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1927

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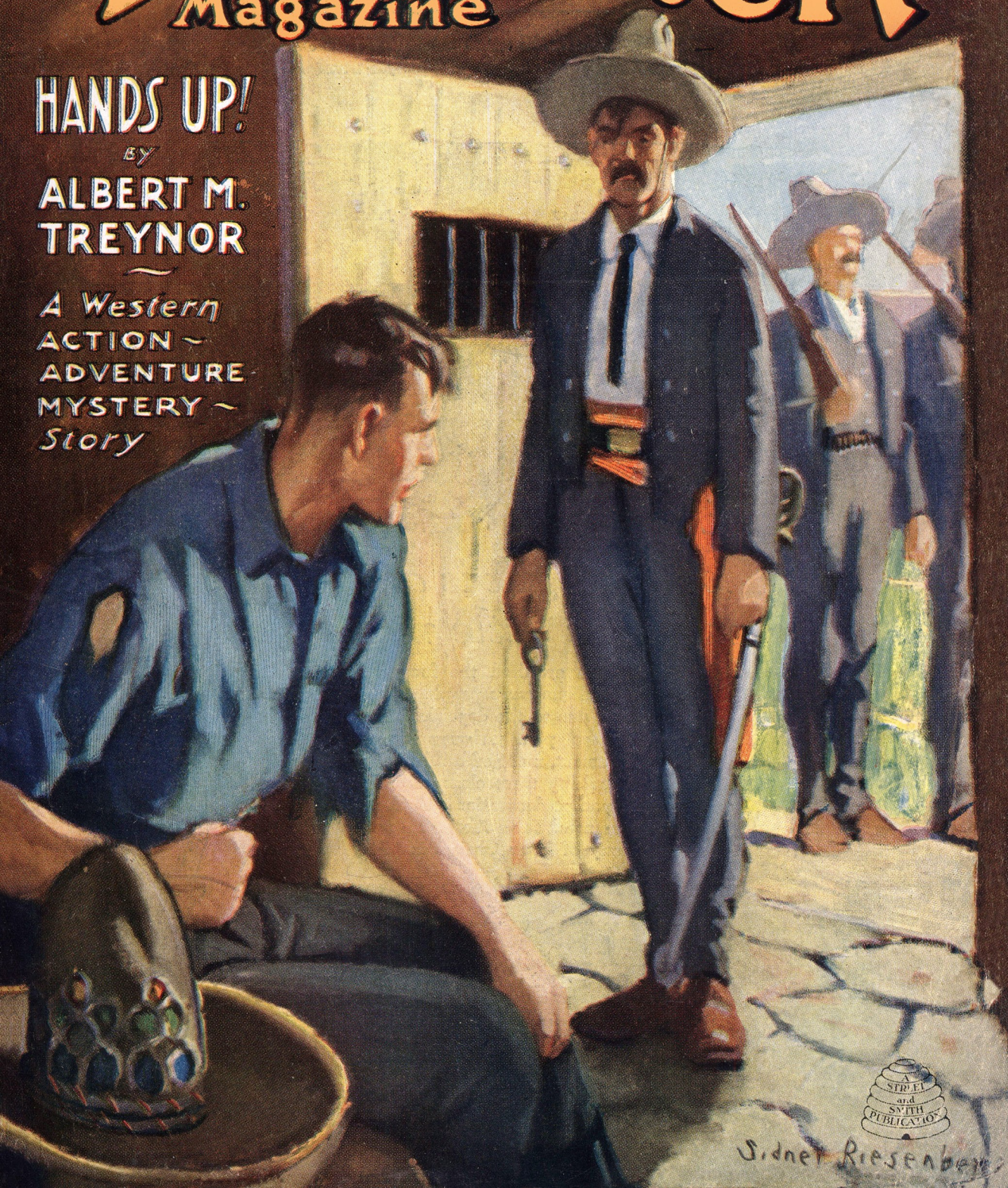
Magazine

HANDS UP!

BY

**ALBERT M.
TREYNOR**

*A Western
ACTION ~
ADVENTURE
MYSTERY ~
Story*

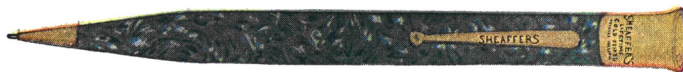


Sidney Riesenberger



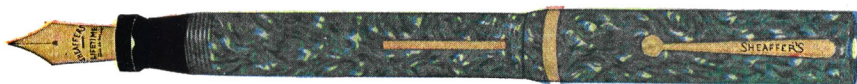
Radite pencil, \$3.25

Also in jade—Sheaffer color



Titan pencil, \$4.25

Jade is Sheaffer color



Lifetime pen, \$8.75

Jade is Sheaffer color



Oriental mosaic set with hand-tooled leather Penvelope in red, blue, coral or lavender, \$15



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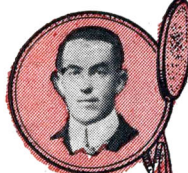


Onyx or Italian Marble Lifetime Desk Fountain Pen Set, \$11

YOU FELLOWS WHO WANT

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Get Into **ELECTRICITY**



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Southbridge, Mass.



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6 BIG OUTFITS
NO EXTRA COST



WHY earn \$15 or \$20 or \$30 a week, when in the same six days as an Electrical Expert, you can make \$70 to \$200—and do it easier—not work half so hard. Why, then, remain in a small-pay, no-future job that offers no chance for big promotion—no chance for big income? Fit yourself for a real job. Get into Electricity. That's where the big money is being made, and always will be made.

Electricity — The Big Pay Field
Today even the ordinary Electrician—the “screw driver” kind—is making money—big money. But it's the trained man—the Electrical Expert—who makes the really big money—\$12 to \$30 a day—\$70 to \$200 a week. Be a Big-Pay man, yourself. Get in line, now, for one of these “Big-Pay” Jobs.

I'll Train You At Home
I'll train you at home—in your spare time. You work just as you are working now—at your same job. My now famous “Work-Sheet and Job-Ticket” method, guarantees you simplified, practical training along work-shop lines. In a few short months you can step out of your old job into a new job—into electrical work where you can be a Big-Pay man in this Big-Pay field.

You Earn As You Learn
To learn Electricity my way you don't have to be a College man, or even a High School graduate. You can read. You can write. That's enough. With me, you get experience as you go along and make good money while learning. I'll show you how—and I'll give you, without extra cost, tools and apparatus to work with—6 Big Outfits in all.

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That's what I agree to do. And back of me in this agreement stands the Chicago Engineering Works, a \$2,000,000 Illinois Corporation. There's nothing like “Cooke” Training, anywhere. It's the Training that big Electrical men are praising; it's the Training that employers recommend; it's the Training that one of our greatest Engineering societies, has endorsed 100 percent. It's the Training for you.

If Not Earning \$70 A Week—Investigate!
Don't wait a minute! Find out today why “The Cooke Trained man is the Big-Pay Man”, everywhere! Find out how “Cooke” Training will help you boost your pay! Mail coupon right now for my Big FREE Book of Facts. See the Six Big Working Outfits I give you without extra charge. See the hundreds of pictures, the proofs, the Big-Pay letters of other “Cooke” Trained Men. Get this great free Book. Send for it today. Clip, sign and mail coupon RIGHT NOW!

L. L. COOKE, Chief Instruction Engineer
L. L. COOKE SCHOOL OF ELECTRICITY
Dept. 79
2150 Lawrence Ave.
Chicago, Illinois

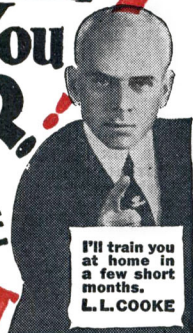


*Hundreds of Men
I have trained
are now earning*

**\$70 to \$200
A WEEK**

Why Dont You

**If you
earn less
than \$70
a week
INVESTIGATE
ACT
NOW**



I'll train you
at home in
a few short
months.
L. L. COOKE

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City _____ State _____

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Ontario, Canada.

The Cooke Trained Man is the “Big Pay” Man

TOP - NOTCH

TWICE - A - MONTH

MAGAZINE

Vol. LXXII

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Number 3

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A mystery trail leads this Westerner into a tangle of adventures, while dangerous men and the menacing desert seek to conquer him.

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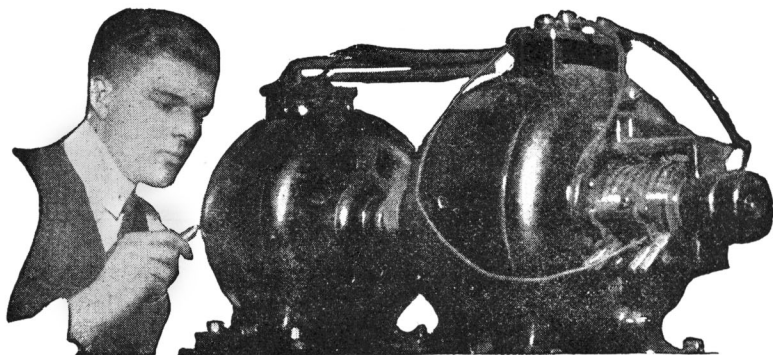
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Twice-a-month publication issued by Street & Smith Corporation, 79-89 Seventh Avenue, New York City. Ormond G. Smith, President; George C. Smith, Vice President and Treasurer; George C. Smith, Jr., Vice President; Ormond V. Gould, Secretary. Copyright, 1927, by Street & Smith Corporation, New York. Copyright, 1927, by Street & Smith Corporation, Great Britain. Entered as Second-class Matter, January 8, 1915, at the Post Office, New York, N. Y., under Act of Congress of March 3, 1879. Canadian Subscription, \$3.70. Foreign, \$4.40.

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Auto Electrician	\$60 a Week and up
Inventor	Unlimited
Maintenance Engineer	\$60 a Week and up
Service Station Owner	\$60 a Week and up
Radio Expert	\$60 a Week and up

electrician, teaching you far more than the average ordinary electrician ever knows and fitting you to hold big jobs after graduation.

Jobs, Pay, Future

Don't worry about a job, Coyne training settles the job question for life. Big demand for Coyne trained men. Our employment department gives you lifetime service. Two weeks after graduation, Clyde F. Hart got a position as electrician with the Great Western Railroad at over \$100 a week. That's not unusual. We can point to many Coyne men making up to \$600 a month. \$60 a week is only the beginning of your opportunity. You can go into radio, battery or automotive electrical business for yourself and make \$3000 a year and up,

Get the Facts

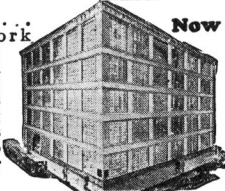
Coyne is your one great chance to get into electricity. Every obstacle is removed. This school is 28 years old—Coyne training is tested—proven beyond all doubt—endorsed by many large electrical concerns. You can find out everything absolutely free. Simply mail the coupon and let me send you the big, free Coyne book of 150 photographs . . . facts . . . jobs . . . salaries . . . opportunities. Tells you how many earn expenses while training and how we assist our graduates in the field. This does not obligate you. So act at once. Just mail coupon.

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This is our new fireproof, modern home wherein is installed thousands of dollars' worth of the newest and most modern Electrical equipment of all kinds. We now have the largest amount of floor space devoted to the exclusive teaching of practical electricity in the world. Every comfort and convenience has been arranged to make you happy and contented during your training.



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500 S. Paulina St., Chicago, Ill.

Dear Mr. Lewis:

Without obligations send me your big free catalog and all details of Free Employment service, Radio and Automotive Courses without extra cost, and how many "earn while learning." I understand I will not be bothered by any salesman.

Name
Address
City State



THERE are some who believe that modern life is a matter of machines and standardized methods and routine ways of doing things. When they can, they run away from the boredom of it all.

But there are others, younger in heart and spirit, who know that America still goes along the romantic road of high adventure, even though these days that road is traveled by speeding motors instead of galloping horses.

It is for this latter class, abundant with high spirits and the sheer joy of life, that Chelsea House, one of the oldest and best-established publishing concerns in this country, combs the market for the best of fiction writers and then puts their works between book covers and sells these copyrighted novels at popular prices.

Writers for Chelsea House know that no machines can ever destroy romance so long as anywhere a man falls in love with a maid. They know that life in 1927 is as full of mysterious happenings as it was in 1627. They know that the great West still has its lure for men who love the out-of-doors. And it is of these things they write to the delight of their coast-to-coast audiences.

Let us have a bird's-eye glimpse of some of the latest Chelsea House of-

ferings. These novels are to be had at your dealer's for the low price of seventy-five cents apiece. And no book bargains now in the market can excel them as reading values.



WHO DARES? an Adventure Story, by Loring Brent. Published by Chelsea House, 79 Seventh Avenue, New York City. Price 75c.

It was an advertisement in a mining journal with the challenging heading "Who Dares?" that stopped Jimmy Webb, courageous young mining engineer, short in the midst of a busy New York street.

The ad offered a job "for good fighters" and said "No weaklings need apply." That was meat and drink for Jimmy, and it wasn't long before he was in the front office of the company offering himself for the position. Not long, either, before he was in the heart of the rough-and-tumble life of the gold-mining fields and a hair-raising series of adventures. It's a hard-fighting story all the way through, with plenty of love thrown in. Who dares now to refuse to march pronto to the nearest bookseller and demand his or her copy of Mr. Brent's masterpiece?

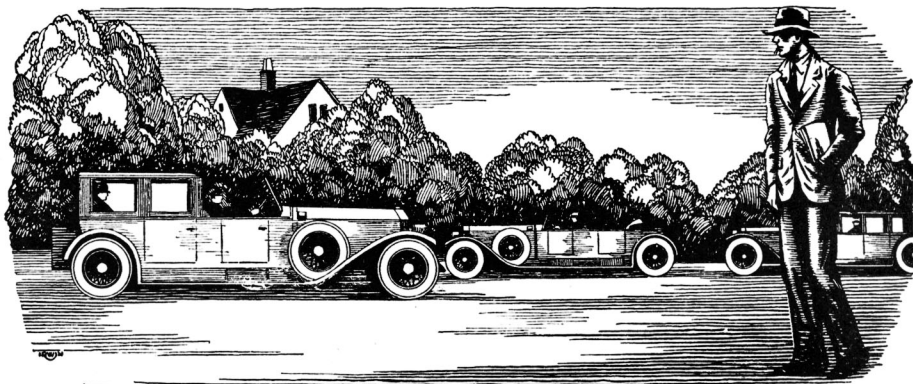


THE WHITE ROOK, a Detective Story, by Hugh McNair Kahler. Published by Chelsea House, 79 Seventh Avenue, New York City. Price 75c.

Whether or not you play the ancient and honorable game of chess, you know that it is a game that requires a keen intelligence and a real master of strategy.

Continued on 2nd page following

Please mention this magazine when answering advertisements



Many times in the old days, while I trudged home after work to save carfare, I used to gaze enviously at the shining cars gliding by me, the prosperous men and women within. Little did I think that inside of a year, I too should have my own car, a decent bank account, the good things of life that make it worth living.

I Thought Success Was For Others

*Believe It Or Not, Just Twelve Months Ago
I Was Next Thing To "Down-and-Out"*

TODAY I'm sole owner of the fastest growing Radio store in town. My wife and I live in the snuggest little home you ever saw, right in one of the best neighborhoods. And I'm on good terms with my banker, too—not like the old days only a year ago, when often I didn't have one dollar to knock against another in my pocket.

It all seems like a dream now, as I look back over the past twelve short months, and think how discouraged I was then, at the "end of a blind alley." I thought I never had had a good chance in my life, and I thought I never would have one. But it was waking up that I needed, and here's the story of how I got it.

I WAS a clerk, working at the usual miserable salary such jobs pay. Somehow I'd never found any way to get into a line where I could make good money.

Other fellows seemed to find opportunities. But—much as I wanted the good things that go with success and a decent income—all the really well-paid vacancies I ever heard of seemed to be out of my line, to call for some kind of knowledge I didn't have.

And I wanted to get married. A fine situation, wasn't it? Mary would have agreed to try it—but it wouldn't have been fair to her.

Mary had told me, "You can't get ahead where you are. Why don't you get into another line of work, somewhere that you can advance?"

"That's fine, Mary," I replied, "but what line? I've always got my eyes open for a better job, but I never seem to hear of a really good job that I can handle." Mary didn't seem to be satisfied with the answer, but I didn't know what else to tell her.

It was on the way home that night that I stopped off into the

neighborhood drug store, where I overheard a scrap of conversation about myself. A few burning words that were the cause of the turning point in my life!

With a hot flush of shame I turned and left the store, and walked rapidly home. So that was what my neighbors—the people who know me best—really thought of me!

"Bargain counter sheik—look how that suit fits," one fellow had said in a low voice. "Bet he hasn't got a dollar in those pockets." "Oh, it's just 'Useless' Anderson," said another. "He's got a wish-bone where his backbone ought to be."

As I thought over the words in deep humiliation, a sudden thought made me catch my breath. Why had Mary been so dissatisfied with my answer that "I hadn't had a chance?" Did Mary secretly think that too?

With a new determination I thumbed the pages of a magazine on the table, searching for an advertisement that I'd seen many times but passed up without thinking, an advertisement telling of big opportunities for trained men to succeed in the great new Radio field. I sent the coupon in, and in a few days received a handsome 64-page book, printed in two colors, telling all about the opportunities in the radio field and how a man can prepare quickly and easily at home to take advantage of these opportunities. I read the book carefully, and when I finished it I made my decision.

WHAT'S happened in the twelve months since that day, as I've already told you, seems almost like a dream to me now. For ten of those twelve months, I've had a Radio business of my own! At first, of course, I started it as a little proposition on the side, under the guidance of the National Radio Institute, the outfit that gave me my Radio training. It wasn't long before I was getting so much to do in the Radio line that I quit my measly little clerical job, and devoted my full time to my Radio business.

Since that time I've gone right on up, always under the watchful guidance of my friends at the National Radio Institute. They would have given me just as much help, too, if I had wanted to follow some other line of Radio besides building my own retail business—such as broadcasting, manufacturing, experimenting, sea operating, or any one of the score of lines they prepare you for. And to think that until that day I sent for their eye-opening book I'd been walling "I never had a chance!"

NOW I'm making real money. I drive a good-looking car of my own. Mary and I don't own the house in full yet, but I've made a substantial down payment, and I'm not straining myself any to meet the installments.

Here's a real tip. You may not be as bad-off as I was. But think it over—are you satisfied? Would you sign a contract to stay where you are now for the next ten years, making the same money? If not, you'd better be doing something about it instead of drifting.

This new Radio game is a live-wire field of golden rewards. The work, in any of the 20 different lines of Radio, is fascinating, absorbing, well-paid. The National Radio Institute—oldest and largest Radio home-study school in the world—will train you inexpensively in your own home to know Radio from A to Z and to increase your earnings in the Radio field.

Take another tip—No matter what your plans are, no matter how much or how little you know about Radio—clip the coupon below and look their free book over. It is filled with interesting facts, figures, and photos, and the information it will give you is worth a few minutes of anybody's time. You will place yourself under no obligation—the book is free, and is gladly sent to anyone who wants to know about Radio. Just address J. E. Smith, President, National Radio Institute, Dept. P-2, Washington, D. C.

**J. E. Smith, President,
National Radio Institute,
Dept. P-2, Washington, D. C.**

Please send me your 64-Page free book, printed in two colors, giving all information about the opportunities in Radio and how I can learn quickly and easily at home to take advantage of them. I understand this request places me under no obligation, and that no salesmen will call on me.

Name.....

Address.....

Town.....State.....

The central character in Mr. Kahler's new novel had both these qualities, and he was playing a far more dangerous game than chess, for its prizes were other people's property. Wherever he made a robbery he had the trick, highly disconcerting to the baffled police, of leaving behind the little ivory chess piece called the rook.

That gave him his personality in the criminal world and made him most desperately sought after by the forces of law and order. For the life of you, you can't help but admire the calm nerve of the man, much as you disapprove of his practices. And, for the life of you, you can't help but sit up with this book until you have turned the very last page.



"HELL BENT" HARRISON, a Western Story, by A. T. Locke. Published by Chelsea House, 79 Seventh Avenue, New York City. Price 75c.

Laughter and "Hell Bent" Harrison were great pals, so it was natural that he should take kindly to that great mirth provoker, the American circus. He had come to the circus

from cow punching and he had all the cowman's love of adventure that takes him into strange places and desperate situations.

We hereby rise to say that "Hell Bent" Harrison is one of our favorite characters in recent Western fiction, and we know you will all rise with us once you have this book on your reading tables.

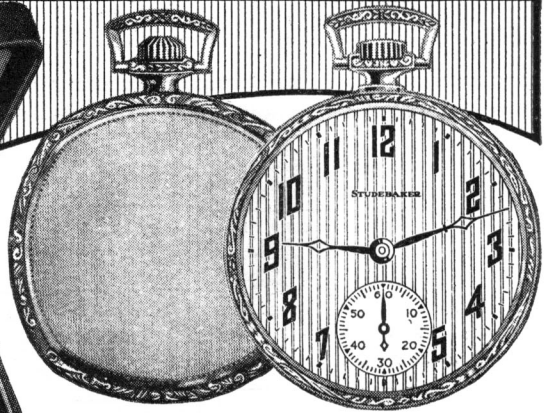
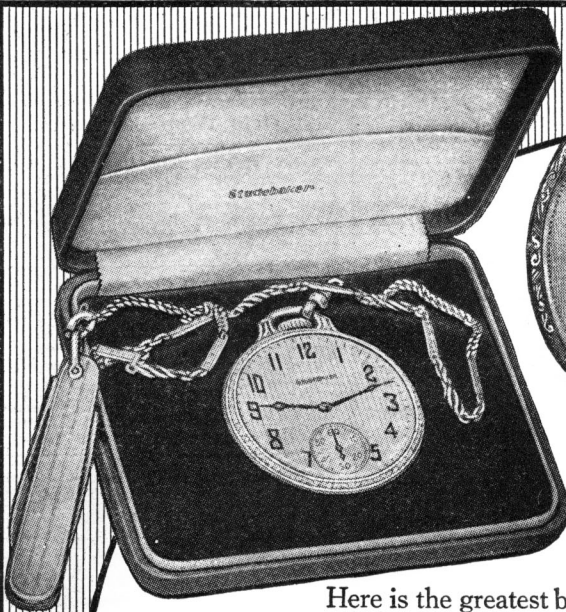


THE CANYON OF CONFLICT, a Western Story, by George C. Shedd. Published by Chelsea House, 79 Seventh Avenue, New York City. Price 75c.

Here is the colorful West as it is to-day, as we remarked above, still full of adventure. The yarn concerns the fight for water rights in a canyon in New Mexico, those precious rights that the peaceful Mark Pitkin possessed, but for which he had to struggle with an unscrupulous band.

There is a glorious story of a running fight and a display of the real courage of real men that will keep you enthralled. By all means make "The Canyon of Conflict" yours, for it is decidedly your sort of novel.





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Street or R. F. D.

City..... State.....

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BIG MONEY AND FAST SALES. Every owner buys gold initials for his auto. You charge \$1.50, make \$1.35. Ten orders daily easy. Write for particulars and free samples. American Monogram Co., Dept. 170, East Orange, N. J.

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AGENTS—We start you in business and help you succeed. No capital or experience needed. Spare or full time. You can earn \$50-\$100 weekly. Write Madison Manufacturers, 564 Broadway, New York.

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SEND NAME, ADDRESS ON POSTCARD. Free introductory copy Salesology Magazine; contains 1000 money making opportunities offered by big reliable firms; no obligation. Salesology Magazine, Desk B236, 500 No. Dearborn, Chicago.

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DAILY PROFIT OPPORTUNITIES presented trading with stock privileges. Small capital sufficient. Write Paul Kaye, 149 Broadway, N. Y.

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MEN—Experience unnecessary; travel; make secret investigations; reports; salaries; expenses. Write American Foreign Detective Agency, 114, St. Louis, Mo.

DETECTIVES EARN BIG MONEY. Great demand. Excellent opportunity. Experience unnecessary. Particulars free. Write, George Wagner, 2190 Broadway, New York.

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PLAYS, Musical comedies and revues, minstrel music, blackface skits, vaudeville acts, monologs, dialogs, recitations, entertainments, musical reading, stage handbooks, make-up goods. Big catalog free. T. S. Denison & Co., 623 So. Wabash, Dept. 132, Chicago.

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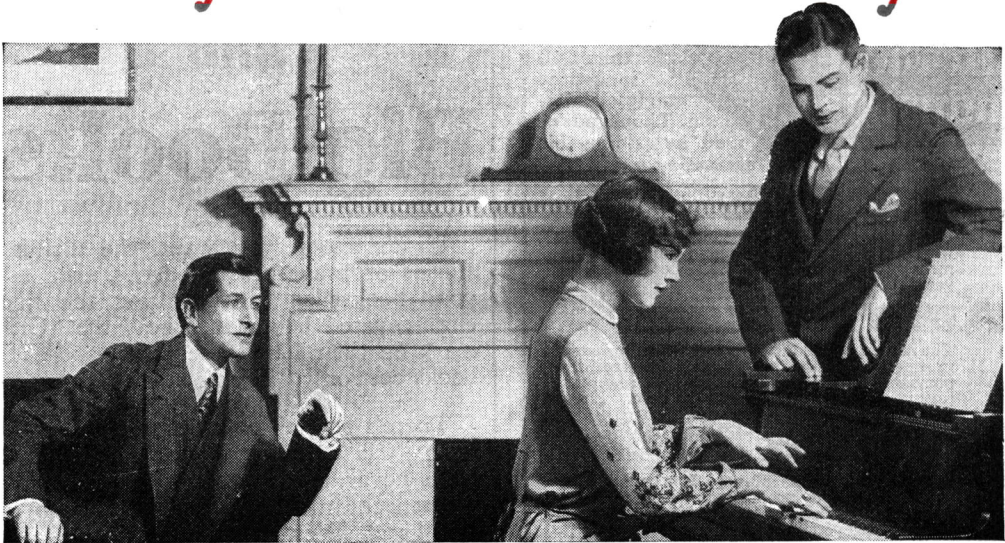
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"And who is your teacher?" I added.

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"No teacher?"

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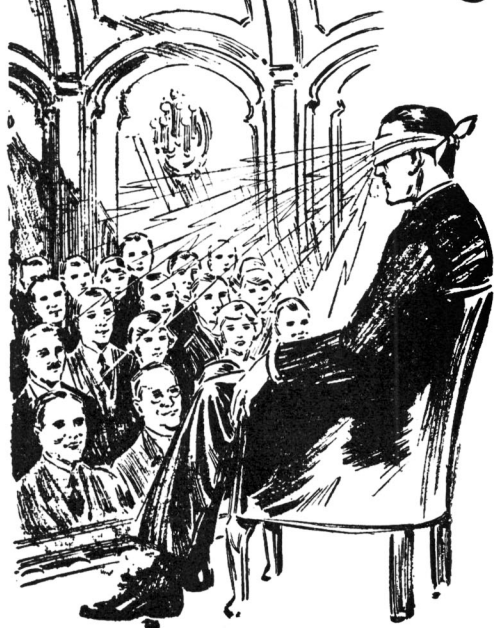
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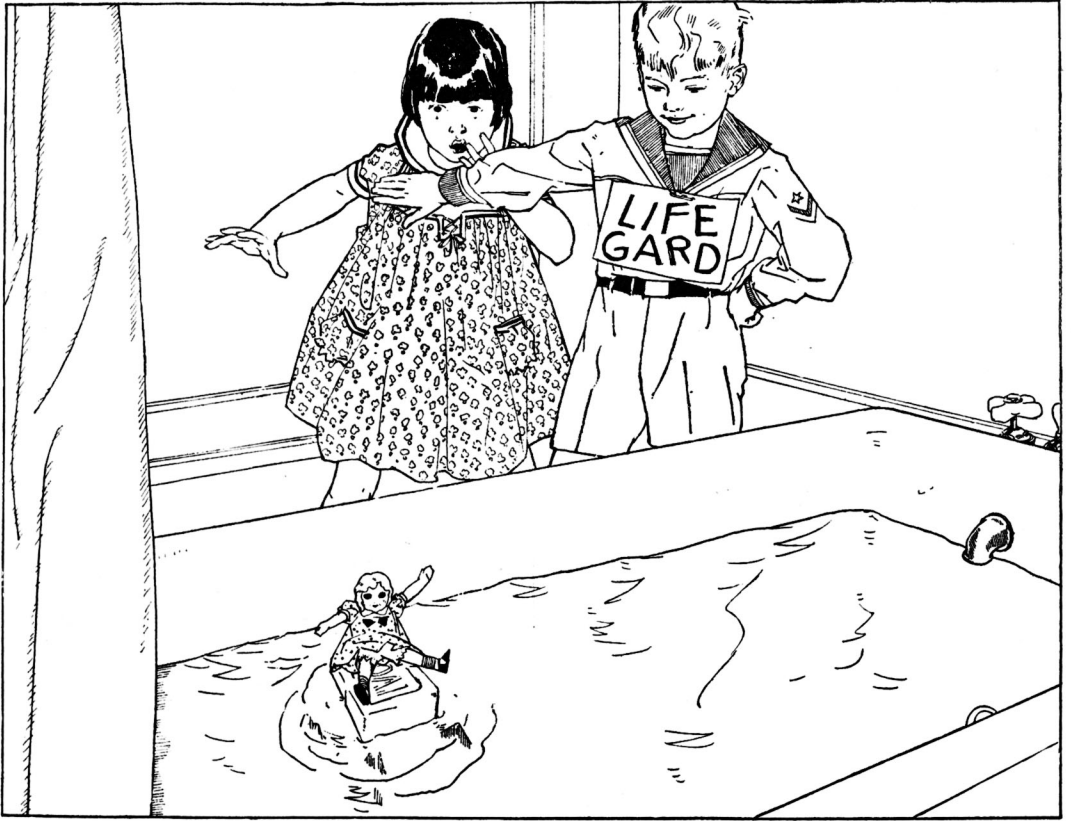
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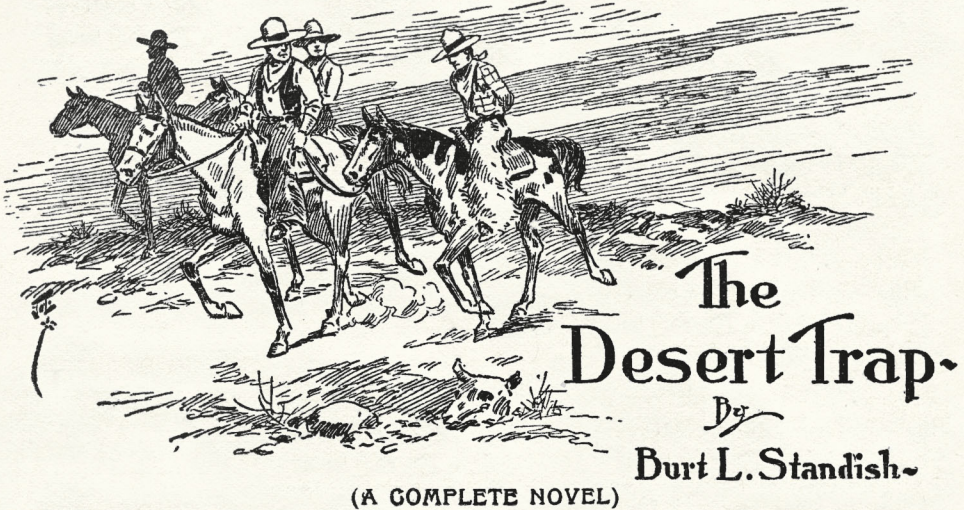
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CHAPTER I.

WRITTEN IN SAND.

SOMETHING was wrong in the Rey Niño stamp mill; as a matter of fact, something had been wrong for all of fifteen minutes before "Dad" Billings, out in the engine room, laid aside the book he was reading and began using his ears.

Dad liked his romances, and he liked 'em red hot. He had one now that was fairly curdling the fringe of hair around his bald spot. All a-quiver with thrills, he had been for a quarter of an hour a stranger to his immediate environment.

At last, finishing a chapter, he came back to earth with a happy sigh like the exploding exhaust of a locomotive. Before he could turn the page, his fogged wits awoke to the realization that

something unusual had taken place in the body of the mill.

Ten stamps, each pitched to a tempo of ninety-eight drops to the minute, kick up a mighty roar with their iron shoes. The volume of sound is consistent and steady, when all goes well; but let one of the dancing stems fail of its function and there is a break, a hiatus in the deafening monotone which trained ears may easily detect.

Dad finally became aware of the lost note, and he lowered the chair he had tilted back against the shaking board wall of the engine room. He got to his feet under the kerosene lamp that had shed a smoky glow on his romance.

"One of them stamps is missin' fire," he muttered; "blame queer Rufus is so long hangin' up the battery."

The boilers needed fuel. Dad opened the firebox and flung in a grist of

crooked ironwood and paloverde. After closing the hot iron doors, he reached for his paper-covered book. But he did not pick it up. The crippled battery was continuing to limp along and Rufus was not doing a thing to stop it. Dad took a look through the doorless opening between the engine room and the body of the mill.

Two big lamps swung over the mill plates. Their dancing flare illuminated the thin flow of muddy water across the plates, but failed to pick the shadowy form of Rufus out of the half dark.

Dad cocked an eye at the mill loft. The ore-crusher, the self-feeding hoppers and the ten bounding stamp stems could be seen in dim silhouette under the loft light. But there was no trace of Rufus.

The mysteries of Dad's paper-covered romance rushed in on the realities of the moment. He got another thrill. Where in Sam Hill was Rufus, the night amalgamator?

Moving toward the box of battery No. 1, Dad discovered that a bosshead had broken off one of the stems. Although he was the engineer and fireman, nevertheless he had been knocking around stamp mills all his life and he knew how to take care of a battery in a pinch. Rushing up the steep stairs to the loft, he grabbed a board and proceeded to put the battery out of commission. He couldn't do the job as deftly or as quickly as Rufus was able to turn the trick, but nevertheless he managed it.

With only one battery pounding away the roar was diminished by half. "Hey, Rufus!" Dad yelled.

There was no answer. Rufus was missing; or, if he wasn't missing, then something had happened to him. Dad pulled a grimy sleeve over his moist brows. There had been deviltry in the Rey Niño mill for a long time now. Possibly the amalgamator had met the deviltry company front, somewhere in

the clamorous shadows of the mill, and this may have been the reason he could not hear his shiftmate, or answer the call.

Dad, with a lantern, was investigating the pitch-dark regions behind the battery boxes, dreading what he might find, when a voice smote on his ears:

"Where's McGowan, Billings?"

Dad, in a shiver, lifted his light and peered into the face of Jud Frawley, the super.

"I'm lookin' for him, Jud," Dad answered. "One of the batteries went wrong and I hung it up. Rufus don't seem to be on deck."

"That's the second time to-night that No. 1 has been out of commission."

Dad nodded. "The other time, about an hour ago," he returned, "Rufus was cleanin' the plates and dressin' down. This last time, though, a bosshead snapped offn the stem. Rufus ain't here to attend to things, and I'm jest nosin' around to see if I can diskiver why."

"We'll both nose around," said the super.

After an hour's search of the mill, the adjacent tailings piles and the cyanide tanks, the mystery of the disappearance of Rufus McGowan was deeper than ever.

In the little laboratory were half a dozen balls of amalgam, the chamois skin through which the quicksilver had been squeezed out of them, and a container with the "quick." The place was just as McGowan had left it, evidently in something of a hurry.

Frawley got the day amalgamator and the crusherman from the bunk house and set them to repairing the crippled battery. The night watchman from the cyanide tanks, and half a dozen from the night shift in the mine, were sent with lanterns to make a wider search for McGowan.

It was dawn before the missing amalgamator was located. Boldero Cliffs, a hundred rods from the stamp mill, had

a sheer drop of two hundred feet to a level of sand and shale. And it was at the foot of the cliffs that the crumpled, lifeless form of McGowan was found.

Why had he come to the cliffs? That was a question no one could answer.

Near the crushed and broken body lay damning evidence: A canvas sack spilling its balls of amalgam over the sand. The mill had been looted of treasure again and again during the preceding weeks, systematically and mysteriously looted. McGowan, now: Had he been up to the eyes in that secret deviltry? Had he been on his way to turn the bag of amalgam over to a confederate? And had he missed his footing in the dark and tumbled over the cliff?

Dad could not believe it, but the evidence was black in Frawley's mind. McGowan had been the thief, and he had lost his life in the very act of treachery.

"What's that, there?" puzzled Frawley, kneeling at the foot of the cliffs.

With a splinter of shale, the last thing McGowan had done was to scrape some letters in the sand. His rigid fingers, gripping the splinter of stone, lay on the last letter—a message begun but never finished.

"Traill," was the one word; "Traill," and nothing more.

"Trail who, or what?" growled the super.

"I'm by!" murmured Dad, in a quiver, "but it's purty turrible, ain't it, Jud? Poor old Rufus!"

CHAPTER II.

RED VERSUS RED.

ALTO! *Alto ahí,* you there! And make it snappy!"

Two guns looked over the top of a rock, leveled downward at the mounted traveler below. The order to halt was instantly obeyed, and the man in the

trail peered upward at the threatening gun muzzles. Back of the guns were two eyes, baleful and determined. Under the eyes was a folded red bandanna; and, over them, was a dingy and battered Stetson, its brim pushed well back on a mop of shaggy red hair.

"What's the trouble?" inquired the man on the horse, making conversation when it was manifestly uncalled for.

"Trouble's all yourn if y'u don't dance to my music, stranger. Me, now, I got to have that hoss."

The voice was unpleasant, and the bad little eyes blinked dangerously.

"Well, shucks!" muttered the rider. "You see, it just happens that I'm needing this caballo myself."

He removed his dusty sombrero and ran his fingers thoughtfully through hair as red as that of the two-gun man above him.

The boulder, as large as a small house, was one of many giant rocks that formed a spur of the Pima Hills. The trail, at that point, followed the base of the spur, making the situation ideal for just such a surprise as this one.

"Trail them reins!" ordered the red-head on the boulder. Promptly the man below put on his hat and released the reins. "'Light, and back off!" was the next command, as the gun muzzles punched the air suggestively.

"This don't seem right to me," complained the traveler as he kicked his feet clear of the stirrups and slid to the ground. "All bricktops ought to hang together and not take these little advantages of one another."

"Red or black's all one to me when I'm set on a play," came raucously from the man overhead. "Shell out what plunder y'u happen to have—guns first. Cash goes, and any trinkets like a watch, et cetery. Make a pile right there in front o' y'u. Pronto's the word, stranger."

The traveler had a solitary six-gun. As he slipped it clear of a shoulder hol-

ster, he executed a half-move that might have been preliminary to an offensive. A weapon barked, and a bullet bit into the sand of the trail dangerously close to the man below.

"I warned y'u!" stormed the man on the boulder. "Any more funny work and the lead won't fly so wide."

"Don't get nervous," said the other; "I'm doing my little best to accommodate you."

He took a gold watch with a carved leather fob from a vest pocket and laid the timepiece beside the gun. Next, he produced a fat wallet, opened it and regretfully considered a thick packet of bank notes. The bad eyes over the bandanna gleamed at the sight of so much unexpected treasure.

"I'm sure playin' in luck this mornin'," exulted the hard voice from behind the handkerchief. "Drop it down there with the gun and the ticker. That all?"

"Isn't it a-plenty?"

"Well, I reckon. Move on, stranger. Leave the canteen—it'll come handy for me."

"Where'll I move?" inquired the unfortunate traveler.

"For'ard! Step lively—I ain't got no time to throw at the birds."

"This is the worst deal one redhead ever put over on another!" deplored the traveler, apparently greatly dispirited.

He moved around the base of the boulder, his feet crunching the sand until the sound of his passing faded to silence in the ears of the man on the boulder. But the traveler, halting at a distance, turned back, dropped to his knees and crawled swiftly toward the scene of the holdup.

The bandit pulled the handkerchief from his face, tucked the guns in his belt and flung his feet over the boulder's crest. He leaped downward, and was in so much of a hurry that he missed his footing when he landed and toppled to his knees.

In a split second a flying form had

descended upon his neck and shoulders. There was a grunt of surprise, a sputtered oath, and then a flurry of sand as "Red" and "Red" came to handgrips and rolled around in the dusty trail.

The two were of the same height and build, evenly matched as to avoirdupois although the traveler quickly demonstrated that most of the skill was on his side. The traveler came uppermost, and the horse snorted and reared backward to give a clear space for the set-to.

The bandit strove hard to get at one of his guns, but the holsters were pushed forward and the traveler's knees pressed down on the weapons and made their removal an impossibility. Two hands encircled the bandit's throat, and the compression of the steellike fingers smothered the man underneath. His eyes were popping and his face growing purple. His lips moved voicelessly, and he kicked out feebly with his booted feet.

The traveler removed a hand from the hairy throat, lifted his knees and snatched the two guns from their holsters. He tossed the weapons aside, reached toward the little heap comprising his own property and picked the weapon out of it. Then he stood up, a grim smile on his face.

"Well, Red, you picked the wrong man for this little performance," was his comment. "Who are you, and what's this all about?"

"Go on," fluttered the baffled bandit, sitting up in the sand and caressing his throat tenderly; "go on, stranger. I reckon I don't want yore hoss, after all."

"My name's Traill, Gordon Traill; Traill, of Trinidad, or Red Traill as it used to be, in the old days." The traveler bent down, keeping his six-gun in readiness for use. "What's yours?"

"I ain't sayin' a word," returned the other.

"Then you shell out," continued

Traill; "empty your pockets and we'll see what we can discover."

The bandit began piling his own personal property on the ground. A knife, a tobacco pouch, a pipe, a small amount of silver and, finally, a letter.

It was the letter that caught and held Traill's attention. He picked it up. The envelope was addressed to "Mr. Judson Frawley, superintendent Rey Niño Mine," and was not sealed. Traill removed the folded sheet and his eyes widened exultantly as he read.

"'Siwash' Brezee, eh?" remarked Traill. "So that's your label. This is right interesting, Siwash. I can use this letter in my business."

"What about me?" quavered Brezee.

"I'm considering that right now," said Traill, of Trinidad, thoughtfully.

CHAPTER III.

INTRODUCING MR. EARLY.

TRAILL repossessed himself of the watch and the wallet. He used both hands in transferring the personal property to his pockets and, for the moment, tucked his Colt .45 under his arm. Apparently he was in a brown study, an abstraction which invited renewed hostilities from Siwash Brezee.

The bandit had won a horse, a watch and a fat wallet, only to lose them again by a lack of wariness and judgment. His spirit rankled and grew reckless. A sudden jump carried him to his guns; but, as he stooped to retrieve them from the trampled sand, a bullet singed his red hair.

"As you were!" ordered Traill; "if you think I'm asleep on the job, you'll have to guess again."

Brezee drew away from the guns, with more respect for his captor and a certain amount of resignation for himself. Loping hoofs could be heard, at that instant, the dull thud rising in a swift crescendo. Another rider was approaching along the base of the spur,

masked from view as yet by the rocks. Traill had hopes that it might be an old compadre who had agreed to meet him in Sandy Bar, and had failed. His hopes proved to be well-founded.

A sorrel nosed its way into sight. A human splinter, a sort of collapsible hat-rack of a man humped over the saddle, rode up with the sorrel and pulled quick rein.

"Gordon!" he bleated, straightening erect and beaming at Traill; "by gorry if it ain't! Why didn't y'u wait in town for yours truly?"

"P. T. Early, 'Poco Tiempo' Early," called Traill with a laugh, putting out his hand. "Late as usual, eh, Pete? Well, I was in a good deal of a rush and couldn't wait. Got to make Buenas Noches by sundown."

"Who's the disapp'inted gent in the checkered shirt?" inquired the curious Early, tipping a nod at Brezee. "Was it you or him fired a shot a minute ago?"

"I had to put a shot across his brows to hold him steady," explained Traill. "He laid for me here at this boulder and tried to annex my horse and personal belongings. Luck went against him. Do you know the hombre?"

Early gave Brezee a sharp sizing. "Never seen him afore, Gordon," was his answer. "He's another of the new stickups who have been makin' things onpleasant for the new sher'ff at Sandy Bar. I'll take him back to the town calabozo while you mosey on to my shack.

"Y'u'll have plenty uh time to make Noches for supper—that is, if y'u ain't got time to linger a spell with an old pard. Say," he added, beaming again, "You're the same old 'Red the Sudden,' ain't y'u? A mite heavier than in them days around Cochise, but jest as pronto—judgin' from the fix Mr. Holdup finds himself in. What's your rush, Gordon? Can't y'u never learn to put off till *mañana* the things that don't have to be done to-day?"

"Some things have got to be done to-day, Pete," said Traill, "and I don't want to linger in this hot sun palaver-ing about them. This man"—he indicated his captive—"is Siwash Brezee. He's a mercenary; a thug, if I have the right dope, who sells his outlaw services to the highest bidder. Right now he is on his way to the Rey Niño Mine with a letter for Judson Frawley, the super-intendent."

"What does Frawley want of him?"

"That's what I can't understand, Pete, but I'm going to find out. How far is your claim from here?"

"Over the ridge yander, and bear off to the left—a matter o' three mile. You go on, Gordon, and make yourself to home. The new sher'ff'll be mighty glad to get this hombre."

"The new sheriff is not going to get Brezee," said Traill, "at least not for a while. I have other plans."

He took a rope from Early's saddle and began lashing Brezee's hands at his back.

"That's his plunder on the ground, Pete," he went on as he worked. "You might gather it in and return to him everything but the guns."

Five minutes later, the old friends were on their way to the ridge, Traill with the captured bandit tramping beside his stirrup, one end of the riata hitched to his saddle horn.

"I'm mighty nigh tuckered," Brezee puffed. "Lost my caballo in a sand storm and I've been afoot ever since."

"Must 'a' been the same blow that delayed me," commented Early. "I reckoned sure y'u'd wait in Sandy Bar, Gordon. Y'u might 'a' knowed I'd come."

"Wait!" exclaimed Traill, "with Rufus McGowan's affairs in the shape they're in? No, Pete, every minute counts. I'd have gone to Noches in a car, but there wasn't one to be had in the town. Back number, that Sandy Bar. Anything new about Rufus?"

Early's long face went longer, at that. "Not about Rufus," he answered, "but somethin' has turned up about you, Gordon."

"No one knows me in this part of the country. How do I figure?"

"Well, jest afore Rufus hit the Big Divide, about the last thing he done was to scratch a word in the sand. One word. An' that was 'Traill.' Along at first, they was reckonin' Rufus had tried to tell them he left behind to trail somebody or other. But there was two 'I's' in what Rufus wrote. He had learnin', Rufus had, and some says what he wrote at his last gasp didn't mean trail nobody, but that it was the name of the man who had knocked him over the cliff and bumped him off——"

Anger flamed in Traill's face. "Rufus and I were sworn friends!" he exclaimed; "and what he tried to write was a call for me."

"Don't I know?" flashed Early; "but y'u couldn't expect them others to know. And then ag'in," he went on, "some says that, goin' fast as Rufus was, he couldn't be expected to mind his 'I's' and that he was really tryin' to leave a message for the super to trail a party or parties unknown. But when you show up at the mine and give the name Traill, y'u'll find yourself in hot water."

Traill fell silent, at that.

"What I want you to do, Pete," he went on presently, "is to hold this fellow Brezee incommunicado at your claim."

"Sure I can hold him; but what's the idee?"

"If I go to the Rey Niño as Traill," proceeded the man from Trinidad, "my activities will be interfered with."

"I'll tell the world!" murmured Early.

"But if I go as Siwash Brezee, and carry Brezee's letter of introduction to Judson Frawley, I'll have the edge on the whole business."

Early let out another bleat, halfway between admiration and dismay. "Ain't

that plumb like y'u, now? Like the old Red Traill of the Cochise days. But do y'u reckon it'll work?"

CHAPTER IV.

BREEZE'S UNDERSTUDY.

BEFORE Gordon Traill transferred his activities to Trinidad and the smelter business, he had roamed through the Southwestern cattle country with Early, and had traveled far and wide as a gold hunter in company with Rufus McGowan.

"Partner" means one thing, but "pardner" means quite another. One term goes just so far, but the other goes the whole way in friendship as well as business. As a case in point, the mystery attending the passing of McGowan had brought Traill posthaste to the rescue of McGowan's reputation which, he had heard, was involved in the Rey Niño affair. A mere "partner" might, or might not have dropped pressing commercial interests to take up the task of character rehabilitation for an old and valued friend. Such sacrifice was not demanded of a partner, but the call to a "pardner" was insistent and imperative.

Traill had called on Early to help him in the unhappy affairs of McGowan. Early and McGowan were strangers to each other; each, of course, knew something of the other through Traill, and Early had been following developments in the tragic case of the amalgamator with more than ordinary interest. He had all the latest details, information that had not found its way into the *Sandy Bar Chronicle* or the *Buenas Noches News-Bulletin*, stored away for the use of Traill.

Periodically, Early, the cowboy, had the habit of "taking a whirl" at gold mining. For a year he had been holding down a claim, hoping it would develop into a "strike" that would enable him to own his own ranch and become

a cattle baron. That was the dream he had tried several times to realize, only to have his ore veins turn out to be "stringers" of no value. But here he was at it again, perennially hopeful in spite of his many reverses.

He was down fifty feet at the Cowboy's Pride on something that "looked good." His blasting was through the hardest kind of rock; and his discovery shaft, with the walls sheer and smooth, formed an excellent place for the detention of Siwash Brezee. With the ladders removed, the captured bandit was as helpless in the pit as he might have been in a dungeon.

Breeze was let down by the windlass, with blankets and a water supply. Food was to be lowered by Early at stated intervals. The prisoner's checkered shirt, battered Stetson, belt and artillery were stripped from him, and Early supplied cast-off garments to take the place of shirt and hat.

There was nothing attractive in this situation for Brezee. He complained wildly, but soft-pedaled his protests when offered a choice between the shaft and the Sandy Bar calabozo.

"He's bein' treated a heap better'n he has a right to expect," grumbled Early; "we'll keep him there till y'u run in your little play, Gordon, and then we'll pass him on to the new sher'ff. But do y'u reckon this here move is sagacious, compadre?" he asked earnestly. "I got a lot of personal doubts."

"You don't doubt what would happen if I went to the Rey Niño as Traill, do you?" fenced the Trinidad man.

"Not for a blamed minute!" Pete quickly replied.

"Then this chance was made to order. No one knows me in this country, and no one knows Brezee. With that letter of introduction, I've got a stand-in that looks mighty promising."

"But it's been some sort of a while, Gordon, since us two was together around old Cochise. You have been in

ca'm waters, and I'm worried a lot that y'u are out o' touch with desert conditions."

Traill grinned. "Does the way I handled Brezee suggest that I have lost my initiative?" he wanted to know. "I can still 'bust' an outlaw bronc, dress down a battery or plant a charge of giant powder in likely rock. What you learn in your youthful years in the open you never forget."

"Mebbe not," agreed Early, "but livin' on the fat of the land sort of takes the tough fiber out of a hombre."

"Why, you old wet blanket," laughed Traill, "I'm only thirty. And I'm hard as nails." He lifted his right arm and clenched his big, capable fist. "Grab hold of the biceps, Pete," he requested.

Early felt of the bunch of swelling muscles and his face cleared a little.

"It's the same arm that put 'Cochise Charley' down for the count!" he had to admit. "'Member that, Gordon? 'Member how y'u——"

"We'll indulge in reminiscences when I get back from the Rey Niño, pard," Traill cut in.

"That's you," grunted Early; "never no time but for what y'u got on hand. Well, go to it. I'm aimin' to rustle a hot snack to speed y'u on your fool way."

He set about the preparation of dinner, and when he again gave attention to his friend, Traill had put himself into the checkered shirt, tied a red bandanna around his throat, belted the guns at his middle and was swaggering around the one room in the battered Stetson.

"Yip-ee!" he yelled. "I'm the bad-medicine kid from the wilds of the Picketwire! When y'u hear me rattle, y'u can gamble a blue stack I'm a-goin' to strike! Walk up, hombres, an' sample my sand!"

Early dropped into a chair and laughed till his blue eyes watered. He doubled up in a wild contortion and

stamped his shack floor with his number twelves.

"I'd sure like to be at the Rey Niño and see the fun!" he gasped.

"Listen, Pete," said Traill earnestly, "you've got to stay right here and look after Brezee. I'd sure have both hands full if you ever let that hard case get away from you. Be on the job every minute, old-timer. None of this *poco tiempo* business while I'm over south working for Rufus. Am I making that plain?"

"Y'u act like y'u didn't trust me?" returned Early, full of gloom.

"I'm banking on you, Pete, from the drop of the hat. Everything depends on your keeping Brezee right where we've put him. I'm only trying to impress on you the importance of that one thing."

"Well, jest consider it impressed," said Early, "an' don't r'ile me with no pesterin' doubts. Grub pile, Siwash; come on an' set in."

They ate, they gossiped a little until the heat of the day had passed, and then Traill went out to the little corral and put the gear on the horse he had bought in Sandy Bar.

"If y'u need me," began Early, "I'll be——"

"Here's where I need you, Pete. You handle this end of the deal all right, and I'll get along at the Rey Niño. Adios, pard!"

"*Hasta la vista, compadre!*"

"*Hasta luego, Pete!*"

And thereupon, with a rattle of spurs, Red the Sudden was away on the trail to Noches.

CHAPTER V.

IN THE NICK OF TIME.

FOR some reason Rufus McGowan had never married. Shortly after Traill had given up prospecting and followed his fortunes to Trinidad, McGowan lost his desire to roam the des-

erts and decided to settle down. He selected the desert-locked town of Buenas Noches for his home, bought a little house, furnished it, and had the girl whom he always referred to as his "kid sister" come out from Santa Ana, California, and take care of the domestic establishment for him.

Although Traill had heard much of Kitty McGowan he had never seen her. The tear-stained letter she had sent to Trinidad was the only communication he had ever received from her. It went to his heart.

You were the friend of my brother Rufus and he loved you as a brother.

Mr. Traill, Rufus is—gone. I am inclosing a clipping from the local paper which will give you a few of the details. But there are details—gossip that has not found its way into print—that hurt and humiliate me because they reflect upon the integrity of my brother, the best man that ever lived.

Oh, I do need a friend in this black hour, and scarcely know which way to turn! Rufus thought so much of you—talked so much of you to me that I cannot feel that we are strangers.

I know you are a man of affairs and more than busy, but if you will let me write to you of all these things that touch my heart and pride concerning Rufus, and will take the time to write me and advise me what to do, the spirit of the man who called you his "pard," his sworn friend, will bless you for the help you give his distracted sister,

KITTY MCGOWAN.

To this Traill had replied by telegraph:

Coming first train.

GORDON.

Here, then, was the cause of his hurry, of his desire to reach Buenas Noches in the shortest possible time.

The sun was low in the west as he spurred into the little town of Good Night, base of supplies for that mining district. Springs of mountain water, their overflow merging into a creek clear as crystal, formed the first and main excuse for starting a town in that part of the hills.

Later, the discovery of rich lodes in the surrounding country justified the site and contributed to the population. A bank, a weekly paper, general stores, real estate and assay offices all contrived to give the little town a metropolitan air in spite of the fact that it was off the railroad and surrounded by miles of desert.

Traill left his horse, Maverick, at the hotel corral, and then went into the hotel with his war bags to scrawl the name of Banford Brezee on the register and to rinse the dust from his face and shake it out of his clothes. Hangers-on regarded him with frank curiosity, and the general wonder deepened and took an unpleasant turn when he inquired the way to McGowan's shack.

"Friend of McGowan's?" quizzed the proprietor, leaning his shirt-sleeved elbows on his six-foot desk.

"What's it to y'u?" snapped Traill, in his best bad-man manner.

He resented the looks that passed from loafer to loafer, and the hint of suspicion in the landlord's query. All this indicated the general feeling with regard to Rufus, dead and gone, and trampled hard on Traill's temper. In his assumed character he was at a disadvantage, for it was not possible for him to parry the subtle thrusts at his friend's reputation without betraying more than was wise.

The sharp retort, and the size of Traill and his ready truculence, won instant respect. The landlord was genial and apologetic in telling him the way to McGowan's, then stared after him with puzzled eyes as he swaggered out and off down the street.

"There's a hard pill, gents," the landlord remarked; "ready for a ruction any old time, I'll bet, and purty tollable able to give a good account of himself."

At the edge of town Traill turned in at a white cottage, the home of his friend for years, and now the desolate home of his friend's kid sister. Trum-

pet vines festooned the small porch, and old-fashioned flowers bloomed in the irrigated garden. Traill considered it all with a swelling heart, and the neatness and order everywhere apparent suggested loving care. That had been really a home for Rufus.

But halfway to the porch Traill paused. An angry voice struck on his ears, a man's voice wafting itself through an open door.

"What's he done with the money he's been stealin' from the mill? He sure turned the amalgam into cash, or some-b'dy in cahoots with him did. I reckon you can get your hands on enough dinero to settle this bill—I sure have been carryin' it as long as I'm goin' to. Come across!"

Then a girlish voice, trembling pathetically:

"Mr. Rackley, you are unjust! My brother never stole from the Rey Niño mill—it is all a lie. Please give me a little time and all bills will be paid in full. Can't you have just a little consideration for me?"

"You're holdin' out on me!" blustered the man; "and I believe y'u know all about that amalgam stealin' and are jest waitin' to skip out o' Noches between two days. I won't——"

In three jumps Traill landed on the porch. The next moment the screen door slammed behind him and he stood in a small living room, facing a hulk of a man in shirt sleeves and a badly frightened young woman. Kitty McGowan and Rackley stared in amazement at the newcomer in the checkered shirt and battered Stetson.

"My name's Brezee," Traill whooped, "and I'm as hard as they make 'em, but I won't stand fer no moharrie bein' tromped on by a cimiroon o' yore stripe."

He laid rough hands on the astonished Rackley and heaved him through the doorway without bothering about the screen. Rackley landed in a de-

moralized heap, and the girl stifled a scream.

"Oh, please, please!" she begged of Traill; then, at the screen door, she went on tremulously: "I am sorry, Mr. Rackley; indeed——"

"I got the number of that desperado!" fumed Rackley, hoisting himself to his feet and arranging his disordered clothing; "and, what's more, I'll have the law on him—and on you, too, for harboring such a character. This ain't the last of this!"

He moved away rapidly, warily looking backward as he went. The girl, flaxen-haired and brown-eyed, turned on Traill.

"You should not have done such a thing!" she cried; "whatever possessed you to come into my house and interfere in such a way?"

"I'll not have the sister of Rufus McGowan bullyragged by a bill collector," answered Traill, mildly. He dropped his voice. "Weren't you expecting me?" he asked; "didn't you get my telegram?"

"Why, why——" The girl was bewildered. "Your name isn't——"

"Yes, it is—Traill, Gordon Traill, here to see that my friend and my friend's sister get a square deal. Traill is the name, Miss McGowan, but you are to forget that for a while and call me Siwash Brezee."

This, then, was the first meeting of Red the Sudden with the kid sister. Perhaps it was well enough, all things considered.

CHAPTER VI.

SHADOWS OF SUSPICION.

AT the low ebb of her fortunes, Kitty McGowan had found a friend. Tears brimmed her brown eyes as the realization came home to her. Sitting face to face with Traill in the little living room, she opened the floodgates of her heart with a story of injustice that made his blood fairly boil.

Rufus was being called a thief on the evidence of the bag of amalgam found beside him at the foot of the Boldero Cliffs. Jud Frawley and a deputy sheriff had searched the cottage, and had found another small bag of amalgam in Rufus' room.

"It was in a dresser drawer," the girl said. "Rufe came home every morning—he was on the night shift—and left for the mine after an early supper in the afternoon. I took care of his room work in the evening; and on that last night when I cleaned up his room and put away some of his clothes, there was no amalgam in any of the dresser drawers!"

She struck her hands together convulsively and insisted with tearful earnestness: "Oh, Mr. Traill, I don't know! How was it that the amalgam came to be in the dresser? Rufe hadn't been back to the house—he didn't come back until they carried him here for the funeral."

"A plant," commented Traill, with a scowl. "Did he have any enemies?"

"He never made enemies. Everybody was his friend. After the amalgam was found in this house, though, the whole town seemed to turn against him—and me. I was teaching school, and the school board discharged me at once. We owed some bills, and all our creditors began demanding payment.

"There's a mortgage on this house. You see, Rufus had to go in debt for it, and was paying for the place on a contract. Payments were overdue. Brother bought that piano for me on installments, and Mr. Rackley has been coming here every day to get the balance due on it. If they hadn't taken the school away from me I could have paid everything in time; but I had very little consideration from anybody."

"Didn't any of them stop to think," flared Traill, "that if Rufe had been stealing steadily from the mill he would have had money to pay his debts?"

"They think, or say that they think, he was hoarding his dishonest returns and that he and I were planning, when the right time came, to steal away and leave our creditors in the lurch. I can't begin to tell you what terrible things have been said about us, Mr. Traill!" the girl finished, with a half sob.

"That will all be ironed out before I leave here," he told her encouragingly; "that's my job, Kitty, and I'm going to see it through."

"But you can't!" she murmured, as by a sudden thought. "I didn't want you to come here. I wrote that letter to learn whether you were still in Trinidad, and get your permission to write another letter telling you everything, so that I might have a friend's advice as to what I should do. Why, you are under suspicion yourself!"

"Because of that one word Rufus wrote in the sand?" queried Traill.

"Yes. Rufus had told others about his friend, Traill; and pretty soon Mr. Frawley began to consider you as a confederate in the stealings." The girl was worried, and kept peering anxiously toward the street. "Mr. Rackley may send an officer here at any minute; and when they learn that you are Gordon Traill, it won't be possible for you to do a thing to help Rufus or me. Oh, I am sorry you came! It is going to mean a lot of trouble for you!"

"Just a minute, Kitty," Traill interposed. "Nobody knows me in this part of the country. I am registered at the Plaza Hotel as Banford Brezee. Don't call me by my real name any more—let's keep that in the background. I'm Brezee, Siwash Brezee."

"Frawley will discover the trick——"

"I don't think so. As Siwash Brezee I have a letter of recommendation to him from a friend of his in Albuquerque. It is a bona-fide letter, too."

He showed the letter to her and explained the circumstances under which he had secured it. Also, he told the

girl how Early was holding Brezee a prisoner in his shaft at the Cowboy's Pride.

"Everything," he added, "is all set for my advent at the Rey Niño Mine. I'm at a big advantage in starting my work there for Rufus."

"But Frawley will learn of your visit here," insisted Kitty, "and of the way you treated Rackley. You have proved yourself a friend of mine—and that will count against you. I am afraid for you, Mr. Tr—Mr. Brezee! I——" She broke off abruptly and started to her feet in wild alarm. "They're coming!" she whispered; "Mr. Rackley with Mr. Jessup, the deputy sheriff!"

Through the open door Traill could see the two men advancing along the walk, the flushed and furious Rackley piloting the officer of the law.

"Don't you be scared, Kitty," Traill told the girl soothingly; "I'll pull out of this in a way to surprise you. Just sit tight and leave it to me."

There was that in Traill's voice and manner which the girl found reassuring. With an effort, she controlled herself and stepped to the door.

"I'm back ag'in, young woman," said Rackley belligerently, "and I've got some one along who'll take care of that tough hombre that made the assault on me. I'll show him that no stranger can pull a rough house in this town and get away with it."

"Is the man here yet, Miss McGowan?" Jessup inquired.

"Yes," was the answer. "Come in."

Traill, in a rocking chair, was calmly lighting a cigar. He looked up as the deputy sheriff and Rackley faced him.

"Who are you," demanded Jessup curtly, "and where are you from?"

"I reckon y'u can call me Siwash Brezee," said Traill; "and, if y'u want, y'u can put my hailin' place in Albuquerque."

"What business you got layin' hands on Mr. Rackley here?" went on Jessup.

"That coyote was bullyraggin' Miss McGowan over a bill; and I reckoned Miss McGowan's uncle would be right pleased if I stepped in and manhandled this Rackley. That's all I done."

"Miss McGowan's uncle?" echoed Jessup.

"Sure; her uncle in Albuquerque. He couldn't get away, so he sent me down here with money to settle her bills. How much is yourn, Rackley?"

"Eighty dollars," said Rackley promptly.

Traill pulled the fat wallet from his pocket and extracted eighty dollars from it.

"Y'u can give Miss McGowan a receipt," Traill remarked, "and then ditch yerself. If Miss McGowan buys any more pianners she won't get 'em from you."

The girl fluttered her hands helplessly and sank into a chair.

"Why didn't you tell me this before?" queried Rackley, busy with a pencil and a notebook.

CHAPTER VII.

THE MATTER OF CREDENTIALS.

MONEY talks in all languages; and it talked louder and more compellingly to Rackley than to any other man in Buenas Noches. His fishy eyes glimmered at the sight of the treasure in the wallet, and he clamped his fingers on his eighty dollars and gave up the receipt.

"Mebby I was a little rough in talkin' with Miss McGowan," he said grudgingly, "but I was afeared I wasn't ever going to collect this bill."

"Well," returned Traill sarcastically, "y'u won't have to lose any more sleep arter this. Clear out!"

"I ain't done with you yet," clamored Rackley. "Jessup, I've got an assault and battery charge ag'inst this Brezee. I'm goin' to push it."

"Afore y'u fall in with that tinhorn's

idees, Jessup," said Traill, "y'u might cast yore peepers on these here credentials o' mine."

He handed the letter of introduction to the deputy sheriff. The latter studied the address on the envelope, and was visibly impressed; he read the inclosed letter, and was still more impressed. Possibly Frawley was a friend of his; at any rate, the superintendent was a man of considerable importance in the community, and interfering in Frawley's affairs was, for Jessup, a proceeding of doubtful policy.

Thoughtfully he returned the letter to Traill.

"I don't reckon, Rackley," said he, "that we want to bother Mr. Brezee any."

"He threw me out of that door," fussed Rackley, "and it wasn't any way for one white man to treat another."

"Y'u wasn't actin' white with the lady," asserted Traill.

"We'll let it go at that," decided Jessup.

The two callers left, and Traill turned with a smile to Kitty McGowan.

"That's one debt off your hands, anyhow," said he.

"Not off my hands," she answered; "it is merely transferred. I have no uncle in Albuquerque."

"What I said was perhaps a trifle unethical," reasoned Traill, "but before I leave Buenas Noches I'll correct that little statement. It's evident that we're dealing with crooks, at the Rey Niño, who are shielding themselves at the expense of Rufus. I am going to smash that combination, but I can't be so open and above-board for the present as I should like. You understand that, don't you?"

The girl considered, and finally agreed with him.

"I suppose," she said, "that a certain amount of deceit is warranted. My brother's name must be cleared, and your way is probably the only one that

will serve. Certainly, if you had come here as Gordon Traill you would have found yourself in difficulties. Just by this call on me you have added to your danger. Mr. Frawley will know all about your acting for that mythical uncle; and, before your letter of recommendation will be of much help to you, that is something you will be called on to explain."

"I am good at explaining," returned Traill, with a laugh. "Was Frawley a friend of Rufe's?"

"We thought so, until the—the terrible thing that happened at the mine. Now he seems to be thoroughly convinced that Rufus was one of the thieves who have been raiding the mill. Probably he intended using Brezee in an attempt to discover who the real thieves are—my brother's supposed confederates, I mean."

"That is my hope!" declared Traill; "and it should be your hope as well as mine."

"But the danger—the danger to you!"

Traill shrugged and gave a careless gesture. "Don't magnify that side of it, Kitty," he requested. "I know these deserts, and the ways of the men, good, bad, and indifferent, who come and go in them. I can take care of myself, believe me, while I'm working for my old pard."

He got to his feet and put out his hand. In the hand he held most of the bank notes that had remained in the wallet.

"I'm going back to the hotel, to swagger and play the game," he went on; "meanwhile, there is a thousand in cold cash. It is not a loan, and it is not a gift. Some time ago Rufe wrote me that he had filed on a mining claim in your name. I'm buying an interest in it; and, if you like, you can quit claim the interest to me. There's no hurry about that."

"Rufe never thought that claim amounted to much," protested the girl;

"you're doing this merely to help me, and not because you——"

"I can afford it," cut in Traill. "Are you going to deny me the right to help Rufus in this little matter of helping his sister? I really want an interest in that claim."

Again there were tears in Kitty McGowan's eyes. She clasped Traill's hand in both her own.

"I'll not refuse," she murmured; "I can't. I can only thank you from the bottom of my heart."

"You'll hear from me later," said Traill, huskily, and turned abruptly and left the house.

"The troubles of the kid sister were twisting themselves in his heartstrings.

"For Rufus and for her," he muttered; "that is the work I have ahead of me."

As he drew close to the hotel, he saw a dusty automobile parked in front. A man in a panama hat was in the driver's seat talking with another man who stood beside the car. Jessup was the man on the ground.

The deputy sheriff caught sight of Traill, said something to the man in the car, and the latter turned a pair of sharp eyes in Traill's direction.

"Just a minute!" he called to Traill. Jumping down from the machine, he crossed the walk to Traill's side. "I've just been talking with Jessup," he remarked. "I hear you've been shaking the plum tree for the McGowan girl. Is that right?"

"It's my own plum tree," growled Traill, "and I shake it whenever I blame' please. And that's my business."

"It happens to be mine, too. My name's Frawley, and I'm superintendent at the Rey Niño Mine. You've got a letter for me, I'm told. You've been showing it around. Didn't Cogswell tell you it was personal?"

"Sure," answered Traill; "but it's my credentials and I had to give Jessup a

look at it. Now y'u can give it the once-over fer yerself."

He put the letter in the super's hands, and waited while he stood reading it. Frawley was uneasy and apprehensive.

"Well," he went on, "I reckon I can give you a job at the Rey Niño, especially since you come so well recommended by my old friend, Cogswell. After you have your supper, come to this car and wait for me. I'll give you a lift to the mine."

Traill watched him cross the street and enter a music store. "D. W. Rackley" was the name over the door of the establishment.

"He's pumped Jessup about me," thought Traill, "and now he's going to pump Rackley. All right; here's where the war begins."

CHAPTER VIII.

THE SUPER HIDES HIS HAND.

THE letter of recommendation, given originally by Cogswell to Brezee, had so intrigued Traill's interest at the first reading that instantly the plan of understudying Brezee had become a fixed idea:

Well, Jud, this letter will be delivered to you by Banford, otherwise "Siwash" Brezee, who is just the man you have asked me to send you.

Your specifications require that the man shall be unknown in your part of the country. Check that. He must know how to handle a gun and use his fists. Check. Plenty of sand. Check. Ready to carry out any orders without question and to hold his tongue—providing he is well paid for it. Check again.

Breeze has handled some delicate undertakings for me, so I am in a position to vouch for him. You will like his work.

Yours as ever, MACK COGGSWELL.

According to this, it will be seen that Brezee was an applicant for a job at the Rey Niño Mine; but not an applicant in the sense that Frawley sought to make it appear by his statement that

he "could give him a job." This business of the super's was special and particular, and he was passing it off in a general manner.

He had given his specifications and requested Coggsell to send on a man who would fill them; and now he was subtly making it appear that Coggsell was taking the initiative and trying to get a man in at the Rey Niño. Traill guessed that this impression was for the general public.

Jessup, however, had seen the letter, and he knew that Frawley had sent out of town for a stranger with nerve. Hence Frawley's irritation in discovering that a very personal matter had been aired for the deputy sheriff's information. He seemed to have squared that with Jessup, if Traill was any judge.

Traill was half through his supper when Frawley walked into the hotel dining room. He sat down beside Traill, and they were the only ones at that table.

"What's the name of the girl's uncle in Albuquerque?" inquired the super.

"Morton J. Quigley," said Traill, meeting the sudden emergency with his usual resourcefulness.

Frawley wrote down the name. "Is he a friend of Coggsell's?" he wanted to know.

"I reckon they must know each other, both bein' prominent."

Traill pushed back from the table, noisily smacking his lips over the last of his pie.

"Put your dunnage in the car, Brezee," instructed Frawley, "and wait there for me."

"I rode over from Sandy Bar and I got a caballo in the corral," said Traill.

"I'll have the horse sent out to the mine to-morrow," was the super's response, "but I'll expect you to ride with me."

"C'rect."

Traill settled his bill, put his war bags in the car, lighted a long "stogie" and

moved down the street. He found the place he wanted—the telegraph office; and he went in and sent this message.

MORTON J. QUIGLEY,

Albuquerque, New Mexico.

Saw your niece, Miss Kitty McGowan, and handed over dinero you sent. She's plumb grateful. RED.

Back in the car in front of the hotel, Traill sat in the front seat imagining Quigley's surprise when he received that message. Quigley was another old friend of Traill; and, to Quigley, Traill was always Red.

"Quig will know that comes from me," thought Traill, "and if Frawley starts any investigation through Coggsell, Quig will follow my tip and protect that gap in my fence. If the super finds I've been telegraphing, and persuades the operator to show him my telegram, all he'll make out of it is just a plain report."

When Frawley emerged from the hotel he walked up the street. Traill saw him turn in at the telegraph office.

"He's wiring Coggsell," theorized Traill, "and asking him to find out if there's such a man as Quigley in Albuquerque; and, if there is, if Quigley has a niece in Buenas Noches." He chuckled. "If Coggsell gets too inquisitive," he was well assured, "Quig will kick him out of his office."

In due course, Frawley returned to the car, climbed into the driver's seat, manipulated the switches and bore down on the self-starter. He had a poker face and, whatever his feelings, he did not betray them. Nothing was said about telegrams.

"Coggsell knows the sort of man I want," the super remarked, as the car left town and sped along the desert trail, "and he says you're just the hombre to fill the bill. I've got a lot of respect for Coggsell's judgment, but the business I've got on hand is mighty important, and it is necessary for me

to make sure of your abilities. Until I'm personally satisfied, you'll loaf around the camp, taking things as they come and waiting to hear from me. Above all, keep your trap closed. The way you showed that letter around hasn't made any sort of a hit with me."

"The way I had to bump Rackley," explained Traill, "got me in wrong with that depertry sher'ff. I figgered that if Jessup knowed I was comin' to see you, he'd leave me alone."

"That's the only reason he did leave you alone. Rackley's a friend of mine, and from now on he's no friend of yours. It's unfortunate, Brezee. I've got to figure out whether you're here to get a job with me, or to help Quigley help his niece. It doesn't look fifty-fifty from where we stand. How in blazes did you happen to load up with work for Quigley at a time Coggswell was sending you to me?"

"Happenchance," said Traill.

"We'll let it go at that—for now," remarked the super.

If it had been possible for Traill to feel uneasy, he might have shied a little at the prospect ahead of him. In calling on Kitty McGowan and in giving her his help, he had piled up difficulties for himself in his assumed rôle. Traill would have been dense indeed not to realize that Frawley held him under suspicion. Nevertheless, he made little of that.

The one thing that counted with him was this: He was to be on the scene of his friend Rufus McGowan's tragic troubles. Suspected or otherwise, he was to occupy a favored position with regard to the mystery of the stamp mill.

Ten miles out of Buenas Noches, the car mounted a rise and rolled down a slope into a valley.

"There's our camp, Brezee," announced Frawley; "loyalty is rewarded in this hangout, but underhand schemers abandon hope when they drop into this valley."

This was undoubtedly intended to be significant. Traill laughed.

"Sure, super," was his comment; "I reckon I get you. Where do I hang up my hat in this hangout and begin to loaf?"

CHAPTER IX.

STRENUOUS LOAFING.

THE valley was shallow, except well to the rear of the mill where Boladero Cliffs broke away in a sheer two-hundred-foot drop. Traill had a glimpse of the precipitous walls from the rim-rock as Frawley drove the car on into the camp. The thought of Rufus, crumpled at the foot of the cliffs, crossed his mind. If his purpose had needed hardening, that one thought would have turned the trick.

Rufus, with the last of his failing strength, writing that call for his old pard in the shifting sand! Traill turned his narrowing eyes from the cliffs and surveyed the camp itself.

There was the drab mill in the background, roaring and muttering as its iron teeth crunched the ore in the hoppers. There were the shaft houses, one or two "whips" on ground that was being developed, country rock lying around in grotesque heaps. The cyanide tanks were perched in three steps like a gigantic stair, chuck shanty, bunk house and all the other surface conditions complementing the underground workings. It was not a new scene to Traill, and merely refreshed his old memories.

The clear ring of hammer on anvil came from the blacksmith shop, penetrating the deep diapason of the mill in shrill notes. It was seven in the evening, night-shift men were on the job and day-shift crews were doing their after-supper smoking and loitering in the vicinity of the bunk house.

The sun, just dipping behind the western hills, flung its golden shafts across the scarred valley and gave Traill

his first clear perspective of the Rey Niño camp. At the close of the long day he could see nothing novel or unusual in the environment—unless he excepted the Boldero Cliffs.

"Get down here, Brezee," instructed Frawley, halting the car at the bunk house. "Hey, Craddock!" he called.

A short man got up from a bench and moved toward the car.

"This man, Craddock," said the super, "is Siwash Brezee. He'll be around here for a while till I get a chance to place him. Show him a bunk. Craddock," Frawley added to Traill, "is one of the foremen."

Traill and Craddock looked each other over. They nodded.

"Bring your truck," ordered the foreman shortly.

The newcomer had a size and a tough swagger that impressed a few of the day-shift crowd, but aroused the ire of others.

"That's where you'll pound your ear, Brezee," announced Craddock, indicating a cot. "I allow," he added speculatively, "it'll be long enough, and wide enough. Make yourself at home."

"It'll be hard enough, too, from the looks," grunted Traill.

"What do you want in a minin' camp—a four-poster and a mattress?"

"Anythin' goes, old-timer," said Traill, "purvidin' it goes my way."

No doubt he was disagreeable; that was part of his scheme in sampling the temper of the men among whom his lot had been cast. Craddock reported negatively to the crowd outside while Traill hung his war bags on a peg. He emerged from the bunk house smoking another of his stogies.

No one welcomed him. Dad Billings, recently transferred from the night to the day shift, looked up from the romance he was reading, studied Traill mildly, and then went on with his story.

There was a gap among the tier of miners perched on the long bench. It

was not wide enough for Traill, but he shoved into it with a humorous remark about there always being "room for one more." Dad, on the end of the bench, was crowded off.

"Where was you brought up—in a saw mill?" demanded a husky miner who was being badly crowded.

"Nary," said Traill; "I was brought up in a bunk house where the benches was a mite longer, and a new hand was given glad greetings. I cut my eye teeth on a six-gun, compadres, and walloped my way through life with my fists. That's me, Siwash Brezee, and don't y'u fergit it!"

"I've seen Siwashes," went on the husky miner in a tone that meant trouble, "and I'm free to say you stack up purty fair with the tribe. *Hyas tyee mika*—but you're not big enough to crowd me!"

He heaved Traill off the bench; and Dad Billings put away his romance and cackled delightedly.

"*Masatche nika tum tum copa mika!*" Traill yelled. "Step out here, kamooks, and let's see who owns that bench?"

The invitation was promptly accepted; and, in less than a minute, a ring of delighted day-shift men were watching "Chuck" Turley, their big, two-fisted heavyweight, stage an impromptu bout with the new hand. The sun was down, by that time, but the afterglow filled the zenith and afforded plenty of light. Frawley strolled over from the boiler-plate garage where he kept the camp car, and became an interested observer.

"Want it stopped, Jud?" asked Craddock.

The super shook his head. "Let's see whether he's the real goods," he answered, "or only a pretender."

It had been a long time since Traill had indulged in such rough work, but he had a game to play and a reputation to establish. He found, in the preliminary sparring, that his footwork was as

good as ever and his skill in the "manly art" as clever as in the old Cochise days.

He played with Turley, and gave him a sample of feints, guards and passes that was altogether new to him. Finally, catching a glimpse of the rising interest in the super's eyes, Traill laid Turley on his back—and then stood over him waiting for him to recover and resume hostilities.

Turley recovered, but he did not "resume." "You can have the whole bench, amigo," he said, nursing his chin. "You got a punch like the kick of a mule, and a bag o' tricks I never seen before. *Kopet!* I'm through. Mebbe some of the others would like to take you on where I leave off."

None of the others, however, were in the mood. If their champion had toppled under the prowess of this new hand, what chance would any of the rest of them have?

Traill had proved that he was no pretender, at least with his fists. The general respect for him had been heightened immeasurably; and he walked over to the deserted bench, recovered the stogie he had left on a window sill, and fell calmly to puffing smoke into the growing dusk.

"By gorry," breathed Dad Billings, "he's got the goods! If he bosses Turley, he bosses this camp. I better stand in with him. Howdy, Siwash?" he said, moving over to the bench and extending his hand amicably.

Frawley, a thoughtful look on his face, went on toward the mill.

CHAPTER X.

THE SUPER OPENS HIS PLAY.

IT was evident to Traill that the Rey Niño camp was a tough one. "Jail-bird" was written large in the faces of most of the men. The law's ragtag and bobtail seemed to have taken refuge there as though drawn by some prospect of immunity for past misdeeds. This

was Traill's first impression and, little by little, his experiences brought firm conviction.

An iron hand alone could keep such a crowd of undesirables in proper working order. That hand, of course, was Frawley's. Traill's estimate of the super's capabilities rose higher with his growing acquaintance with the super's environment. Undoubtedly Frawley had a character of force and decision, and a strong arm that was greatly feared.

Not all the miners and mill men, however, were of the border riffraff. There had been men in the camp like Rufus McGowan, and there were other men on the pay roll like Dad Billings—square as a die. That they risked much in such evil surroundings all must have known; but the lure of a job at good wages has plunged many an honest man into similar conditions, and held him there. McGowan had paid the penalty.

Traill had bested Chuck Turley. This proof of prowess did not make him popular, but, coupled with the swagger of a bully and a bravo, it made him feared. This, considering the character of the camp, was the reputation he considered necessary. He was working, against difficulties, for the confidence of Jud Frawley. Next morning, after breakfast, he had proof that his efforts were carrying him in the right direction.

A man drove into camp in a dusty flivver. "Another telegraft message from Ole Boliver, at Los Angeles," was the talk that reached Traill's ears.

"Who is Boliver?" he wanted to know.

"The hombre that owns this hull valley," came the answer. "Every day or two he sends a wire to the super, seein' as how he's worried about the mill clean-ups."

Shortly after the flivver left camp, Traill was summoned to the super's office, a headquarters adobe that over-

looked the entire layout of surface equipment at the Rey Niño.

Frawley, in his shirt sleeves, was smoking a pipe and leaning back comfortably in a desk chair. He indicated a seat in his close vicinity, and Traill dropped into it. A telegram lay on the desk in front of the super.

"Cogswell wires me that Morton J. Quigley is a real person, Brezee, and that he has a niece in Buenas Noches. You win on that count." Frawley picked up the telegram, looked it over again, and dropped it. "Your acting as agent for Quigley, and being a go-between with McGowan's sister, was unfortunate, but no harm has been done. That is, if you carry out my orders. You are willing to do that without question?"

"If I get what it's worth," said Traill with an assumption of caninness.

"You will be well repaid—if you are successful. We'll consider that point later when I see how you react to the proposition.

"This mine," Frawley proceeded, "is owned by Homer Q. Boliver, of Los Angeles. Ordinarily it is just an average producer; but now and then we run into an ore chamber that is phenomenally rich. During the last two months, and for the first time in a couple of years, the mill has been working on bonanza rock. We're close to the end of the rich ore—and Boliver has failed to receive his honest share of it. Brezee, a gang of crooks has been systematically looting the property."

"High-gradin'?" questioned Traill.

Frawley shook his head. "The trouble," he explained, "is not in the mine but in the mill. I'm a fox at running down that sort of trouble, but this bunch of calamity has got me buffaloed—or, it did have until McGowan, the night amalgamator, fell over the cliffs. McGowan gave me my first clew. When we found amalgam at his home in Noches, the case became a cinch."

"How did y'u figger out the mill was bein' looted?" Traill queried.

"By sampling the ore that went into the hoppers, and by assaying the tailings that came off the plates. The difference would be the amount of amalgam, re-torted and run into bars of bullion. But there was a discrepancy, a big discrepancy. In fact, this thieving gang has been getting rich at Boliver's expense. And not until McGowan crashed did I get a line on the underhand operations.

"I figure that the night amalgamator had an attack of conscience, as he lay broken and dying at the foot of the cliffs. I trusted McGowan; he had always seemed to me like a square man; but he stepped off the cliffs in the dark, while taking a bag of stolen amalgam to a confederate. That point is plain enough."

Traill dissembled his real feelings, and nodded seeming agreement to a conclusion which he knew to be unjust.

Frawley continued: "The last thing McGowan did was to scratch a word in the sand. Undoubtedly it was the beginning of a message, a message that he did not live to finish. But I am as sure of that message as though he had written it out in full. The word was 'Traill.'"

"Huh!" exploded Traill; "he wanted y'u to trail some'un. I get y'u."

"No," corrected the super patiently, "you don't get me. The sort of a trail you refer to is spelled with a single 'l.' This one had two 'l's.'"

"What did it stand for?"

"A man's name, Brezee. Traill was a friend of McGowan's, an old pard, according to McGowan's sister. By that word in the sand, McGowan revealed the name of the man who was his confederate in the thieving."

This was far-fetched, and Traill could see it even if the super couldn't.

"Was McGowan the sort of hombre who'd squeal on an old pard?" he asked.

"Why not? When a man is only a

breath or two from Kingdom Come, he feels like wiping the slate clean. McGowan was that sort. He wanted to hit the Long Trail with an easier conscience."

"So he slammed the other Traill, his old pardner. Looks to me, super, as how y'u was barkin' up the wrong tree."

"Your reasoning is crude," countered Frawley testily. "I'm doing the reasoning, and you're here to follow orders. Traill lives in Trinidad and is connected with a smelter. The stolen amalgam was taken to him and he was the fence who ran it into bars and disposed of it. I have information to the effect that Traill left Trinidad mysteriously; and undoubtedly the troubles of McGowan are bringing him to Buenas Noches to cover up his own tracks and dodge responsibility. Your job, Brezee, is to lay for Traill—and get him."

To "get" a man is a phrase that may run the whole gamut between mere incrimination and a cold-blooded finale. Traill, as Brezee, found himself in a novel situation.

"Let's you and me get down to brass tacks, Frawley," he suggested; "what d'y'u mean by *get*?"

CHAPTER XI.

A TOUGH PROPOSITION.

VERY coolly the super leaned forward to knock the ash out of his pipe. Slowly he refilled it and trailed a lighted match over the bowl. Through the smoke he peered steadily at Traill.

"You're a bit thick, Brezee," he remarked. "I mean you are to get the goods on Traill, even if you have to get him in the usual Western manner. The crooked game has to be called; one life already has paid the forfeit for lawlessness, and the stolen gold has not been located. Boliver offers five thousand dollars for the discovery and arrest of the thieves, and twenty-five per cent of all the gold recovered. That

will be the stake for which you will work."

"H'm!" mused Traill, reaching for another of his stogies. His novel situation did not have the attractive possibilities he had desired. Trailing Traill would take him away from the mine, the scene of McGowan's undoing, and the one spot where his reputation could be cleared.

"Don't y'u reckon, Frawley, ye're plumb wide of the mark?" he suggested. "I ain't looked over yore night shift much, but in the day crowd I'll gamble there ain't half of 'em above a job of gold stealin'."

"Look here!" snapped the super, showing temper; "are you prejudiced in favor of McGowan? Has that sister of his been telling you things?"

"I ain't got no prejudice one way or t'other; I'm jest surmising, and——"

"I made it plain to you that I'd do the surmising."

"It's a job for Jessup, seems like."

"He's too well known. The gang is on to him, and he can't make a move that this crooked outfit isn't next to. That's why I want a stranger of the right sort to go after Traill and bring him to time. That's the job. Take it if you want it; or quit here, and go back to town. I'm going to get to the bottom of this deviltry. If you're not the man to help, I'll get somebody else."

"What sort of a cimiroon is this man Traill?" inquired the man with the smoking stogie.

"Hard as nails—or used to be. Formerly he was over around Cochise, where he had the reputation of being a quick thinker and a tough man to handle. You are both of the red-haired breed," the super said, with a chuckle, "and the clash between you ought to have its interesting moments."

"I don't take a back seat fer no hombre that walks!" flared Traill.

"Then you're in on this?"

"Right from the jump."

Frawley sat back in his chair, seemingly satisfied. "Glad you're coming through," was his comment; "I didn't really think Coggsell could be wrong in picking his man. Your next move is to go back to the hotel in Noches and watch for Traill. When you find him, follow him. What you do after that is up to you—and no one else. If you need help, communicate with Jessup.

"My first intention was to let Traill come to this mine, then land on him and jail him. On second thought, it struck me that such direct methods wouldn't get us anywhere. It is necessary to work more secretly, and to give Traill plenty of rope. When he comes, he'll get in touch with other members of the gang. How many there are, I don't know.

"By watching Traill you should be able to get a line on them; and, through them, we can get him. Shadow the girl. You ought to have a stand-in there, and it's possible she's communicating with some of her brother's old crowd. If you can get the low-down on this through the girl, the incident of your acting as go-between for Quigley won't be so unfortunate, after all."

Of all the unpleasant circumstances connected with understudying Siwash Brezee, this suggestion of Frawley's was the hardest to bear. Traill, however, had elected to follow that particular course and it was too late to turn back. He had to see it through.

"I reckon you'll take me back to town?" he asked.

"Your horse is in the camp corral, and it's best for me not to be seen with you any more, Brezee," said Frawley. "I've decided I don't want you to work in this camp. That will be your excuse for returning to Noches."

"C'rect. I'm one o' these fast workers, and I reckon I'll be movin'."

He got up from his chair with a seeming alacrity he was far from feeling, and went back to the bunk house. The

night-shift men were snoring in their cots. He took down his war bags, left the building and stood for a space surveying the mill.

"It's a tough proposition," he thought. "The easiest way to clear up this matter for Rufus is to hang on here and spot the real thieves somewhere in this ornery crowd of mine and mill men. It's an inside job, no mistake about that. By trying to understudy Brezee, I've cut myself loose from the one place where I ought to be."

On his way to the corral, he met Craddock making for the blacksmith shop with a bunch of drills that needed repointing.

"Pullin' out?" queried the foreman.

"The super allows he can't use me here in the camp," growled Traill. "He ain't lookin' fer real men but has-beens."

Craddock grinned. "You're probably short on minin' experience, Brezee," he hazarded. "No room here for anybody that can't handle a pick, load a hole or dress down the mill plates. You've got a way with your fists, though, that's right compellin'."

The foreman was pleased with the ditching of Traill, so pleased that he showed it. He went on to the blacksmith shop, and Traill turned to a watering trough and filled his canteen from an iron pipe that brought water from a distant reservoir.

Maverick, just as the super had said, was fraternizing with other horses in the camp corral. Traill found his riding gear in a hay shed, saddled up, mounted and set out on the back trail. It was one of the few times in his life when he was thoroughly disappointed with himself.

And the hard luck did not stop there. Halfway to town he sighted a dust cloud moving rapidly in his direction. The cloud was whipped aside and revealed a surprise. Early, owner of the Cowboy's Pride, was riding south at a speed that was trying the endurance of

the horse he bestrode. He bleated wildly, and a bit joyously, at sight of Traill.

"Gordon, if it ain't!" He pulled his dusty mount to a halt alongside his friend. "I didn't reckon on no such luck as this. I got bad news, old-timer!"

"I can guess what it is, Pete," said Traill. "Breeze gave you the slip."

"How'n blazes did y'u know?" gasped Early.

"When Johnny Hardluck strikes out, he always lands on me three times. This is No. 2. How did it happen?"

CHAPTER XII.

UP IN THE AIR.

THE little sister of Old Man Mañana, Poco Tiempo, had been flirting with Early as usual. In spite of Traill's warning, Early's temperamental weakness had given Siwash Breeze his chance. The angular Early was badly collapsed and abjectly regretful as he pointed his horse townward, rode stirrup to stirrup with Traill and frankly described his undoing.

"It was that blamed windlass rope, Gordy. Y'u told me to strip it off'n the windlass, so'st it couldn't slip back into the shaft and drop into Breeze's mitts. I allowed I'd do that, but I had a busted bridle to mend, and one thing another kept comin' up all artemnoon so'st I didn't get around to take off the windlass rope. When I went to bed that night, she was still on the drum.

"Way I figger it, the oxhide bucket at the end o' the rope was settin' a leetle over the platform openin'. Breeze must 'a' shied rocks at it, although heavin' stones up a fifty-foot shaft ain't no easy matter. Still an' all, that's the only method he had o' coaxin' the heavy bucket to spill itself into the shaft and drop down, draggin' the cable with it.

"I was sleepin' good, when I heerd the creakin' o' the windlass. It hadn't

been greased very recent and it sure complained somethin' fierce. Mebby if I'd got up right there I'd 'a' been in time to put a crimp into that get-away. But I didn't. I jest reckoned I was havin' a dream so I chided myself for bein' nervous, turned over and dropped off ag'in.

"Next, I heered gallopin' hoofs. They drummed away into the dark—and I give up thinkin' it was a dream. I rushed for the dump and, when I seen the rope hangin' in the shaft—well, I ain't got no words for tellin' y'u how plumb discouraged I was. Y'u see, Gordon, I knowed what it meant to you. Worst of it all was, Breeze had taken my bronc.

"I set off afoot on the trail, movin' in the general direction of Noches. I never was much good at hikin', but that was all I could do, and the way these bowlegs o' mine dusted along that trail would 'a' been a sight for sore eyes. It was night, and nobody travelin' that could gi'me a lift. It was five a. m. when I made Hamp Little's claim, the Hornet, eight miles from the Cowboy's Pride. Hamp's hoss, Flareback, happened to be a mule; and me and the mule went on to'rds town. That is, some o' the time we went on, but there was long spells when Flareback run true to name and balked on me. I wasted more cusswords on that mule, Gordon, than any mule skinner ever did on a gov'ment six in a mudhole.

"It was seven o'clock when Flareback made up his mind to land me in Buenas Noches. I didn't stop for no breakfast, not me. I was worryin' my old head off about you, out at the Rey Niño, playin' the part of Breeze with Breeze himself stormin' in on y'u and scramblin' yer game. I got a bronc at the hotel corral—this un—and sure kicked up the dust. Then, lo an' behold y'u, I find y'u makin' fer town."

Early wiped the dust and sweat from his brows.

"It was some relief, I'll tell the world! How'd y'u get out of that pinch, Gordon? When the real Brezee blowed in on y'u, how'd y'u manage to get into the clear?"

Traill had listened patiently and, to his credit, tolerantly, to his old friend's tale of woe. Knowing Early as he did, and being fully aware of all his merits and demerits, he was blaming himself for trusting his friend in the important matter of guarding Brezee. Pete Early meant well, always, but he was constitutionally unable to measure up to his high ideals of service.

"Don't worry about it, Pete," said Traill. "Brezee didn't show up in the mining camp last night. I put my play over with Frawley, and he has sent me to town to get a man named Traill." The man from Trinidad grinned. "I'm to land on myself and put myself out of business. Do you get the joke?"

The long, lanky cowboy, after receiving more enlightening details, doubled over his saddle horn and shook with mirth. But his laughter died abruptly and he turned an anxious face to his friend.

"Listen, though," he cried; "Gordon, what in blazes has become o' that Brezee person? He had plenty o' time to reach the Rey Niño by sunup. If he didn't get to the mine, where d'y'u reckon he's gone?"

Traill was already considering that point.

"It's anybody's guess, Pete," he reasoned. "He laid for me in the trail and tried to make off with my horse and personal property. I called that play; but he may be afraid to show himself, thinking I'll proceed to put him in the Noches jail. It's possible he's legging it out of the country as fast as your horse can travel. If that is what happened, I'll still be Brezee to Frawley; and, apart from the loss of your bronc, no great harm has been done."

Early was greatly cheered by this

"Hang the caballo!" he exclaimed; "that sorrel Starface was sure a good cow hoss, but I'm willin' to give him up if he's only totin' Brezee into places unknown, where he can't bother."

"On the other hand," continued Traill, "Brezee knows the law will be after him and he may keep away from it by hiding out and avoiding travelers on the way to the Rey Niño camp."

"D'y'u reckon he'll go there anyway?"

"He may—avoiding Noches and keeping out of sight as much as he can. If that's what he's up to, it would account for the slow time he's making in getting to Frawley at the Rey Niño."

"I don't reckon he'll try that," decided Early. "He wouldn't want to put himself in Frawley's hands, even to call that bluff o' yorn, knowin' the law will be on his trail. No, Gordon, I'll gamble a blue stack that the stick-up boy has left these parts for good."

"You know the sort of camp the Rey Niño is, don't you?" inquired Traill. "Two-thirds of the gang out there have had the law on their trail, at some time or other; in fact, a lot of them may be wanted now. The camp, it strikes me, is a sort of refuge for some of the hard cases at large in these deserts. If Brezee understands that, he may take a chance on Frawley."

Early's serenity was badly ruffled again.

"That's so," he agreed. "How y'u goin' to know if Brezee got to Frawley?"

"I'll wait in Noches according to the super's instructions," said Traill. "If Jessup shows up and invites me over to the cooler, I'll know he's had a talk with Brezee."

"And what'll y'u do in that case?"

"Pete," returned Traill easily, "I never cross these trouble bridges until I get to them. If worse comes to worst, I'll take care of myself somehow."

"That was allers yer way in the Co-

chise days," speculated Early, "but I'm wonderin' if y'u can do it now!"

CHAPTER XIII.

POSSIBLY A TRAP.

IT seemed best that Traill, still posing as Siwash Brezee, should not be seen riding into Buenas Noches with Early. Brezee was a stranger, and hardly the type of man with whom the cowboy-miner would fraternize. Traill argued that he and Early should not appear in the town as friends, or even as acquaintances. It might even be well for Early to show a pronounced dislike for the supposed Brezee.

Acting such a part was not easy for Early; nevertheless, he was won over by the logic of his friend's remarks and agreed to be guided by his suggestion.

Early was first to arrive at the hotel, turn in his horse and take a chair in the lobby. He was there when Traill arrived, put his name on the book and asked for a room.

"Who's that redhead?" Early asked of "Lafe" Carter, the proprietor, when a Jap boy had conducted Traill up the stairs to the second floor.

"Stranger, Pete," said Carter; "calls himself Brezee. His hair is red and he's got a temper that seems to match it. He went out to the Rey Niño looking for a job, but from the looks of things Frawley wouldn't take him on. Another thing he done when he landed here yesterday—he went to see the McGowan girl."

Early dropped his voice. "Reckon he's one of that amalgam-stealing gang?" he asked.

"Jessup would be after him if he and Frawley thought that. No, this Brezee brought a wad of dinero for the girl—from an uncle in Albuquerque—and she's been payin' bills. Nobody knows much about this guy, but he sure don't look on the square."

"I was trimmed by a redhead about

his looks and size, oncet," growled Early; "but that other hombre's name wasn't Brezee."

"Names are easy come by," hinted Carter.

"Y'u might gi'me a room next to his, Lafe," Early requested, with a black scowl, "and if I can find out he's the hombre that hornswoggled me, years ago, the two of us are goin' to lock horns."

"Glad to oblige you, Pete," said Carter, "but I won't have any row in this hotel—mind that!"

"I'll trail him outside some'rs," Early promised, "if he turns out to be the tin-horn that robbed me of a sixty-dollar saddle and the thirty-dollar hoss that was under it."

Early considered this clever; and no doubt it was, in a way. He had offered a plausible excuse for dark designs against the redhead, and was shown to a room next to Traill's. Climbing on a chair, he removed a tin "thimble" from a stovepipe hole in the partition separating the two rooms, and exultantly regaled his friend with the cleverness he had displayed.

"So far, good," whispered Traill, "but don't overdo it, Pete."

"Bank on me, Gordon," Early answered. "Whenever y'u want a private word with me, rap on the wall and I'll pull out this thing-a-ma-jig and take yer orders on the q. t."

After a time, Traill went down into the lobby again. "Any one stoppin' here by the name o' Traill?" he asked of Carter.

The proprietor shook his head. "Nary, Mr. Brezee. You expectin' some one of that name?"

"Mebby yes, and mebbly no," said Traill; "but you tip me off if a cimiroom with that label rides in on the stage from Sandy Bar and puts up here."

"Glad to oblige, Mr. Brezee."

The rest of that forenoon passed uneventfully. Traill would have liked to

while away the time by calling on Kitty McGowan. So far as Frawley was concerned, he was expected to make such a call; but, in the present state of affairs, he felt that it would not be wise.

He and Early had their noonday dinner at the same time, but at different tables. When Traill finished, he halted at Early's chair on his way out of the dining room.

"You ever seen me before, pilgrim?" he demanded, a note of hostility in his voice.

"That's somethin' I'm tryin' to figger out," Early answered.

"Well, when ye're done figgerin', gi'me the result. Mebby it'll mean an eye opener for y'u."

Traill swaggered on.

"He means an eye closer," commented a diner across from Early. "He knocked out Chuck Turley, at the Rey Niño, last night. Bad egg!"

"I'll use cold lead on 'im if he makes any pass at me," threatened Early.

It was two in the afternoon when no less a person than Turley, the defeated champion, drove up to the hotel in the dusty camp flivver. He made his way into the lobby and looked around at the various people in the armchairs. One man was smoking a stogie and watching a game of checkers. Turley walked over to him, took his arm and drew him aside.

"The Boss has changed his mind about you, Siwash," said Turley. "He wants you back."

"I reckoned he'd come to his oats," returned Traill, in the large and confident manner he was using as Brezee. "I'll travel back with y'u in the flivver."

"No, that ain't the way of it. This here is a saddle job, Jud says, and you're to ride out on that bronc of yours and meet him at the p'int where the trail twists through Pima Pass."

Turley dropped his voice.

"Bring two canteens and a bag o' grub," he went on; "also, your guns.

Better start as soon as the heat o' the day has slackened a bit—say at four o'clock."

"I'll be there," said Traill heartily.

But the heartiness was assumed. He watched Turley leave the hotel, climb into the car and roll away down the street. Then he walked upstairs to his room, and rapped on the partition.

"What's new, compadre?" whispered Early, through the stovepipe hole.

Traill told of the summons from Frawley.

"Trap!" muttered Early; "Breeze has got to Frawley, and instead o' turnin' y'u over to Jessup as a suspect, the super's got another trick up his sleeve."

"Possibly," assented Traill; "possibly, too, everything is O. K., and I'll get my chance to do something for Rufus."

"Don't y'u go, Gordon!" breathed the other earnestly.

"Oh, I'm going, Pete, but I'm going prepared. You're to give me some real help this time—if I need it. Cut out the *poco tiempo* business, pard, and see if you can be on the job. Here's what I want you to do."

CHAPTER XIV.

THE WATER HOLE.

IT was nearly seven o'clock in the afternoon when Traill came loping easily to the north end of Pima Pass. A man on a big buckskin horse spurred clear of the entrance to the pass and faced him in the trail. It was Frawley.

Traill was already admiring Frawley for the way he held that tough camp of his together, commanded discipline and forced the lawless to honest effort. The erect, capable figure on the buckskin now filled his eye and still further aroused his enthusiasm.

The super's sphinxlike face was as clear and calm as a day in June. Traill searched it in vain for any telltale evidence of a recent meeting with Siwash Brezee. The manner of Jud Frawley,

however, indicated a growing regard for the supposed stranger from Albuquerque.

"Shake, Siwash!" he said, extending his hand. "We're away from that mob of camp roughnecks, by ourselves out here in the desert, and there is a real job ahead of us. Judging from the way you use your fists, you are a man of parts, a real captain, and we're to be a pair of pards in running out this desperate trail."

Traill was a trifle unsettled by this unexpected show of friendliness, it was so utterly unlike the coldly calculating Frawley of Rey Niño. Nevertheless, he shook hands with the super in assumed heartiness.

"You and me, Jud, are cert'nly a pair to draw to! I knowed y'u was my kind the minute I set eyes on y'u! But what's doin'? Nary a sign o' this amalgam thief in Buenas Noches."

"He's out in the Jornada," returned the super, "and we're going out there after him—just the two of us. We'll make the last water hole for a night camp and then make our dash into the Jornada in the morning. You're well heeled, I suppose? And you have two canteens and a bag of grub?"

"Sure—that's what Turley said y'u wanted."

"Fine! I brought an extra blanket for you from the camp."

Side by side they turned from the trail, struck into the heart of the low, bleak hills and headed southward for the water hole. Frawley explained as they rode.

"Not many hours after you left camp, Siwash, a prospector called 'Sonora Slim' dropped in at Rey Niño. He pitched camp, last night, at the water hole we're making for now; and while there, he met up with a stranger on a sorrel horse. This stranger had hair as red as yours; and he asked Slim about Mexico—how far it was to the border, what water there was on the way, and

so on. Slim says the red-haired stranger acted nervous and suspicious, and it was his guess that he was hustling out of the country to dodge the law."

Traill turned that over in his mind. This stranger, he reasoned, must be the real Siwash Brezee, fearful of his liberty and fleeing to save it. Early's sorrel horse, and the red hair, seemed to be conclusive on that point.

"This Jornada ain't no pleasant place to run away in," remarked Traill. "It's right sizable, too, and lookin' for an amalgam thief in the Jornada is a heap like lookin' for a needle in a haystack."

"In this case our job is not so hopeless," said Frawley. "Miles to the south of the Jornada's northern rim, there's a hole which occasionally holds a little water. Slim told the red-haired stranger about that, and advised him how to go to reach it. There's not one chance in a hundred that the man will find water there, but he'll take the chance. That is to be our port of call, Siwash. We'll make a dash for it to-morrow. With any luck at all, we'll get there, get Traill, and get back."

Rolled up in his blanket at the water hole, that night, Traill wondered at the intrepidity of this mine superintendent. He was risking his life to overhaul the supposed gold thief, the confederate of Rufus McGowan. He talked of the dash into the Jornada as he might have talked of a trip from the Rey Niño camp to Buenas Noches.

"He has plenty of nerve, all right," Traill told himself.

This dash, if successful, brought up another important point. The capture of Brezee would result in the exposure of Traill as Brezee's understudy. This matter, vital though it was, did not shake Traill's confidence in his own resourcefulness.

"I'll take that jump when I get to it," he decided with easy assurance, and dropped off to sleep.

The bright stars looked coldly down

on the water hole, creeping things rustled through the bedraggled mesquite, and the coyotes yelped in the distance. The picketed horses stirred restlessly. The chill of the desert night was the very extreme of the blistering heat by day, and the thoughtfulness of the super in providing a blanket for Traill was greatly appreciated.

Traill was a light sleeper, and he had his belt and holstered guns at his side and within quick and easy reach. Any unusual movement, he knew, would arouse him. A few feet away, in the dusk of the chaparral, Frawley lay in his own blanket as motionless as a log. So the night passed.

The super was astir in the first gray of the morning.

"With an early start, Siwash," he said to Traill, "we should be out and back by shortly after noon—unless the horses fail us. That animal of yours, now, has he plenty of endurance? He looks to be desert bred."

"He'll stay with your buckskin, Jud," asserted Traill, "and when Maverick peters out, we'll both be afoot."

"Buckskin is a camel," remarked Frawley; "he'll travel farther on one good drink than any other horse I ever saw."

The two men gave hasty attention to their cold rations. The buckled belts with their swinging holsters were hung at the saddle horns since wearing the belts as the heat of the day advanced would have been an added discomfort. Blankets were left at the water hole. If another night should find them in the Jornada, with no water at the place described by Sonora Slim, the horses, good as they might be, would be useless; and blankets, for Frawley and Traill, would be of little aid in their extremity.

As the two riders took off, on their left the sun shot up out of the east like a red ball. Ahead of them stretched the Jornada, shadeless, waterless, a plateau a hundred miles across, bleak as the

steppes of northern Asia. Soap weed and bony cactus writhed in the lavalike shale, pallid as skeletons. It was a place of lizards and horned toads, with no other living thing in the deathly waste except these riders and their mounts—and possibly the supposed gold thief somewhere in the hazy distance.

"Without water at that place Slim mentioned," observed Frawley, "we'll find Traill and his sorrel done for—Traill beyond talking."

"More'n likely," agreed Traill.

If he could take comfort at another's misfortunes, such a fate for Siwash Brezee would diminish his own difficulties—he could still be Siwash, and Siwash could still be Traill. But to what end? Clearing the name of Rufus seemed further away than ever.

CHAPTER XV.

JORNADA DEL MUERTO.

THERE was a threat in the still air and growing heat of the forenoon; a sullen foreboding that came to the two in the Jornada like a grim challenge. Traill and Frawley were both weather-wise and could read the "signs." Every mile from the water hole might easily be a mile nearer destruction for, with that hint of calamity in the sky, the dangers of the super's dash southward had multiplied incredibly.

"She's fixin' for a blow, Jud," suggested Traill.

The sun was a mere splotch of red, a brazen shield set in a growing haze. Frawley flashed a look skyward and gave a reckless laugh.

"Let 'er blow," he answered; "let all the dust of the Jornada shake itself loose and blow with it. What does it all matter if I get Traill?"

There was a depth of animosity, a rabid ferocity in those final words that seemed incongruous to Traill. For once, at least, the super had betrayed his swirling emotions.

"Y'u don't reckon he'll wait for y'u at that old water hole if there ain't no water there, do y'u?"

"Lacking water, he'll have to wait. The sorrel was nearly knocked out when Sonora Slim saw the brute."

"Why'n blazes is he makin' for Mexico?" puzzled Traill; "seems like he'd have equal chances this side o' the border."

"We don't know all he's putting behind him, Siwash," countered Frawley; "that amalgam stealing may be the least of it."

Once more silence fell between the two; silence broken only by the hard breathing of the horses, a pad of hoofs, a creaking of leather well dusted with flying sand. The haze thickened; but, although the sun became an indistinct blur just short of the zenith, the haze seemed to intensify rather than diminish its heat.

It was becoming increasingly hard to follow the landmarks described by Sonora Slim; but Frawley, by a sort of sixth sense, seemed to pick them out and to keep the course. He showed a familiarity with the Jornada that surprised Traill.

"The old Spaniards," said the super, wiping the alkali from his eyes and lips, "called this the Desert of Death."

"I reckon they knowed a thing or two," commented Traill.

"Scared, Siwash? Do you think we're getting into something we can't get out of?"

Traill laughed. The dust was in his throat and nostrils, and the laugh was more an ill-omened croak than a suggestion of mirth.

"Ye're takin' a long chance to come up with Traill, strikes me; but y'u'll notice I'm standin' by."

"That's you, Siwash. I'll have to hand Cogswell a vote of thanks for sending me a two-fisted dare-devil. See that notched 'rise' straight ahead?"

Traill saw it dimly, a low hill cleft in twain, its two steep edges falling wide apart.

"Well, that's where Slim's unreliable water hole ought to be," Frawley continued. "If we find *agua* it will be a fine thing for the broncs."

"Supposin', jest supposin', the man we want ain't there?"

"But the man I want will be there—I *know it!* How far are we from the Jornada northern edge?"

"Miles, more miles than it's pleasant to think about, Jud."

They came to the notched rise, but in the gap between the broken halves of the blistered hill there may have been water some time. However, there was none now. A little, semi-circular area as dusty and dry as any other part of the Jornada met the eyes of the two riders. The surrounding walls were a dozen feet high, and sheer up and down. Frawley rode into the flat basin, forced his horse to the farthest wall and then drew rein.

"Can't see a sign of any hombre or caballo, Jud," said Traill huskily.

Frawley dropped his reins. "We'll get down and look," he announced. "They may be holed away in some of the angles or overhangs of the bluffs. You take the left, Siwash, and I'll bush-whack on the right. Don't forget your guns. Traill, they say, is quick on the draw and a big handful anyway you take him."

Traill's belt buckle was hot to his fingers as he pulled up the strap and settled it about his waist. Leaving Maverick, he moved to the steep wall on his left. It was weathered and broken, and he peered into niches which centuries of flying sand had gophered from the soft rock.

"Nary a sign of any livin' thing, Jud!" he called.

"Very well," came to him from the distance; "mosey this way, Siwash. I've got a surprise for you."

Trall faced the center of the basin, retraced his steps and then came to an abrupt halt. Frawley was in his saddle. He had picked up the trailing reins of Maverick and was clutching them in his left hand. In his right hand he held a six-gun, and the point was leveled at Trall.

"Stand!" yelled the super; "right where you are! Another inch in my direction and I'll drop you in your tracks."

"What's the idee, Jud?" inquired Trall.

"The idea is, Siwash, that this little play has gone the limit. I'm leaving you here afoot, and your horse, canteens and grub go back with me to the water hole at the edge of the Jornada."

Trall's hand flashed downward; it lifted with one of his own guns.

"Meanin'," he said, "that you and me are to shoot it out?"

"Break that gun, you poor sap, and take a look at the cylinder."

Trall peered into the cylinder along the barrel. He revolved the cylinder with a finger. There was no need of breaking the piece to discover that there was not a single cartridge in the cylinder.

"T'other 'un the same as this?" he inquired, calmly.

"Of course! Do you think I'd miss a bet like that?"

"However did y'u do it, Jud?" inquired Trall, slipping the useless gun back into its holster.

"Last night," explained Frawley. "I angled for your belt with an ocotilla pole and emptied your guns."

Trall looked around him at the bluffs of the dry well.

"I told you Trall would be here," went on the super, "and here he is and here he's going to stay. You walked into this little trap, Red, without making me any trouble at all. Remember me to your friend, McGowan. So you really thought you could put something

over on me, eh? For once, Trall was wide of his trail."

CHAPTER XVI.

HIS LAST CHANCE.

A BLAST of hot wind assailed the Jornada. Dust arose from it like smoke, whirling high and far, and eddying in thickening clouds downward and into the scoriated basin. Trall lifted the knotted handkerchief at his throat to protect his nose and lips.

His thoughts were circling about this capable super from the Rey Niño Mine, analyzing his motives and paying tribute to his ability as an actor.

"Siwash Brezee made for the mine, after all, eh?" he inquired.

"He blew in shortly after I sent you to Noches," returned Frawley. "It was a remarkable yarn he had for me, Trall. Pete Early failed to coöperate with you properly. Turley reports that Pete was in town. He told you about Brezee, of course."

"Of course."

"And when I told you that fiction about Sonora Slim, you imagined that Red Brezee was hiking for Mexico, right through the heart of the Jornada. Didn't you?"

"You've nicked it, Frawley."

"That's what I thought you'd do. Do you want to tell me who was in with you on this steal at the Rey Niño? You and McGowan must have had help."

Even in that tragic moment Trall found something humorous in Frawley's attempt to secure information about the mill thieves.

"I'm not saying a word, Frawley," Trall told him.

With a roar, the blast hurled a dense cloud of dust into the basin—the backwash of air from the tumultuous swirl over the bluffs. Everything in the basin was blotted out for the moment; and then, when the thick blanket suddenly lifted, Trall was not to be seen. He

had vanished from the spot where he had been standing under the menace of the super's gun.

Where had he gone? Frawley did not know, and he was taking no chances with a man of Traill's reputation. He turned his horse toward the notched opening in the bluff. Both Buckskin and Maverick were restless, and gave the super some trouble; but he tamed Buckskin with the spurs, clung to the led horse, and forced his way back toward the roaring Jornada.

Traill, appraising the bluffs a moment before, had realized that he had one chance, one last chance to turn the tables on Frawley. Under cover of the blanket of sand, he rushed blindly at the wall on the left, groped his way up its steep side by availing himself of the niches he had previously noted, and came to the crest of a ledge. While the dust was settling in the basin, he crawled along the ledge until he reached a point above Frawley and between him and the way to the open desert.

His one hope now was that the super, with his restive horses, would pass close to the left wall. This, precisely, is what happened. At the moment the super came under the ledge, Traill leaped.

The distance from the ledge to the man on the horse was not much of a fall in itself, but the shock was sufficient to tumble Frawley out of his saddle. With frenzied snorts the horses raced on and away, leaving Traill and the super rolling at handgrips in the basin's bed.

Both men were partly stunned, and it was only by luck that they were spared by the flying hoofs.

"Here's something else again, Frawley," puffed Traill, reaching for the gun that the super had dropped. "The boot's on the other foot."

A savage oath leaped from Frawley's lips. He fought like a madman, and was brought to reason only when the muzzle of his own gun touched his chest.

"Steady!" ordered Traill. "You know whether or not this gun of yours is in working order. Here we are, Frawley, in the middle of the Jornada—and both of us are afoot."

Traill took possession of the other revolver at the super's belt.

"Under the lee of the bluffs," he went on, "we can weather this sand-storm. You had your nerve to try for a get-away in the face of it. Try and be sensible, can't you?"

Traill drew himself to the foot of the left-hand wall, and sat there, watching Frawley over his lifted knees. At that instant he saw something else—a canteen on the ground, evidently dropped from one of the saddles when the horses had plunged away. He reached out for the strap and hauled the canteen close.

"Give me that!" gasped Frawley.

"No," said Traill; "I'm going to use this canteen of water to gamble with, Frawley. Get over here, close to the foot of the bluff. We're going to be pretty thirsty, you and I, and hungry too before we're out of this."

Frawley crawled to the base of the wall and settled himself within arm's reach of Traill. Removing his coat, he bundled his head in it and bowed in the teeth of the eddying sand.

Overhead, the sky was obscured as by a whirling gray curtain. The smashing dirge of the wind was like a requiem. How long the uproar lasted the two in the basin could not know. In their stifling discomfort, the minutes dragged like so many hours.

But, by degrees, the storm lessened, the sky cleared and the dust in the basin settled. Frawley cast aside his coat, and the two men stared at each other with bloodshot eyes, their faces streaked with a grime of sand and sweat.

"How are you planning to gamble with that canteen of water?" demanded Frawley huskily.

"You know that old saying, Frawley, that 'truth, crushed to earth, will rise

again?" answered Traill. "When you make a few revelations regarding the thefts at the Rey Niño mill you're going to have water—and not before."

"Why, you fool," cried the super, "what chance have we got of getting clear of the Jornada, with our horses gone? That supply of water wouldn't see us halfway to the water hole we stopped at last night. We're done for, both of us."

"Possibly," agreed Traill calmly, "and possibly not. Do you see that big Sahuara cactus on the crest of the right-hand bluff?"

"What's that got to do with it?" croaked the super.

"When I touch a match to the bark of that cactus," explained Traill, "there'll be a rescue."

"You've framed something on me?" demanded the super.

"I made preparations, that's all. When you called me to Pima Pass I had already talked with Pete Early. Of course, I didn't know what you had up your sleeve, but it seemed wise to me to throw an anchor to windward. But don't make any mistake, Frawley," he finished sternly; "there'll be no smoke signals until you come across with what I want to know—no water, no rescue. Get that straight."

"Then," answered Frawley, with a scowl, "we'll sit here till crack of doom. What revelations do you think I have to make?"

"That's up to you," said Traill; "I'm only guessing, and you know the facts."

CHAPTER XVII.

A TEST OF ENDURANCE.

THE sun went down, that afternoon, in a fiery blaze. Traill and Frawley, still crouched at the foot of the wall, kept close watch of each other. The advantage was all with Traill, since he had the loaded guns and the canteen of water.

In its age-old history, the deadly waterless Jornada had been the scene of innumerable struggles for life. The bleak plateau is peopled with the specters of men and animals who fought the desert's thirst, pursued its mirages, and finally dropped in their tracks and died.

The Apache, in old times, harried the waste in his scalp hunting. For him the Jornada was a great torture chamber, lending to his fiendish ingenuity the thumb-screws of thirst and the rack of pitiless heat. Yet never, in all its history, had that stretch of desert witnessed a stranger drama than the one now being enacted.

The fate Frawley had planned for Traill he was now confronting himself. The unforeseen sandstorm had worked its will with both men, helping Traill and baffling the murderously scheming super. In the end, the storm had trapped them both.

Traill had possession of the canteen. He could have assuaged his own thirst, but in his fight for justice he chose to place himself on a common ground with Frawley. Perhaps he wished to make a test of his own endurance, to decide whether the hardihood of his old Cochise days had been lost in the creature comforts of Trinidad. He would match hardship for hardship with Frawley, and allow the better man to win.

He had wondered at the superintendent's vindictiveness in the matter of the unknown Traill. It was so deep, so relentless that the mere hunt for a supposed amalgam thief did not explain it. The underlying cause must have been something else, something vital to Frawley himself.

Ever since the start from the water hole at the edge of the desert Traill had been puzzling over this fact. Frawley's treachery had yielded a theory of guilt, and with that theory and the canteen of water Traill was now gambling with death for the good name of Rufus McGowan.

Frawley was rolling a hot pebble under his tongue as a relief to the maddening thirst that racked his body. He spat out the pebble and turned on his captor.

"When you fire the Sahuara," he demanded, "who on earth is to come to the rescue?"

"Pete Early," said Traill. "My last word to him was to trail me, and then to stand by until he saw the smoke signal. Not under any circumstances was he to come until he saw it; but, when he did see it, he was to lose no time."

"Pete, 'Mañana Pete!'" jeered the croaking voice of Frawley. "Ten to one, Traill, he'll serve you no better now than he did with Siwash Brezee. Ten to one the dangers of the Jornada held him back."

"If that is true, then so much the worse for us."

"Why torture ourselves when the finish is as certain as fate? I'll draw straws with you, I'll fight with you hand to hand, for a pull at that canteen."

"My price for a drink is a confession from you," Traill answered with finality. "Pay the price, Frawley, or go thirsty and die. You——"

With a yell of fury, the superintendent hurled himself at Traill. He was met with a blow that staggered him, and he resumed his place raving.

The night came on, but there could be no sleep for either of the two. Chilled to the marrow, they crouched at the foot of the wall watching each other with alert and baleful eyes.

Frawley got to his feet and walked back and forth to keep his blood circulating. His beat carried him farther and farther from Traill, and presently he broke away and ran toward the notch and the level desert.

Traill made no attempt to interfere with him, but remained where he was and patiently waited. A rock tumbled from the ledge overhead, missing Traill

by inches. He picked up the canteen and moved away from the wall.

"Any more of that," he called to the shadow of the ledge, "and I'll open fire. You've had your chance at me, Frawley, and it was your last one. I am now having my last chance at you."

The canteen was the lure that brought the superintendent back to his captor. He could be heard scrambling down the wall, and could be seen in the half-dark staggering into the basin.

"Turley gave me my first line on you," muttered the super. "You have tricks at rough and tumble which they still talk about in Cochise."

"But you couldn't believe Turley, eh?" said Traill. "In spite of what he said, you sent me to Noches to get Traill."

"I thought the fool was manufacturing an alibi for himself. It was only when Brezee arrived, that I saw this thing as it was."

Frawley straightened himself on the hard rocks and slept, or pretended to sleep. There was no drowsiness in Traill. He continued as he was, wide-eyed and vigilant, a gun in each fist and the canteen under his knees.

So the night passed and another dawn came on. With blurred eyes, captor and captive watched the sun shake out the banners of day and climb into the eastern sky. Frawley, with a struggle, lifted himself from the rocks. One look into the drawn, relentless face of Traill and his head slumped down between his shoulders.

"Once," said Traill, "I had a pard, as square a man as ever trod the turf. We prospected all over the southern country. He pried me clear of a rockfall in Topolobampo Canyon; and I saved him during a cloudburst in Cimiroon Gulch. Do you suppose, for one moment, I could believe Rufe McGowan dropped over a cliff while robbing your mill? I came on here to prove that slander a lie."

"He had a bag of amalgam there at the foot of the cliff," shouted the super in a frenzy; "and there was more in his house in Noches!"

"That's the evidence, Frawley; it does not prove him a thief, but the victim of the real thieves. It was not an attack of conscience that caused him to write my name in the sand; it was not a revelation of his confederate in the thieving; it was a silent call for me, his old pard, to come on here and see that he received justice. You said, the other day, that when a man is close to Kingdom Come his conscience gets to work. Aren't you near enough to the Long Trail to come across with the truth? If not, we'll continue to wait."

Frawley flung out his arms wildly, helplessly, and babbled a torrent of oaths. No longer was he the sphinx, the self-contained, coolly calculating man of the tough mining camp. The demon of thirst was getting the better of him.

"We'll wait," continued Traill. "The water is here, and some of it is yours whenever you pay the price."

Once more the heat began. Slowly the basin began to bake in the sun's rays.

"Oh, I can't stand this!" moaned Frawley. "You devil, you! What is it you want to know?"

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE SUPER "COMES THROUGH."

AN exultant gleam flashed in Traill's eyes. From his pockets he produced an old letter and a fountain pen; and then he prepared to write, using the flat side of the canteen for a writing pad. In his left hand he continued to hold one of Frawley's six-guns.

"Who threw McGowan over the Boladero Cliffs, Frawley?" Thus Traill, turning the blank side of the old letter and holding the pen poised, began his cross-examination.

The super moistened his dry, cracked lips with his tongue. His hungry eyes were on the canteen, glued to it as by a hypnotic spell.

"No one." His voice was strained, unnatural; now it was throaty and full, and now it broke in a weird falsetto. "He wasn't thrown over the cliff—he fell."

"How? Give me the details—everything you know and failed to tell at the inquest."

Frawley swallowed hard. "'Buck' Jadwin, the day amalgamator, had to dress down the plates every hour while the mill was running on the bonanza ore; the rest of the time he had to stand over them constantly with a bottle of 'quick,' the gold was coming so fast through the sieves. The amalgam from the day run he divided in half, sacked one half and turned the other half over to Sampson, the assayer."

Traill's pen was traveling rapidly over the paper. In his physical condition he found writing strangely difficult, but nerved himself to the work. The overheated pen spilled its ink too rapidly, blotting the paper here and there and staining his fingers.

"What did Buck Jadwin do with the half of the amalgam he did not turn over to the assayer?"

"He hid it back of the mill, under the sump tank of the cyanide plant."

"What became of it after that?"

"I stole down to the sump tank at dead of night, carried the bag to Boladero Cliffs and dropped it down to Dan Rackley."

"D. W. Rackley, who owns the music store in Buenas Noches?"

"Yes. Traill" broke off Frawley, "I can't talk without a drink; my throat is raw and inflamed, and every word is torture. Just a swallow of that water! I'll talk, I'll come through, but——"

"Not a drop, Frawley," was the relentless answer, "until you're done. Why was Rackley in on this?"

"He has a played-out claim at Ojo Caliente; when we went into this together, he gave out that he had struck good ore on the claim. He bought a second-hand, five-stamp mill and run it on country rock. The amalgam from Rey Niño he retorted and ran into bars, passing it off as Ojo Caliente bullion."

This was crafty, good scheming, just the sort of work a capable man would turn his hand to in covering bare-faced theft.

"Buck Jadwin held out the bullion, hid it under the sump tank, and you removed it secretly by night and dropped it over the cliff into the waiting hands of Rackley," said Traill; "then he carried it to Ojo Caliente, retorted and ran it into bars and sold the gold for your joint account. I warn you, Frawley, that all you say will be used against you. Is this the truth? And do you want to go on?"

The super caught at his throat with his hands. "I've got to go on," he mumbled. "My Heaven, I've got to have water! I'm—I'm dying. Go on—hurry."

"Now" resumed Traill, "about McGowan."

"He saw me at the sump tank, that last night. He left the mill and followed me to the brink of the cliffs. There he called me a thief—he had the goods on me. Neither of us were armed. We came together in a clinch, we struggled back and forth—McGowan slipped, fell, and went down. The bag of amalgam dropped with him."

"And Rackley; what about Rackley?"

"He was yellow, and he made a run of it when he saw McGowan and me wrestling above him on the brink. That's all, Traill, and it's straight. Now the water, the water!"

"Presently. The only way you could save yourself was by putting McGowan under suspicion. What about the amalgam in the dresser drawer at McGowan's house?"

"Rackley sneaked that in. He had as much to lose as I had, and he was scared."

"Has all the stolen amalgam been disposed of?"

"None of it has been disposed of for three weeks. After the McGowan affair, Rackley shut down his five-stamp mill and never went near Ojo Caliente."

"There's a lot of this Rey Niño amalgam at Ojo Caliente?"

"Yes, a lot of it."

"Where?"

"Under the plank floor of Rackley's mill, cached by the battery blocks."

"And this is the whole truth?"

"Isn't it enough?"

"Sign there, Frawley," instructed Traill, offering him pen and paper.

"Sign? I can't sign. Look at my hands?"

The super raised his hands and they were quivering as with a palsy.

"You'll have to."

Frawley reached for the pen and paper. "Give me the canteen to write on," he begged.

"Use a flat stone—the one at your side will do. You haven't paid for the canteen yet."

Frawley, swaying where he sat, slumped over the flat stone and traced his signature at the bottom of the confession.

The long agony was over. A breath of relief, like a sob was torn from Traill's lips. He uncapped the canteen and took a swallow of the tepid water. It touched his inflamed throat like fire, but the response of his tortured body to the draft was instant. He felt renewed strength in every muscle. Getting to his feet, he stepped to Frawley's side, took the paper and the pen and placed the canteen in his shaking hands. The super threw back his head, the canteen at his lips.

"Not too much—at first!" warned Traill, snatching the canteen away from him. "I'll give you more before long."

He recapped the canteen, took it over his shoulder and started across the basin toward the opposite wall. Frawley watched his struggle from niche to niche up the sheer slope. If he should fall—

But Traill did not fall. He drew himself over the brink, knelt beside the Sahuara and groped for matches.

Presently a flame flickered at the base of the cactus, fed on the resinous bark and leaped with a roar to the very top of the huge bole. A plume of smoke rose straight upward in the still air.

CHAPTER XIX.

"POCO TIEMPO" BECOMES "PRONTO."

TOGETHER they waited at the foot of the bluff, Red the Sudden in what he ever afterward called the greatest triumph of his career, and Frawley, the unmasked, the crook, and the traitor; they waited, Traill still in possession of the revolvers but with the canteen as common property between himself and the super.

The water was life to them, for they had both been at the breaking point, at the pass where pleasant mirages would soon have appeared cheating them with false hopes and spelling the end of all things.

The question now resolved itself into one of fidelity on the part of Pete Early. He had been cast by Traill for no easy rôle. Shadowing two men into the Jornada, weathering a sandstorm in the open, lying low among the sand heaps of that blighted wilderness and waiting for a smoke signal.

Was Mañana Pete equal to it? Had he successfully accomplished his part, almost as difficult as the business Traill had taken upon his own shoulders?

Traill had a way of trusting his pard. Twice he had placed his liberty and life in Early's hands. Once Early had failed him and given Frawley material for that desert trap; now that the trap had been sprung, with both Traill and Frawley

caught in it and Traill working out a subtle scheme of justice for McGowan, *now* was Early to fail his pard a second time, cheat justice and blot Gordon Traill's name from the scroll of life?

There was anxiety in the face of Traill as his gaze shifted from the smoking Sahuara to the open desert. The giant cactus was quickly consumed. It's longitudinal ribs, bared by the fire, lifted themselves ghostlike on the opposite "rise." Only a trickle of smoke was being wafted upward. As yet no Early, no rescue. Frawley gave a jeering laugh. With returning strength, something of his reckless assurance had also returned to him.

"Mañana Pete is running true to form, Traill," said he. "You win your gamble, but what good will it do you, or anybody else? When the water is gone we'll die here, just you and I, two more victims of the Jornada. Somebody, some time *maybe*, will find us at this tricky water hole, two heaps of bleached bones—all that's left of two men who tried, each in his own way and *failed*."

"There's the Grand Assize," returned Traill solemnly, "and I am well content to hold the brief in my own case."

"After me," growled Frawley, with a scowl, "the deluge. I don't believe in your Grand Assize. It's the courts here below that concern me most. I played the game well and had Old Boliver completely fooled. If I pass out, it will not be under a cloud. Before we're found, that precious paper of yours will have become the sport of the winds, and have traveled into Sonora, it may be, where little is made of such things. I'm content to——"

"Save your breath," cut in Traill; "here comes Early."

There was a dust cloud to the south, rapidly approaching. In due course, Early broke out of the cloud, towing a led horse and riding at speed. And behind him came another rider, also with a led horse. Frawley swore under

his breath. A hard destiny was bearing down on him.

"Mañana Pete has your Maverick horse," muttered the super, "and the other rider has my Buckskin! Luck seems to be breaking well for you, Traill. And that—that second rider," Frawley broke off wondering, "is Jessup!"

"Yes" assented Traill. "I told Pete he'd better bring the deputy. If anything went wrong with me I was sure he'd be needed."

He got to his feet and waved his hat. Early and Jessup, with their led horses, galloped into the basin and pulled to a halt.

"Once, anyway, old-timer," whooped Early, "Poco Tiempo was what y'u might call 'Pronto.' How about it? Am I right?"

He tumbled out of his saddle and grabbed his friend with both hands.

"Jessup," called Frawley, pointing to Traill, "put the handcuffs on that man! He's the ringleader of the amalgam thieves, and I've nearly croaked in getting hands on him."

The deputy sheriff, dusty but determined, advanced with a pair of steel bracelets.

"Read this, Jessup, before you help Frawley make good on his bluff," spoke up Traill, passing the confession to the county official.

A derisive bleat escaped Early.

"Why, I've knowed Traill for some sort of a while" he whooped, "and he never stole a thing in his hull life. He told me to bring y'u, Jessup——"

"Never mind," interrupted Jessup; "is this your signature, Frawley?" he demanded.

"Yes, but——"

"Is this the truth, then?" proceeded Jessup.

"I signed that under duress," cried Frawley. "Traill had all the guns and our only canteen of water. I'd have signed any old thing to get at that can-

teen. That's a romance, that paper in your hands, Jessup."

The deputy sheriff turned his eyes on Traill. "Did you force Frawley to sign this?" he asked.

"Do you think I could get it from him in any other way, Jessup?" said Traill quietly.

"You're a wonder to get it at all. The truth or falsity of the confession can easily be proved. We have Buck Jadwin and Rackley to work on. Rackley's Ojo Caliente claim has turned out a producer lately, so that part is plausible enough. Now if we can find amalgam cached under the floor of his old five-stamp mill, Frawley's talk of duress won't get him anywhere. Put out your hands, Frawley," he added. "I must admit that you are a surprise to me. I never dreamed that Rey Niño affair would come to this."

The metallic snap echoed in the still air.

"Well, anyhow," requested Frawley wearily, "get me out of this infernal Jornada."

"Y'u can bet we won't linger!" put in Early. "Me, fer instance, I've had plumb sufficient o' this Jornada. While waitin' fer smoke signals, Jessup and me took turns hustlin' back to the water hole fer *agua*. Honest Gordon, I was about ready to throw up my hands when I seen yer smoke. How'd y'u lose Maverick and the buckskin? I snared 'em last night on one o' my trips to the water hole."

"This is no place to palaver," remarked Jessup. "Climb up, Frawley, and we'll hustle back to a more comfortable section."

"Any grub left in those bags, Jessup?" inquired the super. "I'm starving."

Traill and Frawley ate as they rode. The Jornada, cheated of its prey, turned more kindly. A breeze from the north arose and fanned the travelers as they galloped.

"Tell me about this, Traill," said Jessup, still leading the buckskin now with the manacled super in the saddle.

CHAPTER XX.

SUDDEN AS USUAL.

EARLY found his sorrel in the corral at Rey Niño. He dropped in on the mining camp unheralded, commissioned by Jessup to lay hands on Siwash Brezee and bring him to Noches. Brezee, however, was not in evidence; he had fled, and by some stroke of luck had left the sorrel behind him. Craddock, in charge since Frawley had left, had no idea what had become of the red-haired bandit.

Traill and Jessup, after secretly conducting Frawley to the county calabozo, waited on Rackley. The miserly seller of pianos had no wind of recent events and was caught at a disadvantage. He was taken in the official flivver to Ojo Caliente, the five-stamp mill was searched, and a barrel of amalgam was found under the floor by the battery blocks.

So perished Rackley's hopes of immunity, and Frawley's story that his confession was a pure romance.

Buck Jadwin, on the occasion of Early's visit to the Rey Niño camp, had taken a lay-off, and was supposed to be in Buenas Noches. But he was not in Noches, and he never returned to the camp. Desert gossip had it that he had joined hands with Brezee, and that both had designs on the amalgam in Rackley's mill. If that theory was correct, then only the quick action of Traill and Jessup saved the gold.

Jessup regretted the escape of Brezee and Jadwin, particularly Jadwin. The testimony of the day amalgamator would have helped the case against Frawley. Not that any more help was really needed, but no law officer cares to see an offender dodge his legal responsibilities.

Boliver, communicated with by telegraph, came personally to Buenas Noches. There was blood in the mine-owner's eye.

"I'll put Frawley through for this if it's the last thing I ever do," he declared. "The treacherous coyote had me buffaloed, right from the start. He ought to swing for what happened to McGowan."

However, the super did not "swing." He and Rackley "went up," as the saying is, for a long stretch, and Craddock stepped into his shoes at the Rey Niño.

Best of all, every one in Buenas Noches turned to Kitty McGowan as they had previously turned away from her. But that little school-teacher held her head high, and showed an injured dignity coupled with a forgiving disposition that rejoiced the heart of Traill.

The school board waited on her in a body. As the president of the board frankly admitted, they "had come to eat crow," and they did it handsomely. They wanted her back in the same old schoolroom at an enhanced salary. And Kitty said she would think it over and give her decision later.

"What do you think about it, Gordon?" she asked.

Traill was remaining two weeks in Buenas Noches, after escaping the desert trap, and he was daily at the old home of his friend, Rufus. The girl asked this question on a day when she and Traill had just returned from the forlorn little cemetery where Kitty had dropped tears, and Traill had placed a wreath, on the new mound with its new monument. The monument was Traill's doing, and much of his heart lay under it.

"You can't very well teach the Noches school, Kitty," said Traill, "if you're not going to stay in the town. Can you?"

Her eyes widened in surprise.

"But I've got to stay here, Gordon," she answered. "This little home, that

claim of mine in which you have become a partner, and this position as teacher are all I have in the world." She sighed. "Because of your wonderful help, my position now is vastly different than it was. The black suspicions have passed. Brother Rufe is no longer the amalgam thief, but the man who lost his life trying to protect the property with which he was intrusted. Everybody is kind to me."

"They ought to be," averred Traill; "they ought never to have been anything else. But you can't keep on burying yourself here."

"What else is there for me to do?"

"Listen," said Traill. "Years ago, when Rufe and I were prospecting together, we had a lot of talk about his kid sister. He showed me your photograph, and after I pulled him out of the flood in Cimiroom Gulch he asked me if he had anything that I wanted. 'You have,' I told him; 'Kitty's photograph.'"

"I can see him this minute, *mujercita*, just as I saw him then," Traill went on. "He turned on me with his face shining, as it always shone when he was pleased, and smiled. 'Gordon,' he said, 'that photo is yours. I can get another for myself. And I'll tell you something else, man to man,' he went on. 'It would be the happiest day of my life if, some day, my red-haired pard could meet Kitty, and know her as I know her. A girl in a million, Gordon. After you meet her, I know what will happen. And it's the one thing I want to happen.'"

Kitty flushed, looked away, then turned her inquiring eyes full on Traill.

"What do you suppose he meant?" she asked.

Traill laughed softly. "Pete Early will tell you, Kitty, that I'm a sudden sort of person," he said. "That means, I suppose, that I am a man of quick judgment and ready resourcefulness. I hope it stands for that, anyhow. That

photograph of yours is in my lonely bachelor quarters in Trinidad, and it has been there ever since I took over that smelter. You know, I fell in love with that photograph from the very first; and now that I have met you, I have transferred my affections from the cabinet photo to its original. No, you can't stay here in Buenas Noches. You see, I want you to go back to Trinidad with me. Will you—as Mrs. Gordon Traill?"

Then it was that Kitty produced, from somewhere about the house, a frontier tin type, a picture of Traill.

"Rufus sent me that, Gordon," she revealed, "soon after he gave you my picture, I imagine. And—I—I— Well, you were always my knight, sworn friend of my brother. I told you——"

When Pete Early heard the news, he gave one of his famous bleats, snatched off his hat, and kicked it joyously across the room.

"Sudden, says you?" he whooped; "say, that Red the Sudden has sure out-did himself. Meet her to-day and marry her to-morrow! Can y'u beat it for fast work? Now I got a place to put up when I take a trip to Trinidad!"

What the Pup Was Good For

A MAN had been boring his friend with a long-winded account of his dog's virtues, when suddenly he espied a cat.

"Chase him!" he said to the pup.

The dog yawned, looked up at his master with a bored expression, and sat down and scratched one ear reflectively.

Red of face, the owner urged the dog to move, without success. Finally, turning to his friend, he said in desperation:

"Now what do you make of a dog like that?"

"Sausages," murmured his friend, gravely.



Red Boy-

By
Reg Dinsmore-

(COMPLETE IN THIS ISSUE)

CHAPTER I.

"A DOG'S LIFE."

LIN HOLT, from where he was perched in the scraggy limbs of an apple tree beside the road, watched a long shiny car slide to a stop beneath him. He reached for another apple, broke the stem with a careful pull and dropped the apple in the padded half-bushel basket that hung suspended by a wire hook from a near-by limb.

"Bird hunters," he muttered to himself. "I'd forgotten that to-day's the first day of open season. Never used to fergit them things when old Trim was alive. He wouldn't let me fergit. Seemed ter know jest as well as anybody when 'twas time ter get out the old brush gun. What a dog!"

A head pushed out of a window of the car below. A red face twisted upward to gaze at the old man in the tree.

"Hey, Hiram!" called the man in the car. "Any woodcock in that alder run down there?"

Now Lin Holt knew perfectly well that two broods of woodcock had been hatched and raised in the tangled alders of his pasture run. Many times in the

spring nights he had awoke to hear the *p-e-ent, p-e-ent*, mating call of the birds drifting up across the greenening ridges. He had also found much quiet enjoyment in sitting with his after-supper pipe at the edge of the covert and watching the two old bulged-eyed cocks as they performed their aërial antics in the soft spring twilight.

Later, along in July, he had flushed young birds evening after evening when driving his cows to the barn. But Lin didn't fancy being called "Hiram." Lin was sixty-five and never before had any one called him that.

"Waal," he drawled, "seems like I did see a bird hammerin' that ole hemlock stub over there this mornin'."

Raucous laughter from the car. Insulting laughter.

"Listen ter that, will yer, Ed?" guffawed the red-faced driver. "The old geezer thinks we're huntin' *woodpeckers*! Wow, that's rich! Well, those alders look good ter me—let's try 'em."

The driver and another man got out of the car, took their guns from the cases and snapped them together. Then the red-faced one opened a rear door, laid hold of a coil of small rope, and savagely hauled a dog from the car.

The dog, a young Irish setter, hit the ground in a sprawl of legs, rolled over on his back and waved supplicating paws in the air. He of the red face drove a merciless toe into the pup's ribs.

"Get onter yer feet, yer worthless mutt!" he snarled. "Yer act the way yer did in that last covert and I'll lift off the top of yer head with a charge of shot. Get inter heel now and come along!"

Lin Holt found his fingers sinking into the apple he held in his hand. He loved dogs, especially setters, and old bird hunter that he was, it aroused his gorge to see a dog abused. But he said nothing and watched the two men and the red pup climb the old stone wall.

Down across the hard-hack grown pasture went the trio, the pup trailing dejectedly at the heels of his tyrannical master. Slap up to the edge of the covert walked the two men, and then Lin, from his perch in the apple tree, saw the silky ears of the pup lift a trifle, saw him swing his nose into the faint breeze that was blowing across the alders, then stiffen to a point.

"B'gravey!" ejaculated the old man, "that red pup's got a nose."

But Lin had little time to admire the pup's point for as the man ahead felt the rope tighten he gave it a mighty yank, throwing the pup off his feet and piling him on his head in the hard-hack bushes.

"Hang back, will yer, yer contrary devil?" he yelled without looking around. "If this rope holds I'll teach yer better'n that!"

The pup was on his feet again and still that electrifying scent was in his wide nostrils. He braced his forefeet, trying mightily to obey the age-old instinct that had come down to him through a long line of field-trial winners, but without avail. The man ahead strode on, yanking the rope cruelly with

each step. Lin watching nearly choked with indignation.

With a whirl of wings a woodcock flushed in the edge of the alders almost under the hunters' feet, whistled merrily, topped the brush and slanted away to the other side of the strip. The hunters, unprepared, fumbled their guns clumsily, drove two ineffective charges after the bird and swore.

"Great dog you've got there, Hahn," chided Ed, the one in the crazy-colored sweater. "Great dog! Draggin' along behind like a sulky hog, when he ought ter been out front pointin' that bird for us."

The pride of the red-faced one was injured and so of course it was the luckless pup that must pay.

"Out front is right—and that's where he' goin' right now!" Hahn shortened the rope until he could grasp the pup's collar, lifted him bodily, swung him once around his bullet head and sent him spinning twenty feet into the covert, where he struck with a pained yelp.

"Evidently Mr. Redmug has forgotten that he gave that pup orders ter 'heel' when he left the car," growled Lin. "B'gravey, I do wish I was twenty years younger, I'd take a hand with that feller. Yes I would!"

Old Lin's basket filled rather slowly with red-cheeked apples. He was much more interested in the yelling, whistling, brush-thrashing mêlée that was being staged in his pasture run, than he was in apple picking.

The red pup finding himself free of his tormenter and in a covert that was fairly alive with birds, started right in on a hunt of his own. The forty feet of sash cord that he was dragging slowed him considerably, but for all of that he could manage to keep out of the way of the red-faced, yelling fury that pursued him.

The pup wriggled his way through the frost-bitten ferns and underbrush to

the opposite side of the covert, ran into the strong body-scent of birds and froze in another point.

Back in the green tangle he could hear the wrathful calls of Hahn, but for the red pup to heed those frenzied yells and return to his master only meant more beating; and just now, with that hot scent in his nose, he was as powerless to move as though chained to the two-foot elm beside which he stood.

CHAPTER II.

THE DOG AND THE MASTER.

UP and down the covert the two men thrashed, calling, whistling and looking for the lost dog. For a full quarter of an hour Lin Holt listened to the profane search. All at once a yell from the man called Ed.

"Here's the red—over here! Hung up with his rope I guess." A moment's hesitation and then: "No, maybe he's pointin'. Come on over!"

"You bet I'll come over!" grated Hahn. "And when I get there I'll teach that heap of carrion what I mean when I whistle! Point or no point, that dog comes when I call him, or I'll kill him!"

Old Lin climbed slowly down the apple tree. "Maybe I'm old," he muttered, "but if that idiot licks that pup after he's held a point for fifteen minutes, I'll——"

More loud talk from the alders. The voice of Ed:

"Hold it! Hold it! Don't lick him until after we've got this bird. Get ready! All set. There he—goes!"

Lin heard the flutter of wings. A woodcock climbed out through the alder tops. Two shots roared, but the bird kept on. Another report and the bird crumbled and pitched back into the green maze. And then the old man scrambled over the wall and started on a run for the alders, for no old bird hunter can listen unmoved to the ago-

nized crying of a dog that is being beaten for something for which it is not to blame.

Lin lost his old felt hat in the wild scramble across the alder run. Brush rumbled his long white hair. Twigs scratched his anger-whitened face. He was a wild-looking little man indeed when he broke into the glade where the unjust castigation was taking place. Ed of the crazy-colored sweater, who was seated on a cradle knoll complacently smoking a cigarette, saw the old man coming and grinned crookedly. This was going to be good!

"Git offen that pup!" panted Lin, and without waiting for his command to be obeyed drove a horny fist to the ear of Redface.

Bending over the dog, out of balance as he was, the blow, although not of damaging force, toppled Hahn into a brush-filled hollow; and the red pup, crazed by the terrible punishment he had received, but with a spirit that was yet unbroken, followed his tormentor and snapped wickedly at a fat thigh.

Redface howled in pain, regained his feet, kicked the dog into the near-by brush and slashed Lin wickedly with the dog whip.

The searing lash caught the old man fair in the face, raising a white welt from temple to chin, nearly blinding him with pain. Yet he dived straight in and closed with the big man. Ed, from the cradle knoll, howled gleefully.

Upon coming to grips with Hahn, Lin Holt realized instantly his mistake. He was a child in the big man's hands. He felt himself being lifted high in the air and then with a bone-racking crash the ground came suddenly up to meet him. Weak and trembling the old man lay there among the frost-bitten ferns. Above him, with threatening dog whip raised, his heavy face purple with passion, bent Hahn.

"How'd yer like that yer old buttinski? That's my dog! I'll lick hell

outa him any time I happen ter want to. I'll *kill* him if I happen ter feel like it! No old wizzled-up hick's gonna tell me when ter stop either, never fergit it! Now get up and fade outa the picture before I cut that ragged shirt clean offen yer with this whip. Get goin'!"

Lin went. As he limped from the glade the red-faced one called after him:

"Keep yer ears open, yer old scarecrow and ye'll probably hear some more dog music, for I'm gonna make that damned pup retrieve that woodcock if I break every bone in his measly hide!"

Yes, Lin went. And as soon as he was out of sight of the two men he went as fast as his bruised body and breathless lungs would permit. Back across the covert, over the wall, across the orchard and in at the back door of his kitchen. He glanced in the cracked mirror at the fast-purpling welt on his face, caressed it tenderly with gnarled fingers.

"Only once!" he panted. "Hit me jest once with that whip and look what it done. That poor pup's taken fifty of them lashes this morning. I may be old but I ain't done yet, b'gravey!"

He trotted across the room, opened a door and took from a cupboard a beautifully balanced brush gun. He pulled the cover from a box of shells, glanced at them, discarded the box.

"Nines ain't heavy enough," he soliloquized. "Where's them fox loads?"

A short search brought to light some shells loaded with double "B's" and the old man slipped two in the gun, crammed a half a dozen in the pocket of his overalls and scuttled back toward the covert.

"Dead bird, fetch!" yelled the red-faced one.

Crack went the lash cross the pup's satinny coat.

"Go git that *bird*!"

Crack!

Pitiful, strangled howling.

"Hey, big boy," advised Ed of the crazy-colored sweater. "Why don't yer try sayin', '*please* bring me the bird, nice doggie?' Har—har——"

His merriment ceased as a pair of cold rings were suddenly shoved against the back of his neck.

"Drop that gun!" rasped the voice of old Lin Holt.

Ed dropped the gun.

"Unhook that shell belt and drop that too!"

Ed dropped the shell belt.

The red-faced one recovered from his surprise and sprang for his gun that was leaning against a near-by tree.

Lin's twin tubes jerker sidewise, covered him.

"Hayr!" yelled the old man, "yer take another step toward that gun an' I'll make yer look like a sieve! Cut that rope off that dog and then both you cuss-cats walk over and stand by that elm while I get the seed outa yer guns. I don't care so much about the welt yer give me across my old mug, but nobody's comin' inter *my* pasture and massacre a dog jest because the dog happens ter know more'n he does, b'gravey!"

Lin broke the guns of the two men, extracted the shells and flung them far into the brush.

"Dump the shells outa yer pockets," he told Hahn.

The man turned the pockets of his hunting coat wrong side out and Lin, satisfied that his prisoners were harmless, tossed them their empty guns.

"Now git for yer car!" he told them.

As the old man followed them grimly across the covert and up to the road he noticed that the red pup was nowhere in sight.

"Call yer dog," he advised Hahn.

"Damn the dog! You'll pay for this little deal!"

As they climbed the wall and stood by the car old Lin spoke again.

"You're goin' ter get inter that car and pull outa here in a hurry. It's a shame for such as you to have a dog, but he's yours, I suppose, so you'd better call him."

Hahn disgustedly hurled his gun into the back seat and slid under the wheel. He stepped on the starter and the powerful motor under the long hood purred into life. "Didn't I jest tell yer 'damn the dog?'" he growled. "I hope I never see him again! Get in here Ed!"

Lin Holt's eye fell upon something he had not noticed before—a number plate on the car. It was an out-of-State number plate.

"Hold on a minute!" he yelled. "You're out-of-Staters. Where's yer hunting licenses? I'm game warden in this district."

Hahn reached a fat hand through the car window, placed the open palm in the old man's face and shoved him back onto his heels. "By, by, Hiram!" he sneered, and let in the clutch.

CHAPTER III.

A MATTER OF JUSTICE.

THE rear wheels dug into the road-bed, throwing dust and pebbles against Lin Holt's shins. The car shot ahead. The horn shrieked mockingly. The old man, with a savage glare in his gray eyes, swung up his gun and made one of the fastest doubles of his life. Yes sir, he ripped a hole in each of those big rear tires that he could have shoved his fist through.

Lin slipped two more shells into his gun and walked along to where the car had skidded into the ditch. He interrupted the steady flow of lurid profanity that was emanating from the windows with a mild inquiry:

"Aire yer two fellows erbout ready ter show 'Hiram' yer huntin' licenses?"

"How do we know you're a game warden?" inquired Hahn, somewhat

mollified by the frowning twin tubes that were staring him square between the eyes. "Where's yer badge?"

Lin twisted a suspender, displaying his warden's badge pinned on the other side.

Hahn wilted. "We haven't any licenses," he admitted glumly.

"Didn't expect you did have," commented Lin grimly, and stepped on the running board of the car. "Drive down to the four corners, about a mile down the road, and let's see what the justice of the peace will say about it," he directed.

"We'll put on those two spares we've got on the tire rack first."

"You'll do nothing of the kind," growled old Lin. "She'll roll that far on the rims and yer won't be tempted ter try any more flying get-a-ways. Get her rollin'!"

The justice of the peace at the four corners considered the case beyond his jurisdiction. He called the municipal judge at the county seat, ten miles away, only to discover that that august personage was out of the State and would not return for two days. So the two offenders of the game laws were forthwith escorted to the crossroads lockup, their car stored under the old horse shed behind the church and Lin Holt trudged back to his farm.

Lin stopped by the roadside wall and surveyed the pasture for the red pup. He was not in sight. The old man sent a low coaxing whistle down across the alders. There was no response.

"Red Boy, Red Boy, he-e-e-re!" he cajoled softly.

A movement of ferns in the edge of the covert. The gleam of a sienna coat and the head of the pup appeared. He stopped, lifted none too trustful ears and gazed at Lin.

"Better come on up, little feller," coaxed the old man. "I don't wonder

you're afraid of every one in the world after the handling you've been having, but old Lin ain't goin' ter hurt yer none. He-e-e-e-re!"

The red pup refused to come. He shifted uneasily, sounded a plaintive little whine and faded into the alders again.

Old Lin shook his head, carried his gun into the house, came out and taking his scythe and wheelbarrow went into his field to mow a foddering of second-crop clover for his cows. As he swung the scythe into the lush forage he now and then sent a cheery call down to the dog. He talked to him as if the dog could understand every word he said.

"Most milkin' time, little feller. Come on up and I'll give yer a drink of nice warm milk. 'Twill help yer fergit the smart of yer hide."

By the time Lin had his wheelbarrow loaded he had coaxed the pup halfway from the edge of the alders to the wall, where he stood with drooping ears and trembling legs, listening to the unmistakable kindness in the old man's voice, yet ready to flee at the first hostile movement.

The pup had heard that tone before. His red-faced master had used it upon occasions to coax him within reach of his terrible hands and then he had administered beatings that had left the pup weak and sick. But this man with the gray hair, who talked and whistled so cheerfully and went calmly on with his work, seemed different somehow. The red pup's tail wagged almost imperceptibly, yet he could force himself no nearer.

Still talking softly Lin trundled the load of clover to the barn, dumped it on the barn floor, opened the linter door and drove in his cows. All this activity was something new to the red pup, so he clambered to the top of the roadside wall and watched with alert golden eyes.

Lin shoved a huge forkful of fragrant clover into each of the cow's mangers and went after the shining tin milkpails that were sunning on stakes by the kitchen door.

"Come on, Red Boy," he called cheerily, as he crossed the dooryard. "Come and get acquainted with the old man. You don't know how decent he can be to a poor misunderstood pup. He-e-e-e-re!"

But no, Red Boy couldn't bring himself to do it. Each moment the pup's lanky body was becoming stiffer and sorer from the beating of the afternoon; a beating which was but the climax of a month of torture that he had suffered at the hands of the red-faced one. Although his tail wagged in spite of him at the friendly tone of the old man, the fear of human touch prevailed. He whined uneasily and stuck to the wall.

Lin knew better than to try to approach the dog. He realized that one hasty movement, any act of his that might hint of a threat, would send Red Boy limping and slinking back into the woodcock covert and perhaps for miles across country.

"He's got ter come all the way himself," the old man soliloquized. "And he's got ter have time ter do it." So, whistling a little tune and paying no further attention to the dog, he returned to the barn.

A peculiar noise from the open door of the linter came to Red Boy's ears.

Zum-drum, zum-drum, zum-drum.

The pup cocked his ears attentively. He had no way of knowing that that soft drumming was old Lin squirting rapid needles of whiteness into the bottom of a tin milkpail. But when the aroma of the warm milk drifted across the yard to his wide nostrils, his mouth watered.

He whined thinly, and cautiously came down off the wall and sat in the road.

CHAPTER IV.

DECENT TREATMENT.

OLD Lin appeared in the linter door. In one hand was a pail so full of milk that the white froth crept over its edge and down the sides in appetizing clots. In the other hand he carried an agate basin. With never a glance at the dog, he ostentatiously placed the basin ten feet from the door, poured in some warm milk, went back into the linter and sat down to another cow. Red Boy watched intently.

How Red Boy craved to curl his parched tongue into that basin of milk and drink and drink! He had had nothing to eat since morning, and then only a few cold scraps. At noon, when his master and the other man had eaten their lunch, the other man had attempted to throw him part of a sandwich, but his master had cuffed him roughly away and had thrown the bread and meat into the brook beside which they were eating. Then he had accused the other man of trying to spoil his dog's nose by feeding him while hunting. Just as if a dog could do good bird work when his stomach was gnawing at his very soul for the want of food.

Red Boy's nose lifted, drawing in the delectable aroma of the rich milk. He minced forward a few feet and dropped to a sitting posture again. But from here the smell of the milk was even more enticing. The pup, drooling in his eagerness, moved forward again.

Old Lin, from where he was milking, could see nothing of the battle between fear and hunger. When his ears caught the rapid *clop-clop, clop-clop* of the pup's tongue at the basin outside, however, he grinned a pleased grin at the flank of the old cow.

"I'll have my hand on that red coat of his afore bedtime," he muttered delightedly.

But in this the old man was mistaken.

Red Boy, the cruel pangs of hunger somewhat dulled by the drink of milk, became wary again. When Lin finished his chores and carried the milk to the kitchen the pup watched him with distrustful eyes from the refuge of the old grape arbor on the far side of the dooryard.

Lin neither called nor cajoled. He just said a pleasant, "Hi, pup!" and went on into the house. Once inside, however, he talked to himself, as is the habit of those who live much alone.

"What eyes that pup's got! Not soft and brown like most Irish setters, but gold, b'gravey! Bright gold, like an eagle's! That dog's got spirit!"

Lin strained and put away the milk then went to work getting his supper. Through the kitchen door, which despite the cool evening the old man had left purposely wide open, the fragrance of frying meat and warmed-up potato drifted out to Red Boy. It reawakened those hunger pangs which the small drink of milk had come far from satisfying.

The pup longed with all his soul to go in there by that old kitchen stove and lay his bruised body beside its cozy warmth. But no, perhaps this man with the gray hair who moved nonchalantly about at the preparation of his meal might be but simulating indifference, that he might fool him into coming within his reach.

Perhaps he, too, somewhere about his clothes, might be carrying one of those curling, biting, burning whips even as had his late red-faced master. Red Boy shivered and whined as the chill of the deepening twilight crept into his battered body, but he conquered the lure of warmth and food and stuck to the grape arbor.

The gray-haired man had finished his supper now and was doing something with the basin from which Red Boy had drunk the milk. He seemed to be breaking up bread into the dish. Yes,

and there went a big handful of red meat trimmings in with the bread. Now a little potato and now—Red Boy's stomach turned a joyful flip-flop of anticipation—a full pint of that wonderful milk.

Could it be—could it be that the gray-haired one was fixing that meal for him? The tip of Red Boy's tail beat the ground in a rapid tattoo, and whether he would or no, his feet dragged him halfway across the yard.

Old Lin came slowly to the door with the dish in his hand. He peered out into the half darkness at the dim shape of the dog. Then he puckered his lips and sent a low whistle out into the autumn evening. A coaxing whistle it was with a little up-sliding, cheerful quirk at the end of it. He placed the dish on the kitchen floor.

"Here's yer supper, Red Boy," he told the dog in a matter-of-fact tone. "Yer'd better come and fill your poor hungry hide, little man."

Without waiting to see whether the invitation was to be accepted, he turned away and began clearing the dishes from his table.

Red Boy couldn't do it. The inducements were great, to be sure, but the doorstep was his limit. Past it, he could not go. The smell of the food and the warm breath that swept out to him from the open door were like a promise of Paradise to the red pup; yet he was still distrustful of the gray-haired one.

Lin finished at the sink, went through a door into the woodshed and returned with an old carriage robe. He spread it down beside the stove. He patted it meaningly.

"She's nice and soft, Red Boy," he told the pup, whose golden eyes watched his every movement. "Better clean up that grub and then come and flop on it. It'll feel mighty good to your poor little carcass."

When Lin Holt placed the kerosene

lamp on the kitchen table and sat down in the old rocker with his pipe and a book, the clock on the shelf above the sink chimed seven. At a few minutes past nine, Red Boy, after countless battles with fear and distrust, stuck his tan-colored nose in the dish of food.

Another hour of wary exploration of the kitchen and dooryard, and he sidled in to curl down with a tired sigh on the folded robe by the stove.

During these three long hours, Lin Holt had not moved. His pipe had gone dead and he had hardly dared to turn a leaf of his book. Now that the red pup, seemingly having accepted of his hospitality, and was to all appearances deep in a sleep of exhaustion, Lin laid down his pipe and started for bed.

He was no more than halfway out of his chair when Red Boy, with a spring, was at the door. Lin, with pretended indifference, dropped back into the chair and picked up his book. Red Boy, after much nervous fidgeting and many suspicious glances, returned to his bed by the stove.

Pallid dawn was just creeping into the old kitchen when again Red Boy opened his eyes. He gazed about himself confusedly, at a loss to remember where he was. He swung his head and the sight of the old man asleep in his chair brought back the events of yesterday.

Red Boy knew that the gray-haired one was asleep, for his head was bowed on his chest and he snored softly, regularly. There was nothing to be feared from a sleeping man. So Red Boy lay quietly and sized Lin up.

The book on the floor, lying with crumpled leaves as it had fallen, the smoky chimney of the burned-out lamp—these attested to the fact that the old man, rather than to frighten the pup from his bed, had spent the entire night in his chair. One of Lin's arms hung limply over the side of the old rocker,

the calloused hand within a few inches of the floor. Red Boy suddenly found himself possessed of a great desire to touch that hand with his nose.

CHAPTER V.

AFFECTION.

WHEN a dog has voluntarily accepted a man's food and shelter, shared his home even for one night, the age-old law of dogdom is that a certain amount of respect and confidence is due that man. In the veins of Red Boy coursed the blood of scores of generations of man's most faithful and devoted companion. That blood was calling to him now, urging him with imperative insistence that he signify his appreciation of the gray-haired one's kindness.

Slowly, wracked with painful twinges of sleep-stiffened, bruised muscles, Red Boy arose and with eyes fixed steadily on that hanging hand silently crossed the kitchen. For a moment he stood beside the old man, gazing up into the sleeping face striving with all his dog-gish soul to read the significance behind that sun-browned wrinkled mask. Then, seemingly satisfied with what he found there, he stretched his lean neck, reached the hand and caressed it once with a swift tongue.

The touch awoke Lin Holt. With consciousness came the realization of what had happened. He did not open his eyes, nor change his posture in the least, but slowly, very slowly, that hanging hand lifted up and out. Red Boy, his eyes blazing with the struggling emotions within him, watched it in fascination, but stood like a rock.

Lin's gnarled fingers touched a silky ear, explored it gently upward to a sleek head, stroked the head slowly a time or two, slid caressingly down Red Boy's neck and rested on the pup's shoulder.

Red Boy trembled at the touch, but the gentle swaying of his tail denoted

no further fear. He took a step forward and laid his beautiful head on Lin's knee. The old man opened his eyes and gazed down into twin pools of fathomless gold. With that long glance came understanding and a new life for the red pup.

The days, weeks and months that followed were for Red Boy but one long span of love, happiness and content. He had found some one who could understand him and whom he could understand; and when a dog is that fortunate the pinnacle of canine bliss has been achieved.

As soon as Lin was satisfied that Red Boy's confidence in him was unshakable the old man began teaching him the basic things that a good bird dog must know.

"It's this way, Red Boy," explained Lin, as if he were talking to a person. "I kin tell by jest a glance at yer that yer've come down from a long line of field-trial winners; dogs that have been bred generation after generation for speed as well as bird work. Now, if a dog's nose is faster than his feet, and the country he's workin' in is wide open—as most of the country is where them field trials are run—that's all well and good. But here in the East in our thick covers, a man wouldn't see one of them wide-rangin' dogs more'n twice a day. Control is what we've got ter go after first, boy.

"Supposin' yer come across the trail of an old grouse that's crossin' a couple of hundred yards of thick cedar swamp, to git a feed of apples under an old apple tree he knows about on the far side. That trail is strong in your nose and it keeps pullin' yer on and on, a little faster and a little faster. And the first thing we know, I'm way back behind, out of sight, and not a chance for a shot at that old bird when he gits up. Now if yer'll stop when I tell you 'whoa' why, we can move up together

like on that trail, and perhaps when Mr. Grouse flushes, we'll put him right in our pocket.

"Course, after yer git older an' have had enough experience, yer'll know jest about how near yer kin go to one of them old cocks without flushin' him. But I'll tell yer now, boy, them wise old fellers don't lay ter a point like a woodcock.

"Yes sir, pup; considerin' the breedin' that I know must be behind yer, an' the natural inclination of a keen-nosed dog to slash over a lot o' ground when bird scent is scarce, it's goin' ter be mighty hard ter slow them long legs o' yourn ter a pace that ole Lin kin foller. But it kin be done—an' without a club, b'gravey!"

Red Boy, understanding nothing of all this talk, was well content to lay his fine head against the patched knee of Lin's overalls and drink in the soothing tone of the old man's voice and the understanding kindness of his eyes—which to a dog speaks more eloquently of good will than does mere words.

And then came the day of days, when Lin donned his worn hunting coat, took the brush gun from its place in the cupboard, and with a red dog obediently at heel, went down across the pasture ridge to the woodcock covert.

October had nearly run her course. Her flamboyant beauties were nearly spent. The foliage that three weeks ago had clothed ridge and swamp in riotous colors now lay a soggy carpet on the ground; beaten flat by the pelting downpour of a nor'easter that had raged throughout the night. The sun, struggling through the flying scud that still raced in over the hills to the east, bejeweled each bush and twig with a thousand pinpoints of prismatic hue—nature's recompense for the gorgeous beauty of which she had so recently stripped them.

"The main part of the woodcock

flight must be past, Red Boy," Lin told the dog. "But this storm probably drove in a few belated stragglers. Lucky the rain knocked the leaves, for I sure want ter shoot good to-day! Nothin' makes a bird dog quicker'n gettin' birds over him."

Within the hour Lin Holt knew that in Red Boy was the making of a wonderful bird dog. Nose, sense of location, caution, and plenty of pointing instinct—he had them all.

Contrary to the opinion of some bird hunters, that the Irish setter is headstrong, the old man found that even when the dog was in strong scent, seemingly oblivious to everything but locating and pointing his bird, he still heeded orders and obeyed them with cheerful alacrity.

After the woodcock flight came the November grouse shooting. Lin Holt, knowing the importance of the first year's training for a young dog, stole away from his farm work at every available opportunity, to comb the surrounding grouse coverts with Red Boy. Each day of this glorious existence was the very essence of life itself to the red dog. When the season had finished and Lin had regretfully put away the old brush gun, man and dog had reached a mutual understanding that to an outsider would have seemed uncanny.

To Red Boy the old man had become a sort of god—to be looked upon, worked for, and loved as such. To Lin Holt, Red Boy had become a pleasurable companion, a lovable pal. Some one to whom in his lonely existence he could confide his troubles and share his joys.

"Red Boy," Lin told the dog, "what worries me most of anything is the fact that yer really don't belong ter me. When yer come right down ter the hard pan of the matter, I suppose that red-faced devil of a Hahn could ride up here and demand yer and I'd have ter let yer go.

"'Taint right, o' course, but them fellers with money generally git what they go after. Only the other day Judge Hobbs told me that when Hahn paid his fine fer huntin' without a license, he had a roll on him that would choke a cow. Well, here's hopin' that he never comes back here. Perhaps he's forgotten all about yer anyhow, boy."

CHAPTER VI.

LIN PAYS A PRICE.

WINTER came and went. With spring, Lin Holt set about the preparation of the land for his crops. A yoke of oxen are a slow team at best, and Lin, working lone-handed, progressed slowly with his plowing, harrowing and seeding. As he rested the lolling cattle at the end of a furrow, the drum of distant motors came to his ears.

"You wait, Red Boy," he said to the dog, who lay sprawled on the fresh, cool earth of the newly plowed ground. "We'll have one o' them tractors, too, before the fall plowin' begins! It would mean that we could handle lots more land, do it easier, and git the fall's work all cleaned up before the openin' o' the bird season."

"Got mighty nigh enough money saved up in the old coffeepot down ter the house ter pay fer one now. Them four pigs that'll be ready fer market soon'll make up the balance, and then, b'gravey, I'll have somethin' that I've wanted and needed fer years!"

Summer and haying time came. Lin, painstakingly hand-scything the strip of grass that grew between the ditch and the roadside wall, was arrested in his work by a voice from a car that slid to a stop behind him.

Before the old man turned, he had recognized that hateful, sneering voice. The recognition caused Lin a sudden faintness, an uncontrollable trembling of the knees.

Red Boy, who had been drowsing in the shade of a near-by clump of maple sprouts, arose with a low growl. The hair along his neck and shoulders lifted menacingly. He moved with stiff-legged dignity to the old man's side.

"Surprised to see me back, are you?" inquired Hahn, with a mean grin. "Well, I met a fellow from up this way a few days ago and he told me that pup of mine had developed into a marvel. Thought I'd come up and get him. It's most hunting time again, you know."

"But—but—you don't want Red Boy!" gulped Lin, at a loss for what to say or do. "Why, he wouldn't work fer yer a minute—and not to blame either! Look at him! Jest *look* at him! Does he look as though he's very glad to see yer?"

It was the worst thing Lin could have said. The overdressed, heavily-roused woman who was in the car with Hahn laughed shrilly. Hahn, bristling, swung open a door and stepped to the ground.

"See here, you old hayseed!" he grated, "that dog's *mine*! He'll work for me or I'll *kill* him! Now you chuck him in the car here, and do it quick!"

"But—I've kept him for almost a year—and trained him!" expostulated Lin tremulously. "The dog thinks I'm right. He and I are pals. You can't take him away from me like this!"

"I can't, hey? We'll see about that! No one asked you to keep the dog—or train him either, for that matter. Get outa the way now while I get a grip on the red devil's collar!" Hahn lunged across the ditch, reaching a hairy hand for the dog's neck.

Red Boy growled and stood his ground. Lin, glancing down at him, noted the tenseness of the muscles beneath the silky coat. Too late he opened his mouth to cry a warning.

The dog sprang. With a twisting snap his inch-long fangs slashed into a

thick wrist, ripping through skin and muscles to the bone. The woman in the car screamed. Hahn cursed savagely, and reached swiftly for a hip pocket. Red Boy wheeled again to Lin's side.

"Cold lead is the right medicine for that brute! Back away, old man, so I can bore him!"

Lin Holt refused to back. Instead, the scythe snath upon which he was leaning leaped up and out. The yard of keen steel at its end swung over the big man's head, and its razor edge came gently to rest against the back of his neck. Hahn's hand came carefully away from his pocket.

"That scythe's purty sharp, mister," remarked Lin, in an icy drawl. "If yer should happen ter make a foolish move, and slip or somethin', 'twould go through yer neck like it would through a milkweed!"

Hahn took a look into Lin's stone-gray eyes, another look at the gnarled hands that gripped the knibs of the snath in white-knuckled tenseness, and believed.

"Well, what do you want?" he asked sullenly.

"Want yer ter name a price on that dog, and do it quick," informed Lin coolly.

"Five hundred dollars!" snapped Hahn, and leered triumphantly. He guessed that would hold the old hick for a while.

Lin Holt gulped in dismay. Five hundred dollars! The savings of three years; the reward of days, weeks, and months of patient drudgery; the means of obtaining a tractor that he needed so badly. Even now he could hear the efficient drone of one of the machines, as it sliced a seven-foot cutter-bar through a field of heavy timothy on the next farm down the road. The pur of the powerful motor beat alluringly in the old man's brain, hinting of greater efficiency, promising an easier existence and increased profits from his farm.

Hahn sensed something of the old man's mental struggle. "Well," he rasped, "d'ye want him at that figure? It's the last word!"

Red Boy pressed closely against Lin's knee. The old man glanced quickly down at the dog, drew a long breath and threw back his head.

"I'll take him."

Hahn was staggered, nonplused. "Huh!" he grunted. "You're a bigger fool than I thought you was!"

"Maybe," agreed Lin. "But now you write me a bill o' sale for the dog, and I'll go down ter the house and get yer the money."

Hahn got out a fountain pen, wrote a satisfactory bill of sale on the back of an old envelope and passed it to Lin.

Lin made sure of its genuineness, stuffed it in an overall pocket, and disengaged his scythe. "Heel, Red Boy," he ordered the dog, and started for the house.

In the pantry he reached down an old coffeepot from an upper shelf and dumped its contents of loose bills and silver onto the work shelf. He counted out five hundred dollars, replaced the few bills that were left over that amount, and went outdoors.

Hahn had driven his car to the house and was waiting. Lin tossed the handful of bills into his lap and turned away.

Hahn counted the money, found the amount correct, crammed the bills in his pocket and speeded up his motor.

"Much obliged, Hiram. Easy pickings!" he sneered and drove away.

Lin Holt walked slowly to the house and sat soberly down on the lower doorstep. Red Boy came and nudged his sleek head beneath the old man's arm.

Lin took his gaze from the dust cloud of the speeding car and looked down into the dog's worshipful eyes.

"There goes our tractor plumb ter

blazes, yer red pest!" growled the old man, in rough tenderness. "Looks like old Star and Line will have to do the plowin' again this fall, don't it?"

Red Boy's swift tongue caressed Lin's leathery cheek.

But old Star did no plowing that fall. After haying, Lin turned the oxen away into a back pasture for a few days' rest before starting his fall's work. When he went to the pasture to salt them one morning, he found Star dead—choked to death by a big apple that he had swallowed without chewing.

The old man was discouraged and heartsick. What could he do without a team—hauling power of some kind? The purchase of Red Boy precluded the possibility of replacing the ox. Perhaps he *had* been a fool. No b'gravey, he didn't regret buying the dog in spite of all this hard luck!

Lin changed work with a neighbor. He gave the man two days of corn-picking and silo-filling for a day's use of his horses, and at this painful ratio managed to get his plowing done. This arrangement, however, gave him little time to be in the coverts with Red Boy, and practically the whole woodcock flight passed without the bagging of a bird.

"Next month," he promised the dog, "we'll hunt a few days, boy. There'll be lots of work after you and I have cashed in."

CHAPTER VII.

THWARTED THEFT.

NOVEMBER came again—the bare branches of a side-hill grouse covert against the pale saffron of a sunset sky. Full game pockets and a full heart for Lin Holt; and for the red dog at his heels the happiness and content that comes from serving a kind master faithfully and well.

"Guess we'd better cut across the big swamp, skirt around the head of the lake and hit the main road there by

Foster's big summer camp," Lin told the dog. "It's going to be dark before we can ever make it, so let's hustle!"

When Foster, a wealthy manufacturer of Providence, had built his summer home there at the head of the lake where the State road swung close to the shore, he had spared no expense. Buildings and grounds were the last word in everything that money could pay for. The few simple country people who had been within its imposing walls came away with wonder in their eyes and babbled of rich rugs and tapestries, carved mahogany and sparkling silver.

In summer, when its owner and his guests were there, the place blazed at night with electric lights like some gay caravansary. Now, however, as Lin Holt and his red dog plodded wearily across the frost-cripsed grass of its expansive lawn, it bulked dark and somber against the background of shadowy pines and spectral birches.

Lin, nearly to the corner of the building, was about to step into the driveway that circled at the back of the house and led to the main road a few rods away, when a low, warning growl from the dog at his heels made him pause. He dropped a hand on the dog's head. "What ails yer, Red Boy? Quiet!" he whispered.

The dog was as rigid as though pointing a bird. Lin ran a hand down onto Red Boy's shoulders. The hair along the dog's spine was standing straight up. Again, deep in his throat, rumbled that ominous warning.

"What——" wondered the old man, and then cocked his ears as a strange sound from within the house reached him.

Something heavy seemed to be moving along the floor. Something that dragged and scraped, was silent for a moment, then dragged and scraped again.

Lin hooked a hand into the dog's collar and tiptoed to the corner of the building. Cautiously he poked his head around, took one long look and caught his breath in a gasp of surprise.

Backed close to the door was a huge truck. As near as the old man could make out in the darkness, its body was piled high with bulky objects. By closer scrutiny the old man made out that these objects were chairs, divans, rolled rugs and other household furnishings.

Two men staggered from the dark doorway, half carrying, half dragging a heavy piece of furniture between them. They lifted it aboard the truck and one of them spoke.

"There! That'll be all for this load. Let's make it fast, get the tarpaulin over it, and pull out of here. We've got to work snappy if we get back for the other load to-night. Boy, this is the best job we've ever pulled!"

Lin was sure he'd heard that voice before—but where? Why was Red Boy lunging savagely against his collar, so intent on getting at the men?

Ah! Lin had it. It was Hahn's voice. No wonder the dog displayed excitement. He'd caught the hateful scent of his former brutal owner. That's what made him strive to be at the two so.

Lin drew the dog back around the corner, soothed and quieted him, and thought the matter over. Pretty tough proposition! An old man and a setter dog against two husky yeggs who were undoubtedly armed and ready to resort to injury rather than submit to capture.

That one of the men had good reason to hate him, Lin well knew, yet the knowledge made no difference in his decision. With a grim set to his jaw, Lin took a firmer grip on the dog's collar, slipped off the safety latch on the old brush gun, and stepped around the corner.

Hahn stood at the tailboard of the truck, holding a flashlight for the other man, who was on top of the load fastening the tarpaulin in place. Lin walked quietly up to him without being discovered.

"Stick up 'em hands!"

Hahn whirled at the words and flashed his light full into Lin's eyes. The glare blinded the old man. He threw up a hand to shield his eyes, the gunbarrels wavered uncertainly. The man on the load, aware of what had happened to Lin, gathered himself tigerishly and sprang straight at him.

Lin Holt sensed rather than saw the form of the man hurtling upon him. He let go the dog's collar, grasped his gun with both hands, and with all his strength swung a slashing blow at the flying shadow.

He felt the impact of his gun barrels against something hard, and in the same thought was knocked off his feet and slammed to the ground. Wiggly little streaks of fire danced in his brain. For just an instant he tottered on the brink of unconsciousness.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE RESCUE.

THEN—a vicelike hand was on his throat, blinding light streamed in his eyes. A heavy knee ground into his ribs. The voice of Hahn sounded in his ears.

"So—it's you again, is it, Hiram? Well you little dried-up hick, you've butted into something this time that's outa your line! This is the third time you've bucked my game. Unlucky third—for you! Your wallop with the gun barrels puts Ed there out of the runnin' for a few minutes, but it'll be a pleasure for me to tend to this deal myself. The lake looks nice and deep off the end of the wharf out there. Plenty of stones to hold you down!"

Lin tried with every ounce of his

strength to twist out of the big man's grip, but the hand on his throat tightened inexorably. His lungs were bursting for want of air, a mighty trip-hammer began thudding in his brain.

Was this to be the end? The old man wondered. Would he ever again look up at those stars that shone so peacefully down between the feathery branches of the pines? Those stars—now they burned green—now red—now—now were flickering one by one into nothingness.

A swift wind crossed the old man's face. He heard a clicking snap—the rip of tearing flesh. Hahn screamed. Something hot squirted against Lin's face. The grip on his throat relaxed, and the flash light rolled away in the gravel of the drive.

Lin Holt found himself free, and scrambled up, gasping painfully. From the darkness came the curses and yells of a terrified man and the eager, whining growl of a dog that fights to kill.

Lin grabbed up the flash light, found his gun that had been knocked from his hands, and swung the light in the direction of the fight.

Hahn lay on his back in the driveway, shielding as best he could his face and throat from the fury of Red Boy's jaws. The dog, now a thing of incarnate hate, strove again and again to reach that thick throat.

Hahn's sleeves were tatters, his hands and arms ripped and dripping red from warding off the dog's attack. One of his checks, torn from the bone by Red Boy's first slash, hung loosely against his jowl. A dark stain grew on the white gravel of the drive.

Lin fastened a hand into the dog's collar and dragged him away. "Quit it, boy! Charge down!" he ordered.

Hahn sat up, his disfigured face ghastly in the brilliant beam of the flash light. Lin, hearing a low groan behind him, knew there was no time to be

lost. The other man was regaining consciousness.

"Get onto yer feet!" he ordered Hahn. "Grab yer playmate there and drag him into that ice house across the drive—and do it quick! Red Boy and I are all through foolin'!"

Hahn was licked and knew it. He managed to get his semiconscious partner into the ice house. Lin slammed the heavy door, bolted it, and went into the cottage. He scouted around, found the telephone, and called up the sheriff.

"'Lo, Jimmie, that yew? . . . Waal—this is Lin Holt, speakin from Foster's camp over here at the head of the lake. Say, Jimmie, I jest stumbled onto a couple o' fellers that were tryin' to haul away most everything here—yeah, robbin' the camp—and I shet 'em in the ice house. Better come on up and tend to 'em right away. I'd wait for yer, only I'm two hours late with my milkin' right now. G'by!"

February came with frosted window-panes. The yellow glow of a single kerosene lamp. A gray-haired man at a solitary supper. A red dog dozing by the old kitchen stove. And—the merry jangle of sleighbells turning into the dooryard.

Lin Holt wiped his mouth on the back of his hand, the back of his hand on the leg of his trousers, and stuck his head out the door.

"Howareye—and whoareye!" he called cheerily, peering into the darkness.

"'Lo, Lin!" came the dry voice of Judge Hobbs. "Say, I was down at Providence last week. Happened to run across Mr. Foster. He sent you up this little token of his appreciation for blocking that camp robbery. Here she comes!"

A long envelope slithered in at the door, and the judge's sleighbells tinkled away up the road.

Lin picked up the envelope and wonderingly tore it across the end. A narrow slip of blue paper slid out into

his hand. He looked at it curiously, caught his breath, held it nearer the lamp and looked again.

"Red Boy, old cost-me-nothin'!" he yelled. "Listen to this. Here's our tractor back again, b'gravey! A check for five hundred iron men!"

Red Boy, understanding only that his master was happy, opened drowsy, golden eyes and thumped the floor contentedly with his tail.

A Wonderful Lunch

HE had just returned from a perilous sea voyage, and, comfortably seated at home, was relating to a host of admiring friends some of the privations endured on the journey.

"Then," he said, "I went down to the cabin for a little lunch."

"But," protested a listener, "you have just said there was nothing left to eat on the whole ship. What did you have for lunch?"

"Oh, it was quite a trifling affair, you know. Beef, wine, and an egg."

"Well, where did the beef come from?" queried a listener.

"From the bulwarks, of course," was the retort.

"Where did you get the wine?"

"From the porthole."

At this a laugh echoed through the room, but still some one asked:

"But what about the egg? Where did you rake that up?"

"Oh, that was simplest of all," returned the cheerful fabricator. "The captain ordered the ship to lay-to, and he gave me one!"



AN OLD STORY

By N. B. Beck

MEN sought a sage in an olden age
To learn the path to glory,
And they listened while, with a sad wise smile,
He told an old, old story:

"And what is life but an endless strife
And struggle never ending,
And what is a man but one who can
Bear buffets without bending.

"And what is death except the breath
Of sleep that follows fighting—
Sweet sleep the strong, who pass no wrong
Without they try its righting.

"So venture far toward a beacon star,
Press on without regretting,
And urge the fight until your might
Expires in long forgetting."

So spake the sage in an olden age
To eager youths who pleaded,
And his voice was strong as the dawn wind's son
But few there were who heeded.

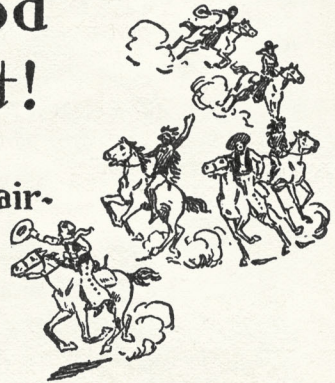


A News Reel Camera Man Story—

Deadwood or Bust!

By
Walter A. Sinclair.

(COMPLETE NOVEL)



CHAPTER I.

CAMERA TRAGEDY.

PANIC swept the clearing in the Black Hills as a frenzied team of runaway horses, driven frantic by the shooting of an Indian attack, dashed blindly toward the president. Eric Carver, ace camera man of Mid-world News Reel, felt the excitement which swayed the throng, yet his professional sense triumphed and he kept on grinding steadily away with his camera crank, filming this startling, totally unexpected thrill, recording in motion pictures this peril to the country's chief executive. He was not near enough to avert the danger.

"Stop them!" yelled the alarmed crowd. "Save the president!"

These appeals were needless. In an instant, cowboys had flung their mounts between the maddened runaways and the president's motor car. Immediately the stampeded pair swerved and thundered down on the front rank of the throng surrounding the pageant field, starting a wild backward crushing of spectators to escape flying hoofs.

This runaway started and assumed full fury in a twinkling. The team had been drawing a covered wagon in

a pageant celebrating a Black Hills historical event, its chief spectator being Mr. Coolidge, who was summering in the West. A crowd surrounding an open field on a hillside was viewing the Indians' attack on the covered wagon when the shooting panicked the horses. Bolting suddenly, they snapped loose the double-trees and galloped toward the crowd.

Swayed away from the president by the cowboys' quick action, the horses plunged dangerously along the throng's front, and in doing so bore down on the foreground space occupied by news-reel and still photographers. Carver was snatching his camera and tripod to safety when he saw a queer old figure doddering directly in the path of the runaways.

He was a shriveled, leather-skinned man of seventy-five, with long white hair straggling from beneath a floppy wide brim, and a billy-goat white beard dangling from a scrawny chin. He wore a checkered red windbreaker, overalls and boots, and appeared doomed to be trampled.

Eric did not stop to weigh chances. The old man seemed paralyzed in the path of the runaways, and the camera man acted on impulse. Jabbing down his camera, Carver made a flying leap,

and with outspread arms swept the old fellow off the path of danger when the team was almost upon them.

Half-carrying, half-pushing the elderly man, Carver reeled to the side lines in safety as the runaways went past, threatening the crowd's edge, and finally found an opening between cars into which they turned. There some cowboys stopped them, and every one breathed a sigh of relief.

Above this mass sigh rose the voice of the rickety septuagenarian, addressing Midworld's camera ace, and his words were not of thanks or appreciation. Far from it. Garnished with some remarkable relics of early Black Hills profanity, he demanded querulously:

"Why the pink-lined Tophet didja chouse me outer there when yuh see me fixing to stop them hosses? Save me? Well, jumping Jeehossfat, there's one! Me, Ash Purvis, who's handled hosses in all stages of wildness before yuh was born—before yuhr daddy was born, I vow. I never been so plumb insulted in my born days—havin' a tenderfoot upstart save *me*, Ash Purvis what's gentled the saltiest hosses."

"My mistake, old-timer," laughed Eric, amused by this odd appreciation. "I acted hastily, thinking a man your age might not be as spry or see or hear so well——"

"Dang yuh, yuh upstart!" snorted Purvis. "I kin trail all day better'n the best of young uns and I got an eye like a eagle. I was a top bronc rider and scout when Deadwood was a heller and these Black Hills wasn't safe fur most he-men, let alone Eastern dudes. Here I figgered to stop that span and be presented to Cal Coolidge, and you just had——"

Carver fled, laughing in spite of the withering volley of hot rebuke which followed. It had been presumptuous for a young man from New York to save from *horses* one of the pioneers

who had survived horses, bad men, wild Indians, and nature's own savagery which still held sway in those sinister hills. The joke was on him, and the other camera men would never let him hear the last of it.

His smile froze. On the ground he saw his camera, smashed to junk by hammering hoofs of the runaways and their pursuers. While his attention was concentrated on snatching that elderly hero from danger, Carver's picture box had been wrecked, and he was useless for further work that day. Out in those historic wild hills he could not get another camera in a hurry—not easily. And a most interesting scene featuring the president, a "subject" especially arranged for the camera men, was scheduled for that afternoon.

Carver considered swiftly: "Was this accident or not?"

He stared thoughtfully at news-reel and still photographers carrying their cameras back to their original stands after momentary flight. Prominent in the group was Louis Zanff of Globe-wide News Film, a rival who hated Eric with a hatred which mounted with every fresh defeat the Midworld ace inflicted. Carver was sure there was a gloating look on Zanff's pudgy, dark face which explained much.

It would be difficult to prove that Zanff had had anything to do with the camera wrecking, but experience had shown that Globewide's star was not above such despicable tricks. All the camera men had been bunched in squad formation when the horses dashed at them, and each had seized his own picture box and had run—a not unusual necessity with them. Carver had set his camera safely on its legs out of harm's way before leaping to aid Purvis, but of course, it could have fallen. Or Zanff could have kicked it under the runaway's hoofs while every one else's attention was bent on escaping.

"Too bad, Carver. I was hoping

you'd give me a little competition," sympathized Zanff with brazen hypocrisy as he joined the others gathered around Eric. The fellow's effrontery in thus pretending honest sympathy after all his underhanded blows was enough to madden Carver, but he merely stared steadily at Zanff.

In that same Pecksniffian manner but with intent to rub vitriol in the wound, Zanff continued, to make his point: "You ought to take better care of your camera, and not leave it to be a hero, rescuing a horse tamer from two old plugs. This hero habit will lead you to rescue 'Trudy' or George Young from drowning next. A tough break, having no camera out here in these hills just when the president is all set to pan some gold for us to shoot."

"Don't be too sure that I won't have a box by then," replied Carver calmly, and turned to examine the junked machine. Its mechanism was wrecked, its gate and lenses smashed and the feed rachets bent. The exposed negative magazine was dented but not pierced, so Eric was able to salvage all film he had shot before the runaway. He put this in a film can for sending to the news-reel's headquarters. Then he made a prompt decision about covering the day's final feature.

CHAPTER II.

CARVER USES HIS HEAD.

THIS was a subject on which he could not afford to be beaten. On the drive back to the summer capitol, the president was to stop at the creek where gold was first struck in the Black Hills and there he was to pan and sluice, just as the original prospectors had done. It had been arranged as an interesting historical feature, and Carver *had* to cover it for Midworld—and not maybe.

Without delay he singled out one of

the camera squad, an emaciated, middle-aged man with prematurely gray hair, worried brow and rather weak face, his stooped figure attired in a well-worn black suit which contrasted with the smart tweed knicker suits of the star crankers from New York. This man was Verne Harper, the footage man who represented Midworld in the region.

A footage man is a camera correspondent who gets no salary, but is paid by the foot for all negative accepted from him. Usually he covers territory not important enough to require a salaried staff correspondent. When a reel editor can anticipate news in a footage man's territory, he wires orders to cover, and sometimes he buys the result. Often he doesn't. Where news breaks without warning, a footage man covers "on speculation." To eke out, in the absence of "spot news," he works up and submits "features" about unusual persons or interesting animals. A few clever footage men prosper, while the less clever have to develop other sources of income beside their news reel correspondence.

Harper had a grievance, and Carver knew it, but he tackled the footage man just the same. Midworld had sent out its ace to cover this rich assignment when Harper felt he, as resident correspondent, should have been assigned. The footage on the president in this picturesque region would have made up for a lean year, but Midworld had assigned its best man. So had the other news reels, but Harper was angered at Midworld, the one which listed him as its footage man.

"Harper, you see what I'm up against," said Carver. "Will you let me use your camera this afternoon to cover the gold panning subject? I'll pay for its use, as well as for all footage I take."

"I'm through with Midworld," grumbled Harper, who had remained

aloof ever since Carver arrived in his territory. "They starved me all year, rejected my stuff or held it up until it was too old to sell anywhere else and now, when here comes a chance to clean up, they send you.

"I've been cheated out of my right, and I'm through. I'm making a complete long feature of all the president's doings out here, and I'll print it and tour it around this State in small towns and make more money that way. So I need my box and can't let you have it."

That was plausible. Footage men did such things. Others did industrial films or scientific subjects for private showings. Carver could sympathize. He knew footage men had tough sledging. Still he persisted, promising to furnish Harper a print of all footage taken with his machine as well as to pay him for its use.

"I can't," confessed Harper, reluctantly. "You see, Mr. Zanff paid me pretty well to-day for an option on the use of my camera, in case anything went wrong with his——"

"Or with mine," corrected Carver. "Remarkable foresight, Zanff showed. He must have had a premonition something was going to happen to—somebody's camera."

"A good camera man always is prepared," announced Zanff, breaking in on them. "Come on, Harper, we're going, and I want to have your camera handy in case any hoss steps on mine. Looks like Midworld is going to lose out on this as a result of treating you so shabbily, Harper. Globewide will do better by you, I'll promise."

With a grin, he led Harper away.

Eric Carver's blue eyes flashed and his fighting chin went out. He did not look like a man facing defeat as he stood staring alertly about. He was erect, broad shouldered, light haired—a lithe, handsome figure in his rough outing tweeds and the campaign hat

which had replaced his usual cap. His glance ran expertly over the spectators preparing to leave as the presidential party started away. Surely in that throng there must be one—Ah! there it was.

Carrying his wrecked machine in the case, he hurried to a car in which sat a plainly dressed man who held a motion picture snapshot camera, one of the kind carried by amateur camera men in increasing numbers. With his usual ingratiating smile, Carver introduced himself, explained his plight, and asked if he could rent the stranger's movie box long enough to make the required footage. Eric promised to reload the machine and to give its owner a print of the gold panning subject, as well.

Carver had a way which won most people, and this man agreed. He had seen Eric's leap to save old Ash Purvis, and laughed heartily when Carver told the joke on himself. The camera owner was driving back the same way the president was heading, so after Eric had covered the gold panning feature and had transferred that negative to a can, he was able to return the borrowed picture box without delay. After hearty thanks, Carver parted company with his timely friend, and drove on to his lodgings near the summer capitol.

While he had been taking the gold sluicing subject, Eric saw Zanff break into a sarcastic grin, after one look at the borrowed camera. Interpreting the thought behind that grimace, Carver blandly stuck to his work without a sign of having noticed. When he reached his field headquarters, he made his arrangements swiftly.

Zanff held in the cause of his amusement until all the reel correspondents had started their films East. While Carver was eating a hasty supper at a rendezvous of press correspondents, camera men and photographers, Zanff entered, followed by Harper and others. At sight of Carver, the Globe-

wide star asked loudly for the benefit of all present:

"Did you see what Carver used this afternoon? When his negative reaches Midworld, his boss, Bannard, will have a fit. That box he used is an old model amateur machine, one of the first gotten out—just a toy. Sure, it'll shoot negative all right, but its film is for a toy projecting machine, smaller than standard size, so that negative won't match up with the rest of the footage."

"So comforting to have somebody else do my mourning," smiled Carver serenely. Rather than to embarrass the other camera man, he never quarreled with Zanff when they were thrown together on assignments.

Flicking a napkin, he rose, concluding: "That subject will be in Midworld's regular issue. A good camera man should study camera tricks instead of—just tricks."

With that he hurried out, smiling confidently, leaving Zanff scowling thoughtfully while the others were impressed by his assurance. In an airplane which he had ordered tuned up while he ate, Eric flew to the nearest big city where he could get new camera equipment. A telegram preceded him, and the dealer was waiting to accommodate Midworld's ace that night. Thus fortified, Carver flew back at dawn, arriving at the summer capital, ready for business by the time the president would appear.

This prompt precaution proved needless, for word was sent to the camera squad that the president would remain in retirement for several days and positively would not pose during that time.

CHAPTER III.

A TIP-OFF.

WHILE this announcement furnished the press correspondents with a basis for reams of wired speculation, it meant doldrums for the camera men.

In the dull spell they entertained themselves as best they could without venturing too far out of reach, in case news they could cover pictorially broke without warning. There was a constant procession of big men arriving to confer with the chief executive, but the reels had pictures of all these in their libraries.

Carver enjoyed short horseback rides around the beautiful wild region. This was the first vacation he had had since becoming a Midworld camera man, and he had visited his Minnesota home en route to the Black Hills, and later would go farther West.

Two days after the runaway incident, he was surprised to see Verne Harper at his door. The footage man looked remorseful, dejected, and more than ordinarily seedy. Hesitatingly, he asked:

"May I have a word in private?"

When Eric admitted him civilly, Harper blurted out: "Carver, you must be mighty sore at me, and I don't blame you. That's why I came here, to tell you I feel rotten for letting you down the other day. I haven't felt right since. I wasn't trying to hurt you personally but Midworld, for doing me out of this chance to make up on the year's average, after turning down so much of my stuff, or holding it up.

"They've held three subjects of mine for months without accepting or sending back, when I might have sold 'em to some other reel. I'm mighty hard up, but I'm no skunk. And after seeing what a decent fellow you are and how calm you took that turndown day before yesterday, it makes me feel cheap to find I'd been the cat's-paw of an unscrupulous fellow like Looney Zanff."

"Did Looney double cross you?" asked Carver.

"No. He paid as he promised, if that's what you mean," went on Harper.

"Don't think I'm remorseful because he gyped me. I'm ordinarily decent when not driven crazy trying to make ends meet. But I thought it all out, and then he let me see what sort of crook he is by springing a proposition.

"He asked me to come to you, pretending remorse, and as a way of making up for the other day, giving you a fake tip. I was to tell you I had a sure inside tip that the president, instead of staying secluded, had slipped away to go hunting on the quiet. If you bit, I was to lead you out into the Black Hills to shoot film of him, and there I'd lose you so that you'd miss out here. Would you have fallen for that?"

"I would not have," answered Eric. "And I don't mean because I'm too clever to fall, but because we camera men have ethics, even if some folks think we're roughnecks who break in anywhere. We always play fair with Cal because he plays fair with us and always accommodates us by posing for any reasonable subject. When he asks us to lay off, we lay off, just as the Washington correspondents do. Anyway, I take his word for it when he announces he'll remain secluded. A president can't afford to lie.

"So I wouldn't have swallowed that fake tip, but I'm glad you tumbled to Looney Zanff by yourself. He hides his hand fairly well, but I've caught him in dirty work that he could be put away for. That's not my way. I realize Zanff is obsessed by a mania to beat me professionally—he never tries to put over anything on me except when we're rivals on assignments. And I like to prove I can beat him, dirty work and all, by playing square. Some day he'll get rope enough."

"I suspect Zanff kicked your camera under the horses' hoofs," muttered Harper. "Now that I know what sort of fellow he is! And to think I helped do you out of that gold panning subject!"

"Don't worry," assured Carver, convinced the footage man's remorse was real. "Midworld will have that shot."

"But," reminded Harper, "Zanff said that toy negative——"

"Zanff knows more about trickery than film, though he is a star and absolutely nervy," interrupted Carver. "What he said was true, to an extent. If I'd sent that to Midworld, it wouldn't have been usable. But I rushed that footage to the big Rochester film laboratory with orders to transfer it to standard-size stock—they have facilities for doing that there. Then they'll rush it right along to Midworld which then can use it. A matter of a few hours' delay."

"You certainly know your stuff!" admired the footage man. "I'd like to be a friend, and make up for the harm I did. I'll keep an eye on Zanff and tip you off if I get onto anything crooked."

"O. K. by me," smiled Eric, extending a friendly hand. "And I'll write Bannard to get some action on your three cans. I sympathize with you, Verne, but look at the local press correspondents, shoved aside by all these Washington star reporters. It's all in the news game and we have to take the breaks we get.

"From my experience with Zanff, he should be watched. He's always trying to put something over."

They parted friends. That was Carver's way—to extend a helping hand wherever possible, and to overlook injuries done thoughtlessly or under stress. He had rivals among the camera men, but only one real enemy, Zanff. The rest of the camera men were friends who would beat him if they could, but who could not help admire Eric Carver for his ability and for embodying the best traditions of the news reels.

During the next week the chief executive remained secluded, pondering

weighty matters. The camera men were notified that there would be nothing worth their efforts until after the end of the week, when the president would attend a picturesque Indian ceremony at Deadwood.

There he was to be adopted into the Sioux, crowned with a gorgeous war bonnet, and to receive an Indian title. That would be ideal news-reel stuff, and Carver did not need Midworld's wired instructions to cover fully without fail.

Returning from a horseback ride before breakfast, a couple of days preceding the ceremony, Carver found two young men waiting. Loutish and husky, they were dressed in slouch hats, striped windbreakers, overalls and boots. They introduced themselves as Ash Purvis' grandsons, Bijé and Grant Purvis, and said they had come to thank Eric.

"Yuh sure saved him a busting," asserted Bijé. "Grandpa don't savvy he ain't as young as he used to be, and his bones is brittle. He sent us to say he's sorry he hoorawed yuh and to thank yuh and ask yuh out. We been around some and know what yuhr news reels like, and he's got slathers of stuff out to his place in the Hills, that yuh'd like and nobody else knows about, and gramp will trot 'em out for you alone."

"That's fine of him," smiled Eric. "But I must stick here."

"Lissen," whispered Bijé, confidentially. "He's got Wild Bill's pistol, Calamity Jane's boots, and the gun 'Deadwood' Charlie killed Wild Bill with. But the big stuff's this: He's trained a team of buffalo what he's gonna present to the president at Deadwood. He's located a big herd of wild buffalo hid in a valley nobody knows about, and he's gonna give 'em to the gov'ment. He'd like to let you photy-graft 'em private, ahead of the other fellers. It's a secret, remember."

This sounded like a real "beat" or scoop. Carver thought rapidly. If he

could film these buffalo this day and send it off by night, Midworld would be able to show the subject exclusively a half a week earlier than its rivals. Midworld could be showing it at Broadway theatres within a few days after the presentation, a beat which would aid its prestige.

CHAPTER IV.

TRAPPED.

IT doesn't seem possible a buffalo herd could exist undiscovered!" he commented. "Could we do it in a day?"

"Sure. Git yuh back by sundown," assured Bijé. "These Black Hills ain't much better knowed now than they ever been. Men flocked here fur gold, and when that petered out they quit, leaving it wild. They's plenty of valleys unexplored, but grandpa knows 'em all. He was one top-hand scout and trailer, and probably he uses a rifle to discourage any one coming near his valley. He ain't even let us see 'em."

"I'll go," vowed Eric, swiftly calculating that his next scheduled assignment, the Indian ceremony, was two days off.

Not a word to any one about what you're after," warned Bijé.

Carver nodded, and hurried to get his outfit. He kept his word to the letter, but did not feel bound not to leave Midworld unprotected during his absence. So he left a hasty note for Harper, reading:

Cover for Midworld if anything breaks today or if I fail to turn up in time for Deadwood. Have been invited by Ash Purvis' grandsons to call on old Ash himself.

CARVER.

That would serve to protect Midworld, if he could bank on Harper's sincerity. Eric had looked into the footage man's remorseful eyes, and was putting his faith in Harper's promise to stand by. It was a gamble on human nature, but Eric preferred to trust men until they were proven untrustworthy.

Bije and Grant led him to a mixed train, which dropped them at a jerk-water station—just a platform with no town. There were some dilapidated cabins, relics of mining days, in the hills adjacent, and from one of these Grant, who had not spoken a word during the entire trip, brought out three saddled horses. Carver's camera equipment was divided among the men for carrying, and with a tingling sense of advancing upon adventure, Eric rode into the hills.

Black they were, wild, rugged and difficult, with twisting valleys where Indians had hidden successfully in the '70s, dodging United States troopers and finally massacring Custer's command. In these dark, tree-screened gulches, black-hearted men had murdered men whose hands were yellow with newly found gold. Back somewhere was the trail along which the Deadwood coach fled from outlaws' guns. It was, indeed, a region rife with adventure.

When, past noon, Carver saw they still were riding on without any indication of approaching a destination, he announced:

"Boys, unless I can start working within the next half hour, I'll have to turn back in order to catch the only train. I can't risk being away from my post later than to-night."

"Larrup ahead, Grant, and see if we ain't most there," ordered Bije, and the other man, nodding silently, spurred ahead. He vanished around a turn in a narrow passage between two high rock faces masked by spruce and pines.

Where this notch narrowed so that only one man could ride through at a time, Bije fell back, letting Carver ride ahead. Jogging easily around the hemmed-in turn, the Midworld ace suddenly came face-to-face with Grant aiming a .45 at him. A trap!

"I've got yuh covered from behind. Stick 'em up," barked Bije directly at

his rear. "Reach fur the clouds and don't make any false motions if you don't want to be plugged in the back as well as the front. Keep him covered, Grant, while I search him."

"Shades of Deadwood Dick! does it take two of you to hold up one tender-foot?" demanded Carver, as Bije searched him, and took off his gun. "I never carry much money on a trip like this, so you've risked prison for mighty little loot."

"Don't worry about us going to prison," grunted Bije. "If yuh don't promise to keep quiet about this, you'll never leave these hills alive. We ain't holding yuh up. We're merely preventing yuh from snooping into a projeck we got under way. We know your pretending to be a photographer is jest a blind to cover being a snooper for certain big interests. You're trespassing on our land, so we'll jest detain yuh a few days until our deal is through. Now, march."

A few days? Long enough to prevent him from covering that Indian ceremony. Carver saw light!

"I was dumb to think you two knew anything about a news reel wanting to get stuff ahead of its competitors!" he exclaimed. "How much did Zanff promise you for tricking me? Be sure to collect in advance or he'll gyp you."

"Never heard of him," growled Bije, while Grant grunted. "And we ain't answering questions, so mush, feller, mush. We're easy to git along with if yuh behave, but if yuh don't, we may have to leave yuh out here fur keeps. Shut up and ride if yuh don't want a shot!"

By the end of that hour, they reached a cabin hidden in a gulch. Gruffly ordering Carver in at the points of their guns, the ruffianly pair followed into the one-room cabin. Its interior was bare, but its log walls were stout and tight, with only one other opening beside the door, a tiny window cut high on

the west wall. A rough, homemade table, and a plain chair were the only furnishings. Bijé and Grant tied Carver securely to the chair, with his hands bound behind him. "I'll ketch the evening train back and collect our second hundred while you guard him," announced Bijé, starting out.

"Hold on," growled Grant, breaking silence. "Gimme my half of the hundred he give yuh, in case he holds out or yuh don't git back."

"How you boys trust each other," sighed Carver. Addressing Grant, he asked: "Why don't you have Bijé give you this hundred and let him keep the second one when Zanff gives it to him?" Then you'll both be sure——"

"Nothing doing. Shut up!" shouted Bijé, angrily. "I near forgot, I gotter take back this feller's hat and a yard of film to prove we got him. How the devil do I git at it?"

He was pawing at the camera. Carver genially offered:

"Let me show you. I'd rather help you than have you wreck my machine trying."

"Aw, smash it," growled Grant, impatiently.

"Naw, we kin sell it for a good bit, if we decide to," retorted Bijé. "Go ahead, feller, and do it, and don't try anything rash."

Holding a gun on Carver, they untied him and ordered him to open the machine, which, he assured, was worth several hundred dollars. Seeing they had the drop and looked desperate enough to shoot on slight provocation, Eric made no attempt to resist, but obeyed leisurely, opening his camera and tearing off a yard of negative. This he inspected with assumed care, using a hand magnifying glass from his camera case and explaining he was making sure it wasn't exposed negative.

As Bijé impatiently seized the negative, Carver indifferently laid the mag-

nifier on the table and closed his case. Without delay the men tied him securely again and Bijé rode away, while taciturn Grant shouted:

"If that feller tries to hold out, tell him if he does we'll turn this feller loose and wise him up."

"Shut up," bawled Bijé, spurring away and disappearing.

CHAPTER V.

BIFFS AND BISONS.

ALTHOUGH no talker, Grant proved to be a perfect jailer. To escape Carver's questions and offers for freedom, the surly fellow went outside and locked the door with a stout lock he had brought. The cabin interior was lighted only by that little window hole, too narrow for exit, through which the afternoon sun's direct rays poured blindingly into the captive's face. Carver moved his head to avoid it, and rapidly schemed an escape.

This was interrupted by Grant returning indoors to feed Eric and give him a drink. Following this consideration, the ruffian gagged Carver, having thought out how to enforce silence. Then he settled comfortably in the doorway, where he could rest while watching his captive and keeping a lookout on the surrounding region. This vigil never relaxed, but on the contrary he frequently examined Carver's bonds.

Night came and passed, with Grant lying on a blanket before the closed door. If he slept at all, it was not for long, because he inspected the ropes several times before dawn. Carver tried to work out of the bonds but they were securely tied. Morning found him no nearer escape. In another twenty-four hours the Indian spectacle would be presented. Would he be there to cover? Eric vowed he would.

The day lengthened. Grant, after feeding his captive, sat in the open door-

way, holding a gun. In the afternoon an eager gasp from Carver drew his attention. The prisoner was staring delightedly at a distant hilltop. Grant glared suspiciously at him and at the hill, while Carver pretended not to be aware he had been detected.

Finally the guard, unable to restrain curiosity and apprehension, removed the gag and, emphasizing his question with a gun, demanded: "What was yuh gawping at? Answer square or I'll shoot."

"Didn't you see some men up there, looking for me?" countered Eric, reluctantly. "They must have seen you, and ducked."

His manner was so confident that Grant was impressed.

"I'll hide out there and bushwhack any one who tries to reach this cabin," he threatened, hurrying out and locking the door, leaving the prisoner ungagged.

Confident of an hour in which to work without being watched, Carver moved promptly. His chair had been tethered to the wall behind, to keep him from moving. By tipping the chair he gained enough slack to reach his feet to the table, and hooking his toes on a table leg, he drew it toward him. Time was precious; he worked fast.

Painfully, he bent forward and with his teeth seized the handle of the magnifier. He bent his head, and held the magnifier so that the direct rays from the sun were concentrated by this burning glass upon the rope around his body. It was a ticklish job, with the magnifier's handle threatening to slip from his mouth, but he hung on desperately.

Quickly the hemp at the point of concentrated sunlight began to smolder and then burst into flame. It scorched against his body dangerously, but Carver strained desperately until the burning strands parted, releasing him from the chair. While the rope continued

to burn as it dangled from the chair he cautiously thrust his wrist bonds into the tiny fire. Flame seared his flesh, but he managed so well that soon he was free.

Hastily upending the table, he broke off two of its stout legs, and then sprang to the door. He was none too soon, for a rattling of the lock announced that Grant had returned. As the man entered the gloomy room, Carver smashed a table leg against the hand gripping the gun, knocking it to the floor. Instantly the other club thudded down on Grant's head, and the fellow dropped, stunned. Before he could recover, he was tied up in the place of his late prisoner, and Carver was hurrying out with his own equipment and Grant's gun.

"Cuss yuh!" snarled the ruffian. "Think you're smart, but yuh'll never find yuhr way outer these hills in a week. And in an hour or so, Bije will be here and let me loose. When we track yuh down, yuh'll never leave the hills a-tall, never!"

There was a sinister, murderous ring to the ruffian's words that promised death. Carver debated a minute whether or not to wait there and capture Bije, leaving both tied. Each minute was precious now, and Bije might not return. With no further delay, the camera man rode off, leading Grant's horse on which he packed all his equipment. Holding the gun ready, he plunged through that trackless wilderness into which he had been lured. Within an hour he realized that Grant had predicted truly.

He was lost.

The turns and twists of those hills, canyons, and woods formed a maze which only a man who knew them could solve. Constantly on the alert for an ambush, he could not study out a trail, and blundered on blindly. Abruptly the sun sank behind the hills, leaving him in darkness. Before its light winked

out, Carver struck a creek, and there beside a big rock, he camped.

Strange noises among the trees warned him that wild animals were prowling near by. To ward off chill and scare away the animals, he built a fire. Its light made him a target for any human skulker, but he had to take that risk. At least the big towering rock would shelter him on one side.

Wearied by the day's trials, he sank down, to rest until dawn, when he would attempt to get out by daylight. Although the odds all were heavily against a tenderfoot finding his way out of those hills in a day, he grimly determined he would do it. He had to get out in time to reach that Indian ceremony.

Startlingly, the near-by brush crackled.

At the sinister sound, Carver dropped instantly out of the firelight and leveled the rifle. Crouched in darkness, he waited tensely, wondering if Bijé and Grant had trailed him. Crackling sounded from a different direction.

It advanced ominously and ceased. Eric challenged: "Who's there? Halt or I'll shoot!"

Directly behind him rose a cackle, then a thin voice said: "Don't shoot, sonny. I could 'a' salivated yuh before yuh savvied I was here. It's Purvis, come friendly to return yore favor."

Old Ash appeared beside him, hands raised, holding a rifle.

"Stop!" ordered Carver. "If you're in with your grandsons——"

"Dang them skunks!" bleated the old scout. "Them scum, passing themselves off as my grandsons! Me, what's been bachelor these seventy-five year! Made me so r'aring mad, when that feller Harper come to me and told me, that I hit this trail to fix 'em. They're jest two hill buzzards what's been tracking me fur years, trying to learn what I got out here.

"Think I must 'a' gave away suthin' once when I was lickered, but them buzzards ain't smart enough to trail me. My only kin is a grandnephew. I lives with him in Deadwood, and I been keepin' my secret to sell fur his benefit, now he's of age."

This was news indeed.

"Harper went to you?" prompted Carver.

"Yep. He knowed I hadn't no children, let alone grandsons, so he suspicioned 'em when he read yore note," said Purvis. "He found out from the train conductor whar yuh got off and, knowing I'm the man what knows these hills best, he come to me and got me so mad with that 'grandsons' yarn that I agreed to trail yuh.

"I was laying in wait at that whistling post to-day when Bijé Heebles got off the train and rode inter the hills to a cabin whar I reckon yuh was kept. I trailed and snuck up close in time to hear Bijé and Grant Larson yelling at each other. Grant yowled that yuh'd escaped and sure would lose yourself in these hills.

"Bijé bellered that the feller what plotted to trap yuh had held out on him when Bijé went to collect, so Bijé come boiling back, only to find yuh gone and Grant tied up. Grant accused Bijé of gitting the money and holding out, and Bijé come back by charging that Grant had sold out to yuh and was holding out on *him*. While they were pounding each other, I whammed 'em with my gun, tied 'em up, and started on yore trail."

Swiftly Carver told his story. Purvis had realized his debt of gratitude, and now he paid. Resting until gray dawn, he guided Eric until, at sunup, they looked down into a hidden valley where a hundred wild buffalo grazed, unsuspected by men. Purvis had discovered them years ago, and had blocked the valley exit so that the herd could be held to increase. Recently he had ar-

ranged secretly to sell them—the only wild buffalo herd at large. Bije had invented the yarn about the presentation span, to lure Carver.

After filming this splendid exclusive, Carver hurried on. The old trail maker laid a direct course to the railroad, landing Carver in Deadwood that afternoon in time to shoot footage of the Indian ceremonial.

When the rush was over, Carver looked around and then asked: "Where's Zanff? I haven't seen him anywhere round here."

"You won't," grinned Harper.

"Zanff was found in his room yesterday, gagged and beaten up so badly that he'll be in bed several days. A rough fellow called the night before, but as Looey admitted him, nobody bothered to stop him when he left. Zanff won't say why he was slugged, but he is frothing mad because that fellow carried off his camera—a late model and the best of its kind."

Thinking of Midworld's buffalo "exclusive," Carver smiled.

"Maybe somebody told him he could sell a camera for a couple of hundred," he remarked, mysteriously.



THE ART OF THE LARIAT

THE art of the lariat is one that depends as much upon the horse as it does upon the puncher who swings the rope. Indeed, in the majority of cases the horse plays the more important part in the roping of steers. The rider must play his rope out, twirl his noose, and make his throw with speed and dexterity, but without the unflinching watchfulness of the pony the whole action would be but lost motion.

As soon as the puncher has made his throw, he snubs the lariat around his saddle horn, and from then on the valiant pony conducts the battle in most instances. Coincidentally with the snubbing of the rope the horse stops short and squats on his haunches, his front feet stiff before him. He keeps his eyes on the roped beast, and as the steer rolls one way or the other the horse pivots on his haunches, so that he is always facing the fallen steer. That leaves the rider free to dismount and tie the animal up.

The horse of a puncher must ever be on the alert when a cast of the lariat is made. Unless horse and rider are facing directly toward or away from the steer to be roped, both will surely crash over when the jerk on the rope comes. A clever pony can put himself into position with a quick whirl if the rider has made the throw out of position.

In spite of the fact that the sagacious little cow ponies are quick to help the punchers out of an awkward situation, and go about their business with their customary cleverness even after numerous spills, they are particularly canny about inexcusable upsets. If a puncher once makes a fool mistake and so causes a bad spill, he will never again make a successful throw from the back of that horse.

The pony will be as meek and amiable as a dove, but as soon as the puncher looses his cast the horse will make a slight swerve that will invariably drop the lariat short of its mark.

The Redemption of Rusty~

By

H.R. Marshall~

(COMPLETE IN THIS ISSUE)

CHAPTER I.

AT DIZZY HEIGHTS.



RUSTY" CROMWELL nudged his long-haired pony into the narrow opening of Jaw-Bone Canyon. "Come along, Pizen!" he ordered. "There's color ahead! Red oxide, blue-greens and yellows! Plenty of color! See it up there on the wall? And where there's color there's apt to be wealth—that's a prospector's law. Believe me, Pizen, old hoss, we could use a little wealth to lift the mortgage on the R-C rancho!"

Enthusiasm and excitement rang through the voice of Rusty Cromwell; it lighted his blue eyes and lean, brown face. Rapidly he urged his horse up the narrow, rock-walled canon, dodging the evenly spaced barrel cacti and oca-tilla, leaping sun-bleached boulders and low clumps of encelia.

"Come along, Pizen!" he repeated. "Get excited! Say, it'd be great to be rich after six years of fighting the cattle market! Yep! I may be a bum rancher, but a good prospector, who can tell? Hold up there! Here we are!"

The desert man swung from his horse at the base of an upward-angling ledge. For a moment he stood there, head raised to study the telltale mineral stains on the wall high above. It was easy now, to see why he was called Rusty: yellow-red hair glinting in the morning sun; brown face, eager and



boyish; thin, whipcord figure. Even his costume of khaki trousers, leather puttees and brown flannel shirt, open at the bronzed throat, seemed worn to justify his name.

"Oxide, sure'n shooting!" he announced excitedly, to his pony. "Looks like copper stain, too, and crumbling quartz. The sun has to hit it just right to show it off; that's why the desert rats have missed it. Pizen, old hoss, your master is no rancher; he's a 'hard-pan Pete' and he's going up to his fortune!"

For the first hundred feet the climb up the ledge of decomposed granite was easy enough. Then the little shelf narrowed rapidly and hung precariously out over the rock-strewn canyon floor. Along it, edging forward foot by foot, Rusty Cromwell climbed. Once he stopped to stare down at his horse below and was amazed at the distance he had ascended.

The wealth-promising formation was just ahead. It glowed in brighter colors now, an oriental pattern of reds and blues and yellows which was almost dazzling—a lodestone brilliant enough to lure any desert man. Rusty Cromwell edged closer. The ledge un-

derstood was so narrow now that he had to find fingerholds in the fissures above to keep his balance. Nearer, nearer, he crept, nearer——

Without warning the shelf of decomposed granite under the feet of Rusty Cromwell dropped out into space. It clattered and rumbled down the mountain side, poured in great shattering pieces to the canyon floor. A dust cloud swirled upward, and high above it, twisting and squirming against the sheer cliff, hung a man. His left hand alone held his body from the death drop of two hundred feet to the piled rocks below him.

The dust cloud hung lazily in the hot desert air; gradually it swung out of Jaw-Bone Canyon to the desert. And still the desert man hung out over space. His body had revolved now and his back was to the sheer rock wall. Tenaciously his left hand clung, twisted as it was. His face, a moment before bronzed and animated, had become a sickly yellow mask; his eyes, ordinarily clear blue and half-closed to the desert glare, were horror-stricken. Rusty was looking straight into the face of death.

At his feet lay the pile of shattered black-white granite; beyond flowed the desert, billowing and rolling its waves of greasewood and sage to the distant mountain-bounded horizon. But the desert was deaf, unfeeling, impervious to man's danger and man's suffering.

The seconds passed. There was no sound, now that the mountain walls had ceased to echo the clatter of the falling granite; no motion, except the pulsating dance of heat waves above the desert floor, and, high on the precipice, a squirming little figure which showed black against the sun-reddened granite.

Minute, worthless, wormlike, that figure seemed. Even the fresh scar, graven black and shadowy against the red cliff, appeared far more important than the human being which twisted above it.

Suddenly another reverberation sounded. The struggling man had kicked a rock loose. It clattered down the mountain wall as if it were the joyous forerunner of the human body which seemed doomed to follow it in a moment.

Young Rusty Cromwell was not through, however. Slowly, agonizingly, he swung himself around again until he faced the treacherous wall. His right hand reached up, its fingers seeking some crevice above. Higher he must reach, higher! He strained desperately. His left arm, aching and almost paralyzed, strove to raise his twisting body, but its strength was lacking.

Now he maneuvered desperately. Slowly, carefully, he set his body to swinging, pendulumlike. Each moment it seemed that the clenched, nerveless fingers of his left hand must lose their grip. A wider arc his body made; his right hand clawed frantically overhead. Suddenly it found a crevice and clung.

CHAPTER II.

A BATTLE WITH FEAR.

SO much was gained—momentary security—no more. But Rusty could rest his numbed left arm now. The respite was short. He felt both arms tiring rapidly. If he were to cheat death, he must move.

There on the wall of the cliff began a strange, pendulous retreat from death's portals. Inch by inch the desert man edged his hands along the crevice and swung his body after them. His fingers were cut to the bone by the sharp rock edges; his muscles seemed leaden, almost useless. But it was death which was being fought, and man's tenaciousness at such a moment is God-given.

Once a bit of rock broke off under that gripping right hand and Rusty's body swung wildly from the precipice.

The odds seemed too great against him; death loomed as the certain victor. But back against the wall the prospector rebounded and his right hand caught a surer grip.

Five feet to the right was the jagged end of the ledge which remained after the miniature landslide. Only five feet, —but five feet to be traveled inch by inch, testing, feeling each grip, while the man's body hung two hundred feet above a rock pile.

Rusty Cromwell reached his goal. To his horror he found that his feet didn't quite touch the ledge. He must drop to it. Less than a foot he would descend, yet he dared not release his grip. The nerves of the man were shattered. Visions of his body bounding from the shelf and out into space swept through his mind, followed by other visions of the shelf breaking under his weight, and he clung to the crevice desperately.

Exhaustion accomplished what courage did not. His clutching fingers became powerless, and, still clawing, he fell to the shelf. For a moment he toppled on its edge, then desperately threw himself prone against the wall.

For minutes that seemed eternities Rusty Cromwell remained on the granite ledge, powerless to move. His pounding heart seemed to shake his whole body, to shake the very mountain. Although heat waves were refracted from the wall beside him, his body was soaked with cold perspiration. Nausea surged over him, followed by a deathly faintness. His eyes were tightly shut as if to keep out horrible visions.

At last the man's eyes flickered open. His head was projecting out over the edge of the ledge. He stared into space, out over the canyon and the rocks below him. He shuddered convulsively and hunched his body closer to the wall. No one could ever know, ever imagine, the horror of those moments.

To regain his feet was a matter of many, many minutes. First came the stage where Rusty Cromwell wormed his way along the ledge; then he rose on his hands and knees and crawled. The ledge broadened rapidly, but it was as wide as a road before the fear-smitten man dared stand. Then he fled frantically, as if death still pursued him, down to the canyon floor. There he flung himself on the sand and rubble and spread his arms as if to hug it all.

"Whew!" he breathed after a moment, "that was a close one! It scared the living daylights out of me! I feel as weak as a baby."

He rose and tottered a few steps toward the patiently waiting Pizen, then, "Here. This won't do!" he exclaimed. "I'm soaking wet with cold sweat again." He threw back his shoulders and raised his head. "Yank out of it!" he muttered. "Snap out of it!"

Fear had bitten too deeply into the soul of Rusty Cromwell to be shaken off; during those horrible moments up on the ledge he had lost his greatest heritage—courage.

Another man could not have frightened him, withering heat or thirst or quick death would have found him unafraid, but those agonizing moments of struggle against height and space had, in some strange manner, snapped his moral fiber. Now, when he swung himself to Pizen's back, a third wave of weakness swept over him. Even that mean height from the ground frightened him horribly.

The lean, brown jaw of Rusty Cromwell set. He slid from Pizen and strode straight back to the ledge. His eyes glinted uncertainly, but up the rock shelf he went, planting his feet with the fierceness of a hot will. Young Rusty Cromwell was determined to conquer it once and for all, to regain the old-time courage which he had left up there on the mountain wall. Game

were his efforts, but he reckoned without his limitations.

Ten feet up the ledge he hesitated; his yellow-white face turned and gazed piteously out over the desert, then at the space below. And now he was through. The surge of weakness and nausea was far too great to repel. For a single breath he tottered on the edge of the shelf. His thin body swung in arcs like an eucalyptus tree in a wind storm. At last he plunged, head foremost, out into space.

Rusty Cromwell had not conquered Fear. He had made his fight, but Fear had thrown him, a limp, warped figure, on to the rock pile.

The desert pony, Pizen, sniffed at that grotesquely sprawled form; he sniffed again and whinnied and waited. At last, thirsty and hungry, the horse loped away, leaving the huddled black mass alone on the sun-bleached rocks.

CHAPTER III.

GREAT HEARTS.

LITTLE RUTH BIRDSALL and "Big Bill" Avery, the huge blond major-domo of the R-C rancho, found that limp body warped on the stone pile, found it at dusk, when purple shadows were creeping up Jaw-Bone Canyon and coyotes had begun their nightly wail.

Big Bill had instituted the search when Pizen returned to the corral without the young boss. Likely enough, the major-domo reasoned, Rusty Cromwell was visiting the Birdsall ranch-house—the whole desert knew that he spent plenty of time, and may be too much, with that little sprite of a Ruth Birdsall. Probably Pizen, tired of awaiting the end of his master's courting, had jiggled home. But at the same time—well, when a riderless horse returns it is a desert law to seek the rider lest he die before the insensate cruelty of the wasteland.

The first and logical move of Big Bill Avery was to visit the Birdsall homestead. Rusty Cromwell was not there, but Ruth Birdsall was, as pretty and light-hearted as ever. Her mood changed quickly when Big Bill began to question her. Ten minutes later the two of them were racing eastward to pick up Pizen's track.

Luck was with them; so, too, was the sinister message of three buzzards which wheeled against the coppery sky toward the mountains. They found tracks—perhaps Pizen's—and they read, fearsomely, the warning of the carrion birds. Then the wide, purple-blue eyes of Ruth Birdsall saw a black form against the rocks of Jaw-Bone Canyon. Recklessly she galloped toward it, her yellow hair flying, her face suddenly white and smitten.

"Rusty!" she called, sliding from her little pony beside that limp figure. Her heart was in her voice. "Rusty!"

Now she was leaning over the grotesquely warped hulk, pleading, while Big Bill Avery stood helplessly beside her.

"Rusty! Oh, Rusty!"

The eyes of Rusty Cromwell flickered open. Very quickly they shut again, but in that single instant the girl had seen that they were very strange. Rusty Cromwell's eyes were empty, shallow; something had gone from them, something of strength and self-reliance, and in its place a demon peered out—Fear.

"Oh, Rusty, what is it? Tell me, what is it?"

The man's lips moved. "I—I fell," he declared apologetically. "I fell."

"But where are you hurt? Tell me. What's the matter?"

Again Rusty Collins opened his eyes and stared into the girl's white face. He strove to tell her what had happened to him, of his fight with Fear and his final defeat. But he couldn't. He could only repeat, "I fell."

Big Bill Avery took a hand in the situation. "Ruth," he ordered, "you get on your pinto and ride hell-bent to Indian Wells for Dr. Sedgwick. I'll get Rusty home. Sure I will. You just help me get him on my horse and then ride for the doctor pronto. He'll be all right. Sure, he'll be all right."

Neither Big Bill nor Ruth Birdsall understood at the time why Rusty Cromwell moaned with agony when they lifted him to the saddle. They thought that movement had brought physical pain, little imagining that the fear of even such a height had wrung that moan from the man.

The last rays of the setting sun showed two bits of motion on the gray desert floor. Westward plodded a horse carrying on its back a lacerated, dust-covered figure which was supported tenderly by Big Bill Avery; eastward a pony bearing a girl raced recklessly.

Straight across the floor of the waste land Ruth Birdsall spurred her mount.

Horse and rider became as one being. Now they rose rapidly through the encelia and buckthorn to the crest of Juniper Mesa; they clattered across the top and slipped down into the greasewood again. Dodging boulders, circling beds of cholla cactus which showed faintly red in the growing dusk, horse and girl raced.

In the ears of Ruth Birdsall echoed and reechoed that fearful moan of the man she loved. She strove to forget it as she spurred her horse recklessly forward, strove to remember instead the words of Big Bill Avery: "He'll be all right. Sure, he'll be all right."

CHAPTER IV.

THE CONSPIRACY.

HE wasn't all right. Dr. Sedgwick had come, made a thorough examination, and gone. He, too, had declared that Rusty Cromwell would be himself again when he recovered from

the shock of his fall. But Rusty didn't seem to recover from that shock.

He was up in a week—but not the old Rusty Cromwell—a pitiful shadow of the man, rather. He seemed spiritless, uncertain, with no zest for anything. His old air of blithe independence had left him; in its place was a queer cringing.

Strange things now happened on the R-C rancho. Young Boss Cromwell, who had rarely been out of the saddle during daylight hours, never threw a leg over a horse; he who was always in the thick of a rodeo or fighting a stampede now took precious care of his own hide.

Boss Cromwell, who had always been willing enough with his fists, one day backed away from an insolent little Mexican fence-rider, and as he retreated he pulled a gun and shrilled frightened words of warning.

Fine goings-on such things were at the R-C; fine it was for the owner and leader to sit silent hour after silent hour in the sun, then sneak into the house at dusk and lock it! They knew now, the vaqueros and Big Bill Avery; even Ruth Birdsall knew—Rusty Cromwell was a despicable coward!

In a primitive land the sick man, the maimed man, is pitied. But for the mentally sick man there is nothing except jeering contempt and utter aversion. So Rusty Cromwell, once so highly admired and respected, was now despised and ridiculed.

Dr. Sedgwick stopped occasionally at the ranch house. Each time he left with a baffled look in his old gray eyes. Yet he always told Ruth Birdsall the same thing: "Shock, just shock, my girl. He'll be the old Rusty before you know it."

As the weeks and months passed Rusty Cromwell was still lying, figuratively, on the rock pile where Fear had thrown him, lying there limp and warped and beaten.

Naturally enough, the two people in the world who most loved Rusty Cromwell conspired in an effort to rescue him from the clutches of fear.

Ruth Birdsall and Big Bill Avery met far out on the desert, there where Salt Barranca cut the border line between the Birdsall and R-C ranchos. Their meeting was not accidental, as both pretended it to be, but a carefully maneuvered affair which began with the discussion of feed and cattle and turned rapidly to conspiracy against Rusty Cromwell.

"See anything of that Herbert Clay any more, Miss Ruth?" demanded Big Bill Avery, nervously twirling his fierce spread-eagle mustache.

"Why, no. Why should I?"

"Well, I was just wonderin'. Wonderin' why you didn't meet up with him some time and bring him around to the R-C."

The girl stared at the big major-domo in complete mystification. "Are you trying to warn me away from Rusty?" she demanded angrily. "Do you think he's such a total loss that you want to find another man for me? In that case, Big Bill, you can mind your own——"

"What I was thinkin'," drawled Big Bill, "was that mebbe you might tote that Herbie Clay over and show him to Rusty. It might rouse Rusty a little, and he sure needs rousin'."

"I see." A frown of thoughtfulness cut Ruth Birdsall's little forehead. "You think that because Herbert Clay has made love to me——"

"And because Rusty hates him," interrupted Big Bill, "and has warned him never to show his face on the R-C again, that sight of him might make Rusty get up on his hind legs and fight. Specially if——"

"Well?"

"If you'd kinda act real friendly with Herbie Clay, and mebbe egg him on to make some remarks in front of Rusty,

kinda sarcastic and boastful, like Herbie is full of. You could egg him into that, couldn't you, Miss Ruth?"

"I could get Herbert Clay to do anything," the girl declared quietly. "He's already hanging around our corral again, trying to get his eyes on me."

"Well," said Big Bill Avery, staring across the sea of greasewood and at last fixing his half-closed eyes on a herd of cattle whose heads bobbed above the brittle desert growth, "there's the High-Society herd. Aim to cut out about three hundred of 'em to ship to the fattenin' farms of Illinois—— It might work, Miss Ruth. Herbie Clay ain't good for much, but he might be the dynamite which would blow poor Rusty out of the muck."

"Might," agreed Ruth Birdsall. "Are you loading at Cactus Siding?"

So the conversation was back to cattle again, but it was not of cattle Big Bill Avery and Ruth Birdsall were thinking; rather it was of a vacant-eyed young man, who sat in the sun at the R-C ranch house and stared listlessly out into space.

CHAPTER V.

SHATTERED HOPE.

RUSTY CROMWELL was sitting just that way when Ruth Birdsall and Herbert Clay rode up three days later. Clay was the proprietor of the Turtle Foot dude ranch, three miles east of the R-C, and a rare business success.

Clay was not unattractive either, with his gracefully slender body and his sharply cut features. Perhaps his eyes, brown-black, were a trifle shifty, uneasy, rodentlike, and this morning they were particularly unstable. Plainly he had no relish for meeting Rusty Cromwell.

"Lo, Rusty!" called Ruth Birdsall, swinging her calico pony in front of the brooding man's chair.

Rusty Cromwell started convulsively,

then caught grip on himself and smiled. "Hello, Ruth. Glad to see you." There was none of the old-time ring in his voice.

"I brought Herb Clay over," the girl explained. "I told him you might be interested in selling out the R-C to him."

"Sell out?" repeated Rusty Cromwell. "Sell out? Why?" He stared at the girl and then at Clay, who was nudging his horse close to the girl's side. At sight of Clay, Rusty made a motion to rise, then sank back wearily in his chair. "Why would I sell out?"

Herbert Clay stared at the broken man in the chair. His quick eyes read the situation and his assurance returned. "Sure you ought to sell out, Rusty," he said. His tone and manner was that of one addressing a child. "Sell out and get out. This isn't any place for a man in your condition."

"My condition?"

"Sure, sure. You haven't any business on the desert any more. Sell out and go to a sanitarium, take a rest cure."

Clay was taking every advantage of Rusty Cromwell's condition now, showing off in front of the girl, lording it over the man who had once lorded it over him. He was enjoying himself, and he intended to make the most of his moment of triumph.

"The desert isn't any place for a sick man, Rusty. Sell out to me. I'll take over the mortgage and give you enough more to start you in the grocery business. Or maybe a meat market, eh?"

Once again Rusty Cromwell made a half-hearted effort to rise, while Ruth Birdsall watched him with anxious, pain-filled eyes. But it was she who applied the final goad.

"You see, Rusty," she said, "if Herb owned the R-C, his land would run right over to ours, and maybe some time——" She turned and smiled into the face of Herbert Clay.

Rusty Cromwell understood. A flood of agony swept over his face and paused in his eyes. He forced himself to his feet. His fists were clenched. Momentarily there was that characteristic tautening of the jaw muscles, a frown of determination. Now was the time he would rouse from his lethargy, now was the time he would overcome fear.

"I—I—I——" he stammered. "Clay, get out of here!" He gazed helplessly at his rival, the man who would take his ranch and steal his girl from him. "Clay, get out of here before I—I——"

Then suddenly, unexpectedly, Rusty Cromwell caved in, fell back in his chair. Quickly his arms rose to shield his shame-tortured face.

"Come on, Herb!" called Ruth Birdsall. Her contralto voice was suddenly hard, and she kept her face averted as she spun her pony and prodded with spurs. Fine white dust from the pony's hoofs rose in a cloud, hung lazily in the air, then descended over the limp, face-hidden figure of Rusty Cromwell.

A mile from the R-C ranch house Ruth Birdsall tersely dismissed Clay. He had played his part, and now she wished to be alone. Straight for Salt Barranca she rode. Her little head was held regally high, her features were set, but from time to time her lips quivered.

There in the sand beside the barranca Big Bill Avery found the girl. She was lying face downward, her fair hair blending with the sand and her little body shaking convulsively. At sound of Big Bill's approach she raised her tear-stained face.

"He wouldn't—didn't?" asked the big major-domo.

The girl shook her head. "He couldn't," she said. "He hardly tried, and Herbert was insulting, too. Oh, I hate Rusty now, hate him! And——" Sobbing made her words incoherent.

Big Bill Avery stared out over the desert again. He seemed to be watching

the heat waves as they danced, feathery light, neatly arranged.

"I shipped the cattle all right, Miss Ruth," he said. "There'll be a nice profit for the R-C." He was silent for a moment. "They say that a man never comes back. Sure they say it. And, I believe it now! We've used up our last ace, Miss Ruth, and Rusty can't come back."

His leathery old face twisted; he cleared his throat, made a few futile motions with his hamlike hands. Then he loped away, head down, sorrowing.

Behind him the girl's fair hair again blended with the sand; behind him, crouched low in the brush, Herbert Clay smiled his satisfaction at the turn of events, and farther behind him, back on the northern horizon, a glowing yellow cloud was gathering.

The three people, completely occupied with their own parts in the little human drama, failed to notice Nature's preparations for a drama of cataclysmic action.

CHAPTER VI.

PRANKS OF FATE.

BIG BILL had almost reached the adobe bunk house of the R-C rancho before the first blast of wind hit him. He turned quickly, raising his huge red face to sniff the air. His eyes studied the yellow glow on the northern horizon. Around him little spirals of sand dust whisked up and went swirling in and out among the regularly spaced greasewood.

"*Whew!*" said Big Bill. "In for a sand storm, eh?"

Suddenly he thought of the girl, lying back there on the edge of Salt Baranca. His eyes clouded with a moment's anxiety and he hesitated, nudging his mount half around. "She's desert wise if a girl ever was," he decided. "She'll beat it for home at the first blast." He hastened toward the corral

to get his horse unsaddled before the real fury of the approaching storm struck.

After that first fierce blast of hot, sand-laden air there was a moment of calm, almost vacuum. Then came the second blast, stronger than the first, carrying its millions of particles of flesh-stinging sand. And now the storm swept by in ever-increasing fury.

The desert landscape disappeared as if a curtain had been lowered; in its place was a swirling yellow cloud, dancing, driving, obliterating everything. Green-black creosote bushes suddenly flattened and remained flat under weight of wind and the great waves of sand which flowed across the desert, leaping and swirling dervishly. The wind shrieked, moaned, screamed with glee.

A maelstrom, a seething, yellow maelstrom had suddenly caught up the desert and tossed it in the air. Woe to any living creature that hadn't found cover!

Big Bill Avery had only thirty steps to take from corral to bunk house, but each of those thirty steps was a man's fight. Like millions of red-hot needles the driven sand pierced his face, ground his eyes. The storm was an immense emery wheel, nature's sandpaper, grinding all things before it.

His massive head shielded by his arms, Big Bill staggered and fought his way against the seventy-mile wind, fought it foot by foot until he could plunge into the bunk house. Inside the atmosphere was heavy, dust-laden. None of the cowboys had returned; all had sought shelter, undoubtedly, in the various line camps.

The gloomy desolateness of the bunk house caused Big Bill's anxiety to return. He twisted his blond mustache uneasily. Surely little Ruth Birdsall would note the approach of the storm in time to reach her ranch house. Even if she had been lying face down, her

ears would catch the roar of the wind, the rasp of sand. If not—well, if not—

Shadows shifted and grew larger in the little bunk house; the yellow murkiness became denser. Outside the wind roared and shrilled demoniacally, each minute growing stronger, more furious, and each minute Big Bill Avery's anxiety mounted.

Suddenly the door blew open. As Big Bill leaped to fight it shut a man pitched into the room. It was Rusty Cromwell, red-eyed, fear-smitten. He clutched Big Bill, clung to him childishly. His face was yellow, even yellower than the mask of dust which covered it, and his features contorted uncontrollably.

"The wind," he cried. "The wind! It's awful! It's blowing the ranch house over. It's shrieking and yelling at me. It's trying to get me!" He buried his face in his hands. "Help me, Bill!" he begged.

Once more Fear was playing its pranks on Rusty Cromwell. But Big Bill Avery was in no mood for pranks. Stern action was needed now.

"Get into a bunk," he ordered shortly. "Hide your head and shut up!"

He spun his boss toward the corner bunk and whirled to the north window where he stood staring anxiously out into the swirling yellow cloud.

CHAPTER VII.

THE UNMAPPED TRAIL.

THE bunk-house door burst open. Into the little low-ceilinged room staggered old Richard Birdsall. His face was covered with a yellow sand mask through which tears had traced their uneven course like streams across the desert floor. His clothes were twisted, almost blown from him, his white hair sand-filled; at the base of his neck and in every sag of his shirt were pockets of grit.

"Birdsall!" exclaimed Big Bill. "Get caught out in it?"

"No," gasped the old man. "I *came* out in it."

"Trying suicide, eh? I didn't know a horse would face it."

"Face it!" choked Birdsall. "Face it? Say, me and the horse just rode that wind's back right against your dobe. Ride? I didn't ride a horse more'n a rabbit, and Pie-Eye didn't run. We just blew. But I had to be sure Ruth was all right. I knew she was over here, but——"

"You mean," demanded Big Bill, "that Ruth didn't get back? She didn't get back? You mean she didn't——"

Two big men looked at each other; each read the fright on the other's face.

"Then she isn't here after all," declared Richard Birdsall quietly. "She's out in that hell!"

"Out in that hell," repeated Big Bill. "Out somewhere between here and Salt Barranca. I left her there two hours ago."

"But she must have seen the storm coming," the father protested. "She's desert wise, and the storm has been as plain as mud since noon."

"I didn't notice it," Big Bill said. "Of course my back was to it most of the time. But the girl——"

"What?"

"She was lying face down in the sand and——"

"Why was she lying face down in the sand?"

The answer came crawling across the floor—Rusty Cromwell, creeping back to Big Bill Avery, mumbling for protection. Big Bill indicated the cringing figure with his foot.

"That's why," he said. "She played her last trump to-day, trying to make a man of him. And he reneged!"

"Bill! Bill!" came Rusty's call. "It's getting worse." His fingers clawed at his protector.

Big Bill pushed the frantic hands

aside. "Get to hell out of here!" he rumbled. "We've got men's work ahead of us, and you ain't a man."

"But Bill, Bill——"

Then Big Bill Avery's anger broke in its full fury. Goaded by disappointment, worry, contempt, he picked up the figure of Rusty Cromwell as if he were a kitten and threw him across the room toward the bunk.

"Get to hell out of here, I said!" he roared. "You're to blame for all of this!" He turned to Birdsall. "We've got to find her. And gosh-awful quick, too!"

Richard Birdsall nodded. "Mebbe I could get back to rout out some of my boys," he suggested indecisively.

"And mebbe not," scoffed Big Bill. "You never could get back in this wind. We'll be lucky to get even as far back as Salt Barranca, and you know it."

Again the old man nodded. "Well, let's go," he said.

He tightened his belt, wrapped his clothes more tightly to his thin body and stepped toward the door. Big Bill Avery strode beside him.

"Where you going?"

It was the voice of Rusty Cromwell, a hoarse, fear-rasped voice. He had raised his head, sensing that his protectors were leaving him.

"Going?" called Big Bill over his shoulder. "Going out to try to find the girl who's out there. Ruth Birdsall. Your girl. Only I guess she's Herbie Clay's girl now."

"Ruth's out there?" Rusty asked slowly.

"You've said it! Come on, Birdsall, we're off!"

A blast of wind and sand swirled into the room as the door opened. Out into the storm had gone Big Bill Avery and Richard Birdsall, out into the torturing, wind-driven sand, seeking little Ruth Birdsall.

Alone in the bunk house, Rusty Cromwell rose to his feet. He seemed

to have changed. He was straighter, his shoulders were held farther back. In the murkiness of the little room he seemed to gain height and breadth, to loom suddenly larger, more powerful. But it was his eyes which had changed most; there were depths in them again, and a glint in the depths.

Momentarily he cringed as a terrific blast of wind shook the bunk house. Then he planted his feet firmly ahead of him, strode toward the door. Perhaps he'd not find it now, perhaps he'd never find it, but young Rusty Cromwell was seeking—seeking the road to courage, the unmapped, sand-buried trail to courage and Ruth Birdsall.

CHAPTER VIII.

ALONG THE ROAD.

IT took Big Bill Avery and Richard Birdsall two hours to reach Salt Barranca, two hours of torture, facing and fighting the seering sand blast. They failed to find Ruth Birdsall. In the blinding fury of the storm they passed within ten yards of the cove where the girl had taken protection—passed and failed to see her.

She was not alone. Herbert Clay was with her. He had seen the approach of the storm before she had, ridden up to her there on the edge of Salt Barranca, and roused her from her lethargy.

"We'll stay here," he shouted above the roar of the wind. His voice was swirled away in the sand-laden gale, and he put his lips close to the girl's startled face. "We'll stay here," he shouted again. "In the Barranca until this blows over." He lowered his head to catch the girl's answer.

"Stay here?" she cried. "Without water? Sand burying us? We've got to keep going. The storm may last two or three days. We wouldn't live through it."

"But we'll have to stay! We'll get

lost sure if we go out in this! It'd be suicide! Over here! Under the north bank!"

Reluctantly the girl accepted Clay's decision and fought her way to the lee of the sheltering bank. There the two sat while the wind shrieked above them with its burden of sand, swirling it around them, dropping it over them.

Once the girl stirred and raised her head; she thought she sensed human motion out there in the sand cloud, but the biting grit blinded her to the two figures—Big Bill Avery and her father—who staggered past.

The eyes of Herbert Clay, too, were red and inflamed, but in them was a glint of satisfaction. After this perilous, terrifying experience, he realized, Ruth Birdsall would be welded to him with a new bond, a strong bond. The girl seemed to appreciate that fact, for suddenly she nestled closer; her purple-blue eyes gazed up through smarting tears.

"Herbert," she called, "I'm glad you're with me!"

The man smiled his satisfaction. Already he was feeling quite possessive, but he couldn't resist one gibe. "Bet old Rusty's scared to death at this storm!" he shouted.

Perhaps the old Rusty was "scared to death," but eastward along the Barranca's bed a new Rusty fought his way and staggered and fought again. A strange, scarecrow figure he was, his eyes as red as railway flares, his face raw. Great cracks had opened in his lips, his clothes were almost twisted from his weary body. With head down behind shielding arms he struggled ahead, pausing occasionally to stare into the whirling yellow cloud around him. He was seeking a little fair-haired girl.

He almost missed her; he almost staggered past those two sand-covered figures in the lee of the bank as Big Bill and Birdsall had done. Suddenly

Rusty cried out. His voice was blown away in the wind, but at that moment the girl raised her head as if she felt his presence. She, too, uttered a cry; she flung herself toward that tottering, sand-bitten figure in the center of the barranca.

"Rusty!" she cried. "Were you looking for me?"

Words were useless, whirled away in the storm, yet Rusty Cromwell understood. He smiled down at the girl, a wry, twisted smile. "Ruth! Ah, Ruth, I've found you!"

The girl smiled back at him, and he read the thought in her eyes. Yes, perhaps he had found himself, too. "And now," he yelled, "we're going home!"

He took the girl in his arms, afraid lest he lose her in the maelstrom of sand, and turned to fight his way back along the barranca to a point north of the R-C ranch house. There he could rise from the dry wash which offered such precious protection and let the wind carry him and his human burden to the shelter of the house. He was oblivious to Herbert Clay, oblivious to everything except the girl in his arms and the storm he must fight.

Suddenly a hand caught his shoulder, pulled at him, stopped him. He turned. Clay was tugging at him and at Ruth Birdsall.

Rusty shook off the detaining hand and strode ahead. Again he was clutched from behind.

"Don't be crazy!" Clay bellowed to the girl. "It's suicide to go out in that now! Especially with a man like that! Stay here with me and let that crazy fool go to the devil!"

A second time Rusty Cromwell shook off Herbert Clay's hand. "We're going to the ranch house!" he shouted. "You can come if you want to!"

"Like hell you are!" Clay's voice was high and shrill like the wind. "Drop that girl before I—I—" His words were swirled away.

Very gently Rusty Cromwell lowered Ruth Birdsall to the barranca's bed. Then he whirled on Herbert Clay with all the pent-up fury of months. There were no challenges and no replies; no preparations, no maneuvering. As if it were ordained from the beginning of time the fists of the two men suddenly began to pound at each other through the yellow air.

A strange fight that was in the wind-swept barranca. Water-washed, sun-bleached stones formed the ring, a slight girl was the only spectator, fate was the referee.

Choking, gasping, driven this way and that more by the force of wind than force of fists, two desert-hardened men lunged and parried and lunged again. Red eyes, angry, inflamed eyes, glared hatred at each other; swollen lips growled, animallike; powerful arms leaped through the murky atmosphere like engine pistons pounding through yellow steam. Over combatants and single spectator alike the wind threw sand in huge blinding scrolls. Yes, a strange fight, but no less fierce than strange.

The wind shrieked, two men choked, fists crunched home on seared, raw faces; a girl shut her eyes and waited breathlessly. The struggle had ceased to be one of blows. It had become a fight of bodies. Locked in each other's arms, staggering, straining against the wind and against each other, the two men shifted up and down the barranca.

Down they went at last, down heavily to the stone bed, where they twisted and squirmed. Occasionally fists flashed out for short, brutal blows.

One man rose at last, leaving the other warped limply on the rocks, his face upturned to the dropping sand. The victor! He wove an uneven way to the girl, who had raised her head and was staring out into the murkiness.

"Come, Ruth!" the man said, almost choking. "Come! We're going home!"

So it was that Rusty Cromwell took the second great step on the road toward the courage he had lost.

CHAPTER IX.

RETURN TO CHAOS.

RUSTY CROMWELL collided violently, blindly, with the bars of the R-C corral, backed away, paused momentarily to get his bearings, then fought his way eastward toward the ranch house. His precious burden, little Ruth Birdsall, was still in his arms. Leaden arms, they were, and the rest of his body was leaden, numb; except his face—that was a raw pulp of sand and flesh in which red eyes flamed.

Ah, there had been a fight! The grandest fight of all—man against Nature when Nature used her most cruel weapons; a bitter, aching contest each step of the way down the barranca, a tremendous struggle up and over the edge, and then a rapid, wind-accelerated race toward the ranch house. And now he was there at last!

Into the big, beamed living room Rusty carried Ruth Birdsall, straight to the couch near the open fireplace. Gently he lowered the little form, then strove to stand upright. His arms remained crooked in front of him as if they had become paralyzed in that position under the girl's weight; he stooped and couldn't straighten.

He slouched wearily across the room, out into the kitchen. When he returned, he carried a pitcher of water and a glass. He held the glass to the girl's dry, alkali-whitened lips. She sipped eagerly, then took the glass from his hands and held it to his mouth. One great gulp he took while the girl smiled up at him. Much was in that smile—much of admiration and pride, returning love. She reached out and patted the man's grimy hands.

"You'll be all right, won't you?" Rusty croaked suddenly.

The girl sensed the man's impending departure. Instantly the smile left her face; anxiety claimed her eyes. "Rusty," she cried. "Rusty, where are you going?"

With one weary hand the man motioned. "Back," he said. "Back to find Herbert Clay."

"Oh, no! No, no!" Ruth Birdsall jerked to a sitting position, reached out with her hands. They were pleading hands, and her eyes and her voice were pleading. "No, you mustn't, Rusty! You can't! Not in your condition. You'd never get there, Rusty, never get back to me. Don't try it, Rusty, dear!"

"But I must," he said wearily. "Don't you see? He's hurt and alone. I must."

For a long moment of silence the red, glaring eyes of Rusty Cromwell burned into the girl's pleading ones. Then Ruth Birdsall sighed.

"Yes," she murmured, "I see. You must."

The man whirled and strode toward the door and the seething chaos beyond it. A cry checked him. He turned. Ruth Birdsall's arms were stretched toward him. Obediently he turned and knelt beside her. Her little hands passed very gently over his raw, sand-encrusted face.

"Now go!" she cried. "Go quickly while I can let you go!"

Before the outer door slammed behind the man she loved, the girl had flung herself face to the wall. Unseeing, she stared at the gray, roughly sanded plaster while timeless moments passed.

CHAPTER X.

ON THE ROCK PILE.

A SINGLE oil lamp smoked in the living room of the R-C ranch house. With each roar and swirl of the wind outside its feeble light danced and flickered. It was powerless to drive back the leaping shadows in the corners. Flying dust added to the murki-

ness of the room, aided in diffusing the yellow glow of the lamp.

Deep in the blackest shadow near the fireplace a girl was lying motionless on a couch. Her face was turned to the wall; her little fists were clenched and the nails bit into the palms of her hands, but no sound came from her.

Hunched wearily in chairs beside the table which bore the lamp were two men—Big Bill Avery and Richard Birdsall. They had returned from their fruitless search for Ruth Birdsall, to find her already in the ranch house. From her they learned of Rusty Cromwell's final, desperate quest for Herbert Clay. They were tempted to start out themselves, but darkness made such an endeavor ridiculously foolhardy, absolutely futile.

They must wait, and as they waited they slouched lower and lower in their chairs. Each hour their eyes became more hopeless. It seemed that the blasts of wind which made the ranch house creak, the banging of doors and rattling of windows, the rasp of sand against the walls, the shriek and howl of the elements, together formed a nerve-wracking death knell of all hope.

Suddenly there was a heavy bump at the door, a muffled cry. Big Bill Avery leaped forward and flung open the door. Into the room as if borne on the great gust of wind and sand staggered Rusty Cromwell. In his arms was a limp human burden—Herbert Clay, the man Rusty hated and the man whose life he had saved.

Rusty had found Herbert Clay and brought him back. Four hours it had taken him, four hours of fiendish torture, superhuman labor, suffering beyond ken; four hours of agony on the sand-blasted desert. At dusk he had stumbled on the limp form in the barranca.

Inspired by a new wave of courage, inspired, perhaps, by memory of a girl's purple-blue eyes and her smile of love,

he had lifted his burden, carried it, dragged it, carried it again, foot by foot, staggering step by staggering step, through the swirling night to the ranch house.

Of that desperate, heart-breaking struggle, witnessed only by the desert wind and the flying sand which strove to beat him down, no man can tell, least of all Rusty Cromwell. But he was home at last, home with his burden.

A girl's voice sounded in the ranch house—poignant, aching with happiness. Two gruff men exclaimed wordlessly. Then a noise rumbled out of Rusty Cromwell's dust-filled throat and a pitiful grin cut his pain-contorted face. He swayed back and forth on weighted feet, there in the doorway. The words burst from him at last, slow, labored words. "Here—he—is!"

Again that agonized grin, again that swaying of Rusty's whipcord body. He toppled, bearing to the floor with him the unconscious figure of Herbert Clay.

Over that huddled heap of humanity two huge desert men—Big Bill Avery and Richard Birdsall—stooped quickly. Once their eyes met. Those eyes were gleaming, and in two bronzed throats lumps were chasing up and down.

"This blasted alkali dust!" said Big Bill Avery, choking and turning his face quickly aside in embarrassment.

"Yeah—dust!" assented Birdsall. "Here, Ruth, you mustn't sob like that! We'll take care of Rusty all right. Bless his heart, you bet we will!"

"I'll take care of him myself,," the girl said. "He's—he's mine!"

After three howling, wind-battered days, dawn broke clear, quiet at last. Big Bill Avery was up early, anxious to get out on the range again, eager to see what water holes were filled, what cattle lost, what other damage was done by the greatest sand storm of the decade. While pulling on his boots he paused suddenly.

"Hey!" he muttered to himself. "Hey, Rusty's gone!"

Yes, Rusty Cromwell was gone. While Big Bill and Richard Birdsall and Ruth searched for him in the ranch house and its environs, he was miles out on the desert, and each moment little Pizen was carrying him farther.

Dawn, the golden-pink dawn of the desert, the dawn of purple shadows and yellow peaks, lighted man and horse. Their progress was rapid, but against the looming mountains it seemed minute, infinitesimal. Zigzagging through the sand-covered creosote, dipping into barrancas and out again, on, on toward the northeast the two went.

Now they reached their goal. Jaw-Bone Cañon opened before them, already gold-filled, brilliant in the refracted glow of its rock walls. Rusty Cromwell swung from his horse. Just ahead of him a ledge angled sharply upward from the desert floor. Toward it he strode.

He reached it, but didn't pause. Up he walked, higher, higher, never hesitating. At last, many feet above the canyon apron, he stopped and faced out over the desert. The sun glinted in his yellow-red hair. He flung his big arms wide. He smiled, he shouted, he laughed. Then he stared down.

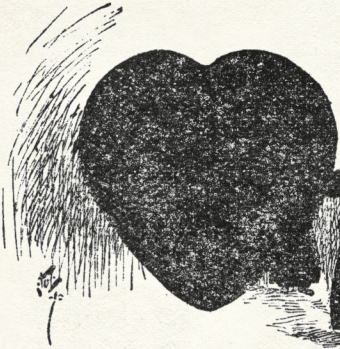
There on the rock pile at his feet lay Fear, crushed and limp and beaten; there, high on the rock wall was Man, triumphant, indomitable again; Man returned to his own and laughing and shouting his paean of victory.

A Radio Wrangle

THEY are telling a good story of a conversation between two radio singers.

One was practising in a broadcasting studio, and the other asked: "What are you singing for?"

"To kill time," was the reply; to which came the quick retort: "Well, you have a terrible weapon."



The Black Heart-

By Sidney Horler-

(A SERIAL—PART III)



IN Paris, an English writer, Gilbert Chertsey, without funds or ideas, accepted an offer made by two strange men. For a sum of money he was to go to a certain flat in London and await further instructions. Later, he was warned against doing this by a beautiful girl.

In the London flat he discovered a murdered man.

Later the same day he again saw the girl who had warned him. With her he went to an underground tearoom owned by London's shrewdest crook. Chertsey hoped the girl would be able to throw some light on the mystery. The place was raided by the police. The girl vanished.

Upon returning to his flat, Chertsey found that the body of the man had disappeared.

The following day Sir Luke Benisty, head of the Black Heart, a mysterious organization, called upon Chertsey, giving a false explanation of the society's principles.

That night the young writer was summoned to Sir Luke's house. There he was put through a very gruesome initiation into the Black Heart, being compelled to take an oath of allegiance.

CHAPTER XVII.

THE LOCKED BOOK.

THAT trans-Atlantic greyhound, the *Morengaria*, was twenty-four hours distant from Southampton when the passenger, who had registered as Mr. James Forbes, and who in the few conversations he had held with his

fellow travelers on the way from New York had let it fall that he was going to England to buy woolen goods, received a wireless message.

Any one looking over the shoulder of Mr. James Forbes at the moment the latter was reading his message, might have smiled:

Cissie sends her best love. PAPA HAPPY.

To such a person it would have seemed a wicked waste of money to have flashed those seemingly fatuous words through the ether. But such an onlooker could not have read in the message what caused Mr. James Forbes to bite his lower lip, while the rest of his face was expressionless.

Five minutes later—that is, after he had allowed sufficient time to stultify the curiosity of any possible prying person—then the self-confessed buyer of woolen goods walked slowly to his cabin.

Once inside, and having carefully locked the door behind him, his manner changed to such an extent that he might have become within the space of a single minute, an entirely different person from the stolid, somewhat gauche passenger which the general community on the *Morengaria* had considered him to be.

With every sign of eagerness, he seated himself in a chair facing the bed, and drew from his breast pocket a small book. It was a curious volume, for Mr. Forbes' manner of opening it was to insert a tiny key hanging from his watch chain, in the equally tiny lock that held the two stiff covers together.

The buyer of woolen goods commenced to turn the pages of his little book very rapidly. In the meantime, the wireless message was laid out on the bed. Mr. Forbes' procedure was to look at one word of the message, and then proceed—or so it seemed—to see what his little book had to say about this particular word.

In twenty minutes, he achieved a surprising solution. As the result of the information received from the locked book, he wrote several words beneath those of the original message. These, in their entirety, ran:

Plans changed. Instead of London, proceed direct to Paris. Stay Hotel Charles VII.

LOGAN.

"Well, I'm damned!" said Mr. Forbes. His astonishment did not lead him to be less cautious than before, however, for, striking a match, he burned the paper on which he had decoded the words, and even then scattered the ash through his fingers. That done, he relocked his book of mystery and placed it in his breast pocket.

The captain of an ocean-going liner of the class of the *Morengaria* is a somewhat difficult personage to be approached by an ordinary passenger, unless the latter's business is both important and urgent. Mr. James Forbes' business must have come under both categories, for within ten minutes of leaving his cabin, he was alone with the captain in a private room.

"I have just had a wireless from the president, Morrison; I am to go to Paris instead of proceeding to London. What do you suggest?"

Arthur Morrison, captain of the *Morengaria*, was quick in his reply. "Nothing can be done until we reach Southampton, Mr. Rinehart. We are due in port in twenty-four hours—say three o'clock to-morrow afternoon. There is a boat leaves Southampton at eleven forty-five the same night, arriving at Havre at seven o'clock the next morning. What I suggest is that you leave the arrangements to me. You can stay in my own quarters when we reach Southampton, until it is time for you to catch the Havre boat. You need not worry about your trunks."

"Perhaps it would be as well to wireless for a promenade-deck cabin," suggested the man who had two names.

"Certainly. I will have that attended to immediately."

"I'm awfully obliged to you, captain." The face which was remarkable for its immobility, slipped into a companionable smile: Mr. James Forbes alias Mr. Washburn Rinehart, could be human when he tried, it seemed.

The captain accepted the proffered hand almost deferentially.

"I am merely doing my duty, sir," he replied; "so long as you are aboard my ship, I hold myself responsible not only for your safety but for your personal comfort."

Once out of the captain's room, the man addressed became the matter-of-fact prospective buyer of Yorkshire products. The world bounded by the steel walls of the *Morengaria* would have marveled had it known the truth. The truth being that, physically disguised just sufficiently to deceive the average person, the name of Mr. James Forbes concealed the identity of the man who, next to the president himself, wielded most power in that most powerful nation, the United States of America.

At rare intervals, Washburn Rinehart smiled at the fact that each morning a trusted valet—who, ostensibly had no

relation with him—arrived at the cabin to change the contour of his face. Dwight had the trick of make-up. It savored of melodrama, this business—but it had been necessary. Very few people knew how necessary! His present mission was the most fateful one of his career. Every possible precaution was essential.

Back in America the papers had been told that Washburn Rinehart, "the power behind the Capitol," was holidaying in the Far East. Some of the opposition papers had unleashed a gentle gibe at the expense of the statesman in the White House, inferring that now the president would be able to govern without gaining the consent of his advisory power, or before signing his name to any measure.

Washburn Rinehart was the human enigma of America. One could understand one of the world's richest men desiring power, but it was difficult to appreciate why such an individual as Rinehart, possessing both in almost terrifying quantities, should keep himself resolutely in the background.

Ever since he had made his influence felt in national affairs, he had refused to take any office whatever—but it was common knowledge that the president made no move unless first he talked it over with Washburn.

It was what the purser—a sour-looking man with a ludicrously red nose—styled "a pig of a night." The Havre boat slithered and rolled in the contemptuous grip of an angry channel. The dark decks were deserted; and as Rinehart had no wish to show himself in the smoking lounge that was a blaze of electric light, he kept to his cabin. Always a bad sailor, he decided to get straight into bed.

He thought longingly of the comfort of the Savoy Hotel in London, where Dwight was already established by this time awaiting his return. What had

caused Logan, his life-long friend and the President of the United States, to send that message at what was practically the last moment, he could not tell. Of course there was a very sound reason, but—what?

He must wait for the answer to that until he reached Paris, where he was due to arrive at eleven fifty-six the next morning.

One thing was certain: he would not be in Paris very long; the business was to be done in London.

As soon as possible, he was going to pay his young nephew, Gilbert Chertsey, a visit. Ever since he had first seen this son of his only sister—now like her husband, dead—he had taken a great interest in the young man's work. Like many other enormously busy men of affairs, Rinehart dearly loved a shocker—and he had not only read every book which his nephew had written, but he had thoroughly appreciated them.

Gilbert did not know of his arrival in Europe; he would take the young rascal by surprise.

This grave man of affairs chuckled. The last time he had heard from his nephew, Chertsey had complained that he had run dry of ideas, and that he was afraid he would never be able to write another book.

"I shall have to give him a bit of a line on this present business—only all his readers will swear that the plot is too fantastic to be believed," he told himself.

Making sure once again that his cabin door was secure, and that the small book beneath his pillow was safe, the man from America sank gently off to sleep.

He awoke to the sound of a winch rattling drowsily, and realized that he was at Havre. With the whining of tackle from the quay side, the stertorous snoring of funnels and the excited cries of the French porters, came a knock on the door. It was the steward with his morning coffee.

The weather was brilliantly fine, and Washburn Rinehart ate his breakfast with a hearty appetite: the murk of England had been replaced by a sunny smile of France.

As he lit a cigar, Rinehart decided that Fate had not dealt with him so badly after all. It was five years since he had been in Paris, and, if his luck held good, he was due to arrive with the sun shining. Light-hearted, pagan Paris with the sun shining—

In that moment Washburn Rinehart did not feel his age. What man would have?

CHAPTER XVIII.

UNDER COVER OF DARKNESS.

APART from running his night clubs, Sylvester Lade, had a hand in many enterprises. Nothing came amiss to this shady character. Dope addicts could have their craving supplied by him—at a price; foolish society girls, thirsting for hectic excitement, could have their wishes satisfied—also at a price. Among Lade's heavy correspondence frequently were letters from men in South American ports, who referred in their communication to "goods received, and quite satisfactory."

The night—or rather the morning after the incident at the Café of the Rosy Dawn, Sylvester Lade's thoughts turned toward two of these correspondents in particular. If it could be managed—and he saw no reason why it should not—he would be effectually rid of a girl who had become a nuisance.

It could not be said that Sylvester Lade possessed a conscience, but he wished London rid of Ann Trentham. There were two reasons why he desired this, but the chief was that, wherever he turned, he found the girl present—and evidently keeping her eye upon him.

The bare fact of being watched meant nothing very much in his life. For years he had been one of the most observed

men in London. It amused him to know that Scotland Yard kept a perpetual surveillance over him: there was nothing in being watched, provided you covered your tracks sufficiently well.

There was a great difference, however, in being watched by clumsily disguised detectives and by a girl whose eyes were a constant reminder of something he would like to forget.

It was difficult to understand why Benisty had not moved in this matter himself. The possibility of Ann Trentham discovering anything was negligible, of course, but so long as she was in London, she constituted not only an annoyance but a certain risk. She might make the acquaintance of men who, attracted by her beauty and inflexibility of purpose, would take up her case.

That she suspected him was obvious; and if his connection with her father's business was once discovered, it might be extremely awkward. For that went beyond ordinary crime; it was a State affair.

The girl would have to be got rid of. He had told himself this many times before, and last night's affair increased his determination. After what had happened, he wasn't quite certain of that guitar player. The yarn the fellow had spun about being a friend of Ann Trentham might have been an invention concocted at the moment, but it was highly probable that if they were not acquainted before, the girl would now make a friend of the man. A friend, and perhaps a confidant.

And then there was the other man—Chertsey. How in the devil had she got to know him?

Benisty could be relied upon to control Chertsey, no doubt—after that spoof ceremony of initiation into the Black Heart, the man would be afraid of his own shadow. The girl represented a distinct risk. He could not afford to have her prying about any longer.

Once over the water, and in charge

of either Manuel, or Vezinolos, her mouth would be effectively shut. And that proud face and beautiful figure—her spirit would be broken.

Late as it was, he made a telephone call, and within twenty minutes a visitor arrived.

This man was a wasp-waisted, dark-skinned mongrel of various breeds.

The two held a brief but animated conversation, during which the mongrel's dark eyes glistened more than once.

"It shall be attended to, Meester Lade," the man said, and the conference broke up.

Chertsey was puzzled. What was the man's object in asking him this question? In any case, he had to be careful.

"I know nothing whatever about the lady," he replied; "she is practically a complete stranger to me."

Sylvester Lade smiled.

"So much the better for you," he said: "As Sir Luke Benisty told you last night, the Black Heart has an effective way of dealing with traitors—and I have already warned you against this girl Trentham." He walked to the door and flung it open. "You are to await your instructions, which will be sent to you soon," were his final words.

For the space of three minutes after the obnoxious caller had gone, leaving the air reeking of perfume, Chertsey roved about the room in the Bloomsbury flat. How he had been able to keep his hands off the man he did not know.

What did Lade's veiled threats mean? Like Benisty, he worked in the dark, a force hostile to everything that was clean, decent and orderly. He cloaked himself in a secrecy which could not be penetrated. Yet he must have meant some harm to Ann Trentham. The thought made Chertsey rush to the telephone. He must give her a warning.

The waiting whilst he was con-

nected made him frantic, but the announcement of the exchange: "I'm sorry, but there's no reply," steadied his nerve. He must control himself; this was a time for calm deliberation rather than precipitation.

And yet— Perhaps Sylvester Lade had already put his abominable plan into operation. Whatever the consequences to himself might be, he must see Ann and warn her. Perhaps he had been a fool to trust to the telephone; how could he tell that the line was not tapped?

It was impossible to rest. Sufficient sense of caution remained for him to use the back entrance as he had done before, instead of leaving by the front door.

Picking up a taxi in Russell Square, he drove to the corner of the quiet West End street in which Ann Trentham had her flat. The night was starless, a fact for which he was grateful. Still, he cut out all unnecessary risks, walking rapidly down the street like a man who had urgent business occupying his mind.

As he reached the entrance to the house, he was stopped from going in by a movement made by a man on the opposite pavement. This man had halted to light a cigarette—the action might be innocent enough, or on the other hand, he might be a hireling of Lade. Without another glance, Chertsey walked on.

Arriving at a corner a hundred yards farther down the street, he looked back at the possible spy. The man was still there, in a lounging attitude, as though waiting for some one. If the fellow was really watching the flat, he would have to dispose of him in some way before entering the house.

It was while he was occupied with this thought that Chertsey's attention was attracted by a motor van turning the corner into Morris Street. Watching the direction the vehicle took, he

was surprised to notice that it drew up, so far as he could tell, outside the house in which Ann Trentham had her flat. Another circumstance he noticed was that the man lounging opposite, crossed the road, engaged in a short conversation with the driver, and then walked away, being quickly lost in the darkness.

Now was his chance! He strode rapidly back down the street. He had not gone more than fifty yards when he saw two men emerge from No. 28. They were carrying a large old oak dower chest. They placed this carefully in the van, jumped onto the vehicle, which then moved rapidly off.

Chertsey ran up the stairs to the first floor. He rang the bell outside the door on which was a small brass plate bearing the name Trentham, before discovering that the door was already open.

Suddenly panic seized him. He rushed inside, to find the small but beautifully appointed flat deserted. A sickly scent hung heavy on the air.

In the bedroom, resting on the bed as though they had just been taken off, were a hat, coat and a pair of gloves. With a stab of pain he remembered the hat: it was the one Ann Trentham had worn the afternoon they drove through Hyde Park.

That chest——

He was back in the hall by this time, looking at a vacant space to the left of the door. On the polished wood was a thin coating of dust; the chest he had seen placed in the motor van must have been resting there only a few minutes before. The imprints of a man's boots in the dust were proof of this.

He raced down the stairs like a madman. Two minutes later he was talking almost incoherently to the taxi driver he had told to wait at the corner of the street.

"Did you see a motor van pass just now?"

The driver, throwing away the fag end of a gasper, stated that he had.

"Catch it up—follow it wherever it goes—double fare!" cried Chertsey, springing into the cab.

CHAPTER XIX.

A NOCTURNAL STRUGGLE.

THE man he addressed was not nonplused—who has ever known a London taxi driver nonplused? Joshua Twinnell calmly resumed his seat, nonchalantly exclaimed: "Right y' are, guv'nor," pushed in his clutch, and was off on his quest.

How he contrived it, and what sixth sense he employed, are known only to Joshua Twinnell, but at the end of ten minutes—which time Chertsey had employed by poking his head in and out of the window like a jack-in-the-box, he leaned backwards and sideways and cried with hoarse triumph: "There she is in front, guv'nor, and if I lose her now, you can 'it me over the 'ead with me own spanner!"

Declining this invitation, but having complete confidence in Joshua Twinnell, Chertsey settled back to wait with as much patience as he could muster.

Thirty minutes by his watch sent him almost frantic again. It was one thing to be on the track of these men; it was another thing to follow them throughout the night.

Follow them be damned! He wasn't going to do any more following. With or without the aid of his driver, he was going to stop the motor van and demand to see what that dower chest contained.

"Guv'nor!"

It was his driver's hoarse voice calling. He pushed his head out of the window, saw darkness all around him, and asked: "Where are we now?"

"Wandsworth—that's the Common over there." Joshua Twinnell's right hand pointed to a vast black patch.

"The beauties in front 'ave turned down this road. Ah—they've stopped! Now what abart it?"

The temptation to try to enlist this man's help occurred to him, but Chertsey was already adopting campaigner's strategy. He must have the driver awaiting his return; even if he were successful in bringing Ann away, he would inevitably be pursued.

He jumped out of the cab.

"What's your name, driver?"

"Joshua Twinnell, guv'nor. May I arsk what the gime is?"

"A game of life and death possibly," was the swift retort. "I'm going into what may be serious trouble, Twinnell; when I come back, I may have a lady with me. I want you to turn your cab round, have your engine running, and once I'm inside, drive like the devil. I'll be responsible for anything that happens to the cab—and there will be a ten-pound note for you on top of all the other charges."

Twinnell's red, weather-beaten face broke into a likeable smile. "Right y' are, guv'nor—and I'll 'ave me little spanner ready in case it's wanted."

Confident that he had an ally on whom he could count, Chertsey went swiftly ahead. There was no illumination, and the road—it seemed more a rough track than a road—appeared to lead nowhere. His spirits sank; had Twinnell been deceived or had he lied? He was still pondering the problem when, his eyes grown by this time accustomed to the gloom, he was confronted by a big, dark house.

Proceeding with more caution now, he crept near enough to the drive that led up to the house to notice with a fervent sense of gratitude that the taxi driver had been right—there was the motor van outside the front door.

While considering what he should do next, he caught the sound of a motor being hurriedly shut off. More of them! He would have to hurry.

Leaving the carriage way and walking on the grass that led round to the back of the house, he stood for a moment wondering. The place was in complete darkness, but as he looked up, a light suddenly showed in an upstairs room. He felt himself shaking as he realized what that light might be disclosing.

So far as he could judge in the darkness, this house was of the modern bungalow type. Twelve feet or so above him was what looked like a balcony, with two windows opening out onto it. But how to get there? He could not leap the distance and there was nothing up which he could climb.

He darted to the side of the house—and there—his luck was with him after all—placed to catch rain from the roof, was a large, closed-in water butt. Using his hands as leverage, he vaulted onto this. Steadying himself, he judged that by climbing a few feet up the water pipe, he would be able to reach with his left hand the top rung of the veranda. He was not used to such acrobatic feats, had never excelled in them even as a schoolboy, and the bare thought of what he was about to attempt caused him to feel dizzy.

It had to be made, however, and he wasted no more time. Sheer determination enabled him to close the fingers of his left hand round the veranda rail. The next moment disaster came, for in his anxiety to get a firm grip, he overbalanced and was launched into space.

He felt that his left arm was being dragged from its socket, and it was in the desperate endeavor to relieve this anguish that he flung his right arm upwards. His fingers gripped something hard—and the next minute he was wriggling his body over the top rail.

He was in so confused a state of mind that he did not know what had given him the necessary leverage. What had happened was that his right foot had found the water pipe again and

supplied a foothold to enable him to make that surprising spring.

He had gained his coign of vantage, but his troubles were by no means over, for, falling on the other side of the veranda rail, he landed with such force on the floor of the balcony that for a moment he lay still, afraid that the noise had attracted the attention of those in the house.

There came no sign that this had happened, and, after listening for a few moments, he tried the nearest French window. Rust crumbled in his hand, and the window opened. It had not been latched on the inside.

Stepping cautiously, Chertsey found himself in a long, narrow room running apparently the whole length of the back of the house, and packed chaotically with furniture. Twice, in the darkness, he skinned his shins before he was able to reach the door on the opposite side to the window.

To the right, as he now stood, stretched a carpeted staircase. The lighted room, his objective, was somewhere above, and he had to go up.

It may have been that the kidnapers were so preoccupied that they did not give a thought to being disturbed, but he was able to reach the door of this lighted room—an attic on the third floor, it was—without being accosted.

"Oh-h!"

A soft cry of agony sounded from within. It was enough; turning the handle of the door, he rushed into the room.

Three men turned. The surprise depicted on their faces was almost ludicrous. Then, with a roar of rage, the first charged at the intruder.

An instinct made Chertsey lower his head to dive at the man's legs. He secured his grip and brought his assailant down to the floor. Before he could rise, it seemed that an avalanche had hit him. The others had come to the attack.

The cold, deadly fury which possessed Chertsey gave him an unrealized strength. Now down, now up, he fought like one driven mad. Heavy blows were rained on him, but he did not feel their weight; the primeval, battling spirit which is in every civilized man, gave him a fierce, unbridled joy in wounding his foes.

It was an unequal contest, and could not have been expected to last. Chertsey was not a professional hero of fiction: he was just a plain, matter-of-fact man of thirty, yanked out of his ordinary, somewhat humdrum, certainly easy-going mode of existence and plunged without preparation or training into a succession of events which would have taxed the nerve and physical strength of the most hardened adventurer.

At length he was down—and down for the last time, because his breath was coming now in deep, sobbing gasps, each one of which caused intense agony. His foes redoubled their blows, uttering deep curses as each went home. What hellish bad luck to have failed was Chertsey's embittered reflection as he tried once again to rise. He was beaten back to the floor with a blow that made red spurt afresh from a previous wound on his lip.

"Tie him up!" ordered a voice that held an unusual foreign accent. "He came to see the girl, no doubt—well, he shall!"

Chertsey's hands were quickly tied with strong cord which bit cruelly into the flesh. Weak and exhausted, his imagination ran riot. What were these swine going to do with him and the girl—especially Ann?

A man, wasp-waisted, rat-faced, mongrel-bred, looked down at him as he lay stretched helpless upon the floor.

"You know what you get for interfering?" said the greasy man he had heard speak before—"you get this!" The long blade of a knife flashed. "But

you came to see the girl! You'll never do that." An evil chuckle followed.

Chertsey felt his head would burst. It couldn't be Ann Trentham of whom this disgusting reptile was speaking; not Ann—at the mercy of this conscienceless gang of ruffians.

"Lift him up!" ordered the mongrel.

He attempted to struggle, but it was pathetically useless. Dragged forward, he found himself by the side of a bed. On this was stretched a girl, bound with ropes. It was Ann Trentham. Her eyes looked into his, and the courage of her—her lips flickered into a smile. The rest of her face was proud and aloof. She had sought to encourage him even in that extremity, but her attitude to her enemies was coldly disdainful.

Chertsey showed his own sort of courage. He would not give these hounds the satisfaction of knowing that he was afraid for the girl, so he remained silent.

The wasp-waisted mongrel pointed to the bed.

"I am going to send her on a long trip," he said. "I am sorry I cannot keep her here—but this is a matter of business. As for you," he flicked the ash from his cigarette into Chertsey's face, "you will not be able to do any more interfering, my friend, because you will be disposed of in another way."

A sharp voice suddenly stabbed the darkness from behind. It had a slight American accent.

"I'll ask all of you to put your hands above your heads," it said.

CHAPTER XX.

THE NAPOLEONIC TOUCH.

IN the instant that the voice of the unseen deliverer was heard, Chertsey looked again at Ann. The girl's face glowed; her lips were parted excitedly. She must know this rescuer! But who was the man?

The air became foul with oaths: the three crooks obeyed the stern injunction to lift their hands to the ceiling.

"Stand away from that man!" was the next order. "And keep 'em up to the sky! I'm suffering from twitching fingers—a dangerous disease when carrying a gun—and it's liable to get the better of me at any moment!"

Chertsey warmed to the speaker. Whoever he was; he liked his grim sense of humor. At first a twinge of jealousy had taken the flavor from the joy of being rescued, but this was now gone: relief at the knowledge that Ann was safe, barring a fatal slip by the stranger, had driven it away.

The man dominating the situation did not strike him as likely to make a slip. When Chertsey turned, after his former jailers had stepped away a pace on either side, he saw a man of about his own age, slim, well-dressed, holding a revolver in a hand which was as steady as a limb of steel.

The stranger's eyes were twinkling, as though in appreciation of the tableau, but the rest of his clean-shaven face was stern. It was a face to inspire confidence, and Chertsey liked its owner on sight.

"I'll soon 'ave those fins of yours free, guv'nor," promised a hoarse voice.

"Twinnell!"

"The very sime, guv'nor—and, as promised, me spanner in me 'and in case any of these beauties start yap-pin'."

How it had all happened, Chertsey did not stop to inquire; directly his hands were free, he rushed to the bed and, with the taxi-driver's knife, cut the girl's bonds. That accomplished, he feasted his eyes upon her face; and then, before he realized what was happening, he had caught her up and was holding her tightly in his arms—so tightly that he felt he could never allow her to go again.

She lay passive as though she were content. He did not reflect on the miracle until afterwards, when the spell was broken. At the time it seemed the most natural, if the most wonderful thing in the world that she should find rest and succor in his arms.

A marvelous knowledge dawned on Gilbert Chertsey's mind during those few precious seconds—he loved the girl! It seemed now that for the previous thirty years of his existence he had been waiting, all unsuspecting, to meet her. But once having found her, he would never let her go.

"Finished, Twinnell?"

The privacy of Chertsey's paradise was disturbed; slowly he put the girl away from him.

Ann Trentham hung her head for a moment. She, too, might have been snatched from a separate existence.

"Mr. Miles! How can I thank you?" she said.

The stranger walked towards them.

"I was lucky—just blamed lucky!" he replied, in a grave tone; "and I owe a lot to this chap Twinnell. If he hadn't shown common sense, I should not have got here."

Joshua Twinnell, glowing after his labor of tying up three prisoners, looked slightly bewildered by the praise. To cover his confusion, he breathed hard upon the spanner he carried, talisman fashion, in his right hand.

Ann laughed. It was a laugh in which recovering confidence and relief from high nervous tension were equally mingled.

"I forgot," she said; "you do not know each other. Mr. Chertsey, let me introduce you to Mr. Napoleon Miles."

The two men shook hands.

"Your name is apt, Mr. Miles, if I may say so," commented Chertsey; "you supplied the Napoleonic touch to-night, at any rate!"

"I was just blamed lucky—that's all," he replied. "Exactly what happened

was this: I had a feeling to-day, after thinking about last night, that Sylvester Lade meant some mischief to you, Miss Trentham. To-night, before I started my show, I thought I would run round in the car and give you a hint of this. I arrived outside your flat to see a wildly excited gentleman tearing out of the house. This struck me as being rather curious—I always suspect wildly excited gentlemen who come tearing out of houses—and when I got upstairs and found your flat empty, with the door already open and the smell of chloroform in the air, I decided that it was up to me to follow the man who was in such a hurry."

"I was the man," supplied Chertsey.

The other looked at him with calculating eyes.

"It was dark at the time. Of course, I didn't know that you were a friend of Miss Trentham's, and when I saw a taxi move off from the corner of the street, I naturally concluded that you must be in it."

Napoleon Miles broke off to smile reminiscently.

"I'll tell the world that you wanted some trailing," he resumed, "but I stuck to the job because I imagined it would be worth while. When I got to the top of this road, I thought that I had lost you, but then stumbled across our friend Twinnell here."

"He was highly suspicious at first, and it was the nearest thing that he didn't use his spanner on me, but then I explained that I was anxious to rescue a young lady in trouble. I guessed that Sylvester Lade's idea was kidnapping—Twinnell became a brother-in-arms at once, told me how he had followed the motor van from Morris Street and offered to come along to lend a hand."

"A good guy, Twinnell! The thing is now what are we going to do with these men? I suggest leaving them here for the police to pick up. No

doubt Scotland Yard will have all their histories off by heart and will be glad to see them again."

Chertsey nodded.

"Before we do that," he said, "I am going to teach one of them a lesson." He looked across at the mongrel, whose dark-skinned face was already yellow with fear.

Miles' mind leaped to the suggestion.

"I will just take Miss Trentham to my car and leave her in the charge of Twinnell, and then I will be back," he said.

He handed over his revolver and turned towards the girl.

Ann Trentham made no demur. Perhaps looking at the faces of her two friends caused her to realize that these men's minds were irrevocably made up. She left the room without comment of any kind.

Within three minutes, Napoleon Miles was back in the attic.

He became brisk and businesslike.

"You want this swine stripped to the waist—that's your idea, isn't it?" he asked Chertsey.

The novelist nodded.

Chertsey picked up a piece of thin but strong rope which had been used to bind Ann Trentham, and tied several knots in one end.

A scream rose swiftly. The mongrel had summed up the situation correctly. His face now was grayish-green with terror.

Miles completed the stripping of the wretch; what would not come off easily was torn ruthlessly.

"That clothes hook will do," he said, pointing to a brass fixture screwed into the center top panel of the door.

"It will do admirably in the absence of anything better," replied Chertsey.

As Miles started to drag him towards the door, the mongrel burst into another high-pitched screaming wail.

"Stop, and I will tell you the man who made me do it!" he cried.

The appeal was fruitless. "We know the man already," commented Chertsey; "it was Sylvester Lade. One day I hope to do the same to him as I am about to do to you. Such specimens as you are flogged by the police with a cat-o'-nine-tails; this rope's end will possibly not hurt you nearly so much. Be thankful, you crook!"

But the man continued to whine. The effect the annoying sound had on Chertsey was to make him more determined. Any of his old acquaintances would not have recognized him in that moment. He looked a different person. An astonishing change had occurred: from the chronicler of other people's doing, he had become a man of action himself.

"Let him have it!" said Miles.

Chertsey swung his rope—a shrill scream of pain tore the air—— It was followed by several others——

Five minutes later, with the door locked behind the unconscious gangster and his two companions, Miles and Chertsey went down to the waiting car, over which and its occupant, Twinnell had kept a zealous watch.

"Nothin's 'appened," announced the taxi driver; "everyfink's been as quiet as the grave."

"Splendid, Twinnell!" Napoleon Miles put his hand into his pocket.

"Look here, this is my show," protested Chertsey. He took out some bank notes and handed them to Twinnell.

"But I can't be left out—I absolutely refuse!" rejoined Miles. Another bank note joined the others in the grimy hand.

"Blimy! Punch me somebody afore I wakes up!" said Twinnell. "I s'pose neither of you gents would like to engage me reg'lar?"

Miles chuckled.

"You're the right sort, Twinnell; where can you be found?"

"Outside the Hotel Majestic in Russell Square, guv'nor. And you've only got to give me a wink and the ole cab'll drive you anywheres you want ter go—and there'll be nothin' on the clock, see?"

"I won't forget."

"I have already tried to thank him," said a voice from the car.

"Bless yer pretty fice, lidy, Josh Twinnell don't want no thanks from the likes of you! If I'd only let meself go, I should have killed those three blighters!" He buttoned up his great coat. "If you gents are all snug and comfortable, I'll be getting back to the ole 'bus. Then, if you're returnin' to town, I'll just lead the way."

CHAPTER XXI.

THREE FRIENDS.

THE offer was accepted, and the journey back was made without mishap. It was decided not to go to the flat in Morris Street, and the car pulled up outside Napoleon Miles' rooms in a quiet Belgravia Square.

Ann Trentham's first thought was for her host.

"But your engagement to-night, Mr. Miles?"

"I've finished with Sylvester Lade—as an employer, I mean," was the reply; "as a matter of fact, I shouldn't be surprised if I became rather busy in quite another direction very soon. But look here, you good people," he quickly broke off, "what about a bite and a sip? I always have sandwiches on tap, and there's whisky for you, Chertsey, and some wonderful old sherry—Heaven's blessing on the man who invented it!—called, I understand, Bristol Milk. Two glasses, and you feel like pushing a 'bus over! I can strongly recommend it—what do you say, Miss Trentham?"

Ann's answering smile disclosed a fascinating dimple.

"You make it sound irresistible, Mr. Miles—thank you, I will."

"One moment, then!" Napoleon Miles smilingly disappeared into an adjoining room.

"Who is he?" whispered Chertsey, eagerly.

Womanlike, Ann answered the question by asking one herself.

"What do you think of him?"

"He seems a thundering good chap; but who is he?"

She leaned towards him. Then came the sound of returning footsteps. "I'll tell you later," she promised.

Whoever cut those sandwiches was an artist; they tasted delicious. Napoleon proved himself an admirable host. It was a happy party, and for the time being the night's previous events were forgotten.

In the act of laying down his glass, Chertsey remembered something.

"We forgot the chest," he said.

"What chest?" asked Miles.

"The chest those men used to kidnap Miss Trentham," supplied the novelist.

Miles' bewilderment showed in his face.

"Mr. Chertsey is quite right," said Ann; "after I was chloroformed the men placed me in a dower chest which stood in the hall of my flat. Of course, I was taken entirely by surprise. I had written Menzies, the big furniture firm, about upholstering a couple of chairs.

"When those men called to-night, with their van, I naturally assumed they had come for the chairs, although it was so late. I turned round to take them into the sitting room when one of them sprang. A pad of chloroform was placed over my mouth, and, although I struggled hard to get free, I quickly lost consciousness."

Napoleon Miles pointed to the telephone.

"It's not likely those beauties have got free—Chertsey and I tied them up

too securely for that—but I think it's time I rang up the police."

Ann touched his arm.

"I didn't say anything before, but I do not want the police in this affair, Mr. Miles."

Miles softly whistled.

"Just as you like, of course, Miss Trentham. But those men will be safer behind the walls of a jail."

"I know—and I must take the risk of them interfering with me again. I have a sufficient reason. And the police would not take any action unless I prosecuted. That would mean my giving evidence and I do not desire to do that. Please do not think I am not very grateful for your help, Mr. Miles—I am—but the leader of those men was punished——"

"Oh, he was punished right enough! friend Chertsey saw to that."

"Then we will let the matter drop. Those scoundrels should have been taught a sufficient lesson by the time they are discovered."

Miles nodded.

"I think Mr. Chertsey will agree with me that the next pressing question is: where are you going to stay now?"

"Yes," agreed Chertsey, "I certainly shall not consent to you returning to that flat to-night."

"I hadn't thought of doing so," said Ann; "my maid has gone to Essex to see her mother who is ill, and in any case I do not fancy sleeping there, at least not to-night. But I must return to lock things up." She rose as she spoke.

Chertsey also rose. "I will see you to your flat, and afterwards to a hotel, Miss Trentham."

"I'll get a taxi," put in Miles; "will you catch cold without a hat?"

"Oh, dear no!"

"Good-by, Chertsey; I hope to run across you again one day," remarked Napoleon Miles, cordially, two minutes later, as he shook hands.

"You were going to tell me about Miles," said Chertsey, as the taxi moved off.

"Mr. Miles is a cabaret entertainer."

"What?"

"Yes. He plays the guitar and sings at the Café of the Rosy Dawn. It was there I met him for the first time last night. Sylvester Lade, finding me sitting alone, was very insulting, and was going to have me put out——"

"The scoundrel!" came from between the listener's clenched teeth.

"The position had become very unpleasant," resumed Ann, "when Mr. Miles intervened. He was kind enough to save me from further humiliation and to put me into a taxi."

Chertsey turned to look at her.

"May I ask you a question, Ann?" he said.

The light from an electric standard showed a flush in her cheeks.

"You wonder why I go to such places as the Café of the Rosy Dawn alone—is that what you want to know?" she asked.

"Yes," replied Chertsey. "Ann," he continued, "when I saw you to-night—helpless—I felt I should go mad. Of course, I have no right to say this, I know that—but why will you expose yourself to such risks? Have I offended you?" as she remained silent.

"No," she answered; "you have not offended me. And after what you did to-night——"

"What I tried to do," he corrected, bitterly; "a nice mess I made of things; if it hadn't been for that fellow Miles——"

A hand touched his arm.

"You proved yourself a very brave man to-night, Mr. Chertsey——"

Again he broke in.

"You have allowed me to call you 'Ann'," he pleaded; "won't you fall into line, and call me something else than 'Mr. Chertsey'?"

Her eyes met his very frankly.

"I will call you 'Gilbert' if you wish it—and if it would give you any pleasure," she replied.

"Pleasure! It would make me the happiest man in the world! I should just about turn dizzy with joy, Ann"—very suddenly—"I suppose you know I love you?"

He could gain nothing from the silence with which she received the words.

"This is madness, I know," he said, "but I've been mad ever since that first moment I saw you in Paris. I want to go on being mad—I like the sensation! And so, Ann, I tell you openly and frankly that I love you! No, for goodness' sake, don't say a single word in reply. Just consider it part of my madness—but remember, also, that you are infinitely dear to me, and that when I think of you in danger, it makes me frantic. To-night I half killed that beast who kidnaped you!"

Again her hand touched his arm. "I shall always remember what you have told me, Gilbert. And not only remember it, but treasure it."

The taxi stopped outside the house in Morris Street.

Chertsey waited in the hall of the flat while Ann collected a few things and packed them in a suit case. He then drove with her to the quiet residential hotel she had selected in the West Central district.

"You will run no more risks?" he pleaded when he left her.

"I cannot promise that," she said, "but I will try to be more careful in the future."

With that he had to be content.

CHAPTER XXII.

LADE RECEIVES A SURPRISE.

ON the cigar he had not yet lit, Sylvester Lade chewed fiercely. The expected telephone message was over two hours late. What had happened to

Gomez? This was the first time he had known the man to fail.

He sat down by the side of the instrument and took off the receiver.

"Wandsworth 0123X," he ordered, sharply.

As second succeeded second, Lade's impatience threatened to overpower him. He rattled the telephone hook repeatedly.

"I'm sorry but there was no reply," said a man's voice from the exchange.

"No reply!" raved Sylvester Lade; "don't be a fool!—there must be a reply! Try them again!"

Exchange's answer was firm but unruffled. "All I can say is that I cannot get you a reply, sir, but I will ring them again."

"Yes—instantly, please!"

Two minutes later, the fuming Lade received another confirmation that he could not be connected.

"Blast the fool!" he cried, smashing the receiver back on to its hook.

This meant that he would have to go out to the place himself—at that hour! Gomez's instructions had been implicit enough; the job should have been easy—then what the devil could have gone wrong? Directly Gomez had the girl safely at the Wandsworth house, he was to have 'phoned.

Brrrh! The 'phone!

"Hullo!" he called, snatching off the receiver.

"Who is that speaking?" came the prompt reply. The voice was authoritative. Moreover, it was distinctly British. It was not the voice of Gomez.

Lade rapidly considered.

"Who are you? And where are you speaking from?" he asked.

"A house called 'The Bungalow' in Ferndale Road, Wandsworth Common. I am Police Inspector Turner of the Wandsworth Police. I have been called to this house on account of a remarkable occurrence. I must have your name and address, please—if you are

the person who has been recently ringing up this house."

"I don't know what you are talking about, inspector. I was trying to get through to a friend of mine in Clapham—and the fools at the exchange must have switched me through to the wrong number. Sorry to have bothered you, inspector, good-night!"

He rang off immediately. Gomez must have blundered things. Something had gone wrong—and the evidence was on view at The Bungalow. But who could have brought the police into the business? And had they discovered the girl? If so, she might give his name.

He started as the phone signal whirled again. Curiosity drove him to the instrument after caution had warned him not to answer.

"Yes?"

"I want to see you instantly, Lade," said a voice that had a steely edge to it; "instantly, understand! Come to Berkeley Square at once!"

"Yes, chief." Sylvester Lade's tone was quiet, respectful, bordering on the submissive. For the speaker was Sir Luke Benisty, the one man in the world of whom he was afraid.

When, a quarter of an hour later, he stood facing Benisty, he found the man to whom he gave allegiance, shaking with rage.

"You have meddled, Lade!" he said, in a chilling tone; "who gave you authority to molest the girl, Ann Trentham?"

Sylvester Lade put up his defense.

"She was dangerous—I have said so many times, chief. And she was always watching me. I thought it was best she should be put out of the way. I have arranged for her to be sent out of the country."

"*You* thought—you have arranged!" came the scornful answer; "what right have you to take on yourself such a

prerogative? Surely you should have remembered that it is *I* who do the thinking, and the arranging—and that you merely carry out my orders!"

The other was shaken by that cultured, but terrible voice, yet he showed courage of a sort, standing his ground.

"I repeat, very respectfully, chief, that the time had come to put the Trentham girl out of the way. What I did, I did as much for your sake as for my own. Now that we're talking about this, I should like to say that I cannot understand why you have not moved in the matter yourself. The girl is dangerous; she has already nobbled that fellow Chertsey."

Sir Luke Benisty did not relent.

"Do you acknowledge that you should have consulted me in this matter?"

"Yes, chief, I do."

"Very well, then you are committed by your own words! Please understand once and for all time that henceforth I will not allow this sort of thing. I go further, and absolutely forbid it. Do you know what has happened to-night?"

Sylvester Lade thought it politic to feign ignorance.

"No," he answered.

"A half-breed named Gomez was discovered by the police to-night at his house near Wandsworth Common, in an insensible condition. Some one had stripped him to the waist, and flogged him mercilessly with a knotted rope. This was discovered near by. Two other men, evidently companions of Gomez, were in the same room. Both were bound hand and foot."

Sylvester Lade's composure was shattered.

"Who did it?" he demanded. "My instructions to Gomez were to take the girl to his house, get what information he could out of her, and then arrange for her to be shipped south."

The fine, aristocratic face of Sir Luke Benisty became livid.

"You fool! You were going to send her south?"

"Why not?" snapped the other; "apart from murder, it was the most effectual way to deal with her."

Benisty controlled himself with an obvious effort, and put out a hand as though to push the other away.

"If you had succeeded, Lade, I would have killed you with my own hands!" he said. "Understand that whatever action is to be taken with regard to the Trentham girl, it will be taken by me!"

The threat subdued Sylvester Lade's growing sense of indignation.

"If that is your order, chief, all right," he forced himself to reply. "What happened to the girl?"

"Apparently she escaped—my information does not include where she is."

"May I ask how you got this information, chief?"

A bleak smile showed on the cultured face.

"You are not the only person, Lade, who can secure information. No doubt you are also curious as to the means by which this business at Wandsworth was discovered? It appears that your man Gomez has been under observation for some time. No doubt his hellish activities have attracted attention. To-night a policeman visited his house with a search warrant. Not receiving any answer, but noticing a light burning in an upstairs room, he forced a window and broke in. Any other question?"

Lade intimated he had nothing further to say. It was a bad night's work, and he wished to forget everything connected with it—especially the one thought that the police had by this time probably acquired the knowledge that it was he who had put through two imperative telephone calls to the house at Wandsworth.

Sir Luke Benisty was suave and cordial.

"The time has come for me to give you your first instructions, Mr. Chertsey," he said. "The commission which I want you to execute is not only a very simple one, but should bring with it a great deal of pleasure. Briefly, all I want you to do is to proceed to Paris by the first available train—there is one from Victoria at eleven o'clock this morning—and go to the Hotel Charles VII., where your room is already booked."

Chertsey listened attentively to these definite instructions, nodding obedience.

"And what do I do there?" inquired the new member of the Black Heart.

"The simplest thing," rejoined Benisty, with another agreeable smile; "staying at the hotel at the present time is a man named Forbes—James Forbes. That is not his right name, but it is the name he has signed in the hotel register. What I wish you to do is not to let Mr. Forbes out of your sight. In other words, I wish you to cultivate his acquaintance and make a friend of him."

"Can you describe this man to me, Sir Luke?"

"I am afraid I cannot give you a very reliable description, beyond the fact that he has rather a commanding figure and is between fifty and sixty years of age. But once you are in the hotel, it should be quite easy for you to locate him.

"A word of warning, Mr. Chertsey! You must on no account lead him to think that one of the Society of the Black Heart has any interest in him; to do so would be disastrous." The speaker paused to study the younger man's face. "Forbes is an international malefactor of the worst description. He has set the law at defiance and, consequently, the Black Heart has determined to punish him for his various misdeeds.

"I will be frank with you, Chertsey;

you are to act as a decoy in connection with this man—but you need have no conscience qualms on that account: the sooner 'James Forbes' is removed from the sphere of his present activities, the better it will be for humanity! Remember that, I do not want you to fail in this first commission, Chertsey. Further instructions will be sent to you without fail at the Hotel Charles VII."

A shrewd, calculating scrutiny, a handshake—and Chertsey was left to his reflections. Evidently Sir Luke Benisty was no sluggard; it was still only nine o'clock.

Keenly as he would have liked to see Ann before he left, Chertsey decided that it would be too risky for him to attempt to do so. Sir Luke Benisty's manner had told him that something big was in the wind; some great coup, perhaps, was being planned by the Black Heart. The part the man Forbes was to play in the scheme he did not know, of course, but he was prepared to bet on one point: that was that James Forbes had a somewhat different character to the one given him by Sir Luke Benisty.

What he personally should do when he met the man was a decision that must be left to the future, but every instinct now warned him to be on his guard. What Sir Luke Benisty had just told him was doubtless a carefully concocted pack of lies, concealing perhaps the giant conspiracy of which Ann Trentham had hinted.

It maddened him to think that he could not see her before he left, but at least he could write. His fountain pen flew over the paper:

ANN: Directly you have read this, burn it. I have just been given my first job. What it is I had better not tell you because I think that the knowledge might be dangerous. It sounds simple—but I am sure it's not.

I want you to keep out of things; you know what I mean. Promise me that! Soon I shall be in this business up to my neck, I am

thinking, and what is to be found out please leave to me. I may muff it—but you mustn't run any more risk.

I will write again when I have something to say.
G. C.

The letter posted at Victoria Station, Chertsey took his seat on the Continental train with a light heart. The prospect of the forthcoming adventure—for that an adventure awaited him in Paris he was convinced—was thrilling. Moreover, he felt that whatever danger he might be going into was being undertaken for the sake of the girl he loved. He had taken the matter out of Ann Trentham's hands now and had shouldered the responsibility himself. The thought was very satisfying.

Until he arrived at the Gare du Nord, he resolved to give his mind a holiday. So it was an apparently care-free young man who boarded the boat at Dover and stepped into the Paris Express on the other side of the channel. The tip he gave the red-faced giant of a Calais porter was of such a handsome character that the man wished him a thousand *bon voyages* in one wonderful burst of volubility.

Bon voyage! Was it to be a good journey? He wondered.

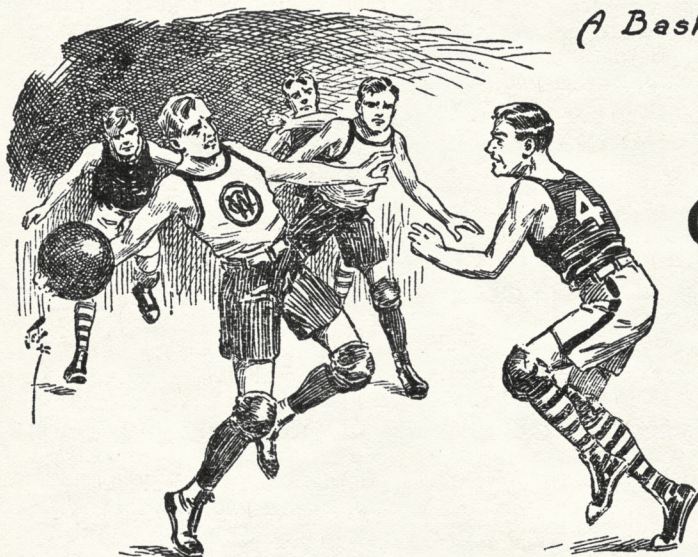
At seven o'clock that night, looking well in evening clothes, Gilbert Chertsey strolled towards the handsome dining room of the Hotel Charles VII, which, as all the world knows, is situated just off the Grand Boulevard, in Paris.

As he turned in through the swinging doors, a man of fifty-five caught his arm.

"Gilbert! By all that's wonderful!" Chertsey turned round to see his American uncle, Washburn Rinehart, who was the man who had registered as James Forbes.

The next installment of this novel will appear in the issue of TOP-NOTCH that is dated and on the news stands December 15th.

A Basketball Story—



Calamity Pipes.

By
Albert Chenicek.

(COMPLETE IN THIS ISSUE)

CHAPTER I.

RETURN OF EXCITEMENT.

HE'S a calamity carrier," said Steve Brandon, hoisting his feet atop the sizzling radiator that heated the little office of the garage. "You've heard of germ carrier, haven't you? Well, 'Pipes' totes around accidents and catastrophies instead of germs. Where he is, plenty of things happen, and I'm not kidding you."

"Do I look that simple?" I inquired. "Calamity carrier—my aunt's cat's kittens! If there were any marines left in the country I'd ask you to tell it to 'em!"

Steve waited until the wind—there was a howling blizzard in the darkness outside—quit clawing at the windows before speaking. "Save your bum jokes, 'Slim.' I know what I'm talking about. Listen to this. Pipes went down to Florida—and the hurricane struck. Later he took a trip to New Orleans, and the Mississippi immediately began to overflow. He started back for Chicago and before he got

there the train jumped the track once and later smashed up two automobiles at grade crossings. When he——"

"I suppose he also caused the San Francisco earthquake and the Chicago fire," I interrupted.

"I didn't say he caused anything," Brandon returned. "I'm just trying to tell you that for some reason or other things are mighty lively when Pipes is around—and he's going to be here in Spurdale pretty soon."

"Well," I told him, "the old burg's been dead lately. We could stand some excitement. Haven't even had a fire for six months!"

Brandon grunted and relighted his cigar. "I've a notion to take out some more insurance to-morrow," he said, half-seriously. "For a fact, Slim, I——"

Just then the street door opened. A gust of wind carried a miniature avalanche of snow inside, and in the middle of the swirling flakes stood a man. He was motionless for a second.

"Hey, shut that door!" I yelled.

He evidently had forgotten about the door, for he jerked suddenly and turned

around. While he was trying to close the entrance against the wind, I heard Steve Brandon sigh.

"Pipes!" he said, when I looked at him. "Pipes Hammond himself."

A minute later, while Brandon, for all his earlier grouching and growling, was greeting the newcomer warmly, I had a chance to study Hammond.

He wore a short overcoat, and after one glance at his legs I knew he'd been nicknamed correctly. Pipes was tall—six feet six, I guessed—and he was upheld by two of the most inadequate pillars in pants I'd ever seen on a human being. Regular toothpick legs.

For the rest, he matched his foundations. His face was thin—also his hair, I noted when he took off his cap—and his arms were skinnier than his legs, if possible. Altogether he looked like a professional human skeleton's undernourished brother.

When Steve introduced us, though, I forgot all about his one-way dimensions. Pipes smiled and I liked him from that instant. His blue eyes twinkled, and his mouth went askew in a whimsical, friendly sort of grin.

Steve Brandon bawled him out for neglecting to write what train he was coming on, but Pipes said he hadn't been sure himself. "Doesn't matter now, does it? I'm here, and the walk from the station did me good."

"Pardon my curiosity," I said, "but did you bring along any—um—excitement with you?"

Pipes shot a glance at my partner and laughed. "I see Steve has been talking. He's got a nice little theory about me, but it's going to be bust sky-high this time."

"I sure hope so," Brandon remarked, almost fervently.

"Yes, sir," Pipes went on, "when I decided to take a little mid-winter vacation I told myself that I'd be sure of a nice, quiet time if I went to visit Cousin Steve in Spurdale. Just sort of

slip into the peaceful stream of small town life and enjoy myself and get a rest, you know."

"Well, we'll see how long the stream stays peaceful," Steve said.

"Fine!" Pipes settled himself more comfortably in his chair. "Anything special going on in town right now?" he asked me.

"H'm. No—except that our basketball team seems due to win the county championship at last."

"Basketball! Say, I haven't seen a game for ages! When is the next battle?"

"Next Wednesday, against Clareville," I told him. "Then the following Saturday we play Loremont. The Clareville game will be easy."

"And the other won't be so easy, eh?" Pipes' eyes were bright with interest. "Pretty lively rivalry, I suppose?"

"Lively! The spirit is about as friendly as that between two of your Chicago bootlegging gangs."

Pipes didn't believe me, I could tell; he evidently thought I was trying to kid him.

"Slim's right enough," Brandon said. "There's no love lost between Spurdale and Loremont, especially where basketball is concerned."

"But why?" Pipes asked, very much surprised. "Surely the competition ought to be keen but good-natured."

"I'll tell you why," Steve said warmly. "It's because Hank Green, who manages the Loremont team, is an underhanded, dirty player. Last year when we played Loremont for the championship, Hank glued sand on the finger nails of every one of his players—and they used that improvised sandpaper to good effect during the game. We couldn't guess what they were doing until after the game—which we lost. Dirty! Hank and his crowd will do anything to win."

"And there's no telling what trick will be tried this year," I added.

"Interesting—very," said Pipes Ham-

mond thoughtfully. "Such unethical conduct has no place in sport."

"Tell you what," I suggested, "you might summon up a cyclone out of your reserve stock and blow Hank and his friends into the next State."

Hammond grinned. "I hope you aren't taking Steve's notions seriously," he began, and then there came an interruption.

Outside, above the howling of the blizzard, came the long-drawn-out, mounting wail of a siren. It rose and fell aërially and sounded like the lamentations of a lost soul.

"Fire!" cried Brandon, and he and I jumped for the door, and pulled it open. We saw a muffled figure hurrying down the walk.

"Where's it at, Bill?" Steve shouted.

"San José Apartments," came the answer. "One hell of a blaze, Steve! See the flames over there?"

A minute later the three of us were climbing into our coats. "Pipes," said Steve, as we started out, "this is the first fire we've had in half a year. You got here to-night. What about my notions, now?"

CHAPTER II.

HAMMOND MAKES A BET.

BEFORE Pipes Hammond had been in Spurdale a week, I was ready to admit that Steve had not been unreasonably pessimistic. Things happened—unpleasant things. Not that the town was stricken with an epidemic or an earthquake or anything like that. The catastrophies were minor ones—but they were catastrophies just the same.

The day after the fire—no one was hurt in that, incidentally, though the building was a total loss—Russ Teal, who managed our basketball team, received a telegram—stating that a relative was very seriously ill. He had to take the first train out of town.

Before leaving, he asked Steve Bran-

don to take charge of the team, and Steve agreed. Ordinarily, that would have been nothing—in the middle of the season, say—but with the Loremont game a little more than a week ahead, and with the probability that Hank Green and his crew would try some underhand trick to gain an advantage, the responsibility was considerable.

After that everything went smoothly until the following Wednesday. During those days Pipes Hammond loafed around town, taking things easy, and making friends with everybody with whom he came in contact, including the team. Pipes attended every practice session, and even offered one or two tips that helped smooth out the teamwork. He knew the game, no doubt of that.

Well, about five o'clock of the day that we were to play Clareville, Steve Brandon came into the office looking as blue as a dry at a wet picnic. I didn't need one guess to know that bad news was coming.

"Slim," said Steve, slumping into a chair, "we're wrecked."

"Maybe not," I said.

"'Bud' Warren broke his arm while cranking his flivver this afternoon," he went on, and then started to speak words not found in the dictionaries.

There was reason enough. Warren played right forward on the team and was the best basket shooter in the league.

I whistled. "A fine how-de-do! What's to be done, Steve?"

Brandon shrugged resignedly. "Nothing, I guess. Tom Curry will have to take Bud's place, and Tom isn't very good."

"Considerable money has already been bet on the Loremont game. Man, what a fuss this is going to make!"

"I know," Brandon nodded, and then in a burst of feeling added: "I wish the devil that Pipes had gone somewhere else for his vacation!"

We didn't see Pipes Hammond until

just before the game started that evening. I spotted him sitting by the rail in the balcony, and went up and squeezed into a place beside him.

He turned. "Oh, hello, Slim!" he said, with a grin. "Quite a crowd out, isn't there?"

"Yep. Even our friend Hank Green," I said, as I noticed a figure some ten feet away. "Bet he's tickled over Bud's injury."

Hammond studied Green for several minutes. The Loremont manager appeared to be supremely satisfied with the world in general. There was a hint of a smug smile about the corners of his thin lips, and his arrogant black eyes betrayed his self-approval. He wasn't alone; a girl occupied the seat next to him, on the side farther from us.

"Who's the young lady?" Pipes inquired, interested.

"Marjorie Carewe," I told him. "A mighty fine girl. I'm sorry to see her with Hank. I thought Bud Warren was making considerable headway with her."

"H'm," said Hammond. "She's probably agreed to come with Hank before she knew Bud wouldn't be playing and would be able to take her. Where is Bud, by the way?"

We located him downstairs, near the Spurdale bench on the side lines. His bandaged arm was in a sling, and he didn't appear very happy as he watched the team practicing out on the floor. Ever so often his eyes strayed up to the balcony where the girl was. I'll bet that in imagination he was doing a lot of mussy things to the gentleman from Loremont.

The crowd that jammed the hall was unusually quiet when the game began a few minutes later—at least, the Spurdalers didn't make much noise. All of us were uneasy and anxious to see how the team would work with Bud Warren out of the line-up.

Well, we saw very shortly, and the sight didn't make us feel exuberant. The team swept into action with its usual vim at the sound of the whistle, Joe Roswell at center tapping the ball to Burke, the left forward. Burke pivoted to escape his guard, shot the ball back to Roswell, and Roswell relayed the sphere to Tom Curry, who was waiting under the basket. Curry tossed for the iron circle—and missed by three feet. Twice more in the next minute he had a chance to cage the ball, and failed miserably.

"Pretty bad," commented Pipes Hammond, and I agreed. So did a lot of other Spurdale fans, for when Curry fozzled two more shots the place became filled with hoots.

Not very nice, of course—poor Tom was doing his best. But there were a lot of disappointed persons in the hall that night, and they had to relieve their feelings in some way. The team's passing game was as good as ever—the way the ball was handled was beautiful to see—but the main cog of the machine was missing.

The Spurdale offensive, developed to perfection during the season, had made four members of the team "feeders" to Bud Warren, who could be relied-on to cage the ball, given half a chance. Curry just couldn't seem to deliver.

When the second quarter began we had but two points, while Clareville had eight. It looked as though our championship hopes were due for a severe jolt.

Pipes was getting more agitated every second. During the second quarter he abandoned his chair and took to leaning over the rail. Every time Curry missed a shot or fumbled a pass he let out three words: "Oh, you ham!"

I don't know where he got the power, but when he yelled he drowned out all the other noise. Then after a while others in the crowd took his call up,

so that whenever a shot failed to tally the roof was raised with:

"Oh, you *ham!*"

Poor Curry! I felt sorry for him.

In the second half, with the score twelve to six in favor of Clareville, things suddenly began to look better, however. Maybe Steve or Bud Warren gave Curry some tips on what his trouble was, or maybe he just got lucky; at any rate, he made four baskets in a row. That put us two points ahead—but only for a moment. Clareville got two on a pair of free throws and evened the count.

After that the scoring see-sawed until, with but a half minute left to play before the final gun, Curry made two more baskets, which was enough for victory.

"Terrible!" said Hammond, sinking back in his chair. "Absolutely terrible. You'll never beat Loremont with Curry at forward."

I shrugged and watched the crowd moving toward the exit. Hank Green, just passing, was grinning; Marjorie Carewe, at his side, was frowning ever so slightly, and appeared thoughtful and oblivious to her surroundings. I was wondering what she might be thinking about when Pipes pulled me by the arm.

"Let's go," he growled. Then, as we were slowly descending the stairs to the ground level he fired a question at me. "Is Curry the best sub on the team?"

"Yep," I said.

Pipes snorted. "And I thought Russ Teal was a good manager! Say"—his voice rose in his excitement—"I'll bet I can get a better basket shooter than Curry without half trying!"

"Fine!" I said, sarcastically. "Steve will be glad to hear that!"

"I could make more baskets myself, and I'm no player," Pipes went on, now thoroughly warmed up. "I'll bet I——" He broke off. "There's Steve. I'm going to talk to him!"

We crossed the playing floor to where Steve was standing with Bud Warren.

"You going to let Curry play in the Loremont game?" Hammond demanded.

Steve looked at him, mildly surprised. "Got to. Who else can I put in?"

Pipes all but tore his hair. "Who else can you put in!" he mimicked. "Say, there are a hundred men within a mile of here who can play a better game! Snap out of it, man! Why, I'll bet I can get a man who——"

"Oh, lay off, Pipes!" said Steve, wearily.

Hammond jabbed a bony hand into a pocket and brought out a roll of bills. "Bet you a hundred I can get a man who'll make two baskets out of every three tries!"

Steve stared at him. "In a game? In the Loremont game?"

"In the Loremont game next Saturday!"

"You're on for a hundred! And I'll throw in an extra hundred if you make good!" Steve Brandon turned to Warren. "Did you hear this nut?" he asked.

But Warren wasn't listening; his eyes were on the crowd that was shuffling toward the exit near by. I followed his gaze and saw he was watching Hank Green and Marjorie Carewe. At that instant the girl turned and saw him. He smiled and nodded, and then his face went white, for she lifted her chin almost imperceptibly and faced ahead without a sign of recognition.

I almost whistled. Then Hammond had me by the arm again. "Come on, Slim, let's vamoze," he said.

CHAPTER III.

THE NEW STAR NEEDED.

THE following day Pipes Hammond disappeared. Presumably he went off to look for a good basketball player, but just where he went to make his search neither Brandon nor I had any idea. Steve wasn't greatly interested—

in his opinion Pipes would be back in a day or so, a wiser man.

I told my partner about the way the girl had deliberately cut Bud Warren and we tried to guess what had happened to get him in bad. In the end we gave it up. Marjorie was a pretty, level-headed and fair-minded girl; certainly she must have felt herself justified in acting the way she did. At the same time, knowing as we did how much the girl meant to Warren, we couldn't imagine him doing anything that would incur her displeasure.

I stewed over the puzzle at odd moments, and even considered trying to get to the bottom of it by going direct to the girl, but then decided to keep hands off and wait. Maybe if Brandon had been more interested we might have done something together, because both of us liked Warren a whole lot. However, Steve was worrying himself bald over the coming Loremont game. And worrying doesn't do any good.

Hank Green was conspicuously in Spurdale on Thursday and Friday, and his presence acted as an irritant on a lot of people.

Mighty few Spurdalers cared to view Green's strutting figure at any time, and considering the way he boasted about how big a score his team was going to run up on us, it was surprising that somebody didn't crown him with a fence post, or something equally effective. We'd been all primed to administer a magnificent beating to Loremont, as payment for past treatment from that town, and now, because of an unlucky break, defeat seemed certain. The prospect was not soothing.

Brandon had the team go through several practice sessions and tried a number of other players at right forward. I wasn't there, but he told me that none of them were any better than Curry. The latter spent about twelve hours a day shooting the ball at the basket, desperately trying to im-

prove his game, but Steve said he got worse instead of better.

Bud Warren moped around with his bandaged arm and didn't have a civil word for anybody. It seemed to me he was brooding himself into a dangerous frame of mind.

We heard from Pipes Hammond just before noon on Saturday. Brandon and I were at the garage office when Pipes phoned and told us to meet him at the Empire Restaurant immediately.

"Maybe he really did get a good player for you, Steve," I said as we started out. "He sounded excited."

"Fat chance!" returned Steve. "Basketball stars don't grow on trees."

"Sure? I've seen some that were lemons!"

Hammond was waiting for us outside the restaurant. His thin face crinkled with a jubilant grin, he trotted us inside and to a vacant table, ignoring the questions I hurled at him until after we'd given the waitress our orders.

"Yes, Slim," he said at last, smiling at me and then at Steve, who looked like he wanted to hope but didn't dare, "I got what I went after!"

"A star player?" I asked, and Steve gawked.

"A shining star! A man who can make four baskets in three tries! A wonder—a find—a basket-shooting genius!"

Pipes wasn't kidding; I was ready to swear to that. Before we had a chance to digest his statements, he rushed on: "He's regular basket-shooting fool, and he never played in a game in his life!"

"Say," began Brandon, disgusted, "are you——"

"Wait a minute and listen. Thursday morning I took an early train to Iron City, and the first thing I saw there was a gang of men putting up structural iron work for a new building. I watched a while—guess everybody likes to watch that sort of work. Then I noticed a young fellow whose job was to heat up

rivets and toss them to another man on a girder above him, who caught 'em in a tin bucket.

"The bird doing the throwing was a peach—all the other man had to do was to hold the can steady and *plunk* the rivet would land smack in it, every shot. That gave me my idea. I talked to the rivet tosser, found he'd never played basketball but was ready to learn—for compensation. That night I took him to a gym and discovered his aim was as good with a ball as with a red-hot rivet.

"You should have seen him sink that ball from any angle! He took yesterday off and I coached him on the game for seven straight hours. Boys, he's good. Considering the system of play we have, he knows all he needs to know. We're going to run away with that game to-night!"

Brilliant! There was no other name for it. Brandon and I both tried to talk at once but we just gurgled deliriously. It stood to reason that a man who could toss rivets accurately for eight hours a day, day after day, for months on end, wouldn't have any trouble throwing baskets. And all we wanted and needed was a man who could toss 'em in once he got the ball. Pipes had made a ten strike, sure enough!

"Where's this bird now?" Steve asked, once he could make intelligible sounds. "You're sure he'll play for us?"

"Absolutely," grinned Pipes. "He's in Iron City, and he'll be waiting at the City Hotel at seven to-night. I'm going to have Bill Owen bring him here in his taxicab. Everything's fixed, so don't do any more worrying, Steve! Bet your money on Spurdale!"

"By George!" I said, "I'm going to do just that little thing, if I can locate Hank Green!"

Brandon came out of his happy daze. "There he is now," he said, nodding

toward the cigar counter by the door. "I guess he just came in."

I started to get up, but Hank was gone before I could leave the table, and so I decided to find him later.

Well, we enjoyed a mighty pleasant afternoon thinking of what was going to happen to Loremont in the evening. I failed to see Hank, but a mob of Loremont fans came to town and so I didn't have any trouble placing a nice-sized wager. Hammond and Brandon did the same.

Along about four thirty Pipes came to see me at the office. "Slim," he said, "I'm worried. I suppose I should have stayed in Iron City and come in with my man. But I can't go there now—I've got to get hold of our players and tip them off about keeping the ball from the new man until he's free to shoot."

I got scared. "Think something might happen to him?"

"I hope not, but—— Slim, suppose you hop on the five sixteen and run into Iron City and meet me at the City Hotel at seven. I'll feel a lot easier if you do."

"Sure!" I agreed quickly. "How'll I recognize him?"

"You won't be able to miss him," said Pipes. "He's a six footer, real husky, and has a white scar across the bridge of his nose—bumped into a steel girder, he said. His name is—um—Shane."

I got the five sixteen.

CHAPTER IV.

A MISTAKEN HOLDUP.

AT six thirty I was at the City Hotel. Shane wasn't there, I discovered after going around the lobby twice, and so I sat down to wait. That wasn't so good, though; I was nervous as a cat in a dog pound, and got up again. Suppose the man didn't show up—suppose something happened to him?

My imagination was working over-

time, and by ten minutes to seven I was perspiring from worry and convinced that Shane had met with a whole batch of accidents. Five minutes later, just as I was ready to go into a panic, I heard a boy paging me and learned that somebody wanted me on the telephone.

It was Hammond, speaking from Spurdale. "Sorry I put you to that trouble, Slim," he said cheerfully. "But our man has arrived here already, so you needn't wait. He found a friend of his was coming out to see the game, so he drove with him. Bill Owen started for Iron City in his cab three quarters of an hour ago; ought to be there by now. He'll bring you back. See you later!"

I was too relieved to be aggravated, and hustled out of the hotel. Owen's taxi was just pulling up, and I hopped aboard before he stopped.

"Head right back, Bill," I told him, and as the car started to move again I gave him the details.

It wasn't exactly an ideal night for a joy ride. The ground was covered with snow, and more was starting to come down. Once outside of Iron City, the car had to be driven in groves made by traffic during the day, and it was impossible to make speed because of the way the bus lurched around. And it was cold. With everything shut up tight and a blanket around me I was shivering before we'd gone a mile.

Once, to avoid being run into, we had to pull over to one side to allow a sedan with a crazy driver pass us, but that was the only car we saw.

By the time we got to Cratchet's Corners, two miles from Spurdale, my teeth were chattering and I was so cold I forgot about the game. To be close to some heat struck me as being the height of earthly bliss.

And then, a quarter mile farther, Owen had to come to a stop because of a black mass that blocked the road. I thought I recognized the sedan that had

cut ahead of us. Before I had a chance to wonder what had happened, a half dozen figures leaped from the darkness along the edge of the road and were on us.

Two men climbed on Bill Owen; four others—two through each door—jumped inside and grabbed at me.

"Hold-up!" was what popped into my head, and I tried to get clear of the clutching hands. It wasn't much use. I was frozen stiff, and hampered by the blanket around me, and there were too many of them. I was jerked into the open and found myself beside Bill Owen. We made another attempt to get free, but the whole crew jumped up and dragged us, willy-nilly, across the snow, through some dry bushes, to the door of a shack some fifty feet from the road. A couple of minutes later we were thrust into a room and the door was slammed and locked.

Except for some cursing at the cold, the attackers hadn't done any talking. Now we heard a husky voice outside: "Gonna stay behind and watch 'em?"

Three or four growls answered, and then: "Hell! I don't aim to freeze for nobody, not even Hank. They can't get out."

Footsteps crunched on snow. An instant later came the roar of a motor. Within a minute we were left in silence and darkness.

Well, Owen and I spoke some fervent words, and, thus relieved, examined our prison. We weren't encouraged by what we found. The walls of the place were made of heavy planks and the door was just as solid. There was no furniture in the small room except for a flimsy chair, and we wrecked that completely trying to batter down the door. After that we must have spent a full hour seeking a weak spot in the walls, by the light of matches, but didn't find any.

Eventually, pretty well exhausted, physically and vocally, we took a rest.

Which was fortunate, for at that instant the wind outside swept around the shack and a few flakes of snow drifted down from the ceiling. We lit a match, looked up, and saw that a two foot hole in the roof was covered with nothing but tar paper.

That looked encouraging. Bill Owen bent over. I climbed up on his back, and in a short while I had ripped out the paper and had a good hold on the edge of the hole. With Bill boosting from below, I managed to pull and wiggle myself up. Then, lying on the snow on the roof, I reached down and helped him out. It took some tugging, but we managed it.

His cab was still in the road, and undamaged. In less than a minute we were heading for Spurdale.

I did some mighty hard thinking in the next five minutes, and finally was satisfied I had solved the puzzle of the attack. The six were Loremont men, obviously, and they had mistaken me for Shane, the basketball star. I remembered that after the Clareville game, when Pipes Hammond had been making his bet with Brandon, Hank Green had been close enough to overhear. Then, during the next few days, he had been hanging around town—waiting for Pipes to get back and learn if the latter had succeeded in getting a player. That much was plain.

Thinking back, I felt Steve had been wrong that noon in the restaurant; Hank Green hadn't just stepped into the place when we saw him—he had been on his way out of the place. He probably had followed us into the restaurant and taken a table near us and overheard everything Pipes said. We had been too interested to pay any attention to the diners at the other tables.

If I was right that far—and I felt sure I was—the rest was easy to guess. Green knew Bill Owen was to go to Iron City to bring back the man Shane, so he had his six friends follow Bill

in the sedan. None of them knew I had gone to Iron City by train. The six knew Bill was to pick up the star at the City Hotel—and when I popped into the cab they thought I was Shane. On the way back, they passed us and prepared their trap.

A slick scheme, but it had failed. I was tickled when I thought of that. Shane at that very instant was probably playing havoc with Hank's hopes of a championship, to the Loremont man's consternation.

Well, we finally got to the hall where the game was being played. As I breezed inside, past the ticket taker, I heard the mob of spectators let out a roar. The place was jammed, with watchers standing all around the playing floor. I couldn't get close enough to see what was going on so I put a question to the man nearest me.

"Six to two, favor Loremont!" he said. "Yeah—second half. Tom Curry is losin' the game for us! The big ham can't make a basket to save his life!"

And Job's comforter walked away.

Disregarding numerous elbows and toes, I forced my way to the front row of the crowd. The man had been right. Tom Curry, and nobody else, was playing right forward for Spurdale.

I was flabbergasted. What had become of Shane?

CHAPTER V.

A UNIQUE SURPRISE.

MY first impulse was to go in search of Brandon and Hammond and find out just what it all meant. Then I decided it didn't matter. Something had gone wrong; that was plain enough—and sufficient. Too late to do anything now, and the post-mortems could wait.

I gave my attention to the game.

Tom Curry was just getting ready to try a free throw, and as he put one foot back and stood ready to flip the ball with

a twist of his hands the crowd became silent. He threw, and the sphere swung in an arc, struck the board, and bounced back to the playing field without touching the rim of the basket. A clean miss, and the Spurdale fans groaned.

Then followed some astounding basketball. Roswell, our center, got the ball, dribbled a few steps, tossed to Curry, who did not try for the hoop but passed to Burke, the other forward. Back and forth the ball went, accurate passing keeping it out of the hands of the Loremont players.

Several times Curry and Burke had clean chances at the basket, and they always ignored them. The place was like bedlam; yells of "Shoot!" punctuated the racket; the Loremont fans strained their lungs with frantic pleas to: "Break that up! Break that up!" Excitement was at fever heat.

The Loremont team, headed by Hank Green himself, desperately tried to put a stop to the lightninglike Spurdale passing game. Collisions between flashing bodies were frequent; figures sprawled to the floor, got up, and returned to the play. More than once I thought I saw Spurdale men deliberately fouled, but the officials appeared blind.

It was a magnificent exhibition of perfect teamwork—but pointless, in more ways than one. If we'd been ahead, the system would have been sensible; but we were losing, and every chance for a basket that was passed up brought defeat closer. And still the ball was shot around—long passes, short passes, backward passes, bewildering field tactics that drove the bellowing crowd into a frenzy of excitement.

Neither side had made a point when the third quarter ended; the score was still six to two. From the talk around me I gathered that, except for a few minutes at the start of the game, Spurdale had used the same tactics throughout the entire period of play.

Glancing up to the balcony, I discov-

ered Pipes Hammond. He was in the first row, his elbows on the rail, his head between his hands. His attention seemed to be focused on the players sprawled on the playing floor taking a rest. I thought I might catch his eye, but he never lifted his gaze.

I was about to start in search of Steve Brandon when the whistle blew for play, and so I remained where I was. This last quarter would tell the tale, and would be our last chance.

Loremont got the ball on the jump and scored two points almost before the crowd knew the game was on once more. Then Roswell slapped the ball to Burke and the merry-go-round started again. Burke to Curry, Curry to Roswell, Roswell to Left Guard White, White to Burke—bulletlike passes, all of them, great to see but scoring no points.

The crowd began to stamp in unison, with one word for each stamp: "Score! Score! Score! Score!"

The din was terrific. About the only person who seemed calm was Hammond. He sat hunched over, motionless; then I saw him wave to some one downstairs.

The futile passing went on until Hank Green and the Loremont center in sheer desperation threw themselves bodily on Curry, who happened to have the ball at that instant. When the flying arms and legs were disentangled, Spurdale was awarded two free throws for a personal foul. Curry, limping somewhat, took his position in front of the basket. He threw once—missed; threw again—and missed.

As play started, Spurdale took time out. Curry shakily went off the floor and another figure appeared in his place. I stared; and then, with the other seven hundred spectators, I gasped.

The man who had replaced Tom Curry was Bud Warren. A fresh, nervous, r'arin'-to-go Bud Warren, with two good arms.

CHAPTER VI.

EXPLANATIONS.

THE rest of that game will always be a part of Spurdale history.

His broken arm somehow miraculously healed, Bud Warren stepped into his old place at right forward and completed the Spurdale machine. Before thirty seconds passed we knew what the result of the game was going to be and started to celebrate then and there.

Burke got the ball shortly after the whistle blew, whipped it to Roswell, who in turn made a snap pass to Warren. Bud pivoted to escape his guard, took a short step back, and with a sweep of his arm shot the ball over his head toward the basket. It flashed through the mesh without touching metal. Score: Loremont eight, Spurdale four.

It was a joy-delirious crowd that watched what followed. The Spurdale quintet swept up and down the field with mechanical precision beautiful to see. Every cog in the machine clicked at the right moment.

Occasionally Loremont would get the ball, but it never held it for more than a few seconds at a time; five Spurdale men who knew exactly what they were doing at all times took care of that. Bud Warren, working with deadly accuracy, scored basket after basket, some of the shots being from almost impossible angles. He was a scoring whirlwind.

Toward the last, just before the gun sounded to give us a thirty-two to eight victory, the Loremont team all but collapsed.

While the crowd milled around noisily, after play was ended, I fought my way to the dressing room. I found a group of tired but happy men inside. Brandon's face was decorated with the widest grin I'd ever seen on a human being, and Pipes—how he got there before I did I couldn't guess—was radiating joy.

"Some game, Slim!" Steve greeted me. "Boy, did we show 'em!"

"And then some!" I agreed. "But for gosh sake, how did Bud's arm get healed so quick—and where was Shane?"

Steve, still grinning, nodded to Pipes. "There's the doctor."

"Bud's arm never was broken," Pipes said, his eyes luminous with unholy glee. "And the man Shane was—um—an imaginary person."

That knocked the wind out of me. "Say that again," I requested, sinking into a chair. "You mean to tell me you sent me to Iron City when you knew that——"

"Yes," Pipes interrupted. "But it was necessary, Slim. You were captured by some Loremont men, weren't you?" When I nodded, he added: "I knew you would be."

"Better give him the whole layout," Steve suggested.

Pipes sat down beside me. "There isn't much to tell," he said. "I was interested in the team from the day I got here, when I learned about the rivalry between Spurdale and Loremont, and how Hank Green used tricks to win. After Steve took charge I became well acquainted with the players.

"Well, to make it short, two days before the Clareville game I met Bud Warren on the street. While we were standing and talking a man with a two-by-six plank about ten feet long on his shoulder came down the walk. He went by us for a few feet and then swung abruptly—and if Bud hadn't ducked, the end of the plank would have smashed against his right arm, between the elbow and the shoulder. It might have broken the bone; certainly he would have received a bad bruise.

"Bud thought the man had just been careless, but he told me that the plank carrier was a Loremont man and, bearing in mind what I had heard about Green's underhandedness, I become sus-

picious. I followed the man and saw him discard his load in an empty lot.

"That settled the thing—Loremont wanted to keep Bud out of our game with Clareville, probably in the hope that we'd be licked and thus eliminated from the championship race."

Pipes stopped for breath a moment. "I figured this way: since the trick had failed, Hank would doubtless try something else, if not before the Clareville game, then before we played them. The thing to do was to trick him—treat him to some of his own medicine. I outlined a plan to Bud, and he reluctantly, at first, agreed to go through with it. He faked his broken arm. Bud felt sure the team could lick Clareville without him, so we played it that way."

I was too amazed to speak.

The smile on Hammond's face broadened as he continued. "You heard me yelling at the Clareville game, of course. That was to attract Green's attention to me. And I purposely raised my voice so Hank would hear me when I made the bet with Steve, after the game.

"The result was what I expected. Hank knew his team would win if we played without Bud Warren; but he had to prevent me from getting a new star for Spurdale. He was hanging around the station when I got off the train this morning, and he followed me from there. I called you up and made the date in the restaurant, and he took a place at a table a short distance away from us when we sat down. Wanted to overhear what I had to tell, of course—he didn't know I'd been visiting all the theaters in Iron City for the past few days, enjoying myself!

"I told you fellows all about Shane in a voice that would carry to Hank. He swallowed the bait. I think you know, or can guess the rest. I made Slim take the place of Shane, though he didn't know it. That's about all, except that I figured it would be best to keep Bud Warren out of the game to-

night as long as possible, to keep Hank Green from working any more tricks on the floor."

Simple? Beautifully so. "But look here," I said, "why wasn't I let in on the scheme? You might have told me about it."

"Cheer up," Brandon said, "I didn't know anything either until just before the game. Pipes *had* to tell me then, since he wanted me to have the team stick to a passing game."

"What was the idea of the secrecy?" I asked Pipes.

His thin face crinkled into a slow smile. "The fewer persons in on a plot like that, the less chance there is for a slip-up. And then," he added, "I thought I'd show you and Steve that I might be responsible for other things besides calamities."

"You win," Steve chuckled. "I take back all the hard words."

Something occurred to me. "Everything's fine," I said, "except that poor Bud Warren's in bad with Marjorie Carewe. You might try doing something for him there, Pipes."

Pipes' smile expanded. "He isn't troubled any more," he stated. "I've talked with her. Bright girl! She was afraid that Bud had weakened and had agreed to help make Spurdale lose, and that he was being paid by gamblers. She knew a lot of money was bet on Loremont. You see, of all the people who saw Bud with his arm bandaged and in a sling, she was the only one with eyes sharp enough to note that he didn't handle that arm as though it was broken. She was certain it *wasn't* broken!"

"I hope," said Brandon, "that you mentioned a few things about Hank Green when you talked to Marjorie."

Pipes shrugged his thin shoulders and said nothing.

But he must have opened the girl's eyes, for three months later she and Bud were married.

Come Back to Aaron~

By
C.S. Montanye

(COMPLETE IN THIS
ISSUE)



FOR more time than Oscar Doolittle, one of the bell hops at the gilded Hotel Ritzbilt, cared to think about, tips had been as scarce as prickly heat in the arctic circle. And the worst part of it was that Doolittle, running Eddie Elton ragged for favor in the blue eyes of Hazel, the orange-topped switchboard Venus, needed ten dollars just the same way a race horse needed a track, a plumber a leaky pipe, a bootlegger a dark night, and a tardy schoolboy a good excuse.

Thinking it over in leisure moments, Doolittle decided that nine dollars or even eight might possibly suffice. The tragedy of it was there was little chance of getting as much as one tenth of one per cent of the required amount from either Nick McBride, the dapper night clerk, or any of his companions in livery. The whole works awaited pay day and appeared as clean as a package of laundry.

Still, there were a few grains of sunshine in the dark morass of disappointment. The ten iron gentlemen were necessary if Hazel was to be taken to the annual outing of the Hotel Work-

ers' Association. They would cover the price of the tickets to Treasure Island on the Sound—they would buy innumerable broiled canines smeared with what the French call *moutard* and they would cover the bus ride to and from the rendezvous.

Likewise, with what change left Doolittle decided he could purchase a sprig of violets for Hazel or a box of candy and treat her to a few of the amusement devices the island had to offer to its patrons.

The outing was scheduled for Saturday and on Tuesday Doolittle was like a sailor lost in the middle of the Pacific without a single sail in sight.

"I hear them tell how you're chirping about dragging Hazel to the big blow-out this week-end," Eddie Elton sneered that same evening. "What happened—wealthy uncle shuffle off to do a piece of harp strumming and willed you a couple of dollars? Come on, tell me all about it!"

Doolittle, who loved Elton in exactly the same manner an ordinary moth was enamored of a roll of tar paper, grinned witlessly.

"My business," he mumbled, moving

a couple of feet that might have won cup races if equipped with masts and rudders, "ain't nobody else's business."

Elton curled a lip.

"Yeah? You can bull frogs and you can kid gloves but you can't buffalo this baby. I'm broke and so are you. You've been scouting around trying to make a touch so you can treat Hazel—the same as I've been doing. And you haven't had the luck of a woodpecker on a tiled roof. Isn't that so?"

Whatever answer Doolittle would have made was never to be known for exactly at the same minute the bell hop's signal buzzed and the elegant Mr. McBride raised a finger in a request for both service and action.

"You can have her—I don't want her!" Eddie Elton murmured, after one glance in the direction of the black onyx desk where a newly arrived feminine guest of the Ritzbilt was in the act of registering. "There's your gold mine, Oscar. Grab your pick and shovel, and go to it!"

The lady whose three bags and hat box Doolittle picked up was anything save prepossessing or one who gave any hint of lucrative gratuities. She was thin, she was elderly, she possessed a countenance that would have caused consternation in any clock factory and she wore a blond wig decorated with coy corkscrew curls. Yet she had been assigned to one of the best suites on the third floor and Doolittle, struggling manfully with the luggage, felt a flicker of hope.

Possibly this woman was a millionairess, eccentric to the point of starvation, with enough money to buy up New Jersey and close it for good. He set the bags down in her rooms and waited patiently. Nothing was forthcoming save words.

"What is your name, boy? How long have you been employed here? Are you honest and ambitious? Do you live home with your parents? Do

you go to Sunday school and can you repeat the Ten Commandments?"

So rapidly did she speak that Doolittle blinked.

"Yes, ma'am," he mumbled. "No, ma'am."

The woman transfixed him with a pair of singularly keen eyes.

"Which is it?"

Doolittle rubbed his ears and fingered the brass buttons on his jacket.

"Both," he answered stupidly.

"The reason I ask," the woman went on, "is because I will have an errand for you in a day or two that will pay you ten dollars. You look like a bright, respectable little chap, who could be relied on. Are you?"

"I had a good one last winter," Doolittle returned politely. "Chap, what I mean. Don't forget me when you want that errand done, ma'am. I've been hunting for ten dollars for the last week and a half."

The woman said she wouldn't and Doolittle returned to the lobby walking on clouds of air. It was the work of a minute only to discover she had registered as Mrs. Brighton Early, from Chicago.

"One of those big-hearted, rich Western women," Nick McBride ventured carelessly. "If you had more sense you could get the dollars, Oscar. Most of these exiles from that section of the country where a bird in the hand is worth two on the plate are prodigals when it comes to soothing the itching palm. Too bad you're so thick!"

Back on the bench Eddie Elton grinned sarcastically.

"What did you get, fellar? Come on, open up the mitt and let's pipe the plunder."

Settling back on the bench, Oscar Doolittle stared dreamily across the lobby. He was just able to glimpse the gleaming crown of Hazel's blond head. One of her slenderly arched brows he glimpsed and a portion of her cheek that

was as white as sun-washed ivory. His imagination glowed fancifully with a picture of Treasure Island, sizzling fox terriers done up in crisp rolls and a scenic railway that was a first aid to erratic digestion.

"I didn't get any money—yet," he replied truthfully, "but I did receive a promise—and, oh, Eddie, *what* a promise!"

Elton snickered and tossed a wink at a couple of his other companions in toil. They returned the wink.

"A promise, eh? Try and spend that up at Treasure Island next Saturday and see how far it goes!"

II.

THERE was no word forthcoming from Mrs. Brighton Early who stayed closer to her expensive suite than a moth to a fur coat, until that Friday noon. Then she sent for Doolittle and let a razorlike glance pass slowly over him.

"I'm going to send you down to John Street," she began, "with a pearl necklace. It is a very valuable pearly necklace worth possibly fifty or sixty thousand dollars. You are to take it to the firm of Ford & Rattle, the large jewelers. I have just telephoned and they are expecting the necklace which I am sending to have its catch repaired. Do you suppose you can deliver it safely?"

"Do birds fly?" Doolittle answered succinctly.

The woman opened her desk and lifted out a long leather box. She opened it, glanced briefly at the coil of pearls it contained before wrapping the box in brown paper and securing it stoutly with heavy twine.

"Here is your carfare. When you return with the receipt from the jewelers I will reimburse you with the ten dollars as I promised. Let me caution you again to be careful. You will?"

"Well," Doolittle replied diplomatically, "I haven't ridden in an ambulance yet!"

John Street, as information divulged, was in the lower regions of the city, a short distance from the financial district. The subways were still doing business, so Doolittle, some fifteen minutes later, shot a nickel into the noisy turnstile and boarded a southbound train.

The train was jammed and he was too small to reach the beautiful overhead straps. So he compromised by seizing the coat tails of a middle-aged gentleman with eyebrows that looked like question marks and a nose that jutted out over the waterfall of a mustache. There was another man close to him that resembled a minister. This second individual had a long, lean, melancholy visage and a chin so pointed that it could have opened any bottle of olives. He appeared to have his hands folded in prayer and Doolittle, shoving Mrs. Early's package into his hip pocket, favored him with only a solitary glance.

All the way down to his destination, thoughts of Treasure Island and the big outing kept pace with the speed of the train. Hot dogs, scenic railways, and the delicious Hazel. A king could ask no more!

Doolittle snapped out of his trance when he reached the proper station. He alighted and headed for the stairs, but before he had placed his foot on the second step that led up to open daylight above, he made a discovery so terrifying and unnerving that he nearly fainted.

Quite by chance his hand automatically sought his back pocket. He half expected the comforting feel of Mrs. Early's package, but instead his fingers brushed nothing except the material of his suit. With a wild cry Doolittle fumbled madly for the missing package until, in another round of dizzy seconds,

the terrible truth dawned significantly and fully upon him.

Either some crook had used agile fingers or—he had lost the valuable pearls!

III.

FOR a confused minute Doolittle thought of two things. One was police headquarters and the other the lost-and-found bureau of the underground cannery. Mature reflection, painfully agonizing, made him decide that it was better to go to Mrs. Early with the horrible news and allow her to act.

"After all," he told himself, "the pearls belonged to her. *She'd* better call the cops!"

Back at the Hotel Ritzbilt, Doolittle made a miserable way into the lobby. He broke the sad news to the exquisite Mr. McBride who shook his head and he told Eddie Elton who failed to display any degree of sympathy in Doolittle's trouble.

"So you let some dip get you for sixty thousand dollars' worth of neckbeads?" Elton said. "Really, it's a wonder a dumb Bennie like you gets home at night without having your elbows picked off or your eyes crooked or something. Well, you must pardon me while I guffaw. This just about bakes your outing with Hazel to a fricassee. Still, it's only what might be expected from you."

Doolittle turned sadly away and used an elevator. McBride had evidently phoned the news up to Mrs. Brighton Early. The woman was pacing the floor with the air of a lioness suffering from insomnia when Doolittle plucked up sufficient courage to enter.

"And I thought you could be trusted!" she snapped. "I thought you were alert. I was certain that you could be relied upon."

"How about the police?" he stammered thickly. "Honest, we got some

swell bulls in this town. I know a party who lost a valise with a pair of pajamas in it and when the flatfeet got it back to him it was filled with sterling silver. I know——"

"I've already communicated with the law," the woman said. "I suppose you realize I have no intention of paying you for your errand. Those pearls were worth——"

A knock on the door interrupted her. She crossed to it rather slowly and opened it. Two men entered, one briskly and one reluctantly. Doolittle, with a stab of surprise recognized the brisk one as being the same gentleman with the question-mark eyebrows whose coat tails he had clung to in the subway. And the other was the same melancholy-faced, ministerial appearing person who had stood beside him in a solemn and prayerful attitude.

"Mrs. Early?" the brisk one began, removing a familiar package from his inner pocket. "Your pearls. I might suggest that you take better care of them in the future. I just stopped in on my way to headquarters with my friend Aaron Hawks, whom you probably know."

"You bet she knows me," Hawks growled. "And believe me, if they are going to job me I'll blow like an electric fan."

The unprepossessing countenance of Mrs. Early grew pallid.

"I—I don't know a thing about all this," she began. "Does this person infer——"

"I happen to be Algernon Wells," the first speaker interrupted. "I represent the insurance company writing the policy on those pearls. In a word, we've been rather suspicious of you, Mrs. Early. I came on from Chicago to sort of keep an eye on the jewels. I got the conversation you had over the wire this morning with Hawks here from the remarkably pretty operator downstairs. Hawks, one of the clever-

est pickpockets in the business, is very familiar to me."

"And you think——"

Wells lifted a polite hand.

"I would not want to think that you had employed Hawks to trail your mes-senged and relieve him of the necklace so that you might collect the insurance. I wouldn't want to believe that, so I'm merely suggesting that you take better care of the necklace until the policy expires. Good afternoon."

Having nothing better on hand, Doolittle followed Wells and the sharp-chinned individual into one of the lifts that was going down. He fingered an ear, shuffled his feet hopelessly and drew a breath when the car reached the lobby level.

There, in the act of alighting, the representative of the insurance company appeared to remember something.

"Oh, by the way," he said to Doolittle, "I hope you don't lose anything on this. Here. I owe you ten bucks. Take it and hide it in your shoe."

He pressed a bank note into the bell hop's nerveless hand and added a dash of explanation.

"Never mind the thanks. If you hadn't been so—ah—easy, Hawks would have never picked the pearls and they wouldn't have—ah—come back to Aaron, as it were. Get the point?"

Doolittle slipped the bill up his sleeve, glanced across at the switch board and found a smile.

"No, sir," he answered. "Yes, sir."



SPEAKIN' OF FISH

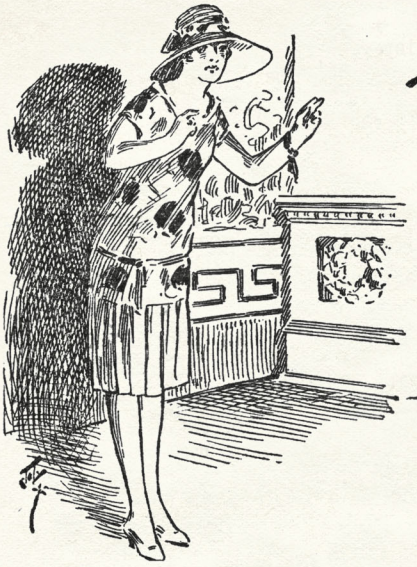
By S. Omar Barker

FISH as big as whoppin' whales are the kind fer anglin' tales
 Fellers like to spin by ruddy camp-fire light:
 Bouncin' bass an' monstrous musky, barracuda fish, an' husky
 Four-pound trout—the kind that spin your reel with fight.

Give us big uns fer fish stories an' the thrill of angler's glories,
 Whoppers swell the fishin' heart of every man—
 Yet the truth will somehow out: boys, that little eight-inch trout
 Is the best to sizzle in your fryin' pan.

Out of ice-cold mountain creeks where the trail through alders sneaks,
 Yank him gently with a two or three-foot line.
 Maybe so you think him small—so he is, but that's not all;
 Cooked in camp you'll find his flavor is divine!

So, fer story an' fer song, finny fellers two feet long
 Are the proper fish to tell your friends about,
 But the truest song to sing is about the fish that's king
 Of the fryin' pan: that six to eight inch trout!



The Time: The Place: The Whirl-

By
Olin Lyman

(COMPLETE IN THIS ISSUE)



ALITTLE pep, Blythe! Suggest your surname. It's the time and the place for the whirl! Give all you've got. Like this!"

Producer-manager-director wee Willy Wallace assumed a pop-eyed glare, pushed pudgy fingers through his hair, snarled noisily and hopped to Estelle Winters, seizing her wrist.

"Ha!" he said dramatically, "I see that wall-eyed whippersnipe on the garden wall! Run away with him, ha? Marry him, ha? Come back into the house, girl! I'll make a housemaid of you! Come on in, the dishwater's fine!"

His raucous voice smoothed to an imploring note. "Now, cut loose, Stella. Squall, squall like a bobcat. Bat me around. Let's go!"

After a moment he halted the resultant action. "Stella!" he said.

"I'm sorry, Willy," the girl said. Her voice was melodious, of mezzo-soprano timbre. It distinctly fitted a lovely presence, but there was a troubled tone in it now.

Willy continued inexorably. "Stella, you wrote this comedy, and you're its star. For nearly three acts you're a

downtrodden daughter, who ought by rights to murder your bullying old father, Montie Blythe. He's keepin' you away from your sweetie, young Berwyck, over there.

"In the last two minutes papa catches you two about to vamoze. He yelps at you. You should yelp back, you should give daddy the jar of his life, you should knock him mentally and physically cuckoo, and sail over the garden wall with your fiancé.

"You have to switch sirup for acid. Do you? I'll say you don't! Instead of yowling, you pur; instead of wall-opping your parent, you shove him! Now, for the hundred and fiftieth time, Stel', watch me."

Willy was a roly-poly little man with a hard-boiled face, and eyes that were exceedingly kind. Now he screeched hoarsely and tore at his hair while he glared at Montie Blythe.

"Dishwater, eh?" the little man howled. "You call my boy a 'wall-eyed whippersnipe?' Look out, papa, I'm a-coming!"

Whooping in a shrill falsetto, he tore at the fastidious veteran character actor, Montague Blythe. Willy beat at Montie's breast, laughing hysterically while he mauled him about the stage. As Blythe staggered toward the wings, Willy leaped for young Berwyck Eaton

and hurled himself into the juvenile's outstretched arms. "Take me where I can change my name, deary!" he gurgled.

Panting and grinning, Wallace slipped from Eaton's embrace. "Then—over the garden wall," he gasped, "and you've got something!"

The immaculate Mr. Blythe placed a manicured hand on a slender hip and grumbled something about Willy being too rough. Paying no attention to him, Willy Wallace resumed putting the small company through its paces. Few rehearsals remained before "The Time; The Place; The Whirl" was due for its opening night in the new Narcissus Theater on Broadway.

The metropolis was in the grip of a late August hot wave. The heat in the uptown vaudeville house, closed during the summer months and secured by Wallace for his work of preparation, was terrific.

Ironically enough, the performers were acting before a back drop showing snowy mountain peaks. Two gyrating electric fans, stirring humid air, merely added to the discomfort. Dim and ghostly showed the auditorium of empty seats, where slumbered seasonal ghosts of laughter and applause.

Finally Wallace threw up the sponge. "Oh, well, it's too blamed hot! On deck to-morrow."

They trooped out into the villainous heat of scorching pavements.

Wallace went out with Estelle Winters. "No, Willy, don't call a taxi for me," she said. "I'd rather walk down town, really."

Never had Willy seen anything lovelier than those brown eyes of Estelle. They were beautiful and earnest, twin habitations for brave dreams. They were perplexing, too, in their range of moods; sometimes dancing with the light of youth, sometimes darkly calm with the shadow of sophisticated maturity.

It was at such moments of gravity that Willy conceded that she was older than he had thought at first—probably thirty, or a little more. He would not have ventured that far in his conjectures were it not for the occasional hint of ripened experience which brooded sometimes in her eyes.

Willy had seen seven years of locusts since he began his career as a producer. He had laboriously sown fields, and treachery had garnered the fruits thereof. He had created stars whose art now enriched others. But never had he exploited a play with the merit of the piece that Estelle Winters had penned, nor ever coached an actress with her personality and charm. His last dollar was staked on her play. With its climax assured, so was success.

Now in his homely face was only gentleness. "You know, Stella, I want you to shine as a real star on Broadway."

Her answering smile was tremulous. Small and slender, her exquisite figure robed in a simple white gown, she stood with him on the curb, cool-seeming and unruffled in contrast to sweltering passersby. Her look grew subtly like that of a grieved child's. "That last scene—I must do it!" she said.

"Now see here, Stel'. We'll be all right by the time we have dress rehearsal. Then we will try it 'on the dog' up in Westchester before opening. Go to your hotel, now—walk if you feel you must—and have a good rest for to-morrow."

He stood and watched her walk slowly down Broadway, moving with the grace of a slim and youthful queen. Poor little thing! It would be ten more years, he reflected, before she came into the heritage of philosophy that life brings to the forties—and then she might look too old to get by.

His mind dwelt rather grimly upon the fact that Estelle was unconsciously

assuming all the responsibility for the weakness of that final scene. As author of the piece and its star, this was natural. Willy knew better. He had been watching Montague Blythe narrowly, and was convinced that the veteran was through.

It would take two to put over that scene, and neither one was up to the mark. Wallace caught at a straw of hope. If he could whip Blythe into real action, might that not give Estelle the confidence she needed? It was well worth trying. Resolving to concentrate his attention upon Montie the next day, Willy hailed a taxi. He never walked if he could avoid it.

II.

MEANWHILE, Estelle, oblivious as always to the stares of admiration which greeted her, walked the two miles to her hotel. Presently, refreshed by a cold shower, she rested by a window which faced the greenery of the park.

Upon her face was the look of matured thought and experience that Willy Wallace's eyes had sometimes caught. It belied the glow of youth that was expressed in the finely chiseled features, the delicate rose leaf of the cheeks, the coiled masses of rich bronze-colored hair with the high golden lights.

Under the sway of this morbid mood, failure of the play seemed certain. Blessed Willy Wallace, who had staked his all upon it, would fail again, and through her fault. Those poor people of the supporting cast would be out of work at the beginning of the season.

It was like Estelle Winters to think of others before herself. But now came thought of what the disaster which threatened would mean to her. The failure to rise to the demands of that climax would be tragic. Up to there, she was persuaded, all was well.

But a weak ending would leave the audience cold.

If the crash came, she need not undergo subsequent hardship unless she willed it. She had only to board a train for the West, where financial comfort awaited her. However, if her stellar attempt failed, she determined, if necessary, to undertake the heart-breaking climb back to public favor, unassisted. If fate required, she would face the third-rate lodging house, the cheap lunch rooms, the sordid daily rounds of the agencies!

In this great moment of decision, while her round chin lifted proudly and her brown eyes glowed with quenchless fire, Estelle Winters looked young, and at the same time, wise and fortified beyond her years.

With the swift changefulness of womanhood, the next moment found her eyes again misty and her lips quivering.

"Oh!" murmured Estelle, "if he were only here. If he were my papa, he would find a way, bless him! Willy thinks I wrote that climax. I did write everything but that, and it's too strong for me."

She gazed moodily at the floor. "That's just the trouble," she conceded. "I couldn't think of any climax, and he wrote in just the right one. Now, if I couldn't think of it, how could I interpret it, afterward? It's too much for me! I'm a perfect mess!"

The next day Montague Blythe telephoned from his hotel that he was ill. Willy received the news grimly. It had lately come to his hearing that Blythe was a victim of bibulous custom during recent days. Wallace could only give him the benefit of the doubt, but he believed calculated malice lay in Blythe's absence.

Willy took the part of the tyrant papa. He was no actor. He had neither the voice nor the presence, yet he

could usually crisp others into action through his sure grasp of values and his enthusiasm. But on this afternoon, he was so worried about the situation, that the rehearsal was a flop.

Montie Blythe, with a look about him which confirmed the manager's suspicions of dissipation, came the next afternoon. As he had promised himself, Willy Wallace devoted particular attention to him, and extended the coaching.

It was apparent that Blythe resented this. General disgust spread as matters grew more hopeless. For this Wallace blamed the old actor, whose daily work grew increasingly careless.

Upon a sultry afternoon, when plenty of perspiration had failed to produce the punch, Willy Wallace exploded. Away flew every vestige of the mournful patience with actors that had always distinguished him.

Shaking his fist at the male lead, he shrilled a savage show-down. "Blythe, I could get a wooden soldier that would show more life in this papa part than you do! Are you in a trance? Now spill that dishwater again, and do it so your daughter gets mad!"

Instead, it was Montie who got mad. He shook his fist back at Willy. "You spill your own dishwater," the actor replied angrily. "You've picked me to pieces for the last time. My rôle should be the lead in this piece of junk, anyhow, and you have me running second to an ingénue who's miscast as a star!"

Willy's eyes narrowed; at last he understood part of the reason for his troubles. "So jealousy has been one thing the matter with you, eh?"

The other actors had drawn closer. "Gentlemen!" pleaded Estelle.

Wallace was cold with wrath. "Make it 'gentleman,' Stella. And this isn't Blythe! You resign then, Montie?"

Blythe bit his lip. He had gone too

far, but must hold to his guns. "I wouldn't act with this outfit!"

"Well, you haven't so far, and you won't get another chance. I accept your resignation. Ladies and gentlemen, you're witnessing that Blythe has broken his contract, and stands without redress. Now will you lift yourself out of here, Montie, or shall I slap you along to the stage door?"

Blythe departed, unslapped and sulky. There was an air of bravado about him which deceived nobody.

Then Willy soberly faced the others. "It's better so. I'd no idea he thought he should have been the star, but apart from that, he's crumbling. I think you've all seen that his work was hampering Miss Winters'. Perhaps I jumped him too hard, but I always seem to have fresh worries."

He yanked a yellow scrap of paper from a pocket. "This telegram kills the 'dog.' We won't draw any try-out up in Westchester to-morrow night. They managed to scramble dates at the opera house and some local fandango is carded for there. They've just advised me. We're carded for a cold turkey opening at the Narcissus Thursday night, and without anybody for the papa rôle.

"Only a miracle can save us. We'd have to find some superior actor, at a moment's notice when all the good ones are signed up, have him study his head off, and then prompt him all through. I don't regret Blythe's going; he would have hashed it, anyway. But I'm afraid the jig is up."

III.

DON'T say that just yet, Willy." With a common impulse they turned to the author-star, Estelle Winters. Her tone crackled with excitement; her eyes sparkled; her smooth and youthful cheeks pinked with optimism.

"I didn't realize Montie had also been such a handicap; I was thinking only of my own wretched work in this climax. An idea just came to me; of course, Willy, you'd signed Montie before I knew, and I couldn't even think of it before. Oh, I'm hoping!

"Willy, will you lend me some bills? I'll repay you this evening. I want to make a long distance call. There are booths in the corner drug store; I can get change there. I just remembered. Thank you, Willy. All of you wait here and pray that I get that connection. Au revoir."

She darted away, leaving them to their devices, tense with suspense, for nearly an hour. Finally the stage door slammed, and she came running back to them, flushed, gloriously exultant.

"Willy, people, it's all right. It broke me: I tried three places, but I got him! In St. Louis. Willy, he's a papa who is a papa!"

The new Narcissus Theater was packed for the opening night of "The Time; The Place; The Whirl." But Willy's anxiety was destined to endure till the final moment. Evening garbed, immaculate, almost weeping, he stood in the wings, tearing at wiry hair he would never permit to lie down.

"I ask you," he inquired of the boss scene shifter, "if ever man born of woman had it piled onto him as I have? I must be walking under ladders all the time; a whole flock of black cats must be following me; a rabbit's foot would burn a hole in my pocket! Ten minutes before the curtain, and my papa not here!"

"Ain't it the truth?" said the man sympathetically.

"Not a rehearsal has he had!" mourned Wallace. "Stella said he had a copy of the play, though why he should have it I don't know, but what good will that do? He should have reached here for dress rehearsal this

afternoon, but a railroad bridge went down, or something. He just phoned that he'd reached the station, but he's not here yet."

"Oh, yes, he is, Willy!" said a soft voice. A sweet young thing, all powdered and painted and chiffoned, came running to him, star-eyed and eager. "My papa's here! I said I'd produce him, and I have!"

"Take me to him!" said Wallace, in vast relief. "I want to kiss him!"

"He's making up in his dressing room, next to mine. Working like mad! The wardrobe woman and I are having to help him; we let out Montie's costumes for him the last three days, but some of them not enough. I just ran out to let you know he was here; I must hurry back. You know he goes on a minute after the curtain rises. See him at the end of the act, Willy!"

She rushed away, but Willy would have followed her had not a boy come running to tell Wallace that the S. R. O. sign was up and he was wanted at the box office. As he hurried back there his wonderment increased.

Why had Estelle Winters been so reticent about this fellow? Why was she so confounded confident that he could make good? Who was he, anyway? Had Estelle told Willy the fellow's name? He entertained a hazy idea that she had.

She was in his dressing room, helping the wardrobe woman with his costumes. Well, of course it was necessary, if the curtain were to rise on time. But, confound it, Estelle was so correct! Willy felt dazed.

It lacked a minute of the curtain's rising when Wallace, who had just left the box office, remembered a detail overlooked in the rush. While the orchestra entered the finale of the overture, Willy wildly seized a program. Yes, there was Montague Blythe's name, cast as papa!

Wallace groaned. Now if this belated phenomenon of Estelle's proved to be a flop, how could Willy ever square things with the public and the press? At least Blythe had been well known and nearly always well received. There was but one thing to do; to hurry backstage, ascertain the name of the substitute and make the announcement.

Too late! Willy dashed cold sweat from his brow as he slumped with arms akimbo over the rear rail.

The curtain was ascending!

IV.

TWO domestics were gossiping in a stage kitchen. In one minute there burst into the picture a big, round figure, about Blythe's height but of a third larger girth. He was gray-wigged and sideburned, pop-eyed and grouchy and glaring.

The audience rustled with surprise. This man was not Montague Blythe!

The substitute loosed a bull-like voice, roaring in a surfeit of the militant ego, browbeating the servants. The audience giggled. In thirty seconds more, as that captious personality cut loose, there came hearty laughter. The audience had forgotten Blythe. So had Willy Wallace.

Estelle Winters came on, to be bullied and tortured by the rotund martinet. She was warmly welcomed, and snapped into it with vim that delighted Willy. Encouraged by the attitude of the public, the supporting actors were doing well.

After ten minutes of action the papa was due for a three-minute rest, after which he was scheduled to reappear and interrupt a meeting of the lovers. Willy made it a point to get back to the wings by the time the stranger came off.

What a huge fellow he was! And he fairly radiated vitality as he stood

chatting with one of the young women, who chanced to leave as Willy approached.

"I'm the manager, Willy Wallace," he said, smiling as he looked up at the man who was saving his bacon.

"I'm Holbrook Winfield," said the actor, grinning as Willy's dumpy hand disappeared within his great hard paw.

Yes, Estelle had mentioned that name, and it had only half registered. Now full remembrance came to Wallace.

"What? The new character man who burst out in the West a season or two ago? That the New York papers have been playing up lately? Weil, the way you're going, no more of the 'sticks' for you!"

The big man's smile revealed glistening teeth as he bowed his acknowledgment. A jovial chap, reflected Willy. With the grease paint and false sideburns it was difficult to judge his age, but Wallace guessed that he was fairly young, and that the real hair under the gray wig was black. The eyes were black and piercing, with whimsical little lights in them.

Then came the cue for papa to prance back upon the stage, and with much satisfaction Willy went to the rear of the house to inform the inquiring dramatic critics that Holbrook Winfield had come from the West, at the last moment, to replace Montague Blythe.

At the end of the first act there were curtain calls for Miss Winters. Feeling better than he had for many days, Willy led her out, while flowers showered over the footlights. Then came insistent cries: "Papa! We want papa! Who is papa?"

Willy, feeling a little light in the head at the prospect of a really great success at last, summoned to his other side the big stage parent of the arch and lovely heroine.

"Ladies and gentlemen," said Willy,

"meet the man from the golden West, Holbrook Winfield!"

Enough of them had heard of Winfield to pass along the information, and there rose a wave of renewed applause.

All was going well. However, as the wait came before the third act, Willy Wallace's nerves were singing and his tongue was dry. He was worrying about those last two minutes of the climax.

Of Holbrook Winfield, Willy felt sure. That superb art of his would be equal to any requirement. But what of Estelle? Wallace felt she would not be there at the big moment, and he thought at last he knew the reason.

A few moments before the curtain was to rise on the final act, Willy went to the actor's dressing room. He found papa straddling a chair, a cigarette between his lips, busily occupied with the details of his last change of costume.

"Tell you what," he said to Willy, "if my—if Miss Winters hadn't remembered that I was wider and rounder than my predecessor in this rôle, we'd have been up Salt Creek for wardrobe. She and the property woman let 'em out pretty well, in the time they had, but not quite enough. In this suit I have to rely more on pins than on thread."

He pinned a seam in his coat and thrust some more pins into the lapel. "For emergencies," he explained. "Must be getting near curtain call."

"You've known Miss Winters for some time, I gather?" hazarded Willy.

The black eyes shot him a peculiar glance. "Yes, for quite some time."

So they were sweethearts, or had been, reflected Willy, sentimentally. Why not? Though so dissimilar in type, they were about the same age, he judged. And the message had reached Winfield at St. Louis, which Willy recalled having once heard was Miss Winters' home town. Winfield having a copy of the play; Miss Win-

ters' joy at the prospect of securing him; all was explained now to Willy's mind.

"Stel' is a dear girl," he pursued. "You've been getting as good a hand as she has, but she isn't the slightest bit jealous."

"Jealous? No, she's not that kind." Tenderness was in the rich tone.

Wallace leaned forward in his chair, tapping Winfield's knee. "Listen, my boy. So far everything's fine. We're riding with luck. There's just one thing that bothers me. It's the climax the last two minutes. It has to be fifty-fifty for the slam. You're there I know. Now, about Estelle—I can see you know her pretty well."

Winfield nodded whimsically.

"She's the best-natured girl who ever walked. She has no temper at all."

"No?" Winfield's note had a rising inflection.

"No. Now, with all respect to her, she's been bum in that climax all through rehearsals. She was as bad as Blythe, though I hate to say it. She wrote that play. But she always falls down right there where she pitches into you. She doesn't get the real fire into it. Unless that climax is done right, we have nothing."

"I realize that," assented Winfield soberly. "So she lacks pep, eh?"

"What that girl needs," said Willy, sighing, "is to get good and mad, right there!"

Winfield stared at him, suddenly tensing. It was as if he were remembering something. Then his black eyes sparkled and his teeth glittered in a broad grin.

"Oh, is that all? I'm glad you told me. It may make history."

Willy relaxed with flooding relief. "So you think you could make her mad?"

Holbrook Winfield rose and slapped Willy's shoulder just as the call boy

came to summon the actor for the third act. He chuckled with half-suppressed mirth while in his eyes danced sprites of wickedness.

"Get her mad?" he repeated. "Say, you watch me!"

V.

SHIVERING with suspense, with his future staked on the next two minutes, Willy Wallace stood in the wings. He was watching three figures staged in the garden scene.

Perched on the top of the garden wall, awaiting his love, was young Berwyck Eaton, his dismayed face turned toward a corner of the stage dwelling. Also registering consternation, Estelle Winters, who had been approaching her sweetie past a fountain and pool of real water set among very good imitations of greenery and flower beds, had turned to face a formidable figure striding toward her from the house. The cheeks of her papa were crimsoned with rage.

"Ha!" roared papa Holbrook Winfield. "I see that wall-eyed whipper-snipe on the garden wall! Run away with him, ha? Marry him, ha? Come back into the house, girl! I'll make a housemaid of you! Come on in, the dishwater's fine!"

By this time Winfield had reached Estelle, who was facing toward the audience, seemingly paralyzed by fear. Willy saw him reach up, fumbling with his coat lapel. An intuition of his intention flashed to Wallace as he beheld that big hand swoop out and around behind Estelle's shoulders.

Willy's nerves sympathetically jumped in unison with Estelle's, as, with the wicked act effectually screened from the audience, Holbrook Winfield stuck against Miss Winters' graceful back the pin he had extracted from his coat lapel.

The effect, from a histrionic standpoint, was even more successful than

Wallace or Winfield had dared to hope for.

With the impact of father's hands, more violent than the audience knew, there broke from daughter's lips a yowl of sheer feminine rage that would have sent a bobcat slinking away in envy.

With rehearsed lines forgotten for electrical and spontaneous action that was far better than the first draft, Estelle pitched furiously into her papa to send him staggering backward. He fell with a great splash into the pool under the spraying fountain, and into it, after him, went the playwright-star.

Like two porpoises they played together, and the female of the species was more deadly than the male. Smiting, mauling with little fists, shrilling weird cries of rage, she stormed around papa as now, half up, he staggered splashing about the pool.

The crowded house whooped and roared and wept in a whirl of emotion.

Willy Wallace in the wings knew for dazed certainty that the piece was now a rip-roaring, yawping, howling hit!

Then from the pool reeled papa, holding tight a squirming, fighting, draggled bundle of palpitant life that seemed trying to kill him. With giant strength he swung the soaked and kicking figure up to Berwyck Eaton, who was transfixed with amazement upon the wall.

"Take her, my boy!" boomed papa, in unconditional surrender. Berwyck retained sufficient initiative to take the cue—and Estelle.

Willy Wallace, likewise coming awake, gestured violently to the stage crew. "Curtain!" he yelled.

However, it was many minutes before the two dripping principals, and young Eaton, were permitted by the enthusiastic audience to cease responding to curtain calls.

Meanwhile, in the wings, Willy Wal-

lace was mumbling to himself. "Unwritten stuff did it. That guy's a genius! What a beautiful temper she has, but where has she kept it concealed all this time? Hope she won't want him fired, for jabbing her with that pin. It was necessary.

"We'll keep the fountain, heat the water to about eighty degrees; and let it go on just as it came out. After this she will remember the pin, and hop into it!"

His monologue was interrupted. To him at last came two watery figures—arm in arm. Even in that damp moment Estelle remained lovely, wholly charming. How girlish she looked, with her eyes like stars!

"Well," boomed the grinning Winfield, "I didn't know just what we'd get with that pin, Mr. Wallace, but I knew we'd get something."

"Isn't he the resourceful dear?" said Estelle. "After he had written that climax, that I couldn't think of, I knew he could do something. I just managed to catch him between engagements. How glad hubby, in St. Louis, will be when he hears of this!"

"Hubby? St. Louis?" Willy stared, wondering if he were quite all there, after all this strain. Estelle was speaking again, eagerly. "Get out a new paper, Willy, and announce it to the press. Skookums here is my co-star, from now on."

"Skookums!" repeated Willy weakly, goggling at the great bulk next her, with a wet arm around her little waist.

"Co-star! After his jabbing you with a pin! Stel', either I'm dreaming, or you're not human!"

"Oh," she said, "I'm human enough, and I've got an awful temper, once it gets loose. Papa here, when he was so inquisitive, used to wonder all to himself whether I had one. So one day he stuck a pin in me to find out. And—oh!—papa, didn't I warm oo little pants for oo?"

"Warmed his little pants!" said Willy, clutching at his hair.

"Yes! And to think he remembered that, all this time!"

The eyes of Willy Wallace were popping. "Stella! Who is your papa?"

Under the spell summoned by Willy's question, Estelle's brown eyes grew misty with memories. Her low-voiced answer to the question held pride and joy. Too, it held the spirit of this age that serves the law of progress, casting forth ancient inhibitions, recognizing no premature barriers of years in the service of arts worth while.

"Who is my papa, Willy? He is my son."

He Was Not Believed

Two friends met for the first time for some months.

"Where have you been, John?" said James. "Haven't been sick, have you?"

"Yes; I've been sick for a bit."

"You're not looking very well. Hope it's nothing serious."

"Oh, nothing much—but this is the first time I've been out for three months."

"Really? What was wrong?"

"Nothing, really, only the jury wouldn't believe it!"

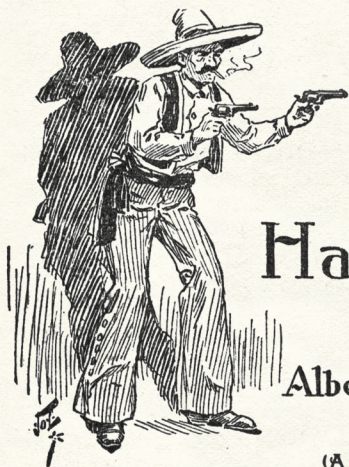
Really Remarkable

MUGGINS was fond of reasoning things out. The other day it was about the beauties of nature that he wanted to bore his companions.

"Seems to me nature has provided for everything," he said.

"What prompts that reflection?" asked one of those who had the misfortune to be near him.

"Why," said Muggins, "look at the way she has placed our ears. Yet thousands of years ago she didn't know we were going to hook spectacles over them."

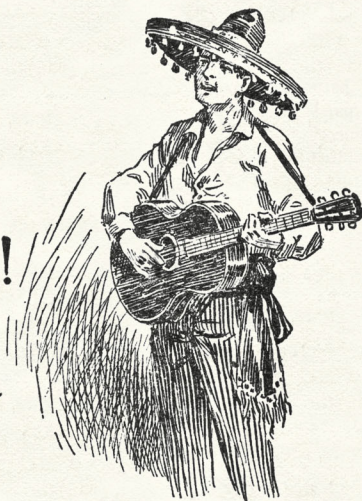


Hands Up!

By

Albert M. Treynor ~

(A SERIAL—PART I.)



CHAPTER I.

A HAT AND TWO GUITAR PLAYERS.

THE caballero strode through the white dust of the roadway, swaggering a little as he walked in the glamour of a lucid and lovely moon. It was a night to increase the foolishness in the world. There was a sweet, heavy perfume in the playful breeze that came down from the orange groves on the hill.

Over in the fig trees a *zenzontil*, the Mexican mocking bird, was singing a wistful, heart-breaking song. The fountain in the square was splashing ever so softly, and in the dusky patio across the way a woman's faint laughter was heard. Otherwise the village slumbered in its cloistered peace. But in Sonora on such a night, anything might happen.

A figure to take the eye, this caballero. He was a very tall man with good, strong shoulders, with his waist and stomach confined in lines almost of girlish slenderness by a broad sash of crimson silk, drawn around him as tight as a saddle cinch.

A thousand dollars at least was invested in the high-peaked, wide-brimmed hat, which he wore perked at a

rakish slant over one eyebrow. Silver-roweled spurs jingled as he tramped along in his shining, cone-heeled boots—a proud, bold fellow, and as foolish in his way as the woman who laughed and the *zenzontil* singing in the moonlight.

His was a fighter's face, sharp and hawklike in cast, cruel about the mouth. There happened to be no fighting going on this evening. Instead of the carbine and bandolier of cartridges with which men of his type ordinarily girded themselves in these unsettled days, the caballero wore over his shoulder a ribbon sling and a light-some guitar.

He arrived at the end of the village street and halted before the last house, a two-story casetta of sun-baked clay, with an upstairs balcony fronting two shuttered windows. There was no light or sound within. The house stood comfortably apart from its neighbors in its private little orchard of lime trees and flowering plums.

The caballero cast a moody glance at one of the second floor windows that looked out upon the roadway from the deep, cool shadows. He dusted off a place for himself on the stone boundary wall and sat down with an ankle crossed over his knee. Taking off his

fine hat, he ran his fingers through his tawny hair and placed the hat on the wall beside him. Then he unslung his guitar, never noticing that one of the shadows among the trees curiously enough had come to life and was moving a-tiptoe behind his back.

His fingers lightly touched the guitar strings and he bent his ear to listen. The chord sounded just a trifle off key. He cocked his head in critical attention and twitched at the pegs. The shadow stood up to tower over the caballero's relaxed shoulders. He threw up his head and lifted a poised hand, ready to sweep the guitar strings, filling his lungs.

And then, just for an instant, the moon rays played on the twinkling blade of a long, thin knife. The sliver of steel punctured the sash and slipped with a silky whisper between two of the caballero's ribs, as he was opening his mouth to sing.

It was a shrewd stroke, heartily delivered from behind. No unusual sound disturbed the pleasant quietude of the evening. The shadow left the knife where it was sticking, and fled. For two seconds the caballero sat upright, and then he put down his guitar and wilted on the wall like a flower in the noonday sun. He slid down into the high grass and lay perfectly still, his song unsung. But the mocking bird went on singing in the fig trees.

Willie Curzon had seen nothing of this. Unable to sleep in the stuffy inn, he got out of bed in the middle of the night and went for a walk just in his trousers and shirt, and without any hat. The white roadway was deserted, and there was nothing noteworthy to look at, excepting to observe that it was a dangerously bewitching evening.

The moon used to have a damaging effect on young Curzon. He recalled a softly shining evening such as this back on Lake Placid and grinned sheep-

ishly, trying to think of something else. Since then he had grown older and developed a much sterner character. He wasn't married yet.

It was an odd name for a strapping, six-foot, grown-up man—that "Willie." Beginning as a fond diminutive of childhood, it had stuck with him affectionately through school and college times. He had always hated it, even when it was thundered across a great athletic stadium.

That was a long while ago. He had to be his own cheer leader now, a thankless task for a gringo salesman who is trying to market modern farming machinery—disk harrows and riding cultivators and such contraptions—in a country where the peons prefer to use wooden plows. In this lonesome land of futile to-morrows the sound of a friendly voice would have been cheering—even some one to call him "Willie."

Aimlessly strolling, Willie Curzon reached the end of the village street. He was puzzled to discover a man's peaked hat and a guitar on the wall under the yellow-roofed casetta. The hat was a gorgeous affair, blocked from an enormous piece of silky felt, braided and stitched with heavy threads of gold. He could not imagine the proud owner walking away and forgetting such a hat.

There was nobody about, however. If he had peered around the corner of the wall, Curzon might have seen the toe of a polished boot protruding in the moonlight. But he had no reason to search for dead men.

Almost anybody would have tried on the hat. It must have weighed a couple of pounds, but it fitted Curzon well enough. He could not see himself, but the shadow he cast in the moonlight was impressive.

Unfortunately he had neglected to put on his belt when he stole out of the inn, and he noticed that the shadow

sagged a trifle at the line of the hips. That was a matter easily remedied. A long cardinal ribbon dangled from the neck of the guitar. Curzon untied the ends, hitched up his trousers, and wound a sash around his waist. He had thus regained the use of both hands, and felt easier in his mind, in case he should meet anybody.

Idly touching the guitar, he seated himself on the wall. Once upon a time he used to play and sing a little himself, not very well, yet not so badly either. He wondered if he remembered any of the chords, and tried a couple to find out.

Certainly he remembered. The sportive breeze ruffled his hair, and for a second he shivered with a strange, unaccountable emotion. His gaze wandered dreamily across the open landscape where the trees and houses and hills stood out like velvet patterns on draperies of silver weaving. Unwittingly his fingers were plucking at the strings of the guitar:

Tunka-tunk-tunk. Tunka-tunk-tunk.

The honeyed tune of an almost forgotten song about a June night and the moonlight came wandering back to him from other days, and the first thing he knew he was tinkling his way through the melody.

Tunka-ta-tunk-tunk. Tunka-ta-tunk-tunk.

Dimly the words began to take form in his recollection, and before he had ambled halfway through the foolish chorus he was singing to himself in a plaintive, mildly abashed baritone:

Hold you,
Infold you,
And dreams will come truhue—
Tunka-ta-tunk!

Just gihive me the moohoon-light
A June night
Ahand youoooooh.

He went fairly well with himself on that one, and was emboldened to try another, not quite so *sotto voce* this

time. He thought of a Spanish sere-nade he had learned as a boy, a madrigal of love sickness that struck him as being peculiarly appropriate to this time and place. So he lifted his face to the moon, struck the accompaniment on the resounding strings, and started his song.

The toe of his left foot was tapping the ground in unison with the pretty measures, not many inches from another foot that the wild grass almost hid. But he did not see the gay-clad figure slumped in the shadow of the orchard wall. He was looking off into mystic spaces, singing without self-consciousness in a full and mellow voice, forgetting that there might be any one to hear.

CHAPTER II.

MOONLIGHT AND MUSIC.

CURZON'S fingers stumbled suddenly on the guitar strings and his song stuck in the middle of a bar. His mouth stayed wide open, but no further sounds came forth. In gawking embarrassment he gazed upward to see the shutters of one of the casetta windows swing quietly apart.

The festoons of climbing roses that half hid the window casement were brushed aside. The startled serenader saw a small, white hand reach forward to rest lightly on the sill. A slim and lissom figure was bending above him among the vines.

Curzon stood up and laid his guitar on the wall. He could make out an oval face, a duskiness of hair and a graceful form in white. A girl had come to the window to hear him sing. The shadows were deep, and he could not know truthfully what she was like. Although, without quite seeing, he felt the potency of the eyes looking down at him. In the magic of the night he was sure that she must be very beautiful.

"My caballero," she complained in

Spanish, "has been a long while arriving." Her voice was lowered in a soft huskiness of tone that was both chiding and caressing.

Curzon spoke Spanish fluently enough, but for the life of him he could not think of a word to say.

"In a minute," said the young woman, "I shall come to you. You will wait." The hand withdrew from the window sill and her figure faded back into the gloom.

Curzon shoved back his sombrero and soberly scratched his blond head. He glanced uncertainly up the silent highway along the avenue of trees, glanced back at the balcony window, and then, with a quick-drawn breath turned to grin at the moon. He might have known what would happen when a Sonora caballero sang songs under shuttered windows—even the wrong caballero.

Had Curzon been half as wise as he lately esteemed himself to be, he would have gone back without an instant's delay to his bed in the inn. But the thought of the hot, rumpled covers revolted him. He had breathed of the languid, balmy night and the moon madness was in the air about him.

The mocking bird in the fig palms had changed his song to a wild and reckless melody. The serenader lingered in momentary irresolution, and then it was too late to go. The girl had come back to the window.

She had brought a long, lacy mantilla, which, with a light and careless gesture, she cast over her head and about her curving shoulders. Then she started to climb down the rose trellis.

Curzon no longer hesitated. No right-minded man could run away and leave a girl hanging on the side of an abode wall, even though she did not seem to be in the slightest danger of falling. He advanced in a stride and reached both hands above his head.

"Here I am," he reassured her in a tingling whisper.

A groping foot reached down and a fragile slipper rested for a moment in the palm of his hand. He heard a tearing sound in the foliage, and then his senses were filled with a warmth and fragrance of throbbing life as the girl let herself go and tumbled into his arms. She was as difficult to hold as a little fish, and although he broke her fall she wriggled through his grasp and slipped lithely to the ground beside him.

"You are so strong!" She sighed, and raised her head to look at him.

Curzon's sombrero had been knocked over one eye, but the brim did not entirely shadow his face. The girl could see him plainly. He waited uneasily for the outburst of anguish or fury, or whatever emotion a young lady would indulge in upon the discovery that she had cast herself into the embrace of a strange cavalier.

Amazingly, nothing whatever happened. The girl held the mantilla about her mouth and nose, like a Turk's veil, disclosing only the soft contour of her cheek, and her eyes, black fringed and widely spaced, as dusky and mysteriously alluring as the vistas of tropical midnights.

She stared at Curzon, unabashed as a child. He, for his part, had no reason to evade anybody's scrutiny. He was built in the way they put up steel office buildings back home, tall and properly balanced, standing straight up from the ground, with the gaunt structural work of the ribs showing under his clinging shirt.

His features were boldly sculptured: arched forehead and a fine manful beak of a nose; a solid reliable jaw, with a wide and capable mouth that might be grim or tender by turns, or just devil-may-care.

"*A los pies, señorita,*" he said, and suiting the compliment with the mag-

nificent gesture, he swept off his sombrero and bowed himself almost to the girl's tiny slippers. He straightened again to face her, with his eyes mockingly alive.

The girl met his regard seriously, without any apparent sense of play-acting. Days spent under blistering suns, trying to teach listless peons how to drive farm tractors and sulky plows, had colored his skin a rich tan that looked even darker in contrast with the line of clean, strong teeth.

In his sash and gorgeous hat he could have posed anywhere as a *gran hombre* of the fair Castilian type, *hacendado* or *brigando*, whichever he preferred. He did not realize how completely he looked the part.

Seemingly satisfied with her scrutiny, the girl touched his hand. "Come," she breathed.

Even then he might have run away. But why should he? He could picture the astonishment in the señorita's eyes if he were to turn and beat it up the road. A pretty figure he would cut! As a matter of fact the thought of escape did not really occur to him. Nothing much had happened to him in five uneventful years.

The never-growing, never-dying little boy that stays on impishly in the heart of almost every man, is always longing for things to happen. This was the night, and Curzon yielded without a struggle to its blandishments, without bothering to remember that one hour of folly may so easily undo the established order of a hundred thousand hours sensibly spent.

"Let us go," he said with an irresponsible laugh.

The señorita's smooth fingers somehow found their way into his hand. With a slight tug she led him away from the wall, out into the open road-way.

"I'll risk anything once," he informed her lightly in English.

Her lashes lifted in a somewhat startled look. "I do not understand."

"Never mind," he said, and unconsciously pushed his hat aslant, forgetting at the moment that it belonged to some one else.

His little companion walked down the length of the empty village street, and he sauntered at her side, warmly aware of the gentle hand pulling at his, guiding him—he couldn't guess where. At the moment it didn't seem to matter.

In good time he'd find out what it all meant. So instead of asking dull questions, he spoke to her of frivolous matters, of the moon and the mocking bird and the heavenly night; even of her own lovely eyes, which she lowered prettily, after a fluttering, sidelong glance.

They arrived at the farther end of the village, Curzon still allowing the señorita to conduct him where she would. Before them stood a square, squat adobe building, with a peeling facade and a vine-covered belfry perched on the roof. The girl's knuckles rapped on the hand-adzed door, and the door was promptly opened. Apparently she was expected.

A fat padre in a cassock was standing in the gloom. He was bald and seedy-looking, and he peered at his visitors with a near-sighted concentration of his sunken eyes, as though he could just barely see them. The girl stepped over the stone threshold. Curzon, his mind still languorously adrift, followed unhesitatingly.

The room was like a cell, dingy and smoke-blackened, with a pallet on the floor, a table, a stool, and nothing else to make it habitable. The table supported a pottery lamp, which guttered feebly and gave off little illumination.

As the padre softly closed the door, Curzon swept the place with a curious glance. He discovered that there was another man in the room, a lank, stooped individual in shabby trousers

and shirt, with a pair of big revolvers belted at his hips. This person remained apart in the dark corner, his eyes watching the newcomer loweringly from under a dank and dangling lock of hair.

Curzon did not like the appearance of this fellow at all, but there was nothing to be said or done about that now. The señorita had taken her place beside him and again was holding his hand. He saw the padre slip a pair of spectacles on his nose and take a small, leather-bound volume from the folds of his cassock. The book fell open at a marked page, and the priest started to read from it in a slow and unctuous voice.

For a moment or two Curzon listened indifferently. Then, all at once, he grasped the meaning of the solemn Spanish phrases. His jaw dropped limply and he felt a sudden emptiness under his ribs. The padre was reading the marriage service.

CHAPTER III.

MENACING SHADOWS.

DURING the first seconds of shocked astonishment Curzon's power of speech was checked in a helpless and ghastly embarrassment. For a man who thought as gently of women as he, it was not easy to wrench his fist free from the confiding clasp of a friendly and appealing girl, and inform her flatly that he refused to go through with such a ridiculous ceremony. On the other hand he had no intention of being dragged into a wedding with anybody. He was not quite that gallant.

The priest went on placidly reading the fateful lines, never noticing the startled expression of Curzon's face and the brick-red color of his ears. He paused at the end of a wheezy breath, looked benevolently at the señorita, and interrogated her in the words of the ritual.

"I do," she answered in a stifled whisper, her head faintly bowing.

"Hold on now!" Curzon blurted out in a thick voice. "Wait a minute!"

The old priest appeared to be deaf as well as near-sighted. He gave not the slightest heed to the interruption.

Curzon opened his hand and released the girl's fingers. His glance sought the door. "Sorry," he started to say, trying to make his refusal sound as courteous as possible, "but——"

He stopped, conscious of a furtive, gliding sound behind him. A warning sense pulled his head around, and he saw that the ill-omened stranger had sidled along the wall to block the doorway. The man had drawn both of his revolvers, and he held them backed against his stomach, with the muzzles significantly leveled towards the bridegroom-to-be. His bony jowls were working up and down, chewing, as he stared at Curzon with a fierce and glittering eye.

A shivery sensation went up and down Curzon's backbone as he encountered the stranger's beady glance. There was no evading the meaning of the guns. They were going to see him married, whether he would or not.

The priest calmly droned the words of the service, apparently too near-sighted to discover what was happening. The señorita had not looked around. Curzon stole a quick glance toward her.

Did she know? Was she a willing participant in this strange and outrageous affair? Her face was still veiled by the white mantilla, and the long, curving lashes hid her eyes. He could not find his clew under such demureness.

The padre had put the direct question to him, and was peering blindly, waiting. Curzon could feel the menace behind him, without needing to turn his head. The "best man" had him covered with a pair of cocked .45s, and the

issue was resolved into the plainest terms. He could say "yes" or take the consequences.

Curzon was as brave as most men, but at that moment he saw no sense in being foolhardy. He looked quizzically at the little señorita, and sighed resignedly. She seemed to be an attractive girl, in her own dark-eyed way. He had seen many brides whom he would sooner flee from. So as long as she seemed so anxious to have him, and in consideration, also, of the two revolvers pointing at his midriff, he decided that he might as well go through with the ceremony. It would be silly to throw away one's life for Quixotic scruples in this land of lax divorce laws. Slowly he nodded as he muttered the expected response.

The padre read a couple of additional lines from his book, and then said something about a ring, and paused expectantly.

"A ring?" Curzon smiled maliciously. They couldn't complete the ceremony without a wedding band for the lady's finger. "I have no ring."

The girl stirred impatiently beside him. "The one on your hat," she reminded him.

He had taken off the sombrero and was holding it limply in his hand. As he had noticed before, the hat was loaded with all sorts of queer ornaments, gold buttons and bangles and odd-shaped coins of ancient minting.

He tilted the gaudy headpiece under the light, and there undeniably was a ring. It was a small, gold circlet, curiously wrought from the purest metal, covered with a fine, talismanic engraving. A stitching of silk thread held it securely upon the embroidered crown band.

"Please," said the girl quietly.

Curzon heard a slow shuffling of feet behind him. He kept his eyes strictly to the front, but his entire consciousness was aware of the skulking figure

that stood at his back. His fingers snapped the thread that fastened the ring to the hat. These hombres on this side of the line were as unreliable as children, he reminded himself uneasily. They were altogether too impulsive to be trusted with firearms.

"All right," he said to the priest. "Go on with it. 'I with this ring do thee herewith——' You know how it goes."

The padre rustled a page of the book, and his placid voice once more took up the reading. Curzon mopped his forehead with his sleeve and shifted his weight to the other foot. The girl was holding up her hand, with one of her tapering fingers separated from the others, waiting a little tremulously.

A dead silence fell upon the room as the padre reached his period and stopped. The man with the guns still remained in the background. He was keeping very quiet; but he did not need to move or make a sound. The knowledge of his presence was clairvoyant in Curzon's brain.

Curzon could feel the ominous shadow behind him, and as he reached awkwardly for the girl's hand he was thinking of the miles of alien country that stretched this way from home. They could carry him out of this hut, if they pleased, and his friends would never know what had become of him.

The señorita yielded her small, shapely finger to him, and he slipped on the ring.

It was finished. The incredible thing was accomplished. The padre raised his arms and spoke the few remaining words of the service; but Curzon was staring dazedly at the woman.

Married! This was his wife—this stranger! He felt like a sleeper who was struggling to awaken from a grotesque nightmare. The affair was so utterly impossible. What did it mean? What did the girl expect to gain? What did she want of him?

Unwittingly, he still held her hand. She reminded him sharply by suddenly tearing her fingers away from his. Without a word she turned and bowed to the priest.

"Buena noche, padre," she said, and moved towards the door.

"Wait! Señorita——" Curzon stopped short, and corrected himself with a wry face. "Señora, I should say. A moment please. I think we have a few things to say to each other."

She paused for a second, and turned her head. "No," she told him. "Nothing." The eyes that had looked up at him so softly a few minutes ago had grown strangely hostile. "Adios, señor," she said in an icy voice.

"Stop!" cried Curzon in a flame of anger. This girl was wearing his ring, and by law and custom he was the boss.

She had tricked him and trapped him, and now she seemed to think she might walk away with her pretty air of scorn, without explanation or apology. His mouth hardened in a caustic smile. Men treated their brides as they pleased in Sonora.

The girl had reached the door, was lifting her hand to the latch. Curzon overtook her in a stride.

"You have forgotten something, señora."

She threw a startled glare over her shoulder and shrank away. He crowded her to the wall and caught her in his arms.

"Oh, no!" she gasped, squirming in his embrace, fighting wildly for release.

The mantilla fluttered between them, and he brushed it aside. In that darkened corner of the room her face was no more than a vague and flinching shadow; without actually being able to see, however, he knew in his heart that she was provokingly pretty. She was trying fiercely to turn her head aside, but his hands had crept upward

to press the soft hair above her temples.

The girl was as lithe as a cat, but Curzon still held the iron of football days, and he was ruthless at this moment. Her mouth was warm and velvety, and he found it and kissed her soundly.

The girl shuddered in his grasp, and her fingers clawed at him. "Ah, you—you beast!" she panted.

For a moment he looked down at her with laughing eyes, and then his arms relaxed and he let her go. "Is it not customary?" he inquired.

She rubbed her lips with the back of her hand, and stared at him. "You—you——" She choked up, and turned, groping for the latch. "Adios!" she sobbed, and, flinging open the door, she bolted out of the hut.

Curzon strode as far as the doorway, and halted with a startled abruptness on the threshold. Two men were standing sentinellike on either side of the entrance, with rifles over their arms. He peered at them quizzically, observing that they were in uniform—soldiers or rurales, he was not quite certain which. They had allowed the girl to pass, but when he showed himself they turned to bar the way.

"Hello!" he ejaculated.

"If the señor is altogether finished with his romance," said a voice at his elbow, "he will go with us."

Curzon glanced around to meet the unpleasant gaze of the man with the revolvers. "Go with you?" he echoed. "And where are we to go?"

"El cuartel," was the brief reply.

Curzon's eyes narrowed. The jail. He was thinking back hurriedly, trying to remember if he had broken any local ordinances lately. "Why?" he demanded.

He had been very well behaved, he was sure, unless getting married was an offense. And he was not to blame

for that, as this gun-totting busybody could easily testify.

"You are not to ask why," said the man. "You are simply to go." He walked to the table, picked up the decorative hat, and returned to clap it down on Curzon's head. "The señor is not to forget his sombrero," he remarked.

"I'll be damned if I'll——" Curzon started to say, and then decided not to say it. He felt something hard and round and about the size of a revolver barrel pressing into the small of his back. "Very well," he ended lamely. "Let us go."

It was a small and sedate procession that left the padre's house and moved silently along the dusty roadway. The American walked a pace in advance, with the two riflemen flanking him on either side, and his particular Nemesis, the man with revolvers, trudging watchfully at his heels.

At the end of a crooked turning they came under an arched doorway that led them across an open patio through a second door into a low-beamed, ground-floor room. Rows of carbines stood in racks around the walls. A man in a tan coat with captain's shoulder straps sat at a table under a green-shaded lamp and puffed at a cigarette.

"Ah!" said the officer, and repeated himself in a rising note of satisfaction. "Ah, *ah!*" He was a small-boned man, sleek and plump as an overfed chihuahua.

Curzon stepped forward. "I want to know what this is all about!"

The captain's feet were on the desk, and he did not offer to take them down. He must have been sitting there for hours, judging by the cigarette butts strewn in dozens on the floor about him. "I am Captain Eusebio Corcuera of the Rurales," he remarked mildly, "and I have been waiting for the señor to be married."

"Oh, you know about that, do you? Well then, maybe you can answer a question or two? Why was that done, I should like to know?"

"Why?" purred the officer, lifting his long, black lashes.

"Yes. The reason for this wedding?"

"How can I know why caballeros marry?" said the captain with a flash of the whitest of teeth. "I have not been so fortunate myself."

"I'm talking about the girl," put in Curzon. "What was her purpose?"

"Perhaps," said Captain Corcuera gently, "she wishes to be a widow."

Curzon blinked his eyes. "I—beg your pardon?"

"I have seen the señora," said the captain with a smile that lighted his genial face. "The señor may console himself with that foreknowledge—she will be a beautiful widow."

"What do you mean?" Curzon asked, his jaw sagging.

The captain fixed him with a sparkling glance. "Ah, Don Ruy da Luz! I knew you would be amusing. I have longed for months to meet you, and here you are. You make me happy."

The pupils of Curzon's eyes sharpened like needle-points as he stared at the rurale officer. He was beginning to comprehend. By some curious concatenation of error and ill logic, they had identified him as somebody else: in fact, they seemed to mistake him for a famous personage who was known below the border as Ruy da Luz.

CHAPTER IV

THE CAPTAIN OF THE RURALES.

IN Sonora the names of two ruthless bandits had grown large in the public imagination during the last year or so. One was Pio Barboza, a monstrous, black-bearded assassin, who captained a renegade band in the Sierra Madres. The second was Ruy da Luz, a masked

rider of the roads, who lived alone and pulled off his daring crimes single-handed, and afterward laughed gayly at the rurales who tried to run him down. Of the two outlaws—the guerilla leader and the soloist of the highway—Da Luz boasted the more formidable reputation.

Curzon was well acquainted with the name. Indeed, who was not? He had heard it whispered in worshipful awe by peons in the fields, and he had seen fellow travelers on the south-bound trains blanch with terror at the merest hint that the fellow might be riding in the neighborhood.

No one had much authentic information about Ruy da Luz. The few who may have seen his unmasked face never returned to report. He was a brigand, a single-handed worker, a soloist in crime. Some people said he was a *gachupin*, a Mexican-born Spaniard; others thought him to be a *mestizo*, a half and half, with ancestors on the California side. Still others insisted that he was a blond Castilian of the purest blood.

But who really could say? Nobody knew where he came from or where he hid. He was a fearsome mystery, of whom it was only agreed that his hair was light, that he was a *bravo*, a *bronco*, a hell rake of a man. Sometimes, it was stated, he gave money to the poor, and almost invariably he cut the throats of the rich. He was courteous, they said, even in his killings, and if there was time he took the trouble to bury his dead.

The rurales had been after the lone bandit for months, but so far they never had come within miles of laying hands upon him. But as Curzon scrutinized the bland face of Captain Corcuera, he realized why he had been received at the jail with such a heart-felt welcome. The officer, for some unaccountable reason, believed that he had captured Ruy da Luz.

It was the capping stroke of a wildly fantastic evening. Even the victim could appreciate the ridiculous side of the affair. The sight of the self-satisfied little officer who posed as a man-catcher was too much for Curzon's sense of humor, and he laughed aloud.

"We are all of us," he said, "absolutely crazy."

Captain Corcuera looked startled for an instant, and then he too decided it was funny. He tossed back his head, his brown throat quivered and his musical voice joined gayly in his prisoner's mirth. "I knew it—I knew it!" he chuckled. "I knew that Ruy da Luz would be magnificent when he is shot."

Curzon's laughter died away. "You —" he started to say, and paused and moistened his lips. "You say that he is to be —"

"At five o'clock in the morning." The captain nodded pleasantly. "In the arroyo at the end of the town where the executions take place."

Curzon experienced a tightening sensation in his scalp and down the back of his neck. "I am not Ruy da Luz," he asserted sharply.

The officer's glance ranged upward to the hat, which the prisoner had lacked the politeness to remove in the presence of authority. "Don Ruy da Luz's sombrero is well known," he lightly remarked.

Curzon slid up his hand, and took off the borrowed headpiece. Enlightenment at last was dawning upon him. It was the hat that had involved him in this incredible muddle. He remembered now that he had heard people speak of Ruy da Luz's sombrero. There was not such another one in the state or in the entire country. By some freakish chance, this possibly might be the bandit's famous hat.

He tossed the hat on the captain's table, thankful to be rid of it. The thing had brought on enough trouble for one evening. He felt a trifle

easier in his mind. He would explain how he had found the hat and tried it on in an idle whim. They wouldn't shoot Willie Curzon, who had never even seen a bandit. The worst that could happen to him had already happened. He was married, that was all. It was not as bad as being shot.

"Assuming that I was Ruy da Luz," he asked with a puzzled knitting of his brows, "why did you force me to be wedded?"

"I?" said the officer. "What did I have to do with it?"

Curzon nodded towards the man with the revolvers, who slouched in his favorite posture, backed against the door. "He is one of yours, is he not? When the padre read the service he pointed his guns at me and forced me to say the words."

Captain Corcuero bent forward until he could peer under the shade of the lamp. "Is this true, Pedro?" he shot across the room.

The man shook his head. "No, my captain. I aimed the revolvers at him to be certain that he should not escape."

"You mean," demanded Curzon, "that you would not have fired had I refused to answer the padre?"

"I should have shot you," was the answer, "only had you tried to run."

Curzon stared at the man with a wilted, sickish look. The statement had the ring of truth. He need not have permitted the ceremony to go on, had he only known. What an idiot he had been! Yet, as he revived his mental picture of the threatening figure who covered him with the guns, he could not honestly blame himself for his misapprehensions. Anybody would have supposed, as he did, that the fellow was there to see that the wedding went on.

Captain Corcuera was watching his prisoner inquisitively. "You are saying that you didn't wish to be married?"

"No. Certainly not. It was infamous." Curzon scowled bitterly. "What possible motive could that girl have had? To become the wife of a brigand!"

The captain made a gracious movement with his hand. "The señor is devilishly good-looking, and—— But of course one knows how those girls are!"

"Don't be foolish!" growled Curzon. "What was her reason?"

"Who knows?" said the officer, and pensively shook his head. "Who can ever say why the girls do as they do?"

Curzon shuffled his feet in irritation. The man evidently was going to say no more than it suited him to say.

"You can at least tell me who she is."

"You do not even know that?" The captain half closed one eye, but the other eye looked arch and skeptical. "You did not know that she is, or was, the Señorita Herminia Amor?"

"I never saw nor heard of her before."

"You did not know that her father is Don Garza Amor, the richest *hacendado* in the western country?"

"I have heard of Garza Amor, but I did not know that he had a daughter."

"The señor," observed Captain Corcuera in his politest accents, "tells a beautiful lie."

Curzon rounded on him hotly. "If you make another remark like that I shall be obliged to hit you in the nose!"

The officer tossed away his latest cigarette, rolled another painstakingly from the papers and tobacco on his desk. He scratched a match and lighted it complacently.

"I was thinking perhaps you would tell us what you have done with the man from the city of New York, whom you abducted two or three weeks ago," he remarked persuasively. "Professor—— I have forgotten the name. He is

a man well known in his own country, and there will be difficulties if we do not produce him."

"I know of no such person!" snapped Curzon. "I tell you I'm not your bandit."

"This poor man is a great scientist, who was searching the ruined caverns of Sierra del Chuchuipa for ancient remains," pursued the officer blandly. "He has no money for a ransom, and I would consider it a favor if you would allow me to conduct him back to his people. Otherwise there will be complications."

Curzon glowered without answering.

"You have killed him, perhaps?"

"You talk like a fool," Curzon declared.

Corcuera shook his head mildly. "Well, no matter. We will have to make our apologies to the man's government. It is unfortunate, but if you won't tell me where he is, what can I do?"

"As usual," said Curzon acridly, "the real Da Luz has gotten away from you again. The rurales are notorious for their blundering."

The captain smiled amiably. "We were informed that you would be in town this evening," he vouchsafed. "We were surprised to discover that Señorita Amor was to become your bride, but in this state we do not interfere with any of the Amor's peculiar whims. If the señorita wished to marry you, that was not our affair. We waited until afterwards before we arrested you."

Curzon stared sharply. "Did the señorita know that her husband was to be arrested after the ceremony?"

"Who can say what the señorita knew or did not know?" inquired Corcuera with a shrug.

"But why in Heaven's name did she do an insane thing like that?" persisted Curzon. "Why? Did she want to marry an outlaw?"

"There is an untamed streak in all the Amors," said the captain. "Perhaps she was thinking of you as a great hero."

"If she expected to become Da Luz's wife, why did she marry me? She could see I wasn't Da Luz. Why did she entangle me?"

The captain sat for a moment with his fine brows reflectively bent, and did not answer. "And you did not wish to be married?" he inquired.

"I did not."

"Ah well, it is of no consequence," smiled the officer. "*No le hace*. You will not be married for long."

Curzon felt that it was his turn to smile. He could picture the captain's chagrin when he discovered that he had arrested the wrong man. "I can prove that I am not Ruy da Luz."

"You have his hat," said the officer placidly.

"I found the hat on a stone wall near the casetta where the señorita was living. I tried it on, just to see what it would feel like."

"Is it likely that Ruy da Luz would forget his hat on a stone wall? Or would any one dare to steal his beautiful hat from him?" The captain looked up in triumph.

"I need only send to the United States for identification," said Curzon. "I am an American. It will be easy enough to find out who I am."

"Ruy da Luz is also said to have come originally from *el Nacion del Norte*," observed Corcuera. "It is known that his Spanish is not of the best. He too has light-colored hair."

CHAPTER V.

IN JAIL.

CURZON was frowning again. He foresaw now that he would be put to a needless amount of trouble to convince this self-deluded rurale that he was not a brigand.

"My bag and papers are at the inn," he submitted. "You need only examine them to learn that I am a farm-machinery salesman from Detroit, Michigan."

"Oh, yes," said the captain. "We have already found the valise and those papers. The name on them is William Curzon. Poor William Curzon!" He shook his head in gentle melancholy. "We will have to make apologies to somebody on that account, I fear. What have you done with his body, señor?"

Curzon drew a sharp breath. "I am William Curzon!" he declared. "If necessary I shall be forced to appeal to the American consul."

The captain settled more comfortably in his chair, and recrossed his short legs on the desk. "The nearest United States consul is two hundred miles from here. You will have no time to send to him. And it would be such futility."

"You mean to say that you intend to shoot——" Curzon stopped and stared aghast.

"At five o'clock to-morrow morning, señor."

"But——" Curzon began to feel ghastly. "I am not Ruy da Luz! You are planning a murder!"

The captain puffed out his lips and a wreath of blue smoke curled lazily about his face. "Don Ruy da Luz has also done his murders. He will sympathize with my own regret."

"But without a trial! Without a chance to save yourself from a frightful mistake!"

"Ruy da Luz did not give a trial to those he wished out of the way." Captain Corcuera shrugged an indolent shoulder. "Besides, the order comes from the authority above me, and I am a soldier, and obedient. You will be shot."

"Not to-morrow! You wouldn't dare."

"Where bandits are concerned, it is not a question of daring, but of doing. At five o'clock, señor."

The captain smiled easily and got up from his chair. He glanced with obvious admiration at the gold-trimmed sombrero, and then picked it up and fitted it back firmly on his prisoner's head.

"I would not wish it said that we had stolen the hat," he said. "You will keep it with you and wear it until you need it no longer. And after that ——" He sighed. "Perhaps it would look well on the captain. Who knows?"

Curzon's fists were clenched, and the tips of his fingers felt icy against his palms. His lungs were suffering for want of breath, his head was whirling. They were going to stand him against the arroyo wall—Willie Curzon! They were going to shoot him at——

"You can't do it!" he gasped. "You can't! You must give me time!"

Captain Corcuera eyed him thoughtfully. "It is true," said the officer at length. "It would not be just." He hesitated and then nodded with sudden resolution. "I have formed an admiration for you, señor, and I shall be your friend. I have my orders, but I shall not regard them, even though I am involved in trouble afterwards."

Curzon waited tensely as the officer paused and gravely surveyed him.

"The orders are to have you shot at five o'clock in the morning," resumed Captain Corcuera. "But no! It is too early to expect any man to leave his bed. The shooting shall be postponed until six o'clock."

The captain flashed his brightest smile, and then spoke crisply to the men who stood guard in the doorway. "Take him to the cell!" he commanded.

As he reached softly for his tobacco bag, the footsteps of the soldiers scuffled across the floor.

It was worth the effort of early rising to see the dawn come in the hills of Sonora. The moon has gone, the

stars are dimming; there are a few minutes of hushed twilight, a sharp, expectant pause: then, in a bewildering and breathless hurry, day has crossed the horizon.

Like the striking and resetting of a stage, the charge breaks before the eyes all at once. A while ago it was night; now it is day. Shadows and silvershine have waned before the rush of vivid color, rioting.

The lush tenderness of the orchards and fields, greens and pinks and wine tints are everywhere. Bright yellow, sunbaked walls glisten; while here and there savage red splashes on the landscape where "Noche Buena" trees droop by the roadways. The brook flashes blue and white as it tumbles down from the mountains. And far-off can be seen the snow caps. The sun does not come up calmly, but bursts over the rim of the world.

The mountains might be seen from the windows of *el cuartel* between the steel bars that were too firmly rooted to be shaken or pried loose. Willie Curzon had tried, and failed. It was a balmy morning. The air had the clean, new-washed smell that comes after rains. He could look straight off from his window across blooming fields and forested hills to the high, ragged sky line.

Under the reach of the cloudless sky he saw a black, wheeling buzzard. He recalled the native name, *zopilote*. The mocking bird was gone, and the *zopilotes* were in the air. It must be nearly six o'clock.

He did not know whether he had slept during the night. He had stretched out for a while on the wooden bench that they called his bed. If he had dozed, it was only in snatches that brought no rest or surcease. Thinking all night long: other times, other places! The discontentments of yesterday are easily forgotten. He remembered that he was young.

The village had been astir for a long while. Since the first breaking of daylight brown, bare-armed women had been sauntering across the plaza with *ollas* on their heads. There they would dip up water from the public fountain, and linger in idle groups along the avenue of palms.

Now and then a horseman would pass down the road and strike off at a reckless gallop to bring the milk cows down from the hills. In the corrals at the foot of the main highway men could be heard yelling and bedamning their business and profession as they loaded up the burro and pack-horse trains that were to set out this morning for the mines in the mountains. Ragged, noisy children were scampering about under everybody's feet.

An unkempt boy of six or seven came by and paused for a while to discuss matters with the sentry who had been pacing back and forth under Curzon's cell window. The boy carried some sort of lizardlike reptile in a box, which he and the guard examined with great interest, poking it with a sharp stick to see if they could make the tail lash.

Presently the soldier threw down his rifle, and sprawled in the grass beside his small friend. With boisterous laughter the two of them began grabbing at flies that would alight in the sunny space beyond the jail wall, trying to catch a breakfast for the lizard. Children in this country as a rule are well treated; probably because the minds and thoughts of their elders seldom develop beyond the childhood stage.

The sentry and his companion were so absorbed in their fly-hunting that they failed to hear the footsteps of a rurale lieutenant who strode around the corner of the building. For a moment the newcomer halted to look on disapprovingly, and then he stepped behind the prostrate guard and administered an earnest kick.

The sentry scrambled to his feet, as one who is used to disciplinary measures, recovered his gun and went back on guard duty.

"Go tell José to relieve you, donkey!" commanded the officer. "And you bring breakfast for the prisoner."

In that manner the guard was changed. The lieutenant stopped for a moment to discuss the lizard with the boy, and then went off on other business, leaving nobody to watch the jail.

Curzon continued his pacing. He had given up all hope long ago, had no further thought of escaping. It was impossible to force a way through the window, and undoubtedly they would be coming for him soon. He had an idea that it was after the appointed time, but when the guard finally opened the cell door and came in with food he learned that it still lacked twenty minutes of six o'clock.

They gave the prisoner a generous breakfast, tortillas, omelette, fried meat, and a cupful of mescal to bolster the nerve. He sat on the bench and managed to eat half of a cake and a part of the omelette. The mescal he left untouched, and the sentry, explaining that he anticipated a trying hour with the firing squad, tossed off the cupful at a gulp.

Curzon sat on his bench, his half-shut eyes morbidly following the guard's movements. Given the slightest chance, he would grab the Mexican's gun and attempt to shoot his way out. After hours of desperate brooding, the genial-featured Northerner had lost his inoffensive look. He was beginning to understand how a cornered beast must feel.

The sentry, however, was a wary man, and did not approach near enough to lure the prisoner's hopes. And presently other feet trampled in the corridor, and a line of armed rurales took up their station outside the grated door,

The lieutenant came into the cell and announced that the squad was in readiness.

Curzon dragged himself to his feet, to stare dazedly at the officer. The lieutenant lacked Captain Corcuera's poise and suaveness. He was a bigger, heavier-boned man than his commander, an unshaven ruffian with eyes as prominent and expressionless as a couple of black-skinned grapes.

"I am Lieutenant Aldape, who is to have the honor of shooting Señor da Luz," he vouchsafed. "It is a good day for it."

Curzon's nails were digging into his dry palms as he protested savagely against the crime that was to be committed. But he realized that he was wasting words. These men had a fixed notion in their stubborn heads, and he could no more stay or sway them than he could halt the minutes of the remorseless hour.

Lieutenant Aldape did not even listen. He produced a length of thong and moved forward to bind the prisoner's wrists. But Curzon struck him aside.

"I will not be tied!"

The officer shrugged indifferently. "It is all one. Keep the hands free, if you wish. Only I warn you to hold them out of the way when the firing order is given."

He stepped to one side, motioning the condemned man to pass. Then he was reminded of something else. "Hold! Your hat, señor!"

Curzon stood sullenly, refusing to look behind him. He had left the sombrero on the bench, thinking he would never see it again—the bandit's accursed hat. But he was not to be rid of it. Lieutenant Aldape picked up the embossed headpiece, weighed it admiringly in his hands, and then pulled it down on the prisoner's tousled head.

"One wishes to look his best at such

a time," he averred, and gestured towards the doorway.

Curzon stumbled heavily across the stone door sill, to pass between the waiting ranks of rurales.

"Forward!" barked the commander. "Right by files! March!"

The squad moved forward, picketing the prisoner between two rows of slanting rifles.

There were eight in the squad, a slovenly, ill-favored crew, none of whom, clearly, would be squeamish about shooting a man—any man. Only two wore jackets; the others simulated a military air in faded cotton shirts. Three were barefooted; one had forgotten or lost his hat. But they all walked importantly this morning, with their shoulders braced for business.

Curzon had dreamed of such things as this: nights, sometimes, when he had eaten unwisely, or had gone to bed with a fever. He still could not quite understand that this was happening to him in reality. Willie Curzon! The name was familiar, but somehow he thought of the men he knew as some one apart, looking in consternation at another person, a comparative stranger, who was to be done wantonly out of life.

CHAPTER VI.

NEARING DEATH.

THEY conducted him across the patio, through the arched gate, out into the sunlight of the open plaza. There were shouts, a hurrying of feet from the direction of the mountain. The news had been whispered through the village during the night. Ruy da Luz was captured! Captain Corcuera had gallantly taken the infamous bandit! There was to be a shooting to-day after sunup, down by the big, bullet-marked rock.

Women put down their *ollas* and bustled across the square; children ranged in from all sides; men came

from the *cantina* and the corrals to line the roadway and grin.

The firing squad was hemmed in for a few moments by brown, good-natured faces: interested and eager faces, excited by a spectacle, betraying in many cases a friendly admiration for the tall man who was taking his last walk; but lacking all compassion.

"He would be so handsome," Curzon heard a woman say, "if he was not so white."

Undoubtedly he was as pale as a badly frightened man can be. To be taken out and destroyed because of a fool's hideous blunder; to be mangled by lead. His careless scheme of life had never steeled him with proper fortitude to meet the great test. The beat of his heart seemed to have slowed almost to the point of stopping, it was only by a strong effort of the will that he could force his legs to support him.

And yet, in spite of fear, of the dread that crept through him like a numbing drug, there remained a cornered, fighting part of his body and spirit that would not let him show his cowardice before these people. Individuals he did not know by sight and whose opinion of him, good or ill, could not matter in the least. He held his head high and kept his blue eyes straight to the front.

As they passed the fountain a girl in a dusty rebozo stepped into the path of the marching squad. "*Adios, señor!*" she cried. "You are taking my heart with you." She smiled prettily and held up her lips for a kiss.

But the guards shoved her aside before she could reach the prisoner.

"Thank you, my dear," Curzon scarcely recognized his own voice, nor quite realized that it was he who doffed the gold-banded sombrero with such a jaunty flourish of farewell.

The crowd parted to let the files through, and then a dozen men and two or three overcurious women closed in

behind to follow along the white road-way. Lieutenant Aldape ordered them fiercely to keep back.

The older people were manageable, but the children would not stay at a discreet distance. There were several bare-footed boys who were running back and forth with shouts, circling around the advancing squad, tumbling under the soldiers' feet. The officer warned them a couple of times, but the children persisted in skipping at his heels.

Suddenly losing patience, the lieutenant pivoted on one foot and hopped back to kick out right and left. The boys scurried out of range with shrieks and laughter, and the commander returned without loss of dignity to his place at the head of the squad.

They quitted the village to pass across a grassy, flower-speckled slope, where honeybees droned in the sunshine. The tread of feet on the dewy turf was a soft, rhythmic beat approaching the mouth of a dry watercourse, opening through the side of the hill. In the seclusion of this arroyo the rurales usually performed those details of their trade.

As the squad drew nearer to the hollow, the straggling ranks of spectators—even the children—began to lag farther and farther behind. The voices were growing quieter.

Lieutenant Aldape dropped rearward a few paces to fall into step with his prisoner. "You are in luck," he said, "that it is to be rifles instead of the rope. But Señor Ruy da Luz had been in his way as brave as a soldier, and it was decided that he should be kissed a soldier's good-by.

"Captain Corcuera by right should be in my place," the lieutenant remarked, as Curzon stumbled among the pebbles of the empty brook, unable at that moment to speak. "Corcuera has not the stomach of a man," said the under-officer in contempt. "He purposely overslept to-day. I am different.

I shall eat my usual breakfast when I return."

Curzon looked at the man who tramped with him step for step, and turned his head aside with a feeling of physical sickness.

The arroyo opened before them between sandy banks. Lieutenant Aldape moved forward again. For a moment or two nothing was heard except the measured *tramp-tramp* in the gravel; then, from off at the left somewhere, the morning quiet was broken by a clear tinkling of bells.

Over the top of the nearest hillock a pack train of burros hove into view—little "floppy ears," laden heavily with tools and flour sacks and cases of dynamite—dipping across the hollow in a jogging line as they trailed after their belled leader for the silver mines in the mountains.

At the end of the string rode a stumpy, red-haired man in a Texas saddle. He drove his burro train across the dry stream course ahead of the marching rurales. When he reached the opposite slope he turned on his cayuse to look back at them.

The rider, ruddy, freckled, obviously was not a Mexican. Curzon saw the square, homely face in a sudden mist, and the pangs of homesickness reached a sharpness unendurable. A countryman of his. The day had dawned for both of them. To-night one of them would camp in the high mountains, hearing the burros cropping grass, smelling supper cooking, smoking his pipe, watching the moon come up—

Curzon halted and flung up his hand. "Wait!" His shout was a breaking of overstrung nerves. "I'm an American! They've got the wrong—"

The squad closed in and one of the riflemen shoved a gun butt into his back, jolting the breath from his lungs.

Lieutenant Aldape glanced behind. "Do not loiter," he said.

Curzon stumbled along again with

his guards, wondering why he had yelled. Nothing could be done for him by a poor pack-train driver, an outlander like himself. The man had given him a funny look, and then swung off after his burros to skirt the shoulder of the hill. The side walls of the arroyo closed on the marching squad.

A freshet of rain and thawing snows had swept through the cut recently, clearing the high banks of vegetation. The stream had dwindled away days ago, however, and there was not a trickle of water left. The lieutenant led the way along the dusty wash until he came to a big, head-high boulder that had stuck in the middle of the gravel bed.

He halted his squad at a distance of twenty paces, and beckoned the prisoner to advance alone.

The rock had a flat, granite face, offering a bold background in the light of the rising sun. Curzon could see that the stone was clipped and scarred by splashes of metal. He was not the first, nor yet the second to be shot here. It was evident, also, that the marksmen did not always plant their shots in the center of the target.

Lieutenant Aldape led him forward and stood him with his back to the boulder.

"Be of good heart." The officer smiled. "Excepting José, who is near-sighted, we work fast and accurately."

Lieutenant Aldape unknotted a scarf of black silk which he wore at his throat, and leaned forward to blindfold the condemned man.

"No!" Curzon voice was strong. "Please!"

"You wish to watch?" The officer negligently folded the scarf and stuffed it into his pocket. "Then watch," he consented.

Curzon was left alone, his back flattened to the boulder. The crunch of the officer's retreating boots was the ugliest sound he had ever heard. The

men of the squad had deployed across the arroyo, and waited tensely with their guns grounded, their long, grotesque shadows reaching almost to the rock.

The boulder did not entirely block the stream course. It was feasible to dodge around the shoulder of rock and run for the opening at the other end of the cut. The thought suggested itself to Curzon, but a strange lethargy anchored him to the spot. What was the use? An open, treeless slope stretched for two miles beyond. Lieutenant Aldape saw fit to take no precautions. A running man would make keen sport.

On the left-hand embankment at the village end of the arroyo, a hundred yards back, perhaps, a knot of people were looking over the rim, shading their faces with their hands. Across the way on the higher slope, somewhat nearer than the others, the red-headed, pack-train driver sat motionless in his saddle, staring down between the ears of his horse.

Curzon felt frightfully conspicuous, standing in his white shirt and gaudy hat against the bare, brown rock, the center of a straining and breathless expectancy. Like stage fright. In spite of himself his knees would sway. His heart was choking him. He had a hideous feeling that he was about to be ill. As if it mattered!

The sunlight burned his eyes, but he could see the blurred shapes of the rurales strung in a restless line across the gully. Their faces were indistinct things staring at him. Aldape drew over to the left flank and gave a command. The line stiffened at attention.

Curzon tried not to look at these men. He could gaze over their heads and shut them out of his consciousness, perhaps. If he could just fix his mind on some more distant object and grip himself tight—it might not be so dreadful.

He was vaguely aware of a movement at the head of the arroyo. Something had entered between the gravel embankment and was coming towards him. He blinked and tilted his head an inch to shade his eyes with the brim of his hat.

The hope of a last-minute reprieve was far from his thoughts. A faint, instinctive curiosity was left in him; that was all. As long as people can see they must look at things. The moving object he saw was only a donkey.

The burro was shambling down the arroyo behind the firing squad. The little mouse-colored animal wore his pack saddle and carried two square wooden cases, lashed on either side of his back. Probably he belonged to the train that had passed a while ago, and had strayed when the driver neglected to watch him.

The red-headed muleteer still lingered on the left bank of the arroyo, fifty yards or so in the rear of Aldape's party. Since Curzon had noticed him last he had climbed off his horse. He acted peculiarly, stooping to pick up loose stones and throw them down at the burro. One of the missiles was well aimed. The little beast kicked out his heels and suddenly changed his jogging gait to a clattering trot.

Lieutenant Aldape gave a harsh command, and the sunshine flickered on the rifles. He heard the trotting hoofs behind him, and turned with an irritable jerk to shoo the donkey back.

Curzon scarcely heard the officer's command, and at that instant he was not thinking of the eight rifles slanting towards him. For some reason he was thrillingly interested in the actions of the burro driver on the hillside. He could not have said why. It was as though life had paused, waiting for the red-headed man.

He seemed to be a cool, easy-going sort, the red-headed stranger. Deliber-

ately he took a carbine from his saddleboot, slammed down the lever and raised the barrel. Curzon heard no report, but he saw a thin spurt of smoke.

After, if he had time for mental impressions, he might have thought that the world was smashing up about his ears. All the air sucked out of the arroyo and the upheaval of sound was too tremendous for human ear to bear. The mouse-colored burro turned into a gust of white flame, and was never seen again. Curzon was lifted, carried, spun around, and dropped to the ground.

The following chapters of this unusual story will appear in the next issue of TOP-NOTCH MAGAZINE, dated and on the news stands December 15th.

In Perfect Health

SMITH was a chronic borrower. He had exhausted all his friends, and one day he tackled a mere acquaintance, Brown, outside the latter's home.

"Excuse me," began Smith diffidently, "but I find I've come away without any money. Can you lend me five dollars?"

"I'm sorry, but I haven't a cent with me," said Brown.

"And at home——" queried Smith hopefully.

"All very well, thanks," murmured Brown.

A Football Joke

SHE didn't understand football.

"Why did they stop that man and knock him down as soon as he picked up the ball?" she asked.

"Because he was trying to score," her brother explained.

"But isn't the object of the game to score?"

"Yes; but he was—you see, he's on the other side. He was going the wrong way—that is, towards the wrong goal."

"Well, I don't see why they should knock him down to tell him that. Everybody makes mistakes."

A TALK WITH YOU

News and Views by the
Editor and Readers

DECEMBER 1, 1927.

You'll find, at the end of this department, an advertisement of the contents of our next issue. Read it now!

IN his own individual way, every one is a creative artist. You are making your dreams come true. You are accomplishing something. You are, perhaps unconsciously, building your reputation day by day.

Not every one can be a sculptor or an artist, a composer of music, or a writer. Some men have ability in particular fields, but all men are continually engaged in adding to, or subtracting from, their reputations.

The world's opinion of you is valuable. One of the big corporations showed an asset of thirteen million dollars on its annual statement for years. This thirteen million dollars was not property in a tangible sense—not stocks or real estate or money in the bank. This amount appeared on the books as "Good Will." It was the firm's reputation for square dealing and honesty.

Financiers, looking over this corporation's annual statement, observed this thirteen-million-dollar asset. It was accepted without question.

Building up this reputation was not a matter of days or weeks. It took years. To gain this much good will, the policy of square dealing was applied to thousands of transactions. Each of these transactions added to the firm's reputation; each had its effect upon the public's opinion of that corporation.

BY your daily acts and words you build up your own reputation. Though you may not be aware of it, you are being observed, weighed, esti-

mated by your fellow men. They judge you, as best they can.

There's not a moment of your life which does not affect your reputation. The hours you spend in work, play, sleep modify it. And how you do your work, your playtime, and the hours you sleep are either known or guessed at.

You mark the work you do in an individual fashion. Men familiar with what you have done in the past can recognize your handiwork. Whether it's driving an automobile, or writing a letter, your own peculiar fashion of driving, or writing, can be identified.

What you do with your leisure hours is no mystery. The man who believes he can escape from the multitudinous eyes of the public is fooling himself—no one else. He may escape detection for a time, but not forever.

No matter how carefully a criminal may work, he usually leaves a clew behind. Though he wears gloves, he leaves "finger prints"—his own unmistakable way of working that marks the crime as having been committed by this one man.

Great artists have not always signed their paintings. But experts, examining these works of art, have been able to prove conclusively that these paintings were the work of certain men.

EVERY man's reputation is the result of his work as a creative artist. The careless workman turns out careless work. The man who spends his spare hours foolishly hurts himself—for he lessens his power of accomplishment. If you're half asleep most of the time, you won't get the reputation of being wide awake and alert.

Big corporations get out an annual statement each year. Why don't you make one out for yourself, a month from to-day? Instead of "Good Will," put down the word "Reputation." And op-

posite that word "Reputation," what amount will you put down?

who does not claim to be the oldest reader."—Ed.)

Likes Seward Stories

DEAR EDITOR: I'm an old reader of your magazine. Are you going to give us some more Seward of Sacatone stories?

J. H. MERRILL.

Rialto, California.

(Yes, there'll be more Seward stories. Watch the ads at the end of this department to see when they'll appear.—Ed.)

Does Not Claim a Title

DEAR EDITOR: In looking over your "A Talk with You" department, I find that some of your readers claim the title of being the oldest reader. *I do not!* But I've read it since it sold for a dime. I've failed to get only a few issues since 1911. That tells what I think of it.

EDWARD F. HART.

Fairfield, Florida.

(Well, since you don't ask for a title, we'll give you one. You are "the man

An Old-timer Speaks

DEAR EDITOR: In a recent issue of your magazine some one asked when "Lefty of the Blue Stockings" was printed. It appeared in October or November, 1914, I believe. I have been reading the magazine since 1913, and have nearly all the copies in my possession now.

T. E. WYCHE.

Albemarle, North Carolina.

(Thanks for being such a faithful reader.—Ed.)

Welcome, Newcomer!

DEAR EDITOR: I had the pleasant experience of reading your magazine for the first time the other day. I was very much pleased to find in it such good stories.

Needless to say, your magazine has gained a new reader. Most sincerely,

Mrs. F. W. THOMPSON.

Long Beach, California.

(We're glad you've joined the crowd. Let's hear from you again.—Ed.)

ON DECEMBER 15th

The CHRISTMAS number of TOP-NOTCH MAGAZINE
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A Complete Novel

CHRISTMAS AT CRACK O' DOOM, by WILLIAM WALLACE COOK
A mystery-adventure story of the West of to-day.

A Novelette

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Herb Hood, the Maine woods guide, gets into a costume.

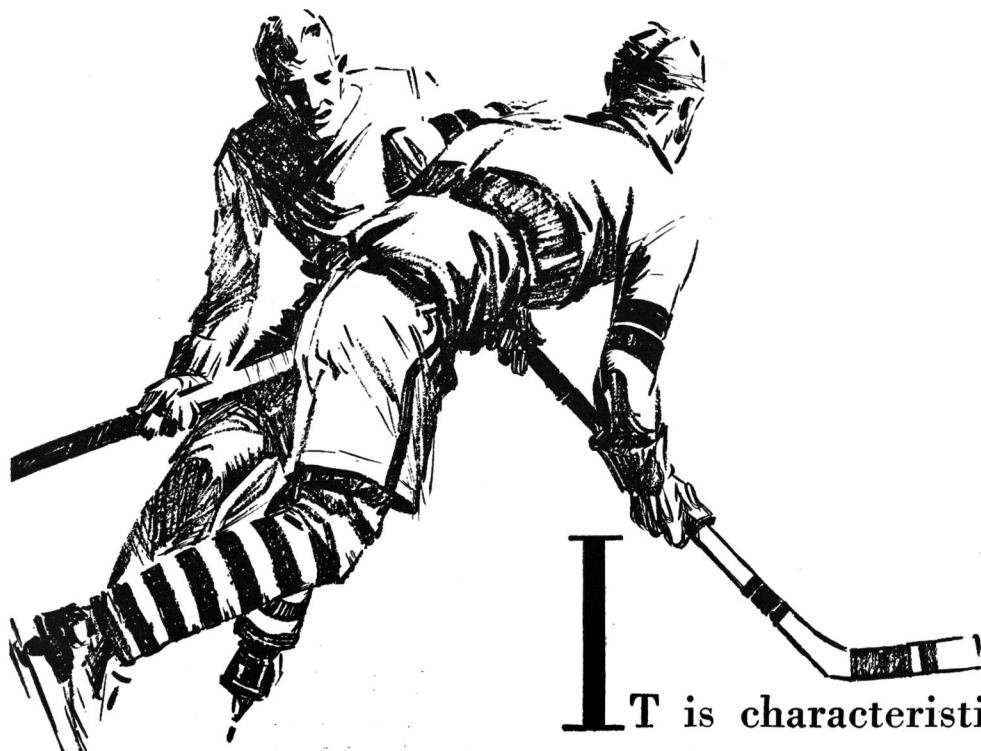
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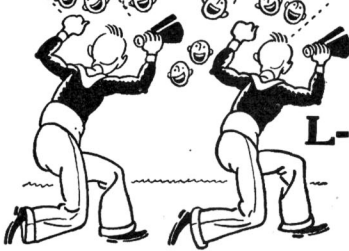
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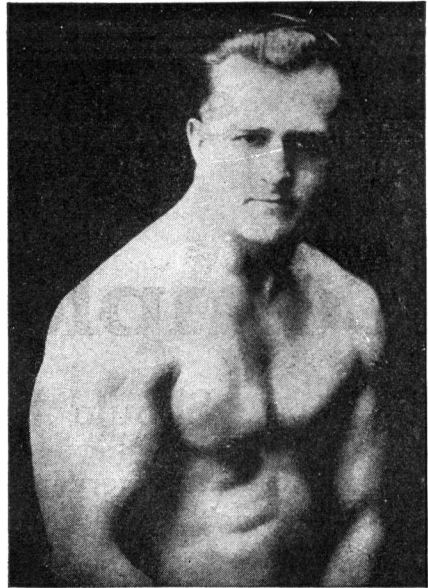
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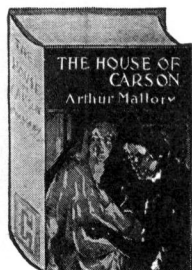
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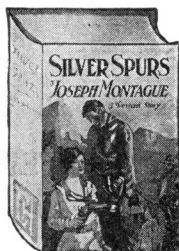
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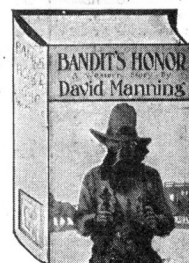
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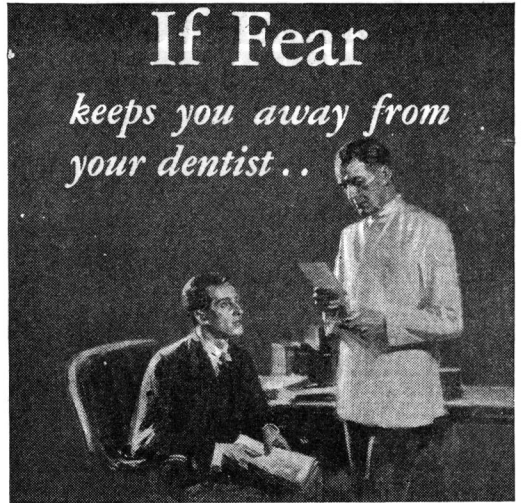
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