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JAN. 15, 1924



Sidney H. Rosenberg

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TWICE-A-MONTH MAGAZINE

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Tale of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police ❖ ❖



Never Fire First~ By James French Dorrance~

(A COMPLETE
NOVEL)

CHAPTER I.

WRITTEN IN GLOOM.

FROM the "dig-in" of the snow bank where he had spent the blizzard night in comparative comfort, Constable La Marr of the Royal Mounted looked out upon a full-grown day. The storm that had driven him to shelter had passed, or at least was taking a rest. For once he had overslept, and where days, even in winter's youth, are but seven hours long, the fault caused him chagrin.

That a "Mountie" in close pursuit of a murder suspect should have made such a slip was disconcerting even to one so young as La Marr. He found little consolation in the fact that when he had enlisted in the Force he had not dreamed of an arctic assignment, but expected one of those gayly uniformed details to Montreal or Quebec. His concern was regarding what his immediate superior, Staff Sergeant Russell Seymour, would think if the news ever leaked out.

There was small chance of that, however, unless he himself tested the adage that confession is good for the soul. That grimly handsome wolf of the North, in command of the detachment post at Armistice, had been absent for two months on an irksome detail of snow patrol, one that should have fallen to the rookie constable, except for his inexperience.

La Marr stamped out of the snow hole that had sheltered him; restored circulation by vigorous gymnastics. Light as was his trail equipment, being without a sled or dogs, he had not suffered, having learned rapidly the first protective measures of the arctic "cop." He was about to make a belated breakfast from his emergency pack when his glance chanced toward the north and focused upon a furred figure which he saw was headed on a course that would bring him within easy reach.

"Aye, not so bad!" he congratulated audibly. "I get my man by sleeping on his trail!"

La Marr chuckled as he saw the snowshod Eskimo stumble directly toward the trap that had been set for him by chance of Morpheus.

A murder had been committed two days before at Armistice, almost within the shadow of the police post. The crime seemed a particularly atrocious one to the constable from the fact that a white man, a trader, had been the victim. Any Eskimo who would go to such lengths either was desperate or insane. La Marr felt that it behooved him to be very much on guard as he waited within the shelter of the snow trap.

He had not a doubt that the native approaching was his quarry, any more than he had of that quarry's guilt. He wondered if the slogan of the Mounted applied in case one had to deal with an insane native. It would be easy—and providentially safe—to wing the oncomer, undoubtedly unaware of the nearness of an officer of the law.

The training at the Regina school of police, however, is strict and impressive. Constable La Marr could not take a pot shot, even with intent only to wound the flounderer.

Next moment surprise caught him—surprise that Avic, the culprit, should be fighting his way back to camp. Why should one so obviously guilty of killing a white man in a bronze country be headed toward the police post from which he had so recently made a clean getaway?

No answer came to La Marr. He merely waited. The Eskimo floundered on.

The constable's concealment was neat enough where all outdoors is white. It was better even than bush or shrub, for they were so rare as to arouse suspicion. At just the right instant he lunged forth, taking the native entirely by surprise. The two men toppled over in a flurry of snow.

For a moment the Eskimo struggled fiercely, probably thinking that his furl-clad assailant was an arctic wolf. His resistance ceased on recognizing that he was in human grip.

La Marr yanked his captive to his feet and searched for weapons, finding none. Then he remembered the rules of

the Ottawa "Red Book" and pronounced the statutory warning:

"Arrest you, Avic, in the name of the king; warn you that anything you say may be used against you. D'y understand?"

As he asked this last, which is not a part of the official warning, he realized that Avic did not.

"Barking sun dogs, why isn't there one language for everybody," he complained. "Anyway, there isn't much chance of my understanding anything you may say against yourself. I'll tell it all over to you when I get you to the post. Now we'll mush!"

"Ugh—yes," grunted the Eskimo, seemingly undisturbed.

The young constable was puzzled by the prisoner's demeanor. He stared at the man, whose stolid expression was heightened by thick lips and high cheek bones. Perhaps the native did not know that he was in the hands of the police and on his way to pay for a dreadful crime.

Raising his parkee, La Marr disclosed the scarlet tunic which he wore underneath. It was the color of authority in the Far North; no Eskimo who ever had seen it before could doubt it.

There was no gleam of intelligence in the dark eyes that stared from behind narrow, reddened lids. Suddenly there dawned upon the constable a possibility. The Eskimo was snow-blind, under the curse of the Northland winter that falls alike to native and outlander at times. That would explain his back-tracking. Rather than wander in circles over the white-blanketed tundra until a miserable death came to his rescue, he was hurrying back, while a glimmer of sight yet remained, to take his chances with the mystery called "law."

"Not a bad choice," thought La Marr, as he stepped out ahead to break the trail that the blizzard during the night had covered.

After locking his prisoner in the tiny guardroom that was part of the one-story frame structure sheltering the small detachment, the constable started for the trading post of Harry Karmack, a few hundred yards away. He was young, La Marr, and pleased with himself over his

first capture of importance. He anticipated satisfaction in discussing the arrest with the only other white man at Armistice, now that poor Oliver O'Malley had passed out.

But he did not get across the yard. The report of a rifle from down the frozen river, which flowed north, halted him. He saw a dog team limping in over the crust, unmistakably the detachment's own bunch of Malemutes. The man at the gee pole could be none other than Sergeant Seymour, returned at last from the long arctic patrol.

Here was a vastly more important auditor for his triumph. La Marr sprang forward to offer salute and greetings and to help with the Malemutes, for an Eskimo dog team always arrives with a flourish that is both exciting and troublesome.

Once the animals were off to the kennels and before Seymour fairly had caught his breath from the last spurt into camp, the young constable was blurted out the details of Oliver O'Malley's untimely end.

"But I've captured his murderer!" La Marr exclaimed in triumph. "I've got Avic, the Eskimo, hard and fast in the guardroom. Come and see!"

With interest, the sergeant followed the lead of the one and only man in his command. The native was squatted on the floor with his back against the wall near a stove, the iron sides of which glowed with heat. On their entry, he arose muttering in gutturals that meant nothing to the constable.

Seymour gave one glance of recognition, then turned. "You've got a murderer, sure enough, La Marr," he said with that slowness of speech so seldom accelerated as to be an outstanding characteristic. "But his name's not Avic, and by no possibility could he have had anything to do with the killing of O'Malley."

"Then who the——" the constable began.

"This is Olespe, of the Lady Franklin band," Seymour interrupted. "For three weeks he's been my prisoner. On the sled out there are the remains of the wife he killed in an attack of seal-fed jealousy."

The chagrin of Constable La Marr was

written in gloom across a face so lately aglow.

CHAPTER II.

IN THE ESKIMO WAY.

GRIM, indeed, had been Sergeant Seymour's sledged return to his detachment. For more than two hundred miles across the frozen prairie he had driven his ghastly load—the murdered woman, wrapped in deerskins after the native custom, sewed up in a tarpaulin and lashed to a komatik, the Labrador sled that gives such excellent service on cross-country runs. All this, that the inquest which the Dominion requires regardless of isolation might be held in form and the case against the killer assured.

And out ahead, unarmed and under open arrest, had mushed the murderer himself, breaking trail toward his own doom. Often in the whirling snow Olespe had been entirely beyond his captor's sight. But never had he wavered from the most feasible course to Armistice; always had he been busily making camp when the dogs and their official driver caught up at the appointed night stop.

Seymour was not thinking now, however, of this recent ordeal. The case of Olespe, except for the formalities of the coroner's inquest, commitment, and trial, was settled. The plight of his unhappy constable held the pity of the sergeant, always considerate.

"I'm not blaming you, Charley," he assured him. "Until you've been up here a few years, all Eskimos look pretty much alike."

"Can't I start after the real Avic at once?" asked the constable. "I'll make no second mistake."

La Marr was as eager as a hound held in leash after its nose has rubbed the scent.

Seymour did not answer at once, but set about taking off his heavy trail clothes and getting into the uniform of command. He was a large man, but lean, without an ounce of superfluous flesh, owing to the long patrols that he never shirked.

The scarlet tunic became him. Across the breast of it showed lines of varicolored ribbons, for his service in France had been a distinguished one. He had

gone into the war from his Yukon post, and almost directly after the armistice back into the Northwest Territories to establish one of the new posts of the Mounted in the Eskimo country.

The green constable chaffed under the silence, but he did not make the mistake of thinking it was due to slow thinking. Many had erred in that direction with Seymour to their sorrow. The sergeant certainly was slow in speech, but when he spoke he said something; he might seem tardy in action, but once started he was as active as a polar bear after a seal.

"No hurry about taking after this Avic," he said at last. "Likely he'll not travel far this double-thermometer weather."

The reference was to a fable current in the region that to get the temperature one had to hitch two thermometers together.

"At worst he can't get clear away—no one ever does, except when Old Man Death catches him first. We'll hold our inquests first, then I'll issue a warrant."

"And detail me to serve it?" La Marr's question had that breathless interrogation point of secret self-accusation.

To Seymour's thin lips came that whimsical smile that transformed his whole expression, despite its blanket of beard. To a student of expression this would have shown the tenderness of a woman to be concealed beneath the life-hardened mask. His grimness melted like snow under the caress of a Chinook wind; yet warning remained that this gentleness was not to be considered open to imposition.

"Righto, Charlie!" he promised. "I've made mistakes in my day and been thankful for the chance to rectify them. You're nominated to bring in whoever is named in the warrant after the inquest. Let's go."

He put on a pea-jacket, the sleeves of which showed the stripes of his rank in deep yellow. On a thatch of tousled, brownish hair, he settled the fur cap prescribed in the regulations for winter wear.

Outside, they first attended to the disposal of the sled. Without telling the post's native hostlers the grim nature of

its load, they saw it placed in a shed which had the temperature of a morgue.

Adjoining the police buildings on the south was the establishment of the Arctic Trading Company, Ltd. This was a low but substantially built structure of timber and stone, also facing the frozen river. The two Mounties entered the storm door that gave upon the factor's quarters, with the intention of separating Harry Karmack from his book and pipe long enough to accompany them to the scene of the local crime.

"Say, but I'm glad to see you're home, serg," was the trader's greeting, as he arose from his chair beside an "air-tight burner" and extended his hand for a hearty grip. "Things have come to a pretty pass in the Territories when the Skims get to biting the hands that feed them."

Seymour met this comment with a grave nod. Like others of the Force on arctic detail he was surprised at what approached an epidemic of murderous violence among their Eskimo charges, in general a kindly and docile people.

A prepossessing individual was Harry Karmack, not at all the typical trader. He was dark, from the strain of French blood in his Canadian make-up, with laughing eyes and a handsome mouth. As he seldom took the winter trail, he shaved daily, not to let the "Howling North get the better of me," as he liked to put it. His smooth cheeks contrasted sharply with the bearded ones of the officers, their growth cultivated for protection on the snow patrols. Always Karmack wore tweeds and a bright tie beneath the collar of his flannel shirt. At that, he was a seasoned sour dough and a sharp trader, respected and feared by the natives.

"What do you say's got into the blood of the breed all of a sudden?" he added.

"We've handed them too many rifles, for one thing," replied Seymour slowly. "But don't you worry; the Mounted will get the deluded creatures in hand. Will you come with us for a look at the O'Malley scene?"

Karmack reached for his furs. "If you don't get busy," he went on, a severe note in his voice, "you scarlet soldiers won't be any safer than us traders. When

I think of young O'Malley, one of the finest chaps ever, struck down right here at a police post——"

A catch in his voice stopped him. Taking a battery lantern from a cupboard beside the doorway, he signified that he was ready for the sad inspection.

La Marr led the way to the scene of the crime—a stone hut half buried in the snow. At the door he broke the R. C. M. P. seal which he had placed there before setting out on his futile pursuit of the suspect.

"Nothing was disturbed, sir," said the constable in hushed voice. "Everything is as Karmack and I found it when we came to investigate why O'Malley did not return to the store."

They stepped out of the gathering dusk into a windowless room. The roof was so low as to cause the shortest of them to stoop. The trader pushed the button of his lantern and raised it.

Across the cavellike room, which was bare of furniture after the Eskimo fashion, Seymour stared. There, in a sitting position on a sleeping bench, was all that was mortal of the unfortunate assistant factor.

In life O'Malley had been a handsome youth of pronounced Irish type. Sudden death had wrought so few changes that the sergeant found difficulty in believing that he looked on other than a sleeping fellow human.

The victim's head rested against the back wall of the hut; his crossed feet upon a deerskin floor covering. Clutched in one hand was a black fox pelt. Upon the sleeping bench beside him lay one of silver. Both looked to be unusually fine skins. Presumably some dispute over the price of the prizes was the motive of the crime.

Karmack stepped closer with the light; indicated by gesture a knotted line of sealskin around the victim's throat, the end of the line dangling down over his parkee.

"The Eskimo way!" muttered the trader brokenly.

The shudder that passed through Seymour's wiry frame was not observed by the two companions of the inspection. Neither was it caused by the untimely fate of Oliver O'Malley.

CHAPTER III.

COMPLICATION ASTOUNDING.

AS is the silken kerchief to the Latin garroter, so is the Ugiuk line to an Eskimo bent upon strangulation. Strong reason had Sergeant Seymour of the Mounted to realize the possibilities in the clutch of the stout cord made from the skin of a bearded seal.

Although he had made no mention of the fact just now in Karmack's quarters, when the trader had pronounced warning that the out-of-hand Eskimos soon would be clutching for the throats of the wearers of the scarlet, already had they clutched at his. The vivid memory of his narrow escape had brought his involuntary shudder at sight of the sinister line about O'Malley's throat.

On the Farthest North night of his last patrol Seymour had elected to sleep in a deserted igloo on the outskirts of a village rather than suffer the stifling air of an occupied one. After midnight he had been awakened by a strangling sensation, to find himself in the hands of two stalwart assailants and the knot of the seal-hide line already gripping his throat. He had thrown off the pair only after a struggle that left him too weak to follow them through the snow tunnel into the storm. Probably he never would know their identity or be able more than to guess at their motive.

Seymour did not speak of this now as they stood in the hut of tragedy. Neither did he mention the news that slowly was filtering through the North that Corporal Doak, Tree River Detachment of the Royal Mounted, and Factor Bender of the Hudson's Bay Company post, had been slain in a brutal and treacherous manner. To spread alarm was no part of his policy. But over at the post was the Ugiuk line that had been used on him and in his mind a vivid idea of its practice in Eskimo hands.

From these—the gruesome souvenir and the shuddering memory—he suspected that the O'Malley case was not as open-and-shut as it seemed. For him, mystery stalked the crime, one that would not be solved entirely by the apprehension of Avic, the Eskimo.

Silently, he completed his immediate

investigation of the hut and the body of the man. Two points stood out to confirm the suspicion born of his intimate knowledge of the Eskimo garroting methods. Upon the *corpus delicti* there was absolutely no mark except the sinister purple line about the throat and a crimson spot beneath the skin where the knot in the seal line had taken strangle hold. In the hut there was no sign of struggle, such as he had put forth to save himself in the igloo, not a scratch in the earthen floor or a skin rug out of place. Yet, as he well knew, O'Malley was a powerful youth and of fighting stock.

"Let's have the facts—such as you know." The sergeant turned suddenly to Karmack.

"You shall have them—every one," returned the trader eagerly.

Despite certain mannerisms and his unusual—for the outlands—fastidiousness of dress, Karmack was straightforward and exceedingly matter of fact.

Word from native sources, it seemed, had reached the trading company several days before that Avic was in from his trap line with fox pelts worth a "fortune," according to Eskimo standards. He had borrowed this hut on the outskirts, in which they now stood, from a relative and sent the native to the store for the makings of a "party," or potlatch. The hunter himself had not appeared in camp or sent any direct word to Karmack that he had foxskins for sale. He had no debit on the books of the Arctic company and evidently was minded to drive a hard bargain.

Skilled in barter with the natives, Karmack said he had countered by betraying no interest in the arrival of the aloof hunter. He had felt confident that, given time, Avic would run short of funds for entertaining and market his catch at a reasonable figure.

But at length disturbing rumors had come over his native "grape-vine." Avic had heard, the rumor went, that the Moravian Mission had established a new trade store at Wolf Lake, near the big river—the mighty Mackenzie. He was excited by tales of high prices paid there and was planning to take his prizes to them.

"It was then," continued Karmack, "that I told O'Malley to mush over to see this bird and talk him into a good humor. The young chap had developed a knack at sign-language barter, although he knew little Eskimo; I was busy on a bale of furs at the store. He was just to persuade Avic to come in to the post, where we'd arrive at some satisfactory agreement as to a price for whatever the Skim's traps had yielded.

"By Jove, sir, two hours passed, and Oliver did not come back, nor was there any sign of the hunter. The job shouldn't have taken him half an hour, for all in the name of reason that the native could have wanted was for us to come to him with an invitation. I began to get anxious and started out to see what was what. Meeting La Marr out front, I asked him to come along with me, still with no real apprehension. We found what you yourself have seen—exactly that and nothing more."

He paused for a moment, overcome with emotion, then added: "Holy smoke, man, if I'd known what would happen, I'd never have sent him, but gone myself! They're afraid of me, these confounded huskies. Why, I'd grown to love that young chap as a brother!"

"What do you know about O'Malley, Karmack—how he came into the Territories—what he'd done down in the provinces—all that sort of thing?" Seymour asked the disjointed question, seemingly satisfied with the other's preliminary statement.

The trader was silent a moment, thinking. "Not a great deal, come to think of it," he said, before his hesitation had become pronounced. "A tight-mouthed lad, Oliver, when it came to his own affairs. He hailed from Ottawa and was sent out by the president of the Arctic Trading Company. Brought a letter from the big chief telling me to make a trader out of him—if possible. Evidently his people have money or influence. Perhaps there's some politics in it. I don't really know."

"Hadn't been in any jam down below, had he?"

"Oh, rather not—not that sort at all. May have seen a bit of Montreal or Quebec, and perhaps had crossed the

home bridge to Hull, where it's a trifle damp, you know, but nothing serious, I'm certain. The big chief never would have sent me a blighter."

The sergeant asked for the victim's next of kin and who should be notified.

"Oliver never spoke of his family," answered the factor. "Had a picture or two on the packing box he used for a bureau, but we never discussed them. Said to notify the head office if anything went wrong with him. The lad was peculiar in some ways. You'd think——" Kamack paused.

The sergeant had turned away. His interest seemed not to lie in the trader's thoughts. He had two inquests on his hands, to say nothing of the capture of Avic of the foxes. For the moment he forgot that he had promised Constable La Marr this detail. Moreover there remained that suspicion, born of his own narrow escape from the Ugiuk line, that there was more behind the murder than appeared on the surface. He led the way from the hut; waited until La Marr had affixed another police seal upon the door; then moved ahead into the main trail, a sled-wide path which camp traffic kept beaten down between the banks of snow.

A shout from down the trail startled them. Out of the increasing dusk, bells jangling, bushed tails waving like banners, dashed a team of strange dogs, dragging a light sled. Wondering, the men flattened against the snow bank to give gangway. The arrival of a strange team at that season of the year was an event.

The sled came to a halt a few yards down the trail. A tall driver, slim, despite an envelopment of furs, sprang from the basket and waited for them to come up.

"I thought I recognized a uniform in passing, and I need to ask direction."

The voice was clear as a bell on the evening frost and unmistakably feminine. Moreover it carried none of the accent peculiar to the half-breed, mission-trained native women who spoke English. The men looked closer into a face that was full white and with eyes that might have been brushed into the pallor with a sooty finger.

A white woman in Armistice—a young and comely girl of their own race! It seemed incredible to the three men who had settled down to an October-April winter of isolation.

"I'm Sergeant Seymour of the Mounted, in command of this detachment," offered the policeman, for once speeding his speech. "Who're you looking for, ma'am?"

"I must find Oliver O'Malley's fur-trading store."

"And who might be seeking our young trader?" The sergeant kept from his voice any hint of the inner dread that had clutched him.

"I'm Moira O'Malley, of Ottawa—his sister."

This astounding complication left the three men speechless, but glad for the dusk that partially masked the consternation written upon their faces.

CHAPTER IV.

BEST OF BAD BUSINESS.

IN his grown-up life Sergeant Russell Seymour had met a procession of emergencies. Seldom had he failed to do the right and proper thing—the best for all concerned. But never had he faced a more difficult proposition than that presented by the young woman who now faced him on the trail, awaiting news of the brother she had journeyed so far to join.

When he thought of what lay in the hut they just had replaced under Mounted Police seal, he was distressed to the quick. When he pondered the grief and disappointment that must be hers when she learned the truth, that hidden strain of kindness within him promptly interposed a barrier against his blurting out the facts, police fashion. He felt that he must temporize.

"You've come to the right camp, Miss O'Malley, but your brother won't be in to-night. In the morning—— But surely you did not mush from the Mackenzie alone?"

A small sigh, doubtless of disappointment at the further delay, passed her lips, but no exclamation. Evidently she was a self-contained young person.

No, she explained readily; she had not

come alone. The Reverend Luke Morrow and his wife were behind with another sled and they had traveled only from Wolf Lake.

"Only!" murmured Constable La Marr in appreciation, although after one glance into her wonder face he was hating himself the more for having let the fox hunter get away from him.

The missionaries were having trail trouble, the girl continued. Being so near journey's end, she had dashed on with her lighter load, hoping to send her brother to help them into camp.

"Constable La Marr will go out at once," said the sergeant. "How far are they?"

"Scarcely a mile. We were in sight of your flag when they spilled."

La Marr at once took the back trail, not waiting to go to the post for the worn police team, nor, considering the distance, wishing to experiment with the girl's strange huskies.

At the moment Moira turned to quell an incipient dog fight; the sergeant turned quickly to Karmack.

"Not a word to her until after the inquest—until we've a chance to break it to her gently."

The trader nodded agreement and was introduced when she had straightened out her team.

"Mr. Karmack was—is your brother's chief here at Armistice?"

For a moment he held his breath for fear the slip in the tense of the verb would be noticed and the question raised. But evidently the girl was too interested in the fact of her arrival. The trader helped by bowing in his best manner and seizing one of her mittened hands in both of his own for a warm greeting.

"A fine lad, Oliver!" he enthused. "What a fine chap!"

His exclamation caused her own eyes to open; but Karmack merely grinned in amiable fashion.

"I hope you and your friends will accept the poor hospitality of the trading post, at least for this night," he concluded heartily. "We'll have plenty of room."

"But isn't there a mission house?" asked the girl. "I thought the Morrrows——"

Seymour interrupted. "Nothing doing,

Karmack, with your commercialized hospitality. They're the first visitors of the winter; I claim them in the name of the king."

He turned to the girl. "The mission house hasn't been opened for months. We'll make you comfortable at the detachment shack—won't have to use the guardroom either. If you'll draw rein at the flagpole——"

Her "Mush—mush-on!" to the dogs rang clear and gave the policeman chance for further speech with the factor.

"You couldn't have her there to-night, Karmack, in view of what I've got to tell her to-morrow. Her brother's things scattered all about—she'd ask too many questions. Have you tangled in no time."

Again Karmack nodded agreement. He hadn't thought of that, but only of being hospitable. It would have been a treat, though, to entertain such a charmer under the chaperonage of the missionary couple. He would send up some real butter for their supper—that of the police store was rank.

"Thank you for the butter; if ours came from cows, they were athletes," Seymour admitted with a grimace. "Come up yourself for coffee. And I wish you'd send your man for their dogs and kennel them for to-night. My Malemutes raise Billy-blue when there's any new canine clan in sniffing distance."

The isolation of Armistice, with its difficulties of transportation, combined with its newness as a police post, caused even the living room of the detachment to take on barracklike austerity. The scant furniture had been made on the spot and was all too rustic. There were bunks along three walls and a scattering of skins upon the rough boards of the floor. A lithograph of King George, draped with the colors, occupied a position of honor; the only other decoration being a print of the widely popular "Eddie," Prince of Wales. But logs blazed cheerfully in the stone fireplace, and Moira O'Malley, divested of outer trail clothes, looked very much at home as she stood before its warmth.

Not until he returned from the kitchen and the starting of a "company" supper did Russell Seymour realize in full the startling beauty of the Irish girl who

had come to them at such an unfortunate moment. She was within an inch as tall as himself as she stood there in front of the fireplace. Her lampblack hair, coiled low on her neck, actually was dressed to show her small ears, and almost had he forgotten that white women had pairs of such.

A generous mouth, full and red of lips, sent his eyes hastening on their fleeting inspection when she became aware of his presence in the kitchen doorway. If the even rows of pearl behind those lips had flashed him a smile just then, the temptation must have been too great. Her slender figure merely hinted at rounding out in its mold of black blanket cloth.

In the eyes he had marked on the trail, however, Moira's beauty reached its highest peak, he decided. They were as blue as the heart of an Ungova iceberg and as warm as the fire which glowed behind her. They looked out at him in a friendly, inquiring way from behind lashes as dark as an arctic winter night.

And on the morrow those lashes would be wet with tears as salt from grief as Hudson Bay is from brine. At the moment he would gladly have given his hope of heaven to have ushered a laughing young Oliver O'Malley into the room.

"Decorative, to say the least," she remarked, at last flashing him the threatened smile.

"Yes, ma'am—what, ma'am?" he stammered.

"The uniform of the Mounted as you wear it in that door frame," she replied. "At that, I'd rather see it—you—on a horse."

He fell back on the only defense he knew—a pretense of seriousness. "Up here we're the Royal Canadian *Dismounted* Police, Miss O'Malley. We know only two seasons—dog and canoe. There isn't a single 'G' Division mount north of Fort Resolution. By the time I see a horse again, I'll probably climb aboard Injin fashion and try to steer him by his tail."

The sergeant was glad to hear the crunch of steps upon the snow. In the circumstances, he was in no mood for persiflage and more than willing to give up the bluff that seemed required. He

stifled a sigh of relief as La Marr ushered in the missionaries.

A quiet couple, plain, both a trifle frail looking for arctic rigors, the Morrrows proved to be. Serious as they were about the work to which they were prepared to give years of sacrifice, both were "regulars" in the life of the North. Scarcely would they wait to warm up, before insisting on helping their Mountie hosts prepare supper. Moira, too, insisted on having a hand. The lean-to kitchen of the post was crowded as a sardine tin, until Seymour cited the rule of "too many cooks" and discharged all but Mrs. Morrow.

The meal which soon was on the oil-cloth was more substantial than formal. There was a warming soup from the great kettle that was one of their culinary economies, in that it held stock for a week's serving. Then came sizzling caribou steaks, sour-dough bread, boiled beans and bacon, and—of course—marmalade that was all the way from England. It was a menu that could be eaten gratefully after a day in the open.

When Karmack came in for coffee, he found the detachment post gayer than ever he had known it to be. Yet for the three of them who knew, their gayety was as forced as is jiggling at a wake.

CHAPTER V.

A BAFFLING QUESTION.

WITH tact increased by the fear that some chance slip would disclose to their lovely guest the news that he felt temporarily should be kept from her, Sergeant Seymour discovered that the ladies were worn by their long mush in the biting cold. He threw open the door of the officers' room, disclosing a wood fire crackling in a Yukon stove and two bunks with a spread of blankets fresh from the post's reserve supply.

"Not much to offer as a guest room, but our one best bet," he apologized. "I'll confess frankly there isn't a single bunk sheet with the detachment. But I think I can guarantee a sound sleep for you both. I'll promise there'll be no breakfast alarm in the morning, but the makings of a meal beside the kitchen stove when you're ready."

Protest unexpected came from mild-mannered Mrs. Morrow. "But we're routing you out of house and home, sergeant." With a nod of her blond head she indicated an extra uniform which dangled from a hook against the wall, telltale staff stripes upon its crimson sleeve.

"A dreadful thing to do," added Moira, "and on your first night at home after your long patrol!"

That portion of Seymour's face that was not bearded took color from the tunic that had betrayed him. "And I thought I'd removed every trace of the former occupant. Must be getting color-blind." He carried the jacket into the living room. "Don't worry about your husband, Mrs. Morrow; he'll bunk snug as a bug out here with La Marr and me," he called back.

There was a chorus of good nights; then the men settled to their pipes before the fireplace. After a reasonable wait in silence, Seymour lowered his voice and communicated the news of the tragedy to Luke Morrow. Without reservation, the clergyman approved their course in keeping the news from Moira until after the necessary legal formalities had been carried out. Then he would take charge with a religious reverence that might lighten the blow.

"She's a wonderful woman, Moira O'Malley," he said, showing deep feeling. "She's endeared herself to every one who met her over at Wolf Lake. Utterly wrapped up in her brother, this will be a terrible blow. I wonder if——" He hesitated. "Would it be admissible, do you think, to tell her of the death, but not its dreadful form?"

Glances exchanged by the three laymen showed that they appreciated the missionary's struggle—kindly thought against strict truthfulness. Long had he taught "the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth." But just now he was wavering.

"By gar, it absolutely would!" Karmack was the first to offer audible approval.

Seymour's quick wit worked out a solution. "An accident of the arctic prairies. I'll trust having that one marked up against me in the Doomsday Book."

"Blessed are the kindly of heart," murmured the clergyman. "So be it!"

Of course, they all realized that Moira would learn in time the nature of the "accident," but that need not be until time had its chance to salve the wound. The arrest of Avic need not bring about disclosure, once the whites in Armistice were pledged to keep it from her. She might know him only as another unfortunate, misguided Eskimo slayer, a handcuffed brother to Olespe, of the Lady Franklin band, then in the guardroom.

"But Mrs. Morrow?" The thought came suddenly to Seymour that the lady missionary spoke some Eskimo. "She'll hear of this from the natives."

Luke Morrow smiled; they did not know the iron that was in the make-up of his little blond wife as he did. "She is a good woman, consequently merciful. I will talk this over with her in the morning."

For a time, gloomy silence held the group around the fireplace. Suddenly Karmack leaned over and grasped Morrow almost roughly by the shoulder.

"Parson, do you know why that girl left the luxury and comfort of steam-heated Ottawa, the most beautiful city in Canada, to share a trader's shack in bleak Armistice with a brother?" The trader's demand scarcely could have been more vehement had he personally resented Moira's coming. "I know that he did not expect her; what's more, that he never even spoke of having a sister."

The missionary's calm was perfect. "She had no way of letting him know that she was coming to spend the winter with him, once the wireless she sent to Edmonton failed to reach Wolf Lake. She came through herself by team in the teeth of the first storm of winter. We had great difficulty in keeping her with us until we ourselves were ready to attempt the trip across country. She'd have come on with an Indian dog driver if we had not protested so stoutly."

"All that to see a brother, eh?" Karmack snorted. "Are you certain she is his sister?"

Seymour sprang to his feet, an angry glitter in his gray eyes. "Enough of that, Karmack! Express another such doubt and out you go—for good."

For a moment a snarling expression strove to master the trader's face.

The missionary tried to pacify them. "I'm sure Mr. Karmack meant nothing wrong. He's just a bit upset by all these happenings."

"Upset? Yes; I'll say I'm upset!" The factor made a quick grasp for peace, for the sergeant looked dangerous. "All I meant was that I could understand a wife making such an effort to join a husband, but not a sister."

"Any reason to believe Oliver O'Malley had a wife?" Seymour still was stern.

"None in the world! But a sister—— To make a trip like that, she must have had some very pressing reason." Again his eyes questioned the parson.

"If there existed any other than sisterly affection," said Morrow evenly, "she did not disclose it to me." His manner was so final as to make further questioning discourteous.

Clumsily as Karmack had used his probe, he had but echoed a query that had been in Seymour's mind from his first realization of Moira's superlative beauty. The sergeant had meant to ask about this when he had Morrow alone, and he would have put his question without giving offense.

Why had one who deserved to be the honored toast of the Dominion capital rushed into the Northwest wilds, evidently unasked, certainly unexpected, and at a time of year when it would be next to impossible to send her back?

Was there any connection between her coming and what had happened so recently in the Eskimo hut? Had she brought a warning of some sort to this beloved brother? Had she been lulled into thinking she might delay for a missionary escort and still be in time to serve and save him?

These rapid-fire speculations, unvoiced, seemed to advise only negative answers. Yet why had she come?

Constable La Marr, who had been silent all evening to a point of moodiness, now aroused Seymour from speculation with a question of his own.

"And when are you going to turn me loose after that accursed Avic?" he demanded in a tone that scarcely was subordinate.

The missionary looked up at his violence, but had no censure for it. These men who give their lives to lighten the arctic native's sorry burden grow accustomed to strong language.

"At daybreak you'll take the dogs, mush over to Prospect and subpoena those three mining engineers wintering there to serve on the coroner's jury. Bring them back with you. Miss O'Malley need know of only one inquest." He glanced with thoughtful eyes toward the closed door of the inner room. "After that we'll——"

One look at the young constable's strained face must have told any who saw it that Avic, the Eskimo, would need to hide out like a weasel to escape being brought in.

CHAPTER VI.

MAGIC SKINS.

LA MARR was away with the dawn with a *veuire facias* for each of the three gold explorers, the only competent jurors within reach. As it was a matter of forty miles rough sledding to the prospectors' camp and return, the inquests could scarcely be held before the late afternoon. That the girl whose emotions they were conspiring to protect might be too busy for vagrant suspicions, Sergeant Seymour suggested to the Morrows that they open up the mission house while he was at liberty to help them.

"Don't want to seem inhospitable, Mrs. Morrow," he said in his slowest, most differential manner, "and you'll be welcome here as long as you care to stay. But I know you want to get into your own place as soon as possible. Never can tell when some arctic hades is going to bust loose and take me out on the trail. I'm off duty this morning—more than ready to help with the heavy work."

This brought an offering from Moira O'Malley that struck the hearts of those who knew.

"Our sergeant of the dismantled is positively brilliant this morning," she said, confounding him utterly with twin flashes of Irish blue. "You see, when Oliver gets back from this inconsiderate mush of his, I'll become quite useless as your handmaiden, Emma."

Mrs. Morrow had not yet been advised of the true situation, but she had her own ideas as to the proper residence in an outlands camp for a girl like Moira.

"Oh, you'll keep right on living at the mission house as long as you're here, my dear," she said. "The shack of a bachelor trader is no place for you."

"But I know Olie's quarters, whatever they are, will need my sisterly ministrations," she protested. "His room at home always was a sight. A place for everything, but nothing in its place seemed to be his motto."

As the two men went on ahead to the small dwelling that had been closed since the previous spring thaw, Seymour found himself asking again—why had she come? Were sisters as devoted as that—as motherly? Never having had a sister, he was unable to answer.

The pair stripped the weatherboarding from doors and windows and aired the house thoroughly while they carried in a supply of wood from the shed. Then they closed it tight and built roaring fires in every available stove to remove the winter chill. The native hostlers from the post already had shoveled paths through the snow.

So far as the two men could see, but little inside cleaning would be necessary, the previous occupant having been a tidy housekeeper. But the women, on coming to the house presently, revised that verdict and fell to with broom and mop.

The smoke from the mission house chimneys probably had been reported to Karmack, for he arrived presently, his interpreter drawing a toboggan loaded with provisions, which were presented to the missionaries in the name of the Arctic Trading Company. The gift was gracious, the supplies being of a sort not found in the somewhat meager store of staples provided by the societies. They were gratefully received.

Then a shock came from Moira, an innocent one, in the form of coupled questions. "But, Mr. Karmack, have you locked up the store?" she asked first.

"Not much trade these wintry days, and if customers come they'll stick around like summer bull flies." He accomplished the only laugh of the morning.

"But who is there to tell Oliver, when he comes back, that I've arrived and am waiting?"

Harry Karmack's freshly shaved, usually ruddy face went as white as the girl's natural pallor at this unexpected turn to his attempted whimsicality. He staggered back as if she had struck him a blow. Seymour, standing near, steadied him into a chair.

"That bad heart of yours again, old top?" the sergeant asked quickly.

No one ever had heard of anything being the matter with Karmack's heart, but the timely question served to cover his emotion. Mrs. Morrow noticed it, but did not wonder thereat. Evidently Moira had hit both these sons of isolation hard, and there were in prospect interesting sessions in the mission house living room for that winter.

Seymour decided that he had endured enough agony for one morning and on the plea of police routine started for the post. But the thumbscrew of misadventure was to receive one more turn. From the door of the mission house the voice of Moira carried to him.

"Oh, Sergeant Scarlet, please do keep an eye open for my merry brother along Rideau Street—or whatever you call the thoroughfare that passes your headquarters."

"And I'll have him paged at the Château Laurier and ask for him out at Britannia Park," he managed to answer in terms of her home city, although he had no heart for the jest, mindful of the change that soon must come to her happy mood.

He entered the police shack by the back door; looked in for a moment upon Olespe. His prisoner from Lady Franklin, oblivious of his fate, seemed to revel in the luxury of the guardroom's warmth. Then the sergeant went out the front way.

"Rideau Street, indeed," ran his thoughts. "What a name for that streak through the snow in Armistice!"

At that, Moira showed that she knew her Ottawa, for Rideau is the street on which faces the red-brick headquarters of the Royal Mounted. Would that she never had left the capital! Would that he could wait her home again, sacrifice

though that would be in this icebound isolation!

Straight to Avic's borrowed hut Seymour went and broke the seal upon the door, as was his right. Again his eyes were upon all that remained of her "merry brother." He wondered about death and the hereafter and various things that never should enter a Mountie's mind—not when he's stationed north of sixty-six.

Then, suddenly, his eyes seemed opened, as if a scale had been cast from each. Perhaps this was effected by the magic of Moira's charm and beauty. Certainly he saw details that had not impressed him the previous afternoon.

As might a wolverine in defense of her young, he pounced upon the silver fox pelt that lay on the sleeping bench beside the murdered youth—lay in such a way as to indicate that its purchase already had been negotiated. He studied the set of the fur and sniffed at the tanning of the inner side. His eyes widened as he held the beautiful exhibit before him and realized the possibilities that were opened up by this definite clew.

"Magic skin," he murmured half aloud, after the fashion of men who find themselves often alone in the wilderness of snow. "You widen the mystery; may you help to close it!"

Gently, without shrinking from the cold touch, he removed the last clutch of O'Malley's fingers from the black fox—probably the pelt of contention. Close examination of this showed the same conditions to exist.

Neither of the foxes had been trapped in the present winter; both had been cured at least a year.

"Magic skin," he repeated, and breathed a wish too fervent for utterance even in the hut where he stood alone.

In the act of wishing, there came to mind that famous tale of Balzac's—"The Magic Skin." That dealt with the hide of an ass, and with every wish invoked from it the skin shrunk until the greedy owner was threatened with the disappearance of his magic possession.

Perhaps Seymour had better cease wishing. But he recalled that he had a pair of magic skins in hand; grew defiant of the venerable myth, and wished again,

more fervently than before, that it would fall to his lot to solve the deepened mystery of the Oliver O'Malley murder.

Opening the pea-jacket of his winter uniform, he tucked both furs beneath his tunic. Closing and resealing the hut, he strode back to the police cabin. Had he intended to appropriate the silver and black treasures for his own gain, he scarcely could have hidden them more carefully.

CHAPTER VII.

THE MOTTO OF THE FORCE.

NOWHERE in the civilized world, perhaps, is more respect paid to the coroner and his inquests than in the Dominion of Canada. This regard is not confined to the settled provinces, but reaches beyond the arctic circle even to the farthestmost post of the Royal Mounted in latitude 76—Ellesmere Island, on the edge of the Polar Sea. This afternoon at Armistice was being devoted to the ancient formality of the law.

As one of the miners, brought in by Constable La Marr from Prospect to serve as a jurymen, put it in half-hearted protest to Seymour:

"You redcoats would hold an inquest at the North Pole if word came to you that some one was violently dead up there."

In his capacity as coroner, Sergeant Seymour first called the inquest over Mrs. Olespe, whose Eskimo name was too complicated with gutturals for English pronunciation. Upon chairs and one of the bunks on the living room of the post sat the jury—the three gold hunters from Prospect and Factor Karmack. At a table beside his superior was Constable La Marr, acting as clerk of court.

The prisoner, more stolid than sullen, was brought in from the guardroom and planted on another of the bunks beside the interpreter who regularly served the Arctic Traders.

Seymour's first difficulty was to make certain that Olespe understood the warning that had been given him at the time of his arrest, for he had not entirely trusted the ability of the volunteer translator who had served him up North.

"Ask him if he knows who the Royal

Canadian Mounted Police are?" was the first question.

There followed verbal explosions.

"Olespe says they are the rich men of the country," reported the interpreter.

Shrugging his shoulders over the apparent hopelessness of the situation, Seymour tried again: "Ask him what he thinks the police came into the country for."

"To make us unhappy," came the report presently.

"In what way—unhappy?"

"By not let us shoot at what is ours to shoot and which we can hit."

Feeling that he was making progress, the sergeant got to the vital point. "Ask him what I said to him when I put him under arrest?"

"He says," translated the interpreter, "you told him he get hurt if he talk too much."

Seymour decided to let it go at that and led the way to the outbuilding used as a morgue. There Olespe identified the remains of his wife, which had been sledded so many snowy miles because there was no possibility of finding a white jury nearer. The Eskimo added indifferently what was translated into "She no good wife."

Back in the station, the sergeant told of his investigations at the scene of the crime, listed possible witnesses, and summarized their version of a tragedy all too common among the Eskimos. The jury promptly brought in a verdict against Olespe, and Seymour, in his capacity of magistrate, held him for trial.

They were ready, then, for the second case of the day, the formal inquiry into the death of Oliver O'Malley. As Karmack was to be the most important witness, a change was made in the jury by substituting for him the recently arrived missionary. With these four and his constable clerk, Seymour went down the trail to the hut which Avic had occupied.

That Karmack elected to stick by the stove at the post until the jury returned caused the coroner-sergeant secret rejoicing. He saw to it that La Marr did not enter the hut. The jury, seeing the interior for the first time, did not miss the fox-pelt clews which he had appropriated that morning.

Karmack and the Eskimo relative who had lent Avic the hut gave the only testimony at the inquiry. This the jury considered sufficient on which to find a verdict against the missing fox hunter and, when the fact had been duly recorded, the coroner's court was declared closed.

The saddest task of the day was at hand—one from which these strong men shrunk, but which none were ready to shirk. Presently a strange procession came up the trail from the hut of tragedy. In the lead was the police team of Malemutes, with La Marr beside the foremost dog, holding him by leash to a dignified pace. They drew a sled, carrying a blanket-wrapped burden. This vehicle Seymour steadied with the aid of a gee pole. The prospectors and Harry Karmack brought up in the rear with bowed heads.

The way led, naturally, to the newly opened mission house, at the door of which Morrow met them. The dogs were unhitched and taken away by La Marr. The others picked up the sled and carried it into one of the bedrooms. From another room, through the thin partitions, could be heard stifled sobs and words of comfort. Moira O'Malley knew, then, that her sisterly rush into the Frozen North, whatever its real object, had been in vain. The missionary wife had broken the news of death without the real details and now was comforting her.

On returning to the post, Seymour was momentarily surprised to see that the police dog team had been hitched to another sled—this one lightly loaded. The native hostler was holding them in waiting. Inside he found La Marr pacing the floor like some animal tenant of a zoo.

"Where away, Charlie?" he asked.

"After Avic. I'm just waiting for you to issue me the warrant. You promised me the chance, you remember."

"But why to-night?"

The constable gave him an impatient glance. "I can make that Eskimo camp on Musk-ox to-night; I'll be that far on my way. Haven't we lost time enough through my mistake?"

It took but a moment for Seymour to issue a warrant charging one Avic, Eskimo, with the murder by strangula-

tion of Oliver O'Malley, which was in accord with the verdict.

"Remember the motto of the Force, young man," he cautioned, as he handed over the document.

La Marr stuffed it in a pocket underneath his parkee. "Aye—— Get your man!"

"Not that," returned the superior with a frown. "It's 'Never fire first!' See that you bring Avic back alive. There's more depends on that than you know."

The constable looked startled. "You don't mean—— Why, it's an open-and-shut case. The coroner's jury——"

"Bring Avic back alive; that's all. Good luck!"

La Marr squared himself for a formal salute and went out into the gathering night. He had his orders.

CHAPTER VIII.

A SURPRISING INTRUDER.

AFTER the excitement attending his return from the North patrol, the short winter days and the far longer nights passed slowly for the officer in command of the Armistice detachment, now reduced to commanding himself. One week—two weeks—part of a third had been crossed off the wall calendar without any word coming from his man-hunting constable. Seymour wasn't actually worrying yet, but he was beginning to wish that he had not been so generous about giving young La Marr this particular chance to redeem himself.

Above all else he desired the custody of Avic, the fox hunter. The body of the accused Eskimo would not satisfy him; neither would a report of his death. Nothing would do but Avic alive.

Often in the endless evenings, while intermittent blizzards raged about the shuttered windows, he would take out the black and silver pelts. From various angles he would argue their bearing on the case. More than ever was he assured that they were not of recent trapping. The fur was that of animals which had been through a long, easy winter—one when rabbits had been plentiful. This was not a rabbit winter on the arctic prairies east of the Mackenzie.

These particular foxes had been

trapped in the early spring, or Seymour was no judge of fur quality. That this spring had not been the last one was shown by the seasoned state of the tanning. Moreover, this tanning did not appear to be Eskimo work, but that of Indian squaws farther south—the Loucheux tribe.

Every Eskimo has a flock of cousins. Seymour had visited several in the immediate vicinity who claimed more or less of that relationship to the missing Avic. He had examined the work of their women on furs. A pronounced difference in process seemed evident to him.

The mystery brought into the O'Malley murder by his own knowledge of Eskimo strangling had been intensified by his study of the exhibits he had secreted. Yet, speculate as he would, there was no other apparent line of suspicion than that of the Eskimo's guilt. He was at loss how to proceed until he had questioned the native for whom warrants had been issued.

Each time he looked at the pelts, one outstanding fact came to mind: No Eskimo ever held a pelt, after his woman had cured it, longer than it took to get to the handiest trader. It was against all rhyme and reason that two fox pelts, worth many times their weight in gold, would remain in the hands of a ne'er-do-well like Avic so long after they were marketable. How, then, had the native come by them?

In ordinary circumstances—rather under the amity of suffer-isolation-together which had existed prior to the tragedy—he might have gone to Harry Karmack with his problem. At least, the factor could have given him expert opinion as to when the skins had become pelts by virtue of trapping and tanning.

At present, however, a breach yawned between the two—one unwittingly caused by the fair addition to the limited population of Armistice. It wasn't an open one, so far, but both knew that it existed and bridging it was the last thought of either. They were unadmitted rivals for the favor of Moira O'Malley. Any one who knew the man could have read the sergeant's interest in his countenance. Contrary to the winter practice of toilers of the trails, his face had been clean

shaved from the morning after La Marr's departure. The trader, on his part, showed the intensity of his devotion by countless little attentions.

The unfortunate brother had been laid away upon the highest knoll about the camp after a simple service conducted by the Reverend Mr. Morrow. The girl had held up in her bereavement with a courage that had commanded all their admiration. No hint of the real cause of Oliver's death had reached her, so guarded had been the four resident whites who knew. From the Eskimo, of course, she learned nothing. She had accepted the report of an "accident of the arctic" and had asked no embarrassing questions as to details. The finality of death seemed to suffice; nothing else mattered.

A week after the funeral a stranger would not have known from her manner that she had been suddenly deprived of her nearest relative. She never spoke of having a philosophy of life, but something of the sort seemed to sustain her. Her whole behavior indicated that she was determined not to make others unhappy with her personal grief. They all had their lives to live in a location that made life difficult. Moira O'Malley would do her utmost to make the winter as happy as possible. She did not even ask if it were not possible to send her "outside," now that the reason for her presence had been removed by fate.

Harry Karmack, bearing a book to the mission house in the hope that gloomy thoughts might be diverted thereby, had been the first of the two men to discover her mental attitude. He had been prompt to act on his important discovery. Besides the volume, he left an invitation to dinner for the girl and her hosts. Sergeant Russell Seymour, official head of the tiny community, was not among those present, having received no invitation.

This was a breach of camp etiquette that could not be overlooked. Far worse than the cut direct, it was nearly as much an insult as a blow in the face. When a handful of whites are segregated in a bronze man's country, they naturally cling to each other. Every one possibly within the pale is invited to everything that approaches a function. Even squaw

men seldom are left out if they retain a semblance of presentability.

There was no possible question that Factor Harry Karmack's dinner was a function. Although it never had been mentioned by Moira or the Morrows, the sergeant had all the details. These were relayed by his native hostler who had them direct from Koplock, the Arctic's interpreter, who had served as butler for the all-important occasion. The meal had been served in courses, for the first time in the history of the camp. The factor's store of delicacies, even to the tinned plumb pudding intended for the Christmas feast, had been freely broached.

Seymour could not hope to equal such a spread from police rations, but he was not to be outdone in hospitality. Miss O'Malley and the Morrows had accepted his invitation to a sour-dough luncheon. The factor had not accepted for the excellent reason that he was not invited.

The three from the mission house were coming at noon, and the sergeant had been occupied part of the morning correcting the haphazard housekeeping of quarters. Then the guests arrived, as was attested by a polite knocking upon the front door.

More lovely than ever Moira seemed to him, as she returned a smile to his enthusiastic greeting. She was dressed entirely in white—the first time he ever had seen her in anything but black.

"What a snowbird you are, Moira!" he exclaimed, almost forgetting to greet the missionaries.

"In that case, I'm relieved you're not packing a gun, Sergeant Scarlet."

"Not even side arms," he said, releasing his whimsical smile. "But hang your wraps in the tent, all of you, and I'll put you to work."

For the first time they noticed the stage setting he had created for his social entertainment. Every stick of furniture had been removed and the floor covered with reindeer moss, gray, soft, and fragrant. Two reserve sleds, padded with outspread sleeping bags, were evidently intended to serve as seats. The "tent" to which he had referred them was a drape of canvas over the door leading into his own room. About the hearth were scattered pots and pans and dishes

of tin. The fireplace glowed like a camp fire permitted to burn down for culinary service.

"So this is what you meant by a sour-dough party," observed Mrs. Morrow, enthusiastic over the idea.

"Wonder if I'm hard-bitten enough to get all the idea?" Moira asked them.

"We're hitting the trail," explained the missionary. "We've just made camp and are about to have muck-muck. As North-westerners never pack grub for idle hands to eat, we'd better strip off our coats and go into action."

Where the fire glowed hottest, Seymour rigged an iron spit from which he suspended a shank of caribou on a wire as supple as a piece of string. Beneath, he placed a pan to catch the drippings. To Moira, he intrusted a second wire so attached that an occasional pull kept the meat turning.

"There's nothing more delicious than roast caribou," he advised her, "and this is the very best way to roast it."

Luke Morrow, was to attend to the broiling of a dozen fool hens—a variety of grouse—which the sergeant had shot that morning. To Mrs. Emma was assigned the light task of picking over a mess of fiddle-head ferns which, by some magic, Seymour had kept fresh since fall. He was certain that, when properly boiled, they would produce a dish of greens more delicate than spinach.

"And you, Russell?" queried the girl, for they soon had taken to first names, except that she sometimes called him "Sergeant Scarlet." "Because of your rank, I suppose you'll merely boss the job and eat twice as much as any one else."

Seymour did not answer, but fell to his knees beside the open mouth of a flour sack. With the aid of water and an occasional pinch of baking powder he quickly mixed a wad of dough. Greasing a gold pan with a length of bacon rind, he filled it with the dough and stood it up facing the fire.

"I'm baking bannock," he answered Moira's query. "When the outside is browned, I'll turn it by tossing like a pancake, and we'll have a better bread than ever mother made."

The primitive feast soon was ready.

and they ate it seated tailor-fashion upon the moss.

Later, when they had turned to moss berries and condensed milk, provided as a typical dessert, Moira expressed regret that Seymour's attractive young constable was not present to share the feast.

"Heard anything from La Marr, Seymour?" asked the missionary.

"Not a word."

Something in his tone startled the girl. "Has he gone on a dangerous mission?" she asked. "Are you worried about him?"

The sergeant shook his head. "He's one of the trail boys and will find others to stand by if he's in trouble. And after a moment's silence, he quoted:

"The cord that ties the trail boys has lashed them heart to heart;
No stage presents their joys, no actors play their parts;
Their struggles are seldom known, because through wilds untrod
These daring spirits roam where there is naught but God."

The spell of silence that followed was rudely broken by a hammering on the outer door. So peremptory was the summons that Seymour sprang to his feet, crossed the room and flung the door open, only to start back in amazement.

"Avic, of the foxes, by all that's holy!" he exclaimed.

Framed in the doorway, his small eyes peering from a strained face out of the wolverine hood of his parkee, the fugitive Eskimo stood alone. Instead of handcuffs on his wrists, he held a rifle across his breast.

CHAPTER IX.

THE HERO FUGITIVE.

AS the sergeant moved forward, intent on seizing the rifle, the huge, raw-boned Eskimo came into the room with a bound that carried him well over the threshold. The move had every appearance of the attack of one demented. But before Seymour could grapple with him, the lack of hostile intent was made manifest.

The rifle Avic carried was thrown carelessly to the floor. With the snarl of a beast, the Eskimo threw himself down

beside the platter that held a generous remnant of the caribou roast. The odors of cooked food had proved too much for tribal restraint.

For several minutes Seymour and his guests stood and watched the fugitive with amazement. He went at that deer shank after the fashion of a starving Malemute. Sinking his teeth into the succulent meat, he tore out great mouthfuls which he swallowed without chewing. At first, growls were interspersed between the bites, but gradually these were succeeded by grunts of satisfaction. Once he dropped the shank, to gnaw at the bannock; but soon he returned to the meat, biting at it while yet his mouth was crowded.

Seymour stooped for the gun, recognized it as a service weapon and grew suddenly grave. "La Marr's rifle," he muttered.

Crossing to the native, he gripped the back-thrown hood of his parkee and dragged him, sputtering protest, to his feet. Avic was a considerable weight, but Seymour was strong and deeply aroused. The caribou shank came with the savage, held in teeth that demanded a last bite.

"Here, you dog, drop that!" came the gruff command. "Want to founder yourself."

Morrow, too, recognizing the danger of overloading a stomach long deprived of food, took hold of the shank and tore it away from the Eskimo.

Seymour spoke rapidly to the missionary, asking him to go to the trading station and bring back the interpreter. In some way the Eskimo grasped the gist of this request.

"Avic, he speak them Engleesh," was his surprising statement.

"Then tell me where you get this gun?" Seymour demanded. "Where is the redcoat what owns him?" Unwittingly he had fallen into the broken speech of the few natives who know other than their own tongue.

Avic grinned widely, showing his ivory fangs. "Him hungry all same me," he said. "Him out there——" he gestured to the front door which one of the women had closed. "Stay by sled."

Something about this reply seemed to

tickle the native, for he laughed until the loose folds of his parkee rippled. Neither Seymour nor Morrow waited to learn the reason for the mirth, but dashed out through the door.

In the furrowed trail they found La Marr, holding the dogs with difficulty, for they recognized they were at trail's end. The constable was in his sleeping bag, which was lashed to the komatik. He had stayed by the sled for an excellent reason—his leg was broken.

"Well, Charlie, I see you got your man," said Seymour, by way of being cheerful, as he steadied the sled which the dogs, under Morrow's guidance, were pulling up the bank and into the yard.

"No, serg; my man got me." The response was in a voice weak from suffering.

They carried him into the house, sleeping bag and all. Before attempting the painful ordeal of extracting the broken, unset limb from the fur-lined sack, they fed him the breast of one of the fool hens that had been left from the interrupted feast. At Seymour's request the two women went to the kitchen to prepare hot water for the impending operation and a strong broth of which the constable would be in need afterward.

As every missionary in the Far North is something of a surgeon as well as a lay physician, Luke Morrow hurried to the mission house for his kit. Meanwhile, Avic sat on the hearth, contentedly munching a chunk of bannock which no one had the heart to take away from him.

When the room was cleared, Seymour leaned over his constable for a low-voiced question. "Is Avic under arrest?"

"I—I hadn't the heart, after all he'd done for me," replied the injured Mountie. "He brought me along willingly enough. Didn't seem the least afraid about coming back to the post. Go easy on him, sergeant. I'd have been wolf food if it hadn't been for him."

The arrest had to be made and quickly, before Moira chanced back into the room, if their kind-hearted plot was to be sustained. Seymour got the Eskimo's attention, reminded him that he understood English and went through the formal lines of arrest and warning, with

the addition that the charge was the murder of Oliver O'Malley.

"Sure!" agreed the native, who had learned some of his English from the American whalers at Herschel Island. "I savvy. What do? When we go?"

Seymour did not understand the significance of this last question, but hadn't the time to inquire into it. Leading Avic to the guardroom, he turned him in, to make friends with Olespe or not, as Eskimo etiquette might decree.

As Seymour was locking the door of the cell room, Moira came from the kitchen with improvised splints and a roll of bandages. She told him quietly of her service in France with a Red Cross unit and asked permission to help with the operation.

"If I can handle the ether or anything that——"

"Thank you, Moira," the sergeant interrupted. "If Mr. Morrow can use you, I'll call."

The parson-surgeon returned with medicine and instrument cases. The sleeping bag was slit down its top center, as the least painful way of extracting the patient, and gently they carried him to an improvised operating table in Seymour's quarters.

Morrow proposed an anæsthetic. Even in the hands of a skilled surgeon, he declared, the bone setting would be most painful; he was just a clumsy, well-intentioned amateur.

"Damme if I'll go out of my head for a jab of pain," declared the constable bravely.

"A whiff of ether will make it easier, Charlie," suggested his superior. "And I'll whisper you a secret—Miss O'Malley is ready to administer it. She served with us in France."

La Marr's black eyes gleamed a second in appreciation. Then he shook his head decisively.

"Aye, and that wouldn't be so bad," he said. "But I've smelled the sweet stuff before. When I am coming out of it I tell all I know. We'll take no chances of ragging her with babbling about Oliver's murder." He turned to Morrow. "Let's go, parson, and do your darndest to make me a straight leg."

When the operation was completed and

the splints finally fastened and the patient refreshed by a cup of fool-hen broth, Seymour asked for an account of the pursuit and accident.

"If you'll hand my jacket—wrote report when I thought we wouldn't pull through." La Marr handed over his notebook. "I want to go sleep now."

In the living room, the sergeant bent over this blurred scrawl in pencil:

SERT. SEYMOUR, O. C.,
ARMISTICE DETACHMENT.

SIR: I have the honor to report: Followed fugitive from one camp to another, always a jump or two behind him. Seemed not to know where he was headed. Ate all my own supplies. Took to Eskimo grub. Not so worse, after stomach gets used.

Three days ago, crossing lake on glazed ice. Think it was Lake Blarney. Dogs sight a lone wolf. Run away. Sled swerves into fishing hole. Me thrown into hole. Leg broken. Make edge of ice and crawl out. Can't go farther. Dogs catch, kill, and eat wolf. Come back looking for me, but not near enough so I can swing on sled.

Am freezing to death when comes Avic over my trail. For why? Who knows? He makes camp in spruce, builds fire, tries to fix leg best he can. Asks, where go? I say Armistice. We start. Blizzard comes. Grub goes. Can't find cache. Maybe we get through chewing leather—maybe not.

Don't make Avic as O'Malley's strangler. Gentle as woman with me. He's not under arrest, but trying his darndest to get me back to post. If blizzard holds neither of us will. Maybe this reach you some day.

Respect,,
C. LA MARR,
CONSTABLE R. C. M. P.

Returning to the improvised hospital to ask a question or two needed to fill in gaps in the report, Seymour saw Moira sitting beside the bed, stroking the fevered brow with her strong white hands. She raised one in caution. The patient was asleep.

CHAPTER X.

IN ANOTHER TANGLE.

PARTIAL explanation of Avic's queer behavior came next morning from the Eskimo himself. After breakfast, but before Moira had arrived to undertake her turn of nursing La Marr, Seymour brought the suspect out for an examination. Avic beat him to the first question.

"When we go?"

Remembering that this identical inquiry had been the last voiced by the na-

tive the previous afternoon, the sergeant surmised that it must have some significance.

"Go—go where?" he asked. "Where do you expect to go, Avic?"

The Eskimo made a sweeping gesture in a southerly direction. "Up big river," he mumbled gutturally. "See all world. Ride in smoke wagon on land, same like steambot on water. Live in stone house, big as mountain. Good grub. Long sleeps. Warm like summer all time."

"And why should all that good luck come to you?" Seymour demanded. "Who's been putting such fool ideas into your head?"

Avic looked puzzled. There were words in the sergeant's questions that were new to him. The officer was about to simplify his query when the native blurted out the desired information:

"Nanatalmute boys, she kill white man. Red policemen take boys on long trip. Treat her fine, them boys. Stay away two, three feezes-up. Come back big mens."

Seymour groaned inwardly as he grasped the reference. The Nanatalmutes are the Eskimos who roam the arctic foreshore to the west of the Mackenzie River. Some years before, an abusive trader had been killed by two youths of the tribe. The authorities of that day decided that they must be taken "outside" for trial. The court developed certain extenuating circumstances which resulted in a penitentiary sentence for the two. In prison they learned to speak English and were given mechanical training. At the end of their term they were returned to their tribe in this land of "midnight suns and noonday nights."

Theorists held that the two would spread a respect for the white man's greatness and power; that their tales of punishment would make the land safe for the interlopers of another race. The effect, as Seymour well knew, had been very different. The Nanatalmutes reported that they had been royally treated. They described the wonders of provincial cities, the thrills of railway travel, the surprising warmth of the palatial house in which they lived, and countless other details that had impressed their childlike minds. Almost did this mistake

of the law put a premium on white murder, so great was the envy of the two who had turned punishment into signal honor.

So this was Avic's motive in the murder of young O'Malley! Seymour had the native's word that he expected a trip "outside." The only implication was practically an admission of guilt. The same motive probably lay behind the attempt upon the sergeant's life by the two unknown Eskimos.

The sergeant knew that procedure had changed. "Courts" now are sent into the farthest North, and trials are held on or near the scene of the crime. Conviction in Avic's case would more likely mean a hanging, with his fellows looking on, than a pleasure jaunt anywhere. But of this he did not speak. Even this practical admission from the native did not convince him that this man alone was responsible for the killing. His own deductions from the situation in the hut were too well grounded and vivid.

"When we go?" Again came the query from the eager native, this repetition sharpened with impatience.

"Not soon," answered Seymour with a shrug; then suddenly turned the inquiry. "Where did you get those fox skins you show to the factor?"

"Avic trap foxes—black and silver," came the ready answer. "Avic fine hunter—ver' best."

"When did you take them from your traps?"

Seymour considered this question vital. He was convinced that the skins had been cured many months before. If the native lied about this, he would feel certain that his sense of mystery had not been misplaced; that there was more behind the murder than Avic's desire for a trip into the outside world.

The Eskimo did not answer at once. He seemed to be counting back. The sergeant gave him his own time.

"Not count weeks and days," he said at last. "Avic trap 'em when the sun go away and much snow comes."

"You mean just after this winter began?" Seymour wished to guard against any misunderstanding.

"This same winter. Avic's cousin wife fix 'em plenty. Avic, he bring 'em to

post. Much travel better than trade-barter from store, so not sell. When we go?"

The sergeant did not press the inquiry at the moment. There was a long, long winter ahead of them in which he hoped the whole truth would out.

Several practical reasons decided his next move, which was to put both of the accused under open arrest. Cell room at the police quarters was at a premium, and food of the sort the natives required was difficult to prepare in a white man's kitchen. The health of the prisoners, which must be his concern until the court had passed on their guilt, was certain to be better if they lived under native conditions. Friends and relatives were more than ready to take them in for the sustenance allowance he made for each. After making them understand that they were not to leave camp under penalty of his wrath, he turned them loose—a parole not likely to be broken.

The happiest weeks in Russell Seymour's memory were those that immediately followed. With his one constable confined to bed, his presence at or near headquarters was required, unless some case of dire emergency arose. For once, he thanked his lucky stars that nothing happened to break the joyous monotony.

For a week, Moira, in her rôle of nurse, spent most of each day at the post. While she was kindness itself to La Marr and anticipated most of his wants, there was no doubt that her real interest was in the sergeant. A close friendship sprang up as they found many interests in common and exchanged life stories with endless detail.

At that, each had mental reservations. Nothing the girl said, for instance, threw any light on her real reason for making her unseasonable and unexpected northward dash. And Seymour's lips never even hinted that he was in love.

In this holding back, however, she had every advantage over the man. She did not need word of mouth to tell her the state of his feelings. Indeed, her worry was over the promptings of her own heart, as she confided to Emma Morrow. Was propinquity disturbing her judgment and isolation distorting her viewpoint? She feared a mistake that might make

them both unhappy in the future. With a tact that at times made her feel cruel both to him and herself, she held the situation to the level of friendship.

In this she was aided by the more active wooing of Harry Karmack. The handsome factor was not held back by any sense of poverty, which was felt perforce by one who had little but his police pay, a far from princely dole. Karmack was as persistent as circumstances and Moira would permit, quite too impetuous for the comfort of one whose interests were divided.

For a time the girl was put to it to keep the two apart. When they both arrived at the mission house at the same time, she felt that she was spending the evening in a T. N. T. factory. While they never actually clashed physically in her presence, she felt certain that only Seymour's military discipline kept them apart. At last she was forced to put them on schedule, giving each two evenings a week, but with the understanding that they were not to come even on their assigned nights unless she previously sent them word. The need for such an expedient could scarcely arise "outside," but she saw no other way out in Armistice, unless she was ready to undertake a "for better or for worse" decision.

Out of this situation grew Russell Seymour's great despair. The first of his evenings arrived, but no summons came from the Irish beauty. The next afternoon, with Mrs. Morrow, she dropped in at police quarters to cheer the convalescing constable. She chose a time when she must have known that the sergeant was afield exercising the police team of Malemites. Also, according to La Marr, she had not been indisposed the previous evening.

A second of Seymour's scheduled visits passed into the discard with no word from her, and then a third. Being an advocate of direct action, Seymour decided to learn the reason for this sudden change which, to him, was unexplainable. He made certain that she had not started on her daily snowshoe sprint about the camp, an exercise of which she was fond, and at which, for a girl, she was something of an expert. Mid-afternoon he presented himself at the mission house.

Luke Morrow admitted him; carried his request for an interview.

More anxious than he dared to admit, even to himself, the sergeant waited, his fingers crunching the fur of his cap as he paced the living room. Even before Morrow spoke on returning, he knew the answer.

The missionary's expression was sympathetic. "Miss O'Malley asks that you'll excuse her, sergeant," was his formal report.

"She is ill?"

"Not physically, I'm sure."

Seymour was too dazed for his pride to come into action and anger him. To be turned away without a word didn't seem fair. What's more it wasn't at all like Moira O'Malley. Surely he had the right to know his fault—his crime.

"Barking sun dogs, Luke Morrow, tell me what I've done to be treated like this?" he urged.

"I'm sure I can't imagine, Russell."

"Does Madam Emma know?"

The clergyman shook his head. "Moira has not mentioned your name to either of us since the last evening you spent here." He hesitated a moment. "She does know at last that her brother was murdered; that such was the accident of the arctic we reported to her."

"Then she thinks I'm responsible for trying to soften that ordeal?" Even as he asked, however, he felt certain that there must be something more of a misunderstanding than that.

"I took full responsibility for our not telling her the full details," said Morrow. "You'll remember I first suggested that——"

"Then Karmack must have——"

Seymour did not finish, but flung out of the door. Before the missionary could utter a word of caution or advise moderation, the sergeant was plowing the trail toward the Arctic's establishment.

CHAPTER XI.

WHAT THE TRADER TOLD.

IF it is true, as Kipling says, that "single men in barracks don't grow into plaster saints," it is doubly true in the lonely detachment shacks of the Royal Mounted scattered about the arctic foreshore. Liv-

ing week upon week with the thermometer at the breaking point, with the momentary sun blackened out for days in swirling snow, with a sameness of "grub" that fairly gnaws the appetite, the wonder is that they carry through even with members of their own outfit. When with this condition of life an attractive, unattached, unexpected white woman is mixed in, a situation is created when anything may happen.

As he descended upon the trading post and the tricky factor, Russell Seymour was scarcely a staff noncom of the Royal Mounted. For the moment he was merely a he-man who happened to be incased in the king's scarlet. Even as he was accustomed to express regard for the rights of others, he was ready to defend his own. A dangerous man for the time being and one with an initial advantage over Karmack, for Seymour's nerve was backed with morality and right.

He did not trouble to knock upon the door of the factor's living quarters, but yanked at the latchstring. Finding no one in the comparatively luxurious living room, he stamped into the store.

Along one wall were shelves on which were displayed the "junk" that goes to make an arctic trader's stock. Protecting these notions, generally more than less unsuited for the customer's actual use, was a counter. From the ceiling along the other wall depended the furs and pelts that had been taken in barter and not yet baled for shipment to the marts of trade, where women would pay whatever price the market exacted that they might adorn themselves.

Harry Karmack was in his trade room, as it happened, gloating over some fox skins just taken at a fraction of their value from one of the Indian hunters who had come up from the south. If he was surprised at the unannounced visit by way of his living quarters, his face was a perfect mask.

"You've been making yourself quite a stranger, sergeant," he said, his tone pleasant enough. "It's the very devil what havoc woman can make of man-to-man friendships up here in the Frozen North. Is it possible you've come to whimper at my success with Moira—Miss O'Malley, the finest woman——"

"Not to whimper, Karmack," Seymour cut in.

"Best take your medicine, sergeant. As a mere arctic cop, on next to nothing a year, you never had a chance to be anything more to her than an entertaining decoration. From now on, you won't even decorate."

Under this insult-to-injury, Seymour held himself with his stoutest grip. "I came," he declared with an ominous outward calm, "to learn just what you said to Miss O'Malley when you broke our pact of silence about Oliver's murder."

"Oh, I said just that—told her as gently as possible the facts. It was high time she knew. Did you expect me to ask your august permission after what has happened?"

The factor put away the fox pelts he had been examining on Seymour's entry and, with casual manner, came from behind the counter. On the open floor of the store the rivals faced each other.

"You told her more than the facts in this case, Karmack," the sergeant said, his words dragging with earnest emphasis. "I'm here to know what you said and know I will—even if—I am compelled to bash you up."

Karmack laughed harshly, perhaps to show a confidence which he may have felt, knowing how long-suffering the Mounties are by training and practice.

"Threatening violence, eh?" said the factor with a sneer. "Thinking of using your police power to repair your shattered romance? What a blooming bone to pull!"

"I'm not here as a policeman, and I'll lay aside the tools of my trade."

Unhooking the belt that held a holstered revolver to his hip, he placed the side arms upon the counter at the end nearest the front door. Beside it he deposited a "come-along," a small steel article with chain attachment, useful in handling refractory prisoners. With his long arms swinging loosely at his sides, he strode back to face the factor.

"Now, Karmack, what else did you tell the girl?"

"Perhaps I showed her how kind you are to Avic, named by the coroner's jury as her brother's murderer." The handsome factor was enjoying himself.

"Of course it would be likely to please her, seeing the only suspect yet named wandering at will about the camp, living in idleness on your bounty, likely to slope off into the snows and never be heard from again."

"The Eskimo is under open arrest—regular enough procedure in the circumstances. I'll stand——"

Seymour caught himself. He did not have to defend himself to this trouble-maker. Moreover, he felt that Karmack must have gone further with his insinuations. The matter and manner of Avic's custody might have brought the girl to him with protest, with demand for an explanation; but it was not enough to bring about an utter break without a word.

"Let's hear the rest of it, Karmack—the whole damnable misrepresentation." Fingers twitching beside the yellow stripe of his trousers showed his tension.

"Perhaps I told her about the foxes—the silver and the black!" The factor's tone was triumphant.

Seymour's expression was too well schooled to betray any surprise at this unexpected thrust. "What about the fox pelts?"

"They disappeared, didn't they, most mysteriously? They were in the hut when you left it under seal the night of your return and Moira's arrival. The hut still was sealed when you took the coroner's jury there next day, but the pelts were not. The jury never saw them. That's what about the fox pelts."

Seymour's lips were as white as the freshly drifted snow outside and his voice as cold as the temperature when he asked what the factor meant to insinuate.

"Perhaps the kindest interpretation for you," Karmack began with gloating insolence, "is that those fox pelts are buying an easy winter for Oliver O'Malley's slayer with an ultimate get-away in the spring. In other words, Seymour, you're a disgrace to the uniform you wear—the first I've ever met with. You're a low-down, grafting bribe taker, and to show you how little I respect——"

Instead of finishing his tirade, the factor flashed out with his right in a vicious uppercut. Seymour sensed rather than saw it coming. Having developed a cat-

like quickness, he might have dodged and let the blow slide past, but preferred to take it on his jaw of iron. He needed, he felt, the sting of it to release for the deserved punishment of his detractor all the latent powers within his rangy frame.

At once the hard-knuckled mill was on—a furious battle of primitive males. Science, if either of them knew aught but the rough-and-tumble tactics of the outlands, was forgotten. Blows were exchanged with a rapidity that must have been beyond the scoring of ring-side experts had there been any present. In the States thousands pay their tens of dollars to see fights so little like this one as to seem primrose teas. Not until Karmack sprawled his length on the rough board floor was there the slightest breathing space.

Seymour stepped back to give the factor time and space to rise if fight still was left in him. Great as was his provocation he insisted on fighting fair. That there are no rules for rough-and-tumble made no difference to him. He couldn't hit a man who was down.

Karmack came up with a surprising show of strength, his dark eyes gleaming dangerously. One of these the sergeant closed with a hard-fisted jolt. But in turn he was knocked heavily against the counter. The wooden edge of this caught him across the small of the back, a terrific kidney blow.

At that vital moment, when he must have been hard put to keep his feet in any event, the factor fouled him with a vicious kick upon the shin. It was inevitable that Seymour go down. In falling, though, he managed to lunge his body forward, gain a clutching grip about his opponent's body and carry him along.

There on the floor they rolled over and over like a couple of polar bears in deadly combat. First one and then the other was momentarily on top and in position to jab. Crimson splotches marked their irregular course. Fingers tangled and untangled, now in the factor's black mop, then in the sergeant's brown one. The latter's uniform would have passed no inspection; the former's tweeds were discolored and torn. Punishment, however, was well distributed and the battle, so far, a draw.

This winter, however, Karmack had held to his store and spent long hours with his pipe; Seymour had roamed the open and seared his lungs with the vital air of the North. In the end this difference in what leather-pushers know as "wind condition" told its tale. The factor was rasping when the Mountie still breathed with comparative ease. Longer and longer on each turn was the policeman holding the uppermost position.

Suddenly Karmack, underneath, ceased violent struggles. It seemed that he had weakened.

"Had 'nough?" demanded Seymour. "Ready to tell the girl the truth?"

For answer he felt the press of steel against his ribs. He realized in a flash that the factor had drawn a gun from some handy concealment, and that his seconds probably were numbered unless he rolled instantly out of range. And roll he did just as the pistol went off.

The bullet grazed a button from his official tunic, then thudded into the plaster board that covered the log wall. Next second, with a bone-breaking wrench, Seymour twisted the weapon from the trickster's fingers. Scrambling to his feet, he threw down upon his opponent, meaning to cover him, just as the front door of the store was thrown open.

With the rush of icy air from without, there came a shrill feminine cry more startling than any previous happening of the contest.

"Don't shoot!" was the command that followed. "Don't you dare shoot, you uniformed brute!"

Seymour turned to see Moira glaring at him from behind an automatic pistol of her own, a blue-black little gun that was held as steady as a pointed finger. The clergyman up at the mission house was a pacifist, the sergeant knew. Doubtless he had told the girl the direction in which his anger had taken him.

"At last I believe," the girl went on, passion in her voice, but not the slightest quaver in her aim. "Well chosen was the name I gave you, Sergeant *Scarlet!*"

The accent she gave her nickname for him startled Seymour. "Just what do you mean, Moira?" he asked, keeping one eye upon the factor who seemed as startled by the intrusion as himself.

"That I've found the murderer of my brother and don't propose to see him claim another victim."

So that was what Harry Karmack had told the girl! That was why the light of her wondrous eyes had gone out for him. Any added hate of his enemy that might have grown from this was lost in her statement that she believed. To make certain that she considered him guilty, he put the direct question.

"After what I've just seen—on top of all that was pointed out to me—I'm forced to believe," she said brokenly. "Go, before I take a vengeance that is not mine to take, but the law's. Go—go!"

As broken as the gun he flung at Karmack, Sergeant Seymour gathered up his side arms from the counter and stalked out of the Arctic's trade room.

CHAPTER XII.

THE SCARLET SPECIAL.

TEN days after the battle between the sergeant and the factor, the quiet of Armistice Camp was again upset, this time most unexpectedly by the arrival of a scarlet special. A corporal of the Royal Mounted breezed in by dog team over the frozen wastes from far-away Athabaska, the end-of-rail gateway of the North, where English to some extent gives place to Cree.

That he brought no mail—beyond a sealed order bag for Sergeant Seymour—showed that the special's visit was sudden as a telegram. But he did carry a late paper or two and several magazines that gave week-by-week summaries of the world's news since Armistice last had heard from "outside," so his unexpected arrival was more than welcome to the whites in camp.

To the disappointment of Corporal Gaspard Le Blanc, the short, plump but doughty French-Canadian who had made the remarkable trip, Seymour was not at the post. The morning after the fight a report had reached the detachment that a band of Eskimos on Skelly River were destitute. With Constable La Marr still convalescing from the accident of his pursuit of Avic, the sergeant had set out to investigate. His return was expected any

hour of any day. As the orders were sealed, the corporal to open them only when assured that something had happened to the ranking noncom to whom they were addressed, there seemed nothing to do but wait.

Factor Karmack was the first to call at headquarters. He met with a cold reception from La Marr, who naturally had sided with his superior on learning of the aspersion put upon the Force by the fur trader's insinuations in the O'Malley case.

"I hear there's a special in from outside," began the factor in his blandest manner. "Hope he had a good trip."

"Aye, not so bad," returned the constable, as communicative as a seal.

"By any chance did he bring any mail for me?"

"Nothing but police business—this special."

If Karmack was disturbed, he took pains not to show it. "But surely he brought some newspapers. Might I borrow—"

"I'm sending a spare paper or two over to the mission house," was the chilly response. "You'd better go there for your news, Karmack."

The factor made as graceful an exit as any one could have asked, nodding pleasantly to the newly arrived corporal. Familiar with the usual fraternity of life in the land of bared boughs and grieving winds, the genial Gaspard expressed surprise.

"What'll how is?" he asked. "You gots somethings on that bird, *non*?" he asked.

"I don't like him," was all La Marr replied, not caring to bare his superior's heart troubles even to one of the Force.

The corporal, steeled against prying into personal affairs, asked no further questions. The two spent the day pleasantly by the open fire, which Avic—the prisoner under open arrest—kept replenished, it happening to be his week for headquarters fatigue duty.

At four in the afternoon Sergeant Seymour munched in, tired and worn from his long errand of mercy. This he had solved by moving the improvident band to another camp of natives who were well supplied, the usual procedure in a country

where it is almost impossible to move relief supplies in midwinter.

His first glance at the features of the corporal who turned out to help him with the dogs acted as a cocktail that banished all fatigue. A strange Mountie in quarters could mean only excitement of some sort, and that was the most potent tonic the sergeant knew.

Scarcely did he wait to peel off his trail clothes, so eager was he to break the seal of the dispatch bag. It held but a single sheet of orders—a dispatch from the commissioner himself dated at Ottawa more than five weeks before—and a warrant of arrest. With the two subordinates looking on in an interest that dared not be put into question form, he read and reread the message. The second scanning thereof snapped him to his feet.

"When did you arrive, corporal?" he asked.

"This morning—early."

"Said nothing about what brought you, I hope?"

A smile flicked the ruddy Canadian face and the French shoulders shrugged. "How could I, when I know not why they sent me on such a mush of the devil?"

"Karmack was here, asking for mail—for the loan of papers," added La Marr. "I told him to go to the mission house for his news."

"Good enough," nodded the sergeant and started getting into the uniform which he wore when at the detachment. In his absence, the tunic had been made fairly presentable—with few traces of his clash with the factor. "I'm going out for a prisoner," he said at the door. "You boys sit tight."

Straight across to the store of the Arctic Company he stalked and there met with disappointment. Both the store and dwelling of Karmack were locked, even Koplock, the native interpreter, was not to be roused. But the sergeant remembered what the constable had said about sending the factor to the mission house for newspapers. Doubtless his rival was there, reading what had happened in the all-alive world since last report. It would not surprise him to find the little group making a news feast out of the un-

expected boon—reading aloud in turn, for every morsel of type, even to the new advertisements, would be of interest to all. He started for the house of the Morrrows.

"Safe home again, Seymour," Luke Morrow greeted him and ushered him hospitably into the living room. "It is well, but I wish you'd been here a day sooner."

Seymour did not trouble to learn what the missionary meant by his concluding wish, but asked at once if Karmack was calling there.

The missionary shook his head, his expression one of genuine surprise.

"Sort of expected to find him—reading papers brought in by the special," explained Seymour. "La Marr said he had sent some over to you and told Karmack to come here for his news."

"Why—but——" Morrow was disturbed to a point of stammering distress. "The factor was here this morning, but he had news of his own. Didn't he leave the keys of the trading post with you police?"

Seymour, in his turn, was aroused. "The keys? Why should he leave his keys with us?"

"He came here shortly before noon," explained the clergyman. "Said the scarlet special had brought him a summons to Ottawa that could not be denied. He meant to ask you people to take charge and look after emergencies until his relief arrived. His years of pioneering service in the North had been rewarded at last, he told us, and he was to be made a high official of the Arctic at the Ottawa headquarters. Naturally we all rejoiced with him."

"The nerve of the scamp!" exclaimed the sergeant. "The only word the special brought was a warrant for his arrest. He has been robbing the company for years, and they've just found him out—got the proof. I came to arrest him. He must have surmised that the coming of the special meant only that one thing and decided to try a get-away. Howling sundogs, this warrant I hold is a secret one! No general alarm has been sent out. Can I see Miss O'Malley—perhaps he's told her something of his plans? In the interests of justice, after she's seen the

warrant, I'm sure she'll not protect him, much as she dislikes me."

The missionary seemed stunned. He bent over in his chair and cupped his hands over his eyes.

"Good Lord, forgive us for our sins of omission," Seymour heard him murmur. "We are but mortal and the flesh of all mortals is weak. How were we to know——"

"Here—here!" interrupted the sergeant impatiently. "It's not your fault that Karmack got away or that you let him use the mission house in his courtship. You good folks couldn't have known that he'd done anything wrong. Send for Miss O'Malley at once. I've no time to lose."

Luke Morrow forgot his supplications for pardon and sprang to his feet. "No time to lose—you're right. That scoundrel was persuasive, and we were weak. Karmack took Moira with him, offering her a safe-conduct to home and friends in Ottawa. We'll never forgive ourselves for——"

But Sergeant Scarlet was gone—in too great a hurry even to close the door behind his exit.

CHAPTER XIII.

A HEART-RENDING QUESTION.

LIKE a Windigo boogie of the subarctic on the trail of a craven Cree, Sergeant Seymour pushed through the white silence in pursuit of his fugitive. If the capture of Harry Karmack, embezzler, spurred him officially, the saving of Moira O'Malley from the fate that seemed in store for her lent wings to his snowshoes. To himself he did not deny the fact that the personal interest was the more potent. There would be weeks and weeks, if required, in which to run down the dishonest factor. Didn't the Royal Mounted always get their men? But there were only hours, he sincerely believed, in which to spare the most beautiful feminine creature he ever had seen a lifetime of humiliation and grief.

This was no night for travel. All the rules of Northern trails forbade it. With the spirit thermometer down to sixty-five degrees below, he should have been snugly in camp in some snow bank, wrapped in rabbitskin robes or incased

in a sleeping bag, with his Malemites snuggled around him. The spirit within that enabled him to defy the inexorable grip of the frost was the same that had not permitted him to delay his start an hour.

Frankly, he would not have gone out that night after Karmack had the rascal been escaping alone. Considering the factor's passenger, however, nothing could have kept him at the Armistice detachment post.

There, action had been swift once he had heard the news from Luke Morrow. At quarters he had turned over the post to Corporal Le Blanc. He was to keep the Arctic Company's trade room and fur storage under seal and to do no trading except that which the welfare of visiting Indians and Eskimos demanded. Hardship might be worked if the trusting natives came in to exchange their furs for supplies and found no mart.

The two Eskimo murderers were to remain under open arrest unless they showed signs of wanderlust after his departure. La Marr was to take no chances with his injured leg, the corporal to make such patrols as were absolutely necessary. Thus, like a good commander, he prepared for the all-too-many eventualities of winter travel.

Morrow had followed him to police quarters almost at once with an offer of the mission-house Malemites for the stern chase. Knowing that both the police teams were worn out—the one of the scarlet special and the other of mercy's errand—Seymour had accepted the mission team, although he preferred always to drive his own dogs when they were in the least fit.

From Morrow he had details of Karmack's morning visit which had resulted in Moira's unfortunate decision to attempt to get outside under his escort. Karmack had said he meant to take the shortest course to the Mackenzie. On the frozen surface of this he expected to find a more or less traveled trail. He would be delighted to have Moira's company. She could drive her own team and would find it easy to follow his own huskies. They would have Koplock, the Arctic's interpreter, a famous musher, to break trail and keep them on the right

track. It would be an express trip, he had declared, and she would find herself with her friends in Ottawa before she knew it.

"Emma and I tried to dissuade her from taking the chance," the missionary had told Seymour with tears in his voice, "but the temptation was too much for the girl. We assured her she was welcome to spend the entire winter with us, but she wanted to get away from the scene of the tragedy."

At the moment, Seymour had wondered how much her ill-founded disappointment in him had affected her decision. And this thought kept recurring to him now, as he followed the two sled trails. It clinched his determination to overtake them at the earliest possible moment.

Fortunately there was no wind, and he had nothing to contend against but the bitterness of the cold. He was trailing light, with caribou pemmican, hard-tack, and tea as the major supplies of his grub sack. The mission dogs were running well, as if out for an exercise jaunt, but the air was too frigid to permit much sled riding for their driver.

Already he had proved one lie in Karmack's statement to the girl and the missionary, as reported with undoubted truthfulness by the latter. The fugitive was not headed directly for the Mackenzie River, the natural highway "outside." That would have taken him by the Wolf Lake trading and mission station. Even in the night the sergeant recognized the ridge they were following and that there had been a sharp veering to the southwest. The course would bring them to the river far from any outpost, and doubtless Karmack, if he got away, would continue to avoid all such on the way up river until certain that he had outdistanced any pursuit.

The possibility that already the girl regretted her hasty decision to leave the Morrows occurred to him as a possible reason for Karmack's change of course. If she had threatened to give up the attempt on reaching Wolf Lake, the factor, naturally, would give the other missionaries a wide berth.

Cheering, however, as was the idea, he soon dismissed it. Moira O'Malley was

not the sort to turn back on an endeavor, and it was improbable that there had been any alarming overtures from Karmack so early in the wild project. He was clever, was Handsome Harry, and, by his own boast, experienced with women. He would wait until he had completely won her by the countless services that would crop up on a trip of this sort.

All the more reason, then, for Seymour to overtake and capture before they got beyond reach of return to Armistice. Again and again his goad of plaited caribou hide snapped near the ears of his team. The panting animals flattened their bodies, while he rode the sled in defiance of the frost.

Soon after break of day, belated in this latitude and season, came his reward. In the course of the night's sled run he had worked out of the bare tundra country of the foreshore into a region spotted here and there with brush and stunted spruce. Now he saw, rising from one of the clumps ahead, a spiral of smoke indicating some one's breakfast fire.

No difficulty was there in guessing whose fire—not in the Great Barrens. Evidently, from the distance covered, Karmack had driven far into the night, but, none the less, did not mean to be deprived of an early start on the second day of his dash for freedom.

Seymour dragged the mission dogs to a halt a mile away from the fugitive's camp. When rival teams meet on the snows, they dash at each other's throats with a chorus of yowls, and all the strength of their respective masters is required to keep them apart. The sergeant expected to be engaged otherwise than clubbing Malemutes when he got to that breakfast fire.

Accordingly, he untraced the team and chained the dogs to the sled in such a way that any attempt to move that vehicle on the part of the animals leashed on one side would meet with the resistance of those on the other. Such an anchorage he had tried before and found effective; in fact, it is about the only one possible in the open snow field.

Tossing each of the seven in the team a frozen fish, Seymour took off his parkee,

exposing to ready grasp the revolver at his hip. From its deerhide case, he removed his rifle, as a precaution against being "potted" in case his approach was discovered at too great a distance for small-arm accuracy. Then he moved swiftly forward, the tails of his "webs" leaving a wake of flying snow.

Evidently the three of the flight party were at breakfast, for he bore down upon the temporary camp without alarm. Soon he was near enough to hear the dogs of their two teams snarling over the early meal. Recognizing that they were parked between him and his objective, he circled for a safer approach.

Almost was he upon the camp when he saw Karmack departing in the direction of the dogs. Easily could he have picked off the accused embezzler with his rifle.

"Never fire first!" With the real slogan of the Royal Mounted he admonished himself under his breath.

Nearer over the crunching snow he crept on that clumsy-looking but most effective footgear which man may have adopted from the snowshoe rabbit. Now he could make out the front of a "pup" tent, doubtless thrown up for the protection of the girl. The Arctic's interpreter could be made out gathering up and packing for the start. Moira was not in sight.

Two minutes more would have brought him into camp and every one under cover of his rifle. Then, out of the tent came Moira, facing him.

He heard her cry out; could not determine whether from surprise at the unexpected appearance of a human stalking out of the white solitude or as a warning to her companions.

Of these, Karmack whirled at first alarm, but the native did not look up from his task. Evidently the factor recognized the unwelcome visitor, for he started back with a rush, drawing his automatic as he came.

"Never fire first!" the voice of training whispered, as the sergeant hurled himself toward his foe.

Karmack's pistol barked. A bullet whispered past the policeman's ear, a narrow miss, but as good as a mile.

Now had come the sergeant's turn.

Upward to his shoulder swung the gun with which Seymour had won many a target match. In a second, it seemed, Karmack must surely fall.

But the gun never was fired. Into direct range between the two men, Moira O'Malley had flung herself, a tall, fur-clad figure. The human target momentarily was blanketed. What mattered it that the girl from Ottawa was pointing an automatic as steadily as she had held it upon him in the trade room that time back at Armistice? Sergeant Scarlet could not fire upon an innocent woman.

He barely saw a whiff of smoke leave the round mouth of her pistol, scarcely heard what seemed a double report when a burning sensation along one temple and across the side of his scalp threw him backward to a fall on his side.

And as he toppled into the snow, to lie inert and helpless, it seemed to him that the glorious girl lunged forward to the same cold couch that was his.

Was it possible that, by some involuntary pressure on the trigger, he had fired at Moira O'Malley? In the clutch of the moment he could not answer the heart-rending question.

CHAPTER XIV.

APPREHENSIONS UNFOUNDED.

CONSCIOUSNESS must have fled Seymour's mind for only a moment. With its return, he realized that Karmack was shouting excited orders to Koplock, the interpreter. Haunted by that last glimpse of Moira tumbling forward into the snow, the sergeant tried to raise himself for another look over the tragic stage.

Only his brain seemed awake; the body muscles refused to respond to its demand. He could only lie there, staring up into the dingy, low-hung sky, and listen.

"Very bad affair this one, boss," he heard.

The voice was Koplock's and the conversational tone, which carried plainly through the frosty stillness, indicated that the interpreter and the factor stood together.

"The redcoat killed her, firing at me, you can see that and swear to it, can't you?" Karmack made this demand.

"But no, Misteer Karmack," came from the native. "She is hit from the back. It was your bullet that lay her low. Koplock swear to nothing but the truth."

An imprecation sprang from the factor's lips, but was scarcely heard by the listening sergeant. He was too filled with thankfulness that no involuntary shot of his had struck her down.

"It don't matter," he heard Karmack grumble. "Go have a look at the policeman. If only she killed him——"

Seymour heard the crunch of snowshoes; knew that the native was coming toward him. What should he do? He was convinced that his wound was only a "crease;" hoped that the muscular numbness would pass. To feign death under the native's inspection was his first impulse.

To that plan, however, several objections immediately presented themselves. The mission-schooled Eskimo would be hard to fool with no more convincing evidence than a bullet graze. Again, there was no telling how long the paralysis that gripped him might continue. No one could lie out in that cold for any length of time without freezing.

He recalled that Koplock always had shown a doglike devotion to him; undoubtedly was grateful for the fees which Seymour had paid for his services as interpreter for the government. Certainly the native was greatly disturbed by what had just happened. To throw himself on the Eskimo's mercy held some risk, but more chance of ultimate safety than attempting to play possum. In the moment of the bronze man's crossing, the sergeant had argued this out mentally and reached a decision.

His eyes were closed when Koplock stood over him and touched his body with the toe of his muckluk. The native stooped for a close examination of the head wound. Seymour's eyes opened, his lips moved in a whisper.

"Stand by your king," he said. "Tell Karmack I'm dead, but don't go on with him."

Koplock assented with a wink and quickly straightened.

"Him passed out," Seymour heard him call to his employer. "Center shot."

"Not so bad!" came the unfeeling response from the factor. "That's what he gets for edging into my affairs. Come here, you!"

The sergeant heard the native shoeing back and then came the calloused instructions of a hard-pressed fugitive, who could not afford to lose his head in such an emergency.

"I must mush on with my dogs," said Karmack. "Take the girl's body back to Armistice on her sled. Tell them—oh, make up any story you like, you'll do that anyhow. I'll be where they'll never get me."

"What do with him?" Koplock asked.

"The cop—let the wolves bury him."

Five minutes or so after Karmack's "Mush—mush on!" had signaled the continuation of his flight, Koplock again was at the side of the sergeant.

"Him very bad mans, that Factor Karmack," he said as he began a skillful massage of Seymour's limbs. For a moment he worked vigorously to restore circulation, and the officer was able to reward him by twitching his fingers. "Big joke this on that Karmack," went on the native, chuckling gutturally.

"Where's the joke with Miss O'Malley dead?" Seymour demanded, as the Eskimo turned him over to rub his spine.

Koplock was too much engaged in his operation to reply at once. In a couple of minutes he added: "The most big joke on him is that Miss O'Malley she am not dead, but just some hurt like you."

The effect upon Seymour was electrical. Power returned to his muscles as suddenly as it had departed them. Of his own will, he turned over and sat up on the snow. With the Eskimo's aid he got to his feet. He glanced anxiously about, but could see nothing of the beloved figure. His eyes put the question.

"Koplock carry her in tent," answered the native.

"Good boy, Koplock!"

Slowly, for his legs were numb, and with the native's grip to steady him, Seymour walked to the tent. There the girl lay wrapped in a rabbitskin robe, gazing open-eyed at the roof of the tent, upon her flushed face an expression of surprise, as if she did not understand just what had befallen her.

"Thank Heaven, you're alive!" cried the Mountie, staring down at her, his eyes brimming with tears of rejoicing.

"You—you!" she murmured. "Where is Mr. Karmack?" She seemed afraid, and her wide eyes accused him cruelly.

Seymour sat down beside her. "After nearly murdering you, Karmack has continued his flight," he said. "You and I will thrash this out once and for all, Moira. The wound of his shot from behind will have to wait until I've cleared your mind of certain misapprehensions."

She turned from him, but he felt certain that she would listen. First he assured her of his great liking for her brother, a mutual regard, he believed. Then he recounted every pertinent detail of the brutal strangling with the Ugiuk line, not forgetting the evidence of the two well-curried fox pelts. Frankly he set forth Karmack's jealous motive in casting suspicion upon himself. Her own misinterpretation of the scene she had interrupted in the trade room was shown with a convincing account of the entire struggle, ending with Karmack's attempt to shoot him. To prove the factor's real reason for flight, he read her the warrant which the "scarlet special" had brought from Ottawa.

"And to-day," he concluded, "while trying again to kill me, he shot you instead."

Slowly the girl returned her averted gaze. With a glad throbbing of heart, Seymour saw that she was convinced.

"And I believed—I believed a thief!" she mourned. "I started for the provinces with him that I might the sooner have the law on you. My heart told me—why, why didn't I listen?—that it could not be you. Oh, Sergeant Scarlet, can you ever forgive me?"

"Forgiven already—and forgotten, all but Karmack's dastardly part," he assured her.

Now, for the first time, the girl seemed to notice the gash alongside his scalp. "But you—you're wounded. "How—who is——"

"It's just a scratch," he broke in cheerfully. "Knocked me out for a bit, you know, but all right now. The how and who doesn't matter. Suppose we see how slightly you're hurt?"

Koplock stood in the tent door with a pan of boiling water, heated at the sergeant's order. Seymour took this from him and sent him to bring in the police team. Then, with deft fingers, he set about an examination of what proved to be a shoulder wound. To his great relief, he found that the bullet had gone entirely through, leaving a clean bore in the muscles, with no need of probing. The girl's coma, so like death as to deceive the excited factor, evidently had been from shock. Applying a first-aid dressing, he wrapped the injured shoulder against the cold. Koplock, with fingers that were none too gentle, looked after Seymour's own injury and bandaged it with material from the police emergency kit. Then they gathered brush from the thicket and built a rousing fire before the tent.

That they would not try to move that day was Seymour's first decision. The girl, he felt, needed rest after the shock of her wounding more than the immediate attention of one with more surgical experience than he possessed. Whether to take her back to Armistice or across country to Wolf Lake required more consideration. The fact that there was a missionary surgeon at the lake, more skilled than Luke Morrow, finally decided him. Moreover, by going to the trading post, he would be much nearer the frozen highway of the Mackenzie, over which his pursuit of Karmack would continue.

In the afternoon, as they lounged in the tent in the genial warmth of the brush fire, Seymour broached one of the mysteries of the eventful winter.

"Mind telling me, Moira, what brought you on this wild, unseasonable dash into the North?" he asked her.

"It was fear, Sergeant Scarlet—fear for my brother."

He was surprised. "You mean you had a premonition that something was going to happen to him?"

"Not that exactly." The girl amplified her first response. "There was a motion picture I chanced to see in Ottawa. It was a dreadful thing called 'The Perils of the North' or something like that. The young man in the picture, away from all of his own kind—well, you know what

might happen. He became a—a squaw-man. I got to thinking of Oliver. He had dashed off while I was on a visit in Montreal and hadn't even said good-by. There was nothing really to keep me in Ottawa, so I decided that my place was with him. That was why I came and not in time——" She broke off with a sob.

Sergeant Seymour assured her that her apprehensions of her brother becoming a squaw-man had been absolutely unfounded. A cleaner specimen of young Canadian, he declared, had never fared to the arctic foreshore. But he did not tell her, then, the real reason behind Oliver O'Malley's ill-starred venture.

CHAPTER XV.

AFTER LONG WAITING.

THE scene in the rotunda of Montreal's impressive Windsor Station was as lively as it was metropolitan. Trains arrived with their outpourings of passengers, baggage laden, rejoicing at journey's end in the Paris of Canada. Immigrants, queerly dressed, stood about in huddled groups, waiting to be herded into the cars that would carry them to the wheat lands of Saskatchewan or the green forests of British Columbia. "Redcaps" bustled about with the expensive-looking baggage of tourists bound back to their own United States.

At one gate to the train shed an explosive Frenchman bade a tearful good-by to a brother ticketed for Winnipeg. At another, behind a brass guard rail, a tall, upstanding citizen waited with impatience the coming of the Ottawa express. His fur coat was unbuttoned, and the open-faced suit of evening clothes that showed beneath gave no clew to his calling. In fact, even his oldest friends in the Far North well might have passed by without recognizing Staff Sergeant Russell Seymour, on special detail.

The hunt for Harry Karmack, embezzler of the funds of the Arctic Trading Company, Ltd., of course, had not been given up. This was Seymour's "special"—would continue to be until the fugitive was apprehended, as is the way of the Royal Mounted. Even a report brought to Fort McMurray by a wan-

dering Chippewaian that the factor's frozen body had been found at the foot of Ptarmigan Bluffs had not halted the search one hour. The Indian's story was too "pat;" the last, lost-in-blizzard note signed "Karmack" too obvious a plant.

A blizzard there had been, to be sure, a stem-winder. Just in time to escape the white scourge howling south, Seymour had munched into Wolf Creek station with his precious invalid. But he did not believe that the Armistice factor had permitted himself to be caught in the storm. Too long had Karmack been in the North to meet any such tenderfoot fate. An old trick, that of reporting oneself dead by freezing! The thief might have saved himself the expense of hiring the Indian to bring in the report, for all it was believed.

This blizzard had held Seymour at Wolf Creek for three endless weeks. There had been just one recompense. At the end of that period, the mission surgeon pronounced Moira O'Malley sufficiently recovered to continue the trip by dog team. The weather had favored them, and eventually they had found themselves at Athabaska, end-of-steel. The trains of the Canadian National and the Grand Trunk had taken them to Ottawa, the girl to a welcome at the home of friends, the sergeant to report at headquarters.

After a conference with the commissioner, Seymour had stepped out of uniform into plain clothes. The still-hunt then begun had continued three months, leading first to Quebec, whence Karmack originally hailed. There Seymour had secured information which confirmed his disbelief of the lost-in-blizzard note—Karmack had paid a secret visit to his old home and departed. Rumor had it that he had gone to the States. Therefore Seymour did not cross the border to look for him.

Knowing the man and his inclinations, the sergeant's hunch was Montreal. From a rented room on City Councillor Street, midway between the French and the uptown quarters of the city, he had played that hunch industriously, but so far without result. He had kept away religiously from the Mounted Police headquarters on Sherbrooke West, and not once had

he been taken for what he was, even by tellow members of the Force.

He was growing a bit tired of the city's confinement, but not discouraged. One day he would meet his man, know him no matter what his disguise, and get him.

This was to be a night off, the first he had taken since getting back to civilization. It was to be a gala, a reunion, night, and now it was beginning, for the Ottawa train had just ground to a stop in the shed outside the high iron grill.

Seymour's pulse beat quicker as he scanned the incomers—first the smoking-car complement, then the day-coach passengers, and at last the Pullman elect. Then he saw her, coming with the poise of a queen, a small black bag in her hand. Neatly he hurdled the brass barrier and at the very gate he took her into his arms and kissed her.

"Moira, Moira, you're a glad sight for tired eyes!" he murmured.

"But not here, Sergeant Scarlet," she whispered in pretended protest. "Not here with all the world looking on!"

He did not care how much of the world saw, for between them an understanding for life had been reached upon the trail.

A taxi, its wheels wearing chains with which to grip the snowy streets, hustled them to the Mount Royal Hotel, where he had reserved a room for her. In less time than most men would have believed possible, she had rejoined him in the lobby, a vision to snow-blind the gods in an evening frock of silver.

Evenings off with Moira were too precious to leave anything to chance, and Seymour's program had been carefully prearranged. Again they took a taxi which brought them out by St. Catherine's Street to a brilliant electric fairyland—the Venetian Gardens. What mattered it that snow never lies on the streets of Venice? Well might they have been in sunny Italy once they had climbed a flight of stairs to pleasure's rendezvous above.

As they entered the huge dancing room, the lights went low, and an orchestra that didn't "jazz" began the soft measures of a waltz. They did not wait to find their table, but swung away with the music for their first dance together.

When they were seated, Moira asked across the narrow board: "Do they teach dancing, as well as riding and straight shooting at the Regina Depot, Sergeant Scarlet?"

"You're forgetting," he responded with a smile, "that I've been to France since I left the Mounted's riding academy."

"It's hard to wait, Russell," Moira said after they had danced again. "Sometimes I wonder is it worth while. Will you ever get your man?"

On the frozen river trail, after he had spoken the three magical words and she had returned them to him with equal fervor, they had agreed that marriage was not to be thought of until Harry Karmack had been brought to book.

It was a long moment before he answered. "I've got to get him, Moira. There'd not be complete happiness for us with that business unfinished. You wouldn't want to change a fine old County Mayo name like O'Malley for that of a quitter, would you, now? But know this, girl o' mine——"

He did not finish, his attention being attracted by a large red-headed man, a bit the worse for liquor. The chap's immediate interest centered in a pair of police constables, resplendent in their brilliant uniforms, handsome young fellows attached to the Montreal detachment.

"Take those young Mounties a bottle of wine and mark it down on my check," the red-haired one was saying to the waiter.

The woman with him, a pretty French girl, reached across the table in an effort to quiet him.

"You leave me alone, Florette," he said resentfully. "I got most all the money in the world, and those brave lads work for next to nothing a year."

"Next to nothing a year." Seymour repeated the expression under his breath. Where had he heard that before and applied to the same Force to which yonder cubs belonged? In a flash he was transported back to the trade room of a sub-arctic post, and in the next he was striding across the room toward the inebriated spendthrift's table.

From behind, one of the sergeant's powerful hands fell upon the wine buyer's shoulder, the other gripped his right wrist

as in a steel clamp. In a voice so low that the words could not be distinguished at the adjoining table, he spoke into the other's ear:

"I arrest you, Harry Karmack, in the name of the king, for the murder of Oliver O'Malley. Anything you say may be used against you." Then he added in a voice still lower: "Better come along quietly. I'm not bound by that 'Never shoot first!' slogan to-night, you having had your first shot up North."

Sobered by the surprise of his capture, turned white by the shock of the unexpected charge, Karmack sagged limply in his chair. That he offered no resistance put Seymour doubly on his guard.

"What do you mean with that murder talk, Seymour?" he asked after a moment, his pretty companion staring at him with an expression half puzzled, half frightened. "I may have squeezed a little from the grasping old Arctic, Ltd., but I swear to Heaven I had nothing to do with strangling young O'Malley."

"It takes two men to use the Ugiuk line effectively, Karmack," Seymour replied, as if in ordinary conversation. "I know, for I've had one around my own throat. Those furs I held back from the coroner's jury happened to come from your own storeroom, two of the lot you held out on the company."

Karmack moved restlessly, with the result of tightening the sergeant's grip. "But man, what motive could I possibly have had?" he begged nervously. "What motive?"

"You learned that O'Malley had been sent to Armistice to investigate you and knew that he had the evidence. What you didn't know was that he already had sent out his report."

Seymour nodded to the two young constables. Sensing that trouble of some sort was on foot, they came at once, although neither ever had seen him before. He spoke a word or two that only the Force could understand, produced his badge of identification, and turned over his prisoner for conduct to headquarters.

"Tell the inspector, please, that I'll report in half an hour," he said. "And watch this bucko closely; he's careless about what he does."

A moment of expert "frisking" gave Seymour possession of Karmack's automatic, which had been parked beneath his left arm. Then the young constables led him away.

Seymour returned to a puzzled Moira.

"Did you arrest him just because he wanted to treat those young policemen?" she asked.

"Hardly for that. Do you think, Moira, that you could be ready for our ceremony to-morrow some time? The chase is ended, business finished, and I don't see why——"

She rose in her chair and leaned toward him. "You mean—— Was that red-headed man——"

"Harry Karmack with his hair dyed by an expert. I've just arrested him for the murder of your brother. He had learned that Oliver came North to investigate him and hired Avic to help him. The case against the factor is complete."

This last contention proved well-founded when, in the spring, a court of the Dominion made the long trip to Armistice to try the two. And it was characteristic of Moira O'Malley Seymour that she insisted on postponing her wedding trip until it could be made along the line of duty of her husband, the newest inspector of the Mounted.

How did this story strike you? A few words about it, if you will be good enough to write them and send them to the editor. We ask you to say, without reserve, just what you think of it. And in the same letter, please give us your opinion of TOP-NOTCH in general.

Really Absurd

TWO amateur gardeners were coming to town one morning. "Say, Bill," said one, "what's good to kill slugs? They are eating up all my radishes."

"Well," said the other, "get a couple of bags of salt and sprinkle it between the rows."

The next morning the two met again.

"How did the salt work?" Bill asked.

"Why, you poor fish," replied the other, "when I went out to look at the garden this morning, the slugs were pulling up the radishes, dipping them in the salt, and eating them."

After all Else Failed ~



JO justice of the peace likes to be roused from his afternoon nap by a young mob scene. Old Sam Barnes, keeper of the peace and dignity and general well-being of the Coon Mountain neighborhood, had learned through turbulent years that there is a time for all things. With the rheumatic Jeff, once a notable skunk dog, snoozing at his side, Sam had just entered upon the second and more enjoyable stage of his doorstep siesta when visitors gave tongue down the path.

There were only three of them, but they made enough noise for thirty; the granite-buttressed heights of Coon Mountain echoed to the sound of their approach. The whiskers of Constable Tom Grupp were easily recognizable, and there was no less difficulty in identifying the prisoners as "Budge" and "Hawk" Turner.

Nobody except the Turner boys, or some fool outlander, would make that much fuss over being arrested. It was noteworthy that Tom Grupp had taken out of moth balls the revolver his father had carried through the Civil War. Tom was champion collar-and-elbow wrestler of the county and under ordinary circumstances he scorned a weapon. With the Turner boys, it was different.

"Drat their hides!" muttered Sam Barnes. He scratched his chin thoughtfully. "I'm going to cure them boys this time, no matter if I bust my galluses

doing it! I've got almost a good mind to send 'em to jail!"

The party halted six feet from the justice and quieted down. Barnes repressed Jeff's bluff at being a watchdog and fixed the visitors with a blue eye which could grow cold and stormy upon occasion.

"Well, Tom," he said, "what's them two rapsallions been up to now?"

"Everything!" exploded Constable Grupp in the strained voice of one who is scraping the bottom of the barrel for more patience. "Disturbing the peace, disorderly conduct, felonious assault, public nuisance, and malicious mischief. If them charges ain't enough I can think of lots more."

Sam Barnes regarded the Turner brothers. Budge was a thick-shouldered young man with level black eyebrows which ran in one continuous line across his face. He was good-looking after his fashion, but a sharp contrast to his brother. Hawk Turner's most prominent feature was a grin, which changed but did not disappear in the stress of battle. He owned a fearless eye and a lithe and catlike body.

In the heart of Sam Barnes there was a soft spot for Hawk Turner. He bore no ill will against Budge, but he had a sneaking fondness for the cheerful Hawk. The justice of the peace was out of patience with both of them now, however. He had hunted bears with their grandfather in the old days, but that was

not going to save them from being settled in some kind of permanent peace.

"You tell me just how come, Tom," he said.

"Well, Sam, these two pests has both been sparking that new waitress at Ike Peabody's boarding house at the Corners. Good-looking girl with fluffy hair. Name's Flora Dell. Last night they both got there at the same time and had an argument. Peabody's got two black eyes, a busted door, and all the furniture in the sitting room smashed. Ike figgers it's set him back twenty-five dollars besides the black eyes."

Sam Barnes filled his corncob pipe and worked the stem to a comfortable place between his teeth. "Black eyes is either durned foolishness or an act of Providence," he said. "Most likely Peabody tried to nose into somebody else's fight. Damages is a different thing. You boys got any money?"

Budge Turner silently produced a roll of bills. Hawk turned his pockets inside out, grinned, and shrugged.

"They's twenty-five dollars damages to pay," announced the justice, "and two dollars to Tom for all this fuss and a dollar more for waking me up to hold court. That's twenty-eight. You hand over half of it, Budge, and I'll see to getting the other half of it out of Hawk. That's easy, but now we're getting along toward the hard part of this rumpus. I'm going to make you boys behave yourselves. I'm going to give ye both a cure! Drat your hides! Budge, you tell your story first!"

Budge Turner looked at his brother and growled throatily. "Flora Dell would marry me if it wasn't for him!" he said.

"Huh!" snorted Barnes. "Well, Hawk, what you got to say?"

"She and I would have been married six weeks ago if it hadn't been for Budge!" exclaimed Hawk, with narrowing eyes. "He took what money I had on an ace full of jacks, and he's been spending it on her!"

They lurched toward each other and Constable Grupp collared them both.

"Stop it!" he yelled. "They had three fights on the way up here, Sam, and I'm all tired out. If you don't do some-

thing to make them critters keep the peace I'll put a hunk of lead into 'em!"

The Turner boys showed marks of conflict, but they were still full of battle and iniquity.

Sam Barnes heaved a sigh and scratched his chin again. "You boys can go to jail or do what I'm going to tell ye," he said. "It'll be less trouble for me if you want to go to jail."

"I'll do what you say, squire," declared Hawk with his usual grin.

"Me, too," agreed Budge.

"All right," said Barnes. "Tom, you take Hawk over to Gideon Barstow's place, and tell him I said to put Hawk to work. Gideon needs a man in haying and part of the money will settle up with Peabody. Budge, you stay here with me. I want to look you over some. Neither one of you is going down to the Corners to see this girl. Can't leave the places where you're at. Sentence of the court! Take 'em away, officer!"

"Gosh, I feel better!" exclaimed Grupp, putting up his revolver for the first time. "Come on, Hawk!"

Budge stood in silence as he watched his brother and the constable disappear. Jeff sniffed at him and cocked an inquiring eye at his master. Sam Barnes rose and knocked out his pipe.

"They's an ax and a woodpile out back of the house," he said. "I'm going down to the Corners and when I come back we'll have supper. Johnny cake and baked beans, and some of the best apple sass you ever et!"

Sam Barnes departed, and it was not until the long shadows of sunset were striking across woodland and rock-studded pasture that he came back to the foot of Coon Mountain. His step was a little slow with age, but there was a spring in it nevertheless, and his face wore the contented look of a man who has made up his mind.

Budge Turner had split wood with a reasonable degree of industry, but it was apparent that he did not relish the job. He dropped the ax where he stood when Barnes called him to supper, and he maintained an almost complete silence while the old man repeated the store porch gossip he had collected.

Budge Turner helped to wash the

dishes after supper and then smoked morosely through the evening.

II.

IT was early the next afternoon, about twenty-four hours after Budge's arrival, when Justice Barnes called him from the woodpile. Sam grinned and pointed down the path with the stem of his corncob.

"Look and see what's coming and then take the crape off'n your disposition!" he chortled.

A slender, light-haired girl was almost upon them. She laughed, dimpling, and exposed the chewing gum between her white teeth as she came up to the doorstep. Her dress was an unobtrusive green, but red sandals and a red vanity case gave a touch of color. Nobody could deny that she was pretty.

"Oh, Mr. Barnes!" she cried. "You're the very dearest old thing! Oh, Budge! Don't stand there like a dummy! You ought to be glad to see me!"

"Flo Dell!" exclaimed Budge Turner thickly. "Say, squire——"

"Never mind asking questions, Budge!" interrupted Barnes. "It looks as though you and this gal knew each other. Mighty glad your friends is coming to see you! I don't want you two should go out of sight of the house, but I don't calculate to spy on ye, neither. Most likely I'll be asleep most of the time while she's here."

"You said we wasn't to see her!" Budge managed a full-sized laugh. "I guess this is one on Hawk!"

"I said neither one of you was to go to the Corners to see her until this business was settled," remarked Sam Barnes with a little coolness. "I don't go back on what I say. But I didn't say nothing about not letting her come up here!"

"She can go to see him, too!" cried Turner. "Flo, have you been to see Hawk?"

Flora Dell tossed her head and sidled away. "Not yet!" she snapped. "But I guess I got a right to if I feel like it."

"Not unless Gideon Barstow give you an invitation," said Barnes dryly. "Leastways I guess Gideon is boss of his own place."

The good humor of Budge Turner came

back. He possessed himself of Flora's hand.

"You better not go to see him!" he said with a grin.

"You better be thankful for your blessings," suggested Barnes.

Flora Dell agreed. "You said a mouthful!" she declared, giggling.

III.

THE back of Hawk Turner was creaking just a little. It's one thing to tramp the mountains with a dog and gun twelve hours on end and another to get up at daylight in haying and pitch onto the load or mow away until a late sunset. In general, Gideon Barstow was a mighty easy man to work for, but mountain weather is temperamental; also hay must be cut when it's right and put under cover at the right time or the year's profits on a sidehill farm may be less than nothing.

Hawk knew Justice Sam Barnes too well to think he could get out of his present predicament, unless he took to the woods. If he took to the woods it would be a long time before he saw Flora Dell again. An inner whisper persisted in telling him that she was not the waiting kind.

Hawk Turner had just finished pitching on a load when down from the cool, maple-shaded farmhouse came a girl in a gingham dress. That was Barstow's daughter, Margaret, with the regular jug of cider. Halfway between the early breakfast and dinner, and again between dinner and supper, she came. Gideon Barstow stuck his fork into the load and slid down; he was a comfortable-looking man with a twinkle in his eye.

"Cheer up, Hawk!" he said. "Soon as we finish getting the hay in we'll take it easy. If you do the chores you can spend the rest of your time playing croquet with Margaret, for all I care."

The Hawk Turner grin was still working; moreover, he liked the whole Barstow family. He had been having the first quiet and uneventful days of his young life, and he rather enjoyed them.

"Most any night at bedtime I'd be willing to take jail, if it wasn't for thinking of the cider next day," he said.

"Margaret," said Gideon Barstow, "Hawk thinks maybe he'd be happier in jail than he is here."

The gingham dress, containing a form calculated to please a most discriminating eye, had arrived. A pair of steady gray eyes looked out from beneath a broad white forehead. She made Hawk Turner think of woody places along a brook, patches of sunlight and little water sounds. Her smile rested a couple of tired men as she handed the jug to her father. He drank and passed it to Turner.

"Hawk wants to see his girl, dad," said Margaret Barstow. "That's what's the matter with him!"

Hawk Turner blushed and choked. Barstow laughed.

"I'm willing," the older man said, "but I got my orders from Sam Barnes. I can't let Hawk go off the farm until I get the word from Sam."

"You didn't promise not to have her come here, did you?" asked Margaret, without even the hint of a smile.

Hawk Turner started and almost dropped the precious jug. Barstow roared and slapped his leg.

"That would be a reg'lar York State joke on old Sam Barnes!" he cried. "Hawk, you've worked like a good feller for three weeks now, and you'd ought to have some fun out of life! Margaret can hitch up to-morrow after dinner and go down to the Corners and get your best girl! We'd ought to get the last load in by noon, and you can have the rest of the day off!"

A resounding thump from the hard hand of Gideon Barstow saved Hawk the embarrassment of trying to answer; literally he would not have known what to say. Three, even two weeks before he would have been willing to ignore Gideon Barstow's whiskers and kiss him at such a privilege. Now Hawk did not want to see Flora Dell; at least he did not want to have her come to visit him there.

"That'll be fine, dad!" Margaret Barstow was saying. "I'll be glad to do anything I can for Hawk! Maybe we can have the wedding here!"

She took the empty jug and started away, flinging a smile over her shoulder. Hawk dumbly watched her, until her

father's voice reminded him that they ought to get that load of hay into the barn, if they ever expected to take in another on the same wagon.

Until exhaustion closed his eyes that night Hawk Turner worried about what was going to happen the next day; and the next day, as noon drew on, he became more and more depressed. After dinner he went to the barn and with lagging hands began to put the harness on Margaret Barstow's driving horse. He heard her step on the planks of the floor and then her voice.

"I suppose you're the happiest man between here and the Canada line, Hawk!"

Hawk Turner was nothing if not a man of action. Suddenly he flung the halter down. For an instant he stood in silence, gazing into the smiling gray eyes of Margaret Barstow. Then he began to unharness the horse.

"You needn't go to the Corners on my account," he said grimly.

"Oh, Hawk!" she cried softly. "I didn't think you'd trifle with a girl like that!"

"Me—trifle?" He turned upon her. "I guess you don't know Flo Dell! The first time I have a chance I'm going to tell Budge he can have her!"

"And everybody was talking about the fight you and Budge had over her! I've been thinking right along you couldn't live without her, Hawk!"

"Well," muttered Turner, "I've kind of changed, I guess."

"Dad hasn't worked you so hard you've lost your spirit, has he?" she asked anxiously. "It's funny you'd change so quick!"

"No!" cried Hawk fiercely. "Any man would change, seeing a girl like you around every day! If—if I amounted to anything I'd—I'd marry you before sunset to-night!"

Twenty minutes later, when Gideon Barstow came into the barn to see why Margaret didn't start, he had to clear his throat three times before the young people heard him.

"Hawk and I are going to get married this afternoon," his daughter told him.

"Well," he said, after a moment, "if Sam Barnes'll marry you I don't know

as I care. There's good stuff in you, Hawk, and with the wife you're going to get it's bound to come out."

IV.

WITH Jeff, the hound dog, sleeping peacefully before him, Justice of the Peace Sam Barnes sat on his doorstep and considered things in general and the Turner boys in particular. He believed that things were working out as he had planned three weeks before; there had been no evidence that they were not.

Although Sam was impartial, according to his lights, in the administration of justice, he could not help favoring Hawk Turner a little over his brother. That is, he wanted Hawk to have what he wanted, but for conscience's sake he felt bound to give Budge just a little bit the better of it.

He had sent Hawk over to Barstow's partly to get him out of the way for a time, and as much in order that he might earn some money and get acquainted with hard work. Sam Barnes had no very high opinion of Flora Dell, but she was all right as girls went, and he was sure that she must see the superiority of Hawk after she'd had a good chance to get acquainted with the crotchets of Budge's disposition.

The mighty brain of Sam Barnes had thought out the somewhat backhanded idea of winning her for Hawk by letting her see too much of Budge. And Budge Turner never would be able to say that he had not had a fair chance. The longer Sam Barnes observed the working out of his scheme the better pleased he was with it.

For a week Flora had come up from the Corners every afternoon. Then she had skipped a day. Then she had stopped coming altogether; and Budge, glummer than ever, had utterly refused to discuss the cessation of her visits.

Four days before this afternoon, Barnes had considered that his work with Flora and Budge was done. He had set Budge free. Now he thought it was about time for him to go over to Gideon Barstow's and get Hawk. Budge had announced his intention of going to the Plattsburg Fair, and the coast would be clear for Hawk

and Flora to get married. Sam was ready to marry them. He had even filled in a marriage certificate that morning.

Into these pleasant meditations broke the war cry of an enraged male human of adult size. Even before his glance jerked down the path, Sam Barnes was sure of his facts. Budge Turner was coming, and he was coming fast despite a certain lurch and roll in his progress.

Sam got up. Jeff bristled and growled. Budge Turner came to a sudden stop six feet away and took off his coat. He began to roll up his shirt sleeves. Justice Barnes noticed that the coat was torn, with a large smear of mud down it, and that Budge carried a black eye.

"What's the matter of you, Budge?" he demanded sternly. "You're drunk!"

"There ain't nothing the matter of me!" replied Turner thickly. "But there's going to be something the matter with you in a few minutes!"

"I'll put you in jail!" roared Sam, discreetly backing away.

"That's all right!" cried Budge. "You're going to have something to put me in jail for, you old he-matchmaker!"

Justice Sam Barnes was unquestionably a brave man, but it would have been folly for him to stand and give battle to Budge Turner. With great speed for one of his years he retreated around the corner of the house. Budge chased him and Jeff chased Budge. The three of them arrived at the woodshed, a low-lying addition to the house, and there Jeff saved the situation for the moment by settling what teeth he had left in one of Budge Turner's legs.

V.

WITH a howl Budge Turner stopped to wrench the dog loose and hurl him into the woodshed. He closed the door on Jeff and looked around for his quarry. Sam Barnes was already on the woodshed roof. From there he scrambled up to the ridgepole of the house and pulled a loose brick from the chimney. He weighed it carefully in his hand as he looked down upon Budge.

"Come on up!" he invited. "That's a thick head you got, but I bet I can dent it some with a brick!"

"I can stay down here a durned sight longer than you can stay up there!"

Budge Turner walked over to the woodpile, which his own labors had increased, and selected several pieces of a size handy for throwing.

Things were not looking as well as they might for Sam Barnes. He was not only in danger of severe physical chastisement from this rapsallion who had no respect for the law, but he was also consumed with curiosity to know what it was all about.

"What's got into you besides hooch?" he cried, as he worked to loosen more bricks. "If ever a man was let off easy, it was you!"

"Easy!" howled Budge Turner. "You call it easy, do you? Planned to get me married to that girl to save Hawk! Almost made me marry her! You knew, all right, what I was getting into! And we hadn't any more than got married in Plattsburg when she runs off with a book agent we meet up there, and I buy drinks for! And when I catch 'em and beat him up, I get dumped in jail overnight and fined ten dollars because she ain't my wife at all, on account of being married to him before! You're a damn' fine justice of the peace!"

Sam Barnes was staggered. The brick dropped from his hand and went skittering down the shingles. Then his glance, turning desperately to the four points of the compass, caught Hawk Turner coming up the path toward the front of the house. He shuddered. If his scheme had done that to Budge what might it not have done to Hawk?

"What are you doing, squire?" called Hawk with a grin. "Fixing your chimney? Guess you better leave it for a while. Margaret Barstow and I want to get married, and her father says if you'll marry us it'll be all right with him! She's waiting down in the road, and we got to have you to help us out!"

Justice Sam Barnes looked down at the rear of his house, where Budge Turner was poising a stick to throw. Not yet did Budge know that reinforcements had come.

"Hawk," called Sam Barnes, getting ready to dodge, "you go around back of the house and lick your brother, and I'll marry you for nothing! I'll be there in a minute with a club to help, if you need me. But if you don't lick him I'll put both of you in jail! This is the last time I'm going to try any monkeyshines with love!"

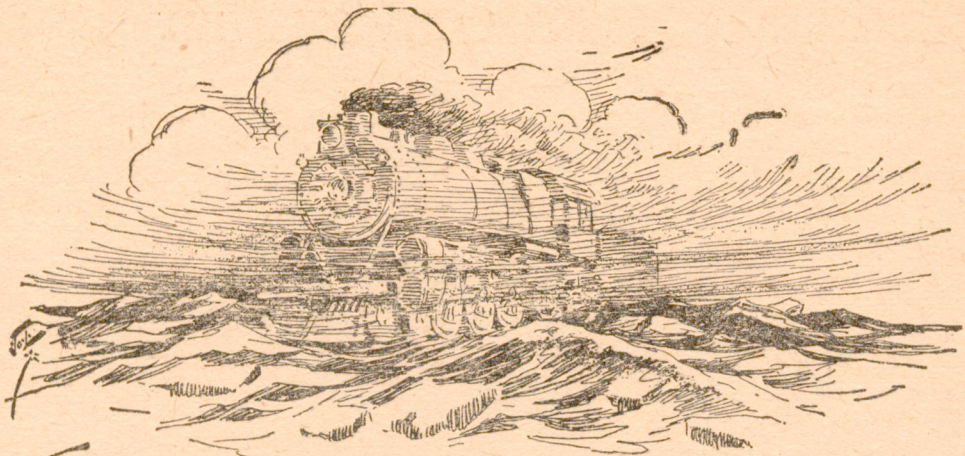


UNDER WINTER SKIES

By Thomas J. Murray

UNLOVELY vistas of the shore attend
 The creek now flowing under winter skies,
 Ice edged, the bank shows white around the bend,
 While through the leafless trees a low wind sighs.
 We miss the stir of summer's enterprise,
 The beat of oars and motors' sharp exhaust,
 And all the distanced mellowed joyous cries,
 Far down the fading year, forever lost.

But hope reminds us of a newer spring,
 When budding willows o'er the stream will sway,
 With tide to lengthen like a silver string,
 In all the softness of an April day.
 So we forget the stretch of sullen shore,
 And glimpse the joys to come through that green door.



The Seagoing Locomotive ~

By Burt L. Standish ~

(COMPLETE IN THIS ISSUE)

CHAPTER I.

FIGHTING A LOSING BATTLE.

THE snowflakes danced madly about the arc lights on the railroad wharf, but everywhere else along the lake front there was silence and desolation. In the darkness there could be seen the firm, immovable surface of the ice, lightly dusted with snow, which enfolded the piles and stretched out as far as the eye could see, into the dark void that was Lake Superior.

Tugs and lake steamers, tightly snubbed in their berths, had the deserted air that properly belongs to Great Lakes shipping during the winter months. No smoke came from their smokestacks. No figures moved about their decks. No light was burning on any of them to indicate its position. The wharves and the ships made fast to them were dark and deserted and heaped with white, save at the one spot where the arc lamps glared brightly through the snowy night.

Here, there were people standing. Here, there was clear water—if water can be termed clear that is a mass of ice pans and slush. A mighty vessel had docked here not long before and now was gone. The trail of its going was in the crushed and broken ice in the dock, and in a

winding, jagged pathway that led off and away into a swirling, dark nothingness.

The vessel had crushed the frozen surface of the lake, shouldered aside the fragments its weight had broken, and had vanished into the vast open center of Lake Superior where a wintry storm now raged, and from which a despairing message had come weakly through space.

The substance of the message was reflected in the faces of those who stood waiting in little groups about the place. Some were merely grave. Some talked earnestly with anxious faces and abrupt gestures. A woman with a child in her arms was crouched against one of the freight sheds, weeping. An old man stood at the edge of the dock and stared out into the blackness. His features were inscrutable. His eyes were pools of bleak despair.

The *Isaquan*, greatest of the Great Lake train ferryboats, was somewhere out in the night, with forty loaded box cars on the rails that ran her length, and a crew of forty souls on board. She was less than halfway to the Canadian side—and she never would reach the shores of Canada. Plunging in the storm, her port propeller had crashed against a monster ice pan and had been crumpled into useless, twisted metal. In the gale that was blowing and with drifting ice to ham-

per her, she was slowly but surely being forced backward, backward onto a rocky coast where her crew would be as good as dead men.

A man came running toward the wharf, hatless and coatless, and with smudges of oil upon his face and soiled jumpers. His face was pale and his eyes staring. He seized the arm of one of those who stood drearily upon the dock.

"The *Isaquan*!" he panted. "They said she was sinking! What news?"

The man looked up. "Drifting," he answered dully. "One propellor gone, and she can't make headway against the ice and the gale combined. She's being driven against the Three Needles."

The younger man stiffened, and clenched his fists. "Where's the rescue boat?" he demanded swiftly. "The ship they're sending to help? I've got to go with it. The girl I'm going to marry is on board the *Isaquan*!"

"And my son's on board," said the other slowly. "They can't send a boat after her."

Tom Garrick flung out his hand passionately to the frozen, silent tugs and steamers along the wharves. "There! Why aren't they making one ready? We can get up steam——"

The other shook his head with the apathy of despair. "Laid up for the winter," he said. "Important machinery taken out. Not one can move under her own power with less than a week's work on her. And my son's on board the *Isaquan*—and she's doomed."

For an instant Tom Garrick stood rigid. Margaret Ryan was the daughter of the captain of the *Isaquan*, and the girl he had made up his mind to marry. They had parted only that afternoon, when he had been in an unreasonable anger because she refused to accept him.

It had been only a few hours before, while the sun still shone and when the wind that blew in from the lake was merely a bitterly cold breeze that had brought roses into Margaret's cheeks. They had stood here, upon this same dock, while the freight cars were shunted into the tracks laid in the cavernous tunnel that ran the whole of the monster train ferryboat's length. The cars bumped over the flexible rail joint that

connected the huge ship with the dock, and disappeared within the vast opening to the sound of a bellowing rumble, strangely echoed and reverberating. Margaret's father, muffled up to the ears, watched the cars as they vanished.

Margaret had been perfect in Tom's sight, then, a joy to the eyes and the sum of all things desirable, even as she dashed his hopes to the ground.

"You see, Tom," she said almost wistfully, "it isn't that I don't like you, or that I like any one else better. It's just that—well, I've always wanted to marry a man I knew was big and fine. And I—I think that maybe you're all I've ever dreamed of, but—but somehow I'm not sure."

"I've got a good job, and a few pennies saved, and I'm crazy about you, Margaret," Tom pleaded.

"It isn't that, Tom," she said, shaking her head. "I guess women are sort of primitive, after all. I'd—I'd like to know that the man I marry is brave enough to face anything and defy anything. I—think you're brave. I couldn't like you at all if I didn't. But I'm not sure, like my mother was about my father. He'd been a lake sailor for ten years, then, and it's nearly thirty years now that he's fought the lake and loved the lake and beaten it and been beaten. She knew he was fine and daring, because it takes all of a man to face the lake when it's angry. There's nothing more wonderful in a woman's eyes than a fighter, and there's nothing more wonderful to fight against than the lake. Don't you see, now?"

"I see that I'm just a poor throttle-pusher," said Tom unhappily, "and I haven't much chance to win you unless I drive old Forty-seven across to Canada in a howling blizzard."

She made a little gesture. "No; you don't understand. I—I think you're all that I said, Tom. I almost believe it. But—but I would like to know! To be sure! I'd like to be proud of the man I marry——"

"And there's not much to be proud of in a locomotive engineer," Tom commented grimly. "All right, Margaret; I'm sorry."

He had turned upon his heel and left

her, angry at the unreasonableness that made her want him, an engineer and the driver of the finest engine on the finest railroad in the world, to perform feats of daring on an inland sea for her own private satisfaction. At the same time a miserable ache pervaded all his being, because he had not exaggerated in telling of his love for her, and the loss of her hurt him terribly.

Now, standing upon the drearily lighted wharf with the stinging dry snow crystals rasping at his face, his anger was forgotten. Margaret was out there somewhere in the storm on board the steamer. Alone upon the huge expanse of water, the train ferryboat was fighting a losing battle. With the storm shrieking about her, the *Isaquan* was struggling desperately, crippled and battered, against the gale that had lifted up its voice and the lake that had reared up its head, and which had united to force her back with agonizing slowness to destruction.

CHAPTER II.

HIS CRAZY IDEA.

A MAN came out of a small building on the wharf, from which telephone wires radiated. His shoulders were sagging. Tom Garrick caught his words as he spoke in an utterly discouraged tone.

"I've tried," he said wearily, "every port along the lake shore. There's nothing! Nothing! Not a boat that could get out to her! And the last wireless from her says that the wind is rising, and she's losing ground faster now than she did before."

Tom rushed to him, seizing his arm. "Man!" he cried fiercely. "There must be something to do! There must be! The girl I'm going to marry is out there! We can't let her die while we stand by and do nothing!"

The other man spread out his hands. "I've got a brother on board," he said wearily. "Don't you think I want to help? There haven't been but two boats afloat on the lake this past three weeks. Now the *Isaquan's* alone. She was the only one that could buck the ice. The other one's here. We might take her out—I'm no sailor, but I'd risk it—but her boilers were removed day before yes-

terday to be replaced. And you can't run a steamer without steam."

His hand flicked to the side of the dock, and Tom Garrick saw the boat that might have meant safety to those on board the *Isaquan*, but for that fatal flaw. It was a train ferryboat like the *Isaquan*, though smaller. Where the *Isaquan* could carry forty cars, this one would accommodate barely fourteen—perhaps only ten. Backed up against the rail ends as if in readiness to take on another cargo of rolling stock to be ferried over to Canadian rails, this ship showed her uselessness in the dismantled roof over the car tunnel. A gaping hole had been made through which the boilers had been hoisted.

Tom Garrick stared at the vessel. A landsman himself, he did not see that the smaller ferryboat was unfit to cope with a storm that would have strained the *Isaquan* to her utmost, even when in the best of condition. He could not see that to put to sea in her in this storm and amid the floating ice that would batter her would be almost suicidal. He could only see in her a potential means of rescue.

Instinctively, his brain raced. The boilers would not be far away. Perhaps in an hour, or two hours— Then he groaned. Hours were precious, infinitely precious, and sober sense told him the thing would be impossible. No number of men, working however feverishly, could replace the bulky boilers and prepare her to make steam in a time to be counted other than in days. But here was a ship, a train ferryboat, the only boat afloat upon the whole lake except the *Isaquan*. And it was helpless for lack of steam! Nothing else, nothing but steam!

The woman, crouched against the freight shed, sobbed and the sounds reached Tom's ears. She was crying in a soft and hopeless fashion to herself, lost in her despair for some man upon the *Isaquan*. Yet she kept the child in her arms tightly tucked in against the storm. The old man on the edge of the dock turned his head for an instant. His face was as inscrutable as before, but tears glistened on his cheeks. The man with whom Tom had first spoken walked

slowly back and forth, his head bent down, his steps dragging.

Nothing but steam was needed to save Margaret and all the kin of these silent, despairing folk. In a moment of passionate rebellion, Tom thought of his own engine, sleek and black and utterly useless, standing supinely upon its polished steel rails. Steam was drifting in little tendrils from minor valves. There was steam, and useless. Here was only the lack of steam and tragedy.

Then, like some galvanic shock that went over his whole being, came clear-headedness. It had never been done before, but no matter. It might be suicide, but no matter. It might be rank insanity or sheer stupidity, but he had a notion in his brain. No matter what the source or what the result, it had to be tried.

He seized the arm of the man from the shed. He was almost incoherent from his desperate need for haste.

"Get steam hose!" Tom cried sharply. "A lot of it! Strong steam hose! Get it on that ship yonder! And get some men to help us! Quick!"

Then Tom sprinted down the street, careless of anything but speed. He ran like a madman with fiends at his heels, but a curious clear-headedness remained with him. He'd have to be sure about the flexible rail joint, and he'd have to remember about blocks for the wheels. The brakes wouldn't do. There might be some one on the wharf who knew how to steer. There had to be!

His engine loomed up before him, its headlight dimmed, purring contentedly to itself. Little wisps of steam curled from beside its monster drivers. There was the indescribable sound of a banked fire beneath its boiler.

He vaulted up and jerked open the fire-box door. Coogan, his fireman, poked out his head from where he slept upon the coal in the tender with innumerable rags for covering and warmth.

"What in blazes is the matter?" he demanded sleepily.

"The *Isaquan's* sinking," said Tom Garrick evenly. "I'm going to drive Forty-seven out to get her people. Margaret's on board."

Coogan blinked and sat up abruptly.

"Drive her out?" he said, startled. "Now may the gods of all the heathen look down upon us! You've gone crazy!"

"You'd better not come with me," said Tom briefly. "I can fire her myself."

Coogan stared at Tom. His face was set and grim, in the light from the fire box, but it was not the face of a crazy man. Coogan's expression was stupefied for an instant, and then he jumped up.

"Well," he said deliberately, "if there's any man living can drive an eighty-ton engine over a blamed fresh-water lake, it's Tom Garrick an' none other. If ye're bent on tryin' it, I'd better come wid ye. I can swim."

He seized a slice bar and joined Tom before the furnace.

"But, just what is it you're doing?" he demanded.

Tom told him, jerkily, in swift, concise sentences.

"Then," said Coogan, relieved, "'tis not insanity, 'tis merely suicide. Well, my insurance is paid up. Ye can step on her, Tom."

The long black engine began to move swiftly down the rails toward the lake front.

CHAPTER III.

INTO THE STORM.

A LONG, slender pencil of light stabbed futilely at the white chaos before it, coming from the *Isaquan* as she battled. Snowflakes, whirling insanely in the intolerable brightness in the few seconds before the dark water swallowed them, dissipated the searchlight rays before they could do more than disclose the terror of the scene. Mountainous seas came vengefully to attack the ship, bearing monster masses of ice to hurl upon her, to batter in her steel sides, to crush her beneath their weight.

Already the *Isaquan* was sheathed in an icy coating that weighed her down. Already she floated soggily. A gathering weight of glistening black lake water surged here and there in her lower depths as she plunged and rose while she fought the storm.

One propeller was useless. A colossal ice pan had crumpled it into twisted metal. She fought gamely but despairingly with the other, aware that at any

moment that might go, too. The wind shrieked triumphantly through what rigging she possessed. The thick black smoke from her funnel was whipped into a thin dark haze by the gale that sped on past, to warn the rocks of the prey that was coming.

The *Isaquan* was beaten, but she would go down fighting. The name of her captain was a guarantee of that. His shoulders above the bridge railing were incrustated masses of ice. His straggly gray beard was frozen to his chin, but he watched grimly as the seas assailed his ship. Now and then he belloyed to the quartermaster at the wheel in the pilot house. Once he slapped his arm across his chest, to get the blood to circulating again.

A figure struggled to him along the bridge, clutching the railing tightly. It was his daughter, Margaret. She stood the freezing blast as a sailor's daughter should, and she met his eyes without fear.

"It looks bad, dad!" she cried.

He slipped his arm about her, to steady her. "I'm thinking we're finished, Margie," he roared in return, above the shrill, weird sound of the wind and sea. "It looks like the lake's got us, but we'll go down fighting. I'm sorry I let you come."

She shook her head and managed to smile at him. There was no fear in her face, but there was wistfulness in her smile. Aware that her life could be measured in hours, she found herself thinking with an odd contrition of Tom Garrick.

Tom was thinking of her with no contrition at all, because he was thinking of her with frenzied anxiety. He was working like a madman. The snowflakes were falling in a stilly silence where he bent over the rail joint that connected the dock with the partly dismantled train ferryboat. The huge locomotive waited incuriously, puffing steam from beside its drivers not a dozen yards from where Tom worked with frantic haste.

The joint slipped into place abruptly and glistening steel rails stretched unbroken from the locomotive onto the ferryboat and deep into the ship's dark car tunnel.

Tom Garrick leaped up. His eyes blazing with fierce resolution, yet his hand on the throttle moving with delicate inch, the black monster crept forward. The headlight flared suddenly to its full brilliance, to light the way. Inch by inch, the black monster crept forward, lurched as it reached the rail joint, lurched still more as its weight came upon the steamer's stern, and then went more swiftly into the tunnel. It stopped with its smokestack directly beneath the gaping hole in the upper decking, where the boilers had been hoisted out. Pandemonium broke loose in there, then. The screech of its whistle, confined and reechoed, burst loose in a horrific bellow. Tom came running back.

"Done!" he panted. "Chock her wheels, Coogan. I'll get this joint loose."

He strained at the joint again. Men came rushing to him. The man of the shed cried out a question.

"This boat has no boilers," snapped Tom. "My engine has them. Give me steam hose to connect my boiler with the steamer's engines and I'll run her out to the *Isaquan*!"

There was silence for an instant, then came gasps and ejaculations from those who heard. Tom found other men working suddenly beside him, men who had spoken not at all, but who were desperately and instantly intent upon aiding him. The dock keeper rushed away, to return a moment later, aided by volunteers, staggering under the weight of several heavy lengths of steam hose. Instantly, Tom left the joint to the others and ran forward, while the hose was uncoiled. He dived into the cab for a wrench, remembered to turn off a steam valve, and began to work frantically.

At last the steam hose was slipped upon the pipe. Coogan improvised a lashing to hold it fast. Clamps of wire and clamps of metal, wrappings and rewrappings of cord stretched taut by the weight of men pulling upon it, and the hose was fast. Tom was down in the engineroom then, stumbling his way by matches to an understanding of the steam lines of the machinery there. The other end of the steam hose would shortly be carried down to him.

Tom Garrick's scheme was composed

of almost equal parts of insanity and common sense. Had the locomotive been any but the largest, its boilers would have been hopelessly inadequate to supply the steamer's engines with power. Had the ferry been the size of the *Isaquan*, no one locomotive, however gigantic, could have furnished sufficient steam. But when Coogan sent the steam flowing through the hose, that flexible pipe distended and uncoiled itself strangely, and somewhere in the steamer's vitals a soft purring set up.

Abruptly, electric lights began to glow. Tom surveyed the engine with anxious eyes. He spent precious minutes grasping its similarities and differences from that of the locomotive. Then he seized a rod, heaved upon it—and the engines stirred. A shudder went through the ship. Then a rhythmic throbbing set up, and she strained mightily at her moorings.

There was a mad scramble on deck, of men to remain and men to leave her. One man thrust out a hastily scribbled slip of paper to a figure on the dock.

"If we don't get back," he said almost apologetically, "see that this is delivered. My son's out there."

Some one gently held back a woman who would have gone. Some one came hastening lest he be left. It was the man to whom Tom had first spoken. Some one else laughed fiercely and flung himself at the restraining cables. They parted beneath blows of an ax. Then the engineroom bells jangled crazily and without signal or sign, the train ferryboat lurched out of her slip and began to move down the lane of crushed ice and open water that the *Isaquan* had left.

CHAPTER IV.

DEFIANCE OF THE LAKE.

SURELY no voyage of rescue or daring was begun with less premeditation. The train ferryboat that plunged out into the heart of the lake, bound for the storm that had beaten a vastly larger and better-found ship, was totally unfitted for the voyage. Its power came from a colossus of polished black that rested upon the rails upon its deck, glaring through a single eye at the confines of its

prison. An old man had climbed painfully to its pilot house and held the wheel. The fireman of a railroad engine had assumed autocratic charge of the engines. Its captain was a locomotive engineer.

Sparks and black smoke poured upward from a hole in the upper-deck planking. Without riding lights, without signal lights, without map or course or navigator, the train ferryboat went out into the jaws of death, while her crew recognized without emotion that they had doomed themselves. Each man, therefore, put a certain reckless desperation into the performance of his self-imposed tasks.

Something watched over them in the hours that followed. Very probably it was the providence that looks after drunken men and fools. They struck the storm and wallowed into its midst. By that time, the locomotive was blocked and triply bound fast by cables. They found the searchlight and turned on its unbearable glare, to light the way before them. They saw chaos and destruction ahead, and they sent the ancient ship into the teeth of the gale's fierce blast. And she floated and moved.

Tom Garrick, in the pilot house, set a younger and stronger man to help the old man at the wheel.

"We've got to hold her like this," the old man told him. "I was a lake captain until I got too old. I know the Needles. We'll hit them in an hour more. The *Isaquan* will be somewhere near."

The wind roared above them, carrying snow crystals to blind them. The seas rumbled and hissed at them, and from the midst of the waters came cannonlike reports and shrill screams as ice pans jostled and ground against each other.

Fortunately, the steamer was light. It had only the locomotive for cargo and that made her list but a little—and that list was toward the side from which the wind blew. The force of the gale strove to heel her in one direction, and the weight of the engine neatly counteracted it. It was upon an even keel, then, that she plunged through the night.

So far, too, she had not met the worst of what she must undergo. She was not

bucking the gale, but fleeing quartering across it. So far the gale helped her, rather than hindered. Already, however, her whole hull glistened brightly from a coating of ice, and she was scarred and battered from the pounding she was receiving. There were enough forces acting against her to offset the temporary kindness of fate.

Six men formed her crew, Tom Garrick, and Coogan, and only four others. Two men were in the pilot house. Two struggled madly to feed the insatiable fire box of the locomotive. Two watched over the engines and recklessly gave them oil in the pious hope that they would run until their work was done. After that, they might fall to scrap iron without reproach.

All in all, however, the smaller train ferryboat wallowed crazily through the gale without injury or peril enough to quicken the pulses of her stoically desperate crew. They knew that their errand had one chance in a thousand of success, and they knew that failure would add their lives to the toll of that night's storm. They were prepared for such an outcome, however, and were as far from panic as they were removed from despair while their ship, unburdened, ran on through the night with the gale almost astern.

On the *Isaquan* there was no such fierce indifference. The *Isaquan* was low in the water, now, and rising soggily to meet the attacks of the waves. Little by little, she was foundering. Captain Ryan even then would have denied it. The *Isaquan's* powerful pumps could have combated the leaks, if steam could have been spared for them.

It was now a question of taking steam from the one boiler in commission—and hastening the time when the hungry rocks would claw her—or of fighting on doggedly while the boat sank lower and lower, as water poured in unchecked. Captain Ryan had chosen the latter course. She would strike the rocks soon enough, in any event, and when she struck they would die—frozen, if not drowned, in the welter of ice and icy water. It was better to fight on to the last as befitted a man and a lake sailor.

Ryan did not see the mad ship that

Tom Garrick captained until long after Tom had seen him. For half an hour, now, they had hooded the searchlight at five-minute intervals and searched the darkened horizon for traces of light. They had seen a dim whitish glow, far away, and known it for the *Isaquan*. Their course was driving them past it. They had to come about nearly into the teeth of the gale to reach her, and in coming about they nearly ended their voyage.

There were three men in the pilot house then. One had come up from the engineroom to relieve those who stoked the locomotive boiler. The relieved fireman seized the wheel with Tom and the old lake captain. The old man's eyes searched the waves, but they were no longer as keen as they once had been.

"Heave 'er over!" he shrilled. "Hard aport! Hard over! Hard over!"

The wheel spun beneath their hands, then bucked and swirled. The ship began to turn reluctantly. The wheel fought the two men who held it, and the muscles stood out like cords upon Tom's back as he clung desperately to the jumping spokes. Into the very trough of the waves she came. Her plunging stopped and the ship wallowed wildly, almost upon her beam ends. For an instant Tom Garrick gazed straight down into hungry black water that reached up eager arms for him. Then there was a terrific, titanic crash.

Thunderous blows were commonplace, but now came the sound of splintering wood and tortured metal. A vast mass of ice had been flung upon the upper deck by a monster wave that had seized its moment. The roof of the car tunnel and a part of the bows were crushed to matchwood by the impact. Then, staggering, the ship recovered. Reluctantly, the huge ice pan slid overboard in fragments, while lake water ran astern knee-deep about the locomotive.

Slowly, they gathered way again and surged forward toward the plunging, despairing *Isaquan*. It was a harder fight, now, and a deadlier storm they had to battle with. Curiously enough, however, the great breach in the ship's upper works gave opportunity for a greater defiance. The single glaring eye of the black loco-

motive shot its beam outward fiercely. Through the splintered wood and broken plates, the headlight beam played angrily upon the waves, as Forty-seven, chained to her rails and with water hub-deep about her drivers, glared her defiance of the lake and the storm.

So the battered ferry fought her way to the *Isaquan*.

CHAPTER V.

CHALLENGE TO THE STORM.

THE *Isaquan* was low in the water, as those on the rescue ship saw in the white beam of their searchlight. She rose weakly to continue her struggle. Her bow went down, down, down, until her very anchor chains were submerged. She hung there for a heartbreaking length of time and then lifted wearily, pouring tons of water and many tons of ice from her decks. Thick black smoke came from her funnel, to be whipped away to nothingness by the gale. Sheathed in ice, incased in ice, half waterlogged and crippled, she was weakening steadily.

Silhouetted in a circle of blazing light with raging darkness all about her, it was plain to be seen that the *Isaquan* was near her end. Even above the gale there could be heard a wild screaming from the blackness at her stern. The storm was piling up its fury on the rocks it was thrusting the *Isaquan* upon. The seas bellowed against the jagged pinnacles, and the ice pans gave forth unearthly sounds as they were crashed and ground to fragments between the hammer of the gale and the anvil of the rocks.

The *Isaquan* was going down, slowly but none the less with certitude. Figures appeared upon her decks, clinging desperately to the railings where they had not been swept away, to gaze at the source of the brilliant glare that enveloped them. Some of them waved wildly. Some gazed at the sea between the two vessels and found a strange new despair come to them. To die without hope of rescue was one thing. To die with safety at hand was another, and no man could see any hope of passing a line from one vessel to the other.

Captain Ryan, on the bridge of the

Isaquan, debated and shook his head. The two vessels dare not approach close enough to toss a rope from one to the other. Flung about by the waves as they were, a near approach would mean that they would be crashed together and their hulls crushed like eggshells. Ryan did not even consider using a small boat. In that maelstrom of angry sea and angrier ice fragments a lifeboat would be rent and torn and sucked down in an instant.

Margaret seized his arm. The wind tore her words from her lips and cast them astern into the shrieking void. She drew her head close and cried out into his ear. Dubiously, Captain Ryan shook his head again, but moved aft to give the orders that would carry out her suggestion.

Tom Garrick saw the ice-covered figure move toward the stern, and he saw a figure whose skirts were stretched out by the gale. Margaret lifted her arm in salute to the new-come vessel—and disappeared as a lurch of the smaller ship sent the searchlight beam stabbing futilely toward the sky.

They saw men working at the stern of the *Isaquan*, and then suddenly there was a flaring torch on the waves behind her. It drifted farther and farther to the rear.

The old lake captain had seemed to sink within himself as the hopelessness of any attempt at rescue had seemed apparent. Now he stared at the flaming torch with wrinkled brows, and his seamed old face was haggard.

"They're tryin' something," he quavered uncertainly, "but I don't know what 'tis."

"They want to get us a line," snapped Tom suddenly. "They've buoyed the end and chucked it over."

The older man brightened. "Yep. That's it! One of them self-lighting life rafts. We got to pick that line up, somehow. I'll take this boat around to th' *Isaquan's* stern."

He rang the engineroom telegraph, but the throbbing of the engines remained unchanged. Coogan, down below, knew nothing of such weird matters as the maritime code of bells for engineers. It took the speaking tube and a roared order

to make him understand. Then the engines slackened speed, and the train ferryboat was driven slowly backward by the storm. Ten minutes later, her engines fought sturdily again while she bore to the left.

The torch blazed wildly in the midst of the inferno of spume and ice. No ordinary flare would have lived in such a smother; but this was a torch of metallic potassium such as all large steamships carry these days, which ignites by chemical action with water and which burns the more violently as the sea struggles to put it out. Designed for use at night, it is attached to a life raft and flung overboard should any one fall into the sea. The swimmer is guided to it by the light, and the rescuing lifeboats find it by the same means.

Tossed by the maddened waves, and buffeted by the ice fragments that shared its place, the light drew nearer and nearer as the small ship approached the *Isaquan*. They could see, for an instant, the serpentine small line attached to it. The life raft danced erratically and was flung hither and thither so that it seemed a sheer impossibility to fish it up by any ordinary means. A boat could not have gone for it, had there been men to try it.

Tom Garrick, sheer flaming resolution upon his face, tore off his shoes and jumper and knotted a rope about his waist. There was one man to help him.

"Maybe I'll get it," he said briefly. "If I do, haul in."

He searched the water beneath him, and leaped from the ferryboat's stern.

Cold as of liquid air or hydrogen enveloped him, cold so intense that it burned like fire. A sharp edge of ice struck his chest an excruciating blow, and the terrible chill of the water pierced inward toward his bones. He swam, and could never afterward tell how it was that he swam. He was enveloped in water that was only partly water. Most of it was that terrible slush that was the remains of the ice pans' grinding. His arms, flailing, bruised themselves upon lumps of ice. His legs were rasped and wrenched by ineffective blows upon larger masses of frozen water.

The intense cold weighed down his limbs until they felt like lead. It was

an infinite exertion to move a muscle. He was in an agony past recounting, yet he swam. Had his own life only been at stake, it would have been simpler and vastly more desirable to let himself sink, but he struggled on blindly toward the glow that was ever before him.

It was a miracle that he reached the life raft. It was still more of a miracle that he managed to bind one of its dangling ropes to the rope about his waist. Then he suffered dumbly as he felt the line about him tighten intolerably. The waves buffeted him. The ice beat at him cruelly. After a long time he felt himself dangling, then swung against something hard and bruising in mid-air. Then he was hoisted over the rail.

It was Coogan who thought of him. The others were mercilessly intent upon their errand of mercy. Coogan it was who carried Tom forward half conscious and dumped him unceremoniously upon the floor plates of the engine cab, where the warmth would bring back some semblance of life to him. But even Coogan left him lying there while he fed the ravening, devouring flames within the fire box.

The others hauled in the fragile line. After what seemed a century a heavy, clumsy cable came up out of the water and was made fast with feverish haste. Then, with the same desperate intentness, the few men upon the half-wrecked train ferryboat scattered to their tasks again. They stoked the locomotive until flames roared upward from its smoke-stack. They moved among the engines. They stood, two of them, up in the pilot house and held the wheel against the battering of the seas until the cable tightened behind them. The longest and most desperate part of the battle then began.

With her single engine, the *Isaquan* could not combat the storm. With inadequate power, the smaller train ferryboat could not tow the *Isaquan*. Added strength was given to the larger ship by the desperate pulling of the lesser vessel, however, and that difference was enough—though barely enough—to make the difference between defeat and victory. The struggle went on for hours, before

they knew whether they were winning or losing.

Two steamers, the one with her upper works crushed in and the other already water-logged and half sinking, fought against oblivion in the midst of whirling chaos. Behind them was the tumult of the hungry rocks, screaming for them to come and be devoured. Before them was all the vengeful fury of the lake and the storm that saw their prey being snatched from them.

From the wreckage atop the foremost ship a glaring eye peered forth. The headlight of a chained locomotive blazed defiance. Its bell clanged erratically with the plunging of the vessel, singing a strange saga of triumph. Once its whistle shrilled a wild and bellowing challenge to the storm.

CHAPTER VI.

AT THE DOCK.

THE shores of the lake were black with people when the two steamers came in triumphantly through the partly frozen lane the *Isaquan* had made through the ice only the day before. Behind them were the dark clouds of the storm they had cheated and defeated. The foremost of the ships was a wreck. Above the water line she was a mass of splintered timbers and crushed planking, mingled in inextricable confusion.

Her pilot house leaned crazily at an angle, and black smoke was coming from an indeterminate spot amidships, together with weird, joyful shrieks and grunts from a whistle such as has never been built upon a ship since time began. The *Isaquan* was in better condition. Battered she was, and sheathed in ice, but she floated high in the water now, since steam could be spared for her pumps, and her single remaining propeller thrashed the water with scornful violence.

The two ships docked—the *Isaquan* neatly, and the other ship with infinite clumsiness. From the *Isaquan* men rushed to the other ship, to wring hands in gratitude and honest admiration. From the smaller boat scarecrows tottered ashore, men worn out and utterly spent by what they had undergone. Six men had navigated the rescue ship from

first to last, and they had burned themselves out in the effort.

Captain Ryan of the *Isaquan* was among the first ashore and with him was his daughter, Margaret. They found Coogan holding up a figure with its arm in an improvised sling, as together the two men made their way to the dock.

"Who's the captain of this ship?" demanded Captain Ryan. "I want to tell him that was the nerviest thing I've ever seen——"

"This is him," said Coogan, and yawned uncontrollably. "He's a bit th' worse for wear, but 'tis hard to go swimmin' in th' lake in th' middle of last night's storm an' not show some signs av it."

Coogan grinned sleepily at them. His eyes were sunk in his head from fatigue. The figure on his arm lifted its head.

Margaret uttered a cry, and ran to him.

"Tom! Tom! Dad, it's Tom Garrick!"

Weeping and laughing all at once, she clung to Tom. Her father pushed Coogan aside and took his place in supporting the engineer.

"Tom, my boy," Captain Ryan said firmly, "it's a new dad you've got now! Here, lean on me. Margaret's got rid of her silly notions, and if you'll brace up we'll have the biggest wedding the Lakes have ever seen."

"It was Tom!" repeated Margaret, her eyes bright with tears. "Oh, dad, it was Tom who came out after us!"

Coogan, reeling from weariness, grinned and spoke up. "Your surprise," he told her, "is unaccountable. Who else but Tom Garrick would be thinking of doing life-saving at sea wid a Pacific type locomotive? I suppose ye'll be looking after him. When he wakes, do ye tell him I'm getting some sleep. An' tell him, that if there's a wedding he'll have to fight me if any but me is best man."

Stumbling, he started away, to be seized and carried off to bed. Margaret Ryan and her father led Tom to a taxicab and took him to their home.

When Tom opened his eyes, Margaret was sitting on a chair near by. He struggled and sat up, to the accompaniment of an infinite number of aches. The lake had used him cruelly.

"Are you strong enough to sit up, Tom?" she asked anxiously. "If you aren't, please don't. Please!"

Tom put his hand to his head, and then gazed at her with great satisfaction. "Margaret," he said after a time, "you're the most restful sight my eyes ever looked at. And I thought, only yesterday, that I mightn't have the chance to see you ever again."

She flushed, and gave him her hand. "You'll—you'll have me to look at always, if you want me, Tom," she said bravely. "After—after what I said yesterday, you might be angry."

Tom Garrick proved then, once and for all, that he was strong enough to sit up. He was sitting up, in fact, when Captain Ryan came softly into the room. Margaret's father stared at the tableau before him, then his eyes twinkled, and he beamed.

"I've news for you, Tom," he said contentedly. "The steamship company—which is the same as your railroad—has voted you five thousand dollars in gold for that idea of yours and for saving the *Isaquan*." He coughed. "That'll furnish a home nicely, won't it?"

"It will," said Tom happily.

"And Margaret told me this morning she was going to marry you the minute you asked her—though maybe she's told you that, by now."

"I guessed it," admitted Tom, tightening his arm about her.

"And the crew of the *Isaquan*," went on Captain Ryan, chuckling, "has taken up a subscription and is going to buy you a pair of gold-mounted binoculars to hang up in your engine cab. They mayn't be useful, but they'll be ornamental enough. What do you say, Tom?"

"I'll say," said Tom, and he looked sidewise at Margaret, "that this is the most wonderful world I ever lived in. How about it, Margaret?"

Margaret, smiling at him and with her eyes shining, agreed that it was.

Did you like this story, or did you not? If you liked it, please let us know why in a letter, briefly worded. If you did not like it, let us know that and why. And while you are about it, comment on any other story in this number, or give us your opinion of the number as a whole. The editors will appreciate any letter you may send.



HIS WEAKNESS

By Key Daniels

LIKE most every other human
I have many tasks to do,
Yet for some uncanny reason
I don't seem to put them through;
There are borrowed books to take back,
There are social calls to pay,
But I put off till to-morrow
What I ought to do to-day.

Now the kitchen range needs fixing,
I should paint the garden fence,
But it seems I always do things
In what's called the future tense;
Though my dear wife tries to change me
With cajoling and with tact,
I've a weakness for to-morrow—
I admit the shameful fact!

I will emulate the beaver,
When to-morrow rings the bell,
Though I know that good intentions
Pave the road that goes to hell;
I'll get busy with a vengeance
And I'll make things fairly hum,
But you know as well as I do
That to-morrows never come!

Why Pass the Puck?



(COMPLETE IN THIS ISSUE)

CHAPTER I.

IT'S A SPEEDY GAME!



IF it had not been for Edna Turner, Lieutenant Arthur Maynard would never have played ice hockey. The coast-guard cutter *Kodiak* had remained in Seattle one winter after a tough season in the arctic, bucking ice, ferrying Eskimos and missionaries about, and doing the thousand and one things a coast-guard ship is required to do in arctic waters.

Edna Turner had visited the cutter with mutual friends. As a brother officer put it frankly, "One look at the girl and old Art took the count." Maynard was not so old, either, being twenty-eight, and battling the elements had not hurt his constitution in the slightest. He had a rugged, seafaring look about him that was decidedly appealing.

Edna was a hockey fan of the first water. It was her belief that hockey, whether played or merely observed, could bring a color to a girl's cheeks that no other sport or no drug store could ever hope to duplicate. Edna's cheeks proved it. As Maynard showed her about the cutter she mentioned the subject of hockey.

"Do you like it, Mr. Maynard?" she asked.

"Never saw a game in my life. You

see, I'm a West-coast product, and we have mighty little ice skating out here. Around Seattle the lakes sometimes freeze for a few days once or twice a winter, but not always. No ice, no skating, and therefore no hockey."

"And you never saw a game in your life?" she queried in amazement. "Oh, you poor boy!"

At that moment Maynard would have become interested in sewing if it meant association with her. Hockey interested him not at all, but the girl did. "Perhaps you will be good enough to accompany me to the game at the Arena some night and explain the fine points of the game," he suggested.

Five minutes of watching the play was sufficient to capture Maynard. "Miss Turner, I want to get into that game!" he cried. Her reply was drowned in an enthusiastic "Wow!" as one side scored. "Say, that was done neatly—knocked the ball for a goal!"

"The puck!" she corrected.

"And teamwork!" he exclaimed. "I have never seen anything to equal it. No one seems to care who gets the glory, just so the team wins. And it's fast!" he remarked after a few minutes more of keen observation. "Faster than anything I have ever seen. Those chaps split their seconds when they do their thinking."

It was the following morning that

Edna Turner assisted Maynard in the selection of skates, little dreaming what she was starting. Later, they spent an afternoon at the Arena, the girl moving swiftly over the ice with ease and grace little short of maddening, the man awkwardly attempting the first steps, his jaws set grimly.

Given a pretty girl, a handsome man, and the background of their mutual love of a clean, fast sport, and Dan Cupid should have been able to finish the job without waste of arrows, but somehow friendship ripened swiftly, and romance was tardy. Not until the *Kodiak* headed northward in late spring did either realize their emotions were deeper than mere friendship.

The custodian of the cutter's athletic fund, Lieutenant Shannon, sought and found Maynard aft, staring moodily over the rail. Shannon was moved to horrible poetry:

"He stood on the deck at midday,
Gazing wistfully o'er the stern,
The pangs of love gnawed at his heart,
But he didn't give a darn!"

Maynard grinned. "Shut up! I had one whale of a good time last winter," he said.

"I didn't come to talk about that. Say, that hockey stuff came aboard about a half hour before we sailed, and it came C. O. D. Ye gods, man, it hit the athletic fund a terrible wallop! What's the big idea?"

"The ship has a hockey team, Shannon. We organized it three weeks ago, picked up some old equipment at the Arena, and have been practicing ever since. I figured we might practice a little while waiting for the floes to shift and let us onto Point Barrow. You know we have to stand by weeks sometimes, waiting for the ice to shift."

"Sure, but with a ball team we can play other crowds and have a show to win, but a hockey team—Suffering Malemutes, who'll play us? No other ships have them; we can't practice regularly, because while any old piece of beach is good enough to play ball on when the tide is out, you've got to have ice for hockey."

"Exactly," said Maynard, sticking to his guns; "but I'm sold on hockey, and so

is my team. Next winter we'll practice a bit at the Arena, then pick up a game or two."

"And get beautifully walloped!"

"Doubtless, but think of the fun we'll have! We might win occasionally. If we do, it'll give the coast guard and the navy something to talk about, because a ship's hockey team is unusual; it is badly handicapped in the matter of practice. We've nothing to lose and everything to gain."

"You're the most optimistic cuss in the world, Maynard, to expect to win a game—one game—against even a dub team with what amounts to one night's practice, but I'm for you. How do you play the game? I was raised in Los Angeles."

"I'll dig you up a rule book, but first you'll have to learn to skate. In fact all of our second team, that is to furnish the opposition for the first, has to learn to skate yet."

"Maynard, you are overlooking a chance to make some money," Shannon remarked with a grin. "You should have brought along some banana plants. With your faith, you could sell the Eskimos on the idea of raising bananas in the winter instead of holing in for six months. Well, so long, duty calls me. Don't moon too much about the little girl in Seattle. We'll be back in the fall, and you can see her then. She looked to me like a girl who'd be true to a sailor!" Shannon hurried away before Maynard could find something to throw at him.

CHAPTER II.

READ 'EM AND LAUGH.

SAM RAMSEY handed a sheaf of telegrams to his partner, Overholt. "Read 'em," said Ramsey, "then tell me I'm crazy. If anybody's bugs it is those people on the West coast; they're crazy about ice hockey. It's only been dished up to them the last few years, and they've fallen hard for it. They even have a league out there; Seattle, Victoria, and Vancouver, I think it is, have rinks and play a regular schedule. My crowd of barnstorming All-Stars should net some real money. Nor is that all! When the local enthusiasts get real het up we should clean up big on the bets. You know—

lose a game or two, then cover all bets and win. It can be done so it won't look raw."

Overholt stopped his reading. "You mean to tell me, Sam, that there's one of your All-Stars who'll throw a game for money?"

"No; and they'd kill me if I mentioned it to them, which I won't. Remember this! I'm manager, and I'm also a good player, and I intend to play."

"I see; and you'll do the dirty work, eh, at the right time?"

"Exactly! This sport has been kept free of that sort of thing so far, so it should be easy."

Overholt was reading the telegrams. "Say, what do you make of this? I never heard of a war vessel sporting an ice-hockey team, though I suppose anything is possible, but it's unusual on the West coast. This coast-guard ship *Kodiak* wants a game!"

"I accepted that challenge so quick it should make their heads swim," remarked Ramsey. "This fellow Maynard is the man I'm gunning for. My fiancée, Edna Turner, met him a couple of winters ago. She's hockey crazy, and it was during a game last winter that I met her—wonderful girl. Well she and Maynard were never engaged, but they did go together the whole winter, and it was through her Maynard became interested in hockey."

Ramsey was silent a moment, then he continued. "Women are strange creatures. This fellow Maynard dropped her cold. He wrote her from Juneau, from *Kodiak*, and Nome, then quit; and yet she's always raving to me about his clean sportsmanship and all that rot. I got rather fed up on the navy crowd, thanks to her, and it's going to cost 'em one neat trimming, and the *Kodiak's* team is going to be the one that's swamped."

"Go ahead; I'm interested if not wholly approving," said Overholt.

"Service men are unusual. A sort of unit loyalty is created by frequent athletic contests. If you want to see a crowd of howling maniacs just watch a football or baseball game between ships. They go down the line for their outfits to the limit."

"I see. We play a game or two around Seattle and lose. That gets the navy

crowd all hopped up, and they'll back even a coast-guard cutter to take our measure. We cover all bets on the quiet and clean up with a bang!"

"You've said it as well as I could," agreed Ramsey.

"Then count me out!"

"What!"

"Count me out!"

"Afraid we'll lose?" Ramsey smiled. "There's no chance of it. I've checked up on the *Kodiak*. She's been on the go all summer, no chance to practice. Since coming to Seattle, the Arena didn't open until around November, and they haven't had much chance to practice on account of the Seattle hockey team and several local organizations using the ice. The *Kodiak* team has had to take what was left. My agent tells me they haven't practiced more than a night or two."

"I'm not afraid of anything, Ramsey," said Overholt slowly. "I played baseball and football at college, and I played clean; then I rowed on the varsity eight, and I rowed clean. I've boxed a bit and shot square, and if I go into the commercial angle of sport, I'm going to be clean from start to finish. Count me out!"

"Oh, well, if you feel that way about it I'll call it off; keep out of the games if you say so." Ramsey was almost pleading.

"No; I've got a new line on you; that's all. No hard feelings and you can have my share of the business for just what I put into it."

"Suppose you'll wire the *Kodiak* and tip 'em off!" Ramsey was sneering now.

"No; I don't think I shall. I rather feel you're riding to a fall. I'm going to let you ride and hope you'll get wise to yourself before you crash. You used to shoot square at college."

"Yeah; but I've learned a lot since I left the dear old college, Overholt. Money talks these days!" The abrupt termination of the partnership left Ramsey in a thoughtful mood. "I can't see how I can lose," he mused; "there's nothing I can lose, because it's unthinkable that a scrub coast-guard cutter team can beat my All-Stars."

Ramsey sent a tentative program to his Seattle agent. It called for three games

to be played at the Arena, two with local organizations and the third and last with the *Kodiak* team.

Two days later the *Kodiak's* hockey team read an item in the sport column of the evening paper with interest.

Ramsey's All-Stars is a team composed of some of the best professional players in the game. It is expected, however, the local teams will furnish the All-Stars with some stiff competition, and local fans may well look forward to three exciting evenings. The burning question in the minds of local fans is, how can the *Kodiak* team, with only one night's practice behind them, expect to hold their own against the All-Stars? Navy and coast-guard circles smile and hint of the answer three weeks hence.

In his room, Maynard read the item and smiled. "That's luck indeed," he informed Shannon. "I expected the All-Star crowd to turn us down cold as not being worthy of their notice. That fellow Ramsey must be a decent chap after all."

"Even if he is engaged to Miss Edna Turner, eh?" asked Shannon. "Oh, you didn't know it? I'm sorry I spoke, old man, but I came across it yesterday in an old paper I was looking over. Seems the engagement was announced shortly before he went East. She's in California, so will miss the excitement, I suppose."

"Not if I know her, she won't," replied Maynard. To himself he added, "And I thought I knew her—once."

CHAPTER III.

GETTING A NEW ANGLE.

THE Ramsey All-Stars swept along the border with varying success, playing Canadian and American teams. If the stars wondered at times when they lost games, they did not express that wonder aloud. Ramsey played brilliantly at moments, sometimes he blundered. A "spotty" player, they called him, but he was making money for them, and their percentage of the gate was larger than they had expected.

Ramsey played with the team during the two Seattle games, played with his eyes on the spectators at times—and the All-Stars lost. It was cleverly done, and the oldest player on his team did not detect it. When he faced them in the

dressing room his glumness was convincing enough. "I've blundered twice, boys, and that's enough!" he informed them. "When we play the *Kodiak* team I'll be sitting with the substitutes, where I belong. Maybe, with me out, you can win."

They denied that he had lost the games. "Just some tough breaks," one of them insisted, "that are liable to happen any time." Yet, inwardly, each member of the team was well pleased with Ramsey's decision.

The day before the game was a busy one for Ramsey. His Western agent called early that morning.

"To-morrow night will be a tough one for the navy," the agent said genially. "The financial crash will be a small-sized Wall Street panic. Most of the *Kodiak* hockey team watched your playing during the two Seattle games, not to mention a thousand or so other bluejackets. Man! Man! They've covered every cent we have put up and are now offering odds with no takers. Can't you rake up another thousand?"

"I've put down everything I have," replied Ramsey, "and even soaked my diamond ring and pin. My fiancée arrives this morning, and I've kept out just enough to entertain her." He rubbed his hands gleefully together. "This has got everything beat for quick turnover, boy. In twenty-four hours we'll be vulgarly wealthy. Have you picked up any information on the other team?"

"Not much! I've straightened out that one-night's-practice rumor. It seems they had a night's practice up in the arctic somewhere, before coming down here. Since then they haven't played much together. They're going to take a light work-out this evening, and I expect to be on hand!"

"Here, too!" agreed Ramsey. "Now you'll have to excuse me; the steamer is docking."

Edna Turner, as radiant as ever, was one of the first down the gangplank. "We are late!" she exclaimed. "Engine trouble, they told me it was. I have been frantic for fear it would get worse, and I'd miss the game. I hear you lost two of them?"

Ramsey was in such fine humor that he

made a mistake. "Well, it looks as if we lost them," he said, "and it will go down in history as dope badly upset, for we were doped to win. However, sometimes you win when you lose. We're going to win to-night!"

Other friends arrived and interrupted their talk, but for the rest of the day Edna had moments of thoughtfulness.

Together they watched the *Kodiak* team work-out that evening, playing against the cutter's scrubs. It was difficult for the casual observer to tell which was the first team. Both teams played well and were evenly matched.

After the work-out, which had preceded a regular skating night, everybody used the ice. Maynard, swinging along nicely, came face to face with a familiar figure. At first the atmosphere was as cold as ice, then a small voice whispered to the girl, "You were good friends, once!" The man thought, "True; she chucked you overboard in a rather un-sportsmanlike manner, but the decent thing to do is to wish her well." They smiled at the same second and stopped to speak.

Maynard had an uneasy moment when his eyes caught the gleam of the engagement ring she was wearing, but the smile on his face belied his feelings.

"Your team is wonderful!" she said frankly.

"It's all your fault," he told her. "You took me to my first ice-hockey game. Shannon read of your engagement in the paper—an old one—and it was my first news, otherwise I would have written. I wish you all the happiness you are entitled to, and that's a lot."

Edna looked at him sharply, her lips parted to question him. At that second Ramsey skated over and claimed her, nodding briefly to Maynard.

"Hang that ring!" Maynard muttered. "It makes me feel uncomfortable. Oh, well! Wonder how long it takes a fellow to forget—if ever."

CHAPTER IV.

JUMPING AT CONCLUSIONS.

TO-MORROW we'll look over a number of interesting houses, Edna!" said Ramsey, expecting the thoughtful girl to smile. "Why so serious?" he

asked testily, a moment later. "Seeing an old sweetheart make you sad? It shouldn't! I'm surprised you even spoke to him, after the way he dropped you."

Ramsey had said the wrong thing at the right time. The girl spoke evenly.

"I don't like something you said yesterday, about when you lose you sometimes win. I can understand how that might be possible, such as finding out who your real friends were when the rest were cheering the victor, but in this instance——"

"Well it happened that we lost two games here," Ramsey interrupted, "and that gave the navy the idea they could make it three. They're backing the *Kodiak* team accordingly. Well, if we win, we'll win a lot, because we are covering their money."

"Rather clever!" she exclaimed. "By purposely dropping two games they jumped at a very foolish conclusion—that they could win."

"Exactly! It's an old game, but can be worked successfully about once in so often. Everything to win and nothing to lose."

"No!" she said. "Everything to lose and nothing to win, except money."

"That's what makes the world go around," Ramsey remarked lightly. "You don't lose much else when you win money."

"You lose everything," she whispered. "Oh, can't you see it is crooked? I hate it all!"

"I'll see you to-morrow, Edna, when you are yourself," he said bluntly.

"I never was more myself than now!" She half took the ring from her finger, then thrust it back on. She hoped that she had not misjudged him. She came to a decision about him that afternoon, however.

That evening a slim figure in furs was waiting for Maynard just before the team went on the ice. "Arthur!" she called in a low voice. Maynard thrilled. "I want you to have some one in authority announce that all bets are off!" said Edna.

"What!" he exclaimed. "Impossible!" Had Ramsey suddenly realized the *Kodiak* team was stronger than he had estimated and was hedging, using the girl for the purpose? Maynard answered his

own thought. "Hardly, with that girl. No; there's something else!"

"They are stronger than you think," Edna declared, "with Mr. Ramsey not playing."

"We believe we can win, even if perhaps—something—did happen at the other games," said Maynard. "We are going to try to win—that's the way we play the game. See the bluejackets here? They've faith in our ability to win; they are backing that faith to the limit. If we lose, you'll hear no complaints. I'm sorry, but all bets stand so far as the *Kodiak* team is concerned. And thanks!" The sympathy in his voice made her eyes misty. "This must have cost you something, and it was magnificent of you."

She smiled and went to her seat. He watched her because he could not help himself.

"She's entitled to a better deal than that," Maynard growled, "but she's true blue and will stick and give him a chance—even now."

Western ice-hockey fans saw a different team of All-Stars when the play began, and they saw a team from a vessel, a team with only one night's good practice behind it, that was fast even in this fast sport. To their speed was added a fundamental knowledge of the game that stood out in every play they made. But above all was the teamwork that had been magically developed. No *Kodiak* player seemed to care for individual glory. The team moved as a unit. Pitted against a combination of some of the greatest players in the game, the bluejackets worked along the theory laid down by the late Bob Fitzsimmons, "the bigger they are, the harder they'll fall."

The first period was scoreless, and half the crowd realized that they had been standing the last five minutes. Early in the second period, Maynard had the puck, but seemed cut off from the goal by two of the opposing team. A *Kodiak* player was free and shouting.

"Why pass the puck?" Maynard asked himself, grinning.

He dodged, spurted, and lifted the puck into the net for a goal just before an opponent's stick smashed against his own.

Sharper in his memory than the swift

rush and score was the thought of the girl who stood with both hands on the rail and watched every movement.

Her solitaire diamond had gleamed briefly as he flashed by, and Maynard thought of it now, even as the frantic bluejackets filled the building with their cheers. Then they were at it again. Now the All-Stars showed their stuff, their experience, that they fought an uphill battle better. Flying figures seemed everywhere, moving, darting, checking as if controlled by invisible wires pulled by a directing hand. Things happened quickly, and the puck was in the net as the *Kodiak* goal tender moved to block it. The period was over, the score was tied. It was any man's game yet.

Ramsey was furious. He knew teamwork, skill in passing, and speed when he saw it, and he had been seeing a lot of it in the two periods. His forwards were tiring from the pace set by the bluejackets, who were younger men and always in training. Then there was Maynard. His skill was amazing for one who had known nothing of the game two years before.

"I'm going into it myself," Ramsey snapped, unable to stand the strain any longer. He had tried to put something over on a supposedly green team and had caught a Tartar. "I'm going to make the fur fly! Now tie into 'em! You're supposed to be All-Stars—show 'em you are!"

Ramsey's pending losses hovered over him like a clutching claw of fate. That fast machine must be broken up, or he'd be broken down, and he knew the cog around which the other cogs seemed to resolve, the directing hand that found an opponent's weakness and there centered the attack.

"I'll take care of Maynard if I'm put off the ice for it!" he snarled. "Who started the rumor they'd only had a night's practice before they came here? They've played together for years!"

Ramsey was into the thick of it from the first. The minutes slipped past slowly, and he saw his men going down under the swiftness of the *Kodiak* attack. The bluejacket team was merciless. Maynard was coming down the ice, almost straight, steering the puck

clear of obstacles by clever stick work. Again the *Kodiak* leader caught the glimpse of a diamond's flash as he rushed past—a strange, living fire that leaped from the heart of the stone. Then he saw Ramsey, frantic in his effort to break up the play. Thoughts of winning were no longer in his mind. He was desperate, glad even to hold them to a tie. Maynard passed the puck swiftly. It slithered across the ice to the safety of a *Kodiak* man's stick, then flashed clear of the surface straight into the net. The cheering of the frantic throng became hushed.

A *Kodiak* player was struggling to his knees, bleeding from a cut on the chin. Twice he tried to get to his feet, only to slump back as a fighter does when the referee is tolling the count. A girl with angry tears in her eyes was looking down, clenching hands that were now ringless save for a band of white where a ring had been worn.

The referee was assisting the fallen man. "What happened, Maynard?"

"Tripped and got clipped with a skate or stick going down," he answered. "It cut a nasty gash on my chin and nearly put me out for a moment."

The referee seemed doubtful of the explanation. He had been watching the puck after the pass and had only caught a glimpse of Maynard's fall. He realized a man is likely to fall at any time. "Are you sure you weren't hooked from behind with a stick?" he queried. "Quite sure?"

"Positive!" declared Maynard.

CHAPTER V.

SIX MONTHS LONG.

THE game was over. A girl whose eyes were red from indignant tears slowly handed a ring to a surly man. "You lost—everything!" Edna said.

"You, too, eh?" Ramsey said unpleasantly. "Well, I might have expected you'd desert a sinking ship." He pocketed the ring.

"Wait a minute!" The girl's voice held a commanding note. "Even when you admitted you had played the two previous games under wraps, so as to deceive the *Kodiak* team, I gave you

another chance. I felt it was the first time you had disappointed me and perhaps your better self would triumph. Then I saw you trip Maynard. Don't deny it! No one else saw it, for they were watching the puck. But as you came toward Maynard I saw something in your face that shouldn't have been there, and I knew, as he knew, and as the referee guessed, that you were going to try to put something over. It was—I don't want even to think of it."

She was gone when Ramsey looked up. The Arena was emptying slowly, people discussing the game in excited knots, bluejackets pounding each other gleefully. The impossible had happened; an ice-hockey game had been won by a team from a coast-guard cutter. It was something a dreadnaught might well have been proud of.

Maynard had no desire to pose as a hero, to be seen with his chin bandaged, perhaps to be cheered. He slipped out of a side door, and it was not chance that placed Edna Turner and her car near that door. It was good judgment and a compelling desire to know just how badly he had been injured.

"Hop in and I'll drive you down to the dock!" she called from the machine.

Maynard hopped. Then he noticed her hand on the steering wheel, small, well shaped, ringless.

"Yes," she said, seeing his eyes were fastened on her hand; "I saw what happened, and there was only one thing to do, even if it did hurt—a lot."

Maynard did not say that he was glad. He was really sorry, even though it opened the way for the old relationship.

"Why," the girl asked, after a time, "didn't you write and tell me the *Kodiak* was caught in the ice and would remain frozen in for the winter? One of the girls said she received a letter from Mr. Shannon."

"You didn't get my letter?" Maynard asked in surprise. "Why, I wrote one! It left the ship over the ice with letters from every man aboard. It was a long letter; twenty pages of it, Edna, typewritten, single spaced to save paper, and likewise a note that—" He stopped abruptly. This wasn't time to tell her what he had written in the note.

"I never received your letter!" she declared.

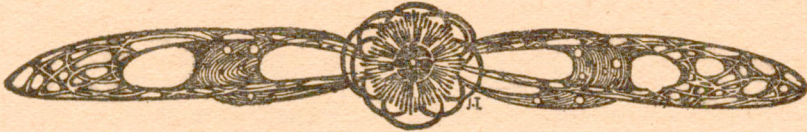
"The mail went by dog team from Nome and on the way the driver broke through the ice, a portion of the mail was lost then, but he insisted that every packet from the *Kodiak* went through O. K.—that it was Nome mail that was lost. When we made Nome this season there were letters, millions of 'em, it seemed, for the others. Not a line from you! It hurt, a bit, and then came the item about your engagement to Ramsey—Shannon found it in an old newspaper."

She drove on past the port commission's Bell Street dock, on to the boule-

wards and around Queen Anne hill. When Maynard came aboard the ship he was whistling, and it was early in the morning.

Ramsey, too, was awake, pacing the room, wrangling his Western agent. "Where'd the newspapers get that stuff about the *Kodiak* team only having one night's practice?" he asked savagely.

The agent shrugged his shoulders. "Oh, that was some fool reporter's idea of a joke, and everybody but us was in on it. The nights up there in the arctic are supposed to be six months long, and I guess about all the *Kodiak* crew did was to play hockey all the time they were frozen in."



SONG O' THE SNOWSHOES

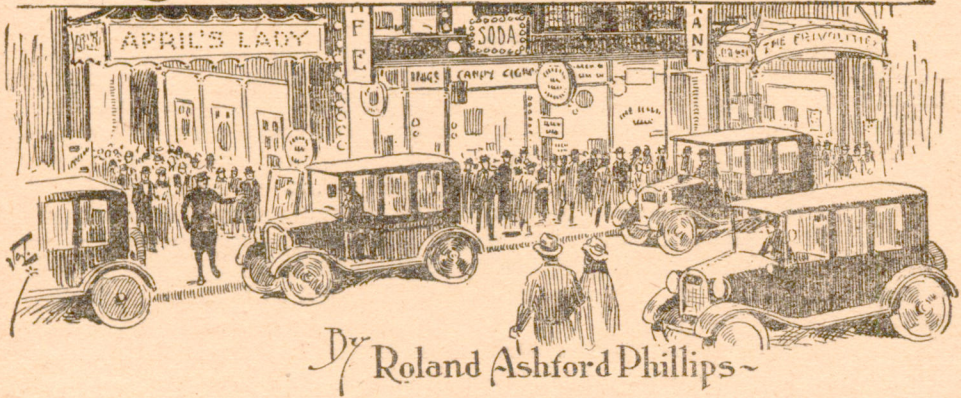
By James Edward Hungerford

DOWN the ol' snow trail, I go with a whiz,
 Knowin' the zest o' what real pleasure is!
 Air below zero, that cuts like a knife;
 Full o' the tang o' the ozone o' life!
 Heart just a-poundin', an' pulses athrob;
 Snowshoes a-singin' with joy on the job!
 Here is adventure that never grows stale—
 Splittin' the breeze on the ol' snowshoe trail!

Catchin' fleet glimpses o' valley an' hills;
 Coulees an' cañons, an' ice-crusted rills;
 Snow-crested peaks, with their heads in the sky;
 Mountains uprearin' white shoulders on high;
 Whizzin' down rivers, agleam with sunbeams—
 Ice thickly shroudin' the frozen-stiff streams;
 Flittin' through gorges, with snow-plastered walls—
 This is the life that's "pepful," an' ne'er palls!

Sweet is the song o' the snowshoes a-zip!
 Eatin' up miles at a breath-takin' clip!
 Bend in the trail, an' smoke wreaths in the air—
 Welcome an' warmth in the valley down there!
 Cabin lights shinin', agleam in the gloam;
 That's where my heart is, an' there I am home!
 Been to the "diggin's," to bring back the mail—
 Headin' for home, down the ol' snowshoe trail!

Rogues at Random ~



CHAPTER XVII.

THE SCENE OF TRAGEDY.

DEFEAT was a bitter pill for Kendal to swallow, more so, perhaps in view of the fact that a competitor had worsted him. He had not been optimistic over the projected plans of Cadwaller, although he admitted, so long as the banker was determined to risk the money, that the long shot might win.

However, Kendal decided to have another and more serious talk with one "Spike" Golding, who had previously figured in the affair when he posed as Haggerty and occupied a chair in the corridor outside of Miss Pulver's dressing room.

Golding was a capable man, in his line; and while he boasted of a police record and had served sundry sentences as an undesirable in the Northwest, the local authorities, to whom he was a stranger, did not molest him. In fact he might have been considered a law-abiding and upright citizen had he not run afoul of Kendal, who, in the days of his agency, chanced to pick up his trail.

In the parlance of the underworld, in which Spike moved and had his being, Kendal "had the goods on him;" but through circumstances known only to the two of them, Kendal did not take advantage of it, and before long, also owing to circumstances, Golding became a trustworthy henchman in the detective's employ.

Never a question of doubt assailed Ken-

dal where Golding was concerned. The man had told his story of the fiasco, and the detective accepted it; repeated it verbatim to Cadwaller himself. Kendal's purpose in visiting his man that afternoon was not alone to question him more determinedly, but to hear what Golding had been in a position to pick up; to learn pertinent facts, or even rumors, that must be adrift in the underworld concerning the stolen necklace.

Golding lived in modest quarters not far from the noisy corner where Forty-second Street crosses Third Avenue. Kendal entered the hallway of the house and ascended the stairs to the room on the second-floor rear; knocked in the prescribed manner and waited for the door to open.

But the door neither opened, nor did the familiar voice, lifted from within, bid Kendal enter. The detective repeated the summons and, after a moment of waiting, tried the door. It yielded readily as the knob turned, and Kendal stepped into the room.

An instant later, with an amazed exclamation tumbling from his lips, the detective was bending over the inert, twisted form of Spike Golding that lay sprawled across the narrow bed.

Life was extinct—had been for some time, Kendal reasoned—for a dry, crimson stain showed around the ghastly knife wound in the man's throat.

Kendal straightened, his troubled eyes sweeping the confines of the little room. The sight that greeted him seemed to

establish a motive for the tragedy. The clothes had been pulled from the closet and hurled upon the floor; the contents of a trunk had been turned out; the dresser drawers were opened. Even the suit Golding wore had not escaped, for all the pockets were turned inside out, and the coat and waistcoat linings were slashed, as if the murderer, in a painstaking search for some valuable possessed by his victim, had resolved to leave no hiding place unexplored.

The thing puzzled Kendal at first. So far as he knew, Golding had not fallen out with his associates, nor engineered a job that had brought him reward. In the detective's estimation, the man had lived fairly straight and made no attempt to follow questionable trails that would lead to a brush with the authorities. Golding seemed to be perpetually broke and always welcomed the engagements Kendal offered.

A sheet of paper, wadded into a ball, lay upon the dresser. Kendal opened it and managed to decipher the scrawled, penciled inscription it contained; and reading it, felt his pulse bound alarmingly. The startling significance of the message addressed to Golding brought an imprecation from the detective.

With a final glance about the disordered room, Kendal stepped into the hall, closed the door behind him, and made his way quickly down the stairs to the street. He dared not remain on the scene to conduct a more thorough investigation. At any moment some one might appear and it would be embarrassing to account for his presence.

So far as he knew, his visit to the house had gone undetected. The premises seemed deserted. At any rate no one had appeared in the hallway or on the stairs, and if the other rooms were occupied, the lodgers did not show themselves.

Kendal had no way of learning that the house was watched and its visitors carefully noted; that a tall young chap concealed in a doorway on the opposite side of the street had viewed the detective and smiled derisively.

Kendal would have recognized the man instantly; and recognition would have brought some enlightenment—offered a clew to Golding's assailant. There was a

scar on the watcher's chin that gave a peculiar droop to his lower lip. It was the same scar that stood out in Judson's memory; that would have served to establish the identity of the prowler he had encountered on the stage two nights before.

Had Judson and Kendal been in a position to compare notes, matters might have terminated otherwise.

The detective was confronted with a most disagreeable duty. He could have avoided it and locked certain matters within his heart. The fact that he did not placed him on the shining-example roll. Only the bravest of men are candid enough to admit their mistakes, particularly when admission is not compulsory.

Kendal hailed the first taxi that crossed his path and gave the chauffeur the number of the house facing Gramercy Park. There he found Cadwaller in consultation with Lane and, without preparing the men for the shock, set off the bombshell that shattered the banker's carefully laid plans.

Cadwaller and Lane lent attentive ears to the story the detective unfolded. Kendal spoke briefly enough, but neglected none of the essential points and did not hesitate to blame himself, in a measure, for what had taken place.

Cadwaller received the news with a lowering, storm-ridden countenance. "Then we are to believe that this man of yours—Golding—stole the necklace?" he got out at length, when Kendal had revealed the facts and awaited the thunderclap of reproach.

"I'm afraid so," the detective admitted. "Golding's failed me for the first time."

"You should have known better than to trust a man of his caliber," Cadwaller returned. "What about the note you mentioned?" he asked. "Where did you find it?"

"On a dresser in the room," replied Kendal. "It not only furnishes a motive for the crime, but its contents would seem to bear out the truth of my theory."

Cadwaller adjusted his glasses and slowly read the message that was handed him, while Lane peered over his shoulder. The scrawled lines were difficult to decipher. Words were misspelled and punctuation lacking; but the information

contained in the note was highly significant. The following met the banker's eyes:

Look out, Spike, you been double crossed. Better get away quick. Duke is going to squeal if you don't come across with a share. Watch out for him, he means business. See Nick; he can be trusted.

There was no signature at the end of the note; nothing to identify the author of the warning. The message was written in pencil on cheap wrapping paper.

Cadwaller read through the note twice before he passed it over to Lane; then he looked up at Kendal.

"There's no mention made of the necklace," he commented, "What makes you think Golding had it? I fail to see where we can connect this affair with the——"

"But he must have pulled off some big job," Kendal broke in. "And some one had double-crossed him in the bargain. Whoever murdered Golding was after a prize. From the looks of things I'd say it was the necklace. The man referred to as Duke must have learned the truth, visited Golding, demanded a share of the spoils and, being denied it, planted a knife in Golding's throat. After that he ransacked the premises. Whether he found what he came for is yet to be learned."

"Know who Duke is?"

Kendal nodded. "Probably Walton. He goes under that sobriquet—a man with a police record and an all-round ugly customer. Duke's figured in more than one shady transaction to my knowledge."

"Who is Nick?" queried Lane, mentioning the other name contained in the message.

"He's a pawnbroker and a notorious fence. The fact that Nick is mentioned convinces me that Golding had the necklace and planned to dispose of it through this man. He wouldn't have been advised to deal with one of Nick's reputation unless he hoped to raise funds on stolen property," Kendal said.

"Apparently not," the banker agreed. "But how was it possible for him to get away with the necklace? According to your version and the newspapers, Miss Pulver wore the jewels until they fell into

the hands of the butler; then he disappeared."

"Golding's story must be discredited. He may have taken the necklace from the butler—Dolan—without the latter's knowledge. Perhaps picked his pocket. Or again, he and Dolan may have been working together. I always trusted Golding," the detective went on; "but I suppose on this particular occasion the temptation was too great to resist."

"Evidently," remarked Cadwaller. "What's to be done now? What can be done? We seem to be running around in circles. I've managed to get Dolan out on bail; but if your first theory is to be credited and Golding operated alone, this actor had no part in the affair and his release is no advantage to us."

"It's too early to be sure of that," returned Kendal, whose mind had been occupied with fresh plans. "The news of Golding's death ought to break any minute now. The police will get on the job, and before long they will identify the victim as the impostor who took Haggerty's post at the theater the night before last. The next move will be a search for the criminal. They won't have this note to offer them a clew," he added.

"Perhaps you should have left it in the room," Lane spoke up. "The note might help to clear Dolan of the charge against him."

"So it might," agreed Kendal; "but at the same time it would get Duke into the police dragnet and——"

"But shouldn't he be apprehended and convicted?" Cadwaller broke in protestingly. "Surely a foul crime of this nature should be punished."

"Eventually, of course," the detective answered. "But suppose the police should force a confession out of him? Suppose he has the necklace or knows of its whereabouts? Where would it place us? With the gems restored to Miss Pulver, we should find ourselves in a worse predicament than in the beginning."

"Still the note you found is a valuable bit of evidence," the banker rejoined. "It should be made use of."

"It will be," Kendal returned. "When our work is finished I'll see that it falls

into the hands of the police; but not until then."

"What do you propose to do in the meanwhile?" Cadwaller asked.

"Find Duke," Kendal answered unhesitatingly. "I'm pretty certain now that he got the necklace from Golding. With this note to back me up, Duke ought to be willing to talk business. He'll go a long way before permitting this evidence to fall into the hands of the police. We'll make a bargain with him—a far better one than he can hope to make with a receiver of stolen goods."

Cadwaller brightened at once. "That's true," he remarked in a more amicable tone. "A good suggestion, Kendal! We haven't lost out yet. After all, Dolan and Golding may have worked together; and if we learn that Duke hasn't the property, then the actor doubtless will be in a position to benefit us."

"I wouldn't approach Dolan yet," Kendal advised. "Not until I have found Duke and sounded him out. We'll know how we stand by that time. In case Dolan is innocent, questioning him would invite suspicion; and if he repeated things on the outside, the police or some wise newspaper hound might figure you were concerned in the matter and rush it into print."

"That's true, too," agreed Cadwaller. "We'll wait until you have acted. Can you find Duke?"

"Don't think I'll have much trouble—if he hasn't flown," the detective replied. "I'll get a line on him one way or another before midnight," he added.

"Very good!" approved the banker.

"Whatever happens, we must consider Dolan's predicament," Lane put in, his legal mind alert. "If we succeed in our dealing with Duke and the necklace is restored to you, Mr. Cadwaller, we must still look out for the actor. Naturally, we cannot inform the authorities as to what has been done, and no matter who the culprit may be, we cannot justly permit Dolan to suffer."

"Certainly not!" promptly agreed Cadwaller. "I would consider myself entirely at fault should my property be restored and Dolan be convicted of the crime."

"He's out on bail just now," Kendal

remarked, prompt to suggest a plan, "and his trial isn't scheduled until the September term of court. Whether or not he is guilty we may find it advisable to forfeit the bond—consider it part of the price paid for the success of our undertaking. It will rest with us to see that Dolan is compensated and retains his freedom, even if it means getting him out of the country and covering his trail."

Cadwaller nodded, giving the impression that such a plan already had been entertained. "Dolan will be taken care of," he said quietly. "Meanwhile, Kendal, we shall await your report. I trust you will be able to find and talk with Duke before the authorities apprehend him. We must have some definite plan to work on."

"I'll have good news for you before midnight," the detective promised, starting for the door. "I've bungled twice, but I don't look for a third disaster."

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE HIDE-AND-SEEK DRAMA.

THE matinée performance of "April's Lady," with Stoddard in the butler's rôle, progressed without a hitch. The newcomer was letter-perfect in his lines, and the discharge of his business was above criticism.

From his seat in the front of the house, Dolan watched his substitute with amazed eyes and a mind that entertained a jumble of astounding conjectures. Previously, Judson had revealed the nature of the conversation that took place the day before, at the time of Stoddard's appearance on the stage, and later, when the matter had been discussed between Thompson and the director.

At the third act curtain, however, when Dolan hurried on the stage to air his suspicions, Judson was not to be found. Thompson said that the director had left the theater just before the last act.

"Thought he went out front," the stage manager said. "Haven't you seen him?"

"He didn't come down to where I was sitting," Dolan replied.

"Stick around. He'll probably be back." Thompson regarded his companion narrowly. "What did you think of

Stoddard's performance?" he asked. "Jove! I had a hard time to convince myself that it wasn't you. Every one in the cast has remarked about it."

"Why shouldn't they? It was a revelation to me as well. If anything, Stoddard gave a better performance than I did. I'll say that much without fear of contradiction."

"Will you say anything else?" Thompson queried.

"I can think a lot," Dolan came back significantly; "but that isn't going to help much. It'll require more than supposition and Stoddard's performance to verify my story."

"Well, you've got something promising to work on," the stage manager ventured. "I'm wishing you luck, Dolan. Shouldn't be at all surprised if Judson's hot on the trail now. There's something in the wind, and it doesn't take a bird dog to get it, either," he added.

Although Dolan waited for half an hour, Judson did not put in an appearance; but Miss Fleming did, and for a brief time at least the actor relegated his troubles to the background.

Together they looked for Judson at his hotel and telephoned to the club, and when those efforts proved fruitless, the searchers went alone to dinner.

The director's unexplained absence was not alarming until theater time; but when the curtain rang up on the evening performance and Judson had not arrived, the matter became puzzling. No one connected with the theater had seen the man after he had left the stage at the beginning of the last act during the *matinée*.

Had the truth been known, Judson gave little thought to the disturbance he had caused, for when he passed through the stage door that afternoon, intending to join Dolan in the audience, a taxi whirled into the alley, stopped, and Griffith called to him.

"Hop in! You're wanted," the detective commanded.

Without questioning the officer's purpose, Judson followed instructions. It was not until he was seated beside Griffith and the taxi was careening through the streets that the director ventured to express himself.

"What's the excitement?" he inquired mildly. "Found the necklace? Want me to identify it?"

"I want you to identify a man—a dead one," Griffith responded.

"Am I supposed to know him?"

"Well, you gave us a pretty fair description of him the other night. If he's the same bird we may be on a warm trail."

"Whom do you refer to? The chap who connected with my chin? Or the one who posed as Haggerty?"

"The latter," Griffith replied. "He was found an hour ago in a room below Third Avenue. Knifed! Already been identified as Spike Golding by the landlady on the premises. If we can hook him up with what took place at the theater, so much the better."

Five minutes later, Judson viewed the remains and pronounced them those of the impostor who had stationed himself in the dressing-room corridor on the night of the robbery, and who had mysteriously disappeared during the excitement.

Griffith seemed to be pleased over the verdict. "Golding—if that is his name—isn't known to us," he told the director, once the men were outside. "The landlady can't give us any information, except that her lodger was quiet, seldom had visitors, and always paid his rent promptly. Occupied the same room for years."

"No motive for the tragedy?"

"Robbery, of course," the detective answered, explaining the condition of the room in which the body was found. "The murderer may or may not have found what he was looking for."

Judson's alert mind was not long in reaching a significant conclusion. "You've a suspicion what that was?"

"Remotely, yes."

"Is that all?" Judson asked, prompt to speak the thoughts that raced through his mind. "The slain man must have had designs on the necklace. He or a confederate worsted Haggerty and presented himself back of the curtain. He was on the scene when the robbery took place and vanished before we went to look for him. Those are facts, aren't they?"

"They are," replied Griffith.

"And two days later this man is found murdered, with evidence pointing to robbery as the motive for the crime. Doesn't that arouse more than a remote suspicion in your mind, Griffith?"

"I'm not ready to declare myself," the other returned evasively. "Of course you are quick to jump at conclusions," he added. "You'll grab at anything that will help to establish Dolan's innocence. You can't expect me to follow suit."

"Do you blame me for it?"

"No; can't say that I do. However, that's beside the point. Golding's dead, and dead men aren't in a position to do any talking. What we must do now is find the murderer and wring a confession out of him. We have one clew," the detective went on; "and oddly enough it involves a man you have had dealings with."

"You surely don't mean Dolan," protested Judson.

Griffith smiled. "Of course not! Dolan has troubles enough without burdening him with this. No; the man I refer to is Walton, known among his associates as Duke. He introduced himself to you night before last. Don't you remember?"

"Oh, that stage prowler? The chap with a scar on his chin? I'd forgotten the name by which you identified him."

On the morning after the encounter, when the director described his midnight assailant, Griffith had at once recognized the prowler as Duke Walton, a questionable character who often figured as a suspect in the world of crime, but against whom the police consistently had failed to obtain damning evidence.

"We've been trying to get track of him," Griffith went on. "Didn't succeed until late this afternoon; and even then he gave us the slip. Haggerty was within a block of where the tragedy took place and was among the first to get on the scene. As he was entering the house, he spotted Duke on the opposite side of the street. Gave chase to him, but the quarry vanished."

"Then you think he killed Golding?"

"Think?" The detective smiled. "More than that. We're sure. Duke has been slipping through our fingers long enough in the last few years. We've

arrested him on a dozen different occasions, practically certain he was the man we wanted; but we always failed to get the goods on him. His goose is cooked now. When he falls into our net this time he's going to the chair."

"Left evidence behind him, did he?" Judson inquired.

"A man and his wife, lodgers in the same house, saw Duke enter Golding's room shortly after noon to-day," the detective condescended to explain. "They heard the men quarreling; and later they saw Duke come into the hall and run down the stairs. Their description of Golding's visitor tallies with our suspect all right enough. Just as soon as the man is captured, and these witnesses identify him, Duke's finish is in sight."

"It looks promising," said Judson, his mind reviewing certain events of the past. "Of course Duke had a purpose in visiting the theater the other night; and so had Golding. They may have plotted the robbery together. And if Golding secured the necklace, Duke may have decided to get possession of it, which accounts for the tragedy."

"I wouldn't put it past him," Griffith declared. "The man who knifed Golding was after something—something big. He ransacked the room and even took pains to turn out the pockets of his victim's clothes. It may have been the necklace he was after, or it may have been the spoils of another transaction that hasn't come to our notice. But, whatever it is, we'll find out. We're combing the town for Duke, and I expect to hear of his arrest at any minute."

The new theory advanced by himself, and partly supported by the detective, gave Judson food for thought. It blazed a new trail of suspicion and opened up a territory of virgin ground. At the same time it exploded other theories that had become more or less fixed in the director's mind.

However sanguine his expectations, and they had been strengthened immeasurably during the day, Judson was not possessed of a one-track mind. All was grist that came to his brain-mill. Although unshaken in his stand with Dolan, he was eager to run down any and all clews that harbored the slightest amount

of promise, even at the expense of discrediting the actor's story.

At the start, having resolved to probe the mystery for himself, make his own deductions and follow his own theories, although it was not from a sense of superiority or a distrust of police methods in general or Griffith's in particular, Judson found himself wavering.

Had Griffith been more amicable and less inclined to scoff, the director might have been tempted to reveal certain matters that had come to his attention; but Griffith asked no questions and apparently did not consider Judson a possible help to him, so the director parted company with the detective without venturing to commit himself.

It was after six o'clock when Judson strolled back to that heterogeneous region infected with theaters, incandescent splendors, ticket speculators, and amusement seekers. And wholly absorbed in his own thoughts he passed within a few yards of where Miss Fleming and Dolan were walking along, unaware of their proximity.

The god of good luck, or the imp of mischief, directed it so, for a second later he was the recipient of a distinct shock of mingled surprise and elation. As he turned into a crowded street that would have carried him to the door of his hotel, Judson fairly brushed shoulders with Duke Walton.

Apparently oblivious of the fact, Duke continued down the street, worming his way through the crowd, his eyes fixed straight ahead; and after recovering swiftly from his amazement, Judson followed, his mind alert with a host of plans.

To keep his quarry in sight was his foremost consideration. For two reasons he hesitated to tackle the man; first, because Duke might have friends on the scene, and against odds Judson would find his purpose defeated; and, second, in following the suspect, something of interest might develop that would present untold advantages.

Thrilled by his remarkable good fortune, and elated at the thought that he was trailing a man for whom the police dragnet had been spread, Judson took up his task.

Duke steered an unerring and evidently a predetermined course along the side street; followed Broadway into the Thirties; turned west and proceeded more leisurely toward Eighth Avenue. Judson followed as closely as he dared, and midway in the block he saw his man step into a building.

Surprised at that unexpected move on the part of his quarry, the director advanced warily. When he approached the doorway through which Duke had vanished, Judson found that it led into a narrow hall. Beyond, according to a sign, was a restaurant, one of the many secluded eating places frequented by those in search of foreign dishes, atmosphere, and modest prices.

After a moment spent in deliberation, Judson passed along the hallway, and at the entrance to the shabby, open-air garden, screened by a row of potted plants, he paused to reconnoiter the scene beyond. The place contained a dozen tables, but either because of the early hour, or an unpopular menu, customers were lacking.

Only one of the tables was occupied. Seated at it, facing the door, was the man Judson had followed. Duke seemed calm and unconcerned, brazen in his assurance that a chance recognition would incur no disaster. Evidently his frequent brushes with the police, and his ability in the past to extricate himself from tight places, were responsible for his calloused indifference.

After a swift glance, content in the thought that his quarry had not escaped him, Judson fixed his eyes upon Duke's table companion, whose back was toward the door. It was several minutes before the identity of the man flashed to the director's amazed brain. Then he stepped back into the hallway.

The recognition, startling as it had been, was not wholly unanticipated. It linked one supposition with another; welded them into one outstanding and plausible theory that Judson felt would solve the mystery of the vanished necklace and at the same time expose the culprits.

A man came along the hallway from the street, brushed past Judson, and strolled into the garden dining room, tak-

ing a chair at one of the tables. The director's eyes followed him speculatively.

The newcomer sat down and ostensibly began to study the menu; but watching him closely, Judson fancied the man was interested in the pair at the other table; that he was really studying Duke and his companion over the top of his menu card.

There was nothing about the stranger to suggest a plain-clothes man, although the director had that suspicion, for no reason whatever. Moreover, not having met Kendal, Judson was not in a position to recognize the newcomer as Jacob Cadwaller's trusted investigator. But Kendal it was. By a stroke of sheer good luck, he had spotted Duke a few minutes before, and after waiting a reasonable time had followed his man into the restaurant.

Blissfully unaware of this new actor upon the scene, Judson began to sketch a plan of action. Alone and unarmed, he was hardly in a position to cope with Duke. At the same time he hesitated to leave the premises in search of help, fearing that the men he hoped to apprehend would vanish.

Faced with this quandary, Judson walked back to the hall exit; and standing there, looking up and down the street, a second stroke of good fortune descended upon him.

The director ran along the street and caught Griffith, just as the plain-clothes man was turning into Eighth Avenue. A minute later he had revealed the situation, in so far as it concerned Duke.

Griffith was all smiles and even condescended to a word of praise, which Judson accepted without making any comment.

"Good work, Judson! This is the last place in town I'd ever think of finding Duke. He's either possessed of a cast-iron nerve, or he doesn't dream we're looking for him. Alone, is he?"

"Went into the restaurant alone," Judson answered evasively.

"Well, this isn't his regular hang-out, which probably accounts for the poor luck my men are having. Come along! We'll ring down the curtain on this little hide-and-seek drama."

CHAPTER XIX.

HIS FINAL TRANSACTION.

FOLLOWED closely by Judson, Griffith entered the hallway and walked toward the garden in the rear. Behind the screen of potted plants, the detective viewed the two occupied tables. At the nearest one sat Duke and his companion. At the other was the lone customer, apparently engrossed in his meal.

A low whistle of astonishment escaped Griffith. "That's Kendal," he declared, nodding toward the lone diner.

"Kendal?" repeated Judson, uncomprehending.

"Yes; Cadwaller's pet sleuth. Told you about him, didn't I?" The detective scowled, as if the presence of this man baffled him. "Wonder what's brought Kendal here?"

"He followed me in," Judson returned. "I thought he was watching Duke pretty closely."

"Huh! He's up to something. Don't recognize the chap with Duke, though," Griffith went on, but did not question Judson. "You stay here and guard this passage. I'll do the rest."

The detective examined his revolver, thrust hand and weapon into his coat pocket, where both could be brought into action quickly, and strolled into the garden.

Duke looked up casually as Griffith stopped beside the table; looked up with a glance that mirrored neither surprise nor consternation. A familiarity with police tactics had bred in him a spirit of utter contempt.

"Evening, Duke!" the detective greeted in a tone that conveyed nothing at all to the man he addressed. "Finished eating, have you?"

"Just started," the other responded.

"Better pay your check and come along with me. It's the last check you'll be paying for a long time," Griffith added.

Duke scowled. "What's on your mind now?" he demanded crossly.

"Oh, don't start that. You know what I'm getting at. Golding can't talk, but the evidence we have will do a powerful lot of shouting."

"Same old line of stuff, eh?" Duke

shrugged. "Still making me the goat. Golding? Who's he? Never heard of the bird."

"Not quite the same old line of stuff, Duke," Griffith came back with an ominous grin. "We've got more than suspicion against you this time. You've pulled off your final transaction."

"Aw, forget it!" Duke broke in sullenly. "You've been handing out that line of talk for the last five years."

"Stand up!" Griffith rapped out the command. "Keep your hands in sight. Be quick about it!"

Duke, apparently surprised at the abrupt change in Griffith's manner, obeyed without further argument. Slowly he lifted himself from his chair, and just as slowly raised his arms ceilingward. Griffith's nimble fingers performed their task and made certain that his prisoner was unarmed.

"Don't think I'd be fool enough to pack around a gun, do you?" Duke said with a perceptible sneer. "What's the sense of getting ugly about it, Griffith? I ain't making trouble. Never did, did I? I'm always willing to travel along and listen to the charges you've framed against me. Just a waste of time, of course; but I'm getting used to it after all these years."

Griffith was a little surprised at the other's unhostile attitude; but he remembered, in the past, that Duke never had shown a disposition to fight or resist arrest; always he had been a most obliging and docile prisoner.

"All right, Duke," the detective said in a more amicable tone. "You won't lose anything by behaving yourself. Suppose you introduce me to your friend."

Griffith turned to survey the other man at the table. "Seems to me I've seen you somewhere before," he remarked after a prolonged scrutiny. "What's your name?"

"Brown," the other responded, his voice unsteady.

"Stand up, Brown! Let's see what you're carrying. Always have my suspicions of Duke's friends."

The man who had introduced himself got to his feet. He cast a frightened glance at Duke; and, as if in answer to that mute appeal, Duke acted swiftly.

Griffith's back was partly turned and

his usual vigilance relaxed. Momentarily, the stranger claimed his attention. Duke was quick to take advantage of the situation. His right arm shot out, catching Griffith under the ear. As the detective staggered back, swearing volubly, his assailant launched another blow.

Before it landed, however, a new actor, who until then had been no more than an interested spectator, jumped forward, caught Duke's arm and flung the man against an adjoining table where, after clawing wildly for support, he crashed to the floor.

A second later Griffith was himself again. He stood over the prostrated Duke, gun in hand. "Get up!" he commanded wrathfully.

As Duke obeyed, Griffith produced a pair of handcuffs. "Turn around and put your hands behind you! Lively now!" he ordered. "I'll teach you to get funny."

Once the steel bracelets were adjusted and Duke's wrists were secured behind him, Griffith turned to Kendal. "Much obliged for your assistance," he said, feeling tenderly the bruised spot on his neck.

Kendal forced a smile. Although he had been quick to take a hand in the struggle, he was not in a smiling mood. His joy at finding Duke had been blighted by Griffith's appearance on the scene. He did not know how the police had connected Duke with the Golding murder; neither did he know if the necklace entered into the affair. But he did realize, with a troubled heart, that with Duke a prisoner, all his cherished plans had been frustrated.

Had the circumstances been otherwise, Kendal would have been just as quick to assist Duke as he had been in combating him, for once under arrest, the prisoner would cease to be a factor. But the circumstances had been against him and he had been compelled to join forces with the officer whose presence and purpose were detrimental to the Cadwaller interests.

"What the devil!" Griffith broke out suddenly, his eyes sweeping the room. "Where'd that other chap go?"

"I didn't have time to notice," replied Kendal, which was not precisely the truth, for he had seen the man duck and run toward the exit just as Duke con-

nected a husky fist below Griffith's ear. Nor had he made any effort to stop the stranger.

Obviously, the man was a pal of Duke's; and, just as obviously, Duke had attempted to make it possible for his friend to escape. Realizing that, Kendal's hopes revived.

Out in the hallway, however, screened from those in the garden, Judson was in action. He had watched Griffith approach Duke's table; had listened to the conversation; saw the fight start and was on the point of rushing in when Kendal acted.

The next thing he knew, the fourth man had scurried across the floor and was running toward him. An instant later the fugitive was staring, wide-eyed, at the man that blocked his escape.

"Don't be in a hurry, Baldwin!" Judson admonished.

Confronted by his director, Baldwin halted momentarily; then with a despairing cry he hurled himself forward. Judson stepped aside and deftly tripped the man.

Baldwin fell heavily. Judson reached down and jerked him erect, surprised at his unexpected strength. Although stunned and shaken by his fall, Baldwin struggled desperately, threshing his arms, kicking out wildly and babbling incoherent imprecations; but all to no advantage. A moment later Judson dragged his prisoner along the hallway into the garden beyond, just as Griffith had questioned the whereabouts of the man and Kendal had answered him untruthfully.

CHAPTER XX.

FLAWS IN HIS ALIBI.

AT the sight of Judson and his prisoner, the detective gave a shout. "Nabbed him, did you? Good work! What was your hurry, Brown?"

"This is Baldwin," Judson corrected.

"Baldwin?" repeated Griffith. The name of the second prisoner had little significance to him at the moment. "Know him, do you?"

"I should," replied Judson. "He is the general understudy for the men in the 'April's Lady' cast."

"Understudy?" the detective cried, sud-

denly alive to the situation. "Is this the chap who took Dolan's part in the last act the other night?"

"He is," answered the director. "And what's more," he added emphatically, "I'm convinced that he has played other parts as well—too well, perhaps."

"And hooked up with Duke!" Griffith made no effort to conceal his satisfaction. "Great Scott! This begins to look promising. How about it, Baldwin? What have you to say for yourself? Speak up now and you'll save yourself a lot of unnecessary trouble."

Baldwin glared sullenly at his captors. "There's nothing for me to say. I'm not hooked up with that man," he went on, looking at Duke. "Never saw him before to-night."

"Oh, didn't you? How, then, was Duke so anxious to pave the way for your escape? Why did you bolt for the door? Never saw Duke before, eh? Well, that's singular!"

"He's telling the truth," Duke put in quickly. "I just happened to be sitting at his table to-night. Didn't even know his name."

The detective grinned. "That's too thin, Duke. You're not dining out with strangers—or protecting them, either. Judson nabbed you on the stage the other night, and you made a get-away. Now we learn that Baldwin is connected with the company. What's the answer?"

"Answer? There ain't none so far's I'm concerned," Duke replied, apparently unperturbed at the excitement that had broken. "I never saw Judson before."

"Oh, what's the use of bluffing, Duke? You're facing a charge of murder, and you're as good as convicted. You know what that'll get you. If you and Baldwin were mixed up in the theft of the Cadwaller necklace you might as well come through clean and spill the facts. It won't do any harm."

The manacled prisoner sneered. "You're barking up the wrong tree as usual, Griffith. I didn't know Golding. I never set eyes on either of these other men until to-night. You'll have to talk sense if you expect me to answer questions."

"Rot!" exclaimed Griffith. "I'll have the truth out of you before morning." He turned to survey Baldwin. "I'll wring

something out of this bird. Speak up, you!"

Baldwin had neither the nerve nor assurance of his companion. That was instantly apparent to Griffith and accounted for his threatening tactics.

"Don't start bluffing," he admonished, moving toward the man. "You want to save yourself, don't you? Just remember Duke's croaked a man, and you're found in his company. Come across with the truth if you don't want to pay the penalty with him. What were you doing here?"

"I've told you before——" the prisoner began.

"Never mind that! You were lying. I'll give you one minute to get out the facts. One minute!"

Baldwin shrank back, his face destitute of color; but before he could nerve himself to speak, Judson intervened.

"Let me help you out a bit, Griffith," he suggested. "Perhaps I can make things easier."

"All right; go ahead. I'm going to get some satisfaction out of this before we move on. Had you suspected this man before?"

"Not until he attempted to cover his trail," Judson replied. "On the night of the robbery, after you had taken Dolan to the police station, I talked with Baldwin. I wanted to know where he had been during the first two acts of the piece, although at that time I had no suspicions against him."

"I told you, didn't I?" Baldwin cried, finding his voice. "I told you we were out in front."

"You and Miss Greer together up until the third act?"

"Yes."

"You should have consulted with Miss Greer before framing this alibi, Baldwin," the director remonstrated. "I saw her the next night. She informed me that you left the theater shortly after the curtain on the first act and that she did not see you again until you made your appearance on the stage in the last act."

Baldwin winced. "Why—that—is not——" He stammered confusedly.

"Just where were you during the first two acts?" Judson insisted.

"I—I was standing up in the rear of

the house," the other finally confessed. "You see——"

"But just an instant ago you swore you were sitting with Miss Greer all the time," Judson broke in.

Baldwin shifted uneasily, but apparently found himself unable to account for the inconsistencies of his testimony.

"You've overlooked several essential details, Baldwin," the director went on. "Perhaps you did not think I would take pains to verify your story. Perhaps I wouldn't have, had I not run across you in the bank the next morning and dug up a few significant facts."

Still Baldwin remained dumb.

Judson continued: "You've shown but one flash of cleverness in the whole affair—your assumed amateurishness in the butler's rôle. That was a master stroke, Baldwin. You were capable of giving a splendid performance in the part—on a par with Dolan or Stoddard—and brilliantly demonstrated it during the second act on the night of the robbery; but afterward, for fear of exposure, you led us to believe you were hopelessly unfit in the matter of make-up as well as in the rendering of the character."

"I—I don't know what you mean," faltered Baldwin.

"Perhaps I can make it clearer," Judson went on. "You stole the prop necklace in the first place, Baldwin. Then, made up and in costume, you waited outside the stage door in a taxi, certain that Dolan would come out. He did. A confederate lured Dolan away and you took his place, passing the doorman who naturally thought you were Dolan. You deliberately avoided Miss Fleming for fear, out of character, she would expose you. You had the part letter-perfect, with the exception of some business put in at the rehearsal that day. In possession of the genuine necklace you made your escape, washed up, returned to the front of the house and came back on the stage in time to go on in the last act, where purposely you gave an atrocious performance."

"No, no, no!" cried Baldwin. "That's a lie. I couldn't——"

"Your amateurlike performance and your assumed lack of skill in making up fooled me at first," the director con-

tinued, heedless of the interruption. "It was impossible to believe that you had played the part in the second act. But later, at the club, I learned that you had played all of last season in a Western stock, where you were considered a wizard at make-up and had won splendid notices for your character acting. The man who volunteered this information could not explain why you bungled Dolan's part; but right there I began to entertain suspicions.

"To discredit Dolan's story further, either you or an accomplice managed to plant the prop necklace in Dolan's clothes, hoping it would be discovered. Well, it was discovered. I found it myself, in the pocket of the butler's waistcoat, shortly after my encounter with Duke."

"You found it?" cried Griffith, who had listened in amazement to the revelations.

"Yes. Miss Fleming was with me. But to protect Dolan we decided to keep the matter to ourselves. I returned the prop necklace to Andy's room the next day."

"Well, I'll be hanged!" exclaimed the detective, both surprised and chagrined. "Seems to me you've been playing a mighty free hand in this affair."

"Why not?" Judson came back. "I've stood by Dolan from the first. I promised to verify the story you and most of the others laughed down; and perhaps I've succeeded."

"Anything else you've done?" Griffith asked.

"A little," replied the director. "On the morning after the robbery I met Baldwin in the bank where I do business—the Gotham International. Had a short talk with him and saw him go downstairs to the safe-deposit department. Don't know why it aroused my suspicions; but it did. Perhaps it was because, a moment before, Baldwin stated that he was unable to save anything on his salary as understudy and gave the impression of being forced to seek a stock engagement if he expected to live during the summer.

"I got to wondering why a man in his position would want a safe-deposit vault, and what he would keep in it. I de-

cidcd, finally, to investigate. I'm acquainted with the officials of the bank, and when I had made a few inquiries of those in the department, after Baldwin had left, I failed to find his name as a box holder.

"That puzzled me, for I had seen Baldwin pass through the gates. When I described him to the guard and we examined the records that are made each time a box is visited, it was discovered that Baldwin had rented a box that same morning under an assumed name. That surprising knowledge, coupled with what I learned at the club of Baldwin's past history, convinced me that I was following a warm trail."

"Great Scott!" ejaculated Griffith, quick to reach an inevitable conclusion. "Why didn't you come to me with this dope? Rented a box the morning after the robbery, did he? And under a fictitious name! Huh, we'll have a look at its contents."

"I don't think that will be necessary," Judson remarked quietly.

"Why not?"

"I've a hunch that Baldwin met Duke here to-night to transact some important business. Perhaps the necklace figured in it. I learned that Baldwin visited the vault this afternoon just before closing time. I also noticed that Duke was very anxious for Baldwin to make a get-away a few minutes ago—before you had a chance to search him. Of course I may be wrong, but——"

"You're right!" cried Griffith, making a break toward Baldwin.

As the detective advanced, Baldwin suddenly galvanized into action by the predicament that threatened him, whirled and dashed toward the hall exit; but his despairing attempt to escape was promptly frustrated.

Before he had taken three steps, Judson was upon him; had pinned him against the wall, within a few yards of where an audience of mute and frightened waiters were grouped, intent upon the bit of drama being staged.

Certain now of the reward that awaited him, Griffith proceeded to explore the pockets of Baldwin's clothes. A moment later he brought to light a tissue-paper-wrapped parcel. Expectantly he removed

the wrappings; then, with a low cry of satisfaction, he held aloft a shimmering, platinum-linked string of jewels—the Cadwaller necklace.

CHAPTER XXI.

EXCEEDINGLY CARELESS.

THE aftermath of that swift and culminating disclosure had an amazingly different effect upon the principals involved. Judson and Griffith were smiling. Baldwin, aware that his doom was sealed, collapsed into a chair. Duke's countenance was twisted into a fury of rage; and Kendal, who had been forced to stand by, helpless, stared enviously at the great prize that, once within his grasp, was now beyond recovery.

For a moment, like a stage picture held for a curtain call, no one moved or spoke. Every eye in the room was fixed upon the string of gleaming jewels that Griffith dangled aloft. The steel-blue, perfectly matched stones shimmered gloriously under the restaurant lights.

Very deliberately, Griffith rewrapped the necklace and slipped it into his coat pocket. "Well, this ends it," he announced. "A quick finish and a most agreeable one. What have you to say now, Baldwin?"

Baldwin, sagging in his chair, made no response.

"You might as well speak out," the detective urged. "Was Judson's theory correct? Let's clear up a few of the details before we move onto headquarters. Say something, Baldwin! You can't get in any deeper than you are now. A confession will make things easier for you in the end."

"Keep your mouth shut!" It was Duke who flung out that warning.

The detective turned upon the speaker. "What are you afraid of?" he inquired. "More trouble? I wouldn't let it worry you, Duke. You're in up to your eyes now."

"Aw, forget it!" the prisoner snarled. "Don't let them scare you, Baldwin."

"Robbery is one thing, murder another," observed Griffith. "You're better off than Duke, Baldwin. Take my advice, not his. If you're mixed up in the Golding affair——"

"I'm not! I'm not!" Baldwin protested. "I didn't know anything about Golding until Duke told me."

"Told you what?" Griffith demanded quickly. "Come now!" he went on as Baldwin remained silent. "Don't let Duke drag you in as an accomplice."

"He can't do that!" cried Baldwin. Fear of a greater punishment spurred him into a confession. He broke into a torrent of words. "I had nothing to do with the killing. I—I did steal the necklace. I took Dolan's place in the second act. It was just as Judson said. I planned it all out while we were on the road. I knew if the prop necklace was missing, the real one would have to be substituted. I knew Dolan always came out after the first act for a smoke. It—it looked so easy. I put the prop into Dolan's clothes after the performance. I did not meet Duke right away, so he came into the theater looking for me. That's when Judson discovered him. But I had nothing to do with the murder. I swear it!"

The man's babbling ended. Duke glared at him wrathfully; but his rage seemed too overpowering to permit of words.

"Go on with your story, Baldwin," Griffith urged encouragingly. "I believe you. You'll not lose anything by this. You took the necklace, put it in a safe-deposit vault the morning after the robbery, and got it out again this afternoon. Why? Did you bring it here to turn over to Duke?"

"Ye-yes," faltered Baldwin. "He threatened to expose me if I didn't."

"Expose you? What about himself?"

"He said he was protected. I didn't know. I—I was afraid. Then he told me about——about Golding and——" Baldwin's voice wavered and broke.

"Take it easy," Griffith said, not unkindly. "Never mind Duke. He can't harm you. Look out for yourself first."

Apparently encouraged, Baldwin resumed; but even as he talked his eyes shifted dubiously to the scowling countenance of his manacled companion. "I got away with the necklace without any trouble; but later I made Duke think that the man who posed as Haggerty had stolen it from me before I left the theater."

"Then you knew Golding?"

Baldwin shook his head. "I thought he was an officer at first. I didn't learn otherwise until Haggerty appeared and told us what had happened. But when I did learn he was an impostor, I decided to use him.

"Duke must have known the man, and believing what I told him, he sought Golding. Guess you know what happened then. When he failed to find the necklace on Golding or in his room, he figured I had double-crossed him, threatened to squeal unless I turned over the necklace to him. He scared me into coming here to-night."

"Who was Golding?" Griffith demanded, turning to Duke. "How did you know he figured in the affair?"

Duke shrugged. "I got nothing to say."

Kendal, listening to the conversation, did not volunteer the information that would have cleared up the mystery surrounding the identity of Golding or of the part he had played in the drama.

"Looks as if Golding had designs on the necklace himself," Griffith said, summing up the testimony that had been offered. "You beat him to it, Baldwin. Maybe we'll get some dope on this man later. At any rate we've made considerable headway."

"Enough to clear Dolan," Judson spoke up.

"Plenty!" agreed Griffith. "And he can thank you for a lot of it. We've got two birds in one trap to-night, along with the cause of it all."

He beckoned to one of the waiters. "Get a taxi around here, will you?"

As the prisoners were marched along the wall to the street, Griffith bent a quizzical glance upon Kendal, who walked beside him. Some remote suspicion stirred in his heart.

"How did you happen to appear on the scene to-night, Kendal?" he asked, openly curious. "This is the second time you've popped up lately. Interested in the affair, are you?"

"Oh, somewhat," Kendal responded.

Challengingly, their eyes met; but Griffith learned nothing from Kendal's placid countenance.

The taxi rolled up. Griffith and his

prisoners climbed in for their trip to police headquarters. Judson hurried off to the theater to break the news to Miss Pulver, Hempelburg—and, most of all, to Dolan. Kendal stood on the sidewalk, looking after the cab. When it had disappeared, he lighted a cigar and strolled toward Broadway; but on this occasion a smile touched his lips.

Within the quiet confines of the study in the house overlooking Gramercy Park, Jacob Cadwaller leaned back in his chair and beamed pleasantly upon the infallible Kendal. Effaced were the lines of his brow; his eyes glowed; and a vast sense of unutterable contentment seemed to have descended upon him.

On the table between the men, unwrapped, lay the priceless heirloom: the alluring string of diamonds, platinum-linked, sparkling radiantly under the shaded lights, its wanderings over, restored at length to its sanctioned resting place.

"Do you think they'll suspect?" Cadwaller asked.

"Suspect?" Kendal laughed meditatively. "Oh, I'll probably hear from Griffith, but he'll make no fuss. Not now. He must realize by this time how exceedingly careless it was of him to stow the necklace in an outside coat pocket."

"And how adept you were in extracting it," the banker added with a smile.

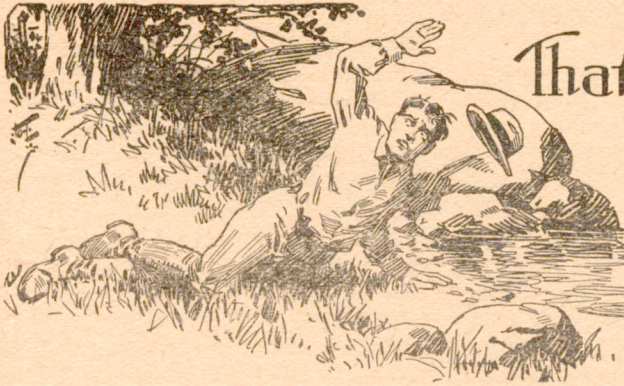
THE END.

Did you enjoy reading this story, or did you not? A word of criticism, favorable or unfavorable, is of value to those who have to get up this magazine. It turns out to be of value usually to the readers as well. Will you tell us briefly what you think of the foregoing story, and in the same letter, please give us your opinion of TOP-NOTCH as a whole?

A Queer Problem

REAL-ESTATE Agent: "This tobacco plantation is a bargain. I can't imagine why you hesitate. What are you worrying about?"

Prospective Purchaser: "I was just wondering whether I should plant cigars or cigarettes."



That Talking Lake -

By
Harrison R. Howard -

(A NOVELETTE)

CHAPTER I.

SEVERAL DISTINCT WORDS.



IT was without the slightest premonition of impending strange events that I followed the difficult trail through the pines. Darkness had enveloped the world abruptly, as it always does in the heart of the forest. The way led through a dense grove of giants, fine stalwart trees that towered above into the gloom like blackened classic columns, the upper foliage from either side of the trail blending to shut out the moonlight. No breath of wind disturbed the sullen atmosphere; even the sunset breeze had spent its brief existence.

To one of an imaginative turn of mind the way might have seemed a passage to a black and particularly atrocious hell, what of the overwhelming gloom, the dark towering shapes, and the weird sounds of the forest night life. It merely irritated me; time and again I was forced to flash my torch to make sure I did not wander from the uncertain way. Then, too, hunger was fraying my disposition, and I began to regret the impetuous whim which had prompted me to take the night trail across the wilderness to Renault House, instead of waiting for the team which would have brought me over the wagon road in the morning.

Suddenly the forest ended, and I stepped out into an open space filled and pulsing with silver gossamer that streamed down from a fat, full moon, riding low upon the horizon of treetops. It might have been fairyland after the long journey

behind, with its black suggestion of the pit. Not half a dozen yards below me lay the edge of a lake, its surface smooth as a mirror and as bright, reflecting perfectly the circle of pines, the star-dotted sky, and the round moon.

For the moment I forgot hunger and the aching discomfort of the pack straps on my shoulders as I stood gazing upon the loveliness of the waveless water. The lake seemed nearly circular, though actual measurement would perhaps have proved it slightly oval. At the upper end, a narrow river broke through the pines to empty with scarcely a ripple into the placid water; at the lower end the lake drained smoothly into another river, and then disappeared among the pines beyond.

It was no miniature lake; the trees on the opposite shore were dwarfed by distance. My trail skirted to the left, and following it I crossed the river upon a giant pine felled across it, and continued along the edge of the water until I reached a point just opposite where I had emerged upon the other shore. Here the way left the edge of the water and plunged once more into the wall of pines, continuing on, I was sure, until somewhere it reached Renault House.

I went up the gentle slope and had reached the pines when the noise began. From somewhere behind me, out upon the serene surface of the lake came a distinct gurgling sound. I paused, turning to scan the mirrorlike water, intent upon fixing a cause for the strange sound, which on the moment I could liken to nothing so much as the sound of water

rushing between the slack lips of a drowning man.

The roots of the hair at the back of my neck bristled, as a voice came from out upon the empty surface of the lake.

"Well, I'll be hanged!" it said.

For the moment I stood transfixed. The voice, deep and hollow, bore a muffled, suffocated quality which again suggested a man drowning. I swept the glistening water with startled, eager eyes, expecting to discover a boat or the head of a swimmer; but the lake lay unblemished and serene; not so much as a wind ruffle disturbed its tranquil surface.

An owl screeched dismally in the pines beyond and was answered from no great distance; and while the air still throbbed with the evil plaint the voice of the lake spoke again.

"Kelpo, you brainless fool! Up there, I say, and be quick about it!"

There followed rapidly a string of imprecations in the same muffled voice; then the vicious chant was taken up by a second, in a strange, unintelligible tongue.

An instant later, slipping out of the pack straps, I sprang down the bank to the edge of the water and stood there tensely listening, my rifle in hand and ready. Following upon a terrific oath, came a sharp, muffled report which my mind instantly likened to the sound attending the discharge of a small-caliber rifle. This was repeated again and again until my ears fairly rang; and as I stood there peering foolishly out upon the empty stretch of water there was borne upon my mind the belief that a battle was in progress between disembodied beings.

It was no nice thing to have one's beliefs thus challenged. Had I been less stanch a materialist there would have been no struggle in my mind; I should have accepted the manifestations for what they seemed to be. As it was, I must admit I was sadly shaken.

I stood upon the soft grass of the bank, staring stupidly out upon the placid surface of the talking lake. My mind swung about in a dismaying cycle of possibilities, searching desperately for some material explanation of the preposterous sounds. That they came from the very surface of the water there could be no

doubt; the opposite shore was far too distant to permit sound waves originating there to reach me with such volume and distinctness.

The fury of the small-caliber weapon went on, accompanied now and then by low, sobbing groans and, at rarer intervals, heavily voiced oaths. The impossible affair was maddening. Could it be some trick of ventriloquism, some vagrant echoes straying far afield, some mirage of sound?

These considerations were rudely interrupted as my ears caught the sound of a dry twig cracking behind me, and with my hand on the safety latch of my rifle I swung about. At the dark mouth of the trail above stood an indistinct figure of a woman dressed entirely in white. How long she had been there I could not guess, but she showed no sign of being startled as I whipped about to face her.

She wore no hat, I observed, and her light hair, piled high upon her head in an amazingly intricate coiffure, deflected the soft rays of the moon, setting up a dim aura about her head. She was poised in an attitude of attentive listening, her white hands clasped.

For a moment she stood like a marble figure in a moonlit garden; then her hands dropped to her sides and she came swiftly toward me. Removing my hat I stood waiting.

CHAPTER II.

A GOOD GUESS.

THE woman halted before me and laid a hand upon my arm. She was quite tall for a woman, her forehead almost on a level with my eyes. Young she was, not possibly more than twenty-five, and extremely good to look upon as she stood there enveloped in the soft witchery of moonlight. But I saw, too, that in her eyes was unmistakable fear and that her lips were unsteady!

"You've heard it—all?" she asked.

I nodded abstractedly, my interest fixed upon the evident agitation of her pale countenance. Her dark eyes were looking past me in a concentrated observation of the placid lake. I wondered, my mind in eager quest of some clew to the baffling situation, what possible con-

nection this lovely girl might have to the enigma of the talking lake.

We both started and stood staring inanely as a withering scream, high and shrill with pain, mounted from off the glistening water. The woman's fingers, cold and white, tightened upon my arm.

"Every night," she murmured, "just at this time it—the lake talks. It terrifies me; yet every night I come back. It seems to draw me!"

I peered intently into her eyes, expecting to find that unmistakable lack-luster of a disordered mind. "You mean to say that this preposterous thing occurs with regularity?" I asked.

She nodded, slowly deliberate, wincing as the sharp reports began once more. "Every night," she repeated dully, "for a little while. Then it stops—short. It will end very soon now."

I was uncannily disturbed by her certainty that so law-defying a phenomenon as a talking lake happened in accordance with a law of time. Could it be possible that there was one prosaic fact in this astonishing enigma, some reason in this stark madness? For the moment I half suspected that an influence had laid hold of me; these were not actual happenings; they were the hallucinations of a disorganized mentality. My hold upon the solidly material was slipping; I reached down, touching the woman's cold fingers to make sure of their actual substance.

She was saying, more to herself, it seemed, than to me, "It should stop now—in a minute or two!"

The fusillade of small-caliber reports ended, and that deep, hollow voice which first I had heard sounded again.

"Damn you, Kelpo! In, I say! In!"

I felt the hot perspiration trickling down from my forehead. A single loud report sounded, followed by a piercing scream which as it reached its climax was suddenly cut short by a gurgling noise, much like that which had heralded the first words. Again the chilling idea struck me that it sounded like the rush of water into the mouth of a drowning man.

Then even that sound ceased, and a placid stillness settled over the softly shimmering surface of the lake. Over-

head the owl hooted dismally and was answered again by its mate.

The girl beside me sighed gratefully, seemed to relax at once, and for the first time smiled.

"I think I can guess your name," she said, holding out her hand. "You're Mr. Horace Vaughn."

I nodded, a bit stupidly perhaps, and took the proffered hand.

"I'm Doris Spears," the girl continued cordially. "They have been expecting you at the House all day."

"Do you live at Renault House?" I asked in surprise. "I understood there were only old Jacques Renault and the two children."

"And Jim, the Indian servant, and his squaw, Tanaka. That is the way it was until two weeks ago, when I came. I am the children's governess."

I was more than a little surprised to learn this. Jimmy Dean, who had arranged this trip for me, had made no mention of a woman's presence at Renault House. Not that Miss Spears disturbed the prospect of an enjoyable stay in the deep woods; for when a man is a bachelor from choice rather than chance he has little to fear in the presence of women.

She evidently misread the significance of my silence. "I hope my being here won't detract from the pleasure of your vacation," she said.

"I was merely thinking about what you said a moment ago," I remarked. "You mentioned that you hear these voices every night. Do you come way off here alone each evening?"

She laughed and pointed to the mouth of the trail behind us. "Why, it's scarcely fifty yards to the edge of Renault clearing. Look there, you can see the light from the House. I'm not afraid of bears and cats, if there really are any here-about, and every evening while the children are studying I stroll out here. The first night, though, I was frightened when the lake began to talk. I ran all the way back like a scared kid, and when Mr. Renault came in I was too shaken to tell him what had happened."

"Have you ever encountered any one here before?"

She shook her head, her intricate coif-

ture shimmering in the soft moonlight. "Strangely, no one at the House seems to know about it."

"That's odd," I observed, pondering the uncanny affair. "The Renaults have lived here for some years, and if this thing occurs each night it is only reasonable to believe they know of it."

"They do not though, I'm convinced, or else they do and have some very good reason for seeming not to. One evening I told Mr. Renault that I heard strange sounds in the night. He was greatly amused, and said that I should not be frightened by the voices of the wild wood."

"Nonsense," I replied. "Those were human voices, and what sounded like a woman's scream—or perhaps it was a child's shriek."

"Yes; but how could they be, coming from off an empty lake?" She smiled dimly. "Sometimes, Mr. Vaughn, I think it's mermaids; but how could a mermaid be so profane?"

Her humor was gratefully diverting. "I admit it is puzzling," I agreed, slinging the pack straps to my shoulders, "and I certainly intend to see the inside workings of the thing before my stay at Renault House is ended."

We went up the gentle slope and entered the mouth of the trail. The way was broader than that beyond the lake and showed signs of considerable usage. It was preposterous, I told myself, that the rest of the occupants of Renault House were in ignorance of the remarkable phenomenon of the talking lake.

CHAPTER III.

IRON DISCIPLINE.

PRESENTLY the dark trail ended and Miss Spears and I came upon a broad clearing, hewed in the heart of the virgin forest. In the center of the wide open space appeared an imposing structure of logs, two stories in height. The upper floor was in darkness; below, the windows in the front were gilded by a soft glow from within.

At the near side of the clearing, now more than two dozen yards from where we had halted, stood a second large building of logs with a cupola surmounted by

a weathercock. It was unmistakably a stable, and I caught the faint stamping of hoofs and the heavy, contented breathing of animals.

"Stock?" I asked the girl at my side, somewhat surprised in the light of so much safe and available grazing space.

I fancied that Miss Spears was confused momentarily. After a time she replied, "That's one of the unaccountable things Mr. Renault does. All his animals are on pasture except enough to fill the stable. I've often wondered."

As we stood looking at the building the doors swung open, and a bowed figure emerged. Had the fellow stood erect he would have appeared to be a powerful man; but the ravage of disease or age had bent him sadly. He closed the stable doors behind him, locked them, and made his way to the big House.

"That's Jim," Miss Spears whispered and I half believed she shuddered. "He and his squaw do most of the work about the place. I don't like him; he sends cold shivers down my back when he is near. I—I believe I'm getting spooky already, and I've only been here two weeks." She laughed softly, and I was not quite sure of the reason. "Come, let's go on to the House so you can meet the children before their bedtime, Mr. Vaughn."

She led the way across the clearing, and presently we were mounting steps to a broad veranda which extended the entire length of the house. From the moonlit garden below rose a heavy fragrance of autumn blooms. I would have enjoyed pausing and contemplating the ensilvered beauty of a planted garden so deep in the wilderness; but Miss Spears crossed to the door, and after a quick knock turned the knob.

Within, I saw a comfortably furnished room lighted by a reading lamp upon a center table, about which sat three persons. Directly facing the door was an elderly man of generous bulk, surprisingly well preserved of countenance, white of hair and beard; to the left was a girl perhaps twelve years of age; and beyond sat a boy not more than fourteen.

As we entered, the children looked up brightly from books; the man rose and came forward.

"This is Mr. Vaughn, whom you were expecting, Mr. Renault," said Miss Spears. "We met on the lake trail when I was taking my evening stroll."

Renault smiled in warm cordiality and pressed my hand. "We looked for you all day, Mr. Vaughn, but when you did not arrive by sundown I suspected you'd come in with your luggage in the morning."

"The storekeeper in the village told me of the trail," I replied, grateful for his evidently sincere welcome, "and I couldn't resist the temptation of coming in to-night."

The old man bowed deeply. "We are honored, Mr. Vaughn, by having with us a man who has made his mark in the world as you have. We seldom have visitors here, and we shall do all in our power to make your visit an enjoyable one."

He turned to the children who had laid aside their books and were studying me intently from under surreptitiously raised lashes.

"Jeanne! Peter! Come here and meet Mr. Vaughn!"

Renault's words, though soft-spoken, were commanding, and the fancy struck me that the children were subject to a rigid discipline. They scrambled from their chairs and came pell-mell toward me. Jeanne reached me first and curtsied quaintly; Peter with a superior smile extended a firm little hand.

"I know all the best fishing holes here-about," he said, by way of acknowledging our introduction.

Every one laughed and Peter flushed awkwardly. I laid a comforting hand on his shoulder, feeling that here I had found a friend. After all it takes a boy to know the things lying closest to a man's heart. "Then if Miss Spears will permit," I told him, "we'll try our hands at fishing some morning."

"I'm sure you're very hungry, Mr. Vaughn," said Miss Spears. "Tanaka is probably asleep by now, so I'll get you a bite of supper."

Renault relieved me of my pack, and presently Miss Spears called me into the next room. I sat down to a meal of potato salad, cold chicken and ham, and a refreshing cup of coffee.

When I returned to the living room, Renault drew up a chair and bade me be seated. I was more than a little surprised at his cordiality; Jimmy Dean had explained that Renault, since the tragic and unaccountable death of his wife, was somewhat of a recluse, and I had expected to find him heavy and remote. He burdened me with countless questions of the city and waited eagerly for my replies. I had never encountered a more flattering listener.

When Miss Spears had taken Jeanne off to bed, young Peter closed his book. Going to a door at the rear of the room he opened it and called softly into the darkness beyond. A moment later a puppy, black and round, and a huge red cat tumbled into the room. The boy dropped upon the floor and the three began to frolic.

Renault, suddenly grown silent, sat watching the boy and the animals. I glanced about at the walls and found that with the single exception of a woman's portrait the pictures were all of circus life. There were photographs of trapeze performers posing beneath their apparatus, animals in cages or performing in an open ring, uniformed bands and groups of extravagantly painted clowns.

I wondered what interest such pictures possessed for the mild-faced man opposite, and came to the ready conclusion that they were for the amusement of the children. Jimmy Dean had told me that they had been motherless since infancy, and doubtless before Miss Spears had come their father had used the pictures as themes for stories with which to while away the long forest evenings.

These considerations were interrupted when the awkward puppy squealed pitifully as the boy, rolling over, accidentally caught the animal's forepaw beneath him. Renault started, and called sharply to the boy. Peter rose to his feet and with downcast eyes stood before his father. Again the conviction that the children were subjected to iron discipline came into my mind.

"Many times, Peter," the parent said heavily, "I have told you never to hurt an animal. You know your mother loved them and cautioned you to be gentle. You will stand in the corner, sir, until

Miss Spears comes down for you, and think over the things I have said about dumb beasts."

Father and son seemed to have forgotten my presence. The boy went to the corner of the room; Renault sat staring into the eyes of the black puppy. The whole incident seemed ludicrously out of proportion to me, and I should have indulged an impulse to smile had I not chanced to glance at Renault's eyes.

I admit I was startled. The man was staring fixedly into the eyes of the puppy, which sat on its haunches staring back. This exchange of scrutiny was no casual affair; there was that degree of intentness in the man's gaze which suggested the hypnotic. His eyes did not waver; they held upon the black puppy as though seeking to cast a spell.

There was an unnatural expression, too, in the eyes of the dog. The orbs were contracted; a pitiable emotion seemed struggling for expression within them. Glancing up at the picture above the mantelpiece I was amazed to note a like expression in the eyes of a great sleek tiger, photographed close-up through the bars of a cage.

Miss Spears came in then and paused on the threshold, taking in the tableau. Her eyes swung from the man to the dog, then to me. At the moment our eyes met, both of us started; for a single word escaped the lips of Renault.

"Bob!" he said.

Instantly the tableau broke. The puppy began to crawl on his belly toward the man. I saw then the unhidden amazement in Miss Spears' eyes, and knew that a like expression must be revealed in mine. The voice of Renault as he uttered that single word was far different from the one he used in conversation. Yet it was not wholly unfamiliar to me; I had heard it before that night as it came floating up from the undisturbed tranquillity of the moonlit lake.

CHAPTER IV.

VISITORS IN THE NIGHT.

LATER Renault led the way upstairs, showed me to my room, bade me good night pleasantly, and returned below. I was gratified to find so com-

fortable the living quarters that were to be mine for a month. The room was imposing in size, with a low, heavily beamed ceiling. There were deep bearskin rugs upon the floor, spacious chairs, a four-poster bed, and a detached French wardrobe for my clothes.

The bedroom was at the northwest corner of the house with windows in either exposed wall. From the windows to the left could be seen the big stable, looming darkly definite against the clear night, and behind which, I knew, was the mouth of the trail to the talking lake. From the other windows appeared only the black wall of the forest, towering against the starlit sky like a feudal barricade about the clearing.

I sat down in one of the deep chairs and for an hour made entries in my diary. I was forced to smile as I wrote, for the questionable spell of the talking lake seemed far removed from these comfortable quarters, the recording of its phenomena seemed ridiculous and incredible, and I was half convinced that I had fancied far more than I had perceived.

Extinguishing the lamp, I perched on the edge of the bed and began to unlace my boots. My attention was attracted presently by the rumble of wagon wheels and the thud of hoofs; and when a muffled voice called, "Whoa!" I went to the window and looked out.

A low, heavy wagon to which two horses were hitched stood before the stable building. I heard the front door of the House close, and a moment later Renault strode across the clearing. Half-way to the stable he halted and glancing back over his shoulder surveyed the front of his home.

Satisfied, I fancied, that the occupants of Renault House were long since asleep, he went on and was greeted in cautious voices by two men upon the wagon seat. They conversed for several minutes, during which the stable doors swung open, revealing a bowed little man whom I identified at once as Jim, Renault's Indian servant.

The master of the House stepped away from the wagon, and the driver skillfully maneuvered the horses to back into the stable. As the conveyance disappeared

within, Renault followed, and the Indian closed the doors behind them.

I drew a chair to the window, determined to see the thing out. For a time all was silent. Then I heard the stamping and chafing of the restless cattle. A half hour was ticked off on the dial of my watch. Ten minutes more and the stable doors swung open, and the wagon rolled out and came into sight once more.

As the vehicle stopped in the light space beyond the shadow of the building, I peered at the load it bore, trying in vain to determine what strange merchandise Renault was thus covertly delivering in the dead of night, with such obvious care against waking his household. I could make out nothing beyond the fact that the wagon held what appeared to be two very large crates, covered by a canvas tarpaulin.

Renault followed out into the moonlight, and as he halted beside the wagon one of the men on the seat produced what appeared to be a check book. From this he tore two strips of paper, signed each with a fountain pen, and handed them to Renault.

A moment after, the driver spoke softly to the horses and the vehicle crawled across the clearing to disappear into the dark maw of an opening among the pines. Renault stood looking in the direction of the point where the wagon had become lost to view. Behind him, the Indian closed and carefully locked the stable doors.

I stood listening to the dying rumble of the wagon wheels and presently started as a muffled scream, high-pitched and weird, came from the same general direction. Renault whipped about and with a soft-spoken curse surveyed the windows of his home. Then, shaking his grizzled head, he came on toward the House, the strips of paper fluttering in his hand as it swung at his side.

Minutes later I heard him enter, mount the inner stairs, and pass along the hall toward the opposite end of the building. When all was quiet again I speedily undressed and got into bed. But it was fully an hour before sleep came. That muffled scream kept echoing maddeningly in my ears, just as it had when I heard

it before floating gruesomely from off the silvered surface of the talking lake.

CHAPTER V.

BY FANG OR KNIFE?

WHEN, at the breakfast table next morning, I announced my intention to try my hand at fishing, young Peter was eager to accompany me. He appealed first to his father who, without looking up from his plate, nodded his head sidewise toward Miss Spears. After a moment's judicious consideration the governess agreed that he might accompany me, provided he would return for his lessons in the afternoon.

As we left the House, equipped with rods, fly book and baskets, Renault joined us.

"Come along this way, Mr. Vaughn," he invited cordially, indicating a trail visible at the east side of the clearing. "It is not much longer to the water, and you'll pass the truck gardens. They'll surprise you for up here in the wilderness, sir. I supply the village below and much more is shipped beyond."

We entered the trail and after a time came out upon a clearing several times the size of the other. It was as perfect a truck farm as ever I have seen, long, unwavering rows freshly green, the soil between fastidiously cultivated. The entire space was crisscrossed by an elaborate system of irrigation channels, and at the upper end appeared a small flood gate where I discerned Jim, the Indian, hoe in hand, banking the main canal.

Renault led the way across the clearing, explaining the growing things, eulogizing the rich virgin soil and the efficacy of water, when available at all times.

"And that is the trouble just now, Mr. Vaughn," he said, shaking his head. "This is our late crop, and we have scarcely enough water to force it along. In all the years I've been here I've never before seen so dry a season. We have to use water sparingly to make it last out until the rains."

"Where do you tap the river?" I asked, interested now in anything pertaining to bodies of water.

"Just above the House, Mr. Vaughn, at the outlet of the lake which you passed

last night coming in over the trail. The lake is low—tragically low—and if we are not very careful and the surface falls much lower we shall be short of water at the House. In the spring I shall dam the outlet, but it is too late in the season to begin now.”

We reached the opposite wall of the clearing, and Renault left us. Peter, whose impatience had grown with the delay, plunged on into the thicket, and it was with difficulty that I kept up with his skillful progress.

We came at length to the river, but so slender and wasted was the stream that I looked askance at my youthful guide.

“Just below, Mr. Vaughn, another stream joins this one. There is plenty of water there.”

This was so. When Peter had said, the night before, that he knew the best places to fish, he had spoken the truth. Such sport at so late a season I had never before encountered. The joyous morning slipped by before I knew it, and engrossed in the pleasant business of inveigling the wary trout, I quite forgot the cares of the distant city from which I had escaped for a month of relaxation.

One disturbing thing, though, persisted in my thoughts. That was the affair of the night before on the edge of the lake above. Each time Peter and I, plowing downstream, approached a stretch of rapids or a miniature waterfall the rushing waters reminded me of the gurgling sounds which had heralded the beginning and the ending of the talk on the lake.

Then, too, there was the episode that had happened later that night; and this was brought sharply into the foreground of my thoughts when, returning just after noon, we crossed the home clearing and passed the big stable.

“Some day you ask father to show you the stock, Mr. Vaughn,” Peter said suddenly. “They are very valuable. He won’t allow Jeanne or I ever to go inside the stable.”

My attention was instantly engaged, and it was on the tip of my tongue to make a few inquiries. But I forbore to question the lad; no matter what the extent of my interest I could not bring myself to satisfy it by probing the inno-

cent mind of the child. His words, though, and the wistful manner in which he spoke them, stayed with me. I could not help speculating upon the question of whether it was because of the valuable stock or some other reason which had prompted Renault to forbid the stable to his children.

That evening, after a meal of delicious trout, Renault left the House and from the wide windows I caught a glimpse of him going toward the stable. Miss Spears and the children went to the big living room for study, while I sat out upon the veranda with my after-dinner cigar, watching the shadows fall upon the forest world and waiting for the approach of the hour when, Miss Spears had said, the lake invariably began to speak.

Just as I was leaving the veranda, Miss Spears emerged from the House and joined me. “The children are hard at work, and this is the hour for my exercise. Are you going toward the lake, Mr. Vaughn?”

“To the lake!” I replied emphatically. “The thing interests me; and I’ve thought that perhaps if we circle the lake while the talk is going on we might find out exactly where the sounds come from.”

We went out across the clearing, past the big stable with its incessant stamping of animals, and took the trail beyond. Darkness was fully come and the way was black, though ahead we could discern the soft glow of the moonlight reflected upon the water. We came presently to the end of the trail and sat down upon the soft grass of the bank, waiting.

Overhead the sky was clear and star dotted; the waning moon rode lower in the sky, pouring an intense, almost warming, energy upon us. Night creatures stirred in the dry thicket beyond, and the owls in the pines hooted dismally.

It was a proper setting, I considered whimsically, for the arrival of ghouls and goblins and fairy folk. The supernatural and the subnatural might appear to convincing advantage thrown into relief against such a background.

Miss Spears glanced at her wrist watch. “It should begin almost any moment now,” she murmured.

Her lips were still moving when abruptly that now familiar gurgling sound reached my ears. We got up hastily and stood gazing out upon the still moonlit water.

The gurgling sound ended in a vast brawling clamor which went hurtling hollowly over the surface of the lake. In a moment this, too, ceased, and there followed a series of muffled reports which, as on the evening preceding, I could liken to nothing other than the firing of a small automatic rifle. Miss Spears touched my arm.

"What can that be, Mr. Vaughn? Invariably I hear it!"

"Shh!" I whispered, momentarily taken off guard and fearing that her words might be heard and the talk on the lake cease. Then I felt the blood rush to my face as a lurid string of imprecations floated up to us, followed by that deep, muffled voice which had spoken the night before.

"Kelpo! Are you mad? In, I say, and be quick!"

The perspiration sprang out upon my forehead. I turned to Miss Spears, sharply irritated by the incomprehensible, impossible affair which offended every law of natural cause and effect.

"The thing is preposterous!" I exploded. "Those sounds come from directly in front of us, yet the lake, plainly, is deserted. There can be no other explanation than that the words are spoken from the opposite shore. Wait here, Miss Spears, while I skirt the lake."

I swung down to the edge of the water and followed along the shore, my ears filled with a strange medley of sounds. Just as I reached the outlet of the lake and crossed the fallen tree, the sounds ceased, and I made my way along the opposite shore in silence.

I halted at a point just across the water from where I had left Miss Spears. Behind me lay the mouth of the trail whose accursed passage I had accomplished the previous night. Not a sound broke the forest stillness; even the night creatures held their peace.

I was dismayed and more than a little disgusted. Apparently my trip had been for naught. Either the voice of the lake was short-lived this night or through

some strange quirk of acoustics the sounds were inaudible from where I stood. I was about to return when these conclusions were suddenly proved wrong. Across the water, directly in front of me, came the unmistakable clank of steel on steel, and the words:

"Kelpo, you fiend!"

A scream that set my hair to bristling hurtled toward me from the empty water; and I knew with entire certainty that my theory of the sounds originating from this side of the shore of the lake was erroneous. Though I stood on the bank opposite the one from which I had before listened to the voices, the sound still came from off upon the silvered surface of the lake.

Abruptly, then, there floated to my ears that distinct gurgling sound, like water rushing between the lips of a drowning man; and thereafter a dismal silence fell over the wide clearing with its floor of ensilvered water reflecting the virginal beauty of the forest night.

I made my way back amid a silence broken only by the dry stirring of night creatures and the hooting of the owls. Miss Spears was waiting as I came up. She smiled in mischievous amusement.

"And now that you've discovered it, Mr. Vaughn, what is the secret of the talking lake?"

I laughed in grateful relaxation from the tensity of the past half hour. "I was wrong," I admitted. "The sounds do not come from the other shore. They come from the lake itself."

She laughed, a bit uncertainly I thought. "But how from the lake?"

"That is the question!" I asserted, thinking gloomily of my solidly materialistic philosophy which was so preposterously challenged.

We went back along the trail in silence, emerged upon the home clearing, and started to cross the open space to the House. As we passed the stable the doors opened, and Renault joined us.

"Why, Mr. Renault, you're hurt!" Miss Spears said suddenly.

I saw then that my host's left hand was swathed in a handkerchief.

"It's scarcely a hurt," Renault objected. "I merely scratched it on a nail in the stable."

When we reached the House the children were still studying. Miss Spears brought a basin of warm water, added a drop or two of carbolic acid, and bathed the cut on Renault's hand.

It was not for me to question any man's veracity, especially the man who was entertaining me in his home; yet, as I watched Miss Spears cleaning the wound, I was forced to remember having learned that a nail tears invariably a ragged course in flesh and in cloth. And the rent upon Renault's hand was clean cut and straight, as though made by the slash of a sharp knife or the strike of a sharper fang.

CHAPTER VI.

WHEN THE CHANCE CAME.

SLEEP was long delayed in coming to me that night. As I lay in the dark, meditating over the events which had taken place since I took the black trail to Renault House, I pondered desperately the seemingly inexplicable phenomena of the talking lake which so sweepingly contradicted the beliefs of my nature and breeding.

Next morning I woke refreshed and in somewhat higher spirits; for from out of the muddle of thoughts from the night before there emerged a clew which as I considered it promised well. That the big stable, to which each evening Renault repaired and from which in the dead of night he delivered unknown cargoes, was in some way vitally linked with the nightly events at the lake was a conviction which I could not suppress.

As it was Saturday morning the children were free from scholastic duties, and when Renault left for the garden clearing they, with Miss Spears, went along. Peter wanted me to go off hunting with him, but I told him that I had a number of letters that must be written, and so I remained at the House.

My real reason for staying behind was to embrace the opportunity thus presented for investigating the stable. Half an hour after they left, I went outdoors and was about to start across the clearing when Jim came into view. He nodded a morning greeting and going directly to the stable unlocked the huge padlock.

Disappearing within the building, he closed the doors behind him.

I lingered amid the fragrant beds of flowers, waiting for the Indian to leave the place and follow the others; but suddenly I decided that now was the best time to put my plan into execution, for with the Indian gone I might experience considerable difficulty getting past the formidable brass padlock.

I crossed to the building, entered, and closed the doors behind me. As I turned about, expecting to face the Indian and ready with a polite request that he permit me to look over the stock, I found no sign of Jim. Twice I called softly to him, but no reply came, only the stamping of the animals broke the silence of the place.

On either hand, in orderly rows of stalls, were fine sleek cattle, well fed and tended. To the rear I saw several horses. I went from stall to stall, searching for the Indian; then climbed the ladder to the hay loft, only to find that, too, empty of human life. I descended once more and seated myself upon some baled hay, which was on the floor of the aisle between the rows of stalls. I was beginning to doubt that I had seen him enter the place, when my eyes fell upon that which promised explanation.

At the rear of the building I saw a second pair of doors, exact duplicates of those at the front. I was startled as the full significance of this arrangement came to me. The stable was so situated in relation to the House that one might enter by the front doors, go out through the rear, and step upon the trail to the talking lake without his departure being observed by any possible watcher from the House.

I understood at once why I could not find the Indian. Some business had taken him to the lake, and not wishing me to observe him he had merely passed through the stable, when for all I knew he was still within.

This conclusion both amused and stimulated me. It promised well as a lead toward the solution of the mystery, which had become my dominating interest. Intent upon the budding scheme in mind, I went outside, closed the doors behind me, and struck off toward the

wall of pines at the south edge of the clearing.

I secluded myself in a clump of undergrowth, from which I could observe any one leaving by either the rear or the front doors of the stable. Having seen the Indian disappear within, and understanding the strategy he had employed, it remained only to wait and see his method of reappearance.

While I waited I made entries in my diary, and when a half hour had passed I closed the book and gave full attention to my vigil. I should relish the sight of the wily Indian emerging from the forest trail, entering the stable at the rear, and reappearing nonchalantly at the front doors, to all casual observation having spent the time within.

Then in my hiding place I started violently and leaped to my feet. The front doors of the building swung open and out into the sunlight strode the Indian. This sudden and unexpected sight stupefied me, and I blinked my eyes to make sure that they were not tricking me. The savage carefully locked the doors behind him, crossed the clearing, and disappeared in the direction of the vegetable gardens.

Still a bit shaken from the impact of disillusionment against my fondly nurtured theory, I went out into the open and made my way to the rear of the building. Inspection proved that the heavy brass lock was tarnished from disuse; the hasp was rusty. Obviously the doors had not been opened for many a day.

The absurdity of the situation smote me and I had to laugh. The Indian had been in the building all the time. But where? I made no attempt to answer; I was through with theorizing which only added to my confusion; and sadly disturbed, I made my way back to the House.

Seating myself in the big living room I lighted a cigar and pondered upon the situation. My gaze traveled over the walls, observing the bizarre photographs of circus life, vast show tents, graceful acrobats, shaggy lions and their sleek mates, clowns, elephants, and the imposing ensemble on parade.

The searching of my thoughts brought

me no measure of understanding of the things which had taken place since first I had looked upon the talking lake. The enigma of the strange happenings was far removed from the range of any conjecture my mind projected toward it in an effort to solve it.

Miss Spears came in presently, and I told her what had happened. She nodded casually, and I was disappointed that she did not show greater interest and surprise. I realized shortly, however, that she had already observed so much which was confusing at Renault House that her capacity for further amazement was probably limited.

"Sometimes, Mr. Vaughn, strange sounds come from the stable, although until now I've never considered them seriously. Besides, the cattle are forever stamping and lowing."

"It's preposterous to stable cattle when so much safe grazing space is available," I declared. "They may be only a blind!"

"I was just thinking that," Miss Spears agreed thoughtfully.

I rose decisively to my feet. "This thing has gone far enough toward baiting me. I'm going to find out if there is anything wrong with that stable. I'll ask Mr. Renault to let me look over his stock, and if he shows any reluctance it will serve to indicate to my mind some connection between the stable and the talking lake."

The two children came in then, and to my query replied that their father was coming directly. I saw the Indian pass the front of the House, going toward the kitchen, and a moment later Renault came up the veranda steps.

"Mr. Renault," I said as he entered, "I am very much interested in stock and should like to look over your stable some day."

Miss Spears, across the room, was observing my host's face closely for any betraying sign. He merely glanced at the clock on the mantel.

"We have time before lunch, Mr. Vaughn," he said. "I shall be pleased to show you the animals."

Instead, however, of leading the way directly outside, he went to the rear door of the room. "Jim, open up the stable!"

he called. "Mr. Vaughn wants to look over the stock."

I was more than a little surprised; surely the master of Renault House carried keys to the stable. We went out upon the veranda, and I saw the Indian running across the clearing. He unlocked the doors, went inside, and closed them behind him. I started on, but Renault stopped me, and kneeling beside a box of pansies entered upon a detailed exposition of their culture.

A moment or so later the Indian reappeared. Renault glanced at him, and I was sure that a message was communicated between them. At once the pansies were forgotten, and my host led me directly toward the stable.

I know something of stock and stockmen, and I perceived at once that Renault was a proper hand with animals. We went from stall to stall, and he seemed to delight in rendering a brief summary of the virtues and defects of each animal.

As his voice droned monotonously in my ears, my gaze wandered over the place, searching for some clew which would lead to the knowledge of where the Indian had been during my previous inspection. Item after item of my surroundings I scrutinized, yet all was in order and above suspicion. I could discover nothing upon which to pin a hope for understanding.

After lunch I encountered Miss Spears in the garden.

"About showing you the stable, Mr. Vaughn," she said, smiling mischievously at me. "Was he—er—reluctant?"

"No one," I replied with entire conviction, "could have been more eager!"

CHAPTER VII.

TRAPPED ON THE TRAIL.

THAT evening and the one following, Miss Spears and I studied the phenomenon of the talking lake without making any discoveries. I must admit of a growing irritability at this constant frustration of my purpose; and only Miss Spears' abiding humor prevented my broaching the subject to Renault.

Early on the fifth morning I left the House with my rifle, intending to reconnoiter the woods beyond the river in

search of game trails. If I found favorable indications I would go out the following night and be on hand when the game came down to water.

As I crossed the home clearing I passed Jim, the Indian.

"Good morning, Mr. Vaughn. You go hunt?" he asked.

I nodded, motioning across the river.

Jim shook his head, his black eyes narrowed and inscrutable. "Better that way," he suggested, pointing in the opposite direction.

"Perhaps you're right," I agreed, wondering suddenly what motive prompted the Indian's words. "Some day I'll try over in there; but this morning I'm just looking about, not expecting to bag anything. My guess is that there should be trails across the river, and I'm going over to see."

"Very foolish. No good that way," the Indian said heavily, shaking his head.

He stood staring at me a moment as though he intended to object further. Instead, he shook his head again and went off in the direction of the stable. I crossed the clearing, cut through the woods, and fording the attenuated river at a space of broad shallows, penetrated the thick wall of virgin timber beyond.

As I thought over the brief encounter with Jim, I became aware of a growing suspicion that his seemingly casual interest in my jaunt may have had its foundation in a desire to keep tab on my whereabouts. I remembered that during the interview he had studied me with an unusual degree of intentness; and there was no gainsaying the fact that in his stolid way he had revealed an urgent desire that I try my luck in the opposite direction.

Reasoning thus as I picked my course through a fine stand of firs, clean based and lusty, the fancy took hold of me that here, perhaps, on this side of the river, lay some tangible clew to the remarkable happenings which so stirred my imagination.

I had met Indians before and to no small extent had been friendly with them. I had never known one to offer unsolicited advice unless some reward, immediate or remote, was forthcoming. With these considerations in mind, I could ar-

rive at but one explanation of the Indian's motive for accosting me, and with heightening interest I plunged on into the virginal wilderness.

I came at length to where the park-like growth of firs ended and entered upon a region where smaller sticks grew up out of a choking tangle of undergrowth. Here I found a dim trail that plainly was not man made and seldom man traveled, though once I made out a fragment of the imprint of a hobnailed boot. This trail I followed, halting now and again to observe the bushes on either side of the way, which, a little earlier had borne berries. There was no mistaking the signs that animals had been feeding there.

The trail, I surmised, led from the river up into the ridges above, and served probably as a thoroughfare for animals coming down to water. A dawn vigil at its side should yield a picture of wild life interesting to behold.

I went along the trail, which gradually ascended to the high ground back of the river. Where it forked I took the smaller strand and followed to the left. By easy windings it made its way to the first plateau above.

I walked briskly, my rifle, balanced in my hand, swinging at my side. I had just gone on from a momentary halt to inspect the chafed trunk of a sapling, where some animal had been sharpening its teeth, when my eyes fell upon a large and ragged hole directly across the floor of the trail before me.

At once I went on another two steps, intending to halt at the edge of the opening and determine its cause and nature.

As I set my right foot upon the ground the world suddenly jerked from beneath me. With a swift sensation of lightness in the pit of my stomach, much the same as one experiences in a swiftly descending elevator, I went down, not upon the ground, but through it.

My rifle caught fast to something upon the surface and was jerked from my grasp. Down I went, amid a shower of stones and loose earth, into a pit of darkness and landed heavily with a jar that set my head to whirling. I knew at once that I was in an animal trap; looking above, I could see light boughs

laid across the top of the pit, covered by cut foliage and loose earth. My rifle I could see far above my reach, caught horizontally across the two boughs between which I had fallen.

I recalled then with a sickening start that other hole. Something, I realized, had fallen through before I had made the second hole. Looking about, I saw the animal—first, two gleaming points of fire which I knew to be eyes, then a dark shaggy head, and a formidable pair of shoulders.

It was a bear, a huge black bear, ordinarily harmless if left alone. At the first glance, however, I saw that my bear was not harmless. He was crouching for an onrush, drawing his forepaws under him with short nervous movements that suggested an old tabby softening her bed.

Doubtless the animal was starving. I was sure that under usual circumstances he would have cowered in the dark corner of the pit. I had hunted his kind before, though in a far different section of the country.

I looked about for some mode of escape or method of combat. Escape evidently was impossible; the roof of the pit was my own length above me. But in the fall I had brought down a short, stout piece of hazel bough, and quickly arming myself with this doubtful weapon I poised to meet as best I could the onslaught so unmistakably imminent.

Like a black smear, the animal suddenly upreared upon its shaggy hind legs. I raised the stick before me. I realized the near promise of death in that one flashing moment; defense was hopeless, futile. Then a cataclysm of sound broke through the pit, and I knew that a rifle had been fired. The bear paused abruptly in full career, his huge form was suddenly possessed of a devastating paroxysm, and he crumpled heavily to the ground.

As I looked above to see who my rescuer was, a heavy rope, knotted at regular intervals, was dropped through the hole caused by my fall. No face was visible and I called out, asking who was there. The rope continued to descend, but no answer came.

My bear was stirring. Glancing at him I saw that he had been stunned, the rifle

ball having cut through his scalp just inside his right ear and had done little more than graze the surface. I lost no time in scaling the rope and, not realizing the childishness of doing so, pulled it up after me.

I looked about, eager to discover and reward my rescuer, but no one was in sight. I called again and again and was answered only by my own words, thrown back from the peaks above. My rifle, lying beside me, was still warm; I broke the breech and extracted a smoking cartridge.

For perhaps a quarter of an hour, I sat there on the edge of the pit, regathering my breath and wits. The bear had recovered and was raging back and forth below, emitting weird guttural noises. I got up and with ponderous caution inspected the trap. The knotted rope, I found, was fastened to the base of a near-by tree, and from its weathered appearance was a permanent adjunct.

I gathered armfuls of greens and dropped them into the pit for the hungry bear, then, my taste for hunting satisfied for the day, I made my way back toward the river and the home clearing beyond.

I was uncomfortably confused by the morning's events. What was the reason for the animal trap, and especially why that kind of a trap? Who was my rescuer, and why did he display such modesty in withholding his identity from my due gratitude? These, and a dozen more questions, as I descended the trail, puzzled through my brain.

The family was at lunch when I entered the House, and I was possessed of the idea, as I took my place at the table, that Jacques Renault looked at me with unusual intentness. Peter was urgent in his query as to my luck; Miss Spears looked unconcerned. I explained that I had met with a big black bear, but had not killed it. The children were overjoyed; Renault was uncommunicative in his study of my face.

Miss Spears and I went again to the lake that evening and sat on the shore while the strange events happened. To me it was maddening thus to observe a strange effect and to be mocked in every effort to comprehend its cause.

I was beginning to understand how

simple it was for people at all gullible to become believers in occult manifestations. I could easily, had I been more imaginative and less imbued with solid scientific principles, have attributed the happenings to creatures of another world, believing this remote lake to be the playground of peculiarly harsh-voiced departed spirits, who swore luridly, and screamed constantly, and repeatedly discharged small-caliber rifles.

That night, as I lay in bed awaiting sleep, the events of the day marched through my mind in an imposing procession: the effort of Jim to change the direction of my wanderings, my fall into the bear trap, the mysterious person who had used my own rifle to save me, the enigma of the talking lake.

For a long time I lay awake. I remember dreaming that I stood alone on the edge of the lake, listening to the subdued rat-tat-tat of rifles. Suddenly the sound ceased, then began again, louder and more distinct. Again there was an interval of silence, followed by the sound now close, near by.

I woke with a start, listening in the black silence of the room. I sat upright as the tapping began once more. I realized then that some one was knocking guardedly upon my door, and the following moment a voice unmistakably feminine whispered:

"Mr. Vaughn! Mr. Vaughn! Wake up, please!"

It was Doris Spears. I leaped from the bed and got into my slippers and bath robe. Opening the door I found her standing in the gloom of the hallway, clothed in a sweeping cloak of dark fur which extended in a single voluminous drop from her shoulders to her feet. Her hair hung loosely about her, and her hands, white in the moonlight, were clasped tightly. There was no mistaking the agitation in her eyes.

"Mr. Vaughn," she said, "forgive me for waking you, but something is happening outside. Please come to my room at once. You can see it better from those windows."

I followed her down the unlighted hall and into her room. It was filled with moonlight from the wide windows. Miss Spears halted there and pointed down

into the open space between the House and its stable.

The scene which met my eyes engaged at once my entire attention. Three human figures were visible below, stationed equally distant from each other, each holding to a short length of rope which extended from their grasp to a common center. There, the three ropes were fastened to a dark, struggling object that seemed to possess great strength. The three people were each holding fast to his particular length of rope.

Two of the participants in this remarkable tableau I recognized at once. They were Renault and the Indian, Jim. Further study revealed the third person as Jim's squaw. With great heaving efforts they were dragging the black object toward the stable.

"What—what is it?" Miss Spears asked breathlessly.

I shook my head, my interest entirely captivated. Foot by foot the struggling form was being forced forward; time and again it attempted to spring at one or the other of its captors, only to be rudely jerked back by the others.

As they neared the open doors of the stable, sounds of impatient stamping and now and then a frightened nicker reached our ears.

"It frightens them!" Miss Spears exclaimed.

"Of course," I replied. "It's wild."

"It? What?" Miss Spears asked in a whisper.

A moment later the objects of our scrutiny reached the deep shadow of the stable and soon afterward the closing of the doors told us that they were inside.

"Please tell me what it was, Mr. Vaughn!"

I started from my preoccupation and looked at the half-frightened girl.

"Nothing very terrible," I replied lightly. "I met one in the forest today, very likely the very same fellow. It was a big black bear."

"A bear? But—but what can they be doing with it in the stable—alive?"

"Perhaps they did not take it into the stable," I answered, suddenly thinking of the rear doors.

"But, Mr. Vaughn, I—we saw them! I— Frankly I don't understand."

"Nor do I," I said. "But this helps a lot. I've an idea, and in a day or so I'll know. You don't know how grateful I am that you called me."

I returned to my room. Sleep for a while was out of the question, and I sat by the moonlit window and read back over my diary. Piece by piece things fitted together. I felt that at last I had stumbled upon a tangible clew, and I later fell asleep with the firm conviction that the bear we had observed below bore a ragged rifle-ball wound just beside his right ear.

CHAPTER VIII.

THAT STRANGE CURRENT.

THE following morning I spent writing letters and making entries in my diary, and after the midday meal made again the trip to the animal trap on the high trail. As I had suspected, the pit was empty and the trap had been carefully reset. Fresh foliage and earth covered the trail floor, ready for the next forest creature to test its treachery.

It was nearing sundown when I returned. I approached by way of the stable and paused at the rear doors to inspect the ground about. No signs were there of a struggle, but as I passed the front of the building I saw unmistakable marks of the affair of the previous night.

Somewhere within the building, I reasoned as I made my way to the House, the bear was concealed. I had twice inspected the structure from within; it was unbelievable that a wild creature could be lodged there. The panic of domestic animals would prohibit its being placed very near them. Yet a bear had been taken within, a living bear which not long before had barely been thwarted in its intention to take my life.

All the evidence pointed to the one theory, and with a feeling of satisfaction I went in to supper. When the meal was over and Renault had gone, I motioned Miss Spears to follow me and went out upon the veranda.

"Miss Spears," I said when she joined me, "I wish to go out to the lake alone to-night. I would like to have you stay here, if you will, and when it is time for

the lake to talk come out on the veranda and keep watch on the stable."

"Has something happened?" she asked with quick interest.

"No one thing in particular," I answered. "Just an accumulation of little things that has given me an idea. You'll do it?"

"Of course, Mr. Vaughn! But am I merely to watch?"

I nodded. "And when I return from the lake tell me whatever you have seen."

She agreed and went back to the children. I sat on the veranda steps for a time, thoughtfully smoking my after-dinner cigar. Then, taking my rifle, I went off into the gathering dusk to the talking lake.

The moon had risen above the tips of the encircling pines as I came in view of the mirrorlike sheet of water. Not a ripple disturbed the polished surface of the lake. A silence as tranquil as the water itself pervaded the air. I sat down at the base of a pine and started upon my second after-dinner cigar.

The tobacco smoke rose languidly in the motionless air. Time passed unnoticed. Presently I threw away the cigar. As I was a trifle thirsty, I went down to the edge of the water and dropped full-length upon the soft grass to drink.

I was just lowering my lips to the cool surface when I saw something that made me pause. The water directly beneath my eyes had suddenly become disturbed, and a narrow current began to flow toward the bank, though I could not understand why it should do so.

As I lay there contemplating this unusual phenomenon, that gurgling sound now so familiar to me reached my ears from directly beneath me, followed by a hollow, explosive imprecation that set the hair at the back of my neck to bristling.

It was impossible. The sounds came from a point just below my chin as I lay there with my head lowered to drink. For the moment I could not move; the power of volition seemed to have deserted me. I lay prone upon the soft grass at the side of the lake, my lips almost touching the water, watching the odd current and listening to the sounds which came from the point to which it flowed.

Abruptly the rapid firing of a small

weapon, as I had judged the sound, began. Now that it appeared to rise from the water beneath me, it sounded different. My mind was trembling upon an explanation when the sound was overcome by the heavy voice of the lake.

"Kelpo, you young vicious fiend! Up, up, I say! Ah—good! Now then back—back there, Kelpo!"

My attention was suddenly caught by a sound on the lake bank behind me. The dry crackling of brittle undergrowth reached my ears, and I knew that some one stood at the mouth of the trail, observing me and listening to the voice of the lake.

Who was there behind me? Miss Spears it could not be; she, I knew, would keep faith with the part I had assigned her; she was on the veranda, watching the stable. It could not be the master of Renault House, for even now his voice was booming forth from beneath me and hurtling out across the undisturbed surface of the silvery water.

Jim, the Indian! That was it; he suspected me. I thought of the previous day when he had tried to alter the course of my wanderings. I raised myself slowly, with what casualness I could assume, intent upon grasping the rifle at my side.

My knees were almost beneath me when the woods reverberated to a heavy shot, fired not more than a dozen yards behind me. My hat was torn from my head and flung out upon the water. With a gasp of dismay I dropped flat upon the ground.

CHAPTER IX.

A CLEW TO THE MYSTERY.

MOTIONLESS, I lay there, scarcely breathing. For a time no further sound came from behind me, then I heard once more the dry crackling of twigs. As the seconds passed, the sounds grew fainter, and I knew that my assailant was taking the trail back to the House clearing.

Through it all the voice of the lake had continued, interrupted now and then by momentary fusillades of small rifles, and once by a prolonged cry of pain.

I ran my hand experimentally along the edge of the water at the point from

which the sounds seemed to come. My fingers came suddenly in contact with something round and hard, projecting about an inch, directly from the earth of the bank. I edged forward and scrutinized the object closely.

I knew it at once for what it was—the end of a six-inch terra-cotta water pipe. It was two thirds out of the water, only the lower lip of the circle being submerged, and into this the water was draining, causing the current which I had observed with surprise a few minutes before and which was still pouring in.

Explanations tumbled riotously into my mind. I glanced carefully at the earth of the bank. There was no mistaking the signs that at normal times the surface of the lake was above the pipe; and I remembered, with new significance, Renault's complaint of low water.

I leaned forward and down, watching the water drain into the pipe. Somewhere it was going; at some point it was used. Not for irrigation; the floodgate below served that purpose. I placed my ear directly to the unimmersed portion of the pipe end. The sounds were wonderfully clear then.

Suddenly I heard what seemed to be the slamming of a door, and Renault's voice boomed angrily.

"Have you lost your wits, Jim?" he asked. "What the devil did you come down yet for? Haven't I told you——" His voice trailed off unintelligibly.

"Him dead!" came the unmistakable guttural of the Indian. "I kill him, Mr. Vaughn, at lake. Water very low; Mr. Vaughn listen at end of water pipe—hear you talk—hear whip."

An oath, uttered in terrific rage, escaped Renault. But I scarcely heard it. My mind had fastened upon that illuminating word, "whip," and feasted its curiosity upon it.

"You fool!" Renault's voice boomed out of the pipe end and went spreading out across the water. "Go back and bring Mr. Vaughn in. If he's dead, I'll cut you to pieces with this whip. Take him to the House and have Miss Spears attend to him at once!"

I got hurriedly to my feet; I had no intention of meeting the Indian upon his return. Picking up my rifle I plunged

into the thicket and at a safe distance paralleled the trail to the home clearing. Once I halted, listening to catch the sound of Jim traveling the trail itself, but no sound met my ears.

Emerging from the woods I dashed across the clearing to the House, catching sight of Miss Spears, standing at the end of the veranda, her starched white skirt glowing in the moonlight. My mind was in a fever of wild fancies; the lure of converging clews was heavily upon me.

Doris Spears met me at the bottom of the veranda steps.

"The Indian!" I panted. "Have you seen him?"

"Not five minutes ago he went down the trail to the lake, Mr. Vaughn."

For an instant my heart stood still. "Where—where did he come from?"

It seemed a century before she replied: "From the stable, Mr. Vaughn. Why, what has——"

My heart pounded on again. "I'm in a hurry! I'll tell you about it later."

I crossed the clearing at top speed and brought up before the stable doors. They were locked. I thrust the barrel of my rifle into the eye of the hasp and forced it off. Then I went inside and closed the doors behind me.

As I turned about, a remarkable sight met my eyes. Directly before me the stable floor ended, and there appeared a square open space from which a dim light came. I recalled in a flash that when I had inspected the place before, three bales of hay had stood on the spot where the open trapdoor now appeared.

I circled the space and found that the bales of hay stood upended, strapped ingeniously to the top of the open door. I discovered a stout steel cable fastened to the under side of the planks, and surmised that it was attached somewhere below to a counterweight which would permit one person's raising the door and its covering of baled hay.

A short flight of steps led down into the dimly lighted space below. These I descended and found myself in a small compartment in which I was forced to stoop low in order not to strike the beams of the ceiling. Here I discovered a second trapdoor in the floor, and taking hold of the ring bolt I cautiously raised it

and went halfway down another and longer flight of stairs.

There I halted. I saw a large well-lighted room, the like of which I had never before seen. Walls and floor were of white cement; two large kerosene lamps hung from the ceiling, flooding the place with light. As my eyes ran over the rest of the room I began to understand those pictures in the living room of the House.

Into each of the four walls was built a large cage, faced with stout, vertical steel bars, equipped with a door and heavy padlock. In the shadows of two of these cages, indistinguishable black forms stalked back and forth; the other two stood empty, their doors ajar. At each of the corners of the room were large pedestals, bracketed to the walls, and removed to one side stood an orderly pile of blocks, barrels, hoops, hurdles, and other paraphernalia of the animal trainer.

These things I saw with one fleeting glance; for my startled attention was at once engaged upon the three living objects in the open room, one human and two animals.

It was evident that I had broken in, all unknown to the three, upon a moment that brimmed with tragedy. To one side of the room, unchained and unnoticed by the two others, stood a young black bear. At the opposite side, crouching low and ready to spring, was a sleek, vicious-looking wild cat, dragging from its neck a short chain. In the center of the room, facing the cat, a broken whip in his hand, stood Jacques Renault.

There was no mistaking the significance of the tableau. I got the fearful understanding of it at a glance. The young black bear was harmless; his was the freedom of the place. The cat, though, was far different; I saw in its green eyes the imminent menace of attack as it crouched there, ready though waiting. In Renault's deep eyes was stark fear.

His hands, the left empty, the right bearing the broken whip, were slowly moving toward each other, obviously to transfer the whip to his left hand in order that he might grasp in his right the revolver I saw hanging in a holster at that side of his belt. The very slowness of his movements was maddening, but I

understood his caution. Any abrupt action would precipitate the beast's onslaught.

I raised my rifle, but before I could take aim, the cat gathered itself and sprang. If I have ever had need to kill, it was then. I fired hastily—missed. Renault fell back, jerking wildly at his revolver; but I realized he was too late; the cat must surely reach him.

Then a thing happened which will probably not be believed when I tell it, even though I saw it happen before me. A black object, upreared on shaggy hind legs, came hurtling in front of Renault and engaged the cat in full career. It was the little black bear, a moment ago harmlessly feeding. The springing cat brought up with a solid impact against the animal, its claws fixing themselves into the bear's unprotected stomach. A scream and a low sobbing cry of pain filled the place; in that blurred moment my full sympathy went out to the black creature; then I drew bead and fired.

CHAPTER X.

WHEN UNDERSTANDING CAME.

MY heart stood still as I watched the effect of my shot, then pounded on again. A withering paroxysm shook the cat, a moment it hung motionless, then fell away from the torn and wounded bear. Renault's rescuer tottered drunkenly on its legs, and suddenly crumpling, rolled over on its side and lay still. I had a fleeting vision of Renault glancing up, then rushing forward to kneel beside the wounded bear.

With a lump in my throat, I sprang down the remaining steps. At the bottom I halted and glanced hastily about for that which would explain the question in my mind. I found it, there against the left wall, a large steel tank open on top. Above it was the end of a six-inch pipe, covered now by a steel cap, such as is used on fire hydrants. I realized that when the cap was removed in order to fill the tank, the sounds occurring in the room went through the pipe to the low level of the lake above, the small flow of water leaving sufficient space for the sounds to travel.

I knelt beside the master of Renault

House. He did not glance at me; his eyes, dim and misty, were only for the bear. One word rumbled again and again from his throat, "Kelpo!"

The animal's stomach was badly ripped where the cat's claws had fastened into the tender young flesh. When Renault had inspected the wound he grasped the animal's hind legs, motioned me to take the fore, and together we carried the unconscious bear to a near-by table.

I held it on its back while Renault brought from a cabinet a surgical kit and medicines. From a basin of hot water, into which he placed a few drops of some pungent acid, he bathed the wound. No words passed between us, though now and again we exchanged a glance that surpassed all verbal communication in its wealth of comprehension.

I have never seen more deft fingers than Renault's as he sewed and knotted the surgical thread, inch by inch closing the scarlet crevices in Kelpo's stomach. It was slow work; once the animal showed signs of regaining consciousness and chloroform was applied. I knew that to Renault the passage of time was as nothing; he was entirely engrossed in the labor of love and gratitude.

Presently, the thing was done; with sighs of relaxation we straightened up from our bending positions over the animal. Renault looked thoughtfully at me; then, shaking his head, he smiled.

"You are tired, Mr. Vaughn. I should have strapped Kelpo down instead of asking you to hold her; but I wanted to act quickly, fearing loss of blood. I shall strap her now, or when she comes to she is likely to tear the stitches."

Footsteps above caught our attention. A moment later the moccasins of the Indian appeared through the square opening of the trapdoor. Upon seeing me, he halted precipitously, and stood staring, the expression of his face like none I have ever seen upon human countenance.

"Come down here, Jim, and strap Kelpo to the board," Renault called. "And mind you take care with the job." Noting the frightened look on the savage's face, the master turned to me. "He believed he had killed you, Mr. Vaughn."

I nodded. "There was a moment when I thought the same thing. Then I un-

derstood that his bullet passed by, instead of through."

Jim got a board fitted with heavy straps, and laying the bear upon it proceeded to fix its legs in a rigid position. Renault gave a few instructions, then with a last look at Kelpo's wound, he motioned to me and led the way up the stairs.

We emerged from the stable building to the relief of crisp night air beneath a black, star-pierced sky. Renault closed the heavy doors behind us, and instead of leading on across the clearing to the House, leaned wearily back against the doors and began filling his pipe.

"We can talk better here than at the House, Mr. Vaughn." His voice was pitifully toneless and flat; his spirit seemed depressed beneath the burden of the evening's happenings. "There are explanations and apologies I must make to you, sir."

I shook my head, overwhelmed with sympathy for the bowed figure before me. "It is I who should apologize for inquiring into your affairs——"

"Not at all, sir. You are a guest in my home, and if you did not find all in order apology is due you, Mr. Vaughn."

"But I think I understand, Mr. Renault."

He smiled in unhidden disparagement. "Doubtless you understand just enough to make further understanding only justice to me, Mr. Vaughn!"

I nodded and waited.

"Mr. Vaughn," the old man said, after a thoughtful pause, "years ago Jacques Renault was known to all circus men as one of the world's great animal trainers. My animals were with every circus menagerie of note in the United States and many in foreign countries. The financial returns were high; I made a fortune.

"My good wife—God rest her soul!—was a tender creature, sir, a gentlewoman from the valley of the Loire. She objected to my profession because she loved animals greatly and said that all animal training is founded on animal cruelty. And how right she was! You hear much twaddle about training with love; but it is the hot end of the whip, sir, that turns the trick!"

Renault paused to mop his forehead with a silk handkerchief. "I was criminally selfish, Mr. Vaughn. Though I already had my share of the world's goods I would not take my dear wife's advice and give up the damnable business. That hurt her—far more than I imagined; and when she would insist that the realization of how I hurt dumb beasts was slowly killing her, I smiled to myself, thinking she was exaggerating, merely using a figure of speech!" Renault's voice trembled.

"She would sometimes wake in the black of night," he went on, "oppressed and suffering, begging that I drop the whip from my hand, or she would surely die. I smiled and thought to comfort her with assurance that it was only dreams. Dreams, indeed! Dreams that came suddenly true!

"She lay sick unto death, and just before the great sleep claimed her she made me promise that if I must go on with my work, I would keep the knowledge of it from the children.

"They must never," she begged me, "hear the screams of hurt animals in the deep night."

"In belated penitence and in misery I dropped it all and came up here. But it is empty mockery for a man to run away from his impulses and inclinations. I was hardly settled here when the old desires swooped down upon me like a blight. There was no fighting them; I had to go on.

"So I very carefully built that basement below there in order that the children might never know," Renault went on. "Double floors, Mr. Vaughn, and cattle above, and when the trapdoors are closed no sound can be heard. Every evening with doors closed I worked with my animals as long as the air was good. When it turned bad I gave up, opened the two trapdoors so that the room would get some ventilation through them; then I locked the stable, and my charges were comfortable until the following evening.

"But I overlooked one thing—the low level of the lake. I should have anticipated what would occur in a dry spell, but this is the first since I've been here. The rest, Mr. Vaughn, you have enough

imagination to understand. All except this—it is all over now!"

Renault seemed to have aged while he talked; and when he indicated in the general direction of the underground chamber his hand shook as with the ague.

"Kelpo saved my life; that cat surely would have had me," he said. "You killed it, Mr. Vaughn; but it was Kelpo's soft body which took the blow intended for me."

I nodded emphatic agreement, and the cold sweat stood out upon me as I pictured once more the spectacle of the slender she-bear hurtling through the air between Renault and the vicious cat.

"Kelpo threw herself in the way," the old man went on. "Her motive I do not for a moment question. Its cause I leave to psychological minds. Kelpo saw my dire need, and came to my aid. Some who think they know animals may smile at that, but I am convinced that it is so. In that terrible moment, sir, the bear repaid me in love what I have given her only with the whip!"

He paused, glancing defiantly at me as though expecting me to challenge his words. And when I nodded, he went on: "I realize now, Mr. Vaughn, that through all these years I have been wrong. My dear wife knew—but how blind I was! Animals have hearts and minds and souls.

"I am through with this game. Animals that one keeps for love are all very well. Animals that you instruct with cunning by the torture of the whip—that is damnable. By morning every beast down there shall be free, and when Kelpo is recovered she, too, shall go to the edge of the clearing and back into the forest."

Renault straightened up and laid a heavy hand upon my shoulder. "Mr. Vaughn, if ever you should marry, take council with your good wife. Women understand so much more than we men do! With them it is largely instinct. For us some terrible catastrophe must take place before we may see. Like Kelpo, Mr. Vaughn—flinging herself—"

His deep voice drawled off indistinguishably. I looked away into the forest night; I do not relish the tragic spectacle

of breaking men—like fine ships going to pieces on the rocks.

A little later we went together to the House.

CHAPTER XI.

FROM THE DEEP FOREST.

PLEASANT, monotonous days slipped by. Daily I stalked the deep woods with my rifle or whipped the river and its tributaries for trout. The evenings grew warmer as Indian summer neared, and through their dimming solitude we would sit out upon the veranda until the velvet of the night sky was dyed black, and the stars were like rare cold diamonds.

One evening as we strolled outdoors after supper, Renault drew me aside. "I should like to have you come along, Mr. Vaughn. The children are busy with their studies now, and we shall be unnoticed. Kelpo is ready to go."

I fancied there was a catch in his voice, and as I fell into step beside him I glanced up at his face. His lips were tightly closed, the corners of his mouth firm from controlled emotion, and his eyes, sensitive and unsteady of lash, stared fixedly out before him.

Entering the stable we found Jim waiting for us, holding Kelpo on a light chain. Renault took charge of the animal.

"We'll go out by the rear, Jim," he said.

When the Indian had opened the doors, Renault led the way across the narrow strip of clearing behind the stable, and onto the trail to the lake. Without speaking we made our way, Renault leading, followed by the sleek young she-bear trotting contentedly at his heels. I came next, Jim bringing up the rear.

The gentle veil of autumn dusk was upon the lake as we halted at its bank. Renault knelt beside the bear and grasping her forepaws gave them a twist which promptly placed Kelpo on her back. There she lay, blinking patiently and trustfully—as the man's skilled fingers inspected the wound upon her stomach.

"You're as good as new, now, Kelpo!" he said, letting the bear scramble to her feet. He unfastened the chain; we all patted the shaggy head the bear raised for our caress, then Renault murmured,

"Good luck, Kelpo," and we turned about and started back along the dark forest trail.

Once Renault, just behind me, stopped; but I did not look back. I have no wish to look upon men when their souls are close to the surface of their eyes. I knew that the master was looking back in silent farewell to the animal which had won so stanch a place in his grim heart.

Next morning after breakfast, as Renault and I sat smoking upon the veranda steps, we were suddenly startled by the delighted squeals of the two children.

"Daddy! Daddy!" Jeanne called. "Come quickly and see the bear. And—and he's not at all wild!"

I felt the hair bristle at the back of my neck and found Renault looking at me from deep eyes suddenly luminous. My host led the way as we rounded the corner of the House, and we brought up breathlessly at the kitchen door, where the rest of the household had already assembled.

I had not been mistaken in my surmise. There in the center of the watching group stood Kelpo, eating from a large pan over which Tanaka, Jim's squaw, jealously stood guard.

Renault and I stood watching in silence as the bear ate and the children, eyes abulge, chatted excitedly. I looked up at the master's face and found it difficult to remove my gaze. He was staring as one transfixed at the slim she-bear.

When Kelpo had her fill, she sat back on her haunches, wiped her face clean, and then, having permitted us all to pat her shaggy head, she trotted off across the clearing and disappeared into the fringe of the pines.

Until the end of my stay at Renault House, Kelpo paid us a daily visit. Regularly each morning she made her presence known by sniffing explosively at the kitchen door. And I must admit that when I patted her good-by that last day I felt foolishly like parting with an old and dear friend.

There is little more to tell. I came back to the city, feeling capable of moving mountains, and was soon into the harness once more, directing the promising destinies of my sturdy young business.

Now and then I received a letter from Miss Spears, telling me of the master, the kiddies, and the visits of Kelpo. Then one day came a note that Kelpo had not been seen in weeks. Mr. Renault told her, she wrote, that the she-bear was hibernating. For many letters Kelpo was the absent member of the Renault household; then in the spring came the letter I treasure most. Here is one paragraph:

And this morning it happened. I have always felt that Kelpo would some day come back. After breakfast the children and I were crossing the clearing when suddenly Pierre cried out, stopped still in his tracks, and stood pointing toward the far wall of pines. I looked, and my silly heart stood still with joy! There trotted Kelpo, headed for the kitchen door, and trailing behind her were two of the fattest, roly-poly cubs you ever have seen!

I wish that I had been there to see it, and to glimpse the joy upon Renault's face when he was told about it. Perhaps, when I go to Renault House again, I shall see Kelpo and the cubs. I shall go soon, I believe, for Doris and I have reached an understanding; besides, it's really an interesting place at which to spend a vacation.

Did you like this story, or did you not? If you liked it, please let us know why in a letter, briefly worded. If you did not like it, let us know that and why. And while you are about it, comment on any other story in this number, or give us your opinion of the number as a whole. The editors will appreciate any letter you may send.



FRIENDSHIP'S TEST

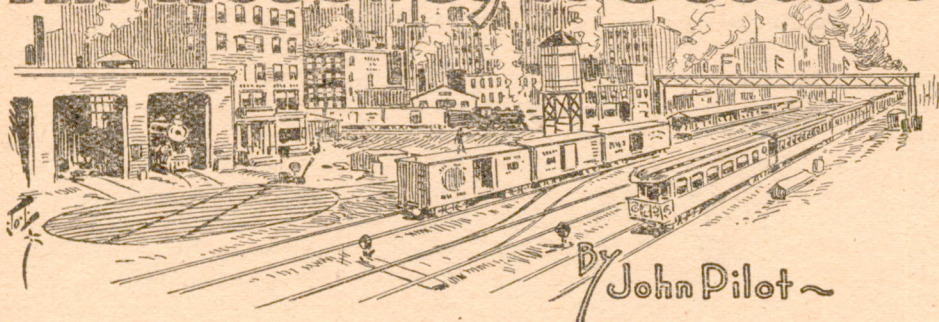
By Edgar Daniel Kramer

HE is not my friend who greets me
 With an ever-smiling glance,
 And who lauds me to high heaven
 In the face of what may chance;
 But 'tis he, who knows my weakness,
 And the blunders I have made,
 Who reminds me of my failures,
 Frankly, kindly, unafraid.

He is not my friend whose friendship
 Is a thing that wealth can buy,
 For a friend whom I can purchase
 Is a friend most prone to fly,
 When the storms of doubt assail me,
 When the wild winds roar and howl
 Down the path that I must follow,
 Though the wolves around me prowl.

Friendship calls for love and courage—
 Courage ever to speak true—
 Love that passes understanding,
 Sympathy and patience, too;
 Hope and faith and kindly wisdom,
 Charity that has no end;
 He who values friendship lightly
 Lacks the stuff that makes a friend!

Adventures of a Young Railroader
His Headway to Success



CHAPTER XXXIII.

A VOLLEY OF STONES.

THE Freight Patrol, originated and captained by Jack Somers, had fired its first volley at the gang of thieves who had planned to rob the freight cars of valuable contents. About a dozen of the thieves were hit; they shouted in fear and surprise, and the others, though unwounded, yelled in sudden terror. A mad rush—a retreat in disordered panic—was stopped by the commanding voice of “Black” Mullins, their leader.

Jack Somers and his assistant, Rafferty, jumped from the shadow of a freight car, followed by every man of the patrol. The thieves saw the advancing figures and met the rush with a volley of stones. Revolvers barking, the patrol charged.

A heavy stone hit Jack on the head, stunning him. Fortunately, he was wearing a thick cap; otherwise, he would have been killed. Rafferty saw who had thrown the stone—it was “Spike” Mullins, son of the leader of the thieves.

With a howl of rage Rafferty fired at the criminal. He aimed at Spike’s legs, but the little thief saw that the gun was being aimed for him, and he dived for the shelter of a truck. The bullet hit him in the chest, and he crawled under the freight car and died.

Besides Jack Somers, two men of the patrol had been hit by the volley of stones. Fifteen of the train pirates were wounded by the bullets, but only Spike Mullins was killed.

“Capture Black Mullins!” gasped Jack Somers, as Rafferty knelt beside him.

Happy to find that Jack was better than he had expected, Rafferty, in a cross fire of bullets and stones, sprang forward. Black Mullins had found his son and was lifting him in his arms when Rafferty reached the two. Mullins pressed the body to him with his left arm and with his right fist met Rafferty’s chin with such a crash that the Irishman went down like a felled ox. He rose to his feet with a furious grunt two seconds later, but Black Mullins and his burden were in one of the two heavy carts, and the horses were racing at full speed across the waste land.

The patrol had drawn first blood in the war with the thieves, but the death of Spike Mullins had made Black Mullins a fierce and desperate enemy. To his natural lawlessness was now added a vindictive and hate-inspired desire for revenge.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

THAT UNKNOWN INTRUDER.

THERE are very few freight-car doors that do not rattle or squeak when opened, and it was on this peculiarity of the car doors that the men of the Sunset Freight Patrol depended for warning that thieves were plying their trade. When all was silent the men of the patrol would hide between the cars or lie flat on the roofs; but at the first sound of a rattle it was their duty to rouse themselves and run toward the sound.

Robert Payne knew very little of the

ways of freight cars and nothing at all of the Sunset Freight Patrol. He knew that he was exhausted, starving, and without a coin of any sort in the pockets of his dilapidated clothes; he knew that the soles of his shoes had given out days before, that his feet were sore, and that it was such agony to walk that unless he could steal a ride on some train he must drop in his tracks.

Fate had dealt hardly with him. Although not yet a hopeless wreck, he was in bad condition. He clung desperately to the belief that if he could get to Montreal he could get into shape again, even though the helping hand he hoped to find there only held out a broom to him with instructions to sweep out a store with it.

Scarcely knowing where his steps were leading him, he had stumbled unnoticed into the yards of the Sunset Railway Co. at Elgin. By chance he had arrived at Elgin's busiest hour of the twenty-four, for the milk trains for Montreal were being loaded up. Although it was in the small hours of the morning, the station and yards were in a turmoil of rush, bustle, and clangor.

Somewhat confused at emerging so suddenly from the stillness of the desolate, snow-clad countryside into such a hive of activity, Payne was for a minute or two completely at a loss as to his next move. Then, realizing vividly that to attract attention to himself would probably mean immediate and rough expulsion, he slipped stealthily behind a nearby pillar and took the first opportunity of stealing into the gloom toward a line of freight cars that had already been loaded.

Payne had hit on a solution of his most pressing difficulty. Montreal was only a few stations away, and if he could conceal himself in one of the cars of the milk train he would get there within a couple of hours.

At a moment when he was sure there was no one near him, he stepped up to the freight cars and hid between two of them. Another period of watchfulness followed, but at last he ventured to leave his hiding place and move back along the train until he came to the door of a car that was not quite closed. He put his

hand against this door and pushed it. It rolled back until there was a slit wide enough to admit his body, but it moved with such a rusty squeak and rattle that Payne stood stiff with alarm for an instant, then dropped as if he were shot and rolled into hiding underneath the car. To his anxious ears the noise seemed loud enough to have drawn the attention of every train hand in the yards to the car, and he lay shivering with apprehension, expecting momentarily to be discovered and have a swift end put to his hopes of getting to Montreal.

A period of suspense followed, but at last Payne understood that except to his own ears the rattle of the car door had been drowned in the clatter of the milk cans that were being loaded. Despising himself for his loss of nerve, he rose to his feet and like a shadow slipped into the freight car and rolled wearily behind some cases of butter that half filled it.

Worn out as he was, Payne would have been glad to sleep until the train pulled into Montreal, but his mind was too ill at ease to allow him any repose. Physically, he experienced a sensation of great comfort, for although he lay on the bare floor of the freight car, he was sheltered from the biting cold, and every muscle of his tired limbs was relaxed.

His brain, unusually active, was busy reviewing the misfortunes that had reduced him to such a plight that he was forced to "ride a milk" like the lowest class of tramp. Though only twenty-six, Robert Payne had seen much of life in an adventurous sort of way. He had rounded up cattle on a ranch in Montana within six months after leaving his home in England; he had hunted big game in the Rockies and traveled from end to end of the great lakes, and at last, irksome though he found city life, he had settled down two years before in a good position in the office of a lumber company in Winnipeg. He had spent his vacations in hunting and fishing expeditions, and with fair prospects he was well satisfied with life when a rapidly arranged amalgamation of interests absorbed the company he was working for, and he found himself without employment.

This unexpected bit of bad luck did

not weigh heavily on his mind at first, but just as he was beginning to make serious efforts to obtain other employment he fell ill. When he recovered, he found that the little money he had saved was almost exhausted, and worse still, he experienced no luck in obtaining work. For nearly six weeks he sought in vain for some means of earning a living. His stock of money dwindled and vanished, and still he was among the ranks of the unemployed.

It was at the slackest season of the year; hundreds besides himself walked the streets of Winnipeg looking for work; winter was rapidly approaching, and the prospect was a desperate one. His belongings, turned into money, paid the various small debts he owed and kept him going for another month. Eventually he parted with his last dollar to an employment agency that promised him work on a sewer outside the city. Payne walked six miles to where the sewer digging was in progress, found a stocky little foreman there who told him bluntly that he wanted no more hands, and walked back to the city penniless and almost in despair.

His application to the employment agency for the return of his dollar was received with jeers, and, as he persisted, with imprecations and threats. Not knowing where his next meal was to come from, he had the luck to run into a burly Irish policeman as he was leaving the employment agency.

He seized on a forlorn hope.

"Look here, officer," he said, "I've paid a dollar to this place for a job, and the job they sent me to was filled. Now they won't give me my dollar back; it was my last coin and I'll give you a quarter of it if you can get it for me."

The policeman looked as though he found the tale amusing, but suddenly he swung toward the door of the agency. "Come in, young man," he said, over his shoulder.

Payne followed him.

The policeman made short work of the business. "You've got a dollar this young man gave you for a job you hadn't got," he growled, "and you've got to give the money back. Shell it out quick or you'll have trouble."

A dollar in small change was handed to Payne at once.

In the street he slipped a quarter of a dollar into the policeman's hand. The burly officer looked at it whimsically and then handed it back.

"Keep it, young man," he said with a grin. "Maybe you'll need it before I will."

That night Robert Payne tramped out of Winnipeg, bound for Montreal. Partly by walking, partly by begging or stealing rides on trains, he had got to within a hundred miles of Elgin. He had tramped that hundred miles in four days, and when he flung himself into the corner of the freight car on the milk train bound for Montreal he had eaten no food for two days.

The clang of the engine bell and the sudden cessation of the clatter of loading milk cans interrupted his bitter thoughts and told him that the milk train was just about to start. With a sigh of relief he curled himself up, hoping that he could now sleep and not waken until he got to Montreal.

His face was turned toward the door of the car, and unconsciously his gaze was fixed on a patch of cloud that was floating slowly across the moon. His lids were just drooping heavily over his weary eyes. In a last wakeful effort he raised them again and noticed with a sleepy sort of curiosity that now he could not see the sky through the slit of the half-open door. Something had obscured the dim moonlight, and the interior of the car was unbroken gloom.

Suddenly a grunt reached Payne's ears, waking his brain into full activity. His eyes were wide open in a flash and staring toward the door. The slit that he had entered by was now taking shape again in the murky light of the moon, and the object that had obscured it was inside the car. He heard a shuffle of feet on the boards in front of him; his eyes traced the shape of the thing that was in the car with him, and he stiffened with alarm. There was a man in the car; he felt certain that some of the trainmen had discovered that he was hidden there and that he was now going to be thrown out.

A sudden jolt of the car diverted his

attention; the train had started for Montreal.

CHAPTER XXXV.

THREAT OF THE IRON BAR.

SEVEN days had passed since the patrol's first fight with the freight thieves. Jack Somers, who always spent an hour each day in his little office headquarters, was busy reading reports and dispatching instructions to the various posts of the patrol. Rafferty, who was his lieutenant and also acted as night inspector, had just looked in on him before starting on his nightly round of the freight yards.

"Anything doing?" asked the Irishman.

"Nothing special," replied Jack. "There's some valuable freight lying in the Lakeside yards to-night, but I've put an extra man on there. There was a skirmish at the South Side yards this morning, and we took two men. I don't think they belonged to Black Mullins' gang. They were a couple of tramps who came in on the milk train, I believe," he added.

"There's too many of them hobos riding the 'milks' for my fancy," growled Rafferty. "They can get into the yards that way without any one being the wiser, and then they sneak off with something when our men have got their backs turned. I've a mind to go out to Elgin to-night and ride back on a 'milk.' By the piper, if I grab any of them I'll make them sorry they were born!"

"Not a bad idea, Rafferty," said Jack, "but don't forget the Lakeside tracks; give the men a shake-up there and tell them to keep their eyes skinned to-night."

A few minutes later Rafferty started on his rounds. As the patrol had no distinctive garb he followed his own fancy in the matter of dress, and at night always wore a soft cap with ear flaps, and a thick pea-jacket. Buckled round his waist was a cartridge belt and in his hip pocket a heavy revolver.

His first visit was to the Lakeside yards. Usually three men were detailed for duty there, and they had succeeded fairly well in holding the thieves in check. As Rafferty drew in sight of the yards and surveyed the desolate tract of rails he felt that Jack Somers had been wise

in dispatching an extra man to help guard the valuable freight that was stored there.

Though the ex-engineer gave no thought to danger, his duty as night inspector of the patrol exposed him to grave risks. To pick his way through the gloomy freight yards was to take his life in his hands, for if he was to fall in with a gang of the train pirates busy at their lawless work, he could expect little mercy from them if he was overpowered. Quite apart from this danger there were risks in connection with his work that might easily have appalled a man of less hardy spirit. It was neither pleasant nor safe to go plunging through the blackness of the night between a moving train on one side, and a row of freight cars, that might conceal a score of thieves, on the other.

"This is a bird of a place, all right," muttered Rafferty to himself as he cautiously approached the freight tracks.

When he reached the first row of cars he halted and listened for any sound that might give him a hint of any unlawful movement in the yards. Not a sound broke the silence of the night; to outward seeming the yards were absolutely deserted.

He moved forward rapidly and almost noiselessly until he reached the door line of one of the freight cars. A last keen glance down the long line of cars failed to reveal even a solitary human figure. He stretched out a hand and rattled the car door. The result was as effective as if the noise had been some magic spell commanding the presence of the guardian spirit of the yards. Out of the gloom a few yards ahead of him, Rafferty saw a figure emerge and the next instant a lithe, athletic man stood in front of him, peering into his face and holding a revolver ready for use.

"What are you doing——" the man began, and then broke off.

"It's all right, Paterson," said Rafferty, seeing he was recognized. "Anything moving here?"

"We got a man two hours ago," was the reply. "Miller took him to the station; since then it's been quiet."

"Right!" said Rafferty, with a satisfied nod. "But keep a sharp lookout to-night; there may be hot work before you. Has the extra man turned up?"

"Yes," answered Paterson. "He's at the other end of the cars."

Paterson disappeared under a car, and Rafferty moved on, picking the other three men up out of the darkness. They came from nowhere in particular and returned to the same place. At the end of the yard he paused for a time. Presently a train of empty freight cars, bound for Elgin, came thrashing along slowly. He flung a word to the driver as the engine passed him, and then grabbed the handrail of a car and swung himself inside.

At Elgin he found that the milk train was being loaded, and that he had some time to wait before it started. A good meal and a quiet smoke fortified him for the rest of his night's work. For some time before the train started he stood on the platform, gossiping with the milk inspector, but while he talked his keen eyes were watchfully roving along the line of cars. Presently he left the inspector and wandered away, moving slowly and as carelessly as though he had no particular destination in view.

As Rafferty got outside the fringe of busy train hands, however, his steps quickened, and he moved rapidly toward the end of the cars. That this inspection was not dictated by a mere casual impulse was clear from the gleam of his eye and the businesslike set of his jaw. He had a definite purpose behind his movements, for, as he had been chatting to the milk inspector, he had chanced to see a curious black shadow appear and disappear alongside a freight car. Rafferty was bent on discovering the meaning of that shadow.

Just as the engine bell warned him that the train was about to start, he drew even with a car that had its door partly open. In a twinkling he lifted his body to the level of the door and thrust himself into the car.

He had a shrewd suspicion that in the interior of the car he would find something that would explain the curious shadow that had so puzzled him. The light from without was sufficient to show him that the car was half filled with cases of butter, but the farther end of the interior was so dark that his eyes could not pierce the darkness. With slow,

deliberate movements he took his pipe out of his pocket, filled it, and placed it in his mouth.

Then he drew a box of matches from his pocket, struck a match quickly, and held it above his eyes. One glance was sufficient for him; he had seen a man's eyes glowing at him from the floor at the back of the car. The pallid, agonized face of a man affected Rafferty not one whit; he had caught a tramp stealing a ride on the milk train, a thief undoubtedly, and he knew how to deal with him.

Rafferty lowered the match to his pipe. As the tobacco caught fire he puffed at it slowly and between the puffs spoke.

"I thought I spotted you, me lad," he began. "Stand up and come this way till I put the bracelets on you. Don't trouble about sleeping now; you'll find a fine cell to sleep in when we get to Montreal."

Another puff at his pipe and he started to speak again, but the words that he would have uttered were choked in his throat by a pair of hands that flew at him out of the darkness. Robert Payne—he was the man that Rafferty had discovered—had made a bold bid for liberty. The horrible prospect of being sent to jail had outraged his free soul; he drew on every ounce of strength in his weary body and flung himself at Rafferty in the hope of overthrowing him and dashing from the car.

Taken thoroughly by surprise, Rafferty staggered under the assault, but he recovered himself instantly. His hands went up and he tore away the grip that Payne had fixed on his throat. A furious, brief struggle followed and left Rafferty the victor. A piece of luck had turned the fight in his favor. Locked in a desperate struggle for mastery they had fallen together to the floor of the car. When Rafferty, who had fallen undermost, exerted all his strength to get the upper grip, he felt the arms that held him relax and fall away from him. He rolled over and rose to his knees, but the fight was over. Payne's head had struck a butter case, and the man lay stunned.

Rafferty struck another match and satisfied himself that the other man was unconscious and not likely to give any

more trouble. He did not think it worth while to snap the handcuffs on him, and when he had found the pipe that had been knocked from his lips he sat down by the side of his prisoner and smoked stolidly.

The milk train drew near to Montreal. Payne's senses slowly returned to him, and he opened his eyes to a realization of soreness and disgrace. He saw the huge bulk of Rafferty outlined between him and the light, and he remembered the fight and the fact that every inch the train was traveling was drawing him nearer to jail. He realized the hopelessness of renewing the struggle with the big man at his side, and he closed his eyes again.

Rafferty felt the body beside him twitch, and he knew that his prisoner was again alive to his surroundings. He had no anxieties, however, in regard to his safe custody; he felt sure of being able to land his captive in jail within half an hour. He stepped to the door of the car and looked out. Ahead of him, not more than a mile distant, he saw the lights of Montreal. The train would slow down at the Lakeside tracks soon.

Still leaning from the car, his ears suddenly caught the crack of a pistol shot. The report of two more shots followed immediately, and on top of them came a fusillade. A scowl of rage leaped to Rafferty's face, and his hand dropped to his revolver. He knew this meant that the Lakeside freight yard had been attacked by the train pirates.

Scarcely a minute passed before the train began to slow down. The Lakeside tracks were at hand, and in a minute or two the milk train would pull right into the middle of the fight. Rafferty prepared to jump and join in the defense of the freight. A thought of his prisoner held him a moment, and he looked behind him to find that the man was still lying motionless. The fight first, his prisoner afterward, Rafferty decided.

The mob of train thieves scattered and gave way before the incoming milk train. Rafferty jumped from the moving car with a yell and started firing at once. To his left he could see the four patrol men making a splendid fight, even though two of their number were badly hurt by

stones. Nearly a dozen of the thieves, brought down by pistol shots, lay groaning on the ground. The freight pirates were giving ground, and all save about a dozen of the most determined were beating a rapid retreat. As Rafferty threw himself into the fight he was received with a volley of stones. Three men, one armed with an iron bar, rushed at him. His revolver spoke, and one fell with a scream; but the man with the bar and his companion flung themselves at Rafferty furiously.

The milk train crawled through the fight, and much was packed into the next few seconds. From the freight car behind him the pallid face of Rafferty's prisoner looked out. Payne had seen Rafferty jump from the car, and the hope of escape had risen in his heart. Thrilling with the thought that he might regain his liberty in the confusion that reigned, he crept to the door. He saw the man with the bar strike at Rafferty's head and miss, then he saw a heavy stone strike Rafferty on the forearm as he raised his pistol to fire again.

The pistol dropped from the Irishman's fingers, and Payne saw a man fling himself at Rafferty and bear him to the ground, while the man with the bar leaped forward to finish him. Forgetting everything but the peril of the threatened man, Payne jumped swiftly from the car to where Rafferty's revolver had fallen. As his fingers closed on it, he swung around.

The man had lifted the bar for a swinging blow at Rafferty's defenseless head. Payne pressed the trigger of the pistol, and the blow missed its mark. A bullet through the man's shoulder had swerved, the downward course of the iron bar.

The fight was over. The four men of the patrol had driven the last desperadoes before them. Rafferty, whose unflinching eyes had watched the course of the threatening iron bar, had noted also what had diverted it. He was on his feet again now, and though his right arm hung helplessly beside him, he seized his prisoner of the milk train with the left one.

"Come along with me," said the big Irishman.

Payne looked him straight in the eyes for a moment and then followed without a word. One of the men of the patrol bandaged Rafferty's injured arm, and then the Irishman turned again to Payne.

"I promised you a sleep when you got to Montreal," he said, "but I'll give you a trifle of breakfast first."

Over breakfast Rafferty was in a cheerful mood and tried to draw out his prisoner. Sick at heart and dejected, Payne had little to say, and he answered his captor's questions almost mechanically.

"We'll see the chief, now," said Rafferty, when the meal was finished.

Jack Somers was watching Payne's face as Rafferty told his tale of the capture of the fight on the line and of the rescue.

"H'm! Mixed goods, is he?" said the young chief. "What's to be done with him now?"

"Sure, sir, with your permission I'll put him on the patrol."

"What do you say to that?" asked Jack, turning to Rafferty's prisoner.

The prisoner flushed, and for a moment seemed unable to reply. Then he said steadily: "I'll do my best."

CHAPTER XXXVI.

A DANGEROUS CUSTOMER.

THE young chief of the Sunset Freight Patrol, felt the responsibilities of his post grow heavy on his shoulders. It was not that Jack Somers had lost enthusiasm for the work or that his energy was dwindling; it was simply that Black Mullins, the clever and daring leader of the most desperate gang of thieves that waged war against the patrol, had pitted his wits against his. Jack Somers clearly saw that it would be a grim struggle, perhaps a fight to the death, before he could claim to have defeated this dangerous train pirate.

A very brief consideration of the work of the Freight Patrol convinced Jack that it would be foolish to think that the patrol had achieved any satisfactory measure of success so long as Black Mullins remained outside prison bars. The patrol had curbed the lawlessness of other gangs of thieves; it had arrested their leaders and broken their ranks so that

they no longer dared to make organized raids on the freight yards. Their thefts had by no means ceased, but they had become less frequent, and it was seldom indeed that closed cars were now "ripped" and looted, except by Black Mullins' gang.

To arrest Black Mullins and break up his gang was now the absorbing aim of Jack Somers' existence, but the crafty leader of the freight thieves seemed to anticipate all traps and ambushes. After his son had been killed, Black Mullins had disappeared for a time, and for many nights there was no trace of his hand in the raids on the freight tracks.

At last, however, he returned to the scene of his former exploits, the South Side yards, and celebrated his reappearance by leading a horde of desperate ruffians who, though they left many wounded prisoners behind them, carried off a quantity of valuable goods from the cars and damaged much that they could not take away. Black Mullins, hitherto a daring and reckless leader, was now positively fearless and contemptuous of danger.

He now carried a revolver and returned the fire of the patrol. He wounded two so dangerously that, though two weeks had since passed, neither of them had been able to resume duty.

Before the patrol was organized, by a sort of agreement with the other gangs, Black Mullins had confined his depredations to the South Side yards, but after his son's death all of the Sunset freight tracks suffered from his daring raids. It was soon evident that, in addition to his natural thieving proclivities, Black Mullins was moved by a desire to take what vengeance he could for the death of Spike Mullins, for all his operations now were marked by a wanton and vindictive destruction of goods which he and his followers could not carry away with them.

Jack Somers was tireless in planning schemes for Mullins' capture. He notified the patrol that he would give a hundred dollars reward to the man who took Mullins. He obtained a warrant for the leader's arrest, but this had proved useless, for the man was never seen now except when he led a raid on the freight tracks, and all efforts to find

where he hid himself in the daytime had proved fruitless.

Black Mullins was at large; he harassed the men of the patrol almost nightly, and day by day Jack Somers' face grew more gloomy as he received reports of goods damaged or stolen from the freight cars.

At the end of a busy week Jack Somers was in his office at headquarters, reading reports from the patrol posts. When he had finished he pushed them from him impatiently, and, frowning thoughtfully, leaned back in his chair. Most of the reports concerned trivial matters, but one had informed him that on the previous night the Lakeside freight tracks had been raided and much valuable booty carried away. The problem of Black Mullins presented itself again, for it was this desperate thief who had led the raid.

For several minutes Jack sat motionless, turning over in his mind various schemes for capturing the brigand, but he could hit on none that was more promising than those that had already been tried and defeated. Dismissing the matter for the moment, he turned to his desk at last and picked up two letters that he had not yet read.

On opening them he found that one was from his uncle, John Fletcher, the general manager of the Sunset line. It referred to a matter of urgent importance, for it told Jack that a consignment of bullion, valued at twenty thousand dollars, was being dispatched that night from Montreal to Toronto, and asked him to see that one of the patrol traveled with the treasure to guard it. Jack made a mental note of this as a matter demanding attention, though he was rather puzzled as to how he was going to spare a man from patrol duty.

The next instant he had almost forgotten it in the absorbing interest of the concluding paragraph of the letter.

I have just heard from the police that they have discovered where Black Mullins is living now. They have traced him to a tenement house near the South Side yards, and hope to arrest him to-night.

This was cheering news for Jack Somers and quickly put him on good terms with himself again. With Black Mullins

out of the way he felt confident that he would not experience very great difficulty in breaking up the last gang of train pirates. While the man was at large, able to use his quick brain and desperate courage in planning and leading raids on the freight yards, the Freight Patrol had an almost hopeless task before it, for unless their numbers were very greatly increased, the patrol had small chance of successfully conquering so determined an enemy.

Jack was still in the first flush of elation at the very comforting news in his uncle's letter when the door of his office opened and Rafferty entered the room. It was his usual hour for visiting headquarters, just before he started on his nightly inspection of the patrol posts.

"You look mighty pleased about something, Jack," said Rafferty in his hearty, mellow voice.

"I've got pleasing news, Rafferty," replied Jack, lifting the general manager's letter. "We've got Black Mullins——"

"By the piper! You don't say so?" interjected the impulsive Irishman. "You've trapped him at last, then?"

"We haven't got the handcuffs on him yet," said Jack, recollecting with a frown that his bird was still in the bush, "but the general manager writes to tell me that the police have found out where he's hiding, and that they hope to arrest him to-night."

Rafferty's eyes had glowed with excited interest at Jack's opening speech, but as the burly fellow listened to what followed, disappointment was written plainly on his face.

"Thunder and hounds!" he growled. "I made sure you'd got him safe in the cells. There's a big difference between the police knowing where he is and them same lads being able to put their hands on him."

Jack was visibly disheartened by Rafferty's words.

"You mean you think he'll escape the police?"

"I mean that I'll believe we've got Black Mullins when I see him standing in front of me with the bracelets on. It's a queer bird he is and as artful as a wagonload of monkeys. It would not surprise me if we heard from him in the

freight yards again to-night. He was wounded four nights ago, but his men got him safely away, and last night he turned up at Lakeside, bold as you please."

"I'll see what the police have to say about him," said Jack. "I'd like to be with them when they start to arrest him."

He turned to the telephone and called police headquarters. He quickly got an answer to his brief inquiries and then swung round to Rafferty.

"Inspector Graves and four men left on the Black Mullins business half an hour ago," he said excitedly.

"I wish them luck," returned Rafferty ironically. "Any instructions for to-night, Jack?" he asked, preparing to leave the office.

"I wish I knew exactly where the police have gone to," muttered Jack, "for I'd be with them." Then Rafferty's question attracted his attention, and his mind was recalled to the business of the bullion.

"Oh, yes, Rafferty," he said hastily; "there's a matter here that needs immediate attention. There's twenty thousand dollars in gold going to Toronto to-night, and the general manager wants a man from the patrol to guard it. Who shall we send?"

"That's a question!" remarked Rafferty, fingering his beard thoughtfully. "We've two men in hospital, and that makes us mighty short-handed. Of course, if the general manager wants a man he must have one, but how we're to spare him is more than I know, with Black Mullins liable to spring a surprise on us at any of the patrol posts."

"The police will have Black Mullins to-night."

"I wouldn't bet on that."

"I'll go to Toronto myself, then!" cried Jack. "The train starts in an hour, so I'll have to hurry and get ready. Telegraph me if the police manage to get Mullins."

"You'd better let me telegraph you if they don't catch him," said Rafferty with a twinkle in his eye. "I'd like to have some message to send you."

"Get out, you croaker!" cried Jack with a smile.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

STOPPED ON THE TRACK.

WHEN Rafferty left him, Jack Somers made hasty preparation for his journey to Toronto. He had very little time to spare, for the bullion was to be dispatched by the Sunset night express, a train that left Montreal every night at half past seven. His first step was to telephone to the railway headquarters to notify the general manager that he was going to take charge of the gold. When he had done this, he slipped a revolver into his hip pocket, put on a heavy overcoat and a cap, and started for the railway station.

In order that he should have time to meet the bank officials, receive their instructions as to the consignment of the gold, give them a receipt for it, and have it carefully stowed away on the train, it was necessary for him to be on the platform before the express started. He reached the station at a quarter past seven with ample time to do all this to his satisfaction.

He found that the gold was in the station agent's office, where a bank clerk and a porter were waiting to hand it over to his charge. It was packed in two stout wooden boxes, each weighing about forty pounds, the whole making a load that none but a strong man could carry more than a short distance. Each of the boxes was securely tied with rope and sealed.

When he had made sure that the bank's seals were intact, Jack Somers signed the receipt that was presented to him and had the boxes loaded on a truck and conveyed to the baggage car of the express. He found the baggage master anxiously awaiting the arrival of the bullion, and pleased that the responsibility of safeguarding it had been taken off his shoulders.

Owing to the late arrival of some goods that were consigned to Toronto by the express, a slight delay was necessary before the gold could be put aboard the train. While the goods were being packed away, Jack sat on the truck that held the gold and watched operations. Idly inspecting the belated stuff, he noticed that most of it consisted of small packages

of the style ordinarily sent by passenger express.

One article, however, attracted his particular attention, and set him wondering how it happened that it was being dispatched by an express baggage car instead of by an ordinary freight train. Both in bulk and weight it differed from the style of articles usually sent by express. He concluded that it was of exceptional value, or that its quick delivery was a matter of importance. It interested him sufficiently to cause him to comment on it to the baggage master.

"That's a curious-looking article," he said.

"Yes!" was the reply. "It's a bit out of our line, too."

"What do you make of it?" asked Jack.

The article they were discussing was just then taxing the strength of three men who were trying to get it into the baggage car.

The baggage master glanced casually at its curious shape while he answered Jack's question. "It's consigned to a party in Toronto," he remarked. "Some crank, I'll bet. It's supposed to be a part of an airship—one of them airplanes they talk about; I expect that's the motor in that box in the middle of it."

The men had succeeded in getting it on the floor of the baggage car. The baggage master stepped forward and directed them.

"Stand it upright, men," he called out. "We can't put anything on top of it or we might break it."

It was satisfactorily disposed of at last, and then Jack's two boxes of treasure were lifted from the truck and carried into the baggage car. The baggage master pointed out where he had kept a corner clear for them.

"They'll be safe enough there," he said, "and easy to get at when we reach Toronto."

A moment later the engine bell warned them that the train was about to start; the baggage master took a last look along the platform, swung the sliding door of the car shut with a rattle, and stepped back alongside Jack Somers.

"We don't open that again until we

get to Toronto," said he, "so I guess the gold is safe enough."

As he spoke, the car jolted with the first revolution of the engine wheels, and the express moved smoothly out of the station.

At any time Jack would have found it tiresome to pass so many hours inactive as his journey to Toronto condemned him to, but he felt it a particular hardship that he should be penned in a railway car that night. In spite of Rafferty's pessimistic attitude, he had strong hopes that the police would succeed in arresting Black Mullins.

Jack regretted that he was going to Toronto when all his inclinations would have led him to stay in Montreal and help to hunt down the chief of the train pirates. He realized, of course, that it was usual to dispatch bullion in charge of an armed guard, but he was inclined to the belief that the baggage master would have been quite capable of safeguarding the two boxes of gold that were responsible for his unexpected journey to Toronto.

By no effort of his imagination could he bring himself to believe that they were threatened by any danger that would call for action on his part. Presently, as the journey progressed, his habit of cheerfully accepting a situation enabled him to adjust his elastic spirits to his uncongenial task. He converted a bundle of sacking into a comfortable resting place, chatted with the baggage master, and soon forgot his annoyance.

It was almost two hours after the train left Montreal when Jack was reminded, by an empty feeling, that in hurrying to catch the express he had forgotten to take his usual evening meal. He commented upon this while he was talking to his companion, who quickly put him in the way of satisfying his appetite by reminding him that there was a dining car on the express.

"Of course there is!" exclaimed Jack. "I'll go there now." He hesitated a moment as he thought of the gold that had been put in his charge, then caught the baggage master's eye, and laughed lightly as he added, "There's no fear of any one breaking in on you while I'm away, is there?"

The man pointed significantly to a rifle that lay in a rack above his head, and then unlocked the end door of the car. Jack quickly passed from the baggage car to the smoker and on to the dining car, where he was soon busy ministering to a remarkably fine appetite.

He wound up his meal with a cup of coffee, and was sipping this with great enjoyment when he was startled by the grinding sound of hurriedly applied brakes, and almost flung from his seat by the sudden stoppage of the train.

He sprang to his feet and listened tensely for some sound that might explain why the train had stopped. He caught the flash of a lantern as the man carrying it ran along the line, shouting hoarsely. He looked around the dining car; the waiters were pale and scared looking, and two passengers, who had been disturbed in the middle of their meals, looked as puzzled as he felt. A sudden thought of the gold in the baggage car fled across his brain, and he felt instinctively that it was in some way connected with the startling stoppage of the express. The next instant he was running swiftly to the head of the train.

When he emerged from the end of the smoking car he was quickly convinced that his apprehension that the bullion was in danger was well-founded. The door of the baggage car would not yield to the pressure he applied. He hammered at it frantically with the butt of his revolver, but there was no reply from the other side. He shouted to the baggage master, and was conscious that beyond the door there was neither voice nor movement, only a grim, foreboding silence.

Unshaped thoughts of disaster were whirling through his head as he hurriedly retreated to the smoking car. He dashed through a startled, chattering crowd of passengers, flung open the door of the smoking car, and jumped from the train. As he ran, he overtook two men; these proved to be the conductor and a porter. When he reached them he found that they were as ignorant as he of the reason for the stopping of the express.

The three men arrived together in front of the baggage car, and found the engineer staring in amazement at its wide-open door. Frantically anxious about

the gold that had been intrusted to his care, Jack Somers sprang into the car. He found it deserted; the baggage master had disappeared. He looked toward the corner where the gold had been placed; the two boxes of bullion were no longer there.

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

A PROBLEM TO SOLVE.

THE baggage master was soon found, lying in a huddled heap in a dark corner of the car, but this discovery served to increase rather than explain the mystery of the vanished bullion, for he was unconscious, and therefore unable to give an account of what had happened. By the light of a lantern Jack Somers discovered that the unfortunate man was terribly wounded on the head.

"See if there is a doctor among the passengers!" he exclaimed hurriedly.

The conductor departed on this errand, and presently returned with a young surgeon who had been in the smoking car. After a quick examination, the doctor informed Jack that the injuries to the baggage master's head were so severe that it was doubtful if the man would live until the train reached Toronto.

"Does any one know how this happened?" the surgeon asked, looking curiously at the little group of anxious trainmen.

"It is impossible to say just yet," said Jack. "All we know is that a signal to stop the train was sent from the baggage car, and that when we investigated we found the door of the car open and the baggage master lying here as you see him. It looks as if he fell heavily against something after he had given the signal for brakes."

"There's something more than that behind it," replied the doctor briskly. "My belief is that the man was struck on the head before he fell. There's a pretty bad wound here that wasn't caused by a fall."

The inexplicable disappearance of the bullion recurred to Jack, and he stepped swiftly toward the young doctor and drew him aside.

"Are you sure of what you say?" he asked. "At first I thought something of the kind had happened, but how could

it have been possible? The man was alone in the baggage car; I was out of the train almost before it stopped and have had a search made in every direction without finding a sign of any one who might have attacked him."

In spite of Jack's earnest words the doctor held firmly to his opinion that the baggage master had been struck down. The mystery grew more puzzling. Jack, who had said nothing yet to any one of the loss of the gold, was tempted to speak of it to the doctor, but was checked by the thought that to make the matter public would serve no good purpose and might not meet with approval at headquarters.

Nevertheless, he organized another search party and himself thoroughly ransacked the baggage car in the hope that the baggage master might have transferred the gold to another corner while Jack had been in the dining car. There was no trace of the gold, however, and the search party returned to report that they had scoured the countryside without discovering a soul.

The only course left to Jack, therefore, was to allow the express to proceed, and continue his journey to Toronto to face the unpleasant task of reporting the loss of the gold to the bank officials there and to the headquarters of the railway company.

On the suggestion of the doctor, a bed of sacking was made in the baggage car for the injured man, and Jack Somers and the young surgeon shared the melancholy and fruitless task of watching by his side for the first moment of consciousness. It was a dismal journey, spent by Jack Somers in unavailing efforts to solve the mystery of the lost gold. He was likewise embittered by the self-accusing thought that the disaster might have been averted had he not deserted his post by leaving the baggage car for the diner. He clung despairingly to the hope that the injured baggage master would recover consciousness before they reached Toronto and give him a clew that would enable him to trace the bullion.

Toronto was reached at last. The still unconscious baggage master, accompanied by the doctor, was removed in an ambulance to the nearest hospital. Jack Som-

ers, stepping from the baggage car, found a bank clerk waiting to receive the twenty thousand dollars that had been intrusted to his charge. As a last forlorn hope, before explaining the situation to the bank's representative, he stood grimly by the car until everything it contained had been removed from it. Then he turned to the bank clerk.

"The gold is not on the train," he said.

The clerk, plainly puzzled, stared at him. "What's that!" he exclaimed. "We've been notified that it was consigned to us by this train."

"The gold is not on the train," returned Jack quietly, but with twitching lips. "Ask your bank to communicate with the Sunset headquarters."

At that moment the conductor of the express handed a telegram to Jack and he turned from the clerk to read it.

It was from Rafferty.

Black Mullins not arrested. Police say he has cleared out of town. RAFFERTY.

Jack crumbled the telegram impatiently in his hand and moved toward the station agent's office, to send a message to the general manager announcing the loss of the gold. He was busy writing a telegram when the bell of the office telephone sounded.

"Here's a telephone call for you, Mr. Somers," called out the station agent from his desk.

Jack stepped quickly to the instrument and found that the young doctor who had attended to the injured man was waiting to speak to him.

"The man has recovered consciousness and may pull through now," were the doctor's first words. They thrilled Jack with the hope that now he could obtain a clew to the missing gold.

"Can he speak?" Has he told anything?" he asked hurriedly.

"He can scarcely speak," replied the doctor. "I've made out that he suddenly found a man in the baggage car and was struck on the head as he was signaling for the brakes. That's all I've been able to get from him, and it would be dangerous to question him more now."

Jack dropped the telephone receiver. A possible solution of the mystery had suddenly flashed across his mind, and

he was anxious to put it to the test while there was yet time. He astonished the station agent by turning sharply to him with the request: "Come quickly with me, and pick up some good men as we go along. I want them to tackle a dangerous job."

Luckily for Jack, the station agent, a keen, alert man, did his bidding without question, and a minute later when Jack got to the station yard there were four sturdy men behind him, each of them watching his movements with obvious wonder.

A quick glance around the yard showed Jack what he was in search of. On a truck that was leaving the yard just at that moment was what had been called a section of an airplane, the article that he had seen put aboard the express at Montreal. A little crowd of men were idly watching it, attracted, probably, by its strange shape.

Somewhat resembling a skeleton bow of a boat in outline, it was made of plain iron and was inclosed in an oblong framework of wood about seven feet in length. Inside the metal frame, secured to it firmly at the base and fastened to its bow-shaped apex by a short chain, was a wooden box standing almost as high as the outside wooden frame and about three feet wide by two feet deep.

Jack Somers had seen two men take charge of this strange-looking affair when it was removed from the baggage car, and now he saw these same two men sitting on the driving seat of the truck.

He turned to the men behind him and pointed to those on the truck.

"I want you to take care of those men when I call on them to stop," he said quietly.

An instant afterward he darted ahead of the truck and confronted the driver with a revolver. "Get down!" he cried sharply. "I want to have a look at that funny business you have there."

The man uttered a shout of alarm and jumped from the truck like a flash, but was immediately seized and held by two of Jack's men. The second man on the truck sat staring at Jack in amazement and made no effort to move.

"I want you to open that thing," said Jack to him, pointing with his revolver

at the wooden box in the metal framework.

The man turned his head and looked at the long box in a puzzled fashion. He had opened his mouth to speak, when suddenly the front panel of the box swung out toward him and a black figure flashed past him and sprang wildly from the truck.

Taken by surprise as he was by the suddenness of the thing, yet Jack Somers had recognized the swarthy, powerful figure that had emerged from the box. His voice rang out in a sharp command to the railway men.

"Hold that man!"

With his revolver ready for use, he stepped forward as he spoke, but the man had fallen as he reached the ground, and he now lay pinned under three of the sturdy station hands. Jack looked at the swarthy face as it stared viciously up at him, and he saw that he had made no mistake. It was Black Mullins.

At the bottom of the box that Black Mullins had made such a desperate effort to escape from, Jack Somers found the two missing boxes of bullion. Within an hour they were safe in the vaults of the bank they had been consigned to, and in far less time than that Black Mullins was behind stout prison bars.

CHAPTER XXXIX.

OUTSCHEMING PLOTTERS.

IT was difficult for Jack Somers to conceal his discontent at a message he received from headquarters a short time later. It told him that his uncle, John Fletcher, the general manager of the Sunset line, had placed his private car at Jack's disposal and wished him to proceed at once to Harrisville on official business. He made prompt preparations to obey this order, but wished heartily that another man or another time had been chosen for the mission.

To Jack's mind, there were urgent reasons why he should not take this journey. In three days Black Mullins was to be tried for his desperate attempt to steal the bullion from the night express to Toronto, and it was of paramount importance that Jack should be at the trial to give evidence against the lawless train

pirate. If he failed to appear as a witness it was almost inevitable that Black Mullins would go free, for the baggage master who had been attacked was in no condition to attend the court, and it was certain that if he did, he could not identify his assailant. Besides, Jack had discovered that the train hands who had helped him to capture the freight thief were strangely unwilling to be dragged into the trial. He traced this reluctance to their fear of the vengeance of Black Mullins' gang, and he believed that, when he got them on the stand, they would prove unsatisfactory witnesses.

In these circumstances Jack was naturally ill at ease and fearful lest any chance should make it impossible for him to attend the trial. He had looked on the capture of Black Mullins as the turning point in the fight between the patrol and the train pirates. When he heard the handcuffs click on Black Mullins' wrists he felt that he had made a most important advance in the work for which he had recruited the patrol. Deprived of their leader, the train pirates would rapidly become disorganized, and the sentence which he hoped to see inflicted on Black Mullins would serve to show any who felt inclined to follow his example that it was war to the knife, and that those who were captured while looting freight would be punished mercilessly.

So far, all was well enough; Black Mullins was in prison, awaiting trial. But the young chief of the Freight Patrol recalled the fact that the man had boasted that he could always escape the penalties of his law-breaking career. Jack had been given the opportunity of testing this boast, and had already discovered that it was not merely words. Before the freight robber was held for trial it was plain that some strong influence was at work to obtain his release. He would have certainly been released on bail had not Jack pointed out that, even if Black Mullins escaped conviction for his attempt to steal the bullion, there was still hanging over him the charge of murderously assaulting the baggage master of the express.

As matters stood at the time, it seemed highly probable that this latter charge

would have to be converted into an indictment for murder, and it was due solely to this that Jack Somers had been enabled to keep Black Mullins behind prison bars pending his trial.

At any other time Jack Somers would have welcomed a journey under such conditions, but his anxiety in regard to his appearance at Black Mullins' trial made him view it in anything but a happy spirit. He listened attentively to Mr. Fletcher's instructions, but inwardly resolved to get through his business at Harrisville with the utmost dispatch and return to headquarters in time for the trial.

Now, although Mr. Fletcher gave no hint of this to his nephew, the journey to Harrisville was of no urgent importance and might easily have been delayed or delegated to some minor official of the company. The truth of the matter was that the general manager had received reliable information that an attempt was to be made to prevent Jack Somers from appearing against Black Mullins, and had decided that the best means of check-mating any plot that might be brewing was to get Jack out of Montreal and thus put him beyond the reach of the conspirators.

CHAPTER XL.

THAT STRANGE DISAPPEARANCE.

THE journey to Harrisville was uneventful, but Jack Somers' arrival there was marked by an incident that was seemingly unimportant, and it passed without arousing in his mind the least suspicion that it was in any way connected with his affairs. Before he started from Montreal he had a short chat with the conductor of the train to which the private car was attached. Jack understood that the car would be slipped at Harrisville, as it was not usual for trains to stop at that station unless they were flagged. To his surprise, the train slowed down outside Harrisville and stopped at the small platform of the little wayside station.

Wondering at this, but not greatly interested, Jack looked for an explanation when he stepped from the private car. He found it in the receding figures of two men who had already alighted from the

train and were walking swiftly from the platform in the direction of the village that gave the station its name. He immediately jumped to the conclusion that, since the train had left Montreal, the conductor had discovered that a couple of passengers had wanted to get off at Harrisville, so he had stopped the train for them. After all, Jack thought, there was nothing extraordinary in this, so he merely noted that the men were roughly dressed, probably mechanics, and dismissed the matter from his mind.

The mission on which Jack had been sent to Harrisville was to obtain an explanation of the irregularities the chief train dispatcher complained of, and to decide whether the station agent should continue in his position or be replaced by a more reliable man. Wilkins, the station agent, had been warned to expect Jack's arrival, and he found the man on the platform, awaiting him in evident anxiety, expecting an unpleasant time.

While the private car was being switched on a siding, Jack Somers chatted with the station agent. Though Jack made but a casual reference then to his official business, he quickly concluded that the young man's offense could be traced to irrepressible enthusiasm and energy that led him to exceed his authority, rather than to willful rebellion against the regulations of the company.

Wilkins was keen, alert, and intelligent, and was clearly marked out for better work than that of an agent at the little wayside station. Jack liked him on sight, and hoped that he would be able to report favorably to the chief train dispatcher. He resolved that if his investigations justified it he would privately suggest that Wilkins be given a position where he would find greater scope for his energy.

"We'll postpone our business talk until the morning," Jack said presently, when Wilkins intimated that although his day's work was done they should adjourn to his office and go into the business that had brought Jack to Harrisville.

"I don't want to break into your spare time," added Jack, "and if we get to work after breakfast to-morrow we'll fin-

ish up in time for you to flag the noon train, so that I can get back to Montreal in the evening. Just now, if you've no objection, I'll take a walk with you and see what kind of a little village you are living in."

Wilkins welcomed this proposition heartily, and cordially suggested that when they reached Harrisville, which lay about a mile and a half from the station, Jack could stay an hour or so with him and share his supper.

"There's nothing in the way of sights to show you," he remarked. "The village has grown up round a couple of paper mills, and the residents don't amount to more than three hundred people, most of them employed at the mills. You'll understand now why passenger trains seldom stop here; the station is mostly used for freight."

"You had two passengers this evening," remarked Jack casually, remembering the men he had seen leave the train.

"Yes," replied Wilkins; "I did not notice them particularly, although they were strangers. They are probably new hands for one of the mills."

Just then the night telegraph operator arrived, and while Wilkins turned over the office to his relief, Jack Somers walked to the private car and asked the porter who looked after it to tell the cook not to expect him back to supper. This done, he rejoined Wilkins, and together they stepped from the platform into the narrow white ribbon of road that ran through the wooded countryside to Harrisville.

Jack Somers supped frugally with the station agent and chatted with him for about an hour afterward. Then he set out to walk to the private car, where his bed awaited him, but, though the porter sat watching for him till long after midnight, he did not arrive there. In the morning, when Wilkins looked for Jack to keep the appointment he had made on the previous night, the young man was missing.

The succeeding chapters of this novel will appear in the next issue of TOP-NOTCH, dated and out February 1st. Back numbers may be obtained from news dealers or the publishers.

•• Tale of Basketball in Porto Rico ••



His Seventh Heaven

By
Murray Keinster

(COMPLETE IN THIS ISSUE)



CHAPTER I.

A CHALLENGE ACCEPTED.



IF I were not *un Americano*," fiercely announced Pedro Ybarra, twisting his mustache angrily and striking an indignant pose, "I would challenge you to a duel and then I would cut your heart out!"

"And if I were not *un Americano*," savagely responded Rafael Ramirez, folding his arms in a dramatic gesture, "I would accept the challenge and separate you from your pancreas!"

Conchita Portarro sighed contentedly as she watched the embattled swains glaring at each other in the light of the Porto Rican moon. "It is jus' like the movies!" she breathed happily.

From where they stood the ground dropped away to show the waters of the harbor glistening with light. Palm trees waved their fronds languidly against a sky of blazing stars. A tropic night wind swept softly overhead, bringing the multitudinous scents of flowers, and manzanita blossoms, and a few of the aromas of the city of Ponce to their nostrils.

Off in the town somewhere a guitar was plunking melodiously, and a man was singing beneath a barred window. He had a slight cold, and his voice was not all that it should have been, but it could clearly be understood that he was singing the seventh verse of "La Paloma," and his ladylove was either blushing or she should have been, because those

Spanish serenades wax vivid after the first few stanzas.

For a moment the dramatic pose of defiance was held, and then some one sneezed violently. It was Alfredo Ruyas, the fourth of the group, but unconsidered by every one. He was spectacled, and the proprietor of a *farmacia*—a drug store—in Ponce, and he adored Conchita quite as much if not as dramatically as Ybarra and Ramirez, but he had not their theatrical presence. And by no stretch of the imagination could he have been imagined as a movie hero, which let him out so far as Conchita was concerned.

"This," said Ybarra with profound gloom, "must stop!"

"More than that," replied Ramirez grandly, "it must cease!"

"Señores!" protested Conchita. "You must not fight over me!"

Secretly, she was thrilled to the core. Nothing more perfectly like the movies had ever happened to Conchita before, and she adored it, but the conventions of the case required that she make some protest.

"A duel," said Ybarra morbidly, "would seem the only way out. But we are *Americanos*."

"And *Americanos*," added Ramirez with a fine air of melancholy, "cannot fight duels."

There was a pause, while they both felt a surge of passionate gratitude for the fact that they were Porto Ricans, and consequently Americans, and so could

not possibly shoot at each other or slice each other up on the field of honor. The police would not allow it.

"Something must be done!" said Ybarra again, tugging at his mustache and gazing with concentrated venom at his rival. "I have the honor to adore the Señorita Portarro. You, señor, have the impertinence to thrust your attentions upon her. Something must be done!"

"On the contrary," responded Ramirez with spirit, "it is I who have the honor to lay my heart in the dust before the Señorita Portarro, and it is yourself who is impertinent. But what is to be done?"

Conchita laid her hand upon her heart. "Señores——" she began pleadingly.

"I suggest that you two go home and put cold towels upon your heads," Ruyas, from his insignificant position in the shadows, said dryly. "This talk of duels is absurd, and you do not mean it. I will challenge either of you and go with you to Habana, where I will undertake to finish you up."

"Silence!" said Ybarra firmly. "This is between Ramirez and me, as true *Americanos*."

Ramirez agreed promptly. Ruyas sniffed, and his eyes glittered balefully behind his spectacles.

"Señores," said Conchita again, "I implore you not to quarrel over me! I implore it!"

"If there is to be a duel——" interjected Ruyas.

"Choose between us, then!" cried Ybarra dramatically.

Ruyas made him nervous, talking about duels. They were all very well to threaten, but they were not pleasant to think about as actual happenings. He considered it better to appeal to Conchita direct.

"Choose between us then, Conchita, and tell this *cucaracha* that it is as the Señora Conchita Portarro de Ybarra that you elect to give me happiness!"

"Ah, Conchita," breathed Ramirez passionately, "you know that my heart lies before you in the dust for your tiny feet to trample on!"

Conchita's hands were clasped together. She gazed from one to the other raptly. "But how, señores, how shall I choose?" she demanded in the best tradi-

tion of the movies that were shown in the Ponce Opera House twice a week. "Both so handsome, both so charming, both so——" She paused, with excellent effect.

Ruyas sniffed again. It was at once a derisive and a heartbroken sniff. He was in love with Conchita.

"Set us, then, a test," cried Ramirez. "My heart, my body, and my soul combine to serve you!"

"Umph!" said Ruyas.

Conchita debated. The scene and the moment were well-nigh perfect. As long as one maintained the standard of respectability that the rather old-fashioned society of Ponce demanded, it was unlikely that anything as thrilling would ever happen to her again. She must make the most of it. But it was beautifully like the movies!

"Señores," she said softly, after a little, "Alfredo and I went to the movies the last week. And there was a picture there in which the hero in a ball-of-the-foot game did adore a young girl. And he fought valiantly for her. When all of his friends were dead and wounded, he did take the ball in his hands and battle through many enemies until he had made a touchdown for his Alma Mater. And I do not like Alma for a girl's name, but the picture was beautiful."

"But," objected Ybarra, "there is no ball-of-the-foot game in Porto Rico. One would become warm, and perspire. There is only the baseball and the basketball and the billiards."

"And I play the basketball!" cried Ramirez hopefully. "I am capitan of a team!"

Ybarra glared. "And I," he said grimly, "have played also."

Ramirez gazed at him. "I am capitan of the Soft-boiled Eggs!" he announced. "The Soft-boiled Eggs have beaten all other teams."

"And I am central of the Hot Dogs!" returned Ybarra violently. "My Hot Dogs have beaten all other teams!"

Conchita looked from one to the other, and her face lighted up. "But it would be beautiful," she cried softly, "for you two to play! To see you, Pedro, with all your friends dead and wounded, dashing through many enemies! Or you,

Rafael, performing splendid feats! It would be beautiful!"

Conchita was an innocent little creature, with a thirst for romance. She beamed happily at the pair before her.

Ramirez bowed stiffly to his rival. "I offer a challenge, señor," he observed formally, "for your basketball team to play with mine."

"At your service, señor," returned Ybarra with a wave of his hand. He laughed, one of those confident laughs. "And the trophy," he cried, "will be the hand of the Señorita Portarro!"

Ruyas sniffed in the darkness. "And after you have won it three years in succession," he observed, "you will be allowed to keep it!"

CHAPTER II.

HIS BURDEN OF WOE.

IT was very clear in at least three minds, the next day, that Conchita might be an innocent and an unsophisticated girl, as befitted the daughter of a respectable Porto Rican, but Conchita expected action during that basketball game.

Ruyas, it had been agreed, was to umpire the affair, and he made his own preparations. Ybarra, his fervent Latin temperament fired by the drama of playing a game for the hand of the girl he loved, was debating the possibility of putting a few of his friends on the balcony that overlooked the basketball court, each of the said friends to have a brick or two in his pocket. At auspicious moments they would drop the bricks, one at a time, upon Ramirez's waiting head.

Ramirez, on the other hand, was hopefully considering the chance of slipping a horseshoe or something similar into the basketball, which might be bounced off Ybarra's cranium with interesting results.

Conchita expected action and longed for thrills. Each of her two suitors was quite willing to oblige her, provided that he was allowed to be the interesting victor while the other was merely the less interesting victim.

Ybarra slipped into the drug store during his noon-hour lunch period from the post office, in which he acted as clerk. Ruyas was indulging in a siesta.

"Alfredo," said Ybarra tentatively, "as a Castillian gentleman, I ask you, are you my friend?"

"Yes," replied Ruyas without enthusiasm.

"Then, my friend, do you as umpire in this basketball game ignore any small irregularity that may occur. You will do that, will you not?"

"Yes," Ruyas answered. His eyes gleamed balefully as he spoke. "What do you plan?"

"To wed Conchita!" declared Ybarra fervently.

Then, after much whispered consultation, he departed. Ruyas blinked at him as he left and ground his teeth. It was not the most pleasant thing for him to be called in as an accomplice by the man who wished him to help in winning the girl he himself happened to love.

But it was worse when Ramirez sneaked in a little later and leaned over the counter to whisper hoarsely: "Alfredo, you are my friend, are you not?"

"Yes," admitted Ruyas.

Ramirez became confidential. "If you observe any small thing that may seem unusual, you will take no notice of it, Alfredo? Such as a little punch administered in the heat of combat?"

"I shall not object," replied Ruyas judicially, "if you kill each other. I would favor it."

"*Bueno!*" cried Ramirez. "It is indeed as I planned! You shall be best man at my wedding to Conchita! Alfredo, you are a friend indeed!"

And he departed, likewise, after whispered confidences.

Ruyas ground his teeth again and laid his chin in his hands on the counter of his *farmacia*, to survey a world that was utter misery. He had not lied in assuring each one that he would act as a friend in so far as any scheme for incapacitating or slaughtering the other one was concerned. He had only a passionate desire to annihilate both of them. But at the moment he had not the faintest idea how to destroy the chances of his two rivals with Conchita.

As far as the game itself was concerned, he could attend to it. Though they destroyed each other, though they used pickaxes and dynamite bombs,

Ruyas was moderately certain that the game would result in a tie, but, after all, Conchita might accept the one of them who happened to be most attractively crippled.

The problem was entirely that of crushing their aspirations to Conchita's hand, and with something close to a sob Ruyas admitted his impotence. For himself, being short and slender and spectacled, and totally unlike any movie hero since the world began, he had no hope whatever.

Then, suddenly, he had an inspiration. He saw two small boys playing in the street outside. They were the most Americanized of all the Porto Rican youths.

Ruyas went to the door of his drug store and called them inside. Presently his cash register clinked musically as he removed certain small coins from its drawer. When they had departed, some of his burden of woe had departed with them.

CHAPTER III.

PHENOMENAL HAPPENINGS.

AT the appointed time that evening the Soft-boiled Eggs trotted out upon the basketball court, to be greeted by cheers and bravos and a shower of rose leaves from sentimental young ladies in the audience. Every one in Ponce was at the game, because every one in Ponce knew of the sentimental condition attached to the contest. If the Soft-boiled Eggs won the game, the Señorita Conchita Portarro would become the bride of Rafael Ramirez, the captain.

Upon the uniforms of each member an egg, in token of their name, had been embroidered in yellow silk. Ramirez, in particular, was magnificent. He was greeted with especial applause, and the entire house beamed upon him as he made a dramatic salute to Conchita, who sat in a box to watch the all-important conflict.

Then the Hot Dogs trotted onto the floor. The cheering was even louder. A small "hot dog" adorned the breast of each of the five, and Ybarra was resplendently shaven and hair-oiled. He led his men to a position before Conchita and held out his arms in splendid appeal

for her smile. She gave it to him, of course.

Then Ruyas appeared, with a grim look in his eyes, but Conchita was playing up to the situation. With a beaming smile for each one she produced her favors for the knights who were to do battle for her hand. To Ybarra she presented a hot dog, tied up in blue ribbon, and to Ramirez she gave a soft-boiled egg, tied up in yellow.

"Go, señores," she breathed, "and fight bravely, for only the brave deserve the fair!"

Ruyas blew his whistle. "I will toss the ball for you," he warned the pair, "and the usual rules of basketball apply. I add one of my own: No hitting during the clinches."

The teams took up their positions. Ybarra and Ramirez were centers. They stood facing each other, eye to eye and scowl to scowl. Ruyas blew his whistle shrilly and tossed the ball. It went up, and up, almost to the ceiling, certainly higher than the level of the balcony that surrounded the court.

As one man, Ybarra and Ramirez leaped for it as it began to descend. Ybarra's strong right hand hit the ball a resounding whack at the same instant that his strong left-hand pushed Ramirez's face. Ramirez sat down very hard. The ball flew into the hands of a Hot Dog warrior, who bounced it and tossed it back to Ybarra, who bounced it, passed it to a forward, took it back again, and made a beautiful throw for the basket—all in the first twenty seconds of play. The ball soared in a magnificent arc, nestled into the ring, and fell out again without having scored.

Ybarra saw only the first part of his throw. He saw the ball settle down to make a score, and altogether failed to notice its inexplicable failure to go through the hoop. He was bowing to the applause when one of the Soft-boiled Eggs sent the ball whizzing past his ear and into the chest of Ramirez, who was just struggling to his feet. It caromed off and into the hands of another Soft-boiled Egg. This man flicked it neatly upward for a goal.

The whistle shrilled. "Foul!" said Umpire Ruyas sternly. "You are not

allowed to pass the ball with your chest. Also, no goal."

No one being able to determine just where the toss-up should be, it took place again in the middle of the court. Again both centers leaped for the ball on the instant. But this time, while Ybarra reached with his right hand and shoved his left palm against Ramirez's face, Ramirez reached with his right hand and executed a very neat left hook into Ybarra's solar plexus.

They sat down together and the ball bounced merrily between them until one of the Hot Dogs dashed to seize it and crashed violently into one of the forwards of the Soft-boiled clan, whereupon both fell in a heap on top of their centers and were buried beneath a mass of legs and arms as the remainder of their respective teams dashed forward to the rescue.

Ruyas watched impassively until volunteers from among the spectators had disentangled the heap.

"He pushed my face!" protested Ramirez wildly.

"He hit me in the stomach," gasped Ybarra. "I claim a foul!"

Ruyas surveyed them, considering. "I will make an exception to the rules," he said. "One of you may wear a baseball catcher's mask to protect his face, and the other may wear a chest protector to guard his stomach."

The whistle shrilled again, and the ball was tossed for the third time. This time it got off to a flying start, and for a good five minutes there was only very pretty work. Perhaps it was because neither Ramirez nor Ybarra had much of a chance at it.

At last, however, the ball was close by the Hot Dogs' goal. There was a swift entanglement and a wild mêlée, from which a Soft-boiled Egg emerged, fleeing swiftly. Instantly the others were after him. He flung it before him, and Ybarra was just beneath the basket. He lifted his hands for a perfect catch and an absolutely certain score. And then there was a tiny "ping-g-g," and Ybarra yelled and clapped his hand to his nose. The ball flattened both the hand and the nose. The whistle shrilled. "Foul!" said Umpire Ruyas. "The ball must be stopped

only with the hands or arms, not with the nose."

A toss-up followed, two leaps, two yells. A Hot Dog forward rescuing the ball and putting it into play prevented an absolute fizzle this time, while Ybarra and Ramirez waved their arms wildly at each other in the middle of the floor. Each of them held out a small *frijole*, a common or garden bean, and frantically accused the other of shooting it at him to spoil the play. As a matter of fact, two youths in the balcony were having the time of their lives with pea shooters.

The debate of the two rivals was interrupted by an uproar that arose all around the court. Even Conchita was not looking at the two champions, nor heeding their rivalry in invective. She, like everybody else, was gazing incredulously at the basketball. It had been tossed for an easy and a perfect goal. It had risen, nestled in the ring, and prepared to descend. But it had not descended. It hung miraculously in mid-air above the basket.

Ruyas made frantic gestures to the two youths of the pea shooters. They fired a volley at the ball, and it languidly dropped to the ground outside the basket, without scoring.

Dazed, but acting from sheer instinct, the two teams began to battle again. Not more than a minute later the ball hovered above the opposite basket, remaining suspended in violation of all the laws of gravitation. A spectator in the balcony poked at it with his cane, and it fell to the floor once more.

Demoralization settled upon the two teams. With passionate determination, they flung the ball at the basket. It either bounced off, rolled off, or hung coyly above the opening in mid-air. It would not go through. It would not even really settle into the ring.

Had it not been for the peculiar aversion of the ball, the scoring would have been phenomenal. By the end of the first half not less than sixty-two points would have been credited to the Hot Dogs and fifty-eight to the Soft-boiled Eggs. But as a matter of fact, when Ruyas impassively blew the whistle for the end of the half, the score was precisely 0 to 0.

It was Ybarra who inspected the basket in which his team had struggled in vain to score. He was in a frenzy of rage when he found that half a dozen small and very fine wires, which looked a great deal like mandolin strings, had been stretched across the opening. They would be invisible from below, but they would effectually keep the ball from going through. He tore them out and went in search of Ramirez.

Ramirez, however, had been inspecting the other basket and had found the same thing. Equally enraged, he was searching for Ybarra. The result was that they went around and around the balcony in pursuit of each other, but without overtaking each other, until the whistle shrilled for the second half.

CHAPTER IV.

A LIGHT OF INSPIRATION.

WHEN the teams took the floor again both men were desperate, and both had managed to infuse some of their spirit of desperation into their comrades. At the toss-up they grappled in enraged combat until both teams piled up on them. Then Ybarra gave a yelp while running with the ball and dropped it. Ramirez seized it and yelped as loudly. Two small boys in the balcony shrieked with delight, and Ruyas smiled grimly. The cost of two pea shooters for those two small boys was already repaid.

And Conchita, of course, was looking very unhappy. Every one in Ponce had come to see two brave men battle for her favor, and now one of them was leaping about with his face in a cage, while the other was hiding behind a mattress. The pair of them had taken Ruyas' suggestion literally during the intermission between halves. A baseball catcher's mask and chest protector adorned the opposing centers. And now Ybarra adopted tactics that he had planned as a last resort.

"Take that, *cucaracha!*" he snarled as he found himself blocking his enemy in an attempt to pass the ball. A little mist of powder descended.

Ramirez sneezed, and as he sneezed he threw the ball. It slammed Ybarra in the eye. There was a surge of men all

about them. The sneeze powder was distributed more freely than its original owner had intended. An outburst of sneezing split the air, and the ball was held by one side or the other only for as long as the man who seized it could keep from sneezing. In the meantime Ruyas' light artillery from the balcony kept up a steady though inconspicuous fire of *frijoles*. Wherever they saw a head, they beamed it. And the two teams went into a frenzy.

Ramirez met Ybarra head-on, as the latter made a wild rush with the ball. Rules had gone by the board by tacit agreement. Anything short of dynamite went in the game, by this time. Ybarra was the heavier man and bowled his rival over, but Ramirez managed to sink his teeth in Ybarra's leg as he went past.

Fifteen seconds later, Ybarra, with tears in his eyes, gave the Soft-boiled Egg chieftan a hard elbow in the bread basket. Ramirez keeled over, and Ybarra painstakingly jumped on his face.

There was a wild yell from the side lines. Those worthy inhabitants of Ponce were Porto Ricans, and consequently Americans, but their ancestors had reveled in bull fights. This was a basketball game after their own hearts. They leaped to their feet with wild shouts of encouragement.

A Soft-boiled Egg saw the injury done to his captain. The honor of the team was at stake. He plunged upon Ybarra and bit his ear. A Hot Dog leaped to his leader's defense and kicked the Soft-boiled Egg on the shins. From there the *mêlée* became general. The Soft-boiled Eggs became scrambled with the Hot Dogs, and the Hot Dogs made a hash omelette with the Soft-boiled Eggs.

The spectators, cheering until the roof shook, plunged over the barrier about the court to advise the contestants at closer quarters. The two small boys in the balcony, in Ruyas' pay, spread a barrage over the whole. The beans were considered as insults to be avenged. The nearest person was required to answer for the insults. Canes, fists, feet, and teeth contributed to a general uproar at which Ruyas gazed with melancholy satisfaction.

Conchita, deathly pale, seized his arm.

"Alfredo! Alfredo! Stop them! Stop them!"

Ruyas sighed. "This is the first time, Conchita," he said sadly, "that I have ever enjoyed regarding Pedro Ybarra or Rafael Ramirez. But I will save them."

He took off his spectacles and polished them. He gazed about the basketball court. A light as of inspiration came over his face. He strode to a fire hose coupled against the wall. He turned on the water and dragged the hose after him. Then, with an augmenting stream pouring from the nozzle, he cooled the hot passions of the combatants, he extinguished the flames of hatred, and finally slipped upon one of the numerous small hard beans upon the floor and collapsed, with the hose pointing straight upward and sending a beautiful fountain of glittering drops toward the ceiling to fall again and obliterate him.

CHAPTER V.

"JUS' LIKE THE MOVIES!"

AGAIN the moon shone down upon the harbor of Ponce, and again the palm trees waved languid fronds against a sky of blazing stars. And once more the scents of manzanita blossoms and tropic verdure was borne to the nostrils of Conchita Portarro. Ruyas, rather damp, had brought her safely home.

"Adios, Conchita," he said gloomily.

She stared at him, then smiled faintly, then dropped her eyes. "Mus' you go so soon, Alfredo?" she asked shyly. "It is not late."

Ruyas sighed, and said nothing.

"It was beautiful, Alfredo!" said Conchita happily. "Do you stay with me a little so we can talk about it. It was beautiful to observe you playing the hose upon them all. It was jus' like the movies!"

Ruyas' eyes opened very wide. "But—but Pedro, and Rafael?" he demanded.

"Pouf!" Conchita shrugged. "They were not heroic. It was you, Alfredo, who were wonderful."

She beamed at him. Like one walking in his sleep, Ruyas gazed at her, then took her hand in his. She did not withdraw it. Instead, she snuggled a little closer to him. And Ruyas suddenly

found his voice, and used it to excellent effect. He was in the seventh heaven when he finally heard her murmuring contentedly:

"But of course I will marry you, Alfredo! It was beautiful to-night, when you fell down upon the floor. You looked exactly like Carlos Chaplin. Ah, it was beautiful! Jus' like the movies!"

Did you like this story, or did you not? If you liked it, please let us know why in a letter, briefly worded. If you did not like it, let us know that and why. And while you are about it, comment on any other story in this number, or give us your opinion of the number as a whole.

Wonderful!

LADIES and gentlemen," said the entertainer, "having blindfolded my partner I will now proceed to test her thought-reading powers.

"I have in my hand an apple. Will you kindly tell the audience what it is that I am holding in my hand?"

"An apple."

"Correct. I have here a watch. Kindly tell the audience what I have."

"A watch."

"Quite right. You see, ladies and gentlemen, it is impossible to catch her."

The entertainer produced a piece of wood and a saw, and began to saw vigorously.

"Kindly tell the audience what I am doing."

No reply.

"This is rather a difficult feat, ladies and gentlemen. I will try again."

"Can you tell me what I am doing?" asked the entertainer, continuing his sawing.

"Yes. You are singing!"

Loud applause.

Truly Terrible!

HOTEL Clerk: "Another guest complained this morning that his room had been burgled during the night!"

Proprietor: "Great Scott! This sort of thing must be stopped! The last three men robbed here didn't have money enough left to pay their hotel bills!"

When the Turtle Snapped



By Harold de Polo

HER small eyes alight with tenderness, the black bear kept a strict watch over her two young cubs. Stretched out under the shade of a pine, her body comfortably resting on the soft needles, the mother viewed the antics of her fuzzy little offspring. In that patch of verdant grass, in the sunshine that was almost broiling, the pair played. Utterly heedless of anything but the fact that, to them, the world was a lovely place meant only for sleeping and eating and enjoyment, they played together in joyous glee. Over and over they rolled, now one on top, now the other, simulating anger, cuffing and biting and snarling. Occasionally, without meaning, one of the immature claws or teeth would sink through the hide and into the flesh, and the sharp cry of real pain would cause their parent to send forth a quick growl of warning.

It was directly after such infrequent happenings that acute worry would replace the deep fondness in her eyes. It reminded her of the grim reality that she was for a few minutes trying to forget. To bring up two youngsters was a hard task; to do it without a mate to help her, however, was a doubly dangerous one.

There are innumerable natural enemies in the wild against which all must contend, but in the majority of cases there is a father as well as a mother to shoulder the burden. In this instance, the male

bear had gone down to his doom, a few weeks before, when defending his family against the attack of a pair of blood-thirsty lynxes who lived on the other side of the valley. Since that time the female had faced the situation alone.

Her worry was not because she was unwilling, or had not valiantly accomplished her duties, but because she honestly thought herself unable to continue. In the battle between the cats and her mate, one of the feline tribe had also lost his life. Consequently, the remaining lynx had been filled with a desire for vengeance that bordered on the insane. She did not dare come into personal combat with the mother bear herself; instead, she spent her time in trying to reach those two cubs in the cave on the hillside. Almost her every waking hour, when she knew that the cubs were alone, was used in efforts to capture them, showing that she at least had the virtue of persistency.

Nevertheless, it was the fear that the cubs might some time stray into the open, during her absence, that was harassing the mother bear. As they grew older, she noticed that they became more mischievous, more curious, more brazen. With all the strict training that was theirs, the streak of inquisitiveness that is the heritage of their ilk was not completely overcome. They always wanted to see what was what, and why it was so.

Knowing this, the mother was continually, while on the hunt, in a nervous

condition that decidedly cut down her efficiency in tracking quarry. For two days she had been without the nourishment she needed in order to give her the strength to suckle her young. It was not that she had been out on the trail and had not gained success; it was that her anxiety had been so great for her whelps that she had stayed at home and nibbled at roots and leaves and sprigs. And these were insufficient.

Now, as she watched them in their carefree play, she soberly realized that she must build up her own body if they were to go on enjoying life. Already, she could see, they were showing the effects of her own malnutrition. To the casual eye it would not be apparent; but, to the scrutiny of a devoted mother, it was just beginning to tell. She herself was feeling the lack of proper food. She was losing weight to an alarming degree, and lassitude was gradually creeping over her. Although she dreaded it, she decided that this very morning she must take her chances and sally forth on the search for some solid food.

This important matter settled, she called her frolicsome cubs to her. Somberly, as she led them into the cave, she tried to convey to them the seriousness of the situation. Very gravely, with slow and deliberate movements, she ushered them to the burrow at the rear, just large enough for their own bodies, where they were to wait while she went foraging.

As they clambered inside, she growlingly tried to tell them what would happen if they left their safe haven during the period that they would be without her to guard them. Then, with a brave heart, she marched out on the business of discovering provender.

II

LIKE practically all youngsters, the little bears obeyed the commands of their mother just so long, and that was for about twenty minutes. After that, their cramped position became irksome. Also, they were growing more impatient, of recent days, of what they felt was the injustice of the restraint that was being put upon them. They wanted to

look, alone and without supervision, at the world that was so enticingly spread before them.

Therefore, they soon took advantage of the opportunity of getting on more or less intimate terms with the universe. Mustering all their strength and courage they bolted pell-mell down the grassy slope in front of their den, making for a fascinating pond that they had often viewed from afar, when off on short rambles with their mother.

As they got close to the swampy edge, they approached the water somewhat slowly and gingerly. There was the pond, the interesting place of which they had dreamed. Here was the spot which was supposed to hold for them countless and wildly exciting happenings. Now that they were here, however, their young and unsophisticated little brains could not fathom what in the world they were going to do.

Suddenly, not a foot away from them, on a sunken and rotten old log, they saw a queer roundish object, greenish-black in color. It looked, at first glance, like one of those mossy stones at a narrow stream where their mother occasionally took them on those short rambles. They were about to dismiss it as a stone. Then, from one end of it, they saw something protrude and wiggle. It struck them that this was similar, though gigantically large, to the tails owned by those small turtles that they had seen on one of their visits to the brook.

As a matter of fact, they were gazing at a turtle. But this was a large one, a snapping turtle, and it would have tipped the scales at eight or nine pounds.

Their eyes agog, the bear cubs stared. Spellbound for a moment, the two youngsters surveyed this sleeping creature. At the brook, when they had seen smaller members of his ilk, they had always been extremely desirous of becoming better acquainted. And here, as if placed in this spot for their particular amusement, was quite the biggest one they had ever seen—bigger than they had thought any of that family could possibly be.

Again that tail wiggled, and, from the other end, a head started to appear. Before it could fully stretch itself from the shell, the inquisitive and frolicsome male

bear cub mischievously put forth a paw and tumbled the half-awakened dozer off the log. The snapping turtle landed helplessly on his back in the soft, swampy ground.

Gleefully, their little sides nearly splitting with heartfelt laughter, the youngsters watched the really ludicrous behavior of their victim. His head was certainly all out, now, and so were his four legs and tail. Wildly, furiously, he was craning and waving them about in a desperate effort to get back into a dignified and more formidable position. All he succeeded in doing, due to the wet earth on which he rested, was to whirl around and around in a dizzy circle.

III.

THE bear cubs gave full rein to their merriment. Frequently, as the snapping turtle whirled about, one of them would reach forward with a forepaw and help him along. If they had known, however, that just one bite of his cruel jaws might have taken off one of their feet, or at least inflicted a very dangerous wound, they would have been much less amused, not so daring.

The fact that the turtle's wicked jaws missed their mark each time, though, surely must have hinted that this was their lucky day. Indeed, the faster they found they could make the turtle spin, the more often they pawed him. They had him going, shortly, like a pinwheel in a strong breeze. Naturally, the more rapidly he went the more dizzy and helpless he became, and, as his gyrations increased, so, too, did the laughter of those two playful youngsters.

Bear cubs soon grow tired of a new toy, however.

Presently they decided that they had experienced enough of those particular antics. They did not abandon their recently found source of amusement, though. They told themselves that they were certain this spinning toy would interest them on some future occasion. This being so, why not take it back with them to their home?

It was a task that would have appalled them if they had stopped to consider it, but since it was sport, and not some-

thing they were compelled to do, they went happily to work. The dangers or the difficulties of the undertaking were ignored. These two little mischievous bear cubs, between them, actually managed to keep that giant snapping turtle on his back while they pushed and nudged him along. They got him to the beginning of the short hill that was about fifty feet from the mouth of their den. How they escaped the vicious onslaughts of his constantly attacking jaws is a question that must forever remain unanswered.

It had taken them about an hour to accomplish this, and it had been an arduous task. With that somewhat steep ascent before them, therefore, they decided to rest in order to regain their breath before starting the last and most difficult lap of their journey.

As they carefully studied that grassy slope, however, they suddenly forgot all about their latest plaything. They were too dumb with horror, too paralyzed with fear, to utter the faintest cry or to move a single muscle.

Above the two bear cubs, nearer the entrance to the cave than they were, stood the dreaded form of the female lynx. She was eyeing them, over the dead partridge that hung between her dripping jaws, with all the horrible hatred with which a creature who is insane venomously glares at her prey.

IV.

THE mother bear, after leaving her youngsters, made up her mind to try the hunting grounds she had, in the past, found to yield the quickest returns. Her appetite leaned toward a fat rabbit or a juicy partridge. Incidentally, the spots mostly frequented by these respective members of the furred and the feathered tribes happened to be those nearest the bear's den. With hurrying footsteps she made for the runway leading to the water hole, one which was popular with long-eared quadrupeds.

She was not successful in her hunting, however. Worry for her offspring was constantly on her mind and she did not, on top of that, spend a great amount of time at her vigil. Indeed, she gave it

some thirty minutes, at the utmost, when often four and five times that much is necessary for success. After that, she swiftly made her way to the dense growth of pines, where the branches grew low and where she stood the best chance of finding a partridge and of creeping up on it.

Here, also, conditions were against her. Her fears for her young, her visions of that fierce lynx, caused her to stalk through the forest, making as much noise as a novice. Her nervousness, too, had the same effect as when she had been hiding near the rabbit runway. It was so acute, so overwhelming, that it ruined her chances. She was soon aware of the reason for her failure to find food, and with a heavy sigh she turned toward her den. All she wanted was to get back to her cubs, and to see them safe and alive.

Her feelings may be imagined, when she topped the small bluff just above her den and took in the scene below her. She was as stunned as were the cubs. She could neither use her vocal chords nor bring her most insignificant sinew into play.

At last, however, she found her voice. A ghastly cry issued from her throat. It was drawn forth by the sudden leap of the cat. The lynx had at length sensed the presence of the mother of her prospective victims, and after one quick glance in which eye had met eye, she had hurled her supple body straight out for those two little helpless bears.

Then it was that the shriek of the agonized mother bear froze on her lips. She saw, through a dim haze, that blackish and muscular form of the cat cut through the air; she saw her beloved cubs, as the clawed peril neared them, somehow find their legs and jump blindly down the slope. Then, as the lynx landed, the mother bear saw a strange and a weird spectacle.

She saw the cat land. She saw that her youngsters had evaded that first charge. Then, although she was positive that the sight was too good to be true or else that her eyes were in some manner tricking her, she saw the infuriated feline bound high into the air with a yelp of pain and surprise coming from her throat. Following this, the

mother bear saw her most-feared and powerful enemy galloping off down the hillside at a pace that she had never previously witnessed, in any animal, during her long and varied career.

And, as her vision cleared, the mother bear distinguished, securely fastened to the left hind foot of that fleeing cat, a snapping turtle that weighed about eight or nine pounds.

Seeing the World

AS the powerful motor car dashed along the French country road in a smother of dust and fumes, the owner leaned toward the chauffeur and yelled out:

"Where are we now?"

"Just running into Paris, sir!" roared back the man at the wheel.

The owner of the car shook his head irritably.

"Oh, don't bother about little details!" he shrieked back. "I mean what country?"

A Different Game

AN experienced golfer, in a fit of condescension, invited a novice to take part in a game. The novice, to the golfer's dismay and disgust, plowed up the ground at every stroke.

After one particularly vicious dig, the golfer remarked, "You've revoked."

"We're playing golf, not whist," said the novice.

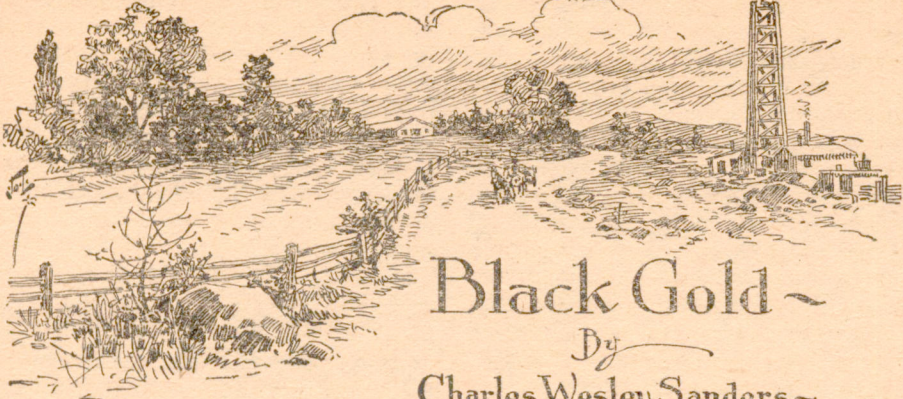
"Yes," replied the golfer; "but you have just played a spade where you should have played a club."

Taking a Chance

WHAT!" said the indignant old gentleman. "You want to marry my daughter? Why, it was only a few years ago that you were caddying for me."

"Yes, sir," the young man replied; "but I don't intend to let that stand in the way. I hope I have sense enough to realize that a very bad golfer may make a fairly good father-in-law."

: Tale of the Western Oil Fields :



Black Gold ~

By
Charles Wesley Sanders ~

CHAPTER I.

CYCLONE COMING!

THOUGH he was not afraid of storms, Halverson had no desire to shake hands with the cyclone which seemed imminent. He had been familiar with destroying winds and torrential downpours ever since he could remember, and familiarity had bred respect for them—not contempt. Long ago he had learned that discretion was always the better part of valor when the winds lay back on their haunches and prepared to spring across the open country.

Therefore, he had kept a watchful, backward eye on the western storm cloud for the past ten minutes. That cloud had been no bigger than a great black kettle when it had first lifted itself above the horizon half an hour before. It now obscured almost all of the western sky. It was still as black as the blackest of kettles, except for the splotches of copper color which seemed to stand out from it here and there. Halverson did not like that copper color. He knew that it meant wind.

"It's on its way," said Halverson calmly to himself, "and its way is right in this direction. I better be looking for shelter. Seems to me I should be almost there."

The horse which he had bought in the village five miles distant had covered those five miles in sedate fashion, a fashion which suited its rider, for it gave him

a chance to observe the country through which he was passing. He had been interested in the signs which showed that much drilling was being done for oil and gas. He had passed one good-sized drum farm, and on both sides of the road, as far as he could see, there had been drilling machines and standard rigs, the latter lifting themselves nakedly to the sky.

"I reckon it's just as good oil country as folks have reported," had been Halverson's verdict. "There ought to be some black gold around here."

As the storm began to crowd in, the sedate horse showed signs of life. It danced on light feet and pushed on the bit. Its ears lay back, and its eyes glinted.

"Know the signs, do you, old-timer?" Halverson asked. "Well, let's get along. Maybe we can pick up that house we're headed for, before the big blow comes."

The horse sprang forward. Halverson paid no more attention to the oncoming storm cloud. He kept his eyes fixed on the right side of the road. He was looking for a road which crossed this one. Just beyond that crossroad there should be a one-story house, and that house was Halverson's destination.

It was now only four o'clock of a late May afternoon, but presently the rider was moving through darkness. It was not the clear darkness of a calm night, but the thick, sluggish darkness of night thrust into day. A sickish, yellow color lay over the fields which Halverson sped by.

He was beginning to think he had missed his way or had been improperly directed when he saw the road he was looking for. Halfway down a field, sitting a hundred feet back from the road, was the house. Halverson pulled up his horse. Now that his goal was in sight, he was loath to cover the few remaining feet which separated him from it. He had known all along that it would require all his courage to confront the woman he was seeking, but he had not anticipated this quick, nervous sinking of his heart. He had never had a sensation like that before. He had never felt it even in the tightest of tight places, with death in the offing.

It was not physical fear. It was a kind of physical and spiritual nausea, and it brought fine beads of sweat to the big man's tanned face. He was about to face a woman to whom he had dealt one blow, and he was about to deal her another blow by the disclosure he would have to make. He had traveled five hundred miles to make that disclosure and had suffered tortures of apprehension every foot of the way.

Now the storm, which was undoubtedly sending shivers up and down many a spine across the country, came to his aid. He had to forget his apprehension so that he might think about his safety. A quick, backward glance told him that he had no time to lose. The great mass of black and yellow was moving toward him. He knew that it was moving with incredible speed. Presently, if it kept on in its present course, it would tear across where he stood, leaving death and destruction in its wake.

"I need more'n a house," Halverson told himself grimly. "I need a cyclone cellar."

He sent one more swift glance toward the storm cloud. His returning eyes swept the field beyond him. Even as they did so, he put out a foot to clap it back against the horse's flank. The foot did not fall, however. Halverson's sweeping eyes had seen a woman at the lower end of the field, a quarter of a mile away.

His eyes went to the house, to the barn back of it, then across the field to the woman. He saw that the field was un-

doubtedly part of the farm to which the buildings belonged. Then this woman was the one he sought. That, unquestionably, was the house which had been described to him. No other woman would be working in a field adjacent to the house.

Halverson strained his eyes through the deepening dark. He could just make out the woman now, and he saw that she was as yet making no move to flee to safety. Her arms were going up and down in a regularity of movement which indicated that she was not yet ready to abandon a task.

"Hoeing cotton," said Halverson to himself, "and keeping right at it in spite of what nature is about to pull off. I better be getting over there."

He turned his horse toward the field. As he did so, he was aware that a great hush had fallen over the land. There was utter silence, utter stillness. The leaves on the trees along the road were motionless. Halverson felt as if he were in a void from which life had been withdrawn. This he knew to be the pause before the blow. At any moment the wind might leap out of that monstrous cloud. Halverson struck his horse sharply and the animal, with fear for spur, went dashing madly across the open field.

Halverson was conscious of a little stir in the air, the forerunner of the blow. A streak of lightning split the sky again and again. There was a crashing, tearing sound. The darkness deepened till it shut Halverson in. The lightning fortunately came once more, and he could see that the woman had begun to move. She was moving away from him, toward a clump of trees, which, Halverson imagined, grew on the edge of a slope.

He struck his horse sharply, and the animal responded as best it could. Halverson felt, however, that the ground was growing heavier here, and the going for the horse was that much the harder. The animal took half a dozen steps farther and then sank halfway to its knees. Halverson slid from the saddle as the horse stopped. He patted the horse on the shoulder and passed a hand down its quivering nostrils.

"Sorry to quit you, old boy," he said gently, "but there isn't anything else for

me to do. Shake yourself free and get out of here."

He jerked up the horse's head, and the animal freed itself and wheeled about. Halverson struck it on the flank, and it sped off in the direction of the barn.

Halverson turned about. He could see nothing now. The storm cloud had crowded close in. Soon it would envelop him. It loomed before him, pressing close down to the earth. He hitched up his belt, pulled down his hat, and squinted in the direction in which he had seen the woman. He was waiting for the lightning's flare, and when it came he saw that the woman had reached the clump of trees. She must just have reached it, he thought, for she was standing still, looking at the cloud.

Halverson opened his lips to cry out to her, and then he changed his mind. Undoubtedly she knew what she was doing, where she was going. If his voice reached her, she would hesitate, possibly halt till he came up to her. That hesitation might be fatal. The breaking of the storm was a question of minutes now, even of seconds. As the woman started down the slope which Halverson had guessed she was facing, he broke into a run toward her.

When he gained the top of the slope, she was at the bottom of it. A flare of lightning revealed her, tugging at an object at her feet. Then, as Halverson dashed down the slope toward her, his ears were filled with a rushing sound. The storm was upon him and upon her.

There was a great hissing, a monstrous roaring, almost an unbroken flare of lightning, and now and then an explosion of thunder which seemed to shake the earth. The lightning aided Halverson. It enabled him to keep the woman in view. He saw that she was still stooped over. Her arms were still straining at some object at her feet.

The slope was steep. Rocks jutted out from it. Vines trailed across it and broken branches, cast down in previous storms, littered it. Twice Halverson's feet were entangled and he plunged headlong. The plunge carried him forward, and he suffered only scratches and bruises. He was within ten feet of her before she became aware of his presence.

That was when she stood up, stared a moment at her feet, and then lifted her eyes to the slope. She kept her eyes on the oncoming man till he reached her side.

Halverson had guessed what she was tugging at—the door of a storm cave, and now he wasted no time in idle questions. Bending, he took hold of a latch which lay on the door. The knuckles of his big hands whitened. Huge muscles bulged beneath his coat. His shoulders lifted upward as he pulled. The flat door creaked and whined and then gave way, disclosing a cave beneath it, a slope leading down to it. Here, at any rate, they would be safe.

Halverson put out a hand to the woman, but she did not wait for his urging. She sprang lightly down the slope. Halverson followed her, trying to pull the door after him. Before he succeeded, the storm broke in all its fury, and the door was slammed against him. He was thrown to the foot of the slope in pitch darkness. The door had struck him on the side of the head, and he had a moment of dizziness.

CHAPTER II.

AN IMPORTANT QUESTION.

A MATCH was struck and, turning his head, Halverson saw the girl was lighting a small, hand lamp which stood on an upturned box in the center of the cave. The light flowed through the cave and revealed two chairs as furnishings, besides the box and the lamp. Halverson got to his feet and confronted the woman as she turned to him, waving the match in her hand to put out the tiny flame.

He saw her lips move to frame a single word, but the word did not reach his ears. The rush of the wind above them, in spite of the closed doors, filled the cave with a hideous roar of sound. The girl seemed to know that her word had not reached Halverson. She made a movement as if to go closer to him, but she did not follow up the movement. Instead, she stood looking at him, scanning his face. She saw a tall man, wide of shoulder, deep of chest. His face was dark, naturally so, she judged, and it

was overlaid with the tan of many summers.

The face, she noted, was freshly shaved, and the blue eyes which looked out at her from it were cool and kind, the eyes of a boy in the face of a man of thirty-two or three. Short, fair hair clustered above his forehead and ran wild over his head. His hair gave him an added look of boyishness. The face was thin, but it was not the thinness of ill health. It was the thinness which comes from an active life. The man's clothing was clean. His shirt had been freshly ironed and his suit recently pressed. He looked like a substantial citizen in holiday attire.

For his own part, Halverson saw a woman—a girl, rather—whose deep brown eyes were not more than four inches below the level of his own. Her hair was as black as any Indian's hereabouts, but it was not straight and straggly like an Indian's. It had apparently been brushed back severely, but the girl's work in the field had loosened it, and it was a cloud about her face in its fine abundance. She, too, was tanned, but it was a lighter tan than Halverson's.

Beneath the tan there was a living color as bright, as deep as the color of any red rose. A girl of flowing, graceful lines, she stood and looked at Halverson. Her eyes showed no concern. The fact that she was shut in a cave with a stranger while nature went wild outside did not seem to make her even questioning. At the end of their observation of each other, she stepped up to him. Her lips framed a word again. Because of the roar of wind above them Halverson had to bend to hear what she said.

"Hurt?" she asked.

He rubbed his head where a small lump was forming and glanced at the scratches on his hands. "I don't reckon they are anything that will prove fatal," he said.

The answer was not such as would be calculated ordinarily to bring a flush to a girl's face, but he saw the rose in her cheeks deepen swiftly. He wondered why. He did not know that the girl had been caught in a kind of sudden fascination by the smile which dawned in his eyes.

He did not know that the fascination

came from the girl's realization that this was the smile of a clean man. She had seen that swift, glimmering light in the eyes of a child, but she had never seen it before in the eyes of a man.

It lighted up the whole tanned face, made it kind, and that in turn inspired trust. Halverson, further, did not know that the girl was affected by the smile because it placed him against a background of men of another kind. The girl had been having experiences with men of that kind lately. That was why she was even now carrying in the bosom of her dress a small pistol.

Halverson, in his turn, had his own moment of fascination. During that moment he forgot the errand which had brought him here. He had not had much experience with women, and he had never before been so close to a woman as lovely as this. He thought that wild color in her cheeks was the most beautiful thing he had ever seen.

Then he remembered. He remembered with a shock which constricted his heart. Before he had met the girl, his errand had seemed hard enough, the blow he must deal brutal enough. But to deal a blow to this girl was more than ought to fall to the lot of a man who had always tried to play a square game. He would have to wait a bit, consider the manner of doing the thing he had to do. He paled a little as he reached his decision, and his eyes wavered away from hers.

Above them the roar of the wind seemed to have abated a little and to have been succeeded by a downpour of rain.

"It's good-by cotton," the girl said with an effort at lightness.

"You were hoeing your cotton, ma'am?" he asked, his eyes seeking hers.

"I was trying to," she answered. "I wasn't making much headway, though. Too muddy. It has rained here every day for a long time. This will be a flood, I reckon."

"Hoeing cotton isn't much of a job for a woman anyway," he said, and there was more in his voice than in his words.

"I can do it," she said lightly. "However, I reckon I won't have to do it now, unless we should get a couple of weeks

of sun. The corn in the lowlands is all under water, too. I suppose it's flooded out by now. It was a foot high a week ago, and I noticed to-day the tops of it were sticking above the water."

"You—you were depending on your crops, ma'am?" he asked.

"I was depending on them," she said, "but maybe I won't need them." She laughed with a sound like that from a muted instrument. "Maybe my oil well will make me rich."

A sudden, eager glow came into his eyes. She noted it and retreated a step from him. She had seen a glow in the eyes of other men when her oil well was mentioned.

"You're drilling for oil on your place here?" he asked.

"I am not drilling," she said a little coldly. "I have given a lease. If the drillers should strike oil, I'd get my eighth. One good well would be enough for me."

"Well, I sincerely hope you get it," remarked Halverson.

He lifted his head and listened. The rain was still beating furiously on the door of the cave.

"Won't you sit down, ma'am?" he asked, indicating one of the chairs. "This rain may go on for an hour."

She sank into a chair, but she did not invite him to take the other seat. He leaned against the wall of the cave and looked down at her.

"My name is Halverson, ma'am," he said. "I come from down Texas way."

She looked him in the eyes, and she did not flush any more. "Oil scout?" she inquired.

Halverson was able to catch at the suggestion without change of countenance. The idea was good. Proclaimed as an oil scout, he would have a rating, something to account for his being in the community and his remaining there.

"Yes," he said. "Oil scout. Came up here to look around and see what I could find."

"Expect to do some wildcatting, do you?" she queried.

"I may. Depends upon how things look."

"Oklahoma is full of oil scouts and oil drillers and wildcatters and stock sales-

men and Heaven knows what," she said, and her voice was a little harsh. "I suppose you have your pockets full of other people's money."

He knew what she meant. Some scouts advertised themselves as being in a position to take up leases when wells came in before the news became public. Some of them did it; some, as the girl suggested in Halverson's case, lined their pockets with other people's money. There were many games within games in the oil fields.

"No," he said slowly; "my pockets aren't lined with anybody's money—my own or other folks. I could take a few leases, at that. But any game I play, ma'am, is a square game. I'd like to have you believe that."

His eyes were cool and wide as he looked at her. She had to confess that he had simplicity and dignity, and yet the oil game had robbed good men of those qualities. Greasy oil meant shining gold, and shining gold had been known to corrupt the best of men. She liked this man's looks, but she had long been on her guard, especially since the drill had been biting a hole into her land in the back lot.

So she was silent. Silence was the best armor she knew of. Out of this silence Halverson spoke.

"Might I ask your name, lady? I expect to be in this neighborhood for some little time, and I owe you for the shelter you have given me against the storm."

"Oh, you don't owe me anything," she said quickly. "My name is Cottingham—Margaret Cottingham."

Halverson looked down. He had faintly hoped that this girl was not she whom he had been seeking, but so it was. After a while—he would have to take a little time—he would deal his blow. He supposed that he would then see those beautiful dark eyes alive with scorn for him.

There was one more thing he had to know. Upon the answer to that depended whether his task would be lightened a little, or whether it would be as hard as it could possibly be made.

He lifted his eyes, and they were a little bleak. The girl saw a strange wear-

ness lying in them, and she wondered about it, for this big man had seemed altogether competent at first.

"You live here with your mother, don't you, ma'am?" he asked. "I'm not trying to ask impertinent questions, you understand."

"Oh, your questions aren't impertinent," she said. "If you stayed here for two days you'd know all about me anyhow. There's talk enough back and forth, I reckon. Yes; I live here with my mother. My father went away. I haven't heard from him."

So she didn't know, said Halverson to himself. His task would be as hard as it could have been made. He had a stunned moment, and then he lifted himself erect. There was one aspect of the situation out of which he could take comfort. People were talking, were they? Well!

The girl, watching him, saw his eyes go cold and hard. His fingers went to his belt, but there was no gun there. She judged that sometimes a gun hung there, and she had no doubt that those long supple fingers could handle a gun with the swiftness of light.

"People are talking, are they?" he asked. "So! Well, I reckon it's time a few mouths were shut round here."

CHAPTER III.

WHAT WAS THE QUESTION?

WITH eyes suddenly widened, Margaret stared at Halverson. For a moment she was too stupefied to speak. Then she managed to ask: "What do you mean?"

Halverson saw that he had gone too far. Fascinated by her, he had not thought how his abrupt words would sound. He understood now that she was likely to resent a stranger's taking up her defense, especially when she had not asked for assistance or protection. She was something more than a mere beauty; she was an intelligent and self-reliant young woman, quite capable of taking care of herself or at least of making a determined effort.

Besides, his words must have been fraught with mystery for her. Why should he, a man seeking shelter in her

cave, show so great an interest in her as to indicate that he was ready to fight for her? His only excuse was that he had been carried out of himself. He had come here expecting to find a dull, drab farm woman. He had found a farm woman, but she was not dull or drab. She had physical and mental charm.

"Why," said Halverson lamely, his red blood suddenly showing in his face, "I reckon I don't quite know what I mean myself, ma'am. But it stirred me up to think that folks should be talking about you. I figure you're a lonely woman trying to get along here on a farm, and some people won't let you alone. How big a farm have you got, ma'am?"

She saw that was only a ruse to draw her away from what he had said, and she smiled faintly.

"There are a hundred acres altogether," she answered. That disposed of, she reverted to his statement. "I don't want you to think it will be necessary for you to shut any mouths. I can handle my own business. At least, I have handled it so far."

"But people are still talking," he said. "You ought to have a man here to stop the talk. What are they saying?"

"Oh, they're wondering where my father is, scorning him for not coming back," she replied. "Then they wonder why I keep on here. They say I ought to go away and get some kind of a lady-like job and wait to see what the drillers will strike in my well."

"But you sort of have a notion that you want to stick to the job?" he asked. "Well, I should think so. It would be foolish to turn your business over to some of these drillers. How are you putting down your well, ma'am? Are you hiring a driller by the day?"

"I don't hire him," she replied. "I lease the oil and gas rights. I'll get my eighth if they strike anything."

"Oh, yes; you spoke of your eighth. Who has the lease, ma'am?"

"Why do you want to know all this?" she asked, her eyes narrowing a little.

"Well, it's this way," said Halverson. "I stumble on you in this storm, and you give me shelter. I find that you are playing a lone hand in a kind of a hard game. I just wanted to size up

your situation. So long as I'm going to be around here for a while, I had a notion I might be able to do you a good turn. I know oil pretty well, and none of these fellows can put anything over on me."

"A man named Upshaw has the lease," she said, for he had fixed his eyes on her face, and she saw that the eyes were shining with an honest light. "He has two hundred acres of land over beyond here."

"Has any oil been struck in this section?"

"Yes; a few months ago they brought in a three-hundred-barrel well on the Hillis farm, about half a mile from here."

"And as soon as that well came in this here Upshaw started taking leases, did he?" Halverson asked.

"Why, yes. He came to father and got a lease from him, and I understand he has made extensive leases all through here."

"What'd he pay you an acre?"

"A dollar."

"Paid you the minimum when oil had already been struck, eh?" Halverson inquired.

"Yes. Father was glad to get the hundred dollars. Upshaw paid it to him in advance."

"As a favor to your father?" asked Halverson, and he looked deeply into her eyes.

"Well," she answered, "he paid it."

A red flush dyed her cheeks again. Halverson needed no words to confirm his suspicion that Upshaw was a suitor.

"Has Upshaw started drilling anywhere else?" he asked.

"Yes; he has started a well on his own place."

"One on yours and one on his own?" queried Halverson dryly. The girl nodded. Halverson stood for a moment frowning at the oil lamp. He was being told a good deal more than he had expected.

"When your father got the hundred dollars from Upshaw, he went away, didn't he?" he asked.

"Yes."

"Where'd he go?" Halverson's voice was low. He seemed to grow tense as he waited for the girl's answer.

She lifted wondering eyes to him.

"Why, I don't know," she answered. "I haven't heard from him."

"Did he have to go away?"

She got slowly to her feet, took a single step, and stood before him. Deep down in her eyes a controlled fire was burning. "Aren't you impertinent?" she demanded. "You are an utter stranger to me. You have no right to question me in this way. Whether my father had to go away or whether he didn't have to go away can make no difference to you. If he did have to go away, the fault was not mine. I am here alone. I have to stand alone. I *can* stand alone."

The deep fire in her eyes flamed up to the surface. He saw that she was capable of righteous anger. She was capable, too, of fighting back. He had a notion that she had been doing some fighting since her father had gone away and possibly before that. There were many rough men in the oil fields. Her beauty would be a lure to them.

"I don't mean to be impertinent," he said. "I just don't like to see a woman forced to fight her own fight. Would you answer one more question?"

"It will depend upon what the question is."

He was thoughtful for a moment. He saw that he would have to go slowly with this girl. In addition to being beautiful and intelligent, she was proud, and she had a temper. His task was growing harder every minute. He had meant to ask her whether Upshaw had been pressing his attentions on her. He perceived that he could not ask that question just yet. It would be too personal. So he veered to something safer.

"What sort of a man is this Upshaw?" he asked.

She fixed speculative eyes on his face, and he understood that she was aware that he had substituted another for the question he had meant to ask.

"Red' Upshaw they call him," she replied. "The name fits him. He is red-haired, red-faced, a big man, a powerful man. His people took up land here years ago, and it has been kept in the family. It all belongs to Red now. He has other land in the western part of the State, too. He has made his land pay somehow. He is one of those men

who can hang to a dollar and make it grow."

"And he's always looking for an opening?" Halverson asked. "He's played the hog among the farmers when this was a farm country, and now that it's turned into an oil country he's going to play the hog some more. Yeah; I've met his kind before."

"Well, we were glad enough to lease our land and have a well started on it at once," Margaret said. "You know, we might have leased it to some one else and drilling might not have started for a long time. My mother and I might have sat idly by and seen other people getting a competence while we lived in poverty."

"You're properly grateful to Upshaw for starting your well next to his own, are you?" Halverson inquired, and there was the trace of a sneer in his voice.

He regretted the sneer before the words were out of his mouth, for he feared that it would stir her anger; but she showed no displeasure. She only smiled softly.

"I'm grateful enough," she said. "But I'm not letting my gratitude warp my judgment."

"You have Upshaw's number then?"

"What question were you going to ask when you asked what sort of a man Upshaw was?" she queried, and there was a little mischief in her eyes.

CHAPTER IV.

A SHARP REBUFF.

HALVERSON stared at her. He was inexperienced with ordinary women. Therefore he could not be expected to understand a girl whose mind seemed capable of leaping from peak to peak. A minute ago she thought he was asking a good many questions. Now she was asking him one that invited another, and he had no doubt she knew that question would be a more personal one than any he had yet put. However, being a straightforward man, he knew no way out of a difficulty except the direct, straight way. He took that now.

"Why," he said, "I was just wondering whether there was anything between you and this man Upshaw."

"Why, yes," she answered demurely; "there is."

He was shocked, and then he wondered stupidly whether her poverty had led her to accept the attentions of such a man as she described Upshaw to be—Upshaw, a land hog, a greedy grasper of everything that came his way. It seemed incredible, and yet she was keen enough to appreciate what Upshaw's wealth would give her. She was beautiful, here in these drab surroundings. He had no doubt she could imagine what she would be in a proper setting.

The girl looked up at him. There was scorn in her eyes, scorn, he felt suddenly, both for Upshaw and for himself because of what he was thinking. Halverson opened his lips to make amends, to tell her he knew the question was foolish; but she did not give him time.

"Yes," she said; "there is something between Upshaw and me. There is a great, wide ocean, a broad continent, the world's longest and highest chain of mountains—any immensity that you can imagine."

"And I," he said humbly, "am plumb crazy to have thought anything else."

"Yes; you were crazy to think of it," she said.

"I guess I got kind of confused, thinkin' of a shameful thing," he apologized. "I'm sorry."

She lifted her head to listen. "I think the rain has passed," she remarked. "Will you lift the door and see?"

He went up the slope, put his shoulder to the door, and lifted it. A flood of light and a gust of sweet, damp air filled the cave.

"I reckon it's all over," he said. "Few drops of rain falling. Black to the south, but the west has cleared."

He put down a hand to her, and after the briefest space of hesitation she laid hers in it. He helped her up into the open and closed the door. He saw, as he stood erect, that she was looking out across the field in which she had been working.

"A flood," she said. "I reckon that's the end of that crop. We'll probably have more rain."

"That field drains well, doesn't it?" he asked.

"Yes; but that's the fourth time it's been flooded since it was planted."

"Well, let's hope for the best," said Halverson. "Mind if I walk up to your house with you? I've got a horse up there some place. I had to abandon the poor old boy when I saw the storm coming. I thought you were headed for a cave, and I didn't know whether you were going to make it or not. You kept right on hoeing till the storm began to swoop down on you."

"I had my eye on it," she said quietly. "I had a notion I could beat it. It was a good thing you were there to open the door, however. The constant rains must have caused it to swell and stick. You can walk to the house with me if you like. We'll have to go over to the next field. It's higher and probably won't be flooded."

"You've got more work on this place than you'll ever get done," he said as they went along.

"I'm not trying to do it all," she remarked. "I'll do what I can and let the rest go."

"Any stock?" he asked.

"A couple of cows and a team. That's all."

"You don't do teamwork do you?" he asked.

"I cultivated the corn in the bottom lands—ten acres of it."

Halverson glanced at her out of the corner of his eye. She was walking erect with a free, easy stride. She was very strong, he saw, as strong as many men; but the thought of her doing a man's work on a farm sickened him. She ought not to be doing it. She ought to have what he supposed the heart of every woman craved—beautiful surroundings, ease of circumstance.

"Doesn't your working the place as much as you can make talk in the neighborhood?" he asked.

"Yes; that's one of the things that make talk. But I can't help it. I'm no hand to see things go to rack and ruin."

"You ought to have a man to do the work," he suggested.

"Help is pretty scarce this spring," the girl replied.

"Well, I'll make a proposition to you," he said hurriedly. "I'll go to work on

the place and see that the work is done right."

She stopped and faced him. "Which is exactly what you won't do!" she said sharply. "And for two very good reasons: In the first place, I have no money to pay you, and in the second place, if you are an oil man, you are not looking for a job on a farm. If you went to work here, you would do it from some ulterior motive. Ulterior motives are poor things for a stranger to have hereabouts."

He lifted his head so that their eyes met squarely. There was no shame in his eyes.

"I only want to help you," he said quietly. "My motives are not bad."

CHAPTER V.

ON A GALLOPING HORSE.

THE girl thought that she knew what Halverson's motive was. This man, like most of the men with whom she came into contact, had been attracted by the beauty which she was not silly enough to deny she had. She had never seen any use in giving the lie to what her glass told her, though she was not vain. But she could not put that into words. And she could not quite bring herself to heap scorn on this quiet stranger, for the very good reason that he roused no honest scorn in her. She had a notion that he was a man who instilled trust in the hearts of those he met.

"Oh, I'm not imputing a bad motive to you," she said. "But your plan just wouldn't do. There would be a flood of gossip."

"You wouldn't need to see me from day to day," he argued. "I could get some place to stay around here. As soon as your well came in, if it did, I'd disappear."

She shaped his insistence to the reason she had conjured up. Otherwise she would have demanded a reason from him. "It won't do," she said firmly. "You'll have to get work somewhere else if you need work."

"Well, I'll be in the neighborhood," he remarked. "If I can do anything for you, just let me know."

They had come up behind the barn, and now they passed around it and paused at the rear of the house.

"It's nearly dusk," she said. "If you'll come in, my mother will give you food and coffee."

"I'll be going on. I've got to find a place to stay. I wonder what became of that horse of mine?"

"Mother!" the girl called.

A woman came to the door. The girl, with the freedom of the place, presented Halverson to her. Mrs. Cottingham said that Halverson's horse was in the barn. She had seen it go in, just before she herself had gone to the storm cellar beneath the house.

"I better get him," Halverson said. "He may get into some feed."

He lifted his hat and turned away. He was halfway to the barn when he saw a horse galloping recklessly down the wet road toward the house. He stopped and waited. The rider turned in at the drive. When he was opposite the kitchen door, he pulled his horse up and tumbled from the saddle. Halverson saw that he was red of face and that red hair showed beneath his hat.

"Red Upshaw," said Halverson to himself. "So soon?"

Red Upshaw, walking toward the kitchen door, called the girl's name. He used her first name. Halverson flushed, then paled a little. Then he hitched up his belt and walked slowly in the direction of the house.

CHAPTER VI.

WHEN STRONG MEN MEET.

AS Halverson went toward the house, he saw Red Upshaw walk directly up to the girl and seize her hands before she could draw them away. Halverson expected, at least hoped, to see the girl struggle against Upshaw's clasp, but she did not struggle. She only stood with lifted head, gazing at him. Upshaw stared down into her eyes from his greater height. Halverson quickened his steps and came within ten feet of the two. Then he stopped.

"I hustled over here just as soon as I could," Upshaw told Margaret. "I was at the back end of the farm when the

storm broke. I was afraid something might have happened to you. Where were you when the blow hit?"

"In the cave," Margaret answered.

"Well, that's good! You know, I've told you that you should be more careful of yourself. You worry me by the chances you take."

Margaret tried to draw her hands away. Upshaw's hold on them tightened. He bent forward, so that his face was close to hers.

"Why don't you listen to what I tell you, Margaret?" he demanded.

Halverson saw that Upshaw was infatuated with the girl. Red Upshaw was gross; his body was overstuffed like that of a fattened animal; but the girl's beauty had roused a rugged passion in him. Halverson believed that he would fight for Margaret to the last ounce of his strength. Doubtless her influence over him was something new and strange in his life.

He had accumulated wealth by living for himself, profiting by the misfortunes of his neighbors, seizing what he could get, in any way he could get it. Except where Margaret was concerned he was ruthless. Probably he would be ruthless if he should be forced to fight to win her.

"Oh, I can take care of myself," the girl answered now.

"I'm always on hand to take care of you."

His head was bent so low that his face almost touched her hair. Halverson saw her shiver and draw back so that her arms were outstretched. She tugged at Upshaw's hands, but she had not the strength to draw out his arms. He remained holding her hands, his elbows crooked.

"I wish you would let go," she said, and there was a hint of rising anger in her voice.

The show of spirit seemed to please the big man. He grinned down into her face. The red deepened in his cheeks. In others he would brook no opposition, but opposition in her seemed to stir some wild depths in his nature.

"You want me to let you go, don't you?" he asked. "Well, I will, in my own good time. Some day I'm going to

catch you, and then I'll never let you go."

"And some day I may kill you, Red Upshaw," she said.

Halverson saw that the color was flaming in her face now; it was the red badge of her righteous anger. She began to struggle violently against Upshaw's grip in an effort to free herself. She tried to retreat farther from him, but she could not break the grip, and she could not retreat. Upshaw's hands only tightened on hers.

She turned her head as he again leaned toward her, and her eyes fell on Halverson, standing rigid, a little distance from them. Her color ebbed out of her face, and her eyes widened.

"Go away!" she ordered sternly.

Halverson understood what had prompted her command. She was filled with shame that he should see her standing thus with Upshaw, even though the fault was in no degree her own. Halverson was sorry that she should be thus tormented, but he had no notion of obeying her. He had found himself bitter against Upshaw during the moment in which he had been watching the man and the girl.

Besides, here at the very beginning of his association with the girl, she stood in need of help against a besieger. Halverson had elected himself as the man who would give her that help. He would aid her even if she did not welcome it.

As Margaret spoke, Upshaw also turned his head and became aware of the presence of a stranger. The blood in his red face thickened instantly. Halverson perceived that wild, unreasoning anger was whipping through him. Upshaw was mad with rage because a stranger had witnessed his rude courting of the girl and had heard him utter his threat that he would some day claim her unreservedly. He dropped the girl's hands and wheeled toward Halverson.

"What're you doing here?" he demanded.

Halverson studied the man opposite him with eyes that flew up and down his figure. Upshaw was a big man, as tall as Halverson and about seventy-five pounds heavier. His shoulders were broad; his legs were solid, and his arms

apparently heavily muscled; but he had a fatal defect: He was fat.

The fat showed in a rolling chin, in drooping jowls, in a protruding stomach. Upshaw had undoubtedly begun with a fine body, but he had fed it not wisely but too well. Halverson, on the other hand, was lean. His belt circled a waist which failed to make an even line with hips and ribs. In him there was only the hardness of bone and muscle, while Upshaw was soft, fleshy.

Halverson did not answer Upshaw's question. He relaxed from his rigid position, hitched at his belt as was his habit, and moved slowly toward the two. The girl, watching him, saw that his blue eyes had a glacial look. She understood that Halverson, like most other men she met, had been strongly attracted to her. He was ready to fight for her, and she did not want him to fight. She did not know what the result of a fight between these two big men would be. Certainly she did not want Upshaw to fight on her account and win, and she did not want Halverson—well, Halverson was a stranger. He had no right to fight for her.

Released from Upshaw's hold, she sprang forward and placed herself between the two men. Halverson stopped, his hands on his hips, his eyes on her face.

"Mr. Halverson," she said, "you started to get your horse. Go and get him and leave here. You have no right to interfere in my affairs."

"I don't want to contradict you," Halverson said, "but I just exactly have the right to interfere in your affairs, and that's what I'm aiming to do."

"You have the right?" she asked, perplexed. "Who—what gives you the right?"

"It is a matter we will discuss later on," he told her.

Upshaw put his hand on Margaret's shoulder and pushed her to one side. Then he stepped past her and confronted Halverson. His rudeness toward the girl filled Halverson with cold fury. He bent at the waist. His hands were lifted, the long fingers curled.

"Go for your gun, Upshaw!" Halverson ordered.

Upshaw's right hand made a move-

ment. Then it dropped to his side. "I have no gun," he said.

Halverson relaxed. A faint smile came to his lips as he looked at the girl.

"I forgot I had no gun either," he said.

He saw her lips harden and a little look of scorn creep into her eyes.

"Gunman, are you?" she asked.

Halverson's face swiftly whitened. She had dealt him a blow whose force she did not realize. She had put into words the thing he had feared later on she would say. The question stung him.

"No," he said lamely; "not a gunman. I forgot myself for a minute."

"Forgot yourself?" Red Upshaw jeered. "You mean you remembered yourself. The first thing you do is to start to jerk a gun. Well, you can't get away with that stuff in this country. You can't get away with it when you're doing business with me. I reckon you don't know who I am, do you?"

"I know who you are." Halverson declared, recovering himself.

"If you do, you ought to know that you can't buck my game in these parts," Upshaw boasted.

"I can buck any man's game anywhere, when he doesn't play his game on the level."

"I'll play my game in my own way and with no help from you," Upshaw declared. "Who are you, and what do you want here?"

"That's my business."

"He's an oil scout," Margaret broke in. "He plans to do some wildcatting hereabouts. The storm overtook him, and he found shelter in our cave."

"I thought you were in the cave," Upshaw said.

"I was."

"With him?"

"Yes," replied the girl.

CHAPTER VII.

WAITING FOR HIM.

PRIDE of possession was Red Upshaw's weakness. He was proud of the lands he owned, proud of the leases he held, proud of the drilling he was doing, proud of the money he had in the bank. More than all he was proud of his fancied possession of this beautiful girl, for he

never dreamed but that he should one day possess her. Even now he was playing a game which he was sure would break her spirit. He was lifting her up on hope only to let her fall later to despair.

Therefore it was to him as if Halverson had spoiled his choicest possession by close association with it. Trust was not native to him. Suspicion poisoned his mind. This stranger was an attractive sort of person, clean cut and probably clever. Doubtless he had tried to impress Margaret. He had been alone with her. Red Upshaw, in his own mind, reserved such privileges for himself. Now the fellow was ready to fight for her. He had been ready to pull a gun. That he had no gun was a joke on him. Upshaw told himself that he would pulverize him. He thought he could break that slighter figure in two.

"Fellow," he ordered Halverson, "you've got about a minute to get off this place."

Halverson said nothing. His moment of fury had passed. He was glad now that neither he nor Upshaw had been armed. If they had been and Upshaw had gone for his gun, Upshaw would be out of things now. Because of his fatal swiftness with a gun, Halverson rarely went armed. Fighting Upshaw with his fists would be a simpler, safer, and vastly easier way. So Halverson stood and waited.

Upshaw watched him while the seconds flitted by. Then he took a forward step, a hard grin wreathing his lips. Margaret flung herself before him and turned on him furiously.

"Upshaw!" she cried. "Stop that! If you fight this man, you'll never set foot on this farm again."

"Margaret!"

The word came from Mrs. Cottingham. Unheard by the others she had come out of the house and stood now on the porch behind them. Halverson glanced at her. Her gray head was lifted; there was fire in her dark eyes, eyes which in her youth had been like the girl's.

"Mother, go in," said Margaret over her shoulder.

"Don't interfere with them," Mrs. Cottingham told her daughter. "Let this

man at Red Upshaw. Let Upshaw be taught his lesson."

"Go into the house and mind your own business, old woman," Upshaw said brutally.

"Ah!" exclaimed Margaret.

She stepped back swiftly and fixed her eyes on Halverson's face. He gave her a fleeting glance, and she saw his confident smile far down in his eyes. She took one sharp, quick breath between parted lips.

"He's yours, Mr. Halverson," she said. "He's yours till you make him apologize to my mother."

"Will you kindly step into the house, ma'am?" Halverson asked.

"I'll remain here," she answered. "Mother, you go in."

"I'll see this, too," Mrs. Cottingham declared. "I'm glad a man has come along that ain't afraid of Red Upshaw. He has tried to rule the roost too long. I hope you half kill him, Mr. Halverson."

Halverson gave her a meed of praise in his own mind, even while he waited for Upshaw. She, he saw, was one of those rugged pioneer women who had come to Oklahoma years before, doubtless before it was a State. A long struggle with primitive conditions had killed fear in her. Of refinement she had little; of courage she had plenty.

"Upshaw," said Halverson, "let's go back of the barn. This isn't going to be a nice thing for women to see."

"Scared already, are you?" Upshaw jeered. "I thought you would be. A gunman without his gun ain't up to much. You'd have murdered me if you could. A fair fight don't appeal to you none."

He spoke in all sincerity with himself. He did not see how Halverson could stand up before him. In his day he had been a mighty fighter in any style. That day had been before he had accumulated his fat. He had not had a fight in a long time. Because of his influence there had been none to take a stand against him. Many owed him money; others did not know when they would owe him money.

Halverson shrugged his shoulders. "You can suit yourself," he said coldly.

"Come on then," said Upshaw.

"I am waiting for you, fellow."

With a sneer on his thick lips, Upshaw advanced. Five feet from Halverson he put up his hands. He took one step more. Then Halverson sprang.

CHAPTER VIII.

CRASHING BLOWS.

UPSHAW had expected Halverson to be fast on his feet. Men of Halverson's build usually were, he knew, but he was not prepared for the slender man's sudden attack. Halverson crossed the space between them in one jump. He came down like a cat, and his blows seemed to be part of his forward movement. The impetus appeared to send his fists forward in flailing blows.

Upshaw was conscious of a rocking smash on the side of his jaw. The blow lifted his head and sent it over till the ear on the other side almost touched his shoulder. Then Halverson's left fist shot into his opponent's stomach. Upshaw had an instant of blindness and nausea. With one hand he covered his face, with the other his stomach.

He was afraid that Halverson was about to strike him again and if this happened with the force that had been in the first blows, Upshaw knew that he could not keep his feet. There were no more blows immediately, however. Upshaw backed away, still with his guard up. Gradually the mist before his eyes cleared.

He saw Halverson standing where he had been when he had delivered those terrific blows. His hands were dropped at his sides. The fingers were curled again as they had been curled when Halverson had spoken of guns. His face was thrust forward and there was a tigerish look in the blue eyes. It was the look of a killer, and it made Upshaw shiver.

Upshaw knew then that he was no match for this man in a fist fight. His only hope lay in rough-and-tumble. He would have to get his hands on Halverson and bear him down by sheer weight. If he could get his hands on his antagonist's throat, the fight would be over.

He advanced a foot cautiously. He knew he would have to be exceedingly cautious. He would have to be ready

when Halverson sprang again. Then he would stoop swiftly, seize his opponent about the legs, and send him hurtling over his shoulder. Turning, while Halverson lay stunned, he would pounce upon him and pin him down.

Halverson wanted to end the fight quickly. His own sight had of course remained clear while he had been dimming Upshaw's with those mighty blows. A quick glance at the girl had told him that she had been shocked in spite of herself by what she was witnessing. Her knuckled right hand had gone to her mouth and had been pressed there—to suppress a scream which had risen to her lips, Halverson believed.

He did not want to shock her; he did not want her to think he was a brute. So now, when Upshaw took that forward step, Halverson sprang again. His first attack had been so successful that he underrated Upshaw. His spring was slower than the other had been, his eyes were on Upshaw's face. He failed to see Upshaw's body tighten as the man prepared to crouch.

As Halverson went in, Upshaw went down. He had his big arms about his opponent's legs before Halverson could side-step to safety. Upshaw lifted with all his strength and sent Halverson over his shoulder. Halverson tried to catch hold of his opponent, but failed. He felt himself flying through the air. Then his head came into contact with the side of the house. The blow dazed him, and he dropped limply.

He heard Margaret cry out and the sound of Upshaw's bellow of triumph. Halverson was lying on his face, close to the house, and he pushed himself away from it and tried to get to his knees. The effort failed. He dropped down and rolled over, so that when Upshaw appeared above him, his face was upturned. Upshaw flung himself down, and his fingers went for Halverson's throat.

Halverson, his sight clearing, seized the hand which was creeping upward. He struggled hard and kept the hand away from his throat, but Upshaw's other hand was going up. He was determined to get that clutch which would end the fight and might likewise end Halverson's life.

Then Halverson saw Margaret beyond

Upshaw. She put both her hands on Upshaw's shoulders and tried to drag him away, but her strength was not equal to the task. Upshaw angrily shook himself free of her clasp and renewed his efforts to reach Halverson's throat.

The girl's efforts to aid him filled Halverson with fury, not against her, but against the circumstance that had made it necessary. He cursed himself for having been careless. The fury brought a renewal of strength. He began to struggle beneath the weight of Upshaw's body.

"Have a little pity!" Halverson entreated Margaret, turning his eyes toward her. "Don't shame me by trying to help me. For Heaven's sake, don't shame me!"

He saw her face color as she realized that she had indeed been in the way of shaming him by trying to aid him. Her movement had been instinctive, because she had not wanted Upshaw to win the fight. She wanted to see him taught a lesson. But if the fight was won, it must be won by Halverson himself. Aid from her would be a blow to his manhood. So she stepped back.

"Thanks," he murmured.

Upshaw, in his interest in the girl's attack on him and what she would do in response to Halverson's appeal, had stayed his hand in its upward movement. In the back of his mind while he, too, had waited for Margaret's decision, Halverson had been aware of that. Now he swiftly took advantage of it. Freeing both his hands, he brought them, clenched, around in short, sharp half circles. Both blows landed flush on Upshaw's jaw. They drove his head back, relaxed him. His two hands went to his face to cover it. That left his throat exposed. Halverson seized his throat and thrust back his head. Upshaw struggled and his body slipped toward the house.

Halverson raised his knees till they were in Upshaw's stomach. Then with a mighty effort he pushed his antagonist away from him. He scrambled to his feet, and Upshaw came up a moment later. Upshaw was bent half double when Halverson struck him on the point of the jaw. His head snapped back, but his body plunged forward. Halverson

struck him again. He went down, rolled over. Halverson flung himself on the prostrate body.

CHAPTER IX.

A CHANCE SHOT.

FURY was flaming in Halverson now.

Almost he had been aided in a fight by a woman. Apparently Margaret had lost confidence in him to win his own battle. She would carry that recollection with her when the fight was done, in spite of the fact that Halverson had won the fight. Besides Upshaw had insulted that rugged, aged woman, a pioneer who had given of her strength and beauty in a fight with the virgin soil.

Halverson had a soft spot in his heart for women like that, for his own mother had been so. In his boyhood he had seen her break and droop in the struggle, and at the last had seen her pass on. And above all, this red brute who now lay at his feet had the temerity to address what he called his love to Margaret Cottingham. That was the crowning insult. So Halverson's fury flamed.

In the clutch of it he flung himself on Upshaw. He struck the huge man twice; then his hands sought Upshaw's throat as a moment before Upshaw's had been seeking his. The difference was that Halverson's long fingers closed on that fat throat. They bit in, sank deep, till the windpipe was between them. Halverson saw the face grow a deeper red, saw the lips part, saw the breathing grow slower and more labored, saw it stop almost altogether, saw the thickened tongue begin to creep between the widening lips.

Lust to kill flooded through him. He increased the pressure of his fingers. Then he felt the pressure of the point of a gun in the back of his neck. He heard Margaret Cottingham speak.

"Stop that! Let him go! You're killing him. You *are* a killer. Oh, you're as much of a brute as he is. Take your hands from his throat or I'll have to kill you."

Halverson was not afraid that she would kill him. He did not know where she had got the gun, though she had drawn it from the bosom of her dress. He did not know how much time had passed

while he had sunk his fingers into Upshaw's throat. But he did know that he had been ready to kill the man.

He loosened his grip and got slowly to his feet. The girl stood holding the gun, but she had dropped her hand. He had expected to see scorn in her eyes, but he saw only reproach.

"You would kill a man, wouldn't you?" she asked, her voice a little uncertain. "I suppose in your time you have killed men."

It was a chance shot, but it bored home. He winced and was silent, hanging his head. "I—I forgot myself," he said. "My temper got the best of me. I—I beg your pardon."

"It would have been a good thing if you had killed him," declared Mrs. Cottingham, from the porch.

"I don't aim to kill anybody," Halverson said. "I reckon I better be moving on."

"You are welcome to stay here for the night," Mrs. Cottingham told him.

"No, no, ma'am," he said hastily. "I couldn't do that now. I'll just get my horse and be moving on."

"You'd better wait till Upshaw comes round," she said. "I'd like to have you finish your job and drive him off the place."

He looked at Upshaw dubiously. The huge man stirred. In a moment he opened his eyes, and he got slowly to his feet. He stared from one to the other, and then his uncertain eyes focused on Halverson.

"I'll see you again, fellow," he said. "This country ain't big enough for the both of us. You better be getting out between this day and the next. Your life won't be worth a cent if you're here for long."

Halverson said nothing. He just stood looking at Upshaw while the huge man shambled out to his horse, mounted it heavily, and rode away. Then Halverson picked up his hat, which had fallen off in the struggle, bowed to the two women, and started toward the barn.

"You're not going to let him run you off, are you?" Mrs. Cottingham called after him.

"Oh, no, ma'am," he said, turning back to her. "I can't leave. Not for the

present. I'll see you both to-morrow if you'll let me."

"You are a good man," Mrs. Cottingham said. "Red Upshaw has been deserving that for a long time."

Halverson went to the barn and got out his horse. He mounted it and rode past the kitchen door. Mrs. Cottingham was standing in the doorway and she waved her hand to him in friendly good-by. Margaret was not in sight.

Halverson rode out to the highway and with bowed head passed down it in the gathering darkness. Yes; he had been about to kill another man. He had been about to kill another man while this magnificent girl looked on. He had been about to kill the man not because the slaying of him would protect and shield the girl from his advances, but because in his own heart there had been the lust to slay.

With a groan he bowed his head still lower. Within him his spirit brooded with still, folded wings.

CHAPTER X.

A SURPRISING INVITATION.

BEING blessed with an abundance of health and strength, misery could not long continue with Halverson. He had not ridden half a mile before he became aware that he was in need of food. He had eaten nothing since morning. He had not known just how far his ride would be, and he had not stopped when he had left the train. He began now to look about to discover a house at which he might apply for a meal and shelter.

For a little only the dark, wet fields lay on either side of him. Though the storm had spent itself, there were still mutterings of thunder in the south, and now and then vague, trembling lightning shimmered in the sky. There was still some wind, and when he passed beneath trees at the roadside they shook water down on him. He was beginning to feel tired and uncomfortable as well as hungry.

The sight of a lighted window was therefore a relief to him. He rode on for a hundred yards and by one of the uncertain shivers of lightning saw a gate in a fence. He passed through the gate

and rode around to the rear of the house. Beyond a drawn blind there was a light, and he found his way to a back porch and knocked on the door.

The door was opened presently, and a man stood in the doorway. Halverson started back, but this time his hand did not go to his belt. A little exclamation of surprise escaped his lips, however, for the man in the doorway was Upshaw. He stood peering down at Halverson, but because of the latter's backward step into the darkness he did not recognize his visitor.

"Well, what is it?" Upshaw demanded sharply. "Who are you?"

Halverson wanted no more trouble with Upshaw that night. He did not know what a second battle might come to. Besides, he was on Upshaw's own ground. Upshaw could kill him and get away with it by saying that Halverson had pursued him to his home and threatened him. Yet it was not Halverson's nature to withdraw without disclosing his identity.

"I'm Halverson," he said. "I didn't know you lived here. I was looking for shelter for the night."

"Oh," said Upshaw, and for a moment he seemed to be debating a question in his mind. Then he astonished Halverson by stepping back from the door and holding it open. "Well, come in!" he said. "I'll have your horse put up. We never turn strangers away in this country."

"I know," Halverson nodded, "but I think I'll move on to the next house. Much obliged, just the same." He stepped back and was about to quit the porch.

Upshaw advanced into the doorway. "Come in!" he said. "I don't hold any grudge against you. We had our little fight, and you came out best man. Let it go at that. You would be quite safe as my guest anyway."

"I wasn't thinking of my safety," Halverson said. "I can just as well find shelter somewhere else."

"Come in and have some food anyhow," Upshaw urged, and his manner was too pleasant to suit Halverson. "Supper is just about ready. Then you can go on and find other shelter if you like. I'd like to talk to you."

Halverson hesitated. While he did so, Upshaw sent a bellow through the house. A man appeared from a door of the kitchen.

"Take this man's horse to the barn and take care of it," Upshaw ordered. To Halverson, he said: "Come in and make yourself at home."

The odor of cooking food had come to Halverson's nostrils. The odor reminded him of an empty stomach. The food would be hot. Elsewhere it might be cold, or he would put some tired housewife to extra trouble.

"Well, since you insist," he said, and passed through the door when Upshaw stepped back.

There was a sink with running water in the corner. Upshaw motioned to it. Halverson hung his hat on a hook and cleaned up.

"Have a seat," Upshaw said, and Halverson sat down.

Upshaw sat eyeing him for a moment, and Halverson returned his regard with steady blue eyes.

"Looking for leases, are you?" Upshaw asked at length.

Halverson hooked his thumbs into his belt and leaned back till his chair was balanced on two legs. "Mr. Upshaw," he said quietly, "I am your guest."

"Which means that what you are doing here is none of my business," said Upshaw.

"You are putting the thought into words and the words are your own."

Upshaw looked down. A heavy crease came between his eyes, but he did not speak again. The man who had been taking care of the horse returned, washed his hands, and put food on the table.

"Draw up," said Halverson's host.

Halverson was prodigiously hungry, and Upshaw was a man of huge appetite at all times. That was the reason for his fat. They ate in silence. Then Halverson pushed back his chair and rolled a cigarette.

"I'm grateful to you for the food," he said. "That's the hungriest I've been in a long time. I'll be moving on."

He rose, and Upshaw followed his example. The man who had served them was standing at the stove with his back to them. Halverson had a notion that

he was listening to what was being said. While he had served the food, Halverson had seen him looking at the bruises on his employer's face.

"I reckon you're tired," Upshaw said. "If so, you won't want to be riding far in the night. There's a house a quarter of a mile down the road on the other side. The Taylors live there. Poor folks, but the woman keeps the place clean: Likely they would take you in. They'd be glad of an honest dollar for a room and your breakfast. Course they won't want to take it, but you could make them."

"I'm not planning to impose on anybody," Halverson said.

"Pete," Upshaw ordered abruptly, "bring the horse up to the door."

The hostler-cook went out without a word or a glance at Halverson. Halverson took down his hat and started for the door.

"I'm much obliged, Mr. Upshaw," he said.

Upshaw remained standing by the table. Halverson's hand was on the latch before he spoke.

"Look here, fellow," he said in an ugly tone.

Halverson wheeled about. He would not have been surprised to see a gun in his host's hand, but he had no gun.

"Well?" Halverson said.

"You ain't aiming to go back to the Cottingham place to-morrow, are you?" Upshaw asked.

"We won't discuss the Cottinghams, if you please," Halverson said in an icy voice.

"You're not game to answer the question," Upshaw said with a sneer.

"I'm not going to discuss those two women—with you," Halverson declared, the last two words coming slowly.

"What do you mean—'with you?'" Upshaw demanded.

Halverson squared around. There was a dangerous glint in his blue eyes. His fingers were curled, and Upshaw noticed it.

"Upshaw," Halverson said, "you think you're kind of a monarch of all you survey round here. Well, that stuff doesn't go with me. I don't wear any man's collar. Where I go and where I stay is nobody's business but my own.

I refuse to be run out of any man's country. You might as well get that through your head now as later on. I'm not looking for trouble. Also, I'm not running away from it."

"Where do you hail from?"

"That, again, is none of your business."

CHAPTER XI.

THE LAST WARNING.

UPSHAW clasped his hands in front of him and pulled at them till the bones cracked. His face was twisted with passion. Beads of sweat came out on his face. "You don't know what you are going up against, fellow," he said. "One thing I'll warn you about: Don't let me catch you speaking to that girl again. I'll kill you if you do. This is the last time I'll warn you!"

The words roused a cold hate in Halverson's heart. He hated Upshaw for daring to think of Margaret as he was thinking of her. Yet, because of a strain of chivalry in him, he would not discuss the girl with this man. He would prepare for the event which Upshaw forecast. With a steady hand he relighted his cigarette. Then he slightly inclined his head.

"Good night, Mr. Upshaw," he said.

The soft words were belied by the cold eyes which for a moment he fixed on Upshaw's face. Then he swung open the door and passed through it, closing it behind him. His horse was at the step, and he took two strides and swung into the saddle. He had a notion that Upshaw, inflamed by his insolence, might appear at the door with a gun in his hand, but the big man did not show himself.

"What'd you give the hoss?" Halverson asked the man who stood at the stirrup.

"Jes' some long feed, boss," Peter answered.

"I'll give him some oats and rub him down later," Halverson said, and he rode out of the yard.

As he passed along the road in front of the house, he saw Upshaw at the front window where he had first seen the light. Upshaw's face was pressed against the pane as he peered out to catch sight

of his departing guest. He was still at the window when Halverson lost sight of him.

"I'll have trouble with that guy," Halverson told himself as he rode on. "He's low grade, mean. He's got his nerve thinkin' about that girl like he is. Case of a coyote lookin' at a queen, I reckon. Wonder what he'd say if he knew about me. I just wonder."

Thinking deeply, head bent, he let the horse walk. After a space he lifted his head and found that he was before a house on the opposite side of the road. This must be the place which Upshaw had mentioned. Halverson turned in. There was a lighted window in this house, in the rear, and through the window Halverson saw a woman washing dishes. She was a young woman, comely, fair haired. Near her sat a man with a young child perched on his knee.

"Nice little scene anyhow," said Halverson to himself, and his heart gave a lonesome throb, for since his boyhood he had known no home.

He slid from the saddle, walked up to the door, and rapped. The man, with the child in the crook of his arm, opened the door.

"Mr. Taylor?" Halverson asked.

"Yes."

"I'm looking for shelter for the night. Upshaw said you might take me in."

Taylor's face hardened, and his head went up. "If you are a friend of Upshaw's he might have given you shelter himself," he said.

A low chuckle came from Halverson's throat. He liked this upstanding young husband and father, and he was glad to believe that Taylor had taken Upshaw's number, too.

"Why," he drawled, "Upshaw offered me shelter, but I just felt that I had to decline. I had to tousle him up some this afternoon over to Mrs. Cottingham's, and him and me don't like each other none too well. I broke bread with him to give him a chance to say what he had to say. Then I came on here."

For answer to that, Taylor thrust open the door with his foot and stepped back. "You're welcome!" he said.

Halverson advanced into the room.

Taylor turned to his wife. "Here's

the man that beat up our good neighbor this afternoon," he said with a laugh.

Mrs. Taylor wiped her hands on her apron and extended one. Halverson took it shyly. He was not used to shaking hands with a woman.

"I just got to shake your hand," she said. "I was over to Mis' Cottingham's to borrow some coffee just after you left, and she told me about that fight. You're welcome here."

"I reckon Mr. Upshaw is about as popular with you folks as he is with me," Halverson said, smiling.

"He's a snake," was Mrs. Taylor's remark.

"You'll want to put up your horse," Taylor said. "Wait till I light a lantern." He gave the child to his wife.

They went out to the barn together. Halverson bedded down his horse in a vacant stall, rubbed it thoroughly, and gave it a measure of oats.

Then he and Taylor went to the barn door.

"Upshaw's a pup," said Taylor. "He has never liked me because I wouldn't knuckle down to him. He's been trying to ride me ever since I came here five years ago. I told him once I'd kill him if he didn't lay off me. I expect you know about the lease situation here. Upshaw gobbled up all the leases, but he wouldn't lease my land. I don't think I'd have leased to him anyhow, for I don't believe he'd ever have sunk a well for me. As it is, I'm hemmed in on all sides by leased land. Small chance I'll have ever to cash in on oil. I don't suppose anybody would take a lease on my land alone. I've only got fifty acres here."

"I'm looking over this country," Halverson remarked. "I'll talk to you tomorrow about a lease."

"Will you?" Taylor asked eagerly. "Well, it'd tickle me to death. I owe some money, and these rains are going to drown the crops if they don't stop. I'd like to see some oil on this place for the sake of my girl and the baby."

"We'll talk the matter over in the morning," Halverson said. "Now if I could go to bed, I believe I could sleep. I'm dog——"

He did not finish the sentence. From

beyond a fence at their right came a flash of flame, a report. A bullet buried itself in the barn door.

The two men dodged back into the barn. To run toward the spot from which the shot had been fired would have been foolhardy. Neither of them was armed, and both could have been shot down as they advanced.

They waited for ten minutes, but there was no more firing.

"He took one shot and then beat it," Taylor commented.

"Maybe he didn't mean to kill me," said Halverson. "Maybe he is just trying to scare me off."

"You can chalk one mark against Upshaw," Taylor said. "That's the kind of a hound he is. But if he is trying to scare you off, and you don't go——"

"There'll be more bullets coming my way, I'll bet!"

They gained the kitchen door before he spoke again.

"You don't happen to have a good six-gun among your possessions, do you, Taylor?" he asked.

"As good a gun as ever was made," Taylor answered.

"Would you lend it to me for a while?" "I sure would."

Ten minutes later Halverson was sitting on the edge of his bed, staring down at the weapon in his hand. The feel of it made his blood tingle.

"Just for an even break, old fellow," he told the weapon. "Just for an even break. They started the gun play. I reckon the time will come when I'll have to finish it."

For a time he lay sleepless, thinking of the blow he would have to deal Margaret Cottingham, dreading that moment. Then his thoughts turned to Upshaw, that gross man whose pride had been so injured, whose warning had been so viciously spoken. Halverson had decided he would stay as long as he liked in this section of the country, and he would not change his mind, even though he knew that Upshaw would not let him remain in peace.

The succeeding chapters of this novel will appear in the next issue of TOP-NOTCH,

TOP-NOTCH TALK

News and Views by the
Editor and Readers.

JANUARY 15, 1924.

Where Readers Differ

IT is only to be expected that with such a large number of readers the letters which reach this office should voice widely different opinions regarding various stories in the magazine. Those which appeal most strongly to some readers make no hit at all with others. That, of course, is natural, and the fact is generally recognized by our correspondents, who admit that the story which does not appeal to them is probably enjoyed by other readers. As long as human nature remains what it is, no one story can possibly please every one.

Two letters, however, which we have received raise a question as to the sort of fiction our readers enjoy—a question that is particularly interesting because the reasons given by the writers of these letters are so widely different.

This is the first letter:

DEAR SIR: Never having read your magazine before, I was curious when the story "Something With a Kick," by William Henry Wright, was called to my attention as being out of the ordinary and well worth reading.

The location and atmosphere of the story are familiar to me; painfully so! In return for seven dollars a week—in advance—I occupy a certain hall bedroom, corresponding accurately to the one in the tale. Therefore, because most of us enjoy seeing ourselves, or the things related to us, in print, I was immediately prejudiced in favor of this amusing episode. My thanks for having published it! Cordially yours,

ALLEN CLARK.

Mr. Clark evidently enjoys a story which touches him personally—one that deals with a phase of life with which he is well acquainted.

Here, then, is the second letter:

DEAR EDITOR: The criticism of Emil C. Wahlstrom in a recent issue on the story "Brother of the Wolves" is very nicely writ-

ten and in beautiful language. I, as one of TOP-NOTCH's satisfied readers, would like to read some story of fiction by him, with everything in it exactly true to life. I can hardly imagine it would be of great interest!

Life—why, we see that every day! That is just the reason why we like to sit down in our easy-chairs, light our pipes, cigarettes, or cigars, pick up TOP-NOTCH, relax, and enjoy ourselves. It is things out of the ordinary that interest most of us humans.

Let the good work go on. You have a good staff of writers and, as for me, I can't see how it would be humanly possible to improve the magazine. Let TOP-NOTCH continue as of old. Its future looks bright to me.

Very respectfully. FRANK B. WELLS.

You can see how different is the type of fiction that pleases Mr. Wells. He doesn't want stories of life as he can see it every day. When he sits down to read in his easy-chair, he wants fiction that will carry his mind away from life as he daily encounters it.

We are not questioning Mr. Wahlstrom's opinion that stories to be entertaining "must be laid upon a basis of facts and circumstances as they are apt to be enacted in real life." That, as a general rule, is true. We are now presenting to you the views of two readers which are as widely separated as the poles. One likes the plain, everyday type of story, dealing with life as he knows it; the other desires fiction that transplants his thoughts to a life of which he knows nothing.

This is an interesting subject. On which side of the question do you stand? Does this supply the reason why you like some stories and dislike others? Or do you side with neither of these correspondents? Perhaps you enjoy stories of both types. Let us have your opinion, anyway, in a briefly worded letter. We shall be glad to publish the most interesting communications on the subject.



In the Next Issue

THE complete novel in the February 1st number will be by Larry Barretto, a newcomer to TOP-NOTCH, and when you have read "Masks of Confusion" we

are sure you will admit that he has given you an entertaining story. The theme is a remarkable one—a daring holdup on the ocean, planned and carried out so as to arouse no suspicion of what was intended. But we mustn't tell you any more about the story. When you have read it, we shall be glad to hear how you liked it.

The novelette is called "Behind the Bolted Door," and the author is William Henry Wright, well known to TOP-NOTCH readers. Mr. Wright has turned out a big New York mystery tale which will grip your interest from the start and hold it to the final paragraph.

The sport stories will be: "Up to a Show-down," a clever baseball tale by C. S. Montanye; and "Time Out!" a stirring story of basketball by Edwin J. Westrate.

Other short stories will be: "When the Earth Quaked," by Frank Richardson Pierce; "The Greater Surprise," a lumberjack tale, by Harrison R. Howard; "Only a Pair of Silvers," by William Byron Mowery; "Picture Bait," by James W. Egan; and "Menace of the Panther," one of Harold de Polo's animal yarns.

There will be the second installment of "Black Gold," the powerful serial of the Western oil fields which begins in the number now in your hands. We hope you have all started to read Mr. Sanders' big novel.

James E. Hungerford will contribute a timely poem entitled, "The Rail-Splitter;" Frank Dorrance Hopley will supply "Playmates of the Night;" Celia Cheeseman's offering will be entitled, "Just a Moment!" while Irene Stanley will add a bit of humor called "The Reason Why."



Honors to Cook and Standish

Editor of TOP-NOTCH MAGAZINE.

DEAR SIR: I have just finished reading the last number of TOP-NOTCH. I think it is unquestionably the finest fiction magazine published. With the exception of the baseball and tennis stories, I read every story printed in TOP-NOTCH.

It is my opinion that William Wallace Cook is the best author who has ever contributed to T.-N. Burt L. Standish will share Cook's honors if he writes another story like "Magic

of the Ranch." It seems a shame for Standish to write baseball stories when he can write such stories as "Magic of the Ranch," "Terror of the Night," by Murray Leinster, was a fine story. I would like to see a good long railroad story in the near future. I would suggest that it be written by the author of "All Aboard the Owl Car" (Cook). I enjoy reading Thomas Thursday's stories.

Very truly yours,
WILLIAM HILL.
Clarion, Iowa.



We Echo the Wish

Editor of TOP-NOTCH MAGAZINE.

DEAR SIR: A football story with a kick in it is quite the ordinary thing—*unless* it has the sort of a kick Frank T. Tucker put into "Five Berries Per" in the November 1st issue!

That was a real football yarn. It had a refreshing twist to it. None of the last-minute-touchdown stuff. Not a lot of cheap sentimental gush, but a real honest-to-goodness plot with a jab of irony.

More stories by Frank Tucker!
Sincerely,
JULIAN L. WATKINS.
Roland Avenue, Baltimore, Md.



A Leather-Pusher Breaks Forth

Editor of TOP-NOTCH MAGAZINE.

DEAR SIR: Just a few words to let you know that I am going on my fourth year as a reader of TOP-NOTCH MAGAZINE, and I can truthfully say that during that time I haven't missed reading one edition.

I read many good magazines, but I'll say that TOP-NOTCH sure tops them all. Your feature stories always keep me on edge from beginning to end, and I just can't wait for the next number to come out.

I take especial interest in your boxing stories; they are always good, and as I am a leather-pusher myself from Los Angeles passing the winter here in New York, I do really appreciate them.

I always read the TOP-NOTCH Talk, and I have been intending to write this letter for several years, but kept delaying, as I am one of those "Let the other fellow do it." Have been a silent admirer of TOP-NOTCH, and I thought writing these few lines to you to let you know that I appreciate the good, clean, and wholesome work of TOP-NOTCH would only be fair to you.

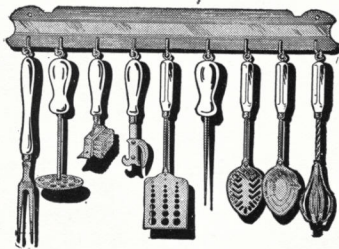
With best wishes for the continued success of the magazine, I remain, yours truly,
JOHNNY BRANNIGAN.
Topping Avenue, Bronx, N. Y.



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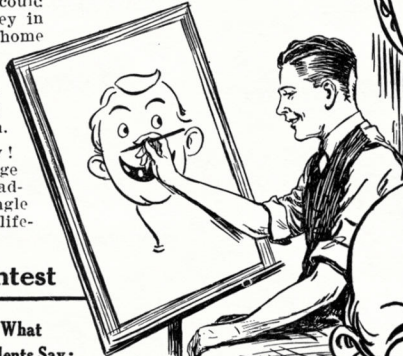
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