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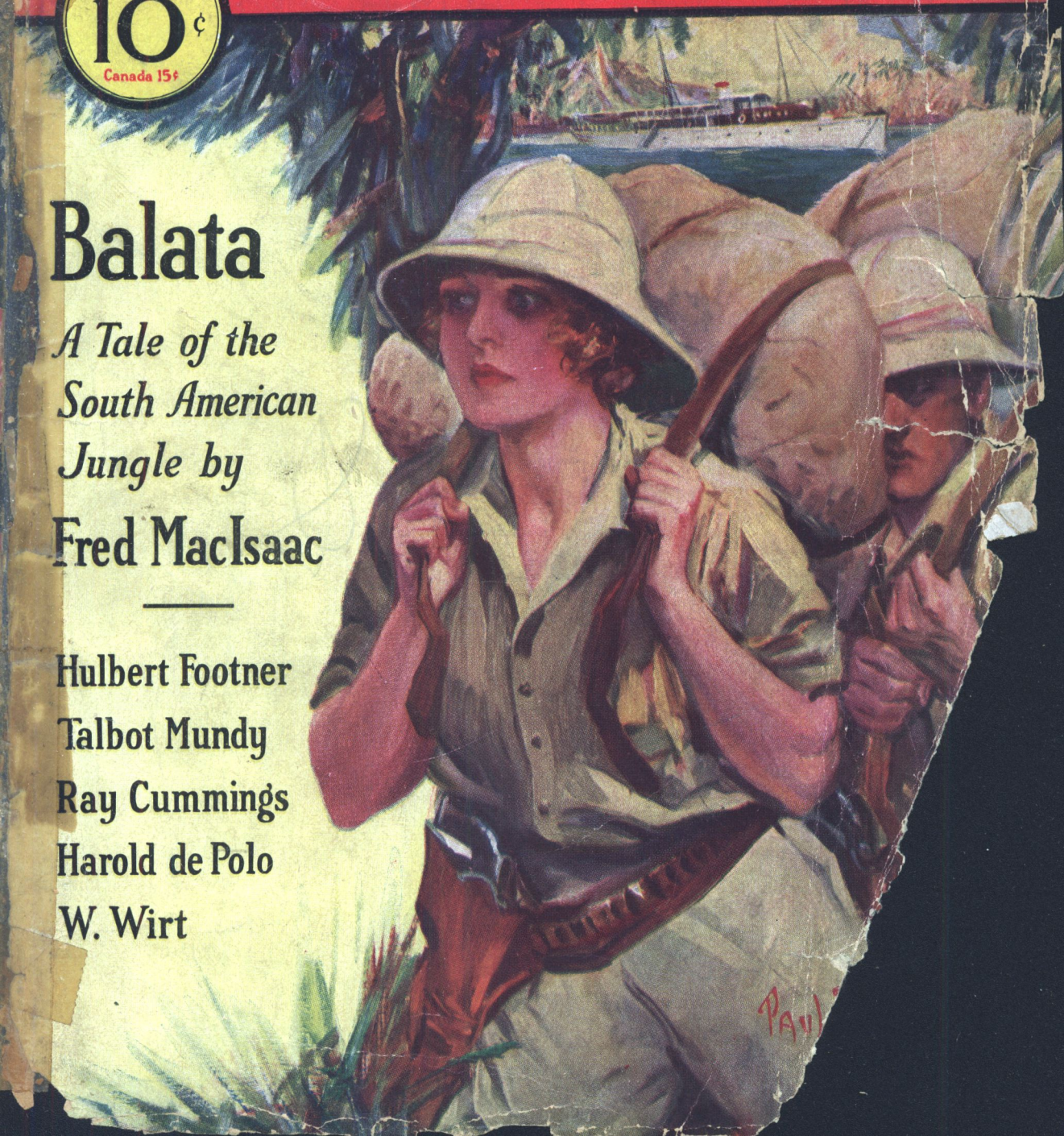

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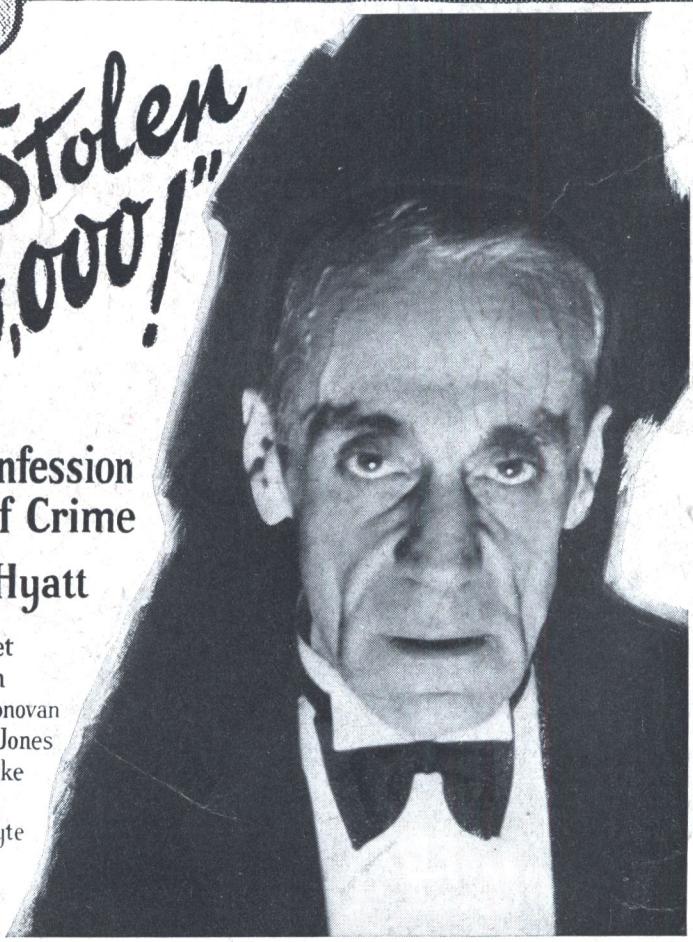

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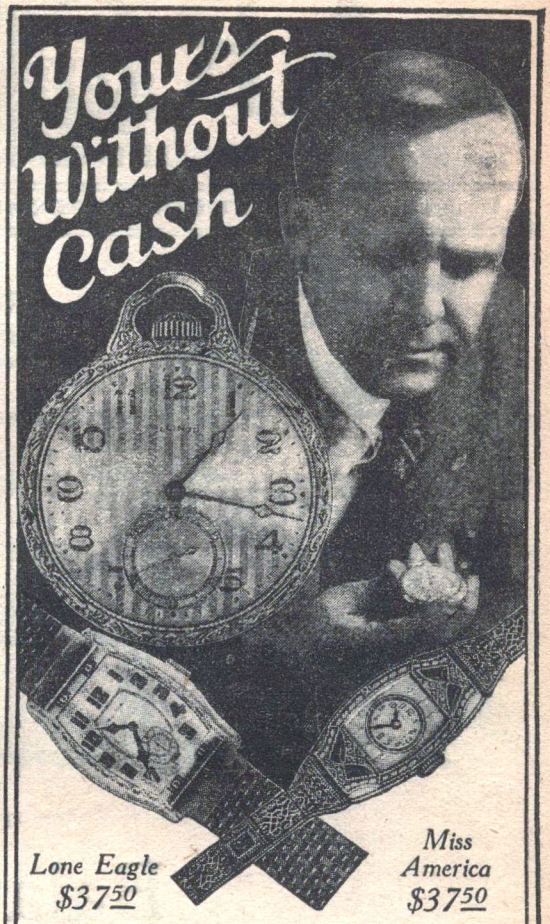

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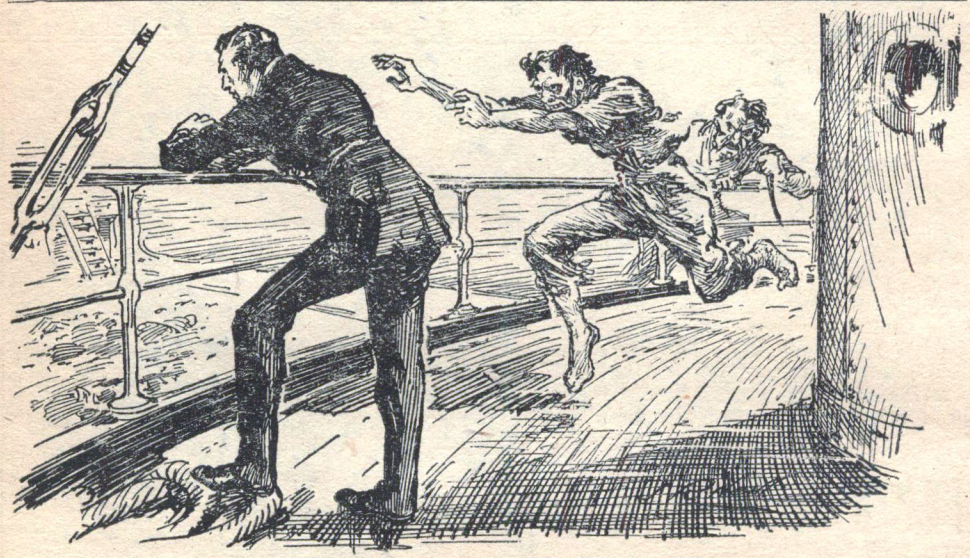


Silently the two natives sprang upon him

Balata

Trees of living gold in the Amazon jungles, guarded by alligators and poisoned darts and rival hunters — such was the lodestone that drew an American expedition, and the unwilling Pete Holcomb

By FRED MacISAAC

Author of "The Legacy of Peril," "The Man of Gold," etc.

CHAPTER I.

OFF FOR THE AMAZON.

PETER HOLCOMB leaned on the rail of a steamer which had already traveled five hundred miles up the Amazon. Although in the heart of Brazil he was as well fixed with creature comforts as if in New York.

There had been a glorious voyage down to Pará, Brazil, upon a superb Atlantic liner; he had danced with Louise and others to the music of a good orchestra, and had paced the broad decks under a tropic moon. Except for one thing, he had been a very happy man. He was hopelessly in love with Louise Gorman—and he had promised her brother that she should not fall in love with him.

Apparently she had taken him at her brother's valuation, assumed him to be a pleasant young chap of no ambition or ability. She had danced and walked and talked with him, and had reserved her admiration for the explorer, Felix Dexter.

Naturally enough Pete hated Felix Dexter. The fellow was a cheerful companion, cultured, mature, interesting, aggressive. He was a young man who shared Lester Gorman's love for wild places and difficult trails. He was tanned and rugged and solid-jawed and cold-eyed, and he treated Pete Holcomb, a man his own age, as an inconsequential kid. Pete was afraid that Louise was in love with Felix Dexter, and there didn't seem anything he could do about it. Dexter was an out-of-doors man like Les, and Gorman trusted him and admired him. If Louise accepted Dexter, Les undoubtedly would give his consent. And Louise certainly liked the brute.

Holcomb and Lester Gorman were both Vardon '22, Pete the most brilliant man in the class, Les the stodgiest and least conspicuous.

Yet Holcomb, in business in New York, was a failure after seven years, chiefly, perhaps, because he paid more attention to the affairs of Vardon University than he did to his own. As class secretary, he was efficient; as a salesman, he was hopeless.

When Les Gorman came to New York after seven years in the desert of Nevada which he had caused to bloom and pay him half a dozen millions of dollars, Pete, at the end of his rope, had persuaded the young millionaire to engage him as his secretary.

Gorman had talked bluntly to Pete upon engaging him. He had not minced matters. He considered Holcomb a light, worthless, but charming boy who had never grown up; and the young millionaire did not propose to have him make love to his beautiful young sister.

"I want Louise to marry a man," said Gorman brutally. "You're a jumping-jack."

"Louise will marry whom she pleases," replied Holcomb angrily. "But I'll do my best to see that she doesn't fall in love with me."

HOLCOMB had expected that Gorman would go into business in New York, but the millionaire had come East with intentions which he kept to himself. Inside of six weeks he had joined Felix Dexter, a South American explorer, in the project of developing a new industry in the Amazon country; and he gave Pete Holcomb the choice of accompanying him into the interior of South America or losing his job.

"You were the best marksman who ever went to Vardon," said Gorman. "Your record as a rifleman hasn't been equaled yet. I never saw a hunter or a cowboy who could equal you with gun or pistol, so you may be useful to us up the Amazon, though it's one thing to shoot at a target and another to bring down a man or a beast that's doing its best to kill you. Want to go?"

"I certainly don't," replied Pete with equal frankness. "I hate hardships, and I despise snakes and alligators. But I seem to be all washed up in New York. I know I'm soft and I'm probably a coward; but if you are going to drag your sister on this expedition, I fancy I can stand it if she can."

"Don't fool yourself. Louise is an old campaigner, and I'm not dragging her. She insists upon accompanying us. Have you kept up your shooting?"

"Certainly not. There aren't going to be any more wars. However, I guess it will come back to me quickly enough."

"I've warned you. I'll give you two months' wages and leave you in New York. There is no turning back once we've left civilization behind."

"I won't like it," admitted Pete, "but I don't think I'm a quitter."

Pete, to whom geography had always been a bore, had assumed that they would go up the Amazon upon some such craft as ascended the Hudson from New York to Albany. Instead, they had left the Rio de Janeiro liner at Pará and boarded a transatlantic liner which had sailed from London for the thousand-mile journey up the Amazon to Manáos.

He couldn't get it through his head that the Amazon was a river. It was as broad as New York Bay and, at night, with a complete absence of shore lights, the effect was of being in mid-ocean.

A COUPLE, strolling arm in arm along the promenade deck, passed Pete, so absorbed in each other that the man did not recognize him. They were Les Gorman and the Senhorita Rosa da Sousa.

Gorman, a man's man—granite-faced, Pete had called him—was laughing and looking down into the eyes of the Brazilian girl. If he hadn't fallen in love with her already, he seemed well on his way. Pete only hoped Rosa would vamp Gorman into marrying her and setting up housekeeping in some lovely villa in Rio de Janeiro; it would put a stop to this mad enterprise.

The *senhorita* violated Pete's tenets of beauty which required a girl to be tall and blond, like Louise; but he granted that she had everything possible in a five-foot brunette with golden skin and raven hair and great, black, limpid eyes. She was a vivid captivating little creature who reminded him somewhat of a bird of paradise, the feathers of which were her favorite decoration.

Her laugh tinkled like a melody played on a lute. Her mouth, a trifle too small, was blessed with dazzling teeth and her smile was ravishing. Half French and half Portuguese in descent, she combined the vivacity of a Parisienne with the allure of the Iberian. When an exotically beautiful creature like Rosa set out to snare a hulking brute from the Nevada desert, she wasn't likely to fail. Poor Les had no adequate defenses against this sort of girl.

The Da Sousas, father and daughter, had come down from New York with Les and his party. Dom Juan da Sousa had met Dexter during one of his voyages up the Amazon, and Dexter had introduced the devastating daughter to Les and Pete. With unerring instinct she had discerned the master and the man at a glance, cold-shouldered Holcomb, and set herself out to win the millionaire.

The Sousas were rubber planters, and Brazilian rubber, like coffee, was no longer the wealth-producer it used to be. Asiatic rubber could be grown and shipped to European and American markets at a price far below the cost of getting it out of the Amazonian forests to Manáos and the sea.

Dom Juan, despairing of the return of prosperity, had gone with his daughter to New York in hope of selling his rubber lands for any price they would bring, and was returning disconsolate because he found no purchaser. Of course the wealth of Les

Gorman had been grossly exaggerated by the New York papers, but a million would buy far more than its American value in the depreciated Brazilian currency.

CHAPTER II.

LIVING GOLD.

THE more Pete heard about conditions in the country back of the Amazon, the less he desired to inspect them personally. The rivers were full of alligators and other ferocious creatures, the trees were the homes of boa constrictors, the forests were infested with natives who shot poison darts from blowpipes, the temperature was always a hundred in the shade, the humidity was worse than the temperature, and there was no excuse for anybody's going there if he didn't have to.

Pete Holcomb had never felt the love of adventure. He liked soft beds and tiled bathrooms, theaters, films, dances, pretty women in Paris frocks, well-lighted streets, and comfortable motor cars.

It was in a very blue mood that Pete leaned by the rail and looked at the black waters of the Amazon. All the "balata" in the world wasn't worth getting killed by a poisoned arrow in one or having a leg bitten off by a cayman, the Amazonian alligator.

Balata. Pete had never heard the word until recently. It was a white gum exuded by a rare tree commonly known as the bully-tree. It would only grow in the Amazonian country and could not be transplanted to Malaysia as rubber trees had been. There was no fear of Asiatic competition in balata.

Very small quantities of the stuff had been discovered up to date. It was an improvement upon gutta-percha and, if found in sufficient quantity, would drive that commodity off the market. Mixed with rubber, balata had a non-slip quality invaluable in electrical industries and particularly in the manufacture of belts for dynamos.

Since the decline of the Brazilian rubber industry, all the traders were ardently seeking balata, which brought a very high price, and rumor said that the Amazonian woods were full of balata hunters who were murdering one another for the precious stuff. They called it "White Gold."

In a journey from the coast of Colombia to the Rio Negro in Brazil, Felix Dexter had come into an unexplored region containing several hundred square miles of bully-trees, and it was in Colombia, across the border from Brazil. Unaware of the presence of balata within their borders, the Colombian government had leased an area as large as a New England State to the explorer, and he had returned to New York for capital to develop his proposition.

The balata was there, all right. He had convinced Les Gorman of that. But it would have to be taken out across Brazil to the Amazon city of Manáos, through a country where there was less law than in the early days in the American West, where man and nature combined to present insuperable obstacles.

In place of the red Indians, the Amazon forests were infested with diminutive but virulent natives whose arrows were poisoned, and there were ferocious animals, disease-bearing insects, floods, swamps, and every grim hindrance imaginable.

Les, Pete realized, had gone into the thing for the very reason which made

the proposition unattractive to him. Gorman liked to tackle hard problems. He got a thrill out of a test of strength between himself and Nature, and he favored the idea of hunting jaguars and shooting alligators and wrestling with snakes and dodging poisoned darts from blowguns. The man was a splendid idiot. More power to the bright eyes of Rosa da Sousa!

"The world needs balata," he had told Pete. "Well, we'll find a way to get the stuff out. I'll probably make a lot more money which I don't want, but the job is going to be a lot of fun. It will make a different man of you, Pete. You'll come out hardy and strong and self-reliant and confident, and the next time you tackle a New York business man for a job you'll scare him into giving it to you."

ESPECIAL care had been taken to conceal the purpose of the expedition. Lester Gorman, American millionaire, was ostensibly after big game in the Amazon country, accompanied by several guests, and had no other purpose. Dexter had warned him that the impoverished rubber hunters of Brazil dreamed every night that they had discovered balata and woke up cursing because it was not true.

"Let them suspect that we know where the stuff is to be found," he stated, as they were sailing south, "and we shall be trailed by a multitude which will make the Yukon gold rush a side show. Remember, also, that the Brazilians will bitterly resent the success of American balata hunters, the more so as they are starving to death. You see, twenty or thirty years ago, Brazilian rubber trees were planted in the Straits Settlements," explained Dexter. "They flourished, and because of abundance of cheap labor it comes on the market at a price which has nearly destroyed the rubber industry of Brazil and Peru."

"I understood," said Pete, "that the stuff was gathered by Indians in South America. Surely they didn't pay them much if anything. How can Asiatic labor be cheaper?"

"My dear boy," said Dexter with biting condescension, "contrary to the general impression, the native population of the Amazon country is sparse. Hence the cruelties perpetrated upon the savages which caused international scandal ten or fifteen years ago. Having comparatively few workmen, the planters had to drive them brutally. And after the rubber was gathered, the transportation of it was a long and very expensive process."

"You see, Pete," said Les, "we are really going to perform a great service for Brazil. Here is a section nearly as large as the United States which is almost bankrupt by the disappearance of its greatest industry. We shall substitute balata for rubber down here. At present Great Britain practically controls the rubber business of the world. We'll bring it back where it belongs. Thus America is benefited, Brazil is benefited, and we shall take out a fortune for ourselves."

"I doubt very much, Les," said Dexter, "whether balata can ever be produced in sufficient quantity to replace rubber. The bully-tree is a hardwood and won't grow except in certain places, under certain conditions. It won't flourish in flood country as the rubber tree does."

"It has never been cultivated," replied Les confidently. "We'll see what science can do about that."

"In the meantime, Holcomb," Dexter observed, "let a whisper of our business get out and we shall all have

our throats cut. I advised Les to go up the Rio Negro with a powerful force, but he insisted upon a preliminary survey with a very small party. Therefore, not a word of our real business."

"Do they have oysters in the Amazon?" asked Pete, grinning.

"Not that I know of."

"They'll have one when I get there."

CHAPTER III.

SHADOWS IN THE NIGHT.

PETE, true to his promise to Les Gorman, had only one dance with Louise on deck that night. Dexter monopolized her the rest of the time, and she bade Pete good night as she took a turn around the deck with the explorer, before turning in for the night.

Pete's eyes followed her mournfully; then he shrugged his shoulders and seated himself in a deck chair. The orchestra, having packed their instruments, departed, and the few passengers who had been sitting in the vicinity disappeared one by one. In a few moments the electric bulbs inside the Chinese lanterns went out and it was dark. Pete sat there while he lighted and consumed a cigarette. He saw the lamps in the smoke room go out and then the deck lights flickered and vanished. There was no moon. A few stars and the lantern on the after mast gave vague, uncertain light.

A man appeared on the opposite side of the deck. Pete recognized the figure of Felix Dexter. He had no desire to converse with his rival and refrained from calling out. Dexter walked to the after rail and leaned on it, looking down upon the main deck where a few steerage passengers were sleeping on the hatch cover.

For the first time Pete became aware that the engines had stopped. The steamer had approached shoal water and a bend in the river and was waiting for a pilot who would guide her for several hours until the danger spots were passed. He saw, far off, a few lights on shore. Evidently there was a village over there.

Dexter still leaned over the rail. Pete wondered whether he had kissed Louise good night. Louise was not casual about such things. If she kissed Dexter it meant that she was in love with him. Well, the fellow might be all right, but he wasn't good enough for Louise. He was an adventurer, hard as nails, not likely to appreciate a wonderful woman. If he married her he would hurt her some day. Damn him!

A scraping sound behind him caused Holcomb to look around. He saw a man swing over the rail from the main deck, eight feet below. Another followed him. They moved noiselessly now, barefooted. They were creeping across the deck. The figure of Felix Dexter was dimly outlined.

Fascinated, Holcomb watched the barefooted men glide toward Dexter. That he was their objective did not occur to Pete until the pair were upon him. Pete Holcomb, until the present moment, knew violence only in the columns of the newspapers.

The men were behind Dexter, their approach unheard by him. Silently they sprang upon him. He saw a second's struggle and then the body of Dexter went limp. They were dragging him toward the port rail.

And then the former cheer-leader came to life. Pete was out of his chair and halfway across the deck in a

bound. Dexter apparently had been stunned by a blow and the pair were dragging him by the shoulders. Pete was upon them in a second, but they heard him coming and, dropping their burden, faced him.

Crash! He catapulted into one of them, aware, too late, that the man had a knife in his hand. Fortunately the shock of the collision sent the knife flying and dropped its owner, a small, frail fellow, to the deck. The other man crouched and sprang at Pete, who whirled from his first victim and let swing a wild but furious right.

He missed, he heard a swish, and felt a sharp pain in his shoulder. Realizing that he had been stabbed, he kicked furiously out with his right foot and caught the knife-wielder in the groin. The fellow staggered back, snarled, and was preparing to close in again, when Dexter clambered to his feet and fumbled for the gun in his hip pocket.

Immediately the man with the knife leaped for the rail four feet distant, caught a rope which was hanging there, and slid down it. Pete turned toward his first antagonist, but that worthy was already vanishing over the rail to the main deck.

Dexter, a little groggy, leaned over the rail, and so did Pete. They saw the fellow run to the port side and go over. Dexter's gun was out; he aimed it, then thought better of it and did not fire. Instead he ran to the port rail, and Pete followed him.

There was a small boat alongside which was casting off, and two men in it were drawing out of the water the fellow who had gone overboard.

"Fire!" exclaimed Holcomb. "There they go in that rowboat. You can disable them."

"No," replied Dexter. "Let them go. That's the best way."

The men in the boat had oars out and they slid away into the black night. Holcomb and Dexter watched them until they vanished a score of yards away from the ship.

"HOLCOMB," said Dexter gravely, "I owe you a lot. If you hadn't come up, I expect they would have got me. I never heard a sound until I received a crack on the back of the head."

"Why didn't you shoot just now?" demanded Pete. "If you give the alarm now, the ship's crew can catch them."

"Let them go."

"But they tried to kill you," Pete protested.

"I don't think so. Their game was to knock me out and drop me into that boat."

"But why, for heaven's sake?"

"Well," said Dexter, "I expect they figured that if they could get me ashore they could squeeze out of me the location of my balata concession."

"Oh, that was it!"

"If I fired and alarmed the ship, the officers would want to know why I was attacked, and others on board might jump to the conclusion that it was balata business. Much better to let them get away. They failed in their attempt, thanks to you. How did you happen to be around?"

"I've been sitting in one of the deck chairs over there. I was in the shadow and they didn't see me."

Dexter thrust out his hand. "I'm tremendously grateful. I expect I might have been tortured if they got me ashore. Holcomb, you're one hundred per cent. If the time ever comes when I can do anything for you—"

"You can," said Pete shortly. "Right now."

"What?"

"Use your influence with Les to leave Louise behind. We have no business dragging her into this mess. This is a sample, I suppose, of what we have to expect."

"My dear boy, I've requested Les to leave the girl in Manáos. I wanted him to leave her in New York. I have explained to her that she will be a handicap to our expedition and that her life may be in danger. But it's absolutely no use."

"But after this?"

"I'll go at Gorman again. I supposed that nobody in Brazil knew my business. I secured the concession through Bogotá. But some one must suspect that I found balata. They suspect everybody up there. They are demented on the subject."

"They seem to have particular reasons for suspecting you," said Holcomb grimly.

"Right. Well, we'll have to take extra precautions. I believe you are going to turn out to be a valuable man, Holcomb."

"Thanks," said Pete curtly. "Don't you think we had better go to bed now?"

"Good idea. I won't forget this."

They parted at the companion entrance, and Pete sought his cabin. In the excitement he had completely forgotten the sharp pain in his shoulder, but he remembered it when he discovered that his shirt was soaked with blood. He rang for a night watchman and asked him to summon the ship's doctor.

There was a four-inch gash in the left shoulder, fortunately not deep. Pete told the doctor that he had been set upon by a couple of robbers who afterward jumped into a boat which was lying alongside.

CHAPTER IV.

THE DYING CITY.

ASIDE from a stiff and aching shoulder, Holcomb suffered no ill effects from his wound, which healed quickly. Dexter made no effort to minimize his presence of mind and courage, and Les, for the first time since college, dropped his exasperatingly patronizing and slightly amused manner. Louise, of course, was sweetly concerned and made a fuss over the wounded warrior. However, she could not be budged from her determination to accompany the expedition.

"Where Les goes, I go," she asserted. "Do you suppose I'm going to spend six months in a miserable black-and-tan town like Manáos while you boys are having marvelous adventures in the jungle?"

"You must forbid her to go, Les."

Gorman laughed fondly. "Lou is as strong as a man, healthy as an ox, has the endurance of the devil, and she will stand it better than you or I. I don't anticipate any danger from the rats who tried to kidnap Felix. We are all good shots, we'll have plenty of ammunition, the best arms that money can buy and we'll take a half dozen good men with us. If Lou would consent to go back to New York, I'd be satisfied; but I agree with her that she is safer with us than she would be alone in any Latin city."

During the day the voyage up the Amazon was a never-ending wonder to Louise, Les and Holcomb. The steamer often ran within a short distance of the bank and they admired a tropic forest of supreme luxuriance.

Pete asked the captain why they were not bothered more by mosquitoes.

"Mosquitoes live on blood of men or animals," replied the British skipper. "How the deuce are they to exist in a country where there are no animals and almost no humans?"

"But I thought the jungle teemed with jaguars and tapirs and all kinds of savage beasts."

"Farthur up, Mr. Holcomb. This whole country is inundated about six months in the year. There is a fifty-foot rise and fall of water, and at its height the river is a hundred miles wide. There are nothing but amphibians along these shores, and villages exist only at occasional high spots. However, you'll find plenty of mosquitoes at Manáos if you are looking for them."

They came in sight of that great city of the interior Amazon in the early morning, and the Americans marveled at its magnificence, an inland seaport located one thousand miles from anywhere. The steamer approached a great system of floating docks which the captain said were erected fifteen years ago at a cost of forty million dollars.

"It was a great port in those days," he declared. "A rich wild city, full of millionaires and beautiful women. But now—keep your hands on your pocketbooks as you walk the streets, and keep out of drinking places. There are hundreds of men in town who would kill a man for a *milreis*—half an American dollar."

THE arrival of the steamer seemed as important an event in Manáos as the passage of a through train in a lonely hamlet. Thousands of people thronged down to the quay and a multitude of nearly naked black, brown and yellow men were quarreling loudly for the privilege of helping to unload her.

The passengers said good-by to the officers and moved down the gangplank, where they were almost torn apart by a mob of drivers of broken-down automobiles and carriages drawn by miserable horses.

They drove through a district of substantial-looking buildings and observed that about half the shops and warehouses were closed and in more or less disrepair. They turned into a wide avenue with tram-car tracks, past rows of one and two story shop buildings, two-thirds of which seemed to be padlocked, past elaborate residences run to seed, and finally crossed the inevitable plaza with its rows of palm trees and its band stand, to draw up before the Central Hotel, a building which was impressive, but decadent.

A multitude of porters and bellboys descended upon them and divided up the luggage, a man to each parcel, no matter how small. The lobby was large and empty, but the clerk wore a frock coat and a stiff collar, despite the heat. He delightedly assigned them to rooms. Louise and her brother were given a suite once occupied and especially decorated for the president of Brazil. Its furnishings were elaborate and expensive. Holcomb drew a very large room with a bathroom almost as large, and Dexter was equally well taken care of.

A couple of hours were spent in unpacking, and then a meeting was called in Les's parlor to discuss a card which Gorman held in his hands.

"Who is Dom Carlos Aguedarno?" asked Gorman when the quartet had assembled.

Dexter looked startled. "Has he called?"

"Sent up his card with the statement that he would present himself in an hour to discuss business. A salesman?"

"No." Dexter spoke very soberly. "He used to be the rubber king of Manáos. He is a scoundrel if there ever was one. The tales they tell up and down the river of atrocities committed by his orders would curdle your blood."

"The heck with him," said Les. "I'll leave word to kick him out of the hotel."

"No, no, you can't do that. We shall have to see him."

"Why?" demanded Louise. "I think Les is right."

"You've got to be courteous to these people. They set up to be gentlemen and they are very sensitive about slights. Men have been murdered for forgetting to return a 'good day.' This man's word travels far up the Amazon, and we don't want to have trouble with him if we can avoid it."

"What's the harm in being polite to this egg?" put in Holcomb. "We're a long way from home, Les, and we'll have enough enemies without going out of our way to create them. Maybe he is the president of the Chamber of Commerce and wants to present us with the key to the city."

"After all, I'd like to see what a rubber king looks like," said Louise. "By all means let's have him up."

"Well, it's a nuisance, but we'll receive him," Les agreed. "Pete, I'm turning your services over to Felix for a few days. He speaks the language and knows exactly what we need here in the way of equipment and you can help him in a clerical way."

"Sure," said Pete. "Though I could never add up a column of figures correctly, and there was always an argument between my bank and me as to how much I was overdrawn."

"We'll get along all right," declared Dexter. "We'll all lunch here, I suppose?"

"If you don't mind, I am going to lunch with the Da Sousas," said Les, coloring with embarrassment. "You three can get along without me, can't you?"

"I suppose we must," said Louise tartly. "I hoped we had seen the end of those people."

"DON'T be jealous, Lou," pleaded Gorman. "After all, I'm going to be interested in some other woman some day."

"You're interested in another woman now," she replied. "You're making a fool of yourself."

"How would you like to mind your own business?" he retorted furiously.

"How would you? You have been minding mine whenever you got the chance."

The pair glared at each other and then Les recovered his temper and laughed.

"Some day *you'll* make a fool of yourself over a man, Lou," he prophesied, "and I'll try not to remind you of this."

"Oh, I suppose Rosa is all right," admitted Lou. "But I should hate to have a Portuguese for a sister-in-law."

"Brazilian, my dear; and you're not in danger of it . . . Rosa refused me last night, if you want to know."

The statement astonished the three, and Les laughed mirthlessly.

"You mean to say that she turned you down?" gasped Louise. "Oh, Les, I'm sorry! How dare she?"

Her anger, in view of her previously expressed sentiments, caused the rather

embarrassed spectators of the quarrel to shout with laughter, and Gorman's stern face relaxed.

"However, I intend to persuade her to change her mind before we leave Manáos," he said.

Further discussion was averted by the announcement of Dom Carlos Aguedarno.

There entered a short, well-groomed man of forty-five. He was slender, wore a monocle in his right eye, a small black brush on his upper lip and a frock coat. He carried in his right hand a tall silk hat. He was perspiring freely in his heavy garments, but he evidently considered this an occasion of ceremony.

His was a harsh if rather a handsome face. He was dark, but there was no evidence that he was of mixed blood. His teeth were very regular and white as milk and his eyes were black and piercing.

"Pardon this intrusion," he said in halting English. "I speak French better than your language and I presume none of you but Senhor Dexter understands Portuguese."

Les eyed him with disfavor. "I speak nothing but English, sir," he replied. "I am Mr. Gorman. This is my friend Mr. Holcomb, and my sister, Miss Gorman. I take it you are acquainted with Mr. Dexter."

Dom Carlos bowed. "We have been introduced, merely. I shall ask you to excuse the English of mine."

"No excuses are necessary," replied Louise. "We understand you perfectly."

He bowed to Louise. "Ah, thank you, *senhorita.*"

His bold eyes ran over the girl and he smirked his approval. Pete felt that she had been affronted by his glance, and he wanted to kick the fellow. Gorman also observed and resented the effect of the lovely blond young woman upon the rubber king.

"We will excuse you, Louise," he suggested. "You won't be interested in a business conversation. I assume the gentleman is here on business."

"In a way," admitted the dom. "First, I bid you welcome to Manáos —alas, not so prosperous as of yore, but still a wonderful city. I trust, *senhorita,* that your stay here will be joyful."

Louise bowed, rose and left the room. The light went out of the eyes of the Brazilian.

"Now, sir, what can I do for you?" demanded Gorman sharply.

The Brazilian seated himself, crossed his legs, drew a case of cigars from his pocket and offered to each of the trio, who all refused. He drew one out and lighted it.

CHAPTER V.

THE RUBBER TYRANT.

"YOU, sir," Aguedarno observed, "are a business man. I also am a business man. You Yankees go right to the point; so do I. You are rich, *senhor.* I am not poor. You invade my country. I bid you welcome. I offer to coöperate with you in taking out its hidden wealth."

"I don't quite get you, sir," replied Gorman stiffly.

"Once we Amazonians were rich," declared the *senhor.* "We spent our money freely. We permitted the North Americans to come and share in our prosperity. No longer is rubber a profitable business. We stagnate here in Manáos. We wait the morrow when all shall be happy as before."

"I'm still up a tree," said Les. "I

mean I don't know what you are talking about."

"The Senhor Dexter knows, do you not?"

"I am afraid I do not, *senhor.*"

"I, then, speak plainly. In our great forests we have one treasure left, the balata. It commands a price which makes it very profitable to market. It will restore the prosperity to Manáos. We must get it out, *senhores.*"

"Is that so? Go ahead," commented Les with a poker face.

"Our country is so vast. A thousand miles in every direction from Manáos is jungle. It is yet to be thoroughly explored. We have not found the great forest of balata trees which we know exists—but the Senhor Dexter, he has found it."

"News to me," replied Dexter imperturbably.

"So we have the situation. You have the secret, but it will not benefit you without my coöperation," declared Carlos. "Without my aid you cannot get your balata to market. Without your aid I cannot market balata. Therefore, I say, let us combine."

"I have no balata," lied Dexter.

"*Senhor,*" said Carlos with a significant smile, "from me the Amazon keeps no secret. My agents notified me, when you began your journey down the Rio Negro, that you had made the great discovery. When you reached Manáos the news was known to hundreds. Had I not, unfortunately, been ill of the fever, we should have done business before you sailed from this city. Well, we shall do business now."

"My dear sir," said Gorman impressively, "you are very much misinformed. Mr. Dexter is an old school friend of mine. I wished to make a hunting trip in the Amazonian jungle and, happening to encounter my old friend in New York, he told me that the Rio Negro district was interesting."

"What do you expect to hunt, *senhor?*" asked the Brazilian softly.

"Oh, anything we can find."

"You will find nothing near the Rio Negro, except caymans and manatees. No animals live in these jungles because of the inundation."

"We'll hunt those alligators and sea-cows then," replied Gorman. "Mr. Aguedarno, you're wasting your time and ours."

The Brazilian rose and his upper lip curled in a sneer. "You assume that we are poor backwoodsmen here, that we have no contact with the outside world," he declared. "I have cables from New York. I know that Senhor Dexter tried to interest three people in his balata discovery and finally made a deal with Senhor Lester Gorman, the great engineer from Nevada. *Now* shall we discuss business?"

Les stood up to his full height. "We shall not, sir," he thundered. "Our affairs are none of your business and we do not need your coöperation in our little hunting expedition. I wish you good morning."

"*Bien,*" replied Aguedarno. "That is your attitude? You defy me!"

"I'm just telling you that you are all wet," said Les contemptuously.

"And you, Senhor Dexter: you know who I am and how many I command. Do you defy me?"

"Certainly not," said Dexter hastily. "I simply deny the statement that I am interested in balata."

"It is war, then."

"Not from any wish of ours," replied Dexter, who was obviously alarmed.

"You may reach your balata region,

senhores," declared Aguedarno, "but you will never take out a kilogram of it. Better that the trees rot in the soil of Brazil than that the gum be brought out to the profit of pigs of Yankees!"

"That will be all from you!" cried the infuriated Gorman, advancing.

HOLCOMB, who had sat silent during the interview, thrust himself between his employer and the Brazilian. Les was in a fighting mood and Pete realized that to strike this man in his own bailiwick would probably have dire consequences.

"*Senhor,* present our compliments to your wife and all the children," Pete said glibly. "We assure you of our most distinguished consideration and we have enjoyed your visit immensely and we certainly feel badly that you have to go."

The black eyes of Aguedarno lighted appreciatively. "*Senhor,*" he replied, "you, at least, are a gentleman. I warn you that if you go up river with these thieves, you will never return with life in your body."

"Thieves!" roared Les. "I'll knock him—"

Pete took the Brazilian's arm and led him toward the door. "You mustn't mind my friend," he chattered. "He thought you called him a bad name and he has a hot temper, but he is the nicest chap in the world when you take him right and he didn't realize that you intended to pay him a compliment, but you have trouble with the English language. That's the door, *senhor.* Good morning. I may say that I have never seen a society man in New York with a snappier frock coat or a shinier silk hat. You must give the address of your tailor."

"But certainly, *senhor.* It is Blake, on Bond Street in London."

Aguedarno was positively good-humored as Pete led him out into the corridor, grabbed his hand and shook it warmly and effusively.

"If I had any balata," Pete finished by saying, "I don't know of any one I would sooner share it with and that goes for my last cigarette and my last crust of frosted lemon pie. Good-by, *senhor.* So glad you called."

He returned to the suite and found two exceedingly sober individuals.

"Always leave them smiling when you say good-by," Pete quoted.

"If you hadn't interfered I would have flattened his pan for him," growled Gorman.

Dexter patted Holcomb on his uninjured shoulder. "Pete, you're immense," he declared. "We were in enough trouble without fisticuffs."

"He threatened to have us murdered," muttered Gorman. "The filthy swine."

"Well," said Pete, "I can get his angle. 'Brazil for the Brazilians.'"

"Our concession happens to be in Colombia," Dexter reminded him. "Unfortunately the stuff must come out through Brazil, and the frontier of the two countries is unexplored and unguarded. Les, send your sister back to New York on the next boat."

"Let's all go back," suggested Pete. "All the balata in South America isn't worth the lives of three magnificent fellows like us."

"Louise must go back," said Gorman thoughtfully. "You can go, too, if you want to, Pete. It looks as though we were in for serious trouble and I certainly wouldn't ask any man to walk into assassination."

For a second Pete thrilled. The prospect of the long trip to New York with Louise was very tempting; but he was shrewd enough to understand that she

would hate and despise him for deserting her brother. And besides—

"I enlisted for the duration of the war, in New York," Pete said stoutly "I am a cowardly soldier, no doubt, but I'll try to stick along."

"Coward!" exclaimed Dexter. "If any man but you called Pete Holcomb a coward, I'd knock him down. I know whereof I speak."

LES grasped his hand. "You're a trump, Pete," he declared. "But you don't go into this expedition as a hired man. You earn twenty-five per cent of whatever I get out of this."

"Twelve and a half per cent," corrected Dexter. "The other twelve and a half comes out of my share. If we win through, you'll be a millionaire, Pete."

Tears welled in Holcomb's eyes. "You are a great pair of lads," he asserted. "I don't have to be taken into the company to go along. I want to go. Dexter, do you suppose our visitor had anything to do with the attack on you down the Amazon?"

Dexter nodded. "Very likely. You see he had agents in New York spying on me, and agents in Pará, no doubt, who planted the two knife-men on the ship and arranged to capture me at the only spot where a boat could come alongside the steamer. Failing in that, he had the impudence to call on us and try to frighten us into taking him in."

"Humph!" commented Pete. "I suppose it wouldn't be a bad idea to take him in. He seems to hold trump cards."

"It would do no good," replied Dexter. "All he wants is an idea of the location of the bully-trees and then he would trim us out of all our profits, if he didn't murder us out of hand. He is a scoundrel and he'll never change."

"He was a fool to disclose his hand," said Gorman. "If we were left unaware that our purpose was suspected we would have been off guard. Now we'll take care of ourselves. I haven't a doubt in the world that we'll get out the balata in spite of this crook."

"We're babes in the woods," observed Holcomb. "Tough babies, though. It's getting on to time to start for your lunch date, Les."

"Will you fellows persuade Louise to go home?" asked Gorman. "Darn the kid, I can drive her just so far and then she turns mule."

"We'll try," promised Dexter and Holcomb.

"What can this Brazilian do to us, Felix?" asked the new member of the firm when Les had departed.

"Plenty. He can pass the word up river to hamper us in every way. He can stir up the Indians against us, prevent us from replenishing our supplies—"

"Shoot us from ambush?"

"I think he is more likely to spy upon us. His game will be to let us reach our concession on our last legs, and then eliminate us. He wants to know the location of the balata region."

"Since he knows about your doings in New York, it ought to be easy to find out. There must be a record of your concession in the files of the Colombian government in Bogotá."

Dexter laughed. "It's only a thousand miles as the crow flies from here to Bogotá and about eight thousand to New York, but actually Bogotá is very much farther away. Not more than half a dozen people have ever penetrated across country from here to Bogotá and it took them from three to six months. Furthermore, there is no record in Colombia of my transactions. A dummy corporation in New

York secured the concession. And it is down as a mahogany timbering concession. No, his only chance of locating it is to trail us; and that, of course, he will do."

"Well," said Pete with a smile which did not come from the heart, "a grand time is going to be enjoyed by all. It certainly is no trip for Louise."

"And I depend upon you to help me to persuade her not to accompany us."

"If you can't move her, I can't," said Pete dismally. "She doesn't take much stock in me."

"Well, let's call her in and see what we can do."

CHAPTER VI.

A HEAVY BLOW.

THE residence of Dom Juan da Sousa stood in the outskirts of Manáos in the center of a large and luxurious garden. It was a long, low villa of wood with broad porches and balconies, and was painted a faded lavender. Like its owner, it was no longer spick-and-span, but a dozen servants still catered to the wants of the family in a country where a servant was glad to earn a few *milreis* a month—the value of a *milreis* being at best about half a dollar.

The prefix "dom" to the name of a Brazilian gentleman is a hold-over from its days under the Portuguese empire. Once a title of nobility, it is still assumed by men of wealth, particularly by those with landed estates. Dom Juan sat upon his screened-in porch and chatted with his lovely daughter while they waited for their guest.

"And during your long acquaintance with this cowboy," he was saying to her, "he dropped no hint of his real purpose in going up the Rio Negro?"

"No, father."

"You are in love with the man and you forgot to do what you were told to do!" he accused.

Rosa's black eyes flashed. "I was not educated to be a spy, my father. You must pardon my lack of skill."

Sousa rose and paced the terrace. "You understand, Rosa," he said harshly, "that under no circumstances may you wed with this North American."

"I can't see why," she protested pitifully. "He is rich and splendid and a man and I love him."

"He is not of your religion, you who have the blood of Portuguese counts and French marquises in your veins; and besides, I have promised your hand."

"But not with my consent," she replied sullenly.

"Are you a Yankee woman?" he demanded angrily. "Are you tainted with the vicious spirit of the age? As my daughter, you will marry Carlos Aguedarno, the greatest man in Central Brazil."

"I hate him. He makes me think of a snake," she protested.

"He is a gentleman and my good friend. Thanks to him we are still able to live as become the Sousas of Manáos."

"I would prefer to starve," she cried defiantly.

"Rosa, be silent. Look, the carriage of Senhor Gorman stops at our gate. During the voyage I have allowed you license beyond precedent for a well brought up Brazilian young woman, but you understood perfectly my reasons. You were warned against sentiment with this man. If Aguedarno knew that you walked the deck alone with him, he would refuse to marry you."

"Then I shall tell him. Father, lay aside your prejudices. Let me marry Lester. He is rich and he will make you rich."

"We shall be rich without your marrying beneath your station!" shouted the old man. "And I forbid you to tell Carlos of your indiscretions. Rosa, for my sake, I implore you, try to discover at what point he intends to leave the Rio Negro for his hunting. That is all I ask."

"Why, that is not much, after all," she said, moved by her father's appeal. "I shall try to discover that for you."

"Let us know into what part of the country he strikes, and we shall soon find the balata. You have agreed with me that it is unfair that Brazilians starve while rich Yankees grow more rich."

"Lester is not greedy, and I believe that he is simply going on a hunting expedition. Come, father, here he is. We must welcome him."

THEY led Gorman to the broad terrace where a servant met them bearing cocktails. As he sipped his drink Les cast an admiring glance around.

"This is palatial, Senhor da Sousa," he declared. "One would not expect to find such a lovely home a thousand miles in the interior of Brazil."

"My friend, we have descended upon unhappy days. I wish you could have visited us ten years ago when prosperity was at its height. There was a society here as cultured as is to be found in Paris, and all the attractions of a great city. You have perhaps observed our opera house as you drove out. Once it contained a company of celebrated singers who gave splendid performances.

"Now, alas, it is infrequently tenanted even by miserable wandering actors. It is typical of the blight which has fallen upon Manáos."

"Well, the world will come to your doorstep imploring you to sell it rubber or something else and then everything will bloom again," predicted Gorman.

"I fear not," sighed Da Sousa. "Rosa, the man is signaling that lunch is served."

They lunched, to the astonishment of the American, upon gold plate, at a table upon a terrace at the rear. The food was delicious and was accompanied by rare wine. No American millionaire could have served a repast which was more impressive than that furnished by this confessedly impoverished rubber planter in this remote corner of the world. Les decided that his advertised poverty was only comparative—in which he was wrong. The debts of Dom Juan da Sousa far exceeded the value of his gold plate and other exquisite household furnishings, and the day of reckoning was not far distant.

Les met the eyes of Rosa across the table and they were so kind that he was greatly encouraged. Perhaps she had reconsidered her decision of the night before. When her father excused himself for a few moments after cordials were served, he determined to grasp his opportunity.

"Rosa, darling," he pleaded, "I was never in love before and it's killing me. Don't you love me a little? Won't you marry me? I can't give you any more than you have here, but I can give you a lot."

She shook her head. "I like you very much, Lester. I wish things were different. When do you start on your journey?"

"If you like me why not marry me?"

"My friend," she said gently, "your sister does not like you to marry a Brazilian girl. Well, my family would not permit me to marry a North American. We are of the nobility, at least so my father claims. And there is religion—that is a barrier."

"You can practice your own religion, darling."

"You do not understand. It cannot be. But I shall be thinking of you always and in fear for you when you go into the jungle. Where do you leave the River Negro, Lester?"

"I don't know. A couple of hundred miles up, I guess. I'm a tenderfoot out here and I leave all that to Dexter."

"That will be at Santa Isabella," she said thoughtfully.

"We go up there by steamboat, I believe. After that we take to canoes for some distance. It's all a mystery to me."

The return of Dom Juan da Sousa ended their *tête-à-tête*.

"HOW about you two coming to dine with us at the hotel tomorrow night?" Gorman invited eagerly.

The old man shook his head. "My friend," he said significantly, "we have enjoyed your company during a long voyage and this is our farewell. I have permitted my daughter much liberty because we were in foreign lands where conventions are not strict. Now we are at home where young ladies who are affianced must not be thrown into contact with attractive young men, especially of alien race and religion."

Poor Gorman felt as though a knife had been thrust into his vitals. Glancing over the shoulder of the Brazilian he saw the little face of Rosa working with emotion, and tears streaming down her cheeks.

"Is—is this true, Rosa? Are you engaged to be married?"

Da Sousa drew himself up and scorched Les with a look.

"I make all due allowances, *senhor*," he said sharply, "but I cannot permit my word to be questioned."

Les saw Rosa slowly bow her head.

"I—I beg your pardon, sir," Les said slowly. "I had no intention—I wish to thank you for your hospitality and to bid you both good-by."

Rosa turned and ran into the house. Da Sousa escorted Gorman to the gate, where a conveyance was waiting into which the American clambered. He sank pitifully upon the torn cushion. In his twenty-nine years, this was the first heavy blow that Les Gorman had ever received.

Les had no means of knowing the weight of parental authority in Latin countries. He did not dream that a girl could be forced into marriage with a man she did not love.

So he bade his romance good-by with a sigh and determined to forget Rosa da Sousa, the beautiful but perfidious. It was a good thing he was going where he would be up to his neck in difficulties and dangers. He would have something to occupy his mind. As for women, he was finished with them forever, except his sister, of course. She was true blue.

LES returned to the hotel shortly after two o'clock to find Louise, Pete and Felix Dexter seated in the suite. The air was tense and full of portent. Louise's pretty mouth was set in a straight line and her eyes were filled with an angry light.

"Look here!" she exclaimed when her brother entered. "Did you sneak

away and put these two hombres up to persuading me to go back to New York?"

"I had an engagement, Lou," he pleaded. "We have discovered that we are up against a tough gang who are going to fight us tooth and nail, so it's impossible to take you with us."

"You don't tell me," mocked Louise. "Well, I serve notice on you that you won't get rid of me."

"Look here, kid," her brother began, "I'm not going to have you hurt in some filthy hole where there is no chance of helping you. Be reasonable, will you?"

"And suppose *you* get wounded in some filthy hole," she retorted. "Not one of you knows the rudiments of nursing. You'd die, so you would. And how do you suppose I'll feel on a steamer or in New York wondering if you have been mur—murdered?"

She burst into tears, which were too much for Pete, who rose and fled into the bedroom. They were too much for Les, too. He ran to her and tried to take her in his arms, but she pushed him away.

"We are men and we have to take our chances," he expostulated. "We shall take a much stronger party than we planned and we'll get through all right. You don't have to worry."

"Bah!" exclaimed Louise. "You make me ill. You big selfish brute, you!"

The two men exchanged astonished glances.

"Selfish?" protested Felix. "Why, we were only thinking of your welfare."

"I'll take care of my welfare. I'll go home on one condition, Les. That you abandon this expedition and come with me."

"But I can't. I've given my word to Felix."

"I won't hold you to it," said Dexter quickly, and he meant it. "I didn't anticipate this situation."

"Well, I won't turn back."

"I'll throw myself into the river before I'll let you leave me behind!" cried Louise. "I'm going."

"You're not!" exclaimed the brother.

"To be frank, Louise," said Dexter indiscreetly, "I doubt if fifty per cent of our force gets through. And you will hamper us."

"The matter is closed," she said stubbornly. "If you go, I go."

"I'm responsible for getting your brother into this," declared Dexter. "I'll call off the whole affair unless you agree to return home."

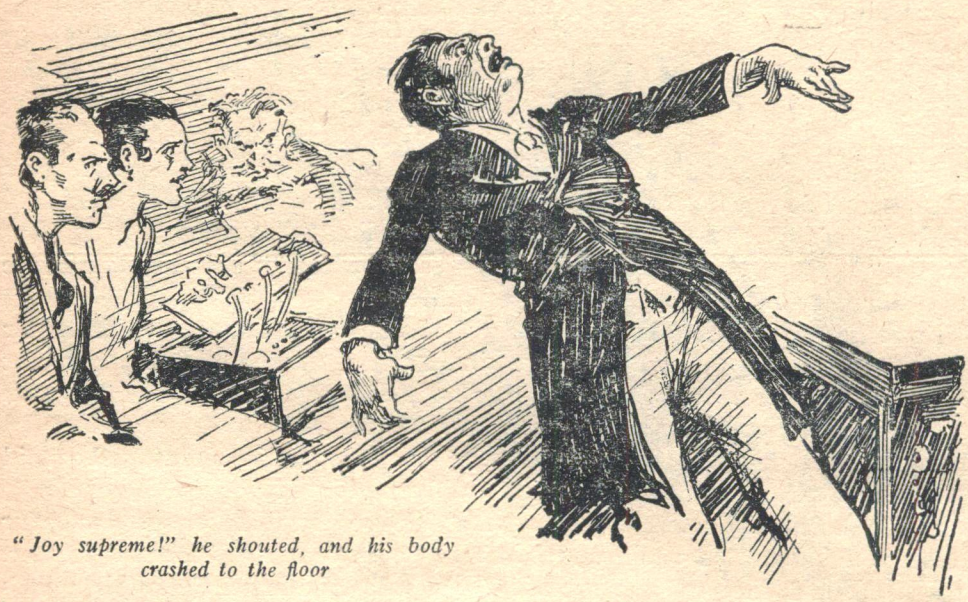
"I won't let you do that, Felix," said Gorman. "I'm in too far to back out. We can't do anything with Lou when she gets like this, and of course the kid would be in agony if she thought I was in trouble and she wasn't around. She really won't hamper us. She is as husky as a man. I guess we Gormans will have to go through this together as we have gone through other things."

"Oh, Les, you old darling," she cried joyfully and she threw her arms around her brother's neck. "So you will let me go."

He sighed. "There would be nobody to keep an eye on you if we left you behind. We've got to get a party so powerful, Felix, that these scoundrels won't dare attack us."

"There is a limit to the size of an Amazonian expedition, you know," Dexter warned him. "A dozen men besides ourselves and our native boatmen and porters are all we can take."

TO BE CONTINUED NEXT WEEK.



"Joy supreme!" he shouted, and his body crashed to the floor

The Death Notice

The leering skeleton of Death lurked among the charlatans who preyed on Mme. Storey's rich and silly friend—but not even the detective could guess how it was to strike

By HULBERT FOOTNER

Author of "The Butlers' Ball," "The Black Ace," etc.

Novelette—Complete

CHAPTER I.

HOUSE OF DOOM.

I DISLIKED the man's voice even before I took in the sense of what he was saying; a slow voice that seemed to dwell with pleasure on its own malice. He inquired over the wire: "Is Mme. Storey there?"

"Who is this speaking?" I demanded.

He laughed sarcastically. "Oh, I haven't the pleasure of her acquaintance."

"What do you want to speak to her about?"

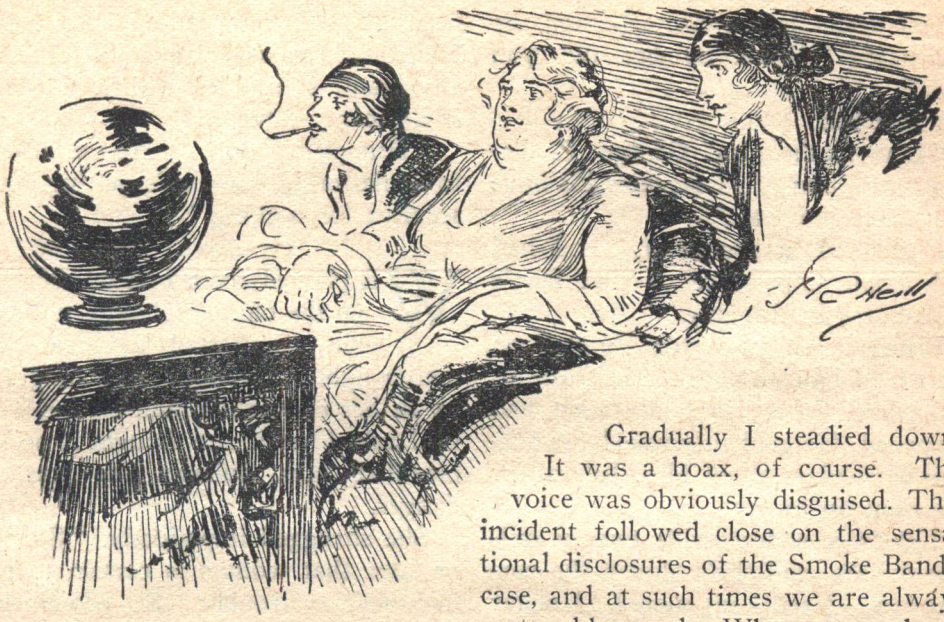
"That I can tell only her."

"Well, I'm sorry," I said, "but I am instructed not to disturb her unless I know it is for a good reason."

"To whom am I speaking?" he asked.

"Miss Brickley, Mme. Storey's secretary."

"I have heard of the admirable Miss Brickley," he said with his insulting laugh. "I feel quite safe in sending her my message by you."



Then he paused, and I said: "Well?"

I could hear his breathing over the wire. He must have had his lips almost directly against the transmitter.

"I have a communication to make in which Mme. Storey is sure to take a keen professional interest," he drawled. "There is going to be a murder committed at number —— East Seventy-Fifth Street this morning."

"What!" I gasped.

He laughed, well pleased with the effect of his words.

"Wait a minute," I stammered. "I'll connect you with Mme. Storey."

"Oh, you can tell her," he said, and hung up, still laughing.

It gave me a nasty shock. My hand was trembling violently when I put up the receiver. Common sense suggested that it was only a hoax, but the ugly voice out of the unknown acted powerfully on my nerves.

Gradually I steadied down. It was a hoax, of course. The voice was obviously disguised. This incident followed close on the sensational disclosures of the Smoke Bandit case, and at such times we are always pestered by cranks. When my employer receives more than three proposals of marriage in the morning's mail I always know that her picture has been published the day before.

GOING into her office, I found her sitting at the big table writing a personal letter. She had a cigarette between her lips and was holding her head on one side in the familiar way to keep the smoke out of her eyes. At sight of my face she removed the cigarette and smiled provokingly.

"Well, what is it now?" she asked.

I told her.

"Damn the telephone!" she said pleasantly. "It puts us at the mercy of every lunatic in the five boroughs."

"It's certainly a hoax," I said.

"Undoubtedly. Just the same, we dare not ignore it."

"After all," I pointed out, "it's a matter for the police to attend to."

"Quite," she said, taking up her pen again. "Call up Rumsey and pass the buck to him."

While I was waiting for my call a sudden exclamation escaped from my employer: "What number did you say?"

I told her.

"Oh—that's Mrs. George P. Julian's new house! I suppose I'll have to go there anyway."

I groaned in sympathy, for I had had ample experience of that lady's foolishness in the past.

When I got Inspector Rumsey on the wire I handed over the instrument, and Mme. Storey told him what had happened. He evidently asked for further particulars about Mrs. Julian, for she went on to say:

"She's a widow with twenty million dollars, and she's almost the perfect fool. Need I say more? A sugar bowl for every new faker who sets up shop. I've already got her out of several scrapes, and that's why—God help me—I am elected to be her friend. Her principal is tied up in a trust fund, but she has over a million a year income, and that's the honey that attracts the bees."

Rumsey asked Mme. Storey about her previous relations with Mrs. Julian.

"Well, she was one of the charlatan Jacmer Touchon's patients. She got me some evidence against him without knowing that she was doing it, and I'm really in her debt on that score. Before that I saved her from handing over half a million to the notorious Walter Hanley. My first meeting with her was at the time of the Miller Moore case. Moore had been bleeding her for a couple of years. I succeeded in sending him to Sing Sing, you may remember."

When she had hung up, Mme. Storey said: "Rumsey is satisfied it's a hoax. He says as long as I feel obliged to go to Mrs. Julian's house he won't bother to send anybody . . . He says I can attend to it better than any man," she added with a sidelong smile in my direction.

"Humph!" I said. "He can afford to be flattering when he's getting your services for nothing."

WE phoned for a taxi and locked up the office. Though my employer affected to treat the matter lightly, I noticed a certain gravity in her expression, and on the way up I asked her if she thought it possible that Mrs. Julian's life was in danger.

She shrugged impatiently. "Sooner or later that woman is certain to get into serious trouble. So prominent, so wealthy, so foolish! It's a fatal combination."

"But if her money's all tied up in a trust fund, wouldn't it be like killing the goose that laid the golden eggs?"

"So it would seem. But there is this to consider. She has a habit of giving out largesse with a good-sized string attached to it. She gives these crooks great sums of money in the guise of loans. There is no record that any of it has ever been paid back. But when she sours on these dear friends she is apt to demand her money, and there have been some very ugly scenes. That might supply a possible motive."

We drew up in front of one of the newer mansions that line the blocks east of Central Park. It was one of those houses that embody every known luxury and extravagance, except the trifling matter of sunshine. The few rooms which faced the narrow street got a certain amount of light, but as the house — as well as all its neighbors—covered about ninety per cent of

its lot, all the other rooms had to be content with electric light bulbs. Why be rich, one might ask, if you can't have sunshine? There is no answer. The rooms were filled with art treasures from every quarter of the globe, but you got no definite impression except that of mere expensiveness.

To match everything else, Mrs. Julian had the most expensive of butlers. His name was Bunbury, and he had been with her for years. He was a very handsome man. He seemed to have raised butlership to heights before undreamed of. He was like a celebrated actor playing the part of butler on the stage.

When my employer asked for Mrs. Julian, Bunbury looked deeply distressed. He knew that Mme. Storey was no ordinary caller to be turned away.

"Mrs. Julian was not expecting you," he suggested.

"No," said Mme. Storey blandly. "But that will be all right." She walked in.

"I'm sorry," he stammered, following us, "but Mrs. Julian is very much engaged. I have the most positive instructions not to disturb her."

"I'm sorry, too," said Mme. Storey, "but I have to see her. It is a matter of the greatest importance."

"Madam, I cannot—I cannot—" he protested helplessly.

"What's she doing?" asked my employer bluntly.

"She's—er—she's having a séance," he replied, embarrassed.

Mme. Storey started up the sweeping staircase with me following her, and the butler bringing up the rear, all but wringing his hands. "Madam, I beg of you—I beg of you—"

"I will take the responsibility of disturbing her," said Mme. Storey serenely. "If I insist on going in, you can't very well stop me, can you?" she added.

"It's as much as my place is worth!" he whimpered.

"Very well, if you get fired I'll find you another place. You're an excellent servant."

He gave up.

THE plan of the house was simple. On the first floor above the street there was a superb central hall with a peristyle of tall marble columns. The staircase swept on up behind the columns. In the front was an immense *salon;* in the rear a dining room. The doors of the *salon* stood open, and there was no séance going on in there. It could hardly be in the dining room, so we kept on up.

The next floor was devoted to Mrs. Julian's personal suite: boudoir, bedroom, dressing-rooms and so forth. All the doors giving on the hall were closed. From behind a door in the front came the steady drone of a single voice, a disquieting sound. Mme. Storey made unhesitatingly for that door, and opened it. The butler had faded away.

The room was dark except for a patch of uncertain light toward the left. I had an impression of several motionless figures sitting around, and I saw a ghastly, distorted face in the dim light. It seemed to have no body. It made my blood run cold. I almost cried out, though I guessed there was trickery in it.

The voice ceased when we opened the door. There was a silence, then Mrs. Julian's voice, sharp and angry, demanding:

"Who is it? How dare you come in here?"

"Sorry, Aline," said Mme. Storey,

calmly, "but I simply had to speak to you."

Mrs. Julian did not instantly recognize the voice. She continued to cry: "Get out! Get out!"

The strange figure in the middle of the room broke in sulkily: "It is useless. Everything is spoiled now. You had better turn on the light."

Mme. Storey turned the switch which was beside the door, and the lights flooded on. The room was Mrs. Julian's boudoir, and it presented a very odd scene. When I say the house had no character I should except the boudoir. That had plenty of character—of the wrong sort. A sea of baby-blue brocade with a foam of lace upon it. One might have guessed at a glance that this room expressed the soul of an elephantine blond woman of fifty-odd.

To the left stood an elegant little lacquer table with a carved teak-wood stand upon it, supporting in turn a crystal globe. This was a beautiful object, reflecting as it did all the lights in broken shining particles. One can easily understand how a crystal globe has always been an object of mystery. A foot or so above the globe hung a lamp concealed within a black shade. It was the light from this falling on the crystal which had created the eerie glow I had first seen.

Beside the table stood a theatrical figure, a short, plump man in a frock coat that was too tight for him. He had a chocolate-colored face and shifty black eyes. His lank, ebon hair was plastered over his temples in the very manner of an oily schemer. As we entered, his shallow eyes rolled viciously at us. Anybody, but Mrs. Julian, would have distrusted him at sight.

Beyond the table in an overstuffed baby-blue armchair sat Mrs. Julian—overstuffed herself, and enveloped in no one knows how many yards of lavender chiffon. Her face, which is naturally red, showed a bluish hue under the make-up. Perhaps that's why she wore lavender. She was a good-natured creature in her way, and I knew that my employer had a kind of fondness for her.

Along the far side of the room sat three other persons, two men and a woman, of whom I shall have more to say directly. All three had an unwholesome look, like things that needed sun.

CHAPTER II.

A HUNDRED THOUSAND DOLLAR HOAX.

MRS. JULIAN'S puffy face presented a study when the lights went up. Dark with anger under her make-up, nevertheless she knew she could not afford to quarrel with Mme. Storey. She bit her lip and looked at the floor.

"It is nothing," she muttered, "only—at such a moment of emotional tension it's a shock to have it broken."

My employer instantly took her cue from the scene.

"I know," she said sympathetically. "But I had a strong premonition that you needed me, Aline, and I hurried right here. You can't stop to question such feelings. I wouldn't let the servant keep me out."

This sort of talk was well calculated to impress Mrs. Julian. She looked at Mme. Storey, surprised to hear it from her, and began to melt.

"Oh, Rosika! But I am all right, darling."

"I'm so glad!" said Mme. Storey, taking her hand.

The East Indian, seeing the current turning against him, became sulkier than before. He placed the crystal and

its stand in the middle of a brilliant silk handkerchief and began to tie up the ends in Oriental fashion.

"With your permission I will retire," he said stiffly to Mrs. Julian.

"Oh, please don't go!" said Mme. Storey in seeming concern. "I am so interested in everything pertaining to the psychic . . . Introduce me, Aline."

"This is Professor Ram Lal," said Mrs. Julian a little unwillingly. Perhaps she suspected her friend of irony. "Mme. Rosika Storey."

All the persons in the room glanced at Mme. Storey with fear and dislike. I began to feel there must be some foundation for the warning we had received, and a nasty chill struck through me. Was it possible that this scowling Oriental meditated an attack on Mrs. Julian, and one of his rivals, getting wind of it, had telephoned us?

"Do go on with your demonstration, professor," said my employer cajolingly. "All my life I have been fascinated by the mystery of the crystal, and have been longing to meet somebody to elucidate it."

"I am sorry," he said with the pompous air that such people often assume, "but the precious filaments that bind us to the infinite are too tenuous to be joined again when once they are snapped."

Mme. Storey listened to him with pretended respect. "Then let us sit and talk awhile," she said, matching his tone. "Let us try to put ourselves in tune with the infinite so that new filaments may be woven." Drawing a chair up beside Mrs. Julian, she produced her cigarette case. I sat down behind them.

Mrs. Julian, finding her friend so unexpectedly sympathetic, sighed with satisfaction, and took a cigarette. "Sit down, Ram Lal," she said carelessly.

He dared not go then, though I fancy he was still leery of Mme. Storey. Declining a cigarette, he sat down on the other side of the table with an air of forced patience.

"Do uncover the precious crystal," begged Mme. Storey. "I love to lose myself by gazing in its depths."

He obeyed with an ill grace.

"How inexpressibly beautiful!" she murmured. "The clear transparent sphere which seems to conceal nothing yet hides all! It is symbolic of the whole cosmos!"

Mrs. Julian, now completely persuaded, leaned over and patted her hand. "Oh, Rosika, it is so sweet to hear you talk like this! Of course you're the cleverest woman in the world, but sometimes I have felt that—that—well, you know . . ."

"That I lacked soul?" murmured Mme. Storey reproachfully. "Oh, Aline, how could you!"

There was good comedy in this, but I felt no inclination at the time to smile. The East Indian's ugly expression kept me on tenterhooks.

BY degrees Mme. Storey lulled his suspicions. When acting she is more natural than other people when they are themselves, and he couldn't stand out against her. He began to think he was making an impression on her and his flat, bright eyes languished at her with a mixture of insolence and fawning. It's funny how people give themselves away. Very likely he was not accustomed to have such a desirable woman fall for him, and it went to his head.

"I see that Mme. Storey is one of us," he murmured dreamily. "A true psychic."

Mrs. Julian was quite carried away. The folds of lavender chiffon undu-

lated with emotion. "Oh, Rosika, you have no conception of what a wonderful man he is!" she whispered. "In Ram Lal I have found a bridge to the beyond. He reads both the past and the future. I know that what he foretells of the future will come true because he is never wrong about the past. As soon as he begins to read the sphere the veils fall one by one."

"Oh, my dear, how wonderful! And what does he say is in store for you?"

A shudder of ecstasy passed through Mrs. Julian's vast bulk. "Happiness!" she whispered; "a great happiness!"

Such a rigmarole! I had all I could do to keep from snorting. It made me mad that such a fool should have so much money to throw to the dogs while intelligent people have to get along with the barest necessities.

Ram Lal was not supposed to hear Mrs. Julian's praises, but, of course, he could guess what she was saying. He lowered his eyes in mock modesty, but the smirk around his lips gave him away.

"And the wonder of it is," Mrs. Julian went on, "this is only a common crystal, though it was the best to be bought in New York." She dropped her voice again. "Just wait until the great Julian crystal is finished, my dear!"

"What's that?" asked Mme. Storey.

"Ram Lal is having the biggest and most flawless crystal made that the world has ever seen!" she whispered. "It's a secret as yet between him and me. It's going to cost a hundred thousand dollars! Ah! Just think what *that* will reveal!"

I wondered if she had given him the money yet. It seemed to me the whole situation depended on that.

"And I mean to build a perfect temple to house the perfect crystal!" she whispered ecstatically. "So that all men may be permitted to share in universal knowledge. That shall be my contribution to my people."

"But I thought it was against the law," suggested Mme. Storey, dryly. "Crystal-gazing, I mean."

"Only if you take money for it," said Mrs. Julian a little sharply. Evidently this unpleasant feature had been forced on her attention before. "I shall endow the temple, of course, so that knowledge may be free to all men."

This obliged me to abandon my first theory as to the situation. That the crystal would ever be delivered or the temple built I did not for a moment believe, but as long as there were still rich pickings to be got out of Mrs. Julian, she was safe from harm at the hands of Ram Lal, of course. I had to find some other explanation of the death warning.

WHILE she occupied herself with the East Indian, Mme. Storey did not overlook the other persons in the room.

"Introduce me to the rest of your friends, Aline," she said pleasantly.

Mrs. Julian threw them an inattentive glance. Clearly their noses were out of joint, as far as she was concerned. "Dr. Cushack, Mrs. Bracker, Mr. Liptrott," she said with careless insolence.

My employer arose and shook hands with each of them affably. The doctor was a small man with an inferiority complex; looked very fierce, squared his shoulders and talked in a deep bass voice. He had a small, waxed mustache and used a slight foreign accent. That was to convey the idea that he had been educated abroad, you understand. He had the cheek to kiss my

employer's hand in the continental manner.

"I see that Mme. Storey has a great sense of humor," he said with a glance of contempt in Ram Lal's direction.

She made believe not to get it. "Oh, I hope so," she said with a silly sounding laugh, and passed on to the next one.

Mrs. Bracker was one of these skinny little women who have reduced to within an inch of their lives. All the make-up in the world could not hide the gaunt lines of under-nourishment and the haggard eyes. She was—God save her—a beauty culturist. She took Mme. Storey's hand in both of hers.

"It is an honor to meet the great Mme. Storey," she simpered, while her eyes glittered with dislike. Well, naturally, a beauty culturist wouldn't have much use for the real thing.

The third was an old man dressed in a respectable black suit. He talked a little like a down-Easter. He was like any other old man, except that his eyes had a crazy expression. As Mme. Storey approached him he fumbled with the straps of a square leather case, and drew from it a weird-looking box with various cords and attachments hanging from it.

"I am the discoverer of the invisible ray," he said impressively, "with which I can rejuvenate mankind."

He plugged one of the cords into an outlet and a hissing, crackling sound issued from the box. My employer stepped back, a little disconcerted.

"Oh, for goodness' sake turn that thing off, Liptrott!" said Mrs. Julian pettishly. "I've had enough of it!"

He obeyed for the moment, but presently I saw him slyly turn it on again. He played with it like a child, perfectly oblivious of the rest of us.

Professor Ram Lal's good humor having been restored, Mrs. Julian suggested that he resume the séance. Immediately there were objections from the other three.

"My dear Aline, the excitement is so bad for you!" said Mrs. Bracker.

"You promised to let me give a demonstration to-day," grumbled the old man.

Dr. Cushack produced an elegant Russia-leather case from his breast pocket. On its being opened two rows of little vials containing drugs were revealed.

"At least you should take your medicine first," he said.

The sight of the drugs made me jumpy. Was this the potential murderer? I wondered. Was he going to poison Mme. Storey's client before our very eyes?

However, Mrs. Julian waved the dose away. "I don't need it," she said. "Ram Lal does me more good than medicine."

The East Indian stood up, pushed his chair back against the wall, and smoothed down his frock coat. He glanced with insulting complacency at his beaten rivals. He made caressing passes with his hands over the crystal sphere. He was excessively vain of his hands, which were soft and plump with tapering fingers manicured to the limit. They looked vicious to me.

"Lights, please," he drawled affectedly.

Nobody moved, and Mrs. Julian said sharply: "Turn off the lights, Dr. Cushack."

The little man set his teeth in a rage, as he crossed the room to obey. Mme. Storey drew her chair closer to Mrs. Julian on the right; and instructed me with a look to sit at her friend's other side. Thus we planned to protect her

in the dark. She had the wall at her back, and the little table in front of her.

ALL the lights in the room went out except the blue lamp concealed within its opaque shade. This cast a sickly glow down on the crystal which played and flickered in a manner most mysterious until I noticed that the East Indian had set the lamp slowly swinging on the end of its long cord.

Nothing in the room was visible except the lambent crystal, the pale hands waving over it, and the smooth, inhuman face in the reflected light, staring at it with an awful intentness. He began to mutter something in an uncouth tongue that was supposed to be Hindu, but was more likely mere gibberish. Pure trickery, but horribly effective. In spite of myself I felt the unreasoning terror of a child. Goose flesh rose slowly all over my body.

The man was clearly working himself into a hysterical state. As he went on his voice became convulsed; a vertical vein stood out on his forehead, and his lips were turned back over his ugly, misshapen teeth. My own teeth were chattering. "Trickery—trickery—" I kept saying to myself, but I could not break the spell.

Finally Ram Lal began to speak English in jerky phrases with long pauses between. "I perceive—I perceive a hilltop garden. It is winter, and the ground is covered with snow. The garden is ringed around with evergreen trees weighted under snow. But at either end there is an opening amidst the trees which looks out over snowy hills and valleys."

"It is my place at Newtown to the life!" gasped Mrs. Julian. "Yet he has never been there!"

I would have been willing to bet that he had been there.

"— An elegant woman comes through a gate from a lower level. She bears herself like a queen. Though it is winter she is clad in the rosy veils of springtide . . ."

This was evidently intended for a portrait of Mrs. Julian.

"— As she advances the snow disappears. The garden breaks into leaf and flower; the distant hills turn green. Now I perceive a great throng of people silently gathered under the trees. Their faces aspire with gladness; they raise their arms above their heads. For the queenly woman has brought light into their lives . . . the light of universal knowledge . . ."

The man now appeared to be completely possessed. His head rolled from side to side, only the eyes preserving their level stare at the crystal, like water in a swaying vessel. It was too horrible, yet I could not drag my eyes away.

"— There is a little pavilion in the center of the garden. It is completely embowered in vines. I cannot perceive what is inside. The woman advances toward it with firm, proud steps . . . Ardent . . . Aspiring with an inward fire. She goes inside . . . She finds . . ." He stopped. His eyes rolled up in his head until only the whites showed.

"Oh, tell me! Tell me!" gasped Mrs. Julian.

"Joy supreme!" he shouted, and his body crashed to the floor in a heap.

CHAPTER III.

THREE STRANGE FIGURES.

WE all cried out. Mme. Storey sprang up and ran to the light switch. Nobody else stirred. The room was flooded with light again, and I covered my face with my hands.

I heard my employer say in a crisp, resolute voice:

"What is this?"

Mrs. Julian had put her handkerchief to her eyes. "It always ends this way," she whimpered. "He gives so much! The strain is almost greater than mortality can bear. He will come to directly."

Mme. Storey relaxed. "Oh!" she said. "Probably epilepsy. I have heard that a fit can be induced in this manner."

"Oh, Rosika, how can you!" said Mrs. Julian tearfully. Then, "Please ring for the servants," she added in a more matter-of-fact tone.

The bell was alongside the mantel behind us. Bunbury and a second man entered almost immediately. It seemed as if they must have been expecting a summons.

"Assist Professor Ram Lal to the retiring room," said Mrs. Julian.

Bunbury took him by the shoulders, the other by the heels. Ram Lal's head lolled from side to side in a horrible manner, and his eyes were open. The two servants had impassive faces, yet it was clear they didn't like this task. They started for the door. Suddenly the butler dropped the body with a horrid thud on the floor. Somebody screamed.

Bunbury turned a livid face toward his mistress. "My God, madam! He's stopped breathing! He's dead!" he gasped.

How shall I describe the scene of confusion that followed? I was dazed. To see death strike in such an unexpected direction; to see a man die without any visible reason for it—it was too horrible. I could not collect my faculties.

The second man, when he discovered he was carrying a corpse, crumpled up in a dead faint. Bunbury dragged him out into the hall. Mme. Storey started to telephone for the police. At the first sound of the word "police" Cushack, Mrs. Bracker and Liptrott made a dash to get out of the room.

"Don't let them out of the house!" cried Mme. Storey, phone in hand. But what could I do?

We found an unexpected aid in Bunbury. He ran in with outstretched arms blocking the way. His eyes flashed compellingly, and he had forgotten the smooth ways of the butler. "Stay where you are!" he cried. "Nobody leaves this room until the police come!" He kicked the door shut.

The two men yelled to get out, the woman screamed in insensate terror.

"Be quiet, you fools!" cried Bunbury. "You are only convicting yourselves!"

His strong voice quieted them. They returned across the room trembling, and turned their backs on the body. Mme. Storey yanked down a *portière* and covered it.

Mrs. Julian, still sitting helpless and squashed in her chair, was imploring Dr. Cushack to revive Ram Lal; but my employer, satisfied that he was dead, forbade Cushack to approach the body. Whereupon Mrs. Julian went off into violent hysterics. It was the best thing she could have done, for it gave Mme. Storey an excuse to get her out of the room. She was sent into her bedroom under care of her maids, and her family doctor telephoned for.

Meanwhile I had been given the job of watching the other three to make sure that nothing in the way of evidence was destroyed. Certainly if Ram Lal had been killed, it seemed that one of them must have done it. But how? How? And why should all three of them be so terrified? It was

evident to me as I watched them that they hated each other, yet their common danger was drawing them together. Well, crime makes strange bedfellows!

THE police were in the house within a few minutes, bringing their own doctor. Inspector Rumsey followed close behind them. Our old friend's face was grave.

"This will look bad for me," he said to Mme Storey, "after having disregarded your warning."

"My fault," she said. "You put it up to me and I failed you."

"Who could have foreseen this?" he said gloomily.

An examination of the body failed to reveal the cause of death. There was no wound upon it. The supposed East Indian's skin proved to be really white. He was discovered to be a drug addict. A hypodermic needle was found on him, together with a half-filled bottle of cocaine. There were marks of the needle on his arms and legs, but apparently the needle in his pocket had not been used within the last half hour.

"I should say heart failure, at a venture," said the police doctor.

"I have reason to believe he was murdered," disagreed Mme. Storey.

"Then it must be poison. Somebody else may have jabbed a needle in him. Could that have happened while the séance was going on?"

"Quite easily," she answered. "It was dark in the room and our eyes were fastened on Ram Lal's face. Somebody might have crept along the floor."

I was looking at that sweating trio when she said it, and I saw strange glances of terror pass between them. Yet if they were all in this together, they must long ago have foreseen what would follow. And why should they look at each other as if in surprise? It was completely baffling.

The body was removed from the house for an autopsy. Inspector Rumsey then set about searching the suspected persons. Dr. Cushack came first. When the pocket medicine case came to light, the inspector handed it over to the doctor for examination. The latter whistled upon reading the labels on the vials.

"A choice collection of poisons!" he remarked. "Some of them so rare I am not familiar with their properties . . . Do you use nothing but poisons in your practice?" he queried sarcastically.

"I don't practice," muttered the young man. "I am engaged in research. Poisons are my specialty."

"Which poison were you intending to give Mrs. Julian?" asked Mme. Storey, dryly.

Cushack paled. I suppose he had forgotten that incident.

"No poison! No poison!" he stammered. "This bottle"—he pointed to one of the vials—"is marked 'antimony,' but it only contains bicarbonate of soda. I—I— These labels—are just a bluff."

Everybody smiled.

"If you don't believe me, analyze them! Analyze them!" he cried.

One of the little vials was empty; which was suggestive if not exactly incriminating. It bore no label. Nothing else of interest was found upon him.

NEXT came Mrs. Bracker. From the side pocket of her smart jacket the inspector lifted a little leather case, which on being opened revealed a hypodermic needle. She screamed at the sight of it.

"That's not mine! I never saw it before! I don't own such a thing. I don't know how it got in my pocket. You put it there yourself!"

"That's what they all say," remarked the inspector wearily.

"I swear it! I swear it!" she screamed.

"Don't swear to me," he said. "You'll have plenty of time to do it later."

She raved and beat her breast; but whether it was innocent or guilty terror I declare I could not tell. After all, they look much the same. You have to go by the evidence.

If her needle had lately contained poison, it must have been one of the volatile sorts, because every vestige of it had evaporated by the time it could be put under a microscope. A subsequent physical examination of the woman revealed no marks of the needle on her body, so she did not use it herself.

The old man, Liptrott, was fairly gibbering with fright when the inspector reached him. It was impossible to get a sensible word out of him. Only crazy talk about his machine. Nothing incriminating was found on him. But Mme. Storey pointed out that the mysterious apparatus was plugged into the wall at the moment of Ram Lal's death, therefore the old man could not be freed of suspicion until the nature of his machine had been investigated.

"It couldn't hurt a fly!" cried Liptrott. "It's to save life — not to destroy it!"

"I'll put it in the hands of an expert for examination," said Inspector Rumsey.

The old man looked at him aghast. Then suddenly frantic, he aimed a kick at his beloved machine that would certainly have destroyed it, had not Mme. Storey coolly moved it out of the way. A policeman flung an arm around the old man.

"It's the work of a lifetime!" he raved. "They'll steal it from me! They'll steal it!"

No papers or letters were found on any of them; nothing that would throw any light on their private lives. This looked as if they had been prepared for trouble. They all had business cards to be sure, but anybody can have what he pleases printed on cards. All three steadfastly refused to answer questions about themselves without the advice of counsel.

Pending the result of the autopsy, nothing more could be done. Inspector Rumsey ordered the three taken to headquarters to be held as material witnesses. They strenuously protested. Cushack had the impudence to suggest that Mme. Storey and I be apprehended also, since one of us was just as likely to have had a hand in the man's death as himself. Inspector Rumsey was much amused by the notion.

As they were about to be taken away Mme. Storey said in that dangerously pleasant way of hers: "Which one of you sent me, or caused to be sent me, a message this morning warning me of what was going to happen?"

They stared at her blankly.

"Somebody telephoned me that a murder would be committed here this morning."

I shall never forget the looks of consternation that spread over those three faces. For the moment they were incapable of replying. Then each stammeringly denied all knowledge of the telephone call. Again they glanced at each other in fear and suspicion. One thing was clear, they were speaking the truth then. Such perfect surprise could not have been assumed.

That, I suppose, was what my employer was after.

Mrs. Julian was still in strong hysteria, and it seemed like a waste of time to wait around until she should be pleased to come out of it. Her family physician was with her. Mme. Storey called him out of the room, and asked that he notify her just as soon as Mrs. Julian was herself again. She strongly urged the doctor not to allow his patient to talk about the case to anybody but her.

CHAPTER IV.

VICTIM OF VULTURES.

OF course, the case created a first-class sensation in the press. Mrs. Julian's wealth and prominence; the suggestions of mystery and chicanery; the weird Oriental flavor; it had everything. The public excitement seriously hampered the police and Mme. Storey in their work, but of course we could not blame the newspapers for making the most of a good story.

The reporters were already waiting for us in a body when we returned to the office. Mme. Storey is popular with these boys because she deals fairly with them. She will keep back information when it seems necessary, but she does not lie to them. She now gave them the plain facts of what had happened in Mrs. Julian's house, and asked them to withhold comment until the result of the autopsy was known.

"But the man is certainly dead," said one.

"Quite!" said my employer with a dry smile. "But it is possible he died from natural causes."

They glanced at each other peculiarly, and young Winship of the *Morning Press* dropped a bombshell by asking:

"Is it true, Mme. Storey, that an unknown person called you on the telephone this morning, and warned you that a murder would be committed at Mrs. Julian's house?"

She bit her lip in chagrin. "Where did you hear that?" she asked.

"My city editor told me to ask you."

"We all heard the story," confirmed the others.

Before she answered them Mme. Storey had me call up the city editor of the *Morning Press*. He told me that he had been given the story by an anonymous person over the telephone, and that of course he would not run it unless Mme. Storey confirmed it. Presumably the same message had been sent to all the papers.

This put my employer in rather a difficult position, but she settled it promptly. "Yes, it is true," she said. "I thought it was a hoax, but I immediately called up Inspector Rumsey to tell him, and I went myself to Mrs. Julian's house."

She was immediately bombarded with questions. "If you knew it, why didn't you stop it? Why did you allow the séance to go on?" And so forth. And so forth.

"No more now," she said firmly. "I'm going to ask you boys to say nothing about the telephone call until we find out where we stand."

"Why? Why?" they asked.

"Well, for one thing I'd like to disappoint the mysterious gentleman who is so keen about having it published."

They were all willing to keep this piece of information back for twenty-four hours except a man on one of those irresponsible sheets that would sacrifice their mothers if there was a sensation in it. I need not name it. This man slipped out of the room, and we knew he had run off to his office

with the story. That let them all out, of course. They hurried away to their offices.

My employer merely shrugged. "We can't reform the press," she said. "We have to work with it as we find it."

AN hour or two later the first editions came out with scareheads. Well, it was a juicy story. We got a shock when we read it, for in spite of the care Mme. Storey had taken to prevent such a thing, it included a preposterous interview with Mrs. Julian.

The woman was off on a kind of emotional debauch. You would have thought Ram Lal was a second Elijah who had been translated direct to heaven. She had no idea what a fool she was making of herself, and naturally the reporters had not spared her. Yet only an hour before that I had telephoned to see how she was and had been told that the doctor had given her an opiate, and she was sleeping.

We called a taxicab to take us to Mrs. Julian's house at once, for there was no telling how she might react to the story of the telephone warning. Just as we were setting out we received some interesting particulars by telephone from the police, about the so-called Ram Lal's ancestry.

Bunbury let us into Mrs. Julian's house. As befitted the perfect butler his aspect was calm and grave. You would never have guessed from him that a tragedy had been enacted upstairs that day. After all, he was the only person in the house who had kept his head, and Mme. Storey smiled at him encouragingly.

"How is your mistress, Bunbury?"

"Calm, madam."

"Bunbury, for her own sake you ought not to let Mrs. Julian talk to newspaper reporters."

He shrugged deprecatingly. "What can I do, madam? I perceived from the first that it would be unwise, but she ignored my suggestions. I cannot aspire to influence her actions."

"What time did Ram Lal arrive here this morning?"

"Ten o'clock, madam."

"Did you notice anything unusual about him?"

"No, madam, I perceived nothing out of the way."

"Did he talk to anybody before he saw Mrs. Julian?"

"No, madam, I showed him directly to the boudoir. Dr. Cushack and Mrs. Bracker were already there. Mr. Liptrott came later."

As we moved toward the stairway Mme. Storey saw by Bunbury's face that he wished to say more. She paused.

"If I might add a word," he went on apologetically, "—I hope it is not unbecoming from one in my position—I have worked for Mrs. Julian for eight years, and I am sincerely attached to her. I hope you will give her a good talking to, madam. She will listen to you. From the first I perceived that something like this was bound to happen—indeed, I feared it might be worse."

"I'll do my best, Bunbury," said Mme. Storey gravely.

WE went on up to the boudoir. That woman's folly was simply incredible. We found her swathed in black chiffon, her face made up dead white. She was seated in front of the lacquer table on which she had placed a large photograph of the smug and unpleasant Ram Lal, flanked with lighted candles. Turning

on my employer like a tragedy queen, she shot out an accusing forefinger.

"You knew what was going to happen! And you didn't prevent it! I could almost call you his murderer!"

"Be yourself, Aline," said Mme. Storey calmly. "I thought it was a hoax. We are continually being hoaxed over the telephone."

"Why didn't you tell me?"

"Well, you are not a person that one tells things to. You carry on so." I doubt if this reached Mrs. Julian's understanding. "I thought the threat—if there was a threat—was directed against you," Mme. Storey went on. "Who could ever have foreseen that it was worth anybody's while to murder Ram Lal?"

It was useless to try to reason with Mrs. Julian. She raved on, calling on Heaven to witness what a pure and holy man had been struck down. There was a sort of complacency in her that suggested she was thoroughly enjoying her own dramatics. Exasperating. However, Mme. Storey merely smoked on and let her rave. When she could get a word in edgewise, she said:

"When you quiet down we will discuss how to set about finding the murderer. That's all we can do for Ram Lal now."

This started Mrs. Julian off at a new tangent. "She did it!" she cried. "That woman! She was jealous of my favor. Oh, what black ingratitude! After the thousands I have spent on her!"

"How could she have done it?" asked Mme. Storey mildly.

"Stole up to him when it was dark and stuck the poisoned needle in his leg! I saw her! I saw her!" she cried wildly.

Mme. Storey was not distinctly impressed by this accusation. "Why didn't you say so at once?" she asked indignantly.

"I was too much shocked. I didn't realize . . . But I saw her, I tell you!"

"Now come, Aline," said my employer. "Are you prepared to go on the stand and swear that you saw Mrs. Bracker do it?"

Mrs. Julian began to falter. "Well—no—but she did it, just the same. They found the needle on her."

"She claimed that it was planted in her pocket."

"That's a lie, anyhow. She bought that needle a week ago. I know that."

MME. STOREY took more interest. "That's important, if true. How do you know it?"

"One day after she had been here I found a little package on the table wrapped in druggists' paper. Not knowing whose it was, I opened it, and the hypodermic needle was inside. She was quite embarrassed when I asked her about it. Said she had bought it for a friend."

"Was the name of the druggist on the paper?"

"Yes. It was Almon & Emory."

"Can you fix the date?"

"Let me see — I was wearing my new pink dress when I handed the package to her. That was Saturday. It must have been Friday when she bought it."

"Friday, February fourth," said my employer. "Make a note of it, Bella. . . . How long have you known Mrs. Bracker?"

"About a year. She brought a letter from Mrs. Hochstetter recommending her as a reducer."

"Who's Mrs. Hochstetter?"

"Oh, she was my most intimate friend at that time, but we've quarreled

since. She's just a woman that you meet in hotels."

"Mrs. Bracker was a professional reducer?" prompted Mme. Storey.

"Yes. She had a new idea; no fasting, no drugs. She just demonstrated slimness."

"Eh?" asked Mme. Storey, running up her eyebrows.

"Will power," said Mrs. Julian.

"Hers or yours?"

"Oh, hers entirely. That's what I paid her for. I had nothing to do but sit and relax."

"I see."

"Seemed so modest and sensible," Mrs. Julian went on. "And you have to admit her methods have been successful in her own case. She used to weigh a hundred and seventy-six pounds. That little woman! Showed me photographs of herself step by step. She took off sixty-eight pounds without denying herself a thing!"

"Did you ever see her eating rich foods?" inquired Mme. Storey dryly.

"Well, no. She never took her meals here."

"I thought not. Go on."

"It was lovely to be able to eat as much as I wanted," said Mrs. Julian innocently. "I do enjoy my meals so. And I lost weight all the time!" She sprang up, gave her skirts a flirt in front of the mirror, and looked at herself coyly over her shoulder. "You must admit, Rosika, that I'm ever so much slenderer than I was last year."

"Optimist!" murmured Mme. Storey under her breath. "How much money have you given her?" she asked aloud.

"Latterly it's been five hundred a week. She claimed to be giving me her entire time. She didn't even have to be in the house with me, she said. She could sit in her own room and concentrate better on my slenderness. She showed me the scales every week."

"Doctored," said Mme. Storey. "You hadn't stopped paying her, had you? Why was she jealous of Ram Lal?"

"Well, she wanted me to settle a lump sum on her."

"Had you promised to do so?"

"Not exactly promised. I couldn't seem to get the money together. I gave it all to Ram Lal."

"How much?"

"A hundred thousand for the crystal. I was trying to get two hundred thousand together to purchase a site for the temple. Nobody knew about the money I gave him. That was a secret between Ram Lal and me."

"I wonder if it was," remarked Mme. Storey. "How about Liptrott?" she went on.

"Oh, just a harmless lunatic," said Mrs. Julian impatiently. "I've been keeping him for years. There's that machine of his. Supposed to restore youth. He's always after me to start a company to manufacture it. Once I thought there was something in it, but latterly Mrs. Bracker and Dr. Cushack seemed to be doing me so much good I hadn't much time for Liptrott."

"SO Dr. Cushack has been doing you good, too?" inquired my employer.

Mrs. Julian paused, and her fat face started to work like a child's about to cry.

"I thought he was," she wailed. "But my family doctor says he's just been feeding me morphine! Cushack said it was a rare drug called 'adrianum.' He imported it from the Great Gobi Desert in China, and it cost five hundred dollars an ounce . . . Oh, it made me feel so good!" she added.

"I don't doubt it," said Mme. Storey. "You need a nurse."

"I know it!" wailed Mrs. Julian. "I have the heart of a child!"

"For goodness' sake, why don't you make friends with decent people?" asked Mme. Storey in some exasperation.

"Nobody likes me except the people I give money to," mourned Mrs. Julian.

My employer and I looked at each other. It was only too true!

"Where did you meet Cushack?" Mme. Storey pushed on relentlessly, determined to extract the most possible information from her blubbering, blond friend.

"At one of Mrs. Piper's teas. She always has such clever people. He attracted me from the first because he talked so intellectually. I adore intellect. Had diplomas from all the best foreign universities. He had a new theory, 'toxi-therapy,' he called it."

"It's new, all right," murmured my employer with distaste.

"You know, it means fighting poison with poison. It certainly sounded convincing. I asked him if my nervousness came from a poison, and he said certainly, and told me of this wonderful new drug. And after he had been to see me a few times I took some."

"You let him give you a poison!" exclaimed the questioner.

"Oh, he took some himself first," said Mrs. Julian, with her innocent baby stare. "He carried around the most terrible poisons and took them quite freely, because he had made himself immune."

Mme. Storey could only shake her head. "How about Ram Lal?" she asked after a brief wait. "Did you also meet him at a tea?"

"No, he wrote asking me to help the starving millions in India. No thought of self. I didn't pay any attention to his first letters; I get so many! But later he said something that proved he was psychic."

"What was that?"

"Oh, you'll only laugh. He wrote that the feeling kept coming to him that I was starving too, in the midst of my riches, and he was holding a thought of spiritual sustenance in his mind."

"So you asked him to call."

"Yes. Oh, my dear, if you could have seen him you wouldn't scoff! So thin and emaciated; his great eyes burning with an other-worldly light! He had spent years in abstinence and meditation."

"Seems to have put on flesh since."

"Well, yes, a little . . . But, oh, my dear! A true mystic! There was a little crystal on my desk, just an ornament. His gaze fastened on it and he began to read the past and the future. Imagine my joy!"

"How about the starving millions in India?"

"Well, we found that the reports were much exaggerated."

"The truth is," said Mme. Storey relentlessly, "Ram Lal's brown skin went no further than his neck and wrists. I am informed by the police that his right name was Sam Gumpel. He was the son of an East Side tailor who threw him out years ago because he wouldn't work."

Mrs. Julian buried her face in her hands. "No! No!" she wailed. "I will not believe it! Oh, spare me my last illusion!" But in her heart she knew it was true.

"I assume you paid all these people by check?" inquired the detective.

Mrs. Julian, weeping, nodded her head.

"Then I want you to make me a list, from the stubs, of all the sums you have given them, with the dates."

The weeping victim promised to do so.

"Last year," said Mme. Storey severely, "I found you in the hands of a witch doctor and a woman who called herself a 'physi-meliorator.' What has become of them?"

"I sent them away," whimpered Mrs. Julian. "Bunbury caught them faking and told me."

"With you," my employer went on, divided between pity and exasperation, "life seems to be just one damn' faker after another. What's to become of you if you go on like this? I can't spare time to get you out of scrapes."

"What am I to do?" wailed Mrs. Julian in one of her rare bursts of honesty. "Anybody with a slick tongue can get around me!"

"Hire a watchdog to stand between you and such people. Get an incorruptible woman for a secretary; one who will tell you the truth!"

"Where could I find such a one?"

"I'll find her for you . . . But, mind you, if you fire her for telling you the truth I swear I'll have you declared incompetent by the courts!"

"Oh, I'll do anything you say, Rosika. Anything!"

CHAPTER V.

A SECRETIVE CORPSE.

INSPECTOR RUMSEY came to our office in the morning to report on what the police had been doing and to confer with my employer. I should point out that Mme. Storey's connection with this case was purely unofficial. It was entirely a police matter, and she worked with them merely because her reputation was involved, owing to that confounded telephone call.

At the same time we were quietly busy on our own account. Crider and Stephens, two of our best men, had been detailed to watch the Julian house and to report on all who entered or left it. I had verified the sale of the hypodermic needle to Mrs. Bracker. Mme. Storey had sent for a transcript of the examination of the three suspects by the police, and was studying it. Psychology is her forte.

Everything still waited on the result of the autopsy. Dr. Chisholm, the toxicologist who was conducting it, had promised to meet the inspector in our office at eleven.

"What progress have you made since I saw you?" asked Mme. Storey of Inspector Rumsey.

"I have been progressing backward," he confessed bitterly.

She laughed and pushed the cigarettes toward him. "Well, it isn't the first time we've been stumped, old friend."

"It seems as if there was a regular conspiracy to balk me!" he went on earnestly, pounding his thigh. "Matson, who runs the homicide bureau in the district attorney's office, won't act. Says the case is a mare's nest. In short, he leaves me holding the bag. On the other hand, the three suspects have engaged Jim Shryock to represent them. The cleverest and most unscrupulous shyster in town! He's been a thorn in my side for years."

"Has Shryock made any move?"

"Yes. He's given me forty-eight hours to have his clients arraigned before a magistrate, or he'll swear out writs of habeas corpus and have them brought in himself. When there is a suspicion of murder a magistrate

would hold them upon the least bit of evidence. But I haven't even the least bit. Shryock knows that no magistrate could hold his clients. He has me by the ears."

"Oh, well," soothed Mme. Storey, "the result of the autopsy may force him to change his tune."

"I don't know," said Rumsey darkly. "He seems so sure of himself."

"What have you learned about these three fakers?" my employer inquired.

"Very little. On the woman's calling cards her address was given as the Hotel Vandermeer. I verified that she had been living there nearly a year. An expensive suite. The management denied that she's been carrying on any business in the hotel."

"They would say that, of course."

"Sure. She had her own telephone. The servants said she had no visitors. I found cocaine in powder form in her room, so I assume she is an addict. Nothing to throw any light on her past except half a dozen family photographs. I'm trying to trace them through the names of the photographers that appear on the cards."

"Here's a lead," said Mme. Storey. "I find that Mrs. Bracker purchased a hypodermic needle from the firm of Almon & Emory on February 4. She presented an order for it signed by Dr. A. Cushack."

Rumsey sat up with a jerk. "Good!" he cried. "Then it *was* her needle that we found on her. It implicates them both. Now we have the beginning of a case."

"We may have," said Mme. Storey.

"AS to Dr. Cushack," the inspector went on, "I have also had the contents of his medicine case analyzed, and the so-called poisons turn out to be harmless. Common salt; colored water; alcohol, and the like. One contained morphine, but not in sufficient quantity to kill. The fellow was actually speaking the truth."

"Even a liar has to, sometimes," murmured my employer.

"I visited his office; a single room in a commercial building on Forty-Second Street. There was chemical paraphernalia lying about; retorts, bottles, and so forth. No drugs. Nothing to show he had been working there lately."

"Probably cleaned up in anticipation of a search," suggested Mme. Storey.

"No doubt," said Rumsey gloomily.

"Did you question the office cleaners?" she asked.

"Not yet."

"I'll do that when we learn the result of the autopsy."

"Very well," said Rumsey. "There were no letters or personal papers," he resumed. "To my surprise his diploma turned out to be genuine. He was graduated from a big medical college here five years ago, and admitted to practice in this State the same year."

"You have inquired at the college?"

"Yes. Members of the faculty identified him from a photograph. Was remembered as a shrewd lad, but an indifferent student. Not well liked."

Mme. Storey was thoughtful for a moment, and then inquired about the third member of the trio—Liptrott."

"I have been able to piece together a fairly complete life story for Liptrott," answered the inspector. "Has lived at the Sanford House on West Eleventh Street for many years. An ancient hotel, now much run down. Has several important inventions to his credit, but the money he got for them has been spent long ago. He is alone in the world now. Is considered slightly cracked by his associates in the hotel.

"There is no doubt that he has gone

deeply into the nature of electrical phenomena. I had an expert from the G. E. laboratories to study his machine. Could make nothing of it. Says it appears to be a senseless conglomeration of tubes and wires and magnets. But he will not swear there is nothing in it without having some knowledge of what Liptrott was after. The longer you study electricity, he says, the greater respect you have for its possibilities."

"Quite." said Mme. Storey.

"I found cocaine in liquid form in Liptrott's room," said the inspector, "but no needle. He's evidently an addict, too. He's been whining for it all day. I don't know what's coming to the world!"

"Oh, the world is much as it always was," returned Mme. Storey. "These people belong to a special class, moral invalids; it's natural they should turn to drugs to buoy them up . . . I suggest you give him a needle to steady him," she went on. "Bring him up here with his machine before lunch, and let him give you and me a demonstration."

Before the poison expert showed up, my employer asked Rumsey what he had learned about the mystic, Ram Lal.

"A month ago he rented a house on West Seventy-Ninth Street, near Columbus Avenue." The inspector shrugged. "It was empty when I entered it yesterday. Had been lavishly furnished in oriental style. According to the neighbors he employed several servants, but they had vanished. I found nothing that threw any light on his murder."

PROMPTLY at eleven the buzzer sounded in the outer office, announcing the coming of Dr. Chisholm. He was the most renowned toxicologist in New York, and a level-headed man. We had had dealings with him before.

I led Dr. Chisholm into Mme. Storey's room. Certainly his face was giving nothing away. The inspector jumped up eagerly; he could scarcely wait for polite greetings to be exchanged.

"Well, doctor?"

Dr. Chisholm spread out his hands deprecatingly. "The result of the autopsy is nil," he said. "I cannot tell you what killed Ram Lal."

It was a bitter disappointment. Inspector Rumsey dropped back into his chair with a grunt. My employer carefully knocked the ash off her cigarette.

I pushed forward a chair for the doctor. For a moment there was silence in the room. Finally Mme. Storey said incredulously:

"A man dies, and with all the resources of science at your command you cannot say why he died or how he died."

"He died because his heart stopped beating," he replied. "I don't know why it stopped."

"No trace of poison in his blood?"

"None whatever."

"Or in his stomach?"

"None."

"How could he have been poisoned through the stomach?" Rumsey asked her.

"I don't know how," said Mme. Storey; "but I didn't want to overlook anything . . . But do men die like that?" she went on to the doctor. "Without any apparent reason?"

"Oh, yes, madam."

"Healthy men?"

"Few men over forty can be said to be perfectly healthy. His lungs showed some infiltration due to old tubercular lesions. His heart was a

little enlarged, but without any pericarditis. There were also some suspicious spots elsewhere. All common conditions."

"But none of them sufficient to have caused death?"

"Not ordinarily."

"Then if this were just an ordinary case, the report would be that the man died of . . ."

"Heart failure, madam."

Mme. Storey and the inspector looked at each other. Rumsey was very glum.

"But aren't there poisons, doctor," my employer insisted, "that may kill without leaving any trace of themselves in the body?"

"There are such poisons," answered Chisholm cautiously, "but naturally they are not known outside the laboratory. We never meet them in practice."

"But there is a possibility," my employer pointed out, "that this crime may be the work of a chemist."

Chisholm nodded.

"Would you be kind enough to prepare me a list of such poisons, together with their properties and effects so far as known?" she asked him.

"Certainly, madam."

"What's the use of that?" inquired Rumsey. "Even though there are such poisons, how can we possibly trace them?"

"Every method has to start as an experiment," Mme. Storey answered, smiling.

"I say we're stalled," said Rumsey with a harassed air. "Aren't we justified now in assuming that it was only a coincidence?" At a questioning look from Mme. Storey he continued: "Well, a practical joker calls up and tells you there is going to be a murder at Mrs. Julian's. You go there, and a man happens to die from natural causes."

My employer slowly shook her head. "That would be stretching the arm of coincidence too far. I don't believe he died a natural death, and you don't believe it. The public would never believe it, and if we tried to put it over it would only react to the damage of our own reputations."

"But what can we do?" he said helplessly. "There is no case against any one."

"In this emergency we must build up a case."

"Have you a theory?" he asked eagerly.

"I have a theory," she answered dryly, "but the evidence is at present quite insufficient."

THEY agreed to withhold the result of the autopsy for a few hours, or at least until Dr. Chisholm had time to read up on the rare poisons that might have been administered to Ram Lal.

However, just as the doctor was leaving, the telephone rang and a man's voice inquired for him. I handed the instrument over to him. He presently clapped a hand over the transmitter and lifted a dismayed face.

"It's the city editor of the *Morning Press,*" he said. "He tells me that somebody has just called him up to say that the autopsy on the body of Ram Lal revealed no trace of poison. He wants me to confirm it. At my office they have informed him I was here."

Inspector Rumsey jumped up, swearing roundly. My employer used no expletives, but her face turned grim.

"This is the 'fine Italian hand' of the murderer again," she said quietly.

"He is vain of his crime; vain enough to keep the newspapers informed."

"But the three fakers are all locked up!" cried the perplexed inspector. "How could they reach a telephone?"

She did not answer. "If the truth about the autopsy is out, we would only make ourselves ridiculous by denying it," she said to Dr. Chisholm. "Tell the city editor his information is correct."

He did so, and hung up. Both men looked to my employer for inspiration. She arose and paced the long room, thinking hard. At last she said:

"When you find yourself in a tight place, surprise measures are often useful. Jim Shryock dares you to produce the suspects for a hearing two days hence. Why wait until he is ready? Shryock is famous for his success in making away with evidence. I suggest that you produce the trio before a magistrate this afternoon."

"They'll be set free!" cried Rumsey.

Mme. Storey shrugged as if to say she was not so sure. "Have them up this afternoon. Summon your witnesses to court. But do not let the suspects be called before the bar until just before court adjourns. If the case goes over until the next day, so much the better. I take it you can arrange that."

"Sure," said the puzzled Rumsey. "Anything you say. But what's the idea? Just give me a hint what you're up to, so I won't make any mistake."

"It's very simple," she answered. "I want to collect the whole cast of our tragedy in court this afternoon, and keep them there so that I can do some intensive work on the case without interference."

"How about Liptrott's machine—don't you want to investigate it?"

"I'll attend to him while I'm eating my lunch," repiied my employer casually.

CHAPTER VI.

LIPTROTT'S GENERATOR.

IN order to save time, I had a light lunch sent in for Mme. Storey. She was eating it when Liptrott was brought up from headquarters carrying his precious box. His guards were invited to wait in the hall. Inspector Rumsey, who had been away on some errand, returned about the same time.

I have already described the old man with his decent black clothes and old-fashioned Yankee manner. There was no look of the potential murderer about him. On all subjects but one he seemed perfectly sane and shrewd; but when that blessed machine came up, his tongue went wild. Such borderline cases, of course, may be extremely dangerous.

"He's happy again," the inspector whispered to Mme. Storey. "They gave him another needle."

And indeed the old man seemed as pleased as a child at a party. My employer had me order in some good cigars for him. Liptrott bit the end off one, and lighted it with gusto.

"The real Havana, ma'am. Once I smoked none but the best, myself."

We grouped ourselves around the big writing table.

"Mr. Liptrott," said Mme. Storey, "I didn't have them bring you up here to worry you with more questions about that terrible affair yesterday. I am just curious about that wonderful machine of yours, and I'm hoping you will give me a demonstration."

The old fellow sprang up with alacrity. "Happy to oblige, ma'am."

I was sitting on Mme. Storey's right

with my notebook on the table. The inspector was opposite her, with his chair turned half around so he could watch Liptrott. The old man carried his apparatus to the nearest electrical outlet in the baseboard, and lifted out the smaller box with the cords dangling from it, and switches and dials on top. Plugging it in, he turned a switch and I heard the familiar buzzing and crackling. The sound brought back the whole horrible scene in Mrs. Julian's boudoir.

Satisfied that it was working all right, he switched it off and gave us a little lecture. I shall not try to repeat it all. A crazy mixture of electrical and physiological terms; it sounded like utter nonsense to me. For instance:

"... And so, ma'am, just as a man-made generator gathers the vital principle out of the air and sends it to us in a current that we can use for light and power, so nature's generator which is the body absorbs life through its organs. But as the body machine wears out it becomes less able to transmute raw life to its own uses, and so our vitality fails.

"My machine replaces the organs and glands of the body. It takes raw electricity from the power station and digests it into a form that the body can use. I am no quack doctor. I make no claim that it can cure disease. I only say that it will furnish you with the vitality necessary to resist disease and to keep you young."

The obvious question was, why didn't he renew his own visibly failing vitality? However, nobody put it to him.

"How wonderful!" said Mme. Storey. "Can you give us all a sample now?"

"Not all of you at once," he said. "One at a time. I must first find out the measure of a person's vitality, and set the machine accordingly. No two persons are the same."

"I see," said Mme. Storey. "We are all like radio receiving sets that only pick up the wave lengths for which we are set."

"Same principle, ma'am."

You see, there was a crazy plausibility about his spiel. I could understand how a woman like Mrs. Julian might be deceived by it a while.

LIPTROTT held out a small zinc cylinder that was connected to the machine by a cord. "If you'll grasp this a minute the dial will register."

Mme. Storey obeyed, and he read off the dial: "Seven-four-seven point two-five. Your vitality is very high, ma'am. You would not need my machine for many a year to come."

"That's nice. I suppose it won't hurt me?"

"Oh, no. Nobody feels so good but what they could feel better." He took the cylinder from her.

"What must I do now?" she asked.

"Nothing, ma'am. You may sit and eat. The best of my machine is, the user don't have to devote any time to it. You can go on about your business and it will still be doing its work as long as you're in the same room."

"How convenient!"

Seating herself, she took another sandwich. Meanwhile Liptrott turned a switch and the crackling recommenced. He had set up a little vertical steel disk on top of the box, and turned it toward Mme. Storey. For a time nothing was said.

"Do you feel anything?" he asked at last.

"A sort of pleasant warmth stealing through my veins."

"That's it!" he cried exultantly. "Increased vitality . . . I am only giving you a very little," he added. "Too much would be dangerous, very dangerous."

It was impossible to tell from Mme. Storey's expression whether she was really impressed or not. Rumsey was watching her covertly.

Liptrott presently switched off the current. "That's enough," he said, "or you wouldn't get any sleep tonight."

"I am tingling all over," she said.

"Would either of you like to try it?" asked Liptrott.

"No, thanks," said the inspector quickly. "I'll take Mme. Storey's word for it."

"I also," I said.

"Can I look inside the box?" asked Mme. Storey.

"Sure," said Liptrott, "but you won't understand what you see." He unhooked the cover, and inside we saw a complicated arrangement of tubes and coils and wires with an odd-shaped bulb in the middle. When he switched on the current the bulb crackled with greenish sparks. Liptrott soon shut it off.

"The green rays are harmful to the eyes," he explained.

He carefully deposited the box in its case together with the various cords and handles, and locked it up. He then stood up with a manner that he intended to be very dramatic, but it was pathetic in one so old. His eyes were quite daft then.

"Now that I have convinced you of the worth of my invention," he said, "I have a statement to make."

Mme. Storey was calmly eating. "What is it?"

The venerable Liptrott folded his arms and said in a low voice:

"It was me who killed Professor Ram Lal."

"The devil! How?" exclaimed Rumsey.

"With my machine. I gave him the full charge. It killed him. I told Mme. Storey over the phone I was going to do it."

"Yours was not the voice I heard over the phone," I said.

"I changed my voice to sound young."

"What did you do it for?" demanded the inspector.

"He was a blackguard and a swindler! I killed him to save Mrs. Julian."

"Is there anything in this?" queried the inspector, turning to Mme. Storey.

She glanced at the old man enigmatically. "I find it hard to believe," she said, "because I only experienced good from the machine." Clearly, this was to draw old Liptrott out.

Mildly as her doubt was expressed, it roused Liptrott to a crazy fury. In order to justify his invention he was willing, it appeared, to send himself to the chair.

"It's true! It's true!" he cried, stamping on the floor. "What can build up can also destroy! If I had an animal here, a dog, a cat, a bird, I could prove it to you. I would kill it before your eyes."

MY employer pretended to raise objections. "I don't want anything killed."

"Then I won't kill it," promised Liptrott. "I'll just drive it crazy for a time. That will show you. Send out to an animal store," he begged; "get a guinea pig, a young dog, anything that has life."

The upshot of this strange scene was that I was presently dispatched to the basement to borrow the house cat

from the superintendent. I returned carrying it in my arms. It was a friendly cat, and I was fond of it. I did not think any harm would come to it. I thought my employer's aim was merely to call the old lunatic's bluff. I was certain that it was not Liptrott who had given me the warning by telephone.

He had his machine out of the box again, and was testing it when I entered. He had calmed down, but his glance was still insane. "It will be a little difficult to take her register," he said. "You had better hold her, since she's accustomed to you."

I held the cat on her back in my lap, putting the zinc cylinder against her breast as Liptrott told me, while he steadied her hind quarters. She was a gentle cat, and made no protest at first; but suddenly, with a loud *miaow,* she leaped from my lap, and running to the door, scratched at it and looked at me reproachfully over her shoulder.

"I have her register!" cried Liptrott, glancing at his dial. "It is seven-six-eight. A very strong cat. So much the better!"

Switching on the current he turned the steel disk in the direction of the cat. She, seeing that no further move was to be made against her, sat down with admirable composure and started licking her paw.

It all seemed like crazy nonsense to me, nevertheless my heart was beating fast. There was something uncanny about it. There was no sound in the room, but the muffled crackling and buzzing from inside the box.

Suddenly the cat, with an uneasy whine, arose and stood as if listening, twitching her tail. She crouched and whimpered, twisting her head from side to side. Then, with a cry, she began to run. She ran straight into the wall. She seemed to have increased to twice her size, and her tail stood up as thick as a fox's brush. Faster and faster she ran, like a creature possessed, until she seemed to be running straight around the walls.

It was too horrible. I screamed, they told me afterward, and climbed on my chair. That awful old man rubbed his hands together in crazy glee. Mme. Storey merely sat and munched her sandwich. Inspector Rumsey had the presence of mind to open the door into my room, and to close it again after the distracted creature had run in. We heard her frantic scrabbling awhile, then silence.

Liptrott switched off the current. He laughed and slapped his thigh in childish delight. "Now will you believe me? Now will you believe me?" he babbled.

I stared at him in horror. Crazy he certainly was, but it seemed to me that he possessed the power of life and death in that black box!

"Then it's true!" muttered the inspector. "It was he who killed Ram Lal!"

"He had no more to do with Ram Lal's death than I had," said Mme. Storey coolly from her chair. "I suspected it from the first. Now I know it. There is nothing the matter with the cat but a shot of cocaine. I saw him give her the needle while Bella held her."

Poor Rumsey looked excessively foolish. I know I felt so.

Liptrott, when his trick was exposed, snarled with rage, and started cursing us all. But his factitious strength had spent itself. He fell to laughing and crying weakly. He sank down on the floor and spread his arms around his machine, completely imbecile.

"Nothing in it but a crazy desire to win notoriety for his machine," said Mme. Storey. "There's no use bringing him up in court. Better take him home to his hotel."

Rumsey nodded.

"It would be inhuman to turn him adrift in that state," Mme. Storey went on compassionately. "He has been a valuable man, in his day. We must have him examined by an alienist and committed to a comfortable place where he can play with his toy to his heart's content, and give treatments to the other inmates."

CHAPTER VII.

AN EMBARRASSED INSPECTOR.

SINCE I had inside information that the suspects in the Ram Lal case were not to be called before the magistrate until near the close of the session, I did not go to court until after four. The place was the West Side Court on Fifty-Third Street. I was provided with a witness's card, which would admit me to a seat on the front benches.

The first editions of the afternoon papers had carried the story of the arraignment, and there was a great crowd on hand. I could not get in by the main door, but had to go around to the prisoners' entrance, and make my way through the long corridor where the accused sit on a wooden bench, waiting for their cases to be called. Dr. Cushack favored me with a poisonous glance as I passed him. It was a sore trial to him to be rubbing shoulders with a drunk-and-disorderly on one side and a sneak thief on the other. Mrs. Bracker was being held in some other part of the building.

I was only too familiar with that ugly, mustard-colored hall and its always fetid atmosphere. Everybody connected with the case was already on hand except Mme. Storey. Inspector Rumsey was sitting inside the rail with a worried expression. The hour was growing late, and he kept glancing toward the door.

Mrs. Julian sat beside him in what was for her a very sober outfit; plum-colored silk and a sable coat. Her puffy, floured face was the chief attraction for the back-benchers. You could see their eyes fairly goggling at the thought: A million dollars a year!

Several servants from her house, together with other witnesses, were strung along the front bench. Bunbury's smooth face wore an expression of dignified gravity. He looked quite the gentleman in his neat business suit.

The gross figure of Jim Shryock was lolling in the corner seat of the front row. With a sneer fixed on his face, he was idly trimming his nails. An entirely unscrupulous lawyer with mysterious political affiliations, he was one of the most sinister figures in New York. Everybody knew he was a crook, but it seemed impossible to reach him.

I was astonished to see that Shryock had old Liptrott sitting beside him. At the moment I was unable to figure out the significance of this move. Liptrott was quiet enough then.

The magistrate was McManigal, one of the newer appointees, who take themselves very seriously.

As the moments passed the frown on Inspector Rumsey's face deepened. He knew that he was doomed to cut a ridiculous figure in court unless Mme. Storey came to his aid before our suspects were arraigned.

Finally the names of the odd trio were called, and they were brought in.

Cushack was trying to look nonchalant, while Mrs. Bracker was tight-lipped and defiant. Both wished to have it understood that though they happened to be arraigned together, there was no connection between them. Jim Shryock arose lazily and entered the enclosure to whisper with them.

THE first to speak, Rumsey asked that the prisoners be held for further evidence until the next day. The magistrate looked at him in feigned surprise. To those who know their New York I do not need to explain that the relations between the Board of Magistrates and the police are apt to be of the cat-and-dog order. His honor was not ill pleased at the opportunity to score a point against an inspector.

"Why, inspector," he said, "it was at your own request, wasn't it, that these people were arraigned to-day?"

"Quite so," said the inspector unhappily. "I was in the expectation of receiving additional evidence which has not yet come to hand."

Mrs. Bracker cried out shrilly: "I demand to be tried! I demand to be tried!"

Shryock, smiling insolently, hushed her up, and addressed the court suavely: "Your honor, I must protest against sending these people back to jail. There is not one iota of evidence against them. They should never have been locked up."

"I don't know why they were brought before me," said his honor with a bored air. "It is most unusual in a charge of such gravity. However, since they are here I must act. We will proceed. If there's any evidence at all I will hold them for the grand jury." He looked around the enclosure. "Is there a representative of the district attorney present?" he asked, though he knew quite well there was not.

"No, your honor," said Rumsey, while Shryock grinned.

"Humph!" snorted the magistrate. "Proceed."

Rumsey started a speech to the bench relating all the circumstances of Ram Lal's death. He was obviously sparring for time, and his honor soon became impatient.

"Inspector, it's scarcely necessary to go into detail concerning a matter that has been so thoroughly written up in the newspapers. Just present your evidence against these persons and I'll hold them."

Rumsey bowed, and called to the stand a clerk from the store of Almon & Emory who testified to the sale of a hypodermic needle to Mrs. Bracker, and identified the order she had presented for it signed by Dr. Cushack. The clerk was followed by a policeman, who testified to the finding of a needle on Mrs. Bracker after the death of Ram Lal.

Inspector Rumsey then called me to the stand to testify as to the obvious jealousy and hatred that Cushack and Mrs. Bracker had exhibited toward Ram Lal.

"Is that all?" asked the magistrate, running up his eyebrows.

"That is all, your honor."

Shryock spoke up. "If you please, your honor, Mrs. Bracker would like to testify in her own behalf concerning that needle."

She was put on the stand and sworn. In her neat, close-fitting gray suit and shaped hat she was as smart as paint. Just the same, she was a horrible-looking woman with those ghastly, starved cheeks and a mouth like a red gash in her powdered face. She sat down, crossed her legs and spread her

gloves on her knee with a great pretense of self-possession.

"DO you admit buying the needle at Almon & Emory's?" asked lawyer Shryock smoothly.

"Certainly. But that was not the same one they found in my pocket."

"One moment! Just confine yourself to answering my questions, please. For what purpose did you buy that needle?"

"Well, I told Mrs. Julian I bought it for a friend," she said volubly, "but that was only a stall. I'm not an addict, but I take cocaine occasionally for my neuralgia. Dr. Cushack told me it was nicer to take in liquid form. So I bought the needle. But I didn't like taking drugs that way, so I threw the needle away."

"Oh, you threw it away. Where?"

"One night when I was crossing Brooklyn Bridge in a taxi I threw it out of the window."

"What about the needle that was found in your pocket?"

"I know nothing about that!" she cried stridently. "It wasn't mine! It was planted on me!"

"All right," concluded Shryock. "That's all." He turned to Rumsey. "Will you question her, inspector?"

"No," replied Rumsey, glumly.

Shryock's next move was to put Liptrott on the stand. "When Ram Lal fell down dead in Mrs. Julian's boudoir," the lawyer said, "I understand that you and these two people were seated behind him and to one side against the wall."

"Yes, sir." The old man was perfectly composed. "I was nearest to the Hindu, then Mrs. Bracker, then the doctor."

"Did either of those persons move from their places during the séance?"

"No, sir. They never moved."

"Are you sure?"

"Sure I'm sure! They couldn't have reached the Hindu without passing in front of me."

"All right. Now I've got just one more question to ask you." Shryock glanced around the court as much as to say there was something good coming. "Can you tell me anything about the hypodermic needle that was found in Mrs. Bracker's pocket?"

A foolish grin spread over the old man's face. He scratched his neck with a forefinger.

"Sure," he said. "That was my needle. I planted it in her pocket."

His words created a mild sensation in the room. All realized that what little was left of the inspector's case had gone glimmering.

"Why did you do that?" asked Shryock.

"Well, when I seen Ram Lal was dead I thought maybe they'd try to hang it on me," the old man said with his witless grin. "I had the needle in my pocket, and I thought they'd make out I'd given him a shot of something, since I was the nearest to him."

"That's all," finished Shryock, in high satisfaction.

"I protest, your honor!" cried Rumsey indignantly. "This man is out of his wits. He's not a fit witness. I can prove it if you give me time."

"Just a minute, inspector," said the magistrate. "As I understand it, this man Liptrott is an addict. You found a bottle of cocaine on him, but no needle. Is that right?"

"Yes."

"Did you ever find his needle?"

"No."

"Then the chances are he's speaking the truth."

"I insist he's not a proper witness,"

repeated Rumsey, snatching at anything to gain a moment or two.

The magistrate shrugged. "Can you offer any evidence that Ram Lal died of poison?" he asked.

"No, your honor."

"Then it doesn't matter whether this man's testimony is proper or not. You have no case, inspector. And I have no alternative but to—"

He was interrupted by the entrance of Mme. Storey.

She entered by the side door, smiling and beautifully dressed. She was carrying a small satchel. A man and a woman followed her; new witnesses, I assumed. They were unknown to me. Inspector Rumsey's glum face cleared as if by magic. A murmur of gratification travelled around the court—then dead silence. All knew her, of course, from her often-published photographs. As a star attraction Mrs. Julian was nowhere compared to Mme. Storey. The audience's silence seemed to say: "Now we'll get a run for our money."

And they did.

CHAPTER VIII.

MME. STOREY'S ANGLE.

BEFORE I go on with my account of the magistrate's hearing I should explain that among the list of rare poisons furnished by Dr. Chisholm, there was one that could be quite simply prepared by distilling and redistilling a substance that is in universal use. This stuff may be purchased in any quantity from druggists or department stores, yet the poison derived from it is one of the deadliest known; moreover, it kills without leaving any trace of itself in the body.

There are so many stills about nowadays, and the process of distilling is so generally understood, that all the doctors in the case agreed it would be against the public interest to advertise this formula. Consequently this poison was never named in the case, and of course I must not name it here. I will simply call the stuff X and the poison distillate DX.

Magistrate McManigal greeted Mme. Storey gallantly, and invited her to a place on the bench. As she seated herself she said:

"I have brought a little additional evidence in this case."

Ah, with what a sharp anxiety Cushack and Mrs. Bracker glanced at her then! The little doctor lost his nonchalance. Jim Shryock chewed the ends of his mustache, sneering still.

"Do you wish these persons to be called to the stand?" asked the magistrate.

"First of all I would like to ask Mrs. Bracker a few questions, if she is willing," said Mme. Storey politely.

Mrs. Bracker glanced anxiously at Shryock, and he answered for her. "Certainly! She is not obliged to answer the questions unless it suits her."

So Mrs. Bracker took the stand again.

Mme. Storey began in a voice as mild as milk—it is at such moments that she is most to be feared: "I suppose you were well acquainted with Ram Lal through having met him at Mrs. Julian's so often?"

"No, indeed!" said Mrs. Bracker, with a toss of her head. "I never aspired to be his friend. I had nothing whatever to do with him."

"What is your explanation of his death?" asked Mme. Storey innocently.

"Oh, I suppose he had a stroke of some sort. Not surprising, with the life he led."

"What about his life?"

"Don't ask me! One couldn't help hearing stories about what went on at that elegant seraglio of his on Seventy-Ninth Street."

Mme. Storey made no attempt to follow up this lead. "I suppose you have witnessed many of Ram Lal's séances at Mrs. Julian's?" she said.

"Sure," was the indifferent reply.

"Weren't you impressed by them?"

"No!"

"Then you believe they weren't genuine?"

"He was just a common faker!" declared Mrs. Bracker scornfully. "That's known now, isn't it? East Indian! Huh!"

"But he seemed to me to be completely under an influence," said Mme. Storey blandly; "to be lifted right out of himself, as you might say."

Mrs. Bracker merely laughed disagreeably.

My employer continued: "Did they always end the same as yesterday—in a sort of fit?"

"Sure! That was part of his game."

"But how could he fake that?" asked Mme. Storey. "The frothing at the mouth, and all."

"Used to slip a wafer into his mouth," said Mrs. Bracker, laughing. "Sort of soapy wafer. That made the froth. It's an old trick."

"Did you see him do that?" asked Mme. Storey, feigning to be greatly surprised.

"Sure. I used to watch for it."

"Did you see him do it yesterday?"

"Sure. I saw his hand go up."

"Thanks, that all," concluded Mme. Storey unexpectedly.

Mrs. Bracker stared at her hatefully. She felt that she had been tricked somehow.

"What's that got to do with me?"

"Nothing whatever," replied Mme. Storey sweetly.

Mrs. Bracker stepped down in somewhat of a fluster.

"WHAT do you expect to show by this line of questioning?" the magistrate asked Mme. Storey. We all pricked up our ears for her answer.

She said: "The first assumption was that Ram Lal had been poisoned through being jabbed by a hypodermic needle. That theory won't hold water. I now aim to show that he was poisoned by the wafer which he took into his mouth a few seconds before he died."

"Poison from what source, madam?"

"I'm coming to that," she evaded pleasantly. "I should now like to put on the stand this woman whom I brought with me, Mrs. Euphemia Larkin. She is really Inspector Rumsey's witness, but he hasn't had an opportunity to talk to her. So if you will permit me I will question her."

"Certainly," allowed the magistrate. "We are not sticklers for formality here. All we want is to bring out the truth."

Shryock arose with his disagreeable smile; yet plainly the man was a little worried. "Excuse me, your honor, but it is five o'clock. I'm sorry to have to mention it, but I have an important engagement . . ."

You could hear the whole room take a breath. They were afraid that the curtain was going to be rung down just at the most exciting moment. Well, his honor was only human and he did not want to miss the *dénouement*.

"Will it take long?" he asked Mme. Storey.

"Less than ten minutes, your honor."

"We will proceed."

Mrs. Larkin was a typical New York

Irish charwoman, a racy specimen. Still youngish and not at all bad-looking, she proudly displayed her Sunday clothes on the witness stand. A little intimidated by finding all eyes upon her, she was nevertheless enjoying her conspicuousness.

"What is your employment, Mrs. Larkin?" asked Mme. Storey.

"Cleaning woman in the Stilson Building on Forty-Second Street, ma'am."

Mme. Storey opened the satchel she had brought and took from it two square-sided quart bottles such as druggists use, a piece of wrapping paper, a length of string and a pink ticket.

"Do you recognize these things?"

"Sure!" said Mrs. Larkin. "Them's the things I give you in my rooms a half hour ago."

"Where did you get them?"

"Picked 'em out of the wastebasket in Room 1014 of my building."

"You can swear that it was Room 1014?"

"Sure. Them's druggist's bottles, and 1014 is a doctor's office, sort of, with a laboratory and all."

"When did you find them there?"

"Night before last at cleaning time."

"You are sure of the time?"

"Absolutely. I mind taking them home with me."

"What did you take them home for?"

"Well, bottles come in handy nowadays," said Mrs. Larkin with a grin that set the whole court roaring. "As for the paper, I took that to wrap the bottles in. I knew they'd come in that paper, because the creases just fitted. And so did the string."

"How about this pink ticket?"

That's a sales ticket from the cut-price drug store in the Stilson Building. I pick up a lot of 'em in the wastebaskets. If you save 'em till you get a hundred dollars' worth they give you a dollar credit in the store."

"Who is the tenant in Room 1014?"

"Dr. A. Cushack."

"Do you know him?"

"No'm. He's always gone home before I do my work."

"That's all, thank you," said Mme. Storey.

Mrs. Larkin stepped down, a little disappointed that her turn had been so brief.

"IF Dr. Cushack is willing to testify as to these bottles . . ." Mme. Storey began politely.

He was already on his feet. "Sure!" he cried. "I want the court to know what was in them!" He took the stand with a truculent air. A day in jail had rubbed none of the bloom off that natty little man. He pretended to be swelling with indignation, like a little turkey-cock.

"You admit, then, that these were your bottles," said Mme. Storey.

"I can't identify them," he said with a conceited laugh, "but if she says she got them out of my wastebasket it's all right with me. Tell the judge what was in them."

"Each bottle contained X," said Mme. Storey carelessly, naming the basis of the deadly poison mentioned by Dr. Chisholm.

"Yeah, X!" he cried, thrusting out his chin at her. "I use it in my lab work. I couldn't do anything without it. Everybody uses X for one thing or another. Thousands of bottles are sold every day. Is there any harm in X?"

"Why, no," said Mme. Storey. "But a little goes a long way. I was just surprised that you used so much."

"Oh, maybe not so much. I don't know how long I've had those botles on hand."

That was his first slip.

"I do know," said Mme. Storey quietly. "You bought them the same day."

He stared at her speechlessly. She merely exhibited the sales slip.

"You can't prove anything by that!" he cried. "They don't enter the items on the sales slips. Only the amounts."

"True," said Mme. Storey. "The bottles are each marked thirty-nine cents. The slip is for seventy-eight."

"That doesn't prove anything. It's only a coincidence. Half the articles they sell are priced at thirty-nine cents."

"Well, what else did you buy that day?" She glanced at the slip. "February 9."

He was dumb.

Mme. Storey gave him a brief respite. It is her way with a witness.

"What's your idea of this case?" she asked confidentially. "Was Ram Lal poisoned?"

Cushack rose to it immediately. "It's an open question," he said importantly. "As a toxicologist I aspire to do a little investigating myself when I get out. It's an elegant case."

Then my employer returned abruptly to the attack. She asked: "What did you do with two quarts of X day before yesterday?"

"I was conducting an experiment," the doctor answered warily.

"Of what nature?"

"I refuse to answer. I make my living out of my experiments."

"But no other drugs were found in your laboratory."

"Well, I used everything up," the doctor replied, bristling a trifle.

"What did you do with the final product of your experiment that day?"

"Poured it down the wash-basin. It was unsuccessful."

"Then why not tell me what other drugs you used? Where you got them, and so on."

"Why should I?" he parried.

"Ever hear of distillate of X?" she asked casually.

Some of the pink faded out of Dr. Cushack's cheeks. "Yes," he admitted. "Poisons are my specialty."

"You are familiar with its properties then?"

He hesitated briefly before answering. "I have read about it. Never experimented with it."

MME. STOREY started on another line. "Where did you go when—"

Cushack interrupted her excitedly. "No, you don't! I perceive what you're after! You can't make an insinuation like that before the court without following it up!"

"All right," she said good-naturedly. "I'll follow it up. Did you make distillate of X in your laboratory day before yesterday?"

"No!" he shouted. "It's false!" He wiped his face.

"What time did you leave the office that day?" she asked.

"I don't remember," he answered sullenly.

"Now, come," she cajoled. "It was only day before yesterday."

"About six," he muttered.

"Where did you go?"

"Home."

"By the way, where do you live? I don't think I have been told."

"Hotel Shirley."

"Oh, the Shirley! Did any one there see you come in?"

"I got my key from the desk as usual. It's not likely the clerk could

remember me on that particular night," the little doctor parried, his voice rising and his forehead visibly beading with perspiration.

"Where did you dine?"

The doctor winced. "At the hotel."

"Alone?"

"Yes."

"Do you always occupy the same seat?" Mme Storey queried.

"Yes."

"With the same people, more or less, at the surrounding tables?"

Cushack saw too plainly where these innocent questions were leading him, and turned scared and stubborn. "I won't answer!" he cried shrilly. "I won't answer any more. If you're trying to pin this thing on me I don't have to answer!"

"Why, of course not!" agreed Mme. Storey with undisturbed good humor. "You may step down."

CHAPTER IX.

THE LAST SUSPECT.

SHE then called the man she had brought with her, a lean young fellow with a bright eye. His name was given as John Withy; his occupation, free-lance writer.

"Where do you live?" she asked.

"Number — West Forty-Seventh Street."

"What sort of building is that?"

"An old residence which has been rebuilt into stores, offices and small apartments. It's a walk-up building."

"Where are your rooms?"

"I have a one room and bath apartment, third floor rear."

"Have you ever before seen Dr. Cushack, the man who last testified here?"

"Yes, ma'am. Saw him in my building day before yesterday. That was Wednesday. About 6.30 P. M."

"Under what circumstances?"

"Well, I was coming home to wash up for dinner and I found him standing in the hall outside my door. Seemed funny, hanging around like that. So I left my door open when I went in, to sort of keep an eye on him. My friend who lives in the front is out of town, and I thought maybe the fellow aimed to get in there. But another man come upstairs in a minute or two, and it seemed this doctor was just waiting for him. The second fellow was the man who rents the hall room next to mine. Alfred Somers is the name on his letterbox downstairs."

"Did you hear what they said to each other?" asked Mme. Storey.

"Just a word or two. Somers says, 'Have you got it?' and this man"—he nodded in the direction of Dr. Cushack —"says, 'Yeah.' Somers says: 'Come on in,' and they went into his room. This sounded kind of mysterious to me, and I wanted to hear more. There is an old door between my room and Somers's which is locked now and the cracks stuffed with paper. I put my ear to the crack and I hear Somers say, 'How can I fix the wafer with this?' and this doctor here says: 'Just pour a few drops on it and let it soak in.' That was all I could hear, and I thought nothing of it at the time."

"Mr. Withy," said Mme. Storey with delicate impressiveness, "I want you to look around this court room and see if you can pick out the man you knew as Alfred Somers."

I jumped, her move was so absolutely unexpected. A breathless silence fell on the court room as young Withy's eyes passed from face to face. It was apparent to all that this Somers must be the actual murderer of Ram Lal.

Withy's eyes traveled slowly along the front bench, came to Bunbury and stopped there. "Why," he said in a surprised voice, "why—that's the man!"

COURT and spectators were perfectly silent. Bunbury jumped up with a face as gray as ashes; then dropped back in his seat laughing. From the end of the bench Jim Shryock laughed loudly to create a diversion. As for me, I was stony with astonishment.

Shryock was quickly on his feet. "Your honor, I must protest!" he cried. "This accusation is laughable, but it is likely to do serious harm to a faithful servant and an honest man! Why, Bunbury has been working for Mrs. Julian for eight years. What possible motive—"

"I beg your pardon," interrupted Mme. Storey with a wicked smile, "are you representing Bunbury, too?"

She had him there, but he didn't care so long as there was no jury present. "No!" he cried theatrically. "My words are dictated by motives of humanity!"

My employer enjoyed a smile at the claim that Jim Shryock had taken a case out of love for humanity.

"Mr. Bunbury, may I have the privilege of representing you here?" asked Shryock with a bow.

"Please do," mumbled the butler. He was a wretched figure then.

"Then I ask again," shouted Shryock, "what possible motive could this man have had for committing such a crime?"

"This is only a preliminary hearing," said Mme. Storey, "and it's not necessary to try the whole case. However, I am perfectly willing to give you the information. It is true that Bunbury has been working for Mrs. Julian for eight years. During that time a whole procession of fakers and charlatans have succeeded in wheedling great sums of money out of Bunbury's mistress.

"Naturally it made Bunbury envious to see all that going out of the house. He began to wonder if he couldn't divert the golden stream in his own direction. The knowledge of Mrs. Julian's character which his position had gained him, his familiarity with every detail of her life and affairs, gave him a special advantage. Naturally he couldn't swindle her in his own person, so he engaged cat's-paws one after another—Mrs. Bracker, Dr. Cushack, Ram Lal—and taught them how to do it."

"We have only your word for this, madam," said Shryock sarcastically. "And you still haven't answered my question. If Ram Lal was Bunbury's own man, why in heaven's name should Bunbury murder him?"

"Because Ram Lal held out on him," said Mme. Storey sweetly. "It was partly out of revenge, and partly as an object lesson to the other faithful workers. Mrs. Julian has furnished me with a list of all the sums she has given these three people, with the dates. On the other hand, my operatives have secured lists of Bunbury's deposits in his several bank accounts.

"These lists will be offered in evidence, of course, and we will show that for every payment made by Mrs. Julian, Bunbury deposited half the amount next day. With one exception: Mrs. Julian gave Ram Lal a hundred thousand dollars two weeks ago. Bunbury got none of that."

Shryock shrugged elaborately. It was all he could do under the circumstances.

"Well, when I see your evidence," he said with a sneer, "I'll be ready to meet it."

"It is sufficient," said Magistrate McManigal. "I will hold these two persons as accessories before the fact. Inspector, I presume you will take care of Bunbury."

"I will, your honor," said Rumsey grimly.

Bunbury had already recovered himself by the time they came to lead him out. He was a very remarkable man. His vanity was hurt by the recollection of that moment when he had shown fear before all these people, and he was bound to make a good exit. He walked to where Mrs. Julian sat and made a low bow.

"My keys, madam," he said, handing them over. "I trust you will find everything in order at home."

Mrs. Julian was too much overcome to say a word.

Bunbury faced the policeman who was ready to attend him. "Keep your hands off me," he said with dignity. "I shall make no resistance." Then he walked out with the air of a martyr going proudly to the stake. If it had been in the theater he would certainly have got a big hand.

ON the same evening Mme. Storey, Inspector Rumsey and I had dinner in a little Italian restaurant on Fifty-Second Street where the spaghetti with anchovies is something to write h o m e about. We all felt the blessed sense of relaxation that follows the completion of a tough bit of work. It was fun to hold a sort of post-mortem on the case.

Mme. Storey said: "The first thing that struck me was that Ram Lal was a stupid fellow playing a clever part. Particularly after I got his history from the police. Before the Ram Lal impersonation he was nothing but a sneak thief, the lowest order of crooks. This suggested that he was simply drilled to go through the motions of crystal-gazing. His whole spiel sounded like something learned by rote.

"When I watched Mrs. Bracker and Cushack and read the transcripts of their examinations by the police, I saw that they also were much too stupid to have thought up the parts they were playing—both parts, by the way, devilishly well calculated to d e c e i v e a woman of Mrs. Julian's character. There was a certain likeness, too, in all these games. This put the idea into my head that there was a superior intelligence directing all three of them.

"Old Liptrott bothered me because he did not fit. His style was quite different from the others, and I could not b e l i e v e that a clever schemer would risk employing so crazy a tool. So I assumed that Liptrott was a hang-over from a time previous to the entrance of the rest of the gang on the scene, and let it go at that. Subsequent events proved that I was quite right."

"When did you begin to suspect Bunbury?" I asked.

"Just as soon as I decided there was a master mind behind the three puppets, my intuition suggested that it was B u n b u r y. Many little straws pointed in that direction. Bunbury was the only person who possessed the requisite knowledge of Mrs. Julian's character. Believe me, nothing can be hidden from our servants! Then I learned from Mrs. Julian that Bunbury had been instrumental in getting the previous lot of fakers fired. All e x c e p t Liptrott, whom he probably regarded as harmless. And for one

brief moment in the boudoir I had a glimpse of the power that underlay the butler's smooth mask. He quelled Cushack and Mrs. Bracker with a word . . . But on the whole it was chiefly a question of style."

"Style?" we echoed.

"Style is a mysterious thing," she went on. "You can't describe it, but you can feel it. You have noticed, I suppose, that Bunbury talks in a style of false elegance. Upper servants are much given to it. 'Elegant,' by the way, is one of the words that are frequently on his lips. Few use it nowadays.

"Well, in Ram Lal, in Mrs. Bracker, and in Dr. Cushack I kept hearing echoes of Bunbury's style. It is largely in the use to which words are put. Besides 'elegant,' notice how every one of them says 'perceive,' a bookish word, when he means 'see.' And the word 'aspire,' generally in an incorrect sense, is continually on their lips. Besides others. When pupils are taught by rote the master's voice may be clearly heard.

"Of course master minds do not work for nothing, and when I checked up what Mrs. Julian had paid out with what Bunbury had received, the motive for the crime became obvious. Ram Lal was too successful, you see. He felt that he had become independent of his master. He had defied the master, and so he had to be made to feel his master's power."

I OBJECTED. "But if it was Bunbury who warned us of the murder, why did he try to keep us out of the boudoir?"

"Think back, Bella," she said with a smile. "The objections he raised were of a sort to make us determined to enter. It is one thing to know who committed a crime, and another to produce sufficient evidence to obtain a conviction," she went on. "The men I assigned to watch Mrs. Julian's house followed Bunbury to his room on Forty-Seventh Street, and so we discovered where he was accustomed to meet and instruct his accomplices. His 'Academy of Faking,' you might call it. But by the time my assistants could get inside he had made a clean sweep of everything in the nature of evidence, of course. Bunbury made no such clumsy mistake as Cushack, who thoughtlessly threw the bottles in his wastebasket.

"I questioned a dozen people in the house before I turned up pay ore in the person of Withy. However, the word 'wafer' which Withy overheard had no significance until after I had tricked Mrs. Bracker into testifying that Ram Lal had taken a wafer. Then it took on a deadly meaning. When one of these water-tight crimes once springs a leak, it is all over."

"It certainly is lucky, for the sake of justice, that Bunbury telephoned you that day," remarked Rumsey.

"Yes, that was his weakness," said Mme. Storey. "Like all criminals of his kidney, Bunbury is devoured by a secret vanity. The result of too many years of suppression as a butler, perhaps. When his plot was all ready to shoot he was so crazy about it, it looked so absolutely detection-proof, that he couldn't bear to let it work unseen. So he gave me a phone call. It was obviously an afterthought, since his associates were not told. And he might have got away with his murder," concluded Mme. Storey whimsically, "had it not been for his 'elegant' English."

THE END.

"If you cannot take a small yacht that carries fifty men—" the Russian sneered

"He's My Meat!"

Like a cornered tiger, the beached yacht manned by Jimmie Cordie and his fellow soldiers-of-fortune shows its teeth to the besieging pirates of the South China Sea

By W. WIRT

Author of "You-All Can't Have Him!" "The Nine Red Gods Decide," etc.

LEADING UP TO THIS INSTALLMENT

DRIVEN by a South China Sea typhoon, the yacht Katherine Neville is borne on a tidal wave through a pass in the foothills into a sand-dune valley on an island off Indo-China. The island turns out to be the stronghold of Henry Warrenne, renegade Englishman who has become a war lord of pirates and a friend of the Soviets.

But the yacht is not defenseless; for John Cabot Winthrop—better known as the Boston Bean, or Beaneater—is a soldier of fortune and lover of fighting; and with him are four comrades: Jimmie Cordie, unofficial leader of the group; Red Dolan, a big Irishman; Abraham Cohen, the Fighting Yid; and Major George Grigsby of Kentucky. All of the long-established group of hard-bitten adventurers are there save Arthur Putney, who gave his life to save them, months before.

Aboard the yacht are also the Bean's English wife, Katherine Neville Winthrop; Captain Paulet and a crew of forty; machine guns, three- and four-inch guns, Winchesters and Colts.

This story began in the Argosy for December 20.

Warrenne and his Soviet ally Radischev barely escape with their lives from a rash and premature attempt to place French seventy-fives on the hills commanding the stranded yacht, for the defenders have already occupied those elevations.

CHAPTER VII.

CHEMICAL WARFARE.

"IT'S a lead-pipe cinch," Jimmie Cordie said, "that Warrenne won't pass over what we've handed to him. Here he was, all set on his island, everything his own way—and we come riding in on a tidal wave and bust up his playhouse. He'll use more care the next time he attacks."

"What the devil now?" interrupted Red. "Let's go and smack him into the sea. There are fifty av us. Can't we take—"

"No, Red, we can't," Grigsby interrupted. "He is not to be caught twice. There is one big difference between bushwhacking an outfit and shooting our way through it, old kid. We caught him by taking advantage of his conceit this time. Don't think for a moment that fifty men can shoot their way through a thousand, if the thousand are fighting men."

They were sitting on the quarter-deck aft, all of them, including "Admiral Winthrop," as they styled Katherine.

"What he will do is this," Jimmie said. "He'll try to frame something that will pull us away from the yacht, or make a direct charge with all he's got from some other direction. At the same time, he'll throw his men against the hill positions. We can't shoot guns two ways at the same time, and he will figure that if he can keep the hill guns busy, he's got a chance at the yacht from another direction."

"Are we to be holed up here like a fox in the den av him, while that scut figures what he will do to us?" demanded Red. "We sit here like a lot of ould ladies. Are we to let a scut av the world like him take what time he needs to frame the likes av us?"

"What would you suggest, Mr. Dolan?" asked Jimmie. "Your plan of going over and slapping them into the blue sea hasn't seemed to meet with general approval."

"'Tis the only way I know, Jimmie, darlin'."

"And a darned good way, if we can't dope out any other. We've smacked him where he lives, and it's a cinch that he'll let go all holds and get us if he can. Bean, have you got any high explosives on board?"

"You mean outside of shells?"

"Yeah, dynamite or what-not."

"No. That time up on the Red River, I just happened to be packing that stuff up to a bird who was mining in Sangshu. Why?"

"I've been looking over the cut where we came in. If we could blow that fifteen or twenty feet of rock that is holding back the sea, it would fill this low valley and maybe-so we could buck her and go out the way we came in, after the valley filled."

Grigsby sat up straight in his chair. "Say that again, Jimmie."

"I said that there is a wall of rock about fifty feet thick and twelve or fifteen feet high that is holding the sea out of this sunken valley. We came over it on the tidal wave, which evidently spread over the rest of the island and got soaked up. If we can blow that wall, the yacht might be floated. We're below sea level—this sandy valley was once sea bottom."

"Maybe-so, Jimmie. Depends on how badly the yacht is damaged."

"Why, she is hardly damaged at all, George," Katherine said. "The engineer told me that she could float. He said that some of her seams were opened when she settled and he was fixing them. I—oh, I wish we could!"

Jimmie smiled at the pretty little Mrs. Winthrop. "So do I, Katherine. But if the Bean hasn't any explosives, I don't see how we are going to blow up that much rock."

"Vait," interrupted the Yid. "Ve got it plenty of shells, ain't it? Ve take the guncotton and the TNT. out of dem und—"

"There isn't enough in all of them to make a ripple in that much rock. And what we've got we'll sure need once Warrenne gets started again. Your suggestion, Mr. Cohen, is all wet."

"TOO much wah-wah," Grigsby said bluntly. "Here it is, down to cases. Warrenne will get his men together, find another place to plant what guns he has left, and throw everything he's got against us. This time we won't catch him off guard. He may come in from the west."

"That's right, George," Jimmie agreed absently. "He may."

He looked at the hills, at the narrow eastern pass the yacht came through, at the cañon through which Warrenne had started to bring his guns. He whistled softly as he looked. Grigsby watched him, a smile on his lips. Red started to speak but Grigsby caught his eye.

Finally Jimmie said, "How long do you think it will be before he makes a play, George?"

"I don't know, Jimmie. Depends upon what men he has left at his base and what he figures on doing. That's like 'how long is a piece of string?'"

Jimmie grinned. "My idea was to —it's a cinch that he won't come back for a couple of days, anyway."

"Vy is it?" asked the Yid. "Vy can't he go right back and get it his men und come?"

"He could—but he won't, Yid. You sabe Chinese as well as I do. He's got to work them up to a point before they will do business again. I don't give a darn whether they are pirates or not; right now, they wouldn't charge against a jackrabbit. For all his training them, he can't change the nature of the beast. Here, if you birds will take over the job of holding him off for say five days, I may be able to make enough high explosive to—"

"*Make* it?" echoed Red, who had worked in high explosives. "What with, ye shrimp? Sure it takes nitric and sulphuric acid and glycerin and wood pulp and—"

"I know what it takes, Red. I wasn't figuring on dynamite. I was figuring on guncotton."

"Guncotton?" the Boston Bean asked, surprised. "That's harder to—"

"Go ahead, Jimmie," Grigsby interrupted. "We haven't got all the time in the world to sit here. If you get a certain length of time, you can make guncotton enough to let the sea in, eh? Well, old kid, we'll see that you get the time."

"Fair enough," Jimmie answered with a grin. "I don't know whether I can do it or not. I know that I saw some cotton growing in a little valley from the top of the hill I was on and I also saw some blamed funny-looking fumes coming from another. If it is what I think it is and the Bean has some pots and pans his chef isn't using, maybe-so can do. I'm going to see."

"I'll go wid ye," Red announced, promptly. "If any wan can make the damned—'tis beggin' your pardon I am, alannah, for the cuss-word."

"It's quite all right, Red," answered Katherine, smiling at the big Irishman. "I said it too when John wouldn't take me to the top of the hill this morning. When are you going, Jimmie? I'd like to take a walk."

"Right now. Come on if you want to go. It's on this side, George. We can get back easy enough even if Warrenne starts anything. The gun crews will pick him up quick enough for us to get back."

Grigsby smiled. "If he comes that way, Jeems. Better take some men and a couple of the Brownings. He probably won't want any more of our game until he figures out a better plan than mounting guns on the hills, but better safe than sorry, young feller me lad. Especially if Katherine is going along."

"I'll do 'er, George. Throw out some two-men patrols on this side and stretch them out to cover those two spurs. If you scatter them—"

"You are teaching your granny how to fry eggs. Get going, Mr. Powder-maker," the Bean said.

"Come on, Codfish," Jimmie answered. "I need your chemical knowledge."

"I go mit, too, Jimmie," the Fighting Yid said. "Red und I will be the army vile you do it the expertin', ain't it?"

"It ain't," Grigsby answered for Jimmie. "You and Red both stay here. Red, you get up on the hill, the one in the middle. Yid, you take out the patrols. Any one would think you birds were out on a picnic instead of being in the middle of a war."

Red glared at Grigsby. "Supposin' that they hop Jimmie and the Bean-eater?" he demanded. "Wid herself along. What then, ye omadhaun?"

"Why, then," Grigbsy said, "they will have to take hold of hands and run, Mr. Dolan. You and the Yid can go to the rescue if that comes off. Make it snappy, Jimmie, if you are going. This bird Warrenne isn't going to wait any longer than he can help."

CHAPTER VIII.

A NEW THREAT.

WARRENNE sat in his headquarters with some of his higher officers. He could not punish those who ran, this time; he had run himself. The loss of the guns affected him very little. He could not use them on board ship—at least on the vessels at his command. The loss of men affected him still less. What did affect him was his loss of "face."

His Chinese officers were as respectful as ever and moved to obey his orders with the unquestioning speed they always did. There was no contempt shown in their eyes or on their impassive faces; and yet—Warrenne knew that his power over them had weakened badly. He had led his men into an ambush that ordinary precaution would have avoided, and in China a leader does not make many mistakes like that, and retain his command. He is lucky to retain his life.

Warrenne knew that he had to do something to regain his "face," and do it quickly. He had some fifteen hundred men in all, counting the crews of the vessels at anchor.

"What was the trouble over in your lines last night, K'ang?" he asked an old officer who had captained a pirate ship before joining Warrenne.

"The dogs heard the wailing of the spirit of Tzu-kung in the hills, Lord," K'ang answered seriously. "It told of death for us all."

"His spirit? Then it is known that he died?"

"Yes, mighty one. The wailing told of his body swinging from the wireless of the ship held by the sand dunes, and called upon his friends to go and give it honorable burial. Two of the bravest crept up in the hills and then down close. The moon was out and they could see the body swaying in the wind, O Leader of Thousands."

"Tell them that I, with Wang-sun, whose mystic power they know, will quiet the spirit of Tzu-kung, and that soon—very soon—the body will receive honorable burial. That is all for to-day, gentlemen."

The officers rose, saluted and went out. Warrenne sat there, staring at the floor. He was in a bad jam and knew it. He must destroy or capture the yacht and the men who held it. He could not do any less and retain his prestige and power. That they only had a certain amount of food and water on board he knew. He could throw a cordon around the yacht, far back in the hills, and wait until starvation and thirst drove the defenders away from it. But how long it would take, he had no way of figuring.

Counting the men there must be at the guns, the men in the charge, and those without question held in reserve at the yacht, he had figured that the Katherine Neville, was a good deal more of a fighting ship than a pleasure craft. He knew that fifty or sixty men led by the soldiers of fortune whose fighting ability was known wherever fighting men gathered, and as well armed as they were, could and would put up a terrific resistance.

A direct assault against machine guns and rapid fire guns, coming across the open valley, would be suicide for the attackers, even if they started out fifteen hundred strong. His Chinese pirates were fighting men but he could not lay down a barrage for them now that the hills were occupied; and to send them in without it—he shook his head. No fifteen hundred men of any race could go through the sleet of steel that would greet them the moment they started.

"If I had enough men," he thought grimly, "I would throw them at the yacht until she ran out of ammunition." But he hadn't. He might try for the guns on the hills—take them and turn them against the yacht. But the Chinese fought for loot and his men might turn on him if he tried to send them up against the guns that had already destroyed so many of them. It was up to him, though. If he tried to starve them out, the Chinese would think that he was afraid and had lost his planning ability. There must be some way . . .

Warrenne looked up impatiently as Radischev came in. The Russian's arm had been given first aid and he carried it in a sling. His eyes still looked inflamed, and from the flush on his face he was running a fever.

"SIT down, Boris," Warrenne said. "I am trying to think of some way to draw the fox."

"Draw the fox? I do not understand—oh, you mean some way to take the yacht?"

"Yes. Here it is, old thing. My men are fighters, I'll give the rotters credit for that. But they fight for what there is in it for them. The chance to loot the city or what-not. This yacht comes in, and to them it is only a small

craft with probably little of value on it. One hundred of them go to take it and are promptly mopped up. Then, in trying to place guns on the hills, some two hundred more are wiped out. I will admit the last was my fault if it will help any, which it won't. I should have sent advance parties up."

"That is," said Radischev smoothly, "what an American I know calls 'water under the bridge,' Warrenne. It is what you are going to do now that counts. I am afraid that if you cannot take a small yacht that carries some fifty men, with all your forces, my people will think you cannot be of much service to them in larger matters."

"What your people think does not worry me, Radischev. I have fought on my own for some years and can continue to do so. It is what my people will begin to think if I do not take that yacht and wipe out the men who killed so many of them."

"You have over a thousand men. Would not a direct assault—"

"No. It would cost me too many men, even if it went over."

"This woman you were telling me about: if you could take her you could make them do anything you say. I know the Americans and the English. They are fools about their women. In Russia we do things better."

"I know you do. Let me think for a minute. What you have said has opened up a line of thought. If I could get hold of Katherine—by gad, I'll try for it."

"And while you are," Radischev said, "I will go to the mainland and get my arm and eyes fixed up. And I have thought of another thing. First, this matter of the million in gold: if I help you destroy the yacht will you divide with me?"

"Yes," answered Warrenne without a moment's hesitation. "I will divide with you, Boris. But help does not mean the suggesting of things for me to do. It means actual help."

"That is satisfactory. While I was speaking I remembered that in Hanoi there are two bombing planes and their pilots. The Soviet sent them there to be ready, when needed. They were shipped there to the War Lord Fokien, who is with us. I can send them to you, Warrenne."

"My word! If you can and will do that, Boris, I will not only split the gold with you, but you may take a double fistful out of the jewel chest. What a pay-off! By all the gods of war, I'll teach the bloomin' bounders to play with Henry Warrenne. When will you go?"

"Now. I will stop at Hanoi and send them to you. They can land on the parade grounds. Do you think that the yacht people can see or hear them come down?"

"No. Not five miles away. If they did it wouldn't make any difference, although I would much rather have it come as a surprise to them. They couldn't put up any defense against a bomber."

RADISCHEV looked at Warrenne through his swollen eyelids. "If the yacht is bombed the woman will no doubt be killed," he said softly, "and I know you want her, Henry. I could tell that as you spoke of her."

"That is quite right, old top," Warrenne answered with a smile. Since Radischev had told of the planes he had regained his usual suave manner. "I do want her. But if I cannot figure out some way to get her before the bombers come, why she will jolly well have to take her medicine with the rest. My word, what a feather in my cap if

I could outplay the famous Boston Bean and the Fighting Yid and the rest, what, what? I can get all the men I want after that. If those bombers will do the work for me, Boris, I will guarantee to join you with ten thousand men."

"They will do it," Radischev answered as he rose. "I will go and pack."

"I can land you at Hanoi in a day. How soon will the planes be here? They can fly it in three hours if they have any speed at all."

"I do not know, Warrenne. It may be that the planes are not yet assembled. They must have been taken down when shipped by steamer. If they are assembled and the War Lord Fokien is there and still friendly it would mean another day. It is quite a distance to his palace, and you know as well as I the delays that might arise. Say three days from now. Then begin to look for them."

"Right. I will pass the word through Wang-sun that soon all will be shown the yacht and men destroyed without the loss of another man. That will keep them quiet and start the regaining of my face. In the meantime I will see if I cannot put to use some of my old-time ability to make the fly walk into the spider's parlor."

Radischev smiled, "My English is not good enough for me to follow into the spider parlors. I go to pack now. Will you have the ship ready in half an hour?"

"Yes. In less time than that if you wish. Will you have a little drink?"

"No, thank you. When I come back, yes. I do not wish to make my eyes more inflamed." Radischev bowed and went out. Warrenne still sat at the table, but now there was a real smile on his lips.

After he had seen Radischev off on the fastest vessel of the pirate fleet he went back to headquarters and sent for Wang-sun. That old Chinaman listened, nodding his head, and finally said: "It is good, little brother. I will pass the word. Let the ships that fly come as a surprise."

He shut his eyes and in a moment went on: "I see them landing—now they rise in the air—now they hover over the ship between the sand dunes—something falls—it hits the ship—there is a loud noise—flames rise—and—and—" He opened his eyes. "That is all I could see, O War Lord. It is true that I am getting old. *Aie, aie,* I wish for the time when I could close my eyes and see plainly to the end. Now I can see but a little."

"What you see, O most honorable elder brother, is sufficient. Will you order Hui to have my launch ready in an hour? I am going to the other side of the island and see if any guns have been mounted."

CHAPTER IX.

JUGGLING GUNCOTTON.

JIMMIE CORDIE and the Boston Bean sat on a ledge of rock overlooking a little valley. Katherine was with them, and a little farther back six men of the yacht's crew lay beside two Brownings. On a hill quite a bit to the left of them stood a sentry and to the right was another.

The Boston Bean and Jimmie Cordie were gazing intently at the smoldering relict of an ancient volcano. Just below its base ran a wide fissure or gulch, which was filled with hot white vapors.

"What does that look like to you, Brownbread?" Jimmie asked.

"Sulphuric acid fumes," the Bean answered promptly.

"It does to me, too. I'm going down and get a cupful. I mean I would if I had a cup."

"You better go slow, James. See those bones lying around. You'd need a gas mask, old kid."

"No, I won't. I can tie my shirt around my head. What the heck can we use as a cup?"

"We can send back to the yacht for one, Jimmie," Katherine said, very much interested. "Supposing it is sulphuric acid?"

"Well, if it is, we've got the cotton and the—what I don't savvy at the minute is the red tinge that comes up in the fumes. Send one of your men back for a quart Mason jar or any small glass pitcher or what-not that is handy."

The Bean dispatched one of the men, then said, "Where has your chemistry gone, Jeems? That red shows nitrates are being introduced into the fissure—but how and from where?"

"Darned if I know. Wait till we test some of it in that dinky laboratory of yours."

"It is not a dinky laboratory," Katherine protested. "It is a very fine laboratory, and John is a dandy chemist, Mr. Jimmie Cordie. Why, he spends most of his time there when he is on the yacht."

The Bean patted her hand. "That's the girl. You straighten out this darned ignoramus about me."

Jimmie grinned: "I meant that the laboratory was a very fine one and John a dandy chemist, Mrs. Winthrop. 'Dinky' means all of that. Sit here and hold hands while your Uncle Jimmie takes a look-see."

The man got back with the Mason jar just as Jimmie returned. Cordie, with his soft flannel shirt wrapped around his head, leaving only a slit for him to see through, went cautiously to the edge of the fissure. He came back with the jar half full of heavy, hot liquid which gave off clouds of vapor.

"It's sulphuric, all right," he announced, "and of darned high concentration, if you ask me. Let's get back to that fine laboratory and test it."

It was of high concentration, as the Bean announced a little later, "and practically anhydrous, containing no water."

Red was standing next to the Yid, both of them having come to the yacht as they saw the party returning. "What the heck does that 'anhydrous' mean, Yid?"

"My, such ignorance," smirked the Yid. "It means dot dere is no vater in it."

"In what?" demanded Red.

"Vy, in de—in de anhydrous, you dumb Irisher."

"Yeah? 'Tis ye that say I'm—"

"Get the heck and high water out of here, you two chattering apes," Jimmie ordered. "My gosh, how can we figure if you are going to start a fight in here?"

"We're shut, Jimmie darlin'," answered Red, who wanted to stick around.

"Well," the Boston Bean went on, "nitrates are being introduced into the fissure, as I said, young feller. But where they come from is the question."

"Must be from above," Jimmie said. "Let's go back and do some prospecting."

"Come on," the Bean agreed. "Katrinka, you stay here with George. It may be a long pull."

"I will, John."

"That's a good girl. We'll be back pretty soon."

"RED, you and the Yid get back to your posts," Grigsby said.

"What the divil is the need av that?" Red demanded. "I will go with Jimmie. Let the Beaneater go up on the hill."

"Are you a chemist?" asked Jimmie. "I'll answer for you—you are not. It takes a chemist for this job, old settler. Go up on the hill, you red-headed gibboon, and guard us."

"'Tis wan hell av a lot—there now, ye have made me curse before herself, Jimmie Cordie. The sin be on the head av ye. Ye need no—"

"Oh, for Pete's sake! Listen, Red, will you do me a favor? Go up on the hill and let us get at this thing. Once we get it, you can be my chief assistant guncotton maker, no foolin'."

"Sure I will, Jimmie alannah. I was only jokin'."

As Red and the Yid started back with the patrols, Jimmie and the Bean went back to the ledge.

"See that hill on the other side?" Jimmie asked. "Let's climb it and see if we can spot anything. It's a cinch that the nitrates must seep down."

An hour later, on an upper plateau, some distance away from the old volcano and above it, Jimmie and the Bean stood and looked at each other, pleased grins on their faces. They had found a large natural deposit of crude crystals of sodium nitrate, known as Chile saltpeter. It was constantly being leached out by the tropical rains and finding its way through cracks or channels in the underlying rock to drip into the mouth of the crater.

"Holy cats," Jimime said. "Here is where she comes from; but what happens, Beaneater?"

"Easy, Jeems. Listen to old Professor Winthrop. The nitrate gets down into the subterranean caverns inside the volcano where it oxidizes the sulphuric vapor to sulphurtrioxide. Is that plain to you, Mr. Cordie?"

"Yes, if you go slow. My chemistry at Boston Tech has slipped me for many a year, professor."

"I see. Well, the said sulphurtrioxide escapes through cracks in the side of the volcano where it combines with the moisture in the soil and air to form sulphuric acid which in turn dribbles down into the fissure or whatever you want to call it. Hence, Jeems, the sulphuric acid you dipped up in the jar."

"Fair enough," Jimmie answered with a grin. "We can make the nitric by cooking the Chile saltpeter crystals with the sulphuric acid, can we not, teacher?"

"We can—if we can find a big stoneware pot, Jeems. If we can't—an iron one will do."

"Well, by the Nine Red Gods, we've got the sulphuric, the nitric, and the cotton. Stick around and watch your old Uncle James make guncotton."

"Not close," the Bean answered as they started back. "Have you ever seen a guncotton wringer fume off, James?"

"Yeah. At an English war plant. Not once, Duke of Boston, but many times. Let the nitrators wear their slickers and goggles. It won't hurt them unless some lands on their skin. I'll do the dirty work with Red—he was so darned anxious to get in."

"Where are you going to get the goggles? Do you think the yacht is a department store?"

"What kind of a question is that to ask the superintendent of the Cordie guncotton works? You're only a chemist, feller. All chemists are silent unless asked for information."

"Most of them that I know aren't very silent," answered the Bean, solemnly. "None of us wear glasses and—"

"Listen—take a rubber sheet and cut slits in it to look through. If she fumes—turn your back—what could be sweeter?"

"Lots of things," answered the Bean firmly. "You and Red can do the nitrating."

Jimmie laughed. He knew that the Boston Bean would try anything at any time, no matter what he might say or pretend.

"All right, Codfish. We'll do 'er. Are you afraid to analyze the product?"

"I'll try to screw up my nerve that far," answered the Bean mournfully.

THE making of that guncotton by Jimmie Cordie, with Red as assistant superintendent, the Boston Bean as chemist, the Yid as general foreman, the crew as laborers, and Grigsby and Katherine as observers, directors, stockholders and what-not, is a story in itself. They used everything on the yacht that could be used, except, as Jimmie said, "our spotless reputations." Nothing was sacred. The chef produced a huge earthen carboy—which, he claimed, had held his private stock of rice wine. The Yid grinningly insinuated that judging by the color of the chef's nose, it had held brandy.

They cooked the Chile saltpeter crystals with the sulphuric acid in it. The neck of the carboy was sealed with mud in which was stuck a large bent glass tube that had been used to siphon wine. The tube was wrapped with cloths that were kept constantly wet with cold water from the yacht's ice plant. That condensed the vapors from the carboy and the nitric acid dripped from the end of the tube into a big glass punch bowl.

"Well," Jimmie said, with a grin, as the bowl slowly filled. "We have now, ladies and gents, nitric and sulphuric acid. *Allons, mes enfants.* What now, chemist?"

"Mix two thirds sulphuric and one third nitric and you have your mixed acid for nitrating, super."

"I know that. What temperature do we nitrate at?"

"As low as you can get it, Jeems, or rather, keep it."

"I know that also. What the heck was the old proportion? Twenty pounds of cotton to four hundred and eighty pounds of mixed acid? But we can't go that strong; about five to ninety-five is our limit. Something like that anyway. Yid, round me up some more crocks—big ones; also get me a tank to set 'em in. Then run in an ice water line. This stuff has got to be kept cool, you hear me?"

"Oi, Jimmie! Sure I hear you. Vare am I to get dem?"

Jimmie stared at the Yid. "Listen," he said firmly. "Are you general foreman of this plant? If you are, don't come running up to me and asking fool questions. If I have to tell you where to find things, I don't need you as foreman. Go and find them yourself, and make it snappy."

"I'll go with you, Yid," Katherine said. "Let's go up to that old temple on the hill. Maybe we can find some crocks up there."

They found several, made of native stoneware; and brought them down to the yacht with the help of some of the crew.

Jimmie and Red stuck the first batch of cotton down in the acid after it was cooled by the ice water around the crock and the rest moved hastily back.

The charge promptly burned up in the acid.

"NOW what the heck and high water is the matter?" demanded Jimmie, as he and Red ran from the red and black and yellow fumes.

The Bean examined the wild raw cotton. "Too many seeds," he announced. "The oil from them is what did it, Jimmie. This cotton must be picked clean."

"Oi," said the Yid, "vot a job. As foreman I don't have to did it."

"Every one has to 'did' it, old kid," Jimmie said firmly. 'Come on, let's get at it. Wait—did it ever occur to any of you that our boy friend is keeping darn quiet?"

"He's framing something, probably," Grigsby answered. "Let him take all the time he wants. We're hooked up for him."

"Maybe so," Jimmie answered. "But I'll feel a darned sight better when we get to sailing over the deep blue sea. Latch on to some of that cotton, Red. What do you think you are, a passenger?"

They cleaned the cotton and after two or three more fume-offs, they nitrated it for thirty minutes, then drowned cotton, acid and all in a barrel of water. They washed the cotton with cold water, they boiled it all day in several changes of water to stabilize it, then they spread it out to dry in the not too hot sun.

"Watch it now, Jimmie," warned the Bean. "It's dangerous and sensitive now."

"I will. How are we going to compress the darn stuff?"

"Can't—except what you can do by ramming it hard with a wooden rammer when you are loading the holes. I hope she'll go."

Jimmie looked at his acid-scarred hands and grinned cheerfully. "So do I, Codfish. Next thing to do is to drill the holes. I've got the engineer making some drills, and the rock isn't very hard, praise be. How will we detonate her, Bean?"

"Take the fulminate of mercury caps out of some cartridges."

"Holy cats! Here's where Mr. Cordie's son Jimmie resigns as superintendent. Can do, Bean?"

"Darned if I know. We can try."

"Maybe-so the electrician can dope out some way to detonate her by putting wires into the cartridges so as they touch the cap. That 'taking-out' thing don't sound so pleasant to me."

"Perhaps he can, Jimmie. There is plenty of wire, anyway, he tells me. We'll put the detonating division under him."

"That's a brilliant suggestion, Codfish. We'll make another batch and then shoot the works."

CHAPTER X.

WARRENNE STRIKES.

KATHERINE came up to where the Yid was sitting under the awning on the quarter-deck aft. "Yid, I want to go up to the temple again. There are some carved stones that I want to examine in the light. I didn't have a chance when we were looking for—"

"Oi, vat a business in de hot sun," the Yid protested. He had really been working very hard and was, for the first time since the guncotton-making began, actually taking it easy. "Look at how far it is up dare. Vait till it gets cooler."

"Why, Yid! It's cool right now. Come with me."

"I vould in a minute," the Yid lied, "but ven I hooked it up de last tank I sprained my ankle. Vait till after dinner, maybe-so it gets better, ain't it?"

Katherine laughed. "It 'll be much hotter then, Yid—and probably your ankle will be much worse. Well, I'm going."

The Yid straightened up in his deck chair and looked around. He could see Jimmie Cordie and the Bean with some of the crew over by the rocks, drilling holes. Red was up on the highest hill with the gun crew, the Yid knew. Grigsby was below with the engineer. There were three or four sentries in sight on the various high points. The temple, what was left of it, was in plain sight.

So the Yid grinned and said, "You have my royal permission, Mrs. Admiral. Take mit you some of de crew," and he settled down to take a nap.

Katherine did not see any reason why she should take any of the crew away from their work, and she sauntered down the sand dune alone.

She walked to the foot of the temple hill and sat down a moment to rest. As she did she waved her hand to Jimmie and the Bean, who she thought were facing her; but they didn't see it. She smiled as she realized how engrossed they were with the guncotton; and after a few minutes she went on up the hill and entered the ruins.

The Yid was sound asleep when Jimmie Cordie shook him awake.

"What kind of a general foreman are you?" Jimmie was demanding when the Yid opened his eyes. "Corked up in the middle of the shift. Didn't you hear that mess call?"

"Vot mess call? Oi, I just closed it my eyes for a minute und—"

"And kept them closed all the morning. You're fired, Yid. This afternoon you can swing a nine-pound hammer."

Red, down from the hills, came up in time to hear the Yid's demotion.

"What has that scut been doing?" he demanded. "Sleepin' here in the shade whilst I am meanderin' up and down hills?"

"My vork vas done," the Yid defended; "I got it a right to—"

"Sure you have, Abie," Jimmie agreed with a smile. "Red is jealous, that's all. Let's eat."

Jimmie, Grigsby, Red and the Yid were sitting at the table when the Bean came in. He had gone to his stateroom when he came on board.

JIMMIE looked up. "Where's Katherine?" he asked.

"Why—I don't know. I thought she was here," the Bean answered. "She and Scotty are side-kicks; maybe-so she is down in the engine room with him. I'll send a steward down."

"No, she isn't," Grigsby said, putting down his fork. "I just came up from Scotty."

"She vent to the temple," the Yid said, "just before I vent to sleep."

"Who went with her?" Jimmie demanded, rising.

"Vy—nobody, I guess. I told her to take it some of de crew, but I don't think she did."

"You let her go by herself! General quarters, Bean! Red, get up on the hill! If you see a party going toward the cañon, get 'em with the gun crew. Yid, get out and circle with the patrols. Swing in toward the yacht. It may be that she is still there!"

The Bean had run out of the dining saloon and at once the bugle blew.

"Take the deck, George. The Bean will want to go with me."

"Hold it a minute, Jimmie. If Warrenne has got her, as he probably has, look out for an ambush up near the temple. Take all the men except a couple of machine gun crews. We'll hold the yacht until you get back if he attacks."

"Right. It may be a mare's nest, but—" The Bean came in. He had his cartridge belt on and was carrying a rifle. "All set, Jimmie," he said, quietly—too quietly.

"Steady, John," Jimmie said gently. "We'll get her. He will not harm her until—"

"Let's go—if you are coming," the Bean interrupted. "I can't stand any talking."

"How many men at their battle stations?"

"Twenty-five."

"Order fifteen forward with us. George will stay here. Come on and—Winthrop! Snap out of it!" Jimmie's voice held the snarl of command. "You are an officer about to lead men."

The Bean's eyes became sane once more. "I'm all right, Jimmie, thanks. Let's go—*please!*"

Red and the Yid had, without a word, started for the hill and the patrols.

There was no ambush at the temple or anywhere else. Jimmie sent an advance guard far ahead, but it was unnecessary. There was not even any sign of a struggle anywhere around the temple.

"He's got her, Jimmie," the Bean said. "Let's get back and go through to where she is with all we've got."

"We will, Bean. Relax, old kid. Listen to reason. He won't touch her. First he'll use the fact that he has her to try to make us surrender. That's a-b-c stuff, John."

"Jimmie, my brain won't open to hear anything. He's got the woman I love better than anything in the world and I'm going to—"

The Yid came up with all but two of the men who had been on the patrol.

"On de next hill, facin' de vater," he said, "are two of our men—dead—mit daggers in de backs."

The Yid's face was not very handsome under any circumstances and now it looked like some stone-carved demon. "It is my fault," he went on, "und I vill go und get—"

"Steady, Yid," Jimmie interrupted. "No time to talk about whose fault it was. We all had her to protect, and now she is gone, that is all. Let's get back. Did you see any trace of a party?"

"No. Ve circled around from de hill vare Red is to de sea and den in to here."

"He took her through some hidden passage, then. Let's go."

BACK on the yacht, Jimmie Cordie, the Yid, and the Bean went up on the bridge where Grigsby stood with Red Dolan and Captain Paulet.

"Here it is," Jimmie said curtly. "There's no question but that Warrenne has captured her. How he got by the patrols, I don't know; and it does not make any difference. I have told the Bean that I do not think that Warrenne will in any way hurt Katherine, but will use her in some way to force us to surrender. He may figure that we will start out to rescue her, which is just what he wants us to do."

"What else is there for us to do?" demanded Red. "Are we to stay here talkin' whilst that scut has herself? We'll take the Brownings and shoot our way in and if he has touched wan hair of her pretty head, I'll—"

"Pipe down, Red," Grigsby ordered quietly. "That's the last thing to do—go rushing in. He will be hooked up for us, as Jimmie says."

"What else is there for us to do, George?" asked the Bean with insulting smoothness. "Wait here until he condescends to send my wife back to me? Well—rush in or not, I am going to take every man on board this yacht and the gun crews on the hills and go and get her. Captain Paulet, order every man over the side, full equipment. One machine gun to every four men. Rifles, Colts and all ammunition that can be carried. Jimmie, are you going with me?"

"No," curtly answered Jimmie Cordie. "After you damned fools get killed, which you will, George and I will take her from Warrenne—if he does not kill her when you come blundering in."

"That's right," Grigsby said. "I won't go with you, Winthrop." Not "Bean" or "Codfish" now; it was Major Grigsby talking to Lieutenant Winthrop. "You are leading your men to certain death."

The Boston Bean stared at Jimmie Cordie and then at Grigsby, as if not believing his ears.

"What the divil do ye mean by that, Jimmie Cordie?" demanded Red, in equal surprise. "Have I lived to hear ye backin' away from a fight? Sorry the day!"

"No, you haven't, you red-headed ape—and you won't, either. If it were just us I'd be right alongside—and well he knows it. But I've Katherine to think of. I love her myself, and by the Nine Red Gods I'm not going to jeopardize her safety while I've still got the sense I was born with. Right now, Winthrop is as goofy as the devil."

"Is he, Jimmie? Be quiet now, Beany darlin'. 'Tis us that will take care of ye as we did up in that desert av—"

The Boston Bean looked at Red, then back at Jimmie Cordie. Slowly he said, "You win, Jimmie. I'm sane. That 'jeopardize her safety' thing knocked some sense into me. I withdraw that order, Paulet. Go ahead, Jimmie."

"I hoped I could jar you loose, Bean," and Jimmie breathed his relief. "The first thing to do is to find out where Katherine has been taken. For all we know, she may be halfway to the mainland by now. Personally, I think she is at his headquarters and he is figuring a play to make us holler 'uncle.' If you birds will give me until morning I can find out. Then during the 'Oh, will you, won't you, will you?' stuff, we can start a little backfire and snatch her out from under, smacking Mr. Warrenne down while doing so, to teach him to lay off our admirals. Use sense, Bean. He won't touch her until after whatever bluff he puts up has failed—and don't forget that Katherine is no weak sister, herself, as far as that goes."

"All right, Jimmie," the Bean answered quietly. "Take the deck. But whatever you do, I'm going to be right along."

"We won't do anything until after dark. Then the men that are chosen can ease off, one by one and—"

"And wan av the wans will be me," interrupted Red, firmly.

"And anodder of de vons vill be me," stated the Fighting Yid, just as firmly.

Grigsby laughed. "Don't start any picking, old kid. We'll all go if there is to be a party."

"I say," the young English captain said, "I want to be included, you know.

Mrs. Winthrop was on board and I was in command. It was up to me to see that she was guarded. You chaps all—especially Mr. Winthrop—you all rank me, but—"

"You will be included, Paulet," the Bean said. "I know how you feel."

"Well, for Pete's sake," Jimmie said, "the whole blame crew will want to go. This is to be just a scouting party."

LITTLE Ming Li, who had been with Katherine's uncle when he met his death on a mountain trail, and who had stayed with her ever since, came up and bowed.

"All right, Ming Li," Jimmie said. "What's on your mind?" All of the hard-bitted soldiers of fortune liked Ming Li, Red especially.

"This, honolable captain," Ming Li answered firmly. "Pilates take my Missee Katheline. I go to find missee, light now."

"Oh, you do? Who is going to do the wailing in the hills after we get eaten up by the pirates? You're supposed to wail 'em into an attack with your ghost-wailing for Tzu-kung, young feller me lad."

"No get eatee up," answered Ming Li positively. "Plenty dead men alound. Me catchee unifolm. Pilates no know evelybody on pilate ships. I go in as wounded man, vely weak—all coveled with bloody lags and evelything. Find whele Missee Katheline is; come back; tellee you, honolable eldel blothels; you go and get."

"Well, I'll be darned," Jimmie said. "I'll bet you could, at that."

"If ye can, ye scut," Red announced, "I'll give ye that chance to play wid a machine gun that ye have been pesterin' me for."

"Can do! I go now."

"You will not," Jimmie answered. "Wait until dark. Then you can, Ming Li. Right now you listen to me. Don't try any rescue stuff yourself or I'll skin you alive. You go in, find out all you can, and come back to where we'll be waiting for you in the hills. Is that plain to you?"

"Plentee plain, eldel blothel. No do any tly lescue stuff all alone."

"That's her, Ming Li. You remember that and I'll make you a present of a gun and a belt."

IT was about two o'clock in the morning when Ming Li came to where the party from the yacht lay hidden in the hills.

"Missee Katheline is in house of Wallenne. No hult yet. Vely easy fol me to find out. Plentee new pilates on ships. All vely angly at Wallenne fol losing so many men and not cutting down 'body' of Tzu-kung. Plentee aflaid of Tzu-kung's spilit wailing in hills."

"How many men are there on shore, Ming Li?" Grigsby asked.

"Vely many. Maybe-so one thousand, maybe-so fifty thousand. Plentee on ships in halbol."

"Where is Warrenne's house?"

"By the piels and the ships. Two legiments alound it."

"Come on," Red said impatiently. "What are ye waitin' for, Jimmie? What the heck is two regiments av them damn scuts? Herself must be worryin' bad. We'll slap 'em outa the way."

"I know Red, but wait a minute. We know that Katherine is not hurt in any way. What else did you find out, Ming Li?"

"Plentee, Captain Coldie. Thele is a mighty magician named Wang-sun that the pilates go to see so he may tellee

them what his eyes see when he sends them abload. They go to him about the wailing of Tzu-kung's spilit. One, a man flom the nolth, say that Wang-sun vely top-side man; Wallenne say, 'will I do this, O vely honolable Wang-sun? Will I do that?' Me, I do not believe that Wang-sun can send his eyes—"

"Nor do I. Now, wait a minute, Ming Li," Jimmie interrupted. "Did you find out where this mighty magician lived?"

"Yes. In a stone house close to the hills, captain."

"Is there a regiment around his house, also?"

"No. One in flont. I went to see if I could get—"

"All right, Ming Li. The gun and belt are yours. Pull out for a minute. Wait—go over to that hill and do a little high-class wailing. Make it strong about how mad Tzu-kung's spirit is at them all, and at Wang-sun in particular."

"What's the idea, Jimmie?" the Boston Bean asked. "We are standing here and—"

"Stay put, Codfish. Something is commencing to buzz around in the place where I ought to carry a brain. If we can get this—no, not so good; a message would be rotten. What the heck is the matter with me? Here I want to decoy Warrenne out in the open and—by gosh, I've got it. Listen to this . . ."

CHAPTER XI.

IN THE SOOTHSAYER'S HOUSE.

OLD Wang-sun, the seer, sat in his stone house, which consisted of one large room and a couple of smaller ones back of it. He was not feeling very well and so could not sleep. A knock came on the door and he called testily, "Enter."

A young wounded Chinese came in, bowing very low.

"Who are you and what do you want?" Wang-sun demanded.

"I am Ming Li, of Yi-yin's regiment, O all-powerful one who speaks with the gods. My spirit is troubled and I would that you, resplendent one, ease it."

"Come to me in the morning. I am tired and must rest."

Ming Li took a gold chain from his blouse and laid it at the feet of Wang-sun.

"Put it in my hand," the old Chinaman commanded, his eyes showing his lust for gold.

Ming Li obeyed and, as he did, said, "It is this that troubles my spirit, O mighty one. Tzu-kung's spirit wails to us, his brothers. To-night two of us went as far into the hills as we dared and it talked to us. It is wrathy and threatened even you, who were its friend when it inhabited the body."

Wang-sun didn't like that at all. For all his half-unconscious faking, he believed in spirits and what an angry one could do.

"Me?" he quavered. "It threatens me? But I always was a friend of Tzu-kung's. Why is it angry with me?"

"Because you have not prevailed on Warrenne to go out and cut down its body and give it honorable burial."

"But he—I—Warrenne is waiting for— Tell the spirit of Tzu-kung that it will be done soon."

"We attempted to tell it, O mighty one, but it is very angry. It said that it would come and tear your spirit out of the body and whip it through the cold outer darkness forever unless you proved that you were doing all you could."

"Proved? But how?" demanded the very much scared old Wang-sun. He didn't doubt in the slightest but what the spirit of Tzu-kung could do just what it threatened to do.

"We, his brothers, asked that—knowing you would demand what proof was desired. We knew, great one, that you could send your spirit out to talk to the spirit of Tzu-kung if you wished, but we thought that we—"

"You did right, Ming Li," interrupted Wang-sun hastily. "I could, but at the moment I am ill. What did the spirit of Tzu-kung want?"

"It told of the capture of a woman from the ship who is now with Warrenne. It cares nothing for the woman, but it wishes to be reassured of your power over Warrenne. You are to send for the Englishman, telling him to bring the woman for you to see. When he comes you will go over whatever plans he has with him. The spirit of Tzu-kung said it would be here to listen. It cannot read Warrenne's mind. This will tell the spirit of Tzu-kung that you are still a friend."

If Wang-sun had taken time and coolly thought over the request, he might have got suspicious. But he was not feeling well, he was afraid of spirits, he did believe that Tzu-kung's could do as it had threatened. He swallowed the bait, hook, line and sinker.

"I will send at once," he said, rising. "Remain here with me, Ming Li. I—I do not care to be alone."

He went to the door, opened it and called to one of the sentries.

The man saluted and came up to the door. "Send Captain Ch'e to me at once."

When the captain came, Wang-sun said, "Go to Lord Warrenne and tell him that I feel my sight returning. Ask him to come here to me as I am not well. Ask him also to bring with him the woman he captured. I have seen her when I sent my eyes abroad. Tell him to bring her as it will help me see."

The captain saluted, turned on his heel and started toward Warrenne's headquarters.

AS Wang-sun shut the door and started back to his chair, he said: "Truly, I hope that the spirit of Tzu-kung will soon be pleased with me. It—"

The Fighting Yid's brawny arm came around Wang-sun's neck and the rest of the speech was lost in a gurgle as the soothsayer's wind was shut off.

In a moment or two the Yid laid him down on the floor. "If you've choked him to death," Jimmie Cordie whispered fiercely, from the door of one of the little rooms, "I'll take you apart, you Yid baboon."

"Vot? I just pressed a little. He is down, but not out, poppa."

"Yeah? Drag him in here and make it snappy. Ming Li, you beat it out the back way and back up the hill. You can come down with the rest if they charge. No; no argument. Obey me."

Ming Li shut the mouth he had opened in protest, and started.

"Take off your coat, Yid. Come on, Bean, help me get the robe off this gent."

"Why didn't you let Wang-sun wait for Warrenne? We could have—"

"I know we could. But it would have meant one more to get in the way if Warrenne brings others with him besides Katherine. Now the Yid will be right up in front. Hurry up, Yid. Some one may come to see you before Warrenne gets here. If they do, go to the door and—"

"Oi, Jimmie! Vot kind of a Chink vill I make it? Von look at my nose and avay goes de ball game." The Yid was taking off his coat.

"A damn rotten one; but it's the best we can do. You needn't take off your pants and shoes, Yid. Roll your pants up. This robe is like a night-gown. Put that belt and holster down, you nitwit. Who ever heard of a Chink with a—"

"Vait, I slip it the Colt up de sleeve, ain't it? See, now it don't show. De cap is too big."

"All the better for you. Get out and sit in that chair till we see how you look. Oh, my gosh! Double rotten. Yid, if any one comes, for Pete's sake talk from the chair, and hold the fan up."

"Talk in vot?" demanded the Yid, very peevishly. "I don't know Chink, Jimmie."

"You don't? I thought you were a Chinese scholar. Well, talk in Yid, then. They'll think you have the gift of tongues and are under the influence."

"I vish to heck und—"

"Steady," whispered the Bean, who was standing as close to the little slit of a paneless window as he dared. "Here comes—Katherine! She is walking beside Warrenne. How about that light, Jimmie?"

There was a kerosene lamp over on a table in the corner. The chimney was dirty, and the wick needed trimming, so there was not much light.

"Let it alone. There's enough. Remember, Yid. Let them get all the way in. As soon as they do, motion Katherine to stand over by the light. As if you wanted to get a good look at her. If you shoot Warrenne, the Bean and I will climb your frame. He's our meat."

"He's *my* meat!" corrected the Bean softly, as he and Jimmie slipped back into the darkness of the little room.

A knock came at the door and the Yid called something that he hoped would be taken for "Come in."

The door opened, and Warrenne, with his hand on the knob, stepped to one side and bowed ironically as Katherine Winthrop entered.

"Enter, my dear," he said. "You are now in the presence of the mighty magician, Wang-sun. He is known—"

One of the Yid's shoes was sticking out less than an inch from beneath the robe, and Warrenne saw it. He had not gained the leadership of thousands of Chinese pirates by being slow, either physically or mentally. As quick as the stroke of a leopard's paw, his Webley came out of the holster. He shot—not at the Yid, but at the lamp. He hit it, and as the darkness came he jumped back through the door, slamming it behind him.

IT was fast, very fast. Too fast for Jimmie Cordie, the Bean, and the Yid, who were all fast men. As it was, the bullets from their Colts thudded into the door. One second less speed from Warrenne and he instead of the door would have received the bullets.

The Bean had Katherine in his arms before the door-slam had died away. The Yid shed the robe as Jimmie said, "Fair enough. Out the back and up the hill, children!"

As he spoke they could hear Warrenne shouting orders which were being repeated by company commanders.

"Hop to it," Jimmie said, as they ran out the back. He, the Yid, and the Bean, had slipped down the hill under cover of darkness and into the

rear of the stone house. The Chinese regiment and the sentries never even dreamed of an attack, and the sentries, as Chinese sentries often do, had almost all gone to sleep.

"I hope that the reserve heard the shots," the Bean said, as he tenderly lifted Katherine over a rough place. At that second he had audible notice that they had. Two machine guns opened up from the hill and down charged Red, Grigsby, Captain Paulet and six of the crew.

The Chinese regiment was flowing around the house on both sides, and when the machine guns opened up, there must have been two or three hundred of them. Two machine guns manned by men who had operated them in France, opened up on the Chinese at almost point-blank range, shooting into the "brown." They blew wide swaths through the Chinese on both sides. But those behind came on, like fighting men.

The charge down the hill stopped as it reached the four, Red letting out a wild Irish yell of joy.

"We can't hold 'em here!" Jimmie shouted. "Back up the hill. Red, quit that! Start back!"

Back they went past the machine guns. "Get ahead with Katherine, Bean," ordered Jimmie.

Two machine guns and ten rifles responded and the regiment of Chung melted away. But another took its place.

"Fall back a hundred yards," Grigsby commanded. "Back, Red! Get to the top. We'll hold 'em there."

They made it, but before they did three of the crew went down. Pirates were firing now from the roofs. The Yid grunted as a bullet tore into the muscles of his shoulder at the back. Jimmie staggered as one caught him in the calf of the leg, but did not fall.

Red saw Jimmie stagger and ran to his side. "Are ye hit, Jimmie darlin'? Will I carry ye?"

"No. I can make it. Get those guns back, Red. Yid! Cover the guns!"

Back they went, then halted and drove the Chinese back down the hill. Back once more and another halt.

Warrenne was like a crazy man. But he was not so crazy as to lead a charge. He knew that five of the best shots in the Orient would crack down on him the moment he showed. He threw his men at the hill, as many as could get on it at a time.

The moon came out a little, which made the shooting light better — for him as well as for the yacht party. But the refugees had reached the top.

The Bean and Katherine were close now. Jimmie shouted, "Get back to the yacht, Bean. George, go with them! We'll hold 'em off until you—"

Scotty, the yacht's engineer, arrived with every man who had been left on the yacht plus those who had been at the guns on the hills. With them arrived rapid fire guns, more Brownings.

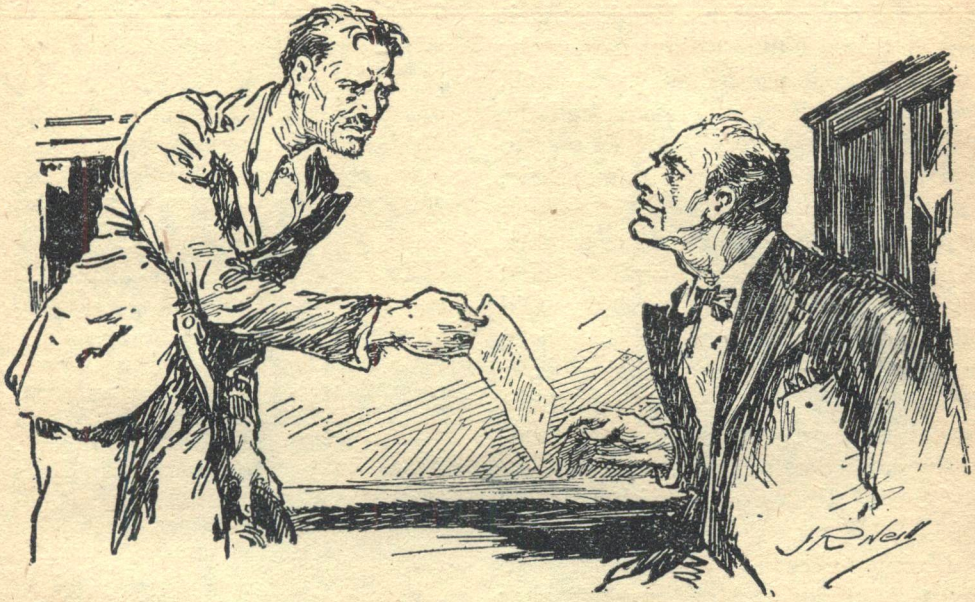
"I couldna stay longer," Scotty panted. "The goons dr-r-rew me." Scotty, whose name was Douglas, had fought with the Scots Greys.

"Glad they did!" Jimmie answered tersely. "Get in action with 'em."

Warrenne tried twice more, and both times got driven back with frightful slaughter.

He finally saw that what he was doing only resulted in the loss of men, and ordered that the charges cease. "We will circle," he said to a high officer with him, "and get between them and the yacht."

TO BE CONCLUDED NEXT WEEK.



He held out a letter, pleadingly

Christmas Eve at Longhorn City

There is no possession so precious as a man's self-respect— and that was what a derelict wanted to borrow, just for Christmas, from a Western banker

By HAROLD DE POLO

"MERRY CHRISTMAS, Skinny." Old Rawhide Henderson, on his way into the bank, of which he was president and cashier and chief stockholder, paused to clap the human derelict on the shoulder and give him an affable grin.

"Merry Christmas, Mr. Henderson," said the man known to Longhorn City as Skinny, his hollow eyes burning feverishly. "I—I wonder if I could see you a minute, Mr. Henderson? I'd like to ask a—a pretty big favor!"

"My boy," old Rawhide boomed heartily, "you didn't even give me time to get to my vest pocket. Here's a ten-dollar gold piece. Have your Christmas cheer on the First National Bank, I was about to suggest."

The banker had told the truth. His fingers, after he had clapped the other on the shoulder, had been on their way to unbutton his coat.

The unkempt and unshaved Skinny shook his head and stepped back, and there was something very bitter and very sad in his smile:

"So help me, Mr. Henderson, it wasn't that. I didn't want money for booze; I don't want money. I—well, I want something you might call the Spirit of Christmas. I'd like you to listen to me just for a few minutes, sir, in your office."

Rawhide Henderson had never taken very long to make up his mind. Had he done so, in the days of the Old West when Longhorn City had been nothing but a street consisting of a few wooden shacks, he would not have been here now. He had been exceedingly rapid on the draw.

"Sure. Come on in with me," he said.

Giving a cheery "good morning" to the two clerks and girl stenographer he employed, he led the man who had asked for the Spirit of Christmas into his office.

"Take a chair," Rawhide said, pointing to one on the other side of the desk from his own.

Silently, the wan-faced Skinny reached into his pocket and pulled out a letter. He placed it before the banker.

"Will you please read that, sir?" he asked.

"Sure thing." Rawhide picked up the letter.

East Poultney, Vermont,
December 21st.

DEAR SON:

Well, you'll be surprised to hear what your dad is going to tell you. I thought first of keeping it a secret and dropping in on you for a Christmas surprise, but then I thought that maybe you might be planning to leave Longhorn City for the holiday and that I'd miss you. And dropping is the right word, son. Yes, sir, by airplane!

It's this way. You remember that rich young man I told you about, that stops in Manchester for the summer? The one that's interested in my bees? The one that has two big planes? Gordon Milburn his name is. Well, he's flying down to Tucson just for Christmas Day, to see a brother who's in a sanitarium there. That's not more than thirty or forty miles from you, is it? Anyway, I'm going with him. I can only stay for Christmas Eve and Christmas Day, because he has to leave the day after. Besides, I can't leave my bees and the stock much longer than that. I've got Jeb Holcomb to look after the place while I'm away.

We'll get to Tucson sometime around noon, Gordon says. Don't worry about that. I'll hire a car and run over to Longhorn City and drop in at the bank. Anxious to see you, son. Seven years since I have.

Your loving father,
VARNUM ASHLEY.

P. S.—Awful glad you're doing so well at the bank, son. I was afraid you might have gone all to pieces when Mary died a couple of years ago. And, son—don't you worry about dinner. I'm bringing a 22-pound, home-fed Vermont turkey with me.

RAWHIDE HENDERSON had never been in the habit of asking too many questions. He didn't now. He merely squinted his bright blue eyes and asked crisply: "Well?"

The man who had hit Longhorn City a couple of years ago as a down-and-out bum, and who had stayed on in this capacity ever since, looked the banker squarely in the eyes.

"That's from my father, sir. He's ninety-one. I'm only thirty-four, although I probably look a dozen years older now. He married late in life. Mother died when I was born. I'm the only child. Father—he thinks a great deal of me.

"I've lied to him. Not with any wrong intent, sir. I've lied in telling him I was doing well. I said I was the cashier here in your bank. I—Mary was my wife. She—died a few years ago. I *did* go to pieces. Booze.

I'm still all in pieces, as you know. I'm not dishonest; I'm not a crook; I'm just a drunken bum. I lied to him about being cashier here because I knew it would make him happy, and because I thought he'd die before he found out. I've made the excuse that I was too busy here, with my work, to get home. I—well, Mr. Henderson, I think the truth would kill him, now!"

"Suspect it might," Rawhide gravely agreed. "What's your antidote?"

The roustabout whose only work in Longhorn City had consisted of occasional odd jobs when he had been sober, suddenly gripped the edge of the desk and leaned over. His eyes were burning.

"I want to be that cashier I've told him I am. Just for to-day, sir. I want the price of a decent suit, and linen, and shoes. I want a hot bath and a hotel room, to straighten up, so I can be here behind the counter when my father comes. I want you to put people wise—want them to bluff it through that I am the cashier. I'll pay you back some way—God knows how—but I'll pay you back. I'll *slave* for you, Mr. Henderson; I'll do anything. I—God, sir, help me!"

He got to his feet in his excitement. If ever eyes pleaded, his were doing it.

"I'm asking it for an honorable man, too, sir. I mean that my dad's all square and fine. He's just a simple old Vermonter, but he's pretty well thought of at home. He has his farm and his bees and he's made a few sound investments, and with his pension—"

"Yeah, I recollect reading the name in the paper: Varnum Ashley. One o' the oldest Civil War vets we've got. Fine feller. I saw him parade in Washington, once."

Henderson had spoken dryly, but there had been a sort of whimsical cordiality in his voice.

"Yes, sir. That's dad. That's another reason I asked *you*. I didn't like to speak of it—pulling the patriotic stuff—but I know you're a veteran of the Spanish-American War yourself. I know how much you think of any ex-service man. I—damn it, sir, I didn't want to say it, but I'm an A. E. F. man myself. Here's my honorable discharge—"

"No time to read it, Skin— What *is* your front name, Ashley?"

"Frank. Frank Ashley, sir."

"Well, Frank," said Rawhide, rising, "you and me have got some tall hustling to do before I make you a respectable-looking cashier!"

IT took close to two hours of some exceedingly tall hustling, in fact, to transform the wreck who had been known to Longhorn City as plain "Skinny" into a presentable person who was to be called "Mr. Frank Ashley" by these same citizens for Christmas Eve and Christmas Day. But Old Rawhide, as with anything he undertook, did a good job.

Bathed and shaved and garbed in the best that Longhorn City afforded, Frank Ashley didn't look as if he'd be a disgrace to any man's bank. He may have been a trifle hollow in the cheeks, a trifle sunken about the eyes, a trifle sagging at the shoulders, but there was a certain almost grim dignity that had come to him in this hour of trial that rather befitted one connected with a banking institution.

The public, apparently, likes a serious air in its cashiers and tellers—the men who visibly handle the currency. A bank president may be jovial, but not one of his employees—not during business hours, anyway.

Old Rawhide, once he had Ashley fitted out, made a bee line with him for the sheriff's office.

Bob Mason, the Longhorn representative of peace and order, was an old side-kick of the banker's. Together, back when the West was more wild and woolly, they had been the main force in putting Longhorn City on the map. They had made it what it was to-day, it could be truthfully stated.

Not that a casual onlooker would have thought it so much to rave about. It had no more than between five and six hundred inhabitants, but it was one of the most important cattle centers in the State. Old Rawhide and Sheriff Bob, it was said, had done some tall hustling themselves to make it so. Other localities, during those wilder and woollier days, had put in bids for that railroad spur. Bids had been backed, in that era, more by six-guns than by politics. Briefly, Messrs. Henderson and Mason had accomplished their wish of having the rails run to Longhorn City. Indeed, their wishes were still observed. Candidly, they just about ran the town. But they ran it fairly.

"Merry Christmas, Bob," said Rawhide.

"Merry Christmas, Rawhide," said Bob.

"Savvy this feller, Bob?" asked the banker, who was prone to drop into the vernacular when conversing with his crony.

Mr. Mason, thin and wiry and with bland brown eyes, pulled at his drooping white mustachios.

"I'd go for to call him by the name o' Skinny, was I onthinkin' about it," he drawled.

"Wherein an' every whichaway you'd be wrong, Robert. Not that I dote on flingin' the lie in your teeth. His name was Skinny. His name comes to be Ashley. Frank Ashley. That's honest . . . Somethin' else has got to be made to look honest: He's the cashier o' the First National Bank o' Longhorn City. He's been the cashier for the last two year' or more. He's a right plumb exalted an' respected an' beloved citizen of our thrivin' little hamlet. His old pa's comin' to visit him to-day for over Christmas, an' Longhorn City expects her populace to show that same visitin' gentleman what they think of his son."

"Jest the way my own trend o' thought was travelin', Rawhide," said Sheriff Mason solemnly, as his old running mate paused.

"SEEIN' that that's the case," frowned Banker Henderson, "I kind o' got the idee that it's your dooty, Bob, to sort o' use your official position. You better see the Rotary Club, an' the storekeepers, an' the cowhands that's in town, an' any one else, an' tell 'em that Frank Ashley will be in the cashier's cage at the bank. You better tell 'em what an all-fired heluva lot we think o' Frank. You better tell 'em how we'd like this to be plain to Frank's dad when he traipses in. You— Well, Bob, I suspect there 'ud be a mighty steep fine for any citizen o' Longhorn City that made a mistake, wouldn't there?"

"I dunno, I dunno," said Mr. Mason after a bit of thought. "I mean, I dunno about the fine. I think there'd most likely be a heavy jail sentence, though, don't you, Rawhide?"

"Now you speak of it, Bob—"

"Don't—don't pile it on *too* thick, Mr. Henderson," Ashley broke in. "I mean that— Oh, Lord, it's hard to say it. God knows I appreciate what

you're doing for me, but I wouldn't want it burlesqued. Dad's pretty keen, even if he is ninety-one!"

It was the first time Ashley had spoken, nervously wetting dry lips with his tongue.

Old Rawhide turned around. He looked gruff and businesslike, now, but the touch of his hand on Frank Ashley's shoulder was kindly. So was his voice.

"Shucks, son, you're nervous. You are tremblin'."

"I can't help it, sir. It means so much. You're so— God, you're so unbelievably decent, after all I've—"

"I was about to say you needed a drink," interrupted the banker, his grip steadying the shoulder of the other. "But don't you worry, son. Me an' Bob will 'tend to things right proper." He looked at the sheriff, then. "Bob, you got any o' that medicinal Bourbon you keep only for damn' stringent emergencies?"

"Might rake up a pint bottle, Rawhide."

"Rake her, Bob."

After the raking was done, the banker handed his temporary cashier a beautifully stiff hooker.

"Drink that, Frank," he said. He added quietly: "I know you'll understand I'm givin' you that because I know you need it. I know you won't take another single drink till I say so, will you, son?"

Frank Ashley was grimacing as the liquor went down his throat—the grimace of a man who has desperately needed a pick-me-up to soothe his shattered nerves. He shuddered, shook his head, straightened up. "Word of honor, sir."

"Thanks, son." Mr. Henderson suddenly looked testy. "Stingin' tarantulas, Bob, do you ever git to work? Me an' my cashier has got business to look after. *Hasta luego,* Bob."

But the sheriff of Longhorn City, after all, was a sheriff. He was also Rawhide's oldest pard and his only intimate crony. He took him by the sleeve and pulled him back.

"Sure this is what they term 'on the up-an'-up,' Rawhide? Been a lot o' bank robbers pullin' some funny ones, remember," he whispered in his friend's ear. "Lotusville was held up two days ago."

"Willin' to bet every chip I got, Bob," was the answer of the bank president.

"Excuse me for bein' so skittish, Rawhide," apologized Bob. "My stack goes with yours!"

BOB MASON wasn't in the least skittish once he had got into action, if one could judge the matter by the behavior of the population of Longhorn City.

It is proved with cold statistics, as the clearing house will verify, that never in all history—per capita and *et cetera* and everything else—had a bank of the size of the Longhorn City cashed so many checks in any one particular day.

It might also go on record, incidentally, that no cashier in the knowledge of man had ever been greeted so vociferously, so heartily, so cheerily: "Merry Christmas, Frank, old boy!"

The derelict, at first, was somewhat bashful and ill-at-ease. He would merely flush and acknowledge the greeting with an awkward grin. After the first thirty minutes, however, he would glance at the signature on the check and cheerily retort:

"Same to you, Samuel," or whatever the name might be.

He seemed to have no difficulty in

counting out the currency, as Old Rawhide had discerned from the first. Mr. Henderson, with a holiday expression on his features, stood outside of the cage. When a check was presented, Ashley would cast a hurried glance at the banker, get a nod that the identity of the customer was correct and coincided with the signature, and pass out the money. The cashier's fingers, as they occasionally went under the till for a new stack of notes, brushed against a brace of forty-five Colts.

But Old Rawhide had told him about these.

"Don't let them worry you none, my boy. Does it come that any shootin' is essential while you're holding down this here job, I aim I'll be doin' it. I got my iron right with me."

As the minutes ticked by, as noon hour approached, the down-and-outer looked as if he needed another drink.

Old Rawhide also discerned this.

"Cheer up, son. You an' me an' your dad 'll have one together when he gets here. I know that it ain't the drink that's frettin' you; I know that it's your wonderin' whether this'll go over with your dad. Cheer up, like I said. It will!"

A veteran taxi flivver, with much grinding of brakes and squawking of horn, suddenly drew up at the curb outside the bank. From it there literally leaped a thin and wiry and remarkably erect old man. He had a battered valise in one hand, while in the other he gripped an immense turkey by the legs that were sticking out of a bag.

He came into the bank, as Old Rawhide later expressed it, as if he were charging up San Juan Hill:

"Frank—*Frank! . . . Son!*"

"*Dad!*"

And money dropped on the floor.

Again quoting Mr. Henderson: "The next hombre that elucidates the opinion that these here New England Vermonters is distant an' reserved when it comes to showin' their emotions has got to argufy with me. I mean argufy right an' proper, too!"

OLD RAWHIDE, as usual, handled the situation perfectly. He had instantly signaled to Kirby, his teller, to take the derelict's place in the cage. He allowed Varnum and Frank Ashley to grip hands, to embrace each other, to feel their happiness at the meeting.

Then he himself stepped up, with outstretched hand and that rare smile on his face that had made him beloved to every man and woman and child in Longhorn City.

"Mr. Ashley," Rawhide said, banteringly, "I see you parade in Washington, eight year ago, an' I admired you a heap, but I'm durned if I'd 'a' done it if I'd knowed what sort of a son you had! Why, the scoundrel won't give a feller a chance to shake your hand! Yes, sir, we think a big lot o' Frank, here in Longhorn City, but we ain't goin' to think it no more if he don't let us say hello to his dad!"

Varnum Ashley couldn't hold back his pride and happiness. He held out his right hand, but he kept his left on the shoulder of the son he hadn't seen in seven years.

"Pleased to meet you, Mr. Henderson—pleased to meet you," he kept saying. "Frank's written me about you. Frank's a good boy; he's a good boy, Mr. Henderson."

"Well, let's you an' him an' me have a mite o' Christmas cheer, Mr. Ashley," Old Rawhide winked. "Come ahead. Let's sashay back to my private office!"

In the private office, however, there was little privacy. Sheriff Bob Mason must have kept himself exceedingly busy, for all the important men of Longhorn City insisted on forcing an entrance in order to shake the hand of good old Frank's father.

"Good old Frank's father" appeared to be just the happiest human being alive. He pumped hand after hand, listened to speech after speech telling him what a great fellow his son was, and unashamedly allowed the tears to trickle down his cheeks.

"Yes, Frank's a good boy. Thanks. Yes. Merry Christmas! . . . Frank's *always* been a good boy!"

Over and over the old man said it. He was still erect, but his voice was shaky and his eyes were moist, and he didn't try to hide the fact.

The derelict who had asked Old Rawhide for some of the Spirit of Christmas, as he had called it, was showing the strain of the situation. Old Rawhide thought he could understand why the man was showing the strain. The meeting with his father, after these seven years, had meant a great deal to him. The irony of the situation, however, must have been a horrible thing to bear.

Old Rawhide did a graceful thing.

"Frank, it's gettin' close to feed time. Chase out there an' fix up your figgers while your dad an' me plans about roastin' that turkey for Christmas dinner to-morrow. Tell Kirby I said to beat it!"

That was one kindly gesture that was amply paid for. The look in Frank Ashley's eyes, as he left the room, made the bank president feel that it was a very great privilege to be able to give a man back his faith in himself.

There was a lot of money out there in the cage and vault to trust to a drunken down-and-out drifter. There were two forty-five Colt revolvers also, with all chambers loaded.

RAWHIDE was a true gentleman. He showed his faith in the roustabout who was handling his money by coolly getting up and closing the door of his private office. He talked with Varnum Ashley, chiefly about Frank, although he knew that it was the slack "dinner hour" and that there was no one guarding his temporary cashier. He talked for ten minutes—for fifteen—and then he rose and stretched.

He did not rise because he was worried. He rose because he really thought that the old Civil War veteran might be hungry.

"Let's get Frank an' put on the feed bag, Mr. Ashley," he politely suggested.

"Yes, sir; thanks! Gosh-all-hemlock, but it makes a father feel good to see his boy so much thought of, Mr. Henderson," said Varnum Ashley.

"He's a good boy, Mr. Ashley," said Old Rawhide, unconsciously repeating the phrase that his visitor had so frequently used.

But the bank president, when he stepped out from his private office, had instant reason to tell himself that he had been a fool—to tell himself that he should, after all, have listened to a wise hombre like Sheriff Bob Mason.

His blue eyes were amazingly quick. Furthermore, they had the trick of taking in what might be called a panoramic picture. They took in one now.

It was the dinner hour—the dull period—and few customers were in the bank. He knew that, of course. He also knew, as every one else would know who had wanted to take the

trouble to find out, that Sheriff Bob Mason was feeding his face down at the Longhorn City Hotel.

Rawhide knew at the first glance that the two men—one at the cashier's cage, the other at the writing stand at the wall—meant serious business. They held their shooting irons, those automatic contrivances that Old Rawhide didn't favor, with a familiar air that showed their deadliness.

At the same time Rawhide saw two other men through the big plate-glass window at the front of the bank. One was sitting over the steering wheel of a high-powered car; the other was at the curb with a repeating rifle in his hands.

The Boulton gang! The crew that had held up the Lotusville bank! The outfit that always shot to kill! The—

"Stick 'em up, you Old Rawhide Henderson guy," the man at the writing stand spat out. "Make it snappy, sucker. Don't try to pull none of that wild-and-woolly hooey. Come on, make it snappy!"

"I RECKON you got me," conceded Old Rawhide, his voice somehow tired and old. "I always did savvy when to respect a piece o' shootin' hardware." His hands rose slowly. "Go ahead, Frank. Hand your friends the money an' wish 'em all that Spirit o' Christmas stuff that you an' your father—"

"You think *that!*" cried the roustabout as if lashed by a whip. "Oh, God help me, Mr. Henderson!"

Frank Ashley's hands had been up in the air, but Frank Ashley's hands came down. That is, they must have come down. No one saw them come down. No one could possibly have seen them come down, they moved so quickly.

The next thing that happened was that the down-and-out souse was holding a Colt forty-five in either hand. One of them spat red flame—the other followed suit.

The man at the writing desk crumpled. The man before the cashier's cage pitched forward, but not before he himself had pulled trigger, his face contorted with rage.

"Damn you!" he shrieked.

Frank Ashley sagged onto his counter, then, and the gun in his right hand dropped to the floor. But as he did so he made one final effort.

He came up with his left arm, shoved it through the aperture in the metal grille, and let it go.

The bullet broke the heavy plate-glass in the Longhorn City First National Bank, but it likewise broke the wrist of the man on the curb who was holding the rifle.

The rifle dropped to the pavement.

Almost simultaneously the gent at the steering wheel sagged slowly over on his seat. Old Rawhide had been responsible for that. Old Rawhide had seen his chance and taken it. He had drilled his man clean through the heart on his first shot.

Old Rawhide, however, was behaving queerly. Old Rawhide had let his weapon drop from his fingers. He wasn't paying any attention to the people who were clustering about him. He was gripping Varnum Ashley by the shoulders.

"Gawd," Rawhide was saying, "an' I thought Frank—"

"Frank *is* a good boy, I told you," the ancient Vermonter was insisting. "Let me see him, Mr. Henderson. Let me get in there. My Frank is hurt. My Frank—"

"I'm—no, dad, I'm not hurt. Don't worry. That bullet just clipped my

temple. I'm—all—right! . . . I'm—" The Longhorn City derelict fainted.

BOTH Old Rawhide and Bob Mason were with Frank Ashley when he came to. Frank was lying in the sheriff's big bed in the best bedroom in the Longhorn City Hotel.

"Where's dad?" was the first question he asked.

"Tellin' the cook how to stuff turkey, Vermont style," said the banker.

"Did—did dad believe everything, Mr. Henderson?" the wounded man asked. "Honestly, did he?"

"Sure he did, son."

"Did he really think I wasn't just a down-and-out bum?"

"You ain't a down-an'-out bum, Frank," said the sheriff of Longhorn City.

"Th-thanks, Mr. Mason."

"I mean it, Frank. How can a man be a down-an'-out bum that's got fourteen thousan' an' five hundred dollars comin' to him?"

Frank Ashley showed that he had a sense of humor. He smiled weakly, felt of the bandage around his head. "Ask me another," he suggested.

"That happens to be the amount in ree-wards that's offered for them members o' the Boulton gang you hamstrung an' hog-tied an' otherwise incapacitated," explained Sheriff Mason.

Frank Ashley was silent. He was so overcome, in all probability, that he just couldn't quite negotiate speech.

Old Rawhide could speak though.

"Son," he said, "don't think I'm a curious critter. I ain't—well, mebbe yes, I am. I wouldn't ask, I wouldn't bother, only I know your own dad's at peace about your condition. Son, they's just two things I hanker to know!" Old Rawhide cleared his throat. "Where in sin did you get teached to count money, Frank? And where in heck did you get teached to shoot?"

"I was goin' to ask about his shootin', Rawhide," put in Bob Mason almost truculently.

The man with the bandage about his forehead leaned up on his elbow and settled the controversy.

"I learned to count money in a bank; I learned to shoot in the American Expeditionary Force," he said. "I'm coming clean. No, I don't mean I've ever done anything dishonest; I mean I'm just telling you the truth. When I asked you to give me that cashier job temporarily, Mr. Henderson, I wasn't asking for something I couldn't handle. I used to be a cashier. After I left the army I was cashier in a bank in Denver. I—well, I lied when I said my wife had died. She didn't; she ran away with—oh, I suppose with a younger and handsomer man. She—"

"Ain't askin' about that, Frank," said Old Rawhide, his voice very gentle. For a minute or two there was a vast silence.

Frank Ashley's voice broke the silence. His tone was suddenly flat, barren of hope, as he sank back.

"You've been awfully kind, Mr. Henderson—you, too, Mr. Mason—so I'm asking you to be a little kinder. Pleast just keep on letting my dad think, till after Christmas, that I'm the cashier of the First National Bank of Longhorn City!"

OLD RAWHIDE was a gentleman. He could do whatever he did with consummate grace.

"Stingin' tarantulas, boy, but *ain't* you the cashier o' the Longhorn City First National?" he asked, with a

mock testiness that was the perfection of art.

"I—" Frank Ashley started to speak, but he could not go on with it.

"Ought to be arrested for vagrancy if he don't take the job, oughtn't he, Rawhide?" put in Sheriff Mason.

Still the derelict couldn't speak.

Mr. Henderson did. "I been needin' a vice president, an' I'm promotin' the man who used to be cashier before I hired *you*. Now where's that there bottle o' medicinal Bourbon, Bob? Call the nurse an' ask her to corral three glasses. We got to drink a Christmas toast to the new cashier. Hustle up, Bob. His dad's waitin'!"

Frank Ashley, in a daze, watched the nurse come in; watched her deliver three glasses; watched those three glasses filled.

As a glass was held out to him, he slowly—very slowly—shook his head.

"If you don't object, Mr. Henderson," he firmly said, "I think you're going to hire a teetotaler. A purely personal teetotaler, I mean to say," he added.

Old Rawhide must have seen the terrific struggle that had gone on within the breast of his prospective cashier—but Old Rawhide never showed that he had. He called for the nurse again, and he actually managed to put enthusiasm in his voice:

"Say, Cora, get me four bottles o' sody pop, will you? I an' Bob an' Frank an' his dad want to drink a Christmas toast!"

"To a good boy!"

That was the toast that Old Rawhide Henderson gave, and that was the toast that Longhorn City drank to him, that day, with all the pride and sincerity in the world.

THE END.

The First City in America

ON the high plateau of Bolivia, not far from La Paz, the capital city, are the remains of a prehistoric city which scientists say is probably the oldest in all America. It antedates the oldest city in Peru by thousands of years, its origin having been long forgotten when the Inca Empire was founded. The time of its building has never been exactly fixed, but the pottery, relics of gold and copper, and the skeletons of human beings taken from its ruins lead to the supposition that it was in existence at least two thousand years before the first stones of the pyramids were placed in Egypt.

This ancient city is known as Tiahuanaco. Most of the ruins of this prehistoric metropolis have been carried away. Only the mighty pillars scattered here and there, the carved stones from the old buildings, and the remains of massive walls and terraced mounds indicate the wonders of the past. Some stones are half buried, and others rise above the tufts of grass and scanty shrubbery. Traces can be seen of five great structures, which scientists know as the fortress, the temple, the palace, the hall of justice, and the sanctuary.

Addie Gates.

Tama of the Light Country

She could hold him in a descent

Swift night abductions of Earth's unprotected girls are only the forerunner of an amazing battle against the conscienceless Space-traveling invaders from distant Mercury

By RAY CUMMINGS

Author of "The Fire People," "The Man Who Was Two Men," etc.

LEADING UP TO THIS INSTALLMENT

MYSTERIOUS night abductions of young women, centering about a summer camp in Maine, lead to the setting of a trap in which are killed two strange beings from another world—a gray-skinned, flabby-fleshed man, and an ethereally beautiful girl with great wings growing from her shoulders. She gasps out a dying warning, in English. One man escapes the trap.

Jack Dean, a reporter and news-broadcaster, is greatly attracted by Rowena Palisse, one of the girls at the camp. She arranges that he and his aviator friend Jimmy Turk are taken with her aboard the Bolton "Flying Cube" designed by the great scientist, Dr. Grenfell. It is a gravity-conquering device, a fifty-foot cube using electrical principles; and Dr. Grenfell had planned to use it for a trip to the Moon, to look for Rowena's brother, Guy Palisse, who had started for there in a Space-rocket ten years before.

Dr. Grenfell's belief that the invasion was by men from Mercury is borne out when they go aloft in the Flying Cube to capture a meteorlike cylinder from Space, which contains a

This story began in the Argosy for December 13.

message from Guy Palisse. He had gone astray, and ended up on Mercury.

Guy Palisse tells how the sunward face of Mercury, the Light Country, is inhabited by highly intelligent people. The women have wings; but the men, to keep them submissive, cut off their wings at marriage. There had long been resentment on the part of the virgins against this mutilation; and it has now flared up in open revolt led by the beautiful Tama, a Mercutian Joan of Arc. Meantime the outlaws of the Dark Country, led by a banished rebel Croat, are planning a revolution, working through Croat's son Roc, who is high in the government of the Light Country. With a Space-traveling vehicle, Croat joins Roc in a siege of the winged virgins hidden in the metal desert.

CHAPTER XI.

THE PLOT AGAINST EARTH'S WOMEN.

WE are still here in the caves at the bottom of our valley (continued the warning message from Guy Palisse). Tama and I got back safely, circling on the upper plateau, reaching the caldron rim and dropped down. Tama, with practice now, could hold me in a long descent.

There seemed no pursuit. Roc's men were quiet up there on the rim. And after a time we saw the Space-ship depart.

During these last three cycles I have been absorbed in this narrative; and in preparing my cylinder for launching. My chemicals are about ready and now I am finishing these pages. A warning to you of Earth! We did not know it was to be a warning until we stood at the window of Croat's Space-ship and heard him talking to Roc.

Even then, at first I was too amazed to grasp the full import of what they were saying. I am not overly skilled in the Mercutian language; but now Tama and I have had time to compare what we heard. Some of it we have had to infer. Croat was explaining to Roc their future plans. But we came in the middle of it, after Croat had been talking for some minutes.

Yet we learned much, and I set it here as a warning. Croat now is leader of the barbarous Cold Country government. He must have stolen the formulas of the Light Country scientific devices of former ages; for he has developed the lost death-ray projector, and the small heat-rays which at twenty paces can burn a hole through a man.

Roc for all these years, was in occasional communication with his father, spying upon the Light Country government. We think it was Roc who secured the records. And Croat built the interplanetary flying ship in the Cold Country.

I must explain that the women of the Cold Country, through long generations forced to toil under every adverse circumstance of living, have long since lost any semblance of beauty. Heavy, pallid creatures, barely able to fly; they are, besides, few in number. There is now in the Cold Country scarcely one woman to ten men. The savage race is dying out.

No doubt it was Croat's idea at first to develop lethal weapons and attack the Light Country, to capture and enslave the flying virgins. Roc's part was steadily to agitate more stringent laws regarding the clipping of the virgins' wings. He and Croat did not anticipate what immediately happened—the widespread, open revolt of the virgins.

Meanwhile I—an Earth-man—had

come with tales of a greater world, with women, beautiful, who cannot fly. Curse my innocent readiness to tell Roc all I could of Earth!

And so I warn you! We got no details, as we listened there at that cabin porte. But we learned enough. Roc mentioned that he was leaving the Hill City permanently. That is good. Without him, the government there will be more conciliatory toward the insurgent girls. Indeed, it has been decided that they will return and try to make peace. We feel that the government will now realize how drastic was that last law. And there are thousands of men—fathers, brothers, and potential husbands of the girls—who now will see things in a different light.

The danger is not here—we realize that now—but on Earth. Croat's ship is leaving for Earth; it may be gone by the time I can get this cylinder launched.

How little Tama and the virgins realized that their revolt would spread to menace the women of another world! But it has.

Oh, my accursedly loose tongue! I had told Roc of my sister, and Professor White, with his girls' camp in Maine. I had made maps of the earth countries for the Hill City government.

Roc had access to them. Croat has them now! From the way he talked, he will land in Maine. I think it is summer now, in Maine. Professor White's camp will be open. I warn you—we fear an attack will be made there!

YOU can imagine how I feel, to have unwittingly been an aid to this menace! Croat even mentioned my sister Rowena, there in the Space-ship. With diabolical cynicism he told Roc how amusing it would be if Rowena Palisse chanced to be among the captive Earth-women whose beauty he would soon be able to display to his men of the Cold Country! Just a few Earth-women this first trial trip. Then at each inferior conjunction he will make other raids.

My sister Rowena! He even calculated her age. I pray you guard her—if only this message reaches you in time!

What Tama and I will do when the virgins return to the Hill City, I do not know. If only we could help you!

One of our girls—a blue-winged child barely sixteen—heard all this from Tama; and she disappeared yesterday. We have been wondering if she flew to Croat's vehicle, possibly to hide upon it and go with it to the Earth? To warn you! Tama says, knowing the girl, that it would be just like her unselfish courage.

Tama and I may try it. I don't know. I cannot think of anything yet but the launching of the cylinder. And we must get the girls safely back to the Hill City.

The storm is really abating now. Roc's men seem to have left this vicinity. We think the Space-ship has gone.

I must stop, and get the cylinder launched. If only it reaches you! We pray for that.

(End of the manuscript of Guy Palisse.)

CHAPTER XII.

NIGHT-PROWLING GIANT.

DR. GRENFELL'S voice died away. And I—Jack Dean, news-broadcaster, who had never dreamed of such strange news as this—slowly became aware of my sur-

roundings: the lounge-room of the Flying Cube; Dr. Grenfell at his table, with the pages of Guy Palisse's message before him and the Space-traveling cylinder at his feet; the other men, all sitting tense; Jimmy Turk staring wide-eyed, breathless.

The spell broke. But still I saw those naked rain-swept copper hills—the Mercutian Space-ship—its lighted cabin with the giant Croat telling his son how he was about to raid the Earth!

How well this message explained what had already happened to us on Earth! Croat had come, as Guy Palisse warned. Croat's Space-ship had come faster than the cylinder; he had made his raid, captured some of the desired Earth-girls. His ship had gone back to Mercury now. Croat had been left on Earth perhaps; but in less than four months, his ship would come again.

I became aware of a hand on my arm. I heard a sob. Rowena was sitting staring with tear-filled eyes. I put my arm around her, and she yielded like a child, clinging to me.

"Well," gasped Jimmy. "That explains it—by George, it does. Everything. He even mentions the winged girl we shot at the camp. Poor little thing—come to warn us, and we killed her! At the next conjunction that ship will come again. Palisse says it plainly. A raid in greater force!"

The men were all excitedly talking at once. Through the bull's-eye pane in the floor, the Earth's surface showed under us—a spread of mountains through a rift in the clouds; we were over the western United States.

"Get back to the controls," Dr. Grenfell ordered. "Good heavens, we might have dropped and smashed on those peaks for all we knew what we were doing!"

We checked our descent and swept eastward. It was 1 A.M. on the morning of September 6.

Dr. Grenfell was glancing through the other pages which Palisse had sent. "He evidently hoped we would have a Space-ship ready. These contain astronomical data concerning Mercury. Facts unknown to us of Earth. Its size. Density. Inclination of its axis; orbital rotation period; axial rotation—the scientists of that Hill City seem fully as advanced as ourselves for all the primitive, decadent civilization Palisse pictures. These notes will be of great interest—"

"To heck with that!" Jimmy muttered. "Dr. Grenfell, when is the next conjunction of Mercury and the Earth—the time when they're closest again?"

"The first week of December. That's three months from now."

"Doctor, that's when the Mercutians will come back! You said so—you warned the Earth of that in your public statement."

"I did, Jimmy." Grenfell's gaze was still on the pages of notes. He added slowly. "He has given us full landing instructions. How best to approach Mercury; the location of the Hill City—there is a sketch map here of all that section of the Light Country; and details of the location of that valley where he wrote the message and dispatched the cylinder."

I burst out: "Dr. Grenfell, we're going, aren't we? If we could get there before the Mercutians are ready to start for Earth again—"

I felt Rowena's body grow tense. She sat erect, staring at Dr. Grenfell with tear-filled eyes, but still she did not speak.

Dr. Grenfell smiled, a queer, grim smile. And as his gaze met mine I saw that his dark eyes were smoldering.

"Oh, yes, we're going! Do you suppose, with the cube successful, as undoubtedly it is, I would be content to make a futile trip to the moon? We'll try for Mercury. Take what weapons we can and try to join Palisse. He evidently did not come on Croat's ship or we would have heard from him."

"When are we going?" Jimmy demanded. "How soon?"

"At once! I won't wait for the next conjunction. Twice as long a voyage now—but what of that? If they're planning a raid upon the Earth for next December—attacking our women— Palisse says 'Earth-women to display to the men of his Cold Country'; and that's just what he's got. We must go there at once!"

IT was just before dawn of September 16 when the Bolton Flying Cube left Earth for its voyage to Mercury. There is so much which of necessity belongs in my narrative that I pass over these ten days of preparation with only a summary.

It was soon decided that a considerable number of men aboard the cube would be a hindrance rather than help. The multiplicity of supplies and equipment needed, and the haste of this departure, made Dr. Grenfell desire as much simplicity as possible.

There were but nine of us—the same nine who had been upon that trial ascent after the cylinder. Dr. Grenfell, Jimmy, myself, Rowena. I was not present when they tried to tell her it would be better for her not to go; what she said I never knew, but she came back to me, white-faced and grim—and it had been decided she was going!

Nor was she a handicap. Accustomed to working among busy scientists, she was a help, not a hindrance. And those tears of thankfulness which had overcome her when she heard her brother's message, learning after all these years that he was not dead—never again did she show such weakness.

The ten days of preparation were busy ones. Equipment had been prepared for a voyage to the Moon. Apparatus for landing and maintaining life on the airless, waterless Moon; and most of it was unsuitable for Mercury.

A multiplicity of details indeed! Things necessary to the vehicle's operation for so long a flight; food; water; personal effects—I saw, when I was given the task of checking them over, Dr. Grenfell's wisdom in holding down our personnel to nine.

There were weapons; and a great variety of scientific instruments, including the most modern wireless receivers and transmitters with which we hoped communication with the Earth might be established.

A series of exasperating delays seemed to afflict us, with Mercury daily adding tremendous distance to our voyage; but at last we were ready.

Everywhere in the world during those ten days, the public eye was upon us. There was no way of keeping the affair secret. The message from Guy Palisse was given out in brief summary; the public knew that in December the Mercutians probably would come again, and that we were going to try to stop them.

We meant to capture Croat's Spaceship, kill Croat, smash his ship, and thus end the menace. Yet such is the public mind—there were learned discussions by self-styled experts who in reality knew nothing; astrologers and every manner of publicity-hungry charlatan who read the stars, or gazed in crystals, or dealt the mystic cards

and solemnly foretold what was going to happen. And there were newscasters with facile tongues and silly wit who thought it clever to be humorous.

Two startling incidents occurred on Earth during those ten days. The first was the experience of the Rev. Arthur T. Hoskins, of Westville, Maine—a town about twenty miles from the White camp.

This report was never made public; I give it substantially as Dr. Hoskins told it to the authorities the following day. He was not a hysterical man, this middle-aged rector; nor a publicity seeker. A man of matured, logical intellect—we could do no less than believe exactly what he said.

ON the evening of September 11, at about eight o'clock, he was sitting alone in his study on the ground floor of the rectory. He was an ardent lover of broadcasted music; he sat before his sound-grid, listening to a Mozart minuet, which was a favorite of his. There was no one but himself in the house; his wife was attending a meeting of one of the ladies' church societies.

It was a cool night, but the rector, fond of fresh air, had his ground floor window wide open. The strains of the minuet floated out that window, and the rector was carried back into dreams of his boyhood. Then abruptly the music was split by the peremptory oscillating wave of the Boston Newscasting Studios. He did not tune them out; instead, he listened, with the minuet fading, to an account of the Bolton Flying Cube which shortly was to make an attempt to reach the planet Mercury.

The rector was presently aware of a figure standing in the dimness of his garden outside the study window. A very tall man, apparently listening to the radiotroned words.

The intruder saw that he was discovered—made a movement as though about to go away, seemed to think better of it, and came slowly forward. He presently stood head and shoulders in the window. The rector's study light fell on him.

He was a man of really giant stature; bareheaded, with black hair graying at the temples. It was queerly cut, this hair. Close-cropped to the man's round skull; but gouged, as though the fellow had inexpertly cut it himself. His face was hairless; massive of feature. A beak of a nose; wide, thin lips; a heavy jaw; heavy black brows, with dark eyes deep-set.

A foreigner, quite evidently. A rough-looking fellow. Yet his was, in a way, an intellectural face. But of what nationality, the rector was puzzled to determine. And he was more puzzled when the man spoke.

The rector said, "What do you want, my friend?"

"I was listening to that instrument you have." The heavy, thick voice spoke good English with an indefinable accent. He spoke carefully, as though with an effort to get it right. And the man repeated: "—that instrument, there, which was talking to you."

The rector had shut off the receiver. He made a move to turn it on again, but the stranger checked him. "I have heard enough."

Strangely commanding sentence! An unconscious command. The man's gaze was on the table where the rector's habitual ten o'clock meal had been placed by his wife. A little stack of biscuits and a glass of milk.

The stranger eyed it. "Food—give me that—will you?"

It seemed, to the surprised Dr.

Hoskins, that his visitor was about to climb into the window. And the rector felt a thrill of fear. There was something uncanny about this fellow—something unnatural. His clothes, for instance; he wore a somewhat dilapidated suit which was far too small for him. And his soiled linen shirt, open at the throat, strained across his great chest muscles, causing a rip in the fabric.

He did not climb in the window, but he leaned far forward. "Give me that."

Again it was a command; but made as though the man hardly realized his tone.

The rector steadied his voice. "You are hungry, my man?"

"Yes. Very."

He wolfed down the biscuits which the rector handed him. The glass of milk he eyed calculatingly, then smelled of it tentatively.

TO Dr. Hoskins, with a vague shudder, now came the thought that this man never had seen milk before.

At about this point realization swept upon the rector. It had been growing on him with a shuddering fear, but now it swept him with conviction: this man—not much under seven feet tall, the rector estimated, as he loomed in the window—was not of this Earth!

Dr. Hoskins was no coward. But he had had no experience in deeds of violence. He was unarmed. His first instinct was to escape from his study. Then it flashed to him that he should make some effort to capture this fellow—apprehend him, or at least set the authorities upon him. There was a telephone across the room; but the rector, transfixed by the shock of his realization, did not dare move.

The stranger drained his glass of milk, tossed it to the floor, appeared surprised when the fragile glass was shattered. Looking up, he met the rector's horrified gaze. He began what seemed words of thanks for the milk; but they died on his lips.

He stepped back suddenly from the window.

"You—think that you know me?"

Dr. Hoskins found himself looking into the muzzle of a leveled weapon. A strangely fashioned weapon, small and globular, with a mesh of wires across its face. The man's huge gray arm, with his grotesquely short coat-sleeve hanging halfway to his elbow, was extended; his hand held the weapon with steady fingers. His voice was quiet, but now held a grim menace.

"I want you to help me. I came for that. Do not move—make no noise!"

The rector sat frozen.

"Is that your flying car in the little house outside? I am not going to hurt you. Answer me. Is it?"

The rector moistened his dry lips. "Yes."

"You are able to fly it?"

"Yes."

It was a small sport plane, given to Dr. Hoskins by the members of his parish.

"Then, come out." The intruder stepped further back from the window, but still held his weapon leveled. "Come out! I want you to show me how to fly it. Come out, I say!"

Dr. Hoskins was somewhat rotund. And with his fright, he climbed over the sill with difficulty. The stranger gripped him by the arm, helping him; and, outside, stood gazing down at him with a faint smile. He was indeed a gigantic man, head and shoulders above the rector. He cut a grotesque figure,

the cuffs of his trousers hanging far up his legs. But he stood erect, commanding—and amused at his captive's fear.

"Stop shaking; I will not hurt you. If you shake like that you cannot fly your little car. You will kill us both. Do not do that!"

Still Dr. Hoskins could not speak. The giant pushed him down the garden path. Its shrubbery secluded it from the road; no one saw them. They reached the little wooden hangar.

The rector found his voice at last. "What do you want me to do?"

"Take us up. Can I trust you not to wreck us? Or must I kill you—and go away disappointed?"

Dr. Hoskins steadied himself. He gazed up to his captor's heavy gray face, and he managed a smile. "You will be safe with me," he said. "Where—where do you want to go?"

But that the man did not answer. They were presently in the little barrel-winged Dinsler and away into the starlight. The rector sat at the sticks; the stranger jammed beside him. There was barely room for them both in the tiny pit.

BENEATH them lay the Maine forests; the starry vault was overhead. Dr. Hoskins, occupied with the controls, found his nerves steadying. He demanded again, "Where do you want to go? It was unnecessary to threaten me. It is not my custom to refuse a service to my fellow man."

"Just around here." The gray arm gestured north toward the valley of the St. Lawrence with the distant mountains behind it. "Just around and back. I want to learn how to sail your little car."

For an hour perhaps, the astounded rector explained how the Dinsler was operated. The engine controls; and then the flying. His captor showed remarkable intelligence, as though familiar with engines and flying controls, though these were wholly strange to him in details.

"Let me try," he commanded at last.

Dr. Hoskins's heart was in his mouth as he yielded his place at the sticks. But presently his captor had caught the knack of it.

"This is not difficult," the strange giant stated. "We will go back now."

"You are going to land us?"

"Land *you*. It is the little car I want."

The rector was momentarily emboldened. "To go—where?"

"Back home." His companion turned and in his sunken dark eyes the rector saw a gleam of irony. "I am trying to get—back home."

He said no more. He turned the Dinsler in an arc southward. A plane passed overhead—a Greenland freight ship heading north from New York.

The stranger chuckled. "No one notices us? That is good." He gazed down at the lights of a little town set in the dark stretches of forest. "Those orange lights are the flying field?"

"Yes."

"I can read the number: M-4870. The 'M'—is that for Maine?"

"Yes."

"The number would tell us the town?"

"Yes."

"And you have maps here?"

The rector produced his field maps. Explained them.

"Yes—I understand. I, too, have maps." He touched his clothes. "I have studied—been taught. And the landing fields of the other States are lettered and numbered like this?"

"Yes. Look here, my man, what are you—"

"I shall not use the public fields. The attendants would be curious . . . Is that your settlement?"

They were back within sight of the rector's village. "Yes," he said. "Please take us down." He was trying to decide what he could do when they landed. His captor seemed to read his thoughts.

"Not there—we will have to find a more secluded place."

He landed them, with what seemed an intuitive skill, in an empty field near a neighboring town.

"Climb out."

The rector got out of the cockpit, stood on the ground. The field, with no houses near it, was dim in the starlight. The rector saw that again the strange weapon was leveled at him.

"You stand still until I have gone!" Again that gleam of irony shone in the giant's dark eyes. "I ought to kill you. I suppose I shall be sorry I did not. You will tell the officials all about me. That is your plan, is it not?"

"Why, I—"

"Well, you may, if you like! What harm to me? Tell them what you like." He leaned out of the pit. The engine was purring; his low voice seemed to purr with it.

"YOU are what they call a man of God, are you not?"

It suddenly struck the rector that this amused, unhuman giant was planning to kill him and then fly off. He stood stricken, clinging to the side of the pit.

"Take your hands off that! Are you a man of God?"

"Yes. I—"

"Then you will not dare speak other than the truth. I have some questions; I want the truth. Will you give it?"

"Yes," gasped the rector.

"There is a girl—a young woman. Her name is Palisse. Rowena Palisse. Have you ever heard of her?"

"Yes."

"Do you know where she is now?"

"They say, in southern New Jersey."

"The same settlement near where they keep the Bolton Flying Cube?"

"Yes—I think so."

"In that town, where does she stay? Has the building a number?"

"I don't—don't know. I have no idea—"

"Then that is all I can get from you. I think I will not let you talk about me."

The terrified rector felt his senses fading. The dim outlines of the field whirled about him. He realized clearly his deadly danger. The realization was too much for him. His pounding heart flung the blood into his head; then it receded. He felt himself fainting; falling, stricken by his own rush of terror.

And to this undoubtedly he owed life. Simultaneously with his fall, he dimly saw a flash, heard a hiss, and felt a burning stab in his shoulder.

Then the field went into black silence as his senses left him.

They found the unfortunate Dr. Hoskins lying in the field the following morning. His shoulder was pierced by a hole burned into it. His aërocar, with the mysterious man, had vanished. Undoubtedly as the rector fell, the assailant believed he had killed him. He had left him lying there for dead—and flown away in the Dinsler.

That was the first of the incidents. That this mysterious man was Croat

the Mercutian, we could not doubt. We recalled the giant figure who had escaped that night at the White Summer Camp when we shot the Mercutian man and the winged girl.

The forests had been constantly searched for that giant Mercutian, but without success. The message from Guy Palisse, picturing Croat so vividly, caused the search to be renewed with additional vigor. When it continued unsuccessful, there were many—Dr. Grenfell among them—who believed that Croat had got back to his Space-flyer. The flyer, it was thought, had never descended into the Earth's atmosphere. The small silver ball—whether one or more was never determined—which had brought the Mercutians down from their hovering ship and took them up again with their captives, must have rescued Croat.

But now, after these many days, it was proven that Croat was still on Earth—still in the general vicinity of the original raids. We could picture how he must have been living—hiding in the depths of the forest by day, prowling at night to steal what food he could. Stealing clothes—trying to make himself less conspicuous—so that if seen he could pass momentarily for a man of Earth. There had been reports from various farmhouses of midnight disturbances. The authorities had discredited them as the products of public hysteria; but they were discredited no longer.

And Croat had been listening at windows, perhaps for the radiotroned newscasters' voices. Hearing about the Bolton Flying Cube. Trying to locate Rowena Palisse.

He had been unable to travel far on foot. But now he had Dr. Hoskins's little aëro, and had disappeared in it.

The assault upon the rector was made on the evening of September 11. The Dinsler was gone. All that day of the twelfth, by every means of our scientific age, it was searched for. And Rowena, in a hotel of that South Jersey town, was kept heavily guarded.

But the Dinsler had vanished. And no attack was made upon Rowena.

Then, at dawn of the 13th, came news of the Dinsler. It was sighted, passing slowly over a village near Philadelphia, heading southwest, at a considerable altitude. Pursuit planes were immediately sent up after it. They fired at it; but not to hit it, for the orders were to take Croat alive if possible.

The little Dinsler sailed serenely on. The police pilots overhauled it, to find its controls lashed and its cockpit empty! Pilotless, it had been launched and was riding the skies until its fuel would have been exhausted.

That was the 13th. Three days later—just before dawn of the 16th—the Bolton Flying Cube, carrying Dr. Grenfell, Jimmy Turk, myself, Rowena, and five assistants, left the Earth upon our voyage to Mercury.

CHAPTER XIII.

IN THE AIR-LOCK.

"THERE'S the Sun, Rowena. It's day!"

Day! Already the word had lost its meaning. Day and night—mere terms of our rotating Earth. Here in Space the Sun blazed in its field of black; the stars gleamed untwinkling; the quarter Moon hung white, like a broken, curved limb against the dead-black infinity of emptiness. Time seemed eternal here.

Rowena stood beside me on the Flying Cube's deck. Together we gazed

at the firmament. We were only a few hours upon the voyage; and the Earth still hung beneath us, a great spreading expanse filling all the lower heavens.

We had long since passed through the atmosphere, ascending an edge of the Earth's conical shadow; and now we plunged from it and the Sun blazed with a strangely flaming glory.

Rowena gestured to the Earth. "It's dwindling. Our little Earth — how small it looks now, Jack!" Her hand touched my arm. I seemed to feel a difference in that touch. As though her fingers were lingering, caressing.

"Rowena—"

Within me there sprang a sudden rush of emotion. I think, perhaps, that from the first moment I saw her I felt instinctively that of all the world, this was the woman for me—This girl, so queenly, aloof, but with gentle, wistful eyes.

"Rowena—"

Perhaps it was the starry firmament around us; the tiny cube seemingly hung here motionless with great soundless blazing worlds strewn about the black heavens. And our Earth seeming so small — dwindling every moment that we watched it. It was as though all this were drawing Rowena and me together, making us realize our littleness, futility, unimportance; and because we were so unimportant to all the Universe, it made us much more important to each other.

"Rowena!"

I must have stood there stupidly reiterating her name. The length of deck was empty save for us two. Through the bull's-eyes, mingled moonlight, sunlight, starlight and earthlight came slanting in soft silver shafts.

"Jack—"

She swayed toward me; was in my arms; her arms up about my neck; her lips returning my kisses, with all her calm regal dignity swept away so that this was just a girl.

There was a moment when we floated off upon the torrent of a new-found love, clinging together, alone in the Universe.

Then I heard a step, and a voice—Jimmy's voice: "Oh, I say — beg your pardon—I'm gone!"

"Oh!" Rowena cast me off. But Jimmy had made good his words, whirling like a rabbit and vanishing into the upper corridor doorway.

We both were laughing. "Oh," said Rowena. "How dreadful!"

"Dreadful? Rowena dear—"

I touched her, but she moved away.

"Dreadful," I said, "that Jimmy should have seen us?"

"No, of course not."

"That you should—love me?"

"No—"

"Well, you do, don't you?"

"Jack—" Her smile was gone. She faced me with quiet, level gaze. "Do you think so, Jack?"

Her eyes were shining in the earthlight, and in them I could not miss the light of her love for me. Just a moment, while we gazed. The spell broke, she laughed again.

"Dreadful, Jack, that I should yield to a thing like that—now, with this voyage ahead of us—with Guy, out there on Mercury."

WE were presently talking of saner things. Dr. Grenfell had calculated this voyage would be a matter of some three weeks. Mercury would be on the other side of the Sun before we reached it. We would pass Venus in five or six days; the Moon we were already passing.

And we talked of Croat. It seemed obvious that he was the mysterious stranger who had assaulted the Maine rector.

"Still on Earth," I said. "His ship came, sent down its silver ball like a tender, while the ship itself hovered out here. Just about here, probably."

That had been on August 10th. It was now September 16th. Croat's ship had hovered out here while the ball went down into the Earth's atmosphere, stayed about a week and the raids were made. Then the ball had come up—with the Earth-girl captives, but without Croat. Mercury was drawing daily further away; the Mercutians, afraid to go back down for their leader, had doubtless taken their ship back to Mercury. Croat was now on Earth. At the next inferior conjunction—next December—the Mercutian ship would doubtless come again to try and rescue Croat.

"But we will reach Mercury before that, Rowena, and stop them. If we can get that vehicle and smash it, down on Earth they'll capture Croat in time, of course, and this threat will be removed."

We had no specific plans of what could be done when we reached Mercury. Rowena said suddenly, "I'm wondering if Guy and Tama were on the Mercutian ship when it waited out here."

"But if they had been—"

"That winged girl who was shot at the White Camp did what she intended and stowed away on the ship. In his message Guy hinted that he and Tama were going to try it."

This was the old calm Rowena, discussing the affair with calm logic. "But if they did hide on the ship, Jack, it's evident that they were not able to get in the silver ball and descend. Either they were still in hiding, or Croat had found and captured them, keeping them up here on the ship, while he went down—"

It was all theory, of course. An hour went by. The Earth shrank amazingly with our upward flight. And as the cube turned and swung toward the Sun, using all the Sun's giant gravitational force to pull us, the firmament shifted. The Earth seemingly came up level with us—a monstrous ball hanging level with the deck windows. The sunlight struck it full; a great reddish ball, shrinking and turning silver.

Again a step sounded behind us; a cautious step—Jimmy again.

"I say, all right for me to show up now?"

"All right, Jimmy," Rowena laughed.

He came toward us along the deck. "You going to stand there forever? We've had breakfast downstairs. I told them you two were busy."

"Jimmy!" Rowena protested.

"Why not? You were, weren't you? Anyway, the doc says for you to come down now—at once. That's an order. You're to have your breakfast and then go to sleep."

We followed him obediently into the second floor corridor and down the ladder-steps and into the lounge.

"You're sleepy," Jimmy added. "If you don't know it, that's your hard luck. We've all been up all night. The doc has turned in, and Rance is in command."

At 4 P.M., by Eastern Standard Time back on Earth, which we were maintaining on the Cube, it was Grenfell's plan for us to start the regular routine of watches which would be held throughout the voyage. It was now 9 A.M.

Rowena and I had a light meal. She went to her cabin—one of those off the second floor cross corridor. Diagonally from her, on the corridor's opposite side, was the cubbyhole Jimmy and I were to occupy. At Rowena's doorway we left her.

"Sleep well, Jack."

Jimmy whirled on her like a little bantam, gazing frowningly up at her. "And how about me?"

"You too, Jimmy!"

"Thanks."

HE was grinning as we entered our room. "Nice girl that. Crazy about you. Well, I don't blame her. You two giants look as though you were born for each other."

We lay in our bunks. Earthlight streamed in the bull's-eye window, until Jimmy drew down its shade.

I think that in a few moments Jimmy was asleep; but for a time sleep would not come to me. The interior of the cube was silent save for the faint hum of the current in the gravity plates. And vibrationless; an utter lack of the sense of movement, though now we were plunging toward the Sun at a velocity which in comparison to the planets was still slow, but inconceivably rapid compared to any vehicle traveling upon Earth or in the air.

I drifted off into an uneasy slumber.

This must have been about 10 A.M. Dr. Grenfell was asleep in his cubby up in the third tier. In the room next to Jimmy and me, Baker and Gibbons were sleeping.

It left Rance and two other men—Jones and Allen by name—in command of the cube. Rance was in the little dome-observatory, at the telescope and working out a chart of our course. For all his skill with explosives and his experience with the New York bomb squad, he was versed in higher mathematics, and upon him Dr. Grenfell depended for much of the routine navigational work.

Jones and Allen were both in the lower tier, watching the mechanisms there and answering Rance's occasional bell-signals.

I have no idea what awakened me. I found myself fully aroused, with the startled feeling that something was vitally wrong. Jimmy was peacefully snoring in the bunk over me. The cube interior was silent as always. Our slide-door to the corridor was closed, as Jimmy and I had left it. My watch gave 3 P.M.; I had slept five hours.

The ominous feeling passed after a moment. I sat up in the bunk, thinking about it; and concluded it was caused by the strangeness of my surroundings when I had so suddenly awakened.

I tried to doze again; Dr. Grenfell did not want us to assemble until 4 P.M. But I was restless; Jimmy's snores annoyed me. I went to the bull's-eye porte-window, raised the shade a trifle. Our window faced the Earth. How amazingly it had dwindled! It hung level with us—a full-round sunlit ball, filling no more than a tenth of the visual hemisphere of the firmament. The tracery of the continents and oceans was plain.

And beside the Earth, to make the third apex of a trangle with our cube, the Moon hung cold and bleak—incredibly black and white with shadows and sunlight.

I turned from the window, and decided I would go down to the lounge room and wait for the four o'clock conference. Perhaps Rowena would be there.

As I passed her corridor cabin-door, I found it flung wide. She had closed

it, I recalled, when she retired. And in the corridor, just outside her threshold, lay one of her slippers. I stumbled over it, picked it up; and found my heart unreasonably pounding. She had been wearing these slippers when Jimmy and I left her at this door five hours before.

As I straightened with the slipper, I glanced into her cabin. It was empty. Its drawn shade was bright with the sunlight glare. The bed had been occupied; a chair beside it was overturned.

All this was utterly unlike Rowena. I hurried down to the lounge. No one was there. The shades were drawn to bar the sun-glare; but on the other side they were up and the earthlight and moonlight streamed in full. The room was bright. And it suddenly seemed horribly empty and horribly silent.

I called, "Hello there! Any one around?"

FROM one of the adjoining mechanism rooms, Jones appeared. A big, florid fellow in white shirt and linen trousers. His inevitable huge black cigar was in his mouth.

"Hello, Dean. Sleep well?"

My sudden fear dissipated. "Yes. Where is everybody?"

"Asleep, I fancy. Allen went up to the dome a while ago to stay with Rance. I'm on duty here—but there's nothing much to do. It was the deuce keeping our pressure equal, but we've got it right now. Your breathing comfortable?"

"Quite." I had flung myself in one of the wicker lounge seats; but immediately I was up again. "Have you seen Miss Palisse?"

"No. She's in her cabin, isn't she?"

"No, she isn't. The door was wide open as I passed."

"Well, she didn't come down here—went up to the dome with Rance probably."

But she was not in the dome. Rance and Allen were there, and they had not seen her. Dr. Grenfell was still asleep in his cubby off the third-floor chart-room.

Fear was plucking at me. But Rance said with a smile, "Try the deck, Dean. No doubt she's Earth-gazing. She'll be glad to have you join her."

I hurried down, and again went the length of the second floor corridor. This time, I peered into each of the rooms as I passed. Jimmy was still sleeping noisily; Baker and Gibbons were asleep in the adjacent cabin; and all the other rooms were empty.

I went out to the deck. Went around all four sides almost at a run. No one was there.

Panic was upon me now. Back within the cube I called frantically:

"Rowena! Rowena, where are you?"

It aroused them all. "Rowena, where are you? Rowena, answer me!"

Jimmy came rushing out. "Heavens, Jack—what in the devil—"

"I can't find Rowena!"

I tried to calm myself. She was here somewhere, of course.

Baker and Gibbons came tumbling from their room. "What's the trouble?"

From the third tier Dr. Grenfell was calling, "Dean! Dean, what is it?" and from the lounge room downstairs Jones shouted up a similar question. We were all in a moment, wildly searching. Shouting back and forth to each other; and calling:

"Rowena! Where are you? Where are you?"

The cube echoed with our voices and the tramp of our feet.

But Rowena had vanished!

Stark horror seized us as we gathered in the lounge. Rowena had vanished. But there was only a moment of that baffled horror; and then a new alarm.

Jimmy's voice from the second tier: "Jack! Jack! Here she is!"

His words, "Here she is!" should have been reassuring. But his terrified tone combined with them was infinitely frightening.

I leaped up the ladder-steps, with the others after me. We met Jimmy. He was wild-eyed and breathless, waving his automatic.

"Jack, my God, she—Jack, he has—Come here!"

I went after him at a run, out the corridor door to the deck, around one of its angles to D-face. Five minutes ago I had run this length; I had unheedingly passed the closed door-slide of the air-lock room.

Jimmy dashed there now. Halted, with upraised weapon.

"Jimmy—look!"

In the little air-lock room projecting out from the deck, Rowena was crouching. And beside her, the huge figure of a man. His arm was around her, holding her half caressingly, half in menace. His other arm hugged his upraised knees; in his hand, a strange globular weapon pointed at Rowena's breast.

It was Croat!

CHAPTER XIV.

HUMAN PROJECTILES.

"STEADY, Jack! He's got her!" We could hear his voice through the door-slide. Calmly ironical.

"Well, and so you have me!" came Croat's voice. "It took you a fair long time to find me—find us—did it not? Sit quiet, Rowena!"

Grenfell came shoving his way through the group of horror-stricken men behind me. "Dean, what—good God, it's Croat!"

We stood stricken with upraised, futilely gesturing weapons; we held each other back, fearful that one of us would make an incautious move to startle or anger Croat into killing Rowena. He could so easily do it by the merest pressure of his finger against that cylinder in his hand.

Gibbons stammered, "The air in there—I left it at five pounds."

"It is quite comfortable now," came Croat's slow voice. And I realized that the door-slide was slightly ajar. "This girl—Rowena Palisse, is she not? By your gods, a woman worthy of mastering Mercury. They will say, 'Croat's mate chosen from all the Universe could be no better suited to him.' I had no idea!"

We stood dumb, with horror, listening to him. Past his great thick shoulder Rowena's white face peered at us.

"Quiet, Rowena." His arm tightened around her. "Do not be foolish or, as I told you, I will have to kill you. And that would be a pity. Sit still, while I tell them what they must do."

Dr. Grenfell stood at the pane. He was unarmed; he had shoved us behind him with a warning command. He put his hands up on the pane of the door and his face close to it.

"You are Croat, the Mercutian?"

"Why, yes." Croat shifted so as to face the door more comfortably. I saw now that he had both of Rowena's hands pinned by the tightness of his encircling arm. "Yes, I am Croat, the Mercutian. You seem to know me.

That is strange." His gray face gazed insolently at Grenfell, though he was obviously puzzled. "My fame must have spread quickly to Earth. How did you—"

Grenfell waved it away. He had recovered from his first shock of horror. He stood calmly calculating; his shoulders hunched, every muscle tense.

"That's not important. We know you. I am in command here. You cannot escape."

"Escape? For a commander you are stupid! Escape? And you make still another error—you are not in command. You were, but now you are not. I command here."

I heard Dr. Grenfell answering, but it hardly registered on my mind. It seemed that Rowena was trying to attract my attention. I caught her glance, and the vague gesture of her head to indicate something behind her. And Jimmy was plucking at me, whispering, "When I first saw him he was starting to robe them in those Moon-landing suits. Then he stopped. Look, he's got the Moon-suits behind him."

I saw then what Rowena was indicating: the pressure suits and helmets for disembarking upon an airless world. We had brought them in case of unforeseen necessity. My mind flashed back to what undoubtedly Croat had done: stolen the rector's aëro to carry him from Maine to southern Jersey; hidden himself on the cube, having boarded it during the confusion of loading for our departure.

We found later that he had hidden in the small lower room where raw bulk foodstuffs were stored—those which obviously we would not need during the first part of the voyage. Then, while she slept, he had captured Rowena; forced her to tell him of the Moon equipment.

He had secured two of the helmeted suits—elastic, rubberite affairs, double-shelled, with interior air-pressure circulating system to withstand the explosive pressure of fifteen pounds to the square inch; and great goggled helmets like an old-fashioned sea-diver. Croat had been about to use them when Jimmy came upon him.

Use them? For what? And why had he tarried?

HE was arguing calmly with Grenfell. He had said: "I am a different race from you. Perhaps you think I would not dare kill this girl and meet my own death almost at once? Perhaps an Earth-man would be afraid to make good his threat? But that, I promise you, is exactly what I shall do. If you cross me—attempt to stop me—I promise it."

And we did not dare take the chance! Grenfell stood there alert. Gibbons was beside him. The door-slide was ajar. In a matter of five seconds Gibbons could have widened that slit, fired in and killed Croat. But in those five seconds the watchful Mercutian would have bored Rowena with the deadly blast from his little cylinder.

Rowena suddenly moved, twisting violently to test him. If she could distract his attention even for a moment—

It alarmed Grenfell. He warned sharply: "Don't do that, child!"

Croat did not turn; his arm again tightened to hold her. And Rowena called:

"He sent an ether-signal for his ship. A flare—didn't you see it? His ship is coming!"

"We have been waiting for it," said Croat; and he added sharply: "Close that door!"

His weapon came up. Swung at us, and back at Rowena. His gray face, the darting fire of his dark eyes, seemed suddenly unhuman. This was a man of a different world. He would plunge heedlessly into murder and suicide.

Gibbons snapped the deck slide closed. Baker exclaimed: "Grenfell—his ship is in sight. It was down by the Moon!"

The Mercutian ship coming! Then it had not gone back to Mercury, but had been waiting out here, perhaps for a signal from Croat? And I saw Croat now menacing Rowena, making her draw on the Moon-suit.

I plucked at Jimmy. "Come! We've got to get other suits!"

No one noticed us as we dashed away along the deck. Grenfell was murmuring to his companions—trying to plan something—watching, trying to dare make an opportunity to open the slide and leap in upon Croat.

We were gone only a minute or two. I came back alone, robed in a pressure-suit; and Jimmy was still searching for another for himself. I passed Baker.

"Where are you going?" He stopped short, turned and followed me back. I carried the helmet in my hand. Baker was stammering: "You got one, Dean? I thought— He's taking her outside!"

The group at the slide stood transfixed with horrified confusion. Within the lock now were two grotesque figures. Round goggled helmets in place; humps on the shoulders where the pressure-batteries were assembled. Bloated figures, with the air-pressure in the suits already operating. I saw that the rubberite of Croat's garment was stretched by his great height. He bent at the outer door-slide. Rowena was struggling now, but he held her; and turned with his weapon to menace the men on the deck.

Grenfell opened the inner slide; closed it again in a panic. The men were all shouting different orders at once. If Croat were to open the outer slide simultaneously with the opening of the inner one, all the air in the ship would go out with a blast. Death to every one on board!

I came with a wild rush. A sudden madness was on me. I calculated nothing—chanced everything. Grenfell and the others scattered before me. They were all shouting, but I did not hear them. I jammed on the helmet; locked it; started up the mechanisms. My suit began bloating; the pressure made my head roar. Then it cleared. Through the visor-pane I could see the deck, and the door-slide to the lock.

I rushed at the manuals. Baker was ahead of me. He swung the lever; pushed me through the opening slide. I stumbled into the lock. The slide closed instantly after me.

And in the next instant Croat opened the outer door. The lock-air went out with a rush; a torrent of pressure escaping into the outside vacuum.

Like projectiles, we three in the lock were hurled into the black void of Space!

CHAPTER XV.

THE COMBAT IN SPACE.

I RECALL that my first emotion was one of utter amazement. There was no sense of movement. I was motionless, while things moved around me—all very slowly, hastelessly. In the midst of them I seemed poised, unmoving!

There were the distant motionless stars—blazing points of white light in the dead black velvet of the void; there was the great ball of Earth; the Moon; the flame-enveloped Sun. All visually motionless. I had gone head first through the air-lock door. I hung level, with no axial rotation.

But there was some movement. The helmeted figures of Rowena and Croat lay near me—twenty feet away, perhaps. They were clinging together and rotating slowly end over end. Croat had lost his weapon. It floated fifty feet behind us. We were falling toward the Earth, undoubtedly; falling with a steady acceleration of velocity which soon would be meteorite swiftness. But none of it was apparent in the vastness of Space.

The cube was over me. In all the glittering scene, the cube now was endowed with the most obvious motion, a hundred feet or so above me, and slowly sailing past. It was turning on a vertical axis; from its corners faint etheric blue rocket-streams were visible.

Then far to one side, off by the Moon, I saw another object—the Mercutian Space-ship! A great white bird-like shape. I twisted my head to see through the lower lens of the helmet visor. It magnified the image, showing Croat's vessel speeding upward at us; its rocket-streams were behind it, fan-shaped like a comet-tail.

How long I hung there I cannot guess. Time, like movement and like all these astronomical bodies of which I now was one, seemed hanging poised. And I think my mind, too, functioned differently—a detached, far-away haze of thought.

I recall that I was helpless to move, save that I could kick and flounder. Celestial forces were upon me now, irrevocable, inexorable beyond all puny human influence.

It penetrated to my consciousness that the Mercutian ship was only a few miles away; and that Grenfell was manipulating the cube around me—and around Croat and Rowena. I saw the yawning, opened air-lock door. Grenfell was trying to get us back in it.

If only I could reach Croat I would try to strangle him with my grip, rip and tear at his bloated garment with the knife which I had in my belt, and rescue Rowena.

The bulk of the passing cube pulled at me. I began rotating; the heavens turned over.

The cube momentarily moved away to take a new position. I suddenly realized I was drawing nearer Croat, or else he and Rowena drifting slowly toward me; the gravitational attraction of our bulk was pulling us together. But it seemed, at first, desperately slow movement.

The heavens again stopped rotating. I found the Mercutian ship directly under me. I gazed numbly down at it. A mile away? Ten miles? Distance could not be calculated here. But through the visor's magnifying lens I saw it clearly, and across this airless void saw details with microscopic, undistorted clarity.

But my brain hardly encompassed what I was seeing. There was a commotion on the Mercutian ship's upper deck under its bell-like dome. There were figures there, fighting! Hot flashes of blue-green were visible. Men were fighting. And I thought I saw a winged girl; and other girls—Earth-girls?

It was a vague impression. Now there was a rush of figures into a round object standing on the deck. A man's figure, fighting, holding back

other men as the girls crowded behind him.

Tumultuous, silent events were happening s w i f t l y down there on that ship's deck. There was one great blue-green flash. I know now that it must have ripped the ship's dome. The air rushed out with a great explosion. I recall seeing the dome lift apart. The figures of men were blasted out—dead instantly as they struck the airless frigid void of Space.

THE Mercutian ship was wrecked, and slowly turned over. But its mass held most of the mangled figures rotating in narrow orbits around it. Gruesome satellites! A broken litter of wreckage, it began slowly falling toward the far-distant Earth.

And with the explosion, I saw the round object catapulted out from the deck. A small silver metal ball, with tiny door and a row of windows, it hurled free; and instead of falling, seemed to rise.

I was suddenly aware that Croat and Rowena were within reach of me! My outflung hand reached him; I touched a metal plate of his sleeve with my metal-fabric glove. It gave us audiphone contact. I heard his breathing; his muttered oath. And then, as he realized that he could hear me, his words:

"And you think you can save her? You—cannot!"

We locked together. He had seen the wreck of his ship—knew it was the end for him. His wild laugh sounded in my ear-grids with an eerie jangle.

"Death! A fitting death for Croat and his Earth-woman—twin stars, falling!"

And I heard Rowena's voice as I touched her. "Jack! Get away! Let me push at you! Don't let him hold you!"

His great arms seized me. Our bloated suits pressed together. Weightless adversaries scrambling in a weightless void! He caught my wrist that held the knife and twisted it. But despite his giant size, I found that I was the stronger. The knife was above him. I forced it slowly down against all his efforts to stop me.

He gave a last wild laugh. Tried to rip at Rowena's garment. Then my blade punctured his suit. With the outrush of its air, I felt it go flat against me. Felt his grip tighten convulsively; and his last human scream, with all the irony gone out of it, jangled at my ears.

His grip loosened. I kicked him free. Like a log shoved violently in water his body floated away.

I clung to Rowena; became aware of the Cube over us; the yawning lock-opening coming with true aim this time to swallow us.

We struck the lock interior, fell in a heap on its metal floor, and the outer slide closed upon us.

CHAPTER XVI.

FALLING STARS.

MY senses very nearly faded; the air in my helmet was fouled, but in a moment I had the mechanism cleared again. Rowena held me; her voice rang in my ear-grids:

"Jack! Jack, dear—what's the matter?"

I gasped, "I'm all right—the oxygen—was clogged."

We were sitting on the floor of the lock. The pressure was coming in; I could feel it against me. Across the lock, at the inner slide, I could see the

anxious faces of Dr. Grenfell, Jimmy and the others peering in at us.

The pressure came steadily and we yielded our garment-pressure to balance it. Presently they were equal. I saw Grenfell signal. The inner slide opened. Jimmy led the rush of men, pouncing upon us, lifting off our helmets.

"You're not hurt, Jack?" Jimmy's arms held me. "Thank God for that! And Rowena—you all right, Rowena? Let me help you up." His face was white and drawn. "We were so helpless, standing inside, watching you out there."

They carried us to the deck and took off our suits. But there was no time for further talk. Outside the deck windows—out there in the starry vault—portentous events were sweeping slowly on.

The wreck of Croat's ship was far beneath us, with the Earth under it. Croat's body was still near at hand. But it was falling. Grenfell had the negative current in the gravity plates of the cube-base. A repulsion there; and Croat's body had come within its influence. The twisted shape of him, gruesome with the sagging helmet and the deflated suit hanging in wrinkled folds, was moving swiftly away from us. The Earth's attraction had caught it.

And the silver ball was mounting. It was quite near us now; the sunlight gleamed on half its sphere with a brilliant white glare; the earthlight painted its opposite side with a mellow silver glow. It was holding a vertical axis upon which it slowly turned so that its tiny windows went in procession before us. Its power-streams were around it like a faint green-blue aura.

Was this ball coming to attack us? The thought struck me. I was still far from normal, confused, with my head roaring and my muscles trembling. Rowena was the same. We stood together on the deck, clinging to each other and to the bull's-eye window-fastenings as we gazed out into the immensity of Space.

Around us the deck was in turmoil. They were rolling one of the guns to the firing porte. Then Dr. Grenfell's voice sounded from the near-by deck speaker-grid. He was calling from the dome-room of the cube.

"It's all right! Baker, swing D-face toward them! It's all right—that's Guy Palisse and, I suppose, Tama!"

Guy and Tama! Rowena held me close. Have I said that only after Guy's message did she yield to the weakness of tears? Not so—for there were tears in her eyes now.

"Jack! He says—it's Guy!"

Again, Grenfell's voice: "I can see them at the windows. It's Guy, and a winged girl, and Earth-girls."

There was a rush of feet on the deck. But Rowena and I were in no condition to join any activity. We could barely stand and cling to each other. I felt that now the reaction was making everything seem so swift—our minds could hardly grasp it. Yet it must have taken half an hour at least.

The silver ball came level and poised. We saw faces at its windows. Rowena recognized her brother. I held her then, or she would have fallen.

Another interval. Jimmy came beside me, volubly triumphant. But I hardly heard him.

Then Dr. Grenfell manipulated the cube until D-face with its open lock-entrance moved slowly toward the hovering ball, which was poised with its porte fronting us. The openings met, with gravity holding the ball as though glued to us.

Another interval.

I murmured, "Rowena, they're here. In a moment or two—your brother, safe!"

"Yes! Jack, everything's blurred—we—what's the matter with us?"

"Just—blurred. I feel it too. The pressure change—being outside there. We're all right . . ."

A rush of feet. Excited voices. I saw Tama—strange, frail little girl-shape — flowing drapery - garments—sleek-feathered wings.

And the Earth-girls, the kidnaped girls from the White camp. They were frightened, pale, some of them sobbing with the joy of their rescue.

And then I saw Guy. Torn white shirt and trousers; a band of red fabric about his forehead. And with him a slim boyish youth like a little American Indian chieftain.

Guy turned: "Toh, stay with Tama a moment. Is that my sister over there? Why, Rowena! You—you're not the little girl I remember!"

Rowena cast me off, and stood wavering, with opened arms to receive him.

I RECALL how Guy explained that he and Tama and her brother had hidden upon Croat's ship, as in his message he had hinted they might try to do. They had been discovered, caught, and held while Croat and some of his men descended to the Earth, using the silver ball as a sort of tender.

The silver ball had returned, with the girl captives, but without Croat. The ship had waited, hoping, expecting perhaps that Croat would signal. Twice, when heavy clouds were over Maine, it had descended.

Then, with the confusion on the Mercutian ship at Croat's etheric flare-signal from our cube, Guy seized his chance to break loose. I had seen the fight on the ship's deck.

Eight of the Earth-girls were saved. I heard Jimmy ask what had become of the others. Guy avoided the question, and no one asked it again.

There was still one last scene out there in the black vault of the heavens. The body of Croat, and the wrecked ship with tiny dots of Mercutians' bodies revolving as satellites around it, were falling toward the Earth. We followed them down.

Again that slow, measured astronomical movement! A tiny instant of time amid the stars; but to us, watching humans, it was literally hours.

The Earth slowly grew larger, spreading out beneath us. Silver, turning yellow-red, then red like a map faintly tinted. And then with other color coming to it: bluish oceans; gray-green continents; white-tipped mountain peaks; banks of obscuring gray haze and solid cloud areas.

The torn ship and the little dot which was the body of Croat fell steadily. Inexorably . . .

The Earth grew to a great shining surface spread half across the lower firmament.

The wrecked, falling ship was first to enter the atmosphere. It turned faintly luminous with friction-heat. Above it a tail of burning gases streamed out. It was falling like a plummet within an hour—down into the denser air-strata—blazing into a great fiery ball of burning gas until it was consumed.

Then Croat's body became a luminous point of light, a dot of fire, a little falling star.

It puffed into sudden brilliance at the end, as though the spirit of the man might be making a last ironic gesture; then faded and vanished into nothing-

ness, with only the unseen ashes like scattered star-dust sifting down.

I REALLY have no more to add. The events I have narrated are world-wide property. Every one knows them from every public source. I have tried merely to give what the newscasters have been pleased to call "an actual eyewitness description."

There are some who have struggled for fame, and when they got it, found it anything but pleasant to possess. Take mine now; in the quiet that follows those extraordinary events of last year, it is not exactly fame, but it certainly is notoriety.

I do not find it pleasant, nor does Rowena, nor any of the rest of us. The world is relieved that Croat's ship is destroyed, Croat himself dead, and the next inferior conjunction of Mercury and the Earth passed safely.

The affair is over. But now people want to know where Rowena and Guy Palisse are; and where is Jack Dean living? And why does not Guy Palisse or Jack Dean go on the lecture platform or into the sound-motion plays—or join a circus, with that winged girl named Tama who came from Mercury? They could make lots of money; why don't they do it?

We answer: that is no one's business. We wish you would let us alone. Rowena and I are living—in as much seclusion as we can find. Tama and Guy are near us. Jimmy Turk is still in the patrol service. Any one is free to try to find out from him where we are.

Guy is beside me as I finish these pages. He likes the tone of these last paragraphs. But Rowena, who came in a moment ago, did not.

"Aren't you a little aggressive?" she said. "After all, every one who reads your narrative hasn't necessarily insulted you. I believe you should change it."

"Not at all," said Guy.

Rowena kissed me and went outside.

"I'll think about it," I called after her. "Maybe I'll change it."

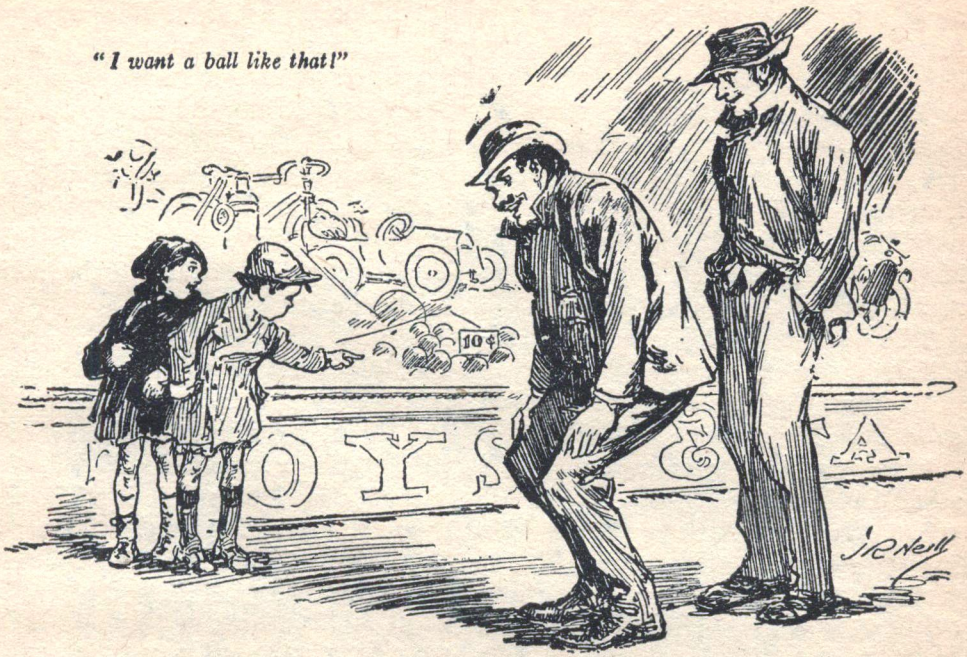
But I haven't.

It is night now. We are in a lonely spot. Forests, and a lake. No, it is *not* Maine.

Tama is outside, flying up into the starlight. She likes it here on Earth, though flying is much more difficult for her than on Mercury. But she is worried over her comrades of the Light Country. The Hill City government took them back, promised them new laws. But Tama is suspicious of those quickly given promises. She and Guy are returning to Mercury as soon as Dr. Grenfell will take them.

Tama keeps very secluded in the daytime here. But at night she flies out. We never grow tired of watching her. Guy called me to the window a little while ago. She went past with fluttering wings and flowing draperies; waved her white arm at Guy as she wheeled and soared out over the starlit lake.

THE END.



Santa's Advance Men

The knights of the open road have a merry time of it, usually; but Christmas brings a cruel problem to drifters like Bill and Jim

By JOHN H. THOMPSON

WOMEN who shed tears when a radiant bride dolled out in lace curtains stands up in front of the audience and murmurs: "I will," might better save the tears and spill them over the poor boobs who have to line up at a quick-lunch counter on Christmas Day and murmur "Beef stew," when by all the laws of custom and nature those poor boobs, like any other normal human beings, ought to be casting benevolent eyes over a groaning table and asking "Who wants the wishbone?"

For fifty-one weeks of the year Bill and I, drifting about the country untrammeled by family ties, kid ourselves into believing we are the original wisenheimers; but when the fifty-second week rolls around and the Salvation Army Santa Clauses don their false whiskers and tinkle little bells beside red canvas chimneys, we realize that for another year the fool-killer has overlooked two shining marks.

As soon as we hit the town, Bill and I began to observe the evidences of Christmas spirit. We had a half dollar between us, but, as the millionaire remarked when the doctor jabbed him with a stethoscope and sadly advised him to make his will, "Money isn't everything."

Wandering aimlessly along the main street we noticed a couple of youngsters standing with their noses pressed

against the plate-glass front of a toy store, gazing longingly at the alluring display inside. Occasional heart-deep sighs sent their breaths steaming frostily against the window. We watched the tableau for several minutes.

Bill reflectively jingled the coins in his pocket and looked inquiringly at me. No words were necessary.

"Go to it, old pal," I said emphatically.

Without further ado we strolled over to the youngsters.

"See anything you want, kids?" asked Bill cheerily.

Bill is one of those guys that kids like instinctively. They smiled shyly.

"I'm the advance man for Santa Claus," he explained jovially. "This fellow is the assistant advance man." He jerked his thumb toward me. "We are trying to get a line on what some of the kids want old Santa to bring them."

Shyness gave place to awed reverence. The kids had swallowed the dope with the avidity of a kitten tackling a chunk of bologna.

"Point out something in there that you'd like to have Santa leave you," urged Bill. "Anything," he insisted encouragingly as they hesitated. Apparently he hadn't spotted the steam engine with a price tag of $40.

The youngsters conferred in whispers. Finally the elder pointed to a rubber ball down in the front of the display, next to the glass. Ten cents, proclaimed the price tag.

"I want a ball like that," he announced.

"Me too," chimed in his companion.

Bill took out a pencil stub and a piece of paper and impressively asked the kids where they lived. The elder one gleefully gave their address.

"I'll tell Santa," Bill promised, "and you two just wait until Christmas Day. Leave the chimney open so there won't be any trouble for Santa to get down."

"We will," chorused the pair; and as they departed Bill was smiling for the first time since we had realized that Christmas was near. I was beginning to feel happy myself.

"We had a narrow escape, though, Bill," I chuckled, pointing to the toy steam engine with the $40 tag.

"Wow! I never noticed that," said Bill. "Some rich kid will get that, probably, and he won't have half as much fun out of it as these two poor little kids will get out of a couple of ten cent rubber balls."

WE bought the balls and blew in our remaining thirty cents on two bags of candy to accompany the balls.

"There's going to be two happy kids in town to-morrow," declared Bill. "I only wish we had a little more money so we could buy some other things for them." He looked longingly at a pair of red-coated Santa Clauses standing in the window.

"Gol-ding it, if we had gone without the coffee and rolls at dinner we could have bought those two Santas." His voice was wistful. For the nonce we had forgotten that we were facing a supperless Christmas Eve and a dinnerless Christmas Day.

We killed time until dark and then, with Bill carrying the balls and I the candy, we set out for the address the youngsters had given us. We planned to go to the tenement, ring the bell and leave the packages at the door. We didn't want the kids to think that Santa Claus was delegating any deliveries to his advance men instead of

doing the work himself with his reindeer.

It is no easy task finding an address in a strange town after dark. Several times we had to stop package-laden pedestrians to inquire our way. Ordinarily anybody stopped by two shabby drifters on a dark street would pull a gun or holler for the cops, but on Christmas Eve everything is different. One old fellow carrying a small Christmas tree even insisted on going a block or two out of his way in order to guide us. We passed rows of shabby tenements and finally reached a broader thoroughfare on which the houses were set back some distance.

"This is your street," the old man said. "Number 190 is the third house on the right. I've got to be hurrying along." He chuckled happily. "Merry Christmas!" he called in farewell and disappeared in the darkness, as we chorused "Merry Christmas" in return.

"Gol-ding it, Jim," ejaculated Bill. "Christmas is pretty good at that. It kind of gets under a fellow's skin, even though he's a homeless old drifter, doesn't it?"

"You recited a mouthful," I conceded. I felt the bags of candy nestling under my arm to make sure they were safe. "It kind of gets everybody," I continued. "Did you notice how that guy in the candy store threw in half a dozen extra pieces when we told him we were buying it for a couple of poor kids?"

Bill chuckled appreciatively. "I bet he'd have given us those two Santas if we'd asked for them," he declared.

We stopped in front of the house our guide had pointed out.

"This can't be the place," Bill gulped.

Lights were peeping from the half-shaded windows of a dark-looking pile of stone set away back in spacious grounds. Two stone pillars marked the entrance to the grounds. By the light of a street lamp we could see a number on one of the pillars. Bill struck a match and held it up to the number. In the flickering flame we read: 190.

"Maybe we're on the wrong street," I ventured.

A boy with a basket over his arm hove into the circle of light, shrilly whistling a Christmas carol as he tramped along.

"Hey, bo, is this Burke Avenue?" Bill called to him.

The boy paused in his whistling long enough to holler a cheerful "Sure it is," and proceeded on his way.

Bill took the soiled piece of paper out of his pocket and we examined it under the street light. "190 Burke Avenue." That was the address the youngsters had given.

"He probably was too young to know his address," I suggested.

"A kid risk giving the wrong address to Santa Claus?" scoffed Bill. "Snap out of it, Jim. Come ahead, we'll investigate anyhow. Maybe they're the servants' kids."

We crept into the grounds and up the driveway to the house. Cautiously we approached one of the windows through which a light was streaming and peeked inside. It was a richly decorated living room. A fire blazed merrily in a grate. Two stockings were hanging from the mantelpiece.

"SUFFERING cats, there's the two kids," declared Bill in mingled astonishment and disappointment. Sure enough, the little fellows, in pyjamas, were dancing about in front of the fireplace. In the background, smilingly watching them, were

a man and a woman, standing with their arms about each other.

"Well, I'll be—"

I didn't have a chance to finish my contribution to the discussion, for we were roughly seized from behind.

"What you bums doing here?" The gruff voice was ominous.

The next instant we found ourselves being dragged into the house. Our burly captor backed us up against the wall in the hall and called the boss of the house, who came hurrying out of the living room.

"I found these two bums slinking around outside," explained our captor. "Burglars, I guess—sizing up the lay of the land."

Bill and I gurgled helplessly.

"Call an officer," commanded the head of the house. "I'll hold the two toughs until you get back." He opened the drawer of a desk and took out a pistol.

"Stand right where you are and keep quiet," he snapped to us. The command was unnecessary. Bill and I have a wholesome respect for pistols, especially when they are pointed in our direction.

"What is the matter, Gordon?" It was a woman's voice from the living room. The happy chatter of the two children had hushed abruptly.

"I'll be there in a minute," called the custodian of the arsenal reassuringly. "A couple of men are here, but they'll be going, right away. Keep the children in there."

"I hope the cops don't forget to put chains on the hurry-up bus. The roads are slippery to-night," Bill whispered miserably to me.

"Quiet!" snapped our guard, and Bill lapsed into gloomy silence.

A patrol wagon might have its disadvantages, but at any rate it was preferable to a hearse. Even the lock-up would be more cheerful than the morgue, especially on Christmas Eve.

The silence in the living room remained unbroken. Knowledge that something unusual had happened obviously had permeated the cheery warmth there.

"Maybe it's Santa Claus!" It was a sudden childish scream of delight.

There was a quick patter of feet and the next instant the two youngsters appeared in the doorway leading from the living room.

They squealed with joy as soon as they saw us.

"Santa's advance—"

"Children!" interrupted their father sternly. They were yanked from behind and the living room door slammed shut as they disappeared from view. We resumed our uncomfortable contemplation of the pistol.

Then came another interruption. The front door opened and our captor reappeared. In his wake was a policeman.

"Want me, sorr?" asked the policeman.

The father sighed with relief as he slipped his pistol into his pocket.

"Yes, Clancy, here's a couple of prowlers — two bums, I guess — who were hanging around outside and peeking into the windows. Better put them where they won't do any harm on Christmas Day."

I GLANCED at Bill, and my heart went out to my poor old pal. He looked as woebegone as a kid whose toy horse has fallen into a manhole. The Christmas spirit had been filling him only a few minutes before, but if there's anything that will smother Christmas spirit it's the prospect of spending the day trying to imagine that

whitewashed stone walls are Yuletide snowdrifts, and iron bars are tinseled Christmas tree bells—and it seemed a hundred-to-one shot that that was how we would spend the day. Our brightest prospect was that we might be able to say "Merry Christmas" to one of the judiciary.

"Got any guns on you?" The efficient Officer Clancy had taken charge of the situation.

We shook our heads in gloomy negation, but Clancy wasn't taking any chances. He started searching us.

"Looks as though it was going to be a mighty nice Christmas, Mr. Hine," he ventured sociably as he ran his hands expertly through our pockets.

Bill and I would have liked to have been heard on the subject, but there was no chance for a minority report.

"Let's see, you've got a couple of youngsters, too, haven't you, Clancy?" Our host, his troubles transferred to the capable, broad, blue-uniformed shoulders, had regained his composure.

"Six, sorr," replied Clancy proudly.

"I suppose they know Christmas is coming?"

"Oh, no, they've completely overlooked it." Clancy chuckled appreciatively at the idea. "But they'll remember it perhaps when they get up in the morning and see all the things waiting for them. D'you know what my boy Tim wanted?" He paused in his search for machine guns and similar paraphernalia in order to ask the question. "A steam engine," he declared solemnly. "But," he added proudly, "Tim's a broth of a boy and he's going to get one."

"My boys had steam engines last year," said our host. He sighed a bit sadly. "The trouble is they have so many things that I hardly knew what to get them this year, and I'm afraid I have made a bad mistake. They were in the ten-cent store last week and pointed out some truck they wanted, but I didn't get it and I'm afraid they are going to be disappointed to-morrow when they see their new toys. I didn't realize until this evening that they had set their hearts on the simpler things."

"That's the way it is with kids," averred Clancy sagely. "If they've got lots of big things, they want the other kind, and if they've got the other kind they—oh, well, we all were like that when we were kids ourselves. The trouble is we don't remember it like we should."

Clancy returned to the business at hand, and tapped the final pockets.

"I guess these two bums haven't got any guns," he said. "We'll be starting for headquarters." Suddenly he noticed the paper bags. "What you got there?" he demanded. "Bombs?" Without waiting for us to answer he relieved Bill of his parcel and gingerly opened it.

"You got any kids?" he demanded of us abruptly after one glance at the contents.

I realized that if we could have said yes, we would have been freed—by Clancy, the way he felt on Christmas Eve. The trouble was we couldn't say "yes." Bill and I are drifters, but we aren't liars.

"No, none," replied Bill sadly.

Clancy's expression, which had softened a bit at the sight of the rubber balls, hardened again.

"Well, come on, you bums can tell the judge about it in the morning." He led the way toward the door.

"Merry Christmas to you, the missus and the—" Clancy's hand was on the doorknob, but he paused as the door at the other end of the hall flung open

and the two pyjama-clad youngsters reappeared from the living room.

"Children! Children, do you hear what I say? Come right back here!" The mother's command was ignored, as the children darted the length of the hall and flung themselves upon us.

Bill flushed uncomfortably and I was wishing that Clancy would hurry and open the door so we could get outside.

"Get away from those men," commanded the youngsters' father sternly. "You don't want to have anything to do with them."

"Why, daddy, these are Santa's advance men," exclaimed the older of the two, who had grabbed Bill's nerveless hand. His tone implied that no further explanation was necessary. "Is Santa going to bring us the rubber balls?" he demanded earnestly. "We asked him for rubber balls last year, but instead he brought us steam engines. They were nice, of course, but we wanted the balls. We—"

Their mother, close on their heels, had collared them and was dragging them back to the living room.

Clancy and the father gazed blankly at each other.

BILL sheepishly handed over the package containing the rubber balls.

"We spent our last cent on 'em," he explained with the shamed air of an amateur crook confessing to a bank robbery, "but we don't need 'em. You might as well give 'em to the kids. You don't have to tell 'em the things were from us. We made a mistake when we saw them down at the store—thought they were a couple of poor kids who weren't going to have any Christmas. My pal has the candy, you might as well take that, too. The police will feed us in jail."

Clancy cleared his throat. He was about to say something but stopped abruptly. The excited youngsters had again eluded their mother and reappeared in the hall. Clancy, father of six children himself, knew better than to shatter any childish illusions, but he was apparently at a loss just what to say.

The situation clearly was serious. The youngsters were gazing at us with the awe and reverence due to the advance crew for Santa Claus. The presence of a police officer, however, was puzzling. After all, it looked as though Bill and I in cozy cells might be better off than the father who would have to do the explaining after our departure.

The father, however, proved equal to the emergency.

"As I was just about to ask you, Clancy, what would you do if Santa Claus were to let his reindeer go hungry?" he demanded.

"Arrest him," said Clancy impressively, winking broadly. The youngsters looked grave. "Of course," Clancy added hurriedly, "Santa Claus wouldn't let his reindeer go hungry." The youngsters looked greatly relieved.

"That's all to-night, Clancy. I just wanted to make sure," said the father. "And by the way, Clancy, here's a little Christmas remembrance I was going to send over in the morning, but this being Christmas Eve, it might come in handy now." He handed over a folded bank note.

Clancy, after voicing appreciation, quickly departed. No police officer, especially one with six children of his own, would want to be suspected of interfering with Santa's advance men.

"You heard what Clancy said?" demanded the father, turning to us. His voice was stern, but there was a twinkle in his eyes.

Bill and I nodded assent.

"Well," continued the father impressively, while the children listened with rapt attention. "We don't want to take any chances. You tell Santa Claus to be sure the reindeer are well fed to-morrow." He slipped a duplicate of what Clancy had received into Bill's hand.

"Suppose — suppose his reindeer have already been fed?" suggested Bill a bit weakly.

"In that case," replied the father, "tell him not to forget his advance men. Good night. And Merry Christmas."

I don't know how the reindeer fared on Christmas Day, but if they did half as well as the advance men, they must have been a contented herd.

THE END.

Ahimsa

THIS strange word is Asiatic and means "harmlessness." The Jains of India are the most complete exponents of *ahimsa* in the world. In fact, they are one hundred per cent "ahimsaists." It is not strange, however, that such a sect should inhabit India, as that is the land of national inertia and fanatical cults.

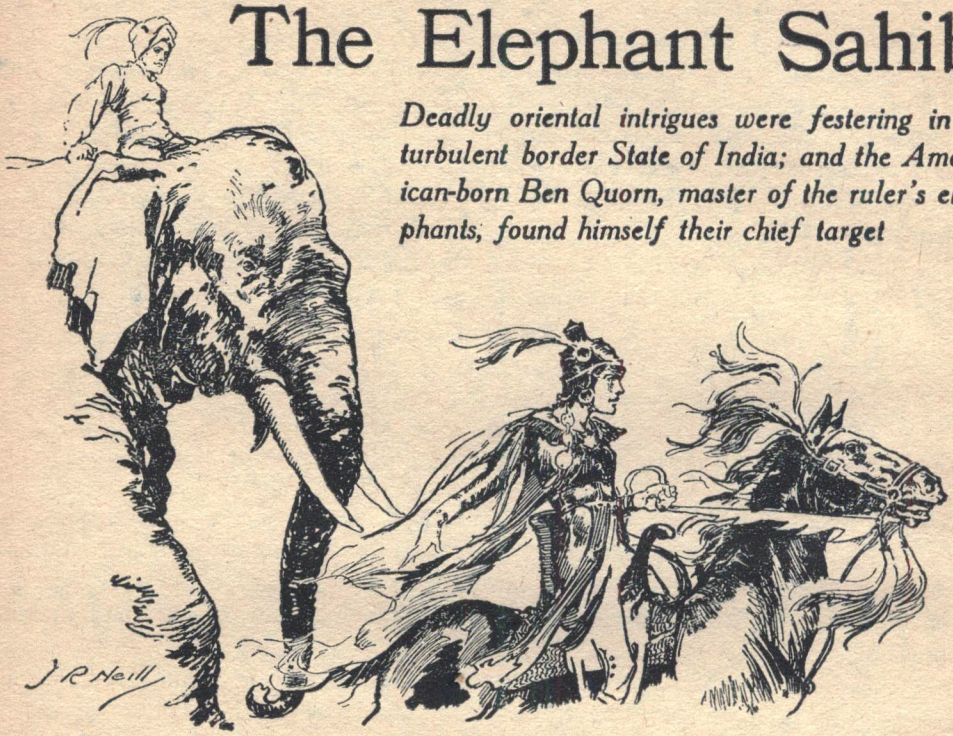
The Jains' fanatical sect numbers more than a million members, extravagantly peaceful, yet they live side by side with the warlike, once ferocious Rajputs. Their temples on Mount Abu are quite remarkable. The age-old carving on pillars and façades are so beautiful and intricate that they much resemble lace. The Jains profess to believe that every living thing has a soul, consequently they do not even kill small annoying insects. In fact, orthodox Jain adherents—*sadhus*—go about with cloths screening their mouths so that small insects flying about may not enter and be accidentally killed. They carry moplike brooms with which they sweep living things out of their paths. They feed cobras, an act which has given tourists the mistaken impression that they worship the huge repulsive reptiles. Of course the Jains become infested with vermin; and the story has been told that a Jain who can afford such a luxury hires another person to sleep in his bed for a few hours in the evening. In that manner the vermin may become so satiated with human blood that the Jain may then lie down on his bed of wood and string and get a restful night's repose.

Naturally the Jains are vegetarians. They could not kill their animal friends even if the animal souls do move on a lower plane. They eat only things that grow wholly above the ground, consequently must be content with a limited diet; nor do they ever eat after sunset—they fear they might accidentally eat a worm or insect in the dark. They boil their water before drinking, so they may be said to have at least one redeeming trait according to Western standards. The reason for this is rather vague, for animal life in water is still animal life, even after being subjected to a high temperature. But being fanatics, they must be allowed their inconsistencies.

J. W. Richard.

The Elephant Sahib

Deadly oriental intrigues were festering in a turbulent border State of India; and the American-born Ben Quorn, master of the ruler's elephants, found himself their chief target



She was a toy queen, tempted to prove herself not such a toy after all

By TALBOT MUNDY

Author of "Asoka's Alibi," "The Affair at Kaligaon," etc.

LEADING UP TO THIS INSTALLMENT

"I AM afraid you must die, Mr. Quorn," was the greeting of the young Ranee of Narada, an independent State on India's mountain border, to her one completely faithful officer, the Philadelphia-born keeper of her elephants.

For Quorn, ex-taxi-driver, had such a mysterious power over the otherwise untamable Asoka, the five-ton giant elephant, that the superstitious natives believed him a reincarnation of the legendary Gunga *sahib,* a half-god of the old days; just as they believed Asoka a reincarnation of Gunga *sahib's* elephant, and the Ranee a princess of that bygone time. And the Brahmin priests, jealous of the Ranee's power and furious at her progressive plans for cleaning up Narada's worst indecencies, had fostered the belief, saying that all three of them would die and then come to life again to save Narada. All that interested the Brahmins was making sure they died soon . . .

And things were complicated by the desire of the neighboring Rajah of Dumdumpore to annex the beautiful Ranee and her kingdom—in spite of her known fondness for the penniless but daring Rajput prince, Rana Raj Singh. Dumdumpore had driven the dacoits—organized bands of robbers—

This story began in the Argosy for December 6.

from his State into Narada, where they have just about conquered the region about the ruined palace of Panch Mahal.

So the Ranee sent Quorn, at the head of thirty-four elephants, to protect her workmen rebuilding that palace.

The dacoits were led by Lumding, but the English-speaking dancing girl, Usha, was the real brains of the band, as well as the real ruler of Dumdumpore. Quorn played on the ambitions of the ignorant bandit Narak to cause dissension.

The *babu* Bamjee, wily purchasing agent of the Ranee, who is loyal to his own pocket and, more or less, to her, conducts a shrewish book-writing widow, a Mrs. Galway, to the camp. Quorn stages a dacoit raid to steal her clothes, forcing her to don some of the Ranee's; and he persuades her that the dacoits think her the Ranee, and that she must play the part if kidnaped by them.

CHAPTER XI.

"YOU SHALL NEVER LIVE TO SPEND IT IF YOU PLAY US FALSE."

THERE was a man named Mulji, Quorn's prime favorite among the thirty-four mahouts. Quorn had offered the smallest, youngest elephant for Mrs. Galway's use in the scheduled abduction for no other reason than because Mulji was that elephant's mahout. A man who can be trusted with the education of a young beast is reliable in certain other matters, sometimes.

"Mulji, you're a bad egg, and you've three thrashings due you," said Quorn. He kicked away the little rags on bits of stick that Mulji had been preparing as bribes to the mischievous godlet who coöperates in the sinful schemes of dissolute mahouts. "That *memsahib* says you stole her overcoat las' night."

The overcoat, along with all of Mrs. Galway's other property that had not been smashed out of recognition by Asoka, lay in a locked box, back of the elephant line, and Mulji knew that Quorn knew there was nothing missing. So he pricked up his ears.

"It is unseemly for one so proud as that *sahiba* to speak lies concerning me, who am an honorable man," said Mulji.

"She says she's going to have the whole durned thirty-four of you clapped in quad, and you especial," Quorn informed him.

"Leaving your honor without mahouts to clean the elephants? Is she in her right mind?" Mulji asked.

"She's mean. You've got to take her to Narada City on that young elephant."

"On an elephant with sore feet?" Mulji asked, eager to please but not yet quite understanding the drift of Quorn's suggestion.

"You sucker! You know as well as I do that if that there young elephant had sore feet, what was left of you would be hunting a job what didn't call for no sitting down at no time for about a year to come."

"Her feet are as the feet of dancing girls," said Mulji quickly. "Never was an elephant that had feet in such perfect condition. She can carry ten *sahibas*—even to Narada City—if the *sahib* says so."

"Mebbe. Long way for a young elephant," said Quorn.

"A too long journey—terrible."

"Terrible my eye! That elephant could do it easy."

"Why not? Did she not come thence easily, bearing a load of tents and what not else?"

"Kept up good, eh?"

"*Sahib,* not even the great Asoka could leave that young elephant behind. She has a pride of workmanship, being well taught. Ever she loves to do her daily task."

"Hmm. Not skeered o' gettin' left behind?"

"Nay, *sahib* — frightened of nothing. Nevertheless, she loves company. Therefore, she is always on the heels of the next elephant ahead."

"Can't spare no elephants to keep her company," said Quorn.

Mulji began to see daylight through the mystery of many words. "She might seek to turn back," he suggested.

"Does she run away now and then?" Quorn asked him. "Say, if you show up back here with that English *memsahib,* I'll kill you!"

"The *memsahib* might fall off the elephant?"

"If she did, *she'd* kill you and save me the trouble. You take my tip and let her down gentle when Bamjee tells you where to halt for dinner."

"But the elephant is young," said Mulji. "If she should set down her burden she might suppose the task is finished. She might wish to return to the herd. It is not always possible to make an elephant obey."

"BAMJEE," said Quorn thoughtfully, "don't know nothing about elephants."

"Surely, *sahib.* That *babu* is totally ignorant of the ways of elephants. Doubtless both he and the *sahiba* will descend from the howdah at some place."

"Yep. They'll mebbe have a servant with 'em."

"He would descend likewise."

"Mebbe. He could climb back, couldn't he, to look for something in the howdah? I was thinkin' o' sendin' my cook."

Mulji grinned. "A great risk, *sahib.* If the cook should climb again into the howdah, surely a young elephant would be excused for thinking it is time now to return homeward. Is it not so?"

"Mebbe. I sure would hate to lose that cook. And I sure would hate to have to take your unsupported word for anything, you sucker. Folks might say you'd run away o' purpose. So you should have a witness."

Quorn turned away to attend to other matters. He was not even present when the elephant kneeled before his tent and Mrs. Galway climbed into the howdah.

From a distance, on Asoka's neck, he watched, suggesting both to the young elephant and Mrs. Galway that he proposed to act as escort for at least a portion of the way; and the fact that his own cook, with a box of provisions and pots and pans, followed Bamjee into the howdah, also helped to create that suggestion in Mrs. Galway's mind. So there were no last-minute arguments.

Far in the lead, Asoka swung along the track toward Narada City and the young elephant followed, in no haste to overtake him, satisfied to know that the pride of the herd was somewhere along the road ahead of her.

But as soon as Quorn came to a gully he turned into it and hid behind a clump of trees. He did not move from there until the sound of Mrs. Galway's noisily complaining voice had died down in the distance.

Then he turned back; and when he had set the rest of the herd of ele-

phants to work at carrying firewood for the camp, he turned Asoka's head toward the village, several miles away, in which the dacoits had established themselves. In a world of almost absolute uncertainties he was sure of one thing: that the dacoits would be keeping guard against surprise. He would be seen, and before long.

He rarely put the howdah on Asoka's back when he rode alone, but he had it now, although it was very lightly loaded, and its contents hidden under sacking. When he found a clump of trees that suited his purpose he made Asoka kneel, and with the aid of a shovel he did some very swift work, covering it neatly with dead leaves and loose dirt.

He was in no danger, he knew that Prince Rana Raj Singh and his Rajput horsemen—possibly the Ranee, too, since nothing could keep that young woman out of the zone of action—were watching him with the inimitable Rajput mastery of scouting.

WHEN the hurried work was finished he chained Asoka by both hind legs to a tree not far away, allowing him scope enough to amuse himself breaking branches. Then he built a small fire, making it as smoky as he could, and sat down to wait.

He did not have very long to wait. There was a hill, much less than a mile away, with a fringe of bowlders along its summit, from which the dacoit watchmen saw him almost as soon as he lighted the fire. He saw one of them make a signal by removing a dead tree-branch that had been stuck into a crevice.

Plainly the dacoits suspected a trap. They were as cautious as panthers. They approached from three sides, under cover, showing themselves suddenly and then vanishing equally suddenly, to tempt an ambush to declare itself if one there were.

Most of them stayed under cover amid the rocks and scrub surrounding the clump of trees, but nine or ten came forward, of whom one was Narak. However, Narak was not the leader; he appeared to give grudging precedence to a man who might be eighty years of age, so gray he was and so sunken of cheek, although his muscular limbs looked active and he walked with an athletic stride.

"This is Lumding," remarked Narak.

Quorn stared curiously, almost as much fascinated by the famous leader's features as the dacoit was by the reputed Gunga *sahib's*.

Lumding had rather a refined look—cruel but sardonically humorous, and capable of far more intelligence than most of his followers; nevertheless, superstition had him by the brain. From his turban of twisted red silk to the toes of both feet he was covered with amulets of one sort or another—tigers' claws and tigers' whiskers, earrings, necklaces, wristlets, bracelets, rings on all his fingers—every one of them designed to guard against the evil eye or some other specific danger of the sort that creep by night and smite in daytime from an unseen world beyond a veil of mystery.

His only weapons against visible opponents were a long sword and a jeweled dagger. He seemed offended because Quorn did not rise to greet him. He spoke abruptly. A man near by interpreted.

"Stand up!"

But Quorn was sitting on the mechanism of his own material contact with the latent forces of an unseen world.

If he had moved it might have cost him all his reputation as a wizard.

"Tell him," he said, in an off-hand tone of voice, "that it ain't the custom where I come from, to talk business standing." He thoughtfully thumbed tobacco into the bowl of his pipe. "Tell him he ain't here to pass no compliments, nor me either. What he wants he won't get—not unless he treats me civil. Bid him sit."

Lumding hesitated but the interpreter explained volubly and his men urged him, so he sat.

"Where's your rajah?" Quorn asked him at once. "Where is Dumdumpore and that writing on paper that the woman Usha promised?"

There was no immediate answer, but a lot of conversation between Lumding and his dacoits.

AT last the interpreter pointed to Quorn and said abruptly: "You come with us."

"The devil I do! What for?"

"You get from Usha what she said you get."

"Nix! You go and tell that witch to keep her promises. She or else Dumdumpore himself can bring me, here, what she promised; or nothing doing."

"You bring your elephant and come or you get made to come," said the interpreter.

"Huh! You ask this boss o' yours if he knows what kind o' man he's talking to."

"He say," said the interpreter, "you choose. You come, or you get come along damn-quick!"

"All right. Tell him I'll make a monkey of him quicker'n he can beg me not to."

The interpreter perhaps was afraid to translate that threat too literally. There followed a lot of conversation and apparently Lumding was making up his mind to act sternly. Narak appeared anxious, as if he would like to speak to Quorn but hardly dared do so in the presence of his chief.

"See here," said Quorn, "I'll show you the kind o' feller I am—make you a bit o' magic. Ask what he'd like to have me do."

It was a perfectly safe question. Instead of answering at once Lumding took counsel with his men, giving Quorn the excuse to interrupt impatiently.

"Heck! I can't wait all day. Tell him I'll show him what I can just as easy do to him if he don't behave himself."

He pointed to a little pool of muddy water left by the recent rains. It was not more than three or four feet in diameter; it was possibly three feet deep. They stared at it.

With his heel Quorn shoved the switch that he had buried under dead leaves. Instantly a stick of dynamite that he had placed at the end of the wire in the pool exploded with a startling cough, and the water was muddy enough to make an astonishing spectacle as it leaped forth.

Asoka screamed, which made a fine addition to the panic in the air; Quorn had counted on that.

"Does he want any more?" he suggested. "Tell him to go and sit on yonder lump o' dry wood and I'll give him a free ride to heaven."

Lumding backed away from it. Quorn pressed his heel against a second switch and blew the lump of wood to smithereens. He was now at the end of his magical resources for the moment, but he did not dare to admit that.

"What next?" he demanded.

"No more!" said the interpreter.

"Lumding, he send for writing from the woman Usha."

"No. Tell him to go fetch it."

Terrified though he was, Lumding had dignity of a kind; he preferred not to be some one's errand-boy. He was afraid to refuse, but he tried to temporize.

"He say," said the interpreter, "if he go—maybe you—not here when he come back."

"All right. You tell him I'm not used to being put off by no argyments. What I say do, gets did—or else there's more o' that there magic, quick and snappy—I ain't guaranteeing where the next lot hits. You tell him, if he's all that unbelieving o' my being here when he gets back, he can leave this sucker here to watch me."

With his thumb he indicated Narak, who was as nervous as his chief. But Lumding seemed to think it a good enough idea to let Narak run the risk of being blown up. He commanded him to stay and Narak, fighting with his own fear, made the most of opportunity to prove in the presence of Lumding's men his own superior courage.

"Sure—he stay," said the interpreter.

LUMDING and his staff took leave as hastily as shreds of dignity allowed, stepping very carefully around the pools of water and the lumps of rotting wood lest sudden magic speed them on their way.

About half of the men who had hidden themselves amid the near-by rocks left cover at once and followed Lumding; but all of Narak's men remained and some of them even drew nearer. One of them called to Narak, urging him to beware of danger. Narak answered gruffly and the man who had served as interpreter at the former interview with Quorn came forward.

"Now," said Quorn, "you tell this feller Narak, if he wants to ketch the Ranee he'd better move quick. She's riding back toward Narada City on a young she-elephant, with a man named Bamjee, one mahout and my cook."

Narak asked a dozen questions in rapid sequence. Quorn answered them all in one slow, considered summary:

"Likely enough the Ranee will pretend she ain't the Ranee jes' to make you doubtful o' yourself. But don't you let her fool you, not even if she tries to kid you she's American or some such stuff as that. Treat her decent. Don't forget that spoiled goods ain't worth a tinker's dam in any market. Dumdumpore won't pay a price for her unless she's right side up and all in one piece. Get me?

"Soon as you've caught her, you beat it to the hills and hide. Make ready to defend yourself 'cause Lumding will try to grab her from you. Soon as you can, get word to the woman Usha saying what you've done; and then send that *babu* Bamjee to bring word to me. You can count on me to help you get what's coming to you. Hurry. Where are your horses? If you go on foot you'll hardly ketch 'em by the time they halt for dinner."

Narak ran and his men went after him like smoke before the wind. Quorn carefully coiled the wire and hid that with the battery and switches in the howdah, knowing that if Usha should come she would have heard the story of the magic and would certainly be shrewd enough to look for causes.

Then he made a fuss over Asoka, petting him and getting him to forget that the two explosions had been so terrible, before he undid the chain and hid that also in the howdah. Then he

mounted and, guiding Asoka to the spot where he had previously sat, waited, *ankus* in hand, on the great beast's head—a living reproduction of the carving done a thousand years ago on the stone wall of Narada City market-place.

The sunlight, broken by the branches overhead, cast shadows that completed the illusion—not that Quorn was conscious of it; he was wondering what he would have for dinner, with no cook to superintend the efforts of the pot-and-kettle boy.

IT was a long time before he saw returning dacoits, and Lumding was not among them. There were not more than twenty or thirty men, all mounted on ponies this time.

A woman on a small gray mule was riding in their midst and, on a horse beside her, a man rode looking as if he would rather have been doing almost anything than that. The woman was heavily veiled; only her eyes were visible above the edge of a silk scarf.

The man, too, had a colored scarf over his mouth and his turban pulled down low over his forehead, but even at a distance Quorn could see that he was puffy-cheeked, black-bearded and had heavy bags under his eyes. He kept glancing to right and left and behind him, not as if he expected pursuit, but more from a sort of guilty nervousness—or so Quorn diagnosed it.

"That guy owes money or else he's done his mother dirt," he muttered, tapping Asoka gently with the *ankus* to get him ready for action at a moment's notice.

The man and the woman approached. The others waited rather far off.

"Buddy, that bird has a gun in his fist," said Quorn. He always talked as if Asoka understood him. "If I prod you with the *ankus,* soak him quick and snappy, because I haven't got no weapon."

But the man kept his hand in his breast and let the woman ride ahead of him until her mule's nose nearly touched Asoka's trunk.

"I have brought you the paper," she said in good plain English.

"Let me see it."

Slowly the man drew his hand from his breast and passed a folded sheet of paper to the woman. Without glancing at it she held it toward Quorn, who ordered Asoka to take it. The elephant gave it into Quorn's hand.

"Jes' as I thought," he exclaimed. "'Tain't legal. There ain't the name o' no bank written on it, nor no value received, nor no time limit. I'm a sucker, I am—mebbe. But I learned about notes along of having set my John Hancock on another fellow's to accommodate him—so I learned it good. Who's your fat friend?" He looked shrewdly at the puffy face behind the scarf. "Is this your hand o' writing? Are you Dumdumpore by any chance?"

He grunted and clucked to Asoka—gave into his trunk the folded note to hand back.

"Never you mind who that man is. It is not your business," said Usha.

Quorn had no doubt she was Usha, any more than he doubted that the man was Dumdumpore, but both of them seemed to wish to play a farce of anonymity.

"Seems to me he come on business," he retorted. "You're a pair o' bright ones, you are! Here I am, all ready to do my bit and turn the Ranee o' Narada over to you—plans all laid—ready to deliver the goods on this here elephant—and you two come an' try to double cross me with a piece o' paper

that ain't no more value than a canceled postage stamp. Huh! I've a mind to run out on you."

THE rajah moved his hand toward his breast again and Quorn made ready, in case of need, to use the heavy *ankus* like a javelin.

"You will not dare to disobey me," Usha answered. "I can send men to catch you at any time. If you don't deliver the Ranee to us—"

"All right—oh, all right. But what's wrong with acting honorable? Why not give me a proper promissory note, so's I can cash it at a money-lender's and make my get-away?"

"You shall have it," said Usha. She turned and whispered to the rajah. "Only you must cash it with the money-lender we name."

"Will he give me a fair face value?"

Again the whispering. "He will discount it."

"Then write the note for twenty-five per cent more money! I know them money-lenders. Say—see here, I'm sick o' argyment; you bring me that there note, writ proper, for the full amount, value received and payable without recourse, to-night to my tent. Get me? If you don't, the game's up—for I'll tip the Ranee to keep out o' your way."

The rajah's hand went to his breast.

"Nah-nah, you don't!" Quorn swung the heavy *ankus* and the Rajah's hand dropped to his side. "You don't know the kind o' guy you're dealing with. You cut along back to your camp and write that note, or you'll lose out. I ain't afraid of you. I'm out for a piece o' money or I'd tell you both to chase yourselves."

"Your money you shall have," said Usha, "but you shall never live to spend it if you play us false."

"I'll be settin' waitin' for you in my tent to-night, after supper," Quorn answered.

They turned and rode away without the courtesy of taking leave, and Quorn sat still watching, to make sure that none of their followers stayed behind in hiding to keep track of his movements. He did not start back toward the elephant lines until they all vanished over the brow of a hill.

Then, when he had ridden perhaps two hundred yards, he became aware that he was watched; but he did not know who watched him until he heard the Ranee's silvery laugh and saw her ride forth, all alone, from behind a high rock by the side of the track.

"Gloomy?" she asked. "Why are you looking gloomy?"

"For one thing, miss, because it's dangerous for you to ride alone. There might be dacoits spying in the long grass."

"There were only five," she answered, "and the Rajputs caught them all. But tell me about your conference. Did all go well?"

"Went perfect, miss. The whole plan's working perfect, excep' there ain't no end to it!"

"Who knows an end from a beginning?" she retorted. "Did you know you were talking to the great Dumdumpore?"

"I guessed it."

"And Usha?"

"I guessed that, too, miss."

"You guessed well. But to outguess is better. Now what I want is Usha safe in my hands—and Dumdumpore at liberty, to guess himself into a quarrel with all the dacoits, so that they will hunt him like a wild beast."

"Yes, miss. Here's wishing 'em luck."

"Have you got that note?" she asked. "Well, get it. His estate will pay!"

CHAPTER XII.

"DID YOU STICK A STAMP ON HER HIDE AND MAIL HER HOME?"

"I WONDER who the sucker was," Quorn wondered aloud, "who invented that there rumor about the East not being in no hurry. Miss, do the earth turn fast enough to suit you? You should live in New York; them hustlers sets the clock forward an hour for an excuse to get up 'fore they go to bed."

The Ranee laughed. No serious discontent could exist within sound of that. Her fearless enjoyment of physical danger was contagious. And behind her laughter there was always judgment, shrewd and unexpected, though invariably daring and indifferent to anybody's comfort, her own included.

"Go ahead, miss. Shoot. I know durned well you're going to play me like a checker on a board."

"Oh, no," she said. "I think it's some one else's turn. My turn to tackle the danger—yours to stay behind the scenes."

"No, miss. Danger ain't no proper sort of employment for a young queen—"

"Don't be silly, Mr. Quorn. I am only a Ranee. I am a toy queen, tempted by fate to prove myself not such a toy after all. If I were a real queen you would see me at the head of armies. I have always thought that Joan of Arc should be spanked for having missed her opportunity—but probably the gods have done that to her. She should have laid all Europe under her heel, of course, and then governed it.

"My chance has not yet come, however—not yet. Perhaps it will. Perhaps I will do no better than she did. Meanwhile, I am only a toy queen, with an army of only fifty Sepoys, who are fed and paid so well that they are useless. One needs an army of starving malcontents to accomplish anything."

"Well, miss—what are you going to do about it?"

"Play-act! Watch me."

She stepped inside Quorn's tent and let the flap fall, so that he could not even guess what she was doing. In less than a minute she came out wearing his new blue turban and the Scotch tweed jacket that he kept for special occasions. She moved as he did, walked as he did. Save that she was wearing white riding breeches and spurred boots, any one at a distance might have thought that she was Quorn himself.

She copied every mannerism, even to his gesture when he squirted tobacco-juice through the gap between his front teeth. By an inch—perhaps more than an inch she was shorter than he, and she was much more lightly built, but perfect acting covered these discrepancies. Quorn hardly knew whether to laugh or feel offended when she mimicked his trick of scratching when he hitched his pants.

"TO-NIGHT I will be Ben Quorn."

"And me, miss?"

"You are Mr. X—the unknown quantity. I will sit inside the tent and wait for the woman Usha—"

"Miss, she'll spot you, sure! She'll split you with a knife as quick as packers split fish!"

"Not she. I will make a monkey of her! All the Rajputs, under Rana Raj

Singh, will dispose themselves in hiding to deal with the dacoits whom Usha will certainly bring to help her make a monkey of you. You are to take your elephant Asoka and scout for Mulji, who ought to be back soon. We don't want Mulji and your idiotic cook to come bursting on the scene with news at the wrong moment. If Narak has captured Mrs. Galway and believes he has captured me, we don't want Usha or Dumdumpore to know that until they are separated and can't confer with each other."

"Miss, why separate 'em? Why not ketch 'em both and let Asoka kill 'em? He'd do it quicker'n a terrier kills a rat. They'd be two bad varmints done with."

"Don't be silly, Mr. Quorn. I want them separated, because Usha has the brains and Dumdumpore has only the resources. His resources are dacoits who will make nothing but trouble for him as soon as his brains are missing. I propose to use his brains myself, which is why Usha must be taken prisoner, not killed; but I don't want to take her prisoner until after I have learned enough from her lips to be able to make full use of all her information."

"Miss, she won't talk to you! Your voice ain't my voice; she'll detect that in the first six words you say."

"Oh? Did you never have a sore throat?" the Ranee retorted. She coughed in exact imitation of Quorn on a cold night when he had a touch of bronchial trouble. Then she spoke hoarsely, coughing again, with a handkerchief over her mouth.

"Holy mackerel! Ain't there no way o' feelin' easy without gettin' lit?"

Quorn laughed. He had to. It was his voice—his words—his mannerisms. She resumed her own silvery speech.

"Do you understand? It would be worse than useless for me to capture Dumdumpore because that would not settle the dacoit problem. If I should kill him, then the British government could declare it proved that I can't rule without murdering political rivals in place of hanging dacoits.

"How can I rid my territory of the dacoits with my little army of fifty incompetents, of whom I have had to leave forty in the city to help the police? There is only one course possible. Dumdumpore must be left at liberty. He must be made to believe that Narak has captured me. Then Dumdumpore—because he is a fool without Usha to tell him what to do—will probably fall foul of either Lumding's party or else Narak's."

"Very good, miss. But what if he doesn't?"

"Then we must see to it that the dacoits quarrel with *him*. But we will cross that river when we reach it."

"THERE ain't no end to this plan, miss. There ain't no *finis* printed on the last page—not so far as I can see."

"Oh, yes, there is. The end will be when all the dacoits are either destroyed or driven out of my territory. That must happen before the British Resident returns from Delhi with power, perhaps, to force my resignation from the throne. And a new book begins—and a good one, Mr. Quorn—when you ride through the streets of Narada as the veritable Gunga *sahib*, risen from the dead. You have to die, you know."

"I'll die cheerful, miss, if that'll keep you from doing it."

"Nonsense! Can't I make you realize you are the Gunga *sahib?* I am no more important than you are—per-

haps, in this particular incarnation, a bit more picturesque, that's all. You and I and Rana Raj Singh always come into the world together. Bamjee, I think, also, although I am not so sure of him; he hasn't the feel of an old familiar friend that you have. Now, you take your elephant and look for Mulji. It is nearly sunset. I will stay here."

"Miss, I'd hate to see you leave the world too rapid. I'll be lonesome without you to make me act like a dog-gone lunatic. Where are your ten soldiers? Have 'em near by."

"No, I have sent them to Rana Raj Singh."

"Well—'tain't my funeral. Mebbe 'tis, though! Well—orders is orders."

And so Quorn rode away on Asoka, silhouetted black against the setting sun. After a mile or so, because he knew there was only one track by which Mulji could return, he halted and stared at the caldron of cooling, fading colors in the Narada River valley, listening to the crashing echoes of the water tumbling through the rapids, until darkness at last conquered all but the echoes and the night breeze came sighing behind him to soften and subdue even the sounds.

Then starlight, luminous enough against the purple sky to tinge with almost indistinguishable opal the veil of mist that the breeze spread silently above the river and the dark-green forests on its banks.

"Heigh-ho!" he sighed, and yawned, both fists above his head. "Why ain't there somewheres a land like this, with a queen like her—and elephants—and decent likker—plus the morning paper and the movies and all a feller's old friends—and jes' an enemy or two to hate an' make you feel superior—and no snakes? Wow! What a world that would be! Why couldn't the Almighty have done it?"

His meditations were disturbed by Mulji and the cook—on foot—no elephant. They looked draggled and weary. As they stepped from the darkness like shadows they hung their heads.

"YOU maybe checked your elephant in a parcel office," suggested Quorn with biting calm. "Or did you stick a stamp on her hide and mail her home? Did you use enough stamps? Sure she won't be returned for insufficient postage?"

"*Sahib*—"

"Go on. Spill your shame! You've lost your elephant. How come?"

"*Sahib,* dacoits came and took her from me."

"But I notice you stuck to your sweet life. I'd ha' sweetened it a piece more, mebbe, if you'd stuck to your charge instead and gone along with her and kept a bright eye for a get-away. I might ha' liked you for it—mebbe. A mahout without an elephant ain't worth a damn to any one. But go on—spill your grief."

"*Sahib,* that *sahiba* has a devil."

"Don't I know it!"

"*Sahib,* I could see the dacoits on a hill-top when she ordered me to stop that she might eat dinner. I said nay, because I knew my little elephant is swift, and we might escape them. But she said, you may tell the dacoits I am the Ranee of Narada and they will make no trouble. *Sahib!* And I think that *babu* Bamjee told her to say that to me; he also has a devil."

"Ten of 'em," said Quorn. "But five of 'em are house-broke. Go on."

"So I stopped, and the elephant knelt, and she descended; but I remained seated on the neck of the ele-

phant because I had foreseen what must happen, and I hoped to escape. Nevertheless, according to your honor's strict command, I waited for this thrice-accursed cook, who was busy with pots and pans and such-like foolishness; nor would he look at me, or he might have understood my signal.

"*Sahib,* I could hear the dacoits coming. So, because your honor had strictly ordered I should bring the cook back, I left my elephant to go and whisper to him beside the fire he had built. And even while I did that, dacoits ran between me and the elephant.

"So I seized the cook and he and I together jumped into a pool of muddy water, amid rushes, by the roadside, where we lay on our bellies because it was shallow. We could see little, because we dared not raise our heads except to breathe; but we could hear much—most of it the voice of that *sahiba,* uttering complaint."

"They hurt her!"

"Nay, but I think she hurt their feelings, *sahib.* For at first she protested she is not the Ranee of Narada, but she acted as it may be she thinks our Ranee might behave in such case—exceedingly arrogant. *Sahib,* there was one there who interpreted. I heard him say to the dacoit's captain, whom he addressed as Narak, that she is pretending to be a 'Melikanee. And the man named Narak was ashamed that any one should think him such a fool as to believe that.

"However, they asked Bamjee, and Bamjee said she *is* the Ranee of Narada—he being either in terror of the dacoits or pretending, I know not which. So then she changed her mind and began to pretend to be the Ranee, whereat the dacoits were even more offended, because they knew no Ranee would behave as she did, so they supposed she was mocking them."

"WHAT did she do?" Quorn demanded.

"*Sahib,* I could not see. But I heard Bamjee beg her not to act so foolishly. He told her that not even peacocks strut thus. Then, in English, she commanded Bamjee to tell the dacoits that her army would presently come and destroy them all unless they allowed her to continue on her journey. But the interpreter overheard that, so he interpreted to Narak—whereat all the dacoits laughed and Narak said in a loud voice: 'Is she mad or art thou lying?' And then Bamjee said she is out of her mind for the moment because of great fear of their honors, which appeared to satisfy them.

"For a while there was a hunt for us two, but the water, as I said, was muddy and none could see us where we lay amid the reeds. Moreover, Narak was in haste. So presently they made her climb back into the howdah along with Bamjee, two dacoits also climbing in; and one of the dacoits took my *ankus* that I had let fall as I ran toward the pond—"

"Fine mahout you are, to let go your *ankus,*" said Quorn. "Kidded yourself you was Babe Ruth, I dare say, making a home run—chucked your bat away! I'll Babe Ruth you, you limping heathen! Go on—what happened next?"

"*Sahib,* that is all. They rode the elephant away. There were many dacoits and they surrounded the elephant on their ponies, so that the elephant had company and was not ill-pleased to go with them. And when they were out of sight this man and I came hither, hoping that your honor will believe our tale, which is the truth

as I am your honor's servant and a living man."

"Aye, I believe every word of it, you sucker, and I'd like you twice as well if you was dead—a-losing your good elephant and coming back alive to face me cheeky as a dog what's lost his muzzle. Weren't you and your personal honor and that there young elephant one package?"

"*Sahib,* but you told me I should bring the cook, and—"

"Yep. That there's your alibi and I'm a reasonable man."

"Your honor is a confidant of many gods and therefore just and merciful."

"Mebbe. You ain't fired. Have you et?"

"Nay, *sahib,* not since morning."

"All right. Up you get behind me. I'll ride ye both back to the lines, where my cook shall fix you up a feed o' hash and he shall give you rations in a cloth for three days. And if either of you says one word o' this to any one—"

"*Sahib,* I will be speechless," Mulji interrupted.

"No, you won't, you sucker. You will tell your wife you're going somewheres and you won't be back for mebbe three days—mebbe longer. Then you go and find them dacoits. And you find Bamjee. And you bring Bamjee back to the lines on the back o' that young elephant."

"But how, *sahib?*" the man wailed.

"Damned if I know. But Bamjee can't manage an elephant. And a mahout without an elephant ain't no good. So you go get your elephant. If you come back here riding on him, and with Bamjee up behind, then me and you is friends again. If not—"

"I will try to do it, *sahib!*"

"You'd better! Give that cook o' mine a leg up—so. Now swing yourself up by Asoka's tail and sit behind the cook and hold him so he don't fall off. Most cooks ain't acrobats, and this one's awk'arder than most. Hang on, both of ye. *Cheloh,* buddy—step on her—give her the gas good!"

CHAPTER XIII.

"THERE ARE WAYS OF PERSUADING."

BACK they swayed toward the lines at high speed. But when Quorn saw there was a dim light in his tent he slowed down. The light was suddenly extinguished. Presently he saw the shadowy shape of a mounted Rajput, so still that Asoka almost touched the horse's flank before a slight movement revealed the rider.

Without stopping, Quorn asked in a low voice. "Are they here?"

"They are here."

After that he made a circuit, in order to come at the elephant lines from the rear, around the hill, and escape observation. He passed figure after figure in the darkness; wherever there was a chance for dacoits or any one else to creep up unobserved Rana Raj Singh had posted either a mounted Rajput or else one of the Ranee's Sepoys; and the Sepoys were as silent as the mounted men, taking example from their betters. Quorn did not dare to chain Asoka in his proper stall, lest the dacoits should see him do it and make deductions; so he roped him instead near the quarrymen's quarters and routed out six of those rascals to bring a mound of fresh grass from the heap brought in by the grass-cutters. He himself went for more substantial fodder.

It was on his way back from the store-shed with a bag of unhulled rice on his shoulder that he encountered

Rana Raj Singh, who was standing beside his mare in darkness so deep that his voice seemed to come from another world.

"Usha has come."

"What now, sir?"

"She is in your tent and the Ranee is also in there. She entered the tent less than five minutes ago, after posting three men in the darkness outside."

"God, sir, they'll kill her!"

"No, no. Three of my men are there. One is in the tent, under a heap of blankets; two are outside; all the others are within hail."

"Then why not close in on the skunks and ketch 'em?"

"Give the Ranee time. She has an automatic and she is well protected. Besides, Lumding and at least two hundred dacoits are in hiding near by. Probably Dumdumpore is with them. We have to be careful, we are so outnumbered. Besides, fighting in the dark is difficult."

"Ain't there going to be no fight?" Quorn asked him.

"Perhaps. Perhaps not. The dacoits may wait until daylight. We will capture Usha presently, without the dacoits knowing what has happened. They are afraid to attack in darkness. Last night taught them that much. And just now I loosed our wounded prisoner after letting him overhear a conversation in which I said the quarrymen have all been armed."

"SIR, why not take the fight to 'em and get it over with?"

"We are too few. And it will be better to have them fight with one another. Has Narak captured Mrs. Galway?"

"Yes, sir."

"And believes she is the Ranee?"

"Yes. Trust Bamjee for that."

"Good. Now you go to the tent, but go quietly and don't be seen or heard."

"Sir, I ain't no Rajput."

"No, but you are Ben Quorn. You can do it. Listen until it seems to you that the Ranee has all the information she needs. Then enter and make all the noise you like. The moment they hear that noise my men, outside the tent, will kill two of Usha's attendants and capture the third. My man inside the tent, with your aid possibly, will deal with Usha. Then take your orders from the Ranee."

"What if your men think I'm one o' them dacoits, sir, and split me like a fish?"

"They expect you. They will see and hear you. But come at the tent from behind. There is a horseman posted between the two big rocks fifty yards back of the tent. Go close to him, but don't speak. Whistle that little tune of yours. When he hears and sees you he will imitate the voice of a jackal and my men near the tent will understand. Now feed your elephant and go."

Quorn, normally the least extravagant of men, gave Asoka the whole bag of rice.

"Help yourself, you big bum. Maybe that's the last meal that ever I'll give you. I'm more skeered o' them Rajputs in the dark than I am o' dacoits! Me and you belong in Hades, I reckon; anyhow, here's hoping that we both goes to the same place! You're a ornery, cantankerous, destructive typhoon in a haybag, but I like you fine. So long to yer! And Heaven pity the guy that has to be your boss when I'm gone!"

He approached the tent with a cold wind on his spine. But it was a cool night wind that favored him, sending

a sigh through the grass and filling night with scores of sounds that served to absorb his stealthy footsteps as he cat-walked from one shadow to the next.

He came on the mounted Rajput from behind, flattering himself that he had come unheard and telling himself for his own encouragement that Ben Quorn was no such duffer after all. But before he could touch the man's stirrup the Rajput whimpered like a jackal without even turning his head to confirm who it was. Quorn's boast died within him. From there to the tent he crept on all fours, because now the moon was rising.

There was litter around behind the tent—boxes not yet opened, sacks of canned goods, cans of kerosene; it was easy to lie unseen when he reached his goal. The tent could be opened at either end, and only one of the flaps at the rear was actually fastened, though they were both closed, so it was easy, too, to hear what passed within.

THE first voice that he heard so exactly resembled his own in a bronchial mood that he had to use will and memory to make himself believe that it was the Ranee talking:

"This here note seems okay—but—who's going to give me money for it?"

"The money-lender Tul Din of Dumdumpore," said a voice that he knew as Usha's.

"Mebbe. How do I know this signature ain't forged?"

"You are a suspicious fool."

"I'm running risks. Suspicion ain't unreasonable."

"You are running no risk whatever unless you fail to do what you have promised. Fail me and take the consequences! I have given you what you demanded. Now do your part." Usha was stern.

"But the Rajah o' Dumdumpore should ha' come. I'd sooner see him sign a note; then I'd know for sure it was him as wrote it. I'm sick of all you four-flushin', double-crossin' folks that—"

"Listen: isn't the Ranee in Rana Raj Singh's camp?"

"I ain't saying."

"She is. We know she is. Those Rajputs are like a nest of hornets or we would go in and seize her ourselves. Now listen: you have that note, which was all you demanded. But if you will deliver the Ranee to us to-night, instead of waiting until to-morrow, you shall have two thousand rupees extra, in ready money."

"Who will pay it?"

"He will. The Rajah of Dumdumpore will pay it. He has the money with him. Take your elephant, go to Rana Raj Singh's camp, and persuade her for any reason you can think of to climb into the howdah. Then carry her off."

"How far would I have to take her?"

"Only a little way. The minute Dumdumpore sets eyes on her you shall have two thousand rupees. And if you are afraid to return to the camp after that, you may come with us."

"I'm skeered. What will you do with her?"

"Take her to Dumdumpore, of course."

"For what purpose?"

"He will make her his wife."

"What if she refuses? She has sperrit."

"There are ways of persuading her to change her mind. But that is none of your business. You will go to the United States and forget all about

her—and all about this. If you don't, you will die more painfully than you can imagine until it overtakes you. Hurry up now; will you or will you not bring her to us to-night?"

"Mebbe she won't come."

CAREFULLY Quorn's fingers felt the tent-flap. Then he tried to peer within, but it was pitch-dark. However, he could tell by the voices that the Ranee sat on or near the heap of blankets in the corner at his end and Usha was on the mat that faced his cot, in mid-tent. She would see him against the moonlight as he entered.

There was nothing for it but to act noisily and boldly, trusting to the Rajputs, outside at the far end, to act swiftly and make no mistakes. So he threw the flap over the guy-rope suddenly to let the moonlight in.

"Heck, no! She won't come!" Quorn said—and ducked. A dagger missed him by an inch. He leaped, feet forward, landing with his heels on Usha's shoulders; and before he could recover himself he felt himself thrust aside by some one who pounced on her and gripped her by the throat and one wrist. Quorn seized the other wrist, and none too gently.

The Ranee, removing Quorn's new blue turban from her shapely head, gagged Usha as artfully as a surgeon bandaging a broken skull. Outside all was silence.

"Do you suppose them guys have made their get-away?" Quorn wondered.

He opened the front of the tent and went outside to look. He stumbled over a corpse that lay face downward. There was another corpse within six feet of it—face upward, this one, with a throat split vertically and the wide-open eyes staring at the moon. Some fifty feet away from that there were three men struggling on the ground, making almost no noise. He went to lend a hand, but there was no need; already the two Rajputs had a turban around their victim's throat and he was growing weaker. Suddenly his tongue protruded and he lay still.

They tied him hand and foot and then gagged him artfully before loosening the noose, by which time he was unconscious.

"A mite too rough with him?" Quorn asked.

"Nay. Tell the Ranee all has been done as she commanded."

Quorn returned to the tent, where the Ranee had lighted a candle and sat close to Usha, studying her face.

"Two dead, one taken," he announced.

"Did that one see you? Did he recognize you?" she demanded.

"No, miss. He ain't recognizing nothing except birdies and a lot o' sparks. Them Rajputs done him up a plenty. He'll lie still for quite a while, I reckon."

"They know their business and they know what to do. He will recover presently. They will carry him to Asoka's stall. Is Asoka in there?"

"No, miss."

"Excellent. They will sit near him and talk to each other of how Asoka is to trample him to death before morning. By the time you go to him he will be in a mood to listen. Help me now with Usha. You loosen her right hand while I cover her with the pistol."

THEN she spoke to Usha pleasantly enough, but with the nearest iron in her voice that Quorn had ever heard:

"I hope you will be sensible. If you

are not, you will have to be killed, although I don't like killing people —even silly people. If you please me, by obeying me exactly, I will very likely find employment for you in Narada later on; but that must depend on yourself. Now—you have told me the Rajah of Dumdumpore is somewhere near. On that box are pen, ink and paper. Write to him. You can write?"

Usha nodded. The Ranee began to dictate and Quorn held the candle.

"It is as we might have foreseen—Narak has stolen her. Already he has escaped with her to the mountains. The man they call the Gunga *sahib* is much upset, because he will receive no money unless we capture her. I tore up the promissory note; I would not give it to him."

The Ranee, pausing to give Usha time to catch up, looked into Quorn's eyes, smiled and handed him the note. "You had better take it. Keep it, and cash it as soon as you can. It is a valid note." Then she went on dictating.

"The Gunga *sahib* captured one of Narak's men in the scuffle. He questioned him, as I have also. Narak loves me. For me, he would exchange the Ranee. So I go to him. The Gunga *sahib* will take me on his elephant. The prisoner will guide us to the proper place.

"I can manage Narak. But I cannot manage him unless I go to him first with none other than the Gunga *sahib* and perhaps one servant. One day later you must come with all of Lumding's men and fall on Narak. Kill him and all his scoundrels. Perhaps it shall be I who kill him, but come you and Lumding to destroy the others. I will put her in a safe place so that you may have her after you have destroyed those rogues."

The Ranee watched each word go on the paper, then took it and examined the large, almost childlike handwriting to make sure that Usha was playing no tricks. But Usha, her eyes glittering like a snake's, had obeyed with suspicious accuracy; it was impossible to believe she should be so obedient and not have a trick in reserve. However, the Ranee dictated again:

"It is safe for me to travel with the Gunga *sahib*, because Narak wants him, thinking him a great magician who may help his cause against Lumding, whom he hates and hopes to overthrow. And this is a good thing, because it will enable you to destroy this fool, who knows too much about you, instead of giving him a promissory note, which might be dangerous evidence.

"Therefore, I beseech you, take no steps to find or to overtake me until after I arrive at Narak's camp. And above all, do not attack this camp, because Rana Raj Singh, who is a devil, has armed the quarrymen and has persuaded them, by means of false promises, to break their word that they would be as your servants in this matter. It will be time to teach those quarrymen their lesson after you have dealt with Narak."

THE Ranee paused, then resumed: "Rana Raj Singh is alert and his men are posted so that it would not be possible, by day or night, to surprise this camp or to assault it successfully without any more men than you have with you. Two of the men who came with me are dead; the Rajputs slew them. The third is a prisoner, but he will presently escape and be the bearer of this letter.

"Gunga *sahib* has concealed me in a stack of sugar-cane near where the ele-

phants are tethered. He will release the prisoner and let him go to you. Thereafter, he will escape with me toward Narak's camp as soon as possible.

"What Rana Raj Singh intends to do is doubtful; but the Gunga *sahib* believes he will probably take all his men and all the quarrymen, along with the elephants, back to Narada City, whence he may send a telegram asking the British government to interfere. But he does not know—he does not even guess that you are in this neighborhood, so such telegram can do no harm; it can only convince the British government that it is high time to include Narada in your territory for the sake of a better administration.

"Go away now, I beseech your highness, and go swiftly, so that Rana Raj Singh may relax his vigilance and I may slip away unseen to Narak's hiding-place. As you have trusted me thus far, now trust me to the end of this affair, that it may bring to your highness wealth and happiness and honor."

The Ranee then commanded: "Sign that."

Usha signed it. She could not speak, because of the gag, but her eyes blazed indignation and Quorn utterly mistrusted her.

"Watch out, miss," he warned, "there's a trick o' some sort. She's too dog-goned obedient."

But the Ranee only smiled. "You don't understand such people, but I do. They are never to be trusted, but they understand defeat. This woman would turn on me in an instant if she had the chance; but for the moment she will do anything that will save her from torture.

"You see—she has seen so many tortured. Haven't you, Usha? Have you seen them with salt in their mouths, Usha, and cool water dripping just out of reach? Was that what Dumdumpore would do to me, to make me agree to marry him? I wonder whether I could have endured it. You know you couldn't—don't you, Usha? Wise woman! But if you ever disobey me—"

She shook the letter until the ink was dry, Quorn wondering, as he watched her, whether she really would apply torture to a prisoner. He was undecided—would have hated to have to bet on it either way. He knew very well that he himself would torture any enemy to save the Ranee's life. She folded the letter and gave it to him.

"Take this to the prisoner, Mr. Quorn. But before he sees you, send the Rajputs out of sight. Undo the gag then and talk to him, telling him all that is in the letter. Once you are sure he believes you, loose him and let him go. But go with him as far as our farthest sentry, because Rana Raj Singh's men might possibly mistake him for an enemy and kill him, which would be inconvenient."

FIRST Quorn summoned some mahouts to drag two corpses out of sight, because he knew the Ranee's superstition about bad men's bodies that, according to her theory, attract the vilest sort of elemental spirits from an unseen world and so become a mental and a spiritual menace as well as a material horror.

He did it tolerantly; she had his permission to think anything she pleased—even that he was the Gunga *sahib*—if it might help to uphold her courage. For his part, he did not actually disbelieve her theories; he merely could not understand them.

"But I don't believe in this here plan," he muttered. "It's too dog-gone complicated. Seems to me, the whole thing blows to bits as soon as

Narak learns he hasn't ketched the Ranee but a hot tomater. Well—orders is orders."

He was swift with the prisoner. He feigned excitement. The man understood Hindustani, so Quorn had no difficulty telling him all that the letter contained. And the fellow was so scared by the Rajputs' talk of crushing him beneath Asoka's feet that the relief Quorn brought him upset any judgment that he might have had.

He swallowed the story whole, and he swore undying friendship. By the time his feet and hands were loose a stranger might have thought him Quorn's blood-brother from the way he took leave; he was as affectionate and fawning as a stray dog somebody had fed.

So, still feigning excitement and fear to impress the man, Quorn led him to the farthest limit of the Rajput ring around the camp and sent him hurrying with the letter.

"And give the Rajah o' Dumdumpore my best respects," he insisted, by way of a last artistic touch.

TO BE CONTINUED NEXT WEEK.

Queer Evidence

IN a laudable attempt to wipe out the practice of Obeah or witchcraft, British courts of justice in Dominica and other islands of the West Indies sometimes consider queer evidence. If a person threatened by a practitioner of Obeah, and who has reported the threats to the police, dies within a short time after the threats are made, the Obeah man who made them is arrested. It is not necessary to find signs of poisoning or of violence on the person of the deceased. The house and person of the reputed Obeah man are searched and if Obeah charms are found he is sentenced to a term of imprisonment. Finding such charms is not considered sufficient proof to warrant the infliction of the death penalty for murder.

Snake doctors are sometimes brought to court for alleged thefts said to be perpetrated by trained serpents. Many Negroes believe that snakes are sent by their masters to procure some article of apparel worn by the person on whom they wish to inflict an injury through witchcraft. Such articles are used in the preparation of death-dealing charms. It is said that the snake by throwing its coils around a handkerchief, a stocking, or perhaps a shawl, is able to carry it away.

Other queer thefts are said to be accomplished by means of a two shilling piece on which an Obeah man has worked his incantations. The storekeeper who receives such a coin may awake some morning to find all his silver or gold has vanished overnight. But the two shilling piece has no power to remove bank notes. So general is this belief that cash drawers in Dominica, St. Lucia, Martinique, and Guadeloupe usually contain an anti-Obeah charm which renders the magical bit of silver innocuous. The charm consists of a lime, a lump of salt, and a bit of garlic.

C. A. Freeman.

"The letter said the police was after you back in Southamp'n—"

The Name is Pearson

What's in a name? Only too much, when two men of the same name get each other's mail—and that mail held things dangerous indeed to the honest Basil Pearson, working in the diamond country of South Africa

By ALLAN K. ECHOLS

I'LL admit that it's a terrible thing to be hiding out from the law, to have to change your name and leave your own people because you've violated the statutes by which your community guides itself. And I'll also admit that it is better to have kept clear of the law no matter what you have done than to have been entangled with it.

On the other hand, I know for a positive fact that there are times and circumstances when you can and should violate the letter of the law to the moral advantage of yourself and the community as a whole. I've seen it done, and I'm glad that I had a part in the affair, even though my part was small.

The matters that were taking me back and forth between Kimberley and Johannesburg concern only a certain generous government and myself, and you may be sure that the government was prodigal with what it gave me.

It had to be, to keep me in South Africa in those days when everything was new and the comforts were few and far between. My business had to be conducted without my attracting attention to it, and it kept me on the move continuously. But it also kept me informed about many things that even old Paul Kruger himself didn't know. And it furnished me with a tiny part to enact in the drama of the two Basil Pearsons, neither of whom had been christened Basil Pearson.

I slipped quietly into Johannesburg

one afternoon after an absence of about a year. After getting myself settled comfortably I dropped into the lounge of the Rand Club.

As I entered the door I stopped in my tracks, staring at a large, clean-cut man of about thirty. He was clad in immaculate white, his smooth-shaven face ruddy; and his clear blue eyes had the same sparkle that I had seen in them during all the days of our friendship at school.

"Well, if it isn't Stewart Churchill!" I began. "Why—"

I was positive that I couldn't have been mistaken, but the man stared at me as if in fright for a fleeting moment, then quickly reached for his hat and disappeared out a side door. He didn't even look back.

I was puzzled. Stewart Churchill and I had been roommates for three years when we went to school back in the States. We had been intimate friends, sharing everything we had with one another. And so far as I knew we were still the same to each other, although it had been several years since I had seen or heard from him.

I dropped into a chair and ordered a drink, and tried to think of an answer to this enigma. Why had my friend cut me? What had caused that look of fear in his eyes, and why had he beat such a hasty retreat at the sight of me?

MY thoughts were interrupted by a Kaffir servant. He handed me a note, then stood back.

I tore it open hastily, then grabbed my hat and, led by the black, soon found myself in a private office a few blocks from the club. Seated across the desk from me, his head in his hands, was my old friend. I waited silently.

"I'll make it short and to the point, Mac," he finally began, throwing his shoulders back and looking me in the face. "I had to dodge you because I'm known around here as Basil Pearson. I didn't want you to use my right name until I'd had a chance to talk to you. Then you can do whatever you think you ought to do."

He poured us drinks and told me a story that made my heart ache for my old friend. Married in England, he had established himself in business and was doing well. Then his wife's brother, Bromley, had wrecked the company, leaving the stockholders with nothing. The brother had disappeared and Churchill was left to face the music. Taking a few dollars of his own, he had made a dash out of England and had succeeded in reaching the Transvaal where at the time he was safe, there being no extradition treaty in effect yet.

"I have been in business here about a year," he finished. "I have been lucky and have just about finished paying off all the debts of the defunct company. When I finish, I'm sure the case against me will be dropped, or else the boy will show up and I'll get my name cleared."

"Well, old man," I answered, "it seems that there's nothing to worry about. Get everything clear and then go back."

"There's where the rub comes," he answered wearily. "Mac, I'm going to be blackmailed."

We were still talking when there was a knock on the door. At my friend's answer, the door opened slowly and a man shuffled in. He stood before us, looking from one to the other, apparently surprised and worried to see more than one of us in the office.

The stranger was a little cockney

Englishman, and there seemed to hover around him the vague odor of Limehouse on a dank night. His black seaman's cap must have come from the neighborhood of the East India docks, and his ragged, dirty clothes could have been picked up from a pushcart on Whitechapel.

His china-blue eyes were small and shifty, and they watered like those of an addict who had gone too long without a shot of morphia. His scrawny hands were more like the claws of some carrion-eating bird than those of a human being. And his spindly legs seemed ready to give way any minute.

He stood crouched before us, blinking in the light. "Which one of you might be Mr. Basil Pearson?" he asked in a voice that sounded as though he were trying to be arrogant.

Churchill looked the man up and down and it seemed to me that a great deal of his fear left him as he realized what a pitiful wreck he had to deal with. "I am Mr. Pearson. Who are you, and what can I do for you?" he said.

"*My* name's Basil Pearson, and I cyme to see you alone," answered the derelict, looking at me suspiciously.

"That's quite all right," answered Churchill. "This is a friend of mine and I've already told him what you were coming for. Let's have your yarn, and be quick about it."

THE other Basil Pearson tried pitifully to fall back on his dignity, but the result was merely a cheap form of defiance. "Don't you be so 'igh and mighty with me, sir," he chirped, wiping his nose on the frayed sleeve of his coat. "I got somethin' to sell that you wants."

"So you've let me know before. Let me see what you have."

"I'd be a proper fool to do that," answered the man. "But I'll tell you what it is and you can see for yourself what it's worth."

"Come on, let's have it," returned Churchill impatiently.

"Well, sir, it's like this. It all come of us havin' the same name—or both usin' it down here," and he leered at Churchill. "I goes and asks for me mail at the post office here and they gives me a letter. I opens it and reads it before I knows it's yours instead o' mine, if you understand, sir . . . Now that letter was from your wife, and it named some names and said some things that I thought you'd rather wouldn't be made public, if you understand."

"What, for instance?"

"You don't believe me, huh?" returned the tramp. "Well it said the police was after you back in Southamp'n, 'n' a lot o' other stuff."

It was true. Churchill questioned the man till there was no doubt in our minds that he had enough information to ruin Churchill if it were known in Johannesburg. And the man was vicious enough to spread the news "if Churchill didn't buy the letters."

"Letters?" asked Churchill in surprise. "Have you got more than one?"

"I sure have," answered the other confidently. "You see I do business with a man down to Kimberley what knowed you when you was Churchill. He recognized that name right away. He and me frames another letter to your missus and gets a lot more stuff about you, on paper, with your wife's signature . . . He used to work with you, and has his reasons for not wanting to come and see you himself."

Churchill gripped the table and looked at me with widened eyes. We

were both thinking the same thing: his brother-in-law was in South Africa! And working hand in glove with this blackmailer!

Although Stewart Churchill was a man of action, he realized the need of care in this case. I could see the dilemma he was in. He was being blackmailed and the criminal was in league with a man whom he dared not prosecute on account of their relationship. The very man who was the cause of his being a fugitive from justice was now helping bleed him, and he couldn't fight back.

"Yes, yes, I know about the other fellow," Churchill said resignedly. "Now how much do you want for the letters and to clear out?"

The derelict named his price. "Two thousand pounds," he said.

Churchill argued wildly that the figure was mad, absurd. It amounted to as much as his commission business would net him in six months. The man held out for a while. "If you don't pye it, you don't make nothin' here no more," he pointed out. Which was true, as Churchill realized.

The man was obstinate, with the bullheadedness of ignorance. Churchill, his back to the wall, was fast losing control of himself and I could see that it would not be long before he would throw caution to the winds and pitch the rat out on his ear. It was then that I stepped in.

"Listen here, Pearson," I offered. "There's no doubt you have my friend Mr. Pearson in a bad jam. And I know him well enough to be sure that he knows when he's licked. But I know, too, that right now he hasn't any cash on hand and won't have any for a week or two. Although I think you're a dirty dog, I'll advance you ten pounds and a ticket to Kimberley. And I'll send you another ten next week. And at the end of that time Pearson will have the money to pay you off. In fact, he's going to Kimberley with me next week to close a deal. You can meet us there and he'll give you the money. What say?"

Churchill did well. He didn't know what I had up my sleeve, but he played the game. After a little argument we convinced the gutter rat that there was no more cash to be had at the time and he left us grumbling, but with his money and the ticket which I procured for him.

I HAD a hard time trying to convince Churchill after the man was gone that I had done the right thing. "Why didn't you let me kick him out of the building?" he asked excitedly.

"Simply because you've got this thing too near cleaned up to take a chance on spoiling all your work. If you had to start over, somewhere else, you might never finish your comeback. And even now you're better off than you were. You know that your crooked brother-in-law is somewhere in this country, and that gives you a chance to lay your hands on him."

Churchill shook his head sadly. "I'm afraid I couldn't do that," he said. "It'd kill my wife if her brother were ever sent back and convicted." The lines of grief came back to his face and he seemed to have aged many years. He seemed a far different person from the fearless and aggressive young fellow I had known and admired for so many years.

I've had many hard tasks to perform down in the new country, but it was apparent that I was facing my hardest. But I had determined to see it through, so I persisted.

I dragged Churchill down to Kim-

berley with me the following day. We scoured the town and at last I got a sight of his renegade brother-in-law. And then I arranged that there would always be a pair of eyes on him. I had many pairs of eyes at work from Kimberley to Johannesburg, and it was a simple matter for me to ferret out the man's history since he had been in South Africa.

I kept Churchill in tow for two days, then one night we were brought horses, saddled and ready for a long trip into the veldt. I had received word that something was going to happen, and this was what I was waiting for.

A new moon was peeking through occasional clouds as our horses beat a tattoo in the dust of Pneil Road. There was the smell of rain in the air and the stillness was broken only by the occasional cry of a night bird. We rode for some distance in silence.

Then I explained as much as I could about our mission. "A runner for an illicit diamond buyer is going to meet a Kaffir who has some jewels, out here to-night," I said. "I think you will recognize the I. D. B. runner."

There was no necessity of my telling him who the runner was. He knew without asking that it was his rascally relation.

"What good will that do us?" he asked.

"I'm going to do some blackmailing myself," I explained.

Churchill protested, as I knew he would. The diamond laws in British territory in South Africa are perhaps the most severe of any modern legislation. And they are rigidly enforced. The diamond detectives have wielded and still can wield a power greater than that of any enforcement officers in the world, far greater even than the Royal Canadian Mounted Police. They can pick up and arrest anybody on the barest suspicion. And the burden of the proof of innocence is on the poor fellow that gets caught.

If a man has a diamond which is unregistered and for which he cannot lawfully account, that is accepted as *prima facie* evidence of guilt and he is shot to prison almost instantly. And any movement that might be construed as guilty action is just as dangerous.

Thus the average citizen has to watch his step constantly, as Churchill knew.

"For my sake, man," he argued, "don't let's get mixed up in anything like this. If I'm not ruined already, this would certainly finish the job if we're seen and mixed up in any I. D. B. business."

I was not in a position to explain my part in the affair. "If you want to get out of the mess you're in," I argued, "you've got to take some kind of chances, haven't you?" It took considerable arguing, but in the long run I had my way.

FINALLY we came to a clump of trees and dismounted. Cautioning Churchill to silence I guided him down an obscure path to a shack that sat darkly in a small clearing. The hut was ordinarily used as a canteen and was licensed to sell liquor to whites, but it could not have gone on doing business had it not depended for its profit on the bootlegging of liquor to natives. We settled behind a large bowlder near the edge of the clearing and began our vigil.

It must have been half an hour before a white man left the canteen. Following him at some distance in the rear came a Kaffir. The man was headed our way, the native overtaking him.

The native caught up with the white

and engaged him in conversation. We saw the black reach into his woolly hair and bring out a white paper which I knew contained a rough diamond. After the white man examined it they dickered for some time, the diamond buyer finally seeming to get the best of the argument. He unrolled a packet of bills and counted out some of them to the black who took his money and disappeared.

The white man looked around carefully, then started hiding his diamond. When he was through, I caught Churchill by the arm in a signal and we sprang at the man.

"All right, break out the stone," I ordered.

"I don't know what you're talking about," the man grumbled.

"Hijackers," I explained bluntly. "I'll give you just two minutes to shell out."

The man was obstinate. Finally, losing patience, I ordered Churchill to remove the man's suspenders. The suspenders were removed and we located the diamond concealed in the clasp that adjusts the length of the straps.

"Humph! Not big enough to bother with," I commented. "But it's big enough to send you to the breakwater for ten years. I think we'll just take you in and turn you over to the law."

The young I. D. B. was scared. He put up a howl, begging us to keep the diamond, but let him go. I acted as though I were in a bad mood on account of my disappointment over the size of our haul. It was my intention to exchange his freedom for the delivery to me of the letters that he and the renegade cockney, Pearson, had got their hands on.

But the deal was never concluded. Pearson, unbeknown to us, was hovering in the background. Seeing that his partner was in a mess, he endeavored to get him out of it. He had slipped up behind us.

"Stick 'em up," he snarled.

There was nothing for us to do except obey. That is, I elevated my hands. But Churchill was in no mood to continue being victimized by this rat. He whirled instantly and grappled with the crook.

The gun crashed once as the cockney tried to kill Churchill. Bromley, Churchill's brother-in-law, was fighting it out with me. When the shot rang out, Bromley crumpled, shot through the chest.

Seeing that he was out of the fight, I dropped him and made a grab for the Britisher. He, seeing that he was now outnumbered, squirmed like an eel and got out of Churchill's clutches. He scrambled, half running and half crawling, back to the woods and disappeared. We followed him, but fruitlessly.

WE then turned our attention to Bromley, who lay groaning in the dust. A short examination convinced us he was not to leave the spot alive. And he seemed to know it.

"This is Stewart Churchill with me," I tried to make the renegade understand. "You're passing out of the picture now—due to a bullet from your blackmailing partner. If you live, which isn't likely, you're going to the breakwater. But you're just about dead. Now come across with those letters you got from your sister."

"I haven't got 'em," the man said in a choking whisper. "Pearson—"

His voice trailed off into a wheeze. A great convulsion shook his body and he lay still. And I couldn't find it in my heart to feel sorry for the coward and misfit who had brought so much

sorrow to his own family. It was only fitting that he should die far from the ministering hands of those who would have forgotten his crimes.

But I had other things to think about. We were in a worse fix than before. My plans had gone astray and this miscarriage had left us more at the mercy of the dope-crazed Pearson than we were before. He now knew that we were his active enemies, and he had the knowledge that we had been hijacking a diamond runner. And he was still armed with the letters that we had to have, upon which depended Churchill's only chance to make good.

We wasted no time in hurrying back to Kimberley. There we spent the rest of the night formulating the only plan that we could think might possibly serve our purpose.

As I intimated, I was on secret work in South Africa. I had many pairs of eyes working for me there. But, more important still, I must not by any mischance appear to have any connection with the case. When we had laid our plans Churchill caught the next train to Krugersdorp. I disappeared from the haunts that knew me.

THE Reefers' Saloon was ablaze with lights. Men of the lower strata of life in Kimberley drifted in and out of the place, some well heeled with money, some almost broke. Some ordered the better drinks, some were satisfied with tuppenny rum. Loud talk and loose banter filled the smoke and grog-laden air.

At one end of the bar stood a cockney Englishman drinking alone. And drinking good liquor! Near him stood a bedraggled man of uncertain nationality. His clothes bespoke long days in the veldt, but his pockets jingled with coin.

"Have a drink?" invited the seeming prospector. "Name's Connor."

"Not 'arf," answered the cockney. "Name's Pearson."

The two men soon lost their distrust of each other. Both had money and apparently had no designs on each other.

"Just pulled a deal," explained Connor after one too many drinks. "Gotta get togged out."

Pearson offered no enlightenment as to his business, which was quite all right in those parts.

The men became friendly. They made the rounds of the dives in Kimberley, each keeping up his share of the expenses. Then, just as the cockney's money began to run low, he found a letter waiting for him at the post office. It contained twenty pounds from the other Basil Pearson and also the information that he would be in Kimberley on the following Friday. The cockney was to have the letters that were for sale and be ready to meet him at a spot that would be designated. The cockney was told to call at the Kimberley post office Friday morning and receive a letter that would arrange the meeting at noon.

Friday morning saw Pearson at the post office when the doors were opened. And, instead of a letter, he got a small parcel, sent letter rates. It puzzled him quite a bit. He stepped over to the desk to open and examine it.

As he undid the little packet a square-shouldered man approached him. The stranger turned back his coat lapel, flashing a badge.

"Let me see that package!" he ordered. Then, not waiting for a reply, he picked it up. Another man who had stepped up kept an eye on the cockney.

"Well, I'll be damned," exclaimed the first detective. "Look at this, will you, Harry?" He handed his partner

an unsigned note which was inclosed in the package. They read it:

DEAR PEARSON:

I received the package. I am returning one stone, which please exchange for the larger one you said you could get, paying the Kaffir the difference. And be careful when you're shooting off your cockney mouth. You've been talking too much for the last few months. Cut out the booze!

An uncut, unregistered diamond was inclosed in the little package.

Basil Pearson protested his innocence, claimed—as what man caught in suspicious circumstances hasn't?—that he was framed. A search of his person revealed nothing in the way of diamonds or correspondence.

As he was being hustled to jail, the man Connor stepped out of a near-by store and proceeded to Pearson's lodgings, where he did a neat job of burglary. But when called to the stand he did not mention this, or his discovery of some letters postmarked London, and others from Johannesburg signed Pearson, all of which he turned over to me. He merely testified that he was a prospector who had met Pearson; that the cockney seemed well supplied with money, but did not work; and that Pearson hinted, when drunk enough, at some source of income.

Churchill did not go to Kimberley the day Pearson was arrested. He was seen in Krugersdorp, however, the day before that; and while it may have been just coincidence the parcel that convicted the cockney Pearson and sent him to ten years' hard labor on the breakwater at Cape Town was mailed from Krugersdorp. As I said before, the diamond laws in Cape Colony are the most severe that ever appeared on a civilized statute book, and we undercover men work hard to catch Illicit Diamond Buyers and all their agents.

The last time I heard from Churchill he had paid all the creditors of the defunct company back in England and had returned to live there with his wife. He had enough money left to start all over, and he's now doing well.

Funny, isn't it, how poetic justice, or the public welfare, or whatever you want to call it, sometimes doesn't exactly fit into the strait-jacket of man-made laws!

THE END.

Timpanogas Jewelry

UNTIL a few years ago, no one suspected that the grim old mountain which rises to the east of Salt Lake Valley had a casket of jewels in its pouch.

The jewels are found in a cave on the northern slope and are some of the finest water-workings to be found in this continent. Instead of the ordinary huge stalagmites and stalactites, the roofs of these caverns are filled with twisted, delicate bits of carbonate that look like flowers, or ferns, or tendrils. Some of them are colored green, others yellow, others brown. One can find carrots, beets, petunias, coral lace, and any desired design at one spot or another, all made of the calcium carbonate deposited from the water. In several places miniature pools of crystal blue water are found on the floor, surrounded with lace-work of the water's carving. The cave is like one large, marvelously designed jewel casket. *Wyman Sidney Smith.*

Argonotes.

The Readers' Viewpoint

A MAN in the Service gives *his* opinion of "Miss Percy":

Army and Navy Y. M. C. A.
San Diego, Cal.

On reading some of the letters in the back of ARGOSY, I decided I would write and let you know what I think of your magazine. I have just read a story by H. Bedford-Jones, called "The Luck of Nagore," and it was fine. I always read his stories. Also that story, "Miss Percy," by James L. Hill, was one of the best short stories I have read in a long time. Give us more stories like this.

I read the serials, too, and like most of them.

Yours as a constant reader,

R. J. FOWLER.

COMEDY is what this reader wants, and he finds it in Rouse's "Bildad Road" stories of Adirondack life:

Danville, Ill.

Give us more stories by William Merriam Rouse. I certainly did enjoy "The Five-Dollar Plot." I make a scrapbook collection of stories and have for five years. So far, I have ten stories in this book, and now I am glad to add to my collection "The Five-Dollar Plot."

Along with the gang war stories, sports, action, etc., we like to get some comedy. And this particular story certainly did furnish it.

ARGOSY is a great magazine and I have read it for years. Now I shall look forward to more stories by this author.

Sincerely,

CHARLINE ODER.

TAKES more than an operation to stop a real ARGOSY fan!

Muskogee, Okla.

I have been reading ARGOSY since the story of "The Emergency Mate," by H. Bedford-Jones. And ever since I have not missed an issue. The magazines I read most are ARGOSY and DETECTIVE FICTION WEEKLY, both by the Frank A. Munsey Co. My favorite authors are Otis A. Kline, W. Wirt, George F. Worts, Don McGrew, Erle Stanley Gardner, John H. Thompson, Ralph R. Perry, A. Merritt, J. E. Grinstead and last, but not least, Fred MacIsaac.

I haven't got a kick to make about it, but give us more of O. A. Kline's stories and Western stories.

JOE R. DURAN.

P. S. Been sick in bed for two months and operated on, but still reading.

ONE of the writers for whom this reader pleads is represented in the current number, and another's appearing in a very early issue. How's that for service? (P. S. We like them, too.)

Corpus Christi, Texas.

My favorite authors are F. R. Buckley, J. E. Grinstead, and Ray Cummings. I have noticed a lack of stories by these authors in recent issues and I would be delighted to see them again soon.

I also liked "The Hawk of Hazard," by Oscar J. Friend.

There are many others I like, but they are too numerous to mention.

C. R. BURNETT.

TO make a Californian think about wanting to leave his State—that's no mean tribute to the fascination of W. Wirt's Kentucky mountaineer novel!

Los Angeles, Cal.

Of course, "The Snake Mother" is good, but before I delve further in the delights of your "ne plus ultra" magazine, I simply must let you know that I've enjoyed W. Wirt's "You-All Can't Have Him!" more than any yarn I've read this year. By all means, let's have more of that type of story.

Tell us, woncha, Mr. Wirt, is that the way them thar Southe'nahs talk and act, really, for sure—no foolin'? Wal, dawg m' cats, I've been missin' something! But I'm young yet! Don't you-all be surprised to see a Californian roamin' 'round down in Kentucky, right soon, if that's on the level! Competition, Southe'n lads! And say! Will they let a fellah tote a "hawg-leg" down

there? This yere West is gettin' some mighty funny ideas about that.

Sorry to leave you-all so soon, but darned if I'm not gonna read Mr. Wirt's story all over again!

ANOTHER ARGOSY FAN.

P. S. I do wish *Sally* didn't have red hair. Now a heroine with yellow hair and brown eyes—

WHILE here's a letter that wonders how Wirt "gets by":

Newark, N. J.

Although I have been a reader of the ARGOSY for more than five years, this is the first time I have written to you. Two reasons prompt me to write now.

The first is to congratulate the ARGOSY on having some of the greatest authors in the country contribute to your magazine.

The second is to give my candid opinion concerning W. Wirt. I think his stories are senseless, worthless and stupidly childish. His heroes are all the rather-fight-than-eat type who draw their trusty six-guns and slay law-breakers by the scores. I'm still counting the men killed in "What Kept You."

How a writer of Wirt's caliber gets his stories published is far beyond me.

JAMES DONALD PLUNKETT.

YOUR CHOICE COUPON

Editor, ARGOSY,
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.....

Name.....

Street.....

City.....*State*.....

12-27

Looking Ahead!

The Fetish Fighters

The Foreign Legion vs. African Amazons!

By F. V. W. MASON

Africa's drums of war rumble a grim warning as stealthy blacks creep through the jungles to fall on an American sergeant and his Foreign Legion comrades.

WHEN DEATH WENT BLIND

By Garret Smith

A NOVELETTE OF THE FUTURE—a World War in the Dark!

COMING TO YOU IN THE ARGOSY OF JANUARY 3rd

Action! Glamour! Drama! Romance!

No field is so replete with all these elements as that confined to two narrow strands of steel, snaking over mountain or plain or desert or swamp. For instance, take

Dynamite Dan

By James W. Earp

The story of a fighting brakeman who battled because he loved to battle, until he banged his way out of a woman's heart and the only home he ever knew. Here is the main line in all its roaring glory.

Gangsters of the Rails

By E. S. Dellinger

A serial now running with a breathless speed through dark intrigue in the Ozarks.

4 True tales of railroading by men who actually work in and around the moving trains.

5 Intensely gripping short stories.

6 Profusely illustrated features.

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FOR JANUARY

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They dared Officer Kane to play

..and his music held them spellbound

ETHEL'S house party was at its height—when suddenly there came an ominous knocking at the door. Ethel ran to open it and—there stood Police Officer Kane.

"I want to see the man of the house," thundered Kane.

"I'm sorry," stammered Ethel nervously, "but my father is not at home."

"Well, what's goin' on in here anyway?" continued the officer sternly. "Every one on the block is complainin' of the noise. I've a good mind to arrest the lot of you."

Ethel was mortified—what a disgrace!

"Oh please," pleaded Ethel, "please don't do anything like that."

Then Kane burst out laughing.

"Don't worry, lassie—you were all havin' such a fine time I couldn't help droppin' in," he explained.

"Oh," sighed Ethel, "how you frightened me. Won't you join us?"

Kane Joins the Party

"Ha," laughed Kane, as the Victrola started again, "why must you play that canned music—can't any of you play this beautiful piano? Sure, I'd like to give you a tune myself."

"I dare you to play for us," shouted Ted Strong.

"I'm afraid I'll have to be goin'," stammered Kane, embarrassed.

"Mr. Kane, I think you might play for me after the fright you gave me," smiled Ethel.

"Well, b'gorry, maybe I will," agreed the officer. And as he sat down at the piano everyone laughed. But the noise stopped when he struck the first rollicking notes of the famous "Song of the Vagabonds."

"More—more."

"That's great—play another," they all shouted as the last notes of that snappy march song died away. Kane then started that stirring old soldier song "On the Road to Mandalay," following it with song hits from the latest shows.

"Well," he laughed, as they finally let him get up from the piano, "I'll have to be on my way now."

"Thank you for your lovely music," said Ethel. "You must be playing a good many years?"

"Sure, and I haven't been playin' long at all." Then the questions came thick and fast. "How did you ever learn so quickly?" "When do you find time to practice?" "Who was your teacher?"

Kane Tells His Story

"Well, to tell you the truth I had no teacher. I've always loved music, but I couldn't take regular lessons on account of my duties as a policeman. Then one evening, I saw a U. S. School of Music advertisement, tellin' of a new way of learnin' to play. I didn't believe it myself but I sent for their Free Demonstration Lesson that showed me how easy it was, so I wrote for the whole course.

"There were no tiresome scales or tedious exercises. I played real pieces almost from the start. Now I'm playin' classical numbers or jazz, havin' the time of my life."

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You teach yourself—right at home—without any uninteresting finger exercises, tedious scales or other humdrum methods.

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(Instruments supplied if desired, cash or credit.) U. S. School of Music, 10312 Brunswick Bldg., New York City.

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