ARGOSY

ALL-STORY WEEKLY

AUGUST 4

PRICE 10¢ IN CANADA 15c

Adventure and Romance in Tropical Seas!

Hawaiian Heels

A New Novel

by

Richard Barry

Feature Stories by

Lt. John Hopper
George C. Jenks
Fred MacIsaac
and others

DON'T FOOL YOURSELF

Since halitosis never announces itself to the victim, you simply cannot know when you have it.

They talk about you *behind your back*

And rightly so—halitosis is inexcusable

HALITOSIS (unpleasant breath) is the one unforgivable thing—because it is *inexcusable.*

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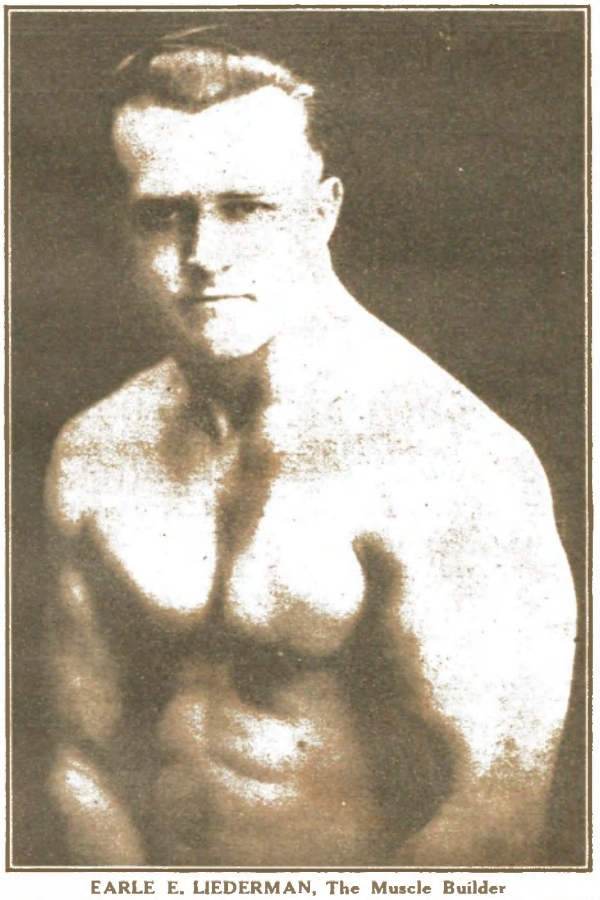
You'll stretch out your big brawny arms and crave for a chance to crush everything before you. You'll just bubble over with vim and animation.



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Author of "Muscle Building," "Science of Wrestling and Jiu Jitsu," "Secrets of Strength," "Here's Health," "Endurance," Etc.

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ARGOSY
ALL-STORY WEEKLY

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ARGOSY
ALL-STORY WEEKLY

VOLUME 196 SATURDAY, AUGUT 4, 1928 NUMBER 6

Ted had just muttered, "I'll divorce you"

Hawaiian Heels

Chance took a hand that night in a Hollywood cabaret—and Lance Houston, movie star, found himself pitched into a real life tragedy

By RICHARD BARRY

Author of "The Long Arm of the Big Gun," "Worth Millions," etc.

CHAPTER I.

A REAL KILLING.

JUST off Cahuenga Boulevard, in the cinema city, is a blind pig. They call it the Cross-Eyed Duck. A false front of mission architecture hides it from the casual passer-by. You go under a bougainvillea bower to a side porch, and then through a decayed living room, to reach it. Beyond the redwood portal there is an old-fashioned bar, with two pyramids of glasses, and a dozen little tables on a sawdust floor.

The Cross-Eyed Duck looks like a set for a movie. In fact, it was built there in imitation of the real thing and

to delude customers into believing it a genuine old-timer.

Everything about it is imitation—the set, the people, the life. The mahogany on the bar is veneered cypress, the bartenders are extras out of work, the froth on the beer is caused by an unwholesome mixture of silicate with badly fermented hops, and the whisky is as denatured as any.

However, they had just as good a murder in the Cross-Eyed Duck as if the sawdust had come from wood instead of from pulverized limestone. It was a real killing.

At the Cross-Eyed Duck the tide usually goes over the crest before four. Actors have found that by leaving not later than four o'clock they have time to ride home, get a cold shower, change their clothes, drink a pot of coffee, eat a bite of breakfast, if there is any appetite left after drinking all night, and be on the job in the studio by eight.

So, at three o'clock on this morning, all the tables at the Cross-Eyed Duck were filled, except one, and this the most prominent, right in front of the bar and adjoining the cleared space, about ten feet square, where the hula dancer was due for her third show at three thirty.

At the next table was Ted John, the camera man, the one who had just finished grinding for the De Mauve superspectacle, "The Knight Nobody Knows," his wife Mabel, and their party of four—the well-known dentist, Dr. H. S. Tweedie, and his wife Clarabelle, and the proprietor of the big Used Car Exchange on Hollywood Boulevard, "Doc" Singletry, and his friend, Una Humbin, the prominent scenarist and secretary.

The Ted John party had just come down from the hill above Franklin, where they had been having a party celebrating the completion of "The Knight Nobody Knows." Ted had used his new telephotic lens, his own invention, in shooting the long scenes on this production, and only that day the first projection room tests had shown these to be highly successful.

The Master Artists had offered him a contract to take him away from De Mauve, and he had announced he would sign with them in the morning. The new salary would put him almost in the class of a director.

Ted had spent a hundred dollars with a bootlegger for some stuff that was said to have come through Smugglers' Cove on Santa Cruz Island, straight from Lower California. Good stuff, it was, all right, for the party had already consumed eight bottles, and none of them were so drunk that they could not navigate. Only half an hour before they had all walked into the Cross-Eyed Duck under their own steam, wabbling a trifle, but all sails up.

Doc Singletry noticed the vacant table, and asked the waiter about it. The information he got caused him to lean over excitedly and whisper to Ted John. Mabel John saw the whispered confidence and alertly interfered.

"Out with it, Doc," she called. "No dirty ones alone after 3 A.M."

"Aw, lay off, Mabel," Ted sullenly retorted. "You're looking for trouble. Doc's only tellin' me that the table next to us is reserved for Lance Houston."

This did not satisfy Mabel.

"Huh," she sneered, "Lance Houston never came to a blind pig in his life; too much sense."

Ted yawned. "Can't prove it by me."

Miss Humbin pricked up her ears.

"What's that," she warbled, "about Lance Houston?"

Doc Singletry called across the table to her: "That table next is his. Waiter just told me so. He's due."

The eyes of Miss Humbin glowed with a luster added to that caused by the gin. She leaned over affectionately and placed her hand across that of the camera man.

"Oh, Ted," she exclaimed, "you know Lance Houston."

"Sure I know him, cutie." He reached across the table and took her chin in his hand and smiled fatuously on her. "Didn't I shoot 'The Purple Twilight' for him? A regular guy, and don't tell me you want to meet him. He's a Santa Ana for vamps; blisters them with disdain. Not a chance for you, Una."

Miss Humbin took down Ted's hand and held it in both of hers, while she languorously replied, looking simperingly into his eyes with an actresslike affectation:

"How could any man interest me when you are along, Ted—as a man? I only want to meet Lance Houston so as to get a chance at the treatment for his next scenario. Purely business, baby boy; so don't be jealous."

Mabel John sat next to Miss Humbin while this was going on. Between her and her husband was Doc Singletry. The party had been laughing and joking and carrying on for hours. Several times during the evening Mrs. John had flared out in explosive protests against her husband's care-free manner with other women.

At one time he had embraced Mrs. Tweedie. That was up at the house before they came down to the Cross-Eyed Duck. Mabel had struck his arms down from the other woman's waist, and there had been a little struggle among the three of them; but no one had considered that it meant anything.

Now, however, Mabel looked at Ted with sinister intensity. Her lips went shut tight. They were drawn in a thin slit.

"You lay off of that stuff out here, you," she shrilled. "It's bad enough in my own home to have you show my friends how little you care for me, but you're not coming into a public place and advertise what you think of me, and get away with it. You start anything here and I'll get you, and get you good."

Singletry and the dentist laughed uproariously at this and applauded.

"That's right, Mabel," Doc shouted. "Keep your husband straight, if you have to lay him out stiff to do it."

"He'll be a stiff if he monkeys any more with me," Mabel responded with ladylike elegance characteristic of their surroundings.

This apparently trifling tiff seemed of no moment to any one in the room, and least of all in the party among whom it occurred. Their hilarity came to a lull at that moment when the outer door of the Cross-Eyed Duck opened and across the dusty floor, threading his way among the tables, came an erect and stalwart figure whose presence instantly quieted the noisy room.

"Houston!" "Lance Houston!" spread in whispers. If a director had trained all present as extras to build up the entrance of the star, the scene would have been no better handled.

Houston walked to the table which had been reserved for him, where a waiter stood pulling out the chairs.

Following him with a rather mincing step, looking somewhat disdainfully on the crowded scene, where most of the people were palpably under the effects of liquor, walked that exquisite little strawberry blonde, Lorraine Call, who had played opposite Lance Houston in "The Purple Twilight." She drew her ermine coat fastidiously up out of the limestone dust and elevated her sandaled high-heeled feet cautiously over the creaking boards of the Cross-Eyed Duck.

Lance Houston took the chair from the hands of Slum Ritey, the waiter, and winked at him broadly. Three and a half years before they had come together from the Lazy Y ranch in Wyoming, where they had both been cowboys, to Hollywood.

Now Slum was getting seven fifty a day as an extra, when he could find a job, which was not often, and his former buddy had just signed a contract with the Noted Stars which would net him, for three years, thirty-five hundred dollars a week.

"I made 'er, Slum," Lance whispered to the waiter. "How's my style?"

"Slicker'n bear fat on a juvenile's eyebrows."

"How's the entrance?"

"Right up to snuff. Good as Lance Houston himself. They's none better."

This muttered conversation went on between the movie star and the extra waiter while Miss Call was being seated. As Slum stood respectfully waiting for the order he whispered: "Thanks a lot, Lance, for doin' as I ast."

The only response from the amiable center of attention was a beneficent grin.

As a matter of fact, it was the first appearance of Lance Houston in the night life of Hollywood. He had been persuaded to it by the importunity of his former buddy, who had refused his repeatedly proffered loans, and who had declared that the only thing Lance would do to help him was to patronize his table at the Cross-Eyed Duck.

As Houston seated himself in the chair which Slum pulled out for him, his coat tails parted and revealed in his hip pocket the butt of a gun. It was clearly visible to the members of the John party who sat at the next table. Carrying his gun in his hip pocket was the only concession Lance had made to the formality of evening clothes.

It was an unhandy place to carry a gun, he had always asserted, but it helped to dress him to stick it there out of the way. In his smartly tailored, form fitting clothes it could never have been concealed anywhere around his waist or upper body.

It was legal for him to carry the gun, because he had been sworn in as a deputy sheriff of Los Angeles County. As a matter of fact, he had not pulled a trigger, except under the guidance of a director, in the three and one-half years since he had been in Hollywood.

A close student of physiognomy might have seen in the countenance of pretty little Lorraine Call a mixture of scorn and patronage as she regarded her escort. She had accepted Lance's invitation to accompany him to the Cross-Eyed Duck solely for professional reasons, for her position as an unattached leading lady without contract was not any too assured.

She had not worked since "The Purple Twilight," for it was the policy of Lance's directors to get him a new leading lady for each picture, and it was Lance's policy to have no social relations with his current leading lady.

The scorn of Lorraine was bred of what she considered Lance's gaucherie in dress. He was wearing a cream-colored frock coat, a modification of the style once known as Prince Albert, with long, cream-colored corduroy pants tucked into fawnskin boots that came up halfway between the ankles and the knees, a flowing black tie, and a high-peaked sombrero.

It was the sort of outfit that could be conceived by no one on earth except a movie actor or the outfitters who serve them. It was Lance's idea of elegance and formality, and he had paid the tailor who produced it two hundred and seventy-five dollars.

To Lorraine Call, who had graduated from the high school at Brentwood, Missouri, the very year that Lance Houston was breaking yearlings on the Lazy Y, and whose social standards were correspondingly elevated, this sartorial crime was unpardonable unless it might be instrumental in getting her another contract.

She was not herself conscious of any inappropriateness in dragging an ermine coat into the Cross-Eyed Duck. Even her scorn of Lance's cream-colored outfit was considerably tempered as she realized that the habitués of the blind pig were almost entirely professionals, and that her presence there with him could not fail to enhance her prestige.

"What 'll you have, Lorraine?" Houston asked.

"Ginger ale."

"Make it two, Slum," said Houston.

The waiter elevated his eyebrows. "With a stick in it?"

"How about that, Lorraine? Want to try this here gin?"

Miss Call shook her chemical curls decisively.

"How about you, Lance?" Slum continued. "Stick for you?"

Houston smiled up at his old buddy with that boyish grin which has endeared him to so many millions. "You know me, old-timer. No hard stuff."

Slum disappeared behind the bar.

While this was going on, every move, inflection, and word from Houston and his companion was being hungrily absorbed by fifty pairs of eyes in the Cross-Eyed Duck. None were more avid than the members of the John party. Even as Houston was crossing the room from the door, Miss Humbin had whispered to Doc Singletry. Obediently he had risen and changed places with her. This placed her next to Ted John.

In all the room only one person seemed to have no interest in the cowboy hero who was the epitome of all that was splendid, dazzling, and dramatic in the cardboard existence of Hollywood. This person was Mabel John.

While the others were fascinated by the movements of Houston, fluttering about him with their attention, like moths about a flame, she ignored him entirely and concentrated her whole attention on Una Humbin.

If the same physiognomist who had carefully observed the face of Lorraine Call had devoted a similar study to that of Mabel John, he would have said that the wife of the camera man was the victim of a fixed idea superinduced by the effects of alcohol.

The whites of her eyes were shown too wide around the iris. The natural color had receded from her face, leaving the rouge showing like paint spots on white calico. She was breathing intensely, and her hands were clenching and unclenching spasmodically. Of this condition in Mrs. John all seemed oblivious.

As Houston sat down, he was back to back with Ted John, and separated by only a step. Una Humbin, slipping into the seat of Doc Singletry, placed her arm up over the camera man's shoulder and whispered:

"Take me over and introduce me to Lance Houston. There's two extra seats at his table. We can stick round with him for a couple of minutes. I'd sure like to know that war baby. He's got the combination to the safe, all right."

While John hesitated—for he felt his own rising importance in the film world, in which fifteen years of technical dexterity was at last about to receive its reward, and he nurtured a subtle, unnamed resentment against the quicker and more dazzling rise of the cowboy—Una pressed her advantage by pinching his ear caressingly, insisting in a little louder tone, "Come along, darling; do it now," and started to rise.

The word "darling" was evidently all that Mrs. John heard distinctly. She saw the half embrace, the partial caress. Something inside her brain snapped. As the Moros would say, if she had been eating betel nut in the hot sun, "she went horromontado." She slipped around Doc Singletry like an eel round a rock.

In a second she had Una Humbin by the hair with one hand and was tearing off her waist with the other, while she screamed in shrill anger. The attack was a complete surprise to Una, but she naturally defended herself, and in doing so tried to seize Mrs. John by the wrists. She lost her balance and slipped from her seat to the floor and on top of her fell the hysterical gin-maddened wife.

Doc Singletry, who was facing the two, tried to detain Mabel John, even

after she sprang, but she was too quick for him. Ted, in front, turned around too late to prevent the two women from falling to the floor.

Then he reached down and took his wife by the shoulders and attempted to pry her loose. She yelled up into his face, calling him contemptible names, while he tried to soothe her, although he made the fatal error of indignantly denying any improper interest in Una Humbin. This had the effect of making Mabel John even wilder.

Lorraine Call was facing this primitive triangle. She lifted up her dainty skirts and pushed her chair back a little as though she would remove herself discreetly from such contamination.

Lance Houston, accustomed to the clatter of the studios, thought that perhaps it was something being staged by a director, and looked about nonchalantly for the Kleig lights even before he glanced back to see what it was all about.

When he did look over his shoulder, there were the two women screaming and struggling almost under his chair, with Ted John stooping over them, trying to pry them apart, with Doc Singletry and Dr. Tweedie standing offside looking for a way to break in and help separate the combatants.

Lance was a drawling, slow-moving, easy-going fellow. Chewing gum was the extent of his dissipation. His idea of excitement was to swing himself under the belly of a running horse and wave his sombrero at the crowds in the rodeo stand.

The fighting of women was to him something peculiarly remote and unbelievable; so he looked down on this scene with the bland curiosity of a boy at a circus.

He did not rise, for fear that he might in some way be implicated in it, but he did twist about considerably, and in doing so the butt of his gun, protruding from his hip pocket, caught in the rungs of the chair back. The gun pulled out and clattered to the floor. Its cold metal touched the hot hand of Mabel John.

Mabel seized the gun as a gift from on high. Ted had just muttered in her ear a husbandly admonition: "You blooming idiot, get hold of yourself, or I'll divorce you and kick you out."

This was the final straw. Mabel placed the muzzle of the gun almost into his chest and pulled the trigger. As Ted's body settled back, Una, underneath, horrified and in desperate fear, struggled up.

Her waist was hanging in shreds, her hair was down, and the blood was streaming from scratches Mabel had made in her cheeks. She got partly to her feet, but Mabel turned the gun on her and pulled the trigger. The shot caught Una in the back and went through her heart from the rear.

CHAPTER II.

COUNTING THE CONSEQUENCES.

SUCH were the basic facts of the Mabel John double murder as were later fairly well established in court by the testimony of a dozen witnesses. It was one of those things that occur occasionally in Hollywood. A European dramatist would have abandoned it as material for study, because nothing in it was properly motivated.

There was no sound reason for the happening. There was nothing illicit between Ted John and Una Humbin. Nothing had happened sufficient to arouse the murderous ire of even an unusually jealous woman, for the conversation between them, and the personal familiarity, was typical of the atmosphere in which they lived and of the society of which they were a part.

Naturally there was a buzz of talk about it for a week or so until its memory was absorbed in a later murder involving people of more celebrity, and with details more obscure and risqué,

The phase of the John murder which makes it worthy of our study was its effect upon the fortunes of Lance Houston, who until that occurred, had done nothing of any particular moment beyond bearing away one of the lucky prizes in the great cinema lottery.

But with those shots of his pistol fired by Mabel John, Lance Houston was suddenly compelled to find himself. They started him on a long trail and a curious one.

Lance was inexperienced in the consequences of murders. He knew next to nothing of the law, although he had hired a fashionable attorney to supervise his seventeen-page contract with the Noted Stars. In his heart he stood a great deal in awe of the complexities of life in the city of Los Angeles, just beyond his horizon and which he entered rarely and with some trepidation.

He was a fearless centaur on the lot, and a wild buckaroo in the presence of the camera man, but when he faced realities other than those he was as shy as a rabbit. Like a rabbit, he could have been easily lured by the glare of a motor lamp to his own destruction under oncoming wheels of whose power he was ignorant.

His essential fearlessness and physical quickness were shown at once, however. It was Lance who seized Mrs. John and disarmed her. Then, of course, the amateur murderess fainted in his arms and lay there like a sack of meal, while Slum and another waiter pulled two tables together and formed a place on which to lay her. A bystander picked up the gun and turned it over to the police.

Lorraine Call had disappeared. She testified at the inquest later that she had gone out before it happened. She knew nothing about it. She had not been there. She was too much of a lady to participate in barroom brawls.

In the uproar some were calling for a doctor, others were calling for the police, and most of the habitués oozed away like rain water out of a leaky can.

Lance stood looking at the still, white face of Mabel John where he had laid her on the table. He thought she was dead. He had never seen a dead woman before. He had seen men, snakes, horses, and cattle die, but not women, and he was curious.

A doctor came up, and, after placing an ear to Mabel's chest, looked up reassuringly and said she was alive. Lance lost interest then and turned to look at the two bodies on the floor behind.

Some one was drawing a tablecloth over the limp form of Una Humbin. Lance stared into her open eyes and lax mouth just as they were covered. He gasped, felt a trifle sick, and looked about for a way to the open air.

At that moment a man seized him roughly by the arm and gruffly muttered:

"You big Wampas, get out of here!"

He turned to confront Joe Bloom, his production manager. Lance followed Bloom, a man half his size, with a nervous, wrinkled face, and dressed in nondescript dark clothes, into a room behind the bar.

The furtive little man led the gawky cowboy in his cream-colored elegance as a mahout would lead an elephant, prodding an iron prong from time to time into a massive trunk. Bloom picked a quick passage through the easy-going room and hustled his charge along a dark passageway, up a creaking stair. They were piloted by Slum, who had been hovering about to offer his services to the resourceful manager.

The three reached a tiny bedroom under the roof. It contained a couch, chair, and a dresser. Slum closed the door and bolted it. Joe Bloom took off his hat and mopped his brow, where the sweat was standing out. His thoughts were racing days and months ahead of the event.

The waiter looked expectantly and vacuously from his old buddy, the present idol of the unseen fans, to the

domineering, aggressive little manager who seemed consumed with a nervous hatred of his ungainly charge.

After a moment of silence Bloom broke forth explosively.

"You moon-faced calf," he exclaimed, "you certainly have cooked up a sweet mess, haven't you?"

Lance opened his mouth as if he would protest, but he lacked the words to express himself. He looked slowly about him in mute appeal to Slum.

"Why—why—I—I—" he stammered, and then stopped, almost guiltily.

He had a foreboding of the thought that lay behind the shrewd eyes of Joe Bloom, but this was the first moment that it had come to him.

"You double-decked, cream-colored idiot, who let you out?" roared Bloom. "Haven't I told you to stay under cover after nightfall, to stick to your hutch like a rabbit and not show yourself after the sun was down?

"What are you doing with that eighteen-room palace in Beverly Hills, and the two butlers, and the staff of servants I dug up for you only three months ago?

"What kind of a low-slung toad are you to come down here like a bum and get mixed up in a Hell's Kitchen like this? What are you trying to do—blow the whole works?"

Still Lance could find no words to defend himself. He sank limply down on the cot and glanced from the waiter to the manager without affront and without reproof, with the bland eyes of a curious boy, wondering, puzzled, but with that dim sense of foreboding growing ever stronger within him.

Slum spoke for him. This seemed like an unforgivable insult to his hero. He wondered why Lance did not smash this audacious cockroach who was climbing over him.

"It's my fault, Mr. Bloom," he said.

The manager whirled on the waiter. "Your fault! How do you get in it, and who the hell are you?"

Lance ran his hand through his wavy hair, the hair which curled naturally so gracefully over his temples, and which took perfectly before the camera.

"Slum, here," he explained, "was my old buddy up on the Lazy Y," he said. "He's afflicted with an ingrowing conscience, or somethin'. I don't know what. He's a dawg-gone good cattle rustler. He can throw a steer next to the best one.

"We could have used him in any one of our last three pictures, and I wanted him to come down and see you and get a job; but he got his back up, and wouldn't come, would rather sling beer here in the Cross-Eyed Duck; false pride, I guess."

"I've got to succeed in pictures on my own talent, Mr. Bloom," Slum spoke up manfully. "I'm not going to let Lance, here, who's all wool and a yard wide, ring me in on any deal of his, just because we happened to bunk together back there in Wyoming."

"What's that got to do with it?" Bloom demanded, still not comprehending.

"I'll tell you, Joe," said Lance. "It was this way. I knew Slum was working here, and I tried several times to get him to come down to the lot and go to work like a he-man. To-day I telephoned him again that we was goin' to work next week on another one, and said as how he had better come down, that he was needed.

"Still he hung off, and I insisted it wan't fair not to let me do somethin' for him, I was sittin' so pretty myself; so he ups and says through the buzzer: 'I can't let you get me any job, Lance, but if you'll come down to the Cross-Eyed Duck about three o'clock some morning and have a drink at my table, it will sure make me solid in this job I'm in now.'"

Lance looked toward Slum appealingly for corroboration.

The waiter spoke up heatedly:

"That's the whole truth, so help me

God, Mr. Bloom. I told you I was to blame."

The sentimentality and trivialness of these cowboy motives afflicted the materialistic mind of Joe Bloom with a new spasm of indignation. "Huh," he exclaimed. "Well, I guess that's enough to put a crimp in the career of Lance Houston that will drag him right down out of the starry heavens. This time next year he'll be slinging beer just like you."

Slum gasped in pain at this assertion.

"Why, Mr. Bloom, what do you mean?" he queried in fear and consternation.

"You don't think I—" Houston started forward.

"No, I don't think you did it, if that's what you mean," Bloom answered coldly. "Maybe nobody else will, though you never can tell. But it was your gun that bumped off a couple of people; no doubt about that. The coroner's jury will get that straight to-morrow.

"There may be enough witnesses to prove that you had no hand in it. That is not what's worrying me. But if you are such a dumb-bell that you don't see what you've done for yourself, I guess it's about time for Joe Bloom to walk out on you; and if I walk out on you, where'll you be? Didn't I pick you up as a stunt man, getting fifty dollars for turning a riding trick, and make you into a star in less than two years?"

Lance Houston nodded gravely.

"Did I hold you up when I had the chance and take half your dough away from you, as I was entitled to, and as any other manager in the business would have done? No, I let you keep sixty per cent of all you make. You get the big half, and my brains are doing nine-tenths of it; and here, in one slip, one fool night party, you queer the whole game. What you've done to-night is to rob me of fourteen hundred dollars a week."

Lance placed a long, lean, brown hand over his mouth and looked studiously at his manager.

"How do you figure that, Joe?" he asked.

"That's my share of what we're both going to lose."

"Lose! Why, you said yourself that there's no chance of my being mixed up in this murder. Not only I had nothin' to do with it, but everybody down there knows I had nothin' to do with it."

"Quit bein' a dumb-bell. Six or seven years ago you might have pulled this off and got away with it. Even three years ago you might have got away with it, but since this super-director guy has come round here, workin' out of a Sunday school, he's got the offices all tied up with a lot of bunk about the mortality of the picture stars.

"Why, five years ago you could have shot up all Laurel Cañon, and the publicity would have boosted your salary. It was good dope then, but it's poison now.

"This reform wave has sure put high life on the bum. You can't get drunk; you can't get divorced; you can't shoot up a girl; you've got to stay out of jail. Nothin' goes, not even a sheriff's sale for your outraged creditors; and as for being held as a material witness in a double murder—why, that's just curtains, that's all. It's the end of the career of Lance Houston."

"Can't you hush it up?" Slum implored.

"Not when the cops down there have Lance's gun; and before daybreak they'll be looking for you, Lance. It's too late to make the morning papers, but every afternoon paper in the United States will have a headline saying that Lance Houston is mixed up in a Hollywood murder.

"It don't make any difference how, or where, or why. Lance Houston is mixed up, that's all. His gun did the

dirty work. Can't get away from it. If he's tried and acquitted, he's ruined. If he's only held as a material witness, he's ruined. If he isn't held at all, but it's only mentioned in the papers that his gun did the shooting, that he was present in a disreputable gin mill at three o'clock in the morning, he's ruined.

"The pictures are ninety-nine and four-tenths per cent advertising. Yesterday Lance Houston was worth ten thousand dollars a week in the box office—one-third for himself, forty per cent of his third for his manager. Tomorrow he isn't worth a dime for anybody. That's what preachers and reform have done to the movies; and that is what you, you poor simp, have done to me."

Houston crossed one cream-colored knee over the other and folded his hands quietly about it, and looked at his manager.

"Aren't you just a leetle bit excited, Joe?" he asked.

"Excited!" cried Bloom, as he pulled out of his pocket a lengthy document, dog-eared with wear, evidently his most prized possession. It was the first carbon copy of the contract between one Lance Houston, actor, and the Noted Stars, a corporation. Quickly and nervously the manager thumbed over the pages one after another. On the seventh page he ran a lean forefinger down the paragraphs until he came to one he was looking for.

"You think I'm talking through my hat, do you? Listen to this." He read from the document:

"'It is further agreed herewith, that if the party of the first part'—that is you, Lance—'at any time during the life of this contract shall become involved in any scandalous notoriety which shall reflect upon his good name as a respectable citizen of clean personal habits and high moral character, that thereupon and forthwith the party of the second part'—that's the Noted Stars—'shall have the right, without recourse, to seize and retain, as liquidated damages, all moneys at that time due the said party of the first part, and, in addition, all the terms of this contract shall become immediately null and void.'"

Joe Bloom refolded the contract wearily and replaced it in his pocket as if it were a thing of no value, and spat upon the floor.

For the moment he had nothing more to say.

Slum looked at Lance in agony. The beads of perspiration were standing out on his forehead. He was enduring the worst moment of his life. Lance studied the floor for a moment, and then he looked up and saw the anguished features of his old buddy.

A slow, broad smile suffused his countenance.

"Can you beat that, Slum?" he commented with a slow drawl. "It's kinda like a faro layout down in Laramie. One night you're ridin' high, the next you're cleaned out. Now, I don't want you to take this to heart, old-timer.

"I come here of my own free will, and I'm right glad I come too. I never saw a gal croak before. I never want to see another one, but still it kinda give me somethin' to think about to see that one, and if the star business is out, as Joe here says—why, then, she is out."

He rose gracefully and stretched his lanky form and heaved a sigh, which seemed one of relief. He walked over to the door, where Slum had subsided pallidly, and thumped his buddy good-naturedly in the ribs.

"Forget it," he said. "It's all in a lifetime. Besides, that English butler was gettin' on my nerves, and that valet Joe picked for me is a pesky nuisance. I tried to make the grade, and done my best, but it sure has gone pretty far for a he-man to have a soft-voiced galoot tellin' him what to wear five times a day."

He turned to Bloom. "Do you reck-

on they'll hold out this week's pay on us, Joe? I'd sure like to salvage enough car fare to get back to the Lazy Y."

CHAPTER III.

THE BIG IDEA.

DOWN in the front room of the Cross-Eyed Duck, Detective Sergeant Dolan was rounding up the witnesses. He had all the surviving members of the Ted John party, and there were half a dozen others who had been sitting near by.

On the table in front of him lay a silver-barreled revolver, mounted in gold, with the butt incrusted with rhinestones which looked like diamonds, and which every one there thought were diamonds.

He held it in his hand and shook it under the face of Doc Singletry. "Do you mean to say," he demanded, "that this woman could carry a gun like that in her clothes and nobody know anything about it?"

"I don't know, sergeant. It sure beats me how she flashed it out. I thought she was nervous and naggy, that was all," said Doc.

"She couldn't carry this around without premeditation. But where did she have it? That's what I want to know." He looked up at the officer who was standing at the door, and commanded: "See if Mrs. John has come round yet, and bring her in."

The officer went to the room adjoining the bar, and there he found Mabel John in the care of a police matron, who had been summoned on the second call so that she could minister to the murderess at once on the scene; for it was considered expedient by Dolan to question her promptly, while still surrounded by the atmosphere of the murder.

"How about it?" the officer asked the matron. "The sergeant wants her. Is she ready?"

"Her heart was pretty near stopped, so I gave her a jolt of digitalis. She has come through now. Just drunk, that's all, and wants to sleep it off."

The matron looked down at the huddled figure slumped in the chair, evidently sound asleep. The natural color had again come into the cheeks of Mabel John, and she was whistling in her nasal passages as she snored.

"Wake her up and bring her in," said the officer. "She'll be just about ripe for the sergeant."

A few minutes later Mrs. John stood unsteadily before the improvised desk of the detective. Her bleary eyes blinked at him, and she hiccuped, while the matron stood close beside her, regarding her coldly, and evidently suspicious that she was simulating some of her symptoms.

Dolan thrust the gold-and-silver pistol toward her.

"How long have you had this?" he demanded.

The sight of the gun affected Mabel as powerfully as had the digitalis. She stood up, started instantly, and the haze seemed to clear from her brain.

"I never saw it before!" she exclaimed.

Dolan thrust it into her hands, insisting: "Look at it close, Mrs. John. Take a good look. That's the gun you killed your husband with, and Miss Humbin too. Better tell me the truth now and save yourself trouble. Come clean with me, and I'll see you get the breaks. Where did you get that gun?"

Mabel looked at the weapon, fascinated and dazed. She turned it over.

"I never saw it before," she repeated.

"Now, Mrs. John, that won't get you anywhere. Anybody can see that's a lady's gun, all dolled up for a party. It really don't make any difference where you got it; you had it, and you killed your husband with it. I've got plenty of witnesses to that. But just as a matter of curiosity, and to make the record straight, I'd like to know where you got it."

Mabel was turning the gun over and over in her hand absent-mindedly. She swayed a little unsteadily on her feet. The matron stepped up and put an arm around her. Mabel's hand fell open nervelessly, and the gun would have dropped to the floor if the matron had not seized it and laid it on the table.

The sergeant picked it up, saying: "Give me a look at that iron. I haven't gone over it yet." He turned it over and over in his hand. He broke it and examined the six cylinders containing two exploded cartridges and four unfired. He was about to lay it down, when he turned the end of the butt toward him. "Here are two initials," he said, "in gold inlay, L. H. Whose initials are these, Mrs. John?"

Mabel looked at him blankly. Her mouth opened and her head sagged. Again she was "out" on her feet.

The matron led her from the room.

Doc Singletry came forward excitedly.

"Sergeant," he offered, "I'll bet that gun belongs to Lance Houston. Anyway, the initials look that way."

"The movie actor?"

"Sure! The cowboy star that's packing 'em in."

"Was he mixed up with this dame?"

"I don't know?" said Singletry.

"Did she know him?"

Singletry felt his importance. He answered slowly, with deliberation:

"I don't know about that; but he was right there when it happened, the nearest person to her."

"What!" exclaimed Dolan. "Why haven't I been told that before?"

"Nobody thought it meant anything," Singletry lamely replied.

"It doesn't mean anything for a man to be the nearest to a murder and have his gun do it? Come across, Singletry. Do you want to be considered an accomplice in this?"

"No, sir," said Doc emphatically. "Only I thought—"

"Don't tell me what you thought. Tell me what you saw."

"I saw Lance Houston come into the room with his former leading lady, Lorraine Call, and sit down at the table next to us."

"When was that?"

"About five minutes before the shooting. And then Miss Humbin changed places at the table so she could sit next to Ted John. She was whispering to him when Mrs. John jumped her."

"What was Lance Houston doing all this time?"

"Nothing. Sitting at the next table with his back to us."

The sergeant looked up at the officer who was stationed at the door herding the witnesses in and preventing any of them from leaving the room. "Tell Connor to get this bird Lance Houston. Take him anywhere you find him—out of bed, if he's there—and get him here. I want him quick."

It was then just five minutes after seven o'clock in the morning. Four hours had passed since the murder, and all of that time had been consumed in seizing the witnesses who were held, and in badgering them.

The officer at the door called out to a cop standing beside a motorcycle in the alleyway. He spoke a few words to him, and then went to the phone behind the bar and called up headquarters.

In a few minutes word of the official search for Lance Houston was radiating through all the police arteries in the greater city.

Long before, in the room above, Joe Bloom had seized his difficult protégé by the arm, as he was apparently ready to leave the room after a decision to nonchalantly sluff off his career as an actor and return to his former occupation as a cowboy:

Bloom halted him abruptly by saying:

"You can't run out on me like this, Houston."

"Who said I was running out, Joe?"

"I did!"

"Thought you said I was through. Reckon you don't want to claim forty per cent of the wages I'm going to look for on the Lazy Y, do you?"

The beady eyes of the nervous little man snapped hungrily: "I have a five-year contract with you, Houston," he asserted. "It says nothing about where you work, or how. If you earn thirty dollars a month, I take twelve of it. Get that!"

Lance grinned amiably. "Sure, Joe; but I reckon you'll have to come out to Wyoming to collect it. Don't try to put me back as an extra or a stunt man. After I've been on top of the sky-scraper I don't want no ground-floor stuff. I'll go back to the subcellar."

Bloom wet his thin lips with a dry tongue. He changed his aggressive manner slightly to one more conciliating. He took the cowboy by the arm and led him back toward the bed.

"Let's think this over, Lance," he said. "If you can't think, sit there and I'll think. Thinking is my part of the show, anyway."

Slum was made almost hilarious by this rift of daylight in the dark cloud.

"Gee, Mr. Bloom," he exclaimed, "that's the way to talk. It 'd be awful measly to lay down a full hand like you got, 'fore ye're called."

Bloom paid no attention to the former buddy of his star. He walked back and forth silently for a few minutes, biting his lip, looking at the floor absent-mindedly. He went to the window and glanced out. The dawn was in the sky. He looked at his watch. It was nearly half past five.

"Here you! Waiter!" the manager snapped out.

"Yes, sir," Slum bowed.

"Get me a newspaper—morning paper preferred. Go downstairs easy. Don't let the cops grab you."

"Yes, sir."

Slum tiptoed out noiselessly, closing the door behind him. Houston lay back on the bed, propped two pillows under his head, pulled one foot 'way up over the other, and held the knee in his hands. He sighed luxuriously and yawned.

"It's time for a cow-puncher to be stirring out of the blankets. Only he ought to get a night's sleep first. It's more regular, and I do like things regular, Joe."

"Huh," grunted the manager, while he listened at the door for sounds of the returning steps of Slum. Lance began to hum:

"The bear went over the mountain,
The bear went over the mountain,
The bear went over the mountain,
To see what he could see."

"Shut up," whispered Bloom.

"All right, Joe," grunted Houston. "Only I'd like to offer a bit of advice if you can carry it along with that big load you've got on your mind."

"Shoot!"

"It won't cost you nothin' to be a little more respectful. You know a cow-puncher on the loose might like nothin' better than just lightin' on a half-portion like you, and if he wasn't pullin' down more'n thirty a month, minus forty per cent, it wouldn't be such a loss for him to spend a few months in jail for breaking your leg or punching out an eye, or somethin' like that."

The tone was not menacing, apparently, but there was a wary something in the undertone which caused the alert and subtle Bloom to glance quickly toward the reclining actor.

Houston's face was a study in contrasts. One side of it was lifted with his boyish grin. The other side was set and deadly. His jaw clamped shut with angular force, although this was somewhat concealed by the lovely rondure of his unlined cheeks.

Bloom saw that look in his eyes which came into them just as he settled himself for one of his stunts, such as leaping to the back of a galloping horse from a standing start.

Bloom changed instantly. He went over to Houston and put an arm round him and gave him a patronizing hug.

"No offense meant, Lance," he explained. "Now I'm going to tell you the truth. Most of the time I think I'm smarter than you, but once in a long while I wake up and think that you are smarter than me. Anyway, you can change quicker and work faster.

"I'm telling you this just because between you and me I want everything to be on the level. There's just one place where I've got you skinned. You were born out there in the hills and grew up under a horse. I was born in Mulberry Bend and grew up under the shadow of the Tombs.

"In everything in your department, west of the Hudson River, I take my hat off and stand aside. You're the king of the riders. But when it gets down to anything to do with a police court, or an afternoon edition, or the box office of a ten-cent theater, then I'm the chief of the highbinders. Get me, Lance?"

"Sure do," grinned the cowboy.

"Good. Then we're set there. Now, I'll take you back on the stage and show you the play I've been rigging up for you in the last few minutes. It's going to depend on two things—no, on three. First, there's your ability to do what I tell you. Second, there's my ability to get to the district attorney."

"Reckon you're not worried about me, Joe," Lance drawled. "And as for your gettin' to the district attorney, I'm not worried about that. You usually get what you go after. What's the third?"

"It is what the steamship travel ads, in that paper Slum is after, will show."

This caused Houston to place his feet down squarely on the floor. He sat up.

"How come?" he demanded.

"If there's a boat leaving San Pedro Harbor for any good town in the South Seas before ten o'clock this morning, the game is as good as won."

"I don't get you, Joe." Houston was puzzled.

"Well, here's the lay. You beat it out the back way here. I can see a motorcycle cop in front of the house. I can see a plainclothes man at the side door. There's a detective sergeant and one or two officers downstairs. All of these I've seen. There are probably more sticking round.

"But the bootleggers have a private exit through the rear of this Cross-Eyed Duck. Your buddy will be able to show it to you when he comes. You can escape from that way.

"Then it will be up to you to make San Pedro Harbor without anybody spotting you. Meanwhile I will have arranged for your passage to Fiji, or the Solomon Isles, or Samoa, or some other nice little quiet spot like that—any place there's a steamer sailing for before ten. You board her incognito."

"What's that? You don't mean without any clothes?"

"I mean like any traveling royalty. You'll be the Prince of Hollywood in disguise. You haven't got enough chin whiskers to grow a beard, but you can put on one of those broker mustaches like a toothbrush and change your name. You're no longer Lance Houston. You are Jefferson Q. Denver, president of the Sure Tire Rubber Company, out on an annual tour of inspection of your rubber plantations."

Lance looked down at his fawnskin boots and the cream-colored corduroy pants tucked into their tops. "That ought to be a knockout in this get-up," he responded dryly.

"You'll have to chuck that ice cream stuff," Bloom continued. "We'll have to find some way to get you some regular store clothes—I wonder what's the matter with that waiter. I hope they didn't take him in."

The door opened, and Slum entered bearing a copy of the *Morning Times*

of the day before. Bloom seized it from him, and hastily turned it open to the column containing the steamship announcements. He scanned this for a moment eagerly, and then exclaimed: "Tough luck! Not a thing clearing today but the Calawaii. She weighs at eight o'clock for Honolulu. Nothing to the South Seas for four days."

"I thought Honey Lou was a gal," said Slum.

Bloom didn't dignify the remark of the waiter with a direct answer. He went on to Houston, however, "Honolulu is the capital of Hawaii. It's six or seven days over there, and it looks like the only way out. I don't like it because the American flag flies there, the same as here, and it's the front yard of California.

"At the same time you'll be on the seas for six or seven days. In that time I may be able to square the thing for you in such a way that there'll be no official interference; so you'll have nothing to fear when you arrive at Honolulu. From there you can get another ship to some point in the South Seas."

A frown had been slowly gathering on the amiable countenance of Lance Houston. He rose to his feet and stood erect. "Say, Joe," he said, "looks like you're framing somethin' for me. If I beat it like this, anybody could say I plugged those people downstairs."

"If there was any suspicion of your being mixed up in it, yes," Bloom assented. "But there's not. You'll be cleared easily at the coroner's inquest. I haven't spread my real scheme for you yet. Now get this, for it's the nub.

"When I said I wanted to fix it with the district attorney, I meant I wanted to persuade him not to ask for your appearance as a material witness. I think I'll be able to explain everything to his satisfaction.

"There's one thing that can't be avoided, and that's the notoriety of the newspaper headlines that are going to smear this all over the country for the next week. We've got to bend before that storm, and let it pass without destroying us.

"I'll take the train this afternoon for New York and get to Morris Inkard himself. He's the inside executive head at Noted Stars. I'll put our cards in front of him and try to get him to take us in.

"If he sees it my way, his publicity department will announce that you have gone to the Mediterranean on a six-months' location for a new sheik picture, where you are going to outride the desert Bedouins at their own tricks.

"If this can come along with the announcement of the district attorney that you are exonerated, I'll get by the adverse ruling of the Producers' Exchange. That's our real obstacle.

"All you do is to keep going, sailing around the South Seas until you hear from me. The thing may blow over by then. If it does, you can come back and go to work again on the lot."

"And go to bed with the chickens," added Lance.

CHAPTER IV.

SPEEDING.

"THE first thing we need," said Bloom, "is the proper traveling rig for Jefferson Q. Denver. I'd say a sack suit of blue or gray."

"Plenty of duds like that up at Houstonia," said Lance.

"Houstonia" was the name of Lance's five and one-half-acre "ranch" in Beverly Hills which was only in process of construction behind a high stone wall where a gang of fifty men was building a swimming pool and enlarging the house so that its original eighteen rooms would be extended to twenty-seven, built round a huge patio.

"I can duck out this back way and grab 'em easy," Lance added, starting toward the door.

Joe seized him by the arm. "Not on your life," said he. "When they want

you down below, which may be at any minute, Houstonia will be the first place they look for you. Next they'll go to your bungalow on the Noted Stars lot. Those are two places you're not going to see again for many a week."

"But this guy, Jeff Denver, ain't goin' to rig up with no hand-me-downs. Thought you said he was president of somethin'. You sure got to get him up handsome, and I got seventeen suits in the cedar chest out there at Houstonia. Ain't none of 'em more'n ninety days to six months old.

"'Twould sure be a high crime and misdemeanor to send Jeff Denver off into the South Seas to inspect his rubber plantations and leave all that tony wardrobe behind."

Joe Bloom silently admitted the force of this argument and cogitated for a moment. Then he turned to Slum and asked: "Where does that bootlegger's exit lead to, back of the Cross-Eyed Duck?"

Slum replied: "Into the garage behind the second house on the next street."

"What's in the garage?"

"Dunno, but she's owned along with the house, by the boss downstairs."

"Good," said Bloom. "We'll get over into that garage and you'll wait there, Lance, while Slum and I go up to Houstonia and get the wardrobe. But we'll have to work fast. It's after six now, and we've got less than two hours to make San Pedro. How far is it to Houstonia from here, Lance?"

"Four, five miles."

"That ought to be a cinch," Bloom concluded. "Ten miles round trip. Thirty-two miles to San Pedro from here. That makes about forty-two miles and we got an hour and three-quarters. Go ahead, Slum, show us the way."

So while Detective Sergeant Dolan was cross-examining the witnesses of the Ted John murder in the front room of the Cross-Eyed Duck, the most conspicuous of them, and the one whose coincidental presence was to lift this killing into being a national nine-day wonder, slipped past the sergeant, on the other side of a thin partition, and went down the kitchen stairs to the cellar, preceded by Slum and Joe Bloom.

Slum picked up a flash light from a niche in the wall and guided them to the far corner, where two beer barrels were suspended on trundles. These were on rollers and he pushed them easily aside.

Behind, a piece of old, worn linoleum covered a doorway. This also he lifted up, revealing steps leading down at a forty-five degree angle. With the flash light he piloted the two into a cement tunnel about five feet high and three feet wide.

By stooping, they managed to get through it without going to their hands and knees. It went on about one hundred and fifty feet, with two sharp turns. At the end Slum had a little difficulty with the door, but when Lance placed a shoulder against it, it gave, and presently the three stood, greatly relieved and breathing freely, in a well-lighted, two-car garage.

Before them was a flivver one-ton truck, and a low slung, parrot-green, eight-cylinder sport roadster.

"You're a great little property man," chuckled Bloom. "These are just the tools we need in our business."

"You don't want to bring a whole truckload of clothes back," Lance protested. "Just a couple of suitcases."

"It's this racing scout, I mean," Bloom muttered, patting the rounded, low-slung fenders of the stream-line car. "Now if we only had a key." He began fumbling under the hood, testing the ignition.

"Key's back of the bar in the Duck," Slum volunteered.

"Get it," ordered Bloom.

Evidently Slum did not relish this assignment with a double trip through the dark tunnel and back into the presence of the cops. He wanted to stick close to Houston. He looked at the cowboy in dumb appeal.

Lance drawled, "Better do as Joe asks, Slum."

"You bet," said Slum, and scuttled away back into the tunnel.

While the waiter was gone Joe examined the car. He found the gas tank full, and got the battery going. The ampere gauge showed a healthy condition. He found a water pail in the corner and a faucet. He filled the radiator. "Looks like everything was set, as soon as we get that key. The property man on the lot couldn't have done better by us."

Houston leaned down into the dark tunnel and peered eagerly for a sight of his old buddy. From his vest pocket he took a match and started to strike it. Bloom lit on him instantly. "You simp," he muttered, "don't you know this garage is full of gas?"

"Sure do, and it's getting to me. Don't you feel it?" Lance began coughing.

Bloom felt suddenly sick. He rushed to the outer door which he tried to open. It was locked. Then he remembered the well-known properties of carbon monoxide, of how suddenly it gets to its victims. He feared that they were caught. He had difficulty in moving his limbs.

"Break the window, Lance," he gasped. "I'll shut off the motor."

Houston was excessively drowsy and willing to lie down and quit. There was no pain, but a stupefying languor had come over him. However, he was so accustomed to obeying the behests of his manager that he was able to reach the window. There was a stick lying on the sill. He seized this and smashed the glass, and held his head up close to the rush of fresh air that came in upon him.

At the same moment the motor stopped.

After a minute or two Houston had recovered sufficiently with the oxygen which came to his lungs, to pull himself together and look around. On the floor, by the side of the car, lay Joe Bloom in a crumpled heap. He had given his last bit of conscious strength to cutting off the motor.

While Houston was bending over Bloom, Slum came out of the tunnel, coughing. "What are you tryin' to do, 'fixiate me?" he demanded, weakly holding out a string containing two keys.

Houston took the keys and went to the outer door, which was padlocked from the inside. One of the keys fitted the lock. In a moment the doors swung open, and shortly the monoxide gas from the interior of the garage was entirely dissipated.

They carried Bloom outside and stretched him on the grass in front of the garage. "Give him a shot of hootch out of his hip," Slum suggested. "He's got it there, 'cause I sold him a pint just afore the killin'."

Houston found a silver flask in his manager's hip pocket. He unscrewed the filigree top and poured some of the contents down the throat of the unconscious Bloom. "If the gas didn't get him, this will."

In a second, Bloom gasped and coughed. A moment later he was sitting up and looking around.

"Hell fire," Bloom muttered. "Who got me?"

"The Cross-Eyed Duck soaked you four dollars a pint," said Lance. "Now snap out of that and climb into this here car, and don't go to sleep on me again."

Houston walked back and tried the other key in the ignition plug. It fitted and released the gears.

"Come on, Joe," he called. "Into the driver's seat with you. Over there, Slum. Open her up, but look out for the crossroads cats. Better keep off Hollywood Boulevard. Go over Franklin as far as she goes and get down to Sunset through Laurel Cañon Road. Turn up at Benedict Cañon and go to Houstonia by the Outer Vale Road."

Bloom had his foot on the gas and the wheels had begun to revolve, when

Houston, standing beside him, gave his final admonition. "I want that brown suit that came in yesterday, the one with the purple stripe, and don't forget the peppermint socks.

"They's a vest, too, I picked up at the Bon-Ton. She's a lallapalooser, with horse-shoes and a riding-crop over the pockets. Pack her in.

"They's a flock of ties in that new-fangled wardrobe without any hinges. Grab me off a handful of them. They's a couple of dozen new silk shirts in the dressing-room beside the hot-water faucet. They are just the things to sail me over the equator."

By this time the car was out in the yard, gathering momentum.

Bloom growled, "Shut up. Leave it to me. Duck back into that truck and wait under the hood. Make yourself as small as a flea under the coat of a dog."

Bloom's foot went down on the gas. The green car sprang forward and out into the street, and a moment later Lance Houston was stretching out flat on his back on the empty floor of the truck, with his two-hundred-dollar coat rolled into a pillow and lying under his head. In five minutes he was asleep, with the sun streaming across his middle from the broken window, and with the front door of the garage carelessly open.

It was almost at this very moment that Detective Sergeant Dolan in the living room of the Cross-Eyed Duck discovered the initials L. H. on the butt of the gun that had killed Ted John and Una Humbin. Bloom, in the green car, turned the corner of Franklin Avenue headed for Houstonia just as police headquarters got the word over the telephone to search the actor's haunts and bring him in.

Joe parked the green car in front of the main entrance to Houstonia at five minutes after seven, telling Slum to wait there for him, and dashed up the broad cement steps and pounded at the oak panels of the Spanish door, while with the other hand he frantically rang the bell.

Meanwhile the Hollywood police headquarters had telephoned Beverly Hills to get Lance Houston in person, and quickly, and to take him out of bed, if necessary.

The sergeant on the Beverly desk called the orderly and said: "Get out the Bix Six roadster and send Tim in here for my relief. I'll go after this bird myself.

"This is a high-priced guy and before you know it, there'll be a flock of magnates round here to bail him out or *habeas corpus* him. We'll beat them to that stuff. You've got no authority, see. I'm taking that with me under my own hat, and with the sheriff's car."

When Joe Bloom came back out of the front door of the cement hacienda at Houstonia he was followed by an English butler who bore in each hand a large walrus-hide suitcase. Joe himself carried a huge pigskin bag with gold mountings.

He was disposing the cases and the bag under the rumble, aided by the butler, when they heard the exhaust of a powerful engine coming up the drive. Joe didn't stop to see who it was, apprehensive of possible interference.

He leaped into the driver's seat, calling to the butler, "Tell any one that calls, that Mr. Houston is in his bungalow at the Noted Stars studio, making up for his next picture, which has not been named yet. It's going to be a super-production, a double-starred sapphire de luxe special."

This trifling and unnecessary bit of managerial flair cost Joe his easy getaway, for before he could finish it and while the butler was standing obsequiously on the lower step of the mansion receiving instructions, the sheriff's car, containing the sergeant from police headquarters whirled round the corner and came to a sudden halt alongside. Joe pressed his button, and started to go, but he was too late.

"Stop," called the officer. He jumped

out and came alongside the green car.

"Are you Lance Houston?"

"No."

"Who are you?"

"My name is Joseph H. Bloom."

It was no time to parry the question, for the officer was in uniform and plainly bent on a serious mission.

"What are you doing here?"

"I'm here on business."

"What kind of business?"

"I came to get a change of clothes for Mr. Houston."

"You working for him?"

"Not exactly; he's working for me. I'm his manager."

"Ah!" The officer relaxed. "Why didn't you say so in the first place. I'll have to check up on you. You are hiding something. Well, if you're his manager, you know where he is."

"Of course," said Joe, "I know where he is. He's in his bungalow on the Noted Stars lot making up. We are shooting an indoor scene to-day for his next production, a big super-spectacle de luxe sapphire—"

"Keep that guff," cut in the officer. "You say you're getting clothes for him, eh? What's the matter? Did he forget his own clothes?"

"Yes—that is—" Joe hesitated and devised a plausible explanation. "The director changed his mind overnight. Mr. Houston was not aware of just what scene was to be shot until he got to the studio."

"You mean to say he was down there to work before seven o'clock?"

"Sure," said Joe, "every morning of his life. Don't you know that Lance Houston goes to bed with the sun and gets up with the sun? It's our slogan. He's one cowboy on the level. No night life for him."

The officer felt sure that Bloom was lying.

"Very well, Mr. —— what's your name?"

"Bloom."

"I'll just take a look through the house myself. You may think he's on the lot all right, but he may have just put one over on you. It's my experience after a couple of years in Beverly Hills that what these here actors put over on their managers is a plenty."

"Certainly, officer," said Joe, "the butler here will show you around, I'm sure. By the way, would you mind telling me what you want Mr. Houston for?"

"Orders from L. A., that's all I know. I suppose he's mixed up in one of these wild parties or hootch sprees. But I want him and I'm goin' to get him."

"Impossible! Not Lance Houston."

The officer, who had placed one foot on the step to ascend in the wake of the butler, turned indignantly and exclaimed: "Are you sayin' I don't get him? Looks like I better put you under arrest."

"Oh, no," exclaimed Joe in apologetic fright, which was not simulated, "you misunderstand me, officer. I merely that it was absolutely impossible that Lance Houston should be mixed up in any of this wild life you're talkin' about.

"He's not that kind of a fellow. Take my word for it. Ask anybody. His life is an open book. He's as clean as a hound's tooth and as clear as an open sky. But, of course, getting him is your privilege, and as far as I'm concerned, I'll help you."

"Oh, you will, eh? Well, that's fair enough. Well, you wait right there till I come back. You can trail me out to the studio."

The officer disappeared after the butler and the huge door of the hacienda closed behind him, leaving the soft patina of its antiqued darkened oak to stare at the palpitating beady eyes of nervous little Joe Bloom.

Joe exerted all of the patience he had and waited fully forty-five seconds. Then his foot touched the button. The gas streamed into the clean cylinders of the waiting Eight, and the green car leaped away from the Big Six in

which the engine was running. Before it passed the gate at the entrance to the grounds the speedometer registered fifty-one miles an hour.

CHAPTER V.

AT THE LAST SECOND.

THE purser standing at the foot of the gangplank of the Calawaii on the San Pedro wharf looked at his watch. It was seven fifty-five. He lifted his hand and signaled to a petty officer on deck. This officer in turn spoke to a Chinese mess-boy, who stood beside him and at the same moment lifted his hand in signal to the quartermaster on the bridge.

The Chinese boy started aft along the taffrail beating a copper gong held in his hand. The quartermaster on the bridge spoke through the tube to the engine room, and instantly the steam whistle shrilled.

It was the five-minute whistle, warning all who did not expect to sail on the Calawaii to get off the ship, and hastening on board the late-comers on the wharf. A belated scurrying of eager feet passed up and down the gangplank.

The purser stood with watch in hand calmly observing the bustle. Others might be excited, but it was routine to him. When the hands of his watch indicated thirty seconds of eight o'clock, he looked up and down the wharf to see that the customary requirements of making ready to cast off had been met.

The baggage gangplank had been drawn in, and the rail on the lower deck through which it passed had been closed. Two sailors stood by the warping hawser ready to pull her in the moment the dock wallopers below should cast it away from its ballard.

At the stern also, two were ready to cast off the hawser. At the top of the gangway two sailors stood at attention, their hands resting on the rail, both of them looking intently toward the purser for the signal. By his side stood two dock men ready to give a lift.

The purser glanced at his watch for the last time and snapped it back into his pocket. There was ten seconds left. It would take him just that time to mount the gangplank and he was proud of the fact that for eighteen months, since he had been in this berth, the Calawaii had not once been one second late in casting off.

"All right, boys," he called, and started to run up the gangplank. The dock wallopers started to slip the hawsers from the ballards.

At that moment, through the sheds of the wharf sounded a piercing siren. There was such an electric quality of surprise and audacity in the sound that even the loutish dock wallopers hesitated in their accustomed duties. The purser stopped halfway up the gangplank and looked back.

Down along the cleared, deserted wharf, rapidly slowing down, but smoking in eloquent testimony of a terrific speed just endured, sped a green Lincoln which slid swiftly and surely on, and stopped twelve inches from the foot of the gangplank.

Lance ran to the side of the purser. "Thanks, Bo," said he, "for waitin'."

The purser folded his arms and looked at Houston. "We never wait," he replied. "Tickets, please."

Lance grinned sheepishly and looked back. "Have to get it from my secretary," he replied. Slum was coming along with the two suitcases, followed by Bloom with the hand bag. "Where's my tickets, Joe?" he asked blandly.

"Tickets? You don't need more than one."

Lance put an arm over Slum's shoulder. The former waiter was laboring heavily under the weight of the large walrus-bound wardrobe. "You don't think Jefferson Q. Denver is going out on a tour of inspection without his secretary, do you?" Lance queried impudently. At the same time, while his

back was turned to the purser, he winked broadly at Bloom.

It was clear to the manager that this was no time for arguments. The taffrail above was lined with curious voyagers. The purser was scowling and fumbling impatiently with his watch. It looked as if his record for promptness was going to be broken. "Move fast," he admonished gruffly. "Tickets."

Joe dropped the pigskin case and took from a wallet a piece of yellow, perforated paper. On the back of this, with a fountain pen, he signed his name, and handed it to the purser. "A cashier's check on the Bank of Italy for a thousand dollars," he said. "Pay for a cabin passage for Mr. Denver out of that and a steerage passage for his secretary."

Slum poked his sly face between them. "What's that you say?" he demanded. "Steerage!"

Lance stepped on Bloom's foot. "Nix, Joe," he said. "Two first-class cabin passages. Ain't this here guy the president of the works?"

The somewhat flashy clothing of the alleged Jefferson Q. Denver and the curious conversation that had passed between him and his companions, added to the impatience of the purser, although he examined the check and could find no fault in it.

The suspicion that these were movie actors flashed over him, and for a few seconds he suspected that his prompt and orderly sailing had been ruthlessly slaughtered for a film holiday. He glanced about to see a concealed camera. He saw more.

"All right," said the purser. "On deck with you." He turned to the dock hands below. "Shove off, boys," he yelled.

Joe Bloom ran down and leaped to the dock as the gangway was being lifted. He stood near the place it had occupied and grinned from ear to ear, waving his hat as the space between the wharf and the Calawaii gradually widened. From above, Jefferson Q. Denver looked down on him without moving a muscle of his face, although even Joe could see there was a merry twinkle in his eye.

Then, as the Calawaii moved off into deeper water, Mr. Denver seemed to become suddenly aware that his manager was waving a saggy cap frantically at him. This immediately put him into action. He mounted the taffrail, seized his fedora and held it high above his head as he yelled shrilly, "Whoopee! See you in jail, Joe!"

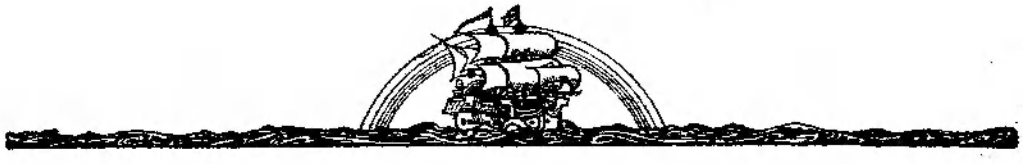
"Good luck, Lance," wailed Joe.

The purser observed the whole episode very much askance.

"Look like a couple of movie actors to me," he muttered. "Guess I'll just radio the bank about this check."

Three hours later, Joe Bloom was in conference with the general manager of the West Coast Studios of the Noted Stars. Before them lay the first editions of the afternoon newspapers. Among the headlines that appeared in them were some that read: "Film Actor Wanted in Hollywood Murder," "Lance Houston's Gun Kills Two," "Police Hunting Lance Houston," and "Houston Present, But Not Guilty, Say Noted Star Officials."

TO BE CONTINUED NEXT WEEK



Texas Comes to West Point

Straight from the back of a savage Texas stallion, Jack Griffin landed in West Point—and immediately grabbed hold in his two-fisted Western way

By LIEUT. JOHN HOPPER
Author of "The Eagle's Brood," "The Sea Spider," etc.

Novelette—Complete

Jack began to retrace his steps,

"RIDE 'im, cowboy; ride 'im!" The familiar cow-puncher cry had just been shrilled by one of a half dozen cowboys who leaned against the iron bars inclosing the big corral of Griffin's ranch, watching a horse and its rider raising the dust inside.

"Whoop-ee!" cried a second cowboy.

It was a sight worth watching, worth the yells of the beholders. The horse was of the variety known as "buckin' broncho." The rider was a calm, masterful youth of about twenty years.

The dust of the battle royal shaded the horse and rider. It was evident that something was due to be broken in the outcome of the battle, either the horse—or the rider's neck.

During the lulls, when seemingly the horse was subdued, but really was gathering strength for new antics and cavortings, the audience of cow-punchers discussed the fight.

"Danged ef I don't think the Kid 'll do it!" said one as he wiped the sweat from the band of his sombrero with a red bandanna. The Texas sun was very hot. "He said he'd bust thet danged hoss 'fore he went t' Wes' Point, or the danged hoss would bust him, sure 'nuff."

"Thet's jus' like 'im," said another. "He's jus' like his ol' man. The Kid has tried t' bust thet devil hoss 'fore now. Las' time, 'member, he got a busted arm outen it?"

Renewed ambition on the part of the horse put an end to further discussion.

The rider was being hard put to it in order to maintain his seat on the back of the small, wiry, black stallion. The nostrils of the horse's nose glowed a

and the couple heard him

vivid red. His wide eyes were wild. His silken flanks heaved mightily.

Back and forth, up and down the corral, first the horse would make a wild dash, and come to a sudden halt, nearly sliding that persistent creature from his back. Failing in that, the horse would arch his back, jump into the air, and thud down to the ground with four stiff legs. But all to no avail; the Kid knew his business.

Jack Griffin, son of "Old Jack" Griffin, settler and owner of Griffin's ranch, had been brought up with horses, cattle, cowboys, dust, and sagebrush. His mother had passed away while the ranch yet was new, at the time of the hardest work, before the immense profits of later years poured in.

Old Jack went on through life alone, bringing up his son, and his ranch. Now he loved both with great pride.

His son was an "honest-to-God" man, who loved horses, the open, the rough-and-ready companionship of the cowboys of the bunk house. He was no son to be packed off East to an effete school to learn "lounge lizardry."

But Old Jack realized that the Kid, as the boys of the ranch had nicknamed his son, required a college education. The old West was changing. The time was coming when the hard-fisted cattleman must give way to the keener, educated business man.

This realization had cost the senior Griffin a great deal of worry. His son had absorbed the equivalent of a high school education from tutors, and from a Texas schoolhouse many miles away from the ranch. But he lacked the polish and poise and general knowledge which contact with men in a large college would give him. His speech still savored more of the bunk house than of books. His customs and manners were still those of men long out of contact with women.

And yet, Old Jack hesitated about sending his son off to an "Easterner" college. He had heard and read too much about them. He thought, with fear in his heart, of his son returning to him thin-chested, pulling at a long cigarette holder, and receiving lavender-scented notes from girls—flappers—left behind him in the East.

One day the senior Griffin had returned home from a cattlemen's meeting at the county seat. His face was aglow. His Congressman had told him of a wonderful college in the East, a man's college. There the Kid would imbibe the blessings of a college education, and yet be subject to none of the dangers.

It was a hard school, where life was more difficult than a cowboy's. None of its students had time for "lounge lizardry" or flappers. They must exercise their bodies in becoming proficient in the arts of manhood: becoming expert in the use of rifle, pistol, saber, boxing, command of men, and—*riding*.

That last item had sold Old Jack. Any school which made its pupils ride must be all right.

And so, the Kid was duly appointed to West Point.

Now, the time was at hand when he was to make the long journey northeast to the United States Military Academy at West Point, N. Y.

II.

THIS particular hot, blazing afternoon, almost the last remaining to him in Texas, the Kid had selected for another, and final, attempt to tame the black stallion.

So far he had succeeded in staying on its back. A cowboy had just proclaimed to his fellows that the Kid had exceeded his former best time limit by two minutes already.

Then the catastrophe happened.

The stallion had reached the desperate stage. He rose up on his muscular hind legs. Higher—higher—

His front feet pawed the air. The Kid bent forward until his forehead touched the crest of the stallion's arched neck. He jerked downward on the reins.

So determined was the horse in getting that maddening animal from his back that he refused to heed the excruciating pain that was tearing downward on his jaw.

On his hind legs, he endeavored to stand higher, straighter in the air. The watching cowboys stared, and hardly dared to breathe. Would the stallion go over backward?

The horse took a few steps backward to keep his balance. The Kid gamely and desperately kept pulling downward with the reins.

Suddenly there was a thud; and a cloud of dust flew up to meet the blue sky. The black stallion had finally lost his balance and had crashed backward to the dust, carrying his intrepid rider with him. There was a thrashing about of black legs. A triangular black head with bloodshot eyes lifted itself out of the denser dust nearer the earth.

In a mad scramble the cowboys rushed for the gate of the corral. What had happened to the Kid? If he had not been able to extricate himself in time, if the heavy bulk of the horse had fallen squarely on him—

Before they could reach the gate they saw the stallion kick to his feet, and start at a mad gallop for the far end of the corral. They saw another form rise out of the dust—itself so covered with dust that it looked like a phantom—and dash after the horse.

The ranch hands halted. Evidently the Kid had not been hurt by his fall. How he had ever escaped was a miracle! At one instant he had been clinging to his saddle, the horse standing almost vertically upward on his hind legs. Then, in the very next instant, before the man had a chance to leap from the saddle, the horse had fallen straight on his back. The Kid must have had to do some tall squirming to get himself out from under before harm came.

And now, both horse and horseman were on their feet.

It was plain that the stallion had no intention of continuing the riding lesson. When he reached the far end of the corral he halted, trembling in every limb. His twitching ears were alert for signals of any one approaching him.

Warily the Kid neared the horse. He was almost upon him, when the stallion, with a snort, was off. Another kind of battle followed, a fight wherein horse cunning was matched against man brains.

There were times when the stallion was just within reach of the Kid. But, before the outstretched hand could grasp the bridle, the black horse was away like the wind, a wind with pounding hoofs.

The watching ranch hands were beginning to advise the Kid to give it up, to let some one help him catch the black phantom. But "Old Jack's" son only smiled through the mask of dirt and sweat on his face, and shook his head negatively. This struggle between Black Devil and himself was a long-standing, private affair.

Again the horse was at one end of the corral. At that point the iron rail fence formed a deep corner.

The Kid, following one side of the corner, neared the horse. Suddenly he halted, waved his arms in the air, and shouted. Black Devil, surprised by such unexpected, open tactics, began a wild dash along the fence that formed the far side of the corner.

At the same instant, the Kid cut across. If he had speed enough, he could head Black Devil off before the horse realized what was happening. The youth had a small distance to traverse, the horse a greater. But Black Devil was so much faster.

"Look at the Kid travel! Go it, Kid," cried a cowboy.

"Gosh! Thet boy has the speediest pair o' legs I ever did see!" exclaimed another admiringly. "Damned strange, too, fer a cow-puncher!"

The Kid barely reached the other side of the corner before the horse passed by.

The stallion reared, and backed on its hind legs. However, before it had a chance to turn and make off in another direction, the Kid seized the bridle.

For an instant, it seemed to the watchers that the horse would tear loose. But no; with a leap the Kid vaulted into the saddle.

The last event proved to be "the last straw" for the stallion. For a few minutes longer he bucked, reared, and ran. But little by little his wildness was dissipating into the Texas sunshine. Then came the time when he was *ridden*, actually obeying the will of his rider. Black Devil, at last, had been conquered.

With a wide, happy grin on his grimy face, the Kid rode his horse to that part of the corral where stood his father's "boys." His clothes were dusty, and torn in many places.

His golden bronze hair, usually so well combed and parted, was a tousled mass. His gray-blue eyes twinkled merrily.

"Waal," he announced in a typical Texas drawl, "Black Devil an' me are friends at last."

He dismounted, bestowed a few pats on the sleek, black neck of his horse, and then turned the reins over to a waiting cow-puncher. The rest of the men crowded about him, shaking his hand, congratulating him.

Finally, there was a silence.

A tall, thin man in the group suddenly became nervous. He took off his worn, sweat-stained sombrero, and wiped his old, bald head with his bandanna.

Hesitatingly, he began to speak.

"Kid, thet was mighty fine hosstamin' yuh jus' did."

He stopped for an instant. The rest waited for him to go on.

"Yuh ain't goin' ta be with us much longer, Kid, an' we all thought we'd like ta say good-by ta yuh all at wunst, t'gether. An' so the boys here named me as the spokesman.

"We all hate ta see yuh go, Kid. But ef Old Jack thinks it's bes' fer yuh, then we guess it's bes', too.

"But, Kid, don' ferget us, nor the West. The East has some mighty fine pleasures an' things, I guess. But some o' them, Kid, don' make a man nohow. Mebbe some of us folks out here ain't got the polish, an' our talk ain't jus' the kind ta suit Dan'l Webster, but we ride hard an' shoot straight.

"An'—an', Kid, mebbe I ain't got no right ta tell yuh so, but we all sorta —sorta hate ta lose yuh to the East. We hope yuh'll allus be one of us—an' ol' Texas cowboy."

As the old man finished speaking, there was something wet burning the dust away in the Kid's eyes. These foolish, old, loyal pals of his! Their simple minds could see an Eastern college no more than a den of vice where man qualities are enfeebled.

"Don't you worry," he assured them, patting the old man's shoulder. "I'll be just a-livin' till I get back here with you-all again."

The old cow-puncher extended his hand. In it was a cleverly wrought gold chain.

Suspended from it was a tooth of some kind, dried with age, yellow stained, and shiny.

"Kid, here's somethin' ta remember us boys an' Texas by. It's good luck. The bes' yuh'll ever find. Thet there tooth came from the gamest mustang thet ever rode the sage. Thet was some hoss. Years ago—

"Waal, anyways, take et. It's jus' a trinket, an' a reminder. An' with et goes the bes' wishes to yuh from us all."

A few minutes later, Jack Griffin, Jr., was alone. He opened his fist and gazed thoughtfully at the trinket in his palm.

Never before had the realization that he was going away, leaving this West of his—going to the far off, mysterious East—struck him so forcibly. In a few days he would be in West Point, a school about which he knew little save that it was a military college, and prepared soldiers for the nation.

In a few days he would be in that curious East, where the people did not eat dinner in the same clothes they had worn during the day.

What was going to happen, what momentous change in his life? What would the East do to him?

Still musing, he heard the dinner gong clang in the ranch house. Old John, the Chinaman, was striking hard.

III.

A YOUNG man, dressed in clothes which very evidently had not come from Brooks Brothers, or from De Pinna's, sat by himself in a coach of a train which was rolling along tracks beside a silver river. Every now and then he would stare out of the window by his seat. His gaze would meet bluff hills rising from the car window.

These, he thought, must be the Highlands of the Hudson, described in the train circular. And, somewhere among those Highlands nestled gray walls and gray buildings—West Point.

What, he wondered, was it going to be like? Already a wave of home sickness was sweeping over him. He longed for the sage-dotted desert, the hot sun.

He looked about him in the car. There were a number of other young men in it. Most of them were engaged in looking out of the windows, busy with their own thoughts. Jack suspected that they, like himself, were on their way to report, for the first time, at the United States Military Academy.

They represented many types. Some had a stamp of rural communities. Their apparel and actions plainly demonstrated it. Others showed that their struggle through life had not been easy. They were poor. But the determination on their faces spoke volumes. They were going to make the most of this chance to be educated at the expense of the government.

And then, there were others. In his mind, Jack put them down for the real "Easterners" that he had heard about. Their dress was just so. Their attitude was easy, assured, nonchalant. These last gathered together in little groups, and played bridge. Jack did not know, then, that the game was bridge.

At the forward end of the coach

were three men who were under continuous awed observation from some of their fellow travelers. The three were clad in uniforms of gray. The black peaks of their gray caps sat down sternly over their eyes. They kept strictly to themselves, paying no attention to the curious stares of the remainder of the occupants of the car.

Every one knew that those men were West Pointers, students in the academy through whose portals the rest of the young men in the car were soon to pass. Even Jack Griffin had guessed it; and he, in common with his future classmates, had been studying the cadets.

Jack was growing tired of gazing through car windows. For days he had done nothing else. He felt the need of companionship. He wanted some one to talk to.

Once, when his eyes were roving through the car and saw the cadets in the far corner, a thought came to him. Since he was so curious about the place to which he was going, why not ask the cadets? An excellent opportunity to secure some advance information.

Back in Texas, when one wished to strike up a conversation with a stranger, he went ahead and did so. He was sure, most always, of a cordial and courteous reception.

The eyes of most of the men in the car were upon Jack as he strolled down the aisle. His attitude had given away his purpose. He was going down to speak to the cadets. The universal wonder was: what kind of reception will he get?

Arriving at the two seats occupied by the cadets, Jack paused. He smiled pleasantly on the men before him.

But the young men in stern, military gray apparently took no notice of him. From their appearance, no one would know that such a person as Jack Griffin, or any one in fact, was standing in the aisle waiting for some act of friendliness.

Finally, Jack ventured to break the ice.

"Beg your pardon," he began.

Now, the cadets looked up. Their glances were curious, their faces noncommittal.

"I guess," Jack concluded, "that you are all from the same school where I'm a going."

For a few seconds the cadets looked at one another. Then one, who was by himself in a seat facing that of the two others, burst into a laugh.

Jack's face reddened ever so slightly. Back in Texas, a stranger making a sociable remark was not usually laughed at.

The man who had laughed was alone in his mirth. The other two cadets were studying Jack curiously.

Turning to one of them, Jack said, "Sorry I horned in on your party. I was just looking for some information, that's all. But, it didn't amount to nothing much."

The man whom Jack had addressed smiled back kindly.

"Oh, that's all right!" he replied. "What part of the country do you come from?"

"Texas."

Jack did not feel especially verbose. The cadet who sat by himself was smiling cynically. Finally, the man drawled:

"Ah! A cowboy, eh?"

It was not the words that infuriated Jack. Rather, it was the tone of them, and the superior, indifferent attitude of the speaker, the scorn of the affected "Easterner" for the unpolished West.

Jack felt that he had better make his departure. The muscles of his arm were beginning to twitch because of the grinning face of the man in the far corner of the seat.

"Sorry I disturbed you, gentlemen. Guess I'll be getting back to my seat."

Perhaps the speaker did not mean that his words should reach the ears of Jack down the aisle, and—perhaps he did. It was the superior cadet who spoke. Jack recognized the sneering voice:

"It's a pity they let such specimens into the academy these days!"

Halfway to his seat, Jack paused and waited for the rest. He was not the only listener. The ears of other men, prospective cadets like Jack Griffin, were attuned to the speaker's voice.

"In the old days, West Point had rather a marvelous social prestige. But it has all fallen off now. I *awsk* you, how can it be otherwise. Formerly, only the cream of the country went to West Point. But nowadays—well, you've just had a sample of what the old place is getting. Raw cattle tenders; no family, no culture, just nobodies from the West.

"For my part, I really am sorry I am graduating from West Point next June. I wish to heaven I had taken my mother's advice and gone to Harvard. If it hadn't been for my *fiancée*, I would have, too. But she's got some odd notions on what a man ought to be."

Jack's ears were burning. "Raw cattle tenders, no family, no culture—nobodies."

With his mind busy thinking, he turned slowly about on his heel, and retraced his footsteps. "Nobodies from the West." That was the way this cynical, sneering "Easterner" classified his father, the boys back on the ranch.

A cold anger gripped him. Why, that young, white-faced whelp! "I *awsk* you." Jack's fingers found a bit of polished ivory hanging from his watch chain, the boys' gift, the mustang tooth.

Alarmed stares followed him up the aisle. His grim face boded some kind of action.

He halted before the gray-clad group. His cool, gray-blue eyes sought out the brown ones of the slim Easterner.

"Overheard your remarks, stranger, and I came back to tell you a few things. Maybe we ain't so strong on the 'social prestige' back home, but—we wouldn't own a hog in our pen that wasn't politer to strangers than you. An—"

The Easterner interrupted, and leaped to his feet. He strove to hurdle the legs of his two comrades to get at this "cowboy." Jack waited, calm, ready, and willing.

But the other two cadets held the third back.

One, he who had spoken kindly to Jack before, addressed his struggling comrade:

"Cut out the damned nonsense, Bob Peck, and sit down! To my mind, you got just about what you deserve. It hurts when you get paid back in your own coin, doesn't it? And, Peck, while I'm at it, I want to tell you that I'm everlastingly sorry that I'm hooked up to room with you, this year. I hope to hell you *don't* graduate from West Point. I'd be ashamed to own you for a classmate."

Peck was snarling furiously to be let loose. Finally, seeing that further struggles were useless, he desisted. However, hot words streamed from his mouth.

"Damn you, Bill Everest! You'd let a common plebe insult your classmate!"

Turning to Jack, he continued:

"Mister, you haven't seen the end of this, yet. Before the year is out you will know where you belong."

Meanwhile, unknown to the occupants of the car, who had been so engrossed in the excitement of the scene, the train had slowed down, and had finally come to a stop.

The blue cap of a conductor was thrust inside the door. His official voice bellowed through the car:

"West Point!"

IV.

For the rest of his life Jack Griffin will not be able to remember much about his first few months at West Point. Too many new things had happened to him too rapidly. Life

had been a confusion of hard discipline at the hands of upper classmen, lengthy drills, endless parades. His awkward, range-bred, horse-accustomed body had been trained in the precision of the foot soldier. His brain, tired from grasping new habits, principles, and ideas, found little time to reflect on where he was, and whether he liked it or not.

However, when the summer training period was over, and the academic year had begun, he had found that he had more leisure to reflect upon what had happened to him since the far-off day in June when he had left Texas.

At times he had longed to be back again to the open range, the companionship of the boys of the ranch. Yet, he was not dissatisfied. The new life was interesting, and there was much of value to be learned.

He had fared pretty well at West Point—as well as any of his classmates. He had attained to a good rating in his military duties and studies. The upper classmen respected him; he was a "good plebe."

However, there were many times when he had provided amusement for them. They enjoyed his Texas drawl, his cowboy anecdotes. Yet, for all the upper classmen who had guyed him about his cowboy youth and the West, there had been only one who had been offensive—Bob Peck, that day on the train.

The true test of a man's popularity is had from the attitude of his closest associates toward him. And Jack's classmates had early dubbed him with the sobriquet, "Tex." It may be depended upon that when a young man has a good nickname, that young man is well liked.

He was popular because of a number of things. He had carried to West Point his Western code of riding hard, and shooting straight. Besides, he had already proved that he was something of an athlete. Then, from the day he had first set foot on the military reservation at West Point, his classmates had talked about his train episode with a first-class man.

Peck, Jack had not seen since that memorable incident. They were in different companies, and lived in separate barracks. Peck was a first-class man in M Company, and lived in North barracks; while Jack was a plebe in D Company, and lived in South barracks. Therefore, the chance of the two meeting was small. Indeed, Jack had practically forgotten that there was such a person as the snob Peck until one day in early spring.

It was track season, and the third day that the United States Military Academy track squad had been outdoors. Lieutenant Graham, an officer in the regular army, and coach of the squad, was preparing to run off a race. This was to be the first actual race of the season, and Lieutenant Graham was anxious to get a line on a couple of new two-milers the plebe class had brought into the Academy with it.

The level field where the track practice was being held was that area designated as "summer camp." In the summer months the great circular cinder path inclosed rows of brown tents. There the corps took up its residence for the period of summer military training and maneuvers.

But now, in the month of April, no hot sun poured down on baking canvas. Instead, there was a damp chill in the air. The skies above were gray, like the old massive barracks and academic buildings in the distance.

The cadets on the squad kept their black sweaters well up around their ears. The ankle bands of the black sweat trousers were drawn tightly.

The black figures, like medieval monks, were scattered over the inclosure encircled by the track. Some were busy heaving the weighty hammer. Others, poised like Greeks of old, were casting slender javelins. Every now and then a dull *plop* would be heard as a discus landed flat against the ground.

Then, there were others, runners, the thoroughbreds of the track. It was upon these that Lieutenant Graham cast a speculative eye. What material had he there? Who was to replace the great Calhoun of last season's fame, the man who could be counted on to bring in first in the two-mile as surely as there was a sun in the heavens?

Yet, more important in Graham's mind was the question: have I a man to beat the Navy? The five points which first place in the two-mile would give were going to weigh unusually heavy in the annual track clash of the traditional service rivals, Army and Navy.

Lieutenant Graham decided to ease his mind. Up to his lips went his megaphone:

"All men out for the two-mile over here!"

Then he began to call off names—names of the men of last year's squad: "Roberts, Dillon, Peck—"

A small group of black-clad men quickly surrounded him. And among them was Jack Griffin.

Jack had early decided to make his principal sports effort in track. He could run. The "boys" back on the ranch had often commented on the unusual fact wonderingly. What! A cowboy able to run fast? But Jack had not spent his boyhood racing colts in his father's corrals for nothing.

Lieutenant Graham had quickly explained his purpose to the contenders for the honor of upholding West Point in track contests with other colleges, and was busily placing them in their starting positions on the cinder road.

Jack was so excited over this, his first real race, that he had not noticed any of the other cadets entered in the race. His heart beat heavily and rapidly as he scraped holes for his toes in the hard-packed cinders. Suppose that he had only been kidding himself into believing that he could run? He had never been up against competition before. These men, some nervous, some confident, might leave him so far behind—

Jack refused to think of the ridiculous figure he might cut.

All holes had been dug. The two-milers were waiting impatiently for the signal to get ready.

Jack began to look around to see whom he was running against.

When he saw the man next to him, he started and stared. Where had he seen that face before—the white skin, the large brown eyes, the almost too high forehead?

In a flash the memory came to him: that day on the train. This was the first-class man who despised the "raw, uncultured West," Bob Peck.

As if Jack's stare had struck him physically, Peck turned around.

"Anything funny about me, mister?" began Peck, not recognizing Jack at first.

A "no, sir," was on Jack's lips when Peck realized that he had met this plebe before.

"Well, I'll just be damned!" he exclaimed. "Here is my little cowboy friend.

"Can you fancy that!" he added joyously. "I've been wondering what happened to you. I thought perhaps you might have changed your mind about becoming a soldier and had gone back to tending cows again.

"Well, I sure am delighted to meet you again," he concluded meaningly.

While Peck had been speaking, Jack had remained rigidly at attention as all good plebes are required to do when upper classmen speak to them. Now he answered nothing and kept looking Peck straight in the eye.

For an instant the first-class man sneeringly sized up the plebe. Then: "So you're a track man, too, are you? I suppose you learned that chasing after cows. Or maybe you used a horse. I don't know. Anyway, you'll never win this race—unless you ride a horse."

The confined anger in Jack was

making his pulse throb. Yet he had learned his soldier lessons well; when a senior talks, say and do nothing, no matter what he says.

Peck laughed. He could see the effect of his words on the Texan.

"What is your name, mister?" he asked.

"Mr. Griffin, sir."

"What! Are you the plebe I've heard rumors about occasionally? Tex Griffin? How stupid of me! I never guessed that he and you were the same one.

"Well, Mr. Griffin, you report around to my room before supper tonight, understand? You and I are going to become better acquainted. I have waited a long time for this opportunity."

Jack had the desire to become "better acquainted," also—with fists.

Lieutenant Graham prevented further conversation. His pleasant voice cried:

"Let's go now, fellows."

The half dozen men who were at the chalk mark which stretched across the track quickly removed their black sweaters and trousers. They stepped forth in their running suits: scanty white shirts and abbreviated pants.

"On your mark!"

The six sought their holes. Jack's brain was afire with determination. His lips were closed tightly. If he died in doing it, he would beat this sneering, confident first-class man beside him.

"Get ready!"

The six went down on their fours.

"Set!"

The six tensed their bodies, ready to spring forward.

Crack!

The starter's pistol roared in the ears of the six. They sprang forward like suddenly unleashed hounds after a fox.

V.

When the first turn of the track had been reached Jack found himself well in the lead. The new, sharp spikes in his shoes were tearing up the cinders nicely. They gave him a feeling of confidence. He lifted his chin, expanded his chest, and drew in deep lungfuls of cool air.

He felt wonderful. There was joy in running, especially when one was ahead of the crowd. He was working off his anger, his fury against Peck, by running swiftly. He would show him —he would beat Peck so badly—Peck would have a little more respect for the West after this race—and he wouldn't be beaten by means of a horse either—just good, straight running.

The first lap.

Jack's flying heels were pounding into the cinders.

The second lap.

He had not slackened his pace since he started out.

Once, on the third lap, he had glanced hastily over his shoulder. He saw the other five runners a full three-quarter lap behind him. The five were sticking pretty much together in a group. Leading them Jack recognized Peck.

"This is easy," Jack thought. "At this rate, Peck will be so far behind by the end of the mile that he'll need a horse to get in."

He was nearing the end of the fourth lap when Jack began to experience difficulties. It was becoming constantly harder for him to catch his breath. His legs were beginning to feel like lead.

Yet, when he passed by the starting line, where Lieutenant Graham waited, stop-watch in hand, he was still running very swiftly.

Amid the roaring in his ears Jack heard the lieutenant's voice shout something. But it was unintelligible. Jack kept on.

Now iron bands were tightening about his chest. The lead in his legs was becoming heavier and heavier. A mist swam before his eyes.

A slim form flitted past him. The

form was running smoothly and easily. Jack knew without having seen—the form belonged to the first-class man, Bob Peck.

Desperately Jack's will endeavored to spur on his legs. He *must* overtake that flying form in front of him. But the iron bands about his chest were becoming tighter. They were squeezing his heart out. There was a ton of lead in each leg.

By the sixth lap others had crept up on him, passed him by, running smoothly. With strained lips and clenched teeth Jack counted them. One—two—three. A little interval—then, *four*. After him, the last man. He was the last man!

The seventh lap.

Running had become an unbelievable torture for him. There was no room at all in his constricted chest for a heart. Breath whistled between his dried teeth. And, all the while, the runners up ahead of him were becoming more and more distant. But he had lost all desire or care to be up with them.

Eighth lap.

Oh, Lord, if this race would only end! The last grilling lap, only a quarter of a mile. Yet to Jack, suffering damnable tortures, it seemed that it might as well have been the distance to the moon.

Subconsciously he understood that now he was alone in the race. The first, Bob Peck, had long since crossed the line. The others, in short intervals after, had followed him in.

Still Jack kept on. The cords in his neck stood out like living snakes under the skin. His face was nothing but a mask of pain. He was not running now; he was stumbling along. His spiked shoes, somehow, kept to the cinder track.

If only he could stop, to ease the terrible pain, to breathe, to cease struggling to lift those leaden legs! He just could not make them move any longer.

Yet his indomitable will forced him on. He might lose the race to Bob Peck. He might come in last. But—never would he quit. That was not what he had learned back home—in the West.

The lowest, worst cow-puncher on his father's ranch would never quit any sort of competition, no matter what pain or penalty was imposed, until the end was reached. And if he should quit now, before these "Easterners" and Peck, could he hold his head up when he went back to the "boys" of the ranch?

The last turn; he was on the home stretch.

He saw indistinct shapes and round white blotches across the track in front of him. He was going to run right into them. Why didn't they get out of the way?

He swerved to avoid them. They reached out to grasp him. He struggled to get away. He staggered, stumbled, and fell—down, down—

He opened his eyes. His stomach was bothering him. He felt nauseated. There was a vile taste in his mouth. But—he could breathe. And his legs were at rest.

Looking down at him was Lieutenant Graham. His face was kindly. Behind the lieutenant were several curious cadets.

"How do you feel now, Griffin?" asked Graham.

Jack's voice was weak as he answered huskily:

"All right, sir."

Jack wished to lie back in the warm blankets in which he was wrapped, and sleep. He wished that he was alone in the world. What a fine showing he had made! He had started out so grandly at the start. He had been so cocky.

But the finish! He winced. He not only had been beaten badly and laughably, but—also—he had fainted, actually passed out, at the end.

From Jack's face Lieutenant Gra-

ham divined what was going on in his mind.

"First race you've ever run, isn't it, Griffin?" he asked.

Without waiting for Jack to reply, Graham went on:

"You're just about what I need for this two-mile. You've got all the speed in the world—and pluck too, which counts a helluva lot in this track business. With some training on how to use that speed to the best advantage, we might give the Navy a surprise this June."

Jack could not believe his ears. The coach still thought that he was a good runner after the exhibition he had just put up! Jack knew; the coach was only being kind. Over the shoulder of Coach Graham, Jack saw the sneering face of Peck, the winner of the race.

Strength returned more quickly to Jack's body. If what the coach said was true, then Jack Griffin would train and train, and in the next race Peck might not come off so successfully.

Jack recalled that he had to report to Peck's room before supper. He still felt a little shaky; but, shaky or not, he made up his mind that the late afternoon would find him reporting there.

VI.

At five thirty that afternoon a plebe dog-trotted down the polished hall of the second floor of the Twenty-Eighth Division, North Barracks. As he went he thought to himself: "If any one had told me, a year ago, that I would be trotting around meekly to the room of a man like Peck, I would have laughed out loud. What would 'Old Jack' Griffin and the men of the ranch think of it?"

He arrived at his destination: black numerals "2823" on a gray door. His gray cap came off, his hands smoothed his hair, his shoes polished their toes on the gray-clad calves of his leg. He was ready to report to the first-class man, Peck.

Cap still in hand, he quietly opened the door and stepped inside.

There were several upper classmen in the square, barren, scrupulously clean room. Among them Jack recognized Peck and his roommate, Bill Everest, who had held Peck in check that day on the train.

"Sir," began Jack, addressing Peck, "Cadet Griffin reports to Mr. Peck as ordered."

The first-class man stopped talking to look at the new arrival. Bill Everest seemed disinterested; even, perhaps, slightly irritated.

"So you are here at last, are you?" greeted Peck sarcastically. "Well, I'm glad to see that you are more prompt than this afternoon."

Not a flicker of emotion passed over Jack's face, though he fully understood that Peck was pointedly referring to the promptness of his finish in the race that afternoon. Peck grinned. He turned to his comrades.

"Gentlemen," he began in the attitude of a blasé circus exhibitor, "let me introduce you to a real live cowboy from the wild and woolly West, the only one in captivity in the United States Corps of Cadets."

All the upper classmen save Bill Everest grinned broadly and in anticipation at Peck's remarks. They expected that they were in for an ordinary "kidding a plebe" session. But when they saw the plebe's expression their faces became more serious.

The plebe was not taking the fun-making lightly.

"Mr. Tex Griffin is his name," continued Peck, "and he's the cat's hinges when it comes to broncho-bustin', hog-tyin' a steer, and making the old redskin bite the dust, aren't you, mister?"

Jack did not deign a reply. But observers could see the color mounting into his cheeks.

The first-class man went on:

"Tex is quite a runner, too. Come on, mister, show us how to win the two mile."

For several seconds Jack remained motionless.

"Go ahead!" cried Peck more sharply.

Slowly, Jack began to double time in place. His feet rose and fell rhythmically, his arms swung across his chest.

His gray-blue eyes never wavered an instant from Peck's brown ones. The first-class man was beginning to become disconcerted. Bill Everest, his whole attitude showing disgust, had walked to the window and was looking down into the Area below. The remaining first-class men in the room were becoming a bit bored, if not a little displeased.

Peck decided on something else, something more exciting.

"The race is over, mister. You came in last—as usual."

Jack ceased to double time. The red anger-color had practically receded from his face. He had come to the conclusion that he did not even hate Peck. All that he could find in his heart was disgust with him, and pity that such a fine school should harbor such a poor man.

"Grab a broom, Tex. Here's a belt. Now, make believe that the broom is a very vicious, and very wild buckin' broncho. The belt is your whip. Now go to it. Show us an exhibition of a cowboy bustin' a broncho. Put lots of punch in it, and make it good. Don't try to fool me, because I know a little about horses myself."

Jack secured the broom, and took the belt from Peck's hands.

Now that he had discovered that he did not hate Peck—the man was unworthy of hatred—he was willing to submit to the ridiculous horse-play. After all, he had done as much for other upper classmen at their request, but they had demanded it in a spirit of fun, and within the traditional rights of upper classmen to derive a certain amount of amusement from plebes. But Jack knew that Peck was doing it to belittle him, to punish him for what had happened on the train.

With energy and skill, Jack entered whole-heartedly into the pantomime. Astride the broom, he "galloped" furiously the length of the room. His "horse" bucked, rose on its hind feet, twirled, danced, and pranced.

The upper classmen, seeing the change in the plebe's attitude, were relieved. They were seeing a rare, different show. Like the good sports they were, they entered into the spirit of the game.

"Ride 'em, cowboy!" shrilled one enthusiastically.

Jack's "horse" came down to a sudden halt. A wave of homesickness swept over him. That "ride 'em, cowboy" brought vivid memory pictures of another day, in another distant, well-loved land, the day he had broken Black Devil, and had heard that old encouraging cry while precariously atop the black stallion's glistening back.

He did not have time to linger long in memories. The upper classmen were clamoring for more.

Obediently, Jack's "horse" renewed its antics to unseat its rider. The broom, at the end of the handle, swished the floor unmercifully. Still, the "cowboy" rode the slender stick, and lashed lustily with his belt.

"Look out, mister! He's getting the better of you!" cried an upper classman gleefully.

"Oh, no, he's not, sir!" replied Jack, laughing himself, and grasping the slender broomhandle tightly about the "neck."

Suddenly, the "horse" gave forth an ominous crack. The broom handle had broken into halves.

With face sober, sad, and dignified, Jack elaborately "dismounted" from his erstwhile "horse."

He approached Peck with a grave expression. Making a courteous bow, and presenting the belt, he said:

"Sir, the 'horse' is broken."

The upper classmen roared with

laughter. They held on to their sides and shouted. Even Bill Everest grinned with a pleased expression. Peck was getting the worst of this endeavor to belittle the man from the West.

Peck's face was black. He was almost beside himself with rage. This damned "nobody" from Texas was making an ass out of him, Bob Peck, his social and intellectual superior.

"Come off the laughing, mister!" he snapped nastily.

Instantly the smile faded from Jack's face. He stood seriously and respectfully at attention.

"You know your Western stuff all right," continued the first-class man. "Now, let's see what kind of manners you have out there. I've often heard that you cowboys eat with your knives. Tell me, if you were at a formal dinner, the names of the forks at your plate in order of use."

Peck was sure that he had the plebe at a disadvantage. He had brought the subject upon ground with which he was thoroughly familiar. There are more ways of skinning a cat than one. And nothing is more apt to make people feel small than the exposing their ignorance of manners.

The rest of the upper classmen waited hopefully for the plebe to speak. They liked him very much, and they were expecting him to turn the tables on Peck again.

But Jack had never been to a formal dinner in his life. The most forks he had ever used at one meal had been two. And the both of them had seemed alike.

"I don't know, sir."

Peck had expected the answer.

"That's just about the size of it!" he said, with a sneer. He turned to the upper classmen. "This country is too democratic. Now, for instance, here we are at the military school of the nation. The masses have always looked up to us as leaders.

"We are supposed to be selected men—the cream of the young manhood of the country, physically, socially, and every other way. But—how can we expect to maintain that standard when indiscriminating or ignorant Congressmen continue to thrust such people upon us?"

Jack's anger was rising again. It was rapidly nearing the danger point. He knew to whom Peck was referring in his speech. And, if you want to get a Texan mad, tell him that he is not as good as anybody else.

Peck turned to Jack.

"I suppose you wouldn't even know what kind of suit to wear to your own father's funeral."

The safety valve of Jack's anger was completely blown to pieces. He might have been able to take all the talk about social distinction without a murmur. But—that sneer about wonderful, white-haired "Old Jack's" funeral was too much for any plebe to take from any first-class man.

Jack's fist shot out swiftly. Peck had been on the watch for it. He had expected—even hoped for—it. He dodged, and countered with his right.

Neither blow landed. The cadets in the room had rushed forward, and seized the two men.

Bill Everest turned away from the window.

"Let them go to it," he advised. "It's got to come off some time. And Peck has sure been aching for all he's going to get."

Indeed, the cadets were glad to release the struggling men they held. They could not have kept them from each other much longer anyway.

Strange to say, the sympathy was entirely for the plebe. Peck, although a good athlete, was not popular. Snobbishness and sneers can never be counted upon to win many friends.

Being an athlete, Peck had a wiry physique, despite his slender frame. In addition, he was no novice in the art of boxing.

Jack Griffin, on the other hand, was the stronger of the two. Range days

and nights, roping steers, riding horses, rough-and-tumble combats with the men accounted for it. But he was no finished boxer.

Peck knew that the advantage was on his side. He judged his opponent warily. Awaited his chance. And then, *biff!*

Meanwhile, the men in the room had been busy pushing furniture aside so that the combatants might have a cleared space in which to maneuver.

The fight was going against the plebe. He was strong. He was game. But the superior skill of the first-class man was telling heavily.

Jack reeled backward from a blow smartly planted on his nose. Bright blood trickled down over his lip. He quickly brushed it aside with the back of his fist. His gray-blue eyes were gleaming dangerously.

Peck laughed.

"Had enough—Tex?" he sneered.

Jack made no reply. His lips closed in a tight line. Was he to be beaten twice in one day—once in the race; the second time in hand-to-hand combat—by this sneering, slim, superior Easterner? The nails of Jack's fingers bit into his palms. Peck would have to kill him to lick him.

Realizing that he could not hope to win by merely boxing Peck, Jack decided to rush him, to clinch, and settle the matter in the good old rough-and-tumble method of the cowboy.

He awaited his opportunity.

Peck feinted with his right, and jabbed with his left. Brushing aside the outstretched arm, Jack closed in.

The first-class man unmercifully rained blows on the plebe's lowered head. His short uppercuts slashed through Jack's guard to land joltingly on his chin.

Still Jack pushed forward, his fists, all the while, moving back and forth like pistons.

No man could have withstood such a furious onslaught without giving way. Peck stepped backward in an attempt to free himself of this man suddenly turned wildcat. He took two steps to the rear; then three. And still, Jack bored away.

Suddenly one of the observers of the fight cried:

"Look out!"

The warning came too late. A small wooden box, used to store rags and cleaning materials, lay in the backward path of the retreating first-class man. His foot came down upon it. He felt himself going, and grasped at his adversary for support. Jack, mistaking his purpose, shook him off. Peck crashed to the hard composition floor.

He cried aloud in agony as he fell.

The upper classmen rushed to his assistance. Jack withdrew to one side, his eyes still blazing, waiting for Peck to rise.

But the first-class man continued to sit on the floor. He held on to his ankle with both hands. His face was contorted with pain.

"Damn you!" he shouted at the startled Jack. "You've broken my ankle."

Jack felt a sudden tremor in his heart. It was one thing to engage in combat with a first-class man. That was bad enough. But, to break his ankle—

Bill Everest, who was kneeling beside his roommate, turned a serious face up to meet Jack's anxious gaze.

"You'd better beat it, Griffin. Don't worry. I'll take care of this. But you had better keep your mouth shut about it."

The upper classmen looked soberly at Jack's troubled face as he prepared to leave the room. As he was going out the door, he heard Peck's rather high-pitched voice screaming:

"You cowardly Western jackass! You did it on purpose. You knew the damned box was there. You saw a good chance to bang up my legs so I couldn't run any more. You—"

Jack started. He had not thought of that phase of it before. Not only

had he, a plebe, broken a first-class man's ankle, but also the ankle of the best two-miler the Academy had.

There was a great deal to worry about. First, if Peck should tell the doctors at the hospital how he came by a broken ankle, there would soon be one plebe less in West Point. Fighting among cadets was something absolutely taboo.

Secondly, when the upper classmen in the Corps heard that the ankle of the best two-miler had been broken in a fight with a plebe, they were not going to be any too well disposed toward that plebe.

VII.

DAYS passed.

For a time there was a great deal of talk about the fight in Peck's room. Some hot-headed, indignant upper classmen gathered together in groups in various rooms evenings after supper, when there was time to gossip, and heatedly agreed that "this bolshevik plebe" should be given "an old-time formation that he'd remember."

However, these upper classmen for the most part were yearlings, not so recently removed from the abject state of plebedom themselves, and consequently were overloud and overready to subjugate any plebe who did not show exact, deferential behavior.

Nothing ever came of these indignation meetings; except that the Corps as a whole took more notice of this "cowboy" plebe, the general attitude toward him remained just about the same.

Jack suspected that Bill Everest had something to do with it. Peck was not a great favorite with the Corps. He was cheered in the two-mile, but outside of the races, few had much to do with him. So, if Everest passed the word that Peck's misfortune was due to his own fault, and not the plebe's, then the Corps was satisfied.

For days after the fight, Jack lived with worry. Each time that the officer-of-the-day entered the division of barracks, Jack's heart would beat faster. Would the O. D. call out his name next? Would there be an order shouted up the stairs to the fourth floor, "plebe heaven," commanding that Mr. Griffin report to the commandant at once?

Such an order could mean but one thing. The academic authorities had learned of the fight. However, each O. D. entering the "div" had called off a name other than Jack's—a special delivery letter, package, or a telegram for the cadet whose name was shouted—and then had left the division.

In this, too, Bill Everest had had a hand. By talking, then arguing, and finally by threatening, he had convinced Peck that he had better remain silent at the hospital as to the cause of his injury.

And, when the first track meet came to West Point, the Corps of Cadets saw one of the most thrilling races in years, and realized that a new star had been added to the track firmament. Tex Griffin won the two-mile.

That, in itself, was not remarkable, but, in a hair-splitting finish, he had beaten the intercollegiate champion two-miler to the tape. That was cause for celebration. That was cause for Navy to worry.

Jack himself could hardly realize how it happened. True, for days and days prior to the race he had given himself entirely to training. Ever, Lieutenant Graham's speculative eye had watched him.

Now and then he would give a bit of advice. At other times he would talk seriously to the young Texan.

Several times, even, Coach Graham, himself a famous two-miler of an earlier day, had paced Jack the whole eight laps. And, bit by bit, Graham's smile had broadened as he watched his "cowboy" runner pace his daily practice.

From his first race on throughout the glorious, zestful spring, Jack romped to the tape every Saturday, gathering five points on his chest.

Then there came a time when track practice became more grim. Lieutenant Graham's face was field for fewer smiles. A successful season was behind him. But the ultimate success or failure—of the entire season was still ahead—Navy.

The only track meet left—Navy. The only thought of the Corps—beat Navy, avenge last year's defeat. The one ambition of every member of the team—" place " against Navy.

The year's academic work was ending. June week and graduation were close at hand. But scant attention was being paid to either. Instead of such topics as " math," conversation evenings was about " seconds—feet—first place in the two mile—third in the hammer throw—"

As close as could be figured by comparing the season's records of the two academies, and by comparing the records of the individual stars, it was decided that the meet would be a tight squeeze, the winner not having *very* many points to throw away.

Meanwhile a newcomer reported for track practice. Bob Peck began training furiously for the two-mile. His ankle, which had not been broken, but had only had the ligaments strained, was completely healed.

Peck's great ambition resulted from two causes. One to make his letter, the coveted, hard-earned " A." For four long years Peck had suffered the labor and discomforts of track training for a single purpose, to win the " A."

His sacrifices had not been so that West Point might win her battles. No. They had been so that Bob Peck might appear on the golf links of the country club back in his home town nonchalantly wearing a huge black sweater bearing a gray " A."

But for four long years the A had eluded him. He had been always " pretty good," but not quite good enough. The great Calhoun had stood in his way. It was upon this year, his last year, that Peck had planned.

Calhoun was gone. Just when the A had appeared to be within his grasp this damned plebe had to come along and ruin his ankle. However, Peck still saw a chance to win the A. A first place against the Navy awarded it.

The second cause of his ambition was—Griffin. Peck had heard, with spleen, the gossip about Jack's victories. All through his enforced stay in the hospital he had been chafing to be out, to put this " cowboy " athlete in a place where he belonged. Peck doubted the tales of Jack's speed. He had beaten him once in a pitiful, ignominious race. He knew he could do it again.

When they met during practice the first-class man appeared not even to know that the plebe existed. This pleased Jack perfectly, as he wished to take no more notice of Peck than the latter did of him.

Both trained religiously. Both had their purposes. Peck—to win an " A," and at the same time, humble the Westerner. Jack—to beat the Navy.

VIII.

DAYS to the Navy meet were getting less and less in number. Excitement at West Point was becoming more intense. To make the event seem closer still, girls from all parts of the country were beginning to arrive for the social festivities which were always attendant upon a clash between Army and Navy.

Track practice now was never devoid of spectators. The warm, lazy afternoons of spring would bring cadets, in snow-white trousers, gray, swallow-tail coats gleaming with buttons of brass, to look on and cheer.

With these soldiers in the making were laughing, bright-eyed girls. The soft, clinging spring dresses and wraps of them drew the eyes and attention of many a perspiring athlete.

Perhaps the magic of young, perishable femininity in spring had greater

effect on no one than it had on Jack Griffin. Never before had he seen such girls, the women of the East, gracious, poised, and fragile. Suddenly he felt awkward, rough. He had come from a far, uncouth country into the presence of goddesses.

In his heart there rose a desire which he could not name. First along he attributed it to the usual effects of spring. But later, he knew, he envied his brother cadets their nonchalant companionship with those delicate, fair creatures known as " femmes."

At the same time that he realized that he wanted a " femme," like other cadets, to talk to, to stroll with on Flirtation Walk, to dance with at graduation hop, Jack resolutely put the subject from his mind. The moon may be desired, but one would be a fool to pine for it. The nearest girl whom Jack knew was a thousand and some odd miles away.

One afternoon Coach Graham called his two milers together.

" Gentlemen, I am going to give you a treat this afternoon. Instead of pacing the same old cinder track, I want you all to take a run around Flirtation Walk. I think the change will do you good. Start at Cullum Hall and come out in back of the old hotel."

His eye went from one to the other of the runners about him. He was checking up to see that all his men had come out for practice that afternoon.

He missed one.

" Where's Peck this afternoon?"

A first-class man replied:

" His femme came down to-day, and I heard him say that he wasn't coming to practice. They were going for a walk."

" Humph!" remarked Lieutenant Graham. " Well, the rest of you start off. After the run you can go in. That will be all for to-day."

Nearly every college has its Lovers' Lane. That of West Point is appropriately named " Flirtation Walk." Well out of sight below the level of the plain where the academy buildings stand, and quarters, and common roads of traffic, the foliaged path of Flirtation takes its secluded course beside the gray rocks which edge the winding Hudson.

Running easily, Jack was enjoying the rare privilege of the afternoon. It was his first visit to Flirtation. Plebes were not allowed to set their unsophisticated feet upon this very sophisticated path, except when touring it for some athletic practice.

The beauty of it entranced him. Texas, with its hot suns and dust, could not be compared to it. Above him, through the young green of the trees, he caught glimpses of pale blue sky. On one side of him an occasional opening through wild bushes gave him a peek at ancient gray rocks serenely cooling their feet in the laughing blue riplets of the Hudson.

He took in huge lungfuls of scented spring air. What a day! What a place! Flirtation Walk. How aptly named! It needed two—a man and a girl—to appreciate most the romance of it.

Some mocking god must have divined his thoughts, and set the stage which met his eyes.

The path took an abrupt turn about a huge bowlder jutting out of a hill. As Jack made the turn he halted suddenly.

A cadet and a girl were standing beneath a large rock which extended from the hillside over the path. The cadet held the girl in close embrace. Her face was tilted up to his, expectant, awaiting the kiss.

Without needing to be told, Jack realized that he had come upon the storied " Kissing Rock " of Flirtation Walk. Legend had it that should a maid refuse to kiss beneath that rock, the rock would fall. Evidently, the maids passing under it had always been tractable, if not willing.

The two now engaged in testing the old rock were blissfully unconscious of any observer of their love scene.

Jack began to retrace his steps. This was not a scene to which he was accustomed. His cheeks glowed red.

Spikes were crunching into the gravel behind him. The other two who had been behind him were approaching. He must warn them.

The crunching of the gravel had also been heard by the couple under the rock. They sprang apart. With a face of displeasure, the man stared upward at Jack, who had not yet entirely disappeared around the turn.

Startled, Jack recognized Peck.

Peck's first impulse was one of anger.

"What the hell you doing up there—spying?" he called.

At this the girl took hold of his arm, gently remonstrating.

Jack had a sensation as though he were tongue-tied. Finally he managed to get out:

"No, sir."

By this time Jack's comrades in the run appeared around the turn. They glanced curiously at him, and at the couple under the rock, but they passed on without halting or speaking. Every one's business is his own on Flirtation Walk.

Jack joined the column of runners. However, as he neared Peck, the latter called out:

"Wait a minute, Mr. Griffin. I want to speak to you."

Wondering what was going to happen next, Jack stopped and stood at respectful attention in front of the first-class man.

Peck was thoroughly incensed. He could have overlooked, with nothing but a feeling of inward anger, being caught in an embarrassing situation by any one else. But, in regard to Griffin, his prejudiced mind told him only one thing. Griffin had been spying, perhaps laughing up his sleeve at what he saw. Above all things, Peck could not stand being made the object of laughter.

His eyes were mean as he addressed the plebe.

"Don't you know any better than to come sneaking around Flirtation Walk? If you had any manners at all you would have had the delicacy to retire instead of gawking until you were caught. But I suppose that's the way they do it out in the cow country."

Jack made no reply to the abuse heaped upon his head. As at other times the muscles in his arm twitched in their desire to propel retributive fists against the hate-filled face of the first-class man.

Through it all Jack had deep sympathy for the girl. It was easy to see that she was suffering acutely from embarrassment.

From out of the corner of his eye, Jack studied her. He was surprised. She did not at all seem to be the type of girl who would choose Peck for a partner for a stroll on Flirtation Walk. From her appearance, she was the kind of girl men dreamed about meeting some day, yet rarely do.

She was of medium height, and slim. The snow-white of her soft, girlish dress was no whiter than the skin which it bordered. She was hatless, which was lucky for all beholders of her, because the gold of her coiled hair threw back with a feeling of kinship the golden darts of the sun.

For the first time in his life Jack felt his heart thrill with a new, delicious feeling. He knew that the girl standing beside Peck was the femme of all femmes.

Peck now desired to make an explanation to his companion. His voice expressing contempt, he said:

"Margy, this is the 'cowboy' you've heard me speak of from time to time. You can see for yourself that he is all that I said he was."

Desperately Jack wished that the girl was miles away from there at that particular moment. Peck and he alone on Flirtation. His hate for this special brand of "Easterner" and "highfaluting" culture would be assuaged.

The girl herself now entered into the

conversation. Her speech astounded both her escort and Jack Griffin.

She stepped forward and inclined her head at Jack as if Peck's words had been a polished introduction to one of his friends. At the same time she extended her hand.

"I am so glad to know you," she said in a soft, low voice. "I have never been out West, but I hope to go some day. I understand that you have a wonderful country out there.

"Now, we mustn't keep you from your practice any longer. I know how terribly important every minute must be at this time, before a Navy meet."

She smiled at the scowling Peck.

"Perhaps I shouldn't even have kept Bob out this afternoon, even though it is the first opportunity we have had to be together in years. I know how badly he wants to make his A. I want him to make it, too."

She smiled companionably at Jack.

"He promised to let me wear it on my sweater.

"Well, get you gone, Mr. Runner!" she cried gayly. "And," she continued, her voice implying a deeper meaning than her words, "don't mind, please, this little interruption in your practice."

While she was speaking, Jack, like a country boy in his first love experience with a feminine "city boarder," had retained possession of her hand.

Gently she withdrew it, and smiled good-by. Without wasting another look on Peck, Jack turned and took up a run along the path.

IX.

AFTER practice, Jack, once more clad in his somber gray "plebeskins," was walking slowly across the empty Area of South barracks.

His mind was filled with nothing else but this girl of Peck's. What a lovely creature she was! And, what a sport! The way she got around Peck's nastiness, and ended the whole disagreeable scene—

In his memory Jack could see her eyes of deep blue, fighting to make smiles hide her disappointment in Peck. Jack relived again the speech his eyes had had with her eyes. She had appealed. Perhaps she had recognized the sympathy in his.

Then Jack fell to dreaming. If a fellow had a girl like that to take to graduation hop, it wouldn't be so bad. He shook his head rather violently. What nonsense! How could homely old Tex Griffin—a cow-puncher, pure and simple, without the courtly manners of the East which such a girl was accustomed to—ever drag such a girl, providing there even *was* another such a girl?

A hand suddenly clapped on his shoulder startled him out of his dreams.

"Hi, there! Whatcha shaking your head like a mad bull for? Somebody step on your toes?"

Jack turned to look into the smiling face of Bill Everest.

Jack and Bill were on the best of terms. At West Point an upper classman may "recognize" any plebe he desires. This establishes, between the upper classman and the plebe, the regular status quo that exists among upper classmen. "Sir," "mister," and other formalities and conventions are dropped, and an ordinary friendship exists between the two.

Bill Everest had recognized Jack not long after his roommate, Bob Peck, had gone to the hospital.

"How's the old heels?" Bill went on. "Ready to show 'em to the Navy?"

Without waiting for a reply he continued more seriously:

"Say, Tex, how about performing a few real wild West cowboy stunts for the horse show? The committee has deputed me to ask you. We need somebody to do some stunts like that. It will be sort of different from the first-class ride, the artillery drill, and the jumps that they have every year. How about it?"

At first Jack was not very enthusias-

tic. The annual West Point Horse Show, which took place among the June Week activities, was a social event of some prominence. It was sponsored by army officers and cadets of the graduating class.

Horse lovers of Eastern society entered their valued horses in competition with army products for many prizes. The show continued for several days as one of the Commencement attractions. It was well patronized by cadets and their June Week visitors, by military dignitaries and by society.

Jack Griffin had never been forward in displaying what few attainments he had to the general public. But Bill Everest argued so long, and so well, that Jack finally gave his reluctant consent.

He decided, however, to trade in his consent for some information.

"Bill, who is that femme Peck is dragging—the one with the gold hair?"

"Strange to say, she is his *fiancée*. Too bad. She is one peach of a woman. Peck says that they haven't seen each other for some time. She came all the way down here from wherever she's from to see him win the two mile, and see him graduate. Personally, I think—"

Bill's words were interrupted by the ringing voice of a bugle.

"There goes first call for supper, Tex," he broke off hastily. "I've got to beat it. See you later about the horse show."

A few minutes later, marching down to supper, Jack, in the rear rank, keeping his shoulders "squeezed back," and his chin well in, was still thinking about the girl "with the gold hair."

She had come all the way down here to see Peck win the two mile. She was going to wear the A on her sweater. Would it matter to her a great deal if Peck won or lost? She was engaged to him. Why? Did she love him?

Jack's company arrived at the foot of the steps leading into the old, gray mess hall. Still thinking, Jack snatched off his cap, and ran swiftly up the steps. No plebe must walk those steps with his cap on.

X.

"—N—N—N—N
—A—A—A—A
—V—V—V—V
—Y—Y—Y—Y
N-a-a-a-a V-e-e-e-e!"

In one corner of the crowded stands, a small group of midshipmen, making a blue blot on a blanket of gray, flung the "Four N" yell victoriously into the faces of their soldier rivals.

The Corps of Cadets applauded like the gentlemen they were, and then settled back in their seats, anxiously awaiting the next event.

It was a most nerve-racking track meet. First, Army would be ahead. Then, on the small blackboard in front of the stands, some one would do some erasing and marvelous additions. The anguished eyes of the supporters of the Military Academy would see the white sum under "Navy" greater than the white figures under "Army."

And so it went on through the entire meet. The events were becoming less in number. The handful of midshipmen who had accompanied their team from "Crabtown" were gaining confidence as the minutes flew by.

Now, the blackboard yielded:

Navy	64½
Army	61½

It was an ideal day. The heavens were cloudless. Golden sunshine poured down on the circular track, and the long line of crowded stands which faced the starting and ending point for the races.

The center portions of the stands were solid gray, where the Corps sat to cheer on a trailing team. The flanks of the stands were colorful. Civilians, girls in gay summer frocks, filled them to overflowing. It was the last day of May, and June Week was but three days away.

An announcer, a cadet, stepped out

from the group of track officials who were bunched near the starting point. His arms were upraised, holding a paper before his eyes. He slowly paced the lanes of the cinder path, announcing as he went.

"For this race:

"In this lane—Peck, Army.

"In this lane—Jackson, Navy.

"In this lane—Roberts, Army.

"In this lane—Munsey, Navy.

"In this lane—Griffin, Army.

"In this—"

By that time, his voice could no longer be heard. A deafening, steady roar issued from the cadet stands. Excitement was running to a fever pitch.

The two mile was the last race, and the last event. If the Army could take eight out of the nine points given by this race, it would win the meet. But—eight out of nine points! That meant not only winning first place, but also second.

To be sure, Tex Griffin would probably come in first. But—who would come in second. The best Navy two-miler was no slouch; he was almost as good as the incomparable Tex himself.

In their hearts, the Corps already was beginning to feel the deadening effects of defeat creeping. If only the Army had another runner like Tex, some one who could take the much needed second place. Peck, probably the next-best two-miler to Tex, was not the Navy man's equal. Hadn't the midshipman come in 'way ahead of Peck in last year's meet?

Down on the track, Jack Griffin jogged around a bit to warm up his legs. A series of thrills were shooting through him. He had not felt that way before the other races of the season. Perhaps it was because this was the Navy meet, and its outcome was dependent upon this race.

A thousand mighty voices were shouting his name.

"Tex—Tex—Tex."

The starter's shrill whistle cut the noise.

As in a dream which had for its background the confused roaring of the excited stands, Jack moved toward the lane of the track which he was to occupy at the start of the race. Through a haze of unreality he saw Peck calmly taking his place at the outer lane. Next to Peck was a youth wearing a white jersey bearing a large blue N. An enemy.

The starter was issuing instructions. Last minutes.

A sudden, momentary panic seized Jack. His eyes leaped wildly to the frenzied, imploring stands. He felt for a slippery piece of enamel suspended on a chain from his neck. A tooth "from the gamest mustang thet ever rode the sage."

A vision appeared before his eyes. He seemed to see some one in the stands. Or, did he actually see her? Hair of gold, blue eyes that appealed, a wistful smile—

"On your mark, gentlemen," came from the starter.

"Get ready.

"Set."

The pistol cracked, and about a dozen runners leaped.

What a racket assailed the heavens! The stands rocked. In every cadet heart there was a prayer. The little group of men in blue glued their eyes on their best man, and kept them there. If he ran true to form, and came in second, the Navy would win.

Roberts, the wily Army decoy, led the runners. He knew his business. His pace was fast, too fast to allow him, or any one keeping up with him, enough strength to complete the race. His game was to entice the Navy star to keep up with him.

When Roberts could run no longer at his starting speed, he would drop behind, content with his work, for the Navy man also would be too spent to place in the race.

But Roberts ran alone. It was too old a trick to catch Navy.

A good distance behind Roberts was

Jack. He was running with his normal stride. Close behind him was the Navy's star. And behind him was Peck. These three in front, the rest straggled out behind.

The Corps groaned. They feared they saw the handwriting on the wall. Here was going to be the finish of the race: Army, first; Navy, second; Army, third. And—Navy would win the meet.

The runners pounded steadily on. Second lap, Roberts still in the lead, with the same three behind him.

Third lap.

There was a lull in the cheering of the crowd. Five more laps to go.

As Jack's body swung rhythmically along, he had time to wonder a bit. He thought of Peck behind him. The memory of his first race flashed into his mind. This one was so different. Then, he had wanted so badly to defeat Peck. But now, he did not care at all. In fact, he would be well satisfied if fate would let Peck come in first and him second.

Fifth lap.

Roberts, panting, with face drawn up into a grotesque mask from pain, had dropped out. There was a clear field ahead of Jack. However, he continued his steady pacing. He had learned, since that first race of his.

The sixth lap suddenly put an end to the lull in the stands. As one, the Corps of Cadets came to its feet, screaming and imploring. Slowly, the Navy man had crept up on Jack. His toes were now meeting Jack's heels. Frenzied again, the Corps tried to warn their hope of his impending danger.

Yet, Jack's spikes still met the cinders with undisturbed regularity. The Navy man breasted him for a time, and then, slowly, oh, so slowly, forged —ahead.

The Corps groaned aloud. Navy was going to take first place in this, too!

Meanwhile, another runner was beginning to call attention to himself. Peck, following the Navy man's lead, was now crowding Jack's heels. For a time, it looked as though he were going to pass him, but Peck could not quite make it. He had to content himself with tagging desperately behind.

The last lap.

One by one, the runners passed the original point of starting. Navy, in the lead. A few feet behind, Jack. At Jack's heels, Peck.

The faces of the runners were commencing to become contorted with heartbreaking pain. They were forcing their unwilling bodies to the utmost for the finish.

All were running with less speed than at the start of the race. To the cadets, the Navy athlete seemed to be a veritable Mercury, eating up the remaining short distance with alarming strides; while the Army runners were snails, with ton weights tied to their feet.

But Jack had not let the Navy man take the lead with his own stride for nothing. Calling on his last bit of reserve strength, Jack's feet tore into the cinders more rapidly.

As if Jack were a magnet possessing the power to draw human beings after him, he seemed to draw Peck along with him. When Jack went faster, so did Peck. As they steadily crept up upon the Navy runner, they maintained their relative distance.

The watching throngs were going mad. The Navy runner heard the spikes bite into the ground behind him. He tried to spur himself on to greater speed. It was useless; he was giving his all.

They were on the home stretch. When seconds seemed like hours, and three hundred yards seemed like three feet, Jack nosed into the front, and began putting distance between him and Navy.

Then, Peck, cutting his heart out as he did so, went by the Navy man.

What pandemonium now broke loose! To it all previous noise was like a popgun to the thunders of heavy

artillery. Army was going to win first and second places. Good old Tex was coming in first again in the two mile.

Stay. Was he? By inches, Peck seemed to be gaining on him. Yet it did not seem that Peck was doing the gaining. It appeared that Jack was running more slowly. Was he tiring? Would he be able to hold out to the finish, and beat the Navy man?

At last, when Peck was abreast of Jack, the Corps realized what was happening. Griffin was *giving* the race to the first-class man.

The Corps roared its approval. Mighty fine of a plebe to give up a sure first place in a Navy meet in order that a first-class man, running his last race for the Academy, might win it.

Bill Everest, in the stands, thought differently. He murmured to himself.

"Tex is sure heaping coals of fire on Peck's head! I wonder what Peck will think about this."

Shaking his head, Bill continued: "Tex shouldn't have done it. There's going to be some trouble over it."

However, there was one who knew the real reason why he deliberately let Peck win first place. That one, just then, was crossing the line, winning second place. As he did so, through the haze of sweat in his eyes, he saw coiled hair, hair golden like the sun. It would make her happy that Peck won the race. She would wear the A proudly.

In the deepening twilight, long after the shouting crowds had flowed away, a mute blackboard, facing barren, wooden rows of seats, told a story:

Navy	65½
Army	69½

However, little would a casual observer of that blackboard know of the personal story of the race that won the meet.

XI.

JUNE WEEK:

Endless parades; endless dances; endless lines of fond parents and proud sweethearts; first-class men, with chests raised like pouter pigeons.

Every afternoon, the center of activity was the horse show. To it in droves, gravitated parents and girls. Every group buzzed about at least one first-class man, who was wearing, for the last week, his gray and buttons of brass.

The immense, oblong stone riding hall was always full. The musty balconies, which ran the long lengths of the hall, were crowded with fluffy girls, satisfied fathers, and complacent mothers.

The balconies looked down upon a huge rectangular, barren area, covered deep with tanbark.

In one corner of the hall, on the tanbark, a number of boxes coursed the wall. These boxes were for the élite: the visiting generals, Congressmen, and society.

Indeed, on this particular afternoon, two European crowned heads, in the center box, were eagerly drinking in all they saw.

A band blared military marches. The smell of horses was in the air. There was the undercurrent of excitement usual to horse shows.

Out in the center of the hall were some tables and chairs. These were occupied by the judges, sophisticated, old horsemen, who judged both skill in riding, and horseflesh.

An event was going on: "Jumping—for cadets of the first class."

Jack Griffin was thrilled with it all. It was good to feel a horse between one's knees again. He was glad that he had accepted the invitation of the committee to do some stunts for them. His coiled rope was hanging from his saddle. He was going to do a few rope tricks, and some lassoing.

He smiled a little apologetically to himself. Gosh! If these Easterners could only see a real cowboy—say, like "Old Jack," for instance—do his tricks, they would see something worth while.

As he rode along the hall, the pomp and splendor of the crowd fascinated him. He had seen rodeos back home, but never one like this. How his father, and the boys on the ranch would open their eyes at a sight like this! This was a rodeo de luxe! This was "class." This was society.

Jack Griffin, for the occasion, in flaming cowboy togs which the committee had procured for him from some theatrical furnishing company, came in for no little attention, and open-eyed stares, himself.

His act was next, after the first-class men decided who was the best jumper among them. Until he was called to the center of the hall, he was going to place himself at the far end to be out of observation.

His course took him by the thronged boxes. Conversation in them practically ceased as he went by. The prince and princess gazed at him in wonder. Some one had whispered the magic word "cowboy" to them.

Paying no attention, Jack kept his head and eyes to the front. He was so close to the boxes, that if he turned and put out his hand, he could touch those in the front row.

Suddenly, he felt uncomfortable. He had a feeling that some one was looking at him with more interest than that of curiosity, That some one was impelling him to look up.

Finally, he did, and looked full into two eyes of blue. He recognized her. Her golden hair was done more softly around her head than it had been that day on Flirtation Walk.

Beside her sat an elderly, distinguished-looking gentleman with fast-graying hair. Him Jack took to be her father.

When he looked up, the girl smiled at him, and waved a tiny handkerchief.

Thrusting Bob Peck out of his mind with distaste, Jack smiled back at her. Then in another instant, his horse carried him beyond the row of boxes.

Reaching his position at the far end of the hall, Jack turned his horse to watch the closing contest between first-class men at the hurdles.

Rider after rider jumped his horse over the high hurdles. The first-class men showed splendidly the results of their three years' training with the horses. In spite of the fact that he came from a horse country, Jack had to admire.

Another rider going over the hurdles drew his attention. He thought he recognized him! It was Peck.

Like everything else that he did, Peck rode well. He sat on his horse easily, and handled him with consummate skill.

Jack thought of the girl in the row of boxes down the hall. His heart became heavy. Peck's girl. And, of all the girls in the world, East and West, she had to be *the* girl in Jack Griffin's heart.

Jack struggled manfully to put her smiling face, her golden hair, out of his heart. Even though she was only Peck's girl, that placed the ban on her for Jack. He was no woman stealer.

But her image persisted. Now, wouldn't he be the happiest *hombre* a-goin' if he could wind up his plebe year, with all its trials, defeats, and victories, at the great graduation ball with a girl—with Margy! She would represent something to work for during the next three years. And, she had said that she hoped to see the West some day.

With jaundice in his eye, he saw Peck being presented with the ribbon of first prize in the jumping contests by the judges.

Then, to make him more miserable Peck grandly rode to the boxes, with applause raining down upon him from the balconies, and neatly halted his horse.

He swept off his cap to the girl waiting there for him. He bowed.

Jack could stand no more. Luckily, the snorting of horses, the rattling of chains, the rumble of artillery wheels

furnished him with something to which he could give his attention.

A battery of field artillery had just entered the hall through the doors at Jack's end.

It was a resplendent unit of war. It was the crack battery of the United States Military Academy Field Artillery Detachment turned out to go through a drill in the riding hall, and give the spectators a thrill.

Everything about the battery was polished until it glistened: the silky coats of the heavy horses, the leather harness, the nickel chains. The guns, the stern, barking dogs of war, were freshly painted, as were the great lumbering wheels upon which they rested. Even the helmets of the soldiers, the drivers, who sat upon the horses, were nickeled over, and gleamed like balls of silver, truly a glorious display.

Whether it was the sudden blaring of the band, which had just started up after a rest, or what, no one knew. Anyway, the leading team began to act up in their traces. Four horses, attached to the first gun, started to pull in different directions at the same time. Thoroughly frightened, being shouted at and kicked by their drivers, they saw that those tactics netted them nothing.

The horses knew of but one thing to do—to run.

Off they started at a mad gallop. Sixteen thundering hoofs pounding into the tanbark, a heavy, dangerously swaying gun rolling after them.

The drivers did their best. But it was to no avail. A runaway artillery team is a formidable thing to stop. One driver was pitched to the ground, where he lay still. The remaining one heroically managed to stick to his post, pulling frantically at the straps.

The watching crowd smiled in approval. This was something new for their entertainment.

But that smile changed to a gasp of horror.

When Bob Peck had bowed to Margy, she had leaned forward over the rail of the box, smiling her congratulations. In addition, she had fluttered her vain, little handkerchief at him, much the same as she had done when Jack Griffin rode by.

Unfortunate handkerchief! She had leaned forward too far. The handkerchief escaped from her grasp, and began to flutter slowly to the tanbark. She stretched forward in an effort to retrieve it.

She had been too quick, and had stretched too far. She felt herself going, and vainly tried to recover her balance. The elderly gentleman with her jumped to help her. He was too late. She tumbled from the box.

In the meantime, the artillery team was rumbling down the hall.

Peck, who had spurred his horse forward to recover the handkerchief, looked up in astonishment at the girl falling from the box.

From where he sat on his horse, Jack saw the whole mishap. The path of the runaway horses pointed directly at her. She, embarrassed by her fall, was getting to her feet. But—her embarrassment blinded her and deafened her to the terrible danger that was bearing down upon her.

Jack dug his spurs into his horse. He prayed that his animal was fast. If only he had Black Devil under him now! The black stallion could catch anything on four legs.

However, a lone horse and rider could make better speed than four artillery horses dragging a heavy gun.

The girl and Peck came into the realization of the danger at the same instant. Women were screaming. Men were shouting.

Margy looked dazed. She did not know which way to run, or what to do. She was alone, on foot, with that awful, thundering team of wild horses bearing down upon her.

Peck rode to her side. He tried to help her mount with him on his horse. He was nervous. The girl was unused to mounting restive horses without aid.

The precious seconds flew by; it was only a matter of a couple of more before the artillery team would be upon them.

Margy, at last realizing that she was unable to mount the horse, clung desperately to Peck, who was having a hard time to manage his horse, now frightened by the noise of the runaway.

Unmercifully Jack dug his spurs into the heaving flanks of his horse. Never in all his life had he ridden so desperately. Yard after yard he gained on the runaway team. Now, he was right behind them. Now, he was abreast of them. His spurs bit deeper into the raw flanks of his horse.

Suddenly, Peck's horse shied. The girl, unable to hang on with her frail strength, dropped back to the tanbark. Peck's horse kept on going, carrying himself—and his rider—out of danger.

The girl tried to run. The team was upon her. Strong men hid their eyes.

A wild whoop rang through the hall. A cowboy would have recognized it as familiar. But, to the uneducated ears of the Easterners, it added to the ghastliness of the affair.

Whooping with all the power in his lungs, Jack cut across the blood-flecked noses of the leading pair of horses of the artillery team. He leaned low in his saddle. His strong arm whipped out, and gathered the fleeing girl up, and on the horse with him.

Meanwhile, his horse had never slackened speed. Still galloping, he sped to a corner of the hall for safety.

There was not a sound from the multitude in the place. Both men and women were too overcome to speak.

Jack brought his steaming horse to a standstill. Gently, he deposited his precious passenger on the tanbark. Peck, waiting to claim her, came forward.

"Margy! Margy! Are you hurt, dearest?"

The girl, white from her experience, looked at him with unutterable scorn. Her lips were bloodless as she spoke.

"Mr. Griffin," she begged, "please take me to my father."

Jack dismounted, and soberly gave her his arm.

She turned to Peck.

"People will call the shying away of your horse an accident which you were helpless to prevent. I shall not say any different. I would be too ashamed. And, you are the man I thought I loved! Robert Peck—I *saw* you spur your horse out of danger!"

Later that afternoon, Jack gazed thoughtfully at the note which he held in his hand. It was written in a heavy, masculine hand:

WEST POINT HOTEL
West Point, N. Y.

DEAR MR. GRIFFIN:

My daughter and I would like you to take dinner with us this evening, if you have no other engagement.

It is impossible for me to express in words on paper how I feel about what you did this afternoon. Won't you try to come over and give me a chance to tell you what I could not, this afternoon?

Most sincerely yours,
JAMES BURTON.

Bill Everest entered the room. He was prepared to hail the "conquering cowboy." He paused on seeing the far-away look in the eyes of Tex.

"What's the matter?" he asked.

"Nothing. I'm going to dinner with Margy Burton."

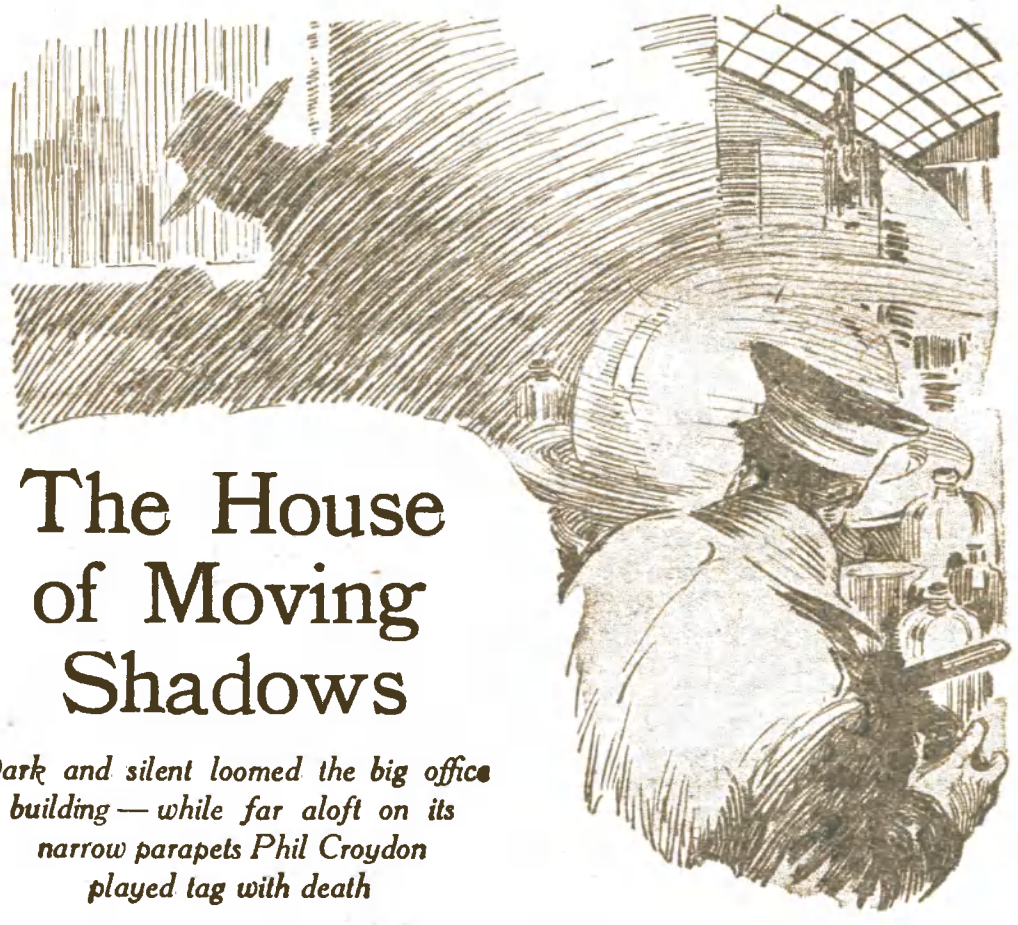
Jack announced the news, startling to him, with much the same awe as he would announce, "I've been elected President of the United States," if he had been elected to that august office.

"That's funny!" Bill said. "I thought Peck was going. But I guess he isn't. He came out to go down to supper with the Corps like me."

Jack did not hear a word Bill was saying. He was recalling an afternoon on Flirtation Walk, and a golden-haired girl saying:

"I have never been out West, but I hope to go some day."

THE END



The House of Moving Shadows

Dark and silent loomed the big office building — while far aloft on its narrow parapets Phil Croydon played tag with death

By GEORGE C. JENKS

STORM clouds had been blotting out the stars in patches ever since Patrolman Phil Croydon left the police station on his tour of duty, and the night now was inky black.

As he paused in his rhythmical tramp along the sidewalk in the light of the street lamp at the corner, Phil glanced downward complacently at his neat new uniform, with its glittering buttons and imposing silver shield.

Then his heart quickened for a beat or two, and he swung his night stick with a flourish, as he reflected that he was the official guardian of all these silent houses on his post, as well as of everybody in them.

Philip Croydon was a "rookie" policeman, and this was his first night detail.

Phil took his job seriously, and he had been deeply impressed by the injunction of the captain at roll call, just before the night squad had filed out, when he wound up a stern warning to his men to be vigilant, with the words:

"And don't forget that each one of you is responsible for anything and everything out of the ordinary that happens on your beat. Dismissed!"

The old-timers on the force had heard this same talk many times and, though they listened respectfully as they stood "at attention" in the charge room, they shook it off as soon as they were outside. After all, it was only a reminder that they were expected to do efficient police duty, and they would do that anyhow.

"It's all right for those fellows," muttered Phil. "But I'm just going to make sure before I go any further."

The new skyscraper, Stonehenge, stood on the corner from which he had just walked away, and he was not quite sure that he had tried the front door. Moreover, he fancied he saw strange moving shadows just there, and—

He countermarched swiftly, and discovered that the shadows were only flickering gleams of light through the glass doors of the big building.

Still Phil was not quite satisfied. Why did the shadows move in that queer way? He tiptoed up the two wide stone steps to peer through the glass into the long hallway.

Why did the shadows move?

At this hour most of the tenants of Stonehenge had gone home. Captains of industry, insurance and real estate agents, architects, high-class tailors, modistes, and even the attachés of Madame Morel's "beauty parlor," on the second floor—all had departed. Two watchmen, with a janitor in the basement, Phil reflected, were alone likely to be moving about in the building at this time of night.

It may be mentioned that an employee of this beauty parlor, an attractive young lady named Ruth Bailey, was a close friend of Phil's. Indeed, he expected to marry her as soon as he had won his first promotion.

Standing close to the doors, he stared into the semidarkness of the lobby, amid which its potted palms and stucco statuary were revealed in ghostly outline by a single electric bulb.

Everything seemed all right, and he was in the act of pulling perfunctorily at the doorknobs when something light and shadowy came gliding down the hall, and in another moment Phil saw that it was a girl.

Then he half choked as he made out that the girl was Ruth Bailey, and that she was beckoning to him frantically.

"For the love o' Mike!" he blurted out. "And the doors are fastened! What is the matter in there? I've *got* to get in!"

He motioned to Ruth to unlock the doors, shouting to her through the glass at the same time.

She shook her head and threw out both hands to indicate that she was helpless, and Phil, motioning to her to stand back, hurled his night stick at one of the doors.

The only thing that saved four or five hundred dollars' worth of plate-glass was the gilded iron filigree work of the grille by which it was protected.

Phil saw there was no time to waste. Ruth was pointing to the foot of the stairway with one hand and beckoning to him with the other. He did not know what it all meant, but he was going to find out right away.

He made a dash for a narrow alley at the side of the building—a mere split in the wall—and gained a rear door in the basement. It gave upon a stone-floored passageway ending in a staircase leading upward. The darkness was slightly relieved by a single electric bulb at the foot of the stairs.

Up the back staircase raced Phil, three at a time, to find himself in the rear of the main entrance hall.

He had barely time to note that Ruth was running toward him from the front doors when she seized him by the arm and exclaimed, in a rapid, gasping whisper:

"Upstairs—top of the house—Druid—robbers, quick! Oh, Phil! I'm so glad you've come! There are two men. They've gone up to Mr. Druid's rooms on the top floor. They're going to rob him! He's alone! And—"

"Yes, I know all about that!" interrupted Phil. "But don't get excited! Tell me! You needn't be scared! Nothing's going to hurt you—now."

"Yes, yes! I know!" she returned, making a desperate effort to calm herself. Then, in short, jerky sentences, she made it all clear.

James Druid, millionaire owner of the Stonehenge Building, occupied the

whole top floor as a bachelor apartment. He lived there alone, save for his Japanese man-of-all-work, Toto, who slept outside, a few blocks away, leaving his employer to himself between eight o'clock at night and the same hour in the morning.

Something of a recluse, a student and a man of fads and eccentricities, Druid each month personally collected the rent from each of his tenants in the big building.

"I see!" broke in Phil, as Ruth came to this point. "This is the first of the month, and he has the rent money he has collected up in his rooms."

"That's what I heard one of the men say. There were two of them. I was working overtime on a special order in our place on the second floor when the two men came up the stairs and stood whispering in the hallway just outside the door where I was at work.

"The door was a little ajar, and I couldn't help hearing what they said. In fact, I listened, for no one had a right to come down our private hall at night, and I felt sure they were after no good. They talked for a few minutes. Then they went upstairs."

"Who were the men? Did you know them?"

"I did not see them," she answered. "I was afraid to look out of the door. But I heard one call the other what sounded like 'Porky,' and then I heard the name 'Gil Price.' I made that out clearly."

"Ah!" ejaculated Phil. "Porky Madden and Gil Price! I know those birds—both of them. Had to arrest them for street-loafing just last week. Belong to a gang that is always causing trouble. I never knew that they did anything so serious as this before. But I am not surprised. It is only a question of time."

"I'm sure they meant to rob Mr. Druid," went on Ruth. "First off, I didn't know what to do. But I had to do something, so I came down here, meaning to go out on the street and call a policeman. But I couldn't, for the front doors were locked, and I was just going to try to find one of our watchmen, when I saw you outside, and—"

"All right!" interrupted Phil. "Tell me the rest later. Porky Madden and Gil Price, eh? None of the elevators are running, I suppose. I shall have to climb the stairs to Mr. Druid's rooms. On the twentieth floor, aren't they? Now, you go back to the beauty parlors and lock yourself in."

Philip Croydon was all policeman now. The captain's words at the station were ringing in his ears: "Each one of you is responsible for anything and everything out of the ordinary that happens on your beat."

His foot was already on the bottom stair when Ruth's hand upon his arm held him back.

"I'm going with you," she said quietly. "Mr. Druid's private elevator is down here. His valet generally uses it when he goes home, and takes it up in the morning. Mr. Druid never goes out at night. I'll show you."

The door of the elevator was unfastened, and they stepped inside. Phil switched on the light in the car and saw the three electric buttons by which it was operated. One was marked "Up!" another "Down!" and the third "Stop!"

"Snap the door shut!" directed Phil, as he turned off the light and pressed the "Up!" button.

Swiftly and noiselessly the car shot upward. At the twentieth floor it stopped automatically.

As Phil opened the elevator door a pungent odor which he recognized made his head feel a little queer for a moment. He nodded approvingly as Ruth covered her mouth with her handkerchief.

"Chloroform!" he muttered. "Stay back here, Ruth!"

There was a note of command in his voice which Ruth, although disposed to

be self-willed, did not care to dispute. So she remained in the private hall after leaving the car, while Phil strode on.

Through a half-open door streamed a ghostly yellowish light. Cautiously pushing the door wide open, he stepped inside.

He found himself in a spacious room, with several windows and a large skylight. On tables and shelves were many glass jars, carboys, crucibles, retorts and kindred vessels and utensils, which, with a roomy glass-top table having a swing-chair behind it, told Phil he was in James Druid's laboratory.

Phil remembered hearing that the eccentric multimillionaire possessed the finest private chemical laboratory in the city, and that he spent much of his time in scientific research in this particular room.

The smell of chloroform was strong. But Phil had become used to it by this time, and it did not trouble him, except that he was curious to find out whence it came.

The laboratory seemed to be untenanted, and he was on his way to a door at the far end when, as he passed around the large glass-topped library table, he stumbled over something.

The obstruction was a man's foot!

Stretched out on the floor behind the table, in a hideous sprawling muddle, the white face turned upward to the amber light in the ceiling, lay the dead body of James Druid!

Officer Philip Croydon had just time to recognize the features of the middle-aged man, whom he had often seen on his beat and knew well as the owner of Stonehenge, when the light went out!

II.

PHIL'S first impulse was to bring out his pocket electric flash, but a feeling that somebody was stealthily creeping about the room restrained him.

The spot of light would have made him a target for a bullet or blackjack before he could even see his assailant. So he silently changed his position and waited.

His subconscious conviction that he was not alone was confirmed a moment later, when he became aware of a moving shadow between himself and the nearest window. It was the outline of a man wearing a large slouch hat.

The man was in the act of crawling out of the window, twenty stories above the street pavement.

A thrill of grim satisfaction ran through Officer Phil at having something tangible to battle with. He hurled himself across the room to the open window.

"Darn the luck!" he exploded below his breath.

He had come into violent collision with the protruding spout of a large glass retort on a table. It went to the floor with a smash.

The noise distracted Phil only for a splinter of a second. The next instant he reached the window and, with a low chuckle of triumph he could not repress, he held a man in a slouch hat tightly clasped in his arms.

A minute later the lights overhead flashed on, and Phil found that *his arms were around the body of a dead man!*

Phil Croydon was a policeman and was gifted with a fairly steady set of nerves, but he could not hold back a horrified shudder.

"Porky Madden!" he blurted out, pushing up the brim of the slouch hat, so that he could see more clearly the white, rigid features. "Still warm! Ah! I see!"

A crimson spot on the light-colored shirt, which was rapidly widening, told the story. Porky Madden had been stabbed in the chest with a narrow-bladed dagger. Somehow he had managed to keep his feet, leaning against the wall, until Phil rushed at the window. Then he had collapsed and died in Phil's arms.

He was *not* the man who had been crawling out of the window!

"I see how it is!" muttered Phil. "That other guy has got away, and he stabbed Porky before he went. Looks as if it might have been Gil Price giving Porky the double cross. Grabbed all the coin from Druid for himself and gave his pal 'the works.' That's the way with rats of his kind!"

Phil looked thoughtfully at the telephone on the big table. Then he shook his head. He would not report to the station just yet. If he stopped to telephone now, the man who had killed James Druid might make his get-away.

He laid the lifeless remains of Porky Madden on the floor, at some little distance from those of Druid, and went over to a large safe at one side of the room. It was closed and locked.

On the large table were a scattered heap of silver, some checks, and a few crumpled bank notes.

Evidently Druid had not placed in the safe any of the money he had collected that day. As Phil Croydon figured it out, the millionaire had been seated in his swing chair, counting on the table the cash that had been paid him for rents, when the burglar slipped up behind him and plastered a chloroform-soaked towel over his face. The towel was still lying by the side of the chair.

James Druid—a strong man, in his fifties—had fought so hard that it had been impossible to quiet him down quickly with the anæsthetic. So one of the burglars—presumably Gil Price—had driven a stiletto into his heart.

Then the robbers had made a hurried grab at the money on the table, leaving some silver and bank notes behind in their haste, and were intending to escape by the stairway when the arrival of the policeman made them change their plans.

"There's one thing sure," murmured Phil. "It's up to me to make an arrest."

Of course, Porky Madden's death was a minor matter from a police point of view. What was really important was to trace and capture the slayer of the wealthy owner of Stonehenge.

Phil was meticulously careful not to disturb any of the immediate surroundings of this influential multi-millionaire who had been so suddenly and rudely called away. Mindful of finger-print evidence, he kept his hands off the swing chair and table and everything else in the laboratory as much as possible.

It was not his province to investigate what would undoubtedly be regarded as a celebrated case by the police and an important "first page story" by the newspapers. That was work for the homicide bureau at headquarters. What Phil had to do, as a patrolman on whose post an act of lawlessness had been committed, was to pick up any suspicious person he might find on the premises.

Porky was dead. He and Gil Price had been traced to the Druid suite. Robbery and murder had been perpetrated. There was only one person on whom suspicion rested, and that was the individual who had gone through the window, after stabbing Porky Madden to death.

Phil had just come to this conclusion when the voice of Ruth behind him made him swing around on his way to the window and exclaim, in an embarrassed tone, for, in his excitement, he had actually forgotten her:

"Haven't seen any one going down the stairs or in the elevator, have you, Ruth?"

"No. What made you switch off the lights just now?"

"I didn't. Somebody turned them off and then put them on again."

"I did that," said Ruth. "I mean, I turned them on. There is a switch here in the hall, as well as one inside the suite. It is the same on every floor. You say you didn't switch off the current? Who did it then? What have

you found out? Where are the robbers? Where's Mr. Druid? Where is—"

"Stay here, Ruth, for a few moments," interrupted Phil, as he took her arm and led her back to the hall. "I am on the track of these fellows. They are on the run. I don't think they will try to get away by the stairs, and it isn't likely they know anything about the private elevator.

"If they should come out here to the hall, switch off the lights again. Understand? It will be a signal to me. When you have turned off the lights, beat it into the elevator and lock yourself in. Get all that?"

"Yes, Phil! You can depend on me!"

"I know that," he returned, giving her hand a squeeze.

Without another word he left her. The atmosphere of the laboratory seemed to be heavier than ever with the nauseating fumes of chloroform.

Giving only a passing glance at the rigid form of James Druid, sprawled out behind the table, and without looking at that of Porky Madden at all, Phil went to the open window and leaned out to see what was below.

A very brief survey was enough. Slipping through the window opening, he hung to the sill by his finger ends for a second. Then he let go and dropped!

He landed on a stone parapet twenty-four inches wide. On one side of this two-foot ledge was the wall of the building; on the other a sheer descent to the stone-paved courtyard between two and three hundred feet below!

Swaying dizzily as his feet came down on the parapet, Phil steadied himself by placing his two hands against the wall. Then, as his head stopped whirling and he became sure of his balance on the narrow path, he scanned the parapet searchingly from end to end.

In one direction—to the left as he stood with his back to the wall—it extended further than he could make out in the gloom. In the other he saw that it reached a corner and appeared to continue around out of sight.

That the man who had slipped through the window after killing Porky Madden had moved along the parapet in one direction or the other was beyond doubt. The question was, which way had he gone?

One thing was pretty well settled in the mind of Phil Croydon, and that was that the fugitive could not get back into the house except through one of the windows of James Druid's suite on the twentieth floor.

As those windows were nearly eight feet above the parapet, that would not be an easy route for the robber and murderer, whoever he might be.

Neither would it be a simple feat for Phil himself. But he did not care for that. If it became necessary, he would have to get up there somehow. It would be all in the line of regular police duty.

Having settled this, he had just decided to work along to the left, when he caught a glimpse of something moving at the corner of the building on the right.

So fleeting was the sight he had that it might have been only a shadow. When he looked a second time it was gone!

To make certain, Phil slipped along the narrow ledge as fast as he could until he reached the end of the building.

Before he could peer around the corner, to identify the moving shadow, or whatever it was, a fist shot out and, landing flush on his cheek bone, sent him staggering backward.

III.

PHIL CROYDON never could tell exactly what saved him from going off the parapet. The attack had been entirely unexpected, and if he had not

been endowed with exceptional agility he never could have stopped himself from diving off into space.

As it was, by an almost superhuman effort, he recovered his balance and, white-faced and panting, glared about him for his would-be murderer.

Phil's blood was up now, and he resolved to capture the insolent desperado if he had to jump off the building after the rascal. That cowardly punch in the face had made him furious.

For an instant he stood on the exposed corner of that twenty-four-inch ledge, holding to the angle of the wall and fighting hard against a sudden and insistent gust of wind. Then he dashed after a hurrying figure a few yards ahead.

The slouch hat, dimly visible, would have told Phil the figure was that of the individual who had left the laboratory through the window, even if there had been a possibility of his being any one else and, reckless of the fact that only twenty-four inches of foothold lay between himself and an awful death, he skimmed along after his quarry at top speed.

Suddenly the fellow stopped, flung out his two arms in a curious way, and bent over as if picking up something. Then, with another convulsive movement of his arms, during which he seemed to be pulling his coat over his head, he straightened up and ran on faster than before.

Phil Croydon was puzzled. What did these maneuvers mean? What was the crazy fool trying to do?

Then, as his feet became entangled in a heap of cloth in his path that he had not observed, Phil pitched forward heavily on hands and knees.

Fervently thankful that he had not been thrown off—which might easily have happened—Phil kicked his feet loose and saw that it was a coat which caused him to trip.

When the fleeing burglar had stretched out his arms, he was not picking up something from the parapet, but had been worming out of his sack coat, leaving it in a bundle on the narrow coping as a trap for his pursuer.

"I didn't think such a bonehead as this Gil Price could dope out a cunning trick like that," thought Phil, as he plunged on, angrier than ever. "Hello!" he exclaimed. "What the—"

The man he had been pursuing had vanished!

Night though it was, there was light enough from the stars to show Phil positively that no one was on the parapet on this side of the building.

If the fugitive had reached the end and slipped around the corner, he must have sprinted with almost miraculous swiftness.

Phil didn't see how he could have done it, but he did not waste time in idle conjecture. Instead, he hurried along. He wanted to get this thing over.

Then came another breath-stopping moment. It was fortunate for Phil that he had slackened his pace to a walk as he approached the corner.

He halted just in time—within less than two yards of a jump-off!

The parapet stopped abruptly as it came to the end of the building. It did not carry on around to the front at all.

The perspiration stood out on Phil Croydon's forehead and he felt the roots of his hair tingling as he realized how close he had come to a death plunge.

He quickly recovered, however. Steady control of the nerves is demanded of all men who wear a police uniform. Phil forgot his fright and gave his mind to figuring out what had become of the rascal who seemed to have evaporated into thin air.

Could he have walked off the end of the parapet?

Phil stepped to the very edge and peered downward to the courtyard.

His nerves were well in hand now. Moreover, Phil had been born with the capability—the natural gift of com-

paratively few human beings—to stare into great depths without a dangerous swimming in the head. He looked down from that twenty-story altitude as calmly as would a skyscraper window-cleaner.

There was no disturbance in the courtyard, as there must have been if somebody had fallen there. It was too dark for him to make out the ground, but the silence told that the man he was after had not gone that way.

But where *was* the man?

A low scraping over his head made Phil look up, and as he hazily distinguished something moving by the side of one of the tall windows, he wondered whether he really saw what he thought he did.

"Yes, by the Lord! He's going up that wall to the roof! Well, it's just what he *would* do."

Phil remembered that when he had arrested Gil Price for loitering and "acting suspiciously," the young gangster had boasted in the police station that he intended to become a "human fly." Trees and telegraph-poles were easy for him, he said, and once, when he was only a kid, he had climbed a gutter-pipe to the roof of the schoolhouse and shinned halfway up the flagpole.

"Well, I'm not any 'human fly,'" thought Bill. "But I'll have to follow him. It's all in my night's work."

A water-pipe ran straight up the face of the wall between two of the windows, but at some distance from either.

Halfway up this pipe clung the now coatless robber, and he was going up like a scared cat.

"All right!" murmured Phil. "Here goes!"

Gripping the pipe with fingers, knees, and feet, he began to scramble upward in pursuit. If luck were with him, he ought to nail his man before he had gone far on the roof.

It was anything but an easy climb, and Phil felt the pipe shaking ominously under the double weight.

"If it pulls out from the wall we'll both be goners!" gasped Phil. "Twenty stories! Wow!"

Suddenly the shaking subsided, and as he stopped to look about him, he perceived that the pipe swung off diagonally to the top of a window on the right and seemed to end there.

"By heck! He's got to the roof!"

Phil had looked up just in time to catch the outline of the slouch hat against the starry sky.

Officer Phil Croydon was fighting mad now, and he made extra good time crawling along the sloping pipe to get to the top of the window.

How he was to follow his man if the pipe ended there he did not know. But, as he clamped his teeth, he told himself that if Gil Price could make the grade, so could he.

There was some ornamental scroll-work at the top of the window. When Phil reached that spot he found that the diagonal pipe was joined to a vertical continuation which was stopped only by the roof.

Climbing a long drain-pipe in full police uniform was fatiguing work. Phil Croydon was young and husky, and he kept himself in condition by regular sessions in the police gymnasium. Nevertheless, he was glad to pause for a few seconds on the ledge above the window and pull himself together.

About a quarter of a minute was all the resting time he took, however. His task was not yet completed.

Taking a firm hold on the perpendicular pipe, he raised himself hand over hand, aiding the climb with feet and knees.

Two minutes of hard work and he was at the top of the pipe. *But he was not on the roof.* An overhanging gutter blocked his way.

Phil hung to his pipe and thought hard.

To negotiate this gutter threatened to be the most difficult part of the ascent. Still, he considered, if Gil

Price could get over, there must be some way of working it.

Closely calculating time and distance, Phil reached up and seized the edge of the heavy iron trough with his right hand. Then, swinging halfway around, he reached it with his left also.

He was now hanging to the gutter by his two hands, about ten inches from the wall.

His next move was to swing his feet inward and clamp them about the pipe, preparatory to pulling himself up by the strength of his arms and fingers—the sort of stunt known in the gymnasium as "chinning."

Just as he braced himself for the effort, the fingers of his right hand were violently torn from the gutter by some unseen person above, and, as his feet let go, he was hanging in midair, twenty stories up, by the left hand only!

That it was the desperate man he had been pursuing who had pushed away his fingers, intending to hurl him to a horrible death, Phil did not question. It was a fiendish trick, but a person who had already committed two murders would not hesitate at another killing to get away from a policeman close on his heels.

For a second Phil's situation seemed hopeless. Then he managed to get his right hand up to the gutter again.

"Well, I made it!" he said to himself. "But it was a close call—mighty close!"

At that moment muscular fingers leaped from the darkness and his left hand was ripped loose from its hold also.

IV.

WHILE one might have counted "one—two!" Phil Croydon's brain whirled wildly. Then—how he did it he never quite knew—he found he again had a grip on the gutter with both hands.

The explanation is simple. What he had done was to hook on with his right hand a sliver of an instant before he let go with his left. Then, as footfalls on the flat metal roof came to him with uncanny distinctness, he swung up with his left hand again, simultaneously twining his feet about the pipe.

He did not stay there long. No sooner did he feel his feet firmly wedged than he lowered himself sidewise by letting go of the gutter with his left hand and grasping the pipe instead. Next he brought down his right hand, to join his left.

Clinging grimly to the pipe, he looked upward and saw how the robber had made his way to the roof. A portion of the gutter, a little way along, had broken away close to the wall, leaving an aperture large enough for an ordinary-sized man to squeeze through. It was within reach of the pipe.

"It 'll be a tight fit for me with my uniform on," thought Phil. "But I reckon I can make it."

It *was* a tight squeeze, so much so that at one time Phil feared he would be obliged to wriggle out of his coat somehow and push it through the hole ahead of him.

Fortunately, this tiresome proceeding proved to be unnecessary. All he had to do was to draw his night-stick from its scabbard and thrust it on to the roof before him.

The club out of the way, the rest was comparatively easy. Phil pushed through the opening with only the loss of one of the buttons from his coat, and at once glared around looking for the fugitive robber.

The spacious flat roof was broken up by the usual blocks of chimneys, a huge water tank, and two small wooden shanties guarding the top of stairways running down to the attics.

These shanties were the first things Phil investigated. Night-stick in hand, he slipped over to them with as little noise as possible. A cursory examination convinced him the man had not escaped by either of the stairways. The doors were bolted on the outside.

The block was a large one, and a considerable expanse of roof aided the hunted man in eluding pursuit. Besides, he had the advantage of the night gloom. Phil's vision was keen, but, standing in the shadow of one of the big chimneys, he could not see all over the roof.

He was about to steal forward, when a feeble glimmer cut the darkness over to the right, and for a fleeting instant he was sure he perceived the outline of the slouch hat with which by this time he had become so familiar.

Phil chuckled softly. He knew where that glow came from. It was from the skylight in the ceiling of James Druid's laboratory.

The time Phil made in covering the fifty yards between himself and the skylight was very good, but he was too late to grab his man. The heavy sash fell with a bang just as he got to it, and Phil could see a coatless man, whose slouch hat was jammed low on his head, hanging to an iron bar inside. Then there was a crash, followed by the jingle of broken glass.

The fugitive had landed kerflump on one of the tables, in the midst of a jumble of retorts, crucibles, curiously-shaped glass vessels, and other costly apparatus used in chemical research.

The amber light was on, and Phil saw that the man was gathering up something from the floor under the window out of which he had dived after driving his stiletto into the chest of Porky Madden. A closer look told him that what the robber was picking up were packages of bank notes, neatly banded, ready for deposit.

James Druid was a methodical man, and doubtless had been absorbed in the task of wrapping and marking the bills with their amounts when the chloroform-soaked towel was clapped over his face.

The intruder, after killing the millionaire, had been unable to take his booty with him through the window. Now, when he believed he had eluded pursuit, he had come back for it before he made his get-away.

It took Phil nearly a minute to open the skylight. Then he slipped through and dropped from the iron bar to the table beneath amid the glass, completing the havoc the burglar had begun.

Jumping from the table to the floor, and hardly stopping to "set" himself, Phil was about to dash over to the window where he had seen the fellow in the slouch hat retrieving the stolen bank notes. Then he saw that his man was no longer there.

As Phil leaped forward to search for him, he saw the rascal slipping out to the hall. Before Phil could reach the door, out went the lights, only to flash on again as he ran out into the hall. It was Ruth's signal.

He had a lightning glimpse of the girl darting across the hall to the private elevator, but, before she could close the door, the robber was in the cage with her, closing the bronze door with a loud clang.

Down shot the elevator, leaving Phil stranded on the twentieth floor. None of the public elevators were in operation, and he could not have afforded time to wait for them if they had been.

Taking the stairs three and four at a time, he bounded down flight after flight. He was not far behind the fast-descending private elevator when he reached the main hall.

Pushing over one of the tall potted palms in his haste, he dashed into the little car through the open door. Ruth lay in a huddled heap in a corner, but before he could speak to her she was on her feet, and out the elevator door pointing in feverish impatience to the rear of the hall.

"The back stairs!" she cried.

It was the only way by which the culprit could expect to get clear, for one of the Stonehenge watchmen, warned by the noise of the falling palm and the coming down of the private elevator that something was wrong, was guarding the front doors, while the

other could be heard scuttling down the stairs from the upper floors.

As Phil ran to the basement stairs the gloom made it impossible for him to discern anything except the moving shadows that were always there. His hearing was keen, however, and he made out the sound of shuffling footsteps below.

"All right, Gil Price! I guess I've got you!" muttered Phil, as he flung himself down the stairs, intent only on catching the rascal who had given him such a lively chase.

The dim light that usually relieved the blackness of the back stairs had been turned off, and the darkness was opaque. Moreover, the sound of footsteps had ceased. He had lost his man. It seemed to Phil as if he *must* be alone down here.

Then, as he groped his way down another stair, two clawlike hands seized his arms from behind and an agonizing pang shot through his elbow.

Phil well knew the meaning of those cunningly-placed fingers. It was jujutsu, the secret of whose power consists not in brute strength, but in scientific attack on some one of the numerous ultra-sensitive nerve centers in the human frame. This was a form of wrestling carefully explained and demonstrated in the police school. Also, what was important, an adequate defense against every known jujutsu hold was taught the men.

Phil Croydon always had been particularly interested in these lessons. So it was only for an instant that he gave way under the sudden assault. With a quick twist, he shook off the unseen fingers which seemed to be searching out his very vitals and threw all his strength into a terrific straight left.

He felt the thrilling impact of knuckles on flesh and bone, and the sound of a falling body told him he had landed fairly on his target.

"Come on, Gil!" he said sternly. "Get up! Don't try to fool me. You are not hurt. Guess I must have got him on the point of the chin," he added, when there was no response. "Well, we'll take you to the light and give you the once-over. Come up here!"

Before he had quite reached the top of the stairs with his unconscious burden Phil had a clear view of the main staircase leading to the upper floors.

Coming slowly down the lowermost flight—white-faced, with glazing eyes and clinging convulsively to the banister—was *Gil Price!*

"Great snakes!" broke out Phil, giving the squirming man on his shoulders an admonitory shake without looking at him. "Where'd you come from?" he demanded of the white-faced man on the upper staircase.

The answer came in a low, whistling monotone: "I ain't done nothin'. Some guy doped me. I'm straight—I am. If you don't believe me, ask—"

But Phil was not listening now. With a sudden movement, he swung from his shoulders the man he had carried from below, and laid him flat on his back on the tiled floor under the electric light.

As the slouch hat fell off, two black beady eyes were fixed on Phil, and one of the two watchmen of the Stonehenge Building blurted out in breathless astonishment:

"Jiminy crickets! *Why, it's Toto, Mr. Druid's confidential man.*"

Stifling his astonishment, and notwithstanding the fact that he had often seen the pleasant-faced little Japanese going in and out of the Stonehenge Building so that he knew him well, Phil maintained his official stolidity, and in a tone of proper police evenness he said to the watchman:

"Do you positively identify this man as Mr. Druid's servant, known as 'Toto?' Make sure now."

"Of course, I identify him," was the reply. "That's Toto—no mistake about that. He generally goes home at eight o'clock."

"Sure!" put in the second watchman, who had come down by this time.

"I know him, too. He always seemed to me a harmless sort of person. I liked him."

"That's the guy!" broke in Gil Price, who had shuffled over to them, pointing to Toto. "Porky Madden and I was up there after the old man's rent money, but this guy beat us to it. I seen this feller slap a wet towel over the old guy's face and grab for the money on the table. Then the old guy—"

"You mean Mr. Druid?" put in Phil sharply.

"Sure I mean him!" returned Gil. "Well, the old man—Druid—put up a fight—a peach of a scrap, if you ask me. Then I seen the Jap pull a pistol and smash him over the head with it. The beanin' didn't fix him, an' the next thing I knowed this here Toto had drove a long knife right into the front of Druid's shirt. The old feller went down, when all at once the Jap lamps me."

"Saw you, eh? Toto?"

"Yes."

"Go on."

"He gives me the eye for a minute. Then he picks up the wet towel from the floor, pours a lot of stuff from a bottle over it, and jumps me. He moves quick an' gets me foul. As he comes he slaps the wet towel on my face, an' I just nat'rally passes out."

"That will do!" broke in Phil, as with a dexterity which had been part of his training in the police school, he slipped a pair of handcuffs on Toto's wrists.

"Keep your eye on that fellow," he commanded one of the watchmen, indicating Gil Price. "Better hold him. I want to see what Toto has about him."

With scientific coolness, that also was part of his police training, Phil took from inside Toto's waistcoat and shirt twelve packages of bank notes. Each was marked on its paper band "$1,000."

"I haven't time to go outside to a police-box," observed Phil, to no one in particular. "I'll have to use the telephone here."

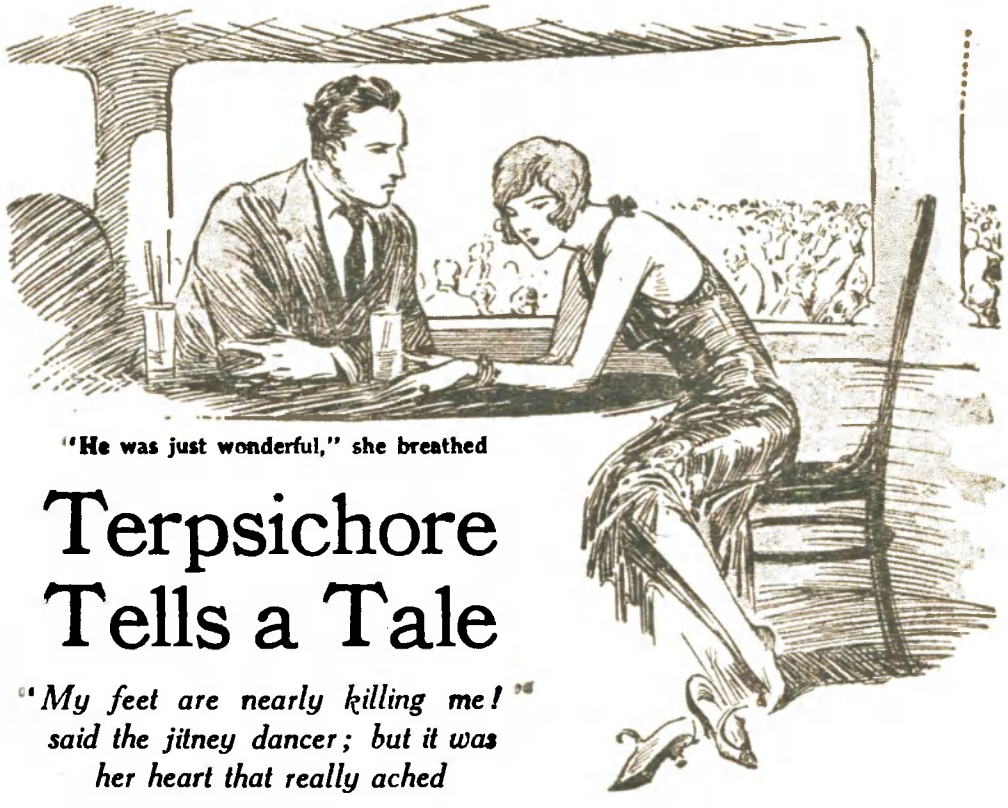
Keeping a firm hold on Toto, he drew him along the hall to the telephone table and took the receiver off the hook.

Having called up the precinct station and received a response, he reported:

"Patrolman Croydon on post. In Stonehenge Building. Homicide and robbery. Two men under arrest. Oh, you are coming around yourself, sir? Yes, sir. I'll take care of my prisoners."

And Phil rang off; and turned and smiled proudly over to Ruth Bailey.

THE END



"He was just wonderful," she breathed

Terpsichore Tells a Tale

"My feet are nearly killing me!" said the jitney dancer; but it was her heart that really ached

By A. T. LOCKE

THE jazz orchestra broke into the palpitating, seductive strains of the latest fox trot, and the music pulsed through the garishly decorated but dimly lighted dance hall. The violins screeched, the horns moaned, the saxophones wailed, and the barbaric, tantalizing drums and cymbals throbbed rhythmically amid the cacophonic chorusings and the rubatic wanderings of the other instruments.

Then the dancers began to stream over the shining floor of the vast ballroom, and the regular shuffle of their feet commenced to add emphasis to the recurrent beat of the music. I walked toward the girl with the blond hair and the pensive brown eyes who was standing alone with her thin white hands clasped before her.

I reached her just ahead of a muddy-eyed, smug-appearing, flabby-fleshed man of middle age.

"May I have this dance?" I asked her, with just the slightest suggestion of a bow.

"Of course you can," she replied, with a smile; and then I thought that she cast rather a darkling glance at the stout, sporty individual who was close beside us.

"I'm glad you got ahead of that other fella," she confided in me after we had danced out of his hearing. "He's crazy about me, the poor old nut. He's got lots o' money and a big car. He's in the cloak and suit business But he can't cloak his intentions; so he don't suit me. I've managed to keep away from him to-night, so far."

"But why," I asked, "do you dance with him at all if you don't care for him—if he bothers you?"

She looked at me curiously.

"Say, who do you think I am?" she asked. And then, without waiting for me to reply: "I'm only a hostess

here, a taxi-dancer; and if I wanta keep my job I've gotta dance with any one who asks me. And I'm not so good-lookin' as most of the girls, so I have to take what I can get."

"Oh," I said.

"But I didn't mean you," she hastened to explain, a little flush coloring her cheeks. "You seem kind o' nice."

"And I think that you," I told her, "are rather—pretty."

"Now you're kiddin'," she accused me.

"Well, then, not exactly pretty," I amended. "Let's say attractive—that is deeper and finer than prettiness."

She smiled her unbelief, and turned her eyes away from me.

"But I mean it," I insisted.

And I did mean it, too.

I had stood apart for awhile when I first had wandered from Broadway into the dance hall, and I had let my eyes travel over the multitude of youthful hostesses who, for the munificent sum of a nickel a dance, sold their graces to any who would buy.

They were young in years, most of them, but the wisdom of the world peered through their hard eyes. They were dressed defiantly, rouged defiantly, and their laughter and their speech seemed to cry defiance to the unseen Angel with the Flaming Sword. But the girl I had chosen to dance with had seemed different.

I had been impressed by her apathetic air, by the fact that she had been standing alone and had not been mingling with the other girls. She had seemed to be of the place and yet apart from it. Her eyes were somber, and I knew that they were darkened by the shadows of older generations which fell athwart them from down the years. In them was that indefinable, poignant beauty which is the heritage of some of the daughters of the lower East Side.

And, surely, there was music in the girl, because her dancing was superb. We circled the scented hall, weaving in and out among the couples that thronged the floor, and came opposite the place where our dance had commenced.

I saw the coarse, dark, flabby man standing there, the man whom the girl was anxious to avoid. He was watching us as we danced.

"Your boy friend is keeping his eyes on you," I told her with a smile.

"Boy friend!" she exclaimed scornfully. "I hate him! He's always watchin' me that way."

"And you really think I'm kind of nice?" I teased her.

"You're not fresh—or you don't seem to be," she replied. "Not yet, anyway."

"You might reward me, then," I suggested, "by telling me your name."

"It's L-e-v-e-e," she spelled. "Virginia Levee. It's a name that's well known in the South."

She watched me carefully, with a little air of bravado.

"But it's better known in New York, my dear," I told her. "You never should change the spelling of your name or the color of your hair."

She flushed a bit, admitting her defeat.

"Well, anyway," she defended herself, "most men are boobs who believe anything you tell them.

"The old Southern family stuff generally goes big here in New York. I like dark hair myself, but men seem to like blondes."

"Your hair will turn dark again," I assured, "and, as far as I am concerned, your name doesn't matter. I'm going to call you Terpsichore, anyway."

She stiffened a little, and looked at me doubtfully.

"What does that mean?" she asked wistfully.

"Terpsichore," I informed her, "was the goddess of dancing, and you surely are a wonderful dancer."

"I love to dance with the right

fella, when I feel like it," she admitted, "but I'm not so keen to-night."

Just a suggestion of a furrow appeared on her smooth white forehead, and her eyes for a moment became more poignant.

"Well, I commenced rather stiffly, "if—"

"Oh, it's not because of you," she objected; "not at all. You're decent, I know it, and you're a good dancer too. If only my feet weren't so tired. They're nearly killing me," she confessed. "I wish I never had to dance another step. I hate it. Oh, it's my feet—and everything."

"Why, you poor kid!" I exclaimed. "Why didn't you tell me before? Come. We'll sit out the rest of this dance. We'll go up in the balcony and have something to drink."

"You're not sore, are you?" she asked rather anxiously.

"Not me," I protested. "I'll be glad to have you take a little rest. You should have told me sooner."

She put her arm through mine, and we wove our way through the dancers and went toward an exit from the floor.

"You're awfully nice," she told me, "and I guess I could like you a little, anyway."

"That's good of you," I told her. "I have a weakness for liking to be liked—a little."

"But I'm kind o' through with love, for a little while, anyway," she continued. "It's all because of one fella's lettin' me down. It just happened last night, and I'm feelin' sort o' blue on account of it."

Already I had sensed her moodiness, and had felt that, for some reason, she was distraught and disappointed. She was silent until we reached the balcony and I had ordered lemonade for both of us.

II.

"I'm going to slip my pumps off and give my feet a rest, if you don't mind," she told me. "After a few more dances my feet 'll get kind o' numb, and then I won't mind the pain so much."

"Sure," I told her, "take them off. And then tell me all about the fellow who let you down."

She leaned over, and I could see her lips compress as she removed the torturing shoes. Then she straightened up with a little sigh.

"He was just wonderful," she breathed. "Oh, if only he hadn't turned out to be so dumb! But maybe he just didn't understand. He came here one night and danced with me three or four times, and somehow I sort o' felt, without him tellin' me, that he liked me a lot. And then he came the next night and the night after that, and he wanted me to dance with him all the time.

"Then he asked me if he could take me home in his car, and I let him. He had a fine roadster, so I was afraid at first, but he turned out to be a perfect gentleman, and he never even tried to kiss me.

"Gee! He had beautiful eyes and that sorta wavy dark hair, and his voice was nice too; it sorta made you feel safe with him. Your voice kinda reminds me of it.

"He got so he came here four or five nights a week, and always he would stay till the last dance and then take me home. And he never got fresh in any way; so I got to likin' him better 'n' better.

"The other girls was all stuck on him, too, but he wouldn't give any of 'em a rumble, and that made me feel good.

"He thought, just like you told me, that I was nicer than any of the rest. Say, I used to dance with him when my feet felt as if they was on fire; but I never said a word about it to him.

"I'm sorry I told you to-night that my feet hurt," she added. "You don't feel sore about it, do you? If you

really want to dance, it 'll be all right," she concluded.

She pushed back a stray curl from her forehead.

"You just rest your tired feet," I told her, "and tell me about this man who was so good to you. He must have been just wonderful."

The music had stopped for a brief intermission, and her words came to me more distinctly in the comparative silence.

"Oh, he was!" she exclaimed. "He was sort of a quiet fella, and that's the kind I like. This Polly don't want no wise-cracker. She wants a regular guy that's serious and decent. No, he never said much; but he just had to look at me with them kind eyes of hisn to thrill me. He never even told me his last name, and I never asked him what it was. If he didn't want to spill it, it was all right with me.

"That's the way I felt about it; I just didn't care. I never ask a fella his last name unless he wants to tell me." She paused a moment expectantly, and then she continued: "Well, anyway, he was nicer and nicer to me all the time, and, believe me, it got so that I dreamed about him all night and thought about him all day.

"He had me puzzled, that fella did. He was a swell dresser, and he seemed to have plenty of money. And the car never cost less than two or three grand.

"Then it struck me, all of a sudden, that he was some unhappy young society guy who had everything in the world he wanted but real love."

She started nervously as, with a crash of brass, the orchestra broke into another dance.

"Gee," she giggled, "that scared me!"

Then we looked down on the dance floor for a moment, and saw it become transformed into a great kaleidoscope.

"I'll give you a ticket," I told the girl beside me, "and we'll sit another dance out." She smiled in agreement. "You thought, then," I suggested, "that he was a young man in quest of real love."

"Oh, yes," she continued, "that's what I thought. You know the sort I mean. The kind of rich young fella that you read about in stories and see on the screen. He should 'a' been in the movies anyway, he was that handsome.

"Well, I figured that if he was lookin' for love, he had picked on the right girl. I didn't have any money, and I wasn't so good-lookin'; but I knew that if he married me there wouldn't be nothin' that I wouldn't do for him. I'd stick to him through thick and thin, that's what I would do."

The lemonade was brought by a sleek-haired waiter; and she paused a moment and started to drink it thirstily.

I fingered my glass and, while she drank, watched the dancers on the floor beneath us. And as I watched I wondered. There they were, pasty-faced, predatory cake eaters, ignorantly insolent; hard-faced girls, unfeminine, unlovely.

And then, of course, there were others who danced without understanding why they danced; those to whom the subtle lure of the carnal music held the vague promise of beauty and rapture.

There they were, from all the ends of the world; dark girls with the moonlight of Arabian nights in their deep eyes, golden girls from northern countries, whose eyes showed ice crystals.

"What are you dreamin' about?" asked the girl beside me, as she put down her glass for a moment.

"I'm wondering," I told her, "about the places those dancing feet came from and how in the world they ever happened to get here."

"Yeah?" she replied. "Oh, they come from all over. Brooklyn, the

Bronx, Jersey, Yonkers, and all over. Why, I've even met fellas from New Haven down here on Saturday nights. They just have to take subways or trains to get here."

"And now tell me," I suggested, "the rest of that story about the nice fellow who let you down."

"Oh, yes," she said. "Le's see—where was I?"

III.

"You were going to stick by him through thick and thin if he married you," I told her.

"Oh, yes," she agreed, "I remember. And then," she continued, "something happened that made me sure I had got him right. About two weeks ago he told me that he had a big surprise for me. Gosh, I'd like to pour some of this ice-cold lemonade on my feet. I bet they'd feel better.

"He told me that he had a big surprise for me. He told me he was goin' to take me somewhere in a coupla weeks, and that he wanted me to get dressed up all pretty when the time came. I begged him to tell me where he was goin'; but he just smiled sorta fondlike at me and said that that was a secret.

"Well, I knew right away that he was goin' to take me to his home to meet his family, and, even if I didn't let on to him, I was some scared. I figured if the family liked me, he would marry me, and then I could quit this job. And, believe me, I wanted to quit it. I figured my feet 'd be worn off my shins if I had to keep dancin' much longer.

"Say, after I knew he was goin' to take me to meet the family, I commenced to dream of goin' to bed at eight o'clock instead of two o'clock. I used to think how soothin' the cool white linen sheets would feel on my feet.

"Well, anyway, last night was the big night, and I got the night off, like he told me to, and he came to my roomin' house and got me at about seven o'clock.

"He looked at me kinda proud when I came downstairs, because, if I do say it myself, I was sure dolled up. I looked better than I look to-night, I tell you. I don't feel so keen to-night, and I know I'm not lookin' so good.

"When I got into the car I asked him again where he was goin' to take me, but he only smiled at me and said nothin'. Then he took me to dinner in a swell Italian joint somewhere.

"When we was eatin' he told me that he bet everybody would go crazy over me, and right there I nearly swallowed a big olive whole. I knew then that I was goin' to meet the family, and for a minute I even forgot the blisters on my feet.

"Well, anyway, after dinner we got in the car and I slipped my pumps off without lettin' him know it, just so as I could rest my hoofs a little. No matter if I was goin' to heaven, I couldn't forget them achin' feet. He went uptown and drove over Fifty-Ninth Street to Park Avenue, which of course made me feel nervous and excited. I wasn't no Follies girl, that I should marry into real high society."

The music, with its monotonous accompaniment of shuffling feet, came to an end, and, a moment later, the story of Terpsichore was interrupted by a girl who came up and whispered something in her ear.

"Oh, it's all right; it's all right," the girl at my side whispered impatiently. "I'll dance with the old sap if I have to." The other girl, with a smile, went away.

"It's the head hostess," Terpsichore explained. "Old Schwartz, the boy friend, as you call him, has complained that I refused to dance with him, and I've got to tow him around next time."

"So you felt nervous when you were riding up Park Avenue?" I suggested.

"Yes," she said. "But not for very

long," she added somewhat grimly. "We got up to One Hundred and Twenty-Fifth Street, and he drove over that and stopped in front of a place that was all lighted up. And I said to him:

"'This isn't where your family lives, is it?'

"He looked at me kinda funny. 'My family?' he said."

IV.

JUST then the orchestra blared forth into the first strains of a syncopated, alluring melody; and Mr. Schwartz, like a jack-in-the-box, materialized before us.

"Is this my dance, miss?" he asked, with a leering and somewhat triumphant smile.

"Oh, I suppose so," she replied wearily. "But my feet hurt so that I don't know whether I dance or not."

"You'll forget your feet when you dance with me," replied Mr. Schwartz gallantly.

"Yeah?" she said sarcastically, as she painfully put on her pumps and stood up.

The violins screeched, the horns moaned, the saxophones wailed, and the barbaric, tantalizing drums and cymbals throbbed rhythmically amid the cacaphonic chorusings and the rubatic wanderings of the other instruments.

The dancers were streaming over the floor of the vast ballroom, and the regular shuffle of their feet commenced to add emphasis to the recurrent beat of the music. The girl with the blond hair and the pensive brown eyes, who was standing with the impatient Mr. Schwartz, looked wistfully at me.

"Well, bye-bye," she said. "Maybe I'll see you again."

And then she turned away.

"But, Terpsichore," I urged, "what was the surprise that the young fellow had for you?"

She turned back to me for a moment.

"Oh," she replied wearily, "he was taking me to an all-night dance of the Chauffeurs' Union."

And now I would like to get an artistic end to this story, and that, somehow, is not an easy matter.

If I were a Russian writer, it would be simple. During the ensuing dance Mr. Schwartz would step on my heroine's corns, and thereupon she would cry, "Down with vodka and the bourgeoisie!" and slay him.

If I were a disciple of Harold Bell Wright, I would have her spurn the obnoxious Mr. Schwartz and go forth into the world and meet a handsome young chiropodist and marry him and live happily ever after.

But inasmuch as I am neither, I might as well let the story end just as it really did.

They were still quite close to me, and I was watching them as they left, when suddenly they were confronted by a tall, dark-eyed young fellow with wavy black hair. He was pleading with the girl, and his impassioned voice carried even to me.

"But I didn't think," he urged. "I didn't understand. But now I know!"

Then Mr. Schwartz made some remark, and the young man turned on him, and Mr. Schwartz retired precipitately to a chair, and, pulling out a large handkerchief, commenced to mop his brow.

And then she was in the young man's arms, and he was shaking his head and speaking to her.

"I don't care how you talked to me," he protested. "I don't care if you did leave me flat. I didn't understand; but I understand now, and I want you to forgive me."

And so, I assume, they were married, and whether that is a happy ending or a tragic ending only the gods can tell.

THE END

Dunn saw the lifted tobacco-filled hand sink out of sight

Six-Foot Lightning

"There's enough rough, no-good trouble-hunters here without adding another to the population," his uncle told Bart Dunn—but this addition was soon to make history in Spring Green

By J. M. HOFFMAN

LEADING UP TO THIS INSTALLMENT

WHEN pompous old Samuel Halliday got to be nearly sixty years of age, he sent for his nephew, Bart Dunn, to come and live with him in the little desert town of Spring Green.

Bart already had a State-wide reputation as the quickest man at drawing a gun in Arizona. His nickname was "One-Gun" Dunn, because, with his single revolver, he was the superior of any two-gun killer who ever attempted to stack up against him in a rain of lead.

When One-Gun reached Spring Green, almost immediately he discovered that he was disliked by Clem Torry, the local boss of a corrupt political gang who backed up their underhanded ambitions with gunplay by professional badmen whom they kept loafing around at their expense, and sent into action whenever they needed them.

One-Gun soon showed up Clem Torry as a coward, when he rescued the young son of Big Ed Grove, the proprietor of the Railroad Café, from the burning Grove home, which Torry was afraid to enter.

Torry and Bail-Bond Wade, a crooked lawyer who was his chief confederate in his shady deals, sent their toughest gunman, Plug Keffer, out to

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make One-Gun ridiculous, but Bart saved his reputation by some lightning-quick shooting, as a result of which Keffer lost his head so far as to threaten to kill One-Gun before sundown.

Dorothy Grove, Big Ed's daughter, grateful for Bart's rescue of her little brother, drove out to Halliday's and told him of the killer's threat against his life; and One-Gun rode straight to town to get the matter over with as soon as possible.

Convinced of Plug's inability to beat One-Gun on the draw, Clem Torry's first thought was to get one of his other henchmen to shoot Bart in the back, while Keffer would hold forth in public in another part of the town and establish an alibi for himself. So Torry and Wade sent out Meadows, a little meek man whom Wade had made his law partner, and whom he intended to run for sheriff against old Jason Flint, the easy-going incumbent of that office, when the old man stood for re-election.

Meadows brought back Slim Gelder, one of Torry's deadliest gunmen; but Clem broached the project of shooting One-Gun in a way Slim did not like, and in the ensuing quarrel the thin gunman quit Torry's employ. That left the gangsters still in a hole about how to follow up Plug's threats.

Clem then remembered that One-Gun never "went for" his gun unless an adversary made the first move; and decided it would be best for Keffer, who was forty pounds heavier than Bart Dunn, to start a rough-and-tumble fight with the young cowboy, and choke him to death during the row. The plan nearly worked, but not quite. Bart managed to knock the enormous bully out after a bout that would have killed two ordinary men.

As he rode home to his uncle's house and his head began to clear, One-Gun realized that Clem Torry must have some deeper reason for wanting to wipe him out of Spring Green other than his irritation over having been shown up as a coward before Dorothy Grove.

But what worried Bart more, at the moment, was the fact that his Uncle Sam Halliday seemed to have sent for him partly in order to marry him off to one of the six worthy but homely daughters of his old mining partner, Jim Lemmon.

CHAPTER VII (*Continued*).

UNCLE SAM'S REASON.

"I'M right glad you sent for me," said Bart. "I'm learnin' new things 'bout Spring Green every minute, an' I reckon it 'll prove plumb interestin'. But I don't wanta do any bottom-dealin', Uncle Sam."

He paused a moment. He did not want to offend his good-intentioned uncle, and it was true that the Lemmons were a nice family, and held a high position among the respectable element of Spring Green. And yet Bart Dunn had that day risked his life in a burning house, been on the verge of a gun fight with Clem Torry, had been jeered at in a frock coat and had gone through the toughest hand-to-hand combat of his life—but the Lemmon supper stood out in bold relief as the most painful incident of the whole day.

"I wanta play squar'," he repeated. "An' I'd say thar ain't one o' them Lemmon gals as suits my taste. Mebbe ef they had a seventh one it might be diff'rent."

"They ain't no hoity-toity beauties, but they're plumb wholesome," argued Halliday. "Y' cain't tell. They might sorter grow on you, Bart."

"They might," Bart admitted, "but I'm a wagerin' they wouldn't. It 'ud take an almighty long time, an' by th' time they growed on me, I figger I'd be beyond th' marryin' age. But I shore am glad you got me here t' Spring Green," he concluded, changing the subject away from the sextet of

girls who, however wholesome, set up no feelings of romance in his heart.

CHAPTER VIII.

MURDER.

ALTHOUGH Bart Dunn had run into considerable action during his first day in Spring Green, the following days of the week passed with little more exciting events than riding down to the Railroad Café with his uncle for noonday dinners, sitting in front of his uncle's great wood fireplace in the Halliday home evenings, when the mountain wind swept down, and learning many new and interesting things about the social texture of the community.

Manuel, the mestizo servant of Samuel Halliday, had been pressed into more active service about the place. He prepared breakfasts and suppers; for Bart Dunn, embarrassed rather than thrilled by hero worship, did not enjoy his trips to the Railroad Café and his rides through town.

He had enjoyed seeing Dorothy Grove occasionally, but his uncle, possibly hoping that a romance might flower, in some weird way, between Bart and one of the Lemmon progeny, had not failed to acquaint his nephew with the fact that Carter Meadows, the young lawyer, was looked upon with favor by Dorothy Grove.

Meadows was inclined to be dapper and smooth spoken. He was making a success of "lawin' it," as Halliday had said, and as well as being somewhat of a novelty to Dorothy, used to the sallies of rougher and less educated men, he was looked upon with favor by Big Ed Grove, who while he did not approve of the companions of Meadows, rather liked the up and coming attorney.

Whether it was for this reason or not, Ed Grove, in his occasional talks with Dunn, had been inclined to praise the young lawyer.

Spring Green itself seemed in the doldrums, although behind closed doors in the Atlantic Hotel and the pool hall and the Bank there was much talk of the historic fight between Keffer and One-Gun Dunn.

The matter could be discussed freely in such establishments, for Plug Keffer was not seen about town, and it was known that the stall in the barn where he kept his horse was empty. Many wondered where Plug had gone, or if it was his intention, after his humiliation, to quit Spring Green for good.

However in the offices of Wade & Meadows, Keffer's whereabouts was not a matter of mystery. Torry and Wade discussed the matter now and then in the rear office, around their little table, a table of several disappointments recently.

They still referred to their maps and plats frequently, although there was no "Bought" cross mark on the mapped location of Ed Grove's acreage. Torry half suspected that One-Gun Dunn, whom he had occasionally seen talking with Grove, had advised the restaurant man not to sell.

"I could handle Grove all right, if it wasn't for Dunn," he told Wade one afternoon, "but I'm afraid Grove 'll hold out if this nuisance keeps advisin' him. An' I feel that if he sees Ed weakenin', he might up an' buy the place himself."

"I don't reckon he has any money to speak of," was Wade's opinion. "An' Halliday's loose cash is mostly in the Saucepan, I'd say. Even if old Halliday got on to the thing, I don't think the word 'oil' would make him much excited. That's always the way with those old mining hardshells. Halliday's heart's in silver, or maybe gold. That's all that means quick money to his type."

Which was not an illogical analysis. In that period of the West, the magic words were silver and gold. Oil largely meant only illumination for the

lamp that shed its rays over nightly cribbage games. It did not have the significance that it would have now, in East or West.

When oil finally took its place as one of the big strikes of certain sections of the West, and keen-minded men visioned great fortunes from it and even then fell short of realities, gold and silver men still looked askance at it. Their contempt, although milder, was almost of a piece with the contempt of cattlemen for sheep growers and handlers.

"I'm hearin' that this Dunn hombre has some money of his own," said Torry. "I reckon his father was a heap different from ol' Halliday, more wanderin' an' hellin' aroun', an' some way, I don't know how, he even got hold o' some oil int'rests. That's where this Dunn's little money, whatever he's got, come from, I understand.

"I got it sorta indirect. Halliday's thick with Ed Grove, an' Ed told his daughter, an' she happened to mention it to Meadows. This Meadows, even if he is a little shaver, stands to be a valuable man to us, Wade."

"Then if he knows or suspects anything about the game," said Wade, "I'm afraid he'll convince Grove to hold on to his property."

"'Fraid so, too," admitted Torry. "Dam' it! I'd hate to think," he added, looking up significantly into the poker face of Wade, "that Grove's house burned down mysterious an' accidental, all for nothin'. Things ain't lookin' so good. This Dunn's gettin' too strong a hold on the public o' Spring Green, too."

"I wouldn't get unduly exercised over the matter," the calmer Wade suggested. "Old Halliday and Jim Lemmon, the only money boys in this neck o' the woods, don't know a thing about oil, or else they'd have taken advantage long ago of the rich opportunities here. I wouldn't worry."

"Yes, but with this One-Gun around, they might soon get on to the situation. Already this Dunn's been snoopin' around, lookin' over some fields that 'ud have no ordinary interest to a cow-punchin' greenhorn. That merely proves that cow-punchin' ain't all there is in this Dunn's head; an' that he ain't a greenhorn."

Wade nodded. "I'm quite conscious of the possible risks," he said. "We can't have taken any chances on having the ground shoveled away under our feet by Halliday and Lemmon money. With their combined resources we'd be snowed out in no time."

"Exactly. One o' the most important stretches for our purposes is Ed Grove's property. If Halliday or Lemmon get on, we're licked there. Grove would sooner sell to them anyhow, than he would to us."

"The whole thing simmers down," Torry summed up, "to Dunn. Damn his tough hide, anyway! That young firebrand has got to be run out o' here, or we're licked proper. We've put too much in this already, Wade, to get shoved out by others—now."

The matter was discussed at some length. Torry's crafty brain and Wade's cool legal reasoning power treated possibilities from several angles. They finally agreed that there was no danger from such old pay dirt prospectors as Halliday and Lemmon. The menace was Dunn. But how to remove the menace, effectively and quickly. That was the question.

"Keffer'll be back before long," said Torry, as if this might have a bearing on the situation. "We'll see what Providence sends along to us," he added.

As a matter of fact, Plug Keffer did return to town. Practically a week had elapsed, and as it usually takes more than one licking to down a Plug Keffer, the badman's spirits seemed almost as buoyant as ever.

Such discreet souls as might have hoped to gloat over a quieted and humiliated bully, found reason for disappointment. For Keffer seemed as

boastful and challenging as usual. He discussed his shooting prowess more than formerly, hopeful that he might, by overbearing vocality, even make capital out of the tussle with One-Gun Dunn.

He made a practice of laughing loudly during his drinking bouts in the Bank. Perhaps he chose this retreat for two reasons. He was fond of liquor, and, in fact, held it rather well. Usually it made him glow without stupefying him. Then, too, One-Gun Dunn, not a drinker, would not be likely to drop in.

And it may have been that he laughed, just to show that he had no reason to hide his now practically toothless mouth. That final pile-driving right smash of One-Gun Dunn in front of the Railroad Café had effectively removed a quartet of stained front-teeth from Keffer's mouth, and Keffer was going to brazen things out.

"I notice this One-Gun Dunn ain't made himself so copious aroun' Spring Green sence th' day o' thet—thet little inceedent," said Keffer, speaking in deprecating terms of the fight. Which was true. Dunn, as has been explained, sought to escape hero-worship by remaining for the most part close to the Halliday home.

"Anybody knows thet I near had 'im licked," he rambled on. "Wunst, jes' wunst, I slammed him with my fist, an' if thar hadn't ben a crowd aroun' to hold him up, I'd 'ave had 'im down—an' thet 'ud ben the end o' thet. Anyhow, I'd figgered on a gun fight, a real man tussle. I reckon Dunn didn't want no part o' me thar. No, sir-ree!"

He gulped a glass of whisky. No one interrupted. Plug Keffer had the floor.

"I ben informed," he went on, "thet this Dunn feller's all-fired quick to pick up my smoke wagons when they dropped. An' what's he do with 'em?" he asked. "What's he do with 'em?" he repeated challengingly. "He han's 'em over t' Jase Flint, the sher'ff, thet's what he does.

"Why? A low down sheep herder'd have enough brains t' figger thet out, he shore would. Waal, thar's a reason. This Dunn feller was afeard o' them guns, thet's the reason."

He did not choose to mention that he had demanded the guns back from Sheriff Flint, and that the corpulent official, now somewhat firmer in the duties of his office with the backing of One-Gun Dunn, had refused to give them back. Torry, he felt, would get around Flint and get them back somehow.

And when he got them back, he, Keffer, would seek no further open warfare with One-Gun Dunn. And he'd be safe. Dunn, at least, never drew first on a man. And he had reason to believe that some fine day Dunn might cease to clutter up the scenery. Leave that to Torry and Wade; they had brains.

In his nightly boasts at the Bank, Plug Keffer had one member among his audience who occasionally took part in the performance. That was Slim Gelder. Despite his short and ill-favored body, Gelder had little fear of any man in Spring Green except Dunn.

He was still spending the money that Torry had paid him at intervals before the altercation in the office of Wade & Meadows, and the fact that there would be no more money coming after his present stake was spent, served to store hate in his venal heart against Torry, Wade, and Keffer. He believed the trio capable of any treachery, and was not far wrong.

Gelder had the heart of a born mercenary, brave enough, but sunk into no particular cause unless there was payment back of it. More than once he had planned to fraternize with the forces in Spring Green that he could see were gradually rallying under the leadership of One-Gun Dunn.

The latter was the only man he feared in an open fight. In some way

he might make friends with this man, and at the same time wreak some handy vengeance upon his former chiefs. He made no attempts to make up with Torry, and once had laughed openly at Keffer's toothless mouth.

"I don't know, Keffer, but what thet change in you mightn't be an improvement, at thet!" he said, one evening in the Bank. "I reckon them front tusks o' yourn wa'n't what I've heerd tell of as bein' teeth like pearls. Fact is, Keffer, they allus looked more like smoked pearls to me."

His general air of cockiness and drunken banter was proving increasingly irritating to Plug Keffer. The latter's black eyes gleamed at him more than once. He made no further comeback. It was plain to him that Gelder had no fear of him. Gelder was quick on the draw.

Slim Gelder did not stop with baiting the defeated Plug Keffer. Occasionally he made bold to stop Halliday, or One-Gun Dunn on the infrequent visits of the latter to the center of town, and took to lounging about the Railroad Café rather than the bar of the Atlantic Hotel, the Pacific Pool Hall or the Bank. His money was running low, and he was drinking less.

Bart Dunn knew hardly what to make of this strange, wizened character with the bristling mustache and sharp, shoe-button eyes. Rather sneaky-looking, he thought, but since Grove did not act belligerently toward the fellow in his own establishment, Dunn tolerated him.

Dunn had finished his noon-day dinner in the Railroad Café early one afternoon. He was alone on this occasion, and he had a tendency to dally. It was not that he had yearned for conversation with Dorothy Grove.

The latter, he now realized, had a special interest in Carter Meadows, whose office was just across the street and who generally came over to his meals late so that he might visit with Dorothy.

Dunn rolled a cigarette and sat and smoked. Well, Dorothy was a nice enough girl. But he, Bart Dunn, had no intentions of poaching on another man's preserves.

He did, however, have a desire to meet Carter Meadows. He had received somewhat conflicting reports of the young attorney, from Ed Grove, from his uncle, from Lemmon, and others. A strange little man, too, to have ambitions to become sheriff of such a community as Spring Green.

He seemed pleasant enough. Was he a smooth thief and trickster? Or was he an honest man who was being used by crooks? At any rate, Dunn hoped to learn more about Meadows.

There was a free-and-easy cordiality about Spring Green. Folks generally nodded to each other when they met at the Railroad Café, whether they knew each other or not. He might get into conversation with this Carter Meadows, and have a chance to size him up.

However, One-Gun was not destined to meet Meadows that day. There were more exciting happenings scheduled for Spring Green than a meeting with Carter Meadows.

Slim Gelder happened into the restaurant. The incident might have had no sequel had not Gelder been carrying Dorothy's little brother, Richard Barton Grove. "My name's Bart, I tell you!" the youngster was insisting. "Me an' this man here's got the same name. Ain't we?" he asked Bart Dunn, sitting idly at a table.

"We shore have, Bart," Dunn answered, smiling.

Gelder smiled back. He put down the boy, who, after one of his frequent visits with Dunn, ran back into the kitchen of the restaurant for any delicacies that he might find.

Gelder took advantage of the situation to converse further with Dunn. "I jes' come from th' Bank," he said. "Cracky! Thet Keffer's an awful blowhard, ain't he? He's down thar

a-gassin' on how yo're afeared thet he'll git his guns back. He says yo're plumb afeard o' them guns. I took occasion," he added quickly, "t' inform him thet he was almighty wrong on thet."

"I'm obliged to you," said Dunn quietly. "Jes' whar," he asked, "didja say this fire-eatin' double shooter was at?"

"Down t' the Bank. He's allus shootin' off his mouth down thar."

One-Gun Dunn got up from his chair. He idled out through the door, sauntered down to the bend in the street, and came across Sheriff Jason Flint, who usually could be found not far from the Bank. Greetings were exchanged.

"I reckon, Jase," said Dunn finally, "thet mebbe it mightn't be sech a bad idee to give thet Keffer hombre back his playthings. From what I'm hearin', I'm thinkin' it might spare the ears o' consid'able o' the popoolation o' Spring Green."

After some discussion Sheriff Jason Flint waddled down the main street, and then waddled back up from his office again. In his hand he held the two pearl-handled six-guns of Plug Keffer.

"Call Keffer out," suggested Dunn.

Keffer was called out of the Bank. It was the drowsy hour in the barroom. The proprietor, tending bar at this idle period, also came out, and a curious lounger, whisky glass in hand.

"Sher'f Flint," said One-Gun Dunn, softly and audibly, "I'm hearin' thet this citizen o' Spring Green sorter feels undressed, as y'might say, without his ol' sixes. He's intimatin' as how he might have some use for them sixes.

"Accordin', I'd suggest that you return 'em. But jes' a minute thar, Sher'f Flint. I was the hombre as unloaded them guns. I reckon it 'd be a mark o' politeness to load 'em agin."

Dunn walked over to Sheriff Flint. The action brought him about ten feet from Plug Keffer, standing there before the Bank. The bad man's jet eyes were gleaming hate. A few curious souls had crossed over from the Pacific Pool Hall.

Keffer fidgeted a little. He did not relish the scene much, but here, at least, was an opportunity to get back his guns. Possibly he had talked too much about that hardware. He watched Dunn as the latter, taking some cartridges from his pocket, filled the chambers of both guns.

"Thar loaded, sher'f, right t' the muzzle," Dunn said. "I'd suggest as how you slip 'em back into Keffer's holsters. Mebbe it's how he ain't used to toys o' this here nature."

Sheriff Jason Flint, from the rear, slipped the loaded guns into the bad-man's holsters.

One-Gun Dunn stood there near the hitch rail. His hands were hanging limply at his sides.

Plug Keffer chose to make light of his humiliating position, to pass it over as matter of fact. "Thankee, sher'f," he acknowledged carelessly, as the weapons were slipped into his holsters.

His beady black eyes held Dunn's steely blue ones for just an instant. Then, with a continued air of forced carelessness, he turned and reëntered through the swinging doors of the Bank.

There was a raucous guffaw back of Bart Dunn. He turned. Slim Gelder was standing there, his heavy mustache curled in an irritating grin.

"Yore comin' t' town has sorter brought back th' ol' fire in me," Sheriff Jason Flint was saying to Dunn, as they stood there before the hitching rack of the Bank. "Cracky! I feel like a young feller agin."

Flint waddled over to the rack and leaned his heavy form upon it. The two men stood there, facing the Bank. The owner of that institution was no believer in ventilation, but a window was opened perhaps six inches. Through the narrow opening could be seen the front of the bar and a painting

of questionable taste on the wall faced by the bar.

"Yore uncle was a fire-eater in his day," rambled on Flint. "'Course he's an important man now, an' the fire in him's sorter—"

He stopped abruptly The irritating laugh of Slim Gelder floated out through the open window. There was some gruff remark from Keffer. Whatever it was, it served only to intensify the alcoholic laughter of Gelder.

"It jes' might be you could buy a set o' them purty wax teeth," Gelder was saying between chuckles. "Kin y' chaw terbacker, Plug? I'm wonderin' ef ye kin. Here, le' see ef you kin chaw terbacker with them gums o' yourn. Here, le's see—"

Sheriff Flint was walking toward the swinging doors. "Slim's a leetle teased up, I reckon," he said over his shoulder. "Neither one amounts to much, but then I'm sher'f, an'—"

Dunn was looking through the partly opened window. Slim Gelder was offering a plug of tobacco to Keffer. He could see the grinning, mustached face of Slim, and the right hand, held high, offering the brown oblong to test Keffer's biting powers.

Jason Flint was puffing up the steps. He was still calling something back at Dunn, when there was a shot from the interior of the Bank.

Dunn saw the lifted, tobacco-filled hand of Slim Gelder sink out of sight. In four long leaps he was inside the barroom, on the heels of Jason Flint. A man who had been sleeping at a table had raised his head and was looking out of sleepy, startled eyes. The proprietor was running from the rear of the saloon, followed by several men who held cards in their hands.

Plug Keffer stood there with his six-gun in his hand. Slim Gelder lay face upward on the floor, his dark eyes staring, his drooping mustache curling over his open, silent mouth.

Keffer turned to gulp his unfinished glass of whisky. He set it down, and picked up his gun from the bar, and was about to turn.

"Keep lookin' right ahead o' you, Keffer!" came the command from One-Gun Dunn. "Don't turn yore head. Keep a-lookin' into thet mirror in front o' you. Mebbe you'd admire t' see what a murderer looks like!"

For answer, Keffer elevated his hands above his head. In this position he turned around.

"Murder, nothin'!" he growled. "He was aimin' t' git me. He was a-devilin' me an' a-threatenin' me, an' he went fur his gun. I beat 'im to th' draw, thet's all thet was."

Sheriff Jason Flint, with a new-found authority, and the presence of One-Gun Dunn, disarmed Plug Keffer. The latter shrugged his shoulders. Through the soaped mirror he could see the reflection of One-Gun Dunn, his six-shooter in his hand.

"I reckon no 'un seen this," said Flint, turning to the group that had now gathered in the room. "Did *you* see it, Rush?" he asked the proprietor.

It developed that Rush Merrill, the proprietor, had not seen it. He had been called back to the poker party to serve drinks in the rear room, just a moment before, he stated. No one else, except Keffer and Gelder had been in the barroom, except the drunken lounger who had been awakened by the shot.

"I ain't sayin' Slim Gelder wasn't devilin' you," said Jason Flint to Keffer. "Fact, I heerd what he was sayin', an' I didn't hear no threat in them remarks. But I do know thet Slim Gelder had a run-in with you an' yore gang not long ago, an' I do know thet he was as quick on th' draw as you be, quicker, if anything, an' I know thet this managed to happen when no 'un was in this room.

"An' I do know thet Slim's six-gun is right in his holster this minute. I calls attention," he added in a legal manner, "o' the gents in this room to see whar thet weapon o' Slim's is—

right in his holster, ain't it? Awright. *But—*" and Sheriff Jason Flint held his bombshell for the last, "all thet's what we might call in the law as bein' carcumstanshul evidence.

"*But,* when I breaks through them doors, th' shot 'ud ben fired, but Slim's gun hand was plumb two feet above his head, with a plug o' terbacker in it. An' thar's the plug o' terbacker on the floor."

"Yo're wrong! It was a fair gun-fight!" insisted Keffer. "It was—"

"It was murder!" cut in One-Gun Dunn. "I seen it myself. Slim Gelder had a repitation as a quick man on th' trigger, an' thar he lays with his gun in his holster. I'm minded," he said, advancing a step and looking straight into the wavering eyes of Keffer, "t' let you demonstrate thet yo're so all-fired much quicker'n a quick man with a gun."

The eyes of every man in the room, and several men had run over from the near-by pool hall and other buildings, turned on One-Gun, who continued:

"Ef he wants to demonstrate thet, sher'f, give 'im back his gun. I say I seen it. He says it was a gun-fight. 'Twon't take long, I reckon, to prove which one's a liar by the clock!"

A pallor overspread the heavy face of Plug Keffer. Torry could probably get him out of this. Torry had suggested once, back in his office, that he wished Gelder out of the way. But the official voice of Sheriff Jason Flint rang out importantly.

"It 'ud be th' quickest jestice, One-Gun," he admitted, "but right here an' now is th' time to show th' public o' Spring Green an p'ints near by thet law an' order's goin' to pervail in our community. Jason Flint's sher'f here, an' it's his authority as is speakin'.

"I shore don't like to interfere with yore pleasure, One-Gun, an' I'd shore admire t' see you chastise this here hombre, but he's ben proved a liar already. This is a plain case o' murder, an' it's a goin' to end up with a rope necktie party after fair an' judicious legal trial accordin' to law."

"I'm willin' to go 'long," volunteered Keffer nervously. "Thar's ben a mistake here, but I'm willin' to go," he insisted. He put his wrists out for the rustling manacles that, finally, Sheriff Jason had found an opportunity to use.

"Ef he is, then, I reckon thet what you say about th' law is plumb true," agreed One-Gun Dunn. "I'm submittin', sher'f, that a fair an' legal trial might be th' best way after all o' sendin' a murderer to Boots Hill."

CHAPTER IX.

FLASHES OF FIRE.

THE next few days were to write a page in the history of One-Gun Dunn such as he had never before experienced. The higher his popularity grew in Spring Green, the greater in proportion grew the dangers to his person, for a man with enemies cannot become a hero peacefully when those enemies stand to lose all in the wash-back of the hero's power.

Dunn and his uncle, Samuel Halliday, had already talked matters over decisively.

"Waal, I reckon I done a lotta things in my time," Halliday had said. "I ben nurse to cows an' wrangled some mighty cantankerous hosses. I've placer-mined it an' took my fling at minin' on a right big scale, an' I ben interested in politics now an' then, but I'm thinkin' the best piece o' work I ever done was to git you here in Spring Green, Bart.

"You shore have made a right royal beginnin', better even than I'd figgered on, an' I'd figgered on considerable.

"It was jes' a thought o' mine at first, but right now I'm plumb beyond th' thinkin' stage. I'm primin' myself, Bart, to do things, in this town—with you. Marryin' into th' Lemmon family wa'n't my only plan, Bart. Fur as ropin' one o' thet Lemmon herd—

waal, I reckon thet plan o' mine's about over."

There was a rueful intonation in the words, as though a great hope had faded away. The disappointment touched Bart, and he slapped his uncle on the shoulder to cheer him up.

"Say, uncle," he asked smilingly, "did y'ever see a hippo with a giraffe's neck?"

Halliday looked puzzled. "I ain't much on goin' to circuses, Bart," he said.

"Waal, you don t nave to go as fur as thet," returned Bart, good-naturedly. "Jes' train yore orbs on Cleopatra, next door. Seems to me she's the one ol' Jim's kinda fattenin' up fur market, an' I cain't asseverate thet she sets up any feelin' o' romance in me. I reckon yo're willin' to see it my way, Uncle Sam."

In spite of himself, a smile crossed the rugged features of Halliday. While Uncle Samuel could not have stood out as an authority in matters of art, he did know when he was not looking at a work of art, and Cleopatra assuredly was not a work of art. A real connoisseur of feminine beauty, on seeing Cleopatra Lemmon, might have handed her an asp in a humanitarian impulse, to take her out of her misery.

"I reckon thet's right, Bart," he admitted. "Desdemony ain't as bad as some of 'em, an' thet young 'un, Iago, has got plenty o' time to grow. I seen some mighty ornery-lookin' females o' her age grow into darned good-lookin' women. But then, I'm willin' t' forgit all thet, Bart. Marryin' into the Lemmon fam'ly is what you might call secondary now. I got another real idee."

"What's thet, Uncle Sam?" asked his nephew. He was hoping it would be a better idea than the one about the Lemmon family.

"Waal, one is t' clean up this here town so's the ol' Saucepan kin smoke up agin without doin' more harm than good in this community. An' th' other is fur you to take th' hull thing over yoreself an' make things hum.

"Ol' Sam'l Halliday had his dreams, boy, an' he still has 'em. Sam'l Halliday ain't goin' to depart this life without a-leavin' somethin' lastin' behind 'im. Th' ol' Saucepan's goin' to rear up long after I'm dead an' gone, Bart, an' th' smoke from th' ol' smelter's goin' to be a moneement to my name. It's goin' t' feed a good many families, thet ol' Saucepan is.

"Thar's a fortune layin' almost idle thar, Bart, an' thar's only two descendants as is a goin' t' have the leavin's o' Sam'l Halliday. Them two is you, ef you help yore uncle t' start things a-hummin' wunst more, an' my daughter, Sally, up in Denver."

"I don't wanta horn in on any o' Sally's prospects," spoke up Dunn. "I'm willin' to do my share; but it might be thet Sally's husband 'ud be a good man, more businesslike, as y' might say, than I am. I reckon I ain't much of a business man, Uncle Sam."

"Sally's husband better stay right up thar in Denver, whar he belongs," said Halliday. "He's a business man, thet's right, but minin's a heap diff'rent from most businesses. I'm sorter countin' on you, Bart."

Dunn listened seriously to the outlining of his uncle's plans.

"Waal, Uncle Sam," he said finally, "I reckon as how y' ain't goin' to be disapp'inted in me. Not ef I kin help it!"

It was not a boast. It was merely a heartfelt reaction of loyalty and a promise to carry out his uncle's fondest hopes and dreams.

"Put 'er thar, Bart!" said Halliday, extending a veined hand to his nephew, and shaking heartily on the young man's assurance. "I knowed thet you'd stay with me. An', as I said, you've made a right royal beginnin' fur th' start, with Plug Keffer in jail, awaitin' trial an' execution fur murder.

"Ol' Jason Flint is back onto his feet agin, assertin' authority as it

should be asserted, an' Clem Torry's aimin' t' find hisself with his back agin th' wall. It's high time to git into operation on them plans I had fur th' Saucepan, for I reckon this town has seen the worst an' is on the mend. The new Saucepan 'ull make this town."

Bart Dunn was silent. His uncle generally knew what he was talking about. He knew mining, at any rate.

But Bart Dunn, although he was far from an egotistical young man, believed that his uncle and Jim Lemmon and other men much older than himself, and much longer in Spring Green, were blind to certain developments taking place about them, and which he, in town for only a short time, had seen.

They had brains and vision of sorts, and had amassed more money than he himself would ever amass by his own efforts during his life, he realized, but they were of the old regime. They had made a great, almost lifelong game of mining, and would be as loath to be weaned away and turned toward any other big commercial game as a confirmed poker player would be loath to turn to some new-fangled pastime.

At the right time he would speak to his uncle of a newer and bigger possibility which might put Spring Green on the railroad and the map, and empty his cornucopia along the little sun-baked main street. But the time to tell his uncle was not yet. He planned a little quiet investigation before speaking.

One-Gun Dunn made a habit of riding many miles about the territory surrounding Spring Green. As Clem Torry had surmised, Dunn was not unaware of the possibilities of oil as a source of fortune. Bart was of the younger generation; it was natural that his ideas were not exactly those of his uncle or of Jim Lemmon.

He had no preconceived prejudices against the developments which would some day raise many Westerners from comparative poverty to millionaire-dom. Dunn saw romance and action and future a plenty in black gold, in oil.

While not allowing his mind to stray very far from the plans mapped out by his uncle regarding the Saucepan Mine, he still browsed about for evidence that one day might drive Clem Torry and his adherents from town; he sensed that to undermine Torry and his supporters, the best method would be to get at the roots which bound them to Spring Green.

From Dunn's keen observation of the surrounding territory, and from his casual conversations with Grove and others, he had decided that it was oil and oil alone, with the great visionary prospect of mammoth fortunes, which rooted the Torry gang to the community.

And the best kind of a fighter, in his opinion, was the fighter who licks an opponent at that opponent's own game. Nothing quite takes the heart out of a man as being licked at his own game.

Riding back into town one afternoon, One-Gun stopped to look at the "Railroad Station." He smiled. But it was a smile of appreciation rather than of ridicule. The station was there, but no railroad. The station stood there, in Bart Dunn's eyes, as a monument to the ever forward dreams of man, and of hope that springs eternal in the breasts of men.

Once upon a time the public-spirited citizens who had built this station had envisioned a day when their little town would be a nest of industry and prosperous advancement, with an artery of transportation winding its important way directly into the soil where they had built their happy, if simple, homes.

Some day, Bart Dunn said to himself, there might still come the realization of the fond hopes of old. A railroad might still come to this station.

A little farther on, near the middle of town, but off a bit to the north, stood an unfinished building of red

brick. Its bulk stood out in this town of wood like an armory in a lumber yard. This square sided, half finished building represented another dream.

As Ed Grove had told him, there had been a time when Spring Green had shown such promise of rapid growth that a mayor and official retinue seemed to loom in the near distance.

In anticipation of this time, the forward citizenry had voted the building of a city hall, to await occupancy which would come as soon as the structure was completed and their ambitious civic plans took place.

Things had made a backward movement in Spring Green, however. The mine had seemed to peter out, the smelter had become practically idle, and the stamp mill silent, everybody in the region had less to spend, comparative hard times swept along, and it had been impossible to finish the building.

Samuel Halliday's purse had helped partially to roof it. Topped by tar paper, it now awaited the day of completion and tenure. It was referred to euphemistically as the City Hall. But at present its only use was as a jail.

Being the strongest set of walls in Spring Green, a section of the "city hall" had been partitioned off, barred by thick joists of iron, and improvised into a place of durance.

And at present, as One-Gun Dunn sat on Silver Dollar surveying the red hulk, Plug Keffer stretched his great chastened person upon a narrow cot within the cell, the only occupant of officialdom's domain, awaiting trial for murder.

Dunn, dreaming on the visionary plans embodied by the structure before him, felt the poignancy of the remainder that so grand a dream had shrunk to so small a reality as to incarcerate a murderer instead of housing a group of loyal, efficient servants of public good.

Thoughtfully, he started to lope along, and pulled up in front of the Railroad Café, and dismounted. This was a good time to have a little talk with the Groves, on Carter Meadows.

The incongruity of Meadows standing for such a job as sheriff in a community like Spring Green had often made him think. He often had hoped to meet Meadows, and have a talk with him. But, as it happened, just the idle days that he had waited for Meadows in the Railroad Café, something more important, or at least more full of action, had occurred.

"Howdy, Miss Grove," he said, taking a seat with her at a table, after he had greeted her father. "Jes' thought I'd drop in. No, ain't hungry right at present; I figured mebbe on gittin' a little information on this Carter Meadows feller.

"I'm a thinkin' he's a mite more important round here then seemed to me afore. He don't go round talkin' much, like th' rest o' th' gang. An' it strikes me as how these silent men's th' ones as have th' most important things t' say."

"I'll tell you, Mr. Dunn," spoke up Dorothy, somewhat animated. It was apparent that Meadows was an interesting man to her. "Mr. Meadows is not at all like the rest of the folks in this town.

"He came here less than a year ago. We got friendly—somewhat," she modified blushingly, as though the statement might be misconstrued, "because people who are different are always interesting. It took about two months before he began to talk openly to me, and I reckon that he's told me more about himself than he's told anybody else."

"He's an Easterner, I reckon?"

"Yes, he was educated back in Omaha. He tried practicing there for awhile, but the city was overcrowded with lawyers, and besides he wanted a change of scenery and climate. He's not a husky man, and he wanted to get down here away from the heavy Nebraska winters.

"After traveling about through the Southwest," she continued, "he decided to settle in Spring Green, chiefly because there was only one lawyer here. Judge Daniels had retired, practically, and had gone to live over near Trinchera. He got tired of the lawlessness of this town."

"Thet reminds me," said Bart. "Sher'f Flint's ridin' over thar to see th' jedge either this afternoon or this evenin'. He's minded to speed up Keffer's trial."

"I hope he does," said Dorothy. And then, returning to the subject of Meadows. "The one lawyer here, you see, was Wade, who was not exactly a young man. Moreover, Mr. Meadows thought he saw good times coming ahead, as he told me, and it looked as if Spring Green, with the Saucepan running full tilt again, might take a new lease on life and grow rapidly.

"Of course, being a gentleman, it was only right of him to have a talk with Wade. And Wade, always tricky as you know, talked him into going into business with him instead of opening up a competing office.

"Meadows had no friends here then, and didn't know, of course, that he would have had very little competition from Wade. All the good people in town hate the sight of Wade, and would have been glad to take their business to an up-and-coming new man. That's the pity of it all. Meadows didn't quite understand."

"I reckon Wade has plenty of other business, not inside the law, but outside, as y' might say," put in Dunn.

"Yes, but Carter is positively in on none of that," the girl defended. "It's too bad he went in with him. Carter wasn't brought up in a rough country like this, and possibly was rather timid about starting out for himself. The little initiative he might have had was taken out of him.

"If Carter were to open up an office of his own right now, and could live down the false start of associating with Wade and Torry, he could even now put Wade out of business—the right kind of business, that is."

Dunn planned principally to listen. He felt a little backward toward adding his uncertain conversation. Dorothy Grove, his uncle had told him, had gone to school for some time up at Denver. Her training was apparent in her speech. Probably that was what had brought Meadows and herself into close friendship, he thought.

"Meadows was taken in by that gang over there," Dorothy Grove continued. "They're right smooth, and it seems that Carter even yet won't believe the extent to which he is being used as a tool by that bunch.

"Meadows is glad to run for sheriff, because he thinks it will give him a good opportunity to make a start in politics. He's interested in politics.

"He thinks that this is destined to be a quiet town, more advanced than certain other Western settlements, and that a hard-riding, straight shooting type of sheriff is unnecessary. He points out that Flint hasn't shot at a man in years.

"He doesn't believe, however, that this town would have been a lot better off even if Jase Flint had been more self-assertive and quicker on the trigger."

"Yaas, I reckon yo're right in thet partic'lar," Dunn agreed. "Thieves is like weeds. Let 'em git a start on you, an' purty soon they spread thick an' perfuse-like. Git 'em out early, an' you ain't got so much to do later. Waal, I take yore word on this Meadows feller, Miss Grove, an' we'll see what we all kin do 'bout it."

"I do wish you could help him," said Dorothy impulsively. "It certainly is a shame to see all of his talents go to waste, especially where real talent is scarce, and needed. It's not like my own case," she added, anxious to impress Dunn. "I could be teaching school, but I sort of feel that I ought to help father out. I do a lot of the

figuring and things like that, as well as waiting on table."

"You do both of 'em mighty well, I reckon," said Dunn gallantly. "Now, as t' this Meadows. Th' first thing necessary, I'd say, 'ud be to see thet them talents o' his ain't put to various an' evil purposes just on account o' bein' misled, y' might say."

Bart found himself trying to swing into his best vocabulary, spurred by the careful speech of Dorothy Grove.

"Meadows might be pleased," he continued, rising, "t' git elected as sher'f, but it ain't for nothin' thet Torry an' Wade is backin' him. I'm afeared they got Meadows sorter bulldozed, an' mebbe aim to git him in as sher'f 'fore Plug Keffer goes to trial.

"It 'ud be a right smart thing to have that trial run off without no waitin' an' no red-tape. Th' hull town's a cryin' fur it anyhow, t' come off immediate. I'm goin' to mosey over to Jason Flint now, an' see jes' how soon Keffer kin be airin' hisself at th' end of a rope. Good day, Miss Grove."

Dunn peeped into the Bank for Flint, but for once that official was not at or near his favorite haunt. Keffer had been in jail three days now, and probably Flint was keeping closer to the jail. He finally found Flint at the square red building. The officious Jason was laying down the law to a deputy, sitting guard near the cell of Keffer.

"Thought you was ridin' over Trinchera way," he said to Flint.

"I aimed to," said the sheriff. "Fact, I think I'll start lopin' along right now. Ef yo're ridin' up toward yore uncle's house, I'd admire to ride along of you."

"Shore," said One-Gun. "An' why not stop in fur supper? Uncle Sam 'ud be glad to have you, an' we could talk things over, an' Uncle Sam's got a mestizo cook up thar thet kin make frijoles taste like strawberries."

Flint accepted the invitation and the two rode toward the Halliday home. Clem Torry, Bart learned, had gone out of town the morning previous and hadn't been seen back as yet. Possibly, thought Dunn, he must have been fearful that the town's cry for a speedy trial would be harmful to Keffer's safety, and perhaps Torry had skipped out to rig up some legal delays.

As the two riders reached the Halliday home, the sun was already setting. Manuel was busy in the kitchen in the midst of some tantalizing odors from pans and skillets, and a few moments later the three men sat down to supper.

"I'm hopin'," said Flint, as he did full justice to the various dishes prepared by Manuel, "thet Jedge Daniels will see it my way fur a quick trial. Then everything shore'll be hunky-dory.

"Keffer won't have no chanst to escape with Jake Eddy standin' guard over 'im. Jake's absolute honest; I've knowed Jake fur twenty y'ar or more. An' the evidence is preponderatin', an' once Keffer's danglin' an' dancin' on th' air, I reckon it won't be long 'fore Spring Green perks up an' gits plumb orderly."

"I hope so, an' I reckon it will," agreed Halliday.

While Manuel might not have passed as a chef in most communities where the finer delicacies are served to discriminating diners, he was good enough for Spring Green. Jason gorged himself plentifully, and sat complacently picking his teeth with a broken finger nail.

"Jes' as soon I didn't have to make thet ride over to Trinchera," he said, lolling back.

"Tell you what I'll do. I'll ride 'long of you," offered Dunn.

Fifteen minutes later, in the thickening darkness, the two riders set out for the home of Judge Daniels. The route to Trinchera lay along the slight rise from which, on his first day in town, Bart Dunn had seen the treachery of Clem Torry in planting a sniper to get

him in the event of a gun fight, and then the trail crossed Pueblo Creek and continued on a short distance from the railroad.

The night was dark, but the moon had come out. It illuminated the trail ahead in a pattern of black and silver, and stars twinkled here and there in the sky.

The trail paralleled the railroad for perhaps a mile, and then, still following the general direction of the creek, but shooting away from the railroad, made an almost semicircular loop down gradually toward the hollow where the little ghost town of Trinchera was located.

Trinchera, however, was not a deserted town. A few persistent miners still clung to its rim, thinking of the boom times when they had first come to this community, when there was a dance hall and money and revelry. A sutler still ran an unmethodical business there, and outfitted the few desert rats who made Trinchera a jumping-off place in their quests for gold.

That there was gold along Pueblo Creek had been proved too definitely in the past not to have still a few believers in its presence. Judge Daniels, who had moved over from Spring Green, was said to be doing a little placer mining on the side, and Samuel Halliday, too, still with his old Argonaut spirit, had made various trips along Pueblo Creek.

But Halliday had remained firm in his opinion that the real gold, if it was to be located at all, would be found in the reaches of Pueblo Creek to the southwest of Spring Green.

And then Halliday had gradually dropped the matter. He had reached an age where he preferred the certainties of his mine, the Saucepan, to the uncertainties of placer operations at some indefinite point along Pueblo Creek.

One-Gun Dunn thought of all these things as, with Sheriff Flint at his side, he rode along directly toward the moon, which seemed to be hanging over Trinchera. The riders completed the semicircular turn to the right, and One-Gun Dunn looked dreamily over his left shoulder at the orb of light in the sky.

How many times would that moon rise again before Plug Keffer dangled from a rope? Where had Torry disappeared to, and what had been his motive? What would Judge Daniels, over in Trinchera, say to the idea of a speedy trial? These and many other thoughts came to him. The horses padded on. Even loquacious old Jase Flint seemed to have talked himself out.

The trail made a bend again. Now it would descend straight into Trinchera. The moon could now be seen almost straight ahead again, through the clump of cottonwood trees that bordered the Trinchera trail.

Silver Dollar lifted his head; his nostrils quivered, and he gave vent to a low whicker. A few rods ahead were the cottonwood trees. One-Gun Dunn put up his hand as a signal to Flint. He lowered his head, and listened.

From the direction of the cottonwoods, there was a muffled sort of sound. Dunn, used to horses since childhood, thought that it might have been the whicker of a horse. But the sound came sort of throttled—as if a man, fearing an answering neigh from his mount, might have held his fingers over his horse's nose.

"Jase," said Dunn in a low tone, "thet sorter sounds to me—"

The sentence was never finished. Just ahead, against the black weft of the trees, there was a flash, and throwing up his hands, Sheriff Jason Flint toppled from his horse into the road and lay motionless, his arms outstretched, his dead eyes staring at the sky.

His horse reared and stampeded over to the side of Silver. There was another flash ahead, and a report, and

the animal, now just in front of One-Gun Dunn, gave a squeal of pain. But it did not fall. It turned away from the cottonwoods and galloped frantically up the slight slope back toward Spring Green.

Bart Dunn however, had not been idle. Almost before the report of the rifle broke the night's stillness, his six-gun had been whipped from his holster and he was firing at the flashes up among the cottonwoods. When the fourth rifle shot came, he felt a sting in the left shoulder, but he kept shooting at the flashes, retreating flashes by now.

He spurred Silver Dollar, who raced down the slope toward the clump of trees. There was another flash ahead, and as he saw it One-Gun fired. It was his last cartridge but one.

One-Gun felt like what seemed a crushing weight fall on his head, and his temple burned as if some one were searing it with a red-hot iron. His horse was still galloping under the smart of the unaccustomed rowel, but for once its rider was not a part of the animal.

One-Gun Dunn's head sank forward, his gun fell from his hand, and he toppled into the roadway.

CHAPTER X.

A RIDERLESS HORSE.

BIG Ed Grove smoked a cigar in front of the Railroad Café while he engaged Carter Meadows in casual conversation. He towered over the frail young lawyer who had ambitions to be sheriff, and he looked over the lawyer's head, seemingly peering into the darkness up along the main street.

"Somebody ridin' hard," he said. "Hear them hoof beats, Carter? I dunno who'd be lopin' hell bent like that jest at present. Course One-Gun Dunn lives up thet way. I wonder what's up."

Carter Meadows turned and gazed in the same direction. Out of the semi-gloom of the upper end of the little main street raced a riderless horse. The stirrups twisted and swung as the wild-eyed sorrel streaked along, and Ed Grove ran out into the middle of the street and waved his arms.

The horse wavered and veered over to the side as Big Ed made a grasp at the bridle, and missed it, but a man walking along the street from the direction of the Bank had also run into the road and managed to check the now slowing animal. It was Bail Bond Wade.

The horse pranced and minced about, and Wade led it toward the light in front of the Pacific Pool Room and peered at it. A number of men had run out of the pool hall, and several were crossing now from the Bank.

"He's been clipped on the muzzle," Wade remarked. "Something irregular. I'm afraid. That's Jase Flint horse, isn't it?"

"It shore is," replied one of the by-standers. "An' look at him. All sweated up, as ef he come some distance."

Big Ed Grove and Carter Meadows had run down the street and joined the knot of men around the animal.

"Jase Flint rode by the place on thet hoss early this evenin'," Grove said to the by-standers. "He was with One-Gun Dunn. I reckoned he'd figgered to ride over to Trinchera, seein' Jedge Daniels 'bout somethin'."

"I seen 'em, too," put in a youth who had run from the pool hall, cue in hand. "'Twas 'bout four o'clock, I reckon, mebbe nearer five." He pointed up the street. "Here comes Sam'l Halliday," he said. "Mebbe he'll have somethin' to tell us."

Samuel Halliday galloped along the street and dismounted at the edge of the crowd. "What's up?" he asked.

"That's what we were wondering," said Wade. "We thought maybe you might have something to tell us."

"All I know," said Halliday, "is that I was talkin' to Jim Lemmon in front o' my house, an' this hoss raced aroun' the turn. We was too late to head 'im off, but we knowed somethin' was up. I had my hoss standin' there, an' I galloped down to see ef he was caught.

"Golly!" He had seen the blood on the horse's muzzle. "Ben plugged, too. Sher'f Flint's hoss. Jase had supper with me an' my nephew, an' then th' both of 'em started over toward Trinchera way."

His voice showed his concern. "Somethin' mighty wrong here," he said. "Waal, some 'un turn thet hoss over t' the vet, an' I'll start up th' trail toward Trinchera.

"Jim Lemmon's saddlin' up, an' I reckon he'll jine me."

"But wait a minute, thar, Sam'l," commanded Big Ed Grove. "No use one or two o' you startin' out. I'll be ready to jine you in two shakes."

"An' me, too," put in Wade. "I think this needs investigating."

"I'll go along," Carter Meadows volunteered.

"Me, too," came more than one voice from the crowd, and there was a dash toward the hitch-rail of the Bank.

It was a matter of only minutes before a sizable group of riders, most of them armed, and one carrying a lantern, rode up the main street toward the railroad that paralleled the Trinchera trail for a couple of miles. They met Jim Lemmon clattering toward town, and the gaunt ex-miner joined the cavalcade.

"I wouldn't fret too much," he took occasion to tell his friend, Halliday. "Yore nephew was along with Flint, wa'n't he?"

"Yep," answered Halliday. "But it all looks wrong t' me."

His seamed old face was pale, and there was a worried look in the faded old eyes. Bail Bond Wade rode over close beside him.

"Yore nephew started out with Flint, you say?" he asked.

Halliday looked up. "Yep," he said briefly. "We got a right smart heap o' prominent citizens here," he added. Then, as if it might be an afterthought, or might have something to do with what he had been thinking about: "I don't see Clem Torry here."

"No," said Wade calmly. "I got a letter from Clem to-day. He's down San Miguel way, getting rigged out with some new clothes. I hope, Halliday, the day comes some time when our own stores can rig out our good dressers. The store here don't seem quite good enough for Clem, an' Jim Lemmon here, for that matter. Too much mail-order business, and too much slipping over to San Miguel."

"Yep," said Halliday.

The cavalcade crossed the creek and rattled on to cross the railroad near the signboard, and turned along the Trinchera trail. The moon had come up full and bright. Samuel Halliday rode at the front of the procession, his old face set in hard lines.

The man with the lantern bent down and let its rays illuminate the hoof-pocked trail. "They shore passed here," he observed. "Them's new hoofprints, an' you kin see the marks o' Flint's hoss on th' back trail. Don't fret too much, Sam'l," he said softly to Halliday. "I reckon 'twa'n't nothin' much happened."

Halliday was silent. Something irregular had happened, that much was certain. His nephew had been with Flint, and Flint's riderless horse had stampeded back into Spring Green, and there had been a bullet-mark in its muzzle.

There had been gunplay of some sort. Had his nephew been in it? And Bart must have seen the sheriff's horse bolt. If something serious had not happened, why had not Bart followed up the horse and caught him before the animal reached Spring Green?

He rode on, silently, his mind full

of alarming thoughts. Had he brought his nephew to Spring Green simply to bury him?

He saw Bail Bond Wade loosen his reins and allow his animal to break to the head of the procession. Was Bail Bond sincere in being a part of this detachment to-night? Had he misjudged Wade in the past, or had Bail Bond simply come along to-night for the looks of the matter? And where was Clem Torry?

After the incarceration of Plug Keffer, the story of Clem Torry's plan to snipe his nephew had come out. Bart had referred to it when he claimed that Keffer was a coward and a murderer. The story had caused gossip in Spring Green. Some believed it; some did not.

Some thought that Bart Dunn might have been mistaken. Clem Torry was tricky, but he would hardly do a thing like that. But Samuel Halliday believed it. And yet Clem Torry would be too smooth to have anything happen to Dunn now unless he himself were some place away from the scene where he could prove a convincing alibi.

The cavalcade approached the semicircular loop away from the railroad, and gradually made the turn and started the slight slope around the trail which then would lead, as straight as the crow flies, toward the hollow of Trinchera.

They made the final bend. The moon had climbed over the top of the cottonwoods ahead; its light streamed down along the trail. Suddenly the horse of Bail Bond Wade shied.

"Steady there, y'old fool!" yelled Wade. "What's up?"

But the sharp old eyes of Samuel Halliday had made out a dark smudge in the moonlit trail a few yards ahead. His old heart was pounding. He spurred his horse. He could hear the clattering hoofs of Wade's horse behind him.

A body lay on its back in the middle of the road, a body with outstretched arms. Halliday and Wade looked down at it.

"Lord! It's poor Jase Flint!" exclaimed Wade. "Plugged! Plugged right through the heart, I reckon."

The rear riders clattered up. "By Heaven! Murder!" ejaculated Big Ed Grove, as he gazed down at the dead face of the sheriff. "Pore ol' Jase! Waal, I knowed Jase a mighty long time. I reckon he didn't have no chanst to go fur his gun, but he died th' way he allus said he wanted to die —with his boots on! Pore ol' Jase!"

But already one of the riders who had advanced to the start of the second turn had yelled and waved back and pointed along the trail.

All except Ed Grove and one or two others who had dismounted, spurred their animals and overtook the rider as he rounded the turn.

A few rods ahead, between them and the clump of cottonwood trees, the figure of a horse was outlined in the white moonlight. There was an unconscious cry of anguish from Samuel Halliday. It was a blaze-faced horse—Silver Dollar.

And he was standing in such a way as to mask something in the middle of the road. The ex-miner could make out a pair of boots projecting beyond the horse's feet.

Halliday's rowel bit into the flank of his horse. In a few seconds he had dismounted and led Silver Dollar a foot or two away. A tall form was lying in the roadside face down.

There was a choking gasp from the throat of Samuel Halliday.

"Bart! Bart!" he called piteously.

Bail Bond Wade had stooped down and turned over the form.

"Bart!" called Samuel Halliday again. "Aw, Bart!"

There were moistened eyes in many a hard, rough face at that moment. Jim Lemmon had come up and placed his lank arm tenderly about the shoulder of his old pard, Halliday. The

man with the lantern was running up. He shed the rays full upon the blood-stained face of One-Gun Dunn.

There was a spasmodic flutter of Bart Dunn's eyelids. "Lor' be praised!" called Jim Lemmon. "Sam'l! Sam'l, ol' pard! Mebbe—jes' mebbe—we ain't too late yit!"

The voice seemed to cut into the ears of Bart Dunn. He half raised his head, and his blood-blinded eyes stared up toward the spot of light from the lantern. Unconsciously his right hand had gone to his empty holster. Then his hand went to his eyes.

"Did I git 'im?" he asked. "Did I git 'im?"

His head sank back again, and he lay still.

Big Ed Grove had seemingly taken charge of things. He turned to a trio of the horsemen.

"We're a heap nearer Trinchera than we are t' Spring Green," he said. "Two or three o' yo' boys ride hell-fur-leather into Trinchera. Ef thar's a doc thar, hev him gallop out. An' one o' yo' boys git hold of a buck-board pronto. This here boy cain't be got in thar no other way.

"We'll git 'im into Trinchera, an' you two, Okey an' Reeve, ride back to Spring Green. Rouse up ol' Doc Travers, in case thar ain't no doc at Trinchera.

"An' say, work fast, an' mebbe it 'll be so thar's only ben one murder tonight. This lad's been creased bad, an' he's ben plugged through th' shoulder.

"But he's got a chanst. Don't fret too much, Sam'l, ol' boy," he added, patting the shoulder of Halliday, who was kneeling in the dust of the roadway over the unconscious form of his nephew.

"Git started, boys," he commanded, turning to the men he had designated. "Roust up Trinchera, an' get some sorter posse started over toward the desert, so' the ornery rattler thet done this don't git too much headstart.

"Or he may still be prowlin' aroun' 'twixt here an' Trinchera. Ef you see anybody suspicious, bring 'im back. An' say, boys, remember, we ain't got no sher'f right at present. Pore Jase is dead. So tote along a rope!"

CHAPTER XI.

WHEN VILLAINS PROSPER.

CLEM TORRY, handsomely bedecked in a new suit of store clothes and a brand-new sombrero, cantered along the trail which paralleled the railroad. His trim stallion looked as though it might be of Arabian lineage.

The sun was hot at this point, and Torry stopped for a moment to remove his sombrero and mop the perspiration from his forehead.

Down along the shimmering trail he could see the crossboard sign beside the railroad tracks. He wondered what had happened in Spring Green during his four days' absence. He wondered if a certain party designated to pick off a certain individual had done his duty and earned his money.

For that had been the real reason for Clem Torry's absence from Spring Green. The ostensible reason for his trip had been the new outfit and some personal business of a financial nature, down in San Miguel. Torry, riding back in a new outfit, would presumably have been to San Miguel for some trading.

He had been known to go down to San Miguel for his clothes before this; and, also, it had got about that Torry had some personal interests in San Miguel. He would show great surprise when, on coming into Spring Green, he would be informed that some one had got Sheriff Jason Flint.

Clem Torry would show astonishment, and then a sort of a speechless sorrow. He had never had any runins with Flint; Flint had been easy to handle at all times. Clem Torry would

be among those to cry loudly for vengeance.

He, Torry, had his following of citizens who believed in him, and the others, while they might suspect him of certain pieces of trickiness, never had been able to prove it definitely.

It might be, of course, that the man he had hired had turned yellow, or had not had a chance to get Flint as the latter rode over to Judge Daniels as Torry knew that he had planned to do. In that case, things would be at least as good as they were before.

But if he had managed to get Flint, that was a master stroke. Flint had been practically the only eyewitness to the Gelder killing, except, of course, One-Gun Dunn. With Flint out of the way, leave the rest to the wily legal mind of Wade.

Flint, at least, would have been the only witness generally regarded as neutral. The whole community knew that Dunn and Keffer had had a bitter man-to-man tussle and that there had been bad blood between them. So if Flint, the neutral witness, was out of the way, he and Wade had a good chance to get Keffer free.

Or, in case even that failed, Wade could possibly delay the trial until they planted Carter Meadows in the sheriff's office. Once they managed to get little Meadows in, he and Wade would be sitting soft.

There were all sorts of ways. Life was like a hand of stud-poker; with a good card buried a fellow had a good chance to pull out right up to the last card.

He and Wade had been pretty smooth in everything they did; no one in the wrong camp had anything definite on them; and if the time came when they did, well, Clem Torry would have won the game by that time, and could pull out of Spring Green to spend his fortune in more interesting places.

Thus ran Torry's thoughts as his stallion plodded across the railroad tracks and turned down the trail across the creek that led into Spring Green. He was a man of active mind.

Even so close to town, he could hardly wait to get the definite information that his arrival in Spring Green would bring.

He did not take the road that led by the Halliday house. Somehow he never liked to chance a possible meeting with One-Gun Dunn. Instead he took the trail that led by the burned Grove dwelling. There were fresh wagon-tracks leading into the little cemetery near the edge of the town. Some one had been buried since he had left. Who?

He rode on slowly. If it had been Flint, Clem Torry would seem greatly shocked. He supposed the sniper that he had hired would make his get-away all right. But, in the event even that he had been caught, and it was not likely, Torry would turn upon him, prove him a liar, and be one of the first to railroad him to the gallows.

Clem Torry's thoughts came to an abrupt conclusion as the trail led him to the lower part of the main street. Up along the street he could see little groups of men, standing around and talking. He sensed an air of bustle usually missing from Spring Green.

A man drew by in a Canastoga wagon. He looked like a rancher returning to his home in the fertile valley to one side of the town. Torry did not recognize him, but he pulled up his horse.

"What's goin' on up there?" he asked. "Looks like excitement?"

The stranger stopped his horses. "Shore is," he said. "Right smart ixcitement to-day. 'Lection!"

"Election!" echoed Torry. "What election?"

"Sher'f," was the reply.

"But Jase Flint's term ain't up yet," said Torry with a look of surprised virtue at the rancher.

"Yep, I reckon it is," was the reply. "Mebbe y'ain't from these parts, stranger. Ef you was, you'd know thet

Jase Flint was shot daid by an orn'ry murderer. Ol' Jase's orfice is bein' filled to-day by 'lection."

"Good Lord!" exclaimed Torry. "Yes, I am from here, but I've been away. I knew Jase. One o' the best friends I had. Killed! Good Lord!"

He removed his sombrero and wiped his brow.

"They'll tell y'all about it," said the rancher, as he clucked to his horses. "Giddap, thar! Yep, some 'un got Jase Flint an' that feller called One-Gun Dunn. Yo're goin' t' hear a mighty excitin' story, stranger. Giddap!"

He pulled on.

Clem Torry cantered up the main street. He had half expected to hear about the sniping of Flint, that was according to plan. But One-Gun Dunn dead, too! Had his hireling gone too far beyond instructions? Was it a good thing or a bad thing? Would it mean that everything would now be plain sailing for Wade and himself, with Dunn out of the way?

Or would the thing look too obvious? No one would suspect him in connection with the Flint killing. But it was known that he and Dunn were enemies. He had better get to Wade at once, and see the lay of the land.

He felt a little nervous as he proceeded up the street toward the office of Wade & Meadows, nodding here and there, but not stopping. He wanted to talk with Wade first. He threw his reins over his horse's head and clattered up the wooden stairs of the law office and threw open the door.

Wade was holding a paper in his hand and discussing it with Carter Meadows. Torry looked at Wade significantly. Wake's poker face remained expressionless.

"Howdy, Clem," he said quietly. "See you been getting all rigged out down in San Miguel. Well, a lot's happened since you've been away. Come back in here, and I'll tell you all about it."

As he passed into the rear of the suite, Torry felt strangely nervous. Everything seemed to be all right, but then Bail Bond Wade was always a good actor. He could have everything go wrong and still hold that poker face. He sat down as Wade slammed the door and winked over at him.

"Gi' me it quick, Wade," he said. "What's up? And what about the election being held to-day? That sure was a surprise. I met a rancher down the road a piece, an' he told me about the election, and "—unconsciously he lowered his voice—"about Flint an' Dunn. The fellow that got him—" He winked at Wade. "Did he get away from Spring Green?"

"He's still in Spring Green," said Wade coolly. "Or right near by, that is."

"What happened? Did they know he got Flint an' Dunn? Has he talked?"

"He's in Boots Hill," said Wade.

"You got me wrong. I don't mean Flint or Dunn, I mean the one that got 'em. Where's he?"

"I got you right," said Wade, with his almost irritating calmness. "He's in Boots Hill, six feet underground. He won't talk," he added grimly.

"But we seem to be all mixed up," insisted Torry. "Dead is he, that fellow? Rope necktie? Posse? What?"

"Our prominent and helpful friend, One-Gun Dunn, got him," Wade informed his crony. "And what do you mean about Flint and Dunn being in Boots Hill? Flint, yes. Jase Flint was buried yesterday. But Dunn, damn his tough hide, is a long way above ground.

"Here," he continued, looking over at the now disappointed face of Clem Torry, "don't cross-examine me. I'll tell you the whole thing from start to finish. And don't look worried. We're sitting soft.

"Sheriff Jason Flint was shot and killed, presumably by some old enemy of his. Flint was riding toward

Trinchera. Dunn was riding with him. It was night.

"The same man, or presumably the same man," he added, in meaning tones, "got this Dunn in the shoulder and also greased him with a bullet in the temple.

"When Jase Flint's riderless horse came streaking into town, a bunch of us citizens—I was among 'em—rode out Trinchera way to see what happened. We found Flint dead in the roadway, about two-thirds of the way between here and Trinchera.

"We found Dunn there too, and thought, for the moment, that he had been killed. But he wasn't. He was unconscious, and we got him on a buckboard and into Trinchera, and Doc Travers rode over and dressed his wounds. Dunn was a long way from being dead, but Travers has made him stay over there. He's making a good recovery—expected back to-day, I reckon.

"At first I was afraid—well, all of us thought that whoever did the shooting had made a get-away or might be around the country somewhere. But Dunn had been shooting at the flashes, it seems, and I guess there's no fooling us on that point any longer—whatever One-Gun Dunn shoots at, he hits."

"He's a lucky, nine-lived cat!" muttered Torry.

"Anyhow," continued Wade, "the boys combed the country for a long way past Trinchera. Then, next morning, this fellow that did the shooting was found in a clump of cottonwoods on the Trinchera trail, his rifle in his hands.

"He'd been plugged in the chest and a couple of times in the belly, and probably bled to death. Anyhow, he's dead—and buried—and if anybody planted him there," he added, again winking at Torry, "that person has nothing to worry about. Dead men tell no tales."

Clem Torry emitted an elephantine sigh. He got up and opened a corner cupboard and took out a tall bottle. Wade shook his head. "None for me—to-day," he said. "I'm going to be right busy."

Clem poured himself a generous drink, and drained the glass.

"An' of course you got the special election held," he said.

"Of course. It was a golden opportunity. I got together a group of ranchers from the west of the county, and also a group of townsmen. I put it up strong to Judge Daniels. Most people take his word on such special occasions, and you know I could always handle Daniels. He and I have been pretty thick.

"He's thrown a lot of legal business my way since he went over there placer-mining. Grove and Lemmon and plenty others were for this Dunn to fill the shoes of the late Sheriff Flint. I got the right people to point out—that was two days ago—that this Dunn was a badly injured man, that he might even die. He was in a fever for thirty-six hours.

"It finally worked out that the candidates would be Meadows, of course, and Jake Eddy, who's been a deputy for years. I knew there'd be a battle. I got the ballots printed that way, though, and if anybody wants this Dunn for sheriff—and a lot do want him, I'm afraid—they'll have to write in his name.

"That gave us an edge right there. The cattlemen are, in some ways, like the sheep that they hate—they follow along nicely when you guide 'em. They have very little initiative. Two out of three will vote for one or the other man whose name's printed on the ticket."

Torry stood up and stretched out his hand to Wade. "If my hat wasn't already off," he said, "I'd take it off to you, Wade. And I got a good new one here, too, as you see. That," he added, "is what I went down to San Miguel for—to buy a new hat and some clothes. You always have an ace in the hole, Wade."

"I have another," said Wade,

smugly. "Ed Grove, Jim Lemmon, Doc Travers, Rush Merrill, an' a good-sized bunch o' the boys rode over to Trinchera to-day. They're bringing back this Dunn. They got a spring wagon, to make it easy for him over that trail, and I reckon they plan on some grand stand play to bring him back to town with a lot of noise before the polls close.

"But Rush, of course, is with us. They think the polls close at four o'clock, and Rush'll do everything over there to keep alive that impression. But what did I do? Got an order signed just this noon, signed by Judge Daniels, the chairman commissioner satisfactory to all sides, that the polls close at two o'clock.

"If there would be any danger from a grand stand play like that, this order fixes it. When they get back, it'll be too late for all of 'em to vote.

"And if there's any flareback, if they blame anybody, let 'em blame Judge Daniels.

"I'm out of it, presumably, and you were out of town. I think we've got a little sheriff in that outside office, Clem," he added, smiling and nodding in the direction where Meadows was at work in the front office.

Clem Torry took another drink of whisky, and shook his great head admiringly. "Wade," he said, "I reckon if you an' me goes to hell when we die, we won't have much to worry about. You'd sorta maneuver the devil aroun' an' git his job, an' I reckon we might find it right pleasant down there."

Wade smiled at the appreciation of his confederate, and in his enthusiasm changed his mind about the bottle. He reached over and poured himself a drink.

"You're talking about some time in the future, Clem," he said. "We're going to do quite a little living first. And this afternoon, when Meadows is counted in as sheriff, we're sitting on top of the world, right next to old Dame Fortune.

"I'm not very modest, Clem. I was born with a crafty mind, and no use making believe that I don't know it. I've often thought," he added, replenishing his glass, "that I'd made good in a bigger way back East if I'd had a chance there when I was younger. And maybe when we have our pile, I'll take a fling at it yet. I'm only fifty-seven, and right now I feel like a boy!"

CHAPTER XII.

THE WOUNDED CANDIDATE.

ALONG a narrow road that sloped up from the hollow of Trinchera rode a group of horsemen. They looked like outriders in the old coaching days, for some of them rode in advance of a covered spring wagon, and some rode behind, and there was a festive air about the procession. There was a banner across the side of the covered spring wagon, a banner which read:

FOR SHURUFF. OUR CANDYDATE.

O. G. DUNN

The lettering was crude, and the "S" in the mispelled word of office was turned the wrong way, and the rough character who had lettered the sign had thought only of One-Gun Dunn's nickname when he sketched in the initials of the candidate. But if there was not culture in this group, there was at least heartiness, plenty of laughter and chatter and evidence of right good will.

One-Gun Dunn, out of consideration for his recent gun wounds, rode in the spring wagon, and Samuel Halliday held the reins. This deputation of Spring Green citizens had ridden over to Trinchera that morning, planning to conduct their candidate for office personally back to Spring Green.

It was a gesture of whole-hearted liking for Bart Dunn, and at the same time one planned to make his entrance into Spring Green, on the day of elec-

tion, somewhat of a gala affair. Samuel Halliday, always a bit of a politician at heart, believed that it would be a beneficial manner of electioneering.

The procession would reach Spring Green somewhere around two o'clock, and traveled at a leisurely pace, secure in the belief that the polls did not close until four. Rush Merrill said there was no use speeding up and rattling up the wounded One-Gun Dunn.

As they reached the top of the sloping hill, crowned by the cottonwood trees, it was Merrill who seemed most eager to learn about the particulars of the ambushing there by the strange sniper a few nights before.

He dismounted, and asked Dunn various questions, complimented the puncher on his courage and marksmanship, and—at one time when he was exploring the ground in the clump of cottonwoods, apparently with great fervor and interest—took advantage of his concealed position to pull out a great silver watch from a pocket of his deerskin vest and consult the hour.

It was a little after twelve o'clock, noon. At this rate, the party would not reach Spring Green before two o'clock, the actual closing time at the polls. And Rush Merrill, henchman of Wade and Torry, would do all the stalling possible to make the party's tardiness a certainty.

As the procession reached the loop-like turn in the Trinchera trail, a horseman could be seen traveling with some speed from the direction of Spring Green. His horse galloped, and then cantered, and then galloped again, and then slowed to a walk. Even at a distance it could be seen that this man was no experienced Western rider.

TO BE CONTINUED NEXT WEEK

U U U

Rainier Starts Something

THE Rainier National Park Company has started something new in the way of outdoor recreation by sponsoring two camps for boys from all over the United States. For four weeks they will climb mountains, scale glaciers, hike over trails, ride horseback, explore caves; and all the thrills which nature holds in store will be theirs to enjoy.

For a week they will camp at Longmire, where they will be taught ways of the trail and get hardened into horseback riding and hiking.

Then two weeks will be spent in circling Mount Rainier on the Wonderland Trail, with stops at camps in Indian Henry's, Klapatche Park, Sunset Park, Mowich Lake, Spray Park, Mystic Lake, White River Camp, Yakima Park, Summerland and Ohanapecosh Parks, the trip ending at Paradise Valley. Each boy will have his own horse, and there will be guides and cooks and directors.

At Paradise Valley the boys will spend the final week in making horseback and hiking trips from there to the glacier caves, over Skyline Trail, up the Tatoosh peaks, and finally up the very summit of old Ranier, the Mountain of Eternal Snows.

The first camp starts July 10 and the second one on August 6, but it is expected that more than enough applications to fill the desired quota will have been received weeks before the date of the first camp. This is a new venture for any national park, and one that others are likely to follow.

Guy Rader.

Behind the scenes in a broadcasting studio which gives us a story which couldn't possibly have been written ten years ago

Applause Mail

By ONEY FRED SWEET

BETTY PARSONS advised all persons craving a try out on WMQZ that Henri Salzman, the program director, would be in the office after three o'clock in the afternoon. She could impart this brief information, say nothing more, and fulfill her duty, but just now there was something most attractive about the inquiring and aspiring young man on the other side of the railing that ran along in front of Betty's desk.

The young man had an instrument case under his arm, yet he was hardly the musician type, Miss Parsons thought. Surely, in his background there had been plenty of outdoors and athletics. If looks could be broadcast, she figured he would be a microphone wow.

"Do you play?" she asked.

"And sing," he nodded.

They were alone in the office.

"I've seen a lot of 'em come and a lot of 'em go," Miss Parsons informed him out of her wisdom of six months at the office of the broadcasting station. "Whether you make good or not 'll depend on the applause mail. Take a seat on the bench there and wait for Henri. He's almost due."

The young man hadn't said anything about a partner in his act. That would probably come later.

Not wholly absorbed in the task of sorting applause mail, Miss Parsons had a chance to study a profile that came as near to being her ideal as had come her way since gaining contact with the business world.

Take the applause mail that Betty sorted at her information desk near the entrance to the office. There were listeners-in who raved about the melodious voice of Bert Hall, the announcer. Betty knew he was married and getting bald.

There were fans that were wild

about the Joy Boys and the Canoedlers, and Betty, seeing who they were and what they were "in person," had nothing particular against them, but never had they inspired in her any emotion.

A candy bar had been named after the famous "comic strip team," but here again, so far as Betty was concerned, familiarity had taken the edge off illusion.

"You must find the work interesting," commented the caller.

Well, it was. But, after all, a job was just a job. It wasn't having somebody care enough about you to want you to share with them "a little white house on a little green hill." All afternoon the office had seemed unusually stuffy.

"Henri's the man you'll see," Betty returned. "Henri and his orchestra furnish the luncheon and dinner concert music down in the Belmore Gold Room."

She lowered her voice and leaned forward.

"I won't introduce you right away. It's best to wait until he gets settled. He hates to deal with try outs that 've got more persistence and pull than anything else. He was the first in the business to figure out radio technic for an orchestra. You've heard Henri Salzman's regular Wednesday night feature — 'Musical Tours to Other Lands.'"

"Always tune in on it," the young man enthused.

He had hair that stayed in place, and he showed just the right kind of teeth when he smiled.

"Well, Henri added reed instruments and got that effect," Betty explained. "And his other complex is applause mail. Claims it's the only way a station can tell whether a thing's 'hot' or not. Every day I and the other girls hand him the mail count. Sssh! Here he comes now!"

Henri Salzman, as he entered, was hardly the music master of tradition. True, he wielded a wicked bow, but mixed with his talent was an economic urge.

He had a habit of blinking. Within him was the struggle between art, as he knew it, and trying to visualize an audience that couldn't be seen.

It was the vagueness of the thing that gave so many of the old-timers stage fright when they got before the microphone. And no one knew better than Henri the list of "flops" that had followed the attempts of stars in other methods of expression to reach the countless numbers seated critically at their radio sets.

"Henri."

"Yes, Betty."

"There's a young fellow here—"

"In a minute, when I go over these scores," Henri blinkingly suggested.

"Suppose you turn on the loud speaker down here now," Betty urged. "It's just about time for the finish of the home management period."

She glanced at the clock.

"I'll take him upstairs to the studio. It's something we ought to grab."

But Henri had sighted something on his desk. It was the scenario to be used that night for compositions by MacDowell. Ed Barton, who had written the "hooey," had left space for a number that went with a description of rippling water.

"It was Ed's idea to leave nothing to the imagination of the listener. And no scenario was quite complete, to Ed's way of thinking, unless the customer was given a word picture of water in the process of rippling.

"I'm going to take him upstairs," Betty interrupted. "See that the horn's working right, won't you? See that he gets the right kind of a 'break.' You know how it was when that woman from Muskegon sang for you the other day. The way the horn was working, Schumann-Heinke herself would have made you throw up your hands and ask to have it shut off."

Betty went first to the mirror at the

rear of the room. The equipment there for freshening up natural beauty was complete. She was glad she had just got a swirl bob.

"Poor kid," she said to herself. "Plenty of the others who have come up here have had their press agents and managers."

She manipulated the clasp to the little railing gate and walked around to where the youth waited on the bench. He sprang eagerly to his feet and she told him to follow.

"Thing to do is just be natural," she coached in an undertone. "Don't get too close to the microphone, and remember the boys in the amplifying room 'll make it louder or softer. And tell all your friends to write into the station telling how 'hot' you were. Write a few letters to yourself. Henri says the only way he can tell about a feature is by the mail it pulls. What's your name?"

"Huntley—Robert Huntley."

"'Huntley's Half Hour of Harmony,' we'll call it. Gotta have a catchy title, and that's as good as Al Somers could've thought of. Without the right kind of 'hooey' in this game you're sunk."

"Hooey?"

"You'll know what I mean if you stick around," Betty sighed.

For some reason she was half out of breath. The elevator was slow in coming.

"Wish I could let the folks know so they could listen in," he remarked.

"Where are they?"

"Down in the southern part of the State."

"'Fraid you won't have time now."

But it was a relief to have him say "the folks" instead of the name of some sweetie.

"Darn old elevators," she complained, nervously. "All of 'em going the wrong way. Thought you weren't just off vaudeville. So many of 'em who come up for a tryout are. They hand out the line about being tired of traveling around, and tell Henri if he'll just put 'em on the air once, the public 'll be so crazy about 'em they'll want to tear down the station if they ain't kept on steady."

"And what happens?" asked Mr. Huntley.

"Station's never been torn down yet. There's so many stations and so many programs. What ever gave you the idea of wanting to go on the air?"

"What made you want to work in a station?" he parried.

"Answered an ad."

"It's been my ambition to broadcast," he declared wistfully, "ever since I got a radio. Musically inclined, I guess that's what they call it. And if I could make a living at broadcasting—"

"We all have dreams," Betty confided. "But you're up against something. We'll have to frame up a letter that you can read over the air. You know—some lonely sheep herder on a ranch. I could type one off. 'Dear Mr. Huntley: I want to let you know how much your music means to me 'way out here forty miles from the railroad.' That always goes strong, and it's a good puller for regular letters from folks who want to hear their names mentioned on the air. Here's the elevator!"

Station WMQZ was located on the fashionable Hotel Belmore's roof. And with frequent mention of the hotel in the announcements, the Belmore got a wonderful "break," even if all the radio artists did have to pass in and out of the marble lobby.

Betty led the way up a final flight of stairs beyond the elevator and young Mr. Huntley, an expression on his clean-cut face of mingled awe and fear, followed with his instrument case gripped tightly under his arm.

The two studios at WMQZ were separated by the glassed-in quarters occupied by the mechanics. Plush curtains had been done away with, the plain walls being of a patent composi-

tion that took proper care of the acoustics.

A Mrs. Eleanor Jarvis was just leaving the microphone with her notes, her period devoted to tips on how to make the home more "homy" having come to a close. She bowed, patronizingly, to Betty as she passed. Ben Morris, the assistant announcer, asked "What's the big idea?" and Max, the lone mechanic on the job at that time of day, frowned.

"It's O. K.," Betty told them defiantly. "Henri ordered a special try-out."

Sullenly Max retired to his glass booth.

"When the red light comes on," Betty schooled her companion, "that means everything you say from then on goes on the air. When the red light switches off, you're off. See! Wait for the red light in the little bulb there on the wall and then strut your stuff."

He turned toward her a face that was tense and pale.

"Don't get mike shy," Betty cautioned him. "There's your microphone —number three. It's all connected up. Go ahead and knock 'em cold."

Betty understood. There was something ogreish about the cold, metallic little disk.

With what sort of a world did it connect up? What sort of people, here and there and out yonder, were listening? And in what mood? And what was it they cared for? And what would be their comment concerning one's effort? If one only knew. Or was one lucky not to know?

A red glow came into the tiny bulb on the side of the wall.

One song that the nervous young man sang as he twanged his uke was called "You May Not Mean Much to the Multitude, But You Make a Hit With Me." There had been a swarm of what might be called sentimental songs suitable to the day and age.

If Betty had any criticism to offer, it was that the youth presented the number in rather stilted fashion, but she loved the theme of the ballad. As to the voice or the accompaniment—these were matters for musicians, who really knew, to decide about.

Announcer Bert Hall came to the microphone between numbers to say in his most velvetlike tone:

"You are listening to Huntley's Half Hour of Harmony."

As Bert turned away, with the performer's back to him, he held his nose, and Betty could have slapped him for it. But Betty knew Bert. There was but one word for all his verdicts on amateur efforts—"terrible!"

The hands of the clock on the studio wall told that it was time for the program's end. The light went out of the little red bulb. The ordeal was over.

Mr. Huntley rose limply from his chair.

"How was it?" he asked, trying to smile.

"Hot," assured Betty. "Don't worry but what it clicked."

"It was different than I thought it was going to be," he quavered. "One of my strings was a little off. Think that 'll make any difference? Thought it would sound worse if I stopped to tune."

"Never correct yourself on the air," Betty advised. "I get that motto from Bert Hall. He's got a tongue that's oiled and he flits right on. Same way with an instrument, I should think."

"Wish I knew just how my voice sounded out where it went to," he regretted.

"Nobody ever knows," she solaced him. "I'll say there's a lot of baloney about all this talk of being able to judge a person by his voice. There's a lot of people who should be heard and not seen, but that don't mean you. It's a profession, being able to register honey in your voice."

"Maybe a million people were listening in." His eyes glowed.

"Maybe."

"If I've made good," he ventured, "and get a lot of—what was it you called it?—applause mail, I'll owe a lot to you."

She flushed and lowered her eyes. Finally she said:

"There aren't many wow musicians who come from down the State. Most of 'em who come to the rail there by my desk are foreign, and look foreign.

"It's like the song you sang. They make good with the million, maybe, but they don't mean much to me. As a rule, folks you like from down State are all right for listening in, but for the broadcasting end, 'not so good.' I—it's the first time I ever tried to push anybody onto the station."

He paused for a moment in fumbling with the snaps on his ukelele case.

"How soon," he asked, "do they put a fellow on regular?"

"Oh, soon as the public shows how it stands," she informed. "Take Moore and Mott—they're not only on the pay roll, but they've had six weeks of vaudeville—you know, fans who want to see them in person—a rake-off from their candy bars, and club dates galore."

"That 'd be great," he enthused. "Dad wanted me to stick with him in the store."

They rode down together on the elevator.

"You'll be dropping around," she called after him as she reached her own floor. "It takes a day or two before the applause mail starts coming in."

II.

Henri was absorbed with the leader of a Swedish Glee Club as Betty entered the office. She waited until their conversation was finished. Still, Henri had nothing to say.

"Darn you, Henri," Betty despaired, "if you forgot to tune in—"

"That's just what I did," Henri apologized. "This glee club guy came along. How was he?"

"He was—"

"I mean his program, Betty, I know all about his being a nice young man."

Miss Matthews, in charge of the filing case, tittered.

"Oh, you all give me a pain," Betty flared. "If it was some wop with black sideburns, you'd have seen he got a 'break.' I don't care nothing about him, personally, but if you let him get away you'll be passing up a good bet."

"He's got nice eyes," Henri agreed, exasperatingly.

"And such broad shoulders," mimicked Al Somers.

Betty knew then that in her absence the whole office staff had started with its joke, and it was a bunch that could razz the life out of anybody.

"Just you wait," she demanded, "until the applause mail starts coming in."

She wished that she had not let them see that quiver to her chin.

Nor did any of them let up when, as the days passed, Huntley's Half Hour of Harmony brought in just three missives. The station opened all fan mail unless it was plainly of a personal nature. Much of the fan mail was addressed directly to the station, and the comment covered a variety of features.

One of the three communications concerning Mr. Huntley's initial radio effort bore the postmark of a certain little town down State, and, while it spoke in glowing terms of the program, the writer, before closing, advised the entertainer to guard against gunmen and foolish flappers. In Henri's opinion, the parental touch offset the value of the applause which the document contained.

There was a second letter so filled with inside radio lingo that one of the girls posted it on the bulletin board. When Betty, coming back from lunch,

saw it there, she tore it into small bits.

And the third letter, suggesting that the genius presenting the Half Hour of Harmony be immediately "signed up," never reached Henri's hands. Knowing who it was from, despite the signature, Betty cherished it for its handwriting, but she credited it on her mail count without turning it in as evidence.

"Three letters," Henri commented, sarcastically, as he scanned the daily reports. "Shows that at least he was on the air. Otherwise might have thought Max never turned on the switch for him.

It made Betty almost hate the "unseen audience." What was the matter with the boobs? Silence—utter silence, after a fellow had done his best.

"You talk about mail," Betty complained to Henri and the bunch in general. "No wonder 'Uncle Dick' gets it from the 'kiddies' who want a ride on the train." Betty talked fast when angry. "And the Miracle Quartet—don't they beg for folks to write in for their free booklet on manicuring? You call it all applause-mail. And what does Mme. Le Fleur do? I've heard her."

Betty provided an imitation. "She says: 'I'd be so pleased to learn of what your reception to my program was like.' Knows she'll get all the bugs who think they've got the best set in the neighborhood." Her lips tightened. "I haven't handled the mail for six months at this studio without knowing the tricks."

"Listen, Betty." Henri was speaking in earnest now. She had piqued him with her criticism. "I haven't heard this baby of yours, but if he's got radio personality I'll give him all the chance in the world. I see he's crashed the gate so far as you are concerned, but you're only one in a wide public. He goes on twice more, and if he pulls a dozen legitimate letters—I said legitimate—we'll talk business."

Betty faced them all with her head thrown back. "I want you all to know here and now that I don't care anything about him, one way or another."

"Oh, we know that, Betty," Henri grinned.

III.

THEIR taunts made it embarrassing for Betty when Mr. Huntley did show up at the office again. She left her desk and motioned to him to follow her out in the hall.

"You can't tell much about mail," she said consolingly. "People don't write like they did when radio first started. They sort of take a good program for granted."

"Wasn't there any? Are you quite sure?" he gasped.

"Well, there was mine and yours, and the one from your ma."

"But I told ma to sign her maiden name."

"She did," Betty assured him, "but she didn't stick to the text."

His face fell.

"Gee," he sighed, "I told the landlady out where I'm stopping that I was one of the staff artists on WMQZ. Next time I could get her to write in."

Betty shook her head.

"No, Mr. Huntley, the letters from now on have got to be honest-to-goodness. Henri can smell the phony kind clear out from where they were mailed. I've argued the other way, but the really hot feature *does* get a response that you can't mistake.

"You've got two more chances. Way the program's filled up, you've got Friday afternoon of this week and Tuesday afternoon of next. Of course I liked your program the other day. I'd leave in that 'You May Not Mean Much to the Multitude' number, but I'll give you the address of the song pluggers, and you go over and see them."

"Wouldn't do any good," he lamented. "All the songs I know I've picked up from hearing some one else

sing on the radio. Practiced on 'em a long time."

"Then you want to put more feeling into your voice," Betty advised. "Just sort o' 'ease into the mike,' as Al would say."

"Will you come up to the studio with me next time, too?"

"'Fraid I can't," she said evenly. "You see, the bunch've started to kid me a lot. They think—well, that maybe my interest in you is just personal."

"Gee, I hope it ain't," he jerked out.

Her eyes narrowed.

"You hope it ain't," she echoed, and her voice was chilled.

That was the way it was these days. A girl had to make all the lead plays. And then to no purpose.

If radio lasted, and they still needed a girl to handle applause mail at WMQZ, and she kept her health and her disposition—then she'd probably be keeping office hours, instead of managing a flat, until they carried her off to the Old Ladies' Home. In another month she'd be twenty-three.

"I'm glad you say the mail don't really count," he was saying, eager to catch at a straw.

"Fact is, it does," she answered coolly. "I might have been blind about your act being a wow."

"How come?" he inquired, innocently.

Betty bit her lip. Guess it was true, all right, about a woman being mentally beyond a young man the same age. She'd read such was the case in Fanny Fern's daily column.

"What was the name of the town you come from?" she asked, starting back for the office.

"Elderdale."

"I thought it would sound like that," she nodded, listlessly.

"Of course I'm 'going on' Friday afternoon," he called after her. "And Monday again I'll drop around for my mail."

"Do that," she called back, "but I don't think you'll need to bring along any bushel basket."

IV.

BETTY'S cheeks were flushed when she reached her desk again. Over and over she rehearsed the bit of dialogue:

"They think—well, that maybe my interest in you is just personal." (With tenderness.)

"Gee, I hope it ain't." (Blurted.)

What was the use?

Perfunctorily, with her red pencil, she marked the applause mail. There was the "Uncle Dick" pile, and "the Joy Boys" pile, and the "Mysterious Melody Maker" stack, and there were the "appreciation postal cards."

On these cards the fans painstakingly wrote down the names of features and marked each with a cross under the brackets labeled "excellent," "good," "fair," "poor."

What a host of conservatory graduates and neighborhood prodigies and church choirs had come and gone and been swallowed up by silence! Maybe a stray cross for some of them on one of the postal cards. But seldom an avalanche echo of the kind needed to open Henri's eyes.

Betty slit envelopes with a quick slice that came from long practice. Sorted the letters as to States. Marveled at the freakish handwriting. Smiled at the strange letterheads.

Four mails a day. The late afternoon one was not so heavy. That gave time for typing excerpts, filling out reports. Dull routine work that was lightened, maybe, by munching on candy.

Visitors at the rail asking for "the man who hired the performers." German opera singers, Scandinavian, Russian. Vaudeville actors. Chautauqua lecturers. Women's club speakers. Mothers with child pianists.

Routine.

The years stretching ahead. Sorting applause mail. Going out to lunch.

Coming back. Al Somers and his wisecracks at the desk. Ed Barton at his. Botlf ineligible.

Henri Salzman coming in at the same time each afternoon and hanging up his umbrella. Answering the phone. Somebody you could half understand explaining in detail about having interference from station WXKP. Who cared?

The world might be divided these days between those who were wild to broadcast and those who were willing to listen-in, but Betty Parsons had dreams of something else. Looked like it was just going to remain a dream.

Friday came and the hands of the clock crept toward the hour of four. Al and Ed were busy writing their "hooey" announcements. Folks believed Bert Hall thought all that stuff up at the microphone, just as he went along—mathematics, musical history, poetry and all.

Well, let 'em think so. Henri had turned on the loud speaker. There was a grind to it—had been for a long time and nobody had fixed it.

"Recognize it, Betty?" Henri called out.

They were all grinning.

Betty recognized it.

The whole bunch had dropped work to twist about in their chairs.

"Can hardly hear the uke," Henri commented, listening soberly, with trained ear.

"You can hear enough of it," chortled Al Somers.

Betty continued to sort letters. The boy hadn't anything, really, when you listened without bias. She was relieved when Henri ordered the program shut off.

Henri came over to Betty's desk.

"I'll keep my word," he promised, not unkindly. "He gets another 'break' next Tuesday. Lacks R. P.—radio personality. But as a plumber, maybe—"

But Betty, for once, came back with no fiery retort. Just kept on sorting mail.

It was odd that most of the mail was applause mail, or nothing. The great "unseen audience" was not given to booing or hissing. If it didn't care for a thing, it simply damned by silence.

Only certain types of sopranos seemed to come in for real roastings. The average program that failed to "click" was apparently regarded as what Al Somers referred to as "just one of those things."

V.

YOUNG Mr. Huntley showed up at the office shortly before it was time for him to go on the air the following Tuesday afternoon.

He looked much as he had that first day when he had breezed in—the same freshness, if not quite the earlier self-confidence. And Betty, in spite of herself, experienced something of the same thrill she had felt on that first occasion.

"Thought maybe you'd go up to the studio with me," he began, hesitatingly. "It's my last time, you know—if I don't make good."

"No mail," Betty reported in businesslike tones. "You can look at the reports. Your second program drew just three less letters than your first."

"Didn't ask my landlady to write," he smiled, lamely. "I've been dodging her. Can't you come up to the studio with me to-day? You helped me a lot that first time."

"Guess I told you, then, all I know from a professional standpoint."

"Just the same," he pleaded, "I'd like to have you along. Those fellows up there in the studio didn't make it so very easy for me. You see, they weren't interested, like you've been—in my act."

Betty got up from her desk.

The afternoon sunlight was filtering

through the portholes along the ceiling of the studio when they entered, and the far corners of the room were in soft shadows.

"Last time, ain't it?" Max, the mechanic, asked gruffly.

He made the connections for the number three microphone over by the little organ that was used for hymns, and went back to his booth.

Finally, there was the flash of the red bulb.

"Bob Huntley announcing his own Harmonious Half Hour!"

He hitched his chair closer to the microphone. There was no life in the metallic disk before him—nothing to be afraid of.

He cleared his throat and fondled the ukelele a bit. Then he started to sing as he strummed.

Betty sat in the background.

He did have a wonderful profile! And he sure was clean looking. And, as she sat there, he went from one number to another.

"How did you like it?" he asked when the minute hand of the clock had reached the half hour's end.

She forgot her peeve.

"I've liked it all along," she answered wistfully.

"And I've liked you all along," he said feelingly. "My program may be a flop, but it ain't as if I hadn't met you."

A warm flood ran through her.

"I don't know as there's anything so wonderful about me," she said, "but if there was anything to me, a boy like you would bring it out. I liked you the first time I saw you. You can call me Betty."

"And you can call me Bob."

"Maybe," she went on, "it's because I couldn't see any fault in you that I couldn't see any flaws in your program. I liked your program, but I guess it's going to be crowded off the air. No applause mail."

"Maybe," he ventured, "we could go somewhere together—if dad don't want to take me back—out somewhere and run a gas filling station."

"You're strong," she admired. "There's plenty of things you can do."

"And if I did play the uke, it'd be just for you."

.....?

.....!

VI.

"TEN, eleven, twelve letters addressed to Huntley's Half Hour of Harmony," Betty was counting gleefully.

"No! Don't say!" Al Somers called over from his desk, doubtingly.

"It's a fact," Betty announced. "And you know, with the letters just starting to come in, what that means."

She picked up one of the missives that had arrived in a pink envelope. She slit the envelope, removed the contents.

Then, as she read, all the joy went out of her and her face became the color of the vivid stationery:

> Your love-making episode late this afternoon was one of the most natural things ever heard on the air. The feeling in the voices was so marvelously sincere. Why can't this couple be a regular feature on WMQZ?

Crushing the communication, Betty pillowed her head in her arms and let out a wail.

"That darn Max," she sobbed. "He never shut off the microphone!"

They were crowding above her. She could hear the cruel "slit, slit" of envelopes.

"Yes, sir," Al Somers was saying, "and every one of 'em for Huntley's Half Hour of Harmony. What kind of a stunt did he have yesterday, Betty? What you mean about Max not shutting off the microphone? No kiddin', the boy's proved a wow. Listen:

> That young love feature this afternoon was a riot. So many of those teams sound stilted, but this was some-

thing entirely novel and clever. Give us more.

Have been wondering if you'd ever hit on something new. Who are Bob and Betty in real life? They sure had me glued to the loud speaker this afternoon. Even the kiss came in clear as a bell. If—"

Betty lifted her head from her arms and let out a shriek. She shoved the whole batch of mail on the floor.

It would keep coming. This was just the first day. The fiends! The far country would be heard from later. Betty knew how the mail ran. And, at this rate, Huntley's Half Hour, Huntley's Harmony, Half Huntley's—

You wouldn't be able to stuff it in drawers to hide it. There weren't enough desk drawers. It couldn't be kept from the prying eyes of the office bunch even if you stayed in from lunch.

The stream would have to be stopped at its source to do any good, and it was too late for that. "Thoughts unexpressed might sometimes fall back dead," but not after they'd been spilled over the radio.

Listeners-in. Huh! Eavesdroppers, that's what they were. If only Al and Ed and the girls and the whole office bunch were 'way out in that far country where the sheep herder was, forty miles from a railroad. If only—"

And then Betty smiled as she sniffed. She had almost forgotten.

The smile continued to play about her lips even though a boy in uniform now stood at the rail with a couple of Harmony Half Hour special delivery letters—even though Henri Salzman had just come in to hang up his umbrella.

"Mail record being broken, Henri," Al announced, rubbing his hands.

"Yeah," Henry commented. His eyebrows lifted. He was all interest.

"And by Huntley's Half Hour of Harmony."

"Don't say," Henri whistled. "You mean on his yesterday's program? Why, what's the count so far? Shows you never can tell."

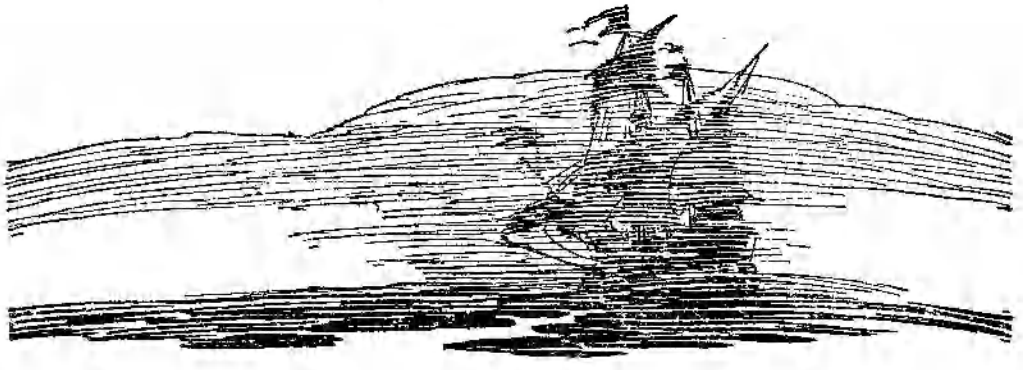
Betty stood and faced them.

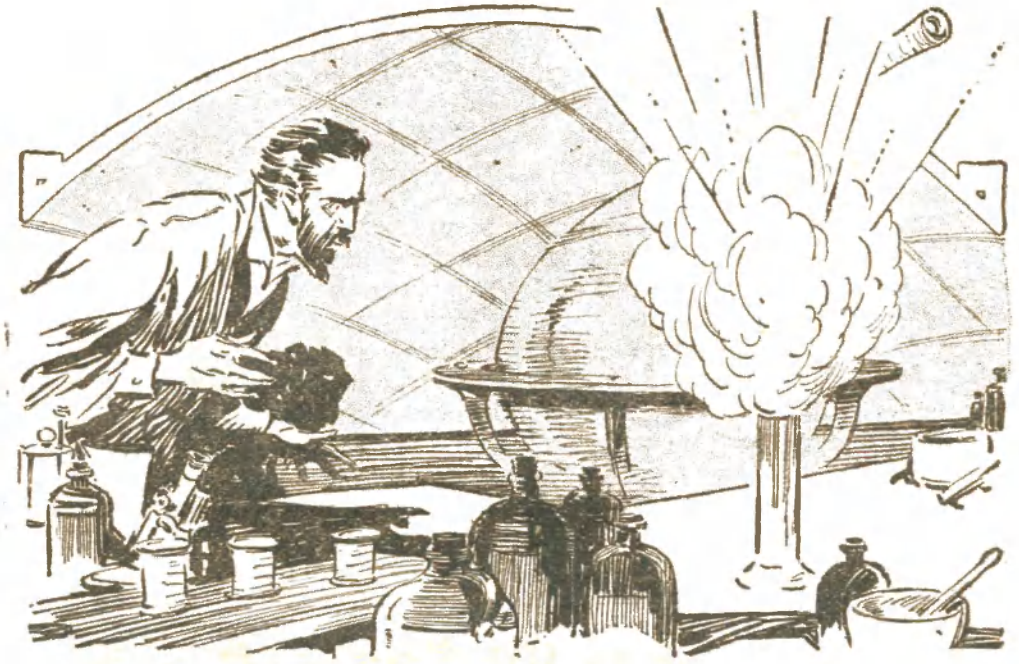
"You and your applause mail," she poohed. "I don't have to read it and weep."

She walked over and jammed on her hat, that fitted closely and becomingly to her reddish swirl bob.

"I hope that gas filling station Bob buys is so far away from a microphone we can't even get static. Applause mail? Applesauce!"

THE END





His tests were watched with breathless interest

World Brigands

When big business pays the fiddler it calls the tune: and its mad dance in 1940 involved the fate of five nations

By FRED MacISAAC

Author of "The Great Commander," "The Pancake Princess," etc.

CHAPTER XXV.

THE PEACEMAKER.

THE various members of the European delegation were conducted to their tents, all pale with excitement and apprehension. Of course, this thing ended all possibility of war.

An American destroyer, fifty miles from the invading fleet, if it contained the apparatus, could totally destroy the enemy. Their only hope was that it would not work, that it was some sort of hoax. No man in that camp save the Americans slept that night. Dick spent the evening with his father for Vesta retired at once.

"How was this discovery made, dad?" he demanded.

"I'm sorry, Dick. I can tell you nothing. They seemed to be impressed, didn't they?"

"Scared to death, every man of them. Vesta alone had her nerve with her."

"That's a very beautiful girl, Richard. Are you in love with her?"

He laughed. "Only stark staring crazy about her."

"Does she love you?"

"I'm pretty sure of it."

This story began in the Argosy-Allstory Weekly for June 30

"Good. I'll be glad to welcome her as a daughter-in-law."

"If your damned experiment won't destroy the human race. Dad, I don't see how you can control the thing. I know a little about chemistry. I know that the oxygen in the air will burn and the nitrogen will explode, but you can no more stop it when it starts than you can save one firecracker out of a pack if you touch off the pack."

"I love life, though I am an old man. I have no intention of committing suicide," replied Mr. Boswell. "Console yourself with that and go to bed, Dick."

Somewhat reassured he sought his cot and slept peacefully until a bugle awakened the camp at six o'clock.

Dick was washed and dressed in a quarter of an hour and wandered about the camp curiously until a second bugle called him to the mess tent. In all, there were a score of tents, while one of the wooden shacks served as a bunk house for a dozen armed range riders.

There were no soldiers in the camp; apparently the Government took no official cognizance of an enterprise which was expected to assure its salvation. There was no evidence here of the machinery which would operate the mysterious discovery.

It was clear that his father had no intention of giving the enemy a chance to study the power which might overthrow the world.

The European contingent filed into the mess tent bearing evidence on their faces of a painful night. They talked among themselves in low tones. Vesta was pale, but her eyes glittered with excitement. She threw a wan smile at Dick, but she was seated between her father and his father and he had no opportunity to talk to her during breakfast. When the meal was finished, Mr. Boswell requested the company to return to the air liner which would convey them to their post of vantage.

In fifteen minutes the ship rose into the air and headed westward. She flew low, only a thousand feet above the ground and in ten minutes Mr. Boswell called the company to the bow windows.

"We are now flying over the territory where the demonstration will take place," he said. "Observe that there are numerous buttes rising abruptly from the plain."

"What is that?" demanded Herr Stutt eagerly. He indicated several black specks which soon proved to be auto trucks of curious type resembling somewhat armored cars.

"They are our equipment," said Mr. Boswell. "I am permitting you to see them that you may judge the insignificance of the apparatus which will cause such enormous destruction."

The ship continued across a barren and depressing country until she approached a mountain range when she rose to a greater height. After another ten or fifteen minutes she dropped cautiously until she came to alight upon a flat mountain top several acres in extent.

"Here is our post of observation," said Mr. Boswell. "Descend, gentlemen. The airship will leave us and get as far from this vicinity as she may in two hours. Late this afternoon, if it seems advisable to venture in, she will return for us."

"What apparatus is carried on those trucks could easily be set up on a small ship," said Herr Stutt in a low voice to Sir Augustus.

"I thought of that," he answered.

They grouped upon the rocky ground, then followed Mr. Boswell who gave his arm to Vesta, and led the way to a white square on the ground which proved to be a concrete floor about thirty feet square, in the center of which was a heavy steel trap door painted white. Mr. Boswell touched a button beside it and the heavy doors lifted displaying beneath a large chamber.

"This is an improvement upon a Kansas cyclone cellar," he said. "The

walls, floor, and ceiling are of reenforced concrete eight inches thick. These steel doors are airtight as you may see. Below is a machine for supplying pure air as in a submerged submarine, and will support our party for a week if necessary.

"You gentlemen will be provided with binoculars. You will stand upon this roof grouped around the door and will descend into the chamber when I give the word. From here you have an excellent view of the field of action. We are exactly fifty miles from the center of the disturbance."

"A fine demonstration," growled Herr Stutt. "Fifty miles away."

"You will see enough," retorted Admiral Graves. "Listen, Miss Tuttle, and gentlemen. You will all be given earplugs. When you get the word open your mouth wide, then be ready to rush into the cellar."

The airship had already departed and was now a black speck on the western horizon. Her captain was eager to get the peaks of the California Sierras between him and whatever air commotion would result from the demonstration.

Dick sought Vesta and endeavored to distract her mind from the tension of waiting by pointing out the view.

Dick saw that the French and Italian representatives were trembling with excitement and the Englishmen, less outwardly emotional, were pale and their mouths were set grimly. Herr Stutt alone appeared entirely at his ease. His eyes were gleaming with interest. Approaching Mr. Boswell, who was sitting on a rock, he asked:

"In what way is this exhibition of fireworks to be set off. Radio?"

Boswell nodded.

"And where is the operator located? Isn't he in great danger?"

"We think not. He is about fifty miles from the center of the disturbance to the eastward."

"And what part in the affair do those motor trucks of yours play?"

"They are simply power generators. They have already started for the firing location."

"As I understand it there is nothing whatever in the desert."

"Your bincoulars should tell you that."

Stutt shook his head. "It is beyond my comprehension."

Mr. Boswell smiled. "It is no part or our intention to permit you to comprehend our methods. You'll be convinced of their efficacy by the results."

"You are exploding the atmosphere. It has occurred to me that the air of this particular section may be impregnated with a gas not to be found elsewhere, that while this might work in this part of Nevada it might be ineffective elsewhere."

"Say on the Atlantic Ocean."

"Let us say so."

"If you wish to stop in New York on your way back to Europe you may consult any chemical authority upon the atmosphere of this section of Nevada. I think you will find that it is the same air we breathe in New York and Europe."

"So? Well, admitting that I do not understand, how are you able to limit the extent of the explosion of the atmospheric gases?"

"I trust it will continue to be beyond your comprehension."

Time passed. The air upon the mountain top which had been uncomfortably cold when they arrived was rapidly becoming hot as the rays of the sun beat upon them. The sun was climbing high in the eastern sky and no longer shot its beam into their faces.

"You will find refreshments in the cyclone cellar," suggested General Peterson, and a number of the guests trooped down there to find the shade grateful.

At a quarter of eleven Mr. Boswell called them to their post of observation.

"Train your glasses on that butte directly to the east," he said. "The one that looks like a finger. Now watch

the air above it. Presently you will see something." They waited, the minutes ticking slowly, their glasses shook as their excitement communicated itself to the inanimate objects.

"Now!" exclaimed Boswell, after glancing at his watch. Dick unconsciously passed his arm about the waist of Vesta, who did not resent it if she was aware of it.

"*Ach, Gott!*" exclaimed the German suddenly. There was a bright flash high in the air above the butte, which expanded into an orange globe and burst like a meteor. The butte two or three hundred feet high, before their eyes, disintegrated, the whole desert seemed to be rising in a black and gray cloud.

"Open your mouths," shouted the admiral. Now the orange glow in the air was expanding, expanding, and then came the detonation. Words cannot describe that crash which fell upon their ears and almost splintered their eardrums, protected as they were by earplugs.

Although they were fifty miles away the explosion was louder than that heard by a spectator on the deck of a battleship when the entire broadside of sixteen-inch guns was let go at once. The solid mountain upon which they stood shook.

Boswell, and the other American began to push the Europeans into the entrance to the cyclone cellar and they stood not upon the order of their descent. In a moment all were within and the heavy steel doors shut. Immediately a buzzing announced that the artificial air machine had started. Dick found himself standing in the middle of the room holding in his arms Vesta, who had fainted at the detonation.

"Lay her on that couch," said his father who was composed and smiling. "What do you think of our show, Dick?"

"Sublime," he whispered. "My God, what was it and how was it done?"

"That's what our friends, for I think they are going to be our friends from now on, would like to know."

There was a jabber of foreign tongues. One of the Latins was laughing and crying: hysterics. Sir Augustus had dropped into a chair and hid his head in his hands. Herr Stutt was on the job.

"And how long must we remain buried here?" he demanded of Mr. Boswell.

"I think that we should allow ourselves at least three hours. The air may be full of poison generated by the explosion. We shall make tests before we go outside. We have an arrangement for drawing in samples of outside air."

"Yah," nodded the German. "At the same time you might have had high explosives buried in the ground. I like not this taking us into this cellar."

"You are at liberty to go out if you wish," said Boswell maliciously. "As the air here is pure I think we might chance opening the door for a second."

"No, thank you," grinned Stutt. "I do not take that chance."

"Suit yourself."

"If it is indeed the atmosphere which has exploded the world may be burning up."

"In which case we shall not survive it very long. Our air supply will only last a week."

"*Mein Gott*, what imprudence," sighed the German.

Vesta had recovered and Dick was leaning over her.

"Do you think the world is burning up?" she whispered.

"No, but if it is I want to tell you that I love you, Vesta."

She smiled. "I love you, Dick. I think I fell in love with you the first time I saw you and I hated myself because you seemed so worthless."

"Gee!" he exclaimed. "If we were only alone."

A steward had appeared from a second small room and began serving high-

balls which were eagerly grasped by the men who had seen what they had seen.

An hour later a lunch was served, but only Dick and Vesta had appetites.

At two in the afternoon, a chemist who had accompanied the American representatives went to a closet and drew from a brass tube which extended out of the ground samples of the air on the mountain top. His tests were watched with breathless interest and his report awaited with wildest anxiety.

Were they buried in this chamber in a world without atmosphere or air which it was death to breathe or was all well without?

The chemist handed a slip of paper to Mr. Boswell. He read it and smiled.

"You will be glad to know, my friends, that the air is absolutely pure. I will now open the doors."

He stepped to the button and the doors opened slowly outward. There was a rush into the upper regions and all stared eastward. The sun was now behind them, but still high in the heavens and the country below was brightly illuminated.

CHAPTER XXVI.

AMERICA'S ULTIMATUM.

NO damage had been done to the mountain upon which they stood nor to the desert at its foot for several miles. Beyond, where had been gray and white and yellow barrens, was a wide expanse of black extending for many miles and circular in shape. There had been half a dozen buttes in this territory and now there was none. Instead, there seemed to be a depression deepening toward the center.

"Take plenty of time to look at it, gentlemen," said General Peterson. "When the airship returns we shall make a voyage over the devastated region."

"You spoke of cyclones," said Stutt. "We know nothing of what happened when we were buried in that cellar."

"We are all alive and that is something," retorted the general. "However the destruction of the atmosphere over such a wide area undoubtedly caused a terrific wind until the vacuum was filled. That is elementary, is it not?"

"Yah, I suppose so," sighed the German. He turned to Sir Augustus.

"My friend, I do not need this airship journey over that country. I can see it from here. I think Germany will not make war on the United States of America."

"I shall have a proposition to make to you gentlemen to take back home with you which I think you will find to your advantage," said Mr. Boswell.

"We are willing to hear it," replied Sir Augustus listlessly.

At five o'clock the airship was sighted and in a few moments came to rest on the mountain top. Her captain landed and hastened to the side of Mr. Boswell.

"Any trouble in the high regions?" Mr. Boswell asked, with a smile.

"We landed at Lake Tahoe in California at eleven o'clock," replied the captain. "There was a terrific wind storm which did a lot of damage to the California forests. We should have fared badly if we had been in the air."

"Doubtless there would not be a tree standing in this country if there had been trees to begin with," said Mr. Boswell. "All aboard, gentlemen. We want to make our tour before it gets dark."

The airship sailed slowly over the center of the region where the unknown force had been at work. There was a moldlike depression several hundred yards deep. In the middle it resembled a shellhole except that it was twenty miles or more in its radius instead of a score of yards. A lake was forming in the deepest part.

"Evidently reached water," said Admiral Graves. "If this demonstration builds a big lake in the center of the Nevada desert, it will be worth a

hundred times the cost of our experiment. Gentlemen, atmosphere is the cheapest explosive known."

"Yes," grinned Stutt, "if you know how to set it off."

At seven o'clock they were back at the camp from which they had started in the morning. Most having been unable to eat lunch did justice to an excellent dinner. After the coffee Mr. Boswell pushed back his chair and cleared his throat.

"Now, gentlemen," he said, "I am ready to make you my proposition. You have seen the powers of nature utilized by science for the defense of this country. You understand that no man-made instruments of war can withstand them. I do not have to ask you if you have abandoned your plan of waging war upon the United States of America.

"You are going to return to report what you have seen, and you have influence enough to persuade your governments to make a permanent peace with the United States.

"You also know that America, in possession of this new weapon, can destroy your armaments without the loss of a man on our side, and, should we declare war as an answer to your insulting ultimatum, your doom is certain."

There was a murmur of consternation. Curiously enough, it had occurred to none of them that America had a right to revenge herself for the slight that had been put upon her.

"You return to conditions abroad as you left them with your cherished hope of making America pay for your bad management destroyed forever. You face anarchy and destruction of established government, the setting up of insane governments of the type established by Lenine and Trotsky in Russia, with the massacre of all except the ignorant proletariat.

"America would treat you as you deserved if she left you to face your troubles unaided. After all, it is not the business of our government to interfere in the internal affairs of Europe.

"However, that would be bad for American business, and it is American business men with whom you are dealing. We do not wish your existing governments to fall, and we are ready to support them if they behave themselves."

"In what way, sir?" demanded Sir Augustus.

"I am coming to that. The government of the United States will make a reply to your ultimatum in a week or so, and this will be the gist of it. All Europe, including your four nations, is to disband its army except for police purposes, scrap its navy with the exception of a very few cruisers for the protection of commerce. America will set the example of total disarmament; we have no need for guns and bombs and poison gas.

"The saving to your respective nations by the abolition of military and naval establishments you all know as well as I."

"It won't pull us out of our hole," declared Sir Augustus.

"Your governments will reorganize along business lines as laid down for you by a commission of American and European business men, of whom the Americans will be in the majority."

"No," cried Herr Stutt. "That would be the loss of our independence. Our people would die first."

"Your own country submitted to an American debt reparation commission, sir, and it benefited you enormously for a number of years."

"We were a conquered nation, and we had to submit," he growled.

"Potentially what are you now?" Mr. Boswell asked sharply. "Must we kill your millions to convince you?

"Now," he smiled, "I come to the pleasant part of our proposition. You are in sore need of ready cash and your borrowing capacity has long been exhausted. The American government

will guarantee your bonds for fifty billions of dollars at a reasonable rate of interest, which will enable you to get upon your feet immediately."

"Why do you do that?" demanded Sir Augustus, utterly astonished. "You don't have to."

"Because it will be an excellent investment. There is nothing radically wrong with Europe, only twenty years of discouragement and lack of confidene. You can balance our quantity production with cheap labor. A ruined Europe is a ruined market for us.

"We are not discouraged by bad faith as regards payment of war debt to us in the past, for we are now in a position to dictate. America has vast sums of money eager to be put to work, and your continent can afford to pay for this money.

"It will be our business to see that you meet your interest. Behind our commissioners is the force which you have seen demonstrated to-day. You may save your faces as regards this American receivership in any way you wish, but you have got to have it. We wish to be at peace with a prosperous and peaceful Europe.

"We shall take care that your judgment and discretion are not drowned by a flood of gold from America. The bonds will be accepted and the money paid upon recommendation of our own commissioners. Now I would like to hear opinions."

Sir Augustus replaced him as a speaker.

"The present war movement in Europe was fomented and brought to a head by a group of important business men, of whom I was one," he said.

"We had no animosity toward America; we were aware there was no legitimate grievance. We were forced to take this attitude by our own situation.

"We had amassed great fortunes which were being taxed away from us, and we saw the inevitable overthrow of the upper classes, and there was no other alternative save war against a defenseless United States. We have been shown the hopelessness of such a war, and we shall prevent it.

"I recognize, also, that universal disarmament is desirable in the face of this new weapon. I have always known that Europe, like any other bankrupt, should go into the hands of a receiver; but the thing seemed impossible. It could only be brought about by an irresistible force.

"As I see it, the acceptance by America of bonds to the total of fifty billions of dollars will be all we need to come back to solvency, to cut taxes, and to eliminate the menace of anarchism.

"The knowledge that America, with her horrible weapon, is behind all our governments will keep the masses in subjugation. Our government can loan the money needed by our bankrupt industries which will enable them to recover themselves, and the rule of the American commissioners may be camouflaged in such a way as to salve national pride.

"From a personal standpoint, I see in your proposition the salvation of myself and my fortune."

There was some slight demurrence after he had finished, but it was purely academic; they had no choice but to accept. From their standpoint, they had come out much better than they expected after witnessing the demonstration of the ultimate force.

"May we meet the inventor of this great engine of destruction?" asked Herr Stutt after a general discussion. "I would like to shake the hand of the mightiest man on earth."

"I am sorry," replied the chairman. "The inventor is unknown to me personally, and his identity will never be known. I do not know his secret, nor, so far as I am aware, does anybody else. It is a very simple thing, and he has no assistants.

"Furthermore, this invention is not

the property of the United States government, and there is no possibility of the formula being ferreted out by spies in government departments. It belongs to American business and is safeguarded in a manner to defy the most ingenious secret agents.

"Our government, therefore, is as defenseless when it lays down its arms as the governments of Europe, and in no position to take advantage of them in any aggression.

"Your bonds will be sold to American citizens, and the great engine, as you call it, is their guarantee, which is even stronger than the guarantee of our government."

"But your government could take it away from you on demand," persisted Herr Stutt.

"No, sir. Neither I nor the admiral nor General Peterson know what it is, and can truthfully say so. It is the discovery of American business, and has been demonstrated to European business. You gentlemen may immediately embark and start for Europe if you wish, or you may sleep here and leave in the morning."

Immediate departure was determined upon, and, after shaking hands all around, the Europeans filed on board. Dick had time for only five minutes with Vesta, but it served to cement their understanding, and at the gangplank she placed her arms around his neck and kissed him under the eyes of her father, who looked astonished but not displeased. Dick was remaining in America for a few days at the request of his father. He would follow her to England soon, and then they would be married.

When the lights of the ship had vanished in the sky Dick returned to the big tent, where he found his father, Admiral Graves, and General Peterson comfortably seated, sipping highballs.

"Greetings, rulers of the world," he said. "Gentlemen, if you had been where I have been and realized what a terrific storm was gathering, and how they hated us, and what they were going to do to America, you would appreciate the admiration I feel for you three who have turned these arrogant, presumptuous conquerors into humble suppliants, and how I am ready to worship the unknown inventor."

The three men glanced at each other and simultaneously burst into a laugh. Mr. Boswell recovered first.

"Shall we tell him?" he asked.

"He deserves it," replied Admiral Graves. "Yes, tell him."

"You don't mean it was some kind of a trick?" he demanded. "It could not possibly."

The old naval officer shook his head.

"No," he said, "it wasn't a trick. We had the stuff right enough, but the show was stage managed just the same, and the costumes and scenery were as effective as the performance."

"Then it was a hoax. My God, suppose they find it out?"

"No," said the admiral, "it was no hoax. You saw, to-day, the work of a new explosive, the most terrible that man has ever been able to produce. Certainly not a hoax."

"Begin at the beginning," said Mr. Boswell.

"Well, about ten weeks or so ago," commenced Admiral Graves, "the Council of Defense was organized, and we consulted to see what we could do to defend the country against the impending invasion. We discovered that we couldn't do a darn thing. So I conceived the idea of a gigantic bluff. I made the council toss into the pot a fund of fifty million dollars, telling them that I had a plan which would deter Europe from jumping us, but I refused to tell them my plan except to say that it was a bluff which I thought would work.

"Now, fifty million dollars is a lot of money, even in these days, and with unlimited funds there is no limit to what can be accomplished. My first idea was to put out a rumor of a new and terrible weapon, and then demon-

strate it by some hocus-pocus which would impress the European spies who swarm over our country. But it was a nebulous idea.

"Boswell and Peterson and myself were the committee in charge of the private defense fund, and after some thought we conceived the idea of coming out here, secretly mining a great stretch of country, and then blowing it up most impressively."

"Oh, my God!" groaned Dick. "So that's what you did."

"Wait a minute, young fellow. It goes to show how fortune favors the bold. We bought this land, formed a corporation, and then I was called upon by one of our council members, head of the steel industry, to tell me that one of his chemists, purely by accident, had come upon the secret that every scientist in the world has been looking for; to put it in plain language, he found out how to utilize the energy in an atom."

"What!" exclaimed Dick.

"Sure enough. Biggest and most dangerous discovery in the history of the world. Everybody was sworn to secrecy, of course, and we turned over to the fellow all the money he needed. We didn't know just how we could utilize his discovery, but we knew we would find a way.

"Well, what you saw to-day was an atomic explosion. Instead of mining that vast tract of land, we just let off a few atoms in a bottle, and you saw the result. Having this ace in our hand, we sent for Fletcher, and, without letting him into the secret, we explained that we had been bluffing, but now we had a pat hand.

"Originally, we hoped to impress a few spies. Of course the explosion of several hundred mines would have torn up the country, but any man familiar with the character of high explosives would not have been fooled if given a chance to inspect the result. We were going to keep the spies at a distance.

"It was Fletcher's idea to capture this gang of murderers who were meeting at Winstut Abbey, and bring them over, willy-nilly, to see what was going to happen to them. From our experiments, we knew that the atomic explosion could not be mistaken for the work of any known explosive, and we could really show these fellows something."

"But we saw an explosion of the atmosphere," said Dick, bewildered.

"Nobody knows how to explode atmosphere, or if it is a scientific possibility," retorted the admiral.

"You see, Dick," said his father, "we had to do something most spectacular. To dress up our show, to throw them completely off the track. If we told this fellow Stutt that we were utilizing the energy in atoms, in five years the Germans would know how to do it. I defy them to explode the atmosphere."

"But the explosion took place in mid air," he protested. "We all saw it."

The three elders laughed. "You thought you did. What you saw was an electrical exhibition produced by radio activity, a wonderful thing in itself, but harmless. Our explosive was in the ground and was touched off by an electric spark sent over a wire."

"But the cyclone cellar, the wind rushing in to fill the vacuum?"

"A certain partial vacuum was created by the explosion," said the admiral. "But we may as well admit that the cyclone cellar was the bunk, calculated, as they say in the 'Mikado,' to give an air of verisimilitude to a bald and unconvincing narrative; and to get those fellows out of the way in case things did not turn out as we anticipated."

"Upon my word," he said slowly. "You are theatrical producers. Bluffers, fakers."

"You forget the actual demonstration," said his father. "We released the most terrific force ever known to mankind, and you saw the result."

"But—but," he stammered, "since

you had it, why resort to charlatanism?"

"Because we wished to make it appear capable of doing what it will not do," said the admiral. "Great as is this discovery, we could not utilize it yet to destroy the expeditionary force and the great naval armament about to set sail for America.

"We don't know how to put it in a shell or a bomb. To be effective, it must have resistance, and the air does not furnish enough, so far as we knew. How could we plant it in the path of the great fleet?

"If they landed and marched an army over a selected twenty miles of ground, we could blow the whole army sky high; but we couldn't take the chance that they would walk over our mine, and we would also slaughter thousands of our own people who lived in the vicinity.

"The explosion of atmosphere explanation was the idea of General Peterson. It appealed to their imagination. They could comprehend that the destruction of the atmosphere over the Atlantic in their path would bring down their ships, sink their sea craft, and destroy their submarines, and they supposed we could operate it anywhere we wished. Naturally they caved. What do you think now, young fellow?"

Dick grinned. "I consider you gentlemen brilliant, but without principle."

"Having impressed them completely," said his father, "it was then up to us to show them the folly of their war. The proposition we made to them is eminently sane and practical, but only by duress could Europe be persuaded to adopt it. Their disarmament makes the world safe for America.

"Our financial aid puts them on their feet and in a position to return us our money eventually, provides a safe investment for our people who have money to put out at interest, and safeguards business and industry everywhere."

"But you cannot keep this secret," Dick declared. "And when it gets out, God help us."

"My boy," said the admiral, "we have only spent a few of our fifty millions in the private war chest. This discovery is new. We shall continue our experiments, and in a short time we shall probably find a way to make a real weapon of war out of atomic energy. Give us a year or two, and we can destroy fleets and airships with it as easily as we now tear up the surface of the earth. In the meantime they think we have our instrument ready and waiting."

General Peterson chuckled. "Stutt is going home, and he will put every scientist in Germany to work to achieve the unachievable. Probably he has figured it out that we shoot into the air an invisible gas which, combined with nitrogen and oxygen, makes an explosive. The European spies will concentrate upon our gas experts, and never think of the young man in the steel mill who plays with atoms."

A week later the United States replied to the ultimatum of Europe with a counter ultimatum so liberal and generous that it provoked an outburst of popular indignation in America. It promised the immediate disarmament of American military and naval forces, and guaranteed a European bond issue of fifty billion dollars, if Europe would also disarm and agree to American supervision of the manner in which the money received for the new bonds was spent.

Senator Maddox, the North Wind, uttered a shriek against the further employment of American money in Europe, while he as loudly indorsed general disarmament.

To the astonishment of the war party in Europe, the press acclaimed the American proposition and demanded immediate agreement. Recalcitrant ministers and legislators in the four nations were taken into the closet of

the premiers and certain information imparted to them, whereupon they did a double somersault and joined the peace party.

The general staffs of European armies and navies who might have been expected to utter wild cries acquiesced meekly. The American proposition was accepted with comparatively little debate in the various parliaments, and in two months the great nations of Europe began to stack arms. Only the munitions manufacturers were left to protest, and for once their protests were unheeded.

The new European bond issues guaranteed by the United States government were eagerly purchased by American investors, despite their low rate of interest, and before a dollar reached Europe prosperity lifted her head across the Atlantic, for with the restoration of credit came confidence.

The receipts of the sale of bonds went into the United States treasury to be supplied to Europe when needed, and a distinguished list of American bankers agreed to serve as European commissioners.

Rumors of the appalling weapon in the possession of America were rife, but were officially denied. The public was led to suppose that the new era had come through the application of good common sense to international problems.

Two weeks after the demonstration in Nevada, Dick Boswell landed in London and went directly to Winstut Abbey, where he was cordially received by Sir Augustus, joyously welcomed by Roger, and openly embraced by Vesta Tuttle.

The wedding of the son of the great American manufacturer of airplanes to the daughter of the richest subject of the King of England was the biggest social event of the year. They were married at Winstut, and royalty in the person of the Prince of Wales was present.

The American newspapers ran double trucks profusely illustrated. When the happy pair landed in New York—they had chosen a seaship instead of an airship so as to enjoy a longer voyage and greater comfort than were possible in the air—they were astonished to find that they were immensely popular.

Avoiding social invitations with great difficulty, they flew to Detroit in a Boswell family airplane, and the following morning Dick turned up at the plant and demanded work.

A month later Roger Tuttle put in an appearance, according to an agreement between himself and Dick, and was placed in a minor post with the promise of promotion.

Six months later Admiral Graves presented himself at the factory, breaking in upon a conference between father and son.

"Well, Dick, my lad," he said, "we have done it. When we told those conspirators that we could explode the atmosphere we thought we were talking through our hats, but our invention marches. We can explode anything. We have our weapon now, and we don't have to bluff. We can show our hand if necessary, and it contains a royal flush."

"God send that we shall never be called," said Mr. Boswell.

"Oh, we may have to teach Asia a lesson some day," replied the admiral. "Since all Europe, including Russia, has disarmed, a great Asiatic invasion is something to be anticipated—not now, but twenty, forty, a hundred years from now. It's a wonderful thing to be prepared."

"Suppose you be prepared to be a godfather," said Dick. "In three months or thereabouts you will have to hold an infant in your arms at the baptismal font."

"Good Lord!" exclaimed the old officer. "I'm not prepared for that."

"And your atomic gun won't help you," laughed Richard Boswell, Sr.

THE END

Glass—With Care

The strange story of an engagement ring that is concerned with more than the two persons to whom it is usually limited

By ROLAND ASHFORD PHILLIPS

THE money was gone, and that was the end of it. Henry felt a panic engulf him when Elmer broke the news.

"What 'll I do?" Henry quavered. "I've got to buy the ring. I promised Lottie."

"You've got to be a sport about it," Elmer reasoned. "Can't expect to win every time. Still I don't understand this upset. It was all fixed. I had a red-hot tip."

"I've got to buy it to-day," Henry persisted. "I can't break my promise. I—I shouldn't have done this thing. Lottie will never forgive me."

Henry Colter presided at the lowly kitchenware department in the Bon Ton basement, and Lottie Bivens plied a needle in the alteration room, twelve floors above. And just seven days before she had promised to marry him.

Having saved a hundred and fifty dollars, the engagement ring was in sight. Now, in a twinkling of an eye, it was gone.

Elmer had been more or less responsible. He was a bright, sophisticated youth who also worked among the subterranean aisles of the Bon Ton.

Once he had persuaded Henry to risk ten dollars, and in no time at all, it seemed, he gave him back twenty-five. Easy. That is if you knew the ropes and had tips. Hot tips.

There were furtive-eyed men haunting doorways along Sixth Avenue that Elmer knew. They took your money and gave you a slip with figures on it. Horse races somewhere. When you bet on a horse and it won, you made a killing, as Elmer expressed it.

The hundred and fifty dollars Henry had saved toward the enchanted pur-

chase wouldn't buy much of a ring—not the way diamonds were priced, so Elmer argued. It ought to be doubled. Get the girl a stone that would make her eyes shine. Henry was for that all right. He liked to see Lottie's eyes shine.

Henry had been in New York less than a year and the city thrilled him, awed him at times, what little he saw of it. The veneer.

Lottie had come from a nine-o'clock town herself about the same time. Until that palpitating moment when their eyes met, melted and clung blissfully together, nothing of consequence had befallen either of them. After that, everything of consequence happened.

"We'll have better luck next time," philosophized Elmer. "You got to take your medicine standing up, Henry. Tomorrow's always another day."

"But I've just got to have that ring to-day," Henry repeated. "I've promised and I've got to keep my word."

"How much you got left?" Elmer inquired presently.

"About twenty-five dollars."

Elmer suddenly grinned and took Henry's arm.

"Come along with me," he ordered. "I've got an idea."

Somewhat cheered, Henry permitted himself to be led into a cubby-hole of a store in a distant side street. Behind the plate glass window and in the showcases myriad diamonds sparkled.

Elmer spoke to a smiling, dark-complexioned gentleman. A moment later Henry caught his breath as the clerk whisked a tray before him: a tray of gleaming stones in every imaginable setting.

"There you are," announced Elmer. "Take your pick. Ten dollars."

"Ten dollars!" Henry echoed in a small, incredible voice.

"Special to-day," the clerk declared. "Genuine Abyssinian diamonds, sir. Every one unquestionably guaranteed to retain its fire and brilliancy forever. They've defied experts the world over."

A clammy hand touched Henry's hopeful heart. "Oh, you mean—mean they are just glass? Just imitations?"

"Not glass," the clerk explained resentfully. "Not imitations in any sense of the word. These are genuine Abyssinian stones."

Henry frowned and looked at Elmer. He didn't quite grasp the Abyssinian connection. He always supposed a diamond either was or wasn't.

"They've sure got a wicked flash," Elmer remarked.

"From the secret and closely guarded mines of a far-off land," the clerk supplemented. "Look at them, sir. Inspect them closely."

"But—but they're phony," Henry said.

"Who'll know it?" Elmer came back. "Pick out a good one."

Henry selected one from the tray, gazed upon it long and earnestly. Indeed, if he hadn't heard to the contrary, he would have pronounced it a diamond of the first water, or however they termed them. It was blue-white, flawless, and it shimmered on his palm like a dewdrop.

"Ten dollars is enough to pay for a flash," Elmer assured him. "Another ten for a good setting, and there you are! Twenty fish and your girl is up in the clouds."

"But—but it don't seem right," Henry wavered.

"Aw, don't start that! You know what you're up against. You've got to have a ring to-day and you've got twenty-five smackers to buy it with. Why squawk? The stone looks like a million. Grab it."

Doubt and apprehension were fading from Henry's mind. He was in a predicament and had to make the best of things.

He wouldn't dare face Lottie without a ring; didn't dare tell her about the money he had lost. Perhaps later he could explain matters. Next week or next month. At any rate, he couldn't afford to quibble now.

"Better hurry," Elmer warned. "We'll be late at the store. It's to be an engagement ring," he explained to the clerk.

"I have the very thing," the clerk stated, beaming. "An exquisite setting Looks, feels, and practically is platinum. And I'll engrave it suitably."

"That's just the ticket, Henry," Elmer counseled. "You'll want 'From Henry to Lottie' engraved in it, won't you? All right. We'll be back after it later."

Henry paid over the money and followed Elmer out to the street. It was almost one o'clock now and they had to hurry to reach the store.

II.

LOTTIE met Henry at the door of her apartment that evening, radiant in a new dress and with a suppressed flutter of excitement. He caught her in his arms, hugged her close. Then he stepped back, flushed and breathless.

From his pocket he drew a little box and with a flourish removed the cover. And there, tucked in a velvet cradle, shimmering like a dewdrop, lay the Abyssinian stone.

"Oh, Henry!" Lottie cried.

He slipped the ring over her finger and kissed the finger.

"Like it?" he asked.

"Like it? Oh, it's heavenly!" she told him.

It did look gorgeous, Henry thought; and when the girl moved her hand the stone was dazzling. A genuine diamond couldn't have made a better showing, he reflected.

Elmer had been right. No one would know the difference.

May, who shared the apartment with Lottie, came into the room to smile upon the enraptured pair.

"What's all this about?" she demanded.

Lottie held out her hand and May bent to inspect the gift.

"What a beauty!" she exclaimed. "A knockout! Don't they have cash registers in the Bon Ton basement, Henry," she twitted.

He grinned.

"Quit your kidding. Come along, Lottie," he urged, suddenly eager to be away. "This is our big night, remember. See you later, May."

"Careful, you two," May warned, following them to the door. "Don't drink too many sodas."

Henry made a bright retort and they whisked out into the hall.

The apartment was on the top floor. Dim gas lights flickered on the landings; the stale odor of cooking and other musty, indescribable smells hung in the air. Strange, nameless people came and went, almost furtively, always in a hurry; it seemed.

You met them in the halls and on the stairs, seldom speaking. Indefinable sounds filtered through the thin partitions, and Mrs. Halsey, the landlady, padded about in felt slippers.

On the stoop with its worn, sandstone steps and rusty iron railing, they passed Mr. Rand, who occupied an apartment on the second floor, apparently alone and apparently with nothing to do. Of all the tenants, Rand alone was in the habit of speaking, briefly to be sure, and more often just a nod.

He was tall and wiry, always well dressed, with hard, shuttling eyes and thin lips. Although Henry always spoke or nodded, he disliked the man. Just why he couldn't tell.

A sumptuous dinner at Tony's noisy *table d'hôte*, with a heaping plate of spaghetti and all the trimmings, a rapturous two hours spent in a glittering picture show palace, an enthralling ride on top of the bus later, rocking along the Drive, where the lights were like gold studs on the bosom of the river and all the misty world about them seemed fairyland; then back to the apartment again, tired, inexpressibly happy, munching sandwiches bought at

a near-by delicatessen store, and the big night was ended.

Long, work-filled days in the Bon Ton basement and all too brief, care-free nights spent in Lottie's company, passed.

Once in awhile, gazing upon the ring, Henry's conscience bestirred itself and smote him, and soon he grew to hate the sight of the Abyssinian gem. A dozen times it was upon his lips to confess, but each time courage deserted him.

He looked so morose that at length Elmer questioned him.

"It's that ring," Henry admitted. "I feel terrible about what I've done. Fooling Lottie all this time."

"Aw, forget it. Lottie's perfectly happy, isn't she? What more can you ask for? She'll never tumble unless you're crazy enough to spill the works. And if you do that, you'll lose her sure. No woman likes to be fooled. Believe me, I know. I learned my lesson."

"How was that?" Henry asked.

"Listen!" said Elmer. "I used to be cuckoo over a girl who had her mind set on a something-or-other fur that I knew darned well cost a mint. I gave her one for Christmas, or anyhow, she thought it was the real thing and was tickled to death. Then along about the time the thing was wore out, I got to feeling like you do now, remorseful and such, and up and tells her it was just a Peruvian ant-eater fur. There's where I was sunk.

"Know what happened? Did she forgive me and tell me how wise I'd been not to squander my money? She did not. She heaved the thing in my teeth and told me never to show my face again. And the very next week her uncle died and left her a hot million.

"That just goes to show," he concluded sorrowfully. "I might have been clipping coupons now instead of selling dishpans. You take my tip, Henry. Don't let this Australian diamond give you a rising temperature."

"It's Abyssinian," Henry corrected, brooding over the moral to the story.

"Well, whatever it is. You let well enough alone. Get married first and do the telling afterward. Then you're safe."

Elmer's story and facetious remarks might have appealed to Henry under dissimilar circumstances, but they certainly were not in keeping in matters pertaining to Lottie's engagement ring.

He said nothing more to Elmer, but he thought a lot, and that night, lying in bed, he resolved to bring matters to a climax. The very next day he would tell Lottie the whole truth.

The following evening, unexpectedly, Elmer waited for Henry outside the store, and in a manner mysterious, despite his protests, conducted him along a certain side street, through a certain door and nodded in a certain way to a man who bobbed up before them like a jack-in-the-box. And when they sat down at a table, the man reappeared with a tray on which were two small, brimming glasses.

"You toss this under your belt, Henry," his companion invited. "It 'll buck you up."

Henry reminded himself that he certainly needed bucking up. To face Lottie would be something of a trial.

Grim of purpose and without hesitancy, he drained his glass. It was, for him, a bold, impulsive and unprecedented step; but then he was in an equally bold and unprecedented state of mind.

The second drink was less distressing.

When he was outside later, and the two were walking briskly uptown, Henry realized that he felt immeasurably better, warm and tingling all over and in a far different mood. Fear no longer oppressed him.

He laughed heartily at Elmer's witty sayings, and began to see that in the past he had made a mountain out of a very insignificant molehill.

Here it was Saturday night, pay

night. He had money jingling in his pocket and could look forward to an enjoyable evening. Surely he deserved it.

By the time he reached Fifty-Eighth Street he had decided to postpone his plans and not risk trouble or a misunderstanding.

When he had parted with Elmer and was mounting the steps of the brownstone front, he found himself whistling. To-morrow, or even the day after, would be ample time enough to explain matters to Lottie. Any night but Saturday.

He found May in the apartment, and at once suggested a dinner at Tony's, the three of them. Presently they were clattering down the stairs, giggling, light-hearted.

On the bottom landing Henry slipped an arm around Lottie and kissed her impulsively. Mr. Rand, coming up the stairs at that moment, witnessed the demonstration and grinned as he passed them.

They went swinging along the bright street, Henry linking arms with both his companions, keeping the girls in a constant titter.

"I like you this way, Henry," Lottie contrived to whisper in his ear. "You've been so quiet lately I've worried."

"Oh, you mustn't worry," he told her airily. "I just get spells."

The dinner was all a dinner should be. They had a nice table in a corner with flowers on it. The music, the fat lady who sang, the buzz of voices and the happy faces all about him, contributed to Henry's gayety.

He talked, waved the bread sticks in time to the music and did tricks with the wriggly spaghetti.

It was not until the coffee was served that Henry began to quiet down. His head started to ache and he felt himself slipping back into his former despondency.

Now the sight of Lottie's ring, which she flashed so proudly, chilled him, and he felt sure the folks at the next table were snickering, passing remarks among themselves.

When he called the waiter and the bill was put before him, Henry, thrusting a hand into his pocket, experienced a shock. He had no money.

He recalled now that he had left his purse in the locker at the store. To add to his distress, he learned that neither Lottie nor May had more than a dollar between them.

He knew Tony slightly, having been a fairly regular customer, so calling him, explained his unfortunate predicament.

"I'll pay you to-morrow," he assured the proprietor.

But Tony shrugged.

"I would like to oblige you," he said; "but so many customers forget their purses. They promise and promise, and I don't see them any more."

"I don't know what to do," Henry returned. He could not get into his locker now and there was no telling where Elmer could be found.

Tony's sharp, black eyes rested upon Lottie's finger.

"If the lady would leave the ring—" he began.

"No, no; not that," Henry protested, alarmed.

"But you should leave me some security." Tony shrugged again and looked as stern as a police officer.

Those at the surrounding tables were looking on, amused. Henry colored. Lottie slipped the ring quickly from her finger.

"It 'll be all right, Henry," she confided in a whisper. "You can redeem it to-morrow."

"Sure he can," declared Tony, his hand closing over the ring. "It will be kept in my safe. To-morrow you bring the three dollars."

Presently they were out on the street, Henry looking distressed, Lottie endeavoring to console him. They walked around a bit and went back to the apartment.

Henry's headache persisted and there was a burned-feather taste in his mouth, but he tried to be cheerful. When he left he was surprised to find it almost one o'clock. Still, to-morrow was Sunday.

The lights in the halls were turned low; the house unusually quiet. When he had descended the next to last flight of stairs, he heard the street door below open and heard some one step quickly into the lower hall. After that, silence reigned.

He stopped, wondering why the newcomer had not started upward; and as the silence was prolonged, he leaned over the railing. Below him, peering through the crack of the door into the street, crouched Rand.

And as he continued to watch, puzzled by the man's singular behavior, he saw Rand close the door softly, lean back and wipe at his damp face.

The sight of Rand's countenance, shiny with perspiration, and the sound of his labored breathing, as if he had run a great distance, startled Henry. For a moment he was afraid; then, as unconcernedly as possible, he walked on down the stairs, just, it seemed, as Rand decided to walk up. They met on the dark landing.

Henry was about to speak, when an oath ripped from Rand's lips. Next, something cruel and hard, desperately swift, collided with Henry's head.

He reeled, opened his mouth to cry out, instinctively flung wide his arms to protect himself. But no sound issued from between his lips and his extended arms met nothing more substantial than the air.

Myriad lights danced about him and suddenly exploded. Then he fell through darkness.

III.

'A MOMENT later, or it may have been an eternity, Henry was unable to judge, his eyes fluttered open. He saw the yellow light in the hall below; discovered he was huddled in a corner of the dark landing and that his head was throbbing wickedly. And when, vaguely recalling a little of what had passed, he endeavored to rise, his stomach turned flip-flops.

In time, however, he managed to draw himself erect and guardedly descended the stairs. The house was still, ominously so. Outside on the stoop the cool night air revived him and his mind began to function more clearly.

He walked on, filled with doubt and apprehension, anxious to put the house behind him. He realized what had happened, but the happening puzzled him.

Blocks farther on, when he touched the very sore and painful spot above his right ear, his fingers came away red. It gave him a queer, sickish feeling.

Why Rand had struck him down he could not fathom, and at the present moment he entertained no urgent desire to investigate. It was doubtful, he told himself, that in the darkness of the landing, Rand had been able to identify him.

In his room at last, before his mirror, Henry surveyed his injuries. They were, he discovered, rather unusual.

Above and slightly forward of his right ear, were a number of plum-colored bruises and a wound that continued to bleed. Studying them closely, he saw there were two bruises the size of pennies, then the wound where the flesh was broken, then another bruise similar to the first two.

What was more confounding, was the fact they were all evenly spaced and in line, as if stenciled upon his temple. That was another thing to account for and he pondered over it long after he had turned out his lights and lay wide awake in bed.

Immediately after breakfast the next morning he visited Elmer and revealed all that had befallen him on his way home the night before.

"Take a look at these marks," he concluded, touching them gingerly with a finger. "Funny-looking, aren't they? What do you suppose Rand hit me with?"

"That's easy," said Elmer, dutifully inspecting the bruises. "He used brass knuckles."

Henry scowled. To him, brass knuckles had been among the questionable weapons glimpsed only in pawnshop windows, along with vicious-looking knives and blunt-nosed revolvers that one associated with thugs.

They discussed the matter gravely between them, based on the evidence, and decided that Rand had been up to some devilment that night. Further than that, however, they did not go.

Elmer supplied a strip of court-plaster, and by wearing his cap pulled down, Henry's injuries were effectively concealed.

"You can tell Lottie you bumped you head. I wouldn't tell her about Rand—not with her living in the same house."

Henry agreed with that. After borrowing three dollars from his companion, the pair set off for Tony's. Halfway to their destination they fell in with Lottie and May.

"I was so anxious about the ring I borrowed enough to redeem it," Lottie explained.

The four journeyed on to Tony's. The moment he set foot inside the restaurant, which was practically deserted at that hour, Henry realized something unusual had taken place.

The proprietor was gesticulating excitedly and talking with a pair of big, stolid-faced men. There was a bandage around his head.

Henry walked up to the desk to overhear a little of what Tony was saying; and that little, tumbling from the man's lips, revealed the truth.

"Tony!" he exclaimed. "You been robbed?"

All the men turned to face the newcomer. At sight of Henry, whom he must have recognized, Tony's distressed voice again filled the room.

"Sure I been robbed," he wailed. "The thief took everything in the safe. All my money and my bonds and—and the ring you left with me."

Lottie clutched Henry's arm.

"My—my ring," she stammered. "Gone? S-stolen?"

Tony nodded miserably.

"It was just when I was closing last night. I was alone. The thief came in quiet and hit me! Look!"

The victim lifted the bandage to display the telltale evidence. "Right here he hit me. It knocked me down. I didn't know anything for maybe an hour."

"Brass knuckles," one of the men remarked. "No wonder."

Henry, his mind whirling, was suddenly aware of the badges the two men wore. Detectives! His heart began to thump.

"What time was it this happened?" he asked.

"A little before one," Tony answered.

The restaurant, Henry recalled swiftly, was not more than six blocks from Lottie's apartment; and it was nearly one o'clock when he left there the night before and started downstairs.

Tony began talking again and Lottie was crying; but in Henry's mind, aside from the matter involving Rand, peace dwelt. The hateful Abyssinian gem was gone!

"Suppose you can identify the man?" one of the detectives asked.

Tony shook his head. "He had a handkerchief tied around his face and just his eyes showing."

"Well, we'll see what we can do. The Liberty bonds are our best bet in case the crook tries to cash them. Three, you say, a thousand each? Got the numbers?"

Tony hurriedly produced a memorandum from his desk which the detective accepted and copied into a book.

"How about that ring?" the other detective spoke up, turning upon Henry. "You left it here as security for a bill? A diamond?"

"An engagement ring," Henry stated.

"Huh, not much chance of finding it again."

"It better be found," Elmer cut in. "Worth five hundred."

"Every cent of that," May corroborated, her arm about Lottie.

"Yeah, I suppose so," the detective rejoined, unimpressed. "Funny how valuable stolen property becomes. Better not make too many rash statements. The ring may turn up and you'll find yourself in a jam."

Henry began to perspire freely. May, who didn't know any better, and Elmer who did, had put him in a sorry plight.

To confirm what had been said in the presence of Tony and the detectives, was unthinkable; to deny it, in the presence of Lottie and before so many witnesses, might be calamitous. And while he struggled to reach a safe middle ground, Tony's voice sounded.

"Just you wait," the man pleaded, wringing his hands. "Maybe we get the ring back soon. I—I lose all my savings. It will be hard to repay. My poor wife and babies in Italy. I was to go back to see them next month. Now it is not to be."

Tears began to trickle down his fat cheeks.

Henry simply had to say something. "Look here, Tony," he began, "you don't need—"

"Aw, that's a lot of applesauce," Elmer broke in. "Don't you let him put anything over on you, Henry. He'll either produce the ring or dig up the price."

"But—" Henry began once more.

"Come along," commanded Elmer. "No use arguing."

Henry tried to get in another word, tried to shake off Elmer's hand, but in neither was he successful. Still protesting, he was yanked through the door.

"You rummy!" Elmer whispered in his ear. "Don't go queering yourself. You're in luck and don't seem to know it."

IV.

HENRY worried through an uncomfortable Sunday. Elmer had left him outside the restaurant, and it was to Elmer's room he sped that evening once he had bid good night to Lottie.

Elmer seemed unable to account for his visitor's doleful countenance.

"Say, I never heard of such luck!" he declared. "The ring's gone. Any crook will spot the phony stone and and toss it a mile."

"That part of it's all right," Henry averred. "It's what you and May told the detectives and Tony."

"Good Lord! Wasn't I doing you a favor? Fixing things? You were so balled up you came near giving things away. That's why I hustled you out of the place."

"You've put me in a fix. You—"

"How's that?" the other retorted. "You'll never see the ring again and you stand to collect a nice piece of change from that wop."

"Do you think I would?" Henry cried resentfully.

"Sure. All you've got to do is sit tight and nick him for the price of a real diamond."

"I'd never do that. I—I'm going to see Tony and tell him."

"You're crazy!"

"Why, suppose the police get the ring back and find out what it is? And Tony, too?"

"Not a chance in a million! Phony or not, a crook wouldn't keep a piece of jewelry on him. Say," Elmer queried suddenly, "do you suppose it was Rand?"

"Maybe," Henry answered, concerned with a new problem. "I ought to tip off the police. It might get Tony back his bonds."

"Nix on that!" Elmer cried. "You steer clear of the cops and Rand, too. You haven't got any evidence against him. Even if you had, you'd be foolish to squeal on him. You just mind your own business. Rand's likely a bad egg and if he suspected you were messing in his affairs, you'd get a knife between your ribs some dark night, or a bullet in the back."

The mere thought of what Elmer inferred pimpled Henry with goose-flesh.

"I wouldn't care for that," he said faintly.

It was the very next evening when he turned into Fifty-Eighth Street that Henry saw Rand on the stoop. He was tempted to turn and run. But as he stood there, undecided, Rand glanced casually over his shoulder and spied him.

Retreat now, he saw, would be fatal. Therefore he mounted the steps, steeled himself to look straight into the man's face as he passed and even nodded with an assumed cordiality.

Rand returned the nod curtly and looked away again, apparently unconcerned. Henry read nothing in the man's dark eyes to disturb him.

To all appearances Rand entertained no suspicion that the quaking individual passing him was the one he had struck down on the dark landing two nights before.

Once inside the house and ascending the stairs to the top floor, Henry breathed a sigh of relief. Yet walking along the second floor hall and passing the closed door of Rand's apartment, Henry's pulse quickened.

It gave him a queer, prickly sensation—the thought that Rand might have been Tony's assailant, that those bonds might be somewhere behind that door.

Starting up the next flight of stairs he turned to look back, his fascinated eyes drawn irresistibly toward the door. A daring, intrepid thought, for an instant stark reality, engulfed him, sent his heart galloping. He took the stairs two at a time and pushed quickly into the top floor apartment.

Lottie greeted him, alarmed. "Henry! What has happened? You look as white as a ghost!"

He managed to force a laugh.

"I—I just ran upstairs," he explained. "It's got me puffing like a steam engine."

In a few minutes he was himself again, heartily ashamed of his childish fears. But in the course of the evening Henry found his mind drifting back to the wildly absurd idea that had gripped him at the moment of passing Rand's door. It hammered persistently; loomed before him like a thing inevitable.

When, much later, he left the apartment and started downstairs, he heard voices in the hall below. Instinctively he halted, ears alert. Rand and Mrs. Halsey were talking.

"A Mr. Lauderdale called to see you awhile ago," the landlady was saying. "He went off in a big car and told me he would call for you to-morrow at half past four."

"All right," Rand responded. "Much obliged. I'll be going out of town with him to-morrow night late. About six. Back in a couple days."

Henry pressed against the wall in the darkest part of the landing. The door below slammed noisily. He could hear Mrs. Halsey padding down the stairs to her own quarters. Then everything was still again.

Almost stealthily, Henry moved down the next flight of stairs. He saw a light through the transom over Rand's door; saw, an instant later, something that had his heart up in his throat. He stiffened, his body tingling as if an electric current was racing along his spine.

On the faded, grimy carpet of the hall, barely a foot from Rand's door, and almost touching his shoe, lay a key—an ordinary, worn key dimly revealed in the light of the gas jet. He stared down at it, fascinated.

Assuredly it belonged to Rand. The man must have left it in the lock, and when he slammed the door, the key had fallen out.

Almost before he realized it, Henry had stooped, picked up the key and was hurrying down the stairs. It was not until he had left the house behind and was walking rapidly along the street, the key clutched in his singularly cold, moist fingers, that he began to breathe easier.

The key to Rand's apartment! He was alternately thrilled and frightened at the thought of what he had done. What rash impulse, he wondered, had prompted him to pick it up? He found himself ludicrously close to a run, glancing over his shoulder as if prepared to see Rand at his heels.

Presently he calmed down and when, a block farther on, he passed Tony's restaurant, he hesitated. It occurred to him he should see Tony at once.

Entering the restaurant and making inquiries, he learned the proprietor was out and would not return until the next day. So Henry departed, leaving no message behind, but determined to call again. A few words with the Italian would absolve him from any future trouble.

In his own room later, Henry undressed and crawled into bed; but it was not to sleep. He was profoundly thankful when daylight came and the shadowy corners existed no longer.

He arrived at the store unusually early. Once there he went mechanically about his duties. He went to lunch, avoiding Elmer; came back. The afternoon seemed to drag interminably. At four o'clock he asked permission to go home.

Out on the street, Henry walked briskly uptown. In his room again he found the key and thrust it into his pocket. Then he walked, still briskly, toward Fifty-Eighth Street. The stoop of the brown stone front was deserted.

In a little lunch room on the opposite side of the street he ordered a cup of coffee; drank it absently, his eyes fixed upon the window. When it was half past four exactly, he saw Rand come out on the stoop.

Almost at once a car rolled up to the curb and Rand climbed in beside the driver. The car got under way again and was lost amid the traffic.

Henry was across the street and into the house, had ascended to the second floor hall and was standing in front of Rand's door with a speed and calmness that amazed him.

The key was slipped into the lock. It turned readily and the door gave to his pressure. Without the slightest hesitation he stepped inside, closing the door softly behind him.

He found himself in a small, barren apartment, incredibly dirty, the two rooms scantily furnished and filled with sour, musty smells. Glancing swiftly about, Henry reasoned that his prospective search must be methodic and expeditious. Time was at a premium.

Strangely enough it was anxiety rather than fear that possessed him—anxiety lest that for which he sought should be gone.

Promptly, spurred by a grim determination, and as coolly as if he had been asked to find some article among the myriad shelves in the Bon Ton basement, Henry started to work. It seemed an hour must have passed, and all the time he had been searching, searching, meeting disappointment at every turn, when from the pocket of a coat that hung on a nail beside the kitchen door, his exploring fingers drew out a pair of brass knuckles.

He surveyed them a moment, at first startled, then pleased by the evidence he had uncovered, next filled with sudden hatred toward their owner. After a close and deliberate inspection, for never before had he been privileged to examine articles of so questionable a nature, he discarded one of the pair and slipped the other over his fingers.

When he doubled his fist and shook it, the act thrilled him. He could understand now, how thus armed, Rand had been enabled to deal such swift and murderous punishment.

After that interruption, and still wearing the knuckles, Henry resumed his methodical, painstaking search.

When he had explored the more remote and more promising hiding places—the closets, the battered suitcase which he drew from under the bed, and the steamer trunk, both unlocked, both packed as if for flight—still unrewarded, he turned his attention to the more obvious caches, those least likely to invite search.

And almost the first place he looked he found what all the time he felt must be on the premises. The stolen property was wrapped in a dirty handkerchief and stuffed into an empty coffee can that stood upon the kitchen table.

With eager, tremulous fingers he untied the knots and opened the handkerchief to reveal the three folded bonds, a roll of currency secured with a rubber band—and Lottie's ring. It was the last article that sent his pulses racing.

The Abyssinian gem gleamed balefully at him. He wondered that Rand had not got rid of the thing before. Was it possible, he asked himself, that the thief had not discovered its nature?

Henry's first impulse was to toss the ring through the open window or better, grind it underfoot, destroy it forever. Never, he decided, was it again to play a part in his existence.

But even as his hand went out toward it, a sound smote his ear. He wheeled, fright enveloping him.

Rand was standing in the open doorway, his head thrust forward, his lips drawn back in a forbidding snarl, his black eyes glittering.

V.

RAND moved warily into the room, closed the door behind him, stood a moment with his back against it. Henry's stricken eyes saw the blunt, black-metaled barrel of a revolver leveled upon him.

"Put 'em up!" Rand barked. "Quick, now!"

Dumbly, Henry obeyed. Rand glided across the floor, ran a hand over the other's shrinking body to assure himself his victim was unarmed. Satisfied, he backed off a step, dropped the gun into his pocket and favored Henry with a leer.

"Say, I didn't think you had the nerve," he began. "I sure didn't. Coming in here, a shrimp like you!"

His eyes swept to the property on the kitchen table.

"So you hooked me up with the Tony job, eh? Figured I had the bonds and that phony ring, eh? Afraid to squeal on me, were you? Afraid Tony and the cops and that yap girl of yours would get wise to what you were trying to put across! So you sneaked in here and decided to help yourself. Thought you'd leave me holding the empty bag, eh?"

Henry had nothing to say; but he wondered how the man had learned so much. It puzzled him.

"Got you guessing, eh?" Rand taunted. "Wonder how I tumbled, did you? Didn't figure maybe I was sitting in the restaurant the night your girl passed Tony the ring. Didn't think I knew it was you I slammed later that night, eh? Never occurred to you I was friendly with Tony and heard a lot of things from him afterward?"

Henry continued to stare at the figure confronting him. Somehow, by some astounding miracle, he was less afraid now. His mind was clearing swiftly, a new-born courage blessed him, unsuspected strength crept into his limbs.

Rand, surveying him, laughed again, as if filled with profound contempt at sight of his puny, cowed captive.

"I'm pulling out of here to-night,"

he taunted. "For good! A gumshoe's been trailing me this afternoon, so it's high time I vanished. I'll leave you behind for the landlady to sweep up in the morning. I'll just bust every bone in your miserable little carcass. Hear that? And just remember this: If you ever open your trap about me I'll see that this glass sparkler gets into the hands of the cops. The engraving inside the ring will identify it."

The nerve ends up and down Henry's body began to tingle.

"You mean if I let you get away with Tony's property you won't say nothing—do anything about the ring?" he asked unsteadily.

"Let me?" the other jeered. "Say, that's rich!" And Rand chuckled.

"I was just asking," Henry rejoined, his voice steadier. "I just wanted to make sure I heard you right the first time."

Rand contemplated his prospective victim with amused tolerance. "All you got to remember is to keep your trap shut after I'm gone."

"You're going to beat me up, and I'm not to say anything," Henry stated, perhaps a little amazed at his audacity. "And for that you're keeping mum about the ring. My girl won't know, or Tony or the cops. And I get a chance, maybe, to collect the price of a real diamond."

"That's something like it; yes." Perhaps wondering at Henry's provocative smile, Rand hunched his shoulders and moved forward.

"What you grinning about?" he demanded sharply.

Henry didn't tell him in words. With incredible swiftness he leaped toward Rand. His clenched fist, which still retained the formidable brass knuckles, shot out.

Behind the smashing blow he mustered every ounce of his new-found strength, aware, even as it landed, how pitiably inadequate it seemed, how tremendously short it fell of dealing the essential knockout punch.

Rand, wholly unprepared for the amazing attack and the astounding display of ferocity on the part of his antagonist, was unable to ward off the blow which he received full in the face.

It staggered him and he wavered an instant, confused. Henry was upon him again, swinging desperately, quick to take advantage of the opening granted him.

Incoherent with rage and pain, the blood streaming into his eyes and over his nose and mouth, Rand lashed out blindly. His hard fists sank into Henry's quivering flesh; but Henry managed to keep his right hand free, even as Rand's powerful arms encircled him.

And that right hand, metal-tipped, swung again and again, relentlessly. He felt the impact of the brass knuckles as they thudded against the other's unprotected head. He laughed exultantly, unmindful of his own suffering.

All at once, so abruptly it left Henry dazed, Rand's crushing arms relaxed, his knees sagged and he toppled over backward on the floor. Swaying a little, Henry stared down at the prostrate form, unable to comprehend just what had taken place, too confounded to realize that his adversary no longer menaced him.

Many things happened then—vague and confusing like poorly focused pictures thrown upon a screen. He thought he saw frightened faces peering upon him from the open door, imagined he heard the clump of running feet and the shrill cries echoing along the narrow hall outside.

Still he wasn't sure. The room was swimming and he felt unaccountably dizzy.

One of the important things he did not know, until much later, was that the landlady, Mrs. Halsey, alarmed by the disturbance on the second floor, and after one frightened glance into the room where her tenant and a stranger were battling, had stumbled down the stairs and into the street, screaming at

the top of her lungs, to collide with an officer and a detective who were, at that moment, walking toward the brownstone front.

Henry saw, rather more distinctly now and with understanding, the two men who pushed their way into the disordered room.

"What's coming off here?" the man in uniform demanded.

But before Henry could say a word, the detective, who first of all glanced down upon Rand, spoke.

"You do this?" he asked incredulously.

Henry stared into the man's face, and after a little effort it dawned upon him it belonged to one of the detectives who had been in Tony's place the Sunday before.

"I—I had to keep Rand from leaving," he explained. "Over there—on the table—is the stolen property. Tony's."

The man stepped to the table.

"The bonds and everything!" he exclaimed. "I'm a son of a gun!"

"Rand hid them here," Henry said.

"Called himself Rand, did he?" The detective grinned. "Huh, he's Sammy Meyers. I been trailing him today. Lost him awhile ago right in this neighborhood. Good thing I stuck around."

Henry nodded as if he understood perfectly. He felt weak and shaky. He heard the detective order some one to run and get Tony.

Then suddenly, running toward him, he saw Lottie. She must have just come home from the store. Her arms were around him and she was asking questions and crying. Then the room seemed to turn on end.

When he came back to the world again he was on a couch, and Lottie was beside him, and there was Tony, looking very much excited, and Rand slumped in a chair, handcuffed, his face puffed and bruised.

"Coming out of it, are you?" the detective inquired briskly. "That's good. I want to hear something of what happened."

So Henry, his voice rather faint and wabbly, told his story, beginning with the night he had seen Rand enter the house and concluding with the discovery of the stolen property and the unexpected return of the culprit.

"How in thunder did you ever beat him up so bad?" the detective asked. "Rand, as you call him, would make two of you. His face looks like it was pushed through a meat grinder."

"It was the brass knuckles," Henry answered.

"This one of them?" queried the detective, holding the article aloft. "I picked it off the floor."

Henry inspected it. "Yes; this is it. I found a pair of them in the pocket of Rand's coat, but I only wanted to keep one—this one."

"Any particular reason?"

"Yes; for evidence."

The detective frowned. "How's that?"

"If you look close you'll see one of the knobs on these knuckles—the third one—has been chipped off a bit, leaving a rough, jagged edge."

"Yes; I see that," the other returned.

"Well, instead of leaving a bruise, as the other three knobs do, it left a cut, breaking the flesh. Like this!" Henry stripped the court-plaster from his temple. "Do you see? There are two bruises, a cut and a third bruise, all in line, matching the knobs on these knuckles exactly. And you'll find the same sort of marks on Tony's head."

The detective peered at Henry's scarred temple and at Tony's; then he glanced again at the brass knuckles he held and whistled.

"You're right. This evidence alone would have been enough to convict the man."

"He used the knuckles on Tony and then on me," Henry stated. "About the same hour. They left sort of a trademark. When I saw the prints on

Tony's head were just like the ones on mine, I figured Rand was guilty."

"Sure," the detective agreed.

Tony came over to seize Henry's hand.

"A brave man, you are!" he cried rapturously. "You saved my bonds and everything. And to think all the time I knew this crook and we talked."

A low, jeering laugh broke from the prisoner.

"Before you thank him too much you better take a squint at that ring," he advised. "It's got a phony diamond in it This bird was figuring to swindle you, claiming it was worth five hundred."

Henry felt the hot blood surge into his cheeks and did not dare look at Lottie.

"A piece of glass!" Rand exclaimed contemptuously. "He's been fooling his girl with it all along. Even when he suspected me of this job he kept mum, afraid if I was pinched and the ring found, you'd all tumble to his racket. That's why he sneaked in here to-day. He wanted to get that ring and the bonds as well."

Both Tony and the detective were examining the ring now; and it was the latter who turned upon Henry.

"A phony stone, all right," he affirmed. "You planned to gyp Tony? Meant to shake him down for the price of a real diamond?"

Henry was on his feet, resolute, unflinching, eager to acknowledge the truth; but before the words he framed left his lips, Lottie was beside him, speaking in his stead.

"Henry isn't to blame!" she cried. "He didn't know. It was my fault."

"Lottie!" he reproved, stunned by her declaration. "You—"

"Henry didn't know," she ran on, heedless of the protest. "It was all my fault. I—I lost the stone from the ring one day. I was scared—afraid to tell—and I couldn't afford to buy another diamond to replace it. So I had an imitation stone put in. Henry never knew the difference—never suspected—and I was too—too ashamed to confess—Sunday."

Her voice faltered and broke and suddenly Henry's arms were around her and she was crying. Dazed, he tried to say something, but his lips were quivering and he felt perilously close to tears himself.

After a time, the room very still, he looked up to behold the detective surveying them. But now his once grim countenance was wreathed in smiles.

"Well, I'm a son of a gun!" he exclaimed softly and chuckled.

Then Tony, his round face beaming, spoke. "As if I didn't know already! Sure! The lady she came to see me yesterday. She was so scared; but I just laughed and promised not to tell her fellow."

Henry was more bewildered than ever. He must make himself heard. Words came, but no one seemed to be interested. Others were talking loudly. He could not make them listen.

The blue-coated officer prodded his sullen prisoner and led him from the room. The others followed, still talking. The detective stopped a moment in the doorway and looked back.

"Seems to me there's a reward out for this crook you nabbed," he stated. "Don't know how much, but you better drift down to headquarters to-morrow and claim it. Wouldn't be surprised," he added, "if it 'll be enough to buy a new ring."

With that he smiled and went out.

When all was quiet again, the girl lifted a timid, tear-streaked face.

"Henry," she faltered. "C-can you ever forgive me for the awful thing I've done?"

"Forgive you?" he echoed, holding her close. "Why, I'm the one to be asking that. It's for you to forgive me, if you can. Just wait—wait till you hear the more awful thing I did to start with."

THE END

Try This on Your Friends

Do witnesses always see what they say they do?

By BOB DAVIS

"NOT one person in a thousand," said the business man, "pays the least attention to what goes on. Very few can accurately quote a conversation twenty-four hours after it occurs and only a fraction can describe the physical characteristics of those with whom they have been brought into accidental contact."

"You are wrong," said the lawyer. "This is a generation of observant people; at times too observant, I am inclined to think. We all have our eyes open and the inquisitive tendency manifests itself to a very considerable extent."

"Neither eyes nor ears open," reiterated the merchant. "Aside from that few of us take the time to think. Let's make an experiment right here in your own office. Yes?"

"Go ahead. What's the proposition?"

"Call in one at a time six of your clerks and associates, one or two of them women, if you wish. Have them take the chair on the far side of your desk. Start a conversation on any subject and draw me into it more or less casually. Five minutes will be sufficient for each.

"To-morrow about this time summon the same people and ask each for a physical description of me; also what I said specifically and something concerning my mannerisms and dress. You will be surprised at the hodgepodge of inaccuracy. Would you mind?"

"Not the least. You are taking chances with my staff, but that's your lookout."

Half an hour was consumed in the several brief interviews that followed. The conversation was on topics more or less of a business nature, and all three of us were drawn naturally into the ensuing talk.

It was arranged among ourselves in conclusion that I should be the judge as to the quality of the observational power displayed by the six individuals, one a woman, who had been injected into the experiment.

Occupying the same chair on the following day, and in the same room, I heard the witnesses describe, one at a time, the general appearance of the absent man and repeat what they thought he said.

It was a truly amazing demonstration, thoroughly inaccurate from beginning to end. All of the six erred as to complexion, and only one observed that the hair was combed pompadour. Four declared that the visitor wore a four-in-hand, two hung out for a bow tie, the latter being correct.

None observed that he wore rimless nose glasses, and that both his shirt and collar were blue. The woman in the case declared that his eyes were brown, whereas they were a light gray. She did, however, state accurately that he had a dry cigar between his lips.

Two of the men witnesses were of the opinion that he carried a cane. Wrong again. A third had a vague impression that he smoked a cigarette. All quoted much of his conversation accurately, but not in sequence.

I injected a query concerning his teeth, which were strong, even and white. No other person in the room seemed to have observed that fact.

At the conclusion of the inquisitorial session, after the last witness had departed, we telephoned the absent subject, who had an office in the next building.

"You have made your point," admitted the man whose employees had so ignominiously failed in the tests, "and I propose to let them know how deficient they are in the art of observing."

"Do not be alarmed," replied the visitor soothingly. "They are no worse or no better than others; just the regular run of shad, so to speak.

"We haven't the time to study anybody but ourselves. We are all in a mad rush to get somewhere and are utterly indifferent as to what is going on between terminals.

"It would surprise you to know how few people who read the popular novels can tell you offhand the names of five of the characters in the volume in which they are engrossed."

He was quite correct. We know the name of the hero and the heroine, and perhaps the villain. The rest of the characters are mere supers coming and going between the pages and generally contributing to the interruptions.

Some people recall names in the form of initials or describe them as persons representing trades or professions.

Moving picture fans know the stars by their baptismal names only. The film as a whole is a flash of intermittent light invaded by titles.

The popular pastime of "Ask Me Another" is not nearly so exciting as "Describe the Person." All one has to do is to lead the subject in among strangers and then lead him out again. After that the deluge.

The day following the experiment in the lawyer's office I telephoned the man who inspired it and asked him what was the color of the necktie I had worn on that occasion.

"Brown," he flashed back, "and it was badly tied."

This column is registered in Washington, and if any one reprints that remark I'll have the law on him.

THE END

The Desert Find

Just a no-account pup was Whiskers—but destined to be the desert's greatest gift to Sheriff Jim Crawford

By JOSEPH T. KESCEL

"Take me home, Whiskers!"

WHILE walking to his horse, tied to the hitching rail in front of the jail, Miguel Sanchez cast a greedy eye down at the yellowish, sand-colored dog squatting on his haunches in the center of the rough plank sidewalk. That was the smartest dog Miguel had ever had anything to do with. Some day he would steal him.

Gray-bearded old Tobe Murdock had given Whiskers, which was the dog's name, to his friend and grub-stake partner, Sheriff Jim Crawford, when the observing animal was only a scrawny, wiry-haired, half-starved pup.

"I found the poor little cuss lost on the desert off to the west of the Seco Road, Jim," old Tobe had explained. "At first I took him fer a coyote pup. But I soon enough found out he wasn't. Then, afore I'd much more'n give him water and grub, I was clean in love with him.

"But it would be nonsense fer me to keep him myself. It's hard enough fer a man to keep grub under his own belt, out there in the desert, to say nuthin' of a growin' pup. So, as I sabe how fond you are of animals—especially ill-treated, wanderin', homeless dogs, Jim—how'd you like to have him?"

Crawford had grinned below his grizzled mustache at the question.

"I'll be glad to have him, Tobe. And although he's about as near nothing a specimen of dawg as I've ever seen, he'll be company for the men in the jail here. Put almost any man behind bars, and he's ready to lavish affection on a dog or a cat."

Whiskers was then, as well as Tobe and the sheriff could judge, about three months old. Now he was full grown, though his shoulders reached barely above the sheriff's knee, and his unruly, wiry coat was little different from what it had been.

Miguel, while in jail awaiting trial on a charge of murder, had been one of the men to become friendly with Whiskers. Yet the dog never trusted the Mexican as he did some of the other prisoners, who had not Miguel's coal-black, shifting eyes and brown, treacherous face.

Old Tobe, who had come from his prospecting into town to get supplies, and who was now ready to return to the desert, led his two freshly packed burros to the hitching rail and tied them there, as Miguel rode away along Barbito's dusty Main Street.

Whiskers wagged his tail, made a little rush, raised himself on his hind legs, and laid his front paws on the old prospector's overall waistband.

Sheriff Crawford came from his office, and at the edge of the sidewalk greeted his grubstake partner with a cheery, "Hello, Tobe."

"Howdy, Jim. H'm. I see you've still got my desert find," Tobe laughed. "And, do you know, I b'lieve he remembers me, even if it is months between the times I pat him on the head? Still keep him here at the cooler?"

"Yep, Tobe. Still keep him here. It's home to him, and he sure does give some of the poor cusses who are locked up a lot of pleasure. But it won't be home to him much longer, though, I'm afraid, Tobe."

"What you mean, Jim?"

Crawford moved a little closer and spoke in a lower tone.

"That I won't be sheriff of this county much longer, Tobe. So to speak, I see the handwriting on the wall. I won't be elected again, notwithstanding my past good record. The folks say I'm getting old, that I can't deliver the goods like I used to.

"It's true enough that I can't, too, Tobe. Getting so along in years has slowed me up, especially in the open trail. But what downed me good and plenty is my not being able to get the evidence to convict that Mexican you saw you riding away just now.

"Miguel is the man who knifed that young tenderfoot prospector in the back, over in the San Gloria foothills. Still, I couldn't find evidence enough to convict him.

"Of course that sand storm coming up when it did, and blotting out all signs and tracks, made some difference. Awhile back, though, I'd have somehow beat that sand storm.

"Miguel said that he didn't do it. I couldn't prove that he did. In fact I couldn't get sufficient evidence to warrant a trial. So if he's ever tried for that crime, it'll be only through his own confession."

Old Tobe nodded gravely.

"I kin see—and I'm sorry, Jim. You've always give your best to your job—which was more'n anybody else could have give, a spell ago. Now you ain't what you was. In consequence you've got to give way to some one else.

"But maybe it won't make no difference, as—as, well, I've got a feelin' that I'm goin' to hit 'er big this time."

"I sure hope so, Tobe." The sheriff lowered his voice still more. "I hope so for both our sakes, 'cause I can't grubstake you after this. I ought to have money. But I ain't got it. That's all."

"I know, Jim," Tobe returned sympathetically. "I know. And I sabe why.

"You've been the best man-catcher these parts has ever seen. But you've at the same time been soft-hearted, slipping some one a dollar or two, here, a few more some place else. Doin' things fer your prisoners that not one man in thousands would do. And givin' me hundreds in grubstakes. You've lived sort of by the way, as you've traveled along."

Old Tobe nodded again as a suspicious moisture showed in his deepset gray eyes, always closed just a little now, on account of so many years' use under broiling desert suns.

"Let's not talk no more now, Jim,"

he said. "It's up to me to make a strike. So long, partner. Look fer me when you see me."

Abruptly he turned to his burros and drove them westward out of town.

II.

In the six weeks that followed as he traveled about over a great stretch of waste land, with its sandy, desolate flats, low hills with their scraggly brush, cactus, and scanty vegetation, he thought a great deal of his grubstake partner, of Miguel, and of Whiskers.

In the beginning he had had great hopes of finding rich ore or some indication that would lead to its discovery. But up to the evening when he made camp beside a grass-fringed spring in some hills, little more than a day's walk from Barbito, he had found nothing worth while.

He was sad, disheartened, disgusted, when, directly after breakfast the next morning, he left his burros' grazing near the spring and, with his prospector's pick in hand, started looking for float, placer ground indications, or the outcrop of a vein.

The hope of making a strike, which had buoyed him up for so many years, was lower that day than it had ever been at any time in his adventurous, hard-working life.

His grub was about gone. He had little idea where he could get more. And he had so wanted to strike it this time—more on account of his grubstake partner than himself.

Absently his old eyes roved over the ground, the hills, and every discolored outcrop. Part way across a tiny basin, two miles from his camp, by accident he kicked out of a slight elevation of earth an egg-sized piece of pinkish-gray stone, which he at once recognized as quartz.

Stooping over, he muttered as he picked it up: "That's float. And I wonder from which direction it worked its way here."

At first he was only moderately interested in the earth-darkened specimen in his leathery, brown old fingers; for float, mysteriously carried from the vein where it had been as mysteriously broken off, had become an old story to him.

But as he turned the specimen over, he gave a startled gulp, and his deep-set gray eyes glowed with excitement. There, showing in a crumbling pinkish depression, was a threadlike stringer of yellow metal.

He gasped. If he could only find the vein from which this quartz had come, his own and his partner's financial worries were over.

Possibly the bedding of ore was right under his feet. He drove his pick into the ground to see. But all the probing steel encountered was soft, yielding earth, which he scooped out with his bare hands, only to uncover more earth.

The float had, then, in some way been carried there. He must try to find where it had come from.

Before midday his prospecting knowledge led him to the right spot—a discolored outcrop nearly hidden by a clump of thick-growing brush halfway up a small hill.

"At last! At last!" he sighed, as he feverishly scrawled the necessary notices of location to make the ground his and his grubstake partner's. "It will make no difference now whether Jim loses his job or not."

A sudden puff of wind blew the folded notice of location from his hand when, a short time later, he started to slip it under the flat slab atop his shoulder-high piled stone discovery location monument. He quickly retrieved it, and after placing it in its proper position, glanced skyward.

"H'm. Reckon we're in fer a blow," he mumbled. "Or maybe a cloudburst. I've sort of been noticin' that she was gettin' dark. But bein' so excited, I didn't pay no attention."

As he turned his nappy old eyes back

to his find, from up on the ridge top came the glad bark of a dog. The sound made him swing quickly about, to see Whiskers bounding down the hillside, through the cactus and scraggly brush, toward him.

But the dog was not all he saw; for outlined on the ridge top against the sky were two packed burros, being pounded on the rump by a man with a cudgel, whom old Tobe could not at that distance recognize.

He hoped and thought it was his grubstake partner. Maybe Jim had become worried and, with Whiskers to help him, had started a search.

Whiskers was barking joyously and trying to lick the prospector's gnarled hand when Tobe saw with a sinking heart that the newcomer was Miguel Sanchez.

Naturally old Tobe was not aware that the same week he had left town behind, Miguel, a very fair miner who sometimes did a little prospecting, had found his opportunity to steal Whiskers and had taken him to his cabin in the San Gloria Mountains.

Whiskers had accepted his new master and his mountain home with no great enthusiasm, notwithstanding the fact that Miguel gave him plenty of food to eat and was lavish with his affection.

It was all right there. Still, Whiskers would rather have been with the prisoners in the jail, or frisking about the heels of the tall sheriff.

What, old Tobe wondered, almost in despair, ought he to do? Miguel was as unscrupulous a man as could be found along the whole southwest border.

But the uneasy prospector had little time to speculate on what course Miguel would take, once he saw the exposed rich outcrop of quartz.

The cudgel with which the Mexican had been belaboring the burros made a good enough weapon to use on a man. Miguel's black eyes gleamed avariciously as he swung the club aloft.

And they still gleamed when, kneeling beside the huddled body on the ground, he stuffed into his own overalls the specimen and the duplicate notice of location that he had just taken from old Tobe's breast pocket.

Whiskers, standing with tail down and head turned just a little sidewise, eyed the proceedings as though he were trying to make his animal brain understand it all. Why had the brown-faced man with the curling lips acted so? Why was the kind old man lying there so quietly? Perhaps he needed help.

III.

WHISKERS started to edge forward when, with a whistling, screaming, cyclone roar, a gust of wind swept down the hillside, as if in protest at Miguel's actions.

Still on his knees, Miguel hitched about to face it. He saw a cloud of dust, twigs, sand, loose brush, and gravel rushing toward him.

Swish! He felt the tearing wind on his face.

Then with frightened eyes that were nearly closed to protect them from that whirling mass now upon him, he saw old Tobe's stone location discovery monument toppling over.

He had no time to throw himself out of harm's way. The topmost rocks struck him squarely in the face, brushing off his hat, knocking out his teeth, breaking his nose, but worst of all, painfully injuring his eyes.

His cry of pain and alarm was drowned out by the clatter of the tumbling rock and the screech of the wind, as he was knocked backward.

To his appalled mind, as he lay there, wounded, suffering, unable to see, whimpering, came the dread realization that this was the beginning of a sand storm.

Groaning dismally he rolled over and, his back to the wind, rose to his knees and raised a trembling hand to his lacerated face and closed eyes; eyes

which pained him excruciatingly, and which would not open, though he tried to separate the lids.

If he could not see, what was he to do? And was his sight gone permanently, or only for the time being?

Disregarding the pain and his other injuries, he at last succeeded in spreading the eyelids apart with thumb and forefinger. Through his tears, he could now see a little. Then his sight was, in all probability, only temporarily impaired.

Still it was quite bad enough. He was more than a day's walk from his cabin. The sand storm had just started. By the time it had blown itself out, what would be the consequences to him, were he to stay there?

He decided that he must try to get to his cabin. Even though he could not see very well, the dog could lead him there.

The wind almost blew him over as, bareheaded, he rose to his feet and cut a pack rope loose from one of his burros, letting the pack fall to the ground.

"Here. Here, Wheezkers!" he called in broken English. "Kom."

Something whisked the rope away as he put out his hand, and he wondered uneasily whether it were that howling wind or the dog.

He groped his way to the other burro, cut loose the pack rope, and held securely on to it, as he called again:

"Wheezkers! Here, Wheezkers! Kom!"

A hairy head was thrust under his hand. He knew by touch that it was Whiskers, and quickly tied one end of the rope around the dog's neck.

First making sure that his half filled canteen hung from his shoulder, he ordered sharply: "Home, Wheezkers! Take me home!"

Whiskers, though still greatly mystified, obediently turned around and started off.

Miguel felt the rope tighten and stumbled forward, little more than a glimmer of light filtering through the tears in his barely opened, discolored eyes.

He was glad to get away; for in his superstitious mind he coupled the sudden ferocity of the elements with his crime. It would be a great relief to him to leave old Tobe behind. Later, he would protect his face with his neckerchief.

In the little basin where Tobe had found the specimen, Miguel was almost carried off his feet by the whistling gust of wind that dashed the stinging sand against him.

Seasoned though he was to the hardships of the desert, he was fearful of the fate that might be in store for him. Once in his cabin, though, he could give himself first-aid treatment.

A little farther along he tried to, by peering through the swirling dust, sand, and flying twigs, pick up some landmark. But he could see only a few yards through that chocolate-brown flying mass, driven on by the furious gale that seemed to come at him from all directions.

Gradually, too, the light was failing, and he wondered whether the increasing darkness was due to the injury to his eyes, the thickness of the flying particles, or the approach of night.

Soon all was pitch black. His fears arose again. He struck a match to see whether or not he still had vision.

He saw a flash of light before the match was blown out, and then stumbled on through the darkness more hopefully, obeying as best he could the pull of the rope around Whiskers's neck.

Uphill, downhill, across sandy flats and through winding cañons, he made his way; stumbling, falling, getting up and stumbling on again, wherever he was led, while the wind moaned, howled, shrieked, and whipped against his neckerchief-protected face.

The whole world seemed to have become a shrieking inferno, but as the hours dragged their slow way to dawn,

it meant little to Miguel. His mind and his senses had both grown dull.

The stumbling, the falling, the rising to stumble on, then fall again, with all the time the sand pelting him and the wind tearing at him, had gradually caused his mind to become almost blank.

Still he staggered on, and still on, gripping the rope fiercely and sometimes muttering incoherent words, until at last his fumbling fingers touched a doorknob.

"Home at last!" he gasped, and swung the door open. Then he reeled inside, still pulled forward by the rope.

"Hey! What's up here?"

IV.

MIGUEL'S blackened eyes flew part way open at the sound of that voice. Who was it? Where was he?

A glance told him all. And the shock of it cleared his brain.

He had bade the dog take him home. Barbito's jail was home to Whiskers. And now he was trying, as he stood with his front paws against Sheriff Jim Crawford's vest, to reach up and lick his face.

Only too conscious of the seriousness of his predicament, Miguel wondered what he had better do. He decided to slump to the floor and sham unconsciousness.

Sheriff Crawford needed only a glance to see that Miguel was badly used up, and after carrying him into a room off from the office, laid him on a bed and dispatched a trusty for a doctor.

The trusty and the doctor came into the room together, to find the sheriff, with the unfolded notice of location in one hand and the gold-laden piece of quartz in the other, frowning down at the shamming Mexican.

"I found these in Miguel's overalls pocket," Crawford explained. "The location notice shows that only yesterday old Tobe located some ground. The quartz specimen somehow tells me that he has also made a rich strike.

"Miguel can't talk, seems to be gone in the head. But as the location notice tells where Tobe has put up stakes, I think it's only fair that I should be heading with somebody out there, to see if Tobe is all right. The wind will go down as the sun comes up.

"You do what you can for Miguel, here in the jail. I'll tell my deputy to keep him here till I come back."

Although he realized that by the sheriff's finding of the notice of location, his own chances of getting hold of the rich claim were gone, Miguel's battered face showed no change of expression.

He would, he supposed, have to swear that the high stone monument, when it had been blown over and had injured him, had at the same time killed the prospector.

As for the dog, he could say that he had found him with Tobe, there at the rich vein. Who could prove otherwise?

When, two days later, Sheriff Jim Crawford returned to Barbito, Miguel stuck to the story he had planned.

"Oh! So that's how it was?" Crawford commented sadly. "I couldn't figure things out at all, as the coyotes, with their long, sharp teeth, got there ahead of us. Poor old Tobe! It was hard to have that happen to him. Coming, too, just when he had struck it rich."

The old sheriff shook his head sorrowfully.

"His locating me in as his partner on that ground," he added, "has made me a rich man. But it's wealth I don't care much about. Though I am glad that now I can do something for you, Miguel, for coming straight to me at the jail, like you did. I'll make it right with you, amigo."

Miguel's blackened, half-open eyes gleamed above the white bandages on his swarthy face at this information. He had lost the ground for which he

had struck the foul blow with his weighty club, yet he was to be rewarded by the gray-haired sheriff, who would undoubtedly be generous.

That night, on the cot in the room off from the jail office, he went to sleep thinking about his good fortune.

V.

SEVERAL hours later he awoke with the uneasy feeling that some one was in the room with him. The only light came from a ghostly moon shining through a window near his head. It was not strong enough to reveal much of the room's scanty furnishings.

But there was light a plenty to show to him, standing at the foot of his bed, the tall figure of a man, whose arms were folded and whose hair and beard, though ghastly white, yet gave off an unearthly glow which indistinctly revealed the features of old Tobe Murdock.

Sweating with fright, Miguel sat up. There was no doubt about it. That was the face of the man whom he had left for dead out in the desert. Now, like a ghost, he was standing silently at the foot of the bed.

A low, hollow voice came from the darkness. "Miguel Sanchez, did you not kill the tenderfoot prospector? Answer truthfully; for with me, a lie will be of no avail."

Miguel's reply came with trembling promptness. "Sí, señor, I stabbed him. Then I took his money belt and what else he had of value."

Another figure suddenly appeared at old Tobe's side, as Sheriff Crawford rose to his feet at the end of the bed and boomed, "That's a confession, Miguel! Witnesses heard you.

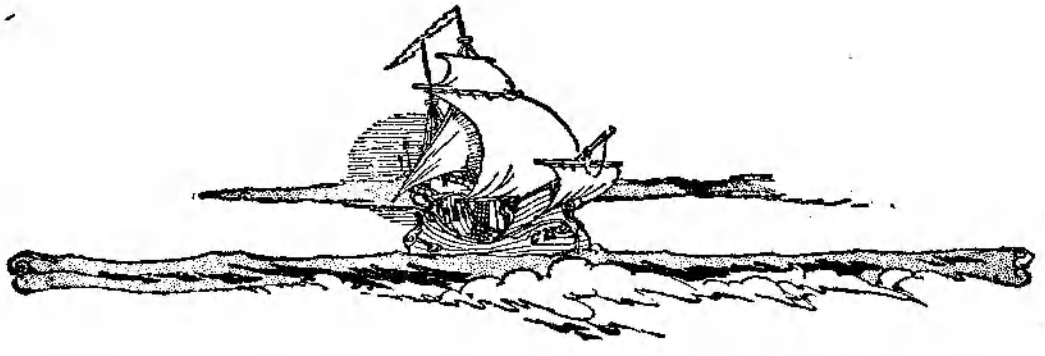
"And as you was never tried for that murder, you've got a good chance to be tried now, which will be a lot worse for you than bein' tried for the attempted murder of my grubstake partner, whom you didn't kill at all.

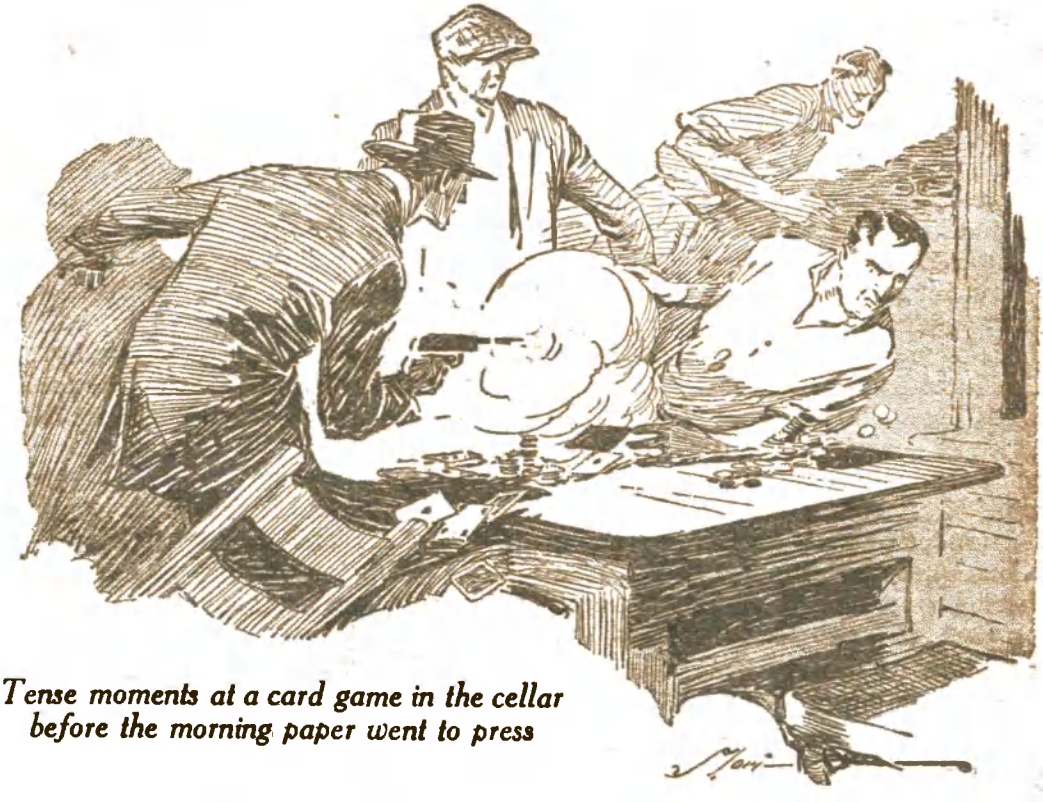
"Your blow on the head only knocked him out for awhile. When he came to, he fixed himself to weather the sand storm. I found him making his way toward Barbito, as I made my way toward him and his strike.

"Soon after that—because I'd like the folks hereabouts to still think I'm fair-to-middling as a sheriff—I frogged out the idea of putting glowing sulphur from match tips in Tobe's hair and whiskers, to make you think he was a ghost, so he could scare a confession out of you. Our scheme worked.

"And now, being that as you'll be safer in a cell than here, I'll move you into one."

THE END





Tense moments at a card game in the cellar before the morning paper went to press

His Last Thirty

By ROBERT BEITH

RECENTLY a relatively obscure dramatic critic of the *Herald* won fame and fortune by writing a play that enjoyed a long run on Broadway, was presented in every large city of this country and in the capitals of Europe. Nearly every one has seen the play, but no one has ever heard how the author got his inspiration. The title of this play, it will be remembered, was "Thirty."

Only last year Barton Hull left the *Gazette* and joined the *Herald* staff. Better money motivated the change. Hull was a good reporter and when he transferred his services he had already established his ability. While working for the *Gazette* he had been instrumental in aiding the police break up several notorious underworld gangs.

But things were different when he went to the *Herald* because this paper traditionally went easy on the gangs and their activities. They had entered into a secret pact with Al Ligone, gang chieftain, the paper assuring Al suppression and Al, in return, promising that no *Herald* reporters would be found dead in some alley.

Connor, the city editor, enforced the paper's part of the bargain because Al knew of the details of a crooked deal he had once pulled on the city when employed by his contractor father.

Al Ligone was a modern criminal; the patent-haired, smooth kind who seldom risk their lives and only commit their crimes after careful plans have eliminated most of the personal risk.

The *Herald* and most of the other newspapers, when they did publish anything about him, painted Al Ligone as the colorful leader of a powerful but not particularly violent gang. They made him a romantic, daring character, and although openly denouncing him and his practices, the public secretly admired him.

Movies, the stage and authors habitually make heroes of criminals, characterizing them as brave though erring individuals who always love their followers, champion women and children and never, never steal from the poor. Such criminals usually bravely hold off armies of police until finally they calmly surrender of their own free will.

Consequently the public couldn't be expected to know that Al Ligone never took part, if he could avoid it, in the gang warfare waged by his dope-charged, mentally diseased henchmen.

Al was a coward and he usually went into hiding whenever there was an underworld flare-up. When he wanted an enemy killed he merely ordered a few of his men to do the job with a machine gun from a speeding automobile.

That's the way the brave modern criminals fight. Al Ligone would have died from fright if he ever had to fight it out with an armed man.

But sometimes when his personal funds were running low and it could be arranged so that there wasn't the slightest danger, Al did reserve a killing for himself.

When Barton Hull took advantage of Connor's absence one night to slip into the *Herald* a story which lacked no details and did not spare Al Ligone, the gang leader had willingly taken upon himself the burden of getting rid of the menace. Hull had ruthlessly disregarded the traditional rules and so it was agreed he had lived long enough.

Al had taken Connor to task for the story, and Connor had explained. He had suggested that Al plan a little murder.

"All right, Connor. I'll bump him off. Hell, it 'll be safer than a beer party."

And so the killing was planned.

II.

THE time selected for the murder was a hot night in August. The rewrite men and the men at the copy desk worked in shirt sleeves. The whirring of the electric fans mingled with the staccato pounding of the automatic printers, punching out news dispatches from all over the world.

Barton Hull sat idly at his typewriter, mopping his face with a moist handkerchief and puffing at his pipe. The evening was slow. There was very little local news because it was too warm for even those who break laws to function.

Several reporters lounged about swapping lies about big stories they had covered. The foolish little insects busily flitting about the lights alone seemed unmindful of the heat.

About ten o'clock Connor walked over to Hull and spoke in an undertone. "Hey, Hull, how about some draw? Are you all caught up?"

"Yeah," the other assented eagerly. Hull was decidedly fond of poker. "Nothin' doin' around here to-night anyway. Slowest night I've seen for a long time. Nothin' but damn obits and lodge notices. I wish somebody'd get murdered."

Connor looked away.

"Well, listen," he whispered confidentially. "We can't leave together. J. P.'s getting wise to these little sessions. He strolled in last night and caught some of the boys hard at it in the composing room. He raised particular hell.

"There's no use of anybody knowin' where we're at. So you stick on your hat, see, and go out the main door like you were goin' on a story. A little later I'll tell 'em I'm leavin' to get something cold to drink. I'll meet you

down in the cellar. Couple of other guys'll be there."

Hull nodded his agreement. He had no cause to suspect danger. It was not unusual to play in the cellar because most of the games were played in the little room down there where the old bound copies of the paper were stored so that if "J. P.," the publisher, came prowling unexpectedly about he never surprised them at their pastime.

When Hull entered the little basement room he was astonished to see Al Ligone already seated, idly shuffling some cards, a cigarette drooping from his mouth.

The gangster nodded pleasantly.

"The boy who gives the low-down about me," he commented lightly.

Hull sat down at the table across from Al and lit his pipe. He said nothing.

He wasn't particular about playing cards with the man opposite him, but he intended to play before he'd run away. It seemed queer to him that Al should be there.

"Hell," laughed Al. "Don't think I hold any of your stories against you. They was good. None of 'em hurt me none."

"You've been getting away with murder, haven't you?" Hull asked, not quite meaning to give his question the implication it carried. "I mean," he added, "that the cops don't bother you much and most of the papers leave you alone."

"I guess both cops and reporters like to live as well as anybody else."

The laugh was Hull's. He drew at his pipe and blew the smoke toward Al.

"How'd you come to sit in here tonight?"

Al grinned. "Well, I got a murder to pull this evening and I felt like some poker first. Connor asked me up. You an' him's buddies, ain't you?"

"Damn far from it," Hull snorted. "He knows what I think of him, the rat. We've had it out more than once, and if he don't lay off me I'm gonna—"

He stopped abruptly and looked toward the door. Footsteps could be heard.

Connor entered the room with a burly fellow from the circulation department known as Jones and another man Hull had never seen.

Hull wasn't aware that this Jones had specially obtained a job as driver of a distributing truck for the paper. He was to shove the body through one of the small basement windows out into an alley which ran past the rear of the building; put it in the truck behind the bundles of papers and then drop it off some place in the city. The stranger was another member of the Ligone gang.

Greetings were exchanged, chips parceled out and the cards cut for the deal. Connor won the first pot.

"Bad luck to win the first," Hull remarked.

"You're the one's gonna have all the bad luck," the other retorted, grinning. The others snickered.

A single glary lamp suspended from the ceiling cast a circle of light about the players from beneath its green shade. Beyond the circle the room was dark.

The game progressed and the chips piled up beside Connor. Al lost the heaviest and the scowl on his face deepened as the luck held against him and favored Connor.

He smoked cigarette after cigarette, made disgusted comments and violently flung his cards from him when exceptionally poor.

Had not Hull been so absorbed in the game he might have noticed that Connor was pronouncedly nervous. The city editor regretted that he had mixed himself up with the affair. He dreaded the moment when Al would make the first of the prearranged moves and the suspense unnerved him.

His winning was uncanny for he scarcely saw the markings on the cards. He played as if in a trance. Yet the chips continued to mount before him.

And as the pile grew Al looked more darkly at him. Al was used to winning and the modern criminal has no sporting instinct with which to meet a losing situation.

Hull was losing heavily, too. He played recklessly and his smile continued although his supply of chips was being rapidly depleted.

Hull knew how to lose. He began wondering when the game would break up because he knew that he and Connor would soon be needed upstairs. Once he spoke of it.

"Quit when Connor's winning?" Al had growled. "Besides," he added, "it ain't quite time fer the murder yet."

Connor involuntarily gasped. Hull disregarded the reference to murder believing it to be Al's idea of being funny. He bet ten chips and won the pot.

Then he began winning consistently. He took the next four pots and his stack of chips nearly equaled Connor's.

When Hull continued to draw good hands Al transferred his scathing glances from Connor to him. He kept on betting wildly, bluffing, his face inscrutable. And he kept on winning, too.

Al began to lose his temper.

"You two birds think you're smart, don't you?" he said to Hull and Connor. "Well, my turn's comin'. And when it does, watch out."

"We can't play much longer," Hull said.

"You'll play as long as I want," Al snapped emphatically.

Hull, who had been about to place some chips in the center of the table, drew his hand back as suddenly as if it had been struck. His eyes flashed.

"We can't play all night. You knew that when the game started."

Al sneered.

"Not so fast, wise guy. You're not goin' nowhere." He laughed. "That is, under your own power."

Jones found that remark funny, for he guffawed heartily.

"What do you mean?" Hull asked slowly.

Al's pistol was in his hand so quickly Hull had missed the motions which brought it from his pocket.

"I just mean, Hull, being's you asked, that you're the murder I been talkin' about. I'm here to get you."

Connor jumped to his feet, pale and frightened, thinking the gangster was about to act. But Al waved him back.

"But I ain't gonna kill you this minute," he informed Hull. "I ain't had enough poker yet. I don't quit till I get a chance to begin winnin'. Play on and keep your seat. If you move out of it I'll drill you."

Being human, Hull was frightened. The situation was hard to believe.

Seated in the basement of a newspaper building in the center of the city with the rumbling of the presses plainly audible, death apparently waited for him only a few minutes away. Now he sat alive and healthy; before long he'd be lying on the floor dead.

He shuddered and looked longingly toward the door only a few feet away. Al saw the look.

"Move and—"

Hull sat still. It was natural that he should want to prolong his life even a few short minutes. He shuffled the cards and began to deal.

Al decided to play with his victim as the cat amuses itself with the proverbial mouse. "Me and Connor fixed it up to bump you off after that story you wrote about me. We planned it out pretty slick, eh? Who dealt this mess?"

Connor had dealt himself a full house, aces high. He stood pat. Connor, Jones and the other man dropped out.

Al stuck, retaining his original cards. He raised Hull's ante and the latter boosted it still further.

Again and again they repeated the procedure, Hull moving deliberately, Al excited and nervous. Higher and higher the stakes mounted until Al flung his last chips onto the pile.

"I'll look, damn ye." He had forgotten about the murder he had to commit so engrossed was he in the outcome of that hand.

Hull spread his cards upon the table. The fifth card had barely left Hull's fingers when Al, pistol in hand, jumped to his feet, face flushed with rage and disappointment.

"You damned cheat," he roared. "You fixed that hand up."

Hull whitened.

"I didn't cheat you," he said almost calmly, although his voice slightly trembled.

"The hell you didn't," the other cried, enraged.

That hand had gripped him and he had depended upon it to turn his luck. But again he had lost. He, too, had held a full house, but it was only kings high and the victory he had anticipated was snatched away.

He wanted to kill now. He was keyed up to the pitch where he usually killed the best.

"No man cheats me and gets away with it," the gangster said grimly. "You're gonna pay me now. Git up."

Connor turned his head away. He didn't know that Al was really enraged. He thought, that he was merely leading the way to the killing.

Hull had never been so frightened. He knew that Al wasn't bluffing and that he meant to kill.

Hull, like most humans, began to appreciate the desirability of life during those minutes he believed were to be his last. And in his desperation he decided to attempt a bold move.

"Being as I'm going to die I might as well tell you I cheated," he said rapidly. "Connor and me fixed it up to clean you out to-night and—"

"Connor!" Al cried.

"He was to win first," Hull lied on, "and then I was to get mine. Connor told me that then we'd say we had to go back to work and leave you skinned."

Connor drew back trembling.

"It's a lie," he cried hoarsely.

Al was livid with rage. The gun in his hand shook. His eyes were bloodshot and his lips were drawn taut across his teeth.

"You damned crooks. Stick 'em up."

"I didn't cheat, Al," Connor whimpered, thoroughly frightened. "It's a lie," he moaned monotonously.

"Shut up," Al snapped. "You're a lousy, double crosser. I thought it was funny the way you was winning. You always used to be rotten. So you get me down here to bump this guy off and fix on stealing the money from me to pay me back for doin' the job. Well, I'm gonna kill you along with him and I'm gonna give you the priv'lege of showing him the way to hell. You're gonna croak first. Get me?"

"Al, for God's sake," Connor pleaded. "I didn't. I swear I didn't," he screamed.

Hull felt no pity for Connor. He was causing his death, but then Connor had evidently plotted with Al to murder him. Turn about was fair play.

"He's the one made me write that story about you anyway," he lied to Al. He hoped that if he further angered the gang leader he might possibly be able to escape. "Connor's been double crossing you for a long time now."

Connor fell to his knees, pleading.

"He's lying. Believe me. I been square," he sobbed.

Al snorted with contempt. He motioned with the pistol.

"Get on yer feet. I want you to fall as far as you can, you dirty crook. Get up," he shouted wildly. "So you're the guy, the smart guy, that thought he'd pull a fast one over on Al Ligone? You oughta know better. Al Ligone wouldn't even let his old man put nothing over, let alone a rat like you. Say yer prayers."

Connor and Hull both knew what was coming. Both saw the tightening of that finger curled about the trigger.

Connor closed his eyes and seemed about to faint. His lips were bloodless. Hull recognized that his only chance had come.

He prepared to act. He watched that finger. He planned to make a dash for the door just as Al fired at Connor. He prayed that he'd pass safely through it before the gunman could shoot again.

As the finger gave a convulsive squeeze, Hull darted for the door. The pistol roared and the report was deafening in the closed little room.

Connor's falling body brushed Hull as he passed. He reached the door, pushed it open and plunged through just as the weapon roared again.

Something seemed to hit him in the back with terrible force. He stumbled, fell to one knee and, dazed, kicked the door shut with his foot.

Regardless of the pain he jumped up and snapped the lock on the door. Yet he wasn't satisfied, for he knew that the men in there could possibly break that lock or smash the door down.

He searched about until he found a heavy plank and one end of this he placed against the basement wall, wedging the other end against the door so that it was held securely.

This work done, Hull was weak and faint. The pain in his back nauseated him and he felt something warm and sticky beneath his clothing.

He staggered up the stairs, walked through the deserted business offices and reached the second floor exhausted.

The door to the dramatic critic's room was open and Hull entered the little den. The critic had evidently not yet returned from the show he was reviewing and Hull knew that he would be undisturbed.

He couldn't go into the city room because they'd ask a lot of questions. He didn't have time to answer them now. He sat down at the typewriter, dizzy, wabbling in his chair.

The keys were blurred and it seemed to him that the lights were flashing on and off. The pain racked him and perspiration oozed from his colorless face.

His breath came unevenly. The clothes at his back became wetter and he felt proportionally weaker. But Barton Hull had a job to do and he fought off collapse.

He placed some copy paper in the machine before him, wrote his name at the top of the page and prepared to begin his first paragraph, the lead. As he concentrated he packed his pipe with tobacco and applied a match.

He might have been seated at his desk in the city room about to write some ordinary routine story, so calm did he appear.

There never has been any newspaper story published as queer as the one Barton Hull wrote that night as he sat, seriously wounded, in the dramatic critic's stuffy office. The lead of that story, many will recall, read:

"As the *Herald* goes to press, Al Ligone, gangster chieftain, is imprisoned in a room in the basement of the Herald Building with the body of the *Herald's* city editor, whom he shot and killed last night."

Then he had graphically written of the events leading up to the murder, omitting no detail. He described the poker game, quoted the conversation and injected into his narration all the color that a novelist would have employed in writing of the scene. Although he told of the part he played and of his wound he did not mention his suffering.

Hull forgot his pain as he wrote. He put down on that copy paper the incidents he had just experienced and when he finished he had written fiction rather than a newspaper story.

The story completed, he typed "—30—" the newspaper man's symbol of conclusion, at the bottom of the last page of copy. The pain suddenly seemed to return with renewed intensity.

A sense of satisfaction and of relief

permeated him and the desire to ward off and resist his weakness left him. He slumped in the chair and would have fallen to the floor had not the desk served as a support for his inert body.

The dramatic critic, returning to write his review a few minutes later, found Hull unconscious. He leaned over him, but drew back when he noted the red stain spread over his shirt.

When he had tried in vain to arouse Hull he telephoned for a doctor. As he was about to leave the room to summon aid, Hull opened his eyes and started to speak.

"The copy—get—it—in."

He tried to speak again, but no words came. Finding a last bit of strength he took a pencil from the desk and wrote on some paper "—30—". Then he pointed to himself and tried to smile as his lips formed the word "Thirty."

His head fell forward and his body relaxed. The dramatic critic understood him. Barton Hull's life was ended.

The manuscript was not edited. It was decided to print it just as it had been written.

And while the presses were printing it on the front pages of thousands of newspapers and wires were carrying it to all parts of the world, the man who had written it lay dead in the dramatic critic's office.

After the body had been removed, the dramatic critic sat down at his typewriter, forgot that his review had not been written, and began to write a play.

THE END

Alaska's Gold-Rush Cities of '98

MOST of the Alaskan towns that thrived during the period of the gold rush are now no more. Sometimes all traces of a previous habitation are gone; again there are only the foundations of the cabins left standing. Some of the bigger towns still have a few inhabitants, while others have lingered on by virtue of some other industry filling the breach when the gold days died out.

Skagway, once a flourishing city of thirty thousand people, the gateway to the gold fields, is now a town of a few hundred inhabitants. The people now depend upon tourist trade, and silver, lead, and zinc mining.

Atland, on Atland Lake, has been reduced to a village of three hundred people, and yet at one time it was also a town of thirty thousand people. All other mining towns in the Atland district have gone into complete decay.

At Discovery, once a town of two thousand population, there is only one family, the father of it having been a boy of ten during the gold rush.

Dawson, too, is reduced from its former grandeur, made possible by thirty-five thousand souls, to a scant five hundred people. At this town it is not unusual to see an old-timer rocking out the gold dust that sifted through the floors of the gambling halls and saloons. During the big boom miners often came into these places and recklessly scattered their dearly gained gold dust all over the floor. These abandoned moments always were manifested after a drunken spree.

The old gold-mining country to-day is mostly populated with old men who tenaciously cling to the scene of their earlier triumphs or disappointments.

Few young men get into these districts, despite the repeated claims that there is still money to be made in gold mining. The old men have lost the desire to search the precious metal out and work for it; so there it lies, waiting for those who will come and get it. *Harold J. Ashe.*

Argonotes

The Readers' Viewpoint

OFTEN one of our readers requests the reprinting of a serial published some years ago. This is indeed a compliment to the story, but, of course, many of our readers want none but fresh material and would feel that acceding to such requests was unfair to them. Mr. Murrav is a champion of A. Merritt's "The Ship of Ishtar."

Lakeland, Fla.

I have just finished reading your June 23 issue, and am more than glad to see that the Readers' Viewpoint, which has been lacking for a number of weeks, is again incorporated in your magazine. I, for one, will make it a point to fill out the Choice Coupon every week, as I am heartily in favor of this expression by the readers to the editorial staff of their likes and dislikes.

A little incident that might be of interest to you! I am in the habit of buying my ARGOSY about eleven o'clock Wednesday morning, which I find is as early as it can be had here, and you may feature my surprise when I called at two news-stands this morning at the usual time to be informed at each of them that they were sold out. The stock at the third was so low that I considered myself lucky in having arrived in time to get one. And this in poor, depressed Florida!

I cannot recall having seen anything other than original material in your magazine in the ten years I have been buying it, but would be in favor of your waiving this supposed rule for one story in particular, "The Ship of Ishtar," by A Merritt. I believe a reprint of this fascinating tale would meet with approval among your readers, not only among those who have become subscribers since it was printed, but also among the readers who have had the pleasure of its thrills on the occasion of its first printing.

Here's to ARGOSY! Long may she rule the periodicals! E. F. MURRAY.

AND Mr. Van Pelt makes a similar suggestion:

Wabasha, Minn.

As a suggestion, it would be a good idea to reprint some of your first stories of twenty or thirty years ago—something that was a sort of a prophecy in those days and has actually come true to-day. For instance, airplanes, radio, medical science, *et cetera*. And for Heaven's sake cut out so many "Western stories!" There are plenty of Western story magazines on every news-stand. Let ARGOSY be a little different. That's the opinion of twenty patients in our ward.

Yours very truly
(for less Western stories)
JUDD VAN PELT.

A SUBWAY train introduced ARGOSY to this reader—and "North Star," by Rufus F. King, held him. Remember what started you on the ARGOSY trail?

Brooklyn, N. Y.

This is the first time I am writing to any magazine commenting on it. Why? Because the ARGOSY is the only magazine I read with any regularity at all. I became acquainted with the ARGOSY quite some time ago. I found a copy on a subway train, and for lack of anything else to do I started reading it. I soon became deeply engrossed in a serial story about a dog, "North Star." In fact, I became so interested that I bought the next copy, which was already on the news-stands. In reading these I became interested in others, and so I have clung up to the present and from the indications I shall continue to do so. I do not see any reason for C. A. Corey's strong feeling on the subject of Westerns. The ARGOSY's aim, I believe, is to please persons of all tastes. Therefore, it stands to reason that there are persons who do not like all of the stories in the magazine. Mr. Corey mentioned the lack of good detective stories. What was the matter with "Too Much Punishment," by Wilstach?

Wilstach and Conlon are my favorite novelette writers. In short stories I enjoy the adventures of *Chili Con Carney*, by Charlton Edholm, most. I also hugely enjoyed Mansfield's "His Service to Folly," and "Red Hot," by Fred MacIsaac. "The Screen of Ice" shows a great deal of promise so far. I have just started the "Heartbreak Trail," and I wonder if the hero will marry *Hetty Leeds* after all. CHARLES BOLTHRUNIS.

"THE APACHE DEVIL" brought in its heavy quota of enthusiasm, as Mr. Burroughs's stories always do. Hear one of his admirers:

Springfield, Mass.

I have been in bed with a cold for a couple of days, and got an ARGOSY about three hours

ago. "The Apache Devil" is one of Burroughs's best, in fact I think it *is the* best. At last, some scientification in "World Brigands." I had about given up hope for some.

"A Hard-Boiled Tenderfoot" was good, but "Private Way—Dangerous!" was very poor. "The Powder Ponies" was one of the worst stories I have ever read. "Now We're Rich" is a diversion—just fine! "The White Antelope" was nothing to boast about.

I wish you could persuade Will McMorrow to write some more scientification; and, by the way, has McMorrow given up writing for the ARGOSY?

I want more of Burroughs, McMorrow, George M. Johnson, Fred MacIsaac, and Morgan Mansfield, whose "His Service to Folly" was excellent. *Chili Con Carney* gets on my nerves.

Is it possible to get Johnston McCulley to write for the ARGOSY again? He is one of my favorite authors.

George F. Worts's "The Screen of Ice" is an excellent crime story.

By all means keep up Argonotes, which I highly approve of. The Choice Coupon idea is excellent.

With hopes of a better ARGOSY fulfilled, I am,

WM. EARL.

For that "hopes of a better ARGOSY fulfilled" we thank you, Mr. Earl. Incidentally, Will McMorrow, George M. Johnson, George F. Worts, and Fred MacIsaac will all be in the procession during the fall months—besides a fine host of newcomers.

IT seems these Western enthusiasts and impossible story fans do not make very good bedfellows; they're always taking a swat at each other—this for instance:

Waldron, Ind.

In June 9 issue I read the article entitled "Cheap Transportation." I think it would be a good idea to reprint the story referred to, also several of the old-time serials of the impossible type. Though only a subscriber for two years, I have read your magazine for a long time and think it is falling off in good stories, especially so in the last four months. Too many Westerns. I have been looking for you to change the title to "All Western Story." What's the matter with a better variety? The so-called impossible serials are what started me to reading the ARGOSY and what have held me to it, but we don't get them any more. Why? Personally, I think the "Radio Planet" stories were the best ever published. Sea stories, war stories, stories of Africa and South America, air stories and business stories are all interesting, but the Western stories—deliver me; with the exception of a few, among them the "Nervous Wreck" and "The Land of the Free." The majority of them deal along the same line, the handsome hero, the robber or rustler, and a girl. The hero cannot miss a shot and the rustler always gets caught with about enough ammunition used to supply a regiment.

Personally I believe a good variety of stories is what made your magazine and the impossible stories more than any other type. Two of the outstanding stories of the mystery type were "The Seal of Satan" and "The Mark of the Moccasin." Why not more along the same line? One of the stories I would like to see reprinted is "The Great Oblivion," printed about 1913, I think. That is the story that won me to the ARGOSY.

WILBUR BUAUER.

For the benefit of the "impossible" fans let us mention that coming down the line are Ray Cummings, Garret Smith, and Will McMorrow with stories of this type. Yes—and we're hoping A. Merritt and Slater LaMaster will soon join the company.

AND now—how did you like this issue? Please tell us about it.

YOUR CHOICE COUPON

Editor, ARGOSY-ALLSTORY WEEKLY,
280 Broadway, N. Y. C., N. Y.

The stories I like best in this issue of the magazine are as follows:

1.....

2.....

3.....

4.....

5.....

I did not like.....

because.....

Name.....

Street.....

City.....*State*.....

8-4

Looking Ahead!

Yes, sailing to you in next week's Argosy are a snappy new serial and two excellent complete novelettes. First there will be:

EVERY MINUTE COUNTS

by EDGAR FRANKLIN

Another of Mr. Franklin's topspeed comedies is this new serial—in which he again demonstrates into how surprising a bunch of trouble an innocent young man may unsuspectingly plunge himself.

PLEASE STAND BY

by JOSEPH IVERS LAWRENCE

A complete radio novelette is this—the interesting story of how just an average sort of likable young American strives to get ahead in this modern world.

THE REAL INSIDE ON DIRT

by JOHN WILSTACH

The real estate game in all its hectic convolutions. An ingenious and amusing novelette this.

Among the short story contributors will be:

FRED MacISAAC, LAURANCE M. HARE
and others

Watch for them in the ISSUE OF AUGUST 11th

ARGOSY

ALL-STORY WEEKLY

"First In Fiction" ***Out Every Wednesday***