ARGOSY

ALL-STORY WEEKLY

AUGUST 13

PRICE 10¢

Bringing the Boom to Vingo

by Loring Brent

A Remarkable Flying Story:

The Stolen Plane

by Richard Howells Watkins

The greatest news event of all time, far more startling than trans-oceanic flights, will be exploited in the new serial now being written for Argosy-Allstory Weekly by George F. Worts. Watch for further announcements, title and release date.

Guaranteed Twin Service for Ambitious Men!

T *Training Preparing you for a better job and a Raise in Pay - - - -*

E *Employment Service Placing you in it, or money refunded!*

Come into Drafting!

Learn drafting—how to *make* and *read* plans, and the doors of opportunity in all mechanical, building, and engineering lines swing open for you! There are more well-paid Drafting jobs open today than in any other one profession or trade. There's a variety, a fascination to Drafting that will grip you. No other work is so interesting, *so well paid*—no other field offers equal opportunities for quick promotion.

The Draftsman is the Boss of the Works!

Destroy blue-prints and *plans*, and the wheels of all Industry will stop until new ones can be made. Every move of every workman on the job is *controlled* by the Draftsman through his plans. Railroads, public works, buildings of a hundred sorts, machinery, electricity, automobiles—all manufacturing and construction *start* on the Drafting table! That's the kind of work to get into, friend. Where you have the same chance as anybody else to make a *quick success!*

O. C. MILLER
Director Extension Work

The American School

is the first in the home study field to recognize the need of guaranteeing its courses with a money-back contract, if the training fails to accomplish the benefits you expect. Thus all risk and doubt are eliminated—**either the training will help you to a better job and a raise in pay or it will cost you nothing.** To better carry out this important service, we maintain a **National** employment department which keeps in touch with the employers of Draftsmen all over the U. S. All this without extra charge to our students and graduates.

Professional Outfit Given!

You will naturally expect the American School to give you the best kind of instruments and tools with the best kind of training. This outfit is good enough to use professionally after you finish your training. Mail coupon for description.

If You Are Now Earning Less than $40 a Week

I guarantee to *prepare* you for a fine drafting position, right in your home, in your spare time; then I guarantee to help you find such a position paying at least 50% *more than you earn today*, within 60 days after you complete this training, or I will refund small amount you pay for tuition. We make this agreement to prove this instruction *will* make you a *real Draftsman*. Back of this guarantee are the entire resources and reputation of this million dollar institution.

O. C. Miller

O. C. MILLER
Director Extension Work

3 DRAFTING Lessons FREE!

—to prove you can learn at home in spare time!

You'll be surprised how *quickly* you can learn Drafting by our new one-step-at-a-time method. We start you off by doing actual Drafting room jobs from the very beginning. Before you know it, you are batting out professional plans like a veteran. Get the first three lessons--the coupon brings them. Do *them*. Test your ability to master Drafting at home. Without cost or obligation.

The American School

Dept. DC-4, Drexel Ave. and 58th, Chicago

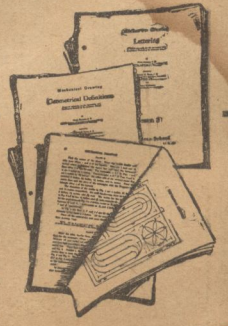
O. C. MILLER, Director Extension Work
American School, Dept. DC-4, Drexel Ave. and 58th St., Chicago.

Your offer to send me three lessons free and facts about the opportunities in Drafting and about your course, looks good to me. It is understood I am not obligated in any way in making this request.

Name _____

Address _____

Occupation _____ *Age* _____



ARGOSY-ALLSTORY WEEKLY

VOLUME 188 CONTENTS FOR AUGUST 13, 1927 NUMBER 3

FOUR SERIAL STORIES

Bringing the Boom to Vingo . . . . Loring Brent 321
A Three-Part Story — Part One

The Call to Arms . . . . . Gordon Stiles 364
A Three-Part Story—Part Two

Paid in Advance . . . . . Edgar Franklin 401
A Six-Part Story—Part Three

Eyes West! 435
A Four-Part Story—Part Four

ONE COMPLETE NOVELETTE

The Stolen Plane . . . . . Richard Howells Watkins . 340

FIVE SHORT STORIES

Far Above Rubies . . . . . Ben Conlon 391
The Despised Comet . . . . . Garret Smith 423
The Sheriff Stays at Home . . . . Eric Howard 455
The Roving Diplomat . . . . . Laurance M. Hare . . . 463
Dumb Is as Dumb Does . . . . . Ellen Hogue and Jack Bechdolt 469

POETRY

Broke . . . . . Edward W. Barnard 339
Stars and Fireflies . . . . . Richard Kirk 363
Song of the Waterfall . . . . Chart Pitt 390
What'd We Do? . . . . Peter A. Lea 400
Circus Day . . . . . Harvey K. Wilson 462
In Confidence . . . Edward W. Barnard 468
The Lost Trail . James Edward Hungerford 478

The Reader's Viewpoint 479

NEXT WEEK:

THUNDERBOLTS OF JOVE

By JOSEPH IVERS LAWRENCE

will take us back to third-century Rome, for a look at some remarkable men

THE FRANK A. MUNSEY COMPANY, 280 BROADWAY, NEW YORK, N. Y., and
LONDON: HACHETTE & CIE., 16-17 King William Street, Charing Cross, W. C. 2
PARIS: HACHETTE & CIE., 111 Rue Reaumur
WILLIAM T. DEWART, President and Treasurer RICHARD H. TITHERINGTON, Vice-President and Secretary
Single copies, 10 cents. By the year, $4.00 in United States, its dependencies, Mexico and Cuba; $6.00 to Canada, and $7.00 to Foreign Countries. Remittances should be made by check, express money order or postal money order. Currency should not be sent unless registered
PUBLISHED WEEKLY BY THE FRANK A. MUNSEY COMPANY.
Entered as second-class matter July 15, 1920, at the Post-Office at New York, under the Act of March 3, 1879

A CLASSIFIED ADVERTISING DEPARTMENT

AGENTS & SALESMEN WANTED

Demand For Electric Window Displays Is Established. Our hustlers easily hitting $100 weekly with the leader—**Magic Window Salesman**—Color, Light, Motion. **High-Class.** Buyers fall quick on demonstration. Greatest quick-change Letter System known, and new, snappy, **Two-Color** Poster Service the answer. Live salesmen getting protected territory **now.** DISPLAY PRODUCTS CO., M407-9 East 31st, Kansas City, Mo.

Agents—$15.80 Daily In Advance. Experience unnecessary—Introducing "Quick Wring" Self Wringing Mop. No more red, ugly hands, caused by hot, dirty water! No more back breaking mop wringing for housewives. Popular priced. Strong, durable, rust proof. Every sale means another. Collapsible sample furnished in neat case like fishing rod roll. Big seller. Entirely different. Write quick. Mathews Products, Hall 2001, Cincinnati, O.

AGENTS MAKE BIG PROFITS SELLING LINGERIE, HOSIERY, DRESSES AND SWEATERS direct to wearer. 300 Styles. Special Selling Plan. Write for our Special Offer. NATIONAL TEXTILE MILLS, 218 S. Wabash Ave., Chicago.

WE START YOU WITHOUT A DOLLAR. SOAPS, EXTRACTS, PERFUMES, TOILET GOODS. Experience unnecessary. CARNATION CO., DEPT. 1040, ST. LOUIS, MO.

$20.00 DAILY SELLING GUARANTEED ALL WOOL MADE TO MEASURE SUITS AND OVERCOATS at $23.50; regular $35.00 values. Large and attractive Fall Sample Outfit Free to men with selling ability. JAY ROSE & COMPANY, 411 S. Wells Street, Desk 12, Chicago.

DISTRICT SALESMAN — ALL WOOL, UNION MADE SUITS, OVERCOATS, $23.50. LIBERAL ADVANCE COMMISSION, BONUS. WRITE FOR EXPENSIVE FREE OUTFIT. HARVEY BROS., DEPT. 500, BOX 00, CHICAGO, ILL.

66 MILES ON 1 GALLON—Amazing, New, Wonderful Vapor Humidifier—Gas Saver—and Quick Starter. For all autos. Exclusive Factory Representatives wanted everywhere. 1 Free to introduce. CRITCHLOW, G-427, Wheaton, Ill.

$14.50 DAILY EASY—PAY IN ADVANCE, INTRODUCING CHIEFTAIN GUARANTEED SHIRTS 3 FOR $4.95. NO EXPERIENCE OR CAPITAL NEEDED. JUST WRITE ORDERS. WE DELIVER AND COLLECT. Full working outfit free. CINCINNATI SHIRT CO., Lane 17619, Cincinnati, Ohio.

AGENTS—MONEY MAKERS. FAST READY SELLERS. Earn $15 daily. Pay advanced, selling tailored $10 value slickers $2.95. Striking colors—exquisite cloths. Slicker and selling outfit FREE. FISK WARNER, 443 So. Dearborn, Dept. M, Chicago.

MICHIGAN FARM LANDS FOR SALE

$10 IS ALL I ASK DOWN ON 20 ACRES IN MICH. POTATO BELT. Very easy terms. Near markets, lakes and streams. Write for particulars now. G. W. SWIGART, M-1276 First National Bank Building, Chicago.

STORIES WANTED

STORY IDEAS WANTED FOR PHOTOPLAYS AND MAGAZINES. ACCEPTED IN ANY FORM FOR REVISION AND SUBMISSION TO MARKETS. Send Mss. for free criticism or write for booklet. Est. 1917. UNIVERSAL SCENARIO CO., 407 Western & Santa Monica Bldg., Hollywood, Calif.

SONG-POEM WRITERS

WRITE THE WORDS FOR A SONG. WE COMPOSE MUSIC. OUR COMPOSER WROTE MANY SONG HITS. MONARCH MUSIC COMPANY, 236 West 55TH ST. (NEAR BROADWAY), DEPT. 109, NEW YORK.

TOBACCO

TOBACCO HABIT BANISHED. NO MATTER HOW LONG YOU HAVE BEEN A VICTIM, no matter how strong your craving, no matter in what form you use tobacco, there is help for you. Just send postcard or letter for our Free Book. It explains everything. NEWELL PHARMACAL CO., Dept. 812-A Clayton Station, St. Louis, Mo.

PATENT ATTORNEYS

PATENTS. BOOKLET FREE. HIGHEST REFERENCES. BEST RESULTS. PROMPTNESS ASSURED. SEND DRAWING OR MODEL FOR EXAMINATION AND ADVICE. WATSON E. COLEMAN, REGISTERED PATENT LAWYER, 724 NINTH STREET, WASHINGTON, D. C.

PATENTS. Write for our free Evidence of Invention Blank and Guide Book, "How to Get Your Patent." Send model or sketch of your invention for our inspection and Instructions Free. Terms Reasonable. RANDOLPH & CO., Dept. 419, Washington, D. C.

PATENTS—Write for our Guide Book "How To Obtain A Patent" and Record of Invention Blank, sent free. Send model or sketch and description of invention for Inspection & Instructions Free. Terms Reasonable. Prompt Attention. Highest References. Victor J. Evans & Co., 762 Ninth, Washington, D. C.

AGENTS & SALESMEN WANTED

TAILORING AGENTS EARN $35.00 TO $75.00 WEEKLY, SHOWING FINE 100% PURE VIRGIN WOOL $23.50 SUITS, UNION HAND TAILORED TO MEASURE. Equal usual $35 to $40 suits. Old reliable $4,000,000.00 firm offers pay in advance, exclusive territory, generous backing and big outfit of hundreds of large samples FREE. Write J. B. SIMPSON, 843 Adams St., Dept. 1378, Chicago.

Make $12 a Day from start and liberal bonus selling PIONEER $23.50 all-wool tailoring. Commissions paid in advance. Striking leather brief case and 100 large cloth samples furnished. We train the inexperienced. Write now to PIONEER TAILORING CO., 159 West Harrison, Dept. H-1009, Chicago.

GET OUR FREE SAMPLE CASE—TOILET ARTICLES, PERFUMES AND SPECIALTIES. Wonderfully profitable. LA DERMA CO., Dept. D, St. Louis, Mo.

Agents make larger profits selling well known Ho-Ro-Co Soaps, Perfumes, Toilet Articles. Our lower prices give larger profits. Over 50,000 cans La-Em-Strait Hair Dressing sold last year. HO-RO-CO, 2702 Ho-Ro-Co Bldg., St. Louis, Mo.

MAKE $45 TO $100 WEEKLY—full or part time—and liberal bonus, selling BETTER QUALITY all-wool made-to-measure suits and overcoats. Save $18.50 per suit. No experience necessary. Commissions paid in advance. We furnish handsome large swatch samples and complete instructions FREE. Write today! W. Z. GIBSON, 161 W. Harrison, Dept. H-409, Chicago.

AGENTS: $13.80 DAILY (IN ADVANCE). SPARE TIME WILL DO. Introduce 12 Months Guaranteed Hosiery. 57 styles, 39 colors, for Men, Women, Children; including latest "Silk to the Top" Ladies' Hose. No capital or experience needed. We furnish samples. Silk hose for your own use FREE. NEW PLAN. Macochee Hosiery Co., Road 27021, Cincinnati, O.

DO YOU WANT AGENTS AND SALESMEN TO SELL your merchandise? Men and women who are educated in personal salesmanship and know the house-to-house, office, and store canvassing proposition. These advertisers are getting them year in and year out, and there are thousands more for you among the readers of the Munsey Magazines. Our Classified Service Bureau will gladly show you how to use this section most profitably and at the least cost. Write to-day to the Classified Manager, Munsey Combination, 280 B'way, New York.

HELP WANTED—MALE

EARN $120 TO $250 MONTHLY, EXPENSES PAID, AS RAILWAY TRAFFIC INSPECTOR. WE SECURE POSITION FOR YOU AFTER COMPLETION OF 3 MONTHS' HOME STUDY COURSE OR MONEY REFUNDED; EXCELLENT OPPORTUNITIES. WRITE FOR FREE BOOKLET CM-30. STANDARD BUSINESS TRAINING INST., BUFFALO, N. Y.

MEN—EXPERIENCE UNNECESSARY; travel; make secret investigations; reports; salaries; expenses. Write AMERICAN FOREIGN DETECTIVE AGENCY, 320, St. Louis, Mo.

TAILORING SALESMEN: BEST PROPOSITION. OUR MEN MAKING BIG MONEY. COMMISSIONS ADVANCED, PLUS BONUS. LARGE SAMPLES. OUTFIT FREE. BRIGHTON TAILORING CO., 640 Broadway, New York, Dept. MC.

HELP WANTED—FEMALE

$6—$18 A DOZEN DECORATING PILLOW TOPS AT HOME. EXPERIENCE UNNECESSARY. PARTICULARS FOR STAMP. TAPESTRY PAINT CO., 128, LAGRANGE, IND.

Part-Time Men Get This Suit FREE

Make $45 a Week and up

Cash profits paid in advance

No question about it, any man can easily earn **$45 a week and up,** just showing our wonderful outfit and taking orders for our high-grade tailoring. Never before such low prices and beautiful styles.

Your Own Clothes FREE

To introduce our unbeatable values, classy styles and perfect tailoring, we make this introductory free suit offer—something different, better, bigger, more liberal than any offer ever made.

Handsome Carrying Case Outfit

of large real cloth samples—everything furnished FREE. *Write today for free suit and big money-making offer.*

SPENCER MEAD CO., Wholesale Tailors, Dept. H-708, CHICAGO

To Bachelors

who have suddenly become Husbands

THIS new husband, scarcely more than three pay-days old, took his first bath in the new family tub with the most gorgeous cake of deep-diving soap that ever came out of Paris, Fr., or London, Eng.

It instantly slipped from his clutching digits and dove to the bottom like a frightened frog.

Having promised eternal devotion to the sweet donor of the lovely soap-tablet, he secretly bought himself that cake of Ivory, which he carefully conceals after each bath—in an old tennis shoe. Meanwhile, in the recesses of her dressing-table, the girl-of-his-dreams treasures *her own* secret cake of Ivory for her own baths.

And both of them wonder why that sunset-tinted cake of sinking savon lasts so long!

Have *you* ever thought how important it is to know that when you drop your bath-soap, it will *come* up and *stay* up?

PROCTER & GAMBLE

IVORY SOAP

Where you can find it

99 44/100 % PURE

ARGOSY-ALLSTORY
WEEKLY

VOLUME 188 SATURDAY, AUGUST 13, 1927 NUMBER 3

Bringing the Boom to Vingo

By LORING BRENT

Author of "Vingo's Devil Girl," "Vingo's Benevolent Bloodhounds," etc.

CHAPTER I.

A GIRL WITH AMBER EYES.

THE accommodation train from Jacksonville came clanking into Vingo, depositing on the mail crane a sack of catalogues, and on the station platform a pretty, amber-eyed girl in a sable coat that cost approximately fifteen thousand dollars.

Her amber eyes would be useful to Jane Holly anywhere but, for Vingo, a sable coat was just about as wise an investment as an ice-making plant would be for an Eskimo.

A glimpse sufficed to inform you that she was from the North. The same glimpse sufficed to inform you that Jane Holly was a girl of means and beauty. Her face was impudent and provocative and beautiful, and on sundry chains dangling from one hand she carried an assortment of metallic objects which gave off, when she walked, a sound reminiscent of sleigh bells. These

were of fine gold, and consisted of a cigarette case, a card case, a vanity case, a beaded purse, and a three-ounce flask. You were correct in assuming that the flask, alas, was empty.

All of this and doubtless more you gathered in at one glance, but what that glance could not have told you—or a thousand of its kin—was that this pretty stranger was destined to play in this region of swamps, sunshine, alligators, palm trees and lost hopes the part of fate's ludicrous and pathetic plaything.

Fortunately, or unfortunately, no prophet was at hand. Only one person was a witness to Jane Holly's arrival in Vingo. Old Uncle Dan Vickus was waiting at the railroad crossing for No. 29 to pull out so that he could drive Rat and Rabbit, a pair of mouse-colored and generally useless mules, over into the black muck of Little Cypress Swamp and snake out a load of fence posts.

Uncle Dan stared at the pretty newcomer with pop-eyed amazement and remarked upon her amber eyes, which had that glowing, forceful look commonly associated with people who have missions in life. He had seen no end of beautiful Northerners on the observation platforms of the fast trains which went through Vingo without pausing, but it was the first time in his memory that one of them had disembarked.

As No. 29 tooted and pulled out for Majolica, Uncle Dan wondered what the girl's business might be in Vingo, and laid a thick oak club upon the flanks of Rabbit with a vigor that would have broken an adult male elephant's back, but which caused the mule merely to heave a weary sigh, and to move leisurely forward beside its companion.

The log cart, with its enormous wheels, bumped and rumbled over the shining steel rails, and left the girl in the sable coat to a contemplation of such desolation as she had perhaps never before feasted her amber eyes upon.

Making sure that no eyes this side of heaven were upon her, she at once did a strange and mysterious thing. She opened her beaded bag, and from it she removed a buff-colored object about two inches in length by a half inch in thickness.

This proved to be, on closer inspection, the foot of a rabbit. An expert in such matters would have promptly classified it as the left hind foot of a rabbit.

With another glance about her to make sure that she was not being watched by any other eye save that of her Creator, high above, she lifted the rabbit's foot to her left ear, and rubbed it briskly, thrice, across the lobe. This ritual concluded, she tucked the rabbit's foot away in the beaded bag, and snapped the catch.

"Well," observed Jane Holly, addressing an empty, smoldering universe in the husky, slurring voice which has such a galvanic effect upon some men, "you've got to take a chance."

Most people when they visited Vingo for the first time said, with the intention of being dryly humorous: "So this is Vingo!" and let it go at that. But Jane Holly applied to the vista of desolation the phrase she used oftenest: "You've got to take a chance." She was where she was at this moment because of the reckless abandon with which she took chances.

And considering the circumstances, such philosophy was not unmerited. Passengers passing fleetly through Vingo on the de luxe trains often murmured: "Thank the Lord, I don't have to spend my life in a place like that!"

Sandy ruts led to a low clapboard building a hundred yards away which bore, on one of the large windows, the legend:

VINGO COMMISSARY & P. O.

There was a larger building a short distance from the commissary and here and there in the nearer and farther distance were small houses of cheap construction, all in a state of abandonment and neglect.

Away to the north stretched the blackness of a swamp, which Jane Holly was to learn was Big Cypress, an abode of water moccasins and alligators stretching along the tracks almost as far as the next settlement, Cypress Spoon.

Down to the south lay a smaller mass of blackness, which announced the presence of another swamp. The name of this one was

Little Cypress, and it likewise was the habitation of ill-tempered reptiles and saurians.

Between the two swamps stretched hammock-land, flat, uncultivated and parched; for Vingo was, at the time of Jane Holly's arrival, enjoying a long, devastating drouth. Yonder, to the east, were forests of turpentine pines, romantic and beckoning, and above these glistened a sky as bright as Oriental sapphire, indicating that, just a little way on, the blue Atlantic foamed and tossed.

The sky caused Jane Holly to fill her lungs in a gasp of sheer delight. A brighter, bluer sky she had never dreamed of. It was Vingo's sole redeeming feature.

Little white clouds sailed here and there upon its vast blueness like ships upon an untroubled sea. She gazed up and witnessed a natural phenomenon, which is visible in few places upon earth—a series of rain showers, not one drop of which reached the ground!

At a tremendous altitude, a small white cloud was spilling its moisture in the form of a trailing white veil into another white cloud, which in turn was decanting its contents into still another white cloud, the whole forming a fairy stepladder into infinite blueness, radiant of rainbows.

"Gosh," Jane Holly informed herself in that low, husky voice of hers, "that's pretty grand."

And she withdrew her eyes from the miracle to a consideration of the dreary broomsage in the fenced field across from the Vingo station.

"My Lord!" she muttered, then valorously straightened her slim shoulders. "Well, you've got to take a chance."

As if that self-consolation had renewed her faith, she picked up her two suitcases of pin seal—they were startlingly purple, with silver snaps—and started trudging through the deep sand toward the Vingo commissary.

She paused suddenly and uttered a faint sound of terror. In the precise center of the sandy road a blacksnake lay stretched out, combining the beneficial effects of a sand bath and a sun bath.

In her terror, the girl saw a shining black dragon. It was the first snake she had seen that was not safely housed in plate glass. Later she would gaze upon blacksnakes with indifference and contempt, knowing them to be harmless cowards.

"Scat!" said Jane, but the reptile was loath to abandon that luxurious spot. Its cold green eyes fastened upon her and glittered.

Jane retreated five yards, and stumbled upon the broken handle of a shovel. She picked it up and hurled it.

The blacksnake slithered away with incredible alacrity, and Jane Holly steeled herself against the tide of faintness that swept over her. Then her sense of the dramatic came to the rescue, and she pictured herself relating to her grandchildren, gathered about her knee, her hair-raising adventure with a vicious boa-constrictor in the wilds of the Florida backwoods.

The blacksnake had retired to the safety of the broomsage patch, and was now gazing at the outlander with reproachful green eyes. But Jane Holly was city-wise, and not wilderness-wise. She passed within four yards of the reptile without seeing it, and trudged on toward the commissary, her legs shaking, her body suddenly moist and prickly.

"You've got to take a chance," Jane reiterated stoically.

The commissary, while it reminded her of a fat, blowzy old woman, with its warped, paintless clapboard sides and its sagging corner, where the underpinning had been eaten away by insects and dry rot, was, thank Heaven, inhabited. The interior was in fairly presentable order, although a masculine air prevailed.

A pine counter ran along one side of the long, shallow room, and at the far end was a partition containing a door and a crudely sawed-out window, above which in white letters some painstaking amateur had painted the legend:

P. O. DEPT.

On a thick post near by the same industrious artist had carefully lettered:

PAY ME TO-DAY AND I'LL TRUST YOU TO-MORROW

Still another sign, this one on the wall, bore witness to the possibility that the pres-

ent or some former proprietor of the Vingo commissary had had dealings with customers none too particular about the state of their credit. This one stated:

IN GOD WE TRUST—
ALL OTHERS PAY CASH

Behind the counter were shelves bearing an assortment of well known canned commodities. It was Jane Holly's first glimpse of a backwoods general store, and she examined it with lively interest. Pots, pans, skillets, and even washboilers hung from hooks on the rafters. Rolls of roofing paper were stacked in one corner, spades and picks in another.

At the far end of the counter were a pile of white thick slabs, which Jane was to learn were heavily-salted, unsmoked slabs of bacon, were called white salt bellies, and comprised the main article of diet among the blacks, and the "crackers."

At the other end of the counter was a small glass showcase filled with boxes of five-cent cigars, chewing gum, brilliantly-colored and dangerous-looking candy and, in one corner, a mound of tiny round cardboard boxes. These contained snuff.

Backwoodsmen, Jane was to discover, were carrying on as a minor vice that which had, in bygone days, been deemed a polite gesture. They rolled the snuff into little wads which they packed between lower lip and gum. From this peppery little salivating wad they derived great comfort.

A tall, weary-looking man with curly, brown hair, watery blue eyes, and a red, seamed face came shuffling out of the post office shortly after the screen door had slammed behind the girl in the sable coat. His jowls were dark with a carrot-colored stubble of several days' growth.

Somehow, he was just the kind of man Jane Holly had expected to find in this ramshackle old building.

Buck Henifer had been asleep when the door slammed; he was still heavy with sleep when he arose from the old armchair in the post office and went out into the store, but one glimpse of his visitor was sufficient to jar him to full wakefulness.

Buck Henifer blinked his eyes several times to squeeze the remnants of sleep out of them, and stared as a man might stare who awakes to see an angel sliding down a moonbeam from heaven.

Jane Holly was just depositing her two purple pin seal suitcases on the floor. Now she removed and carelessly tossed upon the counter her fifteen-thousand-dollar sable coat. A tight-fitting black cloche hat followed.

Next she opened one of the jangling golden ornaments which depended from chains, and removed a cigarette. Another golden toy was brought into action. This she deftly manipulated with a pink thumb. Sparks materialized, and a plump golden flame sprung into being.

The flame she touched to the tip of her cigarette; then she clicked shut the gadget from which the flame had arisen. Presently twin jets of scented tobacco smoke were squirting from her nostrils.

Buck Henifer passed an uncertain hand through his thick, molasses-colored locks, and planted his feet firmly on the floor. What he saw was a slim girl in a sky-blue dress that barely reached her knees. Long, slim, beautiful legs reached from the hem of the dress to immature black pumps on which something like diamonds sparkled. He inspected the face and head thoroughly.

It was a slim, flushed, pretty face surmounted by a small mop of ragged black hair standing out in all directions, but mostly forward. He would later be edified to learn that Jane Holly was sponsoring a Raggedy Ann haircut.

The closeness of the haircut revealed the existence of a pair of small, well-formed, shell-pink ears. Golden eyes considered him appraisingly. It occurred to him, poetically, that her smile was bottled sunlight.

He would revise that later to bottled dynamite; but, for the moment, bottled sunlight stood. Small, even, beautiful white teeth set in a frame of slender shining red lips.

"I'm looking for a man named Buck Henifer," said the slim, rapturous vision, rudely blowing a puff of moist incense into his bedazzled face. "The train conductor told me that Buck Henifer could tell me all about Vingo, and I want to know everything there is to know about Vingo."

"I'm Buck Henifer," he managed to say; and she promptly shot a small white hand toward him.

Buck Henifer took it limply in his red, calloused paw. He had seen no end of pictures of this kind of girl in the magazines, had read comments upon her in the press, and heard denunciations of her from the pulpit, via his radio; but she was the first one he had ever beheld in the flesh. He was, accordingly, prepared for anything, from cartwheels to daylight gunplay, but she merely said, in her low, husky voice:

"I'm Jane Holly—New York. Have one?" And opened her cigarette case.

Buck Henifer selected a white tube with a tip of raspberry silk, and managed to hold it steady long enough to get a light from the golden gadget which spurted flame. It was the first perfumed cigarette Buck had ever held in his lips, and he registered the hope that none of the boys would drop in while he was smoking this one.

"I'm a sort of clearin' house for all the gossip hereabouts," he informed her.

"Then you won't mind my asking a lot of foolish questions, Mr. Henifer?"

"Me? Oh, my, no, ma'am; it will be a pleasure and a privilege," Buck assured her in his best society manner.

"The first thing I want to know," said the girl, briskly, "is, is any land around here for sale?"

"There ain't a speck, or a particle, or a square inch o' land anywhere within ten miles of where you're standin'," Buck Henifer replied, "than ain't for sale."

"Then the Florida boom hasn't affected Vingo?" Miss Holly crisply asked.

"As far as the boom is concerned," was Buck's answer, "Vingo might just as well be located in th' heart of Ioway."

"I am," she said gravely, "going to bring the boom to Vingo!"

CHAPTER II.

GETTING A LINE ON VINGO.

BUCK HENIFER waited breathlessly for details. He held his breath until his face seemed to swell.

Jane Holly swung herself lightly to a perch upon the edge of the counter; opened one of her golden gadgets, and industriously powdered her nose. Buck waited with what patience he could command, but it was evident that the pretty Northerner intended to divulge no further details at that moment. So he put it bluntly.

"Who's goin' to do the boomin', Miss Holly?"

"I am."

"You mean—personally?"

"Sure! Personally! Why not?"

"Well," he pondered, "you don't look much like a boomer."

"Give me a chance," was her business-like answer. "Has there ever been a boom in Vingo?"

"There've been several booms in Vingo," he said. "They went 'Boom! Boom!'—and then silence settled down thick and heavy for another ten years."

"What happened?" asked Jane.

"The first boom," he replied, "took place back in the days when Florida was sort o' bein' wrangled over by th' Spanish and the English, or mebbe 'twas the French. Anyhow, a colony o' Yorkshiremen settled down here and started growin' indigo and long staple South Sea Island cotton.

"But there was wars and one thing and another, and there was a fight with the Indians, and what Yorkshiremen didn't get scalped, hot-footed it.

"I don't think much happened in the next hundred years or so," Buck went on. "About fifteen years ago, some Northern capitalists got the bright idea that the land hereabouts ought to be put to some good purpose; so they started a model farmin' community. All these houses you see around here were part o' that community.

"But the management was bad, then along came the war, and all the young fellers beat it off and never came back, somehow or other. And nothin's happened since."

"All these houses empty?" the girl with the husky voice wanted to know.

"Yes'm; all empty. Th' Negroes claim they're all haunted with the sperrits o' the dead, but for practical purposes, they're plumb empty."

"Who owns them?" Jane asked.

"A lady down by Little Cypress, name of Angelica Boggs—Mrs. Boggs. She owns about five thousand acres of land."

Jane Holly was nodding her Raggedy Ann thoughtfully.

"Does the population of Vingo consist entirely of you and Mrs. Angelica Boggs?"

"No, Miss Holly; there's Bill Boggs, her husband and across the tracks, there's twenty Negroes."

Jane Holly glanced at the well-stocked shelves.

"In other words, you're keeping this store going with only twenty-three customers?"

"No, ma'am; there's more to Vingo than meets the nekkid eye. Vingo," he explained, "is a sort of hub, so to speak, of a lot of backwoods industries. If you started out north, south, east, or west, you'd bump into all sorts o' surprisin' things.

"Up to the north are the turpentine stills. To the south there are two coquina rock quarries. To the west, over on the river, are tie camps and lath mills and shingle mills and cracker farms."

"What's a cracker farm?" she asked.

"A cracker," Buck enlightened her, "is what we call a backwoods Florida farmer. Most of them ain't much account, but they make a livin'.

"You mustn't confuse them with Northern folks who come down here with rash idees and don't make a livin'. Well, as I was a-sayin', there's upward of two hundred folks workin' and livin' around about Vingo, and I do a landoffice business on Saturday nights."

"I observe," said Jane, "that you don't care to do much business on credit."

"Ma'am," he replied, "I am mighty skeptical, the older I grow, of what people sometimes laughin'ly call human nature. Besides operatin' this business, I am postmaster, game warden, deputy sheriff, and notary public. I see a lot o' the seamy side o' life."

"Are you, by any chance," Jane laughed, "Vingo's official taximan? I saw a flivver parked out in front, and I am anxious to palaver with the mighty Mrs. Boggs."

"I will gladly and with the greatest pleasure drive you over to Mrs. Boggs's," was Buck's gallant answer. "But I got to wait on this customer first; leastwise, as soon as he gets through admirin' himself in that window."

Jane looked toward the front of the store and beheld a spectacle that caused her eyes to glow.

A man was standing out on the commissary porch, apparently gazing into the commissary. He was attired in leather chaps, Mexican riding boots, with spurs, a blue flannel shirt, with a gorgeous, brilliant bandanna at the throat, while upon his head he wore a large black sombrero.

Completing the picture were a holster and bullet belt at his waist and, in the background, a fuzzy brown horse carrying a Western saddle.

The young man, who was undeniably handsome in a bold, dashing way, was not however, looking into the store, but at his mirrored image in the window pane.

"Tom Mix!" Jane exclaimed.

"No, ma'am," Buck corrected her. "Henry Myrtle." He pronounced it Henrye.

"Myrtle?" Jane repeated huskily.

"I have observed," stated the postmaster, deputy sheriff, game warden, and notary public of Vingo, "that men with weak backs and spindling arms often take up the profession o' prizefightin', and that men with names like Percival, Clarence, and Algernon, gen'rally go a mile out o' their way to be rough, tough, and hard-boiled.

"You Myrtle Hen-rye, and he'll just as apt as not pull out that gun he bears and apply its contents to your wishbone!"

Jane Holly's eyes glowed more brightly.

"Another name for him," she commented, "is Narcissus."

"That's a flower," said Buck Henifer promptly.

"Narcissus," Jane enlightened him, "was a mythological character who fell in love with his own image reflected in a pool of water. He was so fascinated by what he saw that he pined away and died, and the gods changed him into a flower."

"Hen-rye Myrtle will never forget himself long enough to pine away," Buck answered. "It's a tossup just which Hen-rye is fonder of, hisself or his vittals."

The young man on the porch finished adjusting his bandanna. Now his stare underwent a subtle change. He was looking not at the pane of glass but through it, and a bright and vivid crimson at once inflamed his face.

Mr. Myrtle wheeled about and started toward his horse. Halfway to this objective he evidently changed his mind; for again he wheeled about. This maneuver brought him face to face with the screen door. Straightening his shoulders, he strode to the door, and flung it open. He came striding in, and Jane Holly's glistening amber eyes did not for an instant leave his face.

Evidently she found something in it that amused her, for she at once fell to gnawing at her lower lip, a trick she resorted to when it was necessary to restrain gales of laughter.

"Hello, sheriff," the young man got out in a deep, rough voice, after darting an eagle glance at the girl in the sky-blue dress.

It was his way, Jane supposed, of admitting his disturbance. He was going to be very tough.

"I want some grub," he announced.

"Hen-rye," said Buck solemnly, "I want to make you acquainted with Miss Holly, of N'York. Miss Holly, this here is Mr. Myrtle."

Jane, with sparkling eyes, leaned outward from the counter and extended her hand to Cowboy Myrtle. His face was now magenta, and threatened to go completely purple with embarrassment. He took her hand and squeezed it until her knuckles buckled under the strain. Henry Myrtle was a he-man, and he wasn't going to let any doubt remain about it.

"Who is directing you?" Jane asked.

"Directin' me?" the young man repeated dazedly.

"I mean, what picture are you working in?"

"Picture?" mumbled the embarrassed stranger.

"She gets you wrong, Henry," Buck helped out. "She never saw a cowboy before; she thinks you're all dolled up like that for a movin' picture."

Henry Myrtle essayed a smile, and it revealed big, strong, yellow teeth.

"You must be new to these parts, I reckon," he said. "I'm not a picture actor."

"He's a real, sure enough bull whacker," Buck put in.

"A cow-puncher?" Jane gasped. "How thrilling! I never saw one before in my life."

"He's got a big herd of cattle," Buck added.

"I got close on to a thousand head," confirmed Mr. Myrtle.

"Wonders will never cease," Jane commented in an awed voice. "Whoever dreamed of cattle in Florida?"

"Well," said Buck, still solemn, "he ain't exactly a native born cow-puncher. He's only been down here three years."

Mr. Myrtle darted a mean glance at Buck Henifer.

"He hails from Rackensack, New Jersey," Buck elaborated.

"Why," Jane exclaimed, "that makes us next-door neighbors! I'm from New York!"

"And he," growled the Rackensack bull whacker, "hails from Ohio. He isn't any more a native son than I am, 'though he tries to bluff innocent strangers into thinkin' he is. Callin' himself sheriff! Good grief, the last time a cracker stole one o' my cows and I told him to round up the thieves, he turned blue with fright."

"It's a low-down lie," snapped Buck. "Every time one o' your cows wanders off and gets itself lost, you blame some innocent, peaceable cracker."

Mr. Myrtle was looking dreamily at Jane.

"Any time anybody gets fresh with you or steals something of yours, Miss Holly, don't waste your time on Buck. He's so afraid of both ends of a gun that he keeps his twenty-two caliber side arm locked up in that post office safe. If you ever need a strong, protecting right arm, call on me."

"There seems," said Jane, dimpling, "to be a feeling of rivalry between the States of Ohio and New Jersey."

"Well, nothing ever came out of New Jersey, anyhow, but a few pesky mosquitoes," said Buck.

"And nothing ever grew in Ohio but buckeyes," snorted the Rackensack boy. "And what earthly good are buckeyes?"

"They keep the rheumatism away!" snapped Buck. "And that's more'n you can say for New Jersey mosquitoes."

"Is that so!"

"Yes, that's so!"

"Boys, boys," murmured Jane.

"I'd like to know what he came sneakin' down here to Vingo for, anyhow?" Buck growled.

"And I'd like to know what he came sneakin' down here to Vingo for, too?" growled the Rackensack cowboy.

"Why," Jane exclaimed, "because of the glorious opportunities!"

"Runnin' a backwoods store?" sneered Mr. Myrtle.

"Herdin' a flock o' skinny, starvin' cows?" sneered Buck Henifer.

"Let's not quarrel any more," said Jane sweetly, "although I dearly love a good fight. After all, what did I come down here for?"

Buck grumblingly subsided. "I never accused you of being a criminal, hidin' out from the long hand of the law, Miss Holly. Anybody has only to look at you once to know you're a sweet, innocent little lady!"

"If you don't mind my seeming curious," put in the Rackensack cowboy, "you aren't planning to locate here, by any chance, are you, Miss Holly?"

"This sweet little lady"—Buck took the floor—"is down here to boom Vingo. Yessiree, she's goin' to put Vingo on the map. We ain't gone into details yet; but I got a picture in my mind already of fourteen-story hotels, thutty-story skyscrapers, concrete boulevards, and a palm-embowered plaza with Sousa's band playin' in it every night."

"You sure enough going to boom Vingo?" Mr. Myrtle demanded with large-eyed incredulity.

"Such are my modest intentions," Jane admitted.

"You mean your father is," the boy stated.

"Nope; I mean I am."

The look of admiration in the Florida cowboy's eyes deepened.

Without warning he plucked the black sombrero from his thick curls, and lowered it to the floor with a sweeping gesture.

"My services, in any capacity whatsoever, are at your disposal, Miss Holly. You can count on me, fair or foul, through hell and high water."

"You're terribly sweet," Jane thanked him. "And I won't forget. I'm apt to need lots of protection. I usually do."

"I was just gettin' ready to lock up and drive her over to Angelica's," said Buck. "I suppose you want some o' that eatin' tobacco before I close up?"

"Eating tobacco?" exclaimed the cowboy with distaste. "Why, you know I've been off that vile stuff for ages."

"It all depends on how long an age is," Buck retorted. "If an age is since yesterday, then you've been off the vile stuff for just exactly one age."

Henry Myrtle contented himself with one murderous glance, and said:

"All I want is a pack of Camels. I'll get my rations later. Maybe the Boggs 'll let me take pot luck with them."

"All cowboys smoke Camels, don't they?" said Jane innocently.

"All Rackensack cowboys do," muttered Buck. But Mr. Myrtle elected not to hear him.

"I reckon we do, Miss Holly," he agreed. "I've got a little errand over at the Boggs', and I'll trail behind you on my little old cayuse."

"Cayuse," Buck gravely explained, "is Rackensack cowboy for horse."

"He is getting old and feeble," Henry Myrtle pointed out, "and poking fun at us up-and-coming young fellows is about the only diversion he has left."

Buck carried Jane's purple suitcases to the flivver, and deposited them in the tonneau. Then he snapped a padlock on the hasps holding the front door of the commissary, and seated himself beside her.

"What do you think of him?" he asked, as the stuttering vehicle got under way.

"I think he's very amusing," Jane answered. "It must take a great deal of courage to do what he's doing. Is there any money in raising cattle in this country?"

"He about makes ends meet," Buck admitted. "He raises the frames—just the bony skeletons of cattle—then ships the

frames over to Cuba, where they're fattened.

"But it's hard work and full of big risks. The alligators get his calves, and in times o' drought his bulls die off like flies. If it wasn't for the railroad, he'd go out of business."

"You mean, the railroad buys his meat?"

"No, ma'am; I mean he lets the railroad slaughter his meat; then he sets up a howl, and the claim agent pays him so much for every head they kill. It's plumb pitiful sometimes to see how hard that boy works keepin' his cattle on the right o' way when a fast train is comin' along."

"I think you're prejudiced," Jane argued.

"Why not?" said Buck. "I always suspect anybody who comes to Vingo without a clean bill o' health. It's too easy a place for criminals—murderers, bank absconders, and such—to drop off and be lost to sight in. We've had several.

"Once a man loses himself in those jungles back by the river, all the posses in the world can't ferret him out.

"This road we're on now is called the King's Highway. It's nothin' but a pair o' ruts, but if you'll follow it up north you'll find it follows the high, dry land. It was surveyed by the English long before the Revolutionary War as a military road from Charleston, South Car'lina, into Florida.

"You follow it," Buck went on, "down to the Tomoka and across a bridge, and across that bridge you keep on followin' it, and by and by, first thing you know, it just vanishes.

"Down yonder is nothin' but jungles, stretchin' all the way to the St. John's. It's as wild back in there as the day Florida rose up out of the ocean, as they claim it did, ages back.

"You can find panthers and bears in there still. Yes, ma'am, Vingo is a grand place for a wanted man to drop off if he wants to be overlooked by the police."

"You aren't really insinuating that Mr. Myrtle is a wanted man?" Jane protested.

"He's too dog-goned fresh," Buck averred. "And I don't mind tellin' you, he's got his eye on you. He's a born lady killer, and I'm givin' you fair and full warnin'."

"So he's a sheik!" Jane murmured.

"He's a sheik in mail-order catalogue cowboy clothin'," Buck affirmed. "The gals hereabouts are daffy over him. There is a cracker gal down by the river, name of Matilda Benton, who'd carve out her heart for him. I wish you could see that poor gal when Hen-rye is around! My, it's just pathetic!

"Her eyes bug out, and she hangs onto his every word, as if he was a silver-tongued orator like the late William Jennings Bryan. Matilda is pinin' away for that New Jersey bullwhacker, and he treats her like the dirt under his heels."

"Tell me some more about this Lothario," Jane urged. "He interests me peculiarly."

"You watch out for him, ma'am, I'm givin' you fair warnin'. How come he spends his time punchin' cows for a livin' when he's got a classy outfit of dinner clothes? Answer me that!"

"I didn't know he had a classy outfit of dinner clothes," Jane answered.

"He keeps them hangin' up in a closet over at the Boggs's," Buck elucidated. "And every so often he gets himself all dolled up, and goes over to one of the big beach hotels and vamps all the pretty gals in sight."

The black mass of Little Cypress Swamp loomed ahead of them, and Jane saw, almost at the edge of it, a small, immaculate white house with green shutters. In back was the deep, lustrous green of an orange grove.

"Thank you for warning me about Mr. Myrtle," Jane said in her lowest, huskiest tones.

"I always say that forewarned is forearmed," said Buck.

"Indeed it is, and I'll watch my step with that young man," Jane gravely promised. "Now, won't you tell me something about the Boggses?"

"Bill Boggs is the manager and half owner of one of the coquina rock quarries I spoke of a minute or two back," Buck answered. "Angelica came down here on

a visit, and she made a lucky investment in some swamp land back of Miami. She cleaned up on it.

"Some people say Angelica is dumb, and others say she is smarter than a whip and wiser than a treeful of owls. After three years of studyin' her, I can't make up my mind yet. Anyhow, she's worth a pile o' money, and she'll probably drive a hard bargain with you."

Jane Holly looked a little concerned. When Buck parked the flivver beside the neat fence in front of the Boggs's house, she waited until his back was turned. Then, hastily, she removed from her beaded bag the left hind foot of the rabbit.

Thrice, rapidly, she stroked her left ear lobe with the soft hair of the rabbit foot, and completed the ritual by murmuring her favorite phrase:

"You've got to take a chance."

CHAPTER III.

PRICE FIXING.

JANE HOLLY had prepared herself for a grim-visaged woman of about forty-five, with gray-streaked hair and a thin, hard mouth. Consequently, the Angelica Boggs of actuality almost overwhelmed her. Angelica was not more than twenty-four. She had quantities of glorious golden hair, and eyes of a disarming largeness and innocence, which were blue.

"I wondered who you were," Angelica said, after Buck had introduced them. "I saw No. 29 stop, and then I wondered who would be stopping off in Vingo and wearing a sable coat at the same time. I used a pair of opera glasses," she explained.

Jane promptly sided with that faction which believed that Angelica Boggs was beautiful but dumb.

"Miss Holly," Buck was explaining, "is thinkin' of startin' a real-estate boom in Vingo."

"How thrilling!" cried Angelica.

"It can't be done," said Buck.

A tall, slim, good-looking young man in snake boots, riding breeches, and gray flannel shirt appeared in the doorway. He, Jane saw, was as dark as Angelica was blond. His skin was the color of old cordovan leather from tropical suns and winds.

"Who is thinking of starting a boom in Vingo?" he asked cheerily.

"Miss Holly, here," said Angelica enthusiastically. "This is my husband, Miss Holly. Everybody calls him Bill. He's very slow at thinking and moving, because he used to be a dynamite boss; and dynamite men must move slowly or they're apt to be blown to kingdom come.

"Won't you sit down? We'll have lunch served out here on the porch." She raised her voice to shout: "Come right in, Hen-rye. You're just in time for a bite."

"I was hopin' I might be," acknowledged the Rackensack cowboy, who was tying his horse to a fence post. He came sauntering in, with one hand carried negligently on the butt of his Colt.

"You've met Miss Holly, haven't you, Hen-rye?"

"The sheriff, here, gave me that privilege and honor," replied Mr. Myrtle. "Sit down here, won't you, Miss Holly?"

"Here" was a wicker settee with room for two. Jane seated herself beside him, and intercepted a glance from Buck Henifer which said, as plainly as words: "I warned you! He works fast!"

"So you're thinking of starting a boom in Vingo?" Angelica prompted.

Jane nodded.

"I don't see why anybody wants to start a boom in Vingo," put in the cowboy, lighting a cigarette. "You come down on the train or by automobile from Jax, and everywhere you look you see the same thing.

"Why did they start growing potatoes in Hastings? I'd like to know. You can understand St. Augustine, but how in Sam Hill can you explain towns like Spuds, Bunnell, and Hastings? Palatka's got the river, and it was natural to start a sawmill there, with all the pine and cypress around.

"How do you take one of these chunks of hammock land, like Vingo, for instance, which is just like every other chunk of hammock land, and boom it? Also, why? I mean, why Vingo, and not some other piece of land? There's millions of acres of it, all just alike."

"Have you ever seen deep snow?" Buck broke in.

"Sure, I have; we have fine, clean, white, new snow up in New Jersey. It isn't like that dirty, secondhand Ohio snow."

"Well, did you ever take and make a little snowball and then start rollin' it around through that fine, clean, white New Jersey snow?" Buck persisted. "You've noticed it grow, haven't you? You've noticed the longer you roll it around the bigger it gets, haven't you?"

"What's that got to do with boomin' Florida real estate?" the seeker after knowledge demanded.

"For no reason or any reason at all," Buck answered, "one family locates on any one of these millions o' acres that all look alike. Then their relatives and friends move down and build houses there, too. And pretty soon you've got a town like Bunnell, or Spuds, or Hastings. Then there is such a thing as an idee; but those things don't naturally ever occur to you New Jersey boys."

"Both of you are fairly bright," put in Bill Boggs. "A good, ripened, fancy idea could put Vingo on the map. There was a good idea here fifteen years ago, but it didn't have enough blood in it to last long. I used to picture Vingo with a town hall, and hotels and traffic cops, and all the trimmings, but somehow or other, lately, I've seen Vingo just the way Hen-rye sees it. Just so many acres of hammock land that are like a million other acres from one end of Florida to the other."

"It's plain to see," murmured Angelica, "that Vingo needs some new blood. What development company are you representing, Miss Holly?"

Jane would have preferred to listen on and on to these slowly uttered comments on Florida, and on the philosophy generally of cities.

"I only represent myself," she answered, and was aware that four pairs of healthy eyes were watching her with the keenest interest.

"She must have one of these here idees you were speakin' of," Buck guessed.

"Somethin' the rest of you have overlooked," added Mr. Myrtle.

Angelica was frowning. She was looking off over the flat, brown, grassy terrain which she owned; presumably she was wondering what this pretty, extremely youthful girl from the North had up her sleeve.

Jane corrected them sharply.

"I haven't any ideas," she said. "Unless you could call an idea my firm belief that Vingo can be made to boom. They did it with Miami, didn't they?"

"Sure, they did," Buck agreed, "but look at Miami's natural advantages—Biscayne Bay; all that water front; that swell climate. You don't get that kind of climate up here in Vingo, you know."

"Yeah," assented Bill Boggs, "and you don't catch hurricanes either."

"I'm quite sure," said Jane firmly, "that something can be done with Vingo."

Once more they waited with eager anticipation.

"Of course," said Buck, "the little lady isn't goin' to go around spillin' free beans. She says she's here to buy Vingo from Angelica. Any bean spillin' to be done is goin' to be done after the dotted lines are signed. And speakin' o' dotted lines, I brought along contract forms and my notary seal, in case you ladies decide to get down to business."

Angelica was still gazing thoughtfully over the terrain.

"I don't think it would be fair to my best interests," she now spoke up, "to do any dickering until I knew just what was going to happen to Vingo.

"Bill and I—we're fond of Vingo. We don't want to see it spoiled, and we're protected now by owning almost all of the land. For instance, I wouldn't like to see factories going up in Vingo."

"My idea wasn't to put up factories in Vingo," Jane hastily assured her. "No, indeed, that wasn't my idea at all."

Her four listeners waited.

"As a matter of fact," Jane went on, "I haven't any ideas. I—I just decided I'd boom Vingo."

"And you never saw Vingo before?" Angelica exclaimed.

Jane shook her head. "I never even heard of Vingo until five days ago. You see, it happened pretty unexpectedly."

"What was it that happened?" Buck inquired.

"Well," said Jane, "you see, I'm something of a gambler. Yes, you would be quite safe in calling me a gambler. And something happened that made me decide to take a flyer in Florida real estate. So I bought a big map of Florida, and shut my eyes, and made a jab in the dark with my fountain pen. And when I opened my eyes, the point of the pen had speared Vingo."

The four listeners seemed entranced.

It was Buck who first recovered.

"You ain't kiddin' us, are you, Miss Holly?"

"Not I. No kidding during business hours. I'll run the risk of getting a big laugh by telling you some more. I said I was a gambler. I am.

"Believe me or not, I'm the luckiest person any of you ever met. I can't lose. Three months ago I came into the possession of a—well, let's call it a luck piece. I was told to try my luck with it. I did. I started playing the stock market."

"Did it work?" Buck gasped.

"I'll tell the star-spangled universe it worked! I was working at the time as the private secretary to a commission man. I had a hundred dollars saved up. I plunged, and came out with five hundred. I took another dip, and emerged with almost two thousand. Everything I picked was a winner. My bank roll grew and grew—like Buck's snowball."

Twenty questions were shot at Jane Holly in less than three seconds.

"My luck piece? I won't tell what it is. All I'll tell you is that I have great faith in it. A savage gave it to me. I mean, a savage. She was as black as midnight, and fresh from the heart of Africa. I ran across her in an employment agency while I was picking out a janitor for my boss. I took a fancy to her looks.

"Golly, she was wild-looking! I got the poor thing a job scrubbing floors, and she was so overwhelmed with gratitude that she gave me—my luck piece, or my charm, or whatever you want to call it. Voodoo stuff. I'm not looking any gift horse in the mouth. It worked too darned well.

"How did I pick the stocks to play? The same way I picked Vingo! Every morning I opened my *World* to the financial page, and shut my eyes, and jabbed with a fork, or a fountain pen, or anything that had a sharp point.

"Whatever it landed on, I played. I couldn't go wrong. I suddenly decided to try my luck with Florida real estate. If the price is right, I'll work my lucky charm on Vingo. What's the price?"

Angelica Boggs looked more thoughtful than ever; there was a strange, dancing light in her husband's eyes. She glanced at him.

"Miss Holly, will you excuse Bill and me a moment while we talk it over?" Angelica wanted to know. "It's all so unexpected."

"Take your time," said Jane. "I'm going out in back and look at those oranges. I've never seen an orange actually growing on a tree, and it's going to be a real thrill."

She sprang up and started down the steps.

"I'll go along," announced the Rackensack cowboy. "I reckon you-all don't need me in this conference."

"It's jest wonderful," Buck sneered, "the way that New Jersey boy has picked up the Florida dialect, with his 'I reckons' and 'you-alls.'"

"Being able to learn anything," the cowboy retorted, "is a sight better than just rotting on the vine. Come on along, Miss Holly; I'll show you my own particular tree that will make your eyes stand right out of your head. I cultivated it myself in my spare moments, and it has everything growing on it but doorknobs."

Jane and Mr. Myrtle started down the path to the orange grove.

Bill Boggs glanced first at his wife, and then at Buck. The strange dancing look was still retained by his eyes.

"Did you ever see such a get-up in your life?" he wanted to know.

"She's just modern," Buck defended the absent one.

"What are all those doo-funnies she carries danglin' on her hand?" asked Bill Boggs.

"One's a cigarette case, another's a ciga-

rette lighter, another contains nose-powderin' materials, and the rest have me guessin'," said Buck. "But, down underneath it all, she has a heart of gold. And on top of it all she's got loads of S. A."

"What in Sam Hill," queried Bill Boggs, "is S. A.?"

"S. A.," Buck enlightened him, "is sex appeal."

"Now, you look here, Buck Henifer," growled the dynamite man, "I won't stand for that obscene talk."

"'Tain't obscene to talk about them things any more,' Buck retaliated. "Everybody's doin' it. How do you like that haircut of hers, Angy?"

"It's cute," said Angelica. "She's a cute girl even if she is a flapper. She has adorable legs, although I suppose you men didn't notice th .."

"My, no!" Buck exclaimed. "We didn't even know she had legs."

"Do you believe that story?" Angelica asked in a faint, troubled voice. "I mean about her luck and her gambling and all?"

"She has me guessin'," declared Buck.

"That girl," announced Bill, who had had ample time to think things out, "is a slick article."

"Maybe there's oil under Vingo," Angelica added.

"There is no oil under Vingo," stated her husband emphatically. "This is not an oil country. We've been all over that, honey."

"Maybe there's gold," Angelica suggested.

"Nope. It isn't an oil or a metal country. There's nothing here but Vingo, and it's just like Henry said: Vingo is like a thousand other patches of Florida. This girl's got something up her sleeve, but it ain't oil and it ain't metal. Somebody's probably tipped her off to something.

"Well, we've been here going on five years, Angy, and nobody's tipped us off to anything. I'd say sell. Put a good stiff price on it—and be thankful to get it off your hands.

"Put all the restrictions you want in the contract," he added hastily as the familiar little frown, which he knew was the beginning of doubt or a protest, formed between Angelica's large, innocent blue eyes. "And the contract will be the kind by which the land reverts to you in case time payments are not met. No matter how sound her scheme is, she won't pay all cash. I wouldn't take any less than a third down, though."

"I don't want to sell this house," Angelica demurred.

"Very well, honey. Hold out what land you want for ourselves. I'll get a pencil and paper, and we'll make a list of restrictions and exceptions."

"How much," said Angelica doubtfully, "shall I ask?"

"You own, roughly, two thousand acres. It's worth about twenty an acre. Supposing you ask fifty. That's a hundred thousand bucks. If she's keen to buy, she'll offer you half of that, or fifty thousand.

"Agree to split the difference. That brings it to seventy-five thousand, and if you can get that out of her you'll be making better than a thousand per cent on your original investment. I would call that fair enough, wouldn't you, Buck?"

"I would call it highway robbery," Buck answered, "if you can get away with it. But she's a smart one. They don't come smarter."

"If we can't get seventy-five, we'll take fifty," said Bill, "and if we can't get fifty, we'll take what we can get. All set, honey?"

"I think so," said Angelica tremulously. "I'm to ask one hundred thousand, and if she offers fifty, I'll say we'll split the difference—or take what I can get?"

"Be businesslike," her husband warned her. "She's foxy."

"That sable coat of hers would fit me perfectly," murmured Angelica with true feminine irrelevance.

CHAPTER IV.

A PERFECT DIFFERENCE.

JANE and the Rackensack cow-puncher were meanwhile strolling toward the end of the orange grove.

"The way orange testers, buying for the market, judge the fruit," he was explaining to her, "is to pick an orange and cut it like this." Demonstrating, he plucked a ripe

orange from a branch and, with his pocket-knife, cut deeply into it, twisted the blade and removed a core perhaps two inches long by a half inch in diameter.

"Squeeze the orange and suck the juice," he instructed.

Jane sucked the orange, and found it warm and juicy.

"Now you throw it away," he went on, "and test another."

"It seems so wasteful," Jane protested.

"You may have noticed," said the young man, "that that orange had a slightly sharp taste, although it is as ripe as it will ever become. That means that this soil is not so good. Oranges don't grow very well on this soil. You weren't thinking of growing oranges here, were you?"

"No," Jane admitted, "I wasn't."

"I'll treat anything you want to tell me in absolute confidence," he told her.

"But," Jane laughed, "I haven't a single confidential thing to tell you."

"You mean, that story about your luck piece is on the level?" he demanded.

She nodded vigorously, looking up at him.

"You're going to try to start a boom in Vingo with a charm?" he cried. "No kidding?"

Again Jane nodded.

"Well, you certainly have a lot of courage—or something," he muttered.

"Don't you believe in luck, Mr. Myrtle?"

"Sure I do, Miss Holly; but not in lucky charms. That's voodoo stuff. Then, of course, I'm not the least bit superstitious. Now, here's that tree I was telling you about. I'll bet you never saw a tree like it before in your life."

They had stopped at a low tree. It was, in fact, hardly more than a bush. At first glance, it looked like any other small orange tree; but as Jane gazed at it, her amazement grew.

"There are seven different species of oranges growing on that tree—ranging from a tangerine to an Indian River. That funny-looking one is a King orange. It's done by grafting branches from the trees of the different species."

"Lemons!" Jane exclaimed.

"Yes, and those big ones that look like grapefruit are lemons, too—ponderosa lemons, they call 'em. And back of them are grapefruit. When I'm not ridin' herd, I'm fussin' around with something like this. I like to fuss around."

He looked down at her. The young man was quite pale, and there was that in his eyes which Jane Holly, who was well versed in the subject of men, had come to classify as the hunting look.

"I wouldn't mind fussing around you," the Rackensack bullwhacker admitted frankly.

"No?" said Jane in her low, husky voice.

"I like your looks a lot," the bold youth continued.

"Yes?" said Jane in a voice still lower and huskier.

"The minute I laid eyes on you," the cowboy eagerly went on, "I said to myself: 'There's one cute chicken.'"

"Chicken?" Jane repeated.

"Sure!" he said, gruffly. "One cute chicken. You're just the girl I've been looking for to play around with. If you're going to locate around here, we're going to see a lot of each other, and I don't mean maybe! Honest, I could kiss you right this minute. You are certainly one cute little chicken."

"If you call me a chicken once more," Jane warned him, "I am going to hurl a ponderosa lemon at you. I am not a chicken, and you had better get that straight in your head."

"All right, kid; no offense meant," he airily apologized. "Listen; there's going to be a dance to-night over at the Majolica Beach Hotel. Bill and Angelica are going. Let's all go over together. I'll bet you can dance like a streak."

"I manage to wiggle along," said Jane modestly.

"I shake a pretty mean hoof myself," said Mr. Myrtle, not so modestly.

"You would," said Jane artlessly.

He glanced at her suspiciously. "Is that sarcasm?"

She gazed up at him with big, round, innocent amber eyes. "Gracious, no! You tall, handsome men all dance beautifully."

"I'll bet you've known a lot of men," he growled.

"Well," Jane admitted, "I haven't hidden myself away in dark corners trying to avoid them."

The Rackensack cowboy considered her thoughtfully for a few seconds.

"You're a pretty cool proposition," he decided, "and you're hard-boiled. Well, I'm just twice as hard-boiled."

"I'm glad we understand each other so well," said Jane sweetly.

"You're a wise baby," he complimented her, "and you're not spoofing me for a minute. You've got brains, you've got the looks, and you've got class, and when you're ready to spill the beans, I'm back of you to the limit."

Jane seemed puzzled. "What beans?"

"What you've got up your sleeve about Vingo. Aw, come on. Stop playing this innocent stuff, kid. It's just like you were saying; we understand each other perfectly."

"But I haven't any schemes or plans or secrets—or anything up my sleeve," she protested. "Honestly!"

"Applesauce," he said jovially, and took her by the arm. "You've got the skin I love to touch," he added, as they started back toward the house.

For a moment Jane thought he was going to kiss her; but evidently he thought better of it. He was looking down at her in puzzlement.

"You're a deep one, and I hand it to you," he said. "Well, I wasn't born yesterday. You can fool these hicks, but you've got to get up mighty early in the morning to find dust on me, Jane. You don't mind if I call you by your front name, do you?"

"Why, no," said Jane, "I don't object, if it will make you happy."

"You can call me Harry if you want to."

"Thank you," said Jane gratefully.

"You know," the cow-puncher proceeded, "you've got me guessing. There's nothing I wouldn't do for a girl like you. You don't mind my frankness, do you?"

"Goodness, no. Be just as frank as you like. Of course, we've got to draw the line somewhere."

"All I was going to say," Mr. Myrtle went on, "is that you have made a big hit with me. How old are you, Jane?"

"I was twenty last month," Jane told him with childlike simplicity.

"That's fine," he cried. "I'm twenty-four. I think four years is just about the right difference in ages, don't you?"

"Yes," Jane agreed. "I think four years is a perfectly lovely difference."

His gaze was troubled. "I hope you aren't kidding me, Jane. You've certainly got me guessing. I'm one of these men who speak right out. I don't beat about the bush. If I want to say a thing, I say it. Remember, kid, I'm with you to the last ditch. My gun, as we cowboys say, is at your disposal, ma'am."

They were approaching the veranda.

"Would you mind going on ahead?" Jane asked him. "I want to pause here just a second and do some concentrating."

"You can talk it over with me if you want to," the cowboy urged.

"Thank you, but I'd rather worry it out by myself."

Mr. Myrtle went on, and left her standing in the path alone. At Jane's feet was a bed of dahlias in full bloom. Never in her life, had she seen such large, such perfect dahlias. They were of all colors, deep red, pink, pale yellow, deep yellow.

She gazed at them dreamily as she opened her beaded bag, and removed from it the left hind foot of the rabbit. Thrice she stroked the lobe of her left ear with the charm; then she drew a deep breath, and walked briskly to the veranda, where Buck Henifer, Bill Boggs, Angelica, and the Rackensack cowboy were waiting for her.

CHAPTER V.

DOWN TO BUSINESS.

"IF you will walk to the front of the porch," Angelica said, "you can get a fair idea of the property I own, but before we get down to real business, I suppose you will want to have a survey made, and have the title searched and so on."

"I don't believe that that will be necessary," said Jane. "I'll take your word for it."

"The title," Bill Boggs put in, "goes way back to the original land grant by

King George III. It's as clear as a crystal, and as spotless as the reputation of a day-old baby."

They walked to the end of the veranda. About halfway to the railroad station was a large bungalow of golden coquina rock with a roof of red tile.

"That," Angelica explained, "was the administration office of the old Vingo Development Company. It's still in pretty good repair, and is arranged so that you can use it for an office and living quarters.

"There's a bedroom, sitting room, and bath upstairs, and downstairs is a big office. It will need some fixing up, but not much. I suppose you'll want to live there."

"I suppose so," Jane agreed.

"My property," Angelica went on, "runs as far as that black swamp you see way up yonder. That's Big Cypress. In the other direction, it takes in Little Cypress Swamp, and goes on down to the line of the two rock quarries. It really forms a rough oblong."

"Does it take in all those tumbledown cottages?" Jane wanted to know.

"It takes in all that land with the exception of Mr. Henifer's store and cottage. He owns those. And it runs right down to the river. All told, there's a little more than two thousand acres."

"It sounds like a lot of land," said Jane artlessly, and four pairs of eyes examined her keenly.

"If you want to drive around and look it over, Bill will get his car out."

"It isn't necessary," said Jane.

"Of course," Bill Boggs put in, "you can make your purchase contingent on a survey. You'll want to do that to protect yourself, naturally."

"Naturally," Jane murmured.

"How much do you want for Vingo?" she briskly asked.

Angelica frowned. She darted a glance at her husband, but Bill Boggs was busy looking off toward the railroad station.

"Well, you see," Angelica began in a voice that sounded a little flustered, "there are two thousand acres. And considering the way land all over Florida is increasing by leaps and bounds, I thought a price of fifty dollars an acre was reasonable."

"Fifty an acre," Jane repeated thoughtfully.

"Land that sold for fifty an acre in Miami is now selling for as much as a quarter of a million," Angelica hastily added.

"As much as that?" Jane breathed.

"More!" Angelica gasped.

"Let's see," said Jane. "Fifty an acre for two thousand acres. Why, that's a hundred thousand dollars, isn't it?"

"A hundred thousand, even," Angelica panted.

"And cheap at the price," Bill Boggs spoke up, "considering what you're planning to do with it."

"You ought to clean up a million," interjected Buck Henifer.

"Easy," added the Rackensack cowboy.

Jane Holly looked gravely from one to the other.

"Do you really think so?" she asked.

"Yes, ma'am," Bill Boggs said energetically, "a hundred thousand is a low price for all this land."

"Well, I think so, too," Jane decided. "I think a hundred thousand is a very fair price. I—I'll buy it."

Four pairs of eyes stared at her unbelievingly. They watched the mystery girl seat herself at a little table, open her beaded purse, and remove from it a tiny, folded check book and a diminutive fountain pen mounted with gold. She unscrewed the cap from the pen, opened the check book, and looked up.

"This is the seventeenth, isn't it?" she asked.

"Yes, ma'am," said Buck in a hoarse whisper, "this is the seventeenth. But you ain't—"

He stopped, with bulging eyes.

Jane Holly was writing in a firm, round, girlish hand.

Once more she looked up. "You spell Boggs with two g's, don't you?" she inquired.

Angelica mutely nodded. She was so pale that she appeared to be on the verge of fainting.

Jane finished writing the check. Carefully, with a steady hand, she tore it out of the tiny book. She stood up, waving it gently about.

The Rackensack bullwhacker was the first to recover from his stunned astonishment. He read the figure on the check.

"For the luvva Mike," he blurted, "you made it out for a hundred thousand!"

"Why not?" said Jane. "Wasn't that the price we agreed on? Now can we sign the papers and so on?"

Bill Boggs was scratching his head in bewilderment. Now a crafty look came into his eyes.

"Say, look here," he burst out roughly, "you can't put anything over on us like that!"

Jane looked frightened. "Have I offended anybody?" she gasped. "Have I done something wrong? I didn't intend to put anything over on anybody. I'm just buying Vingo. That's all. This check is perfectly good. You can wait for it to go through, if you wish."

Her very innocence, her large starry eyes, made Bill Boggs even more skeptical.

"There are a whole lot of details to be settled before any papers are signed," he gruffly informed her. "For instance, this house and the land that goes with it—ten acres all told—don't go with the rest of Vingo."

"Oh, I took that for granted," Jane assured him.

"And what's more," Bill Boggs rushed on, "it's got to be distinctly understood that the right of way for my spur—that's my little railroad running up from the quarry to the main line siding—isn't going to be interfered with. That spur's my only outlet for rock, and if that was cut off—"

"Why, that's quite all right with me," Jane reassured him. "I hadn't the slightest intention of interfering with the right of way of your little railroad."

Bill Boggs stared at her with an air of bafflement.

"Then there's restrictions to be gone into," he said. "For one thing, you can't have Negroes on this side of the track. This is the white side, and that's the black side. It's always been that way, and we want it to stay that way."

"That strikes me as a very sound idea," Jane agreed.

"We'll incorporate all that into the contract," the dynamite man said uneasily.

"It ain't goin' to be a contract," Buck pointed out. "This is an outright cash sale. All you are goin' to need for the transaction is a bill o' sale."

"Put it into the bill of sale," said Bill Boggs grimly. "And another thing is the restrictions on what you're goin' to do with Vingo. We don't want a lot of furriners overrunnin' the place."

"All right. Incorporate that into the bill of sale," Jane acquiesced. "No one will be permitted to live in Vingo but Nordic blondes."

"Colored folks ain't Nordic blondes," Buck broke in.

"It's all right with me," said Bill, "as long as the ones who ain't Nordic blondes stay on the black side of the main line."

"Put that into the list of restrictions," said Jane.

And still Bill Boggs's suspicions remained unallayed.

"And there are to be no factories," he said.

"No factories," Jane agreed. "Put all those things into the bill of sale."

"It seems like to me," Buck drawled, "that you've overlooked one mighty important restriction, Bill."

"What one's that?" Bill snapped.

"Well, in case the little lady, with all these restrictions on her, manages to find a way to make a little money, you're goin' to write it in the bill o' sale that she forfeits the land, ain't you?"

"You needn't be sarcastic," Bill retorted. "I hate to be rushed this way, and you know it."

"I sometimes forgit," Buck admitted, "that you're a dynamite, and have to move slow for fear you'll be blown sky high."

"You draw up that rough form, Buck," Bill requested, ignoring Buck's attempt at being funny, "and we'll sign it. But it will only be a temporary instrument. I think Angelica ought to consult a lawyer."

"I don't," Angelica promptly decided. "There are plenty of restrictions and exceptions already."

"There sure are," emphasized the Rackensack cowboy. "After all, you've got to

leave the kid a chance to make some money on her investment."

Buck Henifer, for the next ten minutes, drew up the bill of sale, and a deed, whereby the acreage of Vingo, with certain specified reservations, was sold to one Jane Elizabeth Holly. There was silence while he did this, broken only by the scratching of the fountain pen in his hand, and the whispering of the soft, warm Florida wind in the orange grove.

Jane glanced over the papers, and pronounced them satisfactory. Angelica read them more thoroughly. Their signatures were affixed to the documents, also those of witnesses, whereupon Buck sealed the transaction with his notary public seal.

Four expectant pairs of eyes were now leveled upon Jane Holly.

She said nothing.

"Well," Buck drawled, "now that you own Vingo, what are you goin' to do with it?"

Jane looked from face to face as if seeking an inspiration. She met only glistening, curious eyes.

"Well," she answered, "I think I'll walk over to the bungalow and see what repairs it needs."

"We mean," said the Rackensack bullwhacker eagerly, "what are you goin' to do with Vingo? What you got up your sleeve, Jane?"

"To be perfectly frank," Jane replied, "I haven't decided."

Angelica looked at Bill; Bill looked at Buck; Buck looked at Henry; and Henry, in turn, looked at Angelica. They didn't seem to be getting anywhere with this baffling girl. Obviously, she wasn't revealing her plans—yet.

"Well," Angelica finally spoke in a disappointed voice, "of course we'll want you to stay with us until you're all ready to move into the bungalow, Miss Holly. As a matter of fact, I don't know but what it would be a good plan for you to stay with us right along. I don't like the idea of your living over there all alone. You were planning to live alone, weren't you?"

"Why, yes, I was," Jane admitted.

"Well, you can decide that later," Angelica suggested. "In the meantime, Bill —carry Miss Holly's things up to the spare bedroom."

"I've got to ride up to Cypress Spoon," the cowboy announced, "but I'll be back in time for supper. I thought I heard somebody say something about lunch awhile ago."

"We'll have it right away," Angelica promised.

"I've got another little suggestion to make," said Mr. Myrtle. "Seeing as how you've got Vingo off your hands at a fair price, Angy, I sort of figure that it's up to you to swing a little bender for all hands. Supposin' we get all decked out in our soup and fish, and drive down to the Majolica Beach Hotel to-night?"

"I'll treat the whole crowd!" Angelica cried.

"Count me out," growled Buck. "My tuxedo fell a prey to the moths last summer, and besides I hate those gilded, glitterin' temples o' sin over there.

"I'll spend the evenin' at home on my front porch, thank you, thinkin' over the perversities of human nature in general and the spongin' characteristics of the New Jersey breed of cowboy in particular. So long, folks. I got to get the mail ready for No. 30."

"I'll ride with you as far as the bungalow," said Jane, springing up. "I'm not the least bit hungry."

Angelica, Bill Boggs, and Henry Myrtle watched them go down the path and climb into Buck's ancient flivver, waited until it began to shimmy and clatter.

"Dumb—but happy," stated the Rackensack cowboy succinctly.

Bill Boggs looked at him thoughtfully.

"Don't you believe it for a minute. That girl is a slick proposition."

"Slick?" Mr. Myrtle bleated. "Takin' your askin' price for this no-account deserted village, and payin' spot cash?"

"You just don't see through her, if you believe that, Harry. She's got something up her sleeve that's going to make her millions out of this no-account deserted village. What's a few thousand dollars one way or the other to her? She'd be willin' to pay that to make sure we'd treat her friendly."

And in Buck's flivver, over and above the chattering, clanking, and stuttering of that worn old mechanism, he was saying:

"Miss Holly, I reckon I don't need to tell you that I'm the kind of man people bring their troubles to. What anybody tells me I keep like it was a sacred trust. You can pour out your little heart to me, ma'am, and have no fear of the consequences. I'm here to help you in any way, shape, form, or manner whatsomever. In two little words—what's up?"

"I haven't decided," Jane reiterated. "But when my plans are fully formed, I'll let you know."

"You're as smart as a whip," said Buck, "and any time you need a good bookkeeper, let me know, because the commissary business ain't what it used to be, and I need a change."

"I will count on you," Jane promised, as she alighted at the weed-grown little path that ran up to the bungalow.

"If she ain't the smartest thing that's hit this place in a long, long time," Buck took counsel with himself as he drove off, "then I'm a pink-whiskered, wall-eyed Chinaman!"

On the Boggs's veranda, where luncheon was being served, the same sentiments were being uttered.

"When she gets ready to let us in on what she's up to," Bill Boggs was saying, "it's going to be something worth listening to; what *I* mean."

"You all may've noticed," put in the Rackensack cowboy, "that Jane Holly has got big eyes, medium-sized ears, and a little mouth."

Angelica Boggs made no comments. Less than one minute after the new owner of Vingo had departed with Buck, Angelica had tried on the sable coat, had found that it fit her perfectly. Her eyes, now, were full of wistful dreams.

Jane Holly was, at the moment, standing on the threshold of the administrator's bungalow, gazing with large bright eyes at dust and huge cobwebs. Doubt momentarily assailed her, shadowed the brightness of her beautiful eyes as if a cloud, a dark, impenetrable cloud, had hovered over her spirit.

Then, determinedly, she opened her beaded purse and extracted from it the left hind foot of the rabbit. She caressed the lobe of her left ear with it three times.

"You've got to take a chance," said Jane Holly, completing the sacred ritual.

TO BE CONTINUED NEXT WEEK

ʊ ʊ ʊ

BROKE

SUMMER was short, mourned Marie,
There were so many places to go;
It came and was gone like a flash,
Or the first fall of feathery snow.

Summer was short, sighed Don Juan,
Bright nights were too painfully few;
There were so many ladies to love
One in ten was the best I could do.

Summer was short, wailed mine host,
The picture of great discontent;
My profits, believe it or not,
Were barely one hundred per cent.

Summer was short. All concerned
On this allegation agree;
And here I would rise to remark
That summer had nothing on me!

Edward W. Barnard.

The Stolen Plane

By RICHARD HOWELLS WATKINS

Author of "Winging Through."

A NOVELETTE—COMPLETE IN THIS ISSUE

PHIL LATHROP and I had not been in his little workshop beside the hangar more than five minutes, when he leaped convulsively to his feet. An expression of consternation flashed across his face as he rushed toward the door. To my ears, too, had come the sudden roar from the motor of the little one-seater Spad that he had left warming up on the field. I sprinted after him.

Lathrop's biplane was moving. The whirling propeller swept toward us a blinding cloud of dust. My blinking eyes caught a glimpse of the back of a tan helmeted head protruding from the cockpit.

Phil Lathrop dashed toward the plane with an angry shout. The machine was already moving faster than he could run. It shot across the field. I stopped in my tracks to watch it expectantly. A gusty wind was sweeping across the path of the take-off. There was no room on the field to turn into the wind. It looked like a crash to me.

But the man in the cockpit lifted his stolen ship into the air and headed up-wind as easily as if he were flying straight into a gentle breeze.

The thief, whoever he was, was a pilot of no mean skill.

Once off the ground he circled the field with calm assurance, and then shot off to the eastward, down Long Island. Helplessly we craned our necks at him as the plane, flying low, faded into a black dot and then vanished.

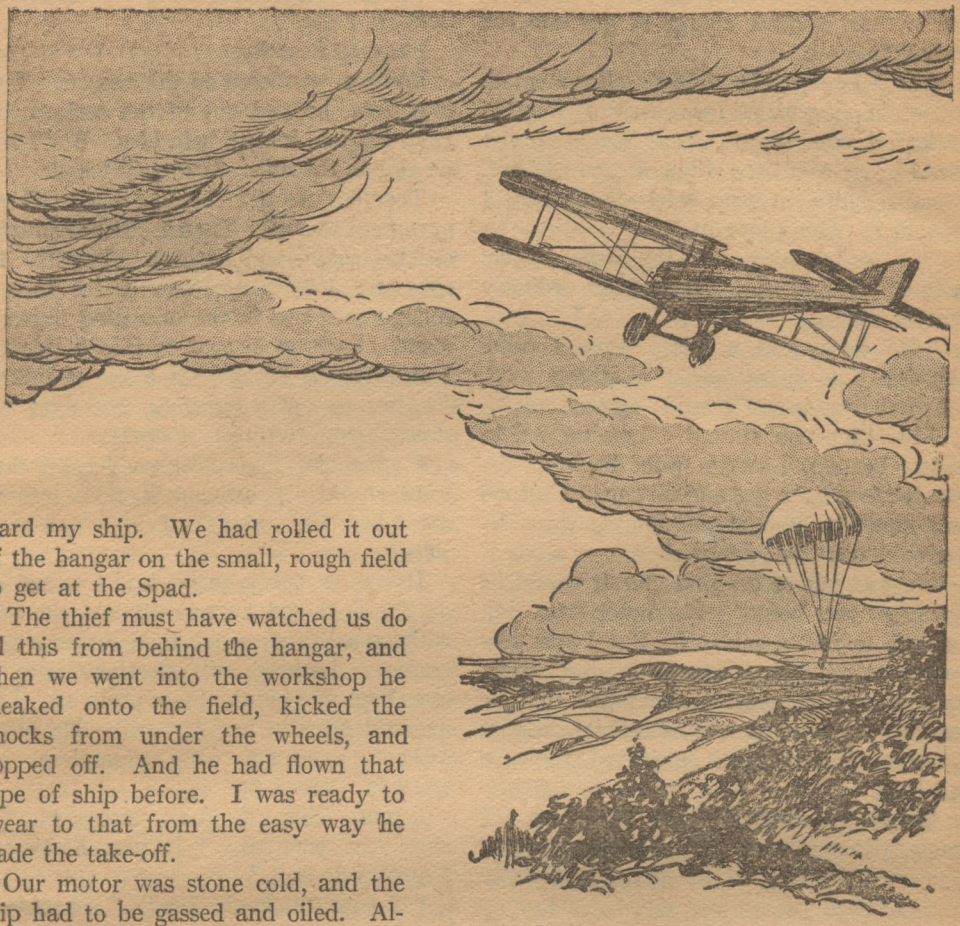
"If I catch—" Lathrop began, and then broke off to race back to the shack. I ran with him as far as the door, but when he caught up the telephone I halted.

Viewing his intent, wrathful face, I felt I would not care to be the thief if Lathrop ever got his hands on him. He was a big man, Lathrop, so big that he more than filled the cockpit of the Spad, and a year in the army air service and half a dozen in commercial flying had somewhat lightened his regard for human life—his own or any one else's.

"Want to chase?" I asked. "He'll do three miles to our two, but—"

"Yes," snapped Lathrop. "We'll have a go at it. Better than standing still."

I left him reporting the theft to the Nassau County authorities, and sprinted to-



ward my ship. We had rolled it out of the hangar on the small, rough field to get at the Spad.

The thief must have watched us do all this from behind the hangar, and when we went into the workshop he sneaked onto the field, kicked the chocks from under the wheels, and hopped off. And he had flown that type of ship before. I was ready to swear to that from the easy way he made the take-off.

Our motor was stone cold, and the ship had to be gassed and oiled. Already the thief in the Spad had put miles behind him. It seemed hopeless, but I could guess how Lathrop yearned for action.

As I primed the motor and toiled at the propeller, I wished heartily that Knowles, Lathrop's only mech, was here to help us. Being broke, I had no mech of my own, but Knowles was always ready to give me a hand.

He was a tall, taciturn, and rather fragile sort of man, whose experience in the war had left him badly shot up. But despite this, he could make a motor sing, and he could line up a ship so that it would fly itself indefinitely.

Lathrop soon joined me. Though an engineer, he too was somewhat lacking as a practical mech, so his help didn't speed things up much.

"No use rushing our heads off," he muttered, as he pulled over the propeller for another try. "That fellow can't get away with it. All the fields will be warned. There aren't many of those war Spads left in this country. Contact?"

He snapped the stick over the compression point, but the motor wouldn't even sputter. Our pursuit was becoming ridiculous. Nevertheless, we persevered.

"Think he stole it because of your new synchronizing gear?" I asked.

My friend is the inventor of a simplified and surer method of firing machine-gun bullets through the sweep of the propeller. On this field, in the midst of a big, abandoned estate soon to be chopped into building lots, he had been able to experiment in privacy and without danger of shooting up any one. The thief had taken advantage of the solitude.

Lathrop shook his head with emphasis as he drew another charge of gas into the cylinders.

"Hell, no! The thing's all patented. What the man wanted was a ship. Why he picked a one-seater pursuit plane of war vintage out of all the ships on Long Island, I can't figure. Cheap ship—that's why I bought it. Get a look at him?"

"I saw nothing but the back of his helmet," I replied. "It was an ordinary leather affair."

"He ducked in a hurry when I came through the dust cloud," Lathrop said. "Switch her on. I'll try it again."

This time she started. Leaving me to warm her up, Lathrop went back to the hangar to get the gas and oil cans. I turned and saw him stop at the door to stare dejectedly into the empty shed.

He was taking his time, for it would be minutes yet before the motor was hot enough to risk a take-off. But I was surprised to see him rummage around inside, and then walk over to the shack that he used as a workshop and occasional sleeping quarters. There was a perplexed frown on his face.

When he emerged from the shack he came right toward the cockpit, gasoline forgotten, holding a bit of mud carefully in his hands.

"Look here!" he said, more excited now than when he had telephoned the alarm. "Dropped off somebody's shoe. Fresh mud. Found it in the sleeping compartment. The thief was there, too. We have not been in to-day."

"That's right," I said.

"Nothing gone, though, as far as I could see," he muttered, frowning again. "He got into the hangar by cutting the putty out around a pane of glass near the window lock. Swiped Knowles's dungarees and helmet. And he must have been in the hangar quite awhile before we got here, for he changed a tire on the bus. The old tube's there on the bench."

"Methodical sort of crook," I commented. "How about that gas and oil? Motor's about set."

"Wish I'd told Knowles to come down to-day," he growled. "Knowles is no fool. He wouldn't have left the ship idling on the field, as I did."

I agreed heartily.

Lathrop wandered to the hangar. I got impatient, hopped out of the cockpit, and went back to him to help him. But I kept an eye on the ship. It was all I had.

Together we got the fuel tank full and gave her some oil. Then I climbed into the cockpit again, and Lathrop followed. My ship is a four seater, two in the forward cockpit and two in the operating compartment. Lathrop elected to ride beside me. I gathered he wanted some one to talk to, for he was still scowling, his eyes half shut, and muttering to himself.

I gave him the cold shoulder. I don't want any one pouring deductions into my ear when I'm taking off in a tail-heavy ship.

It was certainly gusty, but I taxied out on the field and hopped off into the wind without anything worse than rather a hard bounce. Lathrop left me alone until I'd put about five hundred feet under us. Then he suddenly clutched my arm. He turned a countenance at once triumphant and wrathful toward me.

"John Clive, I know who took that ship," he shouted. "It was Knowles—Knowles himself."

"You're soft in the head," I roared back severely.

I was busy taking off my right arm some of the strain of holding the ship. As soon as I'd finished adjusting the tail control wheel, I went on:

"Knowles is no crook. He's a mechanic. A real one. And I'm not sure he isn't a gentleman, too."

"It was Knowles," he bellowed in my ear, and his voice outdid the din of the motor. "I'm certain. There are too many things pointing to him. He's a busted gentleman, all right, and he seemed a damned good man—intelligent, loyal, hard-working. Yet he steals my Spad! Why in the name of Beelzebub and all his fork-tailed friends did he do that? I'm going to find out, and he's going to regret it."

It was quite plain Lathrop meant that last statement.

I thought of Knowles, tall, quiet, re-

served. The visible effects of his war service were a scar on his jaw, where a bullet had passed, two fingers gone from his left hand, and some grayish streaks in his brown hair. What those grayish streaks indicated in wounds or hardships I did not know. He was not telling. It was hard to think of such a man as a thief.

"You're jumping to conclusions," I asserted. "How about giving me a course? Do you want to chase down to Montauk or circle around this section? There's a lot of ground around here."

"Make altitude," he answered. "We will just have to get up high and take a look. That's all we can do. Edge over a bit toward the middle of the island. The county police are warning the big landing fields and also the cities across the Sound. He can't fly more than an hour and a half—the tank wasn't quite full."

Dodging an occasional cumulus cloud that came drifting toward us out of the southeast, I climbed in big circles, keeping an eye on the ground beneath. I had a good deal more faith in the police than I had in our own expedition, and I had very little faith in the police. However, it gave Lathrop something to do, and he was a friend of mine.

The ship was nothing much on maneuverability, for it was a commercial job, but it could and did climb. I kept her nose high until the altimeter read eighteen thousand, and we began to realize that the oxygen wasn't as thick thereabouts as it was nearer the ground.

Breathing became work. Part of the time there were clouds between us and the earth, but they were just masses of mist that did not seriously interfere with our view.

Lathrop stared over one side and I over the other. We could now see the island beneath us, from the long sandy beaches of the Atlantic to the rocky, serrated North Shore. It looked flatter than it was, which is saying something.

Our eyes fell without enthusiasm on the multitudinous brown crisscrosses on the fair face of the green Hempstead Plains that were real-estate developments, and dwelt approvingly on the few broad, level fields that were still left unmarred by houses. A man won't be able to land a ship anywhere one of these days.

There were a few planes beneath us, especially around Mineola and Garden City, but they were all the prosaic, five-dollar passenger-carrying variety, as different from the Spad, in the eyes of a pilot, as a hen from a hawk. It certainly looked as if we were having nothing but a pleasant little cloud-punching expedition.

Above Mitchel Field, the army aërodrome, there were two or three brisk little pursuit ships rolling around in the air, but they too were quite unlike the old Spad. Fighting-ship construction had progressed since the war.

II.

TIME went by, and good gasoline went trailing astern.

Suddenly Lathrop clutched my arm again. He pointed upward, over the wing. I looked.

Breaking through a cloud, a hundred feet above us, came a ship that momentarily made me forget our quest. Upon the ends of its short lower planes were blazoned the white center, with blue and red concentric rings that denoted an American ship during the war. It was the cocard of the A. E. F.

And upon one side of the fuselage, just behind the pilot's seat, I could make out a red arrow, the insignia of the famous Four Hundred and Twenty-Eighth Pursuit Squadron. The ship was like a phantom from the past. It gave me a thrill.

I stared, hand and feet automatically controlling the four seater, while the ship in war paint sped on, above us, and disappeared into another cloud. Then I turned to look at Lathrop.

His jaws were tightly clenched—almost as tightly clenched, I imagine, as the hand that was gripping my forearm.

"That was my ship!" he shouted. "Bank!"

"How could it—" I began, but turned sharply to follow.

"It is!" he declared.

The other plane was heading almost due north, at a speed we could not hope to equal, but I trailed after it, wondering.

Certainly the ship above us was a Spad, but Lathrop's Spad had, of course, neither cocard nor squadron emblem.

I opened the throttle to the limit. At least it seemed likely to me that we pursued a false clew.

The red arrow ship held a straight course. Its pilot, at least, was flying to some purpose. Whether he had seen us we could not tell.

We thundered on, occasionally getting a glimpse that told us we were fast being dropped astern. We were not far now from the North Shore, and I wondered whether he was heading for Connecticut.

I glanced covertly at Lathrop. He was leaning sidewise, his whole head out in the slipstream of the propeller as he kept an eager watch ahead. Certainly there was no doubt in his face that the ship that had passed over us was his own.

The Sound was close ahead now. We were almost over Oyster Bay, I saw, as my eyes dropped to the ground and absently scanned it for possible landing fields. That is an old cross-country pilot's trick—an automatic preparation for possible motor failure.

I spotted a broad, almost rectangular green space in the midst of what I knew was rough country. I had marked this before in the course of flights over the North Shore, and I knew it was a big meadow, once used as a polo field, on the Remsen estate.

But I saw more than the field. I made out a tiny white plane moving above the green surface. A plane was flying above the field.

Lathrop pointed ahead, and brought my eyes up with a start. The far-away Spad had altered its course. It was banking sharply to the right.

At it turned I side-slipped, and took refuge behind a convenient cloud. There was no sense in letting him see that we had followed, if he had not already observed us. Lathrop punched me rebukingly in the side, and I shot out of the mist again so that he could have another glimpse.

The ship of the red arrow was descending in a tight spiral. Did he intend to land on the Remsen field? If so, we had him. But who was he? Lathrop's theory that it was the quiet, hard-working Knowles didn't ring true in my ears.

There were cumulus clouds well below in which we could hide while we watched our slippery, fast-moving quarry. I put our own ship in a spiral and lost altitude more cautiously than the other ship had done.

At perhaps seven thousand feet the Spad came out of the spiral. Promptly I leveled off and awaited the next movement. The red arrow plane seemed to have lost all the purpose that had animated it. It hung in a certain quarter of the sky, southwest of the field.

Unceasingly it pursued a short, erratic course, back and forth, occasionally sweeping easily through an Immelman or a vertical bank. The net result of all its evolutions was to remain in practically the same place.

A few thousand feet above I kept to the shelter of such clouds as offered, and we waited impatiently. It was all we could do, for the moment that we disclosed ourselves to the Spad it could breeze away at a speed we could not even approach.

The ship I had seen leaving the field was now engaged in a series of loops. It was below us and our quarry, and perhaps four or five thousand feet above the ground. It was a big, slow, training ship, and I gathered from the manner in which it was maneuvered that some one was practicing loops with an instructor. Perhaps the Spad was waiting for him to finish before landing.

I shouted this suggestion to Lathrop, but he shook his head.

"Where's the sun?" he asked curtly.

I realized what he meant. The Spad was using the old combat trick—keeping to the sun, so that the occupants of the training ship could not see it at all. If they looked in that direction, their eyes were blinded by the glare.

What did that mean? I didn't know, and obviously Lathrop didn't either. Our speculations were halted when the training ship finished its looping, and glided downwind beyond the field.

Finally, when it was perhaps five hun-

dred feet above the ground, it banked around and headed back toward the field for a landing. It was flying over a wooded, rocky section, heading directly into the wind. It looked as if a cautious pilot was taking every precaution and then some in that uncertain wind to make a perfect landing on the broad, easy field.

I glanced at the Spad, and then dug Lathrop in the ribs with my elbow. It had left its place in the sun and was diving steeply toward the training ship. With motor full on, it hurtled downward.

Such speed as that must have played a hellish tune on the straining wires and struts. You don't make that kind of a dive in commercial aviation, and sometimes you don't make that kind of a dive more than once in combat. Too hard on the wings. I started side-slipping to get nearer to the excitement.

The little ship in war paint was head on toward the training plane and approaching it at about two hundred miles an hour. But the big two seater kept right on toward the field. Probably the pilot decided that the other fellow was only an army pilot having a little fun with a civilian.

It looked to us as if the pilot of the red arrow Spad was drawing it rather fine. In fact, I gasped a bit as I saw him apparently plunging right down on the other ship. But at the last moment he right-ruddered a trifle, and swept down past the other with only a few feet between wing tips.

Once past the training plane, the Spad banked sharply, climbed a bit, and circled the other. By squinting my eyes I made out that the pilot pulled off his helmet and exposed his face to the gaze of the two men in the training ship.

He was flying so that they could get a good look at the ship, and its markings as well. He moved his arm as if in some sort of gesture.

As the little Spad completed the round of the slower ship, a burst of tracer suddenly sprayed the air ahead of it. The red arrow pilot had cut loose his gun just where the other men could see. And the next minute he banked and swept behind the training plane.

"He's going to pot it!" Lathrop shrieked.

I didn't have time to answer. The man in the war plane had whipped it about in an Immelman and was coming down on the tail of the other ship. The rear is the most vulnerable point in even a combat ship.

"He's running amuck!" I shouted, and dived instinctively toward the menaced plane.

Another burst of tracer came from the diving Spad. We were so close now that I could see the little wraithlike path of the bullets from the nose of the war plane down to the other ship.

I felt a bit sickish. You don't expect machine-gun fire in peace.

The spray of lead was shooting over the upper plane of the training ship now. In another second the Red Arrow would dive just a bit steeper. That would bring the lance of death down into one cockpit, and then the other. Then—

Suddenly a figure rose up into view in the training ship. A man had stood up in the rear cockpit. He scrambled over the side.

We watched him drop. He fell perhaps two hundred feet and then a parachute blossomed out over him. The next instant he was dropping rapidly down among the trees.

"One safe!" shouted Lathrop.

His voice was strained, and his face was twisted into a nasty grimace. I remembered then, that this pirate ship was his; that in some slight measure he was responsible for what was going on.

I turned back to see the rest of the business. The training ship was wavering in the air, almost without flying speed. I realized that the man piloting the ship had gone over without warning his mate.

The Spad had ceased firing. It swept down, diving beneath the other ship. The man left in the training ship had gripped the stick and thrust it forward. We could tell that by the way the big ship nosed down and regained flying speed.

The Spad, with motor full on, shot along, straight over the landing field and continued in a straight line course, leaving the training ship far behind. Every instant I expected it to turn, come back, and finish the chap who had regained control. He showed no signs of going overboard.

But instead of attacking again, the red arrow plane fled, climbing steadily, as if a squadron of pursuit ships were on its tail.

The training ship glided down to the field, and landed easily. Both men were safe. It didn't seem possible, after the ferocity and skill displayed by the Spad pilot, but they were.

Had the sight of us frightened him away? I turned to Lathrop questioningly.

He had wrinkled most of his face into a perplexed mask, and was talking to himself.

"Orders?" I said. "Chase or land?"

He came out of it, then, and motioned to me to set the ship on the landing field.

"No use trailing after him," Lathrop said, glancing toward the Spad that was already almost up in a cloud. "Let's see what we can find out."

I landed, and followed the taxiing training ship up to the line.

A young chap, in the lesser twenties, I should say, was climbing out of the cockpit. Several mechanics were scattered around the plane.

A girl, perhaps a year or two older, beautiful even in agitation, was hurrying around the wingtip toward the pilot. There was a sort of resemblance, a similarity of clear cut features and blue eyes, between them.

I cut the motor and hopped out, with Lathrop crowding behind me.

"Kent!" the girl said, with a little catch in her voice. "Are you hurt? Did—did he shoot you?"

"Never touched me," answered the young pilot, and patted her reassuringly on the shoulder. He glanced toward us, then back at the girl. "It was nothing at all, Charlotte; he didn't even hit the plane."

"But—but—Garrarder!" the girl exclaimed. She was much too intent to look toward us—or even to realize we were there. "He—he jumped!"

"Garrarder!" muttered Lathrop. The name was vaguely familiar.

The young face of the pilot darkened, became older, and a trifle bitter.

"Yes," he said. "He—jumped. Fortunately, I had time to grab the stick. But—wait a moment, Sharley; perhaps these gentlemen know something about it." He looked questioningly toward Lathrop and me.

"Mighty little," Lathrop answered guardedly. "Your mechs are sprouting ears fast. Maybe a couple of them ought to go after your friend—Garrarder. He might be hung up on a tree."

The pilot turned to give an order that sent the mechanics away from us at a trot.

"I—I don't want him to come back here—not this afternoon," the girl said suddenly to her brother. Color was flooding back into her face. "I—I couldn't be polite to him—after he—jumped and left you—his pupil."

"Oh, I could handle the ship all right," her brother said, but it was plain that he, too, was feeling none too friendly toward Garrarder.

"Queer," Lathrop confided to me in a low voice, "Garrarder—if it's the same one—was an ace—downed five German planes during the war. And yet—apparently he deserted the man he was teaching to fly."

The young pilot had come toward us. His eyes were questioning, even doubtful, as he surveyed us.

"My name is Kent Remsen," he said. "This is my sister, Miss Charlotte Remsen."

He paused, and Lathrop responded to the introduction. I had heard of them both, as one does hear of the children of prominent families.

"Did you get a good look at the man in the Spad?" my friend asked eagerly.

Kent Remsen shook his head.

"Not very good," he replied. "He had a thinnish face, and brown hair, and he reminded me of some one—but I can't think who. But—do you know anything about this outrage? Who was that lunatic in the other plane?"

Charlotte Remsen's eyes turned eagerly to Lathrop's, but he did not look at her, or answer Remsen's question. He was staring over the field.

"Was this Garrarder who was with you the ace?" he demanded, ending his instant of contemplation abruptly.

"Yes," Kent Remsen answered.

Charlotte Remsen looked away and her brother, sensing her disquiet, added hastily:

"Mr. Garrarder is still an air enthusiast. He is a captain in the army air reserve—is taking two weeks' training at Mitchel Field now. He interested me in flying, too, and lately he has been teaching me to handle a plane. He is a friend—of mine."

The girl flushed at the obvious effort her brother made to protect her by adding the last words. It was quite plain to me, and to Lathrop, as well, that Garrarder was more the friend of the girl than of her younger brother.

How much more than friend we had no means of telling. The girl wore no engagement ring. I felt quite sure that he was less a friend now than he had been before going over the side of the ship.

Young Remsen, impatient now at having his questions disregarded, began another inquiry, with determination, but Lathrop cut in ruthlessly:

"You must forgive me for demanding answers, but this thing must be explained at once. That man may be running wild—shooting down ships all over Long Island—or he may have some reason for attacking you and you only. Tell me this: with what pursuit squadron did Garrarder fight during the war?"

Kent Remsen pointed southward, in the direction taken by the fleeing Spad. "In the Red Arrow squadron," he replied. "In that squadron—the insignia was on that plane."

"Hum!" Lathrop mumbled. "The Red Arrow! Miss Remsen, can you throw any light on this?"

"No," Charlotte answered quickly. Her eyes met Lathrop's frankly. "It's all just a sudden shock to me. I can't think of any reason for it."

"A plane was stolen from my field today," Lathrop explained tersely. "It was a Spad, like the ship that shot up your training plane. But it had no such markings as a Red Arrow. I don't know whether there is any connection between the theft of my ship and the attack on yours. I suspect a man. Until I have some proof I cannot as a matter of fairness accuse him."

He took a step toward my plane, but paused.

"As soon as I have discovered anything definite about it I will let you know," he assured the girl and her brother. "In the meantime I must work. I will be able to find Captain Garrarder at Mitchel Field later to-day, I presume?"

It was the girl who answered. "I am sure the commanding officer will be able to tell you how you can reach him," she said steadily.

"Thanks," said Lathrop. "I think you needn't worry about anything else unpleasant happening. I'll let you know everything I can."

With young Remsen's help he swung the ship around, and we taxied out on the aërodrome.

"Mitchel Field?" I asked.

"No, our own first," he answered.

"Do you still think it was Knowles?" I prodded him, as I swung the ship into the wind.

"In connection with the name Garrarder does the name Knowles—forget the personality of the man—evoke any memories?" he inquired.

I thought deeply. I had barely known the name of Garrarder, for I had not been an overseas pilot, but vaguely I connected the other name with the war.

"Something, but not much," I admitted.

"Give her the gun," he said. "We're going back to find out, if this strong wind isn't too much for us."

I opened the throttle and we rolled over the field and finally bounced into the air.

III.

THE clouds were thicker now, and the bumps were much more frequent. The motor was running sweetly, and we had plenty of gas, so I chanced a forced landing and did some artistic contour chasing.

But even though I hugged the ground, the wind seemed as solid as water, and our speed wasn't anything to beat a freight train with. If we'd been up two thousand we would probably have drifted backward. Lathrop sat, glassy-eyed, beside me, and disregarded one or two incidents in gusts that should have put the wind up him.

Only once during the long pull homeward did he say anything. Then he put his lips

close to the eartabs of my helmet, and shouted:

"Two mysteries or one? That's the big question."

"Half a dozen, as far as I'm concerned," I muttered, but he wasn't listening to me.

The rain clouds herded in from the ocean to the southeast began to spatter pellets of rain that chewed at my prop and wings. That didn't visibly annoy Lathrop, either.

We made it. I clawed over the hangar, restrained the ship from an impromptu loop, and managed to set the wheels on the turf of our field before a gust got under our wing. As landings go it wasn't much, but nothing cracked.

Lathrop jumped out and ran at one wing tip to help control the ship as I taxied up to the hangar. We hadn't got halfway when a man came running toward us, hatless in the wind and rain.

It was the lank figure of Knowles.

Lathrop stopped almost dead, and the wing dragged him along. My hand wavered on the throttle. We recovered simultaneously.

Knowles dashed up to the other wingtip. I stared at him covertly, but all I could see was a good mechanic helping to get a ship in out of trouble.

I couldn't see him at all as a would-be murderer—or a lunatic. Beyond a nod to us both, he paid us no attention, but steadied the wing and trotted beside it.

In that way the three of us rolled the ship into the empty hangar. We looked it over. Knowles was the coolest of all three. I felt my respect for Lathrop's theory dwindling fast. Here was Knowles, but where was the red arrow ship?"

Knowles lifted the tail and released the dolly. Then he spoke, to Lathrop, who was busy slapping his wet helmet against his knee.

"I heard over at Mineola that the ship had been stolen, sir, so I came to the field," he said quietly. "I thought I might be able to help."

Lathrop was long in replying, and I took advantage of the interim to continue my oblique scrutiny of the tall mechanic. Perhaps I should have described him as gaunt, rather than fragile, for I perceived bones of considerable size and strength beneath the thin flesh of his face and hands. There was the framework of a man there, certainly.

The lean, scarred jaw was a man's jaw, too; firm, decisive, as by habit of years. His nose was large and straight.

I looked into his eyes for an instant. They were keen blue, conveying instantly an impression of intelligence, and back of that, something else—something less pleasing. Perhaps this latter was not pleasing merely because it was obscure.

What was it? Disillusion, sorrow, pain, wistfulness? I groped impotently for a word that would define it. You can't pick out a man's qualities as you can a ship's.

And why was this man a mere mechanic—an itinerant tinker? More mystery.

"Help?" Lathrop repeated slowly. "I'm afraid you can't, Knowles. However, come into the workshop. We'll see."

We tramped across to the small shack and shed our coats.

A deep impression seemed suddenly to have overtaken my friend. He leaned for a moment against the workbench; then wandered to the window and looked out at the trees beyond the field, which were beginning to clash their branches helplessly as the wind assailed them. The sky was gray with flying clouds.

"No, Knowles, I'm afraid you can't help," Lathrop muttered disconsolately. There was no animosity, no suspicion in his voice or manner—just dejection. It was good acting. "Unless the ship is down and in a hangar, I'm afraid it won't be of any further use to me. It wasn't much of a ship, you know—I couldn't afford a decent one—and if it's out in this gale it won't last long."

Knowles, who had been following his employer with his eyes, looked down at his feet, and moved the toe of his shoe to tap the leg of the workbench. Then he, too, peered out of the window to study the waving branches of the trees.

"There—there's a chance that if some one took it for a joy ride he might have landed at one of the fields around Mineola or Garden City," he said. "Suppose I catch the bus over and take a look around, sir."

Lathrop laughed dismally.

"Rather a slim chance, Knowles," he said. "However, go ahead. I can't overlook any opportunity to get that plane back. It means a lot—success or failure, perhaps—to me."

For a moment he was silent, sunk in gloom. Then he added: "You've test-hopped the ship before, Knowles. If you should by chance find it I'll trust you to fly it back though it is dirty outside."

"I will, if I should sight it," Knowles replied.

He quickly drew on a slicker over his shiny blue serge coat. It seemed to me that he left almost with relief.

Hardly had he trudged away in the rain, than Lathrop, abandoning his dejection, darted into his sleeping compartment and rummaged about for a moment. When he returned his face was dark.

"Three drums of ammunition gone," he said succinctly. "I forgot to look in the box when I found that dab of mud. But that explains why he came in before."

He stepped over to his bookcase, and drew out a large volume.

"Knowles," he muttered, as he thumbed the leaves. "Knowles. That name is familiar—and getting more so every minute. Ah, here we are!"

He stared at the page a moment, then closed the book with a snap. "Did you know, John, that a man named Knowles—Lieutenant Chester S. Knowles—was a flight commander in 428th Aëro Squadron—the Red Arrow Pursuit Squadron—with seven enemy planes to his credit at the time he was shot down and captured by the Germans?"

"Knowles!" I exclaimed. "This Knowles?"

Lathrop nodded.

"This Knowles," he said positively. "He hasn't done any boasting in my presence—indeed, I thought he was a buck private in the infantry—but this is Knowles, I'm prepared to maintain. And there's another interesting little fact in that book—that Orton Garrarder, the ace, who brought down five planes, was for a time a member of Knowles's Flight."

I gasped. "Then—"

"I'm beginning to remember a bit now," Lathrop muttered, walking up and down the narrow little room. "There was something ugly noised about concerning Knowles—something funny. I wasn't a pursuit pilot—I was with a photographing outfit—so I never heard much about it. But the thing concerned courage, I think."

He came out of his murmured meditation with a start and looked at me calculatingly.

"I'm doing a bit of gambling," Lathrop said. "You're rather an inconspicuous sort of man, as far as height and weight go, John, and my old motor car is like thousands of others. Do you think you could take the car, and trail Knowles? He's walking, so he can hardly have reached the bus line yet."

"I can," I said eagerly.

"Good! I'd like to know where he goes and what he does. But, remember, I'd a dozen times rather have you lose track of the fellow than let him realize he's being followed."

With this injunction in my ears I ran out to his ancient sedan, jabbed it into life with my foot, and started off. I bumped over the little used dirt road and finally reached another that led to the highway.

Luckily, I caught a glimpse of the bus halting to take on Knowles when I was still several hundred yards away. Traffic on the main road was plentiful, so I had no difficulty in following unobserved until we reached Garden City.

There Knowles alighted. He moved slowly, head down, in the direction of one of the fields. Fearful of detection if I loitered behind, I drove on ahead of him and awaited his coming in the partial concealment of a hangar at the nearest of the fields.

But he did not come. I sat in the car with growing uneasiness, and then decided to drive around the aërodrome on the chance that he had turned off and gone to the other side.

The gusty rain and low clouds had dissipated the usual Saturday afternoon throngs of passengers and spectators. The pilots, as far as I could see from the road, had all locked their machines in their

hangars and gone home. Nowhere was there a sign of life.

I wandered around the fields in the old sedan until I realized that I had lost my man good and proper.

Rather shamefacedly I turned my car about and started back to Lathrop's field. The sky was darkening by the time I reached the vicinity of the little aërodrome. As I turned into the side road near it my attention was attracted by the rising roar of a plane. It was coming toward the field.

I craned my neck to see it, and in consequence narrowly avoided running into a big black landau that was parked without lights in the road several hundred feet from Lathrop's hangar. But this misadventure did not prevent me from seeing the plane.

It circled the field once, and then descended, side-slipping and barely escaping the rounded swaying tops of the trees. An instant later it skimmed over the grass, and dropped lightly on the ground. A perfect landing.

Hastily I turned into the field, sprang out of the car, and awaited the coming of the plane. It was the Spad. But on its sides and wings were no war markings such as had been on the Spad that had attacked Garrarder's ship.

The ship came taxiing along the ground at a quick pace. I caught a glimpse of Lathrop, who had run far out on the field before me, trotting beside one wing tip.

The plane came right up to the hangar. Lathrop and I rolled open the doors. Knowles, his mouth expressionless beneath helmet and goggles, jumped out, and together we trundled it in.

There were no markings on it. I looked again—carefully.

The mechanic spoke to Lathrop.

"It was just as I had hoped, sir. The thief had abandoned the plane unharmed on the unoccupied edge of a field at Garden City. It wasn't hurt, but it took me some time to get the motor started."

"Fine detective work, Knowles!" Lathrop applauded heartily. "Are you wet? Come into the workshop?"

We went in together. Lathrop pulled out chairs for Knowles and myself, and handed around cigarettes. Knowles drew on his with evident relish, and leaned back a bit in his chair. Despite the strain of the flight through the gusty, darkening sky, he looked somehow rested, happier.

There was a pause. The sound of the wind, blustering, came to us.

"Knowles, why did you steal that ship in the first place?" Lathrop demanded with sudden brusqueness.

He was standing in front of his mechanic's tilted chair. Knowles's feet clattered to the floor, and he stared up at his employer in sudden, undisguised apprehension.

"Do you deny you took it?" Lathrop went on. "You can, you know, but it won't do you a damn bit of good."

Knowles dropped his cigarette to the floor and stepped on it as if he were treading out that flitting expression of content. When he looked up at Lathrop his face had the same baffled, listless expression that I had observed on it before.

"I don't deny it," he said. "I—had an overwhelming impulse to take a hop, and I did. But I haven't hurt the ship."

He didn't lie well, and he knew it. Lathrop waved his lame explanations aside disdainfully.

"Why did you take it?" he pressed.

"I've returned the ship," Knowles replied slowly. "If you want to charge me with stealing it, I promise you I'll plead guilty in court. But I don't want to make any statement."

"I don't blame you," my friend replied. His tone was positive, inexorable. "The matter of shooting up Garrarder and young Remsen will take a lot of explaining."

Knowles sprang to his feet and stared at the other man tensely.

"You know that, do you?" he said. "Has Garrarder talked to the police, then? I didn't think he would. Did Charlotte—"

"No, Garrarder hasn't said anything, as far as I know."

It was a queer scene, that, the two men standing face to face, in the cluttered little workshop, each eager, questioning and yet holding back. I sat unnoticed, and was glad that this was so.

" If you've got anything to say before we call in the police you had better begin at the beginning and go right on through," Lathrop suggested inflexibly.

Knowles considered, staring over Lathrop's shoulder at a dingy blueprint thumb-tacked to the wall.

" I'll tell you—both," he said, " provided that you give your word of honor not to reveal it to the police. You must believe that it's not on my account I'm asking that —I'll plead guilty to the stealing and take my medicine—but this other part—the shooting—mustn't ever come out. At least, my name mustn't. It's not me, I tell you; it's—there are others that it will hurt. There's precious little in the punishment line that can hurt me."

" Sit down, man," Lathrop said, motioning toward the chair. " We'll decide after we've heard you what's to be done. If that doesn't suit—" He did not finish, but his voice was grim.

Chester Knowles slumped down onto the chair again, elbows resting on knees, staring at the floor. Finally he raised his head. In a strained, uneven voice that he strove to keep to a level monotone he began:

" You know there were friendships made in the aëro squadrons overseas. When you are fifteen or twenty thousand feet high over the enemy lines in a single seater ship, with a flight of Fokkers likely to drop out of the sun, spraying you with machine-gun bullets, you feel lonely. And you get to depend upon and trust the other men of your formation—especially when you've been through a few of those dogfights with them, and they ring true.

" Orton Garrarder and I were friends—that sort. Twice I was lucky enough to get on the tail of a Fokker that was drilling his ship with tracers, and each time I managed to halt the game before it got too serious for him. That was my job, as commanding officer of the flight. And he, although he hadn't happened to help me personally, had played a man's part in every scrimmage our formation had gone through.

" I trusted Garrarder. He had nerve. By that I mean he could fight, not blindly, but coolly, reckoning chances and deciding instantly the best thing to do.

" He trusted me, too, for he never hesitated about going up with me on voluntary patrols. It was on these flights, rather than in formation flights over a stipulated terrain, that a man was more apt to run into trouble or glory, or both. On these raids we depended upon each other more than ever. And neither of us had reason to doubt the other. Then, one day, the pinch came."

Knowles stopped talking to get up and pace the floor for a moment. Then he forced himself back into his chair.

" We were about ten miles inside the German lines when I caught a glimpse of a flight of four Fokkers heading homeward just under a mass of low, fluffy clouds. I signaled to Garrarder, who was behind me, by waggling my wings, and we climbed above the cloud formations and paralleled the enemy's course as well as we could guess it.

" When they came out we were down on them like a full squadron before they could look around. Two of them dived, and the others banked around to seek the shelter of the cloud. I got my guns lined up on one of the diving ships, but before I could fire more than a few shots the guns jammed—first one, and then, not ten shots later, the other. I had dived so rapidly in following my enemy that the other enemy was on my tail and shooting bursts of lead that clipped holes in my upper wing.

" Then, just as I looped to escape, I caught sight of a spurt of smoke from the Fokker beneath me. His own comrade's incendiary bullets had passed my ship and set fire to his gas tank. A moment later, before the second Fokker could loop after me, Garrarder's fire had killed or disabled the pilot. The two Fokkers, almost above each other, dropped in tailspins, one a flaming wreck, the other out of control.

" The scrimmage had carried us well below the cloud, and I watched it anxiously for a moment to see if the two other Fokkers would join in. They had the advantage of altitude now. But apparently they were streaking it off through the mist, perfectly satisfied to get away.

" Garrarder came out of his power dive and circled up to me. I clamped the stick

between my knees and set about clearing the jams. It was usually only a matter of minutes to get out the defective cartridges and put the guns in shape for action again.

"But as I worked with my jam-hammer I cast a glance above me more or less automatically, and sighted a flight of seven Fokkers piquing down from the northward. They were still a long way from us, had several thousand feet of altitude, and were flying to get between us and the cloud.

"We still had plenty of time to beat them to it. I abandoned the attempt to free the guns, looked around, and saw Garrarder just beside me. I pointed out the flight to him, and we started to climb. Garrarder's ship, although an exact copy of my own Spad, was a better machine for climbing, and so he was soon leading me by several hundred feet.

"I squinted up at the enemy formation, and discovered that the bellies of the fuselages were painted bright blue. By that marking I recognized them as members of a formidable squadron commanded by Captain Bloemmer and containing aces hardly less famous for their fighting ability than Richthofen's flying circus.

"It was lucky for us that that cloud was so near, I reflected. The Bloemmer outfit fought with a rare discipline and coolness—and that meant two ships couldn't start anything.

"From out of the mist almost above us, a Fokker came diving with motor full on. It was one of the flight we had attacked. Apparently the pilot had recovered his nerve after our unexpected assault, and had come back for a look.

"The sight of us below and the formation of friends coming on us from above decided him to try a few shots at us. He piqued toward us almost head on. Garrarder, holding up the nose of his ship, fired a burst at him.

"The Fokker did not respond. In an instant he was diving past Garrarder. He pointed his ship directly at me.

"I realized then that he had seen me struggling with my guns, and knew I was helpless. But I chuckled to myself. He had forgotten that in passing Garrarder he had left his tail open to attack.

"There was plenty of time for my comrade to kick his ship around and follow him down with a spray of flaming lead that would make him forget me entirely. It looked like an easy addition to Garrarder's score. And after it he and I would duck neatly into the cloud and let Bloemmer's blue bellies waste good gasoline trying to find us."

Knowles looked away from us, as if he were visualizing on the wall of the shack that easy escape. With an almost imperceptible shake of his head he went on:

"I kept my eye on Garrarder's ship. I saw him look up at the diving Fokkers, and then over the edge of his cockpit at me. I remember a feeling of impatience that he was so leisurely about coming down on the venturesome foe. He had time, but none to waste.

"Precious seconds passed. Garrarder continued to climb. He was almost in the cloud before the Fokker cut loose at me with both guns.

"I gave the ship right rudder, smartly, instead of diving. But the enemy pilot anticipated the maneuver. He kept nose down on me a little longer. Then, at the last moment, instead of plunging past me, he zoomed and made a swift Immelman turn.

"He had held his altitude—was still above me. Again he dipped his nose and pressed the triggers of both guns.

"He was an able man, that pilot. He knew that I must continue to make altitude, and to fly toward the shelter of the cloud so close to me.

"I flashed a glance at Garrarder. He was circling the edge of the cloud, his ship half veiled in mist. Probably he was watching us.

"The fire of the Fokker cut through my cockpit; I felt the sting of a tracer along my face, and another burned through my side, before I whipped my ship out of the line of bullets.

"The motor was still running steadily, and no controls wires or vital parts had been hit. My own wounds were nothing. But Garrarder—what was he doing?

"For a moment, by a swift bank that almost sent our machines crashing together,

I eluded the persistent Fokker. But he zoomed and again swept between me and the cloud.

"I dodged, zoomed, and banked, hanging grimly to what altitude I had, and adding to it when I could. And then, looking up, I saw that Garrarder had vanished into the cloud. Simultaneously the Fokker flight came diving on me, with their guns pouring ahead of them a hail of bullets.

"My chance of hiding myself in the mist was gone. I nosed over suddenly in a vertical power dive, and then threw the ship into a tailspin, as if I had been hit and was crashing. But they followed, concentrating their fire on the whirling target my Spad presented.

"They must have hit me, for things faded out. My simulated crash became real, I suppose."

Knowles stopped abruptly, and gazed at his nervously working fingers.

"It wasn't a sudden streak of cowardice—that desertion of Garrarder's," he said slowly. "You can't always blame a man who loses his nerve and piques for home. In that warfare nerves are strained beyond the limit. No, it wasn't cowardice; it was selfishness—plain, calculating selfishness.

"In his cool, quick way he saw I was in trouble, reckoned up the situation, and decided that he wouldn't take a chance of being caught outside the cloud by the overpowering enemy force. There was nothing to be gained by it—for him.

"He could have made it, but it was too close a call. He hung around calmly enough, saw my finish, or what he thought was my finish, and went back to the Red Arrow aërodrome.

"When I came to myself in a German hospital after weeks of fever of delirium, I couldn't learn much from the doctors about what had happened. I suppose I'd crashed in the branches of a tree or the Spad had leveled off by itself in time to save my life.

"But the doctors did tell me that I'd been going over the situation in my disordered dreams again and again, yelling for Garrarder to come—asking why he hesitated—telling him he had plenty of time.

"I had plenty of time myself—to think about it. I found that I had been pretty well cracked up. I couldn't seem to think of much else but Garrarder's action while I lay there.

"I went over it and over it again, but it always came out the same way. Not cowardice—selfishness.

"He weighed factors, and decided what was best for him. We were too far within the German lines for the fight to be observed by our men. There was nothing to gain by sticking to me, and perhaps something to lose, so he let me go.

"You'd suppose I'd promise myself to square the thing up if I ever met him, and then forget it. But I couldn't forget. The shock of realization that a man I'd trusted with my life, a brave man, my truest comrade, was a creature of utter selfishness, stirred me to my depths. I discovered that I wasn't really angry at Garrarder; I wanted to hate him, but it was like hating a motor that had quit at the wrong moment.

"I had heard of supreme egoism before, but I hadn't been particularly interested in it. Here it was before me. His attitude—placing his own good above everything else in the world—revolted me more than anything else."

Knowles frowned perplexedly, as if this were still rather a mystery to him.

"After awhile, I found myself pitying Garrarder. It can't be pleasant never to feel a surge of warm, generous impulse that obliterates self, such as normal people experience.

"When the Germans released me after the war I was listless and easily tired. Burned out. And I still couldn't get my mind off Garrarder. I didn't want to go back to New York, where I'd be sure to meet him. And somehow I didn't want to meet any of the old bunch in the squadron, although they were the finest lot I'd ever known. Afraid to have more illusions cracked up, I suppose.

"I spent a year and most of the money I had sitting in the sun in Algiers and along the Riviera. Then I took a ship back to the States, still without much enthusiasm for anything, but feeling somewhat better.

"On the boat I met a chap who had been in an American observation squadron during the war. He asked me point blank one day if I was Knowles of the Red Arrow. Talking shop was the thing I most detested, then, so I denied it. He apologized and explained why he had asked. And I listened.

"He told me that there was something queer about Knowles, though he was an ace, and that American pilots often wondered just what it was. When Garrarder came back alone to the Red Arrow squadron he made a very brief report in which he said that I had been shot down in action. And he declined brusquely to discuss the matter, even with his squadron mates. No one knew why he wouldn't talk, but every one had a theory. The theories weren't complimentary to me. But Garrarder was praised for his attitude.

"That information rather staggered me. Garrarder, without saying a word against me, had blackened my reputation—accused me by implication of some foul or cowardly deed—so that if I had not been killed by my crash he would still be safe. There was nothing I could say—nothing I could do—that would remove the blight of that unspoken accusation.

"And certainly no one would believe a word against Garrarder, the man who had refused to give away his flight commander. It was clever, and there was in it the mark of that same unconscionable egoism. My honor threatened his, so he destroyed mine.

"I landed in New York completely knocked out. A decision I had made to look up some of the pilots of the old squadron went glimmering. I was in no shape to try to argue myself back into their respect.

"The old listlessness came back. But I was stronger, physically, and physical labor was the only thing that gave me peace. And flying began to pull me—again. I wanted to tinker with ships, to get a control stick into the hollow of my hand once more.

"So I drifted over the country, one of the straggling, indigent commercial aviators who try to scratch up a living. Sometimes I was a mechanic. Occasionally, when nothing else offered, I was a wing-walker—one of those poor devils who risk their lives on the wings of a ship so that they may eat, and thus continue to risk their lives. Sometimes I'd save up enough money to buy an old ship, but usually a crack-up would put me back into the ranks of the mechanics, before I'd made enough to get a good ship.

"I didn't change my name. It was my name and I had done nothing to dishonor it. I met no one who seemed to recognize me as Knowles, the ace about whom things were whispered.

"Gradually, I found a zest returning to life. My work became more than a narcotic; it became a positive interest. I acquired another plane and deliberately flew East, toward New York and the Long Island fields that I had previously avoided. I didn't know why I was coming.

"The motor was none too trustworthy, and it quit over the Alleghanies. I sideslipped the ship into a pasture. But the ground was too rough, and the plane nosed over. I wasn't hurt. The ship was a washout. But I came on, anyhow, and you gave me a job, Mr. Lathrop."

My friend nodded, but did not speak. Knowles frowned, as if he were having difficulty in framing his next words. Then he went on, slower than before, with obvious reluctance.

"I thought that I had put Garrarder almost out of mind. One paragraph in a newspaper showed me how wrong I was in thinking so. It—it was just a small item that leaped out of the printed sheet in my hands as I was using it to wipe off a turnbuckle that had fallen in the mud.

"It said that Orton Garrarder, the ace, was teaching Kent Remsen to fly down at the Remsen country estate, and added a none too veiled intimation that Garrarder was more interested in a spectator of the flights, Miss Charlotte Remsen, than he was in his pupil. An announcement of interest might be expected some day."

Knowles looked up, but not at us. His face was stern and set.

"That stirred me so that I couldn't sleep. Before we had left the States, while we waited for a transport in New York, I had introduced Garrarder to Charlotte Remsen at a dance.

"There—there had never been anything

of romance between us—she had many better men eager for her favor. And I—well, even had I had a chance, I could not see the justice of a man about to go on a dangerous mission marrying, and perhaps leaving a girl to a lifetime of regret. But she did her best to make things pleasant for me during those last days in New York while we waited for orders and I—had been grateful to her.

"Now, years after the war, I was confronted with the result of that introduction—Garrarder, the unscrupulous egoist, was raising his eyes to Charlotte Remsen. I knew enough about life to realize that there is no hell for a woman more agonizing than to be tied to a man whose one thought is self, however much he may disguise his nature at first. It is like a warm, living thing chained to a cold stone.

"Rather like a man grasping at a straw, I argued within myself that I might have been wrong about Garrarder somehow—that he had been justified in not coming to my assistance—that my judgment of distances had been at fault. But I could not convince myself. I remembered how he had lingered at the edge of the cloud to watch my finish.

"That paragraph preyed on me so that one morning when I was not needed here at the field I went over to the Remsen place in my working clothes at a time when I was sure the family was in town. I applied for a job to the mechanic in charge of the plane, and although he refused me, I managed to get him to talk.

"He let out enough to convince me that the newspaper had not exaggerated. Garrarder was using his opportunity as instructor to pay attention to Miss Remsen. He also told me that Garrarder was prolonging the instruction as much as possible.

"Kent," he said, was already a capable pilot. So convinced was the boy that he could fly alone that he had come down one day and made a short solo flight without Garrarder's knowledge. Usually, however, they flew dual, both equipped with parachute packs.

"Garrarder was now putting the boy through the usual stunt course. That afternoon the two, and Miss Remsen, would be down. I left the hangar as soon as I had learned that. I didn't want them to see me.

"When they arrived a few hours later, I was hidden in a clump of bushes behind one of the stone walls on the edge of the field. I watched the boy fly. Garrarder sat in the other cockpit without touching a control. Kent had always been a quick-thinking, quick-acting boy, and it didn't take long for me to see that he was a natural flyer, with a wholesome respect for the air, but no fear. And once, when he hit an unexpected bump in flying low over the hangar, he pulled the ship out of a sharp nose dive before Garrarder could move.

"After the lesson, Kent stayed behind at the hangar to watch the mechanics go over the ship, and Garrarder and Miss Remsen walked off the field together. That hurt. Garrarder was a handsome chap, highly intelligent, and generally good-natured. His rottenness was in the core of him, not on the outside. No girl could help admiring him. His war record was in his favor, too—and that magnanimity of his in saying no word against me.

"I'd never thought seriously of revenging myself on Garrarder. That sort of thing doesn't appeal to many people in real life. They're content to dislike a man passively, and avoid him.

"But now I had to do something. If he was the kind of man I thought him it would be a vile act to permit him to marry Charlotte Remsen. And no one knew him as I did. It was up to me.

"It would be worse than useless to go to Charlotte—Miss Remsen—with a tale. I planned a way to show her his real character. It was quite simple.

"I knew—or rather I thought I knew—that it would be possible to take the Spad secretly without permission to-day. Several nights ago I bought some linen. On some I painted the white center and blue and red concentric rings that marked a ship as American during the war. On another piece I put the red arrow that was the insignia of our squadron, the 428th Pursuit. I scoured around and succeeded in buying the tent hangar and field rights of a chap in Baldwin who intended trying his luck in the West.

"That was all I had to do. I came down here and broke into the hangar and got the drums of ammunition for the gun from the shack. Then I fixed the tire. I was about ready to start when you two arrived, and I was compelled to hide behind the hangar. But I was feeling desperate, and couldn't abandon my idea even in the face of detection. After all, it didn't matter much about what happened to me.

"When the ship was left idling on the field I waited long enough for it to warm up a bit, and then ran for the cockpit. As you know, I got away safely.

"I flew down to Baldwin, taxied into the hangar and made fast my linen markings to the wings and fuselage. When I rolled the ship out it was an exact replica of my old No. 1 Spad of the Red Arrow Pursuit Squadron. That didn't take very long.

"You know about the attack. Perhaps you saw it. I noticed a big commercial ship near the field that looked like Clive's, but I was too busy watching Garrarder's ship to pay any attention to it.

"I followed my plan rigidly—letting Garrarder see it was I, in No. 1 ship of the Red Arrow Pursuit Squadron. He must have imagined I had come to square things up, for his face was white as he watched me circle his ship. He couldn't dive, for he was over the woods. All he could do was fly for the field.

"By firing a burst I let him see my guns weren't jammed, this time. And then I got on his tail, and let go another burst just above his upper wing.

"He did just what I expected him to do. He deserted his ship, and his pupil instantly, and jumped for safety. The fact that Kent Remsen had never flown a solo, as far as he knew, meant nothing to him. He was threatened with certain death; therefore nothing else mattered but to save himself.

"That quick, decisive jump of his was an instantaneous, wholly convincing revelation of the man's character. And it had been witnessed by the girl. I had done all I could do to warn her.

"At that moment of success, I felt little but a thrill of anxiety as I watched the training ship. I had been compelled to imperil, though not seriously, as I hoped, Kent Remsen. Left uncontrolled by Garrarder's leap, it wavered. The next instant, as I had felt sure would happen, Kent Remsen regained flying speed.

"I shot away instantly, for I did not want Kent to think that he was to be attacked. As I made altitude, I turned and saw that he had landed safely.

"It remained for me to get away if I could. I headed for the biggest field at Garden City, where airplanes are landing and taking off all the time, believing that among these one more would not be instantly detected. I took the precaution, however to fly in on the further side from the hangars, for of course pilots and mechanics would at once recognize the old war markings. I stayed beside the ship just long enough to rip off the cocards and squadron emblem and hide them in the bushes. Then I came back here."

Knowles ceased his tale. He looked at us anxiously.

"And when you saw me so worried about my ship you decided to find it for me and risk detection," Lathrop added.

Knowles nodded.

"You snared me very neatly," he admitted. "But—don't you see, gentlemen, you'll have to let the shooting episode remain a mystery? It's for—I'm not asking you not to prosecute me for stealing the ship. I'll plead guilty to that. But don't link it up with the Garrarder affair."

IV.

KNOWLES's voice had become appealing. I looked hopefully at Lathrop. I believed this story—believed it implicitly.

Certainly Knowles had endangered the lives of both Garrarder and Kent Remsen, but I could see justification for it. You cannot expect a man who has flown through the war and has stood for years the hard and perilous life of a gypsy flyer to place great weight on the danger of a crash. Not when he is trying to save a girl from a calamitous error.

Lathrop drummed with his fingers on the edge of the workbench and looked out of the window. I followed his gaze, but could see nothing except a plane over the field

crabbing against the wind and headed down the island.

"I can't decide what should be done," Lathrop said at last. "I thought you'd bring back the ship, Knowles, so I did a bit of telephoning after you left. And there is some one here whose decision I am willing to accept."

He stepped over to the curtain that divides his workroom from the sleeping quarters, and drew it aside.

There, in the little compartment stood Charlotte Remsen and her brother. I stared, for I had forgotten Lathrop's promise to let them know developments. Their appearance explained the big landau parked in the road outside, which we had seen on our return to the hangar.

Knowles started to his feet. His face paled after a quick rush of color. He stood silent, hesitant, looking uncertainly at the girl.

His eyes completely unmasked him. He had not revealed to us the extent of his feeling for Charlotte Remsen. The man loved her.

I turned to the window. The ship we had seen above the field had landed. Probably a pilot who had dived for the first port in a storm, I decided.

"Chester," the girl said quietly, "I—I have to thank you. Your demonstration was a success—a great success—since it brings you back to us. And I'm sure Kent won't mind that you treated him rather roughly."

"It's—it's all right," mumbled Kent Remsen.

A sudden gust of wind thundered against the house. The plane on the field was drawing up in the shelter of the hangar. A man got out—a solid chap in uniform with a short leather coat.

With his army type parachute slapping against his thighs he walked past my window to the door and pulled it open. I turned toward him.

He stood in the doorway, a blond, calm man, good-looking in his flying gear. His dark, quick eyes flickered over us all, and came to a halt upon the man and girl who stood face to face. It needed no exclamation from Kent Remsen to tell me that this was Captain Orton Garrarder, come to save his face.

The reserve pilot's teeth parted in a smile.

"I appear to have intruded," he said, "but I think I have some concern with this, so I will come in."

He pulled off his helmet and entered the room with every appearance of ease. Knowles stood taut, motionless, eyes and head unmovingly turned toward this former comrade of his. The cords of his neck showed beneath his skin, and his hands were clenched at his sides.

Garrarder ignored the man who had that day defeated his plans. He ignored the rest of us, too, and focused his whole attention upon the girl. Her expression was unfathomable.

"Charlotte, you aren't going to damn me unheard, I know," he said in a low, vibrant voice. "Your butler delivered the impetuous message of yours, but I managed to prevail upon him to tell of Mr. Lathrop's telephone message. So I knew where you were and I followed. I am here to defend myself."

The girl did not answer. She stood there, as calm as he, and returned his regard with steady eyes. Only a quickened movement of her breast betrayed her.

Garrarder glanced around at the rest of us, and finally at Knowles. The eyes of the two enemies met. Those of Knowles were smoldering, almost ablaze with wrath; Garrarder's were restrained, even contemptuous, as they noted the other man's barely concealed emotion.

The perfection of his health and vigor contrasted strangely with the gaunt, strained face of Knowles, ravaged by wounds and trouble. He smiled again, cool in the face of the antagonism electric in the room.

With his eyes scornfully fixed upon Knowles, he spoke to the rest of us:

"I have never in this world said a word against this man, but it is obvious from your attitude that he has said many against me. What am I charged with?"

"I have told the truth?" said Knowles slowly. "I have said you left me when my guns jammed in the face of the enemy."

Charlotte Remsen spoke, too, her voice passionless:

"We make no charge against you. It is your own action to-day that accuses you."

"Ah!" exclaimed Garrarder eagerly, "that is it, then! That I jumped from the ship when this man attacked. Consider! His machine bore the emblem of the Red Arrow and he circled us with his helmet off, that I might see his face. I did see it, and I realized that he had come to pay off a war grudge—an imaginary injustice of mine, but real enough in his sight. And he had come to pay it off with machine gun fire against a defenseless plane.

"But it was me he was out to destroy, not the plane or Kent. To him Kent did not matter; his line of fire was coming down on us both though he had no hatred of Kent. He was mad with the lust to kill me—at whatever cost to others."

He spread his hands in a gesture of helplessness.

"What could I do? I could not fight; I could not land; I could do nothing—save jump. It was not a safe thing to do—from that low altitude, for the 'chute might not have opened.

"But by jumping I separated myself from Kent and the plane—exposed myself alone to his vengeance and thereby protected my pupil. And Kent landed the ship safely, as I knew he would."

He turned from one to another of us, seeking support, though his eyes lingered longest on Charlotte Remsen's still face.

It was plausible, but it was not true. I remembered the sight too vividly; the man jumping from the ship, jerking his rip-cord, and then side-slipping his 'chute with quick, reaching arms, down into the shelter of the trees, while the uncontrolled plane, wavered in the air above.

No; there was nothing of self-sacrifice in that picture; it was self-protection swift and certain. We were silent.

Garrarder read our thoughts.

"I am convicted already, so words do me no good," he said bitterly. "But I will speak. Even a condemned murderer is asked what he has to say when judgment is pronounced. And I will say what I have never said before, that the ill will should be on my part, not on Knowles's. He deserted me in the midst of a fight against odds over the lines, and got what he deserved when an Albatross came down on him as he piqued for home!"

"You lie!" said Chester Knowles, deep in his throat.

"Look at him!" Garrader exclaimed, his voice rising beyond the control he had so far exhibited. He pointed a finger derisively at the shabbily-clad, emaciated figure of Knowles. "Charlotte, are you going to believe that thing—or me?"

It was a flare-up of that inordinate self-esteem that Knowles had discovered too late. Garrarder stood there, strong, handsome in his trim flying clothes, with his medals on his chest, demanding our verdict with a confidence that nothing could destroy. His mind told him that we believed him not, but his conceit would not have it so.

"I believe him," said Charlotte Remsen, and laid her hand gently on Chester Knowles's thin arm.

"That being so," Lathrop interposed suddenly, "I suggest that you leave, Captain Gararder."

But Garrarder did not hear him. He was staring at the man and woman who stood together. The flash of egoism was dying on his face; it was hardening into a mask of hate.

The derision was gone; in its stead was implacable malice. His hands sank down into the pockets of his leather coat.

"Very well," he said, and his hoarse voice was hardly more than a whisper. "Since *you* will not listen to reason, I must appeal to others. He is guiltless of everything in your eyes; in mine he is an assassin. The cowardly attempt to murder me was witnessed by many people on the ground. And he is worse than a thief, for he has tried this day not only to kill, but to rob me of my honor and reputation among flying men."

He stopped, and the muscles of his throat moved spasmodically as he gulped for air.

"Take your choice, Knowles," he went on in that thin, tense voice. "I'll turn you over to the police, like a common felon, or you'll fly that Spad under the guns of my ship to Mitchel Field. We'll see at Mitchel, among pilots, who is to be be-

lieved. We'll see who thinks I deserted you in France—who thinks I jumped in fear of you."

Garrarder back to the wall, withdrew one hand from his coat, and revealed for an instant the blue sheen of an automatic. Then he thrust hand and pistol back into his pocket.

"Though I didn't ask the C. O. for permission, my machine guns are loaded, too, since I come to call on a killer," he said. "The police wagon or the Spad? Which?"

Knowles had glanced with contempt at the pistol.

"It is time for a reckoning between us," he said. "I will fly to Mitchel Field, but not as your prisoner."

"You'll be under arrest, flying in front of the guns of my ship," Garrarder replied.

Knowles laughed. "I will see that I do not," he said steadily.

"Man, you'll never get to Mitchel if you leave this field," Lathrop burst out. "Don't you see? He'll work an old game on you—shoot you full of holes and say you tried to escape."

"You are right," Garrarder answered, with that evil smile of his. "If he tries to escape I will bring him down. But it will be his bullets against mine, for I will not fire on an unarmed ship."

"A modern pursuit ship—against an old Spad!" Lathrop exclaimed. "Knowles, you wouldn't have a chance!"

"I appreciate your warning," Knowles said quietly. "But under the circumstances—hadn't I better take the Spad? May I borrow it? It is not a good time to fly, but I will take care of it."

"The police wagon will be safer," Garrarder sneered.

"Go ahead, Knowles," said Lathrop, gruffly.

For just a moment Knowles looked at the girl, who was standing silent, with one white hand gripping the other.

"I will come back, Charlotte," he said. He opened the door of the shack and stepped out into the gale. The door banged shut.

Garrarder, hands still in his pockets, paused before Charlotte Remsen, his lips twisted into a grin.

"If he does, I won't, my lady," he said, with an ironical bow and flung the door open with a blow of his fist. Lathrop, Kent Remsen, and I followed him out.

V.

"CAN'T we stop—it?" I whispered to Lathrop as we took the few steps to the hangar. "In this mood Gar—"

"Knowles wants to go," Lathrop answered inflexibly. "There'll be justice for him at Mitchel—if he gets there. He's got to risk it. That 'chute jump won't deceive army pilots."

It was true. At Mitchel Field was Knowles's only chance of a hearing that would reinstate him in the eyes of his old squadron mates.

In silence we opened the hangar doors and rolled out the Spad. Garrarder's motor roared into action first—terrific cacophony that told us he had under his hand twice the power of the obsolete Spad.

Knowles started his motor, and warmed it with methodical care, his face averted as he listened with strained ears to its symphonic song of energy. Less powerful it was, but there was no false note in it.

Garrarder jumped out of his cockpit and walked over to the side of the Spad. Knowles throttled down to idling speed, and turned an impassive face toward his enemy.

"Take off and circle left to three thousand above the field," Garrarder instructed harshly. "Then head toward Mitchel Field. Remember, you're my prisoner. Keep your hands away from your triggers. If you make the slightest attempt to get away from my guns or to attack me I'll drop you!"

Knowles, without a sign that he had heard, again opened up his throttle.

In the midst of that renewed roar Garrarder put his foot in the step of the Spad and brought his mouth close to the eartab of Knowles's helmet. His lips moved rapidly in a few secret syllables, and then he dropped to the ground again.

His eyes were gleaming balefully and did not move from Knowles as he backed a step from the machine.

Knowles nodded, inscrutably. For just

an instant their eyes met and measured each other. Garrarder's face was drawn up in a grimace of hate; Knowles's countenance, less malignant, was no less stern and determined.

The time had come for these two to meet. No longer could their enmity continue unexpressed. We all felt that.

Suddenly Garrarder turned and ran to his machine. He scrambled in hastily, as if he feared that at this moment he was to be stopped.

Lathrop jerked the chocks from under the Spad's wheels. Slowly Knowles taxied toward the down wind corner of the field. Garrarder's pursuit ship followed.

Something brushed against my hand. Charlotte Remsen stood beside us, watching silently with her face colorless and still.

The wind was rocking the treetops, whistling through the telegraph wires that ran beside the road, and beating down the grass of the field. And with it was a rain that pattered on us and would rattle like leaden hail on the ships when they reached flying speed. The gusts were severe and erratic; the air was thick one moment and thin the next.

Certainly it was no weather to fly combat planes. The ships would be crashed or fighting against destruction the minute they tried to take off. The smallness of the field did not matter, they would be down in pieces or high in the air long before they reached the boundary of trees.

At the corner of the field Knowles, racing his motor, kicked his machine's head into the wind. He looked toward us for a moment, and I saw his hand move out of the cockpit and down the side of the ship. Something fell from his fingers.

Then I heard the roar of his motor, now faint, now loud. The Spad rocked along over the soggy, uneven ground. Knowles lifted the tail off quickly. The ship bounced, the landing wheels reached for the earth once more, and found only air. A gust hit the ship and blew it a dozen feet higher.

The quick hand of the pilot checked the dive that followed, and he zoomed out of the danger zone that lies just above the earth. The white blotch of his face was sidewise now, as he looked back at the other ship.

Garrarder had started only seconds behind. His more powerful motor lifted his ship into the air with half the run that the Spad had taken.

He, too, zoomed at once, before some vagrant blast should roll him over. His ship was close behind the Spad now. His guns, fixed to fire in the direction of his flight, covered the other machine.

They passed the edge of the field. Knowles headed straight on into the wind. I remembered Garrarder's order, to circle left to three thousand. This was defiance—a challenge, under the very muzzles of the machine guns.

Garrarder's fingers must have been on his triggers, lustful to kill. He sent a burst of lead instantly at the Spad. The action was so quick that we could hardly credit the sight of that streak of gray puffs ahead of his motor cowl.

To us the tracers seemed to rake the Spad from tail to propeller.

But the ship ahead was banking sharp to the right. Its wings swept to the vertical and it snapped around, out of the line of fire. Whether the bullets had passed through the Spad fuselage, it was still in the air. Its vital parts were untouched. The bank carried it straight back on its course, down the puffy wind.

It was a reckless thing, a bank so steep and sudden, for it takes terrific speed to turn thus down a fast wind. But it was not so reckless as to remain in the line of the throbbing machine guns.

Knowles lost altitude in the turn, for the nose of his ship dropped. He still had control. His wheels whizzed over the tops of the small trees bordering the field.

Garrarder followed, but in a wider turn. He opened up his motor and his ship leaped after the slower Spad. Again, as he dipped his nose, he cut loose a stream of lead at the fleeing plane.

Knowles's ship was not ten feet off the ground, yet he banked until one wing tip seemed to graze the grass. In the uncertain wind the wing might touch—hook in—at any instant. That would mean a Spad in splinters, and a dead pilot.

But the ship straightened up, and fled down the field, away from us. Its wheels skimmed over the ground.

It was a desperate game that Knowles was playing. He had brought the fight down into the deadly zone where the slightest slip of hand or foot would be fatal. At twenty thousand feet a man may stall or slide, make any blunder, with perfect safety. At twenty feet a lapse is death.

The speed of Garrarder's new pursuit ship gave him every advantage, for he could follow with a reserve of power, awaiting that moment when the line of fire of his guns should cut into the cockpit of the ship ahead.

Knowles could only flee, for the Spad had not the speed and maneuverability of the other plane. Yet in fleeing he exposed himself to the forward pointing guns of Garrarder's ship.

Garrarder was tearing after him in a frenzy of rage. His guns snarled hot hate every time the elusive Spad swept before his sights. That was not often; the Spad seemed to dance always just out of range.

Knowles flickered down the field, changing direction at every second, weaving a tortuous path. Garrarder, despite his superior speed, could not get his guns upon him. Some hundreds of yards beyond the boundary of the field the ships were not thirty feet apart.

Knowles zoomed suddenly, holding the nose of his ship up until the plane wavered in the air. Garrarder shot under him, unable to follow the quick maneuver. Knowles, somehow avoiding a fatal slide, nosed over, and for the first time in that encounter was on the tail of his enemy.

It was Garrarder's turn then to dodge bullets. But Knowles did not fire. The newer pursuit ship was only in range for a fraction of a second; the pilot, with throttle full on, pulled away in a sharp, climbing turn that Knowles could not follow.

The army ship swept high into the air above the field, the sheer power of the whirring propeller drawing it away from the earth and the machine that had threatened its vulnerable point. Then down it came again, nose on the Spad. But this time Garrarder came more slowly, to prevent a repetition of Knowles's maneuver.

The Spad, constantly changing direction, raced up the field toward us, in front of the hangar, then over to the corner of the field whence the two ships had taken off. Knowles zoomed again, and this time Garrarder instantly zoomed with him, higher yet.

If Knowles tried that same trick now—The Spad whipped about in a swift Immelman turn, half roll and half loop, that reversed direction. He shot by a few scant feet under Garrarder's upward plunging ship.

The sharpness of the zoom had robbed Garrarder of his speed; no ship yet built can ascend vertically. He thrust his stick forward frantically, to dive for speed and control. The machine nosed over and roared ahead with unbelievable rapidity.

But in that second the Spad, too, had been moving. It had executed another precise Immelman. Its nose was pointing toward Garrarder's tail. The two ships were shooting along in the same direction. Knowles's fixed gun covered his enemy. I caught a glimpse of Garrarder's back-turned head.

For just an instant Garrarder held his course, as if in panic he trusted to his mighty motor to outrace bullets. A clear target he presented in that moment of fear or aberration.

But no stream of dim white tracers cut a line from Knowles's gun. He was not shooting. As the two ships swept out of our sight Garrarder had just begun to swerve.

They were back in a second. The Spad, weaving its fantastic course, was ahead again and skimming the corner of the hangar. Garrarder's motor was throttled down, as he tried to follow and yet not overshoot the flickering machine ahead.

He was not risking the Spad on his tail again. At that lower speed the Spad was the better ship, for its motor's weight was less. But if he realized his advantage, Knowles made no move to profit by it.

Back down the field they thundered, the thinner roar of the Spad mingling with the deep-throated exhaust of the newer ship.

Knowles flew with head half turned, sending his ship through its dodging, climbing, dropping course, as if without conscious effort. He was studying his enemy, outguessing him as smoothly as he was outflying him.

And then suddenly one of his quick zooms high up in the air did not continue into a drop and skillful sidewise twist as the other had. The zoom eased off into a climb, a climb as rapid as the Spad's straining engine would permit. Knowles was making altitude.

Garrarder was taken by surprise. He had not attempted to follow that zoom. He had pointed his ship farther into the wind and pressed his triggers, sending his fire into the region into which he hoped the Spad would glide.

When he grasped that Knowles was climbing in earnest he instantly gave his ship the gun to the limit. It roared up in pursuit.

The ships roared like rockets, but Garrarder steadily overcame Knowles's lead. At fifteen hundred feet they were even and over the other end of the field.

Garrarder, emboldened by the altitude under his wheels—ample space to fly in for the first time since the fight had begun—charged after Knowles with new confidence.

Knowles dived. His machine turned its nose earthward in a straight, unwavering plunge. It was an invitation to attack—as reckless a thing to do as to drop fists to the side during a fist fight. It exposed the Spad to Garrarder's bullets, if he followed, in as perfect a target as a man may have in the air.

Garrarder was on him almost instantly. The Spad came down with motor full on, with struts humming and wires screaming. The tortured, straining ship was shooting earthward at a speed far beyond the bounds of safety. Behind it, the pursuit ship, built to withstand such stresses, cleft its way.

It looked like the end for Knowles. Rapidly the stronger, more powerful ship gained on the Spad. Garrarder lined up on the ship ahead; the machine guns roared in a burst of tracer and lead that marked its passage plainly in the air. An easy matter now to focus that deadly stream in the body of the Spad's pilot.

The speed of the power dive annihilated the distance to earth in seconds.

So smoothly as to be almost imperceptible, the Spad's course changed. The headlong dive became a descent; the descent less sharp. But the ship itself seemed almost down on the grass of the field. And, easily as it seemed to come out of the dive, I knew the strains on the machine were tripled by the change of direction. Any moment now—

But the machine neither broke its back nor struck earth. It leveled off, shot up, lay over on its back in a sure, even, circular course—a perfect loop, so wide that the Spad's excess speed was dissipated as it swept on down the turn that would bring it upright again.

Garrarder had looped, too, but he had jerked his ship away from the ground, in a way that would have ripped the linen off the wings of a less stout plane. And his loop was smaller and rather ragged. Few men can loop perfectly when they start at no altitude at all.

The Spad was higher in the air; it was above Garrarder's ship as it came up and reeled over on its back. And as Garrarder finished his loop, the Spad came down on his tail. Positions were reversed. Knowles's third chance to down his enemy had come.

Garrarder must have sensed what had happened, for he did not look behind. His ship was headed toward our end of the field. It had little altitude and no speed to zoom. He side-slipped. The Spad behind instantly imitated the move. Both ships were brought almost to the ground by that peculiar maneuver.

Garrarder's ship hummed on, gaining speed now. As it approached us the pilot swung it so it was head on, toward us. Then we realized why Garrarder had side-slipped. Now, if Knowles fired, he would rake our group in front of the hangar, as well as the plane.

Garrarder was using us as a shield to escape the storm of bullets from the Spad. Lathrop seized the girl. We all dropped to the ground.

Hugging the grass, Garrarder shot toward us. He was striving mightily to lengthen his distance ahead of the Spad, before he zoomed above us and again exposed himself to the burst of fire he feared.

And still that fire was withheld. The Spad, gun silent and cold, pursued at its best pace, nose held unwaveringly in the line of the leading ship's fuselage.

Garrarder, I think, turned—turned for a quick glance at this man who had bested him with an inferior ship—who might at any moment prove his victory by a hail of hot lead. And the nose of his ship came up, to leap the hangar.

But Garrarder's eyes were turned astern a tick of time too long. His arm was tardy in pulling back on the stick, raising his ship high, out of range of our protecting bodies, to take his chance in the air above.

The machine hurtled at us, stunning our senses, paralyzing our bodies. Its wheels sang over our heads, and then, with a rattling crash, hooked into the roof of the low hangar.

The motor roared on for a moment. Then, behind the hangar came a tremendous shock that seemed to stir the earth under our feet. It was such a sound and impact as might come when a molten meteor ended its course through space in the bosom of the earth.

Above us, hardly noticed, the Spad rushed by and banked back to the field.

Lathrop and I dashed around the hangar. In the meadow beyond the road we found the mighty motor, a mass of metal imbedded in the ground. Around it blazed the splintered remnants of the plane. Somewhere in that hell of flaring gasoline was the crushed body of the pilot. Garrarder had played it safe—risked other lives to save his own—once too often. There was nothing we could do. The impact must have killed him.

Back on the field Kent Remsen had brought his sister into the shack. The Spad had landed and came taxiing up to the line. Knowles sprang out and faced us. He cast a glance of deep concern toward the workshop where Charlotte Remsen had been led, and then turned soberly to us.

"Garrarder's dead," said Lathrop. "He was no coward, but he thought too much of himself."

"You didn't kill him; he killed himself," I added. "But what happened to your gun? Did it jam before you could fire a shot?"

Knowles pointed to the corner of the field from which he had started his take-off.

"The drums of ammunition are there, where I threw them," he said quietly. "The gun is empty. I had no wish to kill him. It was to prove myself no assassin, no coward, here or in France, that I fought. I have need of a good name now—I hope."

Lathrop dug his heel in the wet ground and looked away.

"Man, you proved your case," he muttered. "You proved it. We'll be as easy on Garrarder as we can, but the men of your squadron must know the truth."

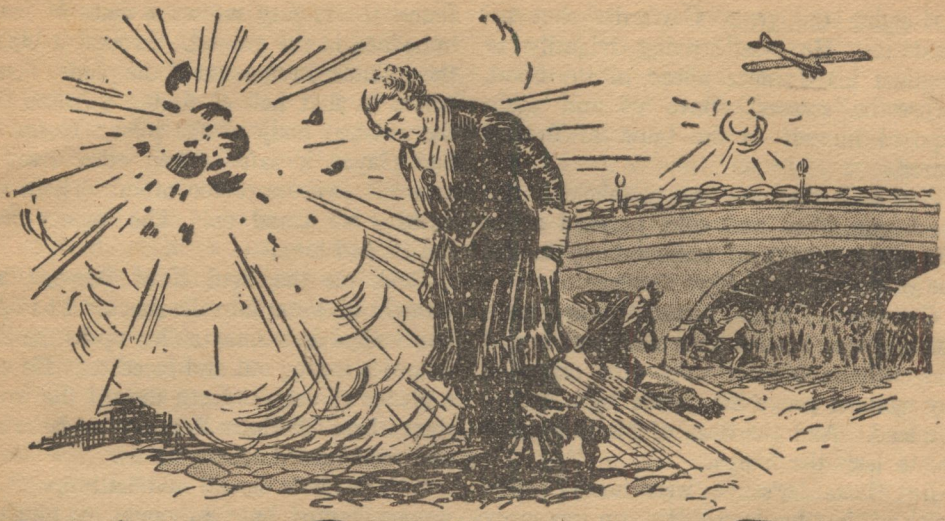
THE END

STARS AND FIREFLIES

HE who made the stars
Made fireflies, too;
The stars were not enough!
He knew
There must be fireflies, too.

And so he made great deeds
For us to do;
But, "These are not enough,"
He knew—
He made the small tasks, too.

Richard Kirk.



The Call to Arms

By GORDON STILES

Author of "Their Private War," "Profits of War," etc.

WHAT HAS OCCURRED IN PART I

RALPH GOODRICH had spent most of his eighteen years in England, as his father, Dudley Goodrich, was British representative of the Hemphill Farm Machinery Company. When war was declared, he entered an Officers Training Camp, coming out as second lieutenant. While on his final leave before going to the front, and his friend, Walter Haines, was on his first leave from the front, there is entertaining at the Goodrich home. Kitty, Ralph's sister—who is Walter's sweetheart—has her friend, Pauline Lowe, another canteen worker, and she and Ralph realize they love each other. Hugo Camp, who has been sent over by the Hemphill company, to absorb Goodrich's knowledge and then supercede him—the company thinking that he has lost the American viewpoint—also attends the parties with a wounded British officer's wife, Mrs. Rena Jarvis. Then, Oscar Gerhard, American friend of the Goodrich son in America, Arthur, arrives ostensibly on legal business; under cover of friendliness draws the young officers out, at the same time sending war secrets in coded messages to espionage agents in America.

CHAPTER IX.

WHAT BROKE UP THE PARTY.

FOUR days later Ralph got his orders. He was to report forthwith to the great artillery training camp at Lydd, on the Kentish coast. That was pleasant, because on such occasions as he could obtain week-end leaves, it would be possible for him to go up to London. The family was happy over it and so was Pauline. Walter had gone North to visit his people, but the daily letters which Kitty opened surreptitiously, almost indicated that he was in touch with the Goodrich establishment.

The friendly Oscar rejoiced with Ralph and hoped he would be permitted to visit the young officer in his new quarters as soon as he should return from a trip to the North which he had in contemplation. To which Ralph replied that he would feel slighted if Oscar did not find his way to Lydd. There was of course no fear of that. Oscar meant to go at the first opportunity.

On the eve of Ralph's departure for his new post, Rena Jarvis gave a big party to

This story began in the Argosy-Allstory Weekly for August 6.

which Ralph and Kitty were bidden. Oscar and Hugo Camp were there as also were some dozen officers and sundry girls from various government departments. It was arranged that Ralph should go to pick up Pauline at nine thirty and bring her to the flat.

At the outset, Kitty saw that this would turn out to be the wettest party she had experienced. There was altogether too much liquor being served. Camp and Gerhard had rigged an impromptu bar in one corner of the room and were ballyhooing for patronage. Some of the officers had dined too well and already were approaching the messy stage.

Ralph frowned his disapproval when he caught his sister's eye, but he didn't quite see what could be done about it. He indulged in a couple of whiskys and soda and Kitty politely sipped a glass of champagne. Beyond that Ralph decided not to go.

He knew that wild parties took place every night—scores of them. It was the logical outcome of the war, where the city is full of men on leave—men who know that they may be dead in a week or less. They feel they are cheated if the hours are not crowded with excitement and nothing brews excitement faster than alcohol.

It was only that he did not care to be snarled up in a carousal that would leave him with a headache to carry along to camp. Besides, there was Kitty as well as the fact that he must drive a good many miles that night.

When the time came for him to collect Pauline, he suggested that Kitty go along with him. But Rena chanced to be talking with the girl at the time and she waved him off with "Toddle off, Ralph. Kitty is all right here with me. I'll take care of her. On your way and hurry back."

Ralph glanced at his sister who nodded in confirmation. "Yes. I'll be all right with Rena. You go along and, as Rena says: 'make it snappy.'" Whereupon the young man made his way down the single flight of stairs that led to the street and was soon speeding off to Pauline's canteen. He would hurry back, sure enough. That bunch was going altogether too strong.

Kitty watched her brother go with a touch of misgiving. But she had felt that to leave in the face of Rena's remark would be rude and, anyway, Ralph would not be away long. She turned her eyes to the half dozen couples dancing to the strains of a phonograph, observed that certain of the officers were making heavy work of it. Over at the "bar" Camp was draining his glass again and his face was deeply flushed with what he had consumed.

Oscar appeared to be quite himself although he swallowed a glass of wine from time to time. He certainly was "the little brother" of the officers who, with a frequency that astonished Kitty, applied for further refreshment. "Great little war, sir!" was his favorite greeting.

And the response was likely to be enthusiastic and now and then one of the "customers" would pause to dilate upon his own part in said war while he toyed with his drink.

Presently Kitty was approached by an officer whom Rena introduced as Captain Orson. "Shall we?" he inquired, indicating the dance space.

Kitty laughed and gave the current answer: "Let's." Orson had been drinking, but he seemed able to take care of himself and the girl wanted to be obliging. She had danced twice before the party began to grow rough and could think of no ready excuse for declining now. So they moved off to the rollicking air of Tipperary.

Kitty at once realized that Orson was farther gone than she had thought. He danced stumblingly, stepped on her foot twice in one circuit of the room. The air was heavy with smoke and the fumes of liquor and, as they passed Rena, Kitty whispered: "Open the door for a minute."

Rena nodded. It was a good idea, she thought, and presently the thick air was cut by the clear, cool draft from the hall. The only other tenant of the building, an artist whose studio occupied the top floor, was away in France, so nobody would be disturbed.

However, it was the opening of the door that led to far different results from what Kitty had anticipated. For, as they came around again, the captain gulped at the fresh air and, without a word, danced on in-

to the hall, carrying his partner with him. There he stopped, and before Kitty observed what he was about, he had closed the door which was fitted with a spring lock and could not be opened from the outside. Also, it so happened that Rena had crossed the room just at that moment and did not notice the departure of Kitty and her partner.

Kitty was not instantly alarmed. The air would do the captain good, she thought, and she preferred being there to dancing in the stuffy atmosphere of the flat. She would ring the bell and Rena would let them in.

The captain remarked, suddenly and thickly: "Clever lad, what?"

"Clever?" Kitty repeated, turning to look at him.

"Ha, ha," he chuckled. "Clever. Of course. Shutting us out. Shutting them in. Ha, ha!"

With which he suddenly grasped the girl's wrists and drew her toward him! Kitty struggled. She hesitated to scream; it seemed such a betrayal of helplessness. But she was no match for his strength and in a moment his arm was around her shoulder and she could feel his heavy breath on her cheek!

Her mind worked quickly and she abruptly ceased her resistance. Taken by surprise, Orson relaxed his grip for the fraction of a second. It was then that Kitty, by a swift effort, freed herself and pushed the man from her. He staggered backward, teetered wildly for an instant on the brink of the staircase, then went over, and in a series of dull thuds, fell the length of the flight; lay in a motionless heap on the floor below!

The door flew open as Kitty turned to beat upon it and the guests poured out in an excited torrent, all shouting together, demanding to know what was the matter. Kitty stood, white-faced, and pointed to the figure of the captain. "He tried to kiss me and I pushed him," she said. "He lost his balance and fell."

"Har, har! Fell for you twice!" bawled a wag whose drunken brain had not grasped the seriousness of the matter.

Some one bade him: "Shut up, you fool." And three or four men hastened below where they lifted the unconscious form of Captain Orson to a sitting position. Kitty, with the instinct that had come to her with her V. A. D. training, pulled herself together and thrust herself into the center of things.

"Rena," she said, "for Heaven's sake, herd that crowd back inside. We'll have the whole of Scotland Yard down on us in a minute. I'll see what can be done out here."

"That's right," Oscar Gerhard put in. Kitty looked up in relief. Here was one sober person, at any rate. With him she went to where Orson breathed heavily and groaned in pain.

"Lay him flat on his back," she ordered. When this had been accomplished, the girl knelt and deftly made an examination. In a moment she announced: "He has a broken collar bone. Of course there may be internal injuries and if any of his friends know where to take him, they had better do it and call in a doctor. I don't fancy it would be wise for him to be taken to a military hospital in his present condition."

"Gad, no," agreed one of the others. "I know a doctor who has a nursing home in Bloomsbury. I'll give him a ring."

"That's it," Kitty said. "Meantime, get a pillow and blanket and we'll make him as comfortable as possible here. Captain Orson! Captain Orson! Do you feel better now?"

"M'm, m'm, yes. Better. M'm. Better."

"He's all right except for that bone," Kitty said.

Orson opened his eyes and stared at her. "Oh, it's you. Good sport. I'm all right. Sorry. Very sorry."

"Hush. Keep quiet," she commanded. And presently the ambulance from the nursing home slid up to the door.

When Ralph arrived, ten minutes later, he was astonished to find that half of the guests had departed and the rest had become amazingly sober. He listened gravely to Kitty's explanation, patted her on the shoulder. "Do you feel all right?"

"Yes, but I'd like to go home."

"All right. We'll go. The party's shot anyway, isn't it, Rena?"

"I'm afraid so," Rena said and smiled faintly.

Ralph started for the car with the girls. Oscar came hurrying after. "I'll go along, too, if you don't mind," he said.

CHAPTER X.

ALL IS FAIR IN WAR.

RALPH enjoyed his work at Lydd from the moment of his arrival. The young officers under training at the great camp were being rushed through the course with all the expedition possible, for now the huge munition plants which had sprung into being under the forceful direction of the dynamic Lloyd George were turning out their product in undreamed-of quantities. A steady flow of projectiles streamed into France along with the thousands of pieces of new artillery and the commanders in the field were calling for more and more officers to take charge of the batteries.

Frequently Ralph found himself participating in as many as four shoots a day, either as an observing officer in the O-Pips or directing the fire of the guns. For hours each day the big pieces thundered and the suffering ranges were torn by the "crumps" of exploding shells. And between shoots there were the hours when facts and theories were discussed and threshed out in the classrooms.

The crowd in the mess to which Ralph belonged was jolly and beyond a bit of mild spoofing because the United States still hung back, he encountered no unpleasantness. There was the usual amount of drinking and considerable gambling, though not for high stakes. While poker is an American game, the British are quite as keen about it, and every evening found three of four tables in full swing in the anteroom. Seldom was the limit greater than a half crown. The commanding officer, Colonel Tait, frowned upon higher play.

Ralph discovered that leave was difficult to obtain; the subalterns had to serve as orderly officers and the proportion of higher ranks was rather large. So more than a month had passed before he managed a week-end in London. However, there were the letters from Pauline every day or two—letters that thrilled Ralph through and through.

It didn't seem possible that a girl like Pauline Lowe could care enough about him to devote so much time to letter writing. But there was the evidence, a fast-growing bundle of it. And each missive meant more than the last. It was all very astonishing. And wonderful!

There were letters from Kitty and his mother, occasionally from Dudley Goodrich. The latter were rather serious, contained much sound advice, but breathed a deep affection that caused Ralph's heart to go out over and over again to this splendid father. From New York Arthur wrote:

DEAR RALPH:

Congratulations on your commission. Now you are a full-fledged British officer, and I am sure you will be a credit to the army and to yourself. I wish you would send me a photograph of yourself; I can't quite picture you in uniform.

As you probably now realize, the participation of America is fast fading into a pipe dream. Wilson will be renominated, largely because he has kept us out of the big scrap. He will be reëlected for the same reason. You will see that after November, the last possibility of our entry will be washed out. This, in spite of the terrific British and French propaganda with which we have been bombarded for more than a year.

Oscar writes very flattering letters about you; he likes you tremendously. From what he says, I imagine he will be over there for a long time to come. It appears that there are so many intricacies in those contracts and the English are so slow moving that the job has assumed mighty proportions. I miss him a lot.

Camp tells me that he gets on swimmingly with father and that he is making good progress in a business way. We are shipping a whale of a lot of munitions now, mostly small shells from three to six inches. It will be odd if you chance to use some of those we turn out, what? I suppose it is possible.

The farm machinery end of the business is rotten, except for the tractors the British government has at last got around to order. I understand the government is buying them to loan to the farmers so that more acreage may be placed under cultivation. What with the U-boat sinkings, it's no wonder they are becoming alarmed. I'll bet a statement of lost tonnage would startle the world, but, of course, they wouldn't do that on a bet.

I wish mother and Kitty were out of it. It seems unfair that they should have to go on short rations. But I cannot seem to make a dent with them. Oh, I suppose it's natural, especially now that you are in the service.

Take care of yourself, kid. Write as often as you can, and don't forget that you have all my wishes for the best of luck.

ARTHUR.

Perhaps, Ralph mused, Arthur was right, after all. That is, right about the United States keeping to her hands-off policy. If Wilson should be renominated and elected, certainly Arthur's case would look sound. Ah, well, what was to be would be!

Three days before Ralph was to have his first leave he was surprised by a visit from his father, Hugo Camp, and Oscar Gerhard. Dudley explained that because of his newly created interest in munitions and his incidental connection with the ministry, he and Hugo had been given permission to visit the camp, and no objection had been raised when he had requested leave to take Oscar along. The latter had been eager to go.

They had two busy days together, watching shoots, inspecting the comparisons of airplane, balloon, and O-Pip observations, prowling about the pleasant countryside, and strolling along the beach. And during all of the twenty-four hours they could hear the rumbling growl of the guns in Flanders on the other side of the Channel.

Oscar casually inquired about the number of officers in training and the speed with which they were prepared for service. Was this the largest artillery training camp, and how did the others compare? He was much impressed, and made no efforts to conceal it.

"To think of it is to be astonished," he declared. "Why, England had practically no heavy artillery at the outbreak of the war. No machine guns at all. And now look at what is happening. I have heard a rumor that plans have been perfected for a *nineteen-inch* gun! Can you imagine such a monster? I wonder if there is anything in it."

Ralph replied truthfully that he did not know, wondered a little where Oscar had picked up his information; but he did not inquire, and the matter passed out of his mind almost at once.

The visit of his father had a very satisfactory angle, in that it gave Ralph opportunity to dispose of a lot of family conversation which would have taken up considerable time in London. Thus it gave him more hours to spend with Pauline. When she was free his family saw precious little of him unless Pauline was at the Goodrich home.

He had four days of delightful foolishness, and when he returned to his post he knew that he loved Pauline and was in a happy agony over the state of her mind in regard to himself. But he dared not put it to the test—not yet.

He went back in a happy frame of mind, and with no thought that his next visit to London would be one of dumb anguish—part and parcel of the most terrible blow he ever had been called upon to suffer!

Dudley Goodrich had gone to Chatham to take up a business matter with the authorities at the naval station there. He was to return by a train which was due to reach Charing Cross at ten in the evening. Kitty would be on duty until nine. That left Margaret Goodrich to dine in solitude—a situation which she did not relish.

Summoning Anna, the cook, Mrs. Goodrich said:

"Suppose you bring me nothing but a cup of tea and a biscuit. I think I shall go down to Charing Cross and meet Mr. Goodrich. Then, if you don't mind, you could fix us a bit of late supper. Kitty will be home before we are, and she probably would like something to eat. It's going to be a fine evening, so I shall go early and walk part of the way."

"Very good, madam," Anna said, and departed to fetch the tea and biscuit.

Margaret Goodrich nibbled slowly at the food, whiled away the time reading the evening paper, skipping hastily over the casualty list, a habit she had acquired since Ralph joined the colors. Then she left a note for Kitty, saying that she would be home about ten thirty. At a quarter before nine she left the house.

It was early in May, and the air was soft and caressing. There was no moon, but the sky was like velvet, studded with many stars. Mrs. Goodrich strode along with a brisk step, inhaling deeply of the balmy air. She passed through the tunnel under the tracks at Putney Bridge Station. She would walk on to Walham Green and board the district railway train there. That would give her ample time to reach Charing Cross before Dudley's train could arrive.

She covered ground more quickly than she knew, and alighted at Charing Cross a full twenty minutes before ten o'clock. Not caring to wait in the dim and dingy station, she strolled along the Embankment for a little way, moving slowly and looking out over the dark and solemn river to the shapeless smudge of buildings on the far side.

She paused and leaned on the parapet near Cleopatra's Needle, watched a string of barges slipping down the stream. The benches across the sidewalk each held its pair of lovers; the combination of spring and soldiers home on furlough was much too much for the English maidens of 1916.

Mrs. Goodrich started to continue her walk, let her eyes travel to the anti-aircraft gun mounted on a platform a dozen feet above its concrete base. Naturally enough, her thoughts flew to Ralph. She wondered what he was doing at that moment, and while she was thus musing the thing happened!

From above her head came a thunderous roar! A spout of bright flame sprang from the muzzle of the gun. Instantly this was followed by the now familiar crump of the "maroon," signal that enemy aircraft were upon the city! From a score or more distant points was borne the sound of similar explosions.

Margaret stood still, petrified with fear. Air raids terrified her. Then the sight of the bench sitters, hastily leaving—the frightened cries of the girls and the soothing rumble of men's voices—galvanized her into action. All those near by were hurrying west, seeking shelter.

Then she remembered that the passage where the Embankment ran under the abutments of Charing Cross railway bridge had been fortified with sandbags, transformed into a sort of huge dugout to be used by the public as a shelter against the bombs of the enemy. She ran for it. The spot was but a short distance away, but when she reached it some fifty persons already were inside, huddled back in the darkness, and from all quarters streams of excited men and women were making for this sturdy haven.

Within five minutes the refuge was packed to overflowing—crowded with a motley assortment of humans, pressed together quite in the manner that prevails in the subways of New York. There were women laughing hysterically, others whimpering. Evil smelling bargemen and cursing workmen with ale on their breath. It was too dark for them to see each other's faces, but the sound of a hundred different voices, punctuated by shrill exclamations of fright from overwrought women, reverberating from the sandbagged walls and low, arched roof, produced a remarkable effect—a bedlam, no less!

But all this was lost presently in the terrific roar of the guns outside. Parliament Hill, Regents Park, Hyde Park, Battersea—from these and many other points came the thunder of the discharges, the who-o-ooh of the sky-bent projectile, the sharp crack of the burst! In and out of it wove the hum of the defending airplanes. Earth and sky aflame! Hell let loose!

Then the sickening roar—the nerve shattering crash of falling bombs! These came from three different quarters. The little gun down there on the Embankment barked away, regularly and defiantly, and at each discharge the huddled refugees winced. It was too close!

Margaret Goodrich, her heart beating wildly, sick with fear, stood for twenty minutes where she had been jammed against the dank wall of the tunnel. She felt reasonably safe when she came to consider it. But there was Kitty! And Dudley! Of course the train he was on would stop and remain motionless and unlighted while the raid was in progress. But it might be hit even so.

Perhaps these thoughts contributed to the nausea which suddenly swept over her,

superinduced by the foulness of the shelter. The smoke of cigarettes, strong pipes, gin, whisky, beer, sweaty and unwashed bodies! It was horrible! She must have fresh air, raid or no raid!

In an awful fear of sudden collapse she fought her way toward the exit. The explosions outside were less frequent now; the worst appeared to be over. This favored Margaret in her efforts to make her way through the densely packed mob, because already others were doing the same thing; many had left the refuge, preferring to take their chances in the open air rather than remain in so unsavory a place.

With what seemed to be her last ounce of strength Margaret dragged her body through the opening. Ah! But that was good! She filled her lungs gratefully, stretched her cramped arms, and stared into the heavens where swift, bright bursts of shrapnel shells told that the enemy still lurked above.

Even as she stared there came a horrible, shuddering *swish*. A blinding flash that lighted up white, terror-stricken faces. The rocking blast of the explosion!

Staring and jibbering—trembling at their miraculous escape, and with horror at what they saw, those who had been making their way to the outer air looked upon the grotesque heaps which dotted the Embankment, at the screaming, writhing figures that still held to life!

Margaret Goodrich neither screamed nor writhed. Her end had been mercifully swift. A jagged fragment of high explosive had pierced her heart as cleanly as a rifle bullet. She lay where she had fallen, her face still turned toward the gun that had reminded her of Ralph!

When Margaret Goodrich had been laid to rest, Kitty and Ralph stood together in the library of the stricken home, each trying to comfort the other by bearing up bravely. Tears trembled in Kitty's eyes and Ralph's throat ached with pent-up sobs. But they tried to address themselves to the problems that were before them.

Dry-eyed and shaken, his mouth set in a twisted line, Dudley stared dully from a window of the dining room. For a quarter of an hour he stood motionless. Behind him on the table lay the cablegram from Arthur:

> Impossible put in words terrible grief and shock I feel. Will write when I can collect myself. All my love and sympathy for you and Kitty and Ralph. For God's sake urge Kitty come here for remainder of war. ARTHUR.

Again and again the thought that if Margaret had taken Arthur's advice, she would now be alive, tortured the man's soul. And yet he knew that nothing in the world would have prevailed upon her to go. Even now, in the midst of her grief, Kitty flatly refused to consider leaving England.

But other thoughts seethed in Dudley's breast. And out of the chaos emerged one clear idea. At least he knew what to do first! He walked into the library and placed an arm around each of his children. They stood there holding to each other, drawing comfort from one another by mere contact.

At last Dudley announced quietly: "I am going to resign my job to-morrow."

Ralph turned to look at his father's face. "Resign your job!" he repeated. "But why, father?"

Kitty watched her parent with startled, questioning eyes.

Dudley went on: "I should lose it before long, anyway. I have been aware from the first that Hugo Camp has been picked for my successor!"

Ralph exclaimed: "Hugo Camp! What are you talking about?"

"It is quite clear to me. Hemphill feels that I have become Anglicized—at least, un-American—in my views. I don't exactly blame him. I have urged the righteousness of the Allied all along. We disagree sharply on the question of America's relation to the struggle. And he sent Camp here to learn sufficient about the foreign end to enable him to take over the post. That's all.

"However, even if that were not true, I should feel bound to give it up, anyway. Somewhere in this great army of millions there is a place for me, and I am going to join up! They can use me where they like; I'll take whatever job they offer so long as I can help. We'll have the Americans here eventually; I don't want to wait."

Ralph grasped his father's hand. "I'm glad," he said. He felt the pressure of the other's fingers. No more words were needed.

Kitty put her arms about Dudley's neck, drew his head down and kissed his lips. "Dad—you're splendid!" she murmured.

CHAPTER XI.

BETWEEN LINES.

HUGO CAMP said polite things when Dudley Goodrich told him of his proposed action, but inwardly he exulted. Here was a bit of luck; he would slip into the director's chair without the least bit of unpleasantness. He much preferred being on good terms with the Goodrich family. So he sighed with relief when the cable bearing Dudley's resignation had been actually filed.

Hemphill cabled from New York:

> Accept resignation with deepest regret. Feel I understand situation. Hope you will resume connection termination war.

Which communication Dudley read with his tongue in his cheek. He could have anticipated the message almost word for word. Well—that was that!

A bit regretfully, Dudley Goodrich cleared out the desk he had occupied so many years; his throat was a little tight as he looked about the familiar office—the office he had established and managed so well. He noticed for the first time that the rugs were somewhat shabby and two or three ink spots stood out accusingly. It seemed only yesterday that he had bought those rugs; it was almost incredible that they could be so worn.

His head ached, dully. He would wait until the next day before taking steps to get into the army. Transferring his personal belongings to Hurlingham would occupy part of the day and he wanted to telephone certain important patrons and break the news that he was leaving the Hemphill company. Perhaps by morning the whole thing would seem less like a horrible dream.

Hugo Camp took possession of Dudley's desk the moment the other quitted the office. His next step was to telephone Oscar Gerhard. The latter was almost bowled over by the tidings. Camp finished his end of the conversation with: "Suppose you and I do a little celebrating to-night? Have dinner together and go on somewhere afterward."

Oscar told him: "Matter of fact, I had asked Rena to dine with me."

"H-m!" said Hugo. "Ah! I have it! I'll dig up somebody and we'll make it a foursome. There's that Lowe girl—Pauline. She's a neat little trick and if she can make it, we'll be set. I'll try to get her on the wire and let you know afterward. All right?"

"Good enough. Snap into it."

Camp did get through to Pauline. As luck would have it, that evening was her night off from the canteen. Ralph had returned to his post and, even if he had not, she knew that he would feel bound to spend the time with Kitty. Camp had made himself agreeable to her on the occasions when they had met. He was quite presentable and could talk well when he set himself to it. So Pauline accepted gladly, and the party was arranged.

Oscar's invitation to Rena was, be it known, part of a deeply considered plan which had sprung into being within that young man's fertile brain. And the first steps toward the end he had in mind included winning the firm friendship and absolute confidence of the woman. The fact that Hugo Camp had been "rushing" her, so to speak, made no difference to Oscar. He believed that, if it came to a real showdown, he could easily put Hugo out of the running.

In this he was correct. While Hugo was presentable and attractive to women, Oscar possessed a higher degree of the polish which appeals to the fair sex and he was of a more brilliant mind. No doubt his Continental ancestry accounted for the easy deference and surface gallantry that marked Oscar Gerhard's attitude toward his feminine acquaintances.

In poaching on Hugo's preserves, however, Oscar had nothing to worry about. Because Camp was of the type which be-

lieves in variety. And already he was chafing under the proprietary manner which Rena had lately assumed toward him. Therefore he welcomed an opportunity to break the bonds by means not altogether graceless. The proposed dinner party would accomplish this nicely.

Further, Camp had taken a violent fancy to Pauline. For Ralph's claims, if any, he had no consideration. He was not one to respect another's rights in such matters. Ralph was only a kid, anyhow. Besides, he was away and would be for some time. It was all in the game.

Because of the conditions set down above, the party turned out to be an undeniable success. Rena's attendant was easily the choice of the two as far as appearances went, certainly. On the other hand, Camp set himself to be excessively agreeable to Pauline; treated her with a grave courtesy that stamped him in the girl's mind, as a man of parts.

Oh, Camp played a good system. When they parted Pauline said: "I have enjoyed myself so much, Mr. Camp. It has been a splendid evening."

To which Hugo replied: "I'm glad you liked our party; it wasn't very thrilling for you, I'm afraid. But I enjoyed the long talk we had. It's so hard to find a girl these days who can carry on an interesting or serious conversation, and it's refreshing to meet one who can."

The old hokum, of course, but it worked as nicely as ever. Hugo departed, chuckling inwardly, knowing perfectly well that he had registered with Pauline and that he would be splitting it not less than fifty-fifty in the girl's thoughts for the next few hours at least. He purposely had not tried to make another appointment with her; it would be better to telephone her when he got ready. That, he told himself, would be soon.

While Hugo was saying good night to Pauline, Oscar shook up cocktails and exchanged banter with Rena in the latter's flat. He had made good headway, he flattered himself, and he had a suspicion that Rena Jarvis was going to be very, very useful to him at no far distant date.

When he returned home, Hugo already had retired, but had not fallen asleep, for he called to the other from the half open door of his room. Oscar returned the greeting and added: "Would it bother you if I should do a little typing to-night? I'll close my door. Want to get a letter off on to-morrow's post and I have an appointment that will keep me busy all the morning."

"Not a bit. Go to it."

Whereupon Oscar locked himself in his own room and proceeded to carry out a most interesting program. First he got into dressing gown and slippers and seated himself at his portable typewriter. At the top of the sheet, he wrote:

PINNACLE EXPORT AND IMPORT COMPANY,
New York, N. Y., U. S. A.

Then the little machine clicked busily for thirty minutes or more. The net result of which was an excellently worded business letter of four pages. The communication went into prosaic details about the legal aspects of certain alleged deals. In itself, it was enough to make the most vigilant censor yawn.

But, having completed and signed the epistle, Oscar proceeded to the next stage of his activities, one which would have startled a great many people had they witnessed it.

From the bottom of his steamer trunk the young man extracted a small leather case which he unlocked with a tiny key attached with others to a gold key ring.

When this was opened there were disclosed two rubber-stoppered bottles and several glass pens such as money order clerks use in many United States post offices. Oscar carefully removed the stopper from one of the vials and dipped the pen therein.

Then, selecting the third sheet of the letter he had written, he began to write. The pen moved slowly and smoothly along, but it moved in the spaces between the typewritten lines and when the writer had come to the bottom of the page, there was nothing to show for it!

Oscar picked up the sheet gingerly between thumb and finger, held it close to the light, scanning every inch of it minutely. He nodded his head in satisfaction, in-

closed the letter in an envelope with printed address and, after tossing off a small drink of whisky, got into bed!

CHAPTER XII.

YOUTH IN LOVE.

IF there had been any doubt in Dudley Goodrich's mind as to his fitness to serve, it was dispelled in a twinkling when he made his way to the war office and asked to be taken into his majesty's forces. In less than an hour—which is going some for British officialdom even in war time—he had been slated for a captain's commission in the department of military intelligence.

It was men of his abilities, he was frankly told, who were most needed in the army. Age did not count for much, particularly in the branch of the service to which he would be assigned. *Brains* topped the market at the moment.

And the physical examination would be only a formality. Which it turned out to be and before night, Dudley Goodrich's name had been forwarded to the *Gazette* and his order for uniform and equipment placed with a firm in Haymarket!

Kitty hugged her father when he came home that evening and showed her his blue enlistment papers. "I knew they would jump at the chance of getting you, dad," she told him. "Have you cabled Arthur?"

"No," he said. "I'll do it first thing in the morning."

Each knew that the other was thinking: "Now, if Arthur only were in—" But neither put the thought into words. Nor was the name of Margaret Goodrich mentioned. Two hearts ached dully with the agony that time alone could soften. The man and the girl knew that their one consolation lay in working hard for the cause to which they had committed themselves.

After dinner Kitty succeeded in getting Ralph on the telephone and told him the news.

"That's great!" he assured her. "I've got some news myself. I'm going to the front at the end of the week and shall be in London to-morrow for four days' overseas leave!"

"Oh, Ralph!" she cried and her heart fluttered—partly from excitement, partly from dread. "Are—are you—glad, dear?"

"I should say I am! It's what we've all been waiting for, isn't it?"

"Yes. But it seems so—so sort of sudden!"

"I know. That's how I felt when they told me, even though I'd been looking forward to it for months. Strange, isn't it? Well, I'll see you to-morrow noon. I'm keen to see father in uniform."

Dudley Goodrich's appointment with the medical board covered the time of the arrival of Ralph's train; Kitty would be on duty, also. She tried to get Hugo Camp on the wire, thinking he would not mind driving to Victoria and picking Ralph up. Gerhard answered the call. No, Hugo was out. But if there was anything he could do—

Kitty explained and Oscar told her that he would be delighted to meet her officer brother. Further, he would take Ralph to lunch and run him out home afterward. All of which suited Kitty and she knew Ralph would be pleased.

Accordingly, when Ralph stepped from the train next day, Oscar's car was waiting, and the pair went off to the Hyde Park Hotel for lunch. Over the excellent food which Oscar ordered they chatted away about the event that so largely occupied Ralph's mind.

Gerhard said: "How are you going out—as a replacement? Or are they sending out complete batteries? I suppose you would prefer going with your own crowd to being a strange dog in a strange kennel."

"Oh, we're all slated for new batteries—twenty-two of them, I understand," returned Ralph innocently.

"That's fine," the other said, "all bound for the Western front, I suppose."

"I believe so. But none of us know which sector, of course. That's a deep, dark secret." Both of them laughed at this.

They motored out to Hurlingham. Ralph had to check up his field equipment and Oscar would be occupied with a number of things, among which was tea at Rena Jarvis's place.

While the above events were taking place, Hugo Camp was framing up a second engagement with Pauline Lowe. He had come in late the night before and departed before Oscar was awake. Thus he knew nothing of the pending arrival of Ralph. And when he telephoned the girl she, too, was in ignorance of the latest developments for the good reason that Ralph had planned to surprise her by walking in on her at the canteen.

Camp said: "Would it seem presumptious if I ask you to dine with me on Friday? That's your evening off, isn't it?"

"Why, I think I can manage it; I'm sure I can, Mr. Camp. I'll come with pleasure. Will you call for me or shall I meet you somewhere?"

"Which ever suits you best."

"Then I'll meet you at the Claridge. That's convenient and it will save me going home."

"Good enough," said Camp. He hung up and sat thinking for a few moments. He was beginning to like London, especially now that he had got the big job. A frown puckered his forehead for an instant as he recalled the astonishment of certain customers when they learned of Goodrich's retirement. Their attitude conveyed quite clearly that they were not overpleased with the change. Camp resented the esteem in which his predecessor appeared to be held everywhere. Oh, well—he had the position. Pauline Lowe was a peach and—there were others, no doubt.

At four o'clock, after having overhauled his kit and spent some time in conversation with his father who came through the physical examination swimmingly, Ralph, uniform carefully pressed and buttons shining, stepped smartly into the canteen where Pauline toiled at the cigarette counter.

The girl saw him and gasped in surprise. "Why, how on earth—" she began.

He laughed happily. "Surprised you, did I? I wanted to. I'm on overseas leave! What do you think of that?"

"You're going to—the front? When, Ralph?"

"On Saturday. I say, can't you wangle an hour off and have tea with me—at the Pic or somewhere?"

"I'll try," she said excitedly. "Wait here."

She disappeared and from behind a thin partition came the sound of buzzing voices. Pauline reappeared, radiant. "Uh-huh! I can go. One of the other girls is going to take over my job for an hour or so. I'll do it for her another time. I'll be with you in a second."

What they said over the tea table is of no consequence to the reader, however vital it may have been to Ralph and Pauline. The former had come to London fully determined to tell the girl of his love for her; all the way up in the train he had pictured to himself the occasion. He would not beat about the bush; he'd tell her straight out that she was everything in the world to him. Ask her to wait for him and all that.

But now here he was and here she was. And his throat was dry; his tongue like a button ball. He must have forgotten how marvelous she was. That he had dared fool himself with the idea that this divine creature could care enough for him to trust him with her future was preposterous. At any rate, he just couldn't say anything about it now!

Pauline, on her part, was worried. Ralph was to leave on Saturday and she had made an engagement with Hugo Camp for Friday night! She wanted to tell Ralph about it and ask him what she had better do, but could not quite work up the courage to do so. Perhaps she could beg off or something might turn up. She would wait. At her age, three days was a long time; anything might happen.

Everybody who has been favored with four days' overseas leave will readily understand how time flew for Ralph Goodrich. It simply romped away! There was Kitty and his father, the latter now smart in his new uniform and due to report for duty in a week. There were the daily gatherings at the Savoy and the Piccadilly bars. There was Pauline!

Hugo Camp he did not see, nor did he want to. He boiled when he thought of that individual in his father's place, not because of the fact in itself, but because of the circumstances in which Camp had come to England. A bit of sneaky business, he

counted it. He had not been sorry to hear that Camp was out of town.

He would have been surprised, however, had he known how disturbing to Pauline was the absence of Hugo. She had telephoned the Hemphill offices on the day after Ralph's return only to be told that Mr. Camp was in Manchester and was not expected before Friday afternoon. That made it awkward. It was one thing to break an engagement two or three days in advance, and another to call it off at the last moment. Pauline was rather meticulous in such matters.

Thus, when Thursday night came and Ralph called to take her out for a late supper, the girl was more than a little upset. Which showed in the absent mood which thrust itself upon her now and then. Ralph noticed it, asked: "What's wrong, Pauline, anything?"

She said: "No. Nothing's wrong." Said it in a tone that more than ever convinced her companion that something indeed *was* wrong. You know how women are that way.

Ralph was a bit fidgety himself. Thus far he had failed to work up the nerve necessary to tell Pauline what was in his mind. But he had sort of consoled himself with the notion that the proper time, really, would be on the eve of his departure for France. But now here was Pauline acting so queerly and it gave rise to an undercurrent of forebodings the nature of which he could not figure out at all. Presently it was time to go home.

"Where shall we dine to-morrow night?" Ralph asked suddenly.

Pauline started in spite of herself—in spite of the fact that she had been waiting for that question. With an effort, she got a grip on herself and her voice was fairly steady as she said: "I'm afraid we can't dine together to-morrow night, Ralph."

Ralph did not catch the appeal in her eyes as she raised them bravely to look at him.

"Can't dine together!" he exploded involuntarily. "But why—I—thought—I—" He stopped in confusion.

"I'm awfully sorry, Ralph," she told him. "But you see, I—I—have another engagement." She added quickly: "I made it before I knew you were coming home."

Ralph stiffened. "Oh," he said in a strained voice; fell silent and sat frowning at the tablecloth.

Pauline put out her hand, let her fingers rest upon his arm. He glanced at them sullenly. He knew he was making an ass of himself, and like all of his kind, knowing it, plunged deeper into the mire. "Oh, of course it's all right," he went on, trying to be casual and failing. "I just didn't understand."

"Understand what?" she demanded, with a return of her wonted spirit.

"I didn't understand that you—that you," he floundered, "were interested in—in—somebody else." He finished bitterly: "Another man, I suppose!"

Nettled by his tone, Pauline said: "Yes. Another man!"

Ralph lost his temper at that. "All I've got to say is that this is the last time that any girl makes a fool out of me!"

"See here, Ralph Goodrich," she countered sharply. "I won't have you or anybody else talk to me that way. I don't go in for making fools of people! And from what you have said—from the way you have acted, I wouldn't have a hard job in your case. That's that, I fancy."

The blood rose in a hot wave to Ralph's face. A sharp rejoinder sprang to his lips. But with all the turmoil going on within him, jealous curiosity forged to the front. He demanded: "Who is the gentleman, may I ask?"

Thoroughly angry, Pauline retorted: "In the beginning, I fully intended to tell you all about this engagement. Now, I shall not. It does not concern you in the least. If you will take me as far as the door, I'll go home."

Ralph paid the bill and they went out together. On the sidewalk, Pauline told him: "You're not to take me home. I'll go by the tube. No!" as he tried to usher her into his car, "I don't *want* you to take me home and I don't want to see you again, either!"

She turned and, whitefaced and stumbling, almost ran for the tube station. Ralph stared after her for a moment, then climbed

into the motor and grimly set his face toward Hurlingham.

On the way, he tried to maintain what he felt was righteous indignation. She *had* made a fool of him! She had been unfair! She should have told him when he first came about that engagement for the last night of his leave. She could not have cared for him the least bit and denied him that last evening. If ever a girl wants to have her man with her, it is when he is about to face death. Ralph felt a fresh wave of self-pity.

Later, all of these feelings turned into anguish—black hopelessness! He tossed about on his bed, throat tight and aching! The bottom had dropped out of everything! Never wanted to see him again! God! How could he endure those days, weeks, months, out there at the front without Pauline's letters!

And suddenly the war seemed cheap and shoddy! Life was unreal! A silly game that meant nothing! Ugh! At daybreak, Ralph fell into a sleep from which he did not wake until almost noon.

A few moments of agony when the realization of what had taken place tore at him, then the reaction to the brilliant day and the optimism of youth made itself felt. After all, things were not entirely hopeless. He would telephone Pauline, admit that he had been wrong. It was he, not she, who had made a fool of Ralph Goodrich. He'd tell her so and ask her to forgive him. Of course! That was it! Silly to quarrel!

Still, on the way into town, misgivings insisted on cropping up and Ralph decided to have a drink at the Savoy by way of fortifying himself for the coming ordeal. This proved to be a fatal step. The bar swarmed with acquaintances; the " no-treating " regulation went by the board. By the time he had swallowed three whiskys and soda in rapid succession, jealous anger had again seized him and for the first time in his life, Ralph Goodrich got good and drunk!

How he found his way home he never did know. Or how he had passed the intervening hours. The first reasonably clear sensations had to do with scrambling into uniform and driving beside his father to the station where the long troop train stood waiting to bear its thousands toward the hell that beckoned on the other side of the Channel!

CHAPTER XIII.

DEATH RODE HARD.

STRANGE cross-currents were at work during the months that followed—the summer of 1916. Ralph wrote to Kitty, to his father, to Oscar Gerhard, and to Arthur. Not, however, to Pauline. A stubborn pride held his hand. On her part, Pauline showed that she, too, had a will of her own. In the beginning she ate her heart out, but the first poignant pain gave way in time to a dull, weary ache, augmented when she saw Kitty and thus was reminded of Ralph.

Arthur Goodrich did not criticize his father for the step he had taken, but his letters lacked enthusiasm and constantly reiterated the statement that the United States never would array herself against the enemies of England and France.

Dudley Goodrich was attached to the branch of military intelligence whose duty it was to coöperate with Scotland Yard in the investigation of such individuals as might be suspected of doubtful activities. Many times these investigations resulted in a clean bill of health for the suspect.

Again there might be a deportation, on another occasion an arrest. And, under Dudley's nose, figuratively speaking, Oscar Gerhard carried on—performed acts that could mean nothing short of a firing squad should they be detected.

Kitty started at every ring of the doorbell or telephone, lest it might be the fateful wire from the War Office which would tell her that Ralph had been killed or wounded. Yet she would not have lifted her finger to withdraw him from the constant danger by which he was surrounded. His letters were, perforce, stilted and contained nothing that might indicate the location of his unit.

With Rena Jarvis, Gerhard had made exceedingly good and was now her most frequent companion. He performed many minor services for her, always cheerfully,

put himself out to make her parties a success. And Rena was pleased by his attentions. She wrote regularly to her husband, who was in the great prison camp of Ruhleben.

Oscar often urged her to write even more frequently. "It must be hell," he told her, "to be cooped up in such a place. And I can imagine what letters from home mean to those poor chaps. Fortunately the mail for the prisoners is permitted to go through promptly, thanks to the good offices of the American and Spanish ambassadors in Berlin. They deserve a lot of credit for that and for making sure that packages of food arrive safely."

So Rena wrote more letters, and Oscar was almost always on hand to post them for her. If she could have seen Oscar, night after night, interlining with his invisible ink her epistles, she would have better understood his willingness to serve as her errand boy.

Or if she could have seen all letters addressed to Lieutenant Cole Jarvis separated from the others on their arrival at Ruhleben, subjected to a certain treatment, then resealed and delivered to her husband. Or the immediate transmission to enemy headquarters of the mass of information which Oscar had picked up, information which served to help check that received from other sources or which was new and vital in itself.

The last place the British censors would look for such communications would be among the letters addressed to prisoners of war, Oscar congratulated himself. That first outline of his plan, sent in his long fake letter to the Pinnacle Export and Import Company, had borne fruit—fine, juicy fruit.

For by the time Oscar had become Rena's handy man, the enemy authorities had been given notice where to look. Although the great wireless station which transmitted daily messages to Nauen Tower had been placed under censorship by the United States authorities, messages of a business nature went through speedily. That was sufficient latitude for the two men who sat in the Pinnacle offices in New York.

Ralph had been assigned to a battery of sixty-pounders. Their camp consisted of a row of dugouts which occupied the dead ground under a ridge overlooking the Somme. Their emplacements were on a slight rise still farther away from the enemy line; thus when the guns were in action, the projectiles passed over the quarters occupied by the gunners.

The arrangements had its disadvantages. Should the enemy accurately pinpoint the battery position, a direct hit on the target might spell disaster, for all of the dead ground. But, by the same token, were the emplacements between the line of dugouts and the enemy, the "overs" might prove just as dangerous. There was a lot of iron flying about in the air that summer; there was no such thing as an entirely safe spot in the army zones, what with the airplanes and all.

Ralph had been assured that he would "get used to it." Well, he had. But he still shuddered when a big one came close, and he often wondered if the goose pimples that so frequently chased up and down his spine would not become permanent fixtures. He had learned one thing—that, deny it though many people will—a few shots of whisky will soothe the raw edges of nerves jangling under a bombardment, better than anything else.

This day Ralph was preparing to act, along with a certain Lieutenant Graham, as observer for a shoot their battery was about to pull on a suspected ammunition dump. The spot had been well camouflaged, but they believed they had its position fairly accurately, and Major Farley declared he had hopes.

"About time we made a showing," he grumbled. "The only thing I am sure we hit during the last week was a boy on a bicycle when headquarters sent out that freak order to fire at anything that moved in enemy territory. Fancy using a sixty-pounder to strafe a kid on a wheel! But there's something in there"—he pointed to the coördinates on the map—"and if there is, we've got to get it. We'll have plane and balloon observation, too."

The O-Pip, to which Ralph and Graham were bound, was one of the nastiest in the sector. It was what remained of a stone church tower, and thrust its riddled pile

some sixty feet into the air. Two observers had been killed in there already, and the place finally had got so hot that the major had withdrawn his officers. Whereupon, the enemy had ceased to bother with it and had not put a single shell into it for a week.

Now it was proposed to take advantage of this, and make use of the tower again. It provided easily the best point for ground observation, and at the call for volunteers half a dozen officers had promptly offered themselves. Of these, Ralph and Graham had been chosen.

"The wires are in good shape; we've had them tested. And if you can manage to get in there without being spotted, we may keep them fooled for a time at least. Be careful about making any false moves when you're up there, because the minute the shoot starts they will watch the tower for signs of life. Even if they don't see you, they may take a pot at the place for luck. Good luck to you."

"Right, sir. We're off," Ralph said.

Picking their way over the shell-torn earth, the two volunteers set out for the tower. They knew they would be safe from enemy eyes up to a point some eighty yards from their objective. After that it was a question. Originally, the pathway had been screened by a line of brush and nets to which miscellaneous bits of foliage had been attached. But the vicious shelling which had resulted in the deaths of two officers had demolished the protection to a certain extent at least. They could not tell until they should reach the place.

It turned out that enough of the screen remained intact so that there was a distance of little more than twenty yards, where they were likely to come under the observation of the hostile balloons. The best plan, it seemed to them, was to lie flat on their stomachs and wriggle across the gap so slowly that their movements would not be detected.

Inch by inch they negotiated the span, and at last stood upright at the foot of the gaunt ruin. Carefully they essayed the climb, gingerly feeling their way among the loose and tumbling masonry, taking advantage of certain scraps of the iron ladder which once had led to the bell loft. In the end, they secured a fair foothold, one that permitted them to train their graticuled glasses through the few remaining slits of Gothic design with which each face of the tower had originally been ornamented.

"Gawd, I'm glad that's over!" breathed Ralph, picking up the telephone, which they had dragged with them to the top of the tower. "Now, let's see about the communication."

The connection was perfect. Back at the battery, the sergeant at the other end of the wire said:

"The major wants to speak to you, sir,"

In a moment Major Farley's voice came over the wire:

"All set, up there? Have you picked up the target?"

Graham, who had been sweeping the terrain with his binoculars, nodded, and Ralph told the major: "Yes, sir; Graham has got it, sir. Map square L, coördinates eighteen, four."

"Right. We'll fire, one, two, three four, at intervals of three seconds. The pair of you ought to manage that."

"Yes, sir."

"Very well. We'll tell you when we are ready."

The two observers agreed that Ralph would report on guns Nos. 1 and 3, while Graham would look out for Nos. 2 and 4. Ralph would continue to handle the telephone.

The shoot began. The shells roared overhead, and the reports on the distant bursts went promptly back to the gunners. Still the slight elevation in the rear of a cluster of shattered farm buildings, which represented the target, remained as it had been despite several crumps that appeared to have found their mark. Perhaps, after all, there was no dump there.

But, of a sudden, a projectile from No. 1 gun landed plumb in the center of the little hill.

"Ah! A beauty!" murmured Ralph, as the black earth spouted up to mingle with the smoke. At the same instant there was borne to his ears a tremendous rumbling sound, followed by a terrific blast. Ralph's eager eyes beheld a geyser of earth mount-

ing from the rear of the wrecked buildings, and with this was mingled a bright spout of flame.

"Got it! Got it!" he called excitedly into the instrument. "Right in the nose! Hell of an explosion!"

"Fine, sir!" returned the sergeant. "Just a moment, sir."

The gunner officer was on the wire. "It is a dump, you say? Great! We'll put in thirty more rounds! Did I knock over the house?"

"You raised hell with what was left of it."

The shells poured into the stricken farm yard, directed with the fine frenzy of a gunner who knows he has hit something worth while. And the tortured target yielded explosion after explosion. Fritz was losing a lot of good war material, all right! Ralph and his companion were both jubilant.

"The old man will be pleased," said Graham excitedly.

Ralph grinned and nodded. "I wonder," he said, "if those babies have any idea we're spotting from here. So far they have been firing only to silence the guns, it seems to me. Ah! Look!"

He pointed to where an observation balloon had been riding some two thousand feet up. Graham looked up in time to see a Fokker scout dive viciously from above, a blue line of tracers spurting downward straight into the blobby envelope.

There was a sudden burst of flame, and in a twinkling the two aërial observers were over the side of the car. Their parachutes blossomed like two gigantic flowers, white against the blue of the sky. Ralph could see the officers kicking their feet to help swing out of the lath of the burning balloon. In a few seconds this dropped with a rush—a blazing mass that passed so close to the descending airmen that Ralph shuddered.

So intent had he and Graham been upon the spectacle that they neglected to observe the effect of the last rounds from their own battery.

"I'm sorry," Ralph said. "Missed those last. Fritz strafed the balloon. Tell them to go ahead."

Even as he spoke there came a new sound—the sound of a shell which a chap feels certain has his own initial carved on the nose cap. It came screaming angrily with increasing volume and instinctively the two officers ducked, futile though the proceeding must be.

The missile passed with a great blast of disturbed air; Ralph Goodrich's heart jumped at the closeness of it! There was a thud behind and a little to the right of the tower, then a booming explosion. Bits of H. E. pinged against the masonry about him.

"They're wise to us!" he shouted to the other, who nodded. Both of them stared off in the direction of their invisible enemy. To the battery Ralph reported: "They're firing on us now."

And they were, with a vengeance! Four more shells came over in rapid succession, exploded so near by that Ralph wondered how he managed to escape the hail of iron and stone that accompanied each burst. The enemy had that tower lined up, all right! But he grinned bravely at Graham, and the latter grinned back, his teeth gleaming white in the grimy setting that was his face.

With the fourth blast the telephone went dead. It was with a pardonable relief that he told Graham: "Phone's out, and that lets us out."

"Good. I've had enough. Let's run for it!"

They started down; but before they got well under way there was another sickening roar—followed by what seemed to Ralph a noiseless surge of a mighty wind. The tower crumpled, tumbled to the ground in a great heap of jagged masonry.

Ralph felt a sensation of falling through a dust cloud, being pelted the while by missiles that thudded rather than hurt! It did not seem that he was falling fast, but floating lazily and wondering when he would stop! It was not unpleasant—just dreamy—just—

He opened his eyes. For a moment he struggled to remember. Oh, yes—the tower had been shot down. But he was alive! How marvelous! His body ached all over, but he could move his legs and arms. Slow-

ly he drew himself to a sitting posture, rose unsteadily to his feet. Apparently he was not wounded, only battered by stones and mortar. Astounding!

He had no idea of how long he had been lying there. He glanced at his wrist watch, found it shattered. For all he knew, it might have been hours, days even. As a matter of fact, it had been but a few minutes and the young man only temporarily stunned.

His brain was clearing now. Graham! Good God! Where was Graham?

He found him lying half buried under a pile of débris. Frantically he tore this away with his bare hands and dragged his comrade into the comparative safety of a shell hole. With trembling hands Ralph undid the blood-soaked tunic, ripped open his first-aid kit, and applied a mass of gauze to the gaping wound just below Graham's right shoulder. He pillowed his friend's head on a mound of earth, felt for heart beats. These were startlingly faint.

Ralph thought quickly. He dared not try to drag or carry Graham into camp. If he were not done for already, that would likely be fatal. He would make the other as comfortable as possible and hurry for aid. He placed his canteen to Graham's white lips, let the wine it contained trickle between the man's teeth.

There was a slight movement; a bit of color flowed back into the pale cheeks. Graham's eyelids fluttered, then slowly opened. He looked up into Ralph's face, tried to smile.

His lips moved, and he whispered: "I'm through, old chap!"

"Nonsense!" Ralph told him. "You're just banged up a bit. I'm going for help. Just you lie quiet now."

Graham shook his head weakly. "No. Don't. I — don't want—to—be—alone. I—"

His voice trailed off. Into his eyes came a look that, even in his brief experience, Ralph had learned to know. The latter felt his throat tighten. He held himself perfectly still, appalled at his own helplessness.

Then Graham's lips moved again, and a wan, tired smile flickered across his face. Ralph bent low to hear what the other was saying. His ears caught: "We—got—'em, didn't we? The — major — *will* — be — pleased."

His shattered body sank back in the arms of his comrade, like that of a weary child falling asleep in its mother's arms.

CHAPTER XIV.

BLIGHTY!

PREPARATIONS were under way for the great Somme offensive. Day after day new batteries and old ones transferred from other sectors wound their way over the atrocious high-crowned roads. Huge guns were caterpillared to the emplacements prepared for them. The western slope of the Somme Valley bristled with artillery.

The air hummed with excitement as fresh divisions of infantry, hundreds of airplanes, hordes of machine gunners, and the astonishing tanks massed for the drive that since has been conceded by the Germans as the turning point of the war. That is to say, up to the battle of the Somme officers of the enemy headquarters staff never doubted that they would win the war. After that battle they knew they could not. For them the struggle resolved itself into an effort to gain a strategic enough position to secure favorable terms.

The army post brought Ralph a letter from his father. Dudley Goodrich wrote:

> . . . By virtue of my job here, I know what is coming off out there, and I want to wish you the best of luck. There is no doubt about the outcome of the struggle. It may take a long time, but the massive machinery which has been created is only now beginning to function.
>
> While the nomination of Wilson has convinced the majority of Americans that the participation of the United States is beyond the range of possibilities, I have reason to know that both Washington and Whitehall are far from sharing this view. Much, of course, will depend on the attitude of the Central Powers, but sooner or later, I feel sure, they will make the error which will prove fatal. They are absolutely mad.
>
> I would like to be out there with you, my boy, but I am content to do my bit in the post, which, it is felt, I am best fitted for.

My work is most interesting, and I like to feel that it is of some importance.

Kitty sends her love. I say God bless you and keep you safe.

Affectionately,

YOUR FATHER.

It thrilled Ralph to know that his father was aware of the proposed offensive. He wondered if Dudley had told Kitty, decided that he had not. First off, it was against regulations, and, further, Ralph knew that his father would not care to have Kitty subjected to the worry she would feel through knowing that her brother was in the thick of the great fight.

Himself, he looked forward eagerly to his first major engagement. He had never participated in an important barrage, and that which was in preparation would be a record breaker in military history. He looked with affection upon the ugly snouts of the guns peeping upon all sides from their well concealed pits.

Ralph idly strolled across to where a second line regiment was making camp. He glanced at the collar badge of a passing officer. Hello! The Ninety-First Wessex! Why, that was Walter Haines's outfit!

Ralph saluted the officer, a major. "I wonder, sir, if you have a Lieutenant Haines in your lot. He's a friend of mine, and I'd like to find him."

"You've come to the right place," the major grinned. "Only it's Captain Haines instead of Lieutenant Haines, now. He got his second promotion last week. Good lad, Haines. You'll find his company over by that strafed château, somewhere. Good luck."

"Thank you, sir," Ralph said and hastened in the direction indicated.

He came upon Walter, ruefully examining what was left of a room among the ruins of what had been a magnificent home. The latter's eyes widened with surprise when Ralph hustled up and the two rushed at each other with excited shouts. They clasped hands, then stood back and surveyed one another.

"I'll be damned!" cried Walter. "What a bit of luck! Who'd have thought we would meet in a show like this?"

"I'll call it luck!" Ralph exclaimed. "And just look at the pips—three—count 'em—three! You're climbing up in the world, my lad. I expect you'll be a brigadier any moment!"

"Have you got any whisky at your place? Our transport isn't up yet, and I'm parched for a good shot."

"We have plenty. Anyhow, you're going to tell your sergeant major to 'Carry on,' and come over with me for dinner. We've got a ripping bunch and a good mess—Armstrong hut and all! Swanky, no end!"

Ten minutes later the two were sipping their drinks and trying to tell each other everything at once. Suddenly Walter said: "By the way, Ralph, I've got a letter that might interest you. It ought to. I don't know what you've been up to. It's from Kitty." He flushed under the thick coat of tan as he caught the grin on Ralph's face, folded the letter so that Ralph could read only a portion of it.

Ralph's heart quickened as he read:

You remember Pauline Lowe; you met her once at the house. Well, she and Ralph hit it off remarkable well. For a time they were absolutely silly about each other. But something happened. I don't know just what. Pauline has not told me and I have not asked her about it.

Anyway, they must have quarreled because neither has written to the other since Ralph went overseas. Also, Ralph got awfully tight the night before he left. All I am sure of is that Pauline is terribly broken up over it. She doesn't say anything, but I can tell from her actions every time Ralph's name is brought up that she feels perfectly dreadful.

I dare say it was just a silly row or misunderstanding, but I'd feel happier if one of them would make some sort of overture. Perhaps when Ralph gets leave . . .

The letters leaped out of the page, it seemed to Ralph. "Terribly broken up over it!" Pauline! For weeks she had seemed like part of a happy dream back in those days that seemed centuries ago. But the few words that Kitty had written bridged the gap instantly—took him back to the side of the most wonderful girl in the world! She was that, of course, she was! And he, well, it didn't matter who was to blame; he loved Pauline Lowe and he was jolly well going to write and tell her so in the morning.

"By Jove, Walter, you've done me a good turn. I'll write to Pauline first thing to-morrow. You can tell Kitty so when you answer her letter. Lord! I feel good! Let's have a glass of sherry before dinner. There's a poker game brewing for this evening. I'm glad. I feel lucky!"

Ralph fell silent more than once during the progress of the meal, which consisted of a meat pie—fashioned from bully beef and turnips—bread, potatoes, jam, and tea. He was turning over in his mind the things he would tell Pauline. The world suddenly had become a marvelous place and a few shells! Ha! He could laugh at them. If only he could wangle leave somehow. Probably it would be possible after the big show, now only a few days off.

They played poker, grouped about one end of the rough table on which they had dined; Ralph, Walter, Captain Woods, Lieutenant Estes, and a visiting area staff officer whose name Ralph had forgotten. The enemy would put on his regular nightly "strafe" about eleven o'clock and keep it up until two or so. Playing cards helped take one's mind off the shells which Fritz popped about here and there on the chance of damaging the concentrations he doubtless knew were being massed against him.

The news of Pauline had raised Ralph's spirits to a state bordering on exultation, and if he was a little wild in his betting, it is easy to pardon. However, as frequently happens in the great game of poker, the wilder his system—or lack of system—the luckier he seemed to grow. And in the excitement of the play, he hardly noticed the rush and burst of the shells with which the enemy was pelting the whole sector.

Walter watched him with an amused expression. He was the worst loser at midnight. The others seesawed up and down, but stuck to it. Finally the staff officer said: "I'm going to toddle off when Fritz let's up for a minute or two."

During the next lull he went out.

The cessation, however, was of the briefest possible nature; then the bombardment was resumed more fiercely than ever. Somebody remarked: "They're shooting at random; you can tell by the sound of the crumps."

"Woo-ooo! Thud! Crash!" That was a close one! The ground shook and a tattoo of dirt and stones and iron rattled against the sheet iron sheathing of the hut.

"Br-r-rh! Random, nothing!" declared Captain Woods as he sorted out his hand. "That one was pointed straight at us!" The group laughed in appreciation. Ralph scanned his cards. A pat full house! He shoved the limit of half a crown into the pot. Woods, at his left, raised for a like amount. The next player hesitated. Then it came.

Came with the roar of an express train. The world seemed to burst into pieces with a mingling of smoke, steel, and flying wood. The hut collapsed in a heap of kindling wood and twisted iron.

Stunned, but still conscious, Ralph found himself looking at the moon, his legs pinned under the edge of the pile of wreckage that had been the once-proud mess.

"Lucky! By Heavens!" he said aloud. "I said I felt lucky! But the others!"

Then he felt a queer sensation in his hip, applied his hand to the spot and drew it away, drenched with blood! He must be hurt, then. Strange it didn't pain him much. Ah!

From the pile of ruins figures crawled—several of them. It didn't seem possible that they could have gone through that blast and still be alive. But the collapse had been one of the freak occurrences that abound where shells burst.

Walter Haines was on his feet, feeling himself. He almost stumbled over Ralph. "Are you all right?" he asked sharply.

"No, I'm hit. My hip, I think. It's all blood, anyway."

"Here come the Red Cross lads," Walter observed. Looked about him and added: "We'd better check up." A couple of other officers had scrambled to their feet by then and the check up proved easy. Only Captain Woods, it appeared, was still in the ruins. Hastily the others, still giddy from their experience, tore at the mound of débris.

And just as the surgeon who had been examining Ralph said: "Fractured hip and flesh wounds—not dangerous," the searchers were rewarded. Captain Woods was lift-

ed tenderly and placed on the ground beside Ralph. The doctor bent over him.

"Nasty crack on the head—scalp wound, concussion perhaps."

At that instant, Woods opened his eyes. "Gawd!" he said in a voice approaching normal. "Gawd! I thought I was dead!" He struggled to lift himself up, continued: "Damned luck! Beastly luck! That was the first time in my life I ever drew four kings—pat!"

By the time the stretcher bearers had deposited him in the shack which was the field dressing station and a doctor had hastily examined his wounds, the merciful numbness caused by the shock was beginning to wear off. So that after a temporary dressing had been applied and the victim placed with three others in an ambulance for transportation to the casualty clearance station, ten miles in the rear, Ralph suffered badly.

He had difficulty in repressing the groans that welled up to his lips as the vehicle threaded its way along the shell-pitted road and felt weak and shaken when at last he was placed on a cot in the crudely constructed ward. But he was not too ill to admire the efficiency with which incoming patients were handled.

As each casualty was deposited in bed, he was taken in charge almost on the instant by a nurse, his clothing removed sufficiently to enable the doctors to treat the wound. On the heels of the nurses came the medical officers.

One of them bent over Ralph, glanced at the jagged flesh wounds, felt of the fracture. "H'm," he said, "how do you feel, my lad?"

"Not so good," Ralph replied. "The damn thing hurts like the mischief."

The officer made a more thorough examination which caused the victim to wince, and said: "We are due to evacuate all who are ready in about an hour—if the blasted train is on time. If you could stand the journey in your present condition, I think it would be better to have the bone set at the base hospital; they are so much better equipped."

"I can manage it all right, sir," Ralph told him. Then voiced a thought which had been running through his mind for the last hour. "I suppose this is a 'blighty' all right."

"Blighty! I should say it is. It will be a matter of months before you can get about, old chap."

"Well, I wasn't certain. Thought perhaps they carried some long cases at the base."

"Nothing like this. Where's your home?"

"London."

"When you get to the base, be nice to the M. O. and ask him if he can get you sent to a London hospital. He can fix it. If your home is there you don't want to shot away to Southampton or Eastbourne or Liverpool."

"Lord, no! I hadn't considered that at all. Took it as a matter of course that I would be sent to London."

"A lot of them do. Then they find themselves a couple of hundred miles from their friends. That's why I'm tipping you off!"

"I'm very much obliged, sir."

"All right, then. I'll put a fresh dressing on the bally nick and give you a shot of a little something that will deaden the pain on the trip."

Two hours later, his nerves soothed by the hypodermic, decorated with a tag bearing his name, number, and rank, Ralph lay in one of the lower bunks of the hospital train. Three tiers of these ran along either side of the car and up and down the narrow aisle nurses and orderlies stepped briskly, ministering to the needs of the sufferers.

It thrilled Ralph to gaze upon the fresh, young faces of the nurses, upon the kind, patient countenance of the sister in charge as she moved about, stooping over a bunk here and there. She smiled into Ralph's eyes, inquired: "Comfortable? Is there anything you would like?"

"I'd give my eyes for a 'gasper.'"

"Right away," she told him; beckoned to one of the nurses. When the latter came, the sister directed: "Bring a pack of Gold Flakes from the cupboard and some matches."

"How did you know the brand I smoke?" Ralph inquired curiously.

"You called them gaspers, didn't you?"

"Oh, so I did. Ah, thanks," as the yellow packet was tendered by the nurse. He lighted one quickly and drew the smoke gratefully into his lungs.

The train rolled slowly on over the worn and uneven roadbed; some of the worst cases cried out with pain at each jolt. Others moaned in agony. There was a bit of conversation across the aisle but not much. The passages were mostly of such nature as:

"Where did you get hit?"

"In the leg?"

"Blighty?"

"Gad! I hope so."

"Know where we're going?"

"Etaples, sister said."

"Um."

And so on. The dreary hours wore away. Now there would be a stop while the occupants of another C. C. S. were taken aboard. Again there would be a wait on a siding while a troop train, bound for the north, passed.

But Ralph was so busy with his thoughts that this did not bother him greatly. How strange it was to see women again. He had not seen one for months until he reached the C. C. S.! He began to realize the difference between men when they are cut off from feminine influence and when they are in contact with the opposite sex. He tried to imagine London or any other big city, without women. Silly, of course.

But out there at the front it seemed to him that men were more honest with each other than they would be back home and he believed that it was because woman was not in the equation. He could not quite work it out clearly, but there was something in it. Women certainly dominated civilization! Practically every situation in normal life was influenced, little or much, by the feminine element. It had to be.

But it was Pauline who occupied his mind for most of those crawling hours. If only he had written that letter before he was hit! He wondered if she would visit him in hospital; decided that she would. Only—it would have been far better had he showed her first that—oh, what did it matter? He would tell her frankly all that he had meant to write in that letter.

How soon would his father and Kitty learn of his mishap? The war office sent telegrams very promptly, he was aware. But there might be delays. There was a regret that he had not got into the big show. Walter would be there. He hoped Walter would come through safely—he hoped the message from the war office would not alarm Kitty too much—he wondered how long he would be laid up—how—Ralph dozed.

At the base hospital, Ralph was surprised to find a half dozen telegrams—from Dudley, Kitty, Hugo Camp, Oscar Gerhard, Rena Jarvis, and, wonder of wonders—Pauline!

She wired:

> Can't tell you how sorry I am, but so, so glad it wasn't worse. Looking forward eagerly seeing you. PAULINE.

A wave of tenderness engulfed the boy. There was a choking in his throat. Pauline! Pauline! How sweet and dear she was! After that miserable night, too. Hot, reluctant tears welled into his eyes and blurred the precious words when he tried to read them again.

CHAPTER XV.

AN AMERICAN FAMILY.

RALPH lay in the hospital at Etaples for a week. The setting of the bones and the first painful dressings frazzled his nerves so that it seemed best for him to rest a bit before the journey to London. He stood that well enough, however.

Strangely enough, the arrival in London was something to which he had given little thought. And he was astonished when, as the ambulances moved gently out into the Strand, to find the street thronged with people—men, women and children, who murmured words of sympathy as the vehicles passed or cheered lustily at the cars filled with "sitters," or slightly wounded.

Girls threw handfuls of flowers into these cars and into the open ends of the ambulances. Perhaps Pauline or Kitty was in that crowd, Ralph thought. But he could not see well, lying as he was.

The convoy of which he was a part pres-

ently drew up before what had been a magnificent residence in Bayswater Road, opposite Kensington Gardens. Now the flag of the Red Cross flew above the entrance and white-clad sisters stood by as the stretchers were borne through the fine vestibule.

Ralph was fortunate enough to draw a bed near a window looking out upon the park and presently he was comfortably established in what was to be his home for four long months. The first question he asked of the commandant, Sister Day, was: "How soon may I have visitors?"

Replying to that query for the fortieth time that evening, she said, smilingly: "Tomorrow afternoon at two o'clock."

Somehow the hours passed. Promptly at two o'clock, Dudley Goodrich and Kitty were ushered to Ralph's bedside. Dudley gripped hard the brown hand of his son, held it a moment without speaking as he looked into the eyes that met his own so understandingly. Then Dudley said: "Thank God, Ralph, you're here. I fancy I lived a year while I was opening that telegram from Walter."

Kitty bent down and kissed her brother's lips. "Poor kid!" she murmured and cried a little.

Ralph said: "What do you mean by that, father—the telegram from Walter?"

"Oh. Walter wired at once. That's how we got the news so soon and could reach you at the base so quickly. The war office notification did not arrive until the next evening."

"Dear old chap," Ralph said. "I'm only sorry I couldn't go through the big show with him."

"The big show," Dudley said soberly, "started this morning."

Kitty cut in: "Who do you think is coming at four?"

Ralph looked up eagerly. "Who? Not—"

"Yes! Pauline! You guessed it. See that you two behave yourselves. I've had it out of her, since you were wounded. I made her tell me the whole story. You know only half of it and you were very stupid."

"For Heaven's sake, tell it to me before she comes. I know I was stupid. Come on; tell me."

Kitty explained while Dudley looked on amusedly. Ralph listened with mixed feelings. At the mention of Camp's name, he flushed a little. "Where does he get off, I'd like to know?" he bridled.

"Don't worry about Hugo Camp. He's off and well off! He had his conge from Pauline a long time back! Didn't wear well, she told me. But from the way she said it, I fancy he became a bit too ardent."

"Damn him! I'd bash him for tuppence!"

"Not worth the exertion, Ralph. Forget him."

The departure of Kitty and her father was followed by the advent of Oscar Gerhard and Rena Jarvis. Rena, like Kitty, brought flowers and Oscar contributed a huge hamper of fruit. While Oscar asked many questions he obtained nothing of particular value because the whole face of the situation on the Somme front had changed radically since Ralph's exit from the scene.

The pair remained but a short time as Rena had an appointment with a tailor and Oscar was to drive her there. Ralph felt a bit relieved; he had feared they would linger until Pauline came and the thought was not attractive. Thus he bade them good-by with quite as much enthusiasm as he had welcomed them.

The sluggish hands of the clock were creeping to the edge of the numerals when Pauline came. Ralph knew it was her step even before she appeared around the screen that served to provide a precarious privacy to the patient and his callers.

She smiled bravely as she came to the bedside and took his hand, but her lips quivered when she said: "Well, well! So you've become a 'casualty,' have you?"

Ralph caught the spirit she was trying to insinuate into the situation; grinned cheerfully. "I have. What's the use of going to war if you can't get yourself wounded and become a blinkin' hero?"

"And sport a wound stripe."

"By jove, so I can! Hadn't got that far."

Pauline rattled on, banteringly, talking of the most inconsequential things such as plays and pictures and new books, leaving Ralph bewildered and uncertain. He had

expected—well, he wondered just what he *had* expected—after that telegram! Why, Pauline wasn't talking a bit like that, now!

This breezy line of conversation was something he had not looked for at all. It depressed him, left him groping. He had meant to say so many things of an entirely different nature—to have Pauline talk about themselves. What did he care about plays or books? Or the blasted war?

He gazed at the girl. She looked just the same as she had in the spring. Ralph thought how strange it is—to know a person, be separated for a long time and then meet again to find that there are the same lips, the same eyes and nose and mouth and arms and body—just the same. It was an incoherent, vagrant thought.

"Pauline!" he exclaimed suddenly. "Stop your nonsense!"

She stared at him in amazement. "Nonsense?"

"Yes," he went on, a new born wave of determination urging him. "I don't care a cuss about anything you're saying!"

"Ralph! You rude thing!"

"I don't mean to be rude. But I've just got to tell you—oh, a lot of things! I mean—hang it—I was going to write to you the day I got hit."

"Were you, Ralph? Really?" Her voice was tender now. "What were you going to say, Ralph?"

"I was going to say that I made a frightful ass of myself the last time we were together! A frightful ass! And that I was sorry! You were quite right and I was all wrong. There was no excuse for the way I behaved. Kitty told me the inside of it. But it would not have made any difference if she hadn't. Or if I'd never known about it.

"It couldn't, you see. Because I love you and because that is all that counts for anything! Everything else is trifling, incidental! Don't you see, Pauline? Oh, I know you'll probably turn me down. You ought to. I have it coming. But, Pauline, I want you to marry me—some day, when this war is over! Can't you forgive me for what I did—wash it all out and love me?"

He caught her hand between both of his, pressed it hard. His blood tingled at the contact and his eyes sought her face eagerly. What he saw there was enough and reaching up, he drew her head down and kissed her lips! She let her cheek rest against his for a moment, then sat upright with shining, tearful eyes. But she laughed happily.

"Of course I love you, Ralph. And you're sweet, so sweet! All that foolishness is washed out—was long ago. We shan't be silly again, shall we?"

She leaned over and kissed him again.

Ralph received a sympathetic cable from Arthur. It had been sent to Etaples and forwarded by army post to London. Ten days later came a letter, a most violent letter, breathing exasperation and utterly lacking the cautious reserve which was part of Arthur's make-up:

DEAR RALPH:

It is needless to say that I was horribly shocked when I received the message telling of you being wounded. It said, seriously, but not dangerously. That was a consolation. Since then father has cabled me details and it is good to know that you will not be maimed or crippled for life.

What bothers me is that you should be injured at all. And I froth at the mouth when I think of what has happened to the Goodrich family, an *American* family, because of a vicious foreign quarrel! Here we were, all well, prosperous and happy—only about a year ago.

To-day what? Poor mother dead! You all smashed up! Father out of his fine connection and devoting his splendid brain and his great energy to the service of an arrogant, reactionary foreign power! Kitty in danger of being killed at any moment, or worse yet, crippled!

It seems to me that all of you are mad! It is so useless, so senseless, so footless! We have lost much. What can we gain? Not even respect! America cannot respect those who renounce their citizenship to fight for another country! England has no use for renegades! She will use them to fight her battles, it is true. But afterward—bah!

Thank God the United States has her eyes open. To-day there is less danger of her becoming embroiled than ever. And after the election—well, you will see. France and England and Italy will see, also.

It is a comfort to read Oscar's letters. There is one American, at least, whose head has not been turned by contact with Europe. If anything, I think his views are stronger than ever

This is a lecture, I know. But I can't

help it. You and father are in the army, and I suppose you will have to remain for the duration of the war. But both of you, at least, might urge Kitty to get out and come over here where she belongs and where the entire Goodrich family always did belong!

ARTHUR.

Ralph was not exactly angry, although the letter upset him more than a little. His feeling was, rather, one of pity. He was sorry that his brother could not see clearly, that he could not grasp anything beyond the fact that the Goodriches were Americans and America was not in the war. It was narrow and deplorable. He hardly knew what to write in reply when he should be able to manage a pen.

Dudley Goodrich looked solemn when he read the letter which Ralph handed to him on his next visit. "It would be hard to show where we have gained anything," he said. "That is, anything tangible. It is a pretty severe arraignment that Arthur has drawn up there. But, well, you understand and I understand. Your mother understood, too, I think. There is no question about Kitty. I see no good in trying to make anything in the nature of a 'paper' defense when you write to your brother. He will come to his senses all in good time."

CHAPTER XVI.

IN THE CITY OF WAR.

BEYOND yielding a mental deference to Arthur's prophetic prowess, Ralph did not give the matter much thought. Too many other interests claimed him. He was able to get about with a pair of walking sticks and the youth and spirit of him was demanding action. After being cooped up for months in hospital, the mere ability to move about stood for something utterly wonderful.

He had been transferred to an auxiliary hospital for convalescent officers and was at liberty to go where he chose provided he checked in at night. Which meant that he mingled with friends both in and out of the service. It was easy to get about by using taxicabs and he frequently took Pauline to tea at smart places such as the Ritz and Claridge's.

The girl enjoyed these sessions hugely. What girl wouldn't. Young, good-looking officer; wounded hero—what? She was tremendously proud of her man, even a little intolerant of officers who did not wear the blue armlet.

Truth to tell, Ralph did not wear it constantly although orders had it that he must. But a chap has to have a drink now and then and the law forbade the sale of alcoholic beverages to wounded soldiers undergoing hospital treatment, and the blue band was the badge which publicans were bound to respect.

However, if a chap saw fit to slip the damaging evidence off just before entering a bar, how could the barmaid be expected to know what the circumstances were? Everybody did it. In the pockets of scores of officers thronging the Savoy bar each day, those telltale armlets might have been found.

Why, the waiters in the grill have been known to remove one from the sleeve of an absent-minded patron, on occasion!

So Ralph roamed the town at will, it might be said, and enjoyed himself with all the zest of a healthy young animal who has been on short rations for a season.

Kitty spoofed him frequently about what she was pleased to term, "his wild courses." But she was as proud of him as was Pauline and would pass up any other engagement to accompany him about.

That was the autumn when the enemy began sending over airplanes to attack London. The successful combating of the zeppelins by the rapidly expanding Royal Flying Corps and the Royal Naval Air Service had put at least a temporary crimp in the ambitious zep program. Against the Rankin dart and tracer bullets the great dirigibles had little chance once the defending airmen had located them.

The enemy's first venture was made by a solitary plane which audaciously flew over the British capital one day at high noon! It was an experimental flight, no doubt—a reconnaissance for the purpose of learning how strong a defense London was prepared to put up. What happened was that the appearance of the invader came as a total surprise and he was off before such squad-

rons as were available could hope to climb high enough to engage him.

The anti-aircraft guns popped away at the intruder and these caused far more consternation among the populace than the presence of the enemy of whose existence the public was quite unaware until the boom of the guns proclaimed that something was amiss.

The event held a remarkable attraction for Oscar Gerhard. To his mind it was a positive indication that the enemy was prepared to send over raiding planes in large numbers and that knowledge set the alert spy to thinking.

From that moment on, he cultivated assiduously all R. F. C. officers with whom he came in contact. He had become known as a " regular fellow " about the Savoy Bar and another drinking place in Albemarle Street where flying officers were wont to congregate. Also, he saw to it that Rena's parties were plentifully sprinkled with uniforms bearing the crown and wings. And he obtained results sooner than he had hoped.

It was at the Albemarle resort that he stumbled upon his bit of luck. The place contained wall seats and a number of tables as well as a short bar. On the evening in question, things had been running rather wild. A bunch of flying men appeared to be holding a celebration of some sort and, deplorable though it may be considered, flying corps celebrations were very wet affairs.

Oscar had come accompanied by a captain of machine gunners and the two sipped their drinks and observed the activities in progress at the long board which had been devised by pushing four small tables together. The snatches of conversation that drifted across to where the two men sat made it apparent that the feast was in the nature of an " overseas " party—that at least a portion of those present were about to take their departure for the front. They had come in, it appeared, from the aërodrome that quartered the squadrons to which London must look for aërial defense.

Oscar itched with curiosity. He wanted to know more of the details, but was able to catch scarcely a complete sentence owing to the growing hilarity of the revelers. But, as if arranged for his convenience, the coveted opportunity came.

Two of the chaps at the long table, evidently dissatisfied with the leisurely manner in which the waiters brought liquids, detached themselves from the party and made their way to the bar where they stood, drinking and talking animately. Here was Oscar's opening.

To his companion, he remarked: " Damn the service to-night! Excuse me a minute. I'm going to get some fags."

He walked across to the bar and, standing close to the back of one of the officers, made known his wants to the barmaid. She greeted him pleasantly and he stood there chatting while he opened the packet and lighted one of the smokes. Even after that, he found a number of things to say to the girl.

From the talk of the two flyers, it seemed that one was about to go overseas while the other expected to remain in England. What caused the eavesdropper to prick up his ears was a remark let fall by the chap whose back Oscar almost brushed.

" It's a sure-enough clean-up," he said.

" Gawd! Clean-up! Fritz will open his eyes when he finds eight new squadrons operating in the Arras sector, what?"

" Yes. But he'd be more surprised to learn that only two piffling squadrons are sitting tight in the London area after Friday."

" Wow!" was Oscar's mental exclamation.

The last speaker went on: " Bloody rotten, I must say! If this keeps up we won't be able to dig up a table at poker!"

Oscar had heard sufficient. Nonchalantly, and in a most leisurely manner, he returned to his table. And as soon as he could decently manage, he steered the captain out of the place. Shortly afterward, he pleaded that he must write some letters and parted from the other.

The cable to the Pinnacle Export and Import Company read:

> All lightweight goods save two parcels to be shipped Friday. This can be relied upon.

Thus, presently the enemy general staff knew that after Friday the only aërial pro-

fection against air raids on London consisted of thirty-two planes!

The following Saturday, Ralph had taken Pauline and Kitty to lunch at a comfortable little restaurant in Sloane Square. He and Pauline had discovered the place some weeks back and had made a practice of going there when they could manage it. The food was excellent and not too expensive and the class of patrons rather above the average.

The trio were lingering over their coffee when from without came the slam, slam of the maroons!

It was the signal for many of the diners to rise to their feet, hurriedly seeking for the waiters with their reckonings. And for several moments there was more or less confusion. Ralph said: "Now I wonder what they are going to pull off to-day. It has been supposed that the lone plane which came over that day was sent to feel out the defenses. And if they are here again—in the middle of the day, too—the chances are they have come in force! What shall we do? Stick here or find a funk hole?"

"I'd like to go outside and have a look at the preliminaries, at least," Pauline told him. "We can duck in somewhere when they get close. What do you say, Kitty?"

"Suits me," Kitty returned and shortly the three of them were in the open air, walking slowly along Sloane Street, scanning the apparently peaceful heavens.

It was a gray day and the visibility not of the best. Ralph did not expect to see the invaders; they would fly too high. But he listened for the drone of friendly motors and for the gunfire that must come before long. People were standing about in little groups, handy to hallways or basement entrances. Others were hurrying to the tube stations.

From far off came the sullen boom of artillery and the sound of bursting shells. Then, to his suprise, over the north of London appeared a perfect swarm of planes, headed straight for the heart of the city and flying in perfect battle formation! Lord, he thought, they had a nerve to venture over at such an altitude!

Kitty cried: "Ralph! Those must be ours! They can't be the enemy!"

"Look, look! They're enemies, all right! See that white burst up there to the left of them! That's our Archie, sure enough! What I want to know is where the devil are our chaps?"

His words were drowned in a pandemonium of noise. From all sides the guns blazed away and the swooping roar of rocketing projectiles mingled with the thud of guns and the sharp crack of exploding shrapnel! Ping! Ping! The stuff had to come down somewhere.

Ralph took an arm of each girl, discarded the use of the single stick he now used, and drew his companions toward a small hotel a block away.

"Let's take shelter," he said; "no sense getting done in by our own side."

The lobby of the hotel was jammed with people curious to see what was taking place outside, yet fearful of the dangerous streets. The new arrivals squeezed themselves into the doorway. The overhang would protect them from falling shrapnel and as yet no bombs had been dropped.

For thirty minutes they stood there—witnesses of the most astonishing air raid in history, little dreaming that the arrogant gesture on the part of the enemy had been made possible by one of the Goodrich family's closest friends!

The handful of Britishers sent aloft had no chance whatever and the contact they secured with the raiders was so brief that only one plane was seen to fall.

From a window of his flat in Great Portland Street, Oscar Gerhard had watched the show. He smiled grimly when the tons of fire and steel were hurled down upon a virtually defenseless city! And again when he saw that the one plane destroyed bore the British emblem!

In January, Ralph's condition was such that he was returned to duty—given six months' home service and detailed to assist in the training of officers at Lydd. The assignment pleased him in that he could see Pauline each week-end; instructional officers had that advantage over those in training. Also, he was awarded another "pip"—promoted to the rank of first lieutenant.

His new work caused him to feel very

mature, as indeed, he was. He had the poise of a man of thirty and looked easily twenty-five. In which respect he was like thousands of other young officers .

Dudley Goodrich carried on in his quiet but thorough manner. Soon after Ralph went to Lydd, Dudley was given the rank of major and made first assistant to Colonel Barnes who directed the investigation of suspected individuals. In his new post he obtained an insight into the amazing system of which he was a part.

Its ramifications were astonishing. Between his department and the Foreign Office there existed a strong *liason* which on frequent occasions proved mutually beneficial. Often the Foreign Office could produce a *dossier* overflowing with information about a suspect who had come to Dudley's attention.

He ran across many strange things, but none of them prepared him for the astounding experience that came to him one March morning while he was in the office of the censor charged with the examination of letters to prisoners of war in Germany. Dudley's business was with Captain Darrow who sat at a desk entirely surrounded by missives for his attention.

The morning was cold and the radiator under the window sizzled under a heavy head of steam. Dudley held his hands to the warmth and Captain Darrow, holding in his hand an opened letter, came over and stood alongside. Dudley made known his errand and passed over a document he had brought with him. In order to examine this more comfortably, the captain laid the letter down on the soapstone top of the heater.

He was some minutes perusing the papers which he folded and returned to Dudley with a number of comments. The latter was about to take his leave when he was startled by an exclamation from Captain Darrow.

"Good Lord! Look at that!"

He was staring at the letter he had been reading. Dudley looked. Between the lines of script which covered the sheet were rows of printed words which showed clearly in a sort of dull red color!

"What the devil is it?" Dudley asked.

"Don't know. It's something the heat brings out, evidently."

TO BE CONCLUDED NEXT WEEK

ʊ ʊ ʊ

SONG OF THE WATERFALL

FOR a thousand years I have served the race,
Grinding its golden grist.
For ages they built their market-place
Within sight of my flying mist.
Though master-servant, a king was I
Until in one fell hour
They conjured the steam from pond and stream,
And robbed me of my power.

The water-wheels rotted, and I was alone,
Save when some one came to see
The mist-wraiths rise from my foaming face,
Like ghosts of the used-to-be.
Now I know once more the song of the wheels—
Monsters grinding by night and day—
For they send my power o'er copper wires,
A thousand miles away!

Chart Pitt.

Far Above Rubies

By BEN CONLON

JANE RAND looked across the table at her husband with benevolent and tender eyes. Her voice, low-pitched and gentle, was part of her kindly nature, and always deepened in its melodious sweetness when she spoke to Aaron Rand. She held an open letter in her hand.

"Reckon I'll have to go on East, Aaron," she said. "Minnie, she's pretty bad, it seems, and there ain't anybody but me to help out right at this time."

Aaron met his wife's solicitous gaze with an amiable widening of his mouth and the gleam of two rows of fine teeth.

"Don't you worry 'bout me, Jane. I'll get along all right for a couple of weeks."

The small, vertical lines between Jane's eyes deepened. "May be more'n two weeks, Aaron. I've never left you that way for more'n a day or two since we been married."

"Well," Aaron argued mildly, "there ain't anything to do 'bout it, is there? She is my own blood sister, and she's in bad shape, and there's the kids, and I reckon she'll need you. So you just got to go, and I've just got to stay here and get along the best I can without you."

"All right, dear." Jane's lips were smiling, her eyes worried. "But you'll promise me to take good care of yourself, won't you, Aaron? You know what I mean," she added slowly.

Her husband's smile became a reassuring grin as he said:

"Don't you worry 'bout me! Course I'll take care of myself. Haven't seen me drink too much for ages, have you, Jane?"

"You've been real good," was Jane's praise, "but you know you've always said, Aaron, that you couldn't kept straight all this time if it hadn't been for me. But I'm satisfied to take your word, dear."

Jane Rand had been satisfied to take her husband's word countless times during the twenty-odd years of their marriage, in spite of his repeated failures to keep his word in the small things. She had always made, would always make, excuses for him, and had mothered his weak and unstable nature with an unwavering understanding and sympathy that had made bitterness and distrust impossible to her.

Now she smiled tenderly and said: "Anything you need, just get it, dear. I was going to take you down to Jasper to

get a new suit of clothes, so you go along and get it anyway, and anything else you need. I reckon I ain't going to scrimp on such things with that three thousand in the bank."

"But ain't you afraid I'll spend more'n I ought to of that legacy?"

"Course I ain't afraid, Aaron. You know's well as I do that we've got to invest that money, most of it anyhow, in good securities, to help take care of us in our old age, but I reckon we can spend some of it for pleasure right now, if we feel like it. But we kind of got to go easy. But you'll take good care of yourself, won't you, Aaron?" she asked again.

Aaron Rand promised—promising was the best thing he did—and the next day Jane started on her trip East, her heart aglow with happy trust in her husband's loyalty and with tender yearning over his childlike dependence upon her.

II.

If the Rands's neighbors, or the inhabitants of the village of Westphalia, two miles east of the Rand farm, had heard this dinner conversation, the worried look in Jane Rand's eyes would not have been lost upon them, for they knew that Aaron Rand, not essentially a vicious man and by no means dull of brain, was what they characterized as "his own worst enemy."

As a youth he had inherited a small tract of land beyond the village limits, and somehow managed to wrest from these scraggy acres sufficient revenue to support himself and his faithful wife, whose village-going wardrobe was confined to "one black dress" each year.

It might have been better for Aaron Rand if the Westphalia Hotel had not been on the direct route which he traversed in driving from the Rand farm to the center of Westphalia, where he disposed of garden truck and occasionally rackloads of hay. But it certainly would not have been better for the proprietor of the Westphalia Hotel, for Aaron usually spent something in the gloomy old bar of this hostelry on his way to town, and regularly spent something on his way back to the farm.

Here, on hot summer days, was cool draft beer to soothe the throat of a man who had unloaded dusty hay or who drove slowly through the streets of Westphalia bawling that fresh vegetables were for sale; and here, on cold winter days, was liquid of a more fiery nature. And if the day was neither hot nor cold, Aaron Rand managed to stop in anyhow.

There were amusing stories to hear, and the longer Aaron remained the more amusing the stories became, and often it was a good thing that his pair of sorrels knew the way home from the Westphalia Hotel.

It had been back in the eighties that Aaron, then a stalwart young man with the world before him, had determined that life would not be worth living unless Jane Flint, then a very rosebud of a girl, helped him to live it; and so ardent had been his suit that Jane had begun to think so too. And although Judge Flint had stormed, and Mrs. Flint had pleaded, Aaron Rand had wooed, and the upshot of it all had been a sleigh ride over to the Middle Settlement, where a crossroads parson, doubtless meaning to do good, had tied the knot.

As the couple drove away joyously, Aaron was jubilant, and Jane was strangely happy, if a bit tearful and dubious. Aaron Rand had won a beautiful bride and a Flint, to boot, and might well be congratulated; and Jane Flint had harnessed her fate with an up-and-coming young man, as she thought, and she hoped that Judge Flint would welcome them on their return from Niagara Falls. And that was that.

Judge Flint, however, proved well named, as many a villager of obvious wit mentioned in his or her gossip over the sensation. He died a bitter old man some eight years later, nor did approaching death soften his resentful heart.

"Have nothing to do with her, Mary," he told his wife. "If you do, I'll come back. I'll come back, and—and ha'nt you!" he had threatened.

And many a day, driving to town with Aaron Rand, Jane looked with furtive and mournful gaze at a great square house on the main avenue of Westphalia, and once in awhile saw, with a lump in her throat,

the figure of an elderly woman in a house-wrapper at the window. But it had been made clear that Mrs. Aaron Rand was not welcome at the big square house.

"When you regret," Mrs. Flint had said primly, "you can be welcome here, Jane. When you're willing to say you're sorry."

But, sorry or not, Jane had never said it. And, gradually, the sensation of Jane Flint's marriage to Aaron Rand had died down. Young Sam Banton, who, folks said, had practically been engaged to Jane at one time, gradually recovered from his nervous breakdown and had gone in with Rowbottom, the jeweler, working hard, remaining single, and having enough money to buy out the little shop when Abner Rowbottom died.

That he continued single had kept Jane Flint with a feeling of guilt for some time. She knew that he had loved her deeply.

Sam Banton was everything that Aaron Rand was not, a man of strong character, of good business sense, of temperate habits, and a regular churchgoer. Once in awhile, as the years went on, Jane met Sam at some church festivity, and once or twice the expression in his gray eyes had stirred in her a deep feeling of compassion and regret that Sam had not found happiness.

Maybe he would some day, she kept thinking, but as the years continued to pass, and Sam's black hair became tinged with gray, and he grew more prosperous and continued to live in his drab little quarters at the Westphalia Hotel, Jane began to realize the depth of Sam Banton's nature, and the depth of the wound that had been dealt him on that snowy day when Aaron Rand and herself were made one.

And then her trips to town became fewer and fewer, and she seldom ran into Sam any more, and occasionally there were Aaron Rand's mild drinking and gambling "tears" to take all of her attention, and the operation of the rocky farm. And then her mother had died, and the legacy had come to her, one of four children, and on the heels of it the news that Aaron's sister, Minnie, was dangerously ill back East.

Her railroad journey was the first she had taken since that memorable trip to Niagara Falls, back in those misty days when her young woman's heart had been filled with thoughts of romance.

III.

SHE continued to worry about Aaron's welfare as the train carried her East, but once arrived at Minnie's humble little home there were other matters to take up her thoughts. Minnie was a widow, and there were three children, and even if part of the poverty that she found was the result of Minnie's improvident Rand nature, it was not the way of Jane Rand to question causes in times of emergency.

For nearly a week she acted as cook, as nursemaid, as trained nurse and general factotum, and to these duties added that as banker, for it was only too apparent that the owner of the house in which Minnie Rand lived was a man of more business acumen than of human sympathy.

Two weeks after her arrival back East Jane decided that it was up to her to cancel some of her sister-in-law's obligations and to propitiate the landlord. She drew four checks, each for a moderate amount, on her bank in Westphalia, where, as complete and substantial proof of her confidence in Aaron, she had deposited the legacy money and insisted upon making the account a joint one with her husband.

Her sister-in-law was almost well again, and Jane was planning to return home, when the landlord came to say that the check given him had been returned. Amazed and inexperienced as she was in such matters, Jane Rand stood there, a look of puzzlement in her eyes.

"But the bank must have made—have made some mistake," she stammered.

"Very likely there's been a mistake somewhere," the landlord agreed dryly. "There's always a mistake, it seems," he added, "in cases like this. But I can't afford these mistakes. I've got to have my rent."

"I'll write to the bank," the puzzled Jane promised.

"I'd telegraph 'em if I was you," had been the suggestion of the hard-faced man who stood before her. "If I don't have

that rent money this time next week, I'll put out this family, sickness or no sickness. I ain't in this business for my health. I can rent this house any time—to cash tenants."

Accordingly, Jane wired the bank. A day or so later came a brief reply, signed by the president of the bank, to the effect that Jane Rand's account had been overdrawn.

Still too dazed to understand, and rather ignorant about such matters, Jane Rand made preparations to return West sooner than she had planned. Vaguely and uneasily wondering how the bank could make such a serious mistake, her mind was so preoccupied that she failed to send Aaron a letter or a telegram to tell him when she would arrive.

When she reached her station and saw no sign of her husband, she recalled that she had sent him no word.

She went straight to the bank from the station, for the matter of that ridiculous mistake must be straightened out. She was told politely but without preamble that her husband had drawn out the entire amount.

"It was a joint account, you see," the banker explained. "There's been no—irregularity, I trust?"

The banker, in common with other residents of Westphalia, had heard various rumors about Aaron Rand.

"Why—why, of course not," was Jane's reply. "I—I remember now. Aaron was to get the money for an investment. I recall now that I told him to draw it out."

"Quite all right, then," said the banker. He looked out with a strange expression as the small figure departed from the bank and crossed to the Westphalia livery, where she hired a rig to take her out to the farm. Once arrived there, she paid the man, and hurried to the back of the farmhouse.

There was no sign of Aaron outdoors, and she ran inside, calling his name with eager, trembling lips.

There was no response. The house was strangely silent. She was half aware that the old grandfather clock opposite the front stairway had stopped. She set it, and wound and started it. She could not stand this oppressive silence.

Then she shuffled out into the front kitchen, and sank into an old armchair, too faint from excitement and a horrible, gripping fear, to stand. Out of the whirl of her thoughts and chaotic emotions emerged a dread that took definite and terrifying form and substance: Aaron had not only taken all her money, but he had deserted her!

For the first time in all the years she permitted herself a disloyal suspicion that her husband could do anything really mean or contemptible.

Numb with anguish and horror, she sat there, as the day waned, with no thought of any of the trivial details of life. She had not removed her hat or coat, and she had not eaten since early morning. The idea of food did not occur to her.

The tinkle of cowbells sounded from the distance, and there was a lowing of cattle. It was milking time, and the listless wonder crossed her mind as to whether the Lithuanian from the next farm, who sometimes helped out Aaron with the milking, was out in the barn, or if all that was alive on the farm had been deserted as she had been.

The twilight came and deepened, and still she sat motionless. It was the custom for the occasional hired man to separate the milk and leave it in the barn for Aaron to bring to the kitchen. No one came to disturb the stillness of the house.

Suddenly one of the dogs barked. It was a friendly, welcoming bark, and Jane's heart almost stopped, for she sensed that that canine greeting could only be for the master of the place.

She tried to rise, but sank back weakly. The next instant the back kitchen door slammed shut, and she recognized footsteps that she had heard in that kitchen for over twenty years.

Then Aaron stood in the room, his eyes blinking through the shadows, sensing rather than seeing Jane where she sat in the old armchair. With a low exclamation of surprise he went forward.

"Well, of all things!" he greeted her, a cheerful smile on his weak but whimsical mouth, for the passing years had not yet stolen a certain dazzling male attractiveness from Aaron Rand.

Jane's first sensation was one of relief, and so intense was the emotion that for a blind, unthinking interval she was conscious only of a wild soaring of her spirit above the pain and fear that had held her cold and taut for hours.

Aaron was *there,* standing before her, smiling, speaking to her! Aaron had not run off, had not deserted her. Aaron loved her, as his welcoming smile and cheerful words assured her.

As she sprung up and flung herself against his broad chest, no other memory crowded upon that ecstatic moment of her life.

She trembled with joy in the close embrace of his strong arms. Then she said haltingly—mumbled it against his tweed coat:

"I thought—I was afraid—oh, Aaron, I thought you had gone away—left me forever."

He held her back from him and studied her agitated face. His own expressed frank surprise and puzzlement. No human face could have reflected a more innocent questioning wonder than his did.

Suddenly her relief and joy were swept away momentarily by a wave of abject shame for her base and baseless suspicions. She had thought, she had feared, that he had not only taken her money from the bank, but had taken it for ugly, unthinkable purposes.

God in heaven! That she should have held such thought of him after all the years of his devotion and loyalty! She heard him say:

"What on earth ails you, Jane? Just because you come in here without letting a body know you're coming, and don't find me here waiting for you, you—" He laughed, and left the conclusion of the thought unsaid. "'Tain't like you, Jane. What all put such ideas in your head?"

He scowled at her a little, and she felt more abject than ever. Never, never could she tell him what ideas she had actually harbored. She would not even question him about the bank. He would tell her of his own accord.

There could be no doubt that he had taken the money for some legitimate purpose. Probably he wanted to surprise her. That would be like Aaron. She would not spoil the pleasure in his still boyish heart by intimating that she knew the money was not in the bank.

With a tender smile of complete faith and love, she said:

"It *was* crazy nonsense, dear. I guess I'm tired out and wrought up after taking care of Minnie and the children, and worrying about her bills and all that. And I've been so homesick. I reckon I was just tired enough to be silly."

His face still expressed slight wonderment. He said:

"But why didn't you send me word you were coming home? Never got a message. Did you send one, Jane?"

Suddenly she remembered that it was because she was preoccupied over the matter of the money that she failed to let him know. She could not tell him that now.

"I was upset, I reckon, about leaving poor Minnie. You know how hard up she is, Aaron, and I guess it's up to me—to us—to help her out a little."

"Sorry 'bout Minnie," said Aaron, "but we've got to feather our own nest first, you know, Jane. I've been doing a little feathering on my own account. What d'you say to that, old girl?"

She couldn't say anything for a few seconds. Whatever he had done would be all right, she knew that. It had not occurred to him, probably, that she knew of the money drawn from the bank.

She had taken a fairly large sum with her in cash, country fashion. He need never know about the returned checks; that would take the gloss from the surprise he had in store for her.

"Tell me, dear, about the surprise you have in store for me," she pleaded. "I don't know what it is—but it's something. I've seen that smile of yours too many years not to know."

"Wait a minute!" Aaron commanded, his whimsical mouth in a smile again. He walked over to the old desk set in the hall between the kitchen and the stairway, unlocked a drawer, fumbled in it. When he returned he was holding something in his hand. Her quick glance told Jane that it

was not a document, not any kind of a paper. She had jumped instantly to the conclusion, when Aaron spoke of feathering their nest, that he had made some unusually attractive investment.

Her puzzled eyes fixed themselves on his right hand, closed tightly over some small object. Then he held it out to her with a broad smile, and never a word.

It was a small jeweler's box. She lifted the lid, and there on the white velvet cushion rested a large, deeply red stone. Her eyes dilated with utter bewilderment.

"What is it?" she asked.

"Lorda'mighty, Jane, don't you *see* what it is? It's a ruby, girl—a beautiful and perfect and wonderful ruby, the most precious of all precious stones. *That's* what it is, old lady!"

Still staring down at the stone, she said: "But I don't believe I understand, Aaron. Where did you get it, and what for?"

In the question was concentrated all the practical common sense with which for so many years she had striven to control the carelessness and extravagance of this thoughtless, lovable man before her.

"Where did I get it?" he repeated airily. "Certainly not at a butcher shop. Where do you suppose, except from a jeweler?"

"From—from Sam Banton?"

"No, sirree!" Aaron rejoined quickly. "Sam Banton ain't a real judge o' precious stones. He never had a stone like that in *his* store, and he couldn't have sold it once in a lifetime. I got that stone in another town—a city, that is—well, in Preble—slipped over there while you were at Minnie's—because I'd heard 'bout it and what a grand opportunity it was to make a fine investment."

Then Aaron's impracticality had not descended to buying this expensive bauble for a woman who had one new black dress each year. At least he had tried to be practical, and yet, what sort of an investment would this prove to be? She had never heard of such a thing.

"Investment," she repeated, dully.

"Sure—investment." No impatience colored his voice. Aaron's good disposition never faltered.

"You mean," she said slowly, "that you put money into this—this stone, because you can sell it for more than you paid for it?" Again her practical mind had gone straight to the heart of the matter.

"That's it! You don't s'pose, Jane, that, poor as we are, I went out and bought a thing like that just to look at it or expect you to have it set and wear it to church?"

"How much—did you pay for it, Aaron?"

"I paid," he answered her quietly, "exactly three thousand dollars. I drew it because this was a real chance. We can sell it any time, when we really need the money—oh, for four thousand, anyhow, maybe more."

Fighting her distress, so as not to hurt his feelings, Jane said gently:

"But, Aaron, dear, wouldn't that same amount of money invested in some stocks or bonds pay interest that we could use right now, and then we'd have the stock to sell later on?"

His smile seemed to say that he had infinite patience with the logic of a woman.

"It's true enough," he admitted, "that the same amount o' money invested in stock and bonds would pay interest—small interest that wouldn't amount to a hill o' beans. But stocks and bonds go down sometimes, Jane. They might be worth about half what we paid for 'em when we came to sell 'em."

She listened in silence, knowing that what he said was true, yet inwardly rebelling, somehow, against his argument. Then she said:

"Aaron, if we keep this stone—just keep it locked up—it 'll be as if we put all that money in a hole in the ground. And when we take it out to sell it, say, if we did make a profit of a thousand or so, wouldn't that be less than the interest on some good investment plus the value of the stock itself?"

Again Aaron smiled superciliously, but affectionately.

"You're dead right, Jane—up to a certain point. That 'ud all be true if the stock stayed level up. S'posing it went down? That couldn't happen with this—no, sirree! Why, if anything ever happened to me, you'd be provided for—could

pay off the rest o' the mortgage and have some left to take care o' you."

As they sat down to supper, the discussion continued, never unfriendly, never probing through Aaron's self-confidence. Aaron couldn't telegraph—he could, that is, but how could he explain all there was to say about the matter? And there wasn't time for letter-writing. Jane had trusted him.

If he had told her all about it, she would have said to go ahead. No time for all that. He went ahead, anyhow. And as to the possibility of the ruby's not being worth all that Aaron thought it was—he smiled at this.

No one had ever "taken in" Aaron Rand very much. On horse trading deals who was it that usually got the better of it? All that.

Suddenly a warm feeling of confidence as well as love and gratitude made Jane Rand lift her face to her husband's.

"I just love you, dear," she said, "for being so thoughtful and far-sighted for my sake. I'm *glad* you did it. I'm kind o' worried about poor Min, but I'll send her my egg money this month."

"Sure," Aaron responded. "I can let you have a little more for her, if necessary. I collected a few old bills—Spriggs paid me for the hay he bought last year. I'd begun to think that was a dead debt."

And so ended the incident of the legacy and the ruby whose price was above all other precious stones!

IV.

THE years passed. The Westphalia Hotel turned its bar into a lunch counter as a concession to certain legislation that the proprietor ranted about from time to time, but Aaron Rand discovered places in Westphalia where the liquor was more poisonous and more expensive. When he stopped in these days it was never for cool draft beer, but Jane Rand made the best of it, and Aaron Rand made promises. His sister Minnie had lingered on, and when she finally died the world had not cheated her out of many years.

Aaron and Jane went East for the funeral, and Jane remained on for a few days. The children were grown, but there were grandchildren to worry about now. Every generation, it seemed, had brought its worries to Jane Rand.

On the occasion of this, her return from the second long train ride she had taken in years, she telegraphed Aaron to meet her with the sleigh. But as the snow-ridged local train drew into Westphalia, a white-haired, heavy-shouldered man was folding the extra lap robe into a neat, oblong and cushioning the seat with it; then he stepped none too spryly from the rig and, plowing through the drifts, helped the woman from the unvestibuled platform of the single passenger car.

The flakes had ceased to fall, although a malicious wind sent stinging white clouds into the faces of the few who were waiting until the train pulled out. The white-haired man was intercepting the passage of the little old woman, who bent her head against the cutting wind. She looked up.

"Sam Banton!" she exclaimed. "I thought Aaron 'ud be waiting."

"Hop in," suggested Sam, reaching for her valise. "I wouldn't wait to visit. Too cold."

A few bystanders were surveying the woman with strange expressions on their faces. Sam Banton's face, too, seemed a little strange.

"I'll drive you on home," Sam offered. "Explain as I go along."

"Aaron ain't sick?" There was real fear in the woman's faded eyes.

"We'd best be getting along," Sam countered.

"Seems queer, this," said Jane. "Well, Aaron must have told you the train I was coming on, anyhow. Getting to be quite a gadabout, ain't I, Sam?"

The attempted flippancy failed to penetrate the gloom of the driver, who pursed his lips to the horse, but otherwise made no sound.

Sam Banton's mouth was twitching queerly. He waited until the Westphalia Hotel was left behind before he found courage to deliver his message. Even then he hardly found the courage. His voice shook a little as he said: "Jane, I hate to have

to tell you, but I ain't got the best news in the world, and—"

"Something about Aaron?"

"We decided not to telegraph. We didn't want to shock you, Jane, at your age. Y'see, the blizzard came up 'bout midnight, and a railing was blown off o' South Creek Bridge, and— Git *up* there, Nig."

Nig, the horse, seemed to be covering the ground at his usual gait. The command had evidently been given to delay tidings of more ominous portent.

"Something's happened to Aaron!"

The dismal news was told—part of it—haltingly. Kind-hearted Sam Banton withheld the part about Aaron's drunkenness.

The ice was pretty thick at that point in South Creek. The drop had been rather a long one. Exposure had done the rest. Swen Rasmussen had found the frozen body on the way to the creamery that morning.

There was no moralizing on Sam's part. He tried to be comforting, asked shyly that Jane try to control herself, as if he knew the futility of his request. The sleigh slipped along the country road, its bells jingling merrily at weird discord with the mood of its occupants.

There was no further speech until the horse quickened its pace as the outline of South Creek Bridge loomed out of the gathering dusk.

"Poor Aaron!" droned Jane, at this cruel reminder. "One o' the best men ever lived, in his own way."

The rig rumbled over the bridge, veered to parallel the stream which split the Rand acres; turned down the Middle Settlement road and through the sagging gate into the farmstead grounds.

The Lithuanian hired man, lantern in hand, took charge of the horse at the frozen chain pump. Jane Rand choked back a convulsive sob. Sam Banton, dry-eyed, but looking very old, helped the woman as she picked her steps across the icy path to the back kitchen entrance.

V.

To say that poor little Jane Rand, a withered but still appealingly sweet woman, felt that life had stopped with her would be striving to express a tragedy of the soul in terse and meaningless words. At seventy the heart does not break, but its beat slows and becomes unsteady with the ache and loneliness of the heart's solitude, after fifty years of love and companionship.

Practical thoughts relating to bare survival and struggle against odds, finally brought to Jane's mind the realization that she must now pay up the mortgage and arrange her affairs so that she could live quietly and restfully for the balance of her days.

The precious ruby had lain, during all the years, on its white velvet cushion, a whiteness now yellowed with age, and the box had been left practically untouched in the small locked drawer of the old desk. Once in a great while Jane had gone to the drawer and taken out the ruby and held it to the light, a glow in her heart at the memory of what her husband had done for her on that memorable day long ago.

A week after Aaron's burial she took the stone out once more, her old eyes dim with the years of yearning and regret for the man she had loved unstintingly since she was twenty; for the man she had trusted unwaveringly except for that ugly interval when she had sat in the old armchair and believed him a thief and a wife deserter.

Faced with the practical and imminent necessity of turning her precious ruby into gold, Jane decided to go to her old friend, Sam Banton. Sam, still vigorous, still ran his jewelry store, and if reports were correct, had salted down many a penny in the years of his devotion to business.

The small, slender figure, with its slightly bent shoulders, from which rose the white-haired head and sweet, softly lined face, entered the store one snowy afternoon about four o'clock.

The lines on Jane's face were tiny lines, so delicately and lovingly etched by time they had not become furrows, nor had they left an effect of shrunken or parched skin. There were even faint roses in the cheeks, but that might have been from excitement—the excitement of parting at last with the token of her husband's thoughtful devotion.

Sam greeted her with a smile on his firm lips and something in his eyes that Jane was too self-effacing to note or understand. She told him in a few words what it was she wanted him to do for her. She referred briefly to the mortgage and other matters of practical significance, and then, with a smile of radiant faith parting her tender mouth:

"You see, Sam, I hate to part with it, but I guess I have to. Aaron put his life's devotion to me into that ruby, so you can understand what it means to me to sell it. And I couldn't bear to take it to any one but you, Sam. I know you'll give me what it's really worth."

Her eyes showed faith in the man before her as well as in the man she had loved and lived with for fifty years.

Sam took the stone in his wrinkled but firm and delicate hands. He walked to a window and studied the stone through the glass that he had fastened to his eye.

He stood quite still and silent for an appreciable moment. Jane watched his back, the curve of his broad shoulders, the hair that, though white, was still thick upon his head.

She was sitting on a chair which he had placed for her. She moved her small feet restlessly, and fumbled with her bag. Perhaps the slight sound of her movements carried across the room to Sam, who stood so still and silent staring at the object in his hand.

He turned slowly, laid the stone back upon its velvet cushion, and walked back toward the chair. His face was a little drawn, his lips stern. His eyes—he did not wear old-age glasses—were dark and inscrutable.

The woman scarcely breathed. It would mean everything to her what Sam could offer for this ruby.

"How much," Sam began quietly, "did—your husband tell you—I mean," he corrected himself, "how much did he pay for this stone, Jane?"

"He paid," Jane answered proudly, "three thousand dollars, and he was sure that it would go up in value. He told me that I might be able to get four thousand for it if I kept it for any length of time. That was Aaron! It's true he gambled a little at the Westphalia Hotel. But then he could gamble in the good sense, too.

"I'd never had the courage to draw out all the money I got for that legacy—but Aaron did, when he found a good proposition."

"Three thousand dollars," Sam repeated slowly. "And you want to get four thousand for it now, is that it, Jane?"

His dark gray eyes stirred in her memories of long-forgotten things. What was it Sam's eyes were trying to tell her?

"It isn't what I *want* to get, Sam, it's what I *can* get. You know the value of such things. I don't know a thing about it. Of course I'll take your word for whatever you say that ruby is worth. If it isn't really worth as much after all these years as poor Aaron thought it would be, why, that's all there is to it. I'll be disappointed—but not more than he'd have been, not near as much. I'll be mighty glad to get back what it originally cost us, Sam, if you feel you can buy it from me."

"What it originally cost you." He repeated the words as if he found difficulty in getting beyond that point. Then he added:

"The fact is, Jane, my dear old friend, it isn't a matter of what the ruby is really worth, but what I can afford to pay for it right now. I don't believe I could pay more than—well, say three thousand five hundred, if that would be all right. I'm sure you couldn't get more than that any other place," and she might have imagined that his voice quavered slightly, might have caught the anxious gleam in his eyes.

"Oh, no, no, Sam! I couldn't bear to sell it to any one but you."

The long breath he drew was more like a deep sigh of immense relief. She thought happily that he understood her sentiment about her husband's gift and was glad that she was willing to sacrifice a certain amount of profit in order to let her old friend take it out of her clinging hands.

"All right," Sam said quietly. "It might go to thirty-six hundred, at that," he added, looking at the stone. "Shall I write you a check, or shall I go to the bank and

get the cash for you? I couldn't get it before to-morrow, I'm afraid. Bank's closed now."

"Why, if you'll attend to matters for me, Sam, I'll be so grateful," was Jane's suggestion. "I'd like you to pay off the mortgage on the farm. It 'll leave quite a tidy sum from the amount you're willing to pay me for the ruby. Then with what's left I want to invest it in some good, conservative stock that 'll pay dividends that 'll take care of me as long as I live. I'm going to ask you to 'tend to everything, Sam, if it ain't imposing too much. And I'd like," she ended, softly, "to will the stock to you, if you outlive me, for there ain't any one else left belonging to me, no real blood relatives, that is."

Sam's eyes filled with the mist of emotion. The gaunt, strong face was not one that would easily wrinkle in grief. These were tears of a strong man in the stress of an upheaval of deep feeling that had survived the years. He took Jane's small hand in his.

"Thank you, dear," he said. "That makes up for—for everything—for the drab dullness of my life."

Jane squeezed his hand with a tardy understanding of the years that had molded him and kept in his heart a love that now, at this late date, found ultimate expression.

"And take pity on my loneliness, Sam," she said. "You used to come to see me, a good many years ago."

"That's right, Jane," said Sam.

After she had gone he drew the almost worthless garnet from its velvet resting place, looked at it with narrowed eyes, and with a flip of his deft fingers, tossed it into the waste basket. It had started to snow outside, and was growing dark. He did not switch on the window lights, but sat there gazing out into the deepening twilight.

THE END

ʊ ʊ ʊ

WHAT'D WE DO?

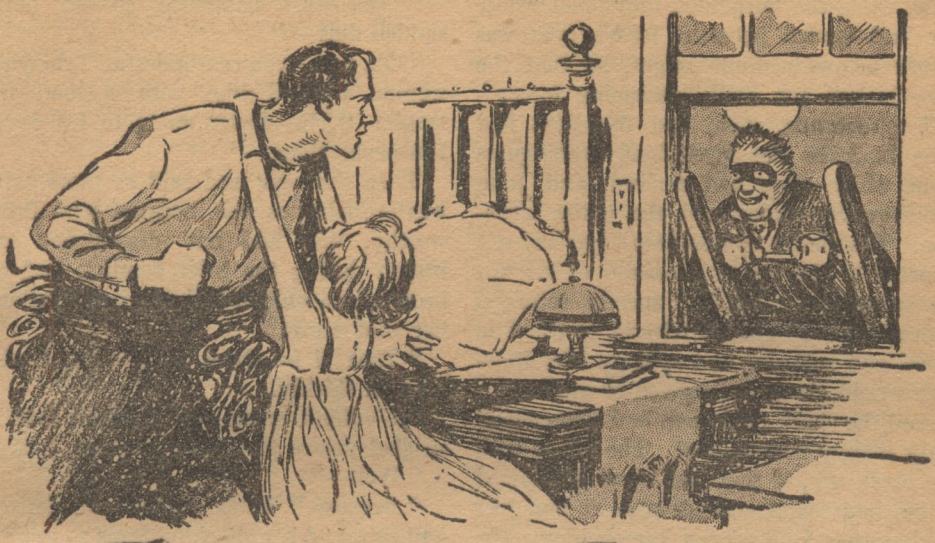
WITH a pick or shovel, rake or hoe,
Runnin' an engine, or firin',
Trappin' up where it's "forty below,"
Or minin'—most o' it's tirin'!

Men who sit at a desk all day,
Puzzlin' with figures or papers,
In country towns or cities gay,
Get weary o' all life's capers.

There's one thing worse than workin'
And that's to have nothin' to do,
And though all of us do some shirkin'
We jes' gotta carry through.

Most laborin' comes from the devil,
There's no two ways about it,
But, honest to gosh, on the level:
What 'd we do without it?

Peter A. Lea.
5 A



Paid in Advance

By EDGAR FRANKLIN

Author of "Roll Your Own," "Regular People," etc.

WHAT HAS OCCURRED IN PARTS I and II

JOHN PROUDWORTHY BOWMAN was made temporary president of the Westboro Chamber of Commerce, so he could deliver the welcoming address to the approaching hardware convention, an event which may bring enormous business into Westboro. John was the best speaker in town, and there was nothing about his handsome, distinguished appearance to suggest that he was the chief clerk of Carter Morse, at a salary of fifty per week. His pretty and competent wife, Janet, well knew his salary, and to meet expenses she arranged—much to his disapproval—to have a Mrs. Duncan for room and board. Then Janet left for her sister's, planning to arrive home at eleven that night. Steve Gail, friend of John's, to make him cheerful, placed loud records on the victrola, while he rummaged about upstairs. After he had gone, Mrs. Duncan unexpectedly arrived sooner than they had arranged for. She was young, of extraordinary beauty, and inclined to utilize all her feminine wiles on John Proudworthy. She tearfully described how, at a wild party, she had become unconscious, and, on awakening in a taxi with a strange man, she was informed that they were married and her name was Mrs. Duncan. She fled from him, and she wanted to hide out here with the Bowmans until her uncle returned from Europe. Mrs. Duncan pointed to a dark man who was the terrible husband. John proceeded to knock him out, after which she explained he was the wrong man. The wrong man ran off, throwing back profane threats. Later, as they went to get his parked car on a side street, John was suddenly attacked by several men.

CHAPTER VIII.

UNFORESEEN.

PRAY be without a suggestion of fear that John Proudworthy is about to be left bleeding and unconscious in that dark byway, while a quintet of night prowlers whisk his beautiful responsibility into the car and drag her away to heaven alone knows what frightful fate.

Mr. Bowman was one of those painfully healthy, almost indestructible people who can take with only momentary inconvenience an amount of battering that would send the ordinary mortal to the hospital for weeks. Also, he was a person of some alti-

This story began in the Argosy-Allstory Weekly for July 30.

tude, while the misguided individual whose fist had landed between John's eyes was rather below medium height, so that the blow lacked any really damaging force.

Two seconds, then, and the stars had gone back to the mysterious nothingness from which they had arrived, and John Proudworthy understood the entire situation. His victim of two hours ago had not resorted to the slower processes of law for his vengeance. He had merely returned with a few well chosen friends, to exact in blood and suffering the apology Mr. Bowman would gladly have given in words.

And the short, dark man had some amazingly snappy friends, too! The fellow with the blackjack, if that was what it chanced to be, had taken another pass at him just as the other four swarmed upon him. Mr. Bowman caught the wrist below the blackjack and hurled its owner bodily over the heads of his friends and against the concrete front wall of some one's unlighted home.

The man lay absolutely still! Mr. Bowman half-turned to look at him. Just then somebody's fist struck Mr. Bowman's jaw, lightly and still rather painfully, and budding sympathy for the prostrate person died, and red-hot, wholly natural rage took its place.

John Proudworthy, in fact, lashed out so viciously with his big fists that there were two cracking sounds that came almost as one—and two men drooped down in two limp heaps before him! Yes, and the remaining two stood thunderstruck throughout that long second wherein they might have fled—stood and then stood no more, because one of them had made a weak motion which suggested the drawing of a pistol from his hip pocket and John Proudworthy had done the rest.

Not even panting, he looked rather blankly at the five darker blotches, here and there upon the pavement. Whatever the precise purpose of their raid, it seemed to have failed. Oh, and there was Paula, uninjured, thank fortune. Mr. Bowman turned to smile at Paula—and Paula's arms were around his neck and she had kissed him, gaspingly.

"Oh, I knew you would! I knew you would—for me!" she cried.

"Well—this happened so—so darned sudden that—"

"Oh, you—you're wonderful!" the young woman advised him with a mad little laugh. "I'm—never going to leave you! I'm never going—"

Then she wept and said no more, which was probably as well, because John Proudworthy, who had not drawn one extra breath during the brief conflict, had now broken into sudden and free perspiration at her wild words.

"That 'll be about all of *that*, Paula!" he said thickly.

"I—didn't mean—oh, I meant that I'm so glad you're just what you are, Jack."

"Well—"

"Because," Paula sighed shudderingly, and returned her shocking arms to more respectable position at her sides, "when I'm—with you, I'm safe!"

She swayed against him. Mr. Bowman patted the slim shoulder and gazed about his personal battle-field.

"All right," said he; "only you know that neither of us are going to be safe about the time one of these boys comes around and begins to yell for help, don't you? If we waste time here that we ought to be using in getting out of the neighborhood, we—"

"Yes—that's true! Quick!" Paula cried, and herself opened the door of the little car.

Mr. Bowman glided inward. Mrs. Duncan glided after him. Mr. Bowman turned on his headlights, noted that the next car was all of twenty feet away and gave up a silent prayer of thanks as he started his engine and glided straight up the dark block.

Well—that had been a hot one and no mistake! He, John Proudworthy, within five minutes of resolving firmly that he was all through with the violent life, had knocked out five men in as many seconds! Why, he had never done a thing like that before in all his days!

And if it leaked out that the new president of the chamber of commerce—oh, well, there was no great danger of that, of course. There had been hardly a sound throughout the battle; the hour had been rather late for Westboro and the main thoroughfare

fairly deserted. And in any case, gentlemen who make an unprovoked attack of that character are not likely to seek legal redress if the adventure chances to go against them.

Any acts of violence that had to be committed on her account should be committed by uniformed police or hired ruffians, according to the needs of the moment. The dog-goned little nuisance might be prettier than any picture that had ever been painted, but—bosh! What was the sense of blaming this affair on Paula? They were out of it; even now they were rolling up the home driveway.

"I'll have to run down to the train for Janet in a few minutes and three can't ride in this car," John stated, as he stepped out. "You don't mind being left alone for a very little while?"

"I do! I—"

"Well, it's unavoidable in this case, Paula," her host said flatly. "You can fasten the door on the inside and go upstairs and lock your own door as well, if you like. If, by any possible chance, somebody should try to break in, you can screech like sin and have a whole army of neighbors around the house in two minutes. Only this time I'll have to desert you."

"You don't—don't think I'm going in there alone, do you?" the paying guest asked swiftly.

"I do not. I'm going with you and we'll search the whole house if you like," John Proudworthy said with resignation. "And then I'll have to hurry off."

The timid girl made no further comment. Clinging to his arm, she entered the pretty little home, John switched on the porch lights. Clinging still, she entered the living room with him, and John switched on the center light, the two lamps, and the two side lights. Next, he detached himself and raised the shade of the wide front window and for a moment he gazed meditatively outward.

The neighborhood, usually dark at this hour, was late in getting to bed to-night. There were lights in Tilson's and lights over there in Miller's. Oh, yes, and the Grange family next door on the other side hadn't retired yet, either, eh? Grange's front door was opening now; John frowned rather wonderingly.

His wonder grew at the sight of Sam Grange himself, crossing the lawn between their houses with a coffee cup in his hand. Was he coming here? Yes, he seemed to be, coffee cup and all.

"Next door neighbor's gone crazy, I guess, Paula," he commented, with a grin. "He's coming to call and bringing us a cup of coffee!"

"Not really?"

"Not really crazy," John muttered, as he answered the ring at the door, "only—hello, Sam!"

"Hello, John!" his neighbor cried, with great heartiness, and stalked straight into the home. "How do? Pretty late to drop in, but Adele said it couldn't be left over even till morning."

"What couldn't?"

"This couldn't!" Mr. Grange announced, brightly, and proffered the cup. "Sugar that Del borrowed from Janet nearly a week ago and she's been forgetting to return it ever since. Here, old man—and much obliged and Del said to be sure to apologize for letting it go so long, but it did seem that every time—oh!" said Mr. Grange, in pretty confusion, and stopped short.

By now, you see, he had hurtled past John Proudworthy and attained the living room itself, so coming face to face with Paula.

"Well—well, excuse *me!*" he stammered, effectively enough. "I thought you were alone, John."

John smiled evenly.

"Our neighbor on the north, Mrs. Duncan," he explained. "Mr. Grange!"

"Well—well, I certainly am delighted!" said the neighbor, and wrung Paula's hand the while he drank in her rare beauty. "Mrs.—ah—Duncan?"

"Mrs. Duncan is boarding with us, Sam."

"You don't say!" cried Sam. "Boarding! Well, that—that's very nice."

"Isn't it?" John smiled. "And now I'll have to ask you to run home, old man, because Mrs. Duncan wants to lock herself in and I have to go down to the station for Janet."

"Well, of course, if—" Mr. Grange be-

gan, and stopped short once more. "What's that? Who the dickens is mowing his lawn at this hour of the night?"

"Give it up," Mr. Bowman grunted.

"He's mowing *your* lawn!" stated the visitor. "That's right outside here, John."

"It does seem to be," the head of the house muttered, with a puzzled frown. And then he smiled sourly as the bell tinkled for the second time in five minutes. "Oh, another caller, eh?"

"Go see who it is," advised Grange. "I'll talk to Mrs. Duncan."

He drew up a chair and cleared his throat, proceeding to talk to Mrs. Duncan. Mrs. Duncan, possibly from habit, possibly on general principles, sat back and allowed her indescribable eyes to glow at Mr. Grange. She said nothing at all. It was rarely necessary for Paula to say anything unless she chose.

Out in the entry, John Proudworthy said, not without a little difficulty:

"Oh—how de do, Miller?"

"Hello, old man! Hello! Hello!" cried a large voice, as a distinctly plump man tramped into the home. "Just saw you come in, you know, and I said to my wife: 'I'm not going to leave that over one more day,' I said. 'I'm ashamed of myself,' I said. 'I'm ashamed to look him in the face,' I said. 'I've had that darned thing a week now,' I said. So I brought back your lawn-mower, Bowman," he concluded, as he marched on, "and I certainly thank you for letting me have it so long and—oh! Why—!"

He, too, stopped, utterly amazed.

"I understand," John said harshly. "You're quite welcome. For the rest of it, the lady's name is Mrs. Duncan—Mrs. Duncan, Mr. Miller, by the way. Now is your curiosity satisfied, Miller?"

"Why—"

"Mrs. Duncan has come to board with us now. I forgot to mention that. If you wish to know her age and the names of her grandparents and so on, you'll have to ask the lady herself."

Mr. Miller, whose hide was quite impervious, beamed artlessly at Paula.

"Isn't he the limit?" he said happily. "On the level, now, isn't he? The way he goes on! Half the time, I don't know what he's talking about. Neither does anybody else, I guess. Get out of the way there, Bowman, old bean. I gotta shake hands with Mrs.—Duncan, was it?"

Abundant, joyous personality that he was, the life of any party that could not avoid inviting him, he trudged across the room and shook Mrs. Duncan's hand.

"Well, I certainly am mighty glad to be one of the first to welcome you to this neighborhood, ma'am!" he cried. "You're going to like it around here when you get used to it. You may feel a little strange at first, but you'll like it. We're a good crowd when you get to know us better. Little rough and ready, perhaps, but our hearts are in the right place—haw! Haw! May I sit down and talk to you?"

"Why—" Paula faltered, as he sat down.

"You may talk to her some other time—if she can stand it," John Proudworthy put in cordially, for in truth he was not the very warmest of Mr. Miller's admirers. "Just now you're going home, because I have to run down to the station for Mrs. Bowman. She's coming home on the eleven o'clock train."

"Oho!" cried Mr. Miller. "*She* hasn't been around, hey?"

"And Mrs. Duncan wants to lock herself in," Grange added, and rose reluctantly.

Mr. Miller tilted back and stared.

"Lock herself in? What for? Why, say! Around this neighborhood, Mrs. Duncan, you could leave every door and window open all night and never so much as—"

"Yes, and now will you please get out—both of you?" John smiled. "Janet will hardly want to stand around that station all night waiting for me."

Mr. Miller chucked richly.

"Got a mighty sharp tongue to-night, I'll say!" he observed roguishly. And then, hearty, simple soul that he was, he added: "Looks to me as if he was kind of sore because we'd butted in, eh, Sam?"

"Um—sort of," Mr. Grange murmured without great enthusiasm, because he did not at all fancy the glint in John's eye.

"And I dunno," pursued Mr. Miller, as he continued his critical examination of Paula, "that I blame him such a terrible

lot. Probably if I, m'self, was all alone with—"

"Miller!" John Proudworthy remarked, very quietly indeed and still with an effect that seemed to set the air of the room into vibration.

Mr. Miller glanced at him and grew considerably less hearty.

"Well—Lord! All right," said he, and arose. "You don't have to pick me up and chuck me out of the house, Bowman. I can see when I'm not wanted. All in fun, anyway, you know. Nothing at all to get hot under the collar about. Anyhow, I—I only came over to return your lawn-mower. I hope to see you again, Mrs. Duncan?"

"Yes—oh, yes," Paula said faintly.

"Wish you'd run over and see Mrs. Miller—any time. She'd be delighted!" the gentleman concluded.

He turned away, stood at attention before the master of the house, executed a burlesque salute, turned back and waved a playful hand at Paula and was gone. Mr. Grange followed at once. John Proudworthy smiled rather grimly.

"Our neighbors—yours, now," he muttered. "Whether you know it or not, that was your coming-out party around here, Paula. You've been looked over."

The rather bewildered light left Paula's eyes; they sparkled up at John.

"Well, I think of all our neighbors, I like you the best, Jack," said she.

"Thanks, honey," John grinned. He could afford to be nonchalant now, you see, because within another fifteen minutes Paula would have been turned over to her landlady for good!

"And *now*, as I seem to have said before, I'll get down to the station. I'll just have time to make it. Now, if you're really timid, put the chain on the door when I'm outside, Paula, only please don't be too timid to come down and take it off again when we get here. I really think—"

He stopped. Out back, the bell tinkled again.

"Who's calling *now?*" snarled John.

"If it's that fat man—"

"If it is, you'll just hear something hit the pavement," responded Mr. Bowman, as he started for the door. "Your ears must be getting used to that sound now, Paula. You—oh, hello, Harvey!"

"Good evening to you, old chap," said Mr. Tilson, entering much after the manner of the others, strolling straight into the living room also after the manner of the others. "Oh!"

Mr. Bowman followed, breathing quite heavily. He was not quite so offensive as Miller, of course—but Harvey Tilson was not really welcome.

"Ah—Mrs. Duncan," John managed to smile. "Yes, this is another neighbor. May I present Mr. Tilson?"

"Mrs. Duncan?" escaped Tilson, as he looked blankly from the lady to John.

"Mrs. Duncan," repeated Mr. Bowman.

"The—"

"Yes, the lady who is to be with us," John said, not very steadily. "Of course, I understand, Harvey, that you didn't come in just to see her and see what she looks like. But I have to go down now and meet Janet and Mrs. Duncan wants to lock up after me, so if you're not here on any real business—"

Mr. Tilson, slightly jarred for the moment, had recovered himself now. He turned slowly from Mrs. Duncan and considered John Proudworthy. Slowly, he winked, and the side of his face that was not visible to Mrs. Duncan also grinned.

"Last one in the world to disrupt the orderly conduct of affairs in any household—me," he smiled. "You know that, John. You were out, weren't you?"

"Yes, we went down to the pictures."

"Well, while you were out, a boy came here with a telegram, Johnny. That's what I came over to tell you, you know."

His eyes rolled toward Mrs. Duncan. He winked again; John Proudworthy flushed faintly. He understood the lie, of course, Tilson, one must admit, was a bit too bright to need properties such as sugar and lawnmowers. Tilson, desiring to examine Mrs. Duncan, merely brought his little plausible excuse.

"Well, I'm very sorry that I wasn't here to get that telegram and it was very nice of you to come over and tell me about it, Harvey," John said. "You didn't wear a hat over, did you?"

"No, so you can't hand it to me," Mr. Tilson laughed, genially enough. "You better call up the telegraph office and find out what it was, Johnny."

"Yes, I will—later on—possibly," Mr. Bowman said, between his teeth. "So sorry you have to go now, old man."

"So am I, Johnny," sighed Harvey and bowed to Mrs. Duncan and headed toward the door. "I'll hope to come in again some time."

Now, they were at the open door itself and, presumably, out of Mrs. Duncan's hearing. Mr. Tilson nudged his friend.

"Oh, you devil!" he breathed. "You mendacious devil! Fifty-five or sixty!"

"I—I supposed—"

"Gad! How the woman holds her age! It's absolutely incredible, Johnny! Why, if you hadn't told me in advance, I'd have sworn she wasn't a day over twenty, you know! Marvelous!" Harvey chuckled delightedly and came closer. "Johnny!"

"What?"

"Gimme the low-down on this, old man," the neighbor whispered. "Who *is* the peach? How did she get here?"

"Janet—"

"Bunk!" interrupted Mr. Tilson. "I know Janet—hey! What are you trying to do? Knock me over?"

"I'm just picking up this slip of paper," grunted John Proudworthy, as he straightened up again.

"Oh—the printed notice the telegraph messenger left," muttered Mr. Tilson. "Listen! On the level, now—"

"Say! *Was* there a boy here with a telegram?"

"Well, didn't I come over to tell you?"

"Yes, but—but I supposed—" John stammered.

Tilson glanced out into the dark street.

"Service is getting better around here," he observed. "They're making another try to deliver it. Here comes the boy again."

Nor was this statement any less accurate than his original one. Undeniably, the uniformed boy was coming up the short path from the street, a yellow envelope in one hand and a black book in the other.

"Well—I'll get along," yawned Mr. Tilson. "Want to congratulate you on having such a nice old lady living with you, Johnny. Going to be a great comfort to both of you to have a motherly old soul like that around, to ladle out good advice, and maybe help darning the stockings if her eyesight's good enough and—no, not me, kid. This gentleman is Mr. Bowman."

He departed whistling. John Proudworthy, frowning both astonishment and perplexity, signed the book and closed the door and hurried back to the better light of the living room.

"Have to read this darned thing, whatever it is, and then run like blazes," he explained, as he slit the envelope.

"The telegram?"

"Yep—just came. Some—"

This sentence was not completed. John Proudworthy's eyes, which had been narrowed as they scanned the yellow sheet, opened abruptly. Nay, they bulged! Mr. Bowman's lips parted, too, which is quite unusual for one with so firm a mouth.

Breath, indeed, seemed to leave the gentleman! He gazed now, not at the telegram, but at Paula. The amazement fled from his expression. Cold horror came in its place. John paled.

"Well—well—" was really all he seemed able to gasp.

CHAPTER IX.

THE REVISED ARRANGEMENT.

PAULA was a nervous little thing. She came out of her chair with a single, twitching leap and stood, shaking in every limb.

"What—what is it?" she gasped. "Some one—dead?"

"Huh? No, I—"

"Well, what is it? What has happened? What makes you look like that, Jack? What—"

Her own excitement seemed to have a pleasantly soothing effect upon John Proudworthy. Much of his horror departed; he even managed to force a smile.

"Be calm, Paula," he said. "Nothing very awful has happened. I must be catching your jumps, I think. It startled me for a moment, and—"

"Well, what? *What* did?"

"Why, the wire here, of course," explained John Proudworthy, and extended the sheet. "Er—Janet isn't coming home to-night."

"And you—you—carried on like that because—" Mrs. Duncan gasped amazedly and sank back weakly into her chair. "Why, I supposed, at the very least, that—" She broke off, and read the wire: "'Going with Sallie to Uncle Martin's for the night. Could not reach you on telephone. Back to-morrow. Janet.'" She ended and looked up at John Proudworthy with her great eyes. "Well, what of it?"

Mr. Bowman stared.

"What of it? I can't reach her and get her back here, of course. Her confounded uncle lives on a farm a thousand miles from nowhere, Paula. There isn't a telephone within five miles of him."

"Well?"

"Well?" cried John, and threw up his hands. "You can't stay here unless Janet is here, can you?"

"Why not?"

"Paula," said her landlady's husband, "please don't be silly. You have seen a few of the neighbors."

"I don't see what the neighbors have to do with it," responded the girl readily enough. "I've engaged board here, haven't I? If Mrs. Bowman finds it impossible to be here at any particular time, it isn't necessary to eject me, solely to please the neighbors, is it?"

"I—I know, Paula. You're right about the letter of the proposition, I suppose." John smiled faintly. "You've paid your way, and you can insist on staying here. Only, of course, you're not going to insist, because I can't let you. I suppose things are different in a boarding house in a big town, but this isn't a big town. Where's your bag? Oh, over there."

Paula was on her feet again. "What do you want with my bag?"

"I'm not going to steal it," John said mildly. "I'm going to put it in the car and take you down and get you a room in the hotel for to-night."

Poor little Paula whitened. "Which hotel? That big yellow one?"

"Westboro House—yes."

"If Duncan's here, isn't that where he would be staying?"

Mr. Bowman considered, with just the smallest touch of weariness. "Perhaps," he conceded. "But if you remain in your room until I come for you to-morrow, you are not going to be in any danger. Come."

"No. Because anywhere that *he* is, I *am* in danger—awful danger!" the girl said stubbornly. "Jack, he—he promised to kill me!"

"But—"

With a little flutter she had reached his side. Her small hand was on his great arm.

"Jack," she said softly, "I—I'm afraid to go there. And if you're not afraid of your beastly old neighbors, I'm not. If—if we know that we're—we're decent, isn't that enough? Isn't that better than having me killed?"

Mr. Bowman patted the hand and did not weaken one particle.

"Anything's better than having you killed," he smiled, "but you're not going to be killed. I'll go first and see if your Duncan's registered. If he isn't, I'll ask the night clerk if anybody resembling him is in the house. Then you won't be afraid?"

"But suppose—"

"And if there is a little risk involved—which, honestly, I don't believe there is—it's a whole lot better than what would happen to you here. You needn't roll your eyes at me like that, honey; you're not going to vamp me into letting you wreck your reputation just because you think somebody's after you."

"When I—I can see you near, I—feel safe!" Paula said thinly. "You're big and powerful and—"

"I'm just about big and powerful enough to pick you up and take you out to that car under one arm, if you'd prefer that to walking," John said with finality. "Only we're starting for the Westboro House now, Paula—and I'm only sorry we haven't some red fire and a brass band, so that the neighbors can be sure we're starting."

Overwhelming brute that he was, he took

Paula's arm and led her to the door and through it to the still brilliantly lighted porch.

"You stand right there beside your bag till I bring the car down," he said. "No, right where the light is brightest!"

Noisily he slammed the door of his home and locked it. Noisily he tramped down the porch and went up the drive to where the car waited so patiently. Cut-out wide open, he started his motor and let it run for a little, giving in a general way the effect of a machine-gun nest in full operation.

Then, when it seemed that everybody within blocks must be telephoning the police and the health authorities and requesting an abatement of the nuisance, when there was a visible head in Tilson's window and one in Grange's and one in Miller's, and several more in several other windows, John Proudworthy backed down to the porch and took aboard pretty Paula and her costly grip—a silent and reproachful Paula just now, who seemed lost in thought.

Well, let her stay lost! Mr. Bowman smiled grimly as he whirled into the street and, starting forward, down the street. It was a good thing that he had discovered at last how to handle the alluring little fiend! Aye, it was well to know that the iron hand really would work on her, if the iron seemed sufficiently hard and unrelenting.

"No Duncans waiting around here, you see," John grinned, when they arrived at the Westboro House.

Paula nodded.

"No, you—you were right, Jack," she said rather soberly. "It wouldn't have done. But I *am* so afraid of him!"

"My dear child, the man isn't within a hundred miles of this spot," John replied. "You've simply scared yourself to death. Now, do you want to wait here while I go in and look over the ground?"

"No, I think I'll go in with you," said the pleasantly saner Paula. "I—I might even go in by myself. Would that be better, do you think?"

"Candidly, I think it would be a lot better," Mr. Bowman smiled. "The eleven o'clock train got in just a few minutes ago, and some of the people must have come up from it already—it usually brings in a few drummers—so it's a perfectly natural time for a woman to be arriving alone."

Paula squared her shoulders and smiled up at him.

"All right, Jack. You'll come for me tomorrow?"

"As soon as ever Janet gets home. I'll leave word and have her call me up at the office, and when she does that I'll run down here from the office and get you."

He pushed open the door, and the girl stepped out with commendable readiness and a quite resolute effect. Mr. Bowman stepped after and beamed down on her. Why, dog-gone it, he was proud of her! Her scare considered, the little rascal had all kinds of spunk, after all.

"I'll stay in my room until you do come for me, you know," she said, and extended her hand. "Good night, Jack—you've been nice to me."

"It would be a queer kind of individual that could be anything but nice to you, Paula," Mr. Bowman laughed. "Now run along and I'll wait around out here for a few minutes, until you've had time to get upstairs safely."

A final squeeze of his hand and she was gone.

John Proudworthy grinned contentedly after her. Funny, lovely little thing she was! It was remarkable, but in these last few minutes—specifically since she had volunteered to take herself off his hands completely—he had begun really to appreciate Paula.

It was going to be rather nice to have her around the house, too. He was glad Janet liked Paula; although, as he had just suggested, it was obvious that any sane person must have liked her.

And he was most tremendously relieved, now that she was definitely out of his home for the night. John yawned widely. Pretty good old world it was, after all. Some few feet he strolled lazily, toward the entrance, for a farewell glance into the lobby. About this time a bellboy would be carrying Paula's grip into the elevator and— Well *what on earth was wrong now?*

In the lobby of the Westboro House were a number of huge and rather impressive pillars. Behind the nearest of these Paula herself was standing, half crouched, the bag beside her. Even at this distance she was trembling visibly. Ah, and now she was leaning forward and peering toward the desk—and *now* she had snatched up her grip. She had turned toward John Proudworthy, she was bounding directly at him.

And now, curiously enough, she had arrived in his arms!

"Jack! Jack! Jack! Quick! Quick!" she gasped out.

"What—"

"He's in there!"

Mr. Bowman took the girl firmly by the shoulders.

"He's not in there, Paula," he stated. "There isn't a soul in sight except—"

"Jack!" the young woman just managed. "By—by the—mail window—in a light—light gray suit!"

"Why, that's so!" muttered John Proudworthy. "There *is* a man there, isn't there? Didn't see him at first, but—"

"Well, that's Duncan. Now, come! Come quick!"

"Come where?"

"Home!" Paula gasped out.

John did not gasp, though. He merely tightened his grip on her shoulders.

"Now, see here, kid," said he sternly. "That's enough panic for one evening. The chances are that this man doesn't even resemble the one you think is after you, but—"

"I saw him, I tell you. I looked squarely at him! That's Duncan!"

"Well, Duncan or no Duncan, we'll just take our lives in our hands and go in and—"

"J-John!" interrupted Mrs. Duncan, so very quietly, so very oddly, that Mr. Bowman stopped and stared. "Do you—want me to shriek?"

"Hey?"

"Because I'm—I'm going to do that in one more minute!" the girl panted, most peculiarly—so peculiarly, indeed, that there was a queer prickling about the roots of John's thick hair. "I've stood—stood all I can, J-Jack! I'm losing myself now and—and if I begin to scream I'll never—be able to stop and—I want to go home!" she whimpered. "Won't you—"

"No!" said John. "Because—"

"You won't? You won't? You really won't? You're going to leave me here to—" the remarkable Mrs. Duncan began, much more loudly, and her gentle little bosom heaved, in veriest truth, tumultuously.

John Proudworthy looked about wildly. This, you see, was no acting at all. This manifestation bore no relation to the thousand pretty little tricks by which, apparently, Paula was in the habit of getting her own way. This excitement was the real thing. And in about half a minute more he would have an hysterical woman clutching him here in the down town district and raising Cain and drawing a crowd and causing the new president of the Chamber of Commerce—

"Say, Paula! Will you please shut up?" John Proudworthy snarled.

"No, I—"

"You must, d'ye hear? Paula! Here! Get into the car—quick!"

"And we'll go home? Home? Home?" the terrified girl cried.

"Damnation take it! Yes!" choked the courteous and hospitable John, and thrust her into his car just as three mildly interested gentlemen appeared in the hotel doorway.

There was rather more agility than grace in the way John followed Paula into his little car. There was considerably more speed than consideration for gears in the way John started his little car and left that particular spot.

Yes, and he wasn't leaving it one second too soon, either.

Just in those few seconds Paula had raised commotion enough to bring men from several directions. They were not rushing to her rescue, apparently. They were strolling up, grinning, from several directions, to learn the cause of the excitement. Now, soundlessly and rather terribly, the lady was weeping. John Proudworthy gritted his teeth. Let her weep!

Two blocks later, however, Paula turned

her tear-stained face upward, and Mr. Bowman's heart, which had been polar ice, turned to an unusually soft grade of putty.

"Th-thank you," Paula said humbly.

"What for?"

"Taking me home."

"I'm not sure that I'm taking you home," Mr. Bowman sighed. "In fact, I can't do that, can I? No, I've got an aunt over in—"

"What? You want to leave me with her? Are you going to stay, too?"

"I am not!" John said flatly.

"Then I won't go. Do you hear? I won't go. Because now I know Duncan is here, and I'm afraid—oh, I'm so afraid! Jack, you—you don't know what it is to be as afraid as I am."

"But—"

"And you promised to take care of me. Jack, you—you promised." Paula sobbed wildly, and gripped his arm with such violence that he just missed running up the curb and colliding with an electric light pole.

"Even if I did—" John began firmly.

"And—and your house is my home now," Mrs. Duncan pursued, and ceased sobbing and allowed her voice to grow quite heated. "I've paid for that room and—and if you don't take me there now I'll go by myself, and if you don't let me in I'll—I'll just let all the neighbors know that you're trying to—to swindle me."

John Proudworthy winced. Briefly, his teeth did a little more gritting. He glanced down, and Paula's eyes fell.

"I'm—sorry, Jack," she murmured. "But I'm so—"

"Don't bother being sorry. You're within your rights, I guess," Mr. Bowman said bitterly. "We're going home now."

"And you'll stay there?" the girl asked swiftly.

"I'll stay if you do exactly as you're told."

"I'll do exactly as I'm told, Jack," the softest little voice informed him.

A small, timid arm was linked through his own. Mr. Bowman blinked once or twice. His—well, his head was beginning to feel sort of queer.

"All right, then," he said. "First of all, sit far back when we turn into our street. Keep out of sight till I've run the car up to the garage and don't speak, either. Then I'll get out and go in the front way—alone, of course—and after the damned neighbors have had a chance to see that I'm alone, I'll let you in the back way. Only *don't* let them see you!"

"I'll crawl in on my hands and knees, if you say so, just so you don't desert me," Paula sighed. "And then?"

"And then—some time after I've gone to work to-morrow morning—you can show yourself. I'll tell any of them that I meet that you were at the hotel for the night. If they happen not to see you arrive at the house in the morning, that's their look-out."

"Yes, Jack," said the small, obedient voice.

Mr. Bowman drove on, not comfortably, not happily, yet aware that he had done the only thing possible. The girl was right; she had paid in advance. And he had promised Janet to look after the girl. If, later, Janet felt inclined to question this slightly questionable night, she would have to find her own answers. Janet had started the whole mess.

"Better sit back now," John murmured as he turned the corner.

Well—his precautionary measures had been justified. There was still a light in Grange's and another in Tilson's. He smiled cynically as he rolled past the lighted porch and into the black garage, and there switched off his headlights.

"Come out with me," he said briefly, "I'll have to lock this door, Paula. Then sneak down that arbor and wait on the back steps. I'll let you in within a few minutes."

She merely nodded and obeyed. Mr. Bowman grinned as he strode back toward the front of his home. Good little sport, she hadn't even spoken. And that was well, for Harvey Tilson was at this very moment making great pretense of examining the lock of his open front door. He peered at John and waved a hand. Mr. Bowman merely entered his home and slammed the door.

The telephone was ringing merrily; he hurried to its closet.

"*Well!*" greeted his ear, in a familiar voice. "Risen from the dead?"

"Hello, Steve," John said.

"Say, I've been trying to get you for twenty minutes," Mr. Gail advised him.

"I just heard the phone for the first time—just now."

"Well, so long as you did hear it. Say, listen." Mr. Gail's gay, chuckling tone pursued. "Somebody said the old lady boarder 'd arrived ahead of time. That right?"

"Yes, but—"

"Did, hey? Haw! Haw! Haw!" cried John's friend. "*Still* there?"

"Yes—er—she—"

"Well—" muttered Mr. Gail, less mirthfully. "Never mind, old man, we'll get rid of her, one way or another. Now let me offer condol—"

"Oh, go to blazes!" John snarled, and rang off.

His supply of patience had grown far too limited to brook any of Gail's imbecilities. Somehow, the sight of Tilson still spying had drained that supply to the bottom of the container. It was in his mind to go over and tell Tilson—the bell was ringing again.

So abruptly did the door come open that Mr. Tilson just missed falling inward. He recovered himself and smiled blandly at John's black, astonished scowl.

"Just little me, old man," he confessed. "I ran over to ask about the pippin and—say, she's in bed, isn't she, by the way?"

"I believe so, by this time."

"Didn't see Janet come back with you and I couldn't resist—"

"Wait a minute, Harvey," John broke in, with a wicked smile. "You needn't explain why you came. You tore over to find out if Janet had returned and, if she hadn't, whether Mrs. Duncan was still here. All right! You're going to be satisfied on both counts. Janet isn't coming home till to-morrow, so I took Mrs. Duncan down to the hotel."

"Well, it—it isn't necessary—"

"I'll determine what's necessary and what isn't," Mr. Bowman cried savagely—and while part of this effect was assumed, another considerable part was quite genuine. "You're going to be satisfied that Mrs. Duncan isn't here, because you're going to search the house."

"Hey?" Tilson gasped.

"Oh, yes, you are!" John assured him furiously, and grabbed Mr. Tilson. "You're going to stick your nasty, prying little nose into every corner of this house, or I'll stick it there for you! Come on! We'll do this floor first!"

Mr. Bowman's color had quite departed—a bad sign, as Harvey Tilson knew. A single glance, then, and Mr. Tilson allowed himself to be propelled through living room and dining room and kitchen—without, by the way, lingering any too long in the latter spot, because there was no way of telling when Paula, out back there and nervous, might misconstrue the sounds within and start a demonstration of her own.

Upstairs next went the inquisitive visitor, John's iron grip upon him, and examined bedrooms and storeroom and bathroom and such closets as were in each. Down on his knees, too, went Mr. Tilson, willy nilly, that he might look under each bed. Then they returned to the lower floor and John Proudworthy whirled his neighbor about to face him.

"Now you're satisfied, are you?" he rasped.

"Johnny, you needn't have—" Tilson stammered.

"Right! Now go home and tell your wife and the rest of the neighbors the girl isn't here, because you looked with your own eyes. And tell them from me that you're the cheapest little busybody that ever lived, and that some day or other you're going to pry just one inch too far into somebody's business and get your damned head knocked clean off your shoulders! And believe me, when you say that you won't be lying!"

Tilson, eyes dropped, reddened painfully. Then he looked up.

"Johnny, I—I guess you're dead right and I beg your pardon," said he. "I'm all that and then some, and if you knocked my block off right here and now, I wouldn't blame you. This thing of—of having to know everybody's business is a bad habit and you've broken me of it, old man. Why,

hell, John!" he cried. "I—never thought—I mean, I know you're on the dead level. Maybe I kid you—kid everybody, for that matter—too much, but it doesn't mean anything. I *do* beg your pardon, Johnny!"

He offered his hand. John shook it heartily enough.

"All right," he said shortly. "The subject's closed."

"Thanks," Mr. Tilson grinned sheepishly. "And—say! You'll have to make some noise to start me looking over this way again!"

"Fine!" said John. "That's just the point I wanted you to grasp."

He grinned as he locked the door after Harvey Tilson and went about turning off lights. He grinned as he heard the Tilson door close. Even as he opened the kitchen door without a single creak and so admitted the small, gliding form of the boarder, did John grin.

"You go straight to bed and don't turn on your light, either," he whispered. "I'll leave that upper hall dark till you get inside and close your door. The shade's up in that room and you mustn't touch it, Paula. I've established the fact that you're not here, you know."

"I—heard you establishing it," Paula whispered back. "I think everybody for blocks must have heard you establishing it."

"So much the better," breathed John. "Now, get upstairs, kid, and don't fuss. I'll be within twenty or thirty feet all the time."

"Yes, Jack," Paula murmured trustfully, and presed his hand and was gone.

Still John Proudworthy grinned as he settled in his chair for a good night pipe and a glance at the neglected evening paper. That time, he fancied, he had done rather a good job! Paula, definitely, was not on the premises, a fact to which Harvey, on occasion, could swear! And hereafter the interest of the Tilson family in the affairs of the Bowman family might be just a bit less lively. Splendid!

Overhead, Paula was moving around without much more noise than one might have expected from a young mouse. Five minutes and she would be in bed; ten and John would have finished his pipe and his headlines; and then he'd make for bed himself and be mighty glad to get into it, for this had been a trying evening.

However, as some one has observed with such astounding accuracy, all's well that ends well, and this evening, thank fortune, had ended pretty well. Paula was tired enough to go straight to sleep. In the morning, he would slip a note under her door, bidding her keep out of sight until ten at least and then to show herself in street clothes, hat and all, so preserving for possibly mystified neighbors the impression that she had just arrived. And John would roll away to work at eight thirty.

Comfortably, he yawned. Put a little wholesome fear into Harvey Tilson, hadn't he? He chuckled. He imagined that Harvey had spoken truly in saying that, hereafter, considerable noise would be necessary, really to attract his attention—well, there wasn't going to be any noise or any excitement after this! There wasn't—

With a stifled shout, John Proudworthy Bowman gripped the arms of his chair and sat bolt upright.

For something had happened just then in the ostensibly vacant room overhead and it had happened with such violence that the house was literally shaking! Yes, that was the fact; he hadn't dozed off and dreamed it, as he assumed during the first two or three seconds. There had been a grinding roar, such as a ferryboat might make in plowing through its slip! There had been a thunderous crash, such as a roof might make in collapsing!

But, more startling to John than these, there had been a shriek, in a high and terrified soprano, that might have been heard down at the Westboro House!

CHAPTER X.

THE HELPING HAND.

AND now, like so many bolts of lightning, gruesome possibilities whizzed through the brain of Mr. Bowman as he sat there, still quite rigid.

Paula had shot herself!

He had been drowsing and what had sounded like a crash had actually been the

report of a heavy pistol, lately concealed in her luggage! The poor little kid, overcome by her troubles and her terrors, had succumbed to a sudden impulse; that scream had been her last and—*rot!*

It was Duncan, of course!

Yes, and he had been so little impressed with this Duncan ogre, so much inclined to believe him composed of at least nine-tenths of Paula's imagination, that the thought hadn't even occurred to him at first! But it was Duncan, all right enough! He had followed them home and located the girl's room; very likely he had entered somehow at the front while John was admitting Paula at the rear and—

Here, at the end of perhaps the tenth second, came another scream—a fainter, more frightened scream! And John Proudworthy came to life again. With a bound, he was at the stairs. With two more bounds he was up the stairs, and in his arms was a tiny, fluffy, trembling person, just able to gasp out:

"Oh, Jack! The—the—Jack! I just sat down on it—it—fell and it—"

John Proudworthy seized her fine little shoulders and steadied her. Giddily, it seemed to him that for hours and hours he had not been doing much of anything save seizing her fine little shoulders and steadying Paula!

"What fell?" he whispered.

"The—the—bed! Jack, I just sat on it and—and it—"

She shuddered up against him, whimpering. John Proudworthy put her carefully to one side.

"Stay there," he ordered. "Don't come near the door, where any one can see you from outside. I'm going to turn on the light in there and see what really did happen."

He entered, not without a tiny thrill, because he knew that bed quite well and knew that it could not possibly have fallen. He entered, in fact, with every expectation of having a form leap at him. And he switched on the light with no undue delay and glared quickly about him.

As well might he have saved himself the trouble of all this glaring. It had been the bed, fast enough. There lay the devilish thing, the foot section halfway across the room, the remainder of the bed resting on the ends of the sidebars. And since the bed was new and since he himself had put it together only three nights back and had even helped Janet make it at that time, it could have gone to pieces like this only if Paula had deliberately lifted those ends out of their sockets and—

John Proudworthy started suddenly. Paula! No Paula had done this idiotic thing; he understood now! He understood why helpful Stephen Gail had run upstairs to wash his hands, after inquiring so carefully about this room. He understood why Stephen had insisted upon playing the deafening jazz record. Indeed, as several dreadful oaths fought hard for utterance, it may be said that John Proudworthy quite comprehended the whole situation.

Stephen had taken upon himself the task of making life a hell upon earth for Mrs. Duncan, the boarder! Stephen, apparently, had elected to do a thorough job at the very outset, by so unfastening the joints of the bed that Mrs. Duncan must suffer a shattered nervous system at least, and possibly even a broken bone or two, during her first night in the new home!

Well, later on, Mr. Bowman would express himself fittingly to Mr. Gail as regarded this performance. Meanwhile, he was profoundly thankful that matters were no worse.

With a sigh of relief, he snatched up the nether section of the bed and fitted it back, jamming it quite viciously into place and hastily smoothing the covers. Then, having scowled about the room, he pulled down the shade before the partly opened window and turned off the lights once more.

Out in the corridor, Paula was waiting, a tiny, indefinite, pinkish figure. For her own sake, Mr. Bowman was grimly thankful that the illumination up here was no better.

"You're not hurt?" he asked softly.

"Hurt? No, I—I think not. That is, I don't feel hurt anywhere," the paying guest chattered. "What—whatever happened?"

"The confounded bed was loose at one end and it fell to pieces."

"But I just sat on it! I was just going to get in and—" The small figure came nearer to him. "Jack, I was so frightened, I—I almost screamed out loud!"

John Proudworthy's lips parted for a bit of highly sarcastic comment; he stilled the words, however.

"Enough to make anybody scream," he said. "However, I've fixed the thing now and it will not occur again. I'm horribly sorry, Paula. You'd better get to bed now and to sleep."

He smiled down upon her in the gloom, in that peculiarly foolish way which seemed unavoidable when one smiled at Paula. Then Mr. Bowman ceased his smiling quite suddenly and stood erect and tense.

"Damnation!" he snapped, coarsely enough. "Somebody did hear it after all, eh? You skip in there, Paula, and don't you even breathe!"

It would hardly be Tilson calling this time.

Tilson always drummed out a fool tune on the door-bell, whereas this late visitor was hammering with his knuckles. John Proudworthy descended hurriedly and opened his front door, not for the first time that feverish evening. It was Tilson.

The latest bit of excitement seemed to have halted the inquiring Harvey about halfway on his journey to bed. Rumpled, shirtless, he had pulled on a sweater; now his slippered feet thudded in and he demanded breathlessly:

"Are you—are you badly injured, Johnny? Are you—"

"I'm not injured."

"What was it that fell, John? What in Hades was it?" Mr. Tilson puffed on and gazed about with startled, wondering eyes. "One of the walls?"

"Did it—er—sound as loud as that?" John asked.

"Did it *what?*" his neighbor cried amazedly and with a strange, confused little laugh. "Why, I thought at first that your whole house had collapsed, Johnny! On the level! I was just getting ready to hop into bed when—well, say! If you want to know how it sounded, look down the street!"

"Eh?"

"Surest thing you know, Johnny! You must have waked everybody from here to the avenue corner; most of them have their heads out now!" His rather wild laugh came once more. "Why, John, if you hadn't opened that door in another few seconds, I was going to smash a window and get in to you. I thought sure you must be—ah—"

Curiously, his words trailed off just here—and then died altogether. Mr. Tilson stared up at his massive friend and neighbor; only too plainly, he was regaining together his breath and his senses.

"Say, what *did* happen here, anyway?" he asked.

"Why, I started through the guest room to close the window, Harvey, and I didn't turn on the light—and I forgot that Janet had moved the bed in there over to the other side. So I fell over the bed and the damned thing came to pieces," John explained smoothly and with an annoyed little laugh. "I had no idea it made such a racket, though. It sounded pretty loud, but not as loud as all that."

Mr. Tilson merely gazed on. One might have thought, somehow, that he did not quite accept this explanation of John Proudworthy's. In any case, he was becoming, second by second, less the concerned friend and more the old, familiar Harvey. He smiled faintly. He squinted up the dark stairway. He smiled more broadly.

"That wasn't exactly what I meant, Johnny, old bean," said he. "*Who was it that shrieked?*"

"Shrieked?"

"The word was 'shrieked,'" Harvey confirmed, with a playful nod. "And the shriek—or so I should opine, off-hand—came from a lady with a peculiarly high, soprano voice!"

John shrugged his utter impatience.

"Some of the neighbors, I suppose?" he grunted.

"Not the shriek I'm dissertating on just at the moment," said Mr. Tilson. "No lady around here had had time to wake up and be scared enough to let off a yowl like that, you see. Moreover, it seemed to come from this direction, about two seconds after the big explosion. And, as I say, it was in a high soprano."

He waited. John only shrugged again. Obviously, he could not rouse even a flicker of interest in this shriek.

"Now, so far as I'm able to recall, Janet has a sort of low, rich voice," Harvey mused on. "A sort of mezzo voice, as one might say. And Janet isn't here to-night."

John said nothing. Mr. Tilson's smile grew still wider, still more quizzical.

"Y' know, Johnny," said he, "I have an evil sort of mind and many and many's the time I've wondered if you weren't a sly sort of devil, after all. I don't know why, but I've just wondered. What I mean, if I hadn't searched this house myself—by invitation, of course—I'd have sworn that that screech—"

"I let off some kind of yelp when I hit the bed," John sighed, boredly. "Is that what you're talking about?"

"When hitting beds, you yelp up above high C or somewhere?"

"Likely enough," the master of the house yawned. "A man's inclined to yip pretty energetically when he takes most of the skin off his shins."

Mr. Tilson scratched his ear.

"I grant you that, Johnny—I grant you that," he muttered. "But still and all, I never heard a guy with a bass as deep as yours produce a squeal like that under any—"

"Say, do you want to search this house over again?" Mr. Bowman demanded in utter exasperation. "Because, if you do, for the love of Mike, call in the whole damned neighborhood and search it and then let me get some sleep. I'm getting tired of this!"

He stood back and waved a hand in invitation. Harvey shook his head.

"Never mind," he sighed. "Only, if my uncle hadn't built this place and I hadn't been around it nearly every day while it was going up, I'd gamble my last million that you had trap doors or secret passages or something here!"

Once more, John Proudworthy yawned. He yawned so vastly, so pronouncedly this time that Mr. Tilson stared with mild interest at his fine teeth and recalled with flitting regret that he had an appointment with the dentist next Tuesday morning.

"You'd win. The house is full of 'em—I put 'em in myself," said Mr. Bowman, at the conclusion of the display. "Would you like to say good night now, Harvey, or shall we stand here and talk things over till three or four in the morning?"

"Oh, I believe I'll say good night now," Harvey replied and turned toward the door. But before stepping out into the night he paused and grinned quite frankly at John. "Say, Johnny—no joking—of course it was a woman in some of the houses around here—the sound I heard, I mean; you never could have made that. But I'd have gone into court and sworn the screech came from this one. Funny, how sounds can fool you, isn't it?"

"Yes, isn't it?" Mr. Bowman echoed, drearily, and leaned limply, patiently against the door casing.

"Ah, go to bed!" Harvey grunted from the porch. "You never did have any head for science, anyway. And look where you're walking this time, will you? Don't go into eruption again to-night—please! I need my beauty sleep."

He waved a hand and scuffed across the lawn in his slippers. The door closed to the accompaniment of another yawn.

But once the latch had clicked and the bolt had been shot, the yawn came to an abrupt end. As he straightened up, John Proudworthy's breath was expelled in one great gust.

"Oh, J-Jack!" Paula called down quaveringly.

"Psst!"

"I won't speak loudly," Paula's clear voice assured him. "But—oh, Jack! I must have screamed, after all!"

Mr. Bowman drew in his breath once more.

"You did."

"Loudly?"

"Did you hear what Tilson said?"

"I—yes, I was listening. But, Jack, he did believe you at last, don't you think?"

"I hope so." John sighed. "If he happens to be outside now and hears us talking, he's not likely to believe much longer, though."

"I'll whisper. I'll—"

"I wouldn't do anything at all but get

right into bed. That was as narrow a squeak as we need."

The small, pinkish figure receded from the head of the stairs.

"Only, Jack—" came down faintly.

"Well?"

"I—I know it seems silly; but it isn't, really. You'd know it isn't, if you knew Duncan. But—"

"What?" Mr. Bowman rasped softly.

"When you were there with the door open and—and looking into the street, there wasn't any sign of—of a short, dark—"

"No, there wasn't!" John snapped. "Go to bed."

"Well, I'm not nearly as silly as you think I am," came resentfully from a still greater distance. "I've had a feeling, ever since we came home, that—that he knew where I was just as well as I did. I have had, Jack! I've had a feeling that he was really coming after me now, and—Jack!"

Mr. Bowman did not reply. In the wide doorway of his living room he stood and listened, smiling tartly, for a moment. From overhead he caught a soft, fluttering sigh, and then light steps in Paula's bedroom.

Ah! There was the tiny, creaking sound which indicated that Paula was at last between the sheets! After that silence, utter, complete and blessed, brooded over the house of Bowman.

With what began as a shaky sigh and ended as a small, inaudible groan, John Proudworthy dropped once more into his chair. Ridiculous, of course—but he was actually weak! His limp hand reached for his faithful pipe and lighted it; passed then to the switch of the floor lamp beside him and turned that.

There, dammit! Now, for the benefit of Tilson and all the rest of them, the house was entirely dark and officially abed and asleep for the night! Heaven being reasonably kind, it might now be John's high privilege to sit here in the gloom and regain a little of his wonted calm before retiring.

And it needed regaining. He growled savagely and laid aside coat and vest and collar and tie. Then, as he sat back and puffed, he became slowly the normal John once more. In a cold and emotionless way he yearned to slaughter Stephen Gail. If he had been quite sure that Stephen was now asleep and dreaming happily, he would have called up the house and delivered a pithy talk on the subject of beds and their maltreatment.

But just at this hour Stephen was more likely to be sitting in a poker game with some kindred morons—and his mother was far too nice a woman to be roused without cause.

So Stephen could wait. But in a way not nearly so cold and emotionless his meditations passed to Janet and her brilliant idea of taking a boarder. He had prophesied trouble, hadn't he? Well, trouble of the most unpleasant variety had missed their little household by a margin so narrow that John's skin crawled as he thought of it—and that before Janet had even welcomed her infernal boarder.

So many blows had *just* failed to fall!

Sitting here and perspiring over disasters that had failed to materialize was not extremely intelligent. Mr. Bowman relaxed and presently found himself giving up thanks for his series of miraculous escapes this night. And still—even the process of giving up thanks seemed to do little toward calming nerves that were almost as jumpy and unreliable as Paula's own.

Confound it! He'd have to stay awake for the rest of the night, ready to leap into action at the first infinitesimal squeak from above, and quiet his charge, should she chance to dream about Duncan, and so on. Mr. Bowman grunted and settled down more comfortably. Why, it was worse than having a baby on one's hands!

Matter of fact, you see, this kid was beautiful after the fashion of a painting or an imported doll or—or something like that. Whereas Janet was surpassingly beautiful as a real girl, alive from the tips of her cute little pink toes to the top of her lovely, curly head, and so absolutely adorable that—so adorable—so—

And now, with a violent gasp, John Bowman opened his eyes and sat bolt upright again, clasping the arms of his chair exactly as he had clasped them—although he

had no suspicion of this lapse of time—two full hours before.

He *had* heard a shade go up with a bang! He— What the devil was all that thumping and thudding and scraping overhead, as if somebody were stumbling about in a fit? What—

John Proudworthy came to his feet, very much awake now.

"Help!" shrieked little Paula, upstairs. And this shriek could not possibly have come from any other spot in the neighborhood. "Help! Help! Help!"

CHAPTER XI.

DISCOVERED!

IF he had hesitated before, permitting horrid possibilities to romp through his brain for many seconds, John Proudworthy did not hesitate this time. This time, you see, he understood: exactly as he had feared, the pretty kid had taken to dreaming!

At a rough guess, she had jumped out of bed in her sleep and was even now dodging a horde of mythical Duncans as they pursued her about the room.

Yes, and she was working overtime at her familiar task of rousing the neighborhood, and, soundly as they must be sleeping by this time, she'd succeed very shortly unless Mr. Bowman managed to clap a hand over her wretched little bud of a mouth.

He bounded on upward. The light was turned on full in Paula's room now. How the dickens had that happened? Aye—he observed in the fragment of one second which took him from the stairhead to the door—the door was wide open and the shade was up and— Here, with a soft crash, Paula Duncan reached him. Her small, bare arms went about his great body; her small, snow-white countenance was buried somewhere in the region of John's heart.

"Help! Help! Help!" Paula shrieked.

"Shut up, you little—" began the master of the house, and stopped short.

Once more, for the moment, speech was quite beyond him. At least he could see now, where a moment back the light had caused him to blink stupidly. He was looking directly across Paula's room and at the window.

Just beyond the window sill was visible a yard or more of John's own fifteen-foot ladder. He knew it to be his own, because only last Sunday he had screwed that small, iron mending-plate over the spot that was threatening to crack. And on the ladder, head and shoulders in full view, stood a burglar who grinned.

That is to say, one assumed that he was a burglar because he wore a rude black mask across the upper half of his face, and one assumed that he was grinning because the more visible lower half was bisected widely, displaying many teeth.

But there was no mask and no cap on the top of his head, and as John's astounded eyes reached that point a maddened snarl escaped him. That round cranium, with its mass of thick, wavy, reddish hair, could belong to just one person in Westboro, and the name of that person was Stephen Gail!

"Buddy, we've got her going!" this devoted soul hissed at John Proudworthy, the hiss being just audible above Paula's present wild weeping.

Then he was gone!

There was a swift, faint scraping sound, as if Stephen had slid down the ladder, rather than climbed. There was the smallest rasp, as the end of the ladder disappeared—and after that, for a matter of twenty seconds, there were really no sounds save those generated by Paula Duncan.

Until Tilson's window went up with a loud bang!

"Let me go, Paula!" John choked wildly.

"No! That—"

"That wasn't Duncan!"

"I know it wasn't! It was a burg—burg—burglar!" Paula gasped out. "And I've—stood enough! I've been frightened enough, I tell you! I can't—oh, oh!"

Temporarily John Bowman's ears ceased to hear her. He was turning dizzy and sickish—because it was all over now, you see!

In the Tilson bedroom, lights had been turned on. There was Harvey and there was Harvey's fat wife, each in pyjamas,

each staring directly into this room, where a disheveled John stood with a numb, protecting arm about a Paula—really more startlingly *en négligée* than he had fancied—who clasped his giant body as if it were her last hope on earth.

"Hey! What's the trouble?" Harvey was bawling through the night. "What's the trouble over there, John?"

"Paula, will you—please let me go?" John demanded huskily.

"No! He—"

"He's gone and—Paula, look for yourself."

With one eye, for one second, Paula looked. Immediately she hid her face again and wept more vigorously.

"But he *was* there!" she said reasonably enough. "I saw him, and I know—"

Mr. Bowman had wrenched himself free now and was striding toward the window, while Paula, tiny pink huddle, gazed terrifiedly after him with eyes that must have been visible in the Tilson home. Other windows had opened since that initial bang from Harvey's, too. The dear old neighborhood was rousing again.

John Proudworthy, somewhere deep inside, grew a little more sickish. Still, he leaned from his window and called in what was meant for a matter-of-fact voice:

"Just a burglar, Harvey! Didn't get anything. I scared him off, I guess. It's all right."

Harvey had disappeared.

"Harvey says he'll be right over!" shrilled Harvey's wife, almost absently, and leaned farther out and strained her eyes still more energetically.

John turned away.

"You'll have to quiet down now, Paula," he said, with a pallid smile. "This damned fool next door's coming over again, and I'll have to go down to him."

"I'm going with you. I'm not going to be left—" Paula began.

"You'll stay right here. And for Heaven's sake, put on a—a bathrobe or something, will you? They can look in here from half a dozen houses, and they're doing it."

All things notwithstanding, a flare of indignation came into Paula's eye. John, despite the rather giddy weakness that was upon him, found himself faintly startled. Perhaps Duncans in person were the only things that really scared her through and through.

"Is it *my* fault if your old town's full of burglars?" the girl asked, and snatched up and enveloped herself in a lacy, pink shadow of a garment. "Am *I* to blame because—because girls don't wear high-necked muslin nightgowns like your grandmothers? Jack! Please! Please, I didn't mean to be nasty," she cried suddenly, as he moved toward the hallway and the stairs. "You're not—going far?"

"I shall not be fifty feet from this spot," John replied weakly, and shuffled on.

Harvey's steps had reached the porch now. John smiled wanly as he opened the door. He sensed that it was no real interest in burglars that had brought Harvey over; he sensed it more keenly as he observed that Mr. Tilson, who should properly have been panting, was only grinning.

"Oh, naughty! Naughty!" said Mr. Tilson, and shook a finger.

"That 'll do," Mr. Bowman said, with none of his characteristic snap. "I know how it looks, but you're mistaken. Mrs. Duncan came back later. She—er—didn't like the hotel."

"Of course not—so few people do," Harvey said soothingly and heartily. "They've spent eight hundred thousand dollars this year trying to make it the best house in the State, but every morning, around one or two, you can see the guests trailing out, just plumb disgusted. Too bad! However, that isn't what I left my bed to come and talk about. Is there—was there real trouble here of some description? Something a friend might help in adjusting?"

"There was a burglar. He put up a ladder and climbed to Mrs. Duncan's window and—"

"Ladder! Where'd he get the ladder?" Sam Grange puffed, coming up just then.

"It was my own ladder, of course, from under the side porch and—"

At that second, the rotund Mr. Miller finished his own trip.

"Under the porch?" he gasped out.

"They said it was a burglar. Was it? Is he under there still?"

"Well, if he was there, he's not far away now," Grange submitted forcefully. "Probably he's there at this minute and—who'll come under with me and get him?"

"I will," cried Mr. Tilson readily. "Matter of fact, I'll go in alone. You stay here, John, in case he makes a break for the street. Gimme that flash light, Sam. You stay in the drive, Miller."

Intrepid soul that he was, he snatched the light from Mr. Grange and dived under that end of the side porch which had not been covered with lattice. Mr. Miller stared amazedly.

"Gosh!" he breathed. "You have to hand it to Harvey, hey? He's got the spunk."

"Yes," John said listlessly.

"Rummaging around in there like a pup going after a woodchuck! Takes nerve to do that! I'd—oh, say, Bowman! How the heck did you sneak that girl back into the house?" Mr. Miller giggled. "I saw you take her away and I could swear I saw you come back alone, but now—"

"No burglar under your porch," Harvey Tilson reported, returning.

"And your ladder's back just where it belongs—just where I put it after I borrowed it last week," Grange added, with a very curious smile. "That's a funny one."

Harvey Tilson shook his head soberly.

"Not in this town," he corrected. "Westboro burglars are different, Sam. We have the tidiest, the most considerate burglars here in the whole United States. Where else, I ask you, could one find a burglar who put a ladder back exactly where he found it?"

"There aren't any footprints around under that window, either," Grange suggested.

"There couldn't very well be, on a concrete drive in dry weather," said John.

"Well—maybe. But still you'd think, with a burglar dragging out a ladder like that and dragging it back again—"

"Well, there *was* a burglar, wasn't there?" Mr. Miller asked, gazing from one to the other. "That's what started the little peach screaming, wasn't it? Or was it?"

He waited. Playful Tilson shook his head.

"Tut, tut!" he said softly.

Mr. Miller gave it up.

"Well, anyhow, Bowman," he said, "for the sake of the fellows around here who want to get some sleep, can't you fix things so there won't be any more—er— burglars between now and getting-up time?"

"I didn't ask you to come over," John said wearily.

Yes, and that was the best he could do, too. Why, the very life seemed to have gone out of him. He wished to leap upon Mr. Miller and to shake the last filthy breath out of him; he yearned to grip Mr. Tilson's neck and Mr. Grange's as well, and then to bang their heads together—and he could only stand there, leaning against the door and reflecting, over and over, that every last appearance was against him.

Harvey was looking at him keenly and wonderingly.

"Well, it seems to me," he said suddenly to the others, "that this—ah—burglar excitement, if one may put it in just those words, is none of our business. Only, John—"

"*What?*" barked John.

"Why—why, nothing. Nothing at all," Tilson said hastily. He stepped to the pathway and waved a hand. "Old man, for the fortieth or fiftieth time, good night!"

"Good night," said John.

"Yes, but—here, wait!" Mr. Miller protested. "I don't understand this at all. First there was a burglar and then it turned into some kind of a joke and—"

The door closed slowly. From the window of his black living room, John Proudworthy saw Sam Grange, after a last look at the door, shrug his shoulders and join the others in their trip down the pathway—saw Mr. Miller gesticulating and, apparently, still trying to understand—heard the mumble of Harvey Tilson's voice.

Then they paused at the sidewalk, a little knot, and conversed in still lower tones for a minute or two; and after that they laughed and separated, Miller and Grange to shout to various heads in various lighted windows that the excitement was all over and the burglar departed.

Soundlessly, Paula had arrived beside John in the darkness.

"They've gone?" she quiverred.

"Oh, yes. They're gone. You'll hardly be able to live here after this, Paula."

"What? Why not?"

"Chiefly," smiled Mr. Bowman bitterly, "because you succeeded in informing the whole region of your presence—"

"Well, do you think I'm made of iron?" the girl demanded. "Do you think I can wake up and see a man climbing into my window and just turn over and go to sleep again?"

"No, but if you hadn't yelled so—if you hadn't turned on the lights up there—"

"I had to see, to get out, didn't I?" asked Paula. "And the switch is right beside the bed and—Jack!"

"Yes?"

"That was somebody Duncan sent to—to get me or to kill me! Mr. Dilworthy said he supposed he must be a criminal of some kind and—and they have gangs, haven't they? So Duncan—"

"Listen to me, my child," sighed Mr. Bowman. "That man had no connection with your Duncan. That was just the village idiot, who considers himself a friend of mine. You see, when I heard that Mrs. Bowman contemplated taking a boarder, I assumed that it was a cranky old lady and this fool—his name is Gail—evidently took upon himself the job of getting rid of you. Understand?"

"I—hear," Paula said.

"And he was the one who fixed your bed so that it would fall to pieces and it was that same Gail on the ladder a few minutes ago, impersonating a burglar to scare you a little more. There's the whole matter. Now you're not scared any longer?"

"You dear!" Paula sighed.

"Eh?"

"I know perfectly well that it isn't the truth, but it was sweet of you to think up a story like that." Paula sighed again.

"But it *is* the truth, I tell you."

"Jack, I'm little and a girl and—and pretty badly scared; I didn't know that anybody could be as scared as I seem to be. But I'm not actually simple, and I know that people don't do things like that."

"Ordinary people—no. But this man is a born fool and—"

"Jack, I'm going to dress and come down here and sit with you."

"All night?"

"I can't go to sleep again and—"

Inside John Proudworthy some nameless, indefinable thing seemed to snap.

"Say, Paula, whether you can sleep or not, you get up in that room and get to bed—d'ye hear?" he cried hoarsely. "Leave your door open if you like. Screech as loud as you please whenever you feel inclined—you can't do any more damage now. Only I'm going to stretch out on this couch down here and get some rest and if you don't go to bed of your own accord I'm going to carry you up and put you there and—and lock the door on the outside."

"Oh!" gasped Paula.

"I mean that," said her landlady's husband.

When, with a terrified sob or two, she had fluttered away from him through the gloom, Mr. Bowman sat down on the couch and spoke of himself, underbreath, in the most uncomplimentary way for a little. Two minutes and he stretched out, smiling bitterly. He wasn't accustomed to excitement and unpleasantness, was he?

Life so far had been so much a humdrum, day-to-day affair that nights such as this entirely ruined his poise. He had bawled like a lout at a tiny, delicate girl no more to blame for screaming than she was to blame for being here in the first place. What he really deserved was a thorough kicking.

But, in spite of that, he would not hasten upstairs and offer his apologies. Things in general, up above, were gratefully quiet just now. John's keen ears had advised him that Paula, pursued by a new terror in the shape of his own violent temper, had indeed retired. Minutes, her stifled sobs floated down to him. Then these died away and there was a great stillness. Presently—well, it might have been the wind in the trees, but it had sounded like the first long, trembling breath of a sleeping Paula.

John sighed heavily. Now he might settle down to preparing for the immediate future—to devising a plausible, nice explan-

ation for all this—yes, by thunder! And to devising a way of getting rid of Paula!

She was dazzlingly lovely, of course. Doubtless, when one came to know her better, her character would have proved as charming as her exterior, and Janet wanted her here, too. But John Proudworthy did not, because if ever there lived a high-power jinx, working continuously on all twelve cylinders, the name of that jinx was Paula. And if she could be ousted before Janet's return, so much the better. Hands behind his head, two deep lines between his eyes, Mr. Bowman settled down to hard thought.

And then, in some unaccountable fashion, morning arrived.

At first, as he frowned about, Mr. Bowman could not identify the peculiar brilliance which filled the room; then, noting that the hands of the clock indicated just twenty minutes of nine, he identified it quite readily as sunshine and shot to his feet as if the couch had exploded.

Why, he was due at the office in another five or ten minutes. No, he wasn't, either—this morning, thank Heaven. Carter Morse would not expect him till aften ten, because he had intended to run out and see old Mansfield before reporting for the day.

As the tea kettle filled, Mr. Bowman frowned meditatively; he had been thinking of something promising, just before he went to sleep. Ah, yes, he had it now. Might work, too, being a rather simple and obvious idea.

"Oh, Paula!" called a combed and brushed and freshly linened John, just as the clock struck nine.

"Coming," floated down from behind Paula's door. "I'll make the coffee."

"It's made," John said sweetly.

"Then I'll make the toast."

"That's made, too."

"Then I'll eat it, at least," Paula cried, and flashed into view.

She had been lovely last night; this morning she was a vision, no more and no less. It occurred to Mr. Bowman that any blind man, having once realized what he had missed in walking past Paula, would have been justified in committing suicide. She had on another dress now, an even prettier dress; she—she—well, John Proudworthy could no more than stand and stare as she descended. Now she was linking her arm through his own and beaming up at him.

"Good morning," she said. "I'm not nearly so silly this morning, Jack. Aren't you glad of that?"

"I—you bet," Mr. Bowman said brilliantly. "Did you sleep?"

"Because I knew that *you* were near," Paula hurled at him, and laid down a heavy barrage with her eyes. "Where's breakfast?"

Mr. Bowman dragged his gaze away, and at once felt slightly more his own man. That, apparently, was one secret; one mustn't look too steadily at Paula if one had anything of importance to say. He let her chatter prettily as she helped carry in the breakfast things; he let her tell him how much less frightened she was this morning. Then:

"Paula," John said gently, across the table, "I've been thinking a good deal about you."

"That's nice," the paying guest said contentedly.

"And about Duncan."

"That isn't nearly so nice," said Paula, and suddenly ceased her smiling. "What do you mean?"

"I want to know more about him—just plain, cold facts. I want to know whether you're exaggerating this thing or not. Paula, this man actually did threaten to kill you?"

"He did," Paula said, thinly. "Oh, Jack, it's so—so nice and sunny and everything this morning, why do we have to—"

"We have to," John said firmly. "Paula, this wasn't a mere crazy threat, made in a fit of rage, was it? He really meant it?"

"Yes, Jack, he really did," the girl said soberly. "And if he ever catches me—"

"You're sure the man you saw in the Westboro House last night was Duncan?"

"It looked exactly like him. It—yes, it *was* Duncan and—Jack, may I sit over there by you?" the paying guest asked, with increasing nervousness.

"Sit where you are. You're not in any danger," John smiled gravely. "But—ah—last night, when I told you that burglar

was a friend of mine, you didn't believe me?"

"And I don't now," Paula smiled faintly. "I know you said that just to keep me quiet."

"Well, perhaps," said Mr. Bowman, and avoided her eye, "you were right."

Little Paula started a trifle.

"Yes, I know that I was right; but you're leading up to something else now. What is it?"

"Something like this, Paula," said John, very earnestly. "No regular burglar would pause at this house, there's nothing to steal. On the other hand, your man Duncan may have determined to kidnap you or really to kill you, and in either case he might well send an emissary, eh?"

"But—"

"So it seems to me," Mr. Bowman pursued impressively, "that since he has located you, Westboro's the last spot on earth for you to be. And there's another angle, Paula; after last night, living in this neighborhood would be extremely unpleasant for you. You'll have to leave this house in any case and—"

"But I dont' want to leave this house," Paula said forcefully. "I—I've paid for my room and board and I want—I want to stay where *you* are, Jack!"

"But my—"

"Yes, I do. Because you're big and you'll take care of me. Oh, Jack, you don't know how frightened I was last night!"

"You've mentioned it several times," John smiled. "But in any event, if I were ten times as big as I am, I couldn't catch bullets if Duncan began to shoot at you—and I've a funny feeling that he's going to do just that if you stay around here. So I'm going to take you down to the train, Paula, and see you safely out of this town."

At this point, his chin set peculiarly. Little Paula opened her eyes and permitted them to rest full upon him for ten seconds. The chin remained set. She unmasked a heavy battery or two. The chin remained set. A little anger, a little terror, came into the eyes.

"I—I don't believe you really want me here," Paula murmured. "I don't believe you're—you're chivalrous enough to want to protect me."

John Proudworthy steeled himself and laughed harshly, brutally.

"You may not be so far wrong there, either," he said. "I've got a wife to look after, you know, and I can't say that I'm just wild about being shot full of holes."

"Oh—oh!" Paula breathed.

Well, Mr. Bowman observed from the corner of his eye, he had made his point. She was wincing visibly. She was growing even paler. She had risen and was pressing one fine little hand to her gentle bosom.

And since plainly all this was preparatory to her offended departure, a throb of gratitude went through John. Here in the bright light of morning, this thing of having Paula in the house was making him more nervous, more uneasy, with every second.

And, on the other hand, in the most curious way, a number of throbs that had nothing to do with gratitude also went helter-skelter through Mr. Bowman. He yearned to hurry to Paula's side and to pat her shoulder and to assure her, as one victim of a wild party to another, that nothing would give him greater joy than the hammering into pulp of anybody or anything that sought to harm her.

He craved to tell her that while he lived and kept his splendid health and—er—while, of course, the whole proceeding had Janet's sanction, no predatory force could come nearer than one mile to Paula without incurring the gravest risk. Aye, these were the things he yearned to say, but the hard-headed part of Mr. Bowman bade him refrain from saying them.

"Very well," Paula murmured, in a small and shaky voice. "I will go."

"Er—now?" John asked without facing her.

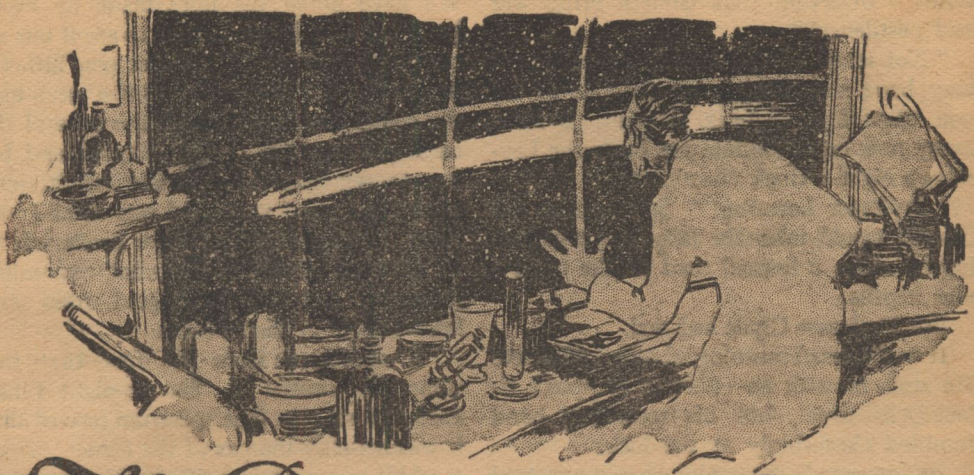
"At once," the paying guest said, coldly, and with a heavy sigh as well. "I'll run up and pack."

"And I'll—er—get the car ready," Mr. Bowman mumbled.

Little Paula nodded.

"But you'll have to give me a thousand dollars," she stated in the most matter of fact voice. "I can't go without that."

TO BE CONTINUED NEXT WEEK



The Despised Comet

By GARRET SMITH

PROFESSOR MARVIN CLYDE'S discovery that the world was doomed, took place on an evening beginning with no more dramatic circumstances than a domestic dialogue that had become quite the regular thing lately in the Clyde home.

Coffee had just been served in the comfortable living room. The professor's comfortable wife was settled by the reading-lamp, cup in one plump hand and a comfortable periodical in the other. From the rear of the house came the tinkle of dinner dishes under ablution, and from above giggles of four young Clydes going into retirement.

The one element in the picture not comfortable was Professor Clyde himself. He lit a cigarette with a nervous jerk, gulped down his coffee and sprang to his feet, a tall, slender, slightly stooping man with a high, white forehead, finely cut features and burning black eyes. Put him in a robe and white beard and he could have posed well as one of the major prophets.

At this point Mrs. Clyde ceased to be comfortable.

"Now where are you going, Marvin?" she demanded in a tone of one not seeking information. The words were conjugal code which decoded read: "I know where you're going and you know perfectly well I don't approve."

"Over to the observatory," code again for: "Same old argument, but I'm going just the same."

"That fool comet on your mind still, is it? Have you analyzed those samples for the rubber company yet?"

"No. That can wait."

"Humph! I can wait for my spring clothes till midsummer!"

"My dear, it's my first duty to the college to add what I can to the world of thought."

"You might consider your family a little, though. Now, you're going out into this damp spring air without an overcoat with this terrible influenza around."

"The comet you despise may be the cause of the epidemic."

This last was a new addition to the nightly dialogue. Mrs. Clyde dropped her magazine and stared at her husband.

"Marvin Clyde, are you getting superstí-

tious? Believing that comets bring war and pestilence?"

"Not at all. It's perfectly scientific. I may have something more definite to tell you when I come back to-night. I must hurry now or I'll be late for Professor Levering's eight o'clock observation."

"Professor Levering!" Spoken thus the listener would infer the lady was mentioning by name a horned toad or like unpopular reptile.

But Professor Clyde had fled.

It was toward morning when he returned. He stole in with an effort at complete silence, as usual, but his trembling hand fumbled clatteringly at the lock.

He mounted the stairs slowly, entered the bedroom and stood hesitant, listening to his wife's regular breathing. Finally, he turned on the night-light and sat gently on the side of her bed. She stirred and opened her eyes.

"What time is it?" she asked drowsily. "Why are you sitting there? For Heaven's sake, get to bed!"

"I've got something serious to tell you, Julia. Don't be too alarmed, though. I may find a way to save us."

"Save us? What do you mean?" Mrs. Clyde was suddenly wide awake. "Is the house afire?"

She started to clamber out of bed.

"No! No! No! Nothing immediate. Be calm, my dear, and listen."

She sat half out of bed and anxiously studied his pale face as he talked.

"It's the comet I have to tell you about," he began and immediately she relaxed into a more comfortable position. "When this newly discovered comet drew near enough for spectrum analysis we found that as usual it was a highly rarified gaseous body. The main element in its composition was represented by a line at the lower end of the spectrum that had never been recorded and indicated no known earthly substance."

"Of course, I don't know what you mean by spectrum," demurred the listener.

"Perfectly simple. When white light is broken up by a prism, it makes a bar of seven primary colors like the rainbow, crossed by dark lines that vary according to the kinds of gas the light passes through. We have noted the lines made by every known gas. I began testing to see if our air contained any of this comet gas hitherto unknown. I found none. But a week ago, the comet brushed through the edge of the earth's atmosphere. Three days later I began to segregate into almost infinitesimal amounts a gas I suspected was what I was after. That same day there broke out in all quarters of the globe, what was called influenza, but which differed from any known form of that disease.

"I suspected from the first that this comet gas caused it. But to-night I had enough for a test. The spectrum proved that it was actually the gas of the comet. I put a rabbit in a container filled with nine parts of air and one of the gas.

In fifteen minutes it developed all the symptoms of the new influenza. So I had proved my point. The comet had caused the epidemic!"

He paused to note the effect of this climax and saw that Mrs. Clyde's eyelids were drooping.

"Did you hear me?" he asked testily.

"Certainly! 'Caused the epidemic.' Go on."

"Good Lord! Doesn't even that impress you?"

"Marvin, dear," she yawned, wiggling into a cozier position among the pillows, "they've been accusing comets of things like that ever since people began to write about 'em. I remember at least two fiction stories based on that idea, and—and—they've never really caught the—poor—poor old—dears at it—yet. Prob'ly—gas—in air—all the time."

Her eyelids closed definitely. Her exasperated husband sprang to his feet.

"Well, if that doesn't hit you, this will," he shouted. "I increased the gas one part and put in another rabbit. He died instantly. If that comet, instead of merely grazing the edge of our atmosphere, had hit the earth squarely, it would have deluged us with its deadly vapor and within an hour there would not have been left on earth a single living thing."

Mrs. Clyde's eyes had opened tentatively.

"Isn't it lucky the comet wasn't a good shot!" she commented without great in-

terest. "So that's over and we can get a night's sleep."

"But it isn't over."

Professor Clyde faced her dramatically.

"The comet's orbit has been exactly plotted and its progress timed. Levering checked up with the Lick Observatory by wireless to-night. The comet is on its way around the sun in a wide hyperbola. It will be back on the return curve and in exactly six months, twenty-three days, one hour and eighteen minutes from the time of observation will strike our earth, this time squarely. Within an hour of that time the human race will be wiped out."

Mrs. Clyde sat up suddenly and looked closely at her husband.

"Marvin, come here."

She lifted one white ample arm toward him. Professor Clyde was suddenly apprehensive. Perhaps he had been too abrupt. Her face was so intent and yet so unnaturally calm that he feared hysteria.

Tenderly he drew near. Mrs. Clyde hooked a hand around her husband's neck and drew his face down to hers. She inhaled deeply. Then she let him go and settled down again.

"I thought for a moment you and old Levering had met a bootlegger," she said, "but it's nothing but too much learning. Well, we haven't got to worry for six months, twenty-three days and something or other minutes and seconds, anyhow. Be sure the front door is locked before you come to bed."

The professor was too enraged to say more. Mechanically, he stamped downstairs in obedience to orders and tested the door.

Locking doors indeed when the end of all things was at hand! As if it mattered at all now who came and went through those doors!

What difference who held possession of property that was soon to lie forever unclaimed where it had fallen from hands suddenly loosed by death!

By the time he was upstairs again, Professor Clyde's mind was in a fine frenzy. Lock doors indeed! He laughed ironically and Mrs. Clyde muttered in her sleep. Lock doors!

Into his overwrought brain burst a jingle he had heard the boys chant on the campus:

> "After the horse was stolen,
> We locked the stable door.
> The darned ol' plug ain't worth a cuss
> Or we'd locked him up before."

He fell asleep at last, the idiotic chant still running in his head.

II.

An orthodox prophet may be not without honor save in his own country. Noah, however, who was the first member of the propheting profession so ambitious as to predict a complete wiping of the mundane slate, didn't run quite true to form.

Telegraph and mail service was poor in those days. Hence, when it came to gunning for the promised honor in countries not his own, he was out of luck. On the other hand he had his thumb on one section of his own country, namely his own household.

Those were the days of the patriarchs when the head of the house wanted what he wanted when he wanted it—and got it without any back talk. If he wanted honor from any of his own particular folks he just spoke up sharp and had it handed to him on the dot. I've always had a notion, though, that Shem, Ham, and Japheth had their secret doubts when they had to stick around Saturday afternoons hewing at gopher wood timbers while the children of the ungodly went to the ball game.

But when Professor Marvin Clyde had thrust upon him the rôle of a latter day Noah, he distinctly lacked the patriarch's strategic position. As has already been indicated his headship in his own home was largely nominal and the honor accorded him as a prophet quite negligible.

And it presently appeared that Mrs. Clyde had set the honor-giving pace for the country. Unhappily, so much has easy communication added to life's drabness, even in those implied other countries where the promise of honor is held forth the same notion seemed to prevail.

His first mistake was the democratic one of going direct to the people, something

quite unclubby among brothers of the scientific fraternity. First thing in the morning after his discovery he sought out the local representative of the Associated Press, who was also telegraph editor of the *Flowerville Courier*. That flippant young man of lost illusions hurried to his managing editor after the professor had gone.

"What do you know about this? Have you heard anything lately about Professor Clyde getting rattles in the bean?"

"No! What about it?"

"I'll say alongside him the March hare is a good candidate for the Supreme Court bench. Clyde's just been in, wild-eyed, looking like he hadn't slept for a month and announced that the comet's coming back on us in six months and twenty-two days and is going to wipe out the well known human race by spilling a bad smell all over it."

He interpreted his notes on Clyde's statement in detail.

"That's good stuff," the chief declared enthusiastically. "I'll send a local man up to interview Levering and the president and scout around for any inside dope on Clyde's mental condition."

The managing editor was silently thoughtful for a moment.

"At that," he said, "Clyde's rated as a careful scientist. I suppose what he says might happen all right. I wonder how the public 'll take it."

"Oh, rot! The way it took old Brother Noah's prophecy. The way it's taken every prophecy of a general smash-up ever since."

"At that, old Noah made good," commented his chief.

But to start with, the A. P. man's cynical verdict was fully justified. Professor Clyde's brother scientists poured spleen all over him for rushing into the news with his discovery. Professor Levering grieved him most.

The old astronomer had been basking exclusively in the local light of the big comet. He resented his associate's shadow. Yes, he'd seen something of Clyde's experiments, but being no chemist could not vouch for their accuracy.

The comet was undoubtedly due back at the time mentioned and the earth would pass through the center of its highly rarified gaseous head. No layman would be likely to notice anything unusual at the time.

Every one of the eminent astronomers, chemists and medical men quoted said they had as yet no sufficient data by which to comment on so astounding a statement. Let Professor Clyde present his facts to a proper committee of scientists and repeat his experiment before them. Then they would have something to go by.

As for the general public, if many of them lay awake worrying over the prophecy, they got over their insomnia when they read the symposium of learned doubt that followed. The net result was hilarity reflected in a flood of humorous letters to editors.

Another wise man either addled by too much study or making a play for the limelight! Nevertheless it was sensational and amusing and the papers clamored for more.

Of course there was a scattering of cranks who took the Clyde prophecy seriously. The head of an obscure sect of millennialites announced that the learned professor had seen the truth, but as through a glass darkly. The actual date set for the end was October 28 instead of the 30th of that month, as the astronomical reckoning indicated.

He rebuked the professor for intimating that man's puny science might serve to defeat the day of doom. It behooved the faithful, rather, to bow to their fate. Other letters by the hundreds began to pour into the Clyde home, some serious, some denunciatory, some purely facetious, many begging for prescriptions against the death-dealing vapor.

Mrs. Clyde's attitude toward her husband's undesired notoriety was by no means consoling at first. Her tongue whetted itself to a sharper edge day by day.

But she was really fond of him. The growing haggardness of his face, his inability to sleep, his lack of interest in food, his increasing nervousness got at the soft spot in her heart.

"Marvin," she said at breakfast one morning, "why don't you give it up? You see, whether you're right or not you can't get anybody much to believe you. When it comes to believing they are going to die on

any particular date in the near future, healthy human beings draw the line. So if you're right, you can't do anything about it and there won't even be anybody alive to give you credit for it or to jeer at you if you take it all back now. Why not play safe? Say you've found you were mistaken or that you had been misquoted or something, and then we'll be let alone."

"Impossible. I haven't been misquoted and I'm sure I'm right."

As he spoke, Professor Clyde looked twenty years older than the forty-eight to his credit.

"The great trouble is, I can't prove it again. The gas I had collected is gone. Most of it I was keeping in a glass container. I find this gas seeps through glass. I had a little, by mere accident, in a lead container. Lead seems to be impermeable to it, for that gas remains, but there isn't enough of it to demonstrate with. And I've been unable to separate any more from the atmosphere. Apparently the little that the comet left behind has been absorbed by other elements. You notice the influenza epidemic disappeared with it."

The waning public interest in the Clyde prophecy revived a little with the publishing of a popular summary of the professor's learned paper, the point played up being his inability to prove even the existence of the new gas.

"Unworthy of further attention," said the scientific fraternity.

"Banana oil!" said man in general.

The whole thing was a choice bit for the irreverent student body of Flowerville. At every turn about campus and buildings he heard not too covert reference to "Brother Noah." They cheered him ironically when he mounted the chapel platform mornings.

The words of a satirical serenade floated in through the open window of his study one evening. It was an old time glee-club song revived for this appropriate occasion—"Who built the ark? Brother Noah. Brother Noah. Brother Noah built the ark," repeated over and over in quavering barber shop chords and harmony so close that at times it might have been said to amount almost to harmony.

At the eighth repetition of this monotonous query and answer, Brother Noah II, otherwise Professor Clyde, was stung by a red-hot idea. He began pacing excitedly back and forth muttering to himself.

"What is it, dear?" called Mrs. Clyde, hurrying in. Her ample figure was always hovering somewhere in the background.

"I've got it! I've got it! Brother Noah built the ark! That's it! I'm going to!" he exclaimed, waving his arms oratorically.

Mrs. Clyde suppressed a scream. She gently led the patient to a chair.

"There, now. Keep cool and tell mother all about it."

He patted her hand affectionately. She saw on his face the first smile in a month.

"Good old Julia! You think I'm insane, don't you? Not a bit of it. I'm simply going to turn our house into a gas-proof shelter by coating it with sheet-lead hermetically sealed. Then we and as many of our friends as the house will hold will be perfectly safe."

Reaction threatened Mrs. Clyde.

"Marvin Clyde, where do you expect to get the money for this lead ark of yours?" she demanded.

"Why, my dear, I have twenty-five thousand dollars in bonds that should amply cover it. We'll store enough liquid oxygen to keep us supplied with air and install a purifier to take care of the bad air. With plenty of provisions we can live sealed up indefinitely. We'll store seeds of all the plant life that needs to be handed on and pairs of such animals as are of value; follow Noah's lead throughout."

Twice Mrs. Clyde opened her mouth to speak burningly, but her husband's face restrained her. Instead she dashed her hand across her eyes and fled from the room. A moment later she was talking on the telephone to Flowerville's leading neurologist.

"Please come up right away, doctor," she pleaded after a sketchy explanation. "Make it seem like a friendly call just to talk over his theory with him, and then tell me afterward if you think he is insane."

"No. Your husband is not in the least insane, Mrs. Clyde," the eminent specialist told her late that evening, having come back secretly by the side door after a two-hour talk with the prophet. "His mind is per-

fectly clear and logical and he believes thoroughly in his discovery. But he is laboring under an intense nervous strain, naturally. So he mustn't be harassed by opposition. I advise you to fall in with him completely and protect him from cranks as much as possible. Otherwise he may suffer a complete nervous breakdown and might conceivably go insane.

"His arguments are interesting at that. Wouldn't it be strange if he should be right? Of course, that's impossible though. I'll keep an eye on him right through. In fact, in his condition of mind, it might not be a bad idea to have a physician in the house during your shut-in period. Quite important for the rest of you, too. Illness might break out, you know. I take October for my vacation. Maybe I'll arrange to take part of it with you if you don't mind. I'll find it a worth while psychological experiment."

"Why, it would be awfully good of you, doctor," Mrs. Clyde exclaimed.

And to the doctor's retreating back she added thoughtfully: "I wonder if he hasn't a sneaking idea back in his head that it might not be a bad notion to play safe."

Mrs. Clyde, thus warned, rose nobly to the occasion. To her, twenty-five thousand dollars was twenty-five thousand dollars, but if it had to be sacrificed, she was going to lose it like a good sport. She proved it next morning at breakfast by entering heartily into discussions of the professor's plans, as though she had approved them from the start. The children, too, might as well be taken into confidence now.

The three older ones, being in school, had already been asking troubled questions, inspired by gibes of their classmates about their father's comet. So she explained now that they were planning to build the house over so as to keep out bad air that might make them very sick when the comet came back in the fall.

"It 'll be just like Noah's ark," the professor chimed in.

Young Julia, aged six, looked perplexed.

"Sadie Field said you was Noah and I said you wasn't."

"Aw, they just been kiddin' dad cause he said there'd be a big flood of gas next fall," explained Marvin, Jr., from the sophisticated height of twelve years. "I knew dad'd invent somethin' to stop it. So we should worry. When do you begin buildin' the good old ark, pa?"

"Very soon."

"Will there be animals in it?" demanded four year old Lucille.

"Why, I guess so, baby. What do you want to save?" smiled the father indulgently at his favorite.

"I want pussycats, an' little woolly dogs, an' big skinny ones, an' bunny rabbits, an' baby lambs, an' goats, an' a elephant."

"Gee! Have to be some ark. Where'd you put 'em In the cellar?" Marvin, Jr. queried. "Will you honest have to save animals, dad? Would they all die if you left 'em out?"

"I'm afraid they would, son."

"Then we won't have any more snakes, er rats, er skunks, er anything."

"I want a lion, an' a white mouse, an' a goat, an' a robin redbreast," Lucille continued her chant.

"I can keep the kittens and Frisky, can't I?" small Julia asked.

"I must save the pony," Marvin, Jr. remembered. "And say, dad, we'll have to save cows or there won't be any more milk. And how about animals for furs, and silkworms, and, oh, all sorts of things?"

"It is a little complicated, isn't it, Marvin?" Mrs. Clyde remarked.

"Oh, how about fish?" broke in the silent Charles. He had received a glorious rod and tackle on his ninth birthday.

"Yes, it's complicated," Professor Clyde agreed with a sigh. "Still, it's not without its element of humor.

III.

On the morning that the press spread broadcast to a snickering world the story of Brother Noah Clyde's lead-lined ark, Mr. Archibald Powers of Powers Publicity & Promotion, Inc., and practically all there was of that corporation at present, sat in his small, but impressive office in New York City, his feet on his large and impressive desk, reading the day's news.

Miss Gladys Simpson, all the rest of Powers Publicity & Promotion, Inc., was back

of her silent typewriter diligently at work with a pair of tweezers making a pair of negligible eyebrows still more negligible.

Mr. Powers, having no beauty worth attention, had nothing to do but improve his mind. Miss Simpson, for a directly opposite reason, had nothing to do but cultivate her beauty.

In other words, business was dull with Powers Publicity & Promotion. It had been dull for some time, one might judge by the thinness of the soles of Mr. Powers's expensive custom-made shoes. His glossy brown hair was overdue for a trimming and there were worry lines developing in his plump, florid face.

Miss Simpson could tell the cock-eyed world business was on the bum. She was back one week on her salary now and was planning to indicate to the Powers guy where he got off if he didn't come across right on Friday P.M. next.

Presently the young man chuckled.

"That fellow's certainly been hitting too much moonshine hooch," he declared.

"Meaning which lucky guy?" languidly asked Miss Simpson, swapping the tweezers for a lipstick. "Lead me to him. I ain't had a date with a hip flask in two weeks."

"Tut, tut, sister! You have the wrong number. I'm talking about Professor Marvin Clyde, A.M., Ph.D., LL.D., D.S., and D.F., of Flowerville College, the chap they call Brother Noah. Didn't you read his latest?"

"Uhuh."

"He's going to cover his house with sheet lead and seal himself and folks in with a lot of live stock to save 'em from poison gas while the comet goes by next fall."

"My gawd! How does a guy get that way? Say, listen, he oughta buy a gas mask, an' leave it go at that."

Mr. Powers grinned and went on with his reading. Suddenly he looked up and stared thoughtfully at the girl for a moment, then leaped to his feet with a glad whoop.

"Queen, you said a mouthful!" he exclaimed.

"Quit your kiddin'."

"Nay, fair wench, I kid not. I speak full seriously of matters touching upon the payment of back salaries and the swelling of those to be. Prithee have an end to painting the lily of thy fair countenance, and get busy. To be brief, dear lady, we are about to manufacture gas masks in swads and squidillions. Hunt up the name and address of the gink who tipped us off last week that he had fifty thousand dollars he wanted to invest in a get-rich-day-before-yesterday scheme of some sort. Then take this letter. Send it special delivery."

Two days later, in response to Mr. Powers's emergency call, one James Hosford of Troy entered the office with eager expectancy written large over a fair young face that had ample room for such writing, He barely had time to squeeze himself into the visitor's chair before Powers was at him with a whirlwind of clippings, statistics, and talk.

"Now here's the psychology of it," he continued after he had brought his caller up to the minute. "To begin with, nobody but a few cranks really believes in the professor's prophecy, but everybody is seriously thinking about it. There's another thing. Do you notice what a good-sized company Brother Noah's already got signed up for his ark? Here it says that while it is understood that Professor Clyde's family and friends, with the exception of his wife and children, are not in sympathy with his views, his relatives and intimate friends, out of deference to his fears for their safety, have volunteered to be imprisoned with him during the period of the comet's visit.

"Here is a statement from the president of the college that while he and his associates in nowise indorse their colleague's position, nevertheless Professor Clyde is so deeply wrought up over the possible fate of his fellow workers, that they, with their families, by common consent, will appease him by accepting internment with him. The local Associated Press man, I notice, has valiantly volunteered to cover the story from the inside. There you are. Everybody is laughing as loud as possible for fear his neighbor will think he takes stock in Brother Noah, and I'll bet a store full of hats every last one of 'em is a shade uneasy down in the bottom of his soul.

"Right there's where we come in. I'll

bet my time for the next five months, if you'll bet your money, that the dear public would put up about two dollars apiece in insurance money if we go at it right. Now I've taken it up with the Primo Sport Goods Manufacturing Company, and they can turn out on my design a fake gas mask for twelve cents apiece that I'll engage to sell for two dollars. We'll be cagy about it, use language in our ads that won't pin us down to any definitely false claims in case they flash blue-sky fraud laws on us. We'll get some chemist to pose as the inventor and send him off on a trip to parts unknown.

To quote the enthusiastic promoter, Mr. Hosford ate it alive. Papers were drawn up promptly, welding the Powers genius and the Hosford currency into an indissoluble compound, and a plan of campaign was completed. Rush work was begun on a trial lot of masks. This accomplished, Mr. Archibald Powers, promoter and philanthropist, paid a visit to Professor Marvin Clyde in Flowerville.

There was a naïve earnestness in this young convert that captivated the professor from the first. He went into the history of his discovery in great detail when he learned that Mr. Powers had two ends in view—to build a lead-lined house for the safety of himself and friends, to use a large part of his "not inconsiderable private fortune" in publicity with a view to persuading the public to take measures to save itself.

As a first practical step Professor Clyde, with a little tactful steering, gave an interview about his new convert and his plans. It made a good story and was published broadcast.

"Has it occurred to you, Professor Clyde," Powers asked next day, "that the most universally practical solution would be a gas-mask made cheap enough to be available for everybody?"

"It undoubtedly would be," the professor approved. "I would probably have thought of it if I had possessed enough of the gas to experiment with along that line. There is no reason why a neutralizing element could not have been found that would make a successful gas-mask."

Next day there appeared from the hand of Mr. Powers, and well scattered by the obliging Associated Press, a statement quoting Professor Clyde as highly approving the gas-mask idea.

The good professor, when he saw this statement in print, gently chided his volunteer publicity man for overzealous exaggeration, but was persuaded to let it go at that. He was too busy getting ready for a lecture on the "Day of Doom," planned by Powers, and preparing texts for leaflets, to cavil over details.

Two days later the papers carried a long statement from an obscure chemist named Abraham Bernstein, that he had collected some of the mysterious comet gas simultaneously with Professor Clyde and had secretly perfected a practical gas-mask. And the day following, James Hosford, a promoter, announced through the press that he had purchased the Bernstein device and would put it on the market practically at cost for the benefit of the public.

The mask was a grotesque rubber face, modeled on the common miniature affairs which, by pressing with the fingers, can be made to give a variety of humorous grimaces. This one, attached to the chin and forehead, could be made to give like effect.

It was a successful toy worth about fifty cents. But in the hollow nose was a pinch of lead filings and common sand, the mysterious chemical supposed to neutralize the comet glass. Hence the charge of two dollars.

This was the craftily worded advertisement that sold it:

THE COMICAL COMET MASK

Here's ten dollars' worth of fun for two dollars. Buy one for your kid and give the family a good laugh on Halloween night.

A GOOD LAUGH MAY SAVE YOUR LIFE

Professor Marvin Clyde says mankind will perish on October 30, or thereabouts, from the comet's poison gas unless we protect our lungs from it. He has proved this gas won't go through lead. The nose of this mask is full of lead filings.

BUY YOUR HALLOWEEN MASK EARLY AND LAUGH OFF THE COMET

And the public obeyed. The preliminary publicity had planted a seed. They read

the advertisement and sneered hollowly. Then they walked by the places of sale, watched the demonstrator in the window, and laughed.

They looked around to see that none of their friends was watching, and finally slipped in and bought from two to six of the masks apiece, "just to amuse the kids," or "to send to some friends for a joke," *et cetera.*

Archibald Powers chuckled discreetly as he read, in the office room assigned to him in the Clyde house, the code reports of cash receipts sent by James Hosford. He chuckled as he directed the professor's lecture tour, as he prepared each day for the press more and more convincing stories bearing on the day of doom, to be openly sent out, and more and more alluring advertisements, to be secretly transmitted to Mr. Hosford in New York. Progress was most merry.

But now and then, as the clever Mr. Powers produced a particularly forceful piece of literature, he would read it over, and exclaim: "By gad! Sounds as if it were true!"

Then he would look thoughtfully out of the window.

"Well, I should worry!" he exclaimed one day after one of these moods. "I've got a safe berth in the good old lead ark!"

However, Professor Clyde came home from a lecture tour uneasy in mind. He had bought one of the masks and studied it. He pronounced it a fake, pure and simple. He wrote a scathing letter to the Hosford outfit, threatening action if they used his name further in their literature, and gave Powers a statement for the press.

"All very well, professor, but let me advise a little caution. You can't prove it's a fake without the gas to test it with."

The professor, chastened by his previous experience with ill-considered publicity, was finally argued into approving a statement that, with its qualifications, so far nullified the spirit of denunciation that the next advertisement of the Bernstein mask ran a quotation from it. Thereafter there was an unacknowledged sense of strain between the professor and his publicity man.

Other chemists declared the mask a colossal hoax. Various legal agents investigated it, but each in turn decided that the seller of the mask could put up a pretty good technical defense that his only positive claim was that he was selling a toy. Anyhow, the craze would soon pass, and it was not a very serious matter. Any attempt to suppress it would only advertise it more.

IV.

BUT while Mr. Powers was flattering himself that he could easily lull to sleep the uneasiness of Prof. Clyde, the prophet's wife was on his trail. Feminine intuition had warned her against the young man from the start. She had not failed to note that he was making no move to build his own much vaunted lead house, although it was now within a month of the date of the comet's return.

The episode of the professor's statement regarding the Bernstein mask had set her to thinking back. Finally she did a little spying upon Powers's mail, then she took a trip to New York, where she found what she went for.

On his wife's return the shocked and indignant professor learned how he had been made a tool for the promotion of a commercial fraud, and Mr. Powers found himself bag and baggage on the outside of the Clydes's ancestral home, wistfully looking in. Mrs. Clyde had all she could do to prevent her husband from exposing the young man's perfidy, thereby adding handsomely to the mountain of ridicule already heaped upon his own head.

Back in New York, now openly established in the Hosford offices taking direct charge of operations, Mr. Powers should have been quite content with things as they were. He had no fear of personal exposure. He had got all he needed from Professor Clyde.

Sales of the Bernstein mask were increasing almost in geometrical progression as the fatal day approached. Messrs. Powers and Hosford were to be very comfortably wealthy young men by October 30th.

Unfortunately, however, the genius of publicity had overreached itself. Archibald

Powers had concentrated all the craft of his agile brain on stirring up uneasiness in the public mind. He had succeeded so well that he had undermined the cynical calm of his own.

In spite of every effort and inclination to let his thoughts dwell exclusively on the completion of his golden pile, he could not shut from his brain the incessant query: "What if the professor is right?"

And unhappily he had not the solace of his dupes, the two-dollar comfort of the specious Bernstein mask.

At the end of three days the pressure became too great. Mr. Powers, in the midst of preparation of a particularly persuasive bit of advertising literature, threw it aside and fell feverishly to drawing up plans for one of the Clyde lead shelters. He secured an option on a small suburban lot and placed an order for lead sheeting. Then he hit a snag.

When in the early days of his fictitious devotion to the cause of Professor Clyde, the prophet had given him in minutest detail descriptions of every phase of the gas-proof house, Powers had listened with a show of keen interest, but had not bothered to let his pleasantly speculative thoughts center on anything but the few high spots that served his own ends. That neglect seemed now a grievous error.

How had the professor welded together his lead sheeting so as to make sure there was no seepage? How deep in the ground must the lead casing go to be safe? What kind of apparatus for supplying pure air did one need?

Hurried consultation with various experts brought out a lot of conflicting advice, but none of these men spoke as one having authority. Anti-comet-gas houses hadn't yet been standardized.

Finally in a panic he swallowed pride and wrote a letter to Professor Clyde, a dignified letter in form, but in spirit a retraction of past error absolute enough to have satisfied a prelate of the Spanish Inquisition. The writer sought absolution and an interview.

When no answer came, he sent another, less dignified, more urgent. Mrs. Clyde replied that Professor Clyde had no time for correspondence or interviews at present.

Thereupon Mr. Powers tried to convince himself that he was quite willing to let the obdurate prophet go hang. The whole thing was bunk. He fell to selling Bernstein masks harder than ever. But two days later, cursing his own idiocy meantime, he gave orders to start work on his own lead shelter. What if it wasn't just like the Clyde affair?

What if it wasn't, indeed? The possible difference between remaining alive and dying on October 30th, he decided at the end of another week. This time his letter of request for information was abject. He offered to denounce the Bernstein mask publicly, to stop its sales, and to pay any reasonable sum for the information needed.

Mrs. Clyde's reply this time stated that her husband would not for a moment consider taking any money for information of this kind, and that it was too late now for Mr. Powers, by any form of retraction, to undo the evil he had wrought. However, he might come to Flowerville on the chance that, after the professor completed preparations for saving his family and friends, he might give him a few moments.

Mr. Powers went by next train. When he neared the big old-fashioned Clyde homestead in the suburbs of Flowerville, he found a large crowd of the curious and anxious already around it. It was a sight to cause comment, entirely apart from its purpose.

Porticoes, pillars, vine-fringed cornices, were all concealed under dull gray sheeting, all grace of line erased. No windows remained. Only one door gaped blankly. The place looked like a sublimated power shed.

From the house to the lead-covered barn extended a sheet lead runway. In this barn was being installed a miscellaneous menagerie of such animals as the professor and his advisers deemed worthy to survive in a new and hand-picked world. In the basements of the two buildings, along with a supply of condensed food for man and beast, were bins of seeds, sprouts, bulbs, and saplings of such plant life as might come in handy in the post-comet era. The

ark of Noah II was nearly ready for the gaseous deluge.

As Mr. Powers, in the front rank of sightseers, paused for a general view before going in, a man in paint-spattered white came around the corner of the house and set a ladder against its front. Simultaneously Mrs. Clyde emerged bearing a paint bucket, which she handed to the painter after stirring it vigorously and testing it with a brush. Thereupon the man mounted the ladder and began turning the converted gray façade a duller gray.

"Mind, it must go on with exact evenness, not the faintest skip," Mrs. Clyde was directing as Powers stepped up to her.

Despite the curtness of her greeting, he attempted social amenities.

"Good of you to let me come! I see you're giving the last touches to the place."

"Last touches that we hadn't thought necessary," she replied, rehearsing a bit of carefully prepared fiction while apparently studying anxiously the painter's technique. "Professor Clyde found a second lead receptacle of gas last week, one he had filled and forgotten. To his alarm he found lead not entirely impervious after all. Much of the gas had escaped. But by lucky accident he hit upon a new paint compound that makes the lead perfectly safe. I'm having it applied now."

Mr. Powers became at once much more than politely interested.

"What's the composition of the paint?" he asked.

"That he refuses to give out."

The lady's tightly pursed lips indicated no hope.

"May I have a talk with Professor Clyde?"

"Possibly. I don't know when, though. Your only chance is to be on hand and catch him when he has a moment. He is very busy."

So Mr. Powers waited with the steadily growing crowd without. Nothing happened that day. He was on hand early next morning. And from morn to noon, from noon to dewy eve, like *Lucifer,* his spirits fell. And the morning and evening was of the fourteenth day before the return of the comet.

That night he sent a letter to his contractor to rush work on the lead house, saying he hoped to have some added instructions in a few days. He must get the composition of that paint, or his house might be no good even if it happened to be all right otherwise.

But days passed, and he got no nearer to the prophet nor further comfort from his faithful watchdog of a wife. Each morning he called, sometimes reaching Mrs. Clyde, more often being told that she was engaged at the moment, and requested Mr. Powers to call later.

Then he would disconsolately join the constantly shifting, ever growing crowd of sightseers. He noticed presently in this company an increasing number who, like himself, were present daily, and that the faces of these were haggard with worry.

Now and then one of them would approach the house's single entrance, only to be turned back. Before his eyes the harassed promoter saw swelling and spreading the leaven of unrest which he had so industriously sown.

Each day he got in touch with progress on his own lead shelter in New York. At the end of a week's absence when there remained only seven days to the cataclysm, and the house was only half finished, he learned that the contractor would be held up ten days on the rest of the needed lead sheeting. That hope of refuge had vanished, even if he should get from Professor Clyde the secret of the protective paint and the other necessary details.

There came finally the afternoon of October 30th, the day on whose evening the comet should return. The world, layman and scientist alike, now had its face turned anxiously toward the heavens. But for a week the astronomers had been able to make no accurate observation of the visitor. That faintly luminous body could be detected only at night from the Western Hemisphere and for seven days general storm conditions had shrouded the observatories with clouds. The peril, if such it was, rushed toward the earth unseen.

It was near twilight. The throng had become so large and uneasy that police reserves had been summoned to hold it in

check. Powers, pressing close to the police line, saw Mrs. Clyde emerge from the house and scan the throng. He caught her eye, and she beckoned to him and signaled the nearest policeman to let him pass.

The watchers saw the prophet's wife and the discredited promoter carry on a long, earnest conversation. Finally they entered the house together. Then, with something suggesting finality, the door began to close.

"Let me in!" shrilled a frantic woman's voice.

There was a commotion at one point in the line. It was like a hammer blow on dynamite. The crowd swayed, swirled, then rushed resistlessly forward, suddenly converted into a panic-stricken beast, sweeping before it the impotent police.

Mrs. Clyde peered out at the tumult, then summoned her husband.

"Quick! Get the door locked."

The plumber who was to seal the tight-fitting lead valve stood by with his tools. The manservant swung the door shut, and Professor Clyde started to throw the bolts. But it was too late.

The van of the mob struck, ripped the door from its hinges, and poured into the house. The rest of the mob shunted by their fellows away from the narrow door, swept around the house like a flying wedge, struck and tore away the sheet-lead causeway connecting the house and barn.

Two clear gaps thus loomed up in the walls of the ark of safety into which the mad destroyers poured, oblivious of the fact that their act had utterly wrecked the safety they sought.

Professor Clyde, pinned by the crowd helpless beside his wife against the wall of the living room, looked over the mass of terror-stricken faces. Even if he could close his shattered doors on this mob, they would shortly suffocate.

His oxygen apparatus was utterly inadequate for so many. The case was hopeless. Long before they could clear out the crowd and repair the damages the poison flood would be upon them.

His apathy remained while the fire company arrived and dispersed the mob by a stream from its hose and the police gradually pried the intruders from the house. He felt no resentment. He was conscious only of a sick pity for them all.

Finally his wrist watch told him their doom was due. Silently he showed his watch dial to Mrs. Clyde. As silently she slipped her hand into his. So minutes passed.

Then above the babble of voices he heard the telephone ring. A little later the Associated Press man, his face blazing his excitement, worked his way over to him.

"Wire to you from Lick Observatory," he shouted. "I'll have to read my scrawl.

"PROFESSOR MARVIN CLYDE,
"Flowerville, New York:
"Sky cleared at six ten. Comet sighted slightly off course, owing interference of meteor swarm. Now passing through edge earth's atmosphere. Rutledge, chemist here, has isolated your gas. All your observations verified. Suggest naming gas Clydeone in your honor. Congratulations.
"ZORNOW."

The newspaper man added his congratulations and hurried away, scattering the news through the crowd.

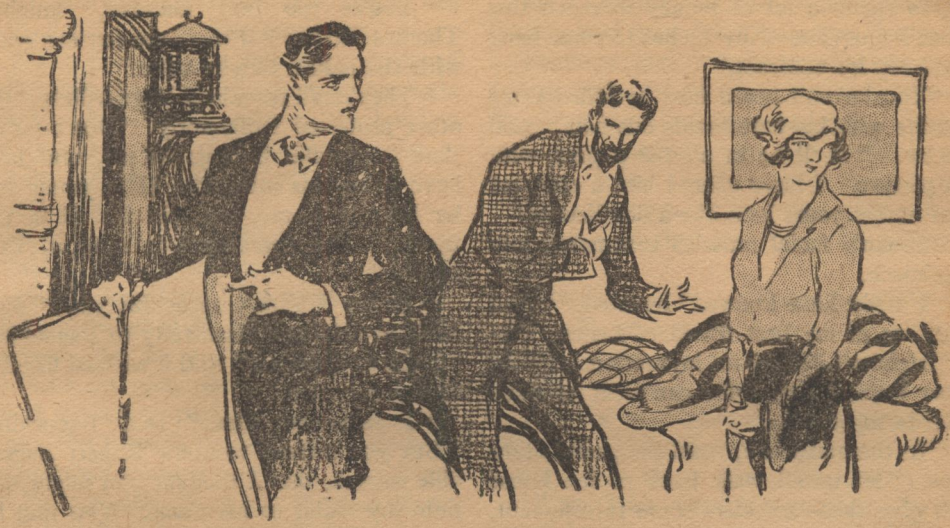
It was some moments before the prophet could speak. When he did there was no triumph in his voice.

"I'm sorry, Julia. All our savings gone. I'll work like a dog now at anything that will bring in money to make up for it to you."

Mrs. Clyde swallowed hard and offered a little mental prayer for forgiveness for what she considered quite justifiable bits of deceit she had found necessary, such as the matter of the paint and a little present softening of the truth to meet Marvin's delicate scruples.

"Marvin, dear, it won't be necessary. You can devote yourself to pure science hereafter. You see, Mr. Powers was really repentant. He made a lot of money selling his funny toy masks. In view of the fact that we gave him the idea and allowed him shelter here during the comet's visit, he turned over to me this afternoon half of his net earnings. It amounts to two hundred thousand dollars, so, as Junior puts it, we should worry."

THE END



Eyes West!

EDITOR'S NOTE.—*This story is by one of our favorite writers. The names of the readers who successfully guess who it is will be printed in the Reader's Viewpoint, although the author's identity will remain unrevealed.*

CHAPTER XVII *(Continued).*

OUT OF THE FRYING PAN—

"SEE what I get!" cried Oatman as he stared with mingled rage and gratification into Bagueville's face. "I make a record flight from San Diego to find you and help you, and the first thing I get is an accident worth my life. And here you are—where you should not be—instead of behaving yourself in my studio and keeping your contract."

Bagueville looked ruefully at his companions and made a gesture of helplessness.

"Who are your lady friends?" demanded Oatman. "One of them is a pippin—the kid with the dreamy eyes. Introduce me!"

"Not your kind," returned Bagueville frankly; "they haven't got the movie bug yet!"

The arrival of the airplane had been observed from the ranch, and a number of men were hurrying out to the scene. Bagueville shrugged his shoulders and looked at the girls.

"No use!" he said quietly. "We're in for another session."

Stanhope and Yatter were leading the reception committee, and Yatter ran forward excitedly as he suddenly recognized Oatman.

"My old friend Oatman!" he cried. "Such a surprise!"

"Tom Yatter!" exclaimed Oatman. "This is a pleasure! How did you get here?"

"Took the subway from San Antonio," chuckled the other. "Believe me, I arrived just in time to save the life of your star: Rupert Bagueville was eating himself to death as the guest of Mr. Stanhope. Shake hands with Mr. Stanhope, Mr. Oatman."

"Aw, I knew that S O S was all a joke!" Oatman declared jovially, as he was greeted by the ranchman, "but I was will-

This story began in the Argosy-Allstory Weekly for July 23.

ing to spend a lot of money to catch this feller Bagueville. Now he has to come back and keep his contract."

"You haven't heard how he killed three bandits with his bare hands out here," said Yatter. "It 'll be in all the papers, with his picture. I have offered him a contract that makes yours look like a dog license."

Oatman's facial muscles contracted into a grimace.

"I might have known!" he cried. "And you, one of my best friends! Listen, Yatter, right off I'll get an injunction. I'll fix it so Rupert Bagueville can't eat or sleep outside my studio."

"In the meantime," said the genial Stanhope, "let us all walk back to the house and give these travelers some refreshment. Come, ladies, I can't trust you out here with a handsome hero like Bagueville. He might fly away with you."

Dorothy Merrick was in despair, but she allowed Bagueville to take her arm and help her to make the return journey.

They found another visitor at the ranch: Ray Haskins, the cowboy lately become Raymond Faire, the movie actor, was there in all the glory of his new prosperity.

"I got a couple of greasers to row me up the river," he explained rather importantly. "I've come to take the girls home. Mr. Quillen wants his daughter right away, and Alvin Trempert wants Emily to come right home."

"He's changed his mind, then," said Dorothy Merrick; "that's a different story from the one that Greta told us."

"Trempert's heard all about this business from the radio," said the young man, "and he's afraid Emily will go into the movies, or do something foolish. He wants to advise her, I guess."

"You mean," said Dorothy, "that he's afraid Emily will go into the movies, and that he won't have a chance to handle her money. He's always far sighted in things that may mean money."

Julius Oatman pushed forward as he recognized Haskins.

"It's a wonder you wouldn't tell me you were coming here," he said sharply. "If these ladies are your friends, we'll have a talk with them."

"You're too late, Oatman," laughed Thomas Yatter; "if there are any contracts with the ladies, they're mine."

"They're all friends of Bagueville's!" the other protested indignantly. "Don't forget that Bagueville belongs to me, and he'll have to use his influence. This young feller belongs to me, too, and it's all in the family. You don't have to butt in, Yatter."

"Funny I didn't recognize you!" Ray Haskins said half resentfully to Bagueville. "Back at Quillen's I said it seemed like I'd seen you before."

"I remember that," said Bagueville. "But you seemed to know Rupert Bagueville so well, that I thought you might dispute my claim to his name. You said he was an old pal of yours, even if he *was* a cake-eater, and I thought perhaps you knew him better than I did. When I'm not wearing my cake-eater make-up I'm not always Rupert Bagueville, and I've often thought I didn't know him as well as some others claim to."

"We'll take Ray Haskins's boat and start for San Antonio," said Dorothy Merrick with determination. "You and Mr. O'Keefe must come with us, Mr. Bagueville. I want to get back to civilization, where there are policemen, and I want to get back to my farm before Alvin Trempert takes it away from me."

"Civilization has no terrors for me!" laughed Orville Stanhope in high good humor. "I'll send for another boat. We'll all go to San Antonio. I'll take Mr. Yatter and Mr. Oatman along, and in the atmosphere of the city we may be better able to talk business."

CHAPTER XVIII.

ST. ANTHONY'S CITY.

AFTER traveling by boat and train, they all arrived in San Antonio at the Southern Pacific station, and found that their approach had been heralded. Evidently, Yatter or Oatman had wired the newspapers while they were on the way, for there was a battery of cameras waiting to open fire on them as they stepped from

the train, and no mercy was shown the girls, Bagueville, or Stanhope.

Yatter and Oatman, publicity experts of unflagging energy and resourcefulness, were quick to indicate the hero of the hour to the camera men, and tenderly assiduous in keeping the three girls well within the center of the picture.

Eustace O'Keefe might have been overlooked, so far as the two showmen estimated his importance, but there was nothing insignificant in his stature or quaint appearance, and he was surrounded at once.

"Who are *you*, little feller?" inquired one of the newspaper men impudently, surveying the tramp's unusual height and his disreputable costume.

"I'm the radio mast that they broadcast the S O S from," answered Eustace.

"Anything to say, Mr. Stanhope?" shouted a reporter, jumping to the side of the millionaire ranchman with little ceremony, but with a certain reserve of deference for the financial rating of the man.

"Don't bother me now, boys," responded the ranchman good humoredly, "but I promise you I'll have plenty to say a little later. Look me up at my hotel, some of you fellows, and I'll tell you the whole story."

Interviewers swarmed about Bagueville, forming a second wave after the first attack of the camera men.

"Nothing to say!" he shouted, pushing his way through the mob, and looking grimly determined. "Thanks to the radio, I was relieved from a disagreeable situation. That's all, thank you!"

"See you at your hotel, Mr. Bagueville!" cried a reporter.

"You'll have to find it first," returned the star. "I don't know where it is myself."

The whole party was slowly pushed and jostled through the station and out to East Commerce Street where the taxicabs were waiting.

"I don't want any one to come with me," Dorothy Merrick said in a low tone, as she managed to draw Bagueville aside for an instant. "I'll take the girls with me alone in a cab, and I know of a small hotel that we can go to for the night."

She cautiously whispered an address in his ear, and he nodded understandingly.

Stanhope and Ingalls pressed forward, trying valiantly to pick the girls out of the throng and lead them to a cab.

"Miss Merrick knows where she is going, and wants to go alone," cried Bagueville to Stanhope. "The other girls will go with her, and they don't care to be bothered."

"That's all right," said Stanhope affably. "We will take them right along with us and drop them at their hotel, wherever it is. The war is over now, Bagueville, and we might as well all be friends. Come along, we'll get a couple o' cabs."

Bagueville shook his head sternly.

"What Miss Merrick says goes!" he declared sharply. "She wants to go alone, so that's the way she'll go."

"Come on, Dorothy," chuckled Stanhope, catching the girl by the arm. "Bagueville is on his high horse again; we'll have to leave him out. You tell me where you want to go."

"Mr. Bagueville has spoken for me," she said angrily. "You must have too much sense to try to add to our embarrassment here, Mr. Stanhope. We're in a city now, and I can call a policeman if I'm driven to it."

"That won't be necessary," Bagueville hastened to assure her. "In the city it's enough that you have friends with you. Even Mr. Stanhope will hardly care to use firearms in the streets of San Antonio."

With Eustace O'Keefe interposing his height and breadth between the Stanhope group and a waiting cab, Bagueville helped the girls into the conveyance and gave whispered directions to the chauffeur.

As the cab sped away from the station, Stanhope turned and looked with superciliious amusement at Bagueville.

"No, we don't try any gun play in the city, of course," he said. "But there are other ways to skin a cat, my dear fellow. As a movie star you have probably piled up some money, but you must know that I have probably a hundred dollars to your one. I have resources that you have never dreamed of, and when I draw on them I am able to get most of the things that I want."

"How about something to eat, gents?" inquired Oatman. "Right up to the Alamo Plaza, and I'll blow the crowd to a swell feed; Tom Yatter and everybody—though he hasn't acted like a white man. We're all friends, ain't we? All right, boys, come on!"

"I have entered one or two hotels in something like my present make-up," said Eustace, "and I always 'came out by that same door wherein I went,' with my speed accelerated. Thanks just the same, but I shall find some tamale sellers in the open air, and they make no distinctions."

"O'Keefe and I will find our way about," said Bagueville coldly. "I may see you later, Oatman."

"See here!" cried the manager, "you can't give me the slip again like that! No, sir! I've been hunting for you too long; I'm not going to let you out of sight again."

"I shan't try to dodge you, Oatman," said Bagueville seriously. "I don't think it will do you much good to talk with me, but if you must do it, I'll call you on the phone at your hotel when I'm ready to see you, and you can unburden your mind as much as you please."

Oatman was moodily doubtful, but he gave the name of the hotel at which he intended to stop.

"You'll find me at the same place," said Yatter, "and when you're through talking with Julius, come to me, Mr. Bagueville. Julius is a tightwad, and I might double any offer that he'll make you. Don't agree to anything until you've seen me."

Bagueville nodded to O'Keefe and they walked away from the group and up the street, Eustace acting as guide with some degree of familiarity.

"I'll leave you at Soledad Street," said O'Keefe suddenly, "and meet you again later, if that's your pleasure. One must conform to the environment at times, and I haven't so much as a pair of leather chaps to absolve me of the sin of vagrancy."

Bagueville offered him some money, but he declined it a little proudly.

"If you care to stroll around by yourself a bit," he said, "and then let me join you again, I'll meet you at the corner of Houston and Saint Mary Streets at five o'clock."

Left alone, Bagueville was fairly bewildered by the congestion of traffic, coming so abruptly after his wanderings in the open. Along the way were sophisticated urban dwellers in their big sixes, straight eights, and sumptuous limousines of Continental make.

A solitary cow-puncher appeared in the moving tide, picturesque in sombrero and leather chaps, perfectly self-possessed as he piloted his cayuse patiently on the course, curbing it as the traffic cop gave a warning signal, moving on again when the procession advanced. Just outside this metropolis, no more than a mile or two, were barren deserts like small Saharas, yet this lone rider and his cayuse as incongruous as they would have been in Fifth Avenue.

During his travels with the flivver, Bagueville had shipped a trunk of wearing apparel to a hotel in San Antonio, and now, after a question or two, he found the hotel in East Houston Street, a large and handsome hostelry offering luxurious hospitality to the tourist. In the crowded lobby he negotiated for a room and bath with a dapper clerk, who evidently saw nothing strange in the guest's rumpled khaki and clay-stained boots and leggings.

A half hour later he sauntered forth in a decent suit of city clothes and began to feel at home in a city that might, in a general way, have been one of the great commercial centers of the East or the Middle West, so elaborately modern were all the surroundings.

To be sure, the palm trees informed the observer that the climate was semitropical, and residence lawns and public parks were embellished with rare cacti, Spanish bayonet, oleanders, and other plants of an equatorial tendency, but Anglo-Saxon progress was in the air.

Then, too, the Texas spirit was almost a palpable thing, forcing itself on the senses: the spirit inherited from Houston, Crockett, Bowie, and Travis—sufficient unto itself, conceding nothing to the effete East, the assertive Middle West, or Golden California.

A hotel clerk directed him to Saint Mary Street, and he arrived at the rendezvous a little in advance of the time agreed upon. There the traffic was dense and impressive,

and the shops had a distinct Fifth Avenue flavor, eked out by the throngs of fashionably dressed women that were passing in motor cars and on the sidewalks.

A tall man in natty tweeds and a golf cap touched him on the shoulder, and he started and uttered a low cry of astonishment as he recognized Eustace Fitzjames Michael O'Keefe. The beard of the vagabond had been trimmed fastidiously, and the slim giant was groomed for an afternoon on the links or the fashionable promenade.

He laughed happily over Bagueville's astonishment and hastened to hand him a folded one-hundred-dollar note.

"'Tis all I have, my friend," he said apologetically, "either in money or jewels, else some other souvenir should go with it. The money debt is now paid, but, on my honor, the debt of gratitude will never be wiped out."

"Look here!" cried Bagueville, stepping out of the moving crowd to the edge of the sidewalk, "you've exaggerated things out of all reason. I couldn't let a pal go into the jug when I was able to go free, and I knew that I should get the money back later. I don't need it now, and I'd rather you'd keep it till a time when you happen not to need it."

"The material debt must be off my mind," insisted the other; "I might die, you know. As for the exaggeration, an act of friendship can't be exaggerated in this unfriendly world, my lad. You've guessed right, that I see little money, otherwise I wouldn't be parading as a hobo. But I think so little of it that I'm happy to have it off my hands. More will come in due time. Meanwhile, my friend, you may have the pleasure—if you feel that way about it—of making me your guest at dinner."

"I see there's no use in arguing the matter," sighed Bagueville, "so we'll go and eat as befits the occasion. If you know the ropes of the city, lead the way to a place where eating can be done right."

They walked down East Houston Street to the Alamo Plaza, crossed through the lovely park with its rare trees and shrubs, and entered a large hotel, ancient and rich in associations, but modernized to the living minute. Lords of magnificent haciendas and opulent planters of the old regimé had sipped their toddy there in stately leisure, but now brisk business men of the Golden Age darted in and out, holding conferences, closing deals, making millions.

Bagueville ordered lavishly, intent on being a generous host, while he observed his companion narrowly and marveled at the change in his appearance.

"You were pretty well satisfied with your 'shreds and patches,' I believe," he said, "until we met Greta Quillen."

"Ah, there's nothing like the critical eye of a young woman to spruce a chap up a bit!" laughed Eustace. "There's other young women around here, too, I've noticed, and it didn't take you long to make some alterations in your own get-up," laughed Eustace. "However, I've observed very little tenderness in that Miss Merrick of yours, but I hope she'll show some appreciation of your devotion, Bagueville—or whatever name you want me to call you."

"Why, Ringham, to my friends!" exclaimed the other earnestly. "Robert Ringham is my name, O'Keefe, and the other is just a fanciful French translation of it.

"My father is a college professor, I'll tell you confidentially," he went on to explain. "He's old-fashioned enough to believe that a college is for study and knowledge, and he has no use for athletics and sports. When I became such a successful oarsman, he felt that I had sacrificed the good name of the family to the mere lure of popularity.

"I was enticed away from his little college to a big university, but I went there as Rupert Bagueville, to humor his feeling that the scholarly name of Ringham would be disgraced. When I went to Europe to clean up the rowing trophies, I had pretty well shaken off the old name, and the new one proved a howling success on the front pages of the papers, and probably helped me to drift into fame as a moving-picture hero.

"In the last few months I've found the good old name of Ringham a welcome refuge from the cheap popularity that I've won, and when I see Bagueville spread all

over theatrical stuff, and tucked into cigarette ads and safety razor posters, I'm glad that it isn't my own name."

CHAPTER XIX.

REAL OR REEL LIFE.

THE two hungry young men disposed of a hearty dinner in short order, then the one who still preferred to be called Ringham went to a telephone in the hotel and called up the address that Dorothy Merrick had whispered to him.

She and the other girls were comfortably established in the small hotel just off the main thoroughfares of the city, and they had not been spied upon or molested. Greta Quillen was anxious to return to her father, so they were planning to steal away next morning and start for Dorothy's poultry ranch in the next county.

Ringham proposed to get a motor car and drive them home, and the girl agreed, and gave him permission to come quietly to the hotel to discuss the plans.

He left O'Keefe where they had dined, and walked cautiously through the gathering darkness of the early evening to the little hotel in the back street, half fearful that he might be seen and traced by some member of Stanhope's party, or by the alert and avid newspaper men.

Dorothy received him in a small parlor of the hotel, alone, and he impulsively took her in his arms and kissed her. She freed herself gently and smiled at him reprovingly.

"You're taking a good deal for granted, aren't you?" she said.

"I was so glad to see you again," he pleaded, holding her hand. "We've been through quite a lot together, haven't we? Of course, you know that I didn't seek any of our adventures for my own sake; I've been at your disposal, my dear, ever since we started on our strange expedition, and you have appeared to trust me most of the time."

She permitted him to hold her hand, but looked at him searchingly.

"It's pretty hard to know people nowadays," she said thoughtfully. "You were Robert Ringham, and then you became Rupert Bagueville. I thought I knew Robert Ringham better than I think I know Rupert Bagueville. I've seen you on the screen a number of times, but you always wore romantic mustachios and elaborate make-up; I never suspected that Robert Ringham could be anything like that."

"He's not!" Ringham declared stoutly, and then he explained the assumption of the professional name to her, as he had explained it to Eustace O'Keefe.

"You had as good a right to the name as your father did," she protested, a little puzzled. "Stage names are common enough, but I never heard of a man having to give up his family name because he excelled in sports. Your father must have been something of tyrant."

"No," he said regretfully, "he was simply devoted to his science and to learning. He couldn't understand my caring for anything that he regarded as trivial and frivolous. I suppose I was a frightful disappointment to him; great scholars always require their sons to follow in their footsteps, if they can.

"I realize now that the ambitions I followed were not my real ones; that's why I ran away from everything and started out to look for myself—trying to find myself and get into the right groove. I guess I've inherited a good deal of my father's love of solitude and peace."

"I never ran away from fame, as you did," she said, "but I'm a fugitive from the world, too. You never heard of me before, of course, but I fled from a social position in the East, and came out here to make my own living and win independence. I haven't made much money, but I've never accepted any help from my family.

"I can't say that I've found much contentment, either. I tried to get among simple people and be natural and human, but I haven't found many simple people; they're all horribly greedy and grasping, and I've had to fight for my rights and everything that I've wanted."

"It's hard to go it alone, isn't it?" he said, putting his arm around her and drawing her to him again. "That's what I've been learning, I think. Solitude is for two,

and not for one. Together we might find what we're looking for, right in the middle of the desert."

She still shrank from him a little.

"I think I'm a little afraid of Rupert Bagueville," she said, but smiled winsomely. "You know, I've seen you make ardent love to several beauties of the screen, and I remember how well you did it. I wonder if I could ever stop thinking that I was the fortieth or fiftieth female that you had made love to?"

"But, my dear, you certainly know what stage love is!" he exclaimed. "And, if anything, screen love is a trifle shallower. One doesn't even have to simulate the sound of a kiss for the screen."

"Doesn't *have* to," she mocked archly, "but one *does* now and then, I dare say. I'm sure the directors wouldn't object if the star happened to give the leading lady a genuine osculation—a real, old-fashioned smack. I was here in San Antonio a few weeks ago, and I saw you in your last South American picture with Floria Maywood.

"All the young girls in the audience sighed when you seized Floria in your arms and kissed her, and as far as I could tell from the picture, the lady wasn't objecting to your ardent attentions; she looked quite as happy and ecstatic as the author of the play required the heroine to look."

Ringham sighed and shook his head.

"I suppose it would be hard to make you believe that Floria Maywood and I never met in the studios without exchanging a few polite insults," he said, smiling ruefully. "Now that you recall a trying episode, I must tell you that in that very scene poor Floria asked the director if he couldn't provide her with a shot of laughing gas to help her through the ordeal.

"She always felt that she ought to be the star instead of me, and she insisted that I was insufferably conceited, while I knew that she was. No, I assure you that if that scene was convincing, it must have been due to the artistic skill of Floria Maywood and your humble servant."

"But it's hard to understand," she persisted. "It seems hardly possible that you could make such passionate love to a girl without any sort of feeling—"

"It's nothing like this," he cried suddenly, and clasped her in his arms, kissing her again and again, in spite of her struggles and protests.

She made no outcry, for there were doubtless several strangers close by who would be unpleasantly curious, but she managed to push him away from her again, and she started to rebuke him passionately, her eyes blazing with rising anger.

"Is that how you—"

He cut her short with a merry laugh.

"Exactly!" he cried, and, breaking down the resistance of her strong little hands and arms, he clasped her closer.

Then she relaxed suddenly and surprised him by giving way to laughter.

"I wonder if a woman never really knows her own mind," she murmured whimsically, permitting him to hold her. "I've always simply hated that awful cave-man stuff in the movies, but I suppose I'd be jealous if you didn't make love to me as passionately as you did to Floria Maywood on the screen, wouldn't I?"

"But the manager and the director insisted that I was never emotional enough with Floria," he said, laughing with her. "And, really, Floria was too disagreeable for me to go through a scene with and put all my emotion into the acting. You don't know yet what a lover I can be, dear!"

He flung both arms about her and enveloped her in a crushing embrace.

"Rupert—*Robert!—Bob!*— Oh, what *is* your name?" she cried shrilly.

Then there were shrill little echoing cries from the doorway, and there stood Emily and Greta, thunderstruck, open-mouthed with wonder at the scene which greeted them as they had started to come into the parlor to greet the visitor.

They turned and were about to flee, but Dorothy hailed them peremptorily.

"Come back, both of you, and protect me from this ruffian!" she gasped, but smiled at them engagingly. "After all the terrors of the desert and the ogre's castle, this is what happens to me right in the heart of civilization!"

Emily ran to her, flushed with excitement and pleasure, and clasped her closely, playfully drawing her away from her lover.

"Oh, Dorothy!" she cried rapturously. "I thought I was happy, just to get away from that place and those men, but this is what I needed to be absolutely happy. We knew that—that Mr.—er—"

"His name's Ringham, I think," laughed Dorothy. "Part of the time it seems to be Bagueville, but it's really Robert—Robert Ringham, I believe. Can't you understand what it must be like, to be wooed by a man whose very name you're not quite certain about?"

"If I was loved by a man like him," said the frank and honest Greta, "it wouldn't make any difference if I didn't know his name at all."

"Why, of course it wouldn't, Dorothy," cried Emily, in hearty agreement. "What has the name got to do with it? It's the man that counts, and I never knew any man would do so much for a girl that treated him so coldly. He went to all kinds of trouble to help *me,* just because you wanted him to; and then he fought bandits for us, and he'd have fought all the men at the ranch if they hadn't used guns."

"I've seen some awfully mean, low-down men in my time," said Greta Quillen gravely, "but Mr. Ringham and Mr. O'Keefe are just about my idea of what men ought to be."

"Let me tell Eustace what you say," Ringham pleaded earnestly. "He's been dressing himself up in new clothes with the hope that you might feel that way about him, Miss Quillen."

Greta blushed furiously and giggled.

"Oh, but I'm not getting sentimental," she protested. "I'm going to be an old maid, and keep house for father, and sing in church, and give music lessons."

Ringham regarded her gravely and reflected that she was just about the girl to follow such a drab career as she outlined: pretty as a picture, but honest and conscientious; ready to sacrifice her life to home ties and apparent duty. And Eustace O'Keefe, mysterious, romantic vagabond, was hardly the practical solution of her problems.

A parlor maid of the little hotel stepped into the room.

"Some gentlemen calling to see Miss Merrick," she announced. "Shall I show them in here?"

"Never mind showing us in, we're here," cried Julius Oatman, breezing into the room, followed by Thomas Yatter, Orville Stanhope, Alvin Trempert, Hiram Quillen, and young Ray Haskins.

"But you have no right to come in here without permission," cried Dorothy angrily. "I don't want to see you. How did you know that we were here—unless you followed us from the station?"

"We didn't have to do that," said Oatman, grinning broadly; "we just kept an eye on Bagueville."

"I saw you come in here, Bagueville, if you want to know," said Ray Haskins curtly.

"And you're not ashamed to admit that *you* were the spy, Ray Haskins?" Dorothy exclaimed.

"I don't know as you've got any right to be hiding away with Greta and Emily, when their folks are looking for 'em!" retorted the youth sullenly. "I thought I was an old friend of you-all, but none of you has had much use for me since Bagueville came along, seems like."

"I'm cert'nly surprised at you, Greta!" said Hiram Quillen, in an aggrieved tone. "With yore bringin'-up, I didn't reckon you'd go traipsin' over the country with a lot of actors and scalawags."

Greta flung herself into his arms and cajoled him into smiling an unwilling pardon.

"But if I had any authority in this here county," he said gruffly, "I'd make some arrests right here an' now."

Alvin Trempert, smiling like a sleek and crafty old tomcat, pursued little Emily around the room when she tried to take refuge back of Dorothy and Ringham.

"Why, child, child!" he said in hurt surprise. "What have I ever done to make you act like that? I've been hunting for you all over the State o' Texas, and just to-night I fell in with these gentlemen, who told me all about you.

"My poor wife and I are 'most distracted, worryin' about you, and the home don't seem like home, Emily, since you went away. We're not going to be hard on you

at all, Emily, and the only thing I've come here for is to tell you that we forgive you and want you back home again."

Emily still kept out of his reach, and she eyed him suspiciously and with a certain vague fear.

"I don't want to go back," she said childishly. "I ran away because I could not stand it any longer. I thought everything might be all right when I heard that all my money was lost for good, and you didn't care whether I ever came back or not. I'm sorry you've changed your mind. Is your lawyer going to try again to break my aunt's will?"

"I'm right sorry you're so ungrateful for what we've done for you, Emily," said Trempert, "but I'm your guardian, and I'm going to do my duty; you've got to come home."

"You'd better let her come with me," said Dorothy spiritedly. "If you take her home again, she'll have to run away again, that's all. You and your wife have never done anything to make her happy, and your terrible son was the last straw; everybody knows about it."

"Come, come, ladies—gentlemen!" purred Julius Oatman, smiling blandly, but becoming bored with the personal bickerings. "All these little family affairs will be fixed up at the right time and place. I've got lots of good news for everybody. Things are happening every minute. I've good news for Miss Merrick—that is, I'll bet my life she'll think so after we've talked it over."

"How could you have any good news for me?" Dorothy demanded.

"It's good news for the public, anyhow," said Oatman contentedly. "There's fine snapshots of all of us in the evening papers, and the story is all over the country. Mr. Stanhope doesn't mind if he *is* the villain of the piece; he's having some fun out of it. Ha, ha! Bandits, beautiful girls in distress! The country's most popular screen hero in the star part of a drama of real life! His career is cinched for twenty years!

"But now," he cried, grinning gleefully at Dorothy—"now comes an A. P. wire from the East about Miss Merrick. Miss Dorothy Merrick, the beautiful débutante of New York and Tuxedo and Palm Beach! She gave society the icy mitt two seasons ago, and disappeared, telling her mother and her devoted friends that she was going to seek her fortune and her independence. She is the lady that's been rescued from bandits and a millionaire villain, and all the dangers of the Wild West, and rescued by the people's pet, Rupert Bagueville.

"You may have found independence before, Miss Merrick," he continued delightedly, "but your fortune is just coming to you. I'm not asking you *can* you act—I'm just asking you *will* you act—for the screen—along with the handsome and gallant Rupert Bagueville? It 'll be a contract for you at two thousand dollars a week, Miss Merrick."

"That's Oatman's figures," said Thomas Yatter. "I'll talk real business with you, Miss Merrick, but I don't care to do it in a crowd."

"He's a big bluff!" cried Oatman. "Whatever that man offers you, Miss Merrick, I'm prepared to go fifty per cent higher; remember that!"

"After he's named his top price," retorted Yatter, "I'll double it, Miss Merrick."

Dorothy sat down, a little bewildered and frightened.

"My mother has always known my whereabouts," she explained coldly, "so there's no need of the newspapers making a sensation about it. It will be very annoying for my mother, indeed; she's never quite forgiven me for the talk that was created when I left home. I wish you would all leave me now, and if I have anything to say afterward I will let you know."

"You could easy enough accept my offer to-night," insisted Oatman.

"Miss Merrick wishes to be left alone," said Robert Ringham sternly.

"Can't she speak for herself?" snarled Oatman. "No need of you always acting as if you was her lawyer or something."

"I am her fiancé, if that means anything to you," Ringham announced.

"Ah, congratulations!" cried Stanhope, emerging from the background.

"Her fiancé!" gasped Oatman, a new line of thought penetrating his busy mind. "Her fiancé, eh? They're engaged! Do you get that, gents? They're engaged! Let's go. I have to get that to the newspapers. Rupert Bagueville, the movie star, is engaged to be married to the beautiful long-lost society queen, Dorothy Merrick. I see the headlines: 'The gallant Bagueville to marry society girl whom he rescued from danger and death! Famous actor of the screen in intriguing romance with New York society beauty!' Say, I've got a smart young writer in my Hollywood studios that 'll make a play out o' the romance of you two kids. 'Rupert and Dorothy in their own thrilling romance of the plains!' How's that, Yatter? You never get any red-hot inspirations like that! Don't talk about your contracts round here, Yatter! You haven't waked up yet!"

"I'm going home," said Hiram Quillen crossly, taking Greta by the hand. "First thing I know, my girl will be gettin' stage struck round here. I never heard such talk!"

"Hold on, friend!" cried the irrepressible Oatman, seizing him by the arm. "Your girl's face is worth a fortune to you, and she's got enough publicity already so she could get a contract without any looks at all. I want every man and woman that was mixed up in this romance. I'll have the original cast. I'll have Mr. Stanhope signed up before I'm through with this."

"I was in on it too, Mr. Oatman," spoke up Ray Haskins, glowering about the group with rising jealousy. "I went to that ranch alone to rescue Greta Quillen, don't forget that!"

"You're signed up already," sneered Oatman, "so you needn't talk. You never had a social position, and you're not so much on looks, but we'll let you do some riding. The principals in the big film will be Rupert and his Dorothy, the big feller that looks like a hobo, Mr. Stanhope for the villain, and Emily and Greta."

"Hold on, Julius," said Yatter. "You missed a trick. I'm signing up little Emily myself, and I've got her guardian's O. K. Mr. Stanhope and I are going to take care of Emily's future; it's all fixed."

"So that's why you've forgiven me, and are so anxious for me to come home again!" cried Emily, staring angrily at Alvin Trempert.

CHAPTER XX.

THE RIGHT TWO.

EARLY next morning Ringham and O'Keefe drove to the small hotel in a car chartered from a renting agency to take Dorothy and Emily to the older girl's ranch. Greta had been spirited away the night before by her scandalized and suspicious father, but Alvin Trempert had magnanimously permitted Emily to remain with her friend Dorothy. He seemed satisfied that the promise of a career for Emily in the movies would keep her within his control, as he had succeeded in establishing friendly relations with Yatter and with the eagerly interested Orville Stanhope.

There had been a feeling of security in the large city, even with the disturbing presence of Stanhope and the movie magnates, and Emily seemed uneasy and miserable in spite of the attentions of her friends, when they drove through the suburbs and headed for the open plains.

They left the city through the beautiful Beacon Hill district, with its costly residences and handsome lawns, and it seemed but a moment later that they were surrounded by broad expanses of sand and spiny cactus and mesquite.

"It's like running up Riverside Drive, then suddenly popping into the Adirondack wilderness," Ringham remarked. "I did not see as much of the city as I intended to, but it looked like *some* city—yet here we are in the desert again."

"It is *some* city," O'Keefe assured him. "About two hundred thousand people now, and still growing. If you don't believe me, ask the Chamber of Commerce, or the Rotary Club."

They passed some small groups of pretty bungalows in the midst of irrigated patches, then two or three isolated houses, then nothing more than an occasional signboard, advertising tires, or gasoline, or oil. The

road was fine and hard, but on each side were fields of cactus, mesquite thickets that stretched beyond the reach of the eye, and groves of live oak with its mistletoe decorations.

In a straight stretch of ten miles they met nothing but a mule-drawn wagon load of thick cactus pads with their needlelike spines.

"Isn't there enough of those things without picking them up and moving them?" queried Ringham.

"That," Eustace explained, "is a load of hay, so to speak. They have machines for dethorning the plants, and some of the farmers burn the spines off with blow-torches, so the cows can tell a cactus from a porcupine. You think there's a lot of it, but there's not so much but what the farmers are planting it and cultivating it—making two little cacti grow where one grew before."

Far ahead they made out a solitary building standing close by the road, and O'Keefe remembered that it was a small store and gas station. As they drew near it, they saw five horses tied to the rail across the front.

"That's the way we show 'em in the films!" exclaimed Ringham. "But I thought it was a picture of the good old times of road agents and Injuns. Now, what are four cowboys doing in that shack? They don't need gas or oil, so there must be—what?"

"Only ice-cream cones and soda pop," laughed Eustace. "The cowboy is a gentleman of simple tastes. He may still pack a gun, and he might tote a flask against a possible meeting with a rattler, but most of that old-time stuff seems to be for the sake of tradition; habits are hard to break."

A man in sombrero and chaps came out of the shack as the car was passing, and Ringham halted.

"Having a convention or something like that in there?" he inquired facetiously.

"Naw, nothin' much," was the grave answer. "There's an agricultural college somewheres that's broadcastin' dope on alfalfa growin', so the boys are stickin' around. Pretty nigh had a fight, too, jus' now. The set is workin' fine to-day, an' one o' the fellers tried to switch off the farm talk and pick up a jazz concert in Chicago."

"The universal conflict," Ringham exclaimed as he drove on; "the soul of a poet in revolt against materialism. What does an alfalfa crop amount to, compared with a few inspiring minutes of jazz?"

"But I thought you left the world of jazz, to find peace in bucolic life, Robert," laughed Dorothy.

"It's all so complex that it's confusing," explained Ringham. "My artistic world, as they called it, was so highly commercialized that the art was obscured, so I fled to seek the poetry that is in the wilds. If I had to plow and plant and harvest for my bread and butter, I might flee back to the cities to look for poetry."

When they arrived at the little poultry ranch, Dorothy uttered a cry of delight at the first glimpse of her foraging white Leghorns. Karl Vogeler, her general factotum, had kept the establishment up to her required standards in her absence, and she was relieved and pleased.

Ringham accompanied her on a tour of inspection of the poultry yards, the incubators, and the brooders, and she was unusually gracious and affectionate, clinging to his arm and showing him her possessions with engaging pride and gayety.

"And you see that I plow, plant, and harvest for my bread and butter," she said archly. "It's for chickens instead of alfalfa, but there's not such a lot of difference. I've had plenty of trouble and worry, and I haven't made a fortune yet, but there's been a good deal of satisfaction in it in spite of everything."

"There's always satisfaction in work," he replied, "but it has to be work that you want to do. You like the outdoors, and the independence of running a small ranch of your own; and you must like chickens, or you would hardly have kept at it so faithfully.

"Now, I really like acting and the theater, but I didn't like the work that my contract held me to. If I could play classics and all sorts of artistic and inspiring plays, the screen would have no terrors for me,

but it fell to my lot to be a romantic hero, and my managers wanted nothing but sword play, gun fights, and wild riding.

"Even that has its compensations, and you can do hokum stuff with a good deal of snap and dash if you have a sense of humor, but my cheap popularity made me the slave of the public, and I had to lay bare my private life—or pretend to do so, and tell the world what kind of soap I preferred, what cereal I ate for breakfast, and what hair tonic had saved me from premature baldness. It's very amusing at first, then it gets monotonous, and after awhile you find yourself going mad."

"Poor Robert!" Dorothy said with sweet sympathy. "You came all the way to Texas to find peace in the open, and you found nothing but war."

"I found you!" he exclaimed happily. "And wasn't that worth a dozen wars? I'm not sure but that the worst war I've had here was with you, dear; you're such a difficult, doubting young person. But since you surrendered everything has changed. I seem to have found the Land of Hope and Glory that I was dreaming of. It doesn't make much difference whether you're in the desert, or the wilderness, or a hut, if you can find love there, does it?"

"I guess that everything in this world was made for two," she admitted, blushing vividly. "Two—that is, the right two, can share trouble as well as happiness, but trouble breaks one alone, and happiness doesn't last long when you're alone with it."

He kissed her for that philosophy, and there was a tender interlude under the shade of the orchard trees.

As they returned to the house their moment of idyllic happiness was rudely terminated by the arrival of a huge touring car containing Stanhope, Ingalls, Gibbons, Oatman, and Yatter. The men did not alight from the car; Stanhope merely halted it in front of the house and loudly hailed the pair as he saw them walking toward the porch.

"Don't mind us," he cried jovially. "Just a neighborly call to tell you that we're all on the way to my pony ranch up the road. I'm entertaining Oatman and Yatter for a few days, and they'll have a chance to compromise on all these troubles about contracts. When you're ready to talk contracts, Miss Merrick, let us know and we'll come over here. I don't care to have any conferences at my house, because my sister, Mrs. Carey, doesn't understand such things and she might be bored.

"And—oh, yes, we've brought you the morning papers," he announced exultantly and held out a bundle of newspapers.

Ringham went forward and took them, and the first thing that met his gaze on the front page of the uppermost sheet was a huge portrait study of Dorothy, with a picture of himself in a character costume just below it.

She came forward and looked over his shoulder, and she gasped and groaned. The picture showed her in an elaborate Paris creation that she had worn in New York at the time of her début in her mother's social set, and she looked very beautiful, but peculiarly haughty and cold.

SPOILED DARLING OF THE UPPER STRATUM NOW RAISES CHICKENS IN TEXAS.

Betrothed to Handsome Film Star Who Staged Romantic Rescue Act.

The headlines were glaring and offensive, but the context wrought exquisite torture for the victims. It was evident that Stanhope had brought some of his boasted influence to bear on the press, for the adventures at the ranch were treated almost facetiously and represented as little more than elaborate practical jokes, with suggestions of the wiles of the press agent back of them.

Alread Dorothy's mother had been interviewed at her hotel in Hot Springs, Virginia, where she was spending the early spring months, and she was represented as indignant and deeply hurt. She hoped, the newspaper asserted, that the young man of her wayward daughter's choice was worthy the honor of an alliance with their ancient family, and that her daughter would not be reluctant to present him in due time to a forgiving and long-suffering parent, if he were presentable.

"We work fast, and we get results, you must all admit," crowed Julius Oatman, grinning happily. "I ought to 'a' been a newspaper man myself, for a fact. That swell picture of Miss Merrick—where do you suppose we got that for a Texas newspaper? Couldn't come all the way from New York in one night, and a newspaper morgue can't carry pictures of every man and woman in the whole country.

"Well, people, I got that myself from the public library; dug it up in a picture magazine last night; had to hunt through the files for two hours or more. I knew I'd find a swell looker like Miss Merrick in some o' them high-hat society magazines if I kept on looking."

"You're going to a lot of trouble, Oatman," said Ringham coldly, "and you'll have no one but yourself to blame if you find that it's all for nothing. I'm getting farther away from the screen every minute myself, and I don't think that Miss Merrick is the sort of person that you can tempt with big contracts."

"Watch us!" retorted Oatman optimistically. "I'm spreading a little epidemic of film fever right in this country, and we'll have 'em all on the run. A little more talk and I'll be signing up that old feller, Quillen, the deputy sheriff."

"I have a flivver parked at your ranch," Ringham said to Stanhope, "unless the deputy sheriff confiscated it the other night. I'll call for it this afternoon, and O'Keefe will drive it into the city for me, while I drive back the car that we hired to-day."

"I'm sure that it's there all right," answered Stanhope nervously, "but don't trouble to come after it, Mr. Bagueville. I'll send a man over here with it as soon as I get home. My sister is very nervous. She has called me on the phone several times since she located me in San Antonio, and I can tell when she is not feeling well. These gentlemen are going out with me for a little social time, but we shall talk no business at the house. If you came, it might recall the adventures of the other evening to her, and she might be disturbed. I'll send your car over immediately."

"It's a comfort to know that Mr. Stanhope has some fear of at least one person," Dorothy remarked, as the men drove away. "You could tell from his nervousness that he expected a bad half hour with Mrs. Carey when he got home. That's the secret of the large party of guests; he's taking his friends, Ingalls and Gibbons, along with him for protection, and he didn't want to lose touch with Oatman and Yatter."

They walked back to the porch of the house and joined Emily and O'Keefe.

"You're left out of the picture sections of the papers, Eustace," said Ringham. "Dorothy and I take up all the front pages, so there's no room for any one else. Your system of seeking social oblivion must be better than all the others, for even the movie producers have given you a wide berth in their publicity campaign."

"Blessed be nothing!" laughed the vagabond. "Clothes mean so much in this world that no one ever suspects a tramp of having any past, present, or future. Therefore the public has no sort of interest in him, except to heave a brickbat at him when they get the chance."

"I haven't taken up all the space in this paper, Robert," Dorothy said, as she indicated a column in the paper that she was reading. "Here at last your real name is given to the world. Your father, Professor William Wallace Ringham, the eminent astronomer and physicist, states that you are the black sheep of an otherwise respectable and distinguished family, and he prefers to have you continue your chosen career under the name of Rupert Bagueville."

CHAPTER XXI.

THE FRAGILE BOND.

RINGHAM'S flivver was duly returned by one of Stanhope's servants, and in the afternoon Ringham and O'Keefe started in procession for San Antonio, to return the hired car; O'Keefe driving the flivver in order that they might have means of returning to Dorothy's ranch on the following day.

They spent several hours in the city next morning, and Ringham visited a bank and attended to some financial matters.

"I have examined my conscience, Eustace," he said solemnly, "and everything seems pretty clear to me. I'm not going to weaken under anything that Julius Oatman can bring to bear. My public career is over, and it's only the great legitimate actors that assume the right to stage an indefinite number of farewell appearances.

"The only way to quit is to quit, and do it as soon as your mind is made up. I've made money for Oatman and his company, and he never did me an act of kindness out of sheer goodness of heart. To him I am simply a business asset—and only so long as I continue to hold the public."

"You've got a grand chance, friend Robert, to prove to your soul that you are sincere," said Eustace earnestly. "I've always tried to keep on good terms with my soul. If a man doesn't do that, there's a gradual estrangement, and it's a terrible thing to be on bad terms with your own soul.

"If you've got your soul all worked up to thinking that you've made some noble sacrifices for the sake of your high ideals, it would be cruel to shake its faith in you by admitting that you were only bluffing yourself and it. Believe me, you'd have a hard time if you ever wanted to make another effort to burn your boats and turn your face toward the heights for good and all."

"I shan't compromise!" Ringham vowed fervently. "My father is welcome to his own opinions, and he usually sticks to them, but he can have a chance now to observe how much I care for the landslide of publicity that has come upon me."

They returned to the little hamlet of small farms in the afternoon, and Ringham found Dorothy ready to welcome him fondly, but she was excited and ill at ease.

"I transacted some business in the city," he told her, "and I have established a bank account there for convenience. You will be more comfortable if you are free of any business connections with Trempert, so I am ready to take over the mortgage that he holds on your ranch. He'll be willing to accept the money, I think, and you'll have that off your mind for good."

She thanked him for his thoughtfulness very sweetly, but her air of distraction continued.

"I'm afraid that you'll be sorry you pledged yourself to a worldly, mercenary woman, Robert," she said presently, with the humility of one about to confess great faults. "I've been terribly tempted since you went away yesterday, and I've—I've practically yielded to the temptation. Money is at the bottom of most of our troubles, but it's frightfully necessary and wonderfully convenient."

He took her hands in his and drew her closer to him.

"That must mean," he said kindly, "that you have decided to go into the movies. I know what the temptation is. I fell for it myself, you know. Fame and adulation, even of that sort, is rather alluring to any human being, and—the money! When they speak of weekly wages in thousands, it makes one drunk with the glamour of it, doesn't it?"

"Think of it, Robert!" she cried hopefully. "Those awful movie men came here last night and overwhelmed me with offers. Yatter has offered me five thousand a week to keep me away from Oatman, and Oatman is mad as a March hare. He declares that he won't go a penny over thirty-five hundred a week, and he's going to appeal to you to keep me from signing a contract with Yatter."

"Then you haven't signed it yet?"

"No; I had the grace to wait for you," she said contritely. "That shows that I have a little decency left, doesn't it?"

"I wonder," he said slowly, "if we couldn't find another way for ourselves? Perhaps you don't realize that I have already made money in the movies. There are young millionaire stars in Hollywood that could make me look like a pauper, but I have more money in the banks now than the average successful business man makes in his whole life.

"I hail from a quiet, conservative family of studious men, and it came upon me one day that I had made enough money. I don't care for the luxuries of steam yachts, and houses in the North, the South, the mountains, and the seashore.

" One good home is enough for a human being, and a comfortable fortune is enough. If you keep on making great sums of money, it masters you, and there's no end to it but death. I want life while I can enjoy it, so I broke with the money god and defied him."

" There's the good that one can do," she said winsomely, making use of the ancient argument for great riches. " Of course, we want a home, Robert, rather than palaces; but we might help others to have homes, too, and there's so much misery that might be lightened with a little money."

" I have even enough for that," he assured her patiently. " I have so much that it will increase without effort on my part, and there will be more and more income for us every year."

She lowered her eyes a little dejectedly.

" Of course, if you're so terribly determined never to appear on the screen again, I suppose I ought to give up the idea. I don't want to go to Hollywood and be just like all the other actresses; I don't want to get into that life, Robert; but I thought that you and I could appear together and have such fun! That's the idea, you know. I believe that Yatter and Oatman would compromise and let us appear in some big productions together under their management.

" We're being read about and talked about all over this country at the present moment, and of course the public will want to see such a romantic couple; you can hardly blame Oatman and Yatter for being excited about it, can you?"

His face had lengthened to a gloomy gravity, but he was sorrowful rather than angry.

" We must not decide anything in haste, dear," he said anxiously. " You may be sure of one thing. I shan't say that you must do this, or you mustn't do that. We can't start life with any domestic tyranny, and I wouldn't take away the independence from you that you came all the way to Texas to find."

" Now you make me feel mean and unprincipled, Robert," she sighed. " I'm learning, after all my doubts, that you're a very kind and unusual man, and my own selfishness is beginning to loom up and shame me."

A pony came galloping along the road, and Greta Quillen whirled into the driveway and slid out of the saddle at the porch.

" And what are you escaping from at present, Greta mavourneen?" cried Eustace O'Keefe, hurrying to meet her.

Her great eyes widened prodigiously.

" But what a fine gentleman you've got to be, Mr. O'Keefe!" she cried in amazement. " I don't dare call you Mike now; you look like one of Orville Stanhope's own crowd."

" The gods forefend!" cried O'Keefe.

" But I mean the clothes!" she protested; " that's all. You're much grander than Mr. Stanhope himself, or any of the dressed-up dog-robbers that hang around him all the time. And your lovely beard! You look like some of the pictures I've seen of Russian grand dukes."

" Can you think of no pleasant compliments to pay an old friend?" he asked in mock despair. " And again I'm asking you, what are you escaping from, on horseback and all excited and out o' breath?"

" I'm running away from the—the movies!" she cried, and giggled in a sudden access of rather hysterical merriment.

" You'd better run away from them!" exclaimed Ringham, more fervently than his smile seemed to indicate. " But they will get you, Greta, if you don't watch out."

" They've got me, I guess," she said childishly. " We had a perfectly terrible time at our house to-day. First it was that miserable low-down Ray Haskins, telling father how I could make a fortune for the family. Father got plumb mad and shut 'im up, but right after that those movie men came along with Mr. Stanhope, and they're there yet, if they haven't started to come over here.

" Father was so upset that he was going to turn 'em all out," she went on excitedly, " but they are such awful smooth talkers—that Yatter and that Oatman feller—they had father talked right around to their own way of thinking in a few minutes. He was sure at first that they were lying, when

they said I could make five hundred a week just playing little ingenoo parts along with Dorothy and Emily, but Yatter offered to pay a month's salary in advance, and said father could have the cash right in his hand.

"Poor father is all lit up about it now," she lamented, "and they can make him agree to anything. He says that if I'd work for about a year at that salary, we could retire, and he could run for Congress or for Governor of the State."

"And don't you believe it?" asked Ringham curiously.

"I don't know what to believe," she answered. "I know that such things never do work out the way you think they will, and I'm plumb scared. I couldn't be an actress if I tried for ten years, and the people would be making fun of me. As for leaving home and going off to California or to New York with queer guys like Yatter and Oatman—well, I can't see it, that's all! It might be all right with Dorothy and Emily along, but suppose we got separated?"

"You stick to that, my dear," counseled Eustace O'Keefe. "Don't let those bounders talk you into doing anything that you don't like. If you need any help, call on your friends."

Stanhope's big motor car dashed up to the house in a cloud of dust, and a crowd of men invaded Dorothy's domain. Stanhope led the procession, beaming with gratification, and he was followed by Oatman and Yatter, and Trempert and Quillen. Oatman was snarling in a fury of dissatisfaction with everything, apparently, but Yatter wore his usual beaming smile.

"We have come to tell you that everything is fixed up for the best interests of all concerned," announced Stanhope to Dorothy.

"Leave me out o' that!" snapped Oatman. "Nothing will be fixed up until I've talked with my lawyers."

"I have given my consent, Emily," spoke up Alvin Trempert genially, "and you are to become a real movie star. My wife and I are reconciled to the idea, much as we hate to part with you, and you are going right off to California with Mr. Yatter and Mr. Stanhope. Mr. Stanhope has promised to see that you are properly taken care of, and I'm glad to have an old friend like him go along with you."

Emily moved over to Dorothy and clung to her arm.

"I don't care to go with Mr. Stanhope," she said timidly. "If Dorothy goes, I might go with her, but I've never wanted to be a movie star."

"You can't get out of it!" cried Trempert, losing his temper. "I've signed the contract for you, and it's got to be kept."

"And Miss Merrick will go right along with us, my dear," said Yatter soothingly. "A very pleasant little party we'll have; Miss Greta will be with us, and I expect Mr. Bagueville will decide to join our forces."

"You'll get your expectations busted!" shouted Oatman. "Bagueville won't go along, if I have to put 'im in jail."

"I told you, Mr. Yatter," said Dorothy anxiously, "that I might consider a contract if Mr. Ringham should decided to go into it with me."

"Don't worry, he'll come all right," Yatter assured her. "Oatman is holding out, pretending he won't play, but we'll fix it up before we're through."

"We won't fix it up!" vowed Oatman. "Look a-here, Bagueville, are you engaged to this Miss Merrick, and can't you say anything about what she can do?"

"I'm engaged to her," said Ringham gravely, "but that doesn't give me the right to interfere in her plans."

"If Mr. Oatman refuses to make any compromise," said Dorothy, "doesn't that relieve you of your responsibility to him, Robert? He's not willing to pay me nearly as much as Mr. Yatter has offered, and Mr. Yatter is ready to pay you twice as much as your present contract calls for."

"But, you see," Ringham answered gently, "I signed a contract with Oatman that I would make pictures for him for a certain length of time, and that I would never do any work for any other producer during that period. Nothing has happened that would release me from an agreement of that sort.

Oatman fetched Ringham a staggering blow across his broad shoulders.

"A white man!" he cried exultantly. "I'm glad to find one white man in the business! Contracts, eh? Tear 'em up, and laugh 'em off, eh? You think a pretty woman can kid a feller into doing anything—but Mr. Bagueville ain't that kind. He's a gentleman—he's been to college; that's what a college education does for a man, see?"

Dorothy stared at Ringham inquiringly, groping for some help out of the dilemma.

"What shall I do, Robert?" she asked. "Wouldn't it be foolish for me to take Mr. Oatman's offer, when Mr. Yatter is willing to pay me so much more? I don't expect to devote my life to such work, and I'm mercenary enough to want to make all I can in a short time. What shall I do?"

"I'm hardly in a position to advise you," he said miserably. "I shall not break my contract, and I shall not go back to the pictures alone—that is, without you. I'm afraid you'll have to decide for yourself, Dorothy."

"But aren't you a little stubborn—a little quixotic, Robert?" she asked gravely. "Mr. Oatman could join forces with Mr. Yatter, if he were not so obstinate; Mr. Yatter offered to make a very fair deal with him to produce some pictures together. If he is determined to block all our plans and play the dog in the manger, I don't think you are called upon to indulge him in such selfishness."

"I wouldn't argue with 'em, Miss Merrick," said Yatter complacently. "There are plenty of good leading men in the field, and you're a better attraction at present than Mr. Bagueville ever was, or ever could be. We've discussed this business over and over, and we can't do anything more than we have done. Mr. Stanhope would like to make reservations on the next train for Los Angeles, and I think that the sooner we get out of this mess the better it 'll be for all of us."

"There's only one thing that I offer any objection to, Dorothy," said Ringham sternly. "As long as we are engaged to each other, I am not willing to have you travel in the company of Mr. Stanhope, or be associated with him in any way."

"That's all bunk!" cried Yatter. "Don't be a dumb-bell, Bagueville! Mr. Stanhope has invested money in my company, and he's going to be actively associated with me. This is no Sunday school excursion we're starting out on, and Miss Merrick is old enough to take care of her own affairs, I guess."

"I'm not traveling *with* Mr. Stanhope, Robert," said Dorothy uneasily, "but I can't very well object to his taking any particular train, just because I'm going on it, can I?"

"I'm not going to quibble about it," said Ringham curtly. "I have merely expressed my opinion and told you how I feel about it. You are always at liberty to decide for yourself."

Stanhope was smiling superciliously, and Ringham's face slowly reddened with the anger that was surging within him.

"I'm sorry that we disagree, Robert," said the girl, staring at him a little defiantly, "but I really think that you have acted unreasonably in this. I wonder—well, wouldn't it be better if we waited a longer time before we decide that we are suited to each other? It seems that I'm making you very angry now, and we might continue to clash over matters of all sorts. Wouldn't it be better to—"

"I dare say it would!" he answered sharply. "If you want to be released from your engagement to me, I shall certainly not oppose you. If you regret what you have done, I shall always be at your service, and I hope you won't let pride make us both any more miserable than I am now."

Emily, clinging desperately to Dorothy's arm, began to sob brokenly.

"How could you do such a thing, Dorothy?" she wailed. "I thought you were too sensible to act like this! Poor Mr. Ringham is better than the whole lot of these men all put together, and he's been so kind to you and to all of us. He knows what he's talking about, and I don't want to go away with these other men, even if you are going."

"You'll do as you're told, Emily!" snapped Alvin Trempert. "I've had all the bother with you that I intend to stand for, and you'd better be glad that some one is willing to do something for you."

Another automobile drove up to the house, and the stately and austere Mrs. Carey was seen to get out and approach the entrance.

"Damn!" muttered Stanhope vexatiously.

Mrs. Carey entered the porch and bowed stiffly to Dorothy. She was white-faced and tight-lipped, quite evidently in something of a temper, but she carried herself with the air of a royal personage.

"I asked you not to leave the house without letting me know, Orville," she said severely to her brother.

"Yes, yes, I remember," he admitted, "but I'm coming right back, you know. Just a little matter of business to attend to over here with these people, and I thought I wouldn't bother you about it."

"Quite a little matter of business I hear!" she exclaimed fiercely, and transfixed him with a look. "A young stripling that is staying at Quillen's was good enough to give me some information. He said that you were about leaving for California with these young ladies and this odd assortment of men.

"Another one of your little pranks, Orville—as if the last one did not win you enough unsavory notoriety. Your picture is displayed in every newspaper in the country to-day, and we shall not be able to show our faces in Chicago for the next ten years.

"Now," she continued judicially, "you will come with me, in my car, instantly. I have reserved accommodations on the evening train for the East, and you and I will be leaving for Europe within a few days. Your new friends will have to get along without you, and I venture to say that your two Texas ranches will have to worry along without their owner's attention for many, many months."

The company listened to her pronouncements in respectful silence, and Orville Stanhope was utterly cowed, but pathetically sullen.

"You're so damned hard on a chap!" he complained bitterly. "Don't forget that it was you that dragged me out here to Texas, to get me away from Chicago and New York. I never liked this country anyhow, but you're never willing to let me have any recreation. I'd sell either one of these dried-up ranches of mine for ten thousand dollars."

"I'll take the cattle ranch off your hands at that price, Stanhope!" cried Ringham. "I want a place about as far from almost everything as that is, and I'm your customer, if you want one."

"Done!" said Stanhope crossly.

"You're willing, Mrs. Carey?" asked Ringham.

"Oh, it may be as well," she said coldly. "It's the way all of my brother's projects terminate. You doubtless realize what prodigious sums he has laid out on his ranches, but I suppose ten thousand is all we could expect from a buyer."

"Then if you're returning to your house, before leaving for the East, I'll go along with you to the county courthouse, and we can close the deal."

"But you're not going to leave us all in the lurch, are you, Stanhope?" Thomas Yatter spoke up boldly.

"Aw, don't bother me now, Yatter!" snarled the millionaire. "These women never listen to reason, and—and—well, I may see you later."

"He will not see you later, sir," said Mrs. Carey crushingly, and Yatter subsided and slunk out of sight.

"This is a pretty mess now, ain't it?" cried Trempert, as Stanhope, his sister, and Ringham went out to the car. "But there's no reason why we can't go right on with the business, Mr. Yatter."

"Oh, of course," Yatter agreed glumly. "Stanhope's presence isn't necessary, and I have a little contract with him. We'll go right ahead with the girls as we planned."

"Where's Greta?" asked Hiram Quillen anxiously, staring about the group.

"In the house probably," said Dorothy, and went in to seek the girl.

She returned in a moment, looking somewhat stunned.

"Greta is gone," she said blankly. "Here's a note she left for me on my desk. She went away with Mr. O'Keefe while we were all talking so much. She says they were taking Mr. Ringham's car, and they intend to drive to some near-by town to be married. It was the only way she could see

to avoid going into the movies, and she expects to be happy with Mr. O'Keefe."

"She's going to marry a tramp—a hobo—a bum!" yelled Hiram Quillen frantically, and he ran out of the house, as though he hoped to pursue the eloping couple.

CHAPTER XXII.

DESOLATION.

WHEN Robert Ringham arrived at the Stanhope cattle ranch which had been transferred to him by due process of law, the place wore an air of desolation and abandonment, but he found a few cowboys in the bunk house and they directed him to the temporary quarters that Ben Ackroyd had established for himself at the big house.

"What are you doin' back here?" challenged the terrible foreman savagely.

"I'm taking possession," said Ringham simply. "I have bought out Stanhope and I'm going to stay here myself."

"That's a good thing, because I'm rarin' to go," said the foreman. "I reckon you know that I ain't foreman here no longer; I resigned some time ago. That crazy guy, Stanhope, lit out and left me here, and I couldn't run off and leave the place to go to ruin. But I wouldn't stay here if I was offered a bank president's salary. If you're goin' to take charge, I'll pack right up an' git out."

"I don't know how to run a cattle ranch," said Ringham; "I shall have to learn, little by little. Of course, I can't offer you a bank president's salary, but I would pay you pretty well to remain in charge for me, Mr. Ackroyd."

"Ain't that the way of everything?" cried the foreman distractedly. "I'm always gettin' stung like that! You don't know how to run a ranch, so you expect to keep me here 'cause it would run straight to ruin without me. I'd be better off if I didn't have any conscience!"

"But I need a man with a conscience; that's why I want to keep you," pleaded Ringham earnestly. "You have a pretty fierce bark, Mr. Ackroyd, but your conscience is always on the job, I've noticed."

"Soft soap!" snarled the foreman disgustedly. "If you want me to stay here, don't try any o' this diplomacy stuff on me; it's too thin."

"All right!" snapped the new owner, feigning a gruff manner. "You get back to the bunk house where you belong, Ackroyd, and get things going. I'll pay you fifty dollars a month more than Stanhope paid you, but you'll have to earn it, or I'll know the reason why."

"Yes, sir!" said the foreman submissively, and looked at his new employer with a puzzled scowl. "Any orders for the day, Mr. Bagueville?"

"My name's Ringham!" corrected the other sharply. "Don't make that mistake again, Ackroyd. When I have any further orders, I'll send for you; you'll get them fast enough without asking for them."

"Yes, sir," gasped the man humbly.

Ringham laughed at the man's change of front, but grew melancholy as he started a general inspection of his domain. Just why he had bought the place was more than he could tell, but there was solitude there in large measure—an isolation that a desert island could scarcely surpass. The house, so lately the scene of exciting episodes, was painfully empty and lonesome, and the owner reflected that Ben Ackroyd, although tamed, would not be the ideal companion for many months of such exile.

In the afternoon, however, there was a surprise to break the spell of melancholy. Two visitors came up from the river, and Ringham ran out of the house in high spirits, to welcome O'Keefe and Greta.

"As there was no invitation, we came without it," said Eustace, embracing his comrade of the recent adventures. "What better place to spend a honeymoon than this? I hope we're welcome, at any rate, and we'll try to be pleasant guests if the host will be gracious enough to tolerate us."

Ringham was overjoyed, and he confided to the romantic vagabond that their arrival had made life almost tolerable for him again.

"A recluse like yourself should see the newspapers now and then, whether he wants to or not," said Eustace, and spread a San Antonio daily before him.

Ringham stared at it and his eyes grew large with wonder.

"Texas tramp is heir to Irish earldom," read the headline of a feature story.

"Permit me to present you to the Countess of Fernside!" cried Eustace, making a sweeping bow to the blushing bride.

Ringham was taken off his feet, but he stammered his pleasure and confessed his astonishment.

"It's too much of a fairy tale, Mr. Ringham!" protested Greta. "He ought to have warned me what might happen. What kind of an earl's wife can I ever make, I want to know? He keeps on calling me the countess, and he says we have to go abroad to claim our estates. I'd drop dead of fright if I had to meet any o' those crowned heads and those peerage folks."

"The countess is the fairest lady to bear the title!" declared Eustace. "She'll get used to it soon enough, I promise you. It's nothing in these days for an earl or a duke to bring home a lady from outside the nobility—a pretty little Gayety girl from London, or the daughter of an American millionaire.

"But I never expected it myself," he confessed. "I thought I was free to live out my own life without interference. A younger son, y' know, with three others between me and the trouble itself. You never know what will come upon you in this world, and it seems that the estate's solicitors have been searching America for me these six months."

The astounded host conducted his noble guests into the house, and they were scarcely seated in the great living room when another guest arrived. There was a timid, feeble knock on the outer door, and Ringham went out and found Emily Preston standing on the porch.

"If you don't want me here, Mr. Ringham," she said plaintively, "I'll go away again. I had to run away from Dorothy and those men; I couldn't go to California with them; and I've come to you. I know you couldn't love me as you did Dorothy, but you're so terribly alone in the world, it seems, and I'm always alone. I was sorry for you, and if you'd let me, I could work for you here. Sometime—after awhile—you might get to like me—perhaps."

"Dear, dear child!" cried the young man, taking her hands and drawing her into the house. "It's heart-breaking for you to come here like this—for my sake! And—I couldn't let you do it, you know. You can stay here now, for awhile, because your friend Greta is here with her husband; but when they go away, I'll have to send you with them."

"I knew it would be like that—I was afraid so," she sighed, and she accepted the verdict with sorrowful resignation.

Then he excused himself and went outside to think. It seemed hard that happiness was so elusive, so difficult, when there were so many ways in which it might be found. Here was a young girl of uncommon beauty and of almost incredible innocence; a lovely child that no one could help adoring if they but looked at her.

He wondered if he were dashing real happiness aside when it was offered to him so unreservedly, but the old conscience halted him at every turn. He loved Dorothy, and her denial of him had scarcely marred that love. It was a great problem, and he told himself that he must think of it long and well. He owed himself some justice, and some comfort.

Two riders came through the gap between the little hills back of the corral, and he strained his eyes to see them; then he cried out and ran to meet them. One was young Ray Haskins, and the other was a tired and dusty Dorothy Merrick.

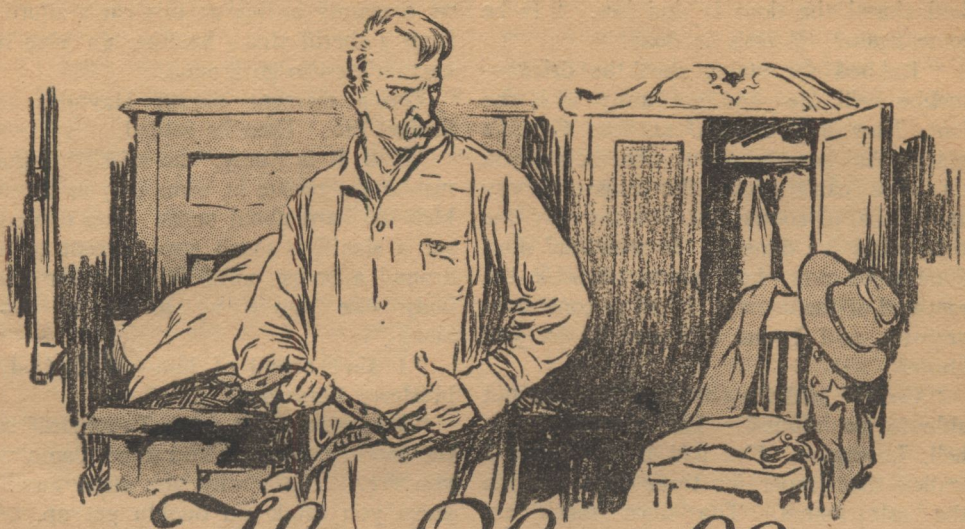
She swayed from the saddle and sank into his welcoming arms.

"I've ridden all night to get to you, Robert," she said tearfully. "Will you take me back now? I had to break away from my managers at the last moment and come to you. That little vixen—that dear, darling Emily—she left me to come to you. I couldn't stand that; I was too desperately jealous when there was another girl involved, so I came to humble myself and beg you to take me back."

Ringham held her close to him.

"We shall have to adopt Emily, I suppose," he said.

THE END



The Sheriff Stays at Home

By ERIC HOWARD

THE lean, raw-boned man rode at a gallop up the dusty street of Cajon, and pulled his black horse to a stop at the door of Sheriff Haynes's cottage. He leaped off and pushed open the gate.

Mother Haynes, the old sheriff's wife, came to the door, wiping her hands on her apron.

"Is the sheriff here?" demanded the stranger.

"Yes, sir," said Mother Haynes. "He is right sick, the sheriff is. Rheumatism. His feet and legs are so bad he can't be up and around."

"Huh! Just when he's needed," snapped the man. "I want to see him."

"Come right in, mister. He's in bed now, but he can see you."

She stepped aside, and the stranger pushed past her into the neat little hall. Mother Haynes trotted along behind him. At one of the doors leading off from the hall she paused, her hand on the knob.

"I hope it ain't trouble," she said. "You mustn't try to get the sheriff up. He can't stand at all, and it wouldn't do for him to ride."

The stranger didn't make any comment. Mother Haynes sighed and opened the door.

"Bill," she called, "here's somebody to see you."

The gray-haired sheriff turned on his pillow and looked at the man who entered. He knew him. It was Lonergan, a cowman from over near Rattlesnake Ridge.

"Hello, Lonergan," said the sheriff. "What's eatin' you?"

"Wild Jim is stirrin' up trouble," answered Lonergan without preamble.

"Hell!" said the sheriff, after his wife

had closed the door behind her. "Is he loose again? What's he done?"

"Robbed the stage, shot the driver—mebbe he'll die—and got away with the loot. Now he's drinkin' at Jose Garcia's place. An' boastin' about what he's gonna do. We can't prove the stage robbery ag'in' him, of course, but he's the only one that could 've done it. If somethin' ain't done right now, he's gonna terrorize the east end of the county. I had to come over anyway, and I was delegated to let you know."

"Gosh!" said the sheriff. "An' me not able to get around. This rheumatism is hell, Lonergan. I've had it ever since I trailed that jasper for three days through the salt marsh. Too durn much exposure."

"Can't you send anybody? Us folks over there need a little protection. We don't git much, I'm tellin' you. The east end of the county might as well be in China for all the policin' it gets. I guess we could handle Wild Jim ourselves, but if we did you and the rest of these Cajon folks would raise the devil with us. Law and order! Damn little law and order we're gettin'!"

"I only got one deputy, Lonergan," said the sheriff mildly. "The two of us has an all-fired lot of territory to cover. Especially when a feller like Wild Jim is tearin' loose. And Slim Jenkins, my deputy, has just got to stay here, on account the Forty Mule people are sendin' out a shipment and we don't want it unprotected. Besides, we have had reports as how Bull Mendoza is blowin' this way. I don't know which one is the worst, Wild Jim or Bull. Anyway, they're both durn bad. An', as I say, I can't get up.

"The only thing to do, as I see it, is for me to deputize you and let you get some men together. I know you're unprotected over toward the Ridge, and you haven't got men enough to do much good, especially if Wild Jim gathers up all the bobtailed skunks that hang out around Garcia's joint. But you could mebbe get ten or fifteen men to go back with you, and if Wild Jim gets goin', nail him!"

"Huh!" grunted Lonergan. "It's funny a county as big as this can't afford to keep a sheriff that's healthy, an' give him enough men to go around."

For a moment Sheriff Haynes's face flashed fire. Then he smiled.

"Yeh, it is funny," he said. "I guess mebbe the reason is, some of you cowmen kick too hard about taxes. You don't figger a sheriff is much good, except to tote around a badge, until Wild Jim or somebody else you're all afraid of comes along."

"I ain't afraid of him—or anybody!" blustered Lonergan.

"You're scared to death, Lonergan!" said the sheriff coldly. "You know damn well you are! That's why you came here. I guess you think I'd oughta get up, crippled as I am, and fight for you. Well, this time you can organize your own fight, if you can. I'm obeyin' doctor's orders, and stayin' right here.

"Go out and round up some men. Better take that Whitley kid with you. He's what you might call a amateur, but he's the only one that has a chance drawin' against Wild Jim. Yeh, see him first and send him to me. I'll give him some instructions."

Lonergan growled something inaudible, and the sheriff smiled.

"Best I can do," he said. "Get along and pick your men, afore Wild Jim gets goin' good. An' send Bud Whitley to me."

When Lonergan had gone, Mother Haynes stepped back into the room.

"It ain't more trouble, is it, Bill?" she asked, smoothing his pillow.

"Yes, ma, it is. Wild Jim has broke out again, over toward the Ridge. Robbed the stage and shot up a man. And that's only the start."

"But you can't go after him!"

"No, ma, I reckon I can't. That's what I told Lonergan. He's goin' to get some men to take along. Bud Whitley, among 'em. Bud 'll be comin' here pretty soon."

"That boy! They shouldn't take him on things like this. He's that reckless, he'll—"

"Never mind, ma. I'm goin' to give Bud some directions. He won't get hurt. And say, ma, hadn't you better go and see

Mrs. Brownley this afternoon? You told her you would."

"I don't want to leave you, Bill."

"I'm all right," the sheriff laughed reassuringly. "Why, except for them swollen feet, I never felt better in my life! You run along over, ma. I'll be all right."

"If you're sure—" Mother Haynes began.

"Sure as anything!"

"Bill, you aren't thinkin' of gettin' up? Gettin' me out of the house and gettin' up, are you? Like you did once before?"

"Oh, that was different, ma. I was a young man then, and not crippled up. No, I won't leave this bed. I promise you that, ma. You run along. Mrs. Brownley may need you."

"If you promise, Bill, all right. I'll go, right after dinner."

The sheriff patted her hand gently. And a little absently, too, for he was thinking. He heard a knock at the door.

"That 'll be Bud," he said. "Let him in, ma."

The youngster who entered was the sheriff's particular pride. Having no children of his own, he had taken a strong fancy to Bud Whitley, who was fatherless.

Bud was a tall, strong lad of eighteen. He had smiling, blue eyes, and a healthy, rosy skin. Since he was a small boy he had idolized the sheriff. And the sheriff, in return, had taught the lad many things —how to handle a six-gun, how to trail animals and men, how to ride anything on four feet.

It was generally acknowledged that Bud was the best shot and the quickest man on the draw in Cajon. As yet he had had no occasion to use his speed and accuracy with a six-gun in anything but fun.

"Sit down, Bud. You got a chance now to help me out a little, like you've been wantin' to."

"Lonergan said you was sendin' me after Wild Jim," said the boy eagerly.

"Yeh. Well, not exactly after him, Bud. I'm sendin' you *to* him."

"How's that?"

"I want you should take him a message, Bud. You'll find him at Jose Garcia's place, most likely. If he ain't there when you get there, you can wait around. When you go to Wild Jim with this message, you leave your guns in your saddlebags. Wild Jim, even drunk, won't throw down on an unarmed man. He ain't that bad."

"But, say—"

"Listen, Bud, you do as I say. Never mind tellin' Lonergan and the rest about it. They're supposed to protect the folks over at the Ridge from anything Wild Jim may try to do. But they won't go after him otherwise.

"You ride over with Lonergan and the bunch. But when you get near Garcia's, you separate from 'em. If Lonergan says anything, you tell him you've got your orders from me. And you go into Garcia's. Now hand me that tablet and pencil over there, and I'll write you the note you're to give Wild Jim."

Bud did as he was ordered, wondering what the sheriff was planning. He was young enough and eager enough to want to meet Wild Jim. The desperado was reputed a fast man on the draw; somebody worth going up against, thought Bud. But in that he was evidently to be disappointed. The sheriff had other plans.

Propping himself on one elbow, Sheriff Haynes moistened the pencil between his lips and scrawled a note. It took him several minutes to get it as he thought it should be.

When he had finished the task, he ripped off the sheet of paper and handed it to Bud. The latter read:

> WILD JIM:
>
> You long-eared baboon, I been waitin' a long time for a chance at you. Now we're in the same county. Are you man enough to come down here to Cajon an' fight me? Or do I have to go after you? The sheriff is crippled up, and we could have a good time here. I'm darin' you to come. If you don't dare, tell this boy so, and I'll come after you. And I'll come shootin'.

The note was signed: "Bull Mendoza."

Bud looked up from the scrawl with a frown of perplexity between his eyes.

"Them two have been enemies for a couple or three years," explained the sheriff. "Wild Jim beat Bull to a train holdup and got away. Bull was arrested for it, and

darn near sent up. When Jim heard that, he sent word to Bull, by one of his men, to get out of his territory. They've been threatenin' to kill each other on sight ever since. I guess Jim won't be scared to come in here, especially with me laid up.

"Now listen, Bud! If he gets sore right away, don't you fight him. You tell him Bull made you bring the note. You act just sorta mild, an' egg him on to meet Bull. Then, if he starts back here, you foller him. Throw off the Lonergan bunch if you can, an' come alone. An' don't let Jim know you're follerin' him."

"But is Bull comin' here?" asked Bud.

"I dunno," answered the sheriff. "Mebbe so; mebbe not. If I knew just where he was, I'd write him a letter, too. If he does, I guess Slim Jenkins can handle him. Anyway, I aim to get Jim here, where I can keep an eye on him. Go along now, son, and don't ask me any more questions. A deputy is supposed to do what the boss says."

"All right, sheriff. But won't Wild Jim know Bull's handwritin'?"

"Not a chance! They ain't never communicated in writin'! Don't forget to leave your guns in your saddlebags, either. If it was Bull I was sendin' you to, I wouldn't risk that. But Wild Jim won't fight an unarmed man. He's white!"

Bud paused for a moment, as if he wanted to ask other questions, but the sheriff waved him away. The lad replaced his big Stetson and walked to the door.

The sheriff chuckled to himself as he heard the boy go down the hall. He was a likely lad, all right, ready and willing to do as he was told. And, in this case, that was precisely what was needed. Bud could do more to help the sheriff than Lonergan and all his men; more even than his regular deputy, Slim Jenkins, who was a good fighter but too independent to obey orders.

Bud leaped on his horse and rode down Cajon's dusty street. At the general store he found Lonergan and a group of men. They were ready to leave. Without a word Bud joined them. Lonergan led the way, and Bud rode at the heels of the posse.

He knew that he was looked upon as an untried boy. But he didn't mind that. The sheriff had placed a lot of confidence in him. It went against Bud's reckless grain to have to leave his guns behind when he went to meet Wild Jim, but the sheriff's word was law. The sheriff always knew what he was doing.

It was a two-hour ride, in the heat of the day, to Rattlesnake Ridge. At a crossroads, one road leading to Lonergan's and other ranches, the other leading down the valley toward Jose Garcia's establishment, the company of men halted.

Garcia's place was a sink of iniquity, the local rendezvous of bad men and rustlers. That fact was well known, but not so easily established in a court of law. And the men of the region, few as they were, had not yet been forced to the point of driving Garcia from the country.

"Now," said Lonergan, "we don't care much what happens down at Garcia's. The more of them hombres Wild Jim wipes out, the better. But we don't want him stampedin' up here on the ranches. We got womenfolk to protect up here. And stock. I move we ride on up to my place, and then scatter round to the other ranches. If Wild Jim does try anything, we'll be ready for him, and we'll get him good and proper."

His suggestion was accepted readily enough. In truth, the men of the posse had no great willingness to meet Wild Jim. He was a deadly man. If they attacked him at Garcia's, they might be outnumbered. All the rogues of the county hang out there.

Following Lonergan, they turned off toward the ranches. Bud headed down the valley road.

"Hey, kid!" called Lonergan. "Where you goin'?"

"I got orders from the sheriff," replied Bud. "He told me to go to Garcia's and scout around. Mebbe if I can find out what Wild Jim is gonna do, I can let you know beforehand."

"The sheriff told you to do that?"

"Yeh."

"Fool idea!" snorted Lonergan. "Sendin' a kid up against Wild Jim!"

"You don't have to worry about me, mister," said Bud softly. "I guess the

sheriff knows what he's doin'. An' as for me, I'm ready to do as he says."

With that, he spurred his horse and rode off. Lonergan and the others paused for a moment, looking after him. Then, grumbling criticisms of the sheriff, they went their way.

Garcia's place was no more than two miles from the fork of the roads. On the way, Bud removed his guns from their holsters and thrust them in his saddlebags. He likewise took off his cartridge belt and stowed it away. He felt in his pocket for the sheriff's note to Wild Jim.

He grinned a little to himself as he pulled his horse up at the hitching rack before Jose Garcia's store. No one inside was likely to know him. Looking up, as he tied his horse, he saw two brown eyes peering at him from behind the closed door. Garcia himself.

Bud strode up the steps to the wide porch, turned the knob and walked inside. Garcia, a fat little Mexican with a wicked grin, stepped aside as he entered, one hand at his waist.

"He's got a knife," thought Bud.

"Say," he began without preamble, "I had one bad scare this mornin'. That feller, Bull Mendoza, is down near Cajon. I had a little run-in with him. Golly, I was scared to death! You're Garcia, ain't you?"

At mention of Mendoza's name Garcia had paled. He hesitated before answering.

"*Si*," he said at last.

"Well, Bull told me to come over here. In fact, he made me come. I didn't want to, but he promised me I wouldn't live long if I didn't. He said Wild Jim was here. I tried to tell him Wild Jim was 'way down on the Pecos, but he wouldn't listen. He knowed he was here. He sent this here note to him. Told me I had to deliver it, or I wouldn't live to eat another meal. Like I said, he had me scared. I got to take him some kind of answer, too. Golly, I don't want no ruction with Wild Jim! Mendoza was bad enough!"

Bud had purposely spoken in a loud tone. While addressing Garcia, his eyes had wandered to the rear of the dim-lit storeroom. It had only two windows, and most of the room was always in darkness.

Garcia made no comment, but as Bud watched him he saw the Mexican look nervously toward a rear door.

"He no here," Garcia began, when that door was pushed open.

The man who entered was a commanding figure. Although he had been drinking all the previous night and all this day, he walked in a perfectly straight line.

He was taller than most men, and there was a litheness in his movements that suggested his ability to spring into action at any second. His hand rested on the butt of a gun.

When he saw Bud, looking quite boyish, he let his hand fall and a grim smile bared a row of strong, white teeth.

"You was lookin' for me?" he asked in a silky voice.

"Are you Wild Jim?" countered Bud.

He had heard much about this man, but had never seen him. He looked dangerous enough to bear out his reputation, but he also looked kind. Bud admired him at sight.

"Some calls me that," admitted Wild Jim, in answer to the question.

"Bull Mendoza made me bring you this here letter," Bud apologized as he handed the outlaw the message. "I didn't want to, you can bet on that, but he made me. An' if I don't take him an answer, he'll sure finish me."

Wild Jim read the note without betraying his feelings. As he finished it, he tore it into many small pieces and let them fall to the floor. Then he breathed deeply, and his eyes flashed.

"I'll answer this," he said in the same quiet voice, "in person, before you could take him an answer. So the sheriff's laid up, is he?"

"Yes, sir," replied Bud. "He's in bed with rheumatism."

"Where'd you meet Mendoza?"

"In Deadman's Cañon, outside Cajon," Bud promptly replied. "He had a little camp there. I stumbled onto it."

"Was he alone?"

"Yes, sir, he was when I saw him. And it looked like he was campin' alone."

"Saddle my horse, Garcia!" snapped Wild Jim. "Pronto!"

The Mexican waddled out to do his master's bidding. Wild Jim looked Bud straight in the eye.

"You're a pretty game kid," observed the outlaw. "There's not many would have brought me that note."

"Gosh, I was so scared I had to!" admitted Bud. "But now, I can see I was runnin' a chance on givin' it to you."

Again that grim smile bared Wild Jim's teeth.

"I don't fight boys," he murmured. "Or women."

Garcia had reappeared in front of the store with a large black horse. It was an animal built for speed and endurance. Without another word, Wild Jim pushed past Bud, crossed the porch and leaped on the horse. Before he had gained the saddle the animal leaped forward.

"Say," Bud demanded of Garcia, as he walked to his own mount, "did that stage driver die?"

"*Si*," responded Garcia, "this morning he die."

"Huh!" Bud grunted as he got into the saddle. "Well, I gotta go back and see what happens to Bull Mendoza."

"What happens, eh?" Garcia smirked. "Thees what happens! One shot and the Bull, he die!"

Bud rode off, thinking it over. He had carried out the sheriff's instructions to the letter. Wild Jim had accepted the note as an insult from Mendoza. To that extent the sheriff had tricked him.

Bud regretted the part he had played in that trickery; Wild Jim didn't seem a bad sort, now that he had met him. But he had robbed the stage and shot the driver; the man was dead. The sheriff had to capture him somehow. Crippled as he was, he couldn't ride after him.

Still, it seemed a shame to play such a trick on Wild Jim. With Mendoza, it would have been different. He was a sly, cunning, treacherous devil. Wild Jim was as nearly square as an outlaw could be.

"Gosh," muttered Bud, "I'd rather shoot it out with him than trick him that way!"

When he was well out of sight of Garcia's place, Bud spurred his horse. He had no hope of overtaking Wild Jim, who was better mounted; but the sheriff had told him to return to Cajon as quickly as he could.

"And what 'll the sheriff do with him when he gets him there, I'd like to know?" he thought. "Slim Jenkins ain't the man to handle Jim. And the sheriff is laid up. I don't see—"

Sheriff Haynes, of course, had thought of that. But he knew his man. If he could induce Wild Jim to come to Cajon, in search of Mendoza, he had figured what would happen.

If Wild Jim did not find Mendoza, it was like him to call on the sheriff. Knowing that Haynes was laid up, it would delight Jim to call on him and pay his respects. That was the sort of humor Jim liked. And if he did call, Sheriff Haynes meant to keep his guest—as a prisoner.

For that reason he had urged his wife to go out. If there was trouble, he didn't want her there. Also, after she had gone, he struggled painfully to his swollen feet and hobbled across the room to a closet door.

From the closet he took out his belt and guns. He fastened the belt around his nightshirt and crawled back into bed, gasping from the effort.

But he had his guns on! Wild Jim wouldn't suspect that he was armed, and there would be some chance to cover him. It was that chance that the sheriff was waiting for.

Over in the east end of the county they were always complaining about him. They had said he was too old for the job. Now that he had acquired rheumatism in the line of duty, they'd be agitating for a new sheriff. He meant to show them that he could lie in bed and capture Wild Jim.

Of course, he had to have Bud's help. And he was going to give the youngster full credit. But if things went well, before the sun went down on this day Wild Jim would be his prisoner. The sheriff awaited developments with a pleased smile.

Mendoza might or might not appear. He was near by, that was certain. But whether he appeared or not, the sheriff was going to take Wild Jim for the stage holdup. If

Mendoza should appear, so much the better. He'd capture them both!

It was a good plan, and it might easily have worked out as the sheriff hoped, had it not been for one unforeseen development.

Bud was riding along at a good pace. Occasionally topping a rise, he could see Wild Jim ahead of him, streaking across the plains. Bud had taken his two guns out of his bags and strapped them about his waist.

The lad was inordinately proud of those guns, gifts from the sheriff. And he had developed a really uncanny skill with them, inexperienced as he was.

About halfway to Cajon he climbed a steep grade and gave his horse breathing space while he looked over the landscape. What he saw, as he gazed after Wild Jim, caused his heart to thump.

For some reason Wild Jim had slowed down. Riding toward him, unseen by Jim himself, was another man on a rangy buckskin horse. From his point of vantage Bud could see both of them. And the man on the buckskin, himself concealed, could see Wild Jim.

Bud would have known that buckskin anywhere. It had been described again and again, and it had been pointed out to him less than a week before. It belonged to Bull Mendoza!

"Golly!" said Bud. And he spurred his horse again, speeding down to the lower country.

He half prayed that the man on the buckskin had not seen him. He suspected Mendoza's game.

Mendoza, tricky as always, meant to ambush Wild Jim. The boy, riding madly to the point where the two men must meet, found himself hating Mendoza and regarding Wild Jim with something like affection.

The difference between the two was great, although they were both outlaws and killers. The difference was one to make an appeal to a boy's heart; Mendoza was unscrupulous, cruel, snakelike; whatever could be said against Wild Jim, and that was much, he was a man.

Bud saw Mendoza halt behind a clump of piñons. He was beside the trail. Wild Jim was riding that way. As soon as he had passed, Mendoza, too tricky even to chance a warning, would shoot. And Wild Jim would fall with a bullet in his back. That was no end for him, thought Bud.

Suddenly the boy swerved from the trail and circled over back of Mendoza. He begged his horse for his utmost speed. He gained the piñons just as Mendoza, gun in hand, called out to Wild Jim. The latter had just passed.

"Put up your hands, and don't turn around!" Mendoza commanded. "If you do, I shoot!"

Bud heard his words clearly, as he slid to the ground and ran up behind. Evidently he had been wrong.

Mendoza did warn the other man, but only, it appears, for the purpose of gloating over him.

"Ah," he said, "the Wild Jim! Not so wild right now, huh! I guess not. I got you now, hombre, like I said I would after you stuck up that train. I guess I paid you back for that, all right," he chuckled throatily, "the other night when I stopped the stage. Huh! They think you do that!"

Wild Jim, hands up, said nothing.

"Now!" snapped Mendoza. "You lower your hands and drop your guns in the road—see? But don't turn around. And drop 'em quick! My finger's nervous, and I like to shoot. Now!"

Wild Jim hesitated an instant, then obediently lowered his hands to his guns. They came out of his holsters and dropped to the ground.

Bud sighed. He had half expected that Wild Jim would try to shoot. But evidently the outlaw had a good deal of respect for Mendoza's marksmanship.

"So you robbed the stage, Mendoza?" asked Jim in his usual mild voice. "The driver died this morning. They'll get you for that."

"Hell!" said Mendoza. "They'll get you. They think you did it."

Bud crept slowly forward, until he stood within ten feet of Mendoza. He considered the situation swiftly.

Mendoza had robbed the stage and

killed the driver. Of that offense, at least, Wild Jim was guiltless. More than ever Bud regretted the trick he had played on him.

And now Jim was unarmed. And Mendoza—

The lad drew both guns.

"Drop your gun, Mendoza!" he called in a tone that was frankly imitative of Wild Jim. "I've got you!"

Mendoza turned swiftly. Bud fired. The gun fell from the outlaw's hand as a bullet seared his right arm.

Out of the corner of his eye Bud saw Wild Jim swoop down to recover one of his guns.

"None of that, Jim!" he called, and fired again. The bullet bit into the dust a foot from Jim's hand. "I can hit you if I want to. Let them guns lay!"

Wild Jim pulled himself up, a sheepish grin on his face.

"You got us both, son," he said. "What you goin' to do?"

"Get off your horse, Jim, and take Mendoza's rope. Mendoza, get back on your horse. Jim, tie him up. Tie his hands together and rope 'em close to his belly, with a cinch around his waist. Then tie his feet under the saddle. I got to take him in, and I'm runnin' no chances."

Jim evidently relished the job, for he did it with a considerable show of enjoyment. When it was done he turned to the boy.

"Now what?" he asked.

"The sheriff sent me to get you, on account Lonergan claimed it was you held up the stage. Knowin' it was Mendoza, I dunno that we want you."

"You can't prove nothing!" growled Mendoza.

"Proof, hell!" said Bud. "We don't need proof. It won't be hard to find twelve men to convict you—of anything."

Wild Jim chuckled at this pleasantry.

"I guess you got to come along as a witness," Bud told him. "Get on your horse, Jim, but leave them guns lay!"

Bud mounted his own horse, and the trio set off toward Cajon.

"I wouldn't be much good as a witness," murmured Wild Jim, riding beside Mendoza, as the trail narrowed along the edge of an arroyo. "I'm too damned prejudiced!"

As he made that observation, his horse suddenly reared and plunged. Bud drew a gun with unusual speed, but by the time it was out Jim was down in the arroyo, leaning over his horse, and zigzagging from side to side. Bud fired once—in the air.

"Adios, kid!" called back Wild Jim. "I'll see you some more!"

An hour later Bud turned his captive over to Slim Jenkins and went up the street to report to Sheriff Haynes.

"Well, son," said the sheriff when he had heard the boy's story, "I think you done me out o' some glory, but I couldn't 'a' done better myself. And, say, mother baked a cake this mornin'. Go on out and light into it."

Those words and that cake were reward enough for Bud, but he collected another reward later on.

THE END

CIRCUS DAY

RAIN afallin', canvas top—
Sof'ly drippin', drop, drop, drop.
Band aplayin' marchin' air,
Men paradin', lady fair,
Ho'ses prancin', dancin' clown,
Juggler, tumblin', sawdust down.
Heart rejoicin' at the sight,
Eatin' peanut, hand held tight,
Rain forgotten, mud on gown,
When the circus hit our town. *Harvey Kelly Wilson.*

The Roving Diplomat

By LAURANCE M. HARE

THE train stopped. Jerry stuck his head up through the ice chest door in the roof of an empty refrigerator car and took a look around.

Up ahead about eighty or a hundred rods was a town. The steeples of three frame churches, clustered close together, gleamed in the sun. At the rear of the train, beyond the red caboose, a straight line of track stretched away into the distance until it was lost in the fields and woods that flanked it.

Opposite Jerry's car was a barren, rocky field sloping down to the line fence. Over the ridge of the slope he could see the roof of a house.

He was thirsty. There might be water at the house. He climbed out of his berth, crossed the tracks and jumped the fence.

The train moved. Jerry turned calmly and watched it go. There would be other trains headed in the same direction and bound for the same destination, wherever that might be. The caboose came abreast of him and passed on.

A man stood where the caboose had been. Jerry sniffed the air and smelled trouble. Jerry didn't mind being in jail in the winter. In fact, if he could not arrive in the sunny South by the time snow began to fly in the Northern States, he would be apt to set about deliberately to get himself arrested for vagrancy.

If he could not obtain a sufficiently long sentence on that offense to carry him through the winter, he would argue with the judge until his sentence was doubled for contempt of court. It usually netted him ninety days.

Summer was different. Jerry loved his liberty in summer. He would do anything to keep out of jail.

He thought quickly as the man crossed the tracks and jumped the fence.

"Nice day," Jerry addressed his caller, around whose lean middle was a belt to which was fastened a sort of badge that glittered in the sun.

"Fine time of day to be findin' that out," replied the constable. "But then, I s'pose you jest got outa bed in one of them empty box cars. Where you from?"

"I ain't been in any box car." Jerry disdained box cars. If he couldn't get in the

ice chest of an empty refrigerator, he took his chances on top. "I walked over here from Setterville, back down the road a piece."

"I know where 'tis if you mean Settleville."

"Yea, that's it. I just pulled in there this mornin'. Ain't got used to the name yet."

"More'n likely you saw the name on the station when you come through in that freight, an' couldn't remember it. Where you stoppin' there?"

"Ain't stoppin' yet. Left my grip at the station to look around some before I locate. May not stop at all."

"An' then agin you may," said the constable. "That's where the county jail is. What's yer name?"

"Jerry Field."

"Field, eh? Must be used to makin' up names right outa whole cloth. That one's pretty good. How much money you got?"

"I left my check book in my grip," said Jerry.

"You're the damnedest liar I ever seen," said the constable. "You never seen a check book, and the only walkin' you've done to-day was from that train you jest got off of to here. An' now you're trespassin' on private prop'ty."

It occurred to Jerry that the constable was just about to arrest him. He had in his pocket thirty odd dollars, made up of the residue of his winter's wages and the combined assets of a couple of negroes who had parted with their last ten dollars at the direction of two little ivory cubes with a varying number of black dots on each of their facets.

Jerry had no desire to part with this money in the form of a fine, half of which would probably find a permanent abode in the constable's pocket.

Jerry called upon his brain for an idea. But the only thing he could think of was the constable's peculiar pronunciation of the word "property." The word repeated itself in his mind several times.

He looked around helplessly. He wondered if his ordinarily nimble brain were giving out. "Prop'ty, prop'ty, prop'ty." After half a dozen more repetitions of the word, he gradually took notice of the "prop'ty" upon which he was trespassing. His face brightened.

"Matter of fact," he said, "I'm lookin' for the owner of this here field. You wouldn't call that trespassin', would you?"

"No, you ain't lookin' *for* him," the constable announced. "You're lookin' *at* him. You interested in buyin'?"

"Kind of. How big is this piece?"

"Two acres." The constable's face did not brighten noticeably, but it resembled that of a small boy who sees the bobber on his fish line wiggle and doesn't know whether he has a fish or a snag.

"How much you askin'?"

"Sixty dollars." The constable's expression changed. It now resembled that of a small boy who is reasonably sure he has a fish. Maybe not a very large fish, but a fish, nevertheless.

"Cash?" asked Jerry.

"Cash."

"Too much." Jerry shook his head dubiously. He was becoming acclimated to his rôle of land buyer, and was acting the part more or less naturally.

He figured on offering about half the constable's price and sticking to it until that gentleman gave him up as a poor prospect, then he could go on his way unmolested.

"'Tain't worth it," he repeated. "Give you thirty. Half down, the balance on a note."

"No you won't. You'll give me sixty, cash. Or else go to jail for vagrancy, train ridin' an' trespassin' on private prop'ty."

Jerry considered. In fact, he worried. This was something else. The old boy was going to saddle him anyway. He dickered.

"'Tain't worth it. I'll give you forty, but not cash. Ain't got that much with me. Pay you thirty now, the balance in six months."

The constable considered. He had once sold the plot, on a similar basis, to the old man who lived on the other side of the slope and whose farm adjoined it. He had foreclosed when the note had fallen due and the old man could not pay.

He could think of no harder cross than

to be burdened with the property. He could think of no better way to cook Jerry's goose than to force it on him.

If he had to foreclose on Jerry, too, he would be just that much to the good. He would still have the property besides the money that both Jerry and the old man had paid him.

The land was unproductive in itself. It was covered with rock, and would not even sustain a crop of weeds. The only way he could make any money from it was by selling it on terms, and foreclosing when the buyer couldn't make it pay.

But it was hard to find buyers. All the village folk knew its history and limitations. He had to depend on outsiders.

He didn't want to arrest Jerry; there would be no profit in that for him. He wanted to make Jerry buy the land.

"Tell you," he said. "I'll make it fifty dollars, thirty down. Either that or go to jail."

Jerry shrugged his shoulders.

"Come on," said the constable. "We'll go down to town an' git things fixed up."

II.

JERRY returned in half an hour with everything "fixed up." He sat down on a bowlder.

He was mad, awful mad. This was almost as bad as being in jail. It was spring and the wanderlust was in his blood. But he was burdened with the responsibilities of being the proprietor of a piece of real estate. He would have to stay put until he could earn enough money to pay the note the constable held. Not until then could he be on his way again.

There was only one comforting thing about it. Some day, when he was old and decrepit, too old to climb up and lower himself into the ice chest of an empty refrigerator car, he could come back and build a shack here in which to die, and they could bury him on his own property.

One thing troubled him greatly. How was he going to earn the money to pay the note? He could not earn it from the land; he would have to get a job somewhere for a few weeks.

He sighed. As he rose to his feet and started over the hill for his long delayed drink of water, he had a wild plan of taking the next train out of town. When the note came due, the constable could have his property and go to thunder.

This notion was dispelled when he talked to the old man across the hill. He had to walk through a large strawberry patch before he reached the house. His neighbor was in the back yard.

"Howdy?" said Jerry.

"Howdy?"

"Guess we're neighbors. I come over for a drink."

"Help yourself. You livin' around here?"

"Just bought that sand patch next to the railroad."

"Hell! Did old Collins sell you that?"

"Kind of." Jerry explained the transaction.

"He's a slick one," said the old man. "I owned that piece once myself."

"How come you got him to buy it back?"

"Didn't. Couldn't finish payin' for it, so Collins foreclosed."

"How much did you pay on it?"

"Forty dollars."

"I'll be damned," said Jerry.

He figured a minute.

"Old boy must be makin' money on it, even if it ain't worth nothin'. He's got your forty dollars an' my thirty. That's seventy. If I can't pay that note, which I don't see no way of doin', he'll still have the property. Kinda slick at that. I'd like to beat that old bugger. Nice patch of strawberries you got here."

"Middlin'."

"Oughta be on a southern slope, though," said Jerry.

"Yea. That's what I bought the sand patch for, but the soil ain't got body enough to grow 'em."

"Soil ain't everything. Gotta have good sunlight."

There was a long silence while Jerry thought. He had learned about farming from various sources. He had an idea.

His itinerant habits had brought him in contact with all kinds and conditions of soil

and climate. He considered himself a better judge of the possibilities of the sand patch than the old man, who had probably spent most of his life in this locality. He wanted to get rid of the property, and at the same time help the old fellow to redeem it.

"Tell you," he said. "I don't want that there two acres. Had to buy it to keep outa jail. I want to get outa here, but I can't till I pay that note.

"Now, pop, that's good strawberry land if it was fixed up right. I seen some land just like that once an' the feller spread it over thick with manure an' wood ashes an' plowed it under. He raised the best crop of strawberries in the neighborhood.

"Now, you got matoor plants right here at hand all ready to bear. All you'd have to do after you get your plowin' an' draggin' down done would be just to dig up your plants an' set 'em out on that south slope. You just dig up your plants with a spade so's to leave plenty of dirt on 'em an' not disturb the roots an' set 'em out. If you get it done early enough, you'll have strawberries this year same as always, only they'll be a sight better an' bigger than you been gittin'.

"Here's what I'll do. You gimme twenty dollars so's I can pay that note an' get clear title to that land an' I'll turn the deed over to you. I'll be losin' money, but I want to get away an' I'd like to see you get hold of that land agin. How about it, pop?"

Pop considered. "By gosh, young feller, I'd like to, but I ain't got twenty dollars—I got a extry horse in the barn, though, that ain't doin' nothin' but eatin' her fool head off. I'll swap you."

"Dunno," said Jerry. "I'd have to sell her first to get enough money to pay Collins. I'll see if I can dig up a buyer."

He moved off toward the village. He was not very hopeful, but neither was he entirely hopeless. Any kind of deal that would permit his exodus from that locality, would satisfy him.

As he thought it over, it occurred to him that he might even be able partly to replenish his cash assets aside from paying Collins, if he had good luck.

He passed the constable's farm on the main highway between pop's place and the town. Collins was in a field adjoining his house, trudging along behind a one horse plow.

Jerry stopped to watch. The horse dug his hoofs into the heavy sod and strained the traces in order to pull the heavy plow along at a snail-like pace.

Jerry stood quite still as his brain began to work. Gradually his face brightened. The end of his troubles was in sight.

He would sell the horse to Collins. He could think of nothing that would give him more satisfaction. He waited until the constable came abreast of him.

"Hey, there," he called. "Looks like that horse of yours needs some help."

Collins leaned back on the reins which were tied about his waist.

"Whoa, gol darn you," he shouted. He turned and looked at Jerry. "Eh? What'd you say?"

"I said you oughta have another horse the size of that one. You'd get along better."

"Don't need another horse. Gettin' along all right's it is."

"No, you ain't," said Jerry. "You oughta be ashamed makin' that one little horse pull that plow through that heavy sod. It's cruelty to animals. A man that does things like that would beat his wife."

"Don't you go sassin' me," warned the constable, "or I'll put you in jail yet. You better get busy rakin' up that twenty dollars you owe me. I can 'tend to my own business."

"No, you can't, not alone. Now, if you had another horse to hitch up beside that nag there, you could plow deeper an' get done quicker."

"Don't need to plow no deeper."

"It's always best. Get better crops. Anyway, a man that's constable of a town has got other things to do besides follow an old plug around a field all day. You oughta be out maintainin' the peace. Now, I got a horse I'll sell you—"

"There ain't nobody gonna sell me a horse. Now go on about your business, if you got any, an' let me 'tend to mine."

"Mebbe we can make a trade," said

Jerry. "I'll bring the horse down an' show her to you."

Collins made some reply, but Jerry was started for pop's place and didn't hear. He returned in a few minutes with pop and one of pop's horses.

They went into the field and waited for Collins to complete a circuit of it. When he stopped in front of them, Jerry said:

"Here's a horse that's a perfect match for the one you got. Same heft an' height, same color. Look at her, she's just rarin' to go. Hitch them two up together an' you could pull a house with 'em.

"See your horse eyin' her? He's lonesome. That's half that ails him. If he had some comp'ny, he'd pull twice as hard's he does. Horses is just like humans. They can't work good alone by themselves."

"I can," retorted Collins, "an' so can my horse. I don't need another."

"Yes you do. Bein' as you're constable an' a leadin' citizen of this here town, you gotta set an example for your feller men an' be progressive an' efficient. With two horses you can do your work quicker an' better an' have time to turn your hand to more important. things. Bein' a public man, you gotta keep yourself before the public. An' some day, when this town gets big enough, you might mebbe get elected mayor, if you handle yourself right, an' show the voters that you're big enough for the job."

Collins straightened his shoulders perceptibly.

"Now," Jerry continued, "I'll sell you this horse for seventy-five dollars."

Collins looked the horse over carefully. He had known pop Fisher for a good many years and he knew pop's horses. He knew this one was sound and not so very old. But he shook his head.

"I'll give you fifty," he offered.

"Sixty-five," said Jerry.

"Nope. Fifty."

"Sixty," said Jerry.

"Fifty."

Jerry had not hoped for more, but he knew that if he had suggested fifty first, Collins would have beat him down.

"Tell you what I'll do," he agreed. "I'll take fifty cash or else thirty cash an' the note I give you an' a deed to that property you sold me."

Collins reached slowly into his pocket and brought out three ten-dollar bills, which he handed to Jerry. They were the same ones Jerry had given him earlier in the day.

"Come on in the house," he said, "an' I'll give you that note an' fix up the deed."

"You better make the deed out to pop," Jerry advised, "because I'm turnin' it over to him soon's I get it."

The constable wheeled about.

"I thought you was buyin' the prop'ty," he said.

"I was, but I traded it to pop for that horse I just sold you. An' I sold you the horse so's I could have a clear deed to give to pop. He's gonna raise strawberries on the land. It's the best strawberry land I've seen in some time when it's fixed up an' I've showed him how to fix it up."

"Strawberry land!" Collins exploded. "An' I sold it for fifty dollars. It's worth twice as much. Oh, Lord!"

"Mebbe more'n that," Jerry added complacently. "But you didn't know it yesterday. You palmed it off on me an' was glad to get rid of it. I got rid of it the best way I could. You ain't got no kick. You got the money pop paid in on it first an' you got pop's horse. Now go along an' make out that deed."

"I won't. You've robbed me. Give me back my money. I'll keep the horse an' you'll have to pay the note besides. I'll send you to jail, you young upstart."

"No, you won't. You'll make out the deed to pop. This deal's on the level. You just been beat at your own game, that's all."

"Better do as you're told," pop advised, "or else I won't vote for you when you run for mayor if you can't take a lickin' any better'n that."

The constable shrugged his shoulders and led the way into the house. He made out a deed. Jerry witnessed the signature and Mrs. Collins stamped it with her notary's seal. The constable sat slumped in his chair as his visitors departed.

Out in the road, pop put out his hand and Jerry shook it.

"Thanks, young feller," said pop. "That was pretty slick. If you're ever around this way agin, drop in an' see me."

"Thanks," said Jerry. "Mebbe some day I'll stop off to git some of them strawberries."

He headed up the road toward the village. On the other side of town, far from constable Collins's habitat, he sat down on an embankment along the railroad to wait.

He felt in his pants' pocket. His money was still intact. He reviewed the occurrences of the day.

Pop Fisher had the property that belonged to him, with the knowledge to make it pay. Collins had pop's original forty dollars and a horse that he didn't want. Jerry had his liberty. He sighed contentedly.

Some fourteen months later, a train pulled into the town and stopped. Jerry stuck his head up through the ice chest door in the roof of an empty refrigerator car and took a look around.

He was hungry. He had been hungry for three days. Fate had been unkind to him. He was broke.

Directly opposite his car was a field that sloped toward the line fence. It was covered with a bumper crop of strawberries. Jerry climbed out of his berth, crossed the tracks and jumped the fence. He took off his hat and filled it with the great, ripe, juicy, luscious berries.

The train began to move. Jerry made a run for it. Back in his private compartment, he sat munching the berries and reflecting on the law of averages.

THE END

IN CONFIDENCE

A YEAR ago when I returned
From Sylvan Glen,
I vowed no power on earth could lure
Me there again.
I went abundantly equipped
With hooks and flies;
But from their bed the lazy trout
Refused to rise.
Although I prayed to divers gods,
And swore a lot,
Mosquitoes gave me all the bites
I ever got.

The sun beat down upon the inn
All day—and how!
As for the eats—no doughboy had
Such awful chow.
The sheets were short, the towels few
And when the rain
Came trickling down upon my cot
I went insane.
Yet, maugre this, the very worst
Of summer fare,
I'm going back again this year,
For *she*'ll be there!

Edward W. Barnard.

Dumb Is as Dumb Does

By ELLEN HOGUE and JACK BECHDOLT

WALTER D. TETMAN, of Tetman & Rogers, novelty importers, did the hiring and firing. John Rogers, the junior partner, felt free to express his opinions—and he always had opinions.

Tetman was forty-three, married, lean, gray and irascible. Rogers was a year younger, plump, round, unmarried and proud of it. Each partner was firmly convinced that without him, the other would wreck the business within a month.

The partners were, for the moment, without a private secretary. They had advertised for a young woman to fill the place.

Briggs, the bookkeeper, brought in a card to Walter D. Tetman. Tetman scowled over it and read aloud: "Miss Kansas Smith."

"Miss Kansas Smith," Tetman repeated. His lip began to curl with scorn. He was about to say to Briggs that the young lady need not wait. Then John Rogers, from his desk across the room, spoke up.

"Count her out," Rogers said.

"And why?" said Tetman promptly.

"Why, good Lord, we don't want a secretary named *that!*"

"Ask the young woman to step in," Tetman told the bookkeeper. He added mildly: "After all, John, whoever she is, she is not responsible for the name her parents gave her."

"Humph," said Rogers, and retired behind his morning newspaper.

Kansas Smith sounded militant, but she was not. She slipped through the door and stood shyly, with her back against it. Then she evidently remembered that a business-like manner was a help.

She came forward swiftly and sat down beside Tetman's desk as if she meant it. She stared, wide-eyed and expectant, at the man she hoped would be her employer. She

looked somewhat like a young robin waiting to be fed a nice, fat worm.

Over in the far corner of the large, old-fashioned office, John Rogers squinted in the strong sunlight and peered disapprovingly.

He pushed back his chair with a loud rasping noise. His eyes were fixed on Tetman in a menacing glare. He cleared his throat deeply.

Kansas Smith jumped a little, but she did not look around. Tetman peered over his spectacles at the junior partner, whereupon Rogers violently shook his head.

A slow flush crept over Tetman's bony forehead. He straightened his lean, gray-clad length behind his desk, and he, too, cleared his throat—not warningly, as Rogers had done, but impatiently, as one who might say: "Wait a minute. Wait—a—minute."

Then he returned to his cautious, shrewd inspection of Miss Kansas Smith.

She was pretty. She had the distractingly lovely advantage of extreme slimness and roundness, too. Her arms were bare to the shoulders, and they were softly curved. Her legs were long; her thin stockings were rolled. Walter D. Tetman saw that right away.

He cleared his throat.

"You are—Miss Smith?" he asked.

"Miss Kansas Smith," she murmured politely and expectantly.

"Er—why did you leave your last position, Miss Smith?"

She hesitated. Then she said:

"In a case like this, honesty is the best policy, is it not, Mr. Tetman? I lost my last position due to my regrettable inability to measure up to its standards. However, that was six months ago. I have employed the interim with a very thorough and extensive course of business training. I feel sure I can be of use to you. I ask only a fair trial."

She had evidently memorized this remark. When she had finished it, she heaved a sigh of relief, and glanced around at John Rogers as if for approval.

She got none. Rogers was not even looking at her. He was glaring stonily at his partner, and when she glanced back, she saw to her evident surprise, that Walter D. Tetman was returning that menacing stare.

His thin lips were set; his lean jaw thrust out.

Walter D. Tetman spoke. His words had the faintest trace of a Scotch burr; he spoke slowly, and in measured tones, now looking directly at the applicant and avoiding John Rogers's gaze.

"Honesty *is* the best policy, Miss Smith," he said. "I—I am sure—most commendable—now—you can do shorthand?"

"Yes, sir."

"We wanted some one with a good deal of experience," he went on doubtfully. "Our personal secretary must meet customers intelligently and—perhaps I may say more than courteously. We think a great deal of our customers."

John Rogers gave an impatient snort.

But the girl did not jump this time. She rattled off a reply:

"Courtesy to your customers, coöperation in all your policies is, of course, part of the intelligent loyalty which I feel I owe to my employers. And I may add, Mr. Tetman, that I have initiative which I am sure will prove valuable to you."

This speech out, Kansas Smith sank back in her chair, as one who might say:

"Isn't that enough for anybody?"

John Rogers, with a violent movement, jerked a sheet of paper to him. On it he wrote two bold, black words. He almost leaped across the room, and slammed the paper down on Walter D. Tetman's desk.

Tetman peered at the words.

"That's out!"

The words stared up at him, and Tetman stared back. He thrust his hand in his thin, gray hair; stood each separate lock on end. He glanced so pugnaciously at Kansas Smith that she visibly quailed.

"I think we may try you," said Tetman. He spoke with determination. At an inarticulate sound from his partner, he repeated the words, slowly and distinctly. "I—think—we—may—try you."

Kansas Smith lost her business-like air. She leaned forward, as though she were about to place her hand on Tetman's, which lay half clenched on the desk. Her eyes

filled with happy tears, and she looked suddenly childish.

"Oh, thank you, Mr. Tetman," she said. "I—oh, thank you."

"That's quite all right, Miss Smith," said Tetman. He, too, appeared ill at ease. "Er—our office hours are from nine to five. You may report to me to-morrow at nine."

"Punctuality," said Miss Smith, "is, naturally, one of your first requirements, demonstrating as it does, my willingness to please."

She opened her purse, took out her vanity case and powdered her nose. Then she rose to go.

"Good-by," she said, and cast a sweet, shy glance at the two men. She left them alone together.

Neither Rogers nor Tetman said a word. They stared at each other angrily.

A slow flush suffused Tetman's face. His expression became defiant, stubborn, mulish. On the round, usually placid countenance of John Rogers there grew a look eloquent of the most intense disgust, a disgust that amounted almost to loathing of his partner.

II.

"Miss Smith," said Walter D. Tetman.

Kansas Smith jumped. She had laid the sheaf of freshly typed correspondence on Tetman's desk and was examining the steel engraving of "Lincoln and his Cabinet" that hung on the wall behind the desk.

Reflected in the glass of the picture, she could see dimly Tetman's back as he bent scowling over her letters. She watched that reflection, hoping for signs of approval.

Kansas Smith was afraid Tetman didn't like her. She wanted everybody to like her. That was her disposition. For six weeks she had been trying to please Tetman, and oh, how she had tried!

"Miss Smith," Tetman said, "how do you spell *receive?*"

"O-o-oh!" Kansas cried. "Did I do that again?"

"And *belief?*"

"Um-um!" She pursed her lips. She looked as mournful as the carven dove upon a tombstone.

Tetman fixed his cold eyes on the girl's distressed face.

"'I before E except after C,'" he quoted inexorably.

"Oh, I *know*, Mr. Tetman. That was such a sweet, darling little poem you taught me. And still I do these things. Can you imagine anybody so dumb!"

Then in quite a different vein she added: "I realize that the mind can be trained—often in these simple ways I do so appreciate your spirit of coöperation. A spirit like that is of inestimable benefit to employer and employee. Don't you think so, Mr. Tetman?"

"Humph!" was Tetman's comment.

But he was not unimpressed. He almost smiled at Kansas. And then remembered something.

"Oh, a minute—the Lippman letter, please." He read it, and added fervently: "Oh, my Lord!"

Kansas Smith clasped her hands. Her blue eyes widened, her lips trembled.

"Oh, no, Mr. Tetman, not another, really—"

"Allow me," said Tetman, in a desperate state of sarcasm. "Allow me to read to you an excerpt from your latest work, Miss Smith. I quote from the letter to Lippman, Nagasaki: 'Owning to the recent industrial expression, we are afraid that the American market for the numbers you mention will prove extremely unlimited.' Now, honestly, Miss Smith, what does that sound like to you?"

Kansas beamed anxiously. "I think it sounds lovely. Just lovely—"

"But what does it mean?"

"Why—why, I thought it so clear—so lucid! I don't know exactly what it means—"

"Nor I," Tetman groaned. "Nor would Lippman, if he ever got it. Just between you and me it doesn't mean a blamed thing, now, does it?"

"It was in my notes," Kansas argued feebly, blowing at an offending lock of her taffy colored hair.

"No doubt. Oh, *no doubt*. Yes, in your notes. Just like that! But what I said, Miss Smith, was this: I said '*Owing* to the recent industrial *depression*, the

American market will prove extremely *limited.*' And that's quite different, isn't it?"

Kansas nodded sorrowfully.

"Yes," said Tetman. "Very different! That's all just now, Miss Smith."

Left alone, Tetman sighed deeply and thrust his chair back from the desk. He rose to pace his office, because Kansas Smith was a problem he simply could not think out sitting still.

Six weeks had passed, six weeks of Kansas Smith. Tetman had been on the point of tactfully notifying the girl she would not do before her first week was up. John Rogers had saved Kansas her job, saved it all unknown to Kansas.

John Rogers had said: "Look here, Walter, that bobbed haired bandit is a bust—and I told you so when you hired her—"

"Oh, I don't know!" Tetman exclaimed belligerently. "I don't know about that, John. Give her time. We'll see."

By the end of the second week, Rogers was demanding that Kansas go. By the end of the month, the matter had become an issue.

"She goes or I do," said John Rogers. And Tetman, turning red, as he strove to hang on to his dignity, had declared:

"It is not the policy of this firm to throw any employee out on his neck just because of a personal grudge. That applies to everybody, from the janitor up. Miss Smith, so far, has done her work very well, far better than any secretary we've ever had—"

"Oh, if you're thinking of Willy," Rogers snarled.

Tetman turned redder then. Willy Hagen was the last incumbent in the secretaryship.

Willy was Tetman's wife's nephew, and an experience too recent to think about with any equanimity. Tetman fell silent, stopped by Willy.

It was tactless, not to say deliberately unkind of Rogers to mention Willy. Tetman writhed, but he refused to admit his error in hiring Kansas Smith.

The young woman did try to please! Tetman was forced to admit that as he paced the floor. There was something almost pathetic about her struggle against bad spelling and faulty stenography.

Kansas had wonderful business ideals, too. When she spoke of them, as she was quite apt to do if given any encouragement, Tetman felt a glow of enthusiasm. She was a real hundred-percenter, Kansas was.

Zeal. Loyalty. Industry. Those seemed to be the foundation stones of her character. And she lived up to them.

She came to work early and she stayed late, long after all the rest were gone. John Rogers pointed out that she stayed late because she had to correct so much bad spelling, but that was unfair to the girl. Yes, by Heaven it was!

Now that he thought of it, Rogers was unfair and had been unfair to Kansas right from the start. The man seemed to feel Kansas as a personal insult.

He was bitter about her. He was unjust. And Walter D. Tetman had a passion for justice.

But now Tetman was forced to admit that John Rogers was right. Kansas would have to go. He had stood for a lot in his championship of right and justice, but when the girl made a botch out of an important letter like that one to Lippman, why, something must be done.

Rogers came into the office at that moment. He greeted his partner with the barest shadow of a sulky nod, and sat down at his own desk, taking up the day's letters that awaited his signature. Tetman continued to pace the floor, hardening his resolution.

From Rogers's corner came a sniff. Then another, followed by a subdued snort. After that, a long tremulous sigh. Then a groan.

Tetman closed his ears resolutely to these sounds. But he felt the tide of angry red begin to rise over his neck. It engulfed his ears. It spread among his sparse hairs. Rogers groaned aloud again, and Tetman lost step with himself.

This was John Rogers's newest manner of annoying him. Rogers had ceased to complain about Kansas Smith. But every day, reading over the letters the girl prepared for him, he sighed and sniffed and snarled and muttered and groaned aloud, raising his eyes to heaven.

This would end in his ringing for Kansas. When she answered, Rogers would

speak gently to her, in words too low for Tetman's angrily bristling ears. But their tone was sad, sad with the utter weariness of one who waited for death to deliver him.

Making a martyr of himself. Tetman knew! Rogers's damned, sniveling, underhanded and cowardly attack was more than Tetman could bear.

Very well, Tetman decided, the girl had to go. He'd see to it, first thing in the morning. But he'd be blest if he'd give Rogers the satisfaction of knowing that. If only he could find some way, any way, to get rid of that taffy-haired dumb-bell without giving John Rogers the opportunity to say, "I told you so!"

III.

TETMAN scowled across his desk at Willy Hagen, his ex-secretary and his wife's nephew.

Willy was a liability. His appearance meant money—money going out. His entry into the business world had almost immediately preceded his exit. Now Tetman hardly knew what to do with him.

He couldn't kill Willy; he couldn't even throw him out. Mrs. Walter D. Tetman would have resented the act too keenly. Willy was her favorite relative—and she had a great many to choose from.

"Aunt Lolly said maybe you'd help me out again," Willy was saying easily. "It must be great to be the guy who has the dough—"

Tetman, that stern and rugged business man who had been known to grind dollars from his competitors, winced at the mention of "Aunt Lolly." If Aunt Lolly had said he must help out Willy, help him out he must.

As he looked at Willy's well-knit frame, incased in plus-fours and golf socks, in the smartest and newest of sports sweaters; at Willy's round, vacant but handsome face adorned with the smallest and scrubbiest mustache ever seen on man, Walter D. Tetman thought longingly that he would like to help Willy out—out of the office, out of the building, out of his life—a life which held a lovable but determined wife. He sighed.

"Matter, unc?" Willy asked gayly.

"I think I'm breaking, Willy," Tetman answered sadly. "I—think I'm—breaking."

"Say," Willy beamed, "you got something in this office that ought to bring you to life!"

"What do you mean, Willy?" Tetman was fumbling for his check book.

"Look out there," said Willy meaningly.

Tetman glanced moodily through the open door of his office. Then he stiffened.

Kansas Smith was leaning on her typewriter desk. Her round, blue eyes were earnestly fixed on those of Thomas Briggs, who had been bookkeeper for the firm of Tetman & Rogers for fifteen years.

Briggs had been married twenty years, and he had five children. He appeared to have forgotten that. On his rugged, honest face was a look which could only be described as fatuous.

He and Kansas were talking intently, earnestly. In the background hovered the assistant bookkeeper, George Wilton, and, as Tetman gazed, Joey, the best office boy the firm ever had, appeared on the scene with a glass of water, which he placed tenderly on the desk before Kansas Smith.

She did not stop talking. She merely laid a hand confidingly and thankfully on Joey's sleeve. Patted him—actually patted him in office hours!

Tetman could not hear what Kansas was saying. If he had, he would have been thunderstruck.

She was remarking: "I do think, Mr. Briggs, I really do think, that the opportunity will come—to me, to you—and all of us. If we seek, we are bound to find the chance to prove that we are aware of the glorious opportunities in the business world to-day. And when it comes, let us not be afraid to seize it—"

Briggs straightened his shoulders.

"I agree with you there," he said, like one inspired. "Yes, I think you're right."

Kansas Smith blew at her hair and smiled admiringly. Briggs sounded almost like the book she kept in her desk drawer called "How to Succeed in Modern Business."

When Kansas smiled, Willy Hagen turned to his uncle.

"Where did you get that beautiful baby doll?" he asked simply.

Tetman snorted. That beautiful baby doll was disrupting his office. And what he, Tetman, was going to do about it, he didn't know!

"I'll tell you what, unc," urged Willy. "You introduce me to that glorious girl and it'll be forgive and forget between us for the way you chucked me out of here!"

Tetman nearly choked.

"Why, you young—why, you young puppy—why, you—" he began.

Then he stopped short. A Machiavellian idea had come to him. He paused, spellbound at his own genius and audacity. Then he said:

"Why—why, certainly, Willy. Surely you can meet her. She—she is a—a lalapaloosa, isn't she? Oh, Miss Smith. Step in here, please."

Tetman rubbed his long, bony hands together as he went back to his desk. This was his idea of ideas! He was—yes, he *was* a great man.

He would marry Kansas Smith to Willy Hagen.

IV.

KANSAS SMITH had been weeping. Tetman knew it. She came in to take dictation looking extremely young and forlorn. Her big, blue eyes swam with tears. From time to time she sniffed.

Tetman looked away quickly. He didn't know what else to do when a woman wept. He cleared his throat and began dictating letters in a large, firm voice.

"Willis, Bartlett, Kansas City, Dear Sirs: In reply to yours of the fifteenth inst. would say: Our Numbers 40, 41, 42 and 43 will be ready for shipping July twenty-one and—"

It was Willy, of course! He hadn't been around for several days. They must have quarreled. Tetman paled at the thought. That young puppy! Willy had been in the wrong, naturally. A lover's quarrel—

"Mason, Walker Co., you know the address, Miss Smith. Can't deliver goods until a week later than date mentioned in our March listings due to freight tie-up—"

Damn that boy! Of course he would flop on this. The way he did with everything else. Why, hang it, here he had an opportunity to marry a fine, little girl, a pretty girl who would make him go to work and amount to something—make a man out of him instead of a conceited puppy—and here this poor little girl was crying her eyes out over him—and he wasn't fit to tie her shoe—

Tetman saw that he must do something—must fix things some way. What in the world would he do with Kansas Smith if Willy didn't marry her and take her out of the office? If he only knew the right thing to say to her—

"Take 'nother letter. Robert Brown, Salt Lake City, Utah: In reply to yours of recent date we have several excellent numbers in the particular style you have been interested in—what's matter, Miss Smith?"

Down came the cream-colored head on Walter D. Tetman's desk. Kansas Smith sobbed with abandon.

Tetman thought ruefully that one thing she could do thoroughly, and that was weep. Her slim shoulders shook. She wept into a damp little handkerchief. She sniffed distressingly.

"Oo—oo—oo," Kansas moaned. "Oh—Mr. Tetman! Realize office no place—emotion bad taste in business—inefficient—realize men don't like weepy women. I can't help it—I'm so unhappy!"

Tetman was in a quandary. He wanted to pat her tumbled bright hair. As he might have patted a child or a puppy. But he didn't know quite how to go about it.

At last he reached out a hesitating, kindly-intentioned hand and laid it on her shoulder.

"Perhaps—perhaps I can do something?" he said. "Sometimes just a word—tell me, Miss Smith—is it Willy?"

"Willy!" Her bright head came up. She gazed on him from astonished, tear-drenched eyes.

"Yes—h'm—I thought—hasn't been around lately—"

"Why, Mr. Tetman! Did you think I would cry over Willy?"

"Well—young pup—might have hurt your feelings—"

"Oh, no, Mr. Tetman! Willy's out of town. I wouldn't cry over Willy." She leaned closer to him, her face suddenly woeful again.

"It's—it's—oh, Mr. Tetman—it's Mr. Rogers!" Her chin was quivering. Her eyes were filling again.

Tetman spoke hastily.

"Rogers! Listen, if that—if John Rogers has been doing anything to make you cry—"

Tetman saw it all. Rogers had practiced his studied cruelty on this little girl, sniffing, whining, nagging at her about her work. He had deliberately tortured her, tortured her into a breakdown.

In a flash Tetman had a vision of himself avenging Kansas and he felt the joy of battle.

Kansas answered quickly, warmed by the gleam in his eye. "Nothing—he hasn't done a thing! Honest, Mr. Tetman. It's—it's only that—that—I can't please him. I can't. And I do so want to!"

She was crying again, stormily, helplessly. And this time her head was on the shoulder of Walter D. Tetman.

Tetman's hands made several frantic clutches at the air. He could feel his collar getting damp. Anybody might come in!

He put his arms around her; patted her gently and agitatedly.

"There, there," he said soothingly. "There, there, little girl!"

"Oh, Mr. Tetman," sobbed Kansas Smith. "I do pray—I do *so* pray that, some day—my chance—will come to show my loyalty to you—to this firm—"

There was an inarticulate sound. Tetman looked up and stiffened. Kansas Smith turned and gasped.

Mrs. Walter D. Tetman stood in the doorway.

V.

Outside the private office of Tetman & Rogers, Briggs, George Wilton, his assistant and Joey the office boy, gathered in fascinated horror. Kansas Smith was not among them. Like a stricken deer, she had fled between the desks to the washroom, where she had remained.

From the inner office came the sound of voices—Mrs. Tetman's, loud, high and angry; Mr. Tetman's, low and explanatory.

Mrs. Tetman was remonstrating with the head of the firm.

"I tell you I saw you—Walter Tetman, after all these years to think I should see you—actually *see* you with a woman in your arms! Yes, blush—blush for shame!"

"But, my dear, I—"

"You have broken my heart," declared Mrs. Tetman firmly. "Broken it. Oh, Walter—there is nothing left for me, after this, but the divorce court!"

And for the second time that day Walter Tetman saw a woman in tears, and didn't know what to do about it.

"I tell you I wasn't making love to her—for heaven's sake, Lolly! Do you think I am liable to go making a fool out of myself in my own office?"

"You're at the d-d-dangerous age, Walter—"

"Dangerous age, hell! Damn that girl! She's made me more trouble—I try to do her a good turn. I try to marry her to Willy. And she goes and gets me into this!"

"Marry her to Willy!"

There was stark horror in Mrs. Tetman's voice. "Walter—marry her to Willy!"

"Well—why not? Ought to thank his stars he could get a nice girl like that even to look at him! Make a man out of him! Get him to work! Nice young girl—ideal match!"

Mrs. Tetman drew her plump form up to its most imposing five feet, four inches. She glared at the lunatic she had married.

"Walter Tetman, are you—you *are* mad! Do you think I want my nephew—my own brother's boy—married to—to that snip? Do you think I want an—an alliance between the Hagens and the Smiths?"

"Why not? Lots of good Smiths in the world."

"Your blond stenographer is not one of them," said Mrs. Tetman firmly. "If that girl is why Willy has been acting so dreamy lately, you've got to just get rid of her, that's all. And I fail to see how holding her in your arms and kissing her could help Willy to marry her, anyway."

"I wasn't kissing her," said Walter Tetman despairingly. "I tell you, I wasn't kissing her—"

He was interrupted. The door was flung open. John Rogers, his face a mask of fury, stood on the threshold.

"Walt, listen to this, by Christmas!" he said. "Oh, beg pardon, Mrs. Tetman—"

"She was just going," said Tetman hastily. "Weren't you, Lolly? Home at the usual time, dear." His voice cracked in his effort to be casual and sprightly.

"You'll be home *early!*" said Mrs. Tetman as she swept out.

"Listen, Walt," said Rogers, as the door closed behind her. "Listen to this. Bob Douglas is out there and he wants to see you personally. Walt, what the hell possessed you to send him a letter like that?"

"What letter?"

"That form letter—"

"What form letter?"

"Say, listen, do you mean to tell me—wait! He's got the letter with him."

He flung open the door. A small, wiry man, who seemed to have been crouching outside, ready to spring, leaped into the room. He waved a sheet of white paper in his hand.

Between his thin, pale lashes, his faded blue eyes peered angrily at Walter D. Tetman. Tetman started uncertainly forward, then stopped.

"Why—why—how-do, Douglas? What can I do for you?"

"Don't you how-do me, Walter Tetman!" The little man's voice was high and shrill, and vibrated in the close, warm office air. "Don't you how-do me! It's come to a pretty pass when a firm like mine can be insulted with a letter like this! With a damn dunning letter. Don't I pay all my bills quarterly? Haven't I been doing it for twenty years? Haven't you always got your money out of me?"

"Why—why, Douglas, I'm sure there's never been any trouble about—about anything." Tetman took out a large silk handkerchief and mopped his perspiring brow. Would this day never end?

John Rogers stood looking at them both with a puzzled expression on his face. Douglas pounded the paper on the table.

"You act like you don't know what it's all about," he stormed. "All right. All right. I'll leave this here. You read it over and then you think it over. You'll get my personal check in the morning, Tetman. And you'll never get another order out of me."

He was gone, and the partners stooped together over the offending letter.

"Form S.36," murmured Rogers in a tone of horror.

"Form S.36," whispered Tetman, his knees growing weak.

The letter ran:

> "DEAR SIR:
>
> "In view of the fact that you have ignored all attempts to reach an equitable and friendly adjustment of our accounts, we are to-day turning the matter over to our attorneys for legal action—"

"Walt, were you crazy? Bob's been buying from us for ten years—"

"John, as the Lord is my witness, I never sent that letter."

They stared at each other; then their eyes slowly sought the door.

And then, in unison, they said:

"Kansas Smith."

"I had her send out a lot of form letters," Rogers began.

"I guess I'll go home, John," Tetman decided suddenly. "You—you investigate this. I don't feel very good. I—it's been quite a day. It's nearly three—I guess I'll go."

He took his hat off the hook, fitted it neatly over his disordered gray hair.

"It *has* been a day," he murmured.

Kansas came into the office at John Rogers's summons with a do-or-die look in her round blue eyes. She had dried her tears, but her eyelids were pink.

Rogers found himself pitying the poor, valiant little dumb-bell who had managed to make herself so useless to them all.

"Miss Smith," he said almost kindly, "did you send out this letter?"

"Yes, sir."

"But I didn't tell you to send form S.36 to Bob Douglas."

Kansas's cheeks grew pinker. She clasped her hands. Her chubby breast rose and fell in a quick breath.

"I know you didn't—but, oh, Mr. Rogers—I heard you and Mr. Tetman saying you wished to—to heaven you'd get a check out of Mr. Douglas. And I—I felt that the opportunity to show all the initiative of which I feel I am capable had come at last. I—I wanted to surprise you."

"You did," said John Rogers grimly.

Kansas Smith was blushing, a beautiful, rosy wave of color that swept up into her fair hair. Even her pretty ears were red.

"And—and I hoped I'd please—*you*."

"Miss Smith," said Rogers slowly, "where did you get all these ideas about—about initiative and coöperation and all that?"

"From a book," she answered simply. "From a book called 'How to Succeed in Modern Business.' It's a very good book. You ought to read it. Not," she added hastily, "that you need to."

"Miss Smith, that very good book has just cost this firm twenty thousand dollars."

"Why—why, Mr. Rogers?"

"I mean," said John Rogers, "that your initiative has just lost us the best customer we had in the world."

The color died out of Kansas's face. Even her lips were pale, and they quivered as if she had been struck.

"Oh, no," she whispered. "*Oh, no,* Mr. Rogers."

She rose, clinging to the back of her chair to steady herself.

"Oh, I feel so bad," she said childishly. "I—maybe you won't believe me—but I'd rather be *dead* than do anything to hurt you—"

Very little, very forlorn, she began to move slowly toward the door. There she turned.

"I—I suppose—you won't want me—here—any more," she whispered. "I never was much good at offices. I guess—maybe—I'm not very bright. But I thought—the book said if I tried—if I showed initiative and the true spirit of loyalty and cooperation. It said if a girl made her employer's interests dearer to her than anything else. It sounded so convincing, in the book! Good-by, Mr. Rogers—"

The door was closing on her small figure.

"Hey, you!" Rogers shouted suddenly, irascibly. "Come back here!"

VI.

WALTER D. TETMAN hesitated to enter his own office on the morning that followed. He looked pallid and he felt pallid. And what remained to be done was the bitterest of all.

Before his own partner, Walter D. Tetman would have to admit he was wrong. In the presence of John Rogers, he must discharge Kansas Smith.

Mrs. Tetman had been firm and somewhat bitter in her insistence. Tetman, who ordinarily never let Lolly interfere in his business, had given her his promise. And aside from any promise to Lolly, the girl would have to go anyway.

She had upset all the discipline of the office. Briggs wasted half the day hanging about her desk. And George Wilton and Joey!

Well, maybe that wasn't her fault. But things like the Lippman letter and that final insult to Bob Douglas—no, no, no! No business under the sun could stand for things like that and hope to survive.

Tetman was glad to see that Rogers had not yet arrived. Maybe he could get the thing over before the junior partner got there.

He reached for the button that would summon Kansas Smith. His finger hesitated before it dealt this death stab.

The girl was rather pitiful in a way. Young, eager, friendly. Probably depended on this job for a livelihood. She meant so well, too!

Tetman remembered how suddenly she had turned on him yesterday and buried her head on his shoulder. Just as if she knew by instinct that he was really kind and gentle of heart, a man to champion a girl in trouble.

Well—damn! Tetman gritted his teeth and pressed his thumb firmly on the button. Business was business, after all!

It was Briggs who answered, not Kansas Smith. No, said Briggs, Miss Smith hadn't come in yet. Kind of queer, she was always so prompt.

Tetman sighed and instructed the bookkeeper to send her to him when she arrived. He fell to pacing his office, gloomy, lean man with graying hair, burdened with business and a sympathetic imagination.

"I guess—maybe—I am breaking up," he muttered. "I don't seem to have the courage to face the girl. Maybe I'd better retire—let John run things—"

An idea! He could write a letter to Kansas Smith. Tell her firmly, yet kindly. That would be simpler.

Tetman picked out his letters with two fingers in the frequent interims when there was nobody to fill the place Kansas was about to leave vacant. He found letter paper and uncovered a typewriter. And so doing found himself confronting a telegram left prominently in the middle of his desk.

Postponing an unpleasant task, Tetman tore open the envelope. He read once and sat down suddenly.

He read again. His gray eyes dilated and the words blurred and ran together.

"Well," said Walter D. Tetman, feebly. "Well," He could say nothing more adequate.

The telegram said:

HARTFORD.

WALTER D. TETMAN,
Tetman & Rogers, New York:

Have taken on new partner. Your loss, my gain. I mean Kansas Smith. Have loved her madly ever since she came to office. Were married here by special license. Advise you advertise for new secretary at once. Home next week. ROGERS.

"Well," Tetman said more slowly.

When five minutes had gone he began to realize what had happened. A broad grin encircled his lean face, a grin of comprehension and relief.

The old order had changed at last. Walter D. Tetman had hired a secretary, but, for once, John Rogers had fired her. Life looked rosier.

THE END

ʊ ʊ ʊ

THE LOST TRAIL

ONE day out in Death Valley land, my burro, "Jim," an' me,
Got lost out in the burnin' sand, an' knowed not where we be;
Our water, it was plumb give out—the ol' canteen was dry,
An' miles o' desert stretched about, to greet my dreary eye.

The prospects shorely looked some grim, an' hope was ebbin' low,
An' things seemed dark fer me an' Jim—we knew not where to go!
We'd tramped fer miles an' miles on end, o'er rollin' sand, an' flat,
An' found we'd circled in a bend—to where we'd started at!

Against the brazen, blazin' sky, a starvin' buzzard soared,
Awaitin' till ol' Jim an' I were down an' out, an' "floored";
But him an' me jest staggered on, with tongues a-hangin' out,
An', although hope was nearly gone—we *stuck,* an' "went th' route!"

Then Jim came to a sudden stop, an' sort o' hung his head,
An' looked like he was 'bout to "flop," an' roll right over—dead!
But suddenlike his ears went back, an' then he dropped his jaw,
An' down that blazin', lonely track—there boomed a loud "He-haw"

An' then he sudden "came alive," an' headed fer a goal,
An' presently we did arrive—beside a water-hole!
Some law o' Nature worked in Jim, before our course was run,
An' if it hadn't guided him—that buzzard would have won!

James Edward Hungerford.

THE READER'S VIEWPOINT

OUR readers who have been curious as to the identity of the author of "The Seal of Satan" and its successors, must not on any account miss the next number, as in that issue his name will be revealed.

The story referred to by Mr. Dowling in the first letter below was the novelette, "Old Enough to Know Better," by John Wilstach, printed in ARGOSY for May 28. For Mrs. M. K.'s information, "The Way of the Buffalo" was written by Charles Alden Seltzer. C. E. is informed that "The Sign of the Serpent" was by John Goodwin and ran from August 26 to October 7, 1922.

CHRISTIE FILM COMPANY,
Hollywood, Calif.

I got a great kick out of the movie story in the ARGOSY, and really enjoyed it more than any movie story I have read; I think, particularly because it was a new angle and not the kind of guff movie fiction about the innocent young girl who comes to Hollywood. PAT DOWLING,
Publicity and Sales Director.

CLEVELAND, OHIO.

I am glad to see Edgar Rice Burroughs is back with us. "The War Chief" promises to be one of the best he has ever written. I am an enthusiastic reader of the ARGOSY ever since "The Way of the Buffalo" appeared. By the way, who was the author?

I have no brickbats, only bouquets for your magazine. "The World in the Balance," by J. P. Marshall, is great. Scientific stories are O K if not drawn out too long. However, I like everything, including, of course, the Reader's Viewpoint. MRS. M. K.

P. S.—I also liked "An Old Hat," by Robert Beith.

VILLA GROVE, ILL.

I have been a regular reader of ARGOSY for fifteen years, so consider I'm entitled to a word. My first is a knock against Edgar Rice Burroughs. His stories are a total loss to me. I should like to see a story every week from E. K. Means. "Forged Faces" was good. "Down With Women" and "The Freedom of the Shes" were both fine. I like most Westerns, but wouldn't like more than one each week. I like war stories, but don't care much for Edgar Franklin's line. If ARGOSY is as good in the future as in the past, I'll remain a regular reader. J. W.

NEWARK, OHIO.

After looking over the Reader's Viewpoint for this week I thought I would chip in with a little praise. The first story I remember reading was called "The Velvet Claw." I don't know how long ago that was, but I think it has been quite awhile.

My favorite authors are MacIsaac, Footner, Worts, and Franklin. For myself, I don't care much about the Westerns. But I can see no reason why you should change your magazine to suit a few when you can satisfy so many by leaving it as it is. C. R. S.

ACME, WASH.

May I write a few words of praise for the ARGOSY? I can honestly say that I think no magazine comes up to it for such a complete variety of stories, and I enjoy almost every one of them. I am personally acquainted with the father of one of your authors, Jack Bechdolt, and he has often mentioned Jack in his lectures on history. He was a history teacher in one of the Bellingham high schools.

I like Mme. Storey stories about as well as any. Also am fond of those about royalty, for what young girl isn't? Am glad that there aren't so many Western stories printed in your magazine any more. CLARA H. D.

READING, PA.

Have just finished reading Edgar Rice Burroughs's "War Chief," and think it is a very fine story in all but one respect. It didn't end just right. The only remedy that can correct it is a sequel, and I hope Mr. Burroughs will write one in the near future. Ask him if he has put *Tarzan* and *John Carter* on the shelf forever.

Attention, C. T. C., of Brookhaven, Georgia! Western stories are not the bunk, nor are they all alike. If you think "The Range Rider," "Land of the Free," or "Silent Jerry" have anything in common, why, I advise you to go back to Grimms's "Fairy Tales." U. S.

COLUMBUS, OHIO.

I have not been a regular reader of the ARGOSY for very long, but just the same I feel like an "Old-Timer"; I used to be an ARGOSY bug about eight years ago.

I notice some readers like one thing and some another, but lots of them think nothing of what the other fellow likes. Some people condemn Westerns, but as for me there are just enough of them to make a perfect balance. Ditto for mystery stories. A good railroad or sea story would be appreciated, too. Give us more of Charles Francis Coe. "Alkali" was excellent. "The Crucible" was one of the best. John Holden's story, "Fingers Don't Lie," and "The Mark

of the Moccasin," by Kenneth Perkins, were good. George F. Worts writes good stories. I just finished "Down With Women" and "The Freedom of the Shes." Edgar Rice Burroughs's "War Chief" proved a worthy story. Here's to him for another. Max Brand is about due for a new one. Charles Alden Seltzer is worth consideration. C. C. Waddell's story, "Adventure's Price" was worthy of praise by ARGOSY readers. As for cutting out anything or changing the old book in any way, I say, *no*. C. E.

OKEMAH, OKLA.

I have been a constant reader of ARGOSY for almost two years and must say it's the most reading for its price on the market. I have just finished "The Mysterious Stranger," and must say it's great. I also liked "Harlequinade" and "Savage Pete," and all of Mme. Storey's yarns. I like all of G. F. Worts's stories, Joseph Ivers Lawrence, Fred MacIsaac, Garret Smith, and Richard F. Merrifield. My husband likes Eric Howard and John H. Thompson. I thought Charles Francis Coe's "Master Pupil" was fine.

As long as ARGOSY is like it is I shall treat myself to the biggest dime's worth of reading on sale every week. MRS. R. A. S.

P. S.—"Alkali" was fine and so was "Land of the Free."

HANNIBAL, MO.

I have been reading ARGOSY since 1922 and can honestly say there is no better on the news-stands. To show how much I like it, I missed part of my dinner in order to get it one time.

I am going to tell who wrote "The Seal of Satan" and "The Mysterious Stranger." None other than Fred MacIsaac! How any one could read his "West of Broadway" or his series of *Faker Brown*, his discourses on characters' mental and moral actions and not recognize the resemblance is beyond me. Yours first and last for ARGOSY. R. K. F.

NEW YORK, N. Y.

Among the many interesting and provocative letters that have recently appeared in the Reader's Viewpoint, there have been quite a few which assert that the editor can do no wrong, and that it is presumptuous in the extreme for a mere reader to voice an unfavorable criticism of any particular story. For instance, in the issue of July 2, W. D. W., of Los Angeles, who sounds like *Long John Silver* on a rampage, says: "Let the editors run the ship. Our duty is to read it and like it." (Meaning, I presume, the magazine and not the vessel.) Of course, our seafaring friend is "all wet," and the editor himself would be the first to admit it. No magazine can exist unless it meets with the approval of its readers, and, except for the rise or fall of circulation the editor's sole means of gauging the public's reaction to his stories are the letters of praise or censure which he receives.

In the case of the ARGOSY, we have a magazine that has rested on a firm foundation for so long, and is so obviously popular, that a department such as the Reader's Viewpoint is really unnecessary, except for the diversion of its followers. Nevertheless, even a successful magazine like the ARGOSY should, and no doubt does, endeavor to please as many of its readers as possible, and constructive criticism should be as welcome as the most effusive praise.

Of course, it would be difficult, if not impossible, to satisfy every wish expressed by correspondents. For instance, my own favorite type of fiction is the fantastic, and I would be quite content if the ARGOSY would double or even triple its quota of unusual stories. Such tales are welcome at all times and, I believe, to most readers. Those of us who have read and enjoyed the utterly "different" stories of Ray Cummings, A. Merritt, and Edgar Rice Burroughs find it hard to become enthusiastic over an ordinary Western; and when the latter kind of fiction is loaded upon us at the rate of one every other week, we are about ready to throw in the sponge. But apparently the sagacious editor is cognizant of this sad state of affairs, for just when the serials are beginning to bore us by their vapidity along comes a treat in the form of A. Merritt's "Seven Footprints to Satan," followed by Will McMorrow's novelette, "Venus or Earth?" and, considerably refreshed, we are prepared to withstand another long siege of inane tales of the great open spaces.

By the way, I see that some of your readers are still trying to guess who wrote "The Seal of Satan." My own idea is that the anonymous author is none other than the versatile and inimitable Fred MacIsaac. Am I right?

And now, if you'll allow me just a few more words, I'd like to say that I heartily agree with Mr. Charles Hooper, of Cœur d'Alene, Idaho. He's got the right idea about woman's place in the cosmos. No, I'm not married either.

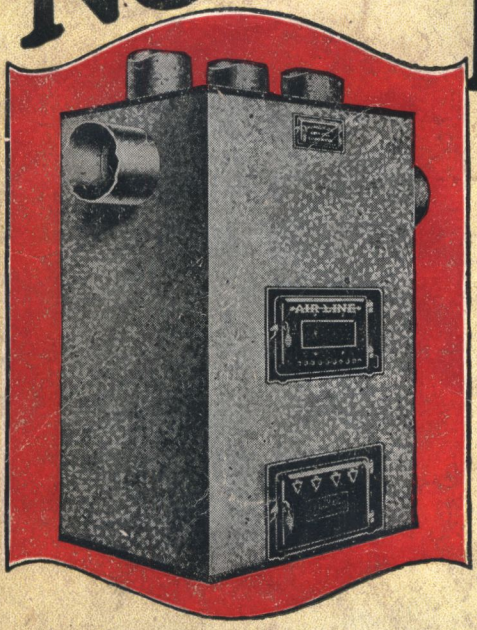
A. L. G.

DAGMAR, MONT.

Having been a reader of the ARGOSY ever since twelve years of age, I have decided to let other readers know what I think of it as a magazine. My opinion is that all the stories are very good, especially the Western stories. "The War Chief" was a good story, although I wish a sequel would be published. "Far Gold" was a very excellent sea and treasure story. Stories like "The Sun Makers" do not appeal to me, as the imagination in them is beyond all possibility. I have read "The Freedom of the Shes," and will hereby say that I am strongly against the women having equal or more rights than their lords and masters, men. Please publish E. K. Means's stories at least once every two weeks. I have discovered that they have immense interest and enjoyment to both old and young.

My guess as to who wrote "The Seal of Satan" is Fred MacIsaac. H. C.

New and Better Furnace!



HERE is the latest and greatest advance in heating. It circulates fresh, warm air through your home, just as hot water is circulated through a radiator. There is an individual air supply for each principal room, so that no room is either over or under heated. The circulating grills are so located that there are no disagreeable drafts along the floor. No other heating method affords such economy, comfort and safety as does the Air-Line.

4 Tons Heats 8 Rooms!

"The Air-Line is the best heating system there is! It heats my 8-room house perfectly and saves fuel, too, as I burned only 4 tons of coal."—Frank Faber, 37 Center St., Little Ferry, N. J.

AIR-LINE Heating System

Not a Pipeless

The Air-Line firepot burns ANY fuel and LESS of it; because it is lined with Power Plant Fire Brick and has Oxidizers that get the entire heat value out of any fuel. Keeps even a wood fire over night! The Air-Line is absolutely dust proof and gas tight and its copper-steel Fire-Ray Radiator receives all the direct rays of the fire. No dark sooty flues to waste the heat.

Comes Completely Assembled— You Install It Yourself

Yes, in a few hours! Send us no plans! If your house is from 4 to 8 rooms, just write us and we will send you the Air-Line for FREE INSPECTION. You will receive the heater, welded together and cased at the factory with all collars cut in, ready to receive the piping, in one substantial crate. Just place the heater in position, and knock off the crate. In another crate is all the necessary piping for the average house, so standardized that you can put it together **more** easily than you can put a smoke pipe on your kitchen range. In a few hours after receiving the Air-Line you can have a fire going and a thoroughly warm house.

No Money Down

Then Small Monthly Payments

Air-Line Furnace Co. Dept. 20-C
2845 West 19th Street, Chicago, Illinois

Without obligating me in any way, please send me your free catalog and special offer on the Air-Line Furnace.

Have you a basement? Yes ☐ No ☐

*Name*_____

*Address*_____

.....

Send for Free Book! Mail the coupon for our free book and special offer. **Do it NOW!—while this great offer lasts!** You do not pay us one cent until after you have received the heater and are absolutely satisfied that you want it. Then you make only small monthly payments at our low price. **And the Air-Line soon pays for itself in fuel saved!**

To find out ALL about this marvelous heating system, just SEND US THE COUPON BY RETURN MAIL!

Air-Line Furnace Co.
2845 West 19th St., Dept. 20-C Chicago, Ill.

THE MUNSEY PRESS, NEW YORK.