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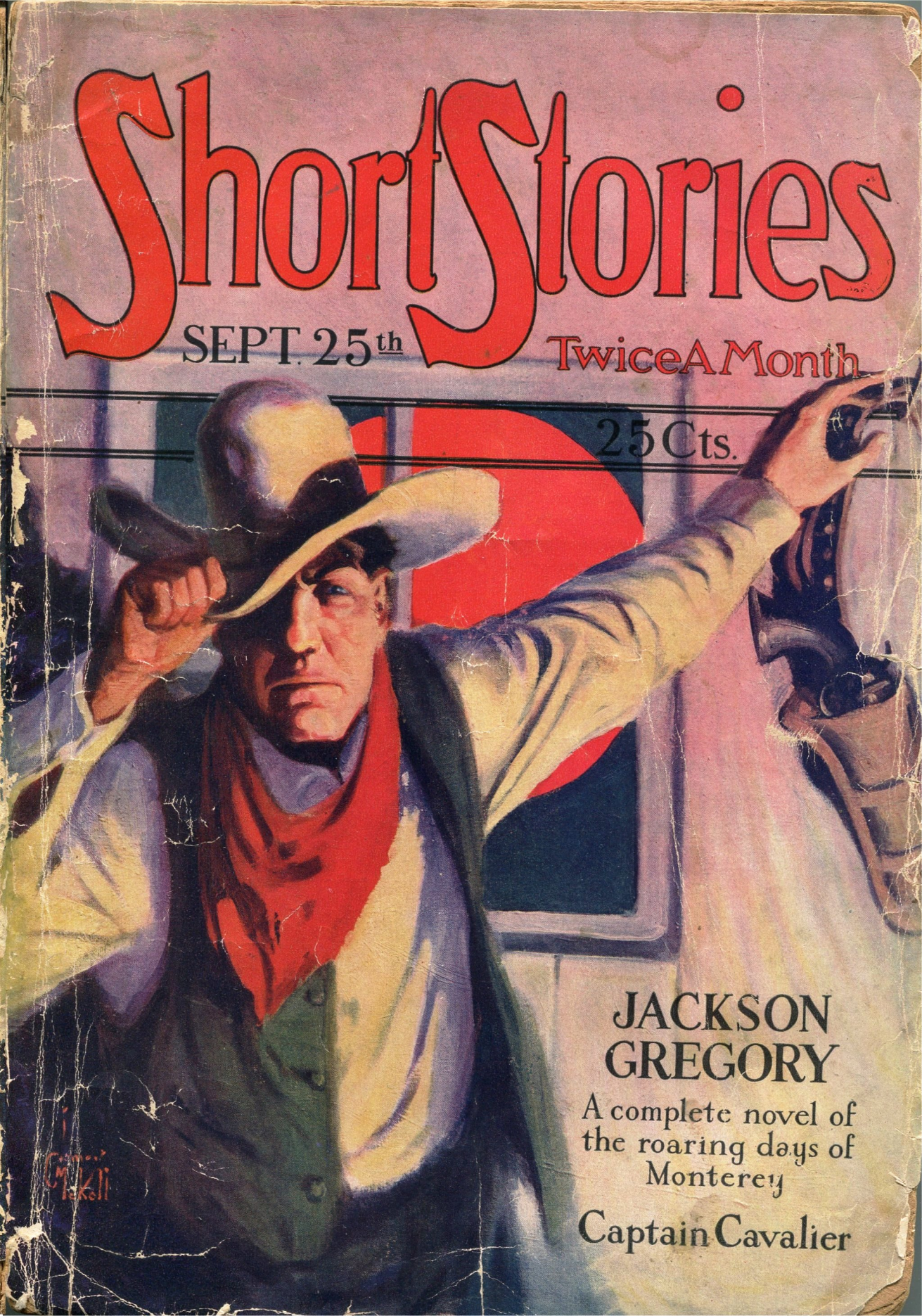

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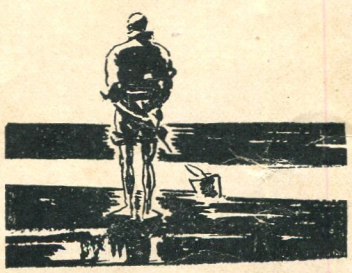

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Short Stories

Vol. CXVI. No. 6 — Whole No. 499

HARRY E. MAULE
EDITOR

D. McILWRAITH
ASSOCIATE EDITOR

CAPTAIN OF YOUR SOUL

I AM the captain of my soul." Well, am I? Are any of us? Can we poor humans bound by a thousand fetters of necessity, duty, loyalty, convention, do just what we want to do? It's a fascinating and an unending realm of discussion. Of course you can end it all by saying yes, surely anyone can do just what he wants to do if he is ruthless in ignoring his duty to individuals and to society. But is that the end of it, really? We think not. Take the person who is utterly ruthless in following his own bent, who overrides all the obligations to others upon which society is founded. Let that person carry the course to its logical conclusion and what does he get? What he wants? Certainly not. Loneliness, disillusion, despair are at the end of that road.

Yet what is the answer? A person must be the captain of his soul and do what he wants to do to survive as a happy individual. For no one can be happy living a thwarted and distorted life, pulled this way and that by outside conditions, the football of fate and the plaything of every breeze of outside influence. Do we seem to contradict ourselves? Well, we do not mean to, but naturally every philosophical generalization must be applied with common sense and conditioned by the practical considerations that enter into it. There is an element of variation even in most mathematical calculations.

So the point is that what we want to do is the thing that will be the *best* for us and upon which our souls may thrive as well as our fortunes and physical beings. But our own rights when we understand them thoroughly will not, in the long run, interfere with someone else or with society. Thus setting out on a career to be captain of one's soul requires some very thoughtful weighing of issues and conditions, which in itself will add stature to any man.

THE EDITOR.

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In Our Next Issue

October 10th

Out the day it's dated

Part I

JUDGE COLT

A story of the high trails of the cattle country; of the times when Arizona was to "quit hellin' round," and of the birth of courage in a man's soul.

by

William MacLeod Raine

Author of "The Desert's Price," etc.

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TWICE A MONTH **Short Stories** SEPTEMBER 25th 1926

CAPTAIN CAVALIER

By JACKSON GREGORY

Author of "The Desert Thoroughbred," "Catch 'Um Gold," etc.

STIRRING TIMES WERE THOSE OF THE LITTLE TOWN OF MONTEREY IN THE DAYS WHEN THE WEST AND CALIFORNIA WERE YOUNG. AND OF ALL THE ADVENTURERS WHOSE SOULS WERE IN THE MAKING OF CALIFORNIA NONE SO COURAGEOUS, SO WILLING TO DARE, SO QUICK IN ACTION AS THAT GENTLEMAN OF FAR-AWAY VIRGINIA — CAPTAIN CAVALIER

LIKE some bedraggled bird of ill omen, the little man perched on the water butt up-ended in the white sand of the cove, and stared out to sea. Here was Sir Harry, as his fellows called him; Sir Harry Hawk. Since the name was acceptable to them and did not offend him, let it stand. Certain it is that this Sir Harry had found it of advantage to sail under many an alias in his time. And also certain that of a downright rascally crew this Sir Harry Hawk was the most thorough-going rascal of them all.

At once sinister and complacent, he amused himself by playing a light-hearted rat-tat-too upon the cask's staves with his bare and dirty heels, the while he cocked a pair of very small and very bright blue eyes at the shimmering blue of the Pacific. Sir Harry was little by stature, littler by nature; he was as treacherous as quicksand and as cruel; the long knife half hidden among his scanty rags knew every whit as much of the quality of nature as did he. Yet withal he had the one saving grace of a merry heart; when others drew long faces or grew black-browed in rage or despair, he skipped and made his quips or lifted a pure sweet tenor voice in snatches of ribald song. When others lost all hope he made them laugh with his vulgar humor; when, as now, there was little to eat and almost nothing to wear, with November bronzing the acorns and painting scarlet the wild holly berries in the mountains behind him, he gnawed at his raw chapped knuckles and waxed musical. As the sinking sun out yonder caused low banks of sodden fog to shimmer like gossamer gold, so did Sir Harry strive to invest with his own inner radiance the bleak gloom of circumstance engulfing him and his companions.

"A man goes to sea in a ship," mused Sir Harry complacently. "The ship goes

to smash on the rocks. Well, what happens? What wreckage floats ashore goes into our fires to keep us warm. That's good. In the same wreck we lose our captain and half the crew, drowned in a dozen fathom of stormy water. Bad for them. Lucky for me. I make myself captain. *That's* good. Cast away on the rocks of California where we had counted upon coming full armed, pillaging; well, at any rate, we've got our heels in California soil."

He spun about, spurned his cask—it was ever Sir Harry's way to bestow a farewell kick upon anything he no longer needed—and while the cask rolled one way he strode off another. Close under a steep cliff in a space further sheltered by big black rocks, blazed a bonfire brightening all about it, even to the score of sinister figures gathering closer as the sunset air grew chillier. A pretty motley they made, these castaways from the ill-fated vessel that had gone down in a storm some miserable weeks before; all that were left of a crew of the whilom saucy little craft which, given to dark and devious ways had borne in her time as many names as even Sir Harry himself.

But though now she had become an adventuring ground for scuttling crab and swift steering fish, one might guess something of her from one good look at this motley of men who had made home of her deck. Through the rags and tatters and oddly fashioned garments of deerskins, their brown and black and yellow hides proclaimed them for what they were; riff-raff from widely scattered unsavory ports of the world. Bringing a fresh log for the fire was a huge Kanaka, naked to the waist, his dark body gleaming. Squatting at an outer rim of coals in a pair of sandals made of pieces of wood and strips of deerhide a Chinaman, almost as big a man as Kanaka George, was roasting acorns. He had got ashore with a brace of pistols, beautiful duelling instruments which had come overseas at an earlier date upon the debonaire person of a young Spanish dandy.

There was an Irishman from Cork—long, long from Cork—whom they called Paddy, one who had a voice like an angry parrot's and who swore in seven tongues and was never known to have a happy thought or a cheerful word for man or beast. There was a native boy not over ten or twelve evil years of age whom they had stolen from an unnamed island in the far South Seas to be cabin boy and aid to the cook; a gaunt, hollow-eyed, crinkly haired son of Satan who had already knifed his man in the back.

Sir Harry Hawk, standing with hand on hip, a thumb crooked jauntily about the wooden handle of his curved knife, regarded these and their companions. Hunger, that was what irked them. Inactivity on top of that. Lack of the cozy comforts to which such gentlemen as his were accustomed: deep feather beds at times of successful sacking of defenceless little ports, unlimited sweet wines and cakes and Spanish *dulces;* all those exquisite delights to win and squander which they risked their hides and the palely glimmering spirits dwelling within. Yes, they were getting bored.

"Where's Nosegay?" he bugled at them, his clear voice lifted in opposition to the dull sullen roar of the breakers along the white beach. "Has he come in yet? Has he sent word?"

"No come," said the Kanaka sullenly, as the others were silent.

"Sent no word?"

"No," growled George.

Sir Harry withdrew, very watchful all the while. When he deemed it safe to spin on his heel he turned his back upon the disgruntled residue of his former captain's crew, setting his face toward the thick timbered mountains rising so steeply from the shoreline. The pines and redwoods high up yonder stood still bathed in the golden glory of the sun.

He scrambled up a cliff, hooking his toes in crevices, following a familiar way. Climbing upward as agilely as a monkey he was soon at the top of the cliffs and on the steep but not so sheer flank of the mountain. Here was a crooked path trodden by the feet of his own men and he hurried along up among trees and boulders. He appeared to ascend as rapidly as the sun descended. Shadows thickened down there among the jagged black rocks while he mounted into a region of golden light and soft shadows.

A little dove crooned softly; he saw its pearly iridescent beauty where its pretty pink feet clung to a dead limb; his eyes gleamed hungrily. A dozen rods farther on he startled an antlered buck which flung up its noble head, sniffed and trotted away into the mysterious precincts of a darkening wood; at the sight the saliva actually drooled from the corners of Sir Harry's mouth. To go hungry when these forested uplands were fat with savory game!

"The devil roast me this black Spanish

Don," he growled savagely. For, put him off by himself, with none to regard, and Sir Harry could cast as evil a look as any.

Such were his haste and the tireless vigor of his spare body he was on the crest of a certain ridge while the sunlight still spattered the black earth with mosaics. From here one had a wide expanse of view; limitlessly to seaward; to considerable broken distances in the east. He stopped, set his two forefingers in his mouth and whistled long and shrilly. Before the echo died an answering whistle came from the wood at his left. And after the call emerged Nosegay himself.

He was a good humored dunce of a fellow; a glance told it. Not a fool entirely, but one who grinned often and vacantly, whose big body had seemingly developed at the expense of his brain and whose nose had grown at the cost of his other features. Like the rest of the little band, this Nosegay was dressed as circumstance made possible. Had one looked upon him, not taking into consideration the nose or the face of him, it would have been logical to deem him a Father Franciscan. For the Franciscan gown of iron-gray garbed him, its cowl covered the unkempt hair of his small round head, its corded girdle belted his protuberant middle. This gown, so ably aiding his sheaths of fat in keeping him warm, had been the reward of a month ago when he had faithfully followed his expert nose. It had led him across a number of miles of pleasant wildwood, to a Spanish mission; in the dark he had managed to steal certain morsels of food and this bit of clothing where it was hung to dry.

"Nothing heard of our Spanish friend yet?" demanded Sir Harry sharply.

"Aye, aye, Captain," puffed Nosegay. "I made him out in the gap not more than the quarter of an hour ago. Riding this way and in haste. He'll be with us any minute."

Sir Harry regarded him coldly.

"And the man I left up here with you to bring me word? What of him?"

"We saw some young conies in the thicket a while ago," beamed Nosegay. "As fat as butter. I set him making snares. He has not come back yet."

Here was rank dereliction of duty. Yet there came no explosion, mindful as was Sir Harry of maintaining discipline. For at the moment there was the sound of galloping hoofs and into full view not a hundred yards away rode the expected Spaniard.

"Go snare your fat rabbits," commanded the captain tersely. "Leave me to talk alone with this hidalgo."

II

SIR HARRY, for all his jovial soul, was hard beset to keep the worm of rancor out of his heart as he watched the oncoming man and spirited horse; a murderously passionate glint flickered for an instant in his hard little eyes. Here, at the moment of his own distress, was altogether too much luxuriousness and plump living.

This was Sir Harry's "black Spaniard." A gentleman with thin hawkish nose, high arched fine black brows, crisp black curly side whiskers extending in a neatly trimmed line from in front of the ear well down to the point of the clean shaven jaw. The thick hair, brushed straight back from the white forehead, disappeared under the black silk handkerchief, bound tight about the head, its tied ends hanging just behind the left ear, the whole surmounted by a hat of the finest vicuna, broad, black, wide, low-crowned.

Sir Harry kept on smiling; but all the while his eyes took stock of an overgreat display of elegant affluence to sit lightly on his pinched stomach. But his treacherous blue eyes brightened like those of a man warmed with glad friendliness. He could not forbear, however, treating himself to one bit of luxury all his own. Still smiling, extending his hand with every mark of delight, he cried out heartily—but in English which he knew his visitor could not understand, "With all the joy in life I'd cut your damned throat, rob you of your cloak and eat your horse!"

The other bowed deeply, lifted his hat and now somewhat hastily withdrew his hand.

"You will pardon me, Señor? I do not understand?" he said in Spanish.

Sir Harry laughed good humoredly. In the Southern tongue he retorted promptly, "Forgot myself, Don Nicolas. What I said was that your arrival is so welcome that you make it seem like sunrise instead of sunset. I kiss your

hand and trust that you slept well last night, dined well today and drank well both times."

Thereafter the captain remembered to confine his remarks to the Spanish language, one which he knew as well as any other since the better part of his life had been spent in smuggling and other illicit operations up and down the Spanish Pacific coasts.

"I see," he ran on swiftly, "that you have a bundle tied to your saddle strings. Is it perhaps——?"

Turning in the saddle Don Nicolas undid it and in another moment Sir Harry squatted over it on the ground, undoing the parcel. He sniffed pleasurably, glanced over his shoulder a couple of times to make sure that none of his companions in hardship was about to mark what he did, then sat down with the whole roast fowl in his lap, the thick greenish bottle unstoppered at his side. Don Nicolas watched the gluttonous attack upon the savory viands with contemptuous eyes.

"What news?" demanded Sir Harry, his mouth full.

"None," returned Don Nicolas insolently, with the air of one who had neither explanations nor apologies to make, and his horse curvetted so that the graceful figure in the saddle swayed far out and the azure lined cloak from his shoulders fell back; thus was Sir Harry afforded an excellent view of the brace of pearl-handled pistols thrust into the sash about his middle. Also, not to be overlooked by a man so keen-eyed as the captain, there was a dagger of a very engaging length and sharpness.

Sir Harry quaffed deeply. "I do what a man can here," he said simply, beginning again to tear at the succulent, golden-brown fowl. "Yet my dogs pull hard at the leash. Should they break loose and run wild—" He lifted a shoulder to indicate that thus he let all responsibility slip off.

Don Nicolas' own shrug, the shrug of an arrogant Spaniard, expressed ten times the meaning of the other's shoulder-twitch.

"Threaten me, Señor," he said with tart directness, "and you die an early death."

How Sir Harry beamed at that!

"Threaten my friend the Señor Nicolas Vara!" he exclaimed. "Never. A warning between friends is not amiss, eh? My dogs, I tell you, Señor, are hungry dogs. They'd set their teeth in the hand that fed them. I've got them by the scruff of the neck today, but tomorrow? Who knows?"

"Yet you would do best, Señor, to hold them well; tomorrow and tomorrow's tomorrows until that which we await comes to pass. There is, as you know, little love for the foreigner in California just now. It is but a few leagues north to the capital at Monterey where His Excellency surrounds himself with his soldiers; a few leagues farther to the south is the presidio at Santa Barbara where the commandante has yet other soldiers. Let word of your presence be blown about and we have soldiers from the north and soldiers from the south shutting down on you like a big pair of shears. *Snip!* Like that."

"None readier than I to grant the wisdom of all you say," admitted Sir Harry affably. "As to my fine fellows down there on the beach, they have neither wit nor wisdom. They are soft-living fellows who would house themselves before the real winter sets in and we've had our warnings already that it is on the way. They know that the hacienda where just now you are visiting is but a short distance set back from the coast. They know that the Mission San Antonio is beyond the hacienda but a shorter distance. They know what may be done in a swift night raid, little armed as they are. Oh, I tell you, they are a stupid and impatient lot."

"*Demonio!*" growled Nicolas Vara. "What do you ask then?"

Sir Harry sprang to his feet, widely waving the meat and drink in his two hands. Now he was a man alert, eager, full of fire.

"What is it we want? I'll put a name to it for you!" His blue eyes began to glimmer like blue fires. "We want all that is to be come at by one bold stroke. We want Monterey sacked, as has long been promised us! We want to kindle a fire of houses that will warm us the coldest night! We want wine by the thousand of hogsheads. We want to see bright golden double doubloons rolling in the candlelight. We want to take up living, Señor, where we left off when the *Lass o' London* went down among the black rocks out there. We want to see a bit of hot red blood running once more and to hear the pretty music which goes up from a seaport put under the sword. That's what we want, Señor; and that, sir, by God, is what we'll have!"

He drained his bottle and flung it to earth savagely; where it struck it splintered into a thousand fragments, and no fragment flashed a more sinister light than those two small bright blue eyes of Sir Harry Hawk.

Don Nicolas stirred uneasily in the sad-

dle. Here, in all these weeks, was the first time this half naked outcast had once lifted a voice to that tune. The fellow grew bold; or was it as he had said? Were his followers rebelling, forcing him along in desperation? Or by any chance was it merely the strong wine tossed into a drawn stomach?

When in doubt there are times when a man may do no better than laugh. Don Nicolas laughed now and tossed out his hands helplessly.

"You have the soul of an artist, Señor," he mocked. "What a picture you draw! Poor little Monterey in flames, yielding all that rich entertainment! Silks and satins, eh? Red wines and golden doubloons and lovely señoritas! You dream, Señor. Hark you." He leaned forward, reining in his horse sharply, speaking in a fierce passionate undertone. "California herself goes almost as naked and hungry as your *piratas* down yonder in the cove. Who knows this better than you? With Mexico in rebellion these seven or eight years against Spain, with Mexico torn two ways like a bloodsoaked banner, the Insurgents pulling one way, the Loyalists pulling the other, who has had a thought to our California? The supply ships come no more; no one sends us sugar and flour, clothing and other things. We go destitute. Spain, claiming to be the great mother, should feed and supply us; she does nothing. We are left to starve. And yet, fools of Californians, we yell ourselves hoarse for Spain."

"Not you," muttered Sir Harry. "If I can't trust you for much else, I can stake my goodly wager on your being hot for rebellion. As I do! But we begin with poesy and end with politics," he concluded humorously. "I've told you what I want. What my men want."

"Well, you shall have it," grumbled Don Nicolas. "Fat or lean as you may find her, Monterey is yours for the looting. But you must await your time."

"We have waited. Many weeks. We have been burned by the sun; we have shivered with the chill. We have hungered. And think you we are minded to wait without end?"

"I would to God your captain had not been drowned in the wreck," cried Don Nicolas. "I know well the kind of man he was; the boldest blade roving the Pacific, yet one to bide his time in patience when must be. And one who knew the trick to whip his dogs down when they snarled." He fixed a baleful glare of his prominent dark eyes upon that captain's successor in command, demanding bitterly, "Having sailed with him why haven't you learned something of the sure wisdom of Captain Cavalier?"

"Oho!" cried Sir Harry Hawk, red with anger. "Oho-ho! You'd have me dead in his place, would you? You'll be forever telling me of what you've heard and heard and heard of Captain Cavalier? Well, he's dead enough now and hell take him. And you'll talk with Captain Sir Harry Hawk, baronet, or you'll talk with none!"

He bristled; a nervous hand half drew the curved knife. But Don Nicolas, watching him stonily, told him with a glance of his own blazing eyes that if he judged the moment ripe for bloodshed he was welcome to be about it.

"You will wait until I give the signal, Captain Hawk; or you will act without my support. I am not ready to strike. You, alone, would be taken by the governor's soldiers; if you kept a shut mouth they would scarcely do more than judge you a crew of smugglers and put you on ship for San Blas. If you grow indiscreet—or if any ugly rumors should happen to attach themselves to you!—you find yourselves taken out of *carcel* one by one to be shot. Myself, when I have word from Bouchard——"

"Bouchard!" cried Sir Harry. "Bouchard, you say? Damme, man, what of Hypolite Bouchard?"

He was as tense as a taut wire.

"He comes soon," said Don Nicolas coolly. "When he comes it will be to strike, sure and swift. With him, I strike. With me, you; if you are wise now and patient a little longer."

"Bouchard!" repeated Sir Harry musing. "Bouchard coming. Hm!" Then he laughed and snapped his fingers gaily. "I have stood alongside Hypolite Bouchard before now. Frenchy and frog-eater that he is, he's a bully-boy to sail with. Coming, you say? Not here, but coming? When, man? How soon—and from what port?"

"From the Hawaiian Islands. When?" His elaborate shrug belied the hot eagerness in his own eyes. Obviously he was one who, though he might preach patience to another, had little enough of any such quality in his own fiery heart. "If one but knew, Señor! Soon; 'tis all I know."

"When you say 'Bouchard' to me, Señor," said Sir Harry, scratching a bare heel with a bare toe, "I am minded to wait a little longer. But meantime, since you promise his early coming, it is high time that you carried out certain other promises. High time that we be arming. We have, down in the cove, a half dozen flintlocks and never a charge of powder and ball. We have a dozen men, with no boots to walk in, come the order to march and attack. Munitions and clothing; we are useless without them, Señor."

"I gather what I may, with little enough in all California, even at the presidios," grumbled Don Nicolas. "As for shoes and clothes, you must make your own."

"No doubt we are to take a bit of blue cloth from the ocean there," jeered Sir Harry, "stitching it with gold thread drawn from the sunset!"

"During this very night," continued Don Nicolas imperturbably, "there will arrive at your encampment some Indians bearing what I have provided for you. Some few scraps of the coarse woolen cloth woven at the mission; two bales of dressed hides; some dried beef and a keg of red wine."

"Bravo! Surely, surely at last the gates of paradise begin to swing ajar! And the powder and ball? And extra weapons?"

"You will see that in that matter, too, I have kept my word. As best as circumstance allows. The munitions are consigned to you in person; not to your men. Give them a free hand with loaded guns and they will make such extravagant war on deer and birds as to proclaim to all the province that already the Insurgents are here."

"Trust me," said Sir Harry.

"As far as I must," said Don Nicolas.

"And I shall see you again soon?"

"Tomorrow I return to Monterey. His Excellency, Don Pablo Sola, relies on me to bring him certain information there."

Always when he mentioned Don Pablo, the governor of Spanish California, Don Nicolas must sneer. Now Sir Harry chuckled.

"You and your Don Pablo Sola!" he laughed. "What a sweet pair of friends you are!"

"He is a bigoted fool," snapped Don Nicolas. "He thinks that the King of Spain hears all that he does here; that the King will reward him. He is the great dolt of the ages."

"Doubtless! Since he trusts to his friend Don Nicolas Vara to perform for him important errands!"

"When Monterey falls, I put this Pablo Sola into your hands."

"A matter of ransom?" Sir Harry brightened.

"Nothing else, Señor. High ransom."

"And of course Bouchard will look on and smile approval when it is Sir Harry Hawk and not himself who swallows this plump morsel?"

"Bouchard is promised other rewards. Besides, it is I who am to be the one true dictator of what is done or not done," exclaimed Don Nicolas with heat. "Such are my plans and for my own reasons."

Sir Harry put tall mockery into his salute.

"Don Nicolas Vara, dictator of California!" he cried.

III

HIST!" commanded Sir Harry, his pigtail flung forward as he jerked his head about, cocking his ear against a sudden sound. "Someone coming. Up from the south. On horses, several of them."

Don Nicolas Vara, too, grew alert and attentive, holding his horse in with a tight rein, leaning forward a bit in the saddle. Where Sir Harry Hawk's was an expression of predatory interest, the other's was purely of perplexity.

"Who will it be?" demanded Sir Harry. "Some of the fine folks of the hacienda down in the hills?"

"No. I've told you already they're all away, visiting down at Santa Barbara. I don't know——"

Here all of a sudden came the priestly garbed Nosegay, running and panting, to announce excitedly, "Four or five on horseback, Cap'n. I couldn't make 'em out any too well, but when they rode along a clear high place where the sun hit among 'em, I saw something wink and twinkle brighter than just an iron buckle! A jewel in some diamond in a fancy hilt?"

He began licking his fat lips.

Sir Harry's little blue eyes began to glitter.

"Call up the boys, Nosegay," he commanded sharply. And as Nosegay jolted puffing along his way upon the most willing of errands, his commander muttered with satisfaction, "Here, with luck, is something to take their minds off their hides and bellies."

"You fool," cried Don Nicolas, but this time was cut short with an angry defiance.

"Hark ye, my Spanish don!" said Sir Harry, bristling. "After Monterey is looted and I've pulled my boys off, California is all yours. Just now, we divide her between us. Will you lend a hand at a little diversion? Or had you rather sit back and watch the fun?"

Don Nicolas cursed, then sighed. "Neither, I think. After all, whoever these travelers may be, they are no friends of mine. So, with your leave, I'll be on my way before they arrive."

From down the steep slope whither Nosegay had hastened came a long, shrill whistle. Again; a third time. An answering shout from about the bonfire in the cove, several voices barely heard here above the boom of the surf. In another moment there would be the rush and scramble upward of the score of barefooted, ragged castaways, in the right mood for any vicious blow to be struck.

Don Nicolas was of a cautious mind to be anywhere but here. He clapped spurs to his horse's sides and was off at a headlong gallop, diving into the woods, avoiding both the vagabonds surging up from the beach and the little band of horsemen coming along the trail from the south.

"If you've two grains of sense in your hot head," had been his last words as he fled, "you'll leave none to spread tales of what you do."

"Go teach the fish in the ocean how to swim," screamed Sir Harry after him.

But as one by one, all uplifted into keen expectation by Nosegay's signallings and his brief words as they came abreast of him, the residue of the *Lass o' London's* motley crew came up from the cliffs he set to work in business-like style placing them in ambuscade. In stealthy pairs he distributed them along the winding trail, so that those who came must ride the gauntlet of them.

"No fuss, nor noise," he cautioned emphatically. "There'll not be over six or eight horses and there'll be anyhow two of you to every pair of reins. Jump quick and we'll take them all of a heap. And no killing, I tell you, until we see what we've bagged! If we're in luck, there'll be ransom out of this."

They dropped silently into their places, Sir Harry Hawk of them all remaining a moment unhidden while he coolly took this moment to make sure that all was planned aright. Then he, too, slipped behind a tree, vanishing. The uplands were very still, engulfed in a deep sinister silence.

The shuffle of hoofbeats, growing slowly more distinct, the mellow jingle of bridle chains, and then, very vague against the dark wood, a line of figures in single file, proceeding slowly. The horses were tired; it had been a long ride that was to end in this bristling cul de sac. Sir Harry chuckled and thumbed his knife.

The obscurity was not such as to hide the most salient of details. One could count; there were six mounted figures in all. The one who rode at the fore was an old man; a wide black hat hid the head and face but the great square beard, as white as snow, caught what little light there was. A man of no great height, yet of powerful build, broad and with amazingly wide shoulders. Behind him a slighter figure lost among the voluminous folds of a loose cloak. Next, also cloaked, a figure that might have been anything, so huddled forward, vaguely suggestive of dispirited lack of all concern. The three others, sitting straight in their saddles, each with a musket across his lap, presented the only hint at preparedness for what was so soon to occur.

"Indians, for a guard," grunted Sir Harry to himself, accurate in his surmise. "Some rich *ranchero* and——"

Now, more than before, did he crouch down into place; Sir Harry Cat, a name to suit him now. For one of the riders had spoken, the second in the tiny cavalcade, that slender rider just behind the old man. Far more musical, even in Sir Harry's tight little ears, than the jingle of silver chains was this voice; touched with weariness, yet as sweet and clear as a bell, the voice of one of those California señoritas toward which Sir Harry's fancies had sped aforetime.

"Have you taken the wrong way somewhere, Great Picton?" she complained. "Oh, but this ride is endless."

"Now!" cried Sir Harry and sprang to his feet.

In an instant, and for scarcely longer than that initial instant, all was scuffle, turmoil and uproar. The horses snorted, reared and began a wild threshing as two

men leaped up from the shadows and flung themselves at each of the bits. Three men to every beast, with Sir Harry looking on, ready to lend a hand at any point.

From the old man in the lead, him whom the girl had addressed as Great Picton, came a rumbling, bellowing roar. What leathern lungs that old fellow had in that deep chest of his! And what rage was unleashed when he saw what was afoot. He snatched at his sword, the longest, heaviest that ever came from far Spain into California. But he had had all too little warning, there was such a whirlwind rush from idle abstraction of one moment to overwhelming attack the next. Picton, struggling and rumbling like a lion in the toils, came down heavily, and his sword was snatched from him.

As matters went with him so, in general, did they behind him with his following and for the most part with readier ease. A shrill scream burst out, pulsing with terror; another scream. Sir Harry gloated afresh. In a party of six to have the luck of two little white mice! Their saddles stood empty as they were dragged down; their screams ended short off as willing hands were clapped over their mouths.

One shot only was fired, a gun discharged in the struggle with one of the Indians. The fellow came down under the feet of his assailants, snatching at his knife. It was kicked from his hand; he wriggled to his feet and started to run. A dark form was upon him, the two struggling together. The parrot voice of the ill humored Irishman cried out in pain; then again in vicious rage. With his second shout came the sound of his blow as he revenged himself for a battered face by driving a knife inches deep into a body which stiffened and then relaxed.

The thing was very prettily done, as Sir Harry was the first to concede. Six fine horses taken, five captives to consider, one Indian knifed and not a man of his crew more than superficially scratched.

"Down to the cove with them, gentlemen!" he commanded brightly. "We'll have a chat with them by the light of the fire. You, Nosegay, and you, Toothy, tie the horses hard and fast against some present need we'll no doubt have for them. You, Paddy of Cork, as long as you've stuck your man, make sure of him; there's to be none crawling off telling yarns."

Then he whirled and, light and agile of foot as light of heart, he led the way down the steep path. Now was Sir Harry Hawk's hour. Give these fellows of his something to do, a bit of spice like tonight's, and he knew the trick of holding them to heel. Given a dash of fun, they were a simple, good humored lot, very pleasant company indeed and easy to get along with.

Sir Harry stood on a low, flat rock near the fire, leaning on Great Picton's sword. Standing here he was granted that which he was ever resentfully conscious of lacking, an appearance of greater stature. Also from here he could more easily see over the heads of the tallest of his fellows, who were soon in a tight packed curious ring about their prisoners.

Beaming upon them Sir Harry watched them snatch and finger. Cloaks were torn from their captives' shoulders and flung with an air about their own; a scarlet lining brushed a pair of grimy naked shoulders. Picton's great black hat was stuck upon a towselled head and the one who wore it was busy rifling its owner's pockets. A few silver coins were chinked gleefully.

For the most part interest centered about the two women. It had been many and many a day since anything even remotely feminine had come among them. They pawed, not ungently for such, at gown and hair. They stood so that the firelight might reveal the features of their prisoners, having piled on dry fuel recklessly. Then a mighty shout went up.

One was a woman of middle age, stout, dark and with more than a hint of Indian blood, gibbering now hysterically. Had she been the only one of her sex, sight of her might have gladdened their starved eyes. But there was the other. Before her, once she was dragged forward to the revealing light, they had first stood mute a minute, staring, jaws dropping. Then came their shout.

Though terror whitened her face it dimmed nothing of her rare loveliness. It served rather but to enlarge her great starry eyes. Though these men had fared into many a port up and down the world, they had never seen anything like her. Among them, in these harsh surroundings, she looked little and delicate and fra-

gile, some rare tender little flower. From her ears, from under the profuse masses of soft disarrayed hair, hung pearl pendants, glowing tremulously in the fitful fire gleam; about the white purity of her throat pearls of price, shining softly with their virginal fires. Yet, ringed about as she was by covetous eyes, the richest of pearls were ignored first for her own rarer richness. Here, without doubt, was one whom in all her little life until now no rude hand had ever touched.

"Gentlemen!" cried Sir Harry now. "Easy does it. Not a scratch upon that fair skin! Not a bruise or a blemish. 'Tis an earnest of what in a few days now Monterey will give us without stint. The very flower of the land, my bully boys. Ve-ry nice!"

She stared about her, her hands clasped tight. Then she closed her eyes and shuddered. But now not even a moan came from her. She was beyond that.

They had run a piece of rope about and about old Picton's body, binding his arms to his sides. He stood gnawing at his under lip, his eyes red. Anger, shame and a deep, deep sorrow gave him such a look that his face caught and held Sir Harry's wandering eye and caused a sudden jeering.

"Oho! Look at our old baby yonder; he's about to cry. Bring him forward; the females will find their tongues later but just now they're useless to the man who would be informed. You, Señor Ranchero," as Picton was thrust closer, "who the devil are you anyway? Can't you see we're all afire with curiosity?"

"Me?" said Picton dully, never a man of the sharpest wits and now almost stupid with despair. "Me, I'm Picton."

"Picton, eh? Picton What, from where?"

"Por Dios!" swore poor old Picton, straining at his bonds, what of his face was not hidden by his beard growing violent red. "Ha!"

Sir Harry laughed and leaned forward to prick him with the long blade.

"Answer up, old bear. Full name and titles for my gentlemen."

"Ho!" cried Picton. And then glaring wrathfully at the threatening sword point, "I'm Picton, I tell you. Pedro Pablo Pilar Picton, an honest man, 'fore God, and one that would hang you to the first tree."

"Master of what broad acres?" demanded Sir Harry, always mindful of ransom. "Of how many thousands of fat cattle and sleek horses?"

Picton gaped at him. Then grunted disgustedly.

"Master of nothing," he growled, "but a pretty wish to get my hands on you. Majordomo, rather, to Don Julian de la Fuente of the *rancho* over yonder by the mission."

"Majordomo!" called Paddy. "Wasn't it a bird calling himself a majordomo I knew down in Argentine? Rich as grease, he was, pilfering from his master."

"Ay, ay," amended Sir Harry. "And now, Don Picton, who's this wench here? One of the fancy, eh? Do you have princesses here in this California of yours? A princess then, I'll be bound."

Inflated until it seemed they must burst Picton's lungs swelled slowly; then came his windy sigh like a gush of air from a leaky bellows.

"Have a care how you even look at her," he growled, deep in his throat. "God would strike any man dead——"

One near her leaned forward leering, brushing his fingers across her throat, setting her earrings shaking. She quivered and turned eyes full of agony upon Picton. He began tearing at his bonds like a madman.

"Soho; gentle does it always," crooned Sir Harry. "Come, Señor Majordomo, and spin us the yarn. Who is the little kitten?"

"She is one," fumed Picton, "for whom every sword in California would jump out of its scabbard! She is the granddaughter of that same Don Julian who when he hears of this will rend you asunder like an old rag."

"Ve-ry good," chuckled Sir Harry, sure now of his ransom. "This other female? Not so much?"

"My own daughter," said Picton heavily, "whom I'd rather see dead at my foot than in your hands. She accompanies the Señorita Virginia Luisa as *duenna*——"

"God save the proprieties!" and there was high approving laughter at Sir Harry's mock reverence. "Now here's the case: one thousand fine Spanish doubloons for the little princess, returned when you say the word to her loving grandfather—and no charge made for any hug and squeeze she may get while in our worshipful midst! Five hundred doubloons for this Majordomo Picton, which amount we'll trust resides in his own coffers, pilfered from his master. One hundred doubloons for his fat-faced daughter—and may she ever tell the tale that gallant gentlemen valued her so high. Of the

two Indians who are left us, one rides in the morning with this word. The other they shall pay ten gold pieces for or we'll slit his gullet for him and raise no argument."

Hope began to battle upward in old Picton's laboring breast. Hope sent its first bright rays into the girl's starry eyes. But, in both cases surrounded by those predatory, merciless devils, hope was a little faint flutter drowned in sick despair.

"So much for tomorrow. For tonight there remain certain trinkets well worth division. After that, will not the little princess smile on us? Tears are not so pretty as pearls, and sighs never tickle the ears like a bit of song and a snatch of laughter."

A dozen men sprang forward, jostling, elbowing, beginning to strike at one another. In the center of the rush, half fainting, the little figure was borne this way and that. A hasty hand broke the tiny chain with its pearls about her neck. Already they had torn off her cloak; its soft blue silken lining brushed a pair of brawny naked shoulders. They plucked at her sash, satin scarlet. Fingering, picking, fighting among themselves, they were like dogs grumbling over their quarry.

Hands were even being raised to tear away her ear-drops, delicate little things swinging from tiny piercings in the hidden lobes.

"Don't! Don't!" she screamed above the raucous babel of their savage voices. "Here; I'll give them to you."

She lifted her own swift flying fingers to her own ears, in the wildest haste to detach the baubles. Sir Harry looked and bespoke his approval.

"Gently, my gentlemen," he called. "Not a bruise, I tell you, on that soft white skin."

Very intent were all these wild devils in what was afoot, equally intent the complacent Sir Harry watching them. Thus it was not strange that no man of them all had eyes for what might stand hidden among the black rocks and their black shadows just without the flickering ring of the fire's brightness. Thus no man of them all had seen a figure which for some moments had stood on the top of one of the biggest of the boulders, in a position to mark everything that happened. Nor had any seen when the figure slipped quietly down from its place to come swiftly yet silently across the narrow stretch of intervening beach.

Sir Harry started at feeling a hand close down firmly over his own on the sword hilt of Great Picton. He turned wonderingly, his grin still pleasantly molding his features.

But now, never did a man's smile flee swifter from mouth and eyes together. In its place started up a look of consternation, of downright terror. Sir Harry's mouth dropped wide open; his eyes stared wildly; in the first shock his hand jerked away from that hand which had sought his, abandoning the sword hilt as though it were a coal of fire. His was the expression of a man who sees one risen from the dead.

First of all there by the fire to see was the girl whom Picton had named Señorita Virginia Luisa. At this moment of the greatest terror of her life she had turned to beg mercy of the little man on the flat rock, him who was in command here. Now she saw that little man suddenly seeming to shrink and cower; she heard him stammering strangely; she saw the figure at his side. And again sudden wild hope leaped up high in her heart.

"Oh, Señor! Señor!" she pleaded, lifting her clasped hands to this newcomer. "Save me!"

In the bright red fire glow she saw a young man who might have had an angel for his mother, but Satan himself for sire. She saw the great black hat with a plume in it pushed far back at an angle of rare and impertinent jauntiness; she saw a pair of bright, laughing eyes. There was elegance about him, in the gay-lined loose cloak that he wore, in the pistols stuck in his sash and, most of all, in the insolent recklessness of his bearing. He fascinated her, bred fresh hope, he instilled new fears.

"You—you come back from the dead!" Sir Harry was gasping.

And now the others saw. From a noisy jostling crowd, as if some magic spell fell upon them, they grew stock still, staring as Sir Harry stared.

The girl saw only him who had stepped to a place where he towered over Sir Harry Hawk. He appeared to see only

her. Across the few paces separating them her eyes pleaded, begged in agony. His own laughed.

Yet, even while he laughed, a subtle change entered his look, as he studied her intently. He swept off his hat, brushing his boots with the plume; he straightened, holding her look with that new look of his —and for the first time her pallor fled and she went red, a hot, burning red while her heart raced.

Silence had held, time had stood still for them. But, with the shock of his sudden appearance passed, the hush of wonder was drowned in a fresh uproar. Men who had held their breaths began shouting.

"Back from the grave!" yelled one. "It's old Kill-devil himself."

He had spoken not so much as a single word. Now, hat in hand, he sprang down from the rock, made his way thrusting them off to right and left, and coming straight to that little prisoner who had so long held his look, lifted her cold hand to his lips, bowing deeply, as in a gay untroubled voice he said lightly, "Your most humble servant, Madam. Captain Cavalier, very much at your service."

IV

STILL holding the lady's hand, which he seemed not in the slightest haste to relinquish, leaning upon Picton's tall sword as on a cane held gracefully, his plumed hat under his arm, Captain Cavalier turned to toss his light words to the motley which, beginning to gape anew, regarded him uncertainly.

"I'd have a little chat with the captive maiden," he announced gaily, as though launched on a lark which promised infinite amusement. "A bit of privacy for us, an it please you."

He made them gasp. It was a way he had, as impertinent as cool. But he was too keenly aware of their characters not to be expectant of some degree of truculence. To have their very fingers upon so choice a bit of spoils, then to be bid stand aside made for too lively a dissatisfaction to be ignored by one who knew them.

Hardest of all was Sir Harry Hawk hit. He fell to frowning as black as a thunder cloud; he could not get enough of fingering at his knife. A moment ago it was Captain Sir Harry Hawk, and now from one he had been pleased to think dead it was stand aside for your master.

Fairly quivering with rage stood little Sir Harry; yet his cunning did not desert him; before another lifted a voice it must be he who seized this opportunity to make himself their spokesman.

"We held you dead, Cavalier," he bugled angrily. "And so——"

"*Captain* Cavalier, you gallows-chick!" cried the other. Yet his words came laughingly such was the exhilaration in the man's mercuric spirit. "Mind your manners, my pretty little man; there's a lady here!"

"I mind the law of gentlemen of adventure!" cried Sir Harry sharply. "With a captain gone, they elect another. When you deserted ship, so to speak——"

"Deserted ship! You're a dirty liar, Harry Hawk, that ever was! It was you lubbers that lost me my ship, piling overboard like rats when she struck. Had I had a handful of you to stick with me I'd have saved her. As it was I was the last man to leave her and came off with food, clothes and dry powder! And look at you!" His taunting laughter pricked Sir Harry's vanity far more than any hot curse could have done.

Sir Harry Hawk had as little fear of physical danger as any man who has an astute brain to counsel him, but of greater moment than his proven courage he himself counted his craft and shrewdness. He cut his eyes sidewise at the knot of men grouped on the far side of the fire. He, better than Captain Cavalier or than even themselves, knew what these weeks of hardship, hunger and enforced inactivity had wrought within them. High-handed Captain Cavalier always was, giving promise now of the very apex of high-handedness. Pluck the very meat out of these hungry fellows' jaws, would he?

"You've heard me?" cried Captain Cavalier again. "A little privacy, an it please you!"

"Ve-ry nice," responded Sir Harry, all smiles. "By your leave we'll step aside for a moment's conference!"

Nor did he have to force that smile; here was a situation made to his hand, with none other than the mad Cavalier doing the making. So Sir Harry, set on leadership and a bit of private vengeance, led the men apart some two score paces, a grumbling lot whose angry voices ceased

to reach them only when the mutter of the sea drowned it. The girl, her fingers caught in the firmest grip which had ever detained them, looked fearfully up into the debonnaire young face now again bent solely upon her own.

"Oh, Señor!" she whispered. "You will save me?"

"From those hang dogs?" He lifted her hand to his lips. "Have no fear of them, lady. And, having saved you from being sullied at their vile hands, I win your gratitude."

She was tugging at the hand which held her, trying to break free from him, and his eyes which were dancing terrified her more than stern sober eyes would have done.

"God strike me dead," he told her gallantly, "if ever in all my life I once looked into such a pair of eyes! You little beauty —you maddening little beauty! I'd lose my ship ten times over to swim ashore to such a land as holds you."

"But you will not be cowardly. You will not be base. I see it in your eyes."

But what she really saw there made her last words falter. Her voice broke. Despair again paralyzed her.

"Look into my eyes then; look deep, look true! What do you see there, most sweet lady? You see the very unhidden soul of Captain Cavalier. He does not mask his thought; he does not hide his intent. Look deep and see to the very bottom of those clear depths!"

He spoke but the truth when he said that here was a man who did not care to masquerade. He was a laughing devil. There was good in him and there was evil. There were reckless generosity, careering boldness, an ability to die as he lived, laughingly; and there was wild lawlessness. He could be staunch to a friend, if ever once he gave his friendship! A man like this was more like to tread his own path alone.

He let you read him, as he had boasted, to the bottom of those depths which he held clear! You saw here a man full of sentiment and villainy. Villainy certainly, if it be the part of a villain to join in bloody raids, robbery and relentless confiscations in order to enrich his own purse; to take with a rash hand what golden apples of fortune thickened the groves of the world through which he went roistering; to make right of might and make sure that he was the mightiest; to let out his sword for hire, asking first the price before he thought to ascertain the cause. For such, at a time when the earth seethed with rebellion, sedition and treasonous plottings, it was as though he and the time were made for each other; for such, in the beginning, it was simple and natural to declare in his heart war against all Spain. After that, placing himself where the richest of Spanish dominions lay athwart his wide path, he had but to strike where he chose and with a conscience as clear as glass.

There came a deep muttering from Picton, prayers and curses intermingled. The two Indians, tied hand and foot and thrown, were twisting at their ropes. The girl's *duenna,* Picton's stolid daughter, threw herself at her mistress' feet, weeping, her face in her hands.

"I have given you my name," Captain Cavalier was saying lightly. "I have heard yours: Virginia Luisa! Ah, 'tis a pretty name, one never to be forgot, I warrant you!"

How could he talk thus, with those men just yonder grouped so ominously? She threw them a hasty glance; just a dark mass in the gloom, vaguely outlined against the ocean, an ocean no more tumultuous than the spirits in their stormy breasts. Yet this Cavalier seemed to have forgotten them.

"Do you know, dear lady," he said softly, "seeing you is like coming home!"

She had wrenched her hand free; he had let it go lingeringly but towered so close over her that she dared not move. Her hands began twisting tight together, an outward sign of how the soul within her writhed, agonized.

Picton could not help her now; she heard the old fellow sob, broken hearted with hopelessness. The two Indians were disarmed and bound; even were they free they would be no help to her. She knew they would never stand up to a score of men like these. What hope on earth for her? None, except what lay in this man who had been master here and who still seemed smug in his belief that master he remained.

"Like home, I tell you," he insisted. "Would you know why?"

Those men whose voices now were lost in the thunder of the surf, how long would they tarry there? They would strike; she knew that they would strike. She had read their wild eyes, had sensed their brutal hearts. Most of all had the sinister word and glance of him they called Sir Harry Hawk told her how desperate was her need. She shuddered, yet strove with all her might to smile up at him who smiled down at her.

"That—sounds—strange, Señor."

She had heard of the way of wolves. One stricken, the brute's fellows fell on him, rending, devouring. If only the odds were not so overwhelming; if only some few of the men stood back to back with Captain Cavalier! Then, while the fight held them for some few minutes, then must she pray God to let her flee in the dark.

"My brave little frightened dove!" he cried in admiration as he saw her wan, tortured smile. "Well, to explain: you see I am an American. A Virginian, and heretofore in calling myself a Virginian I have never meant aught than that Virginia was the land of my birth. But now," and his mocking bow was sweeping, "meaning neither *from* nor *of* Virginia—but *for* Virginia! Heaven my witness, dove-eyes."

"Ah! If I could but believe, Señor! What, then, were not possible?"

"A little white dove that would usurp the cunning of a serpent!" he bantered.

"Oh, Señor, be not thus mad and blind!" She caught his arm; she pointed. "They will be upon you in a minute. Brave as you are, what are bravery and strength of one man against a score?"

He stooped closer, his hand hard on hers.

"Afraid for me, little one? Or——"

She steadied her lips to whisper brokenly, "I am afraid—of you. But—I am more afraid—of them——"

"By the whole calendar of all the saints," he shouted joyously, "you'll make a fool of me yet!"

"They are so many! They will stamp you into the earth," she gasped.

"They will not!"

"They will kill you."

"They will not!"

"Are you mad?"

"If I am, 'tis your doing!"

A second time she caught his arm, lifting to him eyes swimming with distress. She willed with all her girl's soul that all beauty which was hers might penetrate the outer citadel of the man's animal nature into the very center of his true self, that locked and guarded treasure room where every man has whatever God and his better nature has given him for his ideals.

"If it is that you find in me only a trifling plaything, of little worth," she told him in that same quiet, steady voice, "then there is no hope on earth for me. You will fight with those men and to me the end will be the same. At your hands or theirs I shall be broken and before morning I will be dead."

"I mean to have you for my own!" he cried, quickened with enthusiasm. "Were there ten times twenty men there——"

"Sh! Let me speak. Oh, there is so little time, Señor! Would you like best to crush me, to see me dead before the sun comes up? As I swear to be! If not a coward, would you risk much to have me yours, truly yours? Or are you afraid?"

"Afraid? Of what, witch?"

"To set me free; to beat off those men, and set me free. And then——"

"Ah, and then?"

"To follow after me! To really win me, to make me really yours! You, California's enemy, to dare invade California for me wherever I may be! You, one man against hundreds! Oh, you let me read your heart. And I saw wickedness, Señor; and I saw something else. It was shining like a star. It was nobility! And, if you freed me, and if you were not afraid to come for me, one not against a score of creatures like those but against all California, against my own people——"

Sheer mockery in his laughter.

"That star shining in the depths of me, was it then mere vanity? Would you play on me like that, lady? Have me open my hand now for the fool's hope of showing off later on?"

She seemed to droop.

"It may have been vanity. But I thought it nobility."

Seeming to droop, she hid the look in her eyes. Had she lost?

Then there was a deep muttering growl. It was as though the sea had split its voice in twain, speaking now with two voices, one rising more threateningly above the other.

"They are coming!" she whispered. And then, so softly that he scarcely heard with his ears the hushed words that spoke to

something within him, "May God be with you, Captain Cavalier."

V

WITH a sudden sweep of his arm he lifted her clear of the ring of firelight, bearing her back into a region of tremulous shadows.

"Whatever betide," he told her with the fresh quality of sternness in his voice, "stick close to me! But try to flee in the fracas, if it comes to blows— Ah, that's in your mind!—and I swear on my honor to have done with you; to stand back and set the pack loose on you!"

They were close to Picton.

"Tell me, old man," he said swiftly, "can you fight? If I gave you back this little blade of yours?"

"Por Dios!" muttered Picton. "But cut me these bonds, young master, and let me have again my own sword in these two hands and I alone will make a pathway through those blackguards like a cannon ball in a basket of eggs!"

Captain Cavalier laughed softly. A couple of swift strokes and the old man stood free, stamping in impatience, thrusting forth his empty hands.

"By Saint Vulcan, his sweet body!" cried Captain Cavalier, stooping close to look at the man. "What shoulders the fellow has! If you have a heart one half as stout——"

Picton's enormous hand locked hard about the familiar hilt. His breath expelled itself from his vast lungs.

"Now, young master, quick! Run——"

"Run?" snapped the other. "What talk is this? Do I hand you a sword like that to use as a staff to run with?"

"Only thirty paces!" grumbled Picton. "There, among the big rocks and the dark. Give me my back to a rock there and let them come."

Again did Captain Cavalier laugh, clapping a heavy hand on the massive shoulder.

"Not one backward pace, old warrior! Where you stand, guard this sweet lady for me."

Not backward, away from what threatened; rather full tilt to meet it did Captain Cavalier run. Thus, almost at a bound, did he come again into the brighter ring of firelight and there stopped, confronting those who came on from the farther side of the fire. They wanted him? Well, here he stood where they might see him. He made a picture for them to fill their eyes with. They in tatters, shivering with the night air; he warm and richly clad, debonair and unperturbed.

"You are over hasty in returning unsummoned," he told them lightly. "But in another moment I would have called to you, so let it pass. Now for my message to you: I have parleyed with the maid and I have a mind to claim her for my own!"

Sir Harry Hawk at their head was smiling complacently as one guessed by what was to be seen of his face in the flickering light, as one knew by his voice when he spoke.

"I make bold to remind you, Cavalier," he said sneeringly, "that we, and not you, made her and the others captive. We, too, have parleyed and with this decision come to: you have nothing to say on this matter. Further, we grow weary of these ways of yours. The crew, an it please you, are of a mind to have a new captain."

Captain Cavalier nodded pleasantly, but his laughter was full of scorn.

"Men full grown I thought you all," he cried to the crew, "and yet you tolerate that this scurvy knave aspire to captaincy over you! I've a notion to turn my back on the fools' squad of you and let you starve first, freeze second and for third choice go your sweet ways to the gallows."

"Look you," shrilled Sir Harry Hawk, "palaver won't go!"

"You dullards," cried Cavalier. "Look at me and look well!" He struck an attitude for them, such an attitude as no other man among them had the trick of striking. "Look about you at one another, little ones; then look at me! What do you see? Ah, you see me, as ever you did, well clothed, well fed—and you see your little Captain Runt there shivering in rags. And now, having looked, listen! I'll not tell you how I got ashore—yet! But you note that I came off well clad, and what's to the point, well armed and powder-dry! You'd guess I came well provisioned? That perhaps I even took time to bring off with me that which you rats forgot! Can you hear this and have your ears so forgotten the sound of it that you cannot tell what it is?"

In his cupped hands he set something clinking and jingling. No other music in their ears was ever like the music of gold pieces.

"And now look again! Is the light strong enough for you to see?"

With a sudden careless gesture he tossed up that which he had held. The handful of discs spun in the air, gleamed, darkened and shone again and fell into the heart of the fire.

"At least I might have handed you those doubloons?" he demanded contemptuously. "I tell you I've a notion to see you starved and hanged first or—what's worse—led by that unlucky gallows-chick. Oh, you know what a man he is for luck; look at him else! Well, we've no ship now, thanks to you who followed him fast enough overboard, I'll be bound! We're ashore now, and unless I should choose to get us another ship—which, mind you, I'm of no mood to promise——"

"I told you 'ware the man's talk; he has a tongue like a snake!" cried Sir Harry and snatched at a musket in hands nearby, one taken earlier from Picton's Indian guard and now held uncertainly. It was time for a musket ball to put a stop to all parley.

What Sir Harry, ready to end matters, did not look for was what happened. With blows to be struck, Captain Cavalier had ever a great fondness for striking the first. The fire was in his way, but with a shout he went over it, his boots striking brands right and left. Sir Harry whipped up the gun and fired. But like most of the band, he was a far truer hand at steel than at powder and ball, and moreover a target hurtling through conflicting light and shadow and swirling smoke was far from the best. The discharge, though almost in his attacker's face, did not stop Captain Cavalier and did not save Sir Harry Hawk. Sir Harry dropped the flintlock, cursing wildly and snatched at his knife.

Captain Cavalier struck, not with steel, since he had not so much as drawn the rapier at his side, but with his fist. He smote the other square between the little evil blue eyes, such a blow as called up a little grunt of admiration and delight from even Picton, striker of blows. And Sir Harry Hawk dropped in his tracks.

"Good, young master!" Picton was muttering, stamping up and down excitedly. "Ah, Señorita, that's a man!"

Those of Sir Harry Hawk's following held motionless for an uncertain moment with Captain Cavalier standing over the fallen man, nose to nose with them and glaring fiercely. He had drawn no blood; had that been accident or was it prompted by some devilish cunning of his own? Had there been the flash of steel and the slashing of flesh, they must have been swept along into further slaughter. As it was, with him fairly in their midst, they held for that one moment hesitating.

Then, as they shifted suddenly, his voice roared in their ears, rough with a terrible anger. He raged at them, he reviled them, he named them all unspeakable epithets. He gave them such a tongue lashing as seldom any pack of disgruntled men have stood to listen to. He named them by name, one after another until he had named a dozen, until he was out of breath and his voice broke.

Then again he was silent, glaring at them, his face working, his shoulder thrust toward them, his hand at last on his hilt. And they were as silent as he. Only a moment he stood thus. Then he spoke again, briefly now, his voice quiet and hard and cold.

"I'm done with you," he said sternly. "I am ashamed that I ever named myself captain over you. Go, when I'm gone, and rake in the fire for what I've flung there; the last you'll ever have from me."

What gripped them, what still held them standing and gaping, was the ringing note in that quiet voice. It was the bell-clear note of a perfect sincerity. He meant what he said. In disgust and in shame, he was done with them.

He turned his back square on them and strode away, going swiftly to the spot in the shadows where Virginia Luisa, scarcely breathing, awaited him; where Picton, all aquiver like a war charger, was choking over incoherent mutterings.

"Now, young master! *Por Dios!* but you mastered them. Now; quick. They'll be on us——"

There were dregs left in the vials of wrath, and these were poured now upon Picton. Virginia Luisa saw, though dimly, Captain Cavalier's face and whipped back from him, terrified.

"Run, then, you great baby!" he stormed. "Scuttle off with that blade of yours which you'd do well to barter for a wooden one. Give a man room to breathe in. Do you think that I'll be driven to one quick step by that gang of curs?"

"You are going to set me free?" broke in the girl tremulously. "You save me from them and from—from——"

"From me? Ah, your wishes scamper, Virginia! Have I said that?"

"You say nothing! But you have shown me you are not afraid of twenty men! You are not then afraid of anything, of any numbers? You will do that other thing I asked of you?"

"Those fellows, young master, are

grumbling again," warned Picton. "Why didn't you slit that little trouble maker's gullet? They'll be on us, I tell you."

Captain Cavalier paid him no heed. The girl's white face was upturned; he was looking intently down into it.

"By heaven!" he grunted once, half savagely, half in sheer wonder at what she let be revealed to him.

"To horse, old Picton!" he then commanded grimly. "These Indians and that daughter of yours, bring them along. I ride as escort."

VI

"CAPTAIN CAVALIER!" shouted a voice, and from the black mass of figures huddled beyond the fire over the fallen Sir Harry Hawk one broke free and ran a few paces forward. The firelight gleamed bright on the naked length of the upflung cutlass in his hand. "Captain Cavalier forever!"

"That would be Dick o' Boston," hazarded Captain Cavalier softly; Virginia Luisa at his side saw how his eagle's beak of a nose twitched contemptuously. "Dog by dog they'll be coming to their senses. Come; we go. Lead the way, old Picton. Let your Indians arm themselves as best they can with clubs or sharp stones."

Another voice joined itself to Dick o' Boston's; there were now three or four voices shouting vociferously, "Captain Cavalier forever!"

"This way, quick," old Picton was ordering. "Once we're on the cliffs and in the dark we'll brush them off like flies if they think to set upon us. You will step close behind me, Señorita?"

Captain Cavalier, casting a last glance backward saw something lift itself from the ground, rise insecurely, take a forward step and then sink down, sitting upon a rock. There would be Sir Harry Hawk, beginning to stir again, yet still uncertain, sick and dizzy.

"There'll be division among 'em as sure as they're lawless dolts," he offered cheerfully. "But their little affair for the moment is none of ours. Never a prettier time to get to horse!"

They made their way hurriedly to the steeply pitching mountainside and began the difficult ascent. Picton swore at every step, losing himself in the dark, slipping, scrambling more than once on all fours. A figure shot by him; there went one of the Indians, leading more swiftly and surefootedly. Up they went, one at the heels of another, Captain Cavalier bringing up the rear and now and again turning to look back. What he saw down yonder on the beach pleased him; Virginia Luisa, flitting on just ahead of him, heard him chuckle. Despite the panicky fear which had been so long upon her and from which she was yet by no means free, she paused an instant.

"What is it?" she asked.

"Dick o' Boston sees himself a fool for ever having let that little Harry Hawk make himself leader among them," he laughed. "Now, seeing a nice opportunity, he'll rally what of them he can about him. It did the prestige of our friend Harry no great good to go down under a blow; if we sat patiently up here and liked the sport we might yet watch them fly at one another's throats."

"Let us hurry then, while we can!"

There was a report, a flash down there below, the whine of a musket ball.

"Only an explosion of hatred, sweet lady! 'Tis infernally steep and dark here; your hand——"

But instead she gathered up her skirts and ran on ahead. He groped for her, heard her some steps away and hastened after her.

At the top of the ridge they found the two Indians with the horses; Nosegay had wasted little time leading them to any distance and none at all in unsaddling; even the bits were in the horses' mouths. The animals, nervous after the attack so short a while ago and frightened afresh by the Indians dashing upon them, were rearing and threshing about. There was a moment of confusion, ended by Captain Cavalier's curt, "Come, there's no wild haste, is there? We're as good as mounted already and those fellows, were they minded to be after us, have only their bare feet to ride on."

He took the nearest horse by the bit and began soothing him with gentle hand and crooning voice.

"By your sweet leave, Señorita," he said then and lifted his erstwhile captive into the saddle. At random he caught another pair of reins and swung up beside her. The others were up, the Indians beginning to jabber now for the first time.

"Aye," muttered Picton heavily. "They've killed poor Ignacio and he'll have to lie where he is tonight. But we'll be back for him with daylight, my children." He turned in his saddle and shook his fist toward the beach below. "And for you little fellows! Ho, never fear, old Picton returns to you."

"We ride now, as it pleases you," said Captain Cavalier crisply. "Lead the way, old man, or set one of your Indians to do so. In that case you follow him with your other Indian and your daughter."

He leaned out from his saddle and caught the reins of the horse near him, concluding lightly, "Your little mistress and I would talk together as we ride."

Talk? How could he expect her to talk when she was near collapse from all she had undergone; danger not yet entirely to be ignored, the vivid memory of all that had occurred sweeping back upon her like blinding flashes of light.

"Now, tell me," said Captain Cavalier, when at last he gave the signal to follow the others, "just where do we ride tonight?"

"To my grandfather's ranch," she found herself answering. "We were nearly home when— It is but a few miles through the mountains."

"And just who is this grandfather of yours?"

"He is Don Julian de la Fuente."

"A Spaniard and a great man, doubtless?"

"Oh, of course, Señor."

"You live with him, here at the rancho?"

"Oh, no, Señor. I live with my father and mother; in Monterey, for the most part."

"And just now you were coming from them, to pay a little visit to your grandfather?"

"I was coming from the other way; from Santa Barbara, in the south. I was going to stop tonight at the rancho, to go on tomorrow morning to my father's house in Monterey."

"Your grandfather is expecting you, no doubt?"

"But, Señor, my grandfather is not here; he and my grandmother are at Santa Barbara! I was going with them, to visit friends there. I changed my mind and wanted to come back and return to Monterey."

"So you changed your mind! As events have shown, a proceeding not unattended by risk. Yet your grandparents made no objection?"

Her answer was a little longer coming this time.

"Why should you be interested in that, Captain Cavalier?"

"Because I am interested in you!" he flashed back at her. "Here in the dark I may not see your face but I carry the memory of it before me; I cannot look into those eyes of yours, so instead, while I bide my happier time, I look into your heart and mind and soul—if you have one!"

Fear began to fall away behind her. It thrilled her a little to have him declare his intent thus forcefully; also it set her to raising her own barriers to abet that of the night.

"And if," she said coolly, "I do not choose to answer?"

She had forgotten that all the while her horse's reins were in his hand. She was reminded quickly enough as both horses were brought to a standstill and so close together that her swaying body brushed his.

"In that case—and mind you I'd not be the one to weep over such a turn of events—I'd pluck you from your saddle, set you before me and in a very few minutes I'd have you alone with me in the blackest heart of the forests here. We'd have us a great roaring fire there; in its light I'd see your face and your eyes— Aye, and I'd have such answers to my questions as suited me!"

With a rush all her fears came fluttering back. Picton and the others were so far ahead.

"I will answer you, Señor. I meant only— Oh, let us ride on, Señor; I grow afraid——"

He seemed to hesitate and though his hesitation may have been only simulation and though certainly it endured but a few instants, she was numb with terror before his light laugh bespoke his tolerant good humor. Again they rode on, she saying hastily, most eager now for any talk, "Your question, Señor? Oh, yes; if my grandparents made any objection to my coming back? Yes, they did. They wanted me to wait for them; to be more properly escorted and chaperoned, Señor. But they gave in at last."

"A very pretty answer," he told her, chuckling once more. "It tells me that my little beauty likes to have her own way.

No one has ever dictated to you do this, do that? As I am in the enticing position to do tonight?"

"No, Señor." It came steadily, but very faintly.

"Now but you tempt me sorely! To be the very first— Well, never mind. I grow informed upon your family history. You return, all of a sudden, to Monterey. Why this abrupt change of plan? Why so great haste in returning to your father's home?"

"There was to be a dance," she explained thoughtfully. "I had a gown especially made before I left Monterey; there was to have been nothing like it in all California. And Josefa, the stupid thing—she is my maid, Señor—forgot to pack it for me and when we were well on our way, lied to me about it, being afraid to tell me——"

"So the little lady's maid is afraid of her!" He was laughing delightedly. "Scrap by scrap we learn that we have to deal with one who was born and bred to the pretty maidenly trick of stamping a foot and setting conflagrations with a scornful glance! And so, we came all the way back for a dress, did we?"

"What would you?" she asked simply. "I had made up my mind——"

"Yes, I understand all that. Now tell me this: with your grandparents away visiting, who remains at the rancho whither we journey now?"

"No one," she retorted.

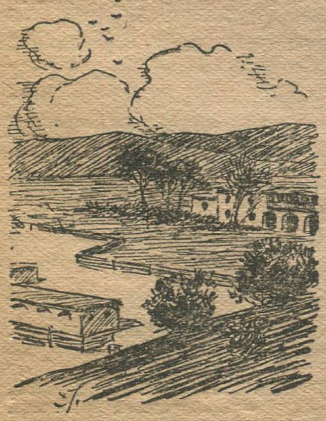
"How, no one? But surely a big rancho is not deserted entirely!"

"Of course household servants remain," she amended, "and Indian *vaqueros* to mind the horses and cattle. They, with a son of Great Picton acting in his father's place as majordomo——"

"Beyond those, not a soul at the place?"

"Not a soul, Señor."

"And you were returning this way to a deserted rancho?"



"Why not, Señor?" she queried. "Am I not safe when I am at Don Julian's *hacienda?* The Great Picton is with me and he is more like a father than a servant; his son is there, and he would die at a word for any one of the De la Fuente. Then, for *duenna,* I have Juana here."

"Oh, you are very well provided for, no doubt. Come, here is a bit of open; let us gallop."

He grew silent for a long while. She never gave over straining her eyes at the hopeless task of making out his face in the dark. What was he thinking now? What did he mean to do? He could be gentle with her; he could be terrible. Was he balancing two impulses?

After a clearing they penetrated a thick pine forest. Now and then Picton shouted back to them, "This way!" and had curt answers from Captain Cavalier. The trail steepened again and grew precariously narrow. They were on a sheer mountainside; from the side and far, far below rose the babble and singing murmurs of the San Antonio Creek.

They passed out of the canyon; the stars so long hidden multiplied over a greatly widened expanse of sky. Once more they could ride abreast and presently they were galloping again.

"Nearly there now?" queried Captain Cavalier out of a silence which had lasted an hour.

"Yes."

"You will invite me within doors? You will perhaps even set a flask of wine and a biscuit before me? You will let me look at you clearly for the first time? I have seen you by a shifting firelight; I want to look at you by the steady, not wind-blown, light of all the candles in the house!"

"I owe you everything," she cried out with a sudden rush of gratitude. Danger lay far behind now; familiar, everyday, homey surroundings grew reassuring all about her. In the phrase of the day she said simply, "My grandfather, were he here, Señor, would be the first to assure you that everything you find here is yours, Señor."

"Yes, you owe me everything!" He repeated her words but invested them with a strange quality, half earnest and half fierce.

The horses' hoofs hammered on, a lively tattoo. The man brooded, his thoughts as darkly hid from her as was the face under his broad hat. From that eager, pulsating rush of warm gratitude she was flung back into uncertainty. In her ears there was only the pound of hoofbeats; it was as though they were beating into her brain the words, "He can be gentle. He can be terrible."

In a grove of noble moss-bearded oaks

Picton had already dismounted. A black square solid mass was the adobe home. Picton was calling out commands. One of the Indians was off with the four horses, the other had hurried on to the house.

Virginia Luisa came down into Picton's extended arms.

"Thanks be to God, Señorita," he said in a low deep rumble, "we are returned safe."

Captain Cavalier dismounted.

"I am invited within for a glass of wine," he said briefly. "You, Picton, take our horses."

They could hear the old fellow breathing; a fierce rush of air when, as now, he cudgelled his wits and held his tongue.

"Juana," he said sharply to his daughter, "run ahead into the house. I but step over to our house to tell my sons what has happened. At the first call, I come."

Virginia Luisa was leading the way, running through the little gate and along a path among roses and trees. Captain Cavalier caught up with her at a bound, sought and found her hand and held it as they went forward. About an angle of massive wall, to a little dark door which was opened from within just as they reached it by an Indian boy bearing a candle.

Then still side by side and with Captain Cavalier's hand tight upon her own imprisoned one, they entered a large room but illy lighted by the solitary candle borne aloft. Through the room to another door which the servant threw open.

This chamber, the main *sala* of the home, was brightly lighted. Virginia Luisa stepped into it; Captain Cavalier followed at the length of their combined arms. He saw the room's spaciousness illuminated by a full score of candles in tall silver candlesticks. He saw a table spread with the remains of a feast, red and purple and golden fruits remaining amidst a fair sprinkling of bottles and glasses. But before this he saw the occupants of this house which it had been promised him was deserted; half a dozen gentlemen about a second table littered with cards.

"So," said Captain Cavalier, clapping his hand to his sword as he stood with her upon the threshold, "this little surprise for me is a token of your gratitude, is it?"

VII

CAPTAIN CAVALIER saw himself tricked toward his undoing. The girl, then, with her dove-eyes was my Lady Deceit, was she?

Yet, making his swift surmises, he stood his ground. He was in an open doorway with a dark empty room at his back. Escape, did it come to that, remained open behind him by the way he had entered.

"Don Pablo!" cried Virginia Luisa and darted forward. "Your Excellency here!"

Captain Cavalier's brows shot up. Oho, so she had led him into the presence of none other than Lieutenant Colonel Pablo de Sola, governor of Spanish California!

The six gentlemen sprang to their feet, their faces indicating various degrees of amazement. Candle flames winked again in silver buckles. Times were hard in California yet these young fellows flaunted their best of broad scarlet sashes and gay hair ribbons in the face of hardship past and a present of ominous threat. Among them but a glance was needed to select Don Pablo Vicente de Sola.

He was a man of nearly sixty, but one with whom age dealt lightly, leaving little mark save in the whiteness of hair and beard. A man as rugged and strong as an ox, as ruddy as full blooded health and many hours in the open could make him. And finally, as arrogant as any Basque who ever lived.

"Señorita!" he exclaimed in that voice which he made echo up and down young California in his day. "But I have just been told that you were at Santa Barbara!"

Captain Cavalier, having marked him well, bestowed his piercing regard upon the gentleman standing next him, one with thin hawkish nose crisply curling ebon sidewhiskers and eyes which leaped to meet his own like antagonistic daggers. This one, who he was presently to learn was Don Nicolas Vara, had stared at Virginia Luisa with the strangest look in the world, then with that flash of enmity at him who escorted her.

A quick smile danced into Captain Cavalier's eyes. For it was given him already to revise a hasty opinion: just as this company had not looked to see her arrive, so had she been as surprised to find them here. Eliminate that trickery on her part and the situation was not without its zest.

"I returned unexpectedly," Virginia Luisa was explaining swiftly to Governor Sola. "I wanted to go back to Monterey."

"Yes, yes," said Sola with a hint of impatience. For so much was obvious and he was now staring at the figure in the doorway. There stood one who was a stranger and it was His Excellency's affair and his pleasure to see that no unexplained strangers set foot in the province. Fur-

thermore, there was a certain dare-devilish carriage there confronting him. "But you have not told us who is this young man. I do not think that I know you, Señor?"

Captain Cavalier brought his heels together, bethought him to touch his hat which he removed with a flourish and bent forward, bowing. The bow itself was an act to deepen the governor's frown; for it was not performed in the Spanish fashion. Captain Cavalier was treating His Excellency to his first view of the graceful salute of a young Virginian, one with French blood in his veins.

Then, erect again, he turned his eyes upon Señorita de la Fuente. His smile remained and now suddenly grew more markedly mirthful. He vowed to himself that it was as good as a play, to await the señorita's choice of answers. And yet, when she appeared to hesitate, he was inwardly very tense.

"He is a gallant gentleman!" cried Virginia Luisa, her cheeks suddenly aflame. "We were beset by a crowd of ruffians. Ignacio was killed. Great Picton was pulled down and beaten. I was in their hands; they tore off my necklace. He saved us and brought us home in safety. He, all alone."

Gayer than ever were his eyes now. He turned them upon her and for a moment, as she stood looking at him, forgot the others in the room. From her it was not to Sola that he looked; some sure instinct drew his regard to the man with a hawk's beak for a nose. Don Nicolas Vara's face had gone a sudden red, then darkened swiftly. In his look Captain Cavalier was free to read suspicion, distrust and finally the clearest and most readable of all emotions, swift jealous animosity.

But now His Excellency's booming voice was only high commendation.

"Señor, you win the gratitude of us all! I am glad that I, representing all California, am here to express that gratitude. You have saved untarnished one of our most precious jewels. Yes, Señor; first you win our thanks; then, as we think upon it, our envy! One may envy you your privilege." He turned banteringly to the man at his elbow. "Eh, my friend Don Nicolas; I know one who would gladly have stood in this gentleman's place tonight!"

Vara's attempt at a smile was a dismal failure. He kept staring at Captain Cavalier as he said, "This man is a stranger. No Spaniard, either."

That was enough to bring back the sober look to Sola's face. To keep California to the Californians, it had ever been Spain's policy to shut her doors against all foreigners.

"True. What, Señor, is your nationality? From where do you come?"

"I am American, Señor," retorted Captain Cavalier.

Sola's brows went down, then rose sharply. He had little love for Americans, and with reason.

"From Boston, Señor? Or Baltimore?"

"From neither, as it please Your Excellency." He stopped there and turned to look at Virginia Luisa.

She saw his look, caught his thought, read his gay challenge and flashed back, "If the gentleman has told me truly, Don Pablo, he is a—Virginian!"

"Right!" cried Captain Cavalier lightly. "Upon such a matter why should I deceive the lady? Or why seek to hide from you gentlemen that of which I am so proud?"

Sola, immediately concerned with what might be a matter of state policy, had no thought to what meanings might lie under words or in glances. But Don Nicolas Vara caught an expression here, an inflection there, which stirred jealousy and suspicion together and darkened his frown. He plucked the governor by the sleeve and began whispering. Sola started and fell to frowning with Vara.

"I trust, Señor," he said with a new quality in his voice, "that our gratitude may not appear the less if we are forced to follow these first words with others? Unfortunately you come among us at a time when California is alert and watchful; when every stranger must be asked to give an account of himself. It is more than a month since word was sent up to me at Monterey from Commandante de la Guerra at Santa Barbara presidio, that we were in danger of an attack from certain pirates. I have begun of late to believe this a false yarn; we've had aplenty of such tales for some years now. Yet

watchfulness is the watchword with us, Señor."

Captain Cavalier nodded as much as to say that here was a condition which he could readily understand though no concern of his.

"And you, Señorita," said Sola, "in whose house I have thus so made myself at home—you shall have both my apology and my explanation—and where I am forced to ask these inhospitable questions, will understand that it is only duty which actuates me? This gentleman, though he has served you so nobly, yet remains a stranger to you. You do not know who he is, what his business. Even his name——"

"Señor," cried the girl warmly, "you use the word *hospitality*. Let it ever be sacred with us. This gentleman must be asked no questions here which he does not volunteer to answer. He has shown himself a hero! He has done for me and all unaided what no other man in all California would have done."

Captain Cavalier bowed deeply.

"You honor me most highly, most sweet lady," he said, that gay smile still shining bright in his eyes. "Far beyond my worth, alas."

"Come, come," said Sola impatiently. "Hospitality is one thing, Señorita. Loyalty and patriotism are others. A stranger——"

"Yet one has shown himself not only a gentleman, but noble!" said Virginia Luisa in haste. For it had dawned upon her, too, that she had promised her escort a house empty of his enemies and that if they pressed him too hard with questions the affair might end unhappily for him. In that case how cruelly she had rewarded his valor! For, be he what he might, it remained that he had come valiantly and fearlessly to her rescue, and that she owed him, as she had said, everything.

But the governor saw his duty clear before him and was not to be turned aside. He it was who ruled California; to none did he report save the viceroy himself in Mexico City, and Mexico was far away and so hard beset with her own revolution that she had scant thought and but a broken authority for this remote province.

"I must recall to you, Señorita," he said bruskly, "that though most undoubtedly this gentleman has befriended you in your hour of need tonight, yet you know nothing of him. Not even his name, I dare say——"

"Oh, pardon me, Your Excellency! But in the excitement of the moment I forgot to present him properly. May I now make known to you the Captain Cavalier!"

No sooner were the words out than she bit her lips, wishing that thus she could have bit back the words themselves. She had never heard the name before tonight; how could she know that these others knew it well and that she could have chanced upon no more unfortunate thing than the speaking it.

At one and the same time she fell to regretting and to wondering. She saw not only Sola and his friend, Don Nicolas, startled, but the four others as well. Two of them wore the uniform of the royal presidial troops and had ridden with His Excellency as his aides; the remaining two were young aristocrats, as one saw at the first glance. Every man of them bristled.

"Captain Cavalier!" boomed Sola when he found his tongue. "What! Captain Cavalier?"

"Captain Cavalier!" gasped Don Nicolas. He had fallen back a pace as though staggered by a blow. "Here? Alive? No, I tell you. Captain Cavalier is dead — wrecked — drowned——"

"Captain Cavalier?" Sola repeated, muttering ominously now, his frown one of black and ungovernable rage. "Leader of traitors, renegades, pirates, cutthroats, murderers! Such a man here, in California? And daring to set foot before me!"

"But I tell you," said Don Nicolas, plainly perturbed, "that Captain Cavalier is dead."

"How now?" growled the governor, turning on his favorite savagely. "How do you know so much? And why have I not been told?"

Don Nicolas Vara, thinking swiftly, answered slowly.

"I have heard rumors, Don Pablo. Only today, before you arrived here. I reserved such information as I had until we should be alone. To be sure they are only rumors but——"

"Curse your rumors," snapped Sola. "You, sir," and he addressed himself

threateningly to him about whom all this talk snapped and crackled like summer lightning, and who had not stirred or spoken, "answer: who the devil are you?"

Captain Cavalier, with all eyes hard upon him, gravely treated them to what interest they might take in the spectacle of a young Virginia gentleman taking snuff. His face still wore that expression of placid gravity, yet one felt that at any moment a ripple of mirth might be expected to dance over it.

"Most sweet lady," he said turning to Virginia Luisa with his little bow, "none regrets more than I that we did not find here a place for that quiet chat for two which we had looked to have. To you, to whom all my devoirs are vowed since some two hours ago, I must take advantage of this tardy moment to complete an introduction which circumstance harshly postponed so long. I am, Madam, none other than Charles Alfred Calvert, poor gentleman of fortune, most loyal Virginian in the world and, I beg you to believe, eternally at your service."

She had hung breathless upon his words. Now, seeking to make amends, she exclaimed quickly, "Captain Calvert! Of course. That is what you told me. And I was frightened and nervous and excited and made of it Captain Cavalier! How stupid——"

But Sola's suspicions were up and would not down. If ever a man looked the part of that swashbuckling captain of buccaneers, he thought to see the man standing there in the doorway.

"Stuff and nonsense!" he said angrily, quick to take up the affront put upon him by this young fellow turning to speak to the girl instead of addressing the highest authority in California. "Never mind the lady now, Señor. You remain unexplained, an intruder, and you will speak to me while I am disposed to grant you that privilege. I'll have that explanation now, or by the blood of Cortez, you'll ask in vain to give it when it is too late."

Captain Cavalier affected to sigh.

"I observe," said he soberly, "a very tragic spectacle."

"Your meaning, sirrah! I grow impatient!"

"You were born impatient, Excellency," returned the other imperturbably. "My meaning? 'Tis this: in gazing upon all this inflated pride of the tenth Spanish governor of California, I cannot but be moved by the consideration that in him I see also—the last of the Spanish governors! Spain loses her iron grip from Cape Horn to San Francisco. You had not heard?" There came a glint of humor into the bold eyes. "My advice to you, Sir Governor, is to abandon a lost cause. Mark you, I see in your clear eyes that you are no fool. Presently you'll be shouting with the rest, 'Down with Spain!'"

Even Virginia Luisa gasped at such heresy. Don Nicolas Vara's black brows bunched nervously; his eyes narrowed.

"Sedition!" shouted Sola. "High treason! 'Tis Captain Cavalier and none other, condemned out of his own mouth. Seize that man!"

"By your leave, dear lady?" said Captain Cavalier and clapped on his hat.

There was a shuffling of feet but not that rush to obey his orders which the governor had counted on. For, donning his hat, Captain Cavalier had been free to employ both hands and now, while his right whipped out a very long, slender and keen blade his left plucked one of the pistols from his sash.

"As you are, gentlemen!" he called coolly. "I took note on entering how you had laid aside your pistols for your game of cards. They lie on the long table yonder at your backs, just out of reach. For your better guidance, should you be moved to recklessness, I may tell you in all simplicity that I'm a terrible fellow with a pistol. Further, you'll mark how both my weapons are double barrelled? Four discharges ready primed. And the first of them, by my honor, costs you your tenth —and last—Spanish governor!"

Sola himself for the instant was speechless. He was unarmed, his own sword had been unhooked and stood yonder against the bench along the wall.

"A word with you, Excellency," ran on Captain Cavalier, all watchfulness and speaking swiftly. "You return to Monterey in the morning? I charge you then with the safe conduct thither of this young lady! She is not safe here with certain ruffians, grown as distempered as jostled hornets, buzzing in a nearby cove. Mark, too, how I honor you. There is not another man in all California I would entrust her to! Certainly not that hawk-faced man at your shoulder. Have an eye on him. And mind you," he added with a new quality of sternness, "I hold you responsible for her safe conduct. Should she know a moment's distress—you answer to me, Señor!"

So did Sola's face redden that it seemed

that his swollen veins must burst. Captain Cavalier, from frowning fierceness went suddenly to light laughter. A last time he turned to Virginia Luisa.

"My heart is in your hands, most sweet lady," he cried gaily. "I exist, but do not live, until we meet again, when you will not return me mine but exchange me yours? In Monterey, Madam! Gentlemen—in Monterey!"

He bowed, saluted and, still laughing, stepped backward into the room behind him. The door slammed, a bolt was shot home and they heard him running through the house.

Running through the flower garden he heard a voice calling softly, "Señor, Señor! Is that you? This way, Señor!"

It was the voice of Great Picton. Wondering, Captain Cavalier hung for a moment upon his heel.

"What is it?" he demanded.

"A horse, Señor. A fresh one, just saddled. I saw who was in there; I guessed that you might seek to depart in some haste. Come, Señor."

Captain Cavalier fell to frowning, wondering more than ever. Yet there was no treachery in that voice. He strode closer and found Picton holding by the reins a restive saddle horse. In a flash he was up in the saddle.

"Just why you do this, old fellow——"

"If you are Captain Cavalier or the devil's uncle," grunted Picton, "it's no affair of mine. You pulled old Picton through an ugly hole this night; more than that you saved Picton's honor for him; and most of all you brought my angel mistress to safety. So it's a small thing I do in return. My master, Don Julian, were he here would have done the same."

Captain Cavalier leaned forward to clap him friendlywise on the huge shoulder. Then, as there was lively din at the house, he shook out his reins and dashed away into the night.

VIII

AFTER him!" thundered Don Pablo Sola. "I'll have the dog shot before dawn!"

"No!" Virginia Luisa threw herself before the governor, catching his arm. "Let him go! He saved me tonight from worse than death and I'll not be the one who led him to destruction here. You must let him go!"

Sola in his blazing anger thrust her roughly aside and ran for his sword, shouting orders. Pistols were snatched up, swords drawn; the two soldiers ran for their flintlocks. But when they found one door bolted and rushed to the other, they had again to do with the girl who stood before it, her eyes on fire with rebellion.

"Has he put a spell on the girl?" fumed the governor. "Out of the way, child. You stand in the path of the king's justice."

"No! I tell you, no!"

But he caught her up, lifted her aside and sped through the door to the dark of the portico. After him streamed the others. Of them all Don Nicolas alone remained behind. He stood looking stonily at her.

"Is Don Pablo right?" he demanded. "Has this stranger put some spell upon you?"

"If it were true and he had," she flung back at him, treating him to the rarest picture of anger and hot scorn, "what then? Why should the matter engage you, Señor Vara?"

"You know why, Señorita," he said quietly. "You know that I love you."

"A fig for such love as yours," she told him passionately. "I have neither asked it of you nor accepted it."

"You know your mother's wishes in the matter."

"A maid does not give her heart by the clock, Señor. Nor am I of a mind to wed where I am told."

"Then there is the acquiescence, the wish of His Excellency, amounting almost to command——"

She stamped her foot. "*Uf!* How you weary me! What I have said before, Señor, must I say again?"

"But I swear to you——"

"Listen!" She ran by him and outside. "I hear a horse running! Ah! *Virgen santisima!* They are shooting!"

Above the detonation and the rush of hoofbeats rose a clear untroubled voice, shouting gaily, "I await you, Señores all, at Monterey."

"And an hour after he is seen in Monterey," Vara said angrily, as they heard the

pursuers returning, "he will stand with his back to the presidio wall looking down the throats of a dozen muskets."

Ah, but she was afraid of that! Why must they hunt him down like a wild animal? What harm had he done them? They should let him go his way—yet she sighed even at that. Thoughtfully she went back into the *sala*. She began to glimpse for the first time in her life that there could arise situations of downright hopelessness.

She heard Don Pablo Sola stamping along, muttering at every step. As he came in she turned to meet him and hastened to be the first to speak.

"You honor my grandfather's home with your presence, Don Pablo," she said quickly. "Don Julian and my grandmother both will be so sorry to have missed you. As for me, you will see that I am very tired from a long day riding and from tonight's terrible adventure. Therefore, I am sure that you will excuse me that I may retire to my room? The house, Señor, is yours."

She dropped him a curtsey and with a bright nod to the gentlemen who came in at his back, turned to leave the room. But Sola, with no tempering of the frown darkening his face, threw up his hand commandingly.

"I regret it, Señorita, but I must have a word," he exclaimed.

"Cannot it wait until morning, Señor? I am so tired."

He handed her a chair, then stepped to the table for a glass of wine. The former she accepted with a sigh; the latter she waved aside.

"Your Excellency commands," she said and looked up to him questioningly.

"Who were those men who attacked you? Where did it happen? How many of them? Where did you leave them? Tell me; tell me everything."

She answered his questions, one after another, at first impersonally and truly seeming bowed down with fatigue; presently with color aroused by memories starting up from her own recital. She lived again through a period of terror, wild hope and despair; she saw Captain Cavalier in every act and gesture. She broke off suddenly at the end, realizing that she was on her feet again and talking with a hot rush of words and that it was of Captain Cavalier, ever Captain Cavalier that she was speaking. Governor Sola's eyes were hard and suspicious upon her.

"You were best with your mother, young woman," he told her sharply. "What sort of thing is this, for a girl to go traveling about the country as you do? We ride early, returning to Monterey. It is best that you ride with us."

It was on the tip of this wilful maid's tongue which had the trick of sharpness at need, to remind Governor Sola that whereas he might order his soldiers about, he held no brief to dictate to her. Yet it remained that she meant in any case to go on to Monterey and that she would be more than glad of such an escort as he and his gentlemen offered. And also she was inspired with a retort which pleased her far better. She made it with her best dimpling smile.

"I see, Señor Gobernador, that you have taken to heart that responsibility which Captain Cavalier placed upon you, and that you mean to carry out his command!"

"Demonio!" roared Don Pablo. And whipping about upon Vara, he demanded, "Is this the maid you told me you were to wed?"

Señor Vara inclined his head gravely.

"Such has been my fondest hope, Señor; such, I have had reason to think, was the señorita's hope also; such, without doubt, is the will of her parents."

"Then, by the head of Cortez!" said Sola heavily. "The thing should be done without delay."

Virginia Luisa bestowed upon California's governor her slow, inscrutable smile.

"Since we must ride early, then I am doubly excused to retire now?" she said quietly. "Gentlemen all, I shall send Juana to you and Isidrio; they will do all that can be done in our too poor home to make for your tonight's comfort. You are at home here, señores—and *buenas noches.*"

They bowed with due gallantry, all save Don Nicolas, who was as stiff as a ramrod and His Excellency, who remained unbending and offended dignity. One of the young fellows in uniform sprang to the door, holding it open for her to pass. Then Sola, dropping heavily into the first chair, began rubbing his chin reflectively.

"A round score or more of the rascals on the beach yonder," he said, staring up at Vara. "Too many for us six, or we'd ride upon them this night. Were only Don Julian and his family not away! There would be enough of them, what with his sons and grandsons, to help me put these wretches to the sword. Well, the thing must await my return to Monterey. You saw nothing of them, of course, in

your ride today, Don Nicolas?"

"Of course not," said Vara, starting from a reverie of his own.

"Who can they be? Not the cursed Russians, plainly."

"Smugglers again, perhaps," said Vara indifferently. "It would not be the first time such a crew commanded by a cursed Boston man had touched at that same beach to put off and take on contraband."

"So you think it's only smugglers?"

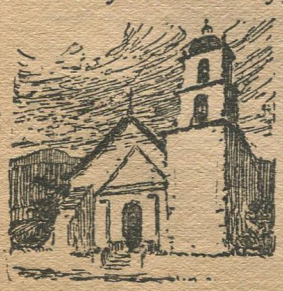
"Doubtless. And, doubtless also after the affair of tonight, they have abandoned their captain and put out to sea. By morning I wonder if we shall even have a chance to see a sail from the Santa Lucias?"

"Yet," mused Sola, "at a time like this when already we are warned of a traitorous attack from the sea, is it not at least possible that they are other and worse than smugglers? Their deed tonight smacks of something of more sinister purport than mere contraband."

"You ride at dawn, as you have said," said Vara thoughtfully. "If you approve, I remain a few hours behind. For my part, I shall ride before daybreak up into the Santa Lucias. With my own eyes I shall see what is to be seen. Then I, too, will haste to Monterey, overtaking Your Excellency or arriving shortly after, bringing you full word."

And so it was arranged, Don Nicolas serving his own secret purpose and Don Pablo thanking him warmly for his patriotic zeal.

Breakfast was served early, horses brought in and saddled by Indian *vaqueros,* long rowelled spurs buckled on. From the house in a fresh riding habit came Virginia Luisa looking eager and bright, fully rested in what must have been a night of pleasant dreams. She had only the gayest of smiles for all; in a moment she made His Excellency forget that any harsh words had ever passed. He patted her little hand with his big one, and vowed gallantly that he had never had so pretty and charming a riding companion. Side by side they led the way, the others falling in behind them.



Thus in the first brilliance of the crisp November morning they clattered by the adobe walls and dark tiled roofs of the Mission San Antonio, and it was almost dusk when the boom of old ocean once more filled their ears. Here, at last, was Monterey.

"Dios, it has been a day!" said His Excellency, brushing the drops from his bushy white eyebrows. "Señorita, your endurance has astonished me."

The last two hours had been ridden in silence, and despite herself the girl had begun to droop in the saddle and a little pallor had crept into her cheeks. Now, however, she sat erect, her eyes brightened, a faint tint as of blush roses returned. Just before her, half seen through dusk and mist, lay Monterey. She began looking quickly this way and that. It was as though she looked for someone.

Yonder, half hidden, fitfully revealed by the shifting gray vapors, the bay glinted dully and vanished by turns. From the beach the gentle slope ran up to the thick woods and between water and wood was the presidio, a sturdy square enclosure of stone and earthen walls some two hundred yards square. From the flagstaff in the center of the walled plaza hung the red and yellow standard of Spain. Sola, at the first sight of it, lifted his hand in salute.

Still farther up the slope and near the edge of the wood stood Monterey's principal fort, placed at this superior elevation whence its guns with wider range might sweep the bay. Then there was the sprinkling of houses, some two score in all, that constituted the capital city of California.

It was toward the most pretentious of these homes, a large, square, white-walled edifice within a stone's throw of the fort, that the governor turned now.

"I do myself the honor of escorting Señorita de la Fuente to the very door of her father's house," he said affably. "You, señores, will ride into the presidio and will inform Commandante Estudillo that I shall expect a word with him in my apartments on my arrival there shortly. Come, Señorita; a lively gallop to end our little ride with a dash!"

A moment later, their horses turned over to the little flock of household servants who appeared from all hands at the sound of hoofs in the yard, they entered the town home of Don Hilario de la Fuente. Virginia Luisa's mother, a tall, dark, handsome woman of fifty though looking ten years younger, with remarkably expressive eyes, keen and intelligent, met them at the door.

If the girl had counted on startling her father and mother she was fated to disap-

pointment. Neither of her parents appeared in the least surprised that she was here instead of being some two hundred miles farther south at Santa Barbara. All warmth of welcome was bestowed upon Don Pablo Sola; the swift look flashed from mother to daughter was in ancient family code. It said, "Just wait until we can be alone!"

"May God keep Your Excellency," Señora de la Fuente was saying fervently while Don Pablo bowed over her hand. "And you will honor us further, Your Excellency?" exclaimed the fashionable matron. "Enter, Don Pablo."

Don Pablo, however, excused himself. He must hasten to his quarters in the presidio; a matter of importance. An affair of state; nothing less could hold him back from so distinguished a door opened so hospitably.

"I must talk with the commandante immediately," he explained. "I did not count on returning so speedily; he is not expecting me——"

Virginia Luisa's mother stared at him in wonder.

"But, Señor, we had your message this morning! Commandante Estudillo as well——"

"Message? I sent no message," said Sola, staring in his turn.

"But surely, Don Pablo, you have forgotten. Your messenger came straight to us, first of all; here he left the horse which he told us he had borrowed at the *rancho* of papa Don Julian. He tarried long enough to sip a glass of wine with us and tell us that all was well with our little daughter and that you in person assumed the responsibility of bringing her to us——"

She broke short off at the look upon the governor's face. His jaw dropped, his eyes grew large with amazement.

"Don Pablo!" she stammered. "What is it?"

"Tell me more," he commanded savagely. "What next did he—this messenger of mine—do?"

"He excused himself and hastened to the presidio, to convey Your Excellency's commands to the commandante——"

"Demonio!" bellowed Sola. "He went to the presidio? Perhaps Estudillo entertained him within the walls?"

"Oh, surely, Señor. From here we could see. They were together an hour, was it not, Don Hilario? And then Commandante Estudillo rode away. We thought at your orders, to meet you——"

And now the dark suspicion broke in on her that Don Pablo, who had despatched a messenger and then forgotten, now went stark mad before her eyes. For, hat in one hand and sword in the other, he ran as no one had ever seen California's dignified executive run before. And as he ran Don Pablo lifted his roughened voice in such syllables as to make Señora de la Fuente clap her hands to her ears. As for Don Hilario, coming to himself with a start, he caught his little daughter by the arm and ran her within doors, that her pure young ears might not be sullied by the unlimited vocabulary of a governor in wrath. And, as for Virginia Luisa herself—how her eyes lighted up!

IX

THE maddest man in all the length and breadth of fair California was its governor. In five minutes he had stormed across the plaza of the presidio, bursting in through the great gate in the twelve foot high wall, stormed to his own apartments, bellowed for his orderly. He had called one man a liar, another a coward and had knocked a third flat down; he had caused a fourth, the innocent drunken vagabond, Molina, to be thrown into the adobe jail and ordered him a dozen lashes. Molina's offence resided in the fact that he dared in his shabby person hold a certain grotesque, caricaturish sort of resemblance to the governor himself; and that he had chosen this inauspicious moment, drunk as usual, to present himself to the wrathful eye.

Commandante Estudillo was nowhere to be found, had not been seen about the presidio since noon. For that Don Pablo cursed Captain Cavalier until the beams of his low ceiling vibrated to the thunder of his voice. Then came such a bit of news as made him forget even Captain Cavalier. But the news itself brought him again to a need for the commandante and that unfulfilled need carried him once again to Captain Cavalier.

"Find me that traitor, that murderous scoundrel, that damnable spy, that pirate," he roared, "and I'll hang him in the gateway there with my own hands."

But again was he driven by the very force of ominous circumstance to forget Captain Cavalier. The news which had just been brought in to him by a sentinel riding on his bloody spurs was that which all California had dreaded for six weeks. On the sixth day of October there had ar-

rived at Santa Barbara the genial Dutch captain, Henry Gyzelaar of the brig *Clarion*, conveying to his friend, Commandante de la Guerra, the dread tidings that an attack upon California was imminent. Himself hasting from the Hawaiian Islands, Captain Gyzelaar warned the commandante that Hypolite Bouchard was even now fitting out his piratical craft, and might be looked for daily. De la Guerra set a messenger upon the swiftest horse in his stables and sent the man racing northward. From the instant on the second day after leaving Santa Barbara the messenger rode into Monterey all California was on the *qui vive*. Time had passed; preparations were made hurriedly; everything was in readiness. But with passing weeks fears passed; Sola himself began to scoff at this, but another false alarm.

And now the sentinel who had nearly killed a horse in riding the short distance from his look-out at the Point of Pines, was crying wildly, "The pirates! They are here, Excellency! Two great black frigates that will drop anchor in the harbor before nightfall!"

And, with the critical hour at last arrived, no commandante at the post! Sola ground his teeth. Yet here were the two sergeants and young Corporal Vallejo.

"You, Gomez," shouted Sola, "to the *castillo!* Man the guns there. You, Vallejo, to our new battery by the beach. By me, Estrada! I am in command in everything. Sound the *generala!*"

The three ran out, shouting commands. In the plaza in another moment there was the rush of feet, the snapping of orders. All was in confusion that the more swiftly might all be in order. The *generala* sounded, that unaccustomed warning rumble of the drum, conveying to all who heard, men, women, little frightened children the ominous message, "The pirates have come!"

Excitement and clamor within the presidial walls gave place swiftly to order and discipline. Monterey, at one moment a tiny drowsing outpost lulled by the lapping of a vast and empty Pacific, was become in another a stubborn military garrison. As word was tossed about that at last the buccaneers were in the offing, this pigmy capital city of California stiffened itself against the impact.

Meanwhile, again in his rooms, Sola had instructed his orderly; with not Monterey alone, but the long sweep of the entire province menaced, orders began to pour forth. A messenger sped northward to carry the word to Commandante Luis Arguello at San Francisco. Another southward, striking out with a fine fierce burst of speed for the first lap of the long ride down to Santa Barbara. There was the thunder of hoofs up and down California that memorable night, a night of thick darkness, scudding clouds and gusts of rain. Traitors, murderers were striking! Let all California gird herself to strike back, a doughty blow for her king, her free hearths, her unviolated homes!

There was the rumble of the great wooden wheels of the *caretas* lumbering behind their yokes of goaded oxen as, at Sola's commands, families began to take their hasty departures. The women and children were to be carried to a safe distance from the coast, as far as the Rancho del Rey, farther to Mission Soledad, Mission San Juan Bautista, Mission San Antonio tomorrow. They went in rude carts or on horseback and with them went the most precious of their belongings.

Yet not all of Monterey's womenfolk joined in that first hasty flight. In the home of Virginia Luisa's father and mother after Don Hilario had armed and gone to join the garrison, several loyal women toiled to provide food for the men who would fight for Monterey.

"We are safe here until morning; by then we must be ready for anything," pronounced Virginia Luisa's mother. "Even for flight at midnight if it comes to that."

Meanwhile in the church tower at the end of the square, the very tower from which many straining eyes had looked out across the bay for those ships which now came at last, Governor Sola was now standing looking into the dusk of the harbor. Thick, low fog, broken a little here and there by a light variable wind, dissipated by brief, chill showers, was closing in again.

Suddenly in a certain spot the fog seemed to thicken as about a concentrated nucleus of itself. Slowly, from the quality of heavy vapor this spot grew into tangible solidity. It came on almost imperceptibly, seeming to inch across the dark waters. It took form, a black hulk

growing larger, looming darker, nearer, more sinister.

"The black frigate!" cried Sola.

He whirled and ran down the steep stairway, shouting commands.

Out yonder there was a splash; the *Santa Rosa* had let go her anchor. A great crowd of men could be seen on board. There sounded the wild confused clamor of voices, a medley of tongues. The ship's sides seemed fairly to bristle with guns.

The slow thick fog shut in again; the buccaneer craft was but a vague ghostly presence. Yet the voices came across the hidden water, yelling, jeering, eager voices.

Virginia Luisa, her heart thrilling at this fight for her California, was helping her mother prepare food for the men, and to her ears came the ominous sounds over the water. She remembered those others there in the little cove, those whom Captain Cavalier had held back from her. Where was Captain Cavalier now? Were those out there truly his friends, his kind; those of the evil mocking voices?

X

CAPTAIN CAVALIER crouched lower in the darkness. An inner glee warmed the heart within him though his body grew goose-fleshed with the damp cold. High luck, to have found these two together and followed them here; to have caught some hint at their plottings. Already one of them had the oars in his hand; a gentle shove was all that was needed to set the little rowboat afloat.

"I tell you, Nick Vara," said the voice of Sir Harry Hawk in the best of good humors, "I know this Frenchy, Bouchard, like a brother. He'll throw his arms about the two of us when he has your news—with me to vouch for it, remember! And he'll be the first to see the advantage of having my twenty fellows already ashore here. Come, man; my throat's aching for the hot rum and warm welcome."

"Your men?" asked Vara. From his voice one knew how he was plucking at his sidewhisker; how he was frowning. "You can hold them to heel a few hours longer?"

Sir Harry laughed affably.

"You have seen, friend Vara! They'll not rebel again. Dick o' Boston was the only man of them all whom I've ever had to watch; and where is poor Dick now? He's done in and done brown," he chuckled. "Aye, all's shipshape there."

"You left them in the wood? They'll not stir until you command?"

"I left them no such place," returned Sir Harry Hawk coolly. "Do you think I want them regretting that crazy Cavalier again? I left them, rather, snug and cozy between four walls. Down in that little shanty of Uncle—that half shop, half dive—I believe the fellow is a trader in contraband——"

"Tio Armenta's!" gasped Vara. "What folly, man!"

"Aye, Uncle Armenta's; that's the place. Folly, say you? What of it? A dash of folly is what my gentlemen must have to keep them as we want them. And there's no danger; the town's as good as deserted, most of the womenfolk gone inland, the birds that want plucking are within the presidio and only a sentinel goes up and down here and there. Let one of them stick his nose in at Uncle Armenta's and there's one less for us to clear out of the way when Bouchard gives the word."

"And old Armenta? Dead?"

"Who, then, would serve my gentlemen their liquor and hand them their cards? Oh, they'll keep the old fellow alive the night through; unless he drops dead of terror. But come; I begin to shiver here."

"Then shiver," growled Vara, "another twenty minutes. I told Sola I was doing a bit of reconnoitering on my own; but he will be looking for me. Wait me here; I report to him, make the great dunce my excuses again and come back to you."

"If you must," sighed the other. "Only I warn you if you keep me overlong you swim out to Bouchard. I'm belly-full of your lessons in patience."

Vara hastened away. Sir Harry Hawk began pacing back and forth along the beach, swinging his arms to keep warm, humming a little unsavory song. Captain Cavalier fell to pondering; he had a full quarter of an hour before Vara's return, ample time to shape his own plans and to take the first step toward carrying them out.

Dick o' Boston dead and Harry Hawk once more in undisputed command; well, after all, it was to be expected. And Nicolas Vara, the governor's trusted friend, hand in glove with the invaders? Hm; that was news. Or rather the first assurance confirming very lively suspicions.

Vara made haste. Challenged by the guard, admitted, he was closeted with His Excellency not above ten minutes. While seeming to make his report, it was really

Vara who asked most of the questions. He knew to a nicety what was planned, what had been done.

"So the De la Fuentes remain at their house?" he queried.

"With horses saddled, like some few other ladies. Under command from me to flee to the hills at the first signal of danger. With them that little love-bird of yours, Vara. She were best wed soon; eh? Her mother agrees; she is scandalized by what the girl has done. She swears that, with all her wild doings, no man will care to marry her. Now's your chance, as soon as we grow settled here again."

"I'd wed her tonight," said Vara, staring hard.

Sola shrugged.

"If it can be done, do so and welcome. But I fail to see how."

Vara rose.

"I'm off for a word with her and her mother. You will understand, Don Pablo, that I am uneasy for them? Have I your permission to absent myself from you for an hour or two?"

"Go, my friend," said Sola. "Only, I'll count upon you at the first alarm. Good fortune attend you."

Vara went out, and though he turned up the slope toward the De la Fuente home, altered his course as soon as he disappeared from the eyes of the sentry and hurried again to the beach.

When near enough to make out Sir Harry Hawk's cloak fluttering against the veil of the dark, he cried sharply, "Get her afloat, man. I've much to do now before day."

"Hist!" came a cautious whisper. "Silence is best, Nick Vara. I heard a noise just now; there's another than ourselves about."

"The more need for haste," returned Vara, his voice lowered, staring about.

Their four hands shoved the little boat out into shallow water; standing in the ebb and flow to their boot tops they got in, Vara in the stern, the other bending to the oars. Like an ebon ship on a sea of pitch the boat carried them out into the bay.

Just before them, half a mile out, lay the nearest of the ships. As it swung idly at anchor, now and then a lantern gleamed faintly. Otherwise all was dark. Vara brooded, a man absorbed with all the plot and counterplot bred of the hour and his own treachery. After the rougher water was behind them and their craft steadied somewhat to the more quiet bay outside the surf, the tune which Sir Harry Hawk had crooned on the beach was wafted back to him in gay whistled snatches.

"You're a merry devil," growled Vara.

But he had no answer. The oars were plied with fresh vigor, silence descended upon both men. Each tonight had his opportunity offered him, his hazards ahead.

They drew close to the dark hull of the frigate. Vara cupped his hands about his mouth and shouted, "Ahoy, there! Is Captain Bouchard on board?"

A man came to the rail, leaning over.

"Who goes?" he challenged.

"Friends," answered Vara. "On urgent business with Captain Bouchard."

The fellow above at the rail hesitated. "This is the *Santa Rosa,*" he answered finally, for there seemed little menace in two men. "Captain Bouchard is aboard the *Argentina.* Where? Somewhere on the bay! Now, tell us about things on shore? Fine clothes for us? Full barrels and fat chests of doubloons? Pretty maids and rich old dons for ransom?"

"Down with Spain!" Don Nicolas gave him for answer, as the little rowboat turned and sped away, heading still farther to sea, questing the *Argentina* and Captain Bouchard.

"There she lies yonder," said Vara presently. "You'll mark the black blot of her."

He had a grunt for answer; the prow turned a bit and with oars plied vigorously again they made straight for the black bulk of the vessel. A lantern appeared, a very glowworm through the mist. They pulled alongside. Again Vara trumpeted through his hands, demanding Bouchard.

It was Captain Bouchard himself who, chancing to be on deck, came to the ship's side and gave back an answer. A rich, mellow voice modulated to a certain cultured civility.

"Who asks for Hipolyte Bouchard? You see him here at your service, Monsieur."

"You are Captain Bouchard?" asked Vara eagerly. The words had come down to him in French yet even so he caught their sense. "I speak only Spanish——"

"Bueno," retorted Bouchard lightly. "I will speak your Spanish with you, Señor. What may it be?"

"I bring news from on shore. Full information, details of everything! I am with you, Señor!" And as before, now again and as bitterly as gall, did he cry, "Down with Spain!"

"Oho! So the Spaniards here in California, like other Spaniards south, stand ready to haul down the lion of Castile?"

"Some few," explained Vara. "Others, the most of them, are all for Ferdinand, tyranny and folly. But, if you will receive me on board, I shall tell you everything."

"Who is your companion, Señor Rebellious Spaniard?" queried Bouchard.

"One whom you know well, Señor; one who will vouch for me. It is a gentleman of fortune who names himself Sir Harry Hawk!"

Again Captain Bouchard said, "Oho!" and then laughed softly.

"Little Harry Hawk, is it? I'd never guessed it; for I never knew him hold his tongue so long a time! He'll bring word from Gentleman Charlie Calvert himself? Ho, there; a ladder overboard. Sharply does it, my hearties."

The ladder was lowered and with the boat tethered to its dangling end its two occupants went up the ship's side, Vara thrusting to the fore. On deck in what small uncertain light fell from a smoke-blackened lantern, he made his bow and sought to see what he could of this Captain Bouchard who might stand tonight in the position to make or mar the fortunes of one Nicolas Vara.

All that he could see was a short, wiry little man in an enormous hat, and the merest hint of a face with black, pointed beard and fiercely upthrust mustaches.

"You are most welcome, Sir Spaniard," said Bouchard, his own bow of the primmest. "I should be glad of your news. To begin with—who the devil are you?"

"Don Nicolas Vara, Señor, at your service."

"Spanish, of course?"

"Never, Señor! Mexican and a son of liberty. But some twelve months from Mexico where I fought with the *insurgentes.* Captured there, Señor, accused of being a spy, ordered shot. I escaped and came here. Here, Señor, I have been accepted as a friend by none less than the governor himself."

There, in a word, he had Bouchard's interest. For, once he had determined on striking a blow, this Hipolyte Bouchard had a great fondness for carrying out his affair with all possible craft; it mattered not at all how much blood was spilled on the other side, but he was a stout advocate of conservation of his own forces.

"Now, this is excellent," is what he said. But it was obvious that his eagerness to learn anything he could was no greater than his alertness. Very bluntly he added, "Before I trust a man, Señor, who comes to betray his friends, I must know something about him."

Vara, expecting this and having made his own preparations, remained unmoved.

"Of course, Señor. That is why I have brought one to vouch for me, one whom you can trust since you know that he makes common cause with you." He turned toward his companion, saying confidently, "You will quiet Captain Bouchard's fears, Señor? You will tell him—everything?"

And here is the answer which Don Nicolas got in a ringing voice the very first sound of which made him start back like a man stabbed, "Everything? None gladder than I to tell you, Hipolyte Bouchard! The man's a dirty, contemptible, treacherous hound, who would rather knife a friend in the back than take a swig of honest rum!"

Vara was speechless. Mind you, this was at a time when rank superstition stalked up and down everywhere among men and was day and night like a ghostly thing at many an elbow. Though he saw Sir Harry Hawk's cloak fluttering against the rail, it burst upon him that the man in the cloak was Captain Cavalier!

But Bouchard, startled as he, too, was, was quick to demand, "What fiend's foolishness is this you treat me to? You tell me this is Harry Hawk? Don't I know Gentleman Charlie Calvert, Captain Cavalier that men grow to call him? Ho, there!" he shouted and a dozen barefooted sailors rushed forward. "Watch me these two well until I have an explanation out of them. Shoot down the first to lift hand or stir foot."

Vara stood as he was, staring. He had

not uttered a word nor is it likely that he had begun to think. Under a shock like his, mental processes are paralyzed. It was in effect as if he had actually seen one man turn into another.

Captain Cavalier, having spoken, also kept his place, right hand on hilt, left hand on the rail behind him, poised it would seem, lifted a little upon his toes, ready for anything.

Bouchard, having barked out his order and seen bristling alacrity in the obedience in the semicircle of his wild devils who started forward, gave a sudden fierce upthrust to both ends of his needle-pointed mustaches, and then sought the shortest way to come to the straight of matters.

"As it please you, gentlemen," he said curtly, "we shall have a word or two explaining how I am bid to harken to Harry Hawk when it's Charlie Calvert and not little Harry at all?"

Here, the first sign that Vara lived and was not a dead man erect, was heard a little click of his teeth. But as for a word of explanation, it could hardly be looked for from him! In truth, he was scarcely less eager than Bouchard himself to know.

Hence it fell to Captain Cavalier, the only man who knew, to tell the tale. Which he did gaily, as one who enjoyed the recital.

"To begin with, Monsieur Hipolyte, my rascals lost me my ship some weeks ago. The rats in a panic went overboard, leaving me alone to think of any small salvaging. One knows if he was not born to be drowned, eh? So I was blown to sea on a leaky, yawing hull; blown north, too, along a shore of sharp crags. Yet, though I lost my ship in the end, I saved a life which is very precious to me; as also, with half a dozen lengths of rope, a certain chest worthy of some small risks. Thereafter, with an adventure here and there which we shall leave for some golden hour over a bottle together, I found me my half-starved vagabonds again. That little Harry Hawk, whom this black dog," and he tipped his head coolly toward the motionless Vara, "expected to have at hand to vouch for him here, had assured himself that his master was dead and himself the man for his master's boots! I had the pleasure of setting him down, though but for the time; I smote him fair between the crafty blue little eyes of him and left him cold."

Here Vara, who already had begun to stir, found his tongue.

"Hear me, Captain Bouchard——"

"I hear one at a time," said Bouchard savagely. "Have done, Calvert."

"This double-dealing Mexican gentleman," went on Captain Cavalier, "has allied himself to Harry Hawk. Birds of a feather, you know, friend Hipolyte! Just now the two, plotting treason, stood on the beach, planning to make you this visit. The Mexican stepped away for a few minutes. Less time would have been aplenty for my business with his companion."

"You murdered him?" demanded Vara, beginning to understand. "Put a knife into his back, eh?"

"Now, would you believe," cried Captain Cavalier, his head to one side, "I never thought of that—not being of your turn of mind, Señor Vara! In my clumsier fashion I took somewhat more pains in the matter and, I'll admit, failed of the clean-cut result your native genius would have come to. I merely trussed him up nicely and left him comfortable in a bed of rock and seashells. I'll not say I did not bruise him; yet murder him I did not."

"You are talking to me, sir," said Bouchard. "Remember that. I am not concerned with your private quarrels. I still fail to understand this theatric appearance before me."

Captain Cavalier fell to staring at Bouchard now. Dim and uncertain as the light was it was sufficient to show a certain quality of bearing in the young Virginian; and it was not that of a man who knuckles under to any.

"Hipolyte Bouchard," he said sternly, "I come here a visitor, of my own will; one free captain presenting himself to another. You will also remember that!"

"He came," cried Vara, "to fill you with lies."

"I came," said Captain Cavalier equably, "because the opportunity was irresistible. Also, to tell you what a traitorous hound this fellow is. And finally to advise with you, speaking of conditions on shore, of the attack to be made, and of my own part in the same."

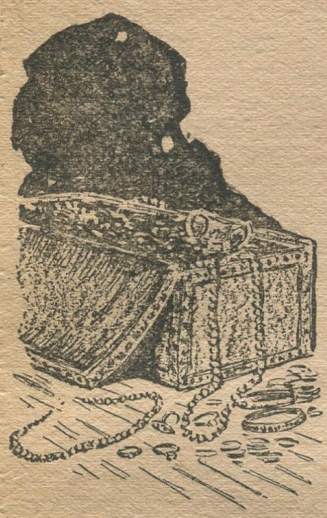
"Ah," said Bouchard. "And your part, Monsieur?"

"I'll lead the attack," was the cool rejoinder. "I am the man for it, as we both know. You want the person of the governor; well, you shall have him and in short time, and the fat ransom thereafter, if you give me my way."

"And you?" queried Bouchard, knowing him well. "You will want some little thing of your own, perhaps?"

Captain Cavalier laughed pleasantly.

"How you read me, Monsieur! There is the presidio and within it certain spoils, doubtless. I want none of that. There are the warehouses outside the walls, stocked as you will find them; I want none of them. There are some Spanish jewels, it may be. There are barrels of good red California wine, casks of very noble brandy; they are yours. There are extramural habitations, better than a score of residences of these hidalgos; take them all—but one! And there we have it, my portion of the booty. Give me one home only and all that it contains. There you see me content."



"No!" shouted Vara. "No! That house falls to me! Look you, Señor," he cried to Bouchard, flinging out his arms with a certain intense and dramatic grace, "I am the man who gives you all California! You come today; I have been here, working toward this one thing, a full year. Where this brawling Cavalier guesses a little, I know everything. Here lies California; she is yours to take, to rend and ravish and loot from end to end. It is I who can show you the way. And it is I who ask that one house only."

Now the two of them set Bouchard wondering. What might that house contain? He put the question promptly. And it was Vara this time, springing forward, who gave him the swift answer.

"It contains my affianced bride."

"You lie," Captain Cavalier told him hotly.

"Gentlemen, gentlemen!" Now Bouchard, meaning to come quite to the bottom of things, was all for peace between them. "Señor Vara," he went on, "you show me something of your heart tonight. You are not the man to love any other so well as you love yourself. Why do you set so much store in one pair of eyes?"

Vara could be as coolly and deliberately direct as any, when he saw the need.

"Then I shall tell you. You come to strike a blow here and to go on. Whether in the end liberty triumphs or King Ferdinand, whom God curse, sits on secure upon his throne, you reck nothing. But for me, it is different. When you sail away, I remain here. Let tyranny fall, I am secure. Let matters go the other way—and they brand me traitor! Is that clear, Señor?"

"Very clear. What next?"

"We come to that one house—and its content, Señor. I wed a certain maid; I ally myself with a certain family, the most powerful within some hundreds of miles of this little Monterey, Señor; the proudest—and the most loyal to Spain. Ah, you see it? Should all my other plans fail, which I do not believe they will, yet I save myself."

"A foot in either camp," nodded Bouchard. "Well, that's plain enough. Yet, what matters all this to me?"

"This, Señor: if I win, I become like a king here! Spanish dominion is dead; I set my foot upon it; I place myself in its stead. I remember my friend Captain Bouchard. He has ever a free port of entry; he has rich gifts; he has many a mission and *rancho* and village to plunder. All this when we win. Should we lose?" He shrugged. "Fortunes of war, Señor. But in any case it costs you nothing—just a girl, whom you have not even seen."

"So that is it?" mused Captain Cavalier.

Bouchard fell to pondering. Presently he looked sharply at Captain Cavalier.

"You are a bold blade, Charlie Calvert," he said suddenly, "to present yourself before me tonight. You will not have forgotten our last meeting?"

"Who but a bold blade need present himself before the bold Bouchard?" asked Cavalier lightly. "Nor am I the man to forget any conversations I have had with you, Monsieur. We quarreled, I believe? But then you and I have, in our time, quarreled with many. You vowed to swing me high, given the so sweet opportunity? Well, but the opportunity has never offered."

Now here was reckless impudence. Yet also, for a man as quick of wit as Bouchard and as steadfast in pursuance of a set purpose, was a quiet voice in his ears saying, "Yonder, the bold devil, is the very man to lead the attack on Monterey. There is always time, after victory, to arrange personal trifles."

So he pondered on. Here before him were two men, either of whom might serve admirably just now. Not both; there was no reconciling such animosity as those two nourished. He could make use of one. The other, with things as they were, he had better make an end of speedily.

He considered Vara. A stranger, a spy, one to betray those to whom he pretended friendship; a slippery customer. Yet one who no doubt, as he had said, knew to the last detail California's mood, her defences, her wealth. A man of ambition; one who, with good luck, might go far; one who might be of service both now and later on.

He considered Charlie Calvert. Young, hot-blooded, headlong. Just the man to lead such an attack as Bouchard planned. A man whose word was as good as gold; a hard hitter but with no trickery in him. In the way of being a private enemy—yet that affair could wait along with many another.

"I believe that one of you gentlemen comes most opportunely," said Bouchard. "The other would have fared a deal better had he remained on shore."

He paused. He was on the very verge of a decision yet, as always was full of deliberate caution.

"Gentlemen——"

Alongside oars were heard, furiously driven, slipping in the oarlocks, splashing awkwardly and mightily. A curse for clumsiness, a mutter of impatience, and then a voice shouting.

"Ahoy, there. A word with Captain Bouchard!"

Bouchard, without moving, called back. "Does all California come uninvited to visit me? Who calls?"

"I'm from the *Santa Rosa,*" was the rejoinder. "Half a dozen fellows with me. Harry Hawk among them, Captain, and he has a mouthful of news. Have you Captain Cavalier with you?"

"Aye," answered Bouchard. "What of it?"

"Harry Hawk here will tell you. Best hold Cavalier tight and watch him, Captain. His band has turned on him; they say he has betrayed them, going over to the Californians for the sake of a pair of eyes and ankles——"

In a flash, needing far less to drag one scale down and elevate its rival, Bouchard's mind was made up. With a nimble leap he sprang aside, and shouted as he sprang, "Shoot me that fellow Cavalier!"

But Captain Cavalier's hand all the while was on the rail, Cavalier himself ready for anything. Amid a rattling volley of pistol shots he went overboard. There was no time now for one of those gestures he loved so well; no time even for one of his swift retorts. And, for once in his haphazard life, there was little grace in the manner of his departure. But, a better thing in its stead, there was an almost incredible swiftness.

"Make sure of him, you fools," roared Bouchard, back at the ship's side and peering down into the thick dark. "Give me an end of this cursed Captain Cavalier."

The men in the small boat had heard the splash of the body diving headfirst and turned their boat toward the spot. They even found Sir Harry Hawk's cloak floating nearby, caught upon an oarblade. They salvaged the cloak and had the satisfaction of making out what appeared to be a couple of bullet holes in the fabric; but they found no Captain Cavalier, dead or alive.

Other boats were manned in haste. It was a full hour before Bouchard disgustedly gave orders to pull back to the *Argentina.* By the time the last boat returned Captain Cavalier, spent and shivering and blue with cold, was crawling ashore. He was in sorry plight, for when rowing with Vara and appearing in Harry Hawk's cloak, he had worn little else!

"California," he chuckled, the while his teeth performed a lively clicking dance over which as yet he had no control, "the fame of your fine hospitality has traveled far overseas. What can you refuse a poor devil in my case? Look at me with kind and sorrowful eyes! You can refuse—nothing. Ergo, you will give me—everything!"

XI

VIRGINIA LUISA was most busy in the kitchen across the courtyard at the back of her mother's house; was at the moment, in fact, applying herself with a pretty clumsiness to sweep the pieces of a broken earthen plate into a convenient corner. No more deft a soft pair of hands in all California for dainty sewing and embroidery; for knitting glorious silken garters for her brothers; no more amazingly silly little hands anywhere when it was a matter of pots and pans and dishes which any stupid Indian of the household could handle.

So engrossed was she that she did not

hear the soft opening and closing of a door behind her.

"Most sweet lady—" said a voice, for Captain Cavalier had been reconnoitering for some time to make sure that the girl was alone in these quarters cut off from the rest of the house.

Virginia Luisa spun about upon a high, red heel; there was a flash of red silk stockings as her sudden movement made her skirts billow.

"Captain Cavalier!" she gasped.

He made her his bow, sweeping and graceful and gallant.

"Have no fear this time, Señorita. I come but to speak a word or two and then go."

Why did this man affect her so? None other ever had! A dash of fear, despite his words and his smile, yet, along with it, a strangely delicious thrill.

"What should I fear?" She made a brave pretense at speaking fearlessly, though her hands were tight clenched and her breast rose and fell. She saw how the door was closed and how he stood with his back against it. "There are soldiers in the house. I have but to call."

"Most excellent! Then we'll have done with any thought of fear, so safe are you."

His eyes were twinkling, he seemed in the rarest good humor. She could have sworn just then that there was no evil in this man.

After her first moment almost of consternation, so deep had been her preoccupation and so unexpectedly broken, her thoughts flew thick and fast again. Here was an enemy of her people and at an hour when Monterey stood in grave danger; yet he was one who had stood her friend in her direst need. Here was one whom the governor had sworn to have hanged or shot on sight and when she had said that soldiers were in the house, within call, she had spoken the truth. A ghastly vision formed in her lively imagination. She shivered slightly.

"You must go! If they find you here——"

"So you would not see me stretching rope for His Excellency? Nor would you witness my poor carcass metamorphosed into a bullet pouch and heavy with lead?" How swiftly those bold eager eyes of his could catch fire. "By the light of glory then, Virginia Luisa, we are friends!"

He made her forget—and remember! Forget the soldiers in the house, the governor in the presidio, the ships in the bay; remember all that had passed between him and her. She had offered him a dare, if he was no coward; to return her to her own people and then to come for her. To multiply his own risks, to pile hazard upon hazard, to set himself single-handed against a host. And he had taken her dare.

It was odd, though this she did not realize until hours afterward, that her one impelling emotion at that instant, while with all her ears she listened for a call from her mother or the tread of soldiery, was a strong, fierce pride. Pride in him, a stranger, an unknown, an enemy to her people.

Yet she reddened and spoke hurriedly. Here was a crisis when one's head might dictate a certain utterance while one's heart cried out another. At such a time may the heart ever have the right of way.

"My mother, Señor, whom you do not know, has sworn that I am to wed Don Nicolas Vara. And without delay."

"Your mother? Vara! The very black dog of treachery? What, lady, does your mother know so little of him then?"

"She has known him a full year. He came up from Mexico with letters proving him to be a true and distinguished gentleman——"

"Then I'll be bound it was his own hand that forged those letters. Distinguished? I doubt it sorely. True or a gentleman? Pah! You'll wed with none like him, my Virginia."

"I have said that you do not know my mother!"

"You mean she would force you?"

"Have not other maids, Señor, married where they were told?"

"Not maids like you," he cried warmly. "But let us have the whole of this. What haste does your mother find necessary? And at a time like this?"

There was defiance in the way she lifted her head.

"She says that I am disgraced. That I have disgraced myself over and over. I have gone about like—like a man! I have not been properly chaperoned. Tongues wag. Will she have me an old maid, Señor? Is my family to be further disgraced by me thus? Yet, so my mother says, in a little while even Señor Vara would refuse to wed me and then fingers will point while the tongues keep on clacking louder than ever—and people will laugh——"

Captain Cavalier laughed now.

"That mother of yours! I must come

to know her better, I see that. But come; time passes and, as you have said, we must remember the soldiers. Already you have bidden me flee for my life. Curious, since it was to urge you to flee and with no further loss of time that I sought you."

"I, Señor?"

"You, Señorita. Of whom else should I think? Listen; out there in the bay are Bouchard's men, preparing to attack. With them is this Vara of your mother's, plotting with them——"

"Señor Vara with them?"

"Nowhere else," he returned curtly, "unless it be that he has started for the shore to aid in the attack."

"Yet how do you know this? How could you?"

"How, unless I had just come from Bouchard's ship myself?"

"You went out to the ship?"

He bowed.

"But why, Señor?" she asked eagerly. "What to do there?"

"To checkmate this Vara, at which I narrowly failed. To have a fling at Harry Hawk. And, finally, to offer myself to Bouchard as a leader in the assault."

She drew back and began to stare fearfully at him.

"You admit a thing like that? You say—what you have said to me—and then tell me this?"

"You think that I would make but a poor advocate? Well, perhaps. There have been few solicitors or men of that ilk among the Calverts of Virginia."

"You remain then an enemy to California?"

"What is California to me? A rich province absurd in its stubborn allegiance to a distant tyrant of a king. That is all; rather, that was all until I met you, sweet lady!"

"Yet even now you offer your sword against my home?"

"To Bouchard, yes. But it happens that he refused the offer. Further, in emulation of your governor, he, too, ordered me shot! Hence I came away with little ceremony and without the men I had hoped to have from him. And without that reward I had demanded—and which your Vara demanded before me."

"And that reward?" she asked, with a sudden quickening of suspicion.

"One certain house in Monterey and all that it contained. I think that you can guess which house."

"But this is terrible!"

"Not so terrible as what you may look to experience within an hour or so, unless you are up and away. The attack may come at any minute; but," he added with a chuckle, "I have taken a pretty step all of my own to postpone it a bit. I have divided their forces for them and trust to give them pause long enough for Bouchard's already awakened suspicions of Vara to grow apace. But strike they will and soon. So you must go. For one can see as plainly as he sees anything that Monterey is doomed."

"No! That cannot be. Our garrison will drive them back."

"You have about forty men? Bouchard has three or four hundred. You have fortifications, walls of earth and loose stones? Bouchard's guns will level them. One thing only you have which he has not; horses. You must use them while there is time."

"But I don't understand."

"Haven't I made clear?"

"Not yourself! It is you that I do not understand. You come to warn me, yet you tell me that you would be the first to lead the attack against Monterey. Whose friend are you, California's or the pirates'? Whose enemy?"

"No friend to Sola, I'll be bound, since he orders me hanged! No friend to Bouchard, since he orders me shot! Whose friend, then? Yours, Virginia, in the first short step to being your lover! Whose enemy? Vara's, since nothing stirs my ire and rancor like a traitor. Especially," he added with a humorous quirk of his lips, "when to treachery he adds the further offence of coveting that which I covet for myself!"

"If this is all true that you tell me! If what you say of Señor Vara is true!"

"Do I lie, Señorita?" he demanded sternly.

She looked deep into his eyes. They were clear; they were honest eyes. The man might be this or that; one thing he was not.

"What must I do?"

"I have told you. I add what you must not do: you must not fall a second time into the hands of such men as follow Bouchard. You must not fall into Vara's

hands. You must not fall into the hands of Vara's friend, Harry Hawk!"

"That man, here, too?"

"Aye, and with Vara now. I let the little spider go when I should have set my heel on him, I suppose. They plan to bring men ashore from the *Argentina*, these to join forces with Harry Hawk's men."

"Harry Hawk's men so close! *Ave Maria purisima!* We are lost then?"

Captain Cavalier laughed in spite of himself.

"They were close," he answered, still with mirth in his eyes, "but I found out the hole that hid them, and when I came ashore, needing—well, several articles of wearing apparel, I hied me to this Tio Armenta's to once more impersonate that little rat, Harry Hawk, and order some from my former shipmates. Hence my costume—and also dry powder!"

"But they will know soon; they will follow you," the girl cried in alarm.

"Not they," Captain Cavalier replied, "When I found how well I could deceive their sentry—it was Nosegay—in the dark, I thought I'd best go one step better, so I sent them on a fool's errand and they are out of the fight for tonight, I think. I owed Harry Hawk at least that trick. Yet it remains that Monterey is lost and that you must go."

"Go? Where shall I go?"

"The others have fled to the King's Rancho. You must follow them."

"But there is my mother, Señor! She will not budge."

"Yet she knows that soon she may have to flee?"

"Yes; she sees that. But she says some of the ladies must remain until the last minute; she will not go and leave my father. She says always she must be near to attend to him. She watches over him like a child."

"She is a brave woman! And a wise, I have no doubt. For she keeps horses saddled and ready? And she can ride?"

"Yes, Señor. And the ladies she has drawn about her, they are like that, too. Only now, after what you tell me of Don Nicolas and his treachery, that may alter matters. Maybe now she will go."

She believed, after the first moment of shock, what he had told her. But then she was of a mind to believe nearly any sinister thing of Don Nicolas Vara. And now she was in the wildest haste to run across the courtyard from the kitchen to her mother and her mother's friends.

"Shall I go to them, Señor, with what you tell me? I am afraid that there is little time."

He stood aside, opening the door for her; for she was right, there was little time to waste.

She darted through, stopped abruptly and came back. By now he, too, was outside. With sudden impetuosity she put out her hand to him.

"Oh, but you have been good, Señor. And brave and generous."

He stood looking down into her face.

"You will try to slip out and tell me what they decide?"

"I will try. But, if you would hear with your own ears and see for yourself, there is an open window on the other side of the house. My mother and her friends are in there. And so, if I can not see you again, *adios, Señor.*"

Lingeringly he let her go. As she sped to the back door and was swallowed up by the house he went tiptoeing around a corner. There was a yellow flood of light indicating the open window. He came close to it through the flower garden. From the shadows of a heavy-timbered vine covered arbor, which abutted against the wall of the house, he could look inside. Thus he saw Señora de la Fuente and some two or three of those other intrepid matrons of Monterey who had elected to remain behind with her and their husbands, while the rest of the women retreated inland. They were passing in and out; in an adjoining room were those half dozen soldiers of whom Virginia Luisa had told him, privates from the garrison faring sumptuously tonight.

Virginia Luisa burst into the room, crying excitedly, "Mamma, mamma! We must fly. We are about to be attacked. There is treachery. That Señor Vara is a traitor; he has gone out to the pirate ships, telling Bouchard about everything on shore. Already boats are bringing men to attack. They have hundreds, hundreds. Monterey is doomed!"

Consternation filled the room. When her rush of words came to an end no one stirred or spoke. Fear started up; frightened eyes looked into frightened eyes.

But Virginia Luisa's mother was not of an order to remain inert long. It was women like her, as well as the adventurous male, who extended frontiers. Yes, and held them.

"How do you know all this? Whom did you see just now when you went out to the kitchen?" she demanded, looking

sharply at her daughter.

Now it was Virginia's turn to be confused. Strange that she had not anticipated that question first of all and had some answer ready against it. Now, though with her color hot in her cheeks, she could only blurt out the truth.

"It was Captain Cavalier. He told me. He is a friend!"

Gasps of new amazement greeted her. But she did not hear them. She was conscious only of her mother's eyes on her. Those eyes from being opened wide slowly narrowed until they were almost closed. Keen and clever eyes, eyes bright now with suspicion.

"So," said her mother in a voice which went well with that look, "here before my friends you heap new high shame upon me, do you? You pretend to go to the kitchen to save the servants and let them have an hour of sleep—and what you do is have a clandestine meeting with that man! When I strive to protect your name against your own folly you, right under my nose, carry on like this? Then, you come back and flaunt it all before us. And, to conclude the matter, you bring us the word of this foreigner, this pirate, this outlaw, this Americano, that Señor Vara, His Excellency's most trusted friend, is a traitor!"

She turned from her daughter whom her words had stricken dumb, to her friends.

The ladies sighed, but their eyes brightened. After all, the affair was such as to awaken lively speculations and some degree of satisfaction—since it was the question of another family than their own.

"Señor Vara," continued Virginia's mother, rather more stiffly and with a return of her usual confidence, "has long been my daughter's suitor, as you all know. He has spoken to Don Hilario and to me. It is understood; even my daughter, spoiled as she has been by her grandmother, understands. It is not a time now, you think, to speak of a wedding? There are extreme cases, *amigas*. This is one of them. The church itself will understand and will set aside formalities."

She was actually smiling. She was of the sort who could fight hard and smile. And she was fighting now for her pride, for her reputation and for her daughter's.

Also her brain was functioning logically. For a moment she had forgotten the chief cause of this trouble, Captain Cavalier, whom her daughter had just left and who could not be far. Still smiling like any Mona Lisa she went to the door of the adpoining room and called sharply, *"Soldados!* Outside is an enemy to California, that Captain Cavalier for whom dead or alive His Excellency has already offered five hundred *pesos*. I now, speaking for Don Hilario, offer another five hundred!"

There was a swift rising and scramble for muskets.

"Mamma!" cried Virginia Luisa.

It was at this moment that the front door opened. Here was Don Nicolas Vara entering, looking disturbed and uneasy.

XII

"AND I add still another five hundred!" exclaimed Vara. *"Por Dios,* a thousand! Come, *soldados;* there are two thousand pesos, enough to make you rich, to him who with a lucky shot brings down this American dog."

They fell over one another in their haste, each snatching up the handiest gun, and poured out through the nearest door. With them, though he had come upon another business, went Vara, urging them on. Virginia Luisa sought wildly to call them back, a sense of betrayal heavy upon her. From her mother's friends came varied exclamations.

"Surround the house," shouted Vara. "If you see anyone, shoot first and ask questions afterward. Two thousand pesos, remember!"

The thing had happened so quickly, so unexpectedly, that for a moment Captain Cavalier was like a man with his back in a corner and with no avenue of escape. Through the window and through the room beyond he had seen Vara entering; he had even caught a glimpse of a vague, iron-gray garbed figure at his heels. Then this sudden clamor, garden and yard filling with armed men and flight shut off. So, like one who contemplates disaster, he stood motionless and uncertain.

But in a flash that irresolution passed. There was always a way if a man could but see it. In such an optimistic outlook was the working philosophy of this Captain Cavalier grounded. They sought him everywhere in the garden, in the yard. Ergo, he must be in neither. The sturdy

grape arbor was overhead. He reached upward blindly, caught hold and went up like a cat up a tree, squatting low, close to the eaves of the house.

"He is nearby," Vara's voice on the other side of the house now was exclaiming. "Else we would have heard him running. Close in, men. He will make a dash for it; then shoot, every one of you."

Captain Cavalier could have wished that he had not so utterly fallen into the folly of eavesdropping. No good ever came of that sort of thing! He could imagine what would happen if he made the slightest sound. A spray of musket balls with him indeed in high luck if his body did not stop more than one of them!

He shifted cautiously an inch or two, drawing close to the roof, trusting in the somber tiles to conceal him, grateful for the dark hues of his garments. The roof was a gently sloping affair; the tiles gave him hand hold. Would they ever think of looking up there for him? At least this struck him as a better place for him just now then the arbor itself, under which some inquisitive soldier might come poking with his musket at any moment.

Curse that diabolical Nicola Vara! The man was using all his wits tonight. He fairly boiled with venomous hatred. That ill-fated visit to Bouchard; most of all, perhaps, the trick that had been worked on Harry Hawk's men if discovered or even guessed at by now, had put an ugly minded man into as ugly a mood as ever tingled in the treacherous hide of his ilk. Here he was, shouting still further infernal orders.

"Keep an eye on the house itself. He may have gone up on the roof. That would be like him."

Captain Cavalier ground his teeth in rage. For a second he was tempted to crawl toward that voice, to locate his man below, to jump down on top of him and treat him to a dagger thrust as he landed.

Yet now was scarcely the time for any intriguing little sallies of so purely personal a trend. So he crawled on and on, now and then looking up at an unwelcome rift in the sky. It seemed to him, though maybe his desires tricked him, that again the high wind was closing it.

Dimly he began to make out the blurred forms below; a soldier running here, one moving yonder.

"Be careful," warned Vara, "that you don't shoot one another. Save your lead for that foreign spy."

"He thinks of everything," growled Cavalier in his throat.

He had inched along until he came to the end of the sloping roof. He put his head out a little, thinking to look down into the garden. Instead he made out that below this gable was another roof, a flat one. If he could lower himself to this he had a better chance of concealment, a far better place to stand if it came to a fight. Give him secure foothold there, let the rift above close, then let them come up for him. Let Vara come first!

Here was the greatest risk of detection, during the split-second it would require him to slip over the edge of the slanting roof to come to the flat one below. But that risk, among others, must be run and the quicker the thing was done the better. So he caught a secure hold on the edge, drew himself closer and in a flash the thing was done. He dropped down, tight pressed against the gable end of the building. And when ten seconds passed and there was no volley of musketry, he breathed a vast deal more easily than at any time since he had played cat to the arbor.

He even began of a sudden to find a certain zest in the situation. It was by no means desperate as he chose to regard it; he had his sword and his dagger; he had a brace of double barrelled pistols; he had a wall to shadow him and he had a level surface under his feet. Then, there was a satisfactory amount of darkness. It was a game of hide and seek, his wits against Vara's. And he had the advantage of knowing just where his enemies were while, crafty as Vara might be, theirs was only guesswork.

So Captain Cavalier, feeling that his bright destiny must be standing close by to lend a hand, was all ears and eyes and questing fingers. Thus, just as Vara was inspired to the act which certainly must have disclosed him, he made his discovery.

"Two of you bring armfuls of dry fodder from the barn," Vara was commanding. "We'll light two fires. If he's on the roof or elsewhere in hiding, we'll have him out."

Had there been ample time for speculation, instead of none at all, Captain Cavalier might have expected to find just what he did find. Roofs serve their purposes, some this way, some that. A sloping roof sheds the rain. A flat roof, given the slightest pitch in the world, turns rain and sun after its fashion; if not quite so well as the other type, yet well enough and with an added value. The Mexican homes and the Spanish, prototypes of the old Californian, have roofs up to which people may go in the cool of evening, there to sit and look out over whatever expanse of view their surroundings offer. To arrive at these exalted places they require a steep stairway along a wall or, where more primitive conditions obtain, a ladder and a trap door. Captain Cavalier had found a trap door.

Squatting over it on his heels, he had ample time for thought. The men were off on a run to the barn, but some moments must pass before they could get the dry fuel, return with it and getting it ablaze with flint and steel or even with a candle brought out from the house. So he fell to considering. Who were left within doors? Half a dozen of the friends of Virginia Luisa's mother; the mother herself and Virginia Luisa. All women. With them, perhaps, the one he had seen at Vara's heels a little while ago, in the iron-gray garb. Women and a priest.

So to go down seemed logical enough at first view. No danger in the house just now.

Captain Cavalier pried the trap door up, lifting it gingerly. He peered down into a room but dimly lighted; what light there was came into it through an open door giving upon the *sala*. He could hear hushed voices bespeaking the natural flutter of excitement. Quick utterances, sudden silences. He heard a broken plea from Virginia Luisa.

"Father, intercede with them—they will do murder—it is not God's will that men kill one another—stop them!"

He heard the reply in the one masculine voice in the house, a voice which to Captain Cavalier, who may have had his prejudices, sounded as though the man had pebbles in his mouth. It mumbled so that one was hard beset to understand the words.

"Peace, my daughter— I, a soldier of God—there must be, too, soldiers of the king—God's justice and man's justice——"

Captain Cavalier's groping fingers found what they sought, a ladder leading down. They were lighting the fires now. He lowered himself through the opening. Trap door or just plain trap? He wondered as he went through. Well, this way was open and his place above was no longer tenable. He closed the opening after him. A moment later he stood in the room below, taking swift stock of his new surroundings.

There was one window. He had never seen a window he liked less. With its heavy bars of oak in lieu of iron it smacked of a jail at a moment like this. True, oaken bars might be hacked through with a sword, but what a time it would take, what a din it would make. There was one door. It led to the room where the ladies were.

He peered in on them. They had but a couple of candles burning, hence the small amount of light where he was. He could see Virginia Luisa; she sat head bowed, her face in her hands. He could see him of the muffled voice, his figure nearly as muffled as his speech. Long gray gown, worn sandals, capacious hood drawn well forward over his head; little of his person seen. In his hands a staff with a crude wooden cross at its upper end; hanging from the staff such a bundle as a wandering priest could be seen any day carrying upon his long marches.

He had his glimpses of two others in the room, Virginia Luisa's mother one of the two. She stood very erect; her mouth set in lines of determination.

Again, keeping in the darkest spot in the room, the corner into which his ladder had brought him, Captain Cavalier regarded his more immediate surroundings. This, obviously, was a spare room and as such given up to household odds and ends. There was a crude spinning wheel, made doubtless by some of the mission Indians; a huge willow basket heaped high with pieces of cloth; a table whose cloth came down almost to the floor. Captain Cavalier let his eyes linger with this; it would appear to offer the only possible hiding place in the square, plain, closetless chamber. If fate drove, a man might have some hope of avoiding discovery if he crawled under that table and resigned himself to a weary period of cramped muscles.

All the while he could hear the voices outside. They sought him everywhere. Presently, he mused, they would become convinced that he was neither in the grounds or on top of the house. Then

they would give him up and grumblingly come back indoors.

He glanced again at the friendly table. There was an earthen jug on it and several cups and glasses, some half full. There were a couple of coffee cups and some plates which had been wiped clean with bits of *tortilla*. It was here then that the soldiers had been sitting when the alarm was given? It would be here that they returned in a few minutes, to talk of their nearly acquired riches while they finished their wine. Captain Cavalier fell to frowning. Best, perhaps, to wait until they began to come in, then return by way of the ladder to his former place on the roof. Yet, it would be very like the meticulous Nicolas Vara to leave a guard outside and the fires burning.

There remained the clothes basket.

Voices outside, steps running up and down. Voices from the next room; a scrap of conversation to hold him attentive a moment. It was Virginia Luisa's mother, giving a curious intonation to her words.

"You are a stranger to us, Father. And I did not know that there were any priests in this part of California whom I did not know. Señor Vara said that he would bring one of the fathers from the Mission Carmelo——"

The mumbling voice hastened to explain.

"As you see, Señora, I am but arrived this moment! From the south; but recently from the College of San Fernando in Mexico. Bearing letters to the fathers here; one to Señor Vara whom I had the pleasure of knowing in Mexico. I had the further good fortune to meet him just now, while we both were on our way to the mission——"

"It is very strange," said Dona Manuela.

Strange? Captain Cavalier scented something beyond the merely strange here. A coincidence with a sinister twist. This mumbling fellow with the hidden face came in such timely fashion at Vara's need.

"Señor Vara explained to you what was wanted?"

"Yes, Señora. Everything. It is unusual, of course. There should normally be the banns— But you know how it is. Still, in so abnormal a case, in a matter of so great an urgency, with Monterey about to be attacked and perhaps some of us killed, such matters may be set aside. If you will get Señor Vara to come in the marriage can be performed without delay."

Virginia Luisa sprang to her feet. Her eyes fairly burned against the dead white of her face.

"No. No, no, no! I won't be wedded against my will. Never to Señor Vara; he is a traitor——"

The mother all the while was scrutinizing Vara's priest.

"You understand, Father?" she said icily. "Myself and my husband consent; Governor Sola wishes it. The girl is too young to know——"

The concealing cowl nodded vehemently.

"In extreme cases—" he mumbled. "With father and mother——"

"No!" cried the girl passionately. Then she grew still and began to shiver. Then she cried out, "But my father is not here! He would not allow this."

"I have sent for him," her mother said quietly. "He is coming now."

It was but a few steps from the house to the presidio and here at last came Don Hilario. He had stopped outside a moment to inquire concerning the fires; to give his suggestions and now entered the house. At the first sight of him in the doorway his wife sniffed audibly.

For Don Hilario, in fine access of military ardor, finding no enemy to fall upon, had attacked a bottle of California brandy instead. His wife, busied with other matters, had not stopped him. The long hours had dragged; here it was long after midnight and Don Hilario equally as long past that correct mental clarity which all required on a night like this one.

His daughter ran to him, throwing her arms about his neck, bending his haughty head down to hers, weeping and pleading.

"They are trying to make me marry that horrible Vara. You won't let them, will you, *papa mio?* You will save me, won't you?"

He patted her shoulder; he looked wise; he nodded approvingly. He muttered something about his pride in her, her maidenly modesty, her natural shrinking. Then he began to eulogize Vara, to call him his son.

Virginia Luisa, as at a blow, shrank away from him, yet there was too much of her own mother in her blood for her to yield as long as a single avenue stood open. There was the door to the front yard, wide open. She caught up her skirts and made a headlong dash toward it.

But only to have the way barred by her mother herself who, with one censuring eye on Don Hilario, seemed to have the other always upon her little daughter. Virginia Luisa felt herself thrust back. She whirled toward another door, that leading to her own room. If she could only get in there and bolt her door! Then let them threaten and plead and batter all night long. But now it was her own father who, smiling his kindly smile and judging all this a bit of maidenly play, stepped in front of her.

She screamed and stamped her foot and gave them all a picture of despair wedded to rebellion. How her mother's friends stared at her; how they whispered among themselxes; how they pointed out this spoiled child and thanked God that He had never inflicted such disobedience on them!

Here at last came Vara. Virginia Luisa saw him coming to the front door. She looked wildly about her. Yonder another door stood open; the door to the little room—*where the ladder led up to the roof!* And now no one stood in her way but Vara's priest. She crashed full tilt into him, won by him. She shot through the open door, whipped it shut after her, stood leaning against it, putting all her slight weight and all her small strength against it.

Here, with the door shut, it was pitch dark. There was no bolt, no bar here. Captain Cavalier, half a dozen steps away from her, could hear her moaning, talking to herself, praying for some way to hold the door shut against them a minute or two.

She did not hear his step as he came silently but swiftly to her. When she did hear a low whisper from lips close to her hair, a frightened scream burst from her.

"Sh!" commanded the whispering voice again, and now she recognized it. "I help you hold the door. And then I promise to save you from this farce of a wedding."

"*Ave Maria purisima!*" gasped Virginia Luisa. "Have I gone mad then?"

"I came down through the trap door. Are you of a mind to see me shot tonight, sweet lady? Are you of a mind to wed that Vara? Or would you like it better for us both to go free?"

Thus far none had sought to follow her. In the next room voices were speaking urgently; her mother's, Vara's.

And here at last came her mother to the door, saying commandingly, "Come out, child. Do not drive us to forcing the door and dragging you out."

"Tell her to wait a minute," whispered Cavalier. "Promise that if they will give you five minutes you will come out. We'll both go free tonight, I swear to you, if you do as I tell you."

Understanding nothing, now not even seeking to understand that which must sound simple impossibility, yet she did swiftly as he commanded.

"Give me a minute alone," she cried. "Five minutes, and I'll come out."

Captain Cavalier patted her shoulder softly. There was a world of comfort and downright encouragement in his touch.

From the other side of the door, silence. Her mother was t' inking. Presently, having thought to some effect, she said, "You may have your way in this, child. "Five minutes, and I'll come out."
not think to escape by the roof. For the soldiers are watching up there."

Again Virginia Luisa moaned hopelessly.

"You see, Señor, all ways are shut to us! Oh, why, why did you do so mad a thing as to come in here? We are lost——"

The man was chuckling softly but in what seemed high and rare amusement!

"You speak in Chinese, my Virginia Luisa!" he whispered, making her wonder afresh. "Now, do as I say and you, too, will have a good hearty laugh before we're done. You will call again to your mother. You will make your voice sound tearful and broken and hopeless. As though to sigh that what must be, must be. But you will stand firm on this one thing: you will not be wed until the father confesses you!"

"I don't understand——"

"But you are going to understand! And laugh, too, I tell you; most of all at our friend Vara. You will demand to be confessed before entering upon holy matrimony. Even your mother will not deny you this. You will bid them send the priest in here, to you. He will bring a candle and he will come alone——"

"You will stab him! You will kill him so that he cannot marry me!"

"Killing him might serve an excellent purpose," he rejoined. "Yet it would give us none of our coveted laughter. No, I'll

not kill him." Again he began chuckling. "Though perhaps your mother may later come close to that."

"Oh, Señor, there is no hope——"

"Do as I bid you. There is always hope now!"

In a blind maze she obeyed. She opened the door an inch or two and made her demand. It was greeted with silence and then with acquiescence. Surely, even in so hasty an affair, any girl might have a moment to make her little confession. Not her mother, not even Nicolas Vara, could think of denying her that. As for Don Hilario, he was very proud of his little daughter that she should remember such a duty.

Here came Vara's priest, shuffling in his sandals, carrying his staff in one hand and the candle in the other. Virginia Luisa opened the door only sufficiently to admit him. Captain Cavalier leaped nimbly behind the panel as the gowned and cowled figure entered.

Suddenly the door closed, Virginia Luisa standing with her back to it. And now Captain Cavalier stood forth unhidden, a look of terrible sternness in his eyes, a double barrelled pistol in his hand and the gaping muzzles of that pistol not a foot from the astonished and frightened face under the heavy cowl.

"One word," said Captain Cavalier, "and you are a dead man!"

The command was unnecessary. The other was bereft of all power of speech. He could only stare and gasp.

"Virginia," commanded Cavalier, "do your part. Let them hear you talking fast and vehemently. Pray the good father to save you; to refuse to perform this marriage. Anything you can think of, while I do what I have to do."

Just what she would have done in any case. She began, almost incoherent.

"Now," ordered Captain Cavalier, "I'll trouble you for your saintly garb. Off with it, my fine fellow. Fast and never a word if you set any value upon your life."

Aha! It was just as he had expected. The fellow had not even taken time to present a tonsured crown. The cowl came off; no priest at all, but one of Bouchard's fellows whom Cavalier had seen more than once. Off came the gray gown; beneath was a most unpriestly garb, retained against the cold; a belt with a dagger and a pistol in it.

Virginia Luisa began to understand. Presently there stood Captain Cavalier clothed from head to foot in the Franciscan habit. He drew the cowl far forward, just as the other had done. He even removed his boots, tied them about his middle under the gown, and slipped his feet into the worn sandals.

"Keep up your pleading," he bade Virginia who was all eyes and had forgotten her part. "I've one other little pleasantry before me."

She began again, hurriedly. He dragged his plucked chicken of an impostor to the far corner where the clothes basket was. With the muzzle of his pistol never wavering, he made the fellow stuff his mouth full of bits of cloth. He tied him hands and feet; he bound a bandage about the mouth full of rags. Leaving him in thus fashion, lying along the wall, he returned to Virginia. Now his pistol was hidden; his staff was in his hands; his cowl still farther drawn over his face.

"Now, my daughter," he said, his eyes dancing, his voice lifted so that they might hear in the *sala*, "I must return to your mother and father. After what you have told me I must have a word with them. And with Señor Vara."

Her own eyes began to shine. She could see nothing of his face in the shadows; his voice he had copied so nicely from that other mumbling voice, that it would deceive anyone.

He stooped closer to whisper, "I'll not tarry long with them, have no fear. Later, when they find this poor devil in here—I grow half sorry for him. Those women will come close to tearing him to pieces! And Vara? He'll need to do a bit of explaining——"

He caught up her hand, made her a profound bow, looked straight into her eyes and said soberly, "After tonight nothing on earth shall keep me from making you my own, Virginia. To follow after; to really win you! And now, my daughter," and here he lifted his voice again for the benefit of those in the other room, "if you will open the door for me?"

She did so slowly; she began to tremble now. She saw him go back among them. Yonder stood Vara, alert and watchful;

in the doorway, staring in curiously, were three of the soldiers.

She watched him, fascinated. He shuffled into the room, dragging his sandals, leaning on the tall staff. He raised a hand as though commanding silence.

She gripped the door with both hands, clinging to it for support. Did Vara suspect something? Did he start now? How keen those black eyes of his were.

Now Captain Cavalier was speaking. He had gone straight to Vara himself. He mouthed his words indistinctly as the other had done.

"Señor Vara, a word alone with you—just outside—something which the señorita has told me——"

"No," cried Vara impatiently. "I must to the presidio immediately; the attack may ome at any minute. We must hurry——"

He was plucked by the sleeve. "Come, I say. A word only, my son. A moment, no less."

The cowled figure passed on, to the door. The soldiers fell back for him to pass. With an imprecation Vara leaped after him.

"What fool's play is this, man?"

"Sh! Danger, I tell you! Come; follow me; a dozen paces; a score of steps——"

Within they stared at one another. Virginia Luisa had come back into the room now, leaving the door closed after her. Her mother's eyes, always keen, were troubled. She was not to be the last one of them to sense something amiss—gravely amiss.

A mumbling voice outside, growing fainter with distance. Vara's voice, insistent, enraged. Silence. The mumbling voice again at a greater distance. Virginia Luisa's face was white; she sank into a chair. Her heart was beating furiously.

Then, startling them all, there was a ringing laugh. A shout, a curse, a blow. The sound of racing footsteps. Then Vara's voice again, raised high, breaking in the blackest rage that had ever gripped him.

"Soldados! This way. Run. Shoot. It is that dog Cavalier who has tricked us. He escapes."

And then, from a larger distance, barely borne to their ears now, that ringing laughter again. About Virginia Luisa blank faces; consternation. In one pair of eyes alone, shining happiness. Virginia Luisa turned toward her mother.

"God has saved me," she said softly.

While others scowled, she began to smile.

She sprang to her feet.

"Now, mama," she said gaily, "I want to show you your priest."

XIII

CAPTAIN CAVALIER was as happy as a lark. What a night the kind gods of his destiny had given him! He loved a good laugh for its own sake and had it now.

"There'll be no maid wedded against her will tonight," he confided in that most sympathetic of all confidants, himself. "And perhaps we have saved her from all annoyance from this Vara; it is likely, for when the lady mother has her suspicions awakened by so ugly a bit of business as a false priest, she'll not rest until she knows all there is to know."

He stood at this moment at a spot which could not be tenable long; at the edge of the wood about equally distant from the *castillo* and the presidio. Surely he could count on Vara setting pursuit afresh upon his heels. Yet here he tarried a little longer, grown from gay to grave as he strove with certain thoughts.

What had Vara meant by a play like that? Why his impostor of a priest? Because time had been short? Because, while saying that he would ride the couple of miles to Carmel Mission he had had other business with Bouchard? Or because he knew that he could find no true Californian priest who would be a party to hounding a girl into wedlock with him?

He had been actuated, first of all, by haste; that appeared obvious. And in all likelihood, therein lay the sole explanation. Further, Captain Cavalier was the first to see that Vara might have counted on the very bald boldness of his stroke succeeding.

It grew late. Long after midnight now; nearing three in the morning perhaps. And still no attack. Here was another matter worthy of a brief pondering.

"That means," mused Captain Cavalier, all smiles again, "that I upset all their plans by losing them their men hidden at Tio Armenta's, and sending them on a fool's errand up the coast. Thus I will have put a pinch of fresh suspicion in Bouchard's snuffbox for him to sneeze over. And he was full of suspicion of Vara from the jump; never was Frenchy Bouchard the man to give great confidence to a traitor, self-confessed! And none knows better than he the intricate crookedness of little Harry Hawk. So Bouchard awaits

daylight. The attack comes at dawn. Hm!"

His musing grew more and more profound. Doubtless he should even now be making good his escape from any place so near fortress and presidio.

"Haste just now led Vara into a mess of things," he muttered. "Haste upsets the kettle and puts out the fire. I'll have none of it."

That was like him; to rush when others loitered and to loiter himself when the bugle blew boots and saddles.

"There's to be fighting at any moment —and I'm out of it," he went on to himself. "A pest to a fix like this. Bouchard's ordered me shot, thus declaring war on a certain Cavalier. We become open enemies that have long been enemies in gloves. Bouchard's doing, when I offered him an alliance. Well, I accept your decree, Monsieur Bouchard; enemies let's have it.

"Now there remains the other side of the battle—and this Spanish governor orders me shot! It would appear, Captain Cavalier, that for once your sword is not welcomed. Two camps bristling, and here I dawdle between. Was there ever a situation so annoying? No; it won't do. With a good fight coming on, I've got to take sides."

He fixed his attention steadily upon this thought. What part for Captain Cavalier? With which side by any possibility lay his sympathies? Why, all of a sudden, with little beleaguered Monterey!

Why not? With friends in neither camp, yet here was Virginia Luisa. Further, he well knew that at any hour those two craft in the bay would be spilling a murderous mob not less than three full hundred strong upon this tiny post, garrisoned by forty.

He tapped the hilt of his sword.

"With the odds nearly ten to one, do you hesitate, Captain Cavalier?" he demanded of himself.

Of a sudden he realized that this was a land wherein he would like to abide. He had fought under more than one flag, had sailed upon more than one ship, had seen his bit of the world as an adventurer sees it and now, behold, he was of a mind to have done with roistering up and down. He knew more of this California than was to be gleaned in one short visit; but a few years ago the smuggling trade had intrigued him and he had put into several sequestered ports and had even glimpsed through their windows, as it were, the sort of life lived by the ranchers. There was a dash of color in it that caught him; a spaciousness to arouse a wanderer's envy. Here men built them up their own kingdoms.

He snatched off his hat. He drew his sword with a flourish.

"At this moment I become a right *Californio!*"

He was vastly pleased with his decision. In high fettle, he told himself, "To be a right *Californio* is to be one of the lords of the earth! It is to have a gay heart, a generous and a hospitable. It is to abound in loyalty to the death, to one's friends. It is to fight fearlessly for one's happiness and to be happy while in the fighting. It is to sing and dance and ride a fine horse.

"Ergo, Captain Cavalier, there are certain things which you lack and must supply yourself without delay: friends to be loyal to; the wherewithal to become the very coin of generosity; the fine horse to ride. Forward!"

Despite the dark and that there were no eyes to see he marched forward with a very fine swagger. He was up to one of his old tricks and brought into its accomplishment a rare bubbling zest. Obeying impulse, yet he did not altogether abandon reason—though there would be some who might maintain that he and reason had never been on speaking terms. He said within himself that Vara and the soldiers

would be yapping after him; that they would seek him everywhere——

No; not everywhere. They would be sure of two places where he would not be found; that he would not linger longer about the house from which they had routed him and, most obvious of all, that he would give the presidio a wide berth. Therefore it was that, sword in hand, hat cocked jauntily, he directed light steps directly toward the broad presidio gate.

"Ho! The guard!" he called breezily.

He had stopped at a sufficient distance to appear safe in his eyes; far enough away so that they could make little of him in the dark and, were they minded to fire, would very likely miss him altogether.

"Who goes?" came the swift retort.

"A friend! *A right Californio!* One who would have word immediately with His Most Excellent Excellency, Don Pablo Sola."

He could hear the rippling murmur among the several men constituting the guard at the gate; he could fancy, rather than see, the shifting of muskets, all aimed his way.

"Come forward, then, *amigo.*"

Suspicion breathed in the words; there was no convincing ring to the word "friend." Captain Cavalier sighed.

"I'll have to overcome a deal of prejudice," he told himself regretfully. To the guard he called back, "Not so fast, *amigo.* Send a man to the governor; let him carry word that one with vital information regarding the enemy stands without; and, for full measure, you may add that this messenger, being a real and true friend to a certain Captain Cavalier, will entrust himself within the gate only upon having His Excellency's plighted word of honor to let him go free again of this place into which he voluntarily thrusts his nose."

Again they murmured at the gate. Captain Cavalier stood stooped a little, muscles tense, ready to spring back and take to his heels at the first sign of danger. But presently he heard the officer in command issue his instructions; a private hastened through the gate into the walled enclosure with his request to the governor. Almost immediately he returned, running.

"His Excellency will see you, Señor. Enter."

"I have his assurance?"

"But of course, Señor. This way."

He came forward at that. They opened the gate just wide enough for him to go through, staring at him curiously all the while. Thus he stepped from the outer dark into the bright flickering light of the fires blazing away in the plaza. The gate closed after him; two men fell in at his sides, both armed and still suspicious, escorting him toward the governor's apartments.

He had eyes for everything as he went along. He noted how all was in readiness here—and, having already bestowed his allegiance, he stifled a sigh. What a pitiful lack of strength in this, California's capital city! A lack of men, a lack of guns. A mere handful of musketeers reinforced by a smaller handful of Indians sleeping on their bows and arrows.

Don Pablo, his elbows on his table, his gray head in his hands, slewed about at the sound of footsteps. Then suddenly, seeing who came, he bounded to his feet.

"You!" he roared after the first moment of speechlessness. "Captain Cavalier! What effrontery!"

Captain Cavalier bowed with his hand on his heart.

"Reporting for duty, Your Excellency," he returned. "A Californian burning to strike a blow for the land of his adoption."

"A renegade! An officer among pirates. A spy."

Captain Cavalier held himself in hand. How, otherwise, was he to gain anything here?

"I bring you certain word, Señor——"

"I want none of it!" Sola's big fist crashed down upon his table; his nostrils quivered. "I'll hear nothing from you."

"You must," said Captain Cavalier serenely.

"What, must? Have a care, you young freebooter——"

"Aye, must," rejoined Captain Cavalier equably. "Since you were never the man to be California's governor were you not a man above petty personalities when it grows a question of state? California must come first with you, Señor; personal likes and dislikes after."

Sola went back to his chair. After all curiosity stirred in him as in others. His eyes narrowed.

"What brings you?" he demanded. "You have quarreled with your own pack of cutthroats once, I believe? Over a girl. Are you come now, perhaps, to betray them into my hands? Or, at least, with some such wild tale?"

"You hit near the mark, yet miss it clean," was the cool answer. "But, since you speak of betrayals, I come first of all to say this: beware of Nicolas Vara. There's your traitor for you. He's hand in glove already with Bouchard."

Sola smiled grimly.

"You aspire to the maid for your own then? That is it?"

"I warn you against Vara. As to the maid, no doubt he has lost all hope of her by now! After his trick of the false priest——"

"How now!" shouted Sola. "What do you mean by all this nonsense? You accuse Señor Vara, my friend, I'll have you understand, first of treating traitorously with the enemy; next of resorting to such a deed as ruining a maid. You——"

"It is but a few steps to where the tale can be told," Captain Cavalier said gravely. "Your Excellency has but to despatch a soldier to the house of Don Hilario, and thus have substantiated one of my accusations."

Sola beckoned one of the guards still in the doorway.

"Double the guard at the gate," he commanded tersely. "Some treachery is afoot; I smell it. Then go swiftly to Don Hilario's house; say that I have sent you to know what has happened there. Return as fast as you can. And, on your way out, order half a dozen soldiers sent me here."

The soldier saluted and ran.

Sola turned again upon his unwelcome visitor.

"Have you done, Señor?"

"I have but begun! Listen"; and, cutting his tale as short as could be crammed into a succinct outline, he told of his visit earlier in the night to Bouchard's ship; of Vara's dickerings with both Harry Hawk and Hipolyte Bouchard. Sola listened in amazement.

"Do you expect me to believe a talk like that? Coming from you?"

"I came to you," said Captain Cavalier simply, "on the instant that I saw it my clear duty; I came out of loyalty to this fair California the instant I gave her my allegiance. For, though you might not believe all and all at once, yet you would have your eyes open. Your reason might even cry me down in all that I tell you; yet your heart must glimpse something of the truth. No matter what you say to me now, you will watch this Vara. Thus, I have done all that I can and, if in ever so little, I have done that little for California."

Sola began drumming on the table.

"You would have me think that Señor Vara, a most trusted friend, is in reality my enemy?"

"In time you will know that you sit in a chair where Vara would sit. That he has trafficked with Bouchard to the end that you may be taken prisoner and carried far from Monterey, with Vara left here to head a new government and make himself dictator—king, perhaps."

More fiercely than ever did Sola drum at his table top. He was frowning like a sky thickening to thunderclouds. Even now he was expecting Vara. It had been Vara's own suggestion that they visit together the *castillo* at the edge of the wood, making sure that all was in readiness there.

"If Vara be traitor, what of you, Señor?" he snapped suddenly; his head came up with a jerk. "You who now turn against your own comrades?"

Captain Cavalier stiffened. It was amazing how stern his face could grow in an instant.

"I came to California in my own ship. I came understanding that your California, like other sister provinces in the south, was sick of Spanish dominion; that she was held to a steel heel and would gladly be free. I came thus as a friend, rather than as an enemy to California."

"And for no thought of loot?" jeered Sola.

"If there were plunder to be had, what of it, Señor? You are an old soldier; you know, I'll wager, the way of spoils of war! But what have I found? A California content with things as they are. Were there two factions here, one shouting *Viva Fernando,* one crying *Viva Libertad,* there is small doubt but I should have found my way into the patriot camp. But there is only one faction. That is mine."

"And your former friends?"

"You yourself know how I cut myself free of my own crew, back there on the cove near the big *rancho.* Tonight, as I have told you, along with Vara I visited Bouchard. Bouchard and I had known each other and had quarreled before. Yet I sought an alliance and——"

"An alliance with that pirate? This very night? And yet you now profess to be a friend to California?"

"I would remind Your Excellency," Captain Cavalier told him coolly, "that then I owed no allegiance whatever to your California. I had even fair cause for an opposite attitude, since you had ordered me shot," he added dryly. "My whole interest lay in one house; I would have lent a willing hand at the sacking of Monterey and asked no other share in booty but——"

"The house of Don Hilario!"

Captain Cavalier bowed.

"Which also was wanted by Señor Vara. He meant to have a foot in either camp, come victory or defeat."

"And Bouchard?"

"Emulated Your Excellency. Ordered me shot. Behold then, Captain Cavalier watching two camps bristle and himself no part of either. Behold how of a sudden he became *Californio!* If you will make use of my sword, Señor, I vow that none other will show you greater loyalty."

"And if I do not? You return to your former friends?"

Before Captain Cavalier could speak, came one in the most urgent haste from the house of Don Hilario. Not the soldier that Sola had sent, but Don Nicolas Vara himself.

His eyes, glaring about him, were like the eyes of a madman. He rushed past the soldiers in the door and into the governor's room. His face was red; there was a cruel show of white teeth under his black mustache.

"So," he shouted angrily, "he is here, then! You have the dog, Don Pablo? Let it be myself then who gives the order to fire!"

Captain Cavalier found in this an occasion to treat them to that merry laughter of which no man was ever more fond or capable.

"Your hot wishes run away with you like wild horses, Señor! But you come opportunely; we were just speaking of you, Don Pablo and I."

Sola was watching them both like a hawk.

"Captain Cavalier hinted at an ugly story, Don Nicolas. Something having to do with a priest who was no priest; with a maid falsely wedded. He promised me details of this if I would but send to Don Hilario's house. You come from there?"

"He lies!" cried Vara viciously, and then fell into a black silence, biting at his lips.

The darker grew Vara's frownings, the brighter Captain Cavalier's smiles. But when Vara said, "He lies!" a new quality crept into his smile. He turned toward Sola, saying quietly, "Of your bounty, with the countless leagues of California at your disposal, will you grant us a little spot a dozen paces square? Where I may let the insults out of this little traitor by slipping some few inches of my sword through him?"

"Gentlemen!" growled Sola in sudden anger. "Have I time now for your quarrels? Don Nicolas, it is not enough to name him liar. What does he mean by so wild a tale?"

Vara glanced over his shoulder. Here came the soldier whom Sola had sent to Don Hilario's home upon this matter; he looked fairly stupid with the shock of that amazement which had burst upon him on hearing the few words he had heard while speeding on his errand. Yet his mouth was opening to spill out as best he could what he had learned. Therefore, striving for mastery over his own mood, Vara made his hasty explanation.

"'Tis a shameful thing to tell, Don Pablo. And to my shame I must confess that this man tricked me. He—he——"

"Go on, man," shouted Sola in high impatience. "What is this thing and what did he do to trick you?"

"I choke over the telling," muttered Vara. But cleared his throat—as perhaps his brain—and went on vehemently. "I was to wed tonight the Señorita Virginia Luisa, as Your Excellency knows. I made haste for a priest. It was dark. I met one, sent as I see now, by this rascal; one who professed to be but come on the moment from Mexico, going to Carmelo; a priest by his talk, by his garb, speaking of letters for me as well as for others here. I thought nothing amiss in my haste. Then it was disclosed that I had to do with an impostor, one of this Captain Cavalier's own crowd, masquerading as a priest. One whom he had brought ashore from Bouchard's ships to play this rôle, to trick me, to make it appear to any who do not have a high regard to my honor that I was a man without honor."

Never was a man in greater perplexity

than Don Pablo Sola at this moment. He could but stare from one to the other while his anger mounted.

"Demonio!" he roared out at the two of them. "You drive me mad. Here you set me puzzles to work out when already I am half dead with the burden on me. If I knew which one of you lied now, I'd run my own sword through him."

Don Nicolas Vara, with one eyebrow lifted very high while the other dropped in sinister fashion, created the very picture of haughtiness and arrogance.

And now Captain Cavalier spoke up swiftly.

"There come times, Excellency, when a man must perforce be his own best and truest friend! There was nothing but truth in what I have told you and between gentlemen there is nothing further to say. But there is this: it is almost dawn and at dawn, as I have warned you, you can look for the attack. Am I to be honored by a position of trust among your defenders? If not, then it were best——"

What else the captain might have had to say was lost in a sudden uproar. The silence of the hushed hour heralding the new day was disrupted by the boom of cannon.

Sola leaped to his feet.

"Ho, there," he called to the squad of men just outside his door, "put me this man in the guardhouse! A prisoner of state until——"

They rushed in. A dozen muskets uncomfortably close were thrust toward Captain Cavalier.

"What?" he roared. "Is the word of honor of Don Pablo Sola——?"

"Silence!" boomed Sola back at him. "I promised you your freedom; you shall have it. But at the moment of attack, can I waste time with you? Later, you shall come before me again. Off with him, *soldados!*"

By now the cannons were hot at it. They were firing from the ship and attack was being met with shot for shot.

Captain Cavalier, quivering with rage but commanding himself, was being led away, bowing as he went. His last glance was at Vara's face. It gleamed with triumph; then most mysteriously clouded with perplexity.

"What guns are those?" he demanded, plainly puzzled. "Not from our *castillo*——"

"From our new battery on the beach," rejoined Sola, already running out. "Thrown up while you were away——"

So Captain Cavalier had his chance again to smile.

"And you failed to report that to Frenchy Bouchard, Señor Vara?" he mocked over his shoulder. "He'll scarce thank you for the omission——"

But he was hustled into the plaza, to a low, squat tiled building. The door was unlocked; he was thrust through into a dark, close hole. He heard the enormous key turn again in the padlock.

"Well, either in haste or in courtesy, they left me my weapons!" Here on the instant he summoned back his pleasant outlook upon murky businesses, and began to feel his way about in the dark, already thinking of escape.

He heard a sound close by. For it he grew rigid, ignoring the crash and boom outside the walls. He had company here, then? A familiar sound that; the unsteady knocking of cup and bottle neck; a pleasant gurgle and the smell of wine.

"Here's one who takes his misfortunes with philosophy," chuckled Captain Cavalier. "I can learn from him."

And without awaiting the swiftly coming light of day, he set about to make the acquaintance of that certain Molina who was here because he had the misfortune to resemble Don Pablo Sola.

XIV

CANNONS crashed; the jug gurgled. Captain Cavalier frowned; Molina drank. Captain Cavalier fumed at being shut up here at such an hour; Molina meditated mistily that, with unseasonable weather prevailing outside, here was the very king of places for a man to sit snug and guzzle.

"Ho there, comrade," said Captain Cavalier. "Who are you?"

"Me?" returned a placid voice. "I'm Molina. Have a drink?"

"Later, perhaps. Why are you locked in here?"

"For being drunk, Señor."

"And for punishment they give you the liquor for deeper drunkenness."

"I have friends. Oh, I am content here. It storms outside. You can hear the thunder!"

"The thunder of guns, man! Monterey is attacked."

"So much the better to be here. Storm or battle, here is quiet."

"It is all one to you if Monterey falls?"

"But Monterey cannot fall, Señor."

They grew silent by mutual consent, Molina lapped in the most serene uncon-

cern, Captain Cavalier with much to ponder. He harkened to the sounds penetrating through the small grilled window; they were all that were to be vouchsafed him of this first phase of the battle. Once he heard Sola's deep voice bellowing commands; once he heard a burst of wild cheering; the guns kept up their savage duet.

The newly improvised battery on the beach was doing all the work for Monterey at this juncture. Already with a thinnish light spreading in the confines of the jail it must be broad daylight in the open. Men could see clearly what they were about. Now came another ringing cheer from the defenders.

"They've made a hit this time," Cavalier muttered, far less to his companion than to himself. "Man, man, I'd give a thousand pesos to be out there with them!"

"Viva Fernando!" said Molina thickly, and drank loyally to his king.

Captain Cavalier, growing steadily more restless as the thunder of the guns kept up, began a methodical study of his prison. The place was made for such petty offenders as Molina, a crude affair of earthen walls; give him a few hours' time, unmolested, and he would find the way to dig out. With the day brightening even in this gloomy place he went up and down, seeking the most likely place for the beginning.

An hour passed thus. He found his spot; near a corner where a cot stood, close to the ground was an inviting crack in the old *adobe*. He pricked experimentally at the earthen bricks with his dagger and made his thoughtful estimate: these walls would be two or three feet thick, yet if a man worked diligently a day should suffice to tunnel through one of them.

Molina, lying upon an old blanket, was beyond taking the slightest interest in what his cell-mate did. But Cavalier meant to make sure of him; who knew but that the fellow, when his jailers came with his breakfast, would be of a mind to indicate his staunch loyalty by doing a bit of blabbing.

"Look you, Molina," began Cavalier, standing over him.

Molina grunted and rolled over, staring up vacantly. And Captain Cavalier, seeing him clearly for the first time, was considerably startled. Could one imagine Don Pablo Sola in such an environment and such a physical condition of rage and tatters and drunkenness, why then there lay His Excellency at his feet on the dirty blanket!

"May the devil roast me if I ever had such a start," admitted Captain Cavalier, half frowning and half laughing. "Why, man, you are the most unlovely picture of Don Pablo himself."

"Yes," said Molina blinking. "Sometimes the boys laugh and name me Don Pablo. Just for sport, Señor. Then if His Excellency hears of it, he locks me up. *Viva Fernando! Viva Sola!*"

There had been a moment's lull in the firing. Now the guns were at it again, inspired to some new frenzy. One could hear the balls from the ships falling on all sides; now and then there was the crash and splinter of one tearing through a tiled roof. There was even a rattle of musketry now and then; cheer after cheer rose through the deeper reverberations. Captain Cavalier fairly tingled.

"My Californios fight with spirit," he muttered a score of times. And each time went back to his work at the *adobe* wall with renewed eagerness.

Another hour passed and then came a sudden and definite cessation of firing. Captain Cavalier left his task, concealed the beginning of his tunnel by dragging the cot against the wall, and repaired to the barred window looking into the presidio plaza. He saw a squad of soldiers pass; they tossed their guns up and shouted their triumphant *vivas*. Again he heard Sola's great rumbling voice; even some few words came to him. It, too, sounded triumphant. Captain Cavalier, who could not understand that victory had been won in two hours' cannon battle, was all burning curiosity.

A third hour passed in silence. Then again he heard the tread of soldiers; they came now straight to the door of the jail. The big key turned in the lock, the door swung open—and with a sudden spurt of expectancy he looked to see the governor himself, come to keep his word and set him free. Instead he saw three men thrust forward through the door and the door shut and locked after them.

In one glance Captain Cavalier disposed of two of these new entrants; a palpable sailor of mixed bloods and a grinning negro. But the third held his look and

caught his interest. This was a breezy young man not over thirty in a tattered uniform of a sort, keen faced and intelligent. But the thing which made Captain Cavalier warm to him from the outset was the fact that without question here came another American!

"Captain Cavalier, Virginian, and at your service, sir."

"Joseph Chapman, born and bred New Englander, jack of all trades, and glad to know you, sir," smiled the other.

"Late of Bouchard's crew? And now a prisoner of war?" asked Captain Cavalier.

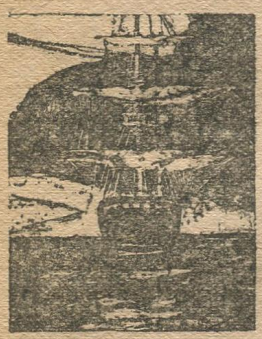
"Something of that sort, sir," returned Joseph Chapman.

"You don't mean that the attack is over so soon?"

"The first of it only, I fear. You see, we had information of their defences; but knew nothing of that battery down by the sea. In the affair of this morning, California wins."

"You will tell me about it?"

Chapman did so willingly enough. He was of the *Santa Rosa's* crew. They had



drawn close in during the night; had fired the first gun at dawn. But those fellows on the beach had surprised them. Two hellish hot hours of it had been enough for the *Santa Rosa,* even with her guns greatly outnumbering those on shore. For, to begin with, it was Hipolyte Bouchard's desire to take this little post without any particular loss to himself.

Therefore just now the *Santa Rosa* had hauled down her flag. But her men had put off in boats to go to the commander's ship. Sola had demanded that they send her officer ashore; they had informed him that Lieutenant Corney had already gone to the *Argentina.* Upon Sola's insistence that they send the officer in command, threatening to open fire again, this Joseph Chapman with the sailor and the negro had come ashore.

"And glad to do it, sir," said Chapman, his bright eyes twinkling. "Between you and me I had had enough of sailing with Frenchy Bouchard. I told the Spanish governor as much; how I had sailed unwillingly all the while, being impressed at the Islands. And he, having named me seven kinds of a liar, sent me here."

"The attack will continue then?"

"Of course. But, I think and I have told the governor, after a different fashion. Bouchard hardly looked for any resistance. Now, seeing he has a fight for it, he'll make sure next time. He's got the men and he's got the guns."

"You mean he will land an overwhelming detachment and march on the presidio?"

"Exactly. Then there can be no doubt of the outcome. And in such a blow Frenchy Bouchard knows that his losses will be little. They'll have to surrender here, sir, or be shot down to the last man."

"Did Governor Sola, by any chance, make any reference to me?"

"Not in my presence. I heard him bark an order or two; say to an officer that he was going to make the rounds in person, to see that everything was shipshape; then go take a sleep to be in readiness for whatever might turn up next. I imagine there wasn't much sleeping done ashore last night?"

"Look here, Mr. Chapman; are you of a mind to sit here awaiting the result of the next bit of fighting? Or do you want to go free?"

"You mean that you count on escape from this place?"

"Frankly, as between Americans, yes. Are you with me? We'd wait for dark, of course; then make a run for it."

He was no little put aback when the other shook his head.

"Make your plans without me, Captain. I'll not interfere, of course, and I'll undertake that my men don't betray you. But for my part, I'll stay. Sounds strange? Well, I told a straight story to the governor, and though he pooh-poohed me, I feel that he knows it. He'll hold me a prisoner of war a few days, a few weeks possibly. Then he'll let me go. And I am of a mind to make a home here. Now, if I bolt with you, where would I go? Back to Bouchard? I'd rather not! Where else? I couldn't leave California, even if I wanted to; and I'd find it hard remaining, a fugitive and under suspicion. No, thanks; I'll stay and take my chances with this Sola of yours. So just forget that—Sink me seven fathoms!" he cried out, having his first glance at Molina. "I've heard there's witchcraft in this California but I——"

Captain Cavalier left him to his wonderment and returned to his work in the far corner.

It would appear that no one remembered the prisoners. Not until high noon did a

squad of soldiers open the door long enough to bring food and water and even a couple of bottles of wine. Captain Cavalier heard them coming and made haste to hide his excavation with the cot and his own body. He asked for news and demanded again to be taken before Sola. They told him that His Excellency was asleep and had commanded them to awaken him only if attack were threatened.

"Have all the citizens gone?" he asked.

Yes; after the fighting this morning there were only the soldiers left. The ladies had at last departed. They took a wounded man with them, Don Hilario——

So Virginia Luisa's father was hurt? Captain Cavalier asked for details and was told that a cannon ball striking a building had hurled a broken tile so that it struck Don Hilario in the head. He was bleeding, unconscious when they put him into a *careta* and started for the Rancho del Rey with him.

"His wife and daughter with him?"

"Si, Señor."

At least it was a relief to know that at last Virginia Luisa had fled doomed Monterey. For still he held it doomed.

He bethought him of Vara; of the look of suspicion on Don Sola's face; of his own parting shot concerning the beach battery. Had Sola's suspicions flowered or died?

"What of Don Nicolas Vara?" he asked.

The soldier looked puzzled.

"In the fighting His Excellency despatched him to the *castillo* for a word with Gomez who commands there. There must have been some misunderstanding of orders, for the next thing Gomez ordered the battery to cease firing on the pirate ship. They would not stop and Gomez turned the *castillo's* guns on our own battery! Some say that Gomez is a traitor, having a nephew with Bouchard's men. But I know better than that, Señor! There are others who say that Señor Vara was the traitor, carrying lying orders from our governor. *Quien sabe?"* He ended with a shrug.

"And Vara? What does he say?"

"No one has seen him since, Señor. Some say he is dead, struck down by a ball outside; some others say he has deserted to the enemy."

For his own part, Captain Cavalier had small doubt: Vara, during the battle, had made the mistake of thinking that Monterey must fall immediately and had sought by a characteristic bit of treachery to hasten matters. Thereafter, having shown his hand, there was nothing left for him but to go to the other camp. He, too, without doubt had seen that piercing glance from Sola.

Well, here were things to think upon and he went back to his labors with renewed energy. For a time all went well; he dug swiftly in the earthen wall, scooping the dirt away with both hands. Then he came to a big rock, set in the adobe and exactly where he would have given most not to have it. He couldn't budge it, so was it held by still other rocks and earth; all that he could do was dig at the side. When the dark of the dreary winter afternoon invaded the place he was still far from his labor's end.

Now and again came interruptions when he must hasten to hide what he did and throw himself down on his cot and wait impatiently for the opportunity to resume his task. The soldiers brought supper; every hour or so some one of them would come to the grated window to peer in curiously upon them, to taunt the newer captives, to while away a period of tedium with question and speculation.

Through the night, while the others slept as best they could, he worked on. It was harder than ever now to make progress; a bit of light would have been as welcome as an extra pair of hands. Yet he stuck to it doggedly hour after hour. What débris he loosened of soil and stones he drew into the room, concealing it as best he could. He grew both weary and heavy with sleep; a time or two he dozed off and dreamed himself free and hastening along toward the Rancho del Rey!

The wall was thicker than he had thought it. Yet sometime between midnight and dawn he thrust an arm through, having pressed head and shoulder into the more generous excavation on the near side of his wall, and felt the cool air and a spattering of raindrops. He worked now with quickened hopes. He seemed to sense, rather than see, the coming of dawn.

He could hear a murmur of bustling. The garrison began to stir. They breakfasted, no doubt; they prepared for the new day. And if he were not gone before that day really came, what hope had he?

He tried now squeezing his body into the hole. Slender though he was, yet he had too great a width of shoulder to please him at such a time. He fell to enlarging the opening; digging out stones which jutted into it like fangs. Now he tried again; he could almost make it. Give him an-

other half an hour—another fifteen minutes.

Again he tried squeezing his body through the hole. It was terribly tight yet he wriggled desperately. He got his arms through; caught hold with his hands and drew himself along. He at last had his head through.

The darkness was dissolving slowly into thin pale light. The sun must by now be tipping a murky horizon but the clouds obscuring the sky and the air thick with a moisture which was half sea fog and half rain, stole from day to extend the term of night. Now was his time; he must hasten or the watchful sentinels would see him.

There was a sudden flurry of hoofbeats; here, spurring in wild haste, came a rider straight to the presidial gate. Captain Cavalier twisted and strained to see, but could but glimpse and lose again the speeding rider. The gate was flung open; the horse dashed through; the gate closed.

"Some sentinel bringing word that the landing party attacks?" was his swift decision.

And he started to pull himself through. But again there was the hammer of hoofs; here came another rider, shouting out at the top of his lungs. A drum boomed out in the presidio; the sharp clear voice of a bugle sounded. Dimly he heard Don Pablo Sola's voice. The gate was flung open again and though the second rider had sped through, the gate remained wide.

Now all was din and uproar. Bouchard's land party was arriving. He could hear a burst of savage shouts; he could make out a blurred mass which broke into many running forms. A score—a hundred—two or three hundred men were sweeping along the slope, bent on surrounding the presidio and making short work of what they had to do.

The presidio gate filled to horsemen; Monterey's soldiery was riding out for the last blow—and, inevitably, for retreat. There was no withstanding that yelling horde with a bare two score men.

He saw Sola at their fore, his sword flung up, his white hair uncovered. He saw Bouchard's men rushing on, a horrible motley.

There was a great, long echoing explosion; a powder magazine had been fired rather than be left to these vandals. There was a rattle of gunfire; attackers and attacked grew still for one electric moment and poured hot lead across the distance separating them.

Still they came on, score after score. The daylight brightened. Here on their frightened horses sat Monterey's few defenders; yonder, in a seething mob, came Bouchard's invaders.

Captain Cavalier heard a sound behind him. They were opening the jail; they had remembered their prisoners. He crept through and stood free, his sword in hand, his body tight pressed against the wall. He heard a sound of puffing and grunting; here, after him, came the drunken Molina.

Sola shouted an order. His men lifted their guns, fired point-blank into the thickest of the attack, shouted, wheeled their horses and were gone.

Bouchard's men were of necessity on foot and therefore could not even dream of pursuit. But they swarmed everywhere; they surrounded the presidio; they began pouring through the gate. Marking them, Captain Cavalier thought that he knew the man who was first through. It was Sir Harry Hawk.

Molina stared, grunted, dropped on his hands and knees and went back through the hole. Just in time he had seen a squad of men turning the corner, coming this way.

In as savage a mood as had ever visited him in his life, Captain Cavalier followed the drunkard's example. Nor was he an instant too soon. He had barely got his boots through when he heard the men outside go tramping by.

XV

HAD it been allowed Captain Cavalier to know who was that first rider who had sped in through the presidio gate, and could he further have guessed that this one person alone now remained with all Monterey deserted, it is extremely more than likely that he would not have lived out the hour. For it was Virginia Luisa. And while he now sought to hide and grumbled the while, she half dead with fear was hiding within the same great enclosure.

How their fates seemed to drag them

along toward their own bitter undoing! She had fled nearly twenty-four hours ago, as he had heard. Governor Sola had issued his final orders that all leave; more than that her father had been brought into the house, bloody and unconscious and at first she had thought him dead. There had been a moment of panic, but her mother, though she turned deadly white, remained calm and issued her own orders, exacting as swift an obedience as the governor received.

A bed was prepared in the cart; oxen were yoked; within ten minutes the little cavalcade started toward the distant Rancho del Rey. All went on horseback, saving alone Don Hilario on his bed and his wife who rode at his side.

Thus after their long, hard ride they arrived at the encampment on the Salinas where already other refugees had gathered and where the garrison, if forced to evacuate, would follow.

"Here we stay until your father is better," said Doña Manuela calmly. "Then we take him on to the rancho of your grandfather Don Julian."

"He isn't—going—to die?" whispered Virginia Luisa, her tears running down her pale cheeks.

"It is not a question of such a thing!" said her mother sharply. "I will not let him die."

And when word went about that Doña Manuela had said that she would not let her husband die, people found themselves ceasing to worry greatly about his condition.

That night Virginia Luisa slept heavily. Her mother awakened her once, bidding her get up and go for some brandy which Don Hilario needed. She arose and went to where some of the men were sitting up about a fire, smoking and drinking and talking of all these untoward events. And as she came upon them it chanced that they were speaking of Captain Cavalier.

They gave her the brandy and she went back to her mother with it. Then she sat on the edge of her rude bed of straw and blanket, and fell to thinking, to remembering and finally to sighing. She wondered where Captain Cavalier was this dark, cold night; how it fared with him. Just what was it that the men by the fire had said?

She returned to them, saying quietly, "What did you say of Captain Cavalier, 'Tonio?"

He laughed. He had been one of the men at the presidio when Captain Cavalier came demanding word with Sola. He told how Sola had thrown him into jail. And in jail he still was when they had left Monterey. Some thought that the governor, with the battle on his hands, had forgotten him. Certainly there was none who had cared to remind him.

She stared, horrified.

"You mean," she gasped, "that he may still be shut up there? Forgotten?"

The man shrugged.

"Why not, Señorita? He is only a pirate, after all. We don't want him; maybe his friends——"

A little cry broke from her as she whirled and ran back to her mother.

"Mamma, mamma!" she cried. "They have locked Captain Cavalier up in jail back there at Monterey! If he is not freed—if the pirates capture Monterey—*they will kill him!*"

Her mother looked at her long and intently.

"What have we to do with this man?" she asked sharply. "It were best if they did kill him. Go to bed, child."

"But——"

"Sh! Your father needs quiet."

With head drooping Virginia Luisa withdrew. She began weeping afresh. She left the past to stare at the future.

What if the pirates took Monterey? There was that vicious Sir Harry Hawk. There was Bouchard who had ordered Cavalier shot. There was Vara who, as Cavalier had told her, was a friend to these men. She saw them open the jail door——

Just as she dared not tell her mother, so she dared not tell anyone what she meant to do, what she must do; every hand would be lifted to stop her. She slipped out in the dark, alone; she found a horse in the corral and for the first time in her life put on a saddle. Then she mounted, turned back toward Monterey and rode.

"Don Pablo must have forgotten him." she told herself a thousand times. "Or else, he would never have broken his word like this. I have only to tell him and he will be the first to run to the jail. He will have to set him free."

She was frightened to ride alone; yet she beat her fears down, reminding herself what dangers he had dared for her sake. Do her best, the day was breaking when she saw the dull walls of the presidio. She dashed at the gate and they saw who it was and stood aside, wondering, as she shot into the plaza. She jumped down, turning her horse loose.

"I want Don Pablo," she called to the first soldier. "Where is he? Tell me, quick."

"Why, in his rooms," said the man. "That is I think— Wait! He is——"

But she had not heard him half through. She sped across the plaza, under the long corridors and to Sola's door. Doubtless he was asleep, but his sleep must be broken. She knocked loudly.

A drum was beating but that meant nothing to her. She had heard so much drum-beating of late! She but knocked the louder and, when there was no answer, tried the door, found it unlocked and went in.

"Don Pablo. Don Pablo. It is I, Virginia Luisa——"

Still no answer. All the while that growing rumble outside. She ran to a window and jerked down the heavy curtain; a little pale light entered. She saw that the room was deserted, and hastened into the next. Here again she called; another curtain was swept aside. This was Sola's bedroom. But, though the bed covers were tumbled every way, there was no one here.

She turned to go back. At the moment there was a more sinister sound; a bugle blowing, a man shouting, then a volley of musket shots. She stood where she was, paralyzed. They were fighting at the gate!

The men were mounted. They were making their last stand. There was such a din of yelling as must come from the throats of attackers a thousand strong. This was the end. Sola meant to withdraw——

She ran into the plaza and toward the gate. It remained open and she saw Sola's little band in the gateway and, beyond them, half naked, shrieking devils who stormed Monterey.

"Don Pablo!" she screamed.

But Sola faced the other way. He gave his last command. In the uproar he could not hear her. His little body of horsemen, spattering mud, was off at a furious gallop.

She stood uncertain; she could stir neither her hand nor foot. All the world, a dizzy, darkening world, seemed to swarm with naked savages. They came on, shouting, yelling, brandishing their weapons, firing their guns in the air, jeering.

Had they seen her already? Her strength came back to her, borne along on a fresh tidal wave of terror. She turned and ran again, this time back to Sola's rooms. To hide somewhere; that was her only living instinct. To find a place to hide.

She was in the rooms again, the door shut. Already the plaza was filling. Men shouted and laughed and went rushing this way and that, each eager to be the first to whatever brand of loot they might discover. She heard the doors banged back. A rush of footsteps came toward her.

Above the din now rose a clear, bugling voice which could belong to but one man on earth; the voice of Sir Harry Hawk. She looked wildly about. Oh, if she could but have got to her father's house! Then there would have been a chance to hide. Like a flash at her need, she remembered the secret closet which she had once seen Sola open.

She darted into the narrow hall connecting parlor and bedroom. The tiny-doored closet stood open, the panel thrust back. She slipped in; she could barely squeeze herself into the tiny space let into the thick adobe wall.

Again that bugling voice rose clear and sinister. Harry Hawk was at Sola's front door, his hand on the latch. She found herself entangled in garments hung on little pegs; a cloak tumbled about her shoulders; she tripped over a pair of boots. She tried to close the panel after her. It seemed to catch; she struggled with it frantically. The front door was opening; she caught a glimpse of Harry Hawk standing on the threshold. But one more moment was granted her, since he stood with his back half turned, calling orders to the surging mob outside. She pulled again, more frantically than ever. The panel moved, caught again, slid into place.

And now she dared not move. She was in a tiny thick walled cell; it was close here and musty; the air was so heavy that she could scarcely breathe it into her laboring lungs. It was as dark as pitch. She leaned back against the wall, her senses reeling.

Sir Harry Hawk strode into Don Pablo Sola's reception room, sword in one hand, pistol in the other. He stood with legs far apart, staring about him, his little eyes gloating, his mouth twisted in a sneer. Then he cast himself down in Sola's favorite chair, put his heels on the table and

helped himself generously to a draft from the neck of the bottle. Then without stirring he began bugling his orders again.

Kanaka George, by this time become Sir Harry's chief lieutenant, appeared at the first summons, a couple of ragged birds of prey at his back.

"You're keeping an eye on that fellow Vara?" demanded Harry Hawk.

Kanaka George nodded and grinned.

"He's a dirty blackguard," Sir Harry went on, drinking deep, wiping his lips and drinking again. "I'd slit his gullet for him on the instant but he may be used to help us find things of value hidden here. So you are not to let him out of sight, George."

"They're looting all the houses," was the swift rejoinder. "I have a mind to lend a hand, Captain."

"You've earned the sweet privilege," cried Sir Harry heartily. "But business man, ever before pleasure! There are those two Indians we caught; servants to some rich don here, I'll be bound. You've put them where I can get my hands on them when I'm ready?"

"In the jail, Captain. We found it open; the key in the lock. I shoved the two inside, locked the door and have the key here——"

"Give it me," commanded Sir Harry. "And go do your looting."

There was the clank of the heavy key tossed to the table top; then the scurry of the Kanaka's swift departure.

All the while the uproar grew. Discipline was relaxed; every man went his own way; vandalism spread throughout the presidio, spilled over and ran like a muddy millstream into the private homes. One did not try a door to see if it were locked; instead an ax flashed up and down and made it into splinters.

Monterey, long prepared for the invasion, had removed her most cherished belongings. Yet there remained much which could not be taken; and there had been those who would never believe that California's capital could ever fall into the enemy's hands. So there was much to take now, much to appropriate and much to destroy. Fine old furniture was dragged out of doors; a heap of it was made in the center of the plaza; there would be a bonfire tonight to be seen far out at sea!

What a mighty roar went up into the weeping skies when Don Nicolas Vara led the way to a certain hidden cellar! Sir Harry Hawk had thirsted long in this California; had but whetted that thirst these last two nights in Monterey; was half drunk now but meant to be drunk to the final degree of absoluteness before he was done. They had cheated him of his prey in allowing Sola to escape; while he drank he cursed Vara for a liar and a cheat. They had robbed him of his *señoritas;* he cursed Vara for that, too. But they had left him the finest of fine brandies and he made his most of them. Later, he would bestir himself; if these fellows stumbled on golden double doubloons, he meant to have his share of them. Oh, he'd have his share, a captain's share, and trust Sir Harry Hawk for that!

Virginia Luisa, crouching in the little closet, could barely breathe now. No fresh air came in here; she felt that soon she must smother, lose consciousness, sink into a black faint which led to death. But better that, better a thousand times, than open her door for air.

Sir Harry Hawk began singing a wicked song; for deep-lunged accompaniment he had the outside uproar and din. She knew when he finished his bottle; she heard it flung across the room with all his might. He got to his feet; he struck the table again with his sword, splintering it; he brushed by her, going for another bottle. Presently he came back. He stopped in the hall. He stood here a moment, leaning against her panel.

After a century he went back to the parlor.

Then she heard someone else come in

Her first sensation was one of stimulating gladness. It was Don Nicolas Vara. Villain he might be, yet here was a man whom she had known for a full year, who had visited at her mother's house, who had sat at table with her a hundred times. He could not be utterly villainous; certainly not such a man to dread as Sir Harry Hawk. It was almost like a dear friend coming.

But her gladness seeped out of her and left her more hopeless than ever. In her desperation she had come dangerously near calling out to him; after the first few

words she feared him as greatly as she did the other.

"How now, Vara!" cried Hawk truculently. "You've made me a pretty mess of things."

"I?" returned Vara haughtily. "'Tis you who have marred everything. You let your men go astray when we needed them most; you thereby postponed the attack——"

"It was that thrice accursed Cavalier," growled Harry Hawk.

"Rather it was you who let him make a fool of you——"

Hawk hammered the table with his bottle.

"Talk softly with me, my traitor friend," he threatened, "or it will be the worse for you. Where's my fine booty you pledged me? Where's this Sola you vowed to put into my hands? Where the big eyed *señoritas* that were to be my prize? You've lied to me——"

"It was your own muddling of matters," cried Vara, hot with anger, and he turned and stalked out.

Now Sir Harry Hawk sprang nimbly to his feet.

"I give you free of the presidio," he bugled. "But not beyond, my Don Nick. I've a dozen men to follow you with their eyes. Traitor to California, traitor to me for a handful of coins."

Vara made some muffled rejoinder and went away. He was uneasy; his voice told that. As well he might be.

The day dragged on, a day of hell for the girl immured in the closet. Men came in, talked with Sir Harry and went out. He himself was gone for a long time and she again slid the panel cautiously back and drank in the air thirstily. She heard someone coming and again closed it.

She explored with her hands the depths of the closet. It was scarcely over two feet deep; it extended some four or five feet long. The panel door was slightly nearer one end than the other; hence by pressing her body tight in the farthest corner she was able to withdraw from the opening some three feet altogether.

As the slow hours passed she had to battle with her fears to keep the dimmest spark of hope alive. Sir Harry Hawk appeared to be drinking steadily; no doubt the other men followed his example. When night came, if night ever came again for her, bringing its most welcome dark, she must try to slip out. She would wait until it grew quiet; she would pray God to plunge these fiends deep in a drunken stupor; she would take her life in her hands and attempt her desperate escape.

Even during this hideous time how insistently Captain Cavalier kept coming back into her thoughts. She recalled how he had made his escape from her father's house. Had he not thus shown her the way? If she donned Sola's great cloak, drew on his boots, found something to throw over her head, might she not pass unnoticed in all this motley crowd?

If only they did not find this closet! If only the secret of the panel could escape notice a few hours longer!

Slowly, each a period of torture both mentally and physically, the hours passed. She heard in horror the deep sea songs and deep sea curses of that type of men who foregather with such as Sir Harry Hawk. At times the little parlor was filled to overflowing with them. They drank and jested; they broke bottles and quarreled; some tossed down ringing coins and wagered over them. Once there was a curse, a blow, a shrill scream and the sound of a body falling. Thereafter a moment of silence and then the complacent grunting of Sir Harry Hawk, very drunk and very venomous now, rifling a man's pockets. It was very long, even after the room quieted, before she dared return to the panel for a breath of air.

All day long Captain Cavalier had had a place in her thoughts. She wondered, frightened by her own thoughts, what had happened to him. Had Sola remembered and set him free as he must have done had he remembered? Or had these others found him, dragged him forth and put him to death, as they would surely do at Harry Hawk's orders if they found him? Or did he still lie there in the jail into which so hastily the big Kanaka had thrust the captured Indians? Oh, dear God, how she longed for him now!

She saw how men came into Sola's apartments only with Sir Harry Hawk or at his invitation. He had set the place aside for his own headquarters. He would sleep here, no doubt, tonight. Alone, in the bedroom? Then she would have her chance to flee! Or would he have his own

men about him? Would the place be full of them, sleeping on the floors, in all the rooms?

It began to grow dark; the most welcome dark in the world. She moved a little; she began to wonder if she could ever walk, run again, so stiffened and cramped were her muscles from these many hours of confinement. She grew dizzy and faint. Never in her pampered life had she known until now just what was meant by thirst, that acute thirst which grips one by the parched throat, tortures and near maddens.

She started. Voices again in the parlor. Had she been sleeping? Had she swooned? It was Sir Harry Hawk and his lieutenant, the Kanaka.

"You've kept an eye on Vara?"

"Aye, Captain. Our boys watch him now."

"He's slippery, curse him," muttered Hawk. His voice was no longer clear and bugle-like; drink had thickened it.

"He'll try to give me the slip. Go get him, George——"

"You're through with him? Knife him?"

"No—curse him. I'll talk with him in the morning. Throw him in the jail for the night. Wait a minute. Have a drink, George."

They drank together, one after the other from the same bottle.

"I'll go myself," said Sir Harry thickly. "It's a way I have, my man; I do my own killing and skinning and so I make sure the job's done aright. Then we'll go make the rounds; discipline be damned on a night like this, but I'll have me some sober and wide awake sentinels, lest those Californians creep back on us and butcher us in the night. That done, we'll have my bully boys here with us; a keg to broach and some dice rolling; eh, George?"

They went out together. It grew very still in the house. She slipped the panel back cautiously. For the first time since dawn, trembling so that she could scarcely stand, she stepped out into the hall. Surely they would be gone ten minutes, perhaps half an hour. She dared not count on longer than a few minutes.

Inch by inch she crept along the hall. She came in a few steps to where it opened upon the parlor. The room was deserted. The front door stood open. She looked through and whipped back. An immense fire was burning in the plaza; men tossed what they found handiest upon the flames; tables, beds, chairs, benches, anything to burn. Scores of men, jostling one another, went up and down; they leaned against the pillars of the corridors; they squatted here and there. She could not have passed half a dozen steps from the door without brushing against many of them.

A strange weird brightness was in the air. Where was that utter dark on which she had counted? Flames stabbed upward from the old fort; from the houses outside the walls. Fires crackled, sparks danced upward until the sky seemed filled with stars reeling drunk like the men infesting the entire settlement.

Now she stole along the hall again but going the other way. Into the bedroom, on through it and into the smaller room beyond. For she knew that there was a rear door and she hoped in that hope bred of despair itself, that the way might be open there.

This door she found locked and the key gone. But here the case was no different; through a little window she saw men everywhere, roistering, drinking, staggering, still bent on pillage; ever dragging fresh spoils to the light, rifling them, cursing and pitching the most part into the flames.

So again was she forced to draw back. She must wait; wait until the fires burned down, until men went to sleep.

Here came footsteps again. She fairly flew back through the little hallway, plunging again into her hiding place, closing the panel in wild haste.

And, impelled by an urgency as great as her own, those rushing footsteps came on. A man dashed into the front room and came running into the hallway. He tripped, treading upon a bottle which rolled noisily against other clinking glass; she heard him curse under his breath.

It was Don Nicolas Vara!

Vara, to whom she would have turned eagerly as to a last hope, had it not been for those words with Harry Hawk which she had overheard; Vara whom now she dreaded no degree less than these others hemming her in. She heard him when he stopped; she heard him stir again. His cloak brushed against her panel and she shivered from head to foot. Would he stand there eternally? Would he never go on about his business?

Not his cloak against the panel now! His fingers instead; they groped in the dark; they were trying to get the hidden door open!

She clapped her hand over her mouth; she cowered in her corner, tight-pressed against the farthest wall. For at last

there was no doubt left; the panel was opening. Was open. Vara thrust his arm into the closet; his questing hand went swiftly back and forth.

She stood very still, frozen now with horror. Did he knew she was here? Was it herself he meant to drag forth? She could not have screamed now had she willed to do so. She could only pray in the depths of her soul that in the darkness and in his obvious haste he might still miss her.

Once he even plucked at her sleeve. But his fingers, urged on by his strange haste, abandoned her to fasten on an old cloak of Sola's. He pulled the thing down and she heard a little grunt of satisfaction from him. But still he sought on, stooping to the floor now and tumbling over such accumulation of odds and ends as find final harbor in a little-used closet.

Then, just as she began to hope that he was going, he straightened, made a last sweeping search of the narrow space and thus set his hand upon her head. For an instant he stood rigid as she. Then his hand fairly leaped to her shoulder, fastening there with a fierce tensity.

"Who are you?" he whispered savagely. "What do you do here? In God's name, it's Virginia Luisa——"

She could scarcely find words to speak; she could scarcely stand.

"Señor Vara! Have mercy! You will not betray me? You will even save me?"

He dragged her with him out into the hall. All the while his fingers bit fiercely into her flesh. He began muttering; she could make little of the words themselves, broken and incoherent fragments. Here was a man in the grip of some powerful emotion, thinking aloud.

At last he spoke to her directly, still in a whisper.

"Hide again, Señorita, and wait for me. I return in a moment. Be not alarmed that it is Vara who has discovered you. Had it been any of the others, your case had been bad indeed! But Nicolas Vara—you know how you can trust to Nicolas Vara! Be still and wait—five minutes only!"

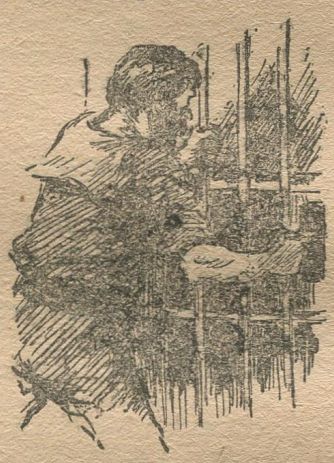
Clutching the garments he had taken from the closet he was off again, running. She heard him chuckle as he went.

XVI

ALTOGETHER Sir Harry Hawk was gone about his business a full hour. For it turned out to be a very pleasant business indeed and he lingered over its pleasures. First in order had been his brief interview with Don Nicolas Vara.

"You promised me the person of California's governor," he said pleasantly. "You lied to me. Tonight you lie in the jail here to think the matter over. In the morning it may be that I will discuss it with you. Or," he added with his humorous quirk, "I may hang you dangling to the flagpole in the plaza replacing the colors you served so faithfully."

He saw his men hustle the cursing Vara into the pail, then with his own hand turned the great key, and went on, smiling.



His course carried him among his merry gentlemen, very merry indeed tonight. They had found half a dozen cattle left behind and had slaughtered them to the last one. On their generous fires great hunks of meat roasted. He stopped to drink and gorge with them. He clapped many upon the shoulders and many were those invited to visit him later in the governor's apartments, now Sir Harry Hawk's.

But while he loitered others made haste, Vara chief among them. In the jail, where he had counted on finding the two Indian captives, he had found but one man, Molina burning with thirst.

"It is you, Molina? Still here?"

"*Si, Señor,*" said Molina thickly. "The pirates, they are gone?"

"But the two Indians? Where are they?" queried Vara.

"Gone, Señor. Crawled out the hole——"

"The hole? What hole, man?" Vara shook him impatiently.

"There in the wall. Where Captain Cavalier made it——"

Vara hastened to see.

"And Cavalier?" he demanded. "What of him?"

"Gone, too, Señor. But five minutes ago. Oh, an hour ago. I don't know. But I grow hungry; and I thirst. The pirates——"

Vara heard no more. But there was one who listened even more intently, missing nothing. This was Captain Cavalier

himself who had drawn himself again through the hole to the outside of the wall as he heard men fumbling at the door, when they came to lock Vara up here. With escape shut off at dawn, he had lain here awaiting in all readiness what might be the next turn of the wheel. When that wheel took a fortunate turn for him as he was ever hopeful it would, and the two Indians were immured as his cell mates, he decided that for him there could be no safer place in Monterey than its jail. He even counted on what had happened; that the Indians would be neglected while their captives roistered; that he would have a day of that very neglect he so coveted.

But there had not been an instant all day long when he was not prepared for instant action. So now, when he heard the clamor at the door, he emulated the Indians who had already crawled through at the first dark. And now, crouching outside in the shadow of the wall, looking this way and that for the readiest avenue of escape, he listened with all his ears.

Thus he learned, first of all, that Harry Hawk and Nicolas Vara had quarrelled with the result that Vara was thrown into jail. Next, listening, he had an inkling of another matter. Where he could have looked to Vara to thank his stars for a lucky hole in the wall and make instant use of it, he found instead a Vara taking his time and grown thoughtful; a Vara cooking up some fresh scheme of his own. Something that had to do with the poor devil, Molina. For he went back to him and set him questions and muttered aloud to himself after Molina sank back and appeared to go to sleep:

"—a suit of Sola's will do the trick——"

Such was one of the fragments for Captain Cavalier to make the most of that he could. And then, here at last came Vara, wriggling through the little tunnel, scrambling to his feet and making off in the strangest of all directions. For instead of running away from the presidio, he made straight through the gate again and into the plaza.

"A suit of Sola's?"

Captain Cavalier straightened up and stared after the hurrying Vara.

"He's trading somehow on that poor devil's odd resemblance to Sola! It is likely that Harry Hawk has seen the governor from a distance; that Vara thinks to palm off this substitute—to gain some reward; to play some satanic trick of his own?"

He stooped to the hole he had made.

"Ho, there, Molina!" he whispered as loud as he dared.

Molina answered drowsily.

"Better come out while you can. I'll give you a hand. Hurry."

"No," muttered Molina. "I stay here—loyal to Monterey—*Viva Fernando*——"

Captain Cavalier, hoping to save him against himself, cajoled, argued and threatened. All to no avail.

Having done what he could, Captain Cavalier shrugged all responsibility off his shoulders and turned his mind exclusively to his own affair. Were it not for Vara coming athwart his path, he had gladly waited another hour before saying his farewells to Monterey. Men still went up and down everywhere; sentinels walked back and forth, evidently on guard against a possible dashing return of the garrison; and tall columns of fire, shot through with plumes and curls and bannerets of black smoke stood up in a dozen places, consuming the interiors of houses, bursting through roofs and windows, making a great deal of undesired light.

Fortunately for whatever it was that Vara planned, it had not been generally known that he had been placed under arrest. Therefore he went his way unquestioned since that way led into the presidio and not toward flight; at the moment Harry Hawk and the big Kanaka were at the far end of the presidio and outside the walls, making their rounds. He went at a breakneck run to Sola's rooms, made his swift seizure of clothes and boots and, had his word with her whom he had discovered in hiding, while Captain Cavalier still reconnoitered from a place in the shadows not a score of paces from the mouth of his tunnel. Here returned Vara with his bundle. He went down on hands and knees, thrust the garments before him and was again inside the jail.

Captain Cavalier had never been Captain Cavalier had he not delayed a last moment, stooping and listening. He heard Vara cursing Molina into sluggish activity; understood that he was getting the man dressed in the new cloak and boots.

The thing was done with amazing swiftness; like a rabbit from its burrow Vara popped out again, giving Captain Cavalier barely time to withdraw and conceal himself. Off again at a run went Don Nicolas——

"It's just the man's idea of a joke. But whether the joke is to be on Harry Hawk or on poor old Molina, it would take the devil to tell."

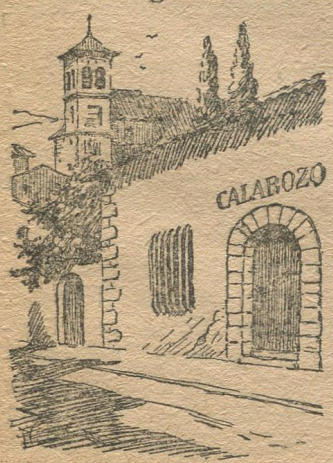
Again he sought to dismiss the matter from his mind, naming himself a meddlesome fool for harboring thoughts having to do with Vara when he were best trimming his own sails. Yet again he was forced to inactivity. A squad of men was approaching; six or eight of them, with two whom he recognized from a distance leading the way. These two were Harry Hawk himself and the Kanaka. Both walked lurchingly; both, plainly enough were drunk. Yet, drunk or sober, there was always a glimmer of his native craft in Harry Hawk and none knew it better than Captain Cavalier. He watched them narrowly, hoping that they would pass without coming too dangerously close.

Hawk was stationing his sentinels, giving them their bounds and swearing to cut the ears off any man who grew lax at his duty. Being rather drunker than he had been for a very long time, he grew rather more cautious. Thus he placed double the outposts any other man would have thought of doing; and thus he doubled Captain Cavalier's hazards.

Presently, the Kanaka having disappeared with two of the men, going toward the castillo, Hawk turned in at the gate. Captain Cavalier heard him cry out in wonderment. He had met Don Nicolas Vara whom, but a short while ago, his own hands had locked in Monterey's sturdy jail!

What the two had to say to each other was lost to him. But they must have come back to the jail door almost at a run. For before Cavalier had stirred again, he heard them rattling away at the padlock, their voices raised in a meaningless clamor.

The door was open at last; they were inside; flint and steel or a brand brought from the great fire created a light for them.



"You see, man," Vara cried arrogantly, "there is no jail in California to hold me. You see further that Nicolas Vara is the one to keep his promise. I said that I would give you Pablo Sola; look at him, worn out, exhausted and drunk in despair—but my prisoner——"

Again that superstitious cry from Harry Hawk.

Vara's arrogance mounted to fresh heights. His the high hand now, his the haughty bravado. In his voice was the note of rare, diabolical mockery.

"You shall see, Señor, how Nicolas Vara keeps his pledged word. I promised you Sola? Here he is; I give him to you. When, setting myself free, I might have fled, I return to redeem my word."

"You will tell me," muttered Hawk, evidently utterly bewildered, "how you have accomplished this thing? Or am I drunk and imagining the impossible?"

Vara's short laugh prefixed Vara's saying sharply, "Think well, now, Harry Hawk! What else did I guarantee you?"

How Hawk must have been staring all the while.

"Monterey to loot?" went on Vara. "Well, you have it. Spoils of a sort? You have them. And, I seem to remember, that you craved something else, something rarer and finer and softer; big eyes to melt into your own; the ministering of some señorita——"

"Man, man!" exclaimed Hawk. "What now?"

And now Captain Cavalier, breathless to catch every word, went as cold as ice.

"What now?" laughed Vara. "You shall hear; you shall see. And then you shall aid rather than impede my departure? What say you when I put into your hands the very daintiest, loveliest maid in all California?"

"You don't mean *her?*" gasped Hawk. "Not Cavalier's fancy?"

"What if I make you the pretty gift of her this minute?"

"Are you a magician then? Do that and you go free; you have what you wish of me——"

"Come then! I have her at hand. Shut in a closet for you, no farther away than Sola's rooms——"

"What?" screamed Harry Hawk. "You have her? She is here? Now, tell me——"

Harry Hawk, his befuddled brain striving mightily to come at an understanding of events, might stop to ask further questions, but Captain Cavalier had heard enough. He broke into a run, dashed in at the gate, hurtled into a man and left him cursing behind. Let all the pirates that ever sailed the blue Pacific stand in his way, he meant to go through them. As straight as a flying dart he raced toward the governor's rooms.

XVII

FORTUNATELY for Captain Cavalier, the carousal in the plaza was now at its maddest. Amid such a devil's gathering, all drunk or half drunk, Captain Cavalier rushing along drew but scant attention to himself saving alone and briefly from those into whom he careened full tilt. Even those few, seeing him pass like a ricocheting ball, merely rocked on their heels and followed him with their curses. So, without once drawing the sword on whose hilt his hand was set in readiness, he came with an unimpeded rush to the governor's rooms.

He flung the door open. Though no candle had been lighted the fireglow from the plaza flickered through the place, revealing with sufficient clearness the objects in the room. A sweeping glance showed him the table strewn with bottles; the chairs pushed back against the walls; a guitar hanging from a peg. Otherwise emptiness. He entered swiftly, sword in hand now, eager-eyed for the finding of Virginia Luisa, alert for anything. Rushing into an empty house, one never knew what he might stumble on.

He closed the door; hesitated an instant as he thought whether to shoot the bolt toward which his hand had gone automatically; made his swift decision and went on, leaving it unfastened. Almost at his heels he could look for Hawk and Vara. He counted on them coming alone. Hawk would want to see his pretty prize for himself; he would want no rabble at his heels. Yes, determined Captain Cavalier grimly; better let the two come alone rather than set them the task of battering down the door and attracting a mob thereby. Further, could he be swift enough, he might have Virginia Luisa by the hand and be out again through that same door before they came.

"Virginia!" he called softly. "Virginia Luisa!"

He ran through the hall, speeding to the adjoining room. As he hastened he heard a little gasp at his very side. He came to an abrupt dead halt, staring into the gloom which had resulted from closing the door. The sound had seemed to come from the wall itself! Though he swept his arm out and brushed the wall, there appeared to be no one near. He called again.

"Virginia! Are you here? It's Cavalier. Quick if you would live the night through."

The panel went back with a rush. Her hand was on his arm.

"I'm here. In the closet. *You!*"

He caught her hand tight in his.

"Whatever happens, keep up your courage now. We've got to go back through those devils outside. Unless there's another door?"

"It's locked. I tried it. The windows are barred——"

"This way, then. Remember, our two lives are not worth a *centavo* if we blunder. Be quick to do whatever I tell you——"

"Señor Vara will help——"

"Vara ran to Harry Hawk to tell him he had you here! That is how I learned. Do you understand? Anything but trust in Vara. They will be here in a minute. Now, if we can win through before——"

"Oh!" she gasped. "They are coming!"

"Aye," he groaned. "They are here. Back into the closet," he commanded in a low whisper.

He even thrust her back. Never had his brain worked so swiftly. Thoughts darted through his mind, coming and going like hastening sparks through swirling smoke. Never in his life had he told himself more earnestly, "There is ever a way if a man can but see it!"

True to his expectation and hope alike, Hawk came attended only by Nicolas Vara. The odds then were but two to one, as long as what might be done here escaped the attention of the howling mob outside.

"I'll shut the door and bolt it," Harry Hawk was saying in the very highest pitch of excitement. "You stand guard while I make out if you have told me truly. Man, man, if you have put that delicious morsel into the hands of Harry Hawk this night, you are free on the instant to whatever thing, great or small, you ask of me. Now, which way? Where's the cursed closet?"

"In the hall there," said Vara coolly. "Feel your way. There's a wooden panel on the left. She's behind that."

Captain Cavalier listened; he felt a shudder shake Virginia Luisa; he gave her a warm pressure of the hand; and all the while his brain raced. He would handle these two men; he would do it somehow in sufficient silence; there would be only sword and dagger play, with never a pistol shot. Then for the dash into the plaza. The devil of it was that a girl must attract attention——

"One thing at a time," he decided as he heard Harry Hawk coming. "I've the advantage in giving him the surprise of his life. Then to strike swift and sure——"

Virginia Luisa was back in the closet. With sudden determination bred of a flash of inspiration, he stepped in after her and drew the panel half shut. Alert to every possible suggestion as one needs must be if he hoped to live through such experiences as thickened the reckless path of Captain Cavalier, he even took stock of that which brushed against him in this narrow space. Clothes hanging from hooks—a pair of old boots.

"Put on these clothes," he whispered, his lips at her ear. "Anything to hide that you are a girl——"

"It's most devilish dark," growled Harry Hawk, still shuffling closer. "Light a candle, Vara."

But, without waiting for Vara to strike flint and steel, his impatience urged him on. His hand brushed against the panel, discovered the opening where Cavalier had left it ajar, and was thrust in.

"Aha, my little beauty!" he cried. "My little one comes back to me, does she? Pretending to save that good-for-nothing Cavalier she throws herself into the arms of Harry Hawk——"

His questing fingers brushed her arm. A stifled scream broke from her. Captain Cavalier thrust her back, still farther into the corner, and slipped in front of her. Hawk's fingers were still seeking; Hawk had laughed delightedly at her scream, the first sound to tell him beyond all doubting that Vara had not lied to him.

"Now, my beauty," he said coaxingly. "Come out where we can see you better. Where we can have a nice talk together, just you and I. We are going to send Vara on his business in a minute."

Captain Cavalier maneuvered so that it was his own cloak on which Hawk's fingers closed. The fingers tugged; Cavalier held back just enough to incite Harry Hawk to further eagerness. Virginia Luisa moaned and again Hawk laughed drunkenly. He pulled harder at the cloak, with both hands now. And Captain Cavalier, meaning to allow no such time as would permit Vara to strike a light and find a candle, appeared to be drawn forth against his will.

"I've got her, Vara!" cried Hawk.

He had Captain Cavalier out in the hall now and was drawing him toward the parlor.

"And I've got you, Harry Hawk!" whispered Captain Cavalier.

Both hands shot out unerringly and closed swift and tight and mercilessly hard about Harry Hawk's throat, choking off words and breath together.

To choke the life out of the little reptile was Captain Cavalier's savage thought and sole desire. If he could account for one of the two against him before Vara guessed or got his candle burning, he would have simplified matters most satisfactorily. He exerted a still greater pressure, drawing upon the last reserves of his strength. Hawk's hands fluttered upward, trying to break that steely grip which was putting the chill fear of death into his soul. When the fluttering hands fell away and went plucking nervously for a dagger, Captain Cavalier withdrew his own right hand and smote it. Such a blow it was that, had it landed square, it must have crushed Harry Hawk's skull like an eggshell. Even delivered haphazardly in the dark it flung the little man back against the wall where he sprawled half dead and less than half conscious of what went on about him.

Vara had heard, misinterpreting the scuffle, and had laughed, going on about his candle lighting and saying with a chuckle, "She'll scratch your face for you before ever you tame her, man."

But he started at the sound of that blow and the crash of the falling body and whirled about, demanding sharply, suddenly suspicious, "What is it, man? What is happening?"

He had managed to light his candle and set it on the table. He came leaping forward, his sword flashing out.

"Cavalier!" he gasped, falling back to stare. "How in hell's name——?"

For answer Captain Cavalier fell upon him with such a fury of onslaught that it must have borne Vara off his feet and toppled him head first into eternity were it not for the accident of the table barring the way. Vara's period of spellbound consternation was of but the briefest. He threw himself on guard and Captain Cavalier saw in a flash that he had to do with one not unskilled at sword play.

Skilled or unskilled, the man must be disposed of in a matter of seconds! Else, there was no hope. Prolonged fighting here would run a grave danger of drawing attention. Further, Hawk was out of it but temporarily. This flashed with the clear emphasis of a streak of lightning on

Cavalier as he leaped forward; at the chance of being spitted on Vara's sword he must scorn all finesse, and drive straight ahead to a speedy end. Now was no time to go around obstacles. To come to safety, he must go straight on over them!

Already Vara, seeing that he had to do with but one man and that man Captain Cavalier, was lifting his voice, shouting mightily.

"Ho! Outside there. To the rescue. It's Cavalier——"

With one bound Captain Cavalier leaped to the table top. With another he was over it, striking as he came to grips with Vara. He must have been sheathed in the finest of steel armor to have attacked in such headlong recklessness and receive no wound. So urgent was his haste that he welcomed Vara's sword thrust in order to deliver his own. Thus Vara's point, lunging at his heart, cut savagely into the left shoulder he left unguarded. And at the same instant his own blade, driven savagely, pierced Vara's right shoulder and stood out six inches at his back.

Vara, with a scream of pain, dropped his sword. He fell back a pace, bringing up against the wall, swaying yet keeping his feet. And again though he had to fight for the strength to shout, he began again calling.

"Help——"

"Oho, ho, ho!" shouted Captain Cavalier, swaying a little where he stood, his own face white and drawn. But his voice rose high above Vara's, drowning it. "Ha, ha, ha!" he roared.

For he had heard a hand at the door.

"What's going on in there?" someone called.

Captain Cavalier stepped swiftly close to Vara; his sword point pricked the flesh of Vara's throat. His eyes glared a deadly warning. And then suddenly, as the one outside stood uncertain, Captain Cavalier lifted his voice again and began to sing.

"We've looted every port in France!
We've gutted full many a town in Spain.
We've had our fling at the devil's dance
And sailed the Spanish Main!"

The one at the door appeared uncertain.

"Did somebody call for help?" he demanded.

"Help?" muttered Captain Cavalier, mumbling his words so that his voice might not be recognized, his sword point pressed until it needed but the slightest touch to drive it in. "What help? With a bottle of brandy? Come now, my bully boys; another stave."

And he began singing again. Yet all the while he watched. Harry Hawk was on his hands and knees. And just behind Hawk stood a figure which at first made him start. Then he saw that under the long cloak and standing in the tall boots was Virginia Luisa! She had even drawn on an old hat.

She had done her part, swiftly and well. If he could do his now, they still stood their chance to go clear. He had Vara silenced; there was Hawk to handle and Hawk was out of his reach unless he withdrew his sword point. Hawk was gasping irregularly, still fighting for a normal flow of breath into his tortured lungs. In another second he would be on his feet; would be charging with sword or pistol—would be shouting. And a pistol shot now would surely call back that lingering fellow at the door.

He must finish Vara in cold blood, even though he stood unarmed and wounded. It was a sickening business for a man with sporting blood in his veins, yet firmly Cavalier brought the double barrels of his pistol down on the crown of the other's head and he dropped in his tracks. On the instant Captain Cavalier spun about and leaped at Hawk. And Harry Hawk, with a sword point now at his own throat, sank back in his corner.

Cavalier had thought that fellow at the door had gone about his business. But again he was pounding at the door and muttering.

"Are you in there, Cap'n? What's afoot? Anything amiss?" he finally called out.

"It's that fool Nosegay," Captain Cavalier hissed into Hawk's ear. "Tell him to go to the devil or I'll send your reeking soul there ahead of him!"

Hawk glared and then flinched, his flesh twitching as the sword point drove terror into him.

"Quick!" whispered Cavalier.

"Go on away, Nosegay," called Hawk sullenly.

"You're busy here and won't be disturbed," whispered Cavalier.

"I'm busy. Go, man—*Hurry and go!*"

he shrilled as Cavalier grew impatient.

Nosegay grumbled something unintelligible and they heard him move away. How far? One step only or to a safe distance? Captain Cavalier was little pleased at the thought that Nosegay had come into the matter at all.

He prodded Harry Hawk to his feet, menaced him with death if he dared utter a syllable or stir a hand, and marched him across the room to a chair close to Vara's prone body.

"If either of you move, that one is a dead man, Hawk," he said and deftly removed first Vara's weapons, tossing dagger, pistol and sword into the hallway, while the man stirred, groaned and sat up. The same office Cavalier performed for Harry Hawk.

"Now shall I kill you, Harry Hawk?" he said softly. "Or have you a fool's desire to see another sun come up?"

"I'll see you in hell before——"

"Before the next sixty seconds have passed," said Cavalier, grim and deadly, "and if I die, you die first. You've my solemn word for that."

Hawk was licking his lips audibly. His eyes roved everywhere; his cunning brain would by now be hard at work. Vara's eyes which had been dull and heavy, began to clear.

"What do you want of me, man?" snarled Hawk.

"I've told you. Only to go free, the lady with me!"

Hawk simulated mockery.

"Only that? With perhaps the sun, moon and stars to carry off in your pocket! Don't you know that there are two hundred men you'll have to go through? And that to the last man they'd ask no better than to cut you down and relieve you of the lady?"

"Yet free we go, were there ten times your drunken two hundred yelping after us! If you do your part, little man. And if you fail us in one jot—why, then, you have my word for it, you're a dead man before I start fighting!"

"You're a fool——"

"Which disposes of me. Now, what of you? Fool or wise man?"

With the words came a sudden twitch of the wrist holding the sword. The barest slight twitch, yet the keen point made its tiny scratch and Harry Hawk felt the first slow, hot drops of blood.

"Hold your hand, Cavalier!" he stammered. "I elect to save my own life. Now, what orders?" he jeered.

"Good. You were ever a logical little beast, Harry Hawk; you mark the cloak I wear? Good. In a moment I am going to put my sword away. Thereafter I'll have a pistol in each hand, each pistol at the full cock. My arms shall be crossed, under this same cloak, mind you, and not to attract attention yet not to be forgot. When I say the word, you will step close to me, on my right hand, and you'll feel the comfortable nose of one of them peering with some degree of curiosity at your very middle. Then, on a word, your friend Vara will heave himself up and step similarly to my left side. We'll be like three good friends arm-in-arm, thus. Is it understood?"

"I cannot stand," groaned Vara. "It would be my death to seek to walk."

"Then you walk to your death," said Cavalier sternly. "I'll take no chances on leaving either of you behind. We'll fling the door wide open; we'll go out of it like three jolly devils roistering. Aye, though you stagger and half faint at every step, Vara. They'll but hold us drunk, like the rest. So we walk across the plaza and out at the gate——"

"No," muttered Vara. "You'd use us to escape; then what of us? Hawk, he'd drop us dead and be off!"

"So I've thought," said Harry Hawk morosely.

"But I'll do nothing of the sort, since I'm forced to barter with you," Cavalier assured them. "Once clear of the presidio, I'll let the two of you go."

"He lies," said Vara. He clasped his wounded shoulder and fell to groaning. Cavalier, while he went on speaking to Hawk, watched Vara narrowly.

"I talk to you, Harry Hawk. You know best whether I lie or not. Now, I pledge you my word to kill you both if you refuse to accommodate me. I pledge you that same word that you shall go scot free if you elect to aid me. Now decide. And decide while a man could count ten. For, if you choose death and stubbornness for your portions, I would know without delay and take my chances without you."

There was the slightest possible hesitation. Then Hawk sighed and thereafter spoke hurriedly.

"Have it your way, Cavalier. I take you at your word. You have promised to set us free when I have done my part?"

"The two of you; you and Vara."

"Curse Vara for a fool and a traitor."

Harry Hawk's eyes roved evilly; it was obvious that he held Vara responsible in

his own mind for their present predicament.

Captain Cavalier laughed. Virginia Luisa looked at him marvelling. She saw that his hand was red with blood where he leaned on the table; blood that had trickled down his arm.

"Come; let us get it over with," muttered Harry Hawk, and seemed of a sudden all eagerness.

"I read your brain, you scurvy rat," Cavalier snapped back at him. "You think to set up such a hue and cry, with your two hundred dogs baying at our backs, as to run us to earth again? Well, we take our chance on that, too, since it is the best we can ask and be sure of getting. Come then; are you ready? Now, Vara."

But Vara only groaned and seemed to be slipping back as though his little strength had flickered out of him. Cavalier stooped over him and plucked him rudely to his feet.

"Any little agony you may suffer tonight is of your own making, my shifty scoundrel," he said angrily. "And not greatly beyond your deserts. Now, steady. Come, Hawk. You will fall in behind us, Virginia? Having first opened the door for us and let us pass. Gentlemen—Forward! And not like sneak thieves, hiding but like three very gay and very bold gentlemen of adventure—swaying a little as we go, perchance, yet lifting our voices in song."

Out into the red light of the fire stepped the four from the governor's rooms. With men all about them, they passed straight on to the gate. As they passed on Cavalier remembered Harry Hawk's sentinels and spoke of them.

"I saw you post your men a little while ago, Harry Hawk. We'll not tarry for any of them and they will have little thought to stop us if we go straight on our way. That way leads through the houses yonder and to the edge of the wood. And if any grow curious concerning us, it must be you who calls out to them who you are and that you are but going to post a fresh guard."

So the four of them hurried on, Virginia Luisa felt the mist in the air and lifted her face to it; she drank deep of freedom, filling her lungs. She walked with the others like one in a dream. Was it true then that again she was to go free and unharmed? Even of Harry Hawk, though her arm brushed his, she was no longer afraid!

Even now Captain Cavalier, seeming vastly pleased, began to chuckle, and she thanked God that he had been spared any severe hurt, though at first the blood on his hand had roused her fears.

Then in a black silence they splashed along, through mud and drizzle. Beyond a gully they came among the first trees. They heard Captain Cavalier's deep sigh. With all his singing and chuckling, Virginia Luisa began to suspect that even he began to breathe deep again only now. On they went, keeping to the clearer open spaces for the sake of making speed. Only when they had gone well upward of a mile did Cavalier call a halt.

"Our thanks to you, most sweet gentlemen," he mocked them. "We shall not detain you longer. Now you have my permission to go; to run as fast as you please, to shout out for help as loud as you please, to chase back, questing in all hot haste. Lady, your hand? We step along now and, I think, in some haste of our own."

He caught her hand and they sped away, leaving Hawk and Vara standing side by side. And now with Cavalier leading the way they pressed on into the deepest, darkest of the wood.

How tightly she clung to his hand now. It was so far to her own people at the King's Rancho; it was but so short a distance from the presidio reeking with foul men.

"Run! Oh, run! They will be after us again."

"Perhaps," he said, "you think me crackbrained to have let them go so soon? Well, perhaps; it has ever been said so of me. But, to ease your mind a trifle, you are free to my explanation: for one thing I did not care to have them with us overlong as I would rather they did not know in which direction we travel——"

"But there can be but the one direction! We have no friends nearer than the Rancho del Rey and it is there we must hurry. All night——"

She was dragging him along frantically. She could hear voices at a distance; Harry Hawk's bugle voice yelling as he ran toward the presidio. But Captain Cavalier hastened to speak what small comfort he could.

"Hawk but wastes his breath; they'll hear never a word, such a frolic do they make of the night, until he's fairly under the walls. And the second part of my explanation: it is toward Rancho del Rey that you would run; and it is toward Rancho del Rey that they'll look for us. Meanwhile, you and I take here a more southerly direction. I know where, but a bare league distant, there is as pretty a thick parklike grove in as wild a country as two fugitives ever sought. Have I not hidden out there myself? And, provident being that I am, have I not even left the place provisioned? 'Tis there we haste, most sweet lady; and there, almost under their noses and hence where they'll look least to find us, we rest us through the night and the coming day. For I am of the mind that we can both find ourselves none the worse for a bit of sleep and food. And now—will you trust yourself to Captain Cavalier?"

"Oh, how gladly!" she cried softly. "Oh, how gratefully!"

They went on in silence for a time, and then Virginia Luisa heard a soft chuckle at her side.

"I burn with curiosity!" said Captain Cavalier. "I heard that villain Hawk say some few strange words back there in the house. That you had returned to the presidio because of—because of what, Señorita?"

"They told me that His Excellency had shut you up in jail. I knew that if you fell into the hands of those pirates——"

"And so, for the sake of saving the worthless skin of this arrant Captain Cavalier, you rode back alone to Monterey?" He caught her arm yet more tightly. "Come, my Virginia; you and I go free this night! 'Tis written in the stars."

They went on, making all possible haste. Virginia Luisa darted ahead, dragging at his hand. And now it dawned upon her that his haste was less than her own. Then she remembered how hard he had fought; he was like a man wearied out. He seemed to stagger along after her. And he was so strangely silent.

"What is it?" she cried in sudden alarm. "You are not—you are not badly hurt?"

"The third and last bit of my explanation, most sweet lady," he muttered. "I did not want them to know. Here; help me wind my cloak tight about my side. They'd track us in the dawn by the blood else——"

"Oh, dear God," she wailed. "This is the end!"

"The end?" he said harshly. "By high heaven and deep hell, lady, it's but the beginning!"

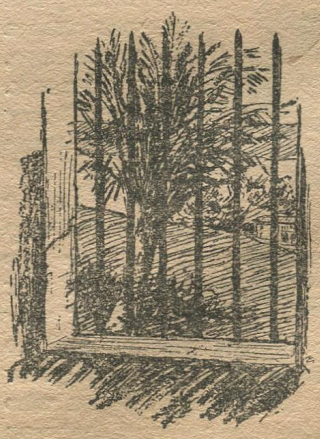
XVIII

CAPTAIN CAVALIER dashed a hand across his eyes which he had shut savagely; opened them again and, finding despite his effort that he was still hard beset by unreasoning chimera and lying vision, shut his eyes with greater determination and fell to muttering.

"I promised I'd wait here until she came back and wait I will. She's gone to walk in the sunshine. But she's away such an unconscionably long time! It's more than an hour since she left me——"

A very soft, wonderfully sweet voice almost at his ear spoke, saying in that tone which one uses to a sick child, "What do you say, Señor?"

His eyes flew open once more and he began a furious blinking as though by batting his lids thus he could dissipate the entire legion of a high fever's minions. At his side there was—nay, there *appeared* to be—a little, pretty and altogether dear old lady, snowy white hair half hid under a lacy black mantilla; one who, he thought, might well be his own Virginia Luisa herself, say a hundred years hence. Her hand, very soft and gentle and practised in the ways of healing her sick, lay on his brow—rather, seemed to do so. For, having been tricked long enough by visions which one after the other turned out to be but empty mockery, he had come to the point when he refused to be put upon. This little old lady now, dear and sympathetic and cozy and motherly, he knew her to be a piece with the rest of this entire figment; the white walls of the comfortable little room in which he found himself, the window yonder giving glimpses of the vine wreathing it, a distant hill dotted with great oaks, a more distant blue patch of blue, blue sky, the very bed on which he lay. A deep feather bed, rose-scented linen sheets with daintily embroidered hems—what had Captain Cavalier to do with such?



"You are awake, Señor?" asked the same low, gentle voice.

"Aye, I'm awake," he muttered into his pillow. "Awake and seeing visions. You are a Vision; a grande dame out of some romance I read once on a time. Yes, awake, I talk with visions." He began groping about the bed, seeking something. "I promised I'd lie here until she came back. To make sure, I bound myself with bits of thong; I tied double knots and then set myself to work to forget how to untie them——"

The door opened softly. Captain Cavalier had the odd sensation which in itself was quite a piece with his many other kaleidoscopic impressions, that he who entered tiptoeing had just stepped down from the frame of some old masterpiece. A very old gentleman, tall and thin and aristocratic, with pointed beard and curling hair snowed upon by the same years which had passed over the sprightly head on the little old lady at his side; one who was in all essentials her most perfectly complementary mate. He was clad in a rich elegance with more than a dash of color in it, gleaming in silver buckles, glowing in sash and jacket lining.

"He is just awake, Don Julian," whispered the one at the bedside.

"And grown much better! Ah, 'tis you, Mariposa Mia, who can draw a man back from the gates of death. Have you not done as much for me?"

So these Visions pretended to be Don Julian and his Mariposa? Her grandfather and grandmother? Captain Cavalier, beginning to lose some degree of confidence in his own recently taken stubborn attitude of denial of all things, began again that furious blinking meant to drive away fever's creatures. In a moment he would be believing that this was reality about him; then what a crushing hopelessness when he awoke again only to find that he and Virginia Luisa were still struggling over endless rocks and gullies; still with the fear of pursuit ever on their heels.

He remembered that he had decided that the best place for them to flee was to the *hacienda* of Don Julian, her grandfather; that they had camped in safety; that they had struggled over what seemed countless miles of rough country, that another night had passed, that his fever had ever mounted. After that things grew very hazy.

He lay very still, debating the baffling matter with himself. If what he saw and heard about him was real instead of fancied, why then he must indeed be at the *hacienda* of Don Julian. Yet how could that be? They must still be miles away from it.

It was altogether too much for him. He was still puzzling over it when he slipped off to sleep.

When he awoke again it was to look sharply about him. How he feared to find himself again and for the thousandth time enduring that agony of watching a beautiful dream fall into ash heaps about him.

Thinking himself alone, he sought to rear up on an elbow the better to look about him, but sank back weakly and with a groan. Someone rose swiftly from the chair at his side; he turned his head and saw Virginia Luisa bending over him.

"Sh!" she commanded when he would have spoken. "I will run and tell *mamma-grande* you are awake."

"Wait," he pleaded. "Tell me; am I delirious? Or—where are we, Virginia?"

"At the *rancho* of Don Julian. And you are getting better. Oh, Señor——"

He studied her curiously. He noted how she no longer wore the torn riding habit in which he had seen her last; how she looked rested and fresh and more dazzling than ever, how she must have bathed and set her hair in order, with its enormous, bejewelled comb—how he had never seen so pretty a dress or so pretty a girl to wear it.

"How came we here? When?"

But again she commanded silence, this time with a finger on her lips, and went rustling to the door and, with a most glorious smile, like the smile of springtime of a glad morning, passed out. The door closed softly, was shut a moment only, opened as softly and here came the dear little old lady.

"Señora—tell me——"

Had she learned that trick of a tender smile from her granddaughter? Or had she given it through inheritance to Virginia Luisa? She sat down by him, took his hand in her two, patting it in her dear motherly way, and smiled more brightly than ever.

"You dear boy! You've had a hard time of it, but you're a fighting man—just like my own Don Julian in his own time! Tell you? Of course I will. Everything? And why not? Only a little by little."

"I've had fever—I've messed up fact and fiction—I don't know——"

She touched his brow with her smooth fingers.

"A terrible fever, but that's over now. Just as cool. God be thanked, Señor. Yes, yes; I know all about what troubles you. Virginia came running to us in the night; that's nearly three weeks ago, Señor. She led the way back to where she had left you. You had won through until you were almost here. Don Julian went, our Great Picton and his sons with him, and they brought you here. To me, Señor, who love to nurse the sick. So I put my silly little granddaughter to bed and I put you to bed and I set to work making two half dead youngsters well. You are now out of all danger; soon you'll be sitting up, eating everything and getting fat. And now—no more talking."

There were a hundred questions he would have asked, but under this tenderness and gentleness there was to be sensed a certain firmness that was not to be denied.

Later on in the day Don Julian himself came into the room for a brief call upon his guest. At the doorway he stopped to make his deep courtly bow, the bow of fifty years ago. Then he came to the bed, for a moment clasping Captain Cavalier's hand in quiet cordiality.

"My wife, Señor, allows me five minutes with you. That I may assure you that you, who from the beginning have been our beloved little granddaughter's protector and savior, honor us very highly by lingering a little under our roof. You will believe me, Señor, that the house and everything in it is yours. We are in all things your servants."

"It is you whom I must thank—for my very life, it seems. My only regret——"

The slim white hand lifted arrested his words.

"No regrets, Señor." Don Julian smiled pleasantly. "Such are my wife's commands. She orders always good cheer and happiness to her invalids—along with the nasty tasting stews and brews of herbs on which she will take so keen a joy in dosing you."

He sat down, drawing his chair close.

"We understand that your mind will be filled with much to make for unrest until you have had information upon this and that," he said. "Bouchard's vandals, as you know, sacked Monterey; they spent some few days there while our governor was gathering reinforcements at the Rancho del Rey. By the time Don Pablo was ready to march back to the coast, Bouchard had fled south. He struck at the Refugio Rancho and then appeared off Santa Barbara. My friend the *commandante* there, Señor de la Guerra, tricked him by marching his handful of men across a little open space in such manner as to make the pirates think he had an army! There was some parley, an exchange of prisoners——"

"Molina?" asked Captain Cavalier.

Don Julian laughed.

"Yes, Molina was returned to us. Poor old Molina! For Don Pablo, I think would have been glad if Bouchard had carried him clean off! As it is, Molina is ordered back to jail to finish his unexpired term. Well, Señor, at any rate we have seen the last of Bouchard; who struck a final fool blow at Mission San Juan Capistrano and departed; and Don Pablo already prepares to rebuild poor little Monterey.

"As you know, we were at Santa Barbara when the attack was delivered upon Monterey. We returned here and a couple of days later my daughter-in-law, the mother of Virginia, brought my son, Don Hilario, here suffering from a slight wound. The first thing she did was ask for Virginia who had ridden away from the Rancho del Rey as her mother thought to come here. Oh, we had our hour of consternation, Señor! But see how things end happily. For while I was gathering a force of men to go with me, back to Monterey seeking everywhere for this wild thing Virginia Luisa, here came she herself, half dead from fatigue, to tell of your plight.

"And now, as you shall see in a day or so with your own eyes when you can sit in the sun, we have with us Don Hilario and his wife, our little Virginia again, two of my sons, two of her brothers, seven of my daughters and daughters-in-law, cousins more than you shall ever count, and friends in numbers to gladden any man. Refugees, Señor, whom we are so fortunate as to have with us. You see, we shall turn our California's misfortune into a grand picnic! Later, when you are better, there will be barbecues and dancing and lots of noise and fun!"

"You would seem—to have your hands full—without me——"

Don Julian, spreading out his hands, looked horrified.

"Is it possible, Señor, for us to have more of our own friends with us than it gives us great joy to welcome? It is at times like this that life is filled up to the brim with happiness. What else is life for? Ah, Señor, if it had not been given us to have you with us at this time, I should have been saddened all my life long!"

Captain Cavalier sought words to express his gratitude. Presently, bethinking him of his own unsolved problems and of Governor Sola, he asked, "And what of Don Pablo? He is not here?"

"No, Señor. For he has been and still is very busy planning all that must be done anew at Monterey."

"Does he know—that I am here?"

A sudden frown darkened Don Julian's fine, cheery face.

"I do not understand Don Pablo in this," he said slowly. "He is my friend and a man of the highest honor. Yet I have heard how he had you clapped into jail. No, he does not know that you are here; none, outside my own household, knows that, Señor. When you grow well, you shall be free to depart, Don Pablo Sola or no Don Pablo Sola."

"No doubt he has forgotten me——"

"You should know the truth, Señor. He has recently offered a fresh reward for your capture and delivery over to him. But," and Don Julian shrugged with fine disregard of any such thing, "you may be as sure here as if you were around the world from California, that not even Governor Sola shall put your freedom in the slightest jeopardy. You remain with us secretly until you are restored to strength and vigor. Thereafter, I have men and horses to put at your disposal; you shall go where you would."

Captain Cavalier fell to staring at the heavy beams across the ceiling. Free to go where he listed. Free—but to go. Aye; there was the rub! When he asked only to stay, to become a true Californian.

"What of Nicolas Vara?" he asked suddenly.

A terrible look shone in Don Julian's eyes, while his two hands clenched into hard fists.

"Virginia Luisa told us everything. My Picton heard; his sons heard. You have not seen them, Señor? They are half Indian. They adore the little señorita; to them she is a goddess. They said nothing when they heard but they went away that night and were gone ten days. They can follow a track as a dog follows a hot scent. What they told Picton I do not know; I know only that he told me that we were not likely ever again to hear of that traitor Vara."

After that Don Julian went away and for a long time Captain Cavalier lay silent, plunged into his own somber thoughts.

Day by day and both steadily and swiftly he grew stronger. He drank of Doña Mariposa's broths and brews, he slept deeply and long, he awakened each time with new vigor. During this time he had only tantalizing glimpses of Virginia Luisa. When he was awake her grandmother came to him and sat with him, chatting cheerily of this and that; old Don Julian paid his respects morning and night; the great Picton himself was allowed to look in on him every day, always with a lusty, "Ho, my young master! You are as strong as a horse today, eh?"

But of Virginia Luisa he saw little. Now and then, when he had been sleeping and awoke suddenly, he caught his glimpse of her. She had been sitting by the window in his room, but rose hastily at the first stir from him, flooded his very soul with that glorious, grateful smile and hastened to tell her grandmother that he was awake. Sometimes she came back for an instant; but only when someone else was in the room and at such times a strange sort of shyness kept her eyes down and her lively tongue stilled.

So, as he grew stronger and his wits returned with health, he strove to trick her. When he awoke, his mind charged with this before he went to sleep, he lay very still, opening his eyes only enough for him to peep through his lashes. Knowing that if he caught her at all he would find her at the window, he had slept on his left side.

There she sat, her hands folded in her lap, her eyes on his face, as she rocked softly, noiselessly in her chair. He marked how her long earrings swung back and forth rhythmically, glinting and glowing in the light pouring in through the vines. He studied at his leisure curve of throat and chin; he marked the exact spot where, should she smile, a dimple would appear; he observed how her curls hid her ears which propriety commanded be concealed down to the necessary tips pierced for their swinging pendants.

She was dreaming-awake. She smiled

a little, somewhat wistfully; she sighed deeply; her eyes grew limpid and then cleared swiftly to some bright, golden-winged hope of future.

He thought soberly, "I'll soon be strong enough to mount a horse and ride away. Out of California."

He, too, sighed, and she looked at him with quick suspicion. But he lay still, breathing regularly and thought further.

"Why should she sit here with me like this—unless she, too, cares a little bit? And if she does, what governor either single handed or with all the troops in California at his back, is going to drive me away?"

She was leaning closer now, her eyes very intent. Slowly a little warm flush crept up into her cheeks.

"Señor," she whispered, "you are unfair!"

"And you, most sweet lady, are very fair indeed."

As quick as a flash his hand shot out and though she sprang up caught hers and held it tight. So tight indeed that she was forced to sink back into her chair.

"I must go," she gasped. "Grandmother——"

"Your grandmother is a most rare angel," he laughed at her. "But 'tis you I want just now. Tell me, Virginia Mia——"

"No, no! It is not proper, Señor! You take advantage; you must remember we are all alone here—without a chaperone——"

He laughed even more delightedly.

"You and your chaperones! What, did we lack them before? When we first met in Smuggler's Cove? When we rode by night? When we adventured in Monterey? When, thereafter, we turned again southward? A fig for your proper conventions."

"Oh, Señor! But it was different with us then——"

"Different? Just how, my most sweet captive?"

"I was a foolish silly girl——"

"And now? Is it years and not mere weeks that I have lain here? Are you grown from girl to woman, then, Señorita?"

"I—I think that I have," she whispered uncertainly. A new look dawned in her eyes, the surge of color crept up to her brow.

"Virginia!"

But with a sudden skillful twist she was free, up and away, laughing back at him from the doorway.

"All right, Señor," she cried softly. "I will do as you wish and tell grandmother——"

Now Captain Cavalier began to find this the very deuce of a situation, one to baffle, irritate and finally downright anger him. With sudden impatience and swift determination, he scrambled out of bed. His clothes were just yonder across the small room in a closet. How stupidly weak he was! Yet he managed his brief journey, bolted his door against invasion and certain opposition and began a hasty dressing.

He heard pleasant sounds. Voices in the kitchen; a guitar tinkling; Virginia Luisa singing happily. He hastened with what he had to do. If they gave him another moment he would be arrived at the triumphant end of the little task and they would have to accept him on his feet. He crept back to the table with its rosewood dressing case. His first good look into a mirror shocked him; what a cadaverous looking, wild eyed devil of a fellow this was! He had been shaved only this morning by Don Julian's own personal servant; how hollow his cheeks were. Better had he left a growth of beard to mask his gauntness.

With difficulty he dragged on his boots. Now, stepping softly, he went to his door. The hall was empty. He stepped out and, steadying himself with a hand against the wall, went toward the front of the house—toward Virginia Luisa's light hearted singing. The main *sala,* also, was empty; he made his pilgrimage through it, tacking this way and that, from chair to table. Thus, all unobserved, he came to the front door and looked out on the vine covered portico. Outside was full glorious sunlight. There were benches. On one sat Virginia Luisa, strumming and humming. He came on and sank down at the nearer end. She turned—and screamed aloud.

"You can't run away from me—any longer," he managed.

But that was exactly what she did. She sped into the house but to return on the instant with a brimming cup of wine. At

her heels came her grandmother.

"He is delirious again!" cried the girl. "See how white he is."

"He is a bad boy," said the little old lady. And then smiled at him encouragingly and came to pat his shoulder, to take the cup from her granddaughter's hands and make him drink. Thereafter they sped for wraps and a footrest; hurried to the kitchen to order hot broth; hung up a blanket to shut off any draft—and for some moments gave him no chance for a single word.

"I am as well as ever," he said as he set down the empty cup. "I must be up and about and so regain my strength. Then, in a day or so, I shall be able to accept Don Julian's offer of a horse, and ride away——"

The grandmother looked at him sharply; the granddaughter started. He went on steadily, looking straight at Virginia Luisa now.

"Is it your desire, Señorita, that I ride away from California? For always?"

As quick as a flash she became all demureness, dropping her eyes as young girls were taught to do.

"We are all your friends here, Señor," she said simply. "So we should be sad to see you ride away."

"I do not speak of friendship," he said stubbornly. "You know that. Nor do you answer me. Do you, just you yourself, wish me to ride? Or is it possible that you would have me stay?"

She looked up swiftly at his words, shot a quick glance at her grandmother, and of a sudden fled. Only from the door, as she slipped into the house, did she again flood the very soul of him with her smile.

"Señora," sighed Captain Cavalier as Doña Mariposa stood at his side, her very attitude inviting confidence, "you know how it is with me. A man dreams his dreams; have I been a fool to dare dream mine?"

She, too, smiled, curiously.

"A man is a fool, my son, not to dream his dreams. But now, wait. Let me talk again with Don Julian——"

"Again?" he said eagerly.

She nodded brightly and laughed.

"For," she continued, "Don Julian is a great friend of Don Pablo. And who knows? His Excellency is not a cruel man and not an ungenerous——"

"But Virginia Luisa herself? She flees from me——"

"And you, Señor, grow strong apace! How many days before you may run as swiftly after her?"

But here came Don Julian, riding swiftly in from the fields. As he swung down from the saddle and came to them with enormous spurs clanking mightily, the first glance at his face told them that something was amiss.

"Señor," he said, offering his hand after his graceful bow, "I rejoice to see you are given permission to be about; that means you grow well. Thee, my little one," he said, lifting his wife's hands to his lips, "I congratulate upon your success with our distinguished guest——"

"Quick, Don Julian," she commanded him. "What is it? What is wrong?"

"It's Don Pablo Sola," said Don Julian bluntly. "I don't understand the man. He gave Captain Cavalier his word of honor, as we know, to set him free and then clapped him into jail. Later, he offered a reward for his capture. And now it would appear that he has come to suspect that we harbor him here. A rider came to me from Monterey, sent by my son Hilario, to say that Sola himself with a squad of soldiers is leaving almost immediately—to come here."

"Don Pablo has no right! This is our home and shall not be invaded by the king himself without our invitation. And any whom we have as guest here——"

"Will not be taken from us!" cried Don Julian as firmly. "I have assured Captain Cavalier that he is safe with us."

But now Captain Cavalier spoke for himself.

"You are such wonderful friends to me—but I may not accept all that you would so generously and so willingly give. You have honored me most highly; while I live I shall never forget. But it would be but a poor return were I to allow trouble between you and your friend the governor to grow out of this. I grow strong as you see. Don Julian has already offered me a horse. Before Don Pablo can arrive, I shall be gone."

"No, no!" cried Doña Mariposa. "We will not allow——"

But Captain Cavalier stood up, pale and determined.

"Señora, you and yours must not be drawn into this quarrel. That would be unthinkable. No, I must go. But to return; I swear it. Time wears away mountains."

"We shall talk further, Señor," said Don Julian. "At least there is no haste. I have sent two men speeding down to

the mission; one rides even farther, watching the road from Monterey. At the first sign of Don Pablo's approach we shall be warned. Also, I have told everything to my good old rascal Picton; he is your friend, Señor, since that first night when you and he met. Night and day he will have horses saddled and ready, the fastest on my *rancho*—which means, I think, the fastest in all California. Now, while you rest we shall plan, my wife and I."

Captain Cavalier, too, did his own planning. He returned to the little room which to him had been so kind a haven and lay on his bed, resting, calling upon his iron will to aid his emaciated body in making its quick necessary return to strength. He thought to find himself for the first time in his life about to accept the obvious. That meant flight. Unless he were of a mind to stake his life in a game of pure madness, he must quit California. And of a sudden he no longer held his personal security with his aforetime lightness; during these few sweet, quiet days life had grown to have a new meaning, a fresh, golden value. He would make his way down to Mexico; there was fighting there, revolution carrying its bloody standards stubbornly on, meaning to sweep down monarchy and so come to national freedom. He, too, could strike a blow against King Fernando. That would be a blow delivered with all his might against Sola, since Sola drew his authority from the throne itself. Topple over the king and throne, thus topple over Don Pablo along with them. A new regime, a new government for Mexico and for California—and here, riding a fine white horse, came Captain Cavalier, back to California—back to Virginia Luisa.

"If she will wait for me! It will be a year; two years or three at the utmost."

Night came, serene and starry. And in the first hour of dark, one of Don Julian's men, riding hard, returned to the *rancho*.

"Don Pablo is at the mission," was the word he bore. "He dines there with the fathers. Then, leaving a dozen of his soldiers there, he rides on to visit you, bringing six men with him."

"I am ready, my friends," said Captain Cavalier, smiling. He tapped the sword and pistols once more at his belt. "First, may I make my farewells to your granddaughter? Alone—for once, Señora?"

He knew where she was to be found; under a certain arbor down at the foot of the garden. He made them his bow and hurried away.

"I have sent word to Picton," muttered Don Julian. "The two horses are ready. Picton himself will ride with him the first lap of his journey, showing him the short trails—and watching over him, to report to us. Also Picton has letters to friends all along the way——"

"God bring him through in safety—and in safety bring him back to us——"

"They are in the garden, saying *adios*," whispered Don Julian. "Ah, Mariposa, mia, why could it not be otherwise?"

"Were our Virginia like a certain Mariposa of thine—fifty years ago, Don Julian—I think that they still might find the way!"

"What? Madness!"

"And were we not mad, once on a time?"

"Listen! Horses already! Don Pablo rides in haste!"

The hooves came on, pounding mightily. Don Julia and his lady, both grim-lipped and stiffened haughtily, went to their door. Don Pablo dismounted and came forward, both great hands out.

"My friends!" he cried heartily. "To come to you after this vast desert of not seeing you is to come to paradise. Señora, I kiss your adored hands. Señor— Eh? What? What is this, my friends?"

His hands dropped slowly to his sides; neither had offered to take them and neither had spoken. But now Don Julian, very dry of speech demanded, "Might one ask what errand bestows upon us the honor of an unannounced visit from His Excellency?"

Sola stared and frowned and muttered. Then, like a peal of jovial summer thunder his laughter amazed them.

"Into the house and the full light, my friends!" he cried cheerily. "What, am I, the guest, the one who must invite thus? For shame."

And still laughing he passed an arm through Don Julian's stiff one and another arm gently about the slim waist of little old La Mariposa, and so bore them along into the *sala*.

"Were you come only in friendship, Señor—" began Don Julian, mightily mystified.

"Yet I come in no such case," returned Sola bluntly. "I learn that you harbor one here whom I have sworn to lay by the heels. What, are you become both traitors to California and to me? So, we'll have our business over with in a trice; we'll put on this Sir Captain of Adventure

such shackles as I have made for him; and then, business forgot, we'll drink and laugh and play together. A dance at the end, as usual?"

"I had meant to come to you, Don Pablo," said Don Julian sternly, "about this same Captain Cavalier. He has become our friend; our very, very dear friend."

"Where is he now?" demanded Sola sharply. "My men have surrounded the house, my friends; he is a fool to think of escape."

Doña Mariposa, who had remained speechless though bristling with indignation all this while, now suddenly flamed out passionately, berating this governor of California after such a fashion as to make even her husband gasp. When she had done Don Pablo mopped a hotly flushed face, glared at her a moment, then laughed and laughing jumped up and caught her two hands.

"Oh, but you do me good, you two. Such friends, such loyal hearts. Well, now you shall listen; having scolded me you shall be scolded. What, am I an ogre, then? Am I man lost to all honor?"

"You pledged your word to set him free——"

"A thousand devils!" shouted Sola. "Can I say nothing? Set him free! Tell me, are you bereft of reason? How may I redeem my word and how may I set him free—*without having him captive first?*"

How they stared at that, bewildered and amazed.

"I should have set him free back there at the presidio but that, suddenly attacked by the pirates, I was forced to detain him briefly as I wanted further speech with him about that villain Vara. So, I put him where he would be safe. The attack came. I grew worried. So, for a moment, I forgot him. Then I slept. Then I remembered and hastened to find him—and he was gone!"

"But why——?"

"I did not know where he was. I knew no way to find him. I knew that he would not trust himself back in my hands, no matter what I promised. So, learning him to be here, I came—to capture him so that I might show him that Sola's word is the word of Sola. To set him free. And now, where is he?"

A groan broke from Don Julian.

"Gone! The horses have been ready all day. Gone, and like the wind, half an hour ago. He left us to say farewell to our granddaughter——"

"Where is she?" Sola was on the instant tremendously moved. "Send for her. Bring her to me."

They ran for her. She was not in her room where her grandmother was so certain she would find her weeping. Nor in the garden, though the servants ran and called.

"She, too, is gone!" Doña Mariposa turned accusing eyes upon Don Pablo.

What a man for lightning moods Don Pablo was tonight. First he frowned and then laughed.

"We must do something for this young fellow! He wants a big *rancho*. He told me. Well, with so many unused acres in California, I can manage that! You'd start him with a fat herd of cattle? Of course. And Don Hilario must do something; Doña Manuela certainly."

They looked at him as though they thought him mad.

"Don't you understand? He is gone."

Sola smiled.

"Were he any other man that would mean that we should never see him again. But being Captain Cavalier, where will he go?" he demanded sharply.

"Toward safety, to be sure," said Don Julian dryly. "Which means out of the country."

Sola chuckled.

"We need not worry. Oh, we'll have them back soon enough. For I'll tell you this of him: he will go just exactly the opposite way of the one you expect. Now, bethink you, where is the nearest priest?"

"Why, at the mission——"

"And not ten miles from the tip of my long nose! Put a boy on a horse, Don Julian, and race him to the mission. There our Captain Cavalier will be found, forcing some poor padre at the pistol's point to marry them."

"But—you left soldiers there—he knows — It would be madness since he still believes you his enemy."

"That settles it. Beyond a doubt!" shouted Sola. "Send your man to see, my friend. Oh, he's a true Californian, that young fellow."

Sola was right.

TWICE IN THE SAME PLACE

By BERTRAND W. SINCLAIR

Author of "With Their Boots On," "Gunpowder Gold," etc.

THEY SAY LIGHTNING NEVER STRIKES TWICE IN THE SAME PLACE; BUT A FEUD MAY BREAK OUT AGAIN AND AGAIN. THIS TIME THE TWO WERE TO MAKE DRAMA IN THE BEAR PAW RANGE COUNTRY

LOOMING high above the Cross Seven ranch on Sandy Creek, Thunder Butte, a miniature mountain by comparison with its fellows which formed the backbone of the Bear Paws, thrust a rocky cone summit above a green escarpment of pine. Thunder Butte had logic behind its name. The timber was scarred with winter slides, full of rubble which had rolled from its bare head. When summer storms gathered stray clouds into forbidding thunderheads the storm center focused on the Butte. The black clouds would spit lightning at that rocky crest. There would be strange flashings between heaven and earth and rocks would come clattering down. Here and there pine trees would be splintered to the roots. The crack and rumble of thunder would sound as if the entire reserves of aerial artillery were hotly engaged.

It was like that now. Down in the bed of Sandy Creek the Cross Seven fields and buildings were gray with lines of sweeping rain. The red roofs of house and barn shone like a flame in the wet. A gunshot from the outbuildings two roundup tents flapped and bellied, straining at guy-ropes. The cook swore at gusts of smoke driven down his stovepipe by puffs of swirling wind. Outside, the saddle-bunch humped tail first to the sheets of rain. The wrangler in his yellow slicker watching his charge, was the only soul abroad in that riot of wind and rain and thunderbolts. The Cross Seven cowpunchers had all taken to cover.

"She's a fine, grand show," Rube Taylor lifted the flap of the chuck-tent to peer out as he spoke to Pete Malone.

"Like some of these new cowhands," Pete murmured. "Mostly noise an' wind."

Rube smiled. But the smile lacked substance. It was more like a grimace. He drew out his smoking material and rolled a cigarette, while the thunder made basso accompaniment to the treble of the wind and chain lightning ripped blazing rents across the black cloud overhead.

Rube had a problem on his hands, a peculiar uneasiness in his mind, which bore upon a man sitting across the tent—a full-faced, darkly handsome cowpuncher. This man had a chest and shoulders like a heavyweight champion, a fine ruddy skin, curly black hair. A bold, high-spirited individual unless his looks belied him. He had come with three new riders imported by the Cross Seven only the night before. Rube hadn't laid eyes on that face for seven years, but he knew Milt Wallace the moment he laid eyes on him. So far he was unable to say if recognition had been mutual. If so, he, Rube Taylor, was due for a peck of trouble. The world, Rube thought regretfully, was sometimes too damned small.

"I wish the lightnin' 'd strike him, darn his hide," Rube muttered to himself.

But the lightning only kept up its ancient assault on the Butte, filling the valley of Sandy Creek with deafening crashes, while Rube squatted on his bootheels, pondering.

"If—" he thought to himself—then shrugged his shoulders. The cowpuncher had to be something of a fatalist. In what he surmised was an approaching crisis Rube ran true to form.

"If," an old saying has it, is a big word. If Mr. Ephraim B. Marks had not in a moment of unseemly wrath applied the toe of his boot to that portion of a man's anatomy which seems designed by nature to be kicked, Mr. Marks would not have had to call in a roundup crew to protect his property against a horde of wild-eyed diggers and sluicers. If—but these things were accomplished facts.

There were certain results of these aforementioned accomplished facts. They had to do with what was running through Rube Taylor's mind while he sat there. The rain slashed at the canvas overhead. Milt Wallace's big voice boomed an obligato through the noises of the storm. Milt was big and so was his talk. Rube listened and thought and kept his thoughts to himself. He would rather have seen the devil, or smallpox, or a hard winter show up on the Cross Seven range than that boastful rider who had a way, Rube knew, of making his boasts good. Wallace spelled trouble with a capital T, to Reuben Taylor, and it was a form of trouble that lay so far behind Rube that he had almost forgotten.

An ear-splitting crash coincident with a blaze of lightning that was like a sunbeam in the eyes brought them all up standing.

"Holy smoke!" Pete Malone exclaimed from the door of the tent. "She hit the barn that time."

They looked, crowding out into the rain. Then they broke in a run for the stable. The lightning had splintered the gable end of a low log building, and the dry stuff had ignited. A little dribble of smoke soared up in the teeth of the rain. The Cross Seven men attacked it with buckets of water from the creek and put out the tiny blaze. Mr. Ephraim B. Marks came surging down from the house. But the danger was wiped out before he got there. He muttered imprecations on the vagaries of lightning and went back to cover. The riders returned to their tent.

"Lightnin' seems to like this spot," one of the strange punchers remarked. "Is that a regular performance?"

"Pretty regular. Never hit a buildin' before," Rube told him. "Thunder Butte's got iron ore in it. These summer storms hang around the Butte and bang away every once in a while."

The thunder shower passed. The wind died. A bright sun blazed on clean-washed hills out of a sky spotted with fleecy tufts of cloud. And while the afternoon was still young the Cross Seven roundup struck its tents with the speed and precision of a three ring circus, the wagons went rolling south with two hundred saddle-horses trailing behind. The Cross Seven bore out to the range again to finish an interrupted task.

In the group that ambled along behind the rattling wagons rode three new men who had come to the Cross Seven from the county seat in response to a word from Johnny Fee that he needed cowpunchers. Mr. Marks had seen fit to retain on the ranch four lusty youths to repel any return sortie of prospectors who might be stricken anew by the peculiar gold-madness inflicted on them by Bony Howe and his shot-gun-salted creek-bed. That still left Johnny Fee a little shy of his original crew. But the three would serve. And so Mr. Marks shooed the roundup out to work again, being even more interested in getting his calves branded and a hundred thousand dollars worth of beef marketed during the fall, than he was in seeing that a lot of wild-eyed prospectors didn't tear the bowels out of his barnyard in a search for non-existent gold. The Cross Seven had saved the day for Mr. Marks. The boys had rested a few days in idleness. They rode forth in very good humor. Rube Taylor alone seemed to have lost his habitual sunniness as the outfit jogged toward the first camp-ground.

"What sits so heavy on your mind, old-timer?" Johnny Fee inquired lightly. "You been lookin' down your nose all day."

They had dismounted together to tighten slack cinches. The others had passed on.

"Just thinkin'," Rube answered.

"That's what makes sheepherders go crazy," Johnny declared. "Sitting still and thinking hard."

They rode a hundred yards in silence.

"Say this Wallace party is the big noise, ain't he?" Johnny startled Rube with the coincidence of his thought. "He's givin' old Pete the jim-jams with his chatter already. Pete don't like his breezy way."

"Neither do I," Rube growled.

"I noticed that," Johnny grinned. "I

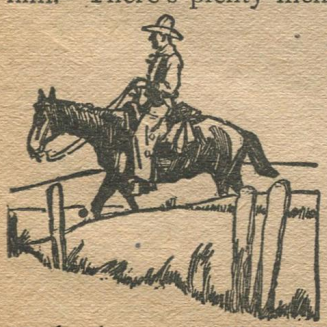
seen you giving him the bad eye. That's why I mention it. These here sudden likes an' dislikes makes trouble. Disorganizes a crew sometimes. Wallace handles himself well. I wouldn't hold it against him too hard because he uses his mouth a lot."

Rube said nothing for a minute. He knew what Johnny Fee was driving at. Personal friction in a roundup crew doesn't make for smooth operation. Johnny, as the Cross Seven range boss, was obliquely appealing to Rube to help the new men fit in. Rube had been with the Cross Seven when Johnny first came into the Bear Paws. Johnny could joke with Rube or draw on his loyalty without being misunderstood.

"As a matter of fact, Johnny," Rube said at last. "It ain't Wallace's windy ways that bothers me. I've worked with 'em noisy an' glum without bein' affected myself. An' I certainly wouldn't make trouble with a man just because I didn't happen to fancy the way he shot off his mouth. It's more than that. I know this hombre. Worse still, I expect he knows me—though he hasn't let on. It's a hundred to one he's got it in for me. He may have drifted in here by accident. On the other hand maybe he came lookin' for me. I have no love for him or any of his breed, but I'd let it slide at that—only I don't think he will. He ain't that kind. He's goin' to ride me. I can see signs of it. 'N' if he does we'll lock horns."

"Well, if it's a private war," Johnny said, "I know you an' I don't know him. So I'll string along with you. Has it got to be serious?"

"If there's anything it'll be serious," Rube said grimly. "Look here, Johnny, I might as well get it off my chest. If he starts anything it'll come out anyway. You know how it is in this country. A man comes along. Nobody knows who he is, where he comes from, what he's done. Nobody asks. They take him as they find him. There's plenty men in Montana that don't ever talk about their personal history."



Johnny nodded.

"Well, I'm one of 'em," Rube went on. "You never heard me talk much about myself an' I've been with the Cross Seven about six years now. I've been a fair sort of a hand to the outfit. I had a little money when I come here. I've saved some since. I got about four thousand dollars in the bankroll. I been standin' pat all this time wonderin' if somethin' would turn up. An' it's here.

"It's this way. I was raised down south, near Roswell, New Mexico. My old man had a few cattle there. He got into a ruckus with the range boss of a big cow-outfit an' they shot it out one night in town. My old man got downed. I wasn't there. But the news gets to me by-an'-by. I'm a hotheaded kid so I buckle on the old fusee an' hunts for this feller. I find him easy enough an' I get him too—though I gave him a show for his alley. Then I find out I've jumped the wrong man. There's two of 'em—brothers. Their name's Wallace."

Johnny Fee whistled.

"One of the two," Rube continued soberly, "killed my father. It was sort of mixed, but they gave the old man a raw deal. An' after I've made my play they tell me the Wallace I bumped off wasn't the one that did the shootin'. An' immediately there was quite a fuss about me minglin' with this wagon-boss. We didn't have no peaceful conversation about it, you sabe. Probably I'd had to mingle with him anyhow. The outfit he run didn't take kindly to us bein' on their range with stock of our own. It was like that sometimes down there.

"Anyway, to save more trouble, I jumped the country. I come north, changed my name, an' figured sometime that old stink would die down. Then, this black-faced curly-haired wind-bag turns up yesterday. He's a Wallace. In fact, Johnny, he's the son of the Wallace I shot up. It's kinda hard for me to stomach him, because I know he was mixed up in the fuss that started me on the warpath. So I don't know where I am at right now. Maybe I'll have to go on the dodge again. Maybe he'll stir things up so I'll be gathered in an' took back there to stand trial. Maybe Milt Wallace will aim to collect my scalp himself."

"You ain't usin' your own name. You must have changed some since them days," Johnny reflected. "You reckon he does know you?"

"I know he does," Rube declared. "I worked in the same roundup with him two summers. I'd know his hide on a fence in hell. An' he knows me right enough. He hasn't said so. But I can see it in his eye."

"Looks kinda unpromisin'," Johnny ob-

served. "Keeps you on the anxious seat. Still, six or seven years is a long time. These things get old an' fade away.. Reckon you'd come clear if you were took back for trial on that shootin' scrape?"

"I dunno. Not if the Colorow Cattle Company still runs that county like they did. Anyway I don't feel like bein' penalized thataway. I was justified. I don't know as I'd stand for arrest. It goes against the grain. There's a heap more law than justice in that part of the country, or used to be."

"Don't see how you can do much then," Johnny said, "unless you jump out again."

"I don't feel like doin' that either," Rube grinned. "I like the Bear Paws. I like the people 'round here. Everybody's treated me white. I feel at home here. I was thinkin' I'd take up a ranch in the foothills an' put in a little bunch of cows next year. I don't want to be a forty-dollar stockhand all my life. I don't want to leave this country."

"Stand pat then," Johnny advised. "Maybe nothin'll come of it."

"I reckon I will," Rube said. "Only you can see how it makes me uneasy, rubbin' elbows with this windy jasper. An' I don't underestimate him. He's bad. All the Wallaces are. Big-mouthed—but ready to back it up. They give the old man plenty of warnin' that they'd get him, an' they did. If Curly Wallace takes a notion he'll make me a heap of trouble."

"Help any if I let him roll his hoop elsewhere?" Johnny asked.

"I wouldn't want you to go that far," Rube said. "Thanks just the same, Johnny. If he aims to get me one way or another I don't know as that would stop him. An' you got old Eph's interests to consider. You're short-handed already. No, I'll see it through as it lays."

"Kinda queer, ain't it?" Johnny said, "you gettin' the wrong man?"

"Nobody told me that till after the smoke blew away," Rube explained. "Hank Wallace was credited with the job. He just reached for his gun when I tackled him about it. If he didn't kill the old man he certainly aimed to fix me. But they said afterward Hank wasn't even in town the night my old man was shot. My conscience don't hurt me none, anyway. I've always suspected the whole Wallace crowd got him foul, an' just passed the buck to be on the safe side. I'd sort of put it all out of my mind till this windy heavyweight showed up here. I mailed a letter this mornin' to a feller I know down at Roswell, an old-timer I can trust, to find out things for me if he can, to see how the land lays. It's a cinch Milt Wallace knows me. Seein' I put his old man's lights out, it's natural he'd crave action agin' me. Gosh, I wish these darned skeletons hadn't raised up to rattle their bones again."

"That's the way it goes," Johnny sympathized. "I'm with you Rube, anytime there's anything I can do. Maybe it'll all come out in the wash."

"Hope so," Rube grunted. "I feel better, anyway, for gettin' if off my chest."

The Cross Seven hauled down to the mouth of Eagle Creek, whence Ephraim B. Marks' Macedonian cry had called them to arms when wild-eyed prospectors overran his ranch. Here they took up the daily routine of ride, roundup, work the herd, brand calves and ride again on the morrow, moving from water to water as they combed the range.

And while they performed their tasks in heat and dust and the bawling of restless herds, the voice of Windy Wallace was loud in the land. Someone had hung that appropriate nickname on him before he was twenty-four hours with the Cross Seven and the name stuck. Windy didn't mind the name. He wore a perpetual grin, even if it was not always a genuinely mirthful one. Windy was a boaster who never failed to make good his word. A wagon-boss had to be impartial and Johnny Fee was fair-minded by nature as well as policy. But because Windy was big and talked big, and because Johnny knew what lay behind the occasional ambiguous remark Windy took to flinging at Rube Taylor, Johnny led him out one tough horse after another.

Windy rode them as they came, until one day he said to Johnny Fee, "Ain't the Cross Seven got no gentle horses at all?"

"You said you could ride anything," Johnny reminded him. "The higher they jump the easier they land, you told me."

"I don't take it back none," Windy bragged. "I can shore ride 'em, Mister Wagon Boss. I'll make 'em gentle for a lady if they'll stay on their feet."

"Ride 'em, then," Johnny said shortly.

Windy could rope with the best of them.

Wrestling calves at the branding-fire his bulk and activity made him so damnably expert that it seemed at times as if he were trying to put every other man to shame with his feats of strength and skill. He would bull-dog a yearling for sheer bravado and bellow challenges to the other riders to do likewise.

If it hadn't been for his everlasting tootle on his own horn, the Cross Seven would have been proud of Windy Wallace. Instead the riders tolerated him and no more. They alternated between contemptuous amusement and downright irritation. All that saved him from a clash with somebody was his impudent cheerfulness—and possibly the self-evident fact that he wouldn't be easy game in any sort of scrimmage.

He gave convincing proof of that one afternoon, a demonstration that to Johnny Fee bore all the earmarks of a grandstand play. The outfit had cleaned up a forenoon's work by ten o'clock. All the cowpunchers, except those on day herd, were loafing in camp. The cook, in his noon meal preparations, had opened and thrown out half a dozen tin cans. Somebody was going over his six-shooter and carelessly took a pot shot at a can.

"Let *me* show you how," Windy uprose bellowing in his great voice. "Watch her yump."

He stood carelessly at ease, fifteen yards from the tomato can. He flipped his .45 and the can hopped. Without moving he emptied the five cylinders. Each shot was a hit. Each hit rolled the jagged piece of tin a few feet farther. The last bullet knocked it over a low bank into the creek.

Rube Taylor stood nearest him. Johnny Fee sat just out of earshot. If Johnny had overheard the low-toned remark Windy made to Rube out of the corner of his mouth he would hardly have assumed that Wallace was merely breaking out in a new place, emulating the sentiments of little Jack Horner when he pulled the plum out of his Christmas pie. Johnny was pretty well tired of Windy's continual plays to the gallery. He was ceasing to pay much attention to anything he did.

What Windy said was for Rube's ears alone. "Why'nt *you* learn to shoot like that when you was young?"

Rube moved a step nearer. His voice was like a rasp, but low. His eyes suddenly seemed to burn.

"You reckon maybe you'd make me a good shootin' teacher? Maybe you'd give me a lesson or two since you're so darned good at it. Is that what you're workin' up to?"

"Now you're gettin' personal Ni—I mean Rube," Windy's full red lips parted over a set of perfect teeth. "Never get personal unless you have to. Tat-ta. That's all for today."

He deliberately turned his back on Rube, addressing himself to the nearest group of cowpunchers. "If somebody'll stake me to a box of shells an' another gun I'll show you how to do the double roll, one of these days. I was just about born with a six-gun in my hand."

He stalked over to his bed and sat there cleaning and oiling his weapon, emitting a continuous flow of words.

"For the Lord's sake, Windy, give us a rest," someone at last said wearily. "We know you're a wolf from Bitter Creek an' your night to howl is twenty-four hours a day. They ain't a man in Montana can outride, outrope, outshoot or outwind you. And it's a cinch nobody in the world can outtalk you. You don't have to demonstrate no more. You win all bets an' all contests. So give our ears a rest for a spell."

Windy laughed. This grudging, half-annoyed recognition of his preëminence in all departments seemed to please him. He continued to talk regardless and he held the floor for a long time. The Cross Seven was beginning to find Windy's talk a Marathon affair.

"The feller that spent his young life trying to discover perpetual motion never happened to come across you, I guess," Old Pete Malone sourly remarked. "Your gab would 'a' give him the key."

If Windy hadn't somehow given the impression of a formidable personality, if he hadn't been able to deliver the goods he advertised, they would have found a way to muzzle him. As it was he compelled attention. He thrived on argument. If that failed, if no one would take issue with him he could spin interminable yarns always with himself as the central figure.

Now, when he had put away his gun he began to reminisce on gunfighters and gun-play. Pete Malone capped a yarn of Windy's with one of his own—the tale of a storekeeper at Ogalalla, Nebraska, who fought a duel in a dark celler with his father-in-law while a cyclone stripped the house from above their heads. And then Windy began on another yarn. Johnny Fee had moved nearer, within earshot. He saw Rube Taylor stiffen, at the first descriptive sentence.

"One time down in Mexico," Windy drawled, "there was a outfit called the Corazon Cattle Company had a couple of brothers workin' for 'em. One was a ranch boss. The other handled the round-up. A few miles below the headquarters of the Corazon a feller name of Smith had a little bunch of cows. He wasn't exactly welcome on the Corazon range—a feller with a couple of hundred head of cows never is. You know how it goes. The big outfit always reckons he don't overlook a chance to increase his herd at their expense. But they never bothered this old feller Smith. He minded his own business. Besides he had a reputation over in Texas where he come from for bein' fast with a gun. They never bothered him none till one day the Corazon range boss, whose name is Hank Jones has some dispute with him over a calf. There's some hard words but no powder burned at the time.

"A spell later, though, old man Smith rides into the county seat. The Corazon roundup's there. So's Bill Jones, the ranch boss. Along late in the evenin' there's a burst of shootin' in the street. Nobody knows who starts it nor why. Only when the noise of battle rolls away an' the populace comes out to view the remains old man Smith has cashed in. Nobody talks. Nobody exactly takes the responsibility for anythin' 'cept to bury old man Smith. It's whispered around that Hank Jones the Corazon wagon-boss had tangled with old man Smith. But nobody takes it up because the Corazon's pretty near the whole thing in that county, an' anyway it was old man Smith's private war.

"But Smith he has a boy ridin' for some outfit down on the Pecos. He comes back to New Mexico pretty soon, sells the old man's cattle, loafs around for a spell sayin' nothin' at all, till one day he meets Hank Jones in front of the courthouse.

"'They tell me here's where justice is handed out,' says the kid to Hank.

"'I guess it is,'" says Hank, "'when there's any on hand.'"

"'There's a supply on hand now, I reckon,' says young Smith. 'Seein' they ain't used up none lately.'

"With that he slaps Hank across the face with one hand an' starts throwin' lead with the other. They was so close the powder singed Hank's shirt front. They say he had his gun out, shootin' as he fell. Some say he didn't.

"Anyway young Smith moseys over to the livery barn, mounts his *caballo,* rides outa town, an' is never heard of there no more."

Windy paused to roll himself a cigarette.

"That sounds sort of unfinished. There's been plenty of these family feuds started in the cow country," Johnny Fee remarked. "What's the point, Windy?"

"Well, I dunno's there is any in particular," Windy replied. "Except that this Smith kid killed the wrong man, an' probably never knowed he done it. It was Bill Jones the ranch-boss that downed his father.

"An' old Hank Jones had a boy about the same age as this Smith kid. Kinda interestin' to speculate on what'd happen if these two ever met up, eh?"

"Jones an' Smith, eh?" Johnny Fee drawled. "Where does Robinson come in? An' what about Tom, Dick an' Harry?"

Windy Wallace laughed. The dinner call cut their parley short. With food stowed away they caught fresh horses for an afternoon ride. When they were far out toward the end of the circle Rube Taylor, jogging beside Johnny Fee, suddenly said:

"I think I've got that jasper sized up. I believe he's aimin' to do the same thing to me Mark Steele tried on Robin Tyler with the Block S once. Recollect? Mark rode Robin to a whisper, on the quiet, tryin' to stir the kid up to declare war so Mark would have a clear case of self-defence."

"It's a funny play," Johnny replied. "I was wonderin' why he told that story before you. Maybe he isn't sure about you yet an' sprung it to see if you'd show your hand."

"No, he's got some other object. He makes little breaks at me on the quiet. It looks like I'll have to go to the mat with him all right. He's going to crowd me."

"Wish you luck when you do," Johnny grunted. "*He* won't be mourned in the Cross Seven."

"More likely to be me," Rube answered slowly. "If I did get him likely all that old stuff would come out. An' he's got me faded to a whisper when it comes to gun-play. I got about as much chance on an even break with Windy Wallace as a

rabbit has with a skunk. You seen him perform on that can. That was mostly for my benefit. D'you know that I haven't fired a dozen shots out of my six-gun since I tangled with Hank Wallace in Roswell. I sometimes wonder how I got away with him. I was so worked up it was always sort of hazy."

"You ain't hardly organized to go against Windy an' that's a fact," Johnny reflected. "I'd hate to be a pall-bearer at your funeral, Rube. So long as nothing has come up yet why don't you go off on a holiday, just to save trouble?"

Rube shook his head.

"I can't do that," said he. "No, Johnny, I'm not yellow. I can't act yellow. I got to stand my ground and call his bluff if he makes one."

Johnny said nothing. He understood. In the same situation he would have felt and done the same as Rube. Life was precious, but a man's innate pride was a factor in his living. Rube would go out in a haze of powder-smoke, knowing his exit foreordained, rather than crawl before an enemy. And in spite of his manifest competence, his assurance, Johnny was not certain that Windy Wallace had the same dour courage that Rube Taylor possessed. That was an impression only. Yet Johnny's instinct about men seldom played him tricks. He did not, however, mention this to Rube. Johnny was troubled for his friend, but there was nothing he could do.

Rube had always been quiet, good-natured, no matter how rough the going. He grew quieter, to the point of brooding. Windy Wallace on the contrary, became more of a continuous noise than ever, if that were possible. His bull voice was forever lifted in conversation, in argument, in facetious dispute. His big laugh eternally boomed out his own quips. Nothing put a damper on his exuberance. He rode and whipped his bad horses into submission and impudently inquired of Johnny if the Cross Seven had any more ladies' mounts.

Then, at the end of a few days, in which Johnny had noted brief asides between the two men, a growing harshness in Rube's voice when he had to speak to Windy, all the evidence of subtle clash between them, he was surprised to see Rube and Windy using a leisure moment to converse, sitting side by side on the wagon-tongue. Johnny took particular note because Rube avoided Windy, talked to him only when the work made speech necessary, and otherwise tried to ignore the man's existence. Johnny suspected that this indifferent attitude nettled Windy as much as any old score he had chalked up against Rube. Without an audience, Windy was unhappy. He loved the centre of the stage. Unconsciously he dramatized himself in everything. Johnny marked that Wallace was doing most of the talking now. Rube finally gave an emphatic shake of his head, a gesture as of finally dismissing something and walked away to the bed-tent.

And the next time Rube found Johnny out of earshot of the others he said:

"Windy's sprung a new one on me. You recollect him tellin' how my old man had a ranch a ways below the Colorow, which he called the Corazon? That's correct. He took up half a section and got his deed to it before he was bumped off. When I sold what cattle he had that three hundred an' twenty acres still belonged to me. It was desert land, with some ranch building. The only thing that made it

worth ownin' was some good springs. Land around there was dear at a dollar an acre. So I told a feller I knew who had a bunch of horses he could use it as long as he wanted if he'd pay the taxes, which wouldn't amount to four dollars a year. He's the feller I wrote the other day to find out for me about this Wallace combination.

"What you think Windy proposes to me? He offers me four hundred dollars for this old homestead."

"What's he say about all these funny little breaks he's been makin' at you?" Johnny asked.

"He just passes 'em up," Rube answered. "He's smooth. He can make things have a meanin' you can figure for yourself. He makes it appear he don't hanker for trouble with me, but he makes that sound all same as a threat. I mean, without him sayin' so in plain English he makes me understand that I'm liable to have trouble on my hands if he feels like stirrin' things up. But he's open enough about wantin' that old ranch. He don't like this north country. He's just up here to look around an' he reckons he'll go home."

"Why don't you let him have it?" Johnny suggested.

"Because I just naturally hate to have any truck with him, an' I can't help it," Rube declared irritably. "What he offers is four hundred dollars which is about what it's worth. To me personally it ain't worth a bean. While he don't put it that way it's just as if he said, 'you let me have that land at my price an' I'll leave you alone. If you don't I'll stir things up!' An' I never could stand this 'you *got* to' business from anybody—least of all from him.

"Besides," Rube ended, "even if he lets things drop with me here, if he goes back to Roswell he'd just naturally advertise me good. You know how he talks. If they still want me down there for tanglin' with Hank Wallace they'll darn soon know where to find me. I don't *sabe* this yearnin' of his for that piece of land, but I'm darned sure he don't never forget I put his old man's lights out.

"If you wrote to somebody there before you left the home ranch you should hear soon," Johnny said.

"That's exactly what I'm doin'," Rube grinned. "I'll hear if old Sandy Sampson is still on deck. We should pull into the ranch in another week?"

"Maybe less," Johnny replied.

"If he's offerin' you money for somethin' you own," Johnny said as an afterthought, "it isn't because he wants to make you a gift."

"About the only gift he'd bestow on me cheerful would be a .45 slug through my middle," Rube snorted.

In heat and dust, amid a daily turmoil of milling cattle and bawling calves, with thunderstorms blowing swiftly up in a brassy sky to lash the parched earth with brief and furious bursts of rain, the Cross Seven finished the calf roundup and hauled in to the home ranch to prepare for beef gathering.

They had been gone a little over two weeks. July had passed. A brazen August scorched the range. They came out of a flat, arid bad water country into the pleasant foothills of the Bear Paws. They were glad of cool mountain airs, the shade of trees, the song of clear running water.

More than anything else Rube Taylor was concerned with the bundle of mail that had accumulated for the absent riders. Windy Wallace had again broached the subject of that piece of land in New Mexico. There had been an obliquity in his words and manner that troubled Rube. He didn't care two whoops about those half-forgotten barren acres. But he had got to the point of asking himself if he were afraid of this loud-mouthed braggart. Rube wanted no revival of the old feud. He had made himself a fresh start in a new country. But he had killed this man's father and Windy Wallace was a potential killer himself. Windy's tactics had worried Rube from the moment of recognition.

That was why Rube sauntered up to the house for his mail as soon as camp was pitched on the level sward a little above the ranch buildings. He pawed over the pile of letters old Eph Marks gave him for the outfit until he found one with a Roswell postmark addressed to himself.

He sat down on the porch steps to read it. From the east a dark patch of cloud had been rolling up while the riders staked the tents. It swept off the plains across the Bear Paws. While Rube sat there the sun above was darkened, the first faint growling of thunder rumbled overhead.

He finished reading the letter, stared up at the overcast sky. Pale bluish-yellow streaks darted between the black heavens and the pine-clad height of Thunder Butte. Small whirlwinds of cold air riffled the dusty stableyard. The thunder growl became spaced crashes. Thunder and lightning and squally wind—an old hot weather story.

The sky above was scarcely darker than Rube's countenance. He frowned at the sheet in his hand, his lips tight, brooding there on the steps. He read the letter again, folded it slowly, stowed it in a pocket, walked down toward the bed tent.

The play of lightning became pyrotechnic, the thunder a succession of volleys. The Cross Seven men moved about their several affairs. No one troubled himself about an electrical display unless rain drove them to cover and sometimes these heat-bred thunderstorms passed in sound and fury without a drop of moisture. Rube had forgotten the letters. Someone had brought them down. Most of the riders were gathered at the end of the stable that he faced, ripping open envelopes, glancing at newspapers. Rube walked toward them, his six-shooter belted about his hips. He looked neither to right or left. His gray eyes were fixed on Windy Wallace leaning in careless ease against the wall poring over an out-spread paper.

Something in Rube's face hushed the chatter. Almost automatically two or three stepped aside as he walked up to

Windy. With his left hand Rube struck the newspaper out of Windy's grasp. With his right he slapped Wallace across the mouth, then stepped back so that a matter of six feet separated them. Rube's right hand dropped to a level with his hip, his elbow crooked.

"I've got you where I want you," Rube breathed in a curious flat tone—scarcely above a whisper. "*You* got my old man."

Wallace turned out both hands, palms up. He ran his tongue over his full red lips. For the first time his big bellowing voice was uncertain.

"I dunno where you get that idea, Rube," he said in a tone almost placating. "Tain't so. I wasn't in on the play."

"You lie!" Rube answered. "I got it straight from home. You shot him in the back while he was arguin' with your uncle. You never gave him a chance. I'm givin' you a chance. I'd 'a' been on your trail long ago if I'd known what I know now. Pull your gun, you skunk!"

Rube spoke in a voice suddenly hoarse with passion. No one spoke. No one moved. Windy Wallace stood against the wall. If he did not precisely cringe he was at least dismayed and uncertain at this blood-feud launched upon him as swiftly as the lightning that stabbed the clouds.

"It ain't so," he said doggedly. "If you got to have trouble I'm not sidesteppin' it, Rube. But I hadn't a thing to do with that killin'. You got my dad for it. That ought to satisfy you. I tell you I didn't, Rube. So help me God! I hope to die if I did!"

Windy threw out his big chest in a fine dramatic gesture and spread his arms wide, a magnificent picture of a man denying a false accusation. And in that breath of dazzling flash seemed to come like a flaming sword down the stable end. The crash that accompanied it made the earth shudder under their feet. It knocked Rube Taylor backward, staggered every man there. The brightness momentarily blinded them.

When they braced themselves after the flash and shock, Windy Wallace was huddled by the foundation log, his face singed, his spurs fused on his heels, as dead as if he had been struck down by the hammer of Thor.

They stood looking at him for a breath. Then Rube Taylor said to Johnny Fee, "He denied it. He said 'I hope to die if I did.' It looks like his bluff was called, don't it, Johnny?"

Johnny Fee nodded. He looked up at the massed cloud. As if the strength of the storm had been spent in that avenging thunderbolt the lightning seemed more tenuous, the thunder boom was dying fast to a mere rumble. Old Eph Marks came hurrying from his house.

"Pick that up and take it away to the bunkhouse," Johnny Fee ordered. The riders carried away the body, left Johnny and Rube standing silent, looking at each other. Rube wiped his face. A queer sweat had broken out on him.

"You can't explain some things, can you Johnny?" he muttered. "I had to jump him if it was the last act of my life. It seemed like something would bust inside me if I didn't. An' that's what happens. Read this here."

He handed Johnny the letter. It ran:

"Dear Nick: Some surprised to hear from you. Often wondered where you was circulating. Say, you'd oughto put Milt Wallace's light out first time he bats an eye at you. It was him got your old man. Your dad was wranglin' with Milt's uncle Bill Jones an' Milt decided to help uncle out so he plugged the old man from behind. I know this. Milt got drunk an' blowed about it one night near four years ago. Bill Wallace is dead. The Colorow don't run this county no more. If you come back nobody'd bother you. This here land of yours is worth money, Nick. They's a railroad acrost it which same I allowed for to build a water tank on the propitty to use the springs. They want to buy. The taxes is bigger now, but I kept 'em paid. Be glad to see you back. I've done well with horses here. Milt Wallace, he only went up north this spring. He's lowdown. Runs an awful bluff but weakens in a pinch. Write if you want I should deal with the railroad for your place. They'll give you two thousand for the half-section, maybe more. Awful glad to hear from you. Yer friend, A. Sampson."

"Gosh no wonder you went up in the

air," Johnny commented. "I dunno's he wanted to get you, Rube, but it's easy seen why he wanted that land."

"He hated me. He'd have liked to get me," Rube mused. "But he saw a chance to gyp me outa that land. Between the two he lost out. I had to go after him when I read that letter. Anyway, that's the end of a false alarm. I feel better it was the lightnin' though. I wasn't cut out for killin'."

Rube stalked away toward the camp. Mr. Ephraim B. Marks joined his range boss. Johnny told him what had happened.

"Seems like this thing they call the act of God, don't it?" Johnny finished. "It was kinda queer. They say lightnin' never strikes twice in the same place."

"Hm," Mr. Marks said reflectively. "I dunno about that, Johnny. You recollect this end of the barn was hit a while back. Well, the other day a feller come through here peddlin' lightnin' rods. He talked me into lettin' him put up a set. See that?"

Johnny looked. He hadn't noticed it before. A ten foot staff of twisted iron crowned the peak of the stable roof. From its base down the stable wall a copper wire led to the earth to the ground conductor.

"I expect Windy had his carcass close to that wire," Mr. Marks observed. "That's how come Rube was saved the trouble of shootin' it out with him." Suddenly he grunted aloud and pointed. "Damnation! That lightnin' rod feller never tied that wire to that rod in the ground at all! The lightnin' just poured out of the end of that wire, right into Wallace!"

HOME 'ROUND THE HORN

By Bill Adams

IT'S blowing up squally, it's piping like hell,
And the packet she rolls till she tinkles her bell.
Oh, I hope it may blow for a week at the least,
She's a Liverpool clipper and bound to the East.

Her foresail is reefed, and it bellies out full
To the westerly roaring like Barney's black bull.
Her six yellow topsails are straining and wet,
And high on the main a topgallantsail's set.

It's raining. It's hailing. And here comes the snow,
And her sea-booted skipper is up from below;
"Let her go as she is, sir," says he with a grin,
"Have all hands keep handy. Let no one turn in."

It's summer off Stiff, and her lifelines are tight.
There's a flickering gleam from her binnacle light,
And her sidelights are winking toward Liverpool town,
As we sweat up her halyards to "Blow the man down."

The chief mate looks into our half-deck. Says he,
"The drift ice is clinking all over the sea."
And the youngest apprentice is shivering and white
As she rollicks and rambles for home through the night.

Oh, there's no time at sea like the time you're bound home
When the decks are waist deep in the greeny white foam;
When she leaps and she lifts to the best of the squall
In December off Stiff—there's the best time of all.

THE JUNGLE ESCAPE SYNDICATE

By FREDERICK MOORE

Author of "The Killers of the Islands," "The Jungle Bandits," etc.

SOUNDS VERY BUSINESSLIKE, DOESN'T IT—THE JUNGLE ESCAPE SYNDICATE? WELL, IT WAS A BUSINESS FOR MEN, THERE IN THE STEAMING JUNGLES, TO RUN AN UNDERGROUND PASSAGE FOR ESCAPING CRIMINALS FROM THE JUSTICE OF THE CHINA SEAS

JUST another yard or so—there! That'll do!"

Pollard stopped short in his tracks as he heard the low gruff words filter through the damp jungle. It had rained a little that morning, and the steaming air was dank and heavy and carried the voice with amazing clarity—and this voice had a peculiar harshness of low vibration, and penetrated the foliage easily. The man spoke as one who had a gin-rasped throat.

"Lordy, but I'm lucky!" whispered Pollard. "Another minute, and I'd have been on that confounded bamboo bridge, and the creaks would have given me away."

The "bridge" was nothing but bamboo poles stretched over a deep marsh, supported by crossed bamboos driven into the mud. It was only a single line of poles, with vines as a handrail so a person could keep a balance when crossing. Pollard had heard the voice just in time—as one foot was ready to take the first step for the crossing.

Now he swung round to the damp and soft earthy soil of the path, where he could move in silence. Gently he put down the cluster of drinking coconuts which he had gathered far down the beach. He carried them in a crude net fashioned of rattans—but he cared nothing about drinking coconuts now.

That jungle, and the river near at hand, were not places where the voice of a white man was often heard. And as for natives, there were none within twenty miles. That particular spot in the jungle was always avoided by them, for they were convinced that evil spirits lurked in the greenery and the mangroves along the river there. They had seen evil spirits there by night. Pollard had attended to that himself. He wanted no spying natives about.

As for white men, there was little reason for them to be up that far in the wilderness river. When they were there, they did not want to get in among the mangroves and the marshy banks of the sullen and yellowish river. That particular spot was a place for white men to keep away from, which was the reason the place had been selected for Pollard's business. And men who had occasion to visit Pollard al-

ways announced themselves by a signal from the mouth of the river. If they failed to make the signal, and were caught probing about in the jungle, they might find the place unhealthy because of other things than crocodiles, fever or snakes.

Pushing aside the bushes and vines with infinite caution, Pollard began working his way toward the river. The brush was wet and hanging low. He had to be careful, and wet jungle is tricky for silent traveling. But Pollard was in no hurry, nor did he care how wet he got. He wanted a sight of the man he had heard speaking—and there must be two of them, or the speaker would not be uttering words of caution.

From his pocket Pollard took a green cloth and tied it over his face. It was really a mask, for there were holes for his eyes. This prevented his face from making an object in the green tangle when he reached a point where he could see somebody. The soft cloth cap on his head was green, and his brownish shirt was slashed with streaks of green paint. Here and there a spot of red or blue appeared on the buff background of his faded khaki riding trousers. His woolen puttees, wrapped about his legs as a protection against leeches, and lawyer vines, were dyed a dark shade of green. So Pollard was well equipped for moving about in lush jungle without being observed from any distance that mattered. Even if surprised, he could freeze where bushes gave him a background, and not be visible to a watcher fifty yards away. A field-glass of great power would not be able to pick him up among green vines and blossoming creepers.

It was a hundred yards or more to the river, and Pollard had to crawl nearly all the way. He made his road before him by pushing aside the vines, and then wormed through the holes. The heavy red earth of rotten vegetation stuck to him, and the yielding soil gave off stinking odors which almost stifled him. But that voice from the river bank would have dragged him over hot coals—for Pollard thought he recognized that voice.

Before long he could see the brassy sheen of the river as it smoothly rolled seaward under the blazing morning sun. The heat reflected from the river penetrated into the jungle now, through that barrier of green between him and the sleek surface which he could see through the tangled vines and the mangroves.

The river was blinding to the eye. Now he smelled the rankness of the muddy slush which washed through the roots of the mangroves and heard the wash of the river as it waved and fretted the great morass of roots and tidal mud. He knew that here he might run into a crocodile which had taken to the bank for a nap. That would be bad enough, but Pollard did not worry so much about the meeting; what did worry him was that the great reptile would be lying with snout toward the water ready to tumble off at the slightest alarm. That would mean a disturbance which might draw attention to where Pollard was working his way to the bank.

The ground began to slope away steeply, and when he got to the top of the rise, he was about ten feet above the water. He waited here a few minutes, hoping he would hear the voice again so he would get better bearings. There was no sign of anybody in the morass below him—just the churning mess of mud and water in the waving roots below. If men were anywhere in there, he knew they must be in a boat.

A peculiar crackling sound reached Pollard's ears. At first he thought it was somebody breaking through a rotten thicket. But when his nose picked up the smell of frying fish, he knew better. The boat in which the men were cooking was a little to the right, so it must have broken into a mud-channel, or bayou, and was away from the river. Hereabouts the bank of the river was broken with tiny inlets which made stagnant pools, overgrown and hidden under looping vines which grew overhead in almost solid mats.

Guided by that crackling from a frying-pan, Pollard twisted to make a course for it. His nose picked up a whiff of a cigar, fragrant and strong over the miasmic jungle smell. When he had made his swing to the left, he went on tunneling through the brush. And in a short time the creepers which heavily infested the tidal pool, sloped away from him, and those that ran down the bank gave him cover. He could see the boat now.

He gasped in amazement. "Great guns! That looks like a coast guard speedboat! And hiding away in here!"

Pollard could only make out bits of her hull and the sides of her low cabin-trunk, which decked her over almost to the stern. He could see some of her cabin ports, a foot or two above the hull line. She was about a thirty-footer, without masts or funnel, so that she could nose easily through the mess of vines, into which she

had been thrust and dragged. Her name plate was visible on her stem—*Camarines*—with her coast guard number. She was the type used for speed work from cutters or shore for chasing smugglers up rivers or into shoal bays and backwaters. She was built on the lines of a torpedo boat and driven by motors of high horsepower.

"Something skew-gee here," Pollard told himself. "If the man I heard speaking was Wolf Boden, what's he doing in a coast guard speeder? And what's the coast guard after in here anyway, unless there's been something gone wrong against me? It's ten to one there's a cutter outside somewhere, and she's got a line on my outfit, and has come blundering in here for a look around. But if the *Camarines* is from a cutter, what's Boden doing in her? By George! I've got it! Boden has made a haul, and has stolen this speeder! And that means he's made a big haul, if he took a chance on stealing government boats to make his getaway."

There was the clatter of a dish being thrown on a table, and the jangle of the pan dumped back on the gratings of the stove.

"Take it easy with the galley-gear," came the throaty voice from below in the cabin. "Want Pollard's gang down on us before we've hidden the stuff?"

"Aw, all I've heard for the last week is Pollard and his gang!" came a nasal voice of disgust. "Eat them fish and give me a rest from Pollard. I'm fed up with this scullion work."

"Just the same," objected the other, in the same gruff voice which Pollard had picked up first from the jungle, "we want to get our load buried without havin' a mob down on us. How do you know there ain't natives around, as well as some of Pollard's men?"

"Blast Pollard anyway!" but now the voice was lower.

"For you, it's Pollard or hang," said the other. "Don't be so damned sure you don't want Pollard. He's saved more'n one of your kind from the hangman."

"That's Boden, sure enough," decided Pollard. His body trembled and his breath came pantingly, for there could be no further doubt that Wolf Boden, the American bank robber who had been operating in the cities of the China Coast for some five years, was in the *Camarines*. Pollard knew that this could mean but one thing—Boden had made another of his daring and astounding raids and probably had a half a million in loot. And he intended to hide it somewhere in the jungle close at hand. And Pollard realized that his first surmise about the boat was correct, and that there was every reason for believing that Boden had stolen the *Camarines* for his escape.

"And he'll want me to give him help to get away," thought Pollard. "But he doesn't want any help from me until he's hidden his loot. Then he'll pretend he hasn't much cash, and come back later to get his pile."

There came the tingle of tinware, and the *pop* as a bottle of wine was opened. There was more conversation, but Pollard could not distinguish the words. The first sentence Pollard had heard in the jungle near the bridge had evidently been spoken while Boden was on deck and working the vessel deeper in among the vines.

For an hour or more Pollard lay still, listening. The sweat poured from his body and face, for the heat in that damp hole was grilling, and the sun was steadily rising and the mists of the morning which had slowly dissipated, still lingered in the brush, and steamed the air. But Pollard hung on. He wanted to see what the loot might be—and where it would be concealed.

Then the men in the *Camarines* came on deck. Pollard only had glimpses of them as they moved about, examining the brush ahead to see how much farther in they could drive the boat. But he made out Boden, a heavy-set man in a brown shirt and dungaree trousers, the latter evidently found in the *Camarines,* and used for jungle work now. He wore a blue navy "watch cap" which fitted over his big head like a skull cap, giving him freedom in poking about in the vines.

The man with Boden was unknown to Pollard. The stranger was young and slight, but at twenty yards, and seeing him only when he appeared for an instant through the basketry of mangrove shoots and the parasitic vines, Pollard had little chance to appraise Boden's companion.

The pair got the boat deeper into the tidal basin, and thus gained another ten yards or so away from Pollard. When they had reached a point which seemed the

limit of distance they could make with the boat, the young man began handing out objects to Boden, who remained ashore, thrashing around to make a small clear space. He had located an outcropping of rock and coral, which jutted up out of the mud and jungle. It was this reef-like ledge which held back the water of the bayou and built a sort of dam against the water, holding it in place there, and at the same time making a rise well above high water of river or mangrove swamp.

Boden was delving now and then in these rocks, piling them in some way, or making a hole. And when Boden made his first trip with what the younger man had handed out from the *Camarines,* Pollard knew that this was the place selected for concealment of the loot.

They were wooden cases, or small iron safes, which Boden was transferring—silver or gold coins, or both. In such cases Chinese banks kept money for their depositors or for themselves, under a safe deposit vault plan.

"He's made a big bank or government department haul," breathed Pollard. "I was right—he's hiding his loot, and then he'll look me up, and play his poor man game. He wants to hide, or get away for a year or two, and come back later for the stuff. In the meantime, he'll probably kill that young pal of his, and have the loot all for himself. All right! I'll be ready to deal with you, Mr. Boden, when you pull your weeper story about a small haul, and you can't afford to pay much for your hiding with me."

Pollard watched case after case laboriously packed ashore, and at last Boden went below in the *Camarines,* declaring that he was going to have a drink and a smoke. Presently the pair were on deck again, and now they labored to get the vessel back toward the river.

"What's this?" Pollard asked himself. "Is Boden going to work the boat back into the stream, and try to get away from here on his own hook? In case he tries it, I've inherited his loot."

But when they had worked the boat close to the river again, they both disappeared below. There came the sound of voices, and the two men dragged out a tarpaulin and covered the cockpit aft.

"We can't have it fill up with rain," said Boden. "May need it, after all. And we can't be sure Pollard's around this neck of the woods until we've made the signal to pick us up. And I guess we'll need more ammunition, at that. Step below again and hand out that big belt."

The young man slipped under the tarpaulin, and as if he had decided to go himself, Boden followed.

There came a dull and muffled report from under the tarpaulin. Pollard took it to be a backfire from the motor, thinking they had tried the engine before finally leaving the vessel. But in a minute he knew what had happened, for Boden's head and shoulders appeared from under the covering 'paulin. And, when he got on deck and threw the 'paulin back, the next move was to drag his companion up from the cockpit.

Boden had shot the man with him!

The robber dumped the body into the muddy water.

"I'll let the crocs finish the job, my boy," remarked Boden, and he went below out of sight.

"Time for me to get out of here," murmured Pollard. He swung around and began to crawl back to the trail near the bamboo bridge, following the underground tunnel he had made to get in sight of the boat. When he had gained the path he removed his green mask, now wet and dripping with perspiration.

He crossed the bamboo poles over the marsh with great care so the ends of the poles would not creak when he was in the center, and the poles were swayed under his weight.

Once over the marsh, he got into the narrow path, overhung with heavy leaves and vines, and ran as fast as he could go, now and then checked till he could push overhanging leaves out of the way.

For more than a mile he was close to the river, or, at least, close to the big marshes which ran in from the river past its banks. He could hear now and then the wash of the river along the banks as it swept through the mangrove roots and making a merry tune. The ground underfoot was treacherous and springy, sodden with water. The sun penetrated here only in tiny spots that made a pattern of brilliant freckles, and in this steaming atmosphere there were bright splotches of color—pendant and flaming blossoms of blue and red and purple from parasitic growths or the blooms of trailing vines.

He bore away from the river along a trail still so narrow that it could be found only by the feet—the bed of a stony rivulet, which ran through the thickest of jungle. Now he was on higher ground, and steadily he went up, but on a slight rise.

Finally he came to a narrow clearing,

and just ahead a high green barrier of vines apparently blocked his way. But Pollard did not halt as that green wall came into sight. He sprang for it and grappled with the vines as if he hoped to tear them down and out of his path. Instead of going through it, he went up, climbing swiftly as if on a ladder. And he was on a ladder, built under the vines, and overgrown by them.

He did not go to the top of the wall. He dove into it when some eight feet above the ground, and came out on a platform which was built along the inner walls of a great stockade. This raised platform was really the roofs of long buildings ranging along the stockade on all four sides. Under shelters at each corner on the roofs, were Chinese watching at loop-holes through the vines.

Pollard dropped down off the roof of the long house along the wall. Now he stood before a row of square houses, like a lot of shops in a bazaar. Some of the houses had bamboo awnings down, others were open to the inner square, and like verandas, made a comfortable shade in the glare of sun which struck into this small walled town. For on all four sides of the great square, more than two hundred yards wide, were these same verandas, cut into rooms with walls of bamboo. And here and there were figures lying on matting, or sitting in rude reclining chairs made of matting, or reading in hammocks slung between the uprights and the outer walls. It had all the appearance of an old native communal village and fortress combined, hidden and overgrown by jungle, and now reclaimed for this curious and mysterious colony buried in a thick jungle which extended for miles in all directions, with jungled hills rising far in the distance away from the sea.

Pollard came down a ladder formed by projections sticking out from the stanchion of a corner house. And as he struck the sandy ground before this "house" he called cautiously and pushed in behind the lattice which dropped from the eaves. "Nash! Oh, Nash!" His voice was vibrant with suppressed excitement.

"What's up?" came a voice from the deep shadows. Then an inner door swung open on crude rattan hinges, and a young man was shown in a bright light which came from some tiny window up in the roof. He wore knee-length white trousers which had been cut off. His calves were bare and his slipper-shod feet were without stockings. He wore a sleeveless undershirt, and one side of his face was covered with white soap lather, the other cheek being freshly shaven. He held a razor in one hand.

"There's a coast guard speed boat in the jungle down near the bamboo bridge."

Nash's mouth opened, his shaven cheek paled a little, and his lower lip trembled. His brown and freckled arms, covered with tattooing of that spidery and lace-like quality of the Japanese artist with the needles, lifted. He threw his razor on a bunk and made a clawing motion toward his face, with open fingers. "They—they've come for me, have they?" he asked in hushed tones.

"No, not you, Nash," said Pollard. "Brace up! Nothing to get jumpy about, so far as you're concerned."

Nash showed relief. "You gave me the devil of a turn," he grumbled. "But what if it's you they're after? That'll be as bad for me."

"I thought at first it was a patrol from a coast guard cutter," went on Pollard, as he dropped into a canvas chair. "But I found out it's not the coast guard at all. We've got to keep it still from the others, though, or they'll be jumpy, too."

"Then who is it?" asked Nash eagerly. "Some of the boys that want a hide-away until the clatter about some job has blown over?"

"You've got it," said Pollard. "The man's Wolf Boden." He pronounced the last sentence with something akin to exultation, and finished it with a low laugh.

"Wolf Boden!" whispered Nash, as if the name was something that would not bear repeating aloud. As it was, the men talked in their habitual low tones, knowing that there were no rooms occupied within fifty feet of them on either side.

"That's what I said."

Nash laid a hand on Pollard's shoulder. "Why, man," he whispered, "you know that means a big haul! Wolf Boden never bothers with a small job. It's a bank or something as fat. And that means a big

percentage to you, if he wants to hide away here. And he wouldn't be in the river unless he wanted to hide away in the undergroun! escape."

"Oh, I'm not sure," said Pollard warily. "He may not have turned a job at all, but may be on the run from the police for some old job. There's a pretty good reward for him, and you know he has to hunt cover every now and then anyway—as a matter of fact, he's under cover most of the time, and can only operate because the police have no good description of him."

"But you've met him," protested Nash. "At least, you must know him, or you wouldn't recognize him in the jungle."

"I only know him by sight," said Pollard. "He wouldn't know me."

"But what the devil's he doing with a coast guard boat?" asked Nash.

"He stole it to make his getaway to this place, that's all I can see in it," said Pollard. "Of course, it gave me a jolt. We never can tell when some chap who's used this hide-out won't bargain or squeal to the secret service to tell where we are in exchange for a light sentence. The police know the underground is working, that's sure. What chance has a man got to escape with loot from a China Coast port, and get very far, without some organized help? Not a chance! Every new port is a chance that you'll be grabbed. A man can't even stay at sea all the time, if he's got his own boat."

"I know how that is," admitted Nash. "But that's why this place pays so well. But when a man gets in a tight place, and has the cash, he'll put up a lot of money to keep his neck from being stretched."

Pollard shivered. "Lay off that talk," he objected. "You know it's nothing to say around me—and for yourself, you're in the same jamb I am. Neither of us has any reason for making any cracks like that."

"You told me not to get jumpy," said Nash, picking up his razor and resuming his shaving. "It's a good thing for you to look out for yourself."

"Say, you know Boden, don't you?"

"Sure, I know him," said Nash, staring into the mirror on the bamboo wall. "I was in Bilibid two years ago when he killed two guards and got away. He was out in the chain-gang, tearing down the city wall near the Parian Gate. I was in the gang at the time. I'll say he had things planned well, and plenty of help. And I'll bet that if he's made a good haul this time, he'll head away for London or the States. He told me more than once that he'd get out of these waters when he mopped up the next time. He's had enough of it out here—too hard to hide and too hard to get away. A man's a fool to try our game out in the Far East, where everybody knows everybody else. It's a fool idea, to play the crook here, when it's better breaks in what they call civilization. If I can get out, I'm done. And that cabin cruiser speed boat sounds good to me. I wish Boden'd take me along."

"Don't be a fool," warned Pollard. "You're safe enough here with me until things simmer down, and it costs you nothing. No man could get far with that boat Boden's got. If he tried to run into a port with it, he'd be grabbed. And he can't sail for San Francisco with a racing boat, that's a cinch. If he's got any sense, he'll lie doggo here long enough to let things simmer down, and let the *secretos* think he's got away long ago."

"Oh, he'll be showing up all right," said Nash, as he wiped his razor. "Leave it to Boden."

"Then you'd better get your guns on, and be ready to drop down to the palm tree and collect his entrance fee," said Pollard. "I'm going to get out of this wet jungle rig."

"I'll watch for the signal," said Nash.

Pollard left the room for the adjoining one, by stepping out under the lifted awning. And as he went, he said to himself without moving his lips. "I'll bet a thousand to one that Nash and Boden are in together—old pals. That's why Boden's coming here for the first time. I'll have to watch that pair, or they'll turn a trick on me. Boden's a bad actor, and he'll put me out of the way just as he put that chap with him into the swamp. But I wasn't born yesterday, Mr. Boden. And if I don't miss my guess, Nash'll have a glint in his eye before long that tells me he also knows about what's buried down in the jungle. That crack about Boden taking him along in the speed boat may turn out as he said, and I'll bet Boden isn't here a week before Nash acts as if he won't need me much longer. But they'll need blue chips to play in this poker game, I'll tell 'em that."

II

DOWN near the mouth of the river a gigantic nipa palm rose from the lower brush of the swamp jungle and thrust its mop-head of fronds a hundred feet or more into the sky line. It dominated the flats and marshes which made the coast when viewed from seaward resemble a great garden overflowed by the sea. This tall tree was a marker by day for skippers passing, and whenever they happened to get ahead in a landfall, they sheered off and laid a course to keep well off the land.

It was a dangerous spot on a dangerous coast, for new land was being born out of the sea-slime, and the reddish apron of water which the river pushed into the sea was building bars of mud and silt and even small schooners might go aground anywhere even though the charts showed safe depths for their drafts.

It was a place of heavy morning fogs which obliterated land and sea for hours each day with woolly mists which rose from swamps and river and all the terrible tangles of wide stretches of mangroves growing in water. They rolled out to seaward like poisonous gases, and clung to the surface of the sea until dissipated by the sun. But above them always rode that mop-head of a palm, as if the Creator had set his own warning beacon against reefs, shifting mud banks, treacherous shoals, the fevers which oozed from a new world being born. The rank odors of tidal mud and rotten vegetation rolled far out to sea on hot breezes, except when the rains of the northwest monsoon swept the miasmic flats clean.

The wildest of the Dyaks kept away from the lower reaches of the river, except now and then when a raft or a canoe came down on the current with a freshet. Those natives far back in the purplish hills did their trading more than twenty miles away around a bend in the coast, traveling by a smaller river. For the place of the big palm was infested with crawling things which belonged on either land or water, and in the coverts of the mangroves they took shelter from the blazing sun which stewed the mud into the stinking soup from which new land is made. The whole place was to be avoided—except for those who wished to hide. So it was inhabited by reptiles just beginning to have legs, and reptiles with legs who had to flee back from a civilization with which they found themselves at war.

The tall nipa was Pollard's signal station. He could see it from the wall of his jungle stockade. Only himself and Nash were ever allowed up on the roofs of the long houses inside the walls, except for the Chinese watchers. Thus the "guests" at the stockade had no idea of where they were, and even when they left the place, would not be able to guide any person back again. If they returned a second time, they came under the same conditions of their first arrival, with no knowledge of the distance or the trail or the bearings of the spot from the big tree.

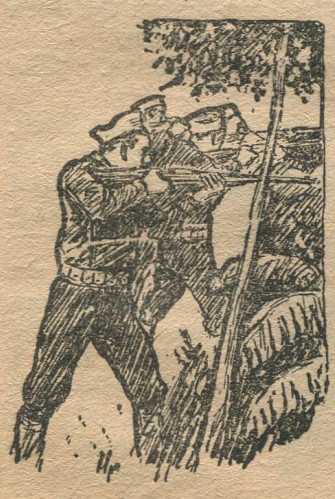
Halyards of fine wire ran to the top of the tree. From them Pollard could make a signal to call or warn a vessel in his service, or persons seeking admission to his secret lair could signal a request to have a guide sent for them. But these signals were not made with flags; combinations of palm fronds were used in a secret code. A single frond run up in such a way that it drooped down from the mop-head, meant a guest was waiting at the base of the tree, knew and was willing to meet the terms of admittance, and therefore was a member of the vast "secret underground escape" which had been built by white men who found it necessary to escape from the talons of the secret service. First, only a small group used the plan, one in hiding aiding others; the number in the combination grew, and the system which had originally been adapted from native methods, widened its clients until it took in a great band of criminals operating against the laws of various countries, from Vladivostok to Aden. If a man could pay his way, he could drop out of sight for as long as he wished to remain hidden; if he escaped from prison, he had a refuge; if he needed two or three men to help him for a job in some port where he was a stranger, he could find the men he wanted at Pollard's place. And the system had its own skippers in its employ, as well as others who could pick up a fat fee now and then by providing safe and secret transportation to a desired destination. It had been in operation as a system long before Pollard entered its employ—and the system was assured against betrayal by the simple plan of hiring only men for its service at the secret station who were wanted for murder. It meant that a man took special pains in handling matters when his own neck got noosed if he failed to safeguard all concerned.

Pollard and Nash had just finished a tiffin when the Chinese on lookout at the

station behind the wall which commanded a view of the nipa tree, came down off the roof, and bowing respectfully as he stood under the low eaves, reported: "Have got —can do. One time." He held up a yellow finger which indicated that one palm frond was drooping limply from the mop-head of the nipa tree.

"All right," said Pollard curtly, and the Chinese went up the ladder. Pollard was now dressed in clean white trousers, a white silk shirt, white shoes and stockings, and a belt from which swung a half-holstered automatic pistol on either hip. His big white sun-helmet rested on the floor beside his chair. Before him on the white cloth of the little table was a glass of yellowish wine, flanked by silver and china and a tall pitcher of fruited water. Underfoot was native matting, and the two men sat in reclining chairs fashioned from bamboo frames and rattan cane backs.

Nash was in striking contrast to the master of the underground station. He was now clad in the jungle suit with its green paint, and green-dyed puttees. Beside him was the green cloth cap, and on it the green cloth which was used as a mask to conceal his face when peering out from a jungle covert. He, too, wore a pair of automatics; a rifle of the repeater type lay on the floor by his cap, with a strap along the barrel from the stock, so it could be slung over his shoulder if necessary. A haversack with shoulder straps was ready at hand; it contained various things he might need, from a flashlight for use in dark jungle, to rockets which when fired shot a line of smoke into the air in a signal for help. There were hand grenades in the haversack, also, and glass balls protected against breakage until needed for use. These latter contained poison gas against any attacking party. A whistle hung from his belt, and packets of emergency rations, in case he got cut off from the stockade and had to remain hidden in the jungle for a couple of days.



"That's Boden's signal," said Pollard, as the Chinese disappeared aloft. "But take the usual precautions with him, and don't start him on his way here until the first runner gets back to you. He may kick about having his eyes bandaged, but he's got to go through with it if he gets here. Move him around in circles several times with the bandage on, and take him over the bamboo bridge at least five times, so he won't be able to swear there's not actually five bridges to cross. Don't be in any particular hurry, so he'll get the impression that it's about ten times the distance from the tree to the stockade. We've got to handle this customer with care—and it's up to you to make a good, safe job of it."

"You leave it to me, Chief," said Nash, as he rose and picked up his equipment. "I know Boden's a bad actor, and I'll take no chances with him."

"He may kick against giving up all his guns, but it's got to be done before you start with him. Send 'em along with the first runner back, and don't take any bluff that he wants to get in at anything under the regular rate. One thousand dollars in cash must be in my hands before he starts from the tree; and that thousand belongs to us, whether he stays one week or the whole ten that's covered by the thousand. And he can't come over this wall with a single weapon on him. Take pains to see that he has no small pistols in secret holsters, or that he hasn't got a derringer under his arm. He'll carry out my orders, or you can leave him at the tree, and he can go back to his speedboat. But don't say a word about the boat—we don't want him to know that we have any hint of how he got here. I want to test him on how good he is on telling the truth."

"I've got it," replied Nash. "I'll make the proper signal if anything goes wrong."

He stepped outside and called out a few words in a native tongue. Two Malays, clad only in breech-cloth, and wearing parangs in bamboo sheaths, came trotting across the enclosed square. These men, being dressed as jungle natives were always used to make the first contact with arriving men at the foot of the big tree. In case they walked into any trap, they could easily claim that they were simply hunting in the jungle. Their families were held as hostages, so there was little chance that they would reveal the hiding place of the underground station.

Nash climbed to the roof and slipped through the vines to the ladder of the outer wall, followed by the Malays. A third native joined them in a few minutes. This was the runner who would return first,

bearing the cash and the weapons of Boden, ahead of Nash and the two Malays acting as guard for Nash and escort for the new guest.

As the party bound for the tree disappeared, there was considerable activity among the men loafing under the veranda-like roofs of the stockade. The hidden white men stopped their card games, or ceased their reading, to discuss who the new arrival might be. There was always a chance that a signal for a new guest might mean a secret service trap, or that the coast guard had learned from some traitor the secret signals. Under their terms of admission to the retreat, they might at any time be armed and required to fight in defense of the place—or to make a running fight through the jungle. So the fact that a new arrival was at the tree always made something of a stir in the colony, but they never asked questions. In this case, however, the word had leaked, and the whole place knew that Wolf Boden was asking for admittance. And when Wolf Boden had to abandon his own cleverness in keeping out of the hands of the police, it could have but one meaning for that colony of crafty men—Boden was evidently hard pressed, or he had made a haul big enough so that he was ready to retire from his profession, and get out of the Far East for good.

But Nash was probably the most excited of the men in the stockade colony. Knowing Boden, Pollard's first officer had hopes that the noted robber might want some man to go with him in the speed boat, and that a line of retreat had already been planned by Boden on his own hook. Nash knew that Boden would not want to operate alone in case he had his own escape planned. And Nash was heartily tired of being cooped up in the jungle stockade, for he had been there months already, and besides, his cash was running low, and he was enabled to remain at the place only by serving Pollard as an employee of the system. As he was slowly coming to a point where he served for his board and quarters, he was afraid of eventually becoming a slave of the system and bound to stay in the stockade because he had no funds to pay for an escape by ship, and no money to make a fresh start in a strange port even if he reached it. He had no desire to leave for the present, for the murder which he had committed was still a live case on the police records of various cities. But he would take a chance to go with Boden—if Boden wanted to go and would take him on.

So as he pushed through the leafy trail, Nash went with more eagerness than he had ever met a stranger outside the walls. One Malay went ahead, one behind, and the runner in the rear, ready to flee back on the slightest warning that the party was running into something which it did not expect to meet. And vigilance was never relaxed, going from or returning to the stockade, the trips always being made with the knowledge that at any time the unexpected might happen.

In due time they reached the edge of an open place in the brush. In the center of this small clearing the great palm bole stood, and standing at its base, smoking a cigar, was the figure of a man. He wore dirty dungarees, a brown shirt, and a hat of dark brown straw made of palm fibres. Nash recognized Boden at once.

"Hello, Boden," called Nash cautiously from his leafy hiding place.

"Hello yourself," said Boden, a hand dropping to a holster.

"Take off your guns, and I'll send a man out for 'em," continued Nash.

"A man has no need of guns in this place," answered Boden, the formula required. He unbuckled his holster and threw it on the ground.

"The ticket is one thousand dollars," went on Nash.

"I see you—and I meet the thousand," replied Boden. He threw a packet to the ground after the pistols and belt.

The native runner darted out of the brush, picked up the package and belt, and ran back to Nash, who immediately dispatched him back to Pollard.

Then Nash walked out across the open spot and shook hands with Boden.

"Well, well!" exclaimed Boden. "I'm sure glad to find you here!"

"We all show up in time," grinned Nash. "Don't see how you've managed to get along without us."

"I could get along without you now," said Boden. "But I want a rest. Not so bad, when a man can slip away and take a lay off without having to worry about waking up with a *secreto* at the door."

"Then you'll only stay with us a few weeks?" asked Nash.

"I haven't made any particular plans. Say, you ain't in full charge, are you?"

"No. I'm only the next to the boss."

"Who's in charge?"

"Chap named Pollard."

Boden shook his head. "I don't know any Pollard."

"He's wanted for a murder a couple of years back, and he's satisfied to remain doggo for another couple of years, I'd say. He's all right, too—he knows the ropes, and he plays fair with a man. Take my word for it, Boden, Pollard's the real stuff."

"So I've heard," said Boden. "He's done mighty well. I hear he ain't lost a man since he took over this job."

"So far as we know, that's right. Now and then a man gets picked up after he leaves his ship, but that's not our fault—we get him through, and after that he's on his own."

"How many you got here now?" asked Boden.

"We don't give that out."

"Say, did you hear any firin' this mornin'?" asked Boden. "I'm a little nervous—I thought I heard a shot myself, about the time I was comin' up the river."

Nash grinned again good naturedly. "We don't give out such things, either. It's just as well that nobody knows just how far we are from the river, you know."

Boden laughed. "You're pretty keen, at that," he admitted. "I guess I'll be safe enough here."

"I'll have to make sure you've got no more weapons on you," said Nash, and then he carried out his instructions from Pollard carefully. Boden assented to all the conditions cheerfully.

"Why can't we be goin'?" he asked.

"All right. We can start now. You'll have to follow a native, and hold a piece of rattan, and we'll put the bandage on when we're ready."

The nearest Malay came forward and handed the end of a long piece of rattan to Boden, and then disappeared in the jungle. Boden followed, keeping the rattan slightly taut, the other Malay fell in behind, and Nash brought up the rear. The party by that time was hidden in the solid-appearing hanging leaves of the jungle, and pushed on for the stockade, Boden at times unable to see his leader only ten feet ahead.

Before they reached the bamboo bridge Boden submitted to having the bandage put over his eyes, and they proceeded across it, Boden not seeing it before he put foot on the bamboo poles. They circled and came back to the bridge, where Nash waited; after another crossing, they zigzagged on another course, and again crossed the bridge, and this was continued until Boden was under the impression that several bridges had been crossed on the way. By the time they reached the stockade, Boden had no idea of the distance or direction of his journey.

III

"HOW do you do, Mr. Boden," said Pollard, as he stood in his room behind awnings of matting which had been dropped as Boden entered.

"You're Mr. Pollard, I reckon," said Boden, squinting into the dim light. His face was red from his climb and trudge, his hat was in his hand, and his black hair was matted down on his head, reeking with sweat. His shirt was also wet and clinging to his shoulders, and he was breathing heavily.

"That's right," replied Pollard. He waved a hand to a cane chair. "Sit down and have a drink. It's a pretty hard tug from the tree."

Boden sat down before a small table, throwing his hat on the matting. "You're deeper in than I expected you'd be. Whew! That jungle's like a steam bath." He grabbed up his hat and began fanning himself, his black eyes taking in everything carefully, even the automatics which Pollard wore.

Nash and the natives left at a nod from Pollard, who then clapped his hands and sat down. A Chinese came from an inner room with a tall pitcher full of yellow liquid, and laid glasses before the two men. Then he brought a bottle. There was nothing extraordinary about this Chinese servant, except that he wore a big native parang strapped to his hip, sheathed with flat bamboo and wrapped with colored strings. This man was Pollard's personal servant—and his bodyguard.

"It's pretty hard to get in, yes," said Pollard, as he sat down opposite Boden. "But you'll be comfortable enough here."

"From what I've seen of it, I'd say you've got some bull-pen. Of course, I've heard a good deal of it from some of my friends, but I never got it into my head you had such a big place. How many—visitors—you got?"

"We have from ten to twenty, as the usual thing. We're a little below the average now. Twelve, I think."

Boden filled his glass with the yellow liquid and spiked it from the bottle. He drank feverishly, and refilled his glass.

"How long do you intend to stay with us?"

"Don't know yet. I was thinkin' I'd take a little trip to Europe, if I could make it that way. Not that I've got a lot of jack, but I'm tired of this climate, and my heart's goin' bad. If I could mosey along out Suez way, say. How far can you run me?"

"To Aden would be about the best I could do, unless you're in a position to charter a schooner to go beyond. That'll be expensive, of course."

"I can stand a little expense—if it's in reason," said Boden, wiping his mouth. "Of course, I don't intend to give up all I've got if I use this underground."

Pollard laughed. "They generally arrive with that idea," he said. "Don't worry on that score. Rates are the same for everybody, unless they want a special passenger service by private schooner. That's a matter of bargaining with the skipper, and we only act as agent in the matter. Your thousand dollars will keep you here ten weeks, and at the end of that time, if you don't want to pay another thousand, you are entitled to a choice of three ports by the first available boat. If we have to wait for the boat, it costs you nothing to wait. But your thousand is ours, as you know, if you happen to want a boat that leaves tomorrow. There's no boat tomorrow—I simply mention it so you'll know what you're buying."

"How much does the skipper who takes us know about what we're wanted for?"

"He knows enough to know what risk he takes, but as he doesn't get paid unless he puts our men where we send 'em, he's mighty careful that his passengers are not taken off by the police."

"Well, what if I happened to kill a man up in Manila—not that I have, but just as an example—does the skipper take my shirt away from me after he gets me aboard?"

"The rate is the same, no matter what the crime is. If the skipper wants to do business with us, and collect, he's got to send back, or bring his next trip, a clearance from you that you landed according to contract."

"Yes, that's all right—I've been told that much. But what if there's a reward? A good fat sum. In that case, what's to prevent the skipper from landing us, getting his clearance to collect from you, and then tipping the cops to pick us up—and collect his reward?"

"Sounds nice," said Pollard with a smile.

"But this game has been working quite a long time. It means lots of money for the skipper to play along with us. They generally own their boats, or have shares in 'em—but our safety lies in the fact that we've got our skippers in such a position that they can't squeal. We pick up a good deal of inside information—and some of it is of a kind that would make it mighty expensive for 'em to go after rewards, no matter how big."

"I reckon you've got the system down pretty good," admitted Boden. "When Jerry gave me my tickets for you in Manila, I could see the thing was pretty well organized. So as all I want to do is lay low for a while and get out of these waters, I think you'll be able to fix me up."

"Where was the job?" asked Pollard.

"Manila."

"And you had to kill a man?"

"Well, there was a man killed. I didn't do it. Had a young chap in with me, and he got nervous, and let the watchman have a pill through the back. Of course, I'm in as bad as he is, and I'll swing if they get me."

"What's become of him?"

"I dropped him on the way down."

"Did he know where you were bound for?"

"He had a suspicion. But he wanted to go on his own, and when we got in close to land one night, he decided to get ashore, so I ran in with him. He took his share with him. We didn't get what we looked to collect. Expected to mop up a good pile, but the vaults fooled us—and that fool had to shoot the watchman and break up the whole plan."

"Bank job?"

"You might call it that, yes. Of course, you'll probably have the newspapers before I'm out of here, so there's no good my trying to string you. But the newspapers are off their trolley—they said we got half a million in paper and gold, but that's a joke. I guess the men in control decided to clean up a little themselves, when they found there'd been a robbery,

and they cleaned the vaults themselves and blamed it on me. I wish I had all the money I've been down in the newspapers as gettin'. I'd have retired a long time ago, I tell you."

"Of course, we all know that there isn't the money in our game that the newspapers say," agreed Pollard. "Only the big winners reach us—we couldn't run the system with a lot of pikers, and that means the successful ones come this way."

"Seems kind of tough on a man to have to give up his guns. Seems as if you've got an awful bulge on us."

"Mr. Boden, you'd want the bulge on the people who come here, if you had charge of this station."

"Maybe I would, at that."

"You wouldn't last very long if you didn't have things your own way. Our guests are gentlemen accustomed to use weapons for getting their own way. I have to deal with everybody with that fact in mind."

"No, you can't have 'em takin' charge of the place."

"And more than that—they might demand rebates on what they've paid when they're ready to leave. And they might want to leave before we're ready to have 'em go, and that would break up the business. But we've been successful—our people come back to us right along, and we couldn't have that reputation if we didn't play square."

"Ever had much trouble?" asked Boden.

"One or two tried a little game, with guns they smuggled in. It didn't prove to be a healthy business. We conduct a graveyard back in the jungle in connection with this resort—and we provide a complete burial service, with prayers."

"Gosh!" said Boden, with a laugh. "Don't scare me! I ain't huntin' trouble!"

"Oh, my remarks are not personal, Mr. Boden. When a man comes here, we take it for granted that he's had trouble enough for a time outside, and wants to leave trouble behind. That's what we sell—peace, comfort, safety, and time to lay new plans. We are also entitled to peace, comfort and safety, and when a man starts for this place, he knows fairly well what it's going to cost."

"I didn't come without lookin' into the matter, you can bet. It's a way I have. But what I want to know is this: what if one of your Chinks takes it into his head to skip out, and sell the government information on how to git here?"

"No chance of that. All the men on regular duty here have either escaped the gallows by getting away from prison, or they're wanted. As for myself, I don't fancy being hanged."

"You in deep as that?" asked Boden, a trifle surprised.

"I'm in deep enough."

"Well, of course, you have to look out for things, or you'd be in somethin' of a jamb."

"We didn't sight any vessels for the last week or so," said Pollard. "How did you come to drop down to this part of the coast?"

Boden hesitated a moment, as if considering just how far he should go, or how he should frame his story. Pollard realized that the hesitation was probably part of the game, and that Boden had it all carefully planned—leaving out what happened that morning in the jungle.

"I had a coast guard patrol boat staked out when I pulled the job," began Boden. "She's the *Camarines*—good for fifty miles an hour, and her tanks full of gas. I ran up this morning under cover of the fog."

Pollard opened his eyes wide in surprise. "Got your own boat, eh? That's mighty good! Then nobody knows you came here at all."

Boden shook his head in confirmation. "All on my own. Say, you could use that speed boat. She runs on low as quiet as a shark—but when you open her up—she flies. You'd find her handy for your business—or a quick run if you wanted to get out of here. Why, in a night you could do as much distance as a schooner would make in a week."

"Where is she?"

"Tucked away in the mangroves. I'll trade her in to you on my account, cheap. She'll outspeed any government craft—and a torpedo boat couldn't catch her."

"All right, I'll have a look at her later, and we may make a deal."

"How soon can you have a schooner pick me up?"

"In a couple of weeks. Captain Peaseley of the *Raja* can pick you up about then, if I can get word to him in time. It may mean a month."

"Old Jed Peaseley! Why, he's as straight as a string!"

"Don't you be so sure," said Pollard with a grin. "The old man has been in more than one smuggling game, and we've got the goods on him. He does about as we say—for a fee, of course, because we play fair as long as anybody we use plays fair."

"Well, it's a new one to me on Peaseley. I didn't think he'd steal a nickel—or go in on shady work."

"That's what the government thinks, but if we should open up on him, he'd be in a mighty hard jamb, and he knows it."

"That's good enough for me," said Boden. "I'll want him to drop me in Aden—or Colombo. And if his price ain't too steep, I may want him to go a bit further. Java would do in a pinch—I've got some friends there. I've thought I could make it in the *Camarines,* but I've got too much sense to be caught with a government speedboat around a Dutch coast. They're pretty hard with the probe in such cases—and they'd probably know all about me by the time I got there, if they don't know now. I did well enough to strike here, runnin' by night, and loafin' it easy by day."

"You'd be foolish to try to make Java. Now I want to say a few words more in the way of advice while you're here. You know Mr. Nash, don't you? That is, before you met him at the tree?"

"Yes, I knew Nash in Shanghai—not very well. Why?"

"He has no weapons except when he starts out to pick up a man at the tree. And it's against the rules to talk with him unless I'm present. That goes for anybody in the employ of the place. You can talk to anybody else—but anything said to the employees outside of the regular routine, may get them in serious trouble. That's a general rule, and everybody understands it."

"That won't work any hardship on me," said Boden. "I don't intend to break any rules, and as for Nash, I'm smart enough to run things on my own. I don't want Nash—or anybody else, to string along with me when I leave."

"All right," said Pollard. "Now we'll have supper as soon as you've had a wash-up, and we'll give you a fresh suit and have your room ready. I'll see about getting word away to Captain Peaseley as soon as possible, and I'll run up a call signal for the boat that passes within a few days."

Boden signed the book of rules, and then followed the Chinese servant away to where a crude shower provided bathing facilities.

IV

JUST at daylight, Nash came scratching at the bamboo awning which enclosed Pollard's bedroom. The light was still poor under the eaves, but Nash saw a gigantic silhouette rise from the floor like a dense shadow appearing on the screen of a magic lantern. It was the Chinese bodyguard, inside, and rising from his mats to interpose himself between his master and the visitor.

"Nash comes," said the young man quietly.

There was the soft patter of bare feet over a matted floor and the silhouette disappeared into the inner chamber. The creaking of a bed announced to Nash that Pollard was getting up in response to the summons of the servant.

"Come in, Nash," called Pollard, and the Chinese hastened to lift the awning.

Nash, a cord slung over his neck with a field glass, and wearing his short white trousers and a cotton singlet, went in and found Pollard sitting on his cot, in pajamas, rubbing his eyes. The Chinese was boring a hole in a drinking coconut for his master.

"Schooner about two miles off—it's the *Raja* right enough," reported Nash.

Pollard yawned. "So Cap'n Peaseley has got here at last," he said. "How many days is it since Boden came?" He turned and glanced at a Dutch calendar on the wall, where the light filtered down through a dead-light in the roof.

"This makes the forty-second day," said Nash.

"So it is. Better call Mr. Boden, so we can get away while the fog is heavy. How are the sails of the *Raja* trimmed?"

"Reefed foresail, and one jib."

"Good! That means the coast is clear, and everything is all right. But watch that the *Raja* doesn't change that—she may see something sneaking alongshore as the fog lifts, and we've got to keep close watch that she doesn't change a warning with her sails. Better send a runner to put up the answering signal at the tree."

"All right."

"Rout the cook out and have him get an early breakfast for us."

"You'll want me along with Boden?"

"No, I'll take him alone. I've bought his speedboat, you know, and we'll be able to make a quick trip. No more of this

waiting for boats to send dinghy's ashore. I'll have Boden aboard the *Raja* in no time after we clear the river—and I'll be back a lot quicker. How's the wind?"

"Light breezes, at sea. The *Raja's* just standing off and on."

"Fine. Well, call Boden, and tell him to be ready without delay. We don't want to lose the river fog, and the wider the fog-sheet out beyond the mouth of the river, the less distance we'll have to run in the clear. I suppose old Peaseley'll come in a bit closer, as he'll expect to send a boat for us. He'll think the coast guard is down on him when he sees us coming at a fifty-mile clip in the *Camarines,"* and Pollard laughed at the idea of a scared skipper in the *Raja* that morning.

"Then I'll be in charge when you go."

"Yes. When you come back, you'll get your guns."

Nash nodded and withdrew, hastening across the open square to summon Boden with the news that he would be "checking out" and there was no time to be lost.

Pollard, with the two Malays, was waiting on the roof when Boden hurried across the inner square after a hasty breakfast. The big fellow was elated that at last the *Raja* was off shore.

"You certainly did well," he told Pollard. "I've had a good rest, but I'm fed up on this place, to tell the truth."

"Sorry to lose you, at that, Boden," said Pollard. "You see we don't try to stretch things—if I'd delayed and held you another ten weeks when your time was out, it'd have been money in our pocket. But I did the best I could, and you'll find old Peaseley a careful skipper."

Boden eyed one of the Malays, who carried the pistol belt and the pair of automatics belonging to him. "When do I get my guns back?"

"You can have 'em before you go aboard the *Raja.* That's the rule. We don't put a man on a ship without his weapons."

"Suits me," said Boden.

Pollard lifted his hand in signal, and the first Malay went through the hole in the wall through the vines. Boden was next, then the second Malay, and Pollard bringing up the rear.

Before they were in sight of the bamboo bridge, Boden's eyes were bandaged, and he went through the roundabout march which confused him as to the route from the stockade. The *Camarines* had been taken from her tidal basin and was in a new hiding place on the river since Pollard had arranged to take her in place of cash for the expenses in the *Raja,* which Pollard himself would pay to the skipper of the schooner. So the party did not go to the signal tree to reach the river, but shortened the trip considerably.

They got the vessel into the stream and the Malays were dismissed and sent back. The river was bathed in heavy mists which floated into the jungle, and there was perfect concealment for the boat. Pollard opened her up on a low speed and, guided by the noise of the ripples through the mangroves on the bank, kept her in clear water with just enough speed for good steerage way in the current which swept them down stream.

The fog thinned out as they went over the bar at the mouth of the river, and by standing up in the cock-pit astern, Pollard could see over the low-hanging mists which reached to seaward, the boat still invisible to any observer outside.

"There's the *Raja,"* said Pollard, pointing to seaward. She was only a mile out, still with reefed foresail and jib. "We're safe."

Boden stood up and scanned the schooner. "Let's go."

Pollard gave the engine a full supply of gas, and the head of the *Camarines* reared up in a lurch, her stern squatted, and she fairly leaped forward, leaving a great smother of spume behind her as she shot out of the low fog like a meteor from some invisible depth of the universe.

At once there were signs of excitement and alarm aboard the *Raja.* The reef came out of her foresail, her mainsail ran up, and she went on a tack to give her every ounce of breeze that she could pick up—she sought to flee from what she had recognized as a government vessel.

Pollard laughed, and stood up, waving his arms in semaphore signals. He could see a figure in white on the quarterdeck scanning the *Camarines* with a glass, and the helm was put over to bring the schooner up into the wind again.

"I knew I'd give the old Bluenose a

scare," laughed Pollard. "Only trouble is, the old fool may make us chase him and go alongside before I can convince him we're safe. He probably thinks we've all been captured, and that he'll be caught in the game."

"We can catch him all right, don't worry," said Boden.

"This old girl certainly can get up and walk," agreed Pollard. "Listen to her hum!"

"You've got the right equipment for your work, right enough, with this outfit," said Boden. "I'm sorry I let you have her at such a bargain."

"Oh, you made a good deal at that," said Pollard. "If you had to dicker with Cap'n Peaseley, you'd find yourself giving up a stiffer price than I'll be able to work him for what you want."

"I should think you'd make your transfers to ships by night, under cover of dark," said Boden.

Pollard shook his head. "No, we found it not so good. If there's a coast guard cutter around, and she sees a schooner in the evening, the cutter's likely to keep tabs on her. And if it's moonlight, it's worse than daylight for us. We can't be sure there isn't some boat in close to the land, hidden by a background of black jungle, watching us run around on a moonlit sea. But by daylight we can be certain we're not watched. If we find anything's around that's suspicious, we don't attempt to get to our ship till all possible chance of danger is over. The schooner simply heads away, and comes back three days later for another try. If she can't come back safely on that third day, she's not due until three days later again. That system has thrown everything off the track so far. The schooner looks things over for us, and by her sails we know the coast is clear."

"You've certainly got it down fine," said Boden.

"It's taken some time to work it out—but it works," and Pollard reached over and touched wood. At the same time he shifted his helm so as to swing round under the stern of the *Raja*.

"What in thunderation you doin' of with a coast guard boat?" yelled a thin little man from the quarterdeck.

"It's all right!" shouted Pollard, over the roar of the motor. "I'm the government around here, and it's my boat."

"You got some sewin'-machine thar," yelled Cap'n Peaseley. "But you give me a turn when I picked you up comin' out of the river soup."

"What are you beefing about?" demanded Pollard, as he rounded the stern, close in, and shut off. "Would you rather take a couple of hours poling around with a dinghy for us, or don't you like it better to see us jump at you out of the fog?"

"Wa'al, I ain't crazy 'bout dyin' of heart disease, neither," said Peaseley. "If we git caught messin' around with that boat of yourn by the gover'ment, it'll take some tall explainin', and I don't aim to git caught in no hole like that." He passed the word forward to drop the sea ladder.

As the *Camarines* eased up alongside the schooner, a line was thrown from the waist by a native sailor, and Boden made it fast to the bow.

"Help yourself to your guns," said Pollard, as he started up the ladder. "I'll be ready for you in a minute or so, when I've fixed the deal with the skipper. We'll give you a call."

"All right," said Boden, and returned to the cockpit and strapped on his automatics and lit a cigar.

Pollard disappeared into the cabin with Captain Peaseley.

The skipper of the *Raja* was a thin-faced little man, without teeth, so that when he talked he seemed to be chewing something, and his face gave the impression of folding up on itself when he shut his lips tightly together. His gray eyes were watery, and the lower lids drooped, showing redly. His voice suggested the piping bark of a snapping fox-terrier. His skinny hands were of an uncanny whiteness, and he carried them at his sides half closed, like hooks.

"Sit down and stay a spell, Mr. Pollard," said the skipper, pointing to the cabin table under the open skylight, which was covered with canvas to shut out the sun glare. "Steward! Fetch a pair of stone gingers and the Hong Kong Scotch. Fair to middlin' weather, Pollard, but I'd like a little brisker from now on, to git a good slant off the land."

The Filipino steward came with jars, bottle and glasses, and poured drinks. Peaseley sat on the transom seat of the

forward bulkhead, while Pollard took a folding chair and sat with his back to the companionway.

"Here's a quick passage, Skipper," said Pollard, as he lifted his glass.

"And blast the police!" said Peaseley. They drank.

"Now then," said the skipper briskly, as he put down his glass and rubbed his bony hands together in anticipation. "I guess you got somethin' good for me—or you wouldn't have sent that hurry call."

"It's Boden—the bank-robber," said Pollard. "Wants to make it to Aden, and from there we'll let him wait to be picked up by some steamer that's right for us, and push him on as far as Suez, or beyond. I've got five thousand gold out of him for your Aden run."

"Boden! That scamp expects me to save his neck for five thousand gold! And to Aden! What's he think he's charterin' of, a Connecticut clammer?"

Pollard took a packet from the inner pocket of his coat and began laying out yellow-backed bank notes, counting slowly.

"Won't take him to Aden for no five thousand!" went on Peaseley.

Of a sudden Pollard stopped counting. Something had come between him and the banknotes he was putting out on the table before him. It was a bright object, and it glinted in the sun's rays that slanted in from the skylight. Bright objects are said to be ideal for the purpose of hypnotizing a person by having the subject's eyes concentrated on them—and Pollard appeared to be hypnotized by what he saw. He was looking at a pair of nickel-plated handcuffs.

There were two exulting little metallic clicks—and the rings of steel were about Pollard's wrists.

He turned his head to the right, and saw a man standing behind him with a revolver pointed at his head. He turned to the left, and another man stood there. He understood now that they had stepped out of cabins behind him.

"Put your hands under the table on your knees and sit up close to the table," advised the man on the right. "I'm Huntley —of the secret service—and my friend here is from the coast guard service." The language was calm and quiet.

"Page Mr. Boden," said the coast guard man. "We're ready for the gentleman." He spoke to Wilson, mate of the *Raja,* who had come down the companionway.

Wilson went out on deck, and Pollard heard the mate call over the side, "We're ready for you to come aboard, sir. It's all fixed."

Boden swung up the ladder and went over the bulwarks. The mate was still standing in the open door of the passage leading aft to the cabin. He beckoned to Boden, and preceded him.

There was Pollard sitting at the cabin table, with a glass before him, and a stack of notes before him, and across from him the skipper. That was what Boden saw as he looked down the passage. He entered the cabin.

From the right and left, concealed behind the forward bulkhead of the main cabin, the secret service man and the coast guard officer pounced upon the robber—and the mate, just ahead, turned and grabbed Boden's weapons.

Boden attempted to fight, but all he could do was struggle helplessly. His hands were manacled behind his back, and he was thrown to a transom seat and his feet bound by the mate.

"So you walked me into a trap, eh, Pollard!" raged Boden, with bitter curses.

"They got me, too," said Pollard, holding up his handcuffs. "It's that blasted boat you stole! The coast guard put a man on every schooner sailing, and a secret service man, knowing you'd have to depend on some vessel to pick you up. You spilled the beans, don't curse me."

"Hustle him out on deck, and keep him there until we've examined this man Pollard," said the secret service man to the mate.

And Boden, trussed into helplessness, was half dragged down the passage to the main deck by the mate, and the door slammed shut.

"Now, Mr. Pollard," began the secret service man, "the cutter will be along in a couple of hours. In the meantime, we want a good long talk, and all the information you've got."

Pollard sought with his handcuffed hands for a packet of cigarettes in his coat pocket. "Boden killed the man with him, and threw the body in the swamp off the *Camarines.* We won't find the body—the crocs will see to that—but I presume you've got a murder charge on him in connection with the robbery."

"He's cinched on that, don't worry," said the secret service man.

"Then you know where the loot is?" asked the coast guard officer.

"Sure. I'll show you where the stuff is buried. You'd better operate by night with

the *Camarines,* and I'll do what I can to help. I'll give you what information I've got, and then, gentlemen, I'm done."

"What do you mean—done?" asked the secret service man. He sat down beside Pollard, and the coast guard officer sat down with Captain Peaseley.

"Now that I've got that swine of a Boden, I'm out of the game."

"What's Boden got to do with your quitting?"

"I've got a little private grudge against Boden. I had a thriving plantation, and sent my bookkeeper to Singapore to pay some heavy bills with cash. Boden robbed him—and I was wiped out. I went bankrupt. I swore then that I'd get Boden for the law if the law couldn't get him."

"Oh, I see—Boden ruined your business, and you're out on this for revenge?"

"No, not revenge, but justice. My creditors dropped some twenty-five thousand dollars—not a big sum, but enough. I lost several years of hard work and planning when my business went to pot. Well, I got Boden, didn't I?"

"You've certainly got him cinched this time," said the secret service man.

"And the rewards for him aggregate a pretty good sum?"

"Taken all together, the rewards for Boden total well over twenty-five thousand gold."

Pollard nodded. "All right. I'm not out for blood money, I'm not after revenge personally. But Boden has gone on robbing, and now he's caught. That reward goes to my creditors, and I help you to recover the loot—then I'm done, as I said."

The secret service man picked a key from his ring and unlocked Pollard's handcuffs. "That's fair enough," said the *secreto.* "You'll be able to pay your creditors dollar for dollar. But we hate to have you quit on us. You know we took a lot of trouble to send out your description as wanted for murder, so as to

build up confidence with the crooks. You've shown a remarkable ability to hold the confidence of crooks and you've been one of our best chiefs of the Jungle Escape Syndicate. And it's been a mighty dangerous job—you've been in danger of having your back blown out at any minute, if your crook friends got onto the fact that we're really in control of the system ourselves."

"I only took the job on a chance that I'd get Boden," said Pollard. "I presume you've got a man ready to take my place as chief of station?"

"We've been training a man in Bilibid Prison for several months for the job. He'll escape next week, and we'll post rewards for him—and he'll take charge of your station. We don't believe he'll do as well as you've done, but he's pretty keen. Of course, we'll give out the news that you were captured with Boden."

"I almost wish I was carryin' Mr. Pollard's passenger, when I look at that pile of cash," said Captain Peaseley. "It'd pay me better'n bein' chartered and employed by the coast guard. Now that the job's finished, let's all have a little drink, and we'll lay a course to pick up the cutter without havin' her come into sight. Then you and Mr. Pollard can arrange for your work after dark up the river with the *Camarines,* and run back to the position of the cutter."

"Well, I'm glad enough to get back to civilization," said Pollard with a laugh. "I was fed up on that stockade. But it was worth doing—Mr. Boden has about reached the end of his career."

BIG HEAP SMOKE

By WILLIAM BYRON MOWERY

Author of "Crawling Snow," "The Galloping Hours," etc.

YOU NEVER KNOW JUST WHAT A HOT SLEEPY DAY AROUND THE BARRACKS OF THE ROYAL CANADIAN MOUNTED POLICE WILL BRING FORTH IN THE WAY OF A TEST FOR THE DETECTIVE POWERS OF THE FORCE

WITH a book in front of him and a pipe between his teeth, Sergeant Elliot was enjoying a turn of "bunk patrol," after three strenuous days of passing out treaty money on the Blood Indian reservation. He had just thrown a bootjack at Constable Doak for suggesting a fishing jaunt; and had sworn, as men foolishly will, that hell and high water would not pry him out of his bunk till the cookee hollered "Come and get it" that evening.

Through the open window of the Mounted Police barracks floated a variety of sounds, all of them softened and blurred into the lazy drone of the hot August afternoon. At the edge of the fir woods, a bowshot from the barracks, a solitaire sang sleepily. From farther down in the deep, mossy forest came the frowsy purl of an overfalls, where Little Oolichan *sauted* down a white water chute and plunged two hundred feet to a boiling caldron.

Eight miles down Little Oolichan valley at Gulch City he heard the diminutive, far-away toot of a narrow gauge engine, and six miles up the valley, the crescendo *wh-uz-zz* of the sawmill at the big Prouty-Farnell lumber camp. In his cabin across the quadrangle Inspector Snowdon, the new C. O., was peck-and-hunting out a report; it sounded like a woodpecker with a very tired neck.

Just outside the window Constable Doak lay stretched full length in the grass, hunting for four-leaf clovers and swiping his five-quart Stetson at bumblebees. Solitude and idleness were anathema to Doak. With nothing to do and all afternoon to do it, he was restive as a bottle of hornets. Excepting Sergeant Elliot and the bumblebees, there was nobody around to pick at and pass the time.

Presently, when the bumblebees began giving him a wide berth, he got up and peered cautiously over the window sill. There were no boots or bootjacks within Elliot's reach. He planted himself in front of the window, purposely cutting off as much light as he could. Wisely Elliot did not rise to the challenge, but went on reading.

"Them queer kind of handles to a book," Doak said disgustedly, looking at the leaderline, "they make me plumb tired."

"Why, what's wrong with this title, Bill?"

"It's a plain frame-up to rope a fellow's curiosity an' make him read the book. He looks at the handle, A Conan Doyle, an' he thinks, 'Now what in thunderation is a doyle? An' what kind of a doyle is a conan doyle?' So he reads the bloomin' book to find out. Anybody oughta see through a gag like that."

Elliot looked up from the page.

"Bill," he asked earnestly, "were you

born that way and couldn't help it?"

"How's that?"

"With the end of your neck haired over."

Doak scratched the member designated and tried to puzzle out what was meant. Elliot was always stuffing him or saying things that went over his head. The sergeant resumed his reading. His persecutor leaned a few inches closer and read several paragraphs of the text.

"Wrist-slappin' mush-guff!" he snorted. "Sarge, I'm surprised at you. No man in pants oughta read such stuff."

Elliot looked up again. "Why, what's wrong with it, Good-for-Nothing? It's jumps ahead of that Deadshot Dick stuff we find under your pillow every inspection."

Doak pursed up his lips and mocked what he thought was the voice of a chocolate-nibbling debutante.

"A chahming young prince he falls in love with a wild woman. Haw haw! Then he falls out of it an' wants his photygraph back. Haw haw! So he sends this Sherlock duck to find it. Sherlock he raises a big hullabaloo but he cain't cut the mustard this time. Snakes, Sarge, chuck it. Let's ankle down an' lift out some Dolly Vardens for mess toni——"

A shout at the edge of the woods where the path led out made Elliot twist his head around suddenly. A white man, hatless and stumbling in his haste, broke out of the woods and ran toward the Police post. Before Elliot could get a square look at him, he had whipped around the corner of the barracks in the direction of the inspector's cabin.

"Snakes!" Doak ejaculated in pop-eyed amazement. "I wunner what's up, Sarge."

They had short time to "wunner." In less than a minute the inspector's voice, sharp and incisive, broke into the peaceful drone of the afternoon.

"Doak. Sergeant Elliot. Double-quick!"

Yanking on his shoes, forgetting his hell and high water resolution, Elliot went out the window.

"Somethin's busted," Doak rapped, as they hurried around the barracks to the cabin. "We're outa luck. If you 'ud listened to me, we'd be outa hearin' distance with a fish pole in our paws."

When Elliot entered the cabin, the hatless man was pacing the floor, repeating his story to the officer.

"Sergeant," the inspector interrupted tersely, "this is Mr. Stevens, pay checker of the Prouty-Farnell. He was bringing up the fortnightly pay—twenty-eight hundred dollars. Ten minutes ago, down in the woods he was robbed. He set the portfolio down for a minute to cut a walking stick. An Indian jumped out of a laurel clump and grabbed it."

"Did you see him?" Elliot turned to Stevens.

"Plain as day. He had four black feathers stuck in a battered hat, a twisted nose and a scar across his neck, like somebody had attempted to cut his throat. I tried to chase him but he faded into the laurel in twenty jumps—like a ghost."

Elliot started. "Lord, that's Crow-Feathers! I know him."

"Take Doak and round him up," the inspector ordered. "He may still have the money on him. If he doesn't, bring him back here and we'll make him talk."

Elliot saluted, went out the door, and crooked a finger at Doak. As they swung along the woods trail, he told the constable what was up.

"Snakes! Doak panted. "Beats all how a good Ind'un can go bad at the sight of easy money."

"It does that, Bill! He used to be a scout for the post. I never knew him to lift a rifle cartridge. It proves that honesty lays in the size of the temptation."

They intended to cross the valley, cut straight for the corner of the reservation and head Crow-Feathers off before he got back home. At the valley the trail led down through a rock fissure, across a footlog just below the overfalls, and up the opposite slope.

As they were stepping across the spray-wet bridge, Elliot looked upstream a few yards toward the boulder jumble at the edge of the caldron. His jaw-breaker nearly knocked Doak off the footlog.

"Ye Lords, Bill, look there! That's—"

"Him!"

Even as they looked, the birch fishing pole flipped up, a silver gleam was drawn out of the green caldron, and a Dolly Varden pounder swung in to the middle-aged Blood Indian sitting on a mossy boulder at his ancestral occupation.

The detail deployed and came at him from two directions, to keep him from fading away again like a ghost. But he made

no effort to fade. As Elliot came out of the laurels upon him, he calmly impaled another grub worm and flung the line back into the water. That done, he nodded "How."

"Where's the *chickamin?*" Elliot demanded sternly, giving the chinook jargon word for money and putting on his hardest-boiled attitude.

"Ugh! What?"

"The money. Shake a leg, you, and produce it quick."

The pith-elder cork was shooting out of sight in the green depth. Crow-Feathers was all eyes and no ears. Elliot got impatient at the pretence. He kicked the pole out of Crow-Feather's hands and yanked him to his feet.

"We want that *chickamin.* Don't sit there and *ugh* like a bump on a chunk. You've cached it here close. You didn't have time to go far. Come on now; pass it over and save yourself a peck of trouble."

The Indian's smoky features were a perfect picture of surprise and dumbfounded bewilderment. Elliot could get nothing out of him but *"Ugh, what's?"* Doak wanted to twist his arm.

"We'll have to hog-tie him," Elliot dissented, "and take him in."

They tied his hands behind him, told him what would happen if he tried to make a break, and started back to the post.

"Smokes, he had his nerve!" Doak commented, as they hustled him along the needle-padded trail. "Plantin' hisself right in sight of the path! I don't get his idee, unless it was bluff."

Twice Elliot, leading, stopped and tried to get him to divulge. He pleaded, threatened, ordered. It was a waste of breath and patience. Elliot correctly foresaw a merry time ahead in getting him to talk. He thought once that no Indian could fool him with so perfect a mask of bewilderment; that maybe Mr. Stevens in his excitement had not described him correctly and they had the wrong man. But that doubt was speedily laid. At the cabin Stevens took one swift look.

"That's the buck. I'd know him in a fieldful."

THE four white men sat on chairs in a semi-circle about the Indian. Inspector Snowdon, directly in front of him, inched his chair a little closer. Fresh from a big-city detachment in an eastern province, Snowdon was well versed in the science and art of extracting information. In the approved fashion he began the job of loosening Crow-Feather's tongue.

"Constable, cut the prisoner's bonds. Now, my friend," to Crow-Feathers, "I can understand how you were tempted to take the bag with the money in it. On the spur of the moment you thought you would do it and could escape. You see now that a man *can't* escape. I know you will never do such a thing again. I want to make things just as light for you as I can. I'm talking to you as a friend. This is just what I'd say to my brother. Tell us where you hid the money; you'll do a little easy work around this Police post for a month or so, and then we'll all forget about it."

Crow-Feathers blinked his eyes like an owl—and said not a word.

No whit daunted, the inspector continued his big-brotherly urging. With shrewd psychology, he sympathized with Crow-Feathers and made the Indian feel he was trying earnestly to befriend him. In a persuasive, smooth, masterly fashion he became almost sentimental. Doak cleared his throat suspiciously.

But Crow-Feathers was a blank.

His first method failing, Snowdon began his second.

"You saw this man," indicating Stevens, "down in the woods?"

To Elliot's surprise the Indian admitted that fact.

"Him go 'cross footlog. Him see me, me see him."

"What did you do after he passed?"

"Me fish."

"How far did you follow him before you saw your chance to take the money?"

"No follow, me fish."

"After you took the money, why did you go back to the pool instead of trying to escape?"

"When did you first get the notion of robbing Mr. Stevens?"

"Did you look at the money in that bag? Didn't you see that all the bills were marked, so that you can't spend a one of them without getting caught? Who told you that Mr. Stevens would come along with money in a bag? What were you doing off your reservation?"

And so on, deeper and deeper, into a maze of questions.

To all of them Crow-Feathers did not even grunt. The "tangling-up" failed as completely as the friendly pleading. Beneath his smooth composure Snowdon was becoming angry at the obstinate silence. There was a faint red flush on each of his cheek bones.

But Elliot's doubt about Crow-Feathers being the guilty Indian was beginning to creep in again. He knew a thing or two about Indians in general and Crow-Feathers in particular. After such an escapade it would have been more like an Indian to evaporate into the woods and leave no tracks. As scout, the Blood had been with him on several trips. Honest and keen enough in wood craft, Crow-Feathers had not seemed particularly quick of wit or sly of tongue. Elliot believed that during the skillful questioning the Blood would surely have betrayed himself if he were guilty.

A small item which encouraged this belief—he remembered that Crow-Feathers' string of fish staked at the water edge was fully four feet long. If the Indian had been lurking along the trail that afternoon shadowing Stevens and watching for a chance to grab the money, he would not have had time to catch so big a string.

When Snowdon ran out of questions and paused a moment, Elliot turned to Stevens.

"Is there any possible chance you're mistaken in this Indian's identity, Mr. Stevens? It might maybe have been another one."

The query drew fire from Snowdon. He whirled upon Elliot.

"That's no remark to make in front of a prisoner, Sergeant. Mr. Stevens described him accurately and then identified him. Your remark stultifies all I've said. Will you please keep silent till I ask your help!"

Elliot flushed hotly, but said nothing. There was no use to argue. He had learned, in the month since Snowdon came, that the inspector had a good opinion of his own ability and not so good an opinion of the rough-and-ready Western personnel.

Snowdon's first two moves were just the beginning of his program. He ordered Doak to handcuff the prisoner again. Then he began putting the screws on proper—and began to get results.

In sharp, curt language he told Crow-Feathers what was going to happen to him personally if he did not get the money and get it quick. He told him what the rock-pile meant, and drew a picture of him shut inside four walls for so long that his squaw would not know him when he got out. No hunting, no fishing, no woods, no birds, no moss, no smell of lodge smoke, no Indians to talk to. Bread and water; a hammer and rocks to break. He would wrinkle up and die before he got out.

To an Indian it was a fearful prospect. Crow-Feathers fidgeted; he began to wilt perceptibly. Seeing that he had got under the skin at last, Snowdon pushed his point. He went on with the rock-pile description till he had Crow-Feathers writhing in his chair. Again and again he whipped back in a twinkling, to his big-brotherly pleading.

Crow-Feathers was talking now, his eyes fixed upon the inspector's like a snake-charmed bird's. He answered questions, gave details of what he had done that day, and even offered to go down in the woods and help hunt for the money. But at every pleading, he reiterated that he had not taken it and did not know where it was.

Elliot's dander began to rise. He had watched the proceedings and done some thinking on his own hook. He was not so case-hardened as Snowdon, and besides the belief had grown on him that Crow-Feathers was not the guilty party. He thought the whole grilling was needlessly cruel.

The inspector switched to Crow-Feathers' family. He had drawn out the information that the Blood had a squaw, a little boy and a girl. He used it mercilessly. This family, his little boy especially, was plainly Crow-Feathers' weak point, once his crust of Indian indifference was broken through.

As Snowdon pictured what was going to happen to them, his face streamed with cold sweat; he grunted as if he was being stuck with a knife. Again and again he looked at Elliot, his white man friend; appealingly, helplessly, beseeching his aid.

Elliot's anger suddenly boiled over. Yesterday, at that good hour on the Blood reservation he had been making a jump-rabbit and a hi-darter for the black-haired little chap, and listening to his stories of the hunter he would be when he got as big as his daddy. He knew what a clutch the boy had on his father's heart, and deeply he realized what torture Crow-Feathers was being put to.

He pushed back his chair.

"My opinion may not weigh a toot around here," he rapped, "but I don't believe Crow-Feathers guilty and I don't like your methods, Inspector. If you want to torture him, do it decently. String him

up by the thumbs or give him the ice test."

Sowdon's face paled. He checked the angry reprimand on his lips, but there was a *promise* in his tone.

"Step outside, Sergeant. And stay around. I want to see you shortly."

Elliot strode out of the door, emphatically, defiantly. He was surprised to find Doak at his heels.

"Canned me, too," Doak growled. "He's got the poor smoky half-crazy now, Elliot. It ain't right. It's a bloody shame. It's—it's——"

Elliot leaned against the corner of the mess room, gazing absently over the fir tops out across Oolichan valley. Seeing him so preoccupied, Doak picked up a stick and whittled it in savage silence.

Presently Elliot snapped around toward him, so suddenly that knife and stick dropped out of his hand.

"Bill," he said hurriedly, "cock an ear. I'm going to teach Snowdon a lesson. You're in on it. Listen here——"

ONE half hour later Elliot was still leaning against the corner of the mess room. From Snowdon's cabin came the steady hum of a voice, punctuated by guttural grunts and groans. At the north end of the quadrangle Doak was tossing a tomato can in the air and clicking his belt gun at it. In the middle of a round he stopped dead short and let out a yell that could have been heard down in Gulch City.

Elliot straightened up.

"What on earth's the matter with you?" he called across the quadrangle.

Doak was swinging an arm wildly at the valley.

"Look't! Look't! Bush fire!"

Elliot looked. Down toward the overfalls and a little north of the trail, a dense cloud of smoke was rising out of the firs. A light valley breeze caught it and swung it downstream. He did not take a second look. In four jumps he was at the door of the cabin.

Snowdon had heard the yell and was at the door, looking at the smoke.

"It got a bad start, Inspector," Elliot said quickly, taking the leadership due his experience. "Looks like a couple acres afire already. Woods dry as tinder—Gulch City right down its path. Maybe we four can stop or check it now. We'll be safe with the overfalls pool there handy. But we haven't a second to waste."

"Heavens—you're right, Sergeant, we've got to stop it—check it—what do you think we must—"

"Get the fire rakes," Elliot yelled at Doak. "You, sir, get blankets—and matches for back firing. I'll 'tend to the prisoner and catch you. For the Lord's sake, hurry!"

Doak grabbed three rakes out from under the barracks and hot-footed it for the woods. Snowdon stuffed a double-handful of matches into his jacket pocket, and ran across to the barracks, jerked four blankets out of the windows where they had been sunning, and rushed after the constable.

Elliot took Crow-Feathers by the arm, whisked him across to the log guard-room behind the mess, shoved him in, banged and locked the door, and bolted after the other men.

Three hundred yards down the trail, he sprinted past Snowdon who was struggling manfully with his load of blankets.

"I'll go on—locate it—" he called over his shoulder as he passed.

Two hundred yards further he caught up with and outsped Doak, panting, swearing fireworks at his awkward burden catching in the branches.

Stevens, carrying nothing, was ahead of both, running down the woods trail like a deer. Elliot streaked on after him, sprinting so fast that his eyeballs hurt. In four hundred yards he began to catch flitting glimpses of Stevens through the boles of firs. An arrow-flight apart they whooped on down the trail.

The fire was not in the gorge itself but up on the plateau on the near side of Little Oolichan and a little north of the falls. Thin wisps of smoke began to sift through the heavy stand of firs, and waft downstream. They grew thicker, denser, as Elliot and Stevens neared the gorge and had the source upwind. In the smoke the man ahead vanished. Elliot let out everything he had in the way of speed; closed up to fifty steps and caught sight of his man again.

Just above the rock fissure Stevens dodged into the bush on the left hand side. Elliot dodged behind a tree. In a handful of seconds Stevens broke out to the trail again and plunged down the cut, with Elliot overhauling him at every jump.

At the stream bank, where a whirlpool gurgled, they met. With a black leather bag open at his feet, Stevens was lifting a good-sized granite stone to put in and weight it—when he looked up and saw his yellow-striped Nemesis.

As he finished tying up his man, Elliot mopped his forehead.

"I'll hand it to you, Stevens—you sure can run, and that scheme of yours was sure a wham. You thought you'd chuck the pay-roll, raise a hullabaloo against Crow-Feathers on the strength of your white skin, then come get it later. You could pick up another job any old day, but you couldn't twenty-eight hundred bones.

"How did I guess it? Well, I was mortal sure Crow-Feathers wasn't guilty. If you hadn't been so positive in identifying him, I'd have thought some other Indian grabbed the bag. But you were dead positive—so it meant either you or Crow-Feathers. And if it was you, why you'd break for the bag the first thing, and get it safe in the water. See how? Let's mosey."

Up on top of the rock ledge again, Elliot stopped and shouted. Doak answered him, three hundred yards up in the woods. Elliot moved on up the trail a little distance and whistled a few times to guide them in.

Snowdon carrying four bedraggled blankets and Doak with three fire rakes on his shoulder and a six-inch grin on his face broke out into the trail.

"Did you put out the fire?" Elliot asked solemn-faced.

"Fire, hell!" Snowdon blazed. "Not enough fire to singe a baby's whiskers. Some fool with a blankety-blank poor idea of jokes raked some dry leaves and needles together on a bare rock and piled on wet moss—"

His eyes were so full of smoke and anger that he only then saw the leather bag in Elliot's hand and saw that Stevens was tied up. He stumbled forward, staring in amazement.

"What in the—heavens above—Sergeant! Where did you get that? And him—"

Elliot jerked a thumb at Stevens. "Ask him. You're so almighty good at extracting information."

He stepped up to Doak who was leaning weakly against a tree.

"Bill, I've discovered one thing anyway you're good for. When it comes to raising smoke, you're a whiz-cat."

"Snakes, Elliot, that was easy. But your cookin' up this scheme—"

"I didn't cook it up. I was reading the identical stunt in the book when you came pestering. You wanted to know what a conan doyle was, Bill," he added, with tongue in his cheek. "A doyle is a trick, and when you put it over as neat as you and I did, then it's a conan doyle. D'you get that?"

Beginning in our next issue

JUDGE COLT

A fighting epic of Lost Park and the high trails of the cattle country.

by

William MacLeod Raine

BUNCH-GRASS BUTCHERS

By STEPHEN PAYNE

Author of "According to the Cavvy," "Rough on Rustlers," etc.

FROSTY MARTIN WAS OLD AND CHAN HARPER NEW TO THE RANGES, AND BETWEEN THEM THEY GOT INTO A TIGHT CORNER. BUT, AFTER ALL, FAIR PLAY PREVAILED AND A NEW CHAPTER WAS ADDED TO THE CATTLE HISTORY OF THE MULE EARS RANGE COUNTRY

HEN MARTIN, better known as Old Frosty, frying his supper at the Slash J's range camp in Bunch Grass County, heard horses approaching, and, stepping to the cabin's door, saw six loose ponies and a mounted snub-nosed youngster flaunting many touches of youthful vanity in his cowboy attire.

"'Lo." The boy flashed a good-natured, friendly smile. "My name's Chan Harper. Ain't you Hen Martin?" His big eyes, brown and serious, rested on the lank figure in the doorway.

Forty years of hazing dogies had made Old Frosty not unlike a dogie himself. A little white mustache looked incongruous on his rawhide face, long and lined. Fringes of unkempt white hairs straggling from under his sweat- and dust-encrusted hat explained in part his nickname. A more complete explanation of that cognomen lay in his disposition. Now he answered his visitor's question with a noncommittal nod.

"Kid would-be-cow-puncher, all togged out like a pictur post-card," he muttered scornfully under his breath.

"Then I've found the right place," Chan resumed, flushing. He'd heard the muttered words. "Mr. Kennedy sent me over here from the home ranch in Pivot County to help you ride range."

Dismounting, he extended a gauntlet-gloved hand.

"Uh-huh," grunted Old Frosty, and the puckers around his faded gray eyes narrowed. "So, 'stead o' a helper, the big boss has sent me a green kid what'll be nothin' but a nuisance."

He ignored the extended hand.

"Grumpy old bear," thought Chan, turning away. He hadn't expected a prodigal-son welcome, but to be thus appraised and disposed of by the grizzled cow-hand cut him to the bone. For two cents he'd pull right out. Then he clicked his teeth shut. He'd make good as a range-rider.

Old Frosty sourly continued. "Well, don't fly off the handle, Kid. I got reason to be grouchy seein' as I was expectin' an old hand as would have some tact and sense. I'm a-havin' troubles enough 'ithout eddicatin' no cub. Yuh see, here in Bunch Grass County all the native ranchers and punchers is dead sot ag'in' a Pivot County outfit's grazin' stock on what they calls *their* range.

"Now o' course, Jim Kennedy, meanin' the Slash J, used this range years before the country was settled, and 'stablished a sorta permanent right; but these yere rubes as has squatted on every patch of ground level enough to build on is a-gettin' sizable bunches o' cows of their own and is actin' more hostile toward us every year. Yep,

notwithstandin' as they's a sight more grass'n they could possibly use and that, if we moved out, sheep'd be movin' in pronto, they thinks the Slash J's one big enemy.

"Huh! Iffen Sam Purdy loses a pot-bellied skim-milker, course it's that dang' Pivot County outfit as has swiped it. An' if Tobe Roper loses a cow in a bog-hole, it's them Kennedy punchers as has run her inter said bog-hole. I has to handle 'em jus' like they was bees, and from the mail-order-catalog look o' you I can't depend on you for nothin', 'cept to get into trouble."

Chan, unsaddling in silence, thought, "At least, the old bear says just what he thinks. I jus' gotta make good with him."

Old Frosty looked beyond the boy at the saddle ponies he had brought, then rubbed a horny hand across his eyes and looked again.

"What?" he muttered. "Rocker, Gunpowder, On Edge, My Meat—old-timers of the Slash J remuda, part of the rough string. Two more, plumb green broncs. Only one gentle hoss," unbelievably. He raised his voice. "By jocks, greenhorn or not, you must be able to set 'em straight up, or the old man'd never 'a' handed you them packages o' trouble. Well, turn 'em loose right here. This is the pasture." He waved a hand at the valley of the creek, at the great hills covered with sage and bunch-grass and spotted with aspen groves. "I got a jinglin' hoss picketed. Can you cook?"

"Not much. They's lots o' things I can't do," Chan replied.

"Humph," said Frosty. "First time I ever heard a swell-headed eighteen-year-old even hint they was a thing he couldn't do."

"I worked for a horse company," Chan was going on, "an' I learned to ride pretty fair, and I practiced doin' trick ridin' a lot. Got so I could jump from the back of one runnin' horse to the back of another and land frontwise, sidewise, or backward. Things like that."

"Humph! Stunts, eh? What good is they?" Frosty snorted. "Can you use that brand new cannon you're totin'?" He indicated Chan's holstered forty-five and continued. "All them smoke wagons is good for is to kill rabbits, sage-hens an' grouse fer grub."

"Well, I ain't so very good with it yet" —young Harper's voice was a slow half-drawl, soft and serious—"but I'll keep practicin'. Ain't I liable to need it to use 'gainst rustlers or somethin'?"

"'Tain't likely," Old Frosty scoffed. "Any hombres tough enough to steal cattle'd take that thing away from you and make you swaller it t' boot. Still, speakin' o' cattle thieves, some o' my elegant fine neighbors keeps yowlin' that they's losin' stock. They's a s'picious bunch of rubes, Kid. We always gathers short a few head, too; but that don't cut no ice with these yere natives. They's plumb ready to believe that the Slash J is one bunch of thieves."

Chan's eyes, big and round and filled with concern, sought those of the old ranger.

"Mr. Kennedy told me to run down anything that looked queer," he offered. "He said that we didn't want to get the people here any madder at us than they is, 'cause they could deal us just lots of misery. He wants the people here to like us. Said that we're to keep our cattle out of their back yards and do all we can to help out the ranchers here, gathering their stock and the like."

"By jocks, he told you lots, didn't he?" And Old Frosty cracked a smile. "Young squirt, be mighty careful as you don't act some way as'll make these clodhoppers, as I call 'em, hot at you. If they can get hep to the slightest thing ag'in' us, they'll magnify it into a crooked play. An' I don't see how you're goin' to get friendly with 'em, neither. You won't be asked to no dinners or dances. You're more apt to get a bullet in yore back. You can put this in yore pipe and smoke it. Willie Wildflower: makin' up with these yere natives is 'bout like a stallion and a jackass cottonin' to each other. Meanin', 'tain't likely."

Chan flamed to the roots of his dark curly hair. The "Willie Wildflower" rankled. "By golly," he thought, "I wonder what I can do to make him like me, or treat me decent? That and fix things between the Slash J and the natives here?"

FOR three days thereafter Old Frosty initiated the novice into the duties of range riding. The territory covered was a land of immense hills and hollows cut by little streams in deep canyons coming from the Mule Ears Range on the north, whose twin peaks—from which the range derived its name—projected pinnacle-like into the clouds on that mountain-rimmed horizon. Many cattle belonging to the ranches within and to the south of the range allotment grazed with Kennedy's two thousand steers. Chan found that their principal duty was to keep

the steers on their proper territory. The older hand found his cub an apt pupil, but, to his way of thinking, over zealous. Chan was prone to investigate everything and to pry into out-of-the-way places, regardless of the established cow trails.

Old Frosty was satisfied that the first thing Chan would do when he sent him out alone on the fourth day would be to get lost. Chan didn't, but he did come across something he regarded as highly suspicious. A wagon track on the range, a spot where the wagon had stopped, tracks of a saddle-horse and a man afoot, of a small calf and its mother, told a strange story as Chan read it.

The man of the wagon had mounted a led saddle-horse, caught a little calf, loaded it into his wagon and driven back the way he had come. The calf's mother had trailed the wagon. As Kennedy had nothing on the range except steers, this was not really a matter for a Slash J puncher; but Chan was sure someone was stealing a calf. Here was a chance to show the Bunch Grass County ranchers that he was looking after their interests. Riding hard, he gathered together four of these ranchers. They followed the plain wagon trail and found that Sam Purdy had brought in one of his fresh milk cows by the expedient of loading her calf in his wagon.

The kid received nothing worse than the haw-haw from the neighbors he'd assembled, but Purdy waxed warm. Things was coming to a pretty pass when an honest rancher could be made an object of s'picion by a damned cub of a cow-puncher employed by a scurvy, hoggish outfit that hadn't no business in the county.

Telling Old Frosty of the incident, Chan concluded, "Should I have come to you? I don't see yet what I did that was wrong."

"Wal, the fact is, you made a kinder jackass o' yoreself," Frosty replied glumly. "Now, what'd you get them ranchers fer? Iffen you'd 'a' smelt that trail out yoreself —— Aw, what's the use o' tryin' to l'arn you? That 'ere long, hungry, slab-shouldered, fish-mouthed Sam Purdy's a leader, an' he'll keep a-yowlin' an' a-harpin' as how you tried to make out he was a thief. Yeh, it'll stick in his craw an' fester. I'm sendin' you up toward the Mule Ear Range after this, whar thar ain't no ranchers fer you to go to when you sees somethin' s'picious."

And for the next three days Chan was prowling about in a country he did not know; consequently, with his desire to familiarize himself with all parts of the range, he explored many places well off the beaten trails that it would never have occurred to the older cowboy to investigate. The evening of the third day he reached camp in a state of suppressed excitement which broke forth after supper.

"Frosty, I don't suppose it amounts to nothin', and I guess you'll give me the haw-haw; but up near the Mule Ears today I stumbled onto a stone buildin'—barn, I guess, 'cause they wasn't no windows and only one wide door to it. It's in a hollow, kind of hidden-like between brushy hills."

Old Frosty filled and lighted his cob pipe, throwing the match at a corner.

"You'll find old cabins every place in the hills," he told the kid. "All this country's been prospected a heap one time. But you say 'twas made o' stone? H'm, I hain't never seed it." He evinced no further interest.

"I suppose whoever built it used rocks because there was lots of them right handy," Chan went on and gave specific details of the location. "It's old, all right," he continued, "and the plank door, which opens out and is fastened with big iron hinges with a wood bar lifting into iron frames to hold it shut, has been fixed up recent."

"Heh? Go on. What else?" The old ranger showed a flicker of interest.

"Inside I saw where a rope had cut into one of the overhead stringers like something heavy had been hoisted from it. Under that beam there were millions of flies, mighty interested in the ground there; but it didn't show nothin', though they was a funny smell as of something dead about the gloomy place. Well, scouting around outside, I found horse and man tracks that weren't terrible old."

He had all of Frosty's attention now, and hurried on. "What say we straddle a couple of them snaky broncs of my string, that needs ridin', and ramble up there tonight?"

"Aw, it don't amount to nothin'," Frosty deprecated; but his pipe had gone out, and he added, "Why tonight?"

Chan upset the bench he was seated on and leaned across the table, his hands trembling with excitement.

"Because I found where something had been buried in the brush near the building;

and heaps of flies were gathered there, too!"

Old Frosty deliberately slouched to the door and looked out. "It's all-fired dark," he commented, "still, if we wants to find out what's buried at this place o' queer business, time to do it's after dark. Uh-huh, I's heard o' men gettin' kilt fer messin' 'round things like that in the daylight."

Two hours later the punchers halted their horses at the top of a timbered hill overlooking a deep hollow beyond which the giant peaks of the Mule Ear Range were silhouetted against the star-spangled skyline.

"Down there," Chan began. Then his breath hissed sharply out as he threw his right hand over to grasp his companion's leg, but both horses shied away from the movement.

"There's a light in the barn!" he gasped.

The door at the west end of the scarcely discernible structure had been opened. A shaft of light had shot out into the night, only to be cut off again as the door was closed.

"How much sand you got, Kid?" whispered Old Frosty. "We'll call on whoever 'tis."

"Do you think there's any danger? Do you think it's——?"

"I'll 'vestigate alone, if yore feet's cold," Frosty cut him off with undisguised scorn.

Chan made no answer, but his teeth clamped shut. He'd show the old-timer. They tied their horses and stealthily circled the hollow on foot. In the scrubby timber on the north side of the building they came upon three horses. Two of these with a pack-saddle from which large panniers now hung empty. An ax and a rope were also tied to the pack-saddle.

Frosty, appraising them in the dim starlight, shook his head. "I dunno who they belongs to. Kid, yore gun all jake? We's hep to somethin' rotten."

Cautiously the two crept to the building. Faint slivers of light came through the cracks of its door. Peering through these cracks, they saw two men skinning a cow or steer by the light of a lantern which stood on the ground near them—one an unkempt, brown-bearded giant, the other small, wiry, weazened of face and beady of eye.

"Honest men don't butcher in a place like this after dark," whispered Frosty. "We could foller 'em up an' see what they does with the meat which they's goin' to load on that pack-hoss, course. But I reckon we'd best nab 'em while the nabbin's good."

"Hadn't we better go get the sheriff and a bunch o' neighbors?" Chan whispered back. "They're tough nuts. I see their guns, too."

"Humph," grunted the veteran. "Time enough to show them rube neighbors, as you calls 'em, that we's runnin' down the damn' cattle thiefs after we catches 'em. Now, I'll get to this side o' the door an' stick 'em up when you opens it. You stay kinda behind it as you does, an' drop low, reachin' only yore arm an' head round it, savvy? Shoot fer that big geezer's belly if they draws, an' shoot quick!"

Chan marveled at Old Frosty's coolness. He himself was all aquiver; but the older hand's assurance steadied him as, gun in hand, he obeyed instructions.

The door's hinges squeaked. The two butchers sprang erect at the sound, pivoting toward the doorway; but their knives dropped and their hands shot upward at Frosty's tersely boomed command.

"Grab air! H'ist 'em!"

"Dead easy," thought Chan as, keeping pace with Old Frosty, he advanced toward the pair.

"Kid, I'll keep 'em covered," rang the old-timer's voice. "You step 'round behind 'em, take their gats, then tie their hands behind their backs."

Chan, with eyes only for the startled captives, moved with alacrity to comply. The lantern, all unnoticed by him, was in his path. His right foot collided with it, shattered the globe and knocked it rolling while he stumbled.

Instantly the place was plunged into darkness—darkness cut by the flash of Old Frosty's gun and filled with the boom of its explosion. Chan was knocked violently aside, completing his fall. Running feet thudded on the hard ground. Frosty's gun belched fire again. Then the door slammed shut, and Chan, running toward it, heard the plank which locked it outside rammed into place. Frosty was beside him. They butted against the door. Too late! The captors were trapped! The butchers had flown! Faintly after a few moments Chan heard the pounding of horses' hoofs over rocks.

Then Old Frosty cut loose. The stream of his profanity, reëchoed in the hollowness of the dark barn, became a mockery to his own ears. The curses were not directed at Chan. They were directed at nothing in particular and everything. Eventually Chan learned that of all knot-

headed, pin-headed, bone-headed imbeciles he took the biscuit.

"You ain't tellin' me nothin' I don't know," he said humbly when Frosty at last stopped exploding. "It all happened so doggoned fast. I'd cuss, too, if you'd left one thing unsaid. There's just once thing: we gotta get out o' here."

"Fat chance!" Frosty growled. "Them birds has run, but I'm thinkin' they'll be back soon with the rest o' their gang, if they is any rest."

Chan fumbled about until he found the lantern. The oil had not spilled, and by its flickering chimneyless light they explored the interior of their prison. The door, made of three-inch hewn planks, fitted at its bottom against a slab of solid stone. The plank across its outerside held firm. There were no timber nor tools of any kind in the building, except the butcher knives and a rope. The walls were stone. The roof was made of heavy poles covered with a thick layer of dirt, immovable as rock. The punchers were reluctantly forced to the conclusion that escape was out of the question.

Old Frosty examined the beef carcass. "'Bout a three-year-old steer," he commented. "Sam Purdy's brand on its left side. Hell! If we'd only 'a' nabbed them birds, you'd 'a' squared yoreself with that old hothead. Yep, we'd 'a' been settin' purtty with all them rubes. An' you, you darned mutton-head, bungled everythin'!"

"Rub it in, I deserve it," Chan returned. "But," hopefully, "we can dig out of here." He picked up one of the butcher knives and fell to work against the east wall.

"I know that bearded walloper with the hunk cut outa his upper lip," Frosty returned, going to Chan's assistance. "Name's Hobbs. Only thing I ever heard in front o' it was Big. Big Hobbs. Trapper, miner, hide buyer—most anything he is. Knows all the settlers, too, and he ain't nobody's fool. Purtty smart ol' hunk o' orneriness, he is. Recognized me right off. Never seed the other lizard afore. Looked as mean as a t'rantuler. What d'you reckon they does with this meat? They's been at this game fer quite a spell."

Chan had no idea. They both dug with their knives at the hard dirt filled with small rocks and pawed it back with their hands.

"Wolverine Mine, up back o' the Mule Ears, uses quite a gang o' men," Frosty mused. "That's the only place I can figger where they'd sell the truck."

"Thunder!" Chan exploded. "This wall goes right down into the ground. Besides, I've struck a big boulder I can't find the edges to."

The lantern sputtered feebly and went out. Its oil was exhausted. In the pitch darkness the trapped punchers tried digging in two other places with no better luck, and the hours dragged by.

Chan lit a match and looked at his watch. "Midnight," he announced. "And we ain't had no luck gettin' out yet."

They heard horses approaching. Frosty grabbed Chan's arm. "Get to the same side o' the door as me," he whispered, "so our fire won't cross. If they tries to get in, we'll give 'em hell."

Someone on foot, whose spurs jingled loudly, came boldly to the door.

"Hey, Frosty, you in thar?" he called out. "This is Tobe Roper."

"Huh? How the blue blazes you know where to find me?" Old Frosty retorted, and to Chan, "Tobe's voice, sure 'nough."

"By jinks! Wal, by jinks!" Tobe returned. "I never thunk it could be so, but I got a bunch together an' come to see. Don't shoot, Frosty; we's friends." He was removing the plank that locked the door.

"Yeh, I know you is," Frosty rumbled. "But jus' same, don't nobody show in that door till you 'splains how come you knowed whar to look fer us."

"Why, you suspicious old long-horn"—Tobe's tone was aggrieved—"it's one hell of a welcome you're givin' us when we come out in the middle o' the night to save you. How'd we know? Wal, 'twas this-away: A young feller campin' in these hills—huntin' an' prospectin' he is—foun' this yere barn and he thunk they wuz somethin' funny 'bout it when he seed two hombres jus' at dusk drag a cow critter inter it. So he hides hisself good an' keeps watch, an' after a while he seed two more hombres come an' sneak on this buildin'. Then he hears a gun battle and sees two hombres beat it atter they locks t'other two in the barn.

"Wal, he was scairt terrible an' thunk as how he'd get a bullet in him if he went to the door; so he comes to me jus' a-hellin', an' I gets a bunch o' us fellers together

an' we comes past yore camp to get you an' the kid. You wasn't thar, so we dopes it out as how you'd got hep to somethin' an' that the thiefs musta got the best o' you, 'cause we knowed it couldn't 'a' been you boys as run. You see, this feller as seed it, he didn't know nobody o' the bunch what he seed, but he guided us, an' here we is, an' here you is, an' we doped her out right."

"That 'splains things all jake," answered Old Frosty, and he and Chan holstered their revolvers. "'Scuse me fer bein' leery, Tobe. Couldn't figger how you could 'a' knowed 'less that damned Hobbs had tried a funny shenanigan an' pulled the wool over yore eyes. Open the door. By jocks, but we's glad you come."

Tobe swung the door wide. Chan and Old Frosty stepped to it, Frosty in the lead. Chan saw other men and horses outside in the dim starlight. As Frosty stepped across the rock doorsill, Chan saw something crash down on his head, saw him drop. At the same instant a body hurtled past Frosty's falling form and caught Chan himself in a bear's hug.

Caught completely off guard, gripped by a man half again his size, Chan was swept backward and slammed to the ground in the space of two seconds. Another man sprang to his assailant's assistance. Chan was rolled over on his face, and his hands bound securely behind his back.

Then, with his gun taken from him, he was allowed to sit up. Old Frosty, still groggy from the blow he'd received, was brought and dumped beside Chan. One man brought a lighted lantern, and Chan saw his captors, seven in all, Big Hobbs and his beady-eyed side partner among them. And there was Tobe Roper, big, squint-eyed and hairy, and Sam Purdy, lank and crooked, his seamed face now wearing a peculiarly hard, sinister expression. The others—Hook Arm Yates, a raw-boned cowpuncher with steel glints in his eyes and a hook for a missing left arm; Joe Kendall, a rancher, round of face and of body; and Ben Jordan, a slim puncher with red-hair—Chan did not know.

They all looked at the steer's carcass.

"Mine, sure 'nough," Purdy remarked acidly. "Hobbs, we's mighty 'bliged to you. You sure give us the right dope, an' we catched these dang' thiefs slick."

Chan did not at once grasp the significance of the words; but Frosty, sitting up unsteadily, did, and his leathery face blanched. These settlers were all too ready to believe anything reflecting no credit on the Slash J men; and Hobbs, knowing it, had played the boldest, most brazen game ever thought of, by turning the tables on those who'd wrought his undoing.

"An', Tobe," Purdy went on, "that yarn you cooked up to nab these skunks 'ithout a scrap was the dope. Yep, if we'd 'a' had to fight 'em, they might 'a' got one—mebbe two—o' us."

He came and stood over Frosty and Chan. "An' we didn't want to kill you devils. Nope, not thataway."

The way this was said, and the leer accompanying the words, made cold chills run down Chan's spine, but he said nothing.

Tobe Roper thrust his hairy face out at the prisoners and added his say. "Guess we knows now who's gettin' away with our stock. Dang that Pivot County outfit! Not content with eatin' up all our range, they hires a couple o' crooks to steal us blind. But Big Hobbs an' Ike Sickles got wise tuh you! Catched you red-handed an' locked you in. No wonder you was suspicious when we come, Frosty. This dang' cub here"—spitting in Chan's direction—"even tries fer to make out as Sam Purdy's swipin' a calf. Hoomph! You're sure a slick pair, purtendin' tuh ride range an' look atter our stock an' be our frien's. Wal, 'nough said. Men, I reckon we's all agreed?"

It seemed that they were. Especially were Big Hobbs and Ike Sickles, his partner, anxious to get the matter over with. Chan thought that possibly Joe Kendall and Ben Jordan wavered a bit when Old Frosty found his voice and with an outraged bellow spouted his side of the affair in no uncertain tones. The rest smiled scornfully, grimly. Big Hobbs pointed out the preponderance of evidence against the Slash J punchers. Sam Purdy said that speedy justice by old-time methods was the only remedy, and slapped Old Frosty across what he called his "lyin' mouth." The scrubby pines and cedars would not do. To a cottonwood tree that Hobbs knew of, they must go.

Chan was dumbfounded, crushed. It was all his fault. The triumph of catching the real rustlers should have belonged to the Slash J men, and he'd blundered. Through his blunder and Hobbs' bold

mastery of the situation, he and Old Frosty were placed in a predicament from which there seemed no escape.

Hook-Arm Yates led up the range-riders' broncs. The other horses were all gathered before the barn, but Chan missed the pack-horse and wondered where he could be. Prodded by guns, he and Frosty essayed to mount their held horses. But their arms were tied behind their backs, and the half-broken broncs shied away, refusing to stand.

"Dang such skittish critters!" Tobe exploded. "We wants gentle hosses that'll stand under the tree."

"Take mine and Ike's," Hobbs suggested. "We'll fork these snakes."

The real thieves' ponies, tired from their long, hard ride, stood quietly. Everybody mounted and the cavalcade moved forward through the dim night. The thudding of the horses' hoofs was the only sound. Talk was out of place with such grim business at hand.

A mile slipped by, and they came to a creek valley among hills rough and timbered. There, in an opening, a giant cottonwood spread its wide high limbs. Reaching it, the lynching party dismounted. Tobe necked together the prisoners' horses and led them under the largest limb, where Yates and Joe Kendall held them. Behind Chan and Old Frosty, the other five fell into a discussion about the proper way to tie the hangman's knot, clustering close together in their earnestness. The prisoners were not over three feet apart, and their feet were free.

Cautiously Chan's right foot reached out and touched Old Frosty's. Frosty paid attention; and as Chan ripped his horse fearfully with his spurs he did likewise. As though shot from a cannon, the two ponies lunged forward together. The three feet of rope between them caught Hook-Arm and knocked him down. Frosty's long leg shot out and took Kendall under the chin. Both captors were down. The spurred horses were racing, regardless of bridle-reins a-trail. Frosty yelled. Chan yelled. The bunched horses of the would-be lynchers bolted ahead of them up the valley.

Instantly guns flashed and roared. Bullets sang and whined around and past the racing fugitives. One creased Chan's shoulder. One smashed into Frosty's saddle cantle. Then they were out of range, tearing madly up the valley, with cursing men running frantically after.

One of the saddle-horses ahead of them swerved aside, stopped. Frosty's mount essayed to turn after the laggard, and Chan's ran on. The neck rope holding them together, this maneuver nearly upset them both. Frosty and Chan used their feet to straighten them out, but time had been lost. The pursuers were coming, and shots rang again while one man recovered the horse which had now stopped. Frosty cursed terribly.

The ponies ahead swerved into the brush at the right. The mounts of the punchers, attempting to follow, ran one on each side of a small tree. The rope between them caught the tree, snapped them around like whippets, and they were hopelessly entangled. The one mounted man behind them seemed to sense that they were held; and as he had fired his last shell, he plunged after the other horses to recover them before they should get clear away. But the rest were coming as fast as they could run.

Something had to be done. Chan leaped from his floundering horse and, twisting in air as he did so, landed behind Frosty with his back toward him.

The frantic animal strove to buck. Chan's hands sought Frosty's wrists. The running men came on, a hundred feet away.

A voice yelled, "Don't shoot! They're tangled up! We'll stretch their necks yet."

Chan's deft fingers tugged at the knotted cord. Frosty's hands came free.

"Yore knife! Cut the rope!" the boy yowled, and leaped back onto his own horse.

Frosty's jack-knife flashed out; his long arm reached forward; he slashed the rope that held the broncs together and held them to the tree. Ten feet away three of the men, ahead of the others, stopped, and their revolvers roared. Up the valley, into the sheltering brush ahead, tore Chan's and Frosty's mounts, bridle-reins broken, running unguided, while over at their right the rider trying to catch the other ponies cursed.

Frosty tore ahead. Chan thundered after. Neither knew where their mounts were carrying them in the dark. Finally all sounds of pursuit were lost. Abruptly Frosty's horse swerved out of the draw they were following, struck into a canyon coming down from the north, and they splashed in the bed of a stream. Old Frosty caught the top of the head-stall still on the animal's head and brought him to a stop. Chan's horse ranged alongside and stopped also.

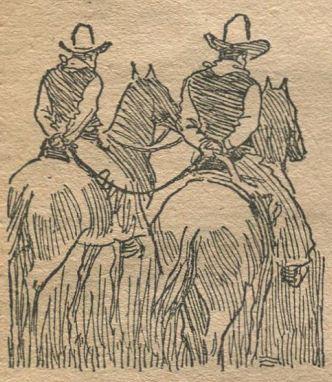
"Kid," gasped the veteran, "I'll never make fun o' yore trick ridin' again. By jocks, if you hadn't 'a' been able to do it —— Reckon I'd best untie you."

"Yes, and now we want to be guidin' these nags and headin' for Pivot County and a sheriff that'll believe us," Chan answered shakily, all a-tremble now that the danger was over.

Frosty untied the boy's numb wrists. "Pivot County? Sheriff?" he grunted. He was outwardly cool, but seething internally. "Kid, I'm bull-headed an' ornery when I gets riled. I'm a-hankerin' to turn the tables on them damn' fools and catch them foxy reptiles what so nigh done fer us."

"We ain't got guns," Chan ventured, "and we jus' mustn't kill Tobe an' Sam an' them——" He broke off. He was inwardly exultant that Frosty no longer made references to his blunder's being the reason for their predicament. "But where you goin'?" The horses were plodding steadily up-stream.

"Son," the veteran's face was as bleak as a mountain peak above timber-line, "when them two snakes put us on these gentle plugs to take us to the cottonwood they never figgered nothin' like this, an' I'm bettin' now that they'll figger we'll *guide* these hosses, which is what we won't do. Chan, these broncs is goin' right to them hombres' camp. Now tell me if I'm wrong. Ike an' Hobbs ain't near as easy as they's lettin' on to be. With us dead they'd probably keep on with their bluff, but with us alive an' loose it's a hoss of 'nother color. They'll ditch that posse, hike to their camp to pick up such stuff as they may want, an' then flag their kites. Course, if they can nab us again afore we has a chance to tell people as'll believe us, they'll still be safe. That is, if they ain't no danger o' whoever they's sellin' beef to exposin' 'em."



"Then we'll be at their camp, waitin' for them?" questioned Chan.

"Prezactly. I'm thinkin' they'll be a gun o' some kind thar."

"What if they brings that whole posse with 'em?"

"They won't! 'Cause why? 'Cause they'll be stuff thar that'll show it's their camp, an' they'll have one job makin' even them deluded ranchers believe it's our'n. You see, Hobbs and Ike's got to show that they lives some place."

Chan thought of something else. "Supposin' they's some more of this butcherin' gang?"

"We'll keep our peepers shinin' an' try an' see 'em first," returned the old hand.

THE horses turned out of the canyon and slabbed the side of the steep hill at its right, where a faint trail wove back and forth, finally reaching the top of the ridge where once again the Mule Ear Range showed plainly. The ponies followed the ridge upward, skirted around a cliff on its north and dropped into a basin. Out of the darkness ahead a horse nickered softly.

Chan's mount answered. Old Frosty slipped from his saddle. "I'll scout ahead," he whispered. "If somebody comes for you, don't wait for me; run like hell." He vanished in the scrubby brush.

Chan waited tensely; then Frosty's unmistakable form reappeared. "It's that pack-hoss," he explained. "Guess they turned him loose to let him come home. He's standin' by a pair o' bars. Got a little fenced pasture, they has."

They went on to the bars, and Frosty slipped ahead again. Eventually he came back.

"It's their lair, a'right," he whispered. "And they's nobody else. At least not to home. They makes a show o' minin', for they's a tunnel in an overhangin' side-hill right back o' the shack. Leave this pack-hoss outside. Then Hobbs and Ike won't s'pect anybody's ahead of 'em. We'll hide ours in some brush beyond the shack and investigate."

Presently the punchers entered the tiny cabin, and, making sure that a light would not show, searched it. It contained only a meager batching outfit and two bunks. Frosty searched everywhere, but not a gun of any kind was to be found.

"You keep watch, while I look in the tunnel," growled the disgruntled old puncher, swearing because he could find no gun.

They put out the light, and Chan posted himself behind the cabin. The overhanging cliff was at its rear, the dump from the tunnel a little to the west. Frosty clambered up the broken rocks and vanished in the dark hole. Daylight was just beginning to creep over the wild rugged land.

Then Chan heard the pack-horse nicker,

and two mounted men and the pack-horse appeared and came openly to the cabin. The coming daylight revealed them: Hobbs and Ike on his and Frosty's horses. They swung off, tied the saddle-horses by turning them head to tail and slipping the bridle-reins of each over the saddle-horn of the other, then unsaddled the pack-horse and entered the cabin.

"Oh for a gun!" thought Chan, hoping that Frosty would find one in the tunnel.

From the other side of the wall came the squeaky voice of Ike Sickles. "What you settin' thar fer, Hobbs? We got shed o' them dang' fool ranchers slick. Let's get our little wad an' make tracks. That bull-headed Tobe's goin' tuh keep on huntin' them two slippery punchers, an' that Sam's got a nose like a bloodhoun'. They's a-goin' tuh find this yere camp, an'——"

Hobbs interrupted. "Yah! Beat it on these Slash J hosses? You talk like an idjit, Ike. That Kennedy never did sell a saddle-hoss. The brand'd give us away. Look-a-here, my scheme worked once, an' she ain't done workin'. What if Sam an' them does find this place? We's peaceful miners. We's livin' here quiet, workin' our claim——"

"Ain't been a lick o' work done on that hole this spring," Ike cut in, "an' them fellers'll know it. 'Sides, whar we goin' to cache the stuff what's in thar? An' what we goin' to do 'bout Gilbert, the boss o' the Wolverine?"

"Wal, we can be jus' gettin' ready tuh go to work, savvy?" Hobbs resumed. "Leave Mark Gilbert to me, Ike. How you reckon he come to be buyin' beef offen us 'ithout askin' questions? I'll tell you. Me an' him both had our hair cut mighty short at the same time back in a stone-walled institution in Kansas. Old Mark don't care to have folks knowin' 'bout that. He'll swear tuh anythin' I asks him tuh, 'specially tuh the fact that Old Frosty an' that cub side-kick o' his'n—damn him!—is sellin' him beef, an' Gilbert never has no idea nothin's wrong, savvy?"

Ike let out a loud falsetto yelp. "Hobbs, somebody's been here! Things ain't like they was when we left! Come on! Let's look! Get out yore gat. Them hosses o' ours might 'a' packed them two punchers right up here, an' them hombres'd be foxy 'nough to leave the pack-hoss!" The door squeaked as it was yanked open.

Chan's heart stopped beating. His brain worked dreamfast. What could he do? Frosty was back in the tunnel, all unknowing. He'd be found, shot down. Chan must get to him. Somehow, the two of them might hold off the rustlers. The boy sprang for the dump. Its rocks loosened beneath his hurrying feet. Too late! He was seen. A bullet ricocheted from a rock ahead of him. Came the double roar of guns, and another bullet spat at his feet. Chan dived into the tunnel's mouth.

"I s'pect I've pulled another awful boner," was his bitter thought as he flattened against the tunnel's wall in a niche about two feet wide just beyond the entrance.

"Didn't hit you?" Old Frosty was right beside him in this sheltered spot.

"It's them!" a voice outside yelled. "I seen the old gazoob, too. We got 'em holed up."

"Steady, steady, Ike! Don't go in thar! Don't kill 'em!" It was Hobbs speaking. "Don't get no murder charge out ag'in' us till you has to," he went on. "Now listen yere. This is plumb luck. We's got the dang' thiefs again, an' it changes things all 'round. You set right here an' keep watch o' 'em. They ain't no guns, so you've nothin' to be scairt of. I takes everythin' outa the cabin as can identify us. Then I goes and gets Gilbert from the Wolverine. What we all swears to, and the evidence what's in that tunnel, puts the goods on them Slash J punchers proper."

"I get you, Hobbs," Ike rejoined. "This is their hidden hang-out from which they does their butcherin' business after killin' beef down at that barn; an' Gilbert, he didn't know as he was dealin' with crooks, when he swears these two suckers was sellin' him beef."

"Sure thing. We all gets off free as air an' gets a reward besides, mebbe. I gotta be movin'. Sam an' Tobe an' all may be 'long in a couple o' hours. They's goin' to find out where our two hosses went last night, you betcha. I wouldn't bother with Gilbert, but we want to get it all squared up t' oncet."

"Bring me out a chair to set on," ordered Ike. "I'll jus' nick them birds if they gets gay."

Peering cautiously around the tunnel's entrance a few minutes later, Chan saw the slimy runt seated on a chair placed some fifteen feet from the opening, with his re-

volver pointed at the hole. Seeing Chan's head, he sent a bullet into the tunnel.

"Out of the flames into the coals," grunted Old Frosty, too mad even to cuss. "The evidence back in yonder, Kid, is four quarters of beef and three salted hides. One hide's Purdy's, one's Tobe's, and one's a Slash J."

"Meanin' that we're such dirty crooks that we even rob the man that pays us," answered Chan. "Can't we get out, Frosty? I s'pose I pulled another boner?"

"Not a chance," Old Frosty gloomed. "Goes back a little ways and turns. Jus' a hole in a wall o' solid rock. Nope, I don't see as you could 'a' done any different, boy. Course, if you could 'a' got here afore they knowed we was in here, we might 'a' got the best o' 'em."

Chan squinted out again. Hobbs was riding away with a sackful of things tied behind his saddle.

Ike threw another bullet Chan's way. "Jus' as leave earmark you a little as not," he squeaked. "That stunt you pulled las' night is what got you hombres away. Purty clever trick rider, ain't you?"

"Frosty," Chan whispered, "we just gotta get outa here, or we're sure goin' to get hung this time."

"Tell me somethin' new," the old puncher muttered. "Course, if you'd rather be shot than hung, walk out. Me, I always keeps holdin' to my worthless life, thinkin' somethin' may turn up."

There were many loose rocks in the tunnel's entrance, and Chan picked up a good-sized one.

"Old-timer," he whispered, "I'm goin' to try somethin'." He squinted out once more. "He's just puttin' two more shells in his gun for the two he's shot," Chan said. "That gives him six shots without reloadin', and he's got only one gun."

With a motion like lightning, Chan hurled the stone in his hand at their watchman. The missile went whizzing past Ike's head. He leaped up cursing and fired twice, the bullets thudding into the framework at the tunnel's mouth. Chan's hand flashed into view with another rock. The throw was far wide.

"I'll get that damned hand!" Ike yelped "I'll l'arn you! Try it again!" his eyes and his gun seeking a target.

"Two," whispered Chan, and spun a rock from six inches above the floor this time. The bark of Ike's gun and the thump of the rock as it hit his stomach were as one, while the bullet sang in the tunnel's emptiness.

"No use—you can't hit him," grumbled Frosty.

"Three," murmured Chan, while Ike cursed and waited, but not for long. Chan's hand flashed for a target, once, twice again. Each time a rock flew and Ike's gun spat its deathly answer at the elusive target.

"Six! I did make him mad enough to forget himself," exulted Chan, and shot out of the tunnel like a wolf charging his prey.

Ike's gun snapped on an empty shell. His eyes, as he realized how he'd been tricked, were those of a cornered rabbit; then Chan was on him. Down they went together in a writhing mass like fighting cats. Old Frosty, hurrying after, saw them roll over the edge of the dump, bouncing onto the jagged rocks. Then, peering over the edge, the old puncher saw Chan on top of his victim ten feet below.

"I kinda wilted him," said Chan when Frosty joined him, "an' I ain't a-tall sorry."

A full-grown respect for the kid was visible in Old Frosty's eyes. "You sure done noble," he admired. "An', by jocks, you went fer the lizard like a hound fer a coyote."

They determined on what to do next; and when Hobbs arrived an hour later, accompanied by a well-dressed man with a smug face and a trim black mustache, Chan, clad in Ike's clothes, holding a frying-pan handle to give at a distance a semblance of a gun, was seated in the chair on the dump. Ike was stowed away in the tunnel, and Frosty was inside the cabin, armed with their late keeper's weapon.

"See you still have them treed," Mark Gilbert called out, as he and Hobbs dismounted before the cabin. "Great work, boys. Hobbs, you're a genius."

"Guess we got our story all straight," Hobbs returned with an exultant grin. "Sam an' them's pretty sure to come. Let's get some grub."

The two moved toward the cabin door, which popped open before them.

"Grab atmosphere!" roared Old Frosty.

Chan darted across the dump and looked down. It occurred to him that he'd never seen anyone so absolutely thunderstruck as smooth-cheeked little Gilbert and great hairy Hobbs as they stood with elevated hands, grotesque, frozen, only their throats working spasmodically. Sliding down the rock pile, he then relieved them of their guns and bound their hands behind their backs.

He and Frosty had no time to spare be-

fore they heard a thunder of hoofs. Evidently the delayed avengers had found the trail and were coming pell-mell, heedless of riding into a trap. Chan saw all five of them a hundred yards away, but he and Frosty acted by prearranged plan. When the five wrenched their horses to a halt by the cabin, they saw Hobbs, Gilbert and Ike standing very close together, with their hands in strange positions, near the overhanging cliff behind the shack.

"What the hell? Hobbs, Ike, what you standin' like that fer?" Tobe bellowed.

Receiving no answer, all five dismounted and with drawn guns stepped gingerly, suspiciously, toward the three.

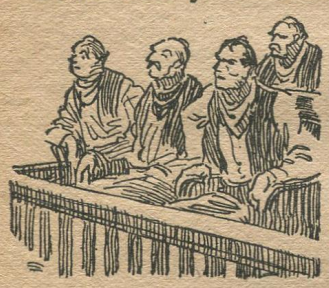
"Stop right where you is!" boomed Old Frosty's voice from behind Hobbs, Ike and Gilbert. "We's aimin' to have a little trial afore they's any more necktie parties."

The newcomers stopped as though suddenly turned to statues. Chan, peeping slyly from between Ike's and Gilbert's heads, photographed five different expressions, all strange.

"Wal, I'll be—" choked Sam Purdy. "We can't shoot 'em, for the dang' thiefs has got the upper hand."

"Not this time," Old Frosty returned, a ring of triumph in his harsh tones. "We ain't a-wantin' to hurt you locoed rubes; but start anythin', and these skunks dies powerful sudden. Tobe, quit sightin' that gun, or I'll blow it outa yer hand."

Tobe hastily holstered his revolver.



"What you mean—trial?" he asked uncertainly. "Jus' 'cause you've got the upper hand don't prove nothin'. Men, are we goin' tuh let 'em get away with this?"

That seemed a matter of uncertainty to all the would-be lynchers, who could see the muzzles of two six-shooters projecting through the tiny gaps between the breastwork of living bodies. They dared make no move, for at any second Frosty or Chan might give any one of them a dose of lead.

"Yeh, trial!" Frosty continued. "Don't you know yet as Hobbs an' Ike has pulled the wool over yore eyes? If it hadn't been for the stunt my kid pard pulled off, lettin' us make a getaway, you jaspers'd have somethin' to haunt you all the rest of yore lives!

"These is the whelps what swiped yore cattle—Ike, Hobbs and Mr. Mark Gilbert o' the Wolverine mine, all workin' in cahoots. We's nabbed 'em all this time, an' we's stayin' with 'em, you betcha!"

"What?" croaked Tobe Roper. He turned to the others. "This can't be, men. Frosty's tryin' tuh make out——"

Chan peeped out again. He saw their wondering eyes all meet. He thought they were staggered. Ben Jordan's and Joe Kendall's faces faded to a sickly hue. Ah, *they* more than half believed Frosty. But Sam Purdy didn't.

"Men, this is the dangedest lie——"

Ben Jordan cut him off. "Listen to what Frosty's got to say," he commanded. "Me, I ain't sure o' nothin' since I found tracks showin' the Slash J punchers come right from their camp and tied their hosses in the timber near that stone barn right where we found 'em last night."

"Good for you, Ben," Old Frosty returned. "Them broncs'll have somethin' to say in a minute, theyselves; somethin' as I was too rattled and you never give me no chance to let 'em tell you last night. You all admit them Slash J ponies is our'n?"

Four nods and one, "What's they got to do with it?" answered him.

Hobbs suddenly broke his silence, heedless of the fact that Frosty'd told him he'd get plugged if he spoke.

"This yere is these damn' crooks' camp. They's——" His voice ended in a yelp of pain as Frosty administered a slight rebuke.

Frosty tossed a letter toward the five. "Ben, read that. I took it away from Hobbs. It'll prove that this here is Ike's and Hobb's camp."

Ben Jordan, the slim, red-haired puncher, picked up the letter. "It's never been mailed," he said, and, opening the envelope, read:

Dear Bill:

Can't take up yore proposition. I've throwed in with a feller name o' Ike Sickles, an' we're camped at the old Shafer Tunnel under the Mule Ears. If you comes over, come——

Ben broke off. "It's Hobbs writin', sure enough," he opined. "He's wrote me checks for hides, an' I know." He turned to the still hidden Frosty. "Well?"

"Now three o' you go look in the tunnel," ordered the old cow hand. "Don't try no shenanigans," Frosty warned the

five as Jordan, Kendall and Hook-Arm started for the tunnel, "or we'll plug the two that's left."

"Four quarters of beef and three salted hides; one Roper's, one Sam's and one a Slash J," reported Ben on the return of the three. "It's proof to me," he added. "Men, we come awful nigh—" and shook his head.

"'Tain't to me!" Sam Purdy sputtered. "I thinks we're gettin' bumfoozled proper. This letter could be forged. This camp could be Frosty's an' the slippery cub's. I'm from Missouri."

"Thunk you was," answered Old Frosty, "so I'll show you. You all know 'nough 'bout range cattle to know no two men could drive a wild steer into that stone barn by his lonesome?"

"Course we do!" Sam barked. "Think we don't know nothin'? That 'ere steer was roped and drug in thar an' his throat cut after you got him down. We know how you done it."

"I was hopin' you'd say that," Frosty came back. "Ben, bring them broncs of our'n an' let's see if they's a man here as can take down a rope on either one of 'em and rope that gentle hoss out thar in the pasture."

Jordan, hastening to comply, mounted Frosty's horse and released the rope. The bronc, snorting with alarm, became unmanageable and stampeded. Ben lost the rope, mastered the horse and brought him back. He then tried Chan's mount. No sooner did he take down the rope than the bronc, frightened at it, staged a bucking exhibition, and Ben was promptly unloaded.

"The critters ain't even bridlewise," he said, grinning ruefully as he joined the other four.

Sam Purdy looked old, haggard and sick. He didn't need telling that nothing had ever been roped from the back of either of those broncs.

"I'm beginnin' to think—" he muttered, and choked.

Old Frosty boomed. "I'll cinch this guilt where it belongs. Me and Chan Harper caught Hobbs and Ike butcherin' yore steer, Sam Purdy. We's eye-witnesses. And now Mr. Gilbert will tell you all who he's been buyin' his beef from. Tell 'em, Gilbert."

Looking like a cornered rat, Gilbert took what he thought was his only chance of clearing himself in part at least.

"Hobbs told me he was buying his beeves," he began. "I hadn't any idea——"

"You dirty double-crosser, you're in this jus' as deep as me," bellowed Hobbs. "He's a rotten jailbird, men. I ain't goin' to see him get away!"

"Frosty, and you, Kid," gulped Tobe Roper, "I wonder if we can ever square things with you boys?"

"There's plenty of range for all," Hook-Arm allowed.

"Sheep'd move in there the minute Kennedy moved out, anyhow," Kendall opined.

"And we can't use all the grass. I'm sure apologizing, boys."

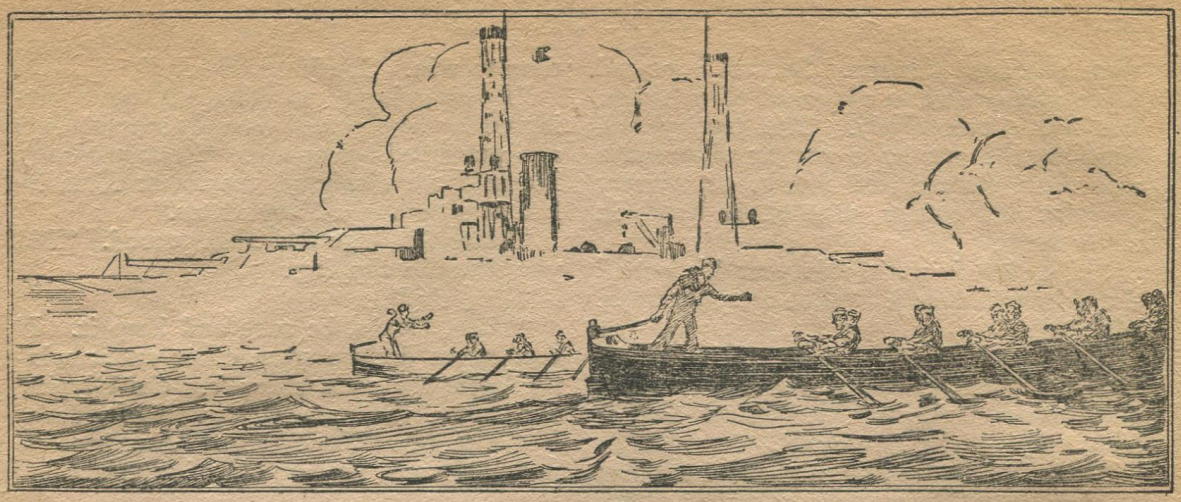
"The kid was doin' prezactly right when he run down my wagon track," Sam Purdy said huskily. "Showed he wuz right on the job. We owes both of you—— Well, I jus' hopes you'll let bygones be bygones."

"Let's talk things over after we tends to these skunks," Frosty suggested. "They won't be no slip this time, 'cause I knows how to tie the hangman's knot, you betcha. An' then if you can square yourselfs with Chan, that does for me. I'm thinkin' he's one fine kid as has fixed a heck o' a lot o' things, and I'm a-hopin' he'll let me call him pard."

"Good old bear," said Chan Harper, gazing up at the old veteran through suddenly misty eyes.

INDIAN PAINTING

THE Crow and Snake Indians painted their faces red, and would leave them so for days, renewing the coloring as fast as it wore off. Every Indian who could get one carried a small looking-glass slung to his wrist by a buckskin strap. Girls of to-day carry their paint boxes in a "vanity case." The looking glass and paint bag were inseparable companions of both Indian men and women, just as they are to-day of the white woman and girl.—E. A. B.



SPUDS AND CUTTERS

By FRANK RICHARDSON PIERCE

Author of "The Squaw Man's Mother," "The Winning Ticket," etc.

OVER CONFIDENCE IS AS BAD IF NOT WORSE THAN NOT CONFIDENCE ENOUGH—ESPECIALLY IN A CUTTER RACE IN THE NAVY. SO THE OLD MAN MADE PLANS FOR THE FINAL THRILLING MOMENT OF AN EPIC STRUGGLE — AND THE NAVY ADMIRED HIS TACTICS

READY All!"

The call floated lazily over the water, the crew manning the cruiser's racing cutter tensed for the next command.

"Ready all?" There was just a trace of mockery in the "Old Man's" tone as he repeated the call. He chewed savagely on the unlighted cigar tucked in the corner of his mouth. "Ready all!" he repeated again. "Why, dang their hides there isn't a man in the boat ready."

"Give way together!" shouted the cox'n. The oars dipped, the first strokes were completed. The craft lost headway as the cox'n shouted, "Way 'nuff!" It was evident the cox'n was training his men in racing starts this morning. It was also evident the Old Man pacing the deck found little to his liking.

"Give way together," he grumbled, "that is just about what they'll do. Here we have a championship crew, or perhaps I had better say a crew holding the championship and what is it? Less than nothing! I repeat, sir, less than nothing!"

The Old Man glowered at the executive officer as if he half expected the "Exec" would argue the point.

"Exactly, sir!" the Exec agreed. He understood, now, the purpose of these morning strolls on deck, if the skipper's vigorous pacing could be called strolling. The morning constitutional had been going on exactly a week.

The Old Man continued. "We've given those youngsters the best we've had. They've been getting six bell hammocks for weeks. They've missed a lot of tough duty; they've had the edge in shore leave; and we've tossed the best the ship affords to build them up. And we've builded them up, eh, sir? Eh?"

"Yes, sir, we've done that!" the Exec agreed.

"Follow me!" the Old Man ordered as he led the way below decks.

The Exec followed. It was his private opinion the Old Man's golf game had suddenly gone stale. Then he recalled, something in the dim past about a cutter race in which the cream of several nations took part. Each cutter had been manned by junior officers, mostly ensigns, and——

"By jingo!" the Exec whispered softly, "the old boy was one of those ensigns—his cutter won. No wonder he has the fine points of boat racing down to the last period."

The pair stopped before a glass case in which was exhibited a beautiful silver cup. The names of many a battleship and cruiser

were engraved thereon. Several appeared twice and one name appeared three times, but not consecutively. The trophy had been turned out by a master silversmith and there were raised figures of brawny oarsmen and cutters, with silver bones in silver teeth.

"If we get it again this year it's ours," the skipper snapped. "Give me your keys, Mr. Mills."

The Old Man selected the all important key and then unlocking the heavy glass door removed the trophy. "How does it look, empty?" he demanded.

"It leaves a void in the case and another in the heart," the Exec admitted, "but what are we going to do about it. It strikes me the crew is over confident."

"Confidence is a beautiful thing. It wins battles and builds nations, but overconfidence is almost as great a sin as entire lack of confidence. Call that boat's crew back, line 'em up on deck and I'll take charge!"

Rather mystified the executive officer passed the word to the officer of the deck and in due time an amazed crew found itself back aboard ship, its racing cutter stowed and secured. "Right, dress!" snapped the cox'n. "Front!"

The Old Man ignored formality this time and got to the point immediately. "Right, face!" he barked. "For'd, Hup!"

The oldest petty officer, grown gray in the service, could not recall anything similar in his experience. He scratched his head thoughtfully and managed to be within earshot when the skipper gave the next command. "Halt! Right, face! Dress up there on the left! Do you men see anything different? Come on, speak up, you are not going to be shot—just yet!"

"The trophy is missing, sir!" the cox'n ventured.

The Old Man snorted. "Hah! So you did notice it, eh? Well, well! I thought you might as well get accustomed to its absence because after the twentieth of next month it will be aboard some other ship won by a better crew!"

"May I say a word, sir?" queried the cox'n.

"If you have anything to say, but before you say it, I think I'll make a few remarks. I'm tired of seeing you men go through the motions of training each day. What I want is work. I want you to look like a championship crew and act like one. You know a championship is harder to keep than to win. Speak up, Cox'n."

"I was going to mention, sir, the sporting editor who visited the ship several days ago published his opinion of our workout. He said we displayed the finest form he had ever seen in a Navy cutter."

"Indeed!" The Old Man purred. "Did you save the clipping?"

"Yes, sir!"

"Then, Cox'n, be sure and keep it. If the judges declare some other cutter winner after the race, show 'em the clipping and prove they are wrong. Left, face! For'd, march. Hup! Hup! And keep on marching until you are out of my sight."

COX'N BARTON of the race cutter's crew wiped his forehead when he halted the men safe within a compartment. The gesture was not for the purpose of indicating pretended warmth—the cox'n was actually perspiring.

"Wow!" he exclaimed, "the Old Man burned us up for fair, didn't he?"

"The Old Boy is all goofy and don't know it," the stroke answered; "we're a better crew than we were a year ago. In the first place this group won the cup, then we defended it successfully and we are going to win it for all time next month. How about it?"

"Nothing to it!" they agreed with confidence. And that was the trouble the skipper feared—the crew was certain it would win. He knew what they could not possibly know, that because of this same confidence there had been an unintentional letting down. To a man they honestly believed each day they gave their best in effort.

And yet for another week the men showed nothing more than beautiful form. The grimness that wins by sheer strength was not there—it lay beneath the surface unaroused.

They would have preferred to train far beyond the critical eyes of their skipper, but this was impossible. He had designated the course over which they were to practice. With binoculars he could view each end of the course, and the center was so close to the quarter deck he could have tossed a golf ball into the cutter.

Again and again the skipper shook his head over the problem. "It is going to hurt them when it is over worse than it will hurt me," he informed Mr. Mills, the executive. "I know it's coming; they don't, so it will be a shock." Then he proved his bark was worse than his bite. "You might arrange for a seventy-two hour leave for

each man after the race. It'll make 'em forget their troubles and I don't want 'em to think I'm saying, 'I told you so!' every time they pass me aboard ship. Those boys are no worse than any other two-time championship crew. I've known one win to set a crew off its balance. I guess I'll go below and see just how serious they are when unobserved. I can get a line——"

He was gone before the sentence was completed.

Within the compartment the stroke was attempting to do things with his feet that must have surprised his muscular system. "Say, Barton," he shouted, "break out that accordion and give us a tune!"

Barton's instrument was filling the compartment a moment later. It was a sprightly tune of interrogative nature having to do with the identity of a petite baby coming down the street. All hands obeyed the impulsive and succeeded with varying degrees of success to dancing the intricate steps of the Charleston. "Wow! Wow! Wow-wow-wow-wow!" whined the instrument. "I don't mean may be—" sang Barton as the compartment door swung open.

For a brief moment Barton struggled for life itself as he saw who was framed in the door. His fingers grew stiff, breathing, and with it singing, ceased. The accordion sighed like some dying creature, the dancers turned to learn the cause, but saw only a door that had been slammed a split second before they turned.

The crew devoted itself to being obscure the remainder of the day, but shortly before sundown the cruiser began throbbing with life. Anchors left the bottom on which they had held securely for several weeks, pumps thumped and streams of water poured down the chains. Deep within the electric drives whined and astern the water began churning lazily. "What do you make of that, Barton?" the stroke oar demanded, "I thought we were to remain here until after the race. This is supposed to be a sort of breathing spell between maneuvers."

"Orders!" the cox'n grunted. "This'll raise the deuce with our practice. Oh, well, we can beat 'em without practice; remember last year, we led the second boat by eight lengths and that's going some for a cutter race."

"It sure was, boy friend!"

For fifteen minutes the cruiser steamed leisurely ahead, then she lost headway, once more the anchors sought bottom and an amazed crew that had a short time before studied shore and city from the comfortable distance of a half mile, now

viewed the same scene from a distance of three and a half miles. No questions were asked, no information volunteered. Again the gray haired petty officer shook his head and attempted to recall a similar instance in his experience. It had never been done before. "But there's a reason," he mused, "the Old Man never did anything yet without a good reason."

It was dawn! Leather lunged boson's mates, half awake and less than half clothed stalked through the various compartments passing the word. "Up all hammocks! Hit the deck! Rise and shine. Come on there, matey, show a leg!"

Bare feet hit the decks, seamen in brief underwear that serves also as a sleeping garment, hauled on trousers and squirmed into jackets. Hammocks were lashed and stowed in the various compartments except that containing the race cutter's crew. At length even this door was opened.

"Hit the deck!" rasped a voice.

Cox'n Barton opened a sleepy eye.

"Pipe down," he retorted; "six bell hammocks for this gang. Now shove off!"

But the other did not shove.

"Orders!" he exclaimed, "orders from the Old Man himself. No more sleeping in until seven o'clock for you birds. You've been reduced or whatever it is. Don't take the news hard because you ain't begin to have heard what's ahead."

"Is that straight?" Barton demanded.

"Say, do you think I'd stir up this nest of hornets if I didn't have the authority? Now shake 'em up, then turn to with the others."

The crew gasped, turning to was the crowning insult. The Old Man sure had it in for them. A week of this and they'd hate his shadow. And later when they were scrubbing down decks the old skipper was in plain sight, observing them from the corner of his eye.

"There's the old barnacle," the stroke rasped; "the last week or so he's chewed his cigar which showed he was not satisfied with the world, but today he is as happy as a seal in a school of salmon; look at that cigar burn."

The stroke knocked the water from his scrub brush with unnecessary violence.

Barton, being a cox'n, handled the hose and gave orders.

Breakfast came in time, and later a boat call that seemed beyond belief. Cox'n Barton gasped, then bellowed at his men. They scrambled out the boom, down the jacob's ladder into the racing cutter which was riding lightly on the comparatively smooth water. Presently they brought the craft smartly alongside the gangway. A yeoman, it seemed, had business ashore. The officer of the deck gave them permission to shove off.

"What's the big idea?" Barton growled. "This sort of work is generally done by motorboats."

As anyone who has seen the swiftly moving craft between ship and shore will testify, such work is usually done by motorboats. In the old days a lot of it was done by man power, or the steamer. It was a long row ashore, and just as long back again. They had hardly tied up to the boom before the call came again. In a sullen mood, the crew came alongside the gangway again. The Old Man and his golf clubs stepped in. He gave the usual orders and completely ignored the fact the finest men in the Navy were pulling at the oars. Cox'n Barton wondered why he didn't use his gig, instead of the cutter.

The Old Man evidently sensed rather than saw the resentment in their attitude. He said nothing, naturally, but on his return aboard the ship that afternoon he said something to the Exec, who said something to the officer of the deck, who called a boson's mate, who in turn called Barton. The boson's mate was brief.

"Report to the spud cox'n," he directed.

"By all the strange gods of China," Barton cried in anguish, "when is this going to cease?"

"Search me," the boson's mate answered; "the Old Man sure has got it in for you."

The "spud cox'n" is the worthy in immediate charge of peeling potatoes of which a large number are used aboard a warship. It was a rare sight, one enjoyed by all hands, to see the race cutter's crew peeling spuds. They might rage inwardly, but it stopped there. In fact each man was quite sure the Old Man was punishing them for their attitude of the morning when they had indicated in their rowing just what they thought of him.

And so, as day by day dawned and vanished in the twilight, their bottled up resentment increased until the pressure was close to the bursting point. They took the jibes of their shipmates in silence. The Navy mascot is a goat, and to lose one's goat in the Navy is something that never happens twice—all hands derive too much pleasure from the misfortunes of the loser.

The day before the race the spud cox'n narrowly escaped with his life when he so far forgot himself as to remark, "They're the best lot of spud peelers I've ever had. They are not what you might call fancy peelers, but for plain every day, garden variety of peelers, you can't beat 'em. Now if there was only a trophy for spud peeling, this crew of Barton's——"

That was as far as he got with his words, but he got something else on the side of the head. It was a half peeled potato, thrown with all the strength of the stroke oar's right arm.

"If that's mutiny," the stroke bellowed, "I'm ready to be hanged right now."

THE Old Man's gig was standing by the morning of the race. He puffed contentedly on a cigar and for a man who had bet a lot of money on a crew of spud peelers, was remarkably calm. Besides it was a grand day. Not a breath of air stirred on the water, the tide was at flood; the sun beat down on bronzed men in the various cutters lining up at the start.

Rumor had it Barton's cutter was due to lose the championship. Something had gone wrong! No practice, long grinds to and from shore each day, spud peeling, turning out with the others instead of sleeping in. A complete upset. As the rival cox'n glanced toward Barton they could sense it. Cox'n and crew seemed repressed.

"Crack!"

The starting gun floated across the waters and a mighty fleet of small craft got under way. Oars lifted and caught the water, each cutter seemed to lose its identity of wood, men and oars. Instead it became a beautiful machine of which some parts were wood, some of men, yet all functioned perfectly. The cries of the

cox'ns came over the water.

"Stroke! Stroke! Stroke!"

They stood in the stern, hands on the tiller, swaying their bodies with each stroke, trying by action and words to put some of their own strength into the efforts of each man.

The Old Man and his gig hung on behind. An officer leaned over.

"Our boys are last, sir!"

"I can see our boys are last, sir!" the Old Man snapped. The officer decided never again to mention the obvious.

A half mile, three quarters with little to choose, then others began to slip behind Barton's cutter. It was not that Barton increased the stroke. Rather, it was a weakening on the part of the rival boats. They were rowing, as they had peeled spuds, grimly with repressed fury.

For days they had felt they had been imposed upon; that officers and men alike had failed to appreciate their efforts. Discipline had kept their tongues silent, but it had not checked the indignation welling within.

Nor did they lose their form as they fought the hottest race in years. Barton had drilled them in form for months. They had it, and could not lose it. They also had something else, the strength that had been stored up in the long drag to and from shore that began the day the skipper moved his ship to the distant anchorage. And above all there was the fire of their fury. The bursting point had been reached, there must be an outlet and it came through their oars in the form of power perfectly applied.

There was no beating such a group. They would show the old barnacle who had rubbed it into them; they'd show the jibing shipmates; they'd show the fleet.

"Stroke! Stroke!" Barton was calling. "Two more ahead of us. There, you've caught one! Come on, now. Stroke! Stroke! Tie into it, you spud peelers, are you quitting?" Barton became caustic, that cutter just ahead was bidding for victory. And the finish was in sight. "Stroke! Stroke!" The stroke oar increased the pace, and two seemed about to falter from the terrible grind. "Yah!" The cox'n yelled, "you're quitting. All you're good for is peeling spuds and pulling a shore boat. Quitters! Stroke! Stroke!"

Beneath his scorn they rebelled. The instinct that impels men to fight for their ship as long as she floats, impelled these men to call for the reserve, the courage, that lurked somewhere in their tired bodies. Something came alongside—the other cutter. Bow to bow; stern to stern; blade to blade they struggled a hundred fathoms without gaining. It could not last much longer. The cox'n pleaded with tears in his eyes, for just a bit more.

"An inch will win," he cried, "an inch!"

The Old Man stood up in his gig, clinging to a rail with one hand, a megaphone in the other. His face was flushed, he chewed on his cigar, or the shred that was left of it. This was a fight to remember and because it was such a fight, his boys must win. The megaphone came to his lips in a sudden sweep. The cigar disappeared in the excitement; an expression of amazement swept over his face, then he gulped. Unexpectedly he had plumbed the store of his experience and remembered the cry that had enabled him to once win a race.

"At 'em, you terriers!" he thundered. "Eat 'em up! They're just as tired as you are! Now beat 'em. One! Two! Three! Four! Five! Ah. Way, nuff."

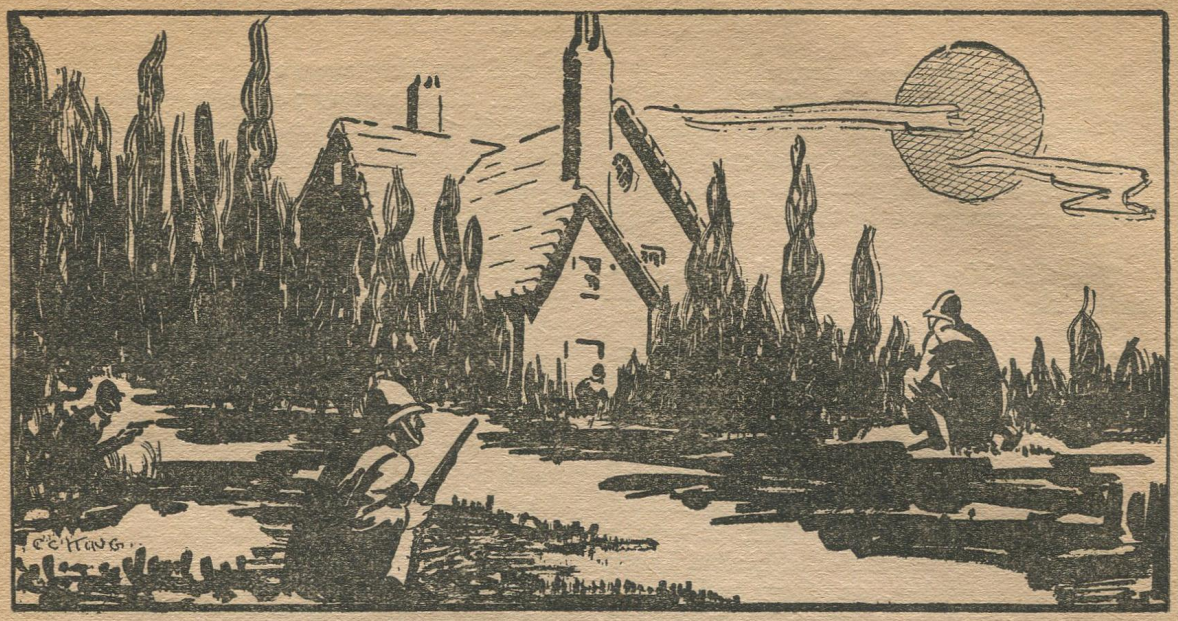
They saw their Old Man jumping up and down, banging the megaphone to shreds. That old cup was theirs, not for a year, but for all time.

They slumped over their oars, the cox'n unable to speak, tossed water into several faces. Somebody aboard their ship had lashed down the siren cord and the wild scream proclaimed victory from the churned waters to the very peaks looking benignly down. Rival crews were cheering them. Their cox'n looked them hard in the eye. He was thinking something and they sensed his thoughts. This had taken every ounce of their strength and their fight to win. Form alone would never have won it. It was fight, fight instilled by a grim old barnacle who had anchored his ship far off shore; who had lashed them with something more potent than a cat o' nine tails. "Let's give the Old Man a cheer" the cox'n yelled hoarsely.

It floated back to the gig and the Old Man swallowed hard. His boys understood him now, even as he had understood them before the race. The gig came alongside, the stern old skipper scowled.

"You men get out of my sight as quickly as you can. Don't let me see one of you for a week. Understand? Dance your fool heads off, I want you to get it out of your sytems, understand. Then maybe I can make something out of you."

The crew grinned. The Old Man looked even sterner. "Ahem!" he barked. "Shove off, Cox'n, immediately!" And then the Old Man grinned.



THE MISSING CHANCELLOR

The Story of the Disappearance of a Man with Two Personalities

By J. S. FLETCHER

Author of "Dark o' the Moor," etc.

Conclusion

Chapter XVIII

LASSITER AGAIN

I DARESAY I started—involuntarily—at this unexpected suggestion; probably I had in my mind a recollection of the fact that some of the gang I was now asked to deal with had shot at me in my own garden—whether to kill me outright or merely to terrorize me into non-interference, I didn't know. I suppose I hesitated—Mr. Alstone laid a hand on my shoulder.

"I want somebody that I can trust!" he said. "Also, I gathered from a remark of yours when we were talking to Miss Travers on Saturday night that you know Salisbury and the district. That's an advantage."

"I know the district, sir," I answered. "Of course, I shall have to go there alone. That, I believe, is a stipulation?"

"Strict—on their part!" he asserted. "But I don't suppose you'll come away alone. There will be—Mr. Petherwin. The conditions, as I understand them, are that as soon as this—we'd better call it by its true name, ransom!—as soon as this ransom is handed over, Mr. Petherwin is to be forthcoming. In fact, handed over to you in exchange. He will no doubt be upset. I want you to bring him to town immediately, or at any rate first thing next morning; he may, perhaps, wish to rest for a few hours at a Salisbury hotel."

"What exact arrangements do you propose, sir?" I asked.

"Well, I think you had better be provided with a car—a private car—and go down in it in good time tonight, leaving it as near this appointed place of rendezvous as you think wise," he answered. "Then——"

"Pardon me, sir," I said, interrupting him, "but I don't think that will do at all! These people insist on a particular kind of secrecy, and I've no doubt that they are keeping a watch on us here! They're clever enough! As I understand it, all they demand is that your representative should be at the third milestone on the highroad between Salisbury and Amesbury at exactly midnight tonight and should there hand over to them what they ask for. If you'll leave it to me—as you wish me to go—I'll make my own arrangements. I know precisely what to do—

which is, to meet these people in strict secrecy at the appointed time and place, and I'd rather do it in my own way."

"Good—good!" he said, with a gesture which indicated that he was only too glad to have the matter taken out of his hands. "Then, I leave it to you—entirely to you, Morrison. The only thing to do now is to give you—this!"

He turned to his desk, pulled open a drawer, and produced a somewhat bulky package enclosed in an envelope of stout cartridge paper, on the flap of which was a big splash of red wax. He made a grimace as he hurried it into my hand.

"There!" he said. "That's what these people want! Very well, Morrison, that's all. I trust everything to you!"

I went away with the bulky package in my inner breast pocket. Before I had got down to the street door I had decided what to do. Without any delay, waiting to see Steppe, or anything of that sort, I would go straight to Salisbury and lie snug in the hotel I had fixed on there until the time came for action—for I knew what I had on me, and I did not know who might not know that I had it. Perhaps this knowledge made me extra sharp-eyed when I emerged into Downing Street; anyway, I took stock, in lynx-like fashion, of everything about me as I walked away from the door of Number Ten. And the first thing I saw was the familiar face and figure of Lassiter, who was coming over in my direction from the corner of the Colonial Office.

Lassiter caught sight of me in that same instant, and came up with his usual obsequious air; he was an essentially polite person. I thought he looked ill, and I stopped.

"Sorry to see you not looking very well, Lassiter," I said. "What's the matter?"

"I am not well, sir," he replied, shaking his head, not exactly dolefully, but with a sort of mournful conviction. "I have not been well for some days. I have been greatly upset, sir, by recent events—nerves, sir! The—the waiting for news, sir, has been very prejudicial in my case. You see, sir, my master's establishment is not

THE MISSING CHANCELLOR

J. S. FLETCHER

Something about the story and an account of the previous chapters

WHEN J. S. Fletcher undertakes to weave a mystery story he is sure to present something unusually interesting. This time he treats of the disappearance of a man who had two personalities—and of the problem of tracing him—and them.

From a small inn on the Wessex coast of England there disappeared a Mr. Peters, a man who came from London occasionally to visit quietly at the inn. Added to his disappearance there is found in the neighborhood the murdered body of Mallett, a young fisherman. It is not certain that there is any connection between the two happenings, but that the police aim to find out. Oddly enough, however, the police seem to be doing very little, and the narrator of the story, a young newspaperman named Morrison, begins to get very curious on his own account. He had a cottage near the inn from which Peters disappeared and was in a position to know of the circumstances connected with it. He himself heard two foreigners speaking on one of the paths near where Peters must have walked and where there were signs of a struggle. Also later on he found a new pocketbook on the ground near that same place. In it was a card bearing the name of Richard Steppe, connected with the paper, the *Evening Planet*. Morrison makes inquiries in Fleet Street, becomes acquainted with Steppe and then finds that some high government officials are interested in him and his investigations.

He is summoned by the Prime Minister and finds out that the Mr. Peters who has disappeared is no less a personage than the Right Honorable Charles Petherwin, Chancellor of the Exchequer whose disappearance, seeing that he had with him several memoranda of the forthcoming Budget, presents an unusual problem to the Government and to Scotland Yard.

Young Morrison, after consulting with the Prime Minister, is commissioned to do anything in his power to find Petherwin, but warned that secrecy as to the missing man's identity must be preserved. Morrison and Steppe interview Sherman, a man interested in finance who lived near the scene of the disappearance, and who they think might benefit from knowledge of the Budget secrets. But from him they learn nothing, and are *almost* convinced Sherman knows nothing about it.

Then it is discovered that a young lady artist who has a cottage in the neighborhood and who was a friend of the missing Chancellor cannot be found. The Prime Minister is discussing this with Morrison when the young lady returns—saying she was kidnapped with Petherwin and that 50,000 pounds ransom is demanded for his release. For the sake of secrecy it is felt this ransom must be paid and the Prime Minister asks Morrison to undertake to deliver it as the crooks demand.

a large one—in fact, I have it pretty well to myself, and——"

I nodded at Number Eleven, the Chancellor's official residence.

"Do you mean it's not a big establishment, then?" I asked.

"Oh, dear me, no sir!" he replied, with a deprecating smile. "I know nothing whatever about that place. That, sir, is, of course, the home associated with my master's high position! I was referring to our own place—Mr. Petherwin's private residence; a flat in Piccadilly, where we have but a small staff, no member of which, sir, is competent to discuss these events. I assure you, sir, the waiting for news, the indecision, the never knowing what you mayn't hear next, is becoming too much for me, and I am just now on my way to see Mr. Rutherford, and to inform him that I must take a few days' change. I suppose you have not heard any definite news in your part of the world, sir?"

I hesitated before replying. I was thinking, for there was a new feature in my relations with Lassiter. In all my previous talks with him he had scrupulously kept to the Mr. Peters' theory; never once had he said, or referred, nor admitted that Mr. Peters was in reality the Right Honorable Charles Petherwin, Chancellor of the Exchequer. Now he spoke of him as such boldly and openly.

"So you are aware that I know Mr. Peters to be Mr. Petherwin, Lassiter?" I said suddenly. "You haven't referred to him as Mr. Petherwin before!"

He gave me a sort of half mournful, half quizzical smile, shaking his head.

"I do not think it is much good keeping up that pretence any longer, sir!" he answered. "I have no doubt that you have known Mr. Peters to be Mr. Petherwin for some time. So do many other people, too. Perhaps, sir, you have not noticed or had your attention drawn to this?"

He drew from his side pocket a neatly folded copy of a highly popular morning newspaper, famous for its provision of sensational news and staring headlines, and pointed to a line that was right across the front page in huge black capitals:

WHO IS MR. PETERS—REALLY?

"As I say, sir, I don't know if you have seen that," he continued, putting the paper into my hands. "I read it first thing this morning. The thing, sir, is getting out. It is no secret—to some people, at any rate."

There were several lines of big, leaded type under the staring headline. But there was nothing definite in them; it was all hint, suggestion, innuendo. Still, suspicion was afoot.

"I do not know where all that can have emanated from, sir," remarked Lassiter. "I have given no information to the Press. I think, sir, it has been derived from the neighborhood of Rumbelow Point, or, possibly, from Miss Petherwin. Indeed, sir, from my knowledge of Miss Petherwin, and from what she said when she came to town the other day, I do not know how the matter can remain secret any longer! Miss Petherwin, when I saw her, announced her determination of giving the widest publicity to the whole thing! And Miss Petherwin is a lady of character, a very resolute lady, as indeed she should be, having, I understand, been engaged in what they call the Higher Education for many years. But you may, perhaps, have encountered Miss Petherwin in your vicinity, sir? I know she was going down there."

I don't know if Lassiter was fishing for information; perhaps not—he was a reserved man himself and doubtless understood reserve in other people. Anyway, I was not going to give him any.

"I have been away from home a good deal lately, Lassiter," I answered evasively. "But look here! Now that you admit Mr. Peters to be Mr. Petherwin, I'd like you tell me something which you doubtless can tell me. Mr. Petherwin, masquerading as or, rather, purporting to be Mr. Peters, had paid two or three visits to the Starboard Light Inn——"

"Three, sir—three previous visits," he interrupted. "This, sir, was the fourth."

"Well, three visits before this last one—the fourth," I continued. "Now, was there anybody in that neighborhood, who, to your knowledge, knew that Mr. Peters was really Mr. Petherwin, the Chancellor of the Exchequer?"

He smiled, in his curious, melancholy fashion, and gave me a sly look.

"May I ask you a question, sir?" he replied. "A pertinent question!"

"You may, Lassiter," said I.

"Well, sir," he continued, still smiling, "I am an observant person, and as I came round the corner there, I saw you leaving the Prime Minister's official residence. Do I take it, sir, that you are in some way concerned in the search for Mr. Petherwin?" Then, seeing my hesitation, he added quietly, "I am, of course, a person of strict honor, sir! Anything you please to tell me I shall hold sacred."

"Then you may take it that I am concerned, Lassiter," I replied. "Will that do?"

"That will do very well, sir, thank you," he said. "And I have no objection, knowing that, to answering your question. Yes, sir. There were two people in the neighborhood of Rumbelow Point who knew that the Mr. Peters of the Starboard Light Inn was really the Right Honorable Charles Petherwin, M. P., Chancellor of the Exchequer."

"Two, eh?" said I. "And—who were they?"

"Well, sir, one was a charming member of the opposite sex," he replied, smiling archly. "A young lady artist, Miss Travis,

a good deal of whose work ornaments the walls of my master's private residence. Mr. Petherwin, sir, is a great patron of art, and has a belief in Miss Travis. He has often assured me that Miss Travis will make a considerable figure in her own line. Now Miss Travis has a little seaside place, Vimiera Cottage, near your way, and she has generally—three out of four times, at any rate— been at it when Mr. Petherwin has been at the Starboard Light. Naturally, sir, he has visited Miss Travis at her cottage. I think, sir, you may remember that on the evening on which I had the honor of first seeing you, at the inn, you and I met later—in fact, collided!—near your own residence? Well, sir, you may have wondered what I was doing down there at that late hour? The fact was, I was on my way to Miss Travis's place, bearing a note to her from my master—to let her know we had arrived."

"I see," said I, remembering well enough what he meant. "And you found her there that night?"

"Oh certainly, and gave her the note, and stayed a little while chatting with her. She gave me a little refreshment, sir, and presented me with a cigar," he answered, still smilingly. "And the next day, when, as you will remember, I sought all round the neighborhood for Mr. Petherwin, naturally I called at Vimiera Cottage to ascertain if he had been there. Indeed, I fully expected to find him there. But I found no one there—the place was locked up."

"Have you ever seen Miss Travis since?" I asked.

"I have not, sir," he answered. "Three days ago I called at Miss Travis's studio, here in town. That, too, was locked up."

"Lassiter!" said I. "Did it ever occur to you that your master had eloped with Miss Travis?"

He shok his head gravely.

"The notion may have come into what I understand is called the subconscious mind," he replied. "But only to be dismissed, sir, as untenable. To begin with, Mr. Petherwin was just about to bring in his first Budget—a most important one, I fancy. To end with, if Mr. Petherwin had matrimonial intentions toward Miss Travis, there was no need for elopement! No, sir! I think the relations between Miss Travis and my master were of the purely Platonic variety."

"Well," I said, "and who was the other person down there who knew that Mr. Peters was Mr. Petherwin?"

He answered that question promptly, as if it had been one which admitted but of one reply.

"Mr. Sherman, the Member of Parliament, sir, who has a country place not far from you—Brockensdene Grange," he said. "That, of course, was unavoidable—once Mr. Sherman and Mr. Petherwin chanced to meet down there."

"Then they did meet?" I suggested.

"The second visit he paid there, I think, sir," asserted Lassiter. "Oh, yes, I remember my master returning one afternoon to the Starboard Light and telling me he'd met Mr. Sherman. I think that was during our second visit—it may have been the third. At any rate, whenever it was, Mr. Petherwin went to Brockensdene Grange next day to lunch with Mr. Sherman."

I went off after that. Lassiter's last bit of information had given me enough food for reflection for the time being. So Sherman had met Petherwin down there, had he—and had entertained him at Brockensdene Grange? That roused all sorts of speculations, doubts, theories. It was puzzling, more than puzzling; it would have to be gone into. Meanwhile—there was the business in hand, and the packet in my pocket.

I took good care to keep my jacket tightly buttoned at Waterloo, and to go down to Salisbury in a carefully chosen third-class carriage in which I had plenty

of company. Arrived at Salisbury I walked straight to the White Hart Hotel, with which I was familiar, and out of its doors never emerged again until it was necessary to set out on my journey to the appointed place of meeting. But during the evening I made all my arrangements with great care. I engaged two rooms—one for myself, one for Mr. Petherwin. I took counsel with the nightporter, explaining to him that I had to go out at half past eleven and should return at half past twelve with a friend. Further I got him to commission me a private car, the driver of which was to be a trusty person whom I should reward well. All that done, I dined quietly, spent the rest of the evening over a book in the lounge, and tried not to think of the somewhat doubtful experience before me—for, after all, there might be danger in the thing. Eventually, eleven-thirty came, and stepping into the car awaiting me, I bade its driver follow the Amesbury Road until I told him to stop.

Chapter XIX

BRIGHT CHESTNUT

EVERYTHING was very still and the night was very dark when I pulled up my driver and got out of his car a little short of the third milestone on the road that leads from Salisbury to Amesbury. I knew that neighborhood pretty well, and I purposely stopped at a place where the car could wait by the roadside, under the protecting shadows of a grove of trees, until such time as I wanted it again. Bidding the driver turn down or shade his lights and explaining to him that I might be back with him almost immediately, or possibly not for half an hour, I went forward to the place of rendezvous. I had timed things excellently; it was precisely two minutes to twelve when I reached the milestone.

There was a silence like to that of the grave at that spot. Standing in the middle of the wide road, my figure, no doubt, distinct enough against the starlight, I waited, listening intently for the sound of approaching footsteps. I heard nothing of that sort. All I heard was the gentle sighing of a westerly wind blowing across the plain and rustling in the adjacent hedge-rows. It was my opinion that the ambassador with whom I was to do my business would come as I had come, in a car, and I strained my ears to catch sounds of its advent. But the minutes dragged by and no sound came; up there, in those vast solitudes (for this was before the War, and Salisbury Plain was innocent of the huge camps, barracks, and aerodromes that have since encumbered it) I seemed to be the only waking thing in a world of sleep. But after a time I began to wonder if the man I was to meet was already there, and if I was being watched. There was ample cover all about me; a man might be hidden amongst those trees, or behind that hedge—watching, to assure himself that I was really alone. That idea made me listen more intently than ever, for the rustle of a leaf, the snapping of a twig. But I heard nothing that signalled the nearness or approach of anything human, and the silence grew trying; it was with positive relief that I heard, far away behind me, the scream of a railway train ploughing east or west on its midnight journey.

Ten minutes passed; fifteen; twenty. I marched up and down in the middle of the road, always listening. I was becoming puzzled; the instructions of these people had been precise. I was at the right place, and at the right time, and unaccompanied. Clearly, something had gone wrong, with them—but what was I to do? And what would be the effect of the failure to meet on the unfortunate Chancellor? It was out of the question that I could wait there all through the night, and at the end of half an hour I walked slowly back to my car. Its driver, whom I had taken into my confidence so far as to tell him that I had gone up there to keep an appointment was smoking his pipe in unconcerned patience.

"The man I expected has not turned up," said I. "I scarcely know whether to wait longer or not."

"How might he be coming, sir?" asked the driver.

"I should say by car," I replied. "And most likely down the road."

"No signs of him now, then," he answered. "That is, at this moment. You can hear a car miles off at this time o' night."

I got out my pipe and tobacco and began to smoke, walking up and down at the side of the car. Another five or ten minutes passed; I was thinking of going back to the milestone when a sudden exclama-

tion from my driver roused me.

"Hullo!" he said, pointing up the road in the Amesbury direction. "Here's a light coming along. That'll be a bicycle. Maybe it's your friend, sir——"

I went forward at that, keeping myself in the center of the road. The light was some distance off, but it was advancing rapidly; at last I heard the faint whirr of rubber-shod wheels. And as I came abreast of the milestone the bicycle and its rider shot clear of the darkness—the head-lamp threw its light full on me, purposely standing in the way. I saw then that the rider was a policeman, and though I scarcely knew why I did it, I lifted my hand.

"Hi, stop!" I called.

He was off his machine at once, staring from me toward the car, the lights of which he could see well enough.

"Are you a doctor, sir?" he demanded hurriedly.

"A doctor? No!" said I. "Why——?"

"Thought you might be, being out late," he answered. "There's a bad accident up the road—young gentleman thrown off his motor-bicycle. I'm afraid it's all up with him. I've got him into a wayside cottage, and I'm going for a doctor, though I don't think it's any good. Broken down, sir?" he added, nodding at my car.

"No!" I replied. "I came up here to meet a man. It may be he's the man you're talking about. Where's he lying?"

He was preparing to remount his machine, but paused at that.

"About a mile and a half along here, in a cottage. You'll see lights in the windows, close to the road. If you think he's somebody you know, perhaps you'll go on and see him. I'll get along for a doctor."

"One moment!" said I. "How did it happen? What was he doing?"

"Going too fast, I should say," he answered. "I didn't see it, but I heard him. Tore past my place at a furious speed, close on twelve o'clock, and came to grief at a bend a bit further on—dashed into a stout wall. There were people awake near—I was fetched. Well—you'll go up there, sir?"

"At once," I asserted. "But—you think a doctor's not much good? Likely to—die eh? Then, if I were you, I should bring your inspector or superintendent back, don't you think?"

I had a purpose in that suggestion. If this man turned out to be the man I had come to meet, and if he died, I foresaw complications for myself: the presence of men in authority were desirable. I might be obliged to take some official or other into my confidence. The policeman acquiesced; he appeared to be certain of the man's fate, and muttered something about an inquest as he jumped on his bicycle and made speed toward Salisbury. And as he vanished I hurried to the car, and bade the driver go along the road till he came to a wayside cottage in which he would see the windows lighted.

We were at that cottage in five minutes. Its door was open; a man, evidently a farm-laborer, came to it as I jumped from the car and made in. He shook his head at sight of me.

"Too late, doctor!" he said quickly. "He's gone! Died just after the policeman set off to fetch you."

I advanced into the light; he saw his mistake then, and drew back, staring.

"I am not a doctor," said I. "The policeman met me on the road and told me what had happened. I came on to see if I could do anything. You say he's dead?"

"Died as soon as the policeman had gone, sir," replied a woman who had come up from within. "Come inside, sir. We've done what we could, but of course——"

There were one or two other folk within the cottage—neighbors who had evidently been roused from their sleep and had dressed hurriedly. They made way for me as I entered, directing my attention to a large, old-fashioned couch which filled one side of the little living-room.

"Never came to himself, sir," whispered the woman. "Stunned he was when they carried him, and remained so till he went."

I bent over the dead man, who lay as they had set him down. He was in his overalls, and still wore a sort of helmet-cap. But from beneath it, at his temples and behind his ears there was plenty of his crisp hair showing—and it was of a bright chestnut color. I had seen hair of that sort and tint not long before—in the grasp of another dead man's fingers. And I had little doubt that here, in this Wiltshire wayside cottage, killed himself by misadventure, lay the man who had murdered Jim Mallett!

I took a long look at the dead man's face. He seemed to be, say, twenty-five years of age—thereabouts; of good features, but with a certain suggestion of brutality about them which was heightened by the injuries plainly visible on temple and cheek-bone. Not a prepossessing young man, and yet I could see, from certain small evidences that he was what is

commonly called a gentleman. A fine, athletic, strongly built young animal—and as dead as a door-nail. And his death was all due to his own foolhardiness, as I presently ascertained. The man of the cottage took me out to the scene of the accident, close by. Another man, a neighbor, went with us, who, he told me, had been sitting up with a sick child when the thing happened and had hurried out. This man said that he heard the motorcycle coming along from the northward at a tremendous rate; had gone to the window and seen it flash past, faster, he declared, than an express train, and had then waited in sure expectation of hearing a smash. For a little way past his cottage there was a right-angled turn in the road; nobody riding at that rate, he said, could possibly get around it in safety. And presently, he had heard what he expected to hear and rushed out, calling the man in the neighboring cottage, and they had found—what I had just seen.

I was, of course, absolutely certain by this time that the dead man was the man I had come to meet. There could be no doubt about it. I waited for the policeman to return with help, wondering all the time what I had better do. It was half past one o'clock in the morning before he returned, but he brought plenty of company with him—two medical men in one car; the superintendent of police, an inspector, and a sergeant in another. Evidently the policeman had explained to the superintendent that I was a person met by chance who had gone up there to meet some other person—probably the dead man. The superintendent eyed me with curiosity, but before questioning me he and his assistanst made a thorough examination of the dead man's clothing and belongings. They made no objection to my presence, and I watched all they did with great curiosity, eager to see if they found anything by which the man could be identified.

They found nothing—of that sort. There were no papers. There were no initials on the linen; no tabs sewn inside the clothes, showing their owner's name and address. There was plenty of money—twelve or fifteen pounds in gold and silver—in the pockets; and first-rate watch and chain. Various little articles, such as a handsome gold cigarette case and a gold match-box, came to light. But there was nothing whatever that showed who the man was, whence he came, whither he was bound. One find, drawn from the deep pocket of his overall clothes, bewildered the police, but it gave me no astonishment. It was a hood, to fit the head and shoulders, and exactly of the sort described at the Prime Minister's by Miss Travis.

The police superintendent turned to me when all this had been gone through. He looked me carefully over as if not quite certain of the situation.

"The constable," he remarked, nodding toward the village policeman whom I had encountered on his bicycle, "tells me that in going to fetch assistance he met you, and that you told him you had come up the road from Salisbury to meet somebody. Is this dead man the man you were expecting to meet?"

"I believe he is," I answered.

He knitted his brows, evidently puzzled, and not liking it.

"Believe?" he said. "Don't you know?"

"I don't!" I replied. "I have never seen this man before—to my knowledge. But I feel sure he is the man whom I was to meet at twelve o'clock, and whom I should have met, but for this accident."

He looked more puzzled than ever at that.

"Strange time to meet anybody!" he remarked. "And a strange place!"

"You are quite right," I assented. "Place and time were alike strange."

He hesitated a little, again closely inspecting me.

"Business appointment?" he asked, brusquely.

"It was an extremely important business," I answered. "Of the very greatest importance!"

Again he hesitated.

"Well!" he said, after a pause, during which his manner became something very like suspicious. "We shall want to know more. If you'd an appointment with this man, you know his name."

"No, I don't!" said I. "I have no more idea of his name than you have."

"How were you to know each other?" he asked, a little sneeringly. "Come!"

"By the mere fact of meeting at a certain place at a certain time," said I.

"Well, there'll be an inquest, of course," he went on, "and you'll have to be there to——"

"Pardon me," I interrupted. "I don't know that I can. There is nothing that I can tell beyond what I have already told you. The fact is, that as this happened I ought to return to London at once. Indeed, I think I shall charter my car to go straight there, now!"

"No!" he said, resolutely. "I can't allow that! You're the only person who, at present, can throw any light on this dead man's identity, and I feel confident you know something about him. Your car driver says he brought you up from the White Hart Hotel. Now I think you'd better give some account of yourself, and tell us what you were doing here. There's something rather suspicious about a meeting such as you hint at. I want to know!"

"Very good!" I replied. "Then you will have to know—and you will have to keep what you know strictly to yourself. So, now listen!"

Chapter XX

BUTTONS

I TOLD the superintendent just as much as it was absolutely necessary to tell him; he listened open-mouthed and wide-eyed, as if he had been a child to whom some extraordinary fairy tale is being set forth. By the time I had finished and had impressed upon him the high source of my credentials, originating with the Prime Minister himself he had come to regard me as a person of great importance, and I saw that I should have no further trouble with him. But wonder-struck though he was, he kept his head, and his first remark was practical enough.

"Then you really think, Mr. Morrison, that this man lying dead in there"—we were talking in the road outside the cottage—"is one of the men who carried off Mr. Petherwin?" he asked. "One of the actual gang?"

"I do!" said I. "What's more, I feel certain he's the man with whom Mallett, the fisherman, was engaged in a hand-to-hand scrap when Mallett was shot. There was hair obviously torn from a man's head, in Mallett's tightly-clenched fingers. It was of a somewhat unusual color—bright chestnut. This man—but you've seen him! It struck me at once."

"You haven't the least idea of where he came from to meet you?" he asked.

"Not the slightest!" said I. "Probably from some distance. And you've found nothing on him that affords any clue."

"There's his machine," he remarked suddenly. "The motor-bicycle! It'll bear a number-plate. We'd better see it."

The motor-bicycle still lay, in a fine state of wreckage, underneath the solid wall into which its rider had crashed. With the aid of a lamp or two we examined it. The number-plate had been removed; there was nothing whatever about the thing by which we could gain any information.

"What shall you do, now?" the superintendent asked when he and I were alone again. "Something will have to be done, of course."

"I shall wire the facts to Mr. Alstone as soon as the telegraph office opens at Salisbury," I answered. "That'll mean a few hours' delay, of course——"

"No," he said. "You can wire now—any time during the night—from the Railway Station. The office is open day and night from Monday morning to Sunday morning. I suppose," he continued, "somebody'll be sent down from London?"

"I suppose so," said I. "Though I don't see what good will come of it. They can't get any more clue to this man's identity than we've got. Anyway, I'll go down to Salisbury and wire. What will be done here?"

"We shall have to remove the body to the nearest inn, to await an inquest," he answered. "There's a village close by—this place is in the parish. After that—nothing, till the inquest. Where can you be found, Mr. Morrison? The White Hart? I'll look in there, about breakfast time."

I left him then, and rejoining my car, went back to Salisbury, and to the telegraph office at the railway station. Thence I despatched two telegrams, one to Mr. Alstone, summarizing what had happened and asking for instructions; the other to Steppe, requesting him to come down to Salisbury by the next train. That done, I went off to the hotel, and after charging the night-porter to call me if by any chance anybody asked for me or any wire came for me before I rose, I repaired to bed, and slept so soundly that I was still heavy with sleep when some hand knocked loudly at my door. The knocking, I think, had been repeated several times before I woke to realize that it was broad daylight and to recollect the recent event.

The night-porter, not yet off duty, was at my door when I opened it, and with him

were two middle-aged, well-dressed, quiet looking men, who might have been, say commercial travelers of the higher class, but whom I instinctively guessed to be detectives.

"Two gentlemen to see you, sir!" announced the night-porter.

"In reply to your telegram to Mr. A," added one of the two, with a slight wink at me. "Shall we wait till you're dressed, Mr. Morrison?"

"No," said I. "Come in—we can talk while I dress." I called the night-porter back. "Order breakfast for three in half an hour," I said. Then, closing the door, I turned to my visitors. "You have not lost much time," I remarked. "I scarcely expected to see anybody just yet."

"This isn't a case to be taken leisurely," answered the man who had first spoken, with a smile at my evident surprise. "Mr. Alstone had your wire in the middle of the night, and immediately communicated with our headquarters——"

"Scotland Yard, of course," I remarked, beginning to bustle about with my dressing.

"To be sure, Mr. Morrison! Better introduce ourselves—this is Detective Sergeant Sparrow; I'm Detective Inspector Cleaver."

"Famous men, both, I believe!" said I.

"Well—well—we've had some experience, Mr. Morrison," he answered. "However, we were sent for and sent over to see Mr. Alstone. He read your telegram to us, told us to get a fast car, and come down to you at once, and hear all about it, and consult with you. So here we are! One question, first, however. You have the packet which Mr. Alstone entrusted to your care?"

I pointed to the pillow from which I had just lifted my head.

"Under that!" I said. "Intact!"

"Mr. Alstone suggests that as it may be a source of anxiety to you, while all this is going on, you should deposit it at one of the banks here as soon as they open this morning," he continued. "You're at liberty to mention Mr. Alstone's name—to the manager."

"Good!" said I. "I shall be thankful to be rid of it, and there's small chance of handing it over, now!"

"You feel sure this dead man is the man you came to meet?" asked Cleaver.

"No doubt of it." I answered. "I think it's absolutely certain. But you, what are you going to do?"

"Our job—now that this has happened—is to endeavor to get some clue that will help toward ascertaining the present whereabouts of Mr. Petherwin," he said. "From, of course, whatever may be found on the dead man."

"Hopeless task!" said I. "There's nothing on him! The local police superintendent went through him in my presence. There isn't as much as an initial on his linen, and the number-plate on his motor-cycle had been carefully removed."

"That rather looks as if, wherever he came from, he set out after dark," remarked Sparrow. "Still, we may find something."

"I don't know what you'll find," I demurred. "Everything about him was most closely examined."

"Um!" said Cleaver. "Did the local police examine the buttons on his trousers, Mr. Morrison?"

"Ah, I don't know about that!" I admitted. "You mean—there might be the name of a tailor of them?"

"Extremely likely!" he replied drily. "I've known identity established through that, before today. However, we'll take a look at everything, ourselves. A curious case, Mr. Morrison!"

"Are you pretty familiar with the details?" I asked.

The two men exchanged an amused smile.

"Why, to tell you the truth, Mr. Morrison," replied Cleaver, "we are! The fact is, we have been kept posted, in everything—by Mr. Alstone in London, and by the local police, at Wickhampton. Yes, I think you may say we are quite up-to-date in our knowledge."

"Why haven't you been more in evidence, then?" I asked.

"That is all part of the—the game, if I may so phrase it," he replied. "We have been kept in reserve, as it were. State reasons—political reasons—all sorts of reasons! But this affair rather alters the complexion of things."

"How?" I enquired.

"There appears to be a direct chance of tracking this gang through the death of one of its members," answered Cleaver. "That, at any rate, is what we're going to work on."

I was dressed by that time, and taking the Prime Minister's packet from under

the pillow beneath which—and my head—it had rested since my belated going-to-bed, I conducted my visitors downstairs to the coffee-room. There, as we breakfasted, the police superintendent, coming to look for me, found us.

The local superintendent, duly introduced, was plainly impressed by the greatness of my two companions. But he had nothing to tell them beyond what I had already told them, and the conversation relapsed into mere exchange of theory and suggestion. The next practical thing to do was to let the two Scotland Yard men see the dead man and after I had deposited the packet at a bank—whose manager was mightily astonished when he heard on whose behalf I left it in his charge—and had left a note for Steppe—from whom I had heard nothing—at the hotel, we set off in their car to the scene of the accident.

The dead man's body had been removed to an inn, not far from the cottage in which I had first seen it. It was now decently laid out, and the clothing which had been removed from it was in charge of the village constable—the same man who had first told me of the smash and its victim. That clothing was the first thing the detectives asked for. It consisted of an overall suit; an Oxford blue flannel coat, a sweater, and a pair of gray flannel trousers. Within a minute, Cleaver, handling the trousers, nudged my elbow.

"What did I say to you, Morrison?" he whispered. "Trousers buttons, eh? Look there!"

He pointed a finger to the very ordinary metal buttons on the trousers. On the outer circle of each one appeared in gilt, two names—the name of a person, the name of a place: *Flaxington, Worcester.*

Cleaver quietly folded up these trousers, after showing Sparrow what he had just shown me. He muttered two words in an aside to me, with a peculiarly knowing glance.

"Got it!" Then, seeing my incredulous look, he smiled. "The beginning, Mr. Morrison, the beginning! And any beginning's better than none!"

I looked round. The local superintendent was outside, talking to his men; the detectives and I were alone.

"You consider that a satisfactory clue?" I suggested.

"And a highly satisfactory one!" said Cleaver. "Flaxington, who is probably a tailor, or an outfitter, or a draper, or all three, at Worcester, supplied these trousers; possibly Flaxington can give information about this dead man. He may remember him by the color of his hair, which is a bit unusual. Anyhow, Mr. Morrison, Sparrow and I are now off to Worcester—and you'd better come with us."

"You're going at once?" I asked.

"At once! We've a magnificent car, all at our disposal. We'll go straight on," he answered. "By the end of this afternoon—who knows?"

I went with them. It was eleven o'clock when we set off from the village inn; just before three in the afternoon we pulled up at the Star Hotel in Worcester. Ten minutes later we set out to seek the shop of Flaxington, tailor or outfitter.

Flaxington proved to be the owner of a business in ready-made clothing; his shop and he were easily found. The shop was one of those places wherein you can get completely rigged out on the spot with everything a man wants in the way of garments. And in the window looking on the street there were two or three pairs of gray flannel trousers—the very marrow, said Cleaver, cynically, of those he had brought with him.

Flaxington was a big, florid-faced, sharp-eyed man who, I fancy, sensed police work as soon as he looked at my two companions. Perhaps Cleaver saw that he did; anyway, he lost no time in getting to business. He spread the tops of the trousers on the counter and pointed to the buttons.

"I fancy this garment has been bought at your shop, Mr. Flaxington," he said. "Your name's there. Well, the young man who was wearing them was killed in an accident early this morning——"

Flaxington interrupted with a knowing look.

"Motor-bike?" he asked.

"That's so," agreed Cleaver. "It was on a motor-bike. Smashed into a wall. You know him, then?"

"No!" said Flaxington. "At least, not who he is. If he's the chap I'm thinking of he's a young fellow that I've seen about the city two or three times of late, riding a motor-bike. Tallish, well-built chap—got a head of hair on him that you could see a mile off—neither red nor ginger, but something between."

"That's the man!" exclaimed Cleaver. "But you know his name?"

"No, know nothing about him, mister, except that, as I say, he's been about here a bit, and that he came into this shop one day last week and bought those trousers," answered Flaxington. "Paid cash for 'em, so of course I'd no occasion to ask his name nor his address." Then, seeing Cleaver's look of disappointment, he added, "There may be—probably are—people in the city that know him. What is it? Police business, eh?"

"We want to identify him," replied Cleaver. "There's nothing whatever on him that gives any clue to his identity."

"Aye, but you want more than that, I'm thinking!" said Flaxington, with a shrewd wink. "Three of you, eh, and none of you Worcester men! But as I say, somebody may know him. If you like to look in again, before I close, I might tell you something. Look in about seven o'clock. I'll ask a question or two in a likely place."

We left Flaxington, and went back toward the Star Hotel, intent on a cup of tea. Cleaver appeared to be encouraged by the outfitter's remark that the dead man had been seen about Worcester; we should learn something yet, he said. We were indeed, to learn something sooner than I expected, for as we neared the hotel, I saw, coming across to it from the Fore Street Station, Steppe—and with Steppe, Miss Petherwin's agent, Munro.

Chapter XXI

THE DOUBLE CLUE

QUICK as I was to recognize Steppe, the two detectives were equally quick in recognizing his companion; they stopped, staring across the street.

"Good Lord! That's Munro, the private enquiry man!" exclaimed Cleaver. "What's he doing here? Surely not on our game!"

"I imagine he is!" said I. "For the other fellow is Steppe, the young journalist I've told you about. Of course they're on our job—come across!"

Steppe caught sight of me just then, and, jogging Munro's elbow, drew his attention to us. They came in our direction, the detectives and Munro meeting with mutual nods of recognition. Steppe buttonholing me.

"What're you doing here, Morrison?" he demanded. "Got some notion?"

"What're you doing here?" I asked. "That's more like it! And didn't you get a wire from me, from Salisbury, early this morning?"

"I had no wire from you," he replied. "Fact is, I've not been home since yesterday. Other things to do." He pointed to Munro, who was exchanging greetings with Cleaver and Sparrow. "He's got a clue—an important one!" he continued. "That's what brought us here to Worcester. But you? And who are those chaps with you?"

"Two big pots from Scotland Yard," I replied. "We've got a clue, too. But we can't talk in the street—and there's a lot to talk about."

I led him back to the detectives; after a few words of explanation we all went into the hotel, and getting into a quiet place ordered tea. As soon as the waiter who took the order had vanished, Steppe plunged into matters.

"Look here, Morrison," he said, "you spoke of Salisbury just now. You've been there, of course. Do you know anything about this?"

He pulled out a folded newspaper and pointed to a passage which he had marked with blue pencil. Cleaver, Sparrow, and I bent over it. To our astonishment we saw it was a fairly full and accurate account of the fatal accident on the Salisbury-Amesbury road, with an intimate description of the dead man's appearance. Cleaver let out a groan of annoyance.

"Confound it!" he exclaimed. "We wanted to keep all that dark for a while. This is the work of some country newspaper reporter. He's got the news early this morning and wired it to some press agency. Of course, it'll be all over the place now!"

"But this man, Morrison?" urged Steppe. "You think he was the fellow you were to meet? And one of the lot that collared Petherwin and Miss Travis—and possibly the man who shot Jim Mallett? You do? Well now, look here! Here we all are—on the same job! Are we going to pool our information and work together? Because Munro has a highly important clue, and I suggest he tells you all about it—if you tell him what yours is."

I looked at Cleaver; Cleaver nodded.

"Our clue is this, Steppe," said I. "The dead man at Salisbury had no papers on him, nor anything by which his identity could be established. But his trouser but-

tons bore the name of a Worcester tailor —Flaxington. So we came here at once to see Flaxington. Flaxington knew the fellow by sight, but he doesn't know who he was, nor his name, nor his address."

"All the same," remarked Steppe confidently, "we're getting on! There's no doubt this place—Worcester—figures in the business. For Munro's clue brought us to Worcester, just as yours brought you. Tell them about it, Munro."

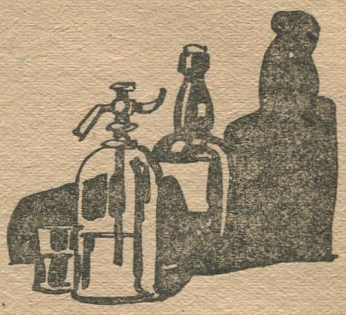
Munro gave the detectives a glance which seemed to imply that they, as professionals in a game at which he, after all, ranked as an amateur, would understand his position.

"I am employed by Miss Petherwin," he said, in his mild, unobtrusive fashion. "My object, of course, is—the recovery of Mr. Petherwin. If the rest of you are willing to help me in that, I'm willing—eh?"

"Oh, we'll make common cause—common cause!" exclaimed Cleaver. "Our object is the same. The only difference is that Miss Petherwin commissions you; we're commissioned by—well, the Government, of course. Work together, now we've met. You know our clue—what's yours?"

The waiter came just then with the tea; Munro preserved silence until he had gone and Steppe had presided over the teapot. Then he spoke.

"Well," he said, after sipping his tea with an air of reflection, "my clue is pretty much akin to yours! Yesterday morning, first thing, I got a wire from Mr. Steppe there, at the Starboard Inn at Rumbelow Point. He asked me to go and examine a cave in the woods near Strillion Cove, adding that he had reason to believe Mr. Peters had been taken there by captors. I ascertained the whereabouts of this cave and went off to find it. There was no difficulty about that; the cave was easily found. I saw at once that people had been in it of late; the floor was much trampled, and there were evidences of occupancy in the shape of an old lunch-basket evidently thrown aside when its contents had been exhausted, cardboard boxes which had contained fruit; others that had held sandwiches and so on. But there were certain things of real importance as clues. To begin with, there were two glass tumblers—good glass, possibly expensive glass, belonging to a set, and, in my opinion though I'm not an expert in glass, old. I feel sure they'd come out of some private house in which the glass was of superior quality. Then there were two half-empty soda-water siphons; each bore the name of a mineral water manufacturer here in Worcester. And there were two empty whisky bottles; each had a label. I have one now with me in this handbag—here it is. Now look at the label!"



He drew a bottle from his bag as he spoke, and we all crowded together to stare at the paper label to which he pointed:

Very old Ardnashean Whisky
(10 years in bottle)
Sole Agents in Worcestershire & Oxfordshire
GLENDINNING & HISSEY: Worcester.

The two detectives exchanged glances: I could see they were impressed.

"Same label on the other bottle?" enquired Cleaver.

"Just the same," replied Munro. "That, and the soda-water siphons, and the two glass tumblers are safely locked up at the Starboard Light. Clearly, these people set out from Worcester on their predatory expedition against Mr. Peters, or Petherwin, and took provisions with them—eatables and drinkables."

"Evident!" muttered Cleaver.

"And now," continued Munro, "the thing is—can we trace them through the wine-merchants, Glendinning and Hissey? That's what we came down for, Steppe and myself."

"We've had no luck with the tailor," observed Sparrow.

"So far,—so far!" said Cleaver. "We may have, yet. But I think these wine-merchants are more likely. This stuff," he went on, tapping the whisky bottle, "is, I should say, a self-whisky, not a blend. In fact, I've heard of it, I fancy, as a self-whisky, like Talisker, and that sort of thing. Now the probability is that it's not bought in any great quantity—not popular, as the more advertised blends are—and that these people, Glendinnings, will, accordingly, know the names of the customers to whom they supply it. Of course, you haven't been to them yet?"

"No, we'd only just arrived when you

met us," replied Munro. "I'm going presently. If they can give me a list of the people hereabouts who buy this whisky from them as a regular thing, it'll merely be a question of weeding out. My belief, having in view all that Steppe has told me about Miss Travis' story—the general appearance, conversation, behavior of the men who trapped her and Mr. Petherwin, the luxurious car in which they were carried off, the room in which she was imprisoned and so on—is that we're dealing with people of position. They're no common, vulgar, ordinary thieves or malefactors, there, Cleaver! They're——somebody!"

"And therefore all the more difficult to catch!" said Cleaver, grumblingly. "Brains—put to bad purpose. However, one's settled! But that paper, with the news of the accident? Where did you get it, and when?"

"At the station here, just as we left the train," replied Steppe. "It's a Birmingham evening paper—four o'clock edition."

"Then of course, it'll be all over the town!" said Cleaver, in disgust. "And sure as fate, if the rest of this gang are in Worcester somewhere, they'll see it! They'll recognize the description of the dead man as their pal who was sent to meet Morrison, and they'll know why he hasn't returned. Then they'll be on the *qui vive*. Well, you'd better try these wine-merchants, Munro, and then we'll drop in on the tailor again."

Then, remarking that it wouldn't do for too many of us to show ourselves at once, he suggested that I should accompany Munro; the rest of them would await our return. And ascertaining the address of Glendinning and Hissey from the hotel people, Munro and I set off—Glendinning's office was in a side-street, close by. I took advantage of our short walk there to ask Munro a question or two.

"Did you make any other discoveries while you were down at Rumbelow Point?" I asked. "Or did Miss Petherwin?"

Munro was the sort of man who thinks before he speaks. He took some time about answering.

"Absolute discoveries—other than what I have in this bag, Mr. Morrison—none," he replied at length. "But I formed certain conclusions."

"Yes?" I said invitingly. "Are they secret?"

"Why, I don't know that they are," he answered. "Miss Petherwin, who appears to be jealous of any feminine influence over her brother, was very strong on the notion that he'd run away with this pretty artist girl. I thought that was all nonsense! To begin with, if Mr. Petherwin wanted to marry Miss Travis, what was there to prevent his doing so openly? To end with, a Chancellor of the Exchequer wouldn't either elope or marry just on the eve of the Budget! But Miss Petherwin is a woman, and women aren't good at reasoning."

"What were your conclusions?" I asked.

"That the whole affair is the work of a small gang of men—adventurers, probably—who were thoroughly conversant with Petherwin's habits and movements," he replied, with evident confidence. "Their object—money! And if this chestnut-haired chap hadn't been accidentally killed last night on his way to meet you, why, of course, they'd have succeeded. And now that I know all about the story Miss Travis told in your presence I think we're narrowing things down. These people have a center, a nest, somewhere—we've got to spot it!"

"This town, I think." said I.

"May be, and may be some town in the neighborhood," he answered. "The chestnut-haired fellow knew Worcester, that's a fact! Now if only these wine-and-spirit people could tell us definitely who he is and——"

But the partner of the wine-and-spirit business with whom we were presently closeted could tell us nothing. He smiled indulgently at the mere notion of his being able to identify the bottle of whisky which Munro exhibited to him.

"That whisky — Ardnashean — has a great vogue around here," he remarked. "We have stocked and sold it for years—it's popular. But the folks who like it don't call it Ardnashean—it is commonly known as Old Sandy. I couldn't possibly tell you who bought that particular bottle, and I, personally, don't remember any recent young gentleman customer resembling the man you describe. Moreover, we supply this whisky, bottled, to a good many hotels and taverns. This bottle may have been bought at any one of them. Anyway, we have no regular customer on our books who fits in with your man. If this man," he concluded, pointing to the evening paper which we had brought with us and in which we had marked the description of the unknown motor-cyclist killed near Salisbury, "is known to have been seen in Worcester of late, why not try the police?"

We went back to the hotel and reported our failure. Munro was all for going to the local police there and then, but Cleaver demurred. First, he said, we would try the tailor again. And so, this time in a body, we went off once more to Flaxington's shop.

Flaxington rubbed his hands at sight of us; clearly, he was one of these good-natured souls who are willing to take a bit of trouble for anybody.

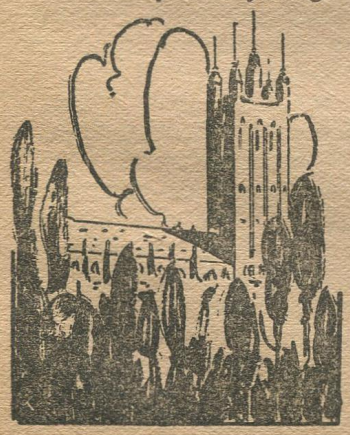
"Well, I've made two or three enquiries about that young fellow," he said. "Not much result, though!"

"Have you got any particulars?" enquired Cleaver.

"Particulars? Well, as you might say, not exactly particulars," replied Flaxington. "I've spoken to a pal or two of mine that's always in and around the town. You know—familiar with things. They've seen this chestnut-haired young fellow about of late—just now and then—but as to who he is, and what his name might be—ah, that I can't ascertain. But one of our policemen that I spoke to, he says he's seen him, on his motor-bike, coming into the town along the Droitwich road. Maybe he hails from there? I'm sure of one thing about him, anyway! He doesn't belong to Worcester. This isn't such a big place that permanent residents could go unidentified long."

We left Flaxington's shop, accordingly, little wiser than when we entered it. Munro wanted to go to the police-headquarters then, to enlist their assistance. But the two men from Scotland Yard, for some reason of their own, did not seem to favor this proposal.

"Let's take a look round," said Cleaver. "If we could identify the house and view described by the young lady—eh? The river—the hills in the distance——"



We were just then near the opening into the Cathedral close, and six o'clock was striking from the high square tower. The last stroke died away—and suddenly a tune broke slowly on the succeeding silence. And the tune was *Men of Harlech!*

Chapter XXII

COLD STEEL

OUR three companions were by that time as conversant with Miss Travis' story of her imprisonment as Steppe and I were, for we had discussed it in every detail over our tea-cups, and when we heard the familiar tune being played, note by note, above our heads we all paused and looked at each other with a sudden comprehension.

"That settles it!" exclaimed Cleaver, suddenly. "This is the place! Worcester! And the next job is—the particular house?"

"That oughtn't to be such a very difficult matter," remarked Steppe. "It looked out—that is, she, from her window, looked out—on the river, on some meadows beyond, and on hills in the distance. I suggest we get down to the river side."

"The river side is down there," said Munro. "Any of these side-streets——"

But Cleaver, practical and painstaking, dived into a stationer's shop; to come back, a moment later, armed with a map. He drew us aside into a quiet corner and spread out his purchase.

"Here we are," he observed presently. "Here's the Cathedral—a good centre-point. Here's the river. A long frontage, too—the house may have been any one of many. From that end of the city called Barbourne to this other called Diglis, it's a fair long stretch. However, let's make a start."

We went down to the river by way of College Green. And once down there, on the embankment that runs alongside the Severn, we saw that, even at that point, there were a great many houses, any one of which fitted in with Miss Travis' description. They were for the most part tall, old-fashioned houses of warm red brick, roomy places, with walled gardens at their bases, extending to the edge of the promenade along the river. There were more of such houses away to the left; still more away to the right. But that it was in one of these houses that Miss Travis had spent her few days of captivity I had no doubt whatever, for there, on the opposite side of the river were meadows such as she had described, and beyond them, in the near distance, was a chain of hills, behind the crest of which the sun was already westering. Munro knew these hills and pointed them out—Hereford Beacon, Worcester Beacon, North Hill.

"Those are what the young lady looked

out on," he said, with an air of finality. "And here's the river she saw, and there are the fields she spoke of. But as to the house—" he shook his head, glancing at the professional detectives. "Case of minute enquiry, I think?" he concluded.

"We can't go knocking at the door of every house that looks on this river front," said Cleaver. "That's certain!"

"What about the local police?" suggested Steppe.

But the two men from Scotland Yard evidently had no liking for this proposition. They drew aside, talking together; eventually they came back to us.

"We don't want too much publicity in this affair, yet, you know, gentlemen," said Cleaver. "The thing to do is to trace this fellow who was killed this morning. It's quite evident he'd some connection with this town. Everything in the case points to this town. This dead man bought his gray flannel trousers in this town—recently. The whisky bottles found by Mr. Munro there at Rumbelow came from this town. The view described by Miss Travis—there it is! And we've heard the tune she heard, played from that very tower. We're on the spot—all we want now is a spot within that spot! And it seems to me that the surest way to get at that is to continue our investigations into the identity of the ginger-haired chap. And as we shall have to put up here and it's getting toward evening, I suggest that the best thing we can do is to go back to the Star, make our arrangements, and eat a bit of dinner."

"No hurry, eh?" said Steppe, a little sarcastically.

"Not with me, Mr. Steppe," answered the detective, composedly. "Hurry's no good, sir—in my line—and in my opinion. Slow and sure—eh, Mr. Munro?"

Munro made some half-joking remark. I took it that he kept his real opinion as to what should be done to himself. We all went back to the hotel, booked our rooms, ordered dinner; the two detectives got into a corner and talked confidentially; Munro occupied himself in writing letters. Steppe and I comforted ourselves with a cocktail in the smoking-room.

"What do you suppose these chaps'll do, Morrison?" he asked, nodding in the direction of the lounge in which we had left Cleaver and Sparrow.

"Not the faintest idea!" said I.

"What shall you do?" he continued. "Lord bless us, somebody's got to do something!"

"Not much idea of that, either," I answered. "I daresay Cleaver's right—the thing to do is to trace the domicile of this dead man. He must have had a home, or something of its nature, somewhere about here. Get at that, and we shall know a lot."

"Aye, but how to get at it!" he exclaimed. "It's a question of method. However, I'm not bound by these chaps! I've nothing to do with the police. I can follow my own line, if I like."

"Got any line in view?" I asked.

He hesitated for a moment, obviously thinking.

"Well, there's our own profession, Morrison," he said at last. "Anyway, the profession that was yours and that is mine. I've as much belief in a keen newspaper reporter as a sleuth-hound as I have in a cut-and-dried detective—perhaps more. A smart young chap that wants to get on, and who knows what one real good scoop would mean to him, eh?"

"You think there might be such a youngster in Worcester?" I suggested.

"I reckon they've a local newspaper or two here and that there'll be fellows on them who'd be keen enough on a likely job if it was put to their hands," he answered. "To my mind—the thing's here. We know quite well that this ginger-haired chap has been seen in this town. Well, seems to me that any smart hand could locate him—that is, find out where he lived—in pretty quick time. A good deal quicker," he added, with a significant nod in the detectives' direction, "than those chaps will!"

"Well, I suppose we're free to use our own methods," I said. "The only thing is that we must bear in mind the real object of our being here—and that's to trace Mr. Petherwin. And that reminds me—I must write a report of my doings to Mr. Alstone after dinner and catch the night mail with it. I haven't had time up to now. What shall you do, Steppe?"

"Don't know yet," he said. "But I shan't be tied down to following Cleaver and his man. I'll go on my own!"

Cleaver, however, made no attempt to dictate to any of us. We all dined together; the detectives made no reference whatever to the job that had brought us all there. And when dinner was over, they both put on their hats and walked out into the streets without a word to us of their immediate intentions. Munro, too, went his way in silence. Steppe, having watched them depart, turned to me.

"Individual, rather than concerted ac-

tion, appears to be the game, Morrison!" he said. "Let's see—you're going to write a despatch, aren't you?"

"If you like to call it so," said I.

"All right!" he answered. "Then I'm going out—to do a bit on my own. See you later—in the smoking-room."

Left to myself, I spent the better part of an hour in writing a full account of my doings since arriving at Salisbury the previous afternoon. I felt that this would be what Mr. Alstone wished. A little before nine o'clock I made up a pretty bulky packet for him, and took it myself to the General Post Office, and that duty performed, I returned to the hotel, to wait for Steppe and the rest of my companions.

I found the smoking-room empty, except for two elderly men, one of whom, when I entered, was reading the evening newspaper aloud, while the other, sitting near, was listening. The first words I heard instantly attracted my attention.

"—— from a certain discovery made this afternoon by the local police, it would appear that the dead man hails from Worcester," read the holder of the newspaper. "That's all," he went on, laying the paper aside and taking off his spectacles. "Um! Seems to me I've some recollection of this young fellow, from the description. Bright chestnut-colored hair—seen him somewhere about, of late."

"I remember him!" said the other man. "Seen him up and down, now and again, on his motor-bicycle. He was staying at that big red brick house near the Deanery—Mrs. Hartop-Courey's house. She's gone abroad for a year or two, and the house was let furnished a while ago to somebody—strangers. I've seen this copper-topped young chap come out of the gates."

"Oh, that place, eh?" said the first man. "Chantry House? Oh, just so! Ah, I felt sure I'd seen him. Well, he seems to have had a fine old smash, poor fellow! Odd thing there was nothing on him to show who he was. However, his friends'll know by now."

These two men strolled out of the room presently, and when they had gone I hastened to pick up the newspaper the spectacled man had thrown aside. It was a later edition than the one I had previously seen, and there were rather more details of the accident on the Amesbury-Salisbury road. I reread the sentence which I had just heard quoted. But as the reader had said, there was no more; nothing followed to show what the certain discovery made by the local police really was. Yet—I knew something, now! Without doubt, the house we wanted was that mentioned by the man who had just gone out—Chantry House. I began to see through things. Chantry House, vacated by Mrs. Hartop-Courey, whoever she might be, during her trip abroad, was to be let furnished. The gang we were anxious to discover had probably taken it from a house-agent for the express purpose of using it as a centre for their operations. In Chantry House, at this moment, Mr. Petherwin was no doubt still imprisoned. Well——

It was just five minutes past nine, then. Should I wait for the return of the others, or should I go out and do a little prospecting myself—alone? I had no idea as to the whereabouts of Cleaver and Sparrow, or of Munro, or of Steppe. Steppe, I fancied, had carried out his project of going to the local newspaper offices; the detectives were doubtless closeted with the local police authorities; Munro, who had all along shown a liking for individual effort, was probably wandering around likely quarters—I might meet him. Anyway, out I went, to view Chantry House, and to gain some notion of its exterior, with a view to effective operations. And by that time having gained a fairly good idea of the geography of the old town, I went down to the riverside by way of Broad Street and Bridge Street, and at the foot of the last-named turned along the South Quay.

That was a dark evening for the time of year; the sun had been set for nearly two hours and the sky was thickly covered with heavy clouds, rolling up from the south-west. Indeed, rain was threatening, which was probably the reason why so few people were about on the promenade that lay along the riverside beneath the tall old houses and the vast walls of the great cathedral. I passed few people; few people passed me, coming or going. That was agreeable to my plans—I wanted to spot the Chantry House. The men in the smoking-room of the Star had said it was near the Deanery: I knew the Deanery by sight; we had located it on Cleaver's map earlier in the evening. It was a big, high-walled house standing boldly above everything, a little to the northward of the Cathedral itself. There were many other houses of like sort near it; their fronts,

I concluded, must be at the other side. in some street opening off the Close or the main street. But the backs came down to the embankment, terminating in gardens shut in by high walls; it was impossible to see into any of them. There were entrances to them, though, in these walls—doors, set deep in the masonry—and I remembered that when we had first walked along there, after our discovery about the chimes, I had noticed name-plates on some of these doors. Now if I could identify the house I wanted by one of those name-plates——

I took several turns up and down the embankment before I considered the coast clear enough to allow me to do what I wanted to do. But at last people—chiefly young couples going along arm-in-arm—cleared off; eventually that stretch was left to me and two men, smoking their pipes, who strolled up and down passing and repassing me, and talking in low voices. They suddenly disappeared—and taking a box of matches from my pocket, I began a systematic examination of the doorways set in the high walls.

It was at the third or fourth attempt that I found what I wanted—a much-tarnished, old-fashioned brass plate, inscribed *Chantry House*. The door to which it was affixed was old, too, and not in over good repair; it badly needed a coat of paint, and one of its lower panels was cracked. But it was securely locked, or bolted, perhaps both, from within, and though the keyhole was big enough, being that of an ancient lock, there was nothing to be gained by peering through it. I wanted to get on the other side of that door—into the garden to which it gave admittance. I examined the masonry on either side; there were cracks and projections here and there which afforded finger-and-foothold. And having looked around to make sure that nobody was coming along the embankment, I clambered up, and first assuring myself that the top of the wall was free of broken glass, swung a leg over the coping. The next instant I had quietly dropped into the garden, amongst a thick mass of laurel. There were deep shrubberies all round the edge of the garden, and I began to pick my way amongst them toward a light which burned in one of the lower windows of the house.

I was close up to that window and fancying myself secure, when, without warning, a vise-like grip fastened itself on the back of my neck, and at the same instant something small and round and cold was pressed relentlessly into my right temple. I knew that, too—the barrel of a revolver.

Chapter XXIII

UNDER COMPULSION

I DON'T know how these men had come up behind me, but when I got some hold on my shocked senses, there they were, two of them, bulking big in the dim gray light. One had his extremely muscular fingers on the scruff of my unfortunate neck; the other was still pressing the barrel of his revolver or automatic pistol into the hollow of my temple. And I knew myself then for a damned fool—and tried to get my wits to work.

It was I, after all, who spoke first—spoke, no doubt, more quickly than you would have thought possible.

"There's no need to hold my neck like that!" I gasped. "That hurts. The revolver's enough. Let go!"

The man who was holding me laughed or growled—I couldn't quite make out which—and relaxed his grip. But his fingers promptly transferred themselves to my left arm.

"Very good," he said cynically. "Perhaps that's more comfortable. But you move a finger and slap through you goes a bullet! Hear that? Now clasp your fingers across your chest—so!—and march. No trifling!"

I made haste to obey him—there was that in his voice which convinced me that he was the sort of person who means what he says. I clasped my fingers above the buttons of my waistcoat. The other man collared my right arm; between them they shoved me forward. A few steps and we came to a door in the basement wall of the house. One of them used his free hand to throw it open; the opening revealed a long, stone-paved passage, lighted by a couple of gas jets, and with doors opening off it at either side. Along this they forced me, or, I should say, conducted me—there is no need to use force on a man who knows that he has no choice but to obey. And at the third door on the right they paused, and opening that pushed me into a lighted room which I saw at once was used as a butler's pantry.

They relaxed their hold on my arms

then, but only with a fresh order to put them up above my head. The man who had the revolver remained covering me in very menacing and unpleasant fashion; the other went through my pockets in a fashion equally thorough, laying out on a table everything he took from them. And in my hip pocket, of course, he found the automatic pistol with which Steppe had obligingly furnished me when we went down together to Rumbelow Point. He showed no surprise at unearthing that, but it seemed to me that he was disappointed that he discovered no papers other than a few private letters. And as if to make certain that I had no secret pockets in my clothing, he went over me again, even to the extent of examining the inside of my waistcoat and turning out the lining of my hat.

The next proceedings of these two men were summary and unexpected. Without a word to me they picked up all the things they had taken from my pockets and quitting the room turned the key in the lock from the outside. I heard their footsteps hurrying along the stone pavement of the passage; then there was silence.

Being fairly trapped through my own foolishness I sat down and examined my surroundings. With a polite consideration for which I was intensely grateful to them, they had left me my pipe, tobacco, and matches, and after seating myself in a chair in which, I fancied, many corpulent butlers had taken their ease, I began to smoke and to look about me. Without a doubt this was a butler's pantry. I had seen its like in many a country house. There was a safe in a corner, in which, no doubt, the family plate and silver reposed; there were shelves filled with old glass; there were chests, doubtless lined with green baize. There was a narrow bed—the idea was in the old days that a butler should always sleep in company with the things which it was his particular province to look after. I gazed with some interest at the window—just as I expected it would be, it was barred. Beyond a few very old prints on the walls and an old clock and ornaments on the mantelpiece there was nothing else to look at, except that over the door there was a transom window of plain glass through which shone the lights of the passage. Also in one corner of the room there was a low door, approached by three or four steps leading downward from the floor. That, I took to be the entrance to a wine-cellar.

I sat smoking and meditating for some time. There was no doubt that I had put myself absolutely in the power of the men who had carried off Mr. Petherwin and Miss Travis. Mr. Petherwin, in all probability, was at that moment incarcerated in some other region of that very house. While they had held me up and searched me, I had taken a careful look at my captors. They were big, muscular fellows; well-dressed, having all the outward appearance of gentlemen, but both of a determined and perhaps truculent cast of countenance—not the sort of men to be trifled with in any way. And I was certain, after looking them well over, that they were the two men I had seen loafing about the embankment by the river who had disappeared before I had tried the garden door; probably they had watched me.

But now, what were they going to do with me? I had no fear that they would murder me. That wouldn't pay. And they, of course, were probably fully aware of what had happened to their associate, the chestnut-colored hair man, who had come to his end the previous midnight. They must know that owing to that unforeseen catastrophe their game had gone all wrong. What had seemed like being a crushing victory for their side had been turned, by sheer ill-luck into an unsatisfactory draw. Still, they had me—and I was locked up there for some purpose.

The time slowly ticked itself away on the old clock set above the mantelpiece; I began to weary of the solitude and inaction. Suddenly, I got a curious feeling that I was being watched, and I turned sharply in my chair to glance at the transom above the door. I had been right in my suspicion; as I looked round, a head disappeared, too quickly for me to see the face; all I saw was a dome of dark hair. Listening intently I heard soft footsteps going away, as of a man who walks in his stockings, or wears felt-soled slippers.

It was some minutes after this that I heard loud, unashamed footsteps outside in the stone-paved passage. Then the key turned in my door, and the two men who had collared me came in again, the possessor of the revolver still holding it carelessly, but obtrusively, in his right hand. They went straight to business, perching themselves on two chairs between the door and the table, and having the table between me and them. The man who had searched me opened his lips and spoke sharply.

"You're Morrison, of Rumbelow Point?" he asked.

I had made up my mind as to what I should do, if questioned, and I replied just as sharply.

"I am!"

"You've been employed by the Government as an agent in this matter?"

I shook my head at that.

"By the Government, no! By Mr. Alstone, yes!" I answered.

"The Prime Minister, then. Are you the man to whom Mr. Alstone entrusted a sum of money which was to be handed over to an agent of ours at a certain rendezvous near Salisbury last night?"

"Yes, that is so," I said. "I am the man."

"We learn from the papers that our man was accidentally killed. What do you know about it?"

"What I know about it is this—briefly. I waited for your man, with Mr. Alstone's packet in my pocket, at the third milestone on the Salisbury-Amesbury road, from twelve o'clock until, I should say, half-past. Had your man come, I should have handed the packet over to him. That was all I was charged to do. He didn't come. Instead, a policeman came along on his bicycle and told me a motor-cyclist had had an awful smash a little way up the road. I went there, and found the man in question dead. I concluded he was your man."

"Unfortunately, he was our man! Well, what did you do with the packet?"

I had felt all along that this was what they were after—anxiety about the money; wonder if there was any chance of their getting it. Secretly jubilant that they had now no chance whatever—as far as I could see—I was still careful enough to keep all trace of satisfaction out of my voice.

"As soon as this happened," I replied, "I communicated with Mr. Alstone. He sent me instructions to Salisbury to deposit the packet at a bank there, in his name. I did so, of course."

I was watching them carefully, and I saw the chagrin and disappointment that came into their eyes. Each remained silent for a moment; then the man who had asked all the previous questions spoke again.

"If you placed that packet in a bank at Salisbury, you'd get a formal receipt for it," he said. "That's not amongst the papers I took from you. Where is it?"

"I posted it to Mr. Alstone, at once," said I. "Naturally!"

The answer evidently satisfied him. Suddenly he fired off a sharp question of a different sort.

"What are you doing here—in Worcester?" he demanded. "Be plain!"

"I see no reason why I should be otherwise, as things are!" I retorted. "You're questioning me at the point of a revolver. Moreover, I don't know why I should keep anything back; this is far more your affair than mine. I am here in Worcester for this reason—when I communicated the news of what had happened to your man to Mr. Alstone, he immediately sent off two very experienced Scotland Yard men——"

He interrupted me with an uplifted finger.

"Names?" he asked peremptorily.

"Cleaver, one; Sparrow, the other," I replied. "They came to Salisbury and examined your man, his machine, and his clothing. They found he was wearing a pair of new gray flannel trousers which had been bought here in Worcester; the buttons bore the name of one Flaxington, a tailor and outfitter in this city. So they came along here at once, to make enquiries, and I came with them."

The man with the revolver snarled.

"That's a spy's part!" he snapped out, with a venomous look at me. "You know what treatment a spy gets—in warfare?"

"I'm not aware that this is warfare," I retorted. "And if it is, allow me to say that it's against the rules of civilized warfare to shoot at innocent men from behind hedges as somebody did at me in my own garden!"

The two men glanced at each other; their surprise evident, and, I thought, palpably genuine.

"That was no work of ours, Morrison!" said the man who had done all the questioning. "None of our party ever shot at you—nor at any one else. That's a fact. Weapons may have been shown, but they've never been used."

"Who shot the fisherman, Jim Mallett?" I asked, point-blank.

"None of us, anyway! We read of it in the papers, but we had nothing to do with it," he asserted. "That is the sure truth!"

"The man whose dead body I saw at midnight had bright chestnut-colored hair," said I. "Mallett had a tuft of hair like

that tightly clasped in his fingers when found."

He nodded.

"I know!" he said. "But that man—the man smashed up this morning—didn't shoot Mallett. He had a scrap with Mallett and Mallett tore a handful of hair out of him! Then he left Mallett, and a few minutes afterward, hearing a shot, went back and found Mallett dead. But he didn't shoot him!"

There was something in his assertion that led me to believe him. I began to think—after all, there was more mystery in this than was represented by these men and their doings. But he went on with his questioning.

"Well, there are others of you here in Worcester," he said. "We've watched you—we watched you, yourself, tonight. Who are the others beside you and the detectives?"

"One is a private enquiry agent, Munro, employed by Miss Petherwin," said I, now fully determined to let them see how hopelessly they were being cornered. "The other is a young newspaper man, Steppe."

"Have they any clues?" he asked.

"Munro has a clue," I replied. "He searched the cave in which you spent the afternoon with Mr. Petherwin and Miss Travis, and found two empty whisky bottles——"

He interrupted me with a glance of vexation and a muttered remark to his companion; it was plain my news had disconcerted him.

"Well?" he said presently. "Any other clues?"

"As a matter of fact, there are a good many clues!" I answered, almost triumphantly. "Miss Travis afforded them! She described the view from her window—a river and hills. The river is, of course, the Severn; the hills are those across there, the Malvern Hills. And another excellent clue—the chimes in the Cathedral here play tunes at twelve o'clock and other hours, and one of them is *Men of Harlech*. Miss Travis told all that to the Prime Minister and the Home Secretary——"

A tap came at the door. One of the men answered it, and came back with a neatly-spread tray on which were sandwiches, biscuits, a bottle of claret, with the cork drawn. He set it on the table and nodded to me.

"You'll have to stay here all night, Morrison," he said. "No harm'll come to you. And I repeat what I said to you before. None of our lot ever shot at you, nor at anybody! We're not murderers, even if we do carry weapons."

Then, without another word, he and his companion withdrew, locking me in. And quick as thought I leaped for a chair and standing on it, peered through the transom, to watch them. They opened the door of another room immediately opposite mine. There, evidently awaiting their return, stood—*Sherman*.

Chapter XXIV

THE GRATING

I HAD a clear view of Sherman. He was standing, in a full light, a little within a room almost immediately opposite that in which I was locked up; it seemed to me that he was talking to some person within that room whom I could not see. But as the man who had just left me entered, he turned to them, and before they closed the door I had seen from the expression on his face that he was undoubtedly anxious about something—probably about the result of their examination of me. Sherman, without a doubt! And now I knew that when Steppe and I had interviewed him that morning he had bluffed us, in a certain degree, at any rate.

But the door I was watching closed, and I saw no more of Sherman and the other men, his associates. I got down from the transom, cursing myself for my folly in running into this danger and wondering what on earth would happen next. I was absolutely at the mercy of these men, and I had no doubt that they were utterly unscrupulous. Nobody knew where I was; it might be some time before Steppe or any of the others could get on my track. Possibly Sherman and his gang, realizing that their chance of handling the ransom money had vanished when I obeyed Mr. Alstone's orders and deposited it in the bank at Salisbury, would now make their escape, leaving me to starve. I felt, anyway, that they would not remain longer in that house, knowing what they did; they would be off, under cover of the night.

The thought of possible starvation made me remember the tray of provisions which had been brought into my prison. There it lay, on the table, and it looked inviting. The wine was of a good vintage, and the cork, very considerately, had been drawn and then replaced; a beautiful old claret glass flanked the bottle. But how did I know the wine might not be drugged? It was far from unlikely. And as I was neither hungry or thirsty, I left food and

drink alone and began—hopelessly enough!—to take another look round the room on the chance of finding some means of escape.

There was nothing to be done at the window; it was not only barred but screwed up. As for the door, I knew it to be locked; there had been no mistaking the turning of the key from outside when the two men left me. But there was the door in the corner of the room, approached by two or three steps sunk in the floor, the door which I had taken as the entrance to a wine-cellar. It was against all chances of probability that it should be unlocked, and I had not the least hope of success when I stole down the steps and tried it, for, to tell the truth, I felt as hopelessly caged as a rat in a trap. Yet try it I did, and to my utter astonishment found that it yielded to my hand!

I pushed this door open, gently, and when I had got it free of the timber in which it stuck a little, poked my head into whatever was beyond. That was inky blackness and an atmosphere which suggested damp, mould, and disuse; it was, moreover, evil-smelling, and in any other circumstances would have made me beat a hasty retreat. But my present circumstances would have forced me into an underground passage, and I pushed that door still further open, staring into the black cavity. Something rustled away in there—rats, no doubt. But no rats could stay me when the slightest chance of escape offered, and presently, striking a match from the box in my pocket, I prepared to explore.

It was little that I could see with so poor a light, but I made out several steps before me. I found at once that they were not merely damp, but thick with viscous stuff into which the toe of my shoe trod unpleasantly. Still, I got down them, by exercising the greatest caution, and after burning another match or two, discovered that it was what might have been used as a cellar but much more resembled a dungeon. The floor was of beaten earth; the walls glistened with moisture; I had a suspicion that there were

live things there of some terrible sort. But suddenly, when one of my matches went out, sooner than it should, I was aware of a faint show of light down there, and presently, striking another match and creeping gingerly toward it across the distasteful floor, I found out whence it came. On one side of the place the earth from above had been cut away, and at the top of this cavity, and evidently communicating with the garden in which I had been surprised and seized, was a grating—I saw the stars through its ribs.

Letting the match die out, and standing there in the darkness, I reached up and felt about that grating. It was, of course, thickly rusted, within and without, but I could get my fingers through its bars and obtain a good hold on them: the all important question was, could I move the grating bodily from its bed? But here again, I had good luck. The grating was fixed in its cavity at a height of about four feet above a sort of shelf or bank of earth in which the cavity terminated; by getting into the cavity, doubled up, I could, by standing on this shelf, put my rounded shoulders against the under-surface of the grating and then, by straightening myself, force it out of its setting. If I could only do that——

I waited for a moment, listening for any sound from above. None came. I crept into the cavity, conscious that I was becoming filthy and slimy in the process, and bunching myself up under the grating, took a deep breath and exerted all my strength. My first impression was one of impending utter failure: it seemed to me that I might just as well have tried to shift one of the Pyramids; the thing felt as if it were embedded in concrete. I stopped, gasping, recovered my breath, pulled myself together again, and made a second attempt. I was just about giving it up and feeling like dropping on the beastly floor beneath me, when one side of the grating gave way. I knew then that unless some of my captors appeared then and there I should, in a few minutes, be far beyond their reach.

And so I was. Having once dislodged the grating on one side, it was a fairly easy thing to work it loose on the other, force it up bodily, turn it over outside and slide it on to the earth of the garden bed in which it had been set. All I had to do then was to scramble after it, which I made haste to do, heedless of damage to hands, knees and clothes. I must have looked a pretty sight when I emerged from that

cellar. Indeed, I created a fine sensation when I came within human ken ten minutes later, bleeding, muddied, and beslimed—but I cared nothing.

Breathless, but spitefully rejoicing, I tore across the garden, climbed the wall overlooking the embankment of the river, and was over it and running along the riverside, careless of direction, and as if I had a pack of hell-hounds after me—all in a burst, possibly, in a sort of subconscious activity.

When I got my full senses, I found I had run to the left instead of to the right, and had passed the foot of the Cathedral steps and the Ferry. To gain the centre of the town I had to go round by the winding street that leads past the Edgar Tower. By that time there were very few people about; indeed, I scarcely met anyone as I hurried along, keeping close to the walls and in the shadows. But just as I had got into the main street and was wondering if I could reach the hotel without being stopped, questioned, and perhaps arrested by a policeman, I saw a man coming along on the same pavement, whom I must inevitably run into. He was a big man; he might be a plain-clothes policeman. And at that I slipped into a doorway, hoping he would pass on without seeing me. But I saw him, for the light of a neighboring lamp fell full on his face as he went by, and I saw every feature clearly. And he was Rutherford!

I felt no surprise at seeing Rutherford there. I had known, well enough, for all that day, that things were coming to a crisis. Evidently the crisis was to materialize there in Worcester; fate, or something, had brought Rutherford to Worcester. But as he was there, I wanted to know where he was going, and as quietly as I could, and stepping along on the tips of my toes, and walking close to the wall, I followed him a little. But not far. He suddenly turned down a side street that led to the Deanery and the houses near it, and I knew then that he was undoubtedly making for the house in which Sherman and his associates were still discussing the news they had got from me.

I let Rutherford go his way then, and made my own to the hotel. And as I came to its front I was aware that things were going on there. Steppe, Munro, and the two Scotland Yard men were outside on the pavement, standing beside a big private car in company with three other men who had evidently just got down from it. One of them turned his face toward the light as I hurried up, and in him I recognized Lassiter.

That certainly surprised me. Perhaps I ought not to have been surprised, but I was; that Lassiter would turn up had never occurred to me. I glanced sharply at the men with him, and immediately set them down as detectives. I saw, moreover, that they were evidently well known to Cleaver and Sparrow, who were talking to them.

I ran into the middle of this group—to be hailed first by Steppe, who drew back from me with a look of disgust at my condition.

"Good Lord, Morrison!" he exclaimed. "Wherever have you been? In the river, or in the sewage works?"

"Don't be an ass, Steppe!" said I. "You might guess where I've been! I've been in the house where Petherwin's no doubt still imprisoned. I was trapped into it, and I've escaped from it. And I've just seen Rutherford going toward it. Look here, there's no time to lose! We'd better surround it. I know which house it is, now."

"Why, so do we, Morrison!" said Cleaver, who had been staring me over from top to toe. He pointed to Lassiter. "He knows—he's brought us the information. Of course, we're going to make a raid. But you can't very well go in that condition. There's blood——"

"Nothing but scratches," I interrupted. "I'm going with you anyway, and if we're not quick in going——"

Lassiter touched my arm, in his usual deferential fashion, at the same time drawing my attention to a dapper-looking suitcase which he carried.

"If you would come with me inside the hotel, sir," he said, precise and punctilious as ever in his speech, "I think I can accommodate you in the way of a change of garments. I never travel unprepared for contingencies. We are much of a figure, sir."

"There's no hurry, Mr. Morrison," said Cleaver. "We've got to get the local police yet. Some of them will be here in a few minutes. Go and repair your damages; we'll hear your story as we go along."

I took Lassiter to the room I had booked earlier in the evening. He was attention itself, taking upon his own shoulders the getting of hot water, the laying out of clothes and all the rest of it. But what I wanted more than anything was to hear the reason of his presence, and I pressed him to tell me all about it while I washed

away the filth and dirt of that slimy cellar.

"It is not a long story, sir," he said. "Merely one in which the details fit one into another, sir. You see, at a somewhat early hour of this afternoon I purchased a copy of an evening newspaper, and there read of the fatal accident which had happened to a young gentleman on the highway between Amesbury and Salisbury at midnight—the unfortunate young man, sir, was reported as having hair of a light chestnut color. Well, sir, I remembered immediately that not very long ago, Mr. Rutherford was visited at Mr. Petherwin's private residence in town by a young friend of his who had hair of this particular color, and whose name, sir, was Midwood, Mr. Cyril Midwood.

He was, I understood, a relation of Mr. Rutherford. When Mr. Midwood left, sir, I packed his things for him, and I found in one of his suitcases an old label with the address at Worcester: Chantry House, Worcester, sir——"

"That's it, Lassiter!" said I. "Chantry House! That's the place!"

"Just so, sir," continued Lassiter imperturbably. "Well, sir, I connected the peculiarly colored hair with what I knew, or recollected, of this affair at Rumbelow Point, and after duly considering the matter, I proceeded to the Prime Minister's official residence, sir, and was admitted in due course to his presence. I told him what I knew, sir, He had already been in communication, I think, with you and with Mr. Cleaver, and eventually, sir, he sent me down here in company with two detective officers from Scotland Yard. I think that is really all, sir—but what is yet to come, I do not know."

"Lassiter!" said I, hurrying along with my repairs, "Have you up to now had any suspicion of Rutherford?"

He shook his head in a fashion which seemed to suggest that on that point there was a great deal that might be said.

"I cannot say that I have ever been greatly impressed by Mr. Rutherford, sir," he answered. "In my opinion, Mr. Rutherford is not the sort of person to be trusted with the important position he has held. Of course, Mr. Rutherford is not, and never has been officially employed by Mr. Petherwin in Mr. Petherwin's own official capacity. Mr. Rutherford, sir, has only been secretary to Mr. Petherwin as a private gentleman—he was employed in that way before Mr. Petherwin took office. But Mr. Rutherford has had the opportunity of learning secrets, sir, and I fear, sir, that he has been mixed up in this wicked plot."

"Have you any reason for thinking that beyond what you discovered today, Lassiter?" I asked.

"I was somewhat suspicious about Mr. Rutherford's behavior and movements at Rumbelow at the time of the disappearance, sir," he replied. "I have reason for believing that Mr. Rutherford was in the neighborhood when he was supposed to be in town."

"Ah!" I exclaimed. "Possibly staying at Sherman's!"

Before he could answer that, Steppe looked in at the door.

"Come on!" he said. "We're all ready!"

Chapter XXV

THE DOUBLE DRAWING-ROOM

LASSITER and I followed Steppe downstairs to a room which the hotel people had put at Cleaver's disposal. In view of what Cleaver had said before I went up to avail myself of the valet's offer I expected to find a complete posse of local police there; to my astonishment there was no one there but Cleaver, Sparrow, and Munro. The two detectives who had accompanied Lassiter in his hurried run from London during the evening had disappeared. Cleaver saw my surprise and smiled.

"All right, Mr. Morrison," he said. "We're in a better state of preparation than you think for. Sparrow and I have done our bit since you last saw us. I mean since we left you after dinner. We made certain discoveries for ourselves, and Lassiter there put the finishing touch to them. Chantry House is our objective, and——"

"Sorry to interrupt you," said I, breaking in on him, "but from what I've seen and learnt and been through this evening, if you aren't in Chantry House jolly quick you'll find it empty! Those men——"

He checked me, smiling at my impetuousness.

"No!" he answered. "That's all right! Chantry House, Mr. Morrison, has been under strict observation by the local police for the last two hours. No doubt they saw you get away from it, and no doubt saw Rutherford enter it. Their instructions from me are to do nothing in the way of showing themselves or giving the merest hint of their presence until the right moment arrives. But the house is watched—back, front, sides! And so is the riverside, and so is the ferry!"

"Ferry?" said I. "What ferry?"

For answer, he spread out his map of the town and its environs on the table, and proceeded to point to it.

"See there?" he asked. "There, just beneath the Cathedral walls on the river side, is a ferry that takes one across the Severn to the meadows opposite. Now look at that. There's a path leads from the landing-place across the river to the suburb called St. John's. That path goes by Sling Pool Walk and Swan Pool Walk to Bramford Road, and in Bramford Road there's a certain garage, Mr. Morrison, and in that garage is the car in which Mr. Petherwin and Miss Travis were carried off from Rumbelow. And it's all ready to carry these chaps off from Worcester!"

I stared at him with a sudden sense of admiration.

"You've been busy!" said I.

"So, so!" he admitted, with a laugh. "But now—you've been in Chantry House? Tell us about it—how you got in—how out? There's no hurry—those men are trapped already! If they go out, back or front, our men are there. But, if possible, I want to get them inside. Now your story—briefly!"

I told them what had happened to me, putting the facts as concisely as I could. Cleaver listened keenly, and when I came to an end, shook his head in a fashion that showed a desire for still more knowledge.

"The great hold we've got on this gang, of which no doubt Rutherford is one member and Sherman another, is not the fact that they carried off Petherwin for ransom, but that one of them shot Mallett!" he said. "Murder! We want the actual murderer. Who is he? Sherman? Maybe—he lived close by. Rutherford?—possibly, for Lassiter here has already told us that Rutherford was down there at Rumbelow and about that district when he was supposed to be in London. Now if we can only get some one of this lot to incriminate another, eh? But the next thing is to get inside the house. That's our job—the lot of us here. The outside's already fixed."

"And how are you going to get inside?" I asked. "I should say you'll have a nice job to do it!"

He smiled knowingly at that.

"No!" he answered, with a look at his colleague. "And that's provided for! Mr. Morrison, there's generally something turns up in these affairs. This lot hired this house, furnished; and they took over with it a man and his wife as butler and cook-housekeeper. Well, these two have become suspicious; their suspicions increased when they read this evening's paper. When Sparrow and I visited the police-office tonight, we found the man there, with the police. And when we go, presently, we shall find the front door open to us. That's one important factor. The other is that the people at the garage were to have that big car all ready for departure at one o'clock this midnight—see?"

I saw the whole thing then, and said so. But I also saw the possibilities of infinite danger, and said that, too.

"Well, it's for you and Mr. Steppe to say if you'll come in at it," replied Cleaver. "I've a pretty good notion how to trap these fellows, and we're all armed——"

"I'm not!" said I. "They took my revolver away."

"Here's another for you—an automatic pistol," he answered promptly, drawing it from his pocket. "I've two. Now let's be moving. If the thing works out as I've planned, we'll have a successful coup. You two," he looked smilingly at Steppe and myself, "are in for a bit of adventure, eh? As for Lassiter here, solemn as he looks, he's a demon for it—eh, Lassiter?"

"I have reasons, Mr. Cleaver, for desiring to pursue this matter to its logical conclusion," replied Lassiter gravely. "As to danger, gentlemen, I, too, am not unprovided with a deadly weapon."

"Aye, and know how to use it, if need be, I'll warrant!" laughed Cleaver. "Well, it's close on the agreed time, so we'll go."

It was within a few minutes of midnight when we left the hotel and passed down the deserted streets to that on which the frontage of Chantry House came out. I had not seen the front before; it stood amongst a thick plaiting of trees and amidst other old buildings. I saw at once how easy it had been for Cleaver and the local police to set a watch on it. And as we made our way toward it, Cleaver tapped my arm.

"There are men watching all round here, Mr. Morrison," he whispered, "and they're just as thick at the back. Now all we want is cuteness and courage—take your tip from me."

I was beginning to understand that Cleaver, whom I had at first thought of as a slow going individual, was pretty well provided with the qualities he had just recommended; certainly he showed great coolness and powers of generalship now that a critical moment was at hand. Getting us together in the porch of the old house—which, from outside, looked silent and dark, save for a faint spark of light in one downstairs and one upstairs window—he whispered his final instructions.

"We shall find this door open," he said. "We file in quietly. On the right hand in the hall is a door which will also be open. We pass in there—every one of you with his gun ready. That door admits to a double drawing-room, the two halves separated by curtains. The other half had been used by these fellows as a living-room; they've taken their meals in there, and they ordered supper in there for half-past eleven tonight. If we can only overhear some of their talk, see? Now you all understand? Be ready to cover your man at any second! And when I give the word, draw aside the curtains, and let every man we find there see that he *is* covered!"

The door opened easily and silently; one by one the six of us—Cleaver, Sparrow, Munro, Lassiter, Steppe and myself—slipped into the hall, and instantly into the room of which Cleaver had spoken. It was all as he had said. There were the curtains shutting off the second half of the room, and from the other side of them came the sound of voices, the rattle of knives and forks, the clinking of glass and china.

We were all ear-strained to the last degree, listening as if our lives depended on it before we had tip-toed a yard into that room. But none of us expected the sudden shock of surprise which we got. A man was speaking.

"—— can scarcely express the gratitude I feel to you both for the efforts you have made! I shall not forget them! You, Rutherford, I can recompense by advancement, and I will! Mr. Sherman, if there is anything I can do for you——"

Lassiter and I, who were ranged shoulder to shoulder, turned, open-mouthed, and stared into each other's eyes, the two most astonished and incredulous men you could have found in the world at that moment. For the voice we had heard was Mr. Petherwin's! And Mr. Petherwin was actually expressing his gratitude for release to two men, who, in our opinion, nay, in our absolute belief, had been arch-conspirators in the plot that had led to his capture and imprisonment! What new—and cunning—deviltry was this?

But Cleaver knew the Chancellor's voice as well as we did, and was just as quick to grasp the situation, and with a sudden exclamation he tore aside the curtains and burst into the other half of the room, with the rest of us at his heels.

It was a pretty picture that we confronted—Mr. Petherwin, bland, smiling, even joyous, more Pickwickish in appearance than ever, at the head of a lavishly spread supper-table, just raising his glass of champagne toward Rutherford on his left and Sherman on his right hand. They were smiling back at him, but the smiles changed to scowls as they turned sharply at the interruption of these amenities, while Mr. Petherwin's benevolent air was transformed into an expression of almost horrified astonishment.

"Are you under the impression, Mr. Petherwin, that those two men have released you from your imprisonment in this house?" demanded Cleaver. "You are being grossly deceived, sir! Here!" he went on, motioning to the rest of us, as Rutherford and Sherman half rose from their chairs. "Cover those two! If they move——"

"What—what is this?" asked Mr. Petherwin, faintly. "You——"

"I'm a Scotland Yard officer, Mr. Petherwin—Cleaver. Here's another—Sparrow. If you'll think a little, you'll remember both of us. We've been sent down here to effect your release. We find you supping with two men who were in the plot to capture and carry you off! These two men——"

"But this is my secretary, Mr. Rutherford!" exclaimed Mr. Petherwin, obviously bewildered beyond measure. "And this——"

"Mr. Sherman, a member of Parliament!" interrupted Cleaver, sarcastically. "And I daresay they've both pitched the tale to you that by superhuman efforts they

discovered your whereabouts? No, sir, they've known your whereabouts all along, and all this is a piece of bluff! These two, sir, came down here today to get their share of the money that Mr. Alstone sent for your release. They'd got it if their agent who was sent to receive it hadn't been accidentally killed. Having failed in that, they've concocted a nice little plot—which has also failed. They got their other associates off—but not far, for the local police will have them safe by this time!—and they themselves remained here to bluff you with the idea that they were here as your saviors. That's the truth, Mr. Petherwin—however much they may attempt to deny it!"

Mr. Petherwin's face was a study. He looked at Rutherford; he looked at Sherman. But Rutherford and Sherman were watching us; they looked like caged animals waiting an opportunity to spring. For which reason two, at any rate, of us—Steppe and myself—kept our revolvers very markedly in evidence.

"You shall hear something, Mr. Petherwin," continued Cleaver. He turned toward a half-open door on his right, and called loudly.

"Mr. Robins!"

A man entered immediately—a middle-aged, meek looking man, obviously of the butler or head-footman type. He looked deprecatingly at everybody.

"Mr. Robins," said Cleaver. "Answer these questions! You were engaged, you and your wife, by the gentleman who took this house, furnished, for a period? That's correct, eh? How many gentlemen were there?"

"There were three, sir," replied the man in a low voice.

"What did they represent themselves as being?"

"Medical men, sir."

"Do you remember that gentleman, Mr. Petherwin, being brought here?"

"Yes, sir."

"What did you understand about him?"

"That it was a mental case, sir—come for treatment."

"In other words, that that gentleman was slightly out of his mind?"

"Yes, sir."

"Well, there was a young lady brought too, at the same time. What about her?"

"Same reason, sir."

"She was mentally defective, too, eh?"

"So I was told, sir."

"And while she was here they'd be a lady to look after her, hadn't they?"

"Yes, sir—a lady doctor she was, they told me."

"Where is she now, then?"

"She left soon after the young lady was removed, sir."

"Very well! Now Robins——"

Sherman broke in, angrily.

"What has all this to do with us? What connection have we with this gang?"

That forced a sharp question to my tongue.

"What were you doing in a room in this house tonight, talking to two of them, Mr. Sherman?" I asked. "I saw you!"

"Negotiating with them, of course!" he answered with a sneer. "Ask Rutherford if I wasn't—and how we came to discover Mr. Petherwin's whereabouts. You're all on the wrong track."

"Utterly!" protested Rutherford. "I'm sorry to say that the dead man, Midford, was a distant relation of mine who, evidently being desperate for money, entered into a plot with two friends of his to carry out this outrage on Mr. Petherwin. I discovered this by reading the accounts of his accidental death——"

Cleaver stopped him with a contemptuous gesture.

"That's more bluff, Mr. Petherwin," he said. "Intended for you, sir, but no good to me. I know what I'm talking about, and——"

"I really cannot believe that Mr. Rutherford, my private secretary, and Mr. Sherman, a fellow-member of Parliament, could be guilty of this!" interrupted Mr. Petherwin, in a deeply pained voice. "I really think, officer——"

"You may think what you please, sir, with all respect to you," answered Cleaver, determinedly, "but I know my duty, and I'm going to take these two men into custody here and now! It's useless for them to remonstrate or show fight—this house is surrounded by police, back and front. So——"

"And pray what are you going to charge us with?" demanded Sherman. "I should advise you to be——"

"Careful, no doubt?" said Cleaver. He turned to Sparrow, who opened the door by which we had entered and admitted a number of local policemen, headed by an inspector. "Certainly. Mr. Sherman, we'll be careful! And as to the charge, it'll be that you are both concerned in the murder of James Mallett, of Rumbelow Point! How does that strike you?"

That brought both men to their feet.

But while Rutherford paled, in spite of himself, Sherman flushed with anger.

"That's all damned nonsense!" he exclaimed. "If——"

It was then that Lassiter spoke—having first attracted attention by a gentle and almost lady-like cough, given behind his lifted hand.

"If I might say a word, sir, as a preliminary to the evidence which I shall doubtless be required to give in another place," he said, addressing Mr. Petherwin, as if the Chancellor had been presiding over a court of justice, "I would submit that this is the psychological moment in which to say it. The truth is, sir, I have been in possession of facts which I thought it best to retain until matters came to a crisis. I am able to prove, sir, that when Mr. Rutherford professed to come from town to the Starboard Light Inn on the evening of your disappearance, sir, he did not come from town! Mr. Rutherford, sir, had been staying in the house of Mr. Sherman, close by Rumbelow, for two days and nights. And touching on the death of the unfortunate man Mallett, I desire to say that I myself, being at that moment searching for you, sir, saw Mr. Rutherford emerge from the wood in which Mallett was shot, a few minutes after I had

heard a shot—and also that I saw Mr. Rutherford bury an automatic pistol in a neighboring rabbit-warren, to which, in due course I shall be pleased to conduct the police!"

I almost loved Lassiter at that moment. And Lassiter, of course, became an important figure—his evidence was listened to with breathless interest when Rutherford, a few weeks later, stood his trial for murder. His motive of course, was the fact that he had come on the scene when his red-haired accomplice was struggling with Mallett, and decided that the fisherman would be a dangerous witness later on. So he decided to dispose of him. There was something curiously impersonal in the way in which Lassiter told his tale. But that tale sent Rutherford to the scaffold.

THE END.

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A novelette of casual adventure

by

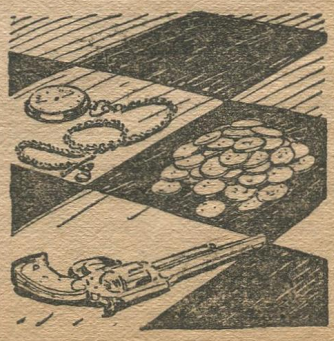
Max Brand

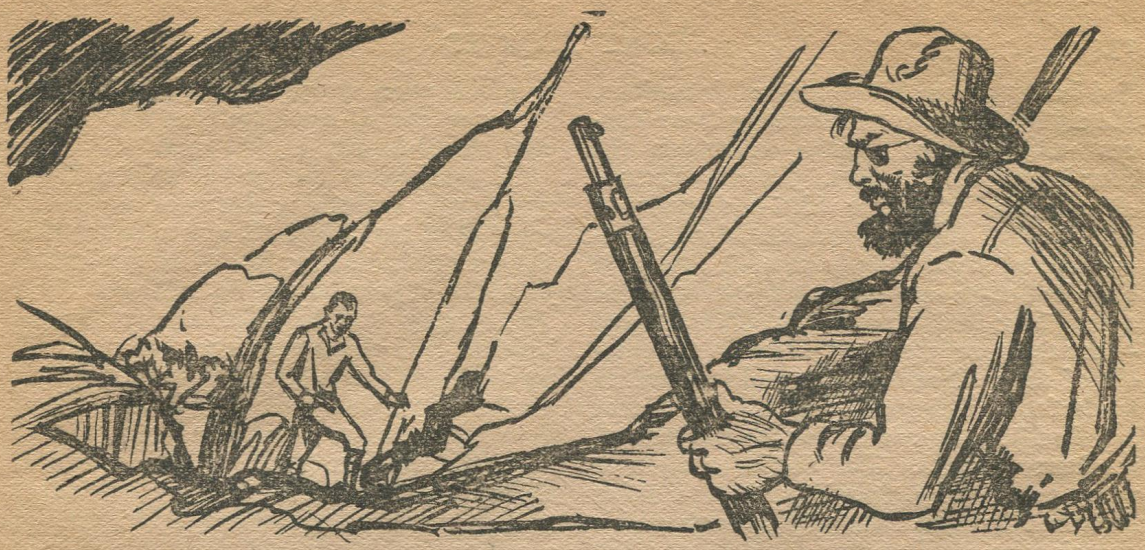
TO COMPLETE HIS COLLECTION

A frenzied adventure—among the stamp collectors

by

H. Bedford-Jones





THE TWO OF US

By ANTHONY M. RUD

Author of "Texas Straight," "A Broad Jump on Jackwade," etc.

IN SPITE OF SUN AND RATTLERS, YOUNG BOB ADAMSON FINALLY DISCOVERED NOT ONLY THE WHEREABOUTS OF THAT WANTED OUTLAW "CANADA" PARKINS, BUT THE IDENTITY OF HIS DOUBLE

WHEN Bob Adamson's partner did not return promptly from Torres, Bob only grinned philosophically. That is, he did not worry on Sunday night, or Monday, but when Tuesday came and went, he began to review half a dozen of the possible eventualities. Sag McCardell was an experienced hard rock man, a good enough scout and companion considering his age, with a somewhat testy temper and a periodical, overpowering desire for liquor and cards on the widely scattered occasions when he was in funds. But he was heedless and extravagant when partly lifted by drink. Twice he had bestowed his share of the quartz claim upon genial companions; only the fact that young Bob faced the issue without flinching, and paid bills said to have been run up, saved the partnership.

On Wednesday morning, with provisions at low ebb and his job of shoring the walls of their thirty-foot prospect tunnel completed, Bob shouldered a pack and set out on foot across the black lava waste, making for a desert trail which skirted the Corduroy Hills, detoured to Gratagua Wells, and thence descended gradually into the valley at the foot of the grim and forbidding Red Chalk Range, where lay the scattering board shacks and huge stamp mills of Torres.

The old man probably was in jail, Bob reflected. For his trip the two had crushed rotted quartz and winnowed the threads and flecks of gold, until Sag had two pokes; one of these was a private account to be subtracted when his share of a first big ore cleanup came. The second, five times as heavy, was to be used in the purchase of additional drills, two more burros with packs, and plentiful supplies. The conglomerate exposed in the breast of crumbling, rotten rock at the end of their shallow stope was jewelry stuff. It was the ardent dream of young Bob Adamson that they might make enough from cleanups to allow them to bring in some machinery, running a small mill of their own eventually.

Shortly before noon, on the outskirts of the lava flow, Bob came upon all that was left of Sag McCardell. It was not much. A few bones and shreds of cloth. A bone handled knife with great nicks in the single blade. A pair of boots torn to ribbons. Coyotes and buzzards had done their work.

From a careful examination at the scene, and a search of the trail further on, Bob deduced that Sag this time at least

had been true to his expressed intentions. He evidently had been returning from Torres with several animals—doubtless the four burros they needed. Now no further sign of the burros or of the manner of Sag's taking off, remained; but Bob Adamson looked about, grimly careful. A flinty light had come into his usually smiling blue eyes. Sag had been hardy, desert cured—not the sort just to lie down in the middle of the trail and check out like a wilted tenderfoot. Bob guessed all too surely that Sag had been murdered for the contents of the burros' packs. The Corduroy Hills in years past since Goldfield, and the Ponder strike at Torres, had won an unenviable notoriety as a refuge for desperadoes; Sag had warned his youthful partner about one in particular whom he had feared they might run across sooner or later, a man of gross bulk, over six feet in height, who wore a black patch over one eye—and who did all his killings from behind rocks or clumps of chaparral, using a rifle. The sheriffs of three counties had grim scores to settle with thim; and even the fact that he had employed several different names in as many places of temporary residence had not prevented a comparing of notes. It was agreed that his real name probably was Canada Parkins; for on two or three occasions he was known to have boasted of an escape from the Royal Mounted.

Failing to discover where the burros had been taken, and certain only that they had not gone back toward Torres or Gratagua Wells, Bob returned for a last, sad duty to his old-timer comrade. There was little he could do save gather the pathetic bones and relics of cloth and leather, making a cairn of lava rock above them. The partnership had not been one of deep affection, such as sometimes obtains between silent desert men long depending upon one another. Sag McCardell seven months before had taken on Bob Adamson, an almost-tenderfoot, simply because the latter had a strong back and an amount of money sufficient to provide two grubstakes, at least. The oldster had been intolerant of mistakes and ignorance; but out of observation and from listening to Sag's huffy tirades, Bob Adamson had learned as much of the desert and of prospecting in a few months, as he could have garnered on his own in as many years. He felt a sense of genuine loss, and a deep, slow anger of the sort which came as a kind of flat ache from behind his Adam's apple to the breadth of his stomach. It was something like a resentment that remains, and which broods as much upon wrong, indecent conditions in a raw land as upon the men who exemplify the philsophy of that land.

In assembling the pitiful relics, Bob's eye caught something flattened against a segment of backbone. It was a leaden pellet, out of shape now, but of an outlandish weight. It was enormous! Beside it a .30-30 slug looked like a toy bullet! Though Bob Adamson from his own experience could not guess, he thrust in his pocket a battered lead missile fired from the largest calibered rifle known until the relatively modern "explora" elephant and rhinoceros rifle. This earlier destructive weapon was the long barreled Ballard .54, a weapon which would stop a bison, or practically decapitate a man if it hit him in the throat. It tore a widening swath through flesh, bone and muscle, but did not penetrate as far as the smaller calibers.

The lava rock lay in shale-like flakes, great, baked chunks and fantastic shapes. Because of its relatively light weight Bob had little difficulty building his cairn, however. He just had lifted a huge flake, flattened and almost circular, when the rock was knocked from his grasp by a terrible blow. The breath driven from his lungs as by the impact of a piledriver, he was bowled backward, realizing that a thunderous explosion near at hand occurred simultaneously.

Startled, he nevertheless saw and grasped the perilous situation instantly. From behind a stalagmite shaped upthrust of lava rose a curl of bluish smoke. A black rifle barrel projected. Behind it a battered tan Stetson rose slowly, an evil, bearded countenance marked unforgetably by a black patch over the left eye.

Gasping air into his bruised lungs, Bob threw himself sidewise, clutching for his six-gun. The rifle roared again; but evidently the lurking assassin was an indifferent marksman, as the bullet did not even come close. Crouching, leaping erratically, Bob dodged behind an eroded chimney, and then, as a third bullet struck, to ricochet with a sibilant screech, he put further distance between himself and the enemy.

Once hidden behind a wall of lava, in a place where the broken formations offered many places of concealment, Bob's flight halted abruptly. He peered back, face grim and set, to fix in mind the position of the cowardly killer—the man he knew must be Canada Parkins, the murderer of his partner. Then swiftly, keeping to cover, Bob began to circle; six-gun in hand he

was stalking in a grim duel to the death a notorious ambusher who had all the advantages of position and superior weapons. More than likely Canada, he supposed, furious at his failure, was after Bob likewise—though it was not his nature to allow a prospective victim any vestige of an even break.

AS A matter of fact the case was far different. The headlong flight of Bob Adamson had deceived the man with the eye patch completely. Chuckling to himself with a grim humor scarcely understandable in such an outlaw, he made his way directly toward the south, striding easily over the rocks where even his hobnailed boots left no sign. He had terrified many a lone prospector in this fashion during the past month. Torres now seethed with tales of almost miraculous escapes—escapes due to sheer luck, plus the excessively poor shooting of the man identified as Canada Parkins. Several posses, thus encouraged, had taken the trail; but no sign of the killer had been found.

A quarter of a mile from the scene of the bloodless encounter, a rugged granite cliff rose from the lava. Unscalable from the north, it nevertheless was the big man's objective. Skirting the butte-like formation, he came to a shallow cave. Therein lay four filled half-gallon canteens evidently brought that morning from Gratagua Wells—or from some desert tank known only to the outlaw. The heavy containers he snapped to his belt back of his hips. Then, slinging the big Ballard rifle by its strap across his shoulders, he began a goat-like climb, using hands and toes on almost invisible interstices in the seventy degree acclivity.

To a stranger the big rock must have seemed patently unscalable; but that had been the reason for its choice. The man with the eye patch had been up and down many times—often for no greater purpose than to collect dried mesquite branches for fuel. He reached the top in a few minutes.

There in a jagged, craterlike depression, deep enough to be shaded in some part through all of the day, was the hidden camp. Depositing his rifle and canteens —unstoppering one and taking a deep drink which elicited a sigh of immense satisfaction—he then took up a leather binocular case, lifting therefrom a pair of high power glasses.

Spreading a blanket on the hot rock near the cliff brink for comfort then, he stretched himself prone and lifted the glasses, peering first at the desert trail toward Gratagua. From this eyrie he planned and began all his operations. With aid of the twelve-power binoculars he could sweep three hundred degrees of a circle; only the heights of the barren Corduroys interrupted in a small segment near at hand; and, thirty miles away, the maroon colored ramparts of the Red Chalks beyond Torres loomed to interfere with westward vision. In all other directions he could discern the dust cloud raised by a man and burro, or a horseman, for sixty miles.

The trail to Torres was empty under the April sun. Well, that kid prospector wouldn't have had time to reach it. Probably he was still running—huh, hope he had water enough so he wouldn't get too thirsty out there in the lava. He——

The sweeping binoculars suddenly came to rest. "Huh! What the hell?" the big man ejaculated. "Well, the damn' nervy little gamecock!" The slow words were wrung from him admiringly. "Nothin' but a shiny nickel six-gun, and comin' after Canada Parkins!"

Down there in the black lava, a little to one side but within a hundred feet of the spot where he had met the outlaw, the figure of Bob Adamson leaped up into the field of his binoculars. Bob was crouching, advancing slowly now, taking advantage of every cover.

"Have to keep an eye out for him," muttered the smiling watcher. "He don't scare; not worth a cent!"

Down there that second something must have happened. Perchance a bit of crumbling rock fell from one of the odd shapes of lava. Perhaps a lizard—a loose skinned chukwalla—ran over some rattling rock chips. From above the wanted man could not tell.

But Bob Adamson froze, looking to the left, six-gun leveled under his chin. The sound must have been near at hand, for immediately he knelt, and then put down one hand. Slowly, stealthily he advanced. He crept around a rock corner, momentarily hidden from sight. Then he appeared again, darting glances this way and that, doubtless puzzled.

Then the snake struck.

Bob Adamson's yell came faintly to the eyrie, but for several seconds the man on watch could not imagine what had happened. From hands and knees the stalker suddenly leaped erect. He flung away his six-gun and plucked frantically at something writhing and slithery which clung to him and to his flannel shirt at a point on his side just below the right armpit.

"Good Lord! A diamond-back!" cried the outlaw. "Damn me, *I done it!*"

His bearded face tensed in understanding and horror. Down there a mere youth had been struck by a venomous rattlesnake —and all because of something like a joke! A joke with a sinister purpose unrevealed to the various victims, however. The man who then thrust aside the binoculars and hurried to his pack of necessaries in the rock crevasse, was far different from the supposed waylayer and assassin Canada Parkins was supposed to be. He cursed himself. He threw aside the strapped rifle, and jammed a pair of Remington six-guns into the sheaths of a new belt which he buckled about his middle. He took a small bottle of blue glass from his cache, and a shiny German silver case, a hypodermic set. Lastly a bottle of whisky, nearly full, was thrust into a deep hip pocket.

Then he climbed down the cliff face more recklessly than ever before.

"Hands up! High—no foolin'!" The newcomer, now acquainted with the temper of the youth who had been stalking him, appeared suddenly with six-gun leveled.

Bob Adamson, a dead rattler at his feet, stood shirtless. He was using a jack-knife, slicing deep cross fissures in the skin and muscle of his right side, where two bluish punctures from the venomous fangs had showed. His face was pale, for well he realized that nothing he could do—far from his camp as he was, and unprepared for this tragic emergency—could save him from a horrible death. His revolver and belt lay some yards away. Yet his blue eyes hardened into flinty discs of light as he gazed steadily at the man he supposed to be the murderer of Sag McCardell.

"Go to hell!" he retorted evenly, making no move to obey. A narrowing of the eyes told that now, even as he faced certain death, he was measuring the distance —figuring on one last play in which his life might be matched by that of this notorious killer.

"Don't be a fool!" snapped the big man, a curious snap coming into the last word. "I seen what happened. I got the stuff here to mebbe pull yuh through! Lay down. Hell, fella, *don't yuh see I want to save yore life?*"

"So I can kill yuh?" This in derision.

"So yuh can do any damn' thing yuh want!"

Bob Adamson obeyed. Then without a second of wasted time, the man with the useless eye patch thrust way up on his forehead, knelt at Bob's back and applied his lips to the gory slashes on the younger man's side. Bob felt as though the ribs themselves would be drawn through the skin by that mighty suction. Mouthful after mouthful of blood tinctured with deadly venom, was spat on the sand and rock. And then came four hypos of the potassium permanganate solution. The puffing wound was blown up artificially to a knob the size of a woman's fist.

"And now drink that likker down as fast as she'll go!" commanded the bearded man. "I dunno as it really does so much good, but they all use it."

A wan, somewhat bewildered smile came to the young man's grim lips. Through Bob Adamson's mind just then thoughts pain driven, were racing in a turmoil.

"You killed my pardner," he stated, though somewhat unsurely.

"I did like hell!" came back the eye-patched one with almost convincing heat. "If yuh stay alive an' kickin', I'll be able to say I never kilt a man! Hell, don't gag! That's the best redeye I could buy. I reckon yuh ain't used to it so much, though. Well then it'll dig in to the roots. Lessee that side again. Huh, it's swellin' fast. Fella, where's yore camp? I couldn't pack yuh to mine, for certain reasons, an' it'd kill yuh to walk. Tell me right now afore yuh go off yore nut, as mebbe yuh will."

When Bob Adamson spoke, his enunciation was slurring. He felt lightheaded, queer, but whether from the whisky or the snakebite he could not tell. The wound in his side pained increasingly, and a throbbing had come in the vein at the base of his neck. His forehead burned. Queer lights daggered over his eyes when he closed them. Little used to liquor, this doubtless came mostly from the enormous and sudden indulgence, though he did not know.

"Back there—across lava fieldsh—jus' unner rock pinnacle like chursh steeple—five mis-milesh——"

"Drunk on jest that much!" cried the bearded man in triumph, albeit marveling.

"Thassit. Now I'll squat—thisaway. Yuh climb right over on my shoulders—yeah. Hold to my waist with yore ankles, keepin' heels an' toes back. Yeah. An' lay yore chin right over my head. Grab my shirt if yuh gotta grab something.

"All right, fella. From now on I'm a desert camule on top speed. As long as yo're with me, jest direct me when I look like I'm headin' wrong!"

THE real Canada Parkins through late afternoon had investigated the claim lately belonging to old Sag McCardell and the scared out tenderfoot, Bob Adamson. The burly, evil featured killer was pleased. Though no miner, he had gleaned sufficient information concerning matters of this sort so he could estimate roughly the worth of this showing of conglomerate. By and by the youngster would come back, maybe with another old-timer partner to be killed. But when the youth did return it would be to a certainty of slavery. Canada had no idea in the world of working even gold quartz rich enough so a goodly fraction of its treasures could be winnowed out with the fingers, if need be. No indeed! He clinked a pair of handcuffs, taken with their key from one of the sheriffs he had slain, and grinned in anticipation. When that young fool came back——

A strange noise sounded on the trail. Almost it had seemed that someone spoke close at hand—a mumbling, half coherent jargon of speech. Parkins leaped away from his tiny cooking fire, crouching, his big rifle couched and ready for instant use.

But then minutes passed. There was no further disturbance. Parkins scouted out a short distance, peering from behind rocks, gradually accustoming his eyes to the light of stars and a young moon. The west still was faintly gray from sunset, enabling him to discern objects a hundred feet distant; but nothing beyond the rock shapes he had seen earlier, came to his view. Slowly he returned to the makeshift camp, putting out the glowing coals of his fire with reluctance. He would have stayed here at least overnight, since he was miles from his own hideout; but years of outlawry had imbued him with a caution so great it almost had made itself one with instinct and intuition. Everything seemed right here; yet he had not accounted surely for that one scared tenderfoot. And then there had been an unexplained noise out there in the waste——

Doing up his blanket roll again, and lifting his deadly rifle, Canada Parkins turned to the spot where he had tethered the burros, intending temporarily to leave the claim which already he considered to be his own.

"Drop that gun!"

The harsh, intolerant command cut through the still night air like the rasp of sandpaper on stone. Just ahead of Canada Parkins, an upright figure, slightly crouching, detached itself from a blotch in the landscape.

The one-eyed outlaw cried out sharply, poignantly. He flinched. But surrender to anyone or any odds was the last consideration in his mind; long since he had put himself outside the pale wherein lay the slightest hope of mercy. With the cry he flung himself sidewise on the rock, snapping a shot with the huge rifle while he still was in air, and then instantly squirming to position for a second shot.

His first bullet missed—or made no impression upon the harsh, waiting figure. Twin streams of copper fire belched parallel to the challenger's waist. Two shots—four—six! The man on the ground yelped a second time as one stung. The big gun belched again; but this time its flame went toward the zenith of the firmament. And then its barrel clattered on the rock. Canada Parkins had murdered his last victim from ambush.

TOWARD dawn, slowly, painfully Bob Adamson opened his granulated heavy eyelids. His features in many queer places were puffed somewhat out of shape—the result of the venom in his system. He ached from head to foot. His whole right side was stiffened, painful and immovable. His heart was beating slowly, almost audibly, it seemed—but it was beating! That in itself was something of a surprise.

Beside him there sprawled two blanket clad bodies. From one came the long drawn snores of utter fatigue; the other, stiffened figure, that of Canada Parkins, never would snore again. To it the night hours had wrought the rigidity of *rigor mortis*.

Bob Adamson had a backbone of something much like steel. He fumbled about till he found a loaded six-gun. Then—still dizzy and half blind from the heady effects of the snake poinson and the whisky—he crawled about, some moments gaping

vacantly at nothing, simply trying to remember his own purpose. But in time he found the still figure, and distinguished the quick from the dead. The dead man looked remarkably like his emergency friend. Both were bearded. Both had carried Ballard rifles. Both wore the same kind of clothes. But one man was possessed of two good eyes—despite the black eyeflap now drawn high on his forehead. In the dead man's skull gaped a dull red hole.

Bob grinned slowly to himself. He was far from complete understanding even now; but to him had come a possible explanation which for the time being completely satisfied. He crawled over, tugged away a canteen from the dead body of Canada Parkins, drank a full pint of the warm fluid, and then sank back with a sigh. He was weak. He could wait for explanations.

But they came immediately. He had made enough noise to awaken the big, bearded man who had watched from the top of the granite rock.

"Huh, I'll take a drink, too, Kid," said he, extending a hand.

Bob passed over the canteen. "I see you got him," he said, grinning a rather sick but sincere apology. "Good for you!"

"Huh, so yuh know us apart now, hey!" chuckled the man Bob had stalked. "Well, that's better." He showed a deputy sheriff's badge, pinned under his left suspender brace. "I'm from Esmeralda County. Tom Gormeley's the name. Ain't got any of that likker left? No? Well then, I'll scurry up some coffee an' grub, an' tell yuh about it. I can see yuh ain't going to want to trail any for a day or so. Plenty time."

Right then Bob Adamson got the story. Tom Gormeley's brother had been murdered four months back by Canada Parkins. Tom, seeing that ordinary retribution was hopeless, had himself sworn in as a deputy, got papers allowing him to hunt for this one outlaw all through Nye County as well, and then came to the Corduroys.

"I was about his size an' looks; so I growed a beard, an' put on that there eye patch," explained Tom. "I took along a Ballard rifle, too, so's to make it seem correct. Then I made me a camp as clost as I could figger to where he stayed. From then on I waylaid prospectors an' sechlike—allus *missin'* 'em when I shot, jest like I missed yuh! Hope I didn't knock too much breath outa yuh when I hit that rock! I'm a dead shot with most weapons, yuh see. I wasn't takin' no chance at all.

"The big idea was mebby Canady would get jealous of this fella who looked like him but who was sech a damn' rotten shot, an' come after him—me. I was only playin' with yuh, like I've done played with nine-ten other hombres who was out here alone. I reckon it was the real Canady who kilt yore pardner. Anyway, it wasn't me. Yuh b'lieve that?"

Bob Adamson nodded. "I believe every word, Tom," he said quietly. "You've proved yourself plumb white, and I like you!"

"Well, you and the old duck had a nice claim there," said Tom, his voice becoming diffident. "Who d'yuh s'pose owns the rest of that now?"

"I—I guess I do. We had that agreement," admitted Bob hesitantly. "But I——"

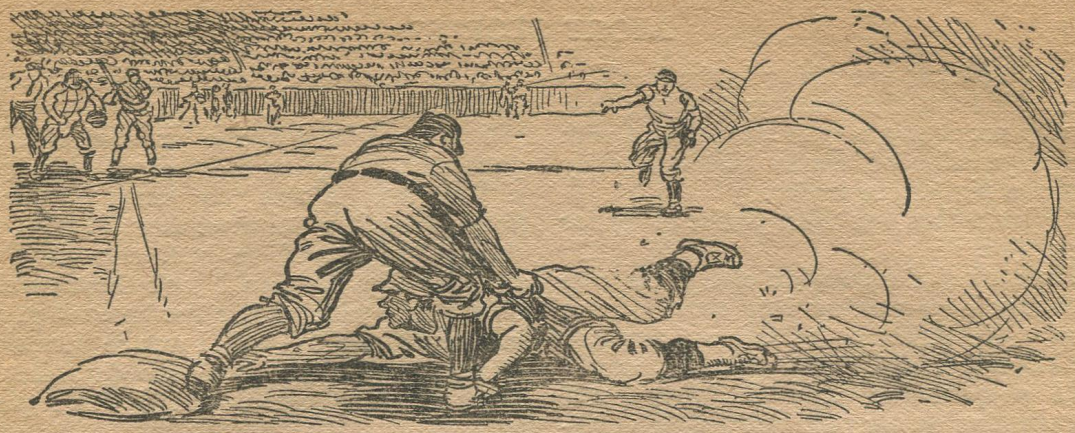
"Well, I gotta be takin' back my booty afore it spoils!" said Tom, getting to his feet. "Back there in that there chaparral, there's four-five burros an' a lot of plunder. Look it over; I reckon it's yours. Me, I'm borrowin' one of the burros for to carry this dead killer. There's six-seven thousand in rewards offered for him, yuh know—an' half of it goes to yuh, Bob Adamson."

"Not to me, big man!" said Bob, kneeling up and grinning as he offered his hand in parting. "Are you free to try something else after you get back to town? A partnership, say?"

"Huh," grunted Tom, turning away. "I—I'd have a fat chance buyin' in on that sorta prospect. Why Kid, it looks like it's worth a million!"

Bob Adamson laughed. "Come back here," he commanded, weakly getting again to his knees. "Just between the two of us, as partners, that share is going for five thousand cash deposited in the bank at Lamar. D'you suppose you'd like to come in?"

Tom looked at him, then away. His Adam's apple worked up and down. "Fella," he said then dryly, but with a strange note of intimacy coming into his voice unbidden, "as a pardner like I ain't never had before, what is it yo're wantin' me to do with the couple thousand that'll be left for snakebite? I figure that's jack belongin' to the two of us. What say?"



THE SIGN STEALERS

By HAROLD DE POLO

Author of "The Pinto Kid," "The $1000 Wop," etc.

WITH ANOTHER WINNING PITCHER IT LOOKED LIKE THE PENNANT FOR THE PYTHONS, BUT ONCE BEFORE RUSS PERRY ALMOST HAD A PENNANT CINCHED—AND THE MEMORY OF THAT FIASCO MADE HIM STUDY THIS NEW MOUNDSMAN WITH INCREASING UNEASINESS

LOOKING back on it, Russ Perry of the Pythons will say that it was probably the intense earnestness of the young fellow's manner that caused him to give Gaylord an interview at that particularly trying time. The big league manager, anyway, had often remarked that he would rather have an average player who took his baseball seriously than a more brilliant performer who took it casually.

The hurling aspirant certainly must have impressed him favorably, for he came unheralded and unsung—came without even a letter from a former pastimer or obscure scout—during the last week in August. This, perhaps, is the busiest and most mentally disturbing period of the year, especially when a team is up in the pennant fight, for it is then that a leader has to decide which men he shall recall or buy when the roster limit is increased from twenty-five to forty on September first. And the Pythons, incidentally, were assuredly in the battle for the bunting, trailing the first place Stags by a comparatively scant three-and-a-half contests.

Gaylord, too, broached the Python mentor at a dangerously inauspicious moment, just after the reptilian clan had lost a tough tussle to the Sparrows, notorious habitues of the cellar. He came spang into the clubhouse, while Russ was still berating his athletes as they tried to get over their showers and into their street garb with all possible speed.

"Mr. Perry," he said, during a breathing spell after a particularly gorgeous tirade, "my name is Gaylord—Frank Gaylord—and I haven't even any sort of recommendation to you. I've been pitching professional baseball for four years, never with anything higher than a Class B outfit—and that was the season before last, with Spartanburg in the South Atlantic. For three seasons before that I was with various Class C clubs, and last year I didn't do anything—anything active, that is. I watched the game from the outside, major and minor, and kept my arm in trim with a pal. I think I'm really ready, sir, for a try at the big time, and I honestly have enough confidence in myself to ask you to give it to me!"

The Python pilot, as the stranger started, had turned around with a growl, but young Mr. Gaylord calmly finished his little speech. There was nothing arrogant about the voice; it was, merely, that of a man who is stating facts in which he believes. Looking him over rapidly, Perry saw a well-set-up chap, possibly a couple of inches under six feet, with a somewhat powerful chest and clean-limbed shoulders that showed strength. His face was slightly grave, and his forehead had puckered into a frown, over wide-spread and clear gray eyes, as if the driving home of

his point meant everything in the world to him. At least, the manager instantly saw, he was not in any way to be confused with the large tribe of freaks who constantly pester a big league leader.

"What makes you think you're ready for the majors?"

Russ asked the question curtly, his own blue-gray eyes peering into those of the other. Nevertheless, he had not repulsed the kid, a few of the boys mentally noted.

"I suppose it's—it's what you'd call presumption on my part, sir," replied Gaylord, with a winning smile that was half-apologetic, half-confident. "I'll admit I didn't set any league on fire, even back with the Class C crowds, but in the latter half of my season with Spartanburg I suddenly got hold of myself. Anyway, I won eleven of the last twelve games I pitched for them, and—but here are the complete records, if you'd care to see them."

He pulled out a bundle of papers with an elastic about them, but the Python chief waved them aside.

"Let that wait."

"I suppose it seems funny to you that I quit for a year, especially when a big league scout—from the Indians, they said—was beginning to inquire about me. I—well, I decided that I needed a little more knowledge, and I don't mean it as flattery when I say I'd set my heart on a chance with the Pythons. I think I learned a lot more baseball last year, watching games and studying players and not forgetting to keep my arm in trim. Of course, sir, I realize that you probably get dozens of fellows pleading for jobs, and I honestly wouldn't take up your time if I didn't think I was ready. If you'd only give me a chance before September first, Mr. Perry, when you begin to increase to the forty lim——"

"Eleven out of your last twelve games, eh?" said Russ, more as if musing to himself.

"Yes, sir—all full length games I'd started, too. Four of 'em were shut-outs, and——"

The leader of the snake tribe nodded, his brow furrowing. Then, sternly, he asked a question he never put to a man unless he strongly contemplated giving him a try-out—a question that was always his first, to any prospective player, ever since his blow-up with "Daffy" Miles in the thick of a pennant fight he had lost just four seasons before.

"Ever drink anything? Even an occasional one or two, the way some of these boys do who can 'take it or leave it alone,' as they say?"

Frank Gaylord shook his head slowly, positively, a wry smile coming to his lips.

"No, sir. I was too young to know much about it when what they tell me was decent stuff could be had, and all I've ever tasted was when I took three drinks to celebrate winning our last baseball game in high school. I—well, I was so darn sick at my stomach for about two days that I never tried it again, and I don't plan to."

Russ Perry, smiling at the forcibly expressed words while a few of his Pythons chuckled, pulled out his watch, pulled it out and played with the stem, twirling it between his thumb and forefinger, as his athletes had learned he always did when coming to any important decision. He glanced at it, hurriedly, and slipped it back.

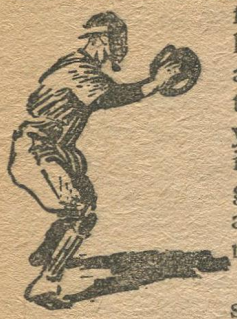
"Show up at the park here at ten tomorrow morning, Gaylord," he said bruskly. "Give you a try-out. Remember that, boys!"

PERRY must have been satisfied with that morning workout, for after it was over he told Gaylord that he would take him on after the first of the month. Probably, he added in all fairness, the youngster might not get a chance to display his wares in actual combat, as the Pythons were too hot after the pennant to break up the combination of the regular hurling corps; nevertheless, there was the bare hope of him getting a touch of relief work, or of going in for an inning or two if ever a game were overwhelmingly won before the last inning. Whatever happened, if his style were satisfactory and he learned quickly, he would be given a positive try at the Southern training camp in the spring.

"Anyway," Russ ended, for he believed in giving a man deserved praise when it wouldn't swell his head, "you can see I think enough of your chances, myself, to pick you with fourteen others from among a good many times that number. Cheer up and work hard—and watch harder—and you'll always get a crack at the big stuff in the end."

Any rookie, incidentally, got more than an even break from the pilot of the Pythons. Russ Perry had one dream in life—had had it for eighteen years—and that was some day to lead a major league outfit to the championship if the world. For eleven seasons, back with the Bearcats, he had been the sensational catching star

of the circuit. When his playing days had finished he had obtained his unconditional release and signed up to manage the Pythons. For seven years he had been tutoring this clan, backed by generous and appreciative owners, but he had not gained his goal.



During his first season he had brought this chronic tail-end aggregation up to sixth place, and the following year he had leaped into the cellar of the more coveted division. Since then he had yearly been a factor in the flag fight, finishing twice in second place, twice in third, and once in fourth. Being a strong believer in young blood, of the opinion that the team with which he copped the bunting would have to be built up by himself, every recruit to join the Pythons received the most minute scrutiny—and the most expert advice and honest encouragement if he showed himself worthy.

Russ told himself, on the second day he watched Gaylord sending them up to the batters during preliminary practice, that the earnest youngster had as smooth a delivery, as little waste motion, as—well, as the famous Daffy Miles, say. Which immediately sent the Python pilot's mind off into bitter channels.

On his first year as manager of the club, he had secured the services of the brilliant Tom Miles, a college phenom with plenty of money who played for the sheer love of the sport. He also did another thing for the sheer love of it; he sampled every known brand of hard liquor that came on the market, and sampled it profusely. Russ, however, thought that he could curb this tendency, could hold it somewhat in check, at least, and his attempts at this are now baseball history.

Briefly, for four seasons he nursed Daffy along with the care of a doting mother, going so far as to hire a bodyguard, on occasions, to trail Miles around and endeavor to keep him out of mischief. The hurler was worth the trouble, for Perry insisted that when Daffy was right there was not a better sharpshooter in the business. Then, at the end of that fourth year, the eccentric moundsman failed to show up for duty for six straight days. This at a period when the Pythons were battling for the gonfalon, and Russ was counting upon so many games from him. The manager fired Daffy when he finally put in an appearance. He was deaf to all pleading, all promises of future good behavior, and the notorious ball-tosser was blacklisted and passed from notice.

He had drunk himself to death; he had been killed in a brawl; he had gone abroad to live—all these rumors went the rounds. All that Russ knew was that Tom Miles had cost him a pennant—the pennant that would have meant a shot at the world's championship flag.

No, it isn't exactly any wonder that Russ Perry had bitter thoughts whenever this particular personage was brought to mind.

JUST because Frank Gaylord reminded him of Daffy Miles, however, did not say that Russ Perry was in any way prejudiced against his most recent twirling aspirant. Far from it. He proved this, conclusively, about a week later. With a game against the slothful Purple Sox practically on ice—the score being nine to one in the sixth—Russ sent a man to the mound whom he had recalled from the International after having farmed him out for the season. The rookie, not so young in years, was doing nobly—but his particular "nobly" was not quite sufficient for even this comparatively weak outfit of the majors. Anyway, they coaxed a walk from him and rapped out two singles on top of it, sending a run over the pan and populating the first and third corners with none out.

With the stage set, the Python pilot was scrutinizingly studying his employee, for the pinch for this particular pitcher was here; and it is how a man behaves in the pinches that counts. This prospective big leaguer decided on speed, for he called upon every bit of his arm power and sent one burning up to the platter—sent one burning up until the batter, all set for this type of service, lashed out with his bat and crashed that pill into the distant bleachers out in the right pasture.

"Oh, boy," groaned Gaylord, unconsciously speaking aloud, "but he certainly telegraphed his ball in advance, and—and Brown of the Purple Sox, anyway, can eat plain speed whenever men are on base! Wow, but he sure should have been handed a floater on the out——"

"What makes you think so?"

Perry, sitting beside him, turned from watching the hitter jog around the paths, wondering how his untried rookie, strangely, seemed to know of Brown's one weakness in a crisis.

"Oh, I—I watched the game some last

year and studied all the players, sir, as I told you," answered the youngster, flushing as he realized that in the excitement he had openly expressed his thoughts.

"Uh-huh!"

The Python boss, grunting the word, held up his hand and stalked out of the dugout. With a nod at his pitcher, who was already looking toward the dugout in a beseeching and questioning manner, he sent him to the showers. Then he turned to Frank Gaylord.

"Got all the team signs, haven't you, Gaylord?"

"Yes, sir, perfectly."

"All right. Instead of calling one of the regulars from the bull pen, I'm going to let you step out there and see what you can do. Have a chat with Somers first, but tell him I said to let you use your own judgment when you want to. Like to see how you behave under fire without too much coaching. Good luck. I don't think you're the type," he added as he turned back to the bench, "that I have to tell not to pitch his arm off. They all try it; kills more promising kids than all the bats in the league do."

Russ, a moment later, told himself that the youngster was cool enough, at least,

for Gaylord was receiving the razzing from the opposition that is the lot of all hurlers who face big league music for the first time. If wanting—if the dreaded "yellow streak" shows up, in other words, —he is harassed until driven out of the circuit but, if he can gamely stand the gaff, the information is passed along that he "won't scare" and in the future he is subjected only to such legitimate kidding as every moundsman occasionally gets. And the Purple Sox, although laggards in fielding and pill-pounding, were quite the opposite when it came to verbal barrages. Indeed, they numbered two of the worst goat-getters in the pastime on their roster: the famous Snake Evans and Butch Murphy.

The above-mentioned pair, nevertheless, did not disturb Mr. Gaylord with their cross-fire from the coaching lines. The Python rookie, after a brief conference with Somers, his battery mate, tossed up the five balls allowed him and then settled down to work. The catcher, Russ saw, called for a fast one on the inside, and the apple zipped over the corner of the pan as the batter held his stick on his shoulder and put up a howl as the umpire cried, "Strike one!"

The manager of the reptilian clan, however, allowed a frown to crease his forehead. Speaking of telegraphing a delivery, the kid had certainly used a little upward jerk of his arms, just before letting the ball go, that would have impressed a watcher as if he were trying to get his last bit of power into the effort. If he always pulled that trick on a fast one it would be bad. Needed coaching along that line, probably, the way they all did. Major league men were too keen, too anxious to get the edge on a sharpshooter, to overlook any infinitesimal move. Already, Russ was sure, several of the Sox had catalogued that gesture with a straight, fast one.

Somers, the pilot noticed, now called for a curve. He got one, too, got one that broke sharply out as it neared the pan and caused the mace-wielder to whiff the atmosphere with a decidedly explosive grunt. But, as the stands cheered the rookie for his second strike, the eyes of the pilot narrowed to a squint as he waited to see what would happen next. For Gaylord, serving up his curve, had used an utterly different wind-up than he had when delivering his fast one. Perry was surprised at this error in a youngster who had seemed so quick in detecting the same fault in others.

Once more, though, Somers signaled—signaled, Russ thought, for another curve like the last. Gaylord, however, was starting his characteristic wind-up for his fast ball. There was that same stretching, that same odd little jerk of his arms, and an unconscious groan escaped the tense lips of the leader as he saw the Purple Sox warrior at the pan confidently set himself for unadorned speed.

The horsehide, though, behaved somewhat mysteriously, so mysteriously that it did not travel straight up to the pan, packing speed alone. Instead, it went up there more slowly, broke nicely on the outside corner, and drew a hearty chuckle from the crowd as the batter, all set for another brand, swung confidently as if for a fast one on the inside and missed the pill.

"Eee-yo-o-ow!" the Python pilot unconsciously cried, using his well-known ejaculation as he brought down his palm on the knee of the player next him, "but that was foxy stuff. Dammit, I'm telling you he had *me* fooled!"

"Gee," said the athlete, the second-string catcher, as he rubbed his knee, "it sure

does look like you've bought a pitcher, Mr. Perry!"

The boss of the snake family, as the innings went by, told himself that it looked as if he had. Russ, sitting there with his eyes glued on his most recent addition, knew that he was witnessing as pretty a mound debut as any he had ever seen. What he liked most was the fact that Gaylord did not try to put everything he had on the ball, as most newcomers are so prone to do. The youngster went along on the wise assumption that there were eight other men on the field beside himself, all of them collecting salary envelopes for playing baseball—and playing baseball, defensively, meant backing up a pitcher. He did not go after a strike-out record, but he studied every ball he hurled and he had the faculty of holding the enemy to weak flies or slow grounders in the pinches. Anyway, he yielded four solid hits, one a two-bagger, but not a Purple Sox crossed the pan. Nice hurling, darn nice hurling, was the opinion of the pleased Russ.

The Python chieftain, furthermore, was not alone in this idea. Old Garry Wadsworth, the sports columnist whose syndicated strip was more avidly followed than any other of its type in the U. S. A., spoke a slight piece on the next morning:

> A young man yclept Gaylord, it is my far from humble hunch, will eventually swallow numerous victims for the Pythons. In his coming out party yesterday, he displayed a sage cranium, a decidedly puzzling change of pace, fair speed and excellent control. Outside of what we have been educated to believe are these diamond requisites, as they are classically called, the youth exhibited an earnestness—an intensity in his work—that caused me to sign at the sight of so much noble concentration gone astray. Alas, what a brave philatelist he would make, peering into the benzine cup for rare watermarks and avidly scanning the engraved beauties for elusive perforations!

As old Garry was one of the most rabid stamp collectors extant, famous for his hobby, this was high praise, indeed.

GAYLORD pulled his swallowing stunt just three days after Wadsworth published his paragraph. With the lead of the Stags cut down to three games, temporary disaster visited Russ. Wenzel, the big right-hander who was always a glutton for work, reported that his arm was so sore that he feared to put it to the test. As the pilot was working a quartet of hurlers in regular sequence, and had been doing so for the past five weeks, he hated to disrupt the combination by calling upon one of the other three reliable boxmen to toil out of turn. So, passing the word to the rest of the staff, rookies as well, to get out and sample their soupbones, he sat down glumly to watch and think.

He didn't remain undecided for very long. Every slab artist except one, desperately anxious to break through and get a regular turn, was ornamenting the orange with everything he had—the one who wasn't being Mr. Frank Gaylord. Coolly, placidly, this earnest young man was going through easy motions, concentrating mostly on control and saving his steam and curves. Briskly, the Python chief walked over, gave a commendatory grunt, and stood behind him—stood behind him for perhaps five minutes, during which time the calm recruit went on quietly displaying his wares.

"You work today, Gaylord," Russ said. "Somers will hand you the signs, as he did the other afternoon. If you ever disagree with him, call him out and talk it over, for he's always open to argument. The Mohawks'll send left-handers against us in this game, so get out there in the batting cage and get that kind of practice. If you want any advice during the game, or think you've picked up any information I should have, remember I'm here. Likewise, if I think you've missed something yourself or need any coaching, you'll hear from me. I told you how to handle yourself the other day and you did—good luck!"

"Phew, I—I certainly will do my best to make good, sir," gasped the youngster with a mixture of awe and joy, but Perry was already out of hearing, having stalked over to a fork-finner to order him to show Gaylord everything he owned. Incidentally, it was the shortest speech that the pilot had ever made before sending in a man to start his first big game; on the other hand, be it remembered that Russ was a fair psychologist. Just enough con-

versation, he believed, was infinitely better than too much. With the Gaylord type, that is.

Russ was right. Gaylord, it must be admitted, had several things in his favor. He had been eased into his major debut without fuss and feathers, in a soft spot with the game already won; then, solely on his own initiative, he had pulled that baffling delivery, the news of which naturally had gone round the circuit. Therefore, when he faced the Mohawks, the psychological edge was with him—and that same edge is just about half the battle. Anyway, the former Spartanburg pill-propeller walked off with the contest by the safe score of five to two, exhibiting the same brand of heady, unruffled ball as on the other afternoon. Furthermore, although he was a pitcher, he showed his belief that a club was something else than a shoulder ornament. In four times at bat, he got free transportation once, fouled to the backstop on another occasion, and ripped out a pair of stinging singles through short. A real major leaguer, fit for fast company, had been born. That, at least, was the unanimous verdict.

There was just one thing, however, that puzzled the Python pilot, and he felt fairly sure, after having surveyed his players and listened to their gossip, that he was the only one who had noticed it. At one period in the fifth inning, with second and third occupied and only one down, Gaylord had called forth Somers for a conference. Apparently they had disagreed, but quite as apparently the receiver had told his mate to use his own judgment. The hurler, back in the box, had still seemed undecided for a moment, and he had seemed to be glancing around him, somewhere in back of first, Russ thought, as if expecting some sign. Anyway, he had suddenly straightened, used his stretching wind-up, and caused the batter to plump down a soggy bunt that snuffed out a runner at the plate. Good sign stealing, or whatever it was, the manager had to admit.

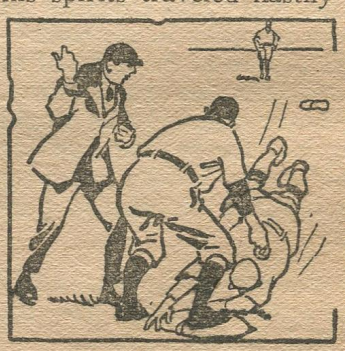
This had not been the only occasion. In the sixth, when he had gotten his first single, the Python mentor knew that Gaylord had already set himself for precisely the sort of ball that was coming—a fast one—even before the pill had left the hands of his rival. Once again, Russ thought, he had seen him hastily cast his eye over in the direction behind first. These thoughts came to the baseball boss after the game was over, when he had the habit of thinking out each and every play in the combat of the afternoon. Funny—yes, just the least bit funny.

"You sure double-crossed them with that first single," he said casually in the clubhouse. "Grab his signs, did you?"

"Signs? Why, no. I just had a hunch he was going to let loose a fast one, that's all," Gaylord answered.

The baseball boss, from the corner of his eye, imagined he saw the moundsman flush the least trifle, but he said nothing further. Perhaps, after all, he was mistaken in it all; perhaps, as none of his athletes had noticed anything unusual, his gaze that was constantly searching for some telltale move had made him surmise something where there was nothing. Anyway, even if there was any sign stealing going on, and it was an unwritten law that a ball tosser should wise his mates, he would let it slide for the present—let it slide, anyway, just as long as Mr. Frank Gaylord continued to deliver winning efforts.

THE leader of the snake-titled clan, four days later, was both a miserable and a contented individual, shifting from one mood to the other several times. To begin with, the morning of that day found him but two and a half games behind the slightly tottering Stags, but around noon he was sunk down to the depths when the despondent Wenzel, having failed to respond to treatment, still carried a salary whip that was unfit for labor. Russ decided, then, to stake his chances of creeping pennantward on young Gaylord again. When his Pythons rolled up six luscious counters for him in the first stanza, on a frenzied batting spree, his spirits traveled hastily upward. They



were taken down, however, when the score-board out in center informed him that the Stags, meeting the lowly Herons, had amassed four counters in the opening canto. But he was not kept at a tension for long. The despised birds, likewise going mad, took a flight that looked like a migration. They rolled off precisely twelve tallies, in the third inning, from the champion Stags. All that the Python boss had to do, thereafter, was to sit gleefully in the dug-

out and watch his new moundsman hold the opposition safe and thereby surge up to within a game and a half of the staggering Stags.

Keen though his eyes had been, he had detected no move, no glance of Gaylord, toward the stands or boxes or any other point. On the other hand, he argued, there had been no need for it, for the battle had been nicely placed on ice from the start. It must not be gathered, from this musing of his, that Russ Perry was a suspicious alarmist; he was, merely, a shrewd baseball man who was well aware that numerous tricks are gotten away with in the game in which all is as fair as it proverbially is in love and war. For all his apparent frankness, it was just possible that the pitcher might have a card up his sleeve. His being set for that ball had seemed as if someone had tipped him off as to what was coming, yet exactly what he could be told that would help him in his hurling was a mystery.

"Damn my stupid worrying," Russ told himself, trying to forget about it. He probably wouldn't have forgotten it, however, if old Garry Wadsworth hadn't dropped in at the clubhouse.

"Just blew around to tell you how glad I am we both picked a winner," said the veteran scribe. "That boy's gonna help you cop the flag, Russ!"

"Is he?" asked Russ, a trifle skeptically after a moment's silence. "I hope so, Garry, but I never count on anything after the way Miles threw me down four years ago, when we had the pennant cinched if he'd stayed sober. Gad, if a kid like this Gaylord had only come along then, Garry, I——"

The sports columnist, as the Python pilot broke off with a shrug, did not pursue the subject or attempt to obtain the opinion for publication for which he had come. He knew, more than anyone else, just how bitter the leader was about the Daffy Miles episode, for the hurler had been more than a player to his manager; he had been a pal. The typewriter-pounder, therefore, made a casual remark, wished his friend luck, and drifted away.

Russ Perry need have had no fears about young Gaylord. The lad certainly proved, as time went on, that he had been correct in thinking he was fit and ready for the main circus. Coming right down to it, the boy whose last stopping place had been in a Class B aggregation rose suddenly to the topmost heights of major league stardom. He took his regular turn in the box, now, with the trio of sturdy Pythons, and he proved to be the deadliest horsehide manipulator of them all. He did not lose a game, and it was he who had the honor of pitching the contest that put his team to a neck-and-neck tie with the brought-to-bay Stags. And five playing days were left, that was all. If the Perry cohorts could cop three of their remaining games, regardless of what their rivals did, the circuit gonfalon would be theirs—the gonfalon that would give them a crack at the dreamed-of world flag!

But Russ, although the pennant was within his grasp, was still in a puzzled frame of mind. What the information was—or just how it would work in for his benefit—he could not tell, yet he was almost certain that Gaylord was getting some sort of signs. His sharp eye, too frequently, had noticed the hurler appear undecided, cast a hasty glance presumably into some part of the stands, and then go ahead with his usual confidence. Whatever it was, furthermore, was the proper dope, for invariably the tactics he then pursued had been winning ones. Nevertheless, with his mind made up not to question a man who was delivering the goods, he kept silent. One way or the other, he had a great moundsman, a moundsman on whom he staked his chances in the crucial game.

The Pythons dropped an extra-inning struggle on the first of those five games, but Gordon and Ludenbach, of the mighty quartet, obliged with winning performances. There were two contests to go, and if the snake tribe garnered one of them the flag would float above their grounds. Many of the experts thought that Russ should have sent in a seasoned veteran in that fourth fray, even though Gaylord was going strong. The deciding battle is the hardest of all to annex, it is common knowledge, and most managers prefer to try for it with a grizzled old-timer, used to the thunder of razzing that always comes when the war is fought on alien diamonds. However, the boss of the Pythons, from the first, made no secret of the fact that he would let Gaylord go to the hill for his regular turn.

Briefly, it did not seem as if he were going to rue this move. The boy who had leaped to such rapid fame once more gave evidence that he had deserved it. Inning after inning he went on, hurling air-tight ball. He had to, for his hill rival was doing exactly the same thing. Neither side could sneak a run across, and until the be-

ginning of the eighth this tense deadlock continued. Then, with two down, a Python walked, walked and then pattered over the pan with the first counter of the contest when the mate who followed him lashed a stinging double through the guardian of the difficult corner.

"The pennant—the pennant and the world's pennant, boys!" cried Russ hoarsely, letting loose his innermost thoughts for one of the very few times in his life.

It looked it, too, as the eighth ended, for although the Pythons couldn't push that man home from second, Gaylord in the latter half held the enemy scoreless. Along came the ninth, and still, stifling the reptile crowd though the opposition hurler did, that one tally looked as big as the proverbial house. It assumed larger proportions, when Gaylord fanned his first man in the final part of the ninth.

After that, however, the scant scattering of Python rooters in this enemy stronghold began to have twinges of heart failure, for the reliable second sacker of the visiting team bobbled an easy grounder and relayed it to the initial cushion just about a yard too late. The fans began the old rallying cry, then, the rallying cry that swelled to a mighty roar when the batter caught the

infield flatfooted with a scientifically placed bunt. First and second populated and one out!

Russ, hunched over on the bench, felt as if he would actually crack from the tension. Gaylord, he saw, was as cool as an iceberg; and, although the man at the plate was not a particularly dangerous hitter, the big gun of the team—the battering baby of the whole circuit—was due to follow him. Already this cocky individual was striding forward with a gleeful grin on his arrogant face, while exactly twenty-four thousand seven hundred and eighty-nine customers were howling their pop-eyed heads off.

The Python pilot, with all the faith in the world in Gaylord, was watching with his breath held. He saw his hurler once more appear undecided and glance at the stands, directly behind third. Still, however, he seemed as if he had not made up his mind. Then, suddenly, he got to work. On precisely four pitched balls he walked the batter—intentionally walked a comparatively weak hitter to get at the horsehide murderer of the league!

Russ, now, was digging his fingers into his knees as if they were avenging talons, and still he didn't make a move toward the bullpen where he always kept two or three sharpshooters warming up during any crucial tussle. Let the youngster out there, who'd proved that he had a long head, take the whole burden and fight it out his own way. Wherein, should it be asked, Perry showed his wisdom.

The circuit clouter of the league, as he came to the pan, wore a smile that was slightly crooked, slightly puzzled. He was, no doubt, somewhat wondering why a harmless man had been given free transportation while his own mighty self stood waiting with the mace. Somehow, it looked as if he were thinking that something was wrong someplace.

He did not have much more time to worry about it, though. The ball was coming toward him—coming toward him at a terrific speed—the speed he was reputed to dote on—waist-high and on the inside. And suddenly, with his graceful movement that had been called a poem by many, he lashed out at the approaching pill.

There was a vicious crack as the ash met the leather, a crack that was immediately drowned in a frenzied roar of the multitude as the pellet started off like a bullet.

With it, though, Gaylord leaped into the air, speared the ball, and with a lightning-like throw snapped it to second for a double play that retired the side and brought home the battle to the Pythons.

"I—oh, I thought it was the only play to make," was all that the youngster would say, to his exuberant mates in the clubhouse later on. "Passing a weak man to get at the big boy, anyway, disturbed his confidence; besides, even if I'd gotten the other fellow on strikes I'd still have had to face the walloper. As it was, having the bases crammed with only one out, gave us just that extra chance for a double play!"

Which is pretty fair logic and pretty fair inside baseball.

RUSS PERRY, at the hotel that evening, was searching for the hurler who'd cinched the bunting, but at eleven o'clock he gave it up and retired to

his room. He wasn't quartered there five minutes, however, before a knock came on the door and the summons to enter was answered by Gaylord.

"Kid," asked Russ, when he had finished his sincere congratulations, "there's just one thing I want to ask you. I did once before, and you evaded it, so I never troubled you again as long as we were scrapping for the flag. Wotinell, though, do those glances of yours mean—those glances to the stands, occasionally, when you seem to be in a tight place? I've tried to dope it, but I admit defeat."

Frank Gaylord flushed, but this time it was with a sort of happily contented confusion.

"You did ask me once about whether I was stealing any signs. I remember, Mr. Perry, and I know I had to evade you. I—I wasn't exactly stealing any signs, although I was getting some. I was getting them from the man who—well, sir, you were kind enough to say that it was my coming along, when Wenzel flopped, that gave you the pennant. If that's true, it wasn't given to you by me; it was given to you by the man who made my arm what it is and who taught me all the real major league baseball I know. The man who coached me in the hard spots!"

Gaylord paused, his face more serious than ever as he leaned over and unconsciously gripped an arm of his employer.

"He's the man who found me at Spartanburg, in the middle of the season two years ago, when I was just a fair-to-middling pitcher. He showed me enough, right that first year, to make me win eleven of those last twelve games I mentioned. He took me out of baseball and staked me, then, and all the next year, as I told you, I traveled around and studied with him. He kept my arm in trim catching for me, and once in a while I'd break into a little game, for actual practice, back in the deep sticks where's as many spectators in the trees as there are in the stands. Then, when I was ready this August, he sent me to you. Yessir, he's the man who won the pennant, if you're kind enough to say I did it! He——"

Abruptly Gaylord stopped, hurrying to the door and pulling it wide open.

"And here he is, sir!"

Russ Perry, looking at the trim figure with the prematurely white hair and lined face, gasped his surprise.

"Tom—Tom Miles!"

The man whose alcoholic antics had kept a baseball populace in roars for several years stepped into the room. Lined and white-haired though he was, he looked in the pink of condition.

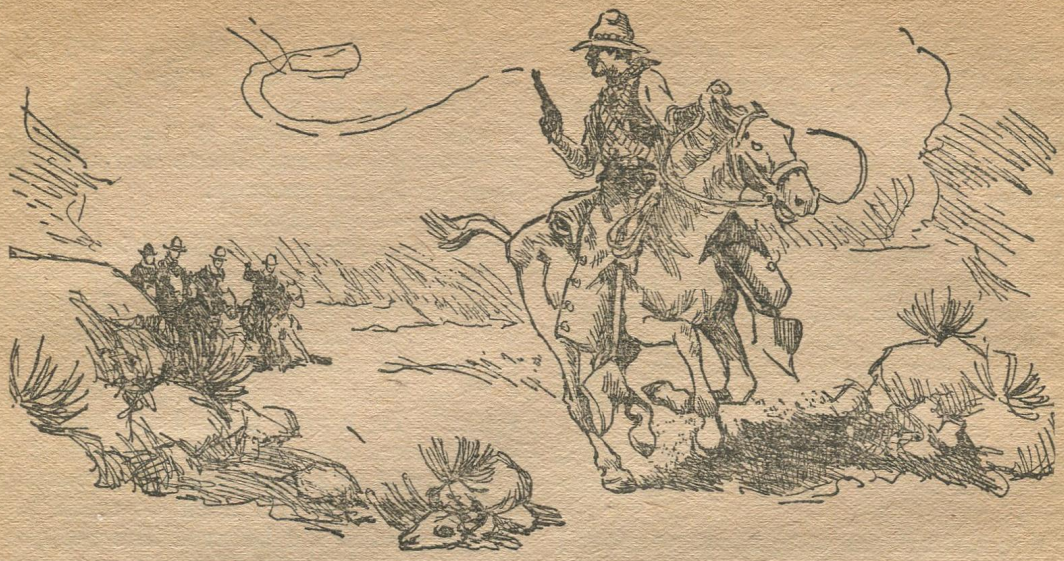
"Yes, Russ," he said quietly, "here I am again." He waved a hand at Gaylord, as he advanced into the room, and went on, "I'm afraid he's piled it on a little too thick, old man, but there's a bit of truth in it. You see, after I'd behaved like the dog I was with you, and lost you that pennant, I went on a frightful bat—a bat on which I stayed for a year. It nearly killed me, but it likewise cured me; that's when I wrote you for another chance, and naturally you were right in telling me to go to the devil. One of my troubles, Russ, was that I'd always had too much coin to spend, but I resolved then to spend some of it in the right way. I loved baseball—I love it more all the time—and I thought that the only way I could square myself with you, and at the same time gain my own self-respect, was to try and help you get that pennant I'd thrown away for you. I——"

He hesitated for a moment, walking over and putting his hand on Gaylord's shoulder.

"I had to have the stuff to work on, Russ, and when I found this chap I was sure I'd discovered it. Anyway, I did my hardest, and—and you've been kind enough to mention, as Frank says, that he grabbed the flag for you. I—Russ, I haven't had a drop in nearly three years, and I never will again as long as I live—please believe that. I want to ask more than your friendship again; I want to ask for a job, although I don't care if it's without pay. Still have my income, you know. No, don't get the idea I think I'll ever be able to pitch, but I'd like to be back with the old Pythons and do the coaching of the rookie hurlers. If you think I'm possibly——"

"Think it?" cried the pilot, speaking for the first time as he stepped forward and stuck out his hand. "Man alive, what more——"

But Gaylord heard no more. He had quietly faded from the room while the two reunited pals stood there pumping their arms off.



THE DESERT RAT

By W. C. TUTTLE

Author of "The Loot of the Lazy A," "The Luck Maker," etc.

UP THERE IN THE HEAT-SCABBED HILLS, LOOKING OUT ACROSS THE OLD MOJAVE, WHERE IN THE OLD DAYS AS NOW THERE WAS LITTLE WATER—AND LESS LAW—ONE LEARNS TO SEE HOW NEARLY AKIN ARE LOVE, HATE, HAPPINESS AND HELL

I TELL you there's just four things in life, compadre; love, hate, happiness, and hell. They're linked awful close together. Ain't more than the thickness of a cigarette-paper apart. I've lived a long time. Look at me! A damned old mummy, eh? Must be close to a hundred.

Quien sabe. I've loved and hated in my life. Mebby I've had happiness. And as for the rest— But when you live alone up here in these heat-scabbed hills, lookin' out across the old Mojave; always livin' here, always lookin'—wonderin'.

Heat? Sometimes the rocks curl up. And in the winter the wind sweeps down across here whistlin' like frightened horses, chillin' you to the bone. And in the nights the moon almost rests on the hilltops and the stars seem so close yuh could hang your hat on a point. Lonesome? Nobody to talk with, you say? I talk to myself—of love, hate, happiness and hell. Oh, there is plenty to talk about.

No, I'm not religious. What is religion? Tryin' to make yourself fit to die? What does death amount to? Why do men try to fit themselves for death, when they are not fit to live? Fear of the hereafter? Fear of somethin' they do not know. Do you know it is harder to live than to die? Death is inevitable. We do not have to struggle to die. But life——

Hate is a queer thing. Happiness is natural; love is just love; hell is what makes you look back at the things you did to spoil love and happiness. Hate and hell go hand in hand, compadre; bunkies of misery.

Don't I know? I've seen it all, and I am not too old to remember what I have seen. I do not forget. You will listen?

Help yourself to the tequila. I make it myself. Ha, ha, ha! *Licores destilados ilegalmente, eh?* Who cares? I am too old to carry it out here; so I make it. But the story——

It was many years ago, but what are years to one who remembers? It was at El Sicomoro; which is American soil, but Mexican in population; out there against the desert hills, white-hot in the sunshine. North of the town, almost against the rear of the buildings, are the rocky hills, where little grows. A few of the poorest Mexicans live there; half-breed Yaqui and Mexicans, huddled away in their hogans; too poor to build better than with pieces of broken boxes and strips of dirty burlap.

Two brothers came to El Sicomoro one

day; two brothers whose name were Jim and Bud Neil, and who were as unlike as two brothers might be. Jim was tall, swarthy, ill-tempered, but men said he was good looking. But Jim had been born with a hate in his heart, it seemed. Bud was almost as tall as Jim, but of different clay; a dreamer of dreams, a man who did not trouble himself to hate anything or anybody.

But with all of Jim's hate, he loved Bud. Perhaps it was the one thing in life that he loved. At least, it seemed that it was the one thing he loved—until he met Dolores Leone.

Her father was an old rancher; old country Spanish, proud as a chief of the Yaqui. Porfirio Leone, who bred fine horses. And Dolores was the kind that makes fools of men. Eyes like shadowy pools, laughing lips, a flash of white teeth; a body as graceful as the deer of the mesquite. *Madre de Dios*, what a girl!

And Porfirio Leone hired the Neil brothers to break horses for him. It was a heaven for Bud, who loved horses better than he loved his life; and it was heaven for Jim, who loved Dolores more than Bud loved horses, if such a thing is possible.

And there was one horse which Porfirio Leone called El Magnifico—The Magnificent; a great slashing bay horse, almost red in the sunlight, bronze in the shadows; faster than any horse in the El Sicomoro country.

And Bud loved this horse passionately. It was a god to him. But more of this later. Jim had no eye for a horse. He knew horses and worked well with them, but his eyes were only for Dolores. Porfiro Leone watched him gravely, but said nothing.

Then came Len Archer, the new sheriff of El Sicomoro. He was a fine figure of a man, handsome, young. And he saw Dolores. It was then that a great hate welled up in the soul of Jim Neil, because he knew that the Rancho Leone would no longer be a heaven for him.

No, he was not a coward—not then; but he was afraid he might not win the race. And he saw that Porfirio Leone looked with favor upon the sheriff. Or perhaps it was because of his jealous hate that he imagined all this. *Quien sabe.*

Then came Miguel La Costa, a gambler of El Sicomoro, and paid the price for El Magnifico. He wanted him for racing across the border, it seems. Bud Neil sat for hours against the corral fence, staring unseeingly. He was like a man whose god has been taken away from him. Even Porfirio Leone, who had been pleased over the price, shook his head sadly, because he was a horse-lover, and understood.

Jim had spoken no words of love to Dolores, but this night he met her in the patio in the moonlight, and told her what she meant to him. But she gave him no definite answer, because she did not know her own mind. He pleaded with her, but she only laughed. He begged her to go to the dance the next night at El Sicomoro with him, and she said she had promised the great Señor Archer.

Blind, unreasoning hate flooded his soul, and he left her there in the patio. Bud was in town, and Jim followed him. It was less than two miles. Jim rode a horse that belonged to the rancho—a horse worth many dollars.

He met the sheriff in a cantina, and in his blind anger, struck the sheriff across the mouth. *Por Dios!* They must still tell of that fight in El Sicomoro. And when it was over the sheriff staggered outside, leaving Jim Neil in a battered heap on the cantina floor. There was nothing breakable in the cantina that was unbroken, and they fought only with their hands.

Men poured water over Jim and bound up his bruises, after which, still unbeaten, he went seeking the sheriff, a gun in his hand and murder in his heart. And then he met Bud, whose face was white in the light from a cantina window.

"I'm goin' away," said Bud thickly. "I've stolen El Magnifico, and they have already discovered the loss. He's my horse, and they'll never catch him."

Jim laughed harshly and grasped Bud by the arm.

"Where is the horse? Get him and follow me to the rancho. You stole what you want—I'll do the same!"

Do you see what he was going to do? He was going to steal Dolores Leone. Mad? Crazy with love and hate; building himself a palace in hell, señor. What sane man would do such a thing. To steal a horse is not difficult, but to steal a woman!

But Bud did not point this out. What was a woman to him, beside a beautiful horse?

So they went back to the rancho, with Bud thundering along in the lead, astride El Magnifico. But somehow it was surmised that Bud had stolen El Magnifico. Perhaps someone saw them start toward the ranch.

They went boldly, tying their horses just outside the big patio gate. They did not need stealth. Don Porfirio and Dolores were on the veranda, which overlooks the patio, and Dolores was strumming a guitar. They could see the glowing end of Porfiro's cheroot.

Jim cursed softly and drew Bud away. They must wait until Don Porfirio would go in the house. It was moonlight, and they saw several horsemen approaching.

"From El Sicomoro!" gasped Bud. "They follow us, Jim!"

He ran for El Magnifico, loosening the big horse as quickly as possible, but his haste made waste. The big animal reared, making it impossible for Bud to mount, and before he could swing away from the patio wall, the sheriff and two other men were upon them.

Jim cursed the sheriff and rode into him, firing as he came. But a bullet from the sheriff's revolver smashed his right arm, while another rider rode him down. Another bullet from the sheriff's gun knocked Bud from his saddle, and the fight was over.

It was weeks before Bud was able to stand trial. Men wanted to lynch them for stealing the horse, but the law prevailed, and the judge sentenced them to three years apiece in the penitentiary. A doctor who knew little of broken bones, sent Jim to the penitentiary with a crooked arm, and more hate against humanity.

Have some more of the tequila. It is not often that I have a chance to say "Here's how," to anyone, except myself. It's hard to drink alone. Sometimes I imagine I'm back in the cantina at El Sicomoro, and I talk with all the old ones. Loco, eh? No; just old age—and memories.

I remember that day when the judge sentenced them. Jim had not spoken a word during the trial. He did not seem to care what happened.

But after he had been sentenced he said to the sheriff, "I'll come back, Archer—don't forget."

The sheriff did not reply, but led them back to their cells.

QUEER ideas—these prisons. Lock a man away from society for a certain length of time. What's the good of it all? Does the man on the outside care about prisons? Does the man inside become any better? It takes him away from society for a length of time, teaches him nothing, except hatred of the law—and turns him loose on society again. Did it teach Jim Neil anything? It did not.

At the end of three years he came out through the big gate, little changed outwardly, more bitter inwardly. All those long days and nights he had nursed his hate of the sheriff of El Sicomoro. He did not hate the prison for the misery it dealt him, but charged it all to Len Archer.

Bud showed the effects of the prison more than Jim. His face was sallow, his eyes larger, slower of step. He had not been well since he had been shot, and there was a cough that racked him a little. They had been kept apart in prison, but outside of a handshake, no one would know they had not spoken to each other for years.

Bud did not hate anybody. He only wanted to get where there was green grass, trees—horses. He stopped beside a stunted cottonwood and felt of its leaves, as though hardly believing it real. He brushed some tears from his cheeks and followed after Jim, who had not seen the cottonwood.

And they came back to El Sicomoro. Things had changed little. It did not take Jim long to find out that Archer was still sheriff, and that he had married Dolores Leone. There was a baby—a boy.

He met the sheriff on the street, but neither spoke. Jim Neil had said he would come back. There was no fear in the sheriff's eyes. He was not that kind. Men said that Archer's term of office was nearly over, and that he would not accept the office again. He was going to take charge of the rancho for Porfirio Leone.

Jim and Bud fixed up a little shack on the hill back of El Sicomoro, among the half-breeds, where Bud spent the days, lying in the sunshine, dreaming away the pain that was in his chest, while Jim drank tequila in the cantinas and listened to the gossip. A stage-driver, who drank too much, told a secret to Jim Neil; the secret of the payroll of the Silver Hill mines.

Once a month this payroll went to the mines from the bank at El Sicomoro, but just on what day, and how—none knew.

The stage always traveled at night, on account of the heat, and it was twenty miles to the mines; twenty miles up-grade. On the night of the fourteenth of the month, before the stage would leave the stable, a man from the bank would enter the back door of the stable, carrying the payroll in gold.

It would be placed on the boot of the stage, beneath some sacks of grain; the last

place anyone would ever expect that amount of money to be carried. No guard rode with the driver; no treasure box was carried. The gold would weigh close to a hundred pounds, although the bulk was not large.

All this Jim learned from the drunken driver. Fortune favored Jim, and he was able to win a few hundred dollars at dice, which kept them in food. Jim purchased a double-barrel shot-gun and a supply of buckshot-loaded cartridges. Then he bought two horses and two old saddles.

Perhaps the sheriff knew of all this. It would not be difficult for him to learn that Jim had bought two horses and a shotgun. Jim met Dolores on the street, but she did not see him. She was even more beautiful now. A thousand schemes for revenge darted through Jim's mind; but he discarded them all. He wanted that Silver Hill payroll—enough money to keep him the rest of his life—and a chance to make Dolores a widow. As far as punishment was concerned, Jim had forgotten the inside of a prison. Thus do prisons teach men to go and sin no more. As well pen up a rattlesnake for three years, and expect it to shed its fangs.

You see, Jim blamed the sheriff for what happened to Bud. When Bud coughed, Jim swore bitterly. The bullet hole in the lungs never did heal properly. Prison is a poor convalescent ward. Anyway, Bud spent most of his time sleeping. Jim's plans did not interest him.

He did not even question Jim when Jim packed up most of their stuff on one horse and rode away with it. He did not know that Jim was making a cache at the Coyote Springs, about ten miles north of El Sicomoro. It was the nearest water, traveling from El Sicomoro to the Vinagarones. There was little water in the Vinagarones—and less law.

It is hot at the Coyote Springs, which is just a sink in a red hot canyon, where the coyote comes to drink. It is not good water—but it is water. Any water is good in the desert, when a man's gullet is parched and his lips broken. Jim did not know that the sheriff saw him start for Coyote Springs.

Jim made his cache at the spring, and with that cache were two big canteens of sweet water from El Sicomoro. He hid his outfit away in the jumble of rocks about fifty feet from the spring, and with a tangle of mesquite, which he cut from further up the slope, he made an ambush. It looked as though this brush grew up among the rocks. At least it looked so to Jim Neil, who did not know Coyote Springs as well as the sheriff did.

Did I forget to tell you about the sheriff's horse? He was as big as El Magnifico, but as white as the snow on the peak of San Gorgonio; a present from Porfirio Leone. The Mexicans called him Ventisca—the Blizzard. Not a spot nor a blemish on that pure white coat.

Bud had not seen this horse, nor had Jim told him. The sheriff rode on a silver-mounted saddle, silver bit, a saddle blanket of the Navajo—blue with white stars. *Madre de Dios,* it was something to make any horseman look twice.

Jim did not tell Bud any of his plans, until the day of the fourteenth; and then he did not tell Bud that he intended killing the sheriff. They were to steal the payroll of the Silver Hill mine, head for the Vinagarones, and have enough money to keep them the rest of their lives.

Jim knew the sheriff well enough to know that he would be on their trail shortly; and Jim knew that their horses would be no match for the big white animal, which would outdistance anything in the country. And Jim knew that the sheriff would expect them to head for the Vinagarones, which would take them past the Coyote Springs.

At least their horses would be able to cover the ten miles ahead of any pursuit. You see, Jim was gambling on the chance that the sheriff would be first at Coyote Springs—after them. His plan, as he outlined it to Bud, was simple. The stage would leave the stable at eight o'clock. Bud was to guard the front door, while Jim went in the rear door and waited for the man from the bank.

Bud was to have his horse at the hitch-rack across the street, while Jim tied his horse near the rear of the stable. Jim would take the money and ride for the Coyote Springs, circling the town, while Bud was to circle the other way and meet him a mile from town, where the trail led straight to Coyote Springs. A pistol shot in the stable would be Bud's signal to depart.

It all worked out as they planned—almost. Bud tied his horse to a hitch-rack across the street, and stood in the darkness of the stable-front, while Jim tied his horse to an old wagon near the rear of the stable. He fastened the shot-gun to his saddle-horn with a leather thong, and made his way to the rear door of the stable.

Two men were hitching the four horses, and did not see Jim come in. He halted

near the rear of the stage, and in a few moments the driver walked past. There was only the dim light of a stable lantern, but Jim's swingin' blow with the barrel of his six-shooter was true, and the driver collapsed in his arms.

Swiftly Jim placed him in a stall and darted to the rear of the stage again. But the boot was empty—the man from the bank had not arrived. The other man, whistling softly, came back, talking to the man who had been with him a moment ago, and did not know what struck him.

He went to join the driver in an empty stall, while Jim swiftly examined the stage, thinking perhaps that the money had been placed elsewhere. But it was not there. He came back to the rear of the stage, breathing heavily, cursing his luck, wondering if the drunken driver had lied.

A man was coming through the rear door, and Jim caught a flash of white collar. It was the man from the bank, carrying two heavy sacks. He laughed as he dropped them gently at the feet of Jim Neil; evidently thinking him the driver.

And the next instant he was looking down the muzzle of a big revolver. He did not make a sound while Jim Neil roped him tightly and gagged him with a piece of old saddle blanket. Perhaps he was too frightened to say anything.

It had all been so easy that Jim Neil laughed, as he hefted the two sacks, which were a load for a strong man. He tied them together and hoisted the load to his shoulder. But before he had a chance to fire the warning shot, several shots were fired out in the street, and there was the sound of men's voices.

Swiftly he left the stable and threw the sacks across his saddle. He mounted and spurred his horse into a run, heading around the west end of El Sicomoro. There was no moon to guide him, but he had mapped out his trail days before.

He had loosened his shotgun, and now he rode with it in one hand, swinging it as easily as most men handle a revolver.

To his left now were the lights of El Sicomoro, and he knew he was close to the old trail. Only the stars lighted the desert. He was still swinging to the left, when out through the Joshua-palms and mesquite came Ventisca, the great white horse, its rider sending him straight for Jim's lurching mount.

And Jim knew that the showdown was at hand. He fairly screamed his defiance at the sheriff, threw the shotgun across the horn of his saddle, and sent two loads of buck-shot across the short distance that separated them.

Came a momentary blindness from the flash of the two heavy cartridges, and a riderless white horse went on.

Well, here's how, compadre! It's a little new, this tequila. Still, it is better than nothing when a man talks much. This is my first chance to talk in a long time—except to myself.

And then Jim went on. For the first time in more than three years he was happy. Happiness is a queer thing. When you have lived here as long as I have, looking out over the old Mojave, you wonder why a man could kill and be happy. Death is inevitable—so why kill?

But Jim knew the death of the sheriff would soon be known, and that many men would ride the trails of the desert for his killer. It was not as he had intended, for his plan had been to kill at Coyote Springs and hide the body somewhere among the rocks, where only the buzzards and coyotes might find it.

But there was food and water at the spring, and Jim knew that Coyote Springs was dry. Men might trail him that far, but they would have to return.

Bud and Jim had agreed that in case anything went wrong they were not to wait for each other, but to head for Coyote Springs. Evidently something had gone wrong, because Bud did not meet him. The shooting in the street would account for that.

Jim's horse barely made the water-hole, and Jim managed to drag the floundering animal into a mesquite patch, before it collapsed. This was something he had not planned. But there was one satisfaction; they could pack the outfit and gold on Bud's horse, and keep going.

All night long Jim lay in his ambush, waiting for Bud to come. At daylight he climbed high on the side of the rocky canyon, where he could look off across the desert, and he saw three men riding toward the spring. They were still a mile or more away.

Jim slid back to his ambush, where he dug into the pack. He was thirsty from climbing the canyon, and—well, the can-

teens were empty. He knelt there on the sand and tried to reason out why the canteens were not full. They did not leak.

Had somebody emptied his canteens, he wondered? The pack was not just as he had left it. Then he sprang out of his ambush, ran across to the opposite side of the spring, where he burrowed down deep among the rocks.

The men came on and stopped at the dry spring. They were all heavily armed, their horses weary.

"Dry as a bone," said one of the men. Jim knew him. It was Slim Appleton, a horse-buyer.

"Pretty dry," said another. "Mebby we could dig down and find water."

The three men dismounted. Jim could not see them now, but he could see the backs of their horses. They were very still now. He lifted his eyes above the rocks. There were no men in sight. Then he looked above where his ambush had been built and he saw Slim Appleton, who had slid over the top of a rock and was looking down at the empty canteens and blanket-roll.

"He found 'em empty, boys," said Slim. "Probably lit right out."

The other men stood up.

"He can't get far," said one of 'em, looking down the canyon. "Len's got men on all sides, watching every foot of the desert, and Jim can't go far without water."

Jim jerked down lower behind the rocks. Can you imagine how he felt? They were talking calmly about the man he had killed; saying that Len Archer had sent men into the desert to surround him. Had he only wounded the sheriff?

The men were mounting, and he heard Slim Appleton saying, "It's a funny deal all the way around. They say that Jim Neil thought more of his brother than anything in the world."

"He did," declared another man. "Don'tcha ever believe Jim wanted to hog all that money. He thought it was Len Archer on that white horse. Len thinks that was the way of it too. He says Bud couldn't help stealin' that white horse."

Jim slid down among the rocks, his eyes staring up at the sky. He knew what he had done. In his blind hate against the sheriff he had not waited to see who rode Ventisca.

All day long he lay there like a dead man; so still that the buzzards came down and stood around him on the rocks, probably wondering why this man who looked dead was not. It was night when Jim climbed out and stared at the stars. He forgot that the canteens were empty, when he tied them around his neck.

He forgot that the men were watching the desert; forgot everything, except that Bud was dead. But he did not forget the gold. Already his tongue was thick from need of water, but he did not know it. With the empty canteens and two-thirds of his own weight in gold on his back, he headed out into the desert. The canteens clanked together at each step, and the weight of the gold drove him ankle-deep into the sand at each step, but he went on and on, with the buzzards circling behind him. A wind storm swept the desert that night, wiping out his erratic trail, but he did not stop. His shoulders were galled to the bone, and he walked like a big ape, hunched almost double, his hands dragging in the sand.

And the Jim Neil of El Sicomoro died. But it was a long ways from Coyote Springs. And somewhere out there in the desert are two heavy canvas sacks. Perhaps they are buried deeply in the sand where no man will ever find them. Jim Neil left them there—close to a hundred pounds of lead rolls—lead from the Silver Hill mines.

That is all the story, compadre. Not much, eh? Dummy pay-roll? Certainly. The real one had gone out another way. Perhaps the drunken driver never knew the difference; perhaps they knew the driver would get drunk. Perhaps they sent several false ones. *Quien sabe.* And Len Archer probably followed Jim Neil to Coyote Springs and emptied the canteens.

Well, here's how. Why don't I write the story? Jim Neil is dead. Who else knows the story as I have told it to you? Happiness is like gold—where you find it; and I am happy here, looking out across the old desert, looking backward. because there is nothing ahead.

And to write, one must hold a pen. That crooked right arm of mine makes it difficult—and I am right-handed. One more, compadre? Go ahead; I'll make some more tomorrow.

The Story Tellers' Circle

JUDGE COLT, Judge Lynch, Judge Law! There, in a few words one finds the evolution of the wilder West. The frontier was dramatic because circumstances made it so, not because the men who took part in the drama were different from you and me. In ten thousand life stories of pioneers still with us or but lately gone was the note of the heroic. This was quite unconscious. It was usually expressed with humor and often with profanity. They were young men, these first comers, filled with intrepid gayety and they asked no odds of any man."

So writes William MacLeod Raine, author of "The Desert's Price," "The Last Shot," numerous other tales and popular books of the fighting West, the old West and the new, and who has written the serial which starts in our next number —"Judge Colt."

In it Mr. Raine returns to his chosen country, the high cattle ranges of Arizona and to his chosen type of character—the youngster who is to develop true manhood along the trails of these high ranges. He further says in connection with "Judge Colt" and the vivid characters who ride across its pages:

"I came into the Southwest as an impressionistic boy, fresh from the sheltered civilization of London. Most of my life has been lived in it, and I endorse fully a sentence from 'The Bozeman Trail.'

"'All through the history of this pioneer condition of our Western country are written, in supreme sacrifice, the stories of narrow escapes —of camps attacked, stock stolen, human suffering from sudden and continuous storms— of the heroic acts of those who were thrown on their own resources for life and preservation.'

"When some mining excitement swept a tide of settlement forward suddenly there always floated on this a scum of desperadoes. Judge Colt was king. A short sharp conflict followed. After some flagrant outrage the best citizens asserted themselves, held a people's court, judged and condemned the evil men who terrorized the community. The day of Judge Lynch was always short. On its heels came Judge Law. Then the community began to talk about civic pride and invested capital and little red schoolhouses.

"In 'Judge Colt' I have tried to express one aspect of this struggle for law and order and to show that the violent recklessness of the desperado was in the end no match for the steady and persistent courage of the good citizen. I have known Jim Turner and By Gar and Black Tom and Pattie Hughes, though none of them are pictures of actual human beings. In my varied wanderings I have talked with Cole Younger and other train robbers. I knew the Coe cousins, who rode with Billie the Kid in the Lincoln County war. I have been the guest of John Poe, who was with Garrett when he killed Billie the Kid. I was in the Washington forests covering the story of Harry Tracy when he was at large. Black Tom is a composite born of many fugitive memories, and the same can be said of the whole story. So far as my memories are truthful in essence—not in detail—'Judge Colt' is a true story.

WILLIAM MACLEOD RAINE
Denver."

So we are glad to have a regular, rous

ing cattle country tale by Raine and warn you not to miss the next number.

THE HABITS OF LIGHTNING

PERHAPS to the average man the greatest characteristic of lightning is its undodgeability. It strikes without playing any favorites, and as if to prove its irresistibility the more, it freakishly leaves untouched the most fragile things while shattering the strongest materials that man can erect in its way. Undoubtedly to the average man the most widespread belief in regard to lightning is that it never strikes twice in the same place. But as a well known scientist once replied to a question on this point:

"Perhaps the reason for the saying is the one given by the darkie—'Iff'n the lightning strikes once, there generally ain't no place left for hit to strike again.'" But Mr. Bertrand Sinclair writes in connection with his story in this issue, "Twice In the Same Place.":

"The lightning episode in my story is one more proof that truth is sometimes stranger than the wildest fiction—because that lightning taking two cracks at the same barn is about the only factual occurrence in that story.

"It did actually happen at the old NL ranch on Birch Creek south of the Bear Paws about 1900, only instead of the second blast, which occurred after a lightning rod had been put up, killing a man, it was a saddle horse that fell victim. This ranch lay right under one shoulder of Tiger Butte which was streaked with iron ore and was a devil of a place for thunderstorms to center. I was on middle guard on a herd there three years later. The cattle shifted off the bedground before a driving rain and wind. They shoved up against a barb wire fence. The lightning hit the fence and left seventeen head of cattle dead in a row. So you see queer things do happen, even if they do stretch the long arm of coincidence in the doing!"

THE CUSTER PISTOL

WE HAVE received the following interesting letter from Mr. Morve L. Weaver a well known firearms expert of Visalia, California.

Editor, SHORT STORIES,
Dear Sir:

In a recent issue of your magazine, a letter headed Eureka, California, notes the possession by Emil Santsche of a cap-and-ball Colt's revolver marked "G. A. Custer" and thought to have been carried by that gallant officer in the battle of the Little Big Horn in 1876.

I wish to congratulate Mr. Santsche on the possession of a very interesting relic, but would recommend that he discount the part of the story regarding its having been in Custer's possession during his last fight. The best Indian evidence we have points to the fact that Custer had recently cut his hair and on the day of the fight was not dressed in his "fort clothes" and that his body was not found by the Indians. Rain-in-the-Face so testifies and adds that they surely would have scalped him had they been able to find his remains.

A further reason for believing the arm to have left Custer's possession prior to the battle is Custer's well known tendency to fit himself with the best and latest in equipment and that he would carry an inferior weapon into an important engagement speaks more for his sentiment than for his judgment. In 1876 when Custer and his command were wiped out the single-shot Remington pistol and the Schofield-Smith & Wesson six-shot revolver of 45 calibre had been about six years in the hands of the troops: the 45 single-action Army Colt was near four years in service, while at least four models of Remington cartridge revolvers had been issued for trial as early as 1870. Besides these arms some troops had been armed with converted Colts using metallic cartridges.

When I refer to the Cap-and-ball Colt as an inferior arm I do not decry its effectiveness nor its accuracy but merely to its unhandiness in reloading. I fully realize that many men carried the old type of revolvers long after the general adoption of the cartridge guns, just 'for old times' sake', but a man would hardly be ruled by sentiment for an inanimate object when embarking on a serious Indian campaign.

Yours truly,
MORVE L. WEAVER

"A CHIP ON HIS SHOULDER"

AS IS the case with expressions we've always known, we've used and seen "chip on his shoulder" countless times and thought very little about it. Now comes a letter from an Englishman to whom the expression is not familiar:

Editor, SHORT STORIES,
Dear Sir:

Having been a constant reader of Western fiction for many years I have frequently come across the expression "wearing a chip on each shoulder," mentioned by Mr. Burtis in his novel, "Handicapping the Climax." Can you tell me its origin? Is it merely an idiom to express a desire to "start something" or did it arise from an actual incident?

I think SHORT STORIES is a magazine of exceptional value, not only from the fiction point of view, but also because of the interesting little monographs dotted about here and there in it which are each a feature (they seem to be getting fewer than of yore; please don't drop them altogether).

Wishing you every success, as the best record

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_____

of Western life and most every other life worth living, I remain,

A constant reader,
C. N. HICKS,
Guy's Hospital,
London, S. E. 1.

Haven't small boys always placed a chip on their shoulders and dared the other fellow to knock it off? We thought hostilities had begun that way somewhere back in the days of Noah's sons. But if SHORT STORIES readers know differently, or who put the first chip on the first shoulder, won't they let Mr. Hicks—and us—know?

MAIL MATTERS

WE ARE regularly getting letters about the Mulford serial just concluded, and it gives us great satisfaction to think that, with all the enthusiasm for Mr. Mulford's characters, "Corson of the JC" will be along in SHORT STORIES before very long.

Editor, SHORT STORIES,
Dear Sir:

I wish to tell you again how much I enjoy SHORT STORIES which I have been reading for a long time and always enjoy all the stories.

I should like very much to express my thanks to Clarence E. Mulford for the pleasure his story "Bar 20 Rides Again" gave me. I sure like the Bar 20 boys, and Hopalong, Red O'Connor, Johnny, Buck and the rest of them are real people and old friends to me. I read my first story by Mr. Mulford in 1910 when I bought the book "Bar 20" and since then I have bought several of his books and read most of his stories in your magazine and others. I hope there will soon be another story about Hopalong and his friends.

I do think that Mr. Mulford makes you feel that his characters are just as real as it is possible to make them. I sure wish it were possible to let Mr. Mulford know how much I enjoy reading his stories and living with his characters.

Wishing the best of success to SHORT STORIES, I remain,

Yours very truly,
HARRY W. ENGLISH,
Poughkeepsie, N. Y.

Here's a letter from a British reader which has bearing on the Long vs Short controversy:

Editor, SHORT STORIES,
Dear Sir:

For several years I have read SHORT STORIES with much interest and pleasure, and I now take no other magazine, as the stories of most of them seem insipid to yours.

I have just been reading in a recent number a letter from a reader in Bath, Somerset, and, as you invite criticism, I should like to say that, whilst agreeing with the majority of her remarks, I do not think two very long stories, as well as a serial, would improve the present arrangement of your excellent magazine.

If I have quarter of an hour to spare I often enjoy reading one of your shorter stories, but I cannot tackle the long ones until I get a free evening. I am therefore all for the short yarns (which your title implies) and one only of the longer.

Yours faithfully,
ERNEST B. SCOTT,
Rhyl, North Wales.

Let this Secret Give YOU a "Million-Dollar" Personality

Do you know how to attract money, success, love, friends, popularity, happiness?

Do you know how to make people like you?

How to control the minds of others?

How to fascinate the other sex?

How to be a leader among men, if you are a man, or the center of attraction if you are a woman?

How to overcome shyness, self-consciousness, fear?

How to radiate that mysterious, irresistible power of personal magnetism that lays the world at your feet?

Make People Love You

What a wonderful thing it is to have hosts of friends, to have everyone glad to see you, to be showered with invitations for good times. What a priceless asset it is in business to have a "million-dollar" personality—to be able to win others to you, to be able to inspire confidence, loyalty and enthusiasm.

What kindles the fires of love? It isn't the best looking girl who is the most popular. Many a girl who would never be called beautiful is the idol of her set. She fascinates everyone.

Who makes the most money? Not the plodding, hard-working man. No! It's the magnetic, dominant, forceful man.

Astounding Secrets

LAID BARE!

How a magnetic man wins success in business.

How to gain control of others.

Secrets of fascinating the other sex.

The capabilities of a real lover.

Advice to those about to marry.

How to overcome shyness, self-consciousness, timidity.

How to become popular, beloved, admired.

How great leaders sway others to their will.

The key that unlocks the door of every heart.

Recharging yourself with vital force.

How to banish worry and trouble.

The magnet that attracts everything you desire.

Win a Big Prize in the Game of Life!

Would you like to have magnetic personality? You CAN. Yes, the same forces of personal magnetism flow through you as through any one else. Only they are hidden deep down in your subconscious self, unrealized, dormant, idle. Like a mighty current of electricity, this mysterious force is waiting for you to "press the button" that will galvanize it into vibrant life and energy.

Every one possesses this mystic quality—it is part of life itself. Read what Mr. Theron Q. Dumont, instructor in the Art and Science of Personal Magnetism, of Paris, France, says: "Every person has already all the magnetic power that he or she will ever have any use for. What you need to know is how to draw upon your storage keeper—the inner self."

And now Theron Q. Dumont has disclosed his whole wonderful system. In one of the most extraordinary books ever written he has revealed the secrets by which any one, anywhere, can develop a "million-dollar" personality.

FREE

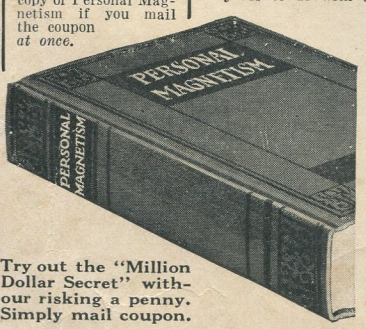
"How to Increase Your Vocabulary"

Do you ever hesitate for the right word? Do you ever come across unfamiliar terms in your reading? A large vocabulary is one of the greatest aids to social and business success. "How To Increase Your Vocabulary" is a book that will give you amazing command of language, make you a more effective speaker—a more brilliant conversationalist — a more finished writer. Without a penny of cost to you, a copy of this wonderful book will be sent with your copy of Personal Magnetism if you mail the coupon *at once.*

The Psychology of Personal Magnetism

This amazing book places in your hands the very "gift of the Gods"—the key to your real inner, wonderful self.

No tedious study, no tiresome mental exercises. It is all a matter of knowing HOW. Once you learn the secrets of personal magnetism, this marvelous force is yours to do with as you will, to win friends, popularity, admiration and love, to become a leader among men, to mould the minds of others, to banish worry, depression, timidity, self-consciousness, ill health. Choose the things you want of life; personal magnetism will draw them irresistibly to you. Start today—NOW.



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