little gal, you make me laugh. This here ride I am going on ain't going to be no fox-hunt for little ladies like you."

"You have said yourself that you were too old for any more desert riding, grandpa. I am—"

"I am going with the best posse in the country," Gaunt interrupted. "There will be Gaskin and Blowfly Jones, and Marty Lingo himself will join us when we reach his ranch. It's going to be a finish fight."

"Perhaps I will never see you again, grandpa, if I let you ride away like this. Think of the chances against your coming back."

"My dad never thought of chances." Gaunt clamped his holster on over the big frock coat. "This here is one time I am going without no hesitation. When I meets up with the bandit I am going to make sure he is my man and then I am going to ask him to look up a tree without the advice of no judge nor jury nor sheriff. No hesitatin' for me! I've been too cautious. From now on you'll never hear folks say the name 'Cautious Peter' again. And look here, gal, don't worry! I promise you one thing: I will send a rider back to you in the morning to let you know how things are going with me. And when we meet up with any of the Gila's gang I will let you know the result, which is that we have pulled off the tight-rope act and are bringing the remains home."

"If I can't come," the girl said, "I want you to promise me, if, when you are riding over the range, you should come across Tom Drury, and he is in trouble—"

"Tom Drury?" old Gaunt repeated almost as if he had forgotten the name. "That damned braggart? All right! All right! I'll help him—the damned four-flusher—since you have set your heart on his being a bona fide go-getter, which he ain't, I will help him."

"And let me know about him, grandpa. He might be wounded. He might be dying.

If he said he was going to get the Gila it means he will fight him when he sees him. I am afraid now that he has seen him. And perhaps lost out in the fight. Otherwise he would not have let these terrible things happen. I am afraid he is in trouble."

"Forget about him, gal, and forget about the danger to all of us. Pray for us, if it'll do your heart any good. I ain't figuring on any prayers getting us better horses or cleaner guns, so you don't have to ask no help from on high for me and my men. All as I want is that the Gila don't have no prayers on his side."

The Cholo servant came into the room and announced to Gaunt that his horse was saddled and ready.

"Damned if I don't wish I had a horse like Crater to ride," Peter said as he kissed his granddaughter good-by. "And damned if I don't wish I had that there six-gun with the single action."

"Tom Drury will use them!" the girl cried. "Remember, grandpa, when you see him I want to know—"

"I will remember, gal."

Half an hour later Peter Gaunt was well on the road toward Donkey Bluffs. In the starlight he could see horsemen trailing across the plain in every direction and concentrating on the point where the posse was to form. The first of the Vigilantes to join the chief was Henry Sugg.

"Mr. Sugg," the chief said as Sugg drove up to him, "when the Vigilantes is all mustered, I'll be asking you to lead the way to where you seen that there bucking horse!"

"Look here, chief," Sugg replied, "I've been thinking hard since last talking to you, and I've come to the conclusion that the bucker I saw was your own outlaw, Crater."

"The hell you say!"

"Mind you I'm not certain, chief. It was starlight and I was hiding in the chaparral. But the way I've been figuring is this: What if that horse *was* your bucker? Isn't there a chance that fellow Tom Drury who came into town as a stranger—giving out that he was from Texas—and—"

Gaunt interrupted:

"I'll be damned!"

"Nobody knows Tom Drury, chief, and as I was given to understand by the barkeep at the Eldorado, he finally refused to take a guide into the desert with him—"

"Yes, I heard that, but—"

"This Gila is supposed to lead a double life, chief, and—"

"Yes, yes, I know!" old Gaunt interrupted. He was silent for a moment, during which he bared his silver hair and scratched his head pensively. "I'll be—"

"You get my point, chief?"

"Tom Drury—a stranger—my outlaw bucker!"

"That's the first little ray of light, eh, chief?"

"I'll need a hell of a lot more light to see clear, Mr Sugg. And I'm goin' to play plumb cautious." They waited for the posse to gather, and as they waited Gaunt mumbled repeatedly to himself: "Well, I'll be damned!"

CHAPTER X.

DRURY AWAKES.

THE greater part of the night Tom Drury had been trudging doggedly toward the east.

When, during the previous afternoon, he had been roped by Henry Sugg and divested of his horse, hat and gun, he set himself immediately to the almost hopeless task at hand. He emptied the duffel-bag of its heaviest contents—the cans in particular, saving enough for a few days' hike. Although his throat was choking with thirst, he was determined to save the whisky for his supper. He could have eaten nothing without it. Tying the duffel-bag over his shoulder after the manner of a knapsack, he started out with a steady gait toward the eastern crest of the mesa, where in their morning's ride they had passed the dry pool.

The sun had beaten down heavily upon his head that afternoon. The only protection was the big bandanna he had tied pirate fashion about his forehead and ears. As he tramped on, fortified against nausea by big chunks of raisins, and fighting his thirst

with a constant dragging at tobacco, night came, and the desert was more merciful. The walking was slow because of the mesquite, and the pony trails, which were mere furrows of sand, afforded scant help.

In the earlier part of the night he stopped by a clump of barrel cactus—the last hope of water for the desert-traveler. Here he built a fire. There was no use traveling in secret now. If the Gila himself already knew where to find him, there was no other danger to avoid. He crushed water from the cactus pulp, sucked out the drink and then fell to his supper of fried potatoes, boned ham warmed over the fire at the end of a pronged stick, and a good gulp of whisky. He finished his meal with Baker's chocolate and more drags of his cigarette to numb the thirst-tortured nerves of his mouth. After this he slept.

From side to side he tossed in the warm sand, disturbed by vivid dreams, the call of coyote and wail of the wind. When he opened his eyes he stared into a sky brilliant with starlight. For a while he felt free, because the sight of stars over him as he lay on his back for a night's lodging was a familiar and homelike thing. He had ridden night herds in just such lonely fastnesses with the same tang of mesquite in the air, the same touch of the desert wind turned suddenly cold, but still redolent with the odor of sage, greasewood, and spice-tree. He felt free, but he knew that he was not. He knew, as he thought over his situation clearly in the stillness of the night, that he was as much a prisoner as if the Gila had put him behind bars. The outlaw preferred imprisoning his men in a desert to holding them in cabins or cellars. For the latter he could be blamed as a kidnaper, a brigand. For Drury's present plight the desert could be blamed. And the desert was more inexorable than iron bars.

From then until just before dawn the Gila haunted his dream. Part of the time it was a real Gila Monster crawling into his life: a hideous, splotchy, red lizard with square, black snout. A lizard which poisons, not with poison glands, but with the decayed animal stuff tucked in behind its teeth.

Drury shuddered at the thought and squirmed restively.

Henry Sugg's wind-tanned face was smiling at him—not grinning, but with a pleasant winsome smile which sharpened and broke to a gleam of teeth. Sugg was wily, suave, soft tongued, crafty.

"He will not kill me himself," Drury grumbled. "He will send others to kill me."

He dozed again, rolling over and cursing because of the burn of his neck. "But damned if I won't go on fighting. I've just begun! He's left me everything to fight with—my life—my hands! Thinks he can rope me and corral me in his desert! You made a mistake, Gila Monster, leaving me my life and my bare hands!"

He jumped up with a start. Then, feeling again the soft, cool wind with its pungent, delicious scent of sage, he came to himself. The stars were above, as at any cow camp on the plains in riding night herd. He wished fervently for the distant song of cowboys quieting a mill of steers, but there was only the doleful wind, and all about him in the light of stars and the gray dawn he saw forms like tree-boles or pronged cactus.

Drury stared. He laughed softly to himself. A cigarette rolled, the flare of a match and a few drags; then he stared again.

Yes, they were "forms." He could not remember if there had been pronged sojuara all about him. There had been barrel cactus, from which he had crushed a bitter, soothing drink. But there were no forms like giant mushrooms. The tops of the mushrooms were sombreros. He looked from one to the other and they moved. Some were crouching. He shrugged his shoulders with a sort of hopeless abandon.

"I knew he'd send them after me. Damned lizard, afraid to even pot me with his own hand! All right, gents, what do you want?"

"We want you, Mr. Gila Monster."

For a moment Drury was convinced that these forms surrounding him in the gray glow of dawn were apparitions. And, furthermore, the voice that had come low, cool, steady, had said a most confusing thing.

Drury recalled his dreams of Sugg. Sugg was the Gila, there had been no doubt about that. But here was a man speaking for a group of tall, silent, waiting figures, accusing him of being the Gila.

Then a flood of light came into his confused, sunheated brain.

Sugg's parting words had been that Drury himself would be called the Gila.

"Don't put your hands into your pockets agin for tobacco," the same voice came out. "Gestures of that sort ain't considered overly polite—particular when the chief of the Vigilantes says to a man, 'Mr. Man, I want you!'"

"Are you the chief?" Drury shouted out.

"I am Peter Gaunt, chief, and this here is my posse got up as a escort for to do military honors during the ceremony which we are about to perform!"

"If it's honest-to-God you, Peter Gaunt, I'm thankin' my lucky stars. My life is saved. Step up and take me, chief. Put the cuffs on me. Anything. So long as I smell leather again and feel the sweat of a horse, I'm praising God!"

The men began to close in cautiously, so that Drury could see the grim mouths under the jet-black shadow of the sombreros.

"Watch out thar, men. I don't want to have no gun-throwin'. And he'd drop a few of us afore we could get him. You seen how he handled Crater back in town!"

"Then you do know who I am!" Drury laughed.

"Damned right."

Peter Gaunt stepped forward while a half dozen barrels were focused on Drury's head.

"There you are. It's all right now, men. I played cautiouslike. We could have dropped him. But Cautious is my name!"

Gaunt hitched a few knots of a lariat about Tom's hands, and an audible sigh of relief escaped from the men, as if for all that time they had been holding their breath.

"Now, then, Mr. Bronc-peeler. You're finished. You came into town and shined up to my little gal and busted old Crater and snorted around like you was one of our leading citizens! But your game didn't work, Mr. 'Cowboy from Texas'!"

"I tell you I *am* from Texas, and I—"

"And this here posse is from Missouri," the old man shot back. "I always did hear the Gila was supposed to be masqueradin' about as a leading citizen—but I never knew he give out that he was a cowboy from Texas. That's a good one!"

The rest of the Vigilantes, now that Tom was roped, joined in a much heartier laugh.

"Well, Mr. Cowboy, we got a little Texas cattle hoss for you-all to ride," Gaunt announced.

"I'm laughing at you, Peter Gaunt!" Drury said. "You're pulling off something here that 'll make you the laughing stock of the county the rest of your life."

"I reckon so."

The gang joined again in a hearty guffaw as they went down into the gulch to get their mustangs. Every man among them was a formidable-looking figure in the dawn. Each one wore shoulder holster as well as cartridge belt and a gun on the thigh. Some of them shoved up their sombreros to wipe sweat from their foreheads; others lit cigarettes, the flare of matches illuminating red, stern, bristling jaws.

Drury reflected that this crowd had evinced enough caution when first surrounding him to show that they were playing no joke. He was convinced that every rider there thought he was the Gila. Henry Sugg had played his game—whatever it was—with a consummate skill.

One man of the posse Drury had not yet seen. It was the man who had remained in the gulch with the horses.

"Sheriff," Drury said, "I'll tell you now—and prove it by half a dozen different ways—that you've got the wrong man."

"We didn't expect you to admit you were the Gila when you've succeeded in keeping it a dead secret for ten years."

"Take me to town, chief, and I'll get half the population as witnesses."

"Take you into town—wow!"

The other riders voiced their astonishment at this suggestion. "Whoop-ee! Take him to town! Zowie! The hell of a chance!"

"And why not?"

"They'd lynch you before we passed the first ranch house!" Gaunt exclaimed. "And I never give up my man once I got him. I act cautiouslike: No lynching. Cautious is my name."

"Well, I'm glad to hear that. But if you aren't going to take me to town, where do you intend riding?"

"Nowheres. We'll take you up here in the hills where my dad used to string up his catches."

"And a trial?"

"A trial?" This was also the subject of exclamations—and laughter.

"If you take it into your hands to string me up without a trial—that's lynching. Your caution isn't going to help me much."

"No, not much. But I'm plumb cautious just the same."

They came down into the gulch where the horses were waiting. It was then that Tom had his first glimpse of the man tending the horses.

The glimpse shocked him, as if he had seen a man step out of his dreams and appear suddenly in flesh and blood. It was as if a horrible malignant spirit had incarnated itself into something not of its own world. And yet when this first qualm of puzzlement and fear was conquered, Drury saw the whole truth of his situation in a flash. And the truth, simple as it was, did not relieve him. It stupefied him.

The glimpse he had was swift, indelible; it came and went with the flare of a match. The man was lighting a cigarette with a maddening nonchalance, and the light, the highest color in the whole scene, fell upon the smiling mouth, the dark, olive-colored cheeks, the blue jaw, the black, shining eyes of Henry Sugg.

CHAPTER XI.

DRURY SEES HIS CRIMES.

AS the men mounted their horses Drury turned to Peter Gaunt:

"Look, here, chief, you can't let a farce like this go on. I'm not the man you want. You know I'm Tom Drury, the man who came into Cattleoe and broke your horse, and made a vow to get the Gila. Well, the Gila's caught, chief, and if you give me time I'll prove to you that I'm innocent and that the man you want is right there!"

Gaunt answered without so much as looking over his shoulder at the horseman Drury was accusing. "You are the man we want," he said. "Your talk is no good. The case is absolutely slick and there ain't nothin' under the sun or moon that 'll help you."

"But I tell you you've got the Gila! I can prove it! There he is—"

This time Gaunt glanced back at the man at whom Drury pointed. Henry Sugg was suavely smoking the cigarette he had just lighted. It did not appear that the accusation of this desperate man could in the slightest degree disturb his equanimity.

"Who in the hell are you pointing at?" Gaunt asked.

"At Henry Sugg. I'm swearing to you before God, chief, that the man you want is Henry Sugg! He took me into the desert, and—"

The Vigilantes burst out in a roar of laughter. If this was the way their prisoner intended to prove his innocence there could be no further doubt in their minds as to his guilt.

"Like as not he's been drinking sojuaro sap." Henry Sugg laughed, turning to his horse and mounting. "If he's got a hallucination like that, chief, I'll say it don't bother me in the slightest. How about taking him directly over to Marty Lingo's and seeing if we can't clinch the case against him?"

Gaunt thought a moment before leading his posse down the trail.

"Look here, Mr. Gila Monster," he began, turning to Tom. "I said there ain't the slightest ghost of a chance that we're wrong in this here business. But I don't want for my men here to see me bust right off into a lynch party without a second thought. They call me Cautious Peter—and I reckon, after all, that ain't such a slouch of a name. At least, my old dad who hanged your forbears wasn't called a lynch judge. And I don't aim to be called one, neither. I'll tell you what I'm goin' to do: I'm goin' to take you over to Lingo's outfit, as this here Henry Sugg suggests,

We'll get what evidence we can concernin' the raid you pulled off last night and then we'll give you a regular trial up there in the little town behind Lingo's, where in the old days my dad acted as sheriff and hanged you birds. I'll promise you this much, since you're plumb down and out: we'll stage a regular trial up thar, a peaceable one, and then hang you after the trial. If that don't suit, cork up and don't let me hear another word from you till we get there. And, lookee here," the old man added as he turned his horse down the trail, "if you go accusin' any more of us bein' the Gila, I'll hang you first and have the trial after!"

They jogged on for a while without further remarks. The jingle of spurs, the retch of leather and the intermittent beating of the hoofs against pebbles covered the silence.

Finally the chief turned to one of his Vigilantes, a loose-jointed man with popping, red eyes and bulging face muscles, who had the reputation among his companions as being a braggart and something of a coward.

"Look here, Clout," the chief said, "I reckon now that the danger's over we can do without you on this here expedition, so I'm goin' to send you with a message to my gal."

"Better send two of us, chief," Clout Gomery suggested. "If I'm ridin' alone I might meet up with this here Gila's gang. They're liable to be hangin' around somewheres, waitin' to snipe-shoot us."

"I reckon you can handle three men with that thar six-shooter, Clout," the chief said dryly.

"I reckon perhaps so, chief, but—"

"And when you get into Cattleoe," Gaunt went on, without heeding the objection, "tell my gal that we seen the enemy and he's ourn."

"The sun's up," Henry Sugg remarked, laughing. "You can make the trip safe enough with the sun up, Clout."

"All right, chief," Clout said, swallowing uncomfortably as his gaze went across the lonely desert. "If I get to Cattleoe I'll tell the gal that you seen the enemy and he's yourn. Is that all, chief?"

Gaunt dropped back to Clout's side and lowered his voice.

"She wanted to know something about Tom Drury, Clout," he said. "And I promised I'd let her know. Tell her that Drury himself is the Gila and that when he come into Cattleoe day before yesterday he was masqueradin' like."

"I'll explain it to her, chief. I got a good way with wimmenfolk."

Gaunt spurred his horse and again took the lead at the head of the little posse, riding by Drury's side.

"We'll stop at the Lingo outfit," he remarked. "And after seeing in broad daylight how you messed it up last night, maybe you won't have the face to deny who you are."

"Never heard of the Lingo outfit," Drury protested.

"And I guess they wished they'd never heard of you."

The Lingo ranch was a good two hours' ride from the mesa, and to reach it the riders cut northward over the sage plain, the first rays of the sun casting long shadows of horses and men over the flat, sand spaces. As they cantered up into the rolling foothills which bordered the north of the desert, Drury had his first sight of the cow farm.

Around a shabby, unpainted, sun-warped ranch house were grouped an indiscriminate bunch of calf-sheds, bunk-houses, and barns. Of one of these, Drury observed, little remained but a charred black skeleton. The whole outfit, in fact, seemed to be in serious disorder. Hog-tied fences were smashed through, tangled strands of cattle-proof wire were all that remained of some of the corrals, and ranch-hands stood about hatless, idle, dazed.

"Now, then, men," the chief said to his posse, "keep your shotguns handy. Stay in your saddles. And play cautious. I don't want no mob violence."

The ranchmen came down through the corrals to meet the chief. For the first time Drury looked upon the long head and woeful, narrow-set eyes of Marty Lingo.

"Well, we got your man for you, Marty," Gaunt announced. "And it's the first time the Gila was ever took."

Lingo glanced up furtively at Tom

Drury, who was seated in his saddle with bound hands laid across the pommel, his head and ears still swathed in the pirate-like bandanna which he had put on the night before.

The ranchers behind Lingo held back, staring, with every mark of awe written on their wrinkled, sun-reddened faces.

After his first moment of speechlessness in the presence of this famous "brigand," Lingo looked about at the shotgun deputies surrounding the prisoner and presently found his tongue.

"Chief! He's done this job up brown—just like he done it over to the X L outfit. My best ranch-hand is shot and the money I got for my herd has went!"

"He's got to hang!" another rancher cried.

"He'll hang, all right," the chief assented. "But I want for him to hang legal-like."

"Lynch him!" a third burst out. "Lookee what he done, chief! The barn—poor Marty had to borrow money on his beef-herd to put it up and look at it now—like a bunch of black cactus over thar."

"Sure!" Marty broke in. "And my vaquero, Dick Holser—"

"I ain't forgettin' him," Gaunt put in.

"He's in the house with the ole woman, chief. Plugged proper. If the doctor from Cattleoe don't shag out'n here in a hurry, they's liable to be another death chalked up to this gunman."

"Lynch him!" one of his companions repeated. "'Tain't only money he's responsible for, but lynch him for what he done to old Widder Holser's boy!"

"Give 'em a tight-rope party, chief, here and now!" a burly cowman yelled out. "Remember, chief, the whole countryside's with him. He'll get off yet!"

"Now hold on, gents," Gaunt objected. "I agree with you, he's got to hang for what he done. But I want to see everything done calm and orderly. They ain't to be no mob violence while I'm chief of the Vigilantes. If you-all are afraid my prisoner will get away, then get your cayuses and your six-guns and come along with me. I grant you every one's goin' to be satisfied. But no mob stuff. If they's any lynchin' it's got to be done by me. I won't have it said of ole Peter Gaunt that they's any lynchin' goin' on in his county without his consent."

"You're doing this business right," Henry Sugg put in. There was a marked contrast between his calm, oily voice and the excited husky voices of all the others. "Don't by any means take him back to the city."

Drury, instead of breaking into a thunder of oaths, checked himself. He was pale with anger; he decided to bide his time.

Little Marty Lingo took off his sombrero and scratched a moist bald head. "If you want us to get our saddle hosses," he remarked, "I take it you're goin' travelin' with this bird before you stage the hanging?"

"Just travelin' fur enough so's our hangin' will be a peaceful one," the chief decreed.

"And that 'll be where—in Cattleoe?"

"Hell, no! If I took this gent to Cattleoe there'd be a mob fight in the middle of the street, and it's too long a journey besides! I'm goin' to stage the hangin' right away, and I'm ridin' up into the mountains here to them little forsaken shacks which used to be called Desolation. In that thar town we'll administer our own justice without the city folks and judges and mayors messin' in."

"Or the Gila's own men attacking you before you could get back to the city," Henry Sugg reminded him.

"I reckon a hanging at Desolation would be satisfactory to us all," Marty Lingo said, seconded by the group of ranchers at his side.

"And afore we hit out for the trail," the chief added, "I want for you to bring all the evidence as you've got ag'in' this gent, because when we get to Desolation I'm figurin' on pullin' off a regular trial."

"Evidence!" Lingo cried. "Is there any doubt about this bird?"

"Absolutely not. But you cain't have a trial without you have evidence."

"But you can have a hangin' without evidence!" a ranch hand brayed out.

Marty Lingo interrupted the argument.

"I ain't askin' for a lynchin', chief, despite the wrong done me. I'll offer a bit of evidence, and it's all any low-abidin' man would want for to convict this here road agent. We got his horse. It come wanderin' down the creek last night from the box cañon up behind my barn."

Gaunt and Henry Sugg exchanged palpably significant glances.

"Bring the hoss along," ordered Gaunt. "When we get to Desolation we'll start off our trial introducin' the hoss. We'll call it Exhibit A."

Drury listened to this argument with a glum, stoical interest. The fact that Peter Gaunt was protecting him from an immediate lynching gave him hope. For the time being he decided to keep quiet. Every one was convinced of his guilt. Perhaps if he waited until the arrival at Desolation he could think up a convincing defense. A few faked-up exhibits he was certain would give him a chance to show the mockery of the whole case. Even this horse they were talking of could be used not as a proof against him, but as a proof of his complete innocence. His horse, he could easily point out, was Crater, an outlaw he had broken in a city lot before a mob of people.

The chief waited for the return of the ranchers who had gone for their mounts and guns. Drury looked toward the barns expectantly to see what sort of a horse they were going to foist upon him as his own.

When he saw what Marty Lingo led out of the corral he realized with a shock the full seriousness of his position. Sugg, the Gila, had played his game with unbeatable, almost uncanny, perfection. The tremendous power, the trickiness, the merciless irony of the Gila and his methods were revealed to Drury in one flash. His case from then on, he knew, would be practically hopeless; he had bucked something too indomitable, too mighty.

Snubbed to Lingo's pommel was the big gelding Crater. When it was brought to join the troop of horses it passed close to the prisoner. Old Crater did not look up at the man who had mastered him. Instead he let out a snort, partly of disdain, partly of distress.

"Let me ride the old horse," Drury said.

"And lead us a chase into Californy?" was the chief's laconic answer.

CHAPTER XII.

THE ACCUSED.

DRURY came to the conclusion that, although the chief was objecting strenuously to a premature hanging, he was in reality merely "saving" his prisoner for a mock trial and a private lynching. He recalled the fact that Sugg, not satisfied with disarming him and leaving him helpless in the desert, had actually used his horse as a piece of damning evidence.

The hat, of which he had been deprived at a time when a hat was most needed, would probably be used as another undeniable proof of his guilt. The fact that he had been left in the desert under the boiling sun without his hat was apparently a secondary condition with his persecutor. It appeared that Sugg wanted to use the hat as one of the strands in his deftly cast net. No sooner had these thoughts come to Drury's mind than little Marty Lingo called one of his vaqueros, who held in his hand a big sombrero with beaded Hopi design.

Old Gaunt took the hat, twirling it on his upraised forefinger. "This here sombrero, gents, will be Exhibit B." He turned to Drury. "I reckon you-all will be needin' this durin' the rest of our ride up to Desolation," he said. "The sun will be beatin' down hot toward noon."

Drury set his jaw, resigning himself for the moment to the grim fate which was enveloping him. As he thought of this second dastardly trick of the Gila Monster he felt that his fate was inescapable. It was the same feeling he had had the day before when he saw the noose of the lass-rope poising above his head.

Just before the posse started on its ride into the mountains Lingo's wife came out of the ranch-house, followed by the mother of the wounded vaquero. Both were pale, sun-faded women, broken by the life of the ranch. Marty's wife was grim, with a set look of triumph on her mouth as she stared

up at the dreaded prisoner. But the old mother, a wretched wisp of a woman, was weeping.

"Now go back and tend to that boy that's wounded," Marty ordered. "We don't want no women bawlin' about this here lynching party."

Marty's wife held up her fist to Drury.

"I ain't bawlin' about you, murderer that you are! It's about us I'm worritin'. How can you repay us by hangin' up on a sycamore limb? How can you pay the drudgery I've went through? You've ruined us—and you've shot up our men! And you've killed the cattlemen all about us as wants to keep law and order! It's only the cowards you let go on livin' their lives like desert rats in holes. But *we* weren't cowards! We fought ye! We showed ye! And you're payin' now!" Her voice mounted to almost a scream. It drowned the words of her husband, cursing at her, begging her to be quiet. "I will tell him! I will say what I want!" She broke down, whimpering: "But the money—the money that was to keep us goin' for another year—is it too late? Is it lost? Can't we get *some* of it to start buildin' up agin?"

Marty swore loudly as the posse gathered reins to start.

"Can't you do one good deed—the last—and let us start agin?"

The chief, who disliked scenes in which women played emotional leads, shrugged his shoulders and clucked to his horse, bidding Drury to follow. Drury had listened to every word of the woman's railing. Her vehemence was so cutting that he felt a strange sensation, almost inexplicable, coming over him. He felt as if he had actually committed the crime himself. Such was the directness and the power of her accusation.

"Cheer up, lady!" he called out over his shoulder. "Remember that the Gila's kingdom is crumbling. If I have anything to say about it you'll get your money back, even if it's hidden away as far as Mexico."

The ranch wife's companion, an older woman, clutched at the reins of Drury's horse before he could turn to follow the chief.

"He shot at my boy and hurt him!" she cried. "He was a big, brave boy, and he fought them. *He* wouldn't let them touch a poor ole woman like me! He fought them, and they hurt him, and he's lyin' in there, sufferin'."

She stared up at Drury, and her eyes, which had been bleary and sullen, seemed to slowly clear until they were burning coals. "You killer! You yellow coyote! You are the one that robbed a poor ole woman of the only thing she's got! My son! If my son dies I'll come to you and I'll kill you."

"There now, ole mother!" Gaunt remonstrated. "Don't get all wrought up and tremblin' thataway. It ain't going to buy you nothin'! You're tremblin' and tearin' yourself to pieces."

He took her arm, which she had raised against Drury. In her hand was a revolver.

"The varmint! God will punish him for what he done. If my boy dies God will 'get' him. The Gila can't get away from Him—no, ye can't!"

"He can't get away from me, either, Mother Holser," Gaunt said proudly. "We're goin' to string this here bird up right after we give him a trial, and then we'll round up his gang."

"If your boy dies, Mrs. Holser," Tom Drury said, "rest assured he'll be avenged. The Gila is going to pay for these wrongs."

The old woman stared into Tom's face. For a long moment she looked, blinking as she faced the sun. The fire in her eyes seemed to soften, or else to change color to something perhaps warmer, but certainly not so piercing and dreadful. She clung to the chief's arm, her hands shaking, partly with palsy, partly with exhaustion. A big tear trickled down the furrow of her cheek.

"We must be ridin' on, Mrs. Holser," Gaunt said. He turned to Marty and the ranch hands. "You men follow us up to Desolation. We'll want you up thar for witnesses. I want all of you, for, as I've always swore, you cain't have a trial without you have witnesses."

The posse hit out for the Desolation trail. A short ride, loping and walking, interspersed with breathing spaces, brought

them well into the foothills. Here it was that they found a road, rocky, gutted, overgrown with chaparral and greaseweed—formerly a trail for prairie schooner, stage coach and pony express rider.

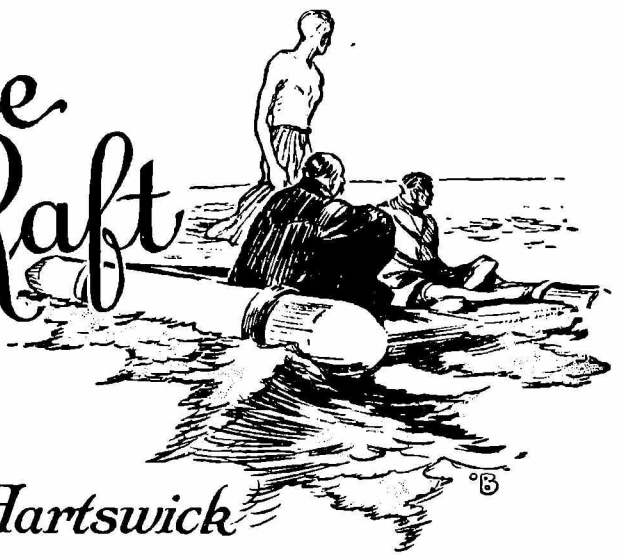
Gaunt and his prisoner led the procession, and the troop of Vigilantes followed two by two. Then came little Marty Lingo on his calico horse, and behind him his ranch hands mounted on stubby cow ponies. At the rear, his blood bay fretting itself into foam in its desire to break ahead with the leader, rode Sugg, calm, smiling, smoking wisps of cigarettes without ceasing.

(To be continued NEXT WEEK.)

The Life-Raft

by

F. Gregory Hartswick



THE justice of the Supreme Court dangled his legs in the Atlantic Ocean and regarded the coming of dawn pensively.

"It's going to be a hot day," he remarked to no one in particular.

"I know it," snapped the doctor, irritably. He removed the jacket of his pyjamas and stood erect, clad only in the lower half of his sleeping apparel. "There's one comfort," he went on more calmly. "We'll be dry, at least." He wrung out the dripping garment he held in his hands.

The young man who had been traveling for pleasure yawned. "I'm going to sleep," he announced. "Somebody watch me and see that I don't fall overboard. Didn't get a wink last night. I had three aces going in when she struck, too. In another five minutes I'd have—oh, well, I didn't, so why worry?" He composed himself for slumber. The doctor looked at his sprawled figure.

"Our involuntary companion seems to have gone overside dressed pretty much in what he could grab. It's a wonder he kept afloat at all in that overcoat. Well—" He looked about him. The morning light was coming swiftly up out of the east. In the dawn-glow the vast ocean stretched about the three men, empty and flat except for their unstable speck of safety. "See any of the boats?" inquired the justice of the Supreme Court.

"Not a boat. She went down so fast that I doubt if many got away. It's one of God's own miracles that this life-raft floated loose, and another that I found it in the dark. I was pretty nearly all in when I heard you yell. How did you get on it?"

"I was asleep when we struck, and didn't get to the deck till she was pretty nearly under. I must have lost my head, for I never looked for a boat. The tilt of the deck did it." He shuddered at the recollection. "When a man wakes out of a sound sleep and hears crashings and screams all around him, and then rushes onto a deck

that's been as level and true as a floor for four days, and finds that surface, which he's come to depend on, slanted at nearly forty degrees—"

"I know," said the doctor. "I felt the same way."

"Well, anyhow, I jumped and started swimming as hard as I could. I used to be a pretty fair swimmer when I was younger, but I'll bet I broke my own record. I heard the ship go down behind me, in the dark, and there were shrieks and gurglings—" Again the justice of the Supreme Court paused and covered his face with his hands. In a moment he had recovered himself. "I kept on swimming blindly, and all of a sudden I came right on the raft. I hit it so hard with my hand that I think I sprained my wrist. I climbed aboard and rested, and then yelled at intervals till I heard you in the water. That's all till we picked him up." He indicated the young gentleman who had been traveling for pleasure. "The next question is, what do we do?"

Morning had come full upon them while they were speaking. The sun flung fiery darts across the levels of the sea, gilding the crests of the long leisurely swells and making deep jade shadows in the hollows. The doctor and the judge stood on the gently rocking life-raft and scanned the ocean. Not a sail, not a smoke-cloud. The immense watery plain was unbroken by the faintest sign of hope.

"What's that?" cried the doctor. "Look—wait till it rises on the swell. There! See it?"

Riding the gently heaving water, about two hundred yards away, was a black object, apparently a spar, with a curious-looking lump attached to it in the middle. At the doctor's cry the lump moved and waved an unmistakable human arm.

"A survivor! He sees us!" The two men waved frantically. The young man who had been asleep, aroused by the noise, leaped to his feet and joined them. The spar with its human freight moved slowly toward the raft.

"He's swimming and pushing it," said the doctor. "Why doesn't he let go? It'll take him forever to get here at that rate."

"Maybe he can't swim. Is there a rope on this craft?"

The judge found a small coil of rope attached to a corner of their unwieldy ship; he waited till the man on the spar had struggled within distance, and flung the line awkwardly, but with sufficient accuracy, to drop the end of it across the spar. The survivor reached it and deftly made it fast to his support; then he slipped free and with long, smooth strokes swam to the raft. In a moment he had hoisted himself aboard and lay panting on the narrow deck.

The three men looked at their new passenger with interest. He was a man of middle age, apparently; his dark hair, dripping though it was, still was crisp and curly. He was naked, having evidently discarded his clothes for greater freedom in swimming, and his body, glistening in the sunlight, showed rippling muscles indicative of great strength. In fact, he almost immediately recovered from the exhaustion of his swim, and, sitting up, looked at his rescuers.

"I know you," he said suddenly to the doctor. "You're Dr. Savage, the psychiatrist. I saw a good deal of you on shipboard."

"You did?" The doctor was plainly puzzled. "I don't remember—how did you escape?"

The man ignored the question. "We seem to be the only ones who did get away," he said calmly. "I won't deny that I was very thankful to see your raft. I saw it an hour ago, and I've been trying to push that spar along ever since."

"Why didn't you yell?" demanded the doctor. The new arrival's calmness seemed to irritate him.

"Needed all my wind for swimming. You weren't moving, I was. Why waste the breath?"

The judge came to the rescue.

"Gentlemen, I am not quite certain as to the social demands of a situation like the present," he said lightly. "However, in order to escape the dreadful fate of Gilbert's unfortunate castaways, who couldn't speak to each other because they hadn't been introduced, let me say that my name is Delavan—Thomas Delavan; I am a justice of the Supreme Court when I am at home.

This gentleman"—he indicated the young man who had been traveling for pleasure—"is Mr. George Hamilton, of New York, recently at the same table with myself in the saloon. Our common friend, the doctor, you already know. And now might I ask—"

The naked man rose and bowed.

"I'm glad to meet you, gentlemen," he said. "My name is—Summers."

The three men started. The doctor spoke first. "Summers!" he cried. "Summers, the—"

"Correct!" broke in the other. "Summers, the murderer, traveling free of charge from the country whence he had been extradited to the country where—" He checked himself. The young man broke in.

"But—but I've seen you on board! You were always with that detective—what's his name—Craddock! Where's he? How did you get away?"

The murderer smiled cynically. "When the ship struck last night Craddock and I had a little argument. He wanted to handcuff me and get me into the same boat with him. I objected. As a result of my arguments he decided to remain behind in the cabin while I went on deck. Unfortunately, I had taken some little time to convince him of the undesirability of his course, so when I reached the deck I was alone. I went overboard with some things which are at present attached to yonder spar. And here I am."

His listeners shrank back in horror. "You mean to say you—killed him?" said the judge at last.

"I don't know whether or not he was dead when I left him," retorted Summers. "But I am fairly certain that he is not among those present now. And now suppose we stop talking about the past and consider the present—and more particularly the future. Has any man here a suggestion?"

The others were silent. In some strange way the murderer, naked and an outcast from civilization though he was, had dominated their spirits.

"I thought not," said Summers, still with an evil smile on his face. Then he turned suddenly on young Hamilton.

"You!" he cried sharply. "Haul that spar aboard!"

Hamilton, amazed at the suddenness of the attack, hesitated. Instantly Summers stood over him, menacing, terrible.

"Haul in that rope!" he thundered. "You know who I am! By Heaven, I could kill the three of you with my bare hands—and I will if you don't jump when I speak!" He curved his powerful arms, and the muscles stood out like ropes. "Haul in that rope!"

Hamilton hesitated no longer. He pulled at the line which the fugitive had made fast to the spar, and presently the dripping stick of wood was close alongside. Summers waved Hamilton away and reached to seize the bundle that was lashed to the spar near the middle. With a deft twist he loosened the knot, and holding the bundle under his arm, pushed the supporting timber off. Then he rose and confronted the others.

"You three," he said with withering contempt, "represent the forces of law and order. You're strong when you number yourselves by the million; you lean on each other for support, and when anything out of the way happens you yap for help like a lot of whipped dogs. When the help doesn't arrive you curl up and quit. Last night you came face to face with one of the elementals—you met death, and the result was that Nature's laws superseded your codes and regulations. There was a struggle for existence, and in that struggle, as you know if you've read anything, only the fittest survive. You civilized apes! Not one of you is a man—but I am! You, free and belonging to the ruling classes, lost your heads the moment you were faced with a real crisis. What did you come away with? Your lives and that's all. I am a murderer, according to your classification; I am outside the pale, a being to be hunted and destroyed; I was a prisoner—your prisoner. To-day your laws are not worth the paper they're written on. The fittest will survive. Look!"

He spread the cover of his bundle—a waterproof slicker—out on the deck, and displayed its contents.

"One flask," he said in the manner of a man taking an inventory, "containing

brandy; useful should it become chilly. One automatic pistol, loaded. I congratulate myself on the job of packing. It appears that the water has not harmed this specimen. However, it's well to be sure." He pointed the weapon into the air and pulled the trigger. The pistol spat flame; the echoless report was curiously not loud in the level stillness. "And *that's* all right. Next, one bottle of spring water. My erstwhile guardian was particular about his drink, an idiosyncrasy for which I thank his spirit. That's all, except a tin of crackers and a couple of boxes of bouillon cubes; packed watertight, as you observe. I regret that I had not time to make larger inroads upon the supplies of our late friend the steward. However, it might be worse." His manner changed abruptly. He was no longer the suave showman. "There are nine shots left in this pistol. I could kill you all now, if I chose—and I *will* kill you when I do choose. But not just yet. You!" He leveled his automatic at the judge. "Take off those pyjamas and give them to me!"

He was obeyed in silence. At another word of command the young man who had been traveling for pleasure shared his garments with the divested jurist.

"I could leave you naked to the sun, if I chose," said Summers. "But I need your services at present." He paused. His glance swept the ocean about.

"There seem to be some sticks floating yonder," he went on, indicating a point where the rise and fall of the swell was flecked with débris. "Hamilton, suppose you swim out and bring some bits aboard—long ones for preference?"

Under the threat of the pistol the young man dived off the raft. A few strokes brought him to where the floating splinters marked all that remained, save the raft itself, of last night's disaster. He soon returned, pushing before him a shattered oar and a slender plank.

"That's good," commented Summers briefly. "Now the rest of you get busy and rig a shelter with those poles and this slicker. There's enough rope, I think. I want something to keep the sun off me."

His orders were obeyed. The three men were utterly cowed by the dominating personality of this killer. The shelter, inexpertly made though it was, seemed to satisfy Summers. He crawled under it and lay, shielded from the sun and in a position where he could watch every move the others made.

The three victims of his tyranny crouched uncomfortably in the growing heat. They were beginning to grow thirsty. But Summers had the precious bottle of water at his elbow, and none of them cared to dare certain death in the effort to reach it. The man in the shade of the improvised awning read their glances and laughed.

"You'd like some water, wouldn't you?" he sneered. "Well, you'll get none. The fittest is going to survive. The only reason I'm letting you live is because I may need you for something else. You'll get nothing to eat and nothing to drink—I'll tell you that now."

The doctor spoke. "Suppose you drive us too far? Suppose we refuse to do what you wish?"

Summers laughed. "Not you! I know a little about psychology, doctor. The will to live is too strong. You'll hang on till the last possible minute, and you'll do what I tell you as long as you can stand. While there's life there's hope." Again he went through one of his curiously characteristic changes of manner. His tone became lightly conversational. "Lucky thing it's calm, isn't it? If the wind should come up I'd have to kill you all, you know. This raft wouldn't have room enough for all of us in a storm."

The day glowed pitilessly toward its close. With the fall of evening the three thirst-tortured men felt a little relief. Summers had refreshed himself guardedly during the heat of the afternoon: one biscuit and one swallow of water was the limit of his allowance to himself. As the dark deepened and the brilliant stars appeared—the night was moonless—Summers was moved to speech, his words during the day having been confined to the issuing of orders and curt refusals to several demands for water.

"You poor, civilized fools!" he said. "Why don't you jump overboard and end it? You haven't a chance to live, and you

know it; but you prefer to hang on and be tortured by thirst and hunger and the sun for another day and maybe another. I don't think you have the stamina to last longer than that. You'll probably attack me some time during the time of your sufferings, and then I'll shoot you down. But I've decided not to kill you outright. I'll cripple you. You represent to me the ineffectiveness of the sheltered world of men when deprived of their fellows. You are particles of a mass; as a whole I will admit that you are almost irresistible; you accomplish your purpose clumsily, ponderously, at a frightful waste of energy and time, but you do accomplish them. However, when you are isolated a higher law than your mass-manufactured statutes comes into play—the law of Nature, gentlemen, the law of God—the law of the survival of the fittest. You are not fit to live in the conflict with Nature; hence you will presently die. I have opposed men all my life; hence Nature is kind to me. I will live. Man is Nature's enemy, and when he strays from his protecting works she strikes him down without pity, except those favored ones who have it in them to best her in the only way she can be bested, which is by scorning the protection of the mass and living boldly to oneself.

"I am strong—you are weak. When an emergency arose you looked around for some of the servitors you have trained to wait upon you at the expense of your natural initiative; failing to find your servants ready at your call you were helpless. I have fended for myself all my life, and when the moment came I was ready. I met opportunity halfway. The result—well, I am free, I have food and water, I hold three lives under my hand to do with as I will—to make serve me, to amuse me, and finally to destroy at my good pleasure. Bah! You are contemptible, you three.

"You, a judge, ordained to sit over your fellows and mete out what you call justice! Who put you there? The very men whom you strip of their possessions by a stroke of a pen, or deprive of freedom and even life. The poor, pitiful, helpless mass must needs choose some one of themselves to say what they shall do, and say and think! And you, doctor—the one to whom the silly sheep people run when they have broken Nature's laws and don't know what's the matter with them! You are what you are because men haven't enough sense to live as they ought to live. Men have become what you call civilized; that is only another way of saying that they have thrown overboard the laws of temperance and moderation, which are the only laws of health.

"As for you, Hamilton, you useless cumberer of the earth, I have more respect for you than I have for either of your far more respectable companions. You are a nothing, a cipher; but you don't assume to be anything else. You are an idler, and that is something I can understand, because even an idler can be genuine. Those others are shams. There is room in the world for idlers, and if circumstances were slightly other than as they are I would say to you, 'Go in peace, so that you promise to keep on idling.'

"And now, gentlemen, I have said my say. There will be sleep for no one this night. I will see that you stay awake. I am stronger than you, and can do without sleep for hours longer than you. Later, when you are exhausted, I will allow you to sleep, and will sleep myself, secure in the knowledge that you are helplessly sunk in slumber. Thus I assure myself safety from medicine, the law, and leisure—the three worst enemies of natural man."

The night wore through somehow. Not for a moment did Summers relax his vigilance, and did one of his wretched victims nod he was upon him with kicks and curses, while the other two watched, helpless against the murderer's ready pistol. Another dawn streaked the ocean; the water changed from black to the green of pine groves, then lightened to foam-flecked emerald; the sun tipped the swells with splendor; another day was upon the survivors.

The three victims of Summers's tyranny were in wretched plight. Since the vessel had struck they had had no food or drink; after their labors they had not been permitted rest. Their lips were cracked, their throats consumed as with flame; their eyes seemed sunk inches deep in their heads. Summers, too, showed the effects of lack of

sleep; but he had had water, and was in much better condition. He looked at his companions in the swiftly growing light and laughed.

"Still all here?" he said. "I had an idea that perhaps one of you would get tired and slip overboard during the night. The will to live is a strong thing. Well, here's another day! I think I shall breakfast."

He helped himself to a pair of biscuits, and took a temperate pull at the bottle of water. It was still three-quarters full, the three noted. The doctor felt a savage impulse surging in him. He would fling himself on that mocking devil; he might be killed, but before he died he would have one swallow—just one delicious draught that would cool his throat and soothe his swollen tongue. With an effort he steadied himself. He must hang on. Hang on—for what? More torture, more suffering. Was it worth it? He looked at his companions; they were in as evil a plight as himself. It seemed vain to keep living, to fan the spark of existence merely to prolong agonies already almost past bearing.

Suddenly his mind cleared. He found himself looking at the raft and its passengers, himself included, almost impersonally, as he would regard a case brought to him for diagnosis. And as a patient's symptoms indicated the trouble to be met, what he saw brought its own solution.

"Summers!" he cried; and at the sound of the authority he had summoned to his voice the murderer, crouched in the shadow of his awning, started and swung to face him with ready pistol and a snarl on his lips.

"Summers!" repeated the doctor. "Give me that pistol."

"Give you—you must be crazy!" Summers's finger trembled on the trigger. "You make a move and I'll—"

"No." By an almost superhuman effort of will the doctor made his voice calm and steady, though each word brought a pang of racking pain to his throat. "No, don't shoot. You will give me the pistol because you want to live. You have not escaped the man-made laws of which you spoke so lightly. You say you will survive us because you are the fittest to survive. You are stronger; you have control of the supply of food and water. But you cannot survive us by many hours.

"We are on a raft in mid-ocean. If we had been cast ashore on an island where there was a chance of wresting life from the soil you would undoubtedly have been the last man alive, and might even have flourished, for you are fitter than we to tear from Nature the living she so grudgingly parts with; but you are not on an island. Nothing but the mere brute will to live has made you treat us as you have. You would have known, if you had allowed yourself to think, that there was no hope for any of us; that the possession of that bottle of water and those biscuits could at the most prolong your life but a few hours. When they were gone, what did you plan to do?

"For a moment you saw yourself in the position of the primal man, living because of his power over his mates, and as such you dominated us. But you have not considered the future. That is a function of civilized man, not of the brutes with which you are so anxious to ally yourself.

"Look there and there!" The doctor's outflung hand carried Summers's gaze with it, and he saw what the awning had hidden from him—a cloud of smoke on the horizon in the south, and another farther east. He sprang to his feet with a snarl of rage; but the doctor's words flowed on in a torrent.

"Those are not chance steamers that may pass us!" he cried. "Those steamers are hastening to this very spot, brought by the wireless summons that went out before our boat sank. They know the latitude and longitude; we have not drifted appreciably; they will be here in a few hours. Civilization, Summers, never left us for one instant. The day of the primal beast has passed, and man rules supreme! You are no longer the strongest of a group of animals, holding possession of the means of existence; you are a man like us, and subject to our laws. Give me the pistol!"

The judge and young Hamilton were staring amazed at the tableau of the two men. Their attention, which had been distracted by the sight of the approaching rescuers, now swung back to the immediate

vicinity. They looked at Summers and forgot their hopes and sufferings in amazement at the transformation he had undergone. His personality, which had radiated easy confidence, had now shrunk to a sort of trapped expression of fear; his lips were drawn back over his teeth, his free hand was clenched into a convulsively working fist. His whole attitude indicated a beast driven to corner and prepared to fight to the death.

"They won't get me alive!" he gritted. "I'll plug you first and save a shot or so for the boat's crew that tries to take me off—and one for myself at the last. Stand back!"

But the doctor faced him calmly.

"The will to live, Summers! You're not a rat in a corner—you're a man. You will surrender peaceably, because you believe that by hiring the best legal talent when you return to New York you can escape the electric chair. Remember, Summers, you are in civilization again."

There was a moment of silence. Then the man crouching under the awning changed once more—his last metamorphosis, from the triumphant primate down to the abysmal brute and up again to the status of a man among men.

"You win, doc," he said with a grin; and his very voice was devil-may-care. "You've got the goods. Here you are." He tossed the automatic into the air, caught it by the barrel and presented it to the doctor. "And now, folks, let's split what's left of this water. I'll take a little brandy in mine, thanks."

A long hoot from the nearer of the two steamers indicated to the castaways that they had been seen and that rescue was at hand.

East is East

Part III

by *T. S. Stribling*

Author of "Birthright."

CHAPTER VII.

THE EMPTY SADDLE.

TOWARD morning a rack of clouds out of the east brought a chill rain on the riders, and far to the west the moon sank among the peaks. At last it went down, looking as if it had been blown into fragments and was lost amid the peaks and hurrying clouds.

Jimmy Million shook from cold. His light silk costume was wet through. The purr of the rain in the trees overhead added to the melancholy. Presently the Targui, who sat invisible upon the white blur of his stallion, called his companions to halt.

Jimmy drew down his bay.

"Are we close to Nalaczi's?" he shivered.

The American saw Goombah slide to the ground across the white body of his stallion.

This story began in the Argosy-Allstory Weekly for April 22.

"I don't know," he burred; "it is near morning."

Jimmy got to the ground with painful stiffness. The insides of his legs were very sore. He shook as if he had Arkansas malaria.

"Whu-what have we s-stopped for?" he chattered.

"For prayers, *m'sieu'*."

Million looked at the dim form.

"P-prayers wh-while we're ch-chasing women?"

"Are you ill?" gutturaled the Targui.

"Nun-no. Go ahead. Are you gug-going to pup-pray here?"

"A little further on, *m'sieu'*, where there is water."

A master shake seized Jimmy.

"Wuh-wuh-water?"

With a grunt of affirmation Goombah moved forward in the darkness, and Jimmy followed the dark form by sound. The white stallion also dropped in behind the raider, but at a word from Goombah the animal stopped. Twelve paces distant his white form was lost in darkness.

The footfall of the men was muffled in wet leaves. The rain fell monotonously and with an increasing chill. The sky was a frayed and hurrying dun. The thought of praying in the rainy night, the thought of walking to some particular spot for water and there to pray in the rainy night filled Jimmy with sour amusement. "What a superstition," he thought. Presently he found himself on a surface of stone whose western side gave the American a sense of void. Rain and wind whipped about this exposed point.

The man from Ouarglum paused.

"Here it is, and over here is water if *m'sieu'* wishes to bathe."

The thought put an extra quiver into the entomologist's shrinking body. He tried to decline, but made only a chattering. He heard the Targui grope his way to where a gurgle of water sounded amid the whisper of the rain. He heard him put sandals aside and the plash of his ablutions. Then he saw the tall inky figure return, kneel toward the East and begin a prayer in Arabic.

Million stood with shoulders hunched. He could feel drops of water trickling down his back. But presently some feeling for the weirdness of the murmuring brown man came over him. The night-shrouded mountains, the peculiar desolation of the moonset he had just witnessed had its effect on the American's mood. The man from Ouarglum was praying. An odd impulse came over the entomologist to join him. Like most American men Jimmy never prayed nor even thought of prayer. So this impulse aroused a queer self-consciousness. He glanced around in Feggy's direction, with a guess at how the little man would take it. The cockney was now barely visible and seemed lost in some reverie.

Million considered it another moment, then knelt awkwardly, almost experimentally in the drizzle. His knees were instantly soaked through. Not a notion of worship came into his head. The chill rain contracted his shoulder muscles into painful knots. The wet stone bruised his knees. There was no prayer in him. But in this venerable attitude, a loneliness came upon him. The black mountains around him and the hurrying sky above him were empty. He knelt to emptiness. There was something appalling about it. He could not pray. But he seemed to grow smaller and smaller among the dark mountains, until he was a tiny kneeling speck amid infinite emptiness. He thought of the man, Ibn Mulai.

A faint gray filtered into the sky. Morning came in imperceptible gradations. Presently he could see the Targui touching his forehead to the stone in a passion of devotion. Then Feggy became quite plain, still deep in thought. An instant after he saw Gwarli stretched out on the stones, fast asleep. A faint vapor arose from his sleeping body as from a sleeping hound. Then he saw the rain that filled earth and sky with a chill perpendicular shimmer.

With the next increment of light, Million made out the figure of a naked man, some thirty yards distant, sitting motionless on the cliff. The man sat upright, legs under him in Arab fashion, and the veil of rain dimmed his features. It was the man Ibn Mulai. The adept's face was without expression. His eyes were closed. Apparent-

ly he was in some sort of trance. At that moment a peak, far to the East, blazed like a candle with the first touch of sun. The glowing peak seemed to hang in midair above a smoking world. The brilliant point lay straight past the adept and framed the long ascetic head in gold.

Million arose with all thought of his own devotions completely dispersed. He shivered violently and rubbed his sore knees. He felt an impulse to go up and speak to the mokaddam. The long dark face fascinated the American.

By Ibn Mulai's side on the rock was a little earthenware bowl with three or four dates in it. The adept's hands lay prone on his thighs. The American went up and touched the mokaddam's dark naked shoulder almost with a feeling of sacrilege. It was cold and without any feeling of life.

"Ibn Mulai!" said Million in a low tone.

He stood looking fixedly at the lifeless face and closed, sunken eyes. A queer sense of necessity came over him. He put both hands on the cold shoulder. "Ibn Mulai!" he repeated earnestly.

A shudder ran through the wet figure, and Million had a queer impression that something had flown back from a distance. The fakir's eyes opened and the balls rolled down and confronted the American.

"What do you wish, my son," he asked.

A queer feeling of childlikeness came over the westerner. He had no clear-cut wish to put into words. Instead his heart was filled with vague and melancholy longings. It was as if the sadness of all human life, which men strive to appease with flesh and food and things, had shown itself naked for an instant, without an object and without and end.

"I am very cold, Ibn Mulai," shivered the youth.

"The sun will warm you presently," said the voice.

"And unhappy, Ibn Mulai."

The fakir reached out a dark hand and touched Jimmy. At the touch it seemed that a warmth flowed out of the adept into the American's body. His fatigue and soreness passed away and left in their stead a sense of profound well being. A great happiness, quite without mental cause, flooded Jimmy's heart. It was as impersonal as sunshine or the laughter of a child. The American stood up and took a deep grateful breath. The feel of the air filling his lungs was delicious.

By now it was full day. A rift had broken in the clouds and behind it lay a depth of African blue. The sunshine spilled through the mountain clefts, and the wet trees glittered.

Goombah Das arose from his long morning prayer. He looked at Million who was coming away from the fakir.

"I see Ibn Mulai has given you a blessing," said the raider in a grave friendly voice.

"I'm completely rested," said Jimmy, and at the moment it seemed so natural he was not astonished by it.

Feggy waked Gwarli. The three men found their horses picking at the grass where they had left them. As Million swung up in the saddle he began thinking over what had occurred to him.

"By the way, Goombah, ought I to have given him something?"

"Of what use would he find your money?" asked the Targui.

"I saw some dates in his bowl," answered the American vaguely.

"A woman brings the mokaddam those dates. For years she has brought two or three dates a day. Once in Algiers a rich Englishman gave the master ten large gold pieces. Thinking to please the old woman the master brought them to the mountain and gave them to her. The next day instead of dates, she brought a platter of cous cous, coffee, a piece of memsib, bread fruit and many other good things. The mokaddam bade her bring back the gold. She did so, and he took both the gold and the food and dropped them over this precipice.

"'I throw my dinner away,' said he, 'because it is forbidden to fatten the body and starve the soul. I throw the gold away because alms are more blessed than gratitude. Bring me my dates. I will never tempt you again.'"

"Did that really happen?" asked Jimmy, amazed at this curious anecdote.

"What difference does it make whether it happened or not—it is true."

"But how can it be tr—" He broke off, drew his bay after the stallion. A little later he began again:

"What I don't understand in the first place—what he gets out of it all—"

"'The sky spreads in vain for the mole,'" quoted the Targui.

"Oh yes, that's all right, but what does he now?"

As the man from Ouarglum made no further reply, the Arkansan fell back on his own thoughts.

Ibn Mulai certainly sat naked among the mountains through heat and chill. He would remain there all through the heat of the coming day. And of what use was it to him? What did it get him?

A thought of Miss Montfairly crossed his mind and he wished the artist could have seen the adept in the rain with the sunlit peak for a corona. Million felt sure it would have made a picture—a wonderful picture. He had a great respect for her work, and an affectionate interest in what she did.

After the rain the air was champagne just off the ice of mountain peaks. Jimmy gulped it, and his thoughts of the mokaddam and his religious impulse vanished.

A convoy of snowy clouds sailed across the sky. Million watched them through the leaves of the great trees under which he rode. The trees were so high that their foliage formed a second stratum of clouds, green, beneath the drifting white. Million could not classify the trees. They bore some sort of white blossom or fruit.

Gwarli still headed the cavalcade down the hinter side of the Atlas range. He twinkled along on stag's legs. Goombah still set the pace on his white stallion. The Targui's light silk clothes had dried very quickly after the rain. He looked as spick and finical as when Million had first seen him sprawling in the Rue de la Kasbah.

The swing of the mare abetted the vagrant mood of Jimmy's thoughts. He wished he had asked Ibn Mulai how this adventure would terminate. He felt sure the adept would have known. Then dozens of questions poured into his mind which he should have asked the mokaddam; for instance, the exact spot where he could find the parasite of the cotton boll weevil. It seemed to Jimmy the adept could have answered him at once. He meditated on this point for several minutes. Such information would have solved the problem of his whole trip around the world. It would have rehabilitated the cotton industry in Texas—everything solved by a timely question asked an adept on a rainy morning.

Then his thoughts shifted to Judith Montfairly. It worried Million that he was failing to keep a tacit appointment with the artist. Men in the South are taught never to break an engagement with a woman if the skies fall, and never to expect a woman to keep an engagement with them in return. The mentors of this chivalric doctrine are the women.

"She'll think I'm a hell of a fellow," mused Jimmy as ruefully as such a morning would permit, "especially when she went to so much trouble for us. That was damn decent of Judy. She's all right!"

Queerly enough, Million used profanity oftener in his thought than in his speech, which he expurgated.

A sudden wheeling and kicking of his mare snatched Jimmy from his reverie. At a turn in the mountain trail, he had almost ridden upon Gwarli crouching beneath a bush. At the mare's attack, the dwarf whipped to the other side of the bush. The bay stood trembling until Goombah Das and Jimmy dismounted.

"Are you tired?" asked Jimmy in French of the little creature. But a glance at the runner disarmed the fear. The pygmy was scarcely panting. He thrummed something in his banjolike voice, pointed in an easterly direction and made a sharp gesture to listen.

The three men fell silent, sifting the forest sounds. First of all, Jimmy heard the breathing of their horses. He erased this into silence and listened for something else. A morning wind breathed among the tops of the tall unknown trees. A locust trilled and was answered. Somewhere near a humming bird poised with a faint barytone murmur. Then into the stillness slipped a rhythm, a syncopation. It grew into sound, detached itself from the forest pianissimo and defined itself as music.

At the point where Gwarli stopped, the trail followed by the riders debouched into a fair roadway. By way of caution, the three riders screened their horses and waited. The music grew louder, and presently one of the oddest processions came around a curve in the road. In front came an old Arab on a donkey; then came six ebony Africans bearing a veiled litter. Following these came a covey of flexuous women ranging from cream to coffee-color. They wore filmy silk veils, and through these Million could see the glint of golden fillets about their hair and the gleam of bracelets and anklets on arms and legs. They walked, or rather swayed behind the palanquin, making little dance steps to their own singing.

As a rearguard, came a number of tumblers, jugglers and acrobats.

There could be no doubt of their profession. One tall negro deftly kept six silver balls in the air as he marched. Now and then an Arab bounced into the air for a somersault. All of it, apparently, was a mere ebullition of high spirits. They had no audience, so far as they knew, except the trees and Bougainvillea thickets. The capering, singing porcession disappeared as it came, led out of sight by the solemn old Arab, and, after an interval, out of hearing. The three men looked at each other.

"Don't all speak at once," said Jimmy.

"A vaudeville, sir," opined Feggy.

The American glanced at the dwarf and immediately scolded: "Gwarli, drop that bug! Turn it loose, sir!"

The Targui sat frowning behind his mask. "We ought to have stopped that crowd," he gutturaled.

"Why so? It would be a pity to crab such a merry bunch!"

"It's a wedding procession."

"Then let them be merry now," said Jimmy cynically, forgetting that he was on the brink of matrimony himself.

"They were carrying the bride to the groom's house."

"In that closed litter?"

"Yes. It's the Arab custom."

"Why should we have stopped it?"

"How do you know what woman was in that litter, *m'sieu'?*" asked Goombah.

Million looked at his companion.

"You mean it might have been Aicha—or Zouie?"

The Targui gave a gesture of assent.

"Most likely, *m'sieu'*. We must be near the count's villa. Who is most likely to make so rich a wedding near here?"

"But he already has the girls with him."

"It is a custom to bring in the bride on a litter, if she must be sent out of the house only to return."

A sinking feeling traversed Million. For the first time since he had left the garden, a genuine moving memory of Aicha's beauty revisited him. The possibility that she had passed within thirty yards of him set him trembling.

"Would she be on her way to be married?" he asked in a queer voice.

Goombah got to his feet.

"Why should she be in the litter?" He whistled, and the white stallion stormed out of the bushes toward him. "We can overtake it."

"Yes, but what 'll we do then?" asked Jimmy, running to his bay.

"See who is in the palanquin."

"But those black fellows won't let us look in."

Goombah galloped down the road.

"They will scatter like dust. Come on!"

The bay followed the stallion's lead, and immediately following came Feggy on the black.

"But look here," called Million above the roll of hoofs, "suppose it is some other woman after all."

"We'll ride away."

"And then the woman's reputation will be ruined, Goombah," objected Jimmy, recalling Aicha's fright when he had first seen her. "This is a funny country—if you just look at a decent woman she's disgraced."

The man from Ouarglum looked around. "Do you think I would risk my happiness for a girl's reputation?"

"You wouldn't?" cried Jimmy, shocked.

"No. Why should I?"

"Not for a woman's reputation?"

The tribesman stared around.

"A woman's reputation is no stronger than the guard around her," he burred.

"I don't get you," called Jimmy, peering at the slit in the mask.

"A woman's reputation lies in bars and veils. If they are weak the reputation goes."

"Look here!" cried Jimmy. "You don't think that of all women?"

"I know it of all women. When the jailers turn loose their prisoners at night you can trust your wives at noon."

"You don't put Aicha in such a class?" demanded the Southerner. His tone caused Goombah to glance around again. It is according to the Arkansas code to take violent action if certain attributes of one's sweetheart are even vaguely questioned. Now Jimmy became aware of his Colts beating a tattoo on his ribs.

"*Messieurs! Messieurs!* Why search the palanquin? It can only hold one woman. If you get one it will warn the other. If you get neither it will warn both."

The cockney's objection was timed and valid. The Targui slackened his speed, but stared down the empty road.

"I believe it was Zouie," he muttered. "It must have been Zouie."

Jimmy rode alongside the raider and reopened the point that had set him on fire.

"Now look here, Goombah, do you deliberately mean to say Aicha would be unfaithful to me?"

The raider must have sensed the young man's growing indignation, for he dropped his satirical tone and asked: "Was she not the betrothed of Count Nalaczi?"

"Certainly."

"Did she not see you once and offer to elope?"

"That's different. She's given me her love, do you understand—her heart. Do you imagine any man in the world could step in now—"

A grating laughter suddenly shook the Targui's shoulders and flapped his black muslin mask. In a sudden rage Jimmy was half minded to draw and shoot it out with this traducer of his fiancée's honor, but at that moment the horses swept around a turn in the road. Fifty yards distant a black boy leveled a long stalklike rifle at the cavalcade and yelled something in Arabic which could only mean halt.

The horses began flinging up their heads and slackening.

Jimmy managed his bay, all the time keeping a troubled eye on the stalk of a gun which apparently was aimed straight at his head.

Goombah Das pulled down his stallion first.

"You can't pass!" cried the black with scared eyes.

"Why not?" burred Goombah coolly.

"It is the order of the master."

"Does he block a French road?"

"This is a private road."

"Who is your master?"

"The Count Nalaczi."

"Why can't we pass?"

"The master makes a marriage tonight."

"And blocks the road!" cried Goombah in astonishment. "Blocks the road on his wedding day! When would he throw it open?"

The black boy felt the force of this objection, for he hedged, and finally said respectfully:

"There are some things a servant cannot speak, *sidi.*"

"Who is he going to marry?"

"You know I must not call the name of beauty, *sidi,* for fear of the evil eye."

"That is true," agreed the man from Ouarglum. There was a little pause, and he added: "So the Count Nalaczi places a guard to turn away his wedding guests?"

"Are you his guests?"

"Can't you see we are his guests?" Goombah indicated the dwarf with a nod. "He sent his servant to direct us."

The black, who still held the rifle poised, now dropped its butt on the ground. The weapon was half a foot taller than its owner.

"Gwarli!" cried the black. "I hadn't noticed him! *Sidi,* I am a wretched man. You see it was my faithfulness."

"What is your name?"

"Panimorpholos; but you will not remember this against me?"

"No; I desired the name of a discreet servant."

"May you safely cross the edge of the sword, *sidi.*"

"But why did my brother, the count, place a guard here at all?" inquired Goombah.

The negro looked up and down the sunlit road at the question, then lowered his tone.

"That is a shameful story, *sidi*. I cannot relate it."

"What is so admirable as discretion," commended the raider.

"Is it possible you do not know?"

"I have just ridden from Ouarglum. I have known the count for many years. We are as brothers born on the same day."

"That is a wonderful horse you ride, *sidi*." Panimorpholos's eyes ran idly over the animal.

"A very good horse."

The black boy twisted.

"You can hear the story from any servant or fellah on the estate except from me, *sidi*, who never chatters. Every one knows it. There is no reason I should not tell it, except I would not repeat such a shameful story."

"Shameful?"

"Yes, shameful!" cried the black. "Disgraceful! I am here guarding this road against a *roumi!*"

"An infidel!"

"Yes, an infidel who may come and steal my master's betrothed."

"Your master's betrothed! Who says anything against my dear friend's betrothed? But what difference does it make what is said? A barking dog does not harm the clouds."

"But it is true!" asseverated the black. "Wali, the bodyservant, overheard a *roumi* speaking to the master at his villa in Al Djezair (Algiers). Another *roumi* had seen her."

"What—saw her?"

"Saw her!"

"And now will my brother still espouse her?"

"Wait! Wait! Wait! That is not all. This *roumi* had written her!"

"No—that is impossible!"

"Yes, it's possible. With a jinni's cunning a second *roumi* disguised himself as a blind and crippled beggar and smuggled himself and his note into the Mustapha Superieur cemetery while the women were celebrating the Friday before Ramadan."

"What a pit is dug for such an infidel!" groaned Goombah.

"The next day this other *roumi*, this beggar, comes to the master's house."

"For his answer?"

"No; that he received in the cemetery. No, he comes and offers to prove the unfaithfulness of my master's betrothed if the master would give him a certain jewel—a stone—"

At this twist in the conversation a sudden amazement flooded Jimmy Million. He leaned toward the guard.

"What is that? Did Feggy—did that beggar tell Nalaczi—"

"What could you expect from a dog of an infidel, *sidi?* He was kicked out of the villa for his pains. My master loved the girl dearer than life itself."

Jimmy wheeled in his saddle. "Feggy, you damn snake—"

The black horse was browsing ten yards distant. His saddle was empty. The undergrowth around him, as far as Jimmy could peer, was empty. Panimorpholos stared at this queer pantomime. Then the negro observed the empty saddle.

"Where is the other rider?" he asked curiously.

"What other rider?" inquired Goombah, without turning to look at the black horse.

"The little man on the black who came to my master's wedding."

"We were only two," said Goombah, still not glancing around. "I led the black, hoping the dwarf would ride."

Panimorpholos stared, bewildered. "A man's eyes are queer things. I would have sworn—"

"Queer indeed," nodded Goombah, "and may you have life and strength."

"May you have life, health and strength," replied the youth, still staring at the empty saddle.

The two men rode slowly forward. The black horse picked up its head and followed.

Jimmy Million scarcely knew where he went or what he was doing. He followed Goombah. Now and then he glanced back over the empty saddle—but it was impossi-

ble to desert the horses and attempt to trail Feggy through the woods. Why had he ever trusted the groveling little cockney in the first place? It had been against his better judgment. In his thoughts he loaded Feggy's name with every oath the genius of Arkansas had concocted.

When they were fifty yards down the road Panimorpholos came pattering after them, out of breath.

"*Sidi*," he panted, "I am as dust beneath your horse's hoofs; but why did you ask the name of my master's betrothed when you already knew the name?"

"To see if you were faithful to your master's counsel. A still tongue is better than gold," and he tossed the black a coin.

The guard bowed until his turban almost touched the dust. "May you have life and health and strength."

The Targui rode on; presently he looked around at the empty saddle, lifted his mask slightly, and spat in the dust.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE FIGHT IN THE CAMEL YARD.

LOVE is a fever that attacks its victim in waves of ever-growing fury until abated by the cold poultice of matrimony. On the crest of such an emotional billow rode Jimmy Million when he came in sight of Count Nalaczi's plantation. He tingled to plunge at once to the rescue of imperiled beauty.

"We must wait for the Bakwa's return," gutturaled Goombah Das for the dozenth time.

Both men stood behind palm trunks, studying the vivid green swale beneath them. A dozen thatched roofs spotted the green; they were far enough below to have the velvety texture of toadstools. Nalaczi's plantation was a sort of natural terrace running east and west, and toward the south it was bounded by a void where another declivity stepped down to some unknown depth. Palms and cork trees marked this sheer southern edge against the gray indefinite haze that lay beyond and below.

The road which the Targui and the American had followed and later had deserted to climb to this point of vantage wound like a yellow thread in the selvage of the terrace. A mountain stream rumbled past the women hunters and lost itself in a tangle of lianas, epiphytes and water growth.

Farther down it reappeared in occasional reflecting streaks, but its course could be more easily traced by the vegetation which formed a vivid green welt across the landscape to where it debouched into the void beyond the plateau.

"Something may have happened to the dwarf," worried Jimmy. "Perhaps he couldn't deliver my note. Maybe he can't get back. Perhaps Panimorpholos grew suspicious and told that we have come. Maybe Feggy—"

"How I ever came to trust such a cur—"

"There are two hundred men down there, *m'sieu*'" burred Goombah.

"What do they with so many?"

"Fellahs on the cotton plantation."

Jimmy pulled at the towlike growth on the palm bole and studied the scene below him at the word "cotton."

"I don't see any cotton."

"Yes, you do," grated Goombah Das. "Those big—"

At that moment Gwarli stepped from behind a clump of hazel bushes. Jimmy was on him in a moment, and seized the paper the dwarf held. He snatched it open and began reading hastily. As he read he flung remarks at Goombah.

"We can come during siesta—the two girls will be in the inclosure behind the fondouk—we can get in from the west side—"

Here Jimmy's face whitened; he swore softly under his breath.

"What is the matter?" inquired the desert man.

"They meant to kill themselves if we hadn't come," gasped Jimmy.

Goombah reached up and settled his mask nervously.

After a pause the Targui spoke.

"We must pick out the fondouk from here. We must know where we are going. This stream of water must run through it."

Both men began studying the whelp of green that ran through the knot of houses.

At last Goombah pointed out a bare rectangle beyond a strip of brown thatch. The stream glinted through a corner of it.

"That's our place," he decided. "Now our horses are a little to the left, near the edge of the plateau. We can reach the inclosure from the south—"

"The note says we enter from the west."

"We'll have to see."

He clucked to Gwarli, and the three mismated companions struck off down the mountainside, each with his separate gait.

The south wall of Count Nalaczi's plantation was some twenty feet high, and served as a protection against the occasional leopard or lion attacks that still annoy the folk of the desert and the Southern Tell.

The wall had been built before the days of the French occupation to withstand the attacks of Tuareg and Tibbu. During the Conquest it had sheltered the patriot armies of the illustrious Abd el Kader. Now it was peaceful enough with vines, flowers and thallophytes sleeping against it in the noontide stillness.

The stream, which Jimmy had seen from above, issued out of the fondouk, or camel yard, in a broad sluice of water. This was guarded against exit or entrance by iron bars set in the stream. The giant, the American, and the dwarf, crossed the creek and moved along the wall, stirring up the warm musky odor of wild cucumber that grew under their feet.

After some twenty-five paces the wall turned at right angles, then continued west again. From the point of inset it was capped with a roof of thatch, which evidently formed stables inside. The reason this particular section of wall had been converted into a stable was because it was penetrated by old portholes, and so formed little slits of windows, which ventilated and afforded a little light to the animals inside.

As the adventurers passed one of these apertures Jimmy heard a queer snarling note within, but the interior was too dark for observation.

A little distance up the stable wall was a barred postern, and to this the dwarf hurried. The gate was quite blank except for broad iron hinges that extended clear across the shutter, and the big heads of hand-wrought nails. Jimmy tested the shutter noiselessly with his shoulder. It was firmly barred.

Gwarli, however, reached in his trousers pocket and drew out a snarl of horse hairs. He made a delicate noose and slipped it in through a minute crack in the shutter. He fished with his noose in evident delight, and after lifting very gently once or twice the hair caught something.

The little monster's flute-player's smile widened. He pulled the hair very gently. The door swung open with a slight creaking. The men stepped through. Just inside lay a negro sound asleep in the noontide. Resting laxly across his breast was a queer old cap-and-ball pistol of the single-shot variety. Three green flies buzzed about his mouth. As Jimmy looked the pendulous lips flopped from side to side and the insects buzzed up. The three men passed on.

A narrow passage between the stables and an interior wall led the way back to the camel yard. A smell of caged animals, quite distinct from that of horses, penetrated this runway. Halfway down Jimmy saw the side of the stable was faced with iron bars.

As the American passed this point a movement inside startled him. He looked around and was surprised to see two hunting cheetahs. The long, narrow animals paced their cage up and down, giving that peculiar final swing to their bodies as they reversed at the end of their beat.

At the end of the passage was a green door fastened by a wooden latch that was worked by a string through a hole. It stood ajar, and through it Jimmy saw the sunlight of the camel yard. He started for it, half running, and in a moment was inside.

At first glance the yard seemed empty and bare, save for the droppings of camels. Then, at the farther end, on a raised stone platform beside the stream, he saw two figures completely shrouded in white melahaf. They sprang up as the men entered. One came running down to Goombah with the peculiar gait of native women who must keep loose sandals on as they run.

The other, a slender white figure, who remained on the platform, grasped Million's entire attention. The whole attitude of the Moorish girl told of a frightened nerving of herself to meet her lover's gaze. Her dark eyes were fixed on Million. With her excited breathing, her filmy veil blew in and out, showing momentary glimpses of an oval face and parted lips.

Now that he was really in her presence, a queer tremulousness seized the American. Such nervous reaction was heightened, no doubt, by his long ride, exposure and lack of sleep. There was a touch of fantasy to his impressions. The girl seemed to glow at him against the ancient walls of the fondouk.

"Aicha?" he almost questioned through dry lips. Then he went forward to her somehow, reaching out his arms.

An exotic fragrance breathed from her melahaf, and her slender fingers crept from its folds into Jimmy's hand. A feeling like some delicious electric vibration tingled up his arm and filled his body. The girl gave a long sigh and leaned into his arms. Million was aware of perfume and a dizzying warmth. The mounds of her bosom were like soft fires. He could sense the very tremors in the turn of her lips pressed to his through the silken film of the haik. For the first time Million realized that never before had the woman in his arms been embraced, or spoken to, or even seen, by any other man.

A tenderness and passion almost bordering tragedy overwhelmed the lover. Tears prickled his lower eyelids. And suddenly it seemed to him that all the passion and æstheticism, the mystery and delirium that make up Africa, were focused and flaming in his arms.

The girl moved her lips a little aside to sigh and whisper the ancient feminine question, if he would always love her thus. It is a question always asked, seldom fulfilled. Upon it hangs the happiness of the woman and of the children she feels beating in her heart.

Million sighed: "Oh, Aicha, forever and ever!"

And that was the peak of his life. A growl from Goombah broke in upon them. Million whirled. He had forgot that he was not alone in the world with the Moorish girl.

At the door of the camel yard stood the black boy, Panimorpholos, and the enormous Japanese who had kicked the dog over the sea wall. The two stood silently watching the two couples. The shadow of the Japanese lay in a big black circle under his feet.

"*Messieurs* seem very intimate friends with the count's family indeed," observed Panimorpholos.

During the swift interval the two parties had been silently taking each other's measure across the fondouk. Instinctively the two pairs of men choose their opponents. The remark of the black boy broke the truce.

Instantly Jimmy Million dashed across the inclosure at the black guard, and Goombah Das charged the huge Oriental. The eyes of Panimorpholos whitened at Million's rush. He made a motion as if he would run. But it was too late, and he struck out, African fashion, with his open palm.

Million ducked, and the blow plopped on his shoulder. Next instant Jimmy uppercut with his left, putting the whole lift of his body into it. It caught the black boy squarely on the tip of the chin. No doubt it was the first trained fist Panimorpholos ever stopped. He rose in air and made a spread-eagle fall backward.

As he fell Million leaped across his chest in Arkansas fashion. They landed heavily with Jimmy astride his enemy. The black gave a terrible grunt. No sooner were they aground than Jimmy began mauling the wretch's face without meeting opposition.

Every blow cut reddish-brown splotches in the ebony skin. The miserable creature wriggled his head trying to escape the bastinado. He worked his black arms up over his face. Jimmy began pounding his unprotected belly.

Panimorpholos curled up in shrieking agony.

"*M'sieu'! Mon Dieu!* Would you kill a man with your hands?"

Jimmy choked him into wheezing silence.

"Not so loud!" he whispered furiously.

Panimorpholos gurgled, walled up his eyes, and waggled his hands in token of surrender.

"Got enough?" snapped the man from Arkansas.

The black lay on his back and stared at Jimmy out of rapidly swelling eyes.

"Got enough? *Mon Dieu!* Do you think I wanted this?"

He put up a hand to his bruised face and began fingering the sticky surfaces where the skin had been peeled.

"Now you stay here," ordered Jimmy, with that masterful feeling that comes with trimming your man. "I'll settle this other."

Jimmy got to his feet and looked at the other. The Targui was in the act of stabbing the Celestial with a kris when the huge man darted in under the blade and made a stroke at the raider's sword arm.

Jimmy's eye could scarcely follow the blur of movement. Came a sharp thud, and the steel spun away, while Goombah's arm dropped as if paralyzed.

The fat man, with a swift and marvelously clever movement of his foot, kicked the kris, a whirling, glittering object, through the sunshine and dropped it into the creek. Next instant the combatants closed.

It was a grotesque struggle. The Targui loomed high above the Japanese. In the very beginning of the struggle their shirts stripped from them like cobwebs. The development of the enormous Targui was remarkable. His tan body was modeled like a prizefighter's. But he had that pitiful Eastern habit of striking with the open palm. His enormous arms drummed a tattoo on the bulk of the yellow man who was simply a smooth tun of flesh. It sounded like the cracks of a bull whip. But the Japanese was under the African's guard, making little dabby motions about the giant's belly. The Targui's face grew distorted with agony. He redoubled his bastinado.

"For God's sake, use your fist!" bawled Jimmy. "Hit him in the head with your fist!"

The American picked out a broad yellow spot just under the burr of the Jap's ear. He flung his whole hundred and eighty pounds into the blow. Million's fist seemed to sink into a rubbery pad. Next instant a wooden sandal struck Million's thigh, spun him around and round and over. The place where the sandal struck burned like fire.

When Jimmy scrambled on his feet again the enormous yellow man had Goombah on his knees, jabbing the giant under the armpits, in the neck, pinching him here and there. The Targui writhed, struck blindly, and visibly wilted. It was as if some immense yellow spider were numbing its victim.

Jimmy rushed from behind, caught the Jap's hair, and pulled. The yellow head gave back, then came forward with a flip. The ruse caught Million at complete surprise. Before he could get his fingers out of the hair he was jerked over on the enormous sweating back. It was like a wet cushion of jelly.

Next instant a hand grabbed his leg and whirled him under the arm of the Japanese. A swift and terrible pressure clamped the American against the Oriental's baggy side and squeezed the breath out of him.

Another instant, and the whole camel yard wheeled around and round, and Million discovered he had been whirled down between the creature's ponderous legs. Then a pressure that made the world blink and flash before his eyes smashed in his stomach and chest.

Jimmy pushed desperately at the ponderous thighs. His diaphragm made spasmodic efforts to get air. He writhed, tried to get his chest out from between the sweaty thighs. The camel yard went red. Next moment the sunshine flickered like a candle and went out.

Jimmy was aroused by hands shaking him. He opened his eyes and saw a woman of fierce and trenchant beauty staring into his face. She was thrusting a stiletto into his hands with some cry in Arabic. Then she almost lifted him up and faced him toward a shocking spectacle.

In the interval when the Japanese had been manhandling Million, Goombah Das had thrown his stallion's plaited leather

rein over the Oriental's head. Now the thong had disappeared in the baggy throat. Its place was marked by two folds of flesh lying together. The wrestler tried to pull Goombah to him, but the huge Targui danced away, jerking the slender cord through the yellow hand. The noose cut deeper and deeper. This slow strangulation was so horrible a sight that Million forget the very stiletto in his hands.

The Jap's eyes bulged in their oblique sockets. His face swelled to a purplish mask. The enormous man's swift, delicate movements became groggy. Then suddenly, instead of pursuing his torturer, the Jap surged back against the noose with his whole weight. At the same moment he drew his head down into the mass of his shoulders, tensing his enormous neck. His face went grayish black. His oblique eyes glowed like red coals against this blackness. There came a muffled pop. The noose snapped loose from its victim. Came a startled moment. Jimmy leaped forward with his stiletto; but it was unnecessary. The vast Oriental lurched forward with a jet of blood spurting from his short nose into the dust and dung. He lay motionless, a quivering lump in the hot sunshine.

Goombah grated something in Arabic, waved the fugitives toward the entrance, and ran ahead himself. When the Targui reached the door he discovered that it was barred from the other side and the latchstring withdrawn.

Just then Jimmy became aware of a wide shouting. He could hear hundreds of feet running back and forth. A human storm was brewing about the fondouk. Then he observed that Panimorpholos had slipped out of the camel yard during the fight.

CHAPTER IX.

THE ABYSS OF SAFETY.

AFTER two or three surges Goombah gave up the door and glanced around the walls of the camel yard. They were sheer and high. Outside the noise increased. A black head popped over the inner wall, peered down on the prisoners, and yelled in Arabic.

The American fumbled for his gun, ready to take a pot shot at the Kybele, when it occurred to him that he would better not add murder to the calendar of his misdeeds in Algeria. So he grabbed up a stone and threw. The missile struck the top of the wall, sent stone splinters over the watcher, who dropped abruptly out of sight.

Like all American youths, Million had played baseball and had pitched. Now he snatched up a handful of stones and kept an eye on the top of the wall. Presently he saw the long stalk of an Arab rifle rise up. He lined out two swift ones at it, and the bearer below stopped climbing. The woman Zouie saw what Jimmy was about, and began gathering projectiles for the human catapult. She brought perhaps two dozen in her skirt. They were all too small. Still it made little difference. Such a defense was momentary, and necessarily futile.

Just then Goombah called to Million in a strained voice. The raider was in the water, one foot up against the obstructing bars, his hands gripped another, and he flung the whole strength of his body against the iron.

The ridges of his back knotted in effort. The American ran to the giant's aid. He put a foot against the bar Goombah held and his hands on Goombah's footbar. The two men formed a cross. The bars must have been deeply rusted, for one snapped. Next moment the Targui jerked out the broken bar for a prize pole and broke out two more.

Jimmy glanced around and saw the rifleman had reappeared on the wall and was leveling on the Targui. The man from Arkansas swung out his thirty-eight and fired on the drop. The rifleman's turban leaped off his head, and the man himself bobbed below. As he did so his gun fired and the bullet splashed the water near Million.

Goombah took the woman Zouie in his arms and disappeared with her through the watergap in the wall. Million beckoned Aicha to him. She ran quickly, making a little detour to avoid the bulk of the Jap, who lay in the dust. Jimmy was about to pick the girl up when Goombah reappeared in the aperture. Aicha jumped into his

huge outstretched arms. He stooped and reëntered the watergap. Jimmy followed at his heels. The water was icy.

As soon as the fugitives were out of the fondouk Million heard the door swing open and the rabble rush inside. He guessed that their immunity from attack had depended on the Targui costume which they wore. Many battles have taught the Kybeles of the Tell a large respect for the desert raiders.

The three fugitives pushed through a tangle of watergrowths and rejoined Zouie. An uproar, mingled with shouted directions, now filled the camel yard. Several shots whipped the water in the gap. The blacks bombarded the hole through which their prisoners had escaped. From somewhere in the stables came a heavy baying of hounds.

During this interval the fugitives were flying down the wall toward their horses. Jimmy ran ahead to loose the mounts by the time the women got there, when a hundred yards ahead of him he saw a figure in a flying burnoose cut across from the villa, headed in the same direction as he. It looked like Panimorpholos. He fancied the guard, in coming back from his watch, had stumbled upon the hidden horses.

Million set out at full tilt after the black boy, yelling for him to halt. He drew his revolver again and ran yelling, "Stop, or I'll shoot! Stop!"

He did fire. At the report Panimohpholos snapped behind a clump of esparto grass and waved his turban from his covert. Jimmy slackened his speed, but kept the turban covered. The American was wabbly from this eternal fighting, running, riding—yes, loving, too, for that had taken its meed of energy.

He trotted up to the clump on legs of lead, all the time warning Panimorpholos not to move. As he came up he decided to force the black boy to help with the horses. When he reached the spot nobody was there. The turban hung on a stem of the feathery grass. At some distance in the coppice he heard a snorting and a trampling of hoofs.

With a sudden spasm of energy Million sprinted forward, bellowing every oath he could lay tongue to. Immediately he heard the crash of undergrowth and the thrum of running horses.

The uproar dwindled swiftly. Desperation seized Million. At that moment, through a gap in the covert, he glimpsed the black boy flash past, bareheaded, beating the horses. The American poked a shaky revolver and fired again. A distant laugh answered him.

The man from Lonoke turned around with a ghastly face. He found his companions struggling after him through the undergrowth.

"The horses are gone!" he yelled desperately.

Goombah stopped in the act of holding aside some aloe spikes for the women to pass.

"Gone?"

"Driven off!"

"Who found them?"

"Oh, that hell hound, Panimorpholos!"

The half-naked giant looked about the covert. Million stood with threads of smoke twisting out of his revolver.

"Did they get the stallion, too?"

"Not a thing left!"

"That's queer. I didn't hitch Selim—I never do." He stood, evidently trying to make some new plans for this dilemma. The baying of hounds broke out in the distance.

The raider listened and seemed to make a note of this in his calculations. Presently he turned and spoke. "If you women desire to live you will find life in the count's villa."

The woman Zouie made a passionate negative gesture and took a step toward her husband. As she did so an aloe spike snatched the white haik from her head. For a moment she was bare before the men. Her hair had been shaved to the scalp. Its bluish pattern covered her skull like a grotesque tattoo. Her face was pale as marble and regular as a cameo. But with her hair gone she looked maimed. Her head seemed too small. Somehow the very animal perfection of her face made her disfigurement more shocking.

For a moment the woman stared at the swift repugnance in the faces of the men.

Then she saw her haik on a thorn, and reached up a hand to her head. With a cry she snatched the gauze from the thorn, pulled it over her dishonor, turned, and fled toward the distant hounds.

Goombah strode after her the next moment. Jimmy and Aicha followed. The Targui caught the woman by the arm and swung her into a southwest course. This was a long angle back to the stream which they had deserted and to the edge of the great plateau.

"We must get to the watercourse," burred the Targui. "There will be a battue for us. We must dodge the dogs." The two couples plunged on side by side through the bushes.

The fugitives were hot and breathless when they reached the stream again. The pursuing uproar had increased. Jimmy reached a point of vantage and peered down the creek at the chase. He saw an old Arab teasing a pack of hounds with some rags of Goombah's shirt, which he had lost in the fight. He flapped their noses with it while they vented the long, desolate howls of man hunters.

The mere sight of the bloodhounds sent dismay through Jimmy. He had helped trail many a black chicken or corn thief in Arkansas with such animals. A little later the dogmaster put his pack across the stream, and they vanished from sight with noses to the ground.

Following them came a rabble of Kybeles, Koulouglous, half dozen or so of the gaily appareled jugglers and acrobats, some young boys, brown and black—all yelling at this human chase. A bunch of this crowd stood uncertain how to cross the icy stream, when they scattered before something.

Million waited another second to see what this could be, when the enormous bulk of the Japanese wrestler splashed through the creek, drawing two thongs after him. At the end of the thongs were two muzzled cheetahs. These cleared the water with easy, catlike bounds and followed the hounds with nervous flicking tails.

Filled with dismay, Million turned and ran down the creek after the Targui and the women. The mountain stream came up about his waist and froze out what courage he had left. Goombah again led the way, chopping through overhanging vines and masses of algæ in the water. Here and there they could walk upright, but oftener they were forced to stoop and go half bent in a tunnel of growth that met above their heads. Fortunately the current, which grew more rapid all the time, aided their flight.

Once Aicha gave a little cry. A diapered water snake had dropped from a limb on her arm, but just as Million lurched forward to unwrap it a flick of Goombah's kris snipped off its head. Evidently at some period in the camel yard the raider had found time to fish his knife out of the water.

By this time the course of the battue was plainly discernible. The dogs were coming back from the place where the horses had been hitched. But when they struck the water there came the long, wailing cries of hounds at fault.

The whole party hurried in their efforts downstream. Jimmy speculated on how long before the hounds would strike scent again. Even with the thought a mouth belled out much closer to them. Some dog on land had whiffed the fugitives, perhaps where a hand or head had touched a bush. At the signal the whole pack came at full cry, coursing both sides of the jungle.

Aicha's face was as white as her torn haik. Her lips were purplish from cold, and her eyes full of terror. Now and then she tried to push down the skirts of her melahaf in the water.

Jimmy overtook her and tried to aid her in wading over the uncertain bottom. Once she looked at him, and Million realized, with a sort of shock, that they were complete strangers. That physical and neural excitement called love had been frozen in abeyance, and the whole affair assumed that nightmarish quality which belongs to all unaccustomed and hazardous experiences.

He kept looking at this strange girl, and her foreignness helped accent this impression. Her face, with its straight nose and full lips, did not have even the familiar racial ensemble that would have made him

feel at home with any American, English, or even Dutch girl. He could interpret nothing about her face except that she was more than weary and half frozen.

The American helped her along as best he could. The howl of a hound not forty feet behind spurred their flagging efforts. The girl stumbled. Million grabbed a vine to support them both, but Goombah Das dropped back from the front, picked her up in his arms, and strode ahead with her. Million saw her drop her head on his shoulder and close her eyes.

The woman Zouie automatically dropped back to Million. She went along, stooping under the matted overgrowth, with her head turned away from the American. Once Jimmy attempted to assist her in a difficult place. She wriggled her arm out of his hand; she seemed self-sufficient.

For some time, and indeed quite insensibly, the noise of the hounds and battue had been giving way to a monotone ahead of the fugitives. Now, when Million became aware of this sound, it filled the jungle like an organ chord. It grew steadily louder, and presently the shouting of the hunters and the howling of the dogs were all but overpowered.

A little later the Targui stopped in midstream. Here both banks were so choked that it was impossible to climb out or in on either side. Immediately in front of the refugees a heavy mist filled the jungle, and in this mist rose a crush of plant life like a green column—airplants, lianas, epiphytes, what not, a chlorophyllaceous crush that piled up and up, sucking in the life-giving vapors. He could nowhere see the summit of this verdant upboiling of life.

When Jimmy tried to stop against the current he found it difficult. The chill water boiled up around his waist and dragged him along. Involuntarily he clung to the Targui woman, and the two stood. Ahead of them Goombah drew his big knife and began hacking a passage straight to the brink of the falls.

What the raider meant to do Million could only guess. Perhaps he meant to hide, or to climb up the vines, or to bury themselves in the water on the brink—everything was equally improbable.

In order to chop, Goombah was forced to put down Aicha. The girl lost her footing instantly and was forced to cling to Million and Zouie and the vines. The Targui woman, however, appeared quite as strong as the American. Her wet melahaf defined a mature and voluptuous perfection.

Such opulence of mold was in keeping with the severe beauty of her face. She made Jimmy think of the "Venus de Milo" in the Louvre. The thought of her disfigured head annoyed Million. If she had had an arm gone, like the statue, it would have been less repugnant, he fancied.

The trio kept creeping down after Goombah. Presently Zouie, with her arm about Aicha's waist, supported most of the girl's weight. They kept edging along, for some incomprehensible purpose, until the edge of the falls lay behind a thin veil of vines. Beyond boiled up the mist. A faint new note attracted Million's ear. He peered around to see a hound lunging furiously against their covert not ten feet distant. He could see its mouth trumpet and its throat swell with its frantic howling.

Next instant a pressure of Zouie's hand and a shriek caused Jimmy to whirl. Aicha was being washed through the vines toward the smooth glasslike turn of the falls. Jimmy lunged after her, but the Targui woman happened to move in his way and stopped him dead.

For a moment Jimmy saw the girl's terrified face, then Goombah Das swung down at full length. He caught her mop of hair, stopped her for a moment on the brink; then, by her hair and her two hands, he lifted her out and pushed her up a thick vine as if she had been a child. She clung where he placed her, with her hair and robe raining a shower over the raider's huge torso.

Then Goombah beckoned to Million. Jimmy loosed his hold and caught the vine as he dashed past. The Targui helped him out and shoved him up the vine after the girl. Then the raider motioned to his disfigured wife. Zouie stared at him and shook her head. Her face was as white as the mist. Goombah beckoned again. She loosed her hold and drifted past.

She made no effort to catch the anchorage, but would have gone straight over the abyss had not the man from the Ouarglum lifted her cleanly from the stream and shoved her up after Million.

At the edge of the vine thicket the bloodhound was frantic at this rapid movement. It was joined by two more, and their hullabaloo reached Jimmy's ears.

What the Targui meant to do or could do in such a position it was impossible to guess. The mist that arose from the falls swayed like a great white pillar with the wind, or broke and vanished for a moment only to lift its wet breath again. During these lucid intervals Jimmy saw the liana up which they had taken refuge reached out and over the falls to a dizzy height to its anchorage in the crest of a leaning cork tree.

Indeed, the great brown cable of a vine arose to such a height that it looked like a mere thread that sprayed into a hundred gossamer attachments to the cork. It was impossible to climb it. Gwarli would have failed.

Then, straight out from the brink of the plateau, at much the same height, stood the crests of some pinsapos and another sort of unknown tree rising from the depths below. The nearest was about a hundred feet distant, and its whitish green foliage stirred continually in the gusts of air whipped down by the plunging water.

The men and women were skillfully placed, for Aicha was soon unable to support herself, and slid down on Million's shoulders. Her hair fell about his head and shoulders with its alien perfume, and her body had that gentle warmth which a chilly *milieu* seems never to affect in a woman. Her weight was not distressing, for the American wrapped his left leg around the vine and knotted its foot under his right knee, sailor fashion. With this purchase he kept his place without effort; however, his left leg soon became numb.

The only end Jimmy saw to this curious retreat was that the battue should come up and eventually find them. Or if they did not find them, he did not see how they would ever get back up the swift current or ashore.

The three dogs were joined by a fourth, all shoving furiously against the matted vines, their bloodshot eyes fixed on their prey.

Jimmy peered anxiously for the hunters. He tried to listen for the shouts of the beaters, but they were quite lost in the roar of the water.

Then suddenly Aicha gripped the American's shoulder.

"*M'sieu'!*" she gasped. "Oh, Allah! Look!"

The American followed her gaze and saw a bright patch of color on the body of a leaning tree. That was all he saw, and he was about to lift his eyes questioningly to Aicha again when he saw the glowing spots of black and yellow had the form of a cheetah.

The American stared. It crept up with such crouched stealth that it appeared not to move at all. Its round, greenish eyes were fixed on the girl.

Million looked at the sinister beauty of the hunting panther and decided that here should go his last shots. He began maneuvering to get his pistol, when he felt a heavy thumping on the liana below him. He wondered if he fired and wounded the panther would it spring? If so it would strike Aicha. A thought came to him to take Aicha's place. He wondered if Zouie could hold the girl up?

He glanced down with an idea of making the shift, when he saw something that flushed every other thought out of his brain. The Targui was chopping the vine in two with his knife. He hacked furiously. For a moment Million stopped breathing, then cried: "Goombah! Goombah! For God's sake!"

At his movement the panther made a quick run up the leaning bole. At the same instant there came a tearing and crackling as the vines gave way. The liana was falling, down, down and out over the precipice. Horror washed through Million. He went giddy. The precipice swung away from him.

The panther launched, but its flying form fell short of the moving vine. It sailed past them, spread out, like an enormous cat, a glory of black and yellow, and in a

long parabola disappeared in the mist below.

Aicha was choking Million. She had slipped down somehow into his arms, clutching her face to his, mingling her terror with his.

With deliberation the great length of the liana swung farther and farther out. Jimmy realized they were not falling—they were swinging. He looked up. Far above the tendrils that moored the mighty vine popped and snapped. Million expected its anchorage to give way. Then he saw the great pendulum would bump into the whitish-green tree.

Instinctively he twisted to grab the succoring branches. Every person on the vine shifted for the catch. Next instant the liana smashed into the foliage. Million grabbed blindly with fuzzy leaves and twigs whipping his face and stinging his eyes. His groping arms found a limb as large as the calf of his leg. He kept his grip on the vine and wrapped both arms around the limb.

Below him Goombah was making the same sort of desperate anchorage. Almost at once the backswing of the enormous vine tore at the men. A knifelike pain set up just under Million's floating ribs.

"Aicha! Get across quick!" he gasped. His eyes burned. He clenched them shut, trying not to think of the abyss beneath him.

"Go across! Go across!" he wheezed.

"I—I cannot, *m'sieu'!*" she wailed, clinging to him.

Million could say nothing more. He knew if Goombah Das loosed his hold to help the girl the weight of the vine would tear him out instantly. He clenched, gripped with shut eyes. He could feel his arms inching loose. Suddenly Aicha lightened.

Jimmy strained up his neck at the miracle. Zouie had crossed to the tree, climbed up above them, and was hauling up the Mooress by the hair of her head. The girl darted across in a spasm of terror. Just then he heard Goombah below him gasp: "When I count three—one—two—three—"

Million dropped away his legs and hung almost lifeless. The Targui woman crept down to him, reached out, caught his dangling legs, and pulled them into the tree. Cold sweat covered the American under his wet clothes; his body ached about the floating ribs.

Above him he saw Aicha glued to a limb, her face an exquisite study in terror through her black disheveled hair. Immediately at him was Zouie; her haik was gone again, and her pitiful bluish disfigurement damned her voluptuous perfection.

Jimmy's weakness and gratitude brought an almost maudlin compassion for the woman. Tears came to his eyes. He was twitching in every muscle.

"H-help me to a limb!" he gasped.

The woman reached up her white, rounded arms. The hands that caught him were shapely. As she helped him down to a horizontal branch the warmth of her body sent a delicious comfort through his whole being. He reached his resting place, sat inert, and the woman held him in place. Through the foliage and the mist the entomologist saw the great liana vibrate once or twice and then hang midway over the falls.

As he looked with weary eyes a crowd of men pushed their way through the jungle to a little open space on the plateau just to one side of the leaping water. They were a rabble of blacks with here and there the bright motley of an acrobat or a juggler. They gave way to make room for two figures.

One was of enormous girth, and he still held one of the hooded cheetahs in leash. The other was the trim and carefully attired figure of Count Nalaczi. This was the end of his wedding party.

The torn branches and vines over the falls told an eloquent and tragic falsehood to the battue. The riflemen peered down the smooth, glittering debouch where the stream made its leap into space. They lingered, peering and craning down, loath to leave the scene of a tragedy.

At last the count made a weary gesture, and the herd of fellahs fell back, struggling through the coppice.

For long minutes the count and the wrestler stood side by side, looking into

the roaring void. Neither moved. The cheetah at last crouched down at the end of the leash, put its muzzle between its paws and slept.

After a long while the wrestler took his master's arm, and the two moved away through the jungle, the cheetah yawning and treading delicately after them. Million watched them disappear hazily. The warmth of the Targui woman filled him with a vast comfort. His eyes dropped shut from weariness, strain, chill, and long lack of rest, and he fell fast asleep in her arms.

(To be concluded NEXT WEEK.)

She Drove Him to It

by

Howard Rockey

"WHO'S the chap that looks like a composite of Lloyd George and Beau Brummel?" Robert Hardinge looked across the luxurious studio apartment at a tall, slender, æsthetic man in a faultlessly tailored frock coat.

"Oh, that's Hubert Raleigh, the playwright," answered Charlie Clarke, pausing in the act of shaking up a cocktail. "He's very much of a social lion, something of a nut, and really quite some pumpkins. He had four shows on Broadway at one time last season, and is said to have drawn down all sorts of coin in royalties. He rides around in a limousine that resembles the Queen of Sheba's boudoir, and I understand his study looks like the den of an Eastern potentate. Temperamental duck, but not a bad sort at all, and he has real ability."

"He certainly seems popular with the women," Hardinge remarked, observing the group of stunningly gowned femininity gathered admiringly about the author. "If he'd have his hair cut and take that monocle out of his eye, he'd look almost like a human being."

Clarke laughed. "I suppose it's part of the game, but I must confess, myself, that I never could understand why a genius has to make eccentricities a sort of trademark by which his superiority over common mortals is to be recognized."

"Are you two making fun of my lion?" asked Elsie Clarke, joining them, pretty and dainty as the charming silver points and portraits she created. "Because, if you are, I shall be angry with you. He's really very wonderful, and interesting to talk to, and he's a he-man, too, decorated with half the orders Europe has to bestow for gallantry in action."

"Well, he certainly deserves a medal for gallantry in a drawing room," chuckled her husband. "Just look at the expression of adoration on the face of Babs Hardinge."

"Don't be silly, Charlie," protested his wife. "Of course Babs is interested in

him, and better still, he is very much interested in her. He's talking about giving her the leading rôle in his new play."

"He's what?" exploded Richard Hardinge. "Is the man crazy, or is Babs—or are you?"

"None of us are," Elsie told him. "You know Babs has talent, and has always longed to express it."

"I know she's frightfully stage struck and always has been," Hardinge responded. "But aside from being beautiful, I'm afraid Babs hasn't a single requisite for becoming a great actress—or even a mediocre one."

"Evidently Mr. Raleigh doesn't agree with you." Elsie smiled. "He just said that Babs was exactly the type he was seeking for the rôle of *Muriel Mathers* in his latest work 'Fetters of Fashion'. I thought so myself, when he read me the manuscript, and that was why I invited Babs here this afternoon to meet him."

Elsie was always doing that. She was forever planning things for other people, and eternally forgetting to do things for herself. She delighted in exploiting the supposed talents of her friends and totally forgot, or else did not know how, to make the most of her own very real ability.

"Why, Elsie!" exclaimed Hardinge, "you're not serious—surely—in thinking that Babs would go on the stage—or that I'd ever consent to it, if she were so foolish as to consider the thing earnestly."

"Why not?" asked Elsie. "You and Charlie are both charter members of the Husbands' Protective League. You don't think your wives ought to do a single thing but sit home and wait for you to get through playing bridge at the club, or chasing about the golf links. I grew tired of it and insisted upon opening this studio and painting people and selling my pictures—and I told Charlie I meant to go on with it whether he liked or not. And you don't like it, one little bit, do you?" She turned with a saucy little face, in the direction of her husband.

"Can't say I do," admitted Clarke. "In the first place you're ruining your eyes."

She turned them on him—great brown eyes that were twinkling with amusement. "And I suppose Robert is thinking that if Babs went on the stage she would lose social caste and ruin her reputation."

"It isn't that," Hardinge said, "it's the fact that she'd make a monkey of herself."

"Or you?" suggested Elsie mischievously. "You're a couple of cross old bears, both of you!"

Hardinge saw his wife and Raleigh adjourn to a window seat piled with silken pillows and sit down together, talking earnestly. He read the light of ambition in his wife's expression, and he was genuinely sorry they had come. Ever since he had first known Babs, she had been mad to go on the stage. She had played in ever so many amateur theatrical affairs, and was eternally reading the most erotic plays. He had been hauled to the theater three and four times a week, in addition to which Babs attended frequent matinées. He had let her have her own way until now, but he felt that if she really meant to do this thing, it was high time for him to interfere.

His hostess turned to greet some newly arrived guests, and Hardinge sauntered somewhat uneasily toward the window seat where his wife was raptly listening to Raleigh.

"I am sure you could do it splendidly, Mrs. Hardinge," he was saying, as Bob came up. "You will be sympathetic with the character. You will be able to impart to it just the touch of reality and naturalness for which I had hoped. So many well known professional folk are just a trifle lacking in the subtleties of social niceties, and this part requires a perfect portrayal of them—"

Babs's cheeks were flushed with excitement as she interrupted him to present her husband, and Hardinge felt himself surprised at the strength of the grip of the playwright's hand. Instinctively, he rather liked the man, but he wished he would stop putting such utterly silly notions into Babs's mind.

"You mustn't let Mr. Raleigh flatter you *too* much," he warned her. "I'm afraid he is merely trying to be polite."

"Indeed I am not!" Raleigh hastily assured him. "I have heard Mrs. Hardinge

recite, and I saw her in Achmed Ben Hassan's tableaux at the Plaza last month. She was glorious as Cleopatra, and she will absolutely personify my *Muriel Mathers*."

"Well, we can talk it over another time," stalled Hardinge, feeling distinctly uncomfortable under the glance of disdainful reproach which Babs turned upon him.

"There is nothing to talk over, Bob," she said. "Mr. Raleigh and I have discussed it thoroughly, and he is coming to read me the play to-morrow afternoon."

"Yes, indeed," said Raleigh pleasantly. "You see, there is no time to lose. We start rehearsals on Monday, and we hope to have the play on within six weeks. Naturally, with limited experience, Mrs. Hardinge will need a little coaching, so the sooner we begin the better for all of us."

"But Babs!" protested Hardinge.

"But nothing," answered his wife. "I have made up my mind. This is the great opportunity I have longed for, and I think it is wonderful that Mr. Raleigh has such confidence in me. Think of it, Rob—no apprenticeship—no long years of struggle! I'm to step on the stage for the first time as the leading lady in a play by our most successful modern author—"

"Oh, Mrs. Hardinge!" deprecated Raleigh, but he was plainly flattered, and Hardinge saw that the man seemed sincere in his belief that Babs could do what he wished.

He shrugged, seeing that further argument, at the moment, was useless, but he meant to take up the matter with Babs when they were alone. He didn't intend to have her go on the stage in Hubert Raleigh's play, nor in any other. He didn't like the atmosphere of the theater, although about all he knew of it, back stage, was a recollection of his college days, when he had fancied himself smitten with a calcimined blonde in the chorus of a tanktown musical show. That some actors and actresses are really very charming, cultivated men and women, never had dawned upon him, and he regarded the whole life as artificial and somewhat beyond the pale of activities of women such as Babs.

"Fancy a descendant of the Richmond Vances appearing on the stage!" he reflected "to say nothing of the wife of a Hardinge!"

He was mighty proud of her lineage, as well as of his own, and his regard for his ancestors was almost barbaric in its intensity. He consoled himself for his comparative poverty with the recollection of the richness and blueness of his blood, and he hated to think of the masks of comedy and tragedy quartering his crest. But he knew Babs's disposition, and he realized all too keenly that he had a difficult task ahead of him if he was to hope to dissuade her from accepting Hubert Raleigh's offer.

But he did not mention the matter again until they reached home that evening, and were seated in the library of their modest, but comfortable suburban home. His wife had been strangely silent on the way out in the train, and he knew that she was pondering over the matter that was perplexing him.

"Babs," he said at last, "I really wish you would put this notion out of your head."

"Well, I sha'n't," she told him decisively. "I've been weighing it from every angle, and I know just what your objections are. Mr. Raleigh has agreed to pay me four hundred dollars a week, and he's going to bring the contract out to-morrow—"

"Four hundred dollars a week!" gasped Hardinge. His monthly salary was only a hundred dollars more, and for months he had earned practically nothing in commissions. He was a clean-cut chap with a pleasing personality, and a circle of acquaintances which, in normal times, enabled him to sell a considerable amount of bonds. Recently, however, his clientele appeared to be utterly without funds, and only the previous week he had heard the firm discussing the advisability of canceling the drawing accounts of all their salesmen.

The suggestion had come as a blow, for only sixty days were to elapse before the third payment on the mortgage of their little home would fall due. How to raise the necessary amount without borrowing it had puzzled him considerably, and his wife was aware of the fact.

"It is a real stroke of good fortune in every way," Babs disarmed him with a smile. "It will afford me the chance I've always wanted, and it will give us money enough to clear the house of our indebtedness and have it all for our own, with no more payments to worry about."

"I'll raise the money some way," he objected. "Don't you worry about that. Besides, I'm not the type of man to let my wife support me. Anyway, it wouldn't do me any particular good at the office to have it known that my wife was on the stage—"

"Being on the stage isn't as though I were in jail—or the divorce court," she reminded him. "There's nothing scandalous about it, and besides, I mean to make good and earn a name for myself."

"After which I suppose I'll be known as Babs Hardinge's husband!" he growled.

But she only threw her shapely arms about him and kissed the frown from his brow. "Now do be sensible about this, and don't make me argue with you any more. I don't want to go against your wishes, but you simply mustn't object, for I'm determined to do it."

That settled it. Babs always did as she pleased, and had done so from childhood. So Hardinge knew there was no use protesting any further. It was going to be a bitter pill, but he would have to swallow it. However, there was just one ray of hope. The play might fail or she might not make good, and then it would soon be over. Of course, such an occurrence would wound Babs's pride, but perhaps, after all, it was better that she should go ahead and get the whole idea out of her head.

The next day, Raleigh came out on the two o'clock train with the manuscript under his arm. He read it to her from cover to cover, and Babs was fascinated. She began to see herself as *Muriel*, and as soon as the playwright had gone, she took up her post before the mirror and began reading her lines aloud. It was a peculiar sort of play, not altogether unpleasant, yet by no means risqué. The character was not a lovely one, but Babs told herself, there were women just like that in the world—vain, mad about clothes, improvident and inconsiderate of others. The fate that befell *Muriel* in the last act, would prove an object lesson to society, and she gloried in the opportunity of giving them its great truth.

Her elation nearly amounted to egotism, and her husband perceived this as soon as he came home. But his eyes opened wider as she showed him the contract Raleigh had brought with him, and which she was to go in town to sign in David Klauberg's office the following morning. There was the salary in plain figures—four hundred dollars a week. It seemed like a dream. Of course, whatever Babs earned would be velvet, so in less than two months they would have more than enough to pay off the mortgage that had been worrying them, with a tidy sum left over.

"I suppose I have no right to howl," he said resignedly. "You'll be able to buy yourself all sorts of things that I can't afford to give you, and I can see that it wouldn't be fair to deny them to you."

"Of course the money will be nice," Babs said with a sigh, "but that isn't the part I'm thinking about. It's the chance to do something worth while—to act—to sway audiences and give vent to the latent talent that's in me."

"Humph!" grunted Hardinge, then his expression changed from one of acquiescence to one of doubt. "Is this show going to stay in New York, or travel on the road?" he asked.

"It will open in Atlantic City," Babs said, "and then come to New York. If the public likes it, I suppose it will stay on Broadway for a whole season—maybe two. Eventually, I imagine it will go on the road. By that time, however, I'll have made my reputation and they'll probably cast me in a new rôle and let some one else play *Muriel* on tour."

That set Hardinge thinking. It would be bad enough to have his wife on the stage right in New York, where he could call at the theater and take her home each evening after the performance, but to have her go on the road would be unendurable. It was not merely his own lonesomeness in her absence that he pictured, but the thought of her being alone in strange cities and unfamiliar hotels and restaurants which

haunted him. The prospect was decidedly unpleasant, and he gave a great deal of thought to it during the next few days.

Rehearsals had begun, and Babs had fallen into the habit of going into town with him in the mornings. Then he would call at the stage door after the stock exchange had closed. At first, the experience rather thrilled him and took him back to his callow days when he had thought it the smart thing to wait in the narrow alley outside some theater. In a way, it added a touch of romance to married life, and it almost seemed to him that he was courting Babs all over again.

He had wanted to be present at one of the rehearsals, secretly eager to see what talent Babs really had, and how she was getting on, but both Raleigh and Babs put their foot upon his desire. Raleigh said that he could not permit outsiders to be present, and in any event, the fact that Hardinge was looking on would tend to make Babs nervous. Babs herself put her refusal on another basis. She said she did not wish him to see her as *Muriel* until the opening night, with the lights and the scenery and her gorgeous costumes—which latter were making heavy inroads on the tiny Hardinge bank balance. However, there was the four hundred dollar a week salary coming after the opening of the show, and Babs said they could soon pay back all that she was drawing on now.

Elsie Clarke occasionally called at the theater and went to luncheon with Raleigh and Babs. On other days, Babs would slip out to some nearby restaurant with Raleigh, or with Crawford Holbrooke, the leading man of the play. Robert was never included in these midday parties, although he was sometimes permitted to join them at tea at the Claridge or the Ritz after the close of the day's rehearsing. He felt like a fish out of water. He rather liked Raleigh, but he formed a distinct dislike for handsome Crawford Holbrooke, with his easy manner, his splendid physique and his distinguished gray hair.

Hardinge was all the more disgruntled because Babs seemed to like Holbrooke very much, and once or twice he clenched his fists beneath the tablecloth when he heard Babs and the actor discussing some love scene. He did not like the idea of any man holding his wife in his arms, even in make-believe, nor did he understand that Holbrooke regarded such caresses simply as part of the day's work. In fact, Holbrooke had little or no personal interest in Babs. He endured her presence in the company because he liked the idea of having an unknown actress play opposite him, thus adding greater luster to his own name, and in the public esteem making him the star. Besides, Holbrooke's popularity was beginning to wane, and he was more than glad to have a part in a Raleigh play under David Klauberg's management.

But one evening, as they made their way out to their country home, Hardinge was particularly morose. Babs was not fully conscious of it until they sat down to dinner, and then, observing his mood with some alarm, she inquired what was the matter.

Hardinge seemed reticent at first, but she pressed him for an answer and he finally blurted it out. "I was fired this afternoon," he said. "I haven't sold ten thousand dollars' worth of bonds in four months, and the firm had to cut down expenses. I don't know when they'll take me back and I don't know where to turn to get another job."

"I'm sorry," said Babs gently. "It's too bad, after the way you've worked for them, but fortunately we don't have to worry. Two weeks more and the show will be on and I'll be drawing a salary big enough for us both."

Hardinge flushed. "I knew you'd say that, and that was the reason I hated to tell you what's happened. I can land somewhere, of course, and you know I can't sit around and let you support me. The Hardinges are not that sort!"

"Now don't be so uppish!" admonished Babs. "Didn't I marry you for better or worse? If we hadn't a cent I'd pin my faith in you, but as it is, it's foolish not to be glad that I will soon be earning some money."

"It makes me feel like a fool!" he said bitterly. "Folks won't understand and a lot of gossipy people will say that I delib-

erately chucked my job in order to let you pay the bills while I loaf around and do nothing."

"How perfectly foolish!" said Babs, and then she seemed suddenly possessed of a brilliant idea. "How would you like to join the company?" she asked.

"Do what?" asked Hardinge in amazement. "I'd make a wonderful actor—like fun!"

"I don't see why not," his wife told him indulgently. "Of course, dear, I realize that you have no inborn talent—that you would never be able to handle a really big rôle—like Mr. Holbrooke—"

"Damn Holbrooke!" Hardinge swore. "You can bet that I'm no matinée idol or poseur like—"

"Now that isn't fair!" objected Babs. "Mr. Holbrooke has been perfectly splendid to me. He has borne with my mistakes and helped me—"

"And held you in his arms and kissed you—"

"Bob Hardinge, you're too absurd for words. You know it doesn't mean a thing to him—or to me!" she protested, a little hurt.

"I really didn't mean that," he admitted, apologetically. "I guess I'm just a bit nervous and upset; and I know, Babs, that you—"

"Now listen to me," she broke in. "I meant just what I said. Percy Graham, who plays the part of the butler in the third act, broke his leg last night, and has to go to the hospital. It isn't much of a part, and they haven't picked any one for it yet. I'll call up Mr. Raleigh after dinner and see if he won't let you have it—"

"But I can't act!" objected Hardinge. "I'd be an unholy joke."

"You wouldn't," she insisted. "You know what a well trained servant ought to do, and surely you have brains enough to do it. That's all there is to the thing. Just be natural—"

"I like your nerve!" he said, laughing.

"You know what I mean." Babs joined in the merriment. "The salary is seventy-five dollars a week—"

"You mean that a stage butler gets that much money?" gasped Hardinge.

Babs nodded, as though it were a mere nothing. Hardinge realized that her ideas had changed so far as finances were concerned, and he wondered just how soon she would conceive the idea of giving up the little house and taking an apartment in town. He hoped that time would never come, for he loved the house he had struggled to buy, and it meant home to him.

Nor did he like the idea of being a butler, even on the stage; but seventy-five dollars a week was something to think about, for a man out of a job. Besides, he suddenly recalled, a part in the play would enable him to be constantly near Babs and to look after her if the show went on the road. It seemed to solve the difficulties all around, so he meekly consented to have her call up Raleigh.

The author did not seem to like the plan at first. He was opposed to husbands and wives being in the same company, on the ground that such an association made far more discord than is usual between theatrical folk. But Hardinge was surprised at Babs's attitude. She did not give in, nor did she plead. She demanded that the rôle of *Judson* be given to her husband. She had developed temperament—and she won out. Before she hung up, the place was promised to Hardinge, and it was arranged that he should accompany Babs to the theater the next morning.

"I could conceive of myself as a fairly convincing truck driver, or perhaps a stevedore," Hardinge told her with a smile, "but never in my wildest moments did I ever consider myself as a possible actor. I don't know whether I'll prove a jinx or not, but I'll bet the price of eggs and overripe vegetables will rise the moment I step on the stage."

However, Raleigh took him in hand. He was directing his own play, and much to Hardinge's surprise, the lines came to him easily and the acting was rather fun. He found himself growing interested, and trying to put himself in the butler's place—to do the right and natural thing and to *feel* the tiny part that was intrusted to him. The atmosphere of make-believe was rather fascinating, and he found the work a lot more congenial than selling bonds. Yet,

deep down in his heart, he held himself in contempt, and wished sincerely that Elsie Clarke had never introduced his wife to Hubert Raleigh.

At first he could hardly control his temper when Holbrooke kissed Babs, and he wanted to break the fellow's head when he ill-treated her in the big scene of the third act. But gradually he got used to that, and even rather relished the kiss the author had provided for him during the course of a brief bit he had with Lola Truelle, who played the part of Babs's French maid.

His respect for Raleigh grew, too. Despite his bushy mane and his monocle, the man had brains and ability. The play was good and he was an able director. Hardinge asked him to lend him the complete manuscript, and that night, at home, he read it through several times, until the story and the action were firmly fixed in his mind.

His friends would probably laugh at his being in the company, but now he felt that he wouldn't mind, and he rather enjoyed working this way with Babs, even though she was a star, and he was hardly above the rank of a common super.

Then came the journey to Atlantic City and the final preparations for the opening night. Babs was as nervous as a cat, but Hardinge was calm as a clam. That was probably because it did not matter much what he did or how he did it. His presence on the stage was of so little moment; while Babs felt that the weight of success or failure rested upon her frail shoulders.

Their little store of wealth was nearly exhausted, but relying upon the pay envelopes they would receive at the end of the week, they took a two-room suite at the Marlboro-Blenheim. Babs had felt that she must live in strict accord with her new dignity as a star, and she reveled in the curious gaze of the other guests as she wandered through the foyer of the hotel or sat opposite Robert in the dining room.

At luncheon, when Raleigh and Crawford Holbrooke joined them, she might have been Julia Arthur or Maude Adams, from her poise, and the dignified air of an artiste which she assumed as though to the manner born.

There were many people whom they knew stopping at the resort, and on the boardwalk as well as at the hotel, Babs was the center of interest. She seemed to revel in it. Even those who did not know her personally, were equally agog over her approaching première. David Klauberg, with rare canniness for publicity, had made the most of the fact that two scions of ancient if impoverished families were members of his cast. Babs had been hailed as the famous Southern beauty, Barbara Vance, and he had persuaded her to take her maiden name for the stage. Hence, the première was intended to be somewhat of a social event—as indeed, it proved to be.

The entire house had been sold out for days, and never had Klauberg and Hubert Raleigh faced a more propitious opening. Klauberg, however, was skeptical regarding the untried player. He had argued with Raleigh from the first, claiming that a seasoned actress ought to have the rôle of *Muriel*. He regarded the play as a good property, and he did not like the uncertain possibility of Babs's inexperience ruining it on the first night. Raleigh, however, remained adamant, and Raleigh was now too successful a dramatist to be argued with. What he said went—and without question.

But as the manager looked over the fashionable audience that filed into the theater and listened to the animated conversation of his patrons, he agreed that it had been a wise thing to feature Babs. Even if she did not score histrionically, she might put the show over by sheer force of popularity.

The Clarkes were in the right-hand stage box, and in various parts of the house were scores of folks whose names were well-known to the newspapers and easily to be found in the social register. Society editors as well as dramatic critics were observing the assembly, and there was an air of eager anticipation as the time drew near for the curtain to go up.

As has been the case from time immemorial, the butler held the stage at the opening of the act.

Those in the audience who knew him spied Robert Hardinge, and, amid chuckles over his burnsides, burst into applause. Klauberg's brow clouded and he muttered

beneath his breath. Hubert Raleigh, standing beside the manager, in the back of the theater, trembled, and wished for the hundredth time that he had not given Babs's husband a part in the play.

It was a bad start. For a minor character to attract such attention at the opening meant that the crescendo of interest and applause could not possibly be hoped to be sustained. Besides, the audience was taking Robert's presence as a joke, and this was a serious play.

Then Lola Truelle made her entrance. The audience hushed. There was some rather clever, brief dialogue between the two—and then Robert kissed the pretty little thing in her frilly white cap and apron, lifting her dainty high heels from the stage and holding her in his arms quite as though he meant his acted ardor.

That brought another laugh from those who knew the Hardinges, and the representative of *Social Chat* hastily made a pencil note on the edge of her program. This would make a delicious morsel of gossip that could be turned very readily into a neat little chaffing phrase or two in her next column of personal comment.

Then Holbrooke came on in evening clothes, and looking more distinguished than ever. The annoyance which his part called for did not have to be assumed. He had been standing in the wings, waiting for his cue with far more trepidation and anger than either Raleigh or Klauberg felt.

But Holbrooke was still a favorite with those who liked drawing-room acting, and the handclapping which greeted him was vastly different from that which had been accorded Robert Hardinge. Now the maid and the butler withdrew, and Holbrooke made the most of the mastery he held over his audience.

Raleigh took courage, and so did Klauberg, although it was now obvious to the manager that the veteran actor had lost much of his punch, and that his portrayal this evening fell short of past performances. Still Klauberg allowed for first-night nervousness and the annoyance which he realized the leading man must have experienced because of Hardinge.

At last Babs stepped from behind the scenes and the house went wild. No favorite of the footlights ever received such an ovation. The action of the play was halted, and Babs, lovelier than ever, and with sparkling eyes, bowed her thanks.

Then the audience sat back with a sigh, impatient to see what she could do.

The tenseness of the atmosphere could almost be felt, and Babs, stunned by it, made rather a bad beginning. Yet those in front were indulgent. They were willing to wait until she got into her stride. Crawford Holbrooke was more than considerate—not only because he wished to save the scene for himself, but because he had genuine sympathy for Babs. It had been many years since his first public appearance, but he had a keen recollection of its trials, and he felt a real liking for Babs Hardinge. He wanted to see her score as much for her own sake as for that of himself and the play.

She seemed to take courage, and the act went rather well. Perhaps she was a bit colorless in her portrayal, but then the audience was not sure that the part did not mean her to be so. In any event, the first curtain fell with satisfactory recognition and left those in front of the house in an interested frame of mind. The critics seemed unanimous in their prediction that Raleigh promised to surpass himself in his newest play.

"It's really decently daring," was the way Holland, of the *Chronicle*, expressed himself; and Lamont of the *Times* voted the dialogue unusually scintillating. And one and all agreed that Babs Hardinge was stunning, so far as perfection of face and figure were concerned.

They were even more convinced of this when the curtain rose again and revealed her with Holbrooke in a beautiful setting, representing a luxurious library with heavy hangings and the soft light from a fireplace illumining Babs's charms. In such an atmosphere Holbrooke was at his best, and with old-time skill he carried Babs with him through the scene. The critics were agreeably surprised at her, and the audience was little short of amazed, while Babs herself trod a path of clouds, her befuddled brain in a whirl. Her own voice sounded far away, and only the deep tones of Holbrooke

seemed to bring her back sufficiently to make her remember to speak her lines when he gave her her cues.

It all seemed more than merely artificial to her. It was as though she were living a dream—a visionary existence which threatened to turn into a hideous nightmare every time she looked out into the yawning blackness of the theater, where misty faces peered at her dimly, and eyes seemed to glare at her viciously, like those of a thousand demons. It was stage fright and more. Things had gone well enough at rehearsals, and Babs had even reached great dramatic heights in the privacy of her own boudoir; but now, in the glare of the footlights, and under the stare of the house—her limbs trembled. She mouthed her words so that they could scarcely be heard, and she felt as though she were going to faint.

Even Holbrooke, solicitous as he was, could no longer help her. The big scene fell flat. What should have been a triumph proved to be a farce. It was pathetic. The heart of the audience went out to her in her beautiful misery, for it was all too apparent—but it soon became obvious that Babs lacked the essentials of a great actress. Her husband sensed it, pityingly, for he realized what this experience must be costing her. He tried to encourage her in the brief bits he had with her, but instead of leaning upon his support—when he wished to be her foil—she only glanced at him helplessly as a terrified child might do.

Klauberg was beside himself, and Raleigh was consumed with mortification as he saw his high points slurred over, his situations lost, and his dialogue stammered almost ridiculously. He had sought a type, and he had found it in Babs, but he had not realized that she could not portray her true self upon the stage.

The final curtain fell with a little ripple of good-natured applause from Babs's friends, and the footlights were showered with flowers for her. But deep down in her heart, Babs knew that she had failed, and the tears were streaming down her cheeks as she hurried to her dressing room.

Holbrooke detained her in the wings, however. "Don't take it so to heart," he said consolingly. "A first night is always trying—even to those of us who have had long experience. A special rehearsal in the morning, to straighten out a few things, and you'll do ever so much better to-morrow night."

Babs appreciated his attitude, but she knew that what he said was not the case. She would never do better; and she wondered whether she would have the courage to step out upon the stage again. It had taken all her self-control to remain there tonight.

She had no heart for the supper party Raleigh was giving after the performance, and she asked Hardinge to seek out the author and say that she was not feeling well.

"Just a little nervous and tired out," Hardinge said, trying to make light of it. "I think she'll be all right after a good night's rest."

"I hope so," rejoined Raleigh politely, just a bit relieved that Babs would not be a guest at the gathering which he himself now dreaded to face. Failure was not a pleasant thought to him, especially when it meant the bungling of a play that would have been a hit if he had taken Klauberg's advice and given Babs's rôle to any one of half a dozen prominent actresses.

The manager was furious. "It's all right to put society women in the movies, where a director can make them do what he wants, and where you can stop the turning of the crank if they go blaa; but on the stage it's sheer idiocy! The show goes to the storehouse the end of the week!"

But none of them were prepared for the criticisms that appeared the next morning. Hardinge was sitting by the little balcony window, overlooking the ocean, when Babs awoke, a sheaf of newspaper scattered about him on the floor. He had read them through, one after the other with ever-increasing amazement, and now a frank exclamation of surprise escaped him. He had just finished Holland's review in the *Chronicle:*

> Despite the finished skill of Mr. Holbrooke and the rare charm of Miss Vance, "Fetters of Fashion" failed to register at the opening performance. Perhaps Mr. Holbrooke's charming society maner is a little too familiar

to playgoers to cause any particular thrill. In any event, his performance last evening lacked freshness and interest. Miss Vance, recently recruited to the stage from real drawing-rooms, was as beautiful a picture as could be imagined, but her acting could hardly have been worse. In fact, the entire cast seemed to be nervous and awkward, with one outstanding exception. That was the character of *Judson,* the butler, played with rare skill by Mr. Robert Hardinge, who in private life is Miss Vance's husband. While intrusted with only a bit, Mr. Hardinge got every atom out of it, and played the rôle with such charm and rare humor that it is hoped that he will be seen in a more important part in the near future. "Fetters of Fashion" is probably doomed for a short life, but if it has done nothing more worth while, it has at least served the public in presenting a young actor of real talent and great promise.

"Well, can you beat that?" demanded Hardinge of no one in particular, and Babs sat up in bed, staring at him inquiringly. Hesitatingly, he handed her the newspaper. He could not bring himself to explain. She would have to read the story for herself. It was her theatrical death warrant, and Hardinge felt like an executioner when he served it upon her. He also hated that fool critic for having praised him, thus adding to Babs's anguish.

But strangely enough, it did not affect her as he had imagined it would. The cruel criticism only seemed to spur her ambition to do better—and she took heart as she remembered what Holbrooke had said to her in the wings the previous evening. Instead of being hurt she was delighted at the praise of Robert. "I'm proud of you, Bob," she said. "Wouldn't it have been terrible if they'd said we were *both* failures? Now I'll have to stir myself and catch up to you."

"Go to it, old girl!" he said joyously, but with a heavy heart, for he knew that she was only deluding herself when she hoped to succeed later on. "But I don't take any credit to myself for giving a life-like performance of a servant. It's like telling a man he'd make a good head waiter."

Crawford Holbrooke, however, was furious when his eyes lighted upon the unanimous roasting he received at the hands of all the critics. Some of them had been less kind to him than the *Chronicle* man, and he flew unto an unreasoning rage. Every paper spoke disparagingly of Babs, and none of them forgot to give a little puff to Hardinge. Klauberg was amused, and Raleigh astounded.

But both the author and the manager were thunderstruck when Holbrooke gave notice that he would leave the production at the end of the week—provided Klauberg persisted in keeping the play on the boards that long. The manager had seriously considered withdrawing it forthwith, but Raleigh objected, and Klauberg did not wish to offend the man from whose work he had made so much money in the past. Raleigh insisted upon continuing for two or three weeks at least, until he could scout about for another cast and doctor the play as he observed its weak spots from the front of the house.

The second performance was, if anything, worse than the first, and the third night found an almost empty house. Then on Thursday came a new complication. A jinx surely seemed to follow the show. While riding on the beach that afternoon Holbrooke had been thrown from the saddle and too severely injured to appear on the stage for several days. That seemed to cap the climax, and Klauberg announced his intention of quitting forthwith.

The news came as a blow to Babs, who was still certain that with a little more practice she would be able to win the critics when they opened in New York. Her lip quivered as she heard the manager's ultimatum, and Hardinge's heart went out to his wife. Of course it was hopeless, but he knew she would never be happy until she had been given her chance on Broadway and had at least demonstrated to herself that histrionic laurels were not for her.

Then he remembered the things the papers had said about him. The notices meant nothing to him, except as a huge joke. He imagined, too, that the critics had praised him with malicious humor, in order to make their slaps at Holbrooke and Babs all the more biting. But now he saw a chance to turn the criticisms to his advantage—and to that of Babs.

"Mr. Klauberg," he said, very seriously, "I seem to have had some little success, and

I believe I can do bigger things than the part for which I was cast. I know this play backward and forward, because I've read it through several times, as well as having rehearsed it. I believe in it implicitly—"

Raleigh puffed up with pride and self-satisfaction. He decided that Hardinge had brains—and potential ability.

"You have made an initial investment in the production," Hardinge went on, knowing that he touched the manager's tender spot. "Mr. Raleigh has put his best into it, and it would be a crime to see the piece taken off the boards before a really worth-while series of audiences has had a chance to judge it. I don't even expect that I can rattle around in Mr. Holbrooke's boots, but I know his lines, and I believe I could play the part fairly acceptably until he is able to resume his rôle."

Klauberg pondered a moment. He had rented the theater for the week. He meant to pay the company a full week's salary, as was his custom, for Klauberg was fair in all he did. He did not stand to lose anything by letting Hardinge do as he asked—and the young man *might* make a go of it, he thought.

"But where the devil will I get a butler that the critics won't roast?" he asked with a twinkle in his eyes. "According to the papers no one in the cast is any good but you. If I promote you, and you're rotten in Holbrooke's part—there's nothing left!" He was sarcastic, yet kindly.

"I'll take care of the butler," Harbrooke assured him. "I'll borrow a real one from Charlie Clarke. He and his wife are down here at the Ambassador, with a suite of their own and a private dining room and all that sort of dog. I'll get him to lend me Terence. He can't act, of course—but he knows his place, and he's a perfect servant."

Klauberg grinned. It was a chance worth taking, and he could be no worse off by consenting than if he refused. "All right," he agreed. "Get your butler and prime yourself in Holbrooke's lines to go on to-night."

Then Klauberg retired to his temporary office and spent half an hour with his press agent. He meant to make the most of the story. The accident and the changes in the cast would permit him to get a good notice in the papers. The time was short, and they had to work fast, but by the dinner hour the news had spread through the various hotel corridors and practically the entire first-night audience stormed the box office in an effort to secure seats. The numerous friends of Babs and Bob wanted to see whether or not the second attempt could be any worse than the first, and the critics came through curiosity to see what the big idea might be, and whether their prophecies regarding Hardinge would prove to be correct.

They did. He carried the various scenes with feeling and finesse. He looked the part and he lived it—because he believed in the play. Babs was awed by his acting, and she tried to live up to the standard he set, but just as she had done with Holbrooke, she failed miserably.

But that was of no moment to Klauberg and to Raleigh. The house went wild over Hardinge, and the author knew that his play had gone over. Klauberg knew something that pleased him still more. "Fetters of Fashion" was going to prove a gold mine. With Hardinge in the leading rôle it was good for two years on Broadway at least, or else he missed his guess—and Klauberg seldom went wrong in his theatrical judgment.

The comments the next morning were as facetious as they were enthusiastic. The *Chronicle* sounded the keynote of the others, and as the stories were wired to New York, the theater-going public of the metropolis was eager in its anticipation of the Broadway opening. This was the story that did it:

> Hubert Raleigh and David Klauberg have evidently invented a new way to make a good play better. The first performance of "Fetters of Fashion" showed an utterly hopeless company—each actor being miscast, with the exception of one. And for that one the reviewers unanimously prophesied a splendid future.
>
> The actor in question is Robert Hardinge—new to the stage, and fresh from the Wall Street sector. He played the part of *Judson*, the butler, on the opening night.
>
> When "Fetters of Fashion" opens at the Polyanna Theater in New York on the twenty-first, Robert Hardinge will appear in the rôle in which Crawford Holbrooke was

seen before his unfortunate accident. Great favorite that Holbrooke has been for many years, young Mr. Hardinge excels him in artistry. Barbara Vance—who is Mr. Hardinge's wife—will withdraw from the cast, and her successor is not as yet announced. However, Broadway awaits the arrival of Mr. Hardinge.

Then the *Times* added a final touch that set those on the inside laughing:

Whether intentional or not, Mr. Klauberg seems intent upon making his apprentice-actors appear in the rôle of butlers. Mr. Terence McTerry, who succeeded Mr. Hardinge in the part of *Judson*, gave the most lifelike portrayal of an autocratic domestic in buckled-shoes and powdered wig, the stage has seen in some time. Undoubtedly he will soar to greater characterizations quite as quickly as did Mr. Hardinge. To keep such a polished actor in so minor a rôle would be little sort of a crime against the art of the theater.

For three hundred and fifty-three nights "Fetters of Fashion" ran at the Polyanna Theater. Klauberg renewed Hardinge's contract on a basis of a thousand a week in salary, plus a percentage of the profits. Babs retired from the glamour of the stage, and wept her eyes out when Hardinge insisted upon getting rid of the little suburban cottage and taking a suite at the Biltmore. It seemed like moving to a strange land to her, and she longed for the peace and quiet that had been theirs in the days when the theater had only meant to them a couple of orchestra chairs.

But Robert Hardinge had developed personality as well as temperament. He went Hubert Raleigh one better by wearing a rimless monocle, without any cord—and the thing really stuck in his eye. Hardinge had a limousine that rivaled Raleigh's in its upholstered splendor, and he affected Japanese kimonos when lounging in his den.

The critics hailed him as America's foremost young actor, and predicted that he would some day occupy the niche once occupied by the late Richard Mansfield, and now filled by Otis Skinner and George Arliss. Babs was proud of him, and not at all regretful of her own lack of success. Yet she did rather feel that being on the stage was somewhat beneath the dignity of a Hardinge. She also wished that the theater, and countless social engagements, would release her husband to her a little more frequently.

On the whole she was inclined to regret the day that Robert had met Hubert Raleigh in Elsie Clarke's studio; and Elsie Clarke bemoaned the moment when she had loaned Hardinge her perfect man-servant. For Terence McTerry has deserted domestic service for the Keith circuit. He has a fifty-two weeks' contract in a skit of his own, entitled "The Gentleman Butler."

U U U U

SLAVES OF THE LAMP

WHEN old Aladdin rubbed his lamp,
The fairy story goes—a flame
Sprang into life, and from its heart
To do his will, a genii came!

A wizard far more wonderful
Is ready at my beck and call—
Wishing his services, I touch
A small, black button—that is all!

And instantly, at dead of night
My darkened room lights brilliantly!
Shucks! old Aladdin's lamp has naught
On electricity and me!

Mazie V. Caruthers.

The Garden of Eden

Part IV

by Max Brand

Author of "The Untamed," "Trailin'," "The Seventh Man," "Black Jack," etc.

CHAPTER XX.

THE FALSE PROPHET.

"THE evil at heart, when they wish to take, seem to give," said Abraham, mouthing the words with his withered lips, and he came to one of his prophetic pauses.

The master of the Garden permitted it to the privileged old negro, who added now: "Benjamin is evil at heart."

"He did not ask for the horse," said David, who was plainly arguing against his own conviction.

"Yet he knew." The ancient face of Abraham puckered. "Po' white trash!" he muttered. Now and then one of these quaint phrases would break through his acquired diction, and they always bore home to David a sense of that great world beyond the mountains. Matthew had often described that world, but one of Abraham's odd expressions carried him in a breath into cities filled with men.

"His absence is cheaply bought at the price of one mare," continued the negro soothingly.

"One mare of Rustir's blood! What is the sin for which the Lord would punish me with the loss of Shakra? And I miss her as I would miss a human face. But Benjamin will return with her. He did not ask for the horse."

"He knew you would offer."

"He will not return?"

"Never!"

"Then I shall go to find him."

"It is forbidden."

Abraham sat down, cross-legged, and watched with impish self-content while David strode back and forth in the patio. A far-off neighing brought him to a halt, and he raised his hand for silence. The neighing was repeated, more clearly, and David laughed for joy.

"A horse coming from the pasture to the paddock," said Abraham, shifting uneasily.

The day was old and the patio was filled with a clear, soft light, preceding evening.

"It is Shakra! Shakra, Abraham!"

The negro rose.

"A yearling. It is too high for the voice of a grown mare."

"The distance makes it shrill. Abraham, Abraham, cannot I find her voice among ten all neighing at once?"

"Then beware of Benjamin, for he has returned to take not one but all."

But David smiled at the skinny hand which was raised in warning.

This story began in the Argosy-Allstory Weekly for April 15.

"Say no more," he said solemnly. "I am already to blame for hearkening to words against my brother Benjamin."

"You yourself had said that he tempted you."

Because David could find no ready retort he grew angry.

"Also, think of this. Your eyes and your ears are grown dull, Abraham, and perhaps your mind is misted also."

He had gone to the entrance into the patio and paused there to wait with a lifted head. Abraham followed and attempted to speak again, but the last cruel speech had crushed him. He went out on the terrace, and looking back saw that David had not a glance for him; so Abraham went feebly on.

"I have become as a false prophet," he murmured, "and I am no more regarded."

His life had long been in its evening, and now, at a step, the darkness of old age fell about him. From the margin of the lake he looked up and saw Connor ride to the patio.

David, at the entrance, clasped the hand of his guest while he was still on the horse and helped him to the ground.

"This," he said solemnly, "is a joyful day in my house."

"What's the big news?" inquired the gambler, and added: "Why so happy?"

"Is it not the day of your return? Isaac! Zacharias!"

They came running as he clapped his hands.

"Set out the oldest wine, and there is a haunch of the deer that was killed at the gate. Go! And now, Benjamin, did Shakra carry you well and swiftly?"

"Better than I was ever carried before."

"Then she deserves well of me. Come hither, Shakra, and stand behind me. Truly, Benjamin, my brother, my thoughts have ridden ten times across the mountains and back, wishing for your return!"

Connor was sufficiently keen to know that a main reason for the warmth of his reception was that he had been doubted while he was away, and while they supped in the patio he was even able to guess who had raised the suspicion against him. Word was brought that Abraham lay in his bed seriously ill, but David Eden showed no trace of sympathy.

"Which is the greater crime?" he asked Benjamin a little later. "To poison the food a man eats or the thoughts in his mind?"

"Surely," said the crafty gambler, "the mind is of more importance than the stomach."

Luckily David bore the main burden of conversation that evening, for the brain of Connor was surcharged with impatient waiting. His great plan, he shrewdly guessed, would give him everything or else ruin him in the Garden of Eden, and the suspense was like an eating pain. Luckily the crisis came on the very next day.

Jacob galloped into the patio, and flung himself from the back of Abra.

David and Connor rose from their chairs under the arcade where they had been watching Joseph setting great stones in place around the border of the fountain pool. The master of the Garden went forward in some anger at this unceremonious interruption. But Jacob came as one whose news is so important that it overrides all need of conventional approach.

"A woman," he panted. "A woman at the gate of the Garden!"

"Why are you here?" said David sternly.

"A woman—"

"Man, woman, child, or beast, the law is the same. They shall not enter the Garden of Eden. Why are you here?"

"And she rides the gray gelding, the son of Yoruba!"

At that moment the white trembling lips of Connor might have told the master much, but he was too angered to take heed of his guest.

"That which has once left the Garden is no longer part of it. For us, the gray gelding does not exist. Why are you here?"

"Because she would not leave the gate. She says that she will see you."

"She is a fool. And because she was so confident, you were weak enough to believe her?"

"I told her that you would not come; that you could not come!"

"You have told her that it is impossible

for me to speak with her?" said David, while Connor gradually regained control of himself and summoning his strength for the crisis.

"I told her all that, but she said nevertheless she would see you."

"For what reason?"

"Because she has money with which to buy another horse like her gelding, which is old."

"Go back and tell her that there is no money price on the heads of my horses. Go! When Ephraim is at the gate there are no such journeyings to me."

"Ephraim is here," said Jacob stoutly, "and he spoke much with her. Nevertheless she said that you would see her."

"For what reason?"

"She said: 'Because.'"

"Because of what?"

"That word was her only answer: 'Because'"

"This is strange," murmured David, turning to Connor. "Is that one word a reason?

"Go back again," commanded David grimly. "Go back and tell this woman that I shall not come, and that if she comes again she will be driven away by force. And take heed, Jacob, that you do not come to me again on such an errand. The law is fixed. It is as immovable as the rocks in the mountains. You know all this. Be careful hereafter that you remember. Be gone!"

The ruin of his plan in its very inception threatened Ben Connor. If he could once bring David to see the girl he trusted in her beauty and her cleverness to effect the rest. But how lead him to the gate? Moreover, he was angered and his frown boded no good for Jacob. The old negro was turning away, and the gambler hunted his mind desperately for an expedient. Persuasion would never budge this stubborn fellow so used to command. There remained the opposite of persuasion. He determined on an indirect appeal to the pride of the master.

"You are wise, David," he said solemnly. "You are very wise. These creatures are dangerous, and men of sense shun them. Tell your servants to drive her away with blows of a stick so that she will never return."

"No, Jacob," said the master, and the negro returned to hear the command. "Not with sticks. But with words, for flesh of women is tender. This is hard counsel, Benjamin!"

He regarded the gambler with great surprise.

"Their flesh may be tender, but their spirits are strong," said Connor. The opening he had made was small. At least he had the interest. Of David, and through that entering wedge he determined to drive with all his might.

"And dangerous," he added gravely.

"Dangerous?" said the master. He raised his head. "Dangerous?"

As if a jackal had dared to howl in the hearing of the lion.

"Ah, David, if you saw her you would understand why I warn you!"

"It would be curious. In what wise does her danger strike?"

"That I cannot say. They have a thousand ways."

The master turned irresolutely toward Jacob.

"You could not send her away with words?"

"David, for one of my words she has ten that flow with pleasant sound like water from a spring, and with little meaning, except that she will not go."

"You are a fool!"

"So I felt when I listened to her."

"There is an old saying, David, my brother," said Connor, "that there is more danger in one pleasant woman than in ten angry men. Drive her from the gate with stones!"

"I fear that you hate women, Benjamin."

"They were the source of evil."

"For which penance was done."

"The penance followed the sin."

"God, who made the mountains, the river and this garden and man, He made woman also. She cannot be all evil. I shall go."

"Then, remember that I have warned you. God, who made man and woman, made fire also."

"And is not fire a blessing?"

He smiled at his triumph and this contest of words.

"You shall go with me, Benjamin."

"I? Never!"

"In what is the danger?"

"If you find none, there is none. For my part I have nothing to do with women."

But David was already whistling to Glani.

"One woman can be no more terrible than one man," he declared to Benjamin. "And I have made Joseph, who is great of body, bend like a blade of grass in the wind."

"Farewell," said Connor, his voice trembling with joy. "Farewell, and God keep you!"

"Farewell, Benjamin, my brother, and have no fear."

Connor followed him with his eyes, half-triumphant, half-fearful. What would happen at the gate? He would have given much to see even from a distance the duel between the master and the woman.

At the gate of the patio David turned and waved his hand.

"I shall conquer!"

And then he was gone.

Connor stared down at the grass with a cynical smile until he felt another gaze upon him, and he became aware of the little beast—eyes of Joseph glittering. The giant had paused in his work with the stones.

"What are you thinking of, Joseph?" asked the gambler.

The negro made an indescribable gesture of hate and fear.

"Of the whip!" he said. "I also opened the gate of the Garden. On whose back will the whip fall this time?"

CHAPTER XXI.

THE HOMECOMING.

NEAR the end of the eucalyptus avenue, and close to the gate, David dismounted and made Jacob do likewise.

"We may come on them by surprise and listen," he said. "A soft step has won great causes."

They went forward cautiously, interchanging sharp glances as though they were stalking some dangerous beast, and so they came within earshot of the gate and sheltered from view of it by the edge of the cliff. David paused and cautioned his companion with a mutely raised hand.

"He lived through the winter," Ephraim was saying. "I took him into my room and cherished him by the warmth of my fire and with rubbing, so that when spring came, and gentler weather, he was still alive—a great leggy colt with a backbone that almost lifted through the skin. Only high, bright eyes comforted me and told me that my work was a good work."

David and Jacob interchanged nods of wonder, for Ephraim was telling to this woman the dearest secret of his life.

It was how he had saved the weakling colt, Jumis, and raised him to a beautiful, strong stallion, only to have him die suddenly in the height of his promise. Certainly Ephraim was nearly won over by the woman; it threw David on guard.

"Go back to Abra," he whispered. "Ride on to the gate and tell her boldly to be gone. I shall wait here, and in time of need I shall help you. Make haste. Ephraim grows like wet clay under her fingers. Ah, how wise is Benjamin!"

Jacob obeyed. He stole away and presently shot past at the full gallop of Abra. The stallion came to a sliding halt, and Jacob spoke from his back, which was a grave discourtesy in the Garden of Eden.

"The master will not see you," he said. "The sun is still high. Return by the way you have come; you get no more from the Garden than its water and its air. He does not sell horses."

For the first time she spoke, and at the sound of her voice David Eden stepped out from the rock; he remembered himself in time and shrank back to shelter.

"He sold this horse."

"It was the will of the men before David that these things should be done, but the Lord knows the mind of David and that his heart bleeds for every gelding that leaves the Garden. See what you have done to him! The marks of the whip and the spur are on his sides. Woe to you if David should see them!"

She cried out at that in such a way that David almost felt she had been struck.

"It was the work of a drunken half-breed, and not mine."

"Then God have mercy on that man, for if the master should see him, David would have no mercy. I warn you: David is one with a fierce eye and a strong hand. Be gone before he comes and sees the scars on the gray horse."

"Then he is coming?"

"She is quick," thought David, as an embarrassed pause ensued. "Truly, Benjamin was right, and there is danger in these creatures."

"He has many horses," the girl went on, "and I have only this one. Besides, I would pay well for another."

"What price?"

"He should not have asked," muttered David.

"Everything that I have," she was answering, and the low thrill of her voice went through and through the master of the Garden. "I could buy other horses with this money, but not another like my gray. He is more than a horse. He is a companion to me. He understands me when I talk, and I understand him. You see how he stands with his head down? He is not tired, but hungry. When he neighs in a certain way from the corral I know that he is lonely. You see that he comes to me now? That is because he knows I am talking about him, for we are friends. But he is old and he will die, and what shall I do then? It will be like a death in my house!"

Another pause followed.

"You love the horse," said the voice of Ephraim, and it was plain that Jacob was beyond power of speech.

"And I shall pay for another. Hold out your hand."

"I cannot take it."

Nevertheless, it seemed that he obeyed, for presently the girl continued: "After my father died I sold the house. It was pretty well blanketed with a mortgage, but I cleared out this hundred from the wreck. I went to work and saved what I could. Ten dollars every month, for twenty months — you can count for yourself—makes two hundred, and here's the two hundred more in your hand. Three hundred altogether. Do you think it's enough?"

"If there were ten times as much," said Jacob, "it would not be enough. There—take your money. It is not enough. There is no money price on the heads of the master's horses."

But a new light had fallen upon David. Women, as he had heard of them, were idle creatures who lived upon that which men gained with sweaty toil, but this girl, it seemed, was something more. She was strong enough to earn her bread, and something more. Money values were not clear to David Eden, but three hundred dollars sounded a very considerable sum. He determined to risk exposure by glancing around the rock. If she could work like a man no doubt she was made like a man and not like those useless and decorative creatures of whom Matthew had often spoken to him, with all their graces and voices.

Cautiously he peered and he saw her standing beside the old, broken gray horse. Even old Ephraim seemed a stalwart figure in comparison.

At first he was bewildered, and then he almost laughed aloud. Was it on account of this that Benjamin had warned him, this fragile girl? He stepped boldly from behind the rock.

"There is no more to say," quoth Jacob.

"But I tell you, he himself will come."

"You are right," said David.

At that her eyes turned on him, and David was stopped in the midst of a stride until she shrank back against the horse.

Then he went on, stepping softly, his hand extended in that sign of peace which is as old as mankind.

"Stay in peace," said David, "and have no fear. It is I, David."

He hardly knew his own voice, it was so gentle. A twilight dimness seemed to have fallen upon Jacob and Ephraim, and he was only aware of the girl. Her fear seemed to be half gone already, and she even came a hopeful step toward him.

"I knew from the first that you would come," she said, "and let me buy one horse—you have so many."

"We will talk of that later."

"David," broke in the grave voice of Ephraim, "remember your own law!"

He looked at the girl instead of the negro as he answered: "Who am I to make laws? God begins where David leaves off."

And he added: "What is your name?"

"Ruth."

"Come, Ruth," said David, "we will go home together."

She advanced as one in doubt until the shadow of the cliff fell over her. Then she looked back from the throat of the gate and saw Ephraim and Jacob facing her as though they understood there was no purpose in guarding against what might approach the valley from without now that the chief enemy was within. David, in the pause, was directing Jacob to place the girl's saddle on the back of Abra.

"For it is not fitting," he explained, "that you should enter my garden save on one of my horses. And look, here is Glani."

The stallion came at the sound of his name. She had heard of the great horse from Connor, but the reality was far more than the words.

"And this, Glani, is Ruth."

She touched the velvet nose which was stretched inquisitively toward her, and then looked up and found that David was smiling. A moment later they were riding side by side down the avenue of the eucalyptus trees, and through the tall tree-trunks new vistas opened rapidly about her. Every stride of Abra seemed to carry her another step into the life of David.

"I should have called Shakra for you," said David, watching her with concern, "but she is ridden by another who has the right to the best in the Garden."

"Even Glani?"

"Even Glani, save that he fears to ride my horse, and therefore he has Shakra. I am sorry, for I wish to see you together. She is like you—beautiful, delicate, and swift."

She urged Abra into a shortened gallop with a touch of her heel, so that the business of managing him gave her a chance to cover her confusion. She could have smiled away a compliment, but the simplicity of David meant something more.

"Peace, Abra!" commanded the master. "Oh, unmannerly colt! It would be other than this if the wise Shakra were beneath your saddle."

"No, I am content with Abra. Let Shakra be for your servant."

"Not servant, but friend—a friend whom Glani chose for me. Consider how fickle our judgments are and how little things persuade us. Abraham is rich in words, but his face is ugly, and I prefer the smooth voice of Zacharias, though he is less wise. I have grieved for this and yet it is hard to change. But a horse is wiser than a fickle-minded man, and when Glani went to the hand of Benjamin without my order, I knew that I had found a friend."

She knew the secret behind that story, and now she looked at David with pity.

"In my house you will meet Benjamin," the master was saying thoughtfully, evidently encountering a grave problem. "I have said that little things make the judgments of men! If a young horse shies once, though he may become a true traveler and a wise head, yet his rider remembers the first jump and is ever uneasy in the saddle."

She nodded, wondering what lay behind the explanation.

"Or if a snake crosses the road before a horse, at that place the horse trembles when he passes again."

"Yes."

She found it strangely pleasant to follow the simple processes of his mind.

"It is so with Benjamin. At some time a woman crosses his way like a snake, and because of her he has come to hate all women. And when I started for the gate, even now, he warned me against you."

The clever mind of the gambler opened to her and she smiled at the trick.

"Yes, it is a thing for laughter," said David happily. "I came with a mind armed for trouble—and I find you, whom I could break between my hands."

He turned, casting out his arms.

"What harm have I received from you?"

They had reached the head of the bridge, and even as David turned a changing gust carried to them a chorus of men's voices. David drew rein.

"There is a death," he said, "in my household."

CHAPTER XXII.

ELIJAH.

THE singing took on body and form as the pitch rose.

"There is a death," repeated David. "Abraham is dead, the oldest and the wisest of my servants. The Lord gave and the Lord has taken away. Glory to His name!"

Ruth was touched to the heart.

"I am sorry," she said simply.

"Let us rejoice, rather, for Abraham is happy. His soul is reborn in a young body. Do you not hear them singing? Let us ride on."

He kept his head high and a stereotyped smile on his lips as the horses sprang into a gallop—that breath-taking gallop which made the spirit of the girl leap; but she saw his breast raise once or twice with a sigh. It was the stoicism of an Indian, she felt, and like an Indian's was the bronze-brown skin and the long hair blowing in the wind. The lake was beside them now, and dense forest beyond opening into pleasant meadows. She was being carried back into a primitive time of which the type was the man beside her. Riding without a saddle his body gave to the swing of the gallop, and she was more conscious than ever of physical strength.

But now the hoofs beat softly on the lawn terraces, and in a moment they had stopped before the house where the death had been. She knew at once. The empty arch into the patio of the servants' house was eloquent, in some manner, of the life that had departed. Before it was the group of singers, all standing quiet, as though their own music had silenced them, or perhaps preparing to sing again. Connor had described the old negro, but she was not prepared for these straight, withered bodies, these bony, masklike faces, and the white heads.

All in an instant they seemed to see her, and a flash of pleasure went from face to face. They stirred, they came toward her with glad murmurs, all except one, the oldest of them all, who remained aloof with his arms folded. But the others pressed close around her, talking excitedly to one another, as though she could not understand what they said. And she would never forget one who took her hand in both of his. The touch of his fingers was cold and as dry as parchment. "Honey, child, God bless your pretty face."

Was this the formal talk of which Connor had warned her? A growl from David drove them back from her like leaves before a wind. He had slipped from his horse, and now walked forward.

"It is Abraham?" he asked.

"He is dead and glorious," answered the chorus, and the girl trembled to hear those time-dried relics of humanity speak so cheerily of death.

The master was silent for a moment, then: "Did he leave no message for me?"

In place of answering the group shifted and opened a passage to the one in the rear, who stood with folded arms.

"Elijah, you were with him?"

"I heard his last words."

"And what dying message for David?"

"Death sealed his lips while he had still much to say. To the end he was a man of many words. But first he returned thanks to our Father who breathed life into the clay."

"That was a proper thought, and I see that the words were the words of Abraham."

"He gave thanks for a life of quiet ease and wise masters and he forgave the Lord the length of years he was kept in this world."

"In that," said David gravely, "I seem to hear his voice speaking. Continue."

"He commanded us to sing pleasantly when he was gone."

"I heard the singing on the lake road. It is well."

"Also, he bade us keep the first master in our minds, for John, he said, was the beginning."

At this the face of David clouded a little.

"Continue. What word for David?"

Something that Connor had said about the pride and sulkiness of a child came back to Ruth.

Elijah, after hesitation, went on: "He declared that Glani is too heavy in the forehead."

"Yes, that is Abraham," said the master, smiling tenderly. "He would argue even on the death bed."

"But a cross with Tabari would remedy that defect."

"Perhaps. What more?"

"He blessed you and bade you remember and rejoice that he was gone to his wife and child."

"Ah?" cried David softly. His glance, wandering absently, rested on the girl for a moment, and then came back to Elijah. "His mind went back to that? What further for my ear?"

"I remember nothing more, David."

"Speak!" commanded the master.

The eyes of Elijah roved as though for help.

"Toward the end his voice grew faint and his mind seemed to wander."

"Far rather tremble, Elijah, if you keep back the words he spoke, however sharp they may be. My hand is not light. Remember, and speak."

The fear of Elijah changed to a gloomy pride, and now he not only raised his head, but he even made a step forward and stood in dignity.

"Death took Abraham by the throat, and yet he continued to speak. 'Tell David that four masters cherished Abraham, but David cast him out like a dog and broke his heart, and therefore he dies. Although I bless him, God will hereafter judge him!'"

A shudder went through the entire group, and Ruth herself was uneasy.

"Keep your own thoughts and the words of Abraham well divided," said David solemnly. "I know his mind and its working. Continue, but be warned."

"I am warned, David, but my brother Abraham is dead and my heart weeps for him!"

"God will hereafter judge me," said David harshly. "And what was the further judgment of Abraham, the old man?"

"Even this: 'David has opened the Garden to one and therefore it will be opened to all. The law is broken. The first sin is the hard sin and the others follow easily. It is swift to run downhill. He has brought in one, and another will soon follow.'"

"Elijah," thundered David, "you have wrested his words to fit the thing you see."

"May the dead hand of Abraham strike me down if these were not his words."

"Had he become a prophet?" muttered David. "No, it was the maundering of an old man."

"God speaks on the lips of the dying, David."

"You have said enough."

"Wait!"

"You are rash, Elijah."

She could not see the face of David, but the terror and frenzied devotion of Elijah served her as a mirror to see the wrath of the master of the Garden.

"David has opened the gate of the Garden. The world sweeps in and shall carry away the life of Eden like a flood. All that four masters have done the fifth shall undo."

The strength of his ecstasy slid from Elijah and he dropped upon his knees with his head weighted toward the earth. The other negroes were frozen in their places. One who had opened his lips to speak, perhaps to intercede for the rash Elijah, remained with his lips parted, a staring mask of fear. In them Ruth saw the rage of David Eden, and she was sickened by what she saw. She had half pitied the simplicity of this man, this gull of the clever Connor. Now she loathed him as a savage barbarian. Even these old men were hardly safe from his furies of temper.

"Arise," said the master at length, and she could feel his battle to control his voice. "You are forgiven, Elijah, because of your courage—yet, beware! As for that old man whose words you repeated, I shall consider him." He turned on his heel, and Ruth saw that his face was iron.

CHAPTER XXIII.

THE TOP OF THE WORLD.

FROM the gate of the patio Connor, watching all that time in a nightmare of suspense, saw, first of all, the single figure of David come around the trees, David alone and walking. But before that

shock passed he saw Glani at the heels of the master, and then, farther back, Ruth!

She had passed the gate and two-thirds of the battle was fought and won. Yet all was not well, as he plainly saw. With long, swift steps David came over the terrace, and finally paused as if his thoughts had stopped him. He turned as Glani passed, and the girl came up to him; his extended arm halted Abra and he stood looking up to the girl and speaking. Only the faint murmur of his voice came unintelligibly to Connor, but he recognized danger in it as clearly as in the hum of bees. Suddenly the girl, answering, put out her hands as if in gesture of surrender. Another pause —it was only a matter of a second or so, but it was a space for life or death with Connor. In that interval he knew that his scheme was made or ruined. What had the girl said? Perhaps that mighty extended arm holding back Abra had frightened her, and with the wind blowing his long black hair aside, David of Eden was a figure wild enough to alarm her. Perhaps in fear of her life she had exposed the whole plan. If so, it meant broken bones for Connor.

But now David turned again, and this time he was talking by the side of Abra as they came up the hill. He talked with many gestures, and the girl was laughing down to him.

"God bless her!" muttered Connor impulsively. "She's a true-blue one!"

He remembered his part in the nick of time as they came closer, and David helped the girl down from the saddle and brought her forward. The gambler drew himself up and made his face grave with disapproval. Now or never he must prove to David that there was no shadow of a connection between him and the girl. Yet he was by no means easy. There was something forced and stereotyped in the smile of the girl that told him she had been through a crucial test and was still near the breaking point.

David presented them to one another uneasily. He was even a little embarrassed under the accusing eye of Connor.

"I make you known, Ruth," he said, "to my brother Benjamin. He is that man of whom I told you."

"I am happy," said the girl, "to be known to him."

"That much I cannot say," replied the gambler.

He turned upon David with outstretched arm.

"Ah, David, I have warned you!"

"As Abraham warned me against you, Benjamin. And dying men speak truth."

The counter-attack was so shrewd, so unexpected, that the gambler, for the moment, was thrown completely off his guard.

He could only murmur: "You are the judge for yourself, David."

"I am. Do not think that the power is in me. But God loves the Garden and His voice is never far from me. Neither are the spirits of the four who lived here before me and made this place. When there is danger they warn me. When I am in error the voice of God corrects me. And just as I heard the voice against the woman, Ruth, and heed it not."

He seemed to have gathered conviction for himself, much needed conviction, as he spoke. He turned now toward the girl.

"Be not wroth with Benjamin; and bear him no malice."

"I bear him none in the world," she answered truthfully, and held out her hand.

But Connor was still in his rôle. He folded his arms and pointedly disregarded the advance.

"Woman, let there be peace and few words between us. My will is the will of David."

"There speaks my brother!" cried the master of the valley.

"And yet," muttered Connor, "why is she here?"

"She came to buy a horse."

"But they are not sold."

"That is true. Yet she has traveled far and she is in great need of food and drink. Could I turn her away hungry, Benjamin?"

"She could have been fed at the gate. She could surely have rested there."

It was easy to see that David was hard-pressed. His eye roved eagerly to Ruth. Then a triumphant explanation sparkled in his eye.

"It is the horse she rides, a gelding from my Garden. His lot in the world has been

hard. He is scarred with the spur and the whip. I have determined to take him back, at a price. But who can arrange matters of buying and selling all in a moment? It is a matter for much talk. Therefore she is here."

"I am answered," said Connor, and turning to Ruth he winked broadly.

"It is well," said David, "and I foresee happy days. In the meantime there is a duty before me. Abraham must be laid in his grave and I leave Ruth to your keeping, Benjamin. Bear with her tenderly for my sake."

He stepped to the girl.

"You are not afraid?"

"I am not afraid," she answered.

"My thoughts shall be near you. Farewell."

He had hardly reached the gate of the patio when Joseph, going out after finishing his labor at the fountain, passed between the gambler and the girl. Connor stopped him with a sign.

"The whip hasn't fallen, you see," he said maliciously to the negro.

"There is still much time," replied Joseph. "And before the end it will fall. Perhaps on you. Or on that!"

He indicated the girl with his pointing finger; his glance turned savagely from one to the other, and then he went slowly out of the patio and they were alone. She came to Connor at once and even touched his arm in her excitement.

"What did he mean?"

"That's the one I told you about. The one David beat up with the whip. He'd give his eye teeth to get back at me, and he has an idea that there's going to be hell to pay because another person has come into the valley. Bunk! I can handle a hundred of these boobs, black and white. But—what happened down the hill?"

"When he stopped me? Did you see that?"

"My heart stopped the same minute. What was it?"

"He had just heard the last words of Abraham. When he stopped me on the hill his face was terrible. Like a wolf!"

"I know that look in him! How did you buck up under it?"

"I didn't. I felt my blood turn to water and I wanted to run."

"But you stuck it out—I saw! Did he say anything?"

"He said: 'Dying men do not lie.' And I have been twice warned. Woman, why are you here?"

"And you?" gasped Connor. "What did you say?"

"Nothing. My head spun. I looked up the terrace. I wanted to see you, but you weren't in sight. I felt terribly alone and absolutely helpless. If I'd had a gun I would have reached for it."

"Thank God you didn't!"

"But you don't know what his face was like! I expected him to tear me off the horse and smash me with his hands. All at once I wanted to tell him everything—beg him not to hurt me." Connor groaned.

"I knew it! I knew that was in your head!"

"But I didn't."

"Good girl."

"He said: 'Why are you here? What harm have you come to work in the Garden?'"

"And you alone with him!" gasped Connor.

"That was what did it. I was so helpless that it made me bold. Can you imagine smiling at a time like that?"

"Were you able to?"

"I don't know how. It took every ounce of strength in me. But I made myself smile—straight into his face. Then I put out my hands to him all at once.

"'How could I harm you?' I asked him.

"And then you should have seen his face change and the anger break up like a cloud. I knew I was safe, then, but I was still dizzy—just as if I'd looked over a cliff—you know?"

"And yet you rode up the hill after that laughing down to him! Ruth, you're the gamest sport and the best pal in the world. The finest little act I ever saw on the stage or off. It was Big Time stuff. My hat's off, but—where'd you get the nerve?

"I was frightened almost to death. Too much frightened for it to show. When I saw you, some of my strength came back. But what do you think of him?"

"He's—simply a savage. What do I think of an Indian?"

"No more than that?"

"Ben, can you pet a tiger after you've seen his claws?"

He looked at her with anxiety.

"You're not going to break down later on—feeling as if he's dynamite about to explode all the time?"

"I'm going to play the game through," she said with a sort of fierce happiness. "I've felt like a sneak thief about this. But now it's different. He's more of a wolf than a man. Ben, I saw murder in his face, I swear! And if it isn't wrong to tame wild beasts it isn't wrong to tame him. I'm going to play the game, lead him as far as I can until we get the horses—and then it 'll be easy enough to make up by being good the rest of my life."

"Ruth—girl—you've covered the whole ground. And when you have the coin—" He broke off with laughter that was filled with drunken excitement. "But what did you think of my game?"

She did not hear him, and standing with her hands clasped lightly behind her she looked beyond the roof of the house and over the tops of the western mountains, with the sun-haze about them.

"I feel as if I were on the top of the world," she said at last. "And I wouldn't have one thing changed. We're playing for big stakes, but we're taking a chance that makes the game worth while. What we win we'll earn—because he's a devil. Isn't it what you'd call a fair bet?"

"The squarest in the world," said Connor stoutly.

CHAPTER XXIV.

THE FLOWER OF DAVID.

THEY had no means of knowing when David would return and the ominous shadow of Joseph, lingering near the patio, determined Connor on a walk out of any possible earshot. They went down to the lake with the singing of the negroes on the other side of the hill growing dim as they descended. The cool of the day was beginning, and they walked close to the edge of the water with the brown tree-trunks on one side and the green images floating beyond. Peace lay over Eden valley and the bright river that ran through it, but Ben Connor had no mind to dwell on unessentials.

He had found in the girl an ally of unexpected strength. He expected only a difficult tool filled with scruples, drawing back, imperiling his plans with her hesitation. Instead, she was on fire with the plan. He though well to fan that fire and keep it steadily blazing.

"It's better for David; better for him than it is for us. Look at the poor simp! He's in prison here and doesn't know it. He thinks he's happy, but he's simply kidding himself. Nothing but a gang of black-faces around him. In six months I'll have him chatting with millionaires."

"Let a barber do a day's work on him first."

"No. It's just the long-haired nuts like that who get by with the high-steppers. He has a lingo about flowers and trees that'll knock their eye out. I know the gang. Always on edge for something different—music that sounds like a riot in a junk shop and poetry that reads like a drunken printing-press. Well, David ought to be different enough to suit 'em. I'll boost him, though: 'The Man that Brought Out the Eden Grays!' He'll be headline stuff!"

He laughed so heartily that he did not notice the quick glance of criticism which the girl cast at him.

"I'm not taking anything from him, really," went on Connor. "I'm simply sneaking around behind him so's I can pour his pockets full of the coin. That's all there is to it. Outside of the looks, tell me if there's anything crooked you can see?"

"I don't think there is," she murmured. "I almost hope that there isn't!"

She was so dubious about it that Connor was alarmed. He was fond of Ruth Manning, but she was just "different" enough to baffle him. Usually he divided mankind into three or four categories for the sake of fast thinking. There were the "boobs", the "regular guys", the "high steppers",

and the "nuts". Sometimes he came perilously close to including Ruth in the last class—with David Eden. And if he did not do so, it was mainly because she had given such an exhibition of cool courage only a few moments before. He had finished his peroration, now, with a feeling of actual virtue, but the shadow on her face made him change his tactics and his talk.

He confined himself, thereafter, strictly to the future. First he outlined his plans for raising the cash for the big "killing". He told of the men to whom he could go for backing. There were "hard guys" who would take a chance. "Wise ones" who would back his judgment. "Fall guys" who would follow him blindly. For ten percent he would get all the cash he could place. Then it remained to try out the grays in secret, and in public let them go through the paces ridden under wraps and heavily weighed. He described the means of placing the big money before the great race.

And as he talked his figures mounted from tens to hundreds to thousands, until he was speaking in millions. In all of this profit she and David and Connor would share dollar for dollar. At the first corner of the shore they turned she had arrived at a snug apartment in New York. She would have a house-keeper-companion, some friendly woman whom adverse circumstances had placed in the servant class. There would be a cosy living room and a paneled dining room. In the entrance hall of the apartment house, imitation of encrusted marble, no doubt.

But as they came opposite a little wooded island in the lake she had added a maid to the housekeeper. Also, there was now a guest room. Some one from Lukin would be in that room; some one from Lukin would go through the place with her, marveling at her good fortune.

And clothes! They made all the difference. Dressed as she would be dressed, when she came into a room that queer, cold gleam of envy would be in the eyes of the women and the man would sit straighter!

Yet when they reached the place where the shore line turned north and west her imagination, spurred by Connor's talk, was stumbling along dizzy heights. Her apartment occupied a whole floor. Her butler was a miracle of dignity and her chef a genius in the kitchen. On the great table the silver and glass were things of frosted light. Her chauffeur drove a monster automobile with a great purring engine that whipped her about the city with the color blown into her cheeks. In her box at the opera she was allowing the deep, soft luxury of the fur collar to slide down from her throat, while along the boxes, in the galleries, there was a ripple of light as the thousand glassses turned upon her. Then she found that Connor was smiling at her. She flushed, but snapped her fingers.

"This thing is going through," she declared.

"You won't weaken?"

"I'm as cold as steel. Let's go back. He'll probably be in the house by this time."

Time had slipped past her unnoticed, and the lake was violet and gold with the sunset as they turned away; under the trees along the terraces the brilliant wild flowers were dimmed by a blue shadow.

"But I never saw wild flowers like those," she said to Connor.

"Nobody else ever did. But old Matthew, whoever he was, grew 'em and kept crossing 'em until he got those big fellows with all the colors of the rainbow."

"Hurry! We're late!"

"No, David's probably on top of that hill, now; always goes up there to watch the sun rise and the sun set. Can you beat that?"

He chuckled, but a shade had darkened the face of the girl for a moment. Then she lifted her head resolutely.

"I'm not going to try to understand him. The minute you understand a thing you stop being afraid of it; and as soon as I stop being afraid of David Eden I might begin to like him—which is what I don't want."

"What's that?" cried Connor, breaking in on her last words. When Ruth began to think aloud he always stopped listening; it was a maxim of his to never listen when a woman became serious.

"It's that negro with the ape-face."

"Joseph!" exclaimed Connor heavily. "Whipping did him no good. He'll need killing one of these days."

But she had already reverted to another thing.

"Do you think he worships the sun?"

"I don't think. Try to figure out a fellow like that and you get to be just as much of a nut as he is. Go on toward the house and I'll follow you in a minute. I want to talk to big Joe."

He turned aside into the trees briskly, and the moment he was out of sight of the girl he called softly: "Joseph!"

He repeated the call after a trifling wait before he saw the big negro coming unconcernedly through the trees toward him. Joseph came close before he stopped—very close, as a man will do when he wishes to make another aware of his size, and from this point of vantage, he looked over Connor from head to foot with a glance of lingering and insolent criticism. The gambler was somewhat amused and a little alarmed by that attitude.

"Now, Joseph," he said, "tell me frankly why you're dodging me about the valley. Waiting for a chance to throw stones?"

His smile remained without a reflection on the stolid face of the servant.

"Benjamin," answered the deep, solemn voice, "I know all!"

It made Connor peer into those broad, animal features as into a dim light. Then a moment of reflection assured him that Joseph could not have learned the secret.

"Haneemar, whom you know," continued Joseph, "has told me about you."

"And where," asked Connor, completely at sea, "did you learn of Haneemar?"

"From Abraham. And I know that this is the head of Haneemar."

He brought out in his palm the little watch-charm of carved ivory.

"Of course," nodded Connor, feeling his way. "And what is it that you know from Haneemar?"

"That you are evil, Benjamin, and that you have come here for evil. You entered by a trick; and you will stay here for evil purposes until the end."

"You follow around to pick up a little dope, eh?" chuckled Connor. "You trail me to find out what I intend to do? Why don't you go to David and warn him?"

"Have I forgotten the whip?" asked Joseph, his nostrils trembling with anger. "But the good Haneemar now gives me power and in the end he will betray you into my hands. That is why I follow you. Wherever you go I follow; I am even able to know what you think! But hearken to me, Benjamin. Take back the head of Haneemar and the bad luck that lives in it. Take it back, and I shall no longer follow you. I shall forget the whip. I shall be ready to do you a service."

He extended the little piece of ivory eagerly, but Connor drew back. His superstitions were under the surface of his mind, but, still, they were there, and the fear which Joseph showed was contagious.

"Why don't you throw it away if you're afraid of it, Joseph?"

"You know as I know," returned Joseph, glowering, "that it cannot be thrown away. It must be given and freely accepted, as I—oh fool—accepted it from you."

There was such a profound conviction in this that Connor was affected in spite of himself. That little trinket had been the entering wedge through which he had worked his way into the Garden and started on the road to fortune. He would rather have cut off his hand, now, than take it back.

"Find some one else to take it," he suggested cheerily. "I don't want the thing."

"Then all that Abraham told me is true!" muttered Joseph, closing his hand over the trinket. "But I shall follow you, Benjamin. When you think you are alone you shall find me by turning your head. Every day by sunrise and every day by the dark I beg Haneemar to put his curse on you. I have done you no wrong, and you have had me shamed."

"And now you're going to have me bewitched, eh?" asked Connor.

"You shall see."

The gambler drew back another pace and through the shadows he saw the beginning of a smile of animal-cunning on the face of Joseph.

"The devil take you and Haneemar together," he growled. "Remember this, Joseph. I've had you whipped once. The next time I'll have you flayed alive."

Instead of answering, Joseph merely grinned more openly, and the gambler, to forget the ape-face, wheeled and hurried out from the trees. The touch of nightmare dread did not leave him until he rejoined Ruth on the higher terrace.

They found the patio glowing with light, the table near the fountain, and three chairs around it. David came out of the shadow of the arcade to meet them, and he was as uneasy as a boy who has a surprise for grown-ups. He had not even time for a greeting.

"You have not seen your room?" he said to Ruth. "I have made it ready for you. Come!"

He led the way half a pace in front, glancing back at them as though to reprove their slowness, until he reached a door at which he turned and faced her, laughing with excitement. She could hardly believe that this man with his childish gayety was the same whose fury had terrified the negroes that same afternoon.

"Close your eyes—close them fast. You will not look until I say?"

She obeyed, setting her teeth to keep from smiling.

"Now come forward- step high for the doorway. So! You are in. Now wait—now open your eyes and look!"

She obeyed again and saw first David standing back with an anxious smile and the gesture of one who reveals, but is not quite sure of its effect. Then she heard a soft, startled exclamation from Connor behind her. Last of all she saw the room.

It was as if the walls had been broken down and a garden let inside—it gave an effect of open air, sunlight and wind. Purple flowers like warm shadows baked the farther corners, and out of them rose a great vine draping the window. It had been torn bodily from the earth, and now the roots were packed with damp moss, yellow-green. It bore in clusters and single flowers and abundant bloom, each blossom as large as the mallow, and a dark gold so rich that Ruth well-nigh listened for the murmur of bees working this mine of pollen. From above, the great flowers hung down against the dull red of the sunset sky; and from below the distant tree-tops on the terrace pointed up with glimmers of the lake between. There was only the reflected light of the evening, now, but the cup like blossoms were filled to the brim with a glow of their own.

She looked away.

A dapple deer-skin covered the bed like the shadow under a tree in mid-day, and the yellow of the flowers was repeated dimly on the floor by a great, tawny hide of a mountain-lion. She took up some of the purple flowers, and letting the velvet petals trail over her finger tips, she turned to David with a smile. But what Connor saw, and saw with a thrill of alarm, was that her eyes were filling with tears.

"See!" said David gloomily. "I have done this to make you happy, and now you are sad!"

"Because it is so beautiful"

"Yes," said David slowly. "I think I understand."

But Connor took one of the flowers from her hand. She cried out, but too late to keep him from ripping the blossom to pieces, and now he held up a single petal, long, gracefull, red-purple at the broader end and deep yellow at the narrow.

"Think of that a million times bigger," said Connor, "and made out of velvet. That'd be a design for a cloak, eh? Cost about a thousand bucks to imitate this petal, but it'd be worth it to see you in it, eh?"

She looked to David with a smile of apology for Connor, but her hand accepted the petal, and her second smile was for Connor himself.

CHAPTER XXV.

THE WIND OF DAVID.

WHEN they went out into the patio again, David had lost a large part of his bouyancy of spirits, as though in some subtle manner Connor had overcast the triumph of the room; he left them with word that the evening meal

would soon be ready and hurried off calling orders to Zacharias.

"Why did you do it?" she asked Connor as soon as they were alone.

"Because it made me mad to see a star-gazer like that turning your head."

"But didn't you think the room was beautiful?"

"Sure. Like a riot in a florist's shop. But don't let this David take you off guard with his rooms full of flowers and full of silence."

"Silence?"

"Haven't I told you about his Room of Silence? That's one of his queer dodges. That room; you see? When anything bothers him he goes over and sits down in there, because—do you know what he thinks sits with him?"

"Well?"

"God!"

She was between a smile and a gasp.

"Yep, that's David," grinned Connor. "Just plain nut."

"What's inside?"

"I don't know. Maybe flowers."

"Let's find out."

He caught her arm quickly.

"Not in a thousand years!" He changed color at the thought and glanced guiltily around. "That would be the smash of everything. Why, he turned over the whole Garden of Eden to me. I can go anywhere, but not a step inside that room. It's his Holy Ground, you see! Maybe it's where he keeps his jack. And I've a hunch that he has a slough of it tucked away somewhere."

She raised her hand as an idea came to her half way through this speech.

"Listen! I have an idea that the clew to all of David's mystery is in that room!"

"Drop that idea, Ruth," he ordered gruffly. "You've seen David on one rampage, but it's nothing to what would happen if you so much as peeked into that place. When the negroes pass that door they take off their hats—watch 'em the next time you have a chance. You won't make a slip about that room?"

"No." But she added: "I'd give my soul—for one look!"

Dinner that night under the stars with the whispering of the fountain beside them was a ceremony which Connor never forgot. The moon rose late and in the meantime the sky was heavy and dark with sheeted patchwork of clouds, with the stars showing here and there. The wind blew in gusts. A wave began with a whisper on the hill, came with a light rushing acrosss the patio, and then diminished quickly among the trees down the terraces. Rough, iron-framed lanterns gave the light and showed the arcade stepping away on either side and growing dim toward the entrance. That uncertain illumination made the crude pillars seem to have only the irregularity of vast antiquity, stable masses of stone. Where the circle of lantern-light overlapped rose the fountain, a pale spray forever dissolving in the upper shadow. Connor himself was more or less used to these things, but he became newly aware of them as the girl sent quick, eager glances here and there.

She had placed a single one of the great yellow blossoms in her hair and it changed her shrewdly. It brought out the delicate coloring of her skin, and to the darkness of her eyes it lent a tint of violet. Plainly she enjoyed the scene with its newness. David, of course, was the spice to everything, and his capitulation was complete; he kept the girl always on an uneasy balance between happiness and laughter. And Connor trembled for fear the mirth would show through. But each change of her expression appeared to delight David more than the last.

Under his deft knife the choicest white meat came away from the breast of a chicken and he heaped it at once on the plate of Ruth. Then he dropped his chin upon his great brown fist and watched with silent delight while she ate. It embarrassed her; but her flush had a tinge of pleasure in it, as Connor very well knew.

"Look!" said David, speaking softly as though Ruth would not hear him. "How pleasant it is, to be three together. When we were two, one talked and the other grew weary—was it not so? But now we are complete. One speaks, one listens, and the other judges. I have been alone. The Garden of Eden has been to me a prison, at many times. And now there is nothing

wanting. And why? There were many men before. We were not lacking in numbers. Yet there was an emptiness, and now comes one small creature, as delicate as a colt of three months, this being of smiles and curious glances, this small voice, this woman—and at once the gap is filled. Is it not strange?"

He cast himself back in his chair, as though he wished to throw her into perspective with her surroundings, and all the time he was staring as though she were an image, a picture, and not a thing of flesh and blood. Connor himself was on the verge of a smile, but when he saw the face of Ruth Manning his mirth disappeared in a chill of terror. She was struggling and struggling in vain against a rising tide of laughter, laughter in the face of David Eden and his sensitive pride.

It came, it broke through all bonds, and now it was bubbling from her lips. As one who awaits the falling of a blow, Connor glanced furtively at the host, and again he was startled.

There was not a shade of evil temper in the face of David. He leaned forward, indeed, with a surge of the great shoulders, but it was as one who listens to an entrancing music. And when she ceased, abruptly, he sighed.

"Speak to me," he commanded.

She murmured a faint reply.

"Again," said David, half closing his eyes. And Connor nodded a frantic encouragement to her.

"But what shall I say?"

"For the meaning of what you say," said David, "I have no care, but only for the sound. Have you heard dripping in a well, a sound like water filling a bottle and never reaching the top? It keeps you listening for an hour, perhaps, always a soft sound, but always rising toward a climax? Or a drowsy day when the wind hardly moves and the whistling of a bird comes now and then out of the trees, cool and contented? Or you pass a meadow of flowers in the warm sun and hear the ground murmur of the bees, and you think at once of the wax films of the honeycomb, and the clear golden honey? All those things I heard and saw when you spoke."

"Plain nut!" said Connor, framing the words with silent lips.

But though her eyes rested on him, apparently she did not see his face. She looked back at Connor with a wistful little half-smile.

At once David cast out both his hands toward hers.

"Ah, you are strange, new, delightful!" He stopped abruptly. Then: "Does it make you happy to hear me say these things?"

"Why do you ask me that?" she said curiously.

"Because it fills me with unspeakable happiness to say them. If I am silent and only think then I am not so pleased. When I see Glani standing on the hill-top I feel his speed in the slope of his muscles, the flaunt of his tail, the pride of his head; but when I gallop him, and the wind of his galloping strikes my face—ha, that is a joy! So it is speaking with you. When I see you I say within: 'She is beautiful!' But when I speak it aloud your lips tremble a little toward a smile, your eyes darken with pleasure, and then my heart rises into my throat and I wish to speak again and again and again to find new things to say, to say old things in new words. So that I may watch the changes in your face. Do you understand? But now you blush. Is that a sign of anger?"

"It is a sign that no other men have ever talked to me in this manner."

"Then other men are fools. What I say is true. I feel it ring in me, that it is the truth. Benjamin, my brother, is it not so? Ha!"

She was raising the wine-cup; he checked her with his eager, extended hand.

"See, Benjamin, how this mysterious thing is done, this raising of the hand. *We* raise the cup to drink. An ugly thing—let it be done and forgotten. But when *she* lifts the cup it is a thing to be remembered; how her fingers curve and the weight of the cup presses into them, and how her wrist droops."

She lowered the cup hastily and put her hand before her face.

"I see," said Connor dryly.

"Bah!" cried the master of the Garden.

"You do not see. But you, Ruth, are you angry? Are you shamed?"

He drew down her hands, frowning with intense anxiety. Her face was crimson.

"No," she said faintly.

"He says that he sees, but he does not see," went on David. "He is blind, this Benjamin of mine. I show him my noblest grove of the eucalyptus trees, each tree as tall as a hill, as proud as a king, as beautiful as a thought that springs up from the earth. I show him these glorious trees. What does he say? 'You could build a whole town out of that wood!' Bah! Is that seeing? No, he is blind! Such a man would give you hard work to do. But I say to you, Ruth, that to be beautiful is to be wise, and industrious, and good. Surely you are to me like the rising of the sun—my heart leaps up! And you are like the coming of the night making the world beautiful and mysterious. For behind your eyes and behind your words, out of the sound of your voice and your glances, I guess at new things, strange things, hidden things. Treasures which cannot be held in the hands. Should you grow as old as Elijah, withered, meager as a grasshopper, the treasures would still be there. I, who have seen them, can never forget them!"

Once more she covered her eyes with her hand, and David started up from his chair.

"What have I done?" he asked faintly of Connor. He hurried around the table to her. "Look up! How have I harmed you?"

"I am only tired," she said.

"I am a fool! I should have known. Come!" said David.

He drew her from the chair and led her across the lawn, supporting her. At her door: "May sleep be to you like the sound of running water," murmured David.

And when the door was closed he went hastily back to Connor.

CHAPTER XXVI.

POLITICS.

"WHAT have I done? What have I done?" he kept moaning. "She is in pain. I have hurt her."

"Sit down," said Connor, deeply amused.

It had been a curious revelation to him, this open talk of a man who was falling in love. He remembered the way he had proposed to a girl, once: "Say, Betty, don't you think you and me would hit it off pretty well, speaking permanently?"

This flaunting language was wholly ludicrous to Connor. It was book-stuff.

David had obeyed him with childlike docility, and sat now like a pupil about to be corrected by the master.

"That point is this," explained Connor gravely. "You have the wrong idea. As far as I can make out, you like Ruth?"

"It is a weak word. Bah! It is not enough."

"But it's enough to tell her. You see, men outside of the Garden don't talk to a girl the way you do, and it embarrasses her to have you talk about her all the time."

"Is it true?" murmured the penitent David. "Then what should I have said?"

"Well—er—you might have said—that the flower went pretty well in her hair, and let it go at that."

"But it was more, more, more! Benjamin, my brother, these hands of mine picked that very flower. And I see that it has pleased her. She had taken it up and placed it in her hair. It changes her. My flower brings her close to me. It means that we have found a thing which pleases us both. Just as you and I, Benjamin, are drawn together by the love of one horse. So that flower in her hair is a great sign. I dwell upon it. It is like a golden moon rising in a black night. It lights my way to her. Words rush up from my heart, but cannot express what I mean!"

"Let it go! Let it go!" said Connor hastily, brushing his way through this outflow of verbiage, like a man bothered with gnats. "I gather what you mean. But the point is that about nine-tenths of what you think you'd better not say. If you want to talk—well, talk about yourself. That's what I most generally do with a girl. They like to hear a man say what he's done."

"Myself!" said David heavily. "Talk of a dead stump when there is a great tree beside it? Well, I see that I have much to learn."

"You certainly have," said Connor with much meaning. "I'd hate to turn you loose in Manhattan."

"In what?"

"Never mind. But here's another thing. You know that she'll have to leave pretty soon?"

The meaning slowly filtered into David's mind.

"Benjamin," he said slowly, "you are wise in many ways, with horses and with women, it seems. But that is a fool's talk. Let me hear no more of it. Leave me? Why should she leave me?"

Triumph warmed the heart of Connor.

"Because a girl can't ramble off into the mountains and put up in a valley where there are nothing but men. It isn't done."

"Why not?"

"Isn't good form."

"I fail to understand."

"My dear fellow, she'd be compromised for life if it were known that she had lived here with us."

David shook his head blankly.

"In one word," said Connor, striving to make his point, "she'd be pointed out by other women and by men. They'd never have anything to do with her. They'd say things that would make her ashamed, hurt her, you know."

Understanding and wrath gathered in David's face.

"To such a man—to such a dog of a man—I would talk with my hands!"

"I think you would," nodded Connor, not a little impressed. "But you might not be around to hear the talk."

"But women surely live with men. There are wives—"

"Ah! Man and wife—all very well!"

"Then it is simple. I marry her and then I keep her here forever."

"Perhaps. But will she marry you?"

"Why not?"

"Well, does she love you?"

"True." He stood up. "I'll ask her."

"For Heaven's sake, no! Sit down! You mustn't rush at a woman like this the first day you know her. Give her time. Let me tell you when!"

"Benjamin, my dear brother, you are wise and I am a fool!"

"You'll do in time. Let me coach you, that's all, and you'll come on famously. I can tell you this: that I think she likes you very well already."

"Your words are like a shower of light, a fragrant wind. Benjamin, I am hot with happiness! When may I speak to her?"

"I don't know. She may have guessed something out of what you said to-night." He swallowed a smile. "You might speak to her about this marriage to-morrow."

"It will be hard; but I shall wait."

"And then you'll have to go out of the Garden with her to get married."

"Out of the Garden? Never! Why should we?"

"Why, you'll need a minister, you know, to marry you."

"True. Than I shall send for one."

"But he might not want to make this long journey for the sake of one marriage ceremony."

"There are ways, perhaps, of persuading him to come," said David, making a grim gesture.

"No force or you ruin everything."

"I shall be ruled by you, brother. It seems I have little knowledge."

"Go easy always and you'll come out all right. Give her plenty of time. A woman always needs a lot of time to make up her mind, and even then she's generally wrong."

"What do you mean by that?"

"No matter. She'll probably want to go back to her home for a while."

"Leave me?"

"Not necessarily. But you, when a man gets engaged, it's sometimes a couple of years between the time a woman promises to marry him and the day of the ceremony."

"Do they wait so long, and live apart?"

"A thousand miles, maybe."

"Then you men beyond the mountains are made of iron!"

"Do you have to be away from her? Why not go along with her when she goes home?"

"Surely, Benjamin, you know that a law forbids it!"

"You make your own laws in important things like this."

"It cannot be."

And so the matter rested when Connor

left his host and went to bed. He had been careful not to press the point. So unbelievably much ground had been covered in the first few hours that he was dizzy with success. It seemed ages since that Ruth had come running to him in the patio in terror of her life. From that moment how much had been done!

Closing his eyes as he lay on his bed, he went back over each incident to see if a false step had been made. As far as he could see, there had not been a single unsound measure undertaken. The first stroke had been the masterpiece. Out of a danger which had threatened instant destruction of their plan she had won complete victory by her facing of David, and when she put her hand in his as a sign of weakness, Connor could see that she had made David her slave.

As the scene came back vividly before his eyes he could not resist an impulse to murmur aloud to the dark: "Brave girl!"

She had grown upon him marvelously in that single half-day. The ability to rise to a great situation was something which he admired above all things in man or woman. It was his own peculiar power—to judge a man or a horse in a glance, and dare to venture a fortune on chance. Indeed, it was hardly a wonder that David Eden or any other man should have fallen in love with her in that one half-day. She was changed beyond recognition from the pale girl who sat at the telegraph key in Lukin and listened to the babble of the world. Now she was out in that world, acting on the stage and proving herself worthy of a rôle.

He rehearsed her acts. And finally he found himself flushing hotly at the memory of her mingled pleasure and shame and embarrassment as David of Eden had poured out his amazing flow of compliments.

At this point Connor sat up suddenly and violently in his bed.

"Steady, Ben!" he cautioned himself. "Watch your step!"

(To be continued NEXT WEEK.)

For Better or Far Worse

by Samuel G. Camp

NO doubt marriage is a grand and glorious institution. But there's times when—well, right now, for example, if I had my way about it, I'd tell the world that a certain Miss Dorothy Kent sure was one girl in a thousand! Owing, however, to circumstances over which I have little or no control, I—well, anyway, she was *two* girls in a thousand, the other, of course, as you may of guessed, being no less than my beautiful and accomplished wife.

And now, having got round that little difficulty in a manner which ought to give the diplomatic squad in Washington some trouble in laughing off—why, maybe you'd like to hear how come that highly flattering opinion of mine with respect to the lovely and likewise clever Miss Kent.

Well, the beginning was no doubt when a husky young gent with a genial smile and a tin ear, and who does his stuff under the *nom de plume* of Jack Casey, gets himself elected president of the heavyweight box-fighters of Dry Country, 'Tis of Thee by the overwhelming majority of one thousand two hundred and forty-four hearty socks over the opposing candidate, who, after caroming off a hospital, fades out of the picture in the general direction of that bourn from which, as the poet says, no champ returneth. They never come back.

Now if, in turn, Mr. Casey had only of had the politeness or something to in due time permit somebody to pop him on the chin, followed by Mr. Casey touring the twilight circuit for an engagement of ten seconds, why no doubt it would of personally saved me the pleasure of passing through what the French or some of the other Allies calls one very bad quarter of an hour—though, as a matter of fact, it didn't last that long.

But nothing like that. Instead, at the end of something like several years, Mr. Casey was still clinging to his much-prized title like what's-his-name, Horatius, the great bridge champion, once holds thirteen trumps or something. And a situation had come up which was a good deal like the one when the great White Hope hunt was on, and which, as you very likely remember, resulted in the reluctant Mr. Jeffries coming out of his retirement, and the unconscious Mr. Jeffries going back to it.

In a word, Mr. Casey having knocked all comers, as they're known to the trade, for the conventional row of shanties—why, that's all there was, there wasn't any more. There was nobody left in sight that had a Chinaman's chance with the title-holder.

And I probably don't have to say that this was a state of affairs which was highly unsatisfactory to all concerned—including Mr. Casey, who was forced to struggle along as best he could on the measly two thousand dollars per week, or thereabouts, which he dragged down for working, so to say, an hour or so a day on the vaudeville circuits, the movie lots, and the like.

So that was the way things was when one day I met up with a friend of mine, Walter McKettrick by name, who tapped a wicked typewriter in the sport department of one of our leading dailies. Well, probably Walter won't ever burn up the old planet. But you got to hand it to him for one thing, anyway: he sure is right up and coming all the time.

What you might call a self-sufficient kind of guy, Walter is, and never at a loss for an idea, if you know what I mean. Why, Walter would no more hesitate about telling Mr. Will Hays, for example, how to stage a Presidential campaign than he would about telling Mr. George M. Cohan all about how to put on a musical show. And I wouldn't be surprised if Will and George might learn something to their advantage, at that.

I might say, however, that I've got some personal reasons for thinking that some of Walter's stuff ain't no good. No, sir; not so good!

Anyway, I met up with Walter; and, having settled several matters of international importance and which had Parliament, the Senate, Congress, and W. J. Bryan hanging on the ropes, Walter finally gets round to the topic of how the heavyweight division still seems to be drifting in what Mr. McKettrick calls the well-known doldrums.

"Doldrums is right," I says. "Whatever they are. Say, I only wish I had one of them handy little household articles such as who's this, Aladdin, had."

"How do you mean?" asks Walter.

"Why," I says, "after applying the necessary amount of friction, I'd wish me some bird that could hand Mr. Jack Casey one very proper pasting!"

"Well," says Walter, "if you want to get a man capable of defeating the champion, why don't you get one?"

"Just like that, eh?" I comes back. "Say, why don't I get a million bucks or something? How d'ye mean, get one?"

"What do people generally do when they want something they haven't got?" counters Walter.

"Why," I says, "just now the simple but efficient blackjack seems to be mostly in favor in our best criminal circles. You see—"

Looked like my stuff didn't go so big

with Walter, however. For, "I ask you again," he cuts in. "What do—"

"Oh, all right," I says. "I'll bite. What *do* they do?"

"Advertise!" says Mr. McKettrick.

"Advertise!" I gasps. "Why, how d'you mean? 'Wanted: Young man to knock Champion Jack Casey for a goal; no references required. Apply, *et cetera,* and bring your own floral wreaths. Line forms on the right!' Something like that? Why, whoever heard of such a thing?"

"Nobody," says Mr. McKettrick with an air of being no more pleased with himself than a bootlegger with a new million. "It's original!"

"All of that!" I says.

I thought for a minute. "Walter," I says then, "d'ye know, I think you've got an idea!"

"Often get 'em," says the young journalist with becoming modesty.

"But how—" I starts.

"Leave it to me," says Walter. "I'll write the ad and see that it gets a good position. What's more, I'm going to play it up big on the sport page, too. Say, this is goin' to be good! It's a knockout! New stuff, Joe! New stuff! But keep this under your hat, see? This is one for the paper—get me?"

"Right with you, Walter," I says. "And God save Jack Casey!"

Say—if I'd thought, I'd of put in a word for myself!

Well, the ad come out in next morning's paper, and was to the general effect that all such as was subject to the delusion that they could whip the great J. Casey to a light froth, should lose no time in making themselves known to Mr. Joe Connery, the celebrated box-fight impresario, at his office on Forty-Third Street, slightly off Broadway. Slightly off was right. And there was a column story on the sport page by the world-famous author, W. McKettrick, which was alone worth the price of admission. All told, the affair kicked up no more commotion than if, say, Charles S. Chaplin was to walk into a kindergarten.

And it wasn't long before the results begun to trickle in. But what few stragglers showed up that first day, why, they was merely the press agents of the coming storm, as they say in the movies. No doubt before most of the coming heavyweight champs could answer the ad—for, of course, they had to show up in person—they were up against the necessity of seeing the boss for the purpose of getting time off from the boiler establishments, trucking studios, piano-moving colleges, and the like, where up to now they'd been hiding their several lights under so many bushels, so to say.

For when next morning I turn up at the building where I'm only three months in arrears for rent—well, I wish you could of seen 'em! If a movie magnate had been on the lookout for a real sure-enough mob scene, why, there it was! All he'd had to of done was come and shoot it.

Why, for a hundred feet in either direction from the entrance to the building, the sidewalk was jammed to the curb. There was ambassadors from all our best-known nationalities, from Czecho-Slovaks and Jerseyites, too, and of course including the Scandinavians. Likewise, there was representatives, as I found out later, of most every trade, art, science and profession known to man, including safe-cracking and painting on china. Most of them, as you could see at a glance, weighs in at somewheres around two hundred. But, here and there, there was visible to the eye an occasional whale who, it was safe to say, would never again see three hundred. And so, as you might say, even if there'd been only a few of 'em present, why, it would of still been quite a crowd at that.

Of course, a good share of the mob was merely innocent onlookers who was there in the usual spirit of "Now, what's comin' off?" Also there was coppers on hand to the number of half a dozen or more, and they were having a sweet time, too, on account of the prospective champs seemingly rarin' to go, and every now and then insisting on starting an elimination tournament among themselves without benefit of clergy or anything.

And there must of been somebody in the bunch that knew me. For I hadn't much sooner heaved in sight than I'm greeted with, "Here he is! That's the guy! Here's Connery!" and the like. And the next

minute I'm confronted by one of the officers of the law.

"See here, guy," he says in a rude, angry voice. "You the bird that's responsible for all this?"

The crowd had me pegged and there was no use denying it. So I didn't.

"All right," says the copper. "C'mon! Let's take a walk."

"Officer," I says politely, "these gentlemen are present in answer to an ad I put in the paper. Ain't a man got a right—"

"I'm wise to that ad stuff," butts in the guardian of the peace. "Some of these guys was tellin' me. Goin' to lick Casey, hey? A sweet chance! C'mon! Let's go!"

"But just one question, officer," I pleads. "What am I pinched for?"

"Breach of the peace, obstructin' traffic, public nuisance, disorderly conduct, resistin' an officer, abusive language, incitin' to riot and—uh—conspiracy," recites the cop.

"Oh," I says. "*Conspiracy*, eh?"

Now if that copper's name wasn't O'Reilly—well, it sure wasn't Swanson, Schmidt, Jones, Levinski or the like, either. So, improvising rapidly, and taking a chance on just how much he knows about the current champ, I goes on in a whisper:

"Listen, officer! D'ye know what this guy Casey's real name is?"

"Why," he says, astonished, "ain't it Casey?"

"Don't make me laugh," I says. "I'll tell you what it is. It's Weinberg—Abraham Weinberg, that's what it is!"

"Discharged!" says Officer O'Reilly.

And just then along came W. McKettrick, and, having with no little difficulty made our way to the office, we opened for business. Maybe we didn't get it! Why, inside of three seconds there's a scene something resembling a cross between a labor riot and a panic on the Stock Exchange; and from thence onward, me and W. McKettrick was no busier than a couple of gold diggers in a restaurant. And when we finally called it a day, I remember there was quite a debate as to whether we'd go home, to a hospital, or to Bloomingdale, which last was strongly indicated.

During the following month or so, not to bother with the details, I was at death's widely known door forty-eight times. Mostly it was from overwork, nervous strain, and the like, incidental to weeding out the chaff from the straw, so to say, which we did by trying out the one thousand candidates—well, maybe there was a few less—against each other at a gym catering largely to the leather-pushing trade.

Other times, however, it was on account of laughing myself simple as the result of watching some of them aspirants for heavyweight honors in the act of doing their stuff. Why, what most of them poor goofs knew about boxing, and what's more, all anybody could ever learn 'em about it, you could write on one wall of a gnat's bungalow. Ninety-nine and nine-tenths per cent of them would of stood the same chance with Mr. J. Casey that Noah would of had without the ark. But of course in order to find it out, we had to put 'em through their paces. So we did.

And the net result was Dudley Edwards Raymond, for which, after a terrible struggle, I managed to dig up the strikingly original ring-title of "Kid" Raymond.

It seems that on account of devoting considerably more time to baseball, football, and allied topics, than he done to a number of other subjects which the faculty foolishly considered more important, Dudley Edwards Raymond had escaped from one of these small Southern colleges after doing only two years, whereas he'd originally been sentenced to four. So then Dudley, who was a Southerner by birth, had come North looking for a job, only to find that, curiously enough, somebody else had been looking for one, too, and had beat him to it. Anyway, I know that, as a matter of fact, the young Southerner was pretty well out of luck when his eye happens to meet that ad calling for recruits for the war against Casey, and he lost no time in answering it.

And he made no mistake when he did. He was a clean-cut, more than ordinarily good-looking two-hundred-pounder, was an athlete from the ground up, and had already done quite a bit of boxing, though only in an amateur way, of course. And the first time I laid an astonished eye on him in fighting trunks, and so forth, I says to myself that here was the winner of our grand

elimination tournament—which, by the way, the newspapers and therefore the public, was following with what is known far and wide as breathless interest—and maybe I wasn't right!

Why, right from the start, just on the way he shapes up, Kid Raymond has the rest of these poor cuckoos looking like a handful of coppers up against a hundred-dollar gold piece, and he proves it by going through 'em like fire through a celluloid collar factory. Anyway, when the weeding-out process was finally completed there was nothing to it but Dudley Edwards Raymond. And in my weighty opinion, and likewise in those of W. McKettrick and several other competent newspaper critics, Kid Raymond, given time and proper handling—which was where I personally came in—stood at the least a fifty-fifty chance of spilling the limas for one J. Casey.

And now we're up against one of them deadly pauses such as in the movies they gets round by blandly throwing on the screen some such thrilling message as "A year passes," or the like. Well, as a matter of fact, that was somewheres near the length of time that had elapsed when one day the newspapers announced to a waiting world that Kid Raymond was now duly signed and sealed to mingle with one "Gunboat" Brown—so called because his well-shaped walkovers resembled nothing so much as a couple of violin cases—and that, what's more, no less than J. Casey had agreed to meet the winner.

So, not to go into all the pros, cons, and the like, which consisted entirely of the kid knocking a dozen or eighteen tough but likewise brainless battlers for a bunch of toll-calls, it goes without saying that Dudley E. Raymond had made the grade. And this Gunboat person, who had been coming to the front since about the time the Kid started his own rise to the top, was now the only obstacle left between us and—well, if we took Casey, a couple of front-row seats right on top of this man's world!

Well, the match with Gunboat Brown was about a month off, and the Kid had been in the strictest of training for a couple of weeks and was going along like Man o' War, when one day I once more chanced to meet W. McKettrick. The spot where the crime occurred was directly in front of a movie house, which I will call the Orpheum, because, as a matter of fact, it was entitled the Lyric. Kid Raymond was with me. For a couple of days I'd been wanting to see Walter on a matter of business, and so I grabbed the opportunity without delay.

"Oh, Walter," I hails him. "Just a minute! I—er—oh, excuse me!" I winds up kind of confused. For up to then I hadn't noticed that Mr. McKettrick was busily engaged in conversation with a young lady who would of most certainly made Harrison Fisher give up in disgust and go in for painting something to which he could do justice.

So then, of course, Walter does his stuff, and it appears that the reigning sensation's name is Miss Dorothy Kent. The best I could do was say I was glad to meet her, though I seemed to remember where somebody had used that line before. As for the Kid—not a word! I looked at him to see what was the reason for this strange silence, so to say. Well, I found out.

He'd already gone down for the third time. You couldn't of saved him with fourteen pulmotors working in relays. Dudley Edwards Raymond was sunk with all on board!

I can tell you how the rest of that little episode come out in a couple of sentences. Miss Kent was merely a casual acquaintance of Mr. McKettrick's, very likely owing to the fact that there was already a future Mrs. McKettrick who wrote a mean "Advice to the Lovesick" column for Walter's paper, and so, of course, she would know exactly what to do in a case like that. And the last I saw of Dudley E. Raymond for some hours was when the doors of the Orpheum closes behind him and the charming Miss Dorothy Kent, who had had the idea of viewing the current attraction in mind when she'd happened to encounter Mr. McKettrick.

So you might say the Kid had made a quick recovery. Well, if that's what you call it.

Personally, it didn't strike me as anything of the sort. Oh, the Kid does his

stuff, I'll allow him that. But all the time it's plain to be seen that he's so far under the influence of love's young dream that, for example, he don't know whether he's working out with an unusually tough sparring partner or touring the world in the subway, so to say. Sometimes I'd find him sitting on a medicine ball, or the like, with a goofy look spread over his features and gazing far off into the dim distance. You know the way they do. Such times, why, I bet you could of stuck a pair of scissors into him an inch and it would of affected him no more than as if he was an iron dog or something.

And outside of this imitation he gives me of a Hindu Yogi training for a prize fight, the best I get from the handsome and athletic young Southerner is an earful of Miss Dorothy Kent, who, of course, the Kid loses no opportunity to meet. And in that respect I must say that, considering the frequency with which Mr. Raymond succeeds in inflicting himself on Miss Kent, why, it didn't look like Miss Dorothy was actually going to the extent of dodging around corners, and the like, to avoid him.

However, though the Kid's output on his favorite topic is enormous, all I get from him which could be strictly regarded as information, amounts to this: She—which is to say the dazzling Dorothy—belongs to one of them fine old New England families which, among one or two others known to history, has seen better days. Likewise, she is what is extensively known as a nice girl. Well, he needn't of told me that. And she is now biting a wicked lead pencil, just to get along, in the office of some broker or something, who, I sort of gather from the Kid, who no doubt got it from the nerve-thrilling Dorothy herself, belongs to the celebrated Legree family.

And that's about all. Beyond that—well, he says a lot, but it don't make sense. You know what I mean.

Anyway, that about describes the condition of the patient during the first two weeks of the disease. Then he takes a sudden turn for the worse. Or as you might say, the worst. What I mean—the Kid comes out with the information that him and some dame—seems like the name was Kent, or something like that—has concluded to startle the natives by getting married.

"Kid," I says, "I'm simply dumbfounded! Why, I had no idea that you'd even so much as look at one of the fairish sex! Who is this Kent lady? I never heard of her."

Say—that boy could sure hurl a mean two-pound dumbbell! Only for my long and wide experience in dodging insurance agents, relatives from Corncob, Connecticut, bill collectors, and the like, I'd of been crashed for a triple.

However, the Kid says I needn't worry, because they ain't going to do anything desperate right away. What's more, he has no idea of quitting the game of fisticuffs till he can do so in the style to which no less than champions is accustomed. So that was O. K. as far as it went. Which wasn't so far.

Well, for a couple of days after Dorothy yesses him, why, the Kid is in what is known to our leading star-gazers as the Seventh Heaven. Then all of a sudden it looks like something terrible must of happened. Anyway, one day Dudley shows up at the gym looking like he'd spent the entire night gazing on the alcohol when it was wooden.

"Sweet sister!" I says with a gasp when I beheld him. "What's happened? You make the 'Wreck of the Hesperus' look like next year's Shamrock! Has she turned you down?"

He shakes his head—and that's all. I can't get another thing out of him. And it don't stop there. As the days go by the Kid continues to grow no better rapidly, and still refuses to tell what's troubling him. Only one thing was certain: Kid Raymond was all shot. He grows more and more to resemble the wrath of Moses, or something, and he took no more interest in the rapidly oncoming gymnastics with Gunboat Brown than a chronic addict to rheumatism takes in Walter Camp's dippy dozen. Didn't care a rap whether the Gunboat knocked his block off or not, so it looked. Why, in fact, I seemed to get the idea that that was exactly what the Kid hoped the Gunner *would* do! He was just that desperate about—whatever it was.

Well, it was my thought that unless something happened, and mighty quick, the young Romeo would get his wish. For with the Kid right, why, the Gunboat would of been a push-over; but with young Mr. Raymond like he most undoubtedly was—well, that was something else again, and likewise, what I'd personally call a sweet state of affairs from any angle!

Three days before the fight I went after him again, and this time I certainly rode him hard. And he came through. Maybe because he'd already made up his mind to get it off his chest. And it seems that Dudley E. Raymond has been doing a bit of flying under false colors. In a word he'd neglected to inform his future helpmate that he was by way of being a box-fighter by trade, for what reason I will leave you to guess at, but had, instead, give her to understand that he was a young business gentleman interested in cotton goods, or something. Then suddenly he'd discovered that this positively could not go on, and—what to do? What to do?

I told him what to do. "You go see her," I says, "and tell her the truth. And do it now. If she's for you, why, it 'll make no difference whether you're a box-fighter, a Congressman, or whether you're holding down one of them intellectual jobs. And if she ain't—well, now's the time to know it."

So he took my advice and went and told her the truth.

And she gave him the air.

That finished Dudley E. Raymond. If there'd been any way of side-stepping the Gunboat Brown thing, which there was not, I'd of certainly showed Maurice and Walton a few little things in the stepping line. I told W. McKettrick my troubles. He said it was a tough break. I said nobody had a thing on him when it come to sizing up situations. The fight—I'll never forget it! During the first two frames Kid Raymond was on the floor six times. The Gunner hit him with everything but the Flatiron Building. At the close of the second, the Kid reels back to his corner. Then somebody shoves a wire for the Kid through the ropes. I read it to him. Maybe it didn't make a difference! Why, the third chukker wasn't a minute old when the Gunner blocks the Kid's right with his chin and immediately leaves for Monte Carlo, or somewheres, while thousands of paying customers and two hundred and sixty-eight eggs who had crashed the gate wishes him a *bon voyage!* Which was very much as it should be.

As you've no doubt surmised, the wire was to the effect that Miss Kent had reconsidered and all was forgiven. And if the thing had stopped right there—but lemme tell you: me and the Kid had hardly reached the dressing room when in rushes no less than the fair Dorothy herself! No doubt she'd sweetened up one of the ushers or somebody and—anyway, there she was. And you could of easily knocked me over with the crank to the family flivver!

Well, there's a reunion that makes a frost out of the final twenty feet of any movie. And among other things Dorothy admits that she simply could not help seeing the scrap and—Dudley was wonderful! "But during the first two innings, or whatever they are," she says, "I thought—what was that message that was read to you?" she breaks off and asks point blank.

"Why, your own!" says the Kid surprised. "Didn't you know—"

He stops and looks at me. And I don't need to be told that he thinks he's been framed. What's more, if what I see in the Kid's eyes comes true, I'm going to take a trip, and that's that! For though I've said that Dudley E. Raymond was a product of the sunny South, maybe I've omitted to state that he likewise had one of them tropical tempers which is anything but sunny at times! And I'd like to say that right there and then I would of cheerfully give five thousand dollars cash for one of them handy little trapdoors which gets our leading scenario writers out of so many embarrassing situations!

However, it looked like there was no other way out of it, and so, "That message?" I says to Miss Kent with considerable aplomb in view of the circumstances. "Why, the one you sent him, of course, saying you'd—er—reconsidered and—eh—forgiving the Kid for deceiving you, and all that."

And with that I deliberately closed one eye—the one that was away from the fiery-tempered young Kentuckian.

"Oh," she says with a smile that, among other things, might be called whimsical. "But he should have got that before! It must have been delayed."

Have you got to give her credit? You have!

When I fell for that fake message scheme, which W. McKettrick had suggested as a last resort, I told him it was for better or far worse. Though far worse was right any way you looked at it. For win, lose, or draw, there was bound to be a comeback—except the way it finally did turn out! Well, you know how the battle with Casey come out. He never had a chance with the Kid. When the Kid and Dorothy steps off I sent her, along with the customary beautiful cut-glass offering, a card: *"To one in one thousand."*

The bridegroom wanted to know what was the idea.

"Well," I says, "do you deny it?"

That's where I had him.

The Lady in Blue

by Part V

Augusta Groner and Grace Colbron

Authors of "The Man with the Black Cord," "Joe Muller, Detective," etc.

CHAPTER XV.

TONY AGAIN.

"SHE gave her thirty crowns," exclaimed Mrs. Deisler, sinking exhausted and breathless into the chair Ossip pushed forward for her.

They were sitting in the big airy kitchen of the Gray House. Ossip, his injured leg still bound, was busily cutting kindlings. Mrs. Deisler had just come in, her arms full of packages.

"She gave her thirty crowns," she repeated, as impressively as her lack of breath would permit.

"You're all out of breath," remarked Ossip without any signs of excitement.

"Who gave who thirty crowns?"

The old housekeeper had poured so many bits of variegated information into his ears in the twenty-four hours since Muller's departure that the young Russian had learned to take them with considerable equanimity. They were not of much value, as a rule.

Mrs. Deisler took a fresh start. "Tony gave the old Crumpholz woman thirty crowns."

Ossip sat up now, and laid knife and wood on the table. "Who is the Crumpholz woman?"

"The old beggar who sits by the cemetery gate. I was coming home from my niece's house—and I thought I'd step in to the poor young lady's grave for a min-

This story began in the Argosy-Allstory Weekly for April 8.

ute. And Mrs. Crumpholz told me—she knows me—that she got all that money from the same young woman who was at the funeral with me."

"When did she get the money?" said Ossip, reaching out for his hat. Mrs. Deisler laughed, a rather bitter laugh. "Oh, don't exert that sore knee of yours for nothing. You won't catch Tony now and I'm right glad of it. For I'll never, never believe that she did anything wrong—never—"

"Please answer me," insisted Ossip.

"Yes, yes, I'm telling you. And I don't mind doing it, either, for it can only help Tony. She came to the cemetery the day she went away. June 4, it was last Friday. Crumpholz is sure of the date 'cause there was a big funeral that day, the old general—lots of people and soldiers and all that. And I think it can't possibly hurt Tony if I tell you this. Because it isn't so easy for a poor girl to give away a whole month's wages. It shows she was trying to make up for whatever she did—although you can't make me think she did anything wrong—whatever you say. But, anyway, she wouldn't keep the money the baron paid her—and I think that's wonderful of her."

Ossip gave a light shrug. "At the cemetery gate you say?"

"Yes. But you ain't going there, are you? Your knee's real bad to-day. I don't like the looks of it."

"I must talk to the old woman."

"She can't tell you any more than she told me."

"I'm not so sure about that. Don't worry about me. It takes a good deal to kill me."

Ossip was out at the door before Mrs. Deisler could enter another protest. But he had a longer walk than he thought, for the old beggar had gone to her home on the outskirts of the city, beyond the tramway lines. When Ossip finally found her, she was disinclined to talk about the money, for she seemed to fear it would be taken from her. But when the Russian showed her a ten-crown gold piece which would be hers if she told him the story, she was quite willing to do what he asked. It wasn't much that she had to say. The young woman who had given her the money had come out of the cemetery after all the people from the big funeral had gone—it might have been about half past six on the evening of June 4. She had stopped and pressed something into the beggar's hand, a tiny packet wrapped in a torn piece of newspaper.

"Pray for two unhappy souls in Purgatory," she had whispered. Then she walked on rapidly. It was some few minutes before the old beggar had been able to examine the packet, for others had stopped to talk to her. When she finally unwrapped it she was aghast at the sum. She imagined it must have been a mistake, and kept the money wrapped up in a safe place. She thought likely the young woman might return for it.

"But she didn't come. I think she must have gone away."

"Did she have any luggage, a valise or the like with her."

"No. But she had a bag hanging at her waist, a little bag like people wear when they travel—on a strap."

"Could you let me have the bit of paper the money was wrapped in?"

The old woman nodded and limped over to a chest of drawers. She took out a tiny package, three ten-crown gold pieces in a bit of newspaper. It was a torn piece of the Linz *Gazette*. Ossip took it and handed the beggar the extra ten-crown piece, thereby calling down blessings on his head.

Then the lad returned to the Gray House, and with considerable difficulty elicited from the unwilling Mrs. Deisler a description of Tony's simple traveling dress and the fact that when the young girl left the house she carried a light-brown leather shawl-roll, and a black valise. The housekeeper seemed to feel that she was the only bulwark between the absent Tony and a world of enemies. Ossip, as the immediate enemy on the spot, came in for her active hatred.

"And now tell me exactly what Tony herself looks like," he asked finally.

The old woman felt like making a face at him.

"She's mighty pretty," she grumbled; "not too tall and not too short—nice and

round—but not fat—and has a pretty fair skin."

"Hair and eyes?"

"Brown."

"When did she leave the house on June 4?"

Mrs. Deisler thought it over. "A little before six," she said finally.

"Can you tell me anything about her—anything unusual that people would remember?"

Mrs. Deisler set the pan she was holding onto the stove with a rattle that expressed something of her feelings of the moment. With both hands at her hips she turned and faced the young Russian.

"Oh, yes, you'd like it if I could tell you that she had a club foot or carroty red hair, or only one eye, or something so's you could spot her anywhere, wouldn't you? But, thank goodness, there's lots of pretty girls everywhere, and what I've said about Tony might suit any one of them. So I'm not scared as to what you can do to harm Tony. I'm not helping you to catch her and haul her up to court and make her unhappy, not I!" She turned to the stove and stirred angrily in the pan.

"Now don't be angry at me," said Ossip gently. "I'm only doing my duty. And there's been a warrant, with full description, out against this Tony for the past two days. If they do get her, it won't be altogether my fault—or my credit. So you see, you needn't turn your back on me like that."

"I can't abide these snoopers—they're up to no good, believe me—snooping round and interfering with decent people. They can't be good men that do that sort of work."

Ossip sighed. "There's one of them is the best man that ever lived—you may take my word on that."

Ossip sent Buchner to the police station with a letter for Commissioner Sennfeld. An hour later many house walls and fences bore a placard asking that whoever took charge of a light-brown shawl-roll and a black valise during the hour between five thirty and six thirty on the afternoon of June 4—said articles being the property of a young woman whose description was appended—should come at once to police headquarters. The evening paper bore the same notice.

The midday meal in the Gray House was eaten in a strained silence on the part of Mrs. Deisler, and considerably suppressed amusement on the part of Ossip. To the latter's great surprise, Franz Moser dropped in shortly after dinner.

"I thought you were at the seminary this time of day," said the Russian, pushing forward a chair for his guest.

"I should be. But I suddenly remembered something which I think I ought to tell you."

"Is it so important?"

"I don't know. But Mr. Muller said that anything which had a bearing on this case might be important. So when I remembered this incident I came at once." Ossip nodded, and the student continued: "I remember passing the garden gate here a few days before—the murder—and hearing Miss Lehman talking in the garden with some one—I could not see whom, but with some one with whom she seemed to be on a footing for intimacy, for this person called her 'Elise.'"

"H-m! That is interesting. Was it a man?"

"No. It was a woman's voice."

"What did you hear?"

"Just a few sentences. Miss Lehman—I know it was she, for I had heard her voice before—said, 'Then you can go away if you want to.' And the other woman answered, 'Oh, Elise—all I want is to be with my two dear ones again.'" Moser rose and took up his hat.

"That was all. But I thought you ought to know."

"Thank you; it may mean a good deal."

An hour or so later a message came from police headquarters, asking Ossip to call on Commissioner Sennfeld.

The commissioner wanted to know Muller's address in Venice.

"Enclose the letter in an envelope addressed to Signor Grunwald, Proprietor Hotel d'Italie. The same for telegrams," answered Ossip.

"Have you important news to send him, sir?"

"Yes. The person—it was a woman—who

took care of Tony's hand baggage that evening has been here. And she gave us information that may be of value."

"Oh—"

"The woman keeps a milk shop and bakery in a side street not far from the cemetery. Tony came in about six and asked her to keep the things. She said she wanted to go to the cemetery, to visit a grave. She returned about eight, took a glass of milk and a roll, saying she was leaving on an evening train. Mrs. Kerner, the woman of the shop, asked her where she was going. Tony's answer was evasive. She said merely, 'It will be an uncomfortable journey. I must spend nine hours without a break on the train on a hot night like this.' She looked very tired, or even worried, when she returned from the cemetery, the woman said.

"You'll write Mr. Muller that, sir?" asked Ossip. "Then I need tell him only my own news?"

"May I know what that is?"

"Only that Tony gave the old beggar woman who sits by the cemetery gate thirty crowns the day she left town—a big sum for a supposed servant to give away. And Mr. Franz Moser tells me that he heard Miss Lehman talking to some one in the garden—some woman whom he could not see—and this woman called her Elise and seemed to be on terms of considerable intimacy with her. No woman came to the Gray House while Miss Lehman lived there except a dressmaker who came twice for a fitting. It could not have been Mrs. Deisler, therefore—it must have been Tony, the 'maid.'"

"Therefore this poor girl must necessarily have played a part all the time she was in the Gray House?" said Sennfeld with a touch of irritation. "Why are you all hounding this woman—and taking for granted that she has more to do with the crime than—than I am willing to assert, for instance?"

"She has lied about everything—then why not about her relations to Elise Lehman?"

"You're hard and cruel—for so young a man. Can't you imagine that necessity would drive her to many things quite foreign to her own nature. I tell you, young sir, that if you had met this woman you'd be willing to give her the benefit of the doubt all along the line."

"That is for Mr. Muller to judge. Will you tell him what I have told you, sir?"

"I wish I could tell him something more definite as to what train she took and in which direction she went."

"Surely you've thought that out—" Ossip stopped short as he saw the flash in Sennfeld's eyes. "I—I didn't mean to be presuming, sir—"

"It's all right, my lad. Muller calls you his 'right hand,' so I shouldn't be offended if you do remind me of my duty—as he has done several times," said the commissioner with a good-natured laugh. "But as a matter of fact, I have reasoned it out somewhat, and I might as well tell you the results. Tony was in the bakery at eight o'clock. She could not have reached the station for any train earlier than eight thirty. Now there is a train that leaves for Vienna at eight fifty and reaches its destination—without change—at five fifty next morning, exactly nine hours later."

"Are there any other night trains?"

"One leaves at ten forty-three, but lands nine hours later—after a change at a junction, in a little Tyrolean town. This girl was no peasant. It's far more likely that she belongs in Vienna, and has returned there. She could not have gone to Munich, as she said, for she could not have reached Munich in nine hours from here, and not without several changes, by any night train. I think it is safe to assume that Tony went to Vienna. I have notified headquarters there, as I shall tell Mr. Muller."

The commissioner rose and held out his hand to Ossip. The lad took it with a deep flush of gratitude at the comradely tone of the official's words. He felt that he was indeed coming back to an honorable place in the world that had cast him off. And again the young Russian's soul melted in a silent prayer of gratitude to the man to whom he owed it all.

As soon as he returned to the Gray House Ossip sat down to study the bit of paper Tony had wrapped around the money she gave the beggar. It was a piece of the Linz

Gazette of June 2. "It is mere chance, or did she deliberately buy that paper? Her assertion that Linz was her home has proved false."

Then suddenly Ossip remembered that Mrs. Deisler took the Linz *Gazette* and stacked up the papers on her living room table. Tony might have taken a paper from the pile at random, or might have had some interest in the paper because she had regular access to it. He studied his bit carefully. On one side was half of the column of "Personals."

Ossip read them word for word. Suddenly he started, a flash of intuition widened his eyes and sent the blood to his head. It was an advertisement headed "Enns Valley," and it read:

> Don't worry; am quite calm; climbed the Tamischpeak yesterday; awaiting you anxiously; no sense in staying on, too dangerous; bit of good news; M. performed Maria Stiegen this week.

Ossip studied the lines again and again, then went over to the table and took down the papers of the last two weeks. He had hard work to suppress an exclamation when he found another "Personal" headed, "Enns Valley" in the copy of May 30. This one read:

> Arrangement stands; then we can be sure of the situation; let me hear from you.

And Ossip found one more Enns Valley "Personal." This one, on June 3, was quite short:

> Day after to-morrow, early morning; don't come for me.

"Day after to-morrow?" murmured Ossip. "That was June 5. This girl arrived in Vienna on the morning of June 5 and she was communicating through this paper with a man—it must have been a man. Women don't usually climb the Tamischpeak—a man who is a mountain climber, and has some connection with Vienna. For there is a well-known church, 'Maria Stiegen,' in Vienna. We are getting warmer and warmer. Mr. Muller can't help finding them both now." The young Russian wrote his employer a long letter, pasting in the three "Personals." He inclosed a letter from Berlin, which arrived while he was writing his own. Then he himself took the night train for Linz.

CHAPTER XVI.

MULLER GOES TO VENICE.

JOSEPH MULLER sat by the car window, looking out on the landscape that sped past the moving train. His lips moved softly. "I shall find what I seek—down there by the southern sea." He paused with a start and sat up straight, but his thoughts ran on, somewhat amused just now. "I wouldn't dare let any one know how much I trust these intuitions. It would injure my reputation. We poor mortals think we have to be so intensely 'practical.' We hate to acknowledge that all our best conscious brain effort is not worth half as much as one flash of this mysterious something we call intuition, the something that whispers to us from outside of ourselves. Facts are all very well in their way, but—by the way, there is some fact connected with the name of Volkner which is trying to edge itself into my memory. What is it? Yes, it's something connected with that forgery case I laid over—we'll look into that later."

At the next station Muller sent off a dispatch to police headquarters in Vienna, then put everything else out of his mind except the case on which he was now engaged.

That is, he tried to. But in spite of the iron discipline his trained will exerted over body and brain, one charming, recent memory would persist in pushing to the foreground the memory of a rich-toned voice, the memory of an unusual personality. "If I were younger," thought Muller with a smile and a half sigh, "I might envy Hubert Lohr his wife."

Venice; sunshine, colors, joyous noise, a press of eager gondoliers, a swift passing over green waters between peering old houses—

Signor Grunwald, genial host of the Hotel d'Italie, doffed his famous black velvet cap, one of the sights of Venice, and greeted Muller with enthusiasm.

"Welcome, welcome," he exclaimed aloud, then whispered, as he helped his guest up the steps: "What is it this time, embezzlement or murder?"

"Murder, friend Grunwald," replied Muller. "But I do not yet know who the murderer is or what his motive?"

"You will know—you will," said Grunwald confidently.

He himself escorted Muller to the comfortable room that had been his on former visits. "You'll find it out soon," he repeated as he threw open the windows.

"How cozy it looks here," said Muller, glancing about the room. "I feel so at home. No, friend, I'm growing old," he continued with a touch of sadness. "No man can expect to do at sixty what he did at forty. My brain and body alike are losing their elasticity."

"You needn't worry," exclaimed Grunwald. "I hear wonderful things of some of your later exploits. By the way, do you still insist on your one hundred convicted murderers before you retire?"

Muller smiled sadly. "I made the vow in an evil hour for me, an hour when society had cast me out for a deed that any man with blood in his veins or a sense of honor would have committed. My life had gone to pieces, but I promised myself that I would serve society in spite of its treatment of me. But somehow, as the years go by, I begin to understand that the average human being, no matter what he may do, is to be pitied, not hated."

Grunwald laughed merrily. "Yes, I've heard stories about that, too. That last murder case, the husband who killed his wife—when you caught him and no one else could, you gave him your own revolver."

"Why not? The woman was a beast. The poor man had suffered enough. I wanted to spare him disgrace."

"And the woman you took into your house—the thief whom you engaged as housekeeper when she had finished her prison term—how are you getting along with her?"

Muller's gravity relaxed in a smile. "I never was more comfortable, never was better served, nor more honestly. I never lock up anything now. Once in a while I do remember to close my safe, but that's all. When I took Katie from prison I said to her: 'If I miss a single piece of paper or a single lead pencil, you'll leave my house at once. And if you should take anything of value and try to get away with it, you know that it would only be a few days, or at most, a few weeks, before you'd be behind prison bars again.' I was more sure of myself in those days. But it helped, believe me. Katie's been with me for eleven years, and I never had a better servant."

"Mercy me!" exclaimed Grunwald. "I wish I were a detective and could get my servants out of the prisons! Then I might have some peace and comfort. Have you been doing any more of that sort of thing?"

Muller opened his bag and took out some papers, which he slipped in his pocket. Then he turned to his host. "If you don't give me away I'll tell you that I have had a chance to save a human life and to save a human soul. I'm afraid I—eh—shall we say, *evaded* the law a little in doing it? For I took under my care a young lad who had killed his mother's defamer, after he had escaped from prison. And, believe me, I did well. Ossip Jewleff has talents along my own line which are well worth cultivating. He is now a capable assistant and will prove a worthy successor. Are there any letters for me, Grunwald?"

"Nothing yet," said the hotelkeeper. "I've been watching the mail like an impatient lover ever since I heard you were coming. But I'll get it to you whenever it comes. What are you going to do now?"

"My gondolier and a native secret service man are waiting for me outside. I'm going over to the Lido."

"Just like a regular tourist? Your man's over there, is he? Poor chap!"

"Yes," said Muller. "I do feel sorry for him, if he is my man."

"Hello—you don't even know it yourself?"

"No. I've never known so little, after finding out so much, as I do about this case."

"Is the case of long standing?"

"It happened on the 29th of May, an apparent suicide which, however, is a murder. And to-day is the 9th of June."

"Good gracious!" exclaimed Grunwald. "That's not two weeks. Most detectives would take a month on a matter like that and then pride themselves on their cleverness."

"I don't," said Muller, "and I know I'm growing old."

When they landed on the Lido Muller told his companion, the secret service man whom the Italian police had put at his disposal, to wait near the wharf while he himself went to the Pension Mantini. He walked through the garden and was just about to touch the bell at the door when he heard voices coming from behind a clump of bushes that concealed the entrance to the kitchen.

"Don't be so mad about it," said a man laughingly, and an angry woman's voice answered: "Why shouldn't I be mad when I get fired for no reason at all? 'Tisn't true that I went through his desk. I never touched a thing in his old room. But there's no pleasing this Mr. Volkner of late. He's scared of anybody."

A door slammed somewhere and Muller thought to himself that things might be easier than he imagined. An angry discharged servant is a valuable ally. He rang the bell and the door was opened by a trim little maid with snapping black eyes. Muller inquired whether the Marchesa Mantini was at home.

"No, sir," answered the girl. Her irritation of a moment back still sounded through her voice.

"That doesn't matter," said Muller kindly. "You may be able to give me the information I need. You belong to the household, I suppose?"

"Yes, sir. I belong to it still," she snapped.

Muller smiled at the sharpness of her tone and laid a few silver pieces in her hand. The anger faded from her black eyes and she smiled at him most engagingly. "What would you like to know, sir?"

Muller sat down in the comfortable chair she pushed forward to him and began: "I want your promise of discretion first of all."

"Oh, of course, sir."

"Very well, then. How long has Mr. Volkner lived here?"

"Oh, it's him you're interested in, is it?" asked the girl.

"If you please, my dear, it's up to me to ask questions," said Muller very definitely.

The girl blushed and answered quietly: "Mr. Volkner has been here about three weeks. I can tell you the exact date, sir, if I look at my book. I had charge of his room—until to-day," she added with a snap.

"Go fetch the book," said Muller calmly, paying no attention to her irritation.

She returned shortly with a big notebook.

"He arrived on May 12. He's got something the matter with his lungs, I think. Anyway, he looks awful sick and he coughs badly."

"Indeed! And has Mr. Volkner been here right along since the 12th of May?"

The girl started, but did not answer for a moment. She knew that during this time Richard Volkner had been away for a few days. But the Marchesa had cautioned her not to say a word about it to any of the other boarders. They were to think that Mr. Volkner was ill and had stayed in bed those days.

Louisa had not been informed as to whether there was any important reason for this secrecy or whether it was merely a whim of the young man. She took for granted it was the last. And besides she'd been given five lira to talk, and she intended to talk. She was glad to play some trick on the suspicious young gentleman who wouldn't believe a decent girl's word.

She looked through her book, put her fingers in several pages and then said, low and cautiously: "There was no work to be done in his room from the 26th to the 31st of May. He was away those days. He may have been just over in Venice."

Muller's faded cheeks flushed slightly. "Just over in Venice, you think? But you're not sure that he might not have gone further away than just Venice?"

Louisa shrugged her pretty shoulders. "He took a little valise with him and an extra overcoat. It looked to me as if he was going further this time."

"Did Mr. Volkner go over to Venice often?"

"Oh, yes, sir. He stayed out over night a couple of times."

"May I see your book myself? It's a rather important matter and I must be absolutely sure. I want to see myself what you have written."

Louisa laid the book in front of him and pointed to various places.

"Mr. Volkner has room No. 3," she said, "and I take charge of it. Any day when I don't have to make the bed and fix the room I write down a naught. Mr. Volkner always had his breakfast in his room. See, I've marked a '1' here—that means that I took the tray up. It's for the room service charge. You see here there's no '1' for the 27th of May. That means he didn't have any breakfast that day. He'd left the night before. I took his overcoat and his bag down to the gondola right after supper and he told me that I mustn't tell any one in the house that he was going away. If anybody asked I must say he was ill and in bed. He went off an hour later, as soon as it was dark."

"And you don't know why he went away, or why there was such secrecy about it?"

"No, sir. I only know that he got two telegrams, one right after the other, that day. I thought maybe some one sent for him."

Muller studied the book carefully. "Then he was away from this house from the evening of the 26th of May until—but you didn't bring him any breakfast on the 1st of June, either, and you didn't fix his room. You said he came back on the 31st."

"Yes, sir, he did. He came home late on the evening of the 31st, but he felt very ill. He told me not to wake him up next morning, that he wanted to sleep. It was nearly noon when he rang for me, and he looked miserable and only wanted a little tea and soup. He didn't come down till that evening, and he looked so miserable that everybody believed he'd been ill. There's one lady here, Mrs. Lechner, who knows Mr. Volkner's mother. She got so scared the way he looked that she wanted to write his mother. That's the first time I ever saw Mr. Volkner impolite to a lady. He was almost impolite to Mrs. Lechner—"

Louisa paused and tilted her head a bit as if listening.

"What's the matter?" asked Muller.

"They're coming downstairs. Mr. Volkner and his sister. What shall I—"

"Just keep quiet, my dear, and pretend you don't know anything about me. Pay no attention to me."

Louisa took up a feather duster and began vigorously dusting the ornaments on the table. Muller took out a handkerchief and wiped his brow just as the young couple passed. His face was completely hidden by the movement. When they had gone he turned to the girl again.

"That young lady is Mr. Volkner's sister?" he asked.

Louisa nodded. "She's only been here three days. Her name is Mrs. von Widener."

"Thank you, my dear. I'll follow them."

Louisa looked after him as he strolled away. She got out the money and looked at it, and smiled a contented smile in which was mingled a touch of malice.

The couple whom Muller was following walked along through the main street that crosses the island. There were so many people strolling about that Muller could follow without any fear of discovery. He was so near them at times that he could hear snatches of what they were saying. The young lady was enthusiastic about some theatrical performance she had seen the day before, but Volkner only grumbled a few words now and then. He looked pale and ill and decidedly depressed. They parted at the entrance to the bathing establishment, and Muller heard them planning a walk to Malamocco after the bath and then a supper on the terrace of the concert garden.

It was the pretty young matron who was the moving spirit in all this. Her brother was not interested in anything. She held his hand and looked at him keenly. "I don't like the way you look at all, Richard. You're so nervous and yet so depressed. Do you feel worse? Do you think you'd better take a sea bath rather than sit somewhere quietly in the sunshine?"

He laughed harshly. "Yes, I see myself sitting quietly! That's about the one thing I can't do now. I much prefer to go into the water—which is not intended for a

joke." He nodded to her quickly before she could say any more and slipped through the entrance of the men's bath. Muller looked around and found his Italian comrade right behind him.

"Are those the people you're following?" asked the secret service man in a low tone.

"Yes. Or rather, the man."

"What are you going to do now?"

"I'm going in bathing."

"Good gracious! Do I have to come, too?" asked the Italian with a smile.

Muller shook his head. "No, you can stay on dry land. Let's follow my man now. It might be a good idea to get the number of his cabin."

Muller stood in front of the cashier's window immediately behind Volkner. The latter asked for his 'usual' number. Muller took a check, and he and his companion followed the young man down the hall. The attendant who came to meet them greeted Volkner and opened the door of room No. 13. Muller got No. 20, and told his companion to wait outside. He undressed quickly and waited at the head of the steps leading to the water until Volkner should come.

Finally he saw the young man coming down the hall between the dressing rooms. In his scanty black Jersey suit, his extreme thinness, contrasting with his well-knit, broad-shouldered frame, was far more noticeable than in his street clothes.

"This man is terribly run down," thought Muller; "it can't be just his wound and the subsequent illness. Can it be—mental trouble, too? Poor chap! I shall really be very sorry if you are the man I'm after."

And yet as the detective followed Volkner down the steps into the ocean he said to himself rather sadly: "I'm terribly afraid this is the man I want. It would have been too strange a coincidence. He was away from the 26th to the 31st, and since then he has been upset and nervous."

Muller dived into the waves that rose up to meet him. When he came up again Volkner was just ahead of him, shaking the water off his hair and breathing quickly as if his lungs still troubled him. He looked around as he heard a friendly voice saying, "Isn't the water delightful here?"

Volkner nodded to the kindly faced, elderly man opposite him, for the free masonry of sea bathing permits what the more formal life on land would not allow. They clung side by side to the rope while Volkner explained that he had just been seriously ill and was not allowed to swim yet, although the daily dip in the ocean did him a world of good. His new friend introduced himself as Mr. Muller from Vienna, dealer in antique weapons and armor. He said that he, too, didn't care very much for swimming, because he so seldom had the opportunity for sea bathing that he was getting rather rusty at the art. He would dart off with a few swift strokes now and then, but returned at once to his young compatriot. By the time they climbed out of the water they were such good friends that Volkner himself invited Muller to spend the rest of the evening with him and with his sister. Muller had cleverly maneuvered to bring about this invitation.

"It's hard to enjoy oneself alone," said the young man with a pleasant smile, "and to tell you the truth I'm very glad to have some one else with us. My poor sister is here only for a few days, too, and I know I'm boring her to death with my nervousness and my melancholy. There's been too much on my mind of late, and I know I'm wretched company. So I'd be very glad if you will have supper with us and listen to the music for a while before you return to Venice. Won't you go for a little walk with us now to warm up after the bath?"

Volkner spoke with all the easy charm of an amiable man of the world. But even while he was talking his thoughts were elsewhere.

Muller noticed it and rather regretted it. For the veteran detective's kind heart was getting the better of him again, and he confessed to himself that if the thoughts of this attractive young man were in Salzburg, as his own were, that same heart would once more come into conflict with his duty. "Oh, dear!" he sighed to himself. "I could almost wish it had been 'Goldie Boy.' He was a tougher sort."

Even before Mrs. von Widener joined them Muller gleaned the information that part of Volkner's nervousness was due to

the non-appearance of a letter for which he was waiting. A messenger from the Pension met him outside the bathing establishment and told him that there was no mail for him in the afternoon delivery. Volkner was quite upset at this.

As they walked along the shore he would either hang back or else pace beside them, scarcely uttering a word. He evidently wanted to be left alone.

Milla von Widener watched him, anxious and embarrassed. She apologized to their new friend. "I'm afraid you'll find us rather stupid company," she said when Volkner had fallen some steps behind them. "My brother is usually the gayest possible sort, and a great favorite everywhere. But he has been very ill and it seems to have changed him completely. Sometimes I think his mind must have suffered as well as his body."

"It looks to me as if he were worrying about something," replied Muller sympathetically. "Couldn't you find out what the trouble is? It may be quite easy to help him if you only knew."

Milla sighed deeply. "Ah, yes, if I only knew what the trouble was! But Richard won't give me the slightest intimation. Oh, how much easier life would be if we only could and would trust those near to us."

Muller exerted himself to the utmost in his desire to please these new friends and to win their confidence. He was so interesting that even Volkner began to join in the conversation here and there, and would occasionally laugh heartily at some sally. When the first stars appeared on the blue-black sky above them and the fresh evening breeze came up from over the water, the three returned to the concert garden the best of friends.

"We have some little time yet before supper," said Milla von Widener, "so if you don't mind I'll run home and scribble off a couple of letters. I'll get my coat, too, and I'll send or bring something for you, Richard. You'll keep him indoors, won't you, Mr. Muller? Don't let him even go out on the terrace until he gets his overcoat." She walked quickly off down the broad street, and the two men went into the big hall, which was now almost empty.

The Italian secret service man strolled in a moment or two later and sat down a little distance away.

"Here's a nice, comfortable table, Mr. Volkner, and not a bit of a draft anywhere," said Muller cheerily, taking the young man's arm and leading him to the corner near the big window. His comrade of the police remained standing, talking to a waiter, until the others were seated. Then he chose his own table and settled down to a bottle of wine and a big black cigar.

Muller ordered Chianti for himself and tea for Volkner.

"Make it hot," said the latter to the waiter who took the order. He shivered as he settled back in his chair.

"Are you chilly?" said Muller.

"I get shivery so often now," answered Volkner. "Those sudden shivers, they're so unpleasant."

"Yes, I know. I had a feeling like that just the other day," said Muller, looking keenly at the young man's face. He had placed the chairs so that the light fell full on Volkner.

He paused for a moment, and Volkner, evidently feeling that some remark was demanded of him, inquired politely: "What made you shiver?"

As he spoke his eyes followed two fine looking women who passed them, followed with but very mild interest.

Muller spoke slow and calmly. "I held a dagger in my hand, the blade of which was dulled with fresh blood stains."

"That was interesting. I suppose you do meet queer things in your business. Did you just happen in on a quarrel? They use that romantic weapon in this country more than they do in our home."

Volkner had spoken with the same absent-minded calmness, while his eyes still followed the women. But his thoughts were neither with them or with the words his companion had just uttered.

Muller had held his breath for a moment or two, now he let it out with a faint sigh of relief. He had made the first test and Volkner had passed it well. No, this was not the man who but a few days before had thrown the blood-stained dagger away in horror.

It could not be. For Richard Volkner was so utterly run down, so utterly unnerved that the sudden scream of a sea gull made him start and a child running too near the water had turned him ghastly pale. No man whose nerves were so little under control could have heard Muller's words so calmly, if these same words had awakened in his mind the memory of the hideous hour in the Gray House.

Muller was too experienced a psychologist not to realize he had followed a false trail. In his own preoccupation with the one important bit of evidence against Volkner, his secret absence from the Pension on the critical day, the old detective had overlooked one point—and he blushed as he remembered that now. All his own discoveries in the Gray House had shown him that it was not a premeditated murder, but a hasty act of violence. When Volkner left the Lido—if he *had* gone to Salzburg to see Elise Lehman, he had no reason whatsoever for keeping his departure a secret. His departure, his absence and the secrecy connected with it—as well as his nervousness—must have some other cause.

Muller felt convinced of this. But he would not let go this trail until he had made one or two more tests. For even if Volkner were not the man he was after, he might give him valuable information.

But his own attention was diverted just now by the appearance of an old man with a cap of the Hotel d'Italie. The man came in the hall, looked around and then came toward Muller. "Oh, Mr. Muller," he exclaimed, "I've been looking for you for nearly two hours. Mr. Grunwald sends this telegram and these two letters. They came about an hour after you'd left."

Muller thanked the old man whom he knew well from former visits, gave him money and told him that if anything more should come it was to be left at the hotel until his return. He took a letter opener from his pocket and cut the envelope rather hastily. Volkner looked at him smiling.

"So you're nervous, too. I thought you were one of the calm, poised sort who never knew what it was to be excited. I've been envying you your steady nerves all the afternoon."

"Even my nerves are not what they used to be," replied Muller with a light sigh. "Will you pardon me if I glance over this mail? I fancy it is important."

Volkner nodded and took up a newspaper.

Muller opened the telegram first, read it quickly and nodded as if content. "Ossip is very intelligent," he thought as he slipped the paper into his pocket. The message was dated that morning from Linz and it read:

> Have handwriting of advertiser of June 2. Advertisement was give in in Amstetten.
>
> JEWLEFF.

Muller looked at the two letters in deep thought for a few moments before he opened them. He took up the commissioner's letter first, because he thought it likely that what Ossip had to say was more important, and he wanted to leave that for the last. Also, Sennfeld's letter was official.

Muller opened it and read it attentively, pausing now and then as if to think. He was evidently greatly interested in what the commissioner had to say. Then he took up his young assistant's letter.

Ossip repeated what Sennfeld had said, also Moser's story of the conversation in the garden between Elise Lehman and some other woman with whom she was evidently on terms of intimacy. Then Ossip told the story of his visit to the old beggar and its scanty result. But there was one thing that he had to say of which the commissioner had evidently known nothing. For the very good reason that Ossip had not told him. And it was this very point that interested Muller more than anything else in the letter.

In talking to Ossip about Tony, Mrs. Deisler had said one day that it was queer how even the most intelligent women were vain. When Ossip asked for an explanation the housekeeper told how Tony had had her face wrapped up in a cloth on account of a bad toothache on the day when Baron Wallroth and Professor Thorn had come to the house. But when the good-looking professor sent for her to come upstairs, Tony took off the disfiguring bandage.

Ossip's letter went on to say:

> I asked Mrs. Deisler how long Tony had worn the cloth and also when the telegram had arrived announcing that the men were

coming. It seems that the telegram arrived about eleven o'clock in the morning. Tony's toothache came on right after lunch, about twelve, and the gentlemen came to the Gray House about three o'clock. It was about half past three when the baron drove away, and Tony took off her bandage when she went upstairs to see Professor Thorn. It looks to me as if Tony had pretended this toothache so that she might hide her face from Baron Wallroth. But she did not mind showing it to Professor Thorn. Evidently he did not know her. But if the baron did know her and she did not want him to recognize her—why did she linger on in the Gray House? Why did she run the risk of having him recognize her?

I found one of these "Personals" in the piece of paper in which Tony had wrapped the money she gave the beggar. It was the Linz *Gazette* of the 31st of May. The other two "Personals" were in the same paper in the copy of June 2 and 3. There was no other similar "Personal" before the 31st of May or after the 3rd of June. I do not think I have missed anything and I hope I have been able to serve you usefully. I am going to Linz to-night in the hope of finding out who put that "Personal" in the paper.

Your deeply grateful,

OSSIP.

Salzburg, June 8.

Then Muller opened the letter which Ossip had inclosed in his. It was from Berlin from Walter Thorn. He wrote:

My surmise as to the person we are seeking has proved quite incorrect. As I fear you noticed, I did have some one in mind, a man whom I knew to have been a lover of the Lehman girl at one time and whose passionate nature might have made such a deed comprehensible. But I find now that he spent those days here going about his business in the usual way, perfectly calm. I hope sincerely that I have not sent you off on any false trail, for I realize now that not every man is a detective.

One thing I do not regret, and that is that I have gradually, little by little, let my cousin see the truth about Elise, her character and the life she led. He is much calmer now, and is evidently glad that he escaped this marriage. He tells me that Hubert Lohr, Elise's stepbrother, warned him several times about her, warned him insistently, although he would not say anything definite. But he evidently did not approve of the marriage. I am returning to Vienna with Wallroth.

Muller studied the letter for a few moments, then folded it and put it in his pocket with the others. Then he rose and to Volkner's great astonishment he walked over to the man who sat at the table near them and spoke to him. They shook hands and the man at the table called up the waiter, paid his bill and strolled out of the hall.

When Muller returned to his table Volkner looked at him with particular interest. "Was that man a friend of yours? I didn't notice that you greeted him."

"I didn't," said Muller, "but I told him now that I no longer needed him, that he could take my gondola and go back to the city."

"Need him? What would you need him for?" asked Volkner with youthful curiosity. But he did not wait for the answer, for there was another interruption. Louisa, the maid from the Pension, came up to the table and handed Volkner a letter and his overcoat.

"The lady sends these," she said, "and she'll be here herself in less than half an hour." Volkner snatched the letter hastily with a murmured thanks to the girl. He looked up with an instant's surprise at her sudden flush and start when she saw Muller. But a moment later he had forgotten everything and was immersed in the letter he held in his trembling hands.

The girl stared at Muller, who looked at her as if he had never seen her before. But when he realized that Volkner was completely absorbed he motioned to her to go away. Then an exclamation across the table drew his attention to his companion again.

Volkner had dropped the letter in his lap, his hands were clasped and he looked up almost as if praying. "Oh, thank God, thank God!" he murmured. Then he straightened up, stretched his young frame and the color flooded his pale cheeks. He looked ten years younger. His eyes met Muller's, and the latter smiled in deep sympathy.

"You've had good news?" he said.

"Yes, indeed!" exclaimed Volkner. "The best of all news. I can now live like a human being—not trembling in terror of what the next moment might bring—in terror of—" He paused, then shook his head. "No, I can't talk about it now, not even to my sister. You won't mention to her—

I mean the effect this letter had on me. Can I depend on you, Mr. Muller?"

"Most people find they can depend on me," said Muller. "And, besides, I'm leaving Venice to-morrow morning and I have my head full of my own affairs, so that you need not fear any indiscretion on my part. But there is something I must say to you before Mrs. von Widener's return, and I, too, must ask for your discretion. Mr. Volkner, I have deceived you as to my person. I am not a dealer in antique, but a detective—and there has been no element of chance in our meeting to-day."

Volkner sat quietly. But his face was ghastly pale despite a strong effort to control it. His hand tightened on the edge of the table until the skin shone white over the knuckles.

Muller's keen, gray eyes rested on the young man's face. "You know Elise Lehman?" he asked suddenly.

This shot produced a wholly unexpected effect. The color flushed back into Volkner's cheeks as a sigh of deep relief passed his lips. The tenseness of his whole attitude changed to an expression of complete surprise.

"Why, yes—I knew her."

"Exactly. *Knew* her — then you've heard?"

"Of her suicide? Yes, it upset me, naturally."

"I can understand that. You were once —on terms of intimacy with her."

"How did you know? You say you are a detective?"

"I am a detective, commissioned by Baron Wallroth to discover the truth of certain peculiar circumstances connected with Miss Lehman's death."

"That's interesting," said Volkner, leaning forward eagerly. "Did—did Wallroth send you to me? I should think he had had quite enough of what I can tell him about her—the telling cost me dear. Oh, I beg your pardon, you may not know—"

"Of your duel with Baron Wallroth? Yes, I do know that," replied Muller calmly. 'To himself he said, "I am following a false trail. This man is absolutely innocent. He knows nothing whatever about the killing." Then he continued aloud: "No, the baron did not send me to you. The conduct of the investigation is entirely in my own hands."

"But what is there to investigate about a suicide?"

"That is what I am to find out. Would you mind answering me a few questions?"

Volkner nodded with a light shrug and a half laugh. "If they're not too personal."

"No. I am not concerned with your relations with Miss Lehman. But you may be able to tell me something about her friends, male and female. There's a girl for instance, who wrote to her during May and mentioned you, saying that you were here."

"Oh, yes. I know who that was," said Volkner immediately. "Her name it Rita Egghart. She's a little actress who was engaged at the same theater in Vienna with Elise Lehman. She was in Venice for a few days in May. I met her on the street and talked to her."

Muller took down the name and address, then he said: "Do you know a man she called 'Goldie Boy' and 'Honeybunch'?"

Volkner flushed and gave an embarrassed laugh. "She called me 'Honeybunch,' too. The other one must have been after my time."

"Yes, he was the man in possession when she became engaged to the baron. I've met him."

"What sort of a person was he?" asked Volkner.

"Sort of a traveling salesman, I think. No great mental light. Husky young animal."

"That was mainly what Elise was after—that and money," said Volkner a trifle bitterly.

"Don't be unjust." Muller's tone was grave. "Did you or any of the other of them—except possibly Baron Wallroth, ask anything of this girl, but that she should amuse you with her gayety and charm you with her beauty? You never asked much about the brain that was inside that beautiful head or the heart that beat in her shapely body." Volkner's eyes drooped and his cheeks flushed.

Muller continued in a more kindly tone: "But all this is beside the point. Can

you tell me of any other woman with whom Elise Lehman was on terms of intimacy? I am thinking now of a very pretty, highly intelligent young person whose first name is probably Tony and whose last name begins with K."

"Why, of course," said Volkner eagerly, his eyes brightening. "That's a former fellow player of hers and now her sister-in-law, a charming woman, indeed! I don't mind telling you that I tried my best to win *her* favor first—but Tony wasn't that kind. She took life seriously—and—and she turned me down hard. Elise was very handsome, and didn't take anything seriously except the money value of a wealthy lover, so I contented myself with her. Why, what's the matter? You look quite upset."

The sudden tensing of Muller's frame and the sharp intake of breath that flooded his cheeks with color had given way to an expression of deep sadness.

"Please—let me get this clearly," he began, not heeding Volkner's last remark. "You said that Tony—was the Lehman girl's sister-in-law. As far as I know Elise Lehman had only one brother, her stepbrother, Hubert Lohr."

"Quite right. Hubert Lohr. Tony has been his wife for the past three years. Her maiden name was Kerner."

CHAPTER XVII.

MULLER DROPS THE FALSE TRAIL.

NEITHER spoke for some time. Muller sat motionless, his saddened eyes staring out ahead, seeing nothing. Behind them the keen brain was battling with a heart that rebelled against what it would not, but must, believe. Volkner sipped the tea that had grown cold and gazed now and then at his companion. His own thoughts were busy. Out of them he spoke finally:

"But I don't see why Wallroth should go to all that trouble and expense—and racking his own nerves besides, just to find out why she did it."

"That isn't the question here. He wants to find out who did it. Elise Lehman did not kill herself."

Volkner gave a sharp exclamation. "But the papers said—"

"Yes. Press and public took it for a case of suicide. And they will never know any better—if I can help it." The last words were spoken low and sadly as Muller passed his hand wearily across his forehead. "But I know and a few others know. I am telling you because I owe you an explanation, and an answer to your question of some few minutes back, just before Louisa came. You asked me why I thought I might need the man I sent away—do you remember?"

"Yes, yes. Well?"

"He was a secret service man. And he was waiting for—orders that I might give him—to make an arrest. But I sent him away, as you see, for I had been mistaken. There will be no arrest."

Again Volkner paled. Then he shook himself impatiently and looked straight at Muller. "And you said something about a dagger—did you mean—could you possibly think—" Volkner sprang from his chair and leaned forward threatening toward the sad-eyed old man opposite.

"Steady there, steady," said Muller calmly, but with a note of real sympathy in his voice. "I told you I had been mistaken. Please sit down."

Volkner sat down mechanically, as if in obedience to orders more than of his own volition. "But how did you ever—why should any one think that I—my God! Why should I do such a crazy thing?"

"I never was quite convinced that you did it."

"But you suspected me? You came here to hound me."

"Please don't feel so bitter about it. Many another honest man has come under suspicion without half the evidence against him that there was against you."

"What evidence?"

"You were Elise Lehman's lover at one time. You said things to Baron Wallroth which you thought would prevent his marriage to her—but they only resulted in a duel. You were absent from the Mantini Pension, secretly, from May 27 to May 31."

Volkner half rose, then fell back into his chair. "How did you discover that?"

"It is my present business to find out where any former lover of Elise Lehman was on May 29, the day she was killed," replied Muller. "I do not yet know where you were on that day. But I do know that you have been more nervous, more upset and irritable since that day, even than your ill-health would warrant. Still I do not suspect you—now—of having killed Elise Lehman. Therefore, it is no business of mine where you spent those days."

Volkner gnawed his lip in silence for a moment, then he spoke harshly with a sudden outburst. "I went to Verona those days and spent most of my time trying to keep my younger brother from taking his own life."

"I am very, very sorry—if I called up sad memories," said Muller softly. "It is one of the hardest things my work compels me to do, to inflict suffering on the innocent."

"I owed it to you and you upset me so that you—wrung the story out of me. The boy had got into trouble—bad company—gave notes with my father's name on them, a band of notorious forgers had him in their power—under the guise of money lenders."

Muller gave a sharp exclamation, and Volkner paused and looked at him.

"Yes, yes, I know," said the detective. "The law has its eye on those people. I was to take up that case, but put it aside when Baron Wallroth sent for me. But rest assured when I do take it up, they will be brought to justice. There's many another rash lad in their power."

"Yes, I imagine it. Robert is inexperienced and young, but it's all settled now, thank God. I made him go back to Vienna and tell the president of the bank all about it. We want to save my father any annoyance and excitement. He is very ill."

Muller nodded with a glance of sympathy. "You see, it was a good thing we met, after all. For now, when I take up the case against those forgers"—his voice dropped low—"and I fear I shall be able to do that very soon—your brother can give me valuable information. But will you help me now? Tell me something about the Lohrs."

Volkner opened his lips as if to speak, then suddenly started and gazed sharply at Muller. There was another pause, then he laughed suddenly.

Muller raised his head and asked, "What are you laughing at?"

Volkner still smiled as he replied: "I was laughing at my own foolish thoughts when you asked me about the Lohrs—and when you described Tony a few minutes back. I suddenly wondered why you wanted to know about them. Then I realized how perfectly absurd was the idea that Tony—Mrs. Lohr—could have anything to do with the Lehman murder. Anyway, you're looking for a man, aren't you? And even if you knew that it was a woman who committed the crime, it couldn't by any possibility be that woman."

"Yes, the thought is absurd," said Muller slowly. "But please tell me all you know of them."

"I have nothing but good to say of them. But if I didn't, neither you nor any one else should ever hear a word from me that could possibly harm them."

Muller smiled. "You're so fond of them?"

Volkner nodded. "He was my school chum. He is still my friend in spite of the fact—or possibly because of it—I mean because he is so entirely different from me. And I'm still in love with his wife and always shall be—in the very best way. So if you want to hear good of those two people you can question me all you like."

"I do," replied Muller, with a strange smile. "I want to hear every possible favorable thing you can say about them."

"We used to call Hubert Don Quixote at school—those who weren't quite so well acquainted with literature, contented themselves by saying that he was crazy. Possibly he was, as far as any creative artist is crazy. I remember once when he beat one of the boys black and blue because he had made an indecent caricature of an old apple woman who had a stand outside the school. And yet another time when our history professor made a rather slurring remark about Schiller's rewriting of history, Lohr exclaimed aloud: "God bless him for that. Where would we be without ideals?"

Most of the boys hooted, but the professor rose, went to Lohr's bench and shook his hand. I could tell you a hundred such stories, and Hubert Lohr hasn't changed in the slightest. His quarrel with his benefactor, the late Baron Wallroth, was quite characteristic of him. It was Baron Wallroth who helped him to study and sent him to the conservatory.

Muller nodded. "Yes, I've heard that. What was the trouble between them?"

"Lohr's whole life is an expression of gratitude to the Wallroth family and yet he refused to sell himself even to please his benefactor. It was this way, the baron had a friend, a rich business man whose only daughter and heiress fell desperately in love with Lohr—Hubert's mighty good looking. Her father had never refused her anything she wanted before, so she thought of course he could buy this husband for her. The baron thought it would be a wonderful thing for Lohr to come into so much money, and the girl was extremely pretty, although very self-willed. So he wanted to help it along. But Lohr refused to have anything to do with it. He didn't like the girl and he was too honest to buy himself a career on such terms."

"That was great," exclaimed Muller. "He must be a real man."

"He is, indeed!" continued Volkner. "But it cost him Baron Wallroth's friendship. Hubert was sorry for it, too, but he could not consent to such a marriage. I know that he was very unhappy about it and that his most ardent wish was that some opportunity might come for him to show his deep and lasting gratitude for the Wallroth family."

"Does he still see anything of the family?" asked Muller.

"Since the old baron's death the baroness and Edmund invite him occasionally to one of their musical evenings."

"Does his wife go with him?"

"No, I don't think so. I remember that he told me once that when he did take Tony to introduce her to the baroness after their marriage, the lady was rather cool toward her. She may not have approved of making a friend of a singer. But that only shows she didn't know Tony Lohr."

"Did Baron Edmund know Mrs. Lohr?"

"I don't think so," said Volkner. "He may have seen her once or twice. I'm not sure."

"H-m—" murmured Muller. "Then it wasn't so daring after all—" Aloud he said: "Mr. Lohr is a mountain climber, isn't he?"

"Yes," said Volkner. "It's his favorite exercise. He has conquered several of the most dangerous peaks."

"And he is left-handed?"

"He was—that is—he has trained himself to use both hands on account of his piano playing. But in unguarded moments he is very apt to use the left hand. Why do you ask this?"

Volkner moved uneasily as he spoke the last words.

"And he is a composer," continued Muller with a certain sad persistence.

Volkner's eyes shone. "He is a composer of eminent ability."

"Yes," said Muller. "He is a true, creative artist. But let's talk of something else now. Here comes your sister."

Milla von Widener came quickly through the now rapidly filling room, came straight to her brother and laid both hands on his shoulder.

"Robert wrote you?" she exclaimed, and her soft eyes shone through tears.

Her brother nodded and drew her down to the chair beside him. "What's the matter, Milly?" he exclaimed softly.

"Mamma wrote me all about it. Oh, you wonderfully wise boy, you. You're so good —so good. You saved Robert's life, his whole existence. And papa's life, too, I am sure. And at such a big sacrifice for yourself, all that money—"

"Hush, dear. It's all over now and it's all right," said Volkner, looking over at Muller. But the latter had tactfully subsided behind a railway guide which he was studying with apparent interest.

The evening passed off pleasantly, although Volkner fell into a brown study now and then, his brows wrinkling as if some problem were worrying him. The old detective was chatty and cheerful, but Milla von Widener had known him only for a few hours, so she could not realize that Joseph

Muller seemed to have grown ten years older in the last two hours. Once he laid his hand on Volkner's arm and asked suddenly: "They have a child, haven't they?"

"Who?" exclaimed Volkner in surprise.

"Lohrs."

"Oh, yes. Surely."

"A little girl, who is blind?"

"She is threatened with blindness. But how did you know that? The child had scarlet fever, which left her eyes very weak. They have taken her to Tony's mother up in the mountains, for the summer."

"Thanks. I must leave you now," said Muller, rising. "I must return to Venice."

"When are you going? What are you going to do now? Why did you want to know about Lohrs?" A sudden uneasy fear tugged at Volkner's heart, but Muller did not answer. He was already making his farewells to Mrs. von Widener and he soon slipped away into the outer darkness.

CHAPTER XVIII.

BACK IN THE IVY COTTAGE.

ON the morning of June 10 Muller was back in his own home. After a hasty breakfast he wrote a few words on a card and addressed them to Professor Walter Thorn. Then he got into the waiting cab and drove to the Wallroth house, leaving the card to be given to Professor Thorn as soon as he arose.

The detective drove on out toward the suburbs. At the foot of Red Hill he called to the driver to halt.

"Wait here," he said as he got out and walked slowly up the hill.

It was another glorious morning, as fresh and fragrant as when he had passed that way a few days before. But Muller's heart was sad and heavy and he scarcely seemed to see the beauty around him. He paused by the blossoming apple tree again and put out his hand. Then he dropped it, shook his head and went on for about a hundred paces. He halted again, turned back and walked quickly to the tree. He cut off three of the most beautiful blossom-laden twigs, nodding to them with a sad smile in his eyes. His lips were tight set.

As he neared the Lohr cottage he saw the young composer standing at the window. The detective paused, half hidden by a bush, and studied the man who stood at the window. Yes, there was pride and firm determination on this handsome face. This man could live up to his ideals, even though it cost him dear. There was a hint of passion, too. Noble passion that might well carry him away at time and lead him into a deed which he had not sought.

Lohr was staring out at the distant sky. His eyes were grave and sad, his pale lips pressed tight together. As Muller watched, another figure came to the window—a woman's figure, tall, strong, and graceful. On her arm Tony Lohr carried a little child, a pale, frail little creature, its eyes hidden behind a green shade. The little blond head drooped onto its mother's shoulder. She bent over it and kissed the soft curls. Then she put her free arm around her husband's neck.

He started up from his sad thoughts and their eyes met in a long look. Then Hubert Lohr put both arms around his wife and child and caught them to him with passionate pressure. It was at this moment that Muller came out from behind the bush and walked toward the little house.

Lohr saw him—and smiled a welcome. He was at the garden gate before Muller could touch the bell.

"You've been to Venice?" he asked as they walked the little garden.

"Yes, I have just returned."

"It was wrong of me to let you go. I should not have done it."

"Oh, no, Mr. Lohr. It was quite natural."

They were in the room now. Tony had sunk down into a chair. Her face was ghastly pale as she held the baby closely to her. She nodded to the detective without a word.

Muller crossed quickly to her and handed her the blossoming apple twigs with a kindly smile. The young woman smiled, too, but great tears ran down her cheeks.

Lohr was the calmest of the three now. The natural color had come back to his cheeks as he pushed forward a chair for Muller. Hubert Lohr was one of those

strong characters who have too much self-respect and dignity to fight the inevitable—and who have self-respect and dignity enough to follow the dictates of their own conscience.

The three sat around the table in the ivy-shaded corner as if united for an hour of social intercourse. Tony still held the apple blossoms in her hand, and behind their pink haze her pale face shone transfigured by the look of devotion in her eyes as she turned toward her husband.

"Madonna of the apple blossoms," thought Muller.

"Then you thought it natural—that I did not speak at once?" continued Lohr calmly. "Well, you understand the impulse of self-preservation—you must meet it often enough in your work."

"It is a natural instinct," replied Muller. "As you say, I meet it always, in every case."

"If you had not come back at once—come back to me—which shows me that you know—all—I should have written Volkner immediately. I have reproached myself bitterly that I should have caused him any annoyance or possible excitement. And I have written a letter already—a letter to police headquarters. Here it is, Mr. Muller. It contains all information which you and the authorities need."

"Hubert!"

"Tony! Tony, dear! Don't break down now when you've been brave so long. I suppose you know, Mr. Muller"—Lohr turned to the detective again—"that it was my wife who covered my tracks—who protected me. I fear it will cost her dear."

"That, too, was quite natural and comprehensible," said Muller as he slipped the letter containing Lohr's confession into his pocket. "But now tell me—how—how did it ever happen?"

"That I killed Elise?" Lohr drew a deep breath. "May I go back a little? It may be easier to understand and I want to tell you the story from the beginning. Look at our little girl here"—his voice was very serious now. "You see how ill she still is, how frail and delicate. She is threatened with blindness as a result of scarlet fever. And we are very poor. I give lessons and my wife embroiders for a linen shop. But all we can do is to keep this very modest roof over our heads, and buy sufficient food and the most necessary clothes for ourselves. Everything else is a luxury that is beyond us. The few pretty things you see here are presents from my pupils. I am paying for my piano on installments. You could easily see how an illness would take the very last cent that we have saved. Our little Rosie fell ill, and we were soon at our wits' end. Then Tony told me that her mother had written her, saying she would take the child for a few months. My mother-in-law lives in a little town in the Enns Valley. She has a small annuity, just enough for her to live on. The doctor told us that Rosie must have a change of air and that a few months in the mountains might set her up again. My mother-in-law was willing to have both my dear ones with her for the summer. We hoped that our little girl would be so strengthened by the change and the good air that she could endure the operation that might save her eyes.

"You can imagine how happy we were at the chance. Tony and Rosie left here on May 2. We had arranged that we should write to one another about twice a week. Tony's letters came from Enns, as I expected naturally, so you can imagine my surprise when, on May 28, I received a letter from my wife written from Salzburg. It contained a confession that she had been deceiving me, and that while Rosie was in Enns with her grandmother, Tony herself was in Salzburg.

"It seems that during the last days of April, when we were both in deep despair about our little girl, my wife received a letter from Elise. The latter told her that in spite of all I had said to prevent it, she had promised to marry Wallroth. The baron had hired a house for her in Salzburg, where she was to spend the summer, and she wanted to have some one with her, as she was afraid she would be bored to death. Wallroth was very jealous, and insisted that she should cut loose from all that had been her life for the past two or three years.

"As she had not seen Tony since we were married, my wife knew nothing of what Elise had been doing these last years.

That was exactly what the latter wanted. She asked Tony if she could come to her without my knowing it—for Elise knew I would never consent. In return for this, Elise offered to bear all expense that might be incurred for Rosie's operation and recovery."

Lohr paused when he reached this point. Muller took up the story.

"I understand. Your wife accepted this offer, as any good mother would have done in her place. And she even consented to deceive you for the sake of her child. It was she who induced her mother to write that invitation that she might be earning the money to pay Rosie's board. She took the child to her mother in Enns, then went on herself to Linz, where she met your sister. Is that right, Mrs. Lohr?"

Tony nodded. "Yes," she said low. "But I insisted on being called her maid, not even a companion. I thought there'd be less danger of any one noticing me then."

"Your sister-in-law met a man in Linz, did she not?" asked Muller.

"Yes. He was her lover."

"But he did not see you?"

"I was only the maid. He scarcely noticed me."

"Yes, he told me. I met him. He was the usual sort—the sort women of that kind are apt to choose—for the lover—but not the husband," said Muller. "Then you were with your sister-in-law from the 1st of May—and you wrote to your husband, sending the letters from Enns with your mother's help?"

"Yes; until I became so utterly disgusted with Elise's rottenness that I could endure it no longer. We had a serious quarrel one day. I told her that Hubert was quite right in his assertion that Wallroth should be saved from a marriage with her, by force if necessary, and that I could not stay with her any longer. She pretended to be terribly repentant, and told me that I ought to realize it was not easy for her to find her way back into a respectable life.

"She asked me if I would stay a few days longer until she found some one to take my place. She insisted that I must keep the two hundred gulden she had already given me for Rosie, and then we made plans for my departure."

"You were talking that over, out in the garden," cut in Muller.

The others looked at him in surprise.

Tony nodded, and continued: "But the very next day I found her writing a glowing love letter to Goldie Boy, and kissing the violets he had given her when they parted. This was too much for me. I brought the hundred gulden I still had left from the money she had given me, laid it down in front of her, and then—then I wrote my husband."

Mrs. Lohr sighed deeply, then covered her face, sobbing. Lohr took one hand gently from her face and held it in his own.

"You did quite right, Tony," he said. "You couldn't imagine it would—turn out as it did."

"It was on receipt of that letter that you went to Salzburg?" asked Muller of Lohr.

"Yes," he replied. "I arrived about five o'clock on the 29th of May. Tony hadn't told me where they were living, any more than to speak of the 'Gray House.' But I found that this name was quite sufficient. I met them both by the river bank near the house. They were both equally astonished and even a little frightened.

"'Don't make any fuss; don't let any one know,' was Elise's first request. I was perfectly willing to keep the whole matter quiet. I know how violent I can be when I'm really angry. I remembered this, and tried to keep calm. I acquiesced in their arrangement that I should be smuggled into the house unseen, for Elise did not want any talk or gossip that might come to Wallroth's ears."

"And so your wife went back," cut in Muller, "ostensibly to get a forgotten feather boa; but in reality she opened the side garden gate and the back door of the house."

Tony nodded to this. Her husband continued with some effort: "Elise and I went into the house from the river side. Tony was waiting for us—for me—in the meadow. We had planned to meet there."

Müller sat up very straight. "Then you quarreled with your sister?"

"Yes. I reproached her for having drawn Tony into a lie by appealing to her love for her child. Then she offered me money, much more than Tony had returned to her. I told her not to say another word about that. I would not touch her money, I said, but I would insist that she break her engagement with the baron. If she did this of her own free will I would not tell him anything; but if she did not, I would open his eyes to her character and her life.

"In my growing excitement I had snatched up something which I turned and twisted in my hands. You know how one does it. It was not until a second or two later that I realized that what I held was a sharp-pointed antique dagger which had been lying on the desk, as if used for a paper knife. Not until—the very last minute in fact—was I conscious that I held the dagger.

"I told Elise that if I could prevent it no Wallroth should ever stain his name by marrying a woman who broke all her promises, who was planning even now to deceive him when she should be his wife—planning to drag him down into the mire where she dwelt.

"'Don't be absurd!' she screamed at me. 'Wallroth isn't particularly brilliant, but he's got sense enough not to expect an actress to be a saint. I do not intend to give him up, and he will marry me, for he's hopelessly in love with me. All your intriguing won't do you any good. I'm not deceiving him. He knows perfectly well whom he's marrying—just as you knew whom you married.'

"She spoke these last words with an ugly sneer, but they ended in an inarticulate murmur—for—for I had already struck her down in my insane rage."

Hubert Lohr's face was pale, but he sat quite calmly as if in complete control of mind and body. Muller was excited. He leaned forward eagerly, laying his hands on Lohr's knee.

"Then you struck her down because she insulted your wife's name?"

The flash in his own eyes woke an answering gleam in Tony's.

But Lohr shook his head decidedly.

"No, Mr. Muller," he said calmly, "that isn't how it was. I know that that fact could be used as an extenuating circumstance to shorten my term of imprisonment—but I prefer to stay by the truth. How could I hide behind a mere word? Why, I wouldn't dare look my wife in the face if I should save myself in that way—after what she has done.

"No, Mr. Muller, self-preservation is all right, but it must not ruin the best in us. Last evening my mother-in-law brought our little Rosie back to us, for we wanted to see her once more—and we talked it all over. We both decided that we must give up this foolish hiding. It is unworthy of us. In the letter which I gave you just now is Tony's confession, too."

"Thank God that I've got it out at last!" exclaimed Tony.

Her husband continued: "Yes, thank God! I can tell you, Mr. Muller, that my degradation began with all the hokus-pokus that was necessary to hide my deed. As to the deed itself, I do not repent it. I would do the same again under the same circumstances. That can't hurt me—the inner *me*.

"I did not kill Elise in my anger at her insulting words about my wife. Nothing that she could say can harm Tony. What made me mad and blind with rage was the absolute truth of her assertion that Edmund Wallroth was hopelessly in love with her, and that he would marry her in spite of all I could do. Her tone and manner as she said this put her on the level of any courtesan of the streets who knows her power over the lowest instincts in man.

"It was that—the thought of the degradation she has brought to our honest family—and the degradation into which she was planning to drag down the people to whom I owe so much—I struck out blindly. I had the dagger in my hand. I knew it when I struck—that is all that you need to know."

Lohr rose. "We can go now, can't we?"

His wife rose, too, and stood beside him. "I'll be ready in a few moments," she said, although she caught at her husband as if to save her from falling.

"No, no. We don't need you now," replied Lohr, as he pressed her gently down into the chair again. "We can let you stay with Rosie for a while yet. Can't we, Mr. Muller? You won't run away—we can't run away. It's only the professional criminal who can escape."

Lohr kissed his wife and child and took up his hat.

"I am ready, Mr. Muller," he said with a touch of impatience.

Muller was on his feet, too. "Yes, Mrs. Lohr, you must stay with your little girl," he said, "and if you permit it, I will look in now and then—to bring you news—until you see your husband again."

Tony Lohr rose, controlling herself with a strong effort. She went to the door with her husband, kissed him once more, laid the little girl in his arms for a moment, and held out her hand to Muller.

"You are so kind," she said low. "Stay with him—don't forsake him."

She went to the window again, and, parting the ivy, looked out after them as she had that other day. But this time she was strong and steadfast.

Ten minutes later Muller and Lohr were in the cab, which set out rapidly toward the city. Lohr had been leaning back, absorbed in his own thoughts. Suddenly he looked out of the window.

"How is he driving?" he exclaimed. "This isn't the way to police headquarters."

"We're not going there," replied Muller calmly.

"Where are we going?"

"To the Wallroth mansion."

Hubert Lohr sank together.

"Why?" he exclaimed. "Why must we go there?"

"It will be for the best," returned the detective; "and when you do give yourself up, it will be much better to do it in Salzburg. You'll save yourself a lot of trouble and time."

"Yes? And suppose I escape on the journey?"

"I'm not afraid. If you hadn't intended to give yourself up you would not have given me your written confession which is now in my pocket. No, I'm not afraid you'll run away, but—I'll go with you. It's an all-night journey in the train—and one's nerves do break down sometimes. I want to help you to return unharmed to your loved ones. You must have courage to live—for such a woman. And what a woman!"

Lohr could not help smiling at this, and held out his hand to his wife's elderly admirer.

"And she put one over on me, too," said Muller more cheerily. "In all the long years of my career it has never yet happened to me that I had my mind fixed on one certain person and yet talked to that person without knowing who it was—without recognizing my prey. Mrs. Lohr is the only one who can say that she completely fooled Joseph Muller. I can understand how she would be the woman to regain her self-possession so soon after the deed. But you yourself were very calm."

"Do you think so?" said Lohr.

"I know it. You could not have conceived the masquerade and carried it through otherwise."

"I had to do something to save Tony and myself. We had to make it look like a suicide."

"They still think it a suicide—the press and public."

"But you found it out."

"Yes, you threw the dagger from you in your first excitement and horror. I, alone, found the mark where it had fallen. There were a few other little mistakes, too."

"I do not doubt it," said Lohr.

They were quiet after that until the wagon stopped in front of the Wallroth house.

Muller asked the servant who opened the door whether he could see Professor Thorn.

"I have orders to take you to him at once," said the man, and added with a look of interest: "He's all excited."

Muller did not heed this last remark, but passed on quickly up the stairs. Thorn was waiting for them, and held out his hand eagerly to Muller. But his eyes were turned on the good-looking man who came in quietly behind the detective.

"Your card certainly excited me," said the painter. "You wrote me that you had discovered the man we are seeking."

"Discovered him and brought him right with me," replied Muller. "Here he is."

Thorn gasped, and the detective continued calmly:

"Let me introduce Mr. Hubert Lohr, Elise Lehman's stepbrother. In him you will learn to know one of those rare human beings who have the courage to follow the promptings of higher morality, even though it may bring them in conflict with the letter of the law. Mr. Lohr, this gentleman is Professor Walter Thorn, Baron Wallroth's cousin. As I have already told you, it is entirely his fault that there was any investigation of this case. But do not blame him for it. He, too, was only following the promptings of his conscience."

Lohr stood quietly with a sad smile. Smaller matters did not seem to touch him now. He turned wearily to the painter, who stood staring at him, still bewildered.

"Yes, professor," he said, "Mr. Muller is speaking the truth. I killed my stepsister—killed her in a moment of insane anger, with the mad thought that I must prevent the disgrace and unhappiness she would bring to this house. You may not know how much I owe this family."

"Yes, yes!" replied Thorn holding out both hands to Lohr. "I do know someting of it. You are wonderful, wonderful!"

"Who are you raving about now?" asked Wallroth coming in. "Oh, Lohr, you're here. I can understand my cousin. Yes, you are wonderful, for you have the courage to tell the truth."

"I've always told you the truth, baron. Oh, if you had only believed me!" Wallroth looked at Lohr surprised. But he staggered back against the table at the young composer's next words. "For then I would not have needed—to kill Elise."

The four men sat together in earnest conversation for nearly two hours.

Finally Muller spoke. "This is a case from my private practice. I am not compelled to give an accounting to any one except you two gentlemen who have engaged me. My conscience certainly does not compel me to sacrifice such a man"—here he laid his hand on Lohr's shoulder—"and the wonderful woman who loves him—to sacrifice such people to a paragraph of law. No one else will discover the true trail. And as for the few who know that there is a trail to follow—well, I do not mind that they should think I have failed this time. I can afford it. As far as I am concerned, Mr. Lohr, you will have no further bother about this matter."

"I shall say nothing," said Thorn.

"And I am willing—that it shall rest right here," said Wallroth.

But Lohr shook his head. "I thank you all so much—oh, so very much," he began. "And were my wife—not just what she is—I might accept your silence. But I must refuse it even with deepest gratitude. For neither Tony or I will be happy until we have done what the law demands. We must be free of this horrible secret that is hanging over us. I'm going to Salzburg today."

"Then we need stay here no longer," said Muller calmly as they all rose. "Take my cab and go back to your wife. I will call for you this evening."

"And to-morrow my mother and I will call on your wife, Lohr," said Wallroth, who was beginning to show the strain of these last hours.

He held out both hands. "And you need have no further care for their welfare until you return to them. The Wallroths, too, know what it is to be grateful."

Tony Lohr was acquitted. For she had only done what any woman might have done out of love for her husband. Hubert Lohr was given all possible attenuating circumstances, and his sentence was shortened because he had voluntarily given himself up.

Wallroth engaged a lawyer of high reputation and ability to defend him. And he also used his influence to obtain a pardon at the end of half a year. He had done other things for Lohr, too. When the latter returned to his home the success attending the public performance of several of his compositions won for him a well-paid position as conductor of a leading orchestra.

Baroness Wallroth took little Rosie into her heart, and her ready aid averted a threatening catastrophe. A favorable operation saved the child's sight.

In the calm and happy days that followed, Joseph Muller was numbered among the outspoken admirers of Mrs. Tony Lohr and won for himself a place in her heart and home which no one dared dispute. He explained it by saying that she was the only person who had ever outwitted him in the course of his long career.

And as for the case itself, Muller says that he does not count it as his ninety-fourth conviction, and he is perfectly willing to have it considered one of his failures.

(The end.)

The Purpose

by

William Merriam Rouse

DOWNSTAIRS in the basement of old Aaron Pratt's boarding house the river drivers and the boys from the mill were playing poker; upstairs in the parlor Yvonne Gonyo would be reading a book, or maybe just standing at the window and staring out into the cold spring night with the pupils of her gray eyes so big and black that they looked like burnt holes in a blanket.

Jed Sanders stood hesitant upon the board sidewalk, as square and solid as a block from a butt log, with a little package of candy from the store in his hand. If he went down into the basement—the doghouse, the boys called it—he would ache to be with Yvonne; and if he went up there where she was he would endure another kind of torture from her. Also Slick Buckley might be there, tall and good looking and witty.

The door of the doghouse opened and old Aaron Pratt himself came up, bringing with him a rush of yellow lamplight and heated air thick with the smell of tobacco and alcohol. The old man had been a famous collar-and-elbow wrestler in his day, but now, although he feared nothing that walked the earth, the years had taken hold of his legs so that he mounted the steps with pain. He stopped, breathing hard, and peered grimly at Jed. His glance dropped to the package, and he sniffed.

"They's a good game started, Jeddy," he said, with a note of something close to kindness in his voice. "Better go down and set in a while. Buckley's brought some licker."

Sanders looked up at the parlor windows. He glimpsed the head of Yvonne, with the crown of misty dark hair that he loved so well, and drew in a breath that brought chest muscles straining against his flannel shirt. He knew then that he was going upstairs; and somehow it seemed as though the way that his feet would take

had been settled before the stars were. He shook his head.

"Guess I'll go talk to Yvonne," he said slowly.

Aaron Pratt wheezed in silence for a moment. Then he did a thing so rare with him that Sanders had never before seen it in the years he had worked, off and on, at Little Falls. He dropped his big and twisted hand upon the younger man's shoulder and let it rest there.

"You're a good boy, Jeddy," he rumbled, "but you're a damn fool."

Jed stiffened, and relaxed as he remembered Pratt's age and realized his good intentions.

Nevertheless there was a growl in his reply. "Nobody can't say anything against Yvonne."

"Of course! She's a good girl, too. A durned good worker, and she earns more'n I pay her for waiting on table. She has the run of things like she was my own daughter."

"She's too good for Slick Buckley!" exclaimed Jed, swept out of his self-control by some subtle contagion of sympathy from Aaron Pratt. "He's a skunk!"

"I calculate he is, Jeddy." Aaron let his hand fall away and sighed. "Talking never done any good about anything, but you're a damn fool jest the same, my boy."

He lumbered on along the sidewalk, up the stairs and into the house, leaving Jed Sanders with a new thought in his head. The new thought was that he was a particular kind of a fool. Up to then it had seemed like the immemorial two men and a girl, with the immemorial ending when one of them gets her and the other marries somebody else after a time, or doesn't, and gets along. No, he was a fool; and the end of a fool in his folly is never the same as the end of an ordinary man.

He went upstairs and into the parlor, as he had known that he would do. Yvonne was alone.

She smiled, and something like the sparkle of a star looked at him out of her eyes. Jed stood in the doorway, his shoulders almost touching the casing on each side, and gazed at her as a one-man dog gazes at its master. Jed looked out of little, deep-set eyes, from beneath an upthrust forest of hair that never would stay parted and brushed down.

She was taller than he was by half a head, and she had that instinct that in some women leads inevitably to the right kind of clothes even in mountain villages like Little Falls. She was something higher than he had ever known before. All that which the soul of Jed Sanders knew how to reach for in aspiration came toward him across the boarding house parlor.

He trembled. "Want some candy, Yvonne?"

She took the package and opened it indifferently. It was true enough that she was above the sweets and cheap jewelry that touched the other girls. There was good blood in the French-English-Irish mixture that her veins carried.

"Sit down, Jed," she said. "I thought you'd be in the doghouse to-night with Slick and the rest of them. He brought up a jug from the railroad to-day."

"I rather be here." He sat upon the bench in front of the rickety organ with his high boots braced far apart. Buckley would have gone over and sat upon the sofa at her side, but Sanders did not dare to. Yes, he was a fool.

She laughed, and when she laughed there was a little wrinkle along the side of her nose that he had wondered at and longed to touch with his lips these many days.

"You're a good old soul, Jed. Most men would rather be with the jug."

"Slick Buckley would." Sanders knew by the darkening of her eyes that he had blundered, and inwardly he cursed himself. He had little hope, if any, of winning her for himself, but he did hope, and almost pray, that he could keep her from Buckley. Always he blundered when he let that desire be seen.

"You're a fool, Jed Sanders," she told him ominously.

He knew that it was this flaming temper that had been unspoken in the mind of Aaron Pratt.

"Twice to-night I've been told that, Yvonne."

"Well—what do you think about it?" The cruelty of this was in her voice—in

the scorn that rang through it like the tolling of a distant bell. It would have hit Sanders anyway, but coming on top of what Aaron had said, and his own thoughts about himself, it stirred the depths of him—the still, deep depths that in any man are not stirred many times during his life.

"I think so, too!" He grew husky and shaking. "I'm a fool to hang on with you—to keep trying to get you to marry me! Of course! Everybody knows it, and so do I! A good old soul! Hell's bells! You won't marry no good old soul, Yvonne!"

It was the first time he had ever cursed in her presence; and that alone should have indicated that she was playing with a situation of magnitude. Probably it did tell her. At least her eyes fell for an instant before they looked at him with the little stars in them again.

"How do you know I won't?" she asked.

"Will you?" Sanders half rose.

"I won't promise."

"Well—you ain't said no!"

"Nor yes, either!"

"Yvonne!" As he spoke her name it was a prayer for mercy. "Don't joke with me!"

"I didn't joke. I might marry you—or anybody else, for that matter."

Jed dropped back to his seat and groaned.

"You're the same as always. I wish you'd say either yes or no, right out."

"You wouldn't want me to say no, right out, would you?"

Before Sanders could reply to that there was a step in the hall, and they both turned. Charley Buckley, whose poker playing as well as his appearance had earned his nickname, came into the doorway and paused, smiling upon them. There was no need for him to frown at a rival like Jed Sanders.

Slick had been drinking more than was good for him, but not enough to dull his eye or put uncertainty into his feet. He was dressed up with a white collar, and, as boss of the gang of drivers, he could afford to have clothes that fitted him.

"Hello, folks!" he said. He took out the big, pearl-handled knife that he was forever playing with and clipped the end from a cigar. "Didn't think I'd show up, did you?"

Jed's glance had gone to the face of Yvonne. The appearance of Slick Buckley would mean exactly what he saw written there; no more and no less. He saw a touch of rose under her fair skin and a lift of the head that his coming had not been able to produce.

"Come in, Charley," she said. That was all, but Sanders thought he heard a caress in the words.

His powerful hands sank helplessly and clasped between his legs. He felt like a clown, perched there in front of the organ. Buckley swung across the room and sat down upon the sofa beside Yvonne.

"Play us a tune, Jed." He laughed, tossed the pearl knife, glistening in the lamplight, and caught it deftly. "Play 'The Girl I Left Behind Me.'"

Sanders felt himself scarlet. He saw the gleam of amusement in the eyes of Yvonne; and he realized that he was even less than a third person there in that room. He was not much more than the battered organ at his back.

"I can't play it, Slick," he said slowly, "but I can do it. And I guess I better."

He got up quickly, and had gone as far as the door before Yvonne Gonyo tried to stop him.

"Oh, don't get mad, Jed! Charley did not mean anything."

Sanders was in the hall as she finished, and he kept steadily on until he stood out beneath the stars. Ice crackled under his feet and a keen wind bit at his face. He pulled himself together, and found that he was in the middle of the highway, going aimlessly.

Why not go on? Yvonne and Aaron and he were all of one mind about him, and if he could stop being a fool it would be a good thing. Why not force himself on, away from Little Falls for good? They needed men at the Cross River mill, he had heard, and never yet where good men were needed had he been refused a job. His money was in his belt, his pipe and plug in his pocket. He knew that if he turned back to the boarding house that night he would not leave at all. He must go on!

Jed Sanders walked all night over the frozen March roads, and at seven o'clock the next morning he went to work with the gang in the Cross River sawmill. He did two men's work that day, and when night came again he was sure of his job. He found a boarding place, and utter weariness made him sleep from supper to breakfast without a thought of the misty hair and the gray-black eyes of Yvonne Gonyo.

For a time thereafter all of the days of Jed Sanders were exactly alike. He worked, he ate, he went to the small room that was his own, and sat, booted, with a dead pipe gripped between his teeth, until such time as his head dropped forward and the pipe fell clattering to the floor. Then he knew that he could sleep; that the face of Yvonne would forsake him until the gray light of dawn upon his eyes awoke him again.

He could not get rid of the memory of her, nor of the pain that ran like fire whenever he thought of Slick Buckley. If only he could stop that! Buckley faithful to Yvonne? Not for six months after they were married! In the doghouse there were no reticences, and there Buckley had revealed himself. It was as sure that he would tire of his wife and beat her as it was that some other woman would come to his call when he chose.

For himself Jed Sanders did not so much care now. Indeed, he had largely ceased to care about himself since that hour when Aaron Pratt spoke to him and called him by his real name.

Jed, who had never before speculated upon the nature of things, thought much now, and came completely to a standstill in the effort to find his own meaning.

Many another man could take his place in the world with cant-hook and pike-pole. He was of no meaning to the girl he loved. He could not win her—he could not stop caring for her. Of what special use was he? To what purpose did he live? No more than to any other man did Heaven vouchsafe a sign at the asking of the question.

So the days of Sanders passed, and so, blankly, his mind stood when a new man came to the Cross River mill and went to work. An able-bodied, talkative man, who sought out Jed when they learned that they both had worked at Little Falls, and retailed the latest news.

He had been on the drive, he said, and he had quit after a fight with Slick Buckley. The newcomer cursed Slick up and down, back for ten generations, and down to the lowest depths of the next world.

"I wouldn't be Buckley's dog, nor his wife, for a million dollars," he said. "They's a gal he's going to marry, down there in the village, an almighty pretty gal! She'd ought to know better. Old Pratt's tried to stop it, but he can't do nothing. Buckley 'll use her like dirt."

That night when Jed shouldered his peevie to go home he knew that it was for the last time in that place. After supper he drew his pay, swung his few belongings over his shoulder at the end of a stick, and at daylight he met old Aaron Pratt just as he was coming out, blinking into the morning, from the front door of the boarding house.

The old man started at sight of Jed.

"I was right after all," he said. "You be a fool."

Without a word Sanders pushed past him into the house. He went upstairs, took the first empty room he found, and came down again when the breakfast bell rang, with his jaw set and his eyes as inscrutable as glass marbles.

No man, not even Slick Buckley, would dare to say much to him; but he knew that amusement would gleam in the face of Yvonne Gonyo when she put his smoking breakfast down in front of him.

So it proved.

"Hello!" she cried, with a ring of genuine surprise in her voice. The clatter of eating broke as the long table took note of the meeting. Shirts of blue, green, red, checks and plaids, rioted to the gaze of Sanders. "Did you get homesick, Jed?"

"Uh-huh," he answered lamely, with the sound of a snicker from the far end of the table in his ears.

The rattle of knife on plate began again, and Yvonne passed with her tray to the next man. Jed knew she knew that he would be seeking her in the parlor that

evening, as of old. Nobody cared, not even Buckley, seated in the midst of his gang of huskies. He grinned. He had joined with a yell in the chorus of greeting when Sanders first appeared in the dining room. Jed was fun to him.

It was Saturday, and therefore inevitable that there should be something doing in the doghouse that night. Other nights there might be; on Saturday night it was certain. But Jed this time did not hesitate upon the board sidewalk and look up at the lighted windows of the parlor. He walked resolutely down from the store with his box of candy, as a man who goes reconciled to his fate, and went into the house. Yvonne sat by the marble-topped table, her fingers beating a devil's tattoo upon its cold surface.

She looked up at Sanders without surprise and nodded toward a chair. It was not upon him or his coming that her thoughts were, and the lightnings in her now dark eyes showed that those thoughts were trouble breeders.

She took the candy and put it down without opening it.

"You're here again," she said.

"Yes," agreed Jed. "I wanted to see you, Yvonne."

She laughed, and for an instant softened with the look that always bound him hand and foot.

Then she asked a question that hurt the more because of that look.

"You didn't see Charley Buckley when you came in, did you?"

"No."

"You didn't go into the basement?"

"No, Yvonne."

Her fingers beat more rapidly; a vertical line grew upon her white forehead.

"He said he was coming up to-night."

Sanders felt sure now that there was something in what the man at the Cross River mill had told him. Before she would not have shown any feeling as to whether Slick Buckley came or stayed away.

"Yvonne," said Jed, "don't you go and let what Buckley does make any difference to you."

"Oh!" She flung out her hand in an impatient gesture, as though to sweep away Jed Sanders and his talk. "You and all the rest of them are alike! You're like a dog with a bone! You growl at all the other dogs because you want the bone for yourself!"

"No," Sanders told her steadily; "you are wrong about me, Yvonne."

Suddenly she flared at him, with a blaze of wrath in her eyes and the corners of her mouth drawing down.

"Prove it, then! Prove it right now! Go down into the doghouse and tell Charley Buckley to come up here! Tell him I want to see him right off."

She knew well enough what she asked, but she didn't care. At best she was putting him under the yoke of a deep humiliation. Sanders wondered where was the real Yvonne, who glowed through the mist of trouble so brightly sometimes.

For a moment he did not make up his mind whether to go or refuse.

"Yvonne, are you going to marry Slick?"

"I didn't say so." She laughed scornfully. "You aren't like the rest of them—oh, no!"

"I'll go," said Sanders, deciding. He stood up. "It seems kind of a bad thing to do, but—maybe—you'll see I want you should be happy."

She had not believed that he would go. He saw that with the last look he had at her face; but she did not try to stop him as he left the room and went, without haste or lingering, down the hall and the stairs.

Before he opened the door he knew that it was a very big night in the doghouse. Song and blasphemy mingled in an undulating roar that met him halfway from the sidewalk; and when he entered the room he stopped to get his bearings.

A man wholly sober needed to step carefully there.

Aaron Pratt, equally imperturbable whether he drank much or little, sat in his armchair at one end like a weary devil presiding over Hades. The long room milled with men, sweating, singing, arguing, and calling upon all the powers of the high gods to prove what they said. Sanders knew intimately the collective mind of the doghouse, although he could neither have written nor said what he knew.

There was nothing mean in such a crowd, drunk or sober, except in the case of lone persons like Slick Buckley. It was not a fighting crowd, but it would fight at the drop of the hat. It preferred to curse in peace and amity, to sing and weep at its own sentimentality, to revel in a false glory of elevation without harm to man or beast. Nevertheless it was mercurial. Death might be a jest, or a joke a tragedy.

Jed stepped around two singers, locked in each other's arms, whose spiked boots alone seemed to hold them upright upon the floor. He avoided, with head turned, a gripping hand that sought to draw him into a trivially mighty argument. Through the haze of smoke and sound he moved toward a corner where Buckley and three other men played poker in comparative silence.

The players nodded greetings. Two of them, being well on in their cups, leered. Buckley frowned. He had been drinking hard, as witnessed the color of his face and the hardness of his eyes, but he was doing what Sanders had seen him do before —going short on his drinks and cheating more and more effectively.

It would not have been according to the code for an onlooker to speak of this. A man was supposed to take care of himself and his money.

Jed sat down beside Buckley, rather close to him, in spite of the unfriendly look of inquiry with which the action was met. He wanted to get a chance, when the attention of the others was diverted by joke or drink or fresh deal, to give his message to Slick in a whisper. It was bad enough to have to carry that word from that girl to this man. He did not want his world to know.

It was not long before the opportunity came. Somebody passed a dipper of hard cider to the poker game, and it was going from hand to hand. The nimble fingers of Buckley had just put the pack of cards down for the next man to cut; they now went into his pocket, drew forth the pearl-handled knife, and snapped out the big blade.

While he waited he pried a splinter from the drygoods box upon which they played, and drew leisurely shavings from it.

Jed leaned forward and touched the coat sleeve of his rival. It was necessary to speak somewhat above a whisper in order to make himself heard at all in that room. Nevertheless his tone was low, and perhaps a little thickened by emotion.

"Slick! Yvonne wants to see you!"

At the touch Buckley had jerked up his head. He stared, hard and scowling, into the face of Sanders. Whether or not he fully understood Jed did not know, but it was certain that he was roused to anger and suspicion.

"What?" he demanded in a tone loud enough to draw the attention of the others at the table. "What's that, Sanders?"

It was too late now to keep the message wholly for Buckley's ears. Everybody understood that there was a certain amount of bad blood between them, and if Sanders had tried to call Slick out of the room at this juncture the drunken mob would have jumped to the conclusion that it was a fight and gone howling after them.

Jed drew back, sitting erect upon his chair, and summoned what dignity he could.

"Yvonne asked me to tell you to come upstairs right off."

This time the words carried even beyond the poker players; even as far as the ears of old Aaron Pratt, who turned in his chair and for an instant allowed a flicker of emotion to pass over his face.

Sanders, superconscious now of all that was going on about him, distinctly heard the word that came from Pratt's lips through the sudden silence.

"Fool!" said Aaron Pratt.

It was this word that broke the momentary silence. Buckley, whose lower jaw had dropped, leaned forward and stared uncertainly at Jed, without speaking. But the other three at the table laughed as one, and the most ribald of them bellowed the sentences that gave shape to succeeding events.

"You got to go, Slick! Her other feller says so!"

A roar of laughter shook the doghouse. Half the room had caught the situation, and the other half was willing to laugh without knowing why.

The lips of Slick Buckley moved, their sound unheard in the bedlam. Sanders, burning but set like a bulldog to the accomplishment of his purpose, gave him eye for eye.

Jed had not so much as the span of a second in which to avoid what came. He saw the fingers of Buckley tighten upon the knife, and instantly a pain darted into his side and seemed to go through and through his thick body.

It was hard to believe that he was stabbed; a knife-thrust from one of his own race was outside the limits of fighting decency as he understood it. He put his hand to his side. It came away red stained, wet. It was true, then. The crowding faces, open mouthed, maudlin, dazed, swayed to his vision. He got upon his feet. Then his knees buckled and he went down to the floor.

For a brief moment the room became mere noise and dancing lights to Sanders. Then a voice that could have called him back from hell reached his ears, and he saw the bright-shirted men press aside to make a path for Yvonne Gonyo. Her cheeks flamed red. Sanders followed her glance and looked upon his enemy again. Buckley was leaning a little heavily upon the box, lips parted. His eyes shifted under the gaze of Yvonne, roved, jerked down to Sanders, and fastened upon the knife. It lay where it had fallen, gleaming guilt in the light.

Yvonne saw it. Then a disturbance from behind pulled her head around for a fraction of a second. She turned back toward the knife. Her foot slid forward and covered it, and she half wheeled so that she was facing toward the front of the room.

The reason for her action came into the range of Jed Sanders's vision. Amos Greenough, the constable, walked through the lane that had grown still wider for him, and glanced down at Sanders. He was a tall, loose-jointed man, unimpressive except for his eyes. They had been known to look down the barrel of a shotgun without so much as a narrowing of the lids.

"Who done it?" he asked quietly.

Of course he did not expect an answer. No man there would have answered that question. If any one spoke it must be one of the three involved. The river and mill men showed their respect for Amos Greenough by silence, but if a strange officer of the law had asked that question he would have been thrown out into the April mud. Greenough knew whom to arrest on suspicion, if he wanted to go through the farce of arresting any one.

A smirk had grown upon the face of Slick Buckley. Safe, now, with the foot of Yvonne covering the evidence against him. He met the gaze which Greenough let pointedly come to rest upon him.

"Buckley," said the constable, "what do you know about it?"

"Nothing," replied Slick. "I was playing cards and some kind of a fight started over by the stove. I don't know nothing about it at all."

Then out of the infinite store of things unexpected came two words from Yvonne Gonyo.

"He lies!" Her hand swept down as a bird skims the earth and held the knife up within a foot of Greenough's face. "I've got him straight now, thank God! Whose knife is that? What's that but Jed's blood on it?"

Slick Buckley sank against the wall, white faced and groping for a hold upon the scarred plaster. A murmur passed over the room.

Even Greenough drew breath quickly.

Jed Sanders, lying upon the dirt and splinters of the doghouse floor, knew in that moment the purpose for which he had lived. Yvonne was saved by his blood.

The fool had gone his way, condemned of men, on to an end which he had not been able to foresee, but which had saved her whom he loved more than life. Now she was free.

All things were not in vain, as he had thought. Bigger than all of them a purpose ran, firm with the firmness of inviolate good. That good had turned his steps up to Yvonne from the doghouse, and turned them down again to meet the knife of Slick Buckley. He was content.

Yvonne dropped down beside him and lifted his head to her lap. He tried to raise a hand and found himself strangely weak;

but he was able to smile up at her with the smile of victory.

"It's all right," he whispered. "You—won't—marry—him!"

Yvonne had slit down his shirt with the knife that had stabbed him, and now her fingers sought to locate the wound. When they had made sure where it lay her eyes changed. Into them came the sparkle of twin stars.

"No, Jed," she murmured to him, "but I'll marry you if you want me."

The End of a Perfect Daze

by Marc Edmund Jones

WALTER WAITE stepped from the Twentieth Century Limited in the Grand Central Station with the same feeling with which he had boarded it at the Western beginning of its run. This was the year, and the month, and the week—and now the day, and nearly the hour of his opportunity. Then he turned to his chance traveling companion, to say good-by.

"It has been a real pleasure—" he began.

"Nonsense!" interrupted the other, the older man of the two. "Now that you are in New York if there is anything that John Long Keith can do for you, ever, don't hesitate to call on me. That's my name—in full."

Walter laughed. "The same goes if you happen to be in Milwaukee, only—"

"Only you hope this new deal of yours goes through; whereupon Milwaukee sees you no more."

"Right! Well—"

"If I can be of any help to you," Keith reiterated, "don't be backward."

"I won't," Walter promised.

He looked at his watch. His appointment with "Old Man" Gregson, of the copper interests, was not for an hour and a half. Yet a little thrill found its way up and over and around and through his spine, for it would not be long now before papers would be signed and he would be making all arrangements for his departure to South America, there to be in supreme charge of all the holdings of the copper trust. What a chance it was for a young man!

A chance he had earned, too. For Walter Waite had served his apprenticeship. After his graduation from Boston "Tech" he had spent long months in harness in Montana, in Mexico, in upper Canada and Alaska; and three grim years in Costa Rica where the recent little fracas, not of importance for general comment in the newspapers in the States, had nearly written a "finis" to the very promising career of a young engineer.

Walter laughed now. Idly he looked about at the warm yellow marble and the handsome generous lines of the Grand Central terminal. Just what could he do with himself for an hour and a half? The

barber, perhaps; and a shine—to the virile conqueror of things of the out-of-doors there was little resource in the time-killing devices of a more effeminate civilization.

But there came to mind the principal sacrifice his chosen work had entailed—a lack of friends. He pictured to himself his arrival in the Eastern metropolis under almost any other circumstance. Almost any other line of effort—in which he might have reached an equal degree of success—would have assured him a chain of intimates and acquaintances across the continent. If he were anything but an engineer, dwelling principally upon the outposts of man in the wilds, he would only have to go to the telephone to find a welcoming voice and a cordial invitation, multiplied perhaps a dozen times over.

Even in Milwaukee he had felt keenly alone. For sentiment's sake he had returned to his birthplace upon the termination of his Costa Rica contract. His mother's death and the sudden move of his brother to take the position with the Boatman's Bank in St. Louis had left him without ties, but he had hoped to find some old forgotten associates of boyhood days—

His six weeks in Milwaukee had been spent at the Plankington; his human contacts had been as casual and ephemeral as the friendship he had just struck up with this Mr. Keith on the Twentieth Century—a friendship that would probably slip easily from his mind, and slip forever, once he sat down at the side of some glass-topped table across from "Old Man" Gregson for the final discussion of his South American contract.

And it was the thought again of the coming conference with the big man downtown that drove any lingering sense of loneliness from his mind. Of course! An hour and a half was hardly enough time for all the things he should do. It would be necessary that he obtain a room at some hotel, a difficult proposition later in the day. There he could leave his bag; there the porter would take the check for his trunk—and it would be just as well that he made sure that his attire was up to all the standards of Wall Street, far from an instinctive thing with the young man of pioneer trails.

He found a room at the Admiral, so that it was not necessary for him to venture out to the street at all. In less than the half-hour of the hour and a half available he was all ready for Rufus Gregson. To kill the remaining time he determined to walk downtown.

"Four miles! One hour! Right!" he told himself.

Parts of the city interested him—the Grand Central Ramp, the Metropolitan Tower; the traffic, the crowds; the sense of immensity in mass rather than individual objects—but by West Fourth Street, half way down, he was disgusted.

"Me for the open," he exclaimed, to no one in particular. "Everything here is too easy. All the wants of man at hand. And I"—he straightened, subconsciously, as he strode along; a boy carrying four hat boxes gaped at him open-mouthed—"I live on problems, real problems."

Precisely at the hour named Walter presented himself in the ornate outer reception room of the handsome offices of the interests he expected to serve for the next four years. Briefly he explained his errand.

In about five minutes a rather small middle-aged gentleman with side whiskers came out. Walter's face fell. Could this be—

"You are Mr. Gregson?" he inquired.

"Oh, no indeed!" The little man smiled tolerantly. "I am Mr. Gregson's confidential secretary."

"But—but I had an appointment with Mr. Gregson!"

"Of course!" The secretary was not to be sidetracked from his own way of accomplishing his errand. "Mr. Gregson suddenly decided to leave for Florida—he had promised Miss Gregson—"

"But I—"

The little man put a hand on his arm. "Do not be impatient, my young friend. Mr. Gregson has all the papers which you are to sign with him, and he is taking the train at three thirty o'clock at the Pennsylvania Station, and he left instructions that you were to ride down to Florida with him, since it will give him a better opportunity to go over everything with him."

"I am to take the three thirty train for

Florida, and meet Mr. Gregson on the train—"

"Exactly. Now—"

But with a mixture of chagrin at this postponement of the interview and excitement at the thought of taking the long ride with one of the biggest financiers in the country, Walter turned on his heel and left, precipitously. Not until he was half way down the elevator did it occur to him that he had turned away abruptly, and that there might have some other detail of the message left by the copper man. Pride kept him from going back.

He hurried on up to the hotel to pack his bag and recheck his trunk; he hardly felt that he should leave it in New York. Vaguely he wondered what he should do with all this extra time on his hands.

Then, in the subway, came an appalling realization. Feverishly he opened his billfold, counting his money. He had far short of the amount necessary to purchase a ticket and Pullman to Florida.

He laughed—his first reaction to the situation — realizing that even had he the money he had neglected to learn his destination, whether Jacksonville or Miami or any one of half a dozen other points. Of course it would be easy to phone Mr. Gregson's secretary, but after his precipitous exit from the offices of the copper company he was determined that he would not appeal to them. A matter of pride again.

But where to get the money he needed! He had his check-book at the hotel, and plenty of funds in the bank in Milwaukee. He knew that the hotel would accept a check to put through subject to collection, and wondered if the credit man could be persuaded to wire to the bank to assure them that there were funds to cover the amount of the check, and to accept his identification of himself by letters, initials on his trunk, *et cetera*.

But the credit man at the Admiral was out.

"He will return about quarter to five," the girl explained.

That would be too late. Walter explained his dilemma. His recital of his trouble gained her sympathy, so that she appealed to the assistant manager, the only officer to be reached at the moment. He shook his head.

"It's a matter of routine, Mr. Waite. I have no doubt but that we can accommodate you later in the afternoon. But we hold our credit manager, Mr. Ruggles, wholly responsible for advances to guests—I simply cannot go over his head."

Suddenly Walter remembered his new-found friend of the Twentieth Century, who just that morning had told him to call upon him for any favors. He took out the card, hurried to a telephone booth.

Mr. John Long Keith was out.

It was indefinite. They didn't know when he would return.

With this Walter realized the seriousness of his situation. He left the hotel and began to walk westward on Forty-Second Street, not with any particular destination in mind, but because he was accustomed to thinking best while he walked. Quite oblivious of the crowds he started to cross Fifth Avenue against the wishes of the traffic police, and was stopped abruptly—all without jostling the subject in hand from his mind.

In the theatrical district, at Times Square, he saw that there was only one thing to do, and that was to begin to act upon every suggestion that came to him, without loss of time, until somehow he obtained the needed funds.

In the Longfield Building was a Western Union telegraph office. He stepped in and wrote a message, hurriedly:

> Second Ward Savings Bank, **Milwaukee**, Wisconsin. Cannot identify myself here. How can I draw on you for funds? Answer collect.
>
> WALTER WAITE.

"What is your address for the answer?" asked the girl behind the counter.

"Can't I wait here, and get you to rush it?"

She looked at him curiously, and as a bit of reciprocity he studied her. He noticed that her hands were very small and competent. She was small herself, but he liked her businesslike attire, a plain linen waist with a little lace collar, and the simple manner in which she dressed her hair. She collected the fee for the message and then

turned back and busied herself getting it rushed for him. After a moment she returned to the counter.

"That should take at least an hour, at the quickest," she said.

"But I can wait here?"

"Of course!"

There was something in her tone that caught his attention. She had read the message, of course. Did she think it odd for a full grown man to be willing to sit around a telegraph office for an hour; or did she think it a fruitless move on his part—

Of course she probably thought nothing about it, but the chain of thought gave him another idea. Quickly he wrote out another message:

Plankington, Milwaukee, Wis.
Caught here unexpected, need for funds. Can you wire me fifty dollars? I will mail my check to cover. Answer collect.
WALTER WAITE.

While he had only been at the Plankington three weeks he had considered it his home; he had left some few of his belongings in the hotel's care; he had rather made friends with the manager and the head clerk. All at once he was aware that the girl behind the counter again looked at him curiously.

"I can wait for that answer, also?" he asked.

"You may," she said; but her tones now were cold.

Actually he did not wait in the office, but he strolled out into the arcade, had his shoes shined again, and nervously watched his time. At last the answers came, one on top of the other:

Put in a check for collection any New York bank or hotel.
SECOND WARD SAVINGS BANK.

And he had known that!

You have an iron-bound, brass-plated crust.
DURANT.

Ouch! Durant was the man at the Plankington he had thought his friend!

Then he glanced up and saw that the girl behind the counter was smiling. She had freckles, but the smile revealed even teeth and dimples—and the amusement in her eyes nettled him.

"It isn't a funny matter," he protested.

She took the fee for the two collect messages, then indicated the second telegram, pointing to the phrase: "iron-bound brass-plated crust." "That's exactly what I thought when you sent the one to the hotel." She giggled. "I didn't think any one would tell you, out and out."

"Didn't you ever get caught, short of money, in a strange city?" he inquired earnestly, not exactly understanding why he sought to justify himself.

"No, I didn't. And if I traveled much I'd carry plenty."

"It isn't always safe to carry a lot in cash."

"All right!" She started to turn away. "Your funds out in Milwaukee seem to be very safe. You have little prospect of spending them."

Checking any impulse to explain further to the girl he hurried out again into the lobby of the Longfield Building. Next the shoe-shining parlor were public telephones, with operators. In a forlorn hope he called up John Long Keith, and found that he still was out.

What to do? Like a flash came the thought of his brother. Of course! There had never been a great degree of intimacy between the boys, due principally to a twelve years' difference in age—then Walter had been impatient, during his college period, with the questions and interests of George; and the younger fellow had never developed the usual awed admiration for an older brother. But George would help him, surely.

As Walter hurried back into the telegraph office the girl looked up with surprise, but did not say anything. He wrote out his message:

GEORGE WAITE,
Boatman's Bank,
St. Louis, Missouri:
Rush me by wire fifty dollars. Answer collect. Hurry. Will mail you check to-day.
WALTER.

The girl behind the counter was deliberate. "You wish this message rushed, also?"

He glanced up at the clock. Five minutes after one! Barely two full hours left. And he had had no lunch, and only a scant breakfast on the train. And he had a bag to pack and a trunk to get out of his room—

"Please! Pretty please!" he exclaimed.

She smiled. "For saying it that nicely I will. And if I suggest that you walk around the block while you're waiting, because you made me awfully nervous before—"

"I'll grab a bit of lunch," he said.

Unexpectedly quick came the answer, for it was ready for him after a very hurried trip across to the Childs on the other side of the Times Building.

George Waite home, seriously ill—influenza.
BOATMAN'S BANK.

Walter Waite suddenly felt every hope ebb away. Was he to lose the great opportunity of his life through his aversion to carrying large sums of money in cash; to his foolish move in taking it for granted he would have no trouble cashing checks in New York City? Of course he could appeal to Mr. Gregson's secretary, but that might make as bad an impression on the copper magnate as missing the three thirty train.

"Seeing that you can't raise the money—"

He started, realizing that the girl was speaking. And it seemed to him that there was a friendly light in two very large brown eyes.

"Seeing that you can't raise any money," she repeated, "isn't there something you can do to achieve the same purpose without money?"

He looked at her blankly. Then an idea flashed to him so very quickly that he turned and left without even thanking her for her interest.

Of course! He did not possess the forty odd dollars he needed for the railroad fare and Pullman for the whole trip, but he could purchase a ticket and berth on the same train for a distance as great as his money would take him. He could have his conference and perhaps close the whole deal without revealing his dilemma. At the least he would conceal his awkward situation for the early and vital beginning of negotiations.

Now, for the first time, he realized suddenly that he did not know what Rufus Gregson looked like, or how he would find him on the train. But this was a minor trouble, and largely due to the fact that he had not obtained more information from the little confidential secretary.

He hurried to his hotel, and there an additional thought came to him. The overcoat he wore, a big English gray tweed purchased in Vancouver, had been rather heavy all day, and he was going South. In his trunk was a lighter brown coat, domestic, which would serve very well. Then he had drawing instruments, and a very fine pair of binoculars, and a number of other items in his trunk, including a full dress suit which had traveled about as much as its owner, and had never been worn except upon the initial occasion for which it had been bought—his mother's first visit to the opera in the Chicago Auditorium. All these, he knew, could be converted into cash at a pawnbroker's. Perhaps he could scrape together enough to buy the full ticket after all.

He had something less than two hours left now, and so he telephoned for the porter and ordered a taxi. The trunk and bag were ready for the train, of course, but the gray overcoat, the full dress suit, the various other items he intended to pawn, looked foolish in his arms; so he impressed a bellboy who followed him into the lobby equally ill at ease with the load.

"My bill, please?" he asked, at the proper cage.

"One day; five dollars — you had no telephones?" Suddenly the girl looked puzzled. "You just came in this morning, didn't you, Mr. Waite? There may be no charge at all for the room in that case. If you can wait until—"

But people were looking oddly at the bellboy with the armful of things to be pawned, and Walter felt too conspicuous to wait. Moreover time was valuable, very valuable, and it was not until he was safely in his taxi that he realized that the five dollars paid out to the hotel might be just

the amount he would be short in order to get the Florida ticket.

"Drive me to a pawnshop!" he instructed the taxi driver.

Then he settled back to examine his finances. He had arrived in New York with about twenty-five dollars, which he had been sure would have been sufficient for his immediate needs upon arrival. But he had been generous with the red-caps and porters and bootblacks, true to the traditions of the open West and South. He could not remember his tips and expenditures, but he had in addition to the small change in his pocket just one new uncreased ten-dollar bill. He needed to raise about thirty dollars.

"I'll make it," he told himself, audibly; the habit of the man of the solitudes. "They say bad luck comes in bunches, but so does good luck, and I live on problems—real problems, and this appointment with 'Old Man' Gregson is too good luck to be associated with any real misfortune."

The drawing instruments, binoculars, several technical books of tables used by engineers—all the items except the overcoat and dress suit—proved easy to pawn at the first shop on Third Avenue not far above Forty-Second Street.

"I'll gif you tventy dollars for der lot," wheezed Whiskers.

"Make it thirty dollars and take the overcoat and suit," pleaded Walter.

"*Nein!* I can mit der clothes do nothin'. Der moths und der bugs—"

"All right! Give me the twenty, and hurry."

Walter took the ticket. With apologies the pawnbroker presented a twenty-dollar bill—he had no smaller change—

Walter crammed the bill into his pocket and ordered his driver to hunt up other shops. The taxi kept on up Third Avenue, but there seemed to be few pawnshops, and after another refusal to accept wearing apparel, at One Hundred and Twenty-Fifth the driver suggested that they turn back to try lower Third, or that they go over to the West Side, on Sixth, or Seventh Avenues.

"Keep in the neighborhood of the Pennsylvania Station," ordered Walter, watching his diminishing time.

On Seventh Avenue they found the proper places, but only after very considerable cruising about.

"Six dollars," dispassionately offered the man behind the counter.

"Can't you make it ten?" urged Walter.

The pawnbroker turned over the dress coat. "Padded shoulders! It is ten years out of style." He fingered the coat. "This is an English coat, fine and warm, but don't look like much; too 'stylish' for a poor man to buy"—quizzically—"and maybe you don't come back. Six dollars!"

"All right! Hurry!"

At the Pennsylvania Station he unloaded his trunk and left the bag with a red cap ordering him to stand by the trunk until he could get his ticket. Then he looked at the taxi meter for the first time, and gasped. Six dollars and twenty cents! He glanced at his watch. Quarter to three. Just about an hour had been spent raising money on his spare effects; about a quarter of the amount raised went to the taxi driver.

But there was no further time to lose. He had to get his ticket and Pullman; then return here to check his trunk. Panting, he presented himself at the ticket window.

"Railroad and Pullman to Florida on the three thirty."

"Whereabouts in Florida?"

"Uh, Jacksonville, I guess." That was the nearest point.

"Fare will be thirty-six fifty-five and the Pullman—"

Surreptitiously Walter counted his money. He had had to break his ten to pay the taxi driver, and of course had tipped him. He had the twenty, and four something, and six—

"Wait, please!" He colored, foolishly. "Make it railroad and Pullman to Washington, D. C., on that train." He slipped the twenty-dollar bill through the grating.

The ticket seller looked at him oddly; then glanced at the twenty. After the one glance he picked it up and examined it. Then he passed it back.

"You have heard about the counterfeit twenties in circulation?"

"Uh, is that one?"

"It is. If I thought—"

Walter flushed. "I know where I got it.

If I had time—" he checked himself instead, and put down the rest of his money. "Give me a ticket and seat to Philadelphia." Walter was actually conscious that his actions were very foolish, not to say suspicious.

The agent shook his head. "Not on that train. That's the Florida Special, and you'll have to go at least as far as Wilmington, Deleware, to ride on it. But"—a rather unexpected sympathetic impulse—"if you know where you got that phoney twenty why don't you go back and make them disgorge? You have three quarters of an hour, and there's plenty space today."

Harassed, Walter took the suggestion. With chagrin he remembered his own feeling of superiority over the big city as he had walked downtown to keep the original appointment with Old Man Gregson. He had felt that the effeminate affairs of the metropolis could never upset one who had so successfully conquered some of the uttermost wilds of the globe. And yet here he was, as flustered as a woman, displaying the intelligence of a five-year-old. Walter Waite, civil engineer! Bah!

On his way to get another taxi the idea came to him to try again to reach John Long Keith, his friend of the morning. The telephones were just across the floor from the ticket window. He called the number. And then it seemed that his luck had turned.

"Good!" There was cordiality in the other man's voice, after Walter had explained. "You got me just in time, for I'm leaving for Westchester, and—you have just ten minutes to get to my bank"—a pause—"let's see! I haven't my check book downtown, but I tell you what I'll do. You take a taxi over to the Thirteenth National Bank, on Fifth Avenue near Thirty-First, and ask for Mr. Spruce—he's one of the paying tellers. I know him very well and I'll phone him, describing you, and telling him to honor your check for fifty dollars on the—"

"Second Ward Savings Bank of Milwaukee," supplied Walter.

"Hurry, now," directed Keith. "The bank closes at three, and here's worlds of luck to you on your trip to Florida with your copper man."

Walter hurried. In the bank the watchman directed him to the proper window. He stopped first to write out his check; then he asked for Mr. Spruce.

"Mr. Spruce has just left," was the surprising intelligence. "Called away unexpectedly."

"Mr. John Long Keith was to have telephoned him about—" Walter began.

"Oh!" The teller picked up a slip. "You are Mr. Walter Waite?"

Walter nodded.

The teller read the slip twice, then examined him closely. All at once Walter had a premonition that something was wrong; he felt the blood leave his face. Certainly Keith had not failed him. The voice over the phone had been cordial. And the teller had known his name.

The teller left the cage to consult with some other men in the adjoining compartment. Both studied him with polite but nevertheless careful deliberation. Then the first man returned.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Waite—this is rather embarassing, but—"

"But—" Walter's voice echoed feebly.

"The description does not fit you at all."

"I don't understand!"

"In the first place you are described as wearing a very noticeably English greatcoat, light gray in color, and—"

"I changed to this brown one because I'm trying to go South with a man, to Florida, on the three thirty train." Walter felt his hands grow clammy. After all, to miss out now—

"Then you are described as very ruddy," the teller went on. "You look almost anæmic, if I may be pardoned—"

"That's worry!" ejaculated Walter. "I've just spent five of the most strenuous hours of my life, all in this hectic effort to raise enough money to buy a railroad ticket, so that I can clinch the job that means the make or break of my future."

"I appreciate that," the teller soothed; "but what you are asking of the bank is very unusual. And then"—looking at the slip again—"your eyes are described as brown, when they are obviously dark blue,

and "—a shrug—"that's all the description Mr. Keith gave Mr. Spruce."

"Isn't"—Walter was grasping at straws—"it is possible for a man to be mistaken in the color of a person's eyes, isn't it?"

"Surely, especially when blue eyes are very dark."

"Then can't you—"

"I'm sorry!" The teller looked at his watch. "It's past closing time, and while I don't doubt that you are Mr. Waite, yet the whole proceedings is rather irregular, and Mr. Spruce is not here. It is his responsibility, and I don't feel I can cash the check for him when, as I say, the description does not fit in any particular. It's the function of a bank always to 'play safe.' I might telephone Mr. Keith, but—"

"He has left his office for the day," Walter explained, forlornly.

"Then there is nothing I can do." This with finality.

After a moment Walter squared his shoulders. Twenty-five minutes left, but he was not ready to quit. The pawnbroker who had passed the counterfeit bill upon him! With the taxi waiting outside the bank—

The pawnbroker was out. The boy didn't know when he would return. Perhaps old Whiskers had known the bill was bad and had expected this call.

Walter groaned. Nineteen minutes! He sank his pride and telephoned the office of Rufus Gregson. The secretary was out. No one else knew anything of the movements of Mr. Gregson, said the operator.

Seventeen minutes! He ordered the taxi driver to make the Pennsylvania Station in a rush. Then came another idea, and he stopped at the only Western Union office he knew, in the Longfield Building. At the least he would die trying, so to speak.

The little girl with the big brown eyes was still behind the counter, and she looked at him searchingly as he scrawled a message, feverishly. He had just thought of Osgood, splendid old Osgood, who had shared his troubles in Costa Rica. Osgood was with Pearce & Burns, engineers, Detroit—

"Will you tell me," suddenly demanded the girl, "what all this rush for money means. You seem to be riding about taxis, yet—"

Walter caught, somehow, the idea that her question was sympathetic. Was it possible that she had felt she had come to know him in the brief hour or so he had waited around? There had been no conversation—

On impulse he explained. The three-thirty train. The one opportunity of a long time. She looked at the clock.

"You don't expect money to be wired to you in time for you to catch a train at the Pennsylvania Station in twelve minutes?"

He shrugged his shoulders helplessly. Of course it was hopeless.

"Quick!" She pushed the message back to him. "You've got to hurry, and hustle some. Make out your check and I'll cash it."

"You'll—" Dazed non-realization!

"Speed!" She put a warm and impelling little hand on his wrist. "No questions! Write! And make out the check to"—hesitating—"cash."

He couldn't thank her, and to his shame didn't try. The taxi obligingly speeded a little bit on the way to the station. There they sold him the ticket to Jacksonville, but told him he would have to buy his Pullman on the train—the diagrams of the sleeping cars had gone down five minutes before.

His trunk and bag were still out in the taxi runway; he couldn't desert them. The red cap had given up, but he managed to check his trunk, stopping explanations that it was far too late to get it on this train.

Then with the bag in hand he sprinted across the concourse.

"You've missed the train by only half a minute," explained the gateman.

After first feelings of chagrin and bitter disappointment came a new sensation of disgust. The little girl! Why had he allowed himself to accept her generous offer? She was real stuff. Even if he never landed Gregson—

Gesticulating rather wildly for a florid and stout man, another would-be passenger came puffing up, followed by two red caps, one with bags the other with golf sticks.

"Damn!" ejaculated the new arrival. "And a young engineer's on that train, waiting to talk business with me, and—oh, hell!"

"You—you're not Rufus Gregson!" gasped Walter.

A little chap with side whiskers came up the stairs from the now empty platform. Rufus Gregson's confidential secretary!

"Oh," he exclaimed. "You both missed it!" Then he extended a little envelope to Walter. "Here's your transportation. You left the office so quickly that I had to come down to the train to catch you."

The Understudy

by Rose Henderson

WHILE his fellow players were collecting their baggage and taking taxis to the Chamberlain Hotel, Dick Morley, of the "Peter Fagan" theatrical company, walked a half dozen blocks through the down-town Des Moines streets to a dingy chop-house with its sign lettered across the windows. He noticed that the lower half of a B was still gone from the sign, like a vast broken tooth. He recognized the same stocky head waiter who used to wink tolerantly at noisy college gangs with whom Dick had consorted less than two years before. The same cracked corner of a mirror marked his place at the back of the grill room.

Dick sat down and glanced furtively about, relieved not to discover a familiar face at the tables near him. And there was no flicker of recognition in Jake's placid countenance.

During his year and a half on the stage Dick had thought often of the possibility of some time playing the old college town, but he had dreamed always of returning in a prominent rôle. The local city papers had made much of the fact that he had landed a juvenile lead his first season in New York. The college weekly had devoted the greater part of several issues to him, and his numerous friends had sent notes of congratulation which had been by no means the least enjoyable phase of his success.

But Dick was already a convincing illustration of the fact that there are violent ups and downs in the acting profession. This year he was on the road with "Peter Fagan," playing the six-line part of a bashful lover and understudying the juvenile lead. For himself, he was not discouraged. The hardships of one-night stands were still an amusing novelty. In two months he knew the play from beginning to end. He was popular with the company. And he was confident that if Barnett, the healthy juvenile lead, would ever get sick, he, the submerged understudy, could show what there really was in the part. It was a big part.

Moreover, he was writing a play that David Murchison, the famous old star who played *Peter Fagan,* declared was not half bad as a beginning. Murchison was a genius in character work, and Dick felt it a privilege to be associated with the great actor.

Murchison directed his own company and was a relentless coach. Dick had learned more from his director than he had imagined there was to be learned, two years ago. But his friends would not know of these compensations. They would remember his leading parts in triumphant amateur productions. They would recall the reports of his flashy Broadway hit, and they would pity and speculate. Ever since he had known that the Des Moines booking was a certainty, the thought of appearing there had hung upon him like a weight.

The clock above the cluttered desk in the chop-house lobby pointed to eleven. The November sun shone palely through the veil of soft coal soot on the chop-house windows. Dick dallied miserably over his coffee and rolls. Out at the university, he reflected, the fellows he had known as sophomores and freshmen would be listening to lectures or hanging around the quad until the noon hour.

At various times since he left, Dick had been desperately homesick for the old scenes, for the class fellowship, the glee club, for Chet Palmer, his particular pal. Chet wrote poetry and Dick recited it, and they both were given to dreaming vast and airy dreams of the future.

Chet was now dramatic critic on the morning paper. He would soon be going up to the hotel to arrange for an interview with Murchison and to hunt for Dick, and in his review of the play he would do his honest utmost to say something complimentary about the sickeningly small part assigned on the program to Richard Morley. Chet would have tact enough not to overdo the thing. That was one consolation. But the pitiful anti-climax of it all nagged Morley relentlessly. And yet he would soon have to face them, to laugh and talk and say how good it was to be back.

The lobby clock pointed to eleven-twenty. The familiar discords of a blind street player jangled at the open windo Dick wished vaguely that he could lurk the next twelve hours in the dingy o security of the grill room. He wonder how it would seem to be a placid he waiter instead of a struggling, inco sequential actor returned to the scenes his early ambitions. Dick felt unbeliev ably old and sad and shaken as he paid h check, got his bag, and walked slowly u Sixth Avenue, expecting every minute t hear a familiar hail. He wished that h had gone along with the rest of the com pany. His solitary breakfast at the ol chophouse had not nerved him for th coming ordeal. Rather it had called up new host of disconcerting memories.

II.

THEY were waiting for him in the hote lobby, Chet and a half dozen other fellows and the reality was much less ghastly tha his anticipations had been. Dick was abl to manage a bit of the gently farcical humor that he had developed early in life and which had forecast his future as comedian. He burlesqued his few lines grotesquely as he described the part to h friends. And he declared seriously that it was worth it all just for the daily contact with a man like David Murchison. Th last suggestion impressed his auditors They agreed that it must be great t breathe the same air, eat at the same table and sometimes ride in the same compart ment with a celebrated actor.

But the afternoon wore on less success fully. There was a faculty tea which h was not adroit enough to escape. Ther were telephone calls and messages fro people he was glad to hear from and fro others whom he knew hardly at all. Ac quaintances questioned him closely and c riously about the "life" he was "leading." Others spoke reprovingly when he tried t laugh away the insignificance of his presen rôle.

"Don't forget that we're expecting bi things of you," they reminded him.

"A former student of mine," beamed th professor of public speaking, introducin Dick to a determined society matron w

was intent on finding out all about "stage life."

They were obviously disappointed because he had so little to tell. They nagged him for details, wounded him with well-meant admonitions and feeble congratulations. By night Dick's nerves, usually an unknown quantity, were taut and twingeing.

Dick was not a snob. He loved the old town, the old school, the friends and associations of his most buoyantly sensitive years. It was his caring that pressed the iron into his flesh. For he was very young, after all, and proud young dreams came back to mock him with their seeming futility. What had he done in two years? What would he ever do? He had been confident, just as these friends of his were. Just how foolishly confident he was able to realize now that he had seen a little of such men as Murchison. Without hard work or time or experience, he had planned to ascend deftly and uninterruptedly to the enticing top of the ladder.

To be sure, he had talked vaguely about effort. But he hadn't known what real effort meant. He, and they, imagined that because he could walk clumsily through an amateur production of a masterpiece he was ripe for the high rewards of the profession. At least, enough of them seemed to think this to make an oppressively overwhelming majority.

He wished they could see Murchison at work on a new production, day after day, night after night, drilling, hammering, polishing. Three o'clock in the morning, four o'clock, and still at it! A few hours' rest and back again. Work, work, work! Despair, tears, weariness! And yet, after all, a dogged, indomitable satisfaction in standing up to the thing. And then, the rare white moments of triumph! Even a little, obscure triumph that a lot of people might sneer at. And a final, proprietary interest in "the whole damned show." He had felt something of it all at college. But results there had been cobblestone rather than mosaic.

To be sure, there was the lighter, easier sort of thing he had done a season ago. But Dick Morley would not be satisfied to do that forever. Thanks to the old town, or the college, or to some kind of romantic adventure within him, he must at least try for what he called the real thing. That was one of the reasons why he was with Murchison.

And so he sat in his hotel bedroom and dreaded and feared the fact that, before an audience who would all know his name, he must go on in the smallest part that the play offered. He hated himself for his fear and dread, vowed he would show them some time, and yet could not smother the foolish, prideful misery that swept him. There was a sickening humility as well as a new doubt of himself that his return to the old environment had created. Chet Palmer, he knew, realized the truth of the situation and believed in him. But then Chet was always tranquil and optimistic.

III.

WHILE Dick sat at the hotel, wishing that the night were over, Chet Palmer was interviewing Murchison, or the star was interviewing Chet. The young critic realized that he was doing too much of the talking as soon as Murchison asked about Dick. But the kindly encouragement in the actor's eyes was irresistible. In a few minutes Chet had forgotten the questions he meant to ask and was deep in a discussion of Dick's latent genius, his skill as a writer, his possibilities as an actor, his loyalty as a friend. Before he realized it, he was revealing the eager aspiration of those moonlit nights on the campus, the aching solemnity of a rare, boyish friendship, the high faith and courage of questing youth. A warmth of sympathy filled the fine old face opposite him, a face which had reflected a score of contrasting rôles, which had expressed the whole gamut of human emotions without losing its own distinguished grace.

Chet suddenly became aware that time was passing. He awoke from his beguiling confidence realizing that he had already taken more of the great man's time than he should have done, and that he had nothing he could print as an interview. He stammered an apology and tried to

think of the questions he had intended to ask.

Murchison came to his rescue with a smile. "Wonder if you wouldn't like something they've never printed about me. Something 'exclusive,' you call it, don't you?"

The reporter flushed eagerly.

"I'll tell you a little story about my beginning days, ages ago. I was an understudy. And I had to play my home town in the rôle of a butler who spoke just once. It seems humorous—now. Think you'd like the story?"

Chet beamed his joy and thanks. They sat back in their chairs at the side of the hotel lobby. The actor recounted the experience with whimsical cleverness and a nice appreciation of the dramatic points.

As he rose and shook hands he was serious again, gazing intently into the young man's face.

"I've never given that to the press before," he said, "because I was—well, sensitive about it, I suppose. But you and I have walked together along a very pleasant high road. I don't believe you'll garble the story or hurt me by anything you say. I believe you understand how I'd rather have it told. Thanks, Mr. Palmer. I am delighted to have had this talk with you."

IV.

In his dressing-room at the theater Dick found a sheaf of roses from his fraternity brothers. He was touched by the tribute, and more touched with gratitude that they had sent them there instead of to the stage during the play. He hoped, he prayed, that nobody would send up any flowers out in front. It would be the last straw of emphasis upon his ignominy. Yet the red roses in a long pasteboard box from a florist he used to patronize suggested the horrible possibility.

Dick realized that he was making a silly mess of his nerves. He sat down and glared at himself in the dressing-table mirror, and with a tremendous effort began to overcome his panic.

"It's for only one night, you nut," he grinned; "and the worst's over."

It was early, but he had been unable to stand the hotel a minute longer. "Only one night," he chattered, gritting his teeth. It was the first time he had known anything like stage fright.

As he got out his make-up box he heard his own name spoken in the next dressing-room. He hated eavesdropping, and was about to find some excuse for calling out, when the speaker's words arrested him with a quick stab of hope. "You see it's his own college town, and it would mean so much to him, just this once."

The voice was Mrs. Devon's, the old character woman whom the whole company loved. In moments of extreme professional pique they might be ready to tear each other's hearts out, all except Mrs. Devon's. Her mellow kindliness had shamed more than one jealous intrigue.

But Barnett's voice answered a shade testily. He didn't see why he should hand over the part, just for that. Morley probably didn't want it anyway. Would be scared stiff at the idea.

"Well, I just thought you might not understand the situation," said Mrs. Devon quietly. "I thought you might like to offer him the part."

"Damn him! He knows I'd like it," raged Dick inwardly as he heard the door close and Mrs. Devon walking back along the carpetless hallway. "Mr. Murchison would let me do it, too."

The momentary hope had flushed his face feverishly. He forced his hand to deliberate calm as he daubed on the make-up. "But it's his own business, you mut," he muttered at the clean blond face in the mirror. "His darned own business."

Then he started to his feet at a quick rap on his door. "Come in," he shrilled. But it was Murchison, not Barnett, who opened it. Dick stammered something gaspingly. He could never remember just what he said.

"Good evening, Morley. Feeling pretty fit?" asked the old actor.

"Y-yes," bleated Dick.

"I'm not quite up to par myself. Indigestion. Bad food, I guess." Murchison crumpled into a chair and looked up at the young man pathetically.

"I—I'm most awfully sorry, Mr. Murchison. Can't I—do something?"

"I was just wondering if you wouldn't do *Peter Fagan* for me. I remember that you read the part uncommonly well at some of the rehearsals when I was studying the play as a whole. Uncommonly well."

Dick's mouth dropped slowly open.

"I—I've heard you rehearsing my lines since. You—know the whole part, don't you?"

"Yes—I—know—the whole—p-play," gasped Dick in a kind of dazed whisper.

"Well, it's early. Suppose you try a few speeches for me. Just to see how it goes."

"But—Mr. Murchison, you're—you're just doing this—for me—"

"Doin' what?" snapped the old actor. "Gettin' this darned stomach ache?"

"No—but—I—you—"

"Well, go to it, Morley. I'm not sick enough to worry about, but I—I'm indisposed to play the part unless I have to. And it's early."

Dick came out of his funk under the steely gaze of the actor-manager, at the lash of a whip in the great, keen eyes. He launched into the speeches of *Peter Fagan* with a kind of singing ecstasy which was strangely self-possessed and controlled. The part had always appealed to him. Now, with the hypnotic personality of Murchison before him, he seemed actually to step into the quaint old character.

"Good!"

"Not so fast—"

"A little more pep."

"That's it."

The terse comments heartened him, spurred him on. The director gave him the cues and he took up the speeches without hesitation. They jumped to the third act and ran over the climax.

"You can do it, my boy," said the old actor. "And I'll see you through. If you should get lost I'll put you on. Remember that. Now for the make-up."

Dick's voice shook and his eyes filled as he tried to stammer his thanks.

"You—you mustn't tire yourself," he protested.

"The pain's better. Quite gone, in fact. But I want to see you do it. I was young once myself. And now—you shall be old!"

He was painting lines into Dick's slim face, thinning his mouth, creasing his forehead, while Dick panted with excitement and vowed his eternal gratitude and devotion. They rushed to the star's dressing-room for the gray wig and the loose-fitting clothes of *Peter Fagan*.

"What—what about my part?" grinned Dick.

"What do you mean, your part? Oh, I'll tell Barnett to do that. It won't conflict with his rôle. Think he may enjoy doing it, eh?"

They rushed up-stage as the orchestra finished the overture. And then the assistant director walked out in front of the curtain and announced that he regretted very much to have to tell them that Mr. Murchison had been suffering from a sudden, though not a serious illness, and that the understudy, Mr. Richard Morley, would play the rôle of *Peter Fagan*.

There was a moment of silence, then a storm of applause. A ripple of laughter swept the house at the incongruity of its response, but the assistant director smiled and bowed understandingly, and the applause flashed out again, to hush abruptly at the ascent of the curtain.

V

It was well for Dick Morley that he was the sort of person who could rise to a crisis, that he enjoyed the tension of it. Back in his college days he could cut class cheerfully, refuse to study for weeks at a time, then settle down and grind for exams with real interest. He could put whole books into his head in a night's cramming. He could become oblivious to everything in the world except French verbs or medieval history. And he liked the excitement of a tremendous task.

The old spell of concentration was on him as he took the stage with the hesitant steps of *Peter Fagan*. And the emotional reaction from his fit of hectic gloom was like wine in his veins. There was a half-

eerie knowingness about the character that had always intrigued him. It was the elfish wistfulness that haunts the very young or the very old.

Dick felt an instinctive kinship with this elusive, gnome-like wisdom, a wisdom tinged with the mocking grace of laughter. He was only half aware of the surging applause, of the college fellows yelling at the close of the first act. He answered curtain calls in a kind of dim rapture. He waited off-stage unconscious of everything except the players in their parts and the occasional hand of Murchison on his shoulder.

The poetic truth of the play thrilled him, knit him closer in sympathy with the star whom he adored. Poignant desires, born of moonlit campus walks, of classroom and library hours, of vague, boyhood dreams awoke and sang within him. Above the glowing tumult of his imagination sat the calm artist, conscious of the color, the pattern of the part he was playing. And so the shining spirit became articulate. His acting, of course, was an almost automatic reflection of the rôle as he had seen Murchison do it, night after night. Yet the flame of his eager youth burned through the lines and made them his own.

It was over at last. David Murchison had gone out with him to bow genially as the house rose to its feet and cheered the final curtain. The whole cast had stopped to congratulate him, Barnett, a little shame-faced. Dick was back again in his dressing-room, mopping the wrinkles of *Peter Fagan* from his smooth forehead.

As the sooty express train pulled out of town the next morning, Dick Morley watched the shabby suburban streets flash past in the November sunshine; and his eyes glowed with a brooding eagerness.

He still heard, in fancy, the old college yells, with his name spelled, over and over. The click of the rails became a jubilant chorus, and the suburban houses faded away into a gleaming ribbon of dreams.

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A PLEA FOR PAINLESS POETRY

I HATE the introspective bards
  Who slice emotions while we wait;
They place our souls on index cards
  And catalogue each hectic state;
They poetize in words that mean
  A thousand things, but nothing clear;
With vague nuance they stir my spleen
  And drive my thoughts to cheese and beer.

The other day in reckless mood
  I read a piece called "Threnody";
A Chinese laundry ticket would
  Have yielded far more sense to me.
I gathered that a cloud had spied
  A mumbling brick whose soul was pink;
Perhaps, thought I, the poet tried
  But knew not *where* to get a drink.

I shun the worldly super-wise
  Who chloroform my griefs and joys.
I shy at pretty verse that pries
  Into my neighbor's psychic poise;
Give me the lilting catch that stirs
  My blood to life and warms the heart;
And, though the highbrow clan demurs,
  I'll take a chance and call it Art.

Elias Lieberman.