

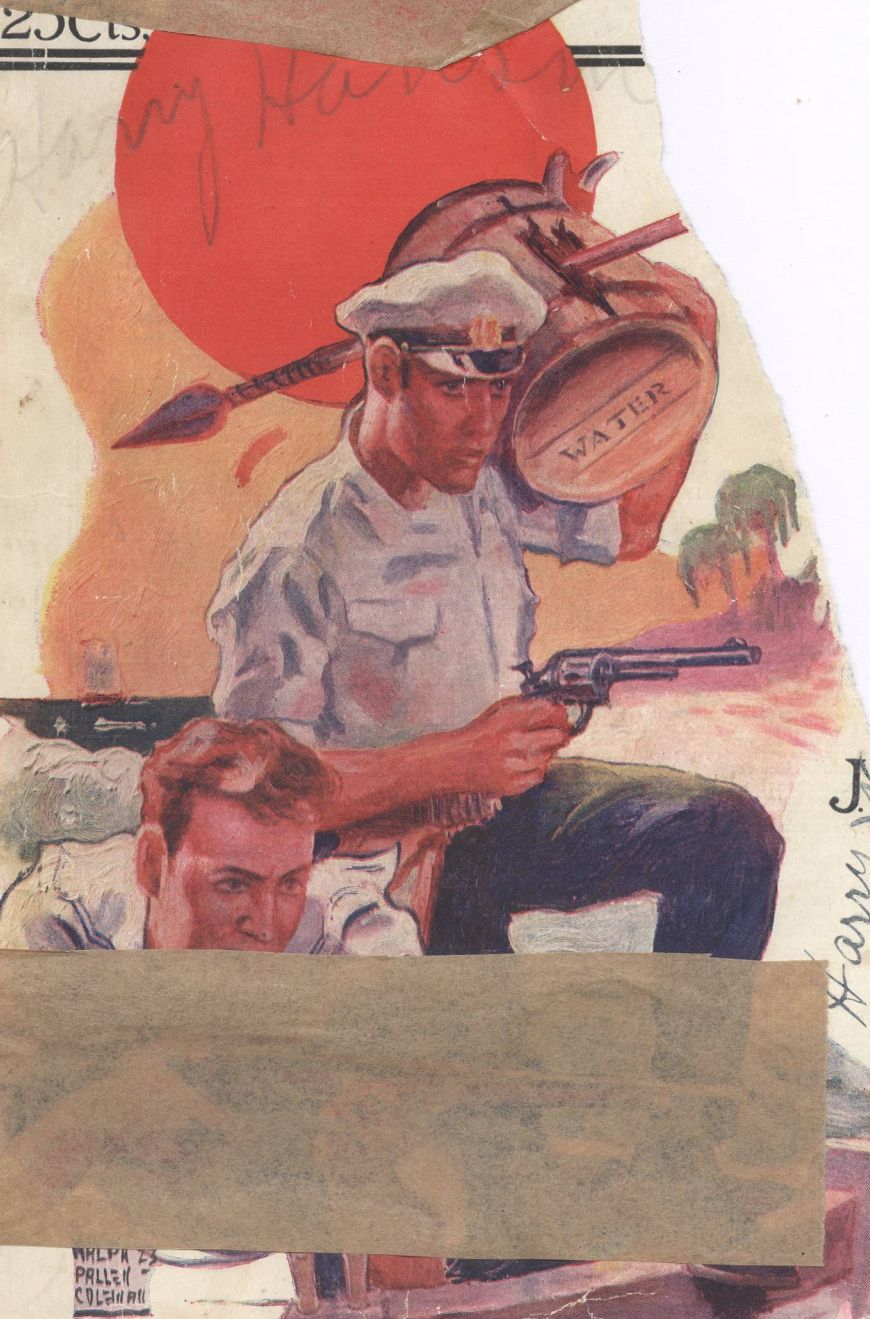
SEVEN

Vol. 9  
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SHORT STORIES



*Harry J.*

WALTON  
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# Short Stories

Vol. CIV., No. 4

Whole No. 425

HARRY E. MAULE  
EDITOR

D. McILWRAITH  
ASSOCIATE EDITOR

## THE VISION OF PERFECTION



NO GREAT invention, machine or organization; no lasting book, poem, picture, song or painting; no achievement of science or engineering was ever accomplished without it—the vision of perfection.

It is the thing which spurs men to do the impossible. Someone has said that genius is the ability for taking infinite pains. Yes, of course, but the driving force is this ideal of perfection which gets into the mind and will not let a man rest until it has been realized.

Does a poet sit down and say, "I will now think up a work of genius?" Did the Wright brothers solve the intricate problem of the heavier-than-air flying machine by a happy accident? Rather not! We believe in inspiration, but our definition of it would be this very thing—the vision of perfection. To the inventor the artist, comes an idea, the conception of a piece of work. It may come piecemeal, or it may come all in a flash, but there it is, growing

in his mind, taking shape and form. His mind's eye rejects all that is second rate. His vision will have only the best. By the time he actually begins work the machine, the picture, that is in his mind is more

real to him than family or surroundings. The test, however, comes in the performance, for the job always comes from the hands full of flaws. Here is the great thing men about the vision of perfection, for little men who have it not say, "By God, I've done a masterpiece!" The thrice blessed one who carries a vision patiently turns eyes inward, sees the shortcomings of his work and, far from being discouraged, goes at it again with joy—because his inward glance has showed him the way. He will be satisfied with naught but perfec-

tion. Ah, here is inspiration—the ability to see and correct the flaws in one's own work.

THE EDITOR.



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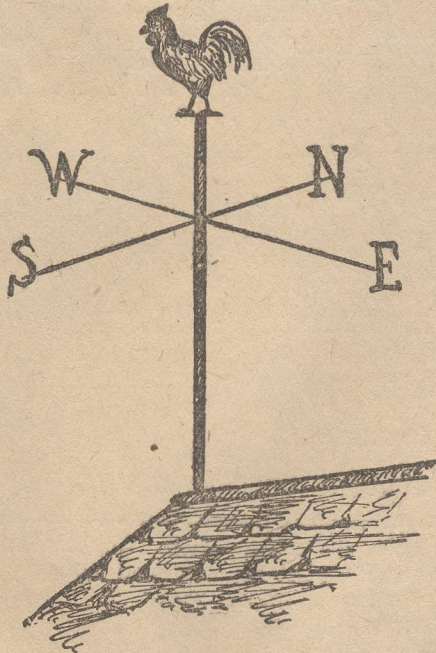
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Get Sept. 10th **SHORT STORIES**  
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# SEVEN BLUE DIAMONDS OF BARODA

*A Complete Novel*

By CHARLES B. STILSON

*Author of "The Strong Minded Isadore," "The Token of the Tiger," "The Luck of the Smiths," etc.*



---

IT IS A FAR CRY FROM THE SPLENDORS OF AN INDIAN COURT TO THE WOODED HILLS OF PENNSYLVANIA; YET IT WAS IN THE NEWER WORLD THAT THIS ANCIENT HERITAGE BROUGHT ON A MURDER, A STRANGE INTRIGUE, CONVERTED A QUIET VILLAGE INTO AN ARMED CAMP—AND GAVE GILBERT WADE HIS GREAT CHANCE

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## CHAPTER I

### I ACCEPT A CHALLENGE

**O**NE of the two letters beside my dinner-plate hinted that I had fallen heir to an adventure; the other threatened me with death should I undertake it.

"The devil!" swore my father, when he had read aloud the lawyer's brief announcement that Uncle Jack Cathcart was dead, and that he had willed me his entire property, including the seven Baroda blue diamonds.

"Cathcart did this out of pure cussedness," father laughed.

"Isn't it just like Jack?" remarked mother. She started to laugh too; but she remembered that Uncle Jack, though he had been only an unloved and little known half-brother, was dead; so she sighed. "What *will* they say?" she added.

"What won't they?" grunted father.

Nineteen other relatives, near and far, all older and better known to Uncle Jack than was I, had nourished Charity's two

sisters for years on account of the Cathcart fortune and the diamonds, if diamonds there were. Some of the nineteen averred that the gems were a myth; that, had he possessed them, Uncle Jack occasionally would have exhibited them, which he never had been known to do.

Now, the lawyer wrote, he had cut the nineteen off with a dollar apiece—and the diamonds had disappeared.

It was an odd, concise letter, typed in the exact center of a great sheet of yellow correspondence paper; and odd, if I was any judge of handwriting, was the man who had signed himself with tall, splashy strokes of a stub pen, *Enoch Stone*.

Pursuant to instructions of the late Mr. John Winchell Cathcart, who died on April the 4th, and whose executor I have the honor to be, I hasten to inform you that, excepting the legacies of one dollar each to—(Here followed a list of the nineteen)—the testator has made you his sole heir, provided that you shall comply with the terms of the instru-



ment, one of which is that you shall be present in person at the reading of the will at my residence at Medburne on the evening of April the 20th at 8:30 o'clock. Another condition is that you shall, within a reasonable time thereafter, take steps toward the recovery of the Baroda diamonds, of the existence of which you doubtless are aware, and which constitute a considerable part of the estate.

That was all. Not a word about the manner of Uncle Jack's taking off. Not an inkling how or why the diamonds came to be where it was necessary to "recover" them. What was back of it, I wondered.

"How the dickens," I asked, "do you suppose he came to pick on me? I wasn't named after him, or anything."

"The fact is that he did pick on you," answered father, who is practical. "Cathcart was queer, and I never liked him; but he's dead, and the money's yours. From what I've always understood, there's a lot of it. Go get it—and the diamonds too, if you can."

That undoubtedly was the sensible way to look at it, but I could not help being puzzled. Why, the man had scarcely ever appeared to be aware of my existence! Since childhood, I had not even seen him; though I could recall a lean, tanned, perverse, waspish-tempered man, many years younger than mother, who had visited us at rare intervals.

He was an inveterate traveler; and in the course of his wandering up and down the earth he made a fortune—just how, he never confided to his humanly curious relatives. He was neither a good talker nor a tolerant listener; he never married; he hated children.

When he wearied of traveling—and he was a man who spoke of going to India as

I would of going to Buffalo—he bought a few acres of mountain land near a village in Central Pennsylvania, built himself a home, and in it lived out his life.



From the village, Medburn, the lawyer's letter was dated.

"That's funny, about the diamonds,"

father resumed. "I never took much stock in them until now, and now—I wonder if this man Stone is all square and above-board. You want to keep an eye on him, Gil."

I nodded absently; I was trying to recall anything and everything that I might have heard about the diamonds. It was not much. Our total knowledge of the gems was derived from a Calcutta dispatch carried by the newspapers a number of years ago, to the effect that John W. Cathcart, an American, in return for services of a nature unknown, had received from the Gaekwar of Baroda "a set of seven magnificent blue diamonds, each stone of which is worth a small fortune."

Mother tangled the thread of my reflections by reminding me that my soup was getting cold. I reached for a spoon, and my fingers encountered what all this time I had forgotten—the second letter.

It, too, was postmarked "Medburne," which I thought strange. It bulked in its square envelope with a weighty, padded feel, as if it might contain a folded handkerchief. I tore it open and shook it, and a part of its contents slipped out and fell in my lap. Staring at it gawk-eyed, I groped in the envelope for its message.

My gasp drew the attention of both my parents. Typed on a half-sheet of note-paper, and unsigned, the second letter read:

A young man of discretion will keep what is sent him, and will *not* be in Medburne on April 20. An indiscreet young man will meet difficulties that may make him an object of interest to an undertaker.

In my lap, concealed by the tablecloth, lay ten thousand dollars in thousand-dollar banknotes! And I determined that I should be "an indiscreet young man."

## CHAPTER II

### MOSQUITO BITES

**M**Y EMPLOYERS, with readiness little flattering to my real estate salesmanship, allowed me a vacation of indeterminate length. On April twentieth morning I started on the first lap of an all-day journey from New York to Medburne.

My pocketbook contained the second letter with its sheaf of banknotes; my army .45 automatic and a supply of cartridges lay in my suitcase; and I had promised myself



that, before I was many days older, I would know who had tried to frighten me, and what stake in the game had led him to sugar his threat with a ten thousand dollar bribe.



Prepared as I thought myself for events,

the promptitude with which they marched staggered me.

I was settled in the smoking-car with a Rath novel and a cigar, and the train was pulling into Rahway, when the news-butcher came through, shouting, "'S Mist-Gilb-Twade on 'scar? Mist-Gilb-Twade! Tel-gram fer Mist-Gilb-Twade!"

I hailed him, and he approached, waving a yellow envelope.

"Yu-che-gent? Mist-Gilb-Twade?" he bawled again. "'Snessuge-fer-yu. Flash yer card, please. Yessir, Mister Gilbert Wade's ri." He handed me the telegram and passed on.

Whoever had put the message in the envelope had moistened and turned in the flap so that it adhered to the enclosed paper. I extricated it, and found that the infernal message-sheet, too, was gummed fast. By the time I had separated its folds with my penknife, the train had stopped at Rahway Station.

The yellow form was blank! No, not quite blank; near the lower right-hand corner, about where the signature to a message should have been, someone had drawn with a fine-pointed blue pencil a row of seven small, rhomb-shaped figures. It did not stretch my imagination to recognize in them the symbols for seven table-cut blue diamonds.

Angered to my finger-tips, I laid my book down and hastened after the news-butcher. When I came up with him, in the last coach, the train had left Rahway.

"Where did you get that message?" I demanded.

"Guy in de pullman gimme an iron man t' page yu wit' it. Why, anyt'ing wrong?"

"I'll give you another if you'll point him out to me."

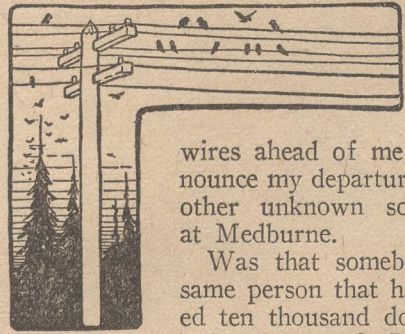
"C'mon, the babe needs booties," he answered, a grin crinkling his freckled phiz.

He had promised more than he could perform. Though we twice made the rounds, from baggage-car to diner, the sender of the dummy message was not to be found.

"He was a slim yeller guy," described the butcher. "He might 'a' been a Jap, an' he might 'a' been a cream-smoke. Yu can frisk my jeans for where he is now—he must 'a' blew at Rahway."

I gave the boy his dollar, and returned to the smoker, where my temper was not improved by the discovery that someone had stolen my Rath.

It—the wordless message—was, of course, a ruse, devised by someone who did not know me by sight, to learn if I had left New York on the only train that would enable me to reach Medburne by the time mentioned in Enoch Stone's letter. I could imagine that a real telegram, dispatched from Rahway, was now on the



wires ahead of me, to announce my departure to another unknown somebody at Medburne.

Was that somebody the same person that had risked ten thousand dollars to buy my absence? I guessed

that it was; and the question presented itself: Would he allow me to reach my destination without interference?

Again I read the threat letter. Two peculiarities in its typing led me to reflect that I would know the machine on which it had been written, should I ever run across it. The capital "A" fell below the line and leaned to the left, and the dot was missing from the small "i."

That gruesome pleasantry alluding to an undertaker leaped up at me. I will not say that it did not impress me; I had just received evidence of its writer's capabilities.

It may have been a foolish proceeding, but I went back to the pullman and transferred the automatic from my suitcase to my inside coat pocket. The feel of it against my ribs heartened me.

My raincoat hung beside the pullman seat. When I took it down to make a pillow, and in one of its pockets found my missing book, the word I said carried across the aisle and disturbed the peace of mind of an old woman in black silk. I said others, under my breath, when I examined the volume.

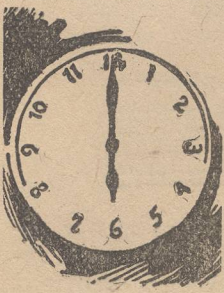
From the fly-leaf, like seven malicious eyes, stared up at me another blue-penciled



version of the symbols that adorned the telegram-blank. On the next leaf the same pencil had been busy, and the title—it was "Too Much Efficiency"—was heavily underscored.

There had been more than one spy on the train; one was still there. He was watching me—following me move by move along the course which Attorney Stone's letter had opened to me—and I hated him for it.

But from then on this shadow apparently ceased from troubling; the remainder of my trip, unless I reckon four pestiferous train changes, was uneventful. At about six o'clock I detrained at Medburne.



Among the three or four passengers who left the train with me was none that I could reasonably suspect of being my persecutor; all bore the local stamp.

There was no one to meet me; so I arranged with the station-agent for the delivery of my trunk next morning, and, with my suitcase, tramped half a mile of state road to the village, and registered at its one hotel. After an amazingly good supper, I set out through the dusk to inquire my way to Lawyer Stone's home.

It was a large house in the midst of a pine grove on a ridge behind the town. There were no sidewalks.

"Hey, thar!—stop right whar you be, an' keep on stoppin'!" growled a voice from among the shadows at the gate, as I turned from the road. A lanky man detached himself from a post and thrust the muzzle of a double-barreled shotgun under my nose.

"Who are you, an' what do you want?" he challenged.

"Who are you? And it's none of your business!" I barked back at him.

"I'm a dep'ty sheriff of Clearwater County, and don't git gay—this gun's mighty easy on the pull," he responded with a grim chuckle. "Back off thar inter the road whar I kin see you." He advanced the weapon so that I had to comply or swallow it.

"Oh, Harve!" he called, when I unamiably had stated my name and business. Another man sauntered from among the trees, and they conferred.

"If you're Gilbert Wade, like you say," said the newcomer, stepping to the gate,

"you'll be having a letter from the old man."

I produced Stone's letter, and he took it, bidding the bearer of the shotgun to keep it on me. When he struck a match to read by, I saw the shine of big revolvers at his belt.

"It's all right, Link, let him in," he directed. "Sorry to pester you, Mr. Wade; but we're in a sorter state o' siege here—prob'ly the old man will tell you why. Go right along in, you'll find him in the livin'-room."

Lights blazed from every window of the house. As I followed a sinuous graveled walk toward the front porch, I saw that other armed men were on guard among the pines.

### CHAPTER III

#### A MOONLIGHT SNEEZE

**L**AWYER STONE'S front door was open. Light from an electric porch-lamp and from the doorway shone strongly on me as I mounted the steps. Medburne's unpaved, walkless streets were thick with April mud; and I had, before I left the hotel, put on rubber overshoes, so my feet made no sound. I crossed the boards and raised my hand.

From my position I could see a section of a large room with many bookshelves. A dozen feet across from me, near the wall, sat a brown-haired girl, whose profile, against the shimmering surface of a hanging mirror, was so clear and pure and splendid that I forgot all else, and stood with my hand foolishly poised and, I suppose, my eyes and mouth agape.

My wits partly returning, I became aware that a little white old lady in a flowered dress, who sat beside the girl, had turned her face toward the doorway. Head on one side, she regarded me with amusement and mischief twinkling from eyes as blue and bright as china beads.

Our glances met, and pertly as a sparrow she nodded at me.

"Well, why don't you?" she piped in thin, childish tones.

My mouth, which had been open when it should have been closed, now snapped shut when it should have remained open, and I stared harder than ever.

"Why doesn't who what?" crackled a dry masculine voice from a part of the room that was beyond my angle of vision.

"Why doesn't the young man who is standing on the porch take off his hat and come in?" answered the disconcerting little



old lady. "I'm sure that we won't bite him."

"Aunty!" exclaimed the girl, after a swift flash of her eyes toward me. "There is someone at the door, Mr. Stone."

"Um—yes—but there shouldn't be," said the masculine voice, accompanied by a prodigious rustling of papers. "Come in, sir, come in."

Hat in hand, I complied.

"That is far enough—stand where you are!" A quality in the dry tones snapped the words like radio sparks.

Behind a rampart of oak desk across the outer corner of the room, a slender old man leaned frowning toward me. One of his hands rested on a heap of documents, the other lay significantly in a partly open drawer.

"Well, well, well," he went on before I could frame a word, "you don't look alarming, at any rate."

His frown disappeared; he removed his hand from the drawer and sat back. A breeze from the open window beside him stirred his tall pompadour of dust-colored hair.

"I am Gilbert Wade," said I.

"Ah!" His wrinkled lids flickered, betraying a flash of interest in his cold gray eyes.

"I'll be bound he is—I knew it all the time," chimed in the old lady.

"That simplifies the matter," remarked the girl, and stood up. "We can go now, Aunt Taphie."

"But I don't want to, and what's more, I won't!" the old lady resolutely declared. "I'll be bound, I sha'n't stir a step until I know why Een Stone's garden is full of shotguns and sheriffs."

"Please don't let me—" I managed to get four words in edgewise.

"But, Aunt Taphie," interrupted the girl, ignoring me.

"I won't, I tell you, Jocelyn—I'm curious."

"—drive you away," I desperately finished.

"Don't you worry, young man, we're not going." The old lady bobbed her white head at me. "I know you don't want us to."

It was useless for me to try to speak to the girl; her outrageous little aunt would not let her pay any attention to me, so I addressed myself to the old lawyer, who

was regarding the three of us across his desk with grim amusement.

"I came here in response to this," I said, and laid his letter before him.

He acknowledged it with a bow. "You should have come a day or so earlier," he rejoined gravely. "You might"—there was an almost imperceptible hesitation in his tones—"have missed a train."

"But I didn't, and I am within the time you specified."

As if to confirm me, a clock on the mantel of the fireplace struck once. It was half-past eight.

Attorney Stone slid forward on his chair and became animated.

"In compliance with the instructions of

my late client, Mr. John Winchell Cathcart," he rapidly recited, "I shall read his last will and testament. Miss Yorkworth"—to the girl, who was still carrying on a low-voiced



argument with her irrepressible aunt—"I must request that you remain a few minutes longer. It is necessary that your refusal to inherit shall be made in form in the presence of the presumptive heir."

"Very well." She sighed and sat down.

"What!" I exclaimed. "Her refusal to inherit?"

"Exactly." The lawyer's tones were as crisp as the rattle of the papers under his hands. "Mr. Cathcart bequeathed his property to Miss Yorkworth, and—"

"Then why, in the name of time," I broke in angrily, "did you send for me?"

"They are going to quarrel!" delightedly shrilled the little old lady. "I love to hear men quarrel."

"—named you as his alternate heir, should she refuse the bequest, which he had reason to believe she would," imperturbably pursued Attorney Stone.

"Of course I shall," said the girl. Her voice, too, tingled with indignation.

"And foolish, too," put in her aunt.

"But she mustn't refuse it!" I stormed.

My position, I felt, was intolerable; to owe a fortune to this unknown girl was unendurable! I appealed to her.

"You must take it," I urged. "I will not consent to any such arrangement."

Curiously unwilling to speak to me, she shook her head.

Stone interposed. "Please address yourself to me, Mr. Wade. You haven't



much choice in the matter. I was acquainted with Miss Yorkworth's sentiments before I wrote to you. They are, I believe, unalterable." He glanced at her.

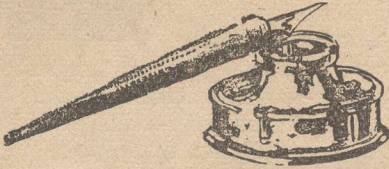
"Absolutely," she confirmed.

"When we have heard the will, and I have placed in your hands certain documents with which the testator entrusted me, I believe that you will view the case differently, Mr. Wade," resumed the lawyer. "Let us proceed to the will."

In a few terse sentences Uncle Jack had devised his entire property to Miss Jocelyn Yorkworth, and to me, should she formally refuse it.

One peculiarity of the instrument impressed me: in the section framed on the assumption that Miss Yorkworth would inherit, there was no proviso that she should undertake the recovery of the Baroda diamonds. The amount of the Cathcart estate was nowhere mentioned.

"Now, Miss Yorkworth"—Stone arose and came from behind his desk—"I have



prepared and attached to the will a formal waiver of your rights. You may sit here to sign it."

With an expression of relief, she came quickly forward.

I had taken breath to voice another protest, when the old lawyer stepped close and whispered:

"*Sh-h*, Mr. Wade, and spare her a peck of trouble." We all were silent while Miss Yorkworth's pen scratched across the paper.

Stone had brought a bundle of documents with him from the desk. When he saw that she had signed, he passed two of them to me.

"A letter from Mr. Cathcart, to be delivered in the event that you should become his heir," he explained, "and an inventory of the properties. I congratulate you, sir." He offered a leather and whalebone hand.

"Please take notice that I comply with my instructions," he went on, and tossed the remaining papers into the grate, where a blazing soft-coal fire curled and consumed them.

"They were to be delivered to Miss Yorkworth, had she succeeded to the property," he answered my look of inquiry. "I

have destroyed them, as Mr. Cathcart directed."

"What a pity!" from Miss Hormung. "I should have so liked to have known what was in them."

"I hope, Mr. Stone, that I shall not have to be connected with this affair in a public way," said Miss Yorkworth earnestly. "You understand—one doesn't like to have one's name—oh, I know that you understand!" Her lip quivered.

The lawyer had thawed considerably now that the main business of the evening was accomplished. "You may rely on my discretion, Miss Yorkworth—and, I hope, that of Mr. Wade," he said.

"Assuredly." I bowed like a stiff-jointed automaton, for I found my position the reverse of comfortable.

At that instant somebody let off under the window a truly tremendous sneeze.

"Goodness gracious!" piped Miss Hormung.

"Catch him! Catch him! There he goes, through the currant bushes!" yelled Stone, who, with astonishing celerity, had reached a window and was hanging half out of it. I ran to another.

Moonlight bathed the house and open garden and thrust coldly bright rapiers among the shadows of the pines. Through the patchwork of silver and dusk hither and yon hurried armed figures, their operations directed by the shouting lawyer.

Near the back of the garden rose a cry of pain. A red glare lighted the gloom under the trees, followed by the twin report of a double-barreled gun. Voices called on the hillside, and grew fainter.

"Let's go out."

Topped by a gray derby, Stone's head popped through the window-frame beside me and back again. As I turned to follow him, I noticed that Miss Yorkworth and her aunt were at a third window.

"Oh, Sheriff! Sheriff!" called Stone when we reached the garden.

"Here," answered the voice of the man whom I had heard addressed as Harve.

He led forward Link, who had held me up at the gate. Link's face was pale, he had lost his gun, and one of his arms dangled, with blood dripping from his hand.

"Someone was skulking and listening under the winder," explained the sheriff. "Link seen him after he sneezed, an', Link being a fair to middlin' runner, he took after him, and tried to stop him out thar at the back. He got this." He turned up the



man's sleeve and displayed a deep knife-thrust in the muscles of the forearm.



holes right now than a pepper can." He lowered his voice. "He didn't have no clo'es on, Mr. Stone, nary a stitch! He was bare-naked!"

To this scandalous fact Link appeared to attach more importance than to his slashed arm.

"Listening, eh? Well, there wasn't anything in the will that would do anyone any good," muttered the lawyer. "Link, you go right over to Doc Baer's and get that arm tended to. Did some of the boys chase the fellow, Sheriff?"

"Yes, but I don't think they'll catch him. He's headed for the hills, with Link's lead in his hide to hurry him up, an' he sure kin run."

Stone and I turned back to the house. When we re-entered the library, the two women had disappeared.

## CHAPTER IV

### MY INHERITANCE

"IS IT safe," I asked, "for Miss—for the ladies, without an escort?"

"They have only a few steps to go, and one of the sheriff's men went with them. Besides"—Stone looked meaningly at me—"now that you have arrived, I do not think that any danger threatens them."

It was turning colder, and a wind was swaying the pines. The lawyer closed his windows, and came and leaned on the mantel of his fireplace. His late excitement passed, he once more was the dust-dry man of law.

"Tomorrow, if you will go with me to Clearwater, we will obtain legal confirmation of your inheritance."

"Tomorrow!" I rejoined impetuously; "let tomorrow take care of itself. Tonight—now—I want to know what I'm up against, and I suspect that if anyone can tell me, you can."

Stone smiled faintly at my heat. "You have Mr. Cathcart's letter," he suggested.

I had thought about that letter, and had determined that, before I read it, I would have from the lawyer all that he could, or would, tell me. To read it first, I had decided, undoubtedly would prejudice my questions, and would make Stone more

than ever my master in an affair in which I already reckoned him as an opponent.

So I told him, "I prefer first to hear from you."

He smiled again, fetched a box of cigars from his desk and drew a brace of deep chairs to the fireside. "Let us make the best," said he, "of what I foresee is bound to be unpleasant. Have a smoke." He sat down by the fire to fight it out.

"Because of my ignorance of many points, and my personal sentiments with regard to certain others," he resumed, "I am afraid, Mr. Wade, that you will find me an unsatisfactory witness under cross-examination—but fire away."

Decency impelled me first to inquire about Uncle Jack's death.

"Mr. Cathcart was fond of horses. He was a skilled rider, but reckless. On the afternoon of April fourth his servant James Mungford, returning from the village where he had been on an errand, found Mr. Cathcart and his stallion, Suliman, lying in the Black Bear trail—a particularly rough stretch of riding below the Cathcart bungalow. The horse's neck was broken, and the fall had fractured Mr. Cathcart's skull. Mungford took him home, and telephoned to Dr. Baer. When the doctor reached the bungalow, Mr. Cathcart was dead."

"He killed himself!" I cried. "I suspected it. The will—it named the day on which I was to be here!"

"That does not prove." Stone shook his head. "He made his will and gave it into my keeping more than two months ago. It stipulated merely that the reading should take place on the sixteenth day following his death." He hesitated, then added, "I believe that his death was accidental; but it may have been—as you have said."

Why, I asked him, had my uncle left his property to Miss Yorkworth, and why had she refused it?

His gray eyes bored into mine, and he puffed vigorously at his cigar; then his queer, straight little mouth tightened.

"Those are points, sir, upon which I shall not allow myself to speculate. Miss Yorkworth is an estimable young woman—a particularly fine young woman. Her reasons are her own, and I am sure that they are sufficient."

He spoke coolly; but unless I was mis-





taken, behind his coolness was a desperate unease—and he had partly evaded my question.

I tried another tack. "But you advised her—that is, you told me—that she would avoid trouble——"

"That is entirely another matter, and she is not aware of it."

We were getting to the point.

"What is this trouble? Was my uncle afraid of it? Did it have anything to do with his death?"

"I do not think——" he hastily began. "No, decidedly, it did not. It was nothing that he feared for himself. Of its exact nature I am regrettably ignorant; but if my surmises would be of any value——"

"You must realize that you are talking in riddles," I interrupted. "I like puzzles, of wood and wire—not human ones."

"Yet everyone is more or less of a puzzle," he placidly replied, "and the late Mr. Cathcart was more so than most." Stone managed to convey in the most exasperating manner that, while he was making allowances for my youth and temper, he would not be hurried.

"As I was saying, my surmises may be of value. They concern the Baroda diamonds. I believe that Mr. Cathcart, who had enjoyed their possession undisturbed, had reason to believe that a powerful agency would attempt to take them from his successor. I further believe that, to balk that agency, he himself concealed the gems, in the hope that his heir would recover and protect them." The lawyer joined his thin fingers and regarded me steadily through a cloud of smoke.

"And this agency?"

"The margin for speculation is wide. We must remember that Mr. Cathcart obtained the diamonds in the East, and that the Oriental mind is capable of peculiar ideas."

Urged by a new thought, I suddenly asked, "Have you ever seen these diamonds?"

"I have—once." Something akin to enthusiasm glinted in his cold eyes. "The set is unique and priceless."

The diamonds really existed then; I had come almost to doubt it.

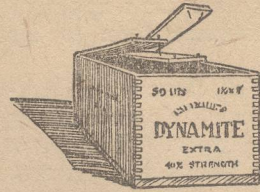
What fairy-tale was this dry old fellow building up? Did he hope to make me believe it? Had he himself stolen the jewels? If not, what was he holding back? If not the diamonds, what was his stake in the affair? Why was he so touchy on all that concerned Miss Yorkworth?

"Mr. Stone, do you seriously believe in

this—risk, you call it?" I pursued. "It sounds to me like nonsense."

"Look here," he straightened out of his chair, stepped across the floor, and flung open the door to a small adjoining room, "does that look like nonsense?"

Plaster from the ceiling lay in heaps on the floor among the debris of shattered furniture; the walls were cracked and gaping; a small iron safe had been overturned, and its door torn off and hurled some distance from it.



"Dynamite." Stone nodded in answer to my exclamation. "This was done in the evening of the third day after Mr. Cathcart's death.

Fortunately, I had been advised by him, and his will and the other documents were in my bank vault in Clearwater.

"Later in the same night Mr. Cathcart's man, Mungford, was overpowered while he slept, and the bungalow was ransacked from ground to roof.

"We don't know who did it. They left absolutely no trace. The sheriff has hunted the mountains and barrens for miles, and found no one. Since that night the bungalow and my home have been constantly under guard, yet you witnessed what took place here tonight. Clever men are at work, Mr. Wade, dangerous men. They handled Mungford with such skill that he did not get a glimpse of them."

Here was evidence with a vengeance. If the old man was a bluffer, I reflected, he was an expert. Link's bloody hand and that shattered safe didn't look like bluff; neither did it seem credible that the lawyer could have the collusion of the sheriff's entire force. And yet—something was wrong. Stone didn't ring wholly true.

Another angle perplexed me—the newspapers. I was familiar enough with the New York dailies to know that the bare hint of such happenings would have been sufficient to send a corps of special writers and camera men hustling to Medburne. I said as much to Stone.

"Perhaps we don't talk as much here in the mountains as they do in the cities," was his dry retort. "Now," he went on when we had returned to the fireside, "I have told you about all of this affair that I am at liberty to tell. I suggest that for further light you refer to Mr. Cathcart's letter."

His tone indicated that I was wearing his



patience thin, and indeed I had meant to. If I could arouse his anger, I hoped that I should hear a grain of truth. I would read the letter, and then I would fire another shot. I opened the sealed envelope.

*Nephew Gilbert:—Besides the blue diamonds, I'm not leaving you much—Stone will give you the inventory. There used to be a lot more, but I've gone through a tidy bit of it. The diamonds are worth the mess of it, many times over. Will you get them? I wonder; it's the first time I've thought much of anything about you. I remember you as a grubby little dub with too much sticky stuff around your mouth and a fondness for kittens—I hate the beasts.*

*After all, there may be something to you; and if there is, you'll find the diamonds. Once you do, your life will be in danger, and you may do as you please about keeping them. They shouldn't be hard to dispose of.*

*Queer sort of legacy, you think, and I'm a cold-blooded old bounder. Well, I never valued my own life too highly, and I sha'n't worry about yours. You and Hassan may fight it out. I wish that I might hang around and watch you go at it—I fancy it will be amusing—but I don't believe in that sort of thing; so I expect that the arrangements will be all the pleasure I'll have out of it.*

*I didn't steal the diamonds, and they are legally mine. The Gaekwar gave them to me when I—well, I had saved something for him that he valued considerably more than his life.*

*Don't let anybody tell you that I killed myself. I have a feeling though that my time isn't far off. I'm not so young as I was, and that brute Sulieman is a devil.*

*I wasn't going to give you any advice, but I will. If the proper person asks you to give up the diamonds, do it without a quiver. (This sentence was heavily underscored.) Burn the attached slip.*

*I'd thank you to keep Mungford on. You'll find him a good man.*

*John W. Cathcart.*

Uncle Jack had written the letter in a fine, square hand on a single sheet. Pinned near its lower edge was a narrow slip bearing the typewritten words:

Read up on Spain. Books in my library—and borrow. J. W. C.

Had I said that I liked puzzles? The

paper slip, I guessed, was the guide to a cryptogram—and what a dubious incentive Uncle Jack had offered to its solution!

For an instant I had a mind to chuck the whole silly business. Then I thought of the letter that attempted to frighten me off. It was evident that there were others to whom it wasn't silly; if I were to chuck it, I would play right into their hands. I looked up and saw that the old lawyer was studying me out of half-closed inscrutable eyes, in which I imagined



thinly veiled contempt. My blood began to sing. My stubbornness set itself against opposition; the mystery—yes, and the danger—called to me.

No; I would not give in. I would go through with it—confound them all!

Now to finish with Stone. "My uncle must have been very sure that I would come," as I folded the letter and slip and returned them to the envelope.

"On the contrary, I think that he was not at all sure—he merely provided."

"Do you know what is in this letter?"

"I have not read it, but I can form an idea."

"Where are the diamonds?" I suddenly flung at him.

Either my shot flew wild, or he had been prepared for it, for he answered deliberately, "My understanding is that Mr. Cathcart did not wish anyone but his heir to accept the responsibility of that knowledge."

"And if Miss Yorkworth had accepted the bequest?"

"I do not know—and that is now out of the question."

"Not entirely, it isn't. Suppose I give it up?"

"In that case—but you will not."

In spite of my dislike and suspicions, his confidence flattered me.

"No, I will not," I answered; "and now see here—" I took the threat letter from my pocketbook. "Tell me what you make of this?"

Too late I threw myself toward him. The letter was in the grate—and he had thrown it there! A leaping flame caught it, and its ashes drifted up the chimney draft.



He was too old, I could not strike him. I sprang up and tramped the room, not trusting myself to speak. He had known about that letter, and now I had not a shred of proof.

I strode back to him. "Perhaps you will undertake the charge of this, too," I said bitterly, and I tossed the ten thousand dollars on his knee.

He coolly folded the bills, and stowed them in his vest pocket. His audacity astonished me; I could only stare at him.

At length he spoke, "You must place what construction you will upon my actions, Mr. Wade. I am peculiarly and unpleasantly situated in my relation to this matter. I wish with all my heart that I had never had anything to do with it. I can only hope that time and events will straighten out my connection with it."

"Stone, you—you— Do you know what I think of you?" I said when I could muster voice.

He lifted a bony finger.

"I am not the arbiter of your thoughts, young man; but," his mouth worked, and there was a quaver of real feeling in his tones that betrayed the stirring of something vital in his musty being, "if you are so fortunate as to be alive at the end of six months, you will have revised your opinion. I will trust myself to speak with you no longer."

He stood up. "The Clearwater train leaves at half-past ten tomorrow. I shall expect you to meet me at the station. Good night, sir."

I went out and left him standing with his coat-tails spread to the fire.

At his front gate a guard of armed men fell in behind me and followed me to my hotel.

## CHAPTER V

### WELCOME HOME

**W**HY would a man leave all his property to an unrelated girl? Because she or her family had done him a great service; or—because he loved her. The second inference seemed the more likely. Uncle Jack had not been so old as to put the presumption out of the question. It did not make Miss Yorkworth less interesting to me; I thought that he'd displayed excellent judgment,

though it was apparent that his wooing had brought him little luck.

As for Enoch Stone, if he was not an unmitigated crook, I surmised that he was the screen for someone who was.

Fraudulent as I suspected his game to be, I admired the thoroughness with which he played it. I went to sleep listening to the soft, steady tread of a sentinel in the corridor; another patrolled the alley below my window; and in the morning I ate bacon and eggs under the watchful eyes of a tall youth who lounged in the doorway of the hotel dining-room with bulging coat-tails eloquent of masked artillery. My own automatic hung in a shoulder-holster against my left ribs.

When I went out after breakfast for a stroll, my tall guardian fell into step three paces behind me.

"Do you think it's necessary?" I asked.

"Ain't thinkin'—it's the old man's orders," he grinned.

In a hollow between two long ridges Medburne lies uneasily and sprawls up their sides. Through the center of the town, bordered by dismal mud flats, Sulphur Creek creeps from up the valley to join Black Bear and flow on to the gorge of Moshannon. A coal branch railroad, on a bed of burned culm, follows the course of the creek and is outlet for three mines.

Beyond the ridges, on every side, shoulder up the round-topped Alleghany Mountains, peeping one above another—mile upon mile of bush and second-growth timber barrens, where only hunters go. Railways wind and narrow roads twist crookedly through the wilderness. Along them infrequent villages are like random knots upon discarded string.

Followed by my marching arsenal, I crossed the creek and climbed part way up the ridge opposite the hotel to the stretch of state road that was Main Street.

Near the brick bank I met Miss Yorkworth and Miss Hornung, the one trim in tailored blue, the other flaunting the hues of a parrot's wing, and gay and mischievous as the talkative bird itself.

Miss Yorkworth returned me an aloof bow; but the little old lady sidled close and touched my arm with a fragile, withered finger.

"You look like a good boy." She peered up at me from under an odd, tight-fitting





turban. "Come and see us—we don't get a chance every day to visit with someone from New York. Besides I'm dying to know what happened last night, and what it's all about."

Her niece moved steadily on, seeing which, Miss Hornung shrugged, made a grimace, and rolled her beady blue eyes.

"Don't you let her scare you," she advised. "She'll get over it—with proper treatment—and she can be very good company when she chooses. I must run along now." She shook her hand at me, and went mincing off in the wake of Miss Yorkworth.

I looked after her, and smiled. She, at any rate, was friendly. I would have liked to tell her my doubts and suspicions, and to ask her advice, but I feared her tremendous tongue.

After writing a letter home full of reassuring untruth, I went to the station.

Stone, in his gray derby and mantle of integrity, was waiting for me. If our tiff of the previous evening had made any impression on him, he was gloriously over it. Sheriff Harvey Bloom and a number of deputies were with him. They hailed me with cordial interest.

"The boys didn't ketch that feller last night, Mr. Wade," said Bloom in the tone of one who makes a report. "He run 'em till their tongues was hangin' out, and then lost 'em. I'm sorry. I expect we'll have to git busy and give the hills a reg'lar comb-in'—and that's some contract."

By his speech and manner I knew that if anything underhanded had been framed, the sheriff was unaware of it; his honesty was transparent. I drew the lawyer aside.

"How long is this to last?" I pointed to the guards. "It is a needless waste of good men's time. I can look out for myself. Why not let me han'g by my own gills?"

"Mr. Wade," he answered levelly, "while I did not always approve of the late Mr. Cathcart, I admired him, and he once helped me out of a middling tight pinch. I am not, if I can avoid it, going to take the responsibility for his nephew's murder."

We rode an hour by train to Clearwater, ate a restaurant lunch, and in a dim old room with dusty windows in the prim-pillared gray courthouse transacted the formalities that put me in possession of what Uncle Jack had left me.

He had written that it was not much. To a fifty-dollar-a-week real estate salesman it loomed large. His bungalow, Rag-narock, with its stables and a few acres of

mountain land, twenty-odd thousand dollars in banked cash, stocks and securities that assured me an income of something more than seven thousand dollars a year, and a Jordan touring car—that was the tale of my inheritance—not to reckon the Baroda diamonds.



As we left the courthouse, I was dreaming.

"Your car, Mr. Wade," Stone broke in upon me. "I took the liberty to telephone this morning to your man, Mungford, and ask him to meet you here at two."

Long as a launch, shiny as a mirror, a forest-green touring car stood by the curb. A small, plump man in knickers was tinkering with the carburetor.

*My car! My man!*

James Mungford lifted an apple-cheeked face as we approached. Never have I seen such black eyes as those which appraised me when Stone introduced him.

"You favor your uncle a goodish bit, if you don't mind," he told me, touching the peak of his cap; "perhaps a bit more rangy and long in the legs. He was a rare one, sir—not many like him—and it's me that knew him. Fifteen years I was with him, sir, and all over the world like—" A spasm shook his features. He turned abruptly and slammed down the hood of the car. "Home now, sir?"

"Yes." Two deputies assigned by Sheriff Bloom had followed us from the courthouse, and stood at my elbows. I included them and Stone in a wave of my hand toward the tonneau. "Pile in, gentlemen—I'm going to drive you."

Stone must have divined my feelings toward him; nevertheless, my invitation manifestly pleased him.

Mungford directing me, I drove that wonder of a car out of town and down the long hill to the bridge across Big Clearwater Creek. At the rim of its misty gorge a state road offered, smooth as a waltz floor.

"Step on her, sir," advised Mungford; "there aren't any state troopers along here today."

I stepped on her! Never had I driven as I wished to until I drove that car—*my car*—that day through the April sunshine down that long gray road.

Though the state road did not long hold out, and the remainder of the way was typical Pennsylvania mountain highway—than which few are worse—we made the



twenty-one miles from Clearwater to Medburne in less than twenty-eight minutes. I believe I shook the best part of a story of Stone's out of his mouth and the deputies' ears. They became glum; and when I slowed at the village limits, they praised me with faint voices.

"You drive like your uncle, sir," said Mungford, and I saw that he, at least, had enjoyed it.

We passed through the village, descended a forest road into the valley of Black Bear, and beyond the creek began to climb the mountain of that name. From the town, it had appeared but a rifle-shot to its wooded side, but we followed a rough and winding road for three miles on the slopes before we reached the trail that led up to Ragnarock.

Up that goat-path no machine, unless it were a tank, could go, and on a triangular level at its foot my uncle had built a stone garage.

Here awaited us one of the men employed by Stone to keep Mungford company at the bungalow. Half a dozen fine saddle-horses were nibbling the turf near the garage. Mungford housed the car, and we mounted.

As the little fellow swung into his saddle, his coat flapped, and I glimpsed at his belt an uncommonly large revolver. He saw my glance.

"They aren't going to do by me again like they did once, sir," he said, his plump face incongruously grim.

Bloom's deputies and the man from Ragnarock carried repeating rifles. As we rode two by two into the rock-fanged gash that marked the beginning of the upward trail, I reflected that I was going in state to my own place.

"Dad McVittie says a feller's been snoopin' in the brush all morning up by the split pine," I heard the man from the bungalow mutter to the deputy that rode beside him.

Stone and I were paired. Of what was he thinking, I wondered, riding so placidly beside me, his eyes fixed on his horse's twitching ears? Was he in league with an unknown peril that lay ahead—that peril to which my uncle had given a name that

but made it more inexplicable—the name of Hassan?

I do not believe that I am a coward; but on that silent mountainside, with a rapidly shortening chain of time between me and so much that I could not understand, I was glad of the company of watchful men with ready weapons.

Here again Stone puzzled me. He had provided my safeguards. If he was working against me, why was he so solicitous? I could make nothing of it.

The trail itself was danger's own highway. So steep was the shoulder of the mountain where it led, that it was less like a path than a crack in a wall. It had sometime been the bed of a leaping stream, long ago perished at its source. Now the overflow runlet of a spring babbled down it, wandering from side to side.

Rock masses at each side overhung the little gorge, half-concealed by tangles of mountain fern. Clumps of sassafras and witch-hazel brushed us with drooping sprays, as if they tendered their frail aids to our scrambling horses. Star eyes of flowering dogwood peeped at us from leafy ambush. On the damp air the odor of earth and decaying leaves was sweetened by the elusive scent of arbutus that trailed its tiny lavender petals among the mosses.

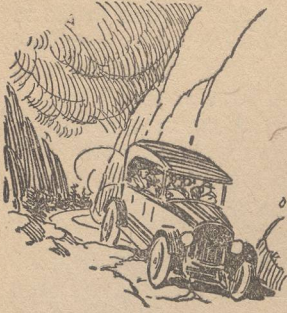
At an angle of the trail we reached the spring, a sanded pool under a bulge of dark slatestone. Above, some hundred paces, a fallen sandstone boulder split the trail.

"Mr. Wade, sir," softly spoke Mungford, riding behind me, "Mr. Cathcart fell here—and Sulieman. He was a Morgan stallion, sir."

Like a good horseman, the little fellow mourned the steed with its master. I twisted in my saddle, and saw him ride by the stone with bowed head and lifted cap. His uncovered scalp was bald and shone like wax.

A word, a thought—even a scent—at times will call to one's mind a picture in action clear as any projected by a cinema. As I glanced up the steep, the constructor of dreams within me gave me to see my lean-faced, dark-browed Uncle Jack recklessly galloping the great Morgan stallion down that perilous track to death—with God knew what furies of passion and despair riding behind him.

Half a mile further the trail ended in a widening cut, from which we rode onto a table-flat expanse of hilltop, strewn with boulders, and with the exception of one grove of primeval pines, sparsely clad with second-growth trees.





Vivid against the dusky background of the pines, as a painted picture on a curtain,



stood a wide-porch villa of gray sandstone, ivy-screened, and surrounded by garden-plots, enclosed by a

ragged wall of unhewn rocks.

A white-haired woman and a man carrying a rifle stood on the stone-pillared porch.

We entered a driveway between rough columns. Near the side of the bungalow we dismounted, and Mungford and one of the deputies led away the horses. Stone and I walked around to the front.

At the foot of the porch steps the lawyer halted, and in a manner as nearly theatrical as I ever knew him to assume, bowed and said, "Welcome, Mr. Wade, to Ragnarock."

His gray derby spun from his head; a spray of dust and flaked stone flew from the porch-pillar nearest him; and on the concrete walk at my feet clanged a disk of splintered steel and flattened lead that had been a rifle bullet.

From far up the hillside came a sound like the snap of a breaking stick.

A man's head, flame-bearded, popped out of a window above the porch; its owner threw a rifle against his shoulder, and its vicious crack was followed by a wild yell.

## CHAPTER VI

### THE BROWN FINGER

**G**ORDIE save us a'!" loudly invoked the white-haired woman, and with an astonishing show of spryness, she whipped about and scuttled in through the door. The deputy sheriff and the man who had brought the horses leaped past me onto the porch, and took cover like Indians behind two of the stone pillars. The other man already had set them the example. Mungford and the second deputy ran shouting from the stables, the little man flourishing in his chubby fist his long-barreled revolver.

"You're not touched, sir?" he cried anxiously, halting beside me and catching at my arm. "You had best go inside, sir. We'll go up after that chap."

"I won't," I declared, impatiently shaking off his urgent hand, and feeling a tide of temper surge into my face. "I'll go with you." I was somewhat flustered by the warmth of my reception home, and the shelter of the stone bungalow looked good

to me, but I wasn't going to celebrate my arrival by playing the coward before them all.

Inside the building hurrying boots clattered down a wooden stair. The red-bearded man, of whom I had had a brief vision at the upper window, emerged into the sunlight, chuckling and waving his rifle.

"Don't nobuddy need ter be skeered," he proclaimed in a twanging voice. "I reckon es how I brownd thet air feller a leetle. He won't shoot ag'in t'day. Been a-hangin' eround yere the hull mornin', thet gaffer hes, an' I've hed half an eye onter him all the time; now I reckon I've gin him a dose o' what he wa'n't lookin' fer." This was Dad McVittie, a long, shuffling, loose-jointed old mountain man with an enormous nose, reputed to be the quickest shot with a rifle, and the canniest bear-hunter in three counties.

Since the shot from the hillside, Stone had not moved or spoken, but had stood quietly beside me. He now took up his perforated hat, and inspected it, wiping the dust carefully from it with his sleeve. A lock of dust-colored hair fluttered to the ground, and showed how close had been his call. He turned on me a dry and frosty smile.

"I shall expect the estate to reimburse me for that hat," said he with perfect composure. "It cost me five dollars."

"I'll buy you the best beaver that ever came out of Italy—and trim it with gold," I told him. My respect for the withered old piece of legal lumber jumped fifty per cent. Slippery customer he might be, of whom I expected little and suspected much, but he was a man.

Old Dad, insisting that he had blooded his bullet, proved his confidence in the assertion by starting recklessly up the hill. We followed.

He led us far up the slope to a tangled copse of mountain-laurel near the tall, jagged stump of a lightning-blasted pine. He had made no mistake about the winging of his man; but his chagrin was loud when, instead of a wounded skulker, he found, on a large flat stone among the laurel, only a wet crimson splotch, and clinging to the glossy leaves above it, a spray of ruby drops.

"Up an' off like a skeered bunny-rabbit—consarn him!" growled MacVittie, dis-





gustedly thrashing the bush. "See, yer's whar he skedaddled—bare-footed, too, b'gosh!" He pointed out, on another stone, the moist fresh print of a naked foot.

My eyes met Stone's; both were thinking of the nude visitor of the previous night, the daring fellow who had sneezed under the lawyer's window, and run the gauntlet of the sheriff's shotguns.

Had I really, as Stone had hinted, to deal with a force sent against me from out of the mysterious Orient? It began to look so.

MacVittie, who had continued to rummage through the thicket, grunted, straightened, and tugging at his red beard, stared curiously at me.

"Reckon, Buddy," said he, "es how some o' these yere Noo York gunmen es we read erbout in the noospapers air a'ter your hide. Ef they be, mebbe we kin larn 'em a mountain gun-trick or two thet they don't know. Look yere." He beckoned, pointing to his feet.

Among dead leaves and sprouting huckleberry bushes lay a high-powered rifle of the latest pattern. Its stock was broken, and it was splashed and smeared with blood. MacVittie stirred the weapon with his foot, grunted again, louder than before, and picked up an object from which I shrank with a shudder.

The others, with wondering exclamations, crowded around us.

It was a newly-severed middle finger—a bony, long-nailed finger, lean and brown. No white man, however tanned, had owned it.

"Off'n a smoke, b'gosh!" The old hunter surveyed the relic with grim satisfaction, rolling it on his palm. "Why, Buddy," glancing at me, "I could stand on one of your eyes an' knock the other off with a club. Reckon es how you won't keer ter hev this leetle soov-i-neer, hey?"

I assured him that I would not, and after he had exhibited it to the others, he tucked it in his vest pocket.

"I'm only hopin' I clipped thet claw off'n the feller es pizined my ole houn'-dog Rip. Ef ole Rip was yere now, we'd track the cuss an' hev him holed or treed in erbout three squiffs o' a b'ar's tail."

"Someone poisoned your dog?" I asked.

"Right yere ter yer place, three days back—consarn him!" he answered with venom. "Best b'ar-dawg in all this country, Rip was."

"They poisoned Mr. Cathcart's two

wolf-hounds, too, sir," put in Mungford. "They're buried down yonder, with him and Sulieman." He pointed toward the grove of pines.



Poisoned dogs, assassins among the laurel—damnable! It gave me the sensation of a blind man alone in an unfamiliar house.

"Do any of you," I broke out, "know who these fellows are, and what they are after?"

I looked quickly from face to face; in Stone's eyes only did I see a glimmer of comprehension. Mungford's black orbs were too blank to be convincing.

"Why," said old Dad, "my understandin' of it is thet some kind of a gang is a-tryin' ter keep you out o' yer nunkie's prop'ty. I been hired by Een Stone an' deppytized by Harve Bloom ter perdeck you—an' funder'n thet I ain't astin'."

"Looks as if we'd have a job, too," supplemented one of the deputies.

These remarks, while their truth was evident, did not enlighten me. We returned to the bungalow.

## CHAPTER VII

### RAGNAROCK

FROM its girdle wall of uncut boulders to its overhanging upper story and oddly gabled roof, my Uncle Jack's villa was a whim in wood and stone. It was six-sided; the front entrance was set into one of the angles, and a low, wide concrete porch extended along the two contiguous faces. The top story, capping fifteen-foot walls of sandstone, was frame. From the great front door of oak and iron, a narrow corridor led to a central living-room, or hall, also hexagonal, which extended without hindrance of ceiling from the floor to the rafters of the domed roof, whence, by day, the light came in through six small skylights.

In the center of the hall, supporting the dome of the roof, was a single pillar, the tall, straight trunk of a pine, unstripped of its bark. One pursuing his fancy might imagine it spreading green branches beyond the covered rafters. Near the ceiling a wooden chandelier ring with more than a score of bulbs encircled the pillar and was attached to it by metal braces. A series of wooden pegs up one side of the giant tree-trunk offered hand and foot holds to anyone who had business with the chandelier.



On four sides of the main room, up and down, were parlors, sleeping-chambers, and a dining-room. Wide alcoves separated the apartments on the ground floor; those on the upper floor were rimmed by a narrow, railed balcony that overlooked the main hall and was connected with it by two open staircases. The two sides of the building that angled to the rear contained the kitchen and servants' quarters.

These were a few of the features of what Dad MacVittie was pleased to call "Rag-on-a-rock." There were many others, and I was some time in discovering them, and accustoming myself to them.

With all its oddities, Ragnarock was cheerful, and might have been a pleasant place for a tired adventurer, like my uncle, to grow old in.

When I stepped from the corridor, my first impression, after the tree-pillar had claimed my attention, was of a furious disorder.

Vandal hands had ripped panels and wainscoting from the walls; they had smashed curio cases in the alcoves; they had rifled cabinets and table drawers; they had torn leather and tapestry upholstery off chairs and divans; the litter of their destructive tactics lay thick on the floor: splintered woodwork, crumpled papers, books, wads of hair stuffing, broken glass, and nondescript fragments.

Stone informed me that it was the same in the other rooms; the searchers with ruthless thoroughness, had ransacked the entire premises.

"I directed Mungford to leave everything as it was until you had seen it," the lawyer went on; and he added, with a show of frankness, "It furnishes proof that a peculiar situation exists."

"Three dawgs a'ter a bobcat couldn't 'a' made it more pecooliar," interjected MacVittie.

I went with Stone on a round of the bungalow and stables; and he introduced to me another important member of my establishment, Mrs. Bessie Muir, my cook and housekeeper, a little pink Scotswoman with snowy hair.

"Ye'll be findin' the hoose and a' in a fearfu' hotch-potch, Mr. Wade," she told me. "I hope ye'll be lettin' Jamie an' me get at it the morrow. The de'ils tied me in my bed the night they come ram-stamin', or I'd 'a' had the broom-handle onto them."

Mungford was in the stables—and in his element. From stall to stall he led us,

descanting on the merits of the horses, of which there were ten.

"Ah, but you should have seen Sulie-man, sir—alongside of him, the best of these was just four legs and a tail." The little man sighed, then brightened, pointing to the wall. "There's a portrait of him, and of Mr. John, sir.

I was a poor market for Mungford's enthusiasm—I knew little about horses—but the picture interested me. The tall, sharp-featured man that stood beside the big gray Morgan looked much as I recollected him, perhaps a bit more gaunt, and older.

Stone yielded to my persuasion, and telephoned to his housekeeper that he would pass the night at Ragnarock. The sun was dipping; and after what had happened, I would not have sent my worst enemy out to ride down the



mountain trail, where the gathering dusk would offer a hundred chances for ambush by an assassin.

Mrs. Muir served our supper in the dining-room, to an accompaniment of apologies for its devastated appearance; and we went afterward into the main hall, to sit and smoke beside Uncle Jack's big English fireplace.

At a table near us two of the deputy sheriffs played pedro; Dad MacVittie, the firelight shimmering in his red beard, nodded on a settle in the ingle-nook, and ever and anon straightened up with a snort and chuckle, like an old dreaming dog; Mungford, light-footed for so plump a man, moved like a restless spirit among the farther shadows, clearing away rubbish and putting things to rights.

Neither the lawyer nor I was talkative. Once or twice I saw him fingering the gap that the bullet had cut through his pompadour, and I knew that our thoughts ran together. Had that bullet been meant for him or for me? In the light of that happening, almost I doubted my doubts concerning him. Either he was for me, thought I, or two forces that were not in accord were against me. Hassan must have sent the rifleman.

Proof that I was impressed, I followed Uncle Jack's directions, and burned in the fireplace the typed slip that he had at-



tached to his letter. I knew by heart its contents.

## CHAPTER VIII

### HASSAN'S TRUCE

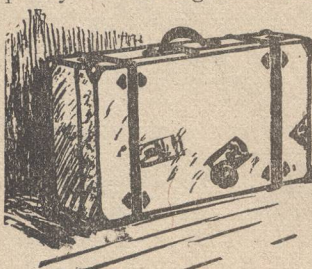
WHEN I awoke from confused dreams, in which Jocelyn Yorkworth's beautiful face had presided, the sun had been hours above Black Bear. I lay for a while blinking at its golden splashes that shimmered on the polished floor.

My room—it had been my uncle's—was on the second floor at the front. Through one of the open windows I could see, on the upper slope of the hill, the split pine stump at the scene of yesterday afternoon's adventure. A villainous old crow, perched at the apex of its jagged spire, cawed incessantly, after each cry turning its head to listen.

I tried to recall my visions of the night, but they were vague. They swiftly faded, leaving only the impression that Miss Yorkworth had pervaded them, urging me to do, or not to do, a shadowy something, the significance of which, with returned consciousness, escaped me.

I jumped out of bed and concerned myself with a seven-foot tub in the bathroom.

Bathroom, telephone, electric lights—there *was* electricity—rather luxurious sounding for a bungalow in the wilderness on Black Bear, but Uncle Jack had not stinted creature comforts. The water came through pipes from the same chain of mountain springs that supplied Medburne; the poles that carried the telephone wire carried too a transmission cable from one of the mines in the lower valley that operated with electric power—a pretty penny the arrangement had cost.



Mungford had fetched my trunk and suitcase up from the hotel the previous morning by pack-saddle. I shaved and got into fresh duds,

dressing with care; for one of my plans for the day was to avail myself of Miss Hornung's invitation, and pay a call on the girl that had haunted my dreams. I would find means to detain Stone until afternoon, and then ride with him to the village.

Caution whispered of brown riflemen

lurking in the bushes, but I refused to listen. In the venture that I had undertaken, I meant to exercise reasonable precaution to preserve my skin unperforated; but, come what might, I was not going to let fear make me a prisoner. Besides, I wanted to see Miss Yorkworth; and the more I thought about it, the stronger grew the want.

When I went down, I found that Stone had left some time before, guarded by two of my men.

Every member of my household was tingling to the vibrations of a happening of the night; only by heroic repression did they carry through a conspiracy to let me breakfast in the peace of ignorance.

Cause of the general excitement—I, too, thrilled when I saw it—fluttered innocently from one of the oak panels of my front door, where someone had nailed it with a cock-spur thorn. It was a neat white envelope, addressed to me.

"It's very strange, sir, how this came to be here," said Mungford, with a side glance at old MacVittie, who had started with the deputy across the lawn the instant they saw me emerge on the porch.

"Tain't a mite strange," MacVittie bristled. "Somebody frum inside tacked it thar. I stood watch last night, an' Jimmy's tryin' ter sinnyate thet I wa'n't on the job. Thar was a white moon, Buddy, an' ef anything bigger ner a punkie hed come over thet wall, I'd 'a' seen it."

"When did you find it?" I asked Mungford as I detached the envelope.

"Just after Mr. Stone left, sir. He went out by the side entrance. I went with him, and then I walked around to the front, and here it was."

So? Was this another of the lawyer's tricks? I opened it, and at its foot read the signature "*Hassan*."

Then I turned and went into the octagonal hall, where the sunshine pierced down through the skylighted dome like a cluster of crossed swords—and was aware that a fourfold disappointed sigh came after me.

On a round seat at the base of the rugged pine-tree pillar I read my letter:

*On my return from a journey, I learned this morning of the unfortunate incident of yesterday. I offer my sincere regrets and apology that it should have happened. One of my servants was over-zealous, and did not comprehend that which now he knows.*

*You will be quite safe until you shall have found that which you came to seek.*



*When that happens, I shall give myself the pleasure of making your acquaintance.*

*Believe me, in my distinguished consideration.*

Hassan.

An apology! A truce! Well, the beggar expressed himself like a gentleman. Moreover, his letter gave me a sense of contact with a real force, a tangible personality, not a myth conjured up to frighten me. There was, too, a sinister certitude in its tone that disturbed me more than had the over-zealous servant's bullet. It had atmosphere. Almost I sympathized with the man who had not comprehended "that which now he knows," for I guessed that his manner of learning it had been unpleasant.

## CHAPTER IX

### I FIND A WHIP

ATTORNEY STONE had telephoned that morning from Ragnarock to Sheriff Bloom at Clearwater; the sheriff would swear in more deputies; an armed force would hunt the hills and bring to justice what lawless scamps might be found in hiding there.

The old lawyer was not a coward; but a man had sneezed under his window and eavesdropped while he was exercising his functions as executor of an estate; the same malefactor, presumably, had lain in wait and with felonious intent had shot him in the hat. He had expressed his intention to ride in person with the posse to track the ruffian down.

So Mungford told me, with unmoved face, but with an irony that I had not thought was in him. In the telling he implied that we knew—he and I—what scant chances this militant expedition had for success.

Everyone, it seemed, credited me with knowledge where I was entirely in the dark. I supposed that they took it for granted that I had full instructions from Uncle Jack.

When I told Mungford to have a horse ready for me after luncheon, that I purposed to ride to the village, his manner swiftly changed, and he protested with an earnest-

ness that I could not doubt. We had to do with bold and wily men, said he; how easy it would be for one of them to pick me off as I rode.

"Would Uncle Jack," I asked, "have consented to coop himself up here, just because someone might take a pot-shot at him if he should stick his nose out in the sunshine?—would he have allowed such circumstances to make even the slightest change in his habits? Come now, the truth, Mungford."

"Well, no, sir," he answered reluctantly, "I don't say that he would have; but——"

I waved aside the "but"; I didn't think so, either. I felt that I was going to like Mungford.

"Mungford," I went on, "you were with my uncle for many years, and you knew his ways and the people that he knew. Mungford, who is Hassan?"

"He is a Hindu, sir, but an educated gentleman, a servant of the late Gaekwar of Baroda," he replied without hesitation, though he began to look uncomfortable. I questioned him further.

The Gaekwar had been Uncle Jack's friend. He had died six months ago. A younger brother was regent in the absence of the heir to the throne, who was attending an English university. Mungford had first seen Hassan when, in company with Uncle Jack, he had visited Baroda. Three months, or thereabouts, before Uncle Jack's death, this Hassan had turned up at Ragnarock. He had come twice. What had been his errand, Mungford professed not to know; neither could he tell me what bond had tied my uncle to the dead Gaekwar.

I showed Hassan's letter. Mungford's face brightened.

"Mr. Hassan is an unusual man, sir—one that will do just what he says. You needn't to fear anything, after all, sir, until——"

"Well, until?"

"Why, until you find the blue diamonds, where Mr. John hid them, sir."

"What is the rest of the story, Mungford?"

"What, sir?"

"Why did Uncle Jack—yes, why did he kill himself? Why did he hide these cursed diamonds? Why has Hassan come for them, and what is the mystery that lies around this place, and that everyone is keeping from me?"

"Mr. John never killed himself, sir!" he cried with sudden vehemence. For an instant he checked himself, then went on,





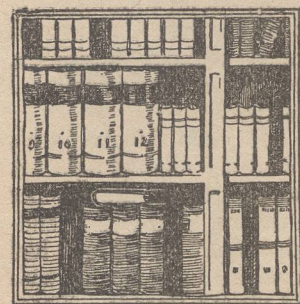
but with less conviction. "Don't you believe that, sir. It was an accident."

Until this outburst, the man, as far as he knew it, had told the truth; of that I was convinced. Sincerity was in his cry of protest, too; but it was the sincerity of consternation rather than of truth. Mungford, as surely as Stone, was covering something.

My premonition became certainty; that the riddle of the concealed diamonds was the least of the mystery that lay ahead. The dark knowledge of another thing had set a seal of fear on all the lips that might have told it to me.

"I differ with you," I said coldly; "and you were not with him when he met with the injury. How can you be sure?"

"But I am sure, sir." He was more composed. "Why, he had been writing quietly—at that desk there, by the bookshelves. He said he would go for a bit of a gallop. He was smiling, sir, and right as right could be. I saddled Sulie-



man, and he rode away alone. The horse was high-spirited—oh, it was an accident, I tell you, sir!" Mungford's voice faltered, trailed, and stopped. His grief, at any rate, was genuine.

"I believe that you have told me part of the truth, Mungford; but"—I spoke decisively—"you haven't told me all of it. There is something here that I am going to get to the bottom of. If none of you will tell me, I shall have to find it out for myself."

"I wish I could tell you more, Mr. Wade, sir—I do, for a fact." He twisted his fingers in a distressed way. "It's a mess, sir. Part of it I don't know the head or tail of, and the rest I can't tell you, more than I have, sir."

"Can't, or won't?"

"Both, sir," stoutly, "you see, I promised Mr. John, sir."

There I was—against a wall.

Mungford went softly out. I arose and paced the big hall, now cleared of much of its disorder. I crossed to the bookshelves in the alcove that was devoted to the library, and glanced along the titles of the more than two thousand volumes.

Above them in long rows hung one of Uncle Jack's favorite collections, his bells.

They had come from many lands and climes; and they were of nearly every conceivable size, shape, and purpose, from tiny silver globes that once had tinkled in the perforated ears of a Siamese cat, to a massive, cube-shaped shell of beaten bronze attached to a leather band large as a man's belt, that had encircled the foreleg of an emperor's war-elephant. All these the men who had searched the bungalow had pulled down and scattered. Mungford had replaced them.

"Read up on Spain," Uncle Jack's note had directed. Certainly there was no lack of material! Two of the shelves below the bells appeared to contain nothing else. I saw small need to obey his further injunction to borrow.

Among those myriad pages must lie the key to at least one of my puzzles—the whereabouts of the blue diamonds.

That could wait; the search of the books would be good enough employment for my evenings. Hassan and his troubles might wait, too. If Stone's and the sheriff's plans went well, his waiting might be long.

Uncle Jack's big teakwood desk was closed and locked, but I now had the keys of Ragnarock. I unlocked the desk, rolled up the lid and sat, with my elbows on the blotter, and wondered what had been his meditations, and what he had written there just before he went, for what I was sure he had known would be his last earthly ride. Perhaps it was there and then that he had penned his letter to me with its strange warning and stranger bequest.

On the wall above the desk hung the broad, mottled skin with its pendant rattles, of a Pennsylvania barred rattlesnake. At my elbow was a covered typewriter. Beyond the blotter, where it might have been shoved by a hand about to write, was a litter of papers. Some of them contained notes in Uncle Jack's hand; but they had to do with his reading, and were not significant.

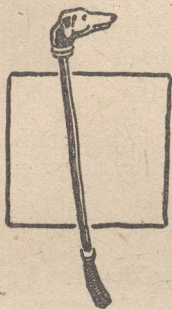
In picking them up I uncovered a light riding-whip with a silver-ornamented handle. I took it up and examined it. The silver was hand-carved in the effigy of a dog's head, extraordinarily well done. It was, I presumed, one of my uncle's crops, though it was of a different and more dainty pattern than those in the stable rack. I thrust my hand through its loop of braided Mexican leather, and closed the desk.





It lacked some time of the luncheon hour. I decided that I would go out and stretch my legs. With a feeling that I was evading my keepers, I swung through the library window and crossed the lawns to the front gate. Idly striking at the weeds with the whip, I circled outside the wall and followed a path that led to the group of pines where Uncle Jack was buried. Beside the little group of standing stones—Mungford had marked the resting-places of Sulieman and the hounds as well as that of their master—I sat in thought, and eventually I dozed. The insistent ringing of a bell at the bungalow awakened me.

On my return I collided in the dusky corridor with Mungford, who was setting out in some perplexity to find me.



In the main hall I was about to toss the riding-crop on a table; but, in tribute to the well-balanced hang of it, I first swished it smartly—and heard a sudden gasp behind me.

Mungford stood there, a queer, startled look on his face. He banished it with an effort.

"You gave me a turn like," he explained. "I wasn't looking for you to do that."

"It's lighter than the others," I said, and again I made the air whine under the crop.

"Yes, it is, sir—Mr. John never used it. There are some new and heavier ones at the stables that will suit your hand better. I will select one for you."

"Never mind," I replied, "I think that I'll adopt this one."

"Where did you run across it, sir?" he asked.

"Oh, somewhere about," I answered, as if I attached no great importance to either whip or question. Secretly I watched keenly to see how he took it, for he had put the query with poor nonchalance.

He did not persist, but moved slowly away. Why every line of his figure should express uneasiness, I could not guess; but it did.

After luncheon I sat a while and thought—and then—

The sun was shining, my cigar was good, spring was in the air, and down in the valley was as fair a face as a man could wish to see. I would go down and try to put a smile on it.

## CHAPTER X

## THE PROFILE IN THE GARDEN

WE RODE at one o'clock.

In the narrow gorge of the Black Bear trail we met the sheriff's men, a full score of them—a seemingly endless line of leaning men and jingling, scrambling horses, when they split from double to single file to pass us.

Enoch Stone, wearing a new gray derby and a grim, gray smile, rode with them.

He nodded pleasantly enough when he saw me; at his second glance he started in his saddle, and a troubled frown drew his bushy brows together. As we came abreast, he made as if to pull up his horse; but the clambering line swept him on, and he resignedly shrugged his shoulders and passed me, leaving unsaid the words that had been struggling to his lips.

I wondered what had caused the sudden change in his demeanor, but I did not turn back. On second thought, I supposed that his unspoken message probably was a protest against my recklessness in riding abroad—and my heart was set on seeing Miss Yorkworth.

Her home was a picture place—a narrow white house with a gabled porch. Mungford had pointed it out, then had gone to do errands.

Miss Hornung bobbed out of a side room in response to my knock and minced along the hall to the open door.

"Oh, it's young Mr. Wade! I'll be bound I know what you came for." She laughed breathlessly. "Jocelyn is in the garden. Come"—she tugged at my sleeve—"don't let's stand here; someone will see us and think—*tee-he!*—that we're having a lovers' quarrel. You don't want to make a scandal for the neighbors?"

Confound her! I was tempted to brush her off like a troublesome insect, and go. But Jocelyn, she had said, was in the garden. I allowed her to pull me by the sleeve through the doorway.

"Let me take your whip—unless you're going to use it on me." She giggled again, took the riding-crop from me, and hung it on the hall-tree.

As we emerged from the rear of the house, a figure was kneeling on the brown garden earth.

"*Hoo-hoo*, Jocelyn!" Miss Hornung called gayly, "I've caught a man to do the dirty work. Young man, you are elected to dig holes for the pansies."

Jocelyn Yorkworth arose and came toward us, wiping her hands on her short



skirt. Though I knew at once, by instinct, that she was not glad to see me, her presence soothed and satisfied me.

We exchanged commonplaces, Miss Hornung supplying the leads, and set to work with a great array of pansy plants which stood in boxes along a budding hawthorn hedge. Miss Yorkworth separated the roots of the plants, and handed them to me. Miss Hornung superintended.

Each time the girl bent over the pansy-boxes, I watched her, unobserved, from the shadow of my cap-brim, but we worked in silence. I did not feel the lack of conversation; the mere propinquity of the girl quieted me. I would, I thought, be careful; I would discover and conquer the cause of her reserve toward me, and then——

Our fingers met among the pansy stems, and I felt her shrink, and she withdrew her hand, as if from contact with a danger.

Hurt and angry, I stared at her. I was conscious of no reason why she should fear me, and the little frightened gesture sent through me a wave of chagrin that submerged my wise resolutions.

"Why did you do that?" I demanded.

She looked at me inquiringly; but her cheeks paled, and I saw a shadow of dismay in her eyes.

"What did I do that—I should not have done?" she countered.

"You recoiled from me," I broke out, "as if my touch was poison." In the pain of it, I was heedless that I made myself ridiculous.

Her color had returned and she smiled.

"You are a very imaginative and impulsive young man, I'm afraid.

The most convincing contradiction that I can offer is to ask you to come and see me again—some time when you are less at the mercy of your impulses."

"Perhaps—when I am as you say," I ventured, "you will extend your pardon so far as to ride with me?"

At that she unaccountably paled again, and her reply was short and hasty. "No, I don't ride—thank you."

Half an hour later, when I saw Mungford waiting at the gate, Miss Hornung piloted me through the house. Miss Yorkworth remained in the garden.

"My whip," I reminded the old lady at the door.

She glanced at the hall-tree, and turned a face of blank astonishment.

"It's gone! I'll be bound I hung it right there."

I could have sworn that she had, but it certainly was gone.

Some neighbor's boy must have slipped in and taken it to play with, Miss Hornung suggested. She promised that she would recover it if possible and keep it for me.

A great fat young man, who was mowing the lawn in front of a small brick house farther down the street on the opposite side, left his machine when he saw Mungford and me riding toward him, and came and leaned on the fence. I had noticed him staring at me when I passed the first time. A sign in his yard read, "Dr. Myron Baer."

He nodded as I rode by, appraising me searchingly from under shaggy yellow brows.

"You've forgotten your whip," he observed, in a voice so resonant and metallic that it might have come from the throat of a horn.

"No," I called, "thank you—some kid stole it."

"Curious," he returned, shaking his big head; "I haven't seen any kids around, and none live on this hill."

Under his breath, Mungford groaned an oath, and blamed it on a twinge of rheumatism.

## CHAPTER XI

### THE LETTERS "A" AND "I"

I COULD not complain that life was dull. In three days a fortune had come to me, an assassin's bullet had missed, and an arrow from the bow of a smaller and more accurate marksman had hit me; and I was up to my ears in a mystery of the first water—I hoped the quality of the Baroda diamonds was as good.

Miss Yorkworth? I had not made an auspicious beginning of the acquaintance to which I had looked forward with so much pleasure. When she had invited me to call again, I knew that she hoped that I would not; but I could not give up—I resolved that I would take her at her word. Moreover, I was piqued, and entertained the conceit that I could change her opinion of me.

Armed riders for the next week subjected the Black Bear and Forge Run mountains and the adjoining hill barrens to the "reg'lar combin'" that Sheriff Harve Bloom had predicted; for that pe-





riod Ragnarock was a fortress, garrisoned by as hearty a score of fellows as ever



snored from weary eve till jingling dawn.

Each day Mungford and I accompanied some division of the force on its expedition; but though we rode until I, at least, was saddle-galled and stiff in the joints, never hide or hair did we see of Hassan and his men.

Influenced partly by Mungford's skepticism and partly by my own impressions, I had foreseen our failure. I harbored a premonition that Hassan and I would in due time come to grips in our own fashion, and that the intervention of all the sheriffs' posses in the world would neither hasten nor avert the event.

Still, I did not wish to appear backward in an enterprise which, so far as the sheriff was concerned, was directed as much to insure my safety as to avenge the outraged legal propriety of the old lawyer. I faithfully took my part in the search, though my judgment told me that it was useless, and every weary bone and creaking articulation in my carcass protested against its continuance.

At the end of the week my retinue was again reduced to four men: Mungford, Dad MacVittie, and two deputies, Link Moyer—lanky Link, of the garden scene—and Charley Borin, a compactly built young chap of Hungarian parentage, who answered to the nickname of Shirt.

So thorough had been their search that those who rode away were convinced that their quarry had fled the neighborhood and would trouble us no more; but three of us who remained behind knew better.

"I hain't seen a solitary sign thet I could pi'nt ter, Buddy, and yit I'd bet a big black hat agin' a sneeze o' snuff thet yer merlasses-complected friends ain't fur off, ner hain't been all the time." Thusly Dad MacVittie, wagging his red beard after Stone's departing riders, and waving a hand inclusively toward the hills.

"They are somewhere about, sir, depend upon it," said Mungford. "We have to

do with men who are taught from childhood to conceal themselves in their native jungles. Among all these hills and forests it has been play to them. We shall hear from them again when we least expect it."

With these two I agreed.

Time and time again, in the saddle, on rock-strewn and forest-spangled hillsides, or in the bottoms where purled the mountain runs, I had known, surely as that vague sixth sense of ours could tell me, that from hidden coverts vigilant eyes watched us. Time and again I had heeded my intuitions and turned aside, but always I had reached the indicated spot too late. A presence brooded over the mountains. I would not fear it, but never for an instant did I escape the knowledge that it impended.

Ragnarock, after the bustle, was rather lonely, curiously still. Mungford and Mrs. Muir had cleared the confusion made by Hassan's housebreakers. Physically wearied and under no temptation, for a time at least, to put a leg across a saddle, I fell in with the mood of quiet seclusion that possessed the place, and began my delayed examination of Uncle Jack's Spanish books.

It promised to be a tiresome business, there were so many of them. Travel, history, romance, and poetry stretched their volumes before me, many of them in the language. To have read them all, would have occupied me for a year. I did not believe that to be the intent of Uncle Jack's note; so I merely subjected each book to a painstaking scrutiny, in the hope of running across the letter, annotation, or other clue, to which his cryptic note must have referred. Dull work it was, but I kept on.



Of Mungford I saw much. A quiet, but nervous little man I found him, even-tempered, willing, faithful as a bulldog, interesting as a book—and like a book, too, one might open and close him at will. He had loved my uncle, had been loyal without stint; it appeared that he had transferred the loyalty to me. Whatever part or knowledge he might have had in fashioning the coil of perplexity into which I had walked, I was certain that it was not disloyal.

Soon after I began examining the books, my confidence in him endured a strain, and was the stronger for it.

I sat at the teakwood desk in the library alcove and took a fancy to use my uncle's



typewriter. Slowly, for I am an indifferent typist, I tapped off half a dozen sentences; then, with a cry of astonishment, I ripped the paper from the machine.

From what I had written two typographical defects glared up at me: the capital "A" fell, with a list to port, below the line; the small "i" was dotless!

It could not be coincidence. The threat letter—the message that Stone had burned—had been written here at Ragnarock—on this machine!

## CHAPTER XII

### FEAR COMES TO RAGNAROCK

**I** PRESSED a button on the desk. From the back of the bungalow sounded in response a dry, thin, singing rattle.

Uncle Jack certainly had been a crank on bells. The electric calls at Ragnarock, instead of metal, were rattlesnake rattles, so attached to the wires that the thrill of the current set them off in the most lifelike way imaginable. After I once heard a living snake *thr-r-r-r* from the bush beside the Black Bear trail, and saw its flat, triangular head with jeweled eyes swaying in menace of my legs, I lost some of my admiration for my uncle's novelties; their unexpected sound was liable to give me a touch of St. Vitus.

Mungford came in, and I questioned him, casually at first. Yes, he had often used the typewriter; he had copied manuscript and taken dictation for Mr. Cathcart. Had he ever written a letter to me? His answer was ready, and it was, "No, sir."

"Mungford"—I launched a bolt at random—"did Mr. Stone write a letter to me on this machine?"

Not quite so promptly, "He may have, sir."

"To your knowledge, did he, Mungford?"

His eyes shifted, and came back to meet mine. He rubbed his bald head.

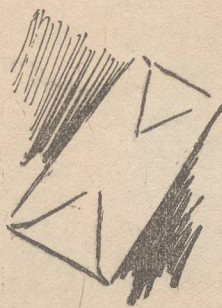
"I don't—" he began, stopped, squared his shoulders, and spoke in an altered tone. "Mr. Wade, sir, there is only—I won't lie to you, sir. Yes, sir, he did."

"Do you know what he wrote, and why?" I persisted.

"No, sir; but it was a thick letter—it was quite by accident, sir, that I saw it."

Truth had spoken, truth unwilling, but unmistakable. If we do wisely, it is through small tests that we recognize our friends. Thereafter, though much of the

faith that I builded was shaken, I never again doubted Mungford.



He left me, and I thought. I tried to construct, on a basis of a miserably few facts and much conjecture, an hypothesis that would show me light. Hypotheses were plenty, came in flocks, but in each one was a large hole.

Stone? He had, then, as I had suspected, written the threat letter. Why? To scare me off? If that were true, it argued that the supposed letter from Uncle Jack to me was also the lawyer's—a careful forgery; and that all the events that had followed were designed with the purpose of disposing of me so that Stone might keep the blue diamonds, leaving to me the comparatively insignificant remainder of the estate. The threat letter and its accompanying bribe bolstered that supposition; but how about the bullet-hole in Stone's hat, and the severed finger of the brown rifleman? Might not Hassan be in collusion with Stone? Why, then, so many complications? It would have been so easy to declare to me that the gems had been stolen.

Were the diamonds really hidden, or was Stone already in possession of them? Where did Miss Yorkworth fit in? I would have sworn that she was both honest and innocent. I wanted to believe in her—I must!

Lastly—dark thought—had Uncle Jack been done to death for the jewels? There was his letter—if it were his—and Mungford's statement to prove that he had not been.

In the haze of confused doubts I could see only one sane course: to keep to one path, the search for the diamonds, and in the meantime to be alert. Already I had learned something; eventually someone would slip, as intriguers always do, and I should learn more.

Respite of a few peaceful days we had in our walled stronghold; then the presence that had dogged our forays in the hills came to invade us at Ragnarock, and I was made aware that Hassan had tightened his cordon.

No visible sign there was at first, only a growing tensity that oppressed all of us, but to which none of us could give a name—a fear of we knew not what. I felt it as I worked among the books, and it fretted



me into sudden starts and prowling excursions through rooms and corners that I knew to be untenanted.

Then Shirt Borin, who firmly believed in ghosts, without, it appeared, being afraid of them, swore that he had seen one. As he patrolled the grounds on his night watch, it had slunk ahead of him near the gate.

Dad MacVittie, a morning or two afterward, laid in my hand the broken half of an armlet of carved bone.

"Found it in the grass, Buddy. Spirits don't wear sech, an' no bird drapped it thar nuther. Wisht I'd seen what Shirt did. I'm a-goin' ter lay fur it."

He did; but "it" had become more wary, and did not again show itself. The consciousness that unseen eyes spied on all our goings and comings remained with us.

My saddle-soreness passed away, my blisters healed, and work among the books was wearisome.

That face down there—so fair to me—I'd failed last time to put on it the smile I'd promised. I would try again, and yet again—until I'd succeeded, I should not be content.

On the May afternoon of my ninth visit to Miss Hornung's gabled porch, Jocelyn's spell was strong upon me. She, in the porch-swing, plaited strings of Indian beads into a rope. Watching her steady fingers among the strands, I slowly made up my mind to speak.

Down at the whitewashed fence the gate creaked and clicked. Miss Hornung, in pea-green gown and yellow straw, fitted along the walk like an animated daffodil. As she reached me, our eyes encountered. A smile of malice or of mischief twisted her whimsical old features, and as she had done at our first meeting, she startled and disconcerted me with the loudly whispered query, "Well, why don't you?" She whisked by me into the house.

She had read me; but for the life of me, I could not tell whether she was for me or against me. Why didn't I? I would!

"Aunt Taphie has been very good to me." Jocelyn spoke hurriedly, without raising her eyes from the bead-work. "This place is hers. I have nothing. My father was a mine-boss. Grandfather Hornung was a minister. This was his home. He was terribly angry when mother married father. He didn't live long afterward, and

he said it had killed him. He left everything he had to Aunt Taphie. She was older than mother. She never married. Sometimes she is strange and says queer things, but she is wonderfully kind-hearted. Father was killed in a cave-in in



the mines, and Aunt Taphie brought mother here to live with her. I was born here. Mother died when I was eleven years old, and Aunt Taphie brought me up. I owe everything to her. She sent me to the Medburne public school and then to the Clearwater Academy. I've never in my life been out of Clearwater county."

Jocelyn's voice ceased. Her fingers, resuming the interrupted bead-work, were not so steady as they had been. No mere confidence she had made me; it was a purposeful argument, a warning—in her last tones a minatory note had sounded. I could not misunderstand; but I would not heed the warning, and the argument did not convince.

What she was, her circumstances—what could they matter? She was she!

I arose and stepped behind the woodbine. "I am glad that you never went away, so that I could find you!"

Why is sincerity short of words, and a man, when he feels the most, tongue-tied. After that one sentence, all I'd meant to say condensed in a broken cry, "Jocelyn! O, Jocelyn!"

"Oh!" She sprang up, thrusting out her hands, misery in her face; but I took courage, for I had feared to see contempt. With an effort, she steadied herself.

"Mr. Wade, I will not pretend that I don't know what you were going to say. No, don't speak; and please believe, if you can, that I do not wish to hurt you. I thought that you knew, that you had seen, that there is a—a reason—she faltered and looked down—"why we cannot be more than friends. If I were to tell you, we could not even be friends. Please, do not ask me. I cannot tell you, and you would only make it harder for us both."



I caught one of her hands.

"Jocelyn, I love you! Please listen, dear," as she tried to pull away. "I don't want to cause you pain. I won't ask you to tell me anything that you do not wish to; but," and I put my heart into it, "I shall find out what this reason is—and no matter what, it can never make you less to me than you are. I want you to look into my eyes and believe that."

Slowly she raised her eyes. I saw both tragedy and fear in their hazel depths, and then a sudden dawn of courage.

"Oh!" Her breath came fast and uneven. "Oh!" She released her fingers, and with her hands pressed tightly to her face, fled past me into the house, leaving me to extract what poor comfort I could from the knowledge that it was neither indifference nor disgust that she hid from me.

Mungford, dodging beside the horses, sprang up at the click of the gate. When he glanced at me, the ready smile on his fat face gave place to concern, and his black eyes softened. He made as if to speak, but turned away, shaking his head. Gloomy and silent, we rode back to Ragnarock.

Next day the gray attorney came up the mountain.

### CHAPTER XIII

#### STONE GOADS ME

**I** WAS at my endless task among the Spanish books when I heard the lawyer's dry tones near the gate, in colloquy with Mungford. They had, or so it sounded, a quarrel between them, in which Stone was the aggressor and the little man defended.

Out of the murmur came in clear protest from Mungford, "Yes, sir, I did; and I have told him the only lie I ever will."

To which Stone, his voice like the crackling shucks of last year's nuts, replied, "In the present situation I can conceive consequences far more disagreeable to us all than a well told lie. I think you overlook your duty."

"I know my duty, sir," Mungford broke sharply in.

They had approached my open window, and they pitched their further conversation in a key too cautious for my ears to catch it.

For the first time in our acquaintance Stone refused one of my cigars. He lighted a lean, disreputable stogy, and puffed hostility with its acrid smoke as he paced

my library floor. Watching these signs, I hoped sincerely that he would lose his temper, and that I could keep mine; such a combination might lead around one turn of the crooked way into which I'd wandered.



He quit his patrol, stood squarely on one of my rugs, and fired first—solid shot.

"Ahem, I have to say to you, Mr. Wade, what is intensely disagreeable. I asked you once, you will recall—that night at my home—to address yourself to me, not to my—to Miss Yorkworth. For the same reasons, I must now ask that you discontinue your visits to her."

"Has she deputized you, Mr. Stone, to forbid me to come?"

"Certainly not." He balanced on wide-spread feet, and ran his fingers through his dust-colored pompadour. "I have watched with regret the development of an unpleasant situation, and I have taken upon myself to intervene——"

"'Interfere' is nearer my understanding of it," I broke in. "What right have you——?"

"The right," he interrupted in turn, "of an old friend and the legal adviser of her family."

"As a legal adviser, aren't you rather playing the middle against both ends, Mr. Stone?" I asked with what irony I could muster. "I thought you were mine."

"No—merely your late uncle's executor." He was exasperatingly cool. "You have not honored me with your retainer."

"Oh, yes I have—and a fairly heavy one—ten thousand dollars."

That visibly shook his aplomb, but he turned it.

"Er—I believe you neglected to specify the purpose of that sum. Accepting your belated declaration, and as your legal adviser"—he gave me a wintry smile—"I will repeat my counsel that you strictly confine your activities to the consummation of your uncle's wishes."

"See here, Stone!" My hold on myself, never tight, was slipping, and I crammed my hands into my pockets to keep them from mischief. "You sent me that ten thousand, and you wrote the letter—the one you were so careful to burn—here on this typewriter. You tried to keep me away, but I came. Now I suspect that you and a gentleman named Hassan have set me on a wild-goose chase while you gather the eggs. I don't know just





what your game is, but I'm getting the wool out of my eyes, and it looks dirty."

Unfit in years and temperament to cope with the secrecy and dissimulation which I felt around me, I was like a bluebottle fly entangled in a spider's web; and, to carry the simile a step further, I was beginning to buzz.

"Blue diamonds be damned!" I went on; "I don't expect to find them, and I don't care; but I'm going to have the truth about two things. I'm going to find out how Uncle Jack died—That interests you, does it?" He had started. "I'm going to find out, too, how and why you have tied Miss Yorkwith into your infernal schemes. I'll swear that her part, at least, is straight and innocent, and I think yours is neither; for, Stone, if you're not a damned old scoundrel, you will have to show me!"

Impassive as his name, the old attorney had watched me. When, breathless with anger, I finished, he turned his head and looked out the open window.

"Well, sir," he said after a time; "well, well." He walked to the window, tossed out his stogy, and came back and faced me.

"Mr. Wade," he said quietly, almost gently, "I wish you were less impulsive. I make due allowance for the situation in which you are placed, but you put a strain on my forbearance. Don't sneer, sir; listen. As I have intimated before, I engaged myself to your uncle for the performance of certain things which, had I forseen the complications that have attended them, I would have had nothing to do with. However, I promised.

"To my mind, Mr. Cathcart was an original, a madman—oh, I don't mean that he was insane in the legal acceptance of the term—but he was steeped in odd, romantic notions. You must learn to reckon, as I have had to do, with his eccentricities. It is their consequences that you are finding irksome."

"What a convenient bugaboo you make of my uncle," I gibed. "Of course he left you instructions to meddle between Miss Yorkwith and me."

He made a gesture of impatience, his slit of a mouth working between his fallen cheeks. "That is another matter," he said. "If you are not what you just called me, pull up, before you wreck what is worth more than a dozen young hotheads!" He straightened his shoulders, wheeled, and marched with wooden steps out to his horse.

## CHAPTER XIV

## THE DEVIL'S DOLL

QUEER, ain't it, the notions that men takes?" Dad MacVittie nodded toward the collection of hanging bells on the wall at Ragnarock. "Queer an' curious. I reckon Mr. Cathcart's got a bell thar from off'n nigh every critter out'n ole Noah's ark es ever wore 'em. Must 'a' cost him a heap, an' what good air they? I wonder now why didn't I never try to sell him the brass one off'n my ole mooley? 'Nuther odd thing is the big pine yender. Whatever would strike a man ter stick sech a thing es thet right inter the middle of his house, when he could see a dozen of 'em ef he'd take a leetle walk inter the woods?"

"An' the books—thar's books thar till a man can't rest. They never hed no use fer me, books didn't. Bad things t' stir up, them words air—one on 'em's es likely ter sting ye any time es a blue hornet."

Dad's eyes twinkled off on another exploration. They lighted when they reached a point above my desk, and he made a chirping noise.

"Thar's somethin' over thar hangin' thet I do know erbout, b'gosh!—thet rattler's hide. I kilt thet rattlesnake myself—le's



see, a year ago come July—an' gin the pelt ter yer uncle. I hedn't kilt one o' the critters before in a coon's age thet hed eleven rattlers onter it."

I liked MacVittie, partly, I suppose, because in the midst of so much that was complex and bewildering, the old hunter's outspoken simplicity was a refreshing relief.

"Dad," I casually asked, "who is the coroner?"

"Why, he's a full-cousin ter ole Een Stone. What's his name now? Zane. Reckon Een got him the job.

"Y' see," Dad laid a lank finger alongside his nose, "ole Een, he's nuthin' hisself, but he jest winds up the hull works in this yere county o' Clearwater, politically speakin', Een does. Beez Durkee, the districk attorney's his brother-in-law, and Harve Bloom, the sheriff, 's his second cousin. They're all good men es fur's they go, but they all rattle in the pod when ole Een shakes the stem."

Devil take the old pod-rattler! I fore-



saw that the investigation that I had determined to make of Uncle Jack's death was likely to be extremely limited and personal, if not perilous.

"*Kor-r-r-rh!*" snorted MacVittie, who sat, while entertaining me, where he could see out of the library windows. He arose, his coppery face expressing strong disgust. "You air goin' ter hev a visitor, Buddy." He stalked away through the hall, muttering, "Drat the critter! He didn't tote all that pork 'way up yere fer nuthin'."

Mungford a minute later announced, "Dr. Myron Baer."

The floor creaked to a ponderous, soft-footed tread; the big young village doctor entered my library, which his presence seemed to fill and overflow. He wore khaki fishing togs, a wicker creel swung against his massive hip, and he carried a wooden rod-case.

"Just whippin' up Forge Run a bit—thought I'd drop in and be neighborly." He said it with a bluff off-handedness that I thought a trifle overdrawn.

His thick red lips curled, showing small, beautifully white teeth; his broad fat face billowed and dimpled. "I'm damned glad to make your acquaintance, Mr. Wade." Every word came from the sounding-board of his palate in a subdued blare that set the atmosphere throbbing with tonal vibrations.

"That's pleasant of you, I'm sure," I told him—and was at least as sincere as he.

Our handclasp settled it: I didn't like him—I detested him! His grip was enveloping, soft, moist, clinging—he held on too long. There was a quality about him at which my gorge rose.

"Pretty comfortable here, eh? Splendid! Fine!" His eyes appraised his surroundings in quick side glances, yet never lost sight of my face; they were inclusive as a parrot's. So far in their depth that one could only guess at it was something cold, motionless, unpleasant. As he stood tower-like on my rug, he was great, clean, golden, artificial—and repulsive. I sat on the edge of a table, and hoped that he would be going soon.

Though he voiced at first only commonplaces, and had masked his call with the casualness of a fishing-trip, I made the guess that he hadn't wet a fly, and that it wasn't fish he

had come angling after; his purpose was deeper—he oozed curiosity.

"Regrettable," he said of Uncle Jack's death, "extremely regrettable—distinct loss to the community—untimely. Mr. Cathcart—I had got to know him—esteemed him—remarkable man—uncommon—life of infinite variety—things most of us dream—and he had lived them."

Baer constructed his sentences of abruptness. In his wonderfully flexible, musical tones, they were singularly impressive.

His talk about my uncle reminded me; and though I was loath to use him as an instrument, to be in any way obligated to him—

"By the way, you examined Mr. Cathcart's body, didn't you?" I asked.

"And reported to Coroner Stone—yes."

"What was the immediate cause of death?"

"*Immediate*"—he caught the word up and gave it back to me with vibrant, metallic emphasis—"concussion—fractured skull, you know—he had fallen."

"No other injuries?"

"None—but yes—bruises—immaterial—a weal across the cheek."

In the doctor's eyes the amber tides ebbed low. What was he trying to tell me—or to learn? He was profoundly interested. He sat carelessly; but on the arms of his chair his big pink hands had closed, knotted, with unsuspected muscles.

"I suppose that a branch caused the scar," I suggested.

"Yes—surely—perhaps—straight, whip-like abrasion."

Baer's eyes told nothing, so I had watched his hands. They relaxed. A crisis had passed.

"Doctor," I persisted, "did any circumstances connected with Mr. Cathcart's death strike you as strange—suspicious? I mean that it might not have been accidental?"

Face and voice he could control, but not those clean fat hands; muscular knobs again bulged under their softness.

He answered with a sonorous no.

"The inquest—?"

"Perfunctory, but conclusive—evidence plain—the stallion Sulieman. You have some reason, Mr. Wade?"

"None at all; I guess it was just a fancy."

"*Um-m-m—*" an organ note. "Glad to help—nothing to go on, unless you—confidential."

I shook my head. "Nothing. It was very sudden. I wanted to be sure."

Suspicion that Stone had sent him, **made**





me doubly cautious. Under cover of a handkerchief at my nose, I glanced at his hands, and saw them smooth and placid. I was mistaken then; had he come from the lawyer, my denial would not have reassured him.

Our conversation became ordinary. Baer professed interest in my books, and borrowed one.

Mungford rode past the windows. The doctor raised his eyes from a volume.

"Splendid horses, Cathcart's—I should say yours. Find the lost whip?"

Miss Hornung's light-fingered young townsman had not returned it. I said a no.



"Too bad—fine carving—dog's head, wasn't it?"

"You have remarkable eyesight," I observed, remembering the distance at which he had seen it.

"Oh no—seen it many times—recognized it." That was odd, thought I; Mungford had told me that Uncle Jack never used it. "One of Cathcart's souvenirs."

Again Baer bewildered me, by adding, "Miss Yorkworth ardent horsewoman—rides spotted mustang."

Jocelyn had refused my invitation, declaring that she did not ride!

But the big doctor reserved his climax until he had crossed my threshold to depart. He turned on the porch; and though the smile that already I hated was unchanged, his gaze was all flint, and his words were ringing hammer-blows:

"Remember—Jocelyn is mine!"

The suddenness of it astounded me. I caught my breath. "What!" I gasped.

"I intend to marry her." He said it deliberately as a chiming clock; but his great pink hands rose into my vision, holding his rod-case between them, and clinched upon it like clamps.

"Anyone that interfered, I would break—like that!" The creature's strength was tremendous; rods and case snapped short in his fingers.

Still smiling his fixed smile, he let fall the fragments at my feet, wheeled his big bulk, and strode toward the gate. The sunlight glinted in his yellow hair; the breeze brought back to me a scent of vanilla that hung about him.

Rage, hot and uncontrollable, shook me. I choked, gulped, got my voice, and bawled

after him my only intelligible thought to which I could fit words—it was rather inadequate.

"Same to you, damn you!—and many of 'em!"

## CHAPTER XV

## TURTLE ROCK

JOCelyn—my Jocelyn—to marry Baer! That sweet and splendid girl to unite her fair youth with that detestable lump of smiling wax and sounding brass! To submit her calm, steadfast spirit to his hateful domination! My entire being flamed into revolt against such a consummation; yet how could I prevent it?

Was not this the obstacle that Jocelyn had raised between us, and that she could not tell me?

But why? My heart, groping in blind misery, ceaselessly questioned and found no answer. Did she love him? She could not! My own hatred and loathing for him forbade me to believe that she could.

Yet with what certainty he had said it!

He was a man to rule and break a woman's soul. His "Jocelyn is mine!" like an echo of the bells of hell, rang incessantly in my ears. It became an obsession. I longed with fierce yearning to seek him out, to call him liar, and to cram his abhorrent declaration down his throat.

"A wonderfully good doctor, sir," Mungford said of him; "but he's not well liked." I knew where he was well hated.

Twice I called at Jocelyn's home, with I know not what riot of protest seething within me, and ready to burst in wild words; but each time Miss Hornung told me that she could not see me. Perhaps she was wise.

Beside this latest trouble, all others faded and dwindled. The missing Baroda diamonds, the knavery of which I sus-



pected Stone, Hassan waiting among the hills and haunting Ragnarock with ghost-like watchers, even the secret of Uncle Jack's death that I'd sworn to penetrate—all became as blades of grass.



I was hit, and hard hit. Had I been less stubborn, I might have given in and retired from the field; for, with Jocelyn lost to me, I cared nothing for the rest; but my stubbornness bade me see it through, and was seconded by a wan hope that Jocelyn might yet turn to me—might need me.

In alternate fits of black despondency and sullen rage, I sat in my little castle and gloomed through the bright spring days; and so June came.

Mungford felt greatly for me; and it happened that a simple touch of his set my clogged mainspring to work and put me in the way of meeting some of my difficulties in the open where I could fight them.

"If you don't mind my saying so, you're not yourself at all, Mr. Wade, sir," he told me one afternoon, interrupting my usual occupation of pacing the library alcove and chewing a cigar that was seldom lighted. "You're looking wretchedly of late—and small wonder." He rolled his eyes at the lines of books as if they had been to blame. "There's Black Roderick out yonder, pawing holes in his stall—why don't you take him out, sir? It would do you both a world of good." The little man's look of commiseration said the rest.

He was right—I was not myself. Sleepless nights a dozen had done their work. My head was light. Ugly shapes crept out at me from shadowy corners, and vanished as I stared.

His reference to the horse aroused in me a curious fellow-feeling. I experienced a sudden wave of desire for something—anything—to do.

"All right," I said, "fetch the horse. I will ride—alone."

Above Ragnarock, a mile or more to the west along Black Bear, is a landmark that, though it is seldom visited because of its remoteness, is known to old Pennsylvanians as Turtle Rock.

It is a curiously shaped boulder, or rather, heap of them, half as large as an ordinary dwelling-house, capped by a single enormous flat and oval stone whose rim for its entire circumference overhangs its supports and whose upper face is convex and ridged like a turtle-shell. The resemblance is made more striking by a jagged raised excrescence at one end.

It stands on a bald, rocky knob at the highest point of the mountain's spine, and but a few yards from the brink of the declivity that dips with almost gorgelike sheerness to the valley of Forge Run. The head of the turtle, facing the chasm, cranes upward and forward as if to reconnoitre.

There is a tale that the landmark was a favored rendezvous of Messrs. Lewis and Connolly, a pair of Pennsylvania Robin Hoods who, fifty years ago, rode the countryside on fast horses, harried the rich and, sometimes, helped the poor.

If the merry outlaws really left any loot in its keeping, the turtle has guarded it well; there is no record that so much as a penny has repaid modern visionaries for backaches and blisters and hours of search for the cavern in which, tradition says, the bandits used to take shelter.

To this lonely spot I rode Black Roderick and halted him beside the rock.

Level with my knees as I sat the saddle, between the great stone shell and its supporting slabs, was a deep crevice. It was itself a small cavern, in which two men could lie with comfort.

By George! someone had lain there! Among the dead leaves that partly filled the crevice gleamed whitely the other half of the broken armlet that MacVittie had found at Ragnarock. I leaned over, and with my riding-crop raked it to me.

As I scratched a finger-nail across its carved pattern of spiral lines, I became so acutely conscious of spying eyes that I twisted in my saddle, half expecting to meet the gaze of a watcher. None was there.

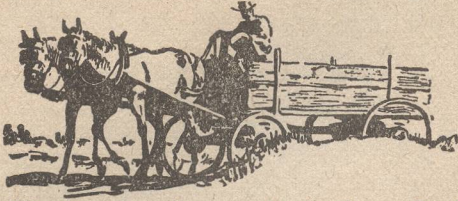
I rode under the turtle's rugged, up-thrust head and circled the rock. A brown-and-gold butterfly was the only living thing I met; the hoofs of Black Roderick, ringing against the flinty soil, made the only sound. The scrubby bushes on the knob could scarcely have hidden a rabbit. On the slopes below was a jungle of boulders, undergrowth, and dwarf forest. I knew by experience the futility of searching there.

Plague take such mystifications! It was as likely that the owner of the broken bangle had left it purposely to catch my eye and bedevil me, as it was that he had lost it. I snapped the bit of bone in pieces, and tossed them away—and knew that near me someone smiled at my petulance.

West from Turtle Rock on the long descending ridge of Black Bear a trail leads down to an abandoned picnic-park and trout hatchery at the upper end of Forge Run Valley, known as Bulger's. It was by this route that teamsters brought up from Philipstown the building materials for Ragnarock. I followed it, and found at intervals faint traces of their wagon-wheels; but most of the track was overgrown with grass and huckleberry bushes,



and in spots I could distinguish it only by the blazes that a thoughtful axman had cut on the trees.



The sun beat hot on the incline. Rock-patches and sand-sloughs that beset the trail threw up choking waves of quivering air. Black Roderick began to show signs of distress; so I turned his head into the bush, and we made a short cut down the steep ground toward Forge Run that shimmered like a twisted silver wire below us.

We reached the stream where a boisterous little fall plunged down a flight of rocky steps into a broad, shallow pool grown about by black alders. Roderick, nickered eagerly, waded into the water up to his hocks, stretched his neck and pumped as if he would never get enough.

I glanced back the way we had come, reflecting that we should have a stiffish climb of it to regain the home trail. As I faced the pool again, I became aware of a man standing on a flat rock beside the fall.

So sudden and unlooked-for was his apparition—within the moment my eyes had swept that same rock and seen it vacant—that I started. The man, seeing that I had observed him, waved his hand with a white object in it, jumped from the stone, and came toward me along the bank.

He was a swarthy, stocky chap, about the build of Mungford, and roughly dressed. He walked with a slouch. As he approached me, he pulled a torn felt hat from a mop of glossy curls, and bowed a number of times, smiling and showing remarkably white teeth. The expression on his broad brown face was vapid, silly, almost stupid. He carried a short fishing-rod.

"Yo' Meest' Wade?" he asked, with an Italian accent. "Gotta let' for yo', *maestro*," as I nodded. "Man backa there," pointing upstream, "geeva heem to me—say geeva to yo', for so mooch." He grinned, opening a short-fingered hand to display a silver quarter.

By this time he was opposite me, and laying down his fishing-pole, he stepped into the water and handed me an envelope.

It was from Hassan! I should have known that spidery writing among ten thousand.

The messenger loitered in the pool beside my knees. I felt in my pocket to add another coin to his fee; and chancing to stoop, I looked quickly at him.

I caught him off guard. There was the same slouching, commonplace figure; but how different the face! Its empty stupidity gone, it was intelligent and masterful. Its black eyes were regarding me with a keen and slightly contemptuous scrutiny.

Not quickly enough did he catch my eye and assumed again his grin of simple good-humor.

"You are Hassan!" I shouted.

His slouch vanished, too, and he leaped back from me, tense and watchful.

What message was in his letter, I never knew; it fell and drifted down the stream as I swung off Black Roderick and ran splashing after him.

## CHAPTER XVI

### THE GAEKWAR'S DEPUTY

**M**Y HASTY performance alarmed Black Roderick so that he slewed, squealing, and let fly his heels. He nearly ended me—the wind from his lashing hoofs fanned my cheek. He backed around, snorting and blowing, scrambled up the bank through the alders, and with elevated tail, danced and pawed the turf in consternation, whickering his distaste for his master's mad antics.

The maneuvers of the horse disconcerted Hassan, cutting off his rush for shore. I sprang shouting at him, my arms outstretched, for I thought that I had him; but he twisted with cattish agility, ducked, and made toward the center of the pool.

Clumsily floundering in his wake through deepening water, I gained on him. Once more, with extended arms, I made a wild plunge. As I did so, Hassan dived headlong. His thrashing heels came up under my nose and splashed my face and eyes with stinging spray.

When I could see, his old felt hat was floating at my waist, and his black curls were bobbing yards ahead of me, as he clove the surface of the pool toward the farther bank, using an overhand stroke of uncommon vigor.

I followed his example.

At the side of the pool whither we were pointed, the water held its depth. Hassan, grasping an overhanging bush, pulled himself ashore. Before it ceased to quiver, I had it, too. I tore my way up through water-plants and clinging creepers that en-



tangled my feet, and alders that whipped my face and snatched away my cap. When I came clear, I saw Hassan, not so far ahead as I had expected, running toward the fall. Something had happened to him; he ran with a slight limp.

He glanced over his shoulder, perceived that I would overhaul him, and turning short at the foot of the fall, dived again into the pool. I foresaw his intention. A gap offering in the alders, with a hope that I might strike deep water and no rocks, I shortened my stride and leaped.

Hassan had the best of our second race. Whatever ailed his leg, did not appreciably cripple his water skill; and he had, besides, dived at a narrower point than had I.

"But with that game leg," thought I, "he will tire, and then——"

I intended to rid myself of one vexation—I would put Hassan in Clearwater Jail.

If nothing more serious could be brought against him, there were two charges of housebreaking that would spoil, for a time at least, the sport he'd been having with me at Ragnarock.

All of which planned nicely; but——

When I had skittered through the mud shallows and emerged dripping from the alder fringe, there at a little distance, erect as a dragoon, sat Hassan on Black Roderick!

My curse of astonishment as I pulled up, drew from him a smile so contemptuous that I would have rushed him regardless; but he backed the horse for instant flight, at the same time raising a hand in a graceful gesture signing me to remain where I was.

"Keep off, please, Mr. Wade," he called, "or I shall leave you to plod home afoot."

He had discarded the slouch and accent of an Italian laborer for the easy manner and speech of a man well bred.

"I am sorry to take your horse—likewise ashamed. Had I not turned my ankle on a cursed stone yonder in the pool"—a note of intense pride thrilled his tones—"you could never have caught me. Now that we are met, let us have a peaceable talk. I think that we may find much to say to each other."

"All that I have to say to you," I responded sulkily, "is that you are lucky in having stolen my horse."

"Easy! easy, Mr. Wade!" he cried, frowning; "it is not so that we shall come

to an agreement. 'Stolen' is not a handsome word. Let us say 'borrowed!'"

"Oh, have it your own way," I jeered; "but I see no reason why you should be so particular. Stealing and spying seem to be part of your day's work. You're trying to steal the diamonds, aren't you? If you and Stone have not already stolen them."

He checked a gesture of impatience, and listened with profound attention to my last words. When I had finished, he leaned forward and studied me with thoughtful eyes.

"Stone—that is the gray old man with dead eyes. No, he has not the diamonds; but that may explain—I had thought there was another reason. I was just about to speak to you about the diamonds, Mr. Wade. Why have you stopped searching for them?"

"How do you know that I have stopped?"

Hassan, smiling at me like one who humors a child, dipped his fingers in his shirt pocket.

"An hour ago, Mr. Wade, you were beside the great rock that is like a tortoise, and there you found—a fragment of carved bone, was it not, which you broke and threw away? Here are the pieces. He extended his hand and displayed the splinters of the armlet gleaming on its brown palm.

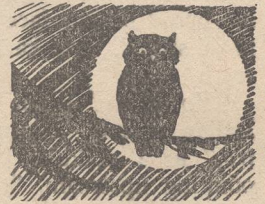
"You saw me!" I exclaimed.

"No, not I, with my own eyes; but I have other eyes that do my bidding almost as well. Those eyes tell me that you are neglecting what you came to Ragnarock to do. I have other hands, too. I am unarmed, and do not wish to harm you, Mr. Wade. Did I so, I would have but to raise my voice and you would lie dead beside the pool with a bullet through your heart. You do not believe? Listen."

He tilted his head, and from his throat issued the *whoo-oo* of an owl. Promptly as an echo, far up the hillside sounded an answering hoot.

Hassan smiled.

"One pair of hands is there—with a good rifle. You brought twenty men to hunt me, Mr. Wade. I have not so many—only seven; but seven braver fellows do not live in all India. They are picked hillmen. Unless you will listen to reason, I shall bring them to Ragnarock, and we will try again where we failed before."





He was talking in a high-flown strain again; he appeared to be an odd mixture of pomposity, earnestness, and humor—a dangerous, but merry man.

"Just what do you mean by 'reason'?" I asked.

"Ah, but that is better!" he cried with a nod. "I suggest that you invite me to Ragnarock as your guest—not like this," glancing down at his rough shirt and corduroy trousers held by a strap belt, "but like a gentleman." He dwelt on the word with pride. "I *am* a gentleman, Mr. Wade—I was educated at Oxford. I should entertain and amuse you in divers ways, and lend to the search for the diamonds a mind that is not entirely useless. There is, I understand, a cryptogram involved?"

"That is a likely proposition," I mocked.

He stiffened, and with dignity said, "Twice I was the guest of Sahib Cathcart, the late your uncle, and he was not ashamed to entertain me, though my mission with him failed."

"Oh, I should not be ashamed of you," I assured him. "That isn't what makes me laugh—it's the idea of you and I looking for the diamonds together. Suppose we found them?"

"I should, of course, take them," he coolly replied; "but I am prepared to offer you a reasonable compensation."

"Hassan, there's nothing the matter with your nerve," I told him, "but it won't work. I don't want your 'reasonable compensation.' I want the diamonds. Another man tried to buy me off, as you may know, but I didn't bite. Now that I know the diamonds are there, I'm going to find them—and I'm going to keep them."

He glared. I grinned. Then we both laughed.

"Why are you so keen after them, anyway?" I went on. "I don't take you for an ordinary thief, and I thought the Gaekwar had bushels of them. Didn't he give them to my uncle?"

"The Great One who is dead did so," he answered conversationally, all his good humor returned; "but the Great One who is living thinks differently about the matter, and rescinds the gift. I am not the mind of the Great One, but I presume that he thinks they should not be in the hands of an unbeliever in a foreign land across the black water. They are very ancient and very sacred, and have been associated with holy things. I am true to my master's salt. He sent me across the sea to get them, and that I shall do."

"If you can," I reminded. "Why didn't you try to take them from my uncle?"

"For so long as the Sahib Cathcart lived, they were his, by gift of the Great One who is dead, for services performed, and the Great One who is living respected the gift; but the instant the jewels passed into possession of another, that respect ended. My mission to the Sahib Cathcart was to persuade him to make provision for their restoration when he should die. He refused to do so. Then I waited."

"You are sure that you did no more than wait?"

Hassan flushed darkly under his bronze skin.

"Mr. Wade, I am no murderer. I had no hand in the Sahib Cathcart's death."

"But you think——?"

"I think nothing, for I know nothing. I will say only that the Sahib was a splendid rider, and could control horses—and also that he had a weakness of the heart."

"What services did he perform for the Gaekwar?" I asked, thinking that I would get all the information I could while it was on tap.

"That may not be said," he gravely answered.



I told him then about the threat letter, and asked him why Stone should have tried to scare and buy me off, unless he had the diamonds or knew where they were. Hassan shook his head.

"I assure you that I had nothing to do with that either, Mr. Wade. It was to my interest to have you come, for I presumed that the Sahib had left his heir some clue by which to find the diamonds, and I had not been able to find them."

"But on the train, the day I came?"

Hassan laughed.

"I plead guilty to that. I had learned—no matter how—that you were a factor in the situation, so your movements became of interest to me. I am to understand, then, that we are not to join forces, that you are going on alone and"—he smiled maliciously—"find them for me? I shall surely have them, Mr. Wade."

I had been edging nearer.

"You go to the devil," I cried, "or to jail!" and, heedless of his hidden rifleman, I ran in at him.

He was wary. Before I could reach him, he struck Roderick a resounding thwack over the rump with his open hand,



and the black was off along the slope at a gallop.

"Horse thief!" I yelled after him. He was a fine and reckless rider, and urged Roderick at top speed through the boulders and undergrowth. Seeing that I had as little chance to catch him as a mountain goat, I pulled up and leaned panting on a boulder. He at once checked Roderick.

"I find myself compelled to borrow your horse," he said easily. "My ankle is stiffening. He shall be returned in good condition. I wish you a pleasant walk."

"I shall find the diamonds, and I shall take good care of them," I retorted. "His Supreme Greasiness of Baroda shall never see them."

He made me a return, with interest.

"Don't waste too much of your time playing with the little brown-eyed Memsahib," he advised, with an insolent smile, and put Roderick in motion:

My unruly temper flamed again at that, and I called him a choice farewell. Then I began my walk home.

Black Roderick early next morning came whinnying down the forest path to the gate of Ragnarock. Tied at his saddle-bow was a great bouquet of pink honeysuckle blooms, dewy and fragrant, and a woven grass bag filled with fresh-caught trout.

## CHAPTER XVII

### THE CRYPTOGRAM

**J**OCELYN'S refusal, Dr. Baer's visit and declaration, had had on me a depressing effect. The absence of any clue, any point from which to work out the elucidation of Uncle Jack's death, had led me to a dead wall of inaction.

To this condition my encounter with Hassan was as a powerful counter-irritant. He had treated me as a mere catspaw; he should learn that I was more. I would find the Baroda diamonds, but he and his master, the Gaekwar, should never have them. I planned what I should do with

the gems when I should have found them. Let Hassan and his seven tiger-hunters come!

Thus stimulated, I became almost cheerful.

After her second rebuff, I did not try again to see Jocelyn. I was learning patience. I would turn my whole energy to the solution of the double puzzle that con-

fronted me. Somewhere in that tangled skein, I doubted not, lay the explanation of her strange behavior.

That she loved Baer, I could not credit; it was far more likely that he had established an imaginary claim on her through possession of a secret that she feared. I would penetrate that secret, and either dissipate its terrors or find means to bury it beyond resurrection.

Hassan I would fairly beat—it was a game—and for him I cherished no resentment; but Baer I hated with consuming hatred. Where he was concerned there would be no stopping-point.

Had Hassan told me the truth, and I saw no reason to doubt him, the position of Stone was more than ever anomalous. In my conjectures I subtracted the attorney from the equation that included the missing diamonds, and placed him in the more sinister limbo that, in my mind's vision, surrounded the central group of a dead horse and a dying man.

Among the shadows that milled around that tragic tableau four images were concrete and distinct: Mungford, Jocelyn Yorkworth, Stone, and Dr. Baer. All of these—and I suspected that little Miss Hornung belonged with them—were keeping something from me.

Jocelyn and the servant, I was convinced, had no guilty knowledge. Whatever they concealed, their motives were clean; but the other two—ah, those others!

Why had Stone risked ten thousand dollars to buy my absence?

What had Baer tramped up the mountain to find out—that his telltale hands had betrayed to me that he had found out, and that had sent him away well satisfied?

In what dark conspiracy were he and the gray attorney partners?

Slowly, by piecing and repiecing my fragmentary knowledge of the events that had preceded me at Ragnarock, I constructed the outlines of a drama that gathered form and substance.

Uncle Jack Cathcart, a man without fear, a skilled horseman, had written something at his desk, had called for his favorite horse, and had ridden away with a smile and a wave of his hand. That was the testimony of the servant that had loved him. Later, returning from an errand, the servant had found the master dying beside his dead horse. In the interval—it was more than three hours—he had ridden somewhere. Something had happened in the Black Bear trail.

A stone in the hands of a strong and





skilled man may become a terribly efficient weapon. Given the opportunity, one who knew where and how to strike could as easily break the neck of a horse as fracture the skull of a man.

Mungford had found the doctor and the attorney at their homes when he had telephoned. That did not prove that one or both had not been in the hills that day. If one, which? If both, which had struck the blow?

Instinct and reason accused the golden-voiced doctor. His science would have made his attack fairly sure; I had evidence of the power of his great pink hands.

The motive? Jealousy.

If Uncle Jack had not been actually infatuated with the girl, he had cared for her so deeply that he had willed her his property. The facts pointed to love. Baer had read them so. He had sought my uncle out and warned him off, as he had warned me. A quarrel had followed.

From much repetition, I became able to visualize that meeting almost as vividly as if I had witnessed it. I had only to close my eyes to become the spectator:

My keen-faced uncle, riding gray Sulieman, comes down the precipitous trail, perhaps on his way to call on Jocelyn. He cuts idly at the overhanging branches with his silver-mounted whip. At the split in the trail a man—one man, I cannot fit the attorney into the picture—waits beside the fallen boulder.

He raises a great arm. The horseman stops. They speak, one in resonant tones of musical insolence and oddly elliptical sentences, the other quickly and sharply, as do I when I am angered.

Their words run high. A threat is uttered. Uncle Jack, choleric always, raises his whip. Before he can strike, the yellow-haired giant has conceived an end. He arrests the menacing arm, wrenches away the whip, and cuts Uncle Jack across the face. They grapple; the big man, flint-eyed and smiling his waxen smile, drags his lighter antagonist from the saddle, and with terrible purpose dashes him against the rock.

The frightened stallion backs, snorting and stamping, in the narrow defile. The assassin, quick with the instinct to conceal his crime, leaps in pursuit, seizes the dangling

bridle-rein, and tethers it to a bush.

He returns to the limp body, kneels, and makes an examination. His skilled physician's fingers assure him that he need add nothing there. Remains the horse.

Coolly—he would be frightfully cool—he selects from the bank a jagged rock of many pounds weight. He approaches the stallion and treacherously soothes it. He lifts the stone with both hands above his head and crashes it down on the animal's spine at the neck-joint. Sulieman groans, folds his knees, and collapses.

The slayer makes a number of abrasions on the stallion's twitching limbs. He carries the crimsoned stone to the spring and cleanses it and his hands. He returns the stone to its bed, then hastens home to await a summons—perhaps to begin at once, for the coroner's perusal, his report of the "accident."

It accorded with Baer's cursed bravado, that he had dared come to me with that tale of the weal across Uncle Jack's face.

What parts the girl and the lawyer had played in the drama, I could not surmise. That Jocelyn knew the whole truth and was shielding Baer, was unthinkable. I was not so sure about Stone; doubtless the physician had achieved a powerful hold on him, and so bent him to his will. I would clear up those matters on the day that I confronted Baer—as I swore I would confront him—with evidence of his guilt. Then I might learn, too, what was the one lie Mungford had told me.

Morning after morning saw me tether Black Roderick at the split in the trail. From the boulder down to the spring, I went over the ground, inch by inch, painstakingly as any detective I had ever read about. For days I devoted my forenoons to the task. Not a twig or blade of grass in the arena of the tragedy escaped my scrutiny.

My afternoons I passed among the Spanish books.

Among the rocks and jungle of the gorge, or in the quiet of the library alcove, I was never free from the sensation that the "eyes" of Hassan watched me, keeping equal check on both of my searches—perhaps confusing the one with the other.

Outdoors the espionage was comprehensible and bearable; but that it could with impunity reach me in my walled and guarded bungalow, was a challenge that irked me almost beyond endurance. I offered a bonus of one hundred dollars to the man who first should discover and capture one of the spies. Half a dozen times we





ransacked the building from basement to roof, and found no sign of tenancy other than our own.

Claw and scramble and squint as I would, the gorge yielded me no clue to its secret. I rifled and thumbed through



every book on the two library shelves devoted to the Spanish section. They were stubborn as the gorge.

Again my patience wore threadbare—

It was a thin, flexible volume, bound in the dark maroon leather, and was not among the Spanish works, but lay flat along the top of other books on another shelf. I twisted my head askew to read its title; my jaw relaxed, and my pipe clattered on the floor.

“*The Bible in Spain*” by George Borrow!”

On the screen of my memory flashed bright and clear the three typewritten lines that Uncle Jack had attached to his letter:

Read up on Spain. Books in my library—and borrow.

How many times had I puzzled over that word “borrow!” I knew that I had its meaning now. I bore the book in nervous hands to my desk. With the exception of Uncle Jack’s signature on his book-plate, there was no writing in it; nor did my first hasty inspection reveal any evidence that it contained a message.

It was evening. I settled myself with my pipe in an easy chair, and began a deliberate, page-by-page examination. Not until I reached the eleventh chapter did I find what I sought. On page 107 I found an ink-mark.

It was small, a mere speck under the letter “s” in the word “tones” in the eleventh line from the top of the page.

Perhaps it meant something; perhaps it was an accident; I turned on.

In the word “thirty” in the eleventh line on page 131, the “y” was similarly indicated.

At last I had struck a trail!

Between that point and the end of the book, I found twenty-six other marked letters. To make sure that I had them all, I searched the volume from preface to printer’s imprint with a magnifying-glass.

When I had set the twenty-eight down in order, thus:

S Y L E T O R N K L N C N J N Y D E I O S N  
N L M C I J

I knew that I had before me the message that, rightly interpreted, would tell me where to find the seven blue diamonds of Baroda.

Before I slept that night, I wrote to father and asked him to send me Hogan Merrill’s treatise on cipher-writing, reference to which I had found in one of Uncle Jack’s encyclopaedias.

## CHAPTER XVIII

### THAT DAMNABLE WHIP

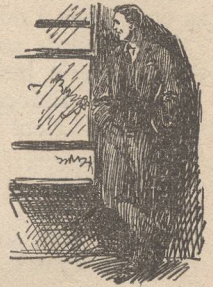
I PASSED that leetle Yorkworth gal down nigh the gerridge.”

Dad MacVittie pulled up his horse in the drive near the rear of the bungalow. He spoke to Mungford, but his most interested audience left its chair and shamelessly eavesdropped at the library window. Dad had returned within the minute to Ragnarock from a trip to Medburne to lay in a supply of snuff.

“She was ridin’ thet spotted mustang o’ her’n,” he went on. “Fust time I seen her a-hossback in a coon’s age. She was head-in’ this way. Seen thet big punkin-lubber of a Doc Baer, too. He was workin’ up erlong Forge Run in his cacky duds, but he wa’n’t fishin’ none. S’pose Buddy’s out takin’ a turn around some’eres?”

Long before he finished his communication, I had suspected that Dad’s simple mind harbored a purpose. He had tuned his nasal voice to just the pitch that would carry back to me. His final question laid his duplicity bare. Right well he knew that I was in the library; I had, from the corner of an eye, seen him crane his head cautiously and look in as he rode by the window.

My papers—I had been working at the cryptogram—ceased to interest me. I took my cap, and in tones as casual as I could muster, told Mungford that it was a fine afternoon, and I guessed that I would ride. His face was too well schooled to betray his thoughts; but Dad, whom I met near the gate, made no attempt to conceal his amusement. He seized the peak of his red beard, thrust it between his teeth, and with twinkling eyes watched me ride past on Black Roderick.





At the left of the gap that opens into the Black Bear trail is a small, table-like hummock a number of feet higher than the adjacent Ragnarock plateau. It shelves out, overhanging the steep declivity of the mountainside; and from its summit one may command a view of the lower valley of Black Bear and Forge Run, and of the trail itself as far as the angle at the spring.

I tied Roderick to a slender juniper at the base of the hummock, and climbed up and stood among the aspens that clung quivering at its verge. I had brought a pair of binoculars—I was prepared to play the spy.

Immediately below me was the rugged throat of the trail. I looked down it—and trembled like the aspens. Beside the fallen boulder—rendezvous of my sinister day-dreams—I saw them.

Baer leaned against the stone. His cap was off, and the rays of the westerling sun, pouring slantly into the gorge, glittered on his bush of yellow hair. Across the rock from him, and in the shadow, Jocelyn sat upon her mustang.

I was quick to notice that their attitude was not loverlike. The boulder was between them, and the girl, it appeared to me, carried herself with uncompromising erectness. She was listening while he talked; one of his hands moved in rhythmic, argumentative gestures.

So much I saw with unaided eyes. I raised the binoculars. In the few seconds that it took to focus them, the discussion reached a crisis.

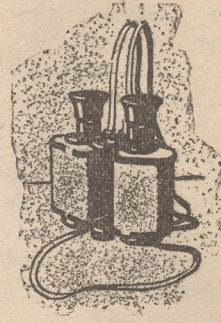
Jocelyn had turned the mustang. Baer leaned toward her, speaking eagerly, his hand lifted. She shook her head, and put the pony in motion. He ran around the rock to intercept her. I saw him clutch at her bridle—

Except that in my fancy the rider had been Uncle Jack, and the horse gray Sulie-man, the drama that I saw, in fact, was so like the other that it thrilled me with superstitious horror. Had my inner vision been prophetic? Was the dark crime to be repeated in the same setting with a second victim? Breathless, paralyzed, stupidly staring, I awaited the dénouement.

Good girl, Jocelyn! She lifted her riding crop and slashed his face. He recoiled, a hand at his cheek; then he sprang forward, shouting in anger so that the echoes of his bell-like voice reached me on my pinnacle.

I saw no more through the binoculars; they slipped from my hands and clattered

among the rocks. Imagination no longer bound me. I leaped from the aspen clump to the bare, perilous rim of the ledge, and my answering cry vibrated down the gorge.



Rage made my voice as powerful as the doctor's. Baer, glancing over his shoulder, let go the bridle, which he had grasped again, and stood arrested, his arm outstretched. Jocelyn, her whip-hand up for another stroke, turned in her saddle. Their eyes searched the heights.

A strange figure I must have presented to their startled gaze, dancing at the brink of my lofty eyrie, howling, shaking my fists—an infuriated jumping-jack in silhouette against the sky.

I tarried only until I knew they had discovered me. I scrambled down from the hummock, and tearing the reins from the juniper, vaulted to the saddle. I turned Black Roderick into the defile, and we stormed down the dangerous trail at a reckless pace.

Sixty heart-beats after our start I checked the panting black beside the spring shoulder to shoulder with Jocelyn's spotted mustang.

Baer was nowhere to be seen.

"Where is he?" I shouted.

Jocelyn had twisted in her saddle to watch my whirlwind approach. She was flushed, but in the shadow of her hat-brim her eyes were brave and steady.

They met mine frankly as she said, "Thank you, Mr. Wade"; and then, with a catch in her voice, "I—oh, that man frightened me!"

"Where is he?" I persisted, glancing down the empty trail.

"He is gone. He climbed up the bank back there when he heard you coming down."

Angry though I was, I laughed. The thought of the tall and portly doctor scrambling and clawing up the steep side of the ravine under the eyes of the girl whom he professed to love, grazed my sense of humor.

Roderick had stretched his neck to drink from the spring. I jerked the bridle-rein and started to turn him.

Jocelyn put out a hand to detain me. "Where are you going?"

"After him."



"No, no, please! Let him go. I am partly to blame. I was foolish to meet him, but he—" Her eyes were troubled. "Let him go, Mr. Wade; I shall take care that he doesn't have another chance to annoy me."

Her hesitation did not escape me. They had met by prearrangement, but she had not wished to come; he had, by threat or promise, compelled her reluctance—it was not a love-tryst. That certainly flooded me with relief. I would attend to Baer's case later.

Too often my tongue is half a step ahead of my judgment.

"Then you don't love him!" I blurted out.

"Love him! No! Whatever made you think it?"

Her protest was emphatic; but I read in her eyes that she had purposed it as much to restrain me as for its own sake. The barrier was a barrier still.

"It isn't right, I know, for us to hate anyone," she went on; "but I hate him, and I can't help it." She put into her repetition of the verb a sincerity that was music to me. "It must surprise you to see me riding," said she, "after telling you that I did not. I used to ride a great deal; but I haven't since—lately. I gave it up, and thought that I never would again, but the days have been so fine that I couldn't stay in any longer.

"You frightened me, dashing down the trail at such breakneck speed. You should be more careful. You might—" She looked past me at the fallen boulder, and shuddered. "It is a dreadful place."

She had been tapping with her whip against the riding-boot that showed below her divided skirt. She gathered her reins. The whip brought to my mind an idea—an excuse.

"I will ride home with you," I volunteered.

"Oh, no, you need not—it isn't necessary—I'd rather you didn't. I shall get along all right."

She spoke with a hasty incoherence that was foreign to her habit. Her voice was different. In the last few minutes she had been almost confidential; now she was again cold and aloof.

"But yes," I insisted; "you are nervous; and besides, I have an errand with Miss Hornung. I want to ask her if she

ever found my whip—the one with the silver dog's head. She told—"

A change so swift and terrible passed over Jocelyn's face that my words faltered and died. Her cheeks faded, fear widened her hazel eyes, and she seemed in an instant to grow years older.

"Oh!" she exclaimed in a low, choked tone; "then what he said is true!" Disregarding my stammered questions, and waving me back with a gesture of aversion, she started the pony.

I thrust Roderick ahead and slewed him so that he blocked the trail.

"See here, Miss Yorkworth!" I said sternly, for the injustice of her treatment stirred my blood; "I sha'n't let you go until I know what I have done. I don't know what you mean, or why you should take offence at a trivial remark that was innocent of any wrong intent. Why is it so terrible that I should ask about the whip that I lost? What has Baer—I suppose you mean Baer—been telling you about me? Now that I think of it, he made a point of asking about the whip when he came spying up to Ragnarock the other day. What is the—"

I stopped, and my jaw fell. I had remembered, too, that weal on my dead uncle's cheek. I'd just seen such another laid across a man's face—by *Jocelyn!* What, in God's name, had the miserable doctor meant by his accursed innuendoes?

Since I had closed the path, Jocelyn had not looked at me, but had sat bowed over her pony's mane. Suddenly her head went up, and she faced me with flashing eyes and quivering lips.

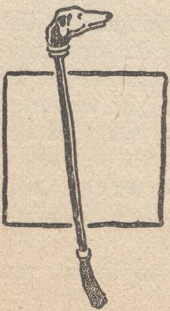
"If you must have an answer, Mr. Wade," she flung at me, "the whip that you refer to is mine. I—I lost it. Now let me go, please, or I shall wish that you had left me with Dr. Baer."

She need not have added that bitter taunt. Stunned and wordless, I drew my horse aside and allowed her to pass me, and she rode by with averted face. When she was a few paces from me, she cut the mustang's flank with her whip; and for the second time within the hour the narrow gorge echoed the thunder of hoofs in reckless haste.

I sat like a statue of despondency; had my heart weighed upon my horse as it seemed to weigh upon me, he must have trembled under the burden.

That damnable whip! *Her whip!* In what devil's doings had it played a part?

My mind went back to the day when I had found it, hidden behind the papers on





Uncle Jack's desk. How had it come there? With what fearful transaction was it associated in Jocelyn's memory, that mention of it should blanch the cheeks and wither the spirit of her who usually was so calm and self-assured? I began to see that the entire fabric of recon-dite circumstances that I had set out to penetrate revolved around so simple a thing as a woman's riding-whip.

In the brief time that I had possessed it, it had everywhere carried anxiety and dismay. I recalled Mungford's concern when he had seen it in my hand, and how he had tried to dissuade me from carrying it; it was the whip at which Stone had stared that day when he met me in the gorge; sight of it had frozen Miss Hornung's welcome on her lips—to purloin and secrete it, she had stolen away and left Jocelyn and me in the garden.

All those incidents, that at the time had puzzled me, were now clear—and they pointed to a clear conclusion: Jocelyn's connection with the ugly tragedy of my uncle's death was closer than I had imagined.

Something had taken place, consequences of which she feared, and her friends feared for her.

Instinctively I ranged myself among them. I am loyal to those whom I love. I needed no telling that, no matter what had happened, no matter how dark the appearances, she was unsullied. For the first time since I had come to Medburne, I admitted that I might have entirely misjudged Stone. If what the lawyer had done had been, as it now appeared, in her behalf, I would with all my heart say amen.

One thing was certain: I must suppress my projected inquiry into my uncle's death. Through no act of mine should suspicion and disgrace come upon Jocelyn; and yet, I must myself learn the truth. I could see but the one way to overcome her distrust of me, and to open the gate to the happiness I'd dreamed—to go to her knowing all.

"*Sahib! Sahib Wade!*"

Half-whispered, half-spoken, the words, coming from above my head, aroused me. I looked up and, peering at me from among the shrubbery at the rim of the bank, I saw two big



dark eyes in a long, intelligent brown face. "Well?" I answered.

The watcher bent upon me a shrewd, piercing look. As if satisfied, he parted the branches, swung lightly down into the trail, and boldly stepped toward me. He was of middle age; his head was turbaned and his feet were bare; trousers of overall material, nearly the color of his skin, hung in tatters from his wiry, muscular limbs.

"Sahib," said he, shaking back the black hair that hung about his ears, "the lord Hassan bids me say to you that the big sahib with the painted face listened while you and the memsahib talked, and that he now goes down the hill toward the stream."

*Baer!*

It came upon me like a lightning-stroke: He held the key to all that was hidden from me; his casual questions about the whip had been to find out if I suspected what he already knew. That, too, explained why Jocelyn had met him, whom she feared and detested.

With a refinement of cruelty, he had made the rendezvous a spot that he knew must be filled with horror for her. He had held his knowledge over her, and tried to force her to his wishes; and she, brave girl, cost what it might, had defied him. Even now she was riding home with a desperate fear that he would publish her secret.

By God, he should not!

I would have it from him, and then I would close his mouth! My hands clenched on my bridle-rein and I ground my teeth. Until now, my part in events had been too largely passive. It should be so no longer! I could at least put up a fight for the girl I loved.

Hassan's messenger, who had been watching me with close attention, spoke again. "If the sahib pleases, I will take the horse to the top of the hill. There is a way up the bank, yonder where the pink flowers hang."

I forgot that this man, too, was, in his way, my enemy. I dismounted and tossed the reins to him, and would have offered him money; but he drew himself up with a gesture of refusal.

Opposite the spot that he had indicated, I took a running start, jumped, and catching a stem of witch-hazel, drew myself up the bank.

## CHAPTER XIX

### I BREAK THE DOLL

WHILE Hassan's messenger was on his way to me, Baer gained a long start; and for all his ponderous bulk, the doctor was uncommonly active.



In vain I looked for him among the small timber on the mountainside below me as I began the steep ascent. I hastened, thrashing through undergrowth, floundering among rocks, sliding and staggering on slippery beds of fern.

Though I made speed as best I could, half an hour elapsed, and I reached the bottom land, before I saw his big, tan-colored figure striding ahead of me. He was crossing an open, meadow-like flat, paralleling the course of Forge Run. I ran after him.

He heard me, and turned and waited. Across his left cheek glowed in scarlet relief against his waxen flesh the mark of a whip. Sight of that merited decoration thrilled me with malicious glee. Jocelyn had struck hard.

The signature of her displeasure made an odd punctuation for the smile with which he greeted me.

"Well met, Mr. Wade!" he called, with simulated heartiness in his metallic tones. He advanced a step, thrusting out his hand, as if he thought that he might really make me believe that he was glad to see me.

I pulled up in front of him. I did not take the hand; and I could not, for lack of breath, at once answer. I made a sign to that effect, and stood panting and wondering how I should manage the situation. I had in hand no easy task. He seemed not a man that I could either pump or silence against his will. Hardest of all would be to check my own temper—his mere proximity set it bucking like an unruly colt.

Subtlety, alas, I had not; I saw no way but to be direct.

"Dr. Baer," said I, "when you were at Ragnarok, you spoke of a mark that you had noticed on Mr. Cathcart's face." To save me, I could not keep my eyes off his damaged cheek, or quite conceal the satisfaction that it gave me. "I know now," I went on, "that you meant more than you said—that when you found me ignorant, you let the matter drop. Will you explain it now?"

He chose to ignore my significant stare—for which I was glad. I did not wish to anger him—yet.

"Um-m-m—yes," he answered, "I think I will." He hesitated; then, standing wide-legged, he folded his arms, inclining his massive head. "Circumstances of

Mr. Cathcart's death—peculiar, weren't they? Very." He opened wide his long-lashed lids; and his eyes, their amber irises so dilated that the pupils were mere jetlike flecks, fixed on mine in a piercing gaze.

"Warranted investigation, didn't you think?" he resumed. "You had suspicions—so did I—indefinite. You had formed no conclusions. Neither had I—then. Now—well, *um-m-m*, you think—"

"I thought from the first," said I, "that he killed himself. I think now that it was murder."

On that declaration I stopped. Were I to say too much, he would penetrate me, if he had not already; whereas, if I should allow him to lead the discussion along his own lines, I might gain an understanding of his motives, and perhaps fathom the entire meaning of his encounter with Jocelyn.

"Unequivocal—that word murder." He slowly shook his head. "Almost too positive, I should say."

"You mean," I queried, "that you think he was not killed outright?"

"Exactly—contributory crime—unintentional. My conjecture merely—perhaps mistaken—may have been, as you say, murder."

Convinced that it was murder, and that he had committed it, I marveled at his aplomb. The sense of my own powerlessness maddened me. The man was playing with me.

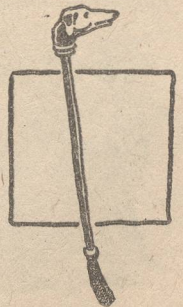
"Baer," I asked shortly, "who struck my uncle with a whip?"

"Miss Yorkworth, of course—Jocelyn," he answered without hesitation. "As you have seen, she is much too handy with one." He smiled, rubbing at the weal across his cheek.

Again he astounded me. He was unlikely to thrust his own head in the noose; it was to be presumed that, if he did not disclaim all knowledge of the murder, he would try to divert suspicion to someone else. But Jocelyn! He had said that he loved her—that he intended to marry her! At what, in the devil's name, was he hinting, and what did he hope to gain?

"But the whip!" I cried. "I found it—"

I stopped. "Ah!" He bent swiftly toward me. "You interest me, Mr. Wade. You found the whip—not at the scene of your uncle's—er—accident; I looked there—but at—?" He waited.





He might wait, thought I, until doomsday. Here was the true reason for his visit to Ragnarock. He had come to learn where I had found the whip, and what importance I had attached to it. There was, it seemed, no end to the mischievous possibilities of that whip.

This thought crossed my mind while Baer awaited my answer to his suspended question.

"I sha'n't tell you," I snapped, "not until I know what you are driving at."

He raised his eyebrows. "But it is simple. You wish to know who killed Mr. Cathcart, if he was killed, don't you? I am trying to help you."

"What has Miss Yorkworth to do with it?" I persisted. "Granted that the whip is hers, I don't believe—and I don't think you do—that she struck my uncle."

"Indeed I do, Mr. Wade," he returned. "It was to—er—persuade her to make a clean breast of her connection with the affair, that I arranged a meeting with her today."

So they, too—Jocelyn and he—had talked of the whip? He knew, or pretended knowledge, of some dark transaction at which I had not guessed. He had threatened her, hoping to compel her to his purposes. He had failed. Now he was trying to make me his ally—to use my determination to clear up Uncle Jack's death to intimidate her further.

He had brought his unwholesome eggs to the wrong market. No appearance, or combination of appearances, had power to shake my faith in Jocelyn. Memory of the desperate fear that I had seen in her eyes as she left me, roused a surge of ugly blood that swelled my neck and hardened the muscles of my jaw.

The wolf must have looked out of my face. Baer's eyes narrowed, and he unfolded his arms.

"Was that," I asked, "the only thing that you tried to persuade her to?"

"Um-m-m—well, some personal matters were discussed between us."

"You didn't appear to prosper in your attempt," I persisted; and this time I looked pointedly at the mark on his cheek.

"It seemed not; but I left her an alternative, and she will think it over."

"What alternative?"

I questioned recklessly now. I would have from him all that he would willingly tell me; and the rest—

"That of being summoned to tell in court what she knows of Mr. Cathcart's death."

"I thought," said I, "that you told me that you intend to marry her." The verb stuck in my throat, but I managed to get it out.

"And so I do," he replied; "but before all else comes justice." The damned hypocrite impressively bowed his head.

"See here, Mr. Wade"—he threw out his hand in an expository gesture—"believe me or

not, I am only trying to help you. There has been a subversion of justice, Mr. Wade, and I am determined, no less than you, to come to the bottom of it. Mr. Stone cannot cover up everything."

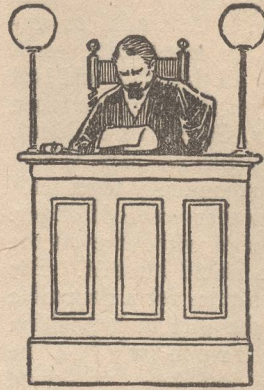
Unmistakable resentment spoke in his mention of Stone. Oddly enough, it stirred in me a sudden kindness for the old attorney. I suspected the lawyer, but the doctor I hated.

"Did you know, Mr. Wade," continued Baer, "that Attorney Stone virtually dictated my report to the coroner, allowing no mention of the abrasion that I found on your uncle's cheek; and that no attempt whatever was made to examine into facts that, to any sane man, must have appeared suspicious? I believe that he even wrote the verdict of the coroner. Why should there have been such collusion, unless to conceal something—to shield someone?"

Light broke upon me, in which the old attorney stood unclouded. His words echoed in my ears: "You will wreck something that is worth a dozen young hot-heads." I saw his meaning now. This creature Baer was in possession of some shreds of truth. Jocelyn had been in some manner involved in Uncle Jack's death, and Stone had shielded her by directing at his will the legal machinery of which he was master. He had not trusted me—I could not blame him for that, I was a stranger—but he should learn that I, too, could be loyal.

Reluctantly I admitted that this new combination must exonerate Baer. Had he been guilty, Stone would have suspected him, and would never have rested until he had run him down. Still, I thought that I might turn my previous suspicion to advantage.

"Where were you at the time of my uncle's death?" I asked.





He laughed, and I saw that my ruse had succeeded.

"So you have suspected me?" he said. "That clears matters. My alibi is unquestionable. I was in attendance on a typhoid patient nearly all that day, and had been at my home only a few minutes when the word came of Mr. Cathcart's accident. I forgive you the suspicion, Mr. Wade. Now we can work harmoniously together."

I bowed to hide another wave of anger. He had hounded Jocelyn without even the excuse that it was to shield himself. His plea of justice was a screen for a damnable conspiracy to place the girl in a position

from which he doubtless possessed the means to extricate her—at a price. Marriage was that price. Now he and I were to work "harmoniously" together!

"But," I objected,

keeping my gaze on the ground because I dared not risk looking him in the eyes, "just why do you suspect Miss Yorkworth? How could she have done it—and why? If there were no witnesses, the circumstantial evidence would have to be pretty strong to convince a jury that my uncle's death was not an accident. They would ask why."

"Let us consider what we know." He was once more at his ease, and spoke in his habitual abruptness. "Bond between them—Mr. Cathcart loved her—left her his fortune. Ah, surprised that I know, Mr. Wade?" I had started. "Friends in Clearwater, too. Stone cannot keep every-thing mum."

"Jury might think she had something to gain—eh? I don't. Crime, if any, was not deliberate. Now—actual facts. She used to ride much—she hasn't ridden since. She was in the hills that day—I saw her go. Came home on a lathered horse. Lastly, the whip, man, the whip! She carried it—came home without it. It didn't turn up again until you found it—"

He paused, inviting my confidence, did not get it, and resumed. "Remember how you lost it—at her home. Strange, isn't it? No—dangerous evidence. Must be got out of way. Miss Hornung—not born yesterday."

"Mind, I don't say premeditated crime—lover's quarrel—temper—high words—a whip-stroke across a man's face, another on the stallion's flank—nasty place, the Black Bear trail. Quite clear, isn't it?"

"Jocelyn—passionate little devil—worth a man's while to tame her, Mr. Wade, very much worth while."

I looked up. He was smiling and moistening his thick red lower lip. He had overdone himself and me. I struck him on the mouth, a blow so swift and furious that I felt his wet tongue on my knuckles, and his bared teeth gashed me to the bone.

His yellow head gashed on his shoulders, he reeled back, from his throat came a sound of rage and astonishment like that I had heard in the gorge; then he came staggering at me, his big pink hands outstretched and clutching, but making no attempt to strike.

Again, pivoting on my heel to put my weight behind it, I launched my fist. My foot slipped on the treacherous grass, my arm shot harmlessly skyward; the soft, powerful hands fell and closed on my shoulders. In that grasp my arms were helpless. I gave him a knee-stroke, and thought his scream would split my ears. As he held me, he raised me above his head and threw me many feet across the grass.

Spongy ground received me. In a breath I was up and back at him, though I saw him in a green mist powdered with gold and silver dust. He thrust out his arms to fend me off, and I saw that he could not box. I danced around him, with sense enough, even in my fury, not to let him get another hold; for in strength I was not half his match.

"Get back!" he roared. "Keep off, Wade! You hurt me! Keep off! Keep off!"

Had I not been beside myself with hate and my long-controlled anger, I should have laughed. Huge and strong and undeniably dangerous, he was, after all, but a hollow shell ringing with echoes. Courage was not in him.

My vision cleared, I evaded his guard and got my fist home on one of his eyes. He rushed me again, howling an indescribable combination of pain and wrath, and swung one of his immense legs at me in a kick that surely would have done my business, had I not seen it coming and caught his foot under my arm and tripped him.

Of what followed I have ever since been ashamed.

I think that—short of killing him—I did to him all that he would have liked to do to me. Both of us were, for the time, quite mad, I with rage, he with the unreasoning terror of a wild beast. It ended





when I twisted my fingers into his collar from behind and propelled his staggering, unresisting mass across the meadow and



through the alders to the bank of Forge Run.

It had come into the red whirl of my mind that there was but one way to silence him.

Dead men do not hale innocent girls into the murder courts.

## CHAPTER XX

### THE DIPLOMACY OF VIOLENCE

**B**AER seemed to be oblivious to what was happening to him. He reeled drunkenly as I hurried him along. On the bank of the run I swung him around to face me, balanced him for an instant, and pushed him from me. He fell with a loud splash and lay on his back in the shallows, his yellow head partly buried in a mud-bank. A red trickle from his mouth tinged the rapid water that flowed over his ears and chin.

I fetched a heavy stone and lifted it above my head. Then sanity returned.

In another split second I should have been a murderer!

With a shudder of disgust and horror I pitched the stone far out in the depths of the stream.

Sickened by the revulsion, I left Baer with the water playing across his broad chest, and sat down on a grassy mound to think the matter out.

Anger and bewilderment alternately swept me, and it was some time before I could clear my mind. Jocelyn, at all hazards, must be protected. How could I do it, and let this man live? Of her part in the events that had led to my uncle's death, I would not think. Loyalty demanded that I wait for time and the girl herself to ravel out that tangled skein. But the doctor—how to silence him?

Baer himself answered the question. Partly revived by the cool water, he began to moan. I leaned forward and stared down at him.

He had raised his chin. His ragged lips

moved, emitting an incoherent babble that mingled with the purling of the stream. His voice, gathering strength, took form in words:

"You hurt me, Wade. I can't stand it! I can't stand it!"

I sprang up. I had it now! I dragged the huge figure to the bank, and by making his body as comfortable as his condition would permit, got access to his mind.

"Can you understand me, Baer?" I asked him many times, until, after a great deal of groaning and profanity, he answered that he could.

"I hear you," he said. "Don't hurt me any more, Wade."

"Listen," I told him, "you're damned lucky, Baer, that you aren't a dead man. Now, if you want to live, and not go through all this again, and worse, you've got to do what I tell you. I may not get Jocelyn; but, by God, I'll keep her from you!"

"You've got to let her alone," I said, "and if you ever tell anyone else a word of what you've hinted to me today, as sure as there is a living God, Baer, I'll break every bone in your body! Do you get that?"

He answered with an unintelligible mutter that was not enough for me. Sure that he was shamming, and though it went against the grain, I prodded him until he shrieked.

"Oh! *Agh-h-h!*" he cried, and then gabbled thickly, "Don't, Wade—you're torturing me! Yes, yes, yes, I understand. I'll promise—promise—anything."

"Then say it after me," I directed. "Say, 'I promise that I will never try to bother Miss Yorkworth again in any way, and that I will never tell anyone, or hint to anyone, that she had anything to do with the death of Mr. Cathcart.'"

"I—promise—" he began, and haltingly repeated it. When he had finished, he turned weakly on his side, shaken by sobs that seemed as if they must burst his lungs.

I helped him crawl into the shade of a black alder bush, and there I left him crying horribly like a huge mechanical toy.

Wearily, for I had not come out scatheless, I crossed the meadow and climbed the mountain to the plateau. Tethered to a spruce near the mouth of the gorge, I found Black Roderick. I was about to throw a leg across his saddle, when I heard a noise close behind me.

Dad MacVittie came scrambling backward down the hummock from which I had spied on the gorge.

"Judast Priest!" he exclaimed, halting



beside me and looking at me with amazement and concern. "Judast Priest!"

"Do I look as bad as that, Dad?" I asked.

"Three times wuss," he said with sincere emphasis. "Yere's yer

glasses, Buddy." He held out the binoculars that I had lost. "I seen the hull of it through 'em—right up till ye walked him turkey inter the elders. I thort sure ye was goin'

ter kill him; but I jest seen him trompin' off erlong the bottom.

"It's a good thing ye held yerself in, Buddy," the old man added earnestly; "a killin' ain't noways a handsome thing ter hev ter explain. So long's ye stopped shy o' that, I don't think no one in all this country will keer what else ye done ter him."

I returned to Ragnarock like a hero to his castle, though a sorry figure I must have presented. When I dismounted, Mrs. Muir seized me by one arm, and Mungford by the other.

"We know, sir—I hope you spoiled him," said the little man.

Sore in every joint and muscle, I creaked out of bed next morning, and laughed at the dilapidated creature that gloomed at me from my mirror. A violet dusk obscured my eyes, other portions of my countenance looked as if I had incurred the displeasure of a tribe of hornets, and a strained tendon in my neck had contracted overnight, pulling my head askew.

Pride and prudence dictated that I remain for a few days in seclusion, but I would not heed. I wanted to see Jocelyn. After breakfast I called for my horse, and slouching low a long-peaked cap, I rode to Medburne.

An automobile stood in the drive deside Baer's house, a white placard was on his door, and a wiry, gray, professional-looking man was smoking on the porch.

As I set foot on the bottom step of Miss Hornung's porch, Jocelyn's voice reached me with singular clarity from within, and in spite of myself I paused.

"He must not be told," she said. "I don't dare—"

"Jocelyn, you're a fool!" cut in the piping tones of Miss Hornung.

I had no business to be listening; so, though I would have given a large share of all that I possessed to know what was under discussion, I put my foot down hard on the step and ascended to the door. The conversation—I thought I'd heard the

lowered tones of a man—ceased like water turned off by a tap.

In the dead silence that followed my knock, Miss Hornung minced toward me through the hall.

"Bless me!" she chirped when I gave her good-morning, and she blinked at me with her head on one side. "Bless me! It's Mr. Wade's clothes and Mr. Wade's voice, but who's wearing them? Gil," in a tone of real feeling, "who did that to you?"

"You ought to see the other fellow," I said grimly, and asked for Jocelyn.

The little old lady chuckled, her eyes darting from me to the house across the way and back.

"Dr. Baer," said she, ignoring my question, "had a dreadful accident yesterday afternoon—perhaps you heard about it? He fell down the falls

into Forge Run among the rocks, and nearly drowned. Dr. Kirkwell of Clearwater is attending him." She peered smiling up at me. "I suppose you have heard?"

I answered that I had not, and again inquired for Jocelyn.

Miss Hornung's face turned sober.

"She isn't at home," she answered; and when I looked as if I didn't believe it, "Well," she snapped, "she won't see you, if you'd rather have the plain truth."

"Aunt Taphie," I pleaded—I had to trust someone—"I want you to help me, but first I'm going to tell you a terrible thing. Won't you come out and sit down?"

"I will that." She briskly opened the screen. "And I'll tell you before you begin, that if it's what I think it is, I'm going to enjoy it. Oh, your poor eyes!" I had perforce removed my cap.

We sat in the porch-swing, and Miss Hornung listened, knotting and unknotting in her nervous fingers a small green handkerchief. Once or twice, with quick little motions, she touched my arm.

When I had finished—I reserved nothing, and did not spare myself—she caught my hand and held it tightly, looking into my battered face and saying, "Gil! Gil!" Then a light of pure savagery glittered in her beady eyes.

"So you thrashed the big doctor. Oh, I would have liked to see it! I wish"—with spiteful emphasis—"that you had killed





him! No, I don't either, for you would have had to suffer. But if you could have—" She stopped.

I thought that I'd gained an ally, but one never could tell about Aunt Taphie. "That's a damnable man." She pointed a slender finger toward the doctor's house.

"He is," I agreed; "but I don't think that he'll ever dare tell. If he does—"

"Exactly!" Miss Hornung drew a knot in her handkerchief viciously tight.

"I don't believe what he said—about Jocelyn," said I. "If I did, it wouldn't matter, but I don't—though I think that he does."

"You believe that it was her whip, don't you, and that I stole it?" queried Miss Hornung. I answered yes.

"Well, it was—and I did." There was a hint of defiance in the old lady's tones.

"The whip," said I, "proves nothing to me. Anyone may lose a whip, and anyone else may find it."

"Where did you find it?" Miss Hornung suddenly asked.

"In Uncle Jack's desk."

Miss Hornung's beady eyes widened. She jerked her head away, arose and moved toward the door. Her change of manner alarmed me. For no reason that I could guess, she was suddenly hostile. I detained her.

"Aunt Taphie," I protested, "don't you think that I've earned a little confidence? I feel—well, sort of on the outside of everything. I love Jocelyn, and would do anything for her—nothing can alter that."

She whipped around at me, and I could see that something had shaken her. Her face was puckered like a child's that is about to cry. She laughed instead, but with no pleasant sound. "I don't trust any man, unless it's Een Stone. I—I don't know what to say to you—besides, I've promised Jocelyn. I think that you had just better keep out of this."

With one of her amazing transformations, she softened again, and laying a hand on my arm, asked, "You are a good boy, aren't you, Gil?"

She had advised the one thing that was impossible to me—I could not keep out of it.

I was hurt and angered. I looked moodily at her and answered, "I don't know."

As if his name on her lips had evoked him, the gray attorney stepped out on the porch. Framed in the doorway behind him stood Jocelyn.

"Oh!" she exclaimed when she saw my face. "Oh, Mr. Wade!" Her hazel eyes swam with pity. She made an impulsive step, pushing the screen; then, with a murmured, "Thank you—forgive me!" she turned and ran back along the hall.

"Take him away, Een," said Miss Hornung, pointing to me. "If I were a man, I should say this is a hell of a mess." She, too, went in the house.

Stone touched my arm. "I will walk with you, Mr. Wade," said he, "as far as the gate."

Neither of us spoke until we reached it, when he turned swiftly toward me.

"Mr. Wade"—his dry, precise tones quivered—"I think that we have greatly misunderstood each other. What you did yesterday—it was illegal, sir, extremely irregular—but, by Saint Christopher, it was well done!"

His right hand shot out with jerky impulsiveness, while his left lifted his gray derby an inch above his pompadour; his wrinkled lids opened wide, revealing as astonishing warmth in his level eyes. "If you will honor me, sir—"

I wrung his fingers, and heard behind us a clapping of hands. I peered under the apple-tree. Miss Hornung had come to the edge of her porch and was applauding us.

"I have misunderstood you," I told Stone; "I don't entirely understand you yet. But the main thing—the only thing that counts—is that you are working for Jocelyn."

"Precisely," he answered, inspecting the hand that I had released. "Ahem, I am not so much astonished that you were able to do what you did to that"—his voice hardened and crackled—"damned scoundrel over yonder."

"What is it all about?" I cried. "You know that I am with you, heart and soul—I love Jocelyn. Must I stay in the dark? Is there any hope that she will change toward me? What is this other thing that she fears? Can't I fight it with you?"

It seemed to me that the lawyer glanced swiftly across my shoulder at the house.

"Mr. Wade, I wish that I might tell you!" he said with a sincerity that I could not doubt. "I really think that it would be better if you knew. Unfortunately, Miss Yorkworth thinks otherwise, and I have passed my word to her. It is a sad





affair," he went on gently; "but I think that we may confidently look to time to rectify it. Be patient—I know the word is repugnant to young blood—but have patience. All will yet be well—am sure of it."

Some of his quiet confidence entered me. I shook his hand again, and we parted with a mutual respect and liking that nothing has ever shadowed.

## CHAPTER XXI

### WHAT "JOCELYN" TELLS

**T**HERE were no stars; through the opaque night beyond my library windows a thin rain sighed on the lawn; the breeze that now and then stirred the curtains brought in a damp, earthy smell. Sometimes a horse stamped in the stables. It was Shirt Borin's watch; occasionally I heard the padding of his feet and the rustle and flap of his rubber slicker as he passed outside on his rounds. The others at Ragnarock were in their beds. Except

the unwelcome companionship—always felt, but never seen—of Hassan's "eyes," I was alone.

Hogan Merrill's book on cipher-writing had come in that morning's mail. Had less depended on it, and I had been more free from anxiety that other matters had caused, I should not have called textbook aid to the elucidation of Uncle Jack's cryptogram, but should have muddled along in my own way, and perhaps—I think not—should have failed.

As a first step, I had learned the sequence of twenty-eight letters in the cipher and had studied their arrangement, to determine to which of the several general classes of cryptograms the message belonged.

I had thought for a time that it was a "substitution" cipher—in which a sign or character, or more than one, is arbitrarily selected to represent each letter of the alphabet, and of which a splendid example is presented in Poe's fascinating tale, "The Gold Bug." On that theory I had worked at some length before the arrival of the book, but had made no headway.

It had occurred to me, too, that Uncle Jack might have couched his message in one of the number of foreign languages with which he was familiar, but I had dismissed the thought. He had intended to communicate something to me; he would

naturally have chosen a medium with which—having cleared the cipher—I would be conversant. The final reading would be in English.

So often had I run the letters over in my mind that I knew them by rote, as well as the a-b-c's.

To make more easy my inspection, I typewrote them, wide-spaced, thus:

SYLETORNKLNCNJNYDEIOSNNLMCIJ

Then, with Merrill and a pad, I settled myself at my desk, lighted a long cigar, and began the struggle.

If the cipher were not a substitution arrangement, I looked to Merrill to tell me what it was, and presently, after studying the book's examples, I decided my uncle's message came under the heading, "Key-Word Ciphers."

I began by typing alternate letters of the message, as the book directed, beginning with the first one, and set down S—L—T—R—K—. By filling the blanks with vowels or consonants, as the case might demand, according to directions I should arrive at the key-word. Nothing seemed to fit.

Conversely, Y—E—O—N—L—, with the ellipses properly supplied, should give the beginning of the message. That appeared equally hopeless.

A wearisome time I spent, and spoiled much paper, without result. No combination that I could make with the letters given offered a particle of sense.

Intensely concentrated, I lost track of time. Shirt Borin, speaking from the window, where he had come without noise, startled me so that my heart jumped like a scared rabbit.

"Sittin' up kinda late, Mr. Wade, ain't you?" he said, and chuckled at my discomfiture.

"Shirt," I told him, "I've got something here that beats all the examples in the arithmetic books."

"Figures, eh?" he answered. "I'm 'fraid I couldn't help you none. Never was any good at 'em. When I seen cube-root comin', I quit school."

He projected head and shoulders across the window-sill and lighted a cigarette.

"I seen the big doc," he continued, apropos of nothing in particular, "down to





Medburne yesterday. He had his face patched up like he'd had a blowout."

I smiled, rubbing my forehead, that after a week, was still tender. Shirt chuckled again, and withdrew.

"Y—e—o—n," I muttered, turning again to Merrill on key-words.

"Of course the system is capable of complications—" I agreed with that—"arbitrary transpositions——"

Transpositions!

There was an idea. Perhaps, after all my work, I'd been barking up the wrong tree. I put a fresh sheet of paper in the typewriter, and reversed the letters of the cipher so that it read:

JICMLNNSOIEDYNJNCNLKNROTELYS

As I had done before, I began with the odd letters, seeking the key-word.

J—C—L—N—— I went no farther.

"Jocelyn!" I cried.

I tapped the word—I confess that I liked to—a number of times on the typewriter; and in my excitement over the discovery that Uncle Jack had employed in his cipher the name of the girl beloved by both of us, I for the instant rather lost sight of the importance of the message into which he had woven it.

After a while my wits returned to earth.

"Let's see what you will tell me, Jocelyn," I whispered, smiling at the conceit, and began the filling in of the important spaces as directed by the chapter on key-word ciphers. It was some time before I satisfactorily filled the gaps, but the final solution came with a rush!

*"Diamonds hidden in snake rattles."*

In the exultation of triumph, I opened my mouth to shout the words, but repressed myself. I clutched the arms of my chair and stared across the top of the desk.

On the wall before me, its scales softly glittering in the light of my reading-lamp, its mottled patterns sinisterly beautiful, hung the skin of the great Pennsylvania rattlesnake that Dad MacVittie had killed.

In seven of the eleven horny shells that depended from the tip of its slender tail, if the cryptic message did not lie, I should find the blue diamonds of Baroda.

Uncle Jack had run true to form. In nothing that he had done was the oddity and cleverness of the man better exemplified than in the curious receptacle that he

had chosen to conceal his cherished jewels. Of the thousand hiding-places that Ragnarock offered, he had selected the one that a searcher, however astute, would be least likely to think of.

I arose to take down the skin.

Uneasiness tapped my shoulder with its shadowy hand, and I paused.

In the moment of victory I felt, keenly as never before since it had pervaded us at Ragnarock, the presence of the unseen watcher. Caution whispered that I must be doubly careful now, for I held at last the knowledge that it, too, had come to learn. An ill-considered move, a rash glance even, might betray me to Hassan.

Instead of meddling with the skin, I hurriedly gathered the papers on which I had worked, crumpled and carried them to the fireplace in the main hall. There I touched a match to them, and watched them burn and smoulder to ashes.

Stronger and more menacing grew the spell of the presence. By what trick it was effected, I could not guess; but I knew, as certainly as if my eyes and ears had borne witness, that I was not alone.

Not until I had with the tip of my fountain-pen crushed the small gray heap of ashes to impalpable dust, was I satisfied that my secret was secure.

I turned a button and flooded the hall with light from Uncle Jack's lofty chandelier. Its leaping radiance banished the inchoate images, but did not rid me of their bedeviling influence.

Again, as I'd done a hundred times, I searched every nook and alcove, and with a flash-lamp made the round of every closet. No one was there. I laughed at my apprehensions, but there was small confidence in my mirth.

The big clock above the library arch struck two. I turned off all the lights and tramped up the stairs to my bedroom and slammed its door behind me.

Five minutes later I opened the door by slow inches without noise and, stocking-footed, crept down like a thief through the darkness.

Hassan or no Hassan, I was determined that before I slept I would see the Baroda diamonds.

## CHAPTER XXII

### A STRANGE HANDCLASP

YOU are," I whispered, to myself through curled lips as I set out on my expedition, "a superstitious coward"; for I had taken a coward's precau-



tions. Besides my flash-lamp, I carried my automatic and a long-bladed hunting-knife. I hoped sincerely that the occasion would not demand the use of any of them, and I heartily cursed the circumstances that had made me a fugitive in my own house.

After I quitted the guidance of the staircase rail, I had to rely on my sense of direction, for the blackness was absolute. I fixed in mind as well as I could the location of the pieces of furniture that I should have to avoid; and thrusting the pistol in my belt to keep company with the knife, I went cautiously forward, bent nearly double and groping with one hand before me.

Without adventure more thrilling than a stubbed toe, I penetrated the library alcove to the desk. One of Hasan's tiger-hunters, thought I with a grin, could not have been more stealthy.

As I should need both hands to detach the snakeskin from the wall, I laid the flash-lamp on the blotter. I made a long step up beside it, and thence to the top of the desk.

There I paused to listen. I heard the soft, hissing fall of the rain, the creebling trill of a tree-frog in the garden, and on the lawn Shirt Borin whistling guardedly between his teeth as he tramped his rounds, to keep his courage up and scare the ghosts.

My exploring fingers touched the outlines of the rattlesnake skin, and I smelled faintly the shellac with which it had been varnished to preserve it. Uncle Jack had attached the trophy to the wall with eight brass-headed thumb-tacks. One by one I loosened them, prying under their heads with the point of my knife. When I began to disturb the tail, the rattles clicked dryly, and I muffled them by winding my handkerchief around them.

I did not entirely remove the tacks from the skin, in which the shellac had securely gummed them; for I wished to return the skin to its place later, in such a manner that no one would be able to see that I had tampered with it. To accomplish that in the dark, would be delicate work; I was forced to invent an expedient that would help me to find again the exact position of the thumb-tack holes.

That I did by splintering with my knife a toothpick that I found in my pocket. I broke the slivers into short lengths and carefully inserted one of them in each of

the holes left by the tacks as I pulled them out.

The diamonds, I had decided, could not possibly be safer than where Uncle Jack had put them. Their hiding-place had defied one thorough search. I meant to have a look at them, and then to replace them where I had found them, and leave them there until I should determine what I would do with them.

Shellac and time had stiffened and crisped the snakeskin. When it finally came free in my hands, it was inclined to crackle at the least movement. I dared not try to roll it, so I held it like a strip of dried bark above my head in one hand, dismounted from the desk, and made my more difficult way back through library and hall and up the stairs. I had left my door ajar. When I had closed it behind me, I drew a long sigh of relief, but did not relax my caution.

Before I made a light, I laid the snakeskin on the bed, which it spanned from side to side, and turned the coverlet down over it. I locked the door and hung my doubled handkerchief from the knob so that it covered the key-hole. Then I pressed the electric button and sat down on the foot of the bed to examine my prize.

I never had thought that the rattles of a snake might be detachable. I had given little time, anyway, to speculation about rattlesnakes; being well content, so long as they kept away from my neighborhood, to leave them to their own devices.

Gingerly I experimented with the curious little appendages, that at my lightest touch gave out a sound as of withered peas in a dead pod.

Sure enough, each was held by its next larger companion above, and in turn gripped the one below, so that they resembled a chain of loose-socketed snap-fasteners, of which the "button," a small brown bit of horn, formed the tip. It was also the key; for when it yielded to a twist and rolled in my palm, I was able with comparative ease to detach the other rattles in the order of their size.

The fifth shell was heavier than its fellows.

It slipped in my nervous fingers—

An exclamation burst from me, and I strained forward.

From the rattle had fallen on the counterpane what appeared to my delighted





eyes like a congealed drop from the bluest lake in the world!

Transplendent in its concentrated glory, it lay on the white cloth—a diamond of hardly half a karat's weight, no larger than a drop of dew—but such a diamond!

Bent over it, holding my breath while I stared into its radiant splendor, I forgot time and place.

It returned my gaze—it had personality, that stone! Looking long into its chambered depths, I learned why men in all ages, since the first bit of glittering carbon



came from its bed of clay, have stooped to any crime to possess these crystal tokens of nature's purity and power.

Unconsciously my fingers curved and clenched; I knew the miser's lust; had anything menaced my treasure-trove, I would, in its defense, have risked my life.

I stirred the gem with a finger-tip. It blinked, and from its azure deeps flashed out with dazzling swiftness, turn by turn in fiery intensity, all the hues of which the sun is master.

One after another I robbed the six other shells and laid their contents on the spread. Each new disclosure was larger and more gorgeous than its predecessor. The last and largest was of not more than three karats' weight—no extraordinary size as diamonds go—but in color and purity it was, with its fellows, incomparable; even I, with no science of gems, could see that.

As I gazed at the firmament on my counterpane, my vision turned inward, the coruscations of the gems blurred and faded, and in their stead I saw a woman's hazel eyes whose steady light outshone all their tricksome brilliance.

When I looked again at the jewels, their glamor, for me, was gone. Pshaw! what were diamonds, anyway? I swept the stones together in a clicking heap and returned them to the keeping of the dead snake. Thenceforth the vision of them that most satisfied me was that in which I pictured them set in a pendant which I would one day hang around the firm white neck of Jocelyn Yorkworth.

"Now," I muttered, as I coupled the last

of the rattles and snapped the "button" into place, "I hope you're satisfied."

If, as Shirt Borin had declared, the restless spirit of that strangely precise madman John Cathcart still lingered near his treasure, the remark was intended for his ears. I had complied with his behest, I had found the diamonds; and I thought that he would approve of the disposition that I intended to make of them. "You may do as you please about keeping them," he had written.

My task was finished—I had accomplished all that I had come to Ragnarock to do.

Finished! I laughed at the irony of the thought. Nothing was finished. Why it was hardly begun! I had the diamonds; but in the hills was the watchful Hassan, implacable and daring, who had sworn to recover them for his master. If I knew anything of men, much water would flow under the bridges before he would allow me in peace to hang that pendant around Jocelyn's neck.

And Jocelyn's neck.

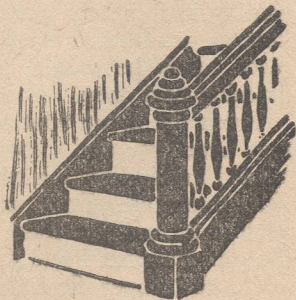
And Jocelyn—I could not leave her! Were everything else cleared up, I still was held by a chain that was stronger than steel.

Finished, indeed!

Once more I took up the snakeskin, and having extinguished my light, stole down into the black and silent hall. I would replace it and await the course of events; my inner consciousness told me that I should not have long to wait.

"Look for me when you have found the diamonds," Hassan had said. I harbored a strong impression that he would keep his tryst.

When the last thumb-tack was replaced, I suppose that I might with safety have turned on the lights—if my strong consciousness of espionage were not a delusion, the hidden spy must know that I was abroad on an errand; and nothing now remained for the darkness to conceal—but it did not occur to me to do so. So, in my attempt to regain the staircase, I missed it altogether and wandered beyond it. I had made that discovery and was about to turn back, when something happened that stiffened me like





a pointer dog that sees a covey, and magically cleared my mind.

It was the cool spray of minute drops of water on one of my groping hands!

Trivial in itself, the incident was fraught with a significance that sent a tingle through me. Instantly I was alert.

At my first contact with the falling damp, I had instinctively withdrawn my hand. I thrust it out again, and again felt on it a spray like that from an atomizer. I knelt and found on the rug a spot some two feet in diameter where the wooly nap was beaded with moisture so fine that it had not soaked into the body of the fabric.

Water from a defective pipe or a leaking roof would have fallen in larger drops and would have formed a pool where it fell.

This precipitation was entirely different—it was the mist of the night itself falling through an opening in the dome!

At last I knew whence the "eyes" of Hassan had pried upon all that had passed at Ragnarock. From the roof—the one spot of all, that, because of its comparative inaccessibility, we had not suspected, and had only perfunctorily searched—one of the Barodian tiger-hunters had watched us these many days! Somehow he had contrived to exist there, and occasionally to quit his post and carry reports to his master.

He was even now huddled up there in the falling rain, straining tense ears to follow what was taking place below.

I shook my fist at the upper darkness, and took oath that after this night he should do so no longer.

Should I raise a general alarm, calling Shirt and the others to my aid? For a moment I hesitated, the cry almost at my lips. No, I decided; given warning that he was discovered, the watcher somehow, shadowlike, would elude us, as Hassan and his emissaries had done before. Alone and in the dark, my chances of capturing him would be infinitely greater. He had no hint as yet that I suspected his hiding-place, else he would not have left his listening-post open.

From the damp spot on the rug I took my bearings and, counting my steps, started in the direction where I thought the wall must be. Four paces brought me against it, and five more took me back to the staircase that I had missed.

On the upper floor I paced five steps along the banister. Luck was with me. Where I stopped, my hand encountered one of the slender carved pillars that at intervals reached from the railing to the

rafters that supported the slant roof of the dome. By its aid I mounted noiselessly, and stood poised on the balustrade, whence I found that I could easily lay hold of the roof-beams themselves.

Ten feet out in the black, if I had not calculated wrongly, the spy was crouched.

Doubtless he was much pestered in mind to guess the meaning of my nocturnal rambles; and what a surprise he had coming to him! I took a small pen-knife from my pocket and tossed it in the general direction of the library. It struck on a table and bounded to the floor with a most satisfying clatter. I grinned. My tiger-hunter would think that I was blundering about below.

Once more I assured myself that my weapons were where I could handily come at them; and then, with a hope for good fortune, I hooked my fingers over the nearest rafter, between the roof-boards, and began to tense my arm-muscles.

As the beam took my weight, it creaked, but only a little. I was extremely deliberate. Only when I was sure that its protests were finished, did I trust myself entirely to it, and lifting my stockinged feet from the rail, swung out in the darkness.

It was a foolhardy proceeding, and had I paused to think it over with a calm mind, I should never have attempted it. Not until I was in the thick of it and it was too late to back out, did I reflect that from the nature of our relative positions, the spy had all the best of it. The long espionage to which I had been subjected had exasperated me beyond caution; and when I had discovered its source, I thought of nothing but the speedy capture of its author.

Hand over hand, my fingers catching precarious holds between the roof-boards, my feet dancing on black emptiness, I went up the slope of the roof.

A breath of cooling air against my face, a drift of dampness on one of my groping hands, warned me that I had reached my objective. As I swung for an instant by the fingers of one hand, my body streaming perspiration, my heart pounding from excitement and my exertions, there came to me with the sickening swiftness of a kick in the stomach a full appreciation of the difficulties of my situation.

Now that I had arrived, what was I going to do about it?





"Go back, you adjective fool!" counseled awakened reason. "Go back and get help. You may lose the spy; but if you go farther into this predicament, you most certainly will break your neck."

Sound common-sense, and I meant to act on it at once. In the meantime I could not dangle there by one hand. My fingers were numbing, and I must get a hold with my other hand for a time sufficient to relieve them.

Muscular impulses that I could not control set my body to turning, and hastened my action. My stiffening fingers were being twisted from their grip. Instinctively and not recking where, thrust up my other hand.

Again moisture fell on it. It shut on nothingness, clutched wildly, and closed with desperation on a human hand!

Two sharp exclamations followed the unexpected contact. One of them was my own, a mixture of fear and astonishment and, yes, of triumph; for had I not what I had come for? The other was a grunt of consternation.

Bare feet and knees beat a tattoo on the shingles. The hand wriggled violently in my grasp. Its owner was bracing himself to withdraw it—and then where would I be?

He began to pull me upward, he had only half my weight to lift. Unless I did something with great swiftness, he would break my grip and precipitate me, whirling end over end, to the hardwood floor below us.

That thought stimulated me. I let go suddenly of the roof-board and clutched the man's wrist.

My weight coming on him when he was only partly braced, was too much for him. Down he came on his face with a thump and a jerk that nearly twitched me off into the darkness; and there I hung panting and kicking at the end of his stretched arm, with as little chance of regaining a hold of the roof timbers as I had of reaching heaven.

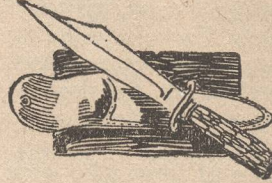
## CHAPTER XXIII

### SHIRT EARNS HIS HUNDRED

**I**F I can't get away, neither can you," I muttered, closing my eyes with a sort of bulldog instinct, though there was nothing to look at. Immediately I opened them again; my muscles, tough as they were, would not indefinitely endure the strain of my weight. Eventually I should have to let go—and what then?

That consideration thrilled my scalp. As if to accentuate it, the arm to which I clung wriggled violently, twitching me up and down and swinging me dizzily to and fro. The spy was trying to get his knees under him again. I jerked desperately to balk him.

Loosened by my exertions, first my hunting-knife and then my automatic slipped from my belt and fell.



Either the safety-catch of the pistol was

defective, or the impact was to much for it. A spurt of flame and a crashing report followed the thud of the weapon on the floor. The clash and tinkle of shattered glass near the library was evidence that the bullet had made a mess of one of Uncle Jack's curio cases.

I had opened my mouth to cry for help, and I let the call go.

"Shirt! Dad! Mungford! Link!" I yelled, the echoing dome multiplying my voice so that it seemed as if a dozen giants were summoning my retainers.

My shouts were needless. The pistol-shot had been enough. With thump and bang and slamming of doors, Ragnarock awoke. Shirt Borin came breathlessly cursing from the lawns, and I heard the rattle and scrape of his rifle as he scrambled across the stone ledge of the library window.

As soon as his boots touched the floor, he turned on his powerful flash-lamp and sent its white ray stabbing in all directions through the gloom below me.

"Where are you, Mr. Wade?" he blared, running into the hall. "What the hell—?" as his light revealed the wreck of the curio case and my pistol and knife on the floor.

When I answered, and he turned the searching ray aloft and in its dazzling shaft beheld me wriggling in midair, his tones became shrill with mystification.

"What in hell you doin' up there? What you got holt of—a snake? Don't let go!" he volleyed, and heedless of my call to turn on the lights, he dashed toward the staircase.

His feet were on the stairs when the others of the household rushed into the hall, bringing a hubbub of voices, in which my instructions were lost.

Mungford turned on the electric switch. A few feet from me the circular chandelier



at the top of the pine-tree pillar blazed into light.

"For God's sake, Mr. Gilbert," Mungford called, "can you hold on?"

The little man was in his pyjamas, and his hair stood out freakishly around his bald spot. He thrust his huge revolver into the holster that he had buckled at his waist, and monkeylike began to clamber up the pegs on the pillar, his fat, upturned face pinched by anxiety, his voice shouting fragments of warning and encouragement. Shirt had reached the balcony, and doubled over the balustrade, was bawling in my ear.

Dad MacVittie alone of those who were so eager to aid me, manifested a clear head. He took in the situation, and made his twanging voice heard through the clamor of futile endeavor of his three comrades.

"Hey! Shet up, all o' ye! Shet up an' leave Buddy git a word in edgeways. He's tryin' ter tell us something. Judas Priest! Shet up!"

While he spoke, the hunter laid his rifle down, snatched a blanket from a divan, and ran under the spot where I dangled, motionless now, for the spy had ceased his frantic efforts to be rid of me.

"Quick, you galoots!" Dad snarled when he had got silence. "Ketch holt o' the corner o' this yere blanket. Buddy's got a grup onder one o' them damn smokes, an' he don't know jest how ter leave go. D'ye want him ter plout down yere an' smash his laigs! Come on, Jimmy—ye won't be airy use ter him, chipmunkin' up thet tree."

I had made two discoveries: The peep-hole in the roof, which evidently was the work of a sharp knife, was hardly more than a foot square; the sinewy brown hand that I gripped in mine lacked its middle finger.

Link and Mungford ran to assist Dad to spread the blanket. Shirt hesitated indecisively at the balcony rail. I called to him.

"Go to the roof through the scuttle at the back, Shirt," I said, "and nab this fellow. I'll hang on until you get him. Maybe then you can pull me up so that I can reach a beam." Even with the blanket waiting to receive me, I did not like the look of that forty-foot fall. "The hundred dollars goes," I added, as Shirt tore around the balcony toward the rear.

"Me for it," I heard him mutter, and he disappeared.

"Leave a squall outer ye ef ye have ter leave go," advised Dad, "so's we kin git braced."

Another voice reached my ears, coming softly from above.

"Sahib Wade," it said hurriedly, "I can pull the sahib up so that he may reach the beam. It is the command of the Lord Hassan that the sahib is not to be hurt, but of the sahib's servants he has said nothing. I am sorry that the sahib has sent the man to the roof. I will not be taken. Will the sahib let me go?"

"No," I answered through grating teeth. Already I could hear Shirt floundering on the shingles.

"I am sorry, sahib, for the——"

The man's speech ended in a choked gasp. Shirt must have seized him by the throat.

A confused drumming on the shingles followed, then Shirt's voice, "I got him, Mr. Wade. I'll pull him up a little, and you can git holt of a rafter."

I felt myself lifted; once more the damp of the outer night was cool on my hands and face; I drew a deep breath of fresh air. Shirt tugged steadily. I heard him grunt. The arm and hand that I held were strangely limp and flaccid; I wondered what Shirt had done to the man.

"Now," said Shirt, "can you switch your holt?"

First I released the maimed hand. Each of my fingers uncurled from it separately, stiffly, as if their joints were rusted, and they pained me. Still curved, I thrust them at the roof, that was close above my head. I heard and saw their knuckles come in contact with the timbers, but there was no feeling in them. Would they support me? There was no time to wonder about it; they must!

Impatiently I hooked them over the nearest rafter, between two of the roofboards. I shifted my weight, and relaxed my clutch on the spy's wrist.

"All right," I told Shirt.

As if it responded to a signal, the brown arm doubled and struck up through the hole in the roof like a serpent. I heard an astonished cry from Shirt, and then a snarl of pain that rose into a shriek. A heavy, struggling weight rolled down the slope of the roof.

I clawed frantically along the rafter for a second hold, obtained it, and felt my fingers slip. They were benumbed and would not obey my will. Slowly they





straightened. I tried to swing in toward the balcony, knew that it was impossible, and with a warning yell, let go and pitched downward, as I had imagined a little while before, whirling end over end.



"Stiddy! Holt hard!" shouted Dad. Deliberately, it seemed to me, the roof receded, and the floor wavered toward me.

Head downward, I shot into the blanket, and the four of us plumped to the floor in a heap. We sat up, laughing foolishly, and stared at one another. For the moment we forgot what might be taking place overhead.

A revolver-shot and the echo of a wild cry that floated down to us through the hole in the roof, wiped the levity from our faces.

"Somethin's happened to thet boy Shirt," said MacVittie. He scrambled to his feet and limped toward his rifle. "Fetch a flashlight, Jimmie."

My hands were useless, but my legs were not; I headed the rush up the stairs and through the scuttle to the roof.

"Shirt, Shirt—where are you?" we called, groping and staggering in the mist on the slippery shingles, while Mungford shot the searchlight ray along the slopes and gables.

"Here. Over here—half on an' half off," a strained voice answered. "Hustle up, you fellers. I'm losin' my holt."

At the edge of the western roof the search-ray picked up Shirt's white face and staring eyes. He was literally hanging by his ribs from the gutter-channel.

"You there, Mr. Wade? You all right?" he asked as Link and Mungford dragged him from his dangerous roost. "I lost that feller. I had him all right, I thought, but he was playin' 'possum, an' he stuck a knife into me and got away. I'm damn sorry. His ladder's somewhere along the edge of the roof. It's a fishpole sort of thing."

"Are you badly hurt?" I queried, cursing Hassan and all his works.

"Naw, I don't think it. He sort of jabbed me and there's a lot of blood running down my leg, but I guess he ain't cut very deep."

"Yere's the galoot's ladder," announced Dad, who had been crawling gingerly along the gutter. He hauled up and exhibited a long cable made of two-foot sections of

bamboo, equipped at regular intervals with loops of thong for hand and foot-holds.

From the hillside sounded the derisive hooting of an owl. I swore again. Somewhere out there in the murk the "eyes" of Hassan was laughing at us.

We carried Shirt down into the hall and bandaged his wound, which was, as he thought, not serious.

"I hope that a hundred dollars will make it feel better," I told him. "You've earned it, and you shall have it."

"Wonder if that was the same feller without no clo'es on that carved my arm that night down to Een Stone's," said Link.

"I don't know," I answered; "but it's the same one that Dad winged up by the blasted pine—there was a finger gone from the hand that I had hold of."

"Judas Priest!" ejaculated MacVittie.

## CHAPTER XXIV

### ONE RIDDLE ANSWERED

**R**AGNAROCK in the morning was a changed place—the atmosphere was different. I thought of it as I superintended the repair of my roof, whereon evidence was not wanting of the spy's protracted tenancy.

The hateful presence that for so long had galled us was gone, and though we had passed through a wild night and suffered a casualty, all of us—even Shirt, with a painful gash in his groin—felt that we had paid cheaply for the riddance. Indeed, when I handed him his hundred dollars, he expressed entire willingness to go through a similar experience as often as once a week for a similar reward.

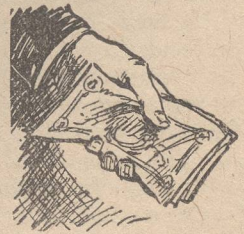
Presently I called Stone on the telephone.

"I have found them," I told him.

"Is that so?" he answered, excitement in his dry tones. "I shall come up immediately and see you."

We sat with our cigars in the library, and I told him, both of my previous encounter with Hassan at Forge Run, and of my discovery of the diamonds and our subsequent adventure with the spy.

The old attorney had proved to my satisfaction that he was worthy of my utmost trust, so I reserved nothing. He listened with a glow of intense interest kindling his cold gray eyes; and when he had learned





the hiding-place of the diamonds, he had difficulty in keeping his gaze from it. As I described the struggle in the dome, his glance strayed around the theater of the night's action, estimated the height of my fall, appraised the shattered curio case, and came back to rest lingeringly on the mottled snakeskin.

"Well, sir—well, *well!*" he commented. He studied for some time the tip of his cigar before he spoke again.

"All this is very like Mr. Cathcart, but—" He hesitated, compressing his straight mouth. "It is not like you, is it, Mr. Wade?"

"How do you mean?" I asked.

"You are young," he went on, apparently ignoring my question; "I can understand that this sort of thing has its appeal, its glamor for you; it has been an adventure. But, had your positions been reversed, you would not have managed affairs as Cathcart did, would you, do you think?"

"Oh, I don't suppose that I would," I answered, wondering what he was getting at. "Uncle Jack must have been—well, extremely peculiar."

"He had in him a strain of madness," declared Stone with conviction. "You are very different from him—although you resemble him a great deal." The old man puckered his grizzled brows and frowned at me as if he held me to blame for that. "I believe, however," he went on interrogatively, "that the relationship is not close?"

"Uncle Jack was my mother's half-brother," I answered.

"Exactly." He nodded, and appeared to ponder.

"I presume then," he said after a time, in rather unconvinced tones, "that you will be going soon."

"You know that I shall not," I told him with stubborn emphasis. Leaving Ragnarock was, just then, remote from my intentions.

"No, I suppose not," he agreed, and slowly shook his head at me. "Well, the best I can offer is my hearty wish for your good luck—in all things. Don't you think," he asked after another pause, "that it might be well to increase your precautions here now, to hire more men?"

His eyes and thoughts were again on the treasure. "I can arrange with Sheriff Bloom—"

I interrupted him. "No," I said, "there are enough of us here. I don't believe that

I run any personal danger, and the diamonds are where they would not look in a hundred years. When the time comes, I shall find some means to get them away."

"As you think best. And now—" Stone leaned toward me with a singularly winning smile on his wrinkled, forbidding countenance—"I wish to clear up a matter that has lain between us too long. I know from what you have told me," jerking his head in the direction of the snakeskin, "that we understand each other better now. I refer to the letter that you accused me of writing, and that I did write, and to this money, which is not mine, but yours."

He had taken out his wallet. While I stared at him, he laid on my knee the well-remembered little sheaf of ten thousand-dollar banknotes.

"The letter was entirely your uncle's idea, and it was in accordance with his instructions that I wrote and sent it to you with the money. He appeared to have had a real affection for your mother. He wanted you to have something—the ten thousand dollars anyway—and he went about it in his own devious way to insure that you should have. He thought that the threatening letter would stir you to action, if you had the right stuff in you. Otherwise, it would show you up, the bulk of his property would pass elsewhere—and you would still have the ten thousand."

Flattering! "What a delightful mess he wished me into!" I could not help saying. "Did he or didn't he take me for a dub?"

"Well, he hadn't any means of really knowing; but I believe that he at least hoped that you had in you something of his own spirit. He was a fatalist, and he didn't reckon much on the dangers to which he exposed you—he would not himself have feared them. I don't mind telling you that I followed his instructions gladly, and that I sincerely hoped that you would swallow the ten thousand, and keep away. You constituted another dangerous factor in a situation that was already too involved."

Stone paused, with an expression on his face that betokened a fear that he might have said too much.

"Do you still regret that I came?" I asked.

"No, I do not"—he said it with sincerity—"and I should be gratified if you would shake hands with me again, Mr. Wade. I should like to know that you cherish no





ill-feeling toward me because of what my conception of my duty has appeared to compel me to do."

We shook hands. "Have you any further instructions for me—now that the diamonds are found?" I inquired.

"No," said he, rising to go; "my responsibility to your uncle is ended. You have complied with the terms of his will. I congratulate you, and hope that you may remain in undisturbed possession of the property, unless—" His wrinkled eyelids narrowed, and he looked curiously at me. "Tut, tut!" he interjected sharply, shaking his pompadour, and I knew that he was reproving himself. "That must be entirely your own concern."

On the doorstep he straightened, and thrust a hand into his breast-pocket.

"I'm getting old and forgetful." He drew out a bundle of tickets. "There is to be a dance next Tuesday evening at the hotel—it is for the benefit of the Med-



burne library fund. Everybody"—he put smiling emphasis on the word—"that is anybody, and a great many that are not, will be there. Miss Hornung commissioned me to sell you some of the tickets."

I bought a dozen of them, and watched Stone ride on his way until his gray derby bobbed from sight into the mouth of Black Bear gorge.

He had cleared up the last shred of the mystery that had brought me to Ragnarock; on the mystery that was holding me there—the explanation that I should have liked best to hear from him—he had offered nothing.

Absent-mindedly I scraped my thumbnail across the edges of the tickets, and the repetition of the mechanical act centered my attention on them. Aunt Taphie had sent them to me, and "everybody," her messenger had assured me, would be there.

I decided that I would go to the dance.

## CHAPTER XXV

## THE LONG THIRTY SECONDS

**T**HOUGH to Stone I had boasted my confidence that the gems were safe, I worried about them. My conscientious thought was, as I had told him, that no one ever would think to look where they were hidden; but that part of the mind that is vigilant while consciousness is at rest, is distrustful. In the night after the attorney's visit foreboding dreams disturbed my sleep. In the second night they returned with doubled force, and compelled my slumbering body to obey.

It seemed to me that I had come through darkness a long distance in pursuit of something that out of its safe invisibility mocked and angered me to tremendous efforts. Weary, shivering, miserable, I stubbornly followed on. The limit of endurance found me staggering and swaying at the edge of a gusty chasm, on a path of ice that numbed my faltering feet.

"I will go on!" I shouted. A blinking light, a mere point, like a glow-worm a great way off, arrested my wandering perceptions. I focused them on it. Aroused consciousness rushed to its place, issuing confused orders.

I was awake, erect, my naked feet resting on a cold substance, one hand grasping a support beside me, the other groping in darkness.

Bewildered by the swift step from a dream into wakefulness, I swayed, breathing hard, seeking landmarks.

Again the light winked. It was below me, not so far away as it had seemed. In its brief flash I saw a huddle of crumpled papers, the curved shadow of a desk, the crouching outline of a man bent over it.

A gale riffling across the shingles of an unceiled roof above me completed my orientation.

It was the balcony stairs of Ragnarock that were so cold beneath my feet; their railing was supporting me, and I was shivering in my pyjamas half way down. A high wind was skirling across the gables and sighing through the pines. I had walked in my sleep.

Down in the hall and its alcoves was darkness, except for those intermittent flashes. They came from the library. At Uncle Jack's desk someone was stealthily





moving, fumbling, searching—within a yard of the treasure!

Spurred by a remnant of the anger that had possessed me in my dream, and heedless that I was unarmed, I descended the stairs and crossed the hall to the library archway.

Apparently the prowler had found something that arrested his attention. His light burned steadily, but so close to the papers that he was examining, that only a faint glow overflowed the sides of the desk and indistinctly silhouetted his stooped figure. He was short and broad, and wore a large cloth cap.

Suspicious that I had long ago allayed, became alive with certainty. There was, after all, a traitor in the house; else why —?

I reached through the archway to the switch-button on the wall, and as I pressed it I cried, "Mungford!"

There was more regret than anger in my tones; for had I not myself come upon him thus trafficking for his own purposes or another's, I would have sworn the man was loyal.

His shoulders shook. He crouched lower over the desk, then whirled toward me, presenting his useless flash-lamp. Slowly he stretched erect. As his face emerged from his upturned coat-collar, and the shadow of his cap dwindled, he repaid me the shock that I had given him, and I cried out again, "Hassan!"

Even as I mouthed the name, I was disgusted with myself for my failure to guess at once that it was he.

But here was a predicament: The indefatigable seeker was within arm's reach of his goal; he had been examining the pad on which I had worked out Uncle Jack's cryptogram. Had the traces of my pencil-point on the blank sheets—ghosts of the message that I had burned—had they betrayed the secret? Curse the carelessness that had left them there!

And if he had read the riddle of the snakeskin, how was I to prevent him from taking the diamonds? Doubtless his tiger-hunters were close at hand. I was unarmed, and shaking in the night-chill so that my teeth clicked; they were determined men and quick, as cats are quick. I should make, but a sorry fight of it against them all. At any rate, Mungford was not disloyal; and I wished that I had him at my back with his big revolver.

So ran my thoughts while we stared one at the other, and the wind screamed on the hill.

Hassan, in trim shooting-clothes with collar and cravat, was different from the Hassan of the meadows; he had a more intellectual look, as if he had put it on with his change of garments; but as the startled expression left his dark features and they smiled, it was the same smile with which from Black Roderick's back he had derided me.

"This is fortunate—though unexpected, Mr. Wade," he said, lifting his cap. "It saves us the perhaps mutual discomfort of the visit to your room that I had thought I should have to make. You came very softly, let me tell you, for I am not easily so taken by surprise. No; stop where you are!"

I had made a move to step through the archway. With a hasty gesture of restraint, he slipped his free hand inside his coat and out again. The muzzle of an automatic pistol pointed steadily at my chest.

"There is no need that we should shake hands," he went on, "and I can see you excellently so." The smile faded from his face, it grew tense with purpose, and his eyes turned coldly cruel.

"You have found them?"

It was less question than statement.

To save the life of me, I could not lie to him. I inclined my head.

"Where are they?"

His tones were low, but the words leaped to me like electric sparks.

"Where they were," I answered.

"Come, there is no truce between us now," continued the vibrant, inexorable voice. "While no one knew and you were searching, it suited me to look on you as an ally. But please believe me when I tell you that your life is nothing to me now."

He laid the flash-lamp on the desk, and took out his watch.

"Thirty seconds I give you to make up your mind—no more, for my time is short. If you are stubborn, afterward—when you are gone—I will haunt this place like a spirit; if I have to pull it down stone by stone and nail by nail, I will have the diamonds.

"But you will tell me." He emphasized his words with a motion of the hand that held the pistol. "Come, I am waiting, and the seconds fly." His voice was light and cool again, but I felt the power of his will pressing about me, as in my dream I had felt the darkness.





I stared at the pistol-muzzle. Its steadiness was uncompromising and terrible. My mouth grew dry and my eyeballs smarted. I glanced at Hassan's face. His eyes no longer met mine; they were directed at my chest, as if they searched there the exact spot where presently his bullet would penetrate.

The man spoke again.

"It is hard, isn't it—to lose all this?" he asked. He smiled and swept a hand around him. "And the little memsahib with the brown eyes? The price is too high, Mr. Wade—and it will not keep the diamonds from me."

It was undeniable truth. The diamonds were not worth dying for. Wisdom, common sense, urged me to give them to him. I would be reasonable. So with a sigh I opened my lips—and my ears heard them say, "If you do pull Ragnarock apart, you won't find the diamonds—no one will find them unless I tell where they are. Now if you think it will help you, damn you, shoot!"

My will had yielded; but before it could entirely surrender, my stubbornness had taken charge and spoken, with what appeared to me to be hollow and useless bravado. If ever a man with all his strength inwardly dissented from his own spoken words, that man was I. Ruefully I abided the result.

Beyond the unwavering pistol-barrel the eyes of Hassan flamed, and his brown finger curled around the trigger. I caught my breath and held it; and in the silence I heard the ticking of his watch, exaggerated to a measured drum-beat for the marching feet of death.

No spurt of flame leaped at me. I glared at the pistol, fascinated, afraid, shrinking in my inmost being; and yet with a small dancing flicker of triumph in my madness—the time that he had allotted must have elapsed twice over, and he had not fired. He would not fire! Or would he?

When he lowered the weapon and slipped it in his pocket, I rocked on my heels, dizzy, like a man pulled from the edge of a chasm.

"I see," he said pleasantly, his teeth flashing; "some of your uncle's blood, it is good blood, and I bow to it," and he did so. "Almost I won—I read it in your eyes—and then blood spoke, and I lost. Well, I shall find another way. Good night, Sahib Wade." He bowed again, and turned toward the window.

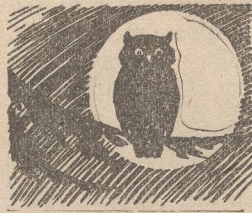
One, two, and three steps I watched him

take, while I stood dazed and powerless; then will and speech returned, and I flung after him, shouting that he should not go.

He glanced over his shoulder, and made a sign. Something grunted at my elbow. Hands seized me from behind, and whirled me sideways against the desk. I caught a glimpse of a nearly naked, brown, smooth-bodied man. I clutched at him; but his flesh was oiled, so that my fingers slipped from it, and he leaped past me.

Hassan sprang gracefully onto the window-ledge, bowed to me once more, and stepped into the night. His henchman followed.

Hardly had they cleared the sill when a shrill cursing sounded on the lawn, which immediately blazed with three successive gun-flares. A confused shouting echoed the reports of the rifle. Near at hand



arose the derisive hoot of an owl. Another answered it from the hillside. A gust of wind shook the library curtains.

In the window-frame appeared the lean face and flaming beard of Dad MacVittie. The old man was breathless, and bitterly complaining.

"Did you hit anyone?" I asked.

"Naw—got es many lives es a bob-cat, consarn 'em!" he panted. "They started a hocus-pocus up yender by the pines a leetle spell back. Reckon 'twus ter draw me away so's they could snuk in yere—an' it worked."

Dad emphasized his disgust with a long and sonorous snort.

I shrugged my shoulders; I had expected his answer. Force against Hassan appeared useless.

Had my mind not been dazed by our recent contact, it might more responsively have echoed the words:

"I shall have to find another way."

## CHAPTER XXVI

### THE DANCE—AND AFTER

MUNGFORD rode with me on Tuesday night to the dance.

We had intended to leave our horses in the garage at the foot of Black Bear gorge, and to motor the remaining miles to Medburne, but something ailed the car, and neither starter nor crank induced so much as a single cough from its silent engine.



"That, begging your pardon, sir," said Mungford, "is damnably curious. I'm certain everything was as it should be when I brought it in yesterday."

He was for investigating on the spot; but I dissuaded him with the argument that he would get grease on his dance



clothes; so we clattered on to Medburne by the light of an early moon, and put out our horses in the barn at the rear of the hotel.

Except for rows of chairs that lined its four walls, the big dining-room of the hotel was clear of furniture. Wall-flow-ers, male and female, sat or stood rest-lessly two deep around the border of the shining floor, and querulous music came from a piano and a violin. Lonely in the midst of the expanse paced a collarless little man, who continually called in tones at once belligerent and insinuating, "Fill up the floor!"

Attorney Stone detached himself from the shore-line and advanced to greet us, his tall, dusty pompadour waving like dead grass. I heard Miss Hornung's shrill titter, and distinguished her, a splotch of pink and heliotrope, where all around was white. She waved her fan at me.

Mungford, who didn't like the lawyer, and who had many friends of his own in the village, melted from me into a wave of white gowns and giggles.

In vain I searched with eager eyes for Jocelyn; and in my preoccupation missed what Stone was saying, until I found myself absently replying, "Is that so?" while he bent toward me, a hand at my elbow, with flushed face and shining eyes.

"Yes—we announced it only today," he said. He took a stogy out of his pocket, gnawed the end off it, and jabbed it back again.

"What!" I exclaimed, coming to myself with a start. "Good work!" I stammered, and gripped his hand. "So she persuaded—ah—I mean you persuaded her at last, did you?"

"Thank you, thank you, Mr. Wade." He squeezed back energetically, entirely oblivious in his agitation to my *faux pas*, and doubtless taking the will for the words.

"Sa-ay, ain't there goin' to be no dance tonight, or are you goin' to play croquet?" blared the little master of ceremonies, rubbing his bare throat; and added beseech-

ingly, "For the luvva Mike, fill up the floor!"

"Well, I'm going to dance with her," I declared, edging in the direction of Aunt Taphie, who was watching us, her quaint face as pink as the edging of her gown.

"So you shall, so you shall," agreed the old attorney, nevertheless holding me back by the slack of my coat. "After me, you shall be the first—you see, I am to have the first dance, she said. In the meanwhile—let's see—ah!"

He swung me around and propelled me in the direction of a red-haired young woman who was chucking at his performance, but I preferred to wait for the next dance, and have it with Aunt Taphie.

"I shall be pleased to step out with you, Mr. Wade—that is, if Een doesn't mind," Miss Hornung accorded when I at length claimed it. She glanced archly up at the soon-to-be collaborator of her bliss.

"Certainly not, most assuredly not," said Stone. "I was, in fact, about to suggest it—er—my dear." He made us an old-fashioned bow.

So Aunt Taphie and I "stepped out," and I found her as agile of body as she was of mind and tongue.

"Isn't this rather sudden?" I asked her, when we were safe from hearing under cover of the riotous music.

"Sudden!" she sniffed. "It's taken the blessed old idiot forty years to make up his mind—and," she added, "I won't say but maybe I helped him a little at the finish."

For all her sharpness, the little old lady was tremulously happy.

"Isn't Jo—isn't Miss Yorkworth to be here tonight?"

Aunt Taphie flashed me a pitying glance, and her wiry little hand tightened on my arm. "She had an errand to do," she answered; "she should be here by now.

"Gil," she said with determination a moment later, "you will have to take that girl in hand. She won't listen to Een or me; and we've both tried hard enough to make her, I'll be bound. I won't tell you all there is to it, only—well, I don't break my promises. You'll just have to take her in hand, and find out for yourself what the matter is. It's bad enough, conscience knows, but it isn't so bad that it should make a mess of two young lives—and I'm afraid it's doing just that."





After that, I found that my taste for dancing had waned. I lounged and smoked in the corridor, with an eye on the outer door.

When I re-entered the dining-room, Jocelyn was there. She had come in through the side entrance, and was talking with a group of girls. She wore a white gown like the others; but they served only as a background, against which she stood forth as sharply defined as the central figure of a photograph in which all else is out of focus.

"Well, go on now, before the next number starts," piped a low voice beside me. Aunt Taphie, whose china-blue eyes seldom missed anything, was at my elbow. In her eagerness to get me started, the old lady prodded me with her fan.

Jocelyn danced with me, and when the music stopped, and before she could protest, I almost dragged her through the side entrance onto the vine-sheltered porch of the hotel. I led her where the shadow of the whispering leaves lay thickest, and took her, still breathless from the dance, in my arms.

Jocelyn was a good girl. She was, besides, a human young woman taken greatly by surprise. When at the first of my kisses I felt her entire body respond, I knew that though she might afterward repudiate it with words, she had answered one of my questions in a manner that mere words could not deny.

For an ineffable instant I felt her arms groping, and her brown head lay on my shoulder; then she tore away and stood panting against the wall.

"Jocelyn!" I reached my yearning arms toward her.

"No, no!" She dashed them aside. "Don't touch me—ever again!" She ran by me along the porch, and flashed through the lighted frame of the doorway, her hands at her face.

Defeat, doubly crushing because of that one moment of transcendent exultation, laid hold of me, and I leaned against a pillar and turned my face toward the darkness and knew no comfort for it.

Beyond the hanging woodbine at the end of the porch a dark object detached itself from the shadow and skulked along the side of the building in the direction of the stable alleyway. Hardly had my eyes distinguished it—a slinking silhouette of a man, crouched like the villain in a shadow-drama—when it disappeared around the corner.

Somebody had watched and listened, and

was gone to tell and chuckle over what he had seen and heard. My muscles tightened with a quick, hot impulse to chase and throttle him; but I reflected that his eaves-dropping must have been involuntary, since he could hardly have foreseen our interview.

With a gesture of disgust, I quit my station and tramped around the porch to the front of the hotel, avoiding the dance-room. For me no more dancing; I would get my cap and go.

I had reached the doorway that opened into the front corridor, when a flutter of white on the bridge over Sulphur Creek caught my eye. It was Jocelyn, her head bent, walking fast, almost running, going home alone.

She would have to walk half a mile of lonely road; for at that hour all the honest people of Medburne who were not at the dance were in their beds. She would have to pass the doctor's house. I did not wait to get my cap.

By the time I reached the bridge she had climbed the hillside to the state road, and without a glance behind, turned the corner of the brick bank. I took the slope at a run. When I stepped into the road she was less than a hundred yards ahead. I followed, walking softly, maintaining that interval. I would see her safely past Baer's house, and in her own home.

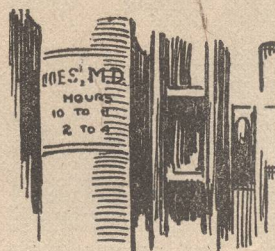
Although I had beaten and apparently cowed the creature, I had, where Jocelyn was involved, a dread of the big doctor that amounted to superstition. In the sinister muddle that entangled her, he was her evil genius; and I did not like the thought of him, crouched like a dark, waiting spider, so close beside her path.

A light burned in Baer's study, and on the drawn shade of the front window a tall shadow passed and repassed. What was he thinking, what contriving, as he paced restlessly through the late hours?

Until I heard Miss Hornung's door close behind Jocelyn, I did not leave his gate-post.

When I turned down the hill again, I found that another man had followed me as silently as I had trailed the girl, and from motives much the same.

"I thought, sir, that two would be better





than one in case anything turned up," said Mungford, touching the peak of his cap and handing me mine.

When I had last seen him, the little man had been dancing with a ripe beauty; yet he had managed to keep an eye on me. My recent encounter had upset and made me sullen. Instead of telling him that I appreciated his loyal vigilance, I gave him an ungracious grunt and trudged down the hill.

A minute later, at the stable, I made a discovery.

Our horses were gone!

Mungford hunted up the stable man; but he had been watching the dancers, and could not enlighten us.

"Somebody prob'ly turned 'em loose for a kid," he suggested. "They can't be far off."

"They'll be nipping somewhere in the fields close by, sir, I'll warrant," Mungford said.

"To hell with them!" I exploded. "Nothing under the moon goes right tonight. You can look for them if you want to, but I'll be damned if I shall. I'm going to walk."

It was five miles to Ragnarock; but I was thoroughly exasperated, and didn't care if it was twenty. The last mischance had spilled my bucket of wrath. I crammed my hands into the pockets of my coat and started. Mungford fell silently in step beside me.

If I had thought to walk off my irritation, I was mistaken; the farther I went, the more out of tune with the world I became, though I lengthened my stride until Mungford's short legs must trot to keep

him abreast of me. By the time I reached the Forge Run bridge, I was talking to myself like a discharged Hun-ky.

"Damn Baer! Damn John Cathcart's crazed notions! Damn Hassan and his crew! Damn Baer again, and eternally! Damn me for the fool I was ever to get into such a mess! Damn the whole works!"

But in my wholesale consignment to perdition I did not include Jocelyn.

Presently, dripping with perspiration, I slackened my pace. Moderation brought a glimmer of reason, and I laughed with no mirth, and ended it with a groan.

Mungford, panting beside me, laid a hand on my shoulder.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Gilbert, sir," he said; "I'm very sorry indeed." There was a tremor in the little man's voice, and I knew that he did not refer to the loss of the horses.

Well-meant and sincere though his pity was, it set me off again.

"Damn your sympathy, too!" I snarled, whirling on him. "Three of you know what the trouble is, but do you tell me? No, you let me fry in hell-fire while you look wise."

He shook his head and plodded on at my elbow in hurt silence. "There's a storm coming, sir," he said a few minutes later.

We were nearly at the garage, so from there on we hurried, scrambling and stumbling up through the ragged black throat of the gorge, a damp wind hissing among the sassafras and witch-hazel, drenching us with mist that chilled us to the bone.

The upper plateau was covered with drifting wrack, through which Ragnarock loomed fragmentary as a breaking mirage.

"There's something wrong here, Mr. Gilbert," muttered Mungford as we entered the drive. He caught at my elbow. "There's no light—and where's the watchman?"

He hallooed softly, once, got no answer, and we approached the bungalow cautiously, Mungford balancing his big revolver in front of him.

## CHAPTER XXVII

### I AM UP A TREE

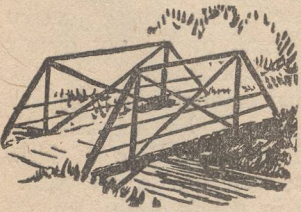
LESS distrustful than Mungford of appearances, I did not attach particular significance to the darkened house and the absence of our sentry. Mrs. Muir might easily have forgotten to leave a light for us; and Link Moyer—it was his night to watch—might have curled up for a stolen nap at the stables; watchmen have been known to do worse.

But it was evident that Mungford smelled a rat. He trotted on tiptoes across the damp lawn to the side of the building, and I followed. We halted under the open windows of the library.

"Now," he whispered, "if you'll just give me a leg up."

I did so, and he sprawled on his stomach across the window-ledge.

Quite suddenly his heels flew skyward, he emitted a startled grunt, and disap-





peared. The sound of his body striking on the floor of the library was almost coincident with the crash of his revolver.



"Run, Mr. Gilbert!" he called. "They—" He bit the remainder of his injunction off short, and I could imagine a restraining hand at his windpipe. I jumped

backward, took a running step or two, and vaulted up and in through the square of darkness, whence issued the clamor of a fracas of astonishing dimensions.

My feet had scarcely touched the rug when I felt rather than saw a man tear at me through the gloom. He laid hands on me, and I on him; and I knew by the feel of him what he was. I wasted no energy trying to get a grip on his slippery body, but seized him by turban and waistband, executed a double-and-twist, and flung him joyfully toward where the wall should have been. He missed it, but went crashing through the front of one of Uncle Jack's specimen cabinets.

In front of me somebody groaned, there was the noise of another heavy fall, and then all around me it seemed to rain men. I plunged on toward the hall, employing fists, elbows, knees, and heels as industriously as circumstances would allow; and though the comment on my efforts was in a language foreign to me, I entirely comprehended it. When I finally staggered into the hall and fetched up against a table, I had for the instant rid myself of all encumbrances.

While I breathed on my hot knuckles and wondered what next, someone snapped the wall-button, and the lights flashed on.

Four muscular, partly-naked brown men confronted me, crouched statue-like in groping attitudes, as the sudden light had arrested them.

Behind them Mungford lay on his back just inside the arch. He, too, must have battled in through the library before they downed him, and it was his groan and fall that I had heard. He lay without motion, and his broad face was streaked with crimson.

Hall and library were in worse confusion than they had been on the first day that I had come to Ragnarock. Everywhere was evidence of a hurrid and ruthless search: broken furniture, ripped upholstery, tattered books, and overturned cabinets—the

seekers had gashed and shredded even the rugs on the floors, and torn everything movable from the walls.

All this I saw as a camera sees, in one swift flash, and more—

The rattlesnake skin was gone!

That discovery caused me a gasp of dismay; then, my mind nearly keeping pace with my eyes, I thought, well, if Hassan had the diamonds, he had them, and that was that. But why had he attacked us? I began to boil with rage at what his ruffians had done to Mungford.

I tightened my muscles to go to him. He must have been watching me, and guessed my intention; for he rolled his head and made me a negative sign with his hand.

At the same instant a voice spoke crisply from the shadow by the stairway, and broke the tableau. The crescent of rascals moved forward. They had me cornered, and were deliberate. A wild-looking crew they were as they slunk panting and blinking toward me—turbaned, bare to the belts of their denim trousers, and armed with knives and pistols. A fifth man appeared in the archway and stood groggily, cursing to himself, while blood trickled down his ribs from numerous cuts about his head and shoulders. I recognized my work, in which the specimen-cabinet had co-operated.

I guessed that Mungford was playing 'possum, and was in no immediate need of assistance; nor could I, unarmed, hope to come victor from an encounter with five men of wiry strength.

At my right and behind me was the great pine-tree pillar that supported the dome of the bungalow. I ran to it and retreated up its ladder of pegs. One of the Barodians—there was not room for more—came swinging monkey-

like after me. I was nearly halfway to the dome when he overtook me, clutching at my legs. I let him have my heel on the side of his head, and he went spinning down and lay on the floor, with all the breath for the time driven out of him. That did not deter his fellows. One



of them would have taken his place and risked the fall; but Hassan, stepping into the circle of light, gave an order that checked them.

At his appearance I quit climbing and clung to my pegs, waiting for the next move. He issued another command, that



caused two of his hunters to approach Mungford.

"Here!" I called. "What are you going to do to him?"

"Nothing that need alarm you, Sahib Wade." Hassan turned and bowed in my direction. "He was the friend and servant of your uncle, the Sahib Cathcart, and I regret that harm has come to him."

The hunters carried Mungford, and laid him on one of the wrecked divans, and placed a pillow under his head. While this was doing, the little man showed no sign of life.

Hassan again looked up at me.

"It is with you that I am to deal, Sahib," said he. "This is my night." He smiled and swept a hand around him to indicate the ruin he had made. "Tonight you shall tell me where are the diamonds."

When I heard that statement, I would have started if I could.

So he hadn't found the gems, after all? I glanced curiously through the two rooms that my position commanded, and I saw the snakeskin lying partly under a table on the library floor. The tail of it was in the light, and it still wore its rattles.

I grinned down at Hassan, who was watching me with an intentness that seemed to plumb my thoughts—as doubtless he would have given much to do.

"You have a fat chance," I told him.

He bit his lip, studying me from narrowed eyes.

"We may apply methods that shall cause you to alter your mind, Sahib," he replied. "We men of the East are skilled questioners."

"You'll have to catch your goose before you baste it," I said, laughing; "I'm quite comfortable where I am, thank you, and I don't think that I shall come down."

All the same, I was not merely so much at ease as I had proclaimed. His hint had aroused in me a lively and shrinking concern. Long ago the idea had come to me that Hassan sometime might try torture. Then I had put it from me; he had appeared too suave, too much the civilized gentleman, to be associated with that sort of barbarism.

He watched me with a half-smile while I thought it out.

"It will not be difficult to get you down, Sahib," he said at length. "My servants shall hold a rug for you to fall in—as I believe yours did on a former occasion. Then I shall shoot you through a leg—or perhaps a shoulder—and I think that you will come down."

He spoke in their language to his men. The four of them that were able to walk fetched a square of carpet to the foot of the pillar and stretched it under me. The chap who had lost his wind sat up, clutching at the pit of his stomach, then scrambled to his feet and laid hold of the carpet. I admired his will-power.

Hassan drew a pistol.

This was coming to cases.

"Do you think the damned things are worth torturing a fellow-human for?" I demanded. I was of two minds as to the outcome should he carry out his threat. I desperately didn't want to be tortured; yet I was afraid of my own stubbornness.

He turned up to me the face of a devil.

"They are worth the lives and howls of a hundred unbelievers," he snarled. He raised the pistol.



Out on the hill, loud and clear, and thrice repeated, sounded the hoot of an owl.

Hassan started. Magically the bitterness and cruelty

melted from his swarthy features. He showed his teeth in a flashing smile.

"Ah, more than ever it is my night, Sahib," he called cheerily, putting away his weapon. "You shall not be tortured. To say truth, mangling the body of a man is clumsy and bad business, for which I have not much stomach. The torture that I prefer is that which torments the mind, Sahib—and it is greatly more efficient. For the present, good-by, Sahib. You shall hear from me soon again."

While I stared after him, he walked out through the library—and on his way trod upon the despised snakeskin. As it writhed under his foot its rattles sounded, and their *thr-r-r-r* was like a thin, dry cackle of derision.

Without another glance at me, the five tiger-hunters followed their master. The entire party disappeared through the library window, and left me clinging to my perch and wondering mightily what the devil was the meaning of it all.

## CHAPTER XXVIII

### MUNGFORD SPEAKS OUT

WELL, what do you know about that?" said I, addressing my query to the world in general and in particular to James Mungford.



Now that the enemy was gone, I had rather looked for some comment from him; but he had shown no evidence that he was aware of the departure; nor did he now answer me.

"Hey! Mungford!" I called. "Come out of it! They've gone."

But the little man did not stir. His eyes were closed, and what part of his face was not dabbled with blood, was deathly white. I clambered down from the pillar and went to him. He was unconscious, but his breathing was strong and even. Blood was running freely from his nose and staining the pattern of the tapestry pillow. I fetched water in a basin from the kitchen, and bathed his face, disclosing a swollen cheek and a big blue bruise where something had struck him at the side of his nose. His head rolled limply on my arm as I handled him, and his double chin sagged flabbily over his collar.

Strong brandy was in one of the cupboards. I fetched it and poured a tot of it down his throat. Presently he shivered, heaved a sigh, and his large black eyes opened and looked into mine.

On Forge Run Mountain the thunder-

heads broke with the devil's own drumming, and came crashing and flaring across the valley to Black Bear. With them came a hissing drive of rain. While the floor reverberated and the lights thrilled

to the incessant shocks of thunder, I bent over the staunch little man, and told him that he had best lie still, as he appeared to be badly done up.

"It's my knee, sir," he explained. "I wrenched it pretty sharply in the muss." He grated his teeth as he spoke. "The blood is only a nose-bleed, sir—one of the bounders did me one on the beak—but it's bled a lot, and it does make me awfully sickish. I wanted to help you, Mr. Gilbert; but the knee wouldn't stand it, so I thought I couldn't do better than just to lie quiet, sir, seeing as one of the bloody scoundrels had my pistol—and then I guess I must have fainted."

His knee was badly swollen. It must have given him intense pain, for he fainted

twice while I was rubbing it with brandy and bandaging it.

"There," I said when I had made him as comfortable as I could; "now I'll look around and see what has become of everybody else."

Mungford put up a hand to detain me. He was pale and sweating profusely, and childishly weak.

"If you don't mind, sir—just a few minutes or so. Wherever the others are, they have come to no harm. It was you that Mr. Hassan wanted. There's something that I want to tell you before I go off again. You've been very good to me, Mr. Gilbert, and I can't bear it any more to see you suffer."

I pulled a chair beside the divan.

Shaken by spasms of pain, and enunciating quickly and brokenly, Mungford began to speak. This is the tale that he told me:

"It was Mr. John, sir—one of the finest gentlemen that ever lived, sir—but he made a mistake. Never forget that, Mr. Gilbert, he made a mistake. He had a weakness of the heart. It came on him and gave him one or two bad spells, and he never was quite the same again—that was it, sir.

"He loved the young lady—Miss Yorkworth. You know how he made his will. She never loved him. I think she was always a bit afraid of him—and he knew it. It caused him many a day of heartache—and him sick to his death besides. It was a thing to pity.

"She used to ride a great deal—Miss Yorkworth, sir. She used to ride into the hills hereabouts. She thought no harm in it—and none would ever have come of it if Mr. John had been himself. Often she came this way, and Mr. John used to sit and watch her with a look in his eyes like a dog that can't go with his master.

"Then one day—the day he died, sir—he met her, yonder in the gorge. He called for Sulieman and rode out, just like I told you before—only he went toward Turtle Rock. He must have ridden down the gorge later, and seen her there. I went on an errand to Medburne, and I met the young lady just this side of town, coming this way.

"I was in the village quite some time, and I wasn't far on my way back when I met her again; and that time she was galloping





her horse as if the devil himself was behind her. I saw fear in her face—and her whip was gone.

"That gave me something to think about, as you can well believe. I rode on quickly, but it is a long way, as you know. When I got to the gorge I found Mr. John dying by the big stone there beside old Sulieman that had a broken neck. He was too far gone to speak again. I got him home and I held him while he died. There was a red mark across his cheek—like the cut of a whip. God forgive me that I'm telling you all this—when I promised not to!—but I can't bear to see you and the young lady held apart by the mistake of a sick man that is dead.

"I telephoned to Dr. Baer. I never trusted him, but he was the coroner. I knew that he would go through Mr. John's pockets, so I just did that ahead of him, and I found a letter, addressed to you, sir, in care of Lawyer Stone. I took that and Mr. John's keys, and when Dr. Baer came, I slipped off and went to see Mr. Stone.

"He said that I had done right. Miss Yorkworth had been to him, too, sir. She told him that she had met Mr. John riding in Black Bear gorge. They talked, and he acted queerly, and she began to be frightened of him. He told her about his will, and she didn't like that—she never wanted any of his property, feeling the way she did toward him. She said so, and it made him angry—you must remember, sir, that he wasn't just himself.

"He asked her to marry him, and talked wildly, and then took hold of her arm—he couldn't have realized what he was doing, sir, for he gripped so hard that he left the marks of his fingers in black and blue. She fired up then, sir, and struck him with her whip. He grabbed it, and she turned her horse and galloped away. He didn't follow her. She told Lawyer Stone that was the last she saw of him. The next she heard he had been found dying almost at the very spot.

"That was all her story; and I believed every word of it, sir, the same as Lawyer Stone did, or as anyone else must that knew her. But you know such a thing as that is bound to make black talk. We were all in mortal fear that it might get to the courts, too, sir—a murder trial—and that, with no witnesses, it might go hard with Miss Yorkworth. So we—Lawyer Stone and Miss Hornung and me—agreed that we never would say anything about it. No one knew that she had met Mr. John; and making trouble for her wouldn't bring

him back—and he would have been the first to forbid it if he could have spoken again.

"When you came—well, we didn't know anything about you, and we thought that looking for the diamonds and all would keep you pretty busy; and the other thing was growing older and less likely to be raked up. Then you seemed so set on finding out about Mr. John's death, and that worried us a good bit. Dr. Baer, too—damn his black heart!—began to meddle. I tell you, Mr. Gilbert, we hardly knew where to turn. And when you turned up the whip, sir—I'd looked for it for hours—that was a dreadful facer. We feared that



before you knew it you would actually have Miss Yorkworth involved in a murder trial.

"But I got to know you better, sir. You took the young lady's part all

along. You nearly did the fat doctor in, and I told Lawyer Stone long before that that I'd risk my life that you would see things the same as we. I know that he agrees with me now. I think that Miss Hornung does, too. So it's only the young lady now, sir—and why she is still afraid to have you know, I don't know at all, sir. There—that's all there is about it, sir."

How clear it all was—the reasons for everything that had made the darker mystery.

Uncle Jack had known that his death was coming—that explained the foreknowledge that he had expressed in his will. Then his love for Jocelyn had got the best of him. He had had his hour of weakness—his sudden yielding to his passion for her had been the act of a man sick in body and in spirit. And when he had staked brief happiness on that misguided cast—and lost—he had come to his home, written that letter to me, and then had ridden Sulieman back down the trail to death.

He had killed himself. I, and only I, had absolute proof of that! I had given it to Miss Hornung, but she had not believed.

Even as this reflection passed through my mind, Mungford, who had watched my face, asked, "Mr. Gilbert, would you mind telling me now, sir, just where you found that whip."



"In Uncle Jack's desk," I answered, with a note of triumph.

He stared. "Why, then——?"

"Yes, Mungford, he returned to the bungalow—by your own story he had plenty of time to do so. He returned, and wrote the letter that you found in his pocket. If you could only have known that, how much it might have spared you all."

"Miss Yorkworth, sir," he said happily; "there's no more reason——"

"God bless you, old fellow!" I cried, and wrung his hand. "You have opened a door!"

"What's that now, sir?" Mungford raised himself on his elbow. "Don't you hear something on the hill?"

The rattle of thunder and swish of rain had ceased. Across the rocky plateau came a quick, staccato clatter—the sound of a horse ridden in desperate haste. On it came, drumming the earth, crunching the gravel on the drive, and halted at the front of the bungalow. There was an interval of a moment, then a tremendous pounding at the front door of Ragnarock.

I caught up from the floor Mungford's first cousin to a cannon and went out.

It was Aunt Taphie Hornung who had ridden so wildly, and who stood

gallant and drenched at my threshold. Tethered to one of the porch-pillars was Jocelyn's spotted pony.

"Well, let me in!" the little old lady cried shrilly before I could speak. "I hope you've got a fire!" She threw away the stone with which she had hammered the oak. "No—you go first." She pushed me back with both hands.

## CHAPTER XXIX

### THE MORE EFFICIENT TORTURE

**S**PEECHLESS I preceded Miss Hornung through the dim corridor to the lighted hall.

Why had this fragile old woman ridden the Black Bear trail alone through the night and the storm? Summoned by the questions, a foreboding laid hold of me, clutching my heart and my throat.

Inside the hall doorway Aunt Taphie halted. When I turned she looked me in

the eyes. She wore a long black cloak that was sodden with rain. She appeared sodden, haggard and weary; but her mouth was set in a tight straight line, and her little blue eyes were wonderfully alive.

"Where's my niece?" she demanded.

"What!" and I heard Mungford from the divan echo my astonished cry.

At the sound of his voice Aunt Taphie's glance shifted for a darting inspection of the hall, took in the confusion of the rooms, saw Mungford's white, swollen face, and came back to mine.

"What has happened here?" she asked.

"But Jocelyn?" I insisted.

Under her cloak Miss Hornung per-versely waved her hand. "Answer me and I'll answer you," she snapped. "What have you been doing here? Who hurt him?" She twitched her head toward Mungford.

"It was the gang that has been after the diamonds. I've never told you all——"

"About them? You don't need to; Een Stone has. What's the good of being engaged to a man if he doesn't tell you things? So they've been here and made all this mess, eh? Did they get the diamonds?"

"No."

"Well—they got Jocelyn."

"They — got — Jocelyn!" I repeated, bending stupidly toward her. Mungford's revolver fell from my hand to the rug.

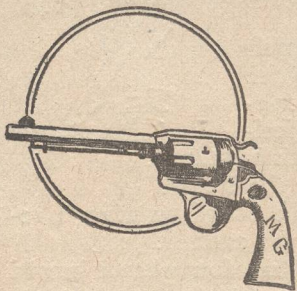
"Yes." Even on the monosyllable Aunt Taphie's voice caught. Her mouth worked as she stepped forward and slumped down in the chair beside Mungford.

"Damn it!" she exploded. "Gil, my temper ran away with my head—I thought that you'd gone madder than John Cathcart ever was. I thought you had carried her off. I rode up here to kill you if necessary."

With that proclamation Miss Hornung whipped from under her cloak and flung on the table an ugly little pistol.

"She was gone when Een took me home from the dance. They must have broken into the house and waited for her. She fought them—things were in a mess. I knew something had happened between you at the dance, and I saw you follow her when she started for home; so I took her horse and came up here to settle it. Een came along with me, but he couldn't keep up—he'll be along when he gets here."

The old lady's energy appeared to leave her. She shrank shivering in her chair and I felt my own flesh chill to the bone.





In the silence Mungford's breathing was like the creaking of a bellows.

Hassan had Jocelyn!

This was the "other way" that he had promised to find! This was the torture that he preferred—that torments the mind rather than the body of a man—because it is greatly more efficient!

And now—when every fibre of me cried for action—what was there to do? No snake more stealthy than Hassan; no fox



more wily in its skulking-places. Twenty men led by skilled hunters had ferreted through the hills for a week, and had failed to find a trace of him. Now, when there was such poignant need of success, there was little hope that a second search would be more fortunate.

Torture could be no more efficient than this! The muscles of my face stiffened so that it felt like a mask of wood.

"Don't fret so, Mr. Gilbert," said Mungford. "Mr. Hassan doesn't want the young lady—he wants the diamonds. When he has hidden her, you will hear from him."

Aunt Taphie took a hairpin out of her mouth.

"You'll get her back, Gil?" she quavered. "Give me a glass of that brandy. I need it."

"Where are you going?" she called after me. I was on my way to the back door.

"To find the men—get horses," I answered.

Sounds of extreme discomfort issued from the stable darkness as I opened the door. Difficultly they resolved into words.

"Oh, ma pair bones, ma pair bones! Ar-re ye a' deed, the rest o' ye, that ye dinna mak' a soun'? Oh, ma pair bones!"

A screech that terminated in a blessing welcomed me when I turned on the lights.

For reasons which I could not follow, the Barodians had isolated Mrs. Bessie Muir in a vacant stall. They had gaggled

her; but by indefatigable exercise of a more than ordinarily active jaw she had slipped the dam of speech.

The others—Dad, Link Moyer, and Shirt Borin—lay straight and stiff in a row beside the granary.

"Leave it ter a wooman ter git her mouth onhooked afore a man," remarked MacVittie when the three were on their feet, getting the kinks out of their cramped muscles. Mrs. Muir had hobbled with shrill progress to the bungalow.

"They kem enter us like the mist outer the dark," Dad explained the attack. "We never had no chanst at all—tied us like so many hawgs fer market."

Could cursing have helped Jocelyn, the fluency of the trio when they heard what I had to tell, surely would have restored her.

For once even Dad was without resource.

"What kin we do, Buddy?" he queried helplessly, milking at his whiskers. "Dunno whar t' start in. Ef the smoke-singed devils hedn't pizened ol' Rip now——"

"By God!" I snarled at him. "We're going to do something!" I was feeling fit to burst with ineptitude.

We made ready the horses.

Stone was in the bungalow when I entered it—Stone and another.

Near the library window whence he had come out of the night stood the slender brown hunter who had taken my horse on the day that I had pursued my reckoning with Baer. Alert but imperturbable, he was paying no heed to the questions with which the attorney, Aunt Taphie, and Mungford alternately and together thrust at him. When he saw me, his swarthy countenance lighted and he bowed.

"Sahib Wade," said he, "you remember me—Gopal Singh. The lord Hassan Ben Halil sends me to say to you that if you would find the young memsahib with the brown eyes, you are to come with me, bringing the diamonds."

"And if I don't—?" I said much else as I walked angrily toward him.

"He said that you would bring them," Gopal Singh gravely replied, keeping his gaze on the floor.

"He would not dare harm her!" I exclaimed. "I will find him——"

Gopal Singh, speaking softly, interrupted me.





"Remember that you did not find us, sahib. The lord Hassan has sworn to have the diamonds. He has now the price with which to buy them. I am sorry, sahib——"

His broken period was filled with implication.

I, too, gloomed at the floor. Between me and the messenger lay the rattlesnake skin. Between it and me was my stubbornness. Stubbornness died.

Dad MacVittie had come in behind me. "Cover this man with your rifle," I told him.

Gopal Singh started, looked into my face, and stood still.

Ready to yield, I would not be tricked. No chance would I take of Hassan holding both jewels and Jocelyn. Every lover is, I suppose, jealous of all the world. I know that I am. It did not seem absurd to me to think that Hassan, too, might have turned desirous eyes on Jocelyn—not though I knew that with him the paramount issue was the diamonds.

Old Dad's weapon pointed steadily at the messenger.

While all of them looked and wondered, I took the snakeskin from the floor and with my penknife severed its rattles and placed them in an inner pocket.

Gopal Singh murmured amazedly to himself as he comprehended the significance of my act.

"We-ell, I'll be dummy-gammed!" swore MacVittie. "So thar's whar he hed 'em hid—right in the tail o' the ol' rattler thet I fetched him! Judast Priest! Thar's one rattler es hed its which-end es chock-full o' trubble a'ter it was dead es its tother was when it was livin'!"

Not all the spirit was out of Aunt Taphie.

"I'm coming, too," she declared, starting up from her chair and repossessing herself of her weapon as we began to file past her on our way to the door. Gopal Singh had stepped out of the window and gone to await us at the front of the bungalow.

Stone and I attempted to dissuade her, but the little old lady was as brave as anything in the world.

"By God, sir, I'd like to go with you, too!" cried Mungford. He wrenched himself around on the divan, and promptly fainted.

"Somebody will have to stay and look after him," I said, and was about to offer that as a further argument to keep Aunt

Taphie indoors; I had forgotten Mrs. Muir.

"I'll keer for Jamie—puir laddie!" she announced, stepping out of the shadows where she had withdrawn at sight of the Barodian hunter. She was armed with her favorite broom.

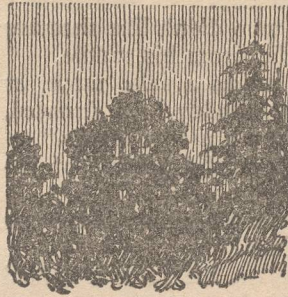
## CHAPTER XXX

DAD RETURNS A SOOV-I-NEER

WE RODE west.

Moshannon Valley had swallowed the storm, and from its distant throat came only an occasional rattle of recrudescing thunder. On Black Bear the moon shone again, but wanly, through a veil of haze.

Dusk was among the pines and in the forest path. From leaf to leaf of trees and shrubs belated raindrops pattered like elfin footfalls keeping pace with our horses' substantial tramp.



Gopal Singh on foot, a wavering, indeterminate figure, led the way.

Presently Aunt Taphie, who had been carrying on a muttered conversation with Stone, pressed the spotted pony alongside Black Roderick.

"They won't fool you, will they, Gil?" she asked.

"Not again—or if they do, I sha'n't be alive to know about it," I told her. I made known to her what Mungford, at the cost of his broken promise, had imparted to me.

"And a good job, too," was her comment.

"But will she—will Joceylyn—?" I faltered, when I had told her all.

Lightly as a leaf the old lady's fingers touched my cheek.

"That," said she, "is for you to manage—after she knows what you know."

Fifteen minutes of riding along the spine of the mountain took us out of the pine wood and through the boulder-strewn jungle of the dwarf forest on the upper slopes. Ahead of us on the bare crest of the knob, bleak and unreal in the misty moonlight, loomed Turtle Rock.

Our guide, distancing the horses on the ragged trail, trotted some way in advance and halted beside the rock. I saw him bow



deeply and heard him speak; and I had the fancy that in his heathen way he was addressing a prayer to the fantastic pile.

As we neared it a whiff of Turkish cigarette smoke drifted athwart my nostrils. I pulled on Black Roderick's rein until my followers were abreast of me, and we approached the landmark in a compact group.

Out of the darkness at Gopal Singh's elbow a man slipped from the crevice below the turtle's shell.

"For the second time, sahib," said Hassan pleasantly, "good evening."

I had brought Mungford's revolver. Between my horse's ears I trained it on him. A shifting glance showed me that my companions at each side had presented their weapons. Aunt Taphie's pistol-hand was as steady as any of them.

Dad MacVittie, who didn't like shooting from horseback, slid from his saddle.

"Ef the smoke makes a false move, er you says the word, Buddy," he drawled, "his life won't be wuth a coon's cuss."

Hassan made a graceful gesture of deprecation.

"This is not necessary, sahib. Have you brought the diamonds?"

For all his coolness, his voice trembled when he mentioned the stones.

"Yes," I answered hotly; "but if you think you are going to see them before you——"

He interrupted me.

"Your word, Sahib Wade, is sufficient. You will give them to me—the condition is understood, is it not?—when I have returned Miss Yorkworth?"

I thought it curious that he made no stipulation for his own safety after he should have received the jewels; but he was either too much excited by the proximity of his quarry, or else was confident of his proved ability to take care for himself; or—perhaps the best guess—he believed that I would be glad enough to get Jocelyn back and too careful of her safety to attempt to meddle with him.

"Yes," I growled. "Where is she?"

He bowed again.

"Not far away, yet it will take a minute or two to produce her." He thrust two fingers between his teeth and blew a sharp whistle. "May I remark," he said earnestly, "that I regret that you compelled me to drive this bargain—that it was the only way left me—and that, were I acting in my own behalf, I should consider that you had largely the best of it."

That—if he meant it, and there was no telling with Hassan—was not badly said;

though I did not at the time appreciate it, and did not answer. I fretted in my saddle. Would they never bring Jocelyn?

Hassan leaned back against the rock and with hands whose trembling belied his nonchalance, lighted another cigarette.

"Gil," Aunt Taphie shrilled in my ear so that I was near to losing my seat; "do you see that?"

Twenty feet away at the brink of the knob, silhouetted against the mist that overhung the gulf, a round dark object had bobbed noiselessly into view. As we stared at it, another joined it. The pair rolled and wobbled like detached balls, grew taller, took on different outlines, and materialized into two of Hassan's tiger-hunters climbing over



the edge of

the abyss—an exploit that I should not have thought possible for any creature less contemptuous of the law of gravity than a snail.

After they had drawn their legs over the lip of the chasm they turned, bent nearly double, and set to work with the motions of men hauling in a fish-net.

I caught my breath, for I understood. Somewhere down the face of that terrible declivity Jocelyn dangled at the end of a rope. If there should be a slip—if the rope should break!

"Have no fear," Hassan said. "The men are skilled, and the others are below. There is a cave under the rock, that has been our good friend since my servants found it long ago."

"I snum to pucker! Lewis and Connolly's cave! The smokes found Lewis and Connolly's cave!" Dad MacVittie muttered. "Thet's whar folks hes allers said they hid their plunder. Many a day I hunted fer it whenst I was a young sprout."

Hassan overheard him.

"There were signs that men lived in the cave long ago," he said; "but there was no treasure."

Steadily the men on the brow of the cliff pulled at their ropes. A long bundle emerged from the chasm. They grappled it.

Again my breathing was difficult. My saddle trappings jingled, I trembled so. Hardly could I conquer the impulse to break from our line and go yonder where Jocelyn—if it were she—swung perilously



between the dim sky and the boiling mists of the gulf.

"Stiddy, Buddy, stiddy," warned Dad in a whisper. "Ef it's her, they'll fetch her all right."

The bundle lay on the ground, the men working over it. They raised it between them and moved toward us.

Why was it inert? What had they done?

In mixed fear and fury I ground my chattering teeth. Above Black Roderick's twitching ears I brought Mungford's revolver again to bear on Hassan; but in my shaking hand the weapon constituted small danger for him.

He let fall his cigarette and spoke in Barodian. The men halted, cut ropes away, stripped off a blanket—

Without consciousness of how I got there, heedless of trickery, I was on the ground running toward her. She took a staggering step or two, while one of the hunters, with outstretched hand hesitated at her elbow; then I had her in my arms and was striding back to where my excited companions were hauling at their reins and shouting cautions.

"Oh, that terrible place! Those dreadful men!" she breathed in my ear. Her head inclined slowly to my shoulder, and I felt her wet lashes against my cheek, and the soft fluttering of her breast close to mine.

"It's all right now, dearest," I comforted her. "Everything is all right now—and for always."

I thought that she had fainted; but when Miss Hornung spoke to her she answered. The little old lady plucked and patted and crooned at her as I swung her into Black Roderick's saddle.

We were turning to go.

"But," Hassan interposed, "the diamonds."

No final wrench of stubbornness disturbed me as I thrust my hand in my pocket, and tossed the rattles across to him; though it seemed to me that they sounded a dry note of protest as they left my fingers.

Adroitly Hassan caught them; then, looking at what he held, he swore, as Gopal Singh had done, a soft, pungent foreign oath.

His four other hunters had clambered up from the cave. All the seven stood with heads thrust forward, staring at their chief in silent immobility, paralyzed by the bigness of the moment.

"While we're passin' things out, yere's another lettle soov-i-neer," drawled Dad

MacVittie. "I been keepin' it fer quite some time, but I don't want it no more." He threw into the group the mummified finger, grim trophy of my first day at Ragnarock! He had dried it in the fireplace smoke and carried it in his pocket!

One of the Barodians—that man with whom I had fought through the hole in the roof—pounced on the sinister thing. Assured that it was his own missing fragment, he became a snarling fury. He tore a knife from his belt; and I think that he would have come on at us, daring our own guns, had not Hassan with an order prevented him. He stood glowering alternately at his withered digit and at Dad's sardonic old face that peered at him along the rifle barrel.



Immediately Hassan's nervous fingers began to tear the crackling shells to bits. A flash of iridescent fire glittered in his palm; and another—

I tugged Black Roderick's head around.

Before my eyes entirely quitted the group I saw Gopal Singh smite his forehead with his fist and start forward, holding in his extended fingers a square of folded paper.

But I was not interested; my affair was to take Jocelyn out of this atmosphere of terror in which she shuddered repeatedly.

A match flared behind me. Before its flickering light diminished, Hassan cried out in strong astonishment. We were some distance down the slope when we heard him shout again, "Wait, sahib! Wait!" There was urgency in the call.

"Yere he comes like the devil thrashin' rats!" exclaimed Dad, who was rearguarding us. "Shell I nail him one?"

Hassan came down the path at a run, his tiger-hunters trailing behind him. Dad's rifle was ready to speak.

I told him to hold his fire until we learned the meaning of this new move. We closed determinedly around the two women and waited with lifted weapons.

## CHAPTER XXXI

### LOSERS AND WINNERS

**H**ASSAN, stopping a little way from us, lifted his arms in a sign of peace.

"May I speak with you, Sahib Wade?" he asked. There was in his manner of address a note of humility—distinctly a new tone for Hassan.



"Don't ye go nigh him, Buddy," advised Dad MacVittie. "Them smokes o' hi'n air quicker than skeered cats."

"I will tell them to go back," Hassan said. "If one of them makes a move, you may shoot him."

At his order the hunters withdrew a short distance up the hillside and stood in a clump.

I gave Black Roderick's bridle-rein into the hand of Shirt Borin, and stepped forward. For myself, I did not greatly fear Hassan. I was extremely curious to learn what he might want of me now.

Nevertheless I halted three paces from him. "Well," said I, "you've done what you said you would. What do you want now?"

His teeth flashed in the ready smile of which he was master.

"Sahib, you might guess a thousand times and not guess rightly—I wish to give back the diamonds."

"What!"

Into my mind swept the memory of what he had said a little time before—that under other circumstances he would have considered me the winner by the bargain. Could it be that he had the hardihood—that he was about to propose a re-exchange?

"What do you mean?" I demanded savagely, fingering at my belt where I had thrust the revolver.

He was quick to follow my thought.

"No, no, I give them back freely, and wish you well in their possession. I think that I can foresee what use you will make of them," and he glanced in the direction of Jocelyn.

"It is like this," he went on while I looked at him wonderingly; "only those that serve them can understand how strange may be the whims of the great ones. It was a whim of the Great One that is dead to give the gems to the Sahib Cathcart, when he might as easily have paid his debt in money. It is by a whim of the new Great One, his son, that I give the diamonds back to you—all my journeying and plotting in this foreign land gone for naught. Ah, well"—he shrugged his shoulders—"such are the ways of the great, and we who are the little men must obey. Here they are, sahib."

He advanced, and into the hand that I mechanically extended he let fall one by one, as if reluctantly, the seven crystal vessels of blue flame.

Still I did not understand, and lamely said as much. Hassan explained.

"That Great One who sent me to fetch back the stones ruled in Baroda only until his brother's son should come to manhood. Time has brought that to pass, and the young man has returned from an English college to sit on the throne of his fathers.



"The gift that his father's brother recalled, he wills shall stand—for the honor of him that gave it. His message telling me this reached me but now. Yonder fool who brought it from my agent in Clearwater had forgotten it."

In other words, the regent of Baroda was relieved of his regency, and the new Gaekwar, son of the old, was determined to respect his father's gift to Uncle Jack.

And the diamonds—what was I to do with them?

I looked down at their little glittering pool where they had fallen together in my palm; and for an instant I was tempted to show Hassan how magnificent a white man might be—to hurl the lot of them out over the edge of the mountain into Forge Run Valley. Then I thought how foolish that would be; they might be made to do a lot of good in the world yet, those diamonds. So I poured them into the pocket of my vest.

Hassan, who had studied my face, and who always comprehended much more than was said to him, watched them disappear, and sighed.

"We have both of us had turns at losing and winning the game," he said; "and while it lasted it was a merry game. You will remember me, sahib, and I hope that you won't think too badly of me. Now that everything is done with, I hope, too, that if you can't forgive me, you will at least let me depart with the honors of war, and not—"

"Oh, go to the devil!" I told him, and gave him my hand; for, after all, though he was a hard man, he wasn't by a long throw the worst chap in the world.

He wrung my fingers, and turned and went up the path toward his men; and that was the last that I ever saw of Hassan Ben Halil. Somewhere out there on the rim of the world's other side he doubtless lives on and does his master's work as he did it here.



**B**ACK at Ragnarock:  
Aunt Taphie on a lounge, quite done up by her wild gallop; Mungford on another, the pain of his leg alayed so that he could sleep; Stone poring over a book of Spanish law in the library; Dad MacVittie in his favorite seat in the ingle-nook, nodding and snorting, and nodding again; the others at something or other, I don't know what.

And I? Well, I was more pleasantly employed than any of them.

A wood fire blazed in the fireplace. I had dragged a Roman chair in front of it for Jocelyn and me, and there we sat with only the fragile barrier of its curved rail between us. Sometimes I drew back to admire the perfection of her profile against the leaping flames. More often I was too close to enjoy the beauty of that prospect, but found my compensation in others no less alluring: the warm twin glories of her hazel eyes, with now no shadow of repulsion or denial in them; the soft abundance of her shining hair; her full, ripe lips, smiling at me now with no constraint.

For I had told her what had forever banished all constraint between us; and I was learning how long and how well my sweetheart had loved me.

"I was afraid of you from the beginning—that night at Mr. Stone's house. You were so like him, and I'd feared him so—only you were younger. How is it that you don't seem like him any more? But I made up my mind not to blame you—that wouldn't be fair. And then—then—Didn't you see? You're very stupid if you didn't—"

"Oh! you won't leave me a shred of reputation!"

I had answered in a manner that brought Dad MacVittie straight in his seat with a prodigious snort. He blew his nose sonorously and blinked at us like a sheepish red goat, if you can imagine such a hybrid. Aunt Taphie started from her sleep, her beady eyes flickering, and shook a finger at us.

In a little while the sun came up beyond Black Bear, big and red and bright and full of promise.

*Take a Trip to*  
**RUSTLERS' VALLEY**

*with*

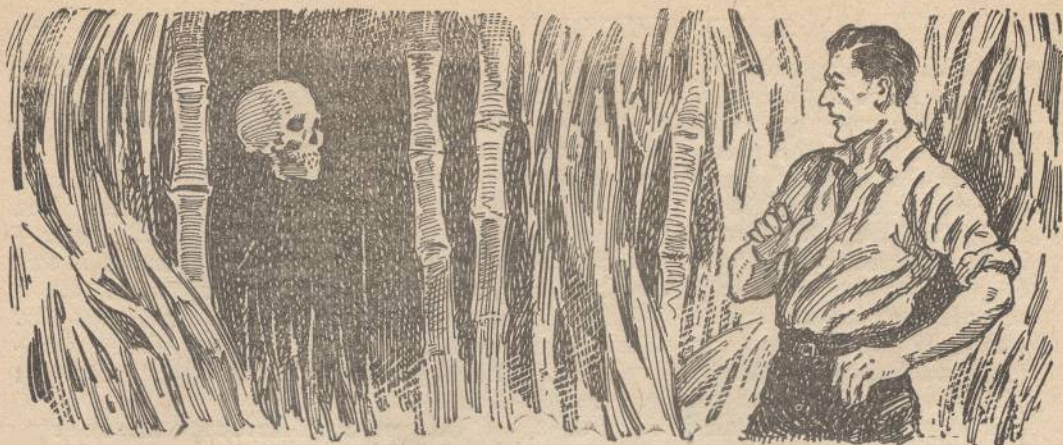
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# THE PENDULUM OF THE SKULL

By J. ALLAN DUNN

*Author of "Cowboy," "Hawkeye Sam's Banking," "Gems of the Jungle," etc.*

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THE SWINGING SKULL WAS A SIGN OF DANGER; BUT DANGER COMES TO ANY MAN WHO INVADES AN ISLAND OF THE SAVAGE SEAS, AND MATCHES HIS WITS AGAINST THE DESPOTS OF THE TROPIC OUTLANDS

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**B**UD BARRETT peered through the stiltlike stems of the pandanus grove that covered the ledge above the waterfall, and saw the weft of canvas flying at the maintop. He was sailor enough to know that this was a signal of recall, to guess that a sudden change in the barometer, prophesying a shift of wind, had decided the skipper of the *Flying Cloud* to get out to searoom and deep water, away from the shallows and coral ledges through which they had worked up to the island in search of fresh water.

The casks were not yet filled. He saw that, by squinting down at the stream where the men labored under the urge of the first mate. But the signal was imperative. In a few minutes they would go.

The first mate shouted his name, cursed it volubly, but Bud lay doggo, wriggling back under the broad leaves of a ground vine, completely hidden.

He was not going back. He had slipped away just as he intended doing when he learned he was to be in the shore party. He had never been a willing member of the crew of the *Flying Cloud*, and now the skipper, or the owners, could take the wages due him, and welcome.

He was through with a bully mate whose head he ached to punch—believing he could do it successfully—but who fought with kicks and belaying pins, backed by a gun and official authority. He was sick of the stench of the fo'c'sle, of the wrecks of humanity with whom he was quartered and rated—though he admitted several of them were better seamen than he was—tired of the badly cooked food. It would have been different if he had deliberately selected his berth. Then he would have gone through with and swallowed his medicine, bitter as it might be, but—

The two boats were leaving. There had come a strong and sudden wind from seaward, against the prevailing trades. The reef-set coast had been suddenly transformed from a weather to a treacherous lee shore. James Barrett, not yet accepted as Able Seaman, meant little in the face of that danger. They would not care if he were marooned on the island for the rest of his life, eaten by the natives. He was not the first sailor who had deserted.

Barrett hugged himself. There was not much danger from cannibals, he fancied, though the bush tribes were said to be wild and dangerous savages. But there was a



trading station along the coast, beyond the lava cape. The creek there was only a shallow one, and the skipper had sailed past, intent only upon replenishing the water that had staled on him and sailing on



down south to the whaling grounds. As soon as the *Flying Cloud* was well clear of the land, Bud meant to work his way along the shore to the station.

His plans were hazy. He thought he might be able to get some sort of a job, splitting coconuts, keeping tally, anything—or playing Crusoe. He had acted on an impulse that was based on weeks of ill treatment. The mates were bad enough, the skipper was a hell driver, and what was bad now would become intolerable once they got to whaling.

He had noticed food enough since he had come ashore—fish in the stream, fruit of all sorts, cocoanuts, wild bananas, shad-docks, guavas, breadfruit, even orange trees. And freedom. Freedom from dirty weather, and a howling mate cursing him on to unfamiliar tasks, setting him to all the dirty work aboard, making a mark of him, calling him "Dude" while the cringing men laughed at the feeble joke. Freedom from the cockroach ridden bunk, and its moldy mattress of sodden, insufficient straw.

He had his knife for defense against wild beasts—if there were any. He didn't believe the tribesmen would bother him before he had got to the station. And he had heard the second mate talking to the doctor—as the cook was called—saying that the island was quite a point of call for whalers watering north and south, and for other ships. He could get away, if the trader wouldn't use him—any ship was better than the *Flying Cloud*, built like a barrel, wallowing and pitching and rancid as an ancient lard keg.

He stretched out luxuriantly in the warmth, shaded from the sun that filtered down through the leaves. It made him drowsy and, before he knew it, he was napping.

When he woke, the sun had shifted several degrees, the seawind was wrestling heavily with the tropic growth, fronded boughs thrashing, ripe fruit plumping

down. The *Flying Cloud* was clawing into the gale, working out through a wide channel among the reefs that now showed white with foam.

Bud came down from the cliff, crossed the stream on smooth boulders, took a drink on the far side, stuffed his stomach with orange-skinned bananas that tasted curiously like Baldwin apples, and, skirting the mangrove belt that masked the exit of the creek, started to work down to the shore where the traveling should be easier and less hazardous than an attempt to strike through the thick bush.

It was harder than he imagined, the belt of mangroves far wider, while the fury of the gale was astounding. Blue sky and sun had disappeared, the clouds were slate colored and lowering, and out of them blew the strenuous wind, that bowed the tops of the biggest trees and sent the palms lashing like whips. Whenever he got into the

open it drove him staggering at a tangent back to shelter again, and came roaring through the bush after him. The barrier reef was a white and smoking wall



of spume, the ordinarily placid lagoon was sudded with windblown foam, washed up, flung up in spongy masses.

Bud didn't know it, but it was getting close to the rainy season, to the monsoon changes with swift shifts of wind and furious storms. All the wonder of gold and green and azure had turned into moaning gale, struggling vegetation that had lost its luster, while the light was flat and hard and cold.

Again the sky appeared to close in. A javelin of lavender flame rent it, flooded turbulent sea and tossing forest with its weird levin. He caught a glimpse of the *Flying Cloud* fighting out under eased sail—thankful that he was not punching at the stiff canvas, yelled and sworn at for his clumsiness—and then, as if the bottom had fallen from a mighty cistern, the tropical downpour burst, hissing into the lagoon, thudding on the beach, bulleting the leaves, cutting off light, all sense of location, blinding him as effectually as if he stood in the tumbling spray back of the falls at Niagara.

The wind did not cease. Its force was



so tremendous that it angled the streams of water, and sent them with a rush and a roar that blotted out every thing, and rendered him in a moment sodden, beaten; until he felt bruised, floundering about in the edge of the bush, tripped, stumbling, flung headlong by writhing lianas. He found himself at last in the midst of the root stems of a great fig-banian, whose mighty thatch resisted even such a rain as this. Penetrating its dark maze until he touched the main trunk, he stood cowering, cold, shivering, though the temperature was close to ninety, watching the eerie flickering of the lightning checking the tangle of the bush, listening to the frightful clamor of the long peals of thunder that went rolling overhead.

It was a nightmare of darkness, of dread, marked by the crash of some great tree, the furious, unceasing battery of the booming surf booming a deep bass to the wild orchestra of wind and rain and thunder. The air was hard to breathe. It was charged with unleashed statics, that he felt crackling in his hair, that tingled at his shrunken fingertips. Half an hour ago and he had been proudly confident of his own cleverness, his own ability, now he felt like the least of mites, the most helpless of atoms, an ant at the mercy of a whirlpool or crawling over a trench top with a battle at its most awful height—powerless—afraid.

Then—suddenly as it had come—the gale passed. First the rain, sweeping on like a gray regiment, the wind driving after it, the thunder lunging in sullen retreat, the darkness lifting—lifting, and the sun flinging flashing lances of victory under its blue banner.

Color and warmth coming out. Sparkling, dripping leaves of emerald, ragged banana pennons lifting again, cockatoos screeching, birds calling, the seas slowly subsiding, the pounding breakers on the reef still flinging spray that was now haloed with rainbows.

Bud came out of the banian to find himself on a narrow trail, less than three feet wide, its floor of dirt packed solid by generations of naked horny feet, the bush on either side wattled with undergrowth, vines, close-set trees. The air blew fresh from the sea, and carried on it the peculiar fragrance of the bush mingled with the salty tang—odors of ripe fruit and heavy scented flowers. He pushed



on shorewards, thankful for the path, not recognizing it for a bushtrail until he came to where it ended on a strip of shingle. Here he saw, aswing from a bamboo like a grisly pendulum, a human skull, sign of *tabu*, warning that the trail was trapped with pits and poisoned stakes, with ambushed spears and arrows triggered for the unwary.

Luck had been with him. The lower end of the path that he had traversed was harmless. He lost no time in leaving the grim vicinity, though he went with the feel between his shoulder-blades of an ever threatening spear flung from cover.

The tide was going out, and he left the bush alone, though his thirst grew as the hot sun warmed him, dried him, and then threatened to sap his vitality.

Globular bush-fruit tempted him, hanging golden and enticing but, to Bud, they were but apples of Sodom, filled with the ashes of death.

Wading, evading quicksand, making swift traverse over beaches of crushed and tiny shells, clambering over flinty lava promontories, he hurried on, with but one thought—to reach the trading station. The swinging skull was in his mind's eye, that inhospitable signboard of the tropical jungle he had looked upon as an inn where food was for the plucking, and sleep a delight. His imagination, stimulated by all that he had heard and read of the savage isles of the South Seas, began to ride him like an evil hag upon his shoulders, bringing only one comfort, a remembrance that the trading stations were said to be comparatively safe these days—for fear of reprisal—and that so long as one kept to the beach in their immediate neighborhood there was not much to fear.

The mates in charge of the two watering boats had been armed, and they had brought along some rifles in the boats. At the time Bud had thought these precautions perfunctory, though it had been because of the mates' watchfulness against any hostile natives that he had been enabled to slip away as he did. Now he realized that he had been running a far greater risk than he dreamed of, and the mere fact that he had come so far unscathed seemed to triple the odds against his getting through.

But at last he came to the horn of a bay, and looked gladly across its blue and green crescent to where buildings showed among verdure, their iron unpainted roofs looking like brass in the sun—now westerling, losing power, but gaining glory, slowly gathering nightrobes of purple for its bed.



There was a long wharf running out into the lagoon, two small boats alongside, a gracefully lined schooner with furled sails at anchor, palms with slender silver trunks and plumes of tender green above clusters of coconuts marching in stately



rows down to a narrow strip of beach. Here was civilization and Bud's spirit resumed its mastery. Fear fell from his shoulders like a released bundle at the end of a long trail. He marched almost blithely through the palms, grateful for their shade, looking longingly up at the nuts. He could not climb those slim boles, nor could he even open the nuts with his knife. But he looked hopefully forward to the trader offering him a green nut with the top lopped off, filled with cool, slightly effervescent contents. He had heard the sailors raving about the joy of a fresh coconut.

He was in bad shape after his long trip in the sun, scorched for all his sea tan, his feet rock-bruised, weary after the rough going that had taken him since noon to travel.

A rocky gully cut through the trees as he neared the house. It looked like a petrified cascade with the water turned to gray, porous stone. It was an ancient lava flow. In little earthen pockets guavas grew, with a sort of Spanish bayonet. Screw pine made clumps of cover. He saw a faint path that led from the plantation he was in, and doubtless offered the best crossing of the ravine. Following it, voices stopped him on the edge of the gully. One was a girl's in evident protest, the other's—rough and domineering with a sort of bullying insolence to it—was that of a man. Instantly—like dog to wolf—imaginary hackles seemed to lift on Bud's neck. The girl's voice was sweet, the man's harshly dominant and masterful.

With the approaching sunset all wind had gone. Words came clearly to him as he halted, uncertain where to look for the speakers, since they were not visible on the little path.

"He can't last out the night, I tell you," said the man. "Then what you goin' to do? You can't stay here alone. You got to come with me. It ain't as if I warn't willin' to marry you, soon's we git to Suva. I can't do it before, can I? Don't be a fool, Thelma. You know what 'ud happen to a woman alone here on a tradin' station. The bushmen'll know when he dies inside of an hour—know if you're alone. The

place'll have to go till we git another agent. Lucky the copra's aboard. Now you go git yore things together, an' be sensible. I'm goin' to look round a bit."

"No!" cried the girl. "Go with you? Trust you? Marry you? No!"

There came an exclamation from the man, another from the girl, stopped almost immediately, a rustling in the bushes, an oath from the man. Then Bud saw them, as the man came out of the cover where they had been talking carrying in his arms a slender struggling figure in blue. The figure writhed and fought, struck and clawed at his bearded face, while he laughed, and forced her higher on his great chest, bending his bull neck until his beard brushed her cheek.

He set her down with a great guffaw, releasing her almost as violently as he must have clutched her and, still laughing, strode off among the guavas toward the buildings. Bud came leaping over the lava rocks, his fists clenched, and his gray eyes blazing.



He had glimpsed scarlet streaks on the man's nose and the barer parts of his cheeks as his big bulk wheeled and disappeared. The girl in blue reeled, steadied herself, rubbed violently at one cheek, and then her eyes, wild with resentment and fear, dilated suddenly at sight of Bud. He was catapulting toward her with his scorched face, unshaven, hatless, his slop-chest clothing grimed and torn, but, nevertheless, to her woman's instinct a knight charging to her rescue, or her avenging.

She shook her head at him, and a mass of redgold hair, already disarranged, came tumbling down far below her shoulders. The beauty of it, the sheer, slender loveliness of her vital youth, held him more than her shaken head, her arm outstretched as if to actually arrest him, her whispered,

"Stop. He'll kill you! He'll shoot."

Bud remembered now the swing of a holstered gun low on the man's hip. It would not have held him back—it would not now. Something else held them both entangled—sea magic perhaps. Magic beyond doubt. Gray eyes looking into blue ones. Gazing with a dawning recognition. It was the call of youth to youth.



Bud looked like a beach-hobo, but manhood showed in his height, in a well knit symmetry, the shape of his head, his jaw, his nose, his eyes looking now with frank admiration.

The girl's color rose till both cheeks matched the one she had rubbed so furiously to wipe out that bearded, ravished kiss. Her young breast rose and fell with her quickened pulse. Like the spark that closes contact between two charged poles, something bridged between them, something rose in their eyes and ran, each to each, along that bridge. For a moment everything else was forgotten except each



other. The surf boomed and the sunset deepened, the world rolled on, but they stood still until there came the sound of the man's voice shouting, "Purdy, Oh Purdy! Where are you, you blighter!"

"I've got to go back to my uncle," said the girl. "He's dying. There's nothing much I can do for him, but—"

"I heard what that blackguard said to you," said Bud. "My name's Barrett—Cyrus Barrett—Bud Barrett. I deserted from the whaler that put in this morning for water lower down the beach."

"You don't talk like a sailor?" There was no real criticism in the words, rather compliment.

"I'm not much of one," said Bud. "But you don't have to go with that skunk, whether he's got a gun or not. So don't let that worry you."

She gave him a look that was reward in advance. But she shook her head.

"You'll only get into trouble," she said. "Watterson's killed more than one man, they say. There are the others with him. And—I couldn't stay here alone with you."

"I don't see why not. What's convention got to do with a deal like this? I'm square—you know that." He had no doubt of her conviction along that line, but he saw in the same instant that she was right. He had to protect her that way, too.

"He isn't going to shoot me in cold blood," he said, "though he might have if I'd interfered just now. I'm sorry I didn't get here soon enough to do that. A man that would bully a girl in the fix you're in is yellow, anyway. You go on to the house, and I'll happen along just as I would have anyhow. What's the matter with your uncle?"

"Heart trouble, island fever and trade gin," she said, her voice suddenly hard and bitter. "A combination of the three."

Bud saw, in her young, brave face, contempt, worry, weariness, the lack of sleep, the long trial of nursing.

"I've got to go," she said shortly. "You must be all tired out—hungry and thirsty. It's good of you to want to help me."

"I'm going to. Have you got a gun up at the house?"

She nodded, though she seemed to be listening to something else. A forefinger shot up to her lips, her pupils enlarged again until her eyes seemed black. She looked like a startled deer, Bud thought, remembering Californian days.

The bearded man had stepped silently as a cat out of the guavas, and stood looking at them with a mirthless laugh. It showed his white teeth amid his uncombed whiskers, puckering close the scratches the girl's nails had scored.

"Who's yore pickup, Thelma?" he asked. His dark eyes flashed in swift anger as he advanced threateningly toward Bud, plainly resenting the intrusion. "Where did you come from?" he demanded. Bud held his ground, looking at him equably, though, what with the need of water, and his leg weariness, his judgment quailed a little at the size and brawn of the man.

"Off the whaler *Flying Cloud*," he answered.

"She's out to sea. Flew the coop, did you? Fo'c'sle too tough for you? Rather shirk than work? Thought you'd hit the beach an' bum yore livin? Well, you've come to the wrong port, sonny. We don't like sandlice round here. Git!"



"You own this place?" asked Bud. He knew he was inviting a row and, aside from the gun, knew the chances were that he was going to get the worst of it, but the girl's presence, the still keen memory of the man's attack on her, did more than merely bolster him; they charged him with challenge, regardless of consequence. Neither was he going to be entirely helpless. He kept his eye on the holster, he set his stance for a spring. He knew the girl was standing with one hand at her heart,



fearful for him, and he knew it was going to come out all right.

Here was more magic—the escape from the watering party, the first glamor of the bush, the wild fury of the storm, the swinging skull and the trapped trail, the girl, and now this encounter.

Swift as the impression of a dream all this projected itself upon the screen of Bud Barrett's brain before the man answered.

"I own half of it, if that's anything to you."

"And the other half is mine," said the girl.

The man's face twitched with rage.

"Then you go 'tend to it," he snarled at her. "You, you scupper pup, git to hell out of here."

With the roar of a brute, his eyes glaring in his convulsed face, the big man leaped with dynamic force and swiftness. One hand was out to clutch at Bud's shoulder, to spin him about while he kicked him down the gully for the pithless scarecrow he looked; the other was clubbed for a blow, ignoring his gun, a man proud of his bull strength, eager to demonstrate it.

It was a costly mistake in judgment. He had expected the scarecrow to turn and run; expected nothing else from a runaway sailor. Ninety-nine times out of a hundred he would have been right. As it was, Bud stooped a little, his two hands shot out, and clamped on the other's right wrist, twisting and wrenching the arm until Watterson yelled with the pain of it, swinging a flailing blow that Bud neatly ducked. Then, while he let go the tortured arm with his left hand for a moment, he deftly plucked the gun from the holster, as the bearded man wrenched free and rushed him, flinging about him hairy arms that were hard as timber and flexible as rubber.

The gun went flying, and Bud spared a glance over his shoulder as he fought to free himself from the grip.

"Get it, get that gun!" he gasped, and saw the girl retrieve it, then step back with the weapon in her hand, her young face fierce with the look of a tigress, cruel and watchful.

All functioning ceased in him save that of preservation. He was on the defensive, his ribs bowing out of shape, his breath being slowly crushed out of him, his arms pinioned, while the bearded face close to his was goating, vindictive.

Bud's right hand worked up the other's left by jerks, feeling the great muscles

pliant in their sheaves, constricting him; feeling for something else, finding the place, fingers digging fiercely, frantically, in between tendon and nerve, touching a vein, clamping down.

The triumphant face was again convulsed, this time in sudden agony. It felt to Watterson as if a redhot wire had been inserted below his left biceps, midway of the great muscle, burning, searing, paralyzing. Strength went out of his left arm, the scarecrow sailor tore loose, leaped in. One blow, cushioned by his beard, but jar-



ring him, crashed hard and close to the point of Watterson's jaw, the other landed full on his mouth as he floundered forward, beside himself with rage, his left arm temporarily

impotent, numbed.

Bud slipped the rush, panting, his wind broken, his heart pounding, but game and cool. The fruit he had eaten since his meager breakfast on the *Flying Cloud* had given him nothing beyond filling space in his clamoring stomach. Sun and the struggle over the beach had taken full toll. He was in the condition of a tired athlete who attempts to wrest honors from a fresh boxer, after a long program of grueling contests. His two tricks of jujitsu had served him well once, but the nerve paralysis would not last much longer, Watterson would be on his guard against repetition. Bud had weight against him, power, the sustained vigor of a well-fed man. His tongue stuck to the inside of his mouth—the thirst that had gradually augmented all through the afternoon now attacked him viciously, making him a little dizzy, robbing him of all elasticity.

The sun was glaring straight up the ravine, close now to the rim of the sea, turning the gray rocks red as blood. Bud sidestepped, working round to get it at his back. Watterson followed him, rubbing his tingling left arm into which strength was slowly returning, murderous rage flaming in his eyes. Bud found himself backed against a boulder just as the girl gave a cry of warning, and his opponent, with a grunt of content, started a left swing that came down on Bud's guard like a sledgehammer. He used the slowly revitalizing limb as a club, while he drove



hard to the body with his right. It shook Bud hard, and it hurt badly. The vitality seemed suddenly sapped out of him, and he sagged down on his heels, covering, with Watterson stepping back a little, grinning, set to send in the finishing blows. Under one wrist Bud glimpsed the face of the girl, anxious, alarmed. This brute, if he downed Bud, would kick most of the life out of him, would have the girl at his mercy.

Bud saw the right fist start and, with his own anger and hatred surging back, bringing fresh energy on its flood, he crouched suddenly and lashed out while Watterson's blow sickled the empty air above him, and its launcher stumbled forward. Bud was inside the guard, and the smash he sank in the other's plexus—with the second higher and under the heart—were vicious and hard enough to brake the fighting impetus of the bearded man. They left him winded, gasping while Bud slid away from the rock that had trapped him, whipped in a short, lifting uppercut to the hairy, deceiving jaw and, trying for a left hook to the pit of the stomach once more, felt his foot slip under a looping vine. It twisted into a crevice, and gave away under him as he fell sprawling, and saw Watterson, still gasping horribly, his great chest pumping spasmodically as he strove for full lungs, stooping. His face was bestial with triumphal ferocity as he lifted a booted foot to kick Bud in the head, the ribs, anywhere that would maim and hurt, leave him crippled and senseless.

Bud could not help himself, the treacherous vine was still snared about his ankle, and he was on all fours.

There was the bark of a shot, the whine of a bullet overhead, sudden stupid surprise on Watterson's face. The girl's voice sounded clear as crystal, hard as metal.

"I'll hit next time, Watty. You know I can. Now, get out of here. Get off to the schooner. Get outside the reef as soon as the tide will let you. Go on, down the gully to the beach. Your boat's waiting for you."

Bud freed his ankle from the treacherous loop, and got up painfully. His foot was hurt and wrenched, but it was still serviceable. Watterson's scowling astonishment changed to a leer.

"That's how the land lies, is it? That's why you deserted? I reckon yore ship called here before, mister. Want to leave the two of you together."

Bud hobbled forward, but the girl was

ahead of him. Her eyes flared, her jaw was hard set, and there was no mistaking the de-

termination that spoke in her words, her pose, as she stood with the big Colt pressed close against her hip, slanting upward, covering Watterson.



"Wattie, if you say another word I'll shoot the tongue out of your mouth. You've shown yourself what I've always thought you were—rotten. I'm through with you."

Watterson nodded, a bit grimly, yet with the air of a winner for all his ignominious retreat. The girl watched him down the slope, standing poised on a boulder where she could command the gully and Watterson's descent to the beach.

When Watterson had turned toward his boat, Bud helped her down, and noticed that her firm chin quivered. She caught up a trembly lip with her little white teeth.

"He'll get all the best of it, at that," she said. "He's got the copra and the schooner, and that's really mine. I'll tell you all about it presently," she went on wearily. "You need food, and uncle——"

A shrill wailing cry started in the direction of the buildings, repeated, augmented by a score of alien throats.

"He's dead," she said in a low voice. "The boys have found it out. I left Tiri, the foreman, with him."

The boys, Bud supposed, were the plantation hands. The mournful sounds were weird in the dusk that was rapidly sifting down as they walked toward the house. He remembered what Watterson had said about the bushmen learning swiftly of the death, and that she was alone. She was not quite alone now, but he had been forced upon her. Unless he went into the bush they would have to defy the conventions until the next ship called. His presence would embarrass her. And he could not leave her with her black boys, savages themselves, and liable to reversion to the wildest type. He had attempted to rescue her from Watterson's frying-pan, only to compromise her, or leave her exposed to perils not to be thought of.

Plain before him he could see the pendulum of the skull.

Suddenly the wailing was punctuated with something that sounded like distant thun-



der from the heights that still held a flaring light on their fantastic crags. It was too regular for that. It was the sound of drums—drums beaten by naked cannibals, dancing about their fires and totem images.

He glanced at the girl, who was looking at him.

"It doesn't mean anything," she said. "They always start them going at sundown, and keep it up until after midnight. Whenever they have nothing to do, the natives dance. They tell me they do much

the same thing in New York," she added, with an attempt at making light of the matter.

But her face was wan, and Bud felt suddenly the strain of the life she must have led—a drunken uncle for her only companion,

the cannibal haunted bush, the treacherous plantation hands, the management of the place in her care. And now this last catastrophe that he had blunderingly brought about.

He braced himself to play the man. At least, Watterson was gone—though she had been the main factor in that. There was no sight of him. His boat had disappeared, the girl said. She had been quite capable of taking care of herself after all—unless Watterson had caught her unawares. It was up to him to solve the situation. As night swiftly fell, he squared his shoulders while he limped along, shaking off the depression of the darkness, the dead man waiting for them in the house, the black boys working themselves into an ecstasy of mock grief that might swiftly change to something far more fiendish, if they sensed that the white girl was unprotected.

So far the presence of the schooner restrained them. When that left it was up to Bud, inexperienced in such conditions but resolved to find some solution.

The stars were coming out, the wailing hands, naked save for loin cloths, their eyes rolling and their heads flung back like howling dogs, had lit palm torches, where they squatted outside the trader's bungalow. They gaped at the sight of Bud. The girl dismissed them tersely, snapping commands at them in Beach English, and they slunk off to their quarters.

A tall native came out on the little porch and spoke to her.

"Massa Timi mate," he said. "Wattosoni, he speak along of you?"

"I saw him, Tiri," she said.

"I hear shot," he replied looking suspiciously at Bud. "Some trouble walk along of you?"

"No trouble. Tiri, you speak along those boys go make one grave—all same in garden. Now."

"I suppose I seem callous to you," she said, "but my uncle has been ill for a long time. He was only my father's half brother, and he was not much of a man."

She was plainly holding on to her self control, and Bud said nothing, wondering at the pluck of her. She left him in the front room with a lighted lamp, while she went in to where the dead man lay. She came out again in a few minutes, her face composed, though she had been crying.

"We shall have to bury him soon," she said simply. "But you've got to eat."

"I'll wait," said Bud. His hunger had left him for the time. He followed her back into the room, and saw the body lying on a bed with the mosquito curtain drawn aside. It was a weak face with a straggling beard that did not conceal the inefficient chin, and marks of dissipation showed on it.

The schooner was still there when they returned from the garden, the grisly task completed.

"They can't get outside until the tide serves," she said. "I don't think he'll bother us. He's satisfied with his bargain. And he'll come back. He knows I can't stay here." She started putting a meal on the table, making hot tea, opening tins, producing bread and fruit.

"We'll eat—we've got to eat," she said. "You must be starved."

She sipped some tea, broke some food, and Bud, after the first morsels, found himself ravenous. Food was necessary for the plan slowly forming in his mind.

"You mean you stand to lose your share of everything?" he asked.

"Watterson was in partnership with my father. My name is Thelma Selwyn. My father owned the schooner. Watterson put up the money for the trading goods. We had a place on Muriti. And we established this station for collecting copra. Afterward we started a plantation here, as





well as at Muriti. Watterson was in charge. I used to sail with my father"—her voice broke, recovered—"until he died. There was a hurricane at Muriti. I was at Suva waiting for father to come back for me. I was staying with friends. My uncle—I always called him that—came instead. Father had been killed trying to rescue some of our people.

"Uncle Tom was no sailor. He hated the sea. I could have handled the schooner alone, but he would not hear of it. So he took over the station here, and brought me with him. Watterson took the schooner, picking up shell and *beche de mer* about the group besides copra. Uncle said father wished it that way. I do not think he trusted Watterson. I never liked him. I know he did what he wanted with my uncle. No doubt he cheated us. There has never been an accounting, I believe. Not for a year.

"I suppose it all seems shiftless to you. Helpless. But I am a girl and legal affairs for a woman under twenty-one are not made easy in this part of the world. My uncle was practically my guardian."

Bud nodded. His face had hardened, but it was not the less attractive to the girl who eyed him frankly. His eyes lost their boyishness, and gained in determination. Lines showed from nose angles to mouth corners; his scorched features became endowed with a stamp of efficiency, and his voice took on character, responsibility. There was little of the deserting fo'c'sle hand in the man who talked quietly and seriously to her.

"The schooner is really your share, then?" he said. "The station and the goods here Watterson's?"

"Yes. Practically that. Wait a moment."

She went out on the little porch, and came back to the open door.

"They are all aboard," she said. "Tiri is watching. He is foreman here, and I can really depend upon him. He is fond of me, and grateful for some things I have done for him. They cannot get out of the lagoon for an hour yet. There is one thing bothers me. Tiri says no one has paid the hands, and their annual wages are due. Watterson knows I cannot do it without money from the copra he has aboard or the ship's money he must have with him. He will claim to have settled with my uncle, of course."

"We'll handle all that, I think," said Bud. "We'll have to work quick, though. We've got an hour, you say. That's what

I wanted to know. How about the crew on the schooner. How many?"

"I'll call Tiri in. He knows."

The native entered, hunkering down on the floor, accepting Bud with a nod, his face with its flat nose, full lips and retreating forehead grave, and his eyes, dark and lustrous, fixed on the girl's face. She spoke to him in native dialect, and he replied promptly.

"There are eight boys in the crew," she translated, "a half-caste cook who is part Chinese, Purdy and Watterson."

"Any of the boys the ones you knew—who sailed with your father and you?"

"Five of them, Tiri says."

"Know you—and like you?"

"I think so. They know Tiri."

"We'll take a gamble on them? How about Purdy?"

"He's Watterson's mate, a Scotch Australian, drunk whenever Watterson lets him be. I was mate for my father. Watterson hired Purdy."



"You could sail the schooner out of the lagoon?"

The girl's eyes lightened as she nodded at him. Tiri listened intently with his head cocked to one side, striving to follow the English.

"As long as the partnership is going to split, that's what you'd rather have, isn't it? Your original share—the schooner?"

"Oh, yes."

"This end of it no use to you—outside of the stores—without capital or without a boat?"

"No use without capital. The hands have to be paid. If they were I could sell the copra to other traders who call here at times. But——"

"I understand. This is no job for a girl. I wouldn't be stuck on it myself." The swinging skull was in his mind's eye, and every now and then, when he listened for it, he could hear the beat of the drums.

"With the schooner you could make out trading, couldn't you?"

"I think so. If I got credit for trade goods. I know a good many of the islanders. I'd like to try it."

Bud almost said, "So would I," but he wasn't ready for that yet.

"All right," he said instead. "How's Tiri as a fighting man?"

"What are you planning?"

"You've got a small boat. I'm going off in it—with Tiri, if he's game—and I'm going to persuade Watterson to take over the station for the schooner. I've mud-



dled things for you so far. I think I can straighten them out. I'm a fair shot myself, and Watterson is afraid of a gun unless he's got the drop on the other man—or girl. I'm going to get the drop on him. What's the crew likely to be doing?"

Her eyes were sparkling now, approving him.

"They'll be for'ard, probably below for a while yet, playing with dice."

"Shooting craps, eh? Civilized that far. How about Tiri?"

"He'll come with us." Again she spoke rapidly to Tiri who rose to his feet and pounded himself on the chest.

"That Wattasoni no good," he said. "That *ehipe* belong along Missy. We take."

"Fine. You'll have to come along," he said to the girl. "Gum things up to leave you on shore. If we make the deal, there's no use delaying a start. Might complicate things. I hope to send Watterson ashore with Purdy and whoever insists on going with him."

"Of course I'm coming," she told him. "Purdy and Watterson will be in the cabin. The native boys may not make any trouble, if we can handle Watterson and the mate."

"We'll handle them. Can you get some things together quickly? You said you had a gun, and there's Watterson's. How about Tiri?"

"Me? I got knife. I got club. No trouble along of me."

"Native boys on board armed?"

"They'll have knives. But Tiri can handle them if they're below. They can only come up one at a time."

"Good, that leaves the cook. He'll be in his galley?"

"If we have luck."

"Bully." Bud stood up, and so did the girl. "Thelma," he said, "you're a wonder. I didn't know there were any girls like you. You're taking me on trust, you know."

"I know," she said gravely.

"You can," said Bud and held out his hand.

She gave him hers. "I trust you," she said. "I know you're not a common sailor. I don't know what I should have done without you. I'll be back in a few minutes. That gun is the same calibre as

mine. Tiri, you go get ready. You savvy what we go along to fix?"

"Plenty I savvy. I go."

She came back with a strapped valise, a gun belted on, her eyes shining. She handed a box half full of cartridges to Bud, who filled the cylinder of Watterson's Colt, and slipped the rest into his pockets. Tiri appeared with the bone haft of a knife showing above his loincloth, and bearing a hardwood club that ended in a knob with a beak of shell or bone projecting from it. This was a formidable weapon which he swung with easy zest, his eyes glittering, transformed into the warrior. He had smeared some white stuff on his face and was plainly happy at the rôle he was to play.

"Those kanaka boy," he said, "talk too much along their pay. I tell um we plenty fix. Tell um bimeby Wattasoni he come along shore—tomorrow he pay. They believe which way along of me I speak."

"Watterson will pay them," said the girl, "if he has the money aboard. I suppose he has. If we take the schooner he'll have to stay here, and run things until a ship calls. Or we can send one."

"We won't worry too much about Watterson," said Bud. "Are we set? Let's go."

They went down the beach, and along the wharf to where the boat lay. There seemed nothing incongruous to Bud in the adventure they were launching—the girl he had met, himself delivered from the fo'c'sle of the *Flying Cloud*, and the loin-clad native. It seemed only the fitting close of the day that had crammed with happenings. It accorded with the sound



of the drums coming down from the dark purple heights, the waving bush, the breeze, spicy with strange scents, that was blowing off the land, the phosphorescent curl of breakers on the reef, the brilliant stars duplicated in the calm lagoon across which they drifted. With Tiri using a stern oar as paddle and rudder both, they moved slowly down on the schooner, which showed with lights in the after ports and glowing from the skylight. A phonograph was grinding raucously aboard.

Tiri was crooning very softly to him-



self as he plied the oar—hardly above his breath—yet there was something blood-thirsty, a very lust of killing, in the short phrases that he hummed, as he carefully handled the turning blade, its little wisps of seafire streaking away from it. They were now close up to the schooner, low in the water from its copra cargo, the free-board easy to negotiate. Tiri brought them up beneath the overhanging stern, round to the starboard quarter. Then he stood up, club in hand.

"I climb um port side," he said in a noiseless, but audible whisper. "You go sta'board. Suppose some one he look along of you, I fix um."

It was good strategy. Tiri was a warrior first, and a foreman afterward.

"You no make fix um for dead," warned the girl.

Tiri grunted, let his body fall away in a curve, and dissolved into the water without splash, hardly rippling it. They gave him a moment or two, though time was getting a scarce and precious commodity. The tide was slack, and any minute Watterson or Purdy, both probably, would turn out the crew, loosen gaskets and hoist the anchor, which had already been hauled short. But the phonograph still sent out its sugary words, and they could hear the voices of the two men, the clink of a glass and bottle, could even get the reek of somebody's pipe as they crouched, their pulses beating fast, their blood tinkling. Man and woman—not much more than boy and girl—they were committed to the same adventure, their adventure, running the risks together.

She touched Bud on the arm. They rose, But with the painter of the shore dinghy ready to take a turn about a cleat, when they saw the glow of a cigarette spark as their heads lifted above the rail. Their hands were already on it, ready to go aboard. A, catlike, white-kilted figure, whose slant eyes shone by the lighted binnacle lamp, glided toward them, a long knife coming out of a girdle with swift dexterity. It was the cook.

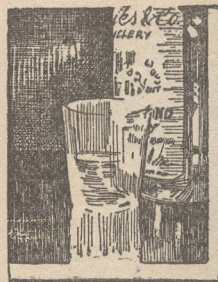
"Wha' fo'—?" he began, and never finished that sentence. Tiri suddenly seemed to materialize out of shadow. His club came forward, too gently to hurt a fly, Bud fancied, a stroking blow that braked its own force, and landed at the base of the cook's skull. Instantly the man pitched forward on his hands, and as instantly Tiri stooped, advanced, picked up his victim before he collapsed, and deposited him neatly in the starboard scuppers.

"Plenty quiet he stop," he said in Bud's ear. "No kill. Him all right bimeby."

The three of them stood glued to the deck, listened, trying to pierce the gloom forward. They had left a light in the bungalow to allay or prevent any suspicions. The phonograph record ended. A man spoke in the cabin, thickly, with a Scotch burr.

"It's all right for you, Watty, the way ye plan it. But what do I get out o' it? I'm your catspaw, it seems. I put the lad out o' the way while you get the lassie, an' a' the gear. Suppose I kill the lad? What's it worth to ye, Watty?"

"I don't want him killed, I told you. Not till I'm through with him. You're half seas over now, Purdy, we'll talk it over again later. Tide's close to the turn. We'll go out now, and we'll come back tomorrow night. Make a landing in Turtle



Bay, and go ashore. You'll get enough out of it to keep you drunk for a month. We'll go into details tomorrow. Time to go on deck."

"There's just two drinks left in the bottle, Watty. Lemme help ye to a dram. We'll drink standin' an' bottoms-up to you an' the little leddy."

Even as the cook's sentence had been clipped, so was the drinking of the toast to which Watterson had responded, standing with his back to the companionway. He caught sight first of the astounded look on Purdy's hiccoughing features, taking in the still more astounding fact that the mate was allowing something to come between him and his liquor. He wanted Purdy to keep mellow until his plans had been carried out. The Scot lost his customary caution when properly primed with alcohol, and would be better able to help in the kidnapping which was forward, together with Watterson's plan of a personal revenge against the scarecrow sailor. He had done what few men could boast of, stood up to Watterson in physical contest and not come off second best.

Purdy's jaw sagged, he slopped some of the gin out of his glass. It was plain to Watterson that the cause of it was back of him, and he started to whirl, his hand at the same time dropping to a gun with which he had replaced the one captured by Bud. But the latter, retrieved and used by the girl, was now, even as Watterson



shifted his shoulders, pressing its hard uncompromising muzzle between them.

"Your own Colt, Watterson," said Bud's voice, almost cheerfully, but not jestingly. "Put up your hands, and keep 'em that way. Mr. Purdy, you're covered from the skylight—so be good."

The mate's eyes, pale blue in their blood-shot whites, rolled upward to where Thelma Selwyn looked down through the opening, her gun barrel resting on one of the brass protection rails.

"Sit down at the table, Purdy," Bud went on. "Stretch your arms out in front of you. Just a minute, Watterson, I want another gun from you. May give it back to you later. All depends on the way you behave. You go sit opposite Purdy. Fix your arms the same way. Now cross 'em, both of you—cross 'em and join hands."

"I heard you two talking about Miss Selwyn," he added, his voice losing everything but menace. "Outside of your kind intentions regarding me, I'd just as soon shoot as not, Watterson," he warned. "Just as soon—and a little sooner." He meant it, remembering the ribald flippancy with which they had planned to pretend to leave, and then return and dispose of both of them. He ached to batter Watterson into a pulp for his rottenness, and his will leaped in his eyes and twitched in his trigger finger.

The pair obeyed, their hands and wrists forming a diamond hitch that left them helpless, though Watterson was raging, and Purdy seemingly stupefied. But Bud kept an eye on the little mate whose eyes held a glint that suggested he was not quite as drunk as he acted.

"We are going to put the partnership on the old basis, Watterson," he said. "I'm acting for Miss Selwyn. You get back the trading station end of it, and she takes the schooner—also the copra—and what's in that safe, outside of enough to pay the hands."

"I don't want a word out of you," he went on. "Your mouth is too inclined to be dirty. You'll do just what I say. You've probably swindled Miss Selwyn out of a good deal of money, first and last. She's closing all transactions here and now with this deal. We'll tow

you out to sea a way, and then you can row back on the tide, and run things as you like. You're getting out of it cheap.

What you need is a dog-lash. I don't want to twit a man who can't talk back, so——"

He moved round the table, and searched Purdy for weapons, finding none. Now he stood at one end of the table, a gun in either hand. The girl had disappeared. Suddenly he heard a shot, a hubbub forward, one deep voice shouting. Watterson hitched his shoulders as if to rise, but dropped them again as Bud's right hand gunsight was brought to bear between his eyes. Bud was torn with irresolution. The girl must have fired. She must have been in peril. The cook might have revived, the men forward——

"Eyah!" That was Tiri, jubilant. Appeals in native, clearly of surrender. The girl, pleading with Tiri.

"That all right, Missy. No can break that kind fella skull. Too much thick. Hi, you black fella, you make um gasket loose, catch um mainsail—catch um jib. Anchor he come up!"

There was the padding of bare feet on deck in answer to the commands. The girl came down the companionway behind him.

"I had to shoot Fong in the shoulder," she said. "He came to and tried to knife me. We'll send him ashore. I'll do the cooking."

Bud was watching Watterson narrowly. The man's evil mind itched for some way to express itself, to hurt the girl, to malign Bud. He started a sneering grin, and checked it as his eyes caught the look in Bud's, coldly malicious as his own.

"Get the money out of the safe, Watterson," Bud said. "All of it. How much do the wages amount to, Miss Selwyn?"

"Nine hundred and sixty dollars, outside of Tiri."

"Let him include Tiri."

"Ninety more."

"One thousand and fifty. You don't *have* to pay this to the hands, Watterson, but it will pay you to do it, so Miss Selwyn thinks you will. They are expecting it from you, anyway. Tiri told them you'd come ashore, and pay it with the cash. I imagine they'll be uneasy till they get it."

"I'm going up on deck again to take her outside," said the girl. "There'll be three men to go back with them, besides Fong. The rest will come with us. I'll give Tiri the wheel as soon as we are clear and come below again."

Watterson rose slowly as she disappeared. His eyes were venomous. He looked at Bud like a balked devil, then at Purdy, and went towards the safe, squatting before it,





twirling the dial. Bud heard Purdy's hard breathing. He had seen the look pass between the mate and Watterson, and he was on his guard against something, not sure of what it might be.

Watterson turned round with a tin cash-box in his hands, and put it down on the table.

"You can open it," he said sullenly.

"There's my keys. But it's plain piracy."

To open it Bud would have to put down one gun, more or less occupy both hands. There was a trick here, but it seemed palpable.

"You open it," he said. "And count off what you need; I'll check it."

Watterson bent his head over his task. But not before there had been another glance between him and Purdy who—too suddenly—showed signs of drunken stupor and drowsiness. And not before Bud fancied he had seen a swift gleam of triumph pass over Watterson's face.

What was it? Counterfeit money? Or was the cash box empty? The ship's money spent?

Watterson seemed to have trouble with the key. The lid came up suddenly, screening his hands. Bud guessed the riddle as Purdy, suddenly sober and alert, flipped up a hand, caught the neck of a bottle, and jerked it straight and hard at Bud's head, while Watterson's right hand came into view holding an automatic he had taken from the cashbox.

Two shots, a crash of glass, then two more shots, blended in continuous sound before the girl came leaping down the companionway. Bud had struck at the flying bottle with his left hand gun, shattering it, even as his right hand pulled trigger simultaneously with the discharge of Watterson's automatic.

A bullet got him in the left shoulder, twisting him with the heavy impact. But he saw Watterson, with a curious look of surprise on his face, fire again, and send the lead through the top of the table before he slid down to his chair seat and then the floor, a leering, foolish grin like that of an idiot's, blood breaking out high above his right eye.

His gun fell on the table. With almost incredible agility Purdy flung a heavy tumbler after the bottle, and reached for Watterson's weapon. The tumbler caught Bud on the jaw, and the cabin whirled in a fog as he convulsively squeezed the trigger—and missed. The bullet flew high while

Bud tottered back, slumping to a transom, struggling against unconsciousness.

He came to, with his head in the girl's lap, his face wet with fresh water, the blood-sodden sleeve of his coat ripped out at the shoulder, and his flesh bared to the wound. Her hands were at work, her fingers probing gently but firmly where the lead had torn through. A twinge of pain had brought him back again to see pain of another sort in her eyes, big in her pale, strained face, to see something else there that was not hard to translate.

"Don't move yet," she said.

"I don't want to move—ever," he murmured, knowing he was foolish, content to be so before he pulled himself together and glanced round. Purdy sat on the opposite transom with a face the hue of cigar ashes, holding his right forearm that was sopping with blood. Thelma Selwyn had shot him before he could fire at Bud.

Tiri had what seemed to be the dead body of Watterson in his brawny arms, depositing him on the transom beside Purdy, bending over for examination.

"He not dead, Missy," he said in tones of distinct disappointment. "Too much luck for him. No crack but plenty headache bimeby."

After all, the casualties were not so serious that they felt compunction about sending them ashore. Blood poisoning was the only thing to fear, and there were plenty of disinfectants in the station kit. Tiri had found it necessary to club two of the crew before a



third capitulated, and the rest—original members—recognized him, and joined the cause of the daughter of their former skipper—the girl who had acted as mate and whom they liked and respected far more than Watterson and Purdy. The thick skulls of the natives, buffered by their mats of hair, had saved them from fracture, and they were able—with the third man who, as their fellow tribesman, was left behind, leaving the schooner purged of all possible malcontents—to place Watterson with his gouged skull bandaged, Purdy, with his bleeding stopped with a tourniquet and Fong, with his shoulder given first aid, into the shore dinghy.

In consideration of the wounds Bud and the girl gave up the plan to tow Watterson and his followers to sea. They cast them off, watching them paddle shoreward toward the beach the wharf and the light-



ed bungalow, as the schooner, on the first of the ebb, the land wind in her sails, slid through the reefgate to the open sea.

IT WAS three days later before Bud made confession. His shoulder was stiff, but it did not pain him particularly, and the wound was healing at first intention. He took it easy in the cockpit, unable to assist, watching the smart handling of the schooner by the girl who, with Tiri for mate, made no trouble of it. She could navigate also; she could do a lot of things that made Bud feel particularly humble.

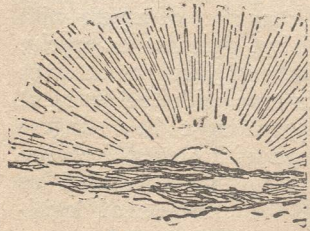
The glamor was still over things. They were alone together in a world of sunshine and fresh wind, of blue seas and sparkling foam—man and maid who had adventured together, and who trusted each other.

"Is there real money in independent trading, picking up cargoes with a schooner?" he asked her, after he had figured out a hundred ways of working up to his subject—and abandoning them.

"A living," she said. "It depends a great deal on goodwill. The big firms like Burns Philp have all the best of it, of course. And we only have a short season for copra. You have to make out with pearlshell, *bêche de mer* and sharks' fins. Through the rainy season you have to lay up.

"Of course if one has capital, and can pay expenses for seven years while the palms grow to maturity, you can lease land cheaply, and then every tree is worth almost two dollars a year to you, if you make oil from the copra. That all means machinery. And it's a long time to wait."

"If one was alone—y e s," said Bud. The girl looked at him questioningly. It was the end of the day, and the sea was dark-



ening with sunset, the curving horizon a wavy line of purple, the sky beginning to glow, Tiri at the wheel, his broad back, wealed with tribal scars and fight records, toward them.

"You see," said Bud, his voice trembling a little with his earnestness, and with his swiftly growing fear of the outcome now that he was going to put things to the touch," I don't amount to much, Thelma. I was shanghai'd aboard that whaler because I thought it was a clever thing to

take in the San Francisco waterfront and try to sample all the rotten booze we ran across. There was a fight, of course, and I believe I started it. I wound up in the fo'c'sle of the *Flying Cloud*.

"But there wasn't a girl mixed up in it. I've petted and fussed, but it always seemed to me that I'd run across the right one some day, and that she'd feel the same way about it—that we'd been on the way to meet each other all the time. That sounds almost crazy, but it's the way I felt about you from the beginning.

"I left a car standing somewhere on Kearney Street—eight weeks ago. I wonder who's got it now? Not that I worry. This schooner's a lot the better boat. And there's quite a bit of money, too, dear. I threw a lot of it away and I'd have got rid of the rest the same way—money that my poor old dad made by bucking the game. I've never earned a cent—so far. I'm not much—but I think I could be—it's different now—"

They had given the raucous phonograph to the delighted crew. Now it suddenly blared out:

*And in June—pretty soon  
On a long honeymoon  
Where the sweet, climbing roses entwine.*

She turned and looked at him, her lips a little apart, her breathing a little hurried, her eyes—

"Would you, could you, Thelma?" he asked her.

Tiri and the native boys did not bother about cooked meals. They had dried fish, green coconuts and fruit. The fact that supper-time passed in the cabin without

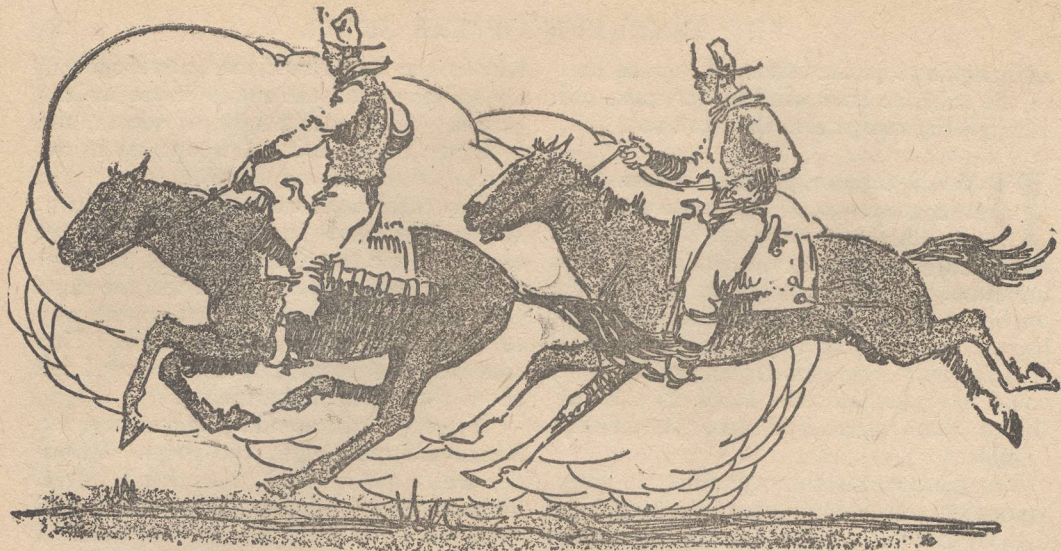


any preparations did not upset their arrangements and Tiri, munching a strip of sun-cured squid he took from his loincloth, made no objections to the fact that, under ordinary circumstances, his skipper-mistress should have relieved him at the wheel.

Looking ahead into the smoky sunset, Tiri took another dried tentacle and crunched into its crisp, salty sweetness. He knew the two were talking nonsense. Lovers always did. Was he not a lover? Was there not a girl even now who would be waiting for him to come back with wild ginger wreaths for his wide shoulders.

Life was good! Fight—food—mating. Very good!





## CERTIFIED LUCK

By ROBERT H. ROHDE.

*Author of "Border to Border," etc.*

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"LUCKBOX" LEAVENS OF DIAMOND CIRCLE RANCH WAS FAMED AS THE LUCKIEST MAN IN THE PANHANDLE CATTLE COUNTRY, "NEXT TIME" MCGILLICUDDY AS THE UNLUCKIEST. WHEN BOTH ASPIRED TO THE FAIR HAND OF THE SAME LADY, LUCK BEGAN TO PLAY A NEW TRICK OR TWO

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**L**UCKBOX LEAVENS shoved a stack of silver dollars onto the black eight just a breath before play was stopped by the croupier's sharp "No more!"

All eyes, save one bored brown pair, turned anxiously toward the slowing wheel. Luckbox had signified this was to be his last play; already his practiced fingers were arranging the mound of cartwheels before him into columns. Even the little click which announced the wheel at a standstill failed to distract his attention.

"Ocho negro!" I exulted, nudging him. "Your old favorite, black eight, and you're right on its nose again!"

"Uh-huh," grunted Luckbox. "I'd lifted three thousand flat and fare back to Tuckerton anyhow. This makes close to four hundred for loose spendin'. Let's irrigate."

We found a place under an awning from which we had unrestricted view of the four story skyscrapers of the busy town on the Texas bank of the Rio Grande and there proceeded, in the manner of old friends whose paths have not crossed for

many moons, to give mutual accountings.

The talk of Luckbox, as always, was of casual adventurings entered upon and ended in one evening. On the question of material progress his report was brief. The itch seemed to have gone from his foot; he had spent the better part of a year with an unincorporated but puissant enterprise known as the Diamond Circle and, since they'd baited their trap with the prospect of a foremanship, thought he'd linger; he was about through with games of chance—shouldn't be surprised if he'd staked his last dollar outside the channels of legitimate commerce.

All this seemed to betoken Luckbox headed for a prosperity more than ephemeral, yet I felt I could not be mistaken that forebodings weighed heavy upon him. Least of all could I understand his revulsion against hazards of the fiesta and the table. In the Panhandle they are nothing if not literal in their bestowal of nicknames; never by any chance does a fat man find himself "Slim" to his fellows. Ergo Luckbox, as often enough had been demon-



strated in my presence and to my sorrow, had luck. Of this I reminded him.

"What do you mean, 'quit gambling?'"

You can't tell me after the wrecking of the casino I've just been witness to that you've lost

your gift. As I've come to figure it, some people have all the luck there is—so it comes there's none left over for the rest of us. You happened to be born that way. Why retire?"

Luckbox's chronic expression of blasé good humor yielded to one of rare solemnity. He started to speak, thought better of it, upended his glass until dry America was clearly visible through the bottom of it and then was reconquered by his original intention. The impulse to the forensic, usually subdued by Luckbox with iron thorax, had found an ally in the heady Chihuahua brew.

"Like most glitterin' generalities—and quite a number of glitterin' generals I've read about—what you say is half right and half wrong," said he. "Luck wouldn't be luck if it stayed with anybody all the time. So far I've done right well, I'll admit; particularly in the clean-up, today. Likely enough it's time for a change. I dunno. That remains to be seen."

"But," I objected, "how are you going to tell? Didn't I hear you say you were pretty sure you'd never gam—?"

"Not with money, I meant," said Luckbox. "But ain't all life a gamble—right on through from where you cough up your first fishbone to where you can't find a smile quick enough to satisfy the rowdy party that contends he isn't what you said he was? Fact is, there's no *dinero* put up on either side in the biggest game we play."

I would have interposed a homily of my own, but the conversational bit was firmly clinched between the big white teeth of Luckbox Leavens. He galloped on:

"I've been makin' a study of the luck thing; almost got it reduced to a science. There's really two kinds of luck, when you come down to it. And that goes for every game of chance—roulette, ranchin', guessin' where the pea is, buckin' the market, matrimony, or whatever you care to sit in at.

"One hombre'll run along, always winnin' but never winnin' big. Then a thing that's important comes along and his luck has run out. Another bird will lose all

kind of piker bets until it looks like he's entertainin' at a give away game—and at last along swishes Lady Luck and hands him the grand prize. That's the way it goes."

Somehow I scented a connection between Luckbox's philosophy of chance and his unnatural melancholy—and in the connection a yarn.

"You're probably right," I remarked. "Well, friend Luckbox, everyone's entitled to his own theory about everything, but it strikes me yours might be hard to illustrate. Wish you were pushing over to New Orleans with me, by the way, old-timer."

Luckbox bristled.

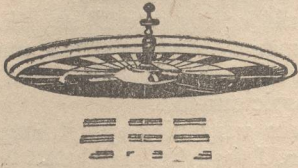
"Might it?" he inquired distantly. "S'pose we pass up New Orleans for a while, then, while a student of fortune quotes to you from the walkin' text-book known as 'Next Time McGillicuddy?'"

**N**EXT TIME (said Luckbox Leavens) was a medium to fair cow-puncher, the same coverin' ridin' and complexion and conduct, that blew along about round-up time and fastened himself to the Diamond Circle. Barring a pair of the most suspicious eyes I ever see peerin' out of a human head there wasn't anythin' out of ordinary which I noticed about him at first meetin'. Chances are I'd of steered clear of the gent if it hadn't been for Magda Waters.

I reckon you didn't get to meet Magda when you was in Tuckerton? Well, you must of heard of her dad, anyhow—old Eb Waters. Well, when Eb checked in he left a will as elaborate as Andy Carnegie's, the main difference between them two capitalists bein' that Andrew left somehtin' for the executors to work with.

But Eb, it turned out, had been gettin' a little financial assistance from parties in New York and signin' papers indiscriminate. So when the old boy passed along, the Waters ranch had an absentee landlord. All that was left for Magda was a three-room shack in Tuckerton with a six-room mortgage attached.

As women will in time of stress, Magda went into the hey, come and feed business. She turned the big front room of the shack into somethin' she called a tea-room, and





hung out a sign she'd painted herself. The big feature of this work of art was a weepin' willow tree, executed sad enough to suit anybody.

This here Weepin' Willow tea-room wasn't a place I'd steer a heavy eater into. About the heartiest grub that Magda set up to serve was chicken sandwiches. But they was a-plenty solid. Ham an' eggs would have gagged the male that tried to eat 'em with Magda lookin' on and wantin' to know twice a minute if everything wasn't all right.

For quite a while I guess I was boss customer of the Panhandle's first and only tea-room; and then this here McGillicuddy blows into Tuckerton with his first pay burnin' a hole in his fist.

I didn't get into town myself that day before sundown, and Next Time had come and gone. Magda was all smiles when I tucked my legs under one of the tables she had painted a high art orange with her own fair hand.

"Business is surely pickin' up, Mr. Leavens," says she. "It was a long time comin', but my judgment's vindicated at last. I knew Tuckerton would appreciate an eatin' place that's—well, different."

"Good!" says I, lying as cheerful as I could. "Where'd the rush come from?"

And I'd of defied anyone lookin' at me to say I wasn't tickled to death, even though I hadn't been pullin' full strength for what Magda refers to as her material success. I'd been figgerin', you see, that after a year or so of luck piled on parsimony I might be able to turn things the other way 'round and have Magda to myself in a six-room shebang with no more than a three-room mortgage. Anyhow, my grin passed inspection.

"Rush?" says Magda. "Yes; I s'pose you might call it that. It wasn't only a one-man rush, but I declare to goodness I was so busy for two solid hours that I couldn't of waited on another soul if they had come in."

"Somebody breakin' a long fast?" I asks her.

"In a sense," says Magda. "It was a Mr. McGillicuddy from the Diamond Circle—a stranger to me but one easy to recognize for a perfect gentleman. You must know him."

"I've noticed him around, I think," I admits. "Say, ain't there anythin' girls use to get rid of freckles that you could recommend to him on the quiet? He might look like a real white man if—"

"Don't you think, Mr. Leavens," interrupts Magda with an effect of light laughter, "that there's something about freckles that makes a man seem wholesome?"

"Buttery' would be my word," says I. "But it was the man's eyes that struck me more'n anything else. Sorter half-closed, but sharp and suspicious-like."

"I thought them very nice eyes," says Magda. "I mean, I thought I might think them very nice on better acquaintance. They may have been half-closed for some reason when the gentleman looked at *you*, Mr. Leavens, but I assure you they opened wide the minute he stepped in here—and stayed thataway!"

Well, old-timer, maybe you've heard tell I'm one of the lightest sleepers that ever done a full day's work before bedtime. I didn't need no more than Magda's look to bring me wide awake. This here McGillicuddy, it dawns on me, has all the earmarks of one of them unlucky-at-cards-and-lucky-in-love birds they tell about. So, bein' that I had knowed old Eb so well and one thing and another, I feel it my duty to give this pore unprotected daughter of his'n a hint as to the character and calibre of Mr. McGillicuddy.

"The person to whom you refer," says I, givin' Magda eye for eye, "is known in this and sundry other sections of the country as 'Next Time.' While varied in some respects his career has been extremely monotonous in others, I seem to recall. Yes; a right smart lot of gossip I've heard about him comes back to me. His passion, I understand, is not so much for punching cows as for pursuing vicissitudes. He is the sort of man that conscientious mothers warns their pigtailed offspring against, recommendin' them rather to the silk-hatted lad who'll provide 'em with all kinds of jewelry except rings if it should ever come to the choice. That is to say, he is a roamer, a rover and a roller."

Through all this Magda Waters just stands there starin' at me. Even when I had to stop for breath she didn't say a word. I took that for encouragement and went ahead:

"Mr. McGillicuddy, I faintly recollect havin' been told—possibly by himself—was at one time before stoopin' to employment with the Diamond Circle, officially connected with a gold mine in Sonora in the capacity of discoverer, founder and proprietor. But, however that may be, the gentleman no longer has the gold mine. It is quite possible he rolled Indian dice for it with a local Yaqui, two mines or,



nothin'. In fact, rollin' dice, two in the hand or five in the box, is one of Mr. McGillicuddy's favorite diversions. Next



after that, he prefers to indulge in dasting Fate to destroy him by drawin' to three-card flushes; next after that faro bank, the wheel, chuckluck or what have you."

At this point Magda puts her pink pastry program in front of me, leanin' it against a rich American cut glass water bottle such as is available to thrifty folks that don't give their soap wrappers to the neighbors.

"How interestin'," she murmurs.

"Interestin' but nevertheless tragic for the individual directly concerned as well as for anyone that might ever be afflicted with the supreme misfortune of dependin' on him," I corrects her firmly. "The unfortunate thing about the speculations of Mr. McGillicuddy, I must hasten to tell you, is that he always loses. So I hear and so I have observed in the course of several minor ventures undertaken by him of recent evenin's."

I looked Magda square in the eye.

"Write that down, Mises Waters," I says. "Next Time McGillicuddy always loses. And they call *me* Luckbox!"

Magda looks back at me so hard that first thing I know I'm studyin' the bill-o'-fare.

"There's more than one kind of luck, Mr. Leavens," she snaps, "just like there's more than one kind of man. As for Mr. McGillicuddy, I think a girl that's spent two years in school at Waco may be trusted to know a gentleman when she sees one—and to know how to conduct herself with anybody who doesn't think the world is all range.

"You spoke of Mr. McGillicuddy breakin' a fast, Mr. Leavens. Well, if you want to make his business your business, he admitted to me that was just about the case with him. The poor man almost wept when he realized the sort of food he might have in the Weepin' Willow. 'A garden spot in the wilderness!' says he. 'An outpost of civilization on the frontier of flapjacks. I have been slowly starvin' on the crude fare afforded by the Diamond Circle management, partakin' only of enough to hold body and soul together.' I give you his exact words, Mr. Leavens."

Well, old-timer, I couldn't hardly restrain myself at that.

"The last thing I see Mr. McGillicuddy partakin' of at the Diamond Circle," says

I, strivin' to be calm, "is seven fried eggs and enough ham to wrap 'em in to take out."

"Possibly," comes back Magda sweetly, "you confuse him with someone else. A woman can always tell. Mr. McGillicuddy was famished. He ate seven chicken sandwiches right here before my eyes, besides four pimento sandwiches, three lettuce and tomato sandwiches, a tomato surprise and six pastries. And when he left he took three dollars and forty cents' worth of real food with him in a box. Please, Mr. Leavens, don't speak again of ham and eggs. I have it from Mr. McGillicuddy himself that he abominates the dish."

Then and there I equals and tops McGillicuddy's record, particularly in regard to the fancy provender carried away. But what happened to the box of real food that McGillicuddy started from Tuckerton with I never did find out. I noticed he managed to partake of enough of Bill Smeed's flapjacks and ham and eggs and other uncivilized grub to keep an elephant's soul and body associated, though, and I didn't hear him voice no cravin' for finer things to eat.

Also, I sat in a couple of nights with the boys and assisted in separatin' Mr. McGillicuddy from what remained of the fruits of a month's industry, takin' more pleasure in the process than is usually the case with me. The set look of suspicion stayed in my friend's eyes; but he never let out a peep, even though it was plain to see he wasn't sure he was bein' used right when his best hands kept runnin' up against better ones.



It wasn't until the third day after his raid on the Weepin' Willow that I had a chance for a good talk with Next Time.

In the meantime I'd got the whole situation doped out plain as the freckles on the bird's face. McGillicuddy had been smit by the rare thing known as love at first sight and there was an added starter in a field I'd had to myself up until then—and hadn't been doin' any too good in, at that.

"Look-a-here, Next Time," I says to him as we rode out together on this particular fatal day, "there's no use of there bein' any dissemblin' between us. I'm willin'



to admit that you've got your eye on somethin' that I've got mine on. When a man with your penchant for the fruit of the fowl and the ham of the hog will commit himself to a long series of sandwiches with lettuce in 'em, there must be an answer. Likewise, when one of my tastes and preferences will take up the chocolate eclair for a pay-day pastime, it cannot be without cause."

Next Time favors me with one of his most suspicious looks.

"Meanin'?" he inquires, very polite.

"Meanin'," says I, "that I'm warnin' you that I'm always out to win—in everythin'—and at the same time seekin' to reach an understandin'. If all the romance in your soul is the kind that'd turn a joust of knights into a eatin' contest, I serve notice I'll outeat you from the jump. On the other hand, why?"

"Meanin'?" inquires McGillicuddy again; and then I see he's set on holdin' a dignified reserve. It looks like a cue for me to try him on another tack.

"I guess you catch my drift, all right," I pursues. "We need mention no ladies' names in our conversation, but I daresay we are thinkin' about the same one."

"Are we?" asks Next Time, still very pleasant.

"Sure," says I. "But I guess at that you've probably seen things in the right light by now."

"Ye-ah?" says McGillicuddy.

"Any good square shooter would," I tells him. "There's a jinx on you, man. The world knows it and you know it. Hard luck is no man's fault, but it's a condition that's got to be faced. A man with hard luck ought to keep it to himself, McGillicuddy. The affliction, combined with a desire for temptin' the goddess of chance, is fatal enough in single harness. And havin' been a good friend to Eb Waters while he lived, I——"

McGillicuddy's tired eyelids snaps up like brand new window shades.

"You have mentioned a lady's name—or next door to it," he says, quieter than before but not nearly so amiable. "Get off that hoss, Leavens!"

I hadn't figgered on anythin' so abrupt, but I was more than willin' to oblige. McGillicuddy and me hit the ground the same second, about a dozen feet apart, and he comes for me swingin'. He lands two whilst I'm shootin' across one. They come, smick, smack!—one on the nose, t'other on the ear. Then, while I'm tryin'

to find a place to plant my fist where my friend ain't got an arm to block the road, he slips a wicked one between my eyes. I see a whole skyful of stars and then comes a diamond sunburst to remind me it's still daytime. McGillicuddy has whammed me again.

At that I give a little ground—not by way of takin' flight, you understand, but thinkin' the fight would be a lot prettier if I could keep out of this fellow's reach for a little while. McGillicuddy keeps comin' strong, one eye half-closed and the other closed altogether.

"I'm a-goin' to kill you with my bare hands, Leavens!" he shouts, givin' color to the remark by spittin' a little blood.

Still muddled, but resistin' the temptation to remove myself from this here sinister presence, I'm waitin' for the new onslaught when Next Time's left spur gets tangled up with his right boot. Down he goes on his face and lays squirmin' for just so long as it takes me to plump onto his back. Bein' that he give plain evidence of havin' homicide on his mind, I figgered that was the best way of avoidin' a fatality of one kind or another."

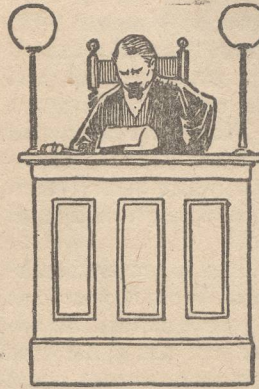
"Listen, McGillicuddy," says I, grippin' his ribs with my knees and sorta wishin' I had my old rockin' chair saddle on him; "killin' with the bare hands has always been classed as a crime in these parts and

I wouldn't like to have nobody get tangled up with the law on my account. And besides, it might be that in this barehand excitement of yours, with all the dust an' confusion there'd be bound to be, the wrong man might lose his health, permanently."

And right here is where McGillicuddy makes the most remarkable speech I ever expect to hear from a man in his position.

"From that, Leavens," says he, "I judge you give up. Very good. Get offen me quick as you can and then I'll consider whatever apology you've got. I ain't promisin' what'll happen after that. I'm displeased with you, Leavens—frankly displeased."

If he'd give a twist then I'd 'a' fell off him sure.





"Whatever has kept you from gettin' farther ahead in the world, it sure ain't lack of confidence," says I. "The trouble with you, my man, is that you lack imagination. S'pose you just stay where you are and ruminate on what's come to pass. Last thing you knew you was in a fight; now you're in the discard. From now on the barehand stuff is on the other foot. For a man with a killin' ahead of him you're in a grand place to start, ain't you?"

McGillicuddy gives a big heave then, but he'd passed up his chance of throwin' me. Havin' stuck with bigger animals I'm still in the saddle when he quits buckin'.

"While you're catchin' your breath," says I, "there'll be time for me to discourse further on the subject which you interrupted. What was it, I ask you, that put you where you are today? 'Twasn't me, McGillicuddy, but just your own hard luck. You might 'a' lasted a little longer against me, though I wouldn't say you'd 'a' had any chance. But, even if it was only to save you from a worse fate, your jinx had to horn in and mix up your feet and your spurs.

"So far as apologies go, I ain't givin' none and I ain't askin' none. The name of the lady in question is respected at least as much by me as by you. For one thing, I've known it longer. I've got no claim staked out, but I'm aimin' to. The field is open—in which remark you may see that my eyesight's good and that I'm givin' you credit for honorable though ill-considered intentions. What I wanted to point out was that the man that gets Magda Waters to cook for him private should ought to have a stake. I've got two thousand skins laid by. But even with fair prospects and constitutional good luck I don't think that's enough. What've you got, McGillicuddy?"

My captive havin' been docile all through this palaver, I climbs off'n him. He gets up glarin', but sold on the idea of negotiatin'. I'd let him see I was broad minded, anyhow.

"Got?" says he, and his tone is bitter. "Got? Well, in exactly twenty-seven days I ought to have a month's pay—if there ain't no credit allowed me meantime in you guys' game."

He shook himself and the dust went flyin'.

"Added to that," he goes on, "my assets consists of a hundred thousand dollars' worth of as pretty a brand of gold mine stock as any widow ever invested the insurance money in—and a piece of paper

the which I once believed to be worth fifty thousand bucks. I'll throw that in for good measure if you feel like takin' a chance on the stock at your own price."



"I'm buyin' nothin' but chips in cash games,"

says I. "They've always proved lucky investments—or I wouldn't even go that far." With that I make the saddle in a jump and the incident seems to be closed.

All the rest of the day McGillicuddy is moody. He doesn't say another word until, on our way home at evenin', the green roofs of the Diamond Circle shows over the rise. Then he comes out with a speech he'd been thinkin' up. I got him right, he admits, when I accused him of honorable intentions; and he confesses that likely enough I hadn't been wrong in what I'd said about his luck and its bein' preferable that the successor to the Weepin' Willow as Magda Waters's sole support should have a bank account behind him, anyhow.

"How much worldly goods do you estimate a man would need to settle down proper in this section, Mr. Leavens?" he wants to know.

"Five thousand dollars," says I firmly. "That's the amount I'm out after and I don't think you could make any less go further."

"Five thousand!" repeats McGillicuddy, turnin' pale. But in a minute he brightens, there bein' no such optimist as a bird with no luck. "That's a lot of money," he says. "but even so you're so far short of the mark that a lot of things might happen before you make up the difference. Considerin' your head start, though, s'pose we agree to confine our talk in Tuckerton to sandwiches until we're even at five thousand—and then let the best man win?"

"Life's too short, my friend," I tells him. "We'll race from where we are."

But, even so, it wasn't only a few days before McGillicuddy and me had worked out what you might call a set of rules. It was stipulated that neither of us was to drop into the Weepin' Willow tea room without the other victim bein' along. Also, neither of us was to go to town alone except on Diamond Circle business—this provision bein' McGillicuddy's and illustratin' his suspicious nature.

The two of us kept our business to our-



self, and the boys at the Diamond Circle began to kid us, before long, about the way we'd struck it up. They called us the twins.

Then, one day the old man told me to ride into Tuckerton after a new saddle he'd ordered in San Antone. McGillicuddy gives me a dirty look as I'm startin' away.

"Lissen," says he. "If you get hungry while you're in town, you're going to Alfredo's, ain't you? Just because you've been addin' to your head start at the rate of a couple of hundred a month while ownin' to the persistent vagaries of the kyards, I'm still at the post, you ain't forgettin' the agreement, are you? You won't be arrangin' any accidental way of seein' someone we both know, will you?"

"McGillicuddy," says I, a little more stern by reason of the fact that I'd just been thinkin' some such accident might happen, "you're dealin' for maybe the first time in your life with a man of integrity. You should ought to know better than make a crack like that. Honest, I never see anybody in the world so plumb full of suspicion of his fellow man."

Agitated as he is by the thought of me gettin' into Tuckerton without him, McGillicuddy turns red.

"Say, Luckbox," he blurts out like a kid, "if you ever got the deal I did you'd be cross-eyed by now from tryin' to look in front of you and in back of you at one and the same time. If you'd spent a year

among a mess of unpleasant Mexican mountains and got your hands on a regular man-size fortune and then had been trimmed out of the whole business, you'd have

doubts about your fellow man your own trustin' self, so you would. C'm'ere!"

He drags me into the bunkhouse and opens up a tin box he'd had with him when he hit the Diamond Circle.

"Look at this, Luckbox," he says, passin' out a bundle of stock certificates with tricked-up gold trimmin's. "And then look at this."

I didn't pay much attention to the stock. There was more readin' on the sheets than I had time for, just then. But the other matter he wanted to bring to my attention was simpler to understand. It was a check drawn on a Fort Worth Bank and made

out to the order of Matthew McGillicuddy. In plain figures and then written out so there couldn't be no mistake about it was the sum—fifty thousand dollars. Yessir, it was a impressive piece of work at that, all complete with an official lookin' rubber stamp on the back.

"What'm I offered?" asks McGillicuddy.

I gives him a queer look, but his face is a perfect blank.

"Try it on somebody else," I laughs. "Maybe you forget havin' offered this to me as a tradin' stamp with the stock."

"Sure," says he, "they goes together. It's a combination trade. What's the bid?"

I laughed louder. But even at that he had me goin'—yes he did. I was right curious about the check and don't mind sayin' so. Naturally I wasn't goin' to buy it from him at a cut rate, it bein' worth fifty-thousand dollars or nothin', plain enough.

"Who," I asks him, "was spoofin' you with a big money check like this?"

"You can read the name signed to it," he points out. "One thing that can be said for Austin Dunn is that he writes a good clean hand."

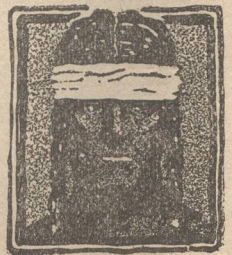
"Austin Dunn?" says I, wonderin' if I hadn't heard the name before somewhere. "Who's he?"

McGillicuddy shrugs.

"Probably he's Wilfred W. Robinson or J. Ernest Morgan right now," he says. "As Austin Dunn he was a gink with the finest watch-chain and the smoothest flow of gab I ever see or hear. His talk was soft and Southern-like, such as you seldom hear in the western end of the state, and off'n his watch-chain he's got the cutest little solid gold elephant danglin' you could imagine—a elephant with diamonds for eyes.

"I come up with this Mr. Austin Dunn in El Paso, Luckbox, when I was just back after thirteen months of prospectin' in the Sonora mountains. It didn't seem to me there was any hoodoo about thirteen then, I want to tell you. I'd hit it and hit it rich. All I needed

was a little financial backin' to be owner of a sure 'nough outcrop gold mine. Believe me, I'd found a little valley so riotous with the root of evil that a whole tribe of Indians had got prosperous just scrapin' away the loose surface





stuff." He was glowin' like a stock prospectus.

"I told you I wasn't in the market for any of your embossed stationary," I reminds him.

"Oh," says he, "you need have no fears. I wouldn't try to sell this here set of pretties—even to you. I've got some principles, Leavens. But my gold mine was real, anyhow, and I got this so-called Austin Dunn all het up with my description of it. He packed into the valley with me, takin' along a feller without no whiskers but which he said was a geologist. It was a long trip, but an hour after we reached where we was headed for we started back. They didn't need only their eyes to satisfy 'em I had the real thing.

"The supposed Austin Dunn won't talk business while we're travelin', but when we're back in El Paso he makes me a proposition. He says that maybe there's enough gold on my claim to pay for his risk and trouble and maybe there's not. But bein' that it's goin' to eat up a lot of his money to find out, leavin' aside the expense of negotiatin' with the several governments unitin' in keepin' disorder in Mexico, he allows he'd prefer to do all the gamblin' by himself."

I laughs right out in McGillicuddy's face when he tells me that.

"He'd sized you up pretty good, hadn't he?" says I. "I wouldn't want to have you on my side in a gamblin' game, either, McGillicuddy."

Next Time gives a shrug dismissin' the remark as unimportant and goes on, "Well, that's how come the presumed Austin Dunn makes me the proposition he did. I'm to turn over my interest outright to a company he organizes and controls, and as soon as I sign a paper to that effect the gent has a lapse of some kind or other and hands me over five thousand dollars in the brightest cash you ever laid eyes on."

"Hold on, McGillicuddy," says I at this point in his story. "Let me take back anything I've said about you havin' no imagination."

"I only wish I had them five thousand dollars now," snorts Next Time. "That's how good the money was. If what was behind it had the same sort of spendability I promise you the Weepin' Willow tea room wouldn't be runnin' much longer."

"What become of it, then?" I asks him.

"I carried it over to Juarez and undertook to outguess the wheel," says McGillicuddy. "You see, this faker Austin Dunn had said I'd have to hang around two or

three weeks while he was makin' financial arrangements of his own and gettin' his company organized. The paper I'd signed was somethin' he called a option; later on I was to sign somethin' else and he was to turn over fifty thousand dollars more in cash and a hundred thousand in stock."



"I see," says I. "And I s'ppose you run the wheel ragged?"

"I done pretty good," says McGillicuddy, serious. "Three or four days I almost broke even and I still had

more'n a thousand left when it's time for me to see the so-called Austin Dunn again. He had a cheap little office across from the Paso del Norte Hotel, with no trimmin's whatsoever, and I might 'a' knowed from that he wasn't high class. He slips me the stock with no questions asked, but instead of the cash he promised me I get this check. He's a smooth one, Dunn, and he tells me he don't intend to start operatin' right away on account of conditions across the line bein' more unsettled than usual. For that reason, he says, he don't expect the stock to develop any value for some time. He asks me how much I've got left of the five thousand; and when I tell him he suggests that I go easy with my cash and save up the check against a rainy day. It'll be as good in a year as right then, he says—and he never cracks a smile. Believe it or not, I still thought he was the goods. Say, if I could see him now I'd kill him with my bare hands, Luckbox!"

Again I couldn't keep from laughin'. It was curious, sure.

"Yeah?" says I. "So when you got the stock and the check what did you do?"

"Swallowed everything he said," says McGillicuddy, "and went over to Juarez to win back what I'd dropped on the wheel. Come right close to doin' it, too. Got up to thirty-seven hundred and then hit the bumps. A week later I was lookin' for Austin Dunn to see what he could do about turnin' the check into money."

"How'd he get around it?" I asks.

"He'd flown the coop," says McGillicuddy, grittin' his teeth. "The little office was closed up. And there wasn't no for-wardin' address on the door, neither."

"But you still had the check," says I,



gettin' more curious every second. "What did they say about it at the bank?"

"Bank?" yells McGillicuddy. "Can't you read? The whole of Texas was between me and the bank that check is drawn on—the Gusher National of Fort Worth. No, sir; I didn't go to no bank. I went to a bar instead to think it over and drink it over and talk it over. I'd met Austin Dunn and transacted most of my business with him in that same bar and I can't say the barkeep was surprised when I told him how I'd been stung. He opens his eyes and whistles when I tell him the size of the check. But he always had his suspicions of the so-called Dunn; he'd picked him for a wise one right off the reel, he says, though he didn't know anything about him, bein' as he didn't belong in El Paso."

"What do you think Dunn's game was?" I asks McGillicuddy. "You should ought to be able to get a line on him easy enough."

"I didn't do much inquirein', because I didn't want to have the whole town laughin' at me after me lettin' it be knowed I'd got rich off a Mexican gold mine. Nobody I talked to knew Dunn any better than I did. What I figger is that he roped somebody with real money on the strength of the geologist's report and got out from under. Probably he'd give me the cash just to keep me quiet while he was jammin' the deal through. And the so-called Austin Dunn was right enough about the stock of the Consolidated Sonora Mining Company havin' no value. There wasn't a broker in El Paso ever had heard tell of the company or the mine, and so I come up thisaway intendin' to return temporarily to the cattle business."

"Expectin'," says I, "to save a bundle of coin and then go huntin' Mr. Austin Dunn?"

"Exactly," says McGillicuddy. "To find him and kill him with my two bare hands. Say, Luckbox, remember you ain't goin' nowhere but the station while you're in Tuckerton!"

I said I'd remember, but that didn't keep me from havin' Magda pretty much on my mind while I was ridin' into town. Thoughts of her was all mixed up with speculations about McGillicuddy and his fifty thousand dollar check and the general perversity of human nature. They all went flyin' no sooner'n I hit Corpus Street and

cantered up to the station. The saddle hadn't come as guaranteed; but Mike, the agent, greets me with a shout.

"Hey, Luckbox," says he. "There's a gent come in on the 4:12 that's headin' for the Diamond Circle. He ain't searchin' for work, and that's a cinch. He looks like a million dollars."

"The hell!" says I, for there'd been talk about the old man sellin' out to a company of Easterners. "Where is he?"

"Disappeared into the Weepin' Willow tea room more'n an hour ago," says Mike, "and I ain't seen him come out."

So over to the Weepin' Willow I goes. That was certainly excuse a-plenty for a visit, but the visitor comes out before I get there. He was a youngish man, very well dressed up in Dallas clothes and pleasant-lookin'. But what hit me about him was the heavy watch-chain he was wearin' and the little elephant with diamonds for eyes that hung off'n it.

"You wasn't goin' to the Diamond Circle, mister?" I asks him.

My eyes was glued to the chain and the elephant, but his was glued elsewhere. Magda had come to the door of the Weepin' Willow. He smiled and, after a second, she did too. Then she disappeared.

"I was," says the stranger, with his head still twisted around. "I've arranged to motor out presently."

His voice was soft and smooth and slow. There wasn't any doubt of his bein' a Southern man.

"I'll say welcome to you, then," says I, findin' it hard to keep my voice steady. "I'm actin' foreman of the Diamond Circle, some part of the time. My name's Evans Leavens."

The visitor kinda grinned.

"I'm sure pleased to meet you, Mr. Leavers," he says. "My name's Austin Dunn!"

Well, old-timer, I won't say it was entirely unexpected, but just the same you could have knocked me out of the saddle with a lot less than a cannon-ball when he spoke the name. It come to me then that I'd heard the old man talk of an Austin Dunn, casual. Seems like they'd done business together.

I kept starin' at the man so hard and so long that he begun to look queer at me. I s'pose, him bein' the old man's guest, I should ought to have warned him about what he was gom up against. But for the life of me all I could think of to say was, "Got to hike out for the ranch right quick myself, Mr. Dunn. See you some more."





And off I went on a tearin' gallop. I didn't want to have no automobile passin' me on the road home. When Mr. Austin Dunn landed at the Diamond Circle I wanted to be there.



I was. But I'd no more than had time to tell the old man there was visitors on the way from Tuckerton when a dust cloud comes kickin' along with the loud poppin' of Simon Hester's flivver distinguishable from somewhere inside it.

"It's a Mr. Dunn," I advises the old man. "A Mr. Austin Dunn. You know him, don't you?"

"Uh-huh," says he. "A mighty shrewd article."

And then my heart gives a jump. McGillicuddy, who's been let to lay around the bunkhouse and environs all day for some reason or another, is comin' toward this same cycle-ogical spot at the cycle-ogical minute. He's only a dozen feet away when Simon Hester pulls up at the edge of the gallery where the old man's waitin' with welcome all over his face, spelled out in wrinkles. From the flivver hops Austin Dunn, a little dusty but still makin' a magnificent appearance.

McGillicuddy stops short, just like I once see a tough customer stop short while approaching a Trocadero deputy with malice in his eye. The difference was that McGillicuddy didn't spin and fall. Instead, after standin' frozen for an instant, he makes a jump forward. At the same time he calls out in blood-curdlin' tones, remindin' me of a actor in a show I see at Albuquerque once, "*Ah, ha! It's you!*"

The so-called Austin Dunn registers more surprise than fear. He's all smiles.

"My dear McGillicuddy!" says he. "What brings you into this part of the country? I've wondered——"

"Poverty brings me here," replies McGillicuddy a lot too pleasantly to match the curly wolf expression around his mouth.

Then dust flies two ways and when it clears the old man is standin' between Austin Dunn and McGillicuddy, and he has his fingers twined firmly in Next Time's longish hair.

"I'll kill him with my bare hands!" McGillicuddy is pantin', resortin' to the song I've heard him sing before.

"Yeah?" says the old man. "Well, I'll flick a bullet through the first bare hand you raise, my boy. What's the trouble, anyhow?"

Next Time straightens as far as the grip on his warlock will let him.

"This man's a trimmer!" he screams. "Anybody that protects him must be the same!"

You could almost hear the old man's eyes click as they met McGillicuddy's and bored into them. His hand dropped to his gun.

"A little quick elucidatin', if you please, Mister McGillicuddy!" he snaps.

Next Time didn't need to see the hand on the gun. The look in the old man's eyes was plenty to calm him.

"I know this man," he says, "and I been a-huntin' him. Whatever name *you* know him by and whatever good *you* may think you know about him, I stand here to tell you that this here so-called Austin Dunn has trimmed me out of as pretty a gold mine as ever——"

Austin Dunn's soft voice booms out at that with a rasp in it.

"Trimmed *you!*" shouts Dunn. "Say, if I hadn't been carried away by enthusiasm you'd never have had a cent of my money for your Mexican mine. It's likely to be a dog's age before I can take gold out of it without payin' twice its value to a gang of blood-suckin' bandits!"

"Easy!" puts in the old man. "Easy, gentlemen. I'm sure there is a mistake here somewhere."

"Mistake!" says McGillicuddy, coolin' at the prospect of exposin' his enemy. He fishes in his pockets and finally finds where he's tucked away the Austin Dunn check after showin' it to me. "Where the mistake comes in," he goes on, unfoldin' the evidence and wavin' it, "is when I let this get-rich-quicker hand me this and tell me it was fifty thousand dollars!"

Austin Dunn's mouth opened wide and then shut again in the shape of a grin.

"I've wondered about Mr. McGillicuddy's restraint," says he, but this explanation is really quite unbelievable." He turns to the old man. "Would you mind," he asks, "looking at what Mr. McGillicuddy has in his hand and telling him what it is."

With a wary eye on Next Time the old





man reaches for his spectacles. He puts them over his nose very deliberate and snaps the cinchas onto his ears. Then he takes the check out of McGillicuddy's hand and reads it over careful, front and back.

"This is a check made out to Matthew McGillicuddy and signed by Austin Dunn," he says, his eyes poppin' and sorta stumblin' one word into another. "It calls for payment of fifty thousand dollars by the Forth Worth Gusher National. I can congratulate you on being the wealthiest man in the Diamond Circle's employ, Mr. McGillicuddy, but still I must confess I don't understand your animosity toward Mr. Dunn. What do you think is the matter with the check, may I ask?"

"Matter with it?" roars Next Time. "Matter with it? How much'd you be willin' to give for it?"

Light begins to dawn on the old man then, judging from the look on his face. Says he, without battin' an eye:

"If I hadn't made other arrangements for capital through Mr. Dunn and if I could use a partner so lackin' in business knowledge, I'd give approximately a third interest in the Diamond Circle for it. Or I'd give you fifty thousand dollars cash if I had it in my safe."

McGillicuddy turns pale and fights for wind.

"Yeah?" he says. "Yes, you would!"

"Certainly," says the old man very quiet. "For more'n a year the money's been waitin' for you in one of the strongest banks in Texas, unless someone's changed the date on the check."

"Yeah?" says McGillicuddy, lookin' like he's ready to faint. "What'd you bet on that?"

"Your whole fifty thousand—if I was the kind to take advantage of a mental cripple," says the old man, tappin' a finger against the blue bank stamp on back of the creased and dirtied little slip of paper. "You poor benighted chucklehead, this check's *certified!*"

**L**UCKBOX LEAVENS lifted his glass to me.

"What I mean to say, old-timer," said he, "is that this here professionally unfortunate Matthew McGillicuddy sure had a platinum horseshoe concealed around him, after all. It led him to this gold mine, it put him in touch with this Austin Dunn, it kep' him from destroyin' or givin' away his fifty thousand dollar check and lastly it fixed up for him to meet Dunn

again and have the intelligence that he's rich blasted through his skull."



"He collected the money, then?" I asked.

"Sure did," replied Mr. Leavens. "That check was as good as any gold that ever came out of the ground."

The brown eyes of Luckbox wavered before mine.

"Did you by any chance know the check was all right before McGillicuddy found it out?" I demanded. "Hadn't you seen bank certifications before?"

Evans Leavens tried once more to meet my eyes. Failing, he nodded.

"Yep," he admitted. "But I didn't try to buy it off'n him, did I? If you'd of been in my place would you've told him what it was—considerin' everything?"

"That depends," said I. "In the circumstances it doesn't seem to have made much difference, since McGillicuddy knew he was worth a fortune almost as soon as you did. But I'm less interested in the ethical question than in the element of romance. You've established your point in regard to luck; now how about the lady?"

Luckbox appeared momentarily distressed.

"That's the big gamble that lays ahead of me," he said. "If I win out, you can bank on it that I'm through for good with all forms of chance-takin' exceptin' such as I may run up against at church fairs. When a man's got someone besides himself to look out for, he's got to keep both feet on the ground at all times, no matter what kind of luck he has."

I asked what the wealthy rival was doing while Luckbox was so far away from Tuckerton.

"Shucks," said Mr. Leavens. "It wasn't hard to get Mr. McGillicuddy to agree to a kind of armistice. In the first place he was plumb dazed. In the second he was achin' to sprinkle away some of his surplus coin, free and easy like and with no one to account to for the hole in the assets. Moreover, after the way he'd abused Austin Dunn he could hardly have stuck with the Diamond Circle even if he'd wanted to. Dunn, you see, bought in on the ranch that very night. He'd intended to close his deal and blow; but, from what the old man let drop, seems like he changed his



mind sudden after arrivin' and was fixin' to stay on, him and the old man keepin' bachelor hall together for the time bein'. So in the mornin' after we'd had a talk, McGillicuddy started off for Fort Worth with designs on the Gusher National and I got a vacation and headed down here with designs on the wheel. The understandin' was that neither of us was to show up around Tuckerton for two weeks—which makes the time of the big return day after tomorrow—and also that anybody that didn't have five thousand dollars amassed or left over at the time should just forget to come back. See?"

"An excellent arrangement," I acquiesced. "But aren't you afraid McGillicuddy may steal a march on you, Luckbox? My own experience with people of a suspicious turn of mind has taught me that they're not greatly to be trusted themselves."

Leavens, conquistador of the fickle wheel, grinned and shook his head.

"No," said he, "I wasn't as much afraid of that as that I mightn't be able to run my two thousand up to five thousand—the which I've finally done and then some. You see, before I left Tuckerton I snuck around and had a talk with Magda, lettin' her know for the first time how things stood between me and Next Time—and her. She pretended like she was surprised and all cut up; but it wasn't any trick at

all to get her to promise to shoot me a wire to the Munsinger Hotel here if McGillicuddy should turn up before we was both due. That was all I asked her. Fair's fair. Of course, I might of—"

Evans Luckbox Leavens emitted a sudden whoop signifying his recognition of a tall, stoop-shouldered man shambling along the opposite side of the street and peering over the doors of the line of "American bars" standing solidly shoulder to shoulder with their backs to the Land of Drought.

"Hi, neighbor!" yelled Luckbox. "Come spray your throat!" And to me he explained: "Cattleman from New Mexico I've been teamin' with. He's stoppin' at the Munsinger, too."

The stoop-shouldered man was crossing the dusty street at a pace which suggested either the sight of Evans Leavens or the invitation had lent him new vigor.

"I was lookin' for you, Leavens," he said as he slumped into a chair. "There's been

a telegram at the hotel since before noon, and thinkin' maybe it was something important I set out to round you up."

Luckbox paled under his tan as he reached an unsteady hand across the table and tore open the yellow envelope.

"It can't be only one thing," he muttered. "The son of a gun! The son of a gun!"

Evans Leavens's face underwent several changes as he read the message. When he had digested it he lifted his eyes no higher than the bottom of his empty glass. He ignored a waiter, a Volstead expatriate from Chicago, who waited for the augmented party's order.

"Did you guess it right?" I asked. "McGillicuddy's back in Tuckerton, eh?"

From Luckbox came not a word, not even a sign acknowledging he had heard.

"It's from—ah—Magda?"

Mr. Leavens morosely raised and lowered his fiercely outthrust chin, once up, once down. I waited in vain for a word from him.

"Well, old man," I ventured after another pregnant interval, "I shouldn't call a premature appearance of the gentleman a complete catastrophe. The thing for you to do is to hurry back."

"Yeah," grunted Luckbox, unlocking his tight lips with an effort. "To hurry back to the fiesta and see how much action they'll barter for five thousand eight hundred and seventy-two dollars."

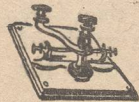
"Nonsense!" said I. "You've made your stake and a resolution. Stick to both of them; and in the big issue trust to your luck. You ought to know what the telegram means, man! Magda wants you to come back to Tuckerton—now, doesn't she?"

Again Luckbox Leavens exalted and depressed his chin; but his face became if anything more tragic. He crushed the yellow slip in his palm and dropped it into a side pocket of his gay holiday coat.

"Very well," I pursued. "She wants you to come back, then. Evans Leavens, can't you guess why?"

To the lips of Luckbox Leavens then came a warped and painful smile.

"No guessin's needed, old-timer," said he, "because she says why in the telegram. She wants me back in Tuckerton day after tomorrow sure, because fate's overtook her while I've been away—and that's the day she's bein' married to the so-called Austin Dunn!"







# THE ASSAY

By JACK BECHDOLT

*Author of "Set in His Ways," etc.*

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"YOU NEVER CAN TELL ABOUT PARTNERSHIPS," SAID THE OLD-TIMER. "USUALLY IT'S THE MOST UNLIKELY ONES THAT PROVE UP PURE GOLD IN THE LAST ASSAY."

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**T**WO men were following a wide mountain glacier. Their figures were dwarfed to insignificant, crawling specks in an infinity of glaring white that lay beneath a slate hued sky.

The higher slopes of the range were already hidden by the lowering clouds. About the men was no bush or tree, no rock, scarcely even a hummock big enough to shelter them.

The river of ice they were crossing was hid under many feet of snow. It looked like any other snowfield, far too much like any other snowfield to suit a cautious man's liking, for here and there beneath the crust lay a crevasse, a crack in the ice often fifty or a hundred feet in depth, bridged over with the snow crust now, ready to engulf the uway. If a man should fall into one of those deep, wide cracks that split the slow moving vast ice river and live to get out again he need be courageous as a lion, cunning as a fox and born hung with horseshoes besides.

The men traveled one behind the other and they moved jerkily, erratically, because the second man was being led. A cord of some six or eight feet in length bound him about the wrist and was tied at the other end in the leader's coat belt. Every floundering movement of the led man was awkward and abrupt and constantly drew the leading cord taut. When

this happened the man who led would give the cord a twitch impatiently and look back over his shoulder in a frenzy of irritation.

The man in the rear fell from time to time and his weight on the cord halted his companion with a round turn. There would be an awkward wait while he scrambled erect. Then the pair would push on without words, in a dogged, grim, bitter determination that told plainer than any speech that they had reached a pitch of mutual irritation and disgust too deep for any profanity to express.

The men were traveling light, without sled or pack or even rifles. They had themselves and their snowshoes to manage and that was as much as they were capable of doing.

Logan Kay, the led man, went down asprawl. Like a horse that has slipped on an icy pavement he threshed for a moment then lay still.

The taut cord brought Lu Carson up with a jerk that twisted him halfway about so that he could watch his partner as he began to feel awkwardly with feet and hands, preparatory to scrambling upright. The physical dissimilarity between the two was as marked as their mental and spiritual differences. Carson was one of those stocky, broadshouldered, shortnecked men. He planted his short, thick legs wide apart as he moved. All that showed of his face between the brim of a thick, flapped cap



and upturned mackinaw collar was two blue eyes, eyes of a slaty blue like the thickening clouds above and as indifferent to the helplessness of the man who struggled to regain his footing on whom they looked.

Logan Kay, his partner, was the tall, rangy, nervous sort who belied his strength with a negligent slouch. Unless you knew men well you would pick Kay as the weaker, the one who would first go under in a pinch. It was not only that he was slighter in frame and flesh, but because of a certain refinement of feature and manner and a drawling leisurely way that the majority of men gave him second place in rating the pair. Yet it was no fault of the spirit that Logan Kay was being led on a string. The day before Kay had gone blind under a brilliant sun that made a



merciless incandescence of the vast snowfields. Snow glare has an insidious way of working harm and has caught plenty of brave men innocent of its dangers. The mischief done by

this effect of torturing light overpowering the optic nerve is not necessarily permanent. But for the present and for days to come Kay would be blind as a bat.

The cord stretched taut between the two men. When Kay with the clumsiness of the newly blinded tried to get himself upright the strain of his bond foiled his effort. Carson could see this plainly enough, but he made no move toward the prostrate man. Rather he settled himself in his stocky immobility with a sort of perverse cruelty that rejoiced in his partner's floundering. Kay caught the cord and jerked it angrily, pulling himself upright finally against Carson's braced bulk.

Carson turned to plod onward, shooting an anxious glance at the slaty clouds. His partner refused to move. His stubbornness brought them face to face again.

Kay panted, "Untie this damned thing. I won't be led like a dog on a leash!"

Carson's answer was a growl. "Shut up, we've got to get going——"

"I'm damned if I do! Cut that rope——"

"Quitting, are you?" Carson sneered. He shortened the space between them and caught the blind man roughly by the shoul-

der. "Listen, you fool! There's a blizzard blowing up and we've got fifteen miles to go before we strike timber below the glacier. If it comes down the way it usually does, we stand about one chance in fifty of making it at all. Every minute we waste is raising the odds against us. Now you walk—and walk quick. If I catch you showing any yellow again——"

"Yellow! You damn liar——"

"Walk!" Carson roared and fairly jerked Kay off his feet as he swung ahead. Carson settled his head closer to his shoulders, turtlewise, until the buttoned up collar seemed to meet the cap brim with only a slit through which his cold eyes gleamed. Behind him Kay floundered at the tugging of the cord, face upturned, hands groping.

Kay's face showed a preoccupation with more serious problems than keeping his balance and escaping the blizzard. Through all the dirt and tan he had flushed at Carson's sneer and his fists had doubled to strike. Anger had given way to a fixed sobriety. Kay pondered a problem as he floundered behind his partner and eventually he reached a decision that brought him to a halt and brought Carson to a halt, likewise, because of the cord between them.

"Carson," Kay said in a level, significant tone, "either you cut this rope—or I will. We'll settle our affairs right now."

**I**N EVERY way the partnership had promised well when the two men met in the previous summer. Carson, who had prospected the country for four years past, had located on a promising creek. He furnished the claim and the experience. Logan Kay, who was a newcomer from the outside, furnished the grubstake and halved the labor.

Kay was a wanderer, an adventurer, a restless man without ties, ready to sail for any port so long as it was not one he had left behind him. The prospect of gold allured him but the chance of new adventures and places to sate his restlessness allured him most. Kay had a quick wit, a streak of ingenuity and a willingness to gamble against big odds. Carson furnished the balance. Carson was methodical, a man with a purpose. His wife and children were waiting in a home in the states. They needed the gold Carson was seeking. Carson had little imagination. He was slow thinking, but once he got an idea he held onto it. His doggedness made up for Kay's brilliance. Their partnership should have been ideal.

They reached Carson's new country, a



week's journey from Haida, the nearest town, in late summer. They built a cabin against the winter and prospected the creek.

It was no fault of Carson's that the creek proved a fluke. Carson had found a pocket or two that promised good pay. Not Carson but the Supreme Geologist was to blame because there were no more rich pockets. The facts were irritating, but Kay acknowledged the justice of Carson's defense gaily. They worked the ground until it froze like steel, but without luck. It was galling to fail, yet they made the best of a bad job and settled down to winter in amity.

It was the winter that split them. As frost will split the hardest granite eventu-



ally, so long winter in confined quarters will split the best cemented friendship—and Carson and Kay's relation was no solid granite structure at best.

Logan Kay was cursed with an adventurer's restlessness. Carson, who was able to take winter like a bear, sleeping and drowsing through interminable days and nights of confinement in the one room cabin, eating monotonous food, washing dishes when he had to and no sooner, going unshaved, unwashed, unkempt, was to Kay no more than a clod. Kay was fastidious. He shaved daily under the most adverse circumstances. He would read anything printed and loved to argue about what he read. He had a most maddening habit of washing out his clothes and hanging them about the red hot stove to dry. Carson began by naming him a racoon for his habit of washing and ended by detesting him for it with a murderous hatred. When Carson thought or talked at all it was about one subject—his wife and four children. He kept kodak snapshots of his family and sometimes looked at these for hours at a time. They were an unprepossessing family as presented in the photographs, a blowsy, homely, middle aged mother and four shabby, second rate children with

over-prominent teeth, ill assorted features and unlovely bodies. Kay marvelled at first that Carson could bear to think at all on such a mistake in his past. In the end he hated Carson's family as much as he hated his stolid partner for leading him into an adventure that turned out all monotonous and squalor.

There was danger as bad as stored dynamite in the solitary confinement of two men under such circumstances. Carson recognized it through experience and Kay's imagination showed it to him. Both held their raw tempers in leash and they stuck it out somehow until the February day when the cabin burned—a day hard as diamonds and as glaring with sunlight, with temperature far below zero.

They had been out together, hunting snow rabbits or anything that would vary the monotony of canned beans. They saw the smoke of the burning cabin from afar and raced over the hills to reach the claim too late. The cabin was gone. Their supplies were gone with it.

Carson looked over the smouldering ruin and made that sucking, clucking sound with his lips that Kay had grown to hate.

"I suppose this is my fault!" Kay burst out.

"I told you not to hang your confounded socks around that stove, Kay."

"I told you to clean up, didn't I? The whole place has been soaked in the grease you spilt around with your cooking. Like a torch!"

They glared like two animals. Simultaneously they exploded into action, flying at each other with murder in their hearts.

Carson caught Kay by the shoulder and managed to hold him off while he argued hard and loud as if addressing a deaf person.

"Listen! Damn you, you've got to listen! We can't scrap here—now! We're wasting the one chance we've got, the chance to get back to Haida before we starve and freeze to death. Listen to me—we've got to *mush!*"

The truth that Carson shouted at him took the fight out of Kay. They had one chance to live, the chance of decent weather for their race back to Haida, a five day trip for them even if traveling light—as they would be of necessity. They had no preparations to make, no blankets to roll, no food to pack—the fire had seen to that! They had merely to start.

With belts notched tight, resigned to the prospect of five days' hunger, they made their tracks over the shortest possi-



ble trail to safety, clipping across ridges and gullies, up through the timber into the



region of perpetual snow and shelterless wastes, as fast and as straight as topography would allow. They drove hard, so long as light lasted or they could

find a way, and at night scooped a hole in the drift where they huddled close, their bodies raising the temperature enough to support life, holed in like two animals.

With the perversity of the adventurous Kay had taken the disaster as a joke and went into the race gaily. Carson saved his breath for hard work, and Kay's insistent chatter rasped him cruelly. Then on their third day Kay, whose eyes had been bothering him until his head seemed split by some bright steel ax blade, lost his sight completely. He groped, then stumbled, then went down and found he could see no more.

Carson heard the news with surly quiet. He made that thoughtful, speculative sucking noise with tongue and lips that irritated Kay so.

"I suppose you think this is my fault, too?" Kay shouted. "I suppose you think I went blind on purpose?"

"You could have been more careful. I warned you about your eyes."

"A lot of my eyes mean to you! Well, don't stand there like a fool. Go on to your wife and brats. I'll take my chances here. I'd rather, than stand two more days of you."

"Lucky I got this cord in my pocket," Carson said stolidly. He ignored Kay while he made the leading string fast. When Kay would have continued to rebel Carson set off with his steady, easy, distance conquering shuffle and Kay was jerked into step.

"No time to argue now," Carson thought. "But if I ever get him back to Haida, then, by glory, we'll settle a few scores!"

In the same mood Kay submitted to leading. Kay wanted to live very much, for he had something to live for—his reckoning with this wallowing, filthy beast, Carson. The prospect of satisfying his glowing hatred by mauling Carson, by gouging his flesh and breaking his bones, was like the prospect of a feast to a hungry man. He put up with everything to gain that

purpose and at every fall his stumbling brought on, Carson, by either his talk or silence, gave him fresh reasons for hating.

For all his trying, Kay's temper exploded finally. It was in that eerie, dead silent moment of lowering clouds and hard gray light, when the storm poised and the earth waited the blizzard, that Kay declared he would no longer be led.

"Carson, you can cut me loose and go on," he declared. "Or you can stay here and settle things, if you're man enough to risk it. Don't worry about my not seeing, either! I can everlastingly handle two of your kind if I am blind as a bat. Cut that rope, if you're a man and not a yellow dog!"

Carson growled, "Shut up and come on! We can't waste a second here!"

"Then you are a yellow dog!" Kay cried hysterically. "I knew it!"

Carson shrugged and would have turned into his stride. As if this was a signal the skies loosed a blinding downpour of snow upon them. It fell straight. Presently the wind would come. In this moment of hush there was no wind at all, just the blinding cloud of white.

The icy flakes rained on Kay's upturned face.

"Snow!" he exclaimed.

"I told you that," Carson answered angrily. "And we're fifteen miles from timber! Will you move now, you damn fool?"

The cold fingers of the blizzard laid on Kay's face had a curious effect upon him. As if the hand of the storm was potent with some hypnotic power its touch drove from his mind all the seething hatred he felt. For the first time, because Carson's grumbled warnings had seemed to him only aggravations without meaning, Kay knew the peril they stood in. He ceased to hate Carson.

Listen, Carson," he began hurriedly, anxiously. "You said yesterday if we headed due north, cutting across this glacier, we'd strike the cliffs? You said a man could climb down that way and cut off twenty miles of detour into Haida?"

"Not in winter," said Carson.

"If you tried it single-handed? Without me to bother with?"

"Can't be done in winter! In summer, maybe. Will you come on!"

"You won't take a chance on the cliffs?"

"I will not!"





"Then listen, Carson, don't be a fool. At the rate you go with me in leash we can never get off this glacier into timber! We'll either blunder into a crevasse or freeze to death. But if you go on alone —"

"Not going alone," Carson grunted. He added deridingly, "Go alone and leave you up here? Give you the satisfaction of knowing I'd be blamed for deserting a partner that's blind? Not me! Now *mush!*"

"Your wife and kids, Carson! Don't they count?"

For reply Carson jerked about, settled his head low and shuffled on. Kay was towed behind him, floundering.

The wind rose with a whoop and the snow, which had been dropping so thick and still, now streamed out before it in a blast that rasped their exposed faces. The white world became mad with the lash and shriek of the storm.

Carson was too busy breasting the gale to watch Kay. His back was to his partner and he could not see Kay fumble a knife from his clothes, spring open the blade and slash the cord that bound them together.

Kay cut the cord, but held its end fast, catching up with Carson as he kept it taut. He knew that if he let go, Carson would instantly feel the release of his weight and turn back for him. He must trick Carson into going on until discovery of the trick came too late to remedy. Once he was left well behind, Kay felt sure that Carson would go on like the common sense man he was, making his way off the glacier into the sheltering timber and eventually to the town below.

Tugging along behind Carson, Kay fumbled until he found the belt of his partner's coat. Into that he fastened the loose end of the shortened cord and let the resulting loop drag along over the snow. He knew Carson was too busy fighting the storm to notice much. So long as there was some pull on the cord he would be satisfied.

Kay dropped behind and staggered off into the storm wrack. He had no idea of direction nor any plan except to get out of Carson's way. He went until the gale tired him, then squatted in the snow, back to the wind, resigned to die. He was drowsy, almost happy. He did not feel cold or hunger any longer. Nor was he angry at Carson or at anybody. He felt that he had done the right thing in cutting himself adrift, giving Carson a chance to get out alive for the sake of his family.

Kay drowsed contentedly and the wind began to build a drift against his hunched shoulders, enshrouding him in frozen snow.



Without means of reckoning time, too stupid to care, Kay had no no-

tion how much later he heard a shout coming down the wind. It roused him from lethargy as Carson's detested voice always did. He cursed Carson for all kinds of a fool to waste time seeking him when he should be getting off the glacier into the forest below the moraine. He vowed he would give Carson no satisfaction and kept silent.

Carson's shouts came closer, drifted away and again neared him. Carson was bellowing, "Kay! Kay! Hello! Hello Kay!" and sheer exasperation prompted him to add frequent profane and indecent adjectives. It seemed inevitable that Carson would find him. A sudden louder shout, its tone changed to satisfaction of discovery told Kay Carson's keen eyes had spied the huddle that was himself. Kay gritted his teeth and his lethargy dissolved in a surge of boiling anger at this blundering, stubborn partner.

Carson's shouts ended with a sharp break. His voice rose in one wild, rasping yell that stirred Kay's hair with horror. Then there was silence.

Kay crouched tensely, listening with all his might, straining to rend the veil across his blind eyes. He began to shout Carson's name and the wind brought an inarticulate faint sound back to him, a low moan.

Carson was in trouble! Somehow in the blinding storm he had met an accident! Kay got to his feet, shaking a great weight of snow off his shoulders and began to grope forward, hands pawing the air before him, his lips busy with Carson's name. He could hear nothing more of Carson though he stopped to listen often. He had only his memory of that distant yell and the low moan that followed, to guide him, a hazy memory confused by his blindness. He stumbled forward, calling, listening, frantic with terror for Carson and himself.

Suddenly, at his very feet, he caught the answer again, a groan, the mutter of his own name—and then the solid earth dissolved into dust. Kay shot downward. Even as he fell he guessed as clearly as though he could see about him that he had



set his feet on one of those treacherous snow crusts bridging a crevasse and the thin, frozen arch had crumbled under his weight.

The fall was much less than Kay expected. It ended abruptly with a crash that threatened to shake life out of him, yet when he began cautiously to flex his muscles, to push out his legs and arms and stir in the prison that constricted him he found many sore spots, though no broken bones.

Carson's voice came from nearby. Carson was swearing with a slow, methodical profanity that included the created universe and all its details.

"I can't get at you," Carson was saying. "My right leg's jammed into a crevice. I guess it's broken—or the ankle is anyhow. I'm jammed in here tight, Kay, feet first, like a cork in a bottle. Can you move?"

Kay proved it by crawling toward the voice. "How deep is it?" he asked.

"Nothing much. Just a rotten spot, a hole that melted out last summer I guess. If I could get on your shoulders I could see out."

"We'll fix that," Kay promised with brisk cheerfulness. He felt his way to Carson, found the imprisoned leg, twisted cruelly as Carson had fallen on it, and began lifting and tugging to shift the helpless man's weight. Aided by Carson's directions he got his partner free. The ankle was badly fractured. It was useless for Carson to attempt to use the leg at all.

Carson's pain made him burst into bitter invective. He turned his wrath on Kay. "You, you fool! You did this! You brought all this on by cutting that cord. We'll both die here—and you're to blame—you cheap, yellow quitter!"

"Carson, we'd never have got off the glacier together," Kay answered calmly. "You know that's so."

Carson began a profane denial.

"It's a fact and you know it," Kay repeated. "And besides, you have a family. There's nobody depending on me. It was right you should win out. Isn't your family something to you, Carson?"

Carson stopped his cursing. After a moment he caught his breath with a gasp like a sob. "I'll never see them now!"

"Don't be a fool," Kay said shortly. "Carson, I'm going to climb out over your shoulder. Then I can haul you out."

"Let me alone, damn you! I'd rather die in this hole!"

"You're not going to die! I'm going to lead now——"

"You lead! You're blind!"

"Your eyes are all right! I'm going to depend on them."

"Kay, we'll die here anyhow. Let well enough alone, you poor idiot."

Unheeding, Kay climbed his partner's shoulders, felt above him until he caught a solid lip of ice and muscled himself to the crust above. Lying flat he got Carson's wrists and, helped by Carson's struggle, pulled him up beside him.

"Well," Carson panted, writhing with the agony of his broken ankle, "this is jolly! A nice place you've picked to freeze to death!"

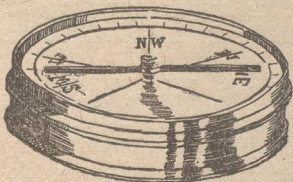
"The snow's thinning," Kay announced placidly. "I can feel it's clearing, blowing over——"

"A hell of a lot of good that'll do!"

"It will that! Carson, shut up and get up. Get on your good leg and hang onto me. We're going to move out of this."

"Where to?"

"Straight across the glacier to that cliff you talked about. You've still got a compass to go by. And when it clears——"



"You've gone clear crazy, you ——"

"Get up!"

Kay shouted, whirling on him, his blind face working with rage. "Get up, you spineless dog! Your own life isn't worth it, but I'll save you for that family of yours if I have to kill you doing it! Get up before I beat you to death!"

CARSON looked over the edge of the declivity and groaned. The storm had cleared, blown on to some higher slope, and the injured man could see exactly what lay below them.

The mountain side broke off abruptly here. A thousand feet below lay gentler slopes, sparsely timbered, and these rolled on to the town of Haida, not fifteen miles distant if one could travel like the eagle. Not five miles from the foot of the declivity, as Carson knew, was a well traveled mail trail. To reach that meant almost certainty of rescue.

The nearness of safety was a horrid mockery of their agony. The drop they faced was not sheer, except in places. When the rock was not drifted with snow or crusted with slippery ice, on a good day, a man in possession of his faculties could make fairly easy work of the descent. Ledges zigzagged along the broken, eroded



strata and these offered pathway of a sort.

But not now!

If Carson had kept his sound legs he would still refuse to trust his luck over the cliff in winter. At the thought of his own helplessness and the appalling gamble Kay proposed he suddenly felt faint, sickened. He lay down and hugged the solid rock while his head swam with nausea.

"No," he groaned. "I'll die where I am!"

The blind man laughed with the same queer, reckless, mad cheerfulness he had shown while he had supported Carson's weight against his shoulder and urged him across the glacier.

"Be damned to you, then!" Kay said hilariously, as if this were a picnic adventure. "I'd rather get my dying over quick. And if I should win out I can get as far as that trail, somehow. But you'll be gone by the time help can make that long detour and find you. Every man to his own taste, Carson! Luck to you!"

Before Carson's horrified stare the blind man stooped, ran his hand along the cliff edge, swung himself over and would have dropped.

"Not there!" Carson shrieked. "Over, to your right—way over! God, you'd have gone all the way in five seconds!"

Kay's blind face grinned at him mockingly. The man had gone mad indeed. "Thanks," he chuckled. "Now which way do I go?"

"Wait!" Carson panted. "Kay! Wait! Stand right still——"

"I'm not going to wait for anybody. You had your chance. I offered to take you down—I could do it by easy stages—with your eyes to see for me. Well, I'm no quitter, anyhow. You can sit there and watch me go, if you prefer that." Kay threw back his head and laughed, his sightless eyes gleaming at the leaden sky.

"Help me down," Carson groaned. "Give me a hand, I tell you!"

Moving was agony for Carson. As he slipped to his partner's hold he could not stop a scream of pain.

Kay maneuvered his partner's body behind him, bowed his back and lifted. Slighter though he was, his nervous reserve and the madness that held him gave him strength to bear Carson easily.

"Which way now?" he grunted. "A step at a time, remember! Hey! Now, we're off!"

Carson's arms were clasped tightly about Kay's neck. Carson's face peered over Kay's shoulder, his good eyes searching

the rock for hand and foothold, but never daring to look below for fear the sickness would shake him so they would both topple.



They stumbled perilously along slippery, broken ledges, working downward slowly with many stops for Kay to get his breath and strength back.

Then something happened which Carson's eyes could not foresee—but the thing Carson feared would happen. Kay set his weight on rock that had been rotted by the frost and the ledge crumpled beneath them.

They dropped into a chute of loose rubble and ice and their separated bodies went spinning into the void. Carson screamed with pain of his broken bones and lost consciousness. When he recovered, Kay was crouched beside him, chuckling foolishly, turning his blind face from side to side. Carson opened his eyes and looked long enough to know that they hung on the very brink of a sheer cliff, caught up against a projecting ledge by a miracle. He closed his eyes with a shudder and lay still, ready to die there.

The blind man would not have it. His hands mauled Carson. His insistent commands roused him. Carson realized that they must go on if it was only to end the agony of this suspense by the topple into space, the last mad moment of horror and the smash of their bodies against rocks which would crush them out of human semblance. Kay was a madman, mad as any fool who ever leaped from a bridge. He was driving the saner man mad as well.

The continuous, back-breaking strain that made Kay's body run with sweat and caused every muscle to cry out in agony had its effect in time. Kay sobered. He had shifted the weight of his helpless partner against the rock behind him, bracing himself to hold him thus while he gasped for breath. This descent through the blackness had ceased to move him to any emotion. He was beyond emotion, mentally and spiritually as exhausted as his body was. He tried to reckon how long they had kept on and found he had lost all memory of ever starting. Before this perpetual struggle and peril his mind recalled nothing. He might have been born in that state. And yet there remained in him the will to go on.

"Carson," he said, "which way? Car-



son!" He bowed his back and shouldered his burden. "Which way?" he rasped.

There was no answer. Carson hung limp on his back, an insensible burden, heavy as lead.

Kay shifted his burden from his shoulders. He fumbled at Carson's face and hands, trying to rouse him, babbling questions, commands, entreaties into Carson's deaf ears. Carson was gone beyond calling back. His heart still beat, but even that pulse, it seemed to the panic-stricken man, was weakening. Then Kay was afraid at last.

Desperation forced him to act. Caressing the rock face with his hands he inched himself along, gained confidence and rose upright to make one step and another until without warning he stepped on a treacherous place and toppled forward.

Kay fell, face downward—and into a snowbank.

He realized it slowly and realizing sat up and laughed foolishly until tears ran out of his sightless eyes. He had not descended a dozen feet below Carson's resting place and he was in drifted snow—at the foot of the declivity his reason told him.

He knew, as plainly as though he could see everything, that they were safe now,

IN A darkened room Kay's eyes were regaining their sight and Carson's broken bones were mending. Kay sat beside Carson's bunk and grinned at his partner. "You'll do! You'll do in a couple weeks more. And mind you, when you get on your pins we've got an account to settle!"

"I've not forgot that," Carson agreed grimly. "And I'll spoil your good looks for you, too, only—" Carson rolled his head on the pillow and groaned—"Kay! Damn it, I don't want to lick you—not now—after what you did—"

Kay exclaimed hoarsely, "Carson, I hate you! There are things about you I could kill you for right now—and enjoy it! But Carson, if I was able to break your body in two with my bare hands, still I couldn't do it now. Because you're bigger than I am, after all. You've got something I haven't got—something that makes you stick! Carson, I—I'd like to keep on with you—if you think we could—"

"We'd certainly scrap like hell," Carson agreed cheerfully.

"We sure will!" Kay grinned and clasped Carson's hand fast. "Maybe we'll come to murdering each other after all. But I guess we'll have to chance it!"



Across Bering Sea and into the ice-locked Pribiloff Islands the coast guard cutter chases fur thieves in



# THE ICE PIRATES

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**FRANK RICHARDSON PIERCE**

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In the Next Issue of **SHORT STORIES**





# ROPE SHY

By HARLEY P. LATHROP

Author of "Flin-Flammed," etc.

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UTTERLY WORTHLESS IN THE COW COUNTRY IS A ROPE-SHY HORSE—WORTHLESS TO ALL BUT A MAN WHO UNDERSTANDS AND TO A GIRL WITH HORSE-RACING BORN IN HER BLOOD

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IT WOULD hardly do to say that his unswerving devotion to horse flesh had blasted old man Erskine's life—that would be stretching the point. There is no question, though, but what it was the ultimate cause of his death. The memory of the oldest follower of the circular track could not harken back to the time old man Erskine had not been one of them. From Tia Juana to Saratoga he had traveled in season with his little string of bang-tails, getting inside the money just often enough to keep his horses in feed, himself in chewing tobacco and his daughter Anne in boarding-school.

Eventually, exposure and the vicarious life of the tracks undermined his iron constitution. With the stoicism of one whose life had been a series of winnings and losses—with losses leading the field—he bowed to the doctor's ultimatum; which was if he persisted in his present vocation, a quick death would be the forfeit. Only a dry climate and perpetual sunshine could prolong his life. So, abiding by this decision, he had sold his small string of horses, advised his daughter by telegraph of his change of base, and departed for the Southwest.

As the closest thing to the atmosphere of the tracks, which was the wine of life to him, he located in a section where a horse is loved and honored in proportion to his worth. This, of course, means that he picked as his new home the country of wide open spaces where a cow is king, and a man must prove his worth. There at a small cross-roads hamlet, he opened up a store, running it with the same degree of

success that had attended his efforts on the track—which meant with no success at all.

His idle moments, and he had a deal of leisure, were spent loafing about in the shade of the store's overhanging gallery, discussing horse flesh, and recalling glories of the past for the edification of sundry stray punchers.

Then one night he died suddenly, and in response to a telegram, Anne Erskine came to Alta Loma.

The only adequate description of Anne would be to say that she made most of the married men wish they were single, and the single men start mentally picking flaws in their best friends. In justice to Anne it must be said that she was entirely unconscious of the havoc she played in the hearts of the opposite sex. She was far too unaffected, and too much of a good fellow to realize it. Of course her mirror told her that her hair was of the gorgeous color and sheen of burnished copper, that her face and figure were pleasing, and that the less she doctored her complexion the better it looked. But no mirror in the world could reveal her ineffable charm of manner nor the spontaneous gaiety of her disposition.

Anne assumed the burden where her father had laid it down. It might have been her winsome graciousness or possibly because of some innate sense of business which came to her assistance, anyway, to the prodigious astonishment of the surrounding country, she made a huge and unqualified success as a merchant. More and more the little false fronted store at Alta Loma became the accepted place for fitting out chuck wagons and the mecca



for wage-heavy cowhands desiring to lighten their pockets. So in a twinkling as it



were, Anne became a very busy young lady. Between listening sympathetically to some purse-swollen ranch owner who was sure the poor house started

him in the face because he had only branded a seventy per cent. calf crop; over-seeing a clerk who was prone to make mistakes, and kindly but firmly assuring some love-sick horse stradler from the forks of the creek that she adored him as a friend, but had not the slightest intention of changing her name, her days were very full.

It was this acute pressure of business that kept her from gratifying a gripping desire that constantly intruded itself. Anne had a deep and poignant longing to possess a pony of her own. True, at all times of day there were horses drowsing at the hitch rail in front of the store—animals of all sizes and colors, good, bad and indifferent. If her wish had been just for a horse to ride, a nod of her pretty head would have made any one of them hers for an indefinite period—the rider as well had she so decreed. But that was not what Anne wanted—just any old pony. She wanted a horse that would be wholly and solely her own. A pony to baby, to make a confidant of, one to love and be loved by. From this it is plain to be seen that as well as his few worldly possessions, old man Erskine had bequeathed to his daughter his obsessing passion for horse flesh.

Now it is not always peaches and cream in cowland. Few outfits pursue the even tenor of their way in peace and serenity. The gloomy specter of debt is always lurking at their heels. Occasionally it catches up and theis selfsame thing happened to the XZ.

It was one morning in early spring that Bud Carney, the XZ foreman lurched into the store at Alta Loma.

"The old man says come on out, and take the pick of our remuda to square the little debt we got here," he greeted hoarsely. "They ain't none of the hoss stock mortgaged, but he's goin' to come clean, and throw them in with the rest of the stuff. He figured mebbe you'd rather take a pony than have your bill drag along till

the bank that's takin' us over got ready to settle. If you want to do this you better mosey over to the ranch pronto."

Then old Bud, taciturn by nature and gruff by upbringing, his message delivered, rolled on out.

This was dangling temptation in front of Anne Erskine with a vengeance. The defunct XZ was noted far and wide for the quality and superiority of its horseflesh. There was a whisper on the prairie that if more feed had gone into poor cows and less into fat horses, the XZ might have kept on as a going concern.

Anne wasted no time in vacillation. She made up her mind with characteristic quickness. Her bill against the XZ was comparatively small, and it was more than generous of the owner to consider her in the light of a preferred creditor. She would be only too glad to take her pick from the horses, but would insist on paying the difference. There was no time like the present either, she thought; she would comander one of the horses outside and ride over to the XZ right away.

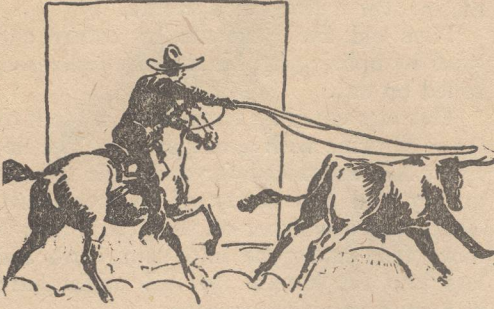
Anne stepped outside onto the gallery. Strange as it may seem, for once the hitch rail failed of its usual quota of drowsing, droop-headed ponies. Only two horses were tied there. One, a saddled horse, was a nondescript looking animal—from his appearance a battle scarred veteran of many ranges. The other, unsaddled, was a golden dun, fat, curried to the minute, the pink of equine perfection. Anne, through constant observation, was familiar with the favorite town horses of her patrons. These two were strangers.

"Now isn't that provoking," she exclaimed to her clerk as she stepped back inside the store. "I want to ride out to the XZ, and there doesn't appear to be a horse in town I can borrow."

Right here Jimmy Todd enters the arena. Jimmy was tall, blond and twenty-three. He had the manners of a gentleman, the soul of a crusader and a very disarming smile. Furthermore he could make a loop at the end of a five-eighths inch, three strand, silk Manilla talk in twenty-seven different languages. Eight months in the year Jimmy held down a job in any outfit that desired a top hand, and would pay commensurate with his services. The other four months Jimmy and his dun horse, Morningglory—Glory for short—followed the rodeos. Calf and goat roping, that was where Jimy shone, twinkled brightly and with undimmed luster. It was by judicially conserving the substan-



tial purses he invariably won at these affairs, that he expected to achieve the ulti-



mate goal of his ambitions. And the target he aimed at was a ranch and a herd of cows wearing his own brand. This objective attained, Jimmy intended forsaking the will-o'-the-wisp life which he now led and settling down to be a staid ranchman.

When Anne stepped back into the store, and voiced her annoyance, Jimmie doffed his wide hat ceremoniously. "Ma'm," he drawled, his smile working readily and his manner most engaging, "that yellow horse of mine—Glory I call him—he's plumb gentle for a lady. I'd be proud for you to ride him wherever you are going."

As is easy to be seen, Jimmy had not been afflicted with deafness during the foreman's explanation, neither had he been struck with sudden blindness. While not overly susceptible to the charms of the opposite sex, this one particular girl Jimmy suddenly decided, filled his every ideal.

So with his offer as an opening wedge, it was not at all strange that an hour later he was standing by Anne's side in the XZ corrals, examining with undiluted interest the milling animals within. When the girl, with a rare sense of discernment, designated a certain animal she wished roped for closer inspection, Jimmy looked at her, a new respect dawning in his eyes.

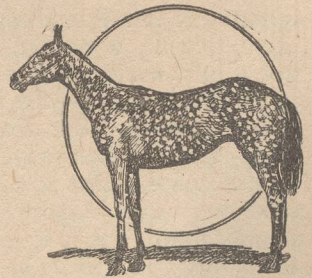
The puncher who had charge of the remuda—a grizzled prairie rat, old and wise in the way of horseflesh, flirted his rope over the horse's neck with a grumbled protestation.

"Now, Miss Anne," he begged as he led the animal from the pen, "don't go and get your fancy sot on this here Spotted Boy. Let me turn him loose. He ain't wuth a good killin'. That there brute is the most cow-shy hoss standin' on four feet today. He's so blamed scary he won't run side by side with another hoss when he's saddled. He's, he's a damn—" and in confusion at his slip of tongue, the old puncher broke into impotent gurglings.

If there is one single trait which marks

a horse as an outcast and pariah in a remuda of working broncs, it is the opprobrium "cow-shy." A horse may be vicious and a killer, may be branded with the mark of Cain; even so there is always some hardy soul who will accept his challenge. Bolters, buckers, lazars, hard mouthed, all will find a rider who will overlook their faults, but a cow-shy horse has not a friend. To ride one is to be the butt of many jeers; to own to an ignominy hard to live down. But Anne, wise in horse flesh though she was, had no idea of the stigma this term conveyed.

"Isn't he a beauty," she sighed ecstatically, her eyes lingering on the horse. Spotted Boy was a beauty—to the eye. Not a bay, not a sorrel, not a chestnut, his coat was the color of clotted blood. Dotted his silken hide as if carelessly cast in enormous handfuls, were white spots varying in size from a pin point to that of a dime. In the glaring sunlight they winked and scintillated like stars in the heavens. His hoofs were black, his mane and tail black, and the forward-pricked ears were as sable as night itself. A trifle high behind, compact almost to chunkiness, his well sprung ribs told of enormous lung capacity. And his underpinning, observing all the laws of compensation, was absolutely perfect. Flat boned, smooth, his hind quarters ribbed with knotted muscle, held



the thrusting force of a locomotive. He was built with all the sweet precision of a highly jeweled watch. Speed and the ability to jump into it from a standing start, in fact all the essential requirements for a perfect quarter horse, were very much in evidence. And the small coal black hoofs were as finely shaped, as delicate in contour as a lady's hand.

"I just know he can run," Anne declared in a sudden rush of enthusiasm.

The old puncher nodded a gloomy acquiescence. "Miss Anne, he could crawl up on anything that wears hair—if he had the heart."

Jimmy's mind still lingered on the puncher's damning words. "Dragged around too much?" he questioned.

The puncher nodded. "They started tying onto big animals off him when he was



nothing but a colt, and too inexperienced to know how to handle himself against a rope. He was dragged down and mauled around till he just won't go up to them. He's just as afraid of a hoss as he is of a cow. Shake a rope around him, and he quits like a dog. Look him over and you'll find out his reason."

Jimmy did. Approaching the Spotted Boy horse he felt up and down just behind his shoulders where the saddle tree beds itself against the forward pull of a rope. A distinct trace of puffy hardness was evident and when pressed, the pony winced and shied away. Next Jimmy passed his hand underneath the horse. Where some, ill made or carelessly kept girth had rubbed and cut under the strain of holding heavy animals, the hide lay in great leather-like welts. It gave to the pressure of the finger, indicating the flesh beneath was sore and bruised.

"No wonder," was Jimmy's judicial comment as he finished his examination. "I should say he had cause to be."

"He's plumb ruined as I said, and it's too bad because he's a steppin' up baby," volunteered the old puncher. "Let's turn him loose and catch another, Miss Anne," he suggested.

The girl shook her head, the light of quick decision showing in her eyes. "I think I'll take him," she said slowly. "I don't expect to do any roping, so his being shy won't bother," she smiled. "Somehow he appeals to me," she explained half apologetically to Jimmy.

He nodded complete understanding, and surrendered absolutely. Here was a girl that knew horses, and would back her own judgment. That to Jimmy was a crowning glory.

So three things happened that day—Anne gratified a poignant longing—Jimmy Todd lost his heart—and the Crowfoot outfit obtained a new hand.

## II

**N**OW if Jimmy Todd had been in a normal state of mind, he would without doubt have made some few inquiries before hiring out willy nilly to young Lynn Crowfoot. But his thoughts were revolving about a certain captivating young lady at the time, and this partially accounts for his lack of attention.

The son of a father whose nickname had

been "Wicked Crowfoot," Jimmy was a bright and shining example of "like father like son." If there was a cubic inch of space under his skin that was not filled with inherent viciousness, it was cramed with iniquity that he had acquired. What was worse—far worse in fact—was that, lacking other objects on which to vent this meanness, the live stock received the brunt. As was natural, the roughest and most brutal hands gravitated to Lynn Crowfoot, hands that had not one iota of sympathy or one shred of compunction for anything that wore hair. Only one animal in the entire Crowfoot string was treated anyway humanely. This was the famous Crowfoot quarter horse, Scallawag, which name it might be said, fitted him to a nicety. He could run—there was no denying that—but seldom did he enter a race but what the cry of unfair tactics was raised. By some queer twist of nature it seemed as though there existed a bond of sympathy between the warped disposition of the horse and the twisted mentality of his owner-rider. If some shady trick, some bit of cunning was required to win and the rider was at a loss, the horse himself would conceive it in his own scheming brain. As contenders they were both feared and hated in the country round about.

As little as Jimmy had known about the Crowfoot's reputation when he hired out, nevertheless he had safeguarded himself insofar as his own horses were concerned. Experience had made him circumspect that way. It was distinctly understood that he was to ride his own horses only when he so desired, and that he alone was to pay for their feed. So Jimmy had no trouble on that score. Attending strictly to business, proving himself a top hand, he viewed the brutal handling of the Crowfoot stock with immeasurable disgust. Only the fact that rodeo time was drawing near, and that he wished to stay in the vicinity of Alta Loma as long as he could, kept him from quitting point blank. As it was his tenure in the job proved of short duration.

In no way had young Lynn Crowfoot proved less susceptible to the charms of a certain young lady than the most callow and impressionable puncher. The truth of the matter is he was harder hit than the majority. Having been brought up nourishing the idea that whatever young Crowfoot desired, that he was entitled to it, was extremely galling to see one of his own hands more highly favored than himself. And there was no disputing that Jimmy Todd was leading all contenders for Anne's





good graces. Just how strongly he was running, Jimmy himself did not realize. It is doubtful if the young lady herself could have told. Lynn Crowfoot in the clutches of the green-eyed monster, was really in the best position to judge, his sense of the way the wind was blowing having been sharpened by jealousy to an acute degree. So in all innocence of his employer's growing rancor, Jimmy proceeded to make hay while the sun shone.

It was at a Saturday night dance given in town that matters began to be brought to a head, Anne being the unwitting cause.

"Jimmy," she confided between dances, "I've got Spotted Boy almost over being shy. He's getting so he will run beside another horse. I raced a hundred yards with Dunbar's Black the other day, and he did not bear off nearly as much as usual. Mr. Dunbar suggested that if he was worked again for a time among other horses, and no one roped off from him, he might get the necessary confidence and make a—" Anne barely breathed the word, "quarter horse."

Jimmy being anything but adept at concealing his feelings, looked a bit dubious. Anne laughed delightedly and lapsed into the slang of the stables.

"Twenty-four," she whispered, "I clocked him.

Now, a quarter of a mile in twenty-two seconds is for a prairie pony, almost incredible time. Twenty-three seconds is practically sure to land the money, and even twenty-four seconds means that you have better than a look in. Jimmy Todd drawing from the well of his experience knew that if Spotted Boy, untrained and still a trifle shy, had, with a girl for a rider, run a quarter in twenty-four, the chances were a hundred to one that another two seconds might be lopped off. Still he could not exactly fathom the workings of Anne's mind.

"You aimin' to race him?" he quizzed.

"It's not that, Jimmy. I love a race, of course, but it's because Spotted Boy is so perfect in other ways. If I could only be sure that he was entirely unafraid to run by the side of another horse, I believe I would be perfectly happy."

This explains the underlying reason for Jimmy being mounted on Spotted Boy while working the Crowfoot cattle several

days later. When the crew had started out that morning it had been with the intention of rounding up a certain herd, and transferring them to another pasture. On this simple job which would require no running or roping, Jimmy had ridden the shied horse, figuring that trailing along behind the herd with other riders would be a good first step toward restoring his confidence. But as always, the unexpected happened. A stubborn bull, deserting the herd refused to drive. There is only one sure way to deal with such. Rope him and make him like it, is the remedy.

Possibly some rumor of Spotted Boy's speed had been noised about and, reaching young Crowfoot's ears, caused him to tremble for his own pony's laurels. Again, knowing what Jimmy's object in riding the animal was, he may have figured that here was a chance to pitchfork Jimmy into Anne's bad graces by causing him to return her horse ruined beyond all possibility of redemption. Whatever the reason, and reason there was, he motioned for Jimmy to tie onto the fighty bull.

Jimmy, sublimely innocent, never a suspicion troubling him that there was an underlying motive behind the order, rode over to his boss.

"How about letting one of the other boys tie onto that old trouble-hunter," he said. "I'm scairt if I rope off this horse, I'd shy him so he never would come out. He's doing nicely now."

Lynn Crowfoot stared at Jimmy with coldly hostile eyes. "You rope or you pack your saddle, understand," Lynn snarled.

Jimmy gazed at him with a maddening air of indifference. "I reckon I'll drag out then," he answered mildly. "It's a cinch I ain't goin' to spoil somebody else's pony."

Inflamed by Jimmy's refusal and misjudging his quiet manner for cowardice, Lynn allowed his anger to boil over. Throwing off a semblance of restraint, he volley forth a stream of vicious curses.

Jimmy Todd listened, his face strained and set. "Give me my time, please," he insisted with deceptive gentleness. Still mouthing lurid curses, Crowfoot filled out a check, and thrust it toward Jimmy. With





careful precision, Jimmy folded it and stowed it away in a pocket, then slipped from his horse to the ground.

"I've taken about all I care to from you," he stated wearily. "One or two remarks you passed made you a candidate for a good licking. Come on off that horse, you skunk," he invited, his tone growing ominously hard.

Whatever else may be laid at Lynn Crowfoot's door, he was not a coward. Consequently the balance of the crew were treated to an exhibition that will linger indefinitely in their minds. Evenly matched in height and weight, both as ignorant of science as two Tom cats—and as anxious to go—the only slight advantage on either side rested with Jimmy Todd.

For some years Jimmie had been taking another man's orders and obeying them had meant more or less hard work. Consequently his muscles were like ropes of wire, his frame as tough as seasoned hickory. For about the same length of time Lynn Crowfoot had issued orders for others to carry out, with the result that he had grown far softer and flabbier than he imagined. Therefore, in time the fight came to a logical ending. Crowfoot was thoroughly and completely thrashed. Several hours later Jimmy, riding one horse and leading two others, somewhat battered, but his same old engaging self, came trailing into Alta Loma.

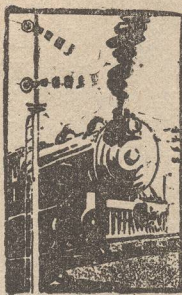
Just what passed between Jimmy Todd and Anne is open to conjecture. There was no visible evidence that he had fallen in her estimation. On the contrary, quite the opposite might be surmised. Securing a boarding place at a nearby ranch, he settled down to condition his "Glory" horse for the coming season's work. Between times—afternoons mostly—when Anne's duties were not pressing, the pair would ride, and if the truth be told, race together. Gradually, under Jimmy's skillful tutelage, Anne's horse worked out of his shyness. Came a time when he would run side by side with any pony, giving all that was asked without one bit of fear. As for his speed and the time he could make—well Jimmy was not far off when he judged two seconds could be lopped from the twenty-four.

### III

**I**T SEEMED as though that season the entire length and breadth of cowland had gone daft over rodeos. Every town, every village, even some of the larger ranches advertised, and held a fiesta.

Jimmy Todd traveling with his horse, Glory, from one to another, roping as he had never roped before, reaped a harvest of golden shekles. Rather impatiently, Jimmy watched the growth of his bank roll. For when it assumed the proportions that would allow him to buy one particular ranch he coveted, he was going to ask a certain young lady to name the day.

Jimmy's work that year had led him in a wide circle, so gradually, as the summer waned he drew near and nearer to his starting point. The last rodeo he planned to attend was at Groveton, a good sized town some twenty miles from Alta Loma. This would wind up his season. Two weeks before the date set for this meet Jimmy had an idle interval of time. Entrusting his horse to the care of a friend,



he caught the train. That afternoon two heads were bent over Jimmy's bank book—one the color of burnished copper, the other Jimmy's own blond thatch. According to the book Jimmy had almost, but not quite made the grade. Only a few hundred dollars more, and he would have the money

to buy the ranch upon which he had set his heart. Jimmy Todd was stubborn—pridefully so, Anne thought. Until the ranch was his, bought with his own earnings Jimmy intended to remain single.

So guilelessly Anne dangled bait in front of Jimmy's eyes. "I'm going to run Spotted Boy at Groveton," she announced suddenly, "and I'm going to split the purse fifty-fifty with the rider."

Jimmy looked startled. "You—he—" began.

"It's mostly because I want to beat the Crowfoot horse, Scallawag," she lied shamelessly. "Lynn Crowfoot boasts around here so much a taking down would do him good."

Jimmy accepted this explanation in all innocence. "Who you going to get to ride him?" he questioned a shade anxiously.

Anne mentioned a local celebrity whose faults were too glaring to mention. "Of course," she hedged, "I'd rather have you ride, but I expect you'll be too busy."

Jimmy grabbed at this bait. "Course I'll ride him," he protested, "but not for half the winnings."

It took some little time and considerable arguing to convince Jimmy that to Anne this was a cold, hard business proposition,



that whoever rode her horse was entitled to half he won. At last he grudgingly agreed to her ultimatum.

That night the entry went forward, "Horse—Spotted Boy; Owner—Erskine; Rider—Todd. Anne was to send the horse over to Groveton in care of a trustworthy man and Jimmy would meet them there. Anne herself was to come over the day of the big event.

Jimmy did not arrive in Groveton until the day previous to the fiesta. The town was in gala attire, and feverishly interested in the forthcoming event. The bustle, the activity and the crowds of booted, swaggering cowmen made no impression on him. This had grown to be a part of his daily life. To Jimmy a rodeo was no epochal day of excitement—it was a case of bread and butter. Inquiring the way, he hastened to the rodeo grounds. There as he had expected, he found Spotted Boy in charge of an old and trusted puncher, who had brought him over the night previous. Jimmy turned his roping horse over to this worthy with instructions to see to them both carefully.

"I'm going to turn in early tonight," he advised. "I'll be out here soon in the morning, and when Anne comes we'll give both the horses a little work out."

Jimmy went directly to a hotel and reg-



istered. He was early in bed, and put in a long night's sleep. When he stepped out on the street the following morning breakfast bent, the first person his eyes encountered was young Lynn Crowfoot. As it happened this was the first time Jimmy had come in contact with his former employer since the day he had thrashed him on the prairie. Jimmy stiffened, and his eyes narrowed. There was a moment of significant silence which was fraught with grave possibilities as the pair faced each other. Then Crowfoot's face relaxed into a semblance of a smile.

"Well, if here ain't Jimmy Todd," he hailed in a manner of forced jocularity. "You ain't holding any hard feelings I hope?"

Jimmy shook his head, and grasped the other's outstretched hand. It afforded him some small measure of relief to know that what promised to be a hard day was not going to start with a row.

"I was out yesterday givin' the quarter horses the once over, and heard you was goin' to ride for Anne. I'm up on Scalawag so I reckon we'll make a race of it. Come have breakfast with me?"

Jimmy hesitated about accepting this peremptory request. He had no desire to eat with his former employer. He disliked him, to say the least. Young Crowfoot, however, was insistent, and Jimmy could see no way of refusing the invitation without being downright discourteous. So with a little inward shrug of resignation, he followed the other into a small restaurant.

Hardly had they seated themselves before Crowfoot pushed back his chair. "Suppose you order for both of us," he suggested. "I bought some cigars in the store next door before I met you, and I just happened to think that I walked out without paying for them. I'll go do it now while I think of it." Rising, he hurried out.

A few doors from the restaurant was a drug store. Its reputation was none too sweet, the proprietor, according to rumor, having small regard for certain constitutional amendments. Lynn Crowfoot hailed the owner as one would an old and trusted acquaintance. There was a moment of confidential talk, a bill changed hands, and when Crowfoot reentered the restaurant a small square of white paper was concealed in one of his palms.

Breakfast had been served and Jimmy Todd, actuated by a sense of courtesy, was waiting his host's return. Crowfoot seated himself and reached for his cup of coffee.

"Stone cold," he exclaimed with a snort of disgust. "I'll see if I can't get some that is at least warm."

Taking both cups he rose and in a free and easy manner hailed a passing waitress. "Sister, this coffee is plumb cold, how about some more?"

Used to the vagaries of cowmen she nodded brightly, and led the way toward a coffee machine which was merrily steaming behind a counter in the rear.





Obligingly she refilled the cups with hot coffee and, setting them on the counter, turned away. Crowfoot reached out ostensibly to pick them up. There was a flash of white and a small powder sifted from his palm into one cup. Slyly Crowfoot tossed a crumpled bit of paper behind the counter.

Fifteen minutes later Jimmy Todd bade him good-by outside the restaurant. Jimmy stood a moment in indecision. His ears were filled with a strange monotonous roaring and the bright sunshine was commencing to assume a bleak opaqueness. His legs felt heavy, and his entire body seemed possessed of a dull inertia. Hardly knowing what he was doing, Jimmy staggered down a nearby alley.

## IV

SEVERAL hours later, mid morning to be exact, Anne Erskine stepped off the train at Groveton. Anxious to see the horses worked out, she snatched a hurried lunch and hastened to the rodeo grounds. Locating the puncher that had the horses in charge, she inquired for Jimmy. The puncher disclaimed any knowledge of his whereabouts.

"He ought to have been here long before this, Miss Anne. He told me last night that he planned to work Spotted Boy out as soon as you came."

The little transient feeling of happiness which had possessed Anne all morning, faded to be replaced with a vague sense of alarm. Something, possibly a woman's intuitiveness, warned her that all was not well. Obeying a hasty impulse, she went back to town. Inquiries at the hotel where Jimmy was stopping revealed the fact that he had left early, but then all trace of him was lost. None of his friends or acquaintances had seen him. Eventually from a stray puncher she received some news. In reply to her inquiry the puncher eyed her with a troubled, speculative look.

"I seen him all right," he admitted with some reluctance. "Not ten minutes ago."

When Anne pressed for details he became vaguely indefinite. At last he confessed. "He's layin' in a shed down the alley by the side of Peter's store. From the looks of him I should say he got tangled up with something stronger than he figured. It's hard luck, Miss Anne, bein' as he was slated to ride your hoss. It ain't worth worryin' about though as he'll sleep it off before long. You just——"

The balance of the puncher's condoling advice was lost on the girl as she sped up

the alley. Never a doubt, never a qualm of distrust entered her mind. Anne loved Jimmy Todd and loving, trusted him. If, as the puncher had inferred, he was unconscious in the abandoned shed, it was not liquor, some greater and graver cause was at the bottom of it.

An hour later, lying in his bed at the hotel, Jimmy Todd, thanks to the skillful



ministrations of a physician, who had been summoned, was slowly coming out from under the effects of the opiate he had unwittingly drunk. He gazed about him weakly, questioningly. In a quick

rush of words, Anne explained her part in the proceedings. Lifting himself out of the haze that still enveloped him, Jimmy, by a great effort of will, pieced the happenings together.

"Crowfoot," he murmured as Anne bent toward him. "He—he wanted Scallawag to win and was afraid of Spotted Boy. The ranch and—and—will have to wait until next year," he concluded forlornly.

For a moment Anne gazed at him with a light of misty tenderness in her eyes, as he strove to hide his disappointment. Then, with a sudden overwhelming rush, her thoughts focused on one grand and glorious idea. Bending over Jimmy she fairly smothered him with a sudden flow of words. Jimmy attempted to protest, but still wrapped in an overpowering languor, his resistance was but feeble.

So a short time later a small group, largely Jimmy's friends, filed into his bedroom. There was some little subdued banter, a few moments of deathly seriousness, the signing of some papers, and the party filed out. Anne, a folded document in one hand was the last to leave. "I'll be back after a bit, Jimmy dear," she whispered. He smiled happily as she closed the door.

## V

THE quarter mile dash at Groveton rodeo was run on the bald prairie. Tightly stretched ropes marked the course, and parked against them, forming a lane down which the horses ran, were closely-packed vehicles. From the lordly limousine to the lowly flivver, from the rakish prairie buckboard to the weighty wide-tired wagon, all were represented. And each and every one held its quota of



spectators wedged as thickly as sardines in a box. Crowding the ropes that defined the course, arguing, wagering, jostling, was a welter of race-crazed humanity. On an improvised platform, marking the finishing line, stood the judge. Around and about his small stand, trespassing on the course, swarming over the finishing line like countless busy ants, surged still more race-mad people. The master of ceremonies, glasses glued to his eyes, announced the entries as they filed to the starting post, in the order which they had been drawn.

Number one, number two, number three, were called, each horse and rider being greeted by vociferous whoops from their backers and admirers.

"Number Four," the announcer bellowed in a foghorn voice, "Horse—Scallawag; rider—Crowfoot. Number Five, Horse—Spotted Boy, rider—" the name of the rider was drowned in the roar of cheers that broke forth.

For the past hour a vague rumor had been winging through the crowd, and now it was proven well founded. Even those most distant from the starting pole could see it was a girl riding the last-called entry. The mannish silks, and the tiny high-topped boots borrowed for the occasion, failed to conceal that fact, or hide the lithe-some grace of the slight figure. From beneath the tight-pulled, long visored cap tumbled forth a mass of copper-colored hair. Again and again as one man, the chivalrous knights of the prairie roared their approval.

As she rode slowly toward the starting point, Anne Erskine felt as though fate had perpetrated another of its grim jests. She had consummate faith that under half way favorable conditions Spotted Boy could show his heels to the balance of the rival racers. The time he had shown in practice proved that. What she feared was that some conscienceless rider aware of Spotted Boy's ingrained dread of a rope, would by some unfair use of it try to eliminate him as a contender.

Even while riding toward the starting line Anne realized that this had now happened. Lynn Crowfoot, after the entries had been drawn, and he was assured that

Spotted Boy was to run side by side with Scallawag, had discarded his quirt for a short piece of rope. This he kept whirling about his head and at his side as he rode forward a short distance in front of Anne. That this action was having the desired effect on Spotted Boy was attested by the little convulsive shivers that flexed his hide at the sound of the manila's snaky hum.

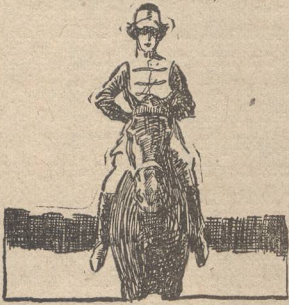
Anne, realizing the dread that the sight and sound of a rope aroused in Spotted Boy, knew that, running by the side of Scallawag, her horse had not a chance. He would either veer wide, and possibly wreck himself against some post or car, or lag behind and lose.

So Anne, her brain revolving in distracted whirls, decided on the only way out of the difficulty. This meant almost impossible effort on the part of the spotted horse, one that if successful, however, would designate him as an outstanding horse among all others.

At the starter's command, the entries lined up for their standing start. No squirming, twisted tangle of horse flesh that marks the start on a circular track was in evidence here. Each and every starter had served in the ranks of the cow-ponies until elevated by sheer stark speed to the honored life of a quarter horse. Calm, cool, collected like veterans under fire, each a tensed and tautened bunch of muscle, they awaited the crack of the pistol, the signal for the jump off. Only Spotted Boy evinced any nervousness and he, prancing uneasily in a space the size of his body, kept edging away from the whistling bit of rope that sung about Crowfoot's head.

Came the pistol's bark and four of the horses were away. One jump, two jumps—and then Anne, holding Spotted Boy still to the line, bent over and spoke in his ears. Like a comet's flash, he started diagonally across the track for a position on the opposite side from Crowfoot and Scallawag. Three jumps—two seconds spells a lifetime, an eternity to a quarter horse—a heart breaking, soul-wrenching distance of a lead. Not one in the throng that viewed the start had the slightest idea that Spotted Boy could regain one half the distance. What a race, what an effort, what gameness.

The spotted pony, freed from the soul-sickening menace of the whining rope, dug his black hoofs into the sod, and ran as he had never run before. Inch by inch, foot by foot, yard by yard, a flank, a neck,





a nose, and when the compact bunch flashed across the line no man but the judge could call the winner. Such a race and such an exhibition of sheer cold, crawly nerve had never been seen in the history of prairie racing. Slowly the horses were pulled up, and slowly the riders paced back to hear the judge's decision.

With a wave of the hand the judge stilled the shouting throng. As if cut off with a keen knife the raucous uproar died, and then clearing his throat the judge announced:



"Spotted Boy, by a whisker, Scallawag second, Brown Lady third."

For the space of a heart beat Lynn Crowfoot sat his horse, stunned and silent, all of his evil plans gone amiss. Then, slipping to the ground, he strode wrathfully toward the judge.

"I protest," he shrilled, "the race was crooked, Scallawag should be declared winner."

The judge, a plainsman of the old school, a relic of the days when to question another's decision meant reverting to the law of the gun, gazed sternly at Lynn Crow-

foot. Like steel drawn to a magnet, his hand crept toward his left armpit.

"Spotted Boy wins," he grimly reaffirmed.

In a gust of rage which bordered on insanity, Crowfoot mouthed his explanation. "Look at your entry papers," he shrieked. "Look at the entry papers, Horse—Spotted Boy; rider—Todd. What is that rider's name? I claim the race on a foul."

The grim look that had settled on the judge's face gradually faded, giving way to an expression of chagrin. According to prairie rule the rider named on the entry papers must ride the horse. Wiping away the little beads of sweat that had formed on his forehead, he reluctantly raised his hand to correct his first announcement.

Bending from the saddle a hint of a smile hovering about her lips, Anne thrust a paper she had drawn from her boot toward the judge.

"The gentleman is right in his contention as far as interpreting the rules go Mr. Judge, but unluckily for him they do not apply in this case. My name is Todd. I was married this morning, and here is the certificate," she said with charming sweetness. "Now," she said, slipping from her horse, "I wish some one would take me to the hotel. My husband and I plan to buy a ranch this afternoon."

# THE BLACK DRAGON

*A Complete Novelette By*

**H. Bedford-Jones**

A tale of adventure and intrigue in China. Far up the Yangst'se a Chinese dictator schemes for power and wealth—and incidentally a white girl—but just as his coup is about to be sprung, an American with other ideas stops to investigate.



In Our Next Issue





# THE TIMBER WOLF

*A Tale of the High Mesa Country*

By JACKSON GREGORY

CONCLUSION

XXIV

I WANT a good long drink of fresh water," said John Cavalier. "And you, after this lunch of ours, will be thirsty. Let's go down to the creek; down there, by the waterfall, after we've drunk, I want to talk with you."

He had turned to her, that flash still in his eyes, before Billy Winch and Mexicali Joe had ridden a dozen yards out of camp. She looked at him in silence, wondering what lay in his thoughts; what had been the sudden, compelling and triumphant motive to actuate him when with his great shout of laughter he had dismissed the two men. He had Joe's secret now; she shared it herself. The gold was far from here, and very near Big Pine, in Light Ladies' Canyon! The strange part of it was that Taggart's first surmise, when he and his companions had trapped Mexicali Joe at the dugout, was that it was in Light Ladies' Canyon that he had made his strike! How many men, and at least one girl, had traveled how many wilderness miles from Big Pine, when the gold lay so snugly close to the starting point! How Joe had tricked his captors, leading them so far afield!

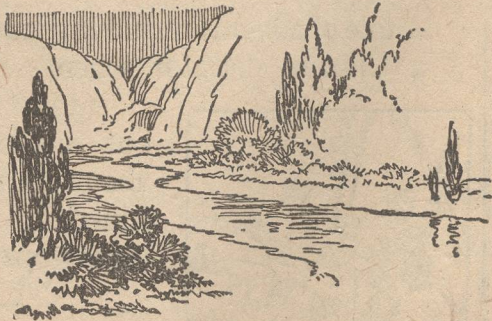
"If I should escape from you now," Lynette could not help crying, "what is there to prevent me from staking the first claim? And bringing my friends—to stake claims!"

"If you should happen to escape me!" he laughed back at her.

Then he stepped to the tree where his rifle stood, and called to Thor as he did always when he left the dog in camp, "Watch, Thor! Watch, sir."

It was not always that he carried his rifle. He explained, while he looked to her to come with him. "We'll talk things over; but in any case it's clear that we're getting short of food. Maybe, while we talk, we can bring down something in the way of provisions with a lucky shot."

Willing enough was she today for talk; at least to listen to whatever he might say. She followed, stopping only to stoop and pat old Thor's head; already she counted the faithful brute a friend. Thor tried to lick her hand; for already Thor, like Thor's master, had bestowed an abiding love to the first true girl who had intimately entered the life of either. Thor wanted to follow; he whined and looked



anxious, ears pricked forward, tail wagging.

"Down, Thor," commanded Cavalier, if



only because already he had issued his command. "You watch camp for us; watch, Thor."

Thor dropped down at the entrance of Lynette's grotto. For one instant his great head lay between his forepaws, then he jerked it up again so that he might watch them as they went through the thickets to the creek and the waterfall.

Here she sat upon a big rock, leaning back against a leaning tree-trunk; he sat down close enough to her to allow of words carrying above the thunder of the falling waters, and filled his after-lunch pipe.

"I know as much as you do of the place to find the gold!" she told him again. "And I, though a girl, have as much interest in a fortune to be made as any man can have. That's fair warning to you, John Cavalier!"

He laughed carelessly. Then he said, "It's neither your gold nor mine. By right of discovery, it belongs to a little shrimp named Mexicali Joe Alguna Cosa! Our hands are off it, so far as our own pockets are concerned."

"But—you took quick interest when you learned where it was! You have some

plan; you commanded your friend Billy Winch to keep Joe well guarded!"

His eyes were twinkling; and greed does not light twinkling lights!

"I've gold of my own, girl! Gold enough to last me my life, and you your life, and both-of-us-together our lives! But let's talk of Mexicali Joe's gold some other time. Today—we have ourselves!"

"You have yourself!" cried Lynette with sudden bitterness. "I have not even my own personal liberty!"

"And what if I let you go, girl? As I have a mind to do today? What then? Where would you go? Where would I find you again? For find you I must, and will though 'it were ten thousand mile.'"

"Am I to suffer your dictation during the days of actual imprisonment at your hands, and then, for all time afterward, render you an accounting of my actions?"

"Why do you try to hate me so, girl?"

"Why should I not hate you?"

"What have I done to you? Have I done anything more than put out a hand to stop time, to snatch time for you and me? Look you, girl; a man, at least a man of my sort, may go a third of his life or a

## THE TIMBER WOLF

By JACKSON GREGORY

Something about the story and an account of the previous chapters

Discovery has been made of a rich gold mine near Big Pine, in the high mesa country of the Southwest. Sheriff Taggart and Young Gallup, a hotelkeeper, have joined forces to pry the secret of the whereabouts of the mine from Mexicali Joe, its Mexican discoverer. But John Cavalier, a four-square fighter known as the Timber Wolf, is determined to block the rascally sheriff and his followers. In this connection he is pitted against another combination—a young adventurer known as Babe Deveril—and a young woman of mystery, Lynette Brooke, both of them attracted to Big Pine by the universal lure of gold. Cavalier and Deveril are distant relatives but have been at odds for years.

At Young Gallup's, Cavalier starts to pay Deveril a sum of money he owes him, but is interrupted by the arrival of his friend, Billy Winch, who informs the Wolf that the latter's horse has just been shot at Gallup's orders. Infuriated, Cavalier does the one thing that can break his self-control—he lisps, in his rage, like a nervous schoolgirl. When Lynette, unable to restrain herself, laughs at him, Cavalier becomes a veritable madman. He pursues the girl to her room, where he is shot from behind while his back was turned for a moment.

Taggart seems to think that the girl did the shooting and starts to arrest her, but Deveril knocks him flat and then, taking from Cavalier's pocket the money due him, he flees with Lynette. But they are overtaken by the Timber Wolf, who has recovered from his wound. Deveril and Cavalier fight it out and Babe is vanquished. The Wolf orders him to be off instantly, and Lynette, to save Deveril's life, prevails upon him to go. Then Cavalier, putting a chain about Lynette and calling her his slave, goes off with her through the woods. He does not, however, otherwise mistreat her.

Meeting Mexicali Joe, they learn that he has been tortured by Taggart and Gallup to get him to tell the location of his mine. He says he lied to them and that the mine is really right near Big Pine. Billy Winch, who has brought Joe over to see Cavalier, tells the Wolf that Deveril has been seen following Joe's trail. Cavalier takes Lynette to a wonderful natural cabin that he calls their Garden of Eden, but makes no move to force his attentions upon her. Meanwhile she has little to say but shows tender concern for the Timber Wolf by treating a wound he had received in rescuing Joe from Taggart's clutches. And Cavalier is now convinced that it was Taggart and not Lynette who had shot him in the back that day at Young Gallup's.



fourth or a full half; and know much less than nothing of what a true girl is! Now it's a fair bet, and no odds given or taken, that one John Cavalier happened to be an unruly devil, a blunt man, a man who has as a part and parcel of his religion to shoot



square and to hit hard, so long as God lets him. I've done wrong and I've done right, and if it happens that I'm a man of few friends—almost you can count 'em on Billy Winch's one leg!

—if few men love me and many men hate me—”

“Yes!” cried Lynette, and her own earnestness was caught and compelled by his own. “Most men, many, many men, hate you! And yet you have it within you to make them love you!”

“Love and hate! What have I to do with the loves and hates of men as I know them? Shall I step to right or to left for all that? I play out my part in the Eternal Game. I live my life!”

“But you don't live your life! You miss everything! If you would be but kind instead of cruel; open-hearted and generous always—you have in you the seeds of all that—then men might come to know the real you. You could make them love instead of hate.”

But his eyes stabbed at her like quickened blue flames.

“So!” he said, and his tone was one of bitter mockery. “If I choose to pay them for the pretty, empty compliment, they will call me a good fellow and—love me! Even your love, that I'd give my soul to have freely, I'd none of it if it were to be bought.”

Lynette looked at him strangely, half-pityingly. And she answered him softly, “You twist things out of all reason to make, to yourself, your own acts appear something other than they are.”

“A girl trying to turn logician?” he laughed at her, teasing.

Little effort on his part was required to set fire to her quick and inflammable temper.

“It's magnanimous of you to jeer at me,” she retorted hotly. “Because you have the physical strength of a beast, and the beast's lack of understanding.”

Now his great, golden outburst of laugh-

ter stopped her. He shouted, “See! There you go! As if to preach me the final word of love and hate! You'd hate me now, just because I tease you! I love you! So that love, my love to you, comes near killing me! It gets me by the throat at night. That's love; and there's less of self in it, I swear to you, than there is of —you!”

“You! You talk of love. To me!”

She broke into her light, taunting laughter. And yet he had set her heart beating and the ancient fear—not fear of him—was upon her. “You, talking of love, are like a blind man lecturing on the colors of the rainbow!”

Cavalier had started to his feet; his eyes went suddenly toward the camp, all sight of which they had lost on coming down into the creek bed.

“Listen!” he cried. “What was that?”

She had heard nothing; nothing above the splash and fall of water—and the beating of her own heart.

“Listen!” he said the second time.

“What is it?”

He caught up his rifle and leaped across the creek. He began running, back toward their camp.

“It's old Thor; there's someone——”

And now, Lynette realized clearly, had come her first opportunity to be free again! While John Cavalier, because of something he had heard above the waterfall, or had thought he had heard, was running back to their encampment, she could run in the opposite direction. She stood balancing, of this mind and that. What had he heard in camp? What was happening there? And then there was a certain assurance in her heart that after all these days the budding intention in John Cavalier's heart was bursting into full flower to set her free again! She hesitated; she saw him running up the steep bank, charging back toward camp, vanishing among the trees higher up on the slope.

And, then, she followed him.

Before Lynette came, through the trees, within sight of the grotto which John Cavalier had given over to her, she heard a sound which brought her, wondering, from swift haste to lingering; she stood, her breathing stilled, listening, groping a moment blindly for an interpretation of that sound for its explanation. Harsh it was—terrible. Never had she heard anything like it. At first she did not recognize it as a sound man-made. She paused; she came a step nearer, peering through the trees.



It was an inarticulate, stifled sound coming from the lips of John Cavalier! He was kneeling on the ground, bending forward. He had dropped his rifle. There was something in his arms, upgathered into his embrace, something held as a baby is held in its mother's arms.



Thor!

And those sounds from John Cavalier's lips! There were tears in them; his voice, always so clear and golden and pure-toned, was shaken; the man was in the grip of that primal emotion of deep-delving sorrow which strikes to the roots of all his emotions. And he held Thor to him in a fierce agony of sorrow.

Lynette came closer, tiptoeing. She heard the sounds as they seemed to choke him, clutching like hands at his throat. And then suddenly, before she caught her first clear view, she knew when into that first emotion there swept the second; when with sorrow and deep grief there mingled white-hot rage. He began to mutter again. He was lisping—lispering as she had heard him do only once before—lispering because his one weakness had leaped out, and caught him unaware, when his vocal utterance was leaping out of the leash of his will because his soul was so deeply stirred. Lispering curses.

She ran closer. She saw old Thor, Thor who had learned to love her and whom she had learned to love, lying limp in Cavalier's arms, the great head drooping! Thor dead? Someone had killed him then, and Cavalier, above the booming of the waterfall, had heard? A sight, perhaps, to stir that wild, uncontrollable laughter of Lynette's! The sight of a big, strong man half-weeping over a dead dog in his arms. Yet, when she came running to him and dropped down on her knees, and put out her quick hand, Cavalier, turning his face toward her, saw that this time there was no laughter in her. Instead, her eyes were wet with a sudden dash of tears.

"He's not dead; we won't have it that he's dead! Thor!" she cried softly.

She did not realize that she had put her warm, sympathetic hand on John Cavalier's arm before the other hand found the old dog's head.

"Thor! Thor!"

Thor looked up at her; at Cavalier. The dog tried to stir; the faithful tongue strove to overmaster the terrible inertia laid upon it; to grant in last adulation the last farewell. For a stricken dog, like a stricken man, knows after the way of all creatures which have the spark of eternity within them, when the day's end is in doubt.

Cavalier tried to speak, and grew silent. How she hated herself then for that one time when he had slipped, through sorrowing rage, into his one unmanly failing—when she had laughed! Her tears began running down. He saw; he jerked his head about, focussing his eyes upon the eyes of a dog that he loved; a dog that had been faithful to him.



"Where is he hurt? He can't be shot," cried Lynette. "We would have heard a shot! If he is poisoned——"

Cavalier had mastered himself. He said coldly, "Look!"

"Who did *that*?"

"If I only knew!"

Thor was not dead; his great body jerked and quivered now and again, in spasms. Yet he looked to be dying. And it grew clear to Lynette, as at a glance, it had been clear to John Cavalier what had happened. Thor had been left in charge of camp; but the one word had rung in the faithful head, "Watch!" Thor left on guard. And then someone had come; Thor had been true to his trust. Some man had struck him down with a great club or a rifle barrel; had struck and struck again; had struck mercilessly. Thor's fore-leg was broken; Thor had been battered over the head. Bones were broken, the skull seemed crushed.

The dog stiffened, fell back.

"Dying," said Cavalier, still on his knees. He placed old Thor very gently on the ground, striving after his own rough fashion to make a dog's last few minutes of breathing no single degree more filled with torment than was inevitable.

"Thor," said Cavalier gently. "Good old Thor!"

The dog tried to rouse himself. The old faithful head on Cavalier's knee stir-



red ever so little. The old steadfast eyes, red-rimmed but clear-sighted, were on Cavalier's. If ever a dog could have spoken, he—

Cavalier, with a sudden thought, jumped to his feet.

"By God," he cried, "there's a chance for him! Billy Winch, the one man on earth who can save a dying dog or horse—yes, or man!—has only just left us! Not riding as I'm going to ride after him! Will you wait for me? Will you wait, girl?"

Already Lynette, in his place, was down on her knees, Thor's head in her lap.

"Of course I'll wait! Hurry. Bring Billy Winch back!"

"God bless you!" And John Cavalier, with never another backward look at Thor was away on a run. Breaking through breast-high brush; splashing once again through the creek, on his way upon an errand of mercy, forgetful of self and the tremendous strain he laid upon his own overtaxed strength, seeking only a man who rode ahead of him, the only man who would know how to work toward a saving of the ebbing life forces of—a dog. A good, old dog named Thor, whom John Cavalier, a man of few loves, loved. A dog who had been faithful and who, in full faithfulness, had been beaten down. So Cavalier broke his way through the thickets; so, running with all the swift speed of which he was capable, he plunged down a slope, sped up a slope, raced over a bridge. And, with what breath was left in his lungs, he began to send out his whistled-call. That summons which his horse, if by any chance it had still remained in these upland meadows, would welcome with quick response. If he could get on his horse's back he'd never waste loitering for saddle or bridle. He'd be on his way, overhauling Billy Winch and doing all that he knew to save the spark of life in old Thor.

And Lynette sat, Thor's head in her lap and crooned in that soft voice of hers, "Thor! Good old Thor! Poor old dog."

She stooped and laid her cheek against the grizzled old face of Thor. And then, with a sudden excess of emotion, she burst into fresh tears. Thor tried to wag his tail. Lynette, like Cavalier before her, felt that the dog was dying. A spirit was passing; what though it were but the spirit of a dog? No man has ever yet lived and seen a dog die who did not have, no matter how briefly, impressed upon him a certain vague wonderment; a certain sense of those

things which lie beyond the narrow confines of the grave.

"Thor!" she whispered. "Can't you hold on? Can't you carry on? He will bring Billy Winch and Billy Winch will help us."

Then there burst upon her a surprise which moved her immeasurably. There,



almost at her side, stood Babe Deveril! She had not heard, had not seen him coming. A moment ago she was alone in the wilderness with a dying dog; now Babe Deveril stood close to her. With

Thor's head still held in her lap she looked up into his face. She saw that it was tense, the muscles drawn, the eyes hard and bright.

"Lynette!" he cried softly. "Lynette! I've followed you half around the world! And now, come quick! We go free and the world is ours!"

And still she sat, staring up at him, still bewildered, Thor's head in her lap, her soft hands straying over the battered skull.

"You!" she whispered. "Then it was you who—who did this?"

He caught her meaning; he glanced down at the big thick green club in his hands.

"I came to do what I could for you. That ugly brute stood up against me. I had no gun; I knew Cavalier was armed. I thought that maybe he had left his rifle in camp."

"What did Thor do to you that you should have done this to him?"

"Thor? That dog? He showed teeth and— Look here, Lynette Brooke; now's your one chance. I've gone through hell to come to you."

"Tell me," she cried. "When did you come?"

Deveril was as tense as a finely drawn steel wire. Again she marked that hard glint in his dark eyes.

"It is up to you to do the telling!" he shot back at her. "I stood back there in the trees; I saw that damned henchman of his and Mexicali Joe come up to you! Joe I've been following for days! I watched, I tell you. I had no rifle; no weapon of



any kind and both Cavalier and Winch were armed. But I could watch! Joe was terribly excited; I saw his waving arms. He told something. He told where his gold was, didn't he?"

"Yes," said Lynette. "And then?"

"And then?" exclaimed Deveril. "What then? That's what we came for, isn't it? You as well as I? You know?"

"Yes! I know."

He caught at her hand.

"Come! On the run. Before that madman gets back. We'll clean up on the whole crowd of them!"

But she jerked her hand away.

"There are certain things I don't understand. Did you see the other night when he took Mexicali Joe out of their hands?"

"I saw; yes. I could have cried for rage! He had a rifle, damn him, and was aching to use it! They laid down before him like pups."

"And you?"

"I stood back in the brush; it happened that I had just overhauled them at that minute! What could I do, with a rotten stick in my hands!"

Was he defending himself? She looked up at him curiously.

"And, today?"

"Today?" His hands hardened in his grip upon his club. "Today, I tell you, I followed them into your camp! I nearly burst my lungs, running after horses. But I came up with them and I saw. Mexicali Joe——"

"You are after Mexicali Joe's gold, Babe Deveril?"

He looked at her steadily.

"As you are. That brought us both into Big Pine in the beginning and then into the rest of it."

"And you were—afraid to come into camp while John Cavalier was still here?"



He laughed at her, the old light laughter, of Babe Deveril.

"Afraid? Call it that if you like." He

shrugged carelessly. "Yet, with an oak club against a man with a modern rifle I——"

"Do you remember the last time? How he threw his rifle away?"

Deveril flushed hotly.

"Some day," he muttered, "when it's an even break."

"What do you want with me, Babe Deveril?"

He stared at her.

"Want with you? I want you to come, to be free from this brute. Is he coming back soon?"

"I think so."

"Then hurry, Lynette."

"Well?"

"Are you coming?"

She stooped over old Thor; her two hands carressed the quiet head.

"No," she said quietly.

"What! After all this, you're not coming?"

"No!"

"But—then why?" he demanded with a sudden flare of anger.

"For one thing," she told him without looking up, "because I told him that I would wait for him. For another——"

"And that is?"

She only shook her head, brown hair tumbling about her hidden face.

"I'll stay with old Thor," she said.

She had cast him away among the lost isles of bewilderment.

"But you'll tell me. You and I have been friends; we've stood side by side. And what about Mexicali Joe's gold?"

"Gold?" she said. "Gold? Is gold the greatest thing in life?"

"But you know?"

"Yes! I know."

"Listen, Lynette! Taggart and Gallup and Shifton and a thousand other men are going crazy to find out! You and I can turn the whole trick. If luck is good—why, we'll quit millionaires, Lynette!"

A shudder shot through the tortured body of old Thor, an anguished shiver bred of the cruel agony he was enduring. Lynette's long lashes were lifted, lashes wet with her tears.

"There are things—beyond millions."

"I don't get you today!"

"Why did you kill this dog? What good did it do you? What harm had he ever done you?"

"He was in my way. I thought, I told you, that a rifle might have been left behind. And it's a dog of Cavalier's, any-



way! And, beyond that, no matter how you look at it, he's only a dog."

"I think," said Lynette, and there was no music in her voice now and no warmth in the eyes, which she lifted briefly to his, "that you had better go! Had you come, without rifle, upon John Cavalier, at least he would had thrown his rifle away to fight with you! You know that. And—and I am not going to go with you, having given my promise. And I'll warn you of this: If he comes back and finds you here and knows you for the man who killed Thor—he will kill you!"

Never in all his daredevil life had Babe Deveril made pretence at striking the angelic attitude. Now, in a rush of feeling, he grew black with anger, and there came a look into his eyes which put the hottest flush of all her life into Lynette's cheeks, as he cried out, "Tamed you, has he? So the Timber Wolf's taken a mate after the fashion of wolves! And I, fool that I was, let you slip through my fingers!"

She did not answer him. Had she answered she could have said, "You could have returned to fight with him; man to man and him wounded! Later, when he snatched Mexicali Joe from them, you could have fought with him. You could have followed him here, seeking me; and you followed Joe, seeking gold. You could have fought with him today; and instead you held back and spied and killed his dog and waited for him to go!" So Lynette, stooping low over Thor's battered head, made no answer.

She knew that Babe Deveril was no coward. She would always remember how he had hurled that gun into Taggart's face and himself into her adventures, reckless and unafraid. Yet Babe Deveril was no such man as John Cavalier; rather was he like a



Jim Taggart, and Taggart was no coward. And it remained that both these men, Deveril and Taggart, were afraid to come to grips with that other man whose fellows named him the Timber Wolf.

"You've thrown in with him!" Deveril cried it out angrily; his hands were hard upon his club. "Here, I've given days and days trying to see you through, and you've

kicked in with him against me! He's had his will with you and he's made you his woman and——"

"You'd better go!"

She was trembling. A spasm shook her, not unlike that which convulsed poor old Thor.

"You won't come with me, then? You'll stick with him? After he put a chain on you!"

"At least he did not stand back and see another man put a chain on me!"

"Is that my answer?"

"Yes!" she cried in sudden fury. "And now go!"

"I'll go, all right," said Deveril. And began to laugh. All that old light laughter of his, gay and untroubled, making dancing echoes in the soul of him who heard, bubbled up again. He looked as he had done when first she saw him, a slender, darkly handsome and utterly care-free picture of insolence.

Still striking the right note, he shrugged his shoulders and tossed his club away as he said insolently, "What need of all this heavy artillery, since the queen of my heart says nay? I'll travel light after this!"

He turned away. But at the second step he stopped and swung about and told her, "If you, with a rush of blood to the head, throw in with Cavalier, I'll play the game out! And what will you have left to trade to me for the pile I'm going to make out of this?"

Lynette, unable to see anything in all the wide world clearly, could only stoop her head over old Thor. Which did she hate most, John Cavalier or his impudent kinsman? Her arms tightened about Thor. If only Billy Winch would come in time, if only Billy Winch would save from darkness that flickering little fire of life in old Thor, then, though she hated all the rest of the world, she'd love Billy Winch.

"One thing I'll tell you!" cried Babe Deveril, already turned away to go. "Taggart and Gallup and Shifton are not too far away! From now on I throw in with them. And when that crazy Mexican yelled at the top of his lungs, "Light Ladies' Gulch!" I heard! Stick with your woman-tamer, I'm lining my pockets—with gold!"

## XXV

**J**OHAN CAVALIER running, breaking a straight path through the brush, came swiftly into the little upper valley. When, in answer to his whistling, his



horse came trotting up to him he did not tarry to saddle; he had picked up his bridle on his way and now mounted and struck off bare-back through the woods with no second's delay.

"Get into it, Daylight!" he muttered. "We're riding for old Thor today!"

From afar Billy Winch, hurrying homeward, heard that long distance call he knew



so well. He pulled his horse down from a steady canter and turned, calling to Mexicali Joe to come back with him. Once within sight, Cavalier waved and shouted again; Winch and Joe sensed urgency and dipped

their spurs, riding to a meeting with him. Winch stared and frowned while his employer made his curt explanation, Mexicali Joe gasped, but neither man had a word to say. Cavalier laid his brief command upon them, and the three turned back, riding hard, into the mountains.

Again Cavalier called, when near enough to camp to hope that his voice would not be lost in the noise of the creek's tumbling waterfalls; this time to Lynette, to tell her of their coming. He rode ahead; again and again he shouted to her. He leaned out to right and left from his horse's back, seeking a glimpse of her through the trees. And yet, when they were almost in the camp, there still came no answer to his shoutings, and he caught no glimpse of her. Suddenly to his fancies, the woods seemed strangely hushed—and empty.

"She's gone," said Winch carelessly.

"No!" said Cavalier with such brusque emphasis that Winch looked at him wonderingly. "She said she'd wait for us, Bill."

But when they drew closer, so close that the various familiar camp objects were revealed, and still there was no response and no sight of her, Winch muttered, "Just the same, gone or not gone, she ain't here, John."

"I tell you, man," snapped Cavalier, "she said she would wait. And what she says she will do, she will do!"

Now the three dismounted in the heart of the camp and still there was no sign of Lynette.

"Anyhow," said Winch, "it's a dog and

not a girl we come looking for. Thor'll be here—if he's alive yet."

"He will be right where I left him." Cavalier led the way among the big trees an arm about Billy Winch hopping at his side the last few steps; they saw him looking in all directions and understood that while he led them toward Thor he was seeking the girl. But they found only the dog lying where he had been struck down; Thor barely able to lift his bloody head, his sight dim, but his dog's intelligence telling him that his master had come back to him; Thor whining weakly. Winch squatted down at the dog's side, become upon the instant an impressive diagnostician.

Cavalier stood a moment over the two, looking down upon them. Then he turned away, leaving Thor in the skilful hands of Winch and hurrying down to the creek, seeking Lynette. It was possible, he told himself, that she had gone down for a drink; that so near the waterfall she had not heard him calling. So he called again as he went on and looked everywhere for her.

But she was not down by the creek, and she did not answer him from the woods. He came back, up into camp, perplexed. Winch was still bending over Thor; he was snapping out brisk orders to Joe for hot water and soap.

Cavalier heard Mexicali Joe's mutterings, "*Por Dios*, I no understand. Somebody hurt one dog an' we wait, an' we look for one girl—an' all the time I got one meelion dollar gol' mine down yonder."

"Shut up," Winch grunted at him, and seeing Cavalier coming back, "Say, John, we better take this dog home with us right away. We can make a sling of that canvas of yours tying either end to our saddle horns, making a sort of stretcher; some blankets in it and old Thor on top of 'em. And I'll tell you this: If we get him home alive, and I think we will, I'll keep the life in him."

Thor was whining piteously; Winch shook his head; if only he had his instruments, his antiseptics, and a bottle of chloroform! For here he foresaw such an operation as did not come his way every day.

"Diagnosin' off-hand," Winch was telling the uninterested Joe, "I'd say here's the two important facts: First, old Thor has been beat unmerciful; his head's been whanged bad, but I don't believe the skull's fractured; his left foreleg is busted, and he may have a cracked rib. Second and



most important, after all that, the old devil is alive!"

John Cavalier, still seeking Lynette, more than satisfied to have Thor in Billy Winch's capable hands, turned toward the grotto which he had set apart for Lynette.



And thus upon his first discovery. There was a piece of paper tied with a bit of string so that it fluttered gently from a low limb where it was inevitable that it must be

seen. He caught it, down eagerly. On the scrap of paper were a few pencilled words, written in a girlish-looking hand. At one sweeping glance he read:

*I have gone back to Babe Deveril.  
Lynette.*

He stood staring incredulously at the thing in his hand. Here was a shock which for a moment confused him; here was something beyond credence. Lynette gone—to Deveril? For that first second his brain groped rather blindly than functioned normally. And then in a flash his thoughts rushed, stabbing a way of light through uncertainties like forks of lightning in a mist. Lynette gone to Babe Deveril—that cursed Baby Devil! And she had broken her word; she had promised to wait for his return, and she had not waited. She had left a dying dog to die alone and had gone to her lover, and she carried with her the key to Mexicali Joe's golden secret—to turn it over to Deveril!

"What's eating you, John?" shouted Winch. "Gone to sleep or what?"

Cavalier tossed the scrap of paper away. And then suddenly he laughed and both Winch and Joe were startled. Bill Winch had heard that laugh once before, and knew vaguely the sort of emotion which prompted it: John Cavalier's soul was suddenly steeped in rage—and anguish.

"We'll be on our way pretty quick, John," said Winch. "We'll ride slow, and you can pick us up in no time. And if you've got anything on your chest, any of your own private rat-killing to do, why me and Mexicali will make out fine as far as headquarters and once there I'll see old Thor through."

Cavalier only nodded at him curtly and went hurriedly to his horse.

THE Timber Wolf, his purposes crystallizing, did not attempt to re-join Winch and Mexicali Joe. By the time he had ridden to the spot where his saddle was hidden, and had thrown it upon Daylight's back, drawing his cinch savagely, he had begun to get his proper perspective. He knew that he could trust Billy Winch in all things; that Winch, with all of that persevering patience which the occasion demanded, and that veterinary skill and love for animals which marked him, would do all that any man could to get Thor home and to care for him. And now, for John Cavalier, beyond the stricken dog lay other considerations: There remained Lynette and Babe Deveril! He ground his teeth in savage rage, and from Daylight's first leap under him rode hard.

Long before the early sun rose he was back at his own headquarters, a man grim and hard and purposeful; clear-eyed after all he had endured, his thoughts set in order, himself throbbing with energy. Rough garbed and still booted, he strode through his study and into his larger office; and in this environment the man's magnificent virility was strikingly pronounced. Here was his wilderness home, a place of elegance and of palpitant centers, of numerous large activities; not a dozen miles from Big Pine and yet, in all appearances, set apart from Young Gallup's crude town as far as the ends of the earth. He stood in a great, hard-wooded room of orderly tables and desks and telephones and electric push-buttons. He set an impatient thumb upon a button; at the same moment his other hand caught up a telephone instrument. While the push-button still sent its urgent message, he caught a response from his telephone.

Into the receiver he called sharply, "Bristow? In a hurry, Cavalier speaking. Give me the stables, Billy Winch!"

All the while that insistent thumb of his upon the button! There came a bursting into the big room, half-dressed and clutching at his clothes, a young man whose eyes were still heavy with sleep.

"You, Graham," Cavalier commanded





him, "get busy on our long distance wire. My lawyers. Get Ben Brewster! It's the hurry of a lifetime!"

Young Graham flew to the switchboard. Meantime came a response from the interphone connecting Cavalier with the stables.

"Billy Winch?" he called.

"No, sir, Mr. Cavalier," said a voice. "This is Dick Ross. Bill, he got in late and was up all night nearly, working over a bad case that come in. Shall I——?"

"That case," Cavalier told him abruptly, "was my dog, Thor. Find out who was left in charge when Bill went to sleep; call me right away, and give me a report on Thor." With that he rang off.

All the while his secretary, Graham, had been plugging away at his switchboard. Cavalier, pacing up and down, heard his "Hello—hello—hello."

Within three minutes the stable telephone rang sharply. Cavalier caught it up.

It was Dick Ross again, reporting, "Bill didn't go off the case until three o'clock this morning. Had to operate at about two; taking out a little piece of bone. He left Charley Peters in charge then; Charley's on the job now."

"Thor's alive, then?"

"Yes, sir."

"Fine! I'll be out in a few minutes to see him. Bill's got him in the 'hospital'?"

"Sure, Mr. Cavalier. Thor couldn't be gettin' better care if he was King of England."

Cavalier rang off and came back to Graham from whose eyes now all heaviness of sleep had fled, leaving them keen and quick. Hardly more than a youngster, this Graham, and yet John Cavalier's confidential secretary, trained by Cavalier himself to Cavalier's ways.

"I've got Mr. Brewster's home on the wire," said Graham looking up. "He's not up yet but they're calling him."

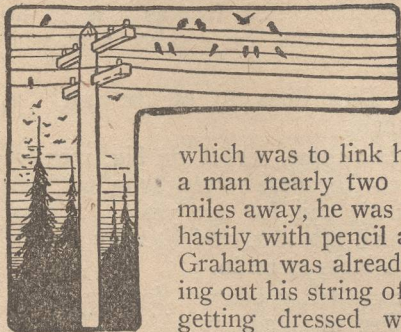
Cavalier took the instrument.

"I'll hold it for him. Now, Graham, order breakfast served here for you and me; plenty of extra coffee for the boys I'll be having in. Get Al Blake on our wire to Red Creek Mine. Arrange to have Bill Winch show up here as soon as he's awake; he's to bring Ross and Peters with him. And Mexicali Joe. I want Joe here with Winch. Hello! Hello! Is this Ben Brewster?"

He heard his lawyer's voice over the wire; then, somewhere over the long line something went wrong; Brewster was gone again. An operator at the end of Cava-

lier's own private part of the line, seventy-five miles away, was saying, "Just a minute, Mr. Cavalier. I'll get him for you."

"Thanks, Henry," said Cavalier. And while he waited for the promised service



which was to link him with a man nearly two hundred miles away, he was working hastily with pencil and pad. Graham was already carrying out his string of orders, getting dressed with one hand meantime.

"Brewster?" Cavalier spoke again into the telephone. "I've got something big and urgent on. Can you come up right away? Take a car to Placer Hill. I'll have a man meet you there with a saddle horse, and you'll have to ride the last twenty miles in. We're forming a new mining company; I want to shoot it through one-two-three! Bring what papers we'll want; that will be all the baggage you need to stop for. Graham will have all particulars ready for you. Thanks, Ben. So long."

"Graham!"

Graham swung about expectantly.

"Get the stables. A couple of the best horses."

"I've already got them," said Graham.

It was for such reasons that Graham, though a youngster, could hold so difficult a position as private secretary to John Cavalier, Timber Wolf.

Al Blake was John Cavalier's mining expert, general superintendent of all Cavalier's mining interests, and the one source to which Cavalier applied for advice on all mining matters. He was the highest salaried man on the extensive pay-roll and the shrewdest. In a few minutes Graham announced that he had the Red Creek Mine on the wire, and that Blake was coming.

"I want you here on the jump, Al," said Cavalier. "And I need forty of our best men. Scare up as many as you can at your diggings; I can fill the number down here. Good men, understand? Men you know; men who at a pinch will fight like hell; every man with a rifle."

"All right," grunted Blake, wide awake by now. "I'm on my way in ten minutes."

Cavalier began pacing up and down



again, his eyes frowning. He needed Billy Winch right now; needed him the worst way. For here was work to be done of the sort which invariably he placed in Winch's capable hands. But Winch had had a night of it, and Cavalier was not the man to overlook that fact as long as he could put his hand on another man who would do.

"Have Dick Ross up, on the run," he told Graham.

Breakfast came, served on big, massive trays by the Japanese servant who had been in Cavalier's pay for five years. Almost at the same moment, and literally on the run, Dick Ross came in.

"Scare up ten good men for me, Ross. With rifles, all ready to ride. I'll have breakfast ready for them here." Graham caught the alert eye of the Japanese who set down his trays hurriedly, and with a quick nod raced off to the kitchen. Cavalier looked sternly at Ross and said curtly, "I'm handing you a job that would usually go to Winch, Ross. But he's asleep—"

"He was just getting up again, Mr. Cavalier. Said he wanted to see for himself how old Thor was pulling along."

"Then," said Cavalier, "hop back and tell Winch what I said. He can tell you the men to pick—or, if he's busy working with Thor he can leave it to you. Of course I want you to be of the number. Peters also if Winch doesn't need him; Winch, too, if he says the word."

Cavalier and Graham ate standing up. Men summoned began coming in. Each of them was given brief, clean-cut orders, and allowed brief time to gulp a hot breakfast. Billy Winch came first, bringing with him Mexicali Joe.

"He's going to be all right, I think," said Winch by way of greeting, and Cavalier understood that he was reporting on Thor. "I never saw man or animal worse shot-all-to-hell, either. I got him in bed now, strapped down; he's conscious this morning, and had a fair night, all things considered. There's nothing more to be done right away, just be kept quiet."

"I was coming out in a minute."

"I can't have folks running in on him, John," said Winch, with a slow shake of the head, mumbling over a mouthful of ham and egg. "But if you'd just run in on him one second, to sort of let him know you was with him, you know, and then beat it, it might do him good."

"Can you leave for two or three hours? To go down with Al Blake and some of the

boys\* to stake a string of mining claims down in Light Ladies' Gulch?"



"That's why the rifles?" said Winch. "Sure, I can go, leaving Charley Peters with full instructions. But I'll have to be back in, say, four hours at latest."

Cavalier turned to Mexicali Joe.

"Joe," he said, "how many friends have you got that we can put on your pay-roll for a few days at twenty-five dollars a day? To stake claims down in the Gulch?"

"Twenty-five dollars a day?" gasped Joe. "For each man? There would be one meelion men, Señor Caballero."

"Take him in tow, Graham! Get a list of names from him, men to be reached in an hour's ride. As many as you can get, twenty or thirty or forty. And get them here—*quick!*"

Al Blake arrived from the Red Creek Mine. Stringing along after him came a dozen men of his choosing; big, uncouth, unshaven, rough-looking customers to the last man of them and yet—as Cavalier and Blake agreed—all *good men!* Good to carry out orders; to put up a fight against odds; to hang on and fight to the last ditch. Graham saw to it that every man-Jack of them was fed, and had his cigar from the Chief's private stock. The men grouped outside and looked at one another, but for the greater part wasted little breath in speculations and questionings, each realizing that his fellows knew as little as himself.

It was a busy morning for John Cavalier. Yet he found the time—rather he made it!—to go out to the "hospital" to stand over old Thor, and speak softly to him. Thor lay upon a white-enamelled bed; his bed was softened for him by many pillows; at the bedside sat Charley Peters, his face as grave, his eye as watchful, as could have been had it been John Cavalier himself who lay there. And when Cavalier came in Thor heard his step, and tried to move; tried to lift his poor battered head. But at the master's low voice, "Down, Thor! Down, sir—good old dog!" Thor lay back and his tired sigh was like the sigh of a man. Cavalier's big hand rested gently upon the old fellow;



then Cavalier went out, walking softly, and Thor lay still a very long while, waiting for him to come again.

Al Blake left within fifteen minutes of his arrival, a little army of armed men at his back. With him, on the fastest horse in Cavalier's stables, rode a man whose sole responsibility was to race back with word of conditions. Fully Cavalier counted on hearing that already at least two claims had been staked. But he was not ready to see Lynette again so soon; he was not ready yet to see Babe Deveril. Never for a single instant since seeing that bit of paper hung to a tree with a girl's mockery upon it, had he doubted that this girl, whom he had thought that he loved, had cast in with the Baby Devil, the two racing side by side to steal Mexicali Joe's gold.

He had said to Al Blake, "Put them off—but don't hurt either of them. Leave them to me."

Attorney Ben Brewster, a man much shaken, arrived in record time. He could scarcely speak and glared at Cavalier as though he would highly enjoy killing him.

"You've got a fee to pay this trip," he groaned, "that will make you sit up and stretch your eyes! Good God, man—"

"Give him a drink, Graham," said Cavalier. "Curse your fees, Brewster. What do I care? So you make an iron-clad job of it."

"And the job?"

Graham saw that he had a cigar.

"Something crooked!" muttered Brewster. "I'll bet a hat!"

"Otherwise," jeered Cavalier, "why send for you! Now shut up, Ben, and get that infected brain of yours working. Here's the tale."



Ben Brewster, a man who knew his business—and his client—went into action. That day he entered in businesslike shape into all possible steps toward forming a new corporation. The

Mexicali Joe Gold Mining Company.

"Lord, what a fool name!" he growled.

"Never mind the name," retorted Cavalier.

During the day many other men came in; among them no less than seventeen swarthy men of Mexicali Joe's breed. Brewster took signatures and the men, showing their glistening white teeth, knew nothing of what was happening save that each man of them was to draw twenty-five

dollars a day for driving a stake and sitting snug over it, rifle in hand and cigarette in mouth! Brewster got other signatures, going down to Light Ladies' Gulch and among the men there. In all, the signed names of about sixty men. The Mexicali Joe Gold Mining Company was born. And the greater part of the stock, and the magnificently shining title of president was invested in—Mexicali Joe! Suddenly, though all day he had been a man as dark-browed as a thunder storm, Cavalier burst out into that golden laughter of his. Not a single share lay in his name, all immediate expenses to be paid by him, and they were to be heavy; yet he counted himself the man to draw a full ninety-nine per cent. of the dividends of sheer triumph! For it was to be a cold shut-out of Taggart and Gallup and Shifton and all Big Pine! *And, most of all, for Babe Deveril and that girl!* For early had come back the report from Al Blake, "Neither of them here; no claims staked!"

Cavalier could only estimate that the girl had misunderstood; that, hearing Joe's description of the place, she had not grasped the true sense of his words. He lingered over the picture of her and Deveril, hastening, driving their stakes somewhere else!

When Mexicali Joe came to understand, after much eloquence from Graham, how matters stood—how he swaggered! This, a day in a lifetime, was Mexicali Joe's day.

"Me, I'm president!"

President of a gold mining company! Mexicali Joe! And of a real mine; for Al Blake had sent back the curt word, "He's got it; he's got a mine that I'd advise you to buy in for a hundred thousand while you can. It may run to anything. The best thing I've seen up here anywhere!"

Mexicali Joe on the highroad to become a millionaire—through the efforts of John Cavalier! *And Babe Deveril and a certain girl, shut out!*

To be sure, Joe, a man very profoundly bewildered, more dumbfounded even than elated, meant never to take a single step nor say a single word without going first to his friend, "John." Before the end of that glorious day Joe was dead-drunk; didn't know whether he was afoot or horseback. But in his crafty Latin way, he kept his mouth shut.

And then John Cavalier, with an eye not to further wealth, but toward the confounding of all hopes of such as Young Gallup and Jim Taggart and Babe Deveril—and a certain girl—sprang his coup.



With Ben Brewster guarding his rear in every advance, he prepared to swallow whole, as Brewster put it, every bit of available land above and below and on every side of Joe's claims. He recked neither of present difficulties and expenses nor of lawsuits to come. He wanted the land—and he meant to get it! And he shot forth the command:

"There's a town there, on Light Ladies' Gulch. You don't see it? It's there! Graham, get busy! A contractor; lumber; building materials; carpenters! We build a town as big as Big Pine and we build it faster than ever a town grew before! A store; blacksmith shop; hotel. Shacks of all sorts. Graham!"

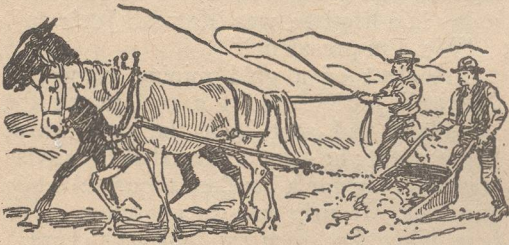
Graham, like a man with an electric current shot through him, jumped out of his chair.

"Send a man on the run to Big Pine with a message for Young Gallup! And the message is this: 'John Cavalier promised to pull your damned town down about your ears—and the pulling has begun!'"

"Yes, Mr. Cavalier," said Graham. And sent a man on a running horse.

And then took swift dictation. Cavalier made a budget of fifty thousand dollars, as a starter. Even Graham wondered what impulses were rioting in his mad heart!

"We want scrapers and plows, a crew of



road-makers! We build a new road—on this side of Light Ladies' Gulch! Got the idea, Graham? We cut Big Pine out. We go by them, giving a shorter road to the outside, a better road. We boycott Gallup's dinky town! Keep in mind we'll double that first fifty thousand any time we need to. Get this word around: Any man who buys a nickel-worth of tobacco in Big Pine can't buy anything, even if he has his pockets full of chinking gold, in our town! No man, once seen setting his foot down in Gallup's town, is going to be tolerated two minutes in our town! Get the idea, Graham?"

"Yes, Mr. Cavalier!"

Cavalier smote him then so mightily upon the shoulder that Graham, a small

man, went pale, shot through with pain.

"Raise your own salary, Graham. And earn it now!"

## XXVII

WHAT John Cavalier could not know was that those few words signed Lynette, and saying with such cruel curtness, "*I have gone back to Babe Deveril,*" had been written not by Lynette, but by Deveril himself. Nor could he know that Lynette had not gone freely, but under the harsh coercion of four men.

Deveril, when Lynette refused to go with him, had hurried away through the woods, his heart burning with jealous rage. Was the hated Timber Wolf to win again, not only in the game for gold, but in another game which was coming to be the one greatest consideration in Babe Deveril's life?

"Not while I live!" he muttered to himself over and over. And once out of sight of Lynette, who still sat bowed over the dog he had struck down, he broke into a run. Jim Taggart and Gallup and Cliff Shifton were not so far away that he could not hope to reach them, and to bring them back before Cavalier returned.

Thus, not over fifteen minutes before John Cavalier came back, bringing Billy Winch and Mexicali Joe with him, Deveril had appeared before Lynette the second time. And now she leaped to her feet, seeing who his companions were, and reading at one quick glance what lay unhidden in their faces. Greed was there and savage gloating and mercilessness; she knew that at least three of those men would stamp her into the ground under their heavy boots if thus they might walk over her body through the golden gates of Mexicali Joe's secret.

"You're arrested!" cried Taggart. "Come, get a move on. We clear out of this on the run!"

"It was you who shot him, not I! And I'll not go with you. In a minute he'll be back."

Taggart was of no mind for delay and talk; he caught her roughly by the arm. Her eyes went swiftly to Deveril's; of his look she could make nothing.

He shrugged and said only, "Taggart's sheriff; he'll take you along anyway. You might as well go without a fuss."

Gallup, his face ugly with the emotions swaying him, was at her other side. She looked to the hawk-faced man, and then away with a shudder.



Then, trying to jerk away, she screamed out, "Help! John Cav——"

Taggart's big, hairy hand was over her mouth.



"Come along," he commanded angrily. "Get a move on."

Half-dragging her the first few steps, they led her out of camp, down into the

canyon, and across among the trees. She gave over struggling. They watched her so that she could not call again. Taggart threatened to stuff his dirty bandanna handkerchief into her mouth. Deveril alone held back for a little; she did not know what he was doing, did not see him as he wrote in a hand which he strove to give a girlish semblance those few words to which he signed her name. She scarcely marked his delay; she was trying now to think fast and logically.

These men were brutes, all of them; she had had ample evidence of that already, and had that evidence been lacking the information was there emblazoned in their faces. Even Babe Deveril, in whom she once had trusted, began to show the brutal lining of his insolent character. And yet, need she be afraid of any of them just now? If she openly thwarted them, yes! They would show no mercy to a girl. But at the moment their thoughts were set not upon her, but upon Mexicali Joe's gold. And she knew where it was, and they knew that she knew.

Taggart was speaking, growling into her ear, "We followed Mexicali; we saw him come up here; Deveril followed him into camp. He told where his gold was. And you heard it all!"

"Well?" said Lynette, striving with herself for calmness. She was thinking, "If only I can have a little time! John Cavalier will come for me. He will come upon them like an angry lion among curs! If only I can have a little time."

"What do you mean by that?" demanded Taggart. "The whole earth ain't Joe's, because he picked up a nugget or two. Anybody's got a right to stake a claim; I got a right and so has the boys—and so have you."

"Suppose," offered Lynette as coolly as she could, "that I refused to tell?"

eyes which answered her more eloquently than any words from the man could have done, which put certain knowledge and icy fear into her.

Always, when nervous or frightened, Lynette's laughter came easily to her, and now without awaiting any other answer from this man she began laughing in such a fashion as to perplex him, and bring a dragging frown across his brows.

"Are you going to tell us?" he asked.

"If I do," she temporized, "do I have the chance to drive the first stakes?"

"By God, yes! And say, Little One, you're a peach into the bargain."

She did not appear to hear; she was thinking over and over, "John Cavalier will come after us as soon as he finds I am gone. I must gain a little time, that is all."

If only she could make them think that the gold was somewhere nearby. Mexicali Joe had tricked them once; if she could do it the second time, and manage to keep them so close to camp that Cavalier must readily find them. But now Deveril had rejoined them, and she recalled how he had heard something, though not all, of Joe's triumphant announcement. For Joe had shouted out at the top of his voice, to catch and hold the Timber Wolf's attention, "Light Ladies' Gulch!" Deveril had heard that; and Light Ladies' Gulch was many miles away, down toward Big Pine.

Deveril was looking at her with eyes which she could not read; they were bright and hard, and told no tales of the man's thoughts. How she hated him at that moment; how she yearned for the coming of John Cavalier.

"He will come," she kept whispering within herself. "He'll come soon."

"This lovely and altogether too charming young woman," Deveril was saying lightly, his eyes still upon her though his words were for the others, "has a mind of her own. It would be as well to hear what she has to say, and learn what she intends to do."

"Will you try to lie to us?" demanded Taggart. "Or will you tell us the truth?"

She, too, strove for lightness, saying, "Think that out for yourself, Mr. Taggart! John Cavalier knows where the gold is now; both you and I know the sort of man he is, and we can imagine that if he drives the first stake he will see to it that he takes the whole thing. Do you really think that after I came into this country for gold



myself I am going to miss my one chance now?" She puzzled them again with her laughter and said, "Not that it would not be a simple matter to trick you, were I minded to let my own chances go for the sake of spoiling yours. Mexicali Joe fooled you so easily."

"Yet you yelled for Cavalier just now."

"After you came rushing upon me as if you meant to tear me to pieces, frightening the wits out of me!"

"Well, then, tell us."

"If I told you now, then what? You'd desert me in a minute; you would race on ahead; when I caught up with you there would be nothing left."

Deveril's eyes flashed, and he said quickly, "And give you the chance to send us to the wrong place, were you so minded, so that you could slip off alone, and be first at the other spot! Very clever, Miss Lynette, but that won't work. You go with us."

And all the while she was trying so hard to think; and all the while listening so eagerly for a certain glorious, golden voice shouting after her. Deveril had heard part of Joe's exclamation.

"It is in Light Ladies' Gulch," she said quietly.

"Yes!" Here was Young Gallup speaking, his covetous soul aflame. "We know that; Deveril heard. But Light Ladies' Gulch is forty miles long! Whereabouts in the gulch?"

She told herself that she would die before she led them aright. And yet she realized to the full the danger to herself if she tricked them as Joe had done, and they discovered her trickery before Cavalier came. Yet most of all was she confident that he would come, and swiftly. Joe's words still rang in her memory; he had told first of the Red Cliffs, how he had found color there last year; how he had made prospect holes; how his real mine lay removed three or four miles.

Still she temporized, saying, "John Cavalier and Billy Winch and Joe have horses. We are on foot. Tell me first how we can hope to come to the spot first?"

"We'll have horses ourselves in a jiffy," said Taggart. "Stepping lively, we're not more than a couple of hours from a cattle outfit over the ridge. We'll get all the horses we want and we'll ride like hell!"

"You know where the Red Cliffs are? At the foot of the cliffs I'll show you Joe's prospect holes."

The pale-eyed, hawk-faced Cliff Shifton spoke for the first time.

"Not half a dozen miles out of Big Pine. I told you last year, Gallup——"

Deveril, the keenest of them all, the one who knew her best, suspected her from the beginning. His eyes never once left her face.



"How do we know," he said quietly, "that there's any gold there? That Joe's gold is not somewhere else?"

"You will have to make your own decision," she told him as coolly as she could. "If you think that I am mistaken or that I am trying to play with you as Joe did, you are free to go where you please."

Taggart began cursing; his grip tightened on her arm so that he hurt her terribly; his eyes were like an infuriated animal's as he shouted at her, "I'll give you one word of warning, Little One! If you put up a game on us now, you cut your own throat. In the first place I'll make it my business that if we get shut out, you get shut out along with us. And in the second place when I'm through with you no other man in the world will have any use for you. Got that?"

She knew what he had done to Mexicali Joe; she could guess what other unthinkable things he would have done. And she knew that if now she tricked Jim Taggart and he found her out—before John Cavalier came—she could only pray to die.

And yet at this, the supreme test in her life, she held steady to swiftly-taken purpose. She would not put the game into these men's hands. And she held steadfastly to her certainty, knowing the man, that John Cavalier would come. Therefore, though her face went a little pale, and her mouth was so dry that she did not dare speak, she shrugged her shoulders.

"Come then," said Taggart. "Enough palaver. We're on our way."

And of them all, only Babe Deveril was still distrustful.

AND thus Lynette, accepting her own grave risk with clear-eyed comprehension and yet with unswerving determination, led these four men to a spot where she knew that they would not find that gold for which every man of them had striven so doggedly; thus it was she who made it possible for John Cavalier to



be before all others, and to triumph and strike the death blow to Big Pine, and to begin that relentless campaign which was to end in humbling his ancient enemy, Young Gallup. Yet there was little exultation in Lynette's heart, but a growing fear. For, after hours of furious haste, she and the four men had come at last into Light Ladies' Gulch and to the base of the towering red cliffs—and there had been no John Cavalier rushing after them.

Cliff Shifton knew more of gold mining than any of the others, and Lynette watched him narrowly as he went up and down under the high cliffs. And she knew that she in turn was watched; in the first excitement of coming to the long-sought spot she had hoped that she might escape. But both Taggart and Deveril followed her at every step with their eyes.

Desperately she clung to her assurance that John Cavalier would come for her. He had said that he would come "though it were ten thousand miles!" And he was a man of his word; there was no other man like him for keeping his pledged word, or for doing with sweeping capability that which he set out to do. He would know that she had not left him voluntarily, for she had given him her word, and he knew that she, like himself, kept a promise made. He might have difficulties in finding her; she might have to wait a little while, an hour or two or three hours. But it remained that he was a man to surmount obstacles unsurmountable to other men; a man to pin faith upon. Yet time passed, and John Cavalier did not come.

They found indications of Mexicali Joe's labors here, rock ledges at which he had

chipped and hammered, prospect holes lower on the steep slope. Cliff Shifton acknowledged that "the signs were all right," but they did not find the gold, and they did not find any-

thing to show that Joe or another had worked here recently.

"All this work," said Shifton, staring and frowning, "was done a year ago."

"He'd be crafty enough," muttered Gallup, "to hide his real signs. We got to look around every clump of brush and in every gully where maybe he's covered things up. You're sure," and he whipped

about upon Lynette, "that you got straight all he said?"

"I'm sure," said Lynette. And she was afraid that the men would hear the beating of her heart. For now she got ugly looks from Taggart, and now Deveril was not the only one who was suspicious.

"I am going up to the top of the cliffs again, and see what I can see," she said.

"If there's gold anywhere it's down here," said Shifton. "There's nothing on the top."

"Just the same I'm going!"

"Where the horses are?" jeered Taggart. "By God, if you have——"

"If you think I am trying to run away you can follow, and watch me. I am going."

She turned. Deveril was watching her with keen, shrewd eyes. Taggart took a quick stride toward her, his hand lifted to snatch her back.

Deveril stepped before him saying coolly, "I'll go up with her, Taggart. And I guess you know how I stand on this, don't you?"

"All right," conceded the sheriff. "Only keep your eye peeled. I'm getting leery."

It was a long climb to the cliff tops, and neither Lynette nor Deveril at her heels spoke during the climb. They were silent when at last they stood side by side near the tethered horses. Deveril's eyes were upon her pale face; her own eyes ran swiftly, eagerly across the deep canyon to the wooded lands beyond. She prayed with the fervor of growing despair for the sight of a certain young blond giant of a man racing, headlong to her relief.

"Well?" said Deveril presently in a tone so strange, so vibrant with suppressed emotion that he made her start and drew her wondering eyes swiftly. "What are you looking for now?"

"Why do you talk like that—what is the matter?"

He laughed, and his laughter was harsh and bitter and set her nerves quivering.

"Is the gold here, Lynette? Or is it some miles away, with John Cavalier already sinking his claws into it, Cavalier style?"

Again her eyes left him, returning across the gorge to the further wooded lands. Over there was a road, the road into which she and Babe Deveril had turned briefly that night, a thousand years ago, when they had fled from Big Pine in the dark; a road which led to John Cavalier's headquarters. From the top of the cliffs she





caught a glimpse of the road winding among the trees; her eyes were fixedly upon it; her lips were moving softly, though the words were not for Babe Deveril's ears.

"Lynette," he said in that strangely tense and quiet voice, "if you have been fool enough to try to put something over on this crowd—can't you guess how you'd fare in Jim Taggart's hands?"

She was not looking at him; she did not appear to mark his words. He saw a sudden change in her expression; she started, and the blood rushed back into her cheeks, and her eyes brightened. He looked where she was looking. Far across the canyon, rising up among the trees, was a cloud of dust. Someone was riding there, riding furiously.

Together they watched, waiting for that someone to appear in the one spot where the winding road could be glimpsed through the trees. And in a moment they saw not one man only, but a dozen or a score of men, men stooping in their saddles and riding hard, veiled in the rising dust



puffing up under their horses' flying feet. Now and then came a pale glint of the sun striking upon the rifles which, to the last man, they carried. They came into view with a rush, were gone with a rush. The great cloud of dust rose and thinned and disappeared.

"That road will bring them down into Light Ladies' Gulch where it makes the wide loop about three miles from here," said Deveril. "Have you an idea who they are, Lynette?"

"No," she said, her lips dry; "I don't understand."

"I think that I do understand," he told her sharply, and she saw the flash of anger in his eyes. "Those are John Cavalier's men and they are riding, armed. Listen to me while you've got the chance! That's not the first bunch of men who have ridden over there like that today. Two hours ago, when you went down the cliffs with the others and I stopped up here, I saw the same sort of thing happening. If you're so innocent," he sneered at her, "I'll

read you the riddle. I've told you those are John Cavalier's men. Then why the devil are they riding like that and in such numbers? They're going straight down into the Gulch where the gold is while you hold us back, up here. And John Cavalier is paying off an old grudge and jamming more gold into his bulging pockets. And you've got some men to reckon with in ten minutes who'll make you sorry that you were ever born a girl!"

"No!" she cried hoarsely. "No. I won't believe it."

He failed to catch just what she was thinking: She refused to believe that John Cavalier, instead of coming in headlong fury of haste to her had raced instead to Mexicali Joe's gold; that John Cavalier, instead of scattering his men across fifty miles of country seeking her, was massing them at a new gold mine. John Cavalier was not like that! She cried it passionately within her spirit. She had stood loyally by John Cavalier; she had, at all costs, kept her word to him—she had come to believe in his love for her, and to long for his return.

"If you saw men before, if you thought the thing that you think now, why didn't you rush on after them? It's not true!"

"I didn't rush after them," he returned curtly, "because I'd be a fool for my pains, and would only give that wolf-devil another chance to laugh in my face. For if he's got this lead on us, and has already shot that many men ahead of him into the game—why, then, the game is his."

"But I won't believe——"

"If you will watch you will see. I'll bet a thousand dollars he has a hundred men down there already, and that they'll be riding by all day; they'll be staking claims



which he will buy back from them at the price of a day's work. He'll work a clean shut-out for Gallup and Taggart. That's what he'd give his right hand to do. You watch a minute."

They watched. Once Taggart shouted up to them.

"Down in a minute, Taggart," Deveril called back.



Before long Lynette saw another cloud of dust; this time three or four men rode into sight and sped away after the others. Before the dust had cleared another two or three men rode by. And at last Lynette felt despair in her heart, rising into her throat, choking her. For she understood with that sure leaping instinct of hers, that in her hour of direst need John Cavalier had failed her.

"Taggart will be wanting you in a minute," said Deveril. He spoke casually; he appeared calm and untroubled. He took out tobacco and papers and began rolling a cigarette. But Lynette saw that his hands were shaking, and knew that the man was atremble with rage. "Before you go down to him tell me: Did you know what you were doing when you brought us to the wrong place?"

"Yes!" It was scarcely above a whisper, yet she strove with all her might to make it defiant. She was afraid, and yet she fought with herself, seeking to hide her fear from him.

He shrugged elaborately, as though the matter were of no great interest to him, and no longer concerned him.

"Then your blood be on your own head," he said carelessly. "I, for one, will not raise my hand against you. What Taggart does to you concerns only you and Taggart."

"Babe Deveril!"

She called to him with a new voice; she was afraid and no longer strove to hide her fear. Until now she had carried on, head high, in full confidence, confidence in a man. And that man, like Babe Deveril before him, had thought first of gold instead of her. John Cavalier had spoken of love and had turned aside for gold; John Cavalier who already had both hands full of the yellow stuff thought only of more to be had and not of her.

"Babe Deveril! Listen to me! I have been a fool—oh, such a fool! I knew so



little of the real world and of men, and I thought that I knew it all. My mother had me raised in a convent, thinking thus to protect me against all the hardships she had endured; but she did not take into con-

sideration that her blood and Dick Brooke's blood was my blood! This was all a glorious adventure to me. I thought—I thought I could do anything; I was not afraid of men, not of you nor of John Cavalier nor of any man. Now I am afraid—of Jim Taggart! You helped me to run from him once; help me again. Now. Let me have one of the horses—let me go."

All the while he stood looking at her curiously. Toward the end there was a look in his eyes which hinted at a sudden spiritual conflagration within.

"You're not used to this sort of thing?" And when she shook her head vehemently, he added sternly, "And you are not John Cavalier's? And have never been?"

"No, no!" she cried wildly, drawing back from him.

Now he came to her and caught her two hands fiercely.

"Lynette!" he said eagerly. "Lynette, I love you! Today you have stood between me and a fortune and I tell you—I love you! Since first you came to the door of my cabin I have loved you, you girl with the daring eyes!"

"Don't!" she pleaded. "Let me go."

"Tell me, Lynette," he said sternly, still holding her hands tight in his, "is there any chance for me? I had never thought to marry, but now I'd rather have you mine than have all the gold that ever came out of the earth. Tell me and tell me the truth; we know each other rather well for so few days, Lynette. So tell me; tell me, Lynette."

Again she shook her head.

"Let me go," she pleaded. "Let me have a horse and go. Before they come up for me."

"Then there's no chance, ever, for me?"

"Neither for you nor for any other man—I have had enough of all men. Let me go, Babe Deveril!"

Still he held her, his hands hardening her, as he demanded:

"And what of John Cavalier?"

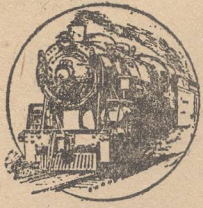
"I don't know. I can't understand men. I thought there never was another man like him, a hard man who could be tender, a man who would count some things above money. I don't know; I want to go."

"Go?" There came a sudden gleam into his eyes. "And where? Back to John Cavalier maybe?"

"No! Anywhere on earth but back to him. To the stage which will be leaving Bib Pine in a little while; back to a land where trains run, trains which can take me



a thousand miles away. Oh, Babe Deveril——”



Taggart's voice rose up to them, sounding savage.

“What in hell's name are you doing up there?”

Then Deveril released her hands.

“Go to the horses,” he commanded. “Untie all four. I'll ride with you to the stage—and we'll take the other horses along!”

She had scarcely hoped for this; for an instant she stood staring at him, half-afraid that he was jeering at her. Then she ran to the horses and began wildly untying their ropes.

Deveril, smoking his cigarette, appeared on the edge of the cliff for Taggart to see, and called down carelessly, “What's all the excitement, Taggart?”

“Keep your eye on that girl. Shifton thinks she's fooled us. I want her down here.”

Deveril laughed at him and turned away. Once out of Taggart's sight he moved more swiftly. Lynette already was in the saddle; he mounted and took from her the tie-ropes of the other three horses.

“On our way,” he said crisply. “They'll be after us like bees out of a jostled hive.”

**T**HEY did not ride into Big Pine, but into the road two or three miles below where the stage would pass. Deveril hailed the stage when it came, and the driver took Lynette on as his solitary passenger. At the last minute she caught Babe Deveril's hand in both of hers.

“There is good and bad in you, Babe Deveril, as I suppose there is in all of us. But you have been good to me! I will never forget how you have stood my friend twice; I will always remember that you were a man who never did little, mean things. I thank God that I can always remember you who never sank to doing cowardly or contemptible things. And now, good-by, Babe Deveril, and good luck go with you!”

“And Cavalier?” he demanded at the end. “You are done with him, too?”

Suddenly she looked wearier than he had ever seen her even during their days and nights together in the mountains. She looked a poor, little broken-hearted girl; there was a quick gathering of tears in her eyes, which she strove to smile away. But despite the smile, the tears ran down. She waved her hand; the stage driver cracked

his long whip—and Babe Deveril stood in the dusty road, his hat in his hand, staring down a winding roadway. A clatter of hoofs, a rattle of wheels, a mist of dust, and Lynette was gone.

## XXVIII

**B**ABE DEVERIL went back to his horse, mounting listlessly like a very tired man. The spring had gone out of his step, and something of the elasticity out of that ever-young spirit which had always been his no matter from what quarter blew the variable winds of chance. Lynette was gone, and he could not hold his thoughts from winging back along the trail he and she had trod together; there had been the time, and now he knew it, when all things were possible; the time before John Cavalier came into her life, when Babe Deveril, had he then understood both himself and her, might have won a thing more golden than any man's mere gold. In his blindness he had judged her the light adventuress which she seemed; now that it was given him to understand, she had passed on and out of his life.

He caught up the reins of the horse she had left behind. His face grew grim; he still had Jim Taggart to deal with, and therefore it was as well to take this horse and the others back to Big Pine, and leave them there for Taggart. For the first thing which would suggest itself to the enraged sheriff would be to press a charge against him of horse stealing, and in this country horse-thieves were treated with no gentle consideration.

“I'll leave the horses there—and go.”

Where? He could shrug at so trifling a matter. It did not matter. There was



nothing left for him in these mountains; John Cavalier had the gold, and the girl was on the stage.

But in his bleak broodings there remained one gleam of gloating satisfaction: He had tricked John Cavalier out of the girl! That Lynette already loved Cava-



lier, or at least stood upon the very brink of giving her heart unreservedly into Cavalier's keeping, his keen eyes, the eyes of jealous love, had been quick to read. It did not once suggest itself to him that Cavalier could by any possibility have failed to love Lynette. The two had been for days together, alone in the mountains; why should Cavalier have kept her and have been gentle with her, as he must have been, save for the one reason that he loved her? Further, what man could have lived so long with Lynette of the daring eyes and not love her? And he, Babe Deveril, had stolen her away from John Cavalier, had tricked him with a pencil-srawl, had lost Lynette to him for all time. The stage carrying her away now was as inevitable an instrument in the hand of fate as death itself.

And she departed thinking of John Cavalier that he was a man to neglect her while he rushed off for gold; thinking of Babe Deveril as she had spoken, that with the good and the bad in him, at least he had been a friend whom she would remember gratefully through the years, one who had been good to her.

He turned back for the other horses which he had tethered by the roadside, and led them on toward Big Pine.

"What the devil is love, anyway?" he muttered once.

It was not for a man such as Babe Deveril to know clearly; for love is winged with unselfishness and self-sacrifice. And yet, after his own fashion, he loved her and would love her always, though other pretty faces came and went and he laughed into other eyes. She was lost to him; there was the one great certainty like a gigantic rock wall across his path. And she had said at the parting—her last words to him were to ring in his memory for many a long day—that there were both good and bad in him; and she chose to remember the good! He tried to laugh at that; what did he care for good and bad? He, a man who went his way and made reckoning to none?

And she had said that she knew him for one who, whatever else he might have done, had never stooped to a mean, contemptible act; she thought of him and would always think of him as a man who, though he struck unrighteous blows, dealt them in the open, man-style—Cavalier style, in which, despite words Deveril himself had spoken more than once, there was nothing of the sneak. And yet—and yet the one deed of a significance so profound that it had di-

rected the currents of three lives, that writing of seven words, that signing of her name under them—



"I am glad that I did that!" he triumphed. And gladdest of all, in his heart, was he that Lynette did not

know—would never know.

Thus Babe Deveril, droop-headed as he rode, found certain living fires among the ashes of dead hopes: A row to come with Taggart? He could look forward to it with fierce eagerness. Cavalier and Lynette separated; vindictive satisfaction there. He'd got his knife in Cavalier's heart at last! He'd like to wait a year or a dozen until some time Lynette forgot, and another man came despite her sweeping avowal, and she married; he would like then to come back to John Cavalier and tell him what a fool he had been and how in the end it had been none other than Baby Devil who had knifed him.

And yet, all the while, Lynette's farewell words were in his mind; she had found bad in him, and above that, good. And he saw before him, wherever he looked, her face as he had seen it last, her eyes blurred with her tears. And he fought stubbornly with himself against the insistent admission—it was Babe Deveril, and none other who, saying that he loved her, had put those tears there. Good and bad? What the devil had he to do with sticking those labelling-tags upon what he or others did?

**J**OHAN CAVALIER was still in his office. He was a man who had won another victory, and yet a man with the taste of despair in his mouth. Gallop's town was doomed; it was one of those little mountain towns which had already outlived its period of usefulness, and now with a man like the Timber Wolf waging merciless war against it, Big Pine had its back broken almost at the first savage blow struck. But John Cavalier strode up and down restlessly like a man broken by defeat, rather than one whose standards went flying on triumphantly. He knew that a new rival town, his own town, was springing into being in a few hours; he had the brief satisfaction of knowing that he was keeping an ancient promise and striking a body-blow from which there would be no recovery, making Big Pine



take the count, and drop out of all men's consideration. He knew, from having seen it many times, that pitiful spectacle which a dead and deserted town presents. So, briefly, just as his kinsman was doing at the same moment, he extracted what satisfaction he could from the hour. He even had word sent to Gallup, "I am killing your town very much as a man may kill an ugly snake. I shall see to it that



goods are sold cheaper here than at your store; there will be a better hotel here, with a better, shorter road leading to it. And I will build cabins as fast as they are called for, to house deserters from your dying town. And I will see to it that men from my town never set foot in your town. This from me, Young Gallup. You're dead and buried!"

But from all this John Cavalier drew no jot of pure joy. For, during the day, word came to him that several men and one girl had been seen hastily occupied at the foot of the Red Cliffs; the girl Lynette; one of the men, Deveril. And it seemed very clear to John Cavalier that Lynette had led Deveril and the others in hot haste to the Red Cliffs, only because she had misunderstood Mexicali Joe's directions, confused as one might be who did not know the country by his mention of these cliffs where he had prospected last year.

"I'll go get them," Cavalier told himself a score of times, "just as soon as I know how to handle them. When I know how I can hurt him most—and her——"

Mexicali Joe swelled about the landscape all day like a bursting balloon, a man swept up in a moment from a position of less than mediocrity to one, so far as Mexicali Joe was concerned, of monumental magnificence and the highest degree of earthly joy. Graham could not keep him out of Cavalier's office; the second time he came in the Timber Wolf lifted him upon his boot, hurling him out through the door, and promising him seven kinds of ugly death if he ever came back. Whereupon

Mexicali Joe, shaking his head, went away without grumbling.

Graham was still laughing when another man rode up to the door, and Graham's laughter died and his eyes grew keen with speculation.

In another moment he stood before Cavalier, saying quickly, "Mr. Deveril to see you. He has ridden his horse nearly to death. And I don't like the look on his face."

"Show him in!" shouted Cavalier. "You fool, don't you know he's the one man in the world——"

Graham hurried out. Deveril, his face pale and hard, his eyes burning though the man were fever-ridden, came into the room. The door closed after him.

"Well?" snapped Cavalier.

"Not so well, thanks," retorted Deveril with an attempt at his characteristic inconsequential insolence. "Here's hoping the same to you—damn you!"

"If you've got anything to say, get it done with," commanded Cavalier angrily.

"I'll say it," Deveril muttered. "But first I'll say this, though I fancy it goes without saying: There is no man on earth I hate as I hate you. As far as you and I are concerned I'd rather see you dead than any other sight I'll ever see. And now, in spite of all that, I've come to do you a good turn."

Cavalier scoffed at him, crying out, "I want none of your good turns; I am satisfied to have your hate."

Deveril, with eyes which puzzled the Timber Wolf, was staring at him curiously.

"Tell me, John Cavalier," he demanded, "do you love her?"

"Love her?" cried Cavalier. "Rather I hate the ground she walks on! She is your kind, Baby Devil, not mine." And he laughed his scorn of her. But now there was no chiming of golden bells in that great volume of John Cavalier's laughter, but rather a sinister ring like the angry clash of iron. All the while Babe Deveril looked him straight in the eye—and understood!



"For once, John Cavalier, you lie! You love her, and what is more—and worse!—she loves you! And that is why——"

"Loves me? Are you drunk, man, or crazy? Loves me and leaves me for you; leads you and your crowd to the Gulch,



trying to stake on Joe's claim, trying to——"

"She did not leave you for me! I took Taggart and Gallup to her and Taggart put her under arrest—for shooting you! And she did not lead us to the spot where she knew Joe's claim was; she made fools of us and led us to the Red Cliffs, miles away!"

Cavalier's face was suddenly as tense as Deveril's, almost as white.

"She left a note saying that she was going back to you. She put her name to it."

Deveril strode by him to a table on which lay some letter paper and a pencil. With slow, careful hand, striving as he had striven once before, to make the writing appear like a girl's, he wrote:

*"I am going back to Babe Deveril.  
Lynette."*

And then he threw the pencil down and stood looking at Cavalier. And he saw an expression of bewilderment, and then one of amazement wiping it out, and then a great light leaping into John Cavalier's eyes.

"You made her go! You dragged her away! And you wrote that!"

Deveril turned back toward the door.

"I have told you that she loves you. So it is for her happiness, much as I hate you, that I have told you. She, thinking that you preferred gold to her, has just gone out on the down-stage."

"By the Lord, man," and now Cavalier's voice rang out joyously, clear and golden once more, "you've done a wonderful thing today! I wonder if I could have done what you are doing? By thunder, Babe Deveril, you should be killed for the thing you did—and you've wiped it out. After this need there be hatred between us?"

He put out his hand. Deveril drew back, and went out through the door. His horse, wet with sweat and flecked with foam, was waiting for him. As he set foot into the stirrup he called back in a voice which sounded queerly in Cavalier's ears, "She doesn't know I wrote that. Unless it's necessary—you see, I'd like her to think as well——" He didn't finish, but rode away. And as long as he was in sight he sat very erect in the saddle, and sent back for any listening ears a light and lively whistled tune.

THE stage, carrying its one passenger out of the mountains, came rocking and clattering about the last bend in the grade where the road crosses that other

road which comes down from the mountains further to the east, from the region of John Cavalier's holdings. The girl's figure drooped listlessly; her eyes were dry and tired and blank with utter hopelessness. Long ago the garrulous driver had given over trying to talk with her. Now she was stooping forward, so that she saw nothing in all the dreary world but the dusty dashboard before her—and in her fancy, moving across this, like pictures on a screen, the images of faces. John Cavalier's face when he had chained her; when he had cried out that he loved her——

The driver slammed on his brakes, muttering, the wheels dragged, the stage came to an abrupt halt. She looked up, without interest. And there in the road, so



close to the wheel that she could have put out a hand and touched him, stood John Cavalier!

"Girl!" he called to her. "Oh, girl!"

She saw that he had a rifle in his hand, that a buckboard with a restive span of colts was at the side of the road. The driver was cursing; she understood that Cavalier, taking no chances of the man who was no friend of his refusing to stop, had meant to stop him in any case.

"What's this?" the driver was shouting. "Hold-up?"

Cavalier ignored him. His arms were out; there was the gladdest look in his eyes she had ever seen in any man's. He had come for her; he wanted her.

"No!" she cried, remembering. "No! Drive on!"

"You bet your sweet life I'll drive on!" the driver burst out. And to Cavalier, "Stand aside."

Then Cavalier put his hands out suddenly, dropping his rifle in the road, and caught Lynette to him, lifting her out of her seat despite her efforts to cling to the stage, and caught up his rifle again, saying sternly to the stage driver, "Now, drive on!"

"No!" screamed Lynette, struggling against the one hand restraining her—and against herself! "He can't do this; don't let him."



But in the end she knew how it would be. The stage driver was no man to stand out against John Cavalier. She wondered if anywhere on earth there lived a man to gainsay him when that light was in his eyes, and that tone vibrated in his voice.

"He'd got the drop on me—he'd drop me dead soon as not. I'll go, miss, but I'll send back word." And Lynette and John Cavalier, in the gathering dusk, were alone again in the quiet lands at the bases of the mountains.

"Girl, I did not know how I loved you until today!"

She whipped away from him, her eyes scornful.

"Love! You talk of love! And you leave me in the hands of those men while you go looking for gold!"

"No," he said, "it wasn't that. I thought that you had no further use for me; that you loved Deveril; that you had gone back to him; that you were trying to lead him and the rest to Joe's gold; that you——"

"What right had you to think that of me?" she challenged him. "That I was a liar, breaking a promise I had made; and worse than a liar, to betray a confidence? What right have you to think a thing like that, John Cavalier—and talk to me of love!"

He could have told her; he could have quoted to her that message which had been left behind, signed with her name. But after all, in the end he had Babe Deveril to think of, a man who had done his part for love of her, whose one reward, if John Cavalier himself were a man, must lie in the meager consolation that Lynette held him above so petty an act as that one which he had committed.

So for a moment Cavalier was silent; and then he could only say earnestly, "I am sorry, Lynette. I wronged you, and I was a fool and worse. But there were reasons why I thought that. After all we have misunderstood each other; that is all. Joe's gold is still Joe's gold; I have made it safe for him, and not one cent of it is mine or will ever be mine."

"Nor do I believe that!" she cried. "Nor any other thing you may ever tell me!"

"That, at least, I can make you believe." He was very stern-faced now and began wondering if Deveril had been mad when he had told him that Lynette loved him. How could Deveril know that? And there was little enough of the light of love in her eyes now. And yet——

"Are you willing to come back to head-

quarters with me?" he asked gently. "There, at least, you can learn that I have told you the truth about Mexicali Joe's gold. No matter how things go, girl, I don't want you to think of me that I did a trick like that—forgetting you to go money-grabbing."

"You can make me come," she said bitterly. "You have put a chain on me before now. But you can never make me love you, John Cavalier."

Now she saw in his face a look which she had never glimpsed before, one which stirred her to the depths; a look of profound sadness.

"No," he said, "I'll never put chain on you again; I'll never lift my hand to make you do anything on earth. I would rather die than force you to anything. But I shall go on loving you always. And now," and for the first time she heard him pleading, "is it so great a thing that I ask? If you will not love me, at least I want you to think as well of me as you can. That is only justice, girl; and you are very just. If you will only come with me, and learn from Mexicali Joe himself that I have touched and shall touch no single ounce of his gold."

She knew that he was speaking truth; and yet she would not admit it to him—since she would not admit it to herself!

"Will you do that one thing? I give you my word I shall not try to hold you."

"Yes," she said stiffly. And then she laughed nervously, saying in a hard, suppressed voice, "What choice have I, after all? The stage has gone, and I have to go somewhere and find a stage again or a horse."

"No. That is not necessary. If you will not come with me freely, I will take you now where you wish; to overtake the stage."



And thus, when already it was hard enough for her, he unwittingly made it harder. She wanted to go—she did not want to go—most of all she did not want him to know what she

wanted or did not want.

She cried out quickly, "Let us go then! I don't believe you, and, if you dare, let me talk alone with Mexicali Joe. I shall know you then for what you are!"



LYNETTE was in John Cavalier's study. He had gone for Mexicali Joe. She looked about her, seeing on all hands as she had seen during the racing drive, an expression of the man himself. Here was a vital center of enormous activity; John Cavalier was its very heart. The biggest man she had ever known or dreamed of knowing; one who did big things; one who was himself, untrammelled by the dictates and conventions of others. And in her heart she did believe every word that he spoke; and thus she knew that he, this man among men, loved her!

And she loved him! She knew that; she had known it—how long? Perhaps with clear definiteness for the first time while she spoke of him with Deveril, yearning for his coming; certainly when she had started at the sight of him at the stage wheel. So she held at last that it was for no selfish mercenary gain that he had been so long coming to her, but rather because he had lost faith in her, thinking ill of her. That was what hurt; that was what held her back from his arms, since she would not admit that he could love her truly, and misdoubt her at the same time. For certainly where one loved as she herself could love, one gave all, even unto the last dregs of loyal, confident faith. How confident all day she had been that he would come to her!

Lynette, restless, walked up and down, back and forth through the big rooms, waiting. Her wandering eyes were everywhere. Upon only one of the shining table tops was a scrap of paper. In her abstraction she glanced at it. Her own name, written as though signed to a note!

It was so easy for her to see much of all that had happened! Deveril today had told Cavalier she was going out on the stage; Deveril had told Cavalier all that had happened—because Deveril, too, loved her, and knew that she loved his kinsman. She recalled now how Deveril had stopped a little while in camp after Taggart had dragged her away. So Deveril had left this note behind? And Cavalier knew now; he had said there were reasons why he had been so sure she had gone to Deveril. She understood now how it would be with John Cavalier; Deveril had told everything and Cavalier, accepting a rich, free gift from the hand of a man he hated, was not the man in turn to speak ill of one who had striven to make restitution, though

by speaking the truth he might gain everything! These were men, these two; and to be loved by two such men was like having the tribute of kings.

She heard John Cavalier at the door, bringing Mexicali Joe. There was a little



fire in the fireplace; she ran to it and dropped the paper into the flames. Then she ran back across the room, and reached the door as it opened

to Cavalier's hand. At his heels she saw Mexicali Joe.

"No!" she cried, and he saw and marvelled at the new, shining look in her eyes; a look which made him stop, his heart leaping, and made him cry out wonderingly, "Girl! Oh, girl—at last?"

"Don't bring Joe in! I don't want to talk with him; I want your word, just yours alone, on everything!"

Now it was Mexicali Joe who was set wondering. For John Cavalier, with a sudden vigorous sweep of his arm slammed the door in Joe's perplexed face, and came with swift, eager strides to Lynette.

"It is I who have been of little faith and disloyal," she said softly. "I was ungrateful enough to forget how you were big enough to take my unproven word that it was not I who shot you, a thing I could never prove! And yet I asked proof of you! I should have known all the time 'though it were ten thousand mile'——"

She was smiling now, and yet her eyes were wet. She lifted them to his that he might look down into them, through them into her heart.

"Let me tell you this first," she ran on hastily. "Babe Deveril saved me the second time today from Taggart. And he told you where to find me. I think that he has made amends."

"He wiped the slate clean," said Cavalier heartily. "Henceforth I am no enemy of his. But it is not of Deveril now that we must talk. Girl, can't you see that——?"

"Am I blind?" laughed Lynette happily.

"Tomorrow morning, girl," said John Cavalier when speech returned to them, "we start on our trip. And our road lies—via Eden!"

And then Lynette whispered, "Let's tarry a little while—in Eden—John Cavalier!"





## AN ALL STAR CAST

By HERBERT LOUIS McNARY

*Author of "His Boss's Keeper," "Mysterious Ethel," etc.*

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WITH A PENNANT SLIPPING FROM HIS GRASP AND HIS BEST PITCHER TOO STRONG TO WORK, NO WONDER THE GRIZZLED MANAGER OF THE ROMANS USED LANGUAGE. THEN ALONG CAME EVELYN—AND THE CAMERA MAN

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UNTIL Evelyn Lawton entered the lobby of the Commonwealth Hotel the world had a dull gray finish from the point of view of Bill Martin, famous manager of the Romans; his face was seamed with the lines of care and worry brought on by his assuming responsibility for numerous temperamental baseball stars whom he guided to frequent championships. But naturally the clouds of dejection were dissipated by the unexpected arrival of the famous Evelyn.

Evelyn carries so much concentrated sunshine in her repertoire that theatrical managers consider anything with words and music a success so long as Evelyn can get an opportunity to flash that smile of hers across the footlights. In addition she was one of two persons who helped to make the little town of Clefton, Indiana, known to the world at large. The other was a boyhood chum of her father, now manager of the Romans, the same Bill Martin, who until now had been leaning disconsolately against the clerk's desk.

"Why, Bill Martin! My goodness, you look as cheerful as a pallbearer."

"That's because I feel like one," answered Martin. "Or rather did feel that way, for it only needs a glimpse of you to drive away all worldly cares. And he let his admiring eyes dwell on her. She was certainly some heart accelerator. "To

think that Tom Lawton's little girl is a world famous musical comedy star! You make me feel old, Evelyn."

She laughed. "No one could call you old."

"They not only could, but they do. But, say, what are you doing here?"

"I'm staying here," she answered, flashing one of her priceless smiles. "I'm doing pictures this summer and we are using all the beautiful scenery along the North Shore. But now you tell me why you were wearing such a funereal expression."

"Well, it's baseball in general and Mal Woodring in particular. The Romans aren't going right and Mal is the cog that is balling up the whole works."

"Can't you fire him?" asked Evelyn, a little pucker between her brows. "Don't they release ball players?"

"They do—and it is no novelty to Woodring. He has been on five big league teams already. The Warriors are just waiting to gobble him up now because they know that when he joins a new team he goes great—for awhile. But that while would be just enough to give the Warriors a comfortable lead in a pennant race that is going to be as close as any on record."

"Don't they fine players?"

"Fine Woodring? His father and money are synonymous; and that won't annoy him in the least. I guess that I



will just have to worry along hoping that he will come through, because he has the



stuff, you know. I've tried about everything I can think of to bring it out and——" Suddenly Martin stopped. His players, when that look came into Martin's

eyes on the bench, could have told you that some stunt for which this wily manager was famous was about to be initiated.

"Evelyn, if I have a way by which you can help me make a real pitcher out of Mal Woodring, will you do it?"

"Of course," answered the famous musical star with a little rippling laugh of astonishment. "What am I to do?"

"I want you to meet Woodring."

Evelyn's blue eyes widened a trifle.

"Oh, he's not a bad sort," hurriedly assured the manager. "No bad habits or anything like that. Merely spoiled, no get-aheadness, doesn't take himself seriously. There is no way of penalizing him so he will feel it—or there hasn't been. I think you will even like him, everyone does."

"How is my meeting him going to help?"

Martin looked at her keenly.

"Just let your mind run back a few years or so ago when you used to wear your hair down your back. Can't you recall all the boys who used to walk on their hands, turn cartwheels, balance themselves on fences and all those sort of stunts when they thought maybe you were peeking out from behind a curtain—showing off? You don't need to grin. I've done it myself before your ma's house—well, never mind that part of it," and Martin looked away for an instant.

There were many men passing through that ornate lobby and without exception their eyes lit up with interest at the sight of Evelyn Lawton. Sometimes there was a hint of envy as they saw how one certain man was holding her attention.

"Every man that's gone through here since you've blessed me with your presence, Evelyn," continued Martin with a twinkle in his gray eyes, "has risked a strained neck taking a second look at you. That bears out my point that the only difference between you and the little girl for whom the boys wished to perform is that now you have an unlimited list of would-be en-

tertainers. Grown men are even more susceptible than little boys and Woodring is no different from the rest, although he is supposed to be woman shy."

Evelyn laughed. "Your aptitude at paying pretty compliments, Mister World's Champion's Manager, is illuminating to say the least, but really you make me feel that you are planning a part in some mystery play. Just where do I come in? Remember I am under contract to do picture work and there is no sinecure in that."

"Will you have an afternoon to yourself soon?"

"I'll have tomorrow. Will that do?"

"Great! I'll have a box seat for you at the game and I'll have Woodring pitching. All you have to do is to let him see you, which won't be hard. I'll see that he gets interested, which won't be hard either. Then casual like I'll let him know how I fit with you. Before I get through, the thing he'll want most in this world is to meet you. Then it will be up to you to let him know what your impression is of a shirker, of a quitter—call him anything that is ladylike but will make him feel bad."

Evelyn was laughing. "This sounds thrilling."

"It will be for Woodring. Do you know much about baseball?"

"Through following your brilliant career I know something, but I could hardly qualify as an expert."

"Maybe that is just as well. You'll do this, will you, Evelyn? It may mean the pennant to me. Will you help me for the sake of your ma and pa and that little Hoosier town of ours?"

The famous blue eyes that smiled into the hearts of thousands softened and Evelyn Lawton placed a dainty hand on Martin's arm.

"For the sake of all you mention, I will. But most of all for my own sake."

"Thanks Evelyn. I'll rest easy tonight."

**R**EST easy is what Bill Martin must have done, for he was unusually light hearted and chipper the next day on the bench. Murphy, the veteran catcher, noted it.

"Who'm I catchin' today, Bill?" he asked when the manager refused to tell him the source of his good humor.

"Woodring."





"Again? The Blues will murder him!"

"I hope so. I hope they paste him all over the lot—at the start, anyway. I have a notion, Eddie, that our temperamental friend will have another one of his famous transformations and settle down and become a real asset to us."

The veteran catcher looked searchingly at his manager for further enlightenment, but, failing to obtain it, shifted a large lump from his left to his right cheek.

"I hope so," he grumbled. "He's givin' the whole of us the willies."

Woodring was opposed to Bailey of the Blues; and if Martin wanted a contrast he couldn't have done better had he had the pick of the league. Bailey had nothing but control and a head that had catalogued the weaknesses of every man who had ever swung a bat at his delivery.

"There's the luckiest guy in the world," growled "Crab" Haley, the second baseman, when he came back for a drink of water after falling for a slow ball. "He ain't got no more on the ball than the janes have on their ankles. If he fell overboard in the middle of the Atlantic a volcano would build an island under him."

"Give him credit," said Martin, instead of calling Haley for being fooled. And out of the corner of his eye the manager made certain that Woodring was within hearing distance. "That old bird knows more about every player in this league than a town gossip knows about her next door neighbor. He ought to be a lesson to those who have the stuff but not the brains to use it."

Every Roman on the bench knew who this dig was for. But Woodring only laughed to himself. It was next to impossible to ruffle his good nature. He had jet black curly hair, dark brown eyes sparkling with laughter, a frame big and athletic enough to set any girl's heart fluttering. And in addition he had a disarming smile that was as contagious as a yawn on an early morning car.

But at the end of the fifth inning Woodring walked into Martin's trap so neatly that the latter was almost unprepared.

"Say," beamed Woodring, wearing a smile as if he had retired the Blues in order instead of presenting them with three runs, "did you see who's in the box near the screen? Evelyn Lawton. I think she had her eyes on me, too." And Woodring's faint indication of embarrassment made the manager's heart leap.

"Most likely she was watching the *ball players*," muttered Murphy without look-

ing up as he tugged at his shin guards. Eddie was a smart ball player and his knowledge of batters was on a par with Bailey's, but that fact never interested Woodring, much to Murphy's disgust.

"Wise stuff, huh?" retorted Woodring. "If I ain't as good as any in this collection I'll eat baseballs for breakfast!"

Murphy looked up in amazement. His sarcasm had not been delivered with any unusual emphasis; not because he hadn't meant it, but because past experience had led him to believe it would be wasted. To Murphy's surprise and Martin's delight the catcher had scored. The other Romans became interested onlookers. Maybe this Achilles had his vulnerable spot after all.

"Smart ball player, you are," came back Murphy. "So smart that with men on third and second you slip Sexton the high fast one that he eats."

"Oh, you guys make me sick," Woodring exclaimed, pulling on his sweater and moving over to the water. "Always

want to hold a council of war over every ball that's pitched."

Martin thought it time to intrude. "Yes, and as a result we get credit for being smart ball players. And I guess you don't need to be told what the popular conception of your ability is. It's brains that count—the boys who are giving their best all the time. That's the kind that make a hit with Evelyn Lawton. She was telling me——"

"She was telling *you*?" broke in Woodring, turning from the water container and looking at his manager partly with surprise and partly incredulous. "You know Evelyn Lawton?"

"Of course I know her—and her mother and father before her. Doesn't she come from Cleton, Indiana, my old home? She's staying at the hotel and I was talking to her last night. She was giving me a dressing down for the way the team was going and I told her who the smart young player was who kept throwing the monkey wrench into the works. She didn't say much, but I have an idea of what she thought, for she knows what work is. Rehearsals in the mornings, matinée and evening performances—and now pictures





in the off season. And every minute making every smile, every bit of her personality and ability go the limit. You can imagine what she thinks of a quitter."

Woodring had a smile; but it was a sick one.

"I can pitch as good as anyone in the league," he declared. But his voice lacked conviction.

"And I can sing like McCormick," cut in Crab Haley and drew a laugh that stung Woodring.

"If you birds will only play behind me, I'll show you some pitching right now," he declared with resentment.

"Well, if you're going to reform," advised Murphy, "take a look at my glove once in a while for signs. I know what this bunch eat and what will make suckers out of 'em."

"If I were you, Bill," declared Carrington, the center fielder, winking behind Woodring's back, "I'd take Mal out now. I'm near dead chasing flies."

"Yeah?" and Woodring bit. "Well, you might as well stay here, for you've handled a ball for the last time today. They won't hit 'em out of the infield."

Just then Bowman popped for the third out and Woodring jerked off his sweater and flung it in a corner. The Romans had seen him in almost every mood but that of anger; and now as they took the field again behind him they were happy in inverse ratio to his resentment.

Woodring's fast ball hopped past the Blues' bats with such bewildering speed, the rest of the game, that even though another loss was finally charged against the temperamental twirler, Martin showed his elation to the extent of promising Woodring an introduction to the beautiful Evelyn that very night.

Martin made good his promise, but not before he had a private talk with Evelyn in which he gave her a few instructions.

"Too bad that you lost that game this afternoon, Mr. Woodring," said Evelyn to him—and beamed as only Evelyn can. "I noticed you pitched much better after you followed Eddie Murphy's instructions. I have long admired Eddie. He is a smart ball player, don't you think so?"

"Er—yes—certainly." Evelyn could hardly have been accused of emphasizing

the word "smart," and yet she gave that impression.

"I have always admired that type of man in any walk of life," she continued, her eyes sparkling. "I meet so many people with talent on which they fail to realize that it is a pleasure to see someone make the most of what little they have. Haven't you found it that way?" And she turned to Bill Martin.

"Certainly have, Evelyn," agreed Martin readily. "I make it a point never to call a player who makes the rankest error at a crucial moment, so long as he has tried to do his best. It is the players who don't try who hear from me. Woodring, here, can tell how I jump on that kind."

Woodring laughed with embarrassment. Then that finely moulded jaw of his set and his dark eyes hardened as if he realized that he and his actions were under fire.

"Most people work because they have something to work for," he said. "And if they think that they have all they want, they don't overexert themselves, unless they have worked so long that they can't do anything else. I don't know, Bill, if you are trying to create the impression that I can't come across with the goods; but just to show you that you are wrong I'll make a little bet that I'll be topping the league when the season ends."

Woodring was flushed and excited, while Martin surveyed him as if accusing him of a little bit of bombast before the pretty and fascinating Evelyn Lawton. But the wily manager was really engaged in some special mental arithmetic. If Woodring should make good his boast that meant enough extra games above the dope to come pretty near winning the pennant.

Martin nevertheless smiled deprecatingly.

"You've got to travel," he said. "You have lost seven games and it's only July now."

"Pitch me every four days. I can stand it. I'll get more than twenty wins to add to the eight I have. All I ask is one run a game."

The manager of the Romans was looking upon a new Mal Woodring; and it was as if he had been made a present of a twirler whom other clubs—the Warriors for example—would have given fifty to one hundred thousand for. A pitcher able to hand over twenty or more wins in the three remaining months of the race was worth more than that to a contender. No wonder the astute Bill Martin felt an inward elation he was careful not to show.





Evelyn Lawton also apparently found the changed Malcom Woodring to be a man to inspire interest—if the way her blue eyes swept over his tall, well knit form was evidence.

Every woman is a born manager, anyway, and nothing tickles them more than the prospect of "reforming" a man. They love to find something pliable and then proceed to turn him inside out like the household furniture that has to be rearranged every so often. Then if the man happens to accomplish something worth while they can say, "There, I made him do that." It is probable that Evelyn Lawton had a sort of mental "Before and After" picture of Mal Woodring—and, by the same token, Bill Martin may have started more than he reckoned on. Where a woman is concerned in a "big idea" it is something like an automobile on a slippery day: not so hard to start, but difficult to stop just when you want to.

One man is supposed not to make a ball team, but the proper man in the proper place is frequently sufficient to mean the difference between failure and success. Man for man the Romans were not rated as highly as either the Blues or the Warriors; but they were evenly balanced in every department save the pitching. The first game Woodring twirled, after his claim that he would be able to lead the league, seemed to change the whole pitching situation. He turned in the first no hit game of the season—and that against the heavy hitting Grays.

Off the field Woodring was his good-natured self; but during any game he worked in now he made Johnny Evers at his peppiest seem as genial as a real estate agent with a prospect. And between games he pestered Eddie Murphy and Martin for information on batters; also he watched the returns on games in which any pitcher leading him in standing was doped to pitch like a trader who has staked his all on a tip watches the stock ticker in a hectic market.

Martin was so delighted at the transformation of the twirler who was now his star that he failed to notice until later that Woodring was always interested in obtaining information about Martin's old home of Clefion, Indiana—a topic of con-

versation that invariably developed into a discourse on the fair Evelyn. Martin had little cause to worry about Evelyn, as the popular actress was busy with her picture work, while the Romans were soon to leave for their last swing around the circuit.

The Romans made one of the most sensational trips in major league history. Leaving home in fifth place, they came back tied with the Blues for second place and a game and a half behind the leading Warriors. Manager Bill Martin, wearing a smile that had not been his for months, was perfectly ready to agree with the frenzied home fans that the Romans were in line for another pennant mainly through the sensational pitching of Mal Woodring and the new spirit of confidence his pitching had inspired in the whole team.

Packed stands watched the Romans gain a full game on the Warriors in the series in which these two teams clashed; but the Blues, favored by double headers with the tailenders, did even better and went into the lead.

All through September the three teams fought it out with the Warriors getting the worst of it. While always dangerous, they never again got back the lead which they had held the greater part of the season. The Blues and Romans meanwhile were swapping first and second place with a frequency that had the fans of the two cities nearly insane with suspense.

Then Woodring suddenly went on a temperamental bat and the old affliction of indifference came back on him. So good had been his record that Martin had felt confident of a certain win when he called upon him to open the series against the Grays—a second division team—just before the final series of the season with the Blues. But from the start of the game Woodring made no end of errors of omission and commission. Martin kept telling himself that it was but a temporary lapse and was reluctant to pull him out; but Murphy was not fooled.

"Up to his old tricks again," said the veteran catcher with a scowl.

Martin was disheartened. "If I pull him out he's liable to go up in the air completely—and I was counting on him for two of the Blue games."

So Martin let Woodring go to the mound again. He filled the bases and brought the heavy hitting Keeley up. Martin signed to the team to try for a double play. The infield played back and Murphy signed for a slow ball that might mean an infield tap; but Woodring disregarded sig-





nals and grooved a fast one that Keeley presented to some fans in the centerfield bleachers.

Martin lost his temper as he rushed out from the dugout and ordered Woodring off the mound with language that must have singed the grass.

Woodring only smiled as he came in. "Why don't you tie the can to me?" he asked. "I'm quitting anyways at the end of the season and it might as well be now.

I'm going to be married."

"Married? Who to?" Martin's last question was prompted more by fear than by curiosity.



"Evelyn Lawton.

I want to thank you for introducing me to her, but you made a mistake when you said she was crazy about baseball. She's interested on account of you, but that's all. So you see it doesn't make any difference to her how I pitch."

"Oh, doesn't it?" frothed the manager. He wanted to say more, but he was so beyond himself with rage and disappointment that he could only glare at the broad back of Woodring as the latter picked up his sweater and slipped into the passageway leading to the showers.

The fact of the matter was simply that this pitcher of his, having won his great prize, thought he could loaf now.

The Romans lost that game and to add to their woes the Blues took both ends of a doubleheader the same afternoon. In a few days the cocky leaders would arrive for a final five game series with a twin bill on the second afternoon. They were now two games in the lead and should win the remaining two games with the Whales.

Bill Martin made an appointment with Evelyn Lawton that night and he gave her to understand in his note that it was of the greatest importance that he should see her.

She received him with interrogation in her eyes—a questioning that deepened as she noted the grim seriousness on the countenance of her father's boyhood chum.

Martin came tersely to the point. "Evelyn, you have been seeing Mal Woodring considerable of late?"

The musical comedy favorite started slightly. And while her smile was disarming her tone was slightly indicative of the defensive as she answered, "Why, you introduced him to me. You could hardly

expect me to forget a friend of yours so quickly."

"You must have become very good friends if in three months you have learned to like him well enough to marry him."

"He told you that?" asked Evelyn in surprise—and then flared, "Isn't three months long enough to find out about a man?"

"Not when that man happens to be Mal Woodring."

"I differ with you. I found him possessed of more good qualities than in any other man of my acquaintance."

Martin bowed acknowledgment. "That's because you found him living up to the best that was in him," he said. "No girl could ask for a better man for a husband under those conditions, nor any manager for a better pitcher."

Evelyn steeled herself. "So that's your motive," she retorted. "You think of him only as a pitcher.

"That's one motive." With him pitching in the series with the Blue the way he has since I introduced him to you the Romans would win the pennant. But, Evelyn, I'm thinking about you, too. You see, I've known Woodring for a long time, known him in his indifferent, careless state; and if you get him that way, something is being imposed on you. Now he's crazy enough about you to do anything you want him to—but don't wait until after marriage; the time to start is right now."

Evelyn had a faraway look in her eyes.

"What do you want me to do?"

"Give him a jolt. He promised you he would lead the league in pitching. His loss today puts him a game behind Burbach. By winning two games in the Blue series, one of them against Burbach, he will be ahead again. Just let him know that a man who can't keep one promise to you isn't to be trusted to keep other promises."

Evelyn promised and undoubtedly kept her word, but Woodring did not show up around the Romans' park and was absent without leave until the opening day of the series with the Blues. Then he reported an hour or so before game time.

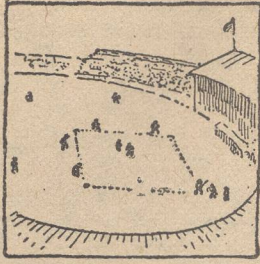
"I'd like to pitch this game," was all he said to Martin. But he had a determined look in his eyes that pleased the manager—and an air of sadness that made Martin say a mental prayer of blessing for Evelyn Lawton. However, the astute manager concealed his delight and merely grunted acquiescence, as if the game or who twirled it meant but little to him.

Three hits and one of them a scratch



was the best the Blues could do, while the four runs the Romans sent over the pan were three more than were necessary.

The next day the Romans lost the first game of the twin bill but slugged their way to a win in the second spasm. An overflowed field suffered mob insanity when the Romans won the fourth game of



the series by a ninth inning rally that was a heart breaker for the Blues. Tomorrow it would be Woodring against Burbach, with the winner becoming the season's leading pitcher and his team the league champions by one half a game.

**T**HURSDAY morning the Romans were going through their final workout, Bill Martin in command, his exuberant confidence contagious. There wasn't a Roman present who didn't believe that, with Woodring pitching, the game was as good as won.

But Bill Martin was human and he had made a mistake. They say every man must have a confidant—and Bill was a bachelor. The result was that he had given the details of the recent situation between Woodring and Evelyn to Eddie Murphy. And this morning the veteran catcher unwittingly "spilled the beans" while Woodring was within hearing distance of the batters' box.

The first intelligence Martin had that misfortune had returned for another visit was when he saw Woodring tearing for him from the batter's box, fire in his eyes. So infuriated was he when he reached the manager near the third base coaching box that he was unable to articulate coherently.

"Tried to frame me, heh? Don't care what you pull off so long as you can win your dirty old ball games."

"What are you talking about?" gasped Martin.

"Oh, I heard Murph telling Haley!"

"Telling him *what*?"

"You know. The dirty lies you told Evelyn to get me in wrong. Well, I don't pitch this afternoon. I'm going to tell her that everything you said was a lie." He turned and rushed for the dugout with Martin after him.

"Listen, Mal. You've got it wrong. Win this afternoon and you will be all set with Evelyn!"

But Woodring waved back his hand in disgust and vanished into the dugout tunnel.

Martin hesitated, dumfounded, and then rushed after Woodring to reason with the infuriated love stricken youth; but Martin failed to find him in the locker room and in his excitement looked in the most inconceivable places until the hum of a racing motor brought him up standing.

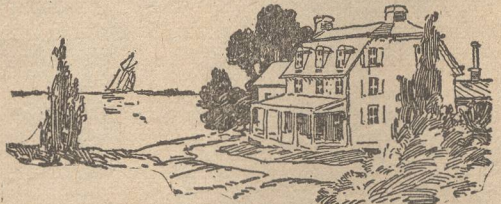
Many of the players, including Martin and Woodring, kept their cars parked under the stands. Now Martin realized that the crazed Woodring was driving away to find Evelyn Lawton without waiting to change to his street clothes. Martin rushed out only to be nearly run down as a red streak shot by him with Woodring at the wheel.

The other Romans had run up now, attracted by the excitement. As the gray-haired manager sprang into his own car and stepped on the starter he called Murphy over to him. "Start Welch if I don't bring Woodring back in time," he yelled, "and stall as long as you can! I'll maybe have to chase this fool all along the North Shore!"

With a roar of the powerful motor Martin's car shot out from beneath the stands and into the street. Woodring's red roadster was out of sight but Martin knew where Evelyn Lawton was "on location" and he sensed that the knowledge was also possessed by the temperamental twirler.

Soon he had passed the city limits and was giving his car all the gas she could take. By the way the excited citizens of the various towns he whizzed through lined the roads and looked upon him as a second mystery he knew that he was on the right track.

Past the summer mansions of millionaires and colonial houses of historical prominence he shot without interest. A



strange sight in his baseball uniform as he crouched over his wheel, eyes glued to the black macadam road ahead. At last his happy eyes discovered the red roadster parked on the edge of a cliff, poised as if ready for a high dive. In another moment he was beside it, but there was no sign of Woodring.



Martin leaped from his car and going to the edge of the cliff looked over. Twenty feet or more below was a mass of jagged, sepia colored rocks covered with kelp and sea grass, with the green pungent Atlantic whirling and swishing through crevices. Then Martin saw something that made him gasp with astonishment. About a hundred yards from shore was a raft; and huddled in one corner of it was a girl, her wonderful gold hair streaming in the wind while she watched four or five men battling for their lives. One was a handsome chap, Martin saw, but the others were as formidable looking as any outside of a jail. Then, off to one side, Martin saw a small boat containing a man cranking a camera and another with a megaphone to his mouth and he knew that he was gazing upon Evelyn Lawton and her supporting cast at work.

Then something else caught the manager's keen sight—and new wrinkles were added to the many about his eyes. A flash of white passed the small boat and, just as someone yelled, a blackhaired figure in a white dripping baseball uniform pulled himself onto the raft. It was Woodring—and Martin concluded that if Evelyn finally decided to appoint herself manager of this individual she was going to have her hands full.

For a moment the six men on the raft formed a tableau, staring at each other. In another instant it was a free for all, with Evelyn and the director out of it except for their voices. Martin, also out of it, could only watch. There would be a wild swinging of arms and two or three would fall to the slippery raft or be knocked into the water. Sometimes the whole six would be struggling on the raft and in the next instant three or four would be floundering in the water. Woodring was as big as any of them and he certainly could handle himself; but Martin saw that it was but a question of time before he would be overpowered.

Suddenly he went down from a crash on the ear. But as two jumped for him he rolled to one side and they slipped off into the water and Woodring rose alone of the combatants, conspicuous in his clinging wet uniform. Someone tried to climb back and Woodring shoved him off; but, as he did so, another whom Martin recognized as the good looking chap climbed up behind him. Woodring turned and the two rushed together. The impact threw them off their feet and they crashed to the slippery deck with Woodring on top; but now others

leaped on and Woodring was subdued at last.

By the time Martin had found a way down to the beach the raft and the boat and individuals were all ashore and it appeared to Martin that they were debating whether to save Woodring for hanging or to just tie a rock around his neck and throw him back into the water again.

When they caught sight of Martin wearing a uniform similar to that of their captive it appeared for a moment that another battle was imminent.

"I'm manager Martin of the Romans," cut in Martin quickly, "and this is Mal Woodring, my star pitcher. What's happening?"

"Nothing at all," said the one in a sport shirt, "except that this star of yours has broken my star's arm and spoiled a whole play that will set us back a hundred thousand or so." And then with another flash of his eyes his tone of sarcasm changed to one of interest. "What did you say his name was? Mal Woodring?" And he looked Woodring over and turned quickly to his camera man. "Dan," he pleaded, "tell me, did you keep the camera going?"

"All the time," answered Dan, "and this bird was facing it."

"Good!" exclaimed the director; and he turned back to Martin. "Say, I'm going to sue you for a million unless you let me use one of your games for a story."

"What's the story?"

"I don't know yet; but what does that matter? The story has to be about Woodring, of course, and I want the background of a game."

"It's got to be this afternoon," said Martin. "The pennant depends on it—and if Woodring is to get in it we have to travel! And another thing—there's only one person who can get him to pitch this afternoon and that's Evelyn Lawton there."

The director showed surprise but was only momentarily deterred.

"Evelyn," he ordered peremptorily, "talk to this fellow."

As Evelyn rose and came over Woodring seemed to remember his reason for coming out.

"Evelyn," he began, flushing, "did Bill Martin tell you a lot of things about me——?"





Her chin elevated a little as she cut in with "He certainly did! He made plain to me that you possessed a weakness of character that no girl could tolerate in a man she expected to marry. Your failure to keep your word, your lack of backbone to carry you through to a goal you'd set for yourself, are bad stuff. Martin was kind enough to say that it was a weakness that might be cured."

Naturally the director could not remain out of the scene so long, so he broke in: "Say, if you two have anything to make up, do it on the way back to the city. I'm going to use today's baseball game and Mr. Martin says we'll have to travel fast to make it." He took a look at Woodring's wet uniform and then turned to Martin again. "Look—do you mind going behind those rocks and giving that uniform of yours to Woodring? We can fix you up with something else."

In a few minutes Martin's and Woodring's cars were headed back toward the city. The director, Myles Brenner, was seated beside Martin while the camera man sat in back grinding away at his box which was leveled on Evelyn and Woodring in the latter's car. Brenner excitedly informed Martin that the story was to be about some conspiracy to throw the pennant race and that Evelyn was the owner's daughter and was kidnapped and rescued by Woodring.

Three o'clock found them a half hour's ride away with the starting scheduled for 3:15. It was exactly 3:30 when Martin turned into the street outside the big park. And then Brenner insisted on some shots. The camera caught Mal dashing into the park, into the dugout and out onto the field. Three Blues were on the sacks and the heavy hitting Tyler at bat. Martin glanced at the score board and saw two goose eggs, and another zero under the "Out."

A howl of delight that might have been heard back where Woodring had taken his



bath broke forth from the massed thousands as Woodring rushed out to relieve the faltering Welch. The first ball he sent over was a strike, the next Tyler lifted into the bleachers, but it was foul by inches.

As cool as a ton of ice Woodring slipped over a curve that Tyler missed by a foot. If a sensation was all that Brenner desired, he could have packed his machine right there; but he insisted on getting more atmosphere. Woodring made the next man pop, and Haley stepped on second for the third out.

Even then Brenner was far from satisfied. One would think that the most important game of the year, the returns of which were eagerly awaited all over the nation, was being staged for his sole benefit and he threatened to pull the few remaining hairs from his head when players failed to fan or make sensational plays just when he wanted them. But a strange feature was that only occasionally did they fail; Brenner appeared uncanny in his ability to call the turn and had he been reading off a script he could have demanded few more thrillers than actually resulted. Dan, the camera man, got everything.

In the fourth inning Carrington beat the ball home by a hair on a sacrifice fly and the Romans held this one run advantage until the ninth when Tyler poled the tying run into the centerfield seats.

In the last half of the tenth Murphy doubled with two down and Martin sent in the fleet Francis to run for him. He was considering a pinch hitter for Woodring when again Brenner took charge of things.

"Now listen, Mr. Woodring, I want you to single over the infield. Just a single is enough—and then the camera will catch your man on second sliding in with the winning run."

Martin's mouth sagged open in astonishment. But Brenner had been calling the turn with so much success that Martin fell for one of those hunches for which he was famous.

"Go ahead, Mal. Do what he says and you get the girl and we get the pennant."

Woodring went up to the plate and, instead of swinging free, choked his bat and poked the first pitch between the first and second basemen. The right fielder caught the ball on the bound and winged it home for all he was worth, but as it thudded into the catcher's mit Francis hooked his toe across the plate with the pennant winning run.

Even that failed to satisfy Brenner. While everyone but the Blues were recovering from their shock of happiness the director was the first to reach Woodring and he rushed him over to the box and into Evelyn's arms for a clinch that was not entirely for the benefit of the clicking camera.





# THE BOX-TRAP

By WARREN ELLIOT CARLETON

*Author of "The Packet Admiral," "The Final Test," etc.*

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PRIDE IN THE SERVICE IS STRONG AMONG MEN OF THE COAST GUARD. WHEN THE NOR'EASTER RUNS HIGH AND THE ROCKETS FLARE OFF THE TREACHEROUS CAPE, THAT PRIDE IS FULLY JUSTIFIED

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**I**N THE dreary, midnight patrol of Surfman Caleb Walker along the Santuck shore of Cape Cod, the hut of Red Pierce was a haven, the only shelter on the four-mile stretch of sand between the Santuck coast guard station and the half-way house where the Goose Point station territory begins. For in the winter the cold is often intense, and the cutting beach sand pricks the patrolman's face in whirlwinds mixed with spray from the incessant surf. There was always a light in Red's shanty when Caleb fought against the gale along that bleak shore, and Red sat up waiting for him, a plump, jovial, red-whiskered little man in the fifties, a cup of hot coffee and a few doughnuts on his table.

Santuck Beach is deserted during the winter, save for the coast guard at Santuck station. Red alone inhabited the eight-mile waste of sand and scrub pine land between Santuck and Goose Point stations. He had taken up his residence there the previous October, raking sea moss, fishing in a battered yellow dory, living the lonely, colorless life of the mossers who dwell in similar isolated shanties along the Cape.

Since he had moved there, Red had not left the environs of Santuck Beach, not even to go to Howesport, the nearest village, for supplies. All his provisions were

brought him, and his fish and moss hauled away by a man who visited him occasionally in a large automobile. The men at the station had been interested enough in their nearest neighbor to observe that much. But they did not get further acquainted with him, for most mossers are peculiar fellows, recluses with a dislike for the haunts of men, and contented with the solitude of bleak shores.

Caleb had become acquainted with Red one night the past November. The maneuvers of a large gasoline launch off the desolate beach were occupying Caleb's attention. There was a new moon and a thick fog that prevented him from keeping the craft under observation. Where the path crosses a crude plank foot-bridge over a gully washed out at high tides in a big sand dune, the patrolling surfman paused to get his bearings. As he looked down, he discerned the form of a man lying at the bottom of the gully, the tide making in and partly washing over him.

Caleb slid down the bank and, with some difficulty in the loose sand, hauled the man to the top of the dune. At first he thought the fellow was dead, but he worked over him, and revived him. It was Red Pierce, the new mosser of Santuck. Caleb assisted him to his shanty, and there the mosser explained to his rescuer how he had fallen into the gully while he was crossing



the footbridge. He could not remember any more. The fall had left him unconscious.

"I'll never forget you for this," the grateful mosser had assured him. That night their acquaintance began. The night or early morning call on Red, depending on hours of patrolling duty, had become as much a part of Caleb's routine as checking in at the half-way house between Santuck and Goose Point.

Caleb never stayed long in the mosser's shanty. Indeed, his brief call there was made possible by covering his return patrol to the station, on which he always made his visit to Red, five or ten minutes in advance of the time allowed by the Government for the patrol. He would drink his coffee and eat a doughnut or two, light his pipe, and relate items of interest—how the superintendent of the coast guard in that district had just resigned; how Cap Rogers of Santuck station had made several trips to Boston lately, leaving Caleb in command of the station during his absence, and other gossip of the station. Then he would stretch his long legs, and his gaunt, severe face of a man in the early forties with its searching blue eyes, would



twist at an angle in the dim light as he nervously studied his watch. He would rise stiffly, a

tall, lean, sinewy figure, straight as an arrow, and bidding Red good night, he would resume his battle against sand and wind to the station.

"I've knocked 'round all over this coast," said Red on one of Caleb's calls. "Funny I should ever land on Santuck, after all I've heard about it. Ain't there a superstition in the coast guard that Santuck is a hoodoo station, or somethin'?"

Caleb felt his cheeks color.

"You mean—what happened here fifteen years or so ago?"

"I guess that's it. Just what was it?"

"There was a cap'n at Santuck named Peters then. He was in command of a different crew in those days—that was 'way back when the coast guard was known as the life-savin' service, before any of us who are now at the station were connected with it."

Caleb paused. Like the rest of the Santuck men, the story of Santuck's dishonor was abhorrent to him.

But Red urged him on. "Peters did somethin', didn't he? Somethin' that disgraced the service."

"I don't know what as he disgraced the service. He disgraced Santuck—disgraced it good and proper! A schooner had gone ashore, on the bar just abreast of this shanty, almost in your front yard. Cap'n Peters and his men went to the rescue. But instead of savin' the men huddled in the riggin', Peters and his men let 'em drown without so much as attemptin' to reach 'em."

"God! That was horrible!"

"Yes—but that wa'n't the worst. In the mornin' the shore was lined with the schooner's cargo—all sorts of stuff in bales and boxes, washed up on the beach when the wreck broke up. Peters and his men salvaged that cargo—sold it. Then Peters reported the loss of the schooner and all her men—turned state state evidence. Her owners had thought she'd foundered at sea."

"Peters led it, then owned up to it?"

"Peters reported that Saunders, mate of the Santuck crew, and the crew did it. Peters swore that he was sick abed that night and didn't even go to the wreck. Then there was an investigation. At the trial Peters produced Doctor Hyde of Howesport as a witness that he had attended him most of that night, and that he didn't leave his bed—had a grippe cold. But Doc Hyde testified he hadn't even attended Peters. Peters couldn't prove that Saunders led the affair. So Peters, Saunders and the crew went to jail together, but Peters got the longest sentence."

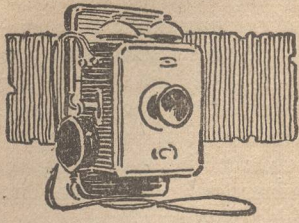
"They deserved it, damn 'em!" flared Red. "The new cap'n at Santuck—I've never met him. He ain't like Peters, is he?"

"Cap Rogers? I should say not! He's too good for Santuck. All of us at the station would go through hell fire to help him live down the disgrace Peters brought on Santuck. Cap takes it that serious. So do I, because I'm mate of the crew, cap's right-hand man."

**E**ARLY one February morning in his midwatch patrol, about one o'clock, Caleb unlocked the safe in the half-way house, removed the metal check left there by the last patrolman, and deposited his own. As usual he was in advance of Sears, the patrolman from Goose Point station, and he waited in the lee of the half-way house for Sears to come up. Sears was usually only a few minutes behind Caleb, but that morning he was late. Caleb thrashed his arms impatiently, and started to telephone the man in the tower at Goose



Point to inquire whether all was well.



He heard a shout, and through the black night he glimpsed a man half running, as if exhausted, toward the half-

way house along the Goose Point path. Hot after the fugitive followed another man. And while Caleb squinted at the two indistinct figures, a revolver spat fire three times from the pursuer, and the one nearest Caleb groveled in the sand.

Caleb squatted behind the shack of the half-way house, feeling quite helpless, for he was unarmed. The man who had fired bent over the fallen figure, examined it, rolled it to one side, and kept on toward the roughly boarded shack. Caleb stood quietly erect, peering around the corner, prepared with all his lithe strength to grapple with the intruder if he came up to his hiding-place.

But the man stopped a few yards away, and looked cautiously around him. He pointed his revolver at the little wooden structure, and shouted evenly, "Come out from behind there—or I'll shoot!"

Caleb's spine tingled with fury, realizing how helpless he was, and chagrined at the power of the armed man over him. He came out from behind the shack, and said as calmly as his nerves, agitated by cold and excitement, would allow, "I'm a coast guard man," thinking that such a meek announcement would serve as ample evidence of his neutrality.

But the other still leveled the revolver at him, and said in an even monotone, "You're better out of the way—like that other guy back there," and the revolver roared almost in Caleb's face. He felt a terrific shock just above his right breast, another shot instantly followed, scalding his flesh almost in the same spot. His head swam; he shouted with rage and surprise, and fell unconscious on the frozen ground.

But he quickly recovered his senses. His assailant was gone. His hand went to the smarting wounds. He felt warm blood, the dented buckle of his suspender. The course of both bullets, shot at such close range, had been broken by his oilskin jacket and the protecting leather of his vest, and the leads had glanced off the metal buckle before entering his flesh. Both bullets had penetrated the flesh only a little way, stopping at the breast-bone. He

was weak from loss of blood and the shock. Dizzily, with much effort he crawled to his feet. He had been dragged several yards away from the half-way house, and dropped on the hard ground under a scrawny scrub pine.

He reeled and fell, but dragged himself toward the shack, pushed the door open, wormed inside, and supporting himself on the woodwork, reached for the telephone.

He tried to get the coast guard stations, first Santuck and then Goose Point. But the line was out of order; he received no response from the operator. The wires had evidently been tampered with, probably cut.

He stopped the flow of blood from his wounds as best he could by holding a handkerchief on them, and he groped his way outside the half-way house into the raking wind. He reached the nearby spot where the other victim of the gunman had been left. The body still lay there, the man dead, shot in the back between the shoulders. It was Sears, the Goose Point patrolman!

In the dead surfman's pocket Caleb found a loaded automatic pistol, which harmless, kindly Ben Sears had not even drawn in his last encounter. Holding it in his right hand, pressing the handkerchief to his wounds with his left, he stumbled along the faintly marked path back toward Santuck station. The cold wind somewhat braced him, and he was now losing but little blood. He was thankful that the bullets had not found their way to his lung, that the suspender buckle and his thick garments had saved him.



At the top of the high sea-washed bluff a few hundred feet from the half-way house he paused, and looked down. On the beach below he made out several men, moving about in the darkness and the gale raking the coast. And offshore he discerned the outline of a ship—a small fishing trawler, all lights but one on deck extinguished.

It was a rough coast for anchoring such a vessel. She was inshore too close; ten yards nearer, and she would surely run on the rocks. She had evidently come from a southerly direction up from Goose Point, for on his patrol he had observed no ves-



sels. Rum-runners and petty smugglers had for some time worried Captain Rogers. Strange gasoline launches and larger craft had appeared close inshore during his and other patrols, like the launch the night he had rescued Red Pierce from the gully. But the coast guard had never caught any of these lawbreakers in the act. By the men who had suddenly appeared on the beach out of the night and the experience he had just been through, Caleb judged that this was an unusually bold and carefully planned attempt to smuggle something ashore.

A yawl started out from the trawler, and hurtled shoreward in the pounding white water. Ready hands on the beach hauled it up, and lifted from it several weighty sacks the size of bags of flour. Dragging these heavily, they started up the shore road toward the Santuck woods. The yawl started back to the trawler. On the larger craft they were getting up steam to make a rapid getaway as soon as the men in the yawl had returned.

There was no doubt about it; those men were smugglers. Caleb was bewildered, not knowing how it would be best for him, in his weakened condition, to proceed. Not for an hour would they notice his absence at the station. By that time the smugglers with their mysterious booty would be safely away from the beach, out of the range of the coast guard's activity. Those rascals who had killed Sears and tried to kill him, who had smashed telephone connections between the two stations—

Caleb staggered groggily away from the crest of the bluff, and resumed his journey along the dark Santuck path. The automatic—he could use that if necessary. But the man who had attacked him had taken away his Coston signals, the torches in cylindrical tubes which every surfman



on patrol carries, for the warning flares of which his partner of the watch in the tower of the station is ever on the lookout. There was no way for him to communicate

with the station before the dog-watch patrol covered that wild coast.

Then he glimpsed a light appearing two miles inland down the shore road, where it led from the beach into the woods. It

was an approaching automobile. The smugglers had carefully arranged every detail of their method of procedure; the automobile was waiting there to take away the smuggled goods. A dash into the night—perhaps there were also other machines waiting to whirl the rest of the party away to safety. Caleb clutched his pistol tighter, pressed the handkerchief closer to his wounds, and plodded weakly ahead.

Twice he fell in his descent of the path to the lower level of the road leading through the woods to the main state highway, but picked himself up and doggedly kept going. At the edge of the sandy road he paused behind a clump of scrub pines, while the men dragging the bags came closer. They did not utter a word, but kept about their business as if every man had been well rehearsed for the part he was to play.

Caleb was a fellow of tremendous grit. Had he not been left for dead by the murderer who had attacked him at the half-way house, he would not have hesitated to battle a dozen armed men single-handed, himself armed only with the automatic pistol. But his weakness diminished his natural foolhardiness that urged him to step out into the open and confront them all.

Closer came the smugglers, until they were abreast of the pines where Caleb was hiding. But he crouched there quietly, and counted eight men hauling as many sacks as they passed his hiding-place.

Not until they were well up the road did Caleb pull himself together. To allow those rascals to get away with their loot would bring fresh dishonor on Santuck, dishonor to his uniform—the uniform of the coast guard, symbolic of heroism every whit as high as the traditions of the American soldier and sailor. Would a soldier, clad in a uniform representing such traditions, skulk like a rabbit while such villainy as this was afoot? Would life to him seem as precious as it had to Caleb while he hid behind the pines? Sears had been killed; that uniform had already been desecrated. Into the open he stepped—and came face to face with a man stealing up the road some distance behind the smugglers. It was Red Pierce.

"Keep quiet," Red spoke. And noticing Caleb's unsteadiness, "Are you hurt?"

"Shot twice, but not so bad I ain't ready to tackle 'em," replied Caleb, gritting his teeth.

"Don't be a fool. There are too many of 'em, and they're tough citizens." Red came closer and noticed the dark stain on



Caleb's yellow oilskin jacket. He unbuttoned it, and briefly examined his wounds.

"Lord, Walker!" he exclaimed. "You *are* hurt. Hurt bad. Did one o' them do it?" The red whiskers fringing his round face were iced with frozen spray.

"The same one that killed Ben Sears—put the telephone between the stations out of commission. What have they got in those bags?"

"How you s'pose I know? I didn't get close enough to 'em to find that out. That trawler looked to me like a wreck. I came out, thinkin' I might be of some help, and walked into this." He took Caleb gently by the arm. "This is no time for talk, Walker. Come on, to my shanty. You've got to be patched up, or you're likely to join the angels."

He tugged at Caleb's arm, and Caleb reluctantly staggered after him along the path back toward Santuck. Up the coast they discerned a light offshore. Caleb knew it must be the trawler.

"The fools!" he burst out. "They're havin' a hard time gettin' up this coast. Never should 'a' come in so close in the first place. If they don't get out in deep water they'll run on the bar sure!"

If he only had his Coston signals! Then he could warn the trawler smugglers of their proximity to the beach and wicked Santuck Bar. But now his only chance to be of service in case she grounded was to reach Red's shanty and stand by with Red's dory. His first duty was to save life, regardless of what other deviltry was afoot. But saving life under such conditions would involve scarcely less risk than tackling the smugglers who had gone into the woods, for a dory is a mere cockle-shell

in such a sea, especially when manned by a wounded, weak coast guardsman.

"Listen!" exclaimed Red, seizing Caleb's arm again. "Do you hear it?"

They both stood motionless, intent. Yes—Caleb heard it. Shooting! From inland above the roar of the gale, indistinct little popping noises, unmistakably the reports of firearms. Then it ceased.

"Pirates among 'em—mutineers—hijackers," Red accounted for the shooting. "I've never heard of smugglers yet who wouldn't sling their own nooses sooner or later. The more they scrap among them-

selves, the easier 'twill be to run 'em down. Come on!" And he again tugged Caleb's arm, assisting him toward the shanty.

On the way they kept the light of the slowly moving trawler under observation, and Caleb's interest in the movements of the craft kept his mind off his wounds.

At the shanty Red poured iodine on Caleb's wounds and bandaged them with lint and a strip of cotton cloth. They returned outdoors. Offshore, almost directly ahead of Red's shanty, the light of the trawler stood motionless. Another light was being waved on her deck. They could hear the chugging of her engine.

"She's struck!" shouted Caleb. "Tryin' to back off, and can't. Come on—to the dory!"

Red had two pairs of oars, and a coil of rope in his hands. He and Caleb started toward the dory.

"If I only had one more man!" Red spoke, half to himself. And to Caleb, "You're in no condition to go, Walker."

"I'm all right," he assured Red. "I'm a new man—if there's to be a rescue."

The trawler fairly jumped out of the water. A streak of fire shot skyward from her, and was followed by a deep boom like the intonation of a cannon.

"It's her boiler!" shouted Red excitedly. "It's exploded!"

The trawler was alight for a few seconds. She rolled over and disappeared.

Caleb put his strength along with Red's into a heave that thrust the dory well into the wash from the surf. Together they shoved it from the beach into the water, pointed it into a roller, jumped in as the wave receded, and headed the dory into the next roller towering over the bow, rowing with steady, quick strokes.

But that roller was a savage one. It hurled the dory back on the beach, upsetting it, and pitching out its occupants. They tried again—were similarly tossed back. On the third try, however, they succeeded in launching the dory, and with Red bow oar, Caleb amidships, they rowed toward the spot where the trawler had disappeared.

A huge roller, greater than all the rest. It swept the dory backward on its crest, wrenched the oars from the hands of its occupants—and Caleb landed solidly on the beach, the dory bottom up beside him, and Red crawling on hands and knees out of the surf. Caleb did likewise, and they met above the high-water mark.

"It's no use," Red spoke sadly. "We





can't do it, Walker, that's all. We've got to signal the station somehow——"



Several miles offshore a searchlight played on the coast, sweeping toward Santuck, then Goose Point, and settling with a steadfast glare on the beach in the eyes of Caleb and Red.

"It's the *Squanto*, the coast guard cutter!" exclaimed Caleb. "I know her searchlight."

By its bright glare they could detect no trace of the trawler. But a small boat huddled with human forms rose on the top of a wave. The roller lifted the little craft up, dashed it down—and as the wave crest rose again the boat appeared bottom up. The wind carried the pitiful, hopeless cries of the men in the water to the men on the beach. Red stood rigid, staring awestricken at the capsized boat, his hands opening and closing, as if he contemplated leaping into the breakers and attempting to swim out to it.

"What can we do? What can we do?" he said.

Closer drew the searchlight. At their feet rolled what appeared to be a bundle of clothes. They hauled it from the water. It was the body of a man, his face blue, the flesh blackened and swollen as if by fire.

Together they worked over him in an attempt at resuscitation. But the man was dead. A yawl washed up close to the dory, and near it another body. Like the first, the man was dead, his blackened features distorted with the agony of death.

"It's no use, Walker," Red declared chokingly. "Most of 'em were likely dead or half dead after the explosion. No man could live anyway in this sea."

The men on the cutter evidently knew that Red and Caleb were engaged in rescue work, for the searchlight wavered up and down, its steadfast glare on them broken by the rise and fall of the cutter the closer she came to the shore. Then she appeared stationery. They could make out the cutter's side now. She had evidently anchored in deep water, not risking a closer approach to that treacherous shore. Then a launch started to chug, setting out from the cutter.

One after the other Red and Caleb

dragged eight bodies from the surf. In all life had been extinct for some time.

"That's their whole crew," declared Red. "Martin, Dolan, old Cap'n Ray—every man of 'em——"

Caleb grabbed Red's shoulder. He eyed the mosser fiercely.

"Her whole crew? How do you know?" he snapped.

Red was taken back. He glared at Caleb with murder in his eyes.

"None of your damned business, Walker!" Red retorted, furious, disgusted at his own incautious remark, and started at a rapid gait up the beach toward his shanty.

Caleb gazed after him, confused, undecided whether to follow Red alone on what would doubtless prove to be a wild-goose chase, or wait for the launch to come ashore. He had lost his automatic in the attempt to reach the wreck. Red's acquaintance with the men in the trawler's crew had betrayed him. And now that he had hastened so abruptly into the upland, there was no doubt in Caleb's mind that all this time the mosser had been deceiving him, that he was one of the smugglers, their agent on Santuck Beach. Caleb started after Red, but stopped, for the launch was close to shore and the men in it were hailing him.

They jumped out and floundered in the surf, hauling the launch up on the beach. Caleb shook the shoulder of their petty officer, and shouted:

"One of the smugglers—just gone in the upland!"

Not paying attention to his appeal, the cutter men examined the bodies of the trawler crew.

"Never mind them!" wildly insisted Caleb. "They're all dead. There's a smuggler in the upland, I tell you! Alive—dangerous. Do you want to let the last one of 'em get away? The only one we can capture?"

"Show us where he is," the petty officer demanded, now interested—and convinced that Caleb was not out of his head.

"Follow me!" shouted Caleb, starting toward Red's shanty, and all the others came up after him.

More men ran down the path from Santuck station. They were Cap Rogers and seven of Caleb's panting fellow surfmen. Cap and the petty officer recognized each other, and they headed their men in oilskins, sou'westers and coast guard caps behind Caleb.

"It's a million-dollar smuggling—of dope and high-duty stuff," explained Cap.



"Santuck will be the talk of the nation."

"Don't we know it?" replied the officer.

"That's what the *Squanto* was sent to look for—the vessel doin' the smugglin'."



Caleb led them behind Red's shanty, tracking Red in the deep sand by the glare of the searchlight. There he struck a little path through the tall beach grass to the upland. Through a thicket of beach plum bushes

that formed a network of underbrush tangling their feet Caleb guided the fifteen or more coast guardsmen, for he knew that Red must have followed that path, and now and then in patches of open sand he could still detect a telltale footprint. He shoved the bushes apart when they blocked his progress, mounting higher into the upland, out of the circumference of the searchlight.

There the armed guardsmen scattered, ranging separately and in pairs through the upland, and Caleb dropped to the ground to rest. Behind the sand dunes the direct sweep of the wind was broken.

Cap Rogers stayed with him and said, "I got a telephone message telling me about this smuggling stunt from Boston police headquarters about an hour ago. They kept quiet up to then—didn't want to bother us, planning to handle it all themselves with the help of the coast guard cutter. I tried to get the news to Goose Point. Telephone wouldn't work. So I got the crew out to be of help if we were needed—and we walked plumb into this."

Three revolver shots sounded from the upland.

"That's a signal!" declared Cap. "They must have got your smuggler."

He assisted Caleb to his feet. "God, man—you're weak!" Cap swore. "What's happened to you?"

"Oh—nothin' I won't get over," replied Caleb, setting an unsteady pace toward the sound of the shooting.

In a little sheltered space two men from the cutter were holding and questioning Red Pierce. Other forms of men burst into the opening from the bushes on all sides, pocket flashlights twinkling, and they formed a group around the captive.

"Is that your man?" the petty officer asked Caleb.

"That's him—hold him!" yelled Caleb. "He's a friend o' mine, and he's brave—as a lion. But he's a smuggler—he knew all about the men on the wrecked trawler—"

"Of course I'm a smuggler," admitted Red with a little laugh. "What are you goin' to do with me?"

"You know what we'll do with you," replied Cap Rogers fiercely. "You're no novice at it, I can tell. Come on, boys! Back to the station. The coast guard gets credit for this one that the police missed."

They started to haul Red back to the beach.

"Wait—one second," pleaded Red. And to one of his captors, "Play your flashlight in that clump of bushes."

The cutter man looked at him strangely, then shot the ray of his electric torch accommodatingly upon the clump of bushes. Hidden under the beach plum tangle was a wooden trap door, perfectly square and constructed of fresh new lumber. It was fastened to the top of a sunken upright wooden box by a heavy padlock and two big staples.



"I've got the key," explained Red. "I came up here and had just locked it before you caught me." He reached into his pocket. "Will you let me unlock it?"

The officer removed an automatic pistol from Red's pocket, and consented, "Yes. Go ahead."

"No!" shouted Cap Rogers. "Don't do it. It may be a trick."

"It's only a box-trap," scoffed Red, "built to catch skunks. When I came up I heard a noise in it, and locked it. So I think there's a skunk caught in it."

"Why not let him open it?" suggested the petty officer. "I'm a pretty good shot. If it's a trick I'll guarantee it will be played on this 'ere smuggler first."

"Well, all right," Cap agreed, his curiosity getting the better of his judgment. "Open her up!"

Caleb unlocked the trap door, and yanked it open, the onlookers alert with drawn weapons and anticipating a trick as Cap had suggested. But Red quietly stepped back among them, submitting to the clutches of his captors again. Every gun in the outfit, every searchlight was aimed at the aperture. And from that opening rose a man's head and shoulders, his eyes squinting, blinded by the flashlights. His hand, grasping a revolver, appeared over the edge of the buried deep wooden box in which he stood. Caleb yelled with surprise, and completely losing his reason, he fired his automatic at the "skunk" peering from the box-trap. His bullet kicked up



the sand to one side, grazing the shin of a concealed man from the cutter. For Caleb recognized the "skunk" as his assailant at the half-way house and Sears's murderer!

One of the surfmen held back Caleb's arm, preventing another shot. But the "skunk" had no opportunity to strike at his trappers, for four men from the cutter hurled themselves upon him, dragging him from the buried long box. They pinned his arms behind his back, while he writhed and cursed venomously.

"Thanks for savin' me this mean job, gentlemen," Red addressed the group, passing the officer a pair of handcuffs. "I



might 'a' had trouble gettin' him out and puttin' these on him. He's the leader of the gang o' smugglers that

has been operatin' on this coast all winter." And turning to the gunman, "I s'pose I could have caught you before. But I was holdin' off for tonight's big haul. The cops have got the rest of the gang and the stuff. The shootin' was over with quick, and you wouldn't 'a' deserted 'em if you hadn't found the game was up. And without you leadin' 'em, they're lost sheep."

"You—you double-crossin' me?"

"That's why I built the box-trap," replied the mosser. "That's why I showed you the path from the woods leadin' to it the other night, and gave you full directions on hidin' in this cyclone cellar if the cops ever closed in on us. I can see you now, droppin' on the ground, crawlin' into the bushes, findin' the path, desertin' your men like a yellow rabbit when you found the game was up and the woods full of cops. You followed my instructions perfectly."

"Turning state evidence on your pal?" Cap Rogers asked Red.

"You might call it that," Red answered. "I'm a secret service man, and I'm responsible for everythin' that's happened here tonight. The police—the coast guard cutter." He displayed his badge. "I planned the trap the cops set."

The captive started to speak, but a cutter man clapped his hand over his mouth.

"Did you ever hear of two men at Santuck named Peters and Saunders?" Red asked.

"The authorities are looking for both of 'em again," eagerly replied Cap Rogers.

"Then meet Mr. Saunders," Red pompously introduced the gunman, and Mr.

Saunders responded by an outburst of anathema.

"Double-crossed me, damn you!" he roared. "I took you into our gang because you was down and out and begged me for the job, and you and me had made plans previous——"

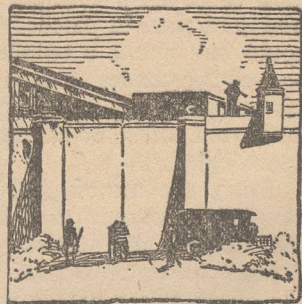
"Was Peters in the gang, too?" asked Cap.

"Pretty much," Red replied. "I'm Peters."

He paused, and the Santuck men muttered savagely to one another.

"Saunders and me were cellmates at Charlestown Prison," explained Peters, "and 'twas there we used to plan smug-

glin' when we got out. I pretended to make up with him and forgive him for what he did to me at Santuck. But that was part of my game to get him. Well, he



got out before I did. It takes a crook to catch a crook, and I had a friend in the secret service who got me in—under a new name, of course. I found Saunders, got into his gang, and—well, when you're in the electric chair for murderin' Sears, I guess we'll be quits, Saunders."

"Peters—you're quits with all of us!" exclaimed Cap Rogers. "Doc Hyde's conscience has been keeping him awake nights. So he made a written statement that he attended you the night of the wreck fifteen years ago—that you were sick abed with a grippe cold—that Saunders bribed him to swear he had not attended you. The authorities haven't made it public, but they will when they find you. I got inside information at the same time I got wind of my new appointment."

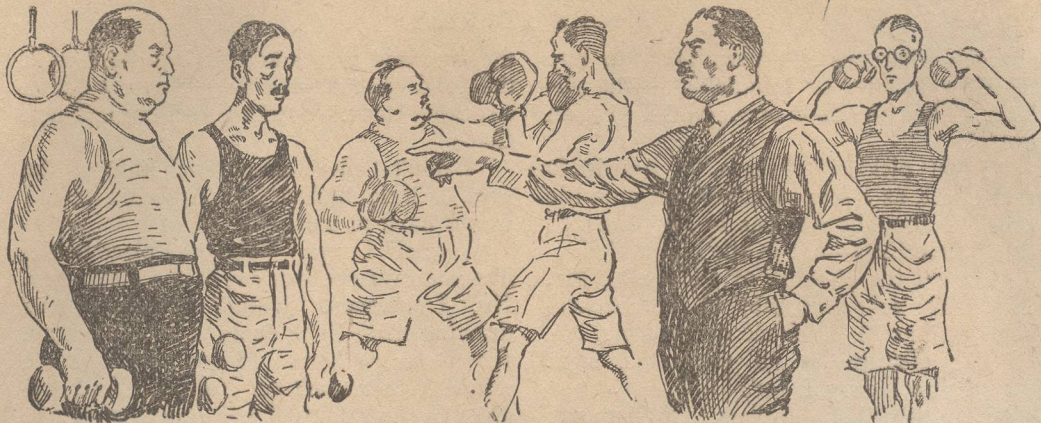
"Your appointment?" asked Caleb. "Why, Santuck's not goin' to lose you, I hope."

"Not altogether. I've been appointed coast guard superintendent of this district."

"But Peters," demurred Caleb, "the Government owes him an apology."

"And that's what he's got," explained Cap. "Credit for thirty-five years of service in the coast guard honorably completed. A pension the rest of his life. The new cap'n at Santuck—his name is Caleb Walker. He's not going in with Peters' record to live down. He's got it to live up to."





## THE REST IS YOURS

By ALBERT EDWARD ULLMAN

Author of "Mr. Fido," "Hip, Hip, Horoo!" etc.

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MCGURK WASN'T MODEST ABOUT HIS HEALTH RESTORER FARM, BUT IT TOOK J. FRANKLIN MANNERS, WHO WAS THE SOLE SUPPORT OF A MUSTACHE THAT MADE A WALRUS LOOK LIKE HE HAD A HAIR-LIP, TO WISE HIM UP TO ITS REAL POSSIBILITIES

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**A**NY time I settles down in a game with a bozo who ain't bare faced you can figure that the attic of my old bean is completely for rent and call me cuckoo! I don't care whether it's stud or rummy or a simple game of hearts, I ain't gonna play unless I can see the other guy's face and size him for the fall. And that goes for any bird who masquerades behind a flock of hairs, no matter whether it's the Smith brothers or the wild man from Borneo!

You see, I used to think I could look a baby in the eye and tell his hole card like the time of day, but such is not the case now. No, sir; what I wants is a opportunity to read his face, if they's anything there, and the rest is up to me like the Yanks is to the Giants. Maybe that presents you with a series of snickers, but all I gotta say for the defenceless is that I has took my last chance thataways—my last chance being in the shape, if you could call it that, of a bird who likes to call hisself J. Franklin Manners. What I calls him is none of the judge's business, but when I say that this baby was the sole support of a mustache that made a walrus look like it had a hair-lip, you got one of my reasons. The other reason, if I has any left, is the which I am about to expose for the first time.

To begin with I didn't like this Manners as much as you and myself the first time I give him the high-low. For one thing, he looked like a million dollars on parade, which a million bucks never looks like; and for another, there was that trick mustache, all curlicued and trimmed like one of them fancy hedges. On top of that it was bright red, and it's trainer was always petting it and putting it in its place like it was a only child. The result was that all you could see of J. Franklin Manners, outside of his glad rags, was his ears and a pair of poppy blue eyes that could sell you the idea that they was, as the poet sayest, wells of truth. The rest of him was all front. And he put on enough dog to fill the *Leviathan*.

I was running my rest farm for tired or fired business birds when I first meets this here Manners and all his chins. And all I'm doing is sitting on the big porch tryin' to treat myself to some relaxation after chaperoning a lotta babies which thinks you can lay in health like you does



the winter's coal, when he crashes into the scene without a n y warnings.

While a taxi has eased up the drive and come to rest, I thinks nothing of that, merely figuring that it's one of my



charges what has got permission to buy hisself a sweater or something in the village. Then the door opens and I gets an eyeful.

"Sweet pickles!" I says, or words to that effect, as I sees what's oozed outa the cab. "I thought we was in the heart of the Adirondikes—not in the circus!"

"Have I the pleasure of addressing Mr. McGurk?" says this baby in the checker-board suit as he lams me in the chair.

"The pleasure is all yours," I says. "What can I do you for?"

"Haw-haw!" he bellers. "What can you do me for!" Then he favors this original remark with another drove of haw-haws and turns his poppy eyes on me. "You can do me for about thirty pounds avoirdupois I don't need," he crows.

"You talk like that's as easy as catching cold," I tells him short.

"I don't say that," he explains kindly. "But a month ought to be time——"

"Sure," says I. "A night oughta be time enough—if we was in the Arctic where they is six months long."

"Haw-haw!" he sounds. "Am I as bad as all that?"

"Even worse," I says. "You're only about two sizes too much." Then I gives his circumference the survey. "You must have a good time trucking yourself around!"

Though his face turns red, he keeps his poker smile.

"All I weigh," he tells me, "is two hundred and thirty."

"You simply astound me," I says. "It must be all the clothes you got on that made me think it was a ton."

"Haw!" he explodes weakly. "I know I'm no gazelle," he manages to grin, but with thirty pounds off in a month——"

"You only knows half," I interrupts. "The other half is that I can't take off no thirty pounds in that time, because the cook won't let me."

"The cook!" he echoes blankly. "I don't get you!"

"Neither can I get his cleaver," I tells him. "He's particular with his tools! No, sir," I goes on, "you can't come up here, after putting on pounds for about thirty years and expect me to restore your former shape in as many days."

"But—my dear sir——!"

"No buts about it," I comes back. "All the exercise you has took since Hector was a pup is with your elbow. What gets me," I raves on, "is the way you babies hit up

the eats and treats and arrives here with the fond expectations of working it off in a rocking chair. You must believe in Santa Claus."

"I don't believe in no such things," he says, a little huffed. "I expected that I would have to work——"

"Work!" I says. "The only place babies like you ever see work is in the dictionary. No," I proceeds, "shaking up cocktails and drawing three light cards is no foundation for the work here. If you wants to see miracles done, call on Edison. And, besides, I don't think I has room enough to accommodate your person."

He starts to turn away—and then weakens.

"Look here," he says, "probably I am a fool to expect you to do so much in so short a time. But I'm hog fat and all run down and every one has told me you're the doctor I need. Now how long would it take you to get me in shape?"

"As to your shape," I says, softening myself, "I won't give no guarantee. But I could deal out them thirty pounds you've been saving for your old age in a coupla months, to say the leastest."

"That's a long time," he says, thinking it over.

"Not a patch on the time you'll be dead!" I says.

He stands there looking down and thinking. And I sits there looking him over and thinking. For one thing, there was his mustache I didn't like; and for another thing, his manners got me the same way. As for the money, as I said before, he looked like its middle name. His clothes simply talked it; and he had on enough jewelry to sink a ship and all on board. Nevertheless, I made sure before committing myself.

"My terms for patients like you," I says, while he's still lost in thoughts, "is five hundred smackers each per month—in advance."

That seems to make up his mind for him, for he looks up while he starts to pull that mustache of his.

"The five hundred smackers is yours," he snaps out. Then he struggles with hisself until he pulls out a



wallet which looks like a young valise. After which he flecks a stack of new bills like a deck of cards and deals me five yellow backs like they was a poker hand.

"It's all in your hands," he says. "And so is my life!"



"All right," I says, "Mister—er—what did you say your name was?"

"My name," he states, producing a card, "is J. Franklin Manners—my friends like to call me 'Good' Manners."

"Sounds kinda familiar," I says, without cracking a lip. "You know you fooled me, brother," I went on, friendly like. "I thought you might be the Ringling brothers!"

"No," he says, without a flinch. "I've never promoted a circus, though I fancy I've promoted other things as large. Now——"

"Well," I says, seeing it's time to get busy with my assortment of wrecks in the gym, "suppose you promote yourself upstairs and slip on a shirt and some trunks. After which I'll have the medico look you over."

"Very well," he says slowly. "Only I think——"

"You don't think," I says, rising from the chair. "I does all the thinking around here until you escapes! Likewise," I continues over my shoulder, "you don't get any newspapers, any fodder which is not on your plate, or anything else I don't think's good for you!"

"Where am I?" he kids. "In Russia?"

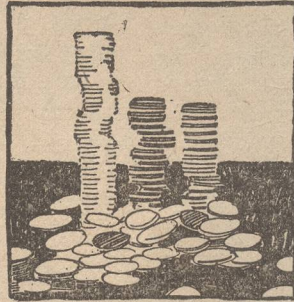
"That ain't what you'll call it," I shoots back, "after I gets started on you! Anyhow, up to your cell."

That seems to act on him, for he ups like a soldier; and an hour later when I calls for him, he's there in his tights somewhat reminding one of a balloon about to go up.

"I'm gonna see a lotta you for the next month, that's certain," I says after the doc' decides he's afflicted with nothing devastating but his shape; "but after that you won't think it's midnight every time you see your shadow."

Well, he took that all right, just as he took all the other riding I gave him while he was there. Only once did he pull anything like a kick and that was the first time I had him on horseback and told him to lead his mount up a hill after a ten-mile jaunt. He wasn't slow in telling me it didn't look good to him a-tall. But after I suggests that the road back to where he came from might look better he gives a correct imitation of a clam. He didn't want to be shooed away, that was certain. To say that he suffered some in the beginning of the festivities is like saying it's a nice day if it don't rain; but he was game, I'll say that, and all he said about it wouldn't start a phonograph needle in life.

Of course he talked—though mostly to me, because he didn't talk much to the other patients—but he wasn't touching on my brutal methods of separating him from his excess luggage. Anyways, from his chinning I gathers that he's promoted about everything that Columbus discovered and that the fortunes he's made and lost could be counted on the hands of a World's Series crowd. Naturally, to a plugger like me, most of this is interesting; and while I don't like the mustache which curtains his lower face I ain't got no reason to suspicion anything he says. Likewise, after playing a few games of penny ante



with him—and winning!— I begins to think I can read his pop-eyes like Webster done English. Anyhow, he sells me on his line of talk. And when his time's up and he blows, minus thirty pounds and the thousand grand it sets him back, I ain't thinking any worse of him than any other good guy. When I adds that a coupla weeks later he sends me a scarf pin in the shape of a horseshoe that must have cost a hundred fish I ain't doing anything put pin roses on J. Franklin Manners.

All of which explains why I'm still harboring kind thoughts about him a week later when the 'phone rings and the boy tells me no other than friend Manners is on the long distance end. Seeing's my season is over in a few days, because them tired business babies won't trust themselves to the fierce rigors and such of winter in the Adirondikes, I is wondering what it's all about.

"McGurk," he says right off the bat, "if you can keep your place open a coupla months and give your exclusive attention to er—a rich relative of mine, I can show you enough jack to make you nearsighted!"

"I've been in the mint," I says, thinking he's kidding. "Just showing me it is no treat!"

"You don't get me," he says and I never heard his voice so earnest. "You can't lose—and if you can fix up this er—relative of mine I can guarantee you a cold ten thousand for your time!"

"Fix him up!" I breathes hard. "What does he want—a coupla new legs and arms?"



"Cut out the kidding," he says shortly. "This is business! And all he's suffering from is dyspepsia. Now, if you'll entertain the matter, I'll run up——"

"I'll entertain Coxey's army for that much jack," I hastens to intrude. "And if dyspepsia is all that's wrong with him I'll have him eating like Bosco!"

"Fine!" he says. "I'll be up towards the end of the week."

The upshoots of it is that J. Franklin Manners breezes in on the 3:02 the following Saturday and I'm there to meet him like the crowd for the parade. The only train back to parts known is due in an hour, so we settles all the details in that time over a couple of fifty cent stogies J. Franklin releases from a gold case. The long and short of it is that I engages to take on this old bird, which he says is a relative of his by marriage, and give him the ropes for a pair of months or until such times as he is able to eat his way through a meal like it means something in his life besides a row of tombstones. Likeawise, after all is said but not done, he agrees to slip me a thousand berries in advance.

"How about the rest of the jack?" I asks.

"The rest is yours," he says, "when he can eat three big meals in a row and call it a day! You say," he goes on, "you can knock his indigestion for a gool, so it's no gamble!"

He had me there.

"Yes," I admits. "If there's nothing else wrong with him, and he ain't no cripple, I guess I can do that little thing."

"I knew you were game," sings J. Franklin, slapping me on the old back. "And I'll guarantee he's sound of wind and limb, so you should worry!"

"That's keno," I says finally. "Now, as I understand it, your folks have had a hel-luva time persuading him to come up here, so if he changes his mind it's nix?"

"That's right," says he. "And you're not to let him give you the slip in case he tires of the——"

"A swell chance?" I chips in. "Seeing it's twenty miles to the station—and only one train a day. Besides, if he gets fresh," I goes on, "I'll lock his little room nights."

"Attaboy!" cheers Manners. "And another thing," he continues as

to a telephone! His wife—er—Aunt Emma, is that chicken-hearted that, if he pulls the baby stuff over the wire, she'd be right up here and spoil the works—and the nine thousand coming to you."

"No, not never!" I shudders. "If they wants him cured and sends him here for his own good, he can change his mind as often as he breathes, but here he stays until he's full of health or I'm completely outa it!"

"That's the way to talk," laughs Manners. "I got to hand it to you."

"And don't forget that ain't all!" I says.

"Haw-haw!" he sounds and then looks serious. "I wouldn't be surprised none," he says, "if the family voted you something extra if you cut the time down. By the way," he goes on, "you'll stick to your rule about newspapers with him, so he don't get his mind——"

"You know I don't allow no newspapers during training," I says short, "not even for myself. However, what you says about something extra sounds good. When did you say he'd arrive?"

"Around the middle of the week," J. Franklin tells me. "While the old boy is retired from business, there's a few things to fix up which will take a day or two. And, don't forget," he ends earnestly, "you're to take on no other patients while he's with you."

"No," I says. "I couldn't if I wanted to, because we'll be snowed under in a coupla weeks. Me and my handy-man to cook and make the beds will be the only ones present."

"All right," he shouts as the train pulls in. "I'll give you a ring before we start."

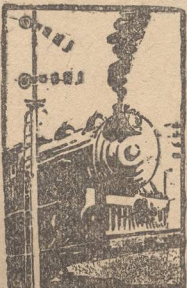
**W**ELL, he was as good as his word, for it's Wednesday evening and I has given up hopes for the day when the 'phone ting-a-lings to be followed by J. Franklin's voice over the wire. It's excited, though pleased, so it sounds like good news as he spills my name.

"Everything's jim-dandy," he breathes, after I yesses him, "and we're starting out now! So if you'll meet our car——"

"Good goshes, man!" I says. "You're not going to motor! Why," I goes on, "you got two hundred miles to cover, with the roads up thisaway simply fierce. Why don't you wait until train time tomorrow?"

"Can't," he breathes back. "He's likely to change his mind again."

"Very well," I says. "He's your relative—and maybe bouncing about like that will do him good!"



if he'd just thought of it, "don't let him get



"You said it!" he kinda laughs. "So you'll meet me with your car?"

"Sure," I tells him. "I don't figure you can do it much under nine or ten hours, so I'll be at the village limits about four G. M."

"Fine!" he cheers. "Because I want to have a few words alone with you on the way to your place. The others can stay

—"

"What others?" I asked, surprised.

"Oh," he breezes, "I'll probably bring one of his old family servants—probably the butler—to keep him company on the ride



—"

"I getcha!" I says. "If you can keep the old gent agreeable, the easier his case'll be."

"I'm glad you agree with me," says he. "Well, so long until we meet at four."

It was so long, all right, for it was almost

six before I lamps a big car bobbing its way along the road which leads over King's Mountain. Of course I knew it was my party, for no one was crazy enough to go joy-riding on a road like that at such a hour; and I was as pleased to meet J. Franklin Manners as I told him I was a few minutes later.

"Same to you," he says as he jumps into my car after racing from the big limousine which has all its curtains drawn. Then he slams the door and turns toward his driver. "Just follow us," he orders. "Goshamighty!" he shivers as we moves off, "sitting in the front has me cold to my toes!"

"Why didn't you ride inside?" I asks. "Is the old gent as big as you—was?"

"No," he answers. "He's little, but oh, my! To be confidential," he sorta whispers, "he got cranky before we started and has been that way ever since. Also, he knows I engineered this for the family and he hits the ceiling every time he sees me. So I'm keeping out of sight!"

"I see," I says. "Are we likely to have any trouble?"

"Not a bit," assures J. Franklin. "He only weighs about a hundred—and can be handled easy. All he can do is shoot off his mouth."

"How old is he?" I queries as we turn into the road leading up the mountain to my diggings.

"Sixty," Manners says, "but full of pep

when he gets started. Especially—" he hesitates, and throws a look at the big car behind us—"especially when he has one of his spells!"

"Spells!" I echoes. "Whadda you mean spells?"

"Didn't I tell you," comes back Manners, calm as you please, "that the old boy was a little queer at times?"

"Queer!" I chokes. "Say, whadda you think I am? If you has the big idea that I'm gonna chaperon any maniac, you're due for a headache—"

"Hold on!" he whispers hoarsely. "You got me all wrong! What I mean to say is that he talks out of his head at times—thinks he's somebody else—but he isn't violent or anything like that!"

"Ah-h!" I says. "So that's the pea in the shell! All you is handling me ten thousand fish for is playing around with a lunatic who may think he's some murderer during the night—"

"No, no!" breathes Manners, like it hurts him. "He's no more offensive than a baby—"

"Baby crocodile?" I interrupts. "No; I ain't gonna—"

"Listen, listen!" he butts in. "You know me and how I wouldn't hand you a wrong steer like that. I'm telling you that all he'll do—if he does that—is shoot off his mouth; and I guess you can stand for that—for ten thousand!"

Naturally them last words caused me to halt and think some, for I wasn't picking up no ten thousand smackers every day for just putting one old gent into shape, even if he was a little queer. We're nearing the gates to my place by this time, so I turns in order to look Manners in them poppy blue eyes.

"You say," I asks him slowly, "that your relative ain't violent and the worst he does is chew the rag?"

"I swear to it!" he says. "And I ought to know."

"Sure," I says, after a minute. "Now, tell me, what kind of delusion does he pack a round with him?"

"Well—" hesitates Manners. Then he feels my eyes on him and goes on. "Well, the last time he thought he was some big financier or banker—I forget the name." He





chuckles softly and gives me a slap on the back. "And all he did was sit around writing checks for a few billions! That's all the violent he was."

"Whereas," I queries, "he is what—and who?"

"He's retired—was a wholesale grocer," says Manners in my good ear. "His name is Tuttle—Samuel Tuttle."

"All right, Manners," I volunteers at last. "I'll take your word—and ditto your relative. But if he tries to get fresh and murder me or something—"

"Nothing like that in our family," he says cheerfully as we starts to ease our way to the front of my shacks. "You'd better let me out here," he goes on suddenly, "because he's likely to wake up and see me. You know I don't want him unsettled."

I done as he told me and then stopped the car in front of the big porch. Right in back of me is the limousine and as it halts I see the driver turn and knock on the curtained window and say something. A minute later he opens the door partways and leans in as if to help somebody. As he straightens up he's got hold of a pair of legs. Then the figure of a little guy is lifted out, with a big, serious looking bird at the head.

The old party they is exercising with is about sixty, I guesses, and sound asleep. Howsomever, he doesn't stay thataway much more than a split second, for as the procession reaches the bottom step one of his feet comes outa the driver's hand and presents him with a kick under the chin. This is followed by a snarl and some more kicks that showed the old gent wasn't particular who he wiped his feet on.

"Wh-where am I?" he gasps, as his other foot is dropped and he lands on his feet. "Wh-what is the meaning of this?"

"You're all right, old party," I says, motioning to the big guy who is still holding his arms. "Just keep your shirt on! You're among friends."

"Among friends!" he pipes, after a wild look about. "I'm among lunatics!" he yells. "What—"

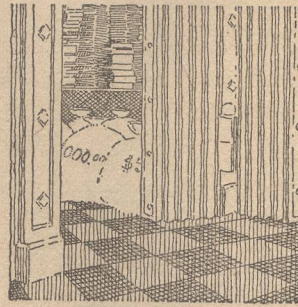
"Sure; we're all looney," I says soothingly. "So we can all play together!"

"Play!" he chokes. After which he gives another wild look about him and appears to catch his breath. "What I want to know is the meaning of this outrage," he demands fiercely, "this criminal abduction of my person?"

"That's the word!" I cheers. "We're goin' to make a new person outa you!

You see," I explains softly as he stands there glaring at me, "when we gets through with you, dyspepsia and you will be as far apart as I and John J. Vanderpool's millions."

"What do you mean—my millions?" he



bellers at me suddenly. "Are you holding me for ransom?" Then he starts to jump up and down like a Mexican bean. "You're a pack of scoundrels!" he yells

hoarsely. "I'll have you jailed! I—I'll have you hung!"

"Now don't get excited, friend," I says, nice and easy. "No one alluded to all them millions you has. It was simply a saying of mine, that crack about old Vanderpool's millions!"

"That's what I said!" he shouts, starting to jump up and down once more. "I'm John Vanderpool—and you know it, you unmitigated scoundrel!"

"Ha-ha!" I starts. Then I sees the wild light in his eyes. "Listen," I says evenly. "Call yourself anything you want, but lay offa them names on me or you and I is goin' to agree as well as scapple and your dyspepsia. Now, go ahead," I ends, "and call yourself Little Eva if you wants to."

"Little Eva!" he shouts fiercely, and shudders. Then he looks frantically around and turns his eyes back on me like a canary which is watching a cat. "Do you know," he stutters, "that I have been kidnapped? Do you know," he goes on more quietly, "that I have been kidnapped in my own car—my own driver spirited away?"

For a minute his serious manner had me going.

"What's your license number," I demands suddenly, just to see how his old bean works.

"New York 307," he snaps like one who knows it by heart.

"Sure," I says and looks at the tag on his car. "Yeh," I laughs, "you was almost right, seeing it's only Jersey 7009."

Right then and there I makes up my mind that crazy guys can act, for he wheels about at my words and gives a gasp.

"Why, er—" he starts. "It's been changed or—"



"I agrees with you," I says politely. "Now maybe you has some mail or something on your royal person that'll show you're whatever you chooses to call yourself?"

I can see another one of them wild gleams come into his eyes at that. Then he plunges one of his hands into a inside pocket.

"I certainly can, you fool!" he hisses.

With that he draws out a coupla letters and passes them to me without so much as a look. "That's who I am!" he crows.

As I accepts them I sees that they has passed through the mails and been opened. Then I gives them the eye.

"That's who you is all right," I says, reading the name written on both of them. "Mr. Tuttle."

"Tu-tuttle!" he breathes like a fish outa water.

"Yes," I says short.

"These letters were placed in my pocket by some rascal," he cries as he gives them the once over. "I can see it all now——"

"Yeh!" I cuts him short. "Your rascal must have been a fortune teller to know I was going to ask you such a question! Why, even I didn't——"

"You're one of them—I should have known that!" he bellers suddenly. Then he seems to be recovering from his threatened brain storm. "Just what are your intentions?" he asks like he is chewing icicles.

"Entirely honorable," I tells him. "All you gotta do is go to your room, which is ready, and have a good nap. After that, Mr. Tuttle——"

"Tuttle!" he cries with a shiver. Then he starts to work hisself up again. "Don't you dare call me by that odious name!" he hisses.

"All right," I says gently. "I'll call you the Sultan of Swat, if it gives you any pleasure. "Here, you!" I says to the big guy who I figures is the butler. "Just help your boss upstairs!"

"Boss!" yelps the old gent, pulling away. "I never saw this ruffian before in my life until——"

"Come on, Mr. Tuttle!" cooes the big bird dutifully.

"Don't you Tuttle me!" shrieks the old gent.

"All right! All right!" I yells suddenly. "Whadda you think this is—a booby-hatch?" Then I turns on old Tuttle. "Lookahere, your majesty," I con-

tinues nice and calm, "you can go up to your room quiet and easy—or you can be carried up royally—you has your pick!"

He looks at me and then kinda wilts under the eye I give him.

"Very well," he says snappily and starts up the steps. "But you'll pay for this, never fear!" With that he disappears through the doorway.

"Here, Gus!" I calls to my handy man, as the driver straggles back from the car with a swell dress suit case. "Juggle that upstairs to Mr. Tuttle's room and see that he's made cozy. Then I spots the letters S. T. on the side of the suit-case and treats myself to a flock of laughs. "You'd almost think the old bird was giving you the goods at times," I says to the butler. "You know for a split second he had me hoggessing!"

"That's the way the boss acts at times," he confesses in a whisper as he casts a look back toward the gate. "There's Mr. Manners motioning to you," he says suddenly.

"Right," I says, moving in the direction. "What relations did you say old Tuttle and my friend, J. Franklin was?"

"I didn't say," grins the big bird, stopping at the car. "But they is very fond of each other."

"A blind man could see that—especially now," I tells him. "They is as lovin' as a coupla strange bulldogs!"

He didn't answer nothing to that, so I keeps on my way until I has joined Manners down by the gate. J. Franklin is delighted the way I has handled things, I can see that. And right away he hands me the thousand fish, all in century notes. Like a wise, he hands me some advice as how to get along with his relative, also the news that he's going to make the train, which is due in about a hour, and then send the car back with the servants. After which he agrees to 'phone the next night about nine o'clock, jumps into the limousine which has come up by this time, and waves me a fond fare-you-well.



**W**ELL, me and the old gent goes to the mat that same afternoon, which is when he comes down for lunch. He's hit the hay for about five hours and the same has done him good, for he's full of his old pep. It began when I started to



Tuttle him and he throws nothing less than a fit that can be heard on the other side of the mountain. Naturally, I lets him rave for a while, but after a hour of it when he's so hoarse he can't talk no more, I points to the thin soup he's been neglecting and gives him the high sign to absorb what nourishment said liquid represents.

"All I want," he groans between breaths, "is a glass of hot water and the beaten white of an egg."

Seeing he's nearly all in from his spell I sympathizes.

"That's too bad," I says. "However, I'll have you eating shark in a short time."

"Never!" he cries weakly. "Solid food would be the death of me!"

"Maybe," I admits. "But not the painful one you're treating yourself to by feeding on bubbles and hot water! Now, in the morning," I goes on cheerfully, "we'll start in with a few light exercises and

"Exercise!" he exclaims faintly. "Do—you realize that I'm sick and no longer a young man!"

"That's the reason you ain't," I tells him. "You're sixty and look every rainy day of seventy; whereas, if you'd taken your share of exercise you'd be hopping around like you was fifty or maybe less."

"Tommy rot! I'm not to be deceived," he says sharply. "Besides I haven't the time."

"Oh, yes, you has," I says easy. "You got time like the ocean has water! And I'm gonna see that you can look a mess of cornbeef and cabbage in the face without dropping dead."

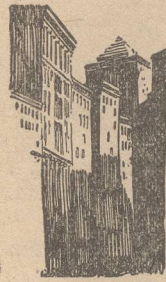
The old boy shivers all over at them cruel words. Then he closes his eyes as if to relax and get back some of his strength. Anyways, he gets his voice back some after heartily partaking of his white of egg and a heaping glass of hot water and keeps it up until it's nighty-night for him, which is two hours after he kidded himself with the toothpick. And every minute he could spare he was trying to convince me he ain't who he is and I'm making it fifty-fifty by trying to convince him that the best thing to do is take things easy and leave the rest to me.

After which I sees that Gus has his cot placed right in front of friend Tuttle's door and gives myself to the arms of Morbus—without his landing much of any long distance knock out on me, though.

However, I finally snatches a few winks, because I figures that the old gent is more'n likely to be over his spell by morn-

ing and willing to listen to reason. Nevertheless, such is not to be the cases, for he's off with the breakfast bell like they is no other starters in sight.

He wasn't violent, get me, except when I points to them letters and initials on his baggage as being the best clues as to who he is. That sets him raving a coupla times, but he breezes over 'em, all right, all right, and spends the rest of his time, which isn't punctuated with the light exercises and stunts I has sentenced him to, telling me all about who he thinks he is and



what is going to happen to me if I don't slip him back to the big burg. Of course I only lets this chatter park in one ear long enough to go out the other. After I gets fed up on it I merely hands him a few things to do that keeps him outa breath and words!

One result is the old boy is so blamed tired that he ducks off to bed after a rave over a plate of broth which has been slipped in his feed bag. So when J. Franklin long-distances me at nine I ain't so blue about his case that I'm color blind.

"Fine!" he congratulates. "You'll have him eating out of your hand in no time. And don't forget," he goes on, "to keep him away from the telephone and any newspapers that——"

"I got the 'phone cut off in my room," I tells Manners. "And the only news that can shock him'll have to come by carrier pigeon, seeing the station is twenty miles

"Yes, yes!" answers J. Franklin. "Only I thought you might be sending down and your man might——"

"I'd like to see him," I says short. "And, besides, he ain't going, because we're banked with everything we needs here from our own chickens and eggs to——"

"Of course," he chimes in. "I just thought that a neighbor or——"

"You oughta know," I says, "that the nearest neighbor is on the other side of the mountain; and I ain't heard of him having any airypplanes as yet."

"Haw-haw!" guffaws Manners. "You're almost as iceolated as if you were at the North Pole."

"You'll say it," I says, "in about another week. Iceolated is like saying violets is blue!"

With some more pros and cons like that he says good night. After which I gets a



half Nelson on the pillow and says the same to myself.

THE next morning breezes in with a few signs of snow; and when I escorts Kid Tuttle out for his canter before breakfast his teeth chatters so he ain't able to hand me the usual bunk. However, after the morning meal, which in his case is some hot broth I substitutes for the hot water, he adopts a new line of conversation which is, namely, the salve. Instead of hinting that he'll use his entire fortune paying the electric bill for the chair he's going to send me to, he now insinuates that my fortune is made. All I has to do it appears is land him back in the city, where his gigantic affairs is simply going to smash by reason of his absence.

"They'll be raiding the market," he says. "And what I stand to lose——"

"Yeh!" I agrees. "You'll be raiding the market when you gets back—for family size porterhouses! And all you'll stand to lose is the bones, which I don't give no guarantee you can digest!"

"Do you mean to say," he trembles, "that I'm to be cooped up in this God forsaken place until I'm forced to eat like some animal?"

"You is a grand guesser!" I says. "And if you eat like the animal which is a fox you'll be——"

"Hah!" he sneers. "And I presume that's all there's to it?" Then he gives me a dirty look and goes on. "Do you think, you stupid, that I don't know your scoundrelly——"

"Stupid!" I yells. "Who do you think you are now—Edison? Now," I continues as calmly, "if you're so nutty you don't know what's good for you, that's your funeral. But I'm here to make you over and you're here to be made over. So I'm going to do it if I has to take you apart and see what makes you tick!"

For a minute I think he's going to throw another one of his favorite fits. But the red finally goes outa his face and he gets up, handing me the glassy glare the whites, and marches out on the porch. When I calls him a hour later for his little work out in the gym he just follows without no word and does the same with his instructions.

"All right, old cuckoo!" I says to myself. "I can sit tight and play 'em just as hard as you can."

And that was that.

Yes; that was that—and the same lasted for two weeks. No kidding, that old boy

capered around with me for all that time and never so much as says a word or gives me a look, nasty or otherwise, unless it's to follow some instructions.



In the gym, for it had snowed and I wasn't ready to put the skii on him, or at the table, he was about as chatty as a clam what has been struck dumb.

Of course I has to converse to him about his exercise and his fodder, but that lets me out. With respects to the first he does the best he can, which only sends him limping to the hay early each evening; but when it comes to the eats he's as firm as Pike's Peak. The little broth which I induced him to start on he still falls for; but if they is so much as a splinter of bone in it he'd yell so you'd think it was part of this Tut-Tut they dug up. And outside of that they is nothing in his young life but the white of a egg and the old hot water. For one whole week I squanders my time in the efforts to entirely surround with his person a coddled egg or maybe one poached on toast. But the total result is nothing, minus zero. After that I gives up. Likeawise, I gives him a close-up three times a day of the fried chicken and waffles and such trifles I punish myself with.

To be sure I figured what was going to happen. Every day during that pair of weeks I could see that his eyes were growing clearer and that his face was taking on a color different from putty. Also, he wasn't moving around no more like a lame pelican; and when he breathed it wasn't like some poor fish outa water. He was better, only he wouldn't let hisself know how much better he was until the old appetite crashed in.

"I would like a small slice of whole wheat bread," was the way he put it when the surrender came. He's looking everywhere but at the plate of chicken stew that's in front of me so I can't catch his eye.

"We're all outa whole wheat," I says mildly. "Yu'd better distract yourself with one of them hot biscuits."

"I—I don't think it will——"

"Suit yourself!" I sings. After which I polishes my plate and leaves him alone with the hungry look on his face.



Also I leaves him alone with four of them biscuits—and they has shrunk to three by the time Gus comes to remove the dishes. And that tells the tale. The rest of it is that Kid Tuttle is eating chicken by the time another week comes round. And before the end of the month he is out looking the coop over to see if the flock is going to last.

To say that J. Franklin is delighted with the bulletins he receives over the 'phone



every other eve is like saying mortgages come due. And when I passes him the news that his relative has told me a funny story that very morning I thought that his haw-haws would set him back at

least twenty fish long distance.

"Does he get off any of his old ravings?" he finally asks. "Or talk about his supposed affairs?"

"Not a peep!" I says. "I think he's cured from the neck up, as well as the neck down."

Manners makes a funny sound at that, but I don't get it.

"What's that?" I asks.

"Nothing," he says. "Only I'll be coming up in a few days—if you think the job is done."

"A coupla days will do the trick," I sings. "And that ends a six-week stunt. So don't forget," I ends pointedly, "about that bonus you was——"

"Not a-tall!" he cheers. "I guess when the folks see him they'll be only too glad."

"Well, they'll see a new Tuttle for their money," I tells him. "And they'd better lay in a extra cook."

"Haw-haw! Splendid!" he breezes. "And now, Mac, don't let him know he's slated to go so soon. Just leave that to me."

"Sure!" I says. "Ain't you the banker in this game! Just 'phone me before you starts," I goes on. "I may have to charter a sleigh for you."

"Won't your old can do?" he asks short.

"I don't think so," I says. "The drift at the foot of the mountain has been pretty bad."

"Well," he says slowly, "I guess we'll have to make the best of it."

"We will," I tells him. "If we gotta use skis!" And that's the last word.

Likeawise, skii is the first word I springs on the old gent the next day.

"Come on," I says, as he appears to hesitate, "and be a sport! They is great fun."

"You know," he says after Gus has strapped 'em on, "I'm beginning to think you're not such a bad sort, after all."

At that he treats hisself to sevarl snickers. But they is cut short because his skis has took a notion to slip down about a hundred feet into a gullys—and being strapped to 'em Kid Tuttle goes along. By the time I reaches the spot he's settled in he's scooping the snow offa his head and face. When he's finished I sees he still wears a smile.

"Anyhow, you're game, old timer," I says, while he flushes like a boy. "Now let's speed up, if the old bones'll let you."

"Proceed!" he says, saving his breath for the work ahead.

And proceed is what we does, except when the old boy is coasting on his ear or taking headers in snow banks, for about a hour. It's after he mastered the idea that his feet ain't exactly wings and has learned to stay right side up for more'n a minute that he makes his strange crack.

"How much," he says as we reach the last rise between us and the house, "are you getting for all this?"

"Well," I says cautiously, "if you continues as you are I'm in for a nice piece of jack."

"How much?" he persists.

My once over shows he's as calm as a cauliflower.

"Ten thousand smackers!" I says, taking a chance.

At that he gives me a sharp look.

"Is that all?" he asks.

"Yes," I answers, surprised. "Unless your folks is so pleased they gives me a bonus."

"My folks!" he says in a strange voice. Then he gives me a queer look. "So you think they will be pleased?"

"They oughta be," I comes back. "I guess Manners is down in your will; and he couldn't be more pleased if he was twins——"

"Manners!" he repeats softly. "Ah, yes! So he arranged everything?"

His tone makes me careful all of a sudden.

"I wouldn't say that," I stalls. "Probably your whole fam-





ily is in on it. Anyhow," I continues, to change the subject, "that stew is waiting for us. So let's go!"

He looks at me as if he thinks I got some kinda ace in the hole. Then he braces hisself for the last coast which will land us in front of the house; and this time he makes the distance standing up all the ways. The result is that he kills the rest of the day, between his acts, bragging about this here athaletic feat.

**H**OWEVER, to get back to cases, the old boy shook a better skii the next day and was all the life of the party. To say he talked about it is like saying birds fly; by afternoon I was bawling Gus out for not finding my earmuffs. In fact the old eardrums were still aching from the strain when J. Franklin calls me up and wises me that he's due on deck the next day.

The result is that I sets out good and early next morning, leaving my patient in the hands of Gus, for I gotta five mile hike ahead of me and the traveling promises to be slow. Nevertheless, I make it in good time and find the sleigh ready, with fifteen miles to go to the station.

J. Franklin is the only person to get off the train and to say he greets me is to say it mild. Anyhow, he quiets down after a while and lets me slip him all the news.

"Fine!" he says. "So I can gather him up and get back for the evening train—you know the schedule has been changed!"

"No," I says. "I hardly knows what day of the week it is."

"Haw-haw!" he laughs. "You certainly know the banks are open tomorrow!"

"Haw-haw!" I laughs myself. "I'll say so—specially if I gets that bonus you—"

"That will all be arranged in the city tomorrow," he interrupts. "Of course you're coming down on the train with us?"

"If I miss it," I tells him, "it'll be because meanwhile my legs is cut off."

After some more conversations of this sort we gets set and is on our way. I attend to the driving, which is mostly uphill, but we make fairly good time.

"Now," says Manners as we draw in sight of the house, "you just sit pretty in the sleigh while I gather up the old man and his baggage! You see," he explains, "I don't know how he'll receive me and I'd rather have it out with him alone. You know," he ends, "how it is about these family affairs."

With that I stops at the gate, as he asks me, and lets him shoot to the house by his-

self. For a time I just sit there figuring out how much the kitty will be with that bonus added; and then I starts to spend some of it. I'm just treating myself to one of them red devil roadsters, I remember, when I hears voices from somewhere around the house.

"You'll give me your word of honor," I hears the voice of J. Franklin say, "or you'll not leave here!"

They is a silence for a minute and then old Tuttle speaks.

"Very well," he says. "I'll give you my word of honor!"

"And the money?" asks Manners.

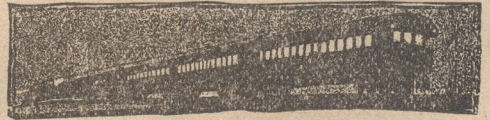
"I'll credit you with a hundred thousand, as I said," remarks his rich relative like it hurts. "All you have to do is call at the office tomorrow afternoon!"

"What time?" asks J. Franklin.

"Three o'clock!" answers the old boy after a while. "Now you have my word—suppose you keep yours!"

"All right," says Manners as if they is a load off his mind. Then he adds something, but they're moving toward the front of the house and I can't make it.

Of course that has me thinking. And I'm still thinking about it when the two of 'em round into sight, followed by Gus, armed with the old gent's bag and one of mine. A minute later my pair of relatives is parked in the sleigh and it's time to go. The old boy crowds off by hisself in a corner, gives J. Franklin a dirty look and



closes up like a oyster. And he's still as noisy five hours later when we pulls into Grand Central.

"Tomorrow at three!" is what he says to Manners. "And bring your friend along!"

**I**T'S ALL of 2:30 the next afternoon when Manners and me make for downtown in a hired taxi. He's nervous—I can tell that without looking at his palm—and for some reason or other my condition is the same. No kidding, I could no more account for it than I could the holes in Swiss cheese, for J. Franklin has told me a hundred times, if he's told me once, that my jack is as safe as the scalp on my head. Nevertheless, there I was with an ingrown hunch that all was not to be fair weather when us guys got to-



gether, as the poet sayest, and I had no more reason for it than you has for setting your grandma on fire.

Howsomever, that said hunch was lost in the shuffle as soon as we strikes the office. For, the minute Manners passes his card to the young bozo with the cheaters on, he gets a bow that a president is entitled to.

"Just wait here a moment, Mac," says J. Franklin as the young bird pases him through the gate with another one of them special salaams.

"Sure," I says, staking myself to a place on a bench. Then I tries to collect some of my thoughts which is geting mixed up like the kitten's yarn. One thought I located, though, is that this don't look like Kid Tuttle is retired any more than a owl. And another is that it ain't no name of a grocery firm I has seen on the door.

"Good Gosh!" I nearly yells. "It was the All Americas Smelting——!"

Then that gate crashes open, somebody grabs me by the arm, and I discovers myself in the corridor gazing into the purple face of J. Franklin Manners.

"The old thief!" he hisses, waving a paper in the air. "I might have known he was a crook!"

"Wh-what? Wh-who?" I gasps out as I sees a coupla big guys, all grins, easing up behind him.

"Bah!" chokes Manners like he's outa his head. "Credits me with a hundred thousand!" he cries wildly, waving that same paper in front of my face, "and then charges me with a half million he's lost in the stock market while he's away. See there!" he ends, frothing at the mouth. "He claims I owe him four hundred thousand! Ha-ha! Ha-ha-ha



—ha-ha-ha! I never saw that much——"

"I—I thought he was retired!" I butts in, kinda dazed by all the happenings.

"You're crazy!" cries Manners likes he's lost his head completely. "That old crook Vanderpool wouldn't retire as long as there's a dollar left for him to steal!"

"Cut that!" suddenly chips in one of those two birds which have been easing up from the rear. "You're crazy—kidnaping a man like Vanderpool! Why, you used to be a good crook!"

"Sweet pickles!" I yells, or similar words. "Old Vanderpool! Then the old bird wasn't cuckoo after all!" For a minute I feels like I'm coming up for the third time. "Let him loose!" I calls after them

two babies which are leading J. Franklin toward the elevator. "Let me at that guy and I'll knock him for a row of graveyards!"

"Easy now!" comes another voice. Then my arms is grabbed and I realizes I've collected a coupla huskies of my own. "Turn your baby loose—if he promises to behave!" calls one of my guys to the pair with Manners. Then he turns on me. "Now come on, McGurk," he says suddenly. "The big noise wants to see you in his office!"

**I**T WASN'T more than fifteen minutes I sat between them two dicks in the little office, waiting for the word from John J. Vanderpool, but it seemed like as many years and I could feel the old hair turning white. I saw it all by that time, for the papers had been full of stories about the hundred thousand old Vanderpool had offered to anyone what could cure him of dyspepsia. And that was only half true, one of the dicks told me while we was waiting. The crack about the hundred grand was only the pipe of some reporter. Oh, what a dumbbell, what a dumbbell was I, as the poet singest!"

However, I'm still breathing my last when that young bozo with the trick magnifiers breezes in and gives the high sign. A minute later I'm in a office about as big as my gym, facing little old John J. Vanderpool.

"Just as you thought, Mr. Vanderpool," says one of the dicks at my side. "This party was in on it!"

"I wasn't sure," says the old boy dryly. Then he gives me a sly look. "How do you feel?" he inquires.

"Not so good—not so good!" says I.

"I shouldn't wonder," he comes back in the same voice. After which he gives me the once over like a professional trainer. "I think you need a rest!" he ends.

"A rest!" I starts.

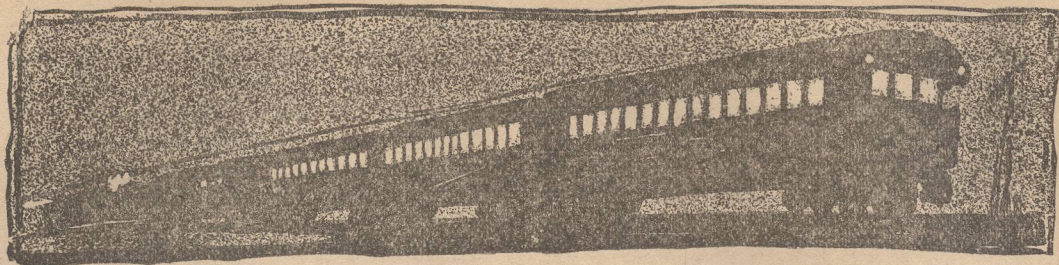
"Yes," he says, serious as a judge, "I sentence you to two months' rest!" Then he suddenly smiles. "I also sentence myself," he goes on.

"Wh-where is we bound for?" I kinda chokes.

For answer he picks up a slip of paper, looks at it, and then passes it to me. It's a check and the figures on it makes the old bean spin.

"I haven't quite made up my mind, McGurk," he laughs. Then he gives me a dig in the ribs I feels the next day. "Maybe the Canary Isles—on my yacht"





# WHO SUPS WITH THE DEVIL

By WILLIAM M. STUART

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IN A RAILWAY MAIL CAR, SPEEDING THROUGH THE NIGHT, CHIEF CLERK BIGGINS MEETS A SITUATION THAT ENTIRELY DISRUPTS HIS SMOOTH ROUTINE—A SITUATION THAT WEIGHS HIS LITTLE FORCE IN THE BALANCE AND FINDS SOME WANTING

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**G**AYLORD RANTON took his grip from the transfer office, kicked viciously at a little, masterless dog, glanced back over his shoulder and entered the postal car, drawn up for loading at the terminal platform. His sagging jaw, shifty eyes and puckered brow indicated that he was one who was dissatisfied with his job.

"We're up against it today, Rant," was barked at him by Biggins, the excitable little clerk in charge, as Ranton slatted his suitcase on the distributing table. "Brown's on his vacation, and Simpson's sick. Coupla green subs out for 'em."

Biggins stopped his frantic hopping about the letter case long enough to shout toward the rear end of the car, "Up this way, men. This fellow'll show you what to do." He puffed vigorously on his reeking pipe. "Good Lord! Two absolutely raw substitutes, and it's Thursday night at that—the heaviest in the week. The Office sure has gone nutty."

He glanced at two official letters lying open before him on the table. "Mr. Ranton," he announced formally, "this is Mr. J. H. Granteer, who is to work Brown's vacation. I believe he said he'd never been in a postal car before. Didn't you, Granteer?"

"Yes, sir," answered a tall, pale-faced fellow of about twenty-five years of age. "I was appointed only last week." His sharp blue eyes searched Ranton's face appraisingly. "I hope you'll be easy with me, Mr. Ranton. I haven't much of an idea what a railway postal clerk has to do, nor how he does it. But I'm willing to learn."

"Sounds good," sneered Ranton. "We'll get on famously. What was your job? Schoolteacher or telegraph operator? Mostly they're one or the other."

"Neither, in my case. I was an organizer of Sunday Schools in the rural districts, but I thought this job would pay better, and the romance of the life appealed to me."

"Huh! You won't get rich on the job, I'll tell the world. And as for romance, there's as much about this life as there is in working on the track. You're in wrong, friend—take it from me."

"And this one," fussed Biggins, "is Mr., er, Ralph Dunmore. He's to run for Simpson until said Simp gets well, and returns to duty."

"Glad to know you, Mr. Ranton," boomed a strongly-built man of perhaps thirty, who advanced confidently and held out a paw the size of a small ham. "I'll help you skin 'em tonight. I was appointed two months ago, and have worked a few trips on the Shore Line." He laughed. "I know the difference between a sack and a pouch, and I'm sure you don't throw letters into the bags loose like the cartoons have it."

"Fine!" smiled Ranton sarcastically. "Here's a guy who can at least lock a pouch or face up daily papers. What was your job?"

"Farming. And I thank you for not noticing it. I supposed I couldn't conceal the fact that I was a rube."

"Well, men," announced Ranton, "as the boss, Mr. Biggins, has his own troubles, as usual, I'll take you in tow. While I'm changing my clothes you fellows hang



the rack. You know what that means, Dunmore. Dump those sacks of empties back there in the storage end, and hang the rack—both sides of the aisle—fourteen sacks to a section. Get me?"

"You bet," snapped Dunmore. "Follow me, Granteer." He placed his coat in the closet, donned a jumper and seized a bag of supplies. "I'll show you how to become a regular postal clerk. Hold your mouth just right, and hang the sacks with the label-holders on the outside—like this. The first space single, the next double. Do you savvy?"

As Ranton slowly changed his garments, a brilliant idea shot through his mind, and caused him to fairly hug himself with sudden joy. Now was the long hoped-for opportunity!

As the weary searcher for a promised land stands on a mountain top and gazes



at rich meads and sparkling streams below; as the inventor who has at last perfected the final combination which will bring him fame and fortune; as the artist about to complete his masterpiece—so gloated Gaylord Ranton as he reflected that his golden moment had come.

"I'll have to handle the registers, of course," said he with a thrill in his voice as he turned to Biggins. "It wouldn't be safe to trust either of these fellows with 'em. They'd lose some of 'em, likely."

"Sure, go ahead," snorted Biggins impatiently. "Run it to suit yourself. I've got more'n I can handle. It's up to you."

He refilled his pipe with a strange and odorless blend, and nervously began to distribute letters into the case. "The Office boneheads!" he growled, "to put green subs on a run like this. Why didn't they order out some regular men? If we go stuck, I'll report it. It's up to them. I'll not take the blame."

He snorted with disgust and pranced about the case, his hands trembling with excitement.

Ranton smiled grimly as he took a package of folded labels from his grip, and proceeded to slip the paper-rack; that is, place each printed label in its respective holder over the sack to be designated. The world

had suddenly grown bright, and to Biggins' obvious surprise, Ranton began to whistle cheerily as he worked.

"You're doing fine," he encouraged the new clerks. "We'll show the Office that we can clean up for 'em. Leave it to us, eh?"

He finished slipping both the paper and the pouch racks, inspected them to see whether all the bags were empty, then strode to the side door of the car and shouted to Patty Dolan, the mail porter, who was waiting the signal to begin heaving in the sacks.

"Throw 'er in, Patty, old timer. Fill up the car. We're here first. It's magazine night, but what do we care? We'll eat 'em raw. Toss 'em in."

"Tis yerself that's feelin' good this afternoon, Mither Ranton," quoth Patty.

"Hev ye jist been promoted, or did yez find a little hootch somewhere? If ye did the lasht, I'd be thankin' ye fer a dhrop of it meself."

"Neither one, Patty, old top, but who knows what's in the future? Let's live in hopes of both. In the meantime here's a quarter for you. When you go off duty—Well, you know what to do, Pat."

"Tis a fine upshtanding young man yez are, sur, and I'll be takin' yer advice, I'm thinkin'. Here's to yer health—I'll dr-r-ink it later. I thrust you'll git what you want and that dom soon, sur. I thank ye."

Ranton's manner inspired the subs to greater activity, and the work progressed well considering the circumstances. Granteer had made a mistake in hanging his portion of the rack and had to do it over, but Dunmore seemed to show special aptitude for the work.

Ranton now set Granteer at unlocking the pouches and arranging the letter packages in rows on the distributing table, while he alternated as distributor—first at one rack, then the other. At intervals all three men gathered at the door as fresh dispatches of mail were received from the General Post Office and the connecting trains.

The September day drew to its close, and at last there was a bump, as a switch engine coupled on to the postal car, jerkily hauled it away from the platform, coursed over clattering switches, and finally crashed it into place at the head of Number 3 standing in the train shed.

Jenkins, the transfer clerk, hopped into





the car, and a porter threw in after him two red-and-white striped pouches, secured with large brass locks.

"You handling the reds tonight, Rant?" inquired Jenkins. "Of course you are, with half the crew green timber. Well, I've got a dose for you." He lowered his voice. "And there's a big shipment of kale, too. I got it straight that the National Reserve's shipping half a million tonight. But, of course, no one on the outside knows it, so everything'll be o. k. Sign on both sheets. So long."

He sprang lightly out of the car as a warning toot came from the engine, and a shudder ran through the train.

At the paper door of the car the substitutes were having the time of their young lives. The last dispatch, heavier than usual, had arrived at about leaving time, and under the promptings of the officious station-master the porters were making the sacks fly as they heaved them into the car.

The new men had been heroically trying to prevent a congestion, but at last, bewildered and covered with perspiration, they stood and gazed at each other helplessly. The sacks and pouches were piled all about them to the height of their waists, the aisles and doors were choked, and several sacks fell out as the train slowly gathered momentum, and rolled away from the station.

"How you coming?" greeted Ranton as he placed the registered mail to one side, and sprang to their assistance. "Do you still like the romance of the life, Granteer?"

Granteer's normally pale face was flushed with exertion as he replied between puffs, "It seems to me more like work. Lord! I didn't realize you fellows had to work like this."

"Just like it used to be up in the top of dad's haymow when they were piling the hay in with a horsefork on a July afternoon," gasped the sturdy Dunmore as he wiped his face on the back of his sleeve. "I believe I'll get to like it, though. A fellow ought to work up a good appetite on this job."

"Well, you fellows have enough to occupy your attention while I look after the registered mail," laughed Ranton. "Pile the direct sacks, and then get busy with the dailies. The boss'll have to distribute the pouches. I'll be back in a few minutes to help you."

He returned to the pouch section of the seventy-foot car, unlocked the registered

pouches, and sorted out their valuable contents on the table. His heart beat high with gladness. Could fate have possibly been more kind? Fussy little Biggins had all he could do; the subs were bewildered, tired and wholly unsuspecting. He could work unobserved. It was one hour's run to Lakemore, the first stop. The schedule time there was 9 p. m.

Selecting the more valuable packages—and he concluded Jenkins' information had been correct—he would place them, unobserved, in an empty pouch, put the pouch into a vacant letter-package box under the table and—be ready for the finale.

After the train stopped at Lakemore, he should announce to the subs that he would get the letters from the depot box, as they were unfamiliar with its location. He would then take the pouch, ostensibly empty, but in fact richly laden, and leave the car. All would think the bag was merely to hold the letters from the box. Then he would just naturally fade away with his fortune made. It was absurdly simple.

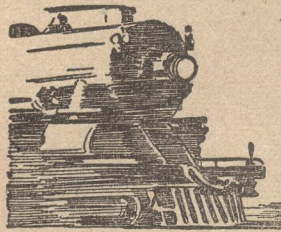
And no pangs of conscience stabbed him.

When he failed to return, Biggins, good old soul, would think he had merely got left and would, therefore, conceal his absence as long as possible, thinking the registry clerk would take the next train and arrive at the terminal in time to bring his run back. He would have at least twelve hours for his getaway. And then, in some distant locality, he would be rich. Oh, boy! After all these years, success was at last at hand.

"Nothing can stop me now," he breathed as he returned to the paper table and resumed his distribution. He had made his selection of the packages, and hidden them as planned.

So engrossed did he become with his pleasant visions that he almost forgot the presence of the men who were perspiring, one on either side of him. Ranton worked with the mechanical accuracy and speed born of long experience, though his mind was far away. Minutes passed and the accumulated stack of daily papers rapidly diminished.

It would not be necessary to leave the country, thought Ranton. In some remote section of the state he could establish himself as a country gentleman, secure all the





comforts of life and forget that he had ever been a postal clerk.

His reverie was interrupted by the sound of the pounding engine, which indicated the train had struck the steep grade of Shawn-gook Mountain. A climb of perhaps twenty minutes, then a rush down the further slope, and they would be at Lakemore. It was time he began to get his things in order.

He rather hoped the Office would not be too rough on old Biggins, for failing to report his absence promptly. But then, that was Biggins's lookout. If he took a chance it was up to him.

"Keep on facing the papers up, men," he said as he started toward the letter case. "I've got some registers for Lakemore to write up. And I'll tap the letter box there. You guys would get lost in the dark trying to find it."

Ranton glanced at his chief, who was frantically hopping about the distributing case, a cloud of tobacco smoke about his head. Biggins' five feet-two of stature excited Ranton's contempt. "Nervous little devil," he murmured, "he'll never be anything but a postal clerk. But me, I'll

Suddenly a sharp command, "Hands up!" rang out. Ranton whirled in astonishment.

Granteer had advanced to the middle of the car, and was pointing an automatic.



His face was pale as usual, but his blue eyes flashed wickedly.

"Stick 'em up, quick," he barked as he swung his gun first toward

Ranton and then toward Biggins. "I've no time to lose."

Biggins had switched about at the ominous words, dropping his pipe in his excitement. "What in hell?" he roared.

But Granteer snapped, "You see, don't you? Up with 'em or I'll turn my gat loose."

Biggins thrust up his hands with a groan that was echoed by Ranton, but which had its origin in a far different emotion.

"But your commission and orders," gasped the clerk in charge, "they were all right. I don't understand."

"Well, if that's all that's troubling you I'll satisfy your curiosity," returned the bandit agreeably as he swung his pistol

around to include in his sphere of observation the gaping Dunmore. "I keep pretty good tabs on what's going on. I have means of doing that. I knew Brown was to be off duty, so I hung around the terminal until a callow youth showed up with all the earmarks of a green sub. Him I relieved of his commission and orders. Then I came on my way rejoicing—after I had tied, gagged and placed the sub in an empty freight room. They'll find him before he starves. Pretty neat—what?"

"Well, I'll be damned," groaned Biggins as he sank weakly down on the table.

Ranton heard the boasting explanation with a mind stupefied by chagrin and terrible disappointment. As through a glass darkly he saw the confident face of the robber and the frowning muzzle of his gun. To be on the summit of achievement, and then at the last minute be hurled into the depths of failure. "God!" he rasped bitterly.

Then through his brain there rushed a thought pregnant with possibilities.

"See here, Granteer—or whatever your real name is—" he snapped shamelessly, "you're poaching on my preserve. I suppose you don't care, but I'll—I'll make you care!"

The bandit gazed at him curiously. "Well, spill it," he said, "if you've got anything on your mind. But make it snappy!"

"I've been waiting years for this chance," Ranton began half pleadingly. "Things never broke right for me before. Tonight I'm in charge of the registers, and I had it all doped out to make my getaway at Lakemore with the best of them. Now you butt in and spoil it. But I'll tell you what I'll do," he went on hurriedly as his shifty eyes turned from the stupefied countenance of his chief to the face of Dunmore, who was gazing at him, a half-quizzical expression in his eyes. "I'll share fifty-fifty with you."

"The devil!" snorted the robber. "Talk to the marines. But," he continued more slowly as he studied Ranton's face, "I believe part of your yarn. You're a natural-born thief, or I'm a liar. Some of us are crooks through necessity, but I'll bet a ham you were born that way."

"If you don't agree," broke in Ranton, "I'll fight. Then you'll have to shoot me. I don't imagine you want to do that. Besides, I've already hidden the best of the kale. You couldn't find it before we get to Lakemore, and then the jig would be up. What do you say? Is it a go? I'll tie up Biggins and that rube sub for you.



You'd better make up your mind. It's a short run to Lakemore."

He avoided looking at his clerk in charge, but he could feel Biggins's look of scorn.

Granteer wavered. "Show me where you put the stuff," he finally said, "and I'll take a chance on you. My word ought to be as good as yours," he continued sharply as he noted suspicion in Ranton's eye. "It's honor between thieves."

Without another word Ranton stooped and plucked the pouch from the box under the table. "Here it is, then," he announced. "Now who'll I tie first?"

His back was toward Granteer, but as he spoke he glanced over his shoulder nervously as he was wont to do. His line of vision took in the robber, peering with cupidity at the treasure, and Dunmore standing by the paper rack, twenty feet away.

The words had scarcely left Ranton's lips when he saw the rube jerk something from his pocket, straighten his arm and—there came a flash and a sharp report.

The bandit's right hand, which clutched his pistol, dropped, the weapon clattered to the floor, and he staggered back against the pouch rack. His face was the color of wet ashes, and blood dripped from his arm.

"You, Ranton, stick 'em up—quick!" menaced Dunmore as he advanced along the aisle. "Biggins, just tie your registry clerk, will you?"

"With the greatest pleasure," proclaimed Biggins as he mechanically fumbled for his pipe. "But who are you? Another one?"

"Not another thief," smiled Dunmore grimly. "I'm D. T. Oliver, Post Office in-

spector." Then, "You know the old proverb, Ranton"—as he glared at the registry clerk—"Who sups with the devil should have a long spoon."

All Ranton's pent up emotion burst forth in a soulful groan as he thrust his hands aloft. But fussy little Biggins permitted himself a smile.

"I suppose that next I'll discover I'm Nick Carter, Sherlock Holmes or Old Sleuth in disguise. But as I'm naturally a trifle interested in this case, I'd like you to tell me how, why, which and when you did it."

"There's very little to tell," said the inspector easily. "Having looked up his antecedents, we suspected Ranton of the petty thieving that's been going on for some time on this line. However, we hadn't been able to get the goods on him. Well, as we knew Brown was to be off duty, we arranged for Simpson to get sick so I could appear as another substitute and thus cause Ranton to be temporary registry clerk. We figured that if he got a whack at the registers he'd fall and fall hard. And so it turned out. I saw him conceal the packages and I intended to arrest him when he attempted to leave the car with them.

"But our guest here"—indicating the bandit—"opened the ball. I'll confess that he put one over on me. I hadn't the slightest idea but what he was the real Granteer, Brown's sub. However, I came out of it in time, caught him napping for a moment and—here we are."

With the hissing of steam the train jarred to a stop in front of the Lakemore depot. Oliver stepped to the door and whistled sharply. Followed the sound of running feet.

"Hop in, Mike," shouted the inspector. "Got an extra pair of darbies? I caught one more fish than I was planning on."



## A PERSONAL INTERVIEW

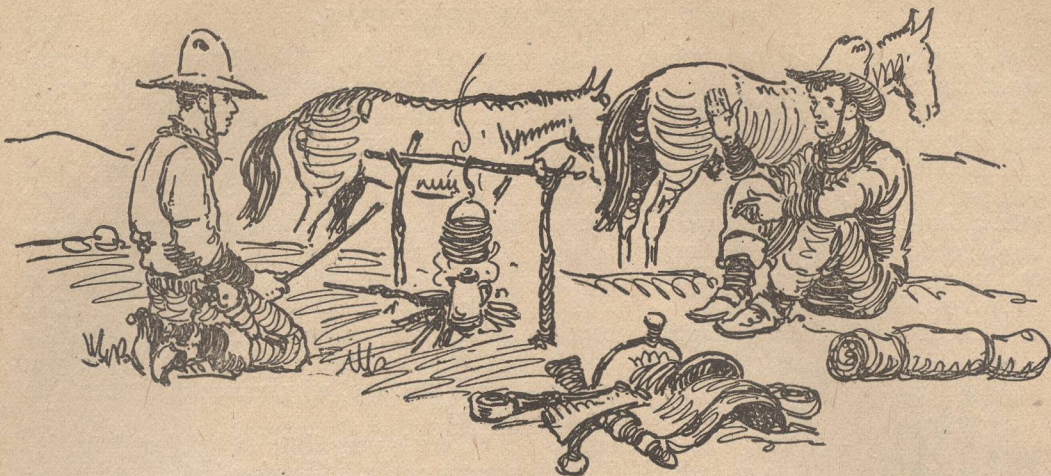
A new "Major" story by

L. PATRICK GREENE

From his city office, surrounded by files and scrap books of crime, Whispering Smith lays his plans to snare the Major. And while his enemies draw the net about him the Major feeds corn to the pigeons.

*In the Next Number*





## IN THE STORY TELLERS' CIRCLE

### BEGINNINGS OF THE GREAT CATTLE DRIVES

AT THE same time as the great westward movement of civilization which peopled the western states and gave us a gigantic drama which will live eternally in the pages of American history, there was another movement from South to North, not of humanity, primarily, but of cattle. Over several well blazed trails extending from the Rio Grande almost to the Canadian border, literally, millions of cattle were driven in the 60's. Just as the westward migration of settlers has placed its stamp on the whole aspect of the United States, so these great cattle drives placed their stamp upon the aspect of the West.

Naturally, every herd was accompanied by a certain number of cowboys, wranglers, foremen, cooks, etc. Traveling thus for months on end, the drives made of the American cowboy a cosmopolitan wanderer. He was equally familiar with the *fiesta* of a Mexican town and the Bad Lands of Wyoming. It carried the customs, methods, and speech of the Southern plains into the North. Indeed, the language of the cowboy was for years, and to a certain extent still is, the drawling southern speech of the Texas plains.

Even more important was the Spanish influence which the cattle drives exerted all through the West. The Spanish ranchers had developed their methods of grazing and their scale of living to a high point and on the vast *haciendas* of Mexico were comforts and refinements not to be found anywhere in the frontier territories. Thus, in spite of their racial antipathy to the Mexicans and Spaniards, the western cat-

tlemen learned many things in Mexico which they carried with them on the cattle drives. The Spanish influence thus imported, may still be seen in the names of towns, rivers, mountains, etc., and in certain methods and words which western cattlemen inherited from the South.

However, cattle raising is a business and the drives were made to find a market for beef in the growing population of the North.

According to J. R. Johnston of Ann Arbor, Michigan, who has made an exhaustive study of pioneer history, the Government in the 60's was faced with a tremendous problem in feeding the Indians who had been herded on the reservations. Consequently, in 1866, Joe Loving, seeking a new market for his Texas cattle, drove a large herd across the Staked Plains and up the Pecos River to the Indian agencies of New Mexico and Colorado. The route lay through hostile Indian territory and over desert strips where grass and water were unobtainable. One herd was to be delivered to Ft. Sumner Indian Agency on the upper Pecos. With a man named Jim Scott, Loving went ahead to study the ground and complete arrangements for the delivery of his cattle. The pair were ambushed by a party of Comanche Indians and Loving was shot through the thigh, the bullet breaking the bone. The two cattlemen took refuge in a hole under the bank of the river and fought off the Indians until nightfall when Scott made a dash for help. Loving, fearing that Scott had been killed, stole past the Comanche sentinels and was later found by a Mexican freighting outfit and was brought back to his own camp. He died as a result of



his injury but his route was firmly established and, in the next twenty years, more than six million cattle were driven over this and the overland trail to the Mormon settlers, to the Indian agencies and to other settlements as far north as Utah, Wyoming and Montana.

### THE COAST GUARD

**W**E. CARLTON, who lives within a stone's throw of where the Pilgrim Fathers stepped ashore and who writes such bully stories of the rockbound northern Atlantic Coast, has given us, in "The Box Trap," a very real story of one of the most heroic branches of the government service; that is, the Coast Guard, which, year in and year out, patrols the shore for sign of ships in distress and, no matter how high the seas, goes out in the work of rescuing lives and property. Speaking of his story and particularly of one of the little illustrations which accompanied it, Mr. Carlton recently said:

The coast guard station in the picture resembles the old style station, such as was standing at Monomoy when the whole life-saving crew was lost. Only one who has stayed at the station on a windy, bleak night knows what a desolate place it is. At Peaked Hill Bars, near Provincetown, the blowing sand has ground the glass of the windows so that one cannot see out. Every year new glass has to be set in the windows of the tower.

If any branch of the government service deserves better treatment, it is the Coast Guard. They are paid less than one hundred dollars a month and must serve thirty-five years before they get a pension. Few last that long. Nearly every retired coast guardsman is almost blind, due to the sand that gouges his eyes on patrol.

I expect to leave soon on a three weeks' sword-fishing trip with Captain Bob Jackson who is off Georges Banks now.

### A NEWCOMER

**W**ILLIAM M. STUART, author of "Who Sups With the Devil," in this issue, is a newcomer to the pages of **SHORT STORIES**. He, too, has an unusual tale of a branch of the government service which has in it a great deal more romance and adventure than ever appears on the surface. If you haven't read his story of the United States Railway Mail, by all means do so. Mr. Stuart is postmaster at Canisteo, New York, and before that spent seventeen years in the railway mail service. Of the story he says:

The setting of this story is the route with which I am so familiar; and the terminal where the story opens is the Erie station at Jersey City. The character, Biggin, is drawn from real life and the original was one of the finest gentlemen that I have ever known. The plot itself is

wholly imaginary, but might easily happen under the circumstances given.

### A LOOK AHEAD

**I**F WE ever did an issue full of your favorite authors, the next number is the one. It starts out with the first instalment—and a long one—of Clarence E. Mulford's new serial under the stirring title of "Rustlers' Valley." Here is a story that is even more exciting than "Tex Ewalt," or "Black Buttes," and it has a great many of the attributes which made Mr. Mulford's stories of "Hopalong Cassidy" and "Johnny Nelson" so popular. It is the tale of a cowpuncher wrongly accused—framed up by his enemies, who flees for his life into a new country in the Southwest where he is unknown. Just in passing, it may be worth noting that every one of Mr. Mulford's serials appear in book form at \$1.75 or \$2.00, whereas you get them complete in two, three, or four big instalments in **SHORT STORIES**.

Our old friend, the Major, is back with us in another African story by L. Patrick Greene.

There will be two long novels in this issue by your favorites. One of them, "The Ice Pirates" by Frank Richardson Pierce, is an adventure story of Bering Sea. H. Bedford-Jones gives us a novelette of China entitled "The Black Dragon."

There will be Western stories by Edwin Hunt Hoover, H. C. Wire, and Murray Leinster; a baseball story by Bill Brandt, the famous Philadelphia sport writer; another of Ullman's inimitable "Mr. Ruddy" stories, and a racing story by Jack O'Donnell.

### THE MAIL BAG

**I**T'S always pleasant to be told that one knows what one's talking about—that is by people who know what *they're* talking about. It's just as pleasant to hear that your magazine knows what it's talking about. As for instance:

Editor, **SHORT STORIES**,

DEAR SIR:

I have been a reader of **SHORT STORIES** for about ten months and think I ought to let you know how well I like it. I have always lived in the West and never have been farther East than the Colorado line. I have always lived on a stock ranch and I know that your range land stories are true to type.

Stories which have especially interested me are: "Cowboy," by J. Allan Dunn; "The Parowan Bonanza," by Bower; "Crossed Wires," "Hawkeye Sam's Banking," "The Road to Monterey," "Beauty, Brains and Luck," "Fires of Fate," "Anybody Can Work," and "The Proof of Progress."

Say, the last issue was the best yet! And the



pony express race story is the peer of the whole issue.

Yours truly,  
CHARLES BURKE,  
Blue Ribbon Ranch,  
Siloam Route,  
Pueblo, Colo.

And here is a reader who has traveled both farther and wider, who cheers us along the same line.

Editor, SHORT STORIES,

DEAR SIR:

Have read SHORT STORIES for a long time. Don't make any pronounced change in this publication. The writer is in a position to follow some of your stories to the lands of their birth. He was on the China Station, including Philippines, Ladrones, German Carolines and some of the South Sea and Hawaiian Islands, coming home in 1905. Also he knows West Indies, Cuba, Mexico and the entire U. S. Atlantic seaboard and the Texas cow country; also southern edge of Arizona, New Mexico and part of California. Your writers know their subject matter!

Don't ever put the back cover of this publication any nearer the front—leave lots of room between them.

Yours for continued success,

T. K. BROWN,  
106 Spring St.,  
Meriden, Conn.

Here is yet one more of our letters from those who have been "on the spot" of our stories. Its writer will be glad to know that issues of the near future will have stories by both Mr. Bechdolt and Mr. Hendryx—a wonderful serial by the latter.

Editor, SHORT STORIES,

DEAR SIR:

I am sending in Readers' Choice Coupon and want to say a word of praise to the good magazine SHORT STORIES. I like all the good North stories that come in it, especially the Alaska stories because I spent two years up there and I know an Alaskan story when I read one.

I want to give James B. Hendryx a good word of praise for "North!" It sure was fine. That is the country I was in. I hope he comes again with another soon. Jack Bechdolt and T. Von Ziekursch are sure swell North story writers also.

An ardent reader,  
WILLIAM L. KEEFER,  
Vancouver, Washington.

Another thing that pleases us is to be able to give exactly the story that somebody wants. In the near future, for example, will appear another fire department story, "The Other Captain Steel," by Mr. Detzer, the author of "A Pinch of Powder," and we only wish we had as good a "policeman" story, just to make a clean sweep in pleasing this writer:

Editor, SHORT STORIES,

DEAR SIR:

Your persistent request for criticism of stories, presented in your magazine, SHORT STORIES, affords the excuse for this letter. I do not enclose the coupon, for the reason that few if any stories you print lower the general standard of all. If there is one good reason for the popularity of SHORT STORIES so far as I am concerned it is this very fact. Your readers of MSS. submitted, must be excellent judges to secure this uniform quality and they merit the thanks of your patronage.

There is, however, one vein of interesting fiction which appears to be neglected and that is concerned with our various police and fire departments. We have detective stories galore, but the humble police officer has been sadly neglected; and it would seem that the life of a fireman would afford adventure worth while. Could you not persuade some of your contributors to put some such officials into interesting fiction?

Thanking you for your interesting twice-a-month magazine, I am,

Very respectfully yours,  
S. J. FORT, M. D.,  
La Plata, Charles Co.,  
Maryland.

**DON'T FORGET THE COUPON! CUT IT OUT TODAY AND LET US KNOW YOUR OPINION OF THE STORIES IN THIS NUMBER**

### READERS' CHOICE COUPON

"Readers' Choice" Editor, SHORT STORIES:

Garden City, N. Y.

My choice of the stories in this number is as follows:

- |         |         |
|---------|---------|
| 1 _____ | 3 _____ |
| 2 _____ | 4 _____ |
| 5 _____ |         |

I do not like:

\_\_\_\_\_ Why? \_\_\_\_\_

NAME \_\_\_\_\_ ADDRESS \_\_\_\_\_



Enjoy thirst~



At a cool and cheerful place, he rules with a smile of welcome. He's quick with his hands and quick with his thought, and he knows how to serve just what you want~ when you come in all thirsty and hot.

Drink

**Coca-Cola**  
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Delicious and Refreshing



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An attractive pair of cuff links, a useful thimble, and a book of "Facts" about Coca-Cola, beautifully illustrated.

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Enclosed find 10c, stamps or coin, covering postage and packing, for which send me the 1923 Coca-Cola souvenirs—the cuff links, the thimble and the book, "Facts."

Name.....Street Address.....

City.....State.....



# Black Jack

Chewing Gum

*"Good old  
licorice flavor!"*

