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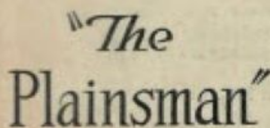
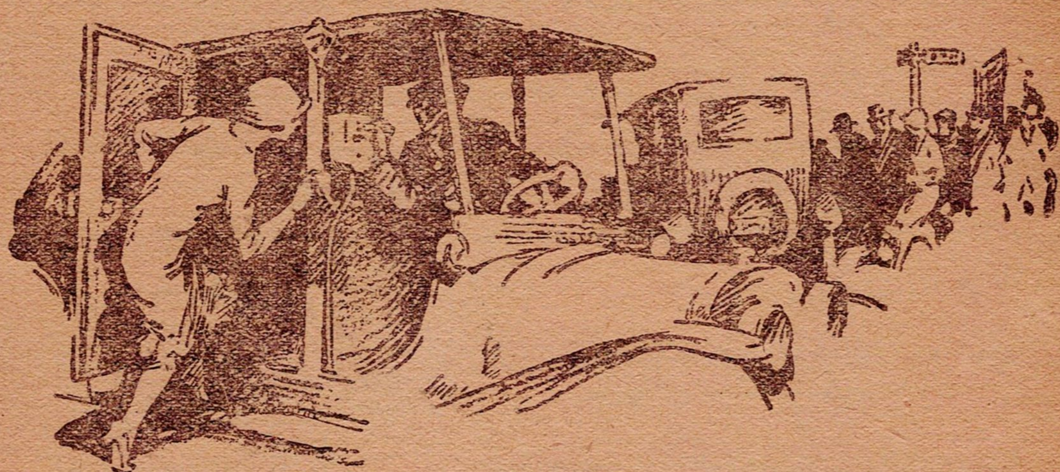


"The Plainsman"

A Novelette

By

J. Allan Dunn



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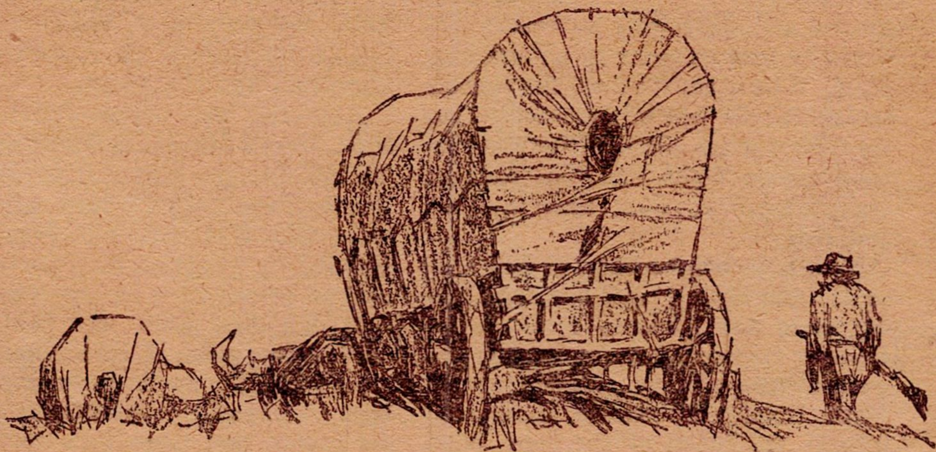

The Plainsman

A Complete Novel by J. Allan Dunn

Author of "The Trap," "Thoroughbreds," etc.

FOR JIM BRIDGER, TRAPPER AND FRIEND OF KIT CARSON, OREGON WAS HIS OWN COUNTRY—ITS HILLS AND FORESTS AND GAME. BUT WHEN THE EMIGRANTS ARRIVED HE HELPED THEM FIGHT OFF THE RAIDING INDIANS. HE DID THIS DESPITE THE FACT THAT THE DAKOTAS COUNTED HIM AS ONE OF THEM.

CHAPTER I.

JUST where the North Fork of the Platte River, swinging its great curve from the Medicine Bow Mountains, north and east and south, where it straightens out as if determined upon its course, running south and east to the mighty Missouri at Council Bluffs—the smaller, livelier Laramie flows in from the south and west, following the trend of the watershed.

There, at the junction of the waters, the lodges of the Sioux were set, many villages of them, as was their wont, outside the stockaded, bastion-defended walls of Fort Laramie. It was sometimes called Fort Platte, trading post of the American Fur Company, stronghold in the wilderness, trafficking station with

the tribes who exchanged their furs for blankets, tobacco, mirrors, face paint, and, above all, for sugar, powder and ball, and trade muskets, flintlocks painted red for the Indian trade, and for drinks of the fire water that the whites had introduced.

Willows bordered the rivers, with box elder and wild cherry, but all about the fort the turf was short on the level ground and there were no bushes that might be used as cover by an attacking force. The tribes tolerated the fearless traders for the sake of merchandise, but the traders wisely did not trust them beyond certain limits, and time had not cemented any covenant between white and red.

Rather, such friendships as had been made from mutual respect in fair dealing, were now suffering from the increasing friction of the emigrants who were drifting through, coming up the Platte from Independence, passing on through the defiles of the great Wind River Range at South Pass, down the valleys of the Lewis and the Snake to the swift, strong Columbia, on to the fertile lands of Oregon, which was not yet American nor wholly British. despite the prestige of the Hudson's Bay Company.

The wise men among the tribes regarded with suspicion the well-marked wagon road at South Pass. Lewis and Clark had not passed this way but they had seen Joe Colter go through at the head of Green River, which is itself the head of the mighty Colorado. That was in 1807, well within the memories of the chiefs. Four years later the overland party of the Pacific Fur Company pushed through to Astoria.

In 1822 William Ashley's trappers came up the Missouri to the mouth of the Yellowstone and down to the Sweetwater and the Green for the Rocky Mountain Fur Company, under the command of Andrew Henry. Four years later, more men of this same company, led by a young man of twenty-two who had been with the first party, James Bridger, actually brought wagons from distant St. Louis, clear across the plains to leave supplies and take back the precious peltry. Bridger had stayed looking for beaver.

Next, Captain Bonneville in 1832, with more wagons, crossed the Great Divide, and then was built Fort Laramie, two years after, established control the fur trade of the Arapahoes, the Cheyennes and the Sioux.

Also came black robes—Jesuit priests at St. Mary's Mission in the Bitter Root Valley since the year before, with the Belgian Peter John de Smet seeking to wean them from their own Manitou to his God, to relinquish the rites of their mdicine priests for a strange ritual.

At first these white men had passed on, but now some of them stayed, and always they came in increasing numbers. The medicine men foretold doleful events, and these were coming to pass. All year there had been a drought, drying up the springs and diminishing the rivers. The buffalo grass had withered, and the buffalo had migrated. Antelope and deer made for mountain fastnesses, crops failed under burning sun that destroyed the fodder, and then a great plague of grasshoppers had descended upon them, thick as clouds, obscuring the sun, the whirring of their gaudy wings a death rattle to vegetation.

It was the Month of Berries, but there were none to pluck. The land was dun, and all things seemed seen through a brown veil. The lofty peaks of Wind River hung vague and uncertain, like ghostly pinnacles and turrets without a visible base. There was no rain, and the babies suffered.

The bad lands south of Laramie Peak, awful stretches of alkali and lava, of pumice and sandstone mesas and monuments where the evil spirits lived with their familiars, the rattlesnakes, seemed

stretching out to engulf the plain, already arid, cracking into the semblance of myriad thirsty, panting mouths.

Ictinike, the Virgin Born, the Divine One, had utterly forsaken them.

Now, within the fort, was Lieutenant Frémont with twenty-one men, resolute, armed, an officer of the Great White Chief at Washington. Why was he come? It was, said the medicine men, the direst portent since, ten years before, the fire ship that moved without sails or paddles, had come to the mouth of the Yellowstone. The coming of the grasshopper but foretold the coming of the white men, as numerous and as devastating.

Had not the great treaty, made in 1815, secured to them these lands together with others that reached back to the Great Water? Did the white man speak always with a forked tongue and was he to nibble at their possessions as the beaver gnaws ever at the trees to destroy them?

The Sioux had abandoned their villages and their receding tracks could be marked by the carcases of horses and dogs strewn along the trail, miserable things that would have starved if their throats had not been cut and their scant blood let out. There was not a blade of grass left by the locusts. The Cheyennes, their ancient enemies, unscourged by drought or pest, were talking of evening ancient scores.

Frémont had called a conference in the big room of the main building set in the center of the log-walled inclosure. With him in consultation were Kit Carson, most famous of scouts, Maxwell, Kit's friend, the mighty hunter, Joseph Bissonnette, a trader attached to the fort, and Frémont's *voyageurs* a little apart from the actual council, lounging close at hand—vigorous, weather-bitten men in leather tunics, with powderhorns and knives at their belts, their long rifles stacked in the corners, watching the eagle face of the man who was yet to be called the "Pathfinder" by a grateful nation.

"There are no young men left in the villages," said Bissonnette. "They have gone on the warpath. There was trouble with an emigrant train ten days ago, and a fight. Eight Indians got killed and you couldn't have come at a worse time, lieutenant. They've gone after that train, and it looks to me as if scalps would be lifted. Once things get started they'll flare up like a prairie fire.

"You say your policy is not to fight. It's my belief that you'll not go twenty miles from this fort without running into trouble. They won't give you time to explain who you are and that you are a peace party. They don't want any more whites. Our own position is precarious. There are all of eight hundred lodges up against the whites. That's a fact."

He spoke in broken English, but most of them would have understood him if he had used his native French. French was almost as universal on the frontier as English. Once it had practically prevailed along the Mississippi Valley, but Frémont preferred to use the language of the government that he represented.

"Our mission's peaceful enough," he said, "but it may not look so to them. It's the first step in the geographical survey of our Western territory between the Missouri and the Pacific Ocean. I want to put South Pass upon the map, to accurately chart it, to help open the way for emigrant travel to Oregon. I shall come back and go farther, but South Pass is named as my present objective and I shall make it unless obstacles prove insuperable. It simply must be done.

"There are especial reasons why emigration should be encouraged into Oregon at this time, which are matters of State. We seek to establish a high-

way through Indian territory, and I can well conceive their objections to it—objections which must be overcome.

"Some day, and that day will come within the lives of all of us who finish out their natural span, there will be communication unbroken between the Atlantic and the Pacific, and all the land between will be part and parcel of the United States. Explorers first, traders next, then emigrants, then the stage lines across the plains and through the passes. At last the railroad, over prairie and sierra. It is inevitable. Progress may not be checked, and those races who seek to oppose it must submit. It is the law of civilization, and those who find and fix the trails are its true pioneers."

His gray eyes flashed, and his men straightened, already leavened with his indomitable spirit. Bissonnette shrugged. Pioneers were well enough but he had seen many of them perish and he was none too keen for this civilization to reduce the profits of the Rocky Mountain Fur Company. He devoutly wished that Frémont had never arrived. Left alone he and his fellows could have stayed within the fort until the trouble had blown over.

The emigrants must take care of themselves. Even Frémont could not help the train that had fought with the Sioux, and upon whose trail the young bucks were now bent, racing their weary ponies, a hundred miles away.

Frémont turned to his men.

"Come closer, boys," he said. "You've heard what was said. We're waiting for a man to come in who knows more about the local situation than anybody. Whatever he may advise, and I trust he will give some advice that we can follow, I am going on to South Pass. We have got about ten days' rations. There is no game in the country. It is about a hundred and forty miles to Red Buttes. The Sioux are on the warpath, but I am going. It is quite optional with you to come with me or return."

There was silence for a moment before a *voyageur,* Lajeunesse, with a look to his fellows that appeared to receive assurance, stepped forward.

"We'll eat the mules," he said simply.

Frémont laughed and shook hands with them.

Bissonnette's assistant, Chartrain, appeared and spoke to the former who excused himself and went out, reappearing almost immediately with a rather tall, lean man between thirty or forty, his face tanned and weather-wrinkled, a short beard covering but not hiding a square jaw, keen gray eyes that took in the whole room at one glance as he removed a broad-brimmed hat that might once have been fawn-colored but was now dingy with wood smoke and the vicissitudes of the trail.

He wore a buckskin coat, a fringed flannel shirt and dark corduroy trousers reënforced with buckskin in the seat and the inside of the legs to below the knees. He set his rifle by the door and came forward. Bissonnette had again gone out.

Carson and Maxwell went swiftly to him, gripping his hand.

"This is Jim Bridger, sir," said Carson. "Knows more about this region than any white man an' more than a hull lot of reds. Lived here most of the time for the last twenty years, ain't you, Jim, tradin' an' trappin'?"

"More or less. What kin I do for you, Cap'n Frémont? I'm at your sarvice."

"We're a topographical survey party, bound for South Pass. I want to survey one or two of the big peaks thereabouts, and then we return to report. Bissonnette says it is perilous for us to go on because of Indian feeling, worked up by recent trouble with a train of emigrants. We're going just the same but we should be glad of your advice as to proceeding with the idea—the es-

sential idea—of not clashing with the Sioux, at the same time not leting them think we are in the least degree afraid of them."

"They won't think thet, if you go ahead, soon's they git a good look at you," said Bridger. "You sure picked a bad time. I'm friendly with 'em, been initiated into some of their lodges and married a Dakota squaw, but I'll not deny my ha'rs been liftin' on the trail here. Those young bucks scalp first an' look at your face arterwards.

"It ain't only the young bucks. The medicine men have blamed the drought an' the hoppers on the emigrants an' the Jesuit priest thet come in last year. The wimmen are mournin' the dead the emigrant train killed. I reckon thet was a party of bucks tryin' to throw a scare, makin' a bluff thet could have been handled 'thout shootin' but wasn't. It don't allus do to have too quick a trigger finger.

"I didn't come here to instruct you none. Don't have to look twice to see you men know your work—also, you got Kit with you. Reckon he's advised you agin' goin' on but is goin' with you jest the same—unless he's changed. I hate to be put off a trail myself.

"If I was you I'd hire an interpreter an' two or three of the old men in the village to go along with you. Tell 'em jest how far you're goin' an' don't go any further. They've got a good idee of how big the white nation is an' they ain't overanxious to bring the white sojers down on 'em.

"The Seven Tribes—thet's the Dakotas, an' don't go ter callin' 'em Sioux, which is only a nickname, their enemies the Chippewas give 'em—stretch a long ways an' they remember the time they fought the French who drove the *Oteeti Cakowin*—the Seven Clans—across the Alleghenies an' across the Missouri to the plains.

"It's only five years ago since they sold the last of their lands east of the Mississippi. They ain't forgot when they fought with the British agin' us, an' they ain't forgot we licked the British. We made a treaty with 'em, givin' the tribe right of land startin' in Minnesota an' takin' in this territory. Looks some as if we might bust thet treaty. But the old men savvy. It's the wild young bucks thet won't listen. It's their nature to fight an' hunt, an' the huntin's derned sca'ce this season.

"It's been sort of hinted to me thet the trail to Oregon should be kept wide open so's to git plenty of Americans thar before it's decided to let the British have it. But it's hard to explain to the Sioux thet it don't mean thar'll be a lot of settlers here. I've tried to myself. But, if you kin spare a hawss or so an' some blankets, you might git some of 'em to go with yer to Red Buttes."

"You seem to be well informed on other affairs besides local ones," said Frémont.

"I've sat at council fires an' heerd the talk. The tribes don't know about the Oregon end of it. I ain't told 'em. As for me knowin', without bein' wishful to brag none, I go to St. Louis once in a while an' even to Washington. My maw died in St. Louis in 1816, an' my pap's sister she took her place till pap died. Then she married a man by the name of John Tyler who lives in Washington."

"You mean President Tyler?" asked Frémont, half incredulously.

"The tribes call him the 'Great White Father,'" said Bridger with a twinkle in his eyes. "Gives me a sort of drag with 'em. I reckon Kit knows about it."

Carson nodded.

"Jim's advice is good," he said. "We'll go anyway. Jest the same I'm goin' to make my will."

The scout's reputation for bravery made his statement add gravity to the situation. Frémont ran his fingers through his beard, pondering Bridger's suggestion.

"If you don't go with us—and there is no real need for it with Kit and the mountains in view from here which we want to reach—are you staying at the fort?" he asked.

"It's a sort of headquarters for me. You see I helped start the Rocky Mountain Fur Company. Bissonnette's a sort of pardner of mine. He'll be here. I reckoned to see if I couldn't cut in ahead of those bucks before they catch up with thet emigrant train. Thar's women with it and mebbe some kids. If thar's more fightin' it'll be bad for trade. No sense in you tryin'. You're on government duty an' you want to keep out of trouble. They know me an' they don't know you. Also I kin travel faster than you could."

"You're a brave man, sir." Frémont held out his hand. Bridger gripped it with a whimsical glance at Carson.

"I don't know about bein' brave," he said, "but ef you show you're skeered out here you might as well quit. Thar's some says I'm the biggest liar west of the Missouri. Ever sence I went up the Yellerstone an' saw them spoutin' geesers, as they call 'em—with them colored terraces an' b'ilin' mudholes—an' was fool enough to talk about it, I've sort of lost my reputashun for truth an' sobriety. However——"

There was a sudden commotion at the door. Thrusting aside a guard who set his rifle across the way but wisely held his fire, six chiefs, fine, powerful-looking men, forced their way into the room, and one advanced. His garb, evidently donned for the occasion, was typical of the others. His hawklike face, with its high cheek bones and haughty expression, was entirely filmed with vivid vermillion.

His black hair hung loose on his back, with feathers fastened with gay strips of leather set in it, one eagle plume standing straight up from the crown of his head. He delivered a note to Frémont and stepped back, his robe, a fine skin covered with colored pictographs of men, buffalo, deer and horses, wrapped about his body, his arms folded in it, the top of his deep chest exposed. His moccasins were thick and sewn with beads in an intricate pattern, as were his fringed leggings. His eyes were sharp, penetrative.

His mien was scornful and confident. His companions seated themselves on a bench near the door, facing Frémont's table desk. There was no show of weapons.

Bridger spoke to him in his own language, a brief greeting which the other answered with a guttural, reticent grunt.

"It's Chief Bull Tail," said Bridger. "Thet's Otter Hat on the bench, with Breaker of Arrows an' Black Night. I don't know the others, but Bull Tail's got some sense. He kin put up a fine bluff but he knows when to lie down."

Frémont read the communication aloud. It was signed by Bissonnette, per L. D. Chartrain and written in French.

"The chiefs, having assembled in council, have just told me to warn you not to set out before the party of young men which is now out have returned, for they tell me they are very sure that they will fire upon you as soon as they meet you. They are expected back in seven or eight days. Excuse me for making these observations, but it seems my duty to warn you of danger. Moreover the chiefs who will prohibit your setting out are the bearers of this note."

"It would seem we are at least dealing with principals," said Frémont quietly. "Mr. Bridger, will you act as interpreter?"

"Sure. Better let them speak first. I see Black Night's bustin' inside with talk."

"You've come at a bad time," translated Bridger rapidly. "Some of our people have been killed. Our young men are eager to avenge the blood of their relations who have been killed. Our young men are bad an' if they meet

you they will think you are carryin' relief to their enemies an' will kill you.

"You say this will make war. We know the Great Father has many soldiers an' big guns an' we do not wish to lose our lives. We love the whites an' want peace. So we have determined to keep you until our warriors return. We are glad to see you among us for we know the Great Father is rich an' we expected you would have brought us many presents of hawsses, guns an' blankets.

"But we are glad to see you. You are as the light thet goes before the sun, for you will tell our Great Father that you have seen us an' thet we are naked an' pore an' have nothin' tö eat, so that he will send us all these things."

One at a time the others spoke, to the same effect. Bridger asked them to supply two or three of their people to go with Frémont until they met with the braves, offering them Frémont's hospitality meanwhile, to eat at his table, with a promise of presents on his return.

They refused, saying there were no young men left in the village and that they were too old to travel so many days on horseback, that they wished to smoke their pipes in the lodges and let the young men go on the warpath. That they had no power over the young men and they were afraid to interfere with them. That the young men had made medicine and could not be restrained.

"They're puttin' it strong," said Bridger. "You tell *them* they can't handle the young bucks an' they'd git almighty sore. Some of it's true, but if you're stiff with 'em they'll give in an' send some one with you."

Tell them this," said Frémont and stood up. The eagle eyes gleamed beneath shaggy brows. His hair was thick and curly above his wide forehead. The heavy beard could not disguise the firm modeling of jaw and mouth, and his nose jutted out with a clean spring. He was preëminently the commander, the chief.

"If you love the whites why have you killed so many of them this spring? You love us but you are not willing to ride a few days with us. You do not look as if you were old men and you are not naked. If you are hungry eat with me.

"We do not believe what you have said and we will not listen to you. When our chief tells us to do a thing it is done. We are the soldiers of the Great Chief, your father, and he has told us to see this country and the Indians, his children.

"We heard before we came that you had killed some of our people and were no longer his children but we came among you in peace, holding out our hands.

"We find the stories are not lies, that you are no longer his friends and his children. We have thrown away our bodies and we will not turn back. When you told us your young men would kill us we talked foolishly and you could not have seen the guns my young men hold in their hands. We are few and you are many. You may kill us all in time but there will be much weeping in your villages for there will be many young men who will not return.

"Do you think the Great Father will let his soldiers die and forget to cover their graves? I tell you that, before the snows melt again, his warriors will sweep away your villages as the prairie fire sweeps away the grass when the leaves fall.

"I have folded my white houses and my people are ready. When the sun is ten paces higher we shall march. If you have anything to say to us, you will say it soon. The talk is ended."

The chiefs rose in silence and stalked out.

"Strong talk," said Bridger. "They'd make good poker players but they'll come to you before you start."

"I thank you, Bridger. Is there any thing I can do for you?"

"You might give my respects to the Great Father from his nephew-in-law, when you git back to Washington. Mebbe he'll make me a gen'ral," added the plainsman with a grin. "Meantime I'd swap thet title for some good terbaccy right now. I'm nigh out of chewin'.

"I might make one suggestion. You kin travel light. Make a cache of your wagon frames an' kivvers an' wheels, with all the stuff you don't have to take along. Dig a hole among the willers somewhere an' be keerful how you spread the dirt. You kin start in full shape an' do it by the end of the first or second day."

"I'll take that advice," said Frémont.

Soon the little caravan got under way with the bronzed *voyageurs*, imperturbable as Indians, riding with their long rifles across their pommels. They emerged from the fort inclosure to find Bull's Tail, waiting with a young man.

"He will go with you," he said. "He will speak with our young men. But he is poor and you must give him a horse."

"I thought they'd give in," said Bridger as he interpreted. "The pore young man is Bull Tail's pet son-in-law. I reckon you're fixed."

He watched them file off, following the Laramie to the west where the ghostly crests of the Wind River Range gleamed faintly.

"He's a full-sized man," Bridger said to Bissonnete. "Now, Joe, fill me up on grub an' give me some ammunition. I've been comin' hard an' fast sence I hear these fellers was at the fort. Give my pony a feed of corn, will you, an' tell me what you know about this rumpus with the train. I've got to ride like all hell was after me to ketch up with 'em. Lucky those bucks' ponies are pore."

"They'll git your scalp, Jeem," said Bissonnette.

"Ain't got it for twenty years, Joe. Ruther they'd lift mine than handle the women in thet train. You know what thet means. Kids, too, I hear."

"It ain't none of your business, Jeem. It's too late."

"I ain't makin' a business trip of it, Joe. Rustle me some grub, my backbone's gratin' agin' my belt buckle right now."

CHAPTER II.

Through a narrow, high-walled cañon in the Big Horn foothills an emigrant caravan lumbered slowly along. There were eighteen wagons in all, canvas tilted over balloon-shaped bows. Most of them had oxen, a few four, the majority two of the patient beasts, their heads low under the yoke, moving slowly, with swollen tongues, dragging the complaining wagons over the trail that was little better than the bed of a creek, and moving in a cloud of fine dust. Three or four of the wagons were hauled by horses that looked like clothes racks. Ahead of the train horsemen straggled, and some of the bearded, roughly clad, despondent men had pity on their mounts and trudged stolidly beside them. All carried rifles, and the leaders scanned the cliffs anxiously. Tired women drove. The cries of thirsty, tired children sounded plaintively from the interiors of the carts.

It was the middle of the afternoon, and the cliffs radiated heat like the walls of an oven. The train fairly crawled. It was an advertisement of despondency. A week ago they had left the river, the springs were all dried up, and there was practically no feed for the teams. On some of the tilts legends showed dimly through the dust, "On To Oregon."

They had been painted there long, long weeks since, when the outfit started bravely out from Independence, Mis-

souri. The spirit of pioneering had flamed high and they had been eager for the sights of the way, the green plains like an ocean, the flowers, the birds, the frequent game. Songs had been sung at nightfall, and there had been tales of the promised land that now seemed so far away on a trail beset with terror.

The land was a desert. There was no green thing. The drought and the grasshoppers had left nothing but the sage, coated with the dust that blew in suffocating clouds whenever the hot wind moved and as the wide wheels rolled slowly on. The floury stuff whitened their hair and faces as if with the dust and ashes of lamentation and it sifted through their clothes and got into their tasteless food.

The fear of death, or horrible, unspeakable deeds to women and torture for the men, hovered all about them. Ahead, at every turn of the cañon, it might lie in wait from the summit of the scorching cliffs, coming up behind in grim vengeance.

They had come to one of the higher forks of the Little Big Horn and found it dry as a bone, as the bottom of a kiln. The Big Horn lay ahead—two days of travel at twelve miles a day. If that failed them——

In the fifth wagon a man tossed, moaned and raved inarticulately. A bloody bandage was about his head, his eyes were glazed and his split, festered lips writhed for the need of water to quench the fever that had burned out his brain. He was young but he might have been thrice his age to look at the face whose dusty skin was stretched like a drumhead over his skull. It was the face of a man, sorely stricken.

The woman, who was driving the wagon, called hoarsely to a man who rode a staggering horse beside it.

"Ben," she said as he came closer. "You got to drive a bit. I can't stand it. It's awful. I suppose he mebbe ain't conscious he's sufferin', but it's givin' me the horrors."

"Ef I stop the hawss he'll never start ag'in," said the man. "As for Edwards, we'll bury him to-night—ef we ain't all killed. Jordan says they're sure follerin' us."

"You got to promise to kill me if they best us, Ben. I've heerd what they do to you." Her voice died away in a dry whisper. Her husband nodded grimly.

"It was all Jordan's fault," he said. "He shouldn't have fired at 'em. The others say they was jest tryin' to stampede us and never would have attacked so long's we kept formation, an' held our fire."

"It ain't no use blamin' Jordan now," she said. "You goin' to drive?"

"I s'pose so," he answered. "Dry camp ag'in to-night. This trip is jest hell."

"We was well enough off to home," she said dully.

"Who proposed it? Wasn't we burnin' up with fever or shiverin' with chills? Who picked on me till I sold out? Who——"

"Don't start quarrelin', Ben. We may not be alive to-morrer. I declare I wish I was dead. Thank heavens, we ain't got any kids. Help me mount. I'm stiff as boards."

"It was green back home," she mumbled to herself as the horse miserably started on. The sick man moaned as the wagon jolted over a boulder. The man at the reins sat with his head sunk low on his chest. Ahead, the black-bearded Jordan doggedly kept his lead. Responsibility hung heavy upon him. If he had misjudged he was paying the penalty. He was ready almost to welcome a shot—it would probably be an arrow. But he was the captain of the caravan, he knew the trail and he cursed grimly in his gritty beard and muttered the first prayer he had made for uncounted years.

"Lord," he said, "send us some help, Lord—for the wimmen an' kids. Us men has got to keep alive to see 'em through, but send 'em water. Thar must be water round here somewhere's yit. Mebbe in a cave. Don't let them red devils git the women, Lord! I'll sarve Ye the rest of my life if You'll git us out of this."

There was no answer. Only the shadow of a buzzard flying over the devastated land, viewing grimly its fair hope of a ghastly feast. There was no sound but the creaking of the ungreased wheels, the clack of tire on rock. The dust rose like a pall.

The cañon opened out at last into what had once been an upland park, and on what had been grass lay the whitened and scattered bones of a horse, the skull leering at them. All about them were ramparts of granite. A cleft showed across the park, darkly shadowed in the swiftly coming twilight. Murky red of sunset glowed through an opening between two peaks above it, blunted crests of eroded hills.

"Here's whar we camp," said Jordan to himself. "Better git out a ways in case those devils come. Wonder they didn't bushwhack us in the cañon. Reckon their hawsses are tuckered out, too. Must be Prospect Park, 'cordin' to the map. A hell of a prospect!"

He stopped his willing horse a mile out into the open and held up his hand. The wagons crept into formation, a circle, tongues under beds, the wretched brutes inside with swollen tongues and lolling heads.

"Better not start no fire," he ordered. "They might sight it. Though Lord knows they can't miss us if they're comin'," he added to himself. "Cold vittles, folks." To-morrer we'll strike the Big Horn. Be out of part of our troubles."

The woman's husband grunted. "Who in hell wants to eat?" he said. "Grub's like so much bricks."

"How's Edwards?" asked the leader.

"He's still alive. Luckier'n the rest of us. He don't know he's thirsty, anyway. Never will, I reckon. Listen to thet damned kiyote, will yer? Wish I could shoot it. I'd drink its blood."

"A shot would just about settle us. You couldn't git in range, anyhow."

"I'd jest as soon they'd come an' git it over with. Thet woman in the next wagon to us is nigh demented. We oughter have stopped to the fort. They was water thar, anyways.

"An' us nigh out of grub."

"I ain't blamin' you, Jordan. Not fer thet. We voted on it."

The smoldering sunset died. It grew cooler, cold. They shivered as they lay in the wagons, covered with blankets. The men on guard squatted at their posts, disconsolate.

"They say they don't never attack after dark," said one of them to the man in the nearest wagon, sucking a dry pipe.

"They raided the hawsses at the fort one time in the middle of the night. I'll take your guard ef you want. I can't sleep."

"Who kin?"

The stars came out, serene and mocking. The coyote chorus swelled. One by one the children ceased crying, and the mothers tried to rest, lying awake with quivering nerves.

At midnight a moon rose, silvering the tilts, picking out the lettering, the legend so bravely emblazoned: "On To Oregon."

On top of the cañon cliffs there squatted on their haunches in a ring thirty young Sioux warriors, their blankets drawn about them over breechcloths and ruddled streaks of war paint. They looked like foul birds alighted from flight. Their wretched ponies stood in a huddle. The bones of men and mounts showed through their skin. They were close to exhaustion. The horses were being rested for the next day's trail that was to see a full revenge,

a return to the village with fluttering scalps of men and the tresses of women fiendishly tortured, hideously mutilated.

They were tired but in better shape than the whites that they had caught up with—for they had seen the dust smoke of the train before the light faded. The tiny fire in the midst of them was well masked. Also, they had visited a hidden pool two miles back, enough to give them a few swallows, not the ponies. They knew where the caravan had passed another unsuspected source of water in a cave.

In the morning they would let the ponies drink there as well as themselves to give them strength for the mad dash upon the wagons which would happen about noon. They would ride around the park and meet them as they entered the defile leading to the Big Horn.

They chewed dried scraps of buffalo, mostly gristle. The blood lust was on them and they stoically derided hunger, able to sustain strength on little. There would be food in the wagons, oxen and horseflesh.

They squatted in silence, brooding Presently they would sleep. There was no danger for them, children of the wild, avengers. To-morrow would come the pleading of women, the bleats of children dashed against the wagon wheels, the prone bodies of bloody men. The thought of it was as hot marrow in the mouth.

A star fell, swift and bright across the sky. It was not a god omen. They began to discuss it in low tones.

"We will appease the spirit to-morrow," said one of them. But it disturbed them. They were intensely superstitious and the rushing glare disquieted them.

A hundred yards away something moved in the dark. As the bucks gazed upward it came closer, halted prone to the earth in a little depression and glided on against the slight wind. Something trailed with it, a long straight thing that slid noiselessly over the ground like a stiff tail.

The thing halted fifty feet from the squatting group, fairly hidden now by a clump of cactus. A gleaming object, like a weird mask, showed terrifyingly. The moon had not yet risen.

A sound, half groan, half grunt, the sound a buffalo makes when it shifts its bed in the night, brought the bucks' attention from the sky, instantly riveted towards the cactus clump that they could just make out.

Over it there shone, limmed with wavering flame, the skull of a buffalo. It rose slowly in the air and moved toward them. A thing of frightful portent, of huge significance, the symbol of that which sustains the Indian's life, emblem of his secret rituals.

It moved up and down and it came on, suspended and glowing in mid-air.

Waves of terror rippled up and down their spines. Here was ghost magic. The falling star and now the skull, symbol of the herds that had fled before the drought. They doubled their bodies, their arms extended, until their heads were close to their knees. When they raised them the thing was gône, with the low bellowing grunt that they had heard before, dying on the air.

None spoke. An awed silence prevailed. They sat crouching like statues until the moon sailed up at last. It revealed the cactus, but none dared go near it. If they had they would have found nothing.

Half a mile away, Jim Bridger found his patient pony. He had buried the phosphorus-smeared skull in a crevice and flung the long pole, which he had cut, among some withered bushes.

"I reckon I've upset 'em a bit," he said to himself. "Injuns don't 'pear to have narves on the outside but they sure got 'em in. Lucky that stars fell Now they won't be so sure they're goin' to win. Half the battle is to git 'em worked up thet a way. Come on, hawss,

we got to jine up with thet train by dawn. Those bucks'll trail around an' be waitin' in the gorge to rush 'em jest before they git to water."

CHAPTER III.

At dawn, the men of the caravan, anxiously expectant of wild yells and charging figures coming toward them in the swiftly graying light, were astounded to find a man in the midst of the wagon circle, undoubtedly a white man by his dress and beard. The guards knew that they had been vigilant, almost every man had been awake for the longer portion of the night, none had heard or seen anything and they gazed at the grinning face as if it was owned by an apparition.

Bridger spoke to Jordan, recognizing him as the leader, while the gray light turned to rose, edged the cliffs and slowly widened.

"I had to git in to you without the Injuns knowin' it," he said. "An' I wasn't minded to git a bullet put into me by one of you takin' me for a brave or a wolf. Consequently I jest slipped in, Injun fashion. Thar ain't anything an Injun kin do thet a white man can't do better ef he sets his mind to it. Take moonlight an' gullies, an' the hull band of 'em could sneak up on you, same's I did. You oughter have dawgs—same's they do in the villages. The tribes use 'em for eatin' but thar prime use is to give warnin'.

"Those Sioux were five mile back of you when you went into camp last night. They'd come far an' fast an' they were none too fresh. So they rested up overnight. It's odds thet they'll tackle you from the ravine yonder. They know you got to go down it to git to water. Your stock'll smell water soon's they strike the breeze, comin' out of the draw. Those bucks figger to ketch you all worked up over thet water an' wide open to a charge. Thar's around thirty of 'em. Got a dozen guns among 'em, mebbe, and bows an' arrers for the rest."

"Who are you?" asked Jordan. He was impressed by the way this stranger had made his way into camp, but none too agreeably so. It showed how open they were to night attacks if any had been made and it reflected upon his leadership.

"My name's Jim Bridger. I'd recommend you git to eatin'. Act jest as you usually would. Last time you was attacked you was in camp formation, I understand. This time I reckon they aim to tackle you in the open, on the march.

"Of course we've all heerd of you," said Jordan, as the women began to join the group. "Figgered we'd likely git to see you—mebbe at the fort. We've got a man along with us made the trip 'specially to see you. They told us at the fort you was somewhere's up in the Big Horn after beaver. We figgered we might find out from some of the Injuns whar you was located—at least Edwards did. Then come the fight, an' Edwards gits hurt pritty bad. I 'low he'll die—ef he ain't dead now."

"Edwards?" Bridger looked puzzled. "The name don't mean anything to me. Better let me have a look at him."

But his inspection of the sick man only brought a shake of the head from Bridger.

"I don't recognize him none," he said. "He looks bad, yit I don't see why he should die of thet wound. Grooved his skull but it don't seem to have fractured it bad. Hard to tell. He's burnin' up with fever. Ef my woman was along she'd fix him up with yarbs. I might bring her in after we git through this trouble. She ain't so far off. I'm cur'ous to know what brung him clar out here to see me."

"Have you got your wife along with

ye in this Injun country?" asked Jordan.

Bridger laughed. "Both of 'em. They ain't white, though. They're squaws."

Suspicion registered instantly on Jordan's face, reflected on the rest of the men who had come to the wagon where Edwards lay. Bridger's eyes flashed for a moment and then he laughed.

"Figgerin' whether I ain't in league with the bucks sence I know so much about them an' thar ways. Figger a squaw man's all the same as renegade, I suppose. You've got quite a bit to l'arn about the West, strangers, an' about what the first to come out here has to tackle. You folks are jest travelin' along a trail thet others have made for you. It ain't none too safe now. How safe do you reckon it was ten year ago, or twenty?

"I'm apologizin' to no one for the way I live. I'm rough an' ready. I'm Jim Bridger, plainsman. I don't shine in a parlor. I live in the open, out in the wilds.

"I've got good enough stock in me, when it comes to thet, an' I've helped through many an emigrant, got 'em out of trouble an' won the thanks of wimmen an' of children thet are growin' up, thar in Oregon, to make this nation of ours big an' strong. Scout an' guide, I am, an' expect to so live an' die. Trapper too, makin' money at it, askin' nothin' for what I kin do to help the folks on the trails.

"I ain't done a dern thing in my life I'm ashamed of an' I don't aim to. When I was thirteen I was runnin' a flatboat ferry at St. Louis. I left thar when I was over eighteen as one of General Bill Ashley's trappers. We lost ten thousand dollars' wuth of goods when one of the boats upset. The Injuns stole most of our hawsses, an' we stayed in around the mouth of the Yellerstone thet winter, trappin' an' huntin'. They went out thet spring, but I didn't.

"This was God's country to me—is yit. It's goin' to be a white man's country some day. Thar's goin' to be a railroad snakin' through here afore I'm dead, if I'm lucky. Mebbe I'll be able to help build it.

"Why? Because I know all the trails an' the passes. I know the rivers an' the limit of their storm waters, their quicksands an' their shiftin' courses. Cap'n Frémont, down to the fort, told me three days ago the government had sent him out to start a topographical record of the West, from the Missouri to the Pacific.

"He's got Kit Carson with him but he took some of my advice. He spoke of the railroad. He's got the vision to see it an' make others see it with him. Ef I kin help to build communication between the 'Big Muddy' an' the Western coast I reckon I ain't lived exactly in vain, ef I do have two squaws to look out for me. I don't expect any monuments or to have my name on the maps but I'm doin' my bit.

"Thar's all sorts of men, trail breakers an' trail makers, an' them thet travels the trails. You're home-builders, you men. I ain't. Since 1822 I've lived out here among Injuns. I could count the white men I'd seen on the fingers of my two hands. Thar wasn't no white women then. Jim Bridger kin git lonesome, same as the next man. I reckon most of you would git lonesome out here quicker'n me.

"I'm follerin' the custom of the country. So far as I'm concerned, I ain't had no personal quarrel with the Injuns —so far. They treated me squar' when I first started to live among 'em an' they saw I was willin' to mind my own business. Thar was plenty of game. What I took they never missed. I traded with 'em fair an' squar' for the skins they got.

"So long's I stood by myself I don't believe thar's a Dakota would go to harm me, even if they was crazy young

bucks on a war trail. I've done 'em good turns, an' they've done 'em to me. We've been friends. I've seen the best side of 'em, mebbe, before they begin to git riled at the amount of white men passin' through their territory. It is their territory. Belongs to 'em by right of original ownership, the hull country, to begin with. The government give it to 'em a second time. White men would git sore.

"Whites come first with me but I've got to live with the Injuns an' I know their ways. I know somethin' of their religion. They've got a spiritual side to 'em as well as a physical. They pray ev'ry mornin', alone, at sunrise. They talk to the Great Spirit ten times a day. They love kids, they look after the orphans an' the old people, they are proud of a woman's chastity though, and, with their customs, a man may have several wives.

"There are women enough among 'em for thet, an' they don't believe in old maids. They won't attack even an enemy who's a visitor in their camp. They will risk their life for a friend. Among themselves they kill all murderers. they used to kill liars and now they punish 'em by turnin' 'em out of the village.

"It may seem derned strange to you to have me talkin' like this when you're expectin' to be attacked any minute. The old men are my friends, the older chiefs, wouldn't do this thing, though their hearts are sore because they think they are goin' to lose their lands. We whites have got plenty of young men who can't be handled—hot bloods an' toughs who fight an' cuss an' kill. Thar ain't a fam'ly thet know thet by their own experience.

"I've rid night an' day to help you an' I kin guess what you're thinkin': Thet Jim Bridger, to keep in with the reds, so's he kin go on huntin' an' trappin', an' because he's got two red wimmin in his camp, is playin' traitor to his own people.

"I'm a white man but I've got a sense of justice. Also those squaws were given to me as a mark of friendship. Ef I'd refused 'em I'd have given insult thet my blood would most likely have had to wash out. I'm fond of 'em, an' they're good to me. I treat 'em fair an' squar'.

"Thar ain't no marriage ceremony among the Dakotas, but those gals come to my lodge an' they've sarved me true an' faithful accordin' to their lights. Thar's been no white woman in my life an' thar ain't like to be. But livin' with them ain't turned me agin' my own or changed the color of my skin any more'n it has the spirit inside of me.

"You may reckon me a wild man, livin' in the wilds among savages. Mebbe so. But thar's somethin' out here on the wide plains an' among the high mountains thet you don't git in town, or in a church—leastwise, I don't. God made the hull earth an' He made man in His own image but He didn't build the cities.

"I live accordin' to my lights an' thar ain't a man kin say Jim Bridger dealt wrong with him—red or white or black. These bucks thet are after you went on the warpath after you'd killed some of 'em. You figgered you did thet in defense of your women an' was justified. Mebbe you shot hasty. But I know thet they went out on the war trail agin' the council of their elders.

"I'm here to try an' stop them from murderin' you an' your women. You ain't the first train I've helped out one way or another. Every time I could do thet an' git out of a fight I did. Every time thar's a killin' it makes things worse for the next train to come along.

"Thar ain't been much trouble up to this spring. Some of the young bloods run off hawsses now an' then like our kids would rob an orchard. An' they like to paint up an' go whoopin' an' yellin', jest like any other hoodlums would to scare folks thet come trailin' through

the front door 'thout sayin' by yore leave. Ever figger it thet way?

"Emigrants git the story passed back. Thar's been some killed they know of, they hear yarns from the traders thet go into Independence an' they come with hammers cocked an' triggers liftin', lookin' for a row.

"You're all wore down—you an' the stock. You ain't fit to go through with the trip the way you stand. You've suffered with the drought an' the hoppers, but you ain't been hit as bad as the tribes. It's sure riled them. They figger it was done by Ictiniki, their Great Spirit, because he is mad with 'em. He's their Manitou, drove the demons away for 'em, give 'em fire an' tobacco an' the buffalo. He got sore at 'em once before, 'cordin' to their legends, an' left 'em but promised to come ag'in, some time.

"They're blamin' it all on the white man's comin'—especially the loss of the buffalo. A buffalo means more to them than jest meat. I played a trick on 'em last night, did hokum with a buffalo skull an' some phosphorus. If the raid don't come off this mornin' jest the way they've figgered it they'll think the skull was a warnin' to them, together with some fallin' stars thet happened along handy, an' they'll be primed an' capped for misfortune, so to speak.

"But thar'll be a fight—it's a cinch. An' I'm stayin' an' fightin' right with ye. It ain't goin' to make matters extry pleasant between me an' the tribe if they find it out, though they'll respect me as a warrior fightin' for my own tribe.

"I reckon they'll stay thar in the gorge until you git close enough for the stock to smell water an' then they'll figger you'll be off your guard a bit, bein' crazy for water yoreselves an' expectin' them to come up from behind. Thet's a fav'rite trick of theirs. I'd advise you to start out jest the same as usual but all re dy to swing into quick formation an' let 'em have it, hot an' heavy. I'll be right with ye.

"I've talked long enough. It's up to you. I'm tellin' you they've got their eyes skinned on this train right now. They're puttin' on their paint. If you figger I ain't on the squar', bein' a squaw man, I kin leave the outfit. But I've warned ye."

He saw that the women eyed him coldly, that some of them whispered to their husbands. It hurt Jim Bridger, who had taken his helpmates according to the custom of the country, to see the white women that never came within the close circle of his life—for whom he was risking everything—look at him scornfully as if they despised him.

To him, the two affectionate, obedient girls who kept his lodge in order, who helped him with his peltry and who looked at him with the mild eyes of those who believe they have been favored above other women, were the natural outcome of his environment. He had mentioned them without thought. Even now his sense of humor overcome his resentment.

"I reckon King Solomon would be read out of the churches an' crossed out of their Bibles if he happened to be livin' to-day," he mused as the women turned away and began to prepare the best meals they could under the circumstances. "First time I mentioned it," he told himself. "Beats all hell how stiff some wimmen are."

"Ef them Injuns sh'ud see you leavin' the train now," said Jordan, "They'd be li'ble to run you down, squaw man or no squaw man. You ain't got no hawss."

"My pony's hid out. I had to come into camp on my belly. An' the hawss was played out. But don't you let thet worry you none. I kin take keer of my scelp."

"I reckon you're squar'," said Jordan. "Man who lives in Rome has got

to live like a Roman. I ain't holdin' the squaws agin' ye."

"Thanks," Bridger answered, a sardonic gleam in his eyes. "I've got my virtues an' I reckon you've got your pet vices. I'll say this for my squaws: thar ain't no vice in them. Ever hear of Kit Carson, any of you?"

"Who ain't?"

"He's with Frémont now. I saw him tother day. You reckon he's a safe an' sound man to have around, do ye?"

Kit Carson was a hero whose reputation resounded from the Rockies to the Missouri, without blemish—fearless fighter, matchless shot and guide. His word was unchallenged.

"No question about thet," said Jordan.

"Feel fine ef he was with ye right now—trust him ter the limit? I reckon so. Well, it may give you all a terrible shock to know it, but Kit Carson has a wife he thinks the world of in Taos. If any one ever 'sinuated to Kit that she wasn't the best woman in the world, I reckon Kit would do his damnedest, then an' thar, to persuade him different, an' Kit ain't easy riled. Well," he went on slowly, enjoying the situation, "Kit's wife is a full-blooded Injun lady." He flung back his bearded head and laughed, all rancor out of him. Jordan flushed, with some of the others, who looked to their leader.

"We've been harried an' upsot," said Jordan. "We've been crawlin' in the Valley of the Shadder. I ain't much of a prayin' man, Jim Bridger, but I sure prayed last night. I prayed for the wimmen to be kept from those fiends, and prayed for the kids, who've quit whimperin' for water because their little mouths is glued up. An' ef I didn't have sense enough to recognize you as the answer to thet prayer, it's because most men is apt to be blind to the ways the Lord chooses.

"I misdoubted ye. I was prejudiced, I ain't ashamed to admit it. You've acted fine. My name's Jordan. I'm supposed to be cap'n of this train an' I've messed the job. I wish we'd met you sooner but I'm derned glad you've come in when you did. I'd about give up—it's a tight place yit—an' if you pull us through I reckon we'll try to show we're grateful. I'm talkin' for all of us!"

"You bet," the rest assented, crowding about Bridger to shake his hand.

"You sure speak like a man," he said to Jordan. "We got different viewp'ints, thet's all, concarnin' wimmin. You've had your pick. I ain't. Me, I'm a wilderness man an' not a fam'ly raiser an' a housebuilder. I wouldn't ask a white woman to share what I do in the way of livin'. An' I got a call to live thet way. She couldn't stand it. I'll have to take out my feelin' on other peoples' kids.

"Now then, git to eatin' an' make a start, same as usual, on'y put all your hawss-drawn wagons to the front. They handle quicker.

"They'll rush ye. They'll ride rings round you. The main thing they're after is to stampede ye, scare the wits out of ye, though they should know by this time you ain't thet kind. But they know you're nigh played out.

"You won't see much to aim at but the back of a heel an' the glimpse of a head an' arm under a hawss's neck. Shoot for the hawss. Hold well ahead an' plug the hawss. Thet advice ain't because I'm wantin' to save bucks who are out to kill. Ef they git on to the fact I'm in here with you I'll have to pull up stakes an' git out of the country quick. But ef I git a bead on any of 'em I'm going to down him.

"It's this: The hawss is a better target to begin with. A Dakota afoot outside of the village is a joke, an' a dern pore one, the way he looks at it. They'd ruther own hawsses'n anythin' else. Most of their raids is to git more ponies. Like so much money, for one thing.

They sure hate to walk. To come back from a war trail minus a pony is to be made plumb ridic'lous—also to have sore feet. They ain't good at walkin'. You bring down their ponies, an' it hurts 'em more'n if you'd hit them."

The fires were lighted, the train took up its usual order under directions from Bridger, though Jordan was still in command and the plainsman's final conference with the captain of the caravan was confidential.

There was a slight slant to the gently rolling contour of the upland park, a gradual descent toward the cañon, whose gorge still showed black with shadow, though above and about it the hills showed golden and bronze, in vivid contrast to the silvery, dust-laden sage that alone had managed to survive the drought and, to some extent, the locusts. Off these bitter twigs the miserable stock of the emigrants had sought sustenance.

Slowly the caravan crawled on in its inevitable cloud of dust. In the high altitude, to which the members of the train had not yet become accustomed, the park had seemed but two or three miles across. It was nearer ten, Bridger told them. Once over, they were but two miles from the river where some feed might be hoped for and the water would seem nectar.

It was just the place for Indian strategy to select for a sudden strike on people liable to be heedless at the prospect of water and on stock that would stampede, if they had had life enough for such an effort. At that the oxen would have to be handled carefully.

The wagons with the horses were placed in front, being handled more readily. That was the only change in the regular order of march. The youths of the train, girls and boys both, walked with the goads beside the plodding sters that already seemed to have received some hint of water ahead. They hauled with a glimmering of spirit and the wheels rolled behind them protestingly for lack of axle grease, or poor substitutes.

They were two miles away, and there was no sign of hostiles. One mile. and the desolate, smitten place seemed peaceful though there was no sign of the game that should have been there, grouse and rabbits or antelopes curiously gazing at the caravan. But that was the drought. Overhead, buzzards were wheeling. They had been the aërial escort of the train for a week, patient, persistent birds of evil omen.

In the wagon the man called Edwards lay in a stupor, his pulse barely perceptible, his eyes varnished with fever, his wasted body in comparative rest on the leveler ground; staring upward at the tilt. Still alive, his reserves were burning like a candle and, not yet exhausted. His resistance showed a phenomenal vitality. If he lasted to the river, Bridger believed he might possibly be saved.

CHAPTER IV.

Suddenly, as if a gate had been lifted in hell to let out a pack of yelling fiends, the bucks came racing out of the cañon. They came on, shaking their weapons, with spurts of dust flying up from the galloping hoofs and trailing far behind, naked save for breechcloths and moccasins, feathers and bits of colored cloth in their hair, paint on their faces and bodies in stripes and smears of bloody scarlet. Feathers were in their ponies' tails, that were plaited close and doubled. They were devils hot from the pit, hideous and alarming to the stoutest nerves.

Jordan's command rang out. Fifteen horsemen immediately formed a line ahead to meet the charge. The two lead wagons turned right and left at right angles to the trail, the drivers leaping out, backing them gate to gate and leading the horses inside the inclosure that

was rapidly formed in a hollow quadrangle.

All who could handle rifles, the youths, the women and the elder girls, lay beneath the wagon bodies, resting their guns on the spokes, waiting for the circling attack that Bridger prophesied.

The horsemen fired a volley, and the Sioux, checking their ponies, swept to one side at full speed once more, hoping to draw the defenders off. They swung a wide loop about the caravan, the crook of the left elbow dropped into a plaited loop of the mane so that they could fire bullet and arrow beneath the neck of the leaping, bucking, racing ponies. spotted and buckskin, freshly watered that morning and given a feed of herbage by the river.

They made almost impossible targets as they fled past, throwing up clouds of dust, the brazen throats screaming out their ululating war whoops, with glimpses of satanic faces, of shaken bows and guns as they would pull themselves to the ponies' backs when they got out of range, to disappear again as they came weaving in.

The wagons of the trains were a steady target, once they had got the range. The canvas tilts began to bristle with arrows, to show bullet holes, while beds, wheel rims, hubs and spokes were struck, splintered. Now and then a barbed shaft flickered through or a bullet buzzed like a bee.

The defenders fired until their guns grew hot and the space beneath the wagon beds was foul with reeking powder gas. An Indian fell with his horse and ran to the next, leaping onto its back in agile vault, helped by the other rider. The pony plunged, halting. A rifle cracked and, this time, the warrior went down to stay. Bridger had been quick to seize the chance at a good target.

Jordan was struck lightly by an arrow in the arm and pulled it out. It had glanced from a spoke and was not barb-deep. A boy, exposing himself, was hit in the shoulder. The yelling ring closed in. Then two more horses went down, and the bucks went streaming off in a line, straight back for the cañon.

Bridger looked serious.

"Ef they make up their mind to stay thar," he said, "they kin either thirst us out or we got to make the top of the cliffs an' try to herd *them* out. Thet would split up our forces. But I reckon they'll come back. They ain't licked yit. Not enough casualties. Here they are. Some of 'em stayed behind. I wonder what for?"

The others could see no difference in the numbers at that distance, but Bridger said that four had remained in the cañon and added that he didn't like the looks of it.

"Up to some new deviltry," he muttered. The main body had halted, just out of range, as a few shots testified. Presently four riders showed, each carrying a load of some kind.

"It's driftwood," said Bridger. "Lots of it in thet cañon. They're goin' to fire burnin' arrers. Them tilts are dry as tinder, an' thar ain't any water. Better git them kids out. Bring 'em down an' roll 'em up in kiverlets. Git thet sick feller. Those wagons'll blaze like matchwood once they git goin'. Thar goes the smoke of their fire. They'll tie greasewood to the ends of their arrers, dern 'em! Boys, this is a nasty corner. You got to shoot your damnedest."

He shook his head, muttering in his beard. The rest, passing the word along the wagons, saw it received in hopeless despair by the mothers who rushed for their children, frantic with the hideous fate that now seemed to be unavoidable. There was a hot wind blowing, enough to fan into streaming, leaping flame the first hint of fire. There was no time to take down the canvas tilts, barely time to think of it.

The bucks were gathering about the

stream of smoke that went up from the burning driftwood. Soon they would come like the wind, from all directions, discharging their blazing shafts. The wagon boxes and their contents would all go up in scorching flames that would send the emigrants out into the open to the mercy of those who knew no mercy and who would gloat over acts that even men would not speak of to each other.

There would be a stubborn, dwindling resistance and then the upland park would be left untenanted once more. There would be charred remnants of wood, parts of iron, the burned bones and half-burned bodies of men stripped naked, scalped, fearfully mutilated before the eyes of women kept alive. After the women had seen their children brained against the wagon tires or tomahawked and tossed into the reddest embers they would be borne off to the village for further entertainment, unless they, too, were killed in some savage whim.

And the buzzards would come down to earth at last.

It was inevitable. The families gathered together in little reunions, wives and mothers, girls unwed, youths who strove to put a brave front upon frightful disaster, and men prepared to fight as only men can in the face of death and of their loved ones, sickeningly certain of the outcome but desperately resolved to play the man.

There were women, clinging to life while there was yet a chance, yet praying that there would be time to send a bullet into their brains before they were seized, and forced to live until the last moment to protect their children.

A throbbing yell, like the howling of wolves, came to them. It held a devilish forenote of triumph. Their blood ran cold, for all their desperate courage, and their scalps tingled as they gripped their weapons convulsively. A few seconds and they would be fighting for life and more than life, with flames raging, stock madly plunging, and the heat turning the place into an inferno.

"I'm goin' to try out something," Bridger said. "Ef it don't work, it won't make no difference, but we kin try it."

They saw Bridger, his buckskin coat and flannel shirt removed, stripped to the waist, his lean body showing ribbed but well muscled and with the marks of several scars, made by claw and knife and bullet. The belt that held up his corduroys was tightly fastened about his hips and the ends of the pantaloons were tucked into his moccasins and held there by thongs of soft leather. A hunting knife swung from his belt in a scabbard that was crusted with beadwork. He had left his rifle with the rest of his clothes.

Jordan looked at him with eyes that had lost their luster and that showed only the somber flame of the man who believes himself doomed.

"What's the idee?" he asked the plainsman. "You think thar's any chance in goin' out after 'em?"

"Jest what they're lookin' for to git you spread out. They'd keep away all they wanted on them ponies agin' your hawsses. No, somethin's got to be tried out an' tried quick, or we're goners. I'm goin' out alone. They know me. Mebbe they'll powwow. They've lost one man. I may be able to chaff 'em into lettin' me fight a duel to finish up this proposition. But you'll have to loan me a hawss an' it's got to be the best you got. I reckon thet roan would be the one."

The man who had the horse refused to consider it.

"You say you know 'em," he said. "Looks to me like you was tryin' for a get-away."

"I reckon I'll have a chat with you about thet later," said Bridger. "You damned, shortsighted fool, I'm goin'

out thar for your wife an' kids, not for you or for me. To hell with you an' your hull outfit, so fur's the men's concerned! I'll borrer a pony from the bucks. They're sports."

He walked swiftly to the two front wagons, ducked beneath them and strode out on the open ground. The other, with an oath, reached for his rifle but Jordan caught his arm.

"Either he's a renegade or he's a man too brave fer us to understand," said the leader. "It's ten to one they'll shoot him down before they recognize him."

But the Sioux, circled about the fire, some still dismounted, preparing their arrows, all suddenly wheeled and gazed in astonishment at the lone figure advancing so boldly toward them.

CHAPTER V.

Jim Bridger was mad clean through. His friendly relations with the Indians, which he believed might be maintained by all whites if they would deal straight with the tribes and believe that the tribes would respect a promise made with due solemnity, were broken from the moment he was recognized. He would have to engage in a bloody duel, at the best, with a warrior skilled in the use of the weapons which would be selected, according to Dakota code, by the challenged one.

And he was doing all this for men who seemed to consider he had lost caste because of his Indian wives and who suspected the very motives that made him take a last desperate chance to save them from a certain and dreadful death.

"If it wasn't for the wimmen an' kids," he muttered as he advanced over the dry turf as composedly as if he had been invited to an Indian love feast, "derned ef I wouldn't light out an' leave 'em. Ef I could," he added with a half grin. "I'm in deep myself."

The only real chance he thought he had of accomplishing his purpose was based upon knowledge, gained at the fort before he left, that Pine-in-the-Cloud, whose sister he had taken to his tent, was leader of the hot-heads, a friend and lodge brother of his. He knew that he had not graduated far into the Indian form of Masonry but he believed that he was high enough in the order to command a pacific hearing.

Next, Ears-of-a-Fox was also present, somewhat of a rival with Pine-in-the-Cloud for deeds of arms but a greater rival once of Bridger's for Early Moon, the sister of Pine-in-the-Cloud, now the white man's squaw.

Ears-of-a-Fox had been absent when Early Moon was given to Bridger in sign of friendship between him and the tribe. He had shown no sign since of dissatisfaction lest he belittle his own pride, and it was from Early Moon that Bridger learned of the incipent courtship of Ears-of-a-Fox. But he knew that Ears-of-a-Fox would leap at a chance to kill the white man who had acquired Early Moon, most desirable of maidens. If he brought back the scalp of the plainsman, won in such honorable warfare as a duel, his fame would be great.

Moreover, Bridger was well aware of his own prestige. He was known as a warrior and a marksman whose gun rarely missed. He was a fighter worthy of respect. He knew that to the bucks, heated though they were with the chase, the fight and the prospect of victory, the chance of a first-class duel between two such opponents would attract them, once he could get to talking with them.

He watched them carefully, wary of the first move to break the spell of astonishment that his fearless advance put upon them. They might think him a madman and as such they would respect him as one whose spirit no longer lived in his body, whom it would be dishonor to kill. Then he saw that they recognized him. He flung up his arm,

first in the sign of a peace parley and then in the swift motion of an initiate of a primary lodge to which they all belonged.

They had all gone through the ceremony of *eneepee* together, the purification by vapor in the sweat huts. They had joined in the ceremonial of the pipe, the *chan-du-hupah-yu-za-pee*. These things did not prevent them from quarreling with each other, and the duel would stamp Bridger as a tribal enemy, but they did, or should, win him a hearing.

All had mounted and made a three-quarter circle round the little fire, a space into which he walked and stood there silent. The first test was passed successfully. Bridger breathed a little more easily. He did not know fear for himself as long dwelling in the wilds had inhibited that emotion. But he was afraid for the women and children he had left behind.

His anger still held against the men. He was not at all sure whether he would have done this thing if there had been only men. He had everything at stake. If he survived the duel he would live in constant jeopardy where before he had dwelled in peace and profit.

The next test was that of silence. He who spoke first would give away a certain moral advantage. He knew the overwhelming curiosity that seethed back of those hawklike faces, blazoned with paint. He saw the sneer on the features of Ears-of-a-Fox and he made his own impassive.

Pine-in-the-Cloud spoke first.

"Why does my brother come from the camp of those who have killed many of us so that the women beat their breasts and the lodges are hung in mourning?"

"I am in your lodge," Bridger replied, using the ritual of their order. He had scored. He had claimed the immunity given even an enemy who comes to lodge or village without show of hostility. He had left his rifle behind him. He was unmounted. Technically, under the rule of Sioux laws, this meeting formed a lodge. Swiftly he spoke the mystic password and then answered Pine-in-the-Cloud.

"Of the first killing of your young men I know only what was told me at your village," he said. "I know that the elders did not wish you to go upon this trail. Therefore they must have seen that there were two sides to that quarrel. Moreover, they are wise. They have given safe passage to a warrior of my race who comes with many other warriors to see this land and to return to the Great Father. They have sent with him the nephew of Bull Tail and they have passed their word.

"Why? Because they know that these men"—he waved his hand toward the wagons—"seek only to pass through your land, on to the great salt waters. Because they know that the soldiers of the Great Father are many, with many big guns. The warrior who came to the fort has spoken of these things, and the elders desire peace. For each warrior of your tribe there are a hundred white warriors and the people of my race are not to be counted any more than you may count the leaves of a forest.

"The people of my race do not make war upon women. Even if they fought you and conquered they would not harm your women and children, nor would they put to death those who surrendered. You know that to be true. Therefore, when I knew that you were on the war trail against these of my people and that there were women and children with them, I came to aid them, for they are of my blood and it sings in my veins and calls me to defend them.

"Last night I saw a vision. Lo! A star fell across the heavens. And a ghost buffalo came and stood over me as I slept. Its skull shone and its eyes were as fire. It spoke and told me many things. There has been friendship between us. That, perhaps is broken,

though I do only what a warrior should. I have always spoken to you with a straight tongue.

"One star fell. There shall be two men to die this day and then, if my people pass on to the salt waters in peace, the buffalo shall return, the grass become green again, the horses will be fat, and there will be plenty in the land."

"One has died to-day," said Ears-of-a-Fox. "No doubt one more, at least shall die. You speak of blood. The blood of one of our braves has been shed. It calls from the ground, even as the blood of the rest who have been killed by these men, who shall surely die if I live. As for their women——"

"If you live, Ears-of-a-Fox. It came into my mind that perhaps you were afraid of me or, if you were not, that you might put this matter to a fight between us. If you live, then surely I shall be dead. The matter will be beyond my hand. But if I live, it will show that I have spoken truly, that perhaps it is not the coming of the white men, who do not seek to stay in your land, that has sent the drought and the grasshoppers and driven away the buffalo.

"It may be that what the ghost buffalo said to me after the stars fell is true and that Ictiniki is displeased with his children—that the blood that has been spilled will be accepted as an atonement. These men seek no quarrel with you, save as it is forced upon them. Ictiniki is just.

"I have heard it said that the young men have forgotten their solitary worship, that they have not attended the lodges and have forgoten their purifications. It seems to me that I have heard these things said."

He knew that he spoke the truth and that the medicine men were preparing charges against the young men to be brought at the autumn grand medicine dance when they would meet for initiation into higher mysteries. He saw the swift glance between them in appreciation if not approval of his argument. And then Ears-of-a-Fox took up the challenge.

"If I am afraid of you, then let me die. It seems you have made favor with the medicine men and the elders in more than one thing. Your scalp is worth more to me than all those of the men of your blood who are in that camp and already beneath our knives. Ictiniki loves not a boaster. Let us see if it was your star that fell, or mine."

Combats between chosen champions were not unusual. The braves were more impressed by the talk of the vision of the night than the rest of the plainsman's harangue. Ears-of-a-Fox was an arrogant brave, who was none too well liked, but it would be a good fight. Even if he lost and the caravan fell into their hands they knew well enough that the massacre might be held against them at the grand medicine dance. And, if the white warrior had been given safe conduct, he must have convinced the chiefs that it was a wise thing to do. Bridger, they knew, had not lied to them in this. Ears-of-a-Fox had claimed his privilege. It would be a good fight.

"You have a knife," said Ears-of-a-Fox. "Pine-in-the-Cloud will perhaps lend his brother a lance."

Bridger was no lanceman. It was peculiarly a Dakota weapon, falling into disuse with the possibility of acquiring guns. Ears-of-a-Fox was noted for his skill with it. He had killed a bear with only that weapon.

Bridger had been forced to take his chances and he did not show that he had hoped, since he had come on foot, that the combat might be confined to knife play. Now he wished that he had his own pony, swift to respond to his voice and the touch of his knees, since he must use both hands for weapons.

"It is well," he said. "I have no pony

but I can fight on foot and you can ride."

"You may take my pony," said Pine-in-a-Cloud. It cost him an effort. But it must not be said that the duel was unequal. The white man had been kind to Early Moon and he had made Pine-in-the-Cloud many gifts. Savage though he was, he had his code of chivalry.

The horse was a spotted pony, colored in white and brown and black with a pink muzzle and one eye blue. It was lean almost to emaciation but it showed fire. At the smell of the white man it plunged and started back until its breath was broken by a twister of rawhide. There was no saddle or stirrups, only a blanket with a single surcingle.

Ears-of-a-Fox rode aside, examined his cinch, remounted and cynically watched the white man vault to the back of the pony, one hand twisted in its mane. Bridgers' grip was like steel. He clamped the plunging mustang with thighs and knees and calves, talking to it in Dakota, soothing it before it exhausted itself. He knew horses, and the pony recognized him for its master and submitted with some last protesting snorts and tosses of its head.

The bucks took up position in an ellipse, forming the tournament ground. The sun was high and gave little advantage to either man. They were led forty yards apart, warriors holding the lances to be given simultaneously into their hands. As Pine-in-the-Cloud handed his weapon to Bridger he said softly:

"Be good to my pony, brother. He also is a fighter."

Bridger's pulse quickened. Here was advice rather than request. The pony was a stallion. So was that of Ears-of-a-Fox. This might be a double duel.

He watched his opponent closely. Ears-of-a-Fox suddenly flung up his left hand, in which gleamed his knife and snatched at the lance that was given him, thrusting his heels into his mount's flank with a yell. He came hurtling forward instantly at top speed, and Bridger, lance tucked close above to his hip, raced toward him. His knife swung from the same wrist by a loop. As they closed in he shifted the spear to his left hand. Most Indians are partially ambidextrous.

Bridger was normally left-handed but he had trained the right to equal skill. With quick knee pressure he sent his horse to one side at the last moment, pitting the lance against the knife of Ears-of-a-Fox, unprepared for the maneuver but resourceful. He parried the plainsman's thrust with his knife blade, seeking to sever the lance end and succeeding in notching it. Then, as he swept on he tried for a double coup, slashing at the spotted stallion that was at once the mount of his foe and the property of Pine-in-the-Cloud his rival.

Bridger swung his lance with a swift turn of the wrist so that the butt struck the brave's wrist smartly but not enough to prevent a cut that grated on the shoulder of his pony. The spotted stallion squealed, reared and whirled, with Bridger leeched to its back. In two tremendous bounds the wounded horse, stung rather than badly hurt, though the bright blood streaked from the cut, snapped viciously at the leg of the man who had struck it. In the next leap, shifting its wrath to its own kind, it sank its teeth in the crest of the other pony that also reared, twisting its neck like a snake, striking with hoofs that clattered against hoofs in a fierce encounter.

Motionless as statues the bucks watched the fight with glowing eyes. From the wagons, they craned to see the combat, knowing the prize and penalty of its issue, contrite at having doubted their champion. For a moment the two riders were out of it. Then the pony of Ears-of-a-Fox, shrilling in pain and defeat, swerved.

Bridger rode in, left hand to right, his lance set fair for the heart of the brave who swung out and down from his seat, his left arm in the mane loop, thrusting from beneath the horse's neck as Bridger's lance met air.

The plainsman, almost off balance, guessed the blow that was coming, drummed with his heels at his stallion's flanks and felt the keen head of the lance—cold, then scalding, stinging hot across his back, just below the shoulder muscles. He felt the hot blood gush out and galloped on to wheel at the end of the field and meet Ears-of-a-Fox, riding at him like a whirlwind, his scarlet face convulsed with hate and satisfaction as he sounded his whoop.

His mount was not so keen for the encounter. Ears-of-a-Fox pricked him deep with his knife, and the pony leaped into the air, as Bridger sent the willing stallion fairly at him. The crash came as the brave's horse touched ground from his jump, caught him with crossed forelegs and sent him crashing down, Ears-of-a-Fox dismounted, his lance under him as he rolled, the shaft snapping beneath him before he jumped to his feet and, seeing Bridger between him and his struggling pony, whose foreleg was broken, folded his arms stoically and waited the stroke of the lance.

The bucks had not moved. They held their fretting ponies in iron restraint, their faces like masks, but a cheer came ringing from the wagons.

Bridger's battle hate and his ancient grudge against Ears-of-a-Fox melted into involuntary admiration of the warrior who stood defying death. He threw up the head of his lance when it was within a foot of the other's chest, rode past, curbed in the stallion, flung the spear aside, dismounted and strode toward the other. His knife was in his left hand, looped from the wrist.

"You still have this," he said, and tapped the blade. Then fell into a crouch. For an instant Ears-of-a-Fox stared at him unbelievingly. The white trapper was mad. But if he threw away the gift of the gods——

He stooped as Bridger struck, stooped and leaped like a sprint runner from his stance, slashing sidewise at the other's belly. The point of the blade struck the strong brass buckle of the plainsman's belt, the jar of the blow almost knocking all the wind out of him. But the wide leather saved him something as the knife slid over the metal and his belly muscles were hard as vulcanized rubber.

His forearm struck the brave's shoulder and the latter's charging rush would have carried him off his feet if he had not put his weight on his left foot and swung the right leg back, as the leg of a compass swings, pivoting like a fencer changing ground. He clutched at the Indian's scanty breechcloth, twisting in his fingers and jerking the other back with all his sinewy strength.

He caught and held Ears-of-a-Fox's knife wrist before the vicious, backward stab could reach him as the Sioux was yanked to a violent stop.

The brave squirmed and wriggled, his magnificent muscles writhing and bunching but the plainsman held him, putting all his strength, conscious of the red stream that ran down his back and must eventually drain the force out of him. Ears-of-a-Fox struck futilely with his left arm while his right was being doubled, remorselessly slid up between his shoulders.

It was Bridger's fight but it was not yet ended. Above the white and Indian partisans who watched the issue with blood tingling, with emotions repressed or displayed, according to their natures, the red gods leaned down to see the combat—and took a hand, not yet satisfied.

The breechcloth broke. Ears-of-a-Fox, naked, save for his moccasins, pitched forward, left knee bent, left

hand touching the earth and, from that convenient pose kicked like a lashing mule. His foot caught Bridger low in the groin and waves of agony and blackness rushed over the plainsman as the ground rocked.

He hung onto the wrist that held the knife though he seemed to be sinking down into a gulf where death lurked and grinned, strength wrenched from him. He forgot the dangling knife, that he could not have used in that moment of infernal torture, and he clinched blindly as Ears-of-a-Fox stood breast to breast with him once more.

Bridger groped in the mists that slowly began to clear, and thought began to function. The Sioux sought furiously to transfer his knife from the captured right hand, clamped by Bridger's rigid fingers, to his left, to drive home to the hilt the stroke that would finish the duel before strength came back to his opponent. He could feel the lax muscles swelling and, with a snarl, he snapped his teeth at the plainsman's throat, tearing the flesh—barely missing the big vein—and snapped and tore again.

Now the white man's blood surged boiling in fury. He was not yet functioning with his brain, but the tearing of his flesh brought him out of the paralysis of pain. Rage served him, sending charges of stimulus that gave him a dynamic impulse. The dangling knife, unthought of, the primitive man in him became dominant and he brought up a blow from the hip that landed fair on the other's jaw.

Ears-of-a-Fox went tottering back in his own fog of short-circuited nerve centers, clutching at the still dizzy Bridger and bringing him down to earth where the two rolled in a cloud of dust, over and over with thrashing limbs, like some eight-legged brute in dying convulsions.

Now one was underneath, hurling off the other. Then they rolled again with mighty heaves, with pants and grunts, a nucleus of hate in the floury dirt that rose about them like vapor, making it impossible for those who watched to judge the progress of the struggle. Arms showed like pistons, legs coiled and bent. Bridger fought in a series of concentrated outputs of all his strength, saving himself when he could, using his head now.

Ears-of-a-Fox fought like a wolf, striving again to cripple the other with his knees, since fist held wrist, left hand to right. Even then, as they wrestled, the blades bit into their flesh and drank blood as each desperately jabbed and was jerkily frustrated. Neither could inflict a mortal wound, but they were wet with sweat and gore.

With locked wrists far out to the right, the other pair came between them as they lay on the ground, their eyes glaring into each other's through the stinging alaki, their hot breath mingling.

Bridger was beneath but it did not bother him. It gave him a chance to let the solid earth support his back, to get a supply of oxygen into his lungs, to slightly relax and replenish forces for sudden rally and attack. His grip was well set. Ears-of-a-Fox might hold his wrist but he held the other's and now and then he had a hint of its weakening.

Ears-of-a-Fox knew that, too. Twice the white man's fingers had rolled the bones of his wrist grindingly together and twice he had felt numbness stealing up into his hand. Before long he would have to lose his knife. His continuous efforts had sapped his strength, his lungs seemed filled with smoke and dust and he could taste the salt of blood through the membranes of his mouth.

Only desperate effort might retrieve him. In the white man's eyes he saw consciousness of ultimate triumph, a steady flame that mocked him. He let Bridger turn his knife wrist slowly, bringing Bridger's own wrist to the top

where Ears-of-a-Fox struck at it as a stoat strikes a rabbit, rending and mangling. His teeth almost met through the ball of the plainsman's thumb and the blood spurted as the crushed fibers refused to function and the fingers seemed to crumble apart, closing again too late.

Ears-of-a-Fox had necessarily shifted his knife to his left hand in the wild wrestle and now the blade was free. It rose, clear of the settling dust but none could tell whose arm held it aloft so smeared were they with sweat and gore and dirt. But here was the end of the fight, surely.

There was a mighty heave from Bridger, and the brave was pitched to one side, his stroke spoiled, but Bridger could not recapture that lunging arm that held the steel. Ears-of-a-Fox gripped him with his knees and set his weight on the lower ribs, compressing lungs and diaphragm. In the effort Bridger's knife arm had flattened out with the Indian still grasping the wrist and now setting a knee on one bicep, seeking to do the same with the other.

He moved almost deliberately, so close to exhaustion was he, slowed down little by little, his breath coming in labored gusts, his face that of a master demon. As soon as he could pin down Bridger's right arm and prevent his parries he meant to cut Bridger's throat, slitting it deliberately while the victim lived through the pulsing seconds that ended time and ushered in eternity.

The brave knew how deer and sheep, how horses and man could still live while the gash widened and the red blood gurgled out. He had seen their eyes roll before they glazed, heard their last choking bleats and this thing he meant to do to Bridger, whose eyes still shone steadily defiant. For the moment Ears-of-a-Fox was at the end of effort, his muscles sluggish with blood that had taken up the poison from his lungs that must be transmuted to energy with fresh air.

Any second the white man might make one of his tremendous explosions of force and unseat him. He must not wait too long. But the strain had been terrific and he had been putting out all his energy in one continuous stream. The knife, free as it was, seemed like a great weight. His lungs would not function properly. Now, that was better. Ah!

Sudden light had leaped into the white man's eyes again, no longer defiant but blazing with purpose, with confidence, with supreme——

Ears-of-a-Fox struck downward with all the force he could muster. There was no longer an arm to fend the blow, and the white man was preparing for a rally. But his throat was defenceless, let him twist his head as he might. No lingering slitting now but a driving gash through the jugular vein. Then the kicking form, drumming a death roll on the earth, the plucked scalp, the whoop of triumph and the rush on the caravan.

Something pricked him, bit and tore with a sickening thrust through the skin and fat and muscle of his belly like flames. His knife came down, wavering, its edge ground against Bridger's collar bone, its point went deep into the ground at Ears-of-a-Fox like a deflating gas bag, sank slowly down, wilting. The broken head of his own lance, found by Bridger's groping hand as he set himself for a heave, chiseled its eager, thirsty way, scraped against his spine and saw light as it broke out through the flesh of his back.

Blood bathed Bridger as he thrust the dead man aside and rose, his pantaloons saturated with the red fluid, his naked torso foul with it, his face as scarlet as the painted one of his dying opponent.

It dripped from his beard. It flowed in a sluggish stream from his back, choked there with dirt. His knees were

weak from the tense encounter. For a moment he contemplated the palpitating corpse that lay on its face with the sun twinkling on the protruding lance tip where blood did not dull it.

There was a sound as of surf in his ears. It was the cheering from the wagons. The bucks remained silent. The spotted stallion had gone back to its owner and Pine-in-the-Cloud stood there like a carven image, his arm stretched to the pony's wide neck.

Bridger stooped, gathered up the Indian's thick, silken, carefully tended hair, trigged out with its feathers and bright tags of cloth and leather, and lifted it. The trophy of savage victory was his for the taking. None would dispute his right. Then he let the hair fall again and walked stiffly toward the group of braves who viewed him somberly.

"I take scalps only in war," said Bridger hoarsely. If his magnanimity won approval there was no sign.

"We return to the village," said Pine-in-the-Cloud. "Your people shall pass without our interference. It is good that you do not take the scalp of Ears-of-a-Fox. Yet I think there will be many scalps drying in the lodges before the snows close the passes."

If this was a last warning as well as a covert threat it was hard to interpret. The glance of Pine-in-a-Cloud held no more friendliness than if his eyes had been orbs of agate. The antagonism of the other members of the band could be plainly sensed. They would abide strictly by the terms of the duel. The caravan would not be interfered with, by them, until they returned to the village. Once there the elders might be able to restrain them from further reprisals, though Ears-of-a-Fox had a father high in the council. But Bridger hoped that no more trains would come to South Pass that season. It was growing late for such a happening. Most of them started within a week or two of each other.

He suspected what might lie back of the young chief's statement. There were many war parties out. Probably the bucks would not consider themselves bound to refrain from sending up smoke talk to any bands that might be in the vicinity. And he saw plainly that, even if the train was not followed and attacked, his own standing with the Sioux was gone. As far as the Dakotas were concerned, every man's hand would be against him.

He wondered where his squaws would stand in the breaking of bonds. They had followed after him to the fort, arriving there only a short while before he started out to warn the wagon train. He had told them about where he expected to strike the emigrants and he was sure they were not far away, probably camped by the river. A smoke would bring them to him and he knew how to send it without arousing suspicion from roving bands. But they would leave signs where he would find them, trail patterns he would recognize. He believed them faithful yet to trust them was to put his life in their hands.

Neither did he mean to leave the train. Their dangers were far from over. It would take many days for the men and the stock to recover their stamina, to say nothing of the women and children, unless they could reach some haven of plenty where they could recuperate undisturbed.

Such a place he knew and, with the fight won for them, his annoyance had dissipated entirely. He, Jim Bridger, had saved them. It had taken a wild man to do it. If they did not like the way he lived he did not care. He had played a man's part, the exaltation of the fight was still upon him as he walked back to the train, weary and spent.

"If they don't like my style an' manners they can't object to the way I

fight," he chuckled, "though some of the wimmen may not like my looks."

He was aware now of the loss of blood. The long cut in his back was stiffening but he made light of that and his other wounds.

"Jest as soon as I git down to the river," he told them, as they clustered about him, the children wide-eyed, the women expressing commiseration and gratitude as they exclaimed over his wounds, the men more dumb but not much less expressive of admiration for his timely victory, "an' I'll have a bath an' surprise my flesh to healin'. We wild men *do* take baths once in a while, though we 'low it ain't too healthy to have 'em too frequent," he added with a twinkle.

"I'm goin' to leave you mebbe when you git to the river," he said, "but only for a while. Thar's more war parties on the prowl. We're safe from those bucks"—he jerked a backward nod at the file of warriors, two of them mounted double with living men, two others bearing corpses in front of them, hideously limp bodies, the two stars that fell in the night—"until they git back to the fort or git in touch with some other war party. Can't tell jest how soon thet might be. They might smoke some up before night.

"This Ears-of-a-Fox thet I killed has a father thet's li'ble to cut up rough an' he's got a couple of brothers who may git on the blood trail. Thet's on 'count of me but they'll reckon you in. Ef I thought I could switch 'em off to foller me an' leave you alone, I'd do it, but it ain't to be done. I'm goin' to guide you to a place whar no Injun'll foller ye.

"They think it's full of demons an' ghosts, an' I hardly blame 'em. Made my ha'r lift first time I saw it. It's a bit of heaven thrown down 'longside of a chunk of hell. Reg'lar object lesson, so's you kin size both up while you're livin' an' take your ch'ice. It's a first-class sermon, 'thout all the preachin'.

"Pow'ful healin' waters thar an' some thet don't look so healin'. They'll cure anything from a cold in the head to a ham. You-all kin git rested up, an' I'll git fit myself for the fall trappin'. It ain't goin' to be wuth much anyway this season, count of the dry spell an' the hoppers. But mebbe I'll stay round whar I'm goin' to take you. Thar ain't been any hoppers thar, to my belief, an' thar's all the water you want, hot an' cold, straight up an' down, level an' fallin'," he ended with a mystifying grin.

"All sorts of fish an' game. Stay three weeks thar an' you won't be able to count your ribs 'thout an operation. I got to git my pony," he concluded, putting his coat on over his flannel shirt, disdaining to bind his cuts or to treat them until he could get to water. From the pocket of the buckskin coat he pulled out some "jerky" buffalo meat and chewed it between his strong teeth with relish.

"I could do with a drink," he went on, "but I'm sort of hungry an' the pemmican's with my hawss. You better git started. I'll ketch you inside of a mile, mebbe less. Your brutes smell water."

But before the train got into motion Bridger went out with his rifle and killed the pony with the broken leg that had belonged to Ears-of-a-Fox and which the braves, whose code of chivalry did not extend that far, had characteristically left to suffer. Another horse needed a merciful bullet, and then Bridger struck off across the park to where a gully, unsuspected until one was close upon it, engulfed him after he had cast a swift look at the disappearing file of bucks.

Deep in the gully where the thick brush was striving valiantly to replace the foliage eaten by the locusts, Bridger set his fingers to his lips and gave a shrill whistle. It was thrice repeated before he heard a noise in the brush and his yellow pony, friend and partner of

many toilsome, lonesome trails, came out of the covert in which it knew itself to have been placed for special purpose. It nickered and nibbled inquiringly at Bridger's pocket and he offered it a bit of jerky which the horse took daintly and politely, chewing on it for some time before it ejected it when Bridger seemed not to be looking, though he caught it in the act.

"Dern you, Posie!" he said. "Don't waste good grub. I'll give you some inside of an hour, old gal. Sure to be grazin' along the river in spots. Dig vou some roots ef the worst comes to the worst. I suppose you'd have stayed in the gully till it snowed in hell ef I hadn't come back. I came damn nigh to not comin', Posie. Now, let's ketch up with them tenderfeet."

With a sigh of relief he hauled himself into the comfortable Spanish saddle and found some pemmican and the good tobacco that he had got at the fort from Frémont's supplies.

"Ef I could show Frémont what we're goin to see," he remarked, talking aloud as he always did when he was with Posie, regarding her as a chum of surprising intelligence and endearing reticence, "he wouldn't dare to put it in the book Kit says he's writin'. They'd jest set him down for a liar same as they allus do me. Even Kit wouldn't believe it. He'd say what the rest of 'em do—that thar jest can't be no such place. But some day, they'll know old Jim didn't lie. They found out about the big salt lake that I thought was the ocean first time I struck it. An'—— Hullo, I thought as much! Hold on, Posie."

The yellow mare who, in some miraculous manner, foraging for herself, had managed to keep tolerably fat and sleek, halted.

Puffs of blanket-screened smoke were rising from behind a shoulder of the cañon into which the bucks had but just disappeared. They were not wasting any time. There was no prohibition laid upon them by the duel that stopped them from telling their news,, if there was any one to "get" their sendings.

Bridger scanned the tumbled horizon of cliffs and peaks. There was no answer. He was about to ride on when his plainsman's sight glimpsed a mere thread of far-off vapor ascending. Others followed, ballooning as they rose, almost invisible, like distant shreds of haze. Bridger shook his head.

"We're safe for to-night," he said. "An' thet helps a heap. But we got to keep movin' right along or they'll git us before we reach Heaven an' Hell. They won't stand for any duel next time, an' I ain't overanxious. I'm stiff as a board. I hope Early Moon an' Running Fawn show up down to the river. Git up, Posie, I'm thirstier'n you are. I'll bet you nosed out some wet mud at thet."

He shifted the "chaw" from one cheek to the other and put the mare into a rocking-chair lope, his face still uncleansed from the fight, his clothes, from the belt down, sticky with darkening blood, his eyes clear and serene as crystals underneath his shaggy brows, the old hat on the back of his head and his jaws working.

CHAPTER VI.

They had struck into the mysterious region, that Bridger called "Heaven an' Hell," toward the lower end of a big lake, its shores extremely irregular, its sparkling expanse dotted with forested islands. Now the sound of thundering waters was in their ears, growing even louder. The same river that entered the lake emerged, he told them, in a series of rapids before it leaped in two magnificent falls into the Painted Cañon.

"We ain't goin' down thar," he said. "We'll keep to the plateau. But it's a gorgeous place. Six hundred feet at

the lowest an' twice thet in places. Looks like a lot of giant painters had gone on a jamboree. The rocks is yeller an' orange, red an' blue an' vi'let agin' the green of the pines, an' more rivers is tumblin' in an' steamin' waters. You couldn't believe what it looks like an' thar ain't no use of my tryin' to tell you. I'll show you enough to make your eyes open anyhow.

"We ain't shook those war parties off yit, though I figger we fooled 'em some the night we trailed on through the rocky defile. But they're persistent. I reckon one of Ears-of-a-Fox's brothers is along. Thar's our trail, yonder. It's a steep pitch but we kin make it."

It was a different-looking outfit since they had passed out of the devastated region and found plenty of water. Bridger had got them to shoot all the game they could at the commencement of the trip and then prohibited shooting.

"No sense in tippin' them off in case they lose our trail," he said. "Those devils'll pick it up soon enough. They've made up their minds to git us an' I've made up mine they shan't," he added, his mouth grim.

They had food enough and they were able to fish and knock over stupid willow grouse with stones. The horses had filled out, and the oxen went along willingly. It seemed as if the place was filled up with the game that had fled the drought for a certain refuge—antelope, deer and elk. Once they sighted a bear shambling along high on a cliff, looking down at them wonderingly.

The emigrants had seen nothing of the pursuit, but Bridger had and knew that it was closing in. Often he rode on the back trail, where his two squaws, Early Moon and Running Fawn, followed the caravan, sensing the veiled dislike of most of the white women against them and their presence. The men made no comments, feeling more practically the obligations which they were under to the plainsman and no longer disposed to criticize his mode of living.

But they had proven faithful. When Bridger picked up their sign on the Big Horn they already knew of the fight, had read the smoke signals and told him of them. No one dared suggest that they were likely to betray the train, and the one man who had hinted at it was fiercely silenced by Jordan.

"Your scalp would be hangin' along with your wife's in some Injun's belt," said the leader, "ef it wasn't for Jim Bridger. We've misdoubted him enough an' the count we owe him ain't to be reckoned. Another yip out of you an' you kin hit the trail by yourself."

The squaws had helped Bridger discover the tokens of pursuit. Once came an eagle and its mate, disturbed from its aerie, flying angrily and not simply soaring for food. There were other things: Little films of dust—films of signal smokes, tiny figures silhouetted against the sky, a solitary horseman, high up and far off, watching the passes. Bridger had risked the loss of time to lead them over stony ways to baffle the avengers. The war parties—the plainsman fancied that two had joined forces—were in a pleasant land, fat compared with the territory they had left. They enjoyed the chase and would not relinquish it lightly.

He was still sore from his wounds but he never mentioned them or seemed to notice them. The squaws had plucked herbs and made various brews and ointments, not only for their lord but for the stricken Edwards. He was now beyond the shadow of death and gaining rapidly. The wound in his head had healed over and there was the light of intelligence in his eyes though they were the questioning eyes of a child rather than a man.

He had lost all recollection of what had happened before the fight in which the bullet had grooved his skull. The

mention of his name or of Bridger's meant nothing to him. He had to be taught to eat and to dress himself. He had lost the use of language and, though he proved an apt scholar, the look of puzzled wonder in his eyes, the efforts he seemed to make for memory were pitiful. Usually they resulted in blinding headaches and, after a while he ceased to try, amusing himself as a child would, taking a great fancy to Bridger, playing with the other children, amusing them, watching them.

To the two squaws he was an object of almost reverent interest and attention. They believed that the Great Spirit had borrowed his soul. From them he picked up Indian speech and sign language as fast as he acquired English.

Save that his clothes were of better quality than the rest, his weapons finer and his hands less calloused, he bore nothing with him to prove identity. In the confusion after the first fight with its hasty retreat, each one looking after one's own belongings, he had lost his baggage. The others knew that he had joined the caravan, paying with supplies for a place in one of the wagons, bringing a horse with him from somewhere down the river—though some said he had come from Omaha. His name was Edwards, his first name George. He had a fine watch, a heavy chain and a ring with a blue stone in it. His accent was refined.

Bridger gave up the puzzle of why the man should be seeking him, though he did not forget it. He had made up his mind to set up camp after the emigrants finally started for Oregon and the pursuit had been ended, confident that it would be given up as soon as they entered the confines of Heaven and Hell, where he had long thought that he might trap.

His specialty was beaver. The silk hat was looming on the horizon but, so far, it had not disturbed his most profitable market. Many of the beaver dams in his own region near Green River headwaters had been unable to keep heads enough of water for the flat-tailed rodents and they had migrated. Those that were left would be poor in pelage. Altogether the scheme promised profits. The prospect of a winter near thermal springs was alluring.

He knew places where he could build a shack supplied with natural steam heat or with dryer warmth from subterranean fires, provided he could coax the two squaws to stay in what was to them an inferno of terror. But they had voluntarily become outcasts from their tribe by remaining with him. He was assured of their devotion and he believed he could overcome their fears.

Edwards also he thought of keeping with him. He felt the man was in a manner his responsibility, consigned to him. The baffling secret of his mission, private or personal, though he had set it aside, was a problem to be tackled in the long winter when the beaver would be closeted in their dams, smeared with their paddles in mud that froze against their natural enemies the wolves and wolverines, unable to break through that natural armor.

Before then Bridger would have taken his toll, and the squaws would have the skins for dressing. He would not clean the beaver out but leave young ones in the lodges to wax fat on the winter supply of roots and bark and selected logs while he and his family of three lived well on the supplies that they would accumulate now and then with fresh meat, trailed on snowshoes the squaws would make. It was a prospect to terrify most men but a pleasant one to Bridger, plainsman and philosopher, with the education of Edwards on his hands and the ministering squaws to keep house for him.

The train reached the plateau without mishap, north of Shoshone Basin, making for the stream that Bridger had

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named Firehole River. Each day the terrane became more desolate, with great stretches of lava alternating with pitlike valleys where the vegetation was lush. The weather became muggy, mists hung close to the earth and now and then they heard strange, distant rumblings and snortings at which the oxen and horses shied. Bridger chuckled.

"One more day an' I'll show you," he told them. "This time to-morrer your eyes'll bulge out of your heads. Also them red varmints'll turn back. I'll warrant thet. They're too derned close to suit me, as it is. We'll make an early camp. Thar's a spring not far ahead. Tastes sort of funny an' it's warmish but it's a tonic. Good for biles, fallin' ha'r, sore eyes an' all such.

"Ef I could bottle some of the stuff an' put a good label on it I could make a fortune out of it. We're comin' close to Hell an' then I'll pilot ye to Heaven. You hold the notch open between them two peaks, Jordan, an' you'll fetch it. I'm goin' back for a spell."

It was an hour after midnight before he rode in on a tired mare. The men of the camp were anxiously awaiting him, most of the women awake, only the squaws in their private camp unperturbed, sure of his arrival.

"We got to hitch an' be goin'," he said. "Do it as quiet as you kin. Grease up your axles good with fat. Thar's a big war party six mile back. They've picked up our trail all right. They've got a fire, an' I crawled up close enough to hear 'em talkin'. They don't like this neighborhood but they don't like givin' us up—me in partic'lar. I heerd my name mentioned mo'n once.

"Come dawn they'll be after us, ki-yootin'. We've got four hours to make the biggest march you've ever done in thet time. 'Bout an' hour after thet they'll ketch us. We may have to 'bandon some of the wagons an' turn the steers loose. I hope not. It's tech an' go. Depends on how fast we travel to-night. They can't see us from here, an' it ain't bad trailin'.

"But thar's sixty or more of 'em an' they'll rush us. Heerd 'em say so. No fancy ridin'. They know our numbers to a dot an' they'll make straight for the wagons. They kin stand the gaff when they git het up. Both of Ears-of-a-Fox's brothers are with 'em. They'll hitch ponies to a wagon, drag it away an' charge through the gap. I heerd the hull strategy. Kind of wished I could work some trick on 'em but et was too resky. They was startin' a dance when I left. Got a prentice medicine man along. Listen!"

Faint on the air they could hear the throbbing of drums.

"Makin' medicine. Dern 'em, I'll show 'em Big Medicine to-morrer! Git hitched—we got to hustle! You kin light your lanterns to show the trail. They won't stir till dawn."

Jordan busied himself, and soon the protesting oxen were roused from their beds and axles greased. Under the stars, with lanterns bobbing ahead of each span, the caravan wound across the lava, Bridger in the lead, the squaws in the rear, listening for sounds of pursuit that did not materialize. All night the weird noises grew louder. The sun rose to shine on heavy fog that rolled along the ground.

"It all helps," said Bridger. "No stop for breakfast, folks. Keep a-goin'. I'll warn ye in time. We made good progress. I ain't dead sure in this mist but I reckon we ain't goin' to lose none of the outfit."

He galloped off, the rattle of his mare's hoofs plain on the lava over which they were traveling at top speed but not much to boast of as it was limited to the pace of the steers who snuffed and snorted continually.

The air began to be charged with steady smells of sulphur. Once a great bellowing broke ahead in the swirling vapors, reddened by the sun. It lasted

for several minutes and then subsided. Still they pressed on. The squaws rode in, showing by signs that Bridger was coming. The lifting sun sucked up the mists and revealed strange formations of snow-white sinter banded with vivid colors—cones from which bright-green and bright-blue water issued, steaming. Terraces, where it was hard to find a way, were growing steeper.

Then Bridger came dashing up.

"This way!" he shouted. "You'll git all tied up in b'ilin' mud over thar. They're hard behind. Hear 'em? But we'll halt 'em. Bring 'em up all standin'."

They could hear the shrill howling of the bucks and then, as they plunged down a steep incline, the wheels locked, they caught a glimpse of the pack, that, sighting them, broke into howls.

"Did you hear Old Faithful snort a while back?" asked Bridger. "He's due ag'in in about ten or fifteen minnits. You kin count on him every time. An' the mist is clearin' fine. I don't want them bucks to miss nothin'. It'll give 'em somethin' to talk about when they git back to the village. How Jim Bridger led the wagons into the ghost country, with the biggest ghost any medicine man ever dreamed of guardin' the trail.

"Et ought to all work out about to the dot. You go on, I'm bringin' up the rear. Wait a minute. Look out for your stock. Hell's likely to break loose afore you pass thet cone down thar. Keep away from et. Et may spout before you're all past. Thar's a hole in it goes clar down to China.

"Go on, I got to gauge this exhibition the best I kin. They're comin', the hull herd of 'em, yippin' like a lot o' timber wolves. Lord willin', we'll send 'em home with their tails between their laigs. Watch your stock now. Don't let 'em bolt, an' keep to thet high ledge well up to wind'ard."

He laughed at their wondering faces as they filed jolting down the sinter deposits over a series of flat, concentric terraces where water trickled in places, blue as the brightest midsummer sky. He watched them swing up to the ledge he had indicated and begin to pass the rimmed basin where his ally, Old Faithful, lived.

"Don't you go back on me, Ol' Faithful," he said. "I'm countin' on you. You're a mighty work of the Lord an' you're due to save some of his people. All the Lord's folks, I reckon, red an' white, but this time it's the whites who need ye."

As he watched, first the basin, then the lava flats where the bucks were racing on toward him, he judged their progress, and rode up a little so that they could see and recognize him. He was almost out of range and he did not bother much about their marksmanship. The more of them who emptied their rifles the better. They would have to reload.

He made a mocking gesture to them, set the mare to a hard gallop and followed the wagon train. But he halted close to the basin, on the near side to the braves, up on the ledge. There he could look down into the seemingly bottomless bowl with its smoothly shining sides, his head cocked, listening intently while the Sioux came clattering down the terraces, a little fearful of their surroundings but heartened by the presence of the medicine man, led on by the sight of the wagons.

Bridger lifted up his voice and shouted to them. He used words, in the Dakota tongue, that seventy five years later, would become famous far over-seas. He had heard a curious whistling sound, gathering tone and volume and felt the faint trembling of the ledge. Old Faithful was on time.

"You shall not pass," he cried. "Lo! Ictiniki speaks!"

They sent back an answering yell in

derision. They spurred their mounts and then curbed them in wild confusion. They strove to turn them, crowding each other, the ponies slipping on the sinter in the melée, frantic at the spectacle from which the terrified braves could not take their eyes, as a huge mass of steaming water was belched out of the geyser basin with a blasting roar. It rose fifty, a hundred, another fifty feet its hissing spray falling, the column holding its gigantic force, obscuring the sun—an abhorrent specter threatening to overwhelm them.

For nearly five minutes Old Faithful gushed and bellowed and, for the last three of those, Bridger watched—holding his sides for laughter—the empty terraces, deserted by the bucks who had ridden down them so tempestuously and who now fled over the lava plains with brains numbed in superstitious terror, the embryo medicine man leading.

Bridger laughed while the tears ran down his cheeks. "They'll hold me a wizard. Timed to a dot. I could have stirred it up a bit sooner by chuckin' in a few rocks. Might have been impressive but I was a bit rushed for time. A feller can't think of everything an' it sure worked."

He rode on to the wagon train where the men were soothing the startled oxen and horses, stilling the crying children some of whom, Edwards leading them, had clapped their hands at the phenomenon as it had gleamed in the sun, radiant, weird, magnificently beautiful.

"Thar's five more of them spouters," Bridger said. "All of 'em shoot higher'n Ol' Faithful but they're onsartin, an' you can't count on 'em. You'll see some of 'em in action mebbe afore you leave here. There's more farther north, an' some south.

"Thar's springs of b'ilin' mud, all colors, like bowls of fancy giants' porridge. I'll show ye whar you kin ketch a trout an' swing it over to whar the water'll bile it for ye.

"Hell in a big sample, ain't it? An' Heaven's over thar." He pointed to where trees clustered in thick forests. "Medders thar, birds an' flowers an' berries, all manner of flyin' an' four-footed things. Thet's your way out. The Lewis River comes out of thet big lake we passed, runs into the Snake an' on down to the Columbia thet some calls the Oregon. It's your trail, plain as a pike.

"You're out of your troubles now an' "—he paused for a minute, the twinkle in his eyes spreading about his bearded lips—"if you think you owe anything to Jim Bridger, I'll tell ye how you kin pay him.

"Tell every one ye see what *you've* seen to-day an' will see afore you leave here. Tell it straight, thet's all, an' mebbe folks'll begin to think Jim Bridger ain't the liar they've made me out to be when I talk about this place.

"Why, it's got so if a bugler gives the breakfast call at a post an' I should yell, "Grub's ready!" they'd all turn over an' say, "Huh, jest another of Jim's lies!"

CHAPTER VII

The summer passed, and the fall advanced with burning colors that slowly faded with the fall of leaves, though the great forests of pine, balsam, fir and spruce presented an unchanging aspect against the towering walls and peaks of the wonderland. Bridger trapped, and the squaws skinned and stretched the pelts with Edwards giving a willing and deft pair of hands. With the coming of October he seemed normal, having to make no show of learning, only his eyes clouded with his recurring efforts of memory that left him baffled and melancholy.

"It'll come all right, son, said Bridger. "Mebbe we'll see a medico before long. I'll take you back to the settlements, mebbe. No sense in worryin'. You come to find me an' you've found me.

It don't bother me none. Mebbe it was important, mebbe not. You rest easy. It'll work out."

Edwards shook his head but smiled at the man he had learned to look upon as his father.

It was the end of the month when Bridger, following his trap line, looked up at the sharp sound of a breaking twig to see a tall figure emerging from the trees, a man in black clothes, with a black hat of clerical cut, leggings on his feet, a pack on his back with the ends of snowshoes showing and leading a horse that was well burdened.

He had a curling beard that reached low down on his chest, his face was more like that of a man of war and stern purpose than that of a preacher of peace, but Bridger had seen the wilderness missionary before and recognized their valor though he did not personally approve of their mission, believing it futile.

The Dakotas, with their story of a Messiah of Virgin birth and divine fatherhood, with their belief in *wakand*—the spiritual force that invests all things but is most manifest in man—he fancied had a belief too closely akin to that taught by the "black robes" and other missionaries to care to change their rituals that generations had welded by continual acceptance.

They were natural fighting men but they had a stern code of morals and they already resented the earnest efforts of the Belgian Jesuits whose station was not so far away.

But he hailed the man cordially as a traveler, wondering at his temerity and his evident purpose of long winter travel.

"I'll venture he ain't got even a knife," he said to himself as the other came on swiftly, as one fired with a purpose that might not be halted. "Lives on yarbs an' berries, likely.

"Howdy, stranger!" he called.

The new arrival ate with him, showing no vegetarian proclivities. The squaws served, and the man looked at them severely, disapproving the reason of their presence that Bridger had openly avowed, in a manner that checked discussion. The stranger carried wisdom on his brows and he made no preachments.

His name, he said, after he had assured Bridger that he had heard of him many times, was Marcus Whitman. He had been appointed in 1834 by the board of commissioners for foreign missions, sitting at Boston, for work among the American Indians, assigned to the Oregon Territory, jointly held by Great Britain and the United States. The next year he crossed the plains and returned to marry and once more go back the next summer with his wife and the other workers to settle at a place called Waiilatpu.

There had been some dissension among the missionaries as to the best plans for bringing in converts, and the prudential committee of the board had issued an order to abandon the mission because of lack of apparent success.

"They are wrong," said the missionary. "The seed is sown and, if the harvest is delayed, how shall it ever ripen if there is no tending, no plucking of the tares? Nor is this all. I learned last month at the British fort at Walla Walla, close to our mission, that large quantities of settlers are expected and that cession of our share in the territory is contemplated, to be released to Great Britain for fishing privileges on Newfoundland.

"So short is their sight. I work for my country as well as for my country's God. Shall this land that geographically belongs to us, to which our own settlers are pouring in as to a land flowing with milk and honey, be given up without a struggle, without full knowledge of its vast resources being presented? I go on a double mission, to plead the revocation of the order to abandon the mission

and to plead consideration for our own people who have ventured in good faith. I go to tell of the glorious possibilities of Oregon, land of mountain and forest and fertile plain—fit cradle for the coming generation of a mighty race—to open the eyes of those who sit in darkness and to proclaim the folly, the wickedness of their plan."

"I'm with you," said Bridger. "I know somethin' of the territory myself. You sure have the gift of tongues. Let you git talkin' an' you ought to convince them all right."

"Eloquence may be like a light beneath a bushel basket. It is hard to talk with those who sit in high places and whose sight is scaled with the disks of Mammon."

"Well, I might be able to help you at thet," said Bridger quietly as his visitor looked at him incredulously.

"As a guide? I know the trail. And the Lord will find a way."

"I didn't mean thet exactly. But thet trail is swarmin' with hostiles right now. Winter on the plains means blizzards and weather forty below zero. You got to know the weather right well an' every march has got to be calculated. I sure admire your spirit an' I might help you thar. But they tell me a mouse kin help a lion if he gits in a net. Mebbe I kin gnaw a bit for you.

"I'll tell you plump an' plain I don't think the Injuns is ripe for your talkin' a new religion. They are considerable het up by the settlers goin' through their territory. I don't reckon I've got what you might rightly call a mission, but ev'ry man wants to do somethin' useful. I do quite a heap of thinkin' out here in the wilds an' it's come to me thet I kin help by keepin' the trails open. I know 'em, the old an' those thet ain't been tried. I've been some use an' I aim to be more. If I kin help you, I will.

"First an' foremost. I don't intend you should travel alone. It ain't safe fer one man. No one knows thet better'n I do. I lay ten days once with a wrenched ankle, an' if I hadn't been able to shoot a fool antelope thet wondered what I was I'd have starved to death.

"I meant to stay here a spell but now I reckon I'll see you as far as the forks of the Platte." He spoke as if it was a settled thing, as it was in his own mind. The pluck of the man had aroused his sympathy but it was the talk of Oregon's abandonment that fired him. The Oregon Trail was his hobby. More than that, it held his deep resolve to do something worth while that would stamp Jim Bridger as something else than a lying old trapper.

"I see no necessity for it," said Whitman in his deep voice.

"Hold on a bit. Let me talk ag'in. I reckon you propose to visit Washington?"

"Beyond doubt. After Boston and New York. I must see the president, if I can."

"Exactly. Hard man to git to. Sort of rushed off his feet all the time. He's hemmed in with cabinet folks an' committees an' special pleaders. What you want is a nice, comfortable talk with him in the White House overnight."

"That would suit my purpose admirably," answered Whitman, not without an irony that Bridger did not notice. "I confess I do not know how or where to secure such an invitation."

"If the President's wife asked ye it would be all right, I reckon. She's a fine woman. Your talk 'ud hit her whar she belongs—I mean about the settlers. She's sort of interested in Oregon. I've told her considerable about it myself."

"You?"

"Me. She happens to be my aunt. Some folks call me the king of liars because I talk about the things I've seen but I usually aim to tell the truth, an' I'm tellin' it now. I guess I kin git her to invite you to supper, an' break-

fast, ef I write her a line. She's quite a home body ef she is the first lady of the land. Sort of hospitable."

"You amaze me. I—I don't doubt you, sir, but——"

Bridger smiled.

"Sort of miracle, I reckon, findin' a nephew-in-law of the President in a rough an' tough wild man like me, out here in the heart of the wilderness. Jest the same I kin prove it before I leave you at the forks."

They talked late that night and the next. In the end Whitman accepted escort. Bridger explained things to his squaws and to Edwards. It was a hazardous trip for him, enemy as he now must be regarded by the Sioux, but he considered it his duty. Weighing the natural perils of the trail was sure that the odds against Whitman crossing in winter would be enormously lessened by his experience.

"I don't know how I can repay you, except with my prayers," said Whitman, when the thing was settled, Edwards to remain in winter quarters with the two squaws until Bridger returned, which might not be till the spring if the snows were deep.

"I do," said Bridger. "You said you knew something about medicine?"

"I studied it in Pittsfield, Massachusetts. It is an essential for a missionary as I believe."

"Then take a good look over Edwards. You noticed anything queer about him?"

"He seems to have a remarkably frank and simple nature, an open mind. He's subject perhaps to melancholia."

"Well, I'll tell you about him. Then I'll call him in. He's helping my wimmen git things ready for us to start."

Whitman listened, interested. He made a thorough examination of Edwards but shook his head when he was through.

"I thought there might have been a fracture, a pressure of a bone splinter on the brain. That might be relieved but I could not perform such an operation under these conditions with much confidence. But I am positive there is no fracture. I believe there must be a clot there, from the blow of the bullet and perhaps he fell against some hard object also.

"He has youth and vitality. He is younger, I fancy, than he appears. It may be absorbed. I think he has a good chance living as he does, simply and out of doors. I shall come back, I expect, at the head of the largest body of emigrants to Oregon I can get together. I shall proselyte in that cause. They will be the best arguments for our maintaining our hold on Oregon.

"I shall endeavor to bring skilled doctors. That should not be difficult. I think I know where to secure some. We can pass this way. Then, if he is not cured, we can hold consultation."

"Thet's fine of ye. Cancels all debts. Mebbe you'd do one more thing. Tell the President erbout these spoutin' steam fountains, will you? He'll believe it, comin' from a preacher. I'd hate to have my aunt think I'm a liar. Mebbe you could git it in the papers."

CHAPTER VIII.

The snows lay deep on Laramie Plains when Jim Bridger came back from the forks of the Platte, leaving Whitman with a teamster's train bound for Omaha. At the fort they told him that the winter had been a hard one and that the passes were closed. In the Wind River gorges and the cañons of the Yellowstone trails were impassable. He had no fears for his camp and he reconciled himself to stay at the fort. There were no Sioux camped there. The hard winter following the drought had been severe on them. Bissonnette reported them as quiet, anxious to get what they could in advance trade goods to help them through.

It was near the end of April before he prepared to take the trail, even then hazardous. Small parties of Indians had appeared, and Bridger had not hidden from them. They treated him with respect and he fancied that the tale of Old Faithful had been the motive of much of the talk in the winter lodges, not without good results for his prestige.

Near the summit of South Pass he came unexpectedly upon a tragedy of the wild. A she-silvertip had come out from hibernation, gaunt and ravenous. An Indian, rashly bold, beset perhaps with hunger, had either trailed or been confronted with the ill-natured brute.

Bridger saw him lift his rifle, an old flintlock, and heard the trigger snap. The priming powder, old trading quality and damp also, refused ignition under the spark. The rearing bear snarled, dropped, charged at incredible speed, reared again and sent the clubbed rifle flying, broken. The Sioux drew his knife before the angry beast, brave to the last, his wet moccasins slipping on treacherous ice. He fell on one knee, doomed. The bear was on him as he breathed a prayer to the Great Spirit and set himself for the last grapple.

A shot rang out, echoing in the pass, snow came avalanching down and the bear whirled, biting at its wound. Then it sank, reddening the snow, and sending it in showers in a death flurry.

The Sioux turned as Bridger came up, reloading his rifle. It was Eagle-that-flies-in-the-Sun, the father of Ears-of-a-Fox.

Bridger, with sphinxlike face, flung up his hand in greeting. He knew that a Dakota never forgot a debt. Eagle-that-flies-in-the-Sun might, deep in his savage soul, have wished that he could have died rather than have been rescued by the killer of his son. But that had been a fair combat and the gods had intervened. Bridger knew the score was evened and that his name was cleared on the Dakota book of revenges.

"How!" he said.

"How, Pay-jee-hoo-tah-wakan!"

Bridger was newly christened. The name meant "The Mysterious Medicine Man" or "The Wonder Worker." And he knew it referred, not to the killing of the bear, but to the spectral apparition that had risen out of the lair of Old Faithful.

Bridger drew out his embroidered, beaded tobacco pouch, gift of Early Moon. He slowly filled his pipe, lighted it and took two puffs. Then he silently extended it toward the sky—the Father—to the earth—the Mother—and passed it to the chief who took it gravely, repeating the ceremony and giving back the pipe.

Then he picked up the buffalo robe he had flung aside for the bear fight, folded his arms in it and, standing at full height, regarded Bridger.

"Ugh!" he grunted, half grudgingly and made the sign of peace.

Bridger returned it and went on up the Pass. It was his bear but he had made a gift of it. Higher up he peered carefully from where he could not be seen, and saw Eagle-that-flies-in-the-Sun expertly skinning the kill.

Once more Jim Bridger could freely enter and pass out of the lodges of the Sioux.

CHAPTER IX.

Old Faithful spouted as Jim Bridger rode across the sinter plateau. Yellow-headed blackbirds and meadow larks were singing as he crossed the river.

He saw the smoke issuing from the little shack before he could see the building, a vertical banner, waving him welcome home.

Before it seemed possible that he himself could have been seen, a horseman came dashing out of the trees. Bridger knew the pony belonged to Early Moon. The man must be Edwards but, even in the distance, it was hard to believe that this youngster, riding with such

abandon of youth, waving his hat and shouting as he urged on the flying mustang, could be one with the stranger who had lain in the wagon with a face like a skull over which parchment has been drawn and, even later, when health had come back to him, had been grave enough for a man of Jim's own years.

Jim touched the yellow mare with his heels and the two men came together. Now the plainsman's ears shared the incredulity of his eyes. The young man was laughing but there were tears of emotion in his eyes as he slid out of the squaw saddle and rushed up to Bridger, who had dismounted also.

"Uncle Jim Bridger! I know who I am! Don't you know me—George Edwards—your sister's boy?"

Bridger gaped, taken off his feet, staring.

"I'll be eternally kicked *an'* petrified!" he said. "You don't mean it! I heerd she married before I left St. Louis but I never did git to know her married name, leastwise I didn't remember it. She went away to work with a fam'ly down in Virginy when I was runnin' the flatboat. Six years older'n me Lucy was. I was never much of a hand to write, an' time she was married it was hard for a letter to git to me. I never expected any an' never looked nor asked for none.

"I kin see her now in your face, sence it's your own ag'in an' not jest a mask. You look like my mother, too. An' me puzzlin' what you come out here for! Jest why did ye come? To say howdy to the old man? Or have you got the Bridger fever, too, in your bones?"

"I guess I have, uncle, if that means that I wanted to come West. Things weren't breaking so well back East. Looked like it might be a long time before I was independent. And it was tame in the city. Naturally I thought of you."

Bridger looked shrewdly at his newly found relative.

"Thar ain't a gal anywhar in the proposition, is they?" he asked.

George Edwards laughed and nodded.

"There sure is. Uncle Jim, if I hadn't come back to my right senses, I might never have seen her again. Her folks are set to come West. Talkin' with them roused up the Bridger fever in me, I guess. They're coming out this spring. I thought by thet time I might be all fixed so she wouldn't have to go through to Oregon. We planned it that way. I was hoping to meet the train along the road. It's too late now."

"Well, the program ain't all sp'iled, son. Thet crowd'll start from Independence an' likely come along with Whitman. They've started already. They'll be comin' in to Laramie an' we'll be thar to meet 'em. Ef the gal's willin' to stay off from her folks I don't see why Whitman can't jine the two of ye up. Ef she's the right kind of a gal you won't have to make much fuss over settin' up house out here. The big outdoors was made for lovers, son."

There was strong affection in Bridger's voice and in his eyes. He was shaken more than he cared to admit. As he had told Jordan, there were times when even he, man of the wilderness, was lonely—times when he longed for closer kin than the two faithful squaws. He had grown to love the boy who now turned out to have the same blood in his veins, the same pioneering spirit.

"You see, George," Bridger went on. "The Reverend Whitman figgers on bringin' out at least a thousand this trip. Thar'll be more follerin' the trails right along. I've been thinkin' Californy'll be next in line. Kit Carson tells me it's got even Oregon beat. Waal, I've got a sort of depot right whar the trail forks on Green River, one way to Californy, an' one way to Oregon. Thar's money in pelts but thar's more in supplies fer the wagon trains if you handle it right.

"I'm a better trapper'n I am a trader. An' it takes time to make a trapper. While you're pickin' up thet end of it, you an' your wife, I propose you should take charge of a place I'm figgerin' on puttin' up this fall, on the depot site. We'll call it 'Bridger's Fort.' It'll be built like one, but we'll make it comfortable."

The younger man's eyes expressed his gratitude, and Bridger smiled at him as they rode up to the shack and the two squaws came out in cordial greeting.

"Anyway, he won't be a squaw man," Bridger mused.

Early Moon showed him some stones that she had found in the creek. They were yellow and heavy. Bridger weighted them in the palm of his hand, then bit down on one of them with his strong teeth. It was soft as lead.

"Gold!" he muttered, his face thoughtful. He made her show him where she had discovered the nuggets and gathered them, thinking to interest him.

"Don't you say a word about 'em to any one till I tell ye," he warned her. She nodded earnestly and Bridger was satisfied of her silence. Wild horses could drag nothing out of her from now on. He meditated a good deal about the discovery, not overpleased with it. Gold would mean the whole country being rushed, the trapping and hunting spoiled, the solitudes invaded by lawless communities who cared nothing, as he did, for the virginity of the wilds.

He might glean it for his nephew and the girl who was even then on her way to meet him.

"They've got better'n gold," Bridger told himself, smoking his pipe that evening, contemplating Edwards. "It's best for him that he an' her should work out their own livin' an' develop the way it was intended. Give 'em a pot of gold an', like as not, they'd start back East, miss the best part of their life, never git real acquainted with each other, raise a lot of loose habits, likely, instead of a husky fam'ly of kids brought up right out West. Thet's the kind of kids the country wants to keep it ahead. Kids born an' bred in the open, two-handed an' able to look out fer themselves.

"Ef the news gits out an' this place gits swamped it'll raise all hell with the Injuns an' they'll start raidin'. Trails'll be shet.

"I reckon we'll forgit about the yeller stones. Jes plumb fergit about 'em till thet Oregon matter is settled anyway, an' Frémont's railroad gits started.

"Ef ever I git old an' busted I kin trail back up here an' scrape up enough of them nuggets to keep me out of the poorhouse. Mebbe I'll leave word of it in my will for George's kids."

The nuggets went to the bottom of his war bag, and even Edwards did not know of their existence until others, long afterward, discovered gold in Wyoming.

The train had arrived, nine hundred emigrants bound for Oregon. Whitman with them, sure that his talk with the President had solved the problem of territory belonging to the United States, and glad that his mission was not to be abandoned. He brought a message to Bridger and an invitation.

"I'm not goin' to be caught in Washington ag'in," he said. "Too much noise an' not enough air. But I'm glad my aunt was good to ye. Did you tell the President what I asked you to?"

"I did but I'm afraid I hardly did the place justice."

"What did my aunt say about it?"

"She said, 'That sounds just like one of Jim's yarns.' But I convinced her she was mistaken. The President will try and get Frémont to visit the geysers."

Bridger didn't notice the end of the speech. "Don't it beat hell," he said slowly, "how tellin' the truth'll make a liar out of a man?"

Below the Semaphore

by G. W. Barrington

Author of "That Awful Sheriff," "The Law at Dun Butte," etc.

MORTON, THE ASSISTANT CASHIER, WAITED OUTSIDE THE DIRECTORS' ROOM TO SEE WHOM THEY WOULD APPOINT TO FILL HIS CHIEF'S VACANCY. HE KNEW WHAT HE WOULD DO IF THINGS WENT AGAINST HIM. BUT HE COULD NOT FORESEE JUST WHAT WOULD COME OF WHAT HE DID. . . . . . .

MORTON, assistant cashier of the Miners' & Traders' National Bank of San Francisco, labored after hours. Of late, he had been accustomed to doing that. Incidentally, he had accustomed others to the spectacle of Morton hunched over his tall desk behind the wire wicket, arranging documents, sorting currency, making things shipshape for the morning.

His fellow employees grudgingly admitted that Morton was the "Ole Reliable" of the Miners' & Traders' National. Beside being industrious and capable, Morton always had been scrupulously honest, his trustworthiness being prompted, not by personal integrity, but by the knowledge that honesty is the best policy—so long as one intends to remain in a bank.

In their room, back of the vault, the directors were engaged in selecting a successor to the cashier, lately retired. Should they choose Morton, he would continue to serve them, faithfully and capably.

But would they?

He considered his own qualifications, coolly, impartially, as impersonally as he would any other of the bank's assets. There was much in the analysis to bring discomfort.

The fact was that he could handle the public's money, but not the public. As a subordinate, he was an invaluable adjunct. As a high official, he would repel custom, rather than attract it. He was a smooth-working business machine, tireless, unemotional, dependable—but without a soul.

Knowing his own qualifications and limitations, Morton knew also that the directors had him accurately appraised.

Very well, the whole thing was up to them. Should he be promoted, he would give them the very best that was in him. Should they pass him by, he would not serve longer as an underling. Neither would he resign, to commence at the foot of some other ladder. There was a way out.

Chairs scraped back from the long table in the directors' room, and by ones and twos they came straying past Morton, who nodded absently in answer to their rather constrained greetings.

Apparently wholly engrossed in his work, Morton was keen to know which way his destiny would lie. Atremble inwardly, he worked on steadily as Bayne,

the president, the last to leave, came slowly out and stopped before the wicket.

"We've thought best to confer the cashiership on Blake, and he'll take charge in the morning," said Bayne. "You are to continue in your present position, in which you have served us so efficiently that the directors have been glad to vote you a thousand-dollar raise.

"Sorry we couldn't see our way clear to promote you, Morton, but"—with a lame attempt to be jovial—"I guess you're too valuable for that. Hope you're not disappointed," added Bayne, kindly.

Glancing up from the columns of a cash book, Morton placed a long finger opposite a line of figures to hold his place and nodded his understanding, his pale, hollow face with its excessively light, expressionless eyes, turned to his superior just long enough to pay decent attention to what the other had said. Then Morton turned back to his book, and the president shrugged his shoulders, as if to shake off some clammy thing, and went on out.

So it was to be that way. The time for speculation and alternative planning had passed. The hour for action had arrived. Morton was ready.

Old Grimes, the honest watchman, locked the street door after the departing official, and entered the directors' room to lower the windows and fasten the door.

The second the watchman passed out of sight, Morton opened a cupboard under his desk, produced a flask and glass, poured a drink of whisky with a steady hand and set it before him. From a drawer he took a folded paper and from it shook a white powder into the flask, which he set beside the glass of liquor.

"Oh, Grimes!" he called.

"Yes, sir!" answered the watchman, coming in at once.

"Just been notified of a raise," announced Morton, affecting good-fellowship, "and here's hoping the same to you some day soon."

Morton tossed off his drink, set the glass down, picked up a pile of books and started for the vault, saying over his shoulder, "Take a shot at it!"

Grimes smiled in friendly fashion, but shook his head.

"Sorry, Mr. Morton, but I never drink while on duty. You can handle whisky, but once or twice it's got the best of me. When I go off duty, I'll take a little snort, and much obliged to you."

"All right, Grimes"—unconcernedly—"you know best, of course. Help yourself before you leave in the morning."

The books disposed of, Morton piled the sheafs of currency in a neat cube on his desk, picked up a tray of silver and started for the vault, then stopped suddenly.

"By George! I almost forgot. I've got to get up a sketchy statement of our collaterals and have it ready when Blake takes things over in the morning. I'm hungry, but I don't want to lock up and then have to reopen the vault. If you don't mind, run over to the café and get me a bite of lunch. I'll nibble a little as I work."

Again Grimes shook his head.

"Sorry, but my orders are positive not to leave this building before opening time in the morning. I'll just phone for your lunch."

While Grimes ordered the lunch, Morton produced a file of documents from the vault, leaving the currency as it lay.

Outwardly cool and matter-of-fact, he was boiling with inward turmoil. A certain look in Grimes' shrewd old eyes had made him vaguely uneasy. Had they set the man to watch him, or had the meddlesome old servant formed suspicions of his own? No matter.

Morton briskly sorted out negotiable documents from the pile before him, whistling casually as he worked. Grimes received the tray of lunch and bore it within the railed inclosure.

"Here you are. Steak, French fries and coffee."

Morton removed his green eye shade, hung it on the wicket, opened his cuffs, rolled up his sleeves and entered the wash room.

Having washed, he took a short, leather billy from his pocket, slipped his left wrist into the loop and rolled his sleeve down over it. Reëntering the front room, he met Grimes, as the latter was starting for the rear, filling his pipe as he walked. As they were about to pass, Morton pulled out his watch, looked at it, shook it, smiled whimsically, and commenced to wind it.

Old Grimes chuckled.

"Forgot to wind it, again, eh?"

Of late that had been a standing joke between them—a joke with a purpose. Morton returned the laugh.

"I sure did. What does that old ticker of yours say?"

Grimes reached across his vest with his right hand and tugged out his heavy, silver timepiece, turning his head a little to look down at it nearsightedly.

Still holding his own watch in his right hand, Morton leaned over as if to get a view of the other.

Then his left swung swiftly in a short arc and struck squarely on the temple. Grimes dropped his old silver watch, to dangle at the end of its chain, as he swayed and collapsed, eased to the floor by Morton.

Three times more, the efficient and thorough assistant cashier swung the deadly little weapon with deliberate precision.

Then he coolly wrapped the sorted currency into a number of packages, each sized to fit one of his pockets, donned a heavy ulster, tucked the little bundle of negotiable bonds under the hollow of his shoulder, turned off the light and left by the front door, which he locked, throwing the key into the gutter.

Twenty minutes later, the Oakland ferry was carrying him steadily across the bay.

Cliff Stevens cussed and browbeat his jack train down from his bachelor's aerie on Lookout and sent them slithering out onto the Ledge at the reckless speed of two miles an hour, halting the phlegmatic burros there simply by ceasing to swear at them.

That is one of the finest things about jack packing—no lost motion while the train is at work, no waste of force while it is at rest. Its engine burns no gasoline, spinning uselessly in neutral, grinds out no brake shoes coming to a halt. When you wish a jack train to stop, simply leave off making it go. The response will be instantaneous.

Up there in the Colorado hills, Cliff and his partner, shrewd-faced old Tucker Giles, had made their pile and were at a loss to know what to do next. At least, Cliff was in that frame of mind, for, though Tuck had ensconced himself on Spring Creek, eight miles down the gorge, content to rust out there as a small rancher, Cliff had not yet arrived at that stage of life when rheumatic joints shriek for a niche near the fire.

Cliff was young, strong, virile. Height, six feet, and looked it—weight, two hundred pounds, and didn't look it. A capable skeleton, clothed in good, firm flesh, broad shoulders with tremendous muscular development, deep chest, lean flanks, massive calves and biceps.

Deep-blue eyes, serious, but with a glint of quiet humor, ever ready to break through, red hair permanently pompadoured by nature, and at times appearing to bristle aggressively.

Decidedly not a "parlor" face. Too rugged, too ruddy, the jaw too square,

the mouth too large, but all of it introducing to the most casual observer a man who knows what he wants and intends to have it—just such a one as would patiently blast a competency out of forbidding low-grade ore.

Mining on Lookout had been little more than a commercial proposition, like milling flour or sawing lumber. Ore was there, easy of access. So long as the profit repaid their toil, Tuck and Cliff had manhandled it to the surface, jack packing and rawhiding it down the cañon to the narrow gauge spur, which gulped it and shunted it away to the smelter.

Fifteen years previously, Cliff's father had appeared in the gorge with his son, then a lad of twelve. After a lean year in the placer on Spring Creek, Stevens and his offspring attached themselves to Tuck, winning success in the low-grade ore on Lookout.

Sixteen months later, Stevens, Sr., made a serious error in calculating the length of a fuse and the number of seconds requisite for getting out of its immediate vicinity, the result being that Cliff, lad that he was, picked up his sire's well-worn pick handle and took his place at Tuck's elbow.

No papers were signed, no court orders entered. There was Cliff, fatherless—there was Tuck, partnerless. From such a condition, the firm of Giles & Stevens evolved as naturally as two bison would graze off in company, after having met at a water hole.

Theirs was an absolute communism, with no accounts kept. After the first year of prosperity, Tuck had paid off the grubstake and discharged some mossy personal debts, in the making of which the lad had had no part. Later, Cliff had spent six winters in a Denver school, drawing on the common hoard as naturally as a squirrel eats nuts from the family store.

Still later, Tuck's motherless daughter, Mary, had taken her turn at the schooling, and now was busily engaged in keeping house for her father—also expanding and contracting Cliff's heart by alternately warming and cooling her demeanor toward him.

Cliff's great drawback was that there appeared to be no trace of jealousy in his make-up, or, if there was, Mary never had been able to locate the outcrop, much less the lode.

Mary was a pert little body, spoiled, of course, by too much petting by the firm of Giles & Stevens. She didn't propose to be taken for granted by Cliff, or any one else. She delighted in shaking her amber curls and smiling with her blue eyes at every spur-jingling cowboy or callous-handed, sourdough miner who happened along, often pouting for days after she had vainly tried to rouse Cliff's resentment.

Like the intermediate landing of an angled stairway, the Ledge broke the eight-thousand-foot climb from the nearest railway station, twelve miles away, to the summit of Lookout.

Above, the trail zigzagged and spiraled up the face of the mountain, threading in and out among formidable boulders and miniature buttes. Below, the ugly irregular slash of the gorge deepened to the south, as Spring Creek danced away to the upper waters of the Platte.

Off the northwest lay Blue Mound, a majestic, pine-clad dome, and above it towered the Semaphore, a lofty spire of quartz, eternally snow-capped.

The Ledge itself was as attractive as the view it furnished. Just a flatiron on the waist of the mountain, it broke the sheer fall of an icy brook which spilled out of Lookout, brawled and sang and roistered across the Ledge, to dive again light-heartedly off the shelf. From there the brook hurried on to the rendezvous where a half dozen similar streams gave birth to Spring Creek.

With barren walls of rock above and below, the Ledge had a light soil, pulled from the hill, and more than the usual adornment of shrubs, vines and flowers.

When Cliff off-saddled Gabriel, his bell jack, that hoary veteran of the trail, chevied the younger beasts off to the brush, as each was relieved of its burden, then took stand near his master to observe the unpacking.

A can of tomatoes, with biscuits, meant a short nooning, with scant perquisites for Gabriel. If coffeepot and frying pan were unslung, that promised pork rind, crumbs of pone, and perhaps potato peelings for the train leader.

But, if the Dutch oven—ah, the Dutch oven—came out of its bag, that signified a night encampment. Gabriel's trumpet sounded avidly. The oven had come forth, and with it—could it be? Yes, beans, firm, hard, delectable, slow-cooking.

"Ooankee! Ooankee! Ooankee!"

Beans!

With the last chortling note, Gabriel kinked his shaved tail close to his paunch and, after much preliminary sniffing and turning about, dropped to roll in the ashes of an old fire, then took station at Cliff's elbow, patently receptive, but too wise to indulge an undue familiarity.

Gabriel's morals were spotted. Long had he known that open piracy was a punishable offense, while furtive peculations, practiced in reason and moderation, were forgivable sins.

So he rubbed his tail against the exact spot on a scrub pine that previous experience had taught was free from knots and splinters, masked the avidity in his face with a look of abject pleading that would have won baksheesh from a stone image and waited drowsily for manna to fall.

One man in a thousand has a natural bent for the law or medicine. One in ten thousand feels divinely inspired to preach. Of every million, not more than one has the temperament necessary in a proper camp cook. Cliff was the millionth man.

First he split a pine knot and set it sputtering in a crevice in the flat rock near the pine, whence he had spanked the protesting Gabriel with a long-handled frying pan.

On this nucleus was built an honest camp fire, no mere handful of nondescript wood, gathered haphazard, but every fagot sound, dry and practically smokeless. As the flames raged, the beans parboiled frothily in a deep iron kettle. Just the berry and water, no salt or other seasoning.

Cook then raked open one end of the bed of coals, after every vestige of flame had departed thence, spread an even inch of gray ash over the red and deposited there Irish potatoes, unpeeled, but washed most conscientiously in the pool at the foot of the fall.

Atop, more dead ash, then live coals. Eggs, properly wrapped in successive strata of water-soaked newspaper, cuddled in the ashes alongside the tubers, to bake slowly to gold-and-white perfection. Fried eggs? A plebeian dish. Boiled eggs? Out with them. Poached eggs? A flavorless compromise. He who never has eaten roast eggs, with just a suspicion of parched shell, never has tasted eggs.

Bacon grilled slowly to crispness. Pone emerged from the Dutch oven, athirst for butter or pork gravy, whichever the gods might provide.

The coffeepot, containing water and nothing else, gathered heat units close inshore on the ruby sea, the coffee having been religiously measured out, ready to be placed reverently in the pot at the exact moment when a cheerful bubbling should denote a near boil—no more. All this was for consumption at luncheon.

Then, for the chief dinner dish, the last word in the science of cookery—

an epicurean masterpiece, to be consumed by those deemed worthy. When night shades have gathered and a chill mountain breeze chevies hungry souls to the glow of a leaping camp fire, with all outdoors as a dining hall—real baked beans!

Boiled to the point of plumpness, judiciously salted and peppered, sparingly but thoroughly, they find repose in the Dutch oven, snuggled in the very heart of the coals. The top is sprinkled lightly to insure the browning process, and ornamentation, as well as flavor, is added in the form of bits of scalloped bacon.

With the cover, there was more science. A strip of bread dough—sour dough, of course—is rolled between the palms and fashioned into a washer, which is introduced between cover and oven, to give before the pressure during the early stages of the baking, but to harden eventually as the pressure decreases. At all times this device keeps the oven hermetically sealed, allowing no atom of savor to escape and waste its sweetness on the desert air.

Wise old Gabriel was in no hurry to seek grass. Grass nibbling and brush browsing would do very well later. But first, slyly filched fragments of pone, eggshells brown brittled, perhaps an empty cracker carton with its delicious paraffine wrapper, salted and crumbed in the creases must start the banquet. Always last, and eminently best, rich-brown scrapings from the bean oven.

None of these dainties were ever openly bestowed. The solemnly innocent expression upon Gabriel's hypocritical countenance, when he had just succeeded in bolting some morsel without leave, appealed to his master's sense of humor.

Even Gabriel's daily allowance of salt was deposited near the fire. Then his master would depart upon some real or pretended errand, always returning to find the morsel gone, and Gabriel reposing in the exact position in which he had been left, apparently engaged in deep rumination. Accused and reproved, Gabriel stood placidly on his constitutional rights. You can't force a fellow to incriminate himself.

On this occasion, Gabriel ruminated under the pine for a time, then roused suddenly, stiffened like a stanch setter, ears pointed down the trail, and bugled uproariously.

Rising hastily, Cliff squinted along the black streak on Gabriel's spine and brought into focus, between the notch of the enormous ears, four dots which emerged from the gorge, took to the hill trail and disappeared around a turn.

An hour later, Gabriel's trumpet sounded again, and Mary Giles, accompanied by a strange man, came in sight, each mounted on a big, black Kentucky jennet from Tuck Giles' string.

At sight of the girl, Cliff rose hastily. At sight of the man, he sat down again. One good look had been sufficient to tell him that Mary had the cold-weather signal flying for him, while the newcomer appeared to be in high favor.

Cliff's remedy for such a condition was to smoke his pipe complacently, retain his good humor and ignore small slights imposed upon him.

Mary's latest find struck Cliff as being rather a poor specimen, physically. He was a gaunt, stringy, stooped fellow, somewhat undersized and shifty looking. At a glance it could be seen that he was unused to the saddle—an outlander fresh from the city.

Seeing Cliff, the stranger waved a hand in nonchalant friendliness, said something to Mary in a low voice, then laughed shrilly, evidently pleased at his own wit.

Then, noticing Gabriel, he laughed again and called in a thin, nervous voice:

"Hello there, old-timer! Is there any wild-ass shooting up on this hill?"

Cliff turned a guileless eye on the

pair and drawled with unruffled good nature:

"Haven't heard of anything like that being pulled off lately. Anyway, I've been regularly deputized as a volunteer game warden, and it's my duty to protect you during the closed season. Therefore, go forward without fear, if you're so minded, or light and hitch if that pleases you better. Better scramble down, Mary. I've a snack in the fire."

The stranger scowled blackly and was upon the point of retorting, but Mary, smiling in mingled amusement and vexation, plucked at his sleeve and whispered. Then the couple dismounted, and Mary partially relieved the awkward situation by introducing her companion as "Mr. Woodley, who has been our guest for a fortnight."

"He and father have some business which they wish to talk over with you, and we expected to have to go to the cabin to find you."

Woodley held out a flag of truce. "Mr. Giles and his daughter have spoken most highly of you, and of course I had no idea that I was addressing you when I made that awkward remark."

"No harm done, so far as I'm concerned," answered Cliff, promptly, but Woodley's fishy eyes took on a little glint of anger as he noted that this breezy, offhand mountaineer offered nothing by way of apology for his own rather caustic remarks.

Tuck Giles soon appeared, driving before him two burros loaded with the stranger's effects.

No conventional handclasp this time. Real, red-blooded men shaking 'em till it hurt, back slapping and "old-manning" each other as though they had been parted for years, instead of weeks. Cliff's rugged face radiated good-fellowship. Tuck's kind eyes twinkled merrily and even his gnarled beard appeared to wave joyously as the two off-saddled the Giles string. Mary removed travel stain at the limpid pool and brazenly assumed the office of chief cook, without asking permission, ostentatiously keeping Woodley close to her side.

As a concession to his guests, Cliff served dinner at five. At first nibbling experimentally, the city man caught the subtle flavor of camp cookery and displayed qualities of trenchermanship unsuspected even by himself. The others were old hands, needing no initiation. Gabriel got no scrapings from that oven, no scraps of pone. It was a complete clean-up, with sundry boxes of crackers and cans of beans added to stave off famine.

After the meal, Mary rolled up her sleeves and commenced the dishwashing, while Tuck proceeded to bring the business conference into session. Filling his pipe, the old miner raked out of the ashes a small stick, with a suspicion of fire at one end. Alternately holding this over his pipe and removing it to blow it into activity, he made known their errand.

"It's this way, Cliff"—*puff*—"Mr. Woodley's a retired business man"—*puff, puff*—"out here for his health, an' he's got some oil stocks that he knows are first class. He wants to let us in on a good thing." *Puff.* "Says that if we put in, say, four-five thousand apiece, we'll clean up a fortune sure."

Leaning back with his feet to the fire and his big red head resting on his crossed forearms, Cliff lazily blew smoke wreaths to the stars and ingenuously inquired:

"If Mr. Woodley has stocks which are certain to make him a fortune, why should he dispose of them to us?"

Mary turned from the dishpan and stood abstractedly scrubbing a kettle cover as she interposed:

"You oughtn't to be so discourteous, Cliff. We haven't known Mr. Woodley long, but we can say that we know him well and have confidence in him. We

think he's doing us a real favor to allow us to buy a part of his holdings."

Mary returned to her work, splashing suds prodigally and stepping about nervously, as a woman does when "put out" about something.

The stranger came out as spokesman for his wares. His sales talk was the old I'll-make-you-rich and you'll-let-me line of patter, spiced with declarations of gratitude for kindnesses extended by the Gileses. Mary [illegible] frequently, and Tuck, less demonstrative, but equally favorable, nodded sage approval of all that his new friend said.

It all seemed satisfactory.

Cliff lounged and smoked complacently, offering neither objection nor approval. Old Gabriel, nodding in the background, was not more indifferent or less responsive.

The salesman was doggedly persistent —Tuck hopeful, as always. [illegible] Mary who grew nettled by Cliff's [illegible] of enthusiasm.

"Don't be such a boor, Cliff!" she burst out. "Business is business, and you oughtn't to sulk because Mr. Woodley chaffed you a little."

Cliff came to life, raised to one brawny elbow and grinned whimsically.

"Me sore? Not a bit of it. Get off me, Mary! I'll buy anything on earth that's for sale at any price, if you people will quit acting peeved." Then, more soberly, "Tuck, you and I have split what cash we had, but we're pards just the same. If you're in this, I'm with you, of course." Turning to Woodley: "How many shares do you offer us, and what's the price?"

"It chances that I have ten thousand dollars' worth of certificates with me, and Mr. Giles is willing to take half of them. Of course, you can——"

"Sure! That's perfectly all right with me. Get out your documents."

The newcomer unleashed a pack and got out a small leather bag, from which he produced a bundle of papers. [illegible] scarcely glancing at them, Cliff flashed a check book and fountain pen.

"Tuck carries his dough in his pockets—the only bank he has confidence in —but I'll have to give you a check on Denver. Five thousand for me, eh? What's the full name?"

Grinning delightedly, Tuck fished in the bosom of his faded, blue-flannel shirt and hauled forth a mighty roll. Peeling off five bills without diminishing the roll appreciably, he gave them a careless flip in Cliff's direction.

"Here's my ante."

[illegible] flicker of flame glowed in the [illegible] pale eyes as he saw that big [illegible] tucked carelessly back into the old man's shirt.

Strangely enough, it was Mary who [illegible] thought about a stay of proceedings. [illegible] she might have caught her cue [illegible] Cliff who, having written his [illegible] and the currency in [illegible] he thumbed the cert[illegible] uncertainly. Willful Mary [illegible] her way. The big, big man had yielded obediently, and she [illegible] have been satisfied. Instead, she grew a [illegible] dubious.

"Oughtn't there to be a contract or receipt of some sort? Of course, it's all right, still, one of you might die, or an accident happen. What is it you give when you sell things? A bill of sale, isn't it?"

Apparently on the point of passing over money and check, Cliff drew them back with mock seriousness.

"Hear the conservative little business head! You don't finger this wealth, Woodley, till you've signed, sealed and delivered imposing writings. Here! I'll rig up a desk and have my private secretary draw a sale contract."

At a little distance from the fire, Cliff spread his notebook on a pack and handed the pen to Mary, Tuck holding a pine torch.

Cliff commenced:

"State of Colorado, County of

Boulder. Know all men by these presents, that I, Richard C. Woodley, party of the first part, in consideration of the sum of ten thousand dollars ($10,000) to me in hand paid, do hereby sell and convey to——"

Cliff paused suddenly. While dictating, he had been strolling in and out of the little circle of light, hands crossed behind him. He now turned to Tuck.

"The court rules that we ought to include the numbers of those certificates in this paper. Run over, old hoss, and get 'em."

Cliff resumed, to stop again when Tuck called excitedly:

"Hey! I can't find them things anywhere!"

All hands trooped to the fire to join in the search, which was fruitless, though all four knew that the shares had been left on that flat rock by the fire. Even the packs and utensils were moved, and various explanations offered, only to be disproved by further investigation. The salesman commenced to grumble suspiciously.

"Pretty piece of business. Ten thousand absolutely gone, and no one took it. Maybe you want me to think those papers took wings and——"

Tuck flared.

"See here, mister! All of us is a-guessin' like you are. None of us'd steal your stuff. Just put that in your hat. Them things is around here somewheres, so don't git grouched!"

Hunched down by the fire, his sharp chin held between his skinny hands, the little man glowered sullenly into the flames and answered with a tinge of sarcasm in his thin, flat voice:

"No trouble for you to say, 'Don't be uneasy.' It isn't your loss—it's mine."

"Not on your life," Cliff spoke up promptly. "I was the last one to handle those certificates, so I stand the loss. I'll just pay you. Then, if I find 'em, all right, and if I don't find 'em, all right anyway, so far as you're concerned. You don't lose—neither does Tuck."

Cliff tore up the check and drew another for ten thousand dollars, which he passed over unhesitatingly.

"You've got yours in any event. Here, Tuck!"

Cliff extended the bills, but his partner shook his head decidedly.

"No welchin' for me, son. We've always split grubstakes as well as ore. Win or lose, we whack even."

So that was decidedly and emphatically that. Knowing his friend's rigid code, Cliff could say no more, so he pocketed the bills and turned to replenish the fire, voicing the consoling thought:

"Anyway, it's a cinch those pesky things are around here somewhere, and we'll find 'em in the morning. Come on, Tuck. Let's hustle some firewood and shake down the bunks."

The appeased city man joined in the work cheerfully enough, and soon all hands were busy. The moon rose suddenly over Lookout, throwing a white glare on the Ledge, silvering the peaks, and, by contrast, inking the gorge below.

Foraging for fat pine, Tuck called excitedly from near the pool:

"Hey, Cliff! Look at the Semaphore!"

Arms full of boughs for bedding, Cliff took one glance in the direction of the distant spire, and bawled back:

"I should say so! Come on in everybody!"

The party reassembled at the fire, Cliff explained for the benefit of the guest.

"The Semaphore's our weather cone. It's in what we call our storm kitchen. When it disappears suddenly, as it just has, that means a storm, and in early springtime, like this, it usually is a severe one—probably an old he-blizzard, with icicles in his whiskers. We haven't time to pack all our plunder and round up all the jacks. You people

can make it to the ranch if you'll straddle some of those big black rabbits of Tuck's and start pronto.

"They'll hit for home lively, with a storm back of 'em, and you'll be sheltered in the gorge plenty long enough to get you home before she drifts much. I'll stick it out here and bring everything on down in the morning, if the trail's open. If it's closed, I'll hit for the cabin and wait for things to loosen up. The hill trail never gets blocked by a northwester, though you can't travel it during a storm. It's on the windy side."

Steve caught a jennet at the edge of the brush and commenced to saddle it.

Mary, quite contrary, offered rebellion.

"Huh! When did daddy and I get to be afraid of a little snow and wind? We'll stick, too, if you do."

Steve jerked the cinch home viciously, and took hold of the girl's arm.

"You'll climb into that saddle within ten seconds, or I'll pack you on with a diamond hitch."

Mary took one look at the determined face of the big, red man, as masterful in an emergency as he was easy-going and amiable ordinarily. Then Mary dutifully climbed.

To the surprise of every one, their guest announced that he would remain with Cliff and clung stubbornly to that determination, giving various reasons, but leaving unmentioned his real one, which had to do with five green-and-gold slips of silk-threaded paper in Cliff's pocket. The man was as rabid for money as a hound is for hare.

He would get what the big man had, one way or the other. The larger hoard in Tuck's shirt would come later.

Tuck led off, his uneasy beast clattering down the hard, white trail, scenting the coming storm, and instinctively seeking the home shelter. With a hand on the pommel of Mary's saddle, Cliff turned her jennet into the path, ambling alongside for a little way.

"I'm going out to Denver as soon as the trail's clear. In the classic language of Shy Anne, they've a preacher there. I want you to go with me."

Masterfulness works nicely in an emergency, but has no appeal to a romantic damsel of twenty, who wishes to see a big man on his knees.

Mary's chin went up, and she pulled her reins free. As she shook up her willing mount, she called back provokingly:

"I never have read the city directory of Denver. The town may be full of preachers for all I know. I'm sure I'm not interested."

With two mighty bounds, Cliff laid hold of the cheek piece and jerked the hard-mouthed little beast back onto its haunches. Plucking the girl from the saddle, he kissed her resoundingly. Then he set her back on her mount, thwacked the burro on the rump with his hat and shouted so that old Tuck on ahead heard, and grinned understandingly:

"You're a liar, Mary Giles! Just an ordinary, amateur, unconvincing liar, and you know I know it!"

It was ten o'clock. Ready for the attack of the storm demons, the bunk for the city man was securely covered by pack tarps stretched over standing alders, trimmed to proper pole length. Cliff's sleeping bag lay snug in the lee of a row of bushes, where it would be certain to be drifted under. Plunder was cached under an overhanging boulder, jacks hobbled to prevent them from drifting with the wind.

The moon still shone brightly on the Ledge, but bearing down from Blue Mound came a tumbling gray wall, writhing, twisting, frowning in angry menace. Up on Lookout, the tall pines suddenly ceased to sway in gentle rhythm, and bent and snapped in torment.

Dropping like a plummet, the tem-

perature had registered a change of forty degrees in as many minutes, and now, as it passed the freezing point, Cliff carried water from the pool, and, with a pine branch, sprayed the little tent, freezing it in bottle-tight.

Then the big, red man stepped out on the little rocky promontory near the camp and stretched bare, knotted arms toward the onrushing clouds—an Ajax defying the elements.

"Come on, you yelling devils! Come on and blow and hiss and howl and sting! We're ready for you!"

As though in answer to the challenge, the breath of the storm beat upon the Ledge, driving down, not snow, but finely chipped ice, which stung the skin and choked the breath and blinded the vision of every thing exposed to it.

At midnight, the hardy Cliff broke loose the icebound flap of the little canvas hut and handed in coffee, cunningly kept hot by burying the pot on a heated stone and covering it with ashes and soil.

"She's turned into a dry norther after all!" he yelled above the howl of the wind. "Just the tail of an old gray wolf that's been howling and snarling around over Wyoming for two-three days! She'll blow herself out before morning. Toss off this nightcap of Java, and then, sweet dreams."

Morning came—crisp, bright, smiling. Always companionable, Cliff chattered and chaffed as the two breakfasted lazily, basking in the grateful warmth of a sun that always shines after a mountain storm.

The guest said little, but managed to screw his thin, furtive face into an expression of amiability.

Liking his guest not at all, Cliff still mentally dubbed him a "mighty game tenderfoot." This estimate of the city man was further enhanced after the meal had been disposed of, and Cliff had commenced preparation for departure.

The guest demurred. He had come out for pleasure, not business, he explained. The stock sale had been an incident, a mere excuse for the trip. It would please him greatly if they could stay another day. That green pool below the fall was a likely place for speckled trout. Off season, to be sure, but fishing was fishing, whether a fellow got a strike or not.

Cliff acquiesced readily enough, and cheerfully spent the day dawdling about camp, keeping fire and tantalizing Gabriel, while the other fished unavailingly and eulogized the scenery.

The supper hour ushered in a perfect spring night in the mountains, every breath of air an etherized bracer. The air of the Rockies will not make a man live forever, of course, but it will make him think he's going to, which does just as well, for the time being.

Cliff sang and whistled at the dish washing and bed making, and his companion, equally industrious, though ineffective because of inexperience, laughed mirthlessly and even essayed a few dry jokes of his own.

There was a strain of some sort between the two characters, an incompatibility of temperament which each sensed, but chose to overlook—Cliff, because he was a good fellow; the other, because of those five crisp bills in Cliff's pocket, and their fellows nestling against Tuck Giles' bosom.

Bedtime came, and Cliff departed for drinking water. The little man rummaged among his goods, produced a flask, poured a drink into the metal cap and placed it on a rock near the fire. Then he sifted a little white powder into the flask, set it beside the poured drink and watched Cliff's approach, his pale, unblinking eyes giving no sign of the turmoil raging within him.

Cliff set the water down a few yards from the fire, covered it with the dishpan and stretched his great arms lazily.

"Believe I'll turn in, if you don't

mind. We were up late last night, and I'm not used to it."

The guest raised his drink.

"Wait a minute. Here's luck to us in anything we are about to undertake."

He set the cap down and pointed to the flask.

"Take a shot at it."

Cliff looked slightly puzzled.

"Me take a shot at it?"

"Sure."

With a movement too quick for the eye to follow, Cliff's hand dropped to his holster. There was a spurt of flame at his hip, accompanied by a tinkle of glass as flask and contents went hissing into the fire. As the volatile liquid flared up, a second shot sent the little metal cap spinning between the other man's feet.

Cliff guffawed uproariously, as the other sprang back, startled, but when the city man regained his composure and frowned in annoyance, Cliff ran a big red hand through his aggressive pompadour uncertainly and registered deep penitence.

"See here, Mr. Woodley! Guess I've made a little mistake. Understand, I thought the bottle was empty. That's our favorite way of disposing of dead soldiers out here, so when you told me to take a shot at it, I did just that. Sorry, of course."

"No harm done, so far as I'm concerned. I had mine, so you cheated no one but yourself."

The little man removed his coat, stepped to the tent and, with arms and shoulders inside, slipped his left wrist into the loop of a little leather billy, and returned to the fire.

As Cliff started to pass in the direction of his bunk, the other stepped up close, watch in hand.

"I've let this thing run down again. What does your old turnip say?"

Cliff drew out his timepiece with short fob attached and extended it at the full length of his long arm

"Look for yourself, then hang 'er on that bush. I always hang it up at night. A jeweler told me that was the best way to do. Good night, Woodley. Me for the hay."

For hours Cliff's guest lay in the tent, worried and irritated. Not for a moment did he consider abandoning the attempt to secure the money he had seen. He was puzzled by Cliff's actions, and his attitude. There was something unnatural about the uncanny way in which the big, breezy mountaineer casually side-stepped trouble, without appearing in the least alarmed, or even suspicious.

Finally a plan presented itself. Wiles had failed—direct action, sudden and unexpected, appeared to offer certain success. Already fully dressed, the little man left the tent by crawling under the rear flap and, six-gun in hand, commenced creeping toward the spot where Cliff's pallet lay.

The city man was unused to the woods, but natural caution compensated for his lack of experience. Once, when the toe of his boot grazed a rock with a rasping sound, he lay motionless for many minutes afterward, and again, when his pipe slid from his pocket to clatter lightly on the hard floor of the Ledge, he became a motionless splotch among the bushes, until convinced that his movements had raised no alarm.

He had seen Cliff shoot, and it made him shudder to think what the result would be, should his intended victim get anything like an even break.

Reaching the little fringe behind which the pallet lay, he listened again. expecting to hear the heavy, regular breathing of the sleeper. But the pounding of his own heart, the twitching of every taut nerve in his thin body, baffled concentration of that sort. Rising to his knees, he peered over the low bushes and made out the pallet.

At one end, the furry oblong was sil-

vered by a vagrant moonbeam, filtering through the screen of brush. There the sleeper's feet should be. At the other end showed the sleeping hood, indistinct in the shadow, but easily recognized. About two feet below the tip of that hood would be the chest. The six-gun was heavy—there could be no failure.

With his thin lips drawn back from his teeth, animallike, and his eyes glowing like a hunting cat's, the prowler rose to his feet, leaned far over and, with deliberate calculation, fired five shots in rapid succession. With the sixth cartridge under the hammer, he stepped through the bushes and braced himself, waiting for any possible movement, ready to deliver the finishing shot, should one be needed.

Not a sound, not a movement, not even the final writhing which precedes death, told him of success. A bullet must have found the heart, drilled clear through the spinal cord, or——

Sick with a sudden suspicion, the little man threw himself down and jerked the pallet open. Empty! Not even warm.

With a ratlike whine of fear, the would-be murderer fled to the tent, reloaded his gun with trembling fingers and sat, shaken, hopeless, waiting for retribution in whatever form it might take. The very stillness tore at his nerves, as no activity on the part of an adversary could have done. For the remainder of the night, he sat there, drinking whisky steadily, alert, listening, dangerous as a teased snake.

Speculation, supposition, had given place to certainty. That big, bluff fellow, with his jovial laugh and guileless eyes, was nobody's fool. He had demonstrated his ability to look after himself. His next step probably would be to look after his assailant.

Midnight—then the small hours dragged past. Then the haze of dawn gave place to broad day, before the little man stepped outside, fearfully, but of necessity.

He more than half expected to be shot on the instant, but he could not stay caged forever. Knowing that no act of his could help him in any way if attacked, the shaken little man summoned the last atom of courage that remained in his being and walked steadily over to examine the pallet. Nothing but the bullet-rent fur bag was there. The slicker cloth tarp and heavy blankets were gone—also the watch, which had been hung on the bush, and the rifle.

There was a ray of hope, after all. The big man might have left the neighborhood before the attempted assault. It was possible that he had become suspicious of his camp mate and gone down the gorge to arrange for his apprehension. Either that, or he had heard his assailant approach and got out of the way hurriedly. The latter was scarcely probable. There had not been time for him to gather so many articles.

Somewhat cheered, yet knowing that in any case it was time for him to travel fast and far, he commenced his preparations at once. First, he must eat. This was to be no boys' game of hide-and-seek, but a stern, hard chase, with life as the prize.

Raking open the ashes, he uncovered a few live coals, threw on some twigs and set the coffeepot in the flame. As soon as it was ready, he punched a hole in a tall can of milk, opened a carton of crackers and sat down. Scant fare, but it would do.

As he seated himself, a rifle barked from the hillside, and the coffeepot came skidding drunkenly toward him, brown liquid spurting from a hole on either side. Another shot sent the can of milk ricocheting past, spraying his clothing with thick, white fluid.

Then silence, inactivity, peace, just the final click of the lever, as an empty left the rifle's chamber and a fresh

cartridge took its place—just a suspicion of smoke haze by the boll of the big pine, up there beyond the alders.

The little man's taut nerves snapped. The strain of the night's vigil, the deadly accuracy of the hidden marksman, his utter inability to do anything by way of attack, defense, or even flight, the sudden reaction from new-born hope, momentarily robbed him of his reason, at the same time breeding in him that courage which is fathered by despair.

Springing to his feet, he emptied his six-gun in useless, aimless rage, shouting shrilly:

"Come down! Step out! Let me see you! I'm Morton, the bank looter! I killed a man! I'll kill you yet! You know how to shoot. I don't, but I'll fight you with guns! You're big and strong! I'm small and weak, but I'll fight you with my hands and feet! I'll fight you any way at all, if I only can get my eye on you!

Two magpies chattered and gibed above the boll of the big cedar by the pool. That was the only answer.

Doggedly Morton picked up the crippled coffeepot, poured what coffee it contained into a cup and drank it steaming, munching a few crackers with it. Then he turned to the tent, to spend the day there, hopelessly forming and discarding plan after plan.

By evening he had made his resolve. He would steal away in the night, and, on the night succeeding, he would reconnoiter the Giles place. He was still bent upon securing that money. Then to Denver to cash Cliff's check.

There was only the slimmest sort of hope for all of this, to be sure, but, after all, that big fellow was just a human being, not above error. Morton was no fool himself, but he had made mistakes. The other fellow might. In any case, win or lose, he must do something, and he saw fully as much chance for a bold counterstroke as for mere aimless flight through a strange country, with certain capture as the inevitable result.

At three o'clock, after the moon had set, Morton left the Ledge, carrying only the little leather bag, a package of lunch and his gun.

The man who wrote, "Hope springs eternal in the human breast," knew humanity. This weak little man had been evaded, trapped, baffled and tortured by uncertainty. He was weak physically, unused to firearms, unfamiliar with the country, and almost on the verge of nervous collapse. Opposed to him, he knew, was a cool, capable, strong-willed superman, an unerring marksman and a trained mountaineer, who doubtless knew every goat trail between the Semaphore and Denver.

Yet, when Morton reached the floor of the gorge, having traveled silently through the darkness, with no sight or sound to warn him that his movements were being observed, that egotism which lies latent in some degree in the most humble-minded of us and which had been this man's ruin, surged again through his weakened body, chased despondency from his half-balanced mind. As the day dawned, he paused several times to watch the white trail behind, confident that no one could follow unobserved.

As his spirits rose he altered his plan to correspond. Instead of skulking about the Giles place, he would go in boldly and employ strong methods. That big, relentless fellow doubtless was hanging about the camp back there, waiting for him to show up. Safety lay in acting before Cliff should become aware of his departure. The scheme would work out all right. It had to.

Then, as he rounded a little cluster of small buttes and glanced ahead, he saw Cliff Stevens, sitting comfortably in the warm sunlight, smoking his pipe complacently and eying Morton with no appearance of surprise. Morton's pale

face grew even more bloodless, and his eyes fluttered nervously as they roamed over the lazy figure by the path.

The big man's rifle leaned against a shrub, and his six-gun was in its holster. Morton's hand commenced to creep slowly toward his own weapon.

"I wouldn't try it, little feller," drawled Cliff, in a detached tone, as he tamped the ashes in his pipe with one hand, the other hanging carelessly at his side.

"I'm no champion gunman, and there are plenty of fellers around here who could make me look foolish at that game, but I could stand on my head and draw and kill you before you could crook your elbow."

The progress of Morton's hand toward the holster stopped. It could have been stopped in but one other way—by killing him. Had Cliff made the least motion toward his gun, or even started to rise, Morton would have shot it out with him, not in hope, but in desperation. Instead, he stood panting, wild-eyed, atremble with hate and rage, but unconsciously borrowing some of the other's impersonal attitude.

Watching Morton steadily, Cliff noted the inner conflict and grunted contentedly when the latter took his hand away from his hip.

"That's better. For two days now, I've been trying to confine my shooting to bottles and coffeepots and milk cans. At times, that's been pretty hard to do. If you get the idea, you'll pay attention to a few things I have to say. When you leave here, go right on past Tuck Giles' place, and don't turn in at the ford where his lane starts, now or at any other time.

"I'm telling you that for your own good, because if you start to cross that creek, I'll punch some holes in you, and you'll sink. A mile below there, the trail forks, the right hand going to the Denver stage station. The left hand takes you to Silver Plume, on the D. & R. G. Take your choice of the trails, but keep traveling away from this neighborhood. That'll be all now. See you later."

At the ford, Cliff tore a leaf from his notebook and wrote a message. This he tacked to an elm where he knew his partner came daily to water his saddle stock.

TUCK: Everything is all right. Mr. Woodley and I have gone to Denver on business. He suddenly decided to leave in the night, so I thought best to go with him. Woodley was in a great hurry, so we hadn't time to stop. Wish you would go up and bring down my jacks, and the stuff. CLIFF.

At the fork of the trail, Morton turned in on the path which led to the stage station. The thawing of the little skift of snow had left the ground soft on the slope, and he made no effort to cover his tracks. For an hour he toiled up the stiff incline, finally reaching the crest of the ridge, where the barren rock would show no footprints.

Here he rested for a time, lunching lightly from his meager supply of provisions. Then he turned to the left along the ridge, rightly supposing that the trail to Silver Plume must cross it. Though weary from sleeplessness and relentless strain, Woodley walked doggedly on, his progress slow, but steady.

By mid-afternoon he turned into the Silver Plume Trail and could see the little town far away at the foot of the opposite hill. Beyond it the railway meandered alongside Clear Creek, which raced down the cañon, Denver bound.

The tired man made a dreary camp that night, eating with no appetite and sleeping fitfully, only half warmed by the small fire he was forced to keep, much against his will, being fearful of attracting attention. When morning came, he worked down nearer the village and waited for the train, still remaining hidden.

A dozen times he heard the whistle sound from up the cañon, and twice he

saw the train appear and round a curve far above him—a tiny toy in the rugged majestic background. Then, when he was satisfied that he would reach the depot just in time to get aboard and away, he left the brush of the hillside and walked boldly along the rock-ballasted right of way.

Silently, nodding to the usual group of spectators on the platform, Morton entered the depot and approached the ticket window. Then every atom of hope, the last trace of fighting spirit, the small remnant of that which is man, oozed out of his flesh, leaving him an empty, useless, purposeless thing.

For Cliff Stevens stepped in from outside, strolled casually to his elbow and, grinning good-naturedly, stretched a hand and took the little black satchel from between Morton's limp, unresisting fingers.

"I've got the tickets, so we'll just get right on."

In a daze, Morton followed into the car and slumped into the seat pointed out by his companion. Settling himself comfortably, the big man glanced down at the abject figure huddled at his side, and in spite of himself felt stirred to pity.

"Look here, Morton," he said in a kindly tone, "I'm afraid I've made it a whole lot harder for you than was necessary. I ought to have brought you right in in the first place, instead of herd-riding you as you froze and starved and worried yourself down here."

Morton mustered the ghost of a smile.

"You're just a better man than I am, Stevens. You look as fresh as ever, and I'm all in. That's the difference."

Cliff shook his head slowly.

"No, it wasn't that. You didn't have anything like an even break. That first night I slept soundly up in the alders, while you lay awake plotting. After the shooting, I rolled over and went to sleep again, while you must have been fretting at the bust you had made, and trying to figure a way to get into the clear.

"Next morning I shot up your breakfast table, to keep you on edge, and took it easy all day, only watching to see that you didn't leave camp, as I more than half expected you would. When you didn't, I knew you intended to go in the night, so I sloped on down the gorge, took a nap and waited for you.

"Yesterday I played safe by taking a short cut to the stage station. When you didn't show up there before the stage left, I just left word for the boys to round you up if they saw you, borrowed a pony and came on here. Went to bed early last night and got another good sleep, with you in the woods somewhere, without bedding. I'm sorry—it was needless cruelty, but I knew you'd fight, and I was afraid I might have to kill you."

Morton answered in a flat voice:

"No difference if you had. They'll attend to that when they get me back to Frisco."

"You're mistaken about that, Morton. I read all about it at the time. That's why you didn't get me with the watch trick or the doped booze. That old watchman was reported dying in the hospital—I suppose you read that before you got out of touch with things—but they operated on his fractured skull and saved him. The worst you'll have to face is grand larceny. If you restore the money and plead guilty, you ought to get off light."

Morton's wan face brightened perceptibly, then clouded again.

"It may seem odd to hear me say so, but I've a certain fool pride left. Looting a bank for a hundred thousand is one thing. Being a cheap, fake-stock crook is another. I suppose you'll have to push that."

"Push what?"

Morton drew a little pink slip from his pocket and passed it to the other.

"Those oil shares I sold you were out-and-out fakes. There was no such company."

"Uh-huh. Pretty rotten at that. No officers' signatures or anything. Just some printing like so many handbills. It's a wonder that even innocent souls like Tuck and Mary bit on that kind of bait. Beats the dickens, don't it, what folks'll buy."

Cliff tore the slip into fine pieces which he allowed to drift through the car window.

"There now. I got away with the shares, and now I've got away with the check. That makes it all even."

"You got away with the shares?"

"Sure did. What I wanted was to play safe by keeping Tuck's money away from you, and"—grinning cheerfully—"I've still got it, so that's another thing that's all right."

"But I saw you lay those certificates on that rock by the fire and I'm certain that you didn't go there again until your friend called us to come and search for them."

"Right you are, but you didn't see me dip them into that can of bacon grease before I laid them down. Old Gabriel did the rest. If there's a thing that he likes better than any other thing, it's salt grease. We hadn't gone a dozen feet before the thieving old cuss commenced to munch 'em. Then he hustled back under that scrub pine and pretended to be sound asleep.

"You know, Morton, people have paid me the compliment of saying that Gabriel and I are a good bit alike temperamentally—sort of patient minded, you know, and inclined to get what we want without much fuss."

It was dusk at the stanch, little log cabin on Spring Creek. Tuck was bringing in wood for the fireplace, while Mary bustled about the supper table.

The front gate creaked and clicked, and a familiar voice called:

"Hello! Anybody alive in there?"

"Betcherlife there is!" yelped Tuck, joyously. "Come on in you ole strayin' maverick, an' tell us where you been keepin' yourself for the last hundred years."

There was a quick patter of slipper toes from the kitchen, and a gingham whirlwind rushed ahead of Tuck, as heavy footsteps crossed the slab floor of the porch. At the door, Mary checked herself suddenly, turned the knob slowly and extended a formal hand.

"Come on in, Mr. Stevens. *Father* will be glad to see you."

Cliff's hat swung in a wide arc from his head to his knee, as he bowed in best dancing-school form.

"Pleased to meet you, Miss Giles," said the big man soberly, as he caught the girl by the arms, swung her from the floor and solemnly kissed her. "Always glad to see any friend of *father's*."

After supper had been disposed of, the partners ensconced themselves by the glowing log fire, where, with pipes in mouth and toddy glasses at elbows, the one related the sins of the erring Morton, and how the latter had been close-herded into a state of collapse.

Her work finished, Mary came to the "front" room, just as Cliff had finished his tale.

"Mr. Stevens, I hope that Mr. Woodley got through safely."

"Safely? I should say yes! He's about as safe as any I ever knew."

"If it isn't too much trouble, I should like to have his address. He made me promise to write to him."

"Easiest thing in the world. Better jot it down, if it's so important."

Mary spread a sheet of paper on the center table, and poised her pencil. Cliff scratched his square chin reflectively, evidently determined to get it just right.

"'Better put it down this way—temporary address, care of the sheriff of Arapahoe County, Denver, Colorado.

Reasonably permanent address, California State Prison. Let's see—San Quentin, isn't it? I wouldn't put anything mushy into the letters—the wardens will insist upon reading all of them. Any more warm personal friends that you've lost track of?"

Tuck's raucous cackle broke out and, with it ringing in her crimson ears, Mary strode stiffly to her room, chin high, even her back registering offended dignity.

Two hours later, warmed by much toddy, at ease in mind and body, old Tuck fell asleep in his willow-bottomed rocker, his toes toasting on the bear-skin rug. Cliff tiptoed out to seek his own chamber. In the hall he stopped and rapped lightly on the girl's door.

"Mary!"

The door swung open a few inches, and there was a misty gleam of white in the half-gloom within.

"Well?"

"I brought one of those Denver preachers as far as Silver Plume. He'll be waiting there in the morning. Thought I'd best tell you to-night, so you'd have plenty of time to get ready."

The voice from within the room was what might be called brittle.

"Indeed? Well, I certainly do admire the assurance which never appears to desert you. But I'm afraid I shan't be able to interest myself in your absurdly useless preacher, unless"—sudden inspiration—"he's young and handsome and entertaining and knows how to treat a girl."

Grinning cannily in the protective gloom, Cliff raised his voice to an angry bellow.

"Shame on you, Mary Giles! Shame on you! Wanting to flirt with an absolute stranger. You're just crazy about city men—that's what you are! You oughn't to act that way, when you know how jealous it makes me!"

For the first time in weeks, Mary's laugh floated out easy and carefree.

"Don't roar at me so savagely, you great, big, jealous brute! I'm afraid of you, Mr. Bluebeard!"

Still smiling complacently, the great, big, jealous brute stamped heavily down the hallway and slammed his door with a vicious bang that brought nodding old Tuck up out of his chair and sent him trotting toward the pegs on which his rifle hung.

"Whazzamatter?" he called to the universe.

The door at the end of the hall re-opened, and a big, red head popped out.

"Go on to bed, Tuck," drawled Cliff, happily. "There's not the least little mite of anything the matter, here or anywhere else. Everything in this big, old world is exactly as it should be."

Redbeard

by Judson Hanna

Author of "Cobblers Four," "Courage and Cartridges," etc

IBRAHIM ZAGOUL KEPT A CENSER SHOP IN THE STREET THAT HAS NO NAME IN CONSTANTINOPLE, AND THE RED CROSS NURSE ASKED HER COMPANION IF SHE DID NOT THINK HIM OGRELIKE—FIENDISH. BUT HER COMPANION HAD A STORY OF THE SHOPKEEPER WHO LOOKED SO FIENDISHLY AT THE FOREIGN WOMEN . . . .

DID you visit the little censer shop in the Street That Has No Name? Then you know Ibrahim Zagoul. Boo! I'm sure he had seven wives and murdered them all—a Moslem Bluebeard. Only it's red, and scraggly. Sort of Bernard Shawish, you know. Didn't you find him ogrelike, my dear?"

The *Locksley Hall* was steaming past Corfu, and the passengers, after a lingering look at the distant pearl of the Mediterranean, were returning to their deck chairs and conversation. The speaker, a Red Cross nurse in uniform, looked at her companion, and added: "Zagoul may have the most beautiful little censers in all Europe, as they say he has, and there isn't much I'm afraid of, my dear, but the way he had of looking at one! The way he looked at every white woman! Tell me, didn't you find him wickedly ogrelike?"

"That depends," Milly Smith replied, looking out at the whitecaps running in the sun. She had been in relief work in the Near East, had passed through all the horror of burning, ravaged Smyrna and was returning to her home in the United States.

"That depends," she repeated thoughtfully. "I may tell you a story about Ibrahim Zagoul some day."

"The slaughter will begin after evening prayers on the third day, and will continue until sunrise of the fourth day. Allah has delivered the Feringis, the damned Europeans, into our hands."

Ibrahim Zagoul, who kept the censer shop in the Street That Has No Name in Pera, the foreign quarter of Constantinople, looked at his two companions, whom he addressed now and then as Hassan and Ahmed, and exclaimed, "Ah, if I were not so old!"

"Old!" Ahmed scoffed. "At forty-five a man may still be a father."

"I am not thinking of children. They are a sorrow," Ibrahim replied mournfully.

"And what would you do if you were not so old?" Hassan asked.

"I might take one of the Feringis to wife."

"You, a follower of the Prophet, would take an unbeliever to your bosom?"

"Some of them are very beautiful," Zagoul said with a deep sigh. "They are like houris, slim and graceful. I could endure one."

"For how long, Ibrahim?" Hassan taunted.

"For as long as she pleased me. Then out she must go."

The three men were silent for a few minutes, each drawing deeply on an American-made Turkish cigarette, and dreaming, perhaps, of the trim, pink-and-white houris who had returned to Pera at the end of the Great War and remained under the protection of Allied occupation.

Some of them, it was known, were now leaving, as the British and French troops withdrew from the city. Many were staying on. Had not Kemel Pasha promised there would be no disorder, no reprisals, when the Turkish soldiers took over the city? Besides, there were the foreign legations. One could always take refuge in one's legation.

Hassan, the youngest, spoke. He was thirty, and skeptical. "I do not think there will be any hunting of infidels. Kemel Pasha—may Allah preserve him—has given his word."

"The word of a Turk is the word of a Turk!" Zagoul replied with devout fervor. "But—accidents *will* happen. And Kemel can explain all. The Jews, or Greeks, taking advantage of the change of administration to revive old hatreds, attacked their Turkish neighbors, and the Turkish men and women defended themselves from death and shame. The rioting was put down quickly by our soldiers.

"It will be deeply regretted that one or two foreign residents put themselves deliberately in the way of the fighting and were killed. Many apologies, and promises of indemnity which will never be paid. Oh, it can be arranged. It *has* been arranged. On the night of the third day, Allah will give the infidels into our hands. Our soldiers have been instructed.

"From dark to dawn they will see nothing, hear nothing. No doubt they will do a little baiting and looting themselves—of the Greeks, of course. They have some scores to settle for the burning of Smyrna. Ah, if I were not so old——" Again Zagoul left his thought unfinished. Snapping his cigarette into a corner, he uncrossed his legs and leaned back against the side wall of his tiny shop, scowling into the street.

It was a very narrow street, running from the Bosporus out to the limits of the city, so narrow that when a burdened donkey passed, the bystanders were crowded into the stalls themselves. Sometimes the donkey's load was far-reaching and brushed down fruit and merchandise piled incautiously high on the trays in front of the shops. Then there was gnashing of teeth, frenzied cursing in four languages, with shrill appeals to the leaders of varied religions.

Some of the shops were mere booths blocking the arched alleyways that ran between the houses. Awnings of striped canvas and, since the Allied occupation, of khaki, jutted out from the walls, supported by shaky poles, giving the street, from a little distance, a crazy, tilted appearance.

There was no more beautiful display in the street than Ibrahim Zagoul's assembly of censers—not in all Europe, maybe, certainly not in Constantinople. Some hung by slender chains from nails pegged into the wooden store front. Others stood on their own bases on the trays below. They were made of silver, of brass, of copper, tinted glass,

porcelain, unornamented or chased, or decorated with figures in bas-relief.

Some were inclosed in filigree baskets of most delicate workmanship. A few were made of terra cotta, but even those molded of the more humble clay were of exquisite symmetry and design. In Millicent Smith's quaint, idiomatic Tennessean, they were "perfec'ly devastatin'."

Zagoul did not sell many of his censers. Works of art are not sold like yards of cotton. But on each sale he made a profit running from five hundred to one thousand per cent, and he had become a money lender.

It was a colorful street. There were bright-hued fruits, vivid silks and cottons, glazed pottery of many tints, sparkling tinware—even colored drinks in tall glasses, green and purple and rose and amber, covered with bits of pasteboard to protect them from the dust and multitudinous flies.

In the narrow fairway, people of many nations, aloof, disdainful of one another in mind, yet compelled to rub thighs and shoulders by the overcrowding of the street, passed in endless procession—Georgians, Italians, Russian refugees, Greeks, Jews, Armenians, Albanians in national costume, Syrians, sailor uniforms from the Allied fleet and bayonets from the Allied regiments, unveiled Turkish women wearing European shoes, and picketpockets and beggars.

Ibrahim Zagoul viewed it all from behind his array of precious censers with an impatience, an intolerance, that amused Hassan, the cynic. It would have been natural if Zagoul were leniently disposed toward these people, unbelievers and outcasts though they were, seeing that he drew a fat living from them.

But he was not, apparently, and, for the last day or two, his friends had noted a growing irritability on his part, especially toward the peoples from the western countries. Hassan assumed that some sharp woman of the Feringis had got the better of him in a bargain.

Others might pause to examine his wares, and Zagoul sat on his heels in feigned indifference. But let a Feringi woman stop before his stall, and he went forward quickly, stared boldly into her face and even tried to question her in her own tongue, for he spoke three or four languages of the West, imperfectly, of course, but well enough to make himself understood.

Two or three of the women were frightened evidently by his unusual advances because they moved on quickly, looking over their shoulders as if fearful he would follow them. One woman only laughed at his impudence and lingered to ask the price of a silver censer that caught her fancy. She had deep-blue eyes and golden hair of silky fineness, and cheeks as velvety and pink as almond blossoms.

Zagoul named a price, but carelessly, as if his thoughts were on other matters, and when the girl started to move away, he attempted to detain her.

"Are you Mamsell Smeeth?" he asked.

"Well, I like that!" she exclaimed. "What affair is it——"

"Where have you been?" Zagoul interrupted.

She would not answer him again, and he pressed another question. "Were you in Smyrna?"

She, too, now, seemed frightened and moved on quickly, but she did not watch him over her shoulder, as the others had done.

Ibrahim's appearance at best was not reassuring, but when he pressed close to a woman of an alien race and stared into her face, few women would refrain from a shudder. Of ordinary size, he had a very dark skin, intense black eyes which glowed fiercely when he talked, a nose strongly aquiline and a red beard, somewhat pointed, and

straggly. He costumed himself in the long trousers of the New Turk, sandals, and embroidered vest and the inevitable red fez of the true believer.

His closest friends knew nothing of his ancestry. Nationally and by religion, he was a Turk. It was whispered among the other shopkeepers that his father had been a Russian Jew and his mother an Orthodox Greek, and that he was apostate to the faith of both.

When the golden-haired houri left, Ibrahim resumed his seat and his talk about the Christian-baiting. Armenians, Greeks, Jews—the last-named included with the Christians because they believed not in Mohammed—were to be hunted down like rats, he said, with whatever Feringis, or Occidentals, were so unwise as to betray their whereabouts on the night of the third day after evening prayers. And once more he lamented the fact that he was too old to take part in such a pleasurable pastime as killing and robbing the unbelievers.

Presently he burst out into a passionate denunciation of the Feringis. It was they, he said, who caused all the trouble in Turkey, encouraging subject peoples like the Armenians to rise against their Allah-ordained masters, the Turks.

"Here comes one of them now," he whispered, and Ahmed and Hassan strained forward to see a tall, well-set-up man in the uniform of a British officer moving slowly up the street in the middle of the human current.

Captain Percy Sinclair was not interested in curios, nor was he buying yards of calico nor cooking pans of tin. On the afternoon past he had met a charming lady in the Street That Has No Name, an American girl with deep-blue eyes and the softest hair he had ever seen, whose laughter was like soft bird notes, and who spoke with a tender little drawl that awoke an old hunger in his heart.

Physically and mentally he was a type of Britain's best. Just now a little blasé and world-weary with war and longing for English town sights and English fields. Pensive, too, and a little sad because he was not going home with his regiment, having been assigned for duty at the British legation. This was all very well in its way, but it did not kill the sorrow of present disappointment and the longing for a night in Piccadilly and an afternoon on his mother's lawns in Sussex.

Milly befriended him, as it were, and lifted, for a little, the shadow from his heart as they stood apart from the mob and talked for half an hour about Tennessee and Sussex, of the queer doings in the Latin Quarter just beyond them, of roses, and the ravishing beauty of moonlight on the Bosporus.

Milly liked him at once, and the captain—well, the captain thought legation duty would not be so dull with Milly in Pera.

So he came again to the Street That Has No Name, trusting to her woman's understanding to know he would come. He stopped at the little censer shop because he had seen Milly stop there before he caught up with her, but when Zagoul stepped forward, rubbing his hands ingratiatingly, and addressed him, the captain looked at him coldly and merged again with the current. A little higher up the street he overtook Milly and could not conceal his satisfaction.

"Did you—may I hope that you expected I might drift along here again?" he asked eagerly.

"To be perfec'ly hones' with you, captain, I did think I might see you. Friends old and new are too few with me just now to warrant my neglecting them. My chum has deserted me, fled ignominiously from the Turkish occupation. She is a painter and lives in the quartah here. You can almost see her studio. Begged me to flee with her,

but I refused absolutely till I saw Constantinople. Do you think there will be any trouble?"

"Not a bit. The Turks are too jolly glad to see us go to risk our return by any high jinks, which, I believe, is an Americanism."

"All is not gold that glitters," Milly replied with a drawling laugh that drew instant response from Sinclair. "Do you know, you looked des'late, forlorn, when I first saw you yestuhday. Are you sorry to leave Constan'?"

"I am not leaving. My regiment goes without me."

"Therefore the gloom. I have heard that a British officer's regiment is his sweetheart, his mother, and his church, to him."

"Hardly, Miss Milly. It can never have blue eyes and hair like sunlight on rippling water, y'know."

"My, but you are progressing, captain. I suspect you have been learning from these unspeakable Americans."

"Hyar, hyar! I won't have you calling yourself names. And you might ask me up to tea, y'know."

Milly started, rejected the idea instantly, then welcomed it back and said finally, "It's too, too dre'fully unconventional, captain. I don't think it would go anywhere except in Pera, in the quartah. But I dunno. Maybe we can put it ovah without being dropped from the social register. Well"—with a light laugh—"we'll try it anyhow."

So they had supper in Milly's friend's studio and looked at all Milly's friend's paintings, and then, because there seemed nothing else to do, they sat on the little balcony overhanging the street and were very happy. Milly told him about her little encounter with Ibrahim Zagoul.

"Isn't it funny how he knew my name," she finished.

"It isn't anything to worry about, Miss Milly," Sinclair said reassuringly. "He knows all the foreigners in the quarter, and they all know him. He lends money, y'know."

At nine o'clock the captain remembered that he might have military duties at the legation. He held Milly's hand very long in parting, and she found no fault with him. But when he was gone, she took account of herself.

"It mus' be the demoralizing influence of the quartah," she said. "Millicent Smith, you mus' never see, never speak to him again."

But as she was dropping off to sleep she whispered contentedly, "He is one of England's finest—Lord bless him!"

In spite of her resolutions, Milly Smith went down the Street That Has No Name at the precise hour the next afternoon. She pretended to herself that she was looking for no one, but nothing escaped her watchful eyes. She noticed with a little sinking of the heart—not of fear, but a sense of lost comradeship—that the Allied bayonets had disappeared. In all the street she could not see the olive green nor the horizon blue of British and French uniforms. One Turkish soldier patroled the Street That Has No Name.

The street did not reach quite down to the water front. It was blocked by a beautiful Turkish residence, built of white marble, with touches of dull green and gold and pink about the roof.

Milly stood for a minute before turning. The picture was almost breathtaking—the beauty of the palace, the green lawns, and, beyond them, the sparkling waters of the Bosporus.

Then she retraced her steps with a little thrill of anticipatory delight. The homesick, handsome English officer would not fail her.

She reached again the censer shop of Ibrahim Zagoul and paused to ask the price of the swinging silver censer, as if she thought it might have changed overnight.

Zagoul looked at her with burning,

hungry eyes, quoted a different price for the censer, but did not attempt to detain her. When she left the stall, he called to Hassan and Ahmed, who were seated in the rear of the shop.

"Come quickly! You see the golden-haired Feringi? Follow her. Look well at her face so that you will know her to-night, when the Christian-baiting begins. See where she lodges, and return quickly and tell me. I will pay you gold."

The two friends hurried out to obey his wish. In half an hour they returned and told Zagoul what they had learned.

"When the infidel-hunting begins to-night, bring her here to me," Zagoul said with glowing eyes. "It will be easy. But mind you do not hurt her—not so much as one little scratch on her body. I will have no damaged goods."

Hassan and Ahmed exchanged glances. Woman-baiting had not been a weakness with Zagoul. Still, if he wanted the golden-haired Feringi that was his affair, and he would pay well for her. They argued over the price he should pay them, while Milly reached the point in the street where the shops ended and the quarter began. So far, no sight of Captain Sinclair, and she began to apologize for him. Of course his duties at the legation held him. When he was free, he would come to her. He knew where to find her now.

She spent a heavy hour in her friend's studio, sitting, thinking. There was no one in the street to whom she could go. She had caught sight of a few of the foreign colony, mostly Italian and French landscape painters, and had heard their fun making at night, but her artist friend had not had time to make her acquainted with any of them.

She went out on the little balcony and watched the street till the muezzin's sunset call to prayer. Then she got herself a light supper and went back to the balcony. Presently it was dark, with only one little street light, and she heard far off, growing nearer, the screams of women, and high-keyed, angry voices of men. She knew what it meant—she had heard far worse in Smyrna.

Freed of Allied control, the Turks and Greeks were at the old game of baiting each other, and, incidentally, the Armenians and Jews. It was to be expected, a sporadic outbreak here and there, but the Turkish troops would soon restore order. Had not Kemel Pasha promised? As yet she felt no danger for herself, but she went back into the room and closed the balcony door to shut out those cries of mortal pain and fear.

After a little, she heard running in the street just outside, and sharp cries and revolver shots, and she hurried onto the balcony. Almost below her, men were struggling in a confused mass, silent now—fifteen, twenty red fezzes trying to drag down a tall, central figure. And suddenly the breath caught in her throat. It was Captain Sinclair.

She could not make out his face, but there was no mistaking the tall, robust figure. He was fighting a desperate battle against overwhelming odds, fighting for her, fighting for his race. They would get him in the end, though already three Turks lay motionless outside the confused circle.

She stumbled back into the room, lost her way in the strange surroundings, so it was a full minute before she reached the street. The shooting had died out. Turks were running in all directions, but six men lay motionless. One of them, she knew, would be the gallant British captain.

Stepping past Turkish corpses, she knelt at his side, listened for his breath, felt his heart, raised his hand and at last realized that he was dead. Blood was spreading from under him on both sides. They had stabbed him in the back.

"Oh, how dre'ful, how dre'ful!" she whispered. "Oh, my dear, my dear!" Bending still lower, she kissed his lips still warm with life. It seemed that he must open his eyes, return her kiss, but though she kissed him again, his eyes did not open, his pale lips did not move.

"Oh, my dear, my dear! I am too late with my kisses, and I would have given them before. I wonder if you know."

She sat back on her heels and considered. Something must be done—she hardly knew what. She could not leave that splendid body lying there in the dirt of the street, and it was impossible for her to move him. Why did nobody come? There were other Europeans in the street. Why did they hide behind doors?

She thought suddenly of a Red Cross brassard in her handbag, a broad, white sleeve band with a scarlet cross on it. She would put it on. Maybe it would protect her. Then she would go for help to the American legation. There must be help somewhere—a few Allied soldiers left in the city.

Returning to her rooms she found the brassard, slipped it over her arm, pinned on her hat and, as a final precaution, took a little dagger from her hand bag and placed it inside her shirt waist.

When she reached the bottom of the stairs, rough hands seized her, a heavy manteau was thrown over her head and a cloth was wound around and around the lower part of her face. She struggled furiously for a moment, and then calmed, realizing that the more she resisted, the greater indignities she would suffer from those violating hands.

Whether she fainted or not she never knew, but the next thing she remembered was being set down abruptly on her feet and kept from falling by a man's hands. The cloth was unwound from her face, she tore off the mantle and looked into the face of Ibrahim Zagoul.

Recoiling a few steps, she struck the wall of the room and stood there, facing him with incredulous eyes.

He parted the curtains behind him, and she heard him in his shop arguing with two men—about money she thought. She looked around her. There was no door, and only one window, head-high, and too small to admit her body. On one side of the room was an inlaid stand holding a lighted lamp. On the other, a divan, where Zagoul slept, doubtless.

She shuddered and moved as far from it as she could. There was no escape. She must face the issue, and she thought suddenly of Captain Sinclair. She would kill, as he had killed, for the honor of her race. If the shopkeeper touched her, she would strike the dagger into his heart. Taking it from inside her waist, she held it behind her back and waited.

The talking ceased. She heard the men leave the shop. The curtains parted and Zagoul stood before her. His eyes glowed with fearful intensity. His beard trembled with excitement, and his voice shook with emotion as he asked, "Are you Mees Smeeth?"

She did not reply.

"Please," he said, "answer me. I must know. There was a young woman in Smyrna who helped the wounded women and children. Her name was Mees Smeeth." Zagoul took something from his waistband and went on, "Here is a little picture of her. It is not very clear, but I think—I am almost sure—it is a picture of mademoiselle."

Milly reached out her left hand and received a well-remembered snapshot of herself taken on the dock on a Peninsular & Orient boat, a full year before.

"Where did you get it?" she asked sharply.

"Ah! You know it. You gave it

to an old woman in Smyrna. Do you remember her?"

"I remember her perfec'ly."

"That old woman was my mother!" Zagoul exclaimed dramatically.

"Your mother! You an Armenian!"

"For reasons of business I am a Turk, but by blood, and in my heart, I am still Armenian."

"But what has all that got to do with your bringing me here?"

"I had you brought here to save you. The Turks are running mad to-night. No woman of your race was safe. Every woman of the Feringis in Pera will be robbed—and worse. The home of your friend, the artist who went back to your country, was marked. They would have found you there."

"Zagoul, are you telling the truth?"

"As Allah—as God is my witness. I heard that an American woman had come here from Smyrna. I feared it was you, and for many days I have been watching for you in the street. I made my friends believe I hate all Feringis, so that I might save you when the time came. But you did not trust me. You would not have come here if I had asked you to come—for which I do not blame you. I am sorry. I warned them to be very gentle with you, but to bring you here or I would kill them. Listen! The dogs have tasted blood."

They heard a rush of feet past the shop and shrill cries: "Allah is God, and Mohammed is his prophet! Kill, kill the infidels!"

Milly shuddered.

"You are safe here," Zagoul said. "They will not suspect old Zagoul the Turk of sheltering a Christian. Hassan, Ahmed, do not know why I had you brought here. And I have stopped their mouths with gold. They thought—Mees Smeeth, I would not harm you with one finger. I am not worthy to kiss your feet. You did for my old mother what I did not think any woman of the Feringis would do for my people. May Allah reward you!

"You saved her with food and tender care when she was dying. She came here with other refugees and found me, but the past suffering had worn her out, and she died in her son's arms. Still, she was happy, remembering all you did for her. Your kindness was her most cherished memory, and she talked of nothing else. She always carried that little picture of you and called you her daughter."

Zagoul paused. His voice had been soft and low. Tears stood in his eyes. Milly's thoughts were far away in burning Smyrna. After a moment Zagoul went on: "When it is day, we will send a messenger to the American officers, and they will send a special guard for you."

He slipped between the curtains and was gone, returning with burdened arms. "Here are new blankets and silks, so that my mother's daughter may sleep," he said. "Good night, Mees Smeeth."

"Good night—brother."

Zagoul flashed around, salaaming very low. "You do me the greatest honor," he said. Again the hangings parted, and he was gone.

After a little, Milly unrolled the blankets and found the silver censer she had coveted. In it was a card with two English words crudely written, "Accept, please."

Holding it up by its slender gold chains, she caressed it with her hand. "How perfec'ly lovely!" she said softly. "And I mus' keep it. I'll pretend his mother gave it to me."

So she slept on Zagoul's bed that night, but it was not of Zagoul she was thinking. A little way up the street lay one of England's finest, dead for her sake, for the sake of his race. Surely he had been coming to see her, to protect her, maybe, when the pack pulled him down and killed him. Milly

cried softly, covering her head with the silks, lest Zagoul hear her.

If Sinclair had lived, she might not have married him, might not have loved him, but the tragic event of his death filled her with sorrow for him and for herself.

Finally a comforting thought came to her, and she whispered, "But he died splendidly. Heaven be very kind to him!"

She heard Zagoul's regular breathing beyond the curtains, and presently she fell asleep.

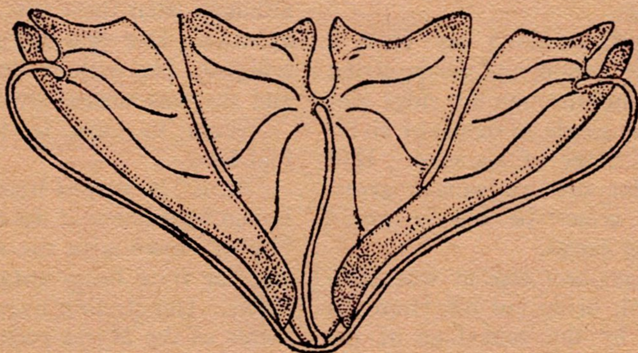
A British battleship went to Constantinople to receive the body of Captain Sinclair, and a Turkish battleship, with its own flag at half mast, and the flag of Britain flying from the masthead, followed in its wake all the way to the Thames roadstead—humiliation enough, perhaps, for the new government at Angora, but of little moment to the long figure lying in the flag-draped coffin.

So one of England's finest came home to his mother's lawns in Sussex, to his beloved Sussex downs.

Corfu was a purple blur on the eastern horizon, and the passengers of the *Locksley Hall,* having gazed their last on the gem of the inland sea, returned to their deck chairs and picked up the broken threads of conversation.

The girl in the Red Cross uniform looked at her companion, the relief worker, and asked: "But didn't you find Ibrahim Zagoul wickedly ogrelike, my dear?"

Milly Smith considered and finally answered: "It all depends. I may tell you a story about Ibrahim Zagoul some day."



The Warning of the Drip

by Harry Harrison Kroll

Author of "The Options," "Lassy's Gold," etc.

MYSTERIOUS WARNINGS WHICH CAME NIGHTLY OVER A WATERFALL FINALLY RESOLVED DAVE SOUTHERLAND TO ACT, WITH THE RESULT THAT DESPERATE TRAIN ROBBERS WERE CAPTURED, AND DAVE FOUND THAT THE MOUSE——

DAVE SOUTHERLAND found the isolation and profound loneliness of the mountain wilderness at Cuss-'em-dead Knob, where he had been assigned as operator on the Southcentral, almost unbearable after his experience in town at the school of telegraphy. For about a million miles he could see nothing but the steady roll of mountain ridge, and the endless doghair of timber.

The railroad, sneaking out from a spar below the station, and disappearing again in a tunnel through the ridge just above, was the single evidence of civilization within range of his eyes. Had it not been for the sympathetic greetings of train crews, he felt he would have gone bug house.

But the cigar-box station was sheltered and cool, being cut off from the summer sun by the bald face of the cut in an alcove of which it nestled, and overhung with trees and vines. A spring flow that dripped from a pocket in the ledge right at his window furnished the company of sound as well as a supply of icy water. Then, within a few days, came "Mouse," and his lonesomeness was forgotten.

He called her Mouse, though her name was Sue Treadwell. But she looked so much like one of the timid, bright-eyed little woods rodents that he could never quite bring himself to call her by name. He fancied some billion tons or so of the hard mountains had fallen upon her at some time in her life and pretty well mashed her beyond growth. She was very slight of body, although what there was of it was hard as nails. Her eyes were black and intelligent, her actions quick and vivid, and she was smart—smart as a brier.

"Want to l'arn to telegraph," she told him.

"Sure," he agreed heartily. He fixed her an instrument at the end of his desk. She sat down with the air of one who was far from being unfamiliar with the ticker. Her fleeting fingers began fragments of the Morse code.

"Why, you already know!" he admired.

She nodded in her swift way.

"A little," she admitted. "But not much. I want to learn good."

That suited him. He began training her with avidity.

Bit by bit now he learned about her.

She lived a quarter of a mile above the station on the "bald." Her father was old "Hardtack" Treadwell. Dave figured that if the old fellow had been a seaman, he would have been a pirate; if a resident of the jungle, a gorilla; but being a mountaineer, he probably was anything from a moonshiner down —or up. The old scoundrel was black and bearded and terrible. Dave was honest in his fear of the man.

The Mouse had several brothers, counterparts of old Hardtack. What they all followed for a living was problematical. It was none of Dave's business, so he did not inquire. At times he vaguely wondered, however.

Sue picked up telegraphy with amazing rapidity. But her virtual illiteracy hampered her greatly, so he facilitated matters by teaching her reading and spelling. No. 7, running just at sundown, was an aid in the educational process, for Mike Stevenson, the engineer, slowed down as much as he dared in order that Hawkins, chief mail clerk, might dump him off the daily paper, and occasional magazines. These became the library from which he taught the mountain girl a larger knowledge of her mother tongue.

As the summer rocked along, drifting into early autumn, and Dave became quite accustomed to his surroundings, faint doubts troubled him about the Mouse. Was he learning to love her? Darned if he didn't believe so! On the other hand, was she beginning to love him? He was equally confident of that.

In the early stages of their companionship it was merely a matter of letting the days drift, seeing them pile up uneventfully, like the mountain ridges must have piled up in ages gone. But one evening at dusk, when her mother's shrill call terminated that day's companionship, he caught the Mouse in a swift, unformulated embrace, and kissed her, feeling the fierce return of hug in her stout arms.

That night matters didn't look just as they had previously been appearing. A lot of questions beset him. He couldn't sleep. What about those folks—the Treadwells—anyway? Bad eggs, the men were. No question about that. Not much was known on the mountain about them, but that little was sufficient. Old Hardtack had killed his man—two of them. The boys were mixed now in another killing and robbery of a bank; were under indictment, in fact. Only the Mouse, and her grim, abused mother, could be said of the entire household to have escaped some form of ill repute.

The one salient fact that Dave could not get away from was that the girl had her father's blood in her. No matter how he tried to modify the relationship, to mitigate its seriousness, he could not dodge the relentless fact itself. And bad blood was a thing he had always been taught to fight shy of. "Keep away from bad folks, and people that are kin to bad folks," was his father's counsel always. Dave never questioned the discretion of those words.

That night he lay open eyed, sleepless, troubled. All of the Mouse's virtues, and they were many, could not, somehow, offset her kinship with murderers and thieves.

Outside of his window the drip of the spring water off the ledge beat a monody of lost hope, of upset desires. Suddenly some change in the regular drip affected his sense of hearing without for the moment actually reaching his consciousness. It was one of those singular impressions the mind sometimes notes, yet appears to make no record of it on the brain.

What were the drops of water saying? "No. 7 Friday night. No. 7 Friday night!"

Dave sat up. He had listened to that trickle of waterfall for six months now, night after night. He had subconscious-

ly grown so intimate with it that he would have sworn that he knew its habitual voice as well as he knew anything. Never before had there occurred a break in it. Always the sound had been a steady pour, scant, it was true, but steady. Now it spoke humanly, in a language which becomes to every telegrapher as vital as his mother tongue. It talked the code of the ticker!

But when he attempted to concentrate his attention upon the thing, the stream poured with its wonted regularity. He got out of bed, going to the window and looking out. A wisp of moonlight caught the flow and transformed it into a thread of silver. Not even so much as a liquid raveling indicated any break in the thread.

He went back to bed. Presently he was dozing. He woke out of a nightmare. "No. 7 will be robbed Friday night at Nailor's Junction! No. 7 will be robbed Friday night at Nailor's Junction!" The drip had caught him just this side of slumber, and told him its warning again.

This time he leaped out of bed, quivering, cold. He recalled all the tales he had ever heard in these mountain wilds—and he had heard enough tales, at that. Haunted ravines, ghost-infested localities—such traditions clung everywhere in the mountains. The rock against whose cool sides the station nestled had been known as Cuss-'em-dead Knob since the time when no man could remember to the contrary, and had been christened with the blood of a man named Elijah Green who had been killed here by a mountaineer named "Cuss-'em-dead" Grier. Tradition said it was haunted.

That some eerie voice was talking to him Dave could not doubt. For he looked out into the quiet autumn night. No sight nor sound gave evidence of human contiguity. The endless mountains buttressed a low, star-studded sky. The forest gloomed in mute rest. The tiny stream out of the face of the cliff purled forth undisturbed.

To satisfy himself completely, Dave donned his clothes, took out his gun, and made a complete and careful circuit of the railroad premises. He carried his investigations three hundred yards both up and down the track. He even climbed the spur and went up within sight of Hardtack Treadwell's cabin. The place was dark and silent. Everybody was in bed and asleep these long hours.

He found nothing whatever to explain the singular occurrence more than the supernatural, which he preferred in no wise to entertain. Baffled, upset, he went back to the station and sneaked again to bed. Eventually he went to sleep.

Morning brought a smile at his fright of the night before. Too much pork and beans, and considerable chunks of loneliness are apt to upset one—particularly when one is in love.

The Mouse did not show up during the day, however. This was curious. She had missed coming down to the office few days since his being stationed here. Though he missed her, and wondered a great deal concerning her absence, in one way he was glad she had not come back. He wanted time to recover from some of his early inhibitions—the one about tying up with bad blood, for example.

That day was Tuesday. Three days intervened between then and Friday. His mind kept going back to the warning.

"Dog-gone it anyhow!" he muttered to himself over and over during the day, pausing occasionally to listen to the fall of water. "Why does that thing worry me so, when any fool would know it was nothing but a nightmare?"

So the day passed.

Sue remained away throughout the following day. By this time Dave was

genuinely concerned. His loss of the girl was sufficient to stir him to both moral and physical activity. He shook off his prejudice against bad blood enough to admit to himself that he could not get along without Sue as easily as he fancied. Just before sundown he climbed the rise to old Hardtack's cabin to learn if possible what was the matter with the Mouse.

Everything about the habitation gave evidence of total and protracted desertion. The mule and one-horse wagon were gone. Several days' rations had been provided for the hens and pig. A trace chain was drawn through the auger holes of the battened door and lintel, and fastened with a padlock. There remained not even a hound to bark at him.

Where the mountain family might have gone he had no more idea than the man in the moon. During all these months he had known the girl he had asked her not one single question concerning the kinfolks or friends up and down the mountains. That Hardtack and his crowd had departed for a visit was readily deducible, but there his deduction ended.

More lonesome than he had been at any time except the first week of his stay in the locality, he went back down to the station.

"Good heavens!" he groaned. "If this wilderness isn't the biggest darned place not to have anybody in it in the world, I lose the pup. Even a spook would almost be welcome now!"

He sat down moodily at his desk, overwhelmed by the terrible vastness of the prospect down upon which he looked from the window of the office. The evenings were growing noticeably shorter; it would be an hour after dark before No. 7 would come snorting up the long grade and Hawkins would kick off the paper and a magazine or two.

He didn't want to read, anyhow. He was sick to death of reading. He could repeat from memory the composite plot of every detective story that had appeared in the popular magazines for the past half year. No, he didn't care to read any more. He wanted human company.

Suddenly the tone of water drip changed. Darkness had just fallen, and he could not see the stream, but the change in its voice was unmistakable.

"Save No. 7 Friday night!" it said, clearly, accurately. "Save No. 7 Friday night!"

He leaped from his chair and dashed out of the door. In thirty seconds he was at the corner of the building striking matches to examine the stream of water. Now, however, it poured steadily. Dave scrutinized the face of the rock minutely for the first time in his life.

The water came from an inch hole, rounded and smoothed by ages of drain. He could stop the flow momentarily by holding his finger over the orifice. But nothing he might do would make the water vary a fraction from its unremitting pour.

For ten minutes he waited there, lingering in the hope of a repetition of the curious warning. But it did not recur. He finally went back inside, lighting up as brilliantly as his lamp and lanterns would permit. This thing was getting on his nerves. How in the devil was he going to sleep there that night, if it kept up? He would not even have entertained the proposition if his orders had not compelled him to remain at the station, whether or no.

No. 7 came in due time, and this helped somewhat. Following No. 7 about thirty minutes was a freight, which took the siding to wait for a southbound manifest which was some hours late. Dave kept edging closer and closer to the engineer. His name was Pete Donagan. Dave knew him very well. Finally he plucked Dona-

gan's sleeve and drew him aside into the darkness.

"Pete," he confessed shamefacedly, "there's something mighty funny going on here! I don't understand it."

He thereupon recited to the engineer the eerie warning of the water drip.

Pete whistled.

"Lemme see that place, bub," he demanded.

Dave led him to the spot. By the pale light of a brakeman's lantern the old man examined the inconsequential finger of water.

"Do you know what I'd do, if I was you, sonny?" he said finally. "If I heard that fool thing telegraphing me any more, I wouldn't do a thing in the morning but report the matter to the old man down at headquarters at Birmingham. You don't need to tell him too much. Just say you got wind of something—needn't say how, if you don't want to. They may poke a little fun at you if there's nothing to things, but that won't hurt you. On the other hand, if you do head off something, you'll have done the railroad a tremendous favor, and they won't forget it soon, neither. I'd sure do that, sonny."

"I believe I will!" concluded Dave fervently.

The engineer sat down on the end of a tie and began recalling, out of the fund of lore every railroader possesses, curious, inexplicable warnings which had saved trains. Ghosts of dead engineers; shades of crushed brakemen; third cousins of firemen—old Pete had a score of such yarns. The conductor and brakeman joined them, and each of them, prompted by the train of thought, spun their supernatural stuff.

Dave's hair fairly stood on end. While they were here he could get along tolerably well. But already the delayed freight was whistling far over the ridge. In ten minutes it had passed. Dave saw the other train pull out of the siding with shivering regret. He was entirely alone.

He sat up as long as possible before going to bed. But presently he found himself yawning, and he undressed regretfully. Somehow the most trying period of the day was that uncharged space between lying down and finally crossing the borderland of sleep. Tonight he found it more trying than ever. The horrible tales recounted by the trainmen came marching back for his review. His scalp pricked, and the shadows of night both inside and outside assumed goblin shapes. He heard sounds such as he never before had noticed. Then suddenly the water commenced its inexplicable message again.

Being wide awake as he was, Dave this time could not be mistaken. His blood seemed to congeal in his arteries. Nevertheless he had sufficient sense to trace the dots and dashes of the falling drip. Naturally it had nothing of the speed of the ticker. But leisurely, surely, it transmitted its message.

"No. 7 will be robbed Friday night at Nailor's Junction!" Then in conformity with the policy it had pursued all along, it repeated the warning.

Dave waited until the last drip had stopped, and the water had assumed its habitual steadiness. He did not presume to know the why or wherefore of the thing. Of only one thing was he certain: No human being was within miles of the station except himself.

He got out from between the covers, lighted a lantern, and went to his instrument. He called division headquarters. McLauran was on night duty.

"I picked up a curious warning," he ticked off, when he had got hold of McLauran. "Don't know whether there's anything to it or not. But there may be. No. 7 is to be robbed Friday night at Nailor's Junction."

There ensued a long silence. Suddenly the instrument began to sputter.

"Give that again!"

Dave repeated.

"Where did you get that stuff?" came the emphatic demand.

Dave's mind worked rapidly. It wouldn't do to give his source of information. Nobody but a fool would even entertain the veracity of such stuff.

"Picked it up from some fellow who came to the station to-night."

"Who was he and what was his name and what did he look like?"

"Hell!" swore Dave aloud. "I make a bad thing look worse. Just my fool luck to start something I couldn't finish. One thing is certain, though, I've got to stick to my yarn."

And stick to it he did, through the rest of the night. For he got no more sleep. After he had handed McLauran all the dope he could cook up about the mysterious stranger, he had to give the same stuff to some one else, who turned out to be the division superintendent, hauled out of bed after midnight to get a line on the matter. Next he had to give it to the Washington offices themselves, where he was pumped for hours in a code he was little familiar with.

With the coming of dawn he was all in. What he had stirred up he had no more idea than a jay bird. If the warning proved false, he'd probably be canned for good for not having sense enough to distinguish between something with some sense to it, and the vaporific mouthings of some wag of a hobo—for he had told the yarn about the strange man so often now, and described him in such detail, that he had come to accept this as part of the crazy situation.

Toward ten o'clock that morning a special motor car came snorting up the grade, stopping in front of the station. Martin, the division sueprintendent, Dave knew. The half dozen other dignitaries Dave had never seen. He was hauled before this tribunal, and his story taken down by a young fellow who handled shorthand, while the officials listened gravely, wagging their heads and looking at one another significantly. Hotter and hotter grew the cross-examination.

"Why the devil didn't you try to hold that fellow?" demanded Martin. "Why didn't you pay closer attention to him? Why didn't you sneak down the track a short way and see what he did with himself? What are you up here for, anyway—to decorate the scenery? Why did you wait to give the stuff into the office, when you say it was Tuesday—or didn't you say Monday once?—when you first saw him? Looks to me like there's something fishy in this whole yarn!"

"Don't be so hard on the boy," pleaded a white-haired man, evidently one still higher in authority. "Now, my son," he went on, turning to Dave, "you realize, I am sure, how grave this matter is, in case you should have picked up a genuine tip. We want to get at the facts, for reasons that I can't give you now. Start from the very beginning and give every detail just as accurately as you can recall."

"You won't can me?" begged Dave.

"Sure not! Shoot right ahead."

Dave saw instantly that the best thing he could do was tell the truth. He told it, not even omitting his kissing the Mouse. The men listened open-mouthed. Several finally smiled. When he had concluded the superintendent growled skeptically.

"Of all the damn fool stuff!" he snorted. "Say, bub, what kind of moonshine do they give you up here in this wilderness?"

The kindly gentleman interrupted. "Your only neighbor is Hardtack Treadwell?"

"The only one."

The men went out now. First they examined long and with profound interest the tiny stream of water. After that they climbed the bluff to inspect the mountaineer's cabin. Dave accom-

panied them, trailing in the rear. The cabin remained deserted.

At length the party prepared to go.

"Don't worry about your job, son," advised his friend. "Even if nothing comes of this, I want you to know you have done the right thing by telling us. The only mistake you made was in substituting fiction, which sounded true, for fact which sounded foolish. We don't pretend to understand the warning you received. Railroad men have their superstitions like other people, and we respect them without necessarily subscribing to them.

"The important thing for you to do now is to keep your mouth absolutely shut. If any questions come over the wire, say nothing. The only communication you will get from us will be in code. Pay no attention to anything else. Inform us immediately if you see a living soul, no matter whom. That's all."

The men got aboard and the special sped away.

The rest of the day dragged; night fell. No. 7 came and went on time, as was her custom. The warning did not come again. The next morning was Friday. Dave spent the day in nervous dread and wondering.

For the first time in ages that evening No. 7 ran late. Dave sat down on the steps in the darkness, pulses athrob, waiting for the glow of the headlight where it would first shoot into view around the curve three miles below at Goose Creek trestle. At Sellers, the last station with a telegraph office twenty miles away, she had been reported on time. Ten minutes past her time, twenty minutes, a half hour. Suddenly a beam of light silvered the distant ledge. The long, musical blast cleft the brooding night. No. 7 was on the rails!

Ten minutes later the express ground to a standstill, a fact as unusual as running behind, for No. 7 paid scant attention to anything smaller than Birmingham, and such like. Dave hung at the door, peering into the windows of each coach. With the cessation of motion, the door of the express car slid open. To Dave's amazement he saw a dozen guards, armed to the teeth with bear rifles and sawed-off shotguns. In the dim light their grim faces looked as if they were after him!

The cordon of men parted. Inside the circle were old Hardtack Treadwell and his four boys, handcuffed, chained to a ring in the floor! Downcast, battered, abused, Dave's first reaction was one of infinite pity. Even when he realized that these were the robbers—that the warning had been valid—he still could not bring himself to hate and despise them.

A slap on the shoulder made him turn hastily. It was the white-haired man.

"Well, we caught 'em, son!" he said heartily, "thanks to your warning, we nailed the whole gang. In a few days now the road will be showing its appreciation of your work by a bigger job and an increased salary. See you again before long!"

He waved his hand. The train pulled out. The smiling face of his friend was the last image he carried with him that night into the land of slumber.

The warning—where did it come from? While waiting for his transfer, Dave speculated endlessly. For two days he prowled about, hither and yon, searching—for what he knew not. He even burglarized the deserted cabin, that seeming a safe thing now to do.

Then came the voice of the drip again!

"At the foot of the big poplar!" it said. "Look at the foot of the big poplar!"

He knew the big poplar well. It stood on the side of the ridge opposite the station, at the spring down under the cabin. Dave lost no time in obey-

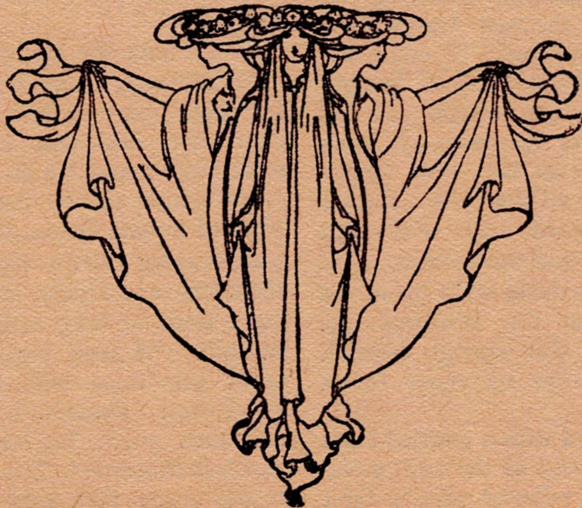
ing the tick. He found something which he never before had observed at the spring—an opening barely covered with a segment of stone!

Now that he had located it, the cave showed signs of being well used, and he did not doubt that much of the doings which had given Treadwell his reputation throughout the mountain regions were carried on in connection with this hiding place. Getting a lantern to light his way, he entered the bowels of the earth.

After winding about through a passageway barely high enough to admit his erect figure, he emerged presently into a commodious cavern. The general direction he had been following was toward the station. Now a distant cry greeted his ears. He hurried forward at a run, lantern swung aloft. Deep within the lost region, anchored to a stone after the fashion the law had used to hold old Hardtack, he stumbled upon the Mouse! She was all but done for, having been without food for several days.

"Paw chained me down here when I wouldn't promise him to keep my mouth shut about him going to rob No. 7 the night the big shipment of money went up from Birmingham," she explained feebly. "I don't know how he found out about it. But I knew this little stream of water poured out at the face of the cliff, so I begun to wire you, every time I thought things would be quiet so you could take my message. I done it by damning up the water with a flat rock, and then turning it loose, so as to make the dots and dashes. When paw didn't come back by to-day I knowed you had got my message, and then I wired for you to come and help me out!"

A week later, when Dave went up to his big job, appointed to it by the president of the railroad himself—who turned out to be his white-haired friend—the Mouse went with him.



Dead Men's Gold

by Carrington Phelps

Author of "The Gun Who Found Himself," "The Man Who Licked a Town," etc.

THERE WAS NO DOUBT THAT THE WILLIAMSES WERE MIXED UP IN IT. THAT WAS WHAT SARAH LEARNED THOUGHT, AT ANY RATE, WHEN HER HUSBAND DISAPPEARED. MURDER LEERED OUT, THAT NIGHT, WHEN DANIEL WENT. BUT HIS WIFE HAD HER OWN LITTLE PLAN . . . .

CHAPTER I.

DANIEL LEARNED turned at the door to answer his wife's question.

"Well," he drawled, buttoning his sheepskin against the raw March wind which whistled without, "I don't exactly know, Sarah. First I thought mebbe I'd go to the village, and get some more feed for the cows. It beats all how much they do eat. Still, there's the milk a-comin' all the time. Then I thought I'd sort of look over that manure spreader, and the harrow. But I guess I'll take a little walk up in the lot, and see what the Williams line fence looks like this spring, instead. Been meanin' to go up there for a month."

He sighed, wiped with a gnarled hand his mouth, gazed out at the still, mole-colored landscape, relieved only by faint touches of green.

Little Mrs. Learned, polishing with her cloth the last of the breakfast dishes, glanced at her husband impatiently. "I do wish, Dan, you'd get that line fence settled once and for all, and not keep worryin' and worryin' about it so. I know what I'd do. I'd have the law on 'em again."

"I did have the law on 'em, once."

"Well, you made 'em pay damages for their pesky critters trompin' down your corn field that fall. That was something. And I'd do it again."

He leaned against the door frame, a giant of a man, brown, lean and sinewy, with graying hair, a slight stoop in his shoulders, and kindly, smiling eyes. "I don't want to keep lawin' it forever," he said. "A man begins that and he never gets done with it—if he don't watch out. Besides, it don't seem to do much good, far as the Williams bunch is concerned. Look at that fence! It was worse than ever when I took a look at it this winter, before the big snow."

"I tell you, Dan, it's the only way to

handle 'em, all the same. There's some folks will listen to reason, and some will listen to threats—but there's some who won't pay any attention to you till you knock 'em flat with a sled stake. And that's the way you got to treat the Williams family, and keep treating 'em, until they act like reasonable, law-abidin' human beings, and not like a pack of wild animals. You know what they are, Dan. Or you'd ought to."

He knew well enough. Hadn't his father experienced the same trouble with old Timothy Williams, and his grandfather, too, with that original limb of Satan, 'Zekiel Williams, who had stolen eighteen fine pullets from him one cold night? Yes. He knew them, from the present head, "Baldy Jim," down through the rest of his family—his wife, who had been "Deb" Browner, and his two sons, Dave and Jim. A bad lot, if ever there was one. Shiftless, dishonest, lawless, like their forebears.

There was a taint in the Williams blood. It went way back to old Grandfather 'Zekiel, who had taken unto himself for wife that one known as Moll Grush, who, tradition had it, was half Indian, and half Guinea coast negro. Grandfather 'Zekiel hadn't minded, it seemed, for he was himself considerable of a mixture, they said. He'd been a soldier at one time, and had retired with a limp and an evil disposition, to wrest a living from the soil. Had bought an old, tumble-down house and barn, and settled. They said he'd steal anything that wasn't nailed down, and he'd steal that if he could steal a hammer.

He and Moll Grush had produced a numerous progeny, as weeds reproduce in a field of good corn, and some had died in their ill-nourished infancy, and some had lived and gone away as they attained maturity, luckily for the community. But always one had remained to carry on the misbegotten strain. Timothy had remained, and so had his son, the present leader of the clan, Baldy Jim. Whether his two sons, young Jim and Dave, would remain was a matter of conjecture.

Folks said young Jim, who took after the original limb in all his devilish traits, had been in jail the time he was away for a year. And everybody knew Dave was a natural and inspired chicken thief. Nor did it take much imagination to link up the Williamses with such curious affairs as the burning of Miss Turner's hay barn, and the disappearance of several sheep belonging to Parson Gates, and the looting of that city man's summer place two winters ago.

Yes, he thought he knew the Williams family, backward. From the ground up. "I reckon I know what they are, Sarah," he said. "But a man has got to be careful. He can't go runnin' his head into trouble. They're a bad lot, of course. Thing is, they don't fight out in the open like a white man, but around behind the lot when it's dark. A man can't rightly oppose 'em.

"What can he do? Grin and bear it, mostly. Why, you know, I realize I made a mistake lawin' it with 'em even what little I did? They cherish a grudge against us, and you mark my words—they won't rest till its satisfied. I've heard talk already. Not that it scares me any. At the same time, you never can tell what they might do."

Sarah turned from replenishing the stove. "What d'you mean, you heard talk? I never did."

"Well, Hart, the storekeeper—he's a good friend of ours—and he told me Parson Gates had told him he'd heard the Williamses had threatened me. 'Specially young Jim. Young Jim had said he'd get square if it took him thutty years. Said no psalm singer was goin' to run it over him, fences or no fences. And that wasn't all. I've heard it from other places. Oh, I don't remember all of 'em. For I didn't pay much atten-

tion. A barkin' dog don't often bite, but still, and at the same time, I don't feel exactly the same as I would if they were decent, upstanding neighbors."

"Nothing to fear from 'em," said his wife, slamming the stove door. "Pack of hounds. Trail around and yawp all night, but they don't put up a fight."

"That's exactly what I'm sayin'. They won't make any trouble open and aboveboard, of course. But they might like as not burn up that barn of mine in the upper-hill meadow. Good barn, if it is a hundred year old."

Sarah nodded. "They might do something like that. You go along and see how that line fence is, anyway. Maybe they've fixed it, since snow went."

He turned reflectively, and went out. On the porch he hesitated for a moment, glancing about the neat and orderly barnyard. It was a good farm, he thought, and it would be too bad if anything happened, like losing a barn, or a cow, or something, just through the fault of a worthless gang like the Williams family. A good farm, as it had been since the days when his great grandfather had settled here. A farm which had always been well kept, in fields and fences and cattle, and not let go like so many hereabouts, with hedgerows growing along the roads and moss choking the meadows, or hardhack the fields, or second growth timber the pasture lots.

It had always taken plenty of hard work to keep the Learned farm up and coming. Constant effort, constant thinking, shrewdness of judgment and foresightedness. Hard work was the main thing. So long as a man kept going, doing something, he was pretty sure to succeed. The minute one let down and began moping and worrying, he was licked. Idleness was the curse of mankind, he thought. Idleness and an unwillingness to sweat when necessary. Honest sweat was the thing which had made all the men of his family successful, plus, of course, brains and character.

And one got rewards for work. One was independent, and not always in mortal terror of his employer firing him.

It was a grand thing to own one's place, free and clear, well kept up, and well insured against fire. A grand thing to be independent. A man could take his day off when he felt like it. A man was his own master. A sort of king in his small dominion. Freedom! That was the key to it! It was for freedom the colonies had fought and bled. There wasn't so much oppression in those days as people made out. It was more the idea of being under some other man's thumb which had brought about the Revolution.

Just an idea, just a feeling. Born of what? An instinct, perhaps, bred through generations of freemen. A gradual thing, dating from the time the serfs were given more liberty. From the time land came into private ownership. That was it. Land! Men craved to own even a little patch of it, so long as they could stand on it and proclaim to the world and to themselves that this was their little kingdom.

It meant emancipation from so much. From rents and from exorbitant taxes and from the peril of unannounced dispossession. A man could dig and build, and cultivate his little patch, and nobody could stop him. Not even the President of the United States. He could make it a fine place to live, or he could blow it up with dynamite—and it was his own personal business.

His glance roved southward over broad, smooth acres, black and crumbly where he had plowed last fall. Waiting the manure spreader were tilth and seeds, which would blossom presently into a fine growth of corn and millet and hay. Behind him lay the hills, the pasture lots, the wood lots where they got their fuel each fall. Enough wood

growing steadily to keep them supplied forever. They couldn't keep up with its increase, and it gave him a nice extra sum yearly to add to the capital which would eventually support him and Sarah in their old age.

He calculated there must be around twenty-one or twenty-two thousand dollars saved, when everything was counted. Invested in sound mortgages at six per cent. Earning around twelve hundred a year, half of which went into new investments each six months. The other half they used for comforts—for luxuries, like the bathroom they had installed last summer, and the radio set, and the new automobile.

Yes, having one's own place was worth it. Of course he might have made more money if he'd studied and entered some profession like that of a lawyer or a doctor. Or if he had gone into "business." But he wouldn't, he thought, be so well off otherwise to-day. Wouldn't be so rugged, and so hale and hearty at fifty-one. Sarah would be forty-three next August. Both of them sound in wind and limb, and due to live twenty years at least. He felt like a man of thirty, except for the cussed rheumatism which laid him low sometimes. And lumbago, with its cruel, disabling pains. Barring these he was fit as a fiddle. And the doctor said fixing his teeth would cure even these.

From the stable he heard the scrape of a shovel as Thomas, the hired man, made clean the stalls. Hens scratched and gossiped in dusty places under the lee of the barn, and ducks were splashing where the overflow from the spring pipe made a little puddle for them at the rear of the woodshed. Half a dozen pigeons were fluttering and love making atop the funnellike roof of the silo, and an aggregation of robins were industriously harpooning worms from the sprouting sod which covered the half acre of night pasture beyond the barn. A sharp squeal told him that one of the young pigs was probably being disciplined by his mother. At his feet, old Flip scratched sleepily in the sunlight, at fleas.

A satisfaction filled him, and a contentment with life as he inhaled a long breath, and turned from the porch to his mission. He took the highway for a brief space, until it veered away from his objective, when he turned in at a bar way and began the long ascent which would lead him through the rock-strewn area of the young-stock pasture, and into the hill meadows. Rabbits scuttled from beneath young alders, and a partridge arose from under his feet with a thunderous roar of wings and was lost instantly to sight behind the trunk of a maple. From a high-flung limb a red squirrel reviled him in staccato squeaks, crows arose with warning caws from pine-tree pinnacles, and a wise old fox scented him from afar, and watched from his laurel-crested hill the intruder's deliberate passage.

Spring, Daniel reflected, was well on its way. He wished he hadn't decided against maple sugar making this year, for he always enjoyed it so much. And Sarah would miss the maple wax he always brought her, cooled to the right consistency on a shovelful of snow. He came to the top of the hill, climbed a stone wall, and stood within the first of the hill meadows, stretching in a gentle slope beyond him for a good half mile. He scanned these reaches for gullies formed by rains, and for encroaching moss, sure sign of sourness, but found neither.

Peering closely, he discerned evidences of an early young growth, and he knew the yield would be heavy this year if it were not too dry a season. He came across the meadows, and entered a fringing growth of big timber. Last fall's leaves were spread thickly, and made a heavy carpet, flattened, as beneath a roller, by the weight of the big snow. And now he approached the

line fence, bone of hot contention between himself and the Williams family.

It was the law that division fences should be maintained by adjoining property owners at mutual expense. Years ago his forebears had agreed with the original 'Zekiel to a partitioning of this fence, one owner to keep in repair the eastern half, the other the western. The Learned's had always kept their half, the eastern, in fitting shape. It was the western which had been the source of eternal trouble.

Daniel neared it now and examined it with a scrutinizing eye. It had never been anything more than a few heaps of boundary stones to begin with, and no Williams had ever lived who thought it needed more than a few poles now and again, laid upon stumps and boulders, to maintain a proper cattle guard.

Daniel paused beneath an oak, whence he could see the half mile of disputed line. They had followed the procedure of their ancestors right enough. But this time they hadn't even cut poles. Instead, they had flung mere brush along the line, and topped it with broken limbs and little saplings, fair game for the first predatory cow that cared to walk through it.

And the Williams cows were predatory and worse. They had grown up with older, wiser cows, and they had become accustomed to the thin barriers affected by the Williamses. Never were these known to be other than flimsy. A slow, deliberate pressure and they gave, and crumbled and vanished. And then there were free and usually uninterrupted meals of more juicy, palatable grass on neighbors' meadows. And if one were an epicure, one might go farther, where corn and garden truck grew rankly.

This makeshift, Daniel knew, would never do. Never at all. The cattle would go through it like straw, and he would face another summer of infuriating chases, purposeless argument, and impassioned entreaty. It would be far cheaper to take upon himself responsibility for keeping up the Williams half, but this he would never do while life was in him. Right was right, and he would insist on it, especially in this case, so long as he had breath in him. It was the only way.

He pushed his way through the feeble thing and went slowly up the slope leading to the Williams house. He meditated, as he walked, upon the wisdom of the step he contemplated, which was to appeal once more to these semioutlaws, and ask them to put up a stronger barrier than dead twigs and brush. In his bones he knew his request would be fruitless, but at least it would have been an effort.

He entered an open field, sown thickly with loose stones, and saw before him the shabby Williams house. A house bare of paint, its windows broken and stuffed with rags, its roof patched with fragments of tin and boards where the shingles had rotted out or blown away. The two barns sagged on their foundations, and boards were gone from the sides and from the roof of the shed. The entire place was cluttered with rusty farm machinery, piles of rotting lumber, tin cans, old barrels, discarded boots, ash heaps and similar trash. A few scraggly hens scratched hopefully between the piles of junk, and a lean, yellow hound appeared from behind the house and commenced a prolonged and dismal uproar.

As Daniel approached he was aware of a stir from within. The sound of a quick step, then silence, followed by the rumble of voices. He knocked on the door, and it was instantly opened by her who had been Deb Browner. She was a blowzy hag with disheveled gray hair stringing about her face, who had apparently been awaiting his knock, and who now stared at him through squinting eyes without speaking.

"I wanted to speak with Baldy Jim," said Daniel.

She turned her head half aside, still eying him, and pronounced, "T'see yer, Jim."

Heavy boots shuffled to the door and Baldy Jim appeared behind his better half, a heavy-set, slouching man, with beetling black brows and an evil eye like his wife's. "Well?" he grunted.

Daniel smiled dryly at the inhospitality of the greeting, and said, "I wanted to speak with you privately, Baldy."

Baldy Jim seemed to hesitate, then he stepped down from the threshold and slammed the door behind him. "What's it private for?" he demanded.

Daniel, withdrawing with calculating finesse, drew him farther away from the house as he talked. "It's about that line fence, of course," he said. "I just been taking a look at it, and it don't seem to me it's going to keep livestock in a minute, it's that pindling.

Baldy Jim's face grew dark. "I guess it'll keep livestock, all right. It's a good enough fence fer me, leastwise, and that's all I wanted when I built it."

"Law calls for a four-strand fence or the equivalent, don't it, Baldy?"

Baldy sniffed, spat a yellow stream expertly to one side.

"Law, eh? Waal, I ain't no lawyer, but I cal'late that fence is good enough. I cal'late that's all the fence I'm goin' to build this year, or the next, too, for that matter. What you goin' to do about it?"

Daniel regarded the heavy, sneering features. He was, he realized, wasting his time. He might better have never come at all than stand here arguing with this ignorant man. "Well," he continued, "I got the law on you once before, and I guess I can again if I have to. It cost you twenty dollars, cash money, last time your cows got into my corn. Why don't you fix it and fix it good, and then it'd be done with, instead of just tinkerin' with it that way, so's the first animal that wants to can walk through it? Which she will, rememberin', as you know they do, about that corn."

"I fixed it, didn't I?" growled Baldy. "What you want me to do, put up a masonary wall for ye?"

"No, I don't. All I want's a good fence. I'd even agree to furnish the wire if you'd put barbed wire up. Two strands wouldn't take more'n a couple of spools, at most."

Baldy shook his head in leisurely contempt. "Trouble with you, Neighbor Learned, you're too damn particular. Why, I don't never have any trouble with anybody elses' fences but yourn. Never have a bit of trouble. Seems to me you'd better be waitin' to see if them caows of mine git through before tryin' to kick up a row like this. And it seems to me I'd be jest a mite careful who I kicked up a row with, too."

Daniel chose to ignore this covert threat. "Fact remains, the selectmen will come in here and put up a legal fence, if you don't, and charge you with the costs. That's what's goin' to happen if you don't fix it, and fix it soon. You promised last year, but you ain't."

"Who says I ain't?" flared Baldy Williams. "There's the fence, ain't it? And that's all the fence I'm buildin'."

Daniel, retaining his good humor, had decided to terminate the interview, when the door was flung back and young Jim came shuffling upon the scene. Heavy set, like his father, and with his father's glowering eyes, bullet head and slanting forehead. A five days' growth of beard blackened his face, and his eyes were shot with the tiny red seams of the habitual drinker. "What ails him, pop?" he asked thickly.

Baldy spat again. "Oh, it's about that damn fence of hisn and ours."

Young Jim laughed, showing yellow fangs. "Fence, eh? Got a lot of gall,

seems to me when we jest got done buildin' it."

Daniel directed himself again to Baldy. "I just thought I'd be neighborly, Baldy, and step over and see if we couldn't fix this up friendly and quietlike. But it seems it's no use. Seems you won't listen to reason, and seems I'll have to go to the selectmen, after all."

"Oh, goin' to th' selectmen, air ye?" jeered young Jim. "That's jest like a Learned! Allus gittin' 'emselves mixed up with lawin' in—allus gettin' folks into trouble of one kind or another and never happy if they ain't. Tell him to go to 'em, pop, and be damned."

"Kind of foolish of you, Baldy, not to fix it, when I offered to furnish th' wire. Makes it easy for ye that way." Daniel had continued to ignore young Jim.

"Gosh!" ejaculated young Jim. "Ain't he generous? Mebbe he'd pass th' plate in church fer us next. Hey, pop?" And slapped the paternal shoulder with a burst of heavy merriment.

"I don't fix no more fences," reiterated Baldy.

"I guess you will," said Daniel. "I kind of guess you'll pay for fixin' 'em, at any rate. For I'm goin' to see the selectmen to-morrow morning. I've done my duty, and more, coming to you this way. And much thanks I get for it. However, I felt it was my duty, and I did it." He nodded, turning on his heel. "Good day to you," he said, and strode off.

Young Jim, bereft of this patronizing antagonist, gazed upon his retreating form an instant, and then, emboldened, raised his voice in a vituperative scorn. "Hey! You damn ole snake in th' grass! You kin go straight to the devil, d'you hear me? You and your fences——"

Daniel Learned, already sore and exasperated, wheeled and retraced his steps until he again stood before the twain. "You're speakin' to me, young man?" he asked.

Young Jim, encouraged by the presence of his father and by the hard cider he had been drinking all that morning, swaggered and swayed his head contemptuously from side to side. "Course I was speakin' to you. You ole snake."

"Well I shouldn't, if I was you, because some day I'm liable to lose my temper, and do something I oughtn't."

Young Jim stuck his thumbs in his pocket, lifted his head, and laughed once more. "You can't scare me, you ole scarecrow. I tell you to go to hell, and I mean it, every word——"

Daniel Learned's long arm shot out, and his fingers clutched the other by the throat, and snatched him off his feet to his knees. Baldy Jim flung himself to the defense of his son, but Daniel balked that effort by catching Baldy's shirt collar and holding him at arm's length, where he began a series of flail-like and ineffectual blows, which fell, for the most part, on empty air. All the while Daniel's fingers were slowly choking the life out of Baldy's first-born son.

It was only when he saw the face of young Jim blackening that Daniel loosened his hold and flung him upon his back, where he lay moaning. He next turned his attention to the still warlike Baldy. Here, he knew, was his opportunity for satisfying a long-due and never-paid account. As yet he had made no aggressive move toward Baldy, but had preserved a strict defensive. Baldy was endeavoring now to circumvent the superior reach which held him powerless, by kicking. His first attempts were futile, but by shifting his position, he succeeded in placing several agonizing blows upon Daniel's shin bones. Whereupon Daniel threw expediency to the winds, took Baldy's thick throat in his two massive hands and shook him until his teeth rattled.

Then he hurled him across the still recumbent form of his son.

"Maybe," said Daniel Learned softly, "maybe that'll teach you."

Baldy, fingering his throat, got to his knees and to his feet. His glance fell upon his son, who was sitting up, muttering profane if faint anathema. Baldy looked at Daniel Learned and his eyes were narrowed—beady and malignant. He slowly raised a sinister finger and pointed at his conqueror. "No man ain't never yet got the better of me, Dan Learned, and lived to tell on it. You remember what I'm tellin' ye. Sooner or later I'm goin' t' git even. Mebbe it'll be to-morrer and mebbe it'll be years from to-morrer, but I'll git even fer this day's bein' put upon."

Daniel leaned to brush the dirt from his trousers leg. "Next time, mebbe you folks'll know how to be civil when a man comes to see you," he said.

And when he walked away this time no mocking insult followed him.

CHAPTER II.

His wife heard the story with mingled exultation and anxiety. "What made you lose your temper so, Daniel? It's not like you. Why! I never saw you mad but twice in my life. When that bull calf ran you through the brier patch, and when the stovepipe fell on you."

Daniel, abashed, knocked the dottle from his pipe and refilled it before he answered. "I guess you're right, Sarah. The minute I grabbed holt of him I knew I'd done wrong. But I had got into it, and the only way was to get out of it. And the only way to get out of it was to savage 'em till they quit. I guess I was a bit unthinking." He frowned thoughtfully.

"Well, I guess so," said Sarah, pointedly. "I never heard the like! If it was anybody but the Williamses I wouldn't care. But now I'm fearful. They'll do anything to even things, and it's going to be a worry to both of us."

He knew she spoke the truth, still he preferred not to confirm, but to belittle her idea, for the sake of her peace of mind. It was nothing, he said, to take seriously. The Williams bunch talked a lot, and threatened a lot, but they never harmed anybody. They'd know better than harm him, or her, for instance, after making these threats today. They'd know they'd be suspicioned in case anything happened. Anyhow, they'd always been talkers, and there was no use fussing any more about it.

She brought her hand to a pause, arrested in mid air, while replacing the dish pan. "You know, Daniel, I was just thinking what I'd do in case anything happened to you. Why! I don't know *what* I'd do, Dan. Seems to me I just couldn't get along."

He came and tucked an arm about her, and drew her close. "You put those things right out of your head, Sarah. Nothing is going to happen to me. I'm goin' to live for sixty years yet, and do a good day's work at the end of it."

She seemed reassured, although she continued to argue for a time. He went out presently, to see if everything was all right for the night, and she sat down in her little rocker before the stove and began knitting on the socks she intended to give Daniel next Christmas. She always knitted him six pairs, every year, and this was the first of them. Her needles flew swiftly while she meditated on that day's stirring event.

Daniel, she thought, shouldn't have forgotten himself like that. Still what was done was done, and no use crying over it. He could say what he liked, but the Williamses were bad people to have as enemies. He'd said as much only this morning, when he'd told her what he'd heard about their threatening to get even. And she had said there

was no cause to fear them. Had been advising him to take a sled stake after them. Well, he'd gone out and done it, and there wasn't the least doubt in the world he'd been influenced by what she'd said.

Daniel Learned didn't know it, but mostly he did what Mrs. Daniel Learned said. Not that he wasn't capable enough of doing his own thinking, but she found it helped him for her to talk things over with him, and sort of guide him. He was like a big overgrown boy in that way. He hardly ever liked to do a thing without first consulting her. And afterward, when he'd done it, he always took the credit for its having been his idea. Not that she cared. Not a bit. That was his right. He was the head of the house, as he should be. She was the head of the household, though. And it was enough glory to know that one had a good big finger in guiding things. Enough to sit behind, and pull the strings, in a manner of speaking.

A vagrant gust of wind swept around the house and banged sharply a loose shutter. She started nervously, and laughed at her own timidity. She was a little jumpy to-night over this Williams trouble. She'd brew herself a good strong cup of tea just before she went to bed to make her sleep.

Her meditations were cut short by the entrance of Daniel and the man, Thomas. She laid their supper and afterward cleared and washed the dishes. Jonah, the cat, came and rubbed against her ankles, asking for milk. She fed him, and watched him curl up contentedly in his place beneath the stove. Presently her men folk went to bed. She banked the kitchen fire, wound the clock, drank her tea, lit a candle and retired to the bedroom on the floor above.

Daniel was already soundly asleep, and she undressed and crept in beside him. The warmth of his body comforted her, and after she said her prayers she drifted into a dreamless slumber, with the last, glimmering thought in her mind that she must be on the watch against the Williams family and any harm they might do her Dan.

Summer came and passed with the swiftness attending human life when filled with activity and accomplishment. Crops were planted and eventually harvested. Bumper crops, for the season was propitious, with plenty of rain and sunshine. Haying went through with few of those prolonged wet spells which are the bane of the farmer. The barns were filled to overflowing, and the old building in the hill meadows was crammed to its beams until it could not hold another forkful, and three loads had to be brought down and put under the barn ell for emergency storage.

The fall was a leisurely one, full of bright sunshine like the summer and holding the illusion of that season's permanence. But one night a south wind came up with much thunder and intermittent gusts of rain and bright flashes of lightning. All that night it blew, but with the morning it calmed again, with sunshine once more, as if the storm had never been. It remained settled for several days and at the end of the week Daniel took himself out with his trusty old muzzle-loading shot gun to see if he couldn't bag a partridge.

His way led him along the alder bushes near an old orchard whose great trees still bore a few wrinkled apples, forlorn remnant of the loads of fruit which once had come from the long-abandoned Hale place. Daniel flushed two birds, but they were wild from too much hunting, and he could not get a shot. One dropped down near by him, just within the trees bordering his meadows, and he crept forward, hoping to come on the bird unawares. He found no trace of it, but he kept on until he had reached the wall. He climbed it, and his eye swept ahead me-

chanically. He paused, with the quick realization that something ailed the appearance of things.

The landscape was quite the same, but he could see no evidence of his hay barn. He went hurrying forward, not crediting his senses, until he had come to a rise overlooking the spot. He understood now why he hadn't seen the building, for nothing was left of it but a barren, four-square space filled with gray ashes. He approached, regarding this little area of desolation with grim eyes. He picked up some of the ashes, sifted them through his fingers. Stepping to the middle, he thrust his hand deep into the ashes. They were quite cold, and upon the surface lay a thin, almost indistinguishable crust.

The barn had been burned down several days ago. But not a trace of smoke had come down to them. It had been burned when the wind was in the south. It had been burned the night of the storm. Had burned like a tinder box, filled as it was with bone-dry hay. The few squalls of rain had caused the crust.

He turned slowly, staring toward the Williams place. This, then, was the first fruit of those threats made by old Baldy! They had bided their time until haying was over and the barn chock full. Had waited for a strong south wind. And had set a match. Of course, there was the possibility that some hunter had dropped a cigarette or a match, but that chance was thin. No hunter would be careless in a barn full of hay. He'd have had to open the big doors in the first place, and he would see the danger and avoid it. In the second place, the thing had burned at night. In the day the smoke would have been seen or smelled. At night, with a south wind, it would go north, away from his house. And the flames wouldn't be seen because the barn was masked by a big growth of trees. Furthermore, it had probably burned around two or three in the morning, when all honest folk were in their beds and sleeping.

This was Williams' work. Not a doubt in the world. Well, he thought, admitting it, what could he do? He couldn't prove anything. There was not even the satisfaction of getting insurance. The company hadn't wanted to take the risks, they said, when he had applied, though they had willingly granted policies on all his other property. This, they said, was too far removed.

That hadn't been his fault, exactly. His grandfather had bought the old barn and the meadow years ago, after the Hale house was burned. Fire seemed to be the eventual fate of all the old houses. They couldn't burn the meadows, that was certain. And hereafter he'd have to fetch the hay down and store it in another barn, which he'd build next summer. He'd always thought of doing that, but the fact of the Hill Meadow barn had kept him from it.

He went slowly back to the house to tell Sarah. She heard to the end with her usual calm. She said she wasn't surprised, because she'd been fearing something like this might happen.

"There's nothing you can do, is there, Dan?"

"Nothing," he told her. "That's the worst of it."

"Well, I hope they're satisfied, and leave us in peace for a spell."

He observed with an incongruous grimness the pendulum of the clock, swinging back and forth with unaltering precision. "They'd better be. If ever I catch any of that tribe at any more funny business, it'll go hard with 'em. I'm not saying I would, but I'd be afeared for 'em, for I'd not hesitate to put a load of buckshot into 'em. The time has got past for treatin' 'em like humans. If they want a fight they'll get it."

She shot a quick, sidelong glance at

him. She had never seen him so forthright, so quietly menacing, and it awed her, and filled her with vague anxiety. "You'd not, Daniel," she said. "The very idea! Why, that wouldn't do you any good, and it might get you into a lot of trouble if you did anything so headstrong."

"I'm not sayin' I would or I wouldn't," he continued doggedly. "But I've stood all I'm goin' to. If there ain't enough law in this community to protect me, I'm goin' to protect myself and my property. And the first thing I'm goin' to do is to get the selectmen and have 'em fix that fence, and then make that outfit pay for it. I've held off so far because I didn't want any more trouble.

"Their cows got out twice and I chased 'em back after they'd et a ton of hay and tramped down three more. And I didn't say anything, because I knew it wasn't any use and would only stir things up again. That's where I wasn't sensible. They'd ha' burned that barn anyway, and I wouldn't have been any worse off than I am now. No, Sarah, I'm goin' to go after 'em. As you said last spring, the only way to handle that kind is to knock 'em over the head with a sled stake."

He had remembered what she'd said, after all—had been influenced by it, too. She hastened now to qualify that statement. "I shouldn't have said that, Dan, but I was mad all through. A body says things they don't mean. The best thing is to leave 'em alone. And after a while they'll get over it, and softened, maybe."

"Them? Softened? Not till they're startin' to rot. No. There's no use talkin', Sarah. I'm goin' to go after 'em."

True to his word, Daniel called in the selectmen that week and took them over the disputed line. They went together to the Williamses afterward, where they were received without warmth and with a species of savage resentment which astonished the three officials. They gave Williams a week to fix the fence.

Nothing happened and they proceeded to build the fence, using good, stout chestnut posts and five strands of barbed wire. Next they presented their bill, which was met with derisive laughter. The matter was next placed in the hands of the town's attorney, who wrote several letters, made two calls, and finally got out an attachment against the property. Two days before the expiration of the period at whose end the property would have been put at public sale, old Baldy appeared at the town clerk's office and paid. Without a syllable of comment he handed over the sum of seventy dollars and eighty-five cents, which represented the expenditure the town had made for labor and materials, plus the costs of the attachment.

Daniel Learned slept well that night, for he knew no more cows could come through that stretch of fence for the next fifteen years.

He did not stop with this, however. His blood was up now, and he was determined to take every opportunity he could to harry and hound the Williams family. He acted now on the theory that they were less dangerous when attacked, as are all cowards, as well as the principle of retribution. To this end he made it his business to take, one day, a little trip in his car to the capital, some sixty miles distant.

He left Sarah home on this occasion, mainly because he secretly feared she might discourage him in the execution of his plan. Once in the city he found his way to a certain government representative, with whom he was closeted for half an hour. He wore a contented expression when he returned, although he said he had been merely looking over some farm machinery he intended to buy next spring.

A week later the Williamses, father and first-born son, were taken into custody by a Federal agent and charged with selling spirituous liquors. Then, and only then, did Daniel confide to his wife what his real object had been in going to town. When she wanted to know why he'd made such a secret of it he told her he hadn't wanted to boast too much before he knew things had turned out successfully.

The Williamses were convicted, and were compelled to serve a sentence of one year and pay a substantial fine. The latter was produced with a promptness which would have been surprising to the community were it not for the unusual disclosures made at the trial.

Daniel, it appeared, had revealed more than he dreamed of. For the Williams family had not only been making and selling hard cider, but they had been distilling it into cider brandy. They had also been producing large quantities of whisky from corn they ostensibly purchased for their cattle. They had made money. Their still was discovered in the raid, cleverly concealed in the cellar behind a false wall. Its fumes had been led up through pipes into the main chimney, and it was pronounced a miracle of ingenuity by the hard-boiled gentlemen making the arrest.

Daniel Learned smiled when he heard the verdict and told himself this would put a pretty considerable damper on the Williamses for all time. In which he reckoned without his host. The younger son, David, continued to remain at home with his mother, caring for the farm. They seemed little concerned by the incarceration of the other two, and came and went about their business with their usual contemptuous attitude of indifference to public opinion and its estimate of their disgracefulness.

At the expiration of their terms, the Williamses, father and son, returned home. And it was not long before bits of gossip began to sift through the community concerning their estimate of Daniel Learned, and concerning his part in their late imprisonment. For, whether or not they were well grounded in their belief, they declared he had been the one who informed against them. They were more guarded in their theories as to the eventual penalty he would pay for so low-down a thing, but enough leaked out to constitute what Sarah interpreted as a threat to get even with him.

They had made such threats before, at the time he had chastised them in their own dooryard, and, she reasoned, it was natural and probable they would never rest until they had once more done him an injury. And the fact that they had not more overtly declared their purpose was to her an added indication of the seriousness with which they contemplated their revenge.

She talked to Daniel along this line, but he would not listen to her arguments. He was, he indicated, committed. There could be no let-up in his campaign against them. Such would be taken as a sign of weakness and would perhaps provoke a more serious reprisal than if he kept at them hammer and tongs. No, he could not quit. He'd taken the bear by the tail—he couldn't let go if he wanted to, and he didn't want to. Sooner or later he'd get the whip hand and drive them out of the county. There was plenty of time and he had a good twenty years ahead of him, so why should she worry?

This was good straight talk of Daniel, she reflected, but it wasn't longheaded, or wise, or safe to keep on as he was going. "You're not a criminal, Dan, and they are. They'll do things you wouldn't. It's not as if you were evenly matched. It's not fair to yourself to keep fightin' them. I do wish you'd stop it. There's no good to come of it, and you'll say so, too, before you've got through."

He wouldn't listen. For perhaps the first time in his life he wouldn't pay any heed to her, and she understood now what true stubbornness meant. It got to be so she began to believe him just a little hipped where the Williams people were concerned. Let her mention their name, and his eyes would set in an angry stare and he'd be talking about them for the next hour.

Back of it all he seemed irritable and absent-minded, as if he were all the time thinking of something. His attacks of lumbago had been growing more frequent of late, and repeatedly she had besought him to go in and have his teeth attended to. She had heard about people dying and never knowing what ailed them, when it was all on account of teeth. A body could have these blind abscesses pouring poison into them day and night and never feel a bit of pain. But Daniel was stubborn about this as he was about other things. He kept promising and putting off, but never doing it. She wished he would, because she hated the sight of those two big gold crowns staring at her every time he opened his mouth in a smile. They had always irritated her a little, but he was a mite proud of them, she suspected.

He had them put in years and years ago, when he was younger—after they were first married. That would be 'most thirty years ago, she reflected. Thirty years! They had passed swiftly and, on the whole, happily. They had had a boy, but he had died; and a girl, but she had married and moved out to Oregon. They hardly ever heard from her nowadays. They had got used to being alone again, and time went quickly, and there was always plenty to do. That was about all a body could expect, she reckoned, in this life. And they were happy, too. Many folks weren't half so well off, and she considered that they were lucky.

And yet, she worried during those days preceding the greater horror, and besought him to carry a pistol, which suggestion he scorned. She effected something, however, by persuading Thomas to carry the antiquated weapon she fetched from a box in the garret, for her husband's protection. She warned Thomas always to be on his guard and to keep Mr. Learned in sight, if possible, especially at night.

Whenever Daniel went out into the woods she followed him when she could, at a distance, and hovered near until she saw him about to return. Then she came scuttling back ahead of him and made a great bustle about the house when he entered, as if she hadn't stirred out since he'd left her. She did this until one day he turned unexpectedly and caught her. She tried to evade his questions, but he saw through her and told her, with a bearish hug of appreciation, to go home and behave herself like a good girl and not worry any more about him.

As if that did any good! What use was it, she thought, to tell a body such a thing when they were scared half to death night and day for fear harm would come to him? For she was sure, with the thing people call feminine intuition, that he was in deadly danger. And she never ceased for so long as she lived, to reproach herself, following that last dread day, because she hadn't insisted on his taking greater precautions.

The last few weeks preceding his death were, save for her fear, happy ones. Spring had come again, the third one since that time when her thoughtless, bragging words had sent him up the hill to the fight with the Williamses which had begun all this grief.

Daniel was full of new plans for the planting, for enlarging the barn, for buying more cows of better breeding and for trading in the car for a newer model. He seemed to have cast behind him his rancor against his old foes, for he seldom mentioned them. He was

like a young man, almost more like an overgrown boy, she thought, than ever. And his vigorous enthusiasm infected her, so that they sat up late those nights, busy with dreams and plans and with no suspicion of the blow about to fall.

It came with no warning and like a bolt of lightning in the intensity of its shock.

CHAPTER III.

Daniel had planned to go that day to the farm of a Guernsey breeder with the purpose of purchasing several cows to add to his own herd. He had had several communications from this man and thought he would later take at least three of the animals, provided they turned out to be as represented.

The car had been sent to a garage the week before to be overhauled, Hart, the storekeeper, having engaged himself to purchase it if it were put in good condition. Daniel intended taking this money and adding enough to it to purchase the new model he and Sarah had been discussing. Thus he had for the past several days found himself compelled to use one of the work-horses for such small journeys as going to the store and the like.

Sarah suggested postponing the trip to see the cows until he had got his new car, but he seemed impatient to close the Guernsey deal, and accordingly he started at daylight that day with a substantial lunch tucked beneath the seat, wearing his sheepskin against the chill wind. It was some ten miles to his objective and he estimated that he would not return before the middle of the afternoon.

Old Bob was no great shakes as a trotter and he would have to take his time. Besides his way led back through the hills where the roads were none of the best, and even a car would not have made much better headway.

Sarah prepared his breakfast and watched his departure with no foreboding of the tragedy to come. That morning and well into the afternoon she seized advantage of his absence to clean house and tidy up the room he used as a combined office and handy room.

She pulled out dusty drawers, emptied their contents and scrubbed them inside and out. She brushed and cleaned and washed walls and floors and set things into some semblance of order, so that the place took on a new appearance.

Daniel, she knew, would have rebelled at this were he here, but once he saw the transformation he would grudgingly admit that it looked better. This done she baked some pies, scrubbed the kitchen floor, washed and ironed three of his Sunday-best shirts, made a meat stew, brought up some thirty geranium plants from the cellar and put them out and sat down to her knitting against the time of his return.

She thought nothing of the slowly waning afternoon hours until she heard the clock strike five. She wondered if he shouldn't be arriving presently and began glancing out the window now and then while she worked. Thomas came in during the next hour for a drink of water, and she asked him if he didn't think Mr. Learned was away overlong. He reassured her with the opinion he might not arrive till dark on account of the roads and old Bob.

Six o'clock came and she gave Thomas his supper, setting Daniel's and her own on the back of the stove to keep warm. Seven o'clock, and she commenced to worry. Even then she felt no serious concern, but only wondered if the buggy had broken down or if Daniel had lost his way and been delayed in finding it again. Another hour, two hours passed, with no sign of him.

It was now shortly after nine. In spite of herself she began to be a little frightened. She tried to convince herself that there was no cause for anx-

iety and pictured in her mind his arrival. Presently she would hear the squeak of the wheels, the rubbing of the harness, and she would go to the door and hold up the lantern she had standing lighted for him.

She moved her chair nearer the door and listened while she knitted, conquering what she termed her silly fears. Nothing, she told herself, could happen to him. He knew the road, the horse was gentle and slow, and he'd be here soon. A person would think her a child the way she was taking on.

As the hour dragged through to its completion she bethought herself of telephoning the man who had the Guernsey cattle. Daniel had his name somewhere in the letters he had received. She went to his desk and, after a search, came upon the correspondence. The man's name was Joseph Wyatt and he lived in West Hill.

She seized the directory, found his number and got him almost immediately on the wire. He told her Mr. Learned had been to his place, but had left hours before. Oh, about two o'clock, he should judge. She asked what time he had arrived and was told it was eleven or half past that morning. She thanked him and hung up.

Estimating the time it had taken him to make the trip, Daniel should have got home long since. In other words he was now more than four hours overdue. Something must have happened. There was no getting away from the fact, no smoothing it over. Something had happened!

She was interrupted in these desperate cogitations by the ring of the telephone. The speaker was Hart, the storekeeper. He wanted to know if Daniel was at home. She told him that he was not and asked what was the trouble, why had he telephoned.

"Miller telephoned me a few minutes ago he'd found a horse and buggy in the road by his barn. From his description I thought it was Daniel's. He said he thought maybe there had been an accident, because there was blood on the bottom boards——"

Sarah, with an exclamation of terror, interrupted him. "Did he look for him? Have they found him? Is he hurt?"

Hart did not know. Miller had told him only that and he, himself, had called her right away. Maybe they'd best look for him. He'd come in his car and get her, and they'd go there at once.

She donned hurriedly her little black bonnet and her blue cape, and paced the floor impatiently until he arrived. She had lighted two lanterns and after she had locked the house she and Thomas got in with Hart and began the journey to the Miller place. It lay five miles back and on the road Daniel had taken to go to the Wyatt farm. They found Miller awaiting them, and she got out and went at once to the buggy. There on the bottom, as Hart had said, was a thick mass of clotted blood. The lap robe was gone, but beneath the seat she found the basket in which she had packed Daniel's lunch. He had eaten most of it, but had returned two extra eggs, with characteristic frugality, which he hadn't touched. It was all so like him, Sarah thought.

They found the wheel tracks without difficulty, clear and well defined in the dusty road, and followed them carefully back through the rocky hill country for a distance of some two miles. Here the tracks veered over to one side and they thought they had found the spot of the attack, for they were now convinced that Daniel had met with the foulest violence.

There was no trace of blood upon the ground, however, and they saw where old Bob had cropped the grass for a space of six or eight feet. He had probably stopped to nibble, Hart said, and then traveled on. But half a mile farther up the road they came upon unmistakable evidences. Here the wheels

had jogged sharply off the road, and had backed and filled several times.

Here, too, the dust had been brushed carefully over with a branch, freshly torn from a tree, to conceal incriminating footprints. Here also the dust was black in two places with that same blood which lay so thickly on the bottom boards.

She had a sensation of faintness and nausea as she contemplated these grim proofs of what she now knew had been murder. But where was her Dan? Where had they taken him to?

They began to search the roadside until they came upon a place where the grass had been trampled down and crushed as if a heavy body had been dragged over it. This trail led them across the stone wall and into a wilderness of hardhack and rocks. Presently it dimmed as they crept up the hillside and then it lost itself completely.

They searched the hill and its farther confines for three hours, but they could not again discover the elusive track and, when Sarah suddenly fainted from the strain of the shock and exhaustion, they gave over and brought her home.

By morning the news had spread throughout the countryside that Daniel Learned had been murdered, and men came swarming to the hunt for his body and his killers. They organized themselves, each group taking its allotted territory, and they searched all that day and night and late into the next day, but they found no trace. What was more, they felt they never would.

Daniel Learned had vanished as into air and of the manner of his going there was no clew. There was no knowledge, save that he had been first probably rendered helpless, by a bullet or a club or the like, before they had taken him away. The men did not give up the search, but kept steadily at it until seven days had passed. And on that day they judged they had done all mortal man could and gradually began returning to their homes and resuming their varied occupations.

They had not confined their endeavors to the hills and valleys alone but, on the next morning following the crime, they had gone to the house of Baldy Williams and searched it and its outbuildings and every inch of the surrounding land. They asked no questions until they had finished, and then they brought the Williamses in, one by one and interrogated them. Their attitude was that of innocent and outraged honest citizens whose home had been indecently invaded.

They had first examined David, the youngest—a crafty, skinny lad of eighteen. He hadn't been out of the house that night, he said, and during the day hadn't stirred from the yard except to go a few hundred feet to the pasture where he had milked the cows.

Young Jim came next, glib of tongue, smooth and obliging. He confirmed David's story, nor could they shake him in any detail. None of them, he said, had left the place that day or night. Asked why they hadn't joined in the search for Daniel he said that they'd been afraid to, knowing they would be suspected of having something to do with it because of the bad blood between the two families. He instanced this interrogation to prove his point.

Baldy Jim followed. Surly, sticking to the same story, refusing to be led into any trap with the reiterated countering statement that he didn't understand what they could be driving at. They brought up the threats made by him and his sons against Daniel, but they could not make headway against his grim determination to keep to simple, one-track arguments.

He hadn't had anything to do with it, he knew nothing about it. Yes, he had made threats, but then everybody did that, and his making them didn't prove anything. He'd been home all day,

mending harness. He showed them the harness to prove it.

They kept his wife, the former Deb Browner, until the last. If Mr. Williams had been reticent in his manner, Deb Browner made up for it with a squalling, abusive attack on them which they strove in vain to stem. They were a pack of stinking skunks to try to hang murder on decent, law-abiding, honest folks and they'd rue the day they ever tried it. They knew they had nothing on any one of the family, before they come here, but they had to find somebody and they were taking the first that came handy.

She didn't see what they were makin' such a fuss about anyway, because that old skinflint Learned had ought to have died long ago, and she for one was glad that somebody had got him at last, and he was gone to hell where he belonged and where she hoped and prayed they'd all be roastin' for harrying an honest woman.

They dismissed Deb Browner as too difficult to handle. They next examined the shooting gear of the Williamses. They found two shotguns, a high-powered rifle, a smaller rifle and two pistols. All these but the shotguns were loaded, and all were scrupulously clean, bearing no indications of having recently been fired. Thus another hope went glimmering.

Once more they searched house and buildings, ascending to the garret, exploring with flash lights the cellar, and even draining the well and sifting the contents of its sandy bottom. They had left no tiny nook neglected, not any article which could have a possible bearing on the crime, but at nightfall they had to confess themselves baffled. They came away from the Williamses empty-handed, but not convinced. These creatures knew something, they were sure, but it was safely hidden in their lying heads and nobody short of Heaven itself could extract it from them.

For ten days or more a few scattered groups continued the search and then they, too, relinquished it. Of theories there were a myriad. Some said they had taken his body, burned it and scattered the ashes and, for a time, this gained credence, especially when several places were found where there had been a fire. These, it was established, had been burned by various farmers, and each one was thus satisfactorily accounted for.

Others said the Williamses must have buried the remains in some swamp, which would have necessitated leaving a trace about the soft margins. Men explored and encircled each and every swamp and morass within a circle of five miles and found nothing save a bogged cow, which they extricated, and the footprints of other wandering cattle.

Still others believed quicklime had been used, but no store had sold the stuff to any one in the community for as far back as a year. These purchasers made ready accounting of its use, if such were needed, because it lost its efficacy within a few weeks unless stored in a dry place. Old wells on abandoned house sites were one and all searched and found empty, save for the skeletons of cats and rabbits which had fallen in and perished there.

The almost forgotten shaft of an ancient mine, sunk during the days of 1849, in expectation of great returns from the gold which analysis proved lay there, but whose stock had brought only disaster to its purchasers, was drained and yielded nothing.

Stone walls were scrutinized and the crannies of granite ledges, familiar to the younger generation from coon and wildcat hunting, the stone tunnels of road culverts, the depths of springs and the primitive drains of farmsteads, and even the sandy reaches of newly-tilled fields, and yet nothing was found. Every suggestion, every theory was run to earth and proved valueless.

So exhaustive were their efforts that they went so far as to reopen the grave of one lately buried in the local cemetery, since a body had some years before been hidden in just such a manner over in East Street. Ultimately the search lessened in intensity until finally it ceased. The tragedy remained more inexplicable than ever and would, people said, go down in the annals of the place as its greatest mystery, unsolved until the end of time.

Sarah Learned, following that first overwhelming shock which had prostrated her for days, recovered gradually her almost shattered mind and more gradually her health. During the search she continued to follow its course with an unflagging concentration, receiving each night a report of the day's results —always empty, always barren even of hope.

She came in the end to reconcile herself to the inevitable. Her Dan was gone and he would never return. It was perhaps a blessing to her that she now found herself confronted with the problem of operating the farm. Thomas still continued his work and could manage to bring it through to the winter by having help at harvest and haying, but in the spring there would be need of another man.

Dan's lawyer suggested to Sarah that she sell the place and retire to some other scene less painful in its reminders, but this she instantly refused. So long as she lived, she said, she would carry things along as Dan would have done. She was familiar with every phase of the work and there was no reason why she shouldn't keep on with it.

She believed she could make the farm pay, even with Dan gone. At any rate she was going to try. Even if she failed it would make little difference, since she had come into the entire estate, amounting to the round sum of twenty-three thousand dollars. She would have enough to live on comfortably even if she never did another stroke of work, but she intended, she said, doing a good many strokes.

"I'm not planning to sit idle with my hands folded," she finished grimly.

Dan's lawyer next suggested that she at least should take a little trip, say to Florida, just for a change of scene. It would do her a world of good, and she would come back feeling like a changed woman.

"Florida!" she exclaimed. "That's where everybody is goin' crazy over real estate, ain't it? When it collapses you won't hear so much about it! No, John Wheeler, I'm a-goin' to stay right here where I belong. If goin' away is goin' to make me a changed woman then that's another reason for stayin'. I don't want to change and I don't want to rest. All I want is to keep busy, get things settled a bit, get used to Dan's not bein' here and not be pestered by well-meanin' folks that don't know what's best for me as well as I do."

So she entered once more the old familiar grooves of life, so soon as her rapidly returning strength permitted, and people who saw her that winter thought her forgetful of Dan, and heartless, because she seemed so much the old Sarah and not cast down and moping about in rusty black, as was the custom hereabouts when one lost a husband.

She resumed her former activities and, in addition, she saw to it when summer came that the work was done properly and not stinted or shiftlessly evaded. She hired another man to help the faithful Thomas, but summarily dismissed him when she caught him loafing. Two more followed in swift succession until she had got the kind she wanted. She raised his wages and thus made him doubly zealous to do and please.

When spring planting was done she relaxed a little and allowed herself a few moments each day of quiet medita-

tion. She would, on these occasions, sit near the window where she had sat that night waiting for Dan, looking out with eyes fixed on nothing, lost in thought. The men judged that she was mourning for him, but in reality she was turning over and over, with an enduring patience, an unflinching resolution, the varied ramifications, the myriad circumstances of possibility, of fact and of chance having to do with Daniel's murder.

And beneath this weaving, kaleidoscopic whole lay, like a rock foundation, the grim determination to find the murderer of her husband.

She had not the faintest glimmer of where Dan's body lay or of the manner in which he had been killed. But she knew with a certainty, as unwavering as the fact that she lived and breathed and possessed a consciousness, that he had met death at the hands of the Williamses. Neither had she any tangible idea of the way in which she would bring to fruition that stern resolve.

It was enough for her that he lay dead and that she was to become the servant of a sure, practical and perhaps a divine retribution. It was, she knew, a retribution which must be just. She knew this because of her recoil from any other sort, rather than from self-analysis. It would have been easy enough for her to go to the Williamses and destroy them at a single blow, root and branch, but that would not have been the way Dan would want it.

It would not be the right way, nor worthy of the dignity, the immeasurable sedateness of the almost sacred duty she felt now imposed upon her. All else, she knew, must yield to this precedence. This business of her remaining on the farm and continuing its operation was of minute consequence compared with her greater task, and had served merely to cloak the thing to which her life would henceforth be consecrated.

As the seasonal changes, with their consequent shifting duties, came and passed, she grew to take a less active part in them, leaving their supervision largely to Thomas, whom she had grown to know more thoroughly and to trust completely. She even curtailed many of her duties about the house which once had seemed so arbitrary in their demands, spending more of her time in that quiet meditation which was earning for her the reputation of being a recluse and the tragic figure of a bereavement.

Her health, however, she steadily regained. She took on flesh and felt in her aging body a new and unsuspected vigor, born of her high and encouraged resolve perhaps, and an unwonted color. She even blossomed forth in a new bonnet of happy hues and shape, to the grim wonderment of other members of her church congregation, but to her own abandoned delight.

Slowly, by dint of unwearying days and months of thought, she conceived a plan, taking for its creation a bit here, a bit there. She was remedying its weaker spots, tearing down mistakes, remaking the structure, testing it by every conceivable circumstance which might arise to ruin its success, until at length she was satisfied. If it did not prove to be what she believed it, why then she would make the attempt again.

She had her life before her. Years were nothing to her. Only let her accomplish this great purpose before she died and she would be satisfied. Fall had come again. She was ready.

CHAPTER IV.

First of all she knew she must have an ally, because there were things in her scheme which only a man—a clever man—could do. She looked about her speculatively, found no one she thought would suit and finally discovered, she believed, in her man Thomas precisely

the individual she sought. This one must be convincing. He must, beyond all things, be loyal. He must be fearless, keenly observant and able to adjust himself quickly to emergencies.

Thomas had such qualities, she thought. He was a bright sort, not more than thirty-five, strong, quick in mind and body, and willing. He was loyal, too, and as devoted to her as he had been to Dan. A likable sort, with a pleasant manner, a slow way of speaking, but fast enough when he chose to be.

She examined his further characteristics. He was cool, logical. He hardly ever lost his temper and rarely swore. He was methodical and he never did a thing unless he could do it right. He was honest as the day was long. Nobody's fool, Thomas. He would do if she could persuade him to his difficult and unpleasant task.

She put it before him one night after the other man had gone to bed. She told him she had an idea she could bring the murderers of her husband to justice provided she had somebody who would help her. She thought he would be that one, if only he wished to. Did he want to help her? If not, say the word, and she'd look elsewhere.

His answer, prompt and eager, meant little. It was to be expected.

"That's all very well," she continued. "But you don't yet know what's wanted of you. Maybe you'll think differently when I tell you."

She went on to explain that she wished to have somebody establish themselves in the very heart of the enemy's camp. In the Williamses household, in brief. This, she thought, could be done—if done cautiously and convincingly enough.

First of all Thomas would begin complaining to the neighbors about her. He would say that the work was a good deal stiffer than when Dan was alive, and that his widow was putting more on him than he could endure. Besides this, she had made him take less wages, when he was working harder than he ever had in his life.

He was to say that the old lady was getting irritable and moody since Dan went, and that it was difficult to live under the same roof with her. He would begin saying these things at once and at the same time he would begin hunting around for another job. He might get offers, but he would hold off for a while until they saw how things were turning out.

She paused. "What do you think of it so far?"

Thomas was regarding her closely. "I don't rightly understand yet what you are aimin' at, Mrs. Learned. I'd wait, I think, till I heard the rest of it."

She smiled. Hers had been a silly question, at that. "The next part," she went on, "isn't going to be so easy. You see what you've got to do is get in with the Williamses. Leavin' here and always complainin' against me and the place will help, but it's not enough—not near enough. They'll listen to you and agree, but that's all. So you've got to do more. You've got to get so that you're one of 'em.

"To be one of 'em, Thomas, you've got to become a drinkin' man. I don't mean you've got to become a drunkard, but you've got to drink enough to make 'em think you've grown to be sort of loose and free and easy—the way they think they are—and you've got to hint at things you've done.

"For instance: It might be a good thing for me to give you Dan's gold watch and let you tell 'em you stole it when you left here. You could ask 'em where you could get rid of it without bein' caught. I could give you mother's gold bracelet, too, and some other things like that. Some of the old silver spoons, maybe. The great thing is to get their confidence. Get 'em to trust you. You could meet 'em naturallike, away from

their house, in the woods perhaps, or at the store. Any way so that you get to talkin' with 'em."

Thomas pursed his lips at this. He said he had never been a drinking man and he didn't think he'd ought to begin at his age in life—even enough to make a show, as she had suggested. However, he'd do it, if it was needful.

It was not only needful, she explained, but everything depended on it. She knew the Williamses. If you weren't a drinking man they hadn't any use for you. They hadn't any use for anybody who was decent and law abiding. That was the worst part of it for him. He'd have to practically lose his character in the community, have to stand having his name blackened and have to stand getting the name of being a drunkard and a thief, for she would let it be known that she suspected he'd stolen Dan's watch and her own things.

But she wouldn't have him arrested, naturally, and she would say she couldn't get the evidence against him.

"I'll take care of the stealin' part if you take care of the drinkin'. And the Lord knows once you get in with 'em you won't have to go far for liquor."

He shook his head. "I don't mind anythin' but the drinkin'."

"Pshaw! You can pretend, can't you? You can pretend to be drunker than you are and spill it out when they're not lookin'? Only you've got to be careful, because they'll be suspicious of everybody since they know folks think they killed Dan."

He agreed to this. It would be easy to get in with them because he'd begin with those hard-cider bums, old Perkins and "Tuggie" Bannocks. They were always hanging around the Williamses, doing odd jobs for liquor.

She went on to say his wages would continue as they were, except for a raise of ten dollars a month—and twenty when he wasn't working—to offset what he'd have to pay for board. If things went through as she hoped and expected and if they succeeded in running down the murderers she'd give him two thousand dollars cash money as soon as they were jailed. Enough, she said, for him to buy a farm of his own and marry and settle down.

He considered this thoughtfully, and she was confirmed in her estimate of his cool and deliberate judgment. He said this was more than fair and that he would think it over that night and let her know in the morning. Before he went out to look over the barns he asked her what all this meant and what she was trying to accomplish.

"That's where you've got to trust me, Thomas," she answered steadily. "I've got my ideas all worked out. Your job will be to obey orders and ask no questions. If I didn't think you could fill the bill I shouldn't have spoken to you about it. Between the two of us we're going to succeed."

When he announced next morning that he had decided to accept her offer, she experienced a thrill of exultation. She had perfectly executed the first step in the great pian.

CHAPTER V.

The little community buzzed when it heard the circumstances attending Thomas Dole's departure that September from the Learned farm, where he had been employed now for the past seven years. It consumed voraciously the gossip derived from him anent Mrs. Learned and it hungered for more. Thomas had been put upon, all right, by the widow. She'd been growing more and more cantankerous since Dan had died, until there was no enduring her.

Thomas had finally quit, with a month's pay coming to him. She'd refused to give it to him, and finally he'd had to go to a lawyer to collect it. It seemed like losing Dan had sort of affected her mind, she was that spiteful

and vicious. She hadn't a good word for anybody. She even went so far as to accuse Thomas of having stolen her husband's gold watch and some of her silver. She said it right in meeting, too, between hymns.

Thus the boomerang these two plotters had so thoughtfully prepared.

Thomas set himself to correct this impression by offering to sell two silver spoons to Tuggie Bannocks, who promptly went to Justice of the Peace Willets, trusting thus to obtain leniency the next time he was arrested for disturbing the public peace.

Thomas, when approached by Willets, denied the aspersion, stating Tuggie had been drunk when they met. But Thomas had brought upon himself suspicion and little further was needed. Later, meeting Tuggie, he accused him of treachery, and Tuggie, to rehabilitate himself, swore that the justice lied, and offered Thomas a peace offering of cider brandy.

Thomas drank, and writhed inwardly as the fiery stuff burned down his throat and coiled itself poisonously at the pit of his stomach. Thomas, however, spoke approvingly of the brandy and this time when offered the flask cunningly ejected the larger part of the drink when Tuggie was not looking.

Thomas wanted to know where he could get some of that fine liquor, and Tuggie winked and asked for a dollar. Thomas handed it over, Tuggie disappeared in the direction of the Williamses, to presently return bearing a half-pint flask. This was speedily consumed. Thomas gave Tuggie four dollars, and Tuggie came back with a quart. That night there went singing through the quiet country roads two voices, one a cracked and creaking falsetto, the other a heavy bass.

The next morning it was discovered that violent hands had been laid on the Baptist Church fence gate. Later it was found half submerged in the adjacent brook. Later still Mr. Willets came upon Tuggie and Thomas fast asleep in his haymow and then and there arrested them both for disorderly conduct, fining Thomas five dollars, but giving Tuggie thirty days at the county jail as an old offender.

Thomas continued to drink without his companion, allying himself with old man Perkins upon whom his blandishments operated with equal success. Old man Perkins hadn't the amiability of Tuggie, but he developed into an excellent provider. Three days later Thomas and Mr. Perkins were found by Mr. Willets sleeping in his haymow. This time he gave the offenders each thirty days.

Thomas took his sentence with a laugh, as befitted one who scorned the law and all its minions. His heart rejoiced, for was he not already become one of the shunned, the blackened sheep of the community and a convict?

Sarah Learned also rejoiced at the furtherance of her schemes and made an effort to have Thomas rearrested, on the completion of his sentence, for stealing spoons and a watch. She failed in this, but no longer were her declarations received with careless levity. Thomas Dole had without doubt stolen the things. Any one could see the sort he had become by a look at his face. Besides he was turning into a regular drunkard like his running mates, Perkins and Tuggie Bannocks.

After his release Thomas Dole got himself a job at day wages, working at wood chopping, but lost it two days later for being drunk and abusive. The next week he accompanied Mr. Perkins to the Williamses, for the first time, where he was received with reserve, but not without a certain sympathy by reason of his recent prison experience.

The tedious months of winter passed without event. Thomas Dole had established his position as an unqualified and worthless drunkard, accepted as

such by every one, including the Williamses, who utilized his services as they did other alcoholic dependents, for wood cutting, repairing sled shoes, cleaning out stables and similar odd chores.

For the most part he loafed, since his remuneration was small, and consisted in the main of his board and room and a certain quantity of cider brandy which he took to bed with him and cannily employed in starting the fire in the small stove which heated his sordid cubicle.

Sarah Learned bided her time during that prolonged and cold season of short days and roaring fires. She bided her time, comforted by the thought that there had been no flaw in her foundation. Thomas had acquitted himself with remarkable thoroughness. The Williamses evidently had swallowed the bait without a second thought. They were, at heart, simpletons.

It would not be long now before summer arrived, when she could begin more actively the consummation of her cherished designs. Nothing would interfere with them. Her two men had been broken in to their work and could be trusted to carry it on without pestering her too much. They were not like Thomas Dole, but they would serve.

The farm was not making money, but it was at least not losing any great sum, and that was as much as she could expect under all the circumstances. She had not communicated with Thomas except on three occasions, when she had paid him his wages in cash, and had given him instructions which were merely a repetition of those of her first interview.

Thomas had complained of indigestion, brought on by such small enforced indulgence as he had been compelled to exhibit for the proper playing of his new rôle and she had humorously cautioned him against the evil of drink and had been cheered by his ready laughter. It was something to know that she had at least one friend left to stand by her in this fight which was, if she were not mistaken, to be the most tedious and difficult of her entire life.

The days began to lengthen and the snow to lower where it had lain so long and so deeply. Bare spots of ground appeared and one day Sarah heard a chicadee's note, and hurried out at this harbinger of spring, threw him crumbs and saw him wolf them greedily. The blue jays which had appeared intermittently through the winter forsook her hospitable dooryard, but a fat hen robin came in their place, dug fruitlessly for worms in the frozen ground and departed once more for a warmer zone. And then crows cawed one morning, and Sarah knew the long winter was at last broken.

She forced herself to patience, awaiting the warm days of June. The rains had come, and settled weather seemed assured. The ground had dried, green grass had sprung up everywhere, and the trees were budding before she took the first step in this strange adventure which was so heavily freighted with uncertainty and chance.

It was common gossip within an hour of her departure on the stage for Pownal Bridge, the county seat, that Sarah Learned was looking peaked. And it was also a matter of considerable concern why she had taken the stage for Pownal Bridge. She seldom went anywhere. Why should she be going somewhere now? Maybe she was going to do some shopping over to Pownal. She had money enough in her own right since Dan had died. She had a right to spend it, too, but it looked funny just the same to see her traveling like that.

Sarah Learned was gone for three days. She returned as she had gone, quietly and without ostentation. One of her men came to the store with old Bob, got her and her little old bag and took her home back to the farm. Two

weeks later Sarah again descended from that rickety buggy before the store, informed her man that he should call for her when the stage fetched her on the morrow and once more departed.

Sarah Learned was gadding about, it seemed. This was the second time she'd gone away inside of two weeks. Of course it was all right, but still it was kind of funny at that to see an old woman who had always stuck around home kind of stepping out this way. Well, of course it was her own business. Still——

The paying teller of the First National Bank of Pownal Bridge looked up from counting a bag of nickels at the low-spoken inquiry. He saw a little old woman standing at the window, wearing a funny little black bonnet, smiling at him very pleasantly. He asked her to repeat her question and leaned closer to hear it.

"Gold," she said. "I've got some gold here and I wanted to know how I'd go about it to get it changed into real money."

The paying teller asked to see it, and she handed him a small bag the size of her fist, made of bed ticking and tightly bound with a piece of thin blue ribbon.

"It's inside that," she said.

He unfastened the string with some difficulty and poked a finger into the little bag. He peered into it and then he exclaimed: "Why, it's gold dust, isn't it?"

"I hope so," she answered amusedly. "If it isn't then more than one man don't know his business. I had it assayed already, or some more like it, in New York, and they told me it was gold all right. How much is it worth?"

He had poured some of the dull yellow stuff into his hand and was staring at it curiously. "Well, this is a little out of our line. I'll have to speak to the president about it." He tied up the bag again and handed it back to her. "Just one minute."

He returned, to tell her they could not give her the value because they had nobody experienced in that sort of thing.

They would prefer that she send it to the man she had seen in New York. It was not in their line.

"But I can't wait that long. Where's your president? Let me talk to him."

The teller indicated a door standing ajar and she walked over and tapped on the frame. The man seated at the flat-topped desk looked up, nodded and greeted her with a pleasant, "Good morning."

She dropped the bag on the desk in front of him. "Your teller says he can't handle this because it's out of his line. But I want the money, and I'm not used to business methods—sending it to New York, and all that—and I do wish you'd accommodate me somehow. I've got two thousand dollars to deposit, too."

He nodded. "Yes," he said, "he was just telling me about this gold dust. It's out of our line. Still, as a matter of accommodation, we might send it for you. We might weigh it, and give you a receipt for it, but I shouldn't care to be responsible otherwise." He finished with inquiry in his tone.

She hastened to assure him that this would be satisfactory. All she wanted was somebody to look after it for her.

She knew this bank and knew it could be trusted. She would perhaps be bringing in more of this gold, as a regular thing. And what should she do now about starting the account? She'd never had one before.

He took charge of this detail himself, giving her a card for her signature, entering her deposit in her pass book and handing it back together with a new and shining check book. He next proceeded to count the money which was in crisp twenty-dollar bills. Excusing himself he went to the rear with her

bag of gold dust, weighed it and gave her a receipt.

She arose, thanking him heartily. He accompanied her hospitably to the door, telling her they would, if she wished, credit her account with the amount of the gold, and they would notify her as soon as they heard from New York. He held her in conversation a moment before asking her casually where she had got a thing so unusual as gold dust in this section.

She laughed with what seemed a slight confusion. "Oh, it's some I found up in an old trunk, belongin' to my grandfather. He was a Forty-niner, and he fetched it back as a souvenir from the West. I thought I might as well get the money as have it layin' around like that."

The president said he'd like to find a ton of it in his garret and they parted most amiably, he to his business and she to her return trip on the stage. But he wondered what she had meant in saying she might bring in "more of this gold."

CHAPTER VI.

There was small doubt that Sarah Learned was getting herself talked about, not alone on account of the repeated trips to Pownal Bridge, but because of certain peculiar behavior on her part, reported first by her hired men, and next by some small boys who were fishing along the banks of Little Sandy Brook. The men said that she was going crazy, they thought. She was growing more and more moody and silent, speaking to them only when she had to, and muttering to herself all the time, and getting up early mornings before it was yet daylight, and going off in the woods.

Often she kept them waiting an hour for breakfast, returning all muddy and wet to her waist, and still muttering. Yes, she was loony all right. Kept telling them to keep an eye out for wet spots, seemed hipped on springs. Wanted to know if they'd ever found a bubbling spring in their work about the woods. Told them, too, that she wanted to find a good sand bank, because she was going to build a stucco bungalow up in the hill meadows, where she could be alone more. She was certainly alone enough as it was, for *they* never saw anything of her except at meals.

It was generally believed on receipt of this that Sarah was actually going off her head on account of so taking to heart the death of her husband. She'd been acting strange for some time, now they thought of it. She had been coming to church in the most outlandish hats, and once in a bright scarlet cape that was scandalous for a woman of her age to be wearing!

A story told by the small boys added fuel to and confirmed this belief. They had arisen very early that Sunday morning and had stolen away to do some illicit fishing before breakfast. They said they were hunting for a crow's nest, and gained credence by the fact that young crows cawed loudest early in the morning, as if aware their human enemies were not yet stirring about. This alibi would have been more convincing but for the fact that the young crows had all left their nests by now and were occupied busily in uprooting the tender young corn of various frantic farmers.

The boys had, they said, been walking along the bank of Little Sandy, which skirted the farther edge of the Learned meadows, when they were unexpectedly aware of a human figure busily engaged on the opposite side and some fifty feet below them. They had continued to observe it, and they soon identified it as that of old Sarah Learned. She was employed in a mysterious occupation, entirely beyond their comprehension. She seemed to be digging in the sand, which had been

washed from the banks by spring freshets and which had accumulated in a shallow bank almost on a level with the flowing water.

She was using a short-handled shovel, and she kept dumping sand into a queer arrangement like a child's cradle which stood beside her. Presently she ceased digging, and, picking up a pail, she waded out into the brook, dipped up a full pail of water, and began pouring it into the cradle arrangement the while she shoved it rapidly to and fro with her knee. Sand and water flowed from one end of the thing while she worked furiously, and when the pail was empty she proceeded to go through the same operation not once, but three and four times.

Next she knelt down and examined with intentness the inside of the cradle thing, pawing and picking up what sand remained and putting it in another small tin pail. She finished at last, took shovel, pail and cradle arrangement and disappeared in the bushes. They were consumed with curiosity, but this emotion was dwarfed by their astonishment at the costume she had been wearing. It consisted of what were indubitably knickerbockers. Pants! Boy's pants. Her legs were encased in rubber boots, and she wore a heavy jacket. She had been hatless, too.

Soon she had emerged, wearing a skirt and her old felt hat, and set out for home across lots. They had proceeded to investigate the strange equipment she had been using, and they found it concealed beneath some brush. The cradle thing mystified them because they had never seen its like. It was crudely built of packing-box boards, and it was evidently her own handiwork, judging from its workmanship.

Their story was received with incredulity until it reached the ears of Justice Willets. There had been funny happenings lately, and he had had an eye on the Learned household for some time. He accompanied the boys and saw the cradle with his own eyes. But it puzzled him. He couldn't imagine what it all meant, unless she was a little touched in the head.

Vague rumors began in the sleepy little community. The widow Learned was losing her mind. She was digging in the brook. She wanted sand. She wanted to find springs. She was gadding at Pownal Bridge, sometimes as often as twice a month. Somebody ought to do something about it. They ought to appoint a conservator over her because probably she'd squander all her money and lose everything before she finished.

Justice Willets decided one day to take a little trip to Pownal Bridge on business. It so happened that he arrived in his car some twenty minutes before the stage which carried Sarah Learned. He parked the car and took up a strategic position across the street behind an array of dry-goods boxes. He saw Sarah emerge from the stage, walk up the street and into the bank.

He waited until she came out and then he entered. He knew the president and he engaged himself in conversation with that gentleman concerning the matter of a modest loan of some five hundred dollars. Negotiations having been tentatively arranged, Mr. Willets casually mentioned the fact that he had just met old Mrs. Learned coming out of the bank. He didn't know, he said, that she had an account here. Nice woman, he added, but peculiar—very peculiar.

The president, being humane and subject to humanity's failings, experienced a sharp twinge of curiosity. Mrs. Learned had been bringing in mysterious bags of gold dust with unfailing regularity now for the past several weeks. He hadn't pressed her for an explanation because she seemed oddly reticent on the subject, but he'd been intending to look into it a bit when he

got time. And the advent of Mr. Willets presented the opportunity.

Who was this Mrs. Learned, inquired the president, and Mr. Willets embarked on a long and detailed discourse. The president said he remembered now, of course, about the Learned mystery. And so this was the widow! And it was thought that she was a little touched, eh, on account of her husband's death? Well, she wasn't touched when it came to business. She had as shrewd a head on her shoulders as any of them.

"And you say she's been digging in the brook bed for sand, eh? Say she's hipped on the subject of springs?" He dropped his chin in his hand and was lost in a momentary reverie. "I'm inclined to think," he went on, "that she isn't as hipped as you might believe, Mr. Willets. However"—and he arose and held out his hand in that allegedly tactful manner of one who considers the interview terminated—"time will tell, time will tell."

On the following Sunday the president journeyed in his car alone to the vicinity of the Learned farm, where he left his car and, in the fashion of one casually strolling, made his way across the fields until he came to the Little Sandy. Here he altered his course until he reached a sandy shoal whose surface exhibited signs of having been recently disturbed as by a shovel. He stooped, gathered up several handfuls of this sand and thrust them into his pocket. He then returned, whistling innocently, got into his car and drove away.

The faithful Mr. Willets had not got much satisfaction from his trip to Pownal Bridge. His inquisitiveness had been, if anything, piqued by the fact of the widow's bank account and by the president's commendation. So Justice Willets returned again to the scene of that curious activity and once more inspected the cradle affair. He could make nothing of it and he took into his confidence at this stage of the affair his crony, old "Simmy" Prescott.

Simmy had been about the world considerably. In his youth he had traveled, even so far as California and back. And he had somewhat later enjoyed the educational advantages offered by the Chicago World's Fair. Justice Willets took Simmy to see the strange contraption employed by the widow in her still stranger actions. And after Simmy Prescott had pawed it and poked it and even smelled it, he pronounced it, in his opinion, one of those things they used for washing gold dust out West.

"Gold dust?" exclaimed Mr. Willets disgustedly. "Why they ain't any gold dust in these parts."

Simmy Prescott performed a gesture of ponderous thought, accomplished by elongating his lower jaw, forming with his mouth a contracted, circular orifice and poking his tongue deep down into his lower cheek. Thus he remained, while Mr. Willets eyed him deprecatingly, for the space of a minute. And then: "Who says they ain't gold hereabouts?" pronounced Simmy loftily.

"Well, they ain't, and you know it. What's the use tryin' to start an argument?"

"Mebbe," said Simmy Prescott with immeasurable scorn, "mebbe if some folks lived hereabouts long as I have, and mebbe if they knew a quarter as much about this country as they'd ought to, they wouldn't be so damn cocksure of themselves and wouldn't go around makin' wild statements such as that statement of yours is."

Mr. Willets ejaculated impatiently. "Well, if you know so darn much about it, where's there gold hereabouts?"

"Years ago, afore you was even thought of," began Simmy, "they found gold in these hills. They was companies formed, they was machinery fetched in. And they was shafts drove down into them mountains. The companies, they sold stock—plenty of it.

I got some of it now up in the garret at home which my old grandfather bought—mebbe two thousand dollars' wuth on it. And it ain't wuth the paper it's written on. Why ain't it? It cost too much money to drive through that granite, that's why. Anybody puttin' in money lost every red cent. But don't you let anybody tell you they ain't gold hereabouts. They's gold, not only here, but in a lot more place throughout Connecticut. Why! Where's yer ears? Where was you when they dreened that old mine shaft, lookin' fer Dan'l's body? Tryin' a case, I cal'late," he concluded sardonically.

Mr. Willets stooped and gathered up a handful of the sand which remained in the cradle. "You don't suppose, do you, they's a chance of her gettin' gold out of this stuff?"

"Why not?" Simmy scuffed the surface of the ground with the toe of his boot. "It's here. Why not? Mebbe they never thought to look in th' sand in th' old days. Mebbe they missed it. Mebbe it's here—right under us where we're standin'." He hitched his trousers higher about his lean hips. "And mebbe it ain't."

"Great Jerusalem!" said Mr. Willets softly. "Great Jerusalem! Why, if that's so we'll all be rich! Rich! To think of diggin' gold—real honest-to-goodness gold, right out of the sand like that!" He glanced scrutinizingly about him. "I wonder how much of this brook she owns, and how much of it can be bought right. One thing about it, Simmy, we've got to keep this to ourselves. Don't mention it to anybody. It's a chanct to get rich, instead of slavin' at farmin' all our lives. And I'm goin' to get busy straight off and see if I can't buy up some of this gravelly land."

"How d'you know they's gold here?" croaked Simmy Prescott. "How d'you know she ain't hipped on the subject? She wouldn't be th' first one by a long shot. Better have this sand analyzed afore you go off half cocked."

Mr. Willets began rapidly filling a pocket with the clean white stuff. "That's what we'll do right off. I'll go to New York or Boston or some place to-morrow and find out for certain. And if it's gold we'll get rich. Rich—you hear me?"

But the aged Simmy had turned and was engaged in picking his way homeward through the brush.

CHAPTER VII.

Some days later an observer might have detected a curious tenseness in the atmosphere of the little settlement—might have have detected, had he been subtle, a certain restrained excitement in the eyes of several of the inhabitants, might have seen, had he been agile, queer actions on their part when night had come and their neighbors were snug in their beds. He might, also, have seen a curious flashing of lights along the sand bars of Little Sandy, accompanied by bulky moving objects which stooped and shoveled and performed fantastic evolutions above more fantastically contrived wooden boxes. For the news had escaped and was achieving hourly a more explosive, more wildly feverish effect, that there was gold to be found on Little Sandy.

It was Mr. Willets who had let the cat out of the bag. He had erred in not taking into his confidence his better and more astute half, who had observed his stealthy withdrawal from the marital bed, had arisen without comment and seen him leave the house, carrying rubber boots and a shovel. And when he had repeated this on the next and the next night she had demanded an explanation. Unaware that she was cognizant of more than one incident he said he had got up to bury a dead cat whose odor had offended him. She asked him if he had buried a cat each

of the three nights he had gone forth and he wilted and told her all.

Mrs. Willets had communicated the startling news to Mrs. Eldridge that her husband had been obtaining gold, actual gold, from the brook bank, and Mrs. Eldridge had told a friend and that friend had told another—all in the strictest confidence. Now seven men made nocturnal pilgrimages, and dug hopefully along Little Sandy's edge, and some of them found gold and some did not. But none of them dreamed of anything less than quick and great fortunes to be had for the mere effort of scooping it up.

It was providential that their activities were not observed during that first week by the widow Learned, who was confined to her bed with a bad cold. But the widow did not remain thus immured during those hours in which her neighbors trespassed and dug with sweat pouring down their faces. The widow Learned arose each night and donned her clothes and went forth and observed with many a chuckle of satisfaction the result of her deep-laid plot. And then she went back to bed and slept the sleep of the just.

Forty-eight hours later the storm broke. Men swarmed upon the brook and upon the sand banks of the lowlands and even in those excavations beside the road where gravel had been taken for fills and repairs. These last fared badly, but those who kept to the brook reaped their reward. The news spread with the velocity of a prairie fire throughout the surrounding country and presently the landscape achieved the appearance of a giant ant hill upon which dark figures moved industriously.

Mrs. Learned appeared in the midst of this turmoil and protested weakly against this encroachment upon her rights and went away again as if defeated. A lugubrious stranger in rusty black presented himself one morning and endeavored to purchase the land bordering Little Sandy, but his offers were received with jeers. He returned to the bank president and reported that his mission had failed.

Prominent among the searchers was Thomas Dole. At first he had seemed to hold the idea of gold to be pure nonsense, but later he presented himself, carrying an improvised rocker and a shovel, and was among the most successful in panning out the golden dust.

It was strange the way it lay among the sand bars. Some obtained a considerable quantity of the precious stuff, while others never discovered so much as a tiny grain. This did not discourage them, for they could see the luck attending their more fortunate companions, working almost at their side. Nor was this luck enormous. It is probable that no one man obtained more than fifty dollars' worth of dust during his entire period of work. It was less the quantity of gold than the fact that there was gold which kept them at fever heat and made them relinquish all else in order to remain so long at this arduous task of shoveling and washing sand.

Conspicuous among the fortunate was Thomas Dole. He seemed favored above the others, because he invariably managed to hit on richer ground. And in the very midst of the excitement he came one morning with a peeled willow wand such as those used by old wives in their search for hidden veins of water where wells could be dug.

They laughed at this wand and at Thomas' grave purpose to find gold through its necromantic power. They did not laugh when he made three small but rich strikes that day, and the following morning saw a dozen respected citizens solemnly parading through the fields, each gazing, rapt and expectant, upon the slender white branch he held before him.

And once again Sarah Learned chuckled.

She presently had an interview with

Thomas, between midnight and daybreak. He reported that all was quiet at the Williams' house. Nothing had happened to rouse his suspicion, and as for his own standing in the Williams' house it was entirely satisfactory. He had their confidence, if only to a limited degree. They never mentioned Mr. Learned, save in quiet contempt. And they never made any allusion to his disappearance. This alone was suspicious, because the subject still continued to be a favorite one around kitchen supper tables and in the cow barns.

The Williamses had been among the first to rush to the gold ground, but thus far they hadn't found enough to fill a thimble. They were a little envious of his good fortune, but he had softened that by giving them a round half of all he found, telling them he would take it out in brandy. And they were also watching the workings of the willow wand. No doubt about it. They were an ignorant, superstitious lot, afraid to pass a graveyard at night, for example, and following the movements of the moon in their planting. They had observed the operations of the magic wand with a sort of fear and reverence. They would not come near it when he laid it aside at night and Deb Browner had sought out her rabbit's foot and hung it about her neck as a charm against any evil the thing might bring her.

Sarah listened attentively. "You must keep an eye on 'em night and day now, Thomas—night and day. If by any chance one of 'em gets up at night see he don't get out of your sight. Watch and follow him. If you miss him why all this would be gone for nothing. And I've another idea." She brought from her pocket a handful of dull metal objects. "Here's an old wedding ring I found in a trunk. And here's a five-dollar gold piece Dan gave me shortly after we were married, and a brooch and a stick pin."

She told him he was to secretly bury these in some unlikely spot beside the road, or wherever his fancy told him. He was then to bring about a discussion of the powers of the wand. Old man Perkins would doubtless prove an unconscious ally for this, because he was that stubborn. Thomas was to offer to prove it on the spot, by going forth and finding gold. He was to wander about indefinitely for a time, and then approach the places where he'd buried the bits of gold. He was to make the wand bend over as he'd already done on the gold dust. And then he was to dig up the proofs.

"That will set 'em thinkin', or I miss my guess. And another thing, you're to go out in the woods and around the hills and swamps with that silly stick and say you're lookin' for more gold. They'll believe you right enough after what they've seen. You're to keep this up for maybe a week. By then I suspicion something will happen. And this is a-goin' to be the most important time of all—this time when you're lookin' through the country. If need be, you're to stay up all night without a wink of sleep, watchin' for 'em to slip out. If they do, you follow 'em.

"Be careful, 'cause they'll naturally be watchin' to see if they're spied on. Follow 'em. Don't think of interferin' with 'em, no matter where they go or what you see 'em do. And then, if you've discovered anything suspicious, come to me. But come in the day, because in the day they won't make a single move that might get 'em into trouble. During the day you can hang around and pretend to pick up good dust. And in case you might run short of dust maybe you'd better take this along with you." And she pressed into his hand a little bag.

He tucked it away, and, after a few more cautions from her, he went back again through the darkness.

Sarah Learned returned again to her bed, but not to sleep. Her great plan,

she believed, was proving successful. All depended upon the events of the next few days, and upon Thomas Dole.

She looked out the window. In the east there showed a faint gray luminosity, impalpable and scarcely to be distinguished from the surrounding darkness. Far down the meadows she discerned the flicker of a lantern. They were already coming to begin another day's labor.

"Fools!" she murmured amusedly. "Fools, all of them! All except that wise old crow, Simmy Prescott." He alone had refrained from joining in the mad scramble, had contented himself with standing on the outskirts and observing, with a cynical eye, the arduous toil of others. He had derided the idea of there being gold in any paying quantity from the very beginning. Well, there hadn't been. All told, she had bought not more than two thousand dollars worth of dust. And she doubted if they'd much more than three fourths of it so far—though they'd probably keep on until they'd scratched up every last kernel. Already they'd dug more than a couple of acres, all in all. They'd sifted enough sand and gravel, as Simmy had expressed it, "to patch hell a mile."

She coiled beneath the covers luxuriously. It had been pretty simple, when you looked at it. What she'd intended was that it should leak out from the bank. But somebody—and she suspected that snooper, Willets—had got wind of it first. Still, he might have got it from the bank at that. She'd seen him one day, when he thought she wasn't noticing, watching her from behind some boxes over in Pownal Bridge—had seen him follow her and go into the bank after she'd come out. He wasn't there just to pick flowers or the like of that.

It had been so easy. Not even the express office knew what was in the little boxes she'd got each time she went to Pownal. And she'd always sent the money for the dust in currency, in a registered package, and the address didn't mean anything even if they'd noticed it, which they probably hadn't. So easy! Merely sending the currency to New York, getting in return the dust, putting it in the bank and getting the money for it, and sending the currency again for more. Sort of an endless chain it was, and without costing anything to speak of either.

She closed her eyes and began counting imaginary sheep jumping over an imaginary stone wall. Presently she slept soundly and dreamlessly.

CHAPTER VIII.

Simmy Prescott, perched upon a stump overlooking the Little Sandy, whittled with studied and deliberate industry at a pine stick, and, when Mr. Willets had finished his speech, cocked a sardonic eye at him. "You know, Sam," said Mr. Prescott, "there air times when you simply astonish me. For instance, you hev just said it's your belief and conviction there air no more gold in them sand bars. Now that's what I call pure reason, and pure reason never was in your maw nor in your paw. And how it comes out of you is why I say it astonishes me.

"Because, how? Mebbe there was gold in these yere sand piles. Mebbe there was a leetle—say enough to fill a good, sizable tea cup. But there ain't any more. And you've come to that conclusion all by yourself, after sweatin' and toilin' and well nigh killin' yourself for the last ten days. All I can say is it takes a heap of labor to bring out an idea from your head. But then it's wuth a heap of labor, because ideas are scarce with you and therefore valuable, Samuel. And so I shouldn't say it was labor in vain."

"You're pretty smaht, ain't you," said Mr. Willetts, mopping his forehead.

"You think because you didn't have ambition enough to do a little shovelin' you're sort of superior to us who tried to make a little money."

"Samuel, hear me. I stand on my record that I allus suspicioned they was damn leetle gold in them sand bars. I tried to warn ye, but you're that headstrong you wouldn't heed to reason. And now I'm tellin' you somethin' more. They's somethin' behind this gold business. I don't know what it is because I ain't a mind reader or a prophet, but you heed to what I say. Sooner or later we're goin' to find out somethin'."

"What's in your fool head now?" inquired Mr. Willets heatedly. "Spit it out and get it over with, Simmy."

"They's considerable in my head, as they ain't in yours. And one thing in it is that the Widow Learned she's made a pack of fools out of the whole kit of ye. All you've got to do is put two and two together, which makes four, which you've nat'rally forgot, bein' only a jestice of th' peace. So I'm doin' it fer ye. Th' first two is what that bank feller told you. He told you she fetched in over five thousand dollars in gold dust, didn't he? What's the next two? She sets over there in her house and she don't even raise her leetle finger to keep all you numskulls from diggin' yourselves black in th' face. Sets there and grins. I seen her when she come out one day and put her hands on her hips and looked at ye and threw back her haid and laffed and laffed.

"Now if you hadn't disremembered how to do sums you could tell me two and two made four. Again I help you out o' your difficulty. And the four of this arithmetic is that she don't care if you dig up the entire farm. She don't care because she knows they ain't any more gold to dig. If she thought they was you kin be sure she'd have a writ on ye inside of two hours for trespass. How does she know they ain't any more gold?"

In the pause which followed Mr. Willets frowned expectantly at Simmy, who had returned to his whittling. "Well," snapped Mr. Willets, "how does she know?"

Simmy raised pale, blue eyes in which gleamed triumphant interrogation. "I jest ast ye, didn't I, that identical question? Why don't ye answer it instead of layin' down and makin' other folks do yer thinkin'? If I was to answer it I'd say I didn't know, like a man. But I ain't answerin' it. Not as yet, Samuel. I'm only sayin' they's somethin' almighty curious about this business. You watch and see."

And if the weary and disappointed men folk of the community, who were now, one by one, relinquishing their great expectations, and gradually returning to humbler but more profitable occupations, did not thus logically analyze the situation they at least were filled with the conviction that there had been a most amazing uproar and hullabaloo over a somewhat insignificant cause. Nobody had got anything to speak of. Everybody had worked like fury.

And it was not long before this irritation produced a soreness which made the subject of gold a sensitive one. The gibes of Simmy Prescott took on barbs. Men began asking each other who it was that had started this fool business in the first place. They admitted the fact of the Widow Learned's having been the original operator, as well as the owner of most of the land on which they had toiled. But they wanted to know who had got wind of it and set everybody by the ears, and got the whole country upset and the work put back so it wouldn't be caught up with this season or the next either.

They ultimately placed the seal of their resentful condemnation upon the luckless pate of Mr. Willets, who bore it with an injured air as one innocent and scorning to defend himself, save

when he encountered Simmy, who flicked him mercilessly and invariably provoked him to fugitive and unavailing argument.

It was not until the solution came of Daniel Learned's murder that they learned the truth. The bitter, inescapable truth that they had been hoaxed—hoaxed and made the unwitting, frantically eager tools of a woman—a fact destined never to be forgiven by them, nor forgotten, so long as Simmy Prescott lived and preserved the use of his facile, sardonic tongue.

It was when the excitement was nearing its frittering and feeble end that Sarah Learned received the news which informed her she had finally accomplished the first tangible results of this prolonged and complicated campaign. She was working that afternoon in her garden when she became aware of a faint whistle. At first she thought it a bird's note, but when it varied with an unmistakable human sequence she glanced in the direction whence it came and detected, half hidden by the fringing brush at the farther side of the road, a beckoning hand. She walked leisurely across the road, glanced about her, and entered the brush to discover Thomas crouched on hands and knees.

He had, he said, great news for her, and he proceeded to recount the events of and prior to last night's astonishing developments. Hurriedly, because he feared if he were gone too long they might suspect him, he told his news.

It had begun, he said, several days ago. He had brought about the test of the willow wand as she had directed him. Old Perkins had denied its power and had dared him to prove it. Thomas had taken pains to conceal his treasure beforehand, so that he was prepared. He had taken the wand and, with the Williams' following proceedings with dogged interest, had gone rambling about the dooryard.

Perkins had jeeringly suggested the ash heap, but Thomas happened to know better. He had walked nearer a spot where weeds grew thickly and had caused the wand to bend a little toward it. He had next gone a distance of some twenty feet on the other side, and the wand had leaned again toward the clump of weeds. Then he had gone around it, telling them he thought there must be some gold object in the clump. They'd laughed the idea to scorn. As if there would be gold in the barnyard!

He had persisted, unhurriedly, until at length the wand stood upright in his hand. No longer veered in any direction. He had pointed to the ground and had told them to dig. None had accepted the invitation, until the youngest Williams boy had got a shovel and begun. He dug down for a foot and found nothing, but Thomas encouraged him, telling him he could have the thing, whatever it was, when he had unearthed it. He dug another foot until he had come almost to hardpan. Nothing appeared and Thomas wondered if his artifice was going to fail.

He dared not use the wand again, as they suggested, because he didn't know but that the ring he had hid might have been thrown aside by the shovel. He dared not search himself because they might think he had just now contrived to juggle the thing into the ground. He told Williams to paw over the loose earth, and finally the ring turned up and he heaved a breath of relief. It was tarnished badly, as she knew, and it looked for all the world as if it had lain there for generations. They took it into the house and polished it, and they all agreed it was gold. Young Williams was in high glee because he had come by a gold ring and was going to take it to the city and sell it.

The next day Thomas had done the same thing over again, twice. By this time they were convinced, he said. They seemed to fear the wand as the devil did

holy water, and they'd made him put it outside at night lest it work some evil on them. Thomas had announced that he was going to see if there wasn't gold up in the hills or about the swamp holes, and had gone off for the afternoon, ostensibly searching, but in reality to get a good sleep on account of what he had been losing from keeping an eye open against the Williams' sneaking out at night. When he returned he said he hadn't found anything, but thought he had struck some promising indications. Upon a ledge, he said, he saw promise. He'd tried the swamps, too, he said, but not very thoroughly. He'd keep to the higher places for a time, and take the lower ones later.

They hadn't seemed very curious about his scouting until the next day, when he told them he had discovered pretty sure signs of something. He pretended to be mysterious, said they'd know about it when he was sure, on the general theory that it was best to keep them in the dark as much as possible.

That night old Baldy Williams had taken him aside and begun asking questions. He wanted to know if that witch magic would work with just anybody holding the stick, and Thomas had told him it wouldn't. Only certain folks could get results. And he instanced the useless efforts of those who had tried to find the dust with willow wands down on Little Sandy. Old Baldy asked if the thing would work in water, iron, stone and wood. And he'd told him it would work in all these, provided there was gold there. And old Baldy had nodded and gone away, spitting tobacco juice something awful.

In the morning young Jim had questioned him, evidently having been hearing from the old man what Thomas had said. He seemed to want to know all about these magic sticks—how one got hold of them and what would happen if the thing got lost. Thomas had told him that anybody could get another if they went to an old woman who lived away over beyond East Street and who made such sticks, cut from a graveyard tree at midnight, with the proper spells.

This stick, Thomas said, he'd bought from a peddler two years ago—more for a joke than anything else. It had been laying around the Learned's woodshed loft, and when they had found gold he'd gone and got it and nobody was more surprised than he was when he found that it worked. Then young Jim had asked what would happen if a person who could work it should die, or get sick, or something? Would anybody else be able to find gold with it?

Right here Thomas had smelled a rat. For some reason they were mortal scared of the stick and what it might do. At first they'd probably thought of destroying it, and young Jim had felt Thomas out about it. When he was told that any one could get more of the sticks he'd next asked what about a person dying or getting sick. And Thomas knew he meant him. And decided he'd get that idea of killing anybody out of his head straight off.

He'd told him that there were several people right now who had heard about this woman who was a witch. And they'd gone over there and got themselves willow sticks just like this one, made from a graveyard tree at midnight, when the ghosts walked. And these persons, or some of them at least, had been able to make the sticks work for them and were right now going around looking for gold. The trouble with the sticks they had on Little Sandy was that they were sort of homemade affairs and not created with the proper spells. The reason he'd been going around himself was so as to beat the others to it in case there was gold about, which he was sure there was and sure he'd come on it sooner or later.

This seemed to sort of discourage young Jim, and he went away like his

father had, without saying more. Thomas had seen him talking it over in the pig pen with the old man and they'd pretended it was something else when they heard him come into the barn.

And three nights later something had happened. He had been awake and waiting, he said, and he'd heard a faint movement from the bedrooms below when everybody should have been asleep. He had raised his window which gave on the little ell, and soon he had seen them sneaking quietly out through the yard to the road. It was dim starlight, and he could barely make out two figures. He'd stepped cautiously out on the ell roof and dropped to the ground in his stockinged feet. He had put on his shoes and hurried after them.

They were walking in the roadway and he could hear the scrunch of their boots on the stones. They kept right on for perhaps a mile to where the road turned off and then they'd taken the old abandoned highway which led over the mountain and down the other side.

It was terribly dark on this trail because of the overhanging trees and brush, and he had taken off his shoes and come closer to them so that he could keep them better in view. They went right along without speaking a word, and it was ticklish work because he was fearful they might face about and come back on him before he could hide or else they might hear a twig break under him or something like that.

They didn't, however, seem to be taking any great care about making a noise themselves, just kept right on going as if they knew where they were headed for and wanted to get there quick. They kept on and on until they got up near the old flat which lay on top of the mountain. He'd been staying close behind, but now he suddenly lost them. He could see nothing and could hear no sound. He stopped and listened. He didn't dare move for fear he would give himself away.

He thought it must have been fully a minute before he heard far-off sounds of branches snapping and he went forward again. He found that they had left the old trail and were following along the edge of the flat. He had a hard time to keep in touch with them, but he did manage. They held straight along to the north, as well as he could judge, for perhaps a mile. And then they stopped and he could hear the sound of their voices. They were evidently discussing the path, though he couldn't make out clearly what they were saying. Only he heard old Baldy cursing and declaring it was farther to the east.

They went on after a bit and he followed again. They veered down the hill, through a thick growth of young pine and white birch for a half mile, and then into a heavy stand of big timber. This timber, he said, was new to him. He couldn't recognize it, familiar as he was with the country for ten miles about. Finally they stopped and began puttering in the very midst of these big trees. He crept nearer, but for the life of him couldn't make out what they were up to. One of them headed back and came within ten feet of him.

"In a minute I heard him chopping," Thomas continued, "and then he went away again. I figured he'd cut a sapling and was fetching it along from the sound of it dragging. And the two of them went at their puttering again. They didn't talk at all now. I came a bit nearer—not close, because the moon was coming up high, and it was beginning to get fairly light. But I couldn't see anything. After a while I heard old Baldy begin cursing again. Then there was a crash and Baldy began groaning and cursing worse than ever."

Whatever it was they had attempted Baldy had been hurt. And they now apparently decided to give it up and re-

turn. Thomas had slipped aside when they passed him and he once more took up the chase. It was not difficult now because they went straight home and he climbed up to his window and went to sleep.

Thomas finished his narrative, to which Sarah Learned had listened with such rapt attention. She now wanted to know if he thought he could find the spot where they had cut the sapling. Thomas was doubtful. He had only the vaguest sense of its direction. The section, as he said, was strange to him. Either that or else he had got turned about in the darkness.

She glanced at the western sun, already dropping rapidly. "You wouldn't have time to look for it to-day anyway. Perhaps you can to-morrow." She listened thoughtfully while he expressed the belief that he might if he could slip away on some convincing errand. Nothing, she realized, had been accomplished after all. Thomas had followed them upon what was to all appearances a fruitless quest. Whatever it had been they had given it over for the time being at least. He didn't even know where the spot lay.

"Big timber, you say? There's plenty of it north of us and northeast—along the west slope of the mountain. There's probably five miles of it, shouldn't you think?" she asked.

"Five mile at the least and maybe more. I should say he went about three miles from the house, all told—maybe a couple of mile into the wild part after we turned off the highway."

There was little she could suggest to him beyond the need of exercising the greatest caution and watchfulness. And presently she sent him away. Nothing had happened, and yet something had happened which might yet prove to be the first betrayal of that mysteriously hidden secret which she was striving so desperately to solve. Something, she believed, which would explain the disappearance of Daniel Learned and bring his murderers to justice.

CHAPTER IX.

In the light of introspection Sarah Learned was inclined to the belief, contrary to her first flush of optimism, that all her hopes and plans would come to nothing. Thomas had not proved himself the paragon of reliability that she had expected, for one thing. He should, if necessary, have stayed rooted to that perhaps vitally important spot, whither the Williamses had led him, until daylight—should have left nothing undone so that he could find and identify the place. For, that it was important, she was sure. Why else should the father and son have got up in the middle of the night if not to conceal their movements? And why did they want to conceal them if everything was honest and aboveboard and as it should be?

Thomas had suggested before he left that they might have been visiting a deer snare. The sapling young Jim had cut might have been used for such a purpose. Thomas also argued that they might have been themselves lost, because they didn't take the same way back by which they had come. But Thomas, she reflected, didn't know what he was talking about. If he did, if he was anywhere near correct, then all her plans and all her efforts had been useless and she was herself just a crazy old woman with a hobby. Of course there was always the possibility that she was completely in the wrong, but appearances pointed against this. Things pointed toward the guilt of the Williams family, toward the probable achievement of her great ambition, unless Thomas botched them up so they never could be straightened out again.

Nightfall had come, and after the men had had their supper she was left

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alone with her thoughts. She went to her room, pulled the shades and lighted a small fire in the fireplace to keep her company until she should again hear from Thomas. To-night, she reasoned, the Williams twain would probably again go forth on their secret mission. Last night they had failed. To-night should prove her theory, one way or the other. She had particularly cautioned Thomas to keep his bearings so that he could locate that spot in the big timber. She had told him to come to her with his report as soon as he had returned, and she was prepared to remain awake until morning if need be.

But as the hours crept past she found herself unable either to concentrate upon the book she had begun, or to rest in her chair for more than a few moments at a time. An ungovernable foreboding had seized upon her, whose source was as intangible as its character. Enough that she felt evil impending, immediate and overwhelming. She strove to shake it off by walking about the yard and by taking her flash light and looking through the barns.

The night was ominously still she thought, without even a breath of wind to stir the leaves of the big maples. The cattle were quiet, chewing their cuds, turning large and curious eyes toward the ray of her flash light. She came back to the house again, but the feeling of sinister menace was still upon her. She went through the rooms, but found nothing unusual, nothing to confirm her anxiety. Returning to her fire she set herself to endure with stoicism what she now characterized as childish fear.

She waited thus, grim and determined, until she heard the grandfather's clock in the kitchen strike three. She got up again, unable longer to remain in the room and felt with practiced feet her way back through the darkness to the rear side porch. She opened the door cautiously, stepped out and stood on the porch, listening. She heard only the hoot of an owl, the endless chorus of the crickets and the persistent voice of some distant hound, baying the moon which had risen through the first third of the heavens.

And then she heard the unmistakable sound of a human being in distress. The groans of a man—of Thomas, she fearfully suspected. She went hurrying out through the yard to the front gate and the groans were nearer—in the roadway, she judged. She came upon his recumbent body where he had fallen from exhaustion and loss of blood. He could scarcely muster strength enough to speak, but he managed to convey to her the fact that they had set upon him and beaten him into insensibility.

She put all her strength into the effort that got him to his feet and, supporting him with his arm about her neck, guided him back to the porch and into the kitchen. Here he promptly swooned, but she poured some aromatic spirits of ammonia down his throat. When he revived she got him upon the couch. She drew the shades and lit a candle and saw for the first time the punishment they had wrought upon him.

His head and neck were a mass of cuts where they had kicked him, and he indicated that his body was bruised from end to end. She bathed his hurts with arnica and bandaged them as best she could. Then she fetched him a glass of brandy from the jug which had been Daniel's, and after he had taken it he seemed to revive. Presently he was able to give her a coherent account of what had happened.

They had got up again, he said, and again he had followed them. But this time they had evidently heard his footsteps on the gravelly road and they had lain in wait for him. Before he knew it they jumped on him, one from each side of the roadway, and began to beat him. He defended himself as best he could, but Baldy had a club and the

first several blows from it had pretty well weakened him. They got him down and then they began with their heavy boots. Baldy had kept saying to kill him, but young Jim had opposed this.

Finally he had lost his senses from the blows on his head and when he came to they had gone. He managed to get to his feet after a while and to make his way back to the Williams' place. There was a light in the window and he had come near enough to see Baldy and young Jim sitting before a table, drinking whisky and talking low. Then he'd come away, as far as the place where she'd found him, and then he'd fainted again. He was just coming out of it when she appeared.

He paused and she gave him another drink of brandy. "It's too bad," he said. "Just as everything was going well, too. But never you mind, Mrs. Learned. They gave me a beating, but I remember what young Jim said when Baldy wanted to do me up for good. He said: 'Don't do that pop, because we've got enough over us as it is.' That's his very words, Mrs. Learned. And it was worth getting licked to hear it—worth getting a couple of ribs stove in, if I ain't much mistaken." And he felt tenderly at his side.

She was silent, thinking what next to do. And by the time she had made him comfortable with pillows she had made up her mind. "I'm going to take you over to Pownal Bridge, straight off, and put you in the hospital. You're to say you fell off a load of logs. And by the feel of it you've got some ribs broke. And you'll stay there till you're well again. The thing to remember is not to bring the Williamses into this in any way. If you do they'll hear of it and it may scare 'em so they won't stir a finger on what I'm expectin' 'em to."

Thomas wanted to know, weakly, what this might be, but she put him off and went out to hitch up old Bob.

She returned home at mid-afternoon of the next day and her progress occasioned much speculation as old Bob brought her past the various farmsteads of the settlement. For no one could be found who had witnessed her departure, and this alone was peculiar and deserving of investigation. She reached home utterly worn out and at once seized the opportunity to steal a few hours' sleep in preparation for what lay before her that night.

She got up in time to prepare the evening meal for the men, informing them that she had gone to Pownal on account of an aching tooth—an explanation which achieved wide circulation within the hour and was, until later events proved its falsity, received with more or less credulity.

When it had grown dark enough to conceal her movements she dressed herself in her knickers, a short skirt and a heavy sweater. It was characteristic of her that she should put on the rusty black bonnet which was her second best and should also don the short black gloves she always wore whenever she left the house. She took with her on this momentous night a small bag of flour, her flash light and, in case of emergency, a little potato knife whose edge she had brought to razorlike sharpness.

She glanced at herself in the old mahogany-framed mirror which hung beside her dressing table, and breathed a mental prayer that she might be successful. This, she felt, was to be her last chance. If she failed to-night then all would fail and forever. She told herself she would not fail and that if it came to it her life would be of no consequence when weighed with the greater question which had come to mean more than death or life to her.

She went from the house, pausing to look back at its quiet, imposing bulk, its outlines softened in the gloom and blending with the trees which flanked it.

She might never come back to it again, she reflected. It had been kind to her —a refuge and a home in her bereavement as well as in her bridal pride and happiness, and in all the years of her hopes, her struggles and her endeavor beside Daniel Learned. It seemed to emanate now a spirit of loyal sympathy, of comradeship, and she turned up the highway with added resolution and vigor.

She came to the Williams' house and she was pleased when she saw a faint light at its windows, for they were still up and had apparently not yet left the place. There would be a yawping hound or two about, she knew, and she dared not come nearer, but walked straight past and up the road for a few hundred feet. Here she turned aside and made her way back through the brush bordering the road until she came to the flanking stone wall. Here she took her stand to wait until her quarry passed. A faint breeze stirred grass and leaves and made all about her a low murmurous sighing which mingled soothingly with the voice of night insects and with the wailing bark of a fox high up the mountain.

Below her the Williams' house was silent. She waited, resting against the cool stones of the wall, patient and watchful. She heard the note of the fox grow fainter as he went away to the north, and presently the breeze freshened and comforted her because she knew it would serve to conceal the sound of her pursuing footsteps if the two men came out and up the road.

Hours passed, and she was beginning to wonder if her quest was a vain one when she heard the near-by hoot of an owl, answered at once by the high-pitched, querulous note of one of the Williams' hounds. She heard a harsh, admonishing voice and knew they had not yet gone to bed. She was filled with jubilance. They were up late for such early retiring folk, and soon, she believed, they would come prowling past. Her hopes were soon fulfilled. She detected the faint scuffle of heavy feet among the pebbles of the highway. She crouched lower. She heard the footsteps approaching, heard them pass within ten feet of her, heard the heavy, asthmatic breathing of old Baldy Williams. There were two of them, from the sound of the footfalls. They went on up the road and she crept out and followed.

She walked on the balls of her feet, cautiously and with a delicate instinct for avoiding rocks and treacherous depressions where rains had washed the looser soil. They were taking the same route as before, straight up the slope of the mountain. She was on her guard when they came to where the old highway turned off.

She detected that narrow depression in the tree tops which told her the trail lay beneath and crept into a tunnel of arching foliage. Here the footing was less rough, for the ground was thickly overgrown with ferns and grass which sprouted undisturbed from a heavy layer of moss and decayed leaves. She paused, once she had gained the entrance to this ancient road, and listened. No sound greeted her straining ear until she heard the snap of a twig. They were ahead of her. She hurried on, fearful of losing them, until the heavy tread of their boots on the earth warned her that she was dangerously near.

She fell back a little at this, and after a few trials learned to judge the margin of safety which she must not pass. They were making good headway and, as when Thomas had followed them, they moved in utter silence. Soon, she knew, they would turn from this old road and strike into the woods along the edge of the level which began near the mountain top. This would be the crucial point of her pursuit. This was where Thomas had almost lost them.

It seemed to her as if the moment

would never come. Stealthily they continued and then she suddenly realized that she would be able to anticipate their shift by the contour of the land. The steepness of the ascent presently began to lessen and she came nearer them. This would be, she judged, the flat. She heard the rumble of Baldy's voice and young Jim's in answer. They were debating, she knew, the proper spot to turn. She must take chances now, no matter what the peril. She came nearer until she knew them to be not farther than twenty feet from her.

And then: "It ain't any farther," she heard Baldy say. "We'll be turnin' in here."

She heard the swish of brush as they pushed through it, heard stones falling as they mounted the wall. She loosened her little bag of flour, took out a pinch and dropped it on the ground. Then she followed them. She crossed the wall noiselessly and entered a stand of second-growth timber. A friendly, faint starlight aided her to avoid the tree trunks and her frequent stumbles over hidden rocks and fallen trees were unnoticed in the noisier and more clumsy passage of the two ahead of her.

Save for the more difficult footing her task was easier than it had been back in the old highway, for, as Thomas had said, they seemed sure of their safety now, and made no effort to lower their voices when they cursed at the stones and the holes over which they were floundering. She followed, dropping little pinches of flour every thirty or forty feet.

She remembered the thick growth of pine and birch that Thomas had mentioned when she again came nearer the two men. The half miles seemed two to her and she breathed a sigh of relief when they led her out of the thickets and into the heavy trees. Thomas had been right when he said it was big timber. Their trunks loomed in the night like vast pillars and she knew from the carpet of needles here and there that some of them at least were pines. She maintained her position behind the two, drawing steadily on her diminishing store of flour. It was almost gone now. But she did not care, because she had, she thought, marked their trail as far as the big trees, and this was all that she had hoped for.

She estimated that they had gone perhaps half a mile farther before she became aware that they had come to a stop. Signalized by the muttering of their voices, by the guarded flare of a match and next by the dull glow of a low-turned lantern. They had come better prepared for their work this night than they had been when Thomas had followed them. She crouched behind a towering trunk to watch their proceedings. The lantern cast a faint, ghostly radiance upon the ground and upon the huge trunks of the trees and their far-flung, softly-moving leaves. In the hemispherical, misty glimmer she saw figures moving dimly—less figures than half-suggested shadows without form or recognizable movements. And when one of them approached the lantern and turned it still lower she was utterly at a loss to distinguish the purpose of their activity.

They were not digging, as she had hoped. They seemed merely moving about in an aimless fashion. They went with sluggish deliberation from one side of the space about the lantern to the other, and their forms cast monstrous shadows against the arching confines made by the leafy branches and the tree trunks. Thus they moved, intangible and ephemeral to her straining eyes for the space of half an hour. At last she heard the sounds of light blows and the scraping as of wood against wood. It puzzled her, but she dared approach no nearer. And then one of the grotesque shapes disappeared entirely while the other remained immovable. A deep silence descended on the place and she

could hear the tumultous beating of her heart.

She was startled from this prolonged suspense by sounds from above—the crack of a branch, the faint rubbing of something, as if against the trunk of the squat and spreading tree which stood in the background. This was followed by the delicate whisper of falling particles striking on the ferns beneath. Silence again for so prolonged a period that she wondered if they had gone away. She was seized with a quick terror lest they had escaped. She arose to go forward, but sounder judgment caught her in time and she sank back again mistress of herself and of her ill-guarded impulse.

The lantern suddenly commenced an airy and fantastic dance, rising into the air and jigging up and down and swaying in circles. It was, she thought, fastened upon a pole, but when it ascended until almost lost to view among the leaves she knew it must be attached to a line—knew one of the two must be far aloft, lost in the maze of branches and foliage which had already swallowed up the lantern's dim glow. She moved backward, stepping with careful steps until she had attained a position where she again caught sight of the lantern. It was stationary now, but the next instant its rays were extinguished. Once more the impenetrable gloom returned, broken only by tiny pin points here and there above which she knew were stars.

Another interminable silence. While she waited, keyed to a pitch of sharp expectancy. It was, she thought, the most outlandish sort of doings and yet they seemed to know exactly what they were about. They had talked very little, had followed what seemed a systematic course from the moment she had first begun to follow them. Presently she heard the sound of a cough, and she knew it was old Baldy who stood just beyond in the darkness near the tree. Young Jim then, she judged, was the one who had gone aloft to rig the rope and raise the lantern. But for what imaginable reason? Why should they want a lantern up there, and having got it up why should they put it out again?

And as the thought passed through her mind she saw once more the glimmer of the lantern high above her, saw it wavering, dancing, jiggling furiously in its descent. Followed another silence. Then there were scrapings which suggested that young Jim was coming down. Finally a thump, like a man dropping upon his feet, came. Low voices again. Then the lantern moved, was extinguished. She heard Baldy's harsh breathing. They were coming away again, were almost upon her. She remained rooted in her tracks, paralyzed by terror.

It was too late to turn and run. Too late, she thought, for anything, until she saw they were passing on the other side of the tree against which she clung. She moved behind it, was aware of their approach, of their horrifying proximity. They kept steadily on and she crept out and once more took up her perilous espionage. They led her, so far as she could judge, back along the trail by which they had come, back through the birches and scrub pines to the deserted road—back finally to the highway and down its winding reaches toward the house. As they neared it the hound began again his mournful challenge. She paused outside the gateway until she heard the click of the opened door, heard their footsteps faintly echoing within and saw a light made in the kitchen.

It was in defiance of prudence that she entered the yard and went to one of the windows. The hound now made a frantic uproar as she ran forward and peered within. Baldy Williams and his son, young Jim, were in the act of drinking from tin cups when she caught that flashing glimpse of them. She

waited for no more but turned and fled headlong with the hound in close pursuit. He made no attempt to attack, but remained at a safe distance and the night rang with the fervor of his excited alarm. She heard Baldy furiously cursing the dog as she turned into the roadway and raced toward her own home and safety.

CHAPTER X.

It was not yet daylight when Sarah Learned came to the house of Justice Willets and knocked imperatively for admittance. Two minutes later she stood in the little room which served Mr. Willets as office and court room, demanding that he accompany her at once. She had, she was sure, evidence which would probably result in the finding of her husband's body and the discovery of his murderers.

Mr. Willets, rubbing the sleep from his startled eyes, wanted to know what she meant, but she would give him no further satisfaction. Would he come, as was his duty, or would she have to go farther and find help elsewhere? Grumbling, he departed, to return presently fully dressed. She advised him to arm himself, because there might be need of it before they were through. Furthermore, she said he'd best get another man or two. "One isn't enough for what's ahead of us, if I'm not mistaken."

He was not loath to accept this suggestion, and they made their way to his crony's, Simmy Prescott's. Simmy was inclined to sneer when first awakened, but Sarah Learned silenced him with the sharpness of her retorts and he ultimately came forth bearing a shotgun over his shoulder. She wanted to know if he expected to see any partridges, to which he made no reply, but broke the gun and drew forth one of the shells. "Buckshot," he pronounced eloquently.

They passed the Williams' house as the first thin mist of dawn was gathering in the east. It was rapidly growing light when they came to the old highway and within another twenty minutes the rising sun had thrown the world into a bright glare. Sarah Learned, who had maintained a grim silence, led the way. She was puzzled for a time to discover the place where they had turned off from the old road the night before, but trampled grass at length gave her a clew and she embarked on the trail with the absorbed concentration of a bloodhound.

To her own intense satisfaction she had little trouble in following that scarcely discernible track, thanks to certain minute patches of powdery white which lay at intervals before her, but it was bewildering as it was exasperating to the two men not to know where she was taking them. Repeatedly they demanded explanations, but got little satisfaction beyond the statement that they would soon see for themselves. Nor did they ever discover how it was she managed to keep to the trail she now and then pointed out to them as proof they were not entirely engaged on a fool's errand.

The growth of birch and pine gave her the greatest difficulty, and several times she lost the telltale patches. In the end she brought them to the big timber and knew that she had now done all she could. The rest remained to be seen. Perhaps it would be what she hoped and prayed for. Perhaps it would be nothing. Whatever the outcome, she would know quickly.

Straight and true the tiny white patches ran until they ceased and she knew she had come at last to her objective. An open space presented itself with a gnarled old oak at its farther edge. She came to the tree and saw a freshly cut sapling in the ferns beside it. A half-burned match lay at her feet and she saw stains of tobacco juice on the trampled grass. She turned to

the two who stood staring at her with mingled resentment and curiosity.

"I calculate this is as far as we're goin'," she said. And I'm thinkin' what I'm seekin' is somewhere right close to hand. It ain't in the ground, I suspicion." She stared at the heavy trunk of the oak tree. One of the oldest trees, she judged, and one it would take three men to span about with stretched out arms. Her eye traveled up the trunk to where the first limbs branched forth—giant limbs as big around as an ox. She counted seven of them. Above their junction there seemed a jutting ledgelike formation, as if once there had been another limb there which had broken off years before.

"I'd like to know what's up in that tree," she said. "One o' you has to climb it, because I can't."

Simmy Prescott uttered a derisive chuckle. "They's nobody here as has gimp enough in him to climb that oak," he said. "Besides, it's foolishness, I'm thinkin'. Whatever I started out on this dratted pilgrimage for I don't know. Seems to me we're all crazy." And he slanted a deprecating blue eye at Sarah.

Argument followed. Some one would have to be brought who could swarm up the thing. Eventually Mr. Willets was elected to go and fetch that some one. He departed muttering, and in the course of two hours, during which Simmy went prowling about in search of a partridge and Sarah sat at the foot of the big tree lost in thought, Mr. Willets returned, bringing the eldest son of Hart the storekeeper. Bringing with him a rope and an ax and, for no particular reason he could explain satisfactorily to the caustic Simmy, several lengths of hay wire.

It was, they said, out of the question to scale the broad trunk without a ladder. There was nothing a man could get his hands on to hold him. It was like trying to climb the side of a house.

"Well, it's been climbed afore," said Sarah, "and no longer ago than last night. And it can be climbed again."

Simmy wanted to know where she got her information.

"That's my business, for the present, Simmy Prescott."

And then her eye fell on the sapling. She pointed to it. "Put that pole up and you'll find it ought to reach to the lowest limbs. Let Tommy Hart climb up the pole to the limbs and he won't have any trouble."

They acted on her suggestion. Hart, lean and active, went easily up the sapling, reached and embraced the lowest limb and swung himself up and over. They waited, watching his inspection of the tree.

He announced that the tree was hollow. "They's been bees here, too," he said. "Some of the combs still hangin' on the inside." He moved inward and was lost to view. They heard the sound of his feet scratching for a foothold. Presently he emerged. It was a big hole, he said, and there was something down into it. Sarah Learned moved back where she could obtain a less acute angle on his movements.

"What is it?" she asked sharply. And saw him light a match and lean down.

He presented to them a face wiped clean of color. "Almighty Heaven!" he cried hoarsely. "It's a skeleton—it's a man."

"It's Daniel Learned," said Sarah. "Sling him up that rope so he can fetch him out."

They tossed up the rope and Tommy Hart set himself to the grim task. Presently he had hauled up the grisly thing which was all that remained of Daniel Learned, and lowered it carefully down to them. Sarah pointed out where the skull had been fractured. She also pointed to the fleshless jaws.

"Look here, all of you. You see where the three gold teeth that you know Daniel had were taken out. Some one has torn them from the jaw re-

cently. You can see for yourselves, can't you?" she asked.

They admitted it, and said that there was no doubt about it. They declared it was certainly Daniel Learned. They remembered the coat he had worn.

Sarah spoke with determination: "I followed the Williams, father and son, to this spot last night. I hid back there while young Jim climbed that tree and went down into the hollow of it, and I followed 'em home. And then I came and got you men. I guess that's enough to hang 'em."

They agreed that it probably was enough, and more. But they were mystified as to why the Williams should want to get the gold out of the dead man's jaws.

"You may know it wasn't for the sake of the gold," she told them. "It was a sight more than that. They wanted the gold because they were scared to death somebody would come on it with a devinin' rod like Thomas used in findin' gold in my sand bars."

Simmy Prescott was for going into this matter more deeply, but she put him off. "Wait till the trial begins, Simmy, and you'll hear a lot of things that's been botherin' you for lack of explainin'."

They held an impromptu council of war. What would be the best way of taking the Williamses? They'd fight if they were given a chance. No doubt of it. They'd best wait and call in the State police. This wasn't a thing suitable for them to attempt. If they tried it somebody would likely get killed.

This, in the main, from Mr. Willets and young Hart. Simmy, smoothing the barrel of his shotgun, mused the while. When Mr. Willets and Hart had finished, he spoke briefly. He had an idea, he said, this thing could be settled neat as a whistle. If they went there in a crowd the Williamses would be sure to smell a rat and start shootin' perhaps. Whereas, if he went, and if Sarah here went, too, why maybe they could sort of catch 'em before they knew it. "That is," he added, "if Sary here has grit enough."

"Don't talk like a fool," said Sarah Learned.

They left young Hart to watch the body and when they had come within sight of the Williams' place they left Mr. Willets in the bushes.

They entered the Williams' yard with the casual air of innocent strollers. But already they had hatched their plan. Sarah Learned marched to the Williams' door and rapped. It was opened by Deb Browner and who scowled at them without speaking.

"I want to speak to Baldy," said Sarah Learned.

Deb Browner looked her up and down with withering contempt, flung a word out of the corner of her mouth to the room behind. Baldy Williams came and stood beside her. Flushed from recent drinking, scowling like his wife and like his wife sparing of speech.

"Your cattle have been traipsin' through my fields again, Baldy Williams," snapped Sarah Learned. "They've et down my corn and somethin' has to be done about it—here and now." There was defiance in her tone —defiance and battle.

From behind her drawled the nasal voice of Simmy Prescott. "An' that ain't all, Baldy Williams. "Them pesky critters hev got down into my pertater patch and tromped th' vines flat. I knowed all the Learneds hev had to put up with 'em and I set my mind to fetch things up short if they ever invaded my premises. And I'm tellin' you this. I'm a-goin' to blow their heads off unless you come right down and settle the damages. And I fetched my ole gun along to do it with into the bargain."

Baldy Williams executed the grimace of a silent laugh. "You and yer gun! You ain't got guts enough to kill a mosquito, Simmy, let alone a critter.

What's more they ain't my critters, for mine is up in the lot."

Simmy Prescott turned to Sarah Learned. "They won't listen to reason, Sary, so you and me we'll be goin'. I guess they'll hear to us when they find their critters dead and buried." And he turned and set off at a deliberate pace toward the gateway.

Baldy Williams called after him. Needn't be in such a sweat, Simmy. If them's my critters I'll go fetch 'em."

Simmy paused and half turned. "I'm waitin'," he said.

Sarah watched Baldy as he entered the house, to emerge with his hat.

"Better bring young Jim," suggested Simmy. "They're wilder'n hen hawks from the chasin' I give 'em afore I got 'em shut into my yard."

Baldy hesitated. Deb Browner was leaning against the door frame, her arms folded, watching the scene with a contemptuous smile. Young Jim had joined her and stood peering over her shoulder.

Baldy turned to them. "Come on, Jim," he said. "May be needin' ye."

Sarah, walking slowly, allowed the two to pass her and join Simmy who led the little procession. They turned down the highway and their voices floated back to her in high argument, Simmy's shrill and cocksure, Baldy's hoarse and sullen. Their debate thinned to an occasional sentence, and by the time they had reached the Learned place they were walking in silence. The thought occurred to her to turn in here, but she dismissed it. She must see things through.

They negotiated the several miles to Simmy Prescott's before the crisis arrived. Simmy, she now realized, was intent on luring his prey to his very doorstep before taking them into custody. At the front-yard entrance Simmy opened the gate, gestured for the two to precede him. Sarah was not ten feet behind. Baldy strode to the corner of the house, young Jim at his heels. Simmy loitered behind, fumbling at the gate latch. Baldy Williams came to a stop, turned and looked back. He and his son loomed large against the white-painted woodshed behind, and she had time to approve Simmy's choice of position before she saw him slowly raise his gun to the level of his shoulder and sight along its glittering barrels. The Williams stared, and Baldy cried out: "What the hell are you p'intin' that gun for, you ole numskull?"

It was then that Simmy Prescott performed the deed which forever endeared him to Sarah Learned. Here was his great moment—perhaps the greatest of his lifetime—but he put it and its glory and its drama aside. "I guess Sary here kin tell you what I'm p'intin' this gun fer," he said quietly. "Tell 'em, Sary."

She moved forward past him and a little aside from the range of fire. She felt the blood surge up into her head in a hot wave of vengeance. And she held in the hollow of her hand the culmination of all those efforts, which in their intensity had equaled the work of a lifetime.

"He's p'intin' it at ye because you're a-goin' to swing fer murderin' Dan Learned and hidin' his body in that oak tree."

The dark face of Baldy Williams turned a sallow yellow and he bellowed thickly: "It's a lie."

Young Jim was quicker, for he had already turned to fly when Simmy's twanging voice stopped him. "Stand quiet, Jim, or I'll blow ye to hell and back."

"It's a lie," repeated Baldy, wiping his sweating brow with a trembling hand.

Sarah Learned laughed sardonically. "Hark to me, Baldy Williams. Ever since the night I found where you'd killed him I said I'd git ye. I had Thomas Dole go and live with ye. And

he follied ye until ye caught him and half killed him. And last night I went myself. I was behind ye all the way, from the time ye left the house till ye got back. And we went to-day and found his body in the tree. And now we've got ye. And ye'll swing. Save the breath of your denials, for you'll be needin' it at the trial."

She heard at her elbow the voice of Simmy, quiet and reassuring, bringing her back to the practical, New England present with a start. "Go back to th' woodshed, Sary, and fetch that calf rope hangin' on th' bucksaw on the right as you go in. We'll hog tie these two till they come to fetch 'em over to Pownal Bridge.

CHAPTER XI.

She sat alone that night before the expiring embers in the big kitchen fireplace. Now that it was over she had a sense of queer desolation. She had thought she would be rejoiced if the time ever came when she would succeed in that plan which had once seemed so great and far reaching. And now that it had been consummated, now that Dan would have a decent burial, now that his murderers would most surely hang, now that all the mystery of it had been solved she experienced a strange loneliness. For there was little more to do. The trial would come and she would appear as a witness. The Williams would pay the penalty. An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth. It was the law.

And what would she do then? She would not forget to take care of Thomas—Thomas who had not hesitated to make every sacrifice for her, and without whose loyal coöperation she would have been powerless. Yes, she would take care of Thomas, for the rest of her life—and afterward, in her will. They would continue to farm, and perhaps she'd leave him the land.

And then what? She was an old woman, nearing the end of her time. She was alone with her memories and her conscience. Some day she would be lying in her bed yonder with the minister at her side and the doctor fussing about and trying to make her believe she wasn't going to die. Well—let it come. She would be ready. Death wouldn't be so bad. There would be Dan waiting for her.

She glanced at the clock. Almost midnight. It was wound and the cat had been put out and the doors locked for the night.

She arose stiffly, shoveled ashes over the dying coals and lit a candle. She shivered as she went slowly from the room, and was cheered at the thought that she would soon be snuggling down warmly in her feather bed. To-morrow, she thought, she must see to it the rest of the corn was cut and shocked and the new calf taken from its mother. Then the first load of winter wood must be hauled in and the leak in the barn patched against late fall rains. She crept beneath the thick coverlet. Soon she was sleeping soundly.

As It Was Written

By Joseph Montague

Author of "The Bar-Bee Raiders," "The Border Coyotes," etc.

WHEN A SNAKE BIT "AMARGOSA JIM" WHILE HE WAS PROSPECTING IN THE DESERT NO ONE SUSPECTED THAT THERE HAD BEEN A WITNESS TO THE MORTAL OCCURRENCE. BUT THERE WAS. AND THE STRANGE PART ABOUT IT WAS THAT THE WITNESS CONSIDERED SNAKES IN A SACRED WAY. . . . .

"INYO" Roberts sat on the porch of his home, gazing at the prospect through the smoke wreaths of his pipe. For all his attitude of lounging ease he looked out of place in the comfortable Shantung chair. Bees zoomed as they worked the roses on the latticed vines, hummed amid the flowers of the garden. There were flowers everywhere—masses of heliotropes, geranium hedges, giant fuchsias and calla lilies. On the trim lawn a sprinkler flung silvery spray that held a glinting rainbow. Pepper trees shuttled shifting, lacy shade patterns as their fronds swung lightly in the breeze, framing a vista of the distant mountains, a magic wall of saffron and violet topped with crystal—the peaks of San Bernardino.

The house was a deep-porched, big-windowed, fresh-painted, clean and orderly bungalow. In the rear a Japanese sang, in a high-pitched falsetto that was not unpleasing, while he went about his household tasks. An old gray-muzzled dog stretched out in supreme contentment beside his master's chair. It was a place of comfort, well planned and well kept—a place that suggested, not riches, but ample means. A Japanese gardener squatted on his haunches, using a tool made in his own country, clipping a Pittosporum hedge to symmetry.

But the master of the cozy holding did not seem to belong there. He was brown as a Navajo, the weather tan of years of continuous exposure accented by the whiteness of his hair, plentiful enough and, like his beard that was also bleached by time and hardship, it was close clipped. A nose bridged out sharply from the heavy brows that shadowed eyes whose color had not yet faded, though there were wrinkles at their corners, though the eyelids framed them in a squinting fashion from a trick of looking into the sun and of enduring the glare of it on sand and alkali.

Lines ran deeply from nostril to mouth. The bronzed skin was tough

and leathery, it creased at the back of his neck and hung in folds on his lean throat. All of him was lean, hardened, tested by work and exposure, his hands were hardened from labor with pick and shovel. He was sixty perhaps, but sound as a good nut. The blue eyes held serenity and they had the look of those who gaze across far spaces, who follow a quest—the eyes of the seaman, of the adventurer, the gold seeker.

His clothes were easy tweeds that had not known the tailor since their making and he looked in them like a soldier in "cits." One could imagine him in homelier, cheaper clothes—blue jeans faded by sun and water, tucked into knee boots, a belt where the brass primers of cartridges twinkled and the wooden butt of an old-time revolver showed in a well-worn holster, a rough shirt and cotton bandanna, and a floppy-brimmed sombrero. So he would look like a soldier of fortune—one who pursues until he overtakes, a conqueror of the waste places. Here, on the porch, smoking amid the roses, he seemed strangely out of place.

The Japanese gardener rose from his clipping and shifted the whirling spray. Inyo Roberts looked at the gleaming shower with a mild pleasure that never failed him at the sight of water. Too often had he been forced to dole out the always tepid, flat and usually alkaline contents of his canteen. To see it gushing free, jeweling the short grass blades, was an agreeable contrast.

He tapped out his pipe, refilled it with plug-cut tobacco that he crumbled in his horny palm with his splay thumb as if they were mortar and pestle, cupped a lighted match and sat forward to light up. He did not relax, but gazed ahead as one who strains his eyes to catch sight of a sail on the far horizon. The smoke was like a magic screen. He passed into a state of thought where space and time were not.

The high range became transparent and he saw himself, far to the north and east, trudging behind a steadfast, pack-laden burro, passing through the Panamints, heading for Pinto Peak. He dreamed of making for the Amargosa Sink that men also called Lost Valley, Mesquite Valley and, at the present time, Death Valley—a place of hope and torment three hundred feet below sea level, shut in between high, bare, brilliantly colored mountains. Here were fifty miles of desolation that lay twenty-five miles between the crests on either side, ten miles wide on the level. This stretch had been at one time a lake. Now it was a mud flat in the winter and a floor of floury dust for the rest of the year, where old lava filled the centers of the dunes, where dwarfed growths grew sparsely and the living creatures were scaled and poisonous.

Yet he loved it and it called to him, none the less now that he had mastered it, had found the key to its treasure box and come out laden from the place where many men have died and many more have failed. Inyo Roberts, they called him, naming him after the county where he had prospected for more than thirty years. And his partner of twelve years' standing had been nicknamed "Amargosa Jim"—his surname, Stanley, almost forgotten.

Jim had been with him when they made their strike, as he had been with him through many months of sampling rim rock and outcrop and lead. And Jim was somewhere out there still, seeking to retrieve the fortune he had flung away in wild carousal—and would fling away again, though age had dimmed his fires and blunted his appetites.

"Ye may think I'm a fool, Inyo," Jim had said. "I reckon you're wise, but you've got stakes driven down an' I'm foot-loose. I'll take none of your share, though I sure appreciate the offer. I kin rustle a grubstake yit. I reckon I kin git a pardner to look up some likely places. I've chucked my

half to the birds, but I had a whale of a time doin' it—an' the birds was sure hungry. Now I want to git back, jest as you will. We're desert men, both of us—bred down in the blood, I reckon. So I'm off, thankin' you kindly.

"You've sure got a nice place here, but I w'u'dn't wonder but what I'll look west some mornin' an' see you comin' out of Pinyon Gulch, pardner. I'd have the coffee brewed an' the batter mixed, with a chunk of sow belly sizzlin' in the pan by the time you come inter camp.

"Over by the Injun water hole that old Juan showed us is likely whar I'd be. Thet was the time the desert nigh cotched us, pardner, when Juan found us with our tongues mushroomed, crawlin' on our bellies toward a mirage pool. I'm goin' to look up old Juan. He's a good Injun."

"I see him sometimes," said Inyo. "Twice since I have bought this place I've seen him. I give him a loan—he insists it is a loan—for old time's sake. To me it's like payin' him for my life on the installment plan. A lump sum w'u'd do him no good."

"No more'n it w'u'd me. If you see him again before I do, tell him I'm lookin' fer him, Inyo."

So Amargosa Jim had left. Inyo fancied he could see the thread of smoke rising in the still air against the mountain wall that was hued like the coat of a harlequin as the sun lifted over Pyramid Peak above the Funeral Range. The little life-saving pool among the rocks, the burro nosing at a clump of sage, the figure of Amargosa Jim bending over the fire, busy with pot and pan.

Juan, the Indian from the Owens Lake district, blanketed against heat or cold alike, squatting on his heels, smoking his corn-husk cigarette, his dark eyes fixed, inscrutable, upon the summits of the range where a great Californian vulture flew through the dawn.

Inyo roused himself with a sigh, rose, and stretched his muscles with clenched fists and expanded chest. The mailman was due. He would bring magazines, papers—Inyo read much nowadays—and letters. One surely from his nephew, one perhaps from his niece. They were his children now, he felt, almost as much as they were the children of his widowed sister, for whom he had bought the place so that he might give her the comfort she had lacked and make the lives of her son and daughter better. The boy was in the East, studying technology. The girl was at the University of California. Inyo's sister had gone north to Oakland to bring her back for the vacation.

It had all been lonelier than he fancied. His home-making had been happy, but he was of another time. His sister was younger by ten years, and she had come to a late fruitage that she made the most of. She had made friends and he had not. He did not understand the way they thought, or acted, or talked. They were town mice and he a desert rat.

The mailman was at the gate, the gardener taking the delivery. The Japanese came up the walk and gave the string-tied package to Inyo with a flash of big teeth and an indrawn "Issir. Much mail to-day."

The expected letters were there—perfunctory things, affectionate enough in a careless way, accepting the gifts the gods had given them through him, dispensing scraps of news that left his interest blank. There were also magazines—and the *Independence Argosy* from Inyo County.

This was his news sheet. He did not like the larger papers from Los Angeles. Here was the news, condensed and a little stale, but good enough for him.

His eyes clouded, changed by some native chemistry, as the liquid in a test tube changes hue under a reagent. They cleared again, but now they were the color of steel—hard, cold and swiftly purposeful.

The hands that held the paper did not shake, though something like a great hand seemed squeezing his heart, and sweat born of mental anguish broke out on his forehead. The lines which he read blurred a little:

AMARGOSA JIM DEAD.

Poisoned by a Rattlesnake in the Desert.

"Word was brought in yesterday by Samuel Jordan that his partner, James Stanley, better known in Inyo County as Amargosa Jim, had been killed by a rattlesnake while asleep at Indian Spring, in Death Valley, where they have been prospecting for several weeks. Jordan had risen first and killed one snake, a sidewinder, with his shovel. He heard a cry from his partner and found he had been bitten in the neck.

"It was impossible to apply a tourniquet and, though he sucked the wound and applied permanganate crystals, the poison had entered a vein and Stanley sank rapidly into coma and then death.

"Jordan leaves with a party to bring in the body. Indian Spring is a little-visited spot that lies beneath Telescope Peak. The tragedy is intensified by the fact that the partners had struck pay ore the day before and were expecting to come to Independence to file their claim.

"Jordan reports that they found a pocket of gold in quartz that should run some twenty thousand dollars. The samples he brought were rich. It is said that Stanley has no heirs and therefore his partner will, in all probability, become the possessor of the entire find. As it is a pocket there is not likely to be a rush, though some of the party will undoubtedly look for near-by sign. Stanley was deeply distressed.

" 'I'd give a hundred times what we found,' he said, 'rather than it should have happened. It was a horrible thing to see your partner go out without being able to help him.'

"Amargosa Jim will be mourned by many. He was a picturesque figure in the records of Inyo County. Once before, when he was the partner of Inyo Roberts, he found fortune in the valley. That noted strike ran, it is said, to an amount in the neighborhood of a hundred and fifty thousand dollars. With the customary generosity and liberality of the old-timer, Amargosa Jim, taking a trip East on a special train, was soon broke. Roberts, more cautious, made good investments and is now living near San Bernardino. Jim Stanley, seeking to recoup his fortunes, found his tragic end in the valley that has been well named for death."

"Jordan," muttered Inyo. "Sam Jordan! So Jim took up with him? From what I know of him the only thing thet w'u'd distress Jordan deeply w'u'd be the loss of the gold. He's got the heart of an iceberg.

"Ses Jim had no heirs, does he? I'll tie a drag to thet wheel. Jim to die like thet, bit in the neck. At Injun Spring—right whar he said he'd be waitin' fer me to come out of Pinyon Cañon. I wish I'd come, Jim. I sure wish I'd come."

He looked at the date on the paper to make sure of it. It was a weekly sheet now three days old. It was a roundabout way to Independence from San Bernardino. A road ran north from Mojave to the west side of Owens Lake, but did not connect with the rail coming south. He could get a car at Orlando or at the rail end, perhaps. He could find that out on the train. But he could hardly hope to get there in time for the funeral. It would not be delayed. Death Valley sun and the

poison of the snake would make a hideous travesty out of the man that had been Amargosa Jim—his partner!

He rose with a grim face and went into the house, the folded paper in his pocket.

"Taka," he said to the man in the kitchen, "I am going away first thing in the mornin'. May not be back fer a week, mebbe two. I'm wirin' Mrs. Goodrich ter-night. She'll come right down, I reckon. You run things. I'll leave you some money."

"Issir," said the imperturbable Japanese. "I fix a' right. Ev'rything go arong a' right. Supper ready pritty soon."

"I don't want any supper. I've got to pack."

The Japanese looked after him for a moment with his hooded eyes and turned back to his work. He was faithful enough in his work, but he held no special interest in his employer's affairs beyond the question of his job. He and the garden boy would eat.

Inyo went to a desk and unlocked a drawer, taking from it a legal-appearing document that he read through carefully. Then he read once more the account of the death. He had plenty of time to pack. There were no trains that he could get out until morning. He had no thought but to go to his partner's grave and to have a little talk with Sam Jordan. That worthy, he believed, would not linger long in Independence, and he wanted to disabuse his mind. When he got up from the desk he looked gaunt. The lines in his face had deepened and he seemed old and tired.

He got together his desert duffle and packed them in a grip. His gun and cartridge belt went in as naturally as did his battered canteen, out of which he and Amargosa Jim had shared many a drink—at Indian Spring and elsewhere.

Presently he went out to the porch in the dusk and sat there in the Shantung chair, his pipe empty between his teeth, viewing in retrospect the ancient days. It seemed as if the last link that bound him had gone—with Jim. Old memories of hopeful and despairing hours, of flush days and days of poverty when the grub was low and the valley seemed to mock them, old talks with Jim, recollections of Sam Jordan —"Shifty" Sam—enriched now at Jim's expense. Jordan would never have found that gold by himself. He was a parasite of the camps, his usual occupaton that of lookout or capper for the gambling layouts. Jim must have come to a sorry pass before he took in Sam Jordan as a partner—too proud to ask his old one for a grubstake. That was the answer.

The mountains faded to a dim bulk of purple, blocked out against the stars. Beyond them Jim was lying, dead, distorted, left alone on the desert while Jordan came in with the news—and filed the claim in his own name. He would be sure to attend to that. Not that he could have well brought Jim's body in alone. It was hard work, at best, for man and beast across the desert, the burro's packs were limited in the soft sand and Jim was a heavy man.

The Japanese came and said good night, going to the servants' quarters. There was a small cabin built for them at the rear. An eerie sound stole out upon the night, inexpressibly melancholy, the sound of a bamboo flute, wailing softly and plaintively. It fitted in with Inyo's mood and it seemed the expression of his own soul. He hardly connected it with its true source.

He sat on there in the darkness and slowly there came to him a sense—a hunch, in desert parlance—that there was more to the death of Amargosa Jim than the newspaper account had given. It was engendered from his dislike of Sam Jordan. He realized that

and tried to discount the persistent impression. But he had been in such close intimacy with his partner, despite some variance in their dispositions, that it seemed to him as if Jim was calling to him from beyond the mountains, trying, almost succeeding, in telling him something. This became so plain that he felt it was an appeal.

"I'm comin', pardner," he said aloud. "I'm goin' to look inter it, Jim."

On the lawn there stood a shape that had suddenly materialized to his sight. There had been no sound. For a moment he held his breath, his brain steeped in the uncanny suggestion he had been harboring. Then he spoke.

"Who's there?" He said it softly but clearly and in the voice of a man who faced the unknown, the possibly dangerous, with assurance.

"Señor, es Juan."

Juan, after whom Indian Spring was named. Juan, between whom and the white partners there was a bond of gratitude that had been forged in the desert to friendship. Inyo bid him come inside and Juan followed him. Men called him a Digger Indian, but, if his mien was humble, it was assured and his features were not ignoble. His black eyes glowed with feeling as Inyo grasped his hand. They spoke mostly in Spanish, with some words here and there of American, or of Juan's own tongue—a dialect familiar to both of them through long association.

The Indian sat erect in his chair, gravely accepting the cigar that Inyo offered him. His face was long, with high cheek bones and a nose that was not flattened but aquiline. There were traces in him of having forebears that had come in from Mexico—a suggestion of the Mayan. There was room behind his forehead for good intelligence.

"You have heard about Jim?"

"I come from there, from the desert. I found him after the other white man had left him. Señor, he was not dead when the other man left."

Inyo leaned forward, his eyes gleaming. Age left him.

"You found him alive?"

"Not so, señor, but he had not been dead very long. He was uncovered. He was a very strong man. He would fight hard against the poison, though it was sure to kill him."

"Go on. Tell it your own way."

"There was only one dead snake. I have heard that Jordan said he killed the first he saw. Why did he not kill the one that killed his partner? If he took it with him he did not show it. I have been to Independence."

"If he left Jim before he was dead ——" Inyo spoke slowly, then stopped to listen.

"I am sure of that, señor, for, if he had stayed, he would have wiped out what was written on the sand. I, Juan, can read a little, as you know, for it was you who taught me. There was not much writing and it was not well done. He must have been very weak and the wind had begun to blow the sand. Señor Jim was on his face when I found him. One arm was out—toward the writing. Señor, there was a J in the sand, marked by a finger, and part of an O. He died before he could finish it, I think."

"Jordan killed him—for the gold."

"I think so, señor, for Jordan is a bad man and greedy. But there is no doubt but that the snake bit him. I have put a flat stone over the writing. I think you will find it there."

"It ain't proof. But I'll have it out of him."

"That is why I came to you, señor."

"You didn't tell any one at Independence?"

Juan made a gesture of impotence.

"Señor, what was the use? I do not like the sheriff and he does not like me, nor any of my people. He calls us dogs. He arrested me for making pul-

que. The judge fined me five dollars, which I paid. But the sheriff was not content. He arrested me again for stealing. You know that is a lie. But he swore that he had found the man's purse upon me. It would have gone hard with me but the man said that he might have lost it, since he was drunk. So I went free and the sheriff told me to get out of town or he would put me in prison. I went there to learn what Jordan had said, to see what he was doing. He had left to bring in the body, so I came to you. I had not met them for I came by my own trail." His eyes were hard.

Inyo stood up, his face solemn.

"Jim, old pardner," he said aloud, "I know now I was right. You tried to tell me. I swear to you, by Almighty Heaven thet I'll see you righted. I'm hittin' trail, Jim. I'm comin' to Injun Spring after all."

Juan stood at the invocation, gravely approving.

"It is not proof, as you said, señor. And this man has much money."

"I've got more. Jim helped me find it. I'll spend the last cent of it if I have to. You're right. The skunk'll fight. We might not be able to git an indictment."

"They might say I did it, señor. Once this Jordan struck me, because of a woman of my people. He will say I did it because of that. He struck me here"—Juan touched his lips—"and others took the knife away from me."

"We'll git at it another way. If he did it he's likely to stay around Independence fer a while. He's smart all right. He'd figger it w'u'd look better to stick around fer a bit. Deeply distressed! He's a human coyote. He'll pull a long face an' not spend the money." Inyo was talking American, mostly for his own ear, but Juan listened, comprehended, nodded.

"You'll stay here with me ter-night, Juan. We'll hit trail ter-morrow. Fer Independence, first. Better turn in now. I'll show you your room."

Juan had come dressed in a shabby suit of serge, a black hat, and old shoes. When Inyo went into him at dawn, sleepless himself, he found the bed unoccupied. Juan had wrapped himself in the coverlet and a blanket and curled up on the rug. He woke at a touch.

"Git some grub inter us, Juan, an' then we'll start. The sheriff won't bother you none with me erlong. Likewise, we ain't goin' to advertise our arrival."

Sam Jordan left the café for his hotel about an hour after midnight. He was slightly jumpy, for he had been steadily imbibing illicit liquor, most of it consumed in solitary drinks taken from a flask of the forbidden stuff, rank with fusel oil. He had sustained the character he had taken in the public eye of being deeply distressed and he had restrained from all lively company. Now it was getting on his nerves. It was plausible enough that a man in his situation should take a few drinks to forget things and drown his sorrow, but he wanted to get away—to go where there were women and wine and song, all to be bought by the gold he had brought in on the trip made for the body of Amargosa Jim.

Ninety pounds of the stuff he had packed in, rotten rock that barely held together the gold that was thicker than fruit in a wedding cake. Much of the matrix he had been able to crumble away with his fingers. About seventy-five pounds of what he brought in was virgin metal. It had been a solitary strike, the lucky picking of one of Nature's pockets. The men who had gone with him—some officially and out of respect for the dead, but others eager only to share in the find—had given it up after a few hours of thorough prospecting, following the coroner and his immediate party back to town.

Fifteen thousand dollars! Not much, even for one. But it would serve his purpose. Five of it he would spend, for clothes, jewelry and entertainment. The ten would constitute his bank roll with which he would start a faro layout of his own, perhaps at Tia Juana or Mexicali, where the pickings were good and the suckers plentiful. No less a sum would do to pay for privilege and as a reserve against a losing streak.

The gold was now in the safe of the express company. They would ship it to-morrow on the same train by which he himself would travel, to Reno first. There was a woman there who had once received his overtures with hardly hidden scorn, with a scarcely veiled suggestion that she thought his stories of himself as a daring gambler lies. He had spent his last dollar on her to prove he was a sport, and her slow smile, accurately appraised by her as to its value with such boasters as Jordan, still rankled in his memory—as she had meant it should.

Now he would show her some real money, flash a roll that would bring a sparkle to her eyes and caresses—for him—to her lips. He was smitten with her charms—entangled in her wiles. She might even go with him to the border. Anyhow they would have a good time together. And he would forget Death Valley and Amargosa Jim—if he could.

He was not so sure of that. The memory of the eyes of Amargosa Jim, blurred by the approaching paralysis, gazing at him with a terrible accusation when he started back for Independence, haunted him. The last he had seen of his partner was as he looked back from the low rise of a dune and saw that the latter had rolled upon his face and was clawing at the sand.

No one knew that he had left Amargosa Jim before he died, or Independence would not have treated him as it did—with a certain deference that was mixed with envy. Anyhow he could have done nothing for him after the bite.

All the same the eyes were beginning to trouble him. He would wake up from sleep and fancy that he saw them in the darkness above his bed. They were in his dreams and lately he had seen them in full daylight, in corners of the room—just the eyes, nothing else at first, hazel eyes at just the height they would have been in Jim Stanley's head.

That was bad enough, but in the last twenty-four hours it had grown worse. He began to see those same eyes in the face of every man he looked at, displacing their own, gazing at him with that terrible accusation. At first a drink changed all that, then it took two, then three, and now he dared not look a man in the face.

High time he got out of the place. There had been no dispute about sharing the gold. No one had appeared for the unmentioned heirs of Amargosa Jim. No one had ever heard the dead man mention any relatives. Jordan had possession, which was better than nine points of the law, since there was no law invoked. He had put up money for the burial and the marker stone, he had done the "handsome thing" by his partner. Now he was off.

Been drinking too much bad whisky! He knew that. And he would have to cut it out. They said you could get good booze in Reno. Making for the main street on which his hotel stood, he passed the entrance to an alley that was black with shadow. He did not look into it—he was afraid of seeing those eyes against the dark background—but instinctively he quickened his pace, lurching clumsily as the "tanglefoot" hobbled him.

Part of the dense shadow seemed to flake off, to detach itself and float as noiselessly as a leaf in the wind toward Jordan. It wrapped itself ex-

pertly about him and became a thing of menace with muscles of steel. As Jordan struggled and opened his mouth to shout, an empty sack was brought down over his head, bundled about it, stuffed into his mouth, promptly tied there with a rawhide thong that kept the coarse burlap in place. He was lifted up, carried back into the alley, two men handling him now, tying him hand and foot. He could hear little, see nothing, say nothing. The attack had been swift and strong. Jordan was fairly active, but he was as a child in the hands of these two men, one lithe and medium tall, the other, who had stopped his cry for help, almost a giant.

It was robbery, of course. They might think he had sold his gold and had the fifteen thousand dollars on him. He had spoken freely enough of his leaving the next day. When they failed to find it they might hold him for ransom. He was sober enough now. Rage mastered all other emotions. To be hijacked like this! The part of the sack that was in his mouth rasped and choked him, his bonds were beginning to hurt and then to numb.

They had laid him down to put a half hitch on him with the lariat. They picked him up and carried him quickly and easily away. They went downhill, which meant that they were leaving the town, going toward the river. Since they had not gone through his clothes they must know that he had not the proceeds of his strike upon him. They had probably been hanging around, lying in wait for a good chance to get him. Now they were taking him to some place of hiding whence he must ransom himself. He swore that he would not give up a cent and knew that he lied, even to himself. Shifty Sam was a coward at heart.

They carried him with one holding his bound feet, the other taking his shoulders, while he swung between them like a laden hammock. Then they laid him down again and the half hitches came off. He was lifted into a pack saddle, his feet bound under the brute's belly, his wrists lashed to the pommel. His captors had said nothing. One of them was leading the animal he rode. So they went on into the night. It did not take him long to determine that he was mounted on a burro and that the two men were afoot and he wondered at this.

They kept descending. Before long he could tell by the cautious steps of his mount, by its hunches and side slips, that they were on a narrow trail. At last they halted, the bag was taken from his head and he could breathe and see again. They were in the bottom of a defile whose steep sides mounted sheer and whose rims were battlemented against the stars. High up there was a slim white crescent of a moon. Near by the sound of a swiftly running creek was heard.

Jordan had guessed right about being on a burro. Another of those patient beasts of burden stood close by, packed with an outfit. He could only see vaguely in the darkness—could barely make out the forms of the two who had brought him there.

"You kin howl all you wanta now," said the taller of them. "No chance of enny one hearin' you this time of night. 'Tw'u'dn't make no difference if they did," he added, with a grim finality that was, to Jordan, ominous. He did not know the voice. If he had heard it before he did not recognize it.

There was the quick flicker and longer glow of a match, shaded by two hands while a cigarette was lit. This man, at least, made no attempt to hide himself. As the light flared and he drew on his cigarette he looked over his hands at the prisoner.

It was Juan, the Indian, whom Jordan had knocked down because he had interfered in an affair of his with a young squaw—tried to knife him.

They had warned him to look out for this man—told him it was dangerous to meddle with his people. He had laughed at them—a dirty Indian! He was not afraid of a damned Digger. Just the same he had been glad when they took the knife away from the bleeding Juan. Jordan had not liked the look in his eyes at all. Now he saw it again. There was no registration of any emotion on Juan's face—just indifference—but the eyes, catching the light of the match, flamed crimson. They were like the eyes of a wild brute.

The match showed that the other man had a white, close-clipped beard. He caught a quick glimpse of a stern face that was strange to him.

Jim Stanley had spoken of an Indian named Juan—had wanted the man to join them, but Jordan had objected. He had no use for Indians, he said, and while there were many Juans and Pedros among the Diggers, all of them duly christened by the priest, he did not want to run the chance of its being the same one. He might wake, with a knife in his breast, for a few stifling gasps before he passed. Now, if this was *that* Juan, why had he made—or helped to make—him prisoner? It had been he who had leaped upon him, agile as a puma. Why?

If it was the same Juan with whom Amargosa Jim had chummed, and who had shown Stanley and his partner Indian Spring and thereby saved their lives, the man about whom Jim was always yarning, saying what a good Indian he was, why had he and the white-bearded man brought him here into the defiles that would lead them out upon the desert? The Big Dipper was high on the left. They were headed east. The creek ran east, one of those that sped their currents to the various sinks that lie along the borders of California and Nevada. Jordan, looking furtively about him, saw the gray wash of its swift riffles.

Then, hovering in mid-air, he saw—or thought he saw—the eyes of Amargosa Jim. He sickly closed his own.

Who was the other man? What were they going to do with him? He moistened his lips several times before he managed at all to put the question, in a voice that wavered, for all his effort to keep it steady.

"I'm Inyo Roberts," said the man. "Amargosa Jim's pardner afore he took in with you. Juan here was one of us and friend to both. We're goin' out to Injun Spring to take a look-see whar Jim died—after you left him, Jordan!

"A man thet w'u'd leave his pardner dyin' in the desert, no matter how nigh he was to the end, how he come by it, is capable of doin' ennything. I've got a hunch thar's more to it than what you told the folks in Independence, Shifty Sam. It was more of a message than a hunch. They say dead men tell no tales, Jordan. It don't do to be too sure of thet. You chew thet over. Time we git ter Injun Spring you may hev suthin' interestin' to tell us. Why you killed the sidewinder thet you found first, fer instance, an' didn't kill the one thet bit Jim."

They started on again, winding in the night through the chasms of the mighty mountains. Jordan shivered with cold from within and without. His soul shriveled. For a few moments, in the midst of those black defiles, with the ancient stars looking serenely down, he beheld a vision of himself, a mote—insignificant but foul—upon the face of eternity. He glimpsed his ultimate doom. He was shaken, but, in the desperate emergency, he braced himslf.

Inyo Roberts! He did not know him though that he had seen him two or three times in company with Jim Stanley before the two made their famous strike. Never much of a hand for drinking or gambling or women, compared to his hail-fellow, happy-go-lucky partner, Amargosa Jim—rather a man

of strong, inflexible purposes, combing the desert patiently year after year, little by little, working out its secret until in the end he had conquered.

Now he remembered a dozen stories about Inyo Roberts, and they did not reassure him. He had come out here believing there was some mystery to his partner's death, talking of his hunches, talking of dead men's tales. What did he mean by that? Had he, too, seen the eyes, perhaps heard the voice of his dead comrade? That sort of thing was nonsense, hallucination born of short-circuited nerves that affected brain registration, an effect overemphasized and therefore readily insistent under strain.

Those eyes of Amargosa Jim had been the last thing he had seen. Their effect had been overemphatic. He did not really see them, of course, only a flash of memory that, now that he was tired from lack of sleep for several nights, persisted. But, how did Inyo, living in San Bernardino, get his hunch, his communication from the dead man?

It was Juan, of course—the damned Digger! And that explained how they happened to know that he had left Jim before the latter actually died, thinking him sinking into a coma from which he would never awaken. Juan had been a witness. What had he seen?

Not much. What he did see he must have viewed from the mountain cliffs well above Indian Spring. He might have come down and found Jim not quite dead. But that was all. If Inyo knew more he would have said so.

Jordan got himself together. Not for nothing had he been dubbed Shifty Sam. He managed to review the situation calmly, as far as it went. The Indian had gone to Inyo with some yarn to which he would probably swear, and Inyo was convinced that there had been foul play. He imagined Inyo as a resolute, relentless man, but naturally one of fair decisions. There was no proof of anything beyond the fact that Stanley had been bitten by a rattlesnake—nothing on which a court would issue warrant or convict.

Inyo could have obtained no arrest in Independence on his suspicions. The coroner had viewed the bloated and distorted body, changed horribly by the venom of the sidewinder. There would have to be some startling and indisputable evidence brought forward, and there was none. Jordan was quite sure of that. No matter what Juan had seen, or thought he had seen, it was nothing positive. The whole thing, this fanatical obsession of Inyo's, Jordan's kidnaping, was based upon nothing definite. The thing for him to do was to keep his head and reason with Inyo. It could be done—*must*—if he was going to get out of a nasty mess.

He had sobered swiftly with the realization of his peril. Only an hour or so ago he had been contemplating the pleasures in store for him, the complaisance of the woman at Reno, the splurge he would make with his money. A few hours more and he should have been on the train going north.

Instead, this taking forcible possession of his was no jest—it was done in deadly earnest. If Inyo felt sure that Jordan had in some way killed Amargosa Jim, he would be capable of killing Jordan—on the same spot—in some mad scheme of vengeance.

He was in deadly jeopardy. He felt that. The intense enmity of the two men who had captured him was manifest without words. But he was only a suspect. He would keep his mouth shut, prepare his arguments and consider all phases of the case. He could outwit them, since he knew more about the affair than they did.

Dawn found them out of the big range of Owens Lake, but still in a maze of ranges. They made camp in Panamint Valley. Directly east was the Pinto Range with Pinto Peak dominat-

ing it. Parallel to that and beyond it was the Panamint Range proper. Beyond that lay Mesquite Valley, really the northern end of Death Valley. But they were bound more directly east, where Telescope Peak and Sentinel Peak looked down on the Sink, almost midway of its western rim.

Juan made a fire of greasewood. Inyo skillfully and swiftly prepared coffee, bacon and bread, which was baked in the skillet after the bacon was ready. They untied Jordan's hands and gave him an equal portion. They had disarmed him and his feet were still tied, but Inyo's gun was handy and Juan watched every mouthful he took. None of them spoke. Inyo's face was a grim one that looked, save for the stern blue eyes, as if it had been carved from walnut. Juan's was equally impassive with a light that played in his dark orbs like the light in a black opal that is moved in shadow.

"You kin sleep ef you wanter," said Inyo. "One of us'll be watchin' ye—four hours."

"I can't sleep tied up like this," said Jordan.

"Then you'll hev to stay erwake. We'll loose you after a bit when we git inter the Pintos."

Inyo curled up in the shadow of a stunted mesquite. Juan watched the creeping shadow and awakened him after two hours, when he took his nap. Jordan affected to doze off, thinking the pose would bolster his plea when he made it, but he did not sleep.

At noon they were entering the Pinto Range by a path that was no better than a coyote trail. They were making a short cut known to Juan. At noon they rested by a shaded natural tank, finishing the cold coffee and left-over bread.

Beams of sunset painted the rugged peaks and cliffs, making their brilliant coloring still more vivid, emphasizing it with purple streaks in the crevices. They took up the march in the twilight and kept going until two hours after midnight when they were on the flank of Telescope Peak and could look down into the great hollow that once had been a lake and was now the mysterious desert.

The drink had died out of Jordan entirely. He shuddered under the blanket they gave him, looking up at the everlasting stars that had been there so long before he came to his tiny moment of life, and which would shine so long after he had passed to dust. With the dispersal of the alcoholic ferment he saw no more of those accusing eyes, but the stars were as bad. The silence of Inyo and Juan, not even conversing with each other, like men whose plans were fixed, beat through his defenses. He wanted to talk but stubbornly held his tongue, listening to the little night noises. Fear rose up in him and troubled him. This night might be his last.

He fought that thought off and feverishly went over and over what he had prepared to say for himself against the charges they might bring. They had untied him, but, unless he killed both of them, secured burro and canteens, he would be worse than a fool to try to get away. Juan squatted motionless, wrapped in his blanket. He looked like a squatting vulture, Jordan fancied. And Inyo—damn him!—snored. Then the Indian, watching the march of the Big Dipper, awakened Inyo and the latter took watch, smoking his pipe with an air of serene judgment. Once Jordan turned on his other side and he saw the glint of starlight on the long blue barrel as it leaped from the holster.

Breakfast again at dawn and the descent, by Juan's hidden trail, down to the valley. The Funeral Range was as black as ebony in front of the lifting sun, but the sands held wondrous opalescent light and shade that shifted

every moment until the angle of the sun revealed it in its stark waste. Behind them the chaos of cliffs and peaks, of ragged spurs, topped by old craters, separating flinty lava flows, blazed raw under the searching sun in rugged detail of white and glaring red and orange, in brilliant yellows, green, blue, purple and black rim rock.

About them greasewood and thorny mesquite, barrel cactus and branching chayas, taller than gallows trees. Pulpy dead man's fingers sprawlng flaccid across their path, all growing sparser now. They were below sea level, and the heat was beginning to suck at their marrows. They trudged through alkali that flaked off under their feet, where no green or gray thing might grow, and where, in the rains, the puddles turned to deadly poison. A mirage shimmered in front of them—a sheet of water with antelope drinking. Sudden winds stirred the soft soil, and the dust inflamed their eyes and nostrils as the temperature rose steadily. By noon it might be a hundred and twenty. Last midnight it had been nearer thirty.

The cliffs across the valley seemed to have acquired a crystalline base, to be lifted above the floor on a cushion of air. Their tops shimmered and danced in the heat waves formed by the ever-changing layers of hot and cold air. It was a place of wizardry.

There were snakes here—the horned rattlesnake, the sidewinder, and the larger but not more deadly varieties. There were leprous, bloated Gila monsters, hairy spiders and scorpions—crawling, creeping, evil creatures. Overhead there sailed gaunt ravens and, higher up, the great California vulture. Between these scavengers in the air and the deadly things on the sand there seemed to be a partnership of death, secrets shared concerning beings that died and, if they were not swiftly consumed, would dry to horrid bundles that the wind could roll in sport. They passed by spots where the alkali looked like cracked clay, treacherous spots, pits of slime, too thick to flow, too deep to dry, fed by burrowing waters.

The burros plodded, shuffling, with heads depressed and ears down. The water in their canteens was brackish, bitter, warm. Any metal was blistering to the touch. When they crossed lava dykes the rock scorched through their soles. Here Jordan suffered most, since he was not wearing boots like Inyo, and Juan's feet were horny on the bottom.

Their shadows lessened until they were shapeless blobs of purple.

They trailed closer to the edge of the valley, making for a gray-green patch of mesquite and cactus. There was Indian Spring. The sweat came out of them and dried in salty streaks as the sun evaporated it. But Jordan was cold with it all. He would have given all his gold for a flask of whisky. In the skimping shade of the mesquites they made a meal, but he could not eat. Afterward Inyo lit his pipe and Juan rolled his corn-husk cigarette. Their purpose seemed to issue from them, as heat issues from an oven. Jordan knew that he had come to judgment.

Huskily he asked for a cigarette. Juan glanced at Inyo, who nodded and gave him the materials. His trembling fingers spilled the tobacco but he managed the roll and lit it. The two sat smoking, watching.

He could see his own camp-fire ashes, the spot where Amargosa Jim had lain for his last sleep, the sign left by the burial party. Not fifteen feet away from where he sat was the body of the snake he had killed, its head chopped off by his shovel, the bloody stump blackened. The ravens had had better scouting and had left it. He could not keep his eyes from it unless they strayed to the faint depression

where the dead man had lain, the hollow he had made for his hip. He was fearful of the hallucination coming back, and he stared at the sidewinder.

Not a big snake, less than twenty inches long, barely two inches at its thickest girth, a pinkish-yellow body, like a Gila monster's—dull blotches on the back with dirty white spaces in between, brown spots in irregular lines along its sides. It had five rattles. The head was a tiny object to hold such horrible death in its glands—hardly an inch long, less than that wide, with two horny projections over each eye.

The ash dribbled from his ill-made cigarette. It burned sidewise, and he flung it away. As if this had been a signal, Inyo began to speak.

"Sam Jordan, you killed Jim Stanley. How did you do it?"

Jordan found his voice. Now that the moment had come he found himself speaking easily.

"No sense in calling that a lie, Inyo. It's just foolishness. You must be crazy. Did you bring me out here to listen to such foolishness? You're a just man, they tell me, and got good judgment, as a rule," he went on glibly, surprised a little at his own facility. "Reckon to do the fair thing. You two have got me where you want me, it seems. No sense in me gettin' mad. You say I killed Amargosa Jim, my partner. Prove it! You're going to have one hell of a time." He ventured a sneer, but he might as well have sneered at a granite rock. Inyo tapped out his pipe and looked about him.

"All cut up with sign," he said. "But we got Juan's evidence, to begin with."

"I can hear 'em listenin' to it. He's got a grudge against me and all Independence knows it."

"An' the sign I want ain't all trod out," went on Inyo imperturbably. "Thar's the trail of thet sidewinder plain enough, ef it is broken up. When a sidewinder goes erlong easy it travels nigh straight. When it's in a hurry fer one reason or ernother, scared, or mad mebbe, or goin' after suthin', it makes a loop first one side an' then tother. Moves off oblique to the way its head p'ints. Only snake thet does in this country, I reckon.

"This one did it, tryin' to git erway from you. Thar's the loops. Thar's whar Jim lay, no disputin' thet. You say the mate of this snake got to him an' bit him in the neck—an' you didn't see it till it was too late. They do move quick. Now, I've knowed snakes crawl up next to a man fer warmth. Even then they leave some sort of trail. Ef they go slow it's continuous. The sand ain't so badly trodden what thar'd be some sign near whar he slept. Thar ain't enny—straight crawl or loops."

"You figurin' on bringin' out a jury to see all this, the way you say you see it?"

"No, I ain't. What's left is mighty faint. The dunes happen ter protect this spot from most winds, but likely as not it'll be gone inside of a day or so. Also thar's a storm brewin' back of the Funeral Mountains an' et might skoot this way. I'm jest p'intin' this out ter show you how I'm comin' ter my conclusions."

"Seems to me you made 'em before you started."

"I did—knowin' Juan don't lie an' don't miss ennything. Git up, Jordan. I'll show you suthin' you missed. Git up!"

Jordan advanced reluctantly until he stood close to where the dead man had lain. Fear, coiled somewhere inside of him, began to assert itself again. He licked lips dried on the trail, but his tongue lacked moisture. His bronzed face paled to the hue of weathered putty, and he felt the blood receding to his heart. What were they going to show him?

Juan lifted a flat stone.

"When you, like the murderin' skunk

you were, left Jim before he was dead, I reckon he'd gone through his first spell. The p'isen makes you dizzy an' unconscious. Jest the same, it averages ten hours fer it ter kill a man as strong as he was. Mebbe you knew thet and mebbe you didn't. You ain't much of a desert man. Here's whar he vomited. Relieved him a little, cleared his brain. He turned over an' he started to write—your name."

Jordan stared with eyes that seemed to flame with scalding blood at the sign in the sand—the scrawled J, the unfinished O.

He saw more than that. The magic of the desert was at work. He saw, as he had seen before—perhaps it was merely the work of a brain cell—the form of Amargosa Jim as he had last seen him, on his face, clawing at the sand, writing there the death warrant of his slayer. And then the evil spirit in the man rallied his possessed soul.

"That don't prove anything," he said. "Juan put that stone over it, after he'd made the letters. He can write. I know that. I'm not on to your game, Inyo, but I know you're tryin' to put this over on me so you can horn in some way on our strike. It don't go! That's faked evidence. And I'll spend every cent of the fifteen thousand dollars fightin' any move you make. You'll get none of it."

"Nor you, that way or ernuther. You figgered ter git his half, thinkin' he had no relatives, becos he never mentioned enny. Waal, I've got his will right with me and I aim ter probate it. Jim was married. He didn't treat his wife right an' she divorced him, over to Reno. After thet she sort of went to the bad. Jim knew thet, but he reckoned it was his fault. Tried ter make up with her the time we made our strike, but she w'u'dn't hev nuthin' ter do with him or his money. Had no use fer enny man save ter make fools of 'em. But I reckon she'll take it now he's dead. Death sorter brings things back, an' Jim's left her a message. She'll git half of it. I aim to hev you make me out an order fer it, Jordan, before we leave here. I reckon you've got it planted safe with the express comp'ny."

Jordan's heart beat more normally. They were not going to murder him out here in the desert as he had feared. They were going to take him back and they could never prove anything on him with a good lawyer. Letters in the sand, even if the courts believed Jim had made them, could not offset death by snake bite. But Inyo's next words stunned him.

"So I figger Jenny Gibbs—thet's her name now—will let bygones be bygones. Jim left her all he died possessed of. Thet's how he worded it."

"Jenny Gibbs!" That was the name of the scornful woman in Reno whom he had meant to dazzle with the sight of the gold. The swift descent of revenge left him dizzy.

"I ain't figgerin' on the letters convictin' you, Jordan," Inyo went on. "It sh'u'd help, though. I'm figgerin' on tellin' the jedge an' jury jest how it all happened—an' you're goin' ter tell it ter me now—right whar you killed Jim, right whar he writ it in the sand. Put up your hand!"

The gun flashed out, the menace of its muzzle, of the heavy bullets peering from the revealed chambers threatening him.

Five minutes later he was tied hand and foot again, lying on the sand with a lariat thonged about him so that he could barely move.

"Third degree is what they call it—Injun style. Juan, find us a snake."

The overhead sun beat down into Jordan's eyes and he closed them, sick and weak. What torture they might be preparing for him he could only dimly guess.

Juan went among some eroded ledges

and came back with a snake that was almost the counterpart of the dead one. He held the wriggling thing just back of its triangular head, the tongue slipping in and out, the body twining and uncoiling viciously about his wrist. By some swift jugglery he pinned it down in firm sand with a cleft stick he had brought with him and, with Jordan watching him, his head twisted sidewise, attached to its tail a length of green rawhide that was just moist enough to be pliable.

The central rows of scales were serrated with highly raised, tubercular keels, and these gripped the thong securely. Its other end Juan tied to a stake driven firmly into the sand. From the pack burro he brought other sharpened pegs of hardwood. Jordan watched the preparations in a horrible fascination that held him in a kind of trance.

Methodically Juan released the snake's head and watched it coil and strike, coil and strike again at the rag he held just out of its reach. Carefully marking the limit of its spring as it dribbled venom from its lancelike fangs, with their slitted perforations, Juan drove the other pegs. Then he and Inyo lifted the convulsive body of Jordan and staked him out with meticulous care. The sidewinder coiled and leaped. Jordan jerked his head aside. Then they bound it down with a band of rawhide across his forehead to two deeply driven pegs. The maddened serpent strove to reach the prone quarry. Juan brought the dead, repulsive body of the other snake and laid it touching Jordan's cheek. He shrieked in horror, spasms jerking his body.

"I'd lie quiet as I c'u'd," said Inyo. "You got one chance. Come through clean with what happened an' we'll take you in an' let the courts handle you. I reckon you'll go ter the chair, but it'll be a clean death. Otherwise, you might die the same way Jim did. Thet's the way you sh'u'd die.

"Thet rainstorm may drift erlong this way, or ernuther one, some time. Ef it does it'll let thet rawhide stretch jest enough ter let the snake reach you. Mebbe it's the same snake thet killed Jim. I w'u'dn't wonder, seein' you didn't kill it an' Heaven takes a hand in jedgments on this airth once in a while. Ef it don't rain, then you'll likely die of the sun or of thirst—both, I reckon. I've leavin' it to the jedgment of the elements—or your own.

"Juan's seen this thing done before. His calculations air likely right."

The maddened reptile coiled and sprang, striking at air, striving with astounding force. Juan tamped down the retaining peg a little more securely and sat on his haunches, his face the face of a Mayan carving.

"You pair of murderers!" screamed Jordan. "You swine!"

"It ain't murder, Jordan. It's jestice—one way or ernuther. I've got paper an' a fountain pen. We come all fixed. Brought a burro fer you ter ride, thinkin' you might not come willin' an' not wishin' ter waste time. I've got a notion Jim ain't restin' easy in his grave—yit."

The cloud looming over the Funeral Range mounted and darkened. There were faintly livid flashes of lightning in it. Its edges showed coppery with the play of electricity. A muttering of thunder boomed dully.

Inyo filled his pipe and squatted down as Juan had done. Juan rolled a cigarette. The great vulture flew out from the peaks, high up, looking down on the drama below with wise, rapacious eyes. Jordan seemed to have swooned. Presently he began to mutter.

"You don't git no water till you come through. I'll have some, Juan," said Inyo.

The Indian dipped up the liquid from

the spring and both drank. Inyo did not finish his but poured out half of it, dribbling it into the thirsty sand. Then he refilled it and set it where Jordan could see it.

The vulture wheeled overhead, the storm brewed. Inyo finished his pipe and started another. The shadows began to lengthen. The heat became almost unbearable. Vagrant winds gathered the sand into dust devils outside of the ring of dunes and sent columns of the soft stuff a hundred, two hundred feet into the air.

It was two hours before Jordan broke down, with the storm now slowly reaching out toward them. Every little while the furious snake renewed its effort.

"You rotten-hearted devils," he said, "I'll talk."

He spoke in broken sentences, his lips cracked and bloody, his eyes closed against the sun. After the first score of words Inyo gave him a sip or two of water, Juan brought a branch of mesquite and held it so that his face was shaded.

"I did it, curse you!" he said, as Inyo wrote. "I didn't meant to at first —not till I saw the snake and killed it. I knew they went in pairs. I was goin' to kill the other. Jim was—asleep. Then I saw the rock—the sun hit the gold. There wasn't so much—not enough for two.

"I got the second snake on my shovel and I set it down by—Jim. It struck before I knew it. Jim woke up. The snake got away. I did what I could to——"

"Never mind thet end of it. You c'u'dn't do ennything. It's short, but it'll serve, I reckon. Thet storm's comin' fast. Juan, you witness this. Jordan, you sign it. I'll witness it too an' add suthin' to it later. It's a true confession."

"Damn you—yes! Let me up."

A drop of rain had splashed on his twitching features. Juan used his knife and freed him. Covering him with his gun Inyo watched him sign, thrust the paper in his wallet and ran for the burros, uneasy at the storm that came heralded by clouds of dust, by a spatter of rain that was soon a downpour. It lasted less than three minutes, but they were drenched. Three minutes more and they steamed under the sun. The sand showed hardly a sign of moisture.

"No sense in stayin' enny longer," said Inyo. "Mount thet burro, Jordan. You'll git your trial. I want thet order fer half the gold first. May save a heap of red tape. I don't know jest how the law works thet a way."

Still cowed, Jordan signed what he wrote, shaking all over as he mounted.

Juan, gathering the duffle, came up and bound his feet and wrists again. Then they started back toward Independence.

At the night camp Jordan refused to eat. He was sullen.

"You got that confession out of me against my will," he said. "It won't go in a court of law."

"I reckon it will. Third degree. They use different methods in the police system, but the confessions go. Ennyway, you kin tell your story, ef your lawyer'll let you talk. An' me an' Juan'll tell ours. Juan put the stone back on over those letters."

Jordan said no more but turned on his side, bound as he was. Inyo covered him with a blanket. Juan, consuming a cigarette, spoke in Spanish to Inyo.

"Is it possible that he may go free, señor? He has half the gold. It is enough to hire a good lawyer."

"He won't go free, Juan. I'm pritty sure of thet. He might escape the chair."

"He deserves death, señor."

"Ef ever a man did, Juan, he does."

The fire died down and, finally, out.

The stars shone steady. It was bitterly cold. The three figures swathed in blankets were motionless. Once Inyo woke, thinking he heard something, but all seemed well and he dozed off again. His work was done. In his sleep he talked with Amargosa Jim, telling his old partner that he had done as he had been asked.

A little later he awakened again, a shriek ringing in his ears. Jordan was writhing in his bonds, screaming.

"I'm bitten! Help me, you devils! I'm done."

Inyo struck a match. There were two punctures in Jordan's neck. A drop of dark blood was oozing from the pierced jugular vein.

"Jordan," he said. "I can't do a thing fer you. Ef I make an incision it won't do no good an' it'll cut the vein."

"Then shoot me. Shoot me!"

Inyo's face was troubled. Juan squatted close by, imperturbable. Slowly Inyo drew his gun from its holster, cocked it. Then he eased down the hammer.

"I reckon it's the jedgment of Heaven," he said solemnly. "I reckon I ain't meant to interfere. 'Vengeance is mine,'" he quoted. "'I will repay, saith the Lord.' Sam Jordan, I figger you'll have ter take your medicine."

The poison of a rattlesnake sometimes produces delirium. Jordan raved while the sun came up, and revealed the rottenness of his evil soul. Juan sat with his Mayan sphinx of a face, but Inyo's lines deepened and age crept again upon him. Then to Jordan came coma and merciful death at last.

"Juan," asked Inyo after a while, "did you set thet sidewinder free back thar at the spring?"

"The snake is free, señor. It would not have been right to leave him tied. They do but perform the will of the gods."

Inyo said no more. He knew that Juan could be silent as an ancient image on certain subjects, particularly where they referred to his religious cults. And he knew that all the southwestern tribes worshiped the serpent, some openly, as the Mokis, others more secretly, like the Zunis, but all holding it the symbol of the source of their being—of divinity and supreme power, handling it with cunning impunity.

Looping itself along the sand, moving with astounding speed in oblique motion, a sidewinder made for a lava ledge. Near its rattles the scales showed signs of chafing, as if it had flung itself continuously against some restraining cord, from which it was now released.

The Get-Together Club

HERE is a letter from a friend of COMPLETE STORY MAGAZINE in Canada, who evidently thinks that the many readers of the magazine outside the limits of the United States ought to be represented in the Get-Together Club. Well, we think so, too, and as a matter of fact they have been many times. We were almost about to say that letters have come to us from every corner of the world, but refrain from doing so because there are so many corners, although it would be true enough if we could consider the corners sufficiently spacious.

They have come to us from North and South America, Europe, Asia, Africa, Australia, and the South Seas—which is comprehensive enough for all practical purposes.

WINNIPEG, Manitoba, Canada.
October 6, 1925.

The Editor of COMPLETE STORY MAGAZINE.

DEAR SIR: On reading some of the comments in your Get-Together columns I noticed that all of the letters supplied are from American readers, so am taking the opportunity of sending in one from north of the boundary. I am not a magazine addict, but at times certainly do enjoy fiction, so I bought a September 25th copy of COMPLETE STORY and expect to buy a copy regularly from now on. I enjoyed all of the narratives, especially "O'Donnell's Demonstration," by J. Allan Dunn, a story which in my estimation was a dandy. Mr. Dunn seems to be very well versed in the South American ways, and also has the art of keeping the reader on his toes. I trust that Mr. Dunn will contribute many more stories of the same caliber as "O'Donnell's Demonstration." I think "The Life of Riley," by Mr. Callahan, was very pathetic and very true to life, and certainly goes to show that there is tragedy behind the scenes as well as other places. In closing, I would like to extend my best wishes for a greater circulation of COMPLETE STORY. I am,

Very truly yours,
AN INTERESTED READER.

We notice that "An Interested Reader" speaks of "American" readers, evidently having in mind readers living in the United States, for he refers to himself as "one from north of the boundary"—that is, in Manitoba.

This reminds us of a more or less violent discussion that has been going on in the newspapers as to the right, or propriety, of citizens of the United States of America calling themselves "Americans." As nearly as we can gather from what we have read of all this talk, that right—or we should more properly say, custom—is questioned mainly by certain of our own people, and perhaps by some also in South American countries. And some inventive geniuses among us have gone so far as to suggest other designations, one so ridiculously artificial as "Usa." But fortunately these reformers do not seem to be getting anywhere.

The great trouble with this discussion, as it seems to us, lies in the assumption that we, who are citizens of the United States of America, have deliberately ap-

propriated the names America and American with the conscious purpose of excluding the rest of the inhabitants of the two Americas from the right to their use. It is rather late in the day for such a question to be raised, considering the fact that all the rest of the world has been identifying us in that way for something over two hundred years, and that nobody, anywhere, has dreamed of calling us anything else but "Americans." We remember having a slight feeling of surprise when we first went abroad in being received everywhere as an American, and that the words United States or United States of America were never even remotely suggested.

The word American was freely used in colonial times—before the United States of America was ever dreamed of—to designate the inhabitants of the Atlantic seaboard, and its use was simply continued afterward—as a habit. That's about all there is to it, except that it will probably be continued into the indefinite future. Everybody, the world over, knows what it means.

Fredericksburg, Virginia,
October 12, 1925.

Complete Story Magazine,
79 Seventh Avenue, New York, N. Y.

Dear Mr. Editor: I have been reading Complete Story Magazine only a few months, and now I feel that I have given it enough of a try-out to call myself a regular in the future, a regular of the regulars. I have made it a rule always to have one magazine purely for entertainment and for no other purpose, and in order to get one that satisfied my craving for entertainment I have made many excursions among the so-called "all-fiction" magazines. A single reading of some of them convinced me that they were not for me. Others I have taken fo longer or shorter periods, always handicapped by hope instead of realization. And the hopes have been uniformly disappointed until I got hold of Complete Story. Or perhaps I had better say until Complete Story got hold of me.

The first number I read gripped me, and its grip has never been loosened. It is difficult to tell just what the quality of your magazine is that makes such an impression. It isn't merely that the stories are well written and well constructed or that there is anything about them that is specially uniform or new. I have asked myself many times just what the cause of the fascination is that I feel, and I can't come any nearer to it than to say that it is human drama set forth in the most realistic sort of way. Perhaps much of this effect is given by the exceptionally good characterization of the people in your stories. One never finds a puppet thrown neck and crop into a story, but rather a real personality who is there because he belongs there.

The man who does this thing best of all for you is Carrington Phelps, who, in my opinion, is one of the really great writers of fiction of to-day.

Long life to Complete Story Magazine.

Yours truly, Murray Jackson.

Let's Talk It Over

DEAD MEN'S GOLD

THE conventional fiction ending of a certain school is to have the hero or heroine blunder upon a pot of gold, or, if he or she does not actually blunder upon it, turn it up through some plot dev[illegible] Such an ending is to a certain extent satisfying, provided that the reader does not stop to consider that only a turn of Fortune's wheel bestowed the unearned fortune on the hero instead of on the villain.

Unearthing buried treasure is usually the quintessence of getting something for nothing, and that is probably why it has a following among fiction readers. Most people are looking for hidden treasure—trying to "clean up" easy money on something or other, sometimes resorting even to questionable methods to accomplish that end when honest methods fail. The lure of easy money often changes honest men—or those who passed for honest in society—to the most despicable of crooks. They were trying to get something for nothing.

Now and then Fortune takes a whim, and her favorite profits by blundering onto treasure hidden by men who died centuries ago. It is regrettable that the seekers of Captain Kidd's treasure did not confine their operations to a single plot of wilderness land. The excavations thus made, if manured and sown, would have converted desert areas into extensive plantations.

But those who wait for Fortune to favor them end their days, nine times out of ten, as dependents either upon relatives or public charity. If there is one outstanding vice in publishing a story in which the hero or heroine gets something for nothing, it is the bad effect it has upon some of its readers by deluding them into believing that they can go out and do likewise.

Because Fortune favors some of our neighbors is no reason why we should wait for her to favor us similarly. More often what looks like a favor of Fortune is the result of years of arduous but unadvertised labor on the part of the recipient of that favor. There are plenty of exceptions, but as a rule the obscure man who suddenly blossoms forth with great financial profits has earned them by the sweat of his muscles or brow. The public sees only the result, not the means by which that result was obtained. Wise men who have excellent ideas never advertise them until they are ready to cash in on them.

It is safest for us to create our fortunes rather than expect them to be built from dead men's gold. For if all of us waited for Fortune to smile on us without paying her due court in the shape of earning power, we would all be Micawbers, waiting in vain for our pot of gold to materialize at the end of the rainbow.

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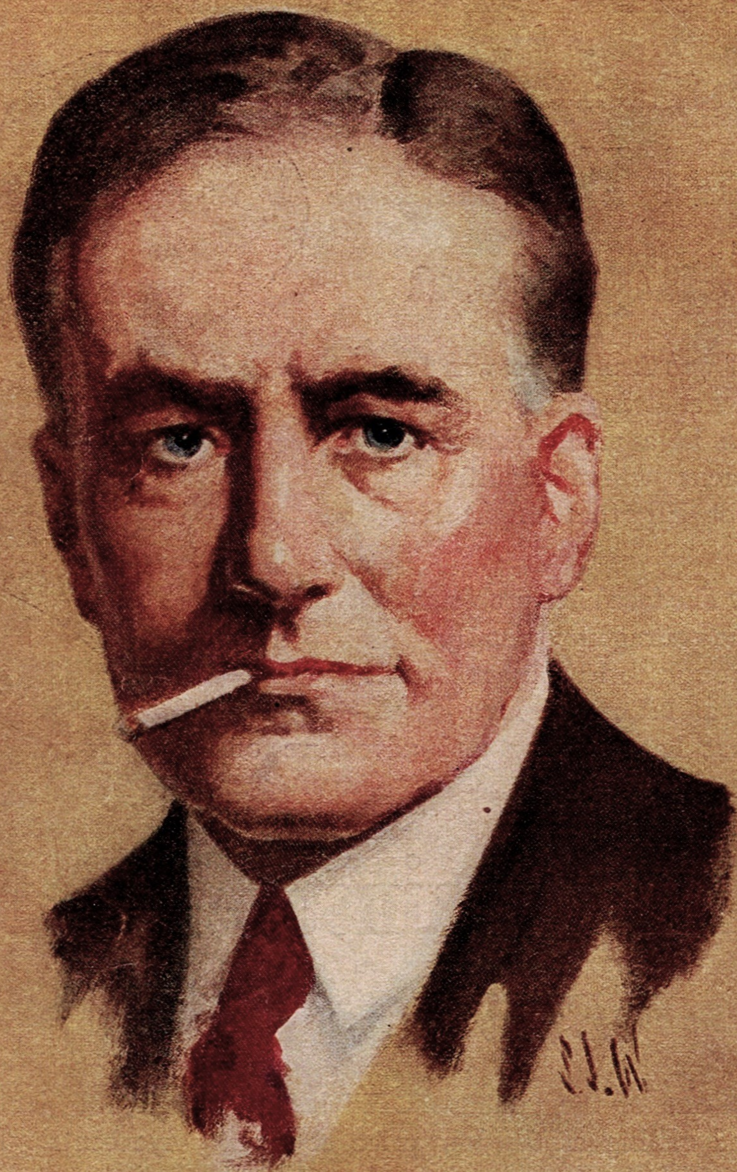

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