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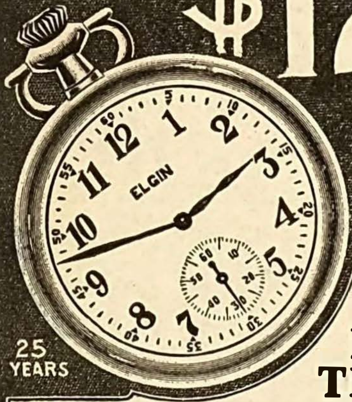

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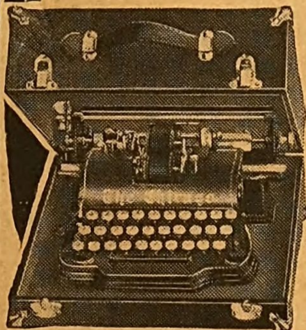

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ALL-STORY WEEKLY

VOL. XLVII | SATURDAY, JULY 10, 1915 | NUMBER 1

Blackmailed

by Arthur Applin

Author of "The Chorus Girl," etc.

CHAPTER I.

Sir Galahad of the Wagon-Lit.

SIR JOHN VESSIE, M.P., got into the express train at Homburg, found the compartment which had been reserved for him, and settled himself down comfortably for the journey. He had just completed the cure and was feeling on good terms with himself and the rest of mankind.

Sir John visited Homburg for preventive measures and because the place amused him. He found it a rest after a strenuous London season—spent in the House. And he was philosopher enough to realize that a short absence from home makes the heart grow fonder.

He was still in the prime of life, still rode straight to hounds when he got the chance, entertained with old-fashioned hospitality at his country place in Sussex, and was regarded by his constituents as an ideal country gentleman and the perfect father of a very happy family. He had married young, the only daughter of a wealthy iron founder.

In spite of bad health, Lady Vessie had proved an ideal helpmate. She was neither brilliant nor beautiful, but she possessed all the other virtues of a simple English gentlewoman. Not a breath of scandal had attached itself either to Sir John's or his wife's name.

Once, in a spirit of humor, Sir John Vessie had remarked that he feared he was wofully old-fashioned and would soon find himself put on the shelf, for nobody in society who was anybody had altogether escaped.

The train had not proceeded far on its journey when Sir John became conscious of an altercation taking place in the corridor just outside his compartment. Having all the Englishman's natural reserve and a rooted objection to mixing himself up in other people's affairs, he would have paid no attention to the heated and apparently one-sided conversation that was being carried on had he not noticed that one of the voices belonged to a woman, obviously an English woman whose knowledge of German was of the slightest.

Unconsciously he listened. It was a remarkable voice—remarkable for its beauty and delicacy even while it

was raised fiercely in denunciation of the German State Railway, the German government, and its officials.

Sir John laid down his newspaper and smiled indulgently. How much better these things were managed in England! He raised the blind of the window looking into the corridor. If a countrywoman of his was in distress it was obviously his duty to help her. And he was sure the possessor of such a voice must be well bred and interesting.

As the blind rolled itself up with a noisy jerk the woman turned, looked into his compartment, and waved her hand with an angry gesture toward it.

The stolid German guard merely shook his head; the compartment was reserved. There was no other place in the train except the one he had found for *madame. Madame* should have applied earlier. If ladies chose to travel alone—

Acting on a sudden impulse, of which he was scarcely conscious at the moment, Sir John rose and, opening the door of his compartment, asked if he could be of any service.

The woman looked at him with flashing eyes which almost instantly softened; the frown that had furrowed the white brows disappeared, and the full, red lips parted in a smile.

"It is too kind," she replied quietly, recovering her temper instantly. "Foolishly I failed to reserve a wagon-lit for myself. In fact, I only made up my mind to return by this train last night. I find the train is full. I am placed in an ordinary first-class compartment with four fat Germans, a smoking-compartment; and their tobacco—ugh!"

She held a dainty lace handkerchief to her nose and made such quaint grimaces that Sir John found himself laughing.

"I am expected to pass the night with four fat Germans," she continued. "I know they'll unfasten their collars and take off their boots. I refuse—I flatly refuse."

Tears gushed into the large, blue eyes. Sir John looked at her and stroked his chin thoughtfully. The German official was quite right. The woman had no business to be traveling alone—a woman so young and so beautiful.

He remembered seeing her once at the Casino, and he had mistaken her for a Frenchwoman. He told himself that he ought to have known, if only by her coloring and her figure, that she was English. Her hair was a rich, reddish brown, gleaming in certain lights like burnished copper; level, brown eyebrows; her face was oval. She was not merely pretty; she possessed, too, much character. Those blue eyes, now filled with tears, expressed determination.

A woman who probably was not unaccustomed to looking after herself. But the German was right; she had no business to be alone. To be quite certain, Sir John questioned her on the subject again.

"Not a soul I know on the train! My friends left Homburg a few days ago. Of course, I ought to have gone with them, but—" She shrugged her shoulders deprecatingly.

Sir John almost wished he had not interfered. If the woman had been neither young nor beautiful he could have grappled with the problem more easily. He felt a little shy and embarrassed.

"I really do not know what to suggest. I'm extremely sorry for you. I can quite understand your feelings. Perhaps if I were to speak to the gentlemen in your compartment—"

"Gentlemen!"

Sir John turned to the guard, and a rapid conversation ensued in German which the woman failed to follow. She stood staring out of the window. In her right hand she firmly held a crocodile-leather dressing-case.

Presently Sir John turned to her with a courtly bow. "If you will sit down in my compartment I'll see what can be done."

He took her dressing-case and put it on the rack above her head. "Perhaps you would like to know my name." He handed her a strip of pasteboard.

She glanced at it and smiled gratefully. "Mine is Myra Berrington."

Sir John wondered where he had heard it before. It had a familiar ring. Closing the door of the compartment, he disappeared down the corridor with the guard.

Myra Berrington folded her hands on her lap and gazed around the compartment. She carefully noted each article of Sir John's luggage, his traveling coat, the books and literature with which he had provided himself for the journey. Then, taking down her dressing-case, she opened it and, finding a mirror, she looked at her reflection.

She smoothed her face with a powder-puff, took off the glove from her right hand, then, closing the dressing-case, she picked up an illustrated paper, and waited.

Sir John returned. His face bore a worried expression. "I am afraid nothing can be done. The train is absolutely full. These officials cannot be bribed."

Miss Berrington smiled at him sweetly and rose from the seat. "It's really too kind of you to have troubled, Sir John. I must make up my mind to pass the next eighteen hours walking up and down the corridor. The scenery in places is very beautiful—and the nights are warm now. Thank you so much."

She was moving out of the compartment, but Vessie stopped her. The idea was preposterous—yet the only alternative would be to give up his wagon-lit and join the four Germans.

He knew Miss Berrington was probably right in her assertion that they would loosen their collars and take off their boots when night came. Sir John had never known a discomfort. He had always insisted on traveling in solitude. He could not do without fresh air and at least eight hours sleep. Nothing, neither work nor women nor worry, ever succeeded in depriving him of the latter.

"Please sit down," he said. And he seated himself opposite her. "Now let us talk this over quietly and see what can be done."

Miss Berrington clasped her hands together nervously. Very beautiful hands, judging from the ungloved one—long, narrow, white, with nails of perfect color. Her feet were long and narrow, too. French shoes and silk stockings, both the color of her dress.

"You mustn't give me another thought, Sir John. It's entirely my own fault. I ought to have known this would happen. But as a matter of fact—"

She broke off awkwardly and lowered her eyes. There were still tears in them. Vessie was afraid lest they overflow.

She did not suggest a hysterical woman. She was far too refined and too much of the typical Englishwoman to suggest the adventuress. Vessie again found himself wondering why her name was familiar.

He tried to concentrate his mind on the position. It might have been awkward had it not come about so naturally. It was certainly piquant. He had lived a quiet, sober, matter-of-fact sort of life. Nothing quite to exciting as this had ever happened to him. It was peculiar. All the more peculiar because he knew in his heart he was enjoying it.

"Now, there's nothing to worry about," he said after a moment's silence. "I—I'll see that you're made comfortable. I'm old enough to be your father, so I'm old enough to look after you."

She looked up and gave him a grateful smile. "You really mustn't worry about me. I deserve to suffer. Do you know—"

"Yes—tell me," Vessie said encouragingly.

"Oh, but it's so silly! I deserve to

suffer. You ought to know, because when you do know you'll no longer sympathize with me. I feel I'm accepting your protection under false pretenses."

Sir John did not laugh. He was relieved at her frankness and his curiosity was aroused. "What dreadful crime have you committed at Homburg? Are you running away?"

"Yes!"

She nodded her head two or three times vigorously. Sir John found himself wishing she would take her hat off. He had never seen such wonderful hair. He wanted to see more of it.

"I went to Homburg partly for my health, partly to rest before starting my London season. I've taken the Empress Theater, you know. I'm producing a new play there in October."

"Ah, yes. Exactly."

Sir John knew now why the name had a familiar ring. He found himself wishing she was not an actress. She hardly looked like one—certainly not like the actresses whose photographs he saw in the weekly newspapers.

"It's a great undertaking," Miss Berrington continued. "My first venture at management."

"That's very interesting. You have a good play, I hope?"

"A wonderful play," she cried enthusiastically. "I believe in it so thoroughly that I'm not only risking my reputation—that nothing—"

Sir John bowed gallantly. "You must allow me to contradict you."

"But all the money I've made as an actress." There was a moment of hesitation, and again she lowered her head. "And would you believe it," she went on, "I'm such a stupid, light-brained little idiot that I've actually been gambling at the Casino at Homburg, and lost. I lost so much that I made up my mind if I stopped a day longer I shouldn't have a penny left with which to produce my play. That's why I'm on this stupid old train. Now, having made my confession, I'll leave you."

"You'll do nothing of the sort," Sir John said deliberately.

"Really!"

Miss Berrington looked at him with an amused smile. She had risen to her feet, and was standing with her hand on the bar of the sliding door. For a moment Vessie had a suspicion that she was laughing at him.

"Now sit down again," he said after a moment's hesitation. "You haven't told me everything."

"Oh, yes, I have. I'm running away from temptation. Rather late, I confess. But he who fights and runs away—you know the rest." She sank back into her seat. "The worst of it is I'm not expected back for another week. My servants are away on a holiday, my flat is shut up, so I'll have to wire for rooms at a hotel—" She gave him a quick glance. "You'll think me perfectly mad."

"My life is lived among the exceptionally sane," Vessie replied. "Now, Miss Berrington, listen to me. You can't possibly wander about in the corridor of this train all night; it's impossible for you to share a compartment with four fat Germans."

Miss Berrington laughed. "Oh, it isn't the first time I've roughed it in my life. I admit that just now, when I found there was nowhere for me to sleep, I lost my temper. But I realize I must suffer for my sins. Anyway, there's no alternative."

Sir John drew himself up with the air of a man who had made up his mind after a prolonged struggle; the expression on the well-bred, clean-shaven face was serious.

Myra Berrington, watching him between her half-closed lids, felt a little nervous. She wondered what was coming. But when she heard his judgment she blushed and raised a pair of astonished blue eyes.

"We must share this compartment!"

Vessie spoke with great deliberation as if trying to convince himself he was not making an astonishing suggestion. He hesitated a moment as he saw Miss Berrington's eyes looking straight into his own, and he coughed nervously, while the color also mounted to his cheeks.

"By day it will be mine; during the night it will be yours. No, my dear young lady, it's not the least use arguing—I have made up my mind. I can get all the rest I want, say, from luncheon till dinner-time. After dinner the attendant will make up the bed, and you'll sleep. I shall occupy your place in the smoking compartment with the Germans. Now let me put your dressing-case on the rack—so. You will be more comfortable if I put this cushion at your back."

Myra Berrington tried to stop him. She threatened to leave the compartment at once if he persisted in his scheme. But Sir John had made up his mind. There had lain buried in his heart all his life the instincts of *Don Quixote*. For the first time he had come across a woman who roused them to activity. He told himself he was merely doing his duty.

It was impossible that a young and beautiful girl should be allowed to travel alone and unprotected. It was his duty as an English gentleman to protect her.

He told her all this as the train swung and swayed past rivers and mountains, and through miles of beautiful forests. The fact that she was willing to accept the slight sacrifice he was making assured him he was doing right.

When she complained of a headache he insisted on her taking her hat off, sent a car-attendant for a bottle of eau de Cologne, and moistening her handkerchief bathed her forehead himself. He did these things gently and sincerely, almost as if he had been looking after a child.

A man passing along the corridor outside stopped to stare through the window. Glancing up, Sir John saw him watching them with a cynical smile on his lips. A middle-aged man, slightly bald, with a black mustache. Vessie glared, then drew down the blind.

"The sun is getting rather strong," he said in explanation to Miss Berrington.

She smiled. "I shall never forgive myself for all the trouble I've given you."

During luncheon, which they naturally took together in the dining-car, Vessie found himself talking to her as if he had known her all his life. All his national and natural reserve deserted him. He behaved like a youth of twenty instead of a man of forty-five. Once he found himself wishing he could knock fifteen years off his age. He told his companion so.

"I was ambitious once, just as you are," he continued. "The world was mine to conquer. Now—" He shrugged his shoulders and shook his head sadly.

"You have conquered it," she whispered.

"Merely a financial victory," he sighed. "After all, what can money buy? A house in town and a country estate. A couple of motor-cars, a racehorse or two—which run for the benefit of the trainer, the jockey, and their friends. Servants who look upon their master as their natural prey. A name and a position which one has to keep up for the benefit of every one except oneself."

Myra Berrington shivered. "You almost frighten me. You possess everything I'm striving to attain, and you're not happy. Perhaps it's a pity I didn't remain in Homburg and lose all I possess."

"Even then I would willingly have exchanged places with you," Vessie whispered.

"I wonder if you really mean that," she said, leaning across the table.

Sir John did not reply. He was paying for the luncheon and giving in-

structions to the steward about dinner. When he had finished Miss Berrington rose:

"Now I'm going to send you to bed," she laughed. "You mustn't attempt to get up until you're called."

They made their way back to Vessie's compartment.

"You won't hide, will you?" he said to her. "I've ordered dinner for you at half past six. At seven o'clock I shall get up; the compartment will be ready for you an hour later. You can take afternoon tea in the restaurant car and read a book until dinnertime."

"Don't worry about me. I shall find plenty to do, Sir Galahad."

It was getting dark when five hours later Sir John awoke, and quickly making his toilet, he found his way to the dining-car, where he discovered Miss Berrington sipping a cup of coffee and smoking a cigarette. They chatted together for half an hour, then he led her back to the compartment and wished her good night.

"You are not to think of getting up to-morrow morning until you're called. I have given the steward full instructions."

"I feel dreadfully guilty," she said, giving him her hand.

"I feel very happy," he replied, taking it.

As the door closed he again noticed the man he had seen staring through the window that afternoon. He was standing a little distance off in the corridor, looking at Vessie with the same cynical smile on his lips.

Taking a newspaper from his pocket, Sir John planted himself with his back to the window, facing the wagon-lit. Having temporarily taken Miss Berrington under his protection, he suddenly realized the full weight of his responsibilities.

Though dinner was waiting, and he was hungry, he had no intention of moving away until the stranger with the unpleasant smile had taken his departure. It seemed more than likely to Sir John that he was a train-thief —or something worse.

CHAPTER II.

"Thief! Stop Thief!"

THE express train from Dover was nearing London. Sir John Vessie was nodding in an armchair of the Pullman car. The journey was practically over, and there was regret in his heart.

As a rule he welcomed the lights of London on his return from abroad; but now, as he raised himself and looked with sleepy eyes out of the window, a sigh escaped his lips, followed by a shiver of repulsion.

London, looking gray and desolate, in spite of the fleeting vision he occasionally caught of crowded streets and glaring lights.

In less than ten minutes the train would crawl into Charing Cross Station; he would drive to the Hotel Regent, and the following afternoon he would go down to his place in Gloucester, where his wife and family would be waiting to welcome him.

Again he sighed. Of course, he was glad of the prospect of going home. He would find a great deal of work waiting for him on the estate. But it would be just the usual routine.

An interview with the head steward, a walk through the grounds with the head gardener. A long conversation with the head gamekeeper about arrangements to be made for the shooting season. A list of guests to be drawn up—men he would have to invite to kill his partridges, because later in the year they invited him to kill their pheasants. This was his life.

It was suddenly occurring to Sir John that this life which he had lived for the past fifteen years was really exceedingly monotonous.

He had been doing the same thing with extraordinary regularity, acting almost automatically. Indeed, he did everything that was expected of him.

He was popular. He wondered vaguely whether he were loved.

And then he jerked himself into an upright position in his armchair and rubbed his eyes.

Seated at the other end of the Pullman, he saw the same sinister-featured man who had haunted him on the express-train from Homburg — the man with the bald head and black mustache. Vaguely he irritated Sir John. He felt somehow that he was partly responsible for his having lost sight of Miss Myra Berrington.

Everything had gone off quite satisfactorily until they boarded the steamer at Ostend. Then Miss Berrington had gone below to lie down—and he had not seen her since. Of course, she was on the train somewhere, but he had searched each Pullman car in vain.

The porter who looked after his luggage had picked up her dressing-case and placed it with his own suit-case beside him in the compartment. He would have to find her to restore her property.

In his heart he was rather glad of the mistake the porter had made. It was a perfectly natural one, because the dressing-case had accompanied his hand luggage throughout the journey, and when Miss Berrington had gone below on the boat she had forgotten to take it with her.

The train drew into Charing Cross Station and stopped. A porter seized his suit-case and rugs. Vessie gave him his baggage check, and then, taking Miss Berrington's dressing-case in his hand, he walked the length of the train searching for her.

To his consternation, he failed to find her anywhere. When the luggage was ready for examination, he searched the crowd surrounding it. In some mysterious way she had disappeared. She could not have boarded the train at Dover at all. Perhaps, missing her dressing-case, she had stayed behind to look for it.

His luggage was passed by the customs and put on to a taxicab. But still he waited. He lingered about until the platform was practically deserted. Then he drove to the Hotel Regent—where he always put up when his town house was closed.

He had, of course, telegraphed for rooms, and the suite he usually occupied was waiting for him—a large bedroom on the third floor and a small one used for a dressing-room adjoining. He left his heavy baggage in charge of the hall porter, and had his suit-case, rugs, and Miss Berrington's dressing-case sent up to his apartments. He remembered that she had told him she was putting up at a hotel in London.

It was just possible that she, too, patronized the Hotel Regent. He enquired at the bureau, and, after searching, the clerk told him that he had received a telegram from some one called Berrington, engaging a room for that night. But no one of that name had, as yet, arrived.

Vessie felt mightily relieved. The dainty dressing-case, with its unknown contents, had become a grave responsibility. Moreover, the unusual beauty and charm of its owner had haunted him for the past twelve hours.

He was quite conscious now that he had been playing the part of *Don Quixote*. For the first time in his life romance had gently thrown her dream-woven garment across his shoulders. He owned frankly to himself that he wanted to see Miss Berrington again, to hear her voice, to take her hand before the cloak fell from his shoulders and he retired to his country estate to take up the threads of his conventional life.

Vessie knew that henceforth life would never be quite the same for him. He felt like a truant schoolboy who had climbed the great stone wall surrounding his playground, and had looked into a wonderful garden—a garden in which boys of his class were forbidden to play.

In case Miss Berrington should arrive, he gave implicit instructions to the clerk:

"Tell her that her dressing-case is safe in my possession. You had better give her the number of my rooms. Say I am exceedingly sorry we missed each other at Dover. I searched for her everywhere."

After a light meal he retired for the night. He found that the porter had placed her dressing-case in the sitting-room, and his own suit-case in the room adjoining it.

He turned the dressing-case over and looked at it almost sentimentally. Her initials were stamped in small gold letters on the face. After a moment's hesitation he left it where it had been placed. Going into the bedroom, he unlocked his suit-case, undressed, and, switching off the lights, went to bed.

He quickly fell into a deep sleep.

It might have been only a handful of minutes, it might have been an hour or two later, when he awoke with a start. Just for a moment he could not recollect where he was. He sat upright, blinking his eyes in the darkness and listening. He fancied he was still on the express-train, that he had overslept himself, and that Miss Berrington was waiting to use the wagon-lit.

Presently he heard sounds of some one moving about stealthily. Automatically he stretched out his hand and fumbled for the electric-light switch, and as he did so he remembered where he was. He slipped out of bed and stood quite still, listening.

Again he heard a stealthy movement and creaking. It seemed to proceed from the other end of the room, from the sitting-room adjoining. In an instant it flashed across his mind that he had left Miss Berrington's dressing-case there! He took a few steps forward on tiptoe, then stopped short. The sitting-room door was ajar. He fancied he saw a light.

Perhaps the porter who had placed the dressing-case there was a hotel thief. . . . And then suddenly he remembered the sinister-looking man who had haunted him ever since he left Homburg. . . .

Some instinct had warned him that his presence outside the door of the wagon-lit was a menace to Miss Berrington. Vessie remembered, too, that he had seen him cross the vestibule of the hotel just when he was giving instructions to the clerk at the bureau.

Vessie took another step forward, again fumbling with one hand for the electric-light switch. He blamed himself for not noting more carefully its position before turning the lights out. He stumbled over something and nearly fell. At the same moment the light gleaming faintly beneath the door of the other room disappeared.

The thief had done his work and was making off. In a flash Vessie realized the awkwardness of his position if Miss Berrington's dressing-case was stolen while in his possession.

He leaped forward.

For an instant his progress was arrested by a sound like that of a revolver-shot. He reached the door of the adjoining room and flung it open. He could see nothing, but he knew that there was some one in the room. He stumbled forward with outstretched hands, groping like a blind man, yet prepared to come to grips with the unseen person.

He was perfectly certain now that a thief was in the room. And the object of the theft was Myra Berrington's dressing-case. A sense of his responsibility struck him like a cold wave.

He was somewhere in the middle of the room now, his eyes straining to pierce the darkness. The flapping of the window-blind caused him to turn his head an instant. He remembered leaving the window wide open; perhaps the thief had entered that way.

Suddenly a faint gleam of light pierced the blackness. The door leading to the corridor was slowly opening. Then, against the beam of light, he saw the outline of a tall, dark figure—the gleam of a white hand, in its grasp Myra Berrington's dressing-case.

He hurled himself forward with a hoarse cry: "Thief! Stop, thief!"

Sir John reached the door just in time. It closed noisily as he brought the full weight of his body to bear upon it. At the same instant a shriek echoed through the room. Sir John felt an ice-cold hand at his throat. He seized it and forced it back; then, flinging his arms around the thief, he lifted him right off his feet and flung him onto the ground. The body struck the floor. Sir John waited a moment in case the man should attempt to rise. The figure on the floor lay quite still.

Sir John commenced to grope along the wall beside the door for the electric-light switch.. He found it, and the room became instantly illuminated. Footsteps sounded in the corridor outside. His shout of "Thief!" and the struggle had been overheard.

He bent over the prostrate figure on the ground. He was lying huddled up. It looked shapeless, sexless, sinister. Sir John turned it over, and then he started back with a cry of horror. His eyes protruded; his face became like putty.

He staggered against the door just as some one outside commenced to knock loudly upon it. Quick as lightning he turned the key. He stretched out his hand for the electric-light switch. And the room was plunged in darkness. But even then Sir John covered his face. For it was a woman he had seen lying unconscious at his feet. It was Myra Berrington!

And the knocking outside the door was redoubled. A voice demanded admittance.

CHAPTER III.

"It Is Too Late."

WITH an effort Sir John Vessie pulled himself together. The instinct of self-preservation came to his aid, forcing him to action.

With one hand pressed against the wall, he stepped over the unconscious figure at his feet. The white, upturned face gleamed in the darkness. A thought struck him that perhaps she was dead. He had used all his strength when he had thrown her. Trembling from head to foot, he crept into his bedroom and shut the door. Turning on the light, he found his dressing-gown and put it on.

He had no definite idea of what he was going to do or say. The knocking outside had to be silenced, some explanation given.

His brain was in a whirl. Reason had deserted him. He wondered if it were not all some dreadful nightmare—everything that had happened since he boarded the train at Homburg.

Automatically he drew back the bolt and opened the door leading into the corridor. The manager was standing outside, behind him a couple of servants, and a third person whom Sir John recognized with a throb of vague fear. The man with the black mustache and a bald head who had haunted him right through his journey.

He was now a part of this dreadful nightmare. The manager stepped into the room and, after glancing round, looked at Sir John. Then he beckoned to one of the servants, the fireman on night duty.

"Hope we are not disturbing you, Sir John, but the fireman reported hearing a disturbance in one of these rooms, a shriek for help."

The fireman stepped forward and touched his cap. "Sounded like a woman's voice, sir. And I heard a man shout 'Thief!' twice."

"I think you must have made a mistake," Vessie said, speaking very deliberately. "I was asleep until a moment ago."

He was conscious of listening to his own voice, of wondering what he was going to say next.

"That's very funny," the manager said, stroking his chin. "I suppose you've looked? There's no one in your sitting-room?"

Sir John stepped back. "When I first heard the knocking I went in there. There was a row going on in

the street—I believe that awoke me—a woman cried out or something. I always leave my windows wide open."

The fireman looked unconvinced. "I certainly heard some one shout out 'Thief!' very distinctly."

"So did I."

Sir John turned round quickly at the sound of another voice. The sinister man with the black mustache had spoken. He was standing close to the sitting-room door.

"I dare say it was some one in the street, though," he continued, looking at Sir John. "You say you heard voices outside?"

Vessie nodded. "Undoubtedly; but I was half asleep and didn't pay much attention."

The manager moved toward the door. "I am very sorry we have troubled you, Sir John. But these jewel robberies we've had lately in London make one nervous," he laughed pleasantly. "And we have a very well-known actress staying in the hotel to-night. I believe she came over in the same boat as you did, Sir John."

The stranger with the black mustache was the last to leave the room. He glanced over his shoulder as Vessie shut the door.

"I should think you will be glad to get home and be certain of an undisturbed night's rest, Sir John," he said meaningly.

Vessie closed the door, bolted and locked it. He stood quite still for a few moments, breathing heavily. He listened until the footsteps outside had died away. Then he crossed the room and noiselessly opened the sitting-room door. He listened before entering. His heart was racing like the engine of a motor-car. His body broke out into a cold sweat as he turned on the light.

Myra Berrington was still lying on the floor; her eyes were closed, but her face did not look quite such a ghastly color. Across the forehead, beneath the crown of red-brown hair, a drop of blood slowly trickled. Sir John bathed her hands and face with cold water, then fetching his flask, he forced some spirit between her lips.

Presently he saw her eyelids flicker, and a prayer of gratitude rose to his lips. A few moments later her eyes opened, and she looked at him.

"What has happened?" she asked faintly.

She made an effort to rise. Lifting her up, Vessie helped her into the armchair. She put her hand up to her forehead as if trying to remember.

"It's all right," Sir John whispered; "it's all right, Miss Berrington. Wait until you have recovered—then—I'll help you back to your own room."

With an effort she rose to her feet, refusing Sir John's assistance. When he tried to touch her she pushed him away. He watched her anxiously, terrified lest she faint, afraid to speak, not knowing what to say. She looked at the dressing case still lying on the floor; then she looked at Sir John. He was still trembling from head to foot.

"I remember now," she whispered. "I came to fetch my dressing case. The clerk at the bureau told me I would find it in No. 42."

"Yes. I—I—" Sir John hesitated. How was he to explain?

"The door was open. I saw my dressing case standing on the table by the window; I entered—the wind must have blown the door to. Just as I was groping for the light some one came into the room, seized me, struck me, and threw me down."

Sir John rung his hands impotently. He was terrified lest some one was still hanging around the corridor outside—lest their voices were heard.

"Miss Berrington, I implore you, wait until to-morrow. If you are sufficiently recovered, go to your own room. Don't speak of what's happened to any one. To-morrow I will explain."

"It was you!" She pointed her finger at him condemningly. "This is a plot, a trick—"

"Miss Berrington!"

There was a short silence, which to Vessie seemed an eternity. Stooping down, Myra Berrington picked up her dressing case.

"Open the door!"

He obeyed, looking at her imploringly. "You must let me see you to-morrow and explain everything. I was asleep in the next room. I heard a noise in here! I came in—in the darkness I mistook you for a thief."

She looked at him scornfully and laughed. "You thought I was a thief. There is a proverb, 'Set a thief to catch a thief.' Perhaps you'll explain to-morrow what *my* dressing-case was doing in *your* possession?"

She swept out of the room before Sir John could stop her. He dared not follow. Slowly Sir John closed and locked the door. What she thought, what she believed, he dared not consider. He had no very clear conception of what had happened himself.

He felt guilty of some hideous crime. Fate had suddenly tripped him up, and he was floundering helplessly in a dreadful quagmire which threatened to engulf him.

A church clock struck the hour. Vessie lit a cigar and tried to steady his nerves. It was all a terrible mistake, yet quite explicable. The hotel clerk with whom he had left the message had blundered. Miss Berrington had no right to walk into any room the door of which she found open, even though she was in search of her dressing-case.

How did he know that there had not been some ulterior motive behind her action? How did he know that she was not a thief, one of those thieves who stole honor, reputation—

Yet if she refused to accept his explanation in the morning? Of course, he might have to offer her some recompense. If the affair got into the newspapers, became public property!

He rose from his chair with a shiver, pulled the blind back from the window and looked out. A pale gray light was stealing over the roofs and spires of the city in the east. Some fifty miles away his wife was sleeping peacefully in the old Tudor mansion in Sussex. His wife and family. He had to consider them as well as himself.

No breath of scandal had ever touched his name. Every single man and woman and child on his estate looked upon him almost in the light of a little god. He could do no wrong.

His nerves were on edge. Everything seemed exaggerated and abnormal. Switching off the light he crept into bed and lay down. For a long time he tossed to and fro, but at last sleep came.

It was half-past eight when he awoke with a start. He felt more himself after a cold plunge; and the whole affair of the previous night seemed more like a bad dream than ever.

Yet he was conscious of both looking forward to, and dreading, his interview with the beautiful Myra Berrington.

The clocks were striking ten as he made his way toward the restaurant.

Sir John was crossing the corner of the lounge when suddenly he stopped dead. Some one had spoken his name. He gazed about him. The lounge was deserted. On his right, the telephone room. The voice he had heard came from one of the telephone boxes. He stood still and listened. Again he heard his name—from a woman's lips!

The voice was Myra Berrington's voice: there could be no mistake. Like all actresses, she had a remarkably clear and penetrating voice. Vessie had thought it beautiful the first time he heard it on the express train. Now—now it somehow fed the flames of suspicion and made him feel afraid—of what, he scarcely knew.

He started forward. At box No. 3 he saw Miss Berrington seated be-

fore the telephone. Her back was toward him. She had failed to close the door properly; it was swinging partly open. Sir John had no intention of eavesdropping, but he listened.

And then, like a lightning flash, he knew what was happening. Myra Berrington was telephoning to Lady Vessie! She had rung up his wife at Napperly Hall in Sussex. With what object? he asked himself, momentarily paralyzed and bereft of action. There could be only one object—revenge, blackmail!

He hardly dared admit the dreadful thought that flashed across his mind. A blind rage seized him. He was goaded by a sense of injustice as well as by a reasonless fear.

He spoke as he pulled wide open the door of the box. Miss Berrington started, looked up, saw him, and smiled. Then she spoke into the transmitter of the telephone again:

"It's all right, Lady Vessie; here is Sir John. He will speak to you himself."

She turned to Vessie. "Your wife wants you, Sir John," she said quietly.

The truth stood clear and vivid now. If Vessie would, he could not hide it from himself. Myra Berrington stood before him in her true colors—an adventuress, a—

He tried to seize the receiver of the telephone in one hand, while with the other he seized Miss Berrington.

"Stand back," he cried hoarsely. "I know what you want now. This is blackmail!"

As Sir John Vessie flung that one ugly word at Myra Berrington she rose to her feet with a startled cry, her head thrown back, her fists clenched. For a moment it looked as though she were going to strike him. Vessie stepped back.

"How dare you, Sir John?" Her voice vibrated with passion. "How dare you make such an accusation. And just after what has happened—after what I suffered at your hands last night."

Vessie had spoken without thinking. He thought—the truth had come to him in a flash—Myra Berrington could not be acting! If she were, then it was superb.

He moistened his lips. "You must admit, if it isn't blackmail it looks very like it! What were you saying to my wife over the telephone? What right had you to ring her up?"

He pointed a trembling finger at the instrument as he spoke. The receiver was swaying too and fro. The mouthpiece was gaping at him. With another start of horror he realized that Lady Vessie at the other end of the wire could probably hear every word they were saying. With a smothered oath he darted forward to seize the instrument and speak to her, again trying to push Miss Berrington aside, to force her out of the telephone-box.

But Miss Berrington realized his intention. She was quicker. Picking the instrument up she stepped back, holding it well out of reach. For a moment it looked as though Sir John were going to struggle for its possession.

"If you touch me I shall call for help," she whispered under her breath.

Vessie stopped, paralyzed with horror. "Hang up the receiver," he said imploringly.

He could picture his wife at the other end of the wire, seated in his study, straining her ears to try and hear what was happening; catching, perhaps, odd words here and there, recognizing his voice—then the voice of a strange woman.

For the moment he was cornered. He was altogether in Myra Berrington's power now.

"I apologize. I spoke without thinking," he stammered. "You must admit the situation was extraordinary—and after what happened last night."

Myra looked at him and laughed. The color had returned to her cheeks now; they were red as peonies. The big blue eyes shone with a dangerous light.

"Put the instrument down again. Let me speak to Lady Vessie," he pleaded; "or replace the receiver."

Still Myra Berrington smiled.

"Prove your honesty, prove that I was wrong, by doing as I ask." Vessie never raised his voice above a whisper.

Very slowly Myra turned toward the telephone, still keeping her eyes on Sir John's face. Then she held the receiver to her ear. Vessie clasped his hands together, watching her with bloodshot eyes and gaping jaws.

Lady Vessie was speaking again. He could see that by the expression on Myra Berrington's face. Every second that passed seemed like eternity.

What was his wife saying? He moistened his lips: "Let me speak to her. Let me explain—"

Myra smiled vindictively and shook her head: "It is too late!"

CHAPTER IV.

The Hawk Circles.

SUDDENLY Myra Berrington replaced the receiver with a click. The line was disconnected. Sir John gave a sigh of relief. He drew his hand across his forehead.

She looked at him still smiling. A strangely subtle smile. He tried to interpret it. He was torn in twain. He had doubted her honesty, now he was doubting his own. For he did not trust himself. He was afraid lest this woman's beauty had in the first place ensnared him; lest, being overcome by it, his judgment was influenced, his sense of right and wrong distorted.

"I think you had better go, Sir John, after what you've said; further conversation between us is impossible." Her voice was strangely cold and emotionless.

Vessie partly recovered his dignity. He bowed, and walked toward the door leading to the lounge. Before he reached it Myra Berrington's voice stopped him.

"Just before you forced your way into the telephone box, where I was seated, I was on the point of ringing up a friend of mine. The clerk at the hotel exchange switched me onto a trunk call for you—Sir John Vessie. Before I could ring off or explain the call came through. Lady Vessie spoke to me. I was holding the line when you burst into the box and accused me of blackmail; you, of all people, to dare make such an accusation!"

Vessie tried to speak, but she held up a long white finger and stopped him.

"You have my explanation, which, doubtless, you may like to make to Lady Vessie herself when she questions you. Don't forget before you leave the hotel to-day that you have both an explanation and an apology to make me for the extraordinary affair of last night."

Again Sir John bowed, and retired. At least, he was going to have an opportunity of explaining to Miss Berrington the dreadful contretemps of the previous evening. That was some consolation. But he was not satisfied. He still felt suspicious. What had Miss Berrington said to his wife?

Vessie had plenty to do before going down to Sussex, and several appointments to keep in the city, yet he did not hurry over his breakfast. With every minute that passed he began to realize more fully that he who had walked scatheless through life under an obligation to no living soul, fearing neither man nor woman, trusted by all, might now find himself in rather a tight corner.

Miss Berrington was breakfasting at a little table only a few yards away. She was wearing the same gown in which she had traveled and the same smart little French hat. Vessie found himself staring at her. The fascination now was akin to what the rat feels before the golden-eyed serpent makes a meal off him!

His breakfast almost untasted, he rose. As he passed her table he paused for an instant.

"You will find me outside near the entrance—the sooner the better."

She merely bowed, and Sir John, feeling that every one, including the waiters, were staring at him, that already the affair of the previous night had got about, that perhaps his name was being linked with hers, that one of them was already suspected of being a criminal, walked unsteadily into the lounge.

He made his way to the bureau. The clerk who had booked his rooms was absent. The day clerk was on duty now. He opened the register of guests. Miss Berrington's name immediately preceded his. She had been the last to arrive. Against his name were the numbers of his rooms: 41 and 42.

It was no use questioning the clerk on duty. He dared not question the manager. While he stood at the desk trying to make up his mind what attitude he should take in his interview with Myra Berrington, a young man entered the hotel, and, going straight up to the bureau, stood beside him. Vessie was unconscious of his presence until he spoke, then he looked up quickly. For the young man asked for Miss Myra Berrington.

The clerk called a page boy, to whom the man gave his card. Vessie glanced at it: "Mr. Ralph Humphry."

He was a tall, slim man, rather pale, with thick, light brown hair, dark eyes, and a determined mouth. A keen, clever face. He wore a blue suit and a light Homburg hat. In one hand he held a large bunch of red roses. Sir John did not move away, he still pretended to be interested in the register.

Presently he realized that the young man was looking over his shoulder. He turned the page and shut the book guiltily.

But still he did not move. Under his hand there was evidence, damning evidence, of his guilt.

The page-boy returned and spoke to Mr. Humphry.

"Miss Berrington will be with you in one moment, sir."

Still Vessie did not move. One of the clerks asked if he was in need of anything; he shook his head. "No—I shall be leaving about midday, I expect. Room 41." He raised his voice slightly.

He fancied this young man glanced at him. A moment later he turned away and commenced to walk impatiently up and down the lounge. Vessie watched him, now and then glancing toward the doors of the restaurant. At last they opened and he saw Myra Berrington come slowly down the lounge.

The young man turned in his walk and saw her too, and in half a dozen strides was by her side.

He took both her hands and raised one to his lips. Miss Berrington buried her face in the roses. Her cheeks reflected the color of their petals. Vessie wished he could hear what they were saying. Their attitude and the expression on the young man's face suggested that they were lovers.

Perhaps Ralph Humphry was her husband. Vessie tried to find some consolation in the idea, but failed. He saw them walk arm in arm to a secluded seat beneath a palm-tree. He moved his position slightly so that he could see them through the branching leaves. It was obvious that they were deeply interested in one another. The young man was talking rapidly, eagerly.

Then a voice, already unpleasantly familiar, assailed his ears:

"Good morning, sir. Hope you didn't suffer from any further disturbance last night?"

He turned quickly. The sinister man with the bald head and the black mustache was facing him.

Vessie nodded curtly. "I passed a very good night, thank you."

Deliberately pushing aside Sir John, the man glanced down the register; then, strolling across to one of the writing-tables, he sat down and commenced to scribble a note. It was brief. He read it over, slipped it into an envelope which he addressed. Beckoning to a page boy, he gave it to him.

Sir John Vessie walked away.

The page boy carried the letter which had been given him across the lounge and gave it to Miss Berrington. She took it, looked at the writing, turned it over, then with a shrug of her shoulders, laid it on her lap. She had seen Sir John crossing the lounge; she guessed it came from him.

"Go on, you were telling me about the theater," she said to Ralph Humphry.

He waited until the page boy had disappeared, then he drew his chair still closer.

"Don't you want to open your letter?"

Myra shook her head. "Oh, it's nothing; probably some journalist wants to interview me, or some tradesman wants to present me with a pair of corsets, or an inventor wants his tooth-paste advertised." She made a little *moue* with her red lips and sighed. "Isn't it awful? An actress in the present day gets inundated with offers for everything except an engagement."

Humphry smiled and took her hand. He caressed the long white fingers lovingly.

"Don't be silly, Ralph," she whispered. "Remember you're in public."

"Hang it all, I haven't seen you for three months."

"Business first, pleasure after," she said firmly. "Now what about the theater?"

"Well, I've got one," Humphry said, and there was a note of triumph in his voice. "Couldn't have found one more suitable for my play. It's the Ingénue. Of course they want a thousand pounds down—six weeks' rent in advance. I told them that would be all right. Between us we can scrape together fifteen hundred, can't we? You told me so before you went away."

Myra raised the roses to her face. "A thousand pounds is rather a lot of money to put down, isn't it, Ralph?"

"Not when one is putting on a certainty," he replied with boyish enthusiasm. "Don't think I am cock-sure of my play. It's of you I'm thinking. You will make the play. We agreed to take the plunge. It's all or nothing. It's worth it, Myra, isn't it? If I had five thousand or fifty thousand I'd risk the lot on you."

She raised her eyes to his. And there was nothing but love and gratitude in them now. Quite different from those into which Sir John Vessie had looked.

There was a short silence. Myra again glanced round the lounge. She wondered where Vessie had disappeared. Perhaps he had run away!

"Ralph," she said softly, "I have a confession to make."

"I have thousands," he laughed, "and I never make 'em. I don't want to hear it. You insisted we should talk business. There are half a dozen people after the Ingénue. I promised the management that it should have our decision to-day, and a check at the end of the week at latest. It's all right, isn't it?"

Myra lay back in her chair and crossed her knees. She had half a mind to send for Sir John Vessie and introduce him to Ralph Humphry. Of course, she would have to tell the latter of their meeting on the Homburg express—and what had happened since.

But the one dreadful word Vessie had hurled at her was still drumming in her ears, drumming with a strange persistence: "Blackmail! Blackmail!"

A hideous word. A repulsive thing. A crime! What could have put such an idea into Sir John's head? Myra could read most men like an open book. And the moment she had set eyes on Sir John she had summed him up fairly correctly. She knew she had made use of him from the first mainly with the idea that he might be still more useful later on. And she knew now that a series of strange events and an almost tragic mistake had placed him in her power. To what extent he was in her power she had never conjectured until the moment when he had lost his head and made use of that dreadful word—blackmail.

"Well, why don't you speak?" Her lover's voice recalled her. She looked at him, looked into the honest brown eyes, and she blushed. Strange thoughts had been creeping, unasked, unexpectedly into her brain. She was ashamed to think.

"I made a fool of myself in Homburg," she said abruptly.

"Myra!"

"Oh, I haven't fallen in love," she said with a forced laugh, "or anything silly of that sort. It's something worse."

Humphry shook his head. "As long as you love me nothing else matters. We will make our fortunes over this season at the Ingénue. I bet you within three months we shall be able to marry."

Myra looked at her lover and there was desperation in her eyes. "Look here, Ralph, you have got to have the truth. I couldn't hide it from you if I would. I was greedy. I felt fifteen hundred pounds was not a big enough capital on which to start. I gambled with it at Homburg—thought I could double it. Instead, I lost it."

Ralph Humphry rose from his seat, his lips apart. With an effort he controlled himself and sat down again. "Lost it? All of it?"

She shook her head. Her eyes were full now. "About seven hundred pounds. I am so ashamed of myself."

He swallowed hastily and forced a smile to his lips. "It's all right, old girl. I'll set to and write some more of my cheap books. It only means waiting another year or two. Don't worry."

Careless as to who saw her, Myra bent toward him and laid her hands on his shoulders. "You are brave. You ought to hate me. A selfish, silly little fool, that's all I am. I've ruined your chances and my own."

"It's all right, dear," he said unsteadily.

"Listen, Ralph." She crept a little closer. "Something happened to me coming from Homburg. Something happened last night. I'll tell you one day. It was all a mistake. It's quite ridiculous, in a way, though it might have been a tragedy. But something good may come out of it. Almost at once." She glanced round the lounge: "I want you to go now. I'll meet you for dinner to-night, if you like, at the Savoy. Perhaps I'll have—better news for you then. But leave me now, there's a dear, and don't ask any more questions. You've been a brick."

There were tears in her eyes. Ralph Humphry rose.

"Right you are. I'll go if you wish it. I'll look in at the Ingénue and ask them to hold on for a bit. I'm afraid it's not much use." He took her hand and kissed it again. "To-night at the Savoy, half past seven."

Myra Berrington watched him cross the lounge. She waved her hand to him as he passed through the folding doors. Then she picked up the letter the page boy had given her. She felt sure it was from Sir John Vessie. She opened it and read the contents.

"It will be to your advantage to see me for a few minutes before you take leave of Sir John Vessie—before you hear his explanation. I shall expect you in half an hour's time at 29a Escott Street, Soho, Flat H. Ring the bell twice. I was the first to hear the cry of 'Thief!' and the screams for help last night. And I traveled with you on the train from Homburg. For your own sake do not fail to come.—S. D."

She scrunched the letter up in her hand. Her face went deathly white. As she raised her head she saw standing beside her a few feet away the man with a black mustache and a bald head.

CHAPTER V.

The Hawk Swoops.

MYRA BERRINGTON half rose from her seat. Then a feeling of vertigo seized her. Just for a moment she thought she was going to faint.

When she looked up again the man had disappeared.

With trembling fingers she spread out the letter and read it again: "For your own sake do not fail to come."

A threat disguised as a warning. The letter was written on the hotel notepaper. The writing was peculiar, very thick and angular; rather repulsive.

Myra Berrington was naturally sensitive and impressionable. At that moment her nerves were strung to their utmost tension, and the thick angular writing somehow suggested the trail of a slimy snake across the white page.

It was suddenly seeing the black-mustached man standing so close that had frightened her more than the letter. Her first instinct now was to tear the note up, fling it into the waste-paper basket—and forget it.

She walked across the lounge, looking right and left. The man who had been standing so close to her when she opened the letter had disappeared; he had gone in a flash just as he had come.

For the third time she read the letter. She knew quite well that it had been sent by this man with the black mustache and bald head. She had seen him at Homburg; he had followed her on the train. She had not given him a thought at the time. But now— Now she knew!

She scrunched the letter up into a tiny ball in the palm of her hand, but she did not destroy it. She did not dare. She glanced at the gold watch on her wrist. Five minutes after twelve. At half past twelve he would expect her at Escott Street, Soho. She knew the neighborhood well. It did not tend to relieve her anxiety.

She walked up to the bureau and asked to see the visitors' register. Half a dozen guests had arrived the previous day, but she could not find a single name which would have fitted onto the initials P. D. She beckoned to one of the clerks and questioned him. She described the man who had sent her the letter:

"He was staying at the hotel last night. I do so much want to know his name, and I can't find it in the register."

Her blue eyes looked appealingly into the eyes of the clerk. He was a Frenchman and susceptible, but he shook his head.

"I know the gentleman to whom *madame* refers. He was here not ten minutes ago. But he has not registered; he is not staying here."

"I saw him last night—" She stopped abruptly.

The clerk smiled, spread out his hands, and shrugged his shoulders. "He is one of those gentlemen who make use of a hotel as if it were a club. Sometimes he comes day after day; then we may not see him again for a long period."

"And you don't know his name?"

The clerk shook his head. He suggested that M. Alphonse, the head waiter, might know.

Myra hesitated a moment, and her cheeks grew a shade paler. But she asked no further questions, and she hurried across the lounge toward the restaurant.

The head waiter could not help her. He did not even recognize the man she sought in spite of her minute description.

Myra made her way back to the lounge and looked through the glass doors of the smoking-room. She saw Sir John Vessie seated in an armchair, a copy of *The Times* lying across his knees. A heavy frown furrowed his brow. He was gazing into space. Suddenly he caught sight of her. She saw him start violently. Rising, he pushed open the smoking-room door and joined her.

"Now, Miss Berrington, I am at your service. Let us find a quiet corner somewhere and—come to an understanding."

He was putting a bold face on the matter. He led the way as he spoke toward the seat Myra had lately occupied with her lover.

"What beautiful roses—it's rather late for them, isn't it?"

Myra looked at them and smiled, but the long white hand which held the flowers was trembling nervously.

"I am afraid I must ask you to defer your explanation until this afternoon, Sir John. I have an appointment, a most important one, at half past twelve."

"I have an engagement for eleven, but I cancelled it out of courtesy to you," he replied sharply.

The fingers of Myra Berrington's left hand were working convulsively, twisting and rolling the small sheet of notepaper in the palm. She was inclined to show the letter to Sir John Vessie, to be perfectly frank with him, and to ask his advice. But the tone of his voice stopped her.

He took advantage of her hesitation, thinking perhaps that she was a little frightened.

"It must be now or not at all," he said firmly. "What I have to say will not take two minutes. I have no wish to hurt or embarrass you, but—"

She laughed in his face. The laughter did not ring quite true: "You can hardly hurt me more than you have already done—physically and mentally—and as for being embarrassed—"

Vessie was impatient. He had been turning the whole affair over in his mind during the forty minutes he had been left to himself in the smoking-room. He was almost persuaded that this woman was taking advantage first of all of his kindness; then of a terrible blunder, for which she was partly responsible.

"I'm ready to do anything in my power to—er—recompense you for the unfortunate accident of last night. In the circumstances it was only natural that, when I found you talking over the telephone to Lady Vessie, I should feel suspicious and accuse you of blackmail. I shall be only too happy to withdraw the accusation, on the understanding—"

Before he could finish the sentence she stopped him with a furious gesture: "Blackmail, blackmail!" she hissed. "That word comes very quickly to your lips, Sir John Vessie. It is simply infamous of you. Do you think that I, Myra Berrington, with my name and reputation, would demean myself to a low trick of that sort?"

Vessie flushed. "Please let me explain."

"Not now," she retorted. "You must explain at my convenience! You accuse me of blackmail, but I think the boot is on the other leg. I was quite willing to believe that your kindness to me on the train was absolutely disinterested, that your brutal conduct last night was a mistake. I begin to doubt it."

Again Sir John Vessie tried to speak, but she would not hear him.

"I shall return to the hotel about half past two this afternoon. I'll listen to whatever excuses or apologies you have to make then."

Turning away, she swept toward the entrance. Vessie followed her.

"Miss Berrington—it is impossible! My train leaves Victoria at three o'clock."

"I'm afraid you must catch a later one."

She told the porter to call a taxicab. Crossing to the bureau she spoke to the clerk again: "I shall be keeping my room here for the next two or three days."

She walked out of the hotel. Sir John Vessie watched her get into the taxicab and drive away. His face was the color of putty. He took a couple of turns up and down the lounge, his hands clasped behind his back, the nails biting into the flesh. Then he told the porter to have his heavy baggage ready shortly after one o'clock.

Going to the telephone box, he had a call put through to "090 Horsham."

Miss Berrington drove no further than the corner of Escott Street. There she stopped the cab and dismissed it, waiting until it had driven out of sight. The street was long, perfectly straight

and narrow. From where she stood it appeared to end in a cul-de-sac, which perhaps accounted for the fact that, with the exception of a very old and dirty motor-car standing a little distance off, it was devoid of traffic.

There were several little restaurants bearing French and Italian names, sinister-looking newspaper shops where European journals, French cigarettes, and doubtful picture postcards were sold. For the rest the street seemed a mixture of second-rate offices and fifth-rate apartments.

Myra's heart was beating rapidly. At last she reached No. 29a. She glanced over her shoulders as if she were afraid of being watched or followed. But no one paid the least attention to her. Well-dressed women were quite common even in the humblest quarter of Soho.

She mounted a flight of dirty stone steps. The knobs of half a dozen electric bells faced her on the wall. She pushed the second, Flat B, and waited. Even then she was tempted to run away, but the taunt of blackmail still echoed in her ears.

She had no idea what this man wanted with her. Common sense warned her that she was doing a foolish thing in taking any notice of his letter; but instinct told her that if she did not go to him he would most certainly follow her. The sooner she knew what he wanted and got rid of him the better.

The front door opened a few inches and Myra saw a fat, middle-aged German woman peering at her; a large blouse open at the neck fell in ungainly folds above her waist; a red petticoat bedraggled the floor, a large plait of coarse hair had slipped from its place and fell across her shoulders.

"Flat B?" Myra asked huskily.

The woman nodded and opened the door. "Second floor, straight up."

Myra slipped past her through the narrow hall and commenced to climb the dark staircase. It was carpeted, threadbare in places, and looked as though it had not seen a broom for years. Instinctively she clutched her short skirt and held it higher. She ran up the stairs as if eager for the interview.

On the second floor facing her a door stood wide open; on the right against the wall was a highly colored poster advertising a cinematograph film. The scent of stale cigarette smoke filled her nostrils. It drifted in thin gray clouds through the open door.

Her courage failed her. She was on the point of retreating when a man appeared suddenly out of the mist. The man she had expected to see—he with the black mustache and the shining bald head.

He nodded and held out his hand. Automatically she took it, and a shiver of repulsion ran through her body.

"You are remarkably punctual for a woman! Come in."

His voice was unpleasantly soft and persuasive. When he spoke the sinister expression left his face; it became almost pleasant; his eyes were like those of a ferret, just as small; the same sickly color and the same blood-hunger gleaming in them.

"Sit down, Miss Berrington. I feel honored by the presence of such a famous actress." He pulled the armchair forward and Myra dropped into it. "Do you smoke?"

She shook her head. She prayed the man did not notice how her fingers trembled.

"You must be surprised I took any notice of your anonymous communication," she said, trying to speak carelessly. "But, like all women, I am dreadfully curious."

He seated himself on the edge of the table and looked at her with unpleasant familiarity as he puffed a cloud of smoke between his thin, colorless lips. She noticed that the fingers of his right hand were yellow with tobacco-smoke.

His patent boots were cracked and highly varnished. His clothes were well cut, but suffered from excessive cleaning and ironing. He wore a dia-

mond pin in his tie. The ends of his mustache were well soaped.

"I haven't introduced myself—but a rose by any other name would smell as sweet—and you had a pretty bunch this morning. The last roses of summer, eh?"

"I told you curiosity brought me here. Unless you satisfy it quickly I shall go, Mr. ——?"

"Mr. Paul Duhardt—at your service; though I hope we are going to be of mutual service to one another. If you are in a hurry, Miss Berrington, I'll come straight to the point without any preamble. I guess you're a business woman, though, as a rule, business and beauty don't go together—what!"

He changed his position, and waved a cloud of tobacco-smoke away.

"'Gad, such a beautiful woman as you ought never to be out of an engagement. London ought to have been at your feet long ago; yes, and Paris and Berlin."

"Mr. Duhardt, what do you want?"

Duhardt threw his cigarette away and lit another. "Money," he said, extinguishing the match.

He waited a moment, but Myra Berrington was silent. He rose to his feet and stood in front of her, almost touching her, his arms folded.

"A mutual want, eh? That's what you're after—money. And, by gad, you've struck a gold mine."

"I haven't the faintest idea what you're talking about." Myra spoke under her breath.

"I saw you get onto the train at Homburg. I heard you curse the German state railways. You did it very nicely. And I watched the little game you played with Sir John Vessie. One of the prettiest comedies I've seen in my life. I don't believe there's another woman who could have done it.

"You know his reputation? Why, down in Sussex they say he won't shoot a hen pheasant until he's been introduced to it! And you had him groveling at your feet inside half an hour."

Myra Berrington rose to her feet as if to leave the room. But Paul Duhardt refused to move an inch. He blocked the way.

"You gave him the slip at Ostend, let him get on the train at Dover alone, with your dressing-case. Followed on by the last train from Dover. On inquiry at the bureau of the Hotel Regent you found that Sir John had your dressing-case in his possession. So you calmly walked into his sitting-room and —he heard some one there, thought it was a thief, and, well—you've fairly got him on toast!"

He gave Myra Berrington an opportunity of speaking, but she said nothing.

"I was passing outside in the corridor; I heard the shout of 'Thief!' Then a scream from you! Of course, I'm not sure now that Vessie didn't know something! Anyway, you worked it perfectly.

"I listened afterward outside the door; overheard every word. You are an artist, Miss Berrington, a great artist. And, by gad! you've struck a gold mine. I need not tell you that Vessie is one of the richest men in England."

Myra stepped back and leaned against the mantlepiece. She was stupefied. She had not expected anything so terrible as this.

She had been accused of blackmail by Sir John Vessie. Now she found herself in the grip of a professional blackmailer! She felt incapable of speech, incapable of action. She could not think clearly.

"What has all this to do with you?" she stammered.

Paul Duhardt lit his third cigarette and once more carefully extinguished the match.

"Well, I'm afraid I must ask you to let me share in your good fortune, Miss Berrington. You want money? Money means success, fame, to you. And money breeds. I want it—at the present moment more than you do. I've had my eye on Vessie for a

long time, but he was too difficult a proposition for me. But you've got him in the hollow of your hand. A veritable gold mine.

"All you need do when you go back to the hotel is to 'stake your claim,' as it were. I'll do the dirty work and get the gold for you. And all I ask in return is 50 per cent. Share and share alike! Now, sit down again, and we'll go into the affair properly. What do you say?"

He looked at her and wagged his head cunningly: "It's no good being greedy, and refusing! It's a fair offer I've made. Share and share alike. You can't refuse—you see I know too much!"

"But of what do I—do you—accuse Sir John?" Myra stammered.

"Of what do we accuse him!" Duhardt grinned. "You've a good choice—of assault and robbery, if you like. Dash it all, you traveled tête-à-tête with him from Homburg, shared his wagon-lit and carried on a delightfully innocent flirtation. You lose sight of him at Ostend; but he holds on to your dressing-case!

"Then you turn up at the Hotel Regent. Sir John is already there. You are told your dressing-case is in Room 41. Naturally you look for it there. Suddenly the door blows to—a man rushes into the room and shouts 'Thief' and knocks you down. There is still evidence on your forehead of his brutality. The hotel is roused; but Sir John Vessie daren't confess what has happened."

Duhardt leaned toward her. "Neither dare you, now! It wouldn't pay, would it? Evidence! You've almost enough to hang him!"

CHAPTER VI.

The Hawk Strikes.

MYRA Berrington tried to laugh. She knew the ferretlike eyes of Duhardt were fixed upon her. She was afraid, or ashamed, to meet their gaze—she hardly knew which.

She did not know what to do or what to say. Her instinct at that moment was the instinct of the rabbit—when it suddenly finds its dread enemy facing it—to bolt! She could quite appreciate the feelings of that unfortunate little animal when it finds its home invaded by the ferret thirsting for blood.

The machinery of thought and action was clogged. The soft, persuasive voice of the man facing her acted like a drug. She began to argue with herself, knowing all arguments were futile. Knowing, too, that silence was fatal.

At last she forced words to her lips. She scarcely recognized her own voice.

"This is blackmail!"

An echo of Sir John Vessie when he had found her at the telephone. Had she been entirely innocent? Her conscience suddenly pricked her.

"Call it what you like," Paul Duhardt said blandly. "We are partners in it."

Again she felt tongue-tied. This man's attitude robbed her of all defense.

"Partners—with you—in blackmailing Sir John? Is that what you mean?" She jerked her head back and forced herself to look at him.

He smiled and nodded his head as if she had asked him some simple question. "That's it, exactly. But may I suggest the wisdom of calling a spade a 'horticultural implement,' even when you are discussing business with your partner?"

"Blackmail!" She flung the word in his face with all the scorn she now felt, backed up by fear and loathing of the man. "Blackmail! You brought me here to accuse me of blackmailing Sir John Vessie—you!"

With speech some courage returned. She looked Paul Duhardt up and down, from the top of his shiny bald head to his highly varnished patent

Original from

boots. She had seen his prototype over and over again in the front row of the stalls when business at the theaters was dull and the box-office was only besieged by deadheads. The sort of man who breakfasted and lunched at the Bodega bar, levying blackmail on the biscuit-box and the cheese-dish. The sort of man who knew the name of every chorus girl in musical comedy, who haunted billiard saloons and blackmailed the markers that they might find him pigeons to pluck.

But Mr. Paul Duhardt was smiling at her as he read her thoughts. She could not run away. She could only crouch back in her seat. It required all her strength not to shriek aloud.

Duhardt once again balanced himself on the edge of the table.

"Nerves rather shaky this morning, eh! Miss Berrington."

"If you don't let me go I shall call for the police." It was a feeble threat, an expiring effort.

"Don't be silly and don't bluff," Duhardt retorted coolly. "We are in the same boat; we must pull together. You're a woman of the world. If you hadn't been I should have gone to work another way. Hang it all, I'm treating you very well. I am being generous. But if you put difficulties in the way you may force me to become greedy. . . . Now then; you left old Vessie at the hotel?"

Miss Berrington moistened her lips. Duhardt nodded.

"He'll be walking up and down the lounge sweating from every pore of his skin until you return. Of course, he'll put up some sort of a fight; you must expect that. But, as I dare say you have already discovered, it's the really innocent man who is most easily convinced of his guilt, and the honest man who is terrified of being thought dishonest."

"Sir John has done nothing which he need be in fear of. I have done nothing . . . . It was an accident. . . . Of course, if it became public property—"

She stopped, realizing that already she was on the defensive. Duhardt threw the end of his cigarette away, and drawing forward a chair planted himself exactly in front of Myra. His varnished patent-leather boots touched the toes of her suède shoes. With the yellow-stained fingers of his left hand he emphasized his words by tapping on her knee:

"Look here, my dear girl, we can't waste any more time. Let's put our cards on the table. What do you want out of Sir John?"

"Nothing. I swear it."

Duhardt gave an impatient shrug of the shoulders. "Well, I do! I've told you not to waste any more time; perhaps I ought to have said don't tell any more lies! The moment you spotted Vessie in the train at Homburg you made up your mind he should be useful to you. When you sat chatting together in his wagon-lit with the blinds pulled down I heard you tell him that you had lost money at the Casino. Has he made you an offer yet?"

"An offer? What for?"

"To recompense you for his assault—for knocking you down last night. Why, the trip from Homburg to Dover is enough in itself. But last night that little scene at the hotel fairly capped it. Perhaps you arranged it yourself. Planned exactly what would happen and gambled on it."

Myra stared at him in horror, unable to reply.

Duhardt laughed in the back of his throat. "Between us we've got enough evidence to absolutely ruin Vessie or to drive him out of the county which his family has adorned for the last three generations. . . .

"Questions asked in Parliament; Sir John forced to resign. His eldest son gives up his commission in the Guards and his youngest son is kicked out of Eton."

Myra Berrington wrung her hands. "But he is innocent, I tell you. He didn't mean to hurt me. And he kept the affair secret because—"

Duhardt chuckled. "That's just it! That's what makes the game so easy. If he were guilty—" He gave a twirl to his mustache and winked. "If he were guilty of any crime he would fight like the devil. Probably face the music and brazen it out. No, it's the innocent man or woman who always tumbles into the trap and pays for his innocence. My chance has just come. . . . We are going to flourish, Myra!"

She rose and pushed back her chair. She understood at last exactly what Paul Duhardt wanted. She had fallen into the trap. She crossed the room, and reaching the door, held the handle firmly in one hand while she faced him.

"You think I'm going to blackmail Sir John Vessie? Then I refuse. You can do your worst. I'll go straight to Scotland Yard and interview the police and you'll be arrested."

Duhardt smothered a yawn. "Suppose I got to Scotland Yard first?"

Myra understood the covert threat in the suggestion.

"But there are other people besides the Commissioner of Police to whom I might go; Lady Vessie for instance, or Mr. Ralph Humphry, your lover."

Myra's arms dropped to her sides. She leaned against the door for support.

"It is remarkable how apt people are to believe evil of their friends. And love itself breeds suspicion. I don't suppose the guard of the express train from Homburg cherishes any feelings of affection for you. Or the steward who looked after the wagon-lit which Sir John occupied. The porter at the hotel or the fireman who heard the cry of 'Thief!' and the shriek for help."

Suddenly Duhardt rose from his seat, and crossing the room put his arm around Myra, supporting her. He led her back to the armchair. Opening a cupboard, he poured some brandy into a wine glass, which he gave her to drink. He smoked a cigarette, waiting until she recovered.

"Rather a close morning. Thunder in the air," he said laconically. "Now, then, shall we get to business?"

Myra Berrington covered her face with her hands. "What do you want me to do?"

Duhardt cleared his throat and walked the length of the room and back. He moved quietly and swiftly. "It's a case of you and I against Vessie, or of I alone against you, Vessie, and Mr. Humphry. I'm not sure if the latter scheme would not be the most profitable for me. But it would be complicated. Besides, I like working with a woman, a clever woman, and such a beautiful one."

"You said you wanted money. How much?" Myra spoke between her teeth as if she were biting off the words, as if the taste of them were gall and wormwood in her mouth.

"Money is only the means to an end. I am ambitious just as you are. I hate being idle. You want money so that you may marry the man you love, the man who worships the very ground you walk on."

Myra Berrington trembled. Her hands still covered her face. Between her long, white fingers tears slowly trickled.

Duhardt twirled the soaped ends of his black mustache. "You want money, too, to produce the play he has written at a West End theater. London has refused to realize what a really brilliant actress you are. That's bad luck, because I've seen you and you've got genius, my dear young lady. You know it, too, and it's making you crabbed and sour because you can't use it, can't get a chance of showing it.

"But your chance has come at last. The hour has struck. If it hadn't been for me you might have turned

your back on this wonderful chance—it's any odds you would have botched it. But with me at your back, why, you've got the ball at your feet."

"How much do you want?" Her voice rose tremulously.

"I have told you fifty per cent. We share and share alike. Half of whatever comes out of the Vessie gold mine."

Turning around, he fumbled in the drawer of the bureau, and taking a book, laid it on the table.

"Listen to this," he cried, dropping his voice. "Sir John Vessie's estate in Sussex is valued at £235,000. That is merely the land and houses he owns. He has got pictures and plate, and his wife has jewels worth double that amount. She has also an income of her own of about £7,000 a year.

"His income from all sources is over £25,000. And he has a controlling interest in the Hatchet Brewery Company. He makes a bit out of his racing stables, too. Just a few thousands, nothing worth mentioning, and he don't mention it either, not to the income-tax assessors. You may call it £40,000 a year. Think of the capital required to bring in that. A gold mine, I said; better than any gold mine."

He closed the book with a snap and put it back on the bureau. The expression on his face had changed, the timbre of his voice had altered. His features no longer looked cynical nor his expression sinister. But the blood hunger in the ferrety eyes was stronger than ever.

He took a watch from his pocket and looked at it. "What time does Sir John expect you back at the hotel?"

Myra Berrington dropped her hands onto her lap. She rested her head wearily against the back of her chair. Her face was like parchment. Her red-brown hair made a vivid blot of color in the dingy apartment. She saw Duhardt faintly through a cloud of quivering pale-gray smoke.

"I told him half-past two."

Duhardt nodded. "Time you were going then. Better have a bit of lunch first and a small bottle of wine with it. And don't look scared. Work him your own way. Don't force things. If he still seems keen—but no, I think he's scared. You had better come down to bed-rock and talk business."

"Business!"

"Tell him you want capital for your theater. You must keep me out of it. Makes it easier for you. But I guess he'll know I'm in the background, though he mustn't know we've ever met. I shall just hover round and keep his nerves on edge."

He stood beside her and laid his hands on her shoulders. "You needn't be afraid; I shall play the game as long as you're straight with me. Mr. Humphry need know nothing; he sha'n't have a chance of suspecting anything. I'll keep right out of the way until things are fairly started."

She looked at him then. All the fight had gone out of her. She had been listening against her will, as it were, yet fascinated by everything he said, realizing in some terrible, subconscious way that she was going to obey him. She had no choice in the matter.

There was no way out.

Presently she heard herself speak. "Suppose he refuses?"

"If you don't suppose such a thing he won't refuse. Anyhow he can't—and you know it."

Duhardt's hand gripped her shoulder tightly. "Why not own up, Miss Berrington? From the moment you found yourself talking to him in the wagon-lit on the German express you made up your mind that he should be useful to you. Didn't you now? Out with it—own it."

"Yes—perhaps I did. There is no harm in that. I thought he might be useful, interested."

Duhardt smiled, and turning on his heel, crossed the room. "That's all

right, you'll know how to tackle him. Make it easy for him at first. Just suggest that he invests, say £10,000 in your theatrical venture."

"Ten thousand—"

"A flea-bite. He'll write you a check before he leaves the hotel. Better make it an open check. When he's gone you'll come back here. I'll be waiting for you, say, at four o'clock."

He opened the door. Myra rose to her feet. Her gloves had fallen to the ground. She picked them up and crossed the room unsteadily.

"You have over an hour in which to get a bit of lunch. And don't forget the bottle of wine. I'll keep out of the way, but I shall not be far off in case you want me. And you'll be back here at four o'clock—earlier if possible."

She felt his hand take hers. It felt like the claw of a bird—hard, bony. She walked down the stairs with difficulty, holding to the banisters. She waited in the street outside until a taxicab passed. Hailing it, she drove to a small restaurant in Dean Street. She tried to eat, but the food choked her. She heard herself laugh as she drank the wine. She was doing just as Paul Duhardt had told her.

She propped a newspaper up in front of her table, for she was terrified lest some one who knew and recognized her come into the restaurant.

At a quarter past two she paid her bill and drove back to the Hotel Regent.

She felt better. The wine perhaps had gone to her head and drugged her senses. She felt she did not care. She would get the money if she could. And she knew that Duhardt had spoken the truth when he said Sir John Vessie would pay. Yes, he would pay up all right, even to the extent of ten thousand pounds!

She looked around the lounge of the hotel, but he was not there. She looked into the smoking room. She waited for a little while, then she inquired at the bureau.

The clerk told her that Sir John Vessie had left at one o'clock. He was not expected back!

CHAPTER VII.

Napperley Hall.

THE clerk repeated his information that Sir John Vessie had left shortly after one o'clock. Myra Berrington stared at him, dazed for a moment. Then she asked if he had left any message for her. The clerk shook his head. She inquired for letters. There were none.

She turned away almost with a sense of relief. He had gone, gone out of her life just as suddenly as he had come into it. She tumbled into an armchair in the lounge and lay back with her eyes closed trying to collect her thoughts.

She still had the bunch of roses which Ralph had given her; they were beginning to droop and fade. She pressed the red petals against her white face. She brushed them with her lips. If he suspected or mistrusted her!

It was only during the last twelve hours that she realized how much she loved him. Ralph was more to her than anything else in the world. Even more than work or ambition. And they had always come first.

In a spirit of adventure, and with the instincts of coquetry, she had trifled with and risked all three, and they were still in danger. In about an hour's time she would have to meet Paul Duhardt again. She started to her feet, the temporary feeling of relief she had experienced giving way to a feeling of fresh terror. Duhardt would probably insist on her following Sir John.

Crossing to one of the writing-tables, she opened Whitaker's Peerage and feverishly commenced to

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hunt for Sir John Vessie's name. She knew he had an estate in Sussex, for he had told her he was going down there.

She ran her fingers down the page.

Vessie, Sir John, Bart., M.P. . . . 25, Knightsbridge, S. W. . . . Napperley Hall, Horsham, Sussex. . . . Clubs: White's, Constitutional, Junior Carlton. . . .

Myra threw the book aside and picked up the A. B. C. Vessie had told her he was going to catch a train about half past two. She glanced at the clock; it was now within a minute of that time. She looked up the Horsham trains. There was one leaving Victoria at two o'clock, another at about three o'clock.

He had probably caught the earlier train, yet there was just a chance he was going by the three o'clock. It was obvious he had left the hotel to avoid her. He was running away—because he was frightened of her!

Myra was beginning to feel more normal now, though her brain was still in a whirl. But she was no longer under the influence of Paul Duhardt. Leaving the hotel she took a cab and drove to Victoria Station.

She had made up her mind to brazen the whole thing out to Sir John Vessie. To confess the whole truth—for she had something to confess. She was not entirely innocent.

Duhardt had made her feel like the lowest of criminals. And she wanted to get right with herself as well as with Sir John Vessie, so that she could look the man she loved in the face, take his hand and press her lips to his without feeling that she had betrayed him. Duhardt might still succeed in blackmailing, but at least her conscience would be clear.

She reached Victoria and hurried onto the platform. There were five minutes before the train was due to start. She searched, but Sir John was not among the crowd of passengers. She looked into each first-class compartment, then waited, facing the barrier, eagerly watching every man who passed it.

The guard waved his flag; the train crept out of the station. She watched it until it was out of sight. She felt that her fate was sealed. She steeled her heart. She would just have to go through with it. She would do as Paul Duhardt commanded.

She heard herself laugh in a strange, unnatural way as the taxicab took her back to the Hotel Regent Ten thousand pounds was a lot of money. It was obvious Sir John was frightened, that was why he had run away!

She began to make her plans. After all, Duhardt could not do anything without her help. He might ruin her reputation as a woman, increasing its value as an actress. He might set Ralph against her and break her heart.

Again she heard herself laugh. Ten thousand pounds! Five thousand would silence Duhardt, buy him off for good and all. With the other five thousand she would take the Ingénue Theater and produce their play. It could hardly fail. The part had been written for her. She knew she could not fail!

She entered the hotel and sat down in the lounge. At half past seven Ralph would be waiting for her at the Savoy. The management of the Ingénue would not keep the date open much longer for her. She wondered how quickly she could get the money out of Vessie; she would have to tell her lover that she had interested him in their scheme, that he was putting money into it.

Ralph could hardly object to that. Suddenly she felt her body break out into an icy bath of perspiration. A wave of unreasoning terror seized her. Raising her eyes she saw Paul Duhardt crossing the lounge. To her surprise he sat down at a table a little distance off, and gave an order to a waiter, who brought him a liqueur and a cigar.

Myra sat quite still trying to control

the trembling of her limbs. Paul Duhardt had smoked his cigar half way through before he rose from his seat. After glancing round the lounge he strolled to Myra Berrington's side.

"It's not four o'clock yet; what are you doing here?" she asked, trying to steady her voice.

"You'll always find me handy in case you want me when business is on. Have you seen Vessie?"

"He has gone."

"Gone. You haven't seen him?"

"I was here at twenty past two. I asked at the bureau; they told me he left about one o'clock. I went to the station in the chance of his catching the three o'clock train. But he was not on the platform, so I came back here."

Myra drew her breath quickly. Again she felt unable to look Duhardt in the face.

"You shouldn't have followed him," he said bruskly. "He left no letter or message?"

"Not a word."

Duhardt smiled and rubbed his tobacco-stained fingers together. "Good. He's scared. I summed him up pretty correctly. He's one of those clever fools who are born to be bled." He pulled out his watch and looked at it. "What time does the two o'clock train get to Horsham?"

"About half past three, I think."

Duhardt nodded. "He'll motor from there to Napperley Hall. Family waiting to meet him. Swell guests in the house for the partridge shooting. Gad, I shouldn't mind a day or two in Sir John's coverts! You must put a trunk-call through and ring him up just as he's sitting down to dinner. In the country usually at half past seven."

Myra was nervously dragging off her long, white gloves. "I can't. It's impossible. I'm—I'm dining out."

Duhardt blew little rings of smoke between his lips. "With your lover, eh? He can wait! Won't be the first time you've kept a man waiting. Makes 'em keen, my dear. This is going to be a soft job."

Myra tried to speak, but the words rattled unsaid in her throat.

"I suppose you know Vessie has got a son in the Guards; he came of age a few months ago. He'll inherit the old man's fortune. No reason you shouldn't be Lady Vessie one day, if you like. That's only a hint, but it's well worth thinking over."

Rising, he put on his hat. I've got a little business to attend to. I'll be back here about a quarter past seven. You had better be dressed for your dinner by then, and you can ring up Vessie before you start."

He laid his hand on her shoulder. "I've got the number of your room; I'll come straight up."

She watched him go out, wondering at her own helplessness, frightened at the fear he managed to strike into her heart.

Paul Duhardt made his way along the Strand to the offices of the Ingénue Theater, and sent his card up to the manager. He told the commissionnaire to say that his business was important.

Some fifteen minutes later the train from Victoria drew into Horsham Station. A footman followed it down the platform until it came to a standstill; he opened the door of a first-class compartment. Sir John Vessie stepped out. The station-master saluted him and welcomed him back; the porters hurried to find his luggage.

Seated in a large motor-car outside was Vessie's eldest son, Reggie. He was almost the image of his father—taller, perhaps, and of slighter build. His hair was fair, with a tendency to curl, and he wore a fair, boyish mustache. He greeted his father affectionately, but with the reserve a well-bred Englishman always exhibits in public.

"Jolly glad to see you back, dad. Left your gout in Homburg, eh? Not looking so well as I expected, though. Beastly journey—what?"

The luggage was piled into the body of the car, and Reggie started the en-

gines. He drove with a careless ease which to the uninitiated suggests recklessness, his left hand grasping the wheel, his right lying lightly on the arm of the seat. Sir John watched him, and a sigh escaped his lips.

"They're all well at home, eh?"

"Topping, dad. I motored over to Epsom yesterday and saw Bolling. He really thinks we've got a chance for the Leger with Black Star. By gad, it would be fine if we pulled it off with a rank outsider, wouldn't it? Grimes says the birds are awfully strong this year. Lord Monkheim and his wife arrived this morning with the family jewels. Crane and Richards turned up last night. Richards has got a new gun by Adams—a ripper."

Sir John let his son babble on, while his eyes rested gratefully on the fresh English scenery. He owned the land on either side almost as far as the eye could reach. It had belonged to the Vessies for generations.

There was a grateful air of peace and security about it; the cool, green pastures, the neatly trimmed hedges, the waving corn waiting to be cut; here and there the machines already at work. He heard their humming engines.

He closed his eyes for a moment.

"You're all right, aren't you guv'nor?" Reggie said, glancing at him. "I believe the cure at Homburg's all rot. What's the use of treating yourself as an invalid before your time?"

The car turned through a pair of iron gates, and swept up the long drive bordered by beech and chestnut trees. Through the leaves the roof of an old Tudor house gleamed in the setting sun. The sound of voices and laughter drifted toward them.

On one of the tennis lawns a set was in progress. Vessie caught sight of a slim, girlish figure in a short, white skirt making a desperate attempt to take a high ball.

Reggie laughed. "She's still a tomboy; won't ever grow up. Jolly good thing. Girls put on such frills when they're women."

The car stopped outside the front door, around which monthly roses and jasmine mingled in scented profusion. A portly butler greeted Sir John and took his despatch-case while he helped him to alight.

The game of tennis broke up suddenly, and four young people raced across the lawn with shouts of welcome. But Lady Vessie was the first to appear and greet her husband. She put her arms around him and kissed him tenderly, without any of the reserve her son had exhibited.

"Welcome home, John. You seem to have been away such a long, long time."

"I have," he echoed, holding her in his arms a moment. "It seems so long I don't think I shall ever go away again —certainly not without you, my dear."

Lady Vessie smiled and almost blushed. She was still in the prime of life, and the soft, brown hair only showed a few white threads here and there. The kindly gray eyes were still full of life and love. Her face was smooth and free from wrinkles.

After Sir John had greeted the other members of his family and his guests, his wife led him to her boudoir, and making him sit down near the open window, she poured him out a cup of tea, waiting on him herself.

"I was so relieved when you rang me up about midday," she said, sitting close to him and laying her hand on his arm. "It took me such a long time to get through this morning, and even then I never managed to speak to you. They are so stupid at the Hotel Regent."

Sir John nodded and swallowed his tea hastily. "They made some mistake," he said.

Lady Vessie laughed. "I know. I got quite a shock when a woman answered me and said she would hold the line until you came back. Such a nice, refined voice too—not in the least like a servant's. Who was it?"

"Another cup of tea, please," Sir John said, holding out his cup.

"There seemed to be quite a dispute going on for a little while," Lady Vessie continued, "and I certainly thought I heard your voice. I could almost have sworn it." Then she laughed. "It's lucky I'm not a jealous woman, isn't it?"

Sir John rose from his seat and leaned out of the open window. The monthly roses brushed his cheek; the scent of the jasmine filled his nostrils. Below him a long stretch of velvet lawn. The game of tennis had been resumed. He listened to the voices of the players as they shouted the score. From the drive came the cawing of rooks.

"I wonder who would be jealous of an old buffer like myself?" he said thoughtfully.

Lady Vessie joined him. "Don't you know I'm jealous, dear?"

Sir John started guiltily and looked at her. Then he laughed.

"Yes," Lady Vessie continued—"jealous of every minute you spend away from me, jealous of every thought I don't share. Isn't it absurd, we have been married twenty-two years. No, it's not absurd; it's beautiful! There are not many men like my John in the world."

He patted her hand tenderly, and picking one of the roses gave it to her almost as if he were still her lover. "You mustn't say that, Mary. I'm just like other men. I've been lucky, perhaps; that's all."

"It's I who am lucky," Lady Vessie replied. She kissed her husband. But she was using the word in a different sense to Sir John. "Now I expect you would like to rest, and see your things unpacked before you change for dinner. We shall be quite a big party to-night."

They walked arm in arm to Sir John's dressing-room. He was glad to be alone. He felt vaguely irritated with himself for the blundering explanation he had given his wife of the telephone that morning.

He had nothing to hide — nothing really of which to be ashamed. And yet—he had run away from Myra Berrington. Now that it was too late to go back, he felt that he had behaved foolishly and like a coward. But it was her fault—for the attitude she had assumed that morning.

He tried to forget her, and to forget everything that had happened since he boarded the train at Homburg, by attending to the vast accumulation of correspondence which awaited him. At seven o'clock he dressed for dinner, and half an hour later joined his guests in the drawing-room.

Dinner was served in the large, paneled room, which was only used when the house was full. A minstrels' gallery ran along one side of it, hung with torn and tattered flags, mementoes of battles in which the Vessies had fought, and regiments in which they had served. The last dying rays of daylight filtered through the huge oriel window on the left.

Sir John Vessie looked down the long table gleaming with old silver, bright with flowers from his garden, and he felt his spirits rise. He was safe in the bosom of his family again, surrounded by friends who loved and respected him. Safe at home!

He looked at his wife and raised his glass. At the same moment the butler leaned over his chair.

"You are wanted on the telephone, Sir John," he said in a discreet whisper. "I said that you were at dinner and could not be disturbed; but it appears to be a rather—er—urgent matter."

For no particular reason there was a sudden lull in the conversation. Reggie glanced at his father.

"It's impossible for me to come to the telephone," Vessie said sharply, angry at being disturbed just as he was feeling happy and quite at his ease again. "Who is it, Bowles? Didn't you ask his name?"

The butler, one of those rare and perfect servants, looked embarrassed. "Yes, sir. The name was Berrington."

Sir John Vessie started perceptibly; the color left his cheeks.

"Berrington," Reggie echoed loudly. "I seem to know that name. Berrington—Berrington?"

Sir John glared at his eldest son. He rose from his seat, then sat down again. Some one made a half-hearted attempt at conversation, but it failed.

"Is anything wrong, dear?" Lady Vessie said from the other end of the table.

The butler, fearing he had been too discreet, repeated the name in full. "Miss Myra Berrington, Sir John; she begs you to go to the telephone just for a moment. From the Hotel Regent, sir."

There was an awkward, almost painful, silence It was broken by Reggie. "Myra Berrington — that's the beautiful actress, isn't it? Saw her photo in the paper last week. I say, dad, do you know her?"

Sir John rose to his feet. "I must ask you to excuse me a moment. I'm so sorry, but it's a matter of business."

Laying down his table napkin he walked heavily out of the room, carefully closing the door behind him.

CHAPTER VIII.

The Other End of the Phone.

THE hands of the clock pointed to twenty minutes to eight. Myra Berrington glanced over her shoulder at it as she sat at the bureau in front of the telephone, the receiver held lightly to her ear.

Behind her chair Paul Duhardt stood; one hand rested on Myra's shoulder, the other grasped the back of the chair. He was leaning forward, his ear also placed close to the receiver.

Myra Berrington was dressed for her dinner with Ralph Humphry. She had put on one of her prettiest dresses, a deep shade of purple, running through it a dazzling touch of red. But there were heavy lines beneath her blue eyes.

Suddenly Myra started and her fingers tightened their grip around the telephone receiver. Some one was speaking again at the other end of the wire. Duhardt put his hand over hers, steadying it and holding it so that they shared the receiver and could both hear.

But the voice over the wire was very faint and far away. Myra kept her hand over the mouthpiece of the telephone.

"I can't hear what he's saying. It's the butler speaking again, isn't it?"

"No; it's Sir John Vessie himself," Duhardt chuckled. "He's speaking in a whisper because he's afraid of the servants or some one overhearing. Tell him you can't hear."

Myra dropped her hand from the mouthpiece and did as Duhardt told her.

Sir John Vessie raised his voice, but they could hear him none too clearly. "I was just sitting down to dinner. What do you want?"

Duhardt put his hand over the receiver now, and whispered instructions into Myra's ear. She repeated into the telephone what he told her to say.

"I told you it was impossible for me to see you this afternoon," Vessie replied, "but that I was at your service the whole morning. I told you I would recompense you for any injury or inconvenience you may have suffered."

Again Duhardt whispered instructions into Myra Berrington's ear. The color was ebbing and flowing in her cheeks. Her eyes dilated. If Duhardt had not been holding her left hand the receiver of the telephone would have bobbed to and fro against her ear like a drumstick rattling against parchment.

From each fresh command he gave her she revolted, yet automatically obeyed. She was horrified at what she was doing. And each passing

moment made it more difficult to draw back.

Questions and answers came rapidly now. It was not easy to hear what Sir John said, and ever and again Duhardt forced Myra to adjure him to speak up.

Once it looked as though Myra were going to faint, and Duhardt gripped her arm in a vise until she cried out with the pain.

"I can't go on with this," she whispered. "Sir John has offered to recompense me. Isn't that enough for the present?"

"Tell him he must write you tonight with a check or else come up and see you the first thing to-morrow, otherwise you'll put the matter into the hands of your solicitor," Duhardt hissed into her ear.

Myra tried to push her chair back from the bureau. "I can't; I won't."

The clock on the mantel-shelf chimed the hour—a quarter to eight.

"Your lover is waiting for you at the Savoy," Duhardt reminded her. "The man whose play you promised to produce at the Ingénue Theater—the play which is going to make your success and your fortune this autumn. Shall I ring him up and tell him why you are keeping him waiting?"

He uncovered the mouthpiece and waited. Myra spoke to Vessie just as Duhardt prompted her.

It seemed a long time before they received Sir John's answer. There was no accusation of blackmail on his part now.

"Very well, Miss Berrington; it's exceedingly awkward, but I'll come up to town to-morrow and meet you."

"Will you be here by eleven o'clock?"

Again a long pause before Sir John replied. "One o'clock would suit me better. Couldn't you suggest some other place than the Hotel Regent?"

"Good," Duhardt whispered. "He has got his tail between his legs. Tell him to be at your flat at twelve sharp."

"But it's shut up."

"You've got a key, I suppose? Tell him your flat at twelve sharp to-morrow."

Myra uncovered the mouth of the telephone. "I shall be waiting for you at my flat, 2 Alma Mansions, at twelve o'clock. You will be there, Sir John?"

"Yes." The one word rapped hastily over the wire. Then they heard Sir John replace his receiver. The line was disconnected.

Myra Berrington fell back into her chair, her arms dropped limply to her side; her eyes were closed. Paul Duhardt hung up the receiver, stretched himself and, taking the inevitable cigarette from a well-filled case, he lit it and inhaled the smoke with a deep sigh of satisfaction. He thrust his hands into his trouser-pockets and jingled the loose change there.

"Good. We've got him all right. You've staked your claim to the Vessie gold-mine, my dear lady, and now there's nothing to do but dig out the gold. I don't think it's going to be difficult."

He looked at Myra, then crossing to the fireplace he rang the bell. "You had better take something to buck you up before you go on to the Savoy. Is Humphry a jealous sort of fellow?"

Myra did not reply.

"Most young men are, especially those of the artistic temperament. You don't want him sniffing round while negotiations are in progress."

A servant knocked at the door.

Duhardt ordered two Martells and a "polly." He put a very small quantity of Apollinaris into Myra's glass. He watched her empty it.

"I'll be round here to-morrow morning at eleven. We'll drive down to Alma Mansions together. I can smoke a cigarette while you interview him. If he shies at ten thousand pounds, you can take five. Having once started paying, he won't be able to stop."

Myra rose from her seat and

walked unsteadily toward the door. "Leave me now. I can't bear any more."

Duhardt caught her roughly by the arm and, dragging her round, looked into her face. "Yes, you look a bit seedy. The blow on your head when you fell last night still shows. You ought to see a doctor."

"I'm quite all right—only let me go." Her voice rose hysterically.

Duhardt opened the door. "I'll see you into a cab. But that's a good idea about the doctor. I'll tell a pal of mine, a decent chap, looks like one of your swell West End practitioners—would have been if it wasn't for the drink—I'll tell him to come round and see you at Alma Mansions before twelve."

Myra turned and, leaning against the wall, looked at him appealingly. "Don't try me too far."

"Oh, he won't worry you. He'll only wait until Sir John turns up; and he'll shake his head and look confoundedly serious; say you're suffering from shock. That'll fairly fix Vessie." He held out his hand. "You'd better give me your arm. You'll be all right with a little fresh air."

It was nearly a quarter past eight when Myra walked into the lounge of the Savoy Hotel. Ralph leaped forward to meet her, but as he reached her side he checked the words that rose to his lips.

She put a cold, nerveless hand into his. "I am sorry, dear. Just as I was starting I was rung up on the telephone. Do forgive me."

Ralph Humphry frowned, but he slipped his arm through hers and held her closely.

"It's all right, dear. I'm afraid I was on the point of losing my temper—after all these weeks of separation every minute we have together seems so precious. I think you might have been punctual—for once in your life." He forced a laugh. "But you're worried about something. You looked rather seedy this morning, and you're perfectly ghastly now."

She managed to smile. "Thanks! You're not exactly flattering, are you? I'm tired, that's all—oh, so tired, Ralph."

"My poor little one! It's that beastly journey. I believe you've been worrying because of your losses at Homburg. After all, it doesn't matter; we'll get enough capital somehow. If not, we must wait a bit."

He led her to a table in a quiet corner of the Parisian restaurant. It was against the wall on the right, partially shut off from the rest of the room. Myra bent over the vase of red carnations.

"You're much too good to me, Ralph," she whispered.

Careless who saw, he stretched his hands across the table and took hers. "You're as cold as ice and white as a ghost. Tell me, who has been worrying you? Who was on the telephone?"

Myra shook her head. Two spots of color burned for an instant in her cheeks. "Don't question me, Ralph. I just want to forget everything tonight and be happy—with you."

Ralph nodded, and a faint smile played about the corners of Myra's mouth. Her eyes, which had been hard and strained, grew tender again. The waiter had served the fish and was pouring out the wine. She waited until he left the table.

"I wish I'd married you long ago when you first asked me, Ralph, she said gently.

"It doesn't take long to get a marriage license," he laughed.

"We women are such foolish creatures. For centuries we've been brought up to be nothing more or less than stupid little dolls, quite ignorant of the meaning of life and love. You ought never to have asked me to marry you; you ought just to have got a license—or whatever the silly thing is—picked me up under your

arm and carried me off—like they do in story books."

"They don't even do that in story books now; but, by gad, Myra, I'll take you at your word. To-morrow morning I'll go round to the registrar—"

Myra started, and the color which had stained her cheeks faded away and left them whiter than ever. She had just been on the point of forgetting. The shaded lights, the distant music, the chatter of voices—all had acted as a background and a barrier. She was with the man she loved. It had taken her six months to know how much she loved him.

Perhaps the knowledge had come too late. She might never be his. She could deceive him now; keep back the truth. But she could not marry him unless her conscience was clear, unless he knew her just as she was — her folly, her cowardice.

Sir John Vessie had called her a blackmailer. Heavens—it was true!

"You're not eating anything, dear."

"I'm not hungry," she answered quickly. She felt suddenly afraid lest he read her thoughts, lest he again commence to question her.

"Tell me, have you seen the Ingénue people?" she asked. "Will they keep the date open a little longer?"

Ralph laid his knife and fork down. "I'm afraid they won't, old girl. There's some one else after the theater—some brute with thousands behind him, I suppose. He's offered them six months' rent in advance — and to take the theater for a year certain. The manager's awfully decent; he rang me up just before I got here. I've got until two o'clock to-morrow. If we don't sign the agreement and give him a check then we lose the theater."

He waited a moment, as if expecting Myra to speak; but she said nothing. Her head was bent so that he could not see her face.

"It doesn't matter about my play," Ralph said unsteadily, "but I did so count upon your going into management yourself, Myra. Not because of making money; you might lose it. But you would make your position absolutely secure in London, and you would do such good work."

Again he waited. Still Myra said nothing.

"You told me there was a chance of your having good news for me tonight?"

Myra emptied her glass. Even now she was half inclined to tell the man she loved everything. With that strange perversity of human nature she would have told him, if she had loved him a little less. But she was afraid of losing him. And now she wanted him more than she had ever done before. Without him she would be utterly lonely—a lost soul. Absolutely at the mercy of Paul Duhardt.

"On the journey from Homburg I met a man who was very kind to me. The train was crowded; he found me a seat, and we got into conversation. I—I told him about our plans — and that I'd been losing money gambling at the Casino."

She saw Ralph raise his eyebrows. "Was that wise to a complete stranger?"

"Anyway, he was interested. An elderly man. From what he said I believe he would like to put money into the venture."

She waited, not daring to look at him.

It was some minutes before Ralph spoke. He was making little bread pellets with his fingers. "What was the fellow's name?"

"I may see him to-morrow." Myra was trying to speak carelessly. She felt her voice betrayed her. "If I do, and he's in earnest, you must meet him."

"What was his name?" Ralph repeated.

Myra thought she detected a note of jealousy in her lover's voice. Doubt

and mistrust, born in his heart in a second. She did not want to give him Sir John's name; it might lead to complications.

"What's the man's name? Why don't you tell me?" Ralph repeated. She saw a frown knit his brows.

"Vessie, Sir John Vessie. But wait until to-morrow, Ralph," she replied hastily. "If anything comes of it I'll ring you up. It must be settled before two o'clock. I hope to see him about midday. Where can I meet you, say, at half past one?"

Again a long silence. "Hadn't I better be present at the interview?"

Myra shook her head. Ralph shrugged. "Very well, I'll be waiting in the foyer of the Ingénue at half past one. I know the name, Vessie—but you can't very well accept money from a stranger. I don't like the idea. That kind of fellow looks upon actresses as fair game."

"He isn't that sort," Myra said quickly. "And he's a member of Parliament — perfectly straight, I'm sure, and most respectable." And then she laughed.

No, she could not tell her lover. As Duhardt had said, it was too late.

CHAPTER IX.

Double-Crossed.

IT was about eleven o'clock when Ralph left her at the hotel. He wished her good night and walked away without once turning his head. She scarcely slept during the night. She breakfasted in bed next morning. Duhardt was waiting for her in the lounge before she was dressed.

As they drove to Alma Mansions in a closed cab he gave her implicit instructions as to how to deal with Sir John Vessie.

"Don't forget I shall be just outside the door. He's sure to put up some sort of fight, but you mustn't let him go without getting cash down."

At a quarter to twelve Duhardt's friend, the doctor, arrived. Duhardt merely told him that Miss Berrington had met with an accident and was suffering from shock.

At twelve punctually the front doorbell rang. Duhardt disappeared into the dining-room. Myra answered the door. Sir John Vessie was standing outside. She led the way into her drawing-room and introduced him to the doctor. The latter was writing out a prescription. Nodding to Sir John, he gave it to Myra.

"This young lady is suffering from a severe shock, though she refuses to tell me the cause. If you are her friend, sir, I hope you'll advise her to take care of herself. She is really not fit for work." Bowing, he took his departure.

Myra waited until the front door closed; then, motioning Vessie to a seat, she sat down opposite him, nerving herself for the terrible task in hand. She felt tongue-tied. She did not know how to begin. The fact that Duhardt was probably standing outside the door, listening, seemed to paralyze her brain.

And she felt so ashamed. She really knew what shame meant now. She had placed herself with her back to the window, her face in the shadow, while the light fell on Sir John's features. They looked tired and drawn, as if he, too, had passed a restless night. She pitied him—her victim.

"You heard what the doctor said, Sir John?"

He cleared his throat nervously. "Yes. I feel that perhaps I ought to apologize for running away yesterday without even leaving a letter. But your attitude—still, we won't go into that again. I've come up to recompense you for — for the unfortunate error I made in mistaking you for a thief.

"I'm prepared to do whatever you or your solicitors think right and proper. But you, for your part, must acknowledge it was a mistake—that,

from the moment of our meeting on the Homburg express, I was only actuated by—er—feelings of common courtesy and politeness."

Myra bowed. She was afraid to speak. Though she could not see Duhardt, yet her eyes unconsciously traveled toward the door behind which he was standing. In imagination she felt his greedy, venomous eyes fixed on her face. And she dared not look at Vessie again. There was something terribly pathetic about him now. His attitude aroused all her best instincts.

Pity, chivalry, and protection — the mother instincts dormant in her breast. She crushed these instincts down and forced to her lips the hateful words Duhardt had prompted.

"Then the only thing to be done now is to fix the amount of compensation."

She found it impossible to control her voice. She wondered why Vessie did not see how frightened she was.

"Wouldn't it be better if I met your solicitors and discussed the matter with them?" Sir John suggested.

Myra started. "It would save a great deal of time and trouble if it could be arranged between us now."

She thought she heard a movement in the passage, and she pressed her hands over her breast. She could hear the noisy beating of her own heart. "It must be settled here and now."

Sir John Vessie rose to his feet and unbuttoned his black morning coat, thrusting his hand into his breast-pocket.

"Very well, Miss Berrington. How much do you want?" he asked.

The question was direct and brutal. But it did not hurt Myra; on the contrary, she felt grateful.

"Five thousand pounds," she replied.

And she wondered why the words did not choke her. She, too, rose as she spoke, her hands clasped tightly over her breast, crushing, bruising herself. A mist rose before her eyes. Everything in the room seemed to be dancing round and round — chairs, pictures, tables. She could not see Sir John Vessie. She tottered forward a few steps and supported herself against the piano.

"Five thousand pounds! You are going to make me pay dearly for my mistake, Miss Berrington."

Slowly the feeling of faintness passed; she opened her eyes again, and saw Sir John standing just in the same position. He had taken a check-book from his pocket and held it in his right hand.

She moved toward him, trying to make no sound. As she reached his side he stepped back. And a little laugh escaped her lips. He was frightened of her! He did not trust her. But she had something to say which she did not want the man waiting outside to hear—something to protect herself and her lover.

Again she advanced, and again Sir John retreated.

She lowered her voice to a breathless whisper: "I don't want the money for myself. You can look upon it as an investment—my season at the Ingénue Theater—I told you about it in the train! If it's a success I'll pay you back."

She finished speaking and glanced over her shoulder, terrified lest Paul Duhardt overheard.

"I'm not interested in theatrical matters," Sir John replied coldly. He put the check-book back into his pocket. "I think a thousand should amply recompense you."

Myra distinctly heard a warning cough outside.

"If I were to take the case into the law courts, Sir John," she interrupted quickly, "I might get far higher damages than that."

Vessie shrugged his shoulders. "Rather than haggle with you I'll pay," he said. He, too, dropped his voice to a whisper now. "You must give me a formal receipt in exchange for the money, worded as I wish."

She nodded and pointed to the bureau. "You'll find pen and ink there."

She looked at the watch on her wrist. It was twenty past one. She had ten minutes in which to get rid of Vessie, settle with Duhardt, and then meet her lover at the Ingénue Theater.

To her surprise Sir John took up his hat and put it on; she wondered whether the insult were intentional. It was a little thing, but the color burned in her cheeks.

"You may find cash more convenient than a check," he said, moving toward the door. "Anyway, I prefer to pay you in bank-notes."

He still spoke under his breath, as if he, too, feared there might be eavesdroppers in her flat. Myra watched him cross the room with a curious fascination. His footsteps made no sound on the soft carpet.

If he opened the door and found Paul Duhardt standing outside! She almost hoped he would. "You will bring the money back?" she whispered.

"Yes; I shall not be more than ten minutes."

She held her breath as Vessie passed into the hall; she knew that Duhardt must have heard him coming. She followed him to the front door and opened it.

"I shall expect you back in ten minutes—with the money—five thousand pounds."

"You need not be afraid," he said bitterly. "I shall be here."

Almost simultaneously with the closing of the front door, Duhardt rushed out from the dining-room. He strode to Myra's side and dragged her toward him.

"He's gone! Where's the money?" The nails of his fingers bit into her wrists. The expression on his face was hideous. He bore a terrible yet almost ludicrous resemblance in the dimly lit hall to a starved ferret pouncing upon its prey.

Myra's hands were tightly clenched together. Brutally he forced them open. His fingers seized the dress at her throat.

"Where's the money? You've been trying to fool me—you and he together. I heard you whispering—"

"He's going to bring it," Myra gasped.

With an oath he flung her off, and, seizing his hat, opened the front door. "Is he? I'll make sure of him, anyway."

He commenced to run down the stairs toward the entrance. Myra called to him to stop, but he paid no attention. She ran back into the drawing-room, and, flinging open the window, leaned out. She saw Sir John Vessie walking up the road. She wanted to warn him, but dared not. If Duhardt overtook and threatened him something terrible might happen.

A cab turned the corner of the road, and Vessie hailed it. Just as it drew up to the pavement Duhardt came out from the entrance to the mansions. As he saw Sir John he drew back, and stood still until the cab drove off. Then he commenced to run along the pavement in the direction it had taken.

Myra watched until both the cab and Paul Duhardt were out of sight. Perhaps, after all, the latter would only shadow Vessie and make certain that he was coming back with the money.

Myra sat down at the bureau and buried her face in her hands. How often in the past she had heard the word blackmail used, and had casually read of cases with callous disregard of its victims.

Without thinking much about it she had despised people who had allowed themselves to be bled by vague threats and get into the toils of unscrupulous men and women.

A dry laugh escaped her lips. She was one of the unscrupulous women now! A partner with one of the unscrupulous men. Blackmailed and blackmailer.

Myra rose and commenced to walk

about from one room to the other. Her little home looked desolate, the blinds down, the furniture covered in white sheets. It was very small and humble; yet it would have been big enough for her and Ralph to start their married life together, if she had not been a coward, afraid of making a sacrifice. She had sneered at love in a cottage.

The three-quarters of an hour chimed! She waited in the hall. Presently she heard footsteps mounting the stairs. She opened the front door and Vessie stood before her. He stepped into the hall, but refused to come further.

He was breathless. Beads of perspiration stood out on his forehead. He handed her a bundle of notes.

"Count them," he said sharply.

She did so. Four of a thousand pounds each, two of five hundred. Then he handed her a sheet of paper, and, taking a fountain pen from his pocket, gave it to her.

"Please sign that."

She obeyed without looking at it. He folded the paper up and put it in his pocket with the pen. "I hope you are satisfied, Miss Berrington?"

She mouthed acquiescence. Vessie turned on his heel and walked away. "Good-by!"

The front door banged. She stood still, swaying slightly, holding the notes in her hand. Again she counted them—five thousand pounds!

She began to laugh. Then checked herself with a start of fear. What had happened to Paul Duhardt. A mad longing to run away seized her.

She walked into the drawing-room and, standing before the mirror, tidied herself. Before closing the window she looked out. Sir John Vessie was just disappearing round the corner. She closed the window, drew down the blinds, and putting the bank-notes in her bag she opened the front door.

Before she could close it Duhardt appeared on the staircase.

"Were you trying to get off with the swag?" he asked sarcastically.

She shook her head. "I have an appointment at the theater at half past one—I must go at once."

He pushed her back into the hall. "Wait a bit, my dear girl, wait a bit. Where's the money? A nice crisp little bundle of notes. I saw Vessie stick them into his pocket."

She opened her bag and took them out. "I'll give you your share. Then I've done with you."

In a flash he had seized them, dragging them out of her hands. He thrust them into his pocket, put his face close to hers, and laughed:

"Oh, no, my dear Myra. No you don't! We've only just started, you and I. I am the predominant partner. I take care of the cash. When you want a little bit to go on with you must ask me for it. I'm in a hurry now, but I'll look you up later at the hotel. So-long!"

Before she could realize what had happened he had slipped out of the door, closed the door, and disappeared.

TO BE CONTINUED NEXT WEEK. Don't forget this magazine is issued weekly, and that you will get the continuation of this story without waiting a month.

WOMEN'S SOULS

BY FERDINAND REYHER

"WOMEN hide their souls," is one of man's old lies;
But I, who watch their faces,
See there God's subtlest traces,
And find their souls uncovered in their eyes.

Adventures of Judith Lee, Lip-Reader

by Richard Marsh

I—THE CLARKE CASE

WHEN one makes the statement that a certain character is quite new in fiction he must expect it to be received with more or less scornful jeers and derisive smiles; nevertheless I feel justified in proclaiming that *Miss Judith Lee,* the heroine of this story and the series that is to follow, is new—*quite* new—and I do so without fear or misgiving, knowing that the scornful and the doubters have only to read to be confounded.

***Judith Lee* is a teacher of the deaf and dumb; she uses the "oral" or lip-reading system, and so proficient has she become that she has only to see a person's face, to watch the movement of his lips—even from a considerable distance—to follow every thing that is being said. In other words she can hear with her eyes.**

Teaching is the one great object of her life; she dreams of teaching the dumb to speak and has no desire to do anything else. But time and again her gift leads her into the byways. A whispered conversation at the other side of a ball-room; the stealthy confidences of a pair of criminals far out of ear-shot are as plain to her as though she stood at their elbows. And so time after time, often against her will, she is forced to play a leading part in some drama of real life; dramas that are sometimes comedies; often serious, and not infrequently tragedies of the most extraordinary kind.

Richard Marsh, the author of the fascinating stories of which this interesting young woman is the heroine—the first series of which appeared in the *Strand Magazine*—has long been well and favorably known in England as a writer of powerful fiction, but *Judith Lee* carried him to the pinnacle of popularity; a popularity that, with the appearance of this new series of her adventures, will assuredly be duplicated in this country.

In this story, the first of the series, *Judith* plays guardian angel to a wealthy young man, greatly to his advantage.

HE had cut the end off the cigar and was about to strike a match when the telephone-bell rang. The instrument was close to the matches, so that without moving he was able to take up the receiver. "Yes, who's there?"

A voice came along the wires.

"If the man with the red mustache offers you a cigar, don't smoke it."

"What's that? Who is it speaking?"

The voice came again.

"Are there three men with you—one with a red mustache, one with a scar on his cheek, and one with his hair parted in the middle? If so, you're in bad company. Be on your guard; and mind — this is very particular—if the man with the red mustache offers you a cigar, don't smoke it. That's all. Good-by."

The voice ceased, but he remained where he was with the receiver still held to his ear.

"Who is that speaking?" he asked, but he was not surprised that no answer came. He still kept the receiver to his ear for an instant. He wanted

to gain time, if only for a few moments, to think.

The voice which had come to him had been unfamiliar; he did not know if it had been male or female. It was strange how it had given expression to certain doubts which had been floating through his mind—so strange as to be almost miraculous.

Presently he hung up the receiver. One of his companions spoke to him, the one with the scar on his face, Fred Darlington; how was it that the person who had spoken to him through the telephone knew that at that moment there was in the room with him a man with a scar on his face?

"I don't like a telephone in the room in which I live," Darlington said. "You never know when it's going to worry you. I hope that wasn't anything worrying."

"No; it was only a reminder," replied the host carelessly. "You must excuse me for a moment while I attend to it."

He passed from the room.

The moment he had gone the man with the red mustache, Clifford Sayers, spoke:

"He took it with him, didn't he?" he asked, and as Darlington nodded: "I wonder what the message was? If it hadn't been for the telephone-bell ringing just then he'd have lit it."

"He'll light it all right when he comes back. What's the matter with you, man? You speak as if you'd got the jumps."

"I have; we are playing such a game of touch-and-go. Suppose he doesn't—we're done."

Charles Arnold, the man whose iron-gray hair was parted in the middle, remarked sententiously, as if he were giving utterance to a profound truth:

"There are other ways."

The three men looked at each other; there was something odd in the glances they exchanged. Gilbert Clarke returned. As if moved by a common impulse the trio glanced sharply at him. He still had the cigar in his hand, unlighted.

"Wasn't it my deal?" he observed as he was crossing the room. "Sorry to keep you waiting."

He put the cigar which he was carrying between his lips and, striking a match, applied it to the end. As if unconscious of the interest with which the three men were watching him, he drew a puff or two.

"Sayers, this is a nice cigar of yours," he remarked. "Now let's go on with business."

He sat down to the table, drawing at the cigar with every sign of enjoyment. The three men eyed him with an interest which seemed to be momentarily growing—as if the spectacle of a man smoking a cigar were a strange one. He took up a pack of cards.

"Are these cards made?" he asked, and added as no one answered: "This is a rattling good cigar of yours, Sayers; top hole."

He took the cigar out of his mouth, drew it to and fro across his nose, and examined the ash with the air of a connoisseur. Mr. Sayers, watching him with a very peculiar expression on his face, put out the tip of his tongue as if to moisten his lips.

"That's not the cigar I gave you," he said slowly.

"My dear fellow, what do you mean? Not your cigar? It's the one you gave me."

"It is not."

"It is—of course it is; what else can it be?"

"I expect you put down the one I gave you somewhere when you were out of the room."

"Sayers — what do you mean?" Clarke demanded, and, resting his elbows on the table, he looked the man with the mustache very straight in the face. "How on earth can you tell this is not the one you gave me? What was the matter with that cigar?"

Arnold struck in: "Don't be absurd. Why shouldn't it be the one

you gave him? Aren't we going on playing?"

"Aren't we?" Clarke echoed the other's question.

At that moment a man came in with some things on a tray; he placed the tray on a sideboard. Clarke took something out of his waistcoat pocket which he held out across the table. "Sayers, have a cigar."

"That's my cigar."

"Is it? Then smoke it."

"What do you mean by that?"

"Ferguson, lock the door and put the key in your pocket." The man who had brought in the tray, moving quickly to the door, did as he was told. Gilbert Clarke had risen.

"You're quite right, Sayers," he said. "This is your cigar, and before you leave this room you're going to smoke it."

Quite a perceptible change took place in Mr. Sayers's complexion. Darlington's scar seemed suddenly to gleam brighter. Arnold was the only one of the three who outwardly remained calm. He looked up at Clarke with what seemed quite natural surprise.

"Clarke—what is the matter with you?"

"Nothing is the matter with me. I just want Mr. Sayers to smoke his own cigar, and I'm going to see he does it before he leaves this room."

"Hand it over." Sayers held out his hand.

"Mr. Sayers, I'm quite willing to do what you call 'Hand it over,' but it's on the distinct understanding that you put it straight into your mouth, light it, and smoke it while I watch you. If you don't—if, for instance, you try to put it in your pocket, or break it up, or to play any trick with it—there 'll be trouble."

"Mr. Clarke, have you suddenly gone mad?" This again was Arnold.

"Why should you suppose that I have gone mad merely because I wish Mr. Sayers to smoke his own cigar?"

"That's not all you've done; you've ordered your servant to lock the door and pocket the key."

"Precisely; because I wish him to remain and see fair play. Three to one are rather bigger odds than I care to face. I'm going to waste no time either. Mr. Sayers, you smoke this cigar at once or I telephone for the police."

"What was that call," asked Darlington quickly, "that you had just now on the telephone?"

"You've hit it, Darlington. That call was a warning not to smoke the cigar which Mr. Sayers gave me. That is why I would like him to sample it himself."

The three men stared at each other, amazed.

"I felt," cried Sayers, "the moment I heard that confounded bell begin to tinkle that there was something up."

"Your instinct guided you correctly, Mr. Sayers; there was something up. It looks as if there were going to be something more up presently. For the last time, are you going to smoke your own cigar?"

"If you'll excuse me, sir," interposed Ferguson, who was standing at the door, "the thing's pretty plain. I think, if I were you, sir, I should let them go."

"There's something, Ferguson, in your idea." Gilbert Clarke looked from one to the other of the three men as if they were curiosities, the spectacle they presented seeming to amuse him. "Ferguson, open the door. Gentlemen—save the mark—let me invite your attention to the open door."

"You've won my money!" exclaimed Sayers.

"That's perfectly true, Mr. Sayers. I think with the assistance of the cigar I didn't smoke, and you won't, it was your intention, presently, to win mine—Mr. Sayers, the door."

"You give me back my money!"

"I'm afraid I can't do that; but—your cigar?"

Sayers made a snatch at the cigar which the other held out. Breaking it in two, he began to crumble up the tobacco in his hands. Clarke watched him smilingly.

"Now that you've quite made an end of it, let me assure you that that wasn't your cigar after all. It was one of my own. If you had smoked it, no results of any kind would have followed; only you didn't even dare to try. It suggests that there must have been something really peculiar about the cigar you gave me, which I have under lock and key—and propose to keep for future use."

Sayers held the remnants of the cigar which he had broken to his nose. He let them fall on to the floor with an oath.

"You give me back my cigar," he demanded.

"You recognize that that isn't yours? There must have been something peculiar even about the smell. No, Mr. Sayers, I shall not give you back your cigar; I never return a present. Let me again invite your attention to the open door."

Arnold spoke as he moved across the room:

"Come on, Sayers. I won't comment upon Mr. Clarke's behavior, or on his notions of the duties of a host. We may have a few words to say to him on a future occasion—words which he will find very much to the point."

"But I want my money," persisted Sayers. "He's won nearly forty pounds from me; he's cleaned me out."

Darlington went close up to Clarke, looking him very straight in the face. He was a bigger man even than his host, who was no pygmy.

"Although, Mr. Clarke, you have your servant here to protect you, I've a mind to give you the soundest thrashing you ever had in your life."

"Have you, Mr. Darlington? Pray don't consider my servant. I am at your service—to thrash."

Arnold, who was standing near the door, called to him:

"Come away, Darlington. What's the use of making a scene? We'll talk to him, in our own fashion, later on. Let him flatter himself for the moment that he has got the best of us."

Clarke made a movement with his hand.

"You hear, Mr. Darlington, the voice of wisdom. May I ask, if you are going to thrash me, to do it at once; I want to be rid of you."

The scar on Mr. Darlington's cheek showed more clearly.

"It's easy for you to talk, my foxy kid; but I could kill you if I liked."

"Darlington!" exclaimed Arnold. "Come, don't be an ass!"

Clarke smiled a little grimly.

"Don't you think you had really better go—leaving me unkilled?" he suggested coldly.

Darlington moved still closer, raising his left hand. Gilbert Clarke did not flinch; he continued to smile. "If you touch me— If you touch me—"

"If you're set on making an ass of yourself, Darlington," said Arnold impatiently, "you can do it on your own—I'm going. Come along, Sayers."

As he spoke Arnold quitted the room. Sayers followed after him. Darlington hesitated.

"You may think you have finished with me, Mr. Clarke, but I assure you I haven't finished with you. You've got my money, and I assure you I'll make you give full value for every penny."

Mr. Darlington followed his companions.

Three days later Gilbert Clarke was at Brighton. On the morning after his arrival he was on the West Pier listening to the band. He was leaning over the railing of the balcony when a voice addressed him from behind:

"Good morning, Mr. Clarke."

Turning, he found that the speaker was a quiet, nice-looking young wom-

an, with big, bright eyes, and a clean complexion. She perceived that he was at a loss.

"No, you've never met me before, nor have I ever seen you; but the man you were talking to just now—I saw him call you Clarke."

"You *saw* him call me Clarke?"

"Why not? If you watch a man's face you can see what he says. I hope you didn't smoke that cigar."

Gilbert Clarke stood with his hat in his hand, plainly more at a loss than even.

"What cigar?" he asked. "I'm afraid I don't quite follow."

"Wasn't it you I recommended over the telephone not to smoke a certain cigar?"

Light seemed to be dawning on him, causing some very curious changes to take place in his expression.

"Was it you?—Great Scott!—You don't mean to say—but I don't understand. To whom have I the pleasure of speaking?"

The girl let his question go unanswered.

"The man with the red mustache is here," she went on quietly. "He's on the deck below. You seem to be quite a decent sort of person; I wondered if you were, and if it would be worth my while to telephone. How came you to be in such society? I hope you're not in the habit of choosing such companions."

Her frankness seemed to take him aback. Her big eyes were fixed on his face, as if she were trying not only to read what was on it, but what was behind it, too. He positively blushed.

"The fact is," he explained with marked hesitancy in his speech, "that I met them—that is, I met Darlington and Arnold—at Monte Carlo; you know how one does pick up men at that sort of place. But, I beg your pardon, I suppose, as you're a woman, you don't."

"You may suppose I do."

"May I? That's good. They seemed to know a lot of other men there, and, after a fashion, I chummed up with them. We came back together, and in London they introduced me to Sayers—and that's how it was."

"I see. Well—they are not nice men."

"May I ask what you know about them; and also I hope you won't mind my asking who you are; you have the advantage of me."

"Darlington is the man with the scar," returned the girl, ignoring the more personal question. "He would kill you at sight, and without warning, if you had something he wanted and he couldn't get it any other way. Arnold, the man with his hair parted in the center, is more diplomatic; he would rather some one else killed you than do it himself. Sayers, the man with the red mustache, is a sneak; he would like to kill you on the sly. By the way, what have you done with his cigar?"

"I'm keeping it as a memento. One day it may come in useful."

"He is preparing another for you—or its equivalent. This time it takes the shape of a woman. Is there a fluffy, fair-haired lady staying at your hotel, to whom you have paid attention—say, just a little?"

Gilbert Clarke blushed again. He was only a young man, after all, and this girl's eyes never left his face.

"There was a lady who sat by me last night in the Winter Garden to whom I spoke a word or two," he replied hesitatingly.

"She has a private sitting-room?"

"I believe she has; she did say something about it. She is staying in the house with her husband."

"Her husband? Yes, quite so. Her husband wasn't there last night?"

"I understood from her that he had gone away for a day or two."

"Exactly; and you asked her to go for a spin with you in your car this afternoon?"

"How do you know that? Did she tell you? Is she an acquaintance of yours?"

"Never spoke to her in my life; but she's an acquaintance of the man with the red mustache."

"No! How do you know that?"

"She has just been talking to him on the front. He wanted to come onto the pier and listen to the band, but she told him that you were doing that already, so they had their little talk on the front instead. Apparently she has got rid of him," she added hurriedly; "isn't that she coming along the pier? A word of warning: Don't go into her sitting-room, and be careful where you go with her in the car."

The girl, laughing at him, held up a monitory finger; then, without the slightest warning, turned and walked quickly away.

"One moment," he exclaimed, and would have hastened after her. She turned into the pavilion; when he reached the door she had vanished from sight.

"Who on earth is she?" he inquired of himself, "and what the goodness does she mean by tearing off like that?"

He glanced down the stairs, looked around the pavilion, went back to the balcony and stared on the deck below; there was not a trace of the girl to be seen. A lady coming down the pier, seeing him lean over the balcony, catching his eye, slightly waved her parasol to him.

"Hello! There's Mrs.—didn't she say her name was Denyer? She's uncommonly good to look at." He took off his hat in recognition of her signal. "Who is that girl I wonder? What does it matter? I shall do no harm by saying a few civil words to Mrs. Denyer, even if she has the misfortune to number Mr. Sayers among her acquaintances. And, after all, I actually have nothing against Mr. Sayers or his friends—that is, nothing substantial. It's only surmise. It looks as if she were coming up here. I don't see how I'm going to cut her if she does; I must be civil."

He was civil to her to such an extent that—unheeding the stranger's warning—he took her out for a spin in his car that very afternoon.

That was on the Friday afternoon. On the afternoon of the following Monday a young woman got out of the train at Bramborough station—Bramborough is a village something more than twenty miles from Brighton—and put rather a singular question to the man who took her ticket at the door.

"Is there a house in the village, or near the village, with a very large sycamore-tree in front of it?"

"Sycamore?" echoed the man. He looked puzzled, as if he would like to ask what a sycamore was.

A man who was on the box of a fly, which was standing in the road, called out: "There's The Laurels, miss. That's got a sycamore in the front garden."

"How far is The Laurels from this?"

"I'll drive you there, miss, in ten minutes."

"Thank you; I think I'd rather walk, if you wouldn't mind telling me where it is."

"It's just outside the village, miss. It's an old-fashioned house, standing well back from the road; there's a laurel-hedge and a large sycamore-tree in the front garden. It's on your right as you go straight on; you can't miss it."

"Just outside the village" proved to be rather an elastic phrase. It seemed to her that she had left the village behind a good half mile before she came to what she was seeking.

"This must be it," she decided. "He said the house with the sycamore; there are hardly likely to be two houses with sycamores in a place like this."

As she stood looking over the gate, she smiled to herself. "A nice wild-goose chase I'm on," she went on to herself; "compared to what I'm doing, chasing a will-o'-the-wisp isn't in it."

She pushed back the gate, which swung on rusty hinges. "That wants oiling. The house seems empty; it looks as if it hadn't been lived in lately. The windows look as if they hadn't been cleaned for ages, or the blinds drawn up. I wonder who's supposed to live there anyhow" She pulled a comical face. "A pretty figure I'm going to cut."

She walked along the weed-covered path to the house; the nearer she came to it the more deserted it seemed. There was no knocker at the front door; she rang the bell, and could hear it clanging within. She rang three times, but no one answered.

"There's no one in here now, that's pretty certain. Somehow, the very way that bell clangs seems to tell you that the house is empty."

She walked around the building. All the blinds were closely drawn. At the back, a pane of glass in a French window was broken. She seemed struck by it.

"That window seems to be broken in a rather convenient place. I wonder if I were to put my hand in if I could reach the fastening? I can—there is the window open. Now, if I enter this house, shall I be committing burglary, or what crime shall I be committing?"

She stood with the open window in her hand, hesitating; then she passed the threshold.

"How dark it is in here. That's because the curtains are so thick and the blinds are all down. Shall I pull them up? Will that be a further offense, I wonder?"

While standing in the shadowed room—she still seemed to be of two minds—the silence was broken by a very curious sound. If for a moment she started, seeming about to retreat, it was but for a moment; almost in the same instant she recovered her presence of mind.

"What was that? I do believe I've **not** come on a wild-goose chase after all."

The room, which was filled with odds and ends of furniture, was apparently a drawing-room. It had folding doors, which were the only means of egress. Throwing one open, she entered the room beyond.

"It isn't very long ago that some one was in here—some one, it would seem, who was having rather a good time."

On the table were two champagne-bottles, which seemed to be empty; a champagne-glass lay broken on the floor; another stood by a dish of grapes; a half-consumed cigar lay on the carpet; a box of cigarettes was open on a chair. Near them was a woman's glove; on this she pounced.

"That ought to be a piece of evidence, if evidence is needed." As she examined the glove that curious sound was repeated. "That comes from upstairs." She passed through the hall; at the foot of the staircase she halted. "I wonder what I'm going to see."

Then she ascended the staircase. When she reached the top she pointed to a door.

"It comes from the other side of that." Even with the handle between her fingers she stood to listen. "I wonder what is on the other side; I do hope it is nothing very dreadful." She threw the door of the room right back. "Oh, what a smell!" Then she went in. "You poor, poor thing!"

It was a bedroom, and something was on the bed. A figure of a man tied hand and foot with a variety of ingenious fastenings. The atmosphere could scarcely have been more unpleasant. There were two windows; she ran to them, drew up the blinds, raised the sashes. A pleasant breeze came through. Then, turning to the bed, she repeated her previous cry of pity.

"You poor, poor thing; what have they done to you?"

The man was not only secured so he could not move a limb, he was gagged as well. It was the gag that, in the efforts which he made to give

vent to his feelings, made it seem such a curious sound. The gag took the form of a towel, which had been folded over his mouth and tied at the back. When she had removed this, the man made an attempt to speak, but failed.

"Don't talk; don't try to. Don't do anything till I have untied you," she commanded, attacking the knot. But it was not an easy job, the untying. "Oh, if I had a pair of scissors or a knife; these knots are terrible. I wonder where the knives are kept? It will take me hours to untie these knots. There must be knives in the house; I'll run down-stairs and get one."

"Don't go," the man managed to gasp."

"I sha'n't be an instant; I'll be back before you know I've gone. I must get something to cut those cords with."

She was nearly as good as her word. Considering she was in a strange house, with no idea of where anything was kept, she was back with surprising quickness, with quite a collection of knives in her hands.

"I brought all these in case any of them should be blunt. Now we'll see! This one is not blunt anyhow; that cord's cut, and that, and that. We'll have them all off in less than no— Oh, Mr. Clarke! What's the matter? Surely I haven't hurt you?"

Something had happened which seemed both to startle and surprise her —the man on the bed had fainted. Momentary reflection, however, told her that that was precisely what might have been expected. The shock produced by the sudden removal of his bonds was more than he could bear.

It seemed to her that the best thing she could do was to remove those ligatures which still remained and do her utmost to recall him to consciousness afterward.

Before very long she was pressing on him the contents of half a tumbler of champagne which she had taken from still another bottle which she had found below—this time a full one—and some biscuits which she had found in a tin.

He disposed of both with a ravenous appetite which it was not pleasant to see. It was some time before he was able to tell his disjointed story, then the chief part of it was prompted by her.

"So you took Mrs. Denyer for a drive on Friday, and she brought you here?" she began.

The man made an effort at recollection.

"Yes; of course," he replied, the words coming from him awkwardly. "I remember—she brought me—somewhere."

"And then you had a drink with her?"

"Yes, I did. She opened a bottle of champagne and—I had a drink with her."

"And after that?"

He repeated her words. "And after that—after that—I—I don't seem to remember—after that." As if a thought had suddenly struck him, he asked a question. "How long have I been here?"

"Well, this is Monday. If you came here on Friday afternoon you've been here practically three whole days."

"Good Lord!" His jaw seemed to drop open; it was with an effort that he recovered himself. "You don't mean to say that I've been here in this house three whole days—tied up—alone?"

"It looks like it, doesn't it—if you came here on Friday?"

"It doesn't feel like three whole days."

"No—fortunately for you, it does not. I rather fancy that that champagne was like Mr. Sayers's cigar—drugged. It would seem that the drug they used is such a powerful one that it has kept you here unconscious for three whole days."

"But what can she have done such a thing for? She could have nothing against me."

"I doubt if she did do it, on her own initiative. I expect Mr. Sayers was somewhere about the house when she brought you here, although she said nothing about that little fact and you did not guess it. Indeed, I may say that I know he was."

"You know he was? Who are you? Aren't you the girl who spoke to me on the pier and then tore off when I asked you what your name was?"

"I am that girl, and my name is Judith Lee. Quite by accident I learned that you had taken a lady out for a spin in your motor on Friday, and had not been back to your hotel since.

"I happen to be acquainted with the establishment which Mr. Sayers patronizes when he wants a little refreshment in the morning; it's a most respectable one. I go there myself sometimes for a cup of coffee. I went there this morning.

"As luck had it, Mr. Sayers was standing in the entrance hall talking to Mr. Darlington as I went in. He was in a hurry—just leaving. All I could see him say was—"

"'*See* him say'?" interrupted Clarke. "That's the second time you have used that expression. I don't understand."

"All I could see him say," repeated Miss Lee, smiling tantalizingly but ignoring his interruption, "was: 'The place is called Bramborough; all I can tell you about the house is that there's a great sycamore tree in the front garden; that's all I know about it.'

"Then he went, and Mr. Darlington with him. It didn't seem much that he had said, but I turned it over in my mind when I was drinking my coffee. Bramborough? I knew where that was; just a nice, short motor run from Brighton. You had gone out on Friday without your chauffeur, as he understood, for an hour or two.

"Nothing since had been heard of you or your car or of the fluffy-haired lady. Suppose, I said to myself, I were to go down to Bramborough—I've nothing to do—and look for the house with a sycamore tree. So I came."

Gilbert Clarke did not present a pleasant spectacle. He badly needed shaving; he would have been the better for washing; his hair was disheveled; his attire was in disorder. But as he stared at the girl the thing which struck one most was the look of amazement which was on his face.

"You say you came as if it were just nothing at all; but if you hadn't come, what would have happened to me?"

"I wonder: it does seem to be fortunate that I came." She went to the open window. "There's some one passing down the road. I'm going to hail him. Hello! Hello!" She waved her handkerchief. "He sees me—he's coming. He quite an intelligent looking boy."

Through the open window she spoke to the boy, who was in the garden below.

"Where is the nearest doctor? About a mile. Where do you live? Just down the road; that's good. Who is there at home? Your mother and your sister; that's still better. Do you think if you were to tell them that there was a gentleman lying ill here, and very much in want of some one to do for him, they would come to him at once, especially if they know that he would pay them well? You think they would; then there's half a crown all for yourself. Now if you'll go and send your mother and sister and go and tell the doctor to come at once to a gentleman who is very ill, when you come back with the doctor I'll make that half-crown five shillings. Off you go as hard as ever you can." She brought her head back into the room. "He's gone; for a boy he seems quite sensible. I shouldn't wonder if we have all the help we want in a little while."

The help she desired came in the shape of a man of medicine. When

the doctor saw the patient, instead of pronouncing him very ill he declared him practically well. To judge from his manner, he had expected to find him trembling on the verge of the grave. His bearing conveyed the impression that, in his judgment, if Mr. Clarke suffered from anything it was from overindulgence in alcoholic stimulant. When he heard what happened to him he whistled—a lapse from the proper "bedside manner" for which he instantly apologized.

"I beg your pardon, but the fact is that not only is your case an extraordinary one—that such a thing should have taken place in broad daylight, under our very noses, and nobody know it—but the most extraordinary thing from my point of view is that I probably saw the miscreant leaving the premises and that I practically bade him Godspeed on his journey."

The doctor, who was a little, bustling, bald-headed man with an inclination to rotundity, seemed quite excited.

"On Friday afternoon I was coming back from a patient; I was alone in my car—it's a two-seater which I've had five years, and is a bit noisy—when I saw a motor-car, big gray one, standing outside the gate of this house."

"That was mine," said the man on the bed—he was still on the bed, though that was more for the sake of his being at his ease than anything else. "It's a forty Daimler."

"Oh, a forty Daimler, is she? I thought it was a very nice car. Just as I was coming round the bend I saw a man coming out of the gate with a woman in his arms—"

"A woman *in his arms?*" exclaimed Miss Lee.

"Yes, in his arms; he was carrying her like a child. He put her into the car and propped her up into the corner. I stopped when I came along. 'I hope the lady's not unwell,' I said. 'She's a bit off color, that's all,' said the man, not noticing me.

"'Can I be of any assistance?' I asked. 'I'm a medical man.' 'I do not know what even a medical man can do for a lady that's been drinking; that's the complaint she's suffering from.' He said this in what I thought was quite an unpleasant tone.

"I looked at the lady; she was breathing heavily and her appearance was quite consistent with what he said. 'You don't mean that she's intoxicated?' 'She's drunk as a lord,' he snapped; and as he said this he got onto the driver's seat and off he went."

"What sort of man was he to look at?"

"The chief point about him that I carry in my mind is that he had a heavy red mustache."

"Mr. Sayers—what did I tell you?"

The girl looked at Gilbert Clarke, who remarked:

"Anyhow, it doesn't look as though Mrs. Denyer was quite the person you thought; it almost looks as if she did not know what was the matter with that bottle of fizz any more than I did."

"Have you any reason to suppose," asked the doctor, "that the outrage to which you have been subjected was prompted by robbery—or by what?"

That one, at least, of the motives was robbery was very soon made clear. To begin with, Mr. Clarke had been stripped of everything of value he had on him.

"Can you think of anything which has been taken," asked Miss Lee, "besides your watch and chain and sovereign case and gold pencil-case and gold match-box and gold cigar-case and links and studs and diamond tiepin? I suppose they were worth taking. It seems as if a man can carry a good deal of solid value about him, if he doesn't wear jewelry."

"I suppose my pocketbook's gone."

"Was there anything in it?"

"As it happens, there was a good deal. I drew two hundred pounds out of the bank when I left London, and

that was in my pocketbook. There was a blank check besides. I always do carry a blank check in case anything should turn up and I should want one."

"A very sensible custom. Something has turned up; probably that blank check of yours has been found very useful."

Mr. Clarke looked as if he would have liked to say something to the young woman, but could not think what. She, however, proved to be correct. That blank check had been found useful; it had been filled up for five hundred pounds, presented by a dapper young gentleman about whose appearance there was nothing in the least suspicious, and paid across the counter.

The motor-car was recovered, which was more than Mr. Clarke's other belongings seemed ever likely to be. Late on Friday night a car had been discovered by a policeman in the lane only a short distance from Harrow Station. The lamps were not lighted; no one was in charge; there was nothing to show where it had come from or to whom it belonged.

The policeman waited and waited. When, after quite a long period of waiting, no one appeared, he gave information at the station-house—and the car was locked up. The owner was ultimately discovered; it was Mr. Clarke's forty Daimler, though how it got to Harrow and who took it there, as the police put it, there was no evidence to show.

Gilbert Clarke went back to Brighton, where he made quite a stay. One morning he was again on the West Pier listening to the band, when, as on a previous occasion, a voice addressed him.

"Good morning, Mr. Clarke; I hope you're feeling better and I hope you have had no more adventures."

He turned with a start. It was Judith Lee.

"It's you again!" he cried. "Why, I'd sooner see you than get back my seven hundred pounds. I'd sooner see you almost than anything. You're looking awfully well. That's a ripping hat, if you'll forgive my saying so. What became of you that afternoon? I thought you were down-stairs somewhere and were coming back with me to Brighton; then when it came to the scratch no one could find you anywhere; you'd vanished."

"I had gone back to town. I am glad you like my hat."

"I do; it suits you splendidly—but never mind your hat."

"But I do mind my hat; it cost quite a lot of money for me. You don't think it's a little big?"

"Not a bit too big; though, of course, it's a pretty good size, isn't it? It suits you down to the ground."

"I'm so pleased that you think it suits me down to the ground—though I don't quite know what degree in superlative that is."

"I was thinking of putting an advertisement in the paper for you."

"Why?" She was looking at him with something like laughter in her big, bright eyes. "You're looking perfectly all right again."

"Oh, I'm as fit as a fiddler. Miss Lee, I owe you an awful lot. First, the warning about the cigar; then the tip about that woman; then your coming to the rescue in that beastly house. I don't know what would have become of me if you hadn't."

"I dare say somebody else would have found you sooner or later—before you were quite dead."

"I believe if I'd remained there, gagged and bound, when consciousness returned, for many hours, I should have gone mad. I felt as if I were going mad when you appeared. I feel that I owe you more than my life. The queerest part is that I know nothing about you. I haven't the faintest notion why you've done all these things for me."

"You see, I'm a teacher of the deaf and dumb—that's why."

"Are you—are you—chaffing me?"

"Not on this occasion. I am a teacher of the deaf and dumb—the lip-reading system—and that is why. In my time I've had to make this explanation to a good many people. If all persons were like me there'd be a good deal less conversation. They would not only be afraid of being overheard; they would be still more fearful of being seen. I only have to see people to know what they are saying."

Clarke stared at her in amazement, but found nothing to say.

"On the afternoon of the day I telephoned to you," went on Miss Lee, "I saw three men sitting in a café—one had a scar on his face, one had his hair parted in the middle, one had a big, red mustache. I was rather interested in what they were saying. It's queer when people are talking secrets and you know every word they're saying; it's a sort of sublimated eavesdropping.

"The man with the mustache took a cigar out of his pocket. 'That's for Mr. Gilbert Clarke,' he said; 'that 'll do his business!'

"'What time are you going?' the man with the scar asked.

"'He said come after dinner about nine.'

"'He didn't ask us to dinner?'

"'No, I noticed he didn't ask us to dinner. He said to come after dinner, about nine, and have a little poker.'

"The man with the mustache held the cigar out again. 'That 'll give him all the poker he wants,' he growled. Then he put it very carefully in a case, which he placed in his pocket.

"Directly they had gone I asked for a directory, and I looked up Gilbert Clarke. I found that Clarke was spelled in half a dozen different ways, but that there was only one Gilbert Clarke, and he spelled his name C-l-a-r-k-e. He had a flat in Whitehall Court, and he had a telephone. I got on to that telephone, and I sent you that message. I thought it possible it might reach you about the time that cigar was making its appearance."

"It did. I've had that cigar analyzed since. It was loaded with some horrible drug, which would have had the effect of making me seem dead drunk. A few whiffs would have been enough, and while I was in that condition they would have been able to do with me what they liked—make me sign anything. It seems that not long ago a young fellow in Paris was made to sign checks for large amounts under precisely similar circumstances, which were cashed before he knew anything about them. I have a large balance at my bankers; but they might have cleared me out."

"I'm glad they didn't. It's one of the pleasures of living to be able to do one's fellow creatures little services."

"Do you call what you've done me 'a little service'? Could any one have done me a greater? If you only knew how I feel about it—if I could only tell you."

"Don't bother to try; let's talk about the weather."

"I hope, Miss Lee, you'll lunch with me."

"Thank you, Mr. Clarke; I'm afraid not. Frankly, one of the reasons why I hesitate to render people—little services is the fear of that."

"The fear of what?"

"The next man to whom I may render a little service may be that person down there with a big, black beard, his hands in his pockets, his hat on the back of his head, and his pipe in his mouth. It doesn't follow because, in pursuit of my hobby, I may render him a little service that I should want to carry it further, does it?" Her smile robbed the words of much of their sting.

"I think I understand," replied Clarke, flushing a little. "Then you are to place me under heavy obligations and I am not to be allowed to show that I am even conscious of what you've done. Is that quite fair?"

"You're a young man, Mr. Clarke,

younger than you think," returned Miss Lee quietly. "I believe you are rich. You'll find all sorts of people who will be ready to take advantage of your youth and—I won't say innocence, because you might think I was insulting you—I'll say money. If you wish to show your consciousness of what I have done for you, consider one or two copy-book maxims: 'Be careful what acquaintances you make;' 'Don't ask people of whom you know nothing to your private apartments;' 'Don't play cards with strangers for money.'"

There was a brief period during which neither spoke. He seemed to be digesting her words, and to be finding the process not a very pleasant one.

"I fancy your three friends have deserted their usual trysting-place," she said at last, and there was a subtle change in her tone. "I have seen nothing of them since that Monday. Have you any news from the police?"

"The police!" He uttered the words as if he scorned what they stood for. "I don't expect to have any news from them. They seem to think that I dreamed the whole thing, and that, if I didn't, it served me right."

"It's certainly very wrong of them to think that."

He glanced sharply at her; on her face was an expression of perfect gravity. He was not sure even that there was a twinkle in her eye.

"I don't care what the police think. What I want is to find myself face to face with Mr. Clifford Sayers, just we two alone, and I shall one day; those things come by waiting. When I do, I'll hand over what is left of him to the police. This is a personal matter between him and me. At present he's one ahead; some day, I hope very soon, that he'll be one, or more, behind."

It was her turn to glance at him. There was a grim look on his face. She thought it suited him; she felt that in a hand-to-hand encounter with his enemy this young gentleman might be at his very best.

"You believe in the old-fashioned methods — redressing your own wrongs; an eye for an eye, and that sort of thing?"

"Exactly, that sort of thing. You'll laugh at me, but I never feel so much at home as in the thick of a row; it's on the way to it that I make an ass of myself."

"If that is the case, suppose"—she glanced at him again—"suppose I were to put you in the way of having a little private conversation with Mr. Clifford Sayers—what then?"

"What then? I should say thank you, and please make it as soon as you can."

"I rather fancy I saw Mr. Clifford Sayers strolling along the King's Road a little while ago; he must be a courageous man."

"He must be. Would you mind strolling with me along the King's Road, the way he went?"

They went off the pier together. When they had gone a little way she stopped.

"If you really would like to have a little conversation with Mr. Sayers, I think you're rather fortunate. Isn't that he talking to a friend?"

A short distance from where they paused, the gentleman in question was waving a friendly adieu to an elegant young man.

"I do seem lucky," observed Mr. Clarke. "I hope he'll be pleased to see me. I fear it may be some time before that smart young man with the pink socks will see him again."

The allusion was to the hose worn by the elegant young man who had just parted from Mr. Sayers. Mr. Sayers was walking toward Kemp Town, in happy obliviousness of the couple in the rear who were making it their business to keep him in sight. He bent his steps toward a hotel, which looked out onto Castle Square, and passed through the door in blissful ignorance that they had entered immediately after. He was going up the staircase as they went in.

"I wish to speak to that gentleman," said Mr. Clarke to the youth who was acting as hall-porter. "I'll go up to his room." He turned to Miss Lee. "Do you mind coming with me?"

The pair went up the staircase, the youth looking after them as if in doubt whether or not he ought to let them go. When they reached the passage on the first floor they saw Mr. Sayers opening the door of a room which was about half-way down it. He still had his back to them when Clarke spurted. Mr. Sayers had opened the door of the room, but by the time he had realized who was coming his recent victim was already on him, and he was assisted into the room with a swiftness which possibly surprised him.

"What the devil is the meaning of this?" he spluttered.

Mr. Clarke was standing at the still-open door.

"Come in, Miss Lee, come in. I should like you to hear me say a word or two to Mr. Sayers, which won't require me to detain you more than a few moments. This appears to be only a bedroom, but perhaps you won't mind that."

Miss Lee did not seem to mind in the least. She came in, closed the door, and stood with her back against it. Mr. Sayers stood staring at his visitors with an expression on his face which suggested that he was very far from pleased to see them.

"What do you mean by forcing your way into a gentleman's room like this?" he demanded furiously.

"I am going to have a little conversation with you, Mr. Sayers," replied Clarke coolly; "and I hope you will enjoy it as much as I feel sure I shall. You tried to drug me with a cigar; and when you failed you tried something else. Had the cigar succeeded, you would certainly have robbed me; when the other way came off as you desired, you robbed me on that occasion instead.

"You took from me my watch and chain, various trifles which I had about me, two hundred pounds in cash, and you got another five hundred for another check, which you first stole, then forged, and then presented. Those various items, added together, represent quite a formidable sum, Mr. Sayers. For that amount you are in my debt; but when we have finished our little conversation I will give you a receipt for it in full."

The man had turned quite an uncomfortable color; he showed white under his freckled skin. He seemed all at once to be short of breath.

"Don't you play any of your monkey tricks with me," he stammered.

"Not at all. I'm not going to play any tricks, Mr. Sayers; I'm merely going to teach you a little lesson."

The man made a dash in the direction of the bell, but Clarke caught him by the shoulder with a grip which made him wince.

"If you should succeed in ringing the bell, Mr. Sayers," he said quietly, "I should hand you over to the police, with the result that you would probably get a long term of penal servitude. I don't want to have the police interfering in a little matter like this; when I'm through with you, I assure you you'll run no risk of penal servitude from me."

He turned to the girl. "I am obliged to you, Miss Lee, for favoring me with your attention while I explained matters to Mr. Sayers; now I think I need detain you no longer."

Miss Lee smiled and went out. As she went, the door was shut behind her, and she heard the key turned on the other side. The look which was on Mr. Sayers's face as Gilbert Clarke, gripping him by the shoulder, explained his intentions, haunted her as she moved along the passage.

Two or three days afterward she was entering a Piccadilly restaurant when she noticed two men standing in the hall. One of them, a man of un-

usual height, had a scar on his cheek. She saw him say to the other:

"So our dear old friend has had trouble."

"He's in the hospital," the other replied, with a smile which hardly suggested mirth; "if you call that trouble."

"It depends rather on the circumstances which have taken him there, doesn't it?"

"Mr. Gilbert Clarke stood for the circumstances in this case. I understand that he, as nearly as possible, broke every bone in his body, and that he won't be able to move for at least a month. A motor omnibus could hardly have hurt him more.

"And I will tell you something else: from what I am told, if you were to meet that nice young man, I shouldn't wonder if you found him one of the toughest propositions you ever tackled. He may be a simpleton, but he's built on a steel frame and he can use it."

The speaker made a little movement with his fists which was full of meaning.

"I have not the slightest wish to meet him, I assure you," the tall man replied; "not the very least. I've had enough of this effete old country, and between ourselves, the day after tomorrow I'm going to leave it for quite a while."

"I'm thinking of leaving it also," the other gentleman returned.

As she went in to lunch Miss Lee was smiling. She had heard from another source quite a spirited account of that conversation with Mr. Clifford Sayers. As she was choosing a table she was saying to herself:

"How strange it must feel to be a young man."

The second story of this series, "THE FINCHLEY PUZZLE," will appear in the All-Story Weekly for July 24, 1915.

LOVE'S ARITHMETIC

BY W. D. YOUNG

If a kiss is just nothing, divided by two,
Does the problem sound quite mathematic'lly true?
Well, let's make a test—then you will decide
When all else has failed, that you *have* to divide.

If you steal a kiss (after much vain petition)
Can you take away something and call it addition?
Should the maid give a kiss (a not-unheard-of action)
Can she put something back and call it subtraction?

Now, if you should multiply nothing by two,
There'd be nothing for her and nothing for you.
That's good mathematics—that nothing accruing—
But apply it to kisses? No, sir! Nothing doing!

So a kiss is just nothing, divided by two,
And I give you a rule which will always hold true:
If you wish to divide (or to kiss) with precision,
Put your heart in your work—and use long division.

Through Flames of Fear

by Kendrick Scofield

Author of "Harbor-Sick," etc.

SYNOPSIS OF PRECEDING CHAPTERS

DOUGLAS STEELE, arriving in New York from India, finds that his aunt, Minerva Steele, with a lot of other women, is studying occultism under Swami Dewan and his disciple, Nathoo. Steele suspects crooked work, especially since Jhanavi Faron, a pretty girl of Indian descent, is mixed up in it; and his suspicions are justified when in a raid on the Swami's house he finds the rag, bone, and tooth, symbols of the Thugs. Chota Lal, Steele's Indian servant, turns up suddenly and recognizes the Swami as Nana Sahib, a Thug leader. Minerva disappears overnight, and when Steele calls at Jhanavi's home, her companion, Mrs. Montague, is terribly upset.

Jhanavi has vanished. Steele cables Captain Fitzallen Austin of the Delhi police, his old chief, and sets other wheels moving to trace the Thug and his dupes. A fresh search of the man's house gives two clues; the names of a town on the Oregon coast and of others in Indo-China. They go to the coast town, where Chota Lal finds an encampment of Thugs and kills one of them; then Steele goes on to San Francisco and learns that Nana Sahib had chartered the Matsu Maru, and that the ship will sail from a point in Magdalena Bay. Then he is attacked by a mob.

CHAPTER XIV.

A Trip on the Side.

WHEN Chota Lal left Steele in the old hotel garden, his pride was still smarting under the blunder which had marked him as an impostor in the now death-blinded eyes of Gunesh, the Thug.

In the extremity of his peril, while he had sat beneath the strangler's noose back there in the hills, at the moment when he had with the swift knife-stroke saved his neck, and later while he lay concealed listening to the talk among the *phansigars,* he had been given little time to brood.

But as he started again for the mountain in the night, there came to plague him the fact that Gunesh had read him like a book. He was consumed with the shame of a man who had boasted and had been bested. He was learning, as was his master, that before Nana Sahib and his murderous pack could be laid by the heels, both of them must play bedfellow with the specter of bloodless murder, and must do so undetected.

The little Hindu was well versed in the devious ways of his people. And, in the manner that traditions are handed down in the Orient, he had become familiar with the usages and customs of the *phansigars.* But when it came to dealing with the ferocious members of the revived murder clan, Chota Lal

This story began in the All-Story Weekly for June 26.

now realized that his and his master's life depended upon avoiding the slightest blunder.

There was but one bit of comfort to Chota Lal in the whole affair which had ended in Gunesh's death. He knew now that his tale of having come from the southward in search of Nana Sahib had not been believed. Evidently the Thugs had kept their presence in the country a profound secret, and this, coupled with his mistake, had served only to put his neck in danger of the noose.

Now he would take no more such chances. His wide-shot arrow had fallen again, and struck not the quarry, but the marksman. From this time on he would let others ask the questions, and not seek to justify his own presence in the hills until it became absolutely necessary.

While he went on into the mountains, his spirits revived under the return of his native stoicism and philosophy. Now he walked forward as blithely as though his destination had been the temple of his beloved Ganesha, God of Wisdom, instead of the rendezvous which he had found after the body of Gunesh had been sunk in the deep mountain stream.

He would take what came to him in the way of opportunities. Let the gods of his people watch over him!

Making no effort at concealment, he covered the long forest miles. He stayed not even though he was drawing near to the camp. Outside of the forests the sun had risen, but only a weak reflection of the outside glare penetrated the gloom which hung beneath the trees. And so it was in a light, almost as gray as a false dawn, that Chota Lal came to the camp.

The Thug band was already stirring. A great fire was alight, and over it bubbled a pot of rice, stewing with the meat of a kid. Behind the fire there loomed eerily the cavernous mouth of a natural grotto.

Chota Lal saw all this as he approached. And with that strange, Oriental gift he cast what remained of his late apprehensions behind him in a twinkling.

In his conscious and subconscious minds he ceased to be Chota Lal, servant to the heaven-born *sahib,* and became Chota Lal, great-grandson of the Thug *jemadar,* Bukshi.

Confidently he strode to the camp of the stranglers. To the men gathered about the fire—for the mountain air was chill—he cried the peace greeting, and they made room for him about the blaze.

That they should thus receive him, a stranger, into apparent fellowship with them, caused him no wonder. He recalled how many thousands of travelers in India had been received as he had been welcomed and lulled into a false security, only to afterward pay for their credulity with their lives.

"I have grown tired of hairy Pathans and Sikhs, with their filthy red beards, my brothers!" Chota Lal growled as he squatted among them on his hams. "We be well met, we of Bengal."

"Seekest thou work?" asked one of the Thugs, a fat man the color of an old, hard-ridden saddle.

"Aye; work in the orchards, but the season is late. There is little to be had, and what is here those dogs of hillmen have obtained before I came," the little Hindu complained.

"Whence comest thou?" the fat Thug squatting next to Chota Lal persisted, and Steele's servant, keeping a veiled watch upon the circle, noticed that another of the stranglers, an old man with seamed visage, industriously drew the back of one withered hand along his chin from the throat outward.

That, Chota Lal recognized, was one of the secret signals of the Thugs. It meant to be cautious; but whether the old man was endeavoring to warn the fat *phansigar,* he could not tell.

Then it flashed into his mind that at any moment some ambitious member of the revived fraternity, anxious to prove his right to the title of honor-

able strangler, might attempt to cast a noose about his throat.

And even though he might escape open attack at this time, Chola Lal still feared that, unless he made it plain to them that he knew the character of the band, when they offered him food or drink, it might contain the seeds of a stupefying plant known as *duttora,* which would render him an easy prey.

So, ready to spring his surprise, he glanced around the circle with studied carelessness.

"*Bhowani puter?*" he spat out.

It was one of the Ramasi dialect catchwords, conveying to the trained strangler the meaning, "Are you a descendant of Bhowani?" And cries of surprise and denial burst from the circle.

"Then why are your *agasi,* your turbans, yellow and white, as is acceptable to our Great Mother of Calcutta?" Chota Lal demanded. "And have I not seen one of us yonder"—and he pointed to the withered, old man—"give the sign of caution?

"Save your denials for babes and weaklings? Try them not on Chota Lal, who sprang from the loins of Jemadar Bukshi's grandson.

"See ye not my turban? It is like yours. Was I not learned in the rite of the Tupponi" (the Thugs' most awful ceremonial) "while I was yet a stripling?"

The squatting children of Kali gazed with wonderment, for Chota Lal was standing now as he cried sharply:

"*Ae ho to ghyri!*"

Literally translated, Chota Lal's words meant in Hindustani: "If you are come, pray descend." But in the fateful Ramasi dialect it was the best known *j'hirni,* or signal to kill; and so swiftly had it come that two of the brown men nervously reached for their turban cloths, while Chota Lal laughed long and deeply.

Up and down before the circle he strutted, conscious of the impression he had made.

"By Dada Dheera," he swore, using the name of an ancient and cannonized Thug, "I will show you what I know!"

Then, beginning with an imaginary band of stranglers who had ingratiated themselves with a party of travelers, Chota Lal, the master mummer of his kind, went through in pantomime the murder of a victim from start to finish.

While the audience sat spellbound, the word that told the Thugs to take their places rolled from his lips. Then came the orders to the Holders of Hands to grasp the victim's arms and the order to the appointed strangler to do the work.

Once he interrupted his recital with the sharp bark of a watcher, telling them that danger of discovery threatened, and followed it with the signal that all was safe once more.

He imitated the motion by which the noose was dropped; he laid an imaginary body softly upon the ground and went through the motions of looting the corpse.

Then he ordered the Grave-Choosers to be about their work, selecting a spot for the hiding of the body, and in the midst of a deathlike silence he resumed his seat, while about him awed whispers demanded:

"What manner of man is this that he is so learned in our art?"

"Surely he must be of our kind, and our brother!"

But Chota Lal, burning inwardly with the success of his performance, assumed an air of affront, and rising again he spat at them:

"Ye have seen what I have done. So speak to me not, O brothers with the tongues of liars! For I know that from him who has once tasted the rite of the Tupponi the desire to serve the Great Mother never departs.

"But I have had enough of men who wish me ill. I go upon my way," and he started across the glade.

"Be not in haste, O Chota Lal," the withered old Thug called to him kind-

ly, for he was apparently satisfied that, by some strange chance, another of their kind had wandered unwittingly into their midst.

"What we do here, we may not tell. But if thou hungerest after the breed of Jemadar Bukshi from whence thou didst spring, stay here with us. And perhaps thou mayest be one of us, for before us lies a pleasant path, O Chota Lal. But more than this I may not say, for thy words, though having the sound of truth, may be but empty things, and thou must first prove thyself!"

While Chota Lal was in the Thug camp in the hills working, watching day by day, worming himself into the confidence of the stranglers, paving a perilous way whereby he and his heaven-born *sahib* might be in at the death, Douglas Steele was coming back to painful consciousness from the blow which had felled him in the little Barbary Coast back street.

Dimly he came to himself, and when in the grip of a surge of pain which rolled over him, he threw out one of his arms, his knuckles crashed into a rough, wooden wall.

He seemed to be in some sort of a narrow box. It puzzled and annoyed him. Then through the throbbing of his head he became conscious of another motion, and though weak and sick, Steele had been too often in nondescript wind-jammers not to recognize the movement of a ship rolling in a heavy, beam sea.

Then his nostrils, distending at the sour-damp odor which assailed them, confirmed his fears that he was lying in a bunk in some filthy fo'c's'le.

He raised himself slowly and peered over the boarded edge of the little space in which he lay. He was very near the eyes of the craft, whatever she might be, for he could hear her forefoot humming beneath him.

He eased himself back, determined not to turn out until some of his strength returned, and there seemed to be no one about the fo'c's'le at that moment to cuff and kick him to the deck in the manner long approved by bucko mates toward men pressed into servitude under them.

He recalled his adventure on the Matsu Maru. He remembered vividly the crashing blow in the dark, and the fight which followed. But he could locate nothing that would connect the blow as the result of his trespass on the old pelagic sealer.

"I guess that hadn't anything to do with it," he finally communed. "It's just a rotten streak of bad luck. Shanghaied!" he added bitterly. "Carted aboard this Billy-be-d—— hooker and signed on while I was all woozy—in this day and age! Shades of Stevenson, please write!"

Had Douglas Steele followed the promptings of his outraged body he might have pried loose a heavy timber and run amuck; but what was left of his senses after the tap he had received warned him that to show fight would get him nothing.

"And I guess I won't wait for any heavy-fisted man-killer to kick what remains of me on deck," he concluded as he rolled stiffly out of the sour-smelling bunk.

It was dim in the fo'c's'le. But the shanghaied man could see that it was a small, cramped place for the number of bunks which were built around, in which the sea-gear of perhaps a score of men was piled. Sea-boots hung from nails in the bulkheads; sou'westers and tarpaulins were thrown about in messy heaps.

From the lines of the ship, disclosed by what part of her skin had been partitioned off to make quarters for her deep-sea crew, Steele surmised that he was in no small, coastwise craft.

He stretched and worked his arms to relieve the muscular cramp. Then, assuming a ginger he did not feel, he sprang through the scuttle to the deck.

For a moment the light blinded him, but, fighting back the pain which nagged at his head, he started shakily

toward the quarterdeck, where a big brute of a man paced back and forth.

Standing at the foot of the steps which led up from the waist, Steele called respectfully: " I report for duty, sir; which watch am I in? "

The big man whirled on him.

" Now, who the —— might you be? " he demanded of the battered specimen that confronted him. Astonishment was written large on his coarse features, for Skipper Black, of the Mollie K., was shy on experiences which involved shanghaied sailormen who did not bluster, threaten, and demand to be set ashore.

" I suppose I'm rated as an able seaman, sir," Steele replied as meekly as he could, although a keen desire to be at the hairy throat of the deep-sea ruffian was twitching his fingers. " I guess I was present, but, you see, I don't remember signin' 'em. But I suppose, sir, one ship's as good as another so long as a man knows his business."

The skipper, who had grinned maliciously at the new hand's very evident attempt at meekness, now guffawed openly.

" Well, if here ain't another jewel for my everlastin' diadem! Mr. Plunkett! " he yelled, and the first mate came running from where he had been standing near the wheel, although it was his watch off.

" Look at what we've got," the captain chaffed. " A sailorman by his looks, and one who had to be batted over the figgerhead before he'd come aboard us. But he's as meek as Moses now, Mr. Plunkett, and don't seem to take no interest in how he comes to be here. Can you beat that? "

The first mate smirked: " I reckon he'd heard o' the Mollie K., sir. The time to fight is afore you get aboard her, not after; and it's likely he knows by repytation that we ain't askin' for no opinion from foremast hands! "

As he finished speaking, from somewhere below eight bells struck from a ship's clock, and the first dog-watch began. The captain left the quarterdeck, and the mate turned, snarling, upon Douglas Steele.

" Ye're in my watch, and I was just a wonderin' whether I'd have to come down and lend ye a crutch to tumble up with. Lay for'ard there and step lively! "

Steele turned to uncomplainingly with the men of his watch. The Mollie K. was now some seven or eight hours out of San Francisco Bay, and, close-hauled, was making long legs of it. He knew enough about seamanship not to incur the ill-temper of the mate during his time on deck, and when the second dog watch brought him relief he put a few cautious questions to the most sociable of his bull-necked watchmates.

From him he learned that the big three-masted schooner was in the Honolulu trade. As nearly as he could figure, he had lain unconscious since he had been loaded aboard well after midnight. Now he was headed with the schooner on a long voyage, for she was charted down on a course generally southwest, which in time would bring her to the Northeast Trades, up which she could run to the Sandwich Islands.

As the shanghaied man reviewed the situation it seemed hopeless to expect to escape from the little floating world into which, without his own consent, he had been thrust.

But, in order to take advantage of any unexpected chance, he must be as free as possible from espionage. And so, in spite of the fact that he was keenly disheartened by the misfortune which had put him out just at the time he had begun to sit in Nana Sahib's little game in earnest, he tried to put a punch in his work.

At eight bells of the first watch he was again on deck to find the Mollie K. heading dead into a haze which seemed to rest low on the face of the waters. Steele knew it to be a fog-bank.

But the Mollie K. held on, for noth-

ing like a hint of thick weather ever turned Skipper Black from his course. To have run down the edge of the fog would never have entered his head.

Nearer and nearer loomed the blanket until finally the bowsprit of the schooner tore into it, and there fell about the ship that soft, gray shroud which lurks over the Pacific in early fall.

Steele's ruse of apparent contentment had worked so well that the mate stationed him with another seaman near the heel of the bowsprit to peer ahead as best they might into the thickness and give warning of danger.

From behind them now and then came the puny bellow of a mouth-blown foghorn. But the signal could pierce but a few feet into the dank curtain which surrounded them.

On for another hour they ran, like a blind wolf fleeing through a snow smother. Then the Mollie K. stood over on the port tack, and, straining his eyes though he did, Steele could not even make out the topmast-stay running down from above him.

Madly he shrieked his warning.

He had heard the faint noise of a laboring ship even before a shadow bowsprit swept out of the mist.

There came the confusion of rending cordage. The forestay and the foretopmast-stay out beyond spit spitefully as they tore, twanging like fiddle-strings, and then whined away.

Far in the smother, the stranger, standing close-hauled on the starboard tack, put up her helm to lessen the shock of contact and then slid off, gone in a moment, as a picture is wiped from a slate.

It was all over in a few seconds. But when the stranger's bowsprit had cleared the deck of the Mollie K. neither of the lookouts were at their posts.

The sailorman, taken unawares as he gazed in the opposite direction, had been swept into the seething sea. But Steele, realizing instantly that a means of escape was offered him in the threatened collision, had crouched low as he yelled his warning, and then, leaping upward as the stranger's bowsprit passed, caught her bobstays.

As the stranger swung off, Steele clung to her, clambering up above the hiss of the waves which reached out hungrily for him. He made no outcry, but clung there until he felt his strength ebbing.

By then he knew the Mollie K. was safely lost in the fog, and that her skipper and mate would believe he had suffered the same fate as the other seaman. There had been none to see his going, thanks to the fog-blanket; and if there had been, nothing could have been done.

But it yet remained for him to see whether he had swung from the frying-pan into the fire.

Working himself up on the bowsprit shrouds, Steele went slowly inboard, like a dripping wraith from the fog-swept sea.

He had leaped from the deck of the Mollie K. on a wild impulse. But as he crawled inboard he concluded from the course that the stranger must have been making to have caused the collision, she was either headed for San Francisco or up the coast.

As he climbed in, Steele could see that the ship to which he had so impulsively entrusted his fortunes had also suffered in the collision. Her jib-halliards had been broken and the sail had come down on the run, now hanging useless, the flying jib and staysail keeping the vessels head to the wind.

Steele's impressions, received in the flickerings of almost a single instant, were of confusion forward. Men hauled on tackles while a mate bullied and cursed them, and was himself in turn the recipient of sundry wild profanities which came through the fog from the quarter-deck where the "Old Man" had the ship, endeavoring to set right some of the damage.

Above him Steele could see the bellying of a huge square foresail. Undoubtedly he was on a coastwise bark, most likely a lumber-boat.

In the midst of that fog-covered confusion Steele set his feet on deck just as the mate yelled wildly: "Man the jib downhaul!"

He started along the deck; but the mate sprang at him, believing him for the moment to be one of the crew, grabbed him by the shoulder and swung him about, shrieking: "Lay onto that—lively there!" He was clean mad with the excitement and the revilings of the skipper.

So Steele swung to the downhaul, never stopping to disillusion the mate; and after that he laid out with a tarry ruffian to stow the jib on the jib-boom.

Then he went inboard again, strode over to the officer with a twinkle in his eye, and asked: "Is that all, sir?"

The mate gasped and drew his rough hand across his eyes.

"This beastly fog is a gettin' me!" he exclaimed. "Sailormen floatin' in out o' the mist!"

"I came over the bows when the bark's bowsprit swiped across the schooner back there," Steele assured the officer. "I'd like a word with the captain if I may, sir."

The mate was a good-hearted fellow, as was the skipper; and so it was with little trouble that Steele arranged for passage into Portland, which proved to be the destination of the lumber bark. He chose to sign on in the crew, however, for the remainder of the voyage instead of asking the captain to take his unsupported word that he would pay his passage as soon as he reached land.

By morning the fog had torn like a sheet, and when eight bells of the morning watch sounded the bark was standing on over laughing waves with a brave wind and a following sea.

Always responsive to the lure of deep water, Steele passed a pleasant enough time while the up-coast miles fell away.

Once in Portland, he sent an "S.O.S." for money to his New York lawyers, and before nightfall, having been satisfactorily identified by the skipper of the lumber craft, was again in funds.

According to his calculations, his little involuntary cruise had cost him nearly five days from his quarry. So, with all the more need for hurrying, Steele jumped the first train for San Francisco after his money arrived.

Once again in the city from which he had so summarily been carried, a half-dead, unconscious weight, he lost no time taking the trail again.

Within two hours, aided by a high-powered automobile, which he rented, he located the hotel at which his aunt and Jhanavi Faron had been stopping, but the clerk informed him that the women had paid their bills and gone that morning. No; they had left no address.

Into his car he sprang, and this time he dismissed his driver when he had been taken to the Barbary Coast limits. He hurried down to the waterfront, and off in the direction of Milner's wharf.

He approached the shore end of the dock carefully, but as he peered from behind a pile of casks he realized that his caution was useless.

The Matsu Maru was gone!

Far out, a smudge of smoke above her dingy hull, he saw the old steam-schooner making for the open sea.

CHAPTER XV.

Turban and Languti.

HIS plan to eliminate the women from the problem blocked by the sailing of the Matsu Maru, Douglas Steele stood staring after the smudge of smoke left by the old sealer on the distant sky-line.

He was nervous and tense, like a hound afield with the scent lost. He

knew that he could easily beat the panting old steamer to Alsea Bay, but he had counted much on being able to battle with the wily Nana Sahib without the added handicap of having to consider Jhanavi Faron and Minerva Steele.

Now, thanks to the Barbary Coast shanghaiers, that was out of the question.

He hurried to the post-office. There the letter which he had given to Chota Lal awaited him. It was the urgent summons agreed upon, and the cancellation showed that it had accumulated dust in the post-office pigeonholes for three days. He should have started for the Thugs' camp at least forty-eight hours before.

Now, there were other unavoidable delays, for his disguise must be perfected.

He made for Kearney Street. But a stone's throw from that thoroughfare stretched the dingy, dirty, threatening lanes of mysterious Chinatown, and toward them Steele turned.

Dupont and Jackson Streets, the main arteries to the heart of Oriental vice which beat strongly in the California seaport before the earthquake and the days of the Asiatic exclusion acts, swarmed with shifty-eyed sons of Cathay. They shuffled along the pavements below gaudy-gilded balconies, which jutted out over yawning doorways as beetling brows overhang the eyeless sockets of a blind giant.

Two flights down from the level of an odorous alley off Dupont Street, Steele found a Chinese apothecary, sleek and fat as the denizens of the seal rocks out in the harbor, and from him he obtained a square brown cake stamped over with sprawling characters. It reminded him of the squares of India ink he had prized as a boy.

Here and there in the bazaar stores he made other purchases before making his way to a pawn-shop in an adjacent street.

There, from a miscellaneous collection of weapons dropped by penniless sailors of the long voyage, he selected one which he could bear without betraying himself.

Denied the comfort of a stiff-backed six-shooter—for he remembered that Thugs never use firearms and only resort to the *cathmi,* or knife, in great emergencies—he chose a slender blade of Oriental temper and design. That must constitute his entire armament.

When, an hour later, he arrived at the little stag hotel where he had put up when he first came to the seaport, his head had been altered by shaving so that now it would pass for the pate of a Brahman anywhere from Calcutta to Delhi.

In his room, with the aid of the hotel bartender, whom he had found going off duty and had subsidized with a gold piece, Steele rubbed a wet cloth upon the dye-cake, smearing his body well. He worked the stain into his skin, permitted it to dry, and then went over it with a damp rag to remove any streaks.

This process he repeated again and again, until two hours later he stood mother naked in the little room, a counterpart of a man who had been born of brown parents and reared beneath the hot India sky.

His beard, by this time of fair length, he trimmed as well as he could to produce the fanlike effect beloved of East Indians of high caste.

Then, cramming some cotton fabrics he had purchased in the Chinatown bazaars into a small grip, Douglas Steele, now, to all appearances, a well-preserved Hindu of middle age, garbed in white man's clothes, stole from the hotel by the side entrance and away.

Only once did he stop on his way to the railway station, and this was to send another code message to Captain Austin. He had hoped to be able to give the chief of the Delhi police accurate details of the intended movements of the Thug band, but was forced to content himself with sug-

gesting that in all probability the destination of the quarry was the wilds of Cambodia.

Steele made the heart of the Oregon hills, out from the town of the blurred postmark, late in the afternoon of the next day. There, selecting a rocky depression screened with vines for his hiding-place, he disrobed. He wound the *languti* cloth about his muscular hips, and then carefully folded another length of material.

In a moment of idleness long ago in India he had learned the trick of winding a turban. It is no easy thing to whirl the long, flimsy strip about one's head and have it settle in the proper folds. Yet, with almost the ease of a native, he soon arranged his scanty garments and concealed his knife in a bundle made of a gaudy handkerchief.

He retained a few of his gold pieces. The rest he left in his clothes, which, with his small belongings, he crammed into the grip and buried beneath the mold collected in a crevice. Now was he ready for the death grapple with the Nana Sahib.

But the few moments he had stood so nearly naked in the chill air of the morning took its toll of the unaccustomed Steele. The cold bit into his bones, and his skin beneath the dye bunched into tiny pimples. The change from even light clothing to no clothing to speak of had been too much.

So he stepped back into hiding, where, safe from prying eyes, he jumped and swung his arms, slapping his sluggish epidermis into a warm glow. Then, not giving his circulation a chance to subside, set off at a brisk pace, bundle in hand, through the trees.

Twice as he pushed on during the dying afternoon he was forced to take brief breathing spells. But while he rested, he did not lie full length as the people of his own race do. Instead, he squatted on his haunches, rising every now and then to rub the stiffness from his muscles and get them used to their new office.

As he went through the forest solitudes he spoke constantly to himself in guttural Hindustani and made use of what few salient words of the Ramasi Chota Lal had given him to add to the knowledge he already had of the dialect. Moonrise, and he strode into the glade of the Thugs.

It lay dark, silent and deserted. Before the little grotto, he found the ruins of the fire, but the sticks were cold and damp. He explored the hollow openly, finding scraps of discarded cloth, with here and there a few grains of rice and crumbs of *chupatti* cake which the woodland birds had not discovered.

But that was all. The Thugs had been gone perhaps since morning, and Steele set about searching for the sign that the little Hindu was to have left.

In all ages and among all men certain symbols have existed. The broken branch, the *patran* of the gipsy bands, marked the trail for lagging comrades. Blazed trees were part of the unwritten code of the American Indian. Then there are the spoor signs of the African blacks.

So with the Thugs. A mark upon the ground, a certain number of stones piled in a particular way, leaves strewn along a path, each have, to the initiated, an unmistakable significance.

The man whose skin was brown but whose blood was white, started over the ground foot by foot, using most of the few matches he had brought before he discovered that for which he sought—a bit of sandy outcropping in the mass of pine needles beside the path which led from the glade

There he read the *pola,* the Sign.

His little servant, leaving the camp, had drawn his foot along in the dust. The scratch pointed about west by south in compass points, as nearly as Steele could judge from the north star, which fortunately he could see through the opening of the trees.

That direction would bring them speedily to the seacoast, and Steele congratulated himself that he had traveled northeast in coming to the glade, thereby missing the *phansigars*.

He returned and studied the sign again. Where the scratch ended was a small depression, as though Chota Lal had ground his heel into the dirt. That, in the Thuggee code, meant that he was to hurry after them.

He lost no time. Sore though he was from unaccustomed barefoot going, he obeyed the sign that his servant had left, and by midnight halted just inside a belt of trees which fringed the beach of Alsea Bay, at this point much nearer the hills than the shoreline near the town.

He pulled aside the branches and peeped through. Down the beach a hundred yards away a score of dark, half-naked men were clustered. They were the wolves of the Nana Sahib.

Nothing could be gained now by hanging back. From now on Steele must take his chances in the open. Nor must it appear that he had been lurking behind the screen of foliage.

He retraced his steps perhaps a dozen yards; and then, with the stride of one who had traveled fast and far, he burst through the tangles and out upon the sand. There he stopped a moment, and cried the name of Chota Lal.

From the knot of stranglers who still squatted immobile in surprise, the little Hindu sprang and rushed toward him. Steele felt something pressed into his hand by his eager servant, who commanded tensely:

"Take thou this. Guard it as thou wouldst forfend thy life, O heaven-born, for of a truth it *is* thy life! When I ask for the sign which thou didst bring let this be thy answer."

The Thugs on the beach had risen and were moving toward them as Chota Lal continued: "Thou deceived even me, who expected thee!"

"But the news, Chota Lal! What is there to tell?"

"I have smoothed the way for thee," the little man whispered quickly, and yet there was in his voice the world-old note which fathers use to infant sons, telling them to be unafraid. "I cannot say now. They come. Remember thou art my brother, Bhagwan. Out there lies the ship. We go to-night aboard her."

Then he turned and hailed the stranglers in low, carrying tones:

"He has come, O sons of the mighty mother. Bhagwan, the eldest of our line, is among you, and he brings that which I promised he should bring. Good fortune and loot shall be ours. And it hath the power to turn aside the omens of evil!"

The Thugs scurried across the last few feet of sand which separated them from Steele and the Hindu. Red-rimmed eyes were aglitter, mouths watered hungrily in sympathy with their desire to behold what the stranger had brought.

"Let our sight rest upon it!" they insisted, pressing closer; but one among them turned, cursing fluently in Ramasi:

"It is profanation to stand while the sacred gifts are disclosed!" he cried. "Since when have the sons of Kali not bowed in her worship?" And in obedience the Thugs sank upon their knees, touching their foreheads to the sand, yet yammering insistently: "Show us what thou hast brought!"

"Stay your impatience, O men of the Thugs," Chota Lal advised, waving back the creatures that fawned as they scrambled forward toward the man who held the mysterious talisman. "Would ye feel the wrath of Nana Sahib, the lord grandfather? Your skins must itch for chastening, and it shall fall upon you if ye stay not," he promised, "for into the hands of the Nana, and him alone, must that which has been brought be delivered."

A murmur of dissent arose among the stranglers. But Steele knew that his game must be to take no chances,

to allow the little Hindu to make the running, and stand to back his plays.

So he scowled down upon the groveling stranglers and spat out:

"Counsel them not, O Chota Lal! These things which I bring—are they not mine and thine? Who then is there, save only the Nana Sahib, to say to us *must* or *shall?* Have we not the brains and the strength of men? Are we weaklings or sucklings that these, our brothers, should so affront us?"

His words carried conviction with them, but the Thugs still growled out their displeasure. Steele affected to ignore their murmurs. At last from the darkness came the sound of muffled oars, and, weaned for the moment from their desires, the stranglers sprang to their feet, turning to gaze into the night.

A boat shot through the surf. Men sprang from her and dragged her to the beach. Came another. Then a third.

At a guttural signal from one of the Thugs, who was apparently in command during the absence of Nana Sahib, the stranglers bunched silently on the strip of sand, and then without word from the oarsmen began clambering aboard the small craft.

Spume, whipped by a wind which had risen, slashed across them in sheets, and in the sickly moon-rays which had broken through the cloud rack to save the night from being inky black, their dark hides glistened as if they had been rubbed with pitch.

In an incredibly short space of time after it had grated on the beach, the first boat shot again into the rollers, and the Japanese crew, after shoving her well into deep water, sprang over her gunwales and gave way. In a moment she was nothing but a splotch out on the troubled waters.

Steele and Chota Lal swung into the second boat that, under the impetus of brawny arms, was sent far enough out to avoid being swept back again. Behind them they could hear the crunch of the third boat pushing off.

Steele felt a tang of excitement creep through his jaded blood as, looking over his shoulder, he saw the strip of shore-line fading. At last he was absolutely committed to the greatest adventure of his adventurous life!

Every buck of the rising sea flung the boat high—but only for her to slide again into deep, interminable troughs when the hump of the waves fell away from beneath her keel.

The air about them was damp; thick with promise of mist and fog. Above, a lowering sky seemed to press down wearily, overburdened with threatening, somber clouds.

In the little more than a hundred years of its existence on maps of the known world, the coast, which the three boat-loads of terrible men with Steele and Chota Lal in their midst were leaving far behind, had seen many wild embarkations.

It was from there that the intrepid American navigators first sailed to establish the trade between our northwest coast and China. Then, in the early '40's, from ports along this wild stretch the crews of "hide-droughing" square-riggers set out for their perilous courses to Boston "around the Horn."

And through its later years, from time to time, different localities of the West Coast had been infested with representatives of every class of blue-water rascal—smugglers of Chinese; runners of contraband opium, masters of low, black schooners, sailing for raids on the seal islands; desperate men whose vessels were designed for South Sea "blackbirding"; furtive crews bent on recovering hoards of buried treasure; bands of wreckers bound for the scenes of their pickings; villains bent on poaching vast wealth from the protected pearl fisheries of the lower latitudes, and other nondescript, tatterdemalion corsairs whose evil ends were known only to their own blood-black hearts.

But of all the weird sailings that the old northwest coast had ever seen, the embarkation of the Thugs, each man of them intent upon wholesale, silent murder, was of them all the most strange.

And something of this entered Steele's mind as he sat there beside Chota Lal among the stranglers. He strained his eyes ahead for a glimpse of the steamer with whose secret presence there his own fate and that of the entire English race in India had become so irretrievably interwoven.

But, though he gazed long and earnestly out over the sea, he could pick up no glinting light to betray the whereabouts of the old sealer. For thirty minutes more the rowers swung their ashen blades before he saw, dead ahead, a black bulk, low in the water.

Not a gleam, nor even the faint radiance of a riding light, came over the ocean from her, for her master, fearing discovery by a revenue patrol or coast-guard, had neglected no precaution.

It was the Matsu Maru, wallowing like an evil, slimy leviathan in the chop of the sea.

CHAPTER XVI.

The Talisman.

FITZALLEN AUSTIN sat alone in his office.

Titularly, he was in command of the Delhi police. Actually, his position in the affairs of British India was of much greater importance, for he was the man to whom every civil official looked as the one indisputable authority upon all matters, native, hidden, occult, and dangerous, which from time to time came snaking up through the crust of civilization that has been smeared over the natural unrest of England's greatest colonial empire.

The city "constabeels" of whom Austin was the ostensible head are, as every one acquainted with India knows, held in high contempt by the natives; and there is as much difference between a policeman and a member of the secret service as there is between a native sweeper and a Brahman priest.

That was why Austin took the opportunity of masking himself as a nonentity, while in strict, inviolable secrecy he was the real force behind that unseen, unidentified, unnamed — and instead of named, numbered— organization, the Indian intelligence agents.

In the army of spies who worked under him were Afghan horse-traders, Parsee merchants, Bengali gentlemen, *babus* and *bunias* recruited from the classes of Bengali clerks and bank employees; and lean Hindu coolies, possessing no more wealth than could be concealed in the shabby, ragged bundles which they carry. In short, Fitzallen Austin's great, even-moving web of espionage upon the hidden doings of the natives was spun by men recruited from every one of the varied phases of Indian life.

As he sat, brows bunched and jaw muscles bulged over Douglas Steele's latest code message—the one filed just before he left San Francisco to take the risks which lay ahead upon the Matsu Maru — he showed a forceful figure of a man.

He was young as years are counted in matters of promotion, though bronzed and baked to an indurated quality of soul and body by the climate and the dangers of his adopted land.

The big office room with its files and records did not seem to be the proper frame for him. To have bulked to his natural bigness, Fitzallen Austin needed a wild, primitive setting suggestive of brute force, and bravery —a hostile jungle creeping with unnamed, unseen terrors perhaps; a sea-swept wreck, desolate and doomed, manned by corpses, or a rock-strewn battle-field, dotted with knife - hacked bodies of the slain, sprawling by thousands under a bloody sun.

The chief of the intelligence agents laid Steele's message face down on his desk, anchored it there from the disturbing breeze by a squat bronze idol which served him for paper-weight, and vigorously punched a call-button.

"Find Meddoes," he tersely commanded the messenger who answered, then settled back, pushing his chair away from the desk, and frowned in concentration as he waited.

Out beyond the windows lay the rambling red sandstone houses of the city on the Jumna. But Captain Austin's thoughts were not bounded by the city walls, nor yet by the scattered ruins of the older town which lay outside of them along both banks of the river.

The fate of the entire empire was on his mind; her seaports, her centers of commerce, her proud Occidental institutions engrafted upon the Oriental land by keen-brained white men, now threatened by that of which the code message there on his desk warned him.

For the first time in his long career Fitzallen Austin was nonplused. It was his initial experience in tackling a problem which he felt was perilously near being out of reach of his own resources and those of his vast, unnamed army of agents.

Had he been allowed to move in time — but now it might be too late, and the hope of the empire to stamp out the insidious murderous revival of Thuggee might depend solely and alone upon the young American and his Hindu servant, with their slim margin of getting through in safety.

And they were beyond all zones of communication.

Meddoes's entrance brought him back with a start. He drew his chair again to his desk, drummed his fingers idly for a moment, and then looked keenly at his subordinate, who had taken a chair and was patiently awaiting his superior's wishes.

"God certainly does love the English, Meddoes!" the captain snapped. "Read this," as he tossed the cable across.

Meddoes glanced down it, translating the code almost as readily as though it had been in plain wording, and commented:

"Stupendous luck, what? Just think of having old Steele—good man that he is—right there at the go-off!"

The captain permitted himself a snort, and scoffed: "Luck, you say? It's a hanged sight nearer the hand of Providence, it seems to me. But we can't sit here doing nothing. The time has come when we've got to start the wheels turning in a hurry. Heard anything from B-29 or X-13?"

The letters and numbers which the captain used were the secret identification of two of the most trusted of the agents, men who with others had been sent on the perilous mission of keeping tabs on certain descendants of families with known Thug tendencies, among whom there had appeared indications of unrest.

"Not a word," Meddoes replied wearily. "It's been a month now since we had anything from either of them."

"Well, I don't know just what we can do to back Steele's play," the captain mused, "but I suppose as far as the restraints which were put on us in the first place are concerned, we're a little better off, now that the Nana is out of the United States."

Meddoes bit into a cigar and nodded as he agreed: "Yes; it means that we will have a much freer rein, although the job of rounding up the lord grandfather will be harder."

"Exactly. When Steele's first cable came, telling us of Nana Sahib's whereabouts, every last one of the civil authorities went home and had fits after I had pleaded with them to let me set the wheels going for his arrest. If the arrest were made in the United States, they said, the news would go around that we regarded the appearance of the Thug pictures as

indicating a really serious state of affairs, and that it would take but a spark to set things off. They had ague whenever they thought of how that might encourage the natives to a Thug uprising, and all that rot.

"But now, Meddoes, it's a much different proposition. The Thugs are on the high seas, and have begun a hostile move which threatens the peace and safety of the empire. They—"

"But, captain, there are still international complications to the thing," the subordinate volunteered hopelessly. "They're on a Japanese ship, and are headed for a territory largely controlled by France. Do you think the authorities will consent to a move even now?"

Captain Fitzallen Austin rose and began buttoning his white tunic. He turned deliberately, looked at his subordinate, and commanded in clear, incisive tones: "Forget all that, Meddoes. In the first place, Nana Sahib bought the ship outright. Her registry, of course, has not been changed; but we won't call anybody's attention to that. Let it get lost in the shuffle.

"In the second place, Steele's servant is a subject of her majesty. Ordinarily, I suppose," he added whimsically, "the government wouldn't be likely to concern itself greatly about the fate of a Hindu, but in this case it may be a good card to play, and you won't deny his neck will be in danger if he's discovered.

"Anyway, international complications or not, I'm for a hand in the game—all the officials from the Himalayas clear to Windsor Castle to the contrary notwithstanding. There are always methods by which a thing like this can be put through.

"You sit tight here," he ordered. "I'm off to get somebody to start something, and if the officials won't —*I will!*"

While Captain Fitzallen Austin was moving all his official heaven and earth to get a little quick action out of miles of red tape in the Indian city thousands of miles away, the boat in which Steele and Chota Lal sat drew steadily nearer the somber hulk of the Matsu Maru. Now it closed along her rough, scored strakes until a sea-ladder swung out of the blackness above them.

Steele watched the lean stranglers as they grasped the swaying ladder, and went up as agile as a troop of apes, and then, following his servant, he began the ascent.

As he came above the rail he paused a moment, and glanced about. The Thugs who had come in the first boat and those who had preceded him up the ladder crowded the deck. Ships were strange to them. They were the devil's tricks of the white man, yet necessary to the work of the mighty mother in this instance. Therefore, they must endure the ship, though plainly ill at ease.

The sea-ladder had been dropped overside well forward of the break of the upper deck, so that the *phansigars* now stood on the main deck; and in the dim light Steele had some difficulty in locating Chota Lal, though finally he found him squatting unconcernedly.

Yet the disguised white man did not go to him immediately. Instead, he walked past him; and locating a coiled cable near the starboard bow-bitts, he crouched beside it, racking his brain to guess what so potent a passport into the ranks of the Thugs his servant with uncanny foresight had provided.

There had been no opportunity for Chota Lal to tell him more of the package than that his life might depend upon it. And, for all the confident assurance Steele had called into play when browbeating the stranglers on the beach, he still retained a deep appreciation of what one false step might mean. The package must remain a mystery a little longer.

He took advantage of the opportunity to unwind his turban and hide the package.

The first flood of excitement attending the embarkation was receding, and

Steele became acutely conscious of jangling nerves, of a subtle, overpowering weariness, and of the pangs of an unsatisfied stomach.

He was glad, too, that he had gotten away from close contact with the members of that ferret-eyed band, with a few moments to spare in which to prepare himself for whatever ordeal was in store for him.

The Matsu Maru received her lading of strange passengers without a hitch. Jap sailors stood by the falls, and already the first two boats swung inward, shipshape on their davits, and the murderous live freight from the last boat was coming over the side. So Steele rose and walked toward Chota Lal, squatting beside his servant.

The stranglers were still on deck. In knots of three or four, they were gathered according to their clans. And Chota Lal, with a wave of his hand toward them, growled:

"Favored sons of the Mighty Mother are they, O Bhagwan." He talked freely, as though he were merely informing his brother of his fellow passengers. "And," he went on, "among them are descendants from all the great clans which sprang from the seven Delhi bands."

Each of them he called by name—those of the Moltani bands, who travel with trained bears and monkeys; those of the Gosaen Thugs, who go about the roadways garbed as mendicants; those from the Krishna River region, whose dark faces, even in the nighttime, showed lines of white running fanwise from nose to forehead; and half a score more of the naked, saturnine men from the clans of river Thugs and of the low-caste Sooseas of Jeypore.

As his servant told off the list of murder chiefs, Steele realized that a more completely representative gathering of the descendants of the old Hindu clans could hardly have been selected.

"Brave men they are," the little man was saying, "and stranglers worthy from ancestry—" But he broke off at the approach of a *phansigar* larger in stature than any of the rest.

He had been one of the most persistent back on the beach in the matter of the fateful package. Now he stopped before them and spoke as with authority, standing there, his height magnified by the uncertain light, and Chota Lal answered his greeting:

"What seekest thou of us, O Bunyara, Subhadar of the Deccan Thugs?"

"The Lord Grandfather hath learned of the strangers who came with us," replied the tall strangler from the Nurbudda River. "He would talk with thee, and with Bhagwan, thy brother. Follow, Chota Lal."

Bunyara leading them, they moved aft through the crowds of Thugs, up the short steps which led to the upper deck. And as he went, Steele kept sharp watch for a sight of the women, but there were no signs of them.

He could feel beneath him a quiver that ran through the rotten, old hulk, and up above him a hoarse voice in the pilot-house (most likely Captain Bonin's) yelled for full speed ahead, as though he were using an antiquated speaking-tube which connected with the engine-room.

He sensed the greater racking of the old sealer's crazy insides under the increased impetus given her screw, and, like a surge of fever, the horrible import of the whole dread business swept over him.

The Matsu Maru was moving out. Little better than a wreck, though she floated and answered to her helm, she was poking into the black sea-night. On her dripping bows there seemed to ride the specter of silent, bloodless death!

Her company were man-beasts, who killed not alone for loot and profit, but willingly and eagerly at the nod of a fearsome, sable deity; who killed not as brave men kill, but as cowards, stealing upon their victims, and while the struggling wretches were held helpless, squeezing out their souls in the strangling folds of the *rumal* knot.

Original from

And to what harrowing, unbelievable, horrible things might lie ahead, there beyond where the boat's bows slobbered and slathered as they ate into the reeking sea, Steele and his servant and the two women of his own race and blood stood irrevocably committed in risk and danger!

He saw, as through a dream, Chota Lal and Bunyara ahead of him. Now the giant Thug stopped before a door on the starboard passageway of the upper deck. A slice of light cut out into the dark as Bunyara swung open the door. The tall Thug disappeared. Then Chota Lal entered.

Steele would be next to test the excellence of his disguise.

The spirit of the weird enterprise laid cold fingers upon him, and cursing himself for his weakness and weariness, the white man forced his feet across the sill.

Nana Sahib no longer occupied the little stateroom on the main deck, next to which Steele had lain secreted that night at Milner's Wharf. Now there was no need of concealing his presence upon the old sealer, and so it was that he had taken up his abode in the big deck cabin behind the pilot-house and chart-room.

He had stripped from him the Brahmanical robes, worn aforetime to delude his credulous dupes. Stark and near-naked he was in the scant clothing of his kind. Stark and near-naked behind him in a corner crouched Nathoo.

But in the change of garments the old man had lost none of his commanding, magnetic presence. Perhaps it was now enhanced, for he carried, as a king might bear a jeweled scepter, the sacred pick, the *mahi,* that implement with which the stranglers scoop out the shallow, circular graves of their victims, and which, tradition says, may be thrown into a deep well at night, and by morning will have returned to the care of its keeper without the aid of human hands.

The glittering, beady eyes of the Nana Sahib flashed from Chota Lal to Bunyara, and then shifted to meet the gaze of the man called Bhagwan.

As he stood there, arrogance and power were stamped in every wrinkle of his face. And yet, as he looked upon Steele, there was something, too, of deep-seated, unadmitted awe and respect in his glance, which told the white man instinctively that the secret thoughts of the old *phansigar* had not to do so much with scorn and potence as with that mysterious thing which had been handed down to the sons of Bukshi, Jemadar of Thugs.

Bunyara had been speaking hurriedly, and he ended: "They are called Chota Lal and Bhagwan, O Nana Sahib. This one"—pointing with long, gnarled fingers wherein lay great strength for strangling—"came upon us in the hills. He spoke in the language of our kind. He knew our secrets and our signals; and he told us more of our own trade than any of us had ever before heard from any man."

The Nana held up his hand.

"I would have their tales from their own lips," the old man boomed. "Out of their own mouths, by the truth or falsity of their tongues, will they be judged.

"I have heard mention of a sacred relic which they bring. If this be so—if they possess that which belonged to the Jemadar Bukshi, and are Thugs of the Thugs, children of the Great Mother—all shall be well with them.

"What sayest thou?" he demanded of Chota Lal.

The little Hindu stepped out from the cabin wall, against which he had prudently placed his back. He cried: "Bunyara hath spoken *such bat,* the truth, so far as he hath told it, O thou who art to lead the Thugs to victory.

"I came upon them as he said, while I was crossing the mountains afoot in search of work. I had heard nothing of the plans to bring our Great Mother into her own again. How should I have learned of it?"

"True," the Nana grunted. "Speak on."

"I saw the turbans of thy men," Chota Lal announced oracularly. "And I saw a certain sign which was made. Am I a fool, or blind, that I know not the kindred of my father's father?" and he paused to allow his words their full effect.

"Then did I declare myself. Ask Bunyara whether he has ever seen a Thug more learned than I," he boasted. "Ask Bunyara whether I am fitted to teach thy young men and instruct them in the use of the *rumal*.

"Ask what pleases thee, O Lord Grandfather, for I have sprung from stock no less proud than thine, even though thou camest from the race of Ghassi Subhadar, and art the son of a woman who herself went upon the expeditions of our Mighty Mother."

Chota Lal's intimate knowledge of the antecedents of Nana Sahib brought a momentary flicker of surprise to the old Thug's face, and he snapped: "Thou speakest with free tongue of things that few men know! Go on! What else?"

"I speak freely because I speak truth. And what I tell, I know; for my line, like thine, hath never given up the worship of our kind. True, we have not taken the road for many years. But, like thee, O Nana Sahib, I was learned in the art of strangling men when I was but sixteen. Day after day I tied the *rumal* knot, waiting for a time when I could prove my prowess.

"Then came a day when a traveler stopped at our village. He was alone, and I trailed him into the forest. When I returned I took rank in our family as a *bursote* strangler, though there was no band for me to lead.

"So was I prepared for this, thy coming. And when I met with thy men in the hills I bethought me of the greatest possession of our line — that which the Jemadar Bukshi had left to his sons and the sons of his sons, for I knew that with such a talisman none could overcome us.

"The tale is told that these things were found in the Caves of Ellora, near Arangabad—those caverns upon the walls of which, when yet the earth was new, the Great Mother Kali herself cut pictures which portray the proper method of killing by her sons.

"And it was in the possession of these things that the Jemadar found strength for his arm and cunning for his feet. Therefore I sent a *chit* (letter) to my brother Bhagwan in the south, for he, being the eldest, held the talisman. He came to us to-night."

Steele, standing by, listening intently that he might miss no clue from the words of Chota Lal, could see that the little Hindu had impressed the old man. The game, for the moment, was coming their way.

A flicker of a smile of approbation crossed Nana Sahib's features as he praised: "Thou hast the spirit of a Thug of the Thugs, Chota Lal. Thy reward shall be a great one. And thy talisman shall rest in a golden casket in the new temple to our Mighty Mother. But first, I would see them," he added craftily, his enthusiasm for the moment waning.

Chota Lal turned to Steele: "The package that thou hast brought, Bhagwan," he commanded.

The jangling nerves and the uneasiness which had possessed Steele seemed suddenly to have left him. Calmly he unwound the folds of his turban and from its hiding-place extracted the mysterious package.

"Thou art a priest of the Thugs, O Nana Sahib," he declared. "And as such, thou thyself shalt open the wrappings." Then, with a touch of scorn in his voice, he added: "There were those upon the beach who would have profaned these sacred relics by their unholy touch!"

At sight of the package, Nana Sahib could scarcely restrain his eagerness. Had Chota Lal swept the world for a passport into the ranks of Thuggee, he could not have found a better one.

With trembling fingers the Thug leader and priest unrolled the outer wrappings and then began unfolding a

bit of cloth, yellow with age and ragged with the shreddings of dissolution.

CHAPTER XVII.

Kali Devi.

CHOTA LAL, who had laid no claim to priesthood in the Thugs, but only that he was a strangler by heredity, fell upon his face beside the groveling Bunyara and Nathoo, while Steele stood straight, as befitted a priest by heredity and the custodian of the sacred relics.

Chuckling in evil glee with thoughts of what good fortune the talisman might bring, Nana Sahib tore off the last of the wrappings, and as tenderly as a mother would have handled her week-old babe, he laid them upon the bit of ragged yellow cloth.

They were a huge tooth, traced over with minute carvings, infinitesimal copies of the scenes from the Ellora Caves, and a section of a rib.

Where Chota Lal could have gotten them Steele could not imagine. The whole thing had been as much of a surprise to him as it had been to Nana Sahib.

But there was no time to question the methods of his incomparable, uncanny servant, for the leader of the Thugs, although a priest, had been overwhelmed with the disclosure, and was stretched full length upon the cabin floor, his forehead touching the edge of the old yellowed cloth.

The Nana, with his keen perceptive sense of suspicioning everything—a natural Thug attribute—had not been prepared to accept Chota Lal and his brother, Bhagwan, on faith. Yet the sight of the symbols awakened a side of his nature more deep seated even than his natural cunning. His normally keen vision was blinded by his superstition, and the belief that a Thug, possessed of the rag, bone, and tooth which had been carried by the redoubtable Jemadar Bukshi, would be invincible.

Pregnant moments, fraught with the destiny of the white man and his Hindu servant, passed as the Nana bowed before the symbols, and each moment that the old man remained prone in his adoration strengthened their chances against immediate discovery.

Finally he raised his seamed old face. The hardness, the arrogance, the cruelty had all miraculously gone from it. For the moment at least he was as clay in their hands. Without the prejudicing influence of the symbols the interlopers would have been lost.

Rising to his full height, the old man flung his arms above his head and boomed: "Kali is great; the Mighty Mother looks with kindness upon us. Who shall say that ill can come to us now?"

Then he turned to the disguised Bhagwan.

"Thou art of the straight line of Jemadar Bukshi?" he asked anxiously.

"Aye, Nana Sahib; of the line which numbers his children and his children's children," came the reply in steady tones.

"Then art thou of priestly caste, and a Brahman, my son, and art fitted to serve as a priest of Kali, being the eldest of thy family. It is well. Into thy hands will I place the symbols for safe-guarding."

Pointing downward with a long, skinny finger, he went on: "Below there, in the hollow of the ship, is our place of worship. There wilt thou and Chota Lal abide. Watch over the sacred possessions of Jemadar Bukshi with thy life," he charged. "I will go with thee, O Bhagwan, and show thee; for only thyself, thy brother who will serve thee, and myself may enter the temple save when we consecrate the sacred pick or take the omens. Come!"

At a motion from Nana Sahib, Steele, with the greatest show of reverence he could master, carefully folded the sacred symbols away and

stepped out into the night behind his servant and their guide. They walked aft to another short flight of steps which led again to the main deck, and finally stopped beside the after-hatch.

There were still no lights showing aboard the old sealer, although she was kicking up some twelve or thirteen knots on the outward trail; and Steele could barely make out the top of a ladder extending through the opening, for there was no companionway in this part of the ancient craft.

Yet without hesitation Nana Sahib swung his long legs over the coaming, and in a moment his turbaned head was blotted from sight. Steele followed him. Then came Chota Lal.

Down Steele went until he could see a glow of light ahead through the rungs of the shaky ladder, and at last his feet touched the deck. Following the shadowy bulk of the Nana, he went forward.

Now the glow of light grew brighter. He could see that it shone through some hangings that divided the hold into two compartments abaft the butt of the big mainmast, which was stepped in the center of the space.

The hangings moved swishingly as the Thug chief went through them. Steele put out his hand and encountered the thick stuff, pushing it apart.

He stood in the Thugs' temple of murder.

For a second, unseen by the Nana, he recoiled. A feeling of revulsion swept over him at the thought of living and eating and sleeping in the dank, foul place. From below came the unmistakable odor of the bilge, and there was about the place that nasty, animal smell which the very wood of a sealer's hold takes on after years of bearing cargoes of salted skins.

And to make matters worse, before him, secured to the thwartship bulkhead, stood the idol of Kali herself!

From overhead a swinging lamp, burning dimly through a yellow globe, shed down rays upon her which brought out in ghastly relief all the terrible attributes of the goddess of Thuggee. Of alabaster was the statue, flecked here and there with gold and silver and precious stones; but the white of the soft marble had been stained a deep indigo, for the Great Mother is a black woman.

Her red tongue lolling out, she stood legs apart, feet planted on the body of her husband, the great Shiv, about whose arm a cobra coiled. Beside her sprawled the sculptured body of the demon, Rukut Beej Dana, headless and horrible.

One of her four arms grasped the severed devil's head by its hair, another hand held beneath the bleeding trophy a dish to catch the blood; in a third hand was a simitar, while a fourth pointed in triumph at her victims.

About her throat hung a garland made of the heads of men; about her waist was a girdle of infants' heads. These were her only garments.

In the gloom Steele shivered as he gazed upon the idol that, for more generations than man can count, has stood in hot, sullen, plague-ridden India as the patron spirit of destruction. Then he saw that Nana Sahib was prostrate before the shrine, and, remembering that this was no time for hesitation, he glided forward and bent in mock adoration to the ghastly figure that towered above him.

Out of the corners of his half-closed eyes Steele could see the lips of the grim old man moving, but no sound came forth; and as soon as the Nana rose Steele did likewise, and laid his precious package between the wide-planted feet of the idol. Then, with the chief of the Thugs, he withdrew to the outer compartment.

"Here will ye remain, O Bhagwan," Nana Sahib directed, as he turned at the foot of the ladder. "Lamps will be sent to thee, and thy food will be brought by a low-caste Soosea. But see to it that no one enters behind the curtain, save only thee.

Aulae bulae ram ram, peace be unto thee," he murmured in friendly tones.

As the lean shanks of the old Thug drew slowly upward through the hatchway, Steele squatted in the gloom beside Chota Lal, consumed with the wonder of it all. Things had been coming just a little too fast in the past hour to be easily assimilated by his fatigued brain.

Leaning over, his lips close to his servant's ear, he asked: "How in the name of all that's holy did you pull it off?" And he mouthed his words so that his whisper would carry no farther than his companion.

"Easily, heaven-born," the little man replied. "The tooth has been in our family for many years. It was looked upon as a lucky talisman. Therefore, I had it with me.

"The bone? A bit I picked up in the woods, rubbing it afterward with stain from a certain berry to give it the color of age.

"And then the rag! Aye, heaven-born! From a trash-heap I had it, outside of the town. Is the heaven-born satisfied?"

"Wonderful!" Steele laughed softly, prey to a vast and inward amusement. It was like the little Hindu to see in an age-yellowed and mammoth representation of the tooth of Kali the nucleus of a hoax which had beyond all doubt saved them from discovery.

But now the necessity of locating the women and of communicating with them in some manner confronted him.

So he motioned Chota Lal to him.

"Tell me now what happened in the camp, and what of their plans thou hast discovered," he said.

The little Hindu replied: "Of the camp — nothing, save that we left it at daybreak, heaven-born, and moved nearer the shore-line. For days they have been alarmed over the absence of Gunesh. But thou knowest a Thug cares only for his own skin, and so no search was made. Instead they held to the camp and muttered that his fate had overtaken him, and that what is to happen will surely come to pass.

"Now of the plans, there is more. I have learned much, *sahib,*" the little man whispered. "The jade disk which was found in the House of Light holds the name of the place to which we go. The Nana will take his stranglers through the fastnesses of Cambodia, across the Inland Sea, and far beyond the ruins of Angkor Thom and Angkor Wat, into a country wild and untraveled.

"Before, when Thuggee flourished in the land, the bands were independent of one another and stranglers answered only to the leader of their own clan. But now it will be different. Nana Sahib will be the ruler of all the bands. And he will be high priest of a temple which they will build to their goddess, more fearsome even than Calcutta's Kali Ghat.

"Another forbidden city, such as Lhasa, except that Kali and not Buddha will reign therein, will be established. And when this shall have been done, those who are with us now will steal singly from the Cambodian city of murder. Into India they will go, armed with thousands of *rupees,* and will there enlist their Stranglers, their Holders-of-Hands, their Inveighlers, and Grave Choosers from among men of lesser Thug ancestry.

"At a given signal, which is to come from the Nana, they will steal upon the roadways and upon the rivers; they will hide in the carriages of the great trains, they will lurk in the shadows of the *serais* to slay and rob and pillage, while thousands of miles away, Nana Sahib, high priest in the new Murder Temple will reap rich rewards from the loot!"

What Chota Lal was telling of the plans of the Thugs was a deep and bitter aggravation to Douglas Steele. He would have risked anything could he by so doing communicate this information to Captain Austin.

But telegraph lines and cables were

now far beyond his reach. He must forge ahead alone.

"Thus far it has pleased the Nana to play into our hands, Chota Lal," he said. "Nothing could have been better than that I have a place where the light of day cannot betray me.

"But there is work for thee, and with the morning, be about it. The women are somewhere upon this ship. Go about the deck to-morrow, keeping a watch, noting the crew and of what nations they are. And if thou seest the girl Jhanavi, I have a plan; listen," and for many minutes, his lips brushing the ear of his servant, Steele gave minute instructions. Then he turned on his side to sleep.

Four hours later Chota Lal wakened him. Above them through the hatch came the dim dawn, and Steele took up the vigil while his servant rested.

A sour Soosea, who because of his low caste had been commanded to wait upon the keepers of the temple, brought them breakfast—boiled *bhat,* a savory curry with some dried fish and a heavy, fried cake, together with a jar of water.

Steele had eaten little for thirty-six hours, and although his palate rejected the cake and the fish, he made a complete meal from the remainder.

During the morning he realized that although it bore less risk, his part in the work would be perhaps more irksome than his servant's, and he fretted for the night to come that he might rise from his never-ending squatting before the curtains behind which Kali the terrible, stood, and stretch his legs in the cool of the deck.

Early in the day came Nana Sahib, giving greeting after his kind and prostrating himself before the idol in matutinal devotion. And he stopped to talk with the false Bhagwan before he ascended the ladder.

"Soon will we consecrate the sacred pick upon this our expedition," he boomed. "Then must the temple be in readiness, for all of us will gather here. But we take not the Auspices until we are again on land, for the mighty mother has given us no signs for the sea.

"Great was thy fortune, O Bhagwan, that thy brother came among us. And great is our fortune in the possession of Jemadar Bukshi's symbols."

When he had gone it dawned upon Steele that his post as the keeper of Kali's temple carried with it duties which he had not realized. So, glad of the opportunity to break the monotonous squatting, he set about clearing the place of its bits of rubbish.

The sail-cloth he piled in the farthest corner, for he would still use it as a bed, and he arranged a curtain about it to allow him even greater privacy. That night, he planned, he would bring one of his weapons within easier reach.

Chota Lal returned to the hold in time for the midday meal, and when he had made certain that the Soosea was not loitering about the coaming above them he leaned forward and whispered to Steele:

"The land has fallen away below the sea, *sahib,* and we are many miles upon our course. Of the women I have seen nothing; but there is on the upper deck, where I am not permitted to go, a space screened with canvas, running from the wall of the house to the rail. It is undoubtedly there that they are."

Steele gathered further that the crew consisted of Captain Bonin, a Japanese mate; two men who could steer, an engineer, and his assistant with four firemen; distinctly a small ship's company, and one which left no men for emergency. He reflected that it was possible that every Jap aboard was also a sailor, and that they could handle the canvas should the engines break down or other necessity arise.

Just how far he could count on Captain Bonin and his Jap crew in case of discovery Steele could not tell. The reputation that Black Mike had given the skipper back there in the

Barbary Coast barroom was not a savory one. According to all likelihood, a man who had fraternized with the Japs to the extent of becoming one of them to all purposes, and who had wrested his livelihood from the sea by unlawful, raiding methods, could not be expected to stand aghast at any small thing like a murder committed upon a craft which had sailed with false clearance and was bound upon the transportation of a band of religious slayers.

In running over the weapons at his hand, Steele thought of the ease with which he could scuttle the ship down there in the dark alone some night, but rejected it as a possibility at this time because of the women. He and Chota Lal might take such a chance; but without some plan which would render the risk less for Jhanavi and his aunt, such an alternative could not be seriously considered.

However, he filed the suggestion away for future reference.

The afternoon passed laggingly, and the evening came before Steele ventured up the ladder, leaving Chota Lal to guard the temple.

The night was clear, and a young moon rode the sky, scattering the black waters with patches of quicksilver that crinkled away as the Matsu Maru cut through.

There was practically no swell, and what little wind was from astern. The smoke from the crazy stack hovered in a dark pall over the old craft most of the time.

It would be days before they would enter the regular trade-wind belt, when, if Captain Bonin so wished, the help of sails might be added to the engines. But even without the aid of wind or gale, she was keeping up her fair thirteen knots.

Steele walked aft to where the steerage yawned, and caught the glow of brazier fires which burned in three-legged *chillum chees,* and about which a company of the Thugs were gathered, squatting immobile and sinister as they grunted in their Ramasi.

Steele stopped by the rail and looked out over the water. One last glow of the sun still painted a hot streak low along the horizon off the starboard quarter, and the hush of the evening sea, which is made up of many murmurs—the soft churning of the ship's screw, the chuckle of water sliding away from cutwater, the gurgle of the boiling wake—stole upon him.

And with the peaceful ocean before his eyes and the prosaic thump of engines beneath his feet, it was hard for Steele to realize that he was surrounded by men who thirsted for death; that he was standing upon the thin, cracking crust of a volcano which might, in sudden eruption, wipe out English civilization in India.

So strongly had the spell of the clean sea dusk appealed to him that he did not notice Skipper Bonin as he strode past, whiskers abristle and rage shining in his little, red-rimmed, animal eyes.

Straight toward the entrance to the steerage he bore, cursing in his beard the foolhardiness of the natives in lighting their careless fires aboard a ship which years of shore whaling and sealing had oil-soaked into a tinderbox.

Then the skipper's anger got the better of him, and he shrieked, presumably to the mizzen truck above:

"Great Gawd! Look down on 'em. Ravin' mad ijits! They'll have this condemned craft a blazin' like a torch under my feet! By the seven gods o' fortune, ye can't beat heathens for fools!"

Slipping gracefully into the language of his slant-eyed spouse, he railed on in choppy Japanese, culled a few oaths from the Pidgin talk of the Nagasaki water-front, sprinkled in a few choice Malay insults, and ended with a torrent of Portuguese, by which time his twinkling legs brought him among the gaping stranglers.

The exhaust of his indignation was still bubbling when he grasped the nearest brazier and started for the deck. One of the Deccan Thugs, with an angry growl, rose menacingly before him.

The brazier flames showed to Steele, standing a dozen yards away, the wolfish twitching of the *phansigar's* lips and the hard, wrathful face of the old renegade white.

Only a moment they stood, for, clasping the brazier to his chest with his left arm, at the imminent danger of singeing his scraggy whiskers, the captain shot out his bony, bunched, right hand. He took the Thug on the point of the jaw and dropped him.

In a trice the old man, with his blazing burden, had leaped to the rail and below the brazier plopped into the sea.

Out from the steerage the Thugs surged, only to be met by a sturdy revolver in the skipper's hand. The muzzle of the weapon seemed to sniff eagerly for blood, and blood is not relished by any of strangler breed. So they hung back, cowed for the moment.

"Pass the word for the skipper o' this crew!" the captain sang out to the false Bhagwan.

But Steele, mindful of his rôle and catching sight of Fuji, the Japanese mate, leaping toward them, jerked off his turban cloth and began rapidly forming a noose. He spat insultingly at the skipper, muttered an oath in Ramasi, and called to the tense Thug men:

"*Kantna pantelao!*"

Which, in Hindustani, means only "bring firewood," but in the Thuggee dialect is the order at which the Holders of Limbs take their places for the murder to come.

Guttural cries of approval greeted the order. They did not stop to question there in the dusk from whom the command had come, for it suited their evil rage. They surged forward, growling and thin lips aslaver. The hammers of the weapons in the hands of the captain and his mate clicked back.

CHAPTER XVIII.

A Bit of Ribbon.

"SHEIKK JEE!"

The Nana, attracted by the yells of his men, sent the Thug danger-signal echoing over the ship. Quicker than any order to desist would have operated, it stopped them like statues in their tracks, while the old man, with Nathoo at his heels, strode among them.

"Would ye slay, then, without the command of Kali?" he demanded. "Stay, my children, lest your feet fall into error," and abashed, the *phansigars* slunk away; for in the confusion and semidarkness they knew not who had given the word to take their places.

He drove them backward, following them to the opening of the steerage, while Steele, taking advantage of the diversion furnished by the coming of the Nana, drew into the shadows where, for a while he lurked, listening to the old man's harangue.

"Listen, ye who would have spoiled all by an ill-timed act!" he charged. "Have ye not seen enough of evil fortune overwhelm our kind? Why, think ye, O foolish ones, that the hated English were permitted to sweep our forefathers from the roadways and rivers, and into the jails at Jubulpore and Sangor?

"It was because of disobedience, my children. Men of all castes were permitted to become Thugs; Mohammedans, aye, and even Sikhs and Pathans! No heed was paid to the omens and men were slain without first consulting the wishes of the Mighty Mother! And also was the noose cast about the throats of those ever protected by our belief; oil-vendors, poets, carriers of Ganges water, women—aye, and even about the necks of those who owned the sacred bulls of Shiv.

"So in her anger did Kali give the English power to fall upon our grandfathers and their fathers, and hang them in the jail yards. And so, also, will evil come to us unless we keep our clans free of unworthy stranglers, observe the omens and protect those whom Kali has decreed shall not be slain!"

As he listened Steele smiled to himself. There was a touch of grim irony in the old Thug's plea to his men to keep their practise pure and in accordance with the immutable laws of Kali.

But the white man had no more time to waste, for already, as he lurked and listened, he had half-formed a plan to take advantage of the situation. So he slipped away and into the shelter of the hold unseen.

"Get thou up, Chota Lal," he whispered after he had hurriedly recounted to the Hindu what had passed. "While the Nana is pacifying his wolves and wiping their dripping jaws, see if thou canst not find the women!"

Silently Chota Lal crept up the ladder. Below him Steele squatted again to wait the result of his servant's reconnoiterings.

The little brown man stopped with his head just above the coaming, ready to duck back should his espionage be observed.

Judging from the stray words that came from the steerage, Nana Sahib was still berating his followers for attacking the skipper. And he seemed to be holding them to heel only by an exercise of his own indomitable will.

Chota Lal could see no signs of other burning braziers, so he concluded that the skipper had finally had his way, even at the expense of riling the Thug men. And that the Nana would ultimately quiet his followers the Hindu had no doubt.

Yet it was an ill thing that the captain had struck one of the *phansigars*. Still it was now giving Chota Lal the opportunity he sought, so he must make haste.

Slipping out of the hatch like a shadow, he dived into the starboard alleyway and peered into the gloom. Grasping a stanchion, he wormed his way upward and clambered over the low rail to the upper deck.

There he halted a moment. Forward lay the wheel-house, occupied by the steersman. It was probable, too, that the captain or mate was about. Aft on the deck below were the Thugs, and then there was a third possibility of discovery; he might be seen by a passing sailor.

But Chota Lal feared such a contingency as this last but little, for he had seen no one except the Nana, Nathoo and the officers upon this upper part of the ship. The old strangler was taking particular care of the birds that laid the golden eggs for him, out of sight and ear-shot of any who might wake their suspicions.

At that moment all quarters seemed safe, and the little Hindu leaped upward, caught at the wood and canvas roof of the after-house, dug his prehensile feet against the scant toe-hold afforded by an open deadlight, and drew himself to the top.

Lying prone, he looked about him. Some extra fire-buckets, set tight in wooden rings, and three extra boats, occupied the space.

And toward one of the boats on the port side he crawled.

Jhanavi Faron lounged on deck in front of her stateroom door. She was attired in the simple, flowing robes of her chosen cult.

The steamer chair which she occupied was painfully new. So was the other deck chair across from hers, dedicated to the bulk of Miss Minerva Steele, who now slept fitfully in her cabin, combating an attack of seasickness which, despite the calm, unruffled surface of the night-sea, had claimed her for its nerve-racking own.

During the flight across the continent and the days when the two voluntarily hid in San Francisco the newly awakened Oriental half of

Jhanavi Faron's nature kept her from sensing the jarring notes in the make-up of the lean old Swami. And while the Matsu Maru had jogged up-coast to pick up the "colonists" the romance of the scheme held her in its sway. So that not until to-night had she beaten at all against the invisible bars which seemed to hold her.

But now the pendulum was swinging back. The influence which had swept her from her home, across a score of States, and far out to sea, thousands of miles from her friends, was showing the faintest quiverings of an ebb.

The day before the wild embarkation off the lone Oregon coast two of the Jap crew, under the direction of the Swami (for *pundit* and teacher he was still to the women), stretched awnings in such a way as to box in the deck space in front of the two cabins occupied by them. Now only the seaward side was open, and thus effectually screened from the eyes of the crew and the dark-skinned passengers alike the young girl and the spinster were spending their voyage, Nana Sahib himself bringing them their meals.

Night and morning he had come, also, to lead them in *yoga* devotions.

But to-night, somehow, Jhanavi seemed to herself a prisoner. The pendulum was making the backward swing faster than it had the forward. She had heard no women's voices aboard, and when she inquired of the "colonists," the *pundit* had seemed to equivocate.

By this time the moon had climbed well above the horizon, and she sat puzzling and fighting down her own good English intuition which was struggling for ascendency in her dual nature.

"*Sahiba!*" came in soft tones from above her, though at first it did not penetrate her abstraction.

"*Sahiba!*"

This time she heard, but sat perfectly still, gripping herself with the same sort of control which had stood by her so well the night the Swami's summons came.

"Rise and stand by the door," the voice directed, and she obeyed. Looking up, she could see in the gaping aperture between the points where the awning was lashed the shadow of a head.

"I am trusting the *sahiba* not to cry out," the shadow said. and, strangely enough, the tones of the voice seemed to reassure her.

"If any should chance to come, then must I escape," the voice went on; "but I place myself in thy hands not to betray me, for I am here as a friend."

The girl, tense and eager, for the strange coming of this man had aroused her curiosity, promised: "I shall keep silent," and then went on: "You are a native, and yet you speak to me in English. Who are you?"

"I am the pupil, the *chela,* of a holy man who sits far down in the bowels of the ship. Never has he been beyond his retreat since he came here, for he spends his days in fasting and in prayer, and in meditation upon the meanings written in the Wheel of Life—"

"Sh!"

Chota Lal waited until footsteps which had sounded in the opposite alley died away, and up by the pilot-house six bells of the first watch, an hour this side of midnight, rang out. Below him he could see that the woman had assumed the careless pose of one leaning idly against the wall of the cabin.

Then he took up his tale again:

"And, though he has never been from out the hold, yet has he in gazing upward seen through these decks as though they were glass and—"

"He saw me? Nonsense!" the girl interrupted, the British side of her nature for the moment paramount. Then there flashed upon her memories of the wonderful things the old Hindu teacher had performed, and in which she had believed.

In spite of her scoffing, the voice above her droned on evenly:

"It is even as I have said, for to-night he called me, his *chela,* to him, and told me that there were in a little room high above us two women, one young, the other old. Thou knowest if he spoke truly."

Yet Jhanavi made no reply.

"And he directed me to seek the younger, and to say to her that my teacher knows the cycle of her soul, though now he can see it but dimly.

"But if there were sent to him one of thy small belongings, and," he added craftily, "a bit of silver for his messenger's labors, then he might read plainer that which is yet but half revealed."

"Wait," the woman whispered. She wanted a few moments to think.

Not for an instant did she now believe in the vaunted occult powers of the old soothsayer, whoever he might be. In the beginning she did not distrust the messenger's words, but Chota Lal had overplayed himself with his artistic whine for money.

Yet, even while the man above her had been speaking, her worries and puzzlement had returned to obsess her. Again she asked herself why she and her companion had been sequestered almost to the extent of forcible restraint.

At first she had been all sincerity in the *yoga* cult. It had taken deep root in her emotional, Oriental nature. That was why she had now unconsciously detected what seemed to be false notes without being at first in the least suspicious.

And into Jhanavi Faron's puzzle this new element had been injected. On the face of the mysterious native's story she could not in the least tell what it meant. His coming this way in the night; his injunctions of secrecy; his whine for silver all spelled a too brazen, all too apparent attempt to communicate with her—but to what end?

Suddenly she made her decision.

"*Chela!*" she called softly, and the shadow head reappeared. "Take this to your master," and she handed up a bit of ribbon which she had jerked from her loose white robe. "I will trust in him. Come again after next midnight with his message. It will be safe and I shall watch for you."

To Steele, waiting in the malodorous after-hold, Chota Lal started with the token. He regained the main deck without discovery, a feat not so difficult upon the old sealer with her small, widely scattered crew, and crept stealthily down the ladder.

While Steele had been waiting for Chota Lal's return he had become impressed with the strangeness of the situation aboard the craft. He ad-admired the rash bravery of Captain Bonin, in so summarily enforcing that primary rule of all good seamanship, the safeguarding of the vessel against fire.

Still, he realized that upon a ship whereon he stood as captain probably through only a verbal agreement, a ship which had cleared irregularly and falsely, that the skipper might find himself with his back to the wall if he were not careful. The possibility of a clash between the Thugs and the white man with his crew of Jap sea-scavengers had not before entered Steele's calculations.

He saw Chota Lal's shanks appear as his feet sought the first rungs of the ladder, and watched while the little, brown man came down without a sound. The glow from the great globe-lamp through the curtains enabled him to watch his servant's movements.

"I have seen the Sahiba Jhanavi, heaven-born," he announced as calmly as he might had his master but sent him around some civilized corner to deliver a *chit* in a perfectly safe city. "She bade me give you this," and he handed Steele the bit of ribbon Jhanavi gave him.

As eagerly as a young cavalier of old receiving a favor from his lady, the dark-skinned, fierce-whiskered impostor snatched it.

It mattered not to him that it had been tricked from her; that it had no sentimental or intimate significance was of small consequence. It was the first actual manifestation that had come to him from her. It seemed to breathe a bit of her fragrance, to exude something of her wonderful personality.

And after all Chota Lal had not lied when he declared that with this his master could better visualize the fair occupant of the upper-deck cabin, for the bit of silk conjured her before him at that moment, tall and dark and ravishing; a woman of soft, warm metals and jewels—the tints of gold and bronze in her skin, the flush of regal pigeon-blood rubies on her cheeks, the glint of satiny pearls when she smiled, the slumberous tint of black opals and deep sapphires in her eyes—

But Chota Lal, ever practical, broke in upon him.

"*Sahib,* she instructs that I come to-morrow after midnight with thy reading of her future. And, heaven-born, the scales are beginning to fall from her eyes, and even now she has her doubts. A few days more and the young *sahiba* will see that she has been tricked and played upon."

"What do you mean? Did she say—"

"Nay, heaven-born. She said nothing, save that she would wait for me next midnight. But for what use are thy servant's eyes if he cannot tell what he has seen? There was in her manner doubt, and trouble showed itself upon her face. I tell thee, Bahadur, that to-night she fears the Swami Dewan!"

There was something in the tones of his man servant's voice which lent conviction to his words, and Steele, seeing their dangerous task made that much easier, flashed back:

"Pray to thy god Ganesha that it be true. Pray that he give her wisdom and penetration to pierce the veil of this Nana Sahib, this arch liar and murderer! And I will set about our plans. They should be less difficult of completion if what thou sayest is so."

CHAPTER XIX.

Kali and Her Chosen.

STEELE was awake and had arranged the temple before the Nana appeared next morning for his devotions. Together they entered and knelt before the shrine of the murder goddess and then Steele remained in devotional attitude while the old Thug leader besought for himself and his followers the favor of the Mighty Mother.

And when they had completed the prayers, the Nana lingered, again squatting beyond the curtain, and said:

"To-day, O Bhagwan, will the sacred pick receive the consecration. My men are impatient. Last night they clamored for the sacrifice of the old white dog above us.

"I care nothing for his life," he spat out, "but who is there among us to handle this great ship and its engines? And so," he added sorrowfully, "he perchance may escape becoming sacrifice meat for our great Kali, for I told them such would be *tikhur*—dangerous for the Thugs!

"And yet to calm their anger I have consented to the consecration of the *mahi,* and they will gather here at *churti phulki* (between sunrise and noon). For this is Friday and a lucky day. That much may we do, O Bhagwan, but more we cannot undertake. We cannot consult the omens, nor can we slay without them, for how else may we tell the wish of the Mighty Mother? And there be no lizards, or wild asses upon the sea to give us our signs."

So when the Nana had left, Steele summoned Chota Lal and told him of the plan, and the little Hindu, in turn, instructed his master in the ceremonial, which the Nana himself would direct.

Then he observed: "In the matter of the omens, heaven-born, the Nana

spoke truly, for the Thugs are slaves to their signs.

"There be two ways in which the Mighty Mother Kali shows her pleasure or anger; and they, O Bahadur, are called the omens of the right hand, the *thibaoo,* and the omens of the left hand, the *philahoo.*

"Thus if the cry of a jackal is heard during the daytime, it threatens great evil, whether it come from the right or left of the road. The *bhonti* omen —the cry of the kite while flying—is also evil. The call of the lizard, the *bara mutti,* at whatever time or place heard, is sign of good fortune. But should a lizard fall from a tree upon any Thug in the band, then will evil surely follow.

"Also is the fighting of cats during the night after the first watch bad fortune, and only to be averted by gargling and squirting sour milk from the mouth.

"But the best of all Thug omens is the *dunteroo,* the omen of the ass. It is the most important of all, whether it promises evil or good, and it is said that the ass is equal to a hundred birds or beasts in the matters of augury.

"If its bray is heard from the left on opening an expedition, and is soon afterward repeated on the right of the road, nothing can prevent success. Yet if an ass approaches the band, braying from the front, it is called the *mathaphore,* or head breaker, and is very bad; but— They come!"

The lean legs of the Nana appeared above them, and he came slowly into the foul-odored hold, followed by the petty chieftains of the clans who bore the utensils necessary to the ceremonial.

Slowly they flowed down into the hold, until they grouped themselves on their haunches, like a circle of wolves watching hungrily the coming of prey. They sat expectantly, for no grave may be dug until the sacred pick has received its consecration.

Out before them the Nana stepped, and swept back the hangings which had concealed the patron goddess of their murderous endeavors. Then he took his place in the center of the half circle, near the butt of the mast.

The false Bhagwan squatted at the right of the group, and Chota Lal was beside him, wearing a counterfeit of the same rapt expression that showed on the faces of the clan chieftains.

The Nana had chosen his place of worship well, for, while the incense offering of the *mahi* is in progress, the shadow of no living thing must fall upon the pick.

Up above a bright, warm sun was dancing across a laughing sea; but down there in the dank hold it was dim and gloomy, and the great pick was safe from contamination.

The implement had been made long before in anticipation of this day by a skilled smith in a shuttered shop, while the Nana stood by to guard it and to guide the artisan.

The lean old Thug leader faced his band and slowly sank to his haunches facing the west. In his hand he held a brazen dish.

Came to him Nathoo of the forbidding mien, stealing from the shadows of a dark corner, the sacred pick held in front of him, while at the sight of the holy attribute of their goddess the *phansigars* sat breathless. Nathoo laid the great implement carefully upon the plate and then glided back into his friendly gloom.

Slowly the Nana lowered the dish to the deck. The silence about him was breathless.

From one of the brazen ewers which had been placed in readiness the High Priest of Kali drew clear water and washed the *mahi;* again he laved it, this time having added a little sugar to the water. Then *dhi,* sour milk, was poured upon it, and lastly it was cleansed with ardent spirits.

At a signal from the Nana, Nathoo again snaked out from the darkness, removed the vessel into which the water, milk, and spirits had collected, and set in its place two other dishes of brass.

Steele watched Nathoo closely as he laid upon one of the platters a coconut, *pawn* leaves, *gogul* gum, a few seeds of the sesamum, chips of white sandalwood, and some sugar; and then set a small cup containing melted butter, or *ghee,* near by.

The white man's pulses were pounding almost audibly in that stillness. Not a word had been spoken since the leader had received the sacred weapon. Even the stranglers themselves seemed impressed, for this was perhaps the first time in twoscore years that a sacred pick had been consecrated for a murderous mission.

While Nana Sahib dabbed seven red blotches upon the *mahi,* his servant kindled a fire of mango and *byr*-tree wood in the other dish and emptied all except the coconut from the other dish upon the flames.

Slowly, devotionally, impressively, the high priest passed the *mahi* seven times through the flames, and then, stripping the coconut of its outer husk, laid it before him.

Raising the pick, he cried out suddenly: *"Shall I strike?"*

Like the staccato volleying of rifles, the *phansigars* chorused: *"Strike!"*

"All hail mighty Kali, Great Mother of us all," the old man chanted.

"All hail, Kali! and prosper the Thugs!" came the response as the pick fell and the shattered coconut-shell flew from beneath it.

Silence came again, while Nathoo gathered up the kernel of the nut and cast it upon the flame that no foot might contaminate it. The high priest was carefully wrapping the now consecrated implement in a clean piece of white cloth, and he laid it before him, pointing to the west.

In a body the Thugs rose, Steele and Chota Lal with them. Down on their faces, groveling in strange devotional, they fell. They writhed and muttered, like victims of a potent drug. Their bodies gleamed like those of reptiles. And over all was cast the soft amber glow from the swinging lamp that beat feebly against the blackness of the old ship's hold.

Steele wriggled on his belly and beat his forehead upon the rough deck planking in simulated adoration as he lay there below the hideous deity, yet it cost him an effort to keep up the deception. His mind was awhirl with other things; the uncanny rite, the intense enthusiasm of the stranglers, the whole weird, nightmarish sacrament of death in which he was taking his unwilling part.

And, above all, he was nearly petrified with astonishment at the doings of Chota Lal.

His little brown servant, he of the usually case-hardened mein, proof against all emotion, was writhing and groveling and slashing about like a maddened animal.

Once Steele caught a glimpse of his eyes. They were glittering, vacant, and staring. His jaw sagged in utter exhaustion, and streams of saliva trickled from the corners of his mouth.

Others among that strange company, too, were beating out their strength in wild abandon against the hard board of the deck. The spirit of their fearsome goddess lay heavily upon them, and one by one they slumped to the floor, inert, loglike creatures from whom all vigor had departed.

And if Steele's devotions were patently false, there was none to note it, for even Chota Lal, breathless, with heaving chest, finally sank forward upon his face. And the white man, forcing upon his tired muscles a final tremor, sank beside him.

For hours, it seemed to Steele, he lay, feigning his coma. Now and then with a faint scuffling the bodies of the Thugs were drawn across the boards as consciousness returned to the worshipers. But still he lay there, holding himself motionless, clamping an iron will upon his imperative desire to ease the cramp of his body; held himself down by sheer force of

mind while the long afternoon slipped by and evening came.

Then he permitted himself to stir, and gradually to straighten his aching limbs. He looked about him.

In the gloom the goddess of Thuggee leered down upon an empty space. Of the Thugs who had battened themselves to drunkenness upon religious emotion none remained.

Gone was the lean Nana and the sacred pick. Gone were the brass bowls and the spitting flames. He lay alone beside the inert bulk of Chota Lal.

The white man unbent his limbs and stood up. For a moment he worked, getting the stiffness out of his joints, and then turned his attention to his servant. But even when the little brown man was rolled upon his back, he lay staring-eyed, breathing with fluttering gasps, until Steele became alarmed and dashed upon him water from their drinking supply.

Slowly the Hindu fought his way back. Uncertainly, as a mesmerist's victim, he returned to consciousness and regained his faculties.

By the time Chota Lal had sufficiently recovered to move around under his own power, their evening meal was handed down through the hatch. They ate in silence, the little Hindu servant wearing the stolid look which showed that the effects of the uncanny consecration ceremony were still upon him, and Steele left him sitting in a half-dazed condition when he went up for his airing.

For an hour or more he strode back and forth along the main deck, and then, prompted by a feeling that it would be ill for his chances to remain too long aloof from the rest of the band, he made his way to the steerage.

He was welcomed with guttural greetings, and the *phansigars* made way for him in their circle. And there he sat, listening to their sporadic talk, joining whenever he felt he could do so without betraying ignorance, while his companions chewed their betel-nut and *pawn,* and streams of blood-red saliva trickled from their mouths.

There Steele remained, ears open to catch any information which might chance his way, until the ship's bell told him that midnight was approaching. Then he went back to the hold.

Apparently fully recovered, Chota Lal awaited him, and, at Steele's command went on deck to await his opportunity of getting into communication with Jhanavi as the girl had arranged.

He found the girl waiting for him, pacing restlessly up and down the small enclosed deck space, and delivered his message.

The white man had been impressed with his servant's declaration that Jhanavi had become suspicious of the Swami and his intentions. Therefore he had framed his message so that it contained a veiled meaning, over which the girl might ponder, and so find substance for her fears.

Between them, Steele and his servant had pretty accurately gaged Jhanavi Faron's state of mind. For all that day her uneasiness had been recurrent and obstinate. Left pretty much to her own devices, except when she was attending the wants of Minerva Steele, who still clung to her berth, she had sought time and time again to discover the purpose of her midnight visitor and his *pundit,* who sat below, far down in the ship.

" My *guru,* O Queen of the River," the messenger declared, " hath charged me with these words: That I must say to thee that he hath read carefully the signs of thine aura, and that trouble and sorrow lurk therein.

" Yet it will not come soon; and when the omens threaten, thou shalt have warning. For these things, to those who cannot see, come as the clash of thunder and with the suddenness of storm. But to one who has the vision of a *pundit,* all things that are to come are made plain. That is my message, Queen of the River, and I wait now to take thy pledge of secrecy to my master. And be thou here,

waiting each night, so that if the warning must be given, I can reach thee."

Jhanavi Faron had not been surprised at the warning. Casting aside the mass of chaff, in which light she regarded the mysterious *pundit's* reading of the future—for well she knew that sincere occultists rarely attempt prognostications—there still remained the kernel and the gist of the message to confirm her own reawakened intuition. The girl who had fallen into the Swami's trap knew well that the time was near when she would need a friend.

"Give to thy *guru* my promise of secrecy," she said softly. "What my fate is to him I cannot tell, but I will be in waiting each night."

And as Chota Lal crept away she sank into her deck-chair and gazed dreamily into the night and out beyond.

In spite of her disquieting suspicions, Jhanavi Faron for the moment was lost in pleasant speculation. All that day she had tried to visualize Nana sitting in his unlighted gloom below.

But somehow the picture would not come. In its place, although she had nothing to support it, came a blurred impression, slipping out of the past, uncalled and uninvited, of one whose face bore faint bloody scratches, and who had crossed paths with her, years back it seemed, in busy New York.

She could not understand the coming of the memory, for in all truthfulness she argued that she had even forgotten the incident. But nevertheless, through what was perhaps some hidden thought-suggestions, the picture came again and again, and would not be wiped away.

While Steele champed through the minutes which must pass before Chota Lal returned, he found that he had not shaken the impression left indelibly upon his mind by the consecration rite.

Somewhere in that grim performance there seemed to have occurred a now intangible something that persistently knocked at the door of his mind for recognition.

Time and time again he went over the ritual as he vividly remembered it, endeavoring to isolate some one thing which had for the moment escaped him. He was like a man racking his thoughts for a recalcitrant word. A sensation possessed him, too, which suggested to his overwrought mind that unseen eyes were spying upon him.

He lay behind his sail-cloth curtain, his keen-bladed knife shoved down out of sight between his bedding and the skin of the ship. Through the hold there sounded a light scratching, and Steele, pushing back the curtain, peered out.

It was Chota Lal returning, and Steele sprang to meet him. They withdrew to the farthest corner of the hold for their confidences, and Chota Lal reported upon his mission. Although they came second-hand and by word of mouth, Jhanavi Faron's words thrilled him, and he knew that he was beginning to love this woman who had come into his life in the midst of mystery and intrigue.

He was picturing her as he had last seen her when his servant recalled him.

"Heaven-born, thy disguise has been a good one. Thou hast fooled all the Thugs from the Nana to the humblest of the Soosea stranglers. But, *sahib*, the sharp eyes of thy servant, even in this dark place, has found a fault. Where thy heels have touched thy thighs in sitting there be spots where the stain has worn away. It is but a little thing, *sahib*, but I have been watching. That is why I saw. Hast thou the dye-stuff?"

"Aye, Chota Lal, and I will fetch it."

"Then all is well," the little Hindu replied, "for with a second coat upon thy skin, and me to watch, the fault is not a fatal one."

Steele obtained the cake of dye, and his servant, with a bit of rag and some water, followed him behind the sail-cloth. The little brown man lighted a small lantern which swung overhead

and signified that all was in readiness. Steele lay before him upon his stomach, stripped, and the little Hindu began applying the dye.

"That was the fault before, heaven-born," he murmured. "Rags take up too much of the dye, and it should have been kneaded in by hand. But thy servant was not near."

Yet did not Steele reply, for with the touch of the Hindu's hands upon his flesh came suddenly the key to that which had eluded him. Came forth the fear which had lurked and skulked and would not be discovered until its own good time to leap out full grown in all its malevolence.

He clenched his teeth to stifle a groan as he realized that the thing which had been haunting him was the memory of Chota Lal, writhing and rabid, the maddest of all that frenzied throng. How he had fallen exhausted as his efforts burned out his strength. How he lay, loglike and inert, after quaffing that dangerous draft of emotion.

Sired by this recollection of his servant was born the fear that Chota Lal, scion of Thugs and bred of *phansigars,* had in the twinkling of an eye returned to his own and shed his garments of renunciation as a viper sheds his skin. Even now the white man lying prone and helpless, could feel the fingers whose creeping, crawling touch as they worked the pigment in took on a pregnant, horrible meaning.

As he lay there, head awhirl, fighting back the growing conviction that the brown man he had trusted was proving false, one thing drummed at what little reason had been left him; he recalled the oft-told axiom that once a Thug, always a Thug, and that he who has once tasted the ceremonial *ghoor* of the Tupponi, never eradicates its influence from his blood!

And if that were so — and Steele could believe any tale of India—why could not the instincts descend by heredity even to the third and fourth generation?

Vividly he remembered Chota Lal's boast, made as he stood before Nana Sahib, that when but sixteen he and a traveler had gone into the forests, and that he had returned *alone!*

Sweat broke out in beads upon the white man's body and then ran into great wet blotches, while the Hindu, with suggestive fingers, kneaded and punched and worked upon him.

"The heaven-born trembles," the Hindu observed, feeling the skin twitching through his sensitive finger-ends.

"Now he is mocking me," flashed through Steele's brain, and it acted like a tonic upon him. The shudders which before he could not quite repress, died away. The white blood of his race must not be shamed. He could make no outcry, voice no suspicions. The white feather must be plucked out and hidden from the eyes of this brown man. And what if he were wrong?

Upward the Hindu's fingers crept, slow and undeviating as the path of doom. Now they were working upon the muscles of his shoulders. At last there was no doubt. Chota Lal was faithless.

Great God of his fathers! What a death it was to die, like that of a trapped wolf with broken fangs! What good had been all his vaunted boastings if his aunt and the woman he loved were to be left unprotected to the tender mercies of men whose sweetest charity lay in the strangling knot—or worse!

The fingers were now creeping, crawling, pinching softly, horribly about the base of his neck.

The white man took pride o' race and fear o' death alike between his teeth. He moved one arm slowly downward, working it to where the keen blade lay concealed and ready to his fingers!

TO BE CONTINUED NEXT WEEK. Don't forget this magazine is issued weekly, and that you will get the continuation of this story without waiting a month.

Feud of the Raccoon-Loop

by Robert Adger Bowen

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CHAPTER I.

Sheep.

TROUBLE had been brewing for some time between the Loop and the Raccoon River ranches, and things had reached that pass where the crack of a blacksnake whip might speedily bring the trouble to a head.

It had begun when Blass Cardross had added some thousands of head of sheep to the possessions of the Raccoon River range. Of course he might have added thousands of devils to his stock so far as his right to do so was concerned; but your cattleman hates sheep almost as much as he does devils, and it was no time before those sheep began to overrun the boundary lines of the two big ranges. Worthing had protested in some disdain, and Cardross had grown sore. What were a few sheep that they should threaten a long friendship!

"What did any full-blooded cattleman want with the damned wool-sacks, anyway?" Worthing had retorted.

Then it was the sheep-dogs. There being no alien flocks of sheep in the neighborhood for the occasional sheep-killer to molest, they developed a predilection for the Loop calves. After Worthing had lost several mavericks in this way, and again protested, he shot one of Blass Cardross's splendid collies.

The depredation continued, for the dog had taught his vicious tendency to others, and the hard feeling between the two ranches grew. To make matters worse, Earle Worthing was in love with Cardross's sister, Nance, and the girl took sides with her brother.

But all this was as nothing to what had more recently happened.

When Worthing had heard that his old-time chum and friend was damming up the Raccoon River so that the perennial pools of that portion of it which ran through the Loop would probably go dry in the seasons of drought when the river-bed as a whole was as bare of water as the plains of trees, he realized that Cardross was no longer his friend.

The realization hurt even more than it angered—at first. There had always been a vindictive streak to Blass Cardross, but it had taken the sheep to make him do so mean a thing.

That is what they were saying about him on the Loop.

"It's them religious animals what's

made Blass Cardross so contrary," declared Buck Brannon to the foreman of the Loop, as a number of the outfit hung about the barn lot at the dinner-hour. "It's like 'tendin' a protracted camp-meetin' to have dealin's with them solemn critters, an' there ain't nothin' like a camp-meetin' for stirrin' up the devil in a man."

"I reckon this last thing's stirred the devil up in Worthing, all right," responded Kilrain. "I ain't seen him so white over anything for a long time, an' when the boss gits white in the face an' don't say nothin'—he means that much more. Too bad, too, for Blass Cardross ain't a bad fellow."

"It's them silly bleaters, I tell you, Kilrain," reiterated Buck Brannon. "A long'orn steer can be mighty pesky, an' a crazy cow can be worse; but there ain't nothin' like a sheep for spreadin' a cussed influence, less'n it be a woman!"

"That so, Buck Brannon!"

It was Jess Kilrain who came up at the moment, and stood beside her father.

"I'm glad to know what you think of sheep—an' *women!*" she added.

The young fellow colored under the amused smiles of those about him.

"I was just talkin', Jess," he said, "though it's plumb true 'bout sheep."

"That's all you're ever doin'," retorted the girl. "Even eatin' don't stop you talkin'. Only you eat good grub an' talk mighty poor sense; but that's 'cause your grub's fixed for you by a woman, an' your tongue's a man's."

"Jess," remonstrated the girl's father, "when you've roped an' throwed your steer, jest hold tight. Don't yank him."

Jess Kilrain tossed her handsome head.

"Some steers don't know when they is roped, father."

"That'll do now," said Kilrain, speaking a little sternly, for the young cow-puncher was a favorite with him, and he knew that his daughter was not always merciful. "There's enough doin' without havin' ructions in our own camp. What's it, my girl?"

"Nothin'," answered Jess, somewhat crossly. "I seen you talkin', an' I come over. Any harm in that? What's doin', father?"

For some reason the girl's presence broke up the lingering group of men. Perhaps it was the serious nature of this latest act of their neighbor on the Raccoon River Ranch that made them feel rather averse to talking about it just then.

Perhaps they had heard enough about it for the time being. Perhaps it was their general knowledge that Jess Kilrain was on very friendly terms with the Cardross household.

Singly and in pairs they moved toward the stables, and Kilrain himself, remembering something, left his daughter abruptly and followed them.

Buck Brannon sprang down from the high fence upon which he had been perched.

"Blass Cardross is hittin' below the belt this time," he said to the girl, who turned to him, something of question in her fine eyes.

"You mean he's gittin' the best of Earle Worthing?"

"Anyway he's tryin' to do him the worst. He's dammin' up his water-supply. With the summer drought only a few months off, that'll mean hell."

"You seem to know a whole lot 'bout sheep an' women an' hell, Buck," Jess said, scorn in her eyes and voice. "Ain't a man the right to do what he pleases on his own land?"

The words swept Buck into a vehemence that was kindled not alone by his loyalty to Earle Worthing.

"No," he cried, "he ain't with a free river what means all the difference 'tween another man's havin' water an' havin' none; an' I reckon he'll find that out. The boss'll fight now, sure an' plenty."

"I guess two can fight," said the girl, and smiled at his amazement.

"You ain't meanin', Jess," he managed to say with some check upon his astonishment, "that you sides with Cardross against the Loop?"

The answer carried evasion. "I always like to make a turkey gobble, Buck Brannon. You gobble fine!"

She saw the anger that whitened his face at that; was, indeed, a little afraid of it, and stepped back at his impetuous approach.

"What makes you treat me so?" he demanded. "What makes you try to make a fool of me, Jess Kilrain? What I said about women was true. They do loose the devil in a man. But why does you try to stir it up in me? No one in my life, man or woman, ever scorned me so afore."

"Then you's learnin' somethin'," she answered, her laughter short and not too certain; for there was a stern light in the young fellow's honest eyes before which her own gaze faltered and fell. "Shucks!" she cried. "You take on like you was in one of them movies they got in town."

He moved away from her suddenly. He laughed, too, a brittle laugh with the hint of a threat in it.

"If you don't look out," he said, tense in the repression he put upon himself, "some day I'll take on in a way that'll lift you clear off your feet, Jess Kilrain, an' I ain't gobblin' when I say that, you can bet your sweet life!"

He swung about and left her standing there, a curious mixture of anger, admiration, and self-humiliation warring within her. Then she lifted her shoulders and sniffed.

"The sass of him!" she murmured.

CHAPTER II.

A Disturbing Suggestion.

"IF Jess warn't so good lookin', Martin," said Kilrain's sister to him that evening, after she had made ready for him the foreman's place by the cleared supper table, "she wouldn't be so headstrong, an' if she warn't so headstrong she'd be more good lookin'—which you can look at from behind side fore, or t'other way, as you please, it meanin' the same thing whichever way. Jess is spoiled, an' spoiled bad, an' I ain't the one what's done the spoilin'."

Agnes Kilrain had come to her brother from the East at the time when, his wife dying, he had been left with Jess, a prattling child, upon his hands.

She was a capable woman, with a will of her own which, as the girl grew up, was not always in harmony with that of her charge, and a tongue which was not always in harmony with her really kind heart. Kilrain idolized his daughter, and stood somewhat in fear of his sister—facts which the girl had long since found out to her own advantage.

Indeed, Jess Kilrain was something of a puzzle to those who knew her best.

She was always in hot water with her aunt. She teased and bullied her father. She was scornful and unkind to Buck Brannon, whose heart, she knew, she held in the hollow of her hand.

She was by turns gracious and ungracious to the rest of the outfit. Even to Earle Worthing himself Jess not infrequently indulged in the caustic flings of her tongue that made her something of a wasp in the social life of the Loop.

"Where is Jess?" asked Kilrain of his sister, for she had spoken with an undercurrent of meaning in her not unusual disapproval of her niece.

Agnes Kilrain shrugged.

"Where?" she echoed. "I'm sure I don't know. With the owls out alone on the plains, where she hadn't ought to be. She's never indoors. Day an' night, she's always somewhere else. 'Tain't right, Martin. 'Tain't proper."

Kilrain's face sobered. He was an easy-going man in his own household, and sometimes he might have wished Agnes were not quite so determined.

"The girl means no harm," he said; "but I'll speak to her."

"Gals don't have to mean harm to git into harm, though I ain't so sure, Martin, that Jess wouldn't grapple with the devil himself just to see what his horns was made of. Jess is powerful pernickety. An' you know what comes of hobnobbin' with the devil!"

Kilrain looked up with some impatience at his sister's pertinacity, laying aside the *Stock Gazette* he had been making an attempt to read and proceeding to relight his pipe with one of the long, twisted paper lighters of which Agnes made a supply each week.

She was herself rather aimlessly hanging about the oak sideboard as though expectant of the question her brother was to put.

"An' who's the particular devil Jess is feelin' the horns of, Agnes?"

The woman lost her indecision at the pointed inquiry, turning abruptly.

"Blass Cardross."

"Blass Cardross!"

"Ain't you ever heard his name, Martin Kilrain?"

He looked at her now more than half inclined to be angry.

"Blass Cardross is a square man," he said slowly, "if he is on the wrong track 'bout some things. I don't see what you're drivin' at, Agnes."

She came nearer to him, any trace of lesser irritation gone from her voice and manner alike.

"Just this, Martin. Is he square enough to marry the gal if he might make her love her—or is he too fine?"

Only recently the realization that his daughter had grown into woman's estate had come upon Martin Kilrain with a shock of surprise. Another and a more numbing shock ran through him now. A mother would never have been thus taken by surprise about her daughter. Martin Kilrain was a man.

"I don't like to think of Jess maryin'," he said, his face grave.

"That isn't goin' to keep *her* from thinkin' of it."

Helpless under this logic, he was silent. She left him at that, going into the kitchen, and Kilrain took up the *Gazette* once more, but he could not read.

Where was Jess?

After a time, Kilrain threw down his paper, rose, and went out of the house. His sister's words had taken an unpleasant hold upon his mind.

With his arms upon the gate he stood smoking. The night was dark, soft with the hint of the coming summer, very still and motionless over the flowering prairies. Most of the surrounding cabins were already in unlighted silence, for the boys of the outfit were given to early turning in.

Kilrain opened the gate, stepping out into the road beyond, and noiselessly letting the latch fall back into place. He was not conscious of this care he took to be unobserved. It was born of the vague disquiet of his mood.

Going down the lane, he reached the lower barn lots, the orchard lying further to his left, pungent with the fragrance of its full bloom. Kilrain turned his back upon it, following the path that ran southward across the prairie to the distant woods that formed at that point the boundary between the Loop and the Raccoon River ranches.

And still it could not have been said that he had done this of deliberation.

Suddenly he paused in his walk, which had become brisk, at a sound which seemed to crystallize his former inchoate distress into a sickening certainty. The distant galloping of a horse's hoofs fell upon the still air, hollow and muffled from the springy turf, growing fainter even as he listened, dying into soundlessness.

Kilrain's breath thickened in his throat. His nostrils dilated. His muscles stiffened along his limbs. Then, almost as an animal might have done, a dog or a horse, he shook himself, and moved onward slowly, halting on the instant.

Coming toward him through the enveloping gloom of the plain a slight figure walked quickly, heedless of

Kilrain's eyes, straining, incredulous of what they dimly discerned yet discerned with an unpleasant certainty.

Just before him the figure stopped, its breath catching softly in some shock of surprise.

"Jess," cried Kilrain. "I'd hoped to God my eyes had played me false!"

CHAPTER III.

Counterplays.

THE girl had been very silent, though nothing better than her silence had been needed to confirm Kilrain in the shock of his disappointment in her.

"I would never have dreamed it of you, Jess," he groaned. "I never would 'a' dreamed you would live to deceive me so."

For the first time then Jess made a sound. She laughed, a bitter thread in the laughter catching her father's notice.

"No, you never would 'a' dreamed it, father, if you hadn't been put to sleep with a burr on your mattress. That's Aunt Agnes's doin's. Some people's so loaded down with goodness that the bad in 'em floats on top, like cream. So she told you I was out here to meet Blass Cardross, an' you swallowed it! You'll have to cough up a lie then, father."

"But, Jess," cried Kilrain, though a weight seemed to have slipped from his heart, "I-heard—"

"You heard a horse gallopin'. So did I. If you'd come just a little farther you'd 'a' heard me talkin' to the man ridin' that horse. That ain't sayin' it was Blass Cardross. Go look in your stable, father, an' see whose horse is missin'. An', talkin' 'bout dreamin'," Jess went on, "I never would 'a' dreamed, father, that Aunt Agnes could throw sand in your eyes an' make you think it was a thunderstorm."

She could not see Kilrain's abashed smile.

"I'm feared she done 'xactly that," he admitted, "but your aunt means well, Jess."

"Oh, sure!" laughed Jess. "She means well when she gives us rhubarb pies, but if you eat 'em you wish you hadn't. Meanin' well an' doin' well ain't always the same—specially when the meanin' p'isons you."

"I'm sorry, Jess."

"So 'm I, father. 'Tain't good to be thought bad of."

Kilrain was silent.

Indeed, his mind was not at ease. There still remained the matter of Jess's intimacy with Cardross. He said no more upon the subject then, however, nor did Jess; but when she had gone on to her room upon reaching the house she did not get ready for bed.

Sitting by her open window, she seemed to wait, and while she waited Jess Kilrain's thoughts were diligently occupied.

She had told her father the truth, but not the whole truth. Not even to herself had she ever told what for some time intuition had been vainly endeavoring to warn her.

She was not happy in her love for Blass Cardross. Some indefinable blight was upon its bloom. Something ached in the joy of her heart too vague to be unhappiness, yet, like a baser alloy in pure gold, subtly changing its color.

It was something which made the girl long this night for the mother she had never known. Jess Kilrain had grown up a man's woman. All her life she had been among men—among them yet apart, as the woman must ever be. It had made her unusually self-reliant.

It had left her strangely alone.

Indeed, for some days past the girl's mind had been wavering on the point of speaking to her father of her love for Cardross; but intuition, telling her that he would not be in sympathy with that love, had helped to prevent her doing so.

The growing opposition toward Cardross in all those about her on the Loop had, while stimulating her loyalty to her lover, made her even more inclined to be reticent. Her father's action this night in rebuking her so sternly for what he had supposed had carried her abroad drove all confidence back upon her own heart.

The room behind Jess was in total darkness.

Beyond her window the prairie stretched an indeterminate space overhung by the warm stars. A sense keener than that of either hearing or sight, compound of both, made her aware that she had heard a sound; that she saw an indistinguishable blur upon the gray darkness — a blur that moved silently, furtively; that gave her an uneasy feeling of being seen herself far more clearly than she could see.

Jess knew that on the plains nearer to the barn lots the calves of the milk cows were turned at night.

She knew, too, that this was no calf she so dimly discerned. Then, her suspicion leaping, she herself sprang softly to her feet, seized from the wall her quirt where it hung beside the window, and, active and lithe as a boy, dropped through the open casement to the ground outside.

Thence she ran, fleet as a wild thing of the plains, over the soft turf to where a slight commotion and that curious stamping of the fore legs of affrighted cattle told her the home calves were huddled in terror and danger.

A moment more and she could dimly descry their dark mass even as a large object, bounding forward toward them in huge leaps, showed the girl the cause of their stupefied fear.

Jess Kilrain, too, sprang forward, cracking her quirt sharply and crying aloud, and so sudden and unexpected was her interruption that the big sheepdog cowered, and, turning, cringed, belly to the ground, at her feet.

She knew that dog, black as coal, save for the tan about his muzzle and the white ruff of splendid hair about his neck — Cardross's prize collie. About that cowering neck Jess now gathered the pliant thong of her quirt, holding the dog fast.

"Banjo, you devil!" she murmured. "You murderin' devil! What am I goin' to do to you, you beauty?"

"Leave that to me," said a voice out of the night behind her, and Jess Kilrain straightened in her body. "You won't deny now, will you, Jess, that it's Blass Cardross's sheep-dogs that murders the Loop calves? The brute doubled on his tracks an' dodged me, but he ain't goin' to double no more."

Buck stepped forward. In his extended hand she beheld the gleam of the starlight upon the steel barrel of his revolver.

"Stan' back," he said to the girl, and the trigger clicked.

Quicker than thought Jess let go the loop of the quirt about the dog's neck and lashed the creature with the full force of her strength; and as he leaped back with a yelp of pain and fright, fleeing into the darkness, Buck's bullet tore open the earth where he had crouched an instant before.

Quivering with white rage, the young fellow faced the girl. Frightened but determined, Jess Kilrain faced him.

"So it *is* Cardross!" he breathed thickly, after a long moment. "I was right when I told you just now that your love for him was makin' you false, Jess Kilrain."

"False to who?"

"To yourself an' to every one—even to him, for you deny your love."

The girl's head lifted defiantly.

"That's a lie!" she cried.

Buck turned from her, laughter caustic and scornful on his lips.

"You're a woman," he muttered. "My hands is tied. If a man had said that to me they'd be his last words for a time. I'm goin' to get my horse."

She made no effort to detain him. Curiously her anger burned not against

him, but against Blass Cardross for the secrecy he imposed upon her.

CHAPTER IV.

When Friends Fall Out.

OF the events of that night Buck Brannon said nothing to any one, and indeed no words of his were needed to tighten the tension that now existed between Earle Worthing and Cardross. There had been a meeting between these two, sought of intent by Worthing, though somewhat against the grain, and prompted by the pleading of his mother in the interest of their old friendship.

"Give him one more chance, Earle," Mrs. Worthing had urged. "Then, if he persists, I'll say no more. Truly, the devil seems to have entered into Blass Cardross."

So Worthing had taken horse and ridden over to the Raccoon River Range, and there before the house, working among the flowers on the big beds, he had found Nance Cardross. She drew off her gloves and, as he approached after hitching his horse, went forward to meet him.

"You have become a stranger, Earle," she said, some touch of constraint in her manner for all her effort.

"Has it been of my doing, Nance? It was not easy for me to come today. Really, my coming is in the nature of a truce."

A slight color deepened in Nance Cardross's cheeks, and her glance turned aside.

"You must fight your battles with Blass alone," she said a little coldly. "Do you wish to see him?"

"That is what I came for. I had hardly hoped to see you, Nance."

"Yet I am pretty substantially visible. How are your mother's plants this spring?"

"Why do you never come to see them?" he asked gravely.

"Have you not made that impossible when every day your enmity toward my brother grows?"

"You can really put it that way, Nance? Why, I am here to-day to try once more if I cannot reach some more friendly understanding with Blass. And you must know my leading motive in doing that."

"I will go and send him to you," said the girl, disregarding the meaning in his last words. "He may go out the back way while we stand here talking."

She left him with that, making no show of asking him to go with her into the house, and the omission was significant to Worthing, who since his boyhood had been as much at home there as in his own house. His face set rather grimly as he waited.

A moment later Cardross came toward him across the sward.

His greeting was not friendly.

"I am somewhat at a loss to understand your being here, Worthing," he said, "after the many unexplained outrages I have suffered at the hands of your men."

Their eyes met squarely, but it was anger that gave decision to those of Cardross.

"I have come," Worthing answered, "to see if I might not avert a tenfold greater outrage on your part, Blass—avert it peacefully if I can; for avert it, in one way or another, I shall."

"Then you have had your ride for nothing," said Cardross. "I suppose you refer to my plans of irrigation."

"I refer to your plans to deprive me of my water rights."

Cardross shrugged his shoulders. He smiled annoyingly.

"It is your misfortune, Worthing, that the Raccoon River runs through my land to yours."

Worthing controlled himself admirably.

"Is our old friendship nothing to you, Blass?" he asked quietly. "Would it not be well for each of us to remember it before it is too late?"

Cardross laughed.

"Why talk rubbish?" he demanded curtly. "If you bid fair to be the loser in the little war you inaugurated, why squeal about it, Worthing?"

For a moment Worthing said nothing. There was no plea in his voice when he finally spoke.

"And that is your answer, then! I had hardly expected it to be otherwise, though I had hoped." His head lifted suddenly. "Every dollar you spend, Blass, that threatens to deprive me of any gallon of water I need, you will spend in vain. I warn you of that in good part. You had better remember it."

An instant he hesitated.

"That's all, I guess," he then said. "Other things will take care of themselves," and walked rapidly toward his horse.

He did not ride homeward at once, but in the contrary direction; and so it was that some little time later, returning toward the Loop, he struck the more direct trail that led through the dividing woods of the two ranches and so on to his own corrals and barns.

And so it was, too, that in the heart of those woods where they dipped down into the tangled ravine that formed the actual boundary-line between the Loop and the Raccoon River ranges, Worthing halted at the sound of a woman's voice raised in tense and passionate pleading.

"Let me speak of it, Blass!" cried Jess Kilrain entreatingly. "Let me tell my father. Why does you try to hide your love for me, an' make me guard it like it was a shameful thing? I'm feared it will come to make me hate it, Blass. I'm feared of that!"

Worthing caught the sound of Cardross's soft laugh.

"Don't you see, Jess," he murmured, and in the silence the words came clearly, "that now it is all our very own—just you and me, with the whole world shut out? Why do you want to let every one into our secret?"

"I hate that secret!" Jess cried, her low voice vehement. "It's made me do what I never done in all my life afore—lie. I've lied about what I ought to be proud to have the whole world know. Why do you make me do that, Blass? Tell me why!"

Worthing rode on. It was not for him to hear more, but in that instant the last remnant of his old-time friendship for Blass Cardross died in his heart.

CHAPTER V.

Sheep and Men.

IT had happened again, and not a man on Worthing's outfit but took it as a personal challenge and affront.

Kilrain, Buck Brannon, and others, riding out one morning before the sun was well up, had seen the choicest bit of pasturage of the nearer ranges of the Loop just beyond the home enclosures white with the detested forms of thousands of Cardross's sheep, and the land denuded in one night of more grass than their own cattle would have consumed in many.

"Now wouldn't that make the pages of your Bible shrivel, Kilrain?" demanded the younger man. "What self-respectin' long'orn is ever goin' to be willin' to graze on that p'isoned land? Look at them sanctimonious bunches of wool reprovin' us for bein' here with them church-like eyes of theirn! Let me find a ram what's got some spunk in him!"

"Wait, Buck," called the foreman. "I'm goin' to put a stop to this thing. Cardross 's been warned over an' over again. I'm goin' to take a big bunch of them sheep up to the corral, an' if he wants 'em he can pay ransom for 'em. Cut out a thick bunch, boys."

They did it with a will, carrying the bleating flock back to the corrals, while others of the men drove the larger number over to the Raccoon River ranges from which they had strayed—strayed or been driven, for the question was an open one.

Cardross had done many things of late to justify the suspicion.

"It's funny 'bout meanness in a man, ain't it, Buck?" said Kilrain, while they waited for the return of the men who had driven off the sheep to their own pasturage. "It's just like the disposition of a bull. The most innocent yearlin' will make the worst three year ole, an' then keep on gittin' uglier an' cusseder for every new ring roun' his horns. Now who'd ha' thought Blass Cardross would ever turn so pesky?"

The smile left Buck's face. He had his own reasons for being disturbed over Cardross's ugliness.

"Is you watchin' him careful, Kilrain?" he asked. He hesitated. "I think you got special cause to, Martin," he added, slowly.

Kilrain glanced up, a keen scrutiny in his regard.

"I know what you mean, Buck," he answered, with grave concern, "but I think Jess can take care of herself."

The younger man looked over the level plains, his eyes coming slowly back to Kilrain's face. Something grim in the seriousness that was upon him had dashed the usual boyishness from his bearing.

"Martin," he said, "if he played her false—or even if I was sure that he meant to—I'd kill him sure as hell holds fire."

Kilrain paled. There was an ominous suggestion in Buck's tense words which threw a baleful color over the other man's unsettled doubts that actually weakened him for the moment. He threw off the feeling by an effort.

"I want you to ride over to him now, Buck," he said, "an' tell him 'bout them sheep. Let him know I sent you, hear—not Worthing. Can I trust you, Buck? Just a cold business proposition—no hot feelin's."

"Sure," said Buck, brightening. "You just soak him hard, Kilrain, an' I'll tell him soft—soft as an April shower an' as penetratin'. What'll it be?"

"Market value," returned Kilrain. "Them sheep is ours. Leastways, he don't git 'em on any other terms."

But when Buck delivered his message to Blass Cardross, the owner of the Raccoon River ranch flew into a rage.

"Ransom to hell!" he cried. "So you turn cattle thieves on the Loop, do you? And you have the nerve, Brannon, to come on my place to bring me a message like that! Clear out with you, and tell those that sent you I say they are a gang of thieves. I'll come after my sheep in my own way."

"Sure," replied Buck, smiling pleasantly. "I never come expectin' to stay, an' I'll just naturally tell what you said. They'd want to know. As for your own way 'bout them sheep which ain't no longer yourn, I'd be careful, Mr. Cardross. We don't keep no murderin', thievin' sheep dogs on the Loop, but there's dogs there what bark powerful true, six times to a clip, and some more—if needs be."

"Get out with you!" cried Cardross angrily. "When I want your advice I'll pay for it."

Having delivered his message and received his answer, Buck should have been discreet and ridden off; but he lingered, standing by his horse's head, his disconcerting gaze studying Cardross with a calm leisureliness. He had little good will for Cardross, distrusting him, fearing him where fear gripped him with a deadly intensity of passion that always threatened to transform him when he gave it a thought.

He knew that Jess Kilrain, whom he loved, loved this man. He knew with an instinct sharpened by his love that Cardross was not playing fair with the girl.

Watching Cardross now, the hated thought leaped into unpremeditated words. He forgot his mission; he forgot Kilrain's admonition. He remembered only the unhappiness which threatened Jess Kilrain at the hands of the man before him.

" An' when you come over, Cardross," he said, his manner quite other from the whimsical banter which had marked it, " don't come by way of the Skunk Hollow. The air's gittin' p'i-sonous in that ravine! "

Blass Cardross flushed and paled. His breath came sharply.

" By God! " he cried, " but you take a chance! " With sudden caution he checked himself. " Just what do you mean by that, Buck Brannon? " he demanded hotly.

" I reckon you don't have to ask me that," retorted Buck, coldly contemptuous. " Just remember them words of mine. The Skunk Hollow's gittin' mighty unwholesome, Cardross—plumb dangerous, I might say." His temper suddenly flared. " Keep out of it, you snake! "

So impetuously had the words come that Blass Cardross fell back only to spring as quickly forward, chest almost to chest with the other. And so for an instant they stood while the alarmed cry of Nance Cardross, as she ran rapidly toward them, snapped the threatening tension. Cardross, muttering an oath, stepped back.

Buck turned to his horse.

"Another time, Buck Brannon," Cardross murmured. " I'll not forget."

" And if you do," said the other, swinging on his horse, " I'll jog your mem'ry pretty lively."

Cardross turned impatiently at the touch of his sister's hand upon his arm.

CHAPTER VI.

Misgivings.

JESS KILRAIN stood behind her father's chair, drawn up before the open door of the dining-room as he sat smoking his after-dinner pipe before he should ride out on the business of the afternoon. From the kitchen beyond came the clatter of dishes where Agnes Kilrain was washing up. In some way she managed to make that clatter express a chorus of rebuke.

Kilrain turned, smiling.

" Hadn't you ought to be helpin' your aunt, Jess? " he asked.

The girl came forward, seating herself on the broad arm of the chair.

" Aunt Agnes knows if she waits ten minutes I'd help her," she said. " She prefers to go ahead alone, so she can have the chance to say I didn't help her. That pleases her, father, more 'n my help would help, an' I've somethin' to say to you. You've done wrong, father, 'bout them sheep. If Earle Worthing was home he'd say so, too."

Kilrain was sober. Since Buck's report of his reception by Cardross that morning, the foreman had reached the same opinion as his daughter's.

" P'r'aps," he admitted; " but it's done now, Jess. Anyway, you needn't bother."

" I'm thinkin' of you," she said, suspecting a reproach in his words. " You've bit off more 'n you can chew, father, an' you can't either swallow it or spit it out."

Kilrain laughed, putting up an arm and encircling the girl's waist. " You come powerful nigh bein' right 'bout that, Jess," he granted. " I reckon I was too hot under my collar when I done it."

Jess nodded.

" I reckon that's it, an' humble pie's sharper than even rhubard pie."

" There'll be no humble pie 'bout it," said Kilrain, rising and laying down his pipe. " The bridges is all down 'tween Cardross an' the Loop, an' it's his own doin's. You'll have mutton pie, my gal, till you're plumb sick of it."

" P'r'aps, an' p'r'aps not."

She handed Kilrain his hat and took his parting kiss, going into the kitchen to join her aunt.

That afternoon Jess saddled her pony, and rode along the path she had walked with her father upon the night when he had gone forth to seek her. It had become the path she usually took, leading across the rolling plains to the distant woods, in which lay the Skunk Hollow, with its tangled ravine.

Tacitly it had come to be the spot where Cardross met her almost daily, and Jess knew she would meet him there this afternoon.

He was waiting for her when she reached the little basin of the ravine, and moved forward to tie her horse by the side of his own. She saw at once that his mood was clouded, and he turned to her with somewhat of reproach.

"I began to think you were not coming," he told her. "I used always to find you here."

Oddly his reproach was not sweet.

"An' is it so much for you to wait for me, Blass?"

"It's so much less than waiting with you, Jess."

"Yet that seems to be what you want—waitin'."

"You child!"

She avoided his attempted caress.

"I ain't a child, Blass. Don't treat me like I was one."

He put his arm about her.

"Sweetheart," he murmured, "I'll treat you like the dearest girl you are if you just won't be cross with me. Things have gone badly with me today. Be good to me."

"Yes," she said, releasing herself from his embrace. "Let's talk about that, Blass. What does you mean to do?"

He smiled. There was much that was endearing about Blass Cardross.

"You are in the camp of the enemy, Jess."

"But I ain't an enemy. I think father made a mistake in what he done. He thinks so himself."

Cardross's face hardened. He misunderstood the admission she made.

"He will have to abide by it."

"He is willin' to, but I ain't willin' to have him, Blass. I'm goin' to manage this business myself, hear!"

"*You!*" Cardross exclaimed.

"Sure," she said; "but no one but you must know it."

He watched her, a generous admiration kindling in his eyes.

"But how, sweetheart—"

"Never mind how. Just give me—just give me till to-morrow."

Of a truth he was not sorry to have the excuse of humoring her to delay his own action.

The shadows lengthened in the woods above them. In the deeper obscurity of the ravine the dank odors of the approaching evening stole about them, heavy weighted, lulling, touched with mystery.

So still they were that the wild things of the woods, curious squirrels, and sensitively sniffing rabbits, crept out from cover, braving the human presence.

"You are happy, Jess?"

"Why else should I be here, Blass?"

But she started at the indistinct sounds of a horse's tread somewhere in the forest above them, standing with her hand tight upon Cardross's arm until it had died away. The man, too, had straightened as he listened, the echoing call of the horse's rider coming to them faintly as he galloped on.

"Buck Brannon," said Jess, and the shadow in her eyes was not happy.

"Of all the men of the Loop I hate him worst," muttered Cardross. Unwisely he added: "Don't trust that man, Jess. His tongue should be cut out."

The girl drew away, a revulsion she did not seek to comprehend seizing her.

"Why should I fear Buck Brannon or any man?" she asked, a proud scorn in her voice. "What has he said to you 'bout me, Blass?"

Too late he saw his error, protesting vainly that she misunderstood; that Buck had said nothing about them.

Jess would not be reassured.

"He's right, he's right!" she cried passionately. "Why does you make me steal out here to meet you so, Blass?"

"Could you come to my house?" he asked. "Can I go to yours as

things are with me on Earle Worthing's place? Steal here, Jess! Have we not a right to our love that all the world must be asked its favor?"

Jess shook her head.

"At least," she said, after a moment, "I'm goin' to tell your sister, Blass."

"Not if you really love me, Jess," he pleaded. "Nance is fond of you, but she is terribly jealous of me. See how she has turned against even Earle Worthing, whom she loved! Can't you trust me, Jess, to manage best until the right time comes? Do you doubt my love?"

He drew her to him, kissing her on the mouth, murmuring the incoherencies that were yet so eloquent, holding her to him until abruptly he himself released her and stood back, fearful of himself, white and breathless.

Jess groped her way blindly to her horse, her breath like sobs in her tense throat. Blindly she got into her saddle and rode away, nor did Cardross seek to call her back.

Could she doubt his love!

Could she trust her own!

CHAPTER VII.

Loyal Treachery.

THAT night Martin Kilrain brought Buck in for supper. The foreman was given to doing that sort of thing with all of his men, though it was more often Buck Brannon than any other.

"There's method in it, Buck," he had once said to the young cow-puncher's protesting half-heartedly over the frequency of his acceptance of these invitations. "Agnes has a soft spot in her heart for you, an' she never gives Jess an' me a better supper than when she knows you're comin'. Not that I've ever any fault to find with Agnes's cookin'."

But if Kilrain and his sister welcomed Buck that night, Jess did not. She felt his being there very inopportune, and she took little enough pains to hide her feeling.

There was a recklessness about her banter to-night that touched on daring, and more than once Kilrain felt bound to remonstrate. Agnes Kilrain showed her disapproval plainly.

They were talking about Cardross's sheep, a topic upon which Buck always waxed contemptuous.

"Take care, Buck," said Jess, as she buttered her hot biscuit, "that them sheep don't turn out wolves in sheep's clothin'. Ain't you ever heard of the biter bein' bit? You talk sheep so much I'd think your mouth 'd get woolly. What you say sounds like it was, anyway."

"I forgot, Jess," the young fellow answered, somewhat abashed, "that you was so partial to Cardross."

The girl's eyes flashed angrily. She saw her aunt transfix Kilrain with a triumphant stare.

"Some folks' tongues," the girl remarked, in a tone of meaning, "strays as silly as some sheep, an' as far from home—only the words ain't worth corralin' an' talkin' 'bout."

She turned sharply to her aunt. "What are you bobbin' your head so at father for, Aunt Agnes? You look like a chicken what's chokin'."

Agnes looked very like that, indeed, as she swallowed her anger, for Kilrain had laughed, and Buck had smiled, and Jess's own lips had twitched with a wicked mirth.

"Never mind her, Agnes," said Kilrain, with clumsy intent to pacify. "Jess is always seein' resemblances."

"'Tain't what I mind, Martin," Agnes complained. "It's what she don't mind—an' that's nothin'. You'll come to grief yet, Jess Kilrain, I'm fearin'."

"P'r'aps," assented Jess. "If I does, I reckon I'll scramble through somehow. What's the use of diggin' graves, Aunt Agnes, when there ain't no corpse to bury? Now you sit still while I clear the table an' wash up. If Buck is goin' to play his accordyum I

want all the dishes rattlin' roun' me I can get, an' a wall between."

Buck played rather dismally after that, though he had a knack of making a concertina talk, and, when he chose to sing, he had a voice. That little passage with Jess had dampened his ardor. He had not meant to be disloyal to her. And Jess did not mean to relent toward him.

She more than half suspected from Cardross's warning that Buck had been led to say something to him of her. Resenting this, and, moreover, not wishing to encourage his late lingering that night, she did not, when she had finished the dishes, return to the sitting-room.

Going, instead, to her own room, which occupied an extension of the little house opposite to that which held the kitchen, she began making her preparations against that time when Buck Brannon should have retired to his own cabin, and her father and aunt to their rooms. Nor did she have very long to wait for this, and half an hour after Buck had taken his departure, the concertina having for some time ceased its dispirited music, the cottage was hushed and in darkness.

Yet for some time longer Jess waited in her own unlighted room.

Perhaps an hour went by before the girl rose and leisurely dressed herself in riding clothes, slipping a pistol in her belt when all was finished. No man of them all on the Loop knew the use of one any better than Jess Kilrain, and use for it she might have this night.

Then, arming herself with a light blacksnake of her father's which she had previously procured, she stepped out from her room into the main portion of the house.

The door of her father's room was ajar—that being his invariable habit—but Jess knew the soundness of his slumber, and she knew, too, where she would find what she must have if she was to carry out her plan. She felt no qualms of conscience in what she was doing.

If she was abetting Cardross, she had good reason to believe the result would relieve her father, also, even should he come to suspect her agency in the deed.

So, tiptoeing into his room, she noiselessly possessed herself of his keys where they lay on the table beside his bed, his revolver guarding them to small profit. The man on the bed, in the first deep relaxation of sleep, did not stir.

Letting herself out of the house, Jess went carefully onward toward the stables, carefully but not stealthily, for she felt little fear that any of the outfit would be sleeping less soundly than her father.

She saddled and bridled her pony, leading him thereafter over to the corrals where Cardross's sheep were locked in. Hitching him there behind the gate, which she unlocked and threw wide open, Jess walked in among the recumbent sheep.

So secure against interruption did she feel that the girl went about rounding up the stupid animals with perfect calmness, cracking her blacksnake softly, and never once looking about her to the dark masses of the silent cabins.

Had she looked she might have seen a moving shadow close to the outer side of the corral fence—a shadow that crept cautiously nearer until it paused motionless on a line with herself. There it clung to the thicker obscurity of a post, and watched the proceedings with a curious intentness.

Whatever might have been the emotions of that silent witness of Jess Kilrain's maneuvers, they did not lead their possessor to seek to stop the girl. Slowly she got the sheep started, headed for the gate, and so out upon the open space beyond.

Pausing to close and lock the gate behind them, she mounted her horse, and with little trouble carried the sheep beyond the barns to the unobstructed plains. There, turning them southward, the click of their trotting feet could be heard as she crowded them toward the Raccoon River range.

Not until the last echo had died away did that shadow by the post of the corral fence turn around. Then Buck Brannon stood erect and squared his chest.

"A sheep is a sheep," he muttered, "an' Blass Cardross is a skunk, but ain't Jess a queen? I just couldn't stop her!"

Which, seeing how the queen had tyrannized over him, and why, was very generous in Buck.

Cardross started from his sleep, roused by the sharp crack of several pistol-shots, followed by the scurrying trampling of many feet across the lawn before his house. Rushing to his window, he looked out and caught a glimpse of lumbering sheep, and, guided by another more distant shot, saw the galloping shadow of a horse going northward. The shrill whistle made by lips upon the bone handle of a blacksnake came clear and triumphant, and silence fell again as the woods swallowed up Jess Kilrain and her horse.

CHAPTER VIII.

Goadings.

IT long remained a mystery on the Loop how Cardross's sheep escaped. It might have been noticed, however, that Kilrain did not press the point with any fervor, and that Buck Brannon was oddly silent on many occasions when sheep were mentioned. As for Jess, she frankly said that it served the Loop right. If they were going to make a business of holding sheep for ransom they ought to have locks that could not be picked and not sleep like snakes in winter time.

At which Martin Kilrain had looked rather sheepish himself. But if any one thought that the restoration of his sheep was going to make any difference in Cardross's relations with the Loop, he was doomed to disillusion. Work on the dam across the Raccoon River went steadily on.

It was rumored on the Loop that Earle Worthing had already taken legal steps to protect himself, though of this the youthful owner of the Loop said nothing even to his foreman.

In the mean time summer had come, and all day the plains lay under a shimmering heat that turned the grass to a golden brown, yellowing the tender green of the broom-sage and drying the earth to a fine dust that stirred like smoke under the hoofs of the cattle and in the warm breezes that swept out of the cloudless skies. It was the heyday for the gorgeous lizards and the horned toads, and for the cicadas that strummed their strident music by the hour, adding to the drowsiness of the air.

And every night the heavy dews and and the purple sky, pulsing with its warm, innumerable stars, gave unwelcome promise of the advent of the rainless season when streams ran dry and water became the most precious thing on the wide ranges.

In the already shrunken bed of the Owl Creek, Worthing was every day just then sinking hogsheads over springs, that whatever happened he might be prepared, for he knew the law moved slowly. In his capable mind he was determined, should the worst come to the worst, that he would take the law into his own hands. He had fairly warned Cardross.

Jess Kilrain upon her pony in the cool shadow of the overhanging bank of the creek was watching several of the men under the guidance of Buck Brannon as they made excavations for a hogshead.

"Say, Buck," remarked Skull Williams, so-called because of his receding eyes and the smile that revealed his even teeth, "who gave you the tip there was any water here? Are you goin' plumb through the crust of the earth till you strikes hell?"

"You are, Skull," said Buck, "sooner or later. What's the differ-

ence of a year or so, more or less? Dig away."

Skull grinned.

"I hopes I meet Blass Cardross ahead of me," he grunted. "Sp'ilin' our restful summer thisaway."

"Blass Cardross ain't thinkin' of hell just now," volunteered another, wringing the sweat from his beaded brow. "They say he's gittin' married to a gal his sister has visitin' her from Sanantony, rotten with money an' ugly as p'ison. Mebbe that'll be hell enough fór him."

"Cut out the swears an' the gossip, Bill," commanded Buck with unwonted sternness, his quick eye sweeping Jess Kilrain's face. "This ain't a quiltin'-bee."

"Didn't know it was a prayer-meetin', either," retorted Bill Grange aggrievedly. He had not for a long time borne any good will to Buck Brannon. "An' you's gittin' powerful careful of Blass Cardross's repytation, Buck."

"That's all right," muttered Buck, stabbed by the sharp pallor of the girl's face. "Never you mind what I'm careful of. You scratch gravel till you gits water! You know more'n as is good for you 'bout Cardross's affairs, anyhow."

Jess Kilrain said no word. The man's remarks had come upon her with startling revelation. More than once recently she had waited in the Skunk Hollow ravine in vain for Cardross's coming, and when he had next come, though his love for her had been all the more ardent for its denial, there had been a restlessness about him which had caused her to wonder.

And his excuses had not rung convincingly even though she had believed them.

For many weeks Jess had not seen Nance Cardross. Instinctively she had come to feel that Nance's friendship would not stretch to welcome her as Blass Cardross's wife, and the element of secrecy in her love imposed upon her by Cardross more and more irked the girl, accustomed as she was by nature and habit to be open about everything.

She lingered a little longer by the men at their work, perfectly aware of Buck's sensitive regard for her feelings, but according him no shade of recognition for it. More than once, however, her eyes, centered upon his stalwart young body and winning face, turned hastily aside as his own glance lifted to hers.

In her heart Jess admired Buck, and was grateful to him.

"I think I'll ride on, Buck," she said, after a time, and even for so slight a singling of him out for special consideration the warm color leaped to the young fellow's face and his eyes glowed. "I hope yóu strike water soon."

He stepped back nearer to her, placing his hand upon her pony's neck. There was an odd satisfaction to him in touching her pony.

"Why don't you ride down the creek bed?" he asked. "It's mighty hot up there on the plains."

Jess nodded. He noticed that her cheeks had not yet regained their wonted hue; that her eyes were strained and troubled.

"I guess I will," she said. "So-long."

It was very little. Jess meant it for even less. But she had been ruled by his advice. Something almost soft had been in her manner. Buck returned to his men, his veins tingling.

Another and different sensation would have been his could he have seen Jess Kilrain when the winding of the creek had well hidden her from those she had just left. A sudden despondency settled upon her.

The pliant grace of her body withered. Into her bowed cheeks a painful crimson swept. A subtle blending of emotions, sharp but not fully comprehended, seized upon her — shame, humiliation, a palpitating dread, a sickening doubt. She straightened in her saddle, her lips setting resolutely.

The weakness left her eyes and a

certain brittle hardness crept into them. Her thoughts at that moment were not gentle thoughts. To have seen Jess Kilrain then would have been to become aware that she might be a dangerous woman to offend.

It never occurred to her to doubt the remark of the man Bill Grange, although she was aware of his twisted nature, about Cardross's interest in another woman.

Unfortunately, doubt of Cardross himself had long been latent in her heart. That her marriage with him would in minor ways be unequal, Jess was too clear-minded not to have seen from the first.

Her knowledge of this fact had given Cardross an advantage which he had been tactful enough to use without hurt to the girl's pride, but of which she had become increasingly sensitive. She was remembering it now with a new sense of strength in the remembrance.

Jess left the cool shade of the wooded creek and turned her pony westward across the plains, skirting the fringe of chaparral that ran into the deeper timber-lands further on in whose shelter lay the Skunk Hollow ravine.

She rode slowly, letting the sun cool in the cloudless sky, her shadow falling behind her in lengthening outline on the alkali dust of the parched prairie. Just as the declining sun began to take on the coppery tint of the season of drought, the girl reached the thicker woods, and entered their obscuring depths.

CHAPTER IX.

Rending the Veil.

TO Jess Kilrain's surprise, when she reached the ravine, the man stood there, apparently awaiting her coming, was not Blass Cardross. It was Earle Worthing who came forward and spoke to her, something of a grave solicitude in his manner.

"Will you get down, Jess?" he asked. "I have waited here purposely to speak with you."

He saw the quick look of comprehension that leaped to her eyes. He saw, too, the troubled concern that followed it.

"You need not have any hesitation," he assured her gently. "I am sure we shall be alone."

For an instant anger sprang to the girl's face, and resentment made her eyes hostile; but Worthing's calm regard steadied her.

"I have known it for some time, Jess," he said quietly, after he had hitched her horse and joined her on the fallen tree that lay spanning the bed of the ravine. "Of course, there are other ways I might have gone about doing what brings me here to-day. I might have spoken to your father. I might have gone to Cardross. There were reasons why I preferred coming to you."

Worthing hesitated for a long moment. His task was not an easy one, and he did not want to blunder. Then he took his courage and his good intent in his hands, and spoke to the point.

"Jess," he demanded, "has Blass Cardross ever asked you to be his wife?"

"Ah!" she cried, on a quick inward breath. "You should ha' gone to him with that question! I won't answer it."

"If you wish me to go to him with it, I shall," he responded gravely.

"An' what makes you think, Earle Worthing," she cried, her flaring anger undisguised, "that I need your help or any man's in my own affairs?"

"There are times when the strongest of us, and I know you are strong, need help. I was only seeking to save you pain, Jess—the pain I have felt in finding Blass Cardross a disloyal friend."

"An' you seek to spare pain by givin' it, is that your way?" she asked, irony curling her lip.

"Yes," he assented. "Sometimes that must be the way."

"Then you've mistaken the way," she told him, and rose from her seat, standing before him, defiant, head erect.

"I'm afraid I have," replied Worthing, and he smiled a little wryly.

It was already twilight in the deep ravine. High overhead against the colorless sky a solitary flying crow cawed raucously. Jess Kilrain had moved over toward her horse, Worthing still sitting behind her. The evening was almost without sound.

Along the path in the woods above them, coming from the direction of the Raccoon River Ranch, the rhythm of a horse's galloping hoofs rāng out.

The girl paused in her slow walk, turning her body toward Worthing. Her face had paled perceptibly, and her eyes upon Worthing's asked a mute question.

"It is Cardross," he answered, rising. "I met him riding toward town. He must have turned back. You need not be worried, Jess."

He moved quickly for his horse, but the galloping speed of the approaching horseman forestalled his intention. Before Worthing could mount, but with his horse untied, Blass Cardross rode into the little space.

He glanced from Jess to his former friend, his first astonishment giving quick place to a suspicion only too evident to those who watched him.

As the spot was on Cardross's land, Worthing felt at a certain disadvantage. To spare the girl, he said with what affability he could:

"I was just on the point of going, Cardross. I had inferred my presence would not be an intrusion to-day."

Cardross swung himself off his horse.

"For one who is so highly sensitive about trespassing," he said coldly, "it is rather odd that you should be here at all." He faced the other more squarely. "You speak of an intrusion. An intrusion upon what?"

Worthing had flushed at the first words.

"Shall I say upon your land?" he answered, his voice pitched low.

Jess Kilrain stepped forward. She was not insensible of Worthing's delicacy of motive. To profit by it stung her pride. Instinctively, too, she felt that Cardross's question had been of the nature of evasion. She put one herself which checkmated all evasion.

"Mr. Worthing," she asked, "how was you aware that Mr. Cardross met me in this ravine?"

Surprised, Worthing hesitated. An expression he caught in Cardross's swift glance at the girl as she spoke decided him.

"Because many weeks ago, as I rode along the path above there, I heard you talking in here with Blass Cardross."

Cardross wheeled upon him with no uncertain anger.

"And was that a deliberate intrusion?" he demanded hotly.

Worthing scorned to answer beyond the steady rebuke of his eyes.

"And doubtless you listened to what we said!" cried Cardross, his voice shaken now by the force of a passion he could not master.

Worthing grew taller with the breath he took.

"I heard what was said, Cardross. It brought me here to-day—that and another thing I have heard—to warn Jess Kilrain against you."

Cardross turned upon the girl.

"Since when has this man become your protector?" he asked.

Jess looked at him, a curious penetration in her clear eyes, an odd and baffling smile twisting her mouth.

"Does you admit the need of his protection?" she said, her voice so low that Worthing scarce caught the words. "Tell him, Blass, that I am to be your wife, an' you needn't talk then of his protection."

With an ugly laugh, Cardross stepped back.

"So this is a frame-up, is it?" he sneered. "You try to force my hand,

Jess Kilrain! Have I ever said you were to be my wife?"

The girl recoiled.

"I had meant to make you tell me that, Blass Cardross," she cried, vibrantly. "I come here to-day to force the truth from your cunnin' lips that have lied to me about your love, though too slick you was ever to let them give me any hold upon you. Hold upon you!" she echoed. "As though I'd lift a finger to hold you once I knew! You fraud! You coward! You liar!"

"I have never lied to you," retorted Cardross. "I loved you. I never said I'd marry you."

"Oh! you coward," she cried again.

Cardross remembered Worthing. He flung around in a blazing fury.

"Get off of my land," he shouted, "you cringing spy, and make your assignations on your own."

Worthing sprang forward. Though white to the lips under the insult, he still held himself in leash.

"I would rather not do it, Cardross," he breathed through his set teeth; "but land or no land, you shall swallow those words."

His doubled fist flung out and caught Cardross upon the mouth, a blow whose force sent the man staggering backward over the spreading root of a tree so that he tripped and fell, and lay for an instant dazed.

"Get on your horse, Jess," said Worthing, turning to the white-faced girl. "This is my business now. You must not be here."

But Jess Kilrain shook her head.

"You are wrong, Earle Worthing," she whispered hoarsely. "It is mine!"

CHAPTER X.

Aftermath.

BLASS CARDROSS got to his feet slowly, sobered in more ways than one by the summariness of his punishment. It was not to imply that he was lacking in physical courage that the fight had gone out of him for the moment.

"That is another thing for me to remember against you, Worthing," he panted, "and I promise I shall not forget it. There are more ways of killing a dog than one."

It was Jess Kilrain's bitter laughter that fell upon the silence. She had feared what he might be impelled to do. That he did nothing filled her with contempt.

"An' I was fool enough to take you for a man!" she cried.

She turned about to Worthing.

"I reckon I can ride on now, Mr. Worthing. You're safe—so long's you face him!"

Perhaps a man would not have said it, but Jess was a woman, and, though she knew it not herself just then, she was wounded cruelly. That knowledge was to come later.

Now she calmly untied her horse, and, leading him out into the center of the enclosure, mounted into the saddle unaided. A moment more, with a nod to Worthing, ignoring Cardross utterly, she put her pony clambering up the little slope to the path above. The sound of its hoofs died away in the woods.

"You have played me a dirty deal, Worthing."

"You played a dirty game. I want no words with you, Cardross. If you care for blows, I am ready, and I owe you the satisfaction."

"To what purpose?" asked Cardross. "You took me by surprise. The trick is yours this time. I do not deny it."

"As you will," returned Worthing. "I do not misunderstand."

He got into his saddle. Without further words he rode the way Jess Kilrain had gone.

Cardross was alone.

He lingered there until the night fell about him, dark and somber; and dark and somber were his thoughts. The impetus of evil was upon him, but he did not yield without a struggle.

Could he have had his way, Cardross would have preferred to do the right thing, but to have his way, right or wrong, had always been his way.

He stood aghast at the bitter fierceness of his mood at this defeat that had overtaken him. His love for Jess Kilrain had not been wholly selfish. At least, he had tried to blind himself to the selfishness of it.

And it had been sincere enough for its loss to stun him, for the girl's passionate scorn to burn deep. Curiously, the act of Worthing's castigation of itself glanced off him with relative lightness. He had provoked that.

Worthing's interference, however, he could not forgive. Worthing's witness of his humiliation at Jess Kilrain's hands he could not forget. Antagonism to his one-time friend turned to hatred.

He knew he had lost Jess irretrievably. Her love had long hung on the tenuous point of his deception, and he had realized that he could not forever hope to deceive the girl. That he should lose her to Worthing—for so his jealousy interpreted Worthing's interest—added the last fillip to his thirst for revenge.

"He'll pay for it," he muttered as he rose from the fallen tree. "He'll pay for it with interest, damn him!"

For days thereafter Jess Kilrain suffered the reaction of her scorn and anger. It was not very easy to live with Jess just then. Her worst forebodings had come true.

Slighted and humiliated where she had loved, spared an even greater humiliation through Worthing's action, her grief was colored by a sense of shame that made Jess hate herself and all about her. She was captious with her father, sharp with Agnes, and she fairly snapped at Buck Brannon when he came near her. Only to Earle Worthing did she show a saddened gentleness which might have told how deep was her gratitude.

Yet despite her treatment of Buck the young fellow was not unhappy. He knew there had been some break in her relations with Cardross, and, remembering her face that day of Bill Grange's remarks, he could have found it in his heart to repent of the rebuke he had administered to the man if so be the information had tended to open Jess Kilrain's eyes to Cardross's duplicity.

He assumed that Jess had taxed him with it and found it real. Naturally, the knowledge would bring her grief and resentment. Resentment in time would palliate the grief. Buck took heart of hope.

His hope had little enough to feed on, but Buck was possessed of a philosophy of patience.

"Never chase nothin' that you wants to come to you," he would say. "Just sit still, but set a purpose! It's all in the purpose."

Which was all well enough in its way if subject to variations. And this, too, Buck knew. One day he tried a variation.

He saw Jess pass before the stable door where he sat splicing the noose-end of a new snake lariat. The half distance of the barn lot lay between them, but hearing Buck's voice as he sang over his work, Jess looked toward him and nodded curtly.

"Can I go with you, Jess?" the young cow-puncher called.

Jess paused before the open gate of the lot.

"Go where?" she asked, unsmiling dark eyes upon him.

He looked at her, a gleam of quizzical humor lighting his face.

"Go to—heaven!"

"I ain't in the mood for heaven," she returned.

He rose, lariat and tools in hand, and moved toward her.

"I'm willin' to go the other way, then," he said. "It's all one to me."

"I reckon there's more truth than religion in that," she told him dryly, and her lips twitched.

She walked on, however, and he

beside her, down the slope of the hill and into the woods that lay behind the orchard, Jess vouchsafing few words on the way. Buck rattled on, rather inconsequently, not because he had nothing to say, but because he dare not say it, and was likewise afraid of Jess's silence.

In a little hollow where the cottonwoods grew tall about a spring Jess stopped.

"Don't you ever try list'nin' sometimes, Buck?" she asked, as she seated herself on a low stump.

"I didn't hear nothin' to listen to, an' I plumb hate a funeral, Jess."

"No one asked you to attend this one," she flashed. "Some folks can't leave even the dead in peace."

Buck's levity, the stirring of vexation he had felt, fell from him instantly. He knew the impatient words carried a confession unforeseen by Jess as she had uttered them.

He, too, spoke with undue prevision, noting only how the girl's face had changed of late, how even now she sat, a listlessness so foreign to her smiting him with keen if unwary compassion.

"Has it hurt you so bad as all that, Jess?" he asked gently,

For an instant it seemed that Jess would not resent the question. For an instant, indeed, she did not. Then the threat of her own weakness gave her strength—an ungenerous strength. Her eyes blazed with anger.

"Mind your own business, Buck Brannon," she cried. "Go back to the barn lot where you belong."

But Buck grew suddenly stubborn at that, and angry, too.

"I won't," he said. "I meant no harm, an' you know it, Jess Kilrain, an' that's more'n you took care could be said of *him!*"

The girl bounded to her feet. A white fury of passion and indignation held her dumb. Her hands clenched tightly on themselves. Her breath choked.

Buck let fall the lariat he had begun to work upon, appalled by the result he had accomplished, yet still swept by a righteous anger.

"Why does you make me say such things to you, Jess?" he demanded. "Why does you treat me like I was a dog, when you knows I'd give my life for you? You've flung insults in my teeth till my mouth is full of them, though I never meant to hurt you back."

Jess laughed hysterically.

"You're all the same," she cried. "You're worse than dogs! A woman ain't safe with no man. I'd liever trust a snake!"

Buck stopped, and took up his rope. His face was grim.

"That's what ole Eve thought in the Garden of Eden," he returned coolly, "an' she done it an' got badly bit. You're some kin to Eve, I'm a thinkin', Jess. You better read up 'bout her again an' see what her leanin' to sarpints done for her."

He walked off, lariat looped over his half-bared muscular arm, leaving Jess watching him, speechless.

CHAPTER XI.

Drought.

THE LOOP was beginning to feel the evil effects of the continued drought. The Raccoon River, drier in its bed than it had ever been known to be before, muddied in its pools by the thousands of hoofs of thirsty cattle, and all but stagnant, became a menace in itself. Disease broke out among the stock, and that ever-present pest in time of summer, the destructive screw-fly, had made its appearance among the herds.

There was work for the boys of the outfit, and Kilrain kept them at it, a constantly growing resentment spreading among them all against Cardross for his share of the trouble. Cardross's share was great.

Indeed, it might have been said it was the trouble, for the big dam he had built had practically shut off Wor-

Digitized by

thing's water supply, the river already being low. Had it not been for the latter's foresight in conserving some of the springs on Owl Creek the Loop on its ranges would have fared badly of a truth.

"Somethin's got to be done, Mr. Worthing," said Kilrain one morning. "The stock is sufferin'. There ain't a sign of the drought breakin'."

Worthing's jaw set. He turned in the saddle, looking at his foreman.

"Yes," he said. "One thing has to be done, Martin. I've held off as long as I could. I am not going to see my cattle suffer and die. I've foreseen the necessity of taking matters in my hands, and am prepared. We shall need three or four of the best of the boys. Talking hands and silent tongues, Martin."

The foreman nodded.

"There ain't a one on the outfit wouldn't be glad of the chance to smash Cardross and let any one else do all the boastin' 'bout it, Mr. Worthing."

"Still," said Worthing with a slow smile, "there's some choice. I leave that to you, Martin. Have them at your house to-night." He thought a moment. "No, it might be better to bring them to my office."

"You're thinkin' of how them sheep got back that time. I ain't never spoke to Jess 'bout that, Mr. Worthing, for Buck got my oath first, but Jess done that six for the Loop an' half a dozen for Cardross, an' to-day she'd split the favor more evenly for the Loop than that. She took care to find out afore she done it there'd be no sleep lost on the Loop if them sheep got away. An' though I ain't never spoke of it, I was sort of worried 'bout the girl an' Cardross once, but you could carve him alive now an' I b'lieve she wouldn't much mind."

"Jess's head is set on square, Martin," said Worthing; "but this is no woman's business, and it's as well that as few know of it, either before or after, as may be."

So it was that that night Worthing met Kilrain, Buck Brannon, Skull Williams, and two others in the little room he called his office and, over the cigars and cooling drinks he had laid out for them, told them of his determination.

"We've got to blow up Cardross's new dam, boys," he said. "You know that I do not usually look favorably upon violent deeds. I've stopped more than one lynching that you can remember, even though the unwritten law of this land would have justified it.

"I've made every effort to protect myself in this thing in an orderly way, but starvation and thirst and disease won't wait on courts of law. My cattle are being destroyed just as surely as though they were stolen and killed, and we've our own law for that in the cattle country. There's danger in this for you, however, and I want you, each one, to realize it, and withdraw now if you'd rather."

"Withdraw!" exclaimed Skull Williams, grinning. "Oh, we'll withdraw in time, but the time ain't come. There ain't no one goin' to beat us on the withdrawin' when the dandermite's ready to speak."

The others echoed his sentiments.

"Very well, then," said Worthing; "we'll do it to-morrow night. Kilrain and I will be at the Moccasin Ford by eight. You boys join us there. You had better slip off from the mess-house one by one so there 'll be no talk."

Before they separated details had been arranged.

Perry Green volunteered to take the explosives over that coming morning before daybreak and cache them near the spot that he might also make certain examinations without danger of interruption from any of the Cardross outfit or the men employed about the building of the dam.

"An' so, if you've nothin' more to say to me now, Mr. Worthing," the big fellow offered, "I'll go an' knock off a few hours' sleep, an' you'd better

come along, too, Buck, for I'll want you with me in the mornin'."

It was just at that moment that a shadow, lurking in the night outside close under one of the open windows of Earle Worthing's office, fell back into the heavier gloom cast by the elms surrounding the house, and made for the road leading to the corrals and the barns.

And as it did so something lighter than a shadow, more like a faint glow of lightness, moved in the blackness of the woodshed, hesitated, and, at the sound of footsteps on the rear porch of the house, stole again into the obscurity from which it had started. Past it went Green and Buck Brannon, talking earnestly in low tones. A little later two of the other men went by. Still later came Kilrain alone.

The waiting shadow moved quickly forward and joined him.

"Jess!" cried Kilrain. "What does you mean by followin' me here in this way?"

"'Twarn't you I followed, father. Come on while I tell you what I've seen."

CHAPTER XII.

Warnings.

JESS led the way out of the enclosure about Worthing's house and to the road beyond. There was something in her manner, a determination and a seriousness, that held her father silent. He had not understood the girl's mood of late, the evident break in her relations with Cardross and his sister scarce serving, in his preconception of them, to justify Jess's erratic behavior.

That she might have been led by curiosity to follow him and the other men to their meeting with Worthing was a distasteful thought to him. That it could have been anything other than curiosity did not enter Kilrain's mind.

Her words recurred to him.

"What have you seen, Jess?" he asked.

She answered his question by another.

"Does you remember, father, what I said to you 'bout Bill Grange?"

"Yes," responded Kilrain slowly. "I think I do. I remember you never liked him, Jess."

"I never trusted him," she corrected. "Pig's eyes an' a blue jay's tongue, an' a chronic grouch. The only honest thing about him is his giveaway."

"Oh, no," said Kilrain. "You're too hard on him. Bill's surly, but he ain't a bad fellow, Jess."

"Ain't he? Then why'd he track you an' Buck Brannon an' Skull an' Perry an' the others up here tonight an' listen under the window while you talked inside? I know he done it, for I saw him fidgetin' roun' after you an' the others had gone an' then sneak off after you, an' I tracked him. If you was sayin' anythin' you didn't want no one to hear, he heard it. That's all."

"You're sure of that, Jess?" Kilrain's voice bespoke his annoyance.

"Am I sure I see this tree here?" the girl asked, brushing a small elm with the tips of her scornful fingers. "'Course it might ha' been Aunt Agnes hoverin' roun' you with wraps so's you wouldn't ketch cold, father, when you come out in this warm, night air; but if it was, she wore Bill Grange's clothes an' his body, too."

Kilrain meditated in a growing uneasiness, through which some incredulity persisted.

"I can't understand it," he muttered. "So far as I know he has no cause to make trouble."

"'Ceptin' that he is jealous of you favorin' Buck Brannon," said the girl. "An' it may be, father, some one else is favorin' him. He seems to know a heap 'bout goin's on at the Raccoon River Range."

"If you mean Blass Cardross," commented Kilrain severely, "I won't

b'lieve it of him, Jess. He's doin' wrong things to Earle Worthing, but he ain't a scoundrel. He fights open."

In the uncertain light of the stars Jess looked at her father, a curious smile upon her lips. He couldn't see either the pain or the tenderness that suffused her eyes.

"You'd have to be learned how to do a mean thing, wouldn't you, father?" she asked, her hand upon his arm in unusual caress. "What a happy woman my mother must ha' been with you!"

In that moment Kilrain realized that Jess was unhappy, and the realization also contradicted his recent estimate of Blass Cardross with a force no mere words would have carried, though now the words came vehemently, too.

"Blass Cardross is a scoundrel, but you keep your eye on Grange, father. He ain't to be trusted, an' he has no use for Buck Brannon. I don't know what you was all talkin' 'bout this night, but I reckon if I throwed a big enough stone at it I could hit somewhere close."

"I reckon you could, Jess," her father said, "an' with you chuckin' it 'twouldn't ha' to be so all-firedly big a stone either. But that ain't sayin' you has any *speakin'* acquaintance with it, my girl."

Jess went to her room upon reaching the house. The unrest of her mind was augmented by the sullen humor of the night. Hot and still it lay over the parched earth, the skies cloudless yet veiling the stars in a nebulous haze, the far-off horizon pulsing with continual heat lightning, pale, and ominous of unbroken drought.

The girl wheeled her light bed beside the window and, propping herself up with the pillows, lay wide awake, her eyes on the vague outlines of the silent plains.

She watched the lightning incessantly blinking. So warm was the night that the fitful breeze coming through the window was more oppressive than the absence of it. The contact of her pillows became unendurable.

Jess flung them aside, leaning her lightly clad body against the framework of the bed. She wondered what plan was afoot that had taken her father and those others to Worthing's house. Water she knew the Loop must have soon if a fearful loss of cattle was to be avoided, and water was not to be had unless it came down the bed of the Raccoon River. It took no very great shrewdness to see that.

It took rather sharp eyes, however, to see any object on the plains just then; though, as Jess dropped lower on her elbows, she thought she saw some moving blur against the feverish flickering of the lightning. She kept very still, as though stillness gave acuter vision, and waited.

The lightning lifted, quivered, and ceased. Upon its glow the dark shadow of a man's body fell and was lost, was caught again less distinctly and more distant, and appeared no more.

But Jess had seen enough to recognize in the rapidly walking man the big figure of Bill Grange as he headed down the trail toward the Raccoon River Ranch, that trail which would take him past the Skunk Hollow with its ravine whose memory now had become so hateful to the girl.

She sat up quickly, cautiously, despite the needlessness of caution, waited a moment, and then, scarcely with any coherent purpose, slipped her feet down to the floor, and went across the room to her clothes and began to dress.

At that moment the cuckoo clock in the dining-room was striking two hours past midnight.

CHAPTER XIII.

Before the Dawn.

IT was not yet dawn when Buck Brannon stirred from his slumber and roused Perry Green, who that night had shared his cabin. They lost

no time in getting into their clothes and out of the house.

"I'll get the horses, Perry," volunteered Buck. "You kin go for the blow-up. I ain't altogether hankerin' after the honor you done me."

"Shucks!" exclaimed the other. "Dandermite's innocent, Buck, till you hit her; then she hits back. Git the horses, an' I'll be with you in three shakes of one of them sheep's tails what's at the bottom of all this trouble."

"You ain't never said a truer word, Perry," rejoined Buck, as he turned toward the barns, walking without any great attempt at secrecy down the lane between the row of silent cabins.

There would have been no need for secrecy had all within been asleep; but Jess Kilrain, waiting she scarcely knew why, heard Buck's footfalls as he passed the house. More than that, she heard the clap made by a loose board in the lot fence as he climbed over and sprang to the ground inside. She could hear even the shrill creaking of the overhead wheel on the barn door as it ran along its groove when Buck opened it.

That some of the boys were carrying out some plan devised in their conference with Worthing was obvious. What it was exactly Jess could not guess, but the previous sight she had had of Grange's hurried flight toward the Raccoon River range gave her a clue. That action had been meant to forestall the result of this other action, and it could imply only danger and risk to these others. So Jess reasoned in those few moments that she stood by her window irresolute.

A moment more, and she had swung her body through the window and dropped to the ground. Running forward, she halted in the obscurity of the mess-house wall, the barn lot lying just beyond.

Leaning there, she heard the coming horses and the subdued voices of the men. The gate clicked back into place as they rode out, keeping on toward the east.

In that east an indeterminate gray darkness was now visible, as though the sultry night was cooling there into its ashes. Jess knew it was the approach of dawn. In its vague lifting of the night's gloom she could see the two men upon their horses. They were riding slowly, it might have seemed carefully, though the watching girl gave no thought to that. She ran out into the road after them, hailing them softly.

"Jess Kilrain, by all the jumpin' devils!" cried Perry Green, and Buck, too, drew in his horse. "I'll be damned if she didn't come nigh to makin' me drap these purty sky-rockets!"

Jess did not beat about the bush.

"Are you callin' on Blass Cardross?" she asked curtly, her sharp glances sweeping from their faces to the objects they carried so carefully. "'Cause if you are, Buck an' Perry, you won't be handin' him no valentine. He'll be expectin' you."

She could catch the swift look of suspicion in Buck Brannon's face. "I come to tell you that you was ridin' into danger, Buck Brannon," she said proudly. "'Tain't nothin' to me what you mean to do to his'n, an' I ain't warned him, though another has. I give you that straight goods for fair play an' love of the Loop, an' I didn't know who you was when I come out here neither."

"But what in— That is, what in the name of smothered milk—" burst out Perry Green, "does all this mean, Jess? Who's gone to who tellin' what? An' what does you know 'bout it?"

She told them then, and they sat there pondering her information in silence.

"Trick's turned, Buck, I'm a thinkin'," said Green after a time. "If Jess ain't makin' no mistake we'd be makin' one to go out there an' be seen. I'm goin' to wake up Martin Kilrain an' let him know 'bout this." He faced

the girl. "You're a wonder, Jess; blamed if you ain't!"

"There ain't nothin' wonderful in bein' kept awake by the heat," said Jess, "an' I was always fairly good at 'rithmetic. Some folks"—and she raised her indignant eyes to Buck Brannon—"can't never make two an' two add four 'thout countin' on their fingers an' gittin' five."

Green got down from his saddle, placing by the side of the orchard fence the parcel he had held.

"Gimme yours, Buck," he suggested, "or you an' Jess may be makin' skyrockets of yourselves 'fore I git back. Wait here till I see Kilrain."

He moved away. When he had gone Buck swung from his horse.

"I'm sure I don't know why I stayed here with you," observed Jess.

"P'r'aps you is better at addin' than subtractin'," Buck ventured.

"P'r'aps," assented Jess. "It 'd be hard to add to your nerve, Buck; an' seems 'tain't possible to lessen it. I don't know why I'm talkin' to you at all."

"It might be easier to say how," he answered, his laugh amused.

Jess turned to Perry Green's horse, giving her companion no reply beyond the protest of her back.

Day was breaking now. Over the wide plain an exquisite, tender gray was stealing, soft and cool. The dampness of dew made the parched earth fresh and sweet. The silence was that of the still sea at ebb.

The subtle influence of the primal hour struck a sudden seriousness to the young cow-puncher's heart. His eyes rested on the girl before him, and the bitterness that had been his died in the onrush of his love. He strode over to her, standing beside her, his arm outstretched along the neck of the horse she was fondling.

"Jess," he asked, with a vibrant tenderness in his rich voice, "why does we keep on scrappin' so when there ain't a thing I could do in this world I wouldn't do to make you happy? You knows I love you, Jess. You knows your love would make me the happiest man on earth. Does you have to scorn me so, Jess Kilrain?"

Jess spoke so softly that her voice was scarce above a murmur.

"I don't scorn you, Buck; but I ain't no love for you—or for any man." She looked at him with a quick fearlessness. "We scrap," she said, "for the same reason fire hisses when it touches water. You make me mad plumb through, Buck, with your self-assurance."

He smiled sadly.

"My self-assurance! Why, it's all bluff, Jess. How can I be self-assured when I knows I ain't got a leg to stan' on? 'Course I ain't a catterpiller!"

"You can sting like one," said the girl, her lips quivering between a smile and tears.

"An' you couldn't love me if you was to try, Jess?"

"I couldn't try. I don't want to try. Don't talk to me of love. I ain't no use for any man."

It might not have been wise, but it was characteristic of Buck to say:

"Then I'm goin' to make you come to have use for me, Jess. There ain't no soil so poor an' measly you can't make love grow in it."

Jess laughed. Strangely, it was not an angry laugh, and she turned her eyes away to the eastern horizon, flushed now to a delicate pink and rose where the unseen sun was heralding his coming.

CHAPTER XIV.

Pent-Up Waters.

SO much of Worthing's plan miscarrying — for Kilrain had discountenanced the initial step upon hearing Perry Green's story — Jess decided that she would herself ride over near the dam that day and report how the situation lay.

"If I'm seen, father," she had said, "'twon't do no harm, where they

would suspect any of the boys. If no one's there I can see just as well as a man. I don't b'lieve they're ready to turn the water in through the upper locks yet, though 'course now they'll guard the work well. So much for not bein' warned by me 'bout that slippery eel, Grange."

But to the girl's surprise, when she had drawn near the new dam, riding always in the sheltering woods along the river-bank, there was no sign of any work going on. The stone and concrete wall blocking the river's course lay unguarded, the water pent up beyond trickling around one corner of its base in an improvised channel.

Nowhere were there any workmen visible.

They had not been able to mislead Jess as to the object of the expedition her warning had prohibited, and now her suspicions stirred. Had Cardross, informed by the man Grange, and unaware of that fact being suspected, determined to play into Worthing's hands by the semblance of ignorance, while in reality he only waited to entrap the men of the Loop?

Jess had developed a profound distrust of Blass Cardross.

She hitched her horse in the chaparral, and went boldly out into the river-bed. She could vault the little stream of water that ran close beside one bank. Going up to the dam, she walked about it, finally climbing up one side until she stood upon its top, looking down into the big basin.

Across its dry surface she could see the comparative abundance of water.

At that moment Blass Cardross climbed up on the dam upon which Jess stood, and came slowly toward her.

They had not met since that eventful evening in the Skunk Hollow, and the girl, somewhat startled and annoyed to be found where she was by Cardross now, nevertheless quickly mastered her discomfiture. Cardross was the more ill at ease of the two, and the very fact lent a certain gravity to the occasion. He looked at her in silence.

"I didn't expect to find you here," said Jess, "or I wouldn't 'a' come."

"It is a funny place to meet again, Jess."

He spoke with evident nervousness. The weeks had not left him without his own suffering.

"Funny! You call this a funny place, Blass Cardross! Does you know what your funny place is doin' for thousands of poor dumb brutes—drivin' 'em to their slow death for want of that water your funny work here keeps away from 'em—keeps away there in abundance! If that's your idea of fun I hope you can laugh hearty over it."

So unexpected by him had come her vehement outburst that Cardross for the instant had nothing to say. His face clouded painfully.

"You wouldn't have talked that way to me once," he muttered, unthinking.

Jess laughed, a ringing contempt for them both in the sound.

"You're dead right there!" she cried, her voice quivering. "There was a time, Blass Cardross, when I was plumb fool enough to take you for a man. I was even drunk enough with my folly to love you. How you must 'a' laughed at me for that! Dreamin' of bein' your wife! Askin' you to make me so! How patient you was with me not to let the cat out of the bag afore she jumped out!

"It don't matter now," she went on, catching her breath. "I've looked at my face so often in that muddy water that I've learned to know it, Blass Cardross. I've been wantin' to tell you this—wantin' to tell you that the hurt is gone though a hate that sometimes makes me afraid of myself grows an' grows. I come here to-day to see how mean a man you really was, an' I see."

She swept her arm toward the pent-up waters, scorn unutterable blazing in her dark eyes.

He moved closer to her, a glowing anger in his face.

"Is that all you came here to-day to see, Jess Kilrain? Have you no fear of me that you come here saying these things to me? You have flayed me with your tongue. No man would have dared to say the half of what you have said to me. We are alone here on my place. What if I made you sorry for those words?"

She sprang back on the narrow ledge of the dam.

"What? For the first touch of your hand upon me I'll lay your face open with this quirt. Earle Worthing ain't here to knock you down. Just try me —if I ain't a man!"

"And then," he cried, beside himself with rage at her taunt, "I'd kill you, Jess Kilrain."

"Would you? P'r'aps you would an' p'r'aps you wouldn't. Try it, if you dare!"

Cardross sprang toward her to be met by the stinging lash of the quirt under which the livid welt leaped like a furrow across the dark skin.

"Curse you!" he cried. "That blow will cost you yourself, Jess Kilrain!"

Then his arms closed about her.

Wild with her fear and anger, Jess struggled, careless if she went over the edge of the wall herself so long as she drew Cardross with her. Near it they came more than once, but by some chance escaped, and the girl began to weaken in the unequal combat, sick to the soul with the dread and the horror of what she fought.

Out of the chaparral behind them there came the crack of a pistol.

Cardross, back toward the basin of the dam, staggered under the impact of a blow unseen and unheard, his hold upon the girl loosening. Soundlessly he reeled backward, toppled over the edge, his body rolling over and over like a bag of sand down the slanting wall to the basin below where it lay face up-gazing and very still.

In dazed horror Jess turned from the sight at the sound of running steps beside her.

CHAPTER XV.

Fate.

WHEN the men rode back at dinner-time along the home trail, Buck let his horse drop behind the others, turning aside to a bunch of cattle strayed to a hollow at one side, and when his companions had ridden on, scarce mindful of his action, he struck off south along the line of the river woods.

It occurred to him to give a casual inspection to Cardross's actions that day upon the dam. If anything were needed to whet his indignation sharper against Blass Cardross it would have been amply supplied by his recent ministrations to the suffering cattle of the Loop.

He had long been angry with Blass Cardross.

He had always distrusted him. That Cardross had trifled with Jess Kilrain he suspected. That he had caused her suffering he knew. But if it had all come to an end now, and Jess were free, Buck could find it in his heart to forget Cardross.

He was thinking of him then, however, as he rode slowly through the woods, the heat of the day shut out beyond the grateful shade.

High in the tree-tops above him crows cawed noisily, their voices softened into music by the heavy somnolence of the day. Quail whistled on the plains. The strident rasping of innumerable locusts vibrated on the still air, and mere specks upon the blue sky circled the watchful turkey-buzzards.

Buck rode on a ridge above that which Jess had followed, and thus he came after a time within partial view of the dam without having noticed the girl's pony, tied in the woods below him.

He hitched his own horse, and not

unmindful of caution climbed down the slope to the lower level, though still keeping the river-bed some distance below. On a slight projection he halted, turning his gaze down upon the dam.

At the sight of Jess Kilrain standing there talking with Cardross the life fairly went out of Buck's veins.

She had lied to him, then, after all! She had come here seeking her lover! Perhaps she had come to warn him! So great was the shock to Buck, so stunning the force of his sudden disillusion, that he hung there incapable of action, incapable, too, of any shade of reasoning, seeing merely with his physical eye the material fact before him.

Even the cautious action of the girl as she stepped away from Cardross's angry threat did not serve to illumine Buck's stupor of surprise, but when he saw her arm reach out and the leaping lash of the quirt take Cardross across the face, the young cow-puncher straightened his lithe body with a cry, short and sharp, and suddenly comprehending.

Before he could move further, Cardross had grappled with Jess Kilrain.

The danger of that struggle horrified Buck. On the edge of a wall that, on the side nearer him, fell sheer thirty feet to a mass of jagged rock and stone the man and woman reeled perilously. Buck dare not call out to them lest it be to hasten their threatened danger.

He could not hope to reach them in saving time. But one thing remained to do.

His nerves steadied miraculously. Revolver in hand Buck waited—waited until in the rapid twisting of those bodies that of the man for an instant stood side toward him and inclined somewhat away from that of the girl.

Buck fired.

Cardross reeled and, as though pushed backward, toppled quickly out of sight.

Thereafter it had taken Buck but an instant to reach Jess Kilrain's side.

Blass Cardross was quite dead.

Buck knew that he would be, for it was seldom, indeed, that his aim ever missed, and there had been no mercy in his soul when he had taken aim. Neither had those words he had once uttered to Martin Kilrain, as it had turned out with ominous prophecy, been vain words. He had done as he had sworn he would do!

Over Cardross's dead body Jess and the young cow-puncher looked at each other. Wide-eyed terror now was on the girl's face. A grim seriousness set the strong jaws of the man.

Slowly Jess spoke.

"He threatened to kill me, Buck! Remember that. He threatened to kill me! I b'lieve in another minute he'd ha' done it. See here!"

She turned her chin upward. On the slender whiteness of her throat the livid print of relentless fingers gave a ghastly corroboration.

"He was mad!" she sobbed dryly. "He must ha' been mad!"

Buck shivered. "He was bad!" he muttered. "I ain't sorry I killed him!"

He stooped and took up the body of Blass Cardross, carrying it to a little tool-shed near. There he laid it down out of the fierce heat of the sun. Against the wall rested Cardross's rifle and a book he had been reading when Jess Kilrain had come upon the dam. Buck pointed to them in silence, turning to Jess in the doorway.

"There was murder in his heart today," he said, after a moment. "Come, Jess! I've work to do while I'm free to do it. You must ride back home alone."

CHAPTER XVI.

The Twist of Circumstance.

FOR some minutes after Jess had reluctantly left him, obdurate, indeed, to her importunities, Buck stood thinking.

"I reckon I'm the special agent of Providence for the job," he said quiet-

ly to himself. "I always wondered how it 'd feel to know you was at the end of your rope. It sure must put a premium on wickedness."

Yet he had no sense of doing any wrong thing in what he now set about doing. Neither did Buck's conscience trouble him for what he had done.

He made for the little metal house some distance off, where he knew Cardross's men had stored their explosives, hesitated not an instant to break open the lock with the heavy crowbar he had found in the tool-shed, and thereafter went about his task with a coolness and thoroughness which he meant should not miscarry.

He laid his mines, using such purposed openings as he found in the masonry of the dam, trusting to heavy charges to do the work effectually.

He set the alarm with which Cardross's battery was furnished, and then going for his horse, Buck rode upstream and waited. He could only trust that no one would approach the dam from the Loop direction during the few intervening minutes.

The shock of the ensuing explosion shattered windows miles away.

It almost knocked down the horse upon which Buck sat waiting in a growing uneasiness lest after all he had not builded well. And it did more than that. It shattered the retaining locks behind which Raccoon River was pent up, and the released water went roaring down over the shattered dam, overflowing the natural bed of the stream and tearing through the underbrush in a wild sweep of rushing, crashing devastation.

Buck, sitting his horse, laughed grimly.

"Now," he soliloquized, with a humor that might have sounded ghastly had any been there to hear it, "if my life goes out at the end of a rope, I'll know I've done more damage than killin' one worthless cayute."

He rode for miles before the freshet he had loosened, spending itself gradually, gave him the desired opportunity to cross over and head his horse for home, for he had waited on the wrong side of the destruction he had wrought.

And so when he at last, sober and somewhat weary, reached the stables of the Loop, it was to learn from many excited voices of the utter demolition of Cardross's dam, and the finding of Cardross's own mangled body beneath the débris.

Oddly this unexpected twist in the coil of events struck Buck dumb. He heard Skull Williams saying:

"Cardross must ha' repented of his meanness, poor devil, an' gone out there to undo all he had done. He'd ordered no one to go out there to-day. Queer, ain't it, Buck?"

Skull looked with reminiscent meaning of their own interrupted designs at the white face of Buck Brannon.

Another on the outskirts of the little group was watching Buck, an agony of entreaty in her eyes.

Where he stood, Buck ungirthed his saddle and slipped the bridle from his jaded horse. Striking the animal gently on its flank, he sent it on to its stall, dropping the saddle by the wall of the stable. In silence still he passed through the group of men and joined Jess Kilrain.

"You've often swore you loved me, Buck," the girl murmured brokenly. "If your words wasn't just chaff, for the love of God keep a still tongue in your head now. Don't stand here talkin' to me. They're watching us."

Buck turned and moved away.

"Now, ain't that just like Buck Brannon!" exclaimed Skull Williams softly. "He had no cause to love Blass Cardross, but ten to one he's grievin' at his death."

Buck was not, though.

An act for which he had had no sense of guilt was, by force of circumstance, taking on the horrid secrecy of crime. With the passing of every minute Buck felt his feet slipping deeper in the mire. He had not foreseen that his full confession would involve Jess Kilrain.

He knew the men were watching him, talking about him, and a quick intuition made him aware of what they said.

He wheeled in his tracks and came back to them.

"I'm glad Blass Cardross is dead," he cried. "He was a scoundrel an' a coward, an' all the more so 'cause he needn't ha' been with all the good that was in him. Don't think I'm cryin' 'cause he's dead, Skull. I ain't."

He caught up his saddle and bridle and plunged through the open stable door, leaving them not a little shocked, if the truth were told.

Skull jerked his ugly head.

"An' that's Buck, too," he said, more wisely than he knew. "He's plumb rotten with honesty."

"Don't talk so much, Skull Williams," came Jess Kilrain's nervous voice as she turned to leave. "You rattle like a rale death's-head."

In the low laughter that followed Perry Green rose and detached himself from the group. He strolled leisurely into the stable, where he stopped before Buck engaged in rubbing down his lathered accouterments. A quizzical gleam came into the big fellow's eyes.

"Buck," he asked softly, "how many sticks of dandermite would you reckon a safe an' effectual charge to blast the walls of Jerusalem the Golden, an' turn loose the River Jordan?"

Buck frowned. In spite of himself he laughed.

"I'm in the devil of a mess, Perry," he said; "but 'tain't just as you're figgerin'."

The big cowpuncher nodded. He was very grave now.

"Go slow, ole man," he offered, "an' take it easy. If a skunk gits smashed when you chop down a hollow tree, 'tain't sayin' he wouldn't ha' soused you first if he'd got the chance."

In the mean while Martin Kilrain was giving the man, Bill Grange, his walking orders. Grange received them in sullen resentment.

"You'll live to see the day you'll be sorry you done this, Kilrain," he threatened. "You're keen enough in your sweepin' 'fore Earle Worthing's door. Don't forgit your own. I know who's put you up to this an' why she done it. An' I'll tell you another thing, Martin Kilrain. Blass Cardross ain't never blowed up his dam hisself. Your friend, Buck Brannon done it."

CHAPTER XVII.

Under Pressure.

THAT night Earle Worthing was in his office.

The death of Cardross had shocked him painfully, wiping out, so far as he was concerned, all scores against his old friend. He had ridden over at once to be of any service to Nance Cardross which she might permit, which, indeed, had proved to be of no service at all.

For Nance Cardross, idolizing her brother, and in a manner attributing his death to the feud between Worthing and him, had at this juncture refused to see Worthing.

And there were haunting doubts in Worthing's own mind about the whole occurrence. Kilrain had told him of the treachery of Grange, a treachery which, at Worthing's own advice, they had agreed to overlook for the moment, not neglecting to keep the man's actions under close surveillance.

Yet Grange was not to be blamed for this, for all day he had been in Kilrain's sight.

Jess Kilrain had admitted to her father that she had talked with Cardross at the dam. What her story lacked in detail it was reasonable enough to believe was accounted for by the girl's horror at the subsequent event.

But Worthing, remembering how just a cause Jess had for revenge upon Cardross, could not banish a sinister fear. Yet Jess could not have

wrecked the dam, for she was at home when that occurred.

Worthing stopped in his restless pacing of the floor at the sound of a knock upon the door. He knew by the first glimpse at the face of the man who entered the room that he was to learn something more definite about the catastrophe.

"You, Buck!" he cried cordially. "I'm mighty glad to see you. I am worried clear through. Sit down and help yourself."

He pushed chair and cigars to his visitor, continuing his own pacing of the room.

"I'm 'feared I'm goin' to have to add to your worry, Mr. Worthing."

Worthing glanced around hurriedly.

"You know something about this terrible thing that has happened, Buck? Tell me what it is. I need not assure you of my discretion."

Buck looked fearlessly into Worthing's kindly eyes. There was no sign of faltering in his own manner, though his usual bright face was clouded.

"I knows all about it," he said calmly, "for I done it—done it all!"

"You done it—you did it!" echoed Worthing. "What do you mean, Buck?"

The young fellow squared his shoulders.

"I shot Blass Cardross through his false heart," he said. "Then, thinkin' I was the least to suffer for doin' it, I blowed up the dam. I ain't sorry for either doin', Mr. Worthing, though things has messed themselves badly, an' I knows I've got to answer for 'em. That's all that troubles me," he added —"the messin'."

Worthing found his chair. His hand was trembling. He was far more disturbed than Buck.

"Why did you do this thing, Buck?" he asked. "I do not mean about the dam."

"I can't tell you, sir. All I can say is, it had to be done!"

The eyes of both men met. In Buck's Worthing read a calm determination that was not to be shaken. In Worthing's Buck read the slow and certain dawning of perfect comprehension.

There was a long and heavy silence.

"You have said nothing of this to any one, Buck?"

"Perry Green suspects somethin' of it—the least of it."

Worthing got up from his chair once more in troubled thought. He did not turn at the low but steady voice of Buck Brannon.

"I come to you, Mr. Worthing, as in duty bound. We've been more like friends than rancher an' cow-puncher. In the mornin' "—and Buck here rose himself—"I'm goin' into the town to give myself up. 'Tain't easy, I allow; but I ain't squealin', an' the law's the law."

Worthing faced about.

"And you are not going to do anything of the sort, Buck," he cried vehemently. "The law!" He laughed, a bitter derision in his voice. "Did the law do anything when I appealed to it? Does the law make men like you? I am the law on the Loop, and you stay right here."

Buck smiled. There was a warm light in the eyes he turned upon Worthing. But he shook his head.

"I couldn't live, Worthing," he said softly, "with this thing shut up inside of me. I couldn't look a cow in the face an' feel I was a man with this hid in me like a sin."

Worthing halted before his cow-puncher.

"Not for her sake, Buck?" he asked, quietly repressed. "Think of that. You do not know the law you would honor. It is famed for stirring up all that happens after it has allowed it to happen. You might hold your silence, but the law would ferret things out. I myself would have to speak against him—against her. She would have to speak. Think of that —of Martin Kilrain, of me, of Cardross's sister—of Jess herself!"

Buck's head drooped.

"You make a coward of me!" he cried. "Don't do that, Worthing."

"God made a man of you first," said Worthing. "You need not fear, Buck."

"It's that man I'm thinkin' of," murmured Buck, and his voice shook. "Mebbe 'tain't much, but it's plumb everythin'! I must, Worthing. I must!"

The door was pushed gently open. Mrs. Worthing entered, starting back at sight of her son's visitor.

"I thought no one was with you, Earle. You have been a stranger, Buck, lately. Some one is here wishing to see you, Earle."

"Some one!"

"Jess Kilrain," she whispered. "Poor child!"

"Ah!" exclaimed Worthing, while Buck lifted anxious eyes.

"Show Jess in here, mother," Worthing added on a quick impulse. "You won't mind sitting alone a little longer."

He walked over to his mother and placed a hand upon her arm. Mrs. Worthing glanced at Buck. She had not needed the hint. She did not resent it. Her confidence in her son was implicit.

"Now, Buck," said Worthing, "be reasonable. This is too serious a matter for any of us to stand upon quibbles. It may not be life or death, but it is the happiness of many. Come in!" he called.

The door opened, and Jess Kilrain came into the room, stopping abruptly as her glance fell and rested upon Buck Brannon. Worthing, going forward, closed the door behind her.

CHAPTER XVIII.

Checkmate.

FOR a brief moment Jess stood looking at Buck, her startled eyes unwavering. Without noticing Worthing she came further into the room.

"So you wouldn't do what I asked you!" she cried. "You wouldn't keep quiet when I asked you to!"

Worthing caught the half-smothered words. He gave Buck no chance to reply to them.

"Sit down, Jess."

Command rang in the tones, kindly but firm. Almost unconsciously Jess obeyed it. Worthing drew up his own chair.

"Jess," he said, and he looked clearly into the girl's eyes as he spoke, "Buck has told me nothing of what happened to-day except what has concerned himself. I know no details. I do not want to know them."

He leaned closer to her, lowering his voice to a whisper. "I want silence to rest on it all—as silence has rested on what has gone before."

Buck had risen, and moved over to the open window, the first touch of bitterness at his fate assailing him. He meant that no word of his should ever involve Jess Kilrain's name. Yet her seeming mistrust of him wounded Buck in his tenderest spot.

In the silence of the room he heard her question to Worthing: "What has he told you?"

"That he blew up the dam—that it was he, not Blass Cardross."

Buck could not doubt the relief in the girl's next words: "An' that is all?" she cried. "He said no more than that?"

Before Worthing could answer Buck stood beside him.

"You shall not lie for me, Worthing," he said and turned, facing Jess. "I told him I shot Blass Cardross an' then blew up the dam, Jess. There'd been a long grudge atween us two. I went over there meanin' mischief, I went a purpose, mad at seein' the sufferin' of the cattle on the Loop. An' havin' done what I done, I mean to make a clean breast of just what I done to-morrow 'fore the law."

Silent, wide-eyed in a palsying terror, the girl looked into his face.

"You won't do that!" she cried

at length. "You won't let him do that, Earle Worthing! It would mean they'd hang you, Buck!"

"P'r'aps!" he assented. "They've hung men for less an' let 'em off for more. I'll take what's comin' to me."

Then Worthing expostulated, pleaded, exhausted his powers of persuasion. Buck remained firm.

"There ain't nothin' else I wouldn't do for you, Worthing," he protested, swayed by an emotion that trembled in his voice. "I can't do this. I'd despise myself forever for a coward. 'Twon't touch no one else. Miss Cardross knows we was enemies. We almost come to blows before her wunst. But I've always faced the music, an' I ain't goin' to live a lie now."

He stood a moment, head bent, showing the effort it cost him to hold his own against Worthing's pleas. He straightened suddenly.

"I reckon I might as well be goin' now," he murmured. "This is worse 'n hangin' already—if hang I've got to!"

He moved toward the door, but, on the instant, Jess Kilrain, who had sat watching him, a strange warring of emotions in her white face, sprang from her chair, calling to him to stop.

"I've somethin' to say," she cried. "Listen to me, both of you: You know I loved Blass Cardross. For many months I've loved him, thinkin' all the time he loved me, too, an' was goin' to make me his wife. You know, Earle Worthing, how far that dream was from the truth. Day after day, week after week, month after month he kept puttin' me off—an' still, like the fool I was, I didn't see, didn't guess—never reckoned he was the man he was till that day you know of when you knocked him down in the Skunk Hollow for what he said.

"Then I knew—knew what a fool I'd been, an' how he'd lied to me, lurin' me on, foolin' me, waitin' always for his hour! I hated him then—like a woman hates who's been treated so. My lips burned with the mem'ry of his kisses. I hated myself. I hated every one who looked at me. I hated you, Buck Brannon, for darin' to say to me the things you said."

She moved and stood before them.

"I hadn't seen him until to-day—over there on the dam. I hadn't known till then how dead my love was or how live my hate was. It leaped in me like a fire. He saw then he'd lost me forever—lost what he wanted of me—an' the devil in him came out."

She faced Worthing only now.

"Buck Brannon tells you that he shot Blass Cardross dead," she cried. "He lies! He lies to save me! Ask him if I did not strike that man 'cross the face with my quirt! Ask him if we didn't struggle on the dam! But don't b'lieve him when he says he shot Blass Cardross.

"'Twas me that done it, an' sent him dead over the wall after he'd threatened to kill me an' insulted me worse than death—an' if Buck Brannon goes to the law an' says he done it, I'll go, too, an' it'll be his word 'gainst mine, an' it'll be me they will believe—I swear it to God!"

She ceased, heaving breath catching in her throat, looking from one to the other as they watched her in dumb amazement. Before they could speak to stop her she had gone.

CHAPTER XIX.

Rushing Waters.

THAT was the strangest night in Buck's life. Alone in his cabin he lay sleepless, thinking of all that Jess Kilrain's impassioned action might mean. As he lay there thinking, the soft night air coming in upon him from the sleeping plains, the arguments Worthing had used recurred to Buck.

In reality what he had done had been justified—how much so Jess's recital had made horribly clear. Wearied out at last by the circling of his thoughts, Buck fell asleep.

Though he did not know it then, Jess had won!

She took her victory as a matter of course—so far, at least, as her outward behavior showed. She evaded meeting Buck all she could and, as the days went by, her bearing fell once more almost into its accustomed manner—almost, yet not altogether. She never quarreled with Buck now. She never teased him. Oftentimes, restless and dissatisfied himself, the young fellow wished she had. In some subtle way she had receded from him into a more unapproachable distance.

In truth, Jess was on guard. A wonderful thing had happened to her. Even in that shocked moment when she had stood looking down upon Blass Cardross's dead body it had been of Buck that she had thought. He had saved her! He was thereby himself in danger!

Strange, nameless emotions stirred in her heart as she had watched him, so clean and capable, so fine and human, so wholly hers in his love. The scales had fallen from her eyes, yet even as her admiration had grown and that first sweet, wild sense of her power over his power, fear had grown, too, in Jess Kilrain's awakened heart.

So Jess had ridden from him that day, her soul in a tumult of feelings of which not the least were the wonder and marvel at herself for her blindness, her folly, the new, quick-bounding capacity within her for joy that seemed to be sweeping her off her feet, a sudden zest for life which not even the though of death as she had just seen it, avenging and terrible, could serve to daunt.

Yet her fear daunted it, and even before the news of the dire results of Buck's exploding of the dam became known Jess had determined she would plead with him through his love for her to be silent about Cardross's death.

She had been quick to avail herself of the impression that had at once established itself in every one's mind as to the source of that explosion, and she had likewise been quick to see that Buck was not going to take shelter under it. So she had gone to Worthing.

Her action there had come at the moment's inspiration. Love and life were in the balance, and Jess threw in her woman's soul to give full measure. She had won, as she knew she would. Then, having won, Jess drew the woman's caution about her—drew it all the closer because of the exposure she had made.

And as though to put the past yet more remote, the face of nature now underwent a change.

The long drought broke, and the autumn came in with rains that seemed endless. Where the creek and river beds had lain dry as bleached bones the waters rushed in freshets that spread over the banks and swirled like maelstroms among the trunks of the trees, drowning some foolish cattle which a few weeks before had been perishing of thirst.

The forced inactivity of the days wore on Jess Kilrain. One morning she stood by the window watching the downpour and wishing she had a man's work that would take her out in it.

"There's plenty of woman's work you might do," said her aunt, to whom Jess had unwisely communicated her desire. "My hands would drap off if they hung as idle as yours, Jess."

"Is that why you keep your tongue goin' so, Aunt Agnes?" asked the girl. "Though I don't b'lieve it would stop findin' fault with me if it did drap off."

Agnes dusted vigorously not to say virtuously.

"My tongue finds no more fault than there's fault to find," she declared. "You think too much 'bout men, Jess Kilrain. I'd ha' thought you'd learned that lesson."

The girl drummed for a moment upon the window-pane with indignant fingers. Then she turned about.

"You should ha' married a parson, Aunt Agnes," she observed as she

passed by her aunt. "Your children would ha' been angels—an' horrid little brats."

She went on to her room, donned rubber boots, and over her riding-clothes put on a black slicker. Even the hat she wore was a man's with rubber cape about the neck.

In the stable she saddled her horse and rode forth.

The heavy black earth stuck like wax until she reached the plains, soft and soggy under her pony's hoofs. There she broke into a splashing canter, the cold rain whipping in her face, the smell of the drenched earth sweet to her nostrils.

Agnes Kilrain had been right.

Jess was thinking not of men, but of one man in particular; thinking of him with an intensity that now and again frightened her lest it rob her of her secret and bring to happen that very thing she yearned for hungrily. But she had learned her lesson, that lesson of a stinging shame that even now sent the hot blood into her cheeks when she remembered the way she had cheapened herself with Blass Cardross. Never, she swore to herself, would she do the shadow of that again.

Rather would she let Buck think her old antagonism toward him once more lived in her heart.

He was avoiding her, she knew, and Jess could imagine the rebellion in his heart. She had bought his compliance with her wishes, and then refused the payment—the only payment that could have salved his hurt manhood. But just because Jess had dared so bravely that night did she shrink the more now.

And already the torturing doubt that Buck despised her for her conduct—that his love for her had died under the exaction she had put upon it—was forming vaguely in Jess's mind. Could she blame him, she asked herself now, with forlorn candor, if guessing her love he should deem it a paltry thing?

He should never guess it again! She had scorned and repulsed him often. Not by the lifting of an eyelash would she have him think she played for him now.

She rode into the river woods. Heavy drops from the trees fell upon her coated body like shot. Her pony slipped and slid on the sodden loam of the forest.

Reaching the ford, Jess saw at a glance that it would be a hazardous thing for her to attempt to make it. So she drew her pony back toward the higher over-hanging bank, and sat him there watching the mad race of the river at her feet.

CHAPTER XX.

An Unheard Declaration.

BUCK BRANNON had crossed that ford earlier in the morning, going on an errand for Kilrain, and he was not relishing a repetition of the feat. Neither, could he have thought of it ahead, would the horse. It had been hard swimming and perilous foothold and little enough leeway to safety.

It was not long before the girl from her elevated post saw him coming now through the opposite woods along the road to the ford.

She was surprised that any one could have made the ford that day, and a very real uneasiness made itself felt in her as she watched Buck's nearer approach. Just where the road shelved into the turbid water he paused, and, raising his eyes, saw her.

A quick pleasure flashed into Buck's eyes, though instantly he reminded himself that she could not have known of his coming or expected to see him there. Then he gave his attention to his reluctant horse.

"Is it safe, Buck?" called Jess.

"Oh! I reckon so. I got over this mornin' all right."

His horse wheeled around suddenly, Buck putting him with spurs and quirt once more at the risk. A risk it was, he knew.

"There's a big log comin' down,"

called out Jess. "Wait till it goes by, Buck."

The log swirled by, eddied and caught among the hanging roots and vines beneath the bluff upon which Jess sat.

"I wouldn't stay on that bank, Jess," urged Buck. "It's badly scooped out, an' the bank is crumblin' somethin' fierce higher up the river."

On the words he carried his horse plunging and floundering into the current, heading the frightened animal well up-stream lest he be swept below the ford and down the river. Jess saw his danger then, and her heart stood still.

Despite his best endeavors the horse lost headway in the rapid current.

Then for a time he seemed to be holding his own, but it was the progress of the treadmill. If he should be swept beyond the ford where the banks, always precipitous, were now actually cut under by the force of the water, the chance for horse and rider would be slender, indeed.

And that seemed about to happen, for the current eddying in-shore was swirling them down at an angle that would miss the shelving ford.

In the helplessness of her terror Jess groaned. But Buck knew his danger, too, and realized that, unaided, the horse would not make his escape.

Jess held her breath as she watched.

Uncoiling his snake lariat from the horn of his saddle, Buck took a few hasty but well-considered swirls, and sent the rope flying outward and upward toward the stump of a cottonwood about whose base the noose settled and drew taut as he wound the lariat by a deft twist around the saddle-horn just in the moment when the battling horse was borne beyond the ford.

Urging the animal forward once more, Buck drew in the slight slack of the rope inch by inch, and in a moment more stood in safety on the sloping bottom, his horse spent and shivering.

So tense had been the strain on Jess that the reaction left her faint, and she did not move even when she heard Buck call to her. He stood coiling his lariat, and blowing his horse, hidden from sight of the girl by the higher bank upon which she was.

"Jess," he called again, "come away from that bank. 'Tain't safe there."

In that moment Jess wished he would ride on homeward and leave her alone. She did not want him to see the weakness that was upon her and which she could not conquer by effort of her will.

Instead of going on, Buck, leaving his horse to wait for him, clambered up the bank and drew near her.

In her nervousness Jess released her knee from the pommel and slipped to the ground. Her face was still very white, and her hand on the rein trembled as she led her pony forward a few paces.

"Why, Jess," Buck cried, "did it frighten you so! 'Twarn't no real danger 'cept for the horse. I could ha' swum for it, had it come to that."

He had not seen her thus alone since that memorable day on the dam. The evidence of her distress about him; the nearness of her body to him, picturesque for all its ugly habiting in rain-proof rubber; the appealing expression in her eyes—an appeal of which Jess herself was unconscious—the remoteness of them both from all others—these things sent the love of her rushing to Buck's heart.

"Jess," he asked, suddenly very grave, "why did you say what you did to Worthing that night? Tell me."

She looked him fairly in the eyes, very pallid, very still.

"'Cause it was so, Buck. 'Cause it was the truth."

"It wasn't the truth!"

"It was in my heart to have it so," she persisted. "It was in my mind. I reckon God Almighty would call it so. An' all you done, you done for me."

"I'm a man," he said, his voice

muffled. "'Twarn't all done for you, Jess—for you an' me!"

Instinctively the girl drew back, sudden fear in her dark eyes — fear not alone of him, and, therefore, the more baffling to Buck.

Quickly his voice rang out in sharp, alarmed command, and he sprang forward, seizing with one hand the girl and with the other the startled pony.

"For God's sake, come!" he cried, and pulled them forward.

It was in the nick of time. There was a crashing, tearing, splashing sound behind them as the ground upon which Jess and her horse had been standing crumbly suddenly and plunged into the river below.

Jess Kilrain had never swooned in all of her strong, young life, but now a faintness that was overwhelming claimed her. She reeled against her pony, who, still startled, swerved aside, leaving the girl swaying unsteadily. Yet even then she lifted a protesting hand as Buck leaped toward her.

"It is where you belong!" he cried, exultant for all his pity as his arms closed about her and her head rested weakly against his breast. "It is where I'm goin' to hold you, Jess, over my heart forever. Hold you till the rivers of hell freeze over an' the little devils go skatin'. Hold you! Don't you hear me, Jess?"

CHAPTER XXI.

In the Woods.

THE feud between the two ranches did not cease with the death of Blass Cardross, and that it did not do so was due in large measure to the resentment and desire of personal revenge of one man.

That man was the cow-puncher Bill Grange, who had been taken on the Raccoon River outfit upon his dismissal from the Loop. He had always been an unpopular member of the Loop outfit; and though not the sort of man of whom a dangerous criminal is usually made, he was crafty and revengeful over petty affronts.

Buck Brannon had incurred his jealous enmity through Kilrain's marked favor for the younger man.

His one attempt to render himself an object of interest to Jess had been nipped so ruthlessly in the bud that, although Grange had never repeated the audacity, he had never forgotten the discofiture. He had lent himself readily as an informer to Blass Cardross, and it had been his fate to meet disaster once again through Jess Kilrain's influence and her father.

Therefore, Grange had resolved to harry the Loop to the limit of which he might go with a due regard to his own safety.

In this he succeeded in various ways, nor at first did they on the Loop suspect the source of the annoyances. Cattle rounded up for a certain purpose overnight would be found scattered in wild disorder in the morning.

They suspected the Raccoon River sheep dogs, but not as incited thereto by a human marauder.

The milk cows turned out overnight in the home runs would come up in the morning to their calves wild-eyed and with scant milk, as though they had been chased and terrified, and again suspicion fell on the dogs. Now and then, as of old, the slaughtered carcass of a calf would be discovered, sure sign of the presence on the Loop of a murdering collie.

Then other things happened for which a dog could not be blamed. A shelter house near the Raccoon River border burned down. Barbed wire fences were cut and ruined.

The obnoxious sheep again began their invasions; and in one conflict ensuing between a vicious old ram and a longhorn bull more pugnacious than wary, the bull had been left dead on the field of battle, and his companion herd stampeded across the Owl Creek, where a steer, breaking over the low bank, had plunged to his death in one of Buck's sunken hogsheads.

It was Jess Kilrain who first definitely connected Grange with these and other similar happenings.

That autumn morning the girl had ridden out into the woods about the creek where the persimmons touched by successive frosts hung luscious upon the trees or were dropping over-ripe to the ground. Pecan nuts, too, had rewarded her search; and Jess, glorying in the crisp day, happy in her self-imposed solitude, hitched her pony to a sapling, and seating herself by the trunk of a cottonwood, cracked her pecans in a dreamy leisure.

She was nursing these days to her heart.

Like a ripening flower, her own love was coming to its perfection. She guarded it jealously as yet—guarded it for the fulfilment of its promise. She still held herself aloof from Buck, not in coyness, not in coquetry, but as one lingers on the threshold of a joy, almost afraid to profane it by a glimpse within.

She knew she could not continue to hold herself so for long.

More than once she had encountered a look of determination in Buck's eyes that had rendered her resistance as water in her veins. Since that day when she had lain in his arms, there would now and then come into his face a hint of conscious mastery that, had he but known it, was as sweet as life to the girl—was life in its tremulous delight and foreshadowing of a glad surrender.

Jess paused with the half of a pecan on the way to her lips, and turned.

She could almost have been sure she had heard a step in the dead leaves of the woods above her. Her pony, with drooping head, stood immovable, its ears, which had been indicating the habitual apathy of the cow-pony when not in movement, now alert.

"What is it, Buster?" she asked, and saw the ears answer at the name. "I reckon it's a rabbit, or a coon, or a possum that can't wait till night to get some of them sugary 'simmons. But it ain't, though!"

There was more than surprise in the sudden decision which, at the same time, brought Jess to her feet.

There might have been nothing unusual or to be startled by in the fact of a man being in those woods at that hour, but intuitively the girl felt there was something to cause both surprise and concern in the sudden turning away of the horseman who must have run almost upon her and her pony before aware of their proximity.

Something furtive, too, about the man's action in quickly shifting the object he carried across the saddle-horn, and his slouching body gave Jess an unpleasant shock.

"Bill Grange!" she called sharply. "What are you doin' in these woods with that brandin'-rod?"

The man swung the long iron over his shoulder and spun around.

"What's that to you, Jess Kilrain?" he demanded. "Am I soilin' this precious land to ride over it?"

Jess climbed the slope that lay between them.

"I'm not so sure that you ain't, Bill. Somebody's been soilin' it pretty often lately. That's a Raccoon River iron," she said, looking sharply from the branding-rod to the man's face. "What does you need it over on the Loop for?"

The man laughed with a covert insolence.

"Time was," he retorted, "when you was more interested 'bout the Raccoon River than you was 'bout the Loop. T'other way about now, eh, Jess? Other chips to burn!"

The girl's face flushed with anger.

"You hound!" she cried below her breath. "You sneakin' cayute!"

He laughed again.

"Sneakin' ain't in your line *now*, eh" he sneered. "Didn't work no how, did it, Jess?" He put his horse in motion. "I must be movin' on," he said. "I'm bound for Shanley's forge."

"You're bound for a halter 'bout your neck!" declared Jess. "That's

what you're bound for. You've stole that brandin'-rod from the Raccoon River. I wonder why!"

"Keep on wonderin', damn you!" Grange cried in sudden fury. "But keep your wonder to yourself, Jess Kilrain. I owes for certain things a'ready. Don't you force me to pay. There ain't no love lost 'tween me an' any one on the Loop, let alone Buck Brannon an' your father!"

He rode on at that, leaving the girl not a little perturbed and vaguely uneasy. Slowly she went back to her waiting horse.

Jess did not dream any more that day. For a time she sat thinking, more and more convinced that Grange's presence on the Loop boded no good for its interests.

He might have been taking that iron to the forge at the fork of the public roads, but for some reason Jess doubted it.

Suddenly it occurred to her that she might ride that far to see if he had been telling her the truth. She would miss her dinner, but that did not matter. The service she might be rendering her father and Earle Worthing far outweighed that.

She went over to her pony, tightened the loosened cinches, and, getting into the saddle, rode up to the plateau of the plains, turning northward until she might strike the ford, and so on over toward the roads beyond the river.

CHAPTER XXII.

Caught.

FOR a time Jess saw no living creature on the wide expanse of the prairie. She knew that most of the men that day were far distant on the western ranges, where many head of cattle had been shifted before they should be brought back to the more sheltered runs on the nearer approach of the winter.

She forded the creek, and some distance farther on, not, indeed, without some misgiving, for the river still ran high, crossed the Raccoon itself on a much safer ford than the one over which Buck had swam his horse that other day.

And here the plains, when she had gained them after a ride through the already shadowy woods, began to be dotted with bunches of cattle, who eyed her with a sober interest as she passed among them.

She wondered a little that at no time had she caught even a fleeting glimpse of Grange. He had not been so far ahead of her that, if he had followed the direct course she was taking to reach the crossroads, she should not have seen him somewhere on the plains ahead; yet, thinking he might have made his crossing somewhere else, Jess pursued her way.

It was a lonely way now, less familiar to her, and broken by frequent jutting spurs of chaparral that lay like the rocky promontories in a sea's vast sweep, mysterious, low lines of hazy gray and green.

In the sear buffalo-grass she started many long-eared rabbits, which bounded away from under her pony's ever-startled nose with giant leaps. She came to a spot, grim evidence of the past summer's toil among the herds of the Loop, where many bleaching bones and stiffened hides struck a snorting distaste in her pony's nostrils.

Far beyond the dip of the prairie, a blue dot on the clear horizon, she could see the smithy at the crossroads.

Intuition told her as she drew near to it, though still afar, that it was closed, as, indeed, was its general state. Then a sense of annoyance at her own credulity beset her. What was wrong with the forge on the Raccoon River that it should be sending its work so far abroad? Grange had lied to her!

Assurance of this grew upon Jess.

She could see the smithy clearly now, and the dark lines of the two roads, lonelier than the plains them-

selves, because of man and deserted by him. But if Grange was not there, and she saw now that he was not, where was he, and for what purpose?

A sinister answer came to Jess, daughter of the cattle country as she was.

She recalled the man's furtive manner, when she had first detected his presence; the flash of his anger at her taunt, and his own deterring threat. And aware now that she had stumbled across some nefarious plan of the discredited cow-puncher, Jess turned her pony about and retraced her steps. But not so exactly as she thought.

Confused by the eternal sameness of the prairie she drifted southward.

She was surprised, too, to find the day so far gone. A chill grayness had begun to steal over the plains, obscuring the soft masses of the chaparral, intensifying the solitude, leveling the soundlessness into an eery soundfulness that throbbed at the ear-drums.

Jess was not afraid, but she became acutely aware of her loneliness, her unprotected state. She found herself dodging the bunches of grazing cattle. She suddenly found herself lost!

"Buster," she said softly to her pony, "where are we? Why'd you do this?"

She twisted her pliant body on the saddle, hand upon the flank of the pony, and gazed about her.

Around a spur of chaparral far to the the south there suddenly came running a number of dark objects. They were not cattle. Partly because of the distance, partly because of the fading daylight Jess was uncertain what they were, until she remembered the drove of horses Worthing had recently added to his stock.

The girl watched them silently, saw their evidently startled flight in her direction gradually change into the high-swinging trot, still frightened, but protesting now as though against an unprovoked indignity, when, abruptly at sight of her, their leader paused, then like a wild thing broke into a plunging gallop, and, followed by the freshly alarmed drove behind him, tore off to the east in a pounding echo of flying hoofs.

So that was it! thought Jess.

She rode cautiously now toward that distant clump of woods which as she drew nearer fell away before her over a dip in the prairie, stretching southward to join the advance woods that held the river in their depths. She knew that chaparral, and when she reached it rode into it, keeping straight ahead until her pony came out into the open beyond.

There she turned, and, skirting the woods, went eastward and southward, the ground sloping ever gradually toward the main forest.

It was dusk now on the plains—night in the bordering woods. Jess was aware that presently she must strike into those woods, and, trusting to her pony to find a cow-trail, follow it to the lower ford. She was just about to do this when ahead of her she saw what gave her abrupt and interested pause, drawing her pony aside into the deeper shadow of the trees.

On the verge of the woods a number of horses and men were gathered.

The girl had ridden so near that she could catch the occasional commands shouted at the nervous horses, could see the shadowy forms of at least two men as they moved about, and saw the glow of a fire that burned behind them. She needed not to be told what the scene meant nor who was at least one of the actors in it.

She knew when the figure bending over the fire straightened and turned about that she would hear the sound she did hear—the suffering groan of a horse who, with nostril clamped and leg tied under him, quivered under the red-hot brand upon his flank.

Jess quivered, too, and, recking not of consequences, rushed forward upon the group.

"So you've come to horse-stealin', Bill Grange!" she cried, a fierce indignation holding her fearless. "Spy

an' talebearer, midnight raider, an' now horse-thief, an' always a skunk an' a liar! Born crooked to straighten out in a halter! Didn't I tell you so, you cross-eyed buzzard?"

The man, dropping the iron from his hand, leaped forward.

"Shut up!" he growled. "You followed me, did you, Jess Kilrain? Well, I reckon you'll stay now's you come."

So quick he was that the girl was in his arms before she knew it, swept from her saddle by a lift and a jerk that was not too gentle, swung upon the ground and held there by Grange's restraining arms.

"I give you warnin'," he muttered. "I tole you I'd listened to your clackin' tongue long enough. You'll clack as I please now, you hussy!"

He snatched the red bandanna from about his neck, and, forcing it between the girl's set teeth, knotted it behind her head. With a cord from his pocket he tied her wrists behind her, his companion holding her arms.

Indeed, Jess did not struggle. She had been surprised. She was furiously angry. She was not frightened at all.

"I can still talk, you cowards!" she mumbled. "Everythin' you is doin' brings you that much nearer hell!"

Grange nodded grimly.

"Hell won't be such a bad place with such as you for company," he retorted. "Now, sit down on that there log, an' hole your tongue. If you squeal—mebbe you'll wish you hadn't. Anyhow, if you could see yourself, Jess, you wouldn't draw no 'tention to your beauty."

His companion laughed.

CHAPTER XXIII.

The Search.

"WHERE'S Jess?" asked Martin Kilrain of his sister when they had sat down to dinner without the girl.

Agnes shrugged her shoulders.

"Gaddin'," she said sententiously. "It's well for you, Martin, that my feet don't itch."

He asked the same question in a different tone when he came in for his supper.

"I wonder," said his sister. "Has she took up again with the Cardross gal?"

"Does you mean she ain't in? That she ain't been in?" Kilrain demanded. "Good God, Agnes, s'pose somethin' happened to her!"

He ate his supper in haste. Then he went out to Buck's cabin.

He found Buck playing on his concertina. The young fellow sprang up so suddenly at the sight of Kilrain's grave face that the rawhide chair he had been sitting in fell over. He threw the concertina upon the bed.

"What's it?" he asked tersely.

"It's Jess. She's missin'. Since early mornin'."

Ten minutes later, with Perry Green, they were in their saddles. Jess had been seen to ride off through the home pastures in the morning, so they turned that way. Beyond that their direction was blind.

Their fear was the river.

It still ran high enough to be a source of danger by way of the fords, and Buck remembered shudderingly that landslides by which once before Jess had been in peril. So they pushed onward toward the woods until they reached the river.

There the futility of their search came home to them. The night was only starlit — the forests were dark. From its banks the river could be seen merely as an objectless void. Yet they went on, riding at haphazard toward the north and scanning the bank closely for any evidence of a fresh crumbling. After slow progress they came to the upper ford by which Jess had crossed some hours earlier on her way to the smithy.

They could conceive of no reason for Jess's crossing the river, yet, examining the soft ground at the mouth

of the ford, they saw the imprint of hoofs—the imprints of more than one horse. Puzzled, the three men looked at one another in the flickering light of their matches.

"There wa'n't none of us this way to-day," said Buck, a certain relief in his voice, for his dread had been terrible, and he welcomed any surcease from that. "She must 'a' gone over."

"With who?" asked Kilrain.

Perry Green was down again on his haunches, burning matches over the tracks.

"With no one," he said after a moment. "Afore or behind some one. Behind, for here's a small hoof in a bigger one."

"Still," said Kilrain, "she might 'a' been just behind."

Buck, too, had been studying the imprints.

"Them's Buster's hoofs, Kilrain," he declared with assurance. "I'm goin' over. Don't you two come till I call."

He mounted and took the ford. He breathed more easily when he found that, though swift, the current was not ugly—that only for a few strokes did his horse have to swim.

In going ashore he drew the horse well to one side that he might not trample the middle ground. Examining this, his relief was again great to find the hoofprints the same as on the opposite shore.

If some of them were those of Jess's pony, and he was sure they were, for the animal, given to Jess by Worthing, was of superior breed and had clean, fine hoofs, then Jess had made the ford in safety, unless in going back over another—

He dashed that thought from his mind. At least now they had some clue. Fortune had favored them thus much.

He called softly to the others. Instinctively now he used caution. Those other hoof-marks were to be accounted for.

They tried to account for them, lingering over them as they talked, for again they knew not which way to turn. Strangely enough they did not think of Grange—did not think clearly of anything the signs might portend, though vague uneasiness was on them all. Their horses started first, ears pointed at a sound the men did not themselves hear, though they listened. Presently Buck dropped his reins and ran forward. A little way ahead they heard his cry—glad, startled, alarmed.

When they made their way to him, leading the horses, they found him holding Jess's pony by the broken bridle. But Jess herself was not there.

"His bridle's busted," said Buck in a curiously contained voice. "Strike a match, Perry, an' let us look at it."

The pony squatted at the flash of light, winced nervously as Kilrain placed a reassuring hand upon its flank.

"What's this?" he cried suddenly, and struck a match himself.

Raw on the pony's flank was the fresh brand of the Raccoon River Ranch!

The eyes of the three men met.

"Bill Grange!" cried Buck, and his voice was hoarse.

Kilrain's match flared and went out.

In the mean while what might have been called Bill Grange's camp was presenting a quiet enough appearance as the two men busied themselves over the fire preparing a supper.

The newly branded horses which they had rounded up from the drove of the Loop stood tethered near by with their own and Jess Kilrain's pony. Jess, seated on the log, watched the proceedings in a stormy silence.

The girl was hungry and shaken by what had happened—tired by her long ride. When Grange offered her coffee and a piece of the rabbit they had shot she accepted it as she accepted the freedom of her body which Grange permitted while she ate.

The other man was eager to be moving.

Jess had never seen him before, but she judged him to be either the advance-agent of some body of drovers due soon to pass along the highway beyond into whose drove the newly branded horses were to be received as a sale of the Raccoon River Ranch, or else a partner of Grange's in a venture more peculiarly their own by which the stolen horses were to be put upon a car at a stock-pen some miles away awaiting the midnight freight to the south.

At any rate, she gathered from their muttered talk as they stood over the fire eating and watching her with a care that did not lapse, that she was a very unwelcome addition to their expedition.

Her presence with them there meant the inevitable search for her when she should be missed. Her release meant a pursuit which might prove fatal in more ways than the mere defeating of their plans.

To take her along with them meant an encumbrance to their actions which they could ill afford to add to the difficulty of managing the half-wild and rebellious horses they had seized. Time passed as they argued, wrangled, finally, fell at odds.

She heard the startling suggestion of the unknown man.

" Take her horse along an' leave her here — tied or loose, an' don't stand here all night thinkin' 'bout it with a rope tightnin' roun' your neck every minute."

As he spoke the man turned, and thrust the branding rod once more in the glowing coals.

He was losing patience. Perhaps Grange was losing nerve.

" Who's bossin' this thing, Lem? " asked Grange. " You or me? "

" I'm a goin' to," sneered the man, " for you can't."

He seized the iron from the coals and, taking a few steps forward, slapped it cruelly with an oath upon the flank of Jess Kilrain's unsuspecting pony.

With a shocked cry Jess sprang to her feet to be caught by Grange's ready arms.

But it had been a thoughtless move on the part of the man Grange had called Lem. Terrified and tortured under the pressure of the hot brand the pony squatted to the ground. Then rearing and plunging, the bridle and reins snapped and he wheeled in maddened flight.

For all his consternation Grange sneered.

" That's a first-class message you've sent to Martin Kilrain. That's first-class bossin'."

CHAPTER XXIV.

Wild Justice.

AWARE that their search for Jess had assumed a new and sinister incentive, Kilrain and his men turned in the direction from which the terrified pony had come running. The evidence of that fresh brand was as the reading of an open book to them, and their surmises even as to details came pretty close to the facts.

" It's them horses," said Buck, " that they've been nabbin'. You should ha' branded 'em, Kilrain, afore this. Jess must ha' run across 'em in some way, an' they nabbed her, too. I'm glad of that! "

" Glad! " echoed Kilrain, at a loss in his alarm.

" Yes," breathed Buck. " Glad of the chance to make whoever's done it sorrier 'n hell."

" An' we know who's done it," said Green. " The same one who's been pesterin' the Loop since you drove him from it, Kilrain. Bill Grange is drivin' down grade with the throttle wide open, an' he can't stop."

" If he's hurt Jess," said Kilrain, the gentle, " I'll kill him like I would a rattler."

Buck was silent. It was the silence of a grim determination. There was no if in what he meant to do.

They rode as swiftly as they could ride noiselessly, skirting the river woods, and heading for that spur of chaparral beyond which they had left the new horses on pasture and beyond which an instinct told them they would find the marauders if they had not already gone on. So when they reached that jutting woods they hitched Jess's pony and made their further way with extreme caution.

That they were not much if any too late presently the faint odor of smoke gave them assurance, the pungent, sweet smoke of dried sassafras-boughs, and almost at the same moment the sound of the clearing of a horse's nostrils came distinct upon the quiet night.

Buck, well in the lead, fell back cautiously at the sudden glimpse of their quarry, and the three men held a whispered conference. Hitching their horses, they crept forward afoot through the shadow of the trees.

Almost at right angles to the chaparral grove ran the edge of the larger woods just within whose shelter the two men, with Jess and their tethered horses, still lingered with a recklessness scarcely to be credited.

Though their fire burned low it served to throw into a dim relief the clustered group of horses and the three figures more immediately about it, the men standing, Jess sitting huddled on the fallen trunk of a cottonwood tree.

The rumbling voices of the men reached the listeners in the adjacent grove. Evidently they argued, almost quarreled. Once the girl lifted her head and watched them. Apparently they reached some decision, for the man who was not Grange turned briskly and started toward the horses further away. Grange faced the crouching girl. They could hear what he said to her.

"Swear to me, Jess, that you won't leave this spot 'fore mornin', an' we'll leave you loose. If you won't swear, you won't leave it nohow, but we'll tie you so you can't."

Jess paid no attention to the words.

"An' we'll fix you so's you can talk as much as you is talkin' now," he added, angrily. "Is you deaf as well as dumb?"

Still Jess did not speak.

Grange growled an oath. He stepped back from the fire, stooped, and took up a coil of rope. As he did so the girl sprang forward, and as he faced her she stood erect, the branding-rod, which had been lying near the fire, clutched in her hand.

She spoke then in fearless anger and contempt.

"If you come near me, you cur, I'll kill you," she cried. "What does you know 'bout swearin', you lyin' thief!"

The other man drew near again.

"In the name of all God's devils," he cried aloud, "air you still waitin' here, Grange?"

He seemed to fly into a sudden fury of exasperation. He jerked the pistol from its holster about his waist, and the click of the trigger sounded clearly.

"Drap that brandin' bar, gal," he shouted to Jess, "or, by God, I'll drap you."

It was then that Perry Green lifted the restraining hand he had been holding on Buck's arm. There was a flash and an echoing report from the chaparral, and the man before Jess flung wide his arms as he pitched forward, the pistol he had held whirling against the feet of the girl.

Instantly she stopped and seized it and covered the astounded Grange.

"Now come on with your rope," she cried to him, "but it's going 'bout your neck, you coward, an' not roun' me."

Leaping forward, they seized him with scarce a show of struggle, bound him with the rope he held in his supine grasp, and Buck, with a thrust upon his chest, sent him sprawling backward upon the ground, where he lay still as that other one whom they turned over contemptuously with their feet.

Kilrain was holding Jess in his arms.

A few minutes later Perry Green stood over the replenished fire alone, its light flickering over the forms upon the ground before him, equally silent, though one was living and the other dead. Buck had gone back through the woods, guiding his horse upon which sat Jess, her father riding beside her, until they should come to the spot where they had left Jess's own pony.

That was a silent group, too. With her hands resting on the broad horn of Buck's saddle Jess sat bending slightly forward as she rode.

Something intimate to her was in the touch of that saddle—something intimate in the close presence of Buck's own young body as he walked at her feet, his grasp upon the bit. He had hardly spoken a dozen words to her, but there had been no need of words.

The light in his eyes as he had looked into her own, his every motion, now told her of his service and his love. She did not have to ask to know whose hand it had been that once again had been ready and sure to save her from a threatened peril. She did not not have to ask to know that life held nothing for this man in all the gamut of its rich possibilities which he would not gladly forego for her and for that love which Jess knew, also, he had come to know by the fine sympathy of love was his now for the asking.

They left him after he had put her on her own pony, his touch strong yet tender upon her, his face looking into hers in the darkness of the midnight woods through which she and her father went on together.

Perry Green was still standing over the fire when Buck got back. Almost immediately thereafter, however, he left his position, and, going over to the group of horses, returned with one of those of the captured men. He looked at Buck.

"Sit up there, Grange," Buck commanded.

But the man sulked. Perhaps it was a weak despair that held him dumb and inert.

"Sit up, damn you!" called Buck again, and now the man twisted himself as he was bidden.

The other two eyed him with a grim disgust.

"You know," said Buck, "what's due you, Bill Grange! Due you over an' over again! It's the hemp what settles such scores as the Loop has against such as you. But 'cause you have worked an' messed with us, an' 'cause you're such a poor excuse for a man, an' 'cause we're willin' to give you a chance to keep your worthless life away from anywhere near these here diggin's, we're goin' to give you a show of winnin' it. 'Tain't much of a show, that's true enough, but it's more'n you deserve. Git up on your feet an' come here."

The frightened cow-puncher drew nearer.

"We're goin' to put you on that horse," went on Buck, "an' give you a runnin' chance. 'Fore you's out of sight me an' Perry's goin' to draw on you an' fire—just once each. If we pot you, well an' good; if not, you're free to go. But listen to this, Bill Grange. If ever after this you dare to show your thievin' face roun' here you'll die as sure as hell holds fire. Untie him, Perry."

The man was whimpering, yet some spark of hope, perhaps even of manhood, kept his tongue from more craven supplication. With their backs to the fire, their pistols ready in their hands, the two men stood as Grange clambered weakly on his horse.

"Now straight ahead," commanded Buck, "an' fast as you can ride, Bill Grange."

The horse bounded forward under jerk and jab of spurs, had all but vanished in the gloom of the shadowy plain when, sharply, two shots rang out as one and, the echo dying, left only the distant pounding of flying hoofs to break the heavy silence of the night.

But not even that sound did Bill Grange hear, lying in yet heavier

silence on the plain, the slow blood oozing from two deadly wounds.

CHAPTER XXV.

Their Own.

THAT night's work ended the long feud between the Loop and the Raccoon River Ranches. Each side had much to forget and forgive, but there were influences which made this forgetting and forgiving easier, and it began the next day when Earle Worthing rode over to see Nance Cardross and insisted upon her listening to his counsel.

They were talking at Martin Kilrain's supper-table about some of the more immediate results of this action of Worthing's. Buck was once more a guest at Kilrain's that night.

"For one thing, Buck," said the foreman, smiling, "Miss Cardross is goin' to git rid of your friends, them sheep."

"If they'd been wolves they couldn't ha' bred more trouble," replied Buck. "Wolves they is in sheep's clothin'."

"I'm goin' up to Worthing's now," went on Kilrain. "I won't be gone long, Buck. Don't you hurry off."

"No," said Buck, and his eyes sought Jess.

Before the wood-fire Jess found herself alone with Buck when Agnes had gone into the kitchen.

It seemed to the girl that years had passed since yesterday when she had sat in the woods thinking of her happiness. It seemed to Buck that he had lived a lifetime since last he had been in that room.

"You didn't bring your 'cordium, Buck," said the girl.

His old smile twisted his mouth.

"No, Jess. I didn't want to make you put walls 'tween us to-night. 'Sides it's sick, an' a sick 'cordium ain't cheerful company."

Jess smiled. It was a rather nervous little smile.

"What's the matter with it, Buck?"

The young fellow looked at her, an unconscious yearning growing in his eyes.

"Reckon I've been complainin' to it too much!"

He took the long tongs from her hands, their fingers meeting in the action. It was not the heat of the fire that glowed in Buck's veins as he shifted the logs and stood the tongs back in the rack.

"Jess," he said, facing her all at once, "I can't wait any longer for your love. I can't, Jess!"

She stood beside him, looking down at the leaping flames, that made a blurred sheet of gold before her eyes. Her throat swelled to choking.

Buck spoke again, the quiver in his low voice holding Jess breathless.

"It come to me last night as I rode through them woods, Jess, thinkin' harm had happened to you, that if I found you safe, God would hold me a fool for not beggin' you to be my wife, even if you laughed at me again; for when a man loves as I do, Jess, as I love you, 'tain't only love but life an' death an' heaven an' hell an' his own soul, an' he ain't no man if he don't speak out!"

She covered her face with her hands, glad, frightened, awed. In all his knowledge of her Buck had never seen Jess break down. He bent his head to catch her choking words.

"I'll never laugh at you again. I ain't worth your love, Buck, but there ain't another man on earth that could ever make me marry him now since you have spoke to me like that!"

"Does you mean that, Jess?"

She took her hands from her face, looking up into his eyes.

"I mean, if you wants me, Buck, I am yours,—for life, for death, forever!"

His arms closed about her, her own about his neck. In that moment of their love's supremacy they forgot the use of words.

(The end.)

Mr. North of Nowhere

by Frank Blighton

Author of "Mr. X and the Magnates," "Into the Fourth Dimension,"
"Swami Ram's Reincarnation," "For Love of the Princess,"
"Fate and Fateh Jang," "Into the Fifth Dimension," etc.

SYNOPSIS OF PRECEDING CHAPTERS

FATHER MATTHEW DALTON, chaplain of Trevor Prison, and Dr. David Madden, the prison physician, attend the hanging of John North, convicted murderer and brilliant inventor. The cleric is overcome at North's callous indifference to the whole proceedings, as are the guards. Dr. Madden reports the hanging to Elliott Mostyn, president of the Universal Products Corporation, which practically controls the whole United States, and the latter is overcome. Mostyn explains that he had not meant to hound North to his death in order to get his marvelous "cold engine" which uses waste nitrogen. However, the secret is lost. Madden, in the pay of the corporation, says he will find it.

Madden draws two hundred and fifty thousand dollars for his expenses and disappears, throwing Mostyn's sleuths off the scent. Meanwhile, Mostyn holds a directors' meeting at which he announces that Universal Products is on the verge of total collapse. All debts must be paid in cash on July 1, or the corporation will fail. Mostyn will borrow in Europe to meet these obligations; they have still sixty days. Spuds Seeley, seeing Mostyn in the street one day, tells Bessie Siderman, his sweetheart, that she shall shortly have her new dress. Madden, meanwhile, is in Ireland, testing a wonderful aeroplane that uses North's engines and makes two hundred and fifty miles an hour and better when driven by Eustace Dalton, Father Matthew's brother. With urgent instructions as to secrecy, Madden sails for New York.

Spuds Seeley tells Bessie that it was he who killed the watchman for whose death North was hanged; that he had acted for Mostyn, and that he proposes to get ten thousand dollars from the magnate. Mostyn, preparing to sail, turns the presidency over to Madden, instructing his secretary to pay Seeley one thousand dollars. Madden tells of his success; but he is seeking an opportunity to overthrow the magnate. Spuds Seeley calls at the offices of the Universal Products Corporation and demands ten thousand dollars. Mostyn, having got three hundred millions in drafts, finds his ship crippled and wonders if he could return to America in Dalton's flying machine.

CHAPTER XIII.

Spuds Seeley Cashes.

DAVID MADDEN leaned back in Elliott Mostyn's chair.

Spuds Seeley at the same instant ceased to be a gangster. He was merely a round, white pebble—smooth, water-worn, fortuitously placed at the very spot where it would be most useful—a trivial, insensate thing, yet pregnant with utility in a modern setting for the duplicate of an old and well-known duel.

The young doctor knew that, having stepped out to battle with the Goliath of greed and tyranny, with whose behests he had so long unwillingly complied, chance—or something that goes by such a name—was offering him another missile for the sling he had already prepared.

Much, however, depended on the

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certainty of his aim. Not only was his own personal future at stake, but something far transcending that in importance. In attaining that something he had already taken desperate chances in the face of conditions where his success thus far was without an authentic precedent in the world's history.

"Well, I'm waitin'," significantly announced the depraved creature on the other side of the desk.

"So I perceive," replied Madden in a non-committal tone. "And, Mr. Seeley, as you doubtless observe, I am doing a little reflecting. As I have already explained, Mr. Mostyn did not leave any specific instructions concerning this matter with me. You appear somewhat miffed at those which his secretary has transmitted to you. Not that I blame you," went on Madden, flashing a not unfriendly smile at the dubious Spuds. "I am merely stating the conditions of things as they have come to my notice."

Spuds gave a contemptuous nod, but his impatience was unabated.

"A matter of ten thousand dollars, I regret to say," went on Madden, "is one which the secretary cannot adjust. Nor, I am quite sure, will any one else here be disposed to pay out this sum without authorization."

"Whadda ya mean?"

"Your impatience, Mr. Seeley, only makes things harder for me. We are total strangers to each other, you must admit. I have taken your word for what you have told me. I have no doubt whatever that you are telling the entire truth. The thing I am trying to adjust is a means of recompensing you for what you have done. I shall personally see to it that you receive all that is coming to you; of that point please be assured!"

The warmth of the last statement did more to allay the hostility of his auditor than anything which had so far developed. He shot a stealthy look at the doctor as the latter leaned back in his chair and closed his eyes, hands clasped behind his head. Then Spuds pinched a bit of glistening white powder from a pill-box between the thumb and forefinger of one hand, transferring it to the back of the other.

His double sniff was followed by a long sigh of relief. The cooling "snow" tingled his nasal passages to a delicious numbness. In a moment or two Spuds was breathing fast, and radiating a geniality equal to that which he had been shown.

"Mr. Seeley," resumed Madden, "I am up against a very hard proposition in this matter. My temporary authority does not extend to drawing funds to cover such a case as yours. That is entirely within the jurisdiction of the president. Nevertheless, I will do what I can. It so happens that I have a little money of my own, and possibly I can procure the balance."

"Why not here?" queried the gangster.

Madden leaned forward confidentially.

"You should be better able to answer that question than I, surely. The nature of the services you have performed are of a delicate character, I take it," continued the speaker, tapping significantly on the "receipt," whose heavy head-lines stared up from the page where it had been flung by the listener.

"What's that to me?"

"Oh, nothing at all, if you choose to look at it that way!" retorted Madden airily. "One moment, please; I want to learn how long Mr. Mostyn expects to be absent."

The reluctant secretary obeyed the buzzer. In reply to Madden's question, he said: "He may stay in Europe six months."

"That's all," said Madden curtly. "Now, Mr. Seeley, if you feel that you have any reason to be aggrieved, your own judgment, I am sure, will show you that I am in no wise responsible for this most regrettable delay. As I have said, I want you to have all that is coming to you, and I again repeat that I will do what I can to see that

you receive it. But, if the best I can do is not good enough for you—"

Seeley leaned forward, raising his hand.

"I ain't sayin' *you* are puttin' anything over on me," he replied. "But I come here to get ten thousand dollars; there's me receipt—and I want it."

"And you shall, as I have now twice assured you, have all that is due you if I can in any way bring it to pass," replied Madden, with more firmness than he had until now shown. "The trouble with you, Seeley, is that you're too independent for your own good. If you would show a little sense, you'd shut up until I'm through with what I've been trying to say for the last half-hour. Now, will you, or won't you?"

Madden jumped out of his chair and faced the gangster. His steely eyes were sparkling. He had been a good boxer in college, and he was sure that Seeley could not draw his gun before the famous "haymaker" in his clenched fist would put the frail, drug-ridden tough before him out of commission.

"Why, I ain't kickin'," protested the other as the exaltation of the drug swept over him. "I want me coin—that's all."

Madden turned away with a toss of his hands.

"Seeley, go right down and pawn your left eye for a million, if it pleases you. I haven't the slightest personal objection in the world to your having not only ten thousand, but ten millions, if you can get it. But, paste this in your hat and read it every time you doff your lid," he sneered sarcastically, turning and shaking his finger directly under the other's nose. "What I give you, you'll get after I get hold of enough to fix you up—and if you think you can get it before, why, start something!"

"When kin I git it?"

Madden emitted a guffaw.

"Why the devil didn't you ask that question before? As soon as I can get it together. Do you think I'm going to claw it out of the air? Wait just a moment; I'll look over my bank balance."

"Nix on the check stuff!" growled the gangster.

"Never mind trying to run my business, Seeley. I'll pay you in cash. Let me see, I've only got about thirty-five hundred there, and I'll have to send Mr. Mostyn's secretary after that, while I draw on the cashier for the balance. On your good behavior now when he comes in."

"Leave it to me."

"Do they know you at the International Trust?" asked Madden when the secretary came over to his desk.

"No, sir."

Madden swiftly filled out a check. "I'll give you a note to the cashier—I'd telephone, but they'd only double-back on it to see if it was a bogus call," he went on swiftly. "How do you want this, Seeley?" He turned to the gangster.

"In cash, sure!"

"I mean, in what size bills?"

"Centuries down to tens."

"Very well. On your way downstairs tell Mr. Turnbull, the cashier, I want to see him in this office, please."

Seeley crossed the room to help himself to a drink of spring-water. Madden furtively scrawled and handed a telephone number to the secretary with a whispered command. He leaned back indifferently as Mostyn's confidential man, making a wide détour to avoid the returning gunman, started for the door.

"How long will I have to wait?" queried Spuds.

"Not long. You needn't wait unless you desire. I'm perfectly willing you should go at any time."

"I'll go when I get what I come after in me kick," heatedly returned the redoubtable one. "And if this *is* a plant I'm wit' you—all th' way!"

"What do you mean?"

"Why, if you're tryin' to frame me because I'm here for me coin-I'll split—that's all."

Madden laughed. Inwardly he wanted to sob.

"I guess you won't do much yelling, Spuds. It would be too risky—after this." He pointed to the paper with the damning illustration of John North, genius, swinging in the grip of a hangman's noose.

Spuds returned the sneer with interest compounded.

"You silk-stocking mutts give me a pain," he observed pointedly. "What would happen if I *should* let out a few yips?"

"You are the best judge of that," Madden equably returned.

"Now you said somethin'. That's why I ain't goin' until I gits me coin," purred the other contentedly. "When a gink like Mostyn frames a mug like whiskers—dere ain't going to be no come-back on Spuds Seeley—that's me. I told me skirt that I was comin' down here to collect—and I'm here, ain't I?"

"If I had any doubts about your physical presence in this office, Mr. Seeley, I am sure the testimony of Mr. Mostyn's secretary would tend to incline me strongly toward the belief that you *were* here—undoubtedly. But the way you go about this thing tends to make me suspect, more and more, that you're trying, as you would say, 'to put one over' during Mr. Mostyn's absence."

"Am I? I only wish he was squattin' where you are right now."

"He left for Europe only yesterday. Why didn't you come in before and put it up to him personally?"

"Wasn't I here?"

"I have no knowledge of what your movements have been, Mr. Seeley. Bear in mind, please, that I only returned from Europe yesterday, as I have told you. What did you say to Mr. Mostyn?"

"A moke on th' door told me to write me name and bizness. I done it. I said I was here to get the coin Jerry, the cop, was to come across wit' when I brung him the receipt. Jerry's out of town. I got tired waitin'. I packed that receipt until it was almost wore out—look at it."

Bit by bit David Madden's brain was busily weaving together the strangely inchoate, disjointed statements of the repulsive thug whose unexpected appearance had come to mean so much to him.

The reference to "whiskers" unmistakably meant John North—and the mysterious repeated allusions to the "receipt" held a sinister significance. But just wherein the connection between Mostyn and John North's alleged crime lay Madden could not perceive. He led on the garrulous Spuds with another taunt.

"Ten thousand is a lot of coin for a piece of dirty paper, flavored with the kind of guff you've been pedling, Spuds. If you could get away with it every day you'd own this building in a month."

Spuds writhed. The inflection of the speaker's voice reminded him of High-Heeled Bessie in one of her most skeptical moods. But his vainglorious swagger preceded another and more amazing disclosure.

"I earned me coin, all right. If I didn't, what makes you kick in wit' it? Mostyn knows I earned it—so does Grogan and Clubby. I could hang Mostyn by openin' me mout', and I *will* hang him if I wait another fifteen minutes!"

Joshua Turnbull's entrance saved Madden the necessity of a reply. Likewise the old man's face went white with horror. The gangster's boast had been pitched in a tone so shrill that he could not have helped hearing every syllable distinctly.

Madden affected a composure in keeping with the part he was playing. He spoke as quietly as if he was not conscious of anything unusual.

"Mr. Turnbull, this is Mr. Spuds Seeley. He says that he has had some confidential business relations with Mr. Mostyn, our president. I, as you know, only returned yesterday after

a prolonged absence. Mr. Mostyn, as his secretary will tell you, left me in charge of his business affairs here. Mr. Seeley refused to accept the payment of one thousand dollars which Mr. Mostyn directed should be made to Mr. Seeley to-day in cash. He says the amount is ten thousand dollars, and I am inclined to believe he is telling the truth. Therefore, I am arranging, owing to Mr. Seeley's pressing demand for this money, to advance all I have in my personal account; but I lack about fifty-five hundred dollars of enough to make up the sum he declares is due him. I do not think it is necessary to discuss the nature of the business between Mr. Mostyn and this gentleman." He waved toward the gangster. "I will give you my receipt for this amount, and the matter can be adjusted and the proper charge made when Mr. Mostyn shall return."

Turnbull bowed weakly.

"Very well, Mr. Madden. In what amounts shall I bring the money?"

"Centuries down to tens," smiled Spuds, treating himself to another generous sniff of his favorite drug. "And get a move on, you old dub! There's too much red tape round here for me."

The tinkle of the phone at his elbow interrupted Madden's next query. He took up the receiver.

Spuds sat forward in his chair. The pupils of his eyes were contracting; his face twitched, and he reached nervously toward his hip-pocket.

The entrance of the secretary, ostentatiously carrying a bundle of money at the same instant, did not appear to reassure the gunman entirely.

"Yes, this is Dr. Madden."—"Oh, is that you, Billy?"—"Who else?"—"Cleve?"—Well, boys, you'll have to wait on me for a few minutes. I'm engaged." — "Yes, very much." — "No, be with you shortly."—"Oh, merely a matter of business. Yes, I won't be long."

The receiver clicked sharply into place.

"Now, Mr. Seeley, if you will oblige me by counting this money—"

Spuds leaned over the desk. The packages of greenbacks fell through his fingers with swift dexterity, down upon the hideous delineation of John North—swinging at the end of a rope.

"Thirty-five hundred—aw' right," growled the thug.

"The other will be here presently," announced Madden. "Where were we at in our little story? Oh, yes. You had just started to say that you could hang Mr. Mostyn, I believe. Spuds, you are the most arrogant boaster I ever listened to. If it were not that Mr. Mostyn had given orders to pay you that thousand, I'd have you kicked down-stairs."

"It ain't too late, if that's the way you feel about it," snarled the other, drawing back.

"No, it isn't," smiled Madden. "But as I gave you a promise, I'll keep it—provided you give me one in return."

"What is it?"

"Here's Mr. Turnbull with the balance of your money. After you have assured yourself that this makes the final payment in full for your special services to Mr. Mostyn, I'll tell you what I want you to promise me, Spuds."

The formality was soon over. Spuds Seeley, now quite alone with his benefactor, smiled his knowing, twisted smile, and set his hat jauntily on his head.

"Me skirt 'll be so sore she'll beef all day," he humorously remarked. "What's this about a promise?"

"That you will never disclose to any one, under any circumstances, the nature of your business with Elliott Mostyn, nor will you again show that ugly face of yours around here," shot back Madden.

He raised a warning hand.

"I've given you the money you asked for, every nickel, Mr. Seeley.

Now, I trust, this ends our acquaintance. Does it or doesn't it?"

Spuds leered. The diabolism of his vicious smile would have angered a saint.

"Promise!" he sneered. "Mostyn knows that I can hang him. Why should I promise *him* anything? He broke *his* promise, didn't he—right here to-day—about me coin?"

He swaggered defiantly through the door into the anteroom.

There was a furious struggle the instant he emerged. David Madden leaped to the aid of the two men whom the cocaine fiend was tossing about as if they were merely pillows.

Like his Biblical namesake the physician realized that he had acquired another pebble for his sling.

CHAPTER XIV.

Mostyn Takes a Chance.

ELLIOTT MOSTYN rose from the appetizing, well-ordered meal in Dalton Hall in far better humor than after the one he had eaten on arriving at Queenstown that morning. Even his habitually suspicious and crafty nature could find nothing to condemn in the plans which the resourceful Madden had formulated to aid him in the dilemma caused by the Emporia's accident.

It was quite miraculous, taken as a whole.

Wireless to Queenstown, cable to New York, and messages in return to Dalton had done much to relieve his anxiety regarding the situation should Mostyn decide to avail himself of Dalton and the air-craft as a last resort.

The machine's performance stirred him to an unwonted but concealed enthusiasm. That machine also was something which Universal Products Corporation naturally attracted to itself by virtue of its gigantic and commanding position.

The director of the mighty concern, however, checked his impulse to speculate on the future possibilities the device might have in further entrenching himself and associates in their dominance of affairs.

His was a very practical mind, hence Elliott Mostyn gave the right-of-way to his still unresolved problem of how to get that enormous amount of money into New York without its source being suspected.

Already it was the night of the 25th of June.

In six brief days he must be ready for the final issue. He had himself selected the battle-ground and the day for the slaughter.

"I must congratulate you upon the perfection of your *ménage*, Mr. Dalton," said he as they left the table. "I envy you this quiet place, with its air of refinement. In America we pay far less attention to such matters. But here, breeding and the heritage of a family name come first—and rightly so."

"You are most welcome, sir," replied Dalton. "Now, is there any other way in which I may be of service to you? My own plans—"

Mostyn checked him with a look. The courteous veneer dropped. Once more he was the master-mind and his host simply a pawn in the great game, whose supine figures Universal Products moved hither and yon on the chessboard of events.

"How do you find your way home when on these air journeys?" he frigidly inquired.

"Very easily, sir."

"I should imagine it would be very difficult," retorted Mostyn. "You have none of the usual landmarks to guide you; things seen from such heights as I saw you attain this afternoon must possess peculiar perspectives."

"The science that sustains us in the air, Mr. Mostyn, also guides us whither we will. Prolonged flights, especially over unfamiliar localities, as you have correctly observed, would only

confuse one. So we fly by compass and according to charts."

"But how do you know that you have attained a certain place?" persisted the magnate. "For instance, if you were steering for Paris from here—one of the cities mentioned in those newspaper clippings—how do you know you are not over some other city?"

"The number of miles is automatically recorded by a device similar to a speedometer on an automobile; the altimeter shows how far we have climbed; the direction of flight is known by the compass; the surface distance, corresponding to all this, is known at a glance by the maps in the fuselage of the machine. They are on rolls, and can be adjusted to any locality by twisting a screw."

"I get you now. This is all quite unfamiliar to me."

"It is to most people—even to the majority of so-called aviators," smiled Dalton.

Into Mostyn's brain the slow ferment of a resolve had been brewing all afternoon. Ordinarily the most conservative of men, the idea of using any untried device for a matter of supreme importance—especially one involving such a danger as aviation—would have evoked only contempt from him. Emphatically, his was not a "take-a-chance" temperament.

He realized, however, that circumstances alter many things—even the habits of a lifetime. He was in a position now where he *must* take a chance of some sort — and which to choose was the only question.

He could cable; he could send Dalton to Madden; he could go with Dalton. The first two alternatives had objections which he had already thrashed out. The third was, on first thought, even more formidable. If anything happened to the aeroplane it would be fatal to Mostyn.

This idea, instead of chilling him, oddly enough had precisely the opposite effect. If he was to be drowned or smashed to fragments, he would go down with the drafts which would save Universal Products Corporation still in his grasp. Even death could not take them from him.

By the same process of reasoning, if Universal Products Corporation also went down, it would only follow his own descent to whatever Avernus waits both for men and their most pretentious achievements.

The very horror of such a suggestion added to the strange access of pleasure he was deriving from the situation since the Emporia's accident had made it impossible for him to reach New York as he had so carefully planned. Life, without control of Universal Products, was not worth living.

The mantle of habit dropped with his next words.

"Dalton, if you were told to take a passenger to New York to-night, what is the first thing you would do?"

"Come into my library, sir, and I'll show you."

The magnate followed him, Secretly he was very pleased with this fellow and his bearing. The matter-of-fact way he met any contingency inspired fresh confidence in one to whom that quality had long been alien.

The young aviator motioned him to a seat. On the ancient table he spread out his charts. They were very modern, Mostyn saw, and bore the imprint of the Royal Geographical Society.

Dalton seated himself on the opposite side of the table. He opened a case of instruments and placed some paper near by for his computations.

"Here is King William Town, Mr. Mostyn. We are now located between that place and Tralee. I select the former as a starting-point because it happens to be due east from Dunmore Head, the furtherest point west in Ireland."

He spread the dividers and compared it with a scale on the map. Mostyn nodded.

"If I were to undertake to carry

any one to New York," went on Dalton, "I should first plot a course, the same as a mariner would lay one out. Steamships do not steer directly east and west. They save many miles by sailing to the north, following the arc of a great circle and thus traverse the earth on a much smaller curvature.

"Now, let us take the latitude and longitude of Dunmore Head, the appearance of which I know very well, having often flown above it."

Dalton made a few computations. "It is located in latitude 52 degrees and 10 minutes north; longitude 10 degrees and 25 minutes west," he announced.

"Go on," said Mostyn shortly.

"Cape Race, a good landmark on the American side, is in Newfoundland. It lies in 46 degrees and 50 minutes north latitude, and 53 degrees west longitude. The difference between these points is five degrees and 20 minutes of latitude, and 42 degrees and 35 minutes of longitude."

The young man paused to make another computation.

"Here is the relative distance, in miles: Queenstown to Dunmore Head, 60 miles; Dunmore Head to Cape Race about 1,756 miles; and from that point to New York City about 1,014 miles—a total distance of about 2,830 miles between Queenstown and your office in New York. With the exception of the distance between here and Dunmore Head, it is all over-water flying."

"How long would it take you to make it?"

"Alone, or with a passenger?"

"Either way."

"It would depend, a little, on the experience of the passenger. If he were accustomed to flights and not frightened out of his senses at elevations, we could do it in less time than flying at low levels."

"Why?"

"We could rise above the wind-currents along the surface. These might hinder westward flights at a less elevation than a mile or two, while the northerly currents would tend to make us drift to the south. At low levels to combat these, we should have to tack occasionally, just as a ship zigzags back and forth in a head-wind. I can only estimate the time, but we should surely be able to make it in fifteen hours, sir, in any event."

"*Fifteen hours?*" repeated the listener mechanically.

"It does sound incredible. But you saw the machine in the air this afternoon."

"I surely did!" Mostyn rose. "How long will it take you to prepare for a journey, should I desire to make one?"

"The machine can be ready for one man in half an hour. For two, it will require a little more time. An extra shield must be raised over the fuselage to protect him from the air-pressure. Otherwise he would chill to an icicle before we had been aloft an hour."

"Prepare it for two," said Mostyn, very quietly. "I will go back to Queenstown and send Madden a cable. Is the car still outside?"

"I have a telephonic connection with the city, sir. That will save you three hours on your message. And, should you desire it, I will be glad to put you up here to-night. You will be more at home than at the hotel. When do you desire to have me start, sir?"

"I have not decided."

"Then, sir, I had best wait until you arrive at some conclusion."

"Why is that necessary?"

"The weight of the passenger, sir, is an important factor in the angle of the stabilizer."

"What is the stabilizer?"

"The device in the rear by means of which we maintain equilibrium. If a man weighs one hundred and sixty pounds, as you can understand, we must arrange to distribute that weight so the machine will neither be tail-heavy nor head-heavy. Otherwise, we are in difficulties. This is done by altering the stabilizer's angle."

"What if the thing is not set right when the passenger gets aboard?"

"Once his weight is known, we use sand-bags until we have proven the machine is properly balanced by a test in the air."

"You seem to think of everything in advance," commented his listener with a faint smile.

"We must, sir," replied Dalton, seriously. "There is no time to repair mistakes once we are aloft, and very little, in fact, to think in. You would be surprised, for instance, to know that I alter control, sometimes, when five miles distant from an object. When flying at a speed of more than three hundred and fifty feet a second I must know what will happen before it has a chance to happen."

"Great guns!" exclaimed his auditor. "Why don't you let some one shoot you out of a cannon's mouth?"

"It is all a matter of experience, I suppose. When Stephenson invented the locomotive, people thought the same thing about speeding twelve miles an hour, and expressed their ideas in almost your language."

Mostyn deliberated. The matter of a choice was one that must be made without delay. If the thing *did* go through— He chuckled.

"I left New York on the Ansonia the 14th of this month," said he to the other man. "I arrived the 20th at Liverpool. If I'm back by the 26th, what a smash it will be to the boys in New York — especially as some of them must know I'm in Ireland right now!"

It was Dalton's turn to be amazed. "*You,* sir?" he queried. "Are *you* thinking of making the flight?"

"Why not—do I weigh too much?" gibed Mostyn, surveying his corpulent figure with mock dismay. "Will that stabilizer of yours be inclined to balk?"

"It's a very sensitive device, sir," seriously returned Dalton, to Mostyn's growing enjoyment. "What do you weigh, if I may ask?"

"About two hundred and twenty."

"I will have the adjustments made at once, sir," returned the other imperturbably, as he left the room.

"Eh?" gasped Mostyn as the door closed.

But Dalton evidently neither heard nor understood the exclamation. The magnate realized that he had unwittingly chosen one of the three possible alternatives.

He wanted to call back the young Irishman. But he did not. The settled gravity of his host, whose sense of humor was more obtuse than he had suspected, had led Mostyn into a trap.

But *was* it a trap?

If two men were to essay such an insane achievement as Dalton and himself had been gravely debating all evening—every second of which was fraught with the most frightful perils—it must at least be conceded that what would happen to one would happen to the other. If Dalton landed safely in New York in two-thirds of the time he had remained aloft over Europe, why would not Elliott Mostyn be as certain to walk casually into his own office, following the aeroplane's arrival?

"I presume I feel much like the fellows who were watching Stephenson's first locomotive would have felt if they had been forced to mount the thing," mused Mostyn. "The only difference is that I've practically agreed to ride one as fast, relatively, as the engine of to-day is, compared to the first crude effort."

He was still ruminating in a half dazed way when Dalton reappeared.

"I have sent the car to Queenstown, sir," he began, "to procure some suitable clothing for you. You will wear a garment lined with penguin feathers and trimmed with sable to protect you from the cold."

Mostyn stared.

"There is very little discomfort, sir," went on the enthusiast. "You sit in what we term a 'pocket seat,' with your legs straight out, but there is room to bend them quite a little. The air-pressure is shunted aside from your

face by the shield the men are installing. And now, sir, may I suggest that you take a little rest to prepare for the trip?"

CHAPTER XV.

"Mr. North of Nowhere."

THE dense shadows of the lonely moor rendered walking difficult when Eustace Dalton guided the president of the Universal Products Corporation out to the hangar, shortly before eleven o'clock. The building loomed up before them a blacker blotch than its surroundings.

Dalton flashed a pocket lamp over the aeroplane.

"Right here, sir," said he, with the same grave courtesy he would have indicated a seat in a coach-and-four a couple of centuries earlier.

Mostyn's foot fumbled for the box which was placed to aid his entrance. He wedged himself into the fuselage, which fitted his overfat, circular thorax snugly. His feet were extended straight ahead, and could be braced against a short rail. Strong straps slipped over his shoulders, and a protecting robe, much resembling an arctic sleeping-bag, was trussed up around his neck and knotted securely.

"The hand-rails are on either side," continued Dalton. "In the first lift from the ground you had better steady yourself with them. But do not allow yourself to remain rigid—relax, as if you were in an invalid's chair. In that way you will be less likely to become overtired."

Mostyn grunted an assent. Inwardly he was fluttering, but pride locked his lips. A small, sealed caloric bottle diffused its grateful warmth around him. This, too, was another forethought of Dalton's.

The passenger saw the young Irishman fastening down the ear-protectors attached to his helmet as he stepped to the front of the machine. Other men were moving about in the darkness.

Two approached on either side of the fuselage and gripped it firmly. Another man, much larger than either of these, moved forward to the front of the machine.

"Tank pressures are O. K.," Dalton's voice floated back to him.

"Turn her over, will you?" commanded some one else.

"Off?" queried Dalton's voice.

"Off!" rumbled the other in a muffled response, directly ahead of where Mostyn was sitting. It seemed to come from the fuselage.

A series of compressions and hissing exhausts followed the gyrations of the propeller-blade as it was laboriously revolved. It was a huge and very formirable thing of itself.

"On?" queried the young Irishman.

"On!" imperturbably responded the same man as before.

"Here she goes!"

A whole artillery-park seemed to have opened fire. Mostyn, straining his eyes, first on one side and then on the other, saw the two men gripping the great aeroplane, digging their heels into the soft earth as they braced backward. A pencil of light flashed out from the forefront of the machine, stabbing the murk for a tremendous distance across the marsh.

Against its brilliancy there was silhouetted for a few seconds the black gauntlet of a raised hand—undoubtedly a signal. The shadow which the motionless glove cast was two hundred yards out in front of the machine, outlined against a group of tall reeds. It was like the mailed fist of a prehistoric monster, half-man, half-saurian.

The fist-shadow wavered, dropped sharply—and Mostyn felt the thing in which he was seated leap forward.

A short series of jars beneath was followed by a more deafening clamor from the engine; the propeller-blade disappeared entirely, then the pencil of light was merely a target of yellowish-white against the chalk-covered side of a huge hill—far in the distance.

Up, up, and up along the steep side

of the hill the round, targetlike spot traveled, momentarily growing larger and larger as they approached it with greater speed than the cloth-yard arrows of dead-and-gone archers had hissed through the air over these very marshes in days of old.

Their next upward bound was so amazing that it seemed as if the twinkling lights far below had suddenly been dropped from the earth and swallowed up in illimitable space in a flash.

Up, up, and still up—the machine inclining at an angle which had Mostyn's feet higher than his head—they rose upon the soft, invisible bosom of the night—no sound save the rhythmical roar of the superlatively-loud exhaust, blasting its defiance against the crooning melodies which the wind twanged on the guy-wires.

There was no vibration, no sickening undulation, no dizzying teetering, first to one side and then the other. By craning his head ever so slightly to one side, Mostyn could look beneath. The point where the wings joined the fuselage was cut away for a small space, resembling a quarter-section of a pie as large as a tub.

Then the machine slanted. Its speed seemed to accelerate a trifle. The speckled blur of yellow below resolved itself into a series of individual light-entities—each vying with the other in its rush upward and backward. Not until the machine had descended quite near in the frightful dive did Mostyn realize that they were over a city.

His sense of proportion returned as the great mass leaped suddenly up—so close that he fancied that he could have reached out and clutched it—at which precise instant the tail above him lowered quickly and the last lights beneath gave way to a monstrous emerald, ringed round with pearls on the edge nearest them.

The emerald expanded with magical velocity. Now it was all around them. Mostyn, unable to credit his senses, suddenly comprehended that they were over the sea.

The sea!

For tossing, restless leagues it was stretching its menacing surface around and below them.

For thousands and thousands of miles its reaches swept north and south until the very earth itself was gripped in its insatiable maw.

The coast of Ireland was already only a faint, yellowish glow below the curvature of the earth when he mustered courage to worm his head about for a look to the rear.

The glow, visible over his left shoulder, was drifting rapidly lower and lower with a southerly trend, and he judged that young Dalton was shaping his course west by north along the invisible lines which geographers have located in their imagination over the earth — as tangible in reality as that subtlest of elements along and through which he was rushing on the maddest, most fantastic of adventures—so undreamed of five days previously that he could not believe it now.

The undeviating volley streaming back to him and dying in their wake aroused a gull which flopped clumsily away, terrified by the terrific velocity which left it a flicker of white far behind in an infinitesimal fraction of time.

Then Mostyn saw that same target of light shimmering down far below and ahead.

With miraculous celerity it spotted an incoming steamer.

The glow from her funnels as she labored along on the bosom of the Atlantic, the mass of lights from her cabins merging into a straight line, leaped into his vision and was swept past in an indisguishable mass of spangled gloom before he could realize the character of the object.

It flashed through his half-numbed brain that this was one of the pilot's devices to insure himself that he was on the proper course.

The cleverness of the idea appealed to him. Dalton was a fit associate for honest, dependable David Madden —

Madden, the assured, competent, efficient youngster who had stood by him so loyally.

He would do something for Dave the day he landed — something commensurate with the character of the services he had rendered. For the first time in years Elliott Mostyn felt a glow of gratitude for a task worthily done. Nor did he repress it, as he had strangled the incipient sentiment a thousand times before. Something of the wonder of the aeroplane submerged every selfish emotion in his calloused mind, and an overpowering realization of the infinity of the earth's resources took its place.

All the secrets feigned in the books of the ancient enchanters, all the fables ascribed to their most mighty talismans, dwindled to shreds of idiocy when measured by the thing that was whirling him overseas far more speedily, safely, and comfortably than the magic carpet of an Arabian genie.

Here, on this roaring behemoth, imagination faded before actuality, and prophecy became realization as they volleyed through the night.

Then the projectile on which he had embarked bounded upward at a slight angle, and the next instant the damp mist enshrouded it as they pierced the heart of a cloud.

But the chattering sound ahead was the same. And in an incredibly short space of time the wreaths of mist parted and fell away, while the star-studded dome of the universe above took its place.

How quiet and serene the brilliant constellations seemed! They receded as steadily as the clambering machine tore upward through still higher spaces.

Mostyn began to be conscious of the rarer quality of the air, and the cold was more noticeable. He was grateful for the goggles Dalton had insisted on strapping around his head over the fur cap. Only the tip of his nose twinged, and this pain he relieved by huddling his chin a little lower in the fur-trimmed, feather-lined garment which he wore over his street-attire.

Inside the pocket-seat the caloric-bottle continued to radiate its grateful heat. Mostyn had experienced more uncomfortable moments in his own private car.

As the craft steadily rose, the magnate's brain began to raise the curtain of apathy which had shrouded him at the beginning of the journey. The air was most exhilirating. The tang of it was like the bouquet of a vintage whose secret passed with the beginning of the century. The stimulation increased the flow of his ideas and his reluctant heart, under its repeated drafts, responded with an elasticity it had not known for years.

Straight ahead toward the western edge of a universe where a blazing constellation hung as if it were a signal-lantern placed for the pilot's guidance, they reverberated on and on and on.

The processional of ideas within were now aping the speed of the thing that supported him. Events long past leaped out of obscure caverns of memory and stalked into the dazzling light of recollection. From a contemplation of his surroundings Elliott Mostyn was shunted back to the introspection of the past.

It unrolled from the earliest beginnings, like a moving-picture whose reel is around a planet.

They dimmed at last, his head sagged, and the mighty magnate of the commercial collossus slept as sleeps a child.

And on and on and on the aeroplane bolted across the cloud-bank two miles and a half beneath it. At the pilot's hand the altimeter needle was touching twenty-one thousand feet. Of all human beings who had sprung from the bosom of their common mother almost four miles beneath, these two alone this night had succceded in spurning the limitations of its mass—these two

alone this night were spurning the miles measuring its curved surface with a speed so marvelous that no comparison can do it justice.

Once the pilot twisted in his seat and glanced to the rear. Through the glass wind-shield he studied for a moment his passenger.

Then his eyes turned again to the mighty signal-lamp, Arcturus, which had literally been his "guiding-star" within an hour after he had risen above the obscurity of the clouds. It was very much lower now, but the inconceivably stupendous sun, exceeding in size the earth's light-giver eight hundred thousand times, blazed as brightly as it had flamed a billion of years before the puny earth was born.

It seemed peculiarly appropriate that the most brilliant gem of that particular group should be set in a constellation which the sons of men had long ago named Hercules.

The Centaur, which had been directly overhead when Arcturus was low on the western horizon, had sloped forward and in front of him to the west. Frons Scorpio and the North and South Scales were, in turn, descending from the zenith, to fall likewise over the edge of the world.

From these mighty and far-removed whirlwinds of cosmic energy flowed kinship with that marvelous propulsive mechanism which the pilot guided. Not once since rising from the bleak moor had the engine which John North's genius created missed an explosion. In the four hours which had elapsed a thousand trackless miles had been hurled behind, in spite of the great elevation which the machine had attained.

Already Menkar, with its curious leaden rays, was now on the zenith overhead, presaging the appearance of Andromeda, most sacred of symbols to Christian nations.

By a strange coincidence the last-named, more familiarly known as the Star of Bethlehem, would be the last star of considerable magnitude to appear before the rising sun at the pilot's back should wither the celestial guide-posts.

The moor had been left at eleven o'clock, and Cape Race, the first fringe of the American Continent, should be sighted within at least seven hours and a half.

Once this landmark was viewed, the compass, with its protective shield, impervious to possible magnetic disturbances, would afford as sure an index of direction as the stars had thus far been.

And still the passenger behind, hanging for the first time over the planet which he had lusted to rule, slept on.

The pilot glanced at the distance-recorder at his elbow, then at the clock alongside. He leaned forward and twisted the roller which the thumb-screw actuated in the cylinder containing the tightly wound map just below the level of his eyes.

As the lithographed surface lowered, he noted the computations carefully penciled in its margin, and then compared them with the compass-needle on his left.

Simultaneously the lever in his hands moved forward; he turned the cable-wound wheel in his strong, gloved hands, and his left leg was thrust out.

The machine inclined steeply downward, "banked" sharply until the outstretched wings approximated an angle of fifty degrees, and the swift descent continued until just below there gleamed an enchanting prospect.

The cloud formations, seen from above, assumed colorations such as only uncontaminated sunlight, when reflected and refracted in countless millions of prisms, can convey. Tints and shadings more elusive than the palette any artist every knew shot over, through, and around the fleecy mass of hovering vapor, toward which the cunningly devised fabric of steel, wood, and varnished linen was driving.

It was at this immortal instant that Elliott Mostyn woke.

Naturally he was confused. The continual blasts from the tremendous exhausts of the engine smote ear-drums which had been sealed in sleep. The peculiarly extraordinary character of the vehicle on which he was riding, the fantastic surroundings, the sense of personal helplessness for a moment smothered his faculties with the sheer weight of voiceless terror.

But it faded out as the scene on the moor flashed through his mind. The solemn and preternatural beauty of the present panorama reminded him of an enormously magnified art-gallery, bristling with statuary and lined with paintings of a relatively corresponding size.

One huge formation toward which they were falling especially impressed itself upon the unusually sensitive mind of Elliott Mostyn. It was a great face, stern, implacable, yet conveying an impression of dispassionate justice.

Something of its appearance roused a shudder of apprehension in the fascinated eyes of the watcher. For the first time in many years he was absolutely disassociated from all the pompous sycophancy and obsequious homage which had long been his portion.

The tinsel and the trumperies by which fraud and force disguise their real aspects while they lure their victims into the web were as completely cut off as if their existence had never been aught but a flattering dream.

A sense of immeasurable loneliness smothered the obese president of Universal Products Corporation, and hard behind rode a grisly fear. It was not in any way connected with the aeroplane or the probability of accident.

It was something else—something so impalpable that no reason could account for it save an intuition that here, far removed from all the cunning devices with which he maintained his ascendency, his sins would find him out.

He was actually hungering for human reassurance. The never-ending roar of the engine came dimly upon his dulled ears; he realized the futility of attempting to talk, and just as he was twisting a little more erect, intending to peer through the shield at the pilot's back that he might seek with his eyes the solace which his ears denied him, the machine rushed headlong into the all-enfolding embrace of the clouds below.

They were through them almost at once. A wisp of moisture whipped clear of his face as the strong, salty tang of the ocean bit once more upon the winged vehicle so long out of reach in the azure heights where the breath of Neptune never reaches.

Far below and exceedingly small, like a dwarf's playground, lay the huddled heap of civilization fringing the Hudson, Long Island Sound, and overflowing into the back country—a pygmy knot of foreshortened lights and shadows—a pasteboard toy. The highest pinnacle of all Mostyn knew for the same stupendous structure which Universal Products Corporation had reared to dazzle the mass with this visible symbol of its impregnability.

He wrenched himself into an upright sitting posture, clutching at the hand-rails conveniently placed for his aid.

His avid eyes peered through the glass plate ahead at the sturdy shoulders of the pilot, upon whose skill his own life had hung during the eternity since he had left Dalton Hall.

The figure was strangely unfamiliar.

It was not slender but broad. The head was not the aristocratic head of Eustace Dalton, balanced upon a neck so slim it might have been called delicate; it was, instead, a rounder form of cranium, fitting closely upon a thick-set neck; and sweeping back over the ears were wisps of yellow hair.

What necromancy was this?

How had Eustace Dalton left the aeroplane, and what manner of man had taken his place?

As if divining his frenzied question, the pilot turned.

A great, bearded face, whose piercing eyes of tawny blue were set under bushy brows, was wreathed in a derisive smile—the smile of a man who has defied the dual dragons of adversity and of chicane—the assured smile of one whom perdition has rejected lest its ruler lose his kingship—*the slow, lazy, insolent smile of John North, the man who was known to have been hanged at Trevor Prison!*

CHAPTER XVI.

The Night—and the Dawn.

THE little group of newspapermen waiting outside the Nacozari Apartments plunged forward as one man when the grave-faced coterie of surgeons emerged and stalked toward their waiting machines.

"Gentlemen," said the foremost of the medical men, "Mr. Mostyn cannot live until morning. He is already unconscious."

He gazed at the group which disintegrated with a celerity suggesting chemical atoms repelling each other from mutual incompatibility. They did not heed his look of disgust. One and all were scuttling for the nearest telephones.

For this was the night of June 30—to-morrow was dividend day for the Universal Products Corporation. The Street for a week had been buzzing with vague rumors, whose number and positiveness increased with each day—all pointing to one thing, and that thing was, "something doing in old U. P. C."

Well might the editors lay more stringent admonitions than usual upon members of their staffs who never so much as glanced at the mouth of "the Street." For "news" revolves around three elemental things—money, love, and life—sometimes all three at once.

The air of repressed expectancy was heightened by the mysterious but pregnant silence which hovered over the Universal Products Corporation offices, in which sat a self-contained young man, to whom all inquirers were referred.

He answered to the name of David Madden, and against his smiling reticence the cohorts of reporters exhausted every trick of their craft to obtain that which their editors were roaring for—"the news."

"Mr. Mostyn is abroad," he had told them with a courteous and sincere air that was most convincing—on June 25. "I had a cable from him at Queenstown when the Emporia put back after her accident."

The cable-message with Elliott Mostyn's name below was authentic enough—on its face. But the wary gleaners of the news were not satisfied with such an obvious explanation. The very simplicity of it was suspicious to their minds.

"When will he be home?" they chorused as one man.

"You can see for yourselves," smilingly replied Madden. "The next steamer leaves Queenstown for New York on the twenty-seventh. It should be here in ample time for Mr. Mostyn to get his firecrackers before our national holiday."

And with that they had to be content. Rumor, gossip, furtive marchings and countermarchings, stealthy conferences in "the Street," midnight meetings of heads of great financial institutions, surreptitious gatherings in brokers' offices, enigmatic signals—all the usual premonitory signs of an incipient "killing" continued unabated.

Waveringly at first, then faster and faster, the quotations on Universal Products dropped down in the market reports. The support which had long been manifest was no longer in evidence.

Alarmed by the prospects and growing more apprehensive of the situation, one by one Paisley, Wallen, Griscom and Grenville stole into the pri-

vate office of "the big chief," to discuss what was impending with the imperturbable, unmoved young physician, whose dark, close-curling hair, firm mouth and fighting chin with the tiny cleft was somehow quite comforting to their timorous souls.

Each went forth with renewed faith—a confidence strangely childlike, in view of the quality of the treatment that each was accorded.

For one and all Elliott Mostyn's substitute had only the same assurance: "Appearances, gentlemen, are often deceptive. I may only say to you that I know that Mr. Mostyn's plans are progressing as well as he had any reason to expect. I am as sure as one can be of anything that the Universal Products Corporation is solid at the core—and that its enemies, on the day appointed, will have ample reason to believe this, even better than the insiders have now."

So, despite the fact that their paper fortunes were visibly dwindling, none of the executive board permitted themselves to be "shaken out" of their holdings before the twenty-seventh.

After that date they were obliged to hold on—for a better reason than before. For that was the day following the night that Elliott Mostyn, president, had been found in a semi-conscious condition, stumbling around in Central Park Menagerie.

Hence, Universal Products slumped with a suddenness and a finality that cut the current prices of the day before in twain. The stock closed at seven hundred and fifty dollars bid and seven hundred and fifty-five dollars asked on the night of June twenty-sixth. On the morning of June twenty-seventh it touched three hundred and seventy-five dollars. A flurry of "short covering" carried it up to three hundred and ninety dollars—when the bears again assailed it—with incredible ferocity.

"How does it come," clamored the ticker, "that Elliott Mostyn was alleged to be in Queenstown on the twenty-fifth and is in New York on the twenty-seventh?"

Therefore the brokers raged and the bankers imagined vain things—the stock which had been held as collateral for certain Universal Products "time-paper" made its appearance in "the loan crowd"—and signs of certain dissolution began to be manifest to the wise ones—not to say rampant to the wiser and wisest of floor-brokers.

"Sell U. P. C." was the tip that went out—and sell they did again on the twenty-eighth. And once again Wallen, Paisley, Griscom and Grenville sought the private office of the president—only to learn that Dr. Madden was at the bedside of the "big chief" and would not budge from his room, in spite of the earnest entreaty of the quartet.

The twenty-eighth and twenty-ninth were momentous days. Universal Products stock not only slipped to two hundred and fifty-nine dollars—but what was still more important not a man in the whole city, save only David Madden, could throw the slightest beam of light upon what had happened or would be likely to happen—and he, compared to Mostyn's usually reticent nature, resembled a paving block alongside a hard-working phonograph.

One other incident, submerged and lost in the frenzied mass of speculation, rumor and allegations with which the newspapers were now blazing, was tucked neatly away in a three-line "city brief." Had the wise ones only appreciated the true significance of that little paragraph, their alleged wisdom would have revealed to them the secret.

"Mr. North of Nowhere," who was given a summons by Patrolman Monahan for alighting in his aeroplane in Central Park, did not appear for trial this morning.

But who cared about a mere aviator who had violated a city ordinance

when the financial fabric of the nation was evincing undeniable rents through which the public confidence was leaking in a terrible fashion?

No one—least of all the hungry gentlemen who had foreseen so much of this months before—for so much had they foreseen, but not all, by any means.

They were wishing they had. They fervently wished, following the news the night of the 30th of June, when the extras swept from Battery Park to Yonkers, and were devoured by tens of thousands of copies far into the night—they fervently and unctuously wished that they could have also foreseen the frosting on their cake—the death of Elliott Mostyn.

"Well, to-morrow is clean-up day," remarked a Semitic-featured pachyderm in the lobby of the Montezuma Hotel, as he fingered the tape. "Old U. P. C. was a good wagon, but she's done broke down—she's off the board.

"Why, it takes three hundred millions to pay off their loans! They're broke, I tell you. Didn't I get it straight to-day from one of the banks? Didn't the banks see it coming? The only stock in the street for a month has been the collateral they had up on their time loans! The banks wasn't going to be caught with three hundred millions in bad loans—even if it was time paper. No, sir; they've peddled it out—and they'll get out all right—take it from me. But to-morrow the wise guys that loaded up with that same U. P. C. around six hundred, five hundred and down to where she is to-day, will be trying to hock it for meal tickets at the Mills Hotel!"

He strutted away, his beefy face flushed with his triumph. The human vultures who trail the big cormorants, buried their talons in the palms of what had once been hands but were now merely the fleshly rudiments of claws.

One reporter, despairing of any other source of authentic news, rushed to a phone booth and began to pour this priceless information to a blasé desk-man who listened in the office of the *Dial*, an influential morning paper.

"Say, Zeke!" interrupted the listener, "bite that off short—the old man wants to talk with you." Zeke, knowing the old man from daily personal contact, obeyed.

His ears tingled with wrath and shame.

"Git out of that lollypop factory," snarled the chief. "Go down to Universal Products Building and up to the twenty-fifth floor. They're battin' the ball all over the lot down there. Been at it all evening—why, you boob, I can see 'em from my own desk! See this Madden guy—he's on the inside. Get—"

And then there followed a string of sulfurous injunctions that made Zeke's hair raise. It was still standing when he sat down, panting, in the anteroom of the twenty-fifth floor, to wait until Madden would see him, which was to be soon.

Presently he was ushered into the room.

His hat went off at the sight of the crape-draped desk where Elliott Mostyn had so often gazed out at the Palisades—as rugged and indomitable as his own unyielding personality.

Madden was sitting in a chair, and around him the four members of the executive board also sat in grave silence.

"You are from the *Dial?*" queried David Madden pleasantly.

"Yes, sir."

"Have a chair."

The reporter sat down.

"You called, I presume, to seek detailed information concerning Mr. Mostyn's demise this evening?"

"Yes," said Ezekiel Webster, straightening and clutching at the brim of his hat as if it were a life-preserver, "about that—and some other things."

"What other things?"

"Well—er—the rumors—the drop

in the price of Universal Products Corporation stock," stammered the reporter. "Say, gentlemen," he burst out, impetuously, "all of you know the *Dial*. It's one of the biggest papers in the city. Why not come across with a clean sheet? The public wants to know."

David Madden picked up a piece of paper from his desk.

"The executive board of Universal Products Corporation," he began, "has done me the honor to elect me in place of the late president, Mr. Elliott Mostyn, whose untimely death we all greatly deplore. You will find here a copy of the resolution passed by the board, and an appreciation of the late executive.

"Mr. Mostyn, I may say in passing, died in harness. He was in Queenstown on the twenty-fifth, watching some experiments with a new engine which his corporation was about to acquire. It was being tested on a new type of aeroplane.

"The policy of Universal Products Corporation has always been to make sure of its ground. Therefore, the corporation did not enter the aeroplane, equipped with the new type of cold engine, officially in the transatlantic aeroplane flights, soon scheduled to be held under the auspices of the International Aeronautic Society. Instead, Mr. Mostyn himself engaged one of the company's own pilots to bring him to America. The flight began over King William Town, Ireland, on the night of the 25th of June, at eleven o'clock. The aeroplane arrived in Central Park about nine-thirty the following morning, New York time."

Zeke Webster gave a long whistle.

"Eleven and a half hours?" he gasped. "Impossible!"

"About fifteen or sixteen, I should say," rejoined the new president, quietly. "There's a difference of five hours, you know, between London and New York time."

"But where is the difference?" demanded the reporter.

"I should say that it is purely arbitrary—a device for the convenience of the earth-bound," smiled Madden. "For further information on the subject I refer you to an astronomer."

Zeke scratched his head.

"There's a ton of 'em around this burg," he muttered. "But, Mr. Madden—how about the rest of the story—what's ailed Universal Products the past couple of months? That's the thing my city editor wants to know."

"Here is a statement taken from the company's books at the close of business to-day," said the new president. "I have no hesitation in saying that it is in every way correct. You may keep it. It has been verified by our executive board here, and is signed, as you will see, by Mr. Phineas B. Griscom and myself."

Zeke unfolded the paper and scanned it avidly.

"W-h-y, an hour ago I heard you were broke!"

"You newspapermen ought to be among the last in the world to believe all you hear—or read," replied Madden. "The company's statement will be sent to all stockholders to-morrow—a duplicate of it is in your hands there. I may also say that the executive board, at Mr. Mostyn's suggestion, more than two months ago agreed with him that every dollar of the corporation's obligations should be liquidated—in cash—at maturity. And, of course, the dividend notices will be made to-morrow."

"Excuse me, gentlemen," Zeke Webster flung over his shoulder. He tore down the stairs to meet the elevator.

Griscom walked over to Madden.

"My felicitations, Mr. President," said he. "Mr. Mostyn himself couldn't have handled the situation more delicately than that. I think I voice the sentiments of all present when I say that we are all in your debt—and shall be for years to come. Had it not been for your forethought—we would have been ruined."

Madden's reply was characteristic of the man.

He did not speak. Instead, he walked quickly to the outer door, closed and locked it.

" When Mr. Mostyn realized he was on his death-bed and made me his sole heir, gentlemen," said he, " he hit me harder than he knew. For I was planning to supplant him in this very position. I have another surprise for you. I trust that it will prove as acceptable as the payment of these loans—and the profits all of us will clean up on the Stock Exchange when U. P. C. goes to four thousand dollars a share to-morrow. It has to do with the future policy of the company. As president, it shall, to a large degree, be under my supervision. We have borrowed money—we must pay it back again. That is easy. But, gentlemen, do you imagine that it will be easy to continue to fight labor, public opinion, and adverse legislation? "

" I'm going to stuff my ears with cotton and beat it to the Adirondacks to-morrow," squeaked Grenville. " I never could bear the howls of the anguished brokers and the bleating of the innocent lambs who have been caught short—"

Madden turned on him a look of superlative disgust.

" If I were you, Grenville, I'd take my profits and move to Paris," said he acidly. " You're too much of a trimmer to be a vital factor in a creative enterprise. Take them while you can get them," he hotly continued. " That's all you can think of—trimming some one for a few millions! "

Grenville was purple.

Madden continued to regard him with such animus that the gambler took up his hat. Without a word the president unlocked the door and re-locked it behind the departing magnate.

The others fidgeted uneasily.

That the new executive should evince such self-assertion was rather out of the routine of past experiences. But Madden's head was held high, and his clear, cutting tones rang as haughtily as if he were born to the position he had just assumed and occupied it when the other men present were carrying hods.

" Right here and now, gentlemen, the new policy of Universal Products goes into effect. Hereafter this gigantic corporation engages in legitimate, constructive and profitable work—the work of the world, if you please. I will not give the details now—I will, instead, allow you to meet my friend and former associate, the man who will replace Mr. Grenville on the executive board at the next meeting—Mr. John North—inventor of the process of reducing waste to power and of the now celebrated North cold engine! "

As he concluded he pulled open the door of the office usually occupied by Baldwin, executive secretary to the deceased president.

" Mr. North, this is Mr. Griscom, our treasurer; Mr. Paisley, our secretary; Mr. Wallen, also a member of the executive board."

Griscom stared hard.

" I thought you were hanged? " he cried in amazement.

" I have a certificate of my official death in my pocket," boomed John North, genially, " also a full pardon from the governor of this State for the crime of which I was convicted. Dr. Madden has the confession, corroborated, of Mr. Spuds Seeley, who killed the watchman in my laboratory.

" Also some other papers. As an inventor, gentlemen, it was up to me in the death cell to exercise the same mind that invented my engine, which your late president thought worth three millions of dollars. Upon that point we disagreed. He is gone now. I brought him across from Queenstown several days ago. The high altitude maintained during the trip combined with the last dive to the ground, proved too much for his weak heart. Dr. Madden can give you the details."

"As a prison physician," supple-

mented the man on whom all eyes were suddenly turned, "I found Mr. North singularly obstinate besides courageous to the point of rashness. Mr. Mostyn intended to intercede for him—and his intention miscarried. The details of that are now of no consequence whatever. What is of consequence, however, is this: I realized that Mr. North was fully determined to die—and with him would perish the secret of his cold engine. This engine, alone, was of such fabulous value that Universal Products Corporation stock at ten thousand dollars a share—instead of one thousand—will shortly be an actuality on the Exchange.

"As I have intimated, Mr. North refused, even at the price of his life, to make terms. Even when led out to the execution chamber, he was still determined.

"The night before, convinced that he was inflexible as he seemed, I conveyed to him a collar of pliable steel, painted to resemble the color of his throat. Also a broad strap to buckle under his arms. His beard hid the one and the simple expedient of buttoning his shirt concealed the other.

"Before going to the scaffold, I gave him a hypodermic, which is customary. Instead of morphin, I substituted hyoscyamin—thus artificially inducing catalepsy. The official hangman was quite willing to suspend Mr. North by the strap as well as by the throat—in consideration of five thousand dollars—advance payment. It almost busted me—"

"And that thirty-secondth-inch steel stuff was too thin for a man of my weight," growled North, "so I almost choked to death."

"You were a perfectly good dead man, even to the color, when I took you to the morgue," interpolated Madden. "But I had another corpse, without a head, which I procured from my alma mater's pickle vat; and after permitting Warden Donovan to look at his late charge, I revived him, slipped him out of the morgue-door into the street, and shipped the actual corpse to New York as a histological specimen."

The three members of the executive board indulged in the luxury of a few legitimate shudders.

"And our personal fortunes were hanging on the same rope with you, sir," cried Wallen, gripping North's hand after a half-hour of eager questions and replies. "It is an incredible story. Had I not seen the official announcement of your death I would never believe such a yarn."

"Nor I," chimed Griscom and Paisley simultaneously, as they, too, extended their hands to North.

"All perfectly good drama!" stolidly returned the bearded one, chuckling. "I had quite a job to fool that death-watch, Terence McCabe. I wanted to put on that collar and belt the worst way—but he kept nosing around until I all but despaired of it.

"But I hit on a plan when he went to let in the priest and Mr. Madden. I stuck my head through the door and began to kick about the dirty pail that catches the sand from the trap. And I kept kicking and yodeling and raising the devil generally, until that good little fellow, Father Matthew, insisted on trying to save my soul. He came into my cell, and I had to keep up the play-acting, even to dropping a phoney letter from an imaginary brother which I wrote myself to give Warden Donovan something to worry about. It worked beautifully, Doc says. It was bully fun!"

"But who," demanded Wallen, another half-hour later, "was it that *did* kill your watchman? That is, who was concerned in it besides this gangster, Spuds Seeley you have mentioned?"

North and Madden exchanged significant glances.

"Gentlemen," said the youthful president, as the first rays of the new sun touched the grim heights of the Palisades with the glory of the newborn day, "to quote the words of a great apostle: 'There then remain

these three—faith, hope and charity—and the greatest of these is charity.' "

Silently the little group of men left the building. The newsboys were already shrilling their morning wares.

"Uxtry *Dial!* All about Universal Products and President Mostyn!"

North shook Madden's arm.

"Where now?" said he, with a boyish smile that curled the ends of his chestnut beard.

"What do you say to breakfast?"

"Suits me."

"Father Matthew Dalton is at the Montezuma Hotel. Shall we go over?"

"With all my heart," assented John North, inhaling the fresh air with gusto, as if absorbing anew the mighty magic of induction and of time. "There are several little matters of our debate which are yet to be settled. I wish to overwhelm that gentleman with proofs of the assertion I made when I was unavoidably compelled to leave him to attend a very pressing engagement some months ago."

"What was that?" queried Madden, his lips curving in an admiring smile.

"I told him his theology was not proof against my science," gravely returned the inventor. "Funny, David, the difference between men about such matters. Now take his brother Eustace—there's a man—"

(The end.)

Lo, the Poor White Man!

by James B. Hendryx

"SPEAKIN' of Injuns," ventured my chance acquaintance of the Cow Creek Trail as we passed close by a solitary red man who sat humped in the shade of a rock-pinnacle, and gazed vacantly out over the range where a band of two-year-old wethers were busily putting on mutton. "I never see an Injun sheep-herder without thinking of Magpie an' the trick he put over on Bear Paw Charlie—which Bear Paw he's be'n dead a couple of years now, an' Magpie's worked into a ranch of his own over on Boxelder.

"Old man Bowman was the big noise among the sheepmen them days, an' when he decided to take a chance on the South Slope, he hand-picked a couple thousan' old ewes an' put Magpie to herdin' 'em.

"They's more sheep than cattle between the mountains an' the Mizoo now, but them days it was different. What with the Lazy Y on Eagle an' the K bar T on Cow Crick, to say nothin' about the Flyin' A horse outfit an' the Circle C over on Fourchett,

the sheepmen kep' purty well north of the mountains, which had got to be a sort of dividin' line till old man Bowman kicked over the traces an' made his play for a chunk of our range.

"I was ridin' for Struthers that year, an' one evenin' Slim Britton sashayed into the bunk-house, pullin' a face as long as a president's message.

"'They've come, boys,' he says; 'an we might as well pull our freight whilst the pullin's good. It's Saskatchewan for ourn, 'cause I seen the handwritin' on the wall, as the soul-puncher was tellin' about, which, in our case, it's a big, white patch shinin' again' the grass way off toward the shoulder of Saw Tooth. I rides over, an', Larrupin' Mike! if it worn't a band of sheep! *Sheep!*' he squeals; '*Sheep! On the South Slope!*'

"First off they was consid'ble growlin' amongst us, an' some right ugly talk; but shucks. The woollies is bound to crowd the cattle off the range anyhow; so what's the use? Wyomin' an' the Johnson County war learnt us that, with its burnt wagons an' slaughtered sheep an' dead cow-punchers, out there on the big, silent range. Course, things on the South Slope wasn't like that, an' we all know'd Slim was nach'ly of a doleful mind; but it wasn't none hopeful at that. Look at it now! The Circle C's gone, the Flyin' A, too; an' the K bar T an' Lazy Y shrunk down to a measly fifty thousan' head between 'em—with sheep outfits strung along the bad lands from Clagett to the Bear Paws.

"'Twas plain old man Bowman looked for trouble.

"Altogether he run sixty or eighty thousan' head of sheep on the other side of the divide, an' he picked the scum of his stock, an' Magpie, for to experiment with. But no trouble come. Magpie herded his sheep an' minded his own business, an' we never bothered him none. He wasn't to blame, nohow, havin' to go where old man Bowman sent him or lose his job.

"I didn't ride the round-up that summer owin' to a cayuse kickin' me plumb over the top of the corral fence, along in the spring. I lit on the roof of Ma Struthers's hen-house, an' come on down through, breakin' a settin' of eggs an' my leg, which it mended all right in time—barrin' a couple of inch of len'th.

"In six weeks I could ride same as ever, except one stirrup had to be took up consid'ble, an' I put in my time amongst the foot-hills, throwin' stragglers on water, it bein' a tol'ble dry summer, an' ridin' over for the mail, an' makin' myself otherwise useful to Ma Struthers, which she hadn't never got through mournin' over that settin' of eggs, spite of the fact that a many a one of 'em wouldn't never of hatched nohow. I *know*, an' so does the boys that carried me out of the hen-house that day.

"Bein' out alone thataway I got in the habit of stoppin' up to Magpie's camp frequent, just settin' around an' watchin' them old ewes eat up good grass.

"Take it first an' last, I reckon sheep-herders is about the most despised race of people they is — an' 'specially Injun sheep-herders — an' this here Magpie was about the tag-rag an' bob-tail of *them*. He was just a kid—fifteen, me'be sixteen year old, an' runty for his age.

"Some one give him the name of Magpie for a joke, an' the name stuck. You see, magpies is about the orneriest, noisiest birds thet is, always squawkin' an' chatterin, all to wunst, instead of which this here Injun kid was about the least talkin' an' stillest individool that ever drawed breath. You c'n take it from me, the Spink of Egyp' didn't have nothin' onto Magpie for gloomy silence.

"Some claimed he didn't have all tha' was comin' to him in the way of brains—but they had to guess ag'in—ain't he runnin' an outfit of his own? He know'd a heap more'n what he looked like he know'd, an' was surprisin' me continual'. One evenin' the

sheep was workin' in onto the bed-ground an' Magpie was watchin' 'em, like he always done.

"'Sheep's gone,' he says, lookin' out over them forty acres of woolly-backs.

"'How many?' I asks.

"''Bout nineteen,' he opines.

"'Look here,' I says, 'you can't count only to eight; how do you know they's nineteen sheep gone out of them two thousan'?'

"He looks at me kind of pityin'.

"'Ain't here; mus' be gone,' he says; an' away he hikes out over the bench, afoot. I hung around a spell, an' then started for the ranch, an', dog my cats, a couple of miles away if here didn't come Magpie up out of a coulée drivin, *nineteen sheep!* I counted 'em myself.

"But around the lambin'-camps an' shearin'-plants they used to pester an' torment him—never hurt him none—jest deviled him along. He stood for it all, never got mad nor started no ruction; jest looked out of them big, mockin' eyes, an' kep' his mouth shut. Somehow, when he looked thataway, you felt like he was laughin' at you, but you wasn't sure.

"It's a cinch the kid know'd more about sheep in a minute than the most of 'em ever will know; jest took to 'em nach'l, an' that's why old man Bowman picked him for the South Slope.

"Me an' him got right well acquainted before the end of that summer. I used to set an' tell him about the things I'd learnt at school an' hadn't forgot. An' I always give it to him straight—never strung him or lied to him like the others done—an' he know'd it.

"He'd set there by the hour with them big, black eyes watchin' my face, only lookin' off now an' then to see how the sheep was feedin', an' listenin' whilst I told him about somethin' or other—didn't make no difference to Magpie if I was tellin' about electin' a sheriff or how the stars was made—he'd jest set an' listen, noddin' his head now an' then to let me see he onderstood what I was drivin' at. I liked him first rate, an' he liked me, too. I reckon I was the only white man ever treated the poor little shaver half-ways decent.

"Tendin' camps for old man Bowman was an old, worn-out cow-puncher name of Bear Paw Charlie, an' Bear Paw worn't none too reg'lar in his trips to Magpie's camp. Even when he did come along he never brung much grub, an' many's the snack I've packed over to the poor little devil, packin' it in my slicker when I'd start out—an' Ma Struthers allowed fallin' through hen-houses worn't none hard on the appetite.

"It run along thataway till one day I was ridin' to town for the mail an' met up with Bear Paw Charlie at the mouth of the cañon. I seen his spring-wagon was loaded with grub till the box was thumpin' the hind ax'. They was ham, bacon, dried apples, spuds, canned milk, butter, coffee, cheese—everything a man ever et that was good. It bein' along about noon, we hobbled the horses, built a fire beside the trail, an' et.

"'Where you headin', with all that grub?' I asks, by way of startin' an argument, after we'd got our pipes lit.

"'It's for Magpie,' he says, tryin' to speak casual.

"'Magpie!' says I, surprised. 'For the love of Mike! what's Magpie be'n made king of?' Bear Paw, he fidgits around a bit an' puffs on his pipe. Then he pulls off his sombrero an' points to where a set of thirteen rattles an' a button is fastened conspicuous jest above the rim in front.

"'Toad,' he says, lookin' solemn—Toad is me, owin' to some an' sundry of warts which had growed onto my hands, an' which I've got red of, subsequent, by rubbin' the same with a piece of liver out of the seventh calf of a blind-eyed cow—'Toad, when any one tells you they know Injuns, jest you set 'em down for a shorthorn. You c'n take it from me, that's et with 'em, an' slep' with em, an' lived with 'em

for goin' on fifty year; they's as much difference in Injuns as there is in *folks*. An' the *hombre* that said all good Injuns was dead Injuns lied like a greaser!

"'Take Magpie, now,' he says. 'I ain't used him right. Here I be'n tendin' his camp for a month an' better, an' I ain't never fetched him nothin' 'cept jest enough to keep him from starvin'. It's as good as most Injuns gits, I thinks, an' lets it go at that. Old man Bowman feeds his hands good—if he *is* a sheepman. But I never seen the use of wastin' good grub on an' Injun, so I brung him beans an' prunes an' flour; but he never kicked. He took what I fetched, an' et it an' shut up.

"'Well, last time I was to his camp—last Tuesday it was, 'cause I've burnt the trail to get back with this layout—was a hot day. I throw'd the grub into his camp-wagon, an' whilst the horses was feedin' I flopped down on the shady side to catch me a little sleep. I must of slep' quite a spell, 'cause when I woke up the sun was shinin' in my face. I woke *sudden*—an' then I laid there, not darin' to move a muscle.'

"Bear Paw's voice dropped low, an' he shivered.

"'Toad,' he says, 'do you know what woke me up? It was—*rattles!* Yes, sir—rattles—an' not a foot from my ear! I looked sideways out of the tail of my eye, an' suffering cats! There was the biggest rattler I ever seen, all coiled, ready to strike, 'cept about eight inches of his neck that was weavin' an' swayin', slow like, almost ag'in' the side of my face! His little black eyes was a snappin' sparks, an' his red-an'-black forked tongue was a flashin' in an' out. Man, it was turrible! I wondered why he didn't strike an' be done with it.

"'I've be'n scairt before in my life; but this time I was plumb petrified! I couldn't no more move than a rock! Then I heard a sound, an' all to wunst, over beyond the snake, I seen the thin, dark face of Magpie framed 'round by his long, black hair. Closter an' closter it come—in an arm's reach now. An' then my hair begun to prickle, an' I got cold all over, like a frog.

"'*His hands were empty!*

"'It seemed like an hour he waited there, an' all the while that rattler was jest a gloatin' an' a honin' to strike. I didn't dast to yell out—jest had to lay there—an' then I catched sight of the kid's eyes behind the wicked, glitterin' eyes of the snake! It's all off, thinks I, 'cause 'way in the back of them big, black eyes he seemed to be laughin'—a mockin' an' a waitin' for the snake to strike.

"'An' then, believe me or not, it's as true as I'm settin' here—that Injun kid jest retch out that long, skinny hand of hizzen an' *picked that rattler up,* an' walked, me'be it's a hundred feet, to the coulée an' down over the edge. I broke out in a cold sweat an' tried to holler at him, but my pipes was dry, an' the wind jest kind of whistled through 'em. D'rectly I heard the sound of a club whackin' the ground, an' back come the kid with these here rattles in his hand.'

"Bear Paw looked at 'em a long time, an' give 'em a proudful poke with his finger. 'Thirteen rattles an' a button,' he mutters. 'An' now you know why I'm packin' this grub to Magpie. He saved my life, that kid did, an' you c'n bet your last blue one that long as I'm tendin' camps he'll get his share—an' then some! But what's botherin' me,' says Bear Paw, after I'd helped him hook up his team, 'I don't know yet whether Magpie's a fool or jest plumb brave, or whether he's some kind of medicine-man that snakes won't bite.'

"On my way back to the ranch that evenin', I stopped at Magpie's wagon. Bear Paw had gone, an' the kid had jest finished the biggest supper he ever set down to.

"'I seen Bear Paw,' I says. 'Shake!' I stuck out my hand, but

the kid don't seem to notice it. He was lookin' past it into my face, an' as he looked I thought I seen in his big, black eyes just the flicker of a mockin' laugh. But he never smiled, an' stepped down out of the wagon.

"'Bear Paw Charlie told me all about it,' I says, thinkin' he hadn't got me. Magpie never said nothin', but he motioned me to come an' lead the way to the coulée, just over the rim, where there's a hole between two rocks. The kid put his mouth clost to the hole an' gives a whistle; he whistled agin, an' d'rectly out of the hole crawls the biggest bull-snake I ever seen; he's six foot, an' thick as a skinny man's arm.

"Magpie picked up his pet and walked to the wagon, where he set the snake on the ground an' begun plaguin' him — snappin' him on the nose with his finger. The big reptile's lazy, an' don't mind it none; but presently he coils up, slow like, an' begins weavin' to an' fro an' dartin' out his forked tongue. It's sure surprisin' how much like a rattler one of them bull-snakes looks when he coils up—'special' if a man's scairt stiff to start off with.

"Then, all of a sudden, I jumped. Sharp an' clear from the direction of that old bull-snake comes the quick sound of a rattle! That's one sound that, wunst heard, is never forgot.

"I looked hard at Magpie, who set clost beside of the snake.

"Slowly he draws his hand from behind his back—between his fingers is a half a dozen dry loco-pods. Then he reaches for his snake, picks him up, an' walks back to the coulée, an' together we watch the old cuss crawl back into his hole. As we turned away, Magpie pointed to the base of a big rock down under the rim of the coulée, an' there, kind of dried up in the sun, laid the body of a whoppin' big rattler—a rattler that wunst had sported thirteen rattles an' a button!"

My trail acquaintance chuckled softly to himself as he rolled a cigarette.

"Bear Paw tended camps plumb up to when he died," he said, in conclusion, "an' he used to show them rattles, an' tell about 'em to every one that would listen. The way I figured, it didn't hurt him none to go on thinkin' thataway—an' it was a heap better for the kid, so I kep' my mouth shut; but I sure had to grin every time I heard him a tellin' how Magpie saved his life. Well, so-long, stranger; I fork off here. You'll find Beckman's eight mile down the creek, an' turn to your left."

And, with a wave of the hand, the cow-puncher rode into the foot-hills, with his game leg thrown carelessly over the saddle-horn.

THE BUSY FLY

BY J. EDWARD TUFFT

OH, the little busy fly, strolling gaily in the pie; wiping his germ-laden feet on the things we have to eat; strutting with a lordly air through our dainty bill of fare; using our new gravy-bowl for his family swimming-hole; diving like a submarine in our china soup-tureen; playing tag with all his kids on our polished kettle-lids; having picnics with his bunch on our nicely ordered lunch; drilling all his armored host on our freshly buttered toast. When he sees our baby romp, brings him typhus from the swamp; gets the mumps from Mrs. Brown, soon has all the children "down"; steals some measle germs, and then, down the family goes again; finds where ague now is bred, sends our mother off to bed; scatters grippe along his track, puts our father on his back! "Save us, save us!" loud we cry. Echo answers, "*Swat the fly!*"

eart to Heart Talks

By the Editor

I ONCE knew a man who thought he was born to be a detective. He read all the *Hawkshaw* novels as soon as they came into print, murders and mysteries were his regular diet. The town stood him all right until he began to follow innocent citizens around at all hours of night. Naturally, he got into all sorts of trouble, but nothing serious happened to him until one evening a blacksmith mistook him for a burglar. Before he graduated from the hospital to the country home the kind State gives its locoed citizens, he told me that he had given up reading detective stories because he could pick the criminal before he was halfway through, and as for cryptograms—he could read them better than the author.

If he had gotten a chance, before he was sent up, at

THE RIDDLE OF THE NIGHT

BY T. W. HANSHEW

it might have cured him, for I defy any one to find a clue that will lead to the criminal in the story before the author gets ready to spring it.

From the discovery of the so-called *Count de Louvison,* strangled and spiked to the wall of the lonely and deserted cottage, to the end, the story is cloaked in an atmosphere of mystery. The identity of the victim, the method of the murderer, even the criminal himself, remain unguessed, while the finger of suspicion whirls like a weather-vane in a storm. It seems almost beyond human ingenuity to solve the problem. But there is one man in the world who can solve it, if any one can—and *Maverick Narkom,* superintendent of Scotland Yard finds him. That man is *Hamilton Cleek,* a once notorious criminal, leader of a band of apaches in Paris, and lover of their queen, *Margot.* He is connected with the "Yard," and as the "Man of the Forty Faces," a terror to evil-doers.

Cleek takes hold, and with his uncanny cleverness at disguising himself, his unusual and bizarre methods, begins to gather up the twisted and tangled threads of the riddle. How he works and finally succeeds makes a story of more than usually compelling power and absorbing interest.

Do not fail to get the ALL-STORY WEEKLY next week, and read the first of the five instalments in which it will be published.

ZULEIKA THE MOONFLOWER

BY CAROLINE STINSON BURNE

concerns the fortunes of *Stuart Harding,* who, when the story opens, is a cadet at the United States Military Academy. *Stuart,* like most West Pointers, has passed through plebe year and has emerged not altogether chastened. In summer he is used to going on three-mile hikes with a pint of lemonade "slum" under his belt,

then dancing all evening till "hell cats," and being ready at the crack of the sunrise-gun for drill.

For three generations there have been Hardings in both branches of the service; and no doubt *Stuart* would have passed through his course creditably if he and two other cadets hadn't become rather intimately associated with some Three Star smuggled in by way of Highland Falls. Not that any of them does anything unbecoming an officer and a gentleman, but the presence of a flask in *Stuart's* bunk constitutes a breach of military etiquette for which he is summarily dismissed from the academy.

The sudden termination of his son's military career is a severe blow to *Colonel Harding;* but he decides to stick by *Stuart,* particularly as the young man seems deeply repentant and anxious to make good at something else.

The colonel gets him a job, therefore, trying to secure from the wily Sultan of Zanzibar a railroad concession which that potentate had persistently and capriciously refused to grant a powerful American financier.

Of his adventures in far-away Zanzibar, his amusing experiences with the Sultan, and of the extraordinary auspices under which he becomes the "legal" guardian of the beautiful half-Arab girl who gives her name to the story, you may read in the July 17 ALL-STORY WEEKLY. "ZULEIKA THE MOONFLOWER" is complete in that number.

"IT CAN'T BE DONE!" by Frank Condon, shows that often when a man thinks he knows his wife's mind like an open book a commission in lunacy ought to be appointed. It is extremely difficult to tell when a young married woman ceases to be a bride. Sometimes she continues to look and act like one long after the fatal stroll down the church aisle, and sometimes, says Condon, "She drops off the bride look about a week later." As for the bridegroom, he ceases to feel like a bridegroom almost instantly, although he tries to hide this from his better-half.

Beth King was one of those pink-and-white specimens of femininity usually surrounded by white lace and brown curls. She was slender and blue-eyed, and *Joe* thought he knew her through and through. He would no more have hurt her feelings with a harsh word than he would have kicked a new-born kitten. Now, anybody with sense—or not married to *Beth*—knows that this kind of condescension on her husband's part is going to lead to trouble sooner or later. As for putting your wife in a show-case, it simply can't be done!

"THE INJUN BOSS," by Chief Red Eagle, is as its title indicates, the story of an Indian, but a special interest attaches to it, for the *author* is an Indian, too; a real, full-blooded aborigine. Both his father and mother were full-blooded Maliseets of the great Algonquin tribes, a small remnant of which still survive in Maine and Canada. He himself was born on the shores of Moosehead Lake, and the greater part of his life has been passed in the woods and among the lumber men of whom he writes so vividly.

When big "*Bud*" *Martin,* boss of *Dan McDade's* lumber-jacks, is deposed for incompetence, and *Lolar,* a full-blooded "Injun," put in his place, it is perhaps only natural that the former should be somewhat peeved, especially as *Martin* is secretly in love with pretty *Marie Latour,* who openly favors *Lolar.* And further when the doubly peeved gentleman happens to be a big, red-blooded, two-fisted lumberman with a rather fertile brain and a vindictive nature—and is a perfectly unscrupulous scoundrel to boot—one may look for a lot of exciting things to happen in the big, lonely woods.

You will not be disappointed. Powerful, resourceful, and armed with a righteous cause as the Indian hero is, if it were not for the woman's wit of *Marie Latour*—well, it would only spoil a very good story to tell any more.

"THE HEART OF THE MUTINY," by Maryland Allen, is another one of that well-known author's South Sea tales. It concerns *Captain Lage Dahlgren,* of the bark Cocohead, who is ordered by his employers, the shipping firm of *Gradon & Taintor,* to carry £15,000 in specie to the firm's representative in Sydney, as payment of a certain indemnification.

The Cocohead was the stanchest and speediest of *Gradon & Taintor's* clipper fleet, and *Dahlgren* was a man to be relied upon thoroughly in any given emergency. But *Captain Dahlgren* announced that he wished to take with him his eighteen year old, convent-bred daughter, *Jeanne-Marie.*

To this *Gradon & Taintor* at first objected. The captain said that he saw no harm in having his daughter along, and so three nights later when the Cocohead dropped down the widening reaches of the river to the sea, the fair-haired *Jeanne-Marie* was asleep in the little cabin off her father's.

His daughter and the £15,000 got *Captain Lage Dahlgren* into trouble, and when you read the story you won't wonder at it in the least.

"CRAZY WITH THE HEAT," by Suzanne Buck, is the story of *Abe's* excellence at arithmetic.

Abe was elevator-boy in Heinsheim's, "Fine Millinery, Wholesale." He had a mind above the mere "chauffing" of a vertical vehicle—he wanted to be a bookkeeper.

To *Heinsheim* himself *Abe* confided this ambition, and pointed out the fact that he was a crackerjack at figures; but *Heinsheim* would have none of him. Back at his elevator post, crestfallen and resentful, *Abe's* eyes were suddenly filled and his senses ravished by the sight of *Ethel O'Neill*, who was looking for a job.

Now, *Ethel*— Well, no one could refuse *Ethel* anything. And that is where *Abe* comes in.

The Heart to Heart letters that the editor has received this week are too good to be true—a regular chorus of praise. It's like the noise at the ninth inning of a ball-game; you know that the kickers are there, but you can't hear them.

Now, as much as he likes to bask in the sunshine of your approval, the editor, being the seventh son of a seventh son, feels that there is something in the air that spells trouble. He is willing to bet that a few husky braves from the heart of the West have dug up their arrows and are about to go on the war-path for our scalp. And some bush-leaguer from Missoula or the banks of the Red River is ready to pitch us a few curves that will tie our prize batter into bow-knots.

Well, come ahead, whoever you are! We're getting in fine form to break a lance, and the rest of you fans can take it easy on the bleachers and cheer for the best man.

A READER FINDS A JEWEL

To the Editor:

The little story in the June 12 issue of the All-Story Weekly, entitled "Captains of the Rainbow," by C. Williams Wood, I consider a jewel. The original, easy style of this author is something seldom found in a short-story writer. He also shows a thorough knowledge of the sea. Though it is evident that he has never been a seafaring man, I feel as well acquainted with these three old salts as I generally do with the characters of a long book with whom I spend much more time.

"The Recluse of Lochristi" is also a good story. But if Frank Condon's story is a good example of "What the People Want," then the *people* ought to be ashamed of themselves.

I hope we will have some more good sea stories by Wood.

Lilian Stanley.

Binghamton, New York.

WE WILL HAVE ONE SOON

To the Editor:

I wish you would entreat E. K. Means to write a yarn for this week's number. I am sure your readers won't have any kicks coming. I am a real Southern girl, so I know how to understand and appreciate each one of his stories; they are so real and true to life.

I have found many enthusiastic readers of our magazine—you notice I say "our magazine"—and I am a great admirer of it.

Do you think Jackson has left us for sure? Give us a good story of adventure.

Wishing your authors the best of success,

Virginia Lea Gibson.

El Paso, Texas.

HERE'S A MAN WHO WOULD DIE FOR US

To the Editor:

Having finished "The Man-Eater," by Anne Warner, and remembering that you said that it was the last of her work, I hope that you realize that a master writer has passed away. I trust that Harold Titus, Ruby M. Ayres, and the character, *Semi Dual*, are still in existence, or I would simply take sick and pass out myself. That is how much I like your magazine.

Philip Feacher,

Messenger, Western Union Telegraph Company, Jacksonville, Florida.

THE SAME TO YOU, MR. PIERCE

To the Editor:

The more I read of other magazines of the same price and higher, the more I appreciate the wholesome, virile, and altogether clean stories of the All-Story Weekly.

I am living in anticipation of a sequel to "The Mucker," by Edgar Rice Bur-

roughs, and I think all the readers of your magazine will agree with me in my request for one.

Best wishes for a long life and prosperity to the ALL-STORY WEEKLY.

WALTON R. PIERCE.

Hotel Gibson,
Cincinnati, Ohio.

A GOOD RESOLUTION

TO THE EDITOR:

I have read the *All-Story Cavalier* for the past three years, and think it is the best magazine ever published. I am now reading "The Promise," by James B. Hendryx, and I think it sure is a swell story. "Sand," "The Laughing Death," and "The Coasts of Adventure," I enjoyed very much.

Give us some more of Frank L. Packard, Jackson Gregory, and Hulbert Footner. I liked "The Fur-Bringers," especially. I hope that I won't miss another copy; not if I can help it.

E. N. MACCURN.

Oakley, California.

MORE OF THE PRIMITIVE EAST

TO THE EDITOR:

I am a subscriber to your magazine and enjoy its stories very much. When *The Cavalier* arrives I look over the page of contents to see if De Lysle Ferree Cass's name appears. He is the only author who can handle Oriental stories, or stories dealing with the primitive East. You certainly ought to hand it to him. But why can't we have more stories from him?

I read several magazines, but like your weekly best of all.

NORMA DORCAN.

Briggs House,
Chicago, Illinois.

SOME ADVICE THAT WE INTEND TO FOLLOW

TO THE EDITOR:

This is the first letter I have written to a publication since I was a boy, and that has been a good many years ago.

I have been reading the ALL-STORY since its predecessor, *The Ocean*, first appeared. This looks a little confusing on the written page, but you catch my meaning, don't you? *The Ocean* carried some smashing good stories, and I hated to see it pass, as I am very fond of sea tales.

I think you have been printing some very good stories in the ALL-STORY, and as it stands to-day, it approximates, to my mind, a "drag-net." Some one story should appeal to the reader, and from its perusal he should certainly be able to get the worth of his dime.

In the issue of June 5 you have four fine continued stories, "all to the good." Of the short stories I only read "Venus by the Pound," "The White Gorilla," and "A Course of Sprouts," all good. But for the sake of the lovers of good, pure, clean literature, even if it is light, give us more stories like "A Course of Sprouts." As some hotel-keepers say in advertising their hostelries, such literature as this is safe "for your wife, mother or sister." I hope Una Hudson may live long and write many more such.

Your Fred Jackson stories are so mushy and slushy that I pass them up. I think Fred is a girl with a diseased imagination.

I like Edgar Rice Burroughs's fantastic stories as a relaxation. I also liked "The Bondboy."

I read several other magazines and find good and bad in all of them, including yours. However, I am glad to say the good predominates.

I have two suggestions to make:

First—Cut out all profanity.

Second—As this magazine is read by many people on Sunday, give us a page or two of Sunday reading.

Yes, I really mean religious literature, and don't be afraid to feature it. All the Sunday newspapers do it, and have you ever heard any of them criticised for so doing?

A WELL WISHER.

3202 Carlisle Avenue,
Dallas, Texas.

GOOD FRIENDS

TO THE EDITOR:

Enclosed find one dollar for which please renew our subscription for three months, beginning with the first July number, which is the July 3 issue of the ALL-STORY WEEKLY.

We have read *The Cavalier* ever since the first publication, which was sent to us as a sample copy. You will notice that we always renew the subscription in plenty of time so as not to miss a single copy. Once in a while one goes astray, and we send to our nearest news-stand to get it. There are certainly some fine stories in it. My husband and I read them together.

MRS. WM. A. DILTS.

Woodworth, Montana.

The Strangest Thing

by Will Casseboom, Jr.

PERCE—short for Percival, his front name—was original, and when he started out to do a thing, he usually did it —and did it well. He knew a little bit of everything, including psychology and advertising; and besides some queer ideas like "the vividness of mental impression" and "the association of ideas," he had a sense of humor plus a face that went well with it, since it made the inscrutability of the Sphinx look like a bland smile.

I hadn't met him lately. I had been using a supper-bound subway train a little earlier in the evening because of a certain blue-eyed blonde attraction it sometimes afforded. No doubt Perce was as busy as the Old Boy, himself, and then again I was interested in the exploits of a crazy man reputed to thrive on the subway air twice a day as related by my charming —er—acquaintance. Sometimes she's as pert as her nose.

"He'd be quite impossible if he weren't crazy," she said one evening. We were somewhat later than usual.

"Did he try to kiss you?" I asked. I had been watching the easy play of her tantalizing lips.

"He reminds me of you," she retorted.

"Then he can't be as crazy as you think," I replied, looking my admiration right at her.

"Impossible man!"

I took it for granted that she referred to our demented friend, and moved closer to her to make room for a fat man.

The cars were already well filled when we reached the Bridge, and from then on most of us did the six o'clock two-step with every swing and jerk of the train, changing straps at each station. At Fourteenth Street, while she was watching the sparring, shoving crowd intently, she suddenly cried:

"There he is now—with the green tie. See him?"

I looked twice to make sure; the man she indicated was being pushed into the car through the side door. It was Perce; but I refrained from recognizing him because the tie he wore must have been selected for its "attention value." It was of the greeniest green imaginable.

"But, listen—" I began.

"That's him—the crazy one I was telling you about. Watch him."

As usual, Perce was lucky; he got a thin woman's seat, and then promptly looked around him. At his left sat one of those near-aristocrats who goes "to tea at Ca-a-stle's, you know," and at his right a bankerlike party who wore glasses with gravity—on the end of his nose.

Perce sized up both, and then pulled a novel from his pocket. On its cover in big white letters was the title, "The Strangest Thing," and under that the author's name. There was nothing

odd about its appearance, and I knew Perce worked for a publisher and often did "reading" for him.

But he hadn't been reading it for more than a minute when the near-aristocrat at his left glanced slyly down at the book, glanced more boldly at him, and then looked as though she had unwittingly sat on the business end of a volcano. Pretty soon the bankerlike gentleman did the same, only he looked amazed. In fact, I have never seen a more perfect expression of wonder.

Perce lifted his sober face and turned a page.

As if by rehearsal the lady and the dignitary leaned toward the book and twisted their separate necks to stare at Perce. The banker, looking as if he wanted to say something comforting, sat back again; but the lady arose hastily and, like a rudderless ship in a heavy sea, lurched toward the conductor.

"Conductor, conductor," she cried; "do you allow lunatics to ride at large?"

The preoccupied guard answered unthinkingly:

"Yeh, lady; but yer got to keep quiet."

The lady snorted—well, it sounded like it anyway—and went into the next car. Her seat was taken by a pretty girl whom I had been watching only because she seemed so contented in reading a face-cream ad when there were plenty of men around.

Just as she sat down, Perce placed the open book on his knee, and a second later every mouth in the car dropped open. Its pages were absolutely blank—they hadn't even a single letter on them. The girl watched him, fascinated, as he turned back in the book to reread some passage that had pleased him. Each page he turned was as blank as its mate—in truth, the book was nothing more than a dummy such as printers make up to show the general appearance of a novel.

Perce found the passage he sought, and frowning, looked up at the car-roof as one who at last becomes aware of the insufficient light. Then he fished out a pair of tortoise-rimmed glasses, adjusted them carefully to his nose, read for a moment the virgin page, and then startled the whole car by laughing heartily, and deliberately putting a marker in the place.

Of course everybody stared. Some smiled amusedly, some in pity, and still others looked indignantly at the others for smiling. The girl alongside him grew fidgety, half afraid to remain in her seat, half afraid she might insult him by getting up. I felt sorry for her. She was very pretty.

However, imperturbable, deeply interested, Perce read on, turning page after page of blank paper with the most doleful face I ever beheld.

But when, without warning, he reached back to his pistol-pocket, the little semicircle of clear space surrounding him widened precipitately.

Everybody moved doorward, and then tried to look as if it was the slowing up of the train that was responsible for the sudden agility. For all that Perce's threatening move had brought forth was a pocket dictionary, which, with solemn face, he consulted at length after first having found the doubtful word he intended to look up by running his finger down the blank page he had been reading.

That was too much for the fidgety damsel beside him. She flew up out of her seat, hurried to the conductor, and asked nervously what the next station was. The conductor answered her in Eskimo, but she must have understood, because she sighed when finally she stepped out on to the concrete platform.

"That wasn't her station at all," whispered my blond friend to me. She had tight hold of my arm because she couldn't reach a strap. "Did you hear her sigh?"

"Safety first," I laughed. But when one of those feminist women with a wide shoe-lace hanging from

her spectacles sat down in the empty seat next Perce, and immediately asked him why he read a blank book, I grew a trifle more serious.

"What do you mean—a blank book?" asked Perce, and, to every one's astonishment, read aloud a bit of clever dialogue bringing in the title, "The Strangest Thing."

The feminist gasped.

"But there is nothing printed there!"

Perce raised his eyebrows significantly.

"She's crazy," he confided to the banker at his right, who humored him until we came near the next station.

It wasn't the banker's station. He had come out just to tell the conductor that paranoiacs should not be allowed to enter the cars. I guess the conductor didn't understand, or else the advice peeved him.

"I didn't see you get on," he snapped, slamming the doors.

"Sir!"

"Nex' a hunder' 'n' sixteen; a hunder' 'n' sixteen nex'."

Now it struck me funny that a banker should use a word like paranoiac, so I drew the gentleman into conversation.

"I beg your pardon, sir," I said, "but you just used a medical term—a rather uncommon one for a banker."

He was so indignant over the conductor's insulting remark that he would have spoken with the Old Boy himself.

"You're another," he snapped; and I didn't know whether he meant I too was crazy or that I was just a plain liar.

What I got out of him was that Perce was a paranoiac—that is to say, a person who suffers from paranoia, a form of insanity which has for one of its peculiarities the hallucination that one is a literary celebrity. According to him, Perce was like a stick of dynamite which, as every one knows, is apt to become violent with undiplomatic handling.

I marveled politely that a banker should know so much about insanity, and then he grew really angry—called me a whipper-snapper and told me he was an alienist—an alienist—did I understand?

I did; and breathed easier after he had gotten off.

"'S funny," I murmured half to myself. "Perce was sane week before last."

"What did you say?" asked my blond companion. She never missed a word of mine.

I told her then that I was acquainted with the demented gentleman, and that if he *was* crazy it was a new conceit of his.

"But look at him now," she replied.

Perce evidently had finished his chapter, and seemingly was searching his pockets for another book-mark. Not finding it, and while all eyes were on that blank, open book upon his knee, he carefully turned down the corner of the page and closed it. Then he sat as straight as a major, his face expressionless, unconcerned with what went on about him.

Everybody stared and looked wise.

Strangers gazed into each other's eyes and nodded, as if finding in them a kindred soul. "It's the strangest thing!" drawled some one, unconsciously quoting the title of Perce's book; and a well-filled creation of charmeuse replied: "Yes; isn't it harrowing. It ought not to be allowed."

By this time we were far up-town, and my little friend was inordinately curious. The crowd gradually began to thin, passing out singly and in twos and threes. But each one did something—glanced at Perce and then either smiled, looked sorry, or clucked his tongue for the last time.

Perce just sat and read the ads for tooth-powder, dirt-cleanser, and hair-tonic, his face as whimsical and inscrutable as ever.

Another station and there were two seats beside Perce.

"Come along," I said to my com-

panion. "We'll see what he has to say."

"Hello, you hybrid humorist," I greeted as we sat down.

"Hel-lo, Bill! Where'd you get on?"

"Wall." And I introduced my friend.

Perce laughed.

"Did you see the show?" he asked when the introductions were over.

"Never saw a better one," I grinned. "Little Golden Locks here has been watching you for a week. She tells me you're quite crazy."

"Crazy!" cried Perce indignantly. "Go on, I'm the smartest one in the whole car."

"But that book!" interposed my—I should say our—lady friend. "It is perfectly blank."

"Yes," I supplemented; "what's the idea, Perce?"

"Any one can find out at a book-stand," he replied, "for a dollar and a half."

"I don't understand."

"It's simple.

"I'm advertising this new novel of mine, 'The Strangest Thing,'—been doing it for two weeks now. Any one who has seen me reading this little book here won't forget the name in a hurry. 'Vivid impression,' you know."

"Well, of all the strangest things—" began our lady friend.

"See?" laughed Perce. "Another week and I'll have 'em all saying it."

And then the three of us laughed together, until each of those still in the car would have separated himself from a respectable bill to know the joke.

Well—as I remarked somewhere before, Perce was original, and when he started out to do a thing, he usually did it—and did it well.

That book sold like those little statues of Charlie Chaplin.

Dust in the Eyes

by Vance Palmer

MARIOTT kept on rowing though his hands were raw and every now and then pains shot violently through his brain and spine. His eyes were sore too.

The blistering sun which shimmered on the water all around him had not been dimmed by a cloud during the last three days and it seemed to dry up all the juices of his skin. His tongue was swollen to twice its size, and he felt he would have given two of the best years of his life for a pebble to place under it, more than that for a mouthful of cold water for the sick man at his feet.

Drummond raised his head a little.

"You say it's an island, Don?"

"It sure is," said Mariott; "and a big one too."

"And you'll be able to make it?"

"I'll make it in a couple of hours if this infernal current will let me."

A slight suspicion entered the sick

man's eyes, and there was a pathetic appeal in his voice.

"You're not telling me all this just to buck me up, Don?"

Mariott gave a spirited jab with his right oar.

"Hardly," he said. "I haven't got enough brains left to invent a lie if I wanted to, and I'm not that sort of a fool anyway."

They rowed on for awhile in silence.

It was three nights since their ketch had gone down, and all that time as they drifted on in the little dingey under a brassy sky Mariott had spoken little save to keep up his companion's drooping spirits. He was a big man, thick in the neck and wide in the shoulders, and his husky figure seemed to be made on a framework of fine steel, but it was his courage that was the most remarkable thing about him.

An adventurer always, he had piloted his ketch into island harbors where no white man's keel had hitherto cut the waters, and had established his trading-stations even in the savage Solomons where the chiefs counted their wealth by the heads that hung drying before their doors.

Adventure was written in his gray, imaginative eyes and his broad, sunbitten forehead that showed no lines. It was that which lured him on when as a boy he had slipped aboard a clumsy wind-jammer in San Francisco; and in the thirteen years of hard faring that had passed since, he had made his name known wherever men combed the atolls for pearl and shell. They knew him for a reckless and hard-grained filibuster who cared little for any laws but his own and struck hard whenever he lifted his hand.

His partner, Drummond, was a man of a different type. Thin, almost ascetic-looking, his power lay almost entirely in his brain, for any man could beat him at the gloves but none at a deal in copra.

The skin was drawn taut over his cheek-bones now, for with the first day's exposure his malaria had come on again. At the end of half an hour he looked up with a flicker of light in his eyes.

"Getting near it, Don?"

"We're not more than three miles away," said Mariott.

"And what do you make it out to be?"

"Lagos Island," was the curt reply.

"Can you see anything—houses or a beach?" inquired the sick man.

"I can see a narrow triangle of roof through the palms," said Mariott, "and some smoke coming up from the native compounds."

The queer excitement that worked through Drummond's frame made him raise himself on his elbow, and something very like horror burned in his eyes.

"Then it must be Goyt's plantation," he broke out.

"That's so," remarked Mariott drily. "I've known it for just an hour and a-half."

He went on rowing steadily, his jaw set and his eyes looking straight ahead of him.

"But you're never going in, Don," protested Drummond. "I'd die rather than ask help from that hog. We've fought each other for three years now and he's tried to get his knife into us whenever he could. He's the sort of man who hasn't got enough kindliness in him to keep out the cold, and he'll leap at the opportunity of getting us under his heel and keeping us there Sooner than ask him for food and shelter I'd take my chance out here with the sharks."

Mariott gave a grunt.

"So would I if I were alone. But I'm in charge of you and you're a sick man."

"But I'm dead against going," said Drummond earnestly. "Goyt's a brute, Don, and he'll make us eat dirt. I know the breed of him."

"So do I," said Mariott laconically. "But it's me he's got the set against, not you. And I've thought everything out and counted the cost."

He went on rowing and something in the set of his jaw made the sick man see that there was no use in further argument. They were close in now, and everything could be seen plainly, the tin roof of the bungalow among the palms, the white beach of powdered coral, and the smoke of the compounds rising up as the natives gathered round their fires for their midday meal.

Over the whole place seemed to hover a more than earthly beauty. Compassing a wave adroitly, Mariott worked his sculls with a sudden vigorous spurt and the dingey went flying in to grate on the coral of the beach.

"Well," said Mariott, "we'll see if Goyt's the brute I always figured him to be."

But it was not Goyt who came down the track from the bungalow. It was a brown-faced girl in a short, swinging skirt and a broad-brimmed hat, who carried a towel and a bathing-suit over her shoulder.

II.

It was nearly two years since Mariott had seen her, and he was surprised by the look in her eyes now. When he had explained the circumstances, he stood watching her, a hard hostility in his face and in every line of his body. It was her beauty that had kept him awake during many sweltering nights when the ketch drifted slowly through smooth waters: the same beauty resided in her face now, and it made him uneasy.

He carried Drummond up to the couch on the veranda and then stood facing her, a challenging look in his eyes.

"You're alone, then?"

"Since early this morning," she said. "Father had to go over to Salua to bring back Davis with his recruiting-schooner. The coolies have been giving no end of trouble lately and he couldn't handle them alone any longer. They're a bad lot."

"Yet he left you alone with them—you!" Mariott flashed.

"He couldn't help that," the girl countered. "He wanted me to go with him, but I wouldn't. Some one had to look after the place. And he'll be back to-night."

Mariott thrust his hands into his pockets and gave a savage grunt.

"And you were left to defend the place, if necessary, against a hundred of those brutes," he said. "There are some men— No, I can't call him a man."

"They're all right in the day-time," she defended quickly. "They've got their work to do and the boss-boys look after them. Anyway I'm not afraid."

"Pity your father hasn't the same amount of sand," he said laconically. "Why did he want to bring Davis back?"

She looked him full in the eyes.

"Two days ago," she said slowly, "the house-boy was found in the bushes near the grass-fence with his head battered in. Then last night half-a-dozen rifles were stolen with most of the ammunition. And my father's a sick man."

It was enough.

From the beginning he had realized the seriousness of the position, for he knew that only in the last resort would Goyt go for help. He was a stubborn man, blind to danger at all times and courageous as a bull, and though Mariott had reason to hate him he did not underestimate his qualities. They were expressed and intensified in the girl who stood watching him now, something appealing and inscrutable in her dark eyes.

When they had eaten their lunch in silence he left her to take charge of Drummond and went the rounds of the plantation.

The compounds were deserted save for a few natives who were sick, and a grass-fence stood between it and the bungalow. In the scrub at the back there were gangs of recruits at work

with their brush-hooks, and they looked at Mariott sullenly as his big figure passed down the cleared track.

They were low, brutish men with cunning bestial faces, their noses and ears tricked out with wire and bits of metal, and Mariott knew the look in their implacable eyes.

During all the afternoon his fingers never left the butt of his revolver, for he did not wish to be picked up in the scrub with his skull shattered, as many of Goyt's overseers had been before that day. Goyt had ruled by fear alone and they were afraid to lift a hand against him, but they had taken heavy toll of his men.

It was now when they found him weakening that their chance had come, and it would only be the work of a few minutes to loot the stores, take the keys of the boat-shed and make back towards the savage islands whence they came.

Mariott thought of the girl back at the house and of her plucky, resolute eyes that had looked into his that morning with the old faith and trust. Assuredly they would not spare her. He went over the stores carefully, but in spite of all his searching he could find no ammunition, and when the truth broke upon him a sudden chill went down his spine.

"H-m," he thought, "that was what he went for. And he won't be back till midnight at the earliest."

He stood quite still with his hands in his pockets and his eyes staring vacantly into space. If he had had more time he would have called the boss-boys together and made them search the compounds for the stolen rifles and ammunition, but it was too late to take such a step now. It might only provoke an immediate attack and his chief aim was to hold on till Goyt returned.

Yet he did not hide from himself that they would probably seize the opportunity while the one man they feared was away. That evening at tea he spoke only in monosyllables, while Drummond lay on his couch in the delirium of fever, and the girl hovered round the room, casting glances now and then at his impassive face.

It was as though some memory was torturing her, but it was not concerned with the fear of what lay ahead.

She seemed eager for some opportunity of breaking down the barrier of reticence he had built around him. When the meal was done, they stood together looking out over the bay which was being covered by the dropping dusk, the stunted mangroves which grew along the shore looking black and evil as the light left them. For awhile there was a strained silence, and then the girl turned her eyes to the man's face.

"Don."

"Well?"

"Why do you treat me as if I were made of stone?"

He gave a shrug of the shoulders.

"How do you wish to be treated?"

Her eyes burned a little defiantly in the dusk.

"Not very long ago you were quite conscious that I was a woman."

It was more her voice than her words that stirred in him all that he had been trying to suppress, and there was something almost brutal in his face.

"I didn't think you wanted me to rake up that," he said drily. "You told me to cut you out of my life then, and God knows I've tried to do it. What should I remember now? That you made a fool of me once and sent me away."

She looked him squarely in the eyes.

"That wasn't my doing. You know that, Don. You and my father fell foul of one another and I had to pay toll."

"You stood by him."

"I was all he had. It would have broken him if I'd gone with you."

"Well?" he demanded. "Why shouldn't I want to break him?"

"I couldn't help to do it—then or now."

He turned on his heel.

"Then what more remains to be

said? The crash came and you clung to what was nearest to you. That settles it for all time."

He set fire to his cigar and paced up the veranda as if he were deliberately treading the past under his heels. But he was hardly concerned with the past just then. He was a man of action rather than dreams, and his mind leaping ahead was busy preparing itself for the horror that would surely come.

III.

It came sooner than he had expected.

A sudden silence in the compound was ominous enough, and it was followed by a secret whispering near the grass fence. The night was so dark that Mariott, looking out of the window, could not make out the outlines of the palms by the gate or even the posts of the veranda, but his imagination could supply all the necessary details. He pulled the pair of revolvers from his belt and gave one to the girl.

"We have just eighteen cartridges," he said. "That's a dozen for me and six for you. You can shoot, I think, Aileen."

"A little, Don. I used to be able to hit every pip in the five-spot at ten yards once."

"Then you take the back window and I'll take the front. But don't waste a shot. We may be able to keep them off till the rest come back."

She looked at him with a kind of dazed wonder as he strode to the door.

"But where are you going?"

"Out on the veranda to try and put the fear of God into them or else bring them to reason."

He spoke confidently as though that were a simple thing, but his brain was under no such delusion. Almost he could have envied Drummond who lay unconscious on the couch near the window, his face looking ghastly in the yellow light.

Those natives were little better than brute-beasts and the only law they knew was that of the jungle. All of them had been recruited from savage islands, some indeed from Malaita, where the taste of human flesh was not unknown, and their contact with the white man had only dowered them with cunning. This attack had been long premeditated round the fires of the compounds, and now their courage had at last been screwed up to the sticking-point.

Mariott stood by the scantlings of the veranda and peered out into the night.

He could see nothing, but his tense nerves were alive to every sound in the darkness about him, the rustling of leaves, the almost imperceptible movement of naked feet on the grass. There was a whispering in the compounds now, and the very silence was uncanny. Mariott felt a cold sweat break out on his forehead.

"It will be the Morrison business over again," he thought; "my God, and yet Goyt loves her."

And still the uncanny silence hovered over everything. The very palms on the beach seemed to keep still as though carven out of brass. Suddenly the sound of a snapping twig close at hand struck Mariott like the blow of a tiny hammer on his ear-drums. He stiffened himself and raised his voice.

"Boys," he called out, "it's no use playing this game with me. Go back to your compounds and nothing more will be said. There'll be double rations in the morning and not even the boss-boys will be flogged. But step on this veranda and I'll blow you through the floors of hell."

The only reply was an angry murmur and a flash.

Mariott felt a twinge in his shoulder as though a burning needle had shot through him. He fired at the flash and then turning on his heel went back to where the girl was waiting for him, her cheeks flushed and her eyes dark and burning.

"It's no use," he said. "They won't

have me. We'll have to fight it out now."

She turned to the window.

"I guessed that all along, Don."

As he knelt at the window looking out into the dark he knew for the first time how much he really loved her. In lonely, wind-swept places under the silent stars her face had often come back to him poignantly, but it had never held such an appeal as now.

Courage was the god he worshiped above all things and there had been no flickering of her eyes, even though she was well aware what the end must be. A couple of dim shapes flitted along the veranda and he fired twice, so that one man staggered forward and pitched headlong on the boards in front of him.

But always was he conscious that the shapes came closer, closer.

He felt a sickening sensation every time he fired, for he knew that every shot hastened the end. There was the continual zip of bullets and the crash of glass behind him as the vases and picture-frames came down in fragments, and he had to waste precious cartridges on the more venturesome who came rushing forward, half a dozen at a time. Then a spurt of flame shot up as one of the sheds near the kitchen was set alight and he knew it was the beginning of the end.

Somehow he did not dare to look across the room behind him, though every fiber of him was conscious of the presence of the girl who crouched near the window.

A pitiful weakness such as he had never felt in all his hard-living days began to afflict him, for he knew that all his strength was powerless to avert the horror which lay ahead. In his imagination the natives out there in the night began to assume bestial shapes, and for the first time he knew the corroding touch of fear.

The whole night seemed full of brutal, gibbering faces, lascivious eyes, and outstretched, horrible fingers.

Half an hour later he felt a touch on his shoulder, and looked up to see the girl standing beside him, a strange light on her face.

"Don!" she said.

"Well?"

"It's the end now. And you won't forget that the last cartridge is mine."

He drew back in horror, reading the meaning of her eyes.

"Aileen!" he groaned. "My God, I can't!"

She put her hands on his shoulders, and her face was quite calm.

"I love you, Don. I've loved you all along. And I've the right to ask you this. Remember Morrison's wife."

He did remember. All night his brain had been alternately visualizing that scene and trying to thrust it from his memory. And he knew the law of wild places, and felt that he could not escape it, even though his shrinking flesh almost paralyzed his will. He leaned forward suddenly and took her in his arms, crushing her to him.

"Aileen," he said, "I love you. And the last cartridge is in the chamber now."

"Then don't flinch, Don. Before God, I won't! They're coming!"

A low, terrifying sound came from outside—a sound that hardly seemed to issue from human throats. It was as if the night was full of bestial, passion-blinded creatures whose prehensile fingers were stretched forth to rend and tear. There was a confused noise, a rush of feet along the veranda, and when the heave came at the barricaded door Mariott raised his revolver.

The girl looked at him with steady eyes, her body taut and rigid, and her whole being transfigured. In the deathly silence the hammer fell with a click. But there was no report.

When the door burst open all power of volition seemed to pass from the girl's overstrung mind, and she fell forward into Mariott's arms.

It was thus Goyt found them.

He had raced up the beach with the

captain of the recruiting schooner and the native crew, and it was his feet they had heard on the veranda as he forced back the last rush. He stood now with his hand on the door-handle, his face white as barley-dough, and his big body trembling as though in the grip of malaria.

The two men faced each other across the room, that was lit up by the yellow flare of the oil-lamp; and, though a mist swam before Goyt's eyes, he took in every detail and knew its meaning. Somewhere in his soul the little imps of the past came forth to make ironic grimaces, reminding him of all the indignities he had heaped on this man who had been his enemy.

There was no time for atonement now, nor could he find the words. He stepped forward and said clumsily:

"Mariott, you're a white man. I'm sorry for all the dust I've thrown at you in the past — before God I am! Shake!"

They shook.

The Gray Tweed Tragedy

by Harriet Lummis Smith

MY wife says that when the Socialists get things their own way, along with dividing up property, she hopes they'll make girls divide up their beaux.

She says it's a bad thing for a girl to have a dozen young fellows quarreling over who'll take her home from church Sunday nights, and that it's just as bad for another girl to feel that nobody wants her. If there was a law limiting the number who could be courting one girl at a time, my wife says it would save no end of trouble.

I'm careful not to say so, as a man needs to be if he's going to stay the master in his own house, but there sometimes is a lot of good sense in my wife's ideas, enough to surprise you.

Just why Amanda Haley should have been one of the girls nobody wanted, I often wondered and wonder yet. She wasn't pretty, of course, but the homely women who marry outnumber the beauties, ten to one. Amanda was big and bony with black eyes; and when she smiled, which wasn't so very often, for she was a sober sort of girl, she showed a set of teeth as white and sound as if she'd bought 'em in town from some painless dentist.

She lost a share of her good looks, to be sure, when she had typhoid, and they cut off her hair. It came out glossy and with a little curl to it, but short hair on a woman isn't to my taste, especially when the woman's as tall as Amanda.

Apart from her looks she was cut out for a good wife, and her cooking

was something to remember. When I see what the pink and white brides look like at forty, I wonder why young fellows haven't got the sense to pay more attention to a girl's biscuits and less to her complexion.

Amanda's mother had been dead six or seven years and Amanda lived alone with her father. Jasper Haley was a quiet-spoken man, especially since his wife's death. He'd had a devil of a temper when he was a boy, like all the Haleys, but he seemed to have got the whip-hand of it better than most who start that way. I imagine he wasn't in any hurry to get Amanda married off. It would have been hard on him, doing without her.

My wife says she'd known for a long time that Amanda was restless and unhappy. It isn't that girls are so set on getting married, she tells me, but they hate to be passed over as if the Almighty had branded 'em old maids from the start. But as near as I can find out, it was the Harris candy-pull that got her sort of desperate, so she wasn't exactly responsible.

There were a dozen young fellows at that candy-pull, and thirteen girls, and for that once thirteen was an unlucky number, as sure as you're a foot high. Amanda had gone with a little bunch of girls who didn't have any fellows holding down the job regular, but when it got time to go home, of course there was the usual pairing off, and of course Amanda was Number Thirteen.

"Dick and I'll take you home, Amanda, if you haven't got company," Antha Beale said to her when the girls were up in the Harris' front room, putting on their wraps. Antha has about as much brain as a beetle, and not enough good looks to set the river on fire, but since she put on long skirts she's been kept busy picking and choosing among her beaux.

Amanda said no, she wasn't afraid. And when she got downstairs, old man Harris saw she was by herself, and he piped up, "Got left, have you, Amanda? Well, I s'pose a bald-head's better'n nobody."

That's just about as much tact as you can expect from any of that Harris crowd, so my wife tells me. But Amanda said no, quiet and low, same as she'd answered Antha. Said she wasn't afraid.

There was a good deal of wind that night, and my wife got up along about one o'clock to see to a shutter that was banging. That was how she happened to catch sight of Amanda, coming home all by herself. She walked in the middle of the road, swinging her arms and striding along like a soldier. She hadn't worn a hat, and the moon was full so my wife could see her face. My wife's notional like all women, but I'm bound to say that when she takes a notion, something generally comes of it.

She woke me up when she got back into bed. "I wish," she said, pinching my arm to make sure I wouldn't drop off again till I'd heard her out, "I wish somebody would marry Amanda Haley."

"Good Lord," I said, kind of huffed at being waked up out of a sound sleep for that. "Well, I'm not a candidate, not with you in your usual health."

My wife kept on without noticing, the way women will. "She feels being slighted and passed over. She feels it more'n most girls would in her place. Sometimes," says my wife, "there's a look about her I don't like, as if she was on the point of doing something dreadful."

Well, it turned out differently from what anybody could have guessed. Amanda went up to Dorsey Lake for a week, and came home engaged.

At least the mail-carrier told my wife that a letter came for her every day, and some of 'em took double postage, and if that didn't mean an engagement, everybody in Big Falls was badly fooled. "You see," I told my wife, "how silly it is to fret yourself about other folks' affairs."

"I only hope he's good enough for

her," said my wife. First she was worrying because nobody wanted Amanda, and now that the man had showed up, she worried for fear he wasn't all he'd ought to be. A woman all over.

Whatever else was true of the fellow, he was some letter-writer.

Amanda got in the way of running over to our house, after the Free Delivery had been along, and she'd read my wife little bits of those letters. As a rule she'd skip over the love-making parts like a heifer jumping a fence, but every now and then a "dearest" or a "darling" would slip out before she knew it. Judging from the letters, my wife said, he thought the world and all of her.

"What kind of a looking man is he, Amanda?" she asked her one day.

"His looks are all right. But it's his mind and heart I care about," said Amanda, kind of haughty.

"Haven't you got a picture of him?" asked my wife. Amanda was so high and mighty that she suspected the fellow's looks weren't anything to brag of, and besides she was curious—being a woman.

"He's going to send me his picture in a few days," said Amanda. And sure enough it wasn't a week before she brought it over.

It was a big photograph, taken some place in Chicago, and my wife said one look at it struck her dumb. For Amanda's young man wasn't just an ordinary good-looker. He was the sort that could have married the president's daughter or an heiress or anybody else he was a mind to.

According to my wife's story, it was just about the handsomest picture of a man she ever set eyes on. I never saw the photograph till it had been torn into half a dozen pieces; but joining the scraps together, I could see that my wife hadn't exaggerated it much.

"I hope," she says to Amanda, when she could get her breath, "I hope he's as good as he looks."

"He's better than he looks," Amanda flashed back, cock-sure, like all girls just engaged. "He's everything I could ask."

But my wife felt uneasy. The more she looked at the photograph, the more she couldn't see what a man with a nose like that, and what you'd call "soulful eyes" wanted of Amanda Haley. "If he thinks as much of you as he seems to," said my wife, picking her words careful, not to hurt Amanda's feelings while putting her on her guard, "he ought to give you a ring."

"I've got a ring," said Amanda. "But I don't wear it often on account of not letting father know."

That was the first notion my wife had that Jasper Haley was in the dark about a thing that had set all Big Falls to talking. Funny how often it happens so. When Ed Fothergill's wife eloped with the horse doctor from the East, there was only one surprised man in hte county and that was Ed himself.

About a week later Amanda dropped into the house one afternoon wearing an apron, and with her left hand under the apron. She looked around to make sure that nobody was by, and then she held out her hand. My wife's never been what you'd call on intimate terms with diamonds but she has a mighty high respect for 'em.

"A diamond ring," she gasped out. "And what a bounder of a stone. O, Amanda you *are* a lucky girl!" And then that uneasy feeling that always began teasing her when she thought of Amanda's young man, egged her on to say, "If he gives you such presents, I'd suppose he'd come to see you now and then, especially if he's no further off than Chicago."

"I never said where he lived," Amanda flung back with a laugh, and that was true.

She'd been mighty close-mouthed about the whole thing. My wife couldn't even have told the man's name. The letters were signed just "H." or H. M." It made my wife uncomfortable to think how little anybody knew about him, and here was

Amanda getting more wrapped up in him every day.

The little she did know worried my wife. For a man as handsome as "H. M." who could give away diamonds as big as peas, ought to have found a woman to please him without taking up with the left-overs of a country village.

But it wasn't two weeks before Amanda's young man showed up.

My wife was sitting out on the porch, and saw him walk by. It was too dark to see his face but she noticed he was a well set-up young chap in a gray tweed suit. The thought flashed into her head that maybe he was Amanda's beau, and she turned her chair so she could see just where he went.

He walked across the Haley lawn, not taking the trouble to go 'round by the path, or maybe he was in such a hurry that he wanted to take the short cut. He knocked and Amanda must have been right there to open the door for he walked in without waiting a second. My wife sat up long after I was abed and asleep, but she didn't see him go away.

That was on a Wednesday, and Wednesday night is the time that Jaspar Haley and Sam Blodgett play chess. They used to do it only occasionally, but after Jaspar's wife died, it got to be a regular thing, once a week.

Besides playing chess, they drank a good deal of hard cider, hard enough so sometimes when Jaspar drove by the house at twelve o'clock or so, he'd be singing. My wife noticed the day of the week particularly, because she wondered if it was all cut and dried for the courting to go on when Jaspar was up to Blodgett's, making up his mind whether he'd sacrifice a pawn or not.

It wasn't long before she was sure of it. The young man didn't come every week, at least she didn't see him every week, but he came often and always on a Wednesday.

My wife told Amanda that she wasn't treating her father right. Amanda looked at her kind of sorry, but obstinate, too.

"You don't understand," she said. "I wouldn't do anything to hurt pa. But it's got to be this way."

"Jaspar Haley's a reasonable man," said my wife. "And reasonable or not, any man knows his daughter has a right to get married if she wants to. It isn't fair to your father to keep him in the dark."

But when she told me about it afterward, she said that when she was begging Amanda to make a clean breast of the whole thing, she felt as if she'd come up against a stone wall.

It was old man Harris who put his foot in it as usual. For one Wednesday night just as Jaspar was tying his mare at Blodgett's door, Harris drove by, and stopped for a word.

"Well, Jaspar," says he, "I got my eye on your future son-in-law the other evening."

"You've got ahead of me, then," said Jaspar, tired-like. Old man Harris makes most folks tired, and Jaspar was never one to attempt to hide his feelings.

"I s'pose the wedding will be coming off pretty soon," Harris went on. "Fellers don't come from the city every week to see a girl, 'less they mean business."

"What the devil are you talking about, anyway?" said Jaspar.

They got the thing explained finally, without coming to blows. Jaspar had tied his mare to Blodgett's gate-post, but he unfastened her in a hurry and took up the whip. Old man Harris was scared at the sight of his face.

"Don't do nothing rash, Jaspar," he called after him. "It's as natural for young folks to court as for birds to sing. Now my girls—"

But Jaspar had whipped up without waiting for him to finish. It was one thing to get the Haley temper started, and another to put on the brakes.

It was just after nine and I was

looking up at the clock and yawning, when my wife came in from the porch. She'd gone white for some reason, and her eyes bulged as if she were choking.

"Jaspar Haley has just driven by," she said, "whipping his mare like a man possessed."

"He hasn't had time to get drunk on Sam's hard cider," I told her, not understanding what she was driving at.

"That young man's there," said my wife. "I saw him go by just after dark."

We didn't either of us say anything more.

I began to wind the clock and my wife went to the back door to call the cat. We were just starting up the stairs to bed when a woman's scream reached our ears. It was an ugly sound, there's no denying, the sort that takes the stiffening out of a man's knees.

"What do you suppose that means?" asked my wife in a whisper.

"I suppose he's telling that young man it's time for him to go home," I said, trying to joke, "and Amanda's of a different opinion."

"Do you think it would do any good for you to go over?"

I just looked at her. She'd known Jaspar Haley quite a spell, and she ought to have guessed how he'd take it to have a neighbor dropping in along about bed time to ask him what ailed his daughter.

But we didn't go upstairs. Instead we went back to the sitting-room and I lighted the lamp. And then I brought in another lamp from the kitchen. Somehow I had the feeling that there couldn't be too much light.

We sat there a matter of three-quarters of an hour. Then there was a knock at the door and when I got up to open it I had that queer feeling in the knees again. I own I was glad to have my wife tag along.

It was Jaspar Haley on the step. "God Almighty, man," I said at the sight of him, for his face was yellow-white like a corpse, and his clothes covered over with blood.

"I'd take it very neighborly," said Jaspar, without looking up, "if your wife could come over to the house. There seems to be something wrong with Amanda."

I've often heard people say that women couldn't make soldiers, but one thing's certain and that is that they've got courage enough. My wife was out of that house before you could say Jack Robinson; and if I hurried after her, it was partly because I didn't feel like being left behind.

The door of the Haley house was wide open.

My wife had kept ahead of us men all the way, and she hurried up the stairs to Amanda's room without ever looking to see if we were coming. At the door she lost her head for a minute and screamed. But right away she quieted down and when I burst in she was stooping over the bed where Amanda lay, stroking her hand.

The girl was in her night dress.

An ugly bruise ran across her forehead, up into her hair, and she was breathing in a way I didn't like, hard and fast, with a queer rattle down in her throat. The room looked as if a whirlwind had been through it.

The bed had been stripped, and Amanda lay on the bare mattress.

The clothes from the closet had been torn off the hooks and flung in a heap, and there was blood everywhere. It's queer how one notices little things at such a time. There was a photograph that had been torn across, and then torn in two again.

It lay right in the middle of the floor, and I remember wondering if it was the one my wife had told me about. It wasn't till later that I pieced the bits together.

Jaspar had followed us upstairs. He stood looking around on the confusion like a man dazed.

"We've got to have a doctor here," says my wife to me. "This girl is

badly hurt. What has happened to her?"

She went on, whirling about and looking Jaspar in the eye. "What have you done to her?"

"She fell out of the window," said Jaspar, low, like a child telling a story it has learned by heart, and my wife gave a snort to show she didn't believe him.

Talk about soldiers! She has the making of a general in her.

She sent me off for the doctor post-haste, as if it wasn't anything to stay in the house with a man who, as far as she knew, might have committed a double murder. She told me afterward that she never thought of being afraid till I'd been gone some ten minutes.

Then she heard a sound on the stairs as if somebody was undressing, and had kicked off a shoe.

She went out to see what it meant. Jaspar Haley was going down-stairs, carrying a candle in one hand, and a bundle under his arm. As my wife looked down he was just stooping to pick up a tan shoe, he had let fall, a man's shoe, splashed with blood.

My wife went back to Amanda's room, and for the first time she was afraid. She took hold of the door to close it, and found that it was leaning up against the wall. It had been wrenched from its hinges.

The doctor and I got back in record time. The doctor said that Amanda was suffering from concussion of the brain, produced by a violent blow on the head. My wife told him the explanation Jaspar Haley had offered, and without a word the doctor looked around the dreadful room. "Who else has been injured?" he asked.

"There was nobody else here when we came," said my wife, thinking, as she told me afterward, of the shoe that had fallen on the stairs.

"The girl has no cuts to bleed. Even on her forehead the skin is not broken. There must have been some one else," the doctor insisted, "I'd like a word with Haley."

"I went to call Amanda's father, but did not find him. One or two neighbors had been attracted by the lights, and the sound of wheels and had come over to see if there was anything wrong. And once started, they kept coming. Talk about wireless telegraphy.

"We're getting to be quite citified, when we can raise a crowd like this at midnight," I said. It wasn't much of a joke, but such as it was, it was the last I was to try my hand at for quite a spell.

Somebody whooped up behind the house just then, and there was a rush. They'd found Jaspar. He lay on the grass, face downward, and my first thought was that he'd finished up his night's work by killing himself.

But he hadn't.

Somebody in the crowd got out a flask of whisky and forced a little between his teeth.

"His heart's beating," said another man, who had pulled open Jaspar's shirt, and then I heard my name called. I went through the high grass slow, as if weights were tied to my feet. I had an inkling of what was coming.

He had taken off the boards that covered the old well that had gone dry a dozen years back. I'd often told him that he ought to fill it up. Well, he'd made a start that night. And before he could get the boards back in place the faintness, or whatever it was, had come over him and he'd dropped in a heap.

Somebody brought a lantern from the barn, and lowered it by a rope. All the men were around the well by now, and out on the grass, Jaspar was coming to, by himself.

We all saw it at once. Every man took a deep breath, and looked at his neighbor.

"I guess," said Henry Joyce, beginning to pull up the lantern, "I guess, boys, this is a case for the sheriff."

Well, it was, though we didn't find in the well what we'd expected. But

we took out a gray business suit, covered over with ugly brown splotches, and socks and a tie to match, and a shirt stained and torn, and the tan shoes Jaspar had dropped on his way downstairs.

It didn't look as if anything more was necessary just then, anyway. Before daylight Jaspar Haley was in the county jail. He'd come to, though he was too weak and shaky to put up any fight against going.

Just before they took him away, he asked me how Amanda seemed, and that was the only word they could get out of him.

There wasn't much work done in town next day. Everybody was using his breath to denounce Jaspar Haley as an unnatural father and a kind of human monster. It was queer how many fellows bobbed up who'd always had a liking for Amanda but gave up because the old man was so darned set against her having company.

But after twenty-four hours, sentiment took a turn. Somebody had been putting two and two together. A story got around that made people shake their heads and whisper. And not a man in Big Falls blamed Jaspar a bit for what he had done.

Public opinion was swinging around to Jaspar's side to beat the band, when Jaspar up and confessed. Sam Blodgett had a talk with him at the jail and told him what folks were saying. "Don't you fret, Jaspar," says Sam, clapping him on the back, "they can't pick a jury in this county that'll convict you with that provocation."

And then as I said, Jaspar spoiled it all. For he told Sam, quiet like, that he hadn't a mite of justification and it was all the Haley temper.

"The boy seemed like a nice, steady sort of young man," says Jaspar, as unconcerned as if he wasn't putting a halter about his neck. "When I came in he told me his intentions was honorable, and he wanted to marry my daughter. And I didn't care to spare Amanda, so I just killed him. She tried to get between me and him and I hit her over the head, with a chair."

"What did you do with him, Jaspar?" Sam asked.

For pretty near the whole town had been out hunting for the body of Jaspar Haley's victim. My corn looked like there'd been a seven-day hail storm, and they'd dragged the creek from end to end. But instead of giving a polite answer to a polite question, Jaspar only told him to go to the devil.

I've always blamed Sam for telling that story, though he said afterward that Jaspar put him up to it, and seemed to want everybody to know the real facts in the case. But the very folks who'd softened most to Jaspar were the sorest of all when they found out that he hadn't the least grain of excuse.

It was a pretty to-do, they said, if a girl couldn't be courted by a nice young man, who wanted to marry her, without her father walking in and killing the pair of 'em. That was exaggerated, of course, for Amanda wasn't dead yet. She just lay there, without moving or speaking, breathing hard and fast and with a rattle in her throat.

Jaspar had been arrested for assault and battery.

There was a hitch about arresting him for making away with Amanda's young man, for they seemed to think that till the body was found, there wasn't any evidence that a murder had been committed. There were the blood-stained clothes my wife had locked away in an old chest that had belonged to Amanda's mother, but the law wasn't satisfied with that evidence it seemed.

And when the search had gone on a few days longer without a trace of "H. M.," folks were so mad that they were frothing at the mouth. Some of 'em were sure that Jaspar was going to get off. They said that unless that body turned up, the lawyers would say the whole thing was a brain-storm. It was one o'clock Tuesday night,

when Sam Blodgett waked me up, shouting under my window.

My wife and I had gone to bed early, clean beat out. She'd been over to the Haley house, taking care of Amanda, most of the time since the thing happened; but Mrs. Deacon Sears had offered to spell her that night, and we'd gone to bed at eight o'clock. And here, at one, was Sam Blodgett, yelling like a madman, and banging against the shutter with the butt-end of his whip.

"Dress and come down quick as you can, for God's sake!" said Sam. "They're taking Jaspar out of the jail. They're going to carry him over to the Point—and lynch him!"

I remembered, thinking, as I dressed that if this was a bad dream it was going pretty far. My wife had jumped out of bed at the first word, but she'd put up her hair in crimping-pins the night before, and I beat her down-stairs.

I used to think a snake was about the most devilish thing God ever made, but a snake's not in it with a mob. Even a rattler plays fair. He gives you warning before he strikes. This crowd of men with masks to hide their faces, cursing and hustling little Jaspar Haley — men who wouldn't have dared to stand up to him for a minute if his hands hadn't been tied—gave me a sort of respect for snakes.

Maybe hell's got something that for pure, low-down meanness will beat a mob, but you won't find it on this earth. That night made me kind of sick and ashamed of being a man, and I've never quite got over it.

Sam and I did our best. We talked about disgracing the fair name of the town, and respecting law and order, and all that sort of thing. Killed a little time, and that was about all. And when we dropped hints of a future reckoning the crowd grew ugly.

"String up the whole three of them!" somebody at the back shouted. "We ain't going to stand for any informers!"

"You bet they know where that body is!" cried somebody else. "Make 'em tell!"

It was turning the tables in a way I hadn't expected. Before I could think of a word to say—my ideas coming slow, as a rule—the crowd had begun to close upon Sam and me, leaving Jaspar sitting on a stump with the noose around his neck.

That hint about the body was just enough for a mob.

Because we wanted fair play for Jaspar they reckoned that we were his pals, and trying to hide the evidence that would hang him. "There's a way to make 'em tell," one man kept saying, and then the others took it up. The woods rang with it. "Make 'em tell!"

A tall fellow jumped on a stump at last and got 'em quiet, swearing at 'em all for a pack of fools. "Stop your yelping!" he yelled at the top of his voice. "Listen!"

The noise had been a good thing, for it had kept them from hearing a sound plain enough by now — the sound of wheels not far off and a horse galloping.

The man who seemed to be the leader swore again. "Say, isn't there a revolver in this crowd? Shooting's too good for the dog, but if the whole town's coming to our party we want to finish up the job right quick."

There were twenty men who put their hands to their pockets and hesitated. You see, Sam and I were the trouble. For all their talk, they weren't quite ready to shoot down the three of us in cold blood.

And before a man had moved Jaspar Haley's old, mud-splashed buggy came in sight, the mare forging ahead for dear life. There were a man and woman on the seat, and the woman was driving. As they came nearer I had a queer pricking in my scalp, as if the hair that used to grow there was trying to stand on end.

The man wore a gray tweed suit, splotched with dark-brown stains.

I had never met him face to face, but I'd caught glimpses of him time and again on moonlight nights like this one, going to see Amanda. So had half the men in the crowd. There was a queer, gasping sound, as if every one had caught his breath the same minute. You could have scattered that mob with a pea-shooter.

The mare came down the hill on the jump, and the woman who was driving pulled her up not ten feet from where Jaspar Haley sat with his hands tied and the noose around his neck. The man sprang out over the wheel. Then he staggered and caught hold of the shaft.

"How dare you—" he said in a voice none of us expected to hear—"how dare you lay a finger on my father!"

The crowd broke and ran. They ran as if the devil was chasing them. I didn't blame them, I wanted to run too. But the woman on the front seat spoke up chipper, and that was the first I knew it was my wife.

"So that's what a mob of lynchers is like," she said, kind of thoughtful. "I always wanted to know. Help Amanda back in the buggy, one of you, and if you'll take the rope off Jaspar Haley's neck and stop staring, there'll be a better prospect of our getting a little sleep before morning."

It was quite a while before we got the puzzle straightened out.

In fact, a good share of the folks down our way never could figure out the thing to their satisfaction. They'll argue about it yet, trying to prove that one thing was so, and another thing wasn't.

But my wife tells it this way: She says that Amanda got so upset over being pitied for never having a beau that she made up her mind to fool everybody. She met a girl from the city when she was up to Dorsey Lake who agreed to help her out.

Amanda wrote the girl long letters, addressed just to "H. M., General Delivery," and the girl pulled off the outside envelope and mailed the inside back to her. All those letters she used to read to my wife, she'd written herself—left-handed.

She meant to stop with letters, but she didn't, and my wife always says she blames herself for that. It was she who put the idea of the photograph into Amanda's head. That young man was what they call a matinée idol.

The Chicago girl bought his picture and sent it up, after Amanda had sent down the money.

Same with the ring, though of course it wasn't a diamond. Amanda said you could buy quarts of 'em in the city for half a dollar a piece. When she found it was so easy to gull people she kept getting bolder, till she decided that she'd have her young man call on her evenings, like the beaus of the other girls.

She got a man's whole outfit from the city—Amanda's father was always free with her where money was concerned.

Then she'd put on the rig at home, slip a dress over it and steal down through the woods where she'd take off her dress and hide it in a hollow tree. Then she'd slip out on the road and saunter up to call on herself, as well set-up a young chap as you'd care to see. Amanda was a plain girl, as I've always said, but I'll be danged if she didn't make a good-looking man.

The night that old man Harris put her father wise, Amanda had made a call on herself and then she'd gone upstairs to bed.

She'd hardly started undressing when she heard her father coming and she was frightened and locked the door. Then Jaspar, all the Haley in him on top, came thundering up the stairs, and ordered her to let him in.

Amanda didn't know how she'd explain to him about her being dressed in man's clothes, and she hurried as fast as she could to get into her nightgown, and hide the other things away. But before she could finish, Jaspar had broken down the door. And at the

sight of the gray suit flung over the chair, and the tan shoes, right in the middle of the floor, he thought, as was natural enough, that his daughter had disgraced him.

I guess what with the Haley temper and the feelings of a father, that Jaspar was nigh crazy for a little.

He tore around the room like a madman, looking for Amanda's lover, and finally he started for the girl to force her to tell where she'd hidden him. Amanda was too frightened to explain, even if Jaspar had been in any mood to listen. As he rushed for her she made a spring for the window and tried to throw herself out.

She'd probably have killed herself if Jaspar hadn't caught her, and as it was, she struck her head against an iron fixture of the shutter, and that was the last word out of her for well on to a week.

Either the effort of dragging her back into the room, and carrying her to the bed was too much for Jaspar, or his rage brought on a violent bleeding from the nose. He bled all over the room as he tried to restore Amanda to consciousness, and when the place looked like a butcher's shambles, he was pretty well cooled off.

When he knew he must have help with Amanda, he didn't forget the telltale clothes, and that other people would find out what he had discovered. He bundled them up and carried them out of the room before he came for my wife and me.

The old well seemed to him a good place to hide them till he could fix matters up with the owner. And if he hadn't fainted from the loss of blood before he got the boards in place, they might have lain there undiscovered till doomsday.

It was Jaspar's confession that most people found it hard to understand, but even that was simple enough when you look at it right. Jaspar Haley wasn't afraid of death, and he could even stand disgrace—for himself.

But when he heard what people were saying of his daughter, he came to her defense just as if he hadn't believed her guilty. The only thing he thought of was to clear her good name. And he told Sam Blodgett afterward that he felt so like a murderer when he tore up that photograph that it didn't seem much of a lie to own up to being one.

The doctor told my wife she had endangered Amanda's life, hurrying her out of bed in that fashion, her first lucid interval after her injury.

But my wife says she didn't have time to be too particular, and when she rushed over to Haley's and found that Amanda had come to her senses, she out with the whole thing before she thought. The dressing up in the blood-stained clothes was Amanda's idea.

It seemed to both of them that to have her show herself in that rig would save a lot of explanation. So it was lucky it was locked up in Haley's chest instead of being in the keeping of the sheriff where most folks thought it ought to be.

Even if that night ride and the excitement and all weren't the best thing for Amanda, she didn't come as near dying afterward as her father had come to being hung. In a month she was most as well as ever, and in six months Jaspar Haley sold his farm and moved out West, starting anew again, turning a large acreage to good account in wheat.

Anybody can stand being talked about sometimes, but to be talked about all the time, and start the whole story over again, whenever you show yourself on the street, is a little too much for flesh and blood.

About two years after Amanda's wedding-cards came, my wife seemed to think it was all right, but I said I was from Missouri, and she'd have to show me. However, the pictures of the kids have been coming along pretty regular, about two years apart, and some of them look like Amanda, so maybe this time it's the real thing.

Suspicious Letty

by Rosa M. R. Mikels

"WHERE you goin', Jim?"

The pitiless sun blazed down upon Letty's bare head and made the baby resting limply upon her shoulder blink and corrugate its tiny red face. But Letty, her attention riveted elsewhere, did not heed it.

Jim kept his face averted, and pretended not to hear as he picked up ol' Pete's right forefoot and examined it attentively.

"Jest as well have him shod today," he remarked casually. "Didn't know he was a needin' it so bad."

He vaulted to the horse's bare back, and with a shamefaced "Good-by, ol' girl!" cantered away on the soft, black prairie road.

Letty, with tightening throat, watched him until he became a mere speck on the dusty prairie and disappeared beyond the rolling ground that merged into the low horizon. Her whole soul was in revolt. She was conscious of but one thing — her overwhelming sense of injury. A whimper, then a sharp cry from the much-enduring baby caused her to turn dazedly into the shelter of the dugout.

Even yet she could hardly believe it. But had she not seen the thing with her own eyes? Had he not that very morning, when he believed her sleeping, gone to their secret little hoard in the safe corner of the dugout and furtively taken money that they were saving for that longed-for frame house—the house that was to take the place of their more primitive abode?

She recalled his clumsy explanation of a bad dream that made him want to see if all was safe when he discovered her startled eyes upon him. Later, when he shaved before the scrap of mirror, and casually said that the horse needed shoeing and he'd better tend to it at once, she knew perfectly well whither he was bound; she knew that his resolution had failed, and that the carnival in the little town five miles away was irresistibly drawing him.

The carnival!

How the flaming posters in town and country had thrilled her for weeks! She longed to see it, to escape the glaring monotony of the dazzling prairies, the shimmering heat, like air from a furnace, rising over them, the mirage that made her eyes ache. But she and Jim had agreed to this one more sacrifice to the new house, and she had put from her the temptation of the merry-go-round with its prancing wooden steeds, the tall lady who wore a No. 24 shoe and a No. 12 glove, the delights of lemonade and popcorn.

And the procession!

Other attractions paled in the light of that splendid scene where the Goddess of Liberty with floating hair, attended by the Sister States, dressed in white with tri-colored sashes, was totteringly enthroned on a farm-wagon gay with bunting. She saw these splendid scenes as through a rosy mist, but she had been loyal to family needs, and had cheerfully consented to avoid these delights for this year at least.

Now when she realized that she was the sole sacrifice, her courage failed and she burst into hot tears that gave no relief. At last recalled to duty by the baby's cry, she sank into the splint-bottomed rocker and gave herself up to bitter reflections as she soothed the child.

Her sense of wrong increased as she recalled that this was their wedding anniversary. How different it had all been three years ago! *Then* she was a bride, and a part of the wedding festivities had been a visit to the county fair.

She and Jim had wandered blissfully among the prize pigs and poultry, had sat hand in hand in Floral Hall with the pungent smell of the fresh sawdust that was liberally sprinkled over the floor, in their nostrils, and later had watched the racers and had seen Jim's little mare come in a glorious winner, carrying off the biggest prize of the day.

And she had ridden a plunging steed of the merry-go-round until sheer shame at her own extravagance had impelled her to refuse a sixth ride! In what lordly fashion had Jim treated her to hokey-pokey and lemonade! And they had gone home in the last bus, she with a blue balloon and a candy cane to remind her of the day's joys.

Now she was left at home to cry her eyes out, while Jim alone took in the sights! She half resolved to take some of their savings herself, walk to town and spend daringly on the finery of the stores and the side-shows of the carnival! But she could not expose baby to so long and hot a trip, to say nothing of her own endurance.

Indeed, if it had not been for baby, she might have mounted behind Jim and in this fashion have reached the heaven of her desires.

Finally she washed her face, laved her smarting eyes, and began to wash and dress baby. She put upon him his best clothes, made by her own mother in far-away Indiana. Then she dressed herself carefully in her best.

She hardly knew why she did all this except that she felt that in some way she was getting even with Jim. If he did not work, neither would she. Indeed, there was little to do, for with her husband away there were no set meals to get. Then she sat in the narrow shadow of the dug-out and gazed listlessly down the road.

A faint hope that a passing neighbor might take her along sprang up, but hardly took definite form.

Her thoughts were far away. Through the shimmer above the prairie she saw the cool shadows of the Indiana home where great trees stood protectingly near the house, and cool breezes lifted the white curtains to peep curiously into the sheltered rooms. She would go back there, she resolved. She would leave Jim to "prove up" by himself, and she would find shelter with baby under her father's roof.

Then Jim—

Her meditations were disturbed by the creaking of an ancient buggy on its way toward town. One glance at the gaunt farm-horse drawing it proclaimed its owner. Old man Oleson, with all his folks, was on his way to the carnival. They sat three deep on the single seat, and one small boy was mysteriously wedged into an incredibly small space between the accumulated family feet and the bulging dashboard.

Mr. Oleson drew rein as he saw Mrs. Jim sitting listlessly before the door, dressed in her best.

"Howdy! Goin' to the carnival I see!" he shouted genially, while his

family availed themselves of this brief respite from travel to readjust their weights and ease their aching muscles, incidentally walking all over the unfortunate small boy in the process. "I'd take you on right now with us, if we had the room," he added with neighborly kindness.

To her own surprise Letty had no inclination to tell her sorrows. Instead, she lied loyally.

"Oh, we're goin' soon, when Jim gits back."

"So-long," called her visitor. "We'll see you-all in town." And with a "Giddap" to his reluctant horse, he drove off.

The burdened buggy creaked slowly out of sight. Silence once more settled over the sunlit expanse. Baby still slept; and Letty, not daring to cry lest she injure her best clothes, tried to picture her recreant husband on his rounds of the side-shows with hilarious companions.

But somehow her bit of loyalty had eased her heart, and she looked with real interest at the distant approach of another vehicle, this time coming from the direction of town. She eyed it with the curiosity that only isolated prairie dwellers feel in passing humanity, and with a desire to know why any one should be coming away from, instead of toward, the scene of such attractions.

She was puzzled, too, by something familiar in the gait of the horse. But the buggy itself she had never seen before, she was sure. As it came closer she stepped to the roadside and from under her slanted hand tried to identify the driver. Was there ever before so close a likeness to Jim? At last, as the buggy emerged from a drop in the road that for a moment concealed it from view, she could doubt her eyes no longer.

"It *is* ol' Pete! It *is* Jim! and he's comin' after us!"

She fled into the dugout in happy excitement. Before the scrap of mirror she patted her hair into shape and pinned on her hat. As she stooped to raise the sleeping baby, Jim's big form darkened the door.

"Well, I'll swan!" he exclaimed delightedly as he caught sight of Letty's pink cheeks and dancing eyes beneath her hat. "Ef you ain't the beatenest woman to find things out! How'd you catch on that I was goin' to take you-all to the carnival?"

She turned upon him with pretty defiance.

"You can't fool me, Jim. But where'd you get that there buggy?"

"That buggy's ourn," he answered proudly; "a weddin' gift to the prettiest girl that ever growed in old Indianny."

"Ours," repeated Letty in subdued rapture. "Oh, Jim, how could you afford it?" she added in sudden fright as she thought of his visit to their savings that morning.

"I'm to work it out for Oleson's son-in-law down the road at thrashin'-time," said Jim happily. "It's a second-hand rig, o' course, but now you can git to town decent, like other women. I met Oleson down the road a piece, and he said you had caught on to my surprise, fer you told him you was comin' soon as I got back. I was some relieved, fer from the way you looked when I went away this mornin', I thought, like as not, I'd strike a reg'lar Dakota cyclone when I got back to explain things."

He helped Letty into the buggy, gently laid the blinking baby in her lap, and settled himself proudly beside them.

They were well on their way to town, and the vociferous band was plainly audible, before he asked quizzically:

"Say, Letty, when did you begin to suspicion me? Was it this mornin' when I got half a dollar from the pile to treat you on to-day?"

"Yes, *it* was then that I suspicioned you," said Letty gaily, glad that he did not ask more definitely what her suspicions had been.

The Ultimate Criminal

by William Holloway

IF Jerry Gregg had not had the worst law practise in New York—a practise only kept from extinction by a yearly check from a fond maiden aunt in Vermont, who fancied him a genius—he might not have found time for his pet theory. As it was, he gradually developed it into a fixed idea which, in the routine of his professional life, he kept strictly to himself but which, nevertheless, curiously colored his waking dreams — those happy hours in his Greenwich Village rooms where he smoked innumerable pipes of his favorite mixture and communed with his thoughts.

He believed, to put it briefly, that in murder cases—a special bent had led him to the study of deeds of violence—justice seldom reaches the real criminal, but merely the figurehead through which the evil-doer works. In other words, it was Jerry Gregg's opinion that most of the men he had seen convicted were really victims of circumstances; and that, in the darkness behind them, lurked other unsuspected forms—those of the real culprits, or, as Jerry phrased it, the ultimate criminals.

As to what manner of man the ultimate criminal might be Jerry could not be certain. He was inclined to believe, however, that a hard, unfeeling, calculating machine like Henry Marshland, the lodger beneath him, was more apt to represent the ultimate criminal than the passion-tossed individuals whom he had seen in court.

Marshland had for years been a fascinating study to Jerry Gregg. Not that there was the slightest friendship or even acquaintance between them.

Once, indeed, when Jerry had encountered Marshland on the wide, old-fashioned stoop, he had ventured an idle remark upon the weather, and Marshland had promptly turned upon him a cold, gray eye and passed on his way without reply.

Nevertheless, Jerry continued to find Marshland interesting. His stern, forbidding cast of countenance, his savagely satirical manner, his harsh, rasping voice, the indefinable sense of power which he exhaled, together with his secluded mode of life, all combined in Jerry's eyes to give the man a certain attraction.

At intervals Jerry wondered lazily who and what he might be, with never a thought that Henry Marshland would prove the means of putting his pet theory of the ultimate criminal to what Jerry himself would have termed the "acid test."

As a matter of fact, it might never have been put to the test had he not

missed his boat from Coney Island one warm Saturday evening last summer. But he did miss his boat, and consequently he did not mount the stoop of his quaint, brick lodging, latch-key in hand, until an hour after midnight.

Upon such slight chances hang empires and theories alike.

The old-fashioned hall—during the summer months he and Marshland had the place to themselves—was very still. The landlady, who resided in some undiscovered region at the top of the house, had doubtless retired hours before; but from under Marshland's door on the ground floor a faint finger of light stabbed the darkness.

There was something so odd in this that Jerry stood gaping about him with absurdly open mouth—odd because the curtains were so closely drawn in Marshland's windows that, from the street, not the faintest sign of life was visible.

And closely covered windows on such a reeking night as this—was it any wonder that all Jerry Gregg's latent suspicions of Henry Marshland should suddenly flame into vivid life? He had glanced at Marshland's windows hundreds of times, and never, to the best of his recollection, had he found them apparently as hermetically sealed as on this sweltering night. It was not astonishing, then, that all Jerry Gregg's vague suspicions of the man should rush into his mind, clamoring for a hearing.

What *was* astonishing was that Jerry Gregg, though obsessed by a biting curiosity, dismissed from his mind all thought of Marshland and tiptoed on his way up-stairs.

At the foot of the stairs he paused in the darkness to feel cautiously for the first step. Anybody who has had experiences with a sharp-tongued landlady will understand why. There were voices in Marshland's rooms—voices pitched in a low key but vibrating, as Jerry could feel, with tense emotion. They came to him with sharp distinctness from his position in front of Marshland's door and, try as he would, he could not avoid hearing.

"But I won't do it, Rayton, I tell you!" came Marshland's rasping tones. "I refuse!"

"You don't mean that, Marshland," answered an assured voice. "Just look at this—straight at it—and you'll see you intend to do it."

There was a resonance about the unknown's words which Jerry found not unpleasing; also, curious little intonations of speech which stamped his sentences with individuality.

Marshland was refusing to do something which his friend, Rayton, desired him to do. This was plain as the nose on Marshland's face.

And equally plain it was that by delaying before the door Jerry might hope to gain a clue to the mystery which he had always felt enshrouded Marshland's life.

But listening at doors was not Jerry Gregg's forte. He told himself this sorrowfully, as he put temptation aside, and padded softly on rubber-soled tennis shoes to his room above.

Keeping one's self-respect sometimes involves hardships.

He was shaving himself next morning—it was a cool Sunday morning, after an early deluge of rain—when there came a hasty tapping at his door.

"Mr. Gregg, sir," a whisper came hoarsely through the panel. "Mr. Gre-e-egg!"

Jerry Gregg put up his shaving utensils with a snap, glanced at his face in the mirror, noted that the new hair tonic was really darkening the gray patch about his temples, and opened the door to his slatternly, asthmatic landlady.

"All right, Mrs. Martin," he cried hospitably. "Come in!"

The landlady entered with a nervous, jerky motion, her untidy figure atremble, her coarse, heavy features filmed over with a look of terror.

"It's the lodger underneath, Mr. Gregg," she said explosively. "The lodger underneath!"

"You mean Marshland?" Jerry's heart, for what reason he could not have told, gave a curious leap. "The old duffer who lives just below me?"

The landlady nodded, and with many gasps told her story.

The lodger underneath, it appeared, was a model of punctuality. Regularly at nine o'clock on Sunday mornings the maid had instructions to knock at his door.

Marshland, who always opened the door himself, invariably sat silently smoking in an armchair, while the servant tidied his sitting-room and alcove bedroom. In the years the maid had attended upon him she could only recall a single instance when he had spoken to her: That was to swear at her for upsetting the papers on his desk.

Winter and summer, at nine o'clock Sunday morning, the landlady flutteringly repeated, he opened the door at the maid's summons. And here it was eleven, and the girl unable to obtain an answer to her repeated calls!

"Ill, maybe," commented Jerry, who never allowed himself to get excited. "Those old fellows get theirs in a hurry, sometimes, you know."

He tied his scarf with a practised hand; then slipped on his coat. "I'm ready," he added.

The hallway beneath was dark, with the sepulchral blackness only a boarding-house knows. A bland August breeze ruffled the faded portières that hid the broad, old-fashioned door, before which they halted.

Jerry Gregg knocked stridently, and, after an interval, yet more stridently, his head bent forward to listen. Then, grasping the door-knob, he gave a gentle push.

"Why, it's open!" he exclaimed, moving the heavy door an inch and then, as suddenly, closing it again. "Maybe the girl didn't push hard enough."

The slatternly landlady shook her head.

"Mr. Marshland's door is always locked," she said confidently. "The girl just knocks and he opens it for her. He is very fussy about doors and things like that."

"Oh, is he?" said Jerry Gregg, and knocked again.

Once more the sound echoed through the vaultlike hall and died into silence.

"Here's where we invite ourselves inside," he added lightly. And, followed by the landlady and an observant maid, he made his way into the dim interior of the closely curtained room, and confronted its solitary occupant, a gaunt, cadaverous man of sixty, who leaned wearily backward in a leathern armchair.

"Hello!" cried Jerry, speaking cheerfully. "Not ill, are we?"

An ornamental clock upon the mantel ticked off the seconds with mechanical exactness. In the dead silence that prevailed its monotonous ticktack sounded appalling distinct.

But the figure at the desk, half shrouded in the shadow, vouchsafed no reply.

In two quick strides Jerry Gregg was at the window flinging aside the tightly drawn curtains. Then he turned toward the silent figure.

Henry Marshland, fully dressed, sat motionless in his leathern armchair, his sightless eyes leering oddly at the ceiling, his strongly marked face ashen gray. He was quite dead, as Jerry saw at a glance, and in the act of dying seemed to have slipped downward in his chair as though lazily stretching.

The maid gave a startled cry, but, at a glance from Jerry, promptly forbore to faint. The landlady, whose fluttering tendencies seemed naturally to dispose her to the making of scenes, turned out to be the coolest of the three.

Beyond a vague inarticulate exclamation, and a quick lifting of the hands, she gave no outward sign of disturbance, thereafter, as far as Jerry could judge from her quick appraising

glances about the room, devoting herself to a mental estimate of the damage that might accrue to her business from the unfortunate incident of the late Mr. Marshland's exit.

But Jerry Gregg gave scant attention to the living intruders in that chamber of death. His eyes glued upon the face of the dead man, he stood absorbed in thought.

The closely drawn curtains on such a stifling night! The late visitor! The menacing voice he had heard!

Was it possible that—

Jerry slowly shook his head. Hardly possible, he decided, in this workaday world.

Presently his eyes fell upon an oblong slip of paper lying on the table before the dead man. A glance showed it to be a doctor's prescription made out on the blank form of a certain "George Andrew Rayton, M. D."

This certainly accounted for the presence of the "Rayton" to whom Marshland had been talking. And just as certainly it took away from the scene a little element of mystery that had gathered there.

Yet, on second thoughts, did it? Did it explain the incident of the closed curtains? Or the puzzling little fact that Henry Marshland for once in his life had neglected to lock his door?

Jerry shook his head doubtfully, while his gaze wandered to a small, half-empty vial, containing a dark liquid, which stood upon the low, flat-topped desk before the dead man. There was no mark of any sort upon the vial, and for all Jerry knew—Jerry, be it understood, was neither an amateur nor professional detective—it might contain poison.

Bending over the desk he caught a whiff of an acrid, rather unpleasant odor from the corked vial, and, as he straightened up, a faint reflection of the same from the dead man's lips.

This, however, he was by no means sure of until, with an effort, he once more bent down, his face close to the strangely pallid features of Henry Marshland. Then the acrid odor was unmistakable!

The landlady, recovering her self-possession, had despatched the servant for a policeman, as Jerry Gregg stood staring thoughtfully around him. For the first time he noticed that a second chair was drawn up to the side of the flat-topped desk, in such a fashion that its occupant—had there been one—must have sat facing Marshland.

Evidently there *had* been a recent visitor, for the desk, sprinkled over with the fine dust only New York can supply, was, at the corner by the second chair, rubbed smooth for a circular space of about six inches.

There was something odd, Jerry told himself, about that mark; something that made his blood tingle as he surveyed it. A man lounging in the chair, his arm upon the table, would have made a long, narrow mark on the dusty surface of the table.

Obviously it was the elbow of Henry Marshland's visitor which had vanquished the dust so peculiarly.

Standing beside the dead man, Jerry tried to image the scene: Marshland talking, his visitor listening, his chin supported in his right palm, his right elbow resting on the table.

That would explain all quite satisfactorily—all, that is, except the strong assured tones of the visitor, as he recalled them from the evening before:

"You don't mean that, Marshland. Just look at this—straight at it—and you'll see you intend to do it."

These were not the words of a man resting his chin lazily on his palm; they were rather those—Jerry could see it clearly now—of a threat. Suppose the visitor had been sitting in the chair as he spoke, pointing a revolver at Marshland! And suppose it was the revolver Marshland was invited to look straight at, by the man he had called Rayton!

Jerry started at his own thought,

and stepping back a pace, stood looking inquiringly at the staring face of the dead man. But Henry Marshland, who in life had been used to keep his own secrets, seemed to guard them even more jealously in death. Jerry's mind was still a chaos of conflicting thought when the door opened to admit a policeman, accompanied by a black-bagged physician.

The latter made one stride toward the dead man, smelled his lips, glanced at the small bottle on the table, and, wiping his forehead, laconically proclaimed: " Suicide! "

The policeman, busily occupied in writing in his notebook, lifted his eyebrows at the news and went on writing. He was a stout, middle aged man, who perspired freely, and with every motion of his stubby fingers and every sound of his rasping voice, managed to convey the idea that he had gone through the same dull routine a thousand times before, and that, really, it was too hot a day for a man to have a suicide on his hands.

One thing, indeed, struck him as odd —the prescription.

" What would that be for? " he asked curiously, eying its cabalistic marks. " Anyway, he saved the money," he added with a smile. And as he spoke, it flashed across his mind that a good many vaudeville headliners turn out poorer jokes than that, and he smiled again with satisfaction.

" That? " asked the medical man. " Oh! that's merely a strong—a very strong tonic. Looks as though the man was run down and went to Rayton for advice. Wait a minute till I get Rayton on the phone."

He stepped into the hall, called up a number, and presently returned.

" He was a friend of Rayton's. Rayton called here last night and left the prescription with him. He told Rayton he felt all in and tired of life, and Rayton advised a trip to the mountains. The man promised to think it over and Rayton wrote out the prescription."

" Gee! " cried the policeman. " Ain't it fierce what the heat 'll do to a man? "

The physician nodded. " Funny things happen in hot spells," he agreed. " And if you only knew it lots of people are tired of the game."

" You're right! " said the policeman. " I suppose headquarters 'll mix in here, and the finger-print sharps and all that. But it'll do no good. The poor gink was tired and quit. That's all."

Jerry Gregg, whose name was already duly committed to the policeman's little book, shook his head in disapproval. Though he had not mentioned it to the newcomers, though he had not decided to mention it even to the coroner, he was quite certain that Henry Marshland had been in no weak mood the evening before.

" But I won't do it, Rayton, I tell you! I refuse! "

Jerry recalled the harsh, rasping tones of Marshland's voice, the full, vigorous intonation that lay beneath it. No matter what Marshland had been or done, the man was clearly not a coward, not a shirker who would lay down his cards in the game of life and leave to another the playing of his hand.

And, at the thought, Jerry came to a sudden resolution. He would do now something which sooner or later he knew his curiosity would compel him to do.

He would go over to Dr. Rayton's office and see the man who had so kindly prescribed for the late Henry Marshland.

Dr. George Rayton lived in an old-fashioned, vine-clad, red-brick house, within a stone's throw of that part of lower Fifth Avenue upon which the sweatshop has not yet laid grimy fingers. He was a tall, broad-shouldered man of about forty, blue-eyed and tanned, and his welcome was cordial.

Jerry Gregg, who had been instinctively attracted by the man's person-

ality, stated his errand, and the physician's face grew serious.

"You want to see me about that prescription of Marshland's?" he repeated. "Very good! Just what can I tell you?"

Jerry Gregg hesitated. Exactly what did he expect Rayton to tell?

He looked about the long, mellow-toned room in which they were sitting, at the golf-sticks in the corner, and the hunting trophies on the walls—things rather out of place in an orthodox waiting-room—and the task of explaining himself seemed a thousand-fold more difficult than he had expected it to be.

"You see," he was beginning rather feebly, when there came a welcome interruption. A woman—really a mere girl if you think of it, with glorious dark hair and soft brown eyes—entered the room.

"Did I hear you say there was more news about Mr. Marshland, George?" she asked eagerly, with a bow to Jerry. "I thought I heard the name. And the telephone just now has made me curious."

Dr. Rayton shook his head.

"This gentleman has come to talk about the prescription I gave Marshland," he explained gently. He crossed the room toward her. "Aren't you getting ready to go out soon?"

She nodded gravely, her oval face slightly flushed. "I'll phone now," she remarked, and with a bright, bird-like nod in Jerry's direction, vanished in the hallway, where Jerry could presently hear the tingle of the telephone bell as she took the receiver off the hook.

Dr. Rayton meanwhile reseated himself in his chair. "As you were saying before my wife came in," he remarked, "you want to ask me some questions. Suppose you fire ahead."

"It's like this," began Jerry. "I'm a neighbor of Marshland's—or rather was. His room is just under mine."

"Oh! a friend of Marshland's," said the other. "I see."

Jerry Gregg slowly shook his head.

"I wasn't a friend of Marshland's at all," was his decided answer. "In fact, I don't recall ever speaking ten words to the man. That isn't the point at all."

"Oh! Isn't it?" asked the other quietly. "Well, what is the point, then?"

Jerry hesitated and in the brief interval heard Mrs. Rayton bring her phone message to a close.

"I'll leave here in exactly half an hour," she remarked as she hung up the receiver.

He listened apparently with one portion of his brain, while with the other he busied himself with the problem of his inquiry. Somehow, since he had seen Rayton's home, and Rayton's wife, the problem had grown surprisingly difficult.

Then the expression of Marshland's cadaverous face as his sightless eyes leered ceilingward, came to him, and his resolution strengthened.

"The thing is," he said firmly, "that I came home from the seashore late last night—"

The physician made no comment, but it seemed to Jerry as if he had started and then checked himself. "You were with Marshland when I went upstairs."

"Yes?" asked Rayton politely.

"Marshland and I happen to be the only lodgers there this summer," Jerry went on, "and I was supposed to be at the seashore. I got back late and of course the place was dark; not a sign of a light from Marshland's window. But in the hall"—Jerry paused an instant—"there was light from under Marshland's door. It struck me as odd—the sweltering night and the closed windows. But I expect they had to be closed, hadn't they?"

"I am no good at riddles," was the quiet answer. "Suppose you explain."

Without more ado Jerry Gregg told his story from beginning to end, told of his theory of the two chairs and the dust rubbed off by the visitor's elbow,

winding up with Rayton's own words:

"Just look at this—straight at it—and you'll see you intend to do it."

Rayton listened to the end without a tremor. The greenish-gray pallor which Jerry had expected to see creep beneath his coat of tan did not materialize. In fact, for all the sign of agitation he showed he might have been listening to a story told casually in a club window.

"Then you mean—" he asked coldly.

"I mean that you forced Marshland to drink that stuff at the point of your revolver. And when it numbed his brain and you saw he was dying, you left the room and came home. The trick of leaving a prescription for a simple tonic was the best card you could have played. It was a corking good idea! A corking good one!

"Only it happened last night"—here Jerry Gregg grew solemn at thought of the trifles upon which hang issues of life and death—"that I chanced to be wearing rubber-soled tennis shoes. Had I worn an ordinary pair of shoes you must have heard me, and then the conversation would have come to a full stop until I went upstairs.

"As it was"—he looked at the man intently—"you said just enough to send you to the chair."

Dr. Rayton sat silent for an instant, his brows drawn down in thought. Then with a quick movement he turned to Jerry.

"Let me tell you something in turn, young man," he said seriously. "Marshland was a beast—a rascal who deserved to die years ago. That's the truth. And for what you think I did a few hours ago—mind, I admit nothing, not a thing—I have only one word to say. I have never done anything to Henry Marshland I wouldn't be glad to do over again—do you get that? Over again!"

"Yes, there is, dear," said a woman's voice, and Mrs. Rayton stepped into the room. "I was in the hall, George," she went on quietly, "and I couldn't help hearing. And you wouldn't do it again, because I wouldn't let you. I'd do it myself first."

Dr. Rayton, who rose to his feet, now caught her hands in his.

"Think what you are saying, dear!" he cried sharply.

She drew back from him an instant and faced Jerry Gregg, as a lioness might face a hunter seeking to attack her cubs.

"I know just what I am saying, dear. The story this man can tell is enough to send a dozen men to the chair. If he tells it on the witness-stand no lawyer can save you. But I shall tell the jury the truth—that you only did my work."

With a gesture of infinite tenderness she laid her hand on her husband's arm.

"I intended to kill Marshland," she said quietly. "And George, who knew it, did it for me without my knowing."

"Oh!" exclaimed Jerry Gregg helplessly. "I never thought of anything like that. It was *you* then who really killed Marshland!"

She inclined her head gravly. "Exactly. George had nothing against Marshland. He had known him casually for years. It was I."

Jerry Gregg tottered rather than rose to his feet. "If you'll excuse me," he said with a gesture of bewilderment, "I'll go for a walk. I need to think this thing over."

And as he left the room he was conscious that George Rayton and his wife, as though impelled by an overpowering force, were linked in each other's arms.

Jerry Gregg had scarcely reached the street when an idea forced its way into his consciousness with such explosive power as almost to stun him.

For years he had been speculating about the Ultimate Criminal, and here fate had thrown the Ultimate Criminal in his face! For a more

perfect specimen of the Ultimate Criminal than Mrs. George Rayton it would be hard, Jerry told himself, to find.

Without a tremor of her voice the woman had confessed that she had intended to kill Henry Marshland; there had been something akin to pride in her tones when she admitted that her husband had done the deed for her.

Jerry slowly removed his hat and wiped the perspiration from his forehead. He had been considerably shaken because Rayton had turned out to be much more pleasant and attractive than a cold-blooded murderer has any right to be.

And now had come the sudden surprising thought that at last, after years of patient waiting, he was really in touch with the Ultimate Criminal!

He walked slowly along the street, turning over the affair in his mind as he went.

Marshland had always impressed him as a man rather different from other men: a man who might have some shameful secret in his life. In all probability he had been right in his conjecture.

Yet this, after all, he reflected, would be scant justification for murder. For any way you choose to look at the question, murder is still murder, still a violation of one of the first commandments, and punishable by death under the laws of almost all nations.

Then he brought himself sharply to heel. What had *he* to do with the brutal, commonplace fact of Marshland's extinction when, for the first time in his life, he was face to face with the momentous possibility of proving the truth of his great theory?

Suppose Marshland *had* been murdered, what did he, Jerry Gregg, care, so long as fate allowed him to unravel the tangled skein, one end of which, he felt sure, was firmly clasped in the hands of the Ultimate Criminal?

And having settled the matter for good and all, he began to wonder at the motive of the woman's enmity for the dead man.

He recalled her voice and the loathing that pervaded it as she mentioned Marshland's name: obviously she had, or thought she had, some serious ground of complaint against Marshland.

Jerry was wondering what it might be when the telephone communication to which he had lately listened came into his mind. Mrs. Rayton had planned to leave the house in half an hour. Why, she must be almost on the point of coming out now!

He swung on his heel, anxious to observe at his leisure this woman who so lightly sent her husband on an errand of death. Perhaps he might learn something!

At first, as he loitered at the corner of the street, he was inclined to be a little skeptical about her intention of keeping her appointment, after the sudden surprise of the news he had brought to her husband. But such doubts proved to have not the slightest basis in fact, for presently she appeared upon the stoop, parasol in hand.

Jerry watched her eagerly as she stepped upon the sidewalk and turned westward to Sixth Avenue. There was a determined set to her shoulders as she swung on her way that to the watcher spoke volumes.

Here, evidently, was a woman in a million! A woman whom not even the confession of a murder could prevent from keeping an appointment!

Mrs. Rayton gradually quickened her pace and Jerry quickened his. Evidently her engagement was important, for she glanced neither to the right nor to the left as she strode on her way.

Presently she reached Sixth Avenue and turned southward toward the nearest "L" station, Jerry a safe distance behind. Once she turned around as she waited to cross a side street, and her watcher had need of

all his agility in taking shelter behind a street show-case.

But by a little good luck he managed to mount to the "L" platform and board the same up-town train without being observed.

At Thirty-Third Street she alighted, and Jerry, who had been on the adjoining car, outraged the guard's feelings by vaulting the closed gate while the car was in motion. Thereafter she went quickly on her way to the waiting-room of the Pennsylvania Station, where a tall, kindly looking man of about thirty-five, dressed very quietly, joined her, and held out an expectant hand.

Mrs. Rayton nodded gravely, opened her hand-bag, and took out a small package of letters which, without a word, she handed to the newcomer, who seized them wolfishly. Then grasping his proffered arm she walked through the crowded waiting-room.

What the two were talking about Jerry would have given a good deal to know. He could guess from their grave faces that the subject upon which they were engaged was serious; he half suspected, from the questioning glances the man flung at Mrs. Rayton, that they were talking of the events of the previous night.

But it was not until they took their station by the news kiosk, and he was able to stand close behind them in the crowd, that he caught a word of their conversation. Then he heard Mrs. Rayton say with a sigh of relief:

"I suppose you feel as I did when I saw them. You can't believe it's all real!"

Her companion nodded, glanced at the time, and held out his hand.

"I'm going, Madge. It does seem" —he hesitated—"it does seem like a dream, doesn't it?"

She nodded in turn. "I just had to bring you to town—you know why. But now it's better for you to go right back."

Jerry watched them as they said good-by, for the second time, at the Long Island entrance; then, when she had turned away, he drew out his mileage book and followed through the gates, in pursuit of the quiet-faced man with the letters.

That the letters contained something bearing upon the crime of the previous night Jerry did not, for an instant, doubt. Mrs. Rayton's statement that the sight of them had seemed unreal to her, and the strange, almost passionate eagerness with which the man had seized them, were proof of this.

Manifestly, if he wished to understand the crime fully, it was necessary to get in touch with their new owner.

It was not difficult to do this, and presently Jerry, after walking through several cars, found himself sitting opposite his quarry.

Mrs. Rayton's acquaintance was a quiet, grave-faced man whose soft, dark eyes had a kindly glint. Just now he seemed to his observer to be in a brown study, for it was only after repeated demands from the conductor that he produced his ticket.

Then Jerry thought his smile rather pleasant.

The train passed through the tunnel and began to clatter through the Long Island countryside, while Jerry devised ways and means to catch a glimpse of the desired letters.

A detective, even though not one of the modern magazine type, would doubtless have solved the problem in a jiffy; but Jerry, as before intimated, was neither an amateur nor a professional Sherlock Holmes. And to himself it seemed that he was hopelessly lacking in the ability to force himself to act.

Had the stranger not risen to leave the car at a small country station, Jerry might never have decided the question. As it was he jumped to his feet and followed his man down the platform and out into the country road with an air of easy assurance he was very far from feeling.

Scarcely a dozen yards separated them as they walked up the sweet-smelling country street, Jerry taking long steps to match those of the other, and walking more slowly when the object of his pursuit slackened his pace.

And so they went on until houses grew scattered and they were in the open country. Then the man paused expectantly and waited for Jerry to come up.

"Looking for somebody?" he asked pointedly. "Or just following me for fun?"

"Looking for somebody," was the laconic answer—"for you."

The stranger surveyed Jerry Gregg searchingly and his dark eyes flashed recognition. "I have a good memory for faces and I remember yours now. You stood near me in the station at New York, and you sat opposite me in the car." He made a step forward. "Just exactly what do you want?"

Jerry considered. Now that he was face to face with the possessor of the letters, he was frankly puzzled as to the next step.

To take the letters by force was, of course, impossible; one look at the man's broad shoulders was enough to settle that. At the same time the letters without doubt had an important bearing on the case of Marshland, or Mrs. Rayton would not have kept her appointment at the Pennsylvania Station after hearing such trying news.

It was, therefore, essential for him to obtain possession of them by hook or by crook. With this in mind Jerry resolved to temporize and trust to developments.

"You see, it's like this," he began easily. "I am interested in the Marshland murder."

A curious gleam appeared in the stranger's eyes. It was as though some fierce emotion had suddenly gripped him. To Jerry it seemed as though he actually trembled.

"Marshland murdered?" he gasped. "Harry Marshland murdered? Are you sure of it?"

"Positive!"

The stranger drew himself together at the sound of Jerry's sharp reply, and, with an effort, mastered his emotion.

"Murdered!" he repeated more quietly. "That *was* a surprise!"

Jerry Gregg surveyed him with a puzzled air. It had never dawned upon him that the man could be ignorant of the tragic events of the night before. From his first sight of him in the Pennsylvania Station he had classified him as one of those impromptu assistants whose functions, his experience had taught him, consist mainly in concealing the evidences of crime.

The cause of the Marshland murder, Jerry's instinct told him, lay in the soiled package of letters reposing in the stranger's pockets. And now to find—and the genuineness of the man's surprise was beyond all doubt—that he had all along been entirely ignorant of the basic fact of Henry Marshland's murder!

As Jerry told himself, it was a "jolt."

"Know any particulars?" came a quick question.

In a few words Jerry told the entire story of his connection with the strange case of Henry Marshland, including his call upon the Raytons and the longing for knowledge of the murderer's motive, which had led him into pursuit of Mrs. Rayton.

"That's why," he ended, "that I followed you. I want that package of letters."

There was a little silence, and the man stood looking curiously at Jerry. He looked so long, and with such strained intentness that Jerry grew a trifle uneasy.

For the first time it occurred to him that he was standing upon as lonely a stretch of country road as he had ever seen, and that the man in front of him was unusually powerful in build. It might have been fancy, but for a moment it seemed as though the

man was about to hurl himself forward.

Then the faint ghost of a smile flickered across his lips, and to Jerry's vast astonishment he held out his hand.

"Let's sit down and talk. If you want the letters after you know more, I suppose you're going to get them."

Seated upon a grassy bank by the roadside, the stranger produced a cigar. "My last!" he said whimsically. "Smoke it while I talk."

He watched while Jerry sent a preliminary blue puff spiraling through the summer air.

"Look here, young fellow," he began. "Did you ever notice that the man who does the killing is seldom or never the one who profits by the murder?"

Jerry nodded, his color heightening. "*Never* profits," he agreed.

"And did you know Marshland?"

"By sight only."

"Marshland was a beast—a clever, intellectual brute, who should have been killed years ago. He lived by blackmail." The stranger's eyes were flashing and his face was stern.

"There wasn't a viler man in God's universe than Henry Marshland. For years he blackmailed the purest, noblest woman in the world because of—" He paused abruptly. "Never mind because of what," he growled fiercely. "She was a good woman. I know because she's going to be my wife! See?"

"Yes, of course," said Jerry hastily, for the stranger's fingers had clutched his knee in a grasp of iron. "Of course; I understand."

The grip upon Jerry's knee relaxed, and the man leaned back.

"I found out only last week," he went on—"found out his name and that there were letters—letters that kept her from me. What did I do?"

Jerry's heart was beating like a trip-hammer. Was it possible that after all Mrs. Rayton was not the real criminal? He laughed excitedly.

"You—you—" he stammered.

"Went to New York to shoot Marshland and get the letters," broke in the stranger. "I told Mrs. Rayton what I meant to do; I told her because the two women are sisters; and very, very fond of each other. I don't think I meant to tell her at first, but I was so bitter against Marshland that the truth slipped out."

He paused to watch the ashes drop unregarded from Jerry's cigar.

"Mrs. Rayton ordered me to wait; she said she had a plan to get the letters that didn't involve shooting. I waited till yesterday, when I got a note to be in New York this morning for the letters. I telephoned her from the station."

From his pocket he produced a package of faded letters.

"Want to see them?" he asked.

Jerry Gregg looked up into the clear blue sky, as though to image there the train of events that led from the man before him, through Mrs. Rayton and her husband to the pallid face of Henry Marshland leering with unseeing eyes ceilingward.

Then he turned toward the man, who, quite ignorant of the great theory, had unconsciously revealed himself as the Ultimate Criminal.

"The letters!" he cried with a glow of triumph. "What do I care for the letters? Or for Marshland? Or for giving evidence? Let Marshland's death go as suicide! What matters to me is that you've helped me to prove the truth of the greatest idea in the world—the very greatest!"

"Yes?" said the man smilingly, as he pocketed the letters. "I knew it would be all right when you understood. But what do you mean by the greatest idea in the world?"

"It's this way—" began Jerry Gregg, leaning forward and seizing the stranger by the buttonhole.

And as his cigar died down to gray ashes, he stood in the country road, explaining with all the passion of a devotee his tried and tested theory of the Ultimate Criminal.