You can, but why should you make HOME-MADE CANDY?

We make it THIS way

FUDGE CENTER: 1 1/2 cups pure cane sugar; 1/2 teaspoon creamery butter; 1 cup rich, full cream milk; 1 cup corn syrup; white of one egg.

CARAMEL LAYER: 4 teaspoons creamery butter; 1 1/4 cups corn syrup; 3 cups rich, full cream milk; 1/2 teaspoon salt.

PEANUT LAYER: 3 cups prime No. 1 Spanish whole nuts, roasted in oil (hulls removed).

CHOCOLATE COATING: Melt one pound pure milk chocolate.

Here’s Oh Henry! all ready to eat, and made that home-made way. Why wrestle with pots & pans? ‘Cause you know home-made candy’s best? So do we! That’s why we stick to this good old home-made way in producing Oh Henry! for you.

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So when you want home-made candy just save time & trouble — say Oh Henry!

Look for the new Gingham wrapper

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Vol. LXXIII CONTENTS FOR MARCH 1, 1928 Number 3

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Johns devised an ingenious device for getting rid of his enemies. He made one dangerous slip; a mystery-adventure story.

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Vic Whitman

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Walter A. Sinclair

To shoot a flaming oil well, Eric Carver had not only to outwit a rival cameraman, but to face death as well.

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Seaburn Brown

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John Mersereau

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Whitman Chambers

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Tid-bits—Verse and Prose

A Famous Indian Scout

Just Gratitude

Air Song

A Talk With You

Cristel Hastings

Editor and Readers

45

57

69

143


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Published on 1st and 15th

Next Number Out March 15th
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have you had your WRIGLEYS today?

"After every meal"
GOOD READING
BY
CHARLES HOUSTON

Rudyard Kipling, the poet, singing:

“The white moth to the closing vine,
The bee to the open clover,
And the gypsy blood to the gypsy blood
Ever the wide world over.”

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Continued on 2nd page following

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By Albert M. Treynov

(A COMPLETE NOVEL)

CHAPTER I.
A BETTER MAN.

HE acquaintances of John Sylvester Johns no doubt would have found it hard to believe that he, one day, would commit a deliberate, premeditated, cold-blooded murder.

Those who knew Johns would have thought him a very ordinary and commonplace young man. There was nothing exceptional about him, in his face or character or habits of life, to stamp him with the mark of Cain.

He was a tow-headed, lusterless-eyed individual of average height and weight, neither conspicuously good looking nor ugly looking. After a high-school and college education he had become a real-estate salesman and fairly successful in his work.

As a golfer, he played as well as the usual run of amateurs. He was agreeable enough in his manners. His friendships were chiefly among men. To girls he was not especially attractive.

Under his somewhat colorless exterior John Johns diverged only in a slight degree from the normal. He was a bit selfish, undoubtedly, a trifle covetous, rather conceited, and shrewd in a small way. Then, too, he was oversensitive about what people said or thought of him, and inclined toward little jealousies. But there are many hundreds of thou-
sands of other men with such trivial weaknesses, who never have done and never will do a murder.

During his life Johns had never exhibited any criminal traits. He had been arrested only twice. The first was for parking his saffron roadster within ten feet of a fire-plug. The second time he tried to show off in front of some girls, by fresh-talking a traffic cop. His record in that respect was clean enough. Certainly nobody would have suspected that he was a person to be feared.

Johns for the last couple of months had been living in the winter resort town of Sea Reach, Florida. He came there from the North on a two-week vacation; he discovered that he liked the place, the climate and the people. When he found the chance of a job in a local real-estate office he grabbed it and became a permanent resident.

In Johns’ opinion the nicest of all the very nicest of the people of Sea Reach was Geraldine Rowland, the twenty-one-year-old daughter of V. Parthington Rowland, the town’s wealthiest citizen. There were many others who would have agreed with Johns’ estimate of Jerry Rowland absolutely.

John Sylvester Johns had long since admitted to himself that he was in love with Jerry. Being a practical young man, he also did not blind himself to the fact that V. Parthington Rowland was an extremely prosperous citizen. Whoever married Miss Rowland would some day come in for quite a sizable parcel of citrus lands, seashore cottages, and apartment buildings—not to mention plenty of ready cash in the bank and stock in secure corporations.

At the end of two months Johns believed that the girl was half won. His saffron roadster was often seen parked in front of the Rowland home. Also, Johns and Miss Rowland swam, golfed, and picnicked together very frequently indeed. Life, in fact, was flowing smoothly for John Sylvester Johns.

Then one day James Crandall came to town.

If the foreknowledge of tragedy could have reached the townspeople at that time, and they had been asked to predict which of the two young men was more apt to turn out a murderer, James Crandall, the newest arrival, in all probability would have got nearly all the votes.

There was nothing murderous in his appearance, though. He had a frank and friendly smile, his blue eyes were keen and kindly, but there was that look about him, in the set of his mouth and square-cut jaw, in the poise of his black head, to suggest that if an unpleasant or dangerous deed was to be done he had the nerve to do it.

Crandall, like Johns, was a Northerner. He was an attorney who came to Sea Reach in the interest of a group of clients to negotiate with V. Parthington Rowland about some important land matters.

Rowland, dour and grizzled, fierce as an old wolf in his business dealings, tried to bully Crandall. Finding that this could not be done, he formed a strong and sudden liking for the younger man.

He dragged his guest home to dinner and introduced him to his daughter with a proud and triumphant air, as though he had brought a priceless gift to his only child.

The easiest way for a man to become unpopular with a girl is to have the girl’s father boosting for him. But singularly enough, in this case, Geraldine Rowland seemed to bear no malice toward Crandall, even while old man Rowland was beaming upon him. The saffron roadster drove up as usual at eight o’clock that evening, and a few minutes later drove away again without a passenger. V. Parthington grinned brutally to himself.

The next afternoon Crandall and Jerry met by appointment at the golf
club. Old man Rowland drove in as they were coming off the veranda. He said that if they didn’t mind, he guessed he’d walk around with them for the exercise.

At the first tee they happened to run into John Johns, who, for the lack of a companion, was in the act of driving off alone.

"Why don’t you come in with us?" suggested Crandall, who had met the other man the night before.

Johns started to frown, and then changed his mind and smiled instead. "Why, yes—if I’m not intruding."

"Don’t be silly!" said Jerry.

Johns turned ingratiatingly to Rowland. "Why don’t you get your clubs, and we’ll make it a foursome—Jerry and I against you two?"

Rowland was a man of violent likes and dislikes. He glowered at Johns as though he would like to take him by the scruff of the neck, goose-step him to the gate, and kick him into the road. Fortunately he was just barely polite enough not to do it. "Guess not!" he grunted.

"Come on, dad," said Jerry. "You know we’ll beat you."

"Who will?" The old man bridled ferociously. "You and that whipper-snapper? I ain’t seen Crandall play, but I’ll bet he’s a better man than you two put together. I’ll bet you——"

"Done!" Jerry snapped him up. "That new motor boat I’ve been wanting, against—what’ll it be, dad?"

Rowland made a rueful face. "Trapped!" he ejaculated. "All right! It goes. The motor boat against your doing everything I tell you to do for a solid month from now."

Jerry laughed wickedly. "I haven’t seen Mr. Crandall play either, but I’ve seen you. It would take you and six professionals to beat anybody. Send for the clubs and let’s get it over with so you can pay the bet."

As a game of golf that foursome was very exciting to watch. As a study of human nature it was interesting.

Johns was not bad as a rule. Ordinarily he might have conceded Geraldine Rowland ten strokes on the eighteen holes. To-day he was too anxious. He was keen to help his partner win her bet. He was pettishly determined to show up that cool-eyed interloper of a Crandall.

His was a superstitious sort of imagination that could see greater things at stake than the mere terms of a wager. So he was as taut as a fiddle string, when he should have yawned and relaxed and not cared so much. The ball kept slueing off on vicious tangents almost every time he hit it.

He tried harder and harder, and grew tenser and less sure of himself as they marched on from hole to hole. His stringy, pale hair fell dankly over one eye. He kept twisting his neck and tugging nervously at a too-tight collar. The effort to act good-humored gave his face a numbed and sickish look.

Geraldine Rowland played about as usual. So did her father. The old man was the club’s prize duffer at golf. No strain could be severe enough to make him play worse than he always did.

Whether Crandall was shooting above his accustomed form, his new friends could not have said. They were not long in finding out that he was unbeatable that afternoon, even with old Rowland dragging on the score. He went about his job with a gentle and deadly address. The combined efforts of his two opponents just barely kept them in the game.

Once when the others had moved on ahead Jerry lagged for a word with him. "Are you going to do me out of my boat?" the girl asked, and gave him an appealing glimpse of deep-fringed, velvety eyes.

"Sorry!" he said. "I don’t know what’s got into me to-day. I’m a dozen strokes better than I should be. It’s
tough luck.” He smiled at her apologetically, looking as though he really would be pleased if he should happen to dub the next couple of holes.

She measured him with a glance of womanly wisdom. Almost any man she had ever known would have driven a few long shots into the rough, and not troubled his conscience too much if he thought he thereby had won the approval of Geraldine Rowland.

Apparently it had not occurred to Crandall that she could expect him to do anything of the sort, or that he could do it even if she wished it. He was playing his best, and good sportsmanship would allow him to do no less than that.

“Sorry,” he repeated contritely.

Jerry faced him thoughtfully, and then, for some reason her glance wandered across the green where Johns was fussing over his choice between two putters. Suddenly she turned back to Crandall, and her eyes were very bright.

“I wouldn’t want the boat if I couldn’t win it,” she said. “It doesn’t look as though I’m going to, and you needn’t feel sorry.”

The game wound up on the sixteenth green when Crandall sunk a twenty-foot putt and sunk his opponents’ last hope with the shot. V. Parthington Rowland belonged to that irritating species of winners who crow over their victims.

“I told you!” gloated the old man, and his fat hand gave Johns a resounding smack on the shoulder blade. “First foursome I ever collected on!”

Johns gritted his teeth to save himself from answering. His face for the moment was a frozen travesty of a physiognomy looking pleasant. “Congratulations, I’m sure,” he contrived to say.

“Don’t congratulate me. Just touch the hat to Crandall. He’s a better man, my boy.”

“A better golfer,” conceded Johns faintly.

“A better man,” insisted Rowland, and turned ponderously to his daughter. “And don’t you forget, either, Miss Whoozis! From now on for a month—what I say goes!”

“Did you ever know me to welch on a bet?” she inquired mildly.

“Then you can start in now,” returned the parent. “We’ll have fried pompano to-night for supper.”

The girl’s nose went up in a wry expression. “I don’t like fish,” she declared, “and it smells up the house so that—”

“Pompano!” declared Rowland pompously. “And not only that—you ask Crandall to be there.”

“Mr. Crandall,” said Jerry, “we’re having pompano to-night for dinner—not supper. And my father insists on your helping eat it.”

“Pompano!” said Crandall. “Delicious! I’ll be there. It’s sweet of you to ask me.”

“I’m not asking you,” Jerry reminded him. “I’m under orders. I wouldn’t want anybody myself who eats fried pompano.”

“You can count on me,” said Crandall. “I’ll be there.”

Geraldine waited for a moment in silence, staring at her father. “What else?” she demanded.

“Nothing else.”

“Father!” she exclaimed, and stared harder. “What else?”

“Oh well,” said Rowland grudgingly, “all right. Go ahead and ask Johns, too.”

The girl turned with an apologetic flush to the third man. “John,” she said, “we’d like to have you come to dinner, even though I’m sure you couldn’t eat a smelly old pompano. It’s the worst fish going.”

The real-estate man’s complexion was tinged with a darker red than Jerry’s. “I don’t eat ’em, thank you,” he answered and bent his head down, intent on the buckle of his golf bag. He snapped the strap fast with a sullen
jerk. "Fact is," he muttered, "I've got another engagement. Good night."

Ignoring the waiting caddy, he flung the bag over his shoulder and stalked off toward the clubhouse, wishing that James Crandall had never existed.

CHAPTER II.

SEEDS OF CRIME.

By the time he had slammed his golf bag into his locker and changed to his street clothes, Johns had improved on his first wish. An event that has already happened is unalterable. Crandall had been born. He had grown to manhood. He was emphatically alive, young, and healthy.

Recalling how Jerry had smiled at the other man on several occasions that afternoon, Johns foresaw jealously that his own carefully worked-out plans were gravely endangered by the trespassing of this engaging newcomer. When he kicked the starter of his car and swung down through the club gate, Johns had gone so far as to wish that Crandall would choke to death on a fish bone, or in some other way might obligingly fall dead.

Many other men have entertained a similar wish toward an enemy or some annoying neighbor, and then put the unworthy thought aside. Evil and malicious ideas are apt to spring up unbidden in resentful minds, but fortunately nothing often comes of them.

One of Johns' small flaws of character, however, was a habit he had of brooding too seriously over his private grievances. He lay awake for a greater part of the night, thinking—thinking—The seed of murder was planted that night, all unknown to Johns, and found a soil for slow, stealthy, and inevitable growth.

When Johns went down to the beach next day for his afternoon swim, his eyes were red-rimmed and tired looking. Any of his friends would have known at a glance that he was out of sorts about something.

The Sea Reach bathing beach was a quarter-moon-shaped stretch of gleaming white sand shelving abruptly into deep water. There was an open pavilion fronting on a plank walk. There an orchestra played each afternoon; and old ladies sat in rockers, looking down at the bathers sprawling under gay umbrellas below them. On either side of the pavilion were grouped bath houses.

Three bronzed, sphinxlike life guards lolled on a stilts-legged bench, idly watching the strangers who went into the surf. The life guards knew the natives by sight and paid little attention to them. It was only the tourists who gave trouble by losing their heads and drowning unexpectedly, or almost drowning, thereby causing their bored rescuers to drop the statuesque attitude and toil at a wet and disagreeable job.

Therefore, those bathers whom the guards did not know personally, were kept herded in a rope corral close to the shore, where a distressed swimmer could be saved at a minimum of labor.

Since Jerry Rowland's childhood days she went where she pleased, inside or outside the ropes. If the jaded eyes of the guards sometimes followed the trim figure in the boyish blue swimming suit, it was in admiration and not because of any suspicion that the girl would ever need to yell for help.

The paid rescuers could have dozed in peace all day long if they had only Jerry to look after. Their warning whistle never shrilled for her, even when she swam alone into the dangerous channel out beyond the reef.

Jerry usually took to the water from a spit of sand a quarter of a mile above the crowded and guarded bathing grounds. Knowing the hour and the place, Johns was confident of finding the girl, and was hoping there would be nobody with her this afternoon.

In his flannel trunks and shirt he
walked up the beach toward the deserted point. Sure enough, there was the familiar white cap bobbing in the bright sunlight several hundred yards offshore.

Johns waved his arm and then placed his hands to his mouth, preparing to send a shout across the water. Then the sound died in his throat and he turned sharply to look behind him.

A big limousine had come skating along the shell road and pulled up at a standstill not a dozen yards away. Two men in beach robes were climbing out of the tonneau. One of the new arrivals was V. Parthington Rowland; the other, James Crandall.

"Hello!" called Rowland boisterously. "How’s the golfing demon this sunshiny afternoon?" He dismissed the chauffeur with a short movement of his head. "Don’t wait. Mr. Crandall and I’ll drive home with Miss Geraldine."

Johns’ mouth closed and he nodded grudgingly. He had the wit to understand that Rowland was trying deliberately to ruffle him. Since he first came to town he was aware that the older man had little use for him. But he had not let that fact depress him.

If Jerry liked him, it didn’t matter particularly how her father felt. If she decided to marry him, Rowland couldn’t stop her. The girl could wind the old man around her finger any time she pleased.

Until yesterday Johns had accepted Rowland as a harmless nuisance. But alarming changes had taken place since Crandall came to town. The old man no longer sulked helplessly over his daughter’s choice of a friend, but grinned and gloated over some monstrous joke that had suddenly brightened his life.

Johns knew perfectly well that he himself was the joke, and apart from everything else his sensitive nature hated being laughed at. As Rowland waddled down through the sand on his plump, bare legs, the real-estate agent made the discovery that he disliked Jerry’s father as thoroughly as that individual disliked him. In this moment he began to associate Rowland in his thoughts with Crandall, as two undesirable human beings.

"You people down here have all the luck," remarked Crandall, who could not have guessed all that was going on in Johns’ mind. "To be able to hop into the ocean any time, summer or winter!"

"It’s a good climate," Johns mumbled sourly.

"That’s Jerry out there," said Rowland, gazing with paternal pride at the white cap floating on the distant blue swells. As he peered off across the water, his eyes suddenly opened wider. "My gosh! Look!"

His two companions stared, and then for a moment both stopped breathing. In the dimpling waves near the reef a black, wedge-shaped object was moving along, cutting the surface of the sea. Even as they watched, the thing swirled in the water, changed its course and cruised stealthily in the direction of the swimming girl.

"Sharks!" gasped Johns.

Crandall had said nothing. His bath robe dropped from his smoothly muscled shoulders. Before the others quite realized what he was doing, he crossed the spit of sand and dived, clearing the incoming breaker and entering the water without a splash. The instant his head reappeared, he lifted his left arm in the crawl stroke and started out toward the girl.

It seemed to take him but a few seconds to glide through the line of the breakers. If the guards at the farther end of the beach could have seen him and noted the whiteness of his arms and shoulders, they, no doubt, would have classified him as just another tourist, and called him back from the deep water.

Then they would have been forced to
revision an overhasty impression. Crandall proved in a moment that he was as much at home in the surf as the majority of sun-browned natives.

He slid with the litheness of a seal through the crashing inshore waves. Before the two other men had drawn a full breath, he was out beyond the area of white water, swimming high and fast through the big, lazy rollers.

"Jerry!" he shouted as his face dipped out for a breath. "This way—Jerry!"

The girl could not have heard him. Perhaps she was expecting him, and had been watching the shore. The men on the beach saw the white cap turn, and then a slim, bare arm was lifted full length above the surface to wave a friendly signal.

With easy, negligent strokes, she started to swim in to meet Crandall. She had not looked behind and evidently had no inkling of the dark fin that was circling steadily after her.

Johns was standing in an agony of indecision. A man is not necessarily a coward who hesitates to plunge into the sea with a man-eating shark.

Crandall was a hundred yards from shore, trailing a white wake of bubbles behind him as he cut through the water with the eight-beat racing stroke. Jerry was coming in faster now, and the distance separating the two swimmers was rapidly closing.

Her quickened stroke betrayed no evidence of fear or panic, but only eagerness to reach the man who was hastening out to her. An ugly ripple marked the course of the nearly submerged shark as the great, shadowy bulk closed in toward the unwitting girl.

With a look of desperate resolution tensing the muscles of his mouth, Johns suddenly ran forward and dived into the ocean after Crandall.

He met the first breaker head-on, came up for a moment, worked his way through a second and a third, and then rolled into his stroke and headed doggedly to sea. Each lifting crest revealed to him Jerry's white cap and the horrid dark fin edging in closer. Johns perhaps did not swim with the frantic haste of the man who had gone ahead of him, but he kept on stubbornly, nevertheless.

Jerry and Crandall had met and were coming in together, the man lagging half a length behind his companion. The huge, slippery, blue shape was nosing along after Crandall, not twenty yards in his rear.

Johns encountered Jerry just outside the farthestmost breakers. He turned to keep pace with her, swimming abreast. She flashed him a smile.

"Hello!" she called carelessly, and then kicked her body to the top of a surging wave, to ride shoreward like an arrow on its sliding, foaming crest.

Crandall, grim and unsmiling, followed her. The three of them picked themselves up in the undertow and waded out upon the beach. Outside the stretch of broken water, the dingy scimitar of a fin switched around and ambled off innocently to sea.

"Jerry!" protested Rowland. "I can't help it; I get scared every time one of those darn things takes after you."

The girl stretched full length on her bare toes, pulled off the white cap and rumpled her hair. "That either was old Tom-tom, or else it was Pete. It's hard to 'tell 'em apart. They've been away for over four months. Must have just got back."

Old Rowland turned a penetrating glance upon Johns, and his mouth twisted in a hard and sarcastic grin. "I noticed you was just a little delayed, young feller," he remarked bitingly. "This other guy not only's a better golfer, but he's a whole lot the faster swimmer, too—especially when there are tiger sharks in the water."

"Father!" protested Jerry. "What's the shark got to do with anything? You know very well that as long as they've got plenty of mullet and things to eat,
they wouldn't touch a human being. Old Tom-tom's just curious—likes to follow you to find out who you are." She explained to Crandall. "I've been going around with tigers most of my life."

"You ought to have told these two boys that before," observed Rowland jocosely. "We might not have found out so much."

"I knew the things were harmless," Johns was foolish enough to remark. "We all of us did, of course."

Miss Rowland was watching Crandall with something more than curiosity. "Did you?" she asked.

"Sure," said Crandall carelessly.

The fine line of the girl's chestnut eyebrows puckered as she scrutinized him with sober intemperance. "You're a liar," she declared unexpectedly, but the gentleness of her voice and the soft glow of her eyes made the speech a sweet impeachment.

"They're both of them liars," old Rowland put in bluntly. He chuckled maliciously as he shed his bath robe. "Well, come along everybody. As long as it ain't so very dangerous, let's all go in swimmin'. We didn't come down here to stand around the beach!"

When they were ready to go home an hour or so later, he was still humorously enjoying himself at the expense of the wretched Johns. "If you didn't have your own car, we could have made room for you," he volunteered. "Well, so-long," he added cheerfully. "See you again maybe."

Johns saw the three of them drive away a few minutes later in Jerry's roadster. His eyes were hard and saturnine as he watched the car turn down the white roadway. He was wishing bitterly that something would happen both to Crandall and to old man Rowland.

That "something" later was to become definite and ugly and frightful. These two men stood in his path. They were leagued against him, or so he could easily imagine.

They were ruining his cherished plans. He was learning to hate them both—Rowland, who sneered and snorted at him and made him look foolish in front of Jerry; Crandall, whom Johns knew in his heart to be a finer, cleaner, braver man than he.

It was not hatred altogether that made him wish so fervently that these two men were out of his way. If he could get rid of them both, he would have a chance with Jerry. Otherwise— he could no longer delude himself—he was hopelessly outclassed.

The black thought came to him in bed that night while he tossed and threshed sleeplessly through the hours of darkness. If Rowland could be removed from the scene, and at the same time Crandall, by hook or crook, might be accused, tried and convicted of the old man's murder, then he, John Sylvester Johns, again would have a clear field with the Rowland heiress.

CHAPTER III.

NOTHING TO FEAR.

JOHNS' idea at first was nothing more than a vicious and tantalizing dream. The actual carrying-out of such a project offered difficulties that amounted to impossibilities. The notion was in his mind, though, and it stayed there and would not let him rest.

He spied upon Jerry Rowland and Crandall. Day by day he watched them from a distance, seeing them together in the ocean, or on the links or shaded bridle paths, or out on the shell roads in the softly moonlit evenings. He saw old Rowland wearing a bland and contented smile when he appeared on the streets.

Murder is a hideous and repulsive thing, but by living with the thought of murder, day and night, the idea in time became the familiar and natural subject of his brooding, and eventually it ceased
to awaken horror in his mind. By continuous thinking over the abstract possibilities, he gradually hypnotized himself into a mood that would allow him to commit a crime, providing he were able to devise a means of accomplishment.

Then one day, like a diabolical inspiration, the daring and crafty scheme suddenly shaped itself in his brain.

It was a fantastic idea, but as he examined it in tense excitement, he saw that it was feasible. If he had the nerve to carry it through, it would work. In fact, it couldn’t fail.

Rowland would be killed. Crandall would be arrested and condemned without a chance of proving his innocence. Nobody would ever dream of suspecting that John Johns was the real criminal.

To Johns’ mind this last feature was the brilliant part of his plan. He had nothing whatever to fear on his own account. There wasn’t the slightest danger of his being caught. He could frame for himself a rock-ribbed alibi which nothing could ever shake or tear down.

For several days he tested and rehearsed his scheme in every detail and from every angle, to make certain that there was no flaw or weakness that might bring his own undoing. There was none.

He satisfied himself absolutely. Thereafter he looked upon Rowland and Crandall with sly contempt. Their lives were in his hands. If he cared to go through with it, he had fabricated a "perfect" crime.

Even then, perhaps, he might have rested in the morbid knowledge of all he could do if he chose to do it. But a series of small events, happening in one day, so exasperated and maddened Johns that his resolution hardened and he found himself ripe for a deed of violence.

The fateful day began for Johns when he reported at his office and learned that a prospective sale, on which he counted for several hundred dollars’ commission, had inexplicably fallen through. His boss blamed him for the failure, and told him so. He was in a sullen and resentful state of mind when he chanced that same morning to encounter James Crandall on the street and found it impossible to escape conversation.

“Haven’t seen you lately,” remarked Crandall. There was something in his steady, smiling glance that Johns’ eyes shrank from meeting.

“I thought you’d gone back North,” said Johns, who really had thought nothing of the sort.

“Not yet. I’ve finished the business that brought me here originally. But Mr. Rowland has a new development scheme that I think will interest my principals back home. We’ll probably be working on it for some time. It looks now as though I’d be here the rest of the winter.”

That piece of information was like an unintentional knife thrust for Johns. He had the wit to foresee that if Crandall stayed in Sea Reach for the winter, Jerry Rowland’s wedding undoubtedly would be celebrated in the spring, and he, Johns, would not be the bridegroom.

Later that day he caught sight of Jerry and Crandall driving off in the girl’s car. Crandall held the wheel. Jerry chanced to see the man on the sidewalk, and waved a friendly hand at him.

Two seconds later she turned back to her companion with an absorbed glance. Johns was left behind with the blighting knowledge that she had completely forgotten his existence.

As he scowled after the vanishing car, Johns heard a heavy step on the sidewalk behind him. The final drop of bitterness went into the venom of his heart, when he discovered that V. Partington Rowland had witnessed his humiliation.
Rowland was a believer in the old-fashioned creed that the winner should gather in all the spoils, while the loser ought to go on paying and suffering, even after he's down.

"Left in the lurch, hey?" mocked the old man in a voice that must have been heard by half a dozen passers-by. "Well, cheer up, fella! There's other good fish in the sea—if you ain't afraid of sharks!"

Johns turned on his heel without a word, and walked away in a cold white fury. His mind was made up in that moment. He'd see to it that Crandall shouldn't go riding any more times with Jerry. He'd borne his last affront from old man Rowland. It was his turn now.

If the Johns of three months ago could have looked into the brain of the Johns of to-day, he would have been appalled. All of the little mean and vicious qualities had come to the surface and joined forces to stifle and bury all the good that was in him. He could be cruel and stealthy and ruthless. His last scruples had left him. He'd show them.

Johns' first move was to obtain a month's leave of absence from his office. He explained to his employer that he knew a man in Chicago who might be persuaded to buy a thousand acres of land in the southern part of the State, that Rowland owned and would be willing to sell at a price.

He further explained that it was better to see his prospective client in person. While he was making the trip, he would combine business with a sort of vacation, driving north in his roadster and camping nights along the way. He bought himself a tent, a portable stove, a cot and blankets and a quantity of provisions, and left town that afternoon. Sea Reach saw nothing further of Johns for twenty-five days.

Buena Vista was a town of ten or twelve thousand inhabitants, situated in the back country, about forty miles from Sea Reach by a branch railroad, and about sixty-five miles by the automobile highway. Johns arrived at Buena Vista in the late afternoon, a few minutes before the closing time of the local post office.

He mailed a half dozen letters, which he had previously written on some old, unmarked sheets of paper he had found and sealed in plain, cheap envelopes.

These communications were addressed to merchandising houses in New York, Philadelphia, Baltimore, and Chicago. From the various establishments he ordered to be sent to George S. Gregory, care of general delivery, Buena Vista, Florida, the following items:

- Two obsolete, single-shot rifles, .38-40 caliber.
- One box of .38-40 smokeless cartridges.
- One electric vibrator of the small, portable type such as beauty specialists use for massaging faces.
- Three coils of insulated wire.
- Ten pounds of plaster of paris.
- Two silencers to fit the rifles.
- One box of oil paints and brushes.
- A kit of gunsmith's tools, including files, steel saw blades, pliers, and a ratchet drill.
- One suit of dark-blue clothes.
- One pair of shoes.
- A wide-brim felt hat.
- One leather suit case.
- One small black satchel such as practicing physicians carry.
- One pair of horn-rim spectacles fitted with plain glass lenses.
- One jar of lemon, skin-bleaching cream.
- One pair of rubber gloves.

Having posted his letters, Johns immediately drove out of town. Nobody had looked at him closely enough to be apt to remember him. After leaving the village a few miles behind, he turned
off on a narrow, fork road that took him farther inland.

When darkness overtook him, he pulled up at the edge of a lonely grove of trees, dined out of a paper bag and a thermos bottle, and pitched his tent for the night.

He was on his way again at daybreak next morning, following a roadway that showed fewer and fainter signs of travel as he drove westward. An hour or so after sunrise he quitted this marked road and turned down a swampy lane that allowed barely enough room for the hubs of his car to pass through between the encroaching fringe of trees and brushwood.

Presently he was brought to a halt by a deep, muddy pool in the middle of the path, which blocked his farther progress.

For the last five or six miles he had made his way through a stretch of low, waste timberland. He had not seen a human habitation in more than an hour. There were no wheel or foot tracks visible along the black, wet path. He drove his car deep into a leafy thicket and left it there, with the assurance that nobody was likely to find it.

Shouldering a load of camp equipment, he went on afoot through a stand of cypress. After tramping for a mile or so among damp undergrowths, he emerged on the bank of a still, black bayou that reached like a crooked arm from the depths of a hidden swamp, known to the natives as Pelican Slough.

He was forced to make several trips from the car, but by noon he had transported his remaining baggage, and the tent was up. Here for two weeks Johns remained in idleness, seeing no one, seen by none, fishing sometimes along the bayou.

He spent most of his time loafing in camp, living as contentedly as it is possible for a man to live on the edge of a black, unhealthy swamp, with only his own black thoughts for company.

Johns made it a point to stay in the shade during the days. By the end of his second week in camp, his becoming coat of tan had faded to a washed-out putty color. He had shaved every morning and kept himself neat, but refrained from using a razor on his upper lip and the point of the chin.

At the end of the fifth day he had grown a yellowish stubble on the neglected spots. By the time a fortnight was out, he was the possessor of a silky mustache and goatee long enough to tug at with his thumb and forefinger. One day he drove to the town of Buena Vista and identified himself at the post office as George S. Gregory.

"I'm expecting some packages by parcel post," he told the man at the general-delivery window.

The clerk, a small, ferret-eyed man, looked at Johns with an expression of relief. "Yeh. I'm glad you came. Didn't know what to do with all this junk. It comes C. O. D. Two hundred an' nine dollars, I think it totals up to."

"That's right," said Johns. He dropped a handful of gold pieces on the counter, anxious to have the transaction over with as quickly as possible.

The clerk gathered up the money, started to count it, and then shoved a silver coin back to the customer. "Here! I won' need that."

"My mistake," said Johns, keeping his head bowed so the other would not be able to observe and remember his face. "It's a Columbian half dollar, my luck piece. It must have got into the wrong pocket."

He thrust the piece into his vest pocket, then took the change the clerk handed to him. A couple of minutes later he left the post office with his arms full of packages, climbed into his car and drove away.

On his way back to the bayou he was congratulating himself on the success so far of his craftily laid plans. Nobody but the clerk had noticed him,
CHAPTER IV.
THE BEST LAID PLANS.

The Seminole Inn of Sea Reach was an old-fashioned resort hotel with wide verandas and gabled corners, fronting the blue sweep of the ocean and backed on the other side along the town’s main business street. The rows of rooms overlooking the sea naturally were the more popular and almost always filled up by the hotel’s guests of years’ standing.

It was usually impossible for a newcomer to obtain a front room. James Crandall, who had arrived in town after the season was in full swing, had contented himself with a corner bedroom and bath on the second floor back. The key number was 28.

Adjoining Crandall’s quarters was a row of three or four unoccupied chambers. These were the least desirable rooms in the hotel. Except for a week or so during the mid-winter rush, they were almost always vacant.

Johns had counted on this fact. When he arrived in Sea Reach on the last train of the night, shortly before twelve o’clock, he was confident that his preliminary plans would carry through without a hitch.

Sea Reach was neither a festive nor fashionable resort. The visitors who knew and liked the place came there for ocean bathing and fishing and golfing, and after playing hard all day they were glad to go to bed early in the evening.

The Seminole Inn boasted neither a dance floor nor a jazz band. When Johns was dropped at the front portals by the night-hawk jitney, there was nobody in the lobby but the night clerk. Johns had never happened to enter the hotel after sundown. He was sure that this day-sleeping clerk had never seen him. His first glance at the man reassured him.

“I seem to be the only passenger tonight,” he remarked casually, as he
dropped his bags on the floor by the desk and kept his face shaded by the wide brim of his hat. "Can you give me a room?"

The clerk yawned sleepily and looked dubious. "I don't know. We're pretty full up."

"I like the second floor, if I could have it. I'm not well and wouldn't want to walk more flights than necessary."

"Well, I don't know."

"You can't accommodate me?"

"Nope. Nothin' on the front. I'm sorry."

"No rooms at all?"

"Well, there's plenty on the rear."

"I'd like it as near as possible to the morning sun."

"Well, there's rooms to the rear, but not many people like 'em. I could give you 29. That's close to the corner on the second floor. The sun'll hit there about eleven."

"I suppose I'll have to take it," said Johns, inwardly exultant. No. 29, as he had previously ascertained, was next door to James Crandall's room.

He reversed the register and, with a flourish, scrawled the name "Martin Keller, M.D., New York, N. Y." A bell boy was summoned from somewhere, and Johns was conducted to his apartment.

The Seminole Inn had renovated and refitted a season or two before. The furnishing of all the rooms was practically identical. Johns on several occasions had visited acquaintances in some of the rooms, and he knew in advance about what No. 29 would be like.

There was a square blue rug on the floor, an ivory and green bedstead, a dresser and mirror to match, two easy-chairs cushioned with bright cretonnes, a spinnet desk and chair, and a polychrome floor lamp with a horizontal arm holding a light bulb and parchment shade.

A tiled bath opened from the main chamber at the right. At the left was a second doorway, which might be opened ensuite with No. 28, or kept closed and locked, separating the apartment into two single bedrooms, as was now the case.

As soon as he was left alone, Johns went to the window and parted the cretonne curtains, to look out on the deserted street below him. Directly across the way he could see the shadowy outline of the Sea Reach Trust Company building, a modern tile-and-stucco structure of eight stories. Like many other pieces of local property, it was owned and operated by V. Parthington Rowland.

Rowland's offices occupied the entire second-story front of the trust building. His private desk stood by one of the broad, street-facing windows, where the north light fell over his shoulder while he worked.

Crandall's bedroom window and Rowland's office window faced each other from opposite sides of the street. It was this accident of location that had afforded Johns his first inspiration for his perfectly planned crime.

Had either window fronted upon another street or from a higher story, he would have been forced to invent a different scheme. In all probability his little, shrewd-thinking brain would have hit upon another method equally as promising. He was an opportunist who worked with the materials that he found at hand.

He stood for a few minutes peering toward the offices across the way, then undressed, snapped off the light and went to bed to sleep soundly through the night.

The next morning Johns sent to the dining room for his breakfast. Later, after he had dismissed the bell boy who brought his tray, and the chambermaid, who wanted to "tidy" his room, he bolted the door, put on his rubber gloves, and set to work.
He had already removed the stock from one of his rifles. His first move was to take apart the lock and file the trigger trip until a feather's touch would set it off. After reassembling the weapon, he unscrewed and removed the horizontal arm from the floor lamp, which stood by the writing desk, in a line with the front window.

He disconnected the electric wires and allowed them to dangle, while he clamped the rifle barrel to the upright standard of the lamp in the place of the usual shade-supporting fixture.

This work took him the better part of an hour. When it was finished, he got his electric vibrator and took off the nickeled shell and handle, leaving only the armature core and the vibrating mechanism. With the help of two "U" bolts and an electric soldering iron, he fastened the vibrator to the lock of the carbine, where the trigger guard had been, and secured the vibrating tongue to the trigger.

He led the insulated wires of the vibrator to the base of the lamp and through a hole punched in the rug, across the floor to an inside corner of the room, where the bell box of a switchboard telephone was fastened to the baseboard. He cut one of these wires, affixed a terminal point to each severed end, and lashed them securely in place, leaving a quarter-inch space between.

Then Johns unscrewed one of the telephone bells, and fastened his clipped wires in such a way that the ball of the bell buzzer would fill the gap with a smallest movement, thereby rejoining the terminals in a perfect electrical contact. Then he plugged into an unused wall switch, and replaced the telephone bell.

So, by ingenious arrangement, the carbine could be discharged by anybody within telephone reach of the Seminole Inn. It would be necessary only to call the switchboard and ask for room No. 29. The operator would plug in. The bell buzzer would buzz and for an instant would fill the gap in the cut wire.

The circuit would be renewed. The electrical current would pass through the vibrator, which would vibrate against the filed-down trigger of the carbine. The spring would be released. The hammer would fall. And—a .38-40-caliber bullet would fire itself whichever way the muzzle of the weapon was pointing.

Johns worked carefully and painstakingly over his delicate adjustments. It was nearly noon before the electrical mechanism was completed to his satisfaction. It was a warm day, and both his room window and the window of Rowland's office across the street were open to the gentle southwest breeze.

Some time after eleven o'clock he had glanced out to see Rowland at his desk. A grim and malevolent look came into his eyes as he watched the old man absorbed in his morning's mail blissfully unaware that he was under hostile observation.

Rowland's desk chair was large and comfortable, with a leather upholstered wing back, affording a padded niche in which he could rest his grizzled head. Johns, who had been an occasional business caller at the realty promoter's office, had noticed that when Rowland talked to visitors he invariably put his feet on his desk, clutched a cigar in one hand, and leaned his big head in the soft right side corner of his chair.

Most people acquire little habits of this sort without realizing it. In years, a six-inch circle of leather in the old man's chair had been worn almost through by the rubbing pressure of his skull.

Looking out occasionally at the man he meant to put out of the way, Johns continued work on his ugly contraptions. Using the carbine barrel as a new floor-lamp arm, he fastened the socket fixture under the muzzle, fitted in the lighting
bulb and replaced the pendant parchment shade. He reconnected the wiring, and found the lamp would light. So far all had gone as he planned.

He waited until somebody came into Rowland’s office. The old man settled back into his familiar position, with his head drooping in the wing of the chair. Johns had previously targeted the rifle, and knew to a hair how it would shoot.

He attached the silencer, then sighted with the utmost care upon his victim’s head. This done, he screwed the base of the lamp rigidly to the floor; then, by means of the arm clasp, realigned his sights.

He did this with infinite patience. When he finally set the clamp nuts, he felt that he had eliminated all possibility of error.

The carbine barrel was gripped in a tight, unmoving vise, and was aimed precisely at the center of the worn spot on V. Parthington Rowland’s chair.

Next it was necessary to disguise the weapon. Johns covered the trigger and lock and vibrator with a small wooden box, which he tied in place. Then he moistened a quantity of plaster of paris, and cast a form around the box, leaving only the breech and the hammer open.

He carried his plaster out to the end of the rifle barrel, coating over the sights and silencer, but taking care not to plug the hole in the muzzle. As soon as the plaster had dried, he got out his box of paints and decorated the whole in the colors of the lamp standard, following out the original pattern as exactly as he could.

He could not help congratulating himself as he stepped back to view his handiwork. What fools the usual run of murderers were, who allowed themselves to be caught! If a man only used his brain and foresaw every contingency in advance, he could do his work without the slightest personal danger.

This lamp looked like any other floor or bridge lamp. There was a bulging at one end of the fixture arm that had not been there before, but the plaster had been tapered so artistically that nobody could possibly suspect that anything but a conventional design was intended.

The chambermaid or bell boys who chanced to glance at the lamp would never dream that it had been tampered with. Johns had only to sit down and wait in patience for the night train out of town.

At five o’clock that afternoon he heard somebody come into the room next door—James Crandall, undoubtedly. There were sounds of bureau drawers opening and closing, and a violent splashing in the shower bath. Later Johns caught retreating footsteps, and the door slammed.

Crandall had probably gone out to keep a dinner appointment with Jerry Rowland. Johns’ mouth was harshly compressed as he set about the final details of his task.

He listened for a while to make certain that his neighbor had no intention of returning, then produced a bunch of pass keys and tried to open the door between rooms 28 and 29. It was a plain spring-and-tumbler lock. At the fourth or fifth attempt, he shot the bolt and entered Crandall’s room.

With a chisel and pry bar he succeeded in ripping up two floor boards under the rug. He refitted the stock to his second carbine, which had been equipped with a silencer. It had been fired the day before, and left fouled with a blackened .38-40 cartridge case in its breech.

He hid this in the opening under the floor. Then he replaced the boards loosely, smoothed the rug back into place, and returned to his own room, locking the door behind him.

Johns sent downstairs for dinner and dined with a hearty appetite. For the next hour or so he wandered around his
room, reviewing the work that had been done and the work left to do, assuring himself that nothing had been forgotten or overlooked.

Rowland had gone home long since and his window was dark. The arm of the bridge lamp, however, pointed precisely at the spot his graying head would occupy to-morrow and the next day, and every coming day until he died. The task of “Doctor Martin Keller of New York” was nearly finished.

At ten o’clock Johns slipped a cartridge into the breech of the masked carbine, and cocked the hammer. This was the delicate part of his undertaking. He worked gingerly, with sweating fingers, agonized by the fear of the weapon’s being fired accidentally.

He fitted a second tiny box over hammer and breech, likewise covered this with plaster, and finished out the painted design. It was done at last, and he heaved a profound sigh of relief.

He packed his tools, the remaining cartridges, the paints and what was left of the wire and plaster of paris, using the smaller bag. The suit case he strapped and locked, and pocketed the key.

His final concern was to break the pane in the lower window sash, knocking the glass inward, so that the splinters fell without too much racket on the rug. This eliminated the chance of a closed window blocking his plans at the critical moment.

During the present dry season it was not likely that the hotel management would be needlessly prompt in sending for a glazier. Certainly he need not fear that the window would be replaced before to-morrow noon.

He cast a last glance about him, then put out the lights, picked up the small bag and left the room, locking the door and putting the key in his pocket.

Last night’s clerk was on duty again. There was no one else in the lobby, excepting a sleepy-looking bell boy.

“I find that I’ve got to leave town for a day or two,” said Johns, bending over the desk, with his hat brim tilted to his nose. “If you don’t mind, though, I’d like to keep my room.”

“’Sall right,” said the clerk indifferently.

“I’ve left a suit case and a golf bag—but it’s not much baggage. If you’d rather, I’ll pay up now without checking out.”

“Don’t matter one way or the other,” observed the clerk.

Johns dropped a twenty-dollar bill on the counter. “Might as well settle up. You’d better take out for two days in advance. If I should decide not to come back in that time, you may consider that I’ve given up the room. In that case please send my baggage C. O. D., care of American Express Company, New York. I’ll pick it up when I get home.”

“Suit yourself,” agreed the yawning clerk, as he made a pencil notation about forwarding the baggage.

“Oh, by the way!” Johns happened to be reminded. “I had an accident and put my elbow through one of the windows upstairs. You might as well collect for that too.”

“Oh!” mused the clerk. “Well, I guess maybe a dollar and a half ought to cover a busted window.” He went to the safe, made change out of the bill, and scrawled a receipted statement.

“Hope you decide to come back, doctor,” he was polite enough to say, but his bored manner made it clear that the departing guest would be forgotten almost before he left the hotel.

“Good night,” said Johns, and walked out, flattering himself that he had completed his arrangements with great finesse.

By retaining his room, he made certain that the name of “Doctor Keller” would not be checked off the telephone operator’s list. At the same time he had paved the way for the vanishing of the masquerader.
After a couple of days the baggage of the recent guest would be sent on to New York, to be swallowed up in time and lost in the express company’s great accumulation of unclaimed effects.

In as much as the vanishing guest had paid his account in full, the bookkeepers of the Seminole Inn would have no further interest in him, either to wonder who he was or what might have become of him.

Johns walked to the railway station, swinging his bag and whistling to himself, elated. He caught the late northbound train for Buena Vista. And Doctor Martin Keller, mustache, goatee, and tortoise-shell spectacles, never again was seen in the town of Sea Reach.

CHAPTER V.

THE TELEPHONE CALL.

The darkened train deposited Johns on the station platform at Buena Vista at some time around two o’clock in the morning. It was not often that any passenger alighted at this wayside stop during the night. There was not even a railroad agent or a jitney driver to see the furtive figure swing down from the last vestibule of the day coach, and strike off afoot into the darkness.

Bag in hand he trudged along the deserted road toward the back country. Shortly before daylight he arrived at his encampment on the edge of Pelican Slough. His final apprehensions were removed when he discovered that nothing had been disturbed during his brief absence.

His car was still parked in the dewy thicket. The hidden bundle of camp equipment remained as he had left it. Obviously nobody had been around, snooping into his secrets.

He had no time to sleep. In fact, his nerves were so keyed up with excitement that he felt as alert and wakeful as though he had spent a restful night in bed.

His first concern was to abolish all that remained of the late Doctor Martin Keller and change back into the person of John Sylvester Johns.

The blue serge suit was stripped off. He put on the old clothes again, suit, shirt, collar, tie, shoes, and hat. He waited for the dawn. As soon as it was light enough to see, he brought out shaving soap, a brush and razor and proceeded to rid himself of his mustache and beard.

Then he opened the jar of theatrical make-up “brown” and massaged his face, carefully rubbing the stain into the pores of his skin. His pocket mirror revealed a face with healthy-looking bronze complexion that was convincingly like the coat of tan he wore when he left town twenty-five days ago. The tint would wear off in a few days, but in that time the Florida sunshine would restore to him a natural and honest coloring.

There was little left to do. A number of days before, he had found a rotting, dug-out canoe that had drifted among the rank rushes at the edge of the bayou. He had fashioned himself a paddle and used the craft on occasion for fishing.

He embarked now with the surgeon’s valise and the clothes he had just shed and other articles that had served their end, all tied up together in a bundle and weighted with stones. Paddling out into the middle of a still, black pool, where the water hid mysterious depths, he dumped the stuff overboard and watched it sink out of sight.

He embarked now with the surgeon’s canoe back into the rushes. Then he reloaded his remaining equipment in the rumble of his roadster, started the long-disused engine, and drove away.

At a few minutes before ten o’clock that morning he was back in the town of Sea Reach. He passed several acquaintances as he drove through the sprinkling of traffic. Two or three hailed him to ask where he had been.
Others nodded absent-mindedly, apparently not even remembering that he had been away. It is not flattering to discover how quickly and completely the ordinary citizen can drop out of his place in a small town’s life.

Johns dropped off his baggage at the apartment, which he still maintained, and then reported at his office. He’d had a pleasant trip to Chicago and back, he told his boss, but in a business way the visit had been a dud.

The man he had hoped to interest in Rowland’s parcel of lowlands had balked at the proposition. But singularly he had found a new client who was looking for a good-sized area of bottom ground, with a view of starting a rice plantation.

This man was a retired New York physician, a Doctor Martin Keller, whom he had chanced to meet here in Sea Reach. He was on his way now to see Mr. Roland and would try to obtain an option on the land at a favorable price.

Leaving his office, Johns strolled down the main street in the direction of the Sea Reach Trust Company building. His heart was tripping heavily as he turned into the drug store that occupied a ground-floor corner, across the street from the Seminole Inn.

From the front show window he could see into the rear second floor rooms of the hotel. In No. 28, which was James Crandall’s room, the sash was up and the curtains billowed in the gentle morning breeze. The window of No. 29 next door was broken. Nobody as yet had come to replace the shattered pane.

Behind the jagged breach in the glass, too far back to see from where he stood, Johns knew there was a lamp standard and a rifle barrel, loaded and sighted, waiting to spit death across the sunny street.

Without needing to look, Johns was certain that Rowland would be in his office upstairs. The old man always came to his desk at ten thirty in the morning, and he never left before one in the afternoon. This was a rule or habit which, in years, he had not varied by so much as five minutes.

Johns’ only doubt at this moment concerned Crandall. There apparently was nobody in the hotel room across the way. If Johns’ plan was to be brought to a successful conclusion, it was absolutely necessary to have Crandall in his room.

There was no reason why Johns could not linger in the drug store without attracting undue attention to himself. The half-hourly seacoast buses stopped at the door. There were always people loitering there.

Nevertheless, he had a feeling that the cashier and the soda clerk were watching him. Two or three times he turned abruptly from his window gazing, to look behind him. On each occasion he found the drug-store attendants engrossed in their own business, apparently unaware of Johns’ existence.

He tried to reassure himself. Nobody could dream that he was other than he pretended to be—a young business man with a few minutes leisure on his hands. Either now, or afterward, who could possibly suspect him?

It was all right—if Crandall would only appear. Only that was making his mouth dry and his fingers feel so cold and nervous against his palms.

Crandall was usually in his room at this hour, to wash before lunch. Johns had watched day after day, and had felt sure that he could count on Crandall. Why didn’t he show up to-day?

It was nearly noon. In another hour Rowland would be closing his desk and leaving the office. Then all this suspense would have to be lived through again to-morrow. Each day would increase difficulties and danger, also the chance of a slip-up.

Johns strolled to the tobacco counter to buy a cigar, which he did not want,
and went back to the front of the store to resume his vigil at the window. The bus came in and left, taking two passengers with it, and leaving Johns with a growing sense of disquiet. As an excuse for staying longer, he went to the soda counter and ordered a chocolate sundae.

"Nice day," said the clerk who served him.

"Yes, isn't it?" agreed Johns, in a voice that didn't sound to him quite like his own.

He forced himself to eat the sundae. He was shoving it away from him, when for the hundredth time in the last half hour his glance wandered toward the window across the street.

Then suddenly he found his hand trembling. There was a movement between the curtains of No. 28. He stared sharply, and saw that Crandall was in his room.

Johns paid his check with an effort of calmness, and got out of the drug store. He walked up the stairs to Rowland's office.

Rowland paid the salary of a secretary, but that fact made him no less accessible to casual visitors. Anybody could gain admission to his office without the formality of sending in a name or a card. Johns knocked on the stenciled glass door, and received a bellowed invitation to "Come in."

The room was blue with tobacco smoke. Rowland sat in his accustomed ease in his big chair with his feet on the mahogany desk top and a mangled cigar smoldering in his mouth. Sprawled in a chair opposite was a second man, a squat, thick-chested figure with a round and ruddy face, who gave an impression of being as immovably established as a stump in a road. The man was there first and he intended staying.

He turned a pair of calm, unwavering eyes in the direction of the newcomer. Johns stopped short and for an instant felt a panic-stricken impulse to back out of the room. The man was the county sheriff.

"Oh, how da do, Mr. Johns?" said Rowland, whose welcome became a trifle bleak when he identified his caller. "Ain't seen so much of you around lately. Kind of got lost out of things, didn't you?"

Johns wavered only for a moment, then he gripped himself and entered the room. "I wanted to see you on business," he said.

"That's all right," consented Rowland. "Go ahead. This is Sheriff Tomlinson. Don't mind him. Anything he hears us say won't go much beyond Florida."

Johns pulled a chair up from the wall and sat down not far from the desk where he could see out the open window. The sight of Rowland's mocking face revived all of his feeling of outrage and injury.

His momentary weakening changed back to a fierce and bitter resolution. As for Sheriff Tomlinson, what had Johns to fear from him? It had startled him to find himself face to face with an officer of the law. Now he was thinking that this meeting was a happy augury.

If he needed an alibi, what better witness could he find than the sheriff of the county? He and the sheriff would be sitting together talking amiably with Rowland when tragedy came into that room.

"It's about that swamp land of yours," said Johns. His speech was a bit breathless, as though he had just climbed many flights of stairs. He could not bring himself to look directly at Rowland. "I think I've got a customer for it."

"That land needs draining to become one of the prettiest stretches of fertility around here," remarked the old realty holder. "And if it can be drained, you can't truthfully call it a swamp."

"A swamp," put in Sheriff Tomlinson, "is a swamp, and you slick real
estaters can’t make ’em any different by callin’ ’em somethin’ else.” He stared disapprovingly at Johns from under his dense, snowy eyebrows. “What are you advisin’ your man to build on this swamp?”

“Now you keep out of this, Tomlinson,” advised Rowland. “What you know about realty developing ain’t worth wasting your conversation on.”

“What do you want for that land?” asked Johns. He was looking across the street into the corner window of the Seminole Inn.

The soft breeze was stirring the sash curtains, drawing them gently back and forth. In the opening between, he could see James Crandall, who had seated himself at a desk with his back to the street. Crandall had a pen in his hand and appeared to be deeply engrossed in whatever it was he was writing. He seemed to be settled there for a while at least.

“You know my price, and it hasn’t gone down any,” Rowland replied.

Johns heard the voice, but he made no sense of anything that was said. In his head a dull pulse was pounding, as though it were counting off the seconds. “One, two, three, four, five—” The time was almost at hand.

“My man’s in town,” he heard himself saying. “He’d better talk to you himself. What do you say if I phone and ask him to come in here?”

Rowland nodded his assent, tossed away his finished cigar stub and selected another from an open box on his desk.

Johns picked up the desk telephone, listened for a moment with the receiver at his ear, and then gave central the number of the Seminole Inn.

He sat almost within arm’s reach of Rowland, but if his life depended on it, he could not have brought himself to glance at the old man. Without looking, however, he was aware that Rowland had relaxed in his chair and let his head fall back comfortably in the padded wing.

From the open window there drifted upward the lazy sounds of the noonday traffic. Outside one could see the tops of the avenue of palm trees, waving tranquilly in the sunlight.

It was a familiar view, down the length of the broad street to the sea and the distant blue horizon, but Johns saw it to-day as in a dream of evil fascination.

Rowland had chewed off the end of his cigar and was fumbling in his pockets for matches. Johns was speculating trivially and horribly, and without the will to check his thoughts. Would the old man get his cigar lighted in time to take a puff or two of the fragrant tobacco, or had he already smoked his last cigar?

“Hello!” Johns gasped into the telephone. “Is this two-two-two? I want to speak to—”

He stopped short, and swallowed something in his throat. From the tail of his eye he had seen Rowland suddenly shift position and bend down to rummage into one of the drawers of his desk.

“Just a minute!” he contrived to say into the transmitter, his brain searching wildly for a pretext. “I—I’ve forgotten the name. Hold the wire just a second. I have it in my book.”

Rowland evidently had no matches in his pocket. He broke open a carton that he found in his desk, his big hands moving with tormenting slowness.

Johns felt in his vest pocket for a notebook, which he worried forth and pretended to search its pages. An icy sweat broke out on his forehead. He breathed heavily from his open mouth. His nerve would not hold out much longer. He must trust in Rowland getting in position before he lost it.

Deliberately the old man drew a box of matches from the carton and calmly lighted his cigar. He flicked the burnt match aside, and drew a deep puff of smoke. Then he sank back with a con-
tented sigh to rest his head again in the corner of his chair.

Johns spoke in desperate haste, as he felt his resolution oozing away. "Operator! Are you still there? I recall the name now. I want to talk with Doctor Keller. Doctor Martin Keller—please!"

CHAPTER VI.
UGLY BUSINESS.

In all probability Rowland never knew what hit him, or even that he was hit. Johns was staring across the avenue toward the window of Crandall's room. He heard a hard thump, like a hammer blow—then, after awful seconds, the creak of springs as the weight of a heavy body went limp and slipped downward on the leather cushion.

Johns had listened with his breath in his teeth for another sound—the coughing spit of a silenced rifle. But either the silencer had completely muffled the report, or else the faint discharge was lost in the rumble of the street traffic below. No sound had reached him.

James Crandall still sat in his room across the way, bending over his desk, his shoulder and the angle of his clean-cut profile visible between the billowing window curtains. He had not moved, and was still engrossed in his writing, apparently oblivious to all else. It was evident that he had heard nothing, was unaware that anything unusual had taken place.

In Rowland's office, Sheriff Tomlinson stumbled to his feet and stood half-crouched on his stumpy, wide-spread legs, a vacant, frozen look in his eyes.

Johns did not want to look at the object in the big wing chair, but a terrible attraction, stronger than his power of resistance, slowly drew his head around. The old man's body had slid and settled lower and lower, until his back rested on the chair seat and his polished tan shoes sprawled stiffly beyond the side of his desk.

Above the depression of his graying temple, there showed a round, bluish mark, from which a bright-colored stain spread and trickled down over his face and sagging jaw. The keen and vital eyes had disappeared behind the tightly shut eyelids.

Johns' face was as pallid, almost as deathlike in appearance as Rowland's face. Sheriff Tomlinson had not noticed the other's look, but had he done so, he could have thought nothing of it. Any one would be dreadfully shocked at what he saw.

The spell of silence was broken suddenly and sharply by the sheriff's voice. "Rowland!" he cried. "Good heavens! Rowland!" He stalked forward to the chair.

Johns, by this time, had torn his glance away. He did not see what the officer was doing.

After an endless time and from a seeming distance he again heard the sheriff talking. "Dead!" declared the officer. "Shot! Murdered!"

Johns turned at this to see Tomlinson draw a bandanna from his pocket and carefully wipe the ends of his fingers. "Who?" Johns faltered. "Where—where did it come from?"

Tomlinson lifted his rugged head. His jaw and mouth looked like a carving in rock. "Now we've got to take this calm and go at it with common sense," the sheriff said. "Rowland is dead. Somebody shot him—with a rifle, I'd say. It must have come from across there some place. Somebody had it in for him. Plenty of 'em had. Poor old Rowland. A first-class man, a fine man to those who liked him."

He stumped over to the window and gazed across the street. "It must have come from the Seminole across there," he mused, his eye tracing out the probable line of fire.

For all he could know, the act may have been done by a madman who was concealed in one of the rooms opposite
prepared to shoot down anybody in sight. But Tomlinson stood full in the open window, heedless of his own safety, as he made his calculations.

"It came on a level and almost straight across," he remarked. "So it must have been one of those second-floor rooms—one of the three nearest the corner."

He was staring at the open window of room No. 28, where James Crandall sat in view, leaning over his desk, unaware that he was being watched.

"Would a man sit quietly and write a letter directly after he had done a murder?" the sheriff asked himself aloud. "Well, he might, after he had hidden his gun—acting innocent. Or it could have come from the room next door with the broken window. Only why didn't the corner man jump up at the shot? Why didn't we hear it?"

He swung around toward the doorway, then stopped short. Something in the plastered wall behind Rowland's desk caught his interest. He crossed the room, scratched at the plaster with his nail, and turned to exhibit a mushroomed chunk of lead in the palm of his hand.

"There's the bullet," he announced. "It went clear through the skull and stuck in the wall."

The lead was flattened beyond the semblance of its original shape, excepting at the butt, which still retained a perfect circumference. This enabled the officer to guess its caliber.

"A .38, I'd judge. Or no—it must have been a rifle. A .38-40, most likely."

He dropped the bullet into his pocket, then pounded on a bell which stood on Rowland's desk.

Almost instantly an inside door was opened and Rowland's secretary showed himself.

"Your chief has just been shot and is dead," Tomlinson bluntly informed the young man. "Now you keep your shirt on and don't get excited. You lock these doors after we leave, then stay out of here yourself. Don't let anybody into this room—not anybody whatever, even if it's Miss Jerry Rowland or the governor of the State." He jerked his head at Johns. "Come along!"

On the way out of the building and across the street, Sheriff Tomlinson answered the greetings of passing acquaintances with his usual grim gayety. Nobody could have suspected that he had just left the body of his dead friend and was on his way to seek the murderer. He and Johns passed among the guests in the Seminole lobby and went up the stairs to the second floor.

Outside the door of No. 28 the sheriff paused and touched Johns' chest with a stumpy thumb.

"I'm deputizing you, young feller. For the time being you can consider yourself an officer of the law. You stand outside here and see that nobody leaves any of these rooms."

Johns was forced to swallow hard before he could answer with a faint "Yes, sir."

At the farther end of the hallway was a chambermaid with a mop and a bucket of water. Tomlinson beckoned to the girl.

"How long you been here?" he asked in an undertone, as she came up to him. "About half an hour," she said.

"Did you see anybody leave any of these rooms on this side?"

The girl answered promptly. "No, sir. There hasn't been anybody, coming in or going out."

"You're sure?"

"Yes, sir," she repeated positively.

"Have you heard anything unusual around here in the last few minutes?"

The girl puckered her brows in an effort of recollection, and shook her head. "No, sir, I didn't."

Tomlinson dismissed her with a nod. "All right. You can go on about your business." He turned away, then faced back again. "Just a minute! Let me have your pass keys."
"Why, I don’t know, sir—" The girl hesitated.

Tomlinson turned back the lapel of his coat and exhibited his shield of office. "It’ll be all right."

Without a word the girl brought a bunch of keys from her apron pocket and handed them to the sheriff. Then she returned for her bucket and mop and disappeared down the turning of the hallway, probably to pass the word on that something queer was happening in the Seminole Inn.

Tomlinson hooked the keys over his thumb, and then knocked on the door of No. 28.

"Come in," invited a quiet voice.

The sheriff entered the room, leaving Johns in the doorway.

James Crandall was still seated at the desk, with a package of envelopes and notepaper in front of him. At sight of the officer he stood up, looking surprised, but not the least bit flustered.

"Sheriff Tomlinson!" he said pleasantly.

"Oh, you know me?" said the officer with a quizzical stare.

"Yes." Crandall smiled. "I met you about three weeks ago. You’ve forgotten. Mr. Rowland introduced us."

"I remember." Tomlinson’s eyes were fastened immovably upon the younger man’s face. "Rowland’s your friend?"

"I like to think so."

"Ummuh," grunted the sheriff.

He looked around the room, then his glance came back again to hold Crandall under his searching scrutiny.

Crandall returned his gaze coolly, without the slightest hint of uneasiness or embarrassment. He neither looked nor acted like a man who harbored an ugly conscience. But Tomlinson’s sternness did not abate by a fraction. He had met a number of clever dissemblers in the course of his official career.

"You been writing here at your desk for quite a while?" he asked.
James Crandall from the dark web of circumstances that was being woven about him.

But no matter what turned up, Johns himself was in no danger. Nevertheless, as he waited in the doorways, he feared that the near-audible pounding of his heart surely must betray him.

Upon entering the room he had sniffed the air anxiously, afraid that there might be some telltale scent left from the exploded cartridge. A strong draft was circulating in the room. His nostrils detected no odor of burned powder. The broken window had served him in more ways than one.

Sheriff Tomlinson was searching for an occupant of the room, and did not trouble to inspect its furnishings. He looked under the bed and into the bathroom and closet, then turned away and shook his head. The lamp was too well camouflaged to invite the sheriff’s notice. He passed it by without so much as a glance.

He left the room and let himself into No. 30 adjoining, leaving the door of No. 29 standing ajar. Investigation satisfied him that the third room of the row was unoccupied. He returned soberly to the hallway.

“The shot certainly had to have been fired from one of these rooms,” he mused. “There’s nobody in two of them. According to the chambermaid, there hadn’t been anybody in them. Which makes it look a little dubious for the man in the corner room.”

He nodded curtly to Johns. “I’m going in there to talk to him again and look around some more. And I guess I won’t need anything further from you.” He strode back to Crandall’s room, reentered this time without knocking, and shut the door very firmly behind him.

The moment Johns was left alone, he cast a furtive glance up and down the hallway, making certain that there was no one about to observe his movements. Then he reentered room No. 29, closing and softly bolting the door.

He was trembling like a leaf. By sulking for weeks over his imaginary wrongs, he had nerved himself to the point of committing a criminal act. Resentment and hatred had reacted upon his selfish and pettish nature like a subtle poison, drugging his sane instincts and leaving only the stubborn will to go on with his crafty plotting. Now that the work was finished, he must have realized that at heart he was a wretched coward.

There was one more thing to be done, the most ticklish and hazardous part of the job. He tried desperately to pull himself together.

The floor lamp must be changed back to its original form. Otherwise somebody, at some time, was sure to discover the fouled, plaster-disguised carbine barrel. An investigation would follow—that must be avoided at any cost. Quaking with anxiety, he set to work.

He first removed the make-and-break contact of the telephone bell that had responded so effectively at the call from across the street. The wires under the rug he cut and hastily recoiled.

Then with fumbling, nervous hands, he removed the rifle barrel and its vibrating mechanism from the lamp standard. This, with the pieces of wiring, he dropped into the golf bag, which he had left in the room the night before, together with “Doctor Keller’s” suitcase.

Then he recovered the arm of the lamp from its hiding place under the bathtub, replaced it on its standard and reconnected the light. He took up the screws that had braced the lamp and swept a few fragments of broken plaster from the rug.

He had worked in a fever of haste, his heart in his throat as he listened to every faint sound about him, his haunted glance turning constantly toward the door. His first intention had been to
fasten up the golf bag and leave it in the room to be shipped out of town with "Doctor Keller's" suit case, but at the last minute changed his mind.

There was no trusting the prying chambermaids of the inn. No matter what the present risk, it was better to take the bag with him now, and so rid himself for all time of the fear of evidence left behind.

With a boldness born of his panicky thoughts, he slung the golf bag over his shoulder, flung open the door, and stepped out into the hallway. Crandall's door was shut. There was nobody in sight.

Breathlessly he tiptoed to the head of the stairs and started down toward the lobby. His terror was growing less acute. John Johns had often been seen on the streets of Sea Reach with a golf bag slung across his shoulder. Nobody was apt to comment now or give him any particular notice.

He reached the foot of the stairs, and with a resolute gulp he crossed the lobby. At the front door he braced his shoulders, then passed outside and strode down the street toward his office.

CHAPTER VII.

STACKED CARDS.

UPSTAIRS in room No. 28 Sheriff Tomlinson had set about the rigorous discharge of a necessary, but very disagreeable, duty. He paused in the middle of the floor, balancing on his spread feet and surveying Crandall with hard, unwinking eyes.

"I've seen you driving around here quite a bit lately with V. Rowland's daughter," he remarked. "She's a mighty fine girl."

Crandall's brow contracted for an instant, then his mouth relaxed in a smile. The intrusion seemed unwarranted, but at the same time he could not hold any active resentment toward this busybody of a sheriff, who knew Jerry Rowland and at least had the intelligence to appreciate her good qualities.

He grinned with a trace of mockery. "Won't you sit down, Sheriff Tomlinson?"

"No. I guess I won't. You say you didn't hear any shot?"

"I've told you I didn't."

"You didn't fire one, did you?" demanded the officer blurrily.

Crandall's gray eyes clouded angrily for a space, but his natural good nature almost immediately reasserted itself. "No, I didn't fire one."

He stood up and advanced a pace, observing the sheriff narrowly. "What's all this mystery about? Has somebody been shot? If so, why are all these questions turned upon me?"

"Yes," said Tomlinson, "somebody's been shot."

"Who?"

"V. Parthington Rowland."

Crandall stared aghast. "What?"

"Killed! My old friend Rowland. Cruelly and wickedly murdered!"

"You—— Wait a minute!" Crandall was finding it hard to understand such a hideous piece of news all in a second. "I saw him not an hour ago. It's impossible! You—you're sure you know what you're talking about?"

"Young man, I'm usually in the habit of knowing exactly what I'm talking about—especially when the subject's murder."

"Yes, of course!" Crandall apologized. "I didn't mean that. Only it's—it's frightful."

"It couldn't be much worse," agreed the sheriff.

"When—— Where?" demanded Crandall, his eyes wide with horror at the realization of this news.

"A few minutes ago—across the street in his own office. I was sitting with him when it happened." Tomlinson's gaze shifted soberly about the room and then came back to Crandall.
"The bullet was fired from across here somewhere—from a rifle."

"But—just a second!" Crandall was too stunned for those moments to take in the full significance of the officer's visit. "If it came from the inn, there would have to be a sound of a shot. I was sitting here and heard nothing—nothing at all."

"You've always got to reckon on the chance of a silencer being used. But letting that point go for the present, you can figure the rest for yourself. Rowland was sitting in his big leather chair when the bullet whistled into the open window. He was hit in the head, and the angle didn't range either up or down. It came straight across from here."

Crandall walked to his open window and stared across the street toward the trust company building. He could see the headrest of Rowland's chair, but the top of the desk hid the body that had slumped down on the seat cushion. For a minute or more he stood in silent contemplation, then turned back thoughtfully to face the sheriff.

"If it happened as you say, the bullet must have been fired from this hotel—from this floor."

"From one of the three rooms beginning at this corner," Tomlinson went on further to declare. "I've been through the room next to this and the one farther on—and there was nobody in them. Furthermore, the chambermaid assures me that there had been nobody seen in them within the last half hour at least."

Crandall's voice was very quiet. "In other words, the shot must have been fired from this room."

"Was there any one here within the last twenty minutes besides yourself?" the sheriff parried.

"Nobody."

"Hum!" said Tomlinson.

Crandall half closed one eye as he smiled dryly at the other man. "You're almost accusing me, aren't you?"

"Not necessarily. You and Rowland were pretty good friends, you say?"

"Excellent."

"No trouble between you?"

"Did you ever know any of Rowland's friends who didn't have some trouble with him occasionally?"

"That's true," agreed the officer. "Everybody did. Even he and I have had our rows."

"But you didn't think it necessary to shoot him. Neither did I. The few difficulties we may have had were trivial. We laughed them off afterward."

"You had some business dealings with him, didn't you?"

"Yes. But as the records will show they were mutually satisfactory and profitable."

"What about you and Miss Jerry?" Crandall's steel-gray eyes narrowed dangerously. "Well, what about Miss Jerry?"

"You didn't have any reason to dislike Rowland, or Rowland you, on her account?"

"No!" said Crandall coldly.

"All right!" returned Tomlinson smoothly. "All right! There was no harm in asking you."

"Why are you so sure the weapon was a rifle?" asked the Northerner, hastening to change the subject.

"I got the bullet."

"What caliber is it?"

"A .38-40. Anyhow, I only think it is. When I get home I'll put the callipers on it and make sure."

The younger man grinned blandly at the sheriff. "Then if you were to find a .38-40 rifle in this room, I suppose you'd be forced to suspect me."

"I guess I'd better snoop around here a little," said the officer.

Crandall sat down in an easy-chair and looked on tolerantly and without concern while Tomlinson ransacked the room.

The sheriff was thorough in his search. He pulled out bureau and chif-
fonier drawers, prodded under the bed and the mattress, hauled out the contents of the closet, inspected the bathroom from the tiled floor to its ceiling, searched behind the curtains and even peered along the ledge outside the window.

There still remained a wardrobe trunk which stood unlocked near the foot of the bed. Crandall reminded him of the oversight, and stood up to help open the upright sections.

The sheriff went through the drawers and the wardrobe compartment of the trunk, and finally shook his head.

“It's kind of puzzling, ain't it?” he vouchedsafed. “Where do we go from here?”

He turned his head with a baffled expression, looking around the room. The corner of the rug where he stood was rumpled. He started absent-mindedly to straighten it with his toe. As he shifted his weight to one foot, the floorboard creaked beneath him. He glanced downward in idle curiosity. Then suddenly his eyebrows bent in sharp questioning. He kicked back the rug.

“Look here!” he ejaculated. “The nails have been pulled. This board's loose!”

He pulled out a jackknife, opened the blade and stooped to pry at the end of the loose board. After one or two futile attempts, he managed to raise the strip until he could get a grip with his fingers. Then he lifted the board, exposing a dark space between the flooring rafters.

With a frown that was partly anxious, partly expectant, Tomlinson thrust his forearm into the dark compartment he had uncovered. His hand closed upon some hidden object within. The lines at the corners of his eyes and mouth grew deeper and harsher. He stood up, grasping a rifle in his hand.

Crandall’s jaw dropped limply. He watched in blank wonderment, without a word to say.

For a space the sheriff, too, was silent while he stared at the weapon and the silencer affixed to its muzzle. He examined the factory mark on the barrel, then snapped down the lever to extract an empty, powder-stained cartridge.

With a curious air of calmness he sniffed at the breech, rechambered the cartridge case and chucked the rifle over the crook of his arm.

“It's a .38-40,” he announced, “and it's been fired.” His eyes measured the younger man gravely. “You still want to say there was nobody in this room but you?”

“Nobody,” said Crandall.

“All right. I've got to arrest you on a charge of murder.”

CHAPTER VIII.

A FRIEND IN NEED.

The Sea Reach jail was a single-story structure of red brick, with a row of four cells in the rear and an office in the front where Sheriff Tomlinson kept his desk and filing cabinets, and hung up his hat. As if it were a sore spot in which the town took no pride, the building was set apart in a grove of drooping palms at the end of a dusty roadway, hidden from sight.

James Crandall, the young black-haired Northerner, had been in that jail all night. His cell was the last of the row, farthest from the town. There was nobody else in jail.

Sea Reach as a rule was a law-abiding place, and the four cells at any time were more than enough. Sheriff Tomlinson got in a lot of fishing every week.

He was a good warden nevertheless. He had seen to it that morning that his only prisoner had a hot breakfast—corn muffins, bacon, coffee and cream, and a slab of fried fish.

A queer bit of irony, Crandall was thinking, that gave him pompano for breakfast his first morning in jail—a schoolmate of the fish he had eaten at his first dinner at the Rowlands. Jerry
hated pompano. Old Rowland had liked them better than anything else that came to the table.

It was almost impossible to visualize Rowland with the life gone from his body. He had always been so full of vigor and good spirits. As Crandall sat with his plate balanced on the edge of the iron bunk, he had a feeling that at any minute he might hear his friend’s big, booming voice wanting to know what he was doing in this place and why he didn’t come out.

The instinctive feeling of Rowland’s being stanchly with him in his time of trouble was so real that the sudden sound of a key grating in the door lock brought him to his feet with a startled gasp. His visitor was Sheriff Tomlinson.

"Hope you enjoyed your breakfast," said the officer as he swung the grille open. He stood on the threshold and did not offer to come in. "Here’s somebody to see you," he said.

Crandall had taken off his coat and tie, and his shirt collar was open. He had not expected callers. There was time only to brush his fingers through his hair as Jerry Rowland came through the doorway.

Neither said anything at that moment, but the girl moved swiftly to him and her hands found his—her warm and reassuring hands.

"Jerry!" he faltered. "I can’t tell you how sorry—"

"You don’t need to," she told him before he could finish. "There’s nothing we can say or do now about poor old dad. He doesn’t need us any more. But you— We’ve got to think just of you now."

"Then you don’t believe—" Crandall began.

She stopped him with a look. "Did you think for a minute that I could ever believe anything wicked or cowardly of you—of you?" She had been crying, but her eyes were clear and brave now, and they met his with utter confidence. "I don’t even want your denial. I know—without asking."

For a moment Crandall saw her with a misty vision. He blinked his eyes and drew a deep, unsteady breath. "Thank you, Jerry!" he said softly. "As long as all this had to happen, there is a compensation in finding out how you and I stand."

"Blind faith is a beautiful thing sometimes, honey," remarked the sheriff, as he pushed his way into the cell. "But just the same don’t forget that the law worries along with just the evidence and the facts."

"Evidence!" The girl turned fiercely upon the officer. "A lot of trumped-up nonsense! And don’t you call me ‘honey.’ Don’t you ever call me anything like that again. You and your law! To be so sinfully stupid as to lock up dad’s friend in a place like this. You—you sinister old man!"

"Now wait a minute, honey. Just hold on." Tomlinson shook his grizzled head. "I ain’t so much over sixty-five. And as for that other thing, some of the facts we’ve got against your dad’s friend are pretty sinister themselves."

"It’s foolish to be huffy with the sheriff," put in Crandall soothingly. "He’s been as decent as any one can be."

Tomlinson turned a benign glance toward his prisoner. "I ain’t saying that I don’t feel a lot like young Jerry here—in a milder and less hot-headed way. I’ve dealt with a few murderers in my time, and there wasn’t one of them that faced me straight like you do."

"I don’t somehow think you did it," he went on. "But what I think deep in me hasn’t got one damned thing to do with it. For courtroom purposes, I’ve got an air-tight case ribbed up against you."

"I don’t quite see how you could build up a stronger one," conceded Crandall.

"Oh, I’ve got more even than you
know. For instance, there are three witnesses who heard you have a row with Rowland yesterday.”

Crandall looked a bit startled for an instant, then his mouth relaxed over some amusing recollection. “Yes, we did have a row.”

“Well?” said Tomlinson.

“The name of John Johns happened to come up between us. I don’t recall now just how. But at any rate I was moved to tell Mr. Rowland that Johns had never harmed anybody and never would, and that in my opinion it was unfair and unsportsmanlike to treat him so abominably.

“That was all, excepting that Mr. Rowland lost his temper for a couple of minutes.”

“Johns,” mused the sheriff. “I believe that was the young man who was sitting with me in Rowland’s office when the shot was fired from across the street. There was nothing more serious than that behind this row?”

“Nothing more than that. It happened on the street corner in front of the trust building. I suppose there were people passing who heard us talking rather heatedly. And probably they didn’t hear the end of it, when we were talking more calmly.”

“What was the end?”

“Merely that Mr. Rowland apologized to me and assured me that I was absolutely right, and that in the future he’d go ahead treating Johns as he pleased.”

Jerry Rowland raised her head with a little, tearful smile, but the sheriff’s features did not change a muscle.

“It’s unlucky that people heard the first part and not the last,” the officer declared. “The prosecution will put witnesses on the stand to show that there was bad feeling between you and that there was a motive for the shooting.”

“I’m in a bad angle,” Crandall admitted.

The sheriff nodded dourly. “Just to check up,” he said, and counted the points of the case on his stumpy fingers. “We’ve got the motive for murder. The shot came from the Seminole Inn, and it had to come from one of the three second-floor corner rooms.

“Two of them were unoccupied,” he continued. “We have proof to that effect. You were in the third room. We have your own testimony that you were alone there. I find a discharged .38-40 rifle hidden under your floor, the same caliber bullet that hit Rowland.

“You deny firing a shot. You deny hearing a shot. You deny ever seeing the fouled gun that I pulled out from under your floor board. Where’ll you ever find twelve men to believe you?

“You can see for yourself,” pursued Tomlinson, as Crandall found nothing to say, “that we’ve got an air-tight case rubbed up against you. I’ve seen many juries in my time. I know what that evidence is going to do. Unless you can figure some way out for yourself, they’ll hang you sure.”

“What?” gasped Jerry.

“We’ve got him so dead to rights,” asserted the sheriff, “that he doesn’t stand a chance.”

The girl stared at Tomlinson and then at Crandall, her eyes dilating with horror. “I didn’t realize it was as serious as that. You mean—there’s actual danger?”

“Unless we can produce the murderer,” said Crandall, “they’ve got me.”

Jerry looked around wildly for an instant, then she moved closer and her fingers gripped Crandall’s sleeve.

“There’s nothing for us to do then but find the murderer,” she said.

“As the prosecutor must see it,” Crandall ruminated, “it’s an open-and-shut case—nothing mysterious about it. His evidence is handed to him ready prepared. But from my point of view, knowing myself to be innocent, it’s all very bewildering.

“As the sheriff points out,” he went on, two puckered lines forming between
his brows, "the bullet had to come from the direction of my room. I was at my desk at the time of the crime, writing a letter. I was absorbed in what I was doing, but I wasn't in a trance or anything like that."

"How could any one have entered my room, fired a shot, concealed a rifle, and afterward escaped without my seeing or hearing? It's utterly impossible! Can't you see that it is?"

"The rifle that the sheriff found may not have been the one that was actually used," suggested Jerry.

"I've been thinking of that possibility," Crandall said. For a second his eyes glinted harshly. "If that happened to be the fact, then the person who committed the crime deliberately planted the fake weapon to frame me for a murder. Why? Who?"

For a moment nobody answered. Jerry was gazing out of the barred window with a queer look of speculation. "I wonder—" she began, and checked herself.

"You wonder what?"

"I was just trying to think what enemy of dad's might at the same time feel that he had a grievance against you."

"Your father never took any great pains to keep from making enemies," observed the sheriff.

"I know," she agreed mournfully. "There probably are plenty of them. But who among them might also dislike Jim. I can think of only one."

"Who?" demanded Crandall and Tomlinson in the same breath.

"The only one I can think of would be——" She hesitated to put her thought into words.

"Well?"

"John Johns," she answered faintly. "Johns!" Crandall questioned her sharply with his glance. "Why would he have it in for me?"

"Don't you know—honestly?" Jerry's eyes met Crandall's waveringly for an instant, then turned away, while a tinge of color mounted into her face.

"Why?" he insisted, looking at her intently.

The sheriff interrupted before Crandall could force the girl to answer. "I don't know what your suspicions are about, but I do know that this Johns had nothing to do with it. Didn't I tell you—he was sitting right beside me, talking business with your father. He was just calling a man on the telephone when the bullet came in through the window. He was so shocked at what he saw that I thought he was going to faint. You may not like him, but there can be no question of his innocence."

"It was foolish and wicked of me to say such a thing, or even to think it," Jerry admitted. "I don't know—it was just a queer feeling I had—nothing you could really base a suspicion on. Let's forget it!"

"I'm not especially fond of Johns," remarked Crandall. "But he's always seemed perfectly harmless to me."

"It only shows you how much a woman's intuition is worth," Tomlinson observed, and grinned at Jerry.

"Have you still got that rifle?" Crandall asked.

"I've turned it over to the prosecutor."

"Did you examine it?"

"There are no finger marks, if that's what you mean."

"Not that altogether. What's its serial number? Where did it come from? Is there any chance of tracing it to the person who bought it?"

"I'll look for the number," said the sheriff.

"Wire it to the manufacturers," Crandall suggested. "They'll have the records and will be able to tell you what jobber or retailer handled it. It's just barely possible that we'll be able to learn the name of the final purchaser."

"I'll do it, of course," promised the sheriff a trifle dubiously, as though he thought the prospects looked hopeless.
"Anything else you think of, let me know. I'm glad to help if I can."

"I'm very grateful to you," said Crandall.

"I'm doing it for Jerry," said Tomlinson. "She appears to like you, and I'm fond of her, even though she does think I'm a sinister old man. Come on, honey, let's go see the prosecutor."

Jerry caught both of Crandall's hands and held them tightly for a moment, looking up at him with tearful eyes. Then, as though she could not trust herself to speak, she turned and followed the officer from the cell. The door was slammed and bolted. Crandall was left to his own reflections.

CHAPTER IX.

THE SHERIFF FORGETS.

The second night spent in the cramped cell was not like the hideous ordeal of the first night. Crandall at least could cherish the comforting knowledge that Jerry Rowland trusted and believed him. He was heartened by the assurance that his friends outside would leave nothing undone to clear him of the hideous charge that the State was preparing for his indictment.

In spite of the hardness and narrowness of his bunk, he slept peacefully through the night. He awakened at sunrise next morning, clear-eyed and cheerful, and feeling almost like his usual self.

The hour of breakfast for some reason was delayed. When Tomlinson finally appeared at the cell with a tray, Crandall forgot his impatience in the discovery that Jerry had come with the officer. The girl entered the door triumphantly flourishing a telegram.

"Here it is!" she announced. "It just came a few minutes ago."

Crandall opened the yellow sheet and saw that the telegram was addressed to the sheriff. It was signed by a well-known manufacturer of firearms, and stated that a .38-40-caliber rifle of the series and number mentioned in Tomlinson's wire had been included in a shipment of a few months before, purchased by a big mail-order distributing firm in Baltimore, Maryland.

"It's an encouraging start, anyhow," said Crandall, as he returned the message to the envelope. "We can wire this mail-order house now and see if they keep track of their customers. They must have a file of the bills of lading, or something of the sort to give us a clew."

"We've already telegraphed for the information," Jerry told him, and smiled wistfully. "It's bound to come out right—I'm sure everything will be all right."

Tomlinson had put down the tray and turned with a gloomy expression to look out between the window bars. Crandall happened to glance in his direction and saw the old man shake his head. It was evident that the sheriff did not share the girl's optimism.

Jerry had put one foot under her and sat on the bunk beside Crandall while he was eating his breakfast.

"The sheriff has searched your room at the inn again and all the other rooms in the same row as yours," the girl said.

"And found nothing?"

"No. If there was a second rifle, it's been carried away. There was not the least clew of any sort."

"I've talked with that chambermaid again, and so has the prosecutor," put in Tomlinson. "She's going to be a damaging witness against you. She was in the rooms next to yours a few minutes before the shot was fired, and was scrubbing the hall floor afterward.

"She will swear on the stand that nobody was in those rooms and that nobody entered or left them during that crucial quarter of an hour. I tried to tangle her, but she sticks to her story. I honestly believe she is telling the truth."

"There are always a good many peo-
ple on the sidewalks in front of the inn at that time of the day," mused Crandall. "It would have been impossible for anybody to climb in or out unseen by way of the windows. Yet somebody had to be in one of those rooms."

"Nobody could have been," Tomlinson declared. "I’m taking the chambermaid’s word on that, and you can bet that a jury will, too."

"And you still say positively that the bullet was aimed from one of those three rooms?"

"Absolutely!" the sheriff insisted. "A line drawn from any of those three windows will reach Rowland’s chair, but that chair cannot be seen from any other window in the inn. You can’t get around geometry."

"There was nobody but me in those rooms. Yet the shot was fired from one of them." Crandall put down his knife and fork and sat for a moment in reflective silence. Suddenly he lifted his head. "All right! Then the rifle must have been set in a vise and discharged by means of a string attached to the trigger, or some similar method, by a man hidden somewhere outside the room. It’s a far-fetched notion, but we seem to have eliminated every other possibility."

The sheriff promptly shook his head. "No good! Remember, young Johns and I hurried across the street and were in those rooms within two or three minutes after Rowland fell. Nobody would have time to dismantle such a device and disappear with a rifle and a gun vise.

"Even if there had been time, the chambermaid would have seen him, or we would have met him on the stairs, or somebody about the inn would have spotted him. You can’t walk around in broad daylight with a rifle in your hands, and not be noticed by anybody."

Crandall threw up both hands in a gesture of hopelessness. "Then what’s the answer?"

"For all purposes of the law," averred Tomlinson, his frosty eyes fixed upon the younger man, "there’s one answer—and only one."

"I can follow your reasoning," said Crandall. "You’ve simmered the evidence down until there’s but a single premise left us. I myself must be the murderer."

He laughed mirthlessly. "You could almost convince me if your logic didn’t have just this one flaw. I happen to have private, inside information: I had no rifle and I didn’t fire the shot."

"I’m just showing you what you’re up against," the sheriff mildly pointed out.

Crandall pushed aside his tray and stood up. "Who was registered in the rooms next to mine?" he asked after a momentary silence.

"Number 30 has been vacant for some time," answered the officer. "There was a doctor, from the North somewhere, in 29 next door to you. But he left town two nights ago, they tell me at the office. It don’t look as though he could have had anything to do with the affair."

Tomlinson picked up the tray full of dishes and beckoned with his head to Jerry. "Come on, honey. We’ve got to be going."

"I met Doctor Bristol on the street this morning," the girl remarked as she got up from the bunk. "He tells me that John Johns is sick. It seems that Johns collapsed from nervous shock after he got back to his apartment that afternoon. I’m ashamed of myself—utterly ashamed—for saying what I did about him."

"Well, good-by," she finished, as she left reluctantly with the sheriff. "We’ll let you know the minute we have any news."

It was in the middle of the afternoon, when Crandall’s dismal reflections were interrupted again by a grating of a key
in the lock of his cell door. Tomlinson and Jerry had returned.

"Things look a little brighter!" the girl exclaimed breathlessly, as Crandall got up from the bunk to greet her. "We got our telegram from that Baltimore mail-order house, and what do you think?" Her soft blue eyes were bright with exultance. "The person who bought the rifle that was found under your floor bought an exact duplicate of the weapon and had it sent to him in the same package. There were two of these .38-40 rifles."

Crandall's mouth drew together as though he were about to whistle. "I thought so!" he ejaculated. "Somebody did frame me then! Discharged one gun and hid it under my floor, and undoubtedly committed the murder with the second weapon."

His forehead wrinkled in an angry effort of recollection. "Now where and when have I made an enemy as ruthless as that? I don't know. I can't even guess."

"At this minute it doesn't matter so much who it was," Jerry declared exultantly. "The only thing I can think of now is that you're cleared of such an infamous accusation."

Crandall did not reply to the girl, but his glance sought the sheriff's stony face instead. "Who was the man who received the guns?" he asked.

"George S. Gregory," said Tomlinson.

"Do you know who he is?"

"Never heard of him."

"Fictitious?" asked Crandall.

"Sounds like it to me."

"Were the rifles received here in Sea Reach?"

"No. The package was addressed general delivery to the post office at Buena Vista, an inland town about forty-five miles from here."

"We've got to find the general-delivery clerk at that office," Crandall said at once, "and learn from him what the man looked like who called for the rifles. Our best, probably our only chance is this clerk. Does he remember the man? Would he know him again?"

"I've seen the clerk," said Tomlinson. "I ran up to Buena Vista to-day, the minute I heard from the mail-order people."

Crandall waited with unconcealed anxiety. "Well?"

The sheriff shook his head. "The clerk has a dim recollection of the package in question, but he says he didn't look closely at the person who called for it. He could never identify him. And there's nobody of the name that was used anywhere in this section of the country."

Crandall sighed dejectedly. "Well, that's that! We're no better off than we were before."

"What do you mean?" demanded Jerry uneasily. "Why aren't we?"

"Just this," said Crandall grimmly. "I could be George S. Gregory as easily as anybody else. Don't you understand? If I had planned a deliberate, cold-blooded crime, I would naturally do what I could to cover up my tracks, to muck up the evidence so that at least there might be some doubt as to my guilt."

"I could have ordered both guns to be sent to me under an assumed name in a town where I wasn't known. One of these weapons I could dispose of in advance. The other I could use in committing the crime, afterward hiding it under the floor of my room, hoping it would not be found."

"If it were found, I could claim that it had been planted there by some one else, and that the actual murder shot had been fired from the second rifle in the hands of a person unknown. Exactly as I do claim now."

He smiled wanly. "You recall, it was I who first suggested to the sheriff that he look up the rifle number and find out
what there was to be learned in that direction. Don’t you see—that would have been my obvious move if I were the guilty man?"

Jerry turned apprehensively to Tomlinson. “Do you see it that way, too?” she asked appealingly. “We haven’t really accomplished anything?”

“We’ve just complicated things,” said the sheriff. “Crandall has stated the case about as the prosecutor will state it. There being a second rifle doesn’t prove anything one way or the other. If Crandall can’t show absolutely that he isn’t George S. Gregory and did not buy the two rifles, then he stands just as he did when I arrested him.”

“Then,” declared Jerry fiercely, “we’ve got to find this Gregory, whoever he is, however cleverly he’s covered his tracks! We’ll make him tell the truth, if we choke it out of him.”

“Of course we’ll try,” Tomlinson promised soothingly. “Of course we will, honey.” He eyed her admiringly. “In the meantime,” he remarked, “I’ve got something I’d like to say in private to Crandall. You won’t mind going outside and waiting in my office, will you Jerry?”

The girl hesitated for a moment, studying the old man’s weather-seamed face, but assented. “Just as you say.” She passed out through the open cell door and disappeared in the dingy outside corridor.

“Now,” declared Tomlinson briskly, as soon as he assured himself that he and his prisoner were alone, “you and I have got to talk straight with each other. I want you to look at me squarely and tell me again that you didn’t kill Rowland.”

Crandall raised his clear, unflinching eyes to meet the officer’s penetrating regard. “I did not kill Rowland,” he said quietly.

Tomlinson looked sober and terribly in earnest. “Somehow, deep down in me,” he said, “I believe you.

“Now wait a minute!” he cut in, as Crandall started to speak. “What I think hasn’t got anything to do with it. We don’t try people in this State on a basis of intuition or moral belief. The only thing you can get before a jury is the strict evidence, and the evidence damns you absolutely.

“By every accumulated fact that we have been able to dig up, you—and only you—could have fired that shot. I understand you’re a lawyer. As a man used to weighing legal technicalities, you agree with me, don’t you? Do you see any loophole for yourself?”

“As a lawyer,” Crandall replied calmly, “I can’t find a single loophole in the State’s case. On the evidence that has been presented so far, any prosecutor, any jury, any judge must convict me of first-degree murder. It’s utterly inescapable.”

“Jerry seems to think a lot of you, and I’m awfully fond of Jerry,” ruminated the sheriff. “I’ve known her ever since she was a little baby. I’d do anything in the world for Jerry.

“She’s right about my being old,” he pursued. “I’m getting to be an old man. My term in this job has got only three more months to go, and I’m not going to run for office again. I need more time for my fishing.

“If a prisoner was to escape on me,” he added after a tense silence, “people’d only say that that old fool of a sheriff has got too senile for his job. We’ll have to vote for a younger man this election.” He chewed his underlip thoughtfully. “Well, that’d suit me. I don’t want to be sheriff any more.”

He lapsed into silence for a moment, and a faint, sweet smile gradually twisted up the corners of his grim mouth. Suddenly he thrust out his big, warm hand and gripped Crandall’s hand. “Well, so long! Good luck, Crandall!”

With an abrupt movement he turned and passed out of the cell, gently closing the heavy door behind him.
A PERFECT ALIBI

Crandall stood wide-eyed, staring down the gloomy corridor, listening to the officer's retreating footsteps. He heard an outer door open and slam shut again. Then the depressing silence once more closed in about him. His glance moved downward to the lock of the grated door. He caught his breath swiftly.

The bolt had been left unfastened. To gain his freedom, Crandall had only to open the door and walk out into the sunlight. Sheriff Tomlinson had deliberately offered him a chance of escape.

CHAPTER X.

AN UNEXPECTED FACE.

INCREDULOUS, Crandall pulled over the ponderous latch. The door swung open silently on its well-oiled hinges. He quickly drew the door shut and walked backward, sat down limply on his bunk.

His thoughts were in a turmoil. A man of Tomlinson's stern rectitude could never have brought himself to do a thing of this sort except at an enormous sacrifice to his conscience. He must be certain in his own mind that Crandall was in a desperate plight—that if he were brought to trial, he would surely be convicted and executed.

Of course the old sheriff never would have betrayed his trust for the sake of a stranger, even though he were convinced in his own heart that the man was innocent. He had acted solely out of affection for Jerry. In doing so, he must have had some reason to believe that Jerry was much fonder of Crandall than Crandall as yet had dared to hope.

For a long while Crandall sat motionless on the edge of his bunk, forgetting that the way was open if he chose to leave, lost in a dream that thrilled him strangely. It was the sound of somebody fumbling at the door bolt that aroused him at last from his absorbing thoughts.

He looked up blankly, then stumbled to his feet. Jerry Rowland was looking at him through the dim opening of the bars. He sprang across the room, shot back the bolt and tugged the door open. "Jerry!" he exclaimed. "I thought you'd gone!"

The girl stepped across the threshold. "The sheriff has gone," she said with a queer breathlessness in her voice. "He just drove away in his car. I stayed here.

"My car is parked outside, waiting," she went on, when he found nothing to say.

"Yes?" Crandall questioned her with a searching glance.

"I see your cell door is unlocked," Jerry observed.

"Tomlinson left it that way purposely," Crandall informed her. He was watching her sharply. "You knew he meant to!" he accused her suddenly. "You planned it—arranged it between you!"

"Yes," she admitted, after a little silence. "The sheriff has told me that—your situation is hopeless. There's only one way to save you—this way."

"You thought I'd be willing to leave—this way?" he asked.

She would not answer his question. "My car is ready for a long run," she said, and kept her eyes averted. "You could reach a little village on the Gulf where there's a boat I happen to know about, ready to clear for Mexico. You could hide yourself in Mexico. You'd be safe there."

"You want me to do this?" he asked her solemnly.

"I do. Of course. You've got to!" she shuddered, then with a visible effort contrived to steady herself. "You're lost if you don't, Jim. Don't you understand. It's the only way!"

"Look at me, Jerry," he commanded.

The long lashes lifted slowly and reluctantly, and the swimming blue eyes yielded to his.
"What would you think of me afterward if I lost my nerve and ran away?" he asked.

"The same that I do now," she told him soberly. "Just the same. It would always be the same."

He shook his head skeptically. "You think so now, I know. But you wouldn't go on feeling that way—afterward, when you'd given yourself time for quiet thinking. You'd remember me as the man who accepted the sheriff's great sacrifice; a man who ran away from danger."

"No!" Her eyes wavered and almost closed. "I wouldn't Jim. I swear I wouldn't! I'll like you always, just as you know I do now."

"That isn't enough for me, Jerry. I want you to like me more than you do now—as much more as you possible can. And you'll never do that if you remember me as the coward who was afraid to face the music."

She looked at him fleetingly and drew a shaken breath. "You haven't any idea how much I like you now. Oh, no! Not even with my telling you! But it won't ever become any less. After you've gone away, it'll be just as it is at this minute, and more, if that is possible."

She reached pleadingly toward him, but stopped just short of touching his hand. "Please—please, Jim! If not for you, for me! I couldn't face it or live through it—the trial—your trial for daddy's—for daddy's—"

She faltered and could not finish.

Crandall moved half a step forward, his hands going out impulsively toward her, then as suddenly he checked himself and his arms dropped stiffly at his side. "I want to ask you something," he said, fighting to keep his voice in control.

"If you were in this jail as I am, an innocent victim—if it were you who stood here facing what I must face—and you happened to find that the door was unlocked and you could leave—would you run away to Mexico, or would you refuse to go?"

"I—I'd go to Mexico," she said.

"Jerry," he said severely, "I asked you for the truth."

He smiled at her tenderly as her head bowed forward. "I know what you'd do, just as you know what I'm going to do. I'm not going to leave. I'm staying."

"But, Jim—" She lifted her wet, beseeching eyes. "The sheriff says you haven't a chance. If you stay, what can you do?"

"Fight!"

She quivered. He saw her slim brown hands clench tightly. "Fight!" she echoed, and her head went back and her chin set suddenly in fierce resolution. "Jim—we'll fight 'em together!"

"Now you're talking!" he said.

The fear of anxiety somehow had gone from her face, leaving her tense with determination. "I'm with you in anything," she declared. "What are we going to do? Where do we start?"

His laughter for the first time in two days sounded natural and whole-hearted. "We have this to start with," he said. "I'm innocent, therefore I have an enemy who committed a horrible crime and tried to frame me for it. We've got to find that man!"

"Jim," she cried, "we'll find him!"

"The sheriff," observed Crandall, "is one of the sweetest old men I ever knew, but for detective work I'm afraid I'd rather employ myself. In the first place, I'm not at all satisfied with his interview with that postal clerk. I'm going to talk with that clerk and see if there isn't some way of shaking up his memory. That's our logical beginning."

"The clerk at Buena Vista?" She wrinkled her forehead dubiously. "How are you going to get to him? You say you won't escape."

"I said I wouldn't steal my liberty. But I don't mind borrowing it. When
I'm through with myself, I'll bring myself back to jail."

She grinned at him boyishly. "Come on, then. Let's go!"

"Wait a minute! You're not going."

"Oh, yes, I am. If I can't come along, I don't lend my car." She started toward the door, then turned back for a moment. "We'll take the back way and nobody'll see us. If they should, I can say you kidnapped me. All right?"

He weakened at once. "All right," he agreed, and moved forward to open the heavy door for her. "Go see if the coast is clear."

She vanished down the corridor, and after two or three minutes came back, beaming with excitement. "O.K.," she said. "Nobody in sight. Hurry!"

As they stole hand in hand, down the corridor and out through the sheriff's office, they looked more like a couple of bad children, ready to giggle at their own imaginary fears, than a murder suspect in the act of breaking jail and a woman who was abetting him in a very serious offense.

The deep grove of palms hid the building from the view of the village streets. While they could hear distant sounds of traffic, there was nobody in sight to observe them or give the alarm. Jerry's roadster stood in the dooryard of the jail, with its motor running.

Crandall slid under the wheel. Jerry climbed into the seat on the other side without troubling to open the door. He slipped in the gears, backed out of the yard, then headed northward through the silent avenue of trees.

They traveled through the back country over a seldom-used road, skirting the edge of marshes and running through scraggly patches of timber, avoiding the railway and the towns. They put on an extra spurt of speed whenever they flashed past some lonesome farmstead.

In the sixty fast-reeling miles they met not more than half a dozen other cars on the road. They were sure that nobody looked after them in suspicion or gave them more than a casual glance. It was five thirty in the afternoon when Crandall turned the roadster into the paved main thoroughfare of Buena Vista.

There were a number of cars parked in the neighborhood of the village post office and a few loiterers along the flagged sidewalk. Nobody paid any especial attention to Miss Rowland's roadster, however, as it pulled up in a vacant space in the middle of the block.

Crandall left the girl in the car, with a promise to return as quickly as possible. After a sharp glance about him, he started around the corner toward the entrance of the post office.

In his haste he just missed colliding with a man who was standing beside the stone ballustrade of the front steps. Crandall halted, started to apologize, then for an instant his breath failed him. The man wore the blue uniform and gilt braid and polished shield of the village police.

"You look out where you're going!" advised the officer in perfectly good humor. He was a very young-looking policeman, with fresh, pinkish cheeks and a boyish smile. There was nothing very forbidding in his appearance.

Crandall promptly recovered his self-possession. "I'll be more careful, officer," he remarked, and pushed on past to enter the post office.

The clerk of the general-delivery window was getting ready to close up for the day when Crandall presented himself. Without preliminary, the newcomer broached his business.

"Was the county sheriff here to see you today?" Crandall asked.

"Yes—three or four hours ago," said the man. He looked interestingly at Crandall. "You a detective?"

Crandall gave a monosyllabic reply that might have passed as an affirmative. "Tomlinson was asking you about some parcel-post packages which were called
for at this window a little over three
weeks ago.”
“Yes, he did. I told him all I could
remember.”
“I was hoping you might have recalled
more by this time. Or perhaps I could
help you refresh your memory.”
“The sheriff told me,” said the clerk,
“that there was a package with two rifles
and silenceders in it, and it was addressed
to a man who called himself Gregory.
He came for them all right, whoever he
was. He came to this window, and I
gave him the package.
“As you say, it must have been nearly
a month ago. I remember the name,
and about giving out the parcels. There
were more than one. But it was a long
while ago, and it’s all kind of dim.”
“Try to think!” urged Crandall. “It’s
a vital matter. Was the man young or
old? How was he dressed? Didn’t you
see his face?”

The clerk puckered up his forehead
in an obliging effort of recollection. “He
must have kept his hat pulled down over
his face, ’cause I don’t think I saw his
face at all. How old he was or what
he looked like—I’d be glad to tell you
if I could.” He shook his head regret-
fully. “Honestly, I wouldn’t want to
say.”

“Was anything said at the time? Can
you recall any incident that might—”

Crandall’s speech broke off as the
lobby door opened and footsteps ad-
vanced behind him. He turned abruptly,
and his jaw dropped. Two men had
come into the post office and were stand-
ing at his back, staring. One was the
young policeman whom he had encoun-
tered outside. The other man was John
Sylvester Johns.

For a moment the three faced each
other in tense silence.

Then all at once Johns stabbed an
accusing finger at Crandall. “That’s
your man!” he declared harshly. “A
murderer—escaped from jail. Arrest
him, officer!”

CHAPTER XI.
BETRAYED.

FOR a dozen hushed and breathless
seconds, nobody spoke or moved.
Crandall regarded his accuser in open-
mouthed curiosity. Johns’ manner was
so vindicative, as though he bore a per-
sonal grudge against the escaped pris-
isoner, and felt injured and outraged at
finding him at large.

“Grab him, officer!” he commanded
fiercely. “Don’t you hear me? He’s
wanted for murder!”

The policeman hesitated, looking du-
biously from one man to the other.
“Well, now, I don’t know,” he said to
Johns. “I just have your word for it,
and this other party don’t look very
dangerous——”

“He’s a detective,” put in the mail
clerk, sticking his head through his win-
dow. “A friend of Sheriff Tomlin-
son’s.”

“I’m telling you he’s an escaped pris-
isoner!” declared Johns, breathing heavily
in his excitement. “You take him to
jail, or you’ll be sorry!”

The policeman was frankly perplexed.
“I’m new on the force,” he remarked,
“and I don’t want any false arrests to
my credit.” He tilted back his helmet
and thoughtfully scratched his head.
“I’ll tell you,” he said at length; “I
guess I’d better phone my chief and find
out what he says to do.”

“Phone him then, and hurry up about
it!” snapped Johns, who was fairly danc-
ing with impatience.

A public telephone booth stood by the
wall at the officer’s back. He turned
around, fumbling in the pocket of his
uniform coat. As he was on the point
of entering the booth, he stopped and
swung back to face Crandall’s accuser.
“You got a nickel to phone with?” he
asked. “I haven’t.”

“ Anything!” Johns sputtered in ex-
asperation, and rammed his fingers into
his pocket. “Anything to get this man
arrested!” He fished out a handful of coins, glanced at them in the fading light, and suddenly stepped over to the parcel-post window.

“No nickels! Here clerk—give me change.” Johns threw a silver piece down on the counter. “Give me a nickel and let’s get this over with.”

Without a word the clerk pulled open his cash drawer and raked out a fistful of small change. He picked up Johns’ coin, started to drop it into the till, then checked himself to peer sharply at the silver disk in his hand.

“Just a minute,” he said. “This is a Columbian half——” He stopped at the word. His lips slowly formed together in a sort of soundless whistle. A queer expression came into his face as he stared intently at Johns.

“Hold on now!” he ejaculated. “I’m—I’m beginning to remember things.” He glanced suddenly toward Crandall. “You wanted to know about a man who called here a few weeks ago for some packages. I remember, there was a Columbian half dollar in his pocket—like this.”

The clerk shifted his eyes back to gaze with a peculiar fixity of attention at Johns’ knuckles as the man drummed nervously on the counter. Suddenly he gave a sharp exclamation of triumph, “And he had a little scar on his finger, like this man’s got! I remember now—I remember him! This is the man, I’m sure!”

“You mean——” Crandall’s steely eyes were searching Johns through and through. “He’s the one who received the two .38-40 rifles from Baltimore?”

“I couldn’t tell you what was in the packages,” said the clerk in a suppressed voice. “But he’s the one who got the packages under the name of George Gregory. It all comes back to me now. I could swear to him!”

Johns’ face had gone a ghastly gray color as he glared back at the clerk. “It’s a lie!” he gasped, and snatched at the Columbian half dollar. “Here give me that!”

“He called it his luck piece,” said the clerk, as Johns shoved the coin back into his pocket.

“There’s some funny business happening here on your beat, officer,” observed Crandall grimly. “If I were you, I think I’d arrest both of us.”

“No!” Johns had sidled away from the counter, his red-rimmed eyes shifting back and forth desperately, like the eyes of a trapped animal.

Suddenly, before anybody could guess what he had in mind, he turned, panic-stricken, and dashed for the entrance doors. He caught the handle of one of the doors, jerked it open and fled into the outer twilight, slamming the door shut behind him.

The policeman at least was not too much of a novice to understand that when a man ran from him, his cue was to run after the man. He threw himself at the door, wrenched at the knob and finally jerked it open. Crandall followed a pace behind.

Johns had taken the stone steps in a flying leap. By the time his pursuers had let themselves out of the post office, he had crossed the sidewalk and was climbing into a saffron-colored car that stood at the curb.

“Halt!” shouted the policeman.

The fugitive gave no heed to the command. In a second he was behind the wheel, kicking on the starter. A warm engine instantly caught the spark, and he shifted to first and let in the clutch.

The policeman pulled at a string in his blouse and drew forth a whistle, on which he blew a shriek of alarm. Johns’ car was away from the curb now, starting down the street with loudly whirring gears.

He shifted to second and took the corner turn at a rapidly increasing momentum, knocking over a traffic standard and narrowly missing two pedes-
trians, who just managed to dodge out of his way. Without looking behind, he shot into high. His car disappeared in a rush of sound behind a neighboring row of buildings.

The policeman was down on the sidewalk, blowing frantic blasts on his whistle as he started off afoot on a hopeless chase, and apparently forgetting all about Crandall. For his part, Crandall waited only until the officer was out of the way, then he ran around the opposite corner and jumped into Jerry’s car.

“What’s the matter?” the girl asked.
“What’s all the racket about?”

He started the motor, turned the car in the street and circled around the farther side of the post-office building, shifting rapidly through his three speeds. “John Johns!” he said, as he swerved into the westbound roadway that led out of town in the direction of the swamp country. “He saw me in the post office and tried to have me arrested.”

She looked up uncomprehendingly. “Johns! What’s he doing here?”
“He must have happened along, just as I was going into the post office. Called a cop and came after me.”
“Well?” she asked anxiously.

They had passed the village limits. The car struck a rutted, unpaved road that reached ahead of them to the fading horizon line. A quarter of a mile or so in front of them, Crandall could make out the rear end of another car bumping along recklessly in the gathering dusk.

“That’s Johns up there,” he remarked, and caught a firmer grip on the steering wheel as he stepped on the accelerator. “The clerk says he remembers him.”

“What do you mean?” she asked, bracing herself in the swaying seat.

“The man who called for the packages—the rifles. Calling himself Gregory! The clerk recognized a pocket piece. The queerest sort of an accident.” He laughed ironically. “A Columbian half dollar—Johns’ lucky piece!”

“You mean to say that I was right—that he was the one—” The girl leaned out from the side of the car to peer down the roadway. The rush of wind whipped the rest of her speech from her mouth. “Faster!” she cried. “Catch him!”

Crandall nodded somberly as he fed more gas to the engine. Johns’ car was rocking and bounding on the rough road, only a few hundred yards ahead. It was clear enough that he had some compelling reason to shake off his pursuers.

“I don’t understand it,” said Crandall, gripping the wheel and holding the crown of the road by muscular strength. “The sheriff says he and Johns were sitting together when the murder took place. You can’t beat that for an alibi. But there’s something wrong somewhere. An innocent man doesn’t run like that.”

They were traveling through a flat and desolate country without any signs of human habitation, that stretched away to the ruddy sky. In the distance they could make out patches of forest, through which they caught occasional glimpses of dark water. Johns was heading for the wilderness of the big swamps.

Crandall had urged his speedometer up to “sixty.” He held it there, feeling that the light car would refuse to grip the road at any increase of speed. Johns was hitting about the same pace. The gap between the two cars did not appreciably lessen.

“He’ll have to stop some time,” Jerry remarked. “If we can just hold him as he is, we’ll be all right.”

“It was funny the way the panic hit him,” said Crandall, his gaze fixed on the banked road ahead. “The clerk knew him only by the luck piece. He could have brazened it out—claiming the
clerk was a fool or a liar. Instead he lost his nerve. Before anybody could move, he was outside, beating it in his car."

"There must have been something more than the luck piece," said Jerry. "Something on his person or in his car," suggested Crandall. "Something he's determined not to let us see. All right! If he expects to lose us, he'll have to do better than he's doing now."

For ten minutes the two cars rocked dangerously along the narrow road without gaining or losing in their relative positions. Johns was two or three hundred yards ahead when he reached the first fringe of the woods.

"That's Pelican Slough beyond there," said Jerry. "A horrible place. The road ends at the water. He won't be able to go any farther."

Crandall said nothing. He was intent on the two wheel tracks which were growing bumpier and less clearly defined as the ground dropped down to the level of the swamp. Johns' car disappeared among the matted thickets. Crandall, still driving at a reckless pace, followed into the timber.

It was a damp and unwholesome spot, filled with rank smells and shut in darkly by moss-festooned trees. As Crandall's wheels splattered along the quaking roadway, he heard a shriek of brakes up ahead.

He skidded through a stand of shaggy water oaks to see a saffron-tinted roadster standing motionless in the thicket, hub-deep in mud. As he brought Jerry's car to a standstill, he saw Johns jump out of the roadster, grab something that looked like a golf bag from the rumble, and start afoot toward an opening among the trees.

In a moment Crandall left the wheel, scrambled over the side of his car, and hastened in pursuit.

Johns cast a fleeting look behind him, then doubled to his right, to plunge headlong through the brush toward the edge of the open swamp. He gained the bank of the muddy pond not more than a dozen paces ahead of his pursuer.

Like a frightened rabbit Johns dived into an overhanging screen of branches. A second or two later, the prow of a dug-out canoe nosed out from the bank. Crandall reached the water in time to see the fugitive clamber into the canoe and shove off with a frantic kick of his foot.

Without hesitation Crandall splashed into the mud and stagnant water. With his second step he sank in above the hips. He flung himself forward. His outstretched fingers just managed to catch a grip on the stern of the dugout.

Johns swung around, his features distorted with fear and fury. "Let go!" he ordered.

Crandall tightened his hold. With a sudden effort he pulled his feet out of the mud and drew himself up alongside the canoe.

"Let me alone! Get away!" Johns was gasping hysterically, almost sobbing. He faced about to strike at the hand that was holding him back, lost his balance, sat down heavily in the bottom of the dugout.

The bank dropped away from the shore in an abrupt "step off." Crandall found himself in water over his head. In the few seconds vouchsafed him he swam around in line with the canoe, then suddenly hoisted himself with both hands to straddle the stern.

Under its original momentum the light craft had drifted twenty or thirty feet offshore and was wabbling precariously on the surface of the deep, still pool.

Johns raised himself to his knees and glared at his unwelcome passenger with a look that was not quite human. A golf bag was slung over his shoulder. As Crandall clambered aboard, he loosened the carrying strap and flung the bag from him, out into the deeper water.
The violent effort unbalanced him again. He blundered and fell across the gunwale. The dugout dipped and suddenly capsized, throwing both men into the stagnant depths of Pelican Slough.

CHAPTER XII.
THE HAND OF FATE.

When Crandall bobbed back to the surface of the pool, his first thought was not of Johns or the canoe or his own water-soaked condition. He blinked his eyes clear and looked around to see if he could locate the golf bag, of which Johns had rid himself in such frantic haste.

As he lifted his face, he heard a splash and a blowing sound behind him. Jerry Rowland’s dripping head emerged from the water. She had dived into the lagoon with all her clothes on, and was swimming toward him.

“Are you all right?” she gasped. “I thought he hit you.”

Crandall could not help grinning at her mud-streaked face. “All right,” he said. “Thanks!” He looked over his shoulder. “What became of that golf bag?”

“It sank like a rock,” she replied. Johns had come up after his plunge farther offshore. He was swimming low in the water with his hat still on his head. Instead of turning for the bank or trying to regain the canoe, he was heading out into the open water, making for a bank of mud, covered with rank growths of rushes, that formed a small island in the middle of the lagoon. Crandall glanced after him once, then turned back to Jerry.

“Let him go,” said Crandall. “Attend to him later. We want that golf bag first.”

Two or three strokes carried him alongside the capsized dugout. Jerry swam up to the opposite gunwale. By their combined efforts they succeeded in dumping a few gallons of water from the craft. Then they righted it and held it balanced on a level keel.

Jerry swam around to the low-riding stern. With Crandall’s help she contrived to pull herself aboard. He tossed her the plank that Johns had used for a paddle.

“What about where did the bag sink?” he asked her.

The girl glanced around to make sure of her bearings. “About ten feet to your left.” She pointed with her finger. “Right in there, I think.”

He let go the canoe and swam to the spot. Filling his lungs deeply, he ducked beneath the surface, reversed his position and dived.

The water was black with ooze and decayed vegetation. He could not bring himself to hold his eyes open. Blindly he swam downward until his hands dug into the soft muck at the bottom. Among partly buried snags and water-logged drift, he groped in the mud in a gradually widening circle, until the need of fresh air drove him back to the top. He took a new breath and dived again.

It was not until his fourth attempt that his search was rewarded. His hand touched a smooth, yielding substance and closed upon a soggy cylinder of leather. He swam back to the surface, bearing his trove with him, and found that he had salvaged the golf bag.

While Jerry balanced the dugout, he climbed in over the prow and dragged the bag after him. As he eased his weight down into the half-submerged canoe, he glanced back across the open lagoon. Johns was nowhere in sight.

“What became of him?” Crandall asked, sputtering and wiping a sodden sleeve across his face.

“He landed on the island and disappeared in the rushes. He still must be in there some place.” Jerry eagerly eyed the dripping bag. “What do you suppose is in it?”

“Must be something terribly prejudi-
cial to Johns, or he wouldn’t have gone to such lengths to lose it.”

The heads of a half dozen golf clubs stuck out from the throat of the container. Crandall drew out the sticks and then unloaded three or four paving bricks that had been wedged in for ballast.

“Evidently he was on his way here, intending to jettison it, at the time he saw me at the post office. Why, do you suppose?”

“There must be something in there he wanted to dispose of,” Jerry hazarded, “and thought it safer away from the neighborhood of Sea Reach.”

“Why didn’t he do it last night?”

“He caved in the other afternoon. Remember? I guess it took him until this afternoon to get back enough strength and nerve to go ahead with whatever it was he had to do.” Jerry was watching with straining curiosity while Crandall rummaged deeper into the bag. “What is it, anyhow?”

“Don’t know. Feels like wires. And something else.” He drew forth an arm-like object coated with a polychrome plaster. He stared wonderingly for a moment, then enlightenment dawned upon him. “Jerry!” he exclaimed. “Look! See what it is? A rifle barrel, and a silencer—disguised under an outer molding.”

“What caliber?” she gasped.

He inserted his finger into the muzzle end of the camouflaged weapon. “About .38,” he declared. “A .38-40, I’m sure.”

“Then it’s—Jim!” Her widening eyes sought his solemnly. “Then—then it’s the missing rifle—the one we had to find—the one from which the shot was fired!”

Crandall did not answer for a moment. He was turning the decorated barrel in his hands. “Look at this gadget fastened to the trigger. There’s something devilish about this. An armature, or something of the sort, hooked on to discharge a cartridge by electrical contact. An electrical contrivance that might fire a gun—from a distance!”

“Wait!” he said, as the girl started to speak. “I’m trying to think. I’ve seen a plaster arm similar to this somewhere. It’s—it looks like the holder on a lamp—” He caught an audible breath.

“I’ve got it!” he almost shouted in his excitement. “The floor lamp in my room at the inn! Similar coloring, same design! There must be a companion lamp in the room next door to mine. Don’t you see, Jerry?

“This must have been fastened to the lamp, bolted and anchored like a gun in a gunsmith’s vise—just as we had guessed before. Wired in some manner to be set off by electricity.

“It was aimed across the street at your father’s easy-chair. The man who killed your father wasn’t in the room, probably wasn’t even in the inn when he fired the shot. A crafty and wicked scheme!”

“I believe I know how it was done,” Crandall declared, as he faced the girl with scowling brows. “The telephone! You remember? The sheriff said Johns telephoned to some client a second or two before the bullet came into your father’s office. And Tomlinson thought that was an alibi—a proof of Johns’ innocence.”

His voice broke into a harsh laugh. “Innocence! It’s the proof of his guilt. We’ll get the whole truth when we go back. The lamp, the telephone box will show evidences of tampering. Johns sat beside your father in friendly conversation when he sent in his fatal phone call. John Johns is your father’s murderer.”

The girl raised a stricken face to him. As she looked at him, a soft, sweet glow came into her eyes. “Then—you’re clear, Jim. You’ve got the proofs. They’ve got to free you. They’ve got to apologize to you. To think for a
moment that they could have believed—" Tears welled up suddenly under the dark lashes. "Oh, Jim, you don’t know what this means to me!"

"I'm not thinking of me just now!" he asserted. He suddenly picked up the paddle, brought the bow of the canoe about, and with short, savage strokes started for the little island where they had last seen Johns.

The instant the prow struck the muddy bank, Crandall sprang ashore to beat through the rushes. It would have not gone pleasantly with the fugitive if he had encountered Crandall at that moment. But Johns was nowhere to be found.

The island was nothing but a mud bank sticking out in the middle of the dismal lagoon. Within three minutes they had searched the high, matted grass from end to end. Nobody was hiding there.

They paused on the brink to scan the waters beyond—dark, still, ugly waters, infested with weeds and floating débris. And as they stared out into the towering twilight, Jerry’s cold, wet fingers clutched at her companion’s wrist.

"Look, Jim!" she whispered, and directed his attention to a drifting object far out among the thickest clumps of weeds.

Crandall gazed tensely for a moment, then he knew. "It’s Johns’ hat," he said.

"I wonder," she began, and stopped. "I think so," he told her. "He must have tried to swim across. And nobody could swim through weeds like those. They would wrap around him and draw him under. Nobody could get through there. Yet Johns is not here. He must have tried."

Jerry turned with a shudder and started back for the canoe.

"Where are you going?" he asked, as he caught step with her.

"To see what we can do."

"No!" he said. "There’s nothing to do. Anybody who tried to dive among those weeds would never come up again. Even so, it would be much too late by now. We were too long in recovering the bag. Besides—"

He steadied her hand as she climbed into the dugout. "How much kinder it is not to interfere! Fate has taken things in charge. It is so much better and easier for Johns to rest his case in the decision of fate. It will be better for every one else, too."

"Perhaps he managed to reach shore," she said unsteadily, as they pushed off from the little island.

"At least we can learn that much with certainty," he said.

As the shadows of night deepened about them, they paddled around the edges of the lagoon, looking for footprints in the mud. They made the entire circuit of the shore, and found no prints. Nothing had come up out of the inky water.

When at last it had grown too dark to see, Crandall suddenly swung the bow of his canoe and started toward the spot where the car was parked.

"The perfect crime!" he mused aloud, as he sent the dugout along with slow, silent strokes. "The thing so many criminals have dreamed of, and none has ever succeeded in devising. You plan and plan, as Johns must have done. You have foreseen everything, you have tied up every loose end. There isn’t a chance of your being caught.

"But there is always some trivial accident or event that you couldn’t have counted on. A straw in the wind; a Columbian half dollar for a luck piece; a new policeman who fears to make an arrest without consulting his chief. Some little thing like that, and the marvelous structure of your scheme has fallen about your head. Even then Johns might have got away, if he hadn’t seen me and tried to send me back to jail."

He leaned forward slightly, trying to
see Jerry’s face in the darkness. “Why did he hate me so?” he asked.

“You still don’t know?” She was silent for a moment, a shadow sitting close to him in the wet canoe. “I was friendly with Johns,” she ventured at length, “because—I don’t know—I guess I felt a little sorry for him. And he didn’t quite understand. He was in love with me, I think, as much as a man of his sort could ever be in love with anybody. He wanted to marry me.”

“I’m in love with you, too, Jerry,” Crandall said softly. “But Johns would not hate me for that reason. I can’t help that. He couldn’t. Nobody could.” He smiled gently. “Why did he hate me?”

“Don’t make me tell you to-night, Jim—please!” she begged.

He drew a long breath. “Whatever you say, Jerry. I can wait. I can wait as long as I must.” He laughed with an undertone of happiness in his voice. “To-night,” he said, “I’ve got to report back at Sheriff Tomlinson’s jail.”

“And to-morrow,” she said under her breath, “when you’re free—I’ll tell you all that you want to know.”

A FAMOUS INDIAN SCOUT

SOME of the stories told about Jim Bridger, the famous Indian scout, are as marvelous as the fiction exploits of “Sherlock Holmes.” Bridger was in many tight places, but he remarked that he had saved his scalp by tying it to his brains.

Once, while on horseback, Bridger saw an eagle feather upon the rocks near by. He thought this feather was worth inspecting. He dismounted, picked it up, and found that a strand of buckskin was attached to the feather’s quill. From this, he deduced that it had fallen from the war bonnet of an Indian. Therefore, he concluded that a party of Indians, on the warpath, was near by. Almost at once he came upon their trail.

At another time there had been rumors of an impending uprising by the redskins. In what is now the Yellowstone National Park was an obsidian cliff from which the Crows, an Indian tribe, quarried arrow heads. Often the Crows bartered these arrow heads to other Indian tribes.

While going across country, Bridger happened on a line of obsidian arrow heads, which seemingly had dropped from a pouch carelessly carried, or which had a hole in it. There were too many arrow heads for them to be dropped by a curio-hunting white man. From the number, Bridger reasoned that the Crows would not have been willing to part with that many to another tribe. No peaceful Indian, he believed, would have been so careless with so many valuable arrow heads. Therefore, he deduced that the Crow tribe was on the warpath.

He was right. Shortly afterward he came upon a Crow moccasin that had been thrown away, and the hoof prints of many ponies. Nowhere was there the mark of any dragging lodge pole. When it is remembered that Indians on the warpath did not carry their tents, the absence of lodge poles was the final, convincing proof that Bridger’s assumption that the Crows were out after scalps was correct.
CHAPTER I.
BURNING OIL.

DEEP in the earth a sixty-quart shot of nitroglycerin exploded with a muffled crack which merged instantly into a rumbling, earth-shaking thunder. Like a cannon shell it whizzed up the fifteen hundred foot boring, driving a thick, scummy bubble through which, with a deafening roar, burst a shower of rock, piping, and water, followed by the skyward leaping geyser of living riches—oil.

For just a second it sprayed the blue California sky with its bellowing, dirty glistening rainbow of flowing gold. Then came a flash, and in a moment that vaulting fortune was a pillar of flame from which fled seared and terrified men, crying: "Gusher on fire!"

Instantly the dread cry swept through the forest of derricks and a squatty village surrounding that heaven-brushing, costly, awful fountain of fire. Those screaming sirens on the well-puller engines and drilling donkeys were not needed to bring every one of the thousand men swarming cautiously.

Their faces were twisted with terror or dismay. They came rushing, to stop the roaring menace which threatened every derrick, rig, house and reservoir tank on that field. Ten minutes after that volcano of flaming oil erupted in the San Esteban field, all available men were mobilizing for battle, while telephone wires were hot with calls for reserves.

An hour later, in the cameramen's room of Midworld News Reel's film exchange in Los Angeles, a tall, dark young fellow, bare-headed to display a handsome permanent wave, hung up a telephone receiver and addressed his visitor, an alert, fair-haired, athletic chap.
"Carver, get ready. California is providing a news reel subject big enough for your camera," he said.

Despite the native son's good-natured sarcasm for a visitor from New York headquarters of their news reel, Eric Carver recognized a ring in Larry Elkins' voice which meant there was something big on foot which might test the rivalry of East and West. On a roving commission, Carver had gone on from San Francisco and after getting acquainted with the crank turners at Midworld's Hollywood studio, had been waiting orders with the Los Angeles cameramen.

Quickly overcoming their fears that Midworld's ace would try to impress them with his reputation, Eric soon won their friendship—even though they reserved their private belief in the superiority of California cameramen.

"What is it? A quake?" asked Carver, jumping up.

"No—we don't have such things. This is a big gusher fire," announced Elkins, inspecting his camera. "Our tipster on one of the papers just phoned that a whopper is blazing up at the San Esteban field, about a hundred and fifty miles above here.

"The Jontee Number One rig brought in a gusher this afternoon, and about one second later what ought to have been the start of a million dollars was going up in flame. An oil flash touched a spark somewhere. The rig is right in the heart of a derrick field plastered against a little town. She's a big one—they've sent for Benton, the well fire-shooter down here, so it must be wild."

"I've got to hand it to you boys, going a hundred and fifty miles at this time," praised Carver, while Elkins tardily hurried to load his camera. Eric's lay, ready loaded, as he always kept it. "Anything I can do?"

"Call Fourleaf Field—the number's on that card—and tell 'em to have a plane readied for us," requested Elkins. "Probably some footage man will get there first, but Frisco will send a man to cover, so we've got to beat 'em. Can't let S. F. put anything over L. A."

"Seems to be some sort of interference," reported Carver, who had dialed correctly but could get nothing but a grinding. Thinking the visiting cameraman didn't know how to use a dial telephone, Elkins seized the instrument, nodding for Carver to finish loading the camera.

"Somebody dialing this number against us," snapped Elkins. "That's a way to prevent us from calling—a rival might for instance, only the other fellows aren't tricky. Say! When I passed Globewide a little while ago, I saw their New York star, Louis Zanff. Would he——"

"He would!" exploded Carver. Any trick to hamper a rival news reel was considered fair by Zanff, the bitter, underhanded professional enemy of Midworld's ace. Zanff had followed Carver to California, trying to revenge himself after being discharged by Globewide. After vainly looking for work turning a crank in Hollywood studios, he had reported at Globewide's exchange on probation to wait reinstatement by New York.

Elkins angrily whirled the dial, and grunted:

"Turn about's fair. I just poked a dialing at Globewide. Now for another try at the flying field."

This time he was successful, and Elkins snapped out orders for a plane to be in readiness.

Excitedly, he turned to Carver, announcing: "They say Globewide just asked for a ship, and they've only one to spare, aside from one they're readying for Benton, the fire-shooter. Come on, New York, and show us how to step."

They grabbed equipment, and scammed to a flivver parked at the curb,
just as two similarly laden young men bounded into a car waiting two doors farther back on Vermont Avenue, where all the film exchanges are bunched. As the car behind shot forward to swing into the street first and get a lead in the race for the flying field, the passenger suddenly twisted the steering wheel, sending the front bumpers crashing against the Midworld car’s outer rear wheel, crumbling it.

With a tinkling of glass, Elkins’ car sagged at one corner while the two local men shouted angrily. Beside Globewide’s local man sat Zanff, heavy-faced and domineering, as he bawled:

“An accident. Drive on, Lacey—you two can fix up the liability to-morrow. He knows where to find you. Get going.”

“Why did you grab the wheel——” began the local Globewide man, hotly, when a nudge in the side shut him up. With Elkins shouting angrily that it was an intentional smash to delay him, Lacey pulled free and dashed away.

“Harry Lacey never tried any dirty work before,” fumed Elkins. “It was that fat-faced crook, Zanff. He jerked the wheel so that Lacey would wreck me. We’re stranded. I haven’t got a spare. I was going to get one today——”

“While there’s a Henry, there’s hope,” cried Carver, leaping into the street. “Yank off that smashed wheel. Hey, mister!”

This was addressed in a commanding shout, as Eric stood with outstretched arms, risking a knockdown to flag an approaching Henry. Its driver braked in puzzled anger, rather than bowl over the cameraman, who promptly thrust the price of a new spare at the motorist and ran to unstrap the spare on the flivver’s rear.

As he acted, Carver rapidly overbore the driver with a glowing tribute for aiding a big news reel in a crisis.

The spare was being hammered in place on Elkins’ car before the motorist came out of his trance to depart with the money.

“Boy, you’re there in a pinch!” exclaimed Elkins as they dashed away. “I’ve heard a lot about you and how you’re never licked, but I know it, now.”

“You’d have done it yourself, but you were busy jacking up the car,” assured Eric, exulting to think that he had prevented Zanff’s unscrupulous act from delaying Elkins more than a few minutes.

With siren screaming peremptory demand for bigger cars to yield right of way, the flivver streaked through traffic filled thoroughfares, its painted legend “Midworld News Reel” winning for it the privileges of a fire truck. Elkins was a daring driver, and he knew his course. Barring that delay which Zanff engineered, he got the breaks in making record time to the flying field. Dashing in through the gate at Fourleaf, the car pulled up at the office.

“Where’s the ship for us Midworld News Reel cameramen?” shouted Elkins, noting that several planes were turning their props at distant spots on the field.

“That one over there,” directed the superintendent, running out. “Better hurry. One of those guys said they were all that’s going.”

His remark was drowned in the cut-out’s banging as the little car went bumping and jumping across field, its siren blowing loudly to detain the pilot, already starting to taxi down the take-off. He was heading away and the roar of his prop deafened him to the excited tooting, while Zanff leaned forward, urging him to hurry.

Fortunately a mechanician heard the siren and saw Carver wildly waving from the bouncing flivver in time to signal to the pilot. The propeller sank
its harsh whir, and the motor car ran alongside, with Elkins angrily demanding:

“What’s the idea of trying to fly off and leave us? I phoned for a ride in this crate.”

“This bird here said they was all that’s going,” growled the aviator, not won by Elkins’ belligerent tone. “How was I to know there were more coming? Thought you boys were in a hurry.”

“That’s all right, Ace, we know it wasn’t your fault,” soothed Carver, giving Zanff a level stare. “We were delayed a minute.”

CHAPTER II.

ONLY DELAYED.

WE’D still be delayed if it hadn’t been for Carver,” rasped Elkins. “What’s the idea, Lacey, pulling such small tricks?”

“You might not have been delayed at all if it hadn’t been for me,” reminded Carver. “I don’t think Lacey had any hand in it.”

“Listen, Elk,” whispered Lacey, as the Midworld man lifted his equipment into the passengers’ cockpit. “I’m as sore as you about it, but this fellow’s from our New York office. If I don’t act with him and do everything to beat you, he’ll put in a knock that’d knock me out of my job. My hands are tied. He says it’s up to us to beat this Carver high-hat from New York, and I suppose he’s right. It is my duty to try.”

“All right, Harry, but guys that play with skunks will need perfume,” growled Elkins savagely. “When we cover this assignment and get back, I’m going to take a wallop at a certain fathead.”

“What’s that?” demanded Zanff, who had caught a word.

“Nothing, to you. I’m talking to a man,” retorted Elkins, coldly. “Shove over there and make room for Carver to crowd in.”

“Hey, pilot. You can’t carry more than us three,” roared Zanff, aggressively. “Not with all our stuff. Get going. We want to go.”

“Where do you get that ‘we’ stuff?” demanded Elkins. “How do you fit in, anyway? I understood that Globewide fired you.”

“I’m here,” stated Zanff coldly. “I’m going because I got here and am in this crock, ready and waiting while you two delay us.”

“You’re here because you dialed against my telephone to kill it when I tried to call up the field first,” accused Elkins. “You’re here because you deliberately knocked a wheel off my car to keep me from getting here. Suppose you get out.”

“You and who else will make me?” challenged Zanff, not denying the charges, while Lacey maintained chagrined silence. “When we get back, I’ll accommodate you. How about it, pilot?”

“I can only carry the three already in,” declared the flyer, shortly. Elkins had ruffled him while Zanff had been craftily cultivating him with oily praise. “Don’t try to get in, fellow, or I won’t hop off at all.”

“I’ll take this up with the field superintendent,” stormed Elkins, making a move to alight. Carver saw Zanff’s eyes glitter.

“Better stay in, Larry, or the ship will fly off while you’re over making a complaint,” he advised. “Don’t let me hold you up any longer. Get along and I’ll tag after some way.”

“Yes, let’s go,” urged Lacey, while Zanff repeated it loudly.

“Maybe you’re right, Eric,” said Elkins, relieved at not having to continue the fight he had taken up in behalf of Carver. “After all, I’m responsible for this assignment—not you. Though, I bet you’d have landed some
good, exclusive footage. Sorry. Some other time."

"Shove off!" commanded Zanff.

The ship trundled down the field and hopped off, circling and heading north with the rival cameramen bound for the big fire.

Eric Carver was left behind.

Those who followed Carver's rapid rise as a daring, resourceful ace of cameramen, knew that he never quit, no matter how dark the outlook, how desperate the chance was. As far as his standing was concerned, there was no reason why he could not have returned to the city for a comfortable evening. This was Elkins' assignment, not Carver's responsibility. But on a big oil-field fire there would be a wide-flung front, with many angles which one man could not cover alone.

Globewide was sending two men, so Carver was determined that Midworld should not be outnumbered. Moreover, he was lured by the prospect of covering a big, spectacular oil-field fire and getting some really sensational film. So many oil-field fires looked dull on the screen.

He wanted to shoot something distinctive, not perfunctory oil-fire footage. This usually consisted of long shots of a heavy, black smoke pall, and a semi close-up of firemen and workers dodging behind buildings to be shielded from killing heat while they directed feeble hose streams.

Footage of that sort had to be positive on red-tinted stock to look as exciting as it deserved. Something novel and exclusive in oil-field fires would make the audiences sit up and take notice.

Immediately after the plane left him, Carver hurried over to another ship which was being tuned up. Of the pilot, he inquired if it could be chartered to take him to the fire.

"Stick around," grinned the aviator, promptly won by Carver's genial per-sonality. "We're running after the fire engines pretty quick. The oil companies phoned down for Bode Benton, the fire-shooter, to come on the second alarm before their whole derrick grove goes up in smoke, and they arranged to have this ship take him."

"How does he do his stuff?" asked Carver, suddenly interested.

"Walks up to a fire and blows it out," replied the flyer. Seeing a questioning look, he enlightened: "Nitro. Blooey! Out."

"That sounds like a fine subject," enthused Carver.

"You can have it," said the flyer, uneasily. "Here he comes!"

An automobile glided softly onto the field, driven with care which was in marked contrast to the cameramen's reckless arrival. On the car's sides were painted big, alarming warnings "Danger. Nitro car." A big-boned, calm-eyed young man was driving with steady caution, as he eased over the bumps on the field.

"I'm Benton. Is this the plane to take me to San Esteban?" he inquired, alighting calmly, and starting to transfer his load.

"Your ship, O. K.,” replied Carver. "Can I help you?"

At a nod, he commenced transferring equipment from the car, a suit of asbestos, a helmet of the same, equipped with a gas mask, asbestos sheets resembling tarpaulins, some tools, and two shells.

"Say, are those nitro?" demanded the flyer, pointing at the shells Benton took carefully from a padded box. "Loaded?"

"Certainly," replied Benton. "I don't use a dud."

"Then, good-night!" exclaimed the flyer. "I'm not afraid of crashing I'll take my chances if I crack up. But I had a friend once who was blown to nothing by nitro. Not for me. I don't fly you."
"Why, man, I've got to get there to work," snapped Benton. "Nothing dangerous about nitro—if you know how to handle it."

"I've heard of guys who knew how to handle it," jeered the flyer. "Could throw it against a wall to see folks turn pale. Then, one time too often or maybe some little slip, and they were blown to bits."

"I'll get another flyer, then," stormed the fire-shooter.

"There goes the only other man available," said the flyer, as a third ship took off on other business. "Sorry."

"Might I suggest a way to go now?" asked Carver. "Empty your torpedo, and fill it at the oil fields. They'll have nitro there, and you can't delay. Your pilot would take you with an empty."

"Sure," agreed the flyer, eagerly.

"That's a good idea," grunted Benton, scowling at the flyer. Without delay he emptied the nitro in some sand.

"I'd like to go with you," requested Carver, introducing himself. "It would make a wonderful news reel subject, and your name in a subtitle would be fine publicity for you, Benton."

"I owe you that much," admitted Benton. "Come on."

During the flight of more than an hour, the cameraman and the oil fire-shooter became friendly. Dusk fell behind them, while ahead, long before they reached their destination, the sky was almost as bright as midday. Ahead, a ragged ridge of coast foothills was silhouetted blackly against a blinding glare. Crossing the ridge, they saw spread out before them a panorama of inferno.

Ink-black against a sunburst glare of fire stood miles of latticed derricks around which patrolled anxious, black, human shapes. At one side, menaced by a towering gush of flame, were hundreds of acres of square reservoirs, their black surfaces glinting like polished ebony in the furious glare which overhung the region.

Open, banked on four sides by yellow clay, these run-off reservoirs were nothing more than lakes of petroleum, exposed to the incendiary touch of the first burning brand which fell upon them.

Huddled so close to the derricks that it seemed unbelievable human beings would live in that proximity, were dwellings, a hamlet which had been there when oil was struck in its backyards, and where its residents had continued to reside. This was the setting, black derricks, black huddle of houses, and black open tanks of oil, framing a shaft of fire which seemed to scorch the clouds. It dominated all else for miles around, a bellowing pillar of flame which lighted the valley as though it were noon.

Favored by this powerful illumination, the pilot was able to make a safe landing on a flat, sandy field a mile from the fire. That was as near as he could land in safety, for the region was rough and highways were jammed with cars hurrying to the spectacle. Benton and Carver ran to the nearest road, a dirt trail through this field, on which was only one lonely flivver. This they hailed.

"Nothing doing!" exclaimed the farmer, when they asked him to take them in with their equipment. "Your stuff might blow up when it gets close to the fire, and where'd I be? Excuse me!"

In vain they assured him they carried no nitro. The farmer said some closed tanks near the fire were in danger of blowing up. He didn't intend to take chances.

Impatiently Carver suggested: "Let us hire your car, then. Benton is going to get a big price for stopping that fire, and he can give you a requisition
for the price of your old boiler if it isn't restored O. K. You can collect from the oil companies, no matter what happens to us.”

CHAPTER III.

FRENZIED MEN.

THIS argument won, and soon the car drew up at the rear guard of a thousand machines blocking the road. On the way, Carver wrapped his equipment in an asbestos sheet Benton loaned him. In exasperation, the fireshotter realized that his path was blockaded and that the fascinated first-comers would not yield way for a late arrival.

"Put on your white suit," advised Carver, who had experience in getting through traffic jams to cover assignments. Rising, he made a megaphone of his hands, and shouted: "Make way for the nitro man coming to shoot out the fire."

At the word "nitro," all rear rank drivers turned in alarm and began edging from the road. Forward ran the excited announcement, quickly reaching the front. Soon a squad of State motor-cycle policemen and deputy sheriffs cut a lane through the crowd, forcing drivers to pull aside while they escorted Benton and Carver forward.

It was a triumphal procession until they reached the front rank, where a cordon of armed men held back all but the fire fighters.

Bunched in querulous group were the cameramen and, as Carver rode past, Zanff sprang out, shouting:

"Stop that man, sheriff, if you're stopping all of us. You can't play favorites. That man is a cameraman. Stop him."

A big-hatted, brawny man with a badge of authority on his coat stepped in front of Benton's car and raised one hand, saying:

"Stop. I've got to protect you fellows against your own rashness. Can't anybody but men fighting the fire go inside these lines."

Carver looked serene and nudged Benton, who roared: "What's the matter with you, sheriff? Don't you want me to blow out your fire? This man is my assistant."

And, as the sheriff waved them ahead with apologies, Carver drove past the indignant camera squad made up of footage men from nearby and staff men from two big cities. He would not have been human had he resisted temptation to shoot a triumphant look at Zanff, who ran bellowing to the sheriff, leading a chorus of demands that all cameramen be admitted at their own risk.

The harassed official waved them aside when a cry billowed along the front line of spectators: "Looters! There are looters inside the lines."

"No, there aren't," bawled the sheriff, angered at this intimation that he wasn't handling the situation properly. "There's no one but the firemen and some of my deputies in there."

"Sheriff, my father, John Merridew is in there," screamed a young woman, trying to force her way to the cordon. "He slipped past the guards a little while ago in spite of all I could do to stop him. He ran back to get some money he had hidden there."

"I told everybody to stay out. I can't be dragging out grown men who ought to know better," roared the sheriff, angrily.

In a poorly hushed aside to the officers gathered around Benton's car, he added: "The old miser! keeping money in there."

"Keep back, folks," he shouted when the girl's vigorous pushing started a forward surge. "We're getting ready to blow up that row of houses that are afire, to prevent it spreading to the tanks. Benton, you'll have your torpedo ready as soon as we do that?"
Benton nodded. He hurried away from the fire with officers guiding him to the nearest magazine where he could fill his empty torpedo with nitro.

Carver remained inside the lines, and started forward, carrying his camera case wrapped in asbestos.

Stretching her arms appealingly after him, the Merridew girl cried: “Mister, please look for my father in that white house and make him get out quick. You may have to drag him, he’s so stubborn.”

Eric promised, and hurried toward the fire. It towered hundreds of feet above the small dwellings which formed a black silhouette base to the enormous torch. Carver didn’t try for that long shot, which did not show the well spouting the flaming oil. Elkins doubtless had shot all that showed above the house tops. What Eric wanted was a “tilt” showing the whole raging column from top to bottom, as well as exclusive footage of the fire-shooter accomplishing the seemingly impossible.

Very businesslike, he carried his asbestos-camouflaged camera past workmen and firemen frantically stringing wires, too busy to do anything but warn him they were preparing to blast the houses which were afire. Sirens would signal before the detonation, warning all away. Dodging these men, Carver slipped into a deserted cottage which was shriveling in the terrific heat.

Still keeping his camera protected, he slipped a filter over its aperture, already equipped with a telephoto lens for long distance shots. The filter was used ordinarily in shooting directly at the sun—he had used it in filming the eclipse—and it now enabled him to focus on this blinding, artificial glare.

Partly sheltered inside the house, he aimed his camera out through a heat-broken window commanding a view of the blazing gusher, a scant five hundred feet away. The Long Tom lens was good for clear detail at that distance. Carver shot the tilt, showing the volcano from its man-made crater to its cloud-reaching apex. Satisfied that he had filmed something extraordinary, he started outdoors, and then recalled his promise to that girl. The little white house was only a few hundred feet down the row, he would need only a few seconds to run and look.

First setting his heavy camera back inside the doorway for shelter, he ran along, hugging the walls to escape that sweep of heat. Without ado, he flung open the door of the white house, and almost fell over two men who were madly struggling.

Merridew, an elderly man with a withered face and wiry body was resisting desperately, but was in a bad way. His shifty, younger assailant, a hard-boiled tough who looked like he might be a tramp attracted by the spectacular blaze, was beating savagely at his victim’s head, which Merridew tried to shield with both arms.

Carver’s abrupt entrance startled both men, and Merridew dropped his arms which had been taking the blows. His assailant promptly smashed a club down on his head, knocking Merridew insensible. As he fell, Eric sprang forward and drove a furious punch at the slugger’s head, catching him flush on the jaw and knocking him with a crash against a window on the opposite wall. To the cameraman’s surprise, the ruffian did not wait to fight but hurled himself bodily through the window, vanishing into the smoke outdoors.

With an insensible man to remove promptly from danger, Carver did not pursue, but stooped to pick up Merridew. As he did so, three strange, armed deputies burst through the doorway, shouting:

“Caught in the act! No mercy for looters!”

Their guns swung ominously toward him. Snatching up the unconscious
householder, Carver faced them, yelling:

"Stop! I'm no looter, I'm a cameraman. I just chased out a yegg who slugged this man. His daughter asked me to look for him here, and I caught a thug beating him up. He jumped out that window."

"It's always some other fellow when you're caught," jeered one excitable deputy whose wits were inflamed by the night's sensations. "Get out of here quick, before they blow up this house. Come along peaceably. If that man dies, you're going to be shot quick. Looters have got to be snuffed out on the spot to show we mean business."

Carver lunged out carrying Merridew, with the deputies herding him, side and rear. When he demanded to be allowed to get his camera which he had left sheltered, they prodded him ahead with revolvers, warning him they would shoot instantly if he disobeyed. Realizing that they were in an overwrought condition where they would do just that, Eric stumbled along, burdened by the insensible man.

"The nerve of this fellow, calling himself a cameraman," scoffed a deputy. "Why, it was a cameraman who tipped us off that this looter was in that house. He described him. We got there just in time to stop a murder."

"A cameraman? Was he a dark, heavy-faced fellow?" demanded Carver, bitterly, as he realized that his plight was not due to chance but because his deadly rival had directed these blunderers.

"He wasn't thin-faced, for a fact. But you never mind how he looked," growled his captor. "Look around, boys, and see if you can spot that fellow, we need him as a witness."

"You'll never see that fellow if he can dodge you," assured Carver. "He's a rival who'd do anything to hurt me professionally."

"Aw, we know a looter when we catch one," sneered the deputy. "Hey, sheriff, we caught a looter who beamed a man."

With this eager shout, they headed for the spot where the sheriff was maintaining field headquarters. That official bustled forward excitedly, while a girl broke through the lines, heedless of all commands to stop, and ran toward the group.

"Looter?" exclaimed the sheriff. "Why, this is Benton's helper! What's the matter with you, men?"

"We caught him leaning over this unconscious man," insisted the deputy, stubbornly. "He was scowling like he'd just beamed him."

"He has saved my father," cried the Merridew girl, forcing her way to their side. "I asked this young man to bring out father."

"Looter! Lynch the ghoul!" howled some one, and the front rank of the crowd took up that savage yell of excitement-crazed humanity. An ominous surge forward sent the guards shouting for every one to stay back—the houses were going to be blown up in a minute.

CHAPTER IV.

PINNED DOWN WITHIN RANGE OF FIRE.

WHERE'S the looter?" demanded Merridew, opening his eyes. Wavering, they rested on Carver. "Him? Why this young fellow saved my life. He busted in just as a looter slugged me."

Struggling to his feet, he effusively shook Carver's hand while his daughter impulsively hugged the embarrassed cameraman. This unmistakable public demonstration promptly quieted the threatening outburst, while the sheriff turned angrily to his deputies, crying:

"You made a fine mess, grabbing the life-saver and letting the slugger escape. Get out of here, and take Merridew with you. That's all you're good
for. Young fellow, you’d better move back, too."

"Who started that lynching yell?" demanded the chagrined deputy, turning on the crowd. A conscientious spectator who had quailed silently during the mob frenzy, now pointed accusingly at Zanff, standing worried with the camera squad now inside the cordon.

The deputy darted forward, angrily bawling: "Durned if it ain’t that liar who sacked us on this fellow. Come on, men, we’ll run him out of the county."

The three raging deputies rushed at Zanff, who backed away in blustering alarm while the sheriff yelled for his men to throw the fellow out. While all attention was focused on this byplay, Carver darted back unnoticed toward the house where he had left his camera. Though peril impended, he raced on, hoping to save his picture box in time. Without it he would be helpless, and would lose all that fire film he had made, to say nothing of being unable to shoot the subject he desired. A quick dash to the house and back would save the camera from being buried.

Above the fire’s roar a siren began shrieking. The warning!

There was yet time for him to double back to safety if he turned and ran. Eric Carver was not the man to run from peril. His work carried him constantly into hazardous situations from which the ordinary man would shrink—an ace cameraman had to be absolutely fearless. It was only by risking danger that he could get big thrill exclusives for his news reel. Without pausing, he ran on, hidden by smoke which whipped down across the little street, blotting out everything for a moment.

Through this pall he groped, finally locating the door of the house in which he had cached his camera. Smoke from an adjoining, burning house filled the room. Carver felt around in the smoke, and his groping hands found the camera, still snugly wrapped in asbestos. Now to get back. One leap would carry him out and away.

A thundering explosion rocked the row and, for a fraction of a second, he was dazzled by the brilliant flash as walls were blown away, letting in the blinding firelight. Then an avalanche of crashing débris swept over him as he was thrown down by the shock of the blast. Instantly succeeding that blinding light came a sudden blackness into which Carver’s consciousness plunged at once.

Blistering heat awakened him to painful consciousness after minutes of insensibility. Dazed and aching, Carver opened his eyes to find himself facing that spouting pillar of flame. All intervening houses and derricks had been blown down, and he lay pinned in a mass of débris which was like a photoplay set, open on two sides.

An end and one side of the cottage seemed to remain upright, although really the entire dwelling had been blown over backward, the wall facing the fire being leveled flat, while all wreckage sloped upward in a ragged pile toward the rear. This back heap concealed Carver from the crowd and from the officers holding back the spectators, while parts of the débris were burning uncomfortably near him and weaving nearer.

Eric tried to free himself and found that, while the débris around his head and torso could be dislodged by pushing, his body from the waist down was pinned tightly by wreckage. He was lying facing the fire, while beams pressed down with crushing force on his legs. Try as he would, he could not pull his limbs free.

He moved his arms to knock away the jumble of broken wood about him, and found that something heavy was
weighting his right hand. Firmly gripped there was his camera to which he had clung through everything, having instinctively shielded his face with it when the blast bombarded wreckage around him.

When he tried to raise his head, he found that a ragged-edged section of roof was resting on his skull. That had dealt the blow which put him out momentarily. Caught thus, head and legs, he crouched in a shelter of débris, through chinks of which he could see small fires approaching threateningly.

He was in a tight place and, unless the fire fighters came quickly to explore the ruins, he was in danger of being burned to death. Experimentally, he raised a call for help, which was drowned in the overwhelming bellow of the burning gusher.

Eric thrashed his arms and found that he could move them in a limited area. Carefully shoving his camera out through the ragged opening facing the fire, he perched it on some flat wreckage and was preparing to make an effort to lift the timbers off of his legs when a ghostly apparition walked into his view, coming from behind the houses.

Instantly Carver ceased to think about his peril, and remembered only that he was a cameraman. Reaching out with an effort which tortured his pinioned legs, he focused his camera by instinct plus experience, and began to crank.

“That 'Salamander' Benton,” he decided, ignoring his pain.

The ghostly apparition marched forward, swathed from head to soles in asbestos, snowy white in the blinding firelight. Asbestos gloves protected his hands and asbestos boots covered his shoes. His head was shielded by an asbestos helmet with a gas mask attachment and isinglass windows, giving Benton the appearance of some terrifying white monster.

He carried, wrapped in asbestos sheets, a torpedo further protected by a vacuum shell which insulated its contents from that terrific heat. From this torpedo trailed detonating wires being reeled out as Benton, the human salamander, walked carefully yet boldly into the killing range of that fire. No man not similarly protected could have approached within four hundred feet of that spouting volcano. Even Carver was forced to shield his head beneath a fold of the asbestos covering his camera.

Benton neared the great jet of flame, approaching from windward, yet risking the menace of a sudden shift in wind. Each move was calculated to the dot. Placing his torpedo as near as he dared to the fire's base without being actually against it, he retreated swiftly, this time facing the camouflaged camera which was recording his every move.

This was a tense moment, filled with menace for both the fire-shooter and the cameraman. If the fire melted that shell holding nitroglycerin, Benton would be blown to atoms, yet he marched back steadily with no sign of panic. Carver, in his dugout, ground grimly at his camera crank, wondering if the torpedo would throw blazing oil to where he was pinned down, a prisoner.

Every instinct of self-preservation clamored for him to cease shooting film, and to cower down or to claw madly to release his pinioned legs. The little fires snaking through the splintered rubbish were creeping nearer. Soon they would be around him.

Benton passed out of sight, hurrying back to shelter before signaling a batteryman to sink the detonating plunger. Carver was left alone, out in this peace-time No Man's Land, menaced on two sides yet sticking to his machine, cranking desperately as he waited for the crash. It came.
With a stunning shock, the detonated nitro exploded. As though a giant had blown a great puff across his gas tip, that dazzling pillar of flame went out in a wink. This instantaneous change from glaring day to dark night made Carver think for a few seconds that the nitro blast had blinded him. Still he kept on turning the crank, thinking of what a "thrill" it would provide for Midworld’s next issue—that weird ghost and its torpedo which blew out a gusher fire as one might blow out a candle—\textit{puff}!

Then he saw fires creeping close to him and knew he was not blind. When fire fighters swarmed forward to beat out the small blazes and to cap the gusher, Carver shouted for them to free him. Quickly men tore the wreckage from off him, and he staggered up on legs wrenched but sound. It had been a great adventure, well worth the giant “candle.”

"Carver, you sure put it over on us," cried Elkins, rushing forward to congratulate, as the camera squad which had made long shots from safe range, trooped after the fire fighters. The great light was out and they could not take anything more. There was nothing to do but return to Los Angeles.

Eric asked a question, and Elkins laughed shortly: "Zanff? Oh, the last we saw of him, those mad deputies were chasing him south, promising to take him apart. At the rate Zanff was running, he must be passing Pasadena now."

Carver smiled happily as he clung to the camera which held a smashing thrill for Midworld, exclusive.

\section*{JUST GRATITUDE}

\textbf{YES, suh!}” declared “Cactus” Jones, a far-away look in his eyes as he peered at the crowd of Easterners who were staring at the old Westerner. “Yes, suh! Gratitude is experienced by all animules—snakes included!”

“Take Oswald, as fine a rattler as ever crawled. Oswald was found by my pard, Bill Brown, wedged between a couple of big rocks, which had fell on him when he was baskin’ in the sun. Bill pried the rocks away, and Oswald follered him around, registerin’ gratitude like a movie actress!”

The Easterners stared, fascinated by the idea of a pet rattlesnake.

“One night,” old Cactus Jones continued, drawing upon his imagination, “Bill woke up, sort of worried. He looked over the side of his bunk, but Oswald was nowhere to be seen. Usual, you know, he coiled up right next to the bunk.

‘Oswald!’ Bills calls, wonderin’ where the reptile was.

“All he could hear was a faint rattle. So he lights a candle, wakes me up, and we step outside our two-room shack. The rattle was louder then. What do you think we saw?”

None of the Easterners could guess.

“Well, we saw what was the matter. Oswald had heard a prowling Indian, jumped at him but missed, and had chased him into the other room. Oswald had that Indian a prisoner there, suh. Yes, suh! And Oswald’s tail was sticking out of the window and rattling like a dinner bell, calling Bill to come and capture that there redskin! That’s gratitude!”

The Easterners seemed unbelieving. One of them asked: "Is that a perfectly true story, Mr. Cactus?"

The old man drew himself erect. “Suh! I’ve lived in these parts for goin’ on forty years—and I ain’t never been lynched yet!”
What A Wallop~

By Seaburn Brown

(COMPLETE IN THIS ISSUE)

CHAPTER I.

SMALL BUT GAME.

This vital human document is looped around "Kid" Terrier, who was one of them chaps you can't help likin'—same as yer millionaire uncle with the let's-call-it-a-day heart.

The first time the Kid fluttered inside my horizon he tipped the hand he was playin' in this world of bum wine, stunnin' wimmen an' nasal song. I was shovin' my way through a mob around the ring in "Happy" Austin's gym, after watchin' the Utica Cyclone mop up a mess of sparrin' mates. I almost stumbled over a strange youngster.

"Look out, sonny; ye'll get hurt," I rapped.

"Aw, go soap yer neck!" he yapped shrilly. Then he shut his mouth so hard it popped, an' his eyes opened wide.

"Gee!" he said. "Gee! I didn't reco'nize you. Ain't you Mr. Slipp, who managed Phil Crimp when he was middleweight champ?"

"Yeah," I answered, squeezin' past. I was clear of the press when I discovered a weight, attached to my coat tail by two grimy fists.

"What'sa idea?' I growled.

"I hung on," piped the Kid, bold, "because you want to talk to me."

"I—what?"

"You want to talk to me," he insisted. "Who wouldn't want to talk to the guy who'll be next bantam champ of the world?"

I got wise. You can write all the sermons you please on the risks an' dangers to girls in bein' stage-struck; but they ain't nothin' whatever to the bumps awaitin' the boy who gets fired by readin' the kayo record of J. Dempsey, the annual opponent of a prominent member of the marine corps alumni.

I side-tracked to a deserted corner of
the big room, set chairs so we'd face each other, an' told him to sit.

"Now," I remarked, "begin at the beginnin'. When did yer conduct first frighten the neighbors' babies?"

"Slice that summer sausage, Mr. Slipp!" he retorted. "I've licked every kid on the corner where I sling papers, up to a hundred an' thirty-fiv' poun's."

I got up.

"Come back in four or five years," I advised. "Ye're too much of a child."

"Oh, all right!" he blatted, injured-like, "I've given you the ground floor chance to handle me. I'm gonna fight, anyway. See? Mr. Slade is ready to start me whenever I say; only I like you better."

I sat down.

"'Porky' Slade'll sign you? That right—no hooey?"

"Sure he will."

"Son," I said, solemn, "take a tip from old 'Catnip' Slipp. Lay off Slade. He's got a fine brain; but his heart ain't big enough to pump power to the knee joints of a baby chick. He won't care nothin' about you. He'll burn you out—throw you in against experienced men out of yer class, just to make coin while you last."

"Then you sign me," he urged. "I ain't no child; I'm nearly twenty-one, even if I don't look it."

"Nope," I decided, preparin' to flee. "I got 'nough trouble on my palsied palms now. Six fighters in my stable an' not one with the class of a 1920 model woman's hat. But remember this; if you let Slade start you—don't sign anything."

Well, the memory of that slim kid's peach-blossom, beardless cheeks, an' the thought of Slade matchin' him with seasoned batters who'd half kill him, sort of worried me.

A week later, when I heard that Slade had carded the boy with a hard-hittin' but slow veteran, "Battlin" Braley, I numbered my intellectual phiz among those ringside.

They was in the curtain raiser. Braley weighed in some six pounds over the bantamweight limit, an' with his face, which bore the record of his eighty-bout career, he loomed like a bulldog pitted against a pup fox terrier. I doubt that the Kid ever weighed one hundred and eighteen pounds at his heaviest; an' he was frail as a soap bubble.

Slade had him announced as "Newsboy" Nolan.

As to the fight: Have you ever seen one of them little white-an'-brown terriers in action when it's out-an'-out mad? That was just the way the boy tore into Braley.

He didn't know nothin'. He had nothin' but a heart bigger'n his tow-head. But, man! How he did battle!

Swarmin' like a hive of bees, he smothered Braley with sheer speed an' ferocity for two rounds.

After that, of course, Braley checked on his roll of experience an' countered the novice to death. Beaten to a pulp, the boy never took a backward step, voluntary—though he was knocked end over end plenty.

Toward the middle of the fourth period the boy's heart couldn't sting his legs into holdin' him up; an' he was crawlin', blind, in Braley's direction when the ref counted him out.

Maybe my pleasin' voice was a bit husky when I ankled into the dressin' room, but the Kid spotted it for mine. I know he did; for his eyes was swelled shut.

"'Lo, Mr. Slipp," he mumbled. "Ain't I a sweet fighter? I'd 'a' knocked that big stiff for a basket of coffin handles if he hadn't caught me with a lucky punch! Slade says he'll let me fight 'im again."

"He will, eh?" I gritted. "Where's Slade?"

"Somewhere around," the Kid panted.
"'S too late to see him. He wouldn' match me 'less I signed a three-year contrac'; so I signed."

"Y'want me?" inquired Slade, easin’ in at the moment.

"Not in particular," I said. "Jus' figured I'd congratulate you. Likely prospect, here."

"So—so," he said correctly, an', lowerin' his tone, "Won't las' long; but he'll draw well—sympathy of the crowd, y'know."

"So I was thinkin'," I parried. "What's this contract worth to you?"

I took him off balance. He stared.

"Five hundred," he cracked at last.

"Bertha, the smellin' salts!" I yelped. "Is his teeth filled with diamonds?"

"More likely with molasses candy," he carped. "But you want him or you wouldn't have come in here."

"Give you a hundred."

"I'll split the difference an' call it three hundred," he offered. The Shylock! "An' speak quick before I raise it."

"I'll pay it," I rasped, unbuttonin' the bank roll; "an' in passin' I'd like to go on record as regardin' the late Jesse James as a prince of a guy, an' a rank amateur when it comes to collectin'."

"Hooray!" whooped the boy. "Am I gonna be your champ, Mr. Slipp?"

"Get yer clothes on," I snapped. "We'll hunt a doctor an' have yer right ear took down before it cauliflowers."

"But I'd like a tin ear—look sporty," he objected.

"Oh, hell!" I responded.

Slade stood by, chucklin', while I got the boy assembled an' led him out. We hopped a cab an' hit for my rooms; an' I was so boiled up I couldn't sling a word all the trip; but I composed a speech that would raise the hair on a scalped Indian.

A medic fixed up the boy. I shoed him out soon as possible, then opened the throttle of my speech tank.

"Son," I howled, "I'm a terrible sap. I forked over three hundred berries, American currency, to-night for—"

"Sure, ye're a sap," he interrupted. "You could 'a' got me for nothin' las' week."

"I done it," I shouted, "because I wanted to keep you from—"

"Who wouldn't?" he snorted.

I was gettin' madder; yet in spite of myself the mite's nerve an' faith in himself was chasin' my nanny all over the joint. It hurt to tell him that if he stuck to the game he'd be old an' sick in body before his time from the punishment. That he simply wasn't rugged enough to stand the pace; an' that, worst of all, I'd bought this contract only to prevent Slade from takin' advantage of him. Yet it had to be done.

"Kid," I said, "you realize I'm hep to this fightin' racket, don't you?"

"I'll say!" he enthused. "I know they nicknamed you 'Catnip' because ye're so slick an' smooth with the fans an' the sport writers an' the promoters an' everybody that they pur for you like a kitten purs over catnip. That's why I like you; why I want you to get the benefit outa me."

"Thanks," I said shortly. "Now, then, basin' my judgment on the experience an' talent you just ranted about, I tell you this: You ain't got a ghost of a show in the ring for anything except a raft of crushin', cribbin' beatin's. An' that's that."

I guess my sayin' that hurt him worse'n a slash across the mug with a whip—an' me, too.

CHAPTER II.

A FEMININE INTERLUDE.

FOR a hellishly long minute he sat stock-still in his chair; his small face, with its pug nose an' bandaged eyes, growin' whiter an' whiter between the black an' livid bruise patches.

After a bit he tried to speak, raisin' a dry whisper I couldn't have heard
If it hadn't been so still in the room: "You—mean—that—Mr. Slipp?"

I felt like an awful fool afterward; but with his voice came a flash of something like heat through me that puckered my windpipe like a green persimmon puckers yer mouth.

It squeezed out words I had no thought in formin': "Gosh, no, son! I was just kiddin' to try yer nerve. Why—why—say, d'ye think I'd pay three hundred bucks to Slade if I didn't know you got the goods, Kid? I ain't so dumb. Slade was an onion to let you go."

"Gee!" he kind of bleated. "Gee whillikers! I'll be a champ!"

"Sure!" I gasped.

He groped for my knee an' pounded it.

"Say, Mr. Slipp, get me a return go with that ham I fought to-night; an' after him I wanta lick the Utica Cyclone—him that I seen mixin' it that day in the gym. Will you, huh?"

Feature that! The Utica Cyclone was then one of the toughest featherweights in the racket—an' without doubt the meanest.

"Both of 'em," I said, "are too heavy for you now, sonny. You need experience; an' unless you grow to featherweight poundage ye'll stick with the bantams. You can't start the lessons in the middle of the book. In chapter one we'll throw yer moniker, 'Newsboy' Nolan, into the sink."

"What'll it be, Mr. Slipp?"

"What d'you suggest?"

He scratched his nob. "The 'Mad Murderer,'" he yapped brightly.

"Too tame for you," I rejected.

"For the first hundred years let's present you as 'Kid Terrier.'"

I had to get fights for him to keep up the weak-kneed pretense I'd lapsed into. The lad was certain he was a Terry McGovern an' Battlin' Nelson rolled into one. He wasn't to blame—he had my word for it.

My plan was to grease him through a flock of soft set-ups, so he wouldn't be injured permanent, an' in the meanwhile gradually unfold the seamy side of pug life an' chill his enthusiasm.

I never worked so hard to boost a scrapper up the ladder as I did to hold Kid Terrier down. Fury of attack carried him to wins over the bums I allowed him to take on. In addition he met two good boys—Lacey Taylor an' Frankie O'Doon. This wasn't strictly accordin' to Hoyle's by-laws, nor the rules an' regulation of the boxing commission, nor my conscience.

He met Taylor first. He had howled so persistent to upheave a boy with a rep that I had to do something about it. I got Taylor an' his manager—a pretty white guy—together an' laid my cards on the mahogany.

"I ain't the fight-fixin' breed," I told 'em. "I'm merely aimin' to cure this youngster. Lick him, sure; but don't hurt him—an' I've got a hundred iron men lookin' for a home, for which you are welcome to open the door of yer cozy purse."

"We'll do it," Taylor promised. "An' concernin' the hundred—keep it to buy an electric train for the boy at Christmas." Still some people say there ain't no humanity in the leather-pushin' profesh!

So the Kid lost every round to Taylor by from here to the third-story elevator landin' of the jail in Constantinople, Persia—yet wasn't mauled to speak of.

I hunched that the outcome would discourage him. Did it?

"Jiminy, Mr. Slipp," he proclaimed. "I'd a' sent that tramp to the dye works if he'd 'a' stood up an' fought like a
The villain came out fightin'. For five minutes I threw punches—chairs; fought with feet an' hands an' profanity—before I finally knocked him unconscious an', in berserk rage, killed him. He was one of the fastest mice I ever encountered personally.

I mopped my noble forehead an' sank wearily on a chair.

"Well, Kid——" I stopped an' stared in amazement. Kid Terrier was posed immovable as a farmhand when the boss has gone to town, holdin' the little jane, an' lettin' his soul drip in sweet, gooey gobs through his eyes an' feast on her map.

She had fainted. Or had she? One way or the other, her glims were closed, an' her lips parted precisely right to give the greatest effect of pearly grinders gleamin' between them heart-spurrin' lips.

I don't trust wimin. "Kid!" I barked harshly.

"Oh-h-h-h, Mr. Slipp," he crooned. "Ain't she—ain't she be-e-e-e-aautiful?"

"I reckon," I gloomed. "So's a well-put-up red-brick chimney, for that matter. Pitch 'er on the bed, toss a glass of water on her face, an' let's blow. You got a fight comin' up to-morrow night; need sleep."

CHAPTER III.

ADDED IMPETUS.

He didn't seem to hear me. Stayed as he was, hypnotized. Presently she slid back an eyelid, showin' a peeper which I'd have sworn was the prettiest in the universe if she hadn't uncovered its runnin' mate immediately, which made it two of a kind. They was blue eyes; deep, swimmin', misty blue—real sweet, an' disturbin'ly wise, if you get what I mean.

"Merci, monsieur," she trilled; an' whatever of resolution the Kid had saved from the wreck of her eyes melted in the warmth an' charm of her
voice. It was gentle an’ murmurn’, like the ripple of water over mossy stones.

“No call for mercy, miss,” I growled. “The mouse will trouble you no more—he is welterin’ in his gore.”

She blushed prettily—or cleverly; an’ the Kid set her down.

“I forgot an’ spoke zee French,” she apologized. “I mean, I thank you. Zee mouse to me eez appalling.”

Here the Kid backwashed a sigh that waved the curtains on the far side of the room.

She darted a quick glance at him. “An’ you save me from zee fall w’en I so foolishly faint,” she caroled. “Ah! You are so stro-o-o-oong, so capable—like zee boxair. Non?”

Then I knew she’d heard my blast about the Kid’s next fight.

He swelled like a poisoned pup. “I am a boxer,” he declaimed. “Champ of the world’s bantamweights, only I got to entice the belt wearer into a ring to prove it.”

I oozed toward the door. “Come on, now,” I ordered. “We got a date with ‘Kid Shut-eye.’”

“So sorry you mus’ go,” babbled the frill. “Your frien’ shall remain zee few—zee vairy few—moments, zat I may explain my gratitude. Yes? He weel follow you shortly.”


“Shucks!” I chored—an’ exited.

I felt better when she kept her word. The Kid floated into our coop before I had my shoes off, steppin’ as if he walked on eggs, wearin’ a silly, happy arrangement of features.

“Forget it, Kid!” I commenced. “Wimmen has knocked more guys out of the fightin’ vocation than John L. Sullivan did. I wouldn’t trust a skirt if I saw it on a person with a beard in Scotland.”

“She’s comin’ to see me fight to-mor-
in by the mob after the catastrophe, an' when she got clear lit out for home.

The Kid pulled himself together sufficient to navigate an' insisted on makin' tracks for her room.

She met us with a dazzlin' smile. "Mon Dieu!" she squealed. "You were magnificent, mon ami; only—unfortunate. You are zee superior pugilist. Oui?"

That was better'n a shot of hop to the Kid.

"I hope to tell ya!" he bellered, truculent. "I was gettin' my secon' wind an' had the bum's system solved when Mr. Slipp threw in the towel. Made me quit cold!"

The condition of the Kid's face chased a shadow acrost hers.

"You are hurt?" she cried.

"Naw," he denied, sullen. "He couldn't hurt me."

"Surely not," she laughed—an' the laugh died as she caught my eye.

"Monsieur le Manager ees somber," she wheezed timidly. "Perhaps if I dance he well cheer up."

An' with another laugh, that tinkled as lightly as her tiny dogs flew, she hopscothed us a fandango which for speed an' grace would make Joie Ray look sluggish as Man-o'-War runnin' on stove legs. She sure had a spry tendon hook-up!

She topped the exhibition with a spin that dizzied yers respectfully—an' spoiled it with a tormentin' question: "Are you gentlemen acquaint wiz zee Utica Cyclone?"

"What say," I moaned forcibly, "we daddle out an' scoff up some hot groceries? Where did you learn to dance, sister? Ain't this a splendid evenin', folks?"

She refused to be steered from the topic. "You know heem?"

"Sure, we know the false alarm," complied the Kid.

"So do I," she said.

The Kid clenched his fists.

"I was leaving zee boxing hall," she continued slowly, "w'en Meestair Cyclone came wiz his seconds down zee aisle for zee main bout. In zee mob I was pin'. He elbow me by zee accident; an' we'ne he see w'at 'e 'as done, 'e apologize so kind an' plead for zee knowledge of my name—"

"Didja tell 'im?" The Kid's voice spurted ilke a gush of steam from a safety valve.

"But certainly not!" she squealed. "I inform heem zat he insult me by acting so familar wizout zee introduction."

"I'll lick 'im—the cur!" squalled the Kid, springin' to his feet.

"Oh!" She kind of caught her breath. "Oh—how gran'! An' I weel attend zee administrator of zee rebuke! Oh!"

I relieved my portion of the sofa. In boiled-over dignity I think I must have stood fourteen hands high.

"Miss," I threw at her, "you are a meddlin', brainless fool. An' you, Kid—if ye're love crazy enough to tackle a seasoned veteran eight poun's heavier'n you—can go to hell so far as I'm in it. I'm done!"

The Kid flushed an' struck a sour note: "Ye're talkin' mighty raw in the presence of this here lady, Mr. Slipp."

"So?" I choked. "I'll see that you won't be offended by the sharps an' flats of my broadcast from this writin'."

An' I decamped.

CHAPTER IV.

A BREEZE AND A CYCLONE.

NEXT p. m.—as I expected—the Kid hunted me up, lookin' sheepish as a wool ranch.

"I hope you ain't mad at me, Mr. Slipp," he said nervously, "I—hell! I sure do appreciate all ye've done for me. I wouldn't know what to do without you in my corner. An'—be honest, now—I gotta lick this Utica breeze, after what she said. Ain't I?"
I couldn’t stay sore at him. It was the manner he had.

“Son,” I trapped him, “as a favor to me, hike along to Austin’s gym an’ ask the Cyclone to box a round with you; he’s workin’ out this aft. Do that before you challenge ‘im.”

“O. K.,” he said, glad to be agreeable. “Twon’t make no difference, though. I’m gonna corner ‘im in front of a crowd anyhow.”

When we blew into Austin’s the Cyclone had worked up a swell sweat an’ was ready to taper off an’ pounce on the rubbin’ slab.

I dispatched the Kid to the dressin’ stall an’ buttonholes the Cyclone.

“Won’t you wait an’ spar a round with my bantam?” I asked.

“Some other day,” he refused. “I’ve worked ’nough.”

“Please—just half a round,” I begged.

“What for?” He was suddenly inquisitive.

“Listen,” I said. “Kid Terrier’s hatched a loony fancy that he wants to fight you. Nutty, of course. Ye’re five years ahead of him.”

“Ain’t he the spunky little buck what’s tryin’ to make a keen French filly I seen at the smoker?”

“’At’s him.”

“I’ll spar wit’ ’im,” he unbent, a steeley glitter lightin’ his eyes. I was some pleased to note that glitter.

“Here he comes,” I counseled. “He needs Hades kicked out of him!”

The Kid leaped into the ring sprylike an’ looked at the Cyclone like a blowtorch high-hattin’ a candle.

“Hello, you bent handle bar,” he flung. “What I forget to do to you to-day will be continued in our next.”

The Cyclone snarled somethin’ that didn’t get past his porcelain bridge—feinted fast, side-stepped trickily, an’ pasted the Kid in the mush.

I bestirred my old bones to clamber in an’ claim my boy’s body while it was still warm; for this Cyclone struck like a coal miners’ union. But the Kid survived the wallop an’ waltzed away!

If you ain’t guessed it by now, I won’t keep you agitated. The Cyclone had pulled the punch—hadn’t hit a tenth as hard as he could have.

They tore into each other then. Nip-an’-tuck it went for the full round; an’ the outburst of cheers for Kid Terrier at the close showed that nobody in the joint but me had detected the Cyclone’s double cross. He was sore over the French jape; he’d slipped it on me by makin’ sure the Kid would insist on a genuine fight with him.

The Kid was totally off the highway with joy. He blatted his cravin’ to crumble the Cyclone into the “Sic ’em, Tige!” face of the sport writers present. It was senseless to talk to him.

The French frill opened her door to encounter a garglin’ maniac by name of Catnip Slipp. “Monsieur!” she sopranoed. “Monsieur, w’at eez wrong? Eez zee Keed Terrier dead?”

“No yet,” I whooped. “But he will be, next week—on yer account.”

“W’at ’as happen’? I do not understan’?”

“You wouldn’t. The Utica Cyclone has a crush on you. He let the Kid make a showin’ with ’im so’s he can murder him in a reg’lar bout. That fight’s gotta be stopped! I come to get you to vamp the Kid outa the notion.”

“Oh,” she said, calm as the surface of a bowl of ice. “Eez zat all?”

“Ain’t it enough?”

She tilted her chin.

“I love zee Keed,” she declared fiercely. “I love heem; an’ he mus’ become zee champion for zee future of us both. I weel not stop ze fight. I weel attend eet. No?”

“Wimmen ain’t allowed to view executions at the State prison,” I spared. “But I s’pose they ain’t no law to hold you away from this one.”
She wrung her hands in a frenzy. "He *muss* become zee champion!" she discorded wildly.

"Of which cemetery?" I fumed, an’ beat it.

The sight of Kid Terrier joggin’ along an aisle to the ring where the Utica Cyclone awaited him forced a comparison with a sheep negotiatin’ a runway to compete with a butcher.

He passed within touchin’ distance of the French broad, who had a seat behind our corner. He promoted a gleeful grin for her consumption, the net profit of which was a vacant half smile in return. Her eyes was riveted on the forbiddin’ physique of the Cyclone.

Some parlor experts whine that a fighter’s second is of no special help to anybody but the towel an’ sponge industry. This opinion can serve as exhibits 1 to 10, in any case versus parlor expertin’. Smart handlin’ has tripped the dope apple cart in more fights than the Democrats have won in Mississippi.

The above pearl of wisdom ain’t offered as an alibi; merely as a preface to this leather brawl.

It was to be a ten-round tussle. The Kid was in for a clubbin’. My business was to pilot him through an’ escape a kayo.

"So," I directed him, "keep movin’—right on top of ’im all the way. Forget you own a right hand, except for blockin’—unless you spot a fool-proof layout for a cross. Jab ’im to death with yer left. If ever he gets you on the run an’ punches flat-footed—ye’re ready for yer flannel nightie."

Before the first round was six punches old I realized that the Kid was keyed-up for the fight of his life, Maybe it was because of the dancin’ frill; maybe on account of the dislike he nursed for the Cyclone. Maybe it was due to the strange fact that every athlete has a supreme battle in his system so far above his average that he delivers it but once—maybe it was a combination of all three.

Whatever the cause, Kid Terrier stepped around the speedy Cyclone like a whirlwind around a barn an’ left-handed him into a take-off on the leanin’ tower of Pisa. The round was ours with some seven hundred pokes left over.

There was just one discord in the first stanza. The Cyclone resorted to body counters, an’ as the round ended he laced a punch to the Kid’s stomach that vibrated my personal diaphragm.

My boy’s body was red from the wallops when the bell liberated him to scoot to the ropes an’ hang over for a word with the jane. She didn’t appear to notice him; an’ I saw a look that smacked of treachery pass between her an’ the Cyclone.

The Kid was too excited to take the slight to heart. I taxed him about the stomach sock. He swore he could absorb a thousand like it—an’ itched to “finish this cripple next time out!”

Still I contrived, round after round, to restrain him to my scheme. Even that was hopeless. Sentiment an’ all that is fine an’ dandy; but prize fightin’ is a matter-of-fact business.

The Cyclone, amazed at the Kid’s viciousness an’ speed, set out to wear him down by counterpunchin’—same as Tunney did to Dempsey at Philly. He was too heavy an’ strong. It worked.

The turnin’ point was reached in the fifth period. Belt line punishment—though he wouldn’t admit it or believe it—had weakened the Kid. An’ all to once a gosh-awful sock, rippin’ upward right where the ribs end, dropped the Kid.

I whooped at him to stay down nine seconds. Not him!

I hoped he’d go down again for keeps. He didn’t. He took a terrible thrashin’ that robbed him of every asset but his pain-twisted grin an’ enough
strength to totter from a neutral corner to his own for the recess.

Somehow, I couldn't hint "quit" to him. I never said a word; an' he was that breathless he couldn't. I yanked full duty from every second of that minute. I cleared his head. But there was no restorin' the kick to his legs.

I was waitin' for the bell, prayin' that the Cyclone'd be decent and ring down the curtain in a hurry, when dainty hands grasped the ropes an' pulled up alongside us—the French jane!

"Keed!" she shrilled, "you mus' use zee right. Smash 'im wiz eet—oh, so hard!"

"Idiot!" I boomed. "Leadin' a right to a bruiser like the Cyclone is suicide."

"Do eet, Keed," she insisted. "Eet eez ze right t'ing."

"I'd do anything for you, baby," the Kid drooled, love dumb. "I c'n kill 'im with either mitt."

The gong sliced off my premeditated remark; otherwise the Kid would've fought the next round with me.

Out he staggered. The Cyclone cagily feinted to make him lead, an'—sure enough! Kid Terrier lashed his right for the heart. The Cyclone beat him to the punch with a left hook that padlocked the night life of the Kid's brain.

While the referee enumerated, the Cyclone peered over his shoulder. I saw the same thing he did: The French broad winked!

CHAPTER V.
THE FISTIC FRILL.

In spite of this eye-witness evidence that somethin' beside the snuff smelled phoey in Copenhagen, I tendered the Kid nothin' but fumbled sympathy when this parachute brought him back to earth.

It was just as well: he felt lower'n a subway foundation.

"I'm all washed up, Mr. Slipp," he lamented. "I gotta see the little girl an' free her of her promise. She'll be waitin' for me."

She'd be waitin'—like hell, I figured inside myself. But she crossed me again. She was waitin'—an' they shoved off together.

My job was done. At last the Kid was wise to himself. Yet I couldn't side-step feelin' pretty blue for him. It was late, but I wasn't sleepy; so I was parked on the rubbin' table, eatin' cigarettes an' mournin', when Jimmy Burns, one of the Cyclone's handlers, looked in.

"Hard lines, Catnip," he harpooned meanlike. "Hate to bring bad news, but yer child prodigy has another trimmin' comin' to-night."

"How so?" I demanded.

"Why," he cracked, "that little French panic breezed to the Cyclone's corner as he was leavin' the ring an' spilled her address. He thought she'd be waitin' for him. She blew with the Kid! The Cyclone lit out after 'em, plenty sore."

In two quirks of a kangaroo's tail I was in a cab—the meter whirlin' like an electric fan. The frill's nest wasn't far from the Arena.

I overtook 'em a block from home. They had stopped. The Cyclone was with 'em.

The screech of brakes acted like a signal for the fighters to dodge into an alley. The jane disappeared in their wake.

What happened in there happened quick! for I done a hop, skip an' jump from the cab into the middle of events, to find Kid Terrier cheek to jowl with the cobblestones, the jane crammin' her fist into her teeth, stranglin' a scream, an' the Cyclone subsided to a dead calm—stretched out stiffen'n a Kentucky cocktail!
"Cripes!" I exploded. "What in—"

"Queek!" she yelped, clawin' me. "Hurry—revive zee Keed before eet eez too late!"

I slopped some reviver—six or eight fingers of it—out of my silver hip protector into the Kid's gullet, which hoisted him out of it like a derrick. He scrambled up with both mitts flyin'.

"Where is he?" he yoddeled.

"Eet eez all completed," chinned the frill. "See! Zere he repose. You 'ave knock heem out!"

The Cyclone was beginnin' to flutter around the edges. The Jane called the taxi commander. "Take zat man to 'is frien's," she ordered, pointin' to the Cyclone. I pushed a bill into the guy's fingers without lookin' at it; which proves how rattled I was!

Between us we propped the Kid an' walked him to her joint. He was considerably used up. The hooch in him helped. We spread him on the sofa. He gazed at us woozily.

"Shay," he gulped. "Shay—I tol' you I c'ud punch 'im pepless."

The Jane squealed applause: "You are zee gran' boxair—zee greatest!"

That burned me up.

"Kid, you require a load of quiet to collect yer nerves," I rapped. "The little lady an' me'll talk private."

"Certainly," she acquiesced, an' led the way into the hall.

"Sister," I said, "I'm wrapped up in Kid Terrier's future like a book in its cover. He can mosey along a lot better without wimmens than with 'em—particularly wimmens that play two fighters at once, holdin' off to see which way the wind of chance'll whistle.

"He ain't no champ—an' you know it. I'll start him again, though, now that he's developed a kayo kick——"

"He eez a champ!" she retorted, eyes blazin'. "But 'e'll nevair, nevair fight again."

"Meanin'?"

She stamped, sore. "He 'ad to be zee champ for me. You no see? You are zee beeze dumb-bell. He could not quit zee ring a loser, an' be 'appy. He 'ad to be zee champ in my eyes.

"Well, 'e eez, now. I vamp zee tough Cyclone—zee disgusting brute. I vamp 'im to follow me, affair I persuade zee Keed to lead wiz 'is right an' be knock-out. I could not endure to see heem so cruelly beaten. So I say, I vamp zee Cyclone to follow——"

"Because you had an idea that the Kid could kayo him?" I chortled my best sneer.

"Because," she chilled, "I knew zat I could knock-out zee Cyclone an' permit zee Keed to t'ink 'e did eet."

"You?" I quavered. "Pifle an' hooey!"

She flushed. "You 'ave 'eard of me?"

"Never knew you were alive till I lamped you here," I disputed.

"I," she declared, "am Mademoiselle Léonie, zee champion woman boxair of Europe——"

"You are her?" My eyes stuck out so you could have knocked 'em off with a fly swatter. I'd heard of that doughty female before I knew Lincoln was anything else but an automobile.

"Zee same. Zee Keed mus' nevair know. I transported to America to win zee fortune in zee ring, like zee great Carpentier. Alas! Eet ees zee deesgrace zee world over for zee woman to box fight. I am force' to teach zee dance for zee rolls an' coffee. I change zee name—I meet zee Keed—I—I love heem. An' now——"

"Now matters are worse'n ever," I wet-blanked. "He was cured of the fever to-night, before you hocus-pocused that knock-out in the alley. He'll be wilder'n ever to fight——"

"I repeat," she cut in. "You are zee ver' good manager—but zee beeg dumb-bell. Zee Keed could not marry me
w’ile a failure. He eez too proud. As for zee future—watch now!

Back we went to the Kid, whose first bleat stabbed me like an ice pick: “We’ll get spliced t’morra, baby. Then you watch yer sweet daddy snatch the trislin’ title belt!”

“Wonderful!” She clapped her hands. “You weel be my champion! But zee wedding mus’ wait.”

“Wait?”

“Wait till zee title eez won,” she said. “Zee terrible noses!”

“Noses?” The Kid an’ me hit the word together.

“Noses of zee boxairs—like zee Cyclone. Broken! Horrible! I could not wed zee man wiz zee broken nose. Yours eez not fracture—yet; not dish in. But perhaps in time to come—”

She shrugged. “Non?”

The Kid set his jaw. “We get spliced t’morra, baby. A little helpless frill like you ain’t safe loose in this burg. I’m gonna begin takin’ care of you right away, I am.”

“But zee title?”

He got up. “I can lick any bantam—any featherweight in the cock-eyed country, baby.”

“But assuredly!”

“You know that, don’t you, baby?”

“You ’ave demonstrate to-night—”

“Then t’hell with the title, baby—’at’s all I give a damn. We get spliced t’morra!”

“Mon Dieu, mon chéri! You are zee masterful man. We weel do as you weesh.”

“This little girl,” the Kid addressed me, “is all right.”

My eye stumbled on a row of very tiny, very white, much-skinned knuckles on the girl’s left hand.

“Kid,” I harped firmly, “you don’t know the half of it!”

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AIR SONG

By Cristel Hastings

UP and away where horizons are melting
Into a sea that is lost in gray mist,
Over brown plains and the white peaks of mountains
That only the sun and a moonbeam have kissed.

Away with the speed of an eagle’s wing, flying,
A plane sails aloft in a sea of clear blue,
The whirl of its motor like a beating heart’s throbbing,
Away like a bird that is soon lost to view!

Errand of daring, of courage, adventure,
Mission of peace—’tis all one to a plane,
Until, like an eagle, with wings spread to heaven,
A flyer comes home from the blue skies again!
The Light
Burners
By John Mersereau
Part III

A SERIAL—PART III.

Shortly after his arrival in the San Simeon district, Forest Ranger Caleb Gill was put to work tracing evidence of the murder of a fellow ranger.

The dying words of the man seemed to involve Marvin Landis, a butterfly collector, who lived with his daughter, June, on the reservation. Others thought the lawless and illusive clan of incendiaries in the neighborhood were connected with the crime.

Gill was treated hospitably at the Landis cottage. He found Landis strange and the daughter delightful. The manner of the man baffled him.

Later he was sent to a dance to get acquainted with the people. There he made an enemy of the Barstow clan by winning a very trying battle with Eli Barstow.

Back at the reservation headquarters, Superintendent Norton gave Gill six weeks in which to clear up the murder of the ranger and the mystery of the light burners. Government timber was being set on fire, and this had to be stopped.

After the rangers had successfully put out a forest fire, set by the light burners, Gill was given a day and a half in which to look about.

His first call was at Sloper’s Saw Mill. There he got his first suspicion that all was not well as far as Sloper went. Also that there was something mighty funny about the lumber Sloper was moving through the mill.

Chapter XV.

Three of a Different Kind.

He ranger sauntered over to the office, a small, separate frame structure, found the door ajar and stepped inside. But he paused there, flat-footed. Through a second open door, without intent, he stood looking straight into the lumberman’s private office. And there was Sloper, hunched over a shiny desk, engaged in a low-voiced conference with Eli Barstow!

Gill turned away. He had no desire to eavesdrop; and what he had already seen offered food for immediate and concentrated thought. Observance of this remarkable tête-à-tête alone had repaid the time and trouble required for the visit. But as he turned, he heard a chair scrape back; and he could not deafen his ears to Sloper’s full, deep-timbered voice.

“Sorry,” the mill owner was saying, “but I can’t make a place for you just now, Eli. Look me up later in the
season. Perhaps——” Sloper’s voice broke off short. “Why—hello there!” he called out, with a pleased surprise that was either real or exceptionally well simulated. He brushed by Barstow, hastening forward with extended hand. “You’re Gill, of course, our new ranger.”

Cale Gill met the mill owner’s clasp with a firm grip. He had no desire to antagonize Sloper, or any one else for that matter. An unsupported suspicion didn’t mean that one had to fly at the suspect’s throat; and certainly he was being greeted in a most cordial manner.

“I just dropped in for an unofficial call,” he said. “I hoped to meet you at the last Leesville dance, but——” He looked quickly past the lumberman, startled at his momentary lapse of caution and ready to defend himself if Eli Barstow had any notion of reopening their differences in the tricky manner he had once employed. But the big hill-billy was lounging easily in the doorway, staring vacantly into space.

Dave Sloper observed the ranger’s gesture, however, and his face sobered. “Come here, Eli!” he called peremptorily; and the mountaineer obediently shuffled forward. “Now we’re going to have a little get-together meeting,” he resumed smoothly. “We already have enough grudges to go round up here in the San Simeon without promoting a new one between two good fellows. You were lit the other night, Eli, and didn’t know what you were doing. Be yourself now and shake with the ranger. You’re willing, aren’t you, Gill?”

“More than glad to,” the young man responded, offering his hand. “I’m sorry that we had trouble.”

Eli Barstow’s sullen, flickering eyes narrowed and looked away. He was like a dangerous trained beast, afraid to reveal his hatred by attack, yet unwilling to be caressed.

“Shake with him, Eli!” If there was a steely note of command hidden in Sloper’s urging, it could well pass as solicitude to bring enemies together. “There! that’s the way to do it. Bygones are bygones, and let’s have a little shot around to drown all memories. A cigar, then, if liquor’s against your principles or digestion,” he insisted, as Gill declined with thanks.

“I’ll stoke up my pipe, if you don’t mind,” the ranger again begged off.

“Suit yourself; no accounting for tastes, as they say. But come along.” Sloper herded the others back into his private office and closed the door. From a desk drawer he extracted a bottle and two generous whisky glasses. He filled them both to the brim and handed one to Barstow. The other he raised aloft for an impromptu toast. “Sorry you won’t join us, Gill—but here’s to your long residence in the San Simeon. Bottoms up, Eli!”

Gill did not think it good form to observe with what graciousness Barstow joined in on the toast. His glance remained fixed on the pipe he was filling. But had he been watching, he might have detected a saturnine smile on the hill-billy’s lips as the glass touched them—and the hint of a warning lift to Dave Sloper’s farther eyebrow.

Eli Barstow did not tarry longer than the occasion demanded. With a mumbled word of leave-taking and a surly nod, he slouched out through the door to carry on with his lawful or unlawful affairs. Sloper jerked a thumb after him and smiled at Gill.

“Queer character,” he observed. “Rob for a friend and kill an enemy. You’re lucky, in a way, that I managed to patch things up between you.”

“I’m grateful, of course,” Gill said. “But do you really think he meant it?”

“Oh, absolutely! Eli’s tricky, but he doesn’t go back on a handshake. You can count on that.” The mill owner
shrugged. "Well, what do you think of my little plant here?"

"Tiptop! First-rate equipment, from what little I saw of it."

"Oh, it's just so-so," Sloper deprecated. "I can't afford improvements on the margin you fellows allow me. Actually, I've lost a barrel of money since my own timber was destroyed, and I've been forced to work in that confounded government burn. I'll be ruined if you have many more blazes tributary to here."

"But certainly you know the most you can afford to pay," Gill protested. "You buy on a stumpage basis, don't you, with a service scaler to tally your log cut?"

"Well—not precisely. You see, it's a sort of unusual situation. I'm the only operator on this side of the forest. I have to buy up these adjacent tracts of burn from the government, but they also have to sell to me—or let it rot.

"So when they put the hooks to me too hard, I simply threatened to close down permanently unless I could bid in the burn on a flat-acreage basis, my estimate against theirs. That's the only way I can keep my head above water, so much of the stuff proves worthless after the saws rip it up."

"But I saw a trainload of perfect timber coming in as I rode up."

"It varies," Sloper admitted. Naturally it can't all be bad, or I'd have no lumber to sell."

"That seems logical," the ranger chuckled, reaching for his sombrero. "But if you don't mind, just out of curiosity I'd like to take a look at your saws working on the stuff. And by the way, what is your average daily cut?"

For a first time, the lumberman's suave pose deserted him. He had been chafing inwardly from the very beginning of this casual cross-examination. After all his successful missionary work, here came a red-headed young

whippersnapper blundering into the heart of a delicate situation. A blackboard forester, with chalk still on his fingers, doing his damnedest to spill the beans!

Sloper's lips compressed. The young man might be a fighter, but he didn't look particularly keen. A good bluff—the old righteous indignation line—would head him off.

"Frankly, Gill, the details of my business are none of your affair," he retorted sharply. "And I don't like meddling. My contract was made by your superiors after due investigation. You're insulting them, as well as me, by questioning its provisions. I venture to say, even, that it might prejudice some one against you if I were to report your—well, presumption, to put it mildly."

"Pardon me," the ranger cut in quietly, "but I wasn't questioning the provisions of any contract. I was merely seeking enlightenment. The whole subject is new and interesting to me. I didn't suspect that it would be distasteful to you."

"Nonsense! you misinterpreted me, my boy; and I guess I misunderstood you. Let's have no hard feelings." Sloper was his unctuous, ingratiating self again. "I'll be only too glad to show you around some time when we can go into things thoroughly."

"It will be a pleasure. Unfortunately—" He looked at his watch with a startled frown. "By George! time does fly when one gets to chatting, doesn't it? But as I was saying, unfortunately I'm due, overdue really, in Leesville. Perhaps you'll keep me company that far, eh?"

"Sorry," Gill said, "but I'm not riding that way."

"Ah! Taking a patrol up our trail to the meadows, I suppose, on your way back to East Fork?"

"No," Caleb Gill saw no reason for evading the issue, if there was to be
one. "It's my day off. I'm paying a visit at the Landis homestead."

The mill owner's smile faded. His heavy brows furrowed together.

"It's a long ride, Gill."

"I don't mind," the ranger replied cheerfully. "It's worth the trouble."

The lumberman's jaw thrust out. Here was a personal matter, calling for none of the delicate handling of a business affair. The lids drooped protectively for a moment over his calculating eyes. It might even be of later advantage to have it known that he and Gill had private differences.

"I suppose you know that I am interested—quite interested—in Miss Landis?" he suggested.

"I believe that I did hear something to that effect," Cale admitted. "But I can't see where it concerns me."

"Well, it concerns me!" Sloper burst out. "We don't stand for 'cutting in' up here. I'd be a general laughing-stock if I permitted it."

"Are you engaged to Miss Landis, if that's a fair question?" the ranger asked.

"No—but I'm going to be. Her father approves. And I'm asking you, Gill, really just as a matter of form, not to intrude."

"Well, you're sure pretty emphatic about it—for just a matter of form," Gill observed coolly. "But what if I refuse?"

"You'll suffer the consequences!" Sloper's clenched hand came down on his desk with a resounding crash. His fury was genuine now, the unthinking fury of a jealous man.

"They'll tell you around here that I usually get what I go after. It's true! I don't boast. And I'll have you broken—or worse—if you fail to take my warning."

"I'm not another Eli Barstow," he continued venomously. "I use my head first, although I can manage my fists, too, on occasion."

"Well," Gill sighed, "if that's a threat, maybe you'd better take me on here and now. I've been getting a lot of practice since I hit the San Simeon; and I wouldn't want you to accuse me later of being a professional!"

He squared his broad shoulders. A glint came into his blue eyes. "Step on the button when you're ready, Sloper; you're the self-starter, not I. And you'll have to mess me up considerably before you can name the trails I ride!"

If Sloper was afraid to meet the challenge, he in no wise revealed that fact. He was a powerful, rugged man himself; and the personal management of a rough-and-ready crew doubtless called for an occasional free use of fists. For reasons of his own, he refused to accept Gill's ultimatum on the spot. But it at least had a calming effect on him.

"I never fight," he said, "until all other methods of attack fail. It's a stupid waste of energy. You'll probably have occasion to remember that later on!"

"Suit yourself; it's your party," the ranger granted, and started for the door.

"Just a moment!" The lumberman's voice was again cool and edged with a faint mockery. "It has just occurred to me that we may still not altogether understand each other. Particularly, I'd just suggest that you make no mention to any one of our elaborate discussion regarding my logging contracts.

"That would force me to take steps that I would much prefer to avoid. I could only defend myself by stating that your backbiting was the result of an unfortunate personal rivalry. And I don't fancy that you would relish having a young lady's name dragged through such a discussion."

"If you ever bandy the name of June Landis, you bounder, I will trounce
you—and plenty!” Gill promised, flinging wide the door.

“And lose your job for an unprovoked attack on a respected and law-abiding citizen!” was Dave Sloper’s startling final amendment.

CHAPTER XVI.
OFFSHOOTS OF MYSTERY.

Off up the trail Caleb Gill rode in something more than an ordinary quandary. For all his promise to exact a fitting recompense, he knew that Sloper had him shrewdly checkmated in this one respect.

Without proof positive, he was reasonably sure that he had stumbled onto an irregularity in the millman’s operations; but even so he could not divulge his suspicions for the certainty of dragging the name of June Landis into the ensuing investigation. Sloper would stop at nothing where defense or revenge were concerned.

From another point of view, also, it was just as well to let the matter rest temporarily as it was. After all, Gill recalled, he had not been assigned to inspect the operations of any mill. Others, better qualified than he by service and experience, took care of that. They might make a slip in a special instance, but still it was outside his province to interfere.

If he made charges and they were substantiated, some one would be called up on the carpet to answer for negligence; and he, Caleb Gill, would languish through an immediate hearing of Dave Sloper’s case.

Meanwhile, the light burners would be at large with the torch. A month would wing away, with the loss in destroyed stumpage many times more costly than the lumberman’s petty thefts.

Not that the ranger had any intention of forsaking all interest in Dave Sloper. On the contrary! Where he had set forth only with an undefined suspicion, he now was utterly sold on the belief that the mill owner was part and parcel of the light-burning brigade.

Motives were to be worked out, but the presence of Eli Barstow and Sloper in close conference was certainly evidence of some sort of understanding. And the Barstows, according to Norton, were the field agents of the “higher ups” who stood to gain from the forest’s destruction.

Gill had not been misled by Sloper’s elaborate dismissal of the mountaineer at his own surprise entrance. It had been altogether too well done—and too coincidental. Why should the lumberman have raised his voice at the precise moment except in the desire to be overheard?

Barstow’s attitude had not been that of an applicant for a job. Heads together, it had looked much more like a consultation between men agreed and plotting toward a common goal.

That might or might not be a usable deduction, but it was a logical one. And surely, by the same process, some motive could be evolved to link Sloper with the light burners—if he really was conspiring as their brains and leader.

With head bowed deep in thought, Gill rode on into the afternoon. Shortly after twelve, he passed the short-cut trail leading directly to Hannegan’s Meadows. But he had completely forgotten the hour, as well as the luncheon in his saddlebags. He was absorbed to the exclusion of all else in one problem.

Where could be Dave Sloper’s possible motive for destroying the very thing upon which he relied for his livelihood and profit? He was a lumberman without timber of his own. He was entirely dependent on the government in that respect.

Below his holding, east and south, Spindle Top Valley broke sharply to the lower grassland levels of the cattle
country. But for the San Simeon reserve, he would be already a bankrupt. His mill would be an idle, rotting ruin, unsalable and too remote to move with profit to a new location.

As evidenced on the very face of things, the millman could not conceivably be a party to the repeated conflagrations that had swept the San Simeon. Each one removed, a step at a time, a potential source of revenue. In the stead of fine green timber was left only the burn.

Gill paused, drawing on his reins so sharply that his pony stopped. Ah, yes, the burn—the unprofitable burn that the government was forcing Sloper to log off at a steady loss!

Gill had left that out of his calculations—as other men had done as naturally before him—as just part of a recognized business arrangement. But now, again, he recalled that trainload of solid, char-faced logs and the well-maintained appearance of Sloper’s mill. And the brand-new sheen of the mahogany desk in Sloper’s private office!

The lumberman had erred there, as criminals have erred in small things since the beginning of thievery. He loved display and ostentation. His polished riding boots and well-cut clothes had betrayed that at once. But where a man may well have reason for a good personal appearance, he would be a fool to carry extravagance into the least necessary appointments of a losing enterprise. And Dave Sloper was no fool. He was a hard-headed business man, efficient and practical, as the smooth and ordered rush of labor at his mill attested.

If the ranger had in the beginning any doubts—and he might well have had—in imputing to Sloper the authorship and compounding of a bold and audacious felony, those doubts vanished with the memory of that gleaming desk. It was a symbol, the secret but visible evidence of his success to a man deprived for the time of a normal outlet for his vanity.

Dave Sloper was guilty! He, and not some cattleman, was the presiding genius of the secret order of light burners. Day in and out his mill saws hummed through forty or fifty thousand board-feet of the cheap burn. A million and a half a month!

An infinitesimal profit per foot would mount to a staggering total over a period of time. And always, always the burn would have to be replenished—and had been—to supply this ill-regarded fodder to the hungry saws.

Here Caleb Gill saw a final and deciding reason to withhold for the present his sure belief that the millman was operating at a profit. That could be proved, if true, at any time. But an accusation now would only warn Sloper to cover up his other and more sinister operations.

Circumstantial evidence alone could not convict him as a light burner; that would have to be proved beyond any reasonable doubt. And this larger crime, by every right, should come first in the calendar of retribution.

Ranger Gill was thankful for one thing. His theories in no wise complicated the suspicion that hung over the white head of Marvin Landis. Rather, they seemed to clear the old butterfly collector on many counts.

Landis could not be a paid light burner, it seemed, for in such an association he would have a club of his own with which to intimidate Sloper. The lumberman could be ruined summarily and sent to prison by charges of arson and conspiracy, if those charges were backed by proof.

Still the fact remained that June’s father was in fear of Sloper. The millman was applying an effective pressure of some sort. And it was in the nature of a secret thing that Landis dared not have brought to public light.

Gill’s temples began to throb with
the effort to join and yet keep distinct these many threads of mystery and intrigue that led him on and on to fresh conjecturings. Each one must be followed to its very end, none the less, before his job would be complete. And the time for that was limited to thirty days, with the first of them, to-day, already winging on into the afternoon.

Taking out his watch, the boy was amazed to find that it was after three o’clock. And by a simple and immediate association with the hour, he recalled the neglected package in his saddlebags. He was famished and weary, he realized.

His head throbbed not so much from snarled thoughts as from the continued and unsupported activity of a long day. And directly ahead, the trail opened onto a bare, heat-blistered shank of Spindle Top that had nothing to commend it either as a place to eat or rest.

His roan having already stopped, Gill dismounted forthwith and “tied it to the ground.” Then, breaking out his substantial lunch, he proceeded to the feast beneath the cool shadows of a giant pine at the edge of timberline. From where he sat, back at ease against the tree, he had an almost unobstructed view of the upper mountainside.

A short mile on, he fancied, he would reach the junction of the upper meadows trail. Thence, not far beyond, would be the hogback where old Landis had given him the slip on that queer nocturnal reconnaissance of two weeks ago.

As he ate, the ranger amused himself by trying to pick out that particular ridge from among the several that lay bright and bare above him in the beat of a westering sun. But they were many and confusing. Nearly identical in the main, like twins or buckskin horses.

Gill lowered his eyes to the more important consideration of a second sandwich. Jelly or fried ham, put up with bachelor prodigality—which should it be? The question and the ensuing pause were of as much moment, in a way, as was that braw Scot, Robert Bruce’s, historic observance of a spider spinning at its web.

For, had the ranger paused a second longer or a second less, his casual glance would not have returned to the mountainside when it did. He would have missed the quick reflected gleam of sun on glass and all that this significant discovery was to lead him to.

The flash came and vanished with the speed of light. Gill paused his hand, with a sandwich half raised to his waiting lips. There must be obsidian scattered up above, he thought, although the reflection had been more brilliant than he had believed could come from volcanic glass. He waited, mildly interested, for a repetition of the queer phenomenon. But it did not come!

The ranger sat up more alertly. Another minute passed. He cautiously crumpled up the paper sack that contained his lunch. Otherwise, he did not move, for he was partially screened by foliage; and the protective color of his uniform was camouflage enough. He gave ardent thanks for that—because there was a man hidden up there on the ridge among the rocks!

CHAPTER XVII.

THE DISCOVERY OF A BURNER.

GILL knew that, and by supported reason. It was no chance guess. Not once, but several times in his days of riding through the San Simeon, he had seen the flash of a lookout’s glass strike through the sun in endless search for fire.

Only a signal helio, used to telegraph from peak to peak, could give a similar clear and concentrated light. And had that mirroring surface been ob-
sidian, the sun and rock would have remained focused one on the other for more than one brief flash.

Without question, a man lay ambushed on the ridge sweeping the meadows trail through a field glass of some sort. And that man’s purpose demanded explanation. All service men were under orders to stand by their posts.

The nearest fire guard was stationed miles away. And even discounting the prohibition on all hunting at this time of year, no poacher needed to go so far afield in search of meat.

Gill kept patiently to his cover and waited while the minutes ticked away. A quarter of an hour dragged on with no repetition of the flash and no movement apparent on the ridge.

Then, without warning, a tiny form sprang into view against the background of the rocks. So distant it was that the ranger could barely make it out. Had he not been watching closely, it would have escaped him completely.

Even as it was, the antlike figure was soon lost to him. Dipping behind an intervening ridge, it disappeared. But the ranger was not disturbed by that.

The one above, satisfied that the coast was clear, had started to descend the mountainside. The stranger would reach the junction of the trails in a half hour. Thence, he must choose to go straight on toward Hannegan’s Meadows—or take this short cut leading to Dave Sloper’s mill.

Caleb Gill proposed to be ready for either eventuality. A handful of pine needles quickly covered the fragments of his lunch. He led his pony well away into a dense grove of sapling timber and tethered it securely there. His .38 lay snug and ready in a hip pocket. Allowing the cautious stranger up above a minimum time to attain the vantage of the next and closer ridge, he set out afoot for the junction of the trails.

Shadows were already creeping up this eastern side of Spindle Top. In another hour the afternoon would be fading into dusk. Gill hoped that a meeting might be delayed until then at least. Darkness alone could even up the odds if it came to an armed encounter with a gunman. The young Ranger appreciated his own lack of skill in the deadly mountain style of snap shooting.

Gill walked at top speed for a short ten minutes, then dropped prone behind the shelter of a great lava block. Flat on his stomach, he peered out to watch the second ridge. His vigil was soon rewarded. The stranger topped the hogback close onto calculation and went into hiding once more to reconnoiter the trails ahead. Nearly an hour passed this time—such was the thorough care with which the work was done. Or perhaps the stranger, too, had reason to prefer the evening shadows for a guard as he came closer to his secret goal.

At any rate, gray dusk was settling on the San Simeon when the lone man ventured forth again. He was closer to Gill now than at the moment of first discovery, much closer, but he showed only as a faint blur in the gathering darkness. And he was still afoot—suspicious in itself in a land of large distances where horseflesh sold at bargain prices. Before night closed in completely, he reached the junction and chose his route. It was the meadows trail.

The ranger took up pursuit unhindered by his former fears. The one need was to move in silence, to prevent a warning sound. Reasonable care forestalled that, even though the trail was rough and rocky. There was another danger, of course, but that could not be guarded against.

It was now dark, without the questionable advantage of a moon. The trail was visible for only a few rods
ahead. If his quarry should stop for any reason, Gill foresaw that he must blunder into him.

There is an edge of chance and luck, however, to every chase. The Ranger counted himself indeed fortunate to have had the "breaks" with him this far. He tramped on at a steady pace. Once past the junction, he paused briefly at each bend to listen for some telltale sound ahead.

Each time he heard nothing and went safely on. The stranger was something of a hiker, it appeared, and had relaxed his former caution with the fall of night.

Eventually, Gill was forced to a similar decision for the sake of greater speed. Timberline loomed close ahead again, and once there, he intended to close in. That is, he was determined to risk discovery rather than be eluded by the easy trick old Landis had employed another night.

Presently the pines closed in about him, whispering and soughing in the evening breeze. The faint crunch of rocks underfoot gave way to the silence of a thick carpeting of needle leaves. Bending down, the Ranger made out the fresh but undefined marks left by heavy boots. The stranger, then, was still ahead!

Gill speeded up his stride. For almost an hour now, he had seen nothing of the unknown man. No sound. No movement. Actually, he could not describe the other's face or build, nor what he wore—excepting by a general khaki color. It was almost a phantom quest, one shadow in pursuit of another, through the blackness of the forest and the night.

Suddenly some clinging thing embraced Gill's ankle and tripped him headlong to the ground. He landed with a thud that jarred his teeth; but his fall was soundless and without hurt other than a shaking up. His hands whipped instantly to the entwined foot.

He tore loose the "thing" with one fierce tug.

He could not see and dared not risk the lighting of a match. But his exploring fingers told him at once precisely what they held. It was a coarsely woven strip of fabric that had been slashed along its heavy seam—an opened burlap sack.

Such a find might have had its humorous aspects at another time. But not now. Gill remembered all that Supervisor Norton had told him about the light burners' shrewd method of avoiding incriminating tracks. They bound their boots with heavy burlap wrapping, that was it. And there was some of that selfsame material made ready to apply. The stranger had dropped it accidentally in the dark.

Gill assumed that much at once. And his heart beat full and fast with the thought of the big catch that had fallen, almost, into his very hands. The mysterious one he followed was a light burner, there could be no reasonable doubt of that. The fellow had spied out the ground with cunning care; he was slipping down at night to make his set. Well—Caleb Gill smiled thinly—let him go to it! Norton, to mention only one, would not be at all unhappy over the capture of a firebug red-handed.

The ranger scrambled up as silently as he had fallen. With grim haste, he proceeded on his way. The chase couldn't last much longer, unless the burner intended to cross the open meadows to some favored spot close by his last abortive effort.

Just to make sure of its readiness, Gill reached to his hip pocket for the comfortable touch of his revolver. His groping fingers felt and felt again. He stopped. The pocket—he felt a last time with the despairing hope that all losers know—the pocket was quite empty!

The revolver was gone. It had
slipped out when he fell, he supposed; or maybe at that hiding place behind the lava rock. He could not recall having missed its weight. But the reason and place were of small importance now.

It was gone, that was the hardpan fact—gone when he was treading the heels of a desperado. He could not have gone back to retrieve it, had he known precisely where it lay. No time for that. The burner might strike off into the timber at any moment now, if he had not done so already.

Caleb Gill hunched up those inordinately broad shoulders of his. He'd go on, unarmed. The devil take him for a yellow dog for hesitating this long! After all, it was black night. The chances for an effective shot were negligible.

But he was forced to halt a second time, not ten yards from his last stopping place. Off to the left, back in the forest, he observed a flickering, moving light. Faint, but unmistakable. And moving slowly. Back and forth. The burner was already at his task. Satisfied of his utter safety, he was using an electric torch to pick out material for his set!

The ranger threw off his shoes and puttees. A fallen twig or limb hurt his feet, but that was better than to have dry wood snap loudly and ruin all chances for a capture. He left the trail and closed in one slow, balanced step at a time, feeling his way. A north-woods Indian would have done it in one-third the time, but no better. And the light moved to and fro ahead, steadying him to patience.

Gill managed to get within forty yards of the bearer of the light. There he stopped. That was as near as he dared trust his ability for undetected approach. Too, his eyes were held for an unwilling moment of fascination on the satisfying proof of guilt. The burner, still unrevealed behind his torch, stood with it playing on his completed work.

The set stood ready to light in the hollow catface of a giant pine. Against the dripping pitch pocket lay a pile of pine needles and crumpled, greasy papers. Upon them rested an ordinary tallow candle, protected from the wind.

The candle was placed to burn for hours, while the incendiary made a casual get-away. Then, timed to catch it in early afternoon, the papers would ignite. The dripping pitch next would take the flame and throw it with fierce abandon to the dry litter on the ground. And before a lookout could report the smoke, another forest fire would be raging on his way!

Small wonder that the devilish, cunning scheme had remained a forest service riddle until now! Caleb Gill was the first and only ranger in the San Simeon who had ever seen a set. Once in operation, the whole thing vanished neatly with the flames it spread. And the man who had laid it would be miles away, ready with a perfect alibi!

But here, through Gill's shrewd turning of a chance, the two had been found together. The light burner and his infernal contrivance! It was the Ranger's first impulse to try and make the capture by a rush. But all of his experience advised against that course.

He had learned in his police days that a criminal will often fight when closed with, out of a simple instinct for defense—whereas he would have submitted to a mere command at the outset. And handicapped as he was, the young man knew that his best chance for success lay in an assured playing of his cards.

"Put up your hands!" he snapped.

"I have you covered!"

The flash light wavered in a startled arc—then suddenly went out. Gill's monumental bluff had not only worked, but worked too well! There was neither fight nor surrender. Instead,
there came the scurry of fearful, running feet. The light burner was trying for a get-away!

Headless of the risk, failure his one terrifying thought, the ranger set out in hot pursuit. A warning bullet droned by at a wild margin, but he kept on. Ahead of him the brush crashed to a headlong, undirected flight. His own running was as indifferent to silence. Snags tore through his clothes and scratched his face. His feet were bleeding. But his dander was up. He had come so close. He would not be cheated now!

Gill gained rapidly from the start, and then he had been only a matter of yards behind. In a minute’s time he was tight behind the awkward, stumbling fugitive. He could hear the fellow’s labored gasps for breath. But with his hand already reaching out to seize, the burner slipped to one side and turned on him.

“I’ll shoot!” he heard a desperate, high-pitched voice. And if there was terror in the panting warning, there was also firm resolve. “Stand off, I say—or I’ll shoot!”

Cale Gill stopped in his tracks, a faint moan of anguish choking from his lips. No fear for himself had stopped his hand, but fear for some one else. And when he spoke, it was with the weary lagging of an old, old man.

“Better give me your gun and light,” he said. “But so help me Heaven, I’d rather have you shoot me—June!”

CHAPTER XVIII.
SHOTS AND UNCERTAINTIES.

THERE was a moment’s indecisive pause. Then Gill felt an uncertain hand reach out to him. He took the proffered weapon and the light, snapping the latter on. June Landis stood facing him, her cheeks drained of color, but with eyes unwavering before the powerful beam of the electric torch. A complete bewilderment was evident in her expression—and a hint of resentment.

“Why—Cale!” she began breathlessly. “I’m sorry that your plans have gone wrong, of course. But—but don’t you think it’s a little unkind to be angry with me now? I didn’t know that it was you. I was only trying to—”

“I don’t know what to think!” the ranger burst out. “Can’t you see what a desperate risk you were taking in—everything? It was folly. Madness! I might have shot you, June!”

“I wouldn’t have been so frightened if that had been the only chance I took,” the girl confessed. Her lips were trembling. Again, as in days past, that haunting look of fear was in her splendid eyes. “I sent for you. You didn’t come. I couldn’t wait any longer, don’t you understand?”

“I guess I understand—enough,” Gill said, dispiritedly. “And I couldn’t come before to-day. The new ranger didn’t reach East Fork to relieve me until last night.” His hands clenched.

“But I can’t understand how any man, whatever his need, could ask a girl—his own daughter—to do a thing like this.”

June Landis winked back her tears. For a first time and suddenly, she was aware of the sinister implication that the boy had attached to her presence here. Her rounded, stubborn chin uplifted. Storm signals were flying in her flashing eyes.

“Ask her to do what, Cale?”

The ranger refused to be warned by a changed and sharpened voice. He had drawn a natural and logical conclusion. And in a growing indignation against Marvin Landis, he had passed all caution.

“Ask her—you—to lay this fire!” he answered bluntly. “Heaven knows that I pity your father if he is being forced somehow to do such an unlaw-
ful and terrible thing. But why isn’t he man enough to take his own chances? Why must he sacrifice you?”

“Don’t you dare call my father a coward!” June flared. “He’s fine and courageous and self-sacrificing. He fights his own battles alone. And he doesn’t even know that I’m here now. But if he did, he’d at least give me a chance to explain before condemning me. He’d play fair!”

“Well, then,” Gill said, placatingly, “I apologize. But I certainly haven’t refused to let you explain. And I want you to do so—nothing more, if you can without—”

“Stop!” The girl stamped her foot furiously. “Next you’ll be warning me, I suppose, that whatever I say will be used against me! But don’t worry; I won’t incriminate myself. You can figure it all out for yourself very cleverly, I’m sure—you and Supervisor Norton! I must compliment you on learning so quickly and ably his methods of persecuting innocent people!”

“June!” begged the boy. “You know that isn’t true. You must know it! Why, ever since I met you I’ve tried to be your friend. Because I had faith in you, I told you and your father things that really should have been kept secret. I didn’t use my fair advantage because—well, somehow I couldn’t with you. I’ve played openly and aboveboard in everything, June.”

“Have you? Then your memory must be short! Have you forgotten the night that you accepted our hospitality and then sneaked out up the trail after dad? Do you deny that?”

“No, I don’t; but—”

“Never mind explaining!” June interposed frigidly. “I can draw my own logical conclusions, too!” She paused. “Well, do you think that your circumstantial evidence is strong enough to arrest me as a light burner now, Mr. Ranger? Or may I go home until you have perfected your case?”

“Of course, you may go home!” Caleb Gill drew a sigh of relief. “Wait just a minute, please, while I gather up a few things—my shoes included—and I’ll see you home.”

“Thank you, no! I’m perfectly able to care for myself—if you’ll kindly return my flash light and revolver. It’s my own .32,” she added bitterly, noting the Ranger’s interest in the weapon, “and I seldom miss. You’re one of the fortunate few.”

“Yes—this seems to be my lucky night.” Gill mustered a wry smile. “Here’s your light, and the gun, June. I’m not going to force my company on you. But this isn’t precisely my idea of proper country for an unescorted girl to be traveling through after dark. I’m going to follow you home—or at least until you’re safely on your horse.”

“I walked all the way,” June said. “Some one ‘borrowed’ Connie out of the pasture again last night.”

“Your buckskin mare? She’s used sometimes without your permission, you mean? Taken and returned secretly?” It seemed to Caleb Gill that the wearyly supplied affirmation, so significant to him, was hours in coming. He gave an exultant cry. “I’m glad—awfully glad of that, June!”

“Well, I’m not!” she answered crossly. “And I’m quite able to take care of myself, here or anywhere, thank you.”

“I’m going to follow you, whether you want me to or not,” the boy reiterated stubbornly. “But it won’t be necessary to warn me off with your revolver. I surely understand that you don’t wish my company!”

“Under those conditions, then, I promise not to shoot.” The butterfly hunter’s daughter, bending down to remove the burlap wrappings from one of her boots, relented ever so little. “Good night.”

“Good night!” Cale Gill accepted his dismissal with graceless ill humor,
Turning abruptly, he picked a way gingenly over the litter of sharp pine needles to the pitch tree where the candle was still burning. Women were undoubtedly the most contrary of all creatures, he decided grumpily.

Here he'd shown June every consideration, championed her as few men would—and she had sprung at him like a young tigress. She had mocked him and dared him to find evidence against her! Just as if he hadn't given her every chance, with all fairness, to explain!

Furthermore, except for that first horrified moment of discovery and natural doubt, he had not questioned June's innocent purpose here. And, stretching a point a little, he had been right about her father.

The butterfly hunter had involved her, one way or another, in a venture that might have brought a fearful penalty. Learning somehow of the set and its location, she obviously had come to destroy it and cover up all evidence of criminal intent. But supposing that it had been Norton who had discovered her now!

Gill swiftly removed the lighted candle from its resting place. He sighed with audible relief as he saw from the drippings that it must have been burning for several hours. That unquestionably let June out; no light burner, however foolhardy, would care to linger over his work, once it was as completely prepared as this.

The ranger carefully folded the paper on which the candle had been set and placed it in his pocket. It had been smeared with bear grease and crumpled to render it more inflammable. For that very reason any tell-tale finger prints might have run together into a useless blur. But it was worth inspecting. One perfect print would be enough to identify and convict the maker of the set!

Nor did the ranger flinch at the thought of the bearing such proof might have on others besides the guilty one. He had seen a forest fire roll a wave of destruction through the magnificent timber of the San Simeon. His own secret hopes were as nothing to that. And if Marvin Landis had laid his fingers on the paper, hiding of that fact would only delay eventual detection and disgrace. June would be spared nothing by an inexcusable violation of duty—aside from the fact that his ranger's oath was a sacred thing to Caleb Gill.

A final glance about, however, convinced him that he could do nothing more here to-night. Candlelight alone was useless for any general survey of the scene. He would have to return for that. Meanwhile, June had already gained more of a start than he had intended. And whatever she might say to the contrary, the byways of the San Simeon were decidedly unsafe.

Returning to the trail with all speed, Gill put on his shoes and puttee leggings. He glanced quickly at his watch before extinguishing the candle and putting it in his pocket. Time had surely flown since afternoon. It was past ten o'clock. Several hours more would be required to reach the Landis cabin.

The Ranger smiled grimly to himself as he set out at a good clip to overtake the girl. Thirty hours' leave! The monthly release from care and labor accorded to every ranger. What a fine vacation it had turned out to be!

Caleb Gill realized suddenly that he was weary, more weary than he had ever been before in a life always devoid of ease and luxury. Not that this tramp along the shoulder of Spindle Top was so exhausting. The night air was crisp and invigorating. The trail was not especially steep. And except for the big fire at the meadows, his duties had called for no unusual endurance.
It was the constant mental strain, rather—day after day—that gnawed at taut nerves and wore down the body. The boy’s face had thinned perceptibly in the few short weeks of incessant conflict in the San Simeon. Perhaps he was accepting more than his rightful burden of responsibility, but of that there was more than a fair share for any one assigned to the East Fork district.

One puzzle was no sooner laid than another leaped up, hydra-headed, to take its place. Right now there were three, if one considered June as an individual case—she, her father and Dave Sloper. Each one of them seemingly driven by an individual purpose, yet somehow a secret common factor.

Just how much did June know about the nature of this binding tie, the ranger wondered? Could she, if she would, reveal the underlying motive for the unnatural, contradictory alliance? Or would such a revelation, if she knew, implicate her father equally with Sloper?

As the trail took an abrupt turn, Caleb Gill’s thoughts turned with it. He recalled that he had been following June at a good pace—faster than she could go, surely—for all of a half hour. She had left the set no more than five minutes in advance of him. Guiltily, he increased his stride. It would be a fine joke on him, after his insistence, if she should outwalk him!

Another half hour passed without bringing her within his promised protection. With a sheepish grin, Gill gave over his effort as hopeless. He was practically certain now that June could not be ahead of him. She had eluded him, just as her father had done once, by hiding until he passed. And he was as helpless to retrieve his blunder as he had been then. June had proved her independence very neatly by——

The ranger came to a sudden full stop. Off to the left, a twig had snapped, just a few feet from the trail. The sound was startlingly distinct in the night silence. Gill’s lips parted in a wide, admiring smile. He had been outwalked, after all.

“June!” he called, ingratiatingly. “No need to rub it in, you know——”

But from the dark thicket that edged the trail there came no response in kind. Instead, a spurt of flame and the crashing echoes of a shot. And Caleb Gill felt the tearing agony of a bullet that had found its mark.

CHAPTER XIX.

OUT OF THE DARKNESS.

The ranger dropped into the worn furrow of the trail. Quicker than thought, instinct urged him instantly to this one possible chance for self-preservation. Unarmed, it would have been suicidal to rush his hidden enemy. And he was hurt—just how badly he could not determine as yet from the biting pain that seemed to overspread his whole left shoulder.

The bullet had not taken the strength from his arm. A guarded effort told him that presently. And he could still put up a fight, he guessed, if the attacker could be lured to grips in the belief that his shot had been fatal.

Gill’s mind, overleaping the first shock of surprise and pain, raced on. He was in a mighty tight corner, that was one sure bet. And that June could not possibly be his cowardly assailant was another. She might fight, but she’d always fight fair. His faith in the girl’s sportsmanship was unshaken.

No; he was up against a man, perhaps the man who had laid the set. But identities didn’t particularly matter now. The important thing was to escape alive from this desperate situation. And that quite plainly could only
be managed by a quick and unexpected play. Gill moaned faintly, twitched a leg spasmodically, and lay still.

A minute passed. A cautious movement sounded in the brush near by. Through the hiding dark, some one was advancing. One slow step at a time. The ranger dared not move a finger, hardly dared to breathe. He waited, muscles tensed.

More interminable minutes passed before the other reached the trail. Cale could not see him then, only a few feet away. He could only hear the killer’s heavy breathing and the faint shuffle of his steps.

An unseen hand reached out and touched the ranger’s chest. He lay still, mastering an all but overpowering impulse to strike. The fingers moved on to fumble at the buttons of his Norfolk jacket. “Searching me to see if I’ve picked up any evidence,” Gill thought. But no. The hand stopped directly over his heart, feeling for a beat!

Caleb Gill lunged up. He dared wait no longer. His heart was beating like a trip-hammer! He grappled desperately for a hold, his big, powerful arms reaching for the indistinct form of his antagonist.

But at the same instant a crashing weight descended on his head. His fingers relaxed their tension. His knees gave way. And he went sprawling into unconsciousness to the thunderous echo of a second shot—or was it only the concussion of a second tremendous blow?

Not infrequently men are unable ever to bridge the hiatus resulting from a knockout shock. The subconscious mind fumbles one small fact, and the past remains a blank from that point on. Events are blotted out forever as effectually as if they never had transpired. Sometimes all memory is lost to the pitiable victim.

Fortunately, there was nothing abnormal in Cale Gill’s return to consciousness. In a matter of minutes, he rallied back from oblivion. His lids fluttered apart, shutting again instantly to fend out a blinding glare of light. And he was aware of a voice—annoying in its insistence—calling his name. Why couldn’t people leave him alone when his head and shoulder throbbed so?

Once more, after an interval, he opened his eyes. The light wasn’t so strong now. He saw some one bending over him, hands deftly moving at some queer, absorbing task. A tearful, white-faced girl—June! How had she got here? But—where the devil was he, anyway?

Memory came flooding back, along with a definite appreciation of a pounding headache and a shoulder that seemed bathed in liquid fire. But mounting that was the startled recollection of a menacing assailant not yet accounted for.

“Where is he, June?” The ranger tried gamely to rise, but could not manage it alone.

“Cale! Dearest!” The words came of themselves. Taken altogether by surprise, the girl’s hands fluttered to her breast. A little glad cry welled from her parted lips. “He’s gone. Yes, he is!” she insisted. “He ran when I came up and fired. I think I hit him, too. But you must lie still. You’re hurt, and I’m trying to bandage you——”

The ranger lay back willingly enough. He was weaker than he had supposed. But the bright, dizzying spots no longer rose to fog his sight. His mind was clear. In the light of the electric torch propped up beside him, he watched June’s hands work deftly and gently with strips of improvised bandage. And when he could without detection, he studied the expression in her eyes.

Something was there, unguarded for
the moment, that made him forget his hurts; something that made him forget, too, the hopeless seal of silence that he had placed upon his dreams. Was this just another one of his ghastly misinterpretations, he wondered? Or had he heard aright all that June had said as he first returned to consciousness?

"There!" The girl tied a final knot and drew back with a tremulous smile. "The bullet just nipped your shoulder; you won't have to worry about that. But your head—there's a big gash that will need several stitches."

She paused, her self-control wavering now that the emergency was past. "Oh, Cale! you looked so horribly still when I found you."

The ranger made a second determined attempt to rise. He was stronger now and sat up without undue effort. Reaching for June's hand to steady him, he gained his feet. Bandaged and disheveled, but smiling, he faced her. And he did not relinquish her hand.

"I'm not hurt badly," he said; "not half as badly as when you doubt me, June. You see—well, I don't know how to say it. I've never talked this way to any other girl. But"—his voice faltered—"June, I love you! And you—perhaps it isn't fair, but I'm going to use something you said to-night against you if I must. For you do care, don't you, just a little?"

The girl's misted eyes dropped before his steady glance.

"I do care, Cale," she murmured, "more than a little and much, much more than I should. I want you to know that, so you won't despise me later on. Please!" She drew gently away from him. "We aren't free, either one of us. You have your duty. I have mine. And it happens to be one of life's little ironies that they conflict. Can't you understand what I'm—trying to say?"

"Your father? He's forbidden you to have anything more to do with me?"

"No. You've misjudged him, just as I have sometimes, too, I guess." A tender light warmed the girl's sad eyes. "He is good and brave and self-sacrificing, Cale. He's afraid of Dave Sloper, terribly afraid. I don't know why. I only know that, hating himself for it all the time, he's been urging me to marry Dave. Until to-day. He told me this morning to follow my heart and, if you asked me, to—marry you!"

"Well, then!"

"But can't you see? That doesn't solve his problem. Dave Sloper never forgives; he doesn't bluff. And my father has given the best years of his life for me. It's my turn now, Cale. I'm going to—I have to marry Dave!"

Caleb Gill pressed her hand reassuringly.

"Game little kid! You have had your share of trouble, no mistake. But don't worry about Sloper. He's gambling for big stakes, but he's spreading a good bluff out too thin. If things break right, a month more will see him fixed for life—where he can't harm any one."

June shook her head in a dejected negative.

"We haven't even that small chance. My answer must be ready to-morrow. That's why dad talked things over with me, I suppose."

"Then there's no time to lose. We'd better start hiking now." The ranger spoke with grim purposefulness. "I want to have a little talk with your father, June—as soon as ever I can. I won't interfere or argue," he hurried on to promise. "It's just that I have a notion, a sort of hunch, that he may have something he'll want to tell to me. Something that will help us all, I hope."

June's protests were of no avail. The ranger overrode them all. His
injuries were of no least consequence, he vowed, however ugly they might look. He felt fit as two fiddles now that his head was bandaged. He could easily walk the few miles to his horse; and, furthermore, he would!

Perforce, the girl picked up her light, left burning on the ground, and snapped it out. It would be safer to travel in the dark in case Gill’s enemy had any thought of making a second surprise attack. But that was a remote possibility, with the odds two to one and a warning already given. And June was armed with her efficient little .32. It was ready in her hand as her companion led a slow way upward along the southeast flank of Spindle Top.

Gill kept doggedly to a steady pace. After he warmed to it, the going wasn’t hard. He had been little weakened, if any, from a moderate loss of blood. It was the pain of the two raw wounds, rather, that was hard to bear. And his temples pulsed with a jarring beat.

He spoke but little during the first long hour; not at all of the romance that had come to such sudden bloom in the shadow of conflicting hopes and fears. He sensed intuitively that June preferred to leave that precisely as it was for the time being. She was counting on him to understand and help.

He would help, he gave a silent promise, to the very end of hope. Then, all else failing, he would act—not as an oath-bound member of the forest service, but as a man. He would turn in his cherished pine-tree badge and call Dave Sloper to a last account. And on a bed-rock issue, outside the usage of the law, he believed that he could bring the lumberman to his knees. He could trade by force his own career for a confession that would free June Landis from the need of any great, unselfish sacrifice.

Things had not reached that desper-
hasn’t. On the contrary, he’s put them out—he and I; three sets this year alone!"

“But why hasn’t he told us that?” Gill demanded. “Why has he deliberately let the forest service suspect the worst of him?”

“Would you have told,” the girl wanted to know, “if you had been shadowed and accused as we have been? Would you expect any one to believe the truth under those circumstances? Supervisor Norton, for example?”

“But I believe you!” the ranger burst out, impetuously. “And I may have the evidence right here that will convince Norton.”

He unbuttoned the flap and reached into a pocket of his jacket. In quick succession, he turned out all his other pockets.

“I had a paper,” he continued, dejectedly, “a piece of greased paper that lay underneath the candle at the set. It very likely was marked with the light burner’s finger prints. But it’s—gone. The fellow who knocked me out got it before you scared him off.”

June reached out her hand and pressed his arm.

“It’s kind of you—not to say that it’s my fault. And I was to blame. Yes, I was!” she carried on bravely. “It was my shot at you that called him back. I know, for I had been watching him since early afternoon. I’ve been watching from the ridge every day, in fact, since I phoned you.

“That was the scheme I had worked out for you to try. It’s high up there, but much closer to the timber than the lookout stations are. A good field glass can cover almost all the meadows and a lot of the little open spaces in the trails. You can time a man between those spots, and if he takes too long, you can assume that he’s up to something wrong.”

“But it couldn’t work, not possibly!” Gill objected. “No light burner would be fool enough to follow these trails and lay his sets in broad daylight!”

“Why not? If he’s seen on the trail, it’s far easier to trump up a passable reason for being there in daytime. You couldn’t see a man a hundred feet back in the timber then, while you caught sight of my flash to-night at several times that distance. And a set couldn’t be made properly without some sort of light to work by.

“The point is that my theory did work out!” June concluded triumphantly. “I picked up a man skirting the lower end of Hannegan’s Meadows this afternoon—on foot, coming this way. I saw him twice again before he disappeared for good. But I know every foot of the East Fork trail.

“I had him located definitely to within three hundred yards; and if he was a light burner, I guessed that he’d work close to an especially heavy patch of young undergrowth I saw down there. Good feed to start a fire running, you know! Perhaps I was lucky—but I was right. I found the set, Cale, just where I expected it to be!”

“Whew!” Gill whistled admiringly. “That’s what I call deduction! But don’t go proving any more theories—please. It was just luck to-night that you weren’t shot instead of me.”

“I don’t think so,” the girl quietly disagreed. “You see, Cale—I can’t swear to it, and I know you’ll say that I’m imagining things—but I think it was Dave Sloper who I saw this afternoon. And I think it was he who tried to murder you to-night!”

CHAPTER XX.
LANDIS’ DISAPPEARANCE.

It was in the darkest hour of the night, just before the coming of false dawn, that the Ranger and June Landis reached her lonely home on the Wolf Creek trail.
The girl preceded him into the dark cabin and made her way surely to a lamp. She turned the wick screw up. A match flared in her fingers; and a homely radiance filled the living room.

"There!" June faced about, smiling. Tired, too, she still was buoyed up by that amazing reserve of strength that women can call forth in emergency. "I'll get dad now to dress your head and shoulder properly, while I fix up a bite to eat. I'm famished!"

"So am I," the boy admitted; "but let your father sleep. He'll probably run me off the homestead when he wakes up and finds out where you've been."

"Don't worry. I'll accuse him first of lacking interest in his flapper daughter. It's no fun coming in late if one's confiding parent doesn't even know she's out!"

June opened the bedroom door and called softly to her father. She called again and crossed the threshold. There was a moment's silence, save for the faint creaking of her steps on the puncheon floor. Then Gill heard her draw a quick, sharp breath. "He's gone!"

It was the tone, rather than the words, that alarmed the ranger. He rose quickly from his chair, only to meet the girl as he reached the doorway.

"I'm sorry for your sake, Cale," she said, "but dad seems to be making a night of it after moths. They're at the top of their season now." She shrugged, with an air of unconcern that was patently assumed. "Well, I guess—I'd better be getting something together for us to eat. Then I'll make over dad's bed for you."

"I wouldn't think of it," Gill interposed. "The lounge is plenty comfortable enough for me."

"Young man, you'll take the room your hostess offers," June told him firmly. "You need a rest. Besides, dad probably won't be in before breakfast time; and I—I think I'll lie down on the lounge myself and wait for him."

"You're worried about your father, June!" the ranger charged. "Isn't he out this late often?"

"Not—without telling me beforehand. It's stupid of me, I know. He's never been hurt for all my worrying. But I had a sort of—premonition this morning that something dreadful was going to happen soon."

"Nonsense!" Gill tried to laugh away her fears. "But if you insist on being a prophetess, why don't this bump on my head do for Exhibit A? Believe me, that was dreadful for a while!"

"I'm sorry, Cale! I didn't mean to neglect you this way." June refused to listen to a more detailed interpretation of Gill's words.

With quick efficiency, she prepared a palatable meal of odds and ends. But her own appetite was gone. Urged to it, she drank a cup of tea. That was all. Excusing herself quickly on a pretext then, she spread fresh linen on her father's bed. And when Gill came out of the kitchen to protest, she revenged herself by applying a stinging antiseptic to his wounds.

"You'd think I was a babe in arms," he grumbled. "And I must look like a Hindu swami with all these bandages wound round my head. Not that they don't feel mighty good. In fact, I think I'll wait up with you—if I may."

"You may not! I'm going to turn the light out and lie down. Run along to bed!"

"Well, then, good night. But you must call me as soon as your dad returns," the ranger added optimistically.

Once inside the bedroom, however, with the door closed, his brows drew together in a frown. He had not
wished to alarm June further by agreeing with her fears, but he actually saw real cause for serious concern. It was between three and four o’clock. Decidedly, the absence of Marvin Landis at this time called for explanation.

Many possible mischances had to be reckoned with, of course. On rugged Spindle Top, an accidental injury could happen easily at night to any one venturing off the beaten paths. And even the most expert woodsman might become temporarily lost. But despite himself, Gill’s reasoning had already taken another and an opposite course.

He fought against it, tried to argue his suspicions down. His theories seemed little less than traitorous to the girl he loved after the assurances of faith that he had given her so recently. Still, he recalled, he was not bringing June or her sincerity into any doubt. It was quite possible that she had been purposely misled.

This new development altered the whole complexion of the case, at any rate. Facts were facts. They must be faced as such. A question could not rightfully be ignored when it involved details of the one key mystery of the San Simeon.

“Was it Dave Sloper who made that set and tried to murder me?” the ranger asked himself, point-blank. “Or was it—Marvin Landis?”

There it was in a nutshell! And if Landis were the guilty one, it did not particularly matter for the moment whether he had been working to his own ends or as the mill owner’s unwilling tool. Motives could be ignored in sifting over specific facts in this new light.

The first of these facts, as Gill adduced it, was that the butterfly hunter had provided himself with the opportunity to commit the night’s double crime. The other fact was that he had been suspected as a light burner over a long period.

Admittedly, Supervisor Norton’s charges against the old recluse were based on observations that, lumped together, could not justify a conviction. Just as Landis’ present absence was circumstantial evidence, pure and simple.

Either coincidence had been carried to the point of sheer absurdity, or the law of averages had established the existence of some fixed cause. And that cause, to all seeming, could be of none other than criminal origin. The repetition of these acts was hideously suspicious.

Gill dropped into a comfortable old chair that was quite in keeping with the other frugal furnishings of the room. Looking around idly, he observed a second door leading directly into the garden. He eyed it thoughtfully. Why had this unneeded exit been added to a simple cabin, he asked himself—unless Marvin Landis wanted especially to come and go without his daughter’s knowledge?

On an impulse, the ranger crossed over to this outer door and silently made fast the bolt. Then, blowing out the lamp, he returned to his former seat and lay back to rest and wait. Landis could not know that the room was occupied. If he planned to return to it secretly to-night, he was due for a surprise! If he did not return—well, nothing could be done about that before dawn. It would be like hunting for a needle in a haystack to try finding a man at night on Spindle Top.

One distressing thought did occur to Gill abruptly. June had said that she believed she had wounded the one who had bushwhacked him on the trail. If that were true, and if these other substantial theories were correct—she must have shot her own father!

Another installment of this novel of the forest ranger will appear in the following issue of TOP-NOTCH MAGAZINE, dated and on the newsstands March 15th.
The Hoofin' Wizard

By

Vic Whitman

(A COMPLETE NOVELLETTE)

CHAPTER I.

JAZZ HOUNDS

OVER the sliding scuff of shoes on the dance floor came the sounds of music. The croon of saxophones, the twang of banjo, and the boom of bass drum blending into the tune, "Collegiate." Thus did Jimmy Price's Purple Serenaders get under way, making their nightly offering to the goddess of syncopation.

Out in front of them, his dark eyes alight with excitement, Jimmy Price danced. His long legs buckled grotesquely, lithe body swaying and jerking back and forth as he did his original eccentric dance.

"Come on, gang!" he panted in the midst of an intricate clog. "A little more pep in there! Get hotter!"

It was Saturday night and the dancers of the little town were out in full force. Swirling by the orchestra platform, the regular patrons grinned up at the dancing leader and exhorted him with frenzied yelps to greater efforts.

"Step 'em out, keed! 'At's puttin' the old stuff over!"

"Let's go, Jimmy! Shake it up! Wow!"

"Baby mine! The boy's a dancin' fool!"

A party of strangers was rather tip-sily in evidence. It suspended its noisy activities long enough to regard Jimmy Price with appraising eyes. Indeed, he was well worth watching. Viewed away from his natural world of the dance hall he was not at all unusual.

He was tall, slender, erect, with friendly dark eyes and a wide mouth that could grin engagingly or tighten with determination. But before dance music he was striking.

It was impossible for him to keep his feet still while playing a lively number that he liked. So he usually led the team while doing a variety of dance steps that would make many a professional become thoughtful.

He was a good violinist and a good
leader, well-versed in syncopation. His reputation, however, was due to his dancing. It was as natural for him to dance as it was for the sun to rise.

Behind him as he danced now his orchestra paid little attention. It was all old stuff to them. They were bored with Jimmy and life in general, more so to-night than usual.

The alto and tenor saxes were slouched down in their chairs, playing mechanically. They heard their leader's voice but heard it as just one more sound in a constant flow of noise. Chet Clarke, who played the piano, was merely hitting the accompaniment, making no effort to climb over the keys. Even Charley Deware, the good-looking drummer, was hunched disconsolately over his traps, breathing through his mouth and staring out over the floor with eyes that saw nothing.

"Collegiate—collegiate—"

The music gathered volume under the waving arms of Jimmy Price, bunched into a meaningles slatter on the last four beats, and ended apparently in mid-air with a wail of soprano sax and a crash of cymbal. Jimmy acknowledged the applause with a grin and a nod of his head, and turned to his musicians.

"What's the trouble with you birds to-night?" he asked pleasantly. "You're not workin' together at all."

They stared back at him, stolidly indifferent.

"Aw, go to the devil!" muttered Charley Deware, as he lowered his snare-drum stand. "Who d'ye think you are, anyway?"

Jimmy didn't hear the words, but the tone contained rebellion. Rebellion is something that an orchestra leader must never stand.

"What's that?" he demanded sharply.

"You heard me," answered Charley sullenly. "You ain't deaf, are you?"

Jimmy laid down his violin. Lately he had been having trouble with Charley Deware and he was getting sick of it. He was not especially fond of trouble, but he never avoided it.

As he started to step forward a hand touched his arm. He turned, looking down at a nattily-dressed man whose face was slightly overflushed.

"Just wanted to say, kid," said this man in tones that were tinged with thickness and condescension, "that you ain't half bad. Your team here ain't worth the powder to blow it to hell, but you ain't so worse yourself. Joe Verrill broadcasting."

Instantly Jimmy forgot all about Charley Deware and impending trouble. Joe Verrill, the biggest dance-band man in Boston here in the hall watching him! He knew Joe Verrill's music by heart, having a standing order at the music store for all the Verrill records that came out. Impulsively he extended his hand.

"Say, I'm sure tickled to meet you, Mr. Verrill!" he exclaimed. "I don't wonder you don't think much of us after the band you got! On the level, there ain't any I like better!"

Verrill warmed to this enthusiasm.

"Well, it ain't so bad," he admitted. "Took me a long time to work it up to where it is now, though." He sighed profoundly and fragrantly and voiced a great truth: "This music game's a killer, kid, it's a killer. But what the devil! A short life and a merry one is my motto every time."

His eyes wandered to Jimmy's face.

"I was going to say something to you, kid, I sure was," he continued, swaying a bit. "Lemme see, now—oh, yeah, how about comin' to Boston and takin' a try-out with my band? You're just a little too good for this hick outfit."

Jimmy's eyes gleamed. Verrill's words were directly in line with the dark-eyed young leader's fondest dream. To go away to the big towns,
win himself a name in the world of syncopation, and come back with front-page publicity and his own famous band to knock the home towners for a row of kettle drums!

He didn’t stop to reflect that Verrill was three sheets to the wind and might only be talking to hear his own voice, for Verrill’s presence there seemed like an omen.

“Say, that’s wonderful, Mr. Verrill,” he said slowly. “I’ve a good mind to take you up on that, too.”

The band king waved an important hand. “Sure, kid,” he said majestically. “Come any time. Joe Verrill, that’s me, and anybody at the union can tell you where my office is.”

Jimmy hardly even noticed Verrill walking back to his party. His dark eyes were glowing.

“Gee!” he murmured. “Won’t Ruth be glad!”

He glanced toward one of the hall doors. Closely connected with his dream was Ruth Brand, the golden-haired, languid-eyed ticket seller.

Perhaps she was one of the reasons why he hadn’t gone out into the world of big music before, because he didn’t like the idea of being away from her for long. But now that his chance had come——

“Yes, Ruth’ll be glad,” he thought again.

She appeared, then, and stood framed in the doorway, looking up at him, her red lips curved in a smile. He waved back to her, and then turned to his musicians, standing erect and slender.

“Take ‘Memories’ waltz time,” he said, and raised his violin.

“Aw, have a heart!” protested Charley Deware suddenly. “We’ve played that damn thing every night for the past six months! How about layin’ off?”

“If you got to play it,” grumbled the trumpet player, “for cat’s sake play it trot and jazz it up a little! That waltz tempo is drivin’ me nuts!”

“Bury it!” called the alto sax. “Bury it!”

Jimmy’s mouth straightened and the smile in his eyes chilled. They couldn’t know, of course, that he always played it because it was Ruth’s favorite number. It expressed better than words the feeling between himself and Ruth when played softly and dreamily, but nevertheless their remarks were gross, uncouth, and uncalled for.

“You heard me!” he snapped. “All right, let’s go!”

CHAPTER II.

A HICK COMES TO TOWN.

As they started reluctantly, Jimmy turned and watched Ruth glide about the hall with the ticket taker. What a honey she was! To go away and get in with the big-timers; then come back for her in a blaze of glory. That was the dream.

The dream became a nightmare as the playing of the orchestra grew lifeless and ragged. Jimmy spun around in time to see Charley take his foot from the bass-drum pedal, drop his sticks, and lean back with folded arms. A note or so later the alto sax stopped, grinning sheepishly. And then the trumpet. “Memories” died away in a heart-rending discord.

Jimmy’s hands clenched tight. This was open mutiny.

“Somebody must be lookin’ for a bat in the jaw,” he stated with grim quietness. “What’s the big idea?”

“That’s the last time I’ll ever play that thing waltz time,” said Charley. “I’m through with it.”

“Me, too,” chimed in the trumpet. “All through.”

Jimmy looked from one to the other, and their eyes fell before the look in his.
“I’d ask you to come out back one at a time or all together,” he said very slowly, trying to hold himself in, “but I know you’re too damned yellow, all of you.

“Come to think of it, I guess it’s just as well that you quit on ‘Memories.’ The worst bunch of ham musicians in the world would show you plumbers up, and I don’t mean maybe.”

The smoldering jealousy of weeks began to flame.

“Listen to him!” sneered the thin-faced alto sax. “Anybody’d think he was Whiteman or Bernie or one of them guys!”

“Why don’t you get out then if you’re so blamed good?” suggested Charley Deware with maddening calm. “You’re always ravin’ about the big-town teams and how you’d like to sit in with one! Let’s see you do it! Go ahead!”

He finished with heavy sarcasm: “You’d last a long time there, you would! Yeah, in a hen’s left tooth!”

They laughed at that. Jimmy hesitated between scorn of these blacksmiths and an impulse to slam Charley in the eye. Scorn won.

“Yeah?” he inquired lazily. “Well, think this one over. I’m leavin’ to-morrow for Boston and when I come back I’ll have my own team with me. And before I get back you wise bozos’ll have heard plenty about me. How d’ye like them for apples?”

They grinned widely, and Charley Deware derided openly. “You’ll be back in a week with your tail between your legs,” he sneered. “Why, you dancin’ fool——”

That was as far as he got. Jimmy leaped, and his hand flashing out spattered across Charley’s mouth.

“Shut up!” he flared. “One more word out of you and I’ll smash your face to pieces!”

He glared around at the rest and saw that they had become suddenly busy toying with their instruments. Then without another word he packed up his violin, and strode out of the hall before the surprised dancers.

Ruth Brand caught up with him halfway down the street. “What was the idea of the fuss?” she inquired.

Jimmy stopped and looked down at her. “Oh, nothin’ much,” he replied. “They kicked on playin’ ‘Memories’ waltz time, so I quit.”

“I should think you would,” said Ruth. “Honest, it was awful.” This was not particularly comforting but it was just.

“Yeah, it was. Too bad, too, because it’s the last time I’ll be playin’ it around here for some time.”

She gazed archly up at him. “Getting sick of it?”

“Sick of it!” exclaimed Jimmy. “I’ll say not! I’ll never get sick of it! It’s because I’m goin’ away to-morrow.”

“You are! Where to?”

“I’m goin’ to Boston.” Briefly he told her about Joe Verrill. “You see, hon, it’s a great chance and things are gettin’ so’s I can’t stand ’em around here.”

“But what about me?” demanded Ruth with a trace of petulance in her voice. “What am I going to do back here in this dead town?”

He was pleased at the thought that she would miss him, but he didn’t say so. Jimmy Price had never been much at things sentimental.

“Well, it won’t be long now, Ruth,” he told her. “When I bring my own team back to the old hall I’ll have ’em play ‘Memories’ and play it right.”

Thus began Jimmy Price’s search for the pot of gold at the end of the rainbow. He landed in Boston the next afternoon with fifty dollars in his pocket, his violin case under his arm, and in his soul a determination to conquer the world.
He inquired his way to the music union and engaged a room near it on St. Botolph Street. From there he sought the office of Joe Verrill.

A bright-eyed girl with freckles and an impudent nose looked up from her desk as he hesitantly opened the office door.

"Hello," he said, reddening under her frank stare of appraisal. "Is Mr. Verrill in?"

The girl rose. "Yes," she said. "What name, please?"

Jimmy told her and she went into an office to reappear immediately.

"Mr. Verrill is busy just now," she announced. "Can I do anything for you?"

"Well, you see," Jimmy explained. "I came to take a try-out with him. He promised me one."

She smiled knowingly. "Was he soused when he made the promise?" she asked.

"He'd been drinking some," answered Jimmy dubiously, "but——"

"Uh-huh." The girl looked rather pityingly at Jimmy. "You're just another. You might come back tomorrow, though."

Jimmy came back on the morrow, but Mr. Verrill was still too busy to be seen. "And the day after that and the day after that."

On his last visit Jimmy became desperate. "Say, listen!" he said to the girl whose name he had learned was Peggy Warden. "What's the idea? He can see me for a minute, can't he?"

She shook her small head. "Apparently he can't see you for a thing," she replied, and bent over her work.

Jimmy eyed her, frowning. She was much different from the girls he had known, and far too flippant and slangy to suit him. Not much like Ruth.

His mouth became grim. He had come to Boston to see Joe Verrill, not to take the razzing of office girls.

"Well, he's goin' to see me," he muttered.

He strode across the floor and threw open the door to the inner office. Verrill was lying on a couch reading a musical journal. "Hello, Mr. Verrill," said Jimmy firmly. "I came in to see when I could take that try-out with you."

"What the devil!" exclaimed Verrill angrily. "Didn't Peggy tell you I was busy?"

"Sure she told me," nodded Jimmy, "but I had to be shown." He grinned easily. "I wish I could always afford to be as busy as you are right now."

Verrill snorted, apparently in a bad humor. "Never mind the wise cracks," he said. "And there's the door behind you."

Jimmy's grin died away. "But when do I get that try-out?" he asked.

"Try-out!"

"Yes. You promised me one."

"Promised you a try-out!" said Verrill, a trace of a sneer on his lips. "Say, listen, you're from that hick band, aren't you? If I was you I'd go back to it. If I need any musicians I know where there's plenty of big-timers around here."

Jimmy stared; then his fists slowly clenched. "What a nice clean-cut guy you turned out to be!" he said slowly, his eyes narrowing. "I've a good mind to sock you one on the jaw right here."

He added as Verrill sat up on the couch, alarmed: "But I won't until I take that try-out with you. And, believe me, I'm going to get it, too, if it takes me a year!"

Turning, he went out the door, snapping it shut behind him. As he went into the outer office he noticed the girl's look of surprised admiration. Apparently she had heard.

"You win," she said. "I'm all for you. Any one from the sticks who'll break in on the biggest bandman in
Boston, and tell him where to get off—sure deserves a lot of credit."

"He's a dirty bum!" said Jimmy bitterly.

CHAPTER III.
IN QUEST OF FAME.

He went back to his room and dropped down on the bed to think things over. He came to Boston on what had proved to be a wild-goose chase. Bitterly he berated himself, and then his jaw squared. It wouldn't be a wild-goose chase for he would take his try-out with Verrill's band. There was more than one way to get around such things.

When he had cooled down, however, he realized that he would have to have work, work that would bring in money. For a few days he hung around the union. An occasional call came in for a sax, a trumpet or a banjo, but none for a violin. The man at the desk told him that there was a surplus of violins that season.

Then he sought out the big men, Adams, McLaney, and others. His luck with them was no better.

They did take his name and address and tell him that they would notify him when anything turned up, but that procedure, as he learned later, was a mere formula. It was a concession to the time when such youngsters as he might be preëminent.

Discouragement came, of course, but he grinned through it as best he could. The letters he wrote back to Ruth were cheerful and devoted.

He hadn't landed anything yet, he told her, but that was because things hadn't really settled down for the season. After they did he was positive he'd get something.

He wished that he might go home for a day to see her, but he had made his promise and he would keep it. "Memories!" The tune was constantly with him, continually going through his head—now tinkling softly—again booming insistently. It was the future outlined in his dream; it was his hymn of all things.

Bit by bit his stock of money diminished. It was surprising how quickly it went. He tried to cut down on his food. His daily menu became toast and coffee for breakfast, beef stew at noon, and doughnuts and coffee at night. But still the money trickled out in nickels, dimes, and quarters, until he omitted the beef stew.

Came the morning when he arose penniless, weak and faint from lack of nourishment. Disconsolately he crawled out of bed, yawned, and stood in the middle of the floor looking wistfully at his violin case.

He could pawn that if the worst came to the worst, as he had pawned his other few belongings. Yet he'd rather starve. Hunger, and that dull ache at the pit of his stomach. He wondered if he'd ever get rid of the ache. For several days now he'd been conscious of it.

Then, because he had always looked on the bright side of things, he grinned.

"What a life!" he reflected. "Not a cent and not an idea!" His hands shook as he lighted the stub of a cigarette he had held over from the preceding night. "Well, I might as well have breakfast here as anywhere."

Dressed, he practiced on his violin until a slight faintness drove him outdoors. As he wandered into the Fenway things swam before his eyes, dizziness seized him, and he dropped down on a bench.

"Memories!" The tune was a far-away chime now, sounding faintly in his ears—mocking him with all that he had planned to do.

"Why not go back home?" it seemed to tinkle. "You can at least make a living there."
His dark eyes narrowed, and his jaw thrust forward. Go back now when he had boasted of the things he was going to do? Go back home to be a laughing stock? His fighter's soul within its dancer's body rebelled at this. No, he couldn't do that!

After all, he wasn't so hungry. He could go for a long time yet without eating. It was nice and warm here in the sun, and after he'd rested a while he'd make the old legs carry him over to the union.

Perhaps something would turn up there, and if not, he'd make the rounds of the restaurants and hash houses again. A guy usually could pay for a meal by washing dishes or bussing, but every available job seemed to have been taken.

As he sat there blinking in the sun, he heard a cheery voice: "Oh, there you are!"

Looking up he saw that it was Peggy Warden, a cheerful little bundle of smiles and energy.

"Hello."

He tried to smile, and Peggy saw how wan his face was. She stopped before him, her own smile dying away.

"What's the matter? You don't look well."

"Matter?" Jimmy shrugged. "Why, nothin'."

She sat down beside him on the bench, looking at him, her bright eyes traced with concern.

"Oh, yes, there is. Don't be trying to put anything over on this little girl 'cause it can't be done. You're as white as a sheet."

Jimmy wished she would go and leave his alone. Perhaps, because she worked for Verrill, he couldn't help associating her with the band king. But apparently she didn't have any intention of actually going.

She continued: "Haven't you found work?"

He was ashamed to tell her. "Well, I expect to—that is—"

"All of which means no," she cut in.

A fruit cart rumbled by and she saw the sudden, strained look that came into Jimmy's face, saw him moisten his dry lips, and stare hungrily out. She bit her lip and looked at her wrist watch; then rose decisively.

"Now you're going to get right off that bench and come with me," she said in a voice that admitted of no argument.

"What's the idea?"

"Don't be like that. It isn't every day that a girl asks you to go walking with her. Come right along, and don't be curious."

Had Jimmy known what she was about to do he wouldn't have gone, for pride was a broad element in his make-up. Not knowing, he went with her, not particularly because he wanted to, but because there was nothing else to do.

She led him to a near-by apartment house. "My home," she announced brightly, as she let him into a sunny little room that seemed in some way to reflect her personality.

"Don't you think it's keen?" She didn't wait for his answer. "Make yourself comfortable, and I'll be with you in a few minutes."

She went out into a tiny kitchenette, and Jimmy could hear her bustling around, rattling dishes and humming. Presently the smell of cooking food drifted in to tantalize him. Shortly after Peggy appeared with a tray of toast, delicatessen beef, scrambled eggs, and coffee.

Then Jimmy realized what was up. Hungry as he was he came to his feet, looking at Peggy.

"I can't do this," he said.

She seemed not to hear. "Oh, I forgot the sugar," she exclaimed, and hurried out into the kitchenette after it.
“There! Now I hope you’ll like my cooking.”

She didn’t look at him. She felt she would cry if she did.

“But, honest, I can’t——” he began.

She went on hurriedly: “I’ll feel hurt if you leave even a crumb.”

Turning abruptly away from him she fled into the kitchenette and closed the door.

When she came out again, Jimmy had obeyed orders and not left a crumb. He had tried to resist, but he couldn’t. Aside from his own hunger courtesy demanded that he recognize her motives.

“Gee! you’re a life-saver!” he said fervently. “If you ever want anybody shot, you just come to me. Honest, I feel like a new man. I ain’t got any idea how I’m goin’ to thank you, but——”

“Don’t try,” said Peggy quickly. “You did enough when you ate what I cooked.” She laughed lightly trying to put Jimmy at ease. “I’ve been told that I’m all wet as a cook.”

“They’re crazy!” said Jimmy with conviction. “That’s the best meal I ever ate.” Another thought occurred to him. “Say, you came back here and did this when you’d ought to been at work, didn’t you?”

She shrugged unconcernedly. “Who cares?”

“But Verrill might.”

“Apple sauce to him!” said Peggy disdainfully. “If he doesn’t like it he knows where he can get another stenog. Besides, he’s so busy getting his men together for the ball to-night that he won’t miss me.”

“What ball?”

“Don’t you know! Why he’s playing the job for the Artists’ League. It’s one of the biggest things in town. Lots of people will go.”

Jimmy’s brain began to function.

“H’m,” he said thoughtfully. “Will there be musicians there, men from outside Verrill’s bunch?”

“Dozens of them.”

An idea flashed suddenly into Jimmy’s mind in all its daring completeness, and he sat up straight.

“Fine!” he said. “I’ll take my try-out with him to-night.”

Peggy gazed at him, round-eyed.

“You’ll what?”

“I’ll take my try-out to-night—the one he promised me.”

Peggy was doubtful. “But he won’t let you.”

“No?” grinned Jimmy. “I got a hunch he will.”

Briefly he told her of his plan, and when he had finished her eyes were alight with admiration.

“I sure must hand it to you for nerve,” she said, shaking her small head. “And I’ll make it a point to be in the hall to-night. You may need somebody to bail you out.”

“Maybe,” nodded Jimmy, “but, believe me, if I do, Verrill will need somebody to dig him out.”

He rose and stood before her, looking down. “I’ll be running along now,” he said, “so’s not to keep you from work too long. And if I go over to-night, you bet your life I’ll know who to thank for it.”

CHAPTER IV.

THE TRY-OUT.

SAXOPHONES that flowed as smoothly as clear sirup. Two trumpets that bit off staccato notes with knife-edged precision. A steady, unshakable foundation of piano, banjo and drums; guttural, pompous bass, and slurring trombone—all worked in perfect accord. These were some of the things that made Joe Verrill’s first team the best dance band in Boston.

Then, too, there was Verrill, and he knew music. One had to admit that,
watching him stand out in front of his musicians leading with the baton. Confidently, easily, he would bring the music up to a crashing crescendo, or wave it down with a flick of his hand.

The grim-faced Price had just come into the hall and was standing in a dim corner holding his violin case under his arm. He was not interested in Verrill so much just then as he was in the crackling syncopation of Verrill’s band.

“They sure can play,” he muttered, straightening his Tuxedo coat. “Boy! how they can play!”

He looked them over. Ten men, any one of whom could qualify for symphony. For a moment Jimmy felt sickening doubtful. What a boob he was to think he could put it over!

Then his jaw squared, and the light of battle came into his dark eyes. Sure, he could put it over. He had to.

He glanced about the hall. Yes, Peggy was there as she’d said she would be. She was dancing with a nice-looking, elderly man.

Price’s eyes rested gratefully on her. Some kid, after all! He sure owed her a lot for that meal. Well, some day he’d get a chance to square the account.

The music stopped, and Jimmy saw Verrill bow to applause and saunter off the stage into an anteroom for a smoke—a privilege he did not allow his men. This was what Jimmy had been waiting for. Clutching his violin case tightly, he hurried to the door that opened into the anteroom.

Verrill looked up inquiringly from lighting a cigarette. Without a word Jimmy put down his case.

“So it’s you again, hey?” snorted the band leader. “Just what d’ye think you’re goin’ to do?”

Price spun around. One of his hands shot out and clutched Verrill by the shoulder.

“I’m goin’ to take that try-out, Verrill,” he said low voiced. “If you think you can stop me go ahead. Just one yip out of you now and I’ll smash that face of yours to pulp.”

He shook Verrill savagely to emphasize his words. The man changed color at the glare in the dark eyes. “Get me?” Jimmy asked menacingly.

Verrill knew danger when he saw it. He nodded, inarticulate.

“Now you stay there and don’t move!” ordered Jimmy harshly. “I can see you from the stage, and if you try to get out of that chair, I’ll mix your band up so you’ll be the laughin’-stock of the whole hall. And you know how easy it is for a leader to do it, too.”

Still watching Verrill he backed away and took his violin from its case. The band leader sat humped over in his chair, furious, yet helpless.

He wanted to call out to his men, but the look in Jimmy’s eyes cowed him completely. He had once seen a look something like it in the eyes of a murderer.

Jimmy straightened his tie, and called softly to the pianist. Tuned, he nodded warningly to Verrill, and walked out on the stage. He felt no confusion now, even when the musicians looked curiously at him. He had gone too far to feel confused; he was desperate. He was determined to make good.

“Mr. Verrill is letting me handle this number,” he told them. “We’ll start off with the old ‘Twelfth Street Rag,’ and play it about as you played it for the records. For the encore use ‘Ida.’ And listen! Cut loose with some dirt on the second strain of the ‘Twelfth Street.’ I don’t care a hoot if the style is to play everything soft and straight. I’m runnin’ this number, and I want it hot. All set?”

He raised his violin bow and brought them to attention. His voice carried authority, and while they wondered, they did not question. They were drawing their pay. If Verrill wanted to
send a stranger out to lead them it was none of their affair.

They listened for the two taps of the stranger’s foot that would give them the tempo. The taps came decisively, and they whirled into the “Twelfth Street.”

A wide grin grew on Jimmy’s face with the first few bars. Exultation filled him. He, Jimmy Price, was actually leading a big-town band! And what a band!

He gained confidence as the men followed him. The saxes were playing with the even mechanism of a trio of engines. The banjo and drums twanged and boomed out the tempo. The trumpets cut loose blue “breaks.”

“Get hot in there!” he yelled joyously. “Atta way to work! Zowie!”

The band hit the second strain under a full head of steam, and Jimmy Price responded. One foot began tapping the floor, then the other. He was dancing. Clogging, gliding, swaying, his fingers snapping, he went through the paces of his eccentric dance, the embodiment of syncopation.

He was irresistible and the band caught his enthusiasm. Wilder grew the wail of the saxophones under his waving arms, sharper the bite of the trumpets.

The dancers looked up, surprised. They stopped delightedly to watch the graceful gyrations of the dark-eyed, laughing boy who led. It was distinctly a novelty in an era of dignified, made-to-order leadership, and attractively spontaneous.

A small, bright-eyed girl watched eagerly, then whirled to the older man who was with her.

“What did I tell you, Arthur?” she demanded. “Isn’t he a knock-out?”

The man nodded thoughtfully, his eyes on the dancing figure of Jimmy Price.

“He sure is—very unusual,” he answered. “Where the deuce did Verrill get hold of him?”

Peggy hid a smile. “How should I know?” she countered. “I’ll tell you this much, though: I’m pretty sure he hasn’t signed with Verrill yet.”

People started applauding, clapping and shouting before the band had finished the number. Jimmy bowed and grinned out over the floor. The noise became deafening. Laughing, he faced them, erect and slender, bowed once more, then turned to the band.

“Take ‘Memories’ waltz time,” he told them. “You fellows all know it. Three choruses, and play ’em soft and dreamy. All set?”

It was his way of rendering tribute to his dream and to the golden-haired Ruth, even now in his first moment of triumph. As the mellow notes flowed out his thoughts reverted to the old home town.

His gang, Charley Deware and the rest would be playing to-night, might even be playing “Memories” as a trot. And Ruth would be in the box office listening sadly to the syncopation of her favorite number. If only she could see him now!

Before he realized it, “Memories” had died away on a gentle croon of saxes. As Jimmy nodded cordially to the musicians and started from the stage.

Some one called: “Oh, Jimmy, just a minute, please.”

It was Peggy, a sparkling-eyed, entrancing Peggy standing at the edge of the stage.

“Oh, you were great, Jimmy, just wonderful!” she enthused, as pleased as though the success were her own. “I’m so glad!”

She turned to the man with her.

“Jimmy, this is Mr. South, Arthur South.”

Arthur South! Another name big in the music world!
“Glad to know you,” smiled South, holding out his hand. “Boy! you’re a dancing fool if ever I saw one!”

A shadow crossed Jimmy’s face. He didn’t like the term. It was reminiscent of Charley Deware. But he knew that South meant it as a compliment.

“Thanks, Mr. South,” he said slowly. “Glad you liked it.”

“I certainly did—so much so that I want to know whether you’re tied down to any contract or not.”

Before replying, Jimmy looked into the glowing eyes of Peggy Warden. It was very evident that she had been trying to help him still more. What a girl she was!

“No, I’m not under contract,” he told South.

“Would you care to talk business?” Jimmy seemed to consider this.

“Why, I guess so—yes.”

“Great!” South’s eagerness was apparent. “We’ll go to my office right now if it’s convenient to you.”

“Sure,” said Jimmy. “Just a minute till I pack up my fiddle.” He stepped down into the anteroom to meet the open-mouthed gaze of Joe Verrill.

“Say, kid!” said that individual. “S’pose we let bygones be bygones, what d’ye say? Come on around and see me to-morrow, will you?”

Jimmy’s voice was cold. “Verrill, you can go to the devil!”

Half an hour later he came out of Arthur South’s office with a contract in his pocket. The dream had begun to materialize.

CHAPTER V.

THE DANCING FOOL.

Gradually Jimmy Price became known to the dancers of Boston. His work was original. Originality combined with whole-hearted enthusiasm is all too rare in the dance-band game.

People began to watch for him, to smile at him. They talked about him. He was recognized as a whale of a leader, and billed by the shrewd South as “The Dancing Fool.”

He wrote and told Ruth all about it. It wouldn’t be a great while before he’d be home to see her. He was making good money and saving it. He was keeping his eye peeled for opportunities, and some day in the near future she’d be surprised.

Peg Warden, too, seemed greatly interested in his progress. He spent much time with Peg, taking her to a show whenever he had a night off—spending many hours in her cozy little apartment.

She was always glad to see him—always made him feel at home. He liked to hear her jolly little laugh, and watch her bustle around. Yet she was not Ruth. She was pretty, and lively, and modern, but she was not Ruth.

The weeks passed into months, and his contract with Arthur South ran out. South wanted him to sign another, but Jimmy had different plans.

The plans worked out as he had hoped. One day he burst breathlessly into Peggy’s apartment.

“I’ve got my own team finally, Peg!” he exclaimed happily. “Ten pieces and they’re the hottest musicians in Boston! The meanest trio of saxes I ever heard. A trumpet that’s pure dirt. And a piano—hot dog! I wish you could hear that baby play!”

“You bet I’ll hear him play!” said Peggy promptly. “I’ll hear all of you play. Oh, I’m thrilled, Jimmy! Tell me all about it! When do you open and where?”

“To-morrow night at Riverdown,” he went on, trembling with excitement. “I’ve been watchin’ the place for some time and when I told the manager who I’d have for men he gave me the contract. Gee, Peg!”
Unable to contain himself he danced around the room singing "Strutter's Ball" at the top of his voice, until the people in the apartment below pounded on the pipes for a cessation of activities.

"Will you go out with me, Peg? Listen, it won't be complete unless you're there, too. Will you go?"

"You couldn't keep me away," replied Peggy, shining eyed.

That opening night of Jimmy Price's Nightingales was an event of events. At eight fifteen with the big Riverdown hall well filled and couples pouring in, Jimmy led in his men.

There were ten of them attired in white robes, dark blue turbans, and dark sashes.

They wandered onto the stage behind the curtain and started off with "Gypsy Sweetheart," playing softly, rapidly, and sneakily.

Then the curtain rose slowly. Soft blue lights flooded a palm garden setting, and Jimmy brought down his violin for louder, crashing effects.

After the dance Peggy Warden rendered her verdict. "The best band in Boston, Jimmy, and I'm not saying that just to be nice! New stuff, real music, and the time—Mmmm! Marvelous! Oh, I'm so happy I could howl!" She gazed proudly up at him. "But Jimmy, why play that old 'Memories' waltz time? It's a sweet old number, but wouldn't it go better jazzed up?"

Jimmy looked at her. "No, Peg, it wouldn't," he said slowly. "It's just a weakness of mine to play it that way. We all have 'em, you know."

The success of the Nightingales was phenomenal. Nightly, crowds flocked to hear the sensational new band, and to see its dancing leader. The prestige of Jimmy Price soared.

Spurred on by the knowledge that his dream was coming true Jimmy slaved with the team, tirelessly rehearsing new numbers, continually on the watch to anticipate different trends in the dance-band world.

Soon there came an offer from a small recording company. Jimmy held off and not long after, a big company sought his signature. The band spent three weeks perfecting a new jazz hit.

When the record appeared "Memories," by a strange freak of fate, was on the other side, played waltz time by a string trio.

Finally came the biggest offer of all, the offer that meant more to Jimmy Price than all the others. It was in the form of a timid letter asking if he would consent to bring the band to the old home town for a night.

The money wouldn't be an awful lot, the letter had said, but the whole town would turn out to the dance.

"Will I play?" murmured Jimmy, his dark eyes shining with anticipation of the climax. "Will I! They're happy right I will! I'd play if there wasn't a red cent in it!"

After he had wired acceptance he went in high glee to Peggy Warden.

"That'll be great," she said with a strange lack of enthusiasm. "I hope you knock 'em all dead, and I know you will."

There was no need for her to ask what Jimmy was thinking about. In the time that she had known him she had come to know of the home-town girl.

Now she turned away toward the window that looked out over the Fenway. "I may not see you again after you go," she said bravely. "I—I expect to go to New York before you get back?"

"What's the idea?"

"Well, Arthur South has made good there with his new band and he—"

Jimmy guessed the rest. "The lucky stiff," he commented, staring down at
the small, lowered head. "The lucky stiff."

"Is he?" said Peg, forcing a smile. "I'm glad you think so, Jimmy."

"Are you goin' before I get back? Is that definite?"

"Well, not definite," she said slowly. "I probably shall, though. Why?"

His thoughts turned to Ruth. "I'll have some news for you, maybe," he said with a grin that failed to take account of her wistful eyes. "Pretty big news, too."

She understood. "I wish you luck, Jimmy," she said, low voiced. "But I don't guess I'll be here when you get back. I'm giving him my answer Saturday noon."

"And we play the old burg Friday night," commented Jimmy. "Not so good. Well, anyway—" He held out his hand. "Good luck, Peg, kid. You've sure been a great little pal and I won't forget you."

Her lips quivered but she faced him smiling. "Good-by, Jimmy. Show 'em what a real team is. 'By."

Jimmy Price thought of some of these things the night he stood in the old, home-town hall before his famous Nightingales. Wielding his baton, tapping his gleaming shoes, and swaying easily to the syncopation of the saxes and the other instruments they kept recurring to him.

It sort of disturbed him to think of Peg getting married. Somehow or other it seemed that it would take something very fine out of his life.

"Oh, well," he muttered as his first trumpet took a "break," and carried it to the heavens; "she probably knows what she wants."

Once again, for the hundredth time his dark eyes swept the hall. Everywhere he saw familiar faces that smiled and stared at him in admiration and welcome. He felt a queer little thrill of pride. He had made good, and he had kept his word.

The triumph was not yet complete for Ruth Brand had not appeared. He had planned to call her immediately upon his arrival in town. The train had been an hour late and he had had to hurry his men straight to the hall.

Yet her lateness would make the finishing touch perfect. It would give him the chance to effect the little drama that they alone understood. A thousand times he had pictured it to himself.

He sighed, and then for the first time saw his old musicians. There they were over in one corner, their heads together nodding toward the band.

They were picking him to pieces, he knew, in the way of musicians the world over, but their expressions told what they really thought. Green-eyed, rampant jealousy was on their faces.

All but Charley Deware, the old drummer. He wondered where Charley was. And as his eyes swung back to the entrance he found out.

Just coming in was Charley, and with him was Ruth.

Jimmy's heart seemed to stop. The graceful, languid Ruth. He waited for her to wave, and when she did, gazing eagerly up at him, he bowed formally as she had bowed to applauding audiences. It suited his dream to do that.

He watched Charley and Ruth glide out among the swaying couples. Then he stopped his band on a note with a warning wave and a downward sweep of his baton.

"'Memories,' waltz time," he ordered. "Soft and dreamy. Let's go."

The old tune flowing with liquid softness from the perfectly tongued saxes floated out over the hall, almost conveying the words:

"Memories—memories,
Dreams of love so true—"

Oddly enough, just then, a cross cur-
rent of thought went through his head and he wondered what Peggy Warden was doing. He could imagine her reading, or bustling around packing for her trip on the morrow.

It never occurred to him for a moment that she might be lying face down across her bed crying as though her heart would break.

The thought drifted away and he turned to the floor again. Charley was saying something to Ruth, presumably from his disgusted expression something about the number he had never liked.

And Ruth was laughing! Laughing! No familiar turn of her golden head toward the platform! No tenderness to him in her glance or her bearing! No sign even that she recognized "Memories!"

Yet when the last note had died away she came across the floor leading Charley by the hand.

"Welcome home, Jimmy," she cried, holding out her hand, and he noticed that it had become very plump. "You've got some band here, some band!"

"Thanks," said Jimmy mechanically. Her face, now that she was close to him, had grown infinitely heavier.

"Yes, you sure have," nodded Charley Deware with some awe in his voice. "It's mighty good."

Then he grinned with something of the old maliciousness. "I see they still call you the dancin' fool. Seems to me I was the one that started that name. And say, how about doin' a little steppin' around up there? We'd like to see you."

Jimmy's smile was wintry. "I'll think it over," he said briefly. This was not a pleasant request.

"Oh, yes." Ruth tucked her hand possessively under Charley's elbow as she had used to under Jimmy's. "Charley's my husband now, Jimmy," she announced with the old light laugh.

Strangely, it had become a giggle. "We were married two weeks ago."

The dream smashed suddenly to pieces. Yet the crash was not great. Jimmy wondered at the lightness of his spirit. It hardly was possible that reality could be like this.

"Is that so?" he said slowly, and out of the fragments of the dream came the true awakening. "Well, I congratulate you both. Yes, I sure congratulate you."

He smiled down upon them and turning, beckoned a small boy. Hurriedly he wrote out a telegram.

There would be plenty of time for Peg to get it, and she couldn't possibly mistake its meaning. He had been as blind as a bat, as dumb as a—a dancing fool.

"You asked me to dance?" he said to Charley. "Sure, I'll dance this number. And I've got a little surprise for you and Ruth."

Erect and slender he faced his band. "Take 'Memories' again," he said quietly, "and get behind it with all the dirt you've got. Jazz it up, tear it all to pieces, smash hell out of it! All right, let's go!"

---

Time to Cheer

Seated in the depths of the club's best armchair, the young man reading the morning paper gave a shout of great joy.

"Fine," he remarked. "Perfectly splendid!"

"Oh," remarked another member of the club, "what can this be that excites this poor fellow's gray matter?"

"My friend," replied the young man in the armchair, "have you observed that gasoline has been reduced in price?"

"Yes," answered the other, "but I didn't know you had a car."

"As a matter of fact, I haven't," said the languid one, "but I run a very powerful pocket lighter that uses gas."
CHAPTER I.

WISE GUYS OF THE WAR.

BATTALION of infantry wound its way like a ponderous brown snake along the shell-torn road. The troops were marching at route step, splattering on through the inch of creamy mud that covered their path.

The front was only ten kilometers or so away, as was evidenced by the tattered camouflaging that cut up the landscape as far as the eye could reach. There was a tiredness in the men's step—for the rising of the curtain for another act of the much-talked-of drama was but a few hours away.

Yet from the lips of one Private Blimp there arose a song.

Oh, the infantry, the infantry,
With the dirt behind their ears;
The infantry, the infantry,
That drinks up all the beers.
The artillery, the cavalry,
The dirty engineers;
They couldn't lick the infantry
In a hundred million years.

Corporal Ditty, the immediate superior of the singer, looked at him disinterestedly. "Pipe down," he said. "Ain't the smell o' that bar rag wore off yet?"

Private Blimp, with the far-away look of one whose muse had been inconsequently interrupted, ignored the admonition of his superior. "Prunes," he retorted.

Oh, yes, we had some very fine wine,
Parley voo.
Oh, yes, we had some very fine wine,
Parley voo.
Oh, yes, we had some very fine wine—

"Shut up," ordered the bored corporal.

The interruption did not disturb Private Blimp. He finished:

'Twas made of tar, pitch and turpentine;
Hinkey, dinkey, parley voo.

"You got a voice like the exhaust of a flivver," said the corporal.

"You ain't got no ear for music," returned Blimp. "An' if I couldn't sing no better'n you I'd keep my mouth buttoned."

"If the Jerries heard that noise they'd
think the whole American army was sick,” went on Corporal Ditty. “Who let you in on this war, anyways?”

“Boy, they was after he-men when they took me. As for you, you’re so thin you can’t never be hit—unless they spot that empty conk o’ yours, an’ that wouldn’t be no loss to anybody.”

Private Blimp referred to the height and slimness of Corporal Ditty; he was tall—several inches better than six feet, and his width was not worth mentioning. On the other hand, Private Blimp was stubby, fat, and full. He was comparatively short, although his stature was accentuated by his paunch.

So far as the more or less unknown quantity called friendship was concerned, the two men were inseparable. Yet to casual observers this friendship was wholly negative. Each was eternally at war with the other; they had been at war since enlisting in the army together many months before.

“Tub o’ lard,” said the lengthy corporal sententiously, referring to his loquacious subordinate, “it ain’t safe to get personal about personal matters. Maybe I ain’t a Apollo; neither am I a jellyfish. Boy, you’re excess baggage from your fat head to your fat feet; they ain’t nothin’ lean about you exceptin’ your brain!”

“Put on a new record,” sneered Private Blimp, “an’ also a little meat; you’re beginnin’ to look like the ghost of a lost reputation. An’ as I have cracked before, you ain’t been castin’ no shadow for the last two months.”

“Listen, flabberties!” returned the corporal. “This place we’re goin’ to ain’t goin’ to be no bon sector like some o’ the others. Fat ginks like yourself has got to do somethin’ besides cooshayin’ twenty-five hours a day like you done on the other front. An’ that reminds me, have you heard anything funny about this sector? They say they ain’t much shootin’ goin’ on, but that the casualties is fierce.”

Blimp turned to Ditty suspiciously. “Who’s been fillin’ you with all that pap?”

“Got it straight from the frogs, brother. This sector is hoodooed. They say guys drop out o’ sight on details; men are found knocked off without wounds, an’ they’s general blue Hades to pay all the time. Them enemy fellers don’t do much shootin’.”

Blimp started to speak, but ducked instead. A sound like the roaring of a freight train reached his ears, and a moment later there was an earth-splitting crash two hundred yards to the left. Then, as the whining of distant shell fragments died down, he resumed the conversation.

“Yeah!” he said. “I see they don’t do no shootin’. What d’ye call that, a spit ball?”

“They’re shellin’ Dead-Man’s Curve ahead,” advised the corporal. “The Frenchie’s said the enemy always do that night an’ day. We’ll be there in a minnit.”

“Dead-Man’s Curve, hey?” inquired the equally experienced Blimp. “I never seen a front yet where they don’t have a dead-man’s curve—usually a half dozen of ’em. Yeah, this is a quiet sector, all right; you mean they quiet guys who goes into it.”

“I’m tellin’ you straight,” said Corporal Ditty. “It’s a quiet front. The frogs call it ‘The Trench of the Ghost.’”

Private Blimp was not superstitious. To him life was a logical succession of causes and effects. He grunted. “Huh; them French birds has been fillin’ you to the gills again. Ghosts, hey! Yeah, ghosts with green uniforms, potato mashers, an’ saw-tooth bayonets. We’ve met ’em before. Did these Frenchie’s tell you all about Santa Claus, too?”

“Listen, dizzy, is they anything you don’t know?” demanded Ditty. “These frogs ain’t so dumb, lemme tell you that.”

“Your brain is on a furlough,” pro-
claimed Blimp. "These Frenchmen has been fightin' too long to get scared with haunts. Did they tell you what these enemy ghosts looked like?"

"They said it was a par bon sector an' that guys had been found on outposts without no wounds—an' dead."

At this moment several freight trains were heard approaching at the same time. They came in a gurgling roar and with a screaming cadence that grew speedily louder. 'A half dozen green replacements looked askance at the more experienced members, but as the latter showed no undue signs of concern the replacements accepted their initiation with outward composure.

The older members had learned that the shell which heralds its approach long before it reaches its objective is usually harmless. They had also learned that the shell which speaks late leaves mourners. With a world-rocking smash the H. E.'s met the curve ahead, and a smother of black smoke, mud, and shell splinters blotted out the immediate horizon.

"Boy," observed Blimp. "I'm thinkin' this man's army had better do a little detourin'. I don't crave to keep on this bridle path while they're droppin' ten-story buildin's on it. Maybe that's some more o' the ghosts work, hey?"

"We're goin' to need more'n a half-dozen replacements in a minnit," said Ditty, ignoring Blimp's question. "Listen to them splinters sing!"

Corporal Ditty's war wisdom was wrong. The head of the battalion turned into another mud-oozing road, and the shells continued to fall harmlessly far to the right.

In less than an hour the troops were halted to wait for darkness before proceeding to the lines. For they were now so near the front that further marching would have brought them under direct observation from the enemy positions.

The battalion halted for nearly two hours—the war-wise members improv-
"You guys got here just in time," said Blimp. "We're goin' into a front what is a front."

"You have been there before, of course?" asked the new man named Troft.

Blimp looked at his questioner. He saw some five-and-a-half feet of uniform and youth that had seemingly been forced through a clothes wringer. Manifestly the boy was soft, from his somewhat intelligent face to his obviously sore feet.

"How long you been in the army?" said Blimp.

"Let's see—well, about five months. We have had very intensive training indeed."

"Indeed!" said Blimp.

"I find military life most interesting," went on Troft. "You see, at the beginning I had grave doubts as to my fitness for so strenuous a profession as that of arms. I have, however, made a very profound study of military tactics and find that I am greatly intrigued. I am surely glad that we are now bound for the front where I shall have an opportunity of putting my knowledge and training to the severe test of active service."

"Have a drink o' water," said Blimp.

"Do you believe in ghosts?" added Ditty.

The newcomer smiled. "The supernatural never has interested me. Ghosts, goblins, and witches were invented by very primitive and uneducated peoples, you understand."

"Listen 'Bosco.'" Ditty put a friendly arm about the pack-laden shoulders of Private Troft. "We're goin' into a sector what has ghosts in it. It's a quiet sector—with heavy casualties. The frogs has been driven out o' there by spooks. Huh?"

"I see," smiled Troft.

"Now," said Ditty, "me an' my friend Blimp has been makin' a study o' this thing, an' we believes this sector is par bon. The Frenchies told us they find a lotta guys dead, without hearin' any shootin'. They find their throats cut, see? An' they find 'em choked—with an awful look in their mugs. Then off in a old communication trench they come across three guys, without a scratch. After this they was four guys found in a dugout who had been playin' poker. They wasn't no wounds on any of 'em."

"Probably gas," said Troft.

Ditty grunted. "Then they see funny lights in the sky——"

"Flares," explained Troft.

"Then they see white things what moves, an' they hear music what seems tuh come from nowhere."

"Wine," said Troft.

"Listen." Ditty eyed Blimp, and the latter nodded. The corporal continued: "Me an' Blimp is willin' to bet they's spooks in this here front. Are you a gamblin' man?"

Troft chuckled. "If you can produce a ghost I'll give you all that I have coming to me on the next pay day."

"Put 'er there, kid!" Ditty extended his hand. "All you'll do is sign the pay roll."

Blimp and Ditty were slightly puzzled at Troft's attitude toward the front. New men were usually easy to scare; but evidently this replacement was made of different clay. Blimp was aware that Ditty had been using a supply of imagination.

He knew, also, that in all probability the Frenchmen had stretched the story of a mysterious-seeming sector for the benefit of Ditty—who, if not credulous, was willing to be for the sake of Blimp. The latter, although he had been characteristically at variance with Ditty a short time before, entered into the spirit of the thing for the benefit of the all-too-complaisant newcomer, Private Troft.

As darkness came on, the battalion fell in and continued their march to the front. Troft as well as several more
of the newcomers were placed in the platoon of which Blimp and Ditty were a part, to the mild satisfaction of these two soldiers of contrast.

As the column neared the lines all conversation was forbidden; but in the darkness hoarse whispers served the purpose of the two miscreants better than the matter-of-fact voices of daylight.

“Something ain’t right about this front,” said Ditty, with an intake of breath. “You notice they’s plenty o’ flares, but no shootin’. But these lights don’t look natural to me; you don’t see ’em near the ground; they sort o’ come out o’ the air an’ then are gone.”

“Due to a fog bank,” whispered Troft in a voice that did not crack. “We’ve been marching through fog for half an hour.”

“Don’t kid yourself, Troft,” said Blimp. “This fog’s just in this valley; the lines is higher; no fog there.”

“Listen, Troft,” said Ditty; “we ain’t tryin’ to scare you; but we’ve been on fronts before, an’ we seen some things they don’t put in headlines. We ain’t sayin’ we believe in ghosts; but you get this way when you’re with a killin’ outfit.”

“Yeah,” said Blimp, “if he’d a’ been in that other sector with us he wouldn’t be so sure of hisself. Boy, that was like the D. T.’s backward!”

A battery of French artillery on the right opened a desultory fire. In the thick fog the booming detonations sounded like muffled thunder from another planet, the shells wailing like lost souls in flight. The guns were answered by enemy shells that seemed to vie with the French missiles in their hollow shriekings.

Ditty’s murmurings took their tempo from the weird-sounding duel. “This place gives me the willies,” he whispered. “Them shells sound like they was filled with liquid fire. You can almost hear it gurgle.”

Blimp tuned his hushed voice to that of Ditty’s. “Boy, them Jerries sure is the devil’s right-hand men. Listen to that!”

Far ahead a rattling came out of the depths of the night. At first it was clearly audible, and then it died into the silence.

“That’s another o’ them phantom attacks,” explained Ditty. “You notice you didn’t hear no Maxim fire; it was all shout-shout an’ Hotchkiss. The frogs say they’s one o’ them attacks every night. But they never see no enemy.”

“The Frenchmen probably have an attack of nerves,” suggested Troft. “I have heard that all troops are occasionally subject to promiscuous firing, especially at night.”

Blimp touched the newcomer’s arm. “Troft,” said he, “that’s right about troops sometimes thinkin’ they see something, an’ it often happens—with green men. But them Latin allies of ours has been at this thing four years. That firin’ we heard was all from our side. Ditty’ll tell you what them Frenchies said about the attacks in this sector.”

Ditty hesitated. “I ain’t sure I’ll tell you, Troft. You wouldn’t believe it. But for three weeks now the Frenchies has been repellin’ attacks nearly every night. They see the enemy comin’ through the dusk, an’ they hear ’em whisper an’ grunt as they stumble across the shell holes.

“It ain’t just a few men they see; it’s whole lines of ’em in ragged formation. Then when the French opens up a kind of blackness seems to settle over No Man’s Land—an’ the attack melts.”

“Are these so-called attacks preceded by an artillery barrage?” demanded Troft.

“I been tellin’ you they ain’t much shellin’ exceptin’ behind the lines,” said Ditty.

Troft chuckled. “There’s the answer to the whole silly thing. I have heard that large operations or raids of any
THE GHOST OF NO MAN’S LAND

consequence are invariably preceded by thorough artillery preparations. My friend, you have been led astray by the canny Frenchmen.”

Ditty was wildly disappointed by Troft’s attitude. But he determined not to let up on the newcomer. There were few men, he had found, but who were subject to his tales of the front. The foggy night dripped with mystery, and he knew that the time and place were in accord with his purposes; yet something was wrong with his efforts.

As they approached the lines the firing died down. They were marching in single-column formation now, and the men seemed unusually quiet. The wood through which they made their way was apparently deserted. Presently they came into an open field and then entered a communication trench, winding their way ahead silently. Some two hundred yards forward they passed a dugout from which a faint light could be seen. The aroma of cooking food reached Blimp's nostrils.

“Huh,” said he, “them babies scoff, war or no war; these frogs have got this little guerre down to a science.”

Troft grinned aloud. “Nothing worries them but ghosts, I take it.”

Troft was beginning to get on the two men’s nerves. His complacency and quiet disregard for his position weighed heavily on their respective stomachs. They remembered well their first entrance into the lines. Dry mouths and constricted throats had been their lot, and they resented the newcomer’s calmness. Moreover, his attitude was apparently all wool and as wide as the Western front.

In twenty minutes they reached the front line and the men were placed in the Frenchmen’s positions. The poilus’ whispered greetings were calm, and the relief was made without confusion. The darkness was now intense, for dawn was less than an hour away. With the exception of an occasional short burst of Maxim fire the enemy lines were comparatively quiet.

As the east commenced to be tinged with the faint glow of early dawn Blimp saw the bedraggled Troft gazing calmly into No Man's Land. A look of contentment was spread upon his features. He pointed nonchalantly toward the enemy positions.

“Friend Blimp,” he whispered, “since you have had ample experience on a variety of fronts, kindly tell me why we see no men over there. I have been looking for them since it commenced to lighten up, and I can see nothing—not even a trench.”

“Listen, brother,” said Blimp; “I been tryin’ to figure that out myself. Up on the other front we seen a bunch of ’em sittin’ on their trench—but something’s wrong here.”

Troft grinned. “My boy, do you actually believe this ghost rot? There is an enemy in our immediate front; did you hear the machine guns?”

Blimp scowled. “Wait till you’ve been here a day or two; you’ll be smilin’ on the other side o’ your map. Even if you don’t believe these here funny stories the frogs has been tellin’ about this sector, war ain’t no kindergarten game, brother.”

CHAPTER III.

A MUSICAL DISCOVERY.

Ah, here’s another warrior!” Troft greeted the approaching Ditty with a smile. “Well, Corporal Ditty, Blimp and I have been discussing the glorious art of war. We cannot see any of the enemy, yet we know that they are in evidence.”

“Listen, ‘general,’ an’ listen careful’,” Ditty began. “How’d you like to go on outpost duty to-night? They’s a half dozen ‘listenin’ posts along our front what has to be manned, an’ some fellers ain’t particular about this duty seemin’ as how that’s where they get hamstrung.”
Troft patted Ditty on the shoulder. "Corporal," he said, "I'm your man. That would indeed be an experience. Danger, my boy, is my dish."

"Yeah, you'll be dished all right!" said Blimp. "We'll prob'ly gather you up in a platter."

"Understand, brother," cautioned Ditty, "these posts ain't supposed to be held by new replacements. You'll prob'ly relieve Blimp here some time after midnight. See?"

"Spill that again," demanded Blimp, turning toward Ditty. "Do I understand you to say I'm takin' over one o' them posts?"

Ditty looked at Blimp with a telegraphic eye. "Sure," said the corporal; "I been talkin' with the sergeant. You'll take over a post when the relief is made to-night. Then I'll sneak out with Troft an' he can relieve you."

"Well, Troft," said Blimp doubtfully, "if you find me tore into raw ribbons you'll crawl into the enemy lines an' take a eye for a eye, huh?"

"Certainly," said Troft; "or possibly I might round up a brace of ghosts. Eh, Mr. Ditty?"

Ditty grunted. "Well, come on, Blimp; me an' you is on a detail to get some monkey meat an' stuff down through the jungles. Them antagonists has been droppin' mustard an' phosgene into the valley, an' the teams couldn't get through last night."

"He turns to Troft. "Remember to-night, soldier; you better make your will."

But Troft did not answer. He was gazing intently toward the enemy lines, with a look of sublime contentment.

"This guy, Troft, has got to have something happen to him," quoth Ditty as the pair made their way along the trench. "I never seen such a ham. Maybe you could dress like a ghost an' crawl into No Man's Land."

"Yeah, an' maybe I couldn't," said Blimp. "Boy, your ideas is in reverse."

"Or maybe you could hide out ahead of the post an' just jump him."

"Your brains is at rest," sneered Blimp. "Snap 'em into it an' save your breath."

"Well," suggested Ditty, "if you got any ideas let's hear 'em."

"We got until night to dope something up," stated Blimp. "This bird ain't so dumb, an' you can't fool him with nothin' less than a big idea."

"Leavin' the brain work to me, eh?" asked Ditty.

"Your conk is a vacuum," spat Blimp. "How far's this monkey meat?"

"Most a kilometer," said Ditty. "It's near that busted town."

Some half hour later Blimp and Ditty, with a detail of five other men, made their way to a designated point three quarters of a mile in the rear of the lines. The ration dump, however, could not be found.

Ditty was in a quandary. "The lootenant said 'twas here," he stated, pointing to an empty area in the middle of a wood. "This is it all right, because he said 'twas just above that gutted town we passed through last night."

Blimp snorted. "I tell you what, Corporal Dizzy, you've lost your bearin's. I hereby proposes that you, as commandin' officer, scatter the inferior troops what you have under you, an' direct 'em to get busy and do a little reconnoiterin'."

"All right," agreed Ditty; "you guys do a little scoutin' for them rations; me an' High Private Blimp will see can we get any information in this place what was once a town."

"Yes, sir," saluted Blimp; "would the corporal like to have Private Blimp carry his troubles?"

"Go sit on a tack!" said Ditty.

The town was smashed beyond recognition. Stark walls, without roofs, looked down upon débris-filled rooms. The silence of deserted streets was broken only by the clumping hobnails
of the two men as they wound their way through scattered cobblestones and shell holes.

“We seem to have this here town all to ourselves,” commented Blimp.

Ditty halted and surveyed his surroundings. “Yeah; ain’t nobody here, unless it’s in the other end of the town. We’ll go around that way an’ then come back on the other side.”

But no sign of life was found. The last building on the street was more or less intact, however, and a bullet-ridden sign caught the men’s attention: “Café.”

“Maybe the ration dump is in here,” said Ditty.

Blimp agreed. “Yeah, an’ it’s our duty to look, corporal. We don’t want to miss it.”

Yet the café was deserted, both of bottles and of men. The place had apparently been raided during its occupation by the enemy, and the solitary aspect of the tabled room saddened the two crusaders.

“They enemy birds sure make a clean sweep,” observed Blimp, looking about him. “They’ve even taken the smell.”

Ditty was correspondingly depressed. “Let’s look around an’ see can we find something in the cellar,” he suggested.

“As you were!” Blimp pulled a dusty box from the recesses of a cupboard. “Boy!” he gloated, “you gotta admit I’m—”

“A dummy,” finished Ditty, looking at the box’s contents.

“A phony graft!” said Blimp. “Who’d ‘a’ thunk it?”

“Yeah; 1908 model.” Ditty scratched his head. “First time I ever seen one o’ them things in France. This café sure was up-to-date. Boy, this is some trickvola; put on one o’ them records!”

Blimp selected a much-used cylinder record from a collection of about a dozen, and wound the squeaking machine. “Now,” said he, “for the edification of Corporal Ditty we’ll play that little song entitled—”

“Madelon!” The two men chorused the word as the lilting strains of that Gallic air filled the silent café.

Presently the song ended. Blimp straightened and looked intently at Ditty. The latter removed his helmet. “We are in the presence of a idea,” whispered the corporal with affected huskiness.

“All we need is string,” said Blimp, looking into the future.

“About two hundred feet of it,” added Ditty, mentally computing a distance.

The phonograph and horn were put into separate sacks. A ten-minute search was required to find the required string; but at last the pair were ready and started back toward the forgotten detail.

The men were waiting for them. “Yeah, you birds,” they demanded, “what you been doin’? We found the dump on the other side of the woods, an’ we been coolin’ our heels waitin’ for you bums to show up. What you got in them two bags?”

“Never mind what we got,” said Ditty.

“It’s vin or o-der-vee, or something,” commented one of the men. “Come across, you crooks. Lemme look in them bags.”

“We got this stuff from some Frenchies over in the town,” said Ditty. “It’s for some machine gunners up in the second line. We don’t know what’s in the bags an’ we ain’t gonna open ’em.”

This exclamation was greeted with profane derision. But Blimp and Ditty were adamant. They knew that a general knowledge of their plan would mean no plan at all, and they were determined to keep their designs to themselves.

The detail made its way back to the kitchen, and the supplies were duly delivered to the mess sergeant. That iron-faced individual eyed the two bags with suspicion, and the pair’s explanation
convinced him not at all. But with the breadth of cynicism the poker-faced sergeant waved the two men on their way. He knew that bacon did not come in lily-shaped containers.

Blimp and Ditty wound their way up through the zigzagging communication trench, hid the ancient phonograph in an abandoned Stoke's motor emplacement a short distance behind the front line, and then made an incidental search for the complacent Troft.

They found that imperturbable soldier lolling against the side of the trench, a nail file in his hand and a serene expression upon his face. He looked up as the two men approached and favored them with a placid smile.

"Troft," began Ditty, "I was only kiddin' you about that listenin' post; it ain't right to put a green man there, an' I don't want to be responsible for havin' you all carved up."

Troft's face fell. "This is a great disappointment," he said. "What's wrong?"

CHAPTER IV.

THE EFFECT OF SONG.

WELL, they ain't nothin' wrong much, exceptin' we've heard a few more things about this sector from the Frenchies, an' I don't know as you'd better go out there. They said four men was found bumped off last night, before we got here; two of 'em didn't have no marks on 'em, an' the others was all mute-lated up. Another feller ain't been found—an' they wasn't hardly no sound anywhere exceptin'——"

Ditty paused and looked into the churned waste of No Man's Land. Then he resumed: "This frog could spill a little Ooniglay, an' he give me a earful. He was a old guy, an' he wasn't tryin' to make no wise cracks either. He said 'twas about two o'clock in the mornin', when he was out on one o' them outposts. Things was quiet an' he almost goes asleep; then he hears a funny sound.

"At first he couldn't make out what it was, an' then he hears it again. This time it comes low an' clear. It was sort of whispered music, an' it seemed to come out o' nowhere. Just after that he hears a gurglin' moan, an' then everything was quiet again. In the mornin' they finds these four guys, an' the other was gone."

Troft's smile widened. "My boy,.." said he conclusively, "the job is mine!"

Blimp and Ditty retired, containing themselves with an effort. Fearful lest their phonograph be discovered they made their way to the hiding place and covered the sacks with dirt.

The day proved to be a long one for the two men. By midday they were in an agony of suspense; and as the afternoon wore into evening they grew more enthusiastic. Shortly before midnight the relief made its way toward the listening posts and Blimp took over an isolated position well suited to their plan.

Three quarters of an hour later Ditty secured the two sacks, wound his way quietly back to Blimp's post, and the pair commenced operations. The machine was carried some fifty feet into No Man's Land, the string was attached to the releasing lever, and Ditty stretched the cord back to a shell hole immediately ahead of the front line. It would be easy to reach.

Then he went in search of the dauntless Troft. The latter was waiting for him. "Corporal Ditty," said he, "I am much indebted to you for this opportunity. I have been looking forward to this all day."

"So have I," said Ditty.

Troft touched the corporal on the arm. "Don't worry, Friend Ditty," said he; "I shall conduct myself like a veteran. Nothing shall disturb my equanimity."

Ditty offered friendly counsel. "Re-
member, brother, this ain't gonna be no old home week—you've gotta stand on your own feet out there. But don't try to lick no enemy regiment if they come your way. You ain't supposed to hold 'em off single-handed; these is listenin' posts."

"Retreat is out of the question," announced Troft. "Like the indomitable Frenchmen at Verdun I shall say: 'They shall not pass!'"

"All right, army, let's be steppin' along," said Ditty. "Blimp's out there holdin' down that post for you, an' he ain't fallin' all over hisself about the job seemin' as how all them guys has been cut."

Ditty led the way and Troft kept closely behind. As they reached the post a flare shot from the enemy lines, revealing Blimp in a tense attitude. He turned with raised finger. "I been hearin' funny noises out front!" he whispered.

Troft chuckled and settled himself calmly into the post. Then slipping two extra clips from his belt where they would be within easy reach he bade the pair good night.

Blimp and Ditty retired slowly to the front line. Blimp was impatient. "We'll touch it off in about a half hour, huh?" he suggested.

Ditty, however, was more conservative. "Wait till things is all set," he cautioned. "A hour or two o' that creepin' silence will straighten them curly locks o' his; then we'll give him the works."

The period of waiting was endless for the two conspirators.

One o'clock came and then two. The lines had quieted down. Some half mile to the left a machine gun clattered faintly; then it was cut off, and a short rattle of distant rifle fire tattooed the night. Yet the lines in their front were as quiet as thought. The suspense was beginning to tell on the two crusaders. "Boy," whispered Blimp nervously, "pull that string! This is worse than waitin' for pay day."

Ditty nodded, urged by the uncalled-for dryness of his mouth. Reaching slowly over the parapet he fumbled for the string. Finding it he brought it silently into the trench. Then with an unsteady hand he commenced to draw it in. Blimp waited, his breath coming in silent whispers.

Two feet, three feet, the cord was drawn in. Then Ditty paused and whispered to Blimp, his voice in near panic:

"It ain't hitched!"

"Pull it, you ham; you're just takin' up the slack!"

"Lord! if it ain't——"

Ditty pulled. The line tightened. Then from out of the deathless silence of No Man's Land there came a muffled sound. At first it was indistinct, like ghostly music from the voids of infinity. Yet in a moment the sound grew in volume, stretching in tonal strength as it gained momentum.

Then there echoed over that vast belt of black silence called No Man's Land, the mechanically imperfect though distinct voice of a Frenchman, rendering with Gallic emotion the love song of poilu legions: "Madelon!"

In that breathless moment, breaking the impure strains of the immortal song, came sounds which were not on the record. There was the single snapping report of a Springfield, and then the mechanical melody was punctuated with four more shots in quick succession. Something was happening.

The two men did not hesitate. Jumping to their feet they made for the outpost. Yet they had covered but half of the distance when Ditty halted. From their immediate front came strange sounds—a muffled clumping of feet and indistinct murmurings.

Then the pair saw, winding up from the direction of the outpost, the unmistakable figures of five of the enemy,
their sinister helmets bobbing like evil shadows in the semidarkness.

Ditty's rifle snapped to his shoulder; then in the act of squeezing the trigger he paused. In the rear of the five enemy infantrymen was the trailing form of an American soldier. There was a swank in his confident step and he carried himself in a manner that was strange yet familiar to the two men. It was a replacement turned soldier.

There was a low, decisive command and the enemy soldiers halted. Troft greeted Blimp and Ditty calmly. "Not bad for a first try, eh?"

The two conspirators maintained an eloquent silence.

"These prisoners of mine were crawling to the left of my post when I discovered them," explained Troft. "There were four others with them—you heard me fire?"

Ditty nodded.

"You see, it was this way——"

"Yeah," said Blimp.

Troft continued. "These fellows had evidently missed my post, and as soon as they passed to the left I crawled out behind them, with the intention of beating them at their own game."

"Ahm," said Ditty.

"I was on the point of attacking them when a most infernal noise started out in No Man's Land, and for a moment I was nonplused."

"Yeah, a plused pulse," ruminated Ditty.

Troft ignored the interruption. "Well, when these fellows heard the sound they paused a moment and then beat a hasty retreat, thinking, I presume, that some French troops had cut them off. But you see I blocked their withdrawal."

"Uhh," said Blimp.

"When I commenced to fire they called for quarter; but not trusting them I emptied my gun. They, thinking there were more troops in their rear, were probably more docile than they might have been. Hence——"

"You say they was a noise?" demanded Blimp.

"It was a most peculiar sound," said Troft. "It seemed like a French voice lifted in ribald song, but I am not sure; you see, I was so occupied with these men that in the confusion the sounds were forgotten." Troft paused. "Well, I must get them in. By the way, I am in a quandary about that voice; but I'm sure it could be easily explained. Did either of you men hear anything peculiar?"

The pair exchanged glances for a long moment. Then Ditty answered. "Not a whisper," he said.

Try Again

"All you have to do," said the film producer to the moving-picture star, "is to seize the woman in your arms, jump on top of a passing taxi, and leap from there to the fire escape of the building on the corner."

He paused for breath.

"Then you must climb up to the sixth floor, drag her to the parapet, and, bracing yourself against a chimney, hurl her out into space. She catches a window ledge in her fall, and——"

"'Spose I drop her?" hazarded the actor.

"Well, you'll have to pick her up and begin all over again."

Where It Was

The golfer had lost his ball at a critical stage of the game. He and his caddy were feverishly searching for it.

When they were about to give up the hunt a tall and angular lady appeared. "I think it's disgraceful that you are allowed to drive those horrid balls about!" she said, indignantly. "Why, one came over this way a few minutes ago and it's absolutely ruining my bulldog's teeth!"
CHAPTER I.
HORSES AND HOT DOGS.

The loose pants of leather, the same chaps "Red" Cullen had worn when he was riding Arizona cow ranges, flapped noisily in the gale of a stiff nor’wester blowing down from the white-capped Pacific beyond Point Dume.

Red bucked the breeze afoot, in a forward slanting manner, toward the end of an amusement pier on which gaudy billboards advertised "Red Cullen and His Diving Horse."

"I sound more like a ship with blowing sails than what I do a cowboy," he thought, gripping the pier railing to steady himself.

Red was headed for the hot-dog stand of "Tony, the Greek," his partner, financial backer, and manager in the show business. In spite of the nasty weather, a large crowd was patronizing the beach resort, for it was a holiday.

Los Angeles, seemingly, was emptying herself of workers and tourists.

They poured beachward in electric trains, buses, and private automobiles.

"Hardly anybody uses a hoss, nowadays," Red said complainingly to Tony, the Greek after reaching the wind-rocked shelter of the flimsy hot-dog stand. "Seems like somethin' otta be done about these here automobiles an' the way they high hat the noble critters nature made fer man to ride on.

"Makes me peevy to see the way these city flivvers go after a hoss the moment one shows up on the avenue, which is about as rare as an ice boat on the Amazon. Minute they spies a hoss a million motorists starts buzzin' their buzzers to scare it out the way, 'stead o' showin' one o' man's best friends the courtesy and honor due him."

Red sighed discontentedly, but he brightened considerably when the breeze, leaking through numerous cracks, wafted the full strength odor of hot dog his way.

"Where would the world be to-day," he demanded, "if it hadn't 'a' been fer the hoss? I ast you, Tony? What
was it that hauled the Roman chariots to vict’ry? And later on what was it Napoleon rode astride of?"

Tony, the Greek, paused in his duties as a hot-dog chef long enough to wipe a razor-edged knife on his apron. He grinned as he slitted another wiener sausage and placed the halves on his flat-topped stove.

"You ask-a me what Meesta Napoleon ride-a on? Why you ask-a me, Red? You no go to school? Why you no getta one-a book from histor-e-e?"

He surveyed the cowboy with grave reproof.

"Me, all I know from-a my educate ees-a that thees-a here Napoleon what you spik about, he no ride all-a da time. One-a day come along anotha guy name-a Meesta Wellington. He wanna go for leetla ride, an’ who you tink-a he use for a horse?"

The Greek tossed some chopped onions on the hot dog.

"Meesta Wellington he ride Napoleon!" he declared with the confidence of a student who knows his history.

With his mouth full of luscious hot dog, its mustard and onion stimulating against the salty gale, Red waved aside the historical digression. But he continued to grumble about the horseless habits of his era.

"Why you keek about-a that?" Tony wanted to know. "Look-a how all-a dees-a people come-a down to da beach to-day. Da wind she blow an’ da wave she mekka too beeg for a swim, but do all-a dees-a people stay home? Not so much you can notice heem! What for dey come-a down here? What dey wanna see? Not-a you, Red, but da horse. ‘Cause da horse, she’s no common.”

Red turned and scowled over his lean shoulder at the giant seas racing shoreward along the pier. They roared murderously as they shook the pilings, as though bent on wrecking this flimsy peninsula man had dared thrust out into their domain. The onslaught against the pier had set lofty roller coasters and the towers of amusement palaces to swaying and rattling apprehensively.

Into that welter Red and his horse must dive presently.

“There’s considerable meat in what you say, Tony,” the cowboy admitted. “Your wisdom is like your hot dogs, meaty and all to the mustard. But I’m not kickin’ about the way our act is drawin’ the crowds, storm or shine. I know it means an extended contract with the pier management.”

For a time Red chewed in moody silence, and Tony watched his partner solicitously. Not until Red’s last bite was warming the inside of him did the cowboy venture further comment. Then, as Tony had expected, he unbosomed himself fully.

“It’s hosses in general I’m worried about, old sausage herder; but particularly I’m nervous to-day about Demon. He’s the best hoss that ever rode a range or swum an ocean.

“Just take a look at this here Pacific Ocean of yourn, and note what a frothin’ fit of hydrophoby she’s go to-day. Ain’t that the thunder of a pond to make a good hoss dive into?”

CHAPTER II.

HIGH SEAS AND HIGH WORDS.

NEAR the end of the amusement pier a platform of skeletonlike scaffolding had been erected. A chute with cleats for horse hoofs slanted up to it. The pier itself stood twenty feet above the water and the platform ten feet higher, making a total of thirty feet.

For three weeks Red Cullen and his trick horse, Demon, had been making two dives daily from that height. A matinée dive in the afternoon was followed by an illuminated act at night, when red flares heightened the thrill for the spectators.

Red’s pet horse, favorite of a string
of six he had brought to the coast in search of fame and fortune in the movies, had never faltered in the death-defying leap into the ocean.

But to-day, as the hour for the matinée dive approached, the Pacific was a seething welter of foam and monster billows. It was rougher than Red had seen it before.

In the morning Red had dropped in at the offices of the amusement company which operated the pier. To Ike Spearman, business manager, Red had mentioned that it might be difficult to get his horse safely ashore in such a storm.

"There's some strong rip tides runnin', too," Red had mentioned casually hoping his employer would suggest a cancellation of to-day's diving act without being asked directly. "If it hadn't been for the life guards," he added, "a couple of men and a kid would have been drowned. They was caught by a rip that carried them half a mile out to sea in no time at all."

Ike Spearman smiled in a tight-lipped way. Perhaps Ike had anticipated what the cowboy was after. The smile vanished quickly.

"What do you think we're payin' you good money for, anyway?" Ike demanded. Then, as though Red had argued, which he had not, the pier manager became abusively sarcastic.

"Come in here to stall, didn't you?" he sneered. "Want to cancel your act to-day just because there's a little wind blowing. You stunt men are all the same. You all make me sick!"

"All you want is a nice, fat contract calling for twice what your act is worth, with everything easy and no hard work. Then the minute a little hardship comes along you start stallin' and sobbin'. You get cold feet and won't take a chance, but expect the management to do all the gamblin'!"

Ike had lashed himself into a near frenzy and could not stop talking now, though Red was doing his best to get in a reassuring word.

"Why the devil didn't you quit yesterday, then, and give us a chance to kill all the expensive advertising and publicity we run for your act in the morning papers uptown? Don't you know your contract says we can fire you any time you refuse to go ahead with your act?"

"That's what we can do, fire you, and no chance for you and that fat crook partner of yours, Tony, the Greek, to come back at us with a lawsuit."

He paused for lack of breath, and Red got in: "Listen, mister, I wasn't a-Samin'——"

Ike interrupted harshly. "Shut up! I'm doing the talking here. I say we'll fire you and your rotten act if you play the piker now, after we've packed the pier through advertising you. When you signed your contract with us you ought to have known the ocean ain't always a mill pond. I give you your choice right now. Either you go through with both dives to-day or you get out!"

Red Cullen rose from the soft chair in which he had seated himself. Red's face betrayed an inner struggle. Any one knowing him and his ways would have guessed he was fighting against a temper that went naturally with his flaming hair.

"Mr. Spearman," he said quietly, so softly that the manager's irritation gave way to a naturally strong instinct for self-preservation, "I'm goin' through with the divin' act to-day. Don't worry about that. Me an' my string o' hosses has got to eat, an' I can't buy hay if I don't get paid. The crowd is here an' I'm here an' Demon is out in his stall waitin' fer his act, so rest easy."

The cowboy turned and took two strides toward the office door. With his hand on the knob he delivered a parting shot.

"One thing my contract don't call for," he said in the same level, dread-
fully calm voice, "is takin' insults from you. First you calls my partner, Tony, a fat crook; for which I say you're a low-down liar! Secondly, and worst of all, you say me an' Demon are a rotten act."

Red's eyes blazed so wrathfully now that Ike Spearman cringed in his chair. "That was a lie, too, you hound!" Red almost whispered. "If we was a bum act, why does the crowd come jammin' to the beach, even on a rotten day? You yourself have admitted we're a good drawin' card for the pier. But it ain't the lie I'm objectin' to so much.

"Nobody expects the truth from a cuss like you. What makes me hot is the insult you've handed to a hoss, the best hoss that ever run smooth over a rough range or dove clean out o' his nat'r'al hoss element into the ocean from a high platform."

Red's voice grew a little unsteady. "When you offers an insult to Demon, you pop-eyed jellyfish, you takes a tur'ble chance with Red Cullen. Don't do it again, mister!"

Red slammed the office door behind him.

CHAPTER III.

THE LADY LIFE GUARD.

DEMON turned his handsome head and nickered when his master entered the stall assigned to him in a livery barn ashore. In adjoining stalls were the rest of Red's string of six horses, and each one greeted the cowboy with equine demonstrations of affection.

As he saddled his favorite, Red whistled a little tune; but there was no music in Red's heart. He was bluffing to prevent his misgivings from being communicated to his horse. Demon would need every ounce of courage for the dive that afternoon, and his morale must not be impaired.

Red was cinching the elaborately ornamented cowboy saddle when a girl entered the stable. Hard-bitten bachelor that he was, with affairs of the heart far removed from the desires of a nature so horsy that horses and horses only played any deep part in his affections, Red made a wry face before turning his head.

"Ain't I got troubles enough without no woman buttin' in!" he thought fiercely.

She was a winsome girl, though. Pluck was written in every line of a face which even a showgirl's make-up could not quite conceal. And Red admired pluck, male or female.

"H'lo, Nell," he saluted, doffing his Stetson. "I'm right glad t'see you."

Nell O'Byrne laughed. "Glad you're glad, Red; but I don't believe a darned word of it. Knowing what a woman hater you are, I can't just understand how you manage to be so polite."

The cowboy grinned and looked embarrassed. He had never been around girls much, had never wanted them or sought them. Nell O'Byrne, however, had succeeded in winning more of his friendship than any of the other women of the various concessions and show enterprises on the pier. Perhaps it was sheer admiration for her nerve as a professional swimmer and diver that had made Red, himself, a mere novice in the water, thaw to her.

And then, too, Nell, in her official capacity of "lady life guard" at the beach resort, had been associated intimately with Red's diving-horse act. The management, never overlooking an opportunity for a new thrill, novelty, or sensation, had assigned the girl to a part in which she and another life guard, a man, acted as human convey while Red and Demon swam ashore after their dive.

Nell broke a rather awkward silence which ensued when Red's tongue suffered a stroke of paralysis.

"I just thought I'd drop in," she said, "to see if you was really goin' to do
your dive to-day. It's such terrible weather, you know, and the currents are dangerous. I kind of hoped Ike Spear-
man would show good enough sense to call the act off for a day."

Mention of the pier manager caused Red's muscles to stiffen. But he held onto his temper. For one thing, he realized that the girl herself would need all her morale in the forthcoming dive.

"Oh, it won't be so bad," he declared.

"Just a little rougher."

Something in the girl's eyes caused him to add: "You just grab onto the pommel of Demon's saddle if the tide's runnin' too strong offshore fer you. This here hoss"—patting Demon's shimm-eringly curried and brushed flank—"can swim three times as strong as any man. If he couldn't, how'd I get ashore?"

Nell returned his gaze reprovingly.

"I ain't afraid, Red. Don't worry none

about me. Gosh! didn't I pull a kid out from under the pier only an hour ago? Say, you desert-bred land fish, don't you never insult me like that again! I could swim from here to China, an' if you don't believe it I'll show you all the press clippings I've got."

Red tried to stammer an apology. He wished Nell hadn't come, particularly right then. For two weeks, ever since he had met the girl, Red had been wor-
rying about her. She was so game and so nice and wholesome.

Not at all like some of the women around there, who tried shamelessly to make love to any man who was making money. Nell was different, and Red couldn't quite make up his mind what attitude he should assume toward her.

She had been very generous and hospi-
table, inviting him up to her apartment for dinner with her and the jolly, fat, impractical mother she supported. A widow who herself had been a circus trapeze performer before age changed the proportions of her body.

Tony, the Greek, admired Nell, too.

"She's a fine woman for a good keed like-a you, Red," Tony would hint.

"You mekin' plenty money now, why you no get a wife? You gonna get a bad stomach ache if you doan cut out eatin' hot dog an' hamburger t'ree-four-five meals a day."

"Jumping horned toads!" Red would protest. "Can't you leave me alone? I don't want a wife no more than a fish wants a currycomb!"

Before Nell left the stable she planted a lovey kiss on Demon's sorrel nose.

"I got to go change for the act now," she said. "It's a crime for Ike Spear-
man to let it go on in such weather, but he's a born criminal, anyway. Why don't you tell him the ocean is too rough to-day?"

Red lied like a gentleman. "Wouldn't ast no favors of that shrimp!"

Nell eyed him disbelievingly. "Well, then, since I happened to see you com-
ing out of Ike's office, with murder in your eyes, I don't mind telling you I went up there, too. I told Ike what I thought of him, and he told me, among other things you'd be too young to un-
derstand, that at the end of the week I could go look for another job."

What could Red Cullen say? What could a bashful, woman-shy cowboy do in a case like that?

"Whatcha go takin' chances on your job like that for, Nell?" he stammered.

The girl looked at him queerly.

"I'll tell you some other time, you seagoing broncho buster."

She passed him with a little laugh and headed for her dressing room in the bath house.

CHAPTER IV.

DRIVEN TO ACT.

GOSH!" Red muttered feebly as he led his favorite out of the stall.

"Here I am, lovin' only a hoss; an' now it looks like it's gonna be up to me to propose marriage to a woman. Looks
like if I don’t I won’t be no gentleman, the nice way she’s treatin’ me.”

As he mounted Demon he made the horse a solemn promise. “We’ll move back to Arizony, the hull string of us, rather than that! Yes, sir, we’ll bust our contract an’ shake the salt water off’n our feet. Heaven made us fer single cuss-ness an’ the desert wastes, Demon.”

Then he thought of Tony, the Greek, his partner, backer, and stanch friend. Tony it was who had discovered the horse’s latent genius for sea diving. Red had ridden Demon over the edge of that same pier only a few weeks back, to save his beloved horse from the knife of a movie director who had gone berserk with rage when Demon slipped and fell in a dare-devil movie act.

Tony’s hot-dog stand had been wrecked when Red and Demon came crashing through the canvas roof in that fall from the roller-coaster track they were mounting for a picture thriller. But the Greek, instead of suing for damages, had invested his hard-earned savings in launching “Red Cullen and His Diving Horse”—the act which now paid a thousand dollars a week for attracting crowds of thrill seekers to the pier.

“No, we can’t walk out on the lady like that,” Red admitted miserably. “We gotta consider Tony. What the deuce can we do, Demon?”

The horse arched his neck, snorted at the challenging ocean, and shook his head up and down and sideways.

“You’re as bewildered as me,” Red accused with a grin. “Well, forget it, kid! If she loves me, I love her not. Which don’t mean I ain’t got a lot of respect an’ admiration fer the lady. It ain’t my fault I can’t get sentimental over wimmens; I guess it’s just hoss sense.”

From his saddle Red surveyed the ocean. “We gotta keep our heads free from worries to-day, old hoss, an’ that’s no guess. The tide rips are so strong you can see ’em draggin’ out to sea. You an’ me, Demon, we gotta dive into that mess.”

As he rode out onto the pier, following a brass band, Red Cullen looked every inch a cowboy in his silver-ornamented trappings. He had to keep doffing his broad Stetson because the wind wouldn’t let it stay on his head anyway.

Nell O’Byrne and the masculine life guard, one Bill Prentiss, followed in an automobile. Both were wonderful swimmers, but Red couldn’t help worrying a bit.

“No lady ought to be made to dive into that rough water to-day. Wind giants has sure broke loose in the Pacific.”

Out at the end of the pier an enclosure had been roped off to keep the crowd from choking the chute’s entrance to the diving platform. A Barker with a megaphone was shouting, and the band had stopped playing.

“Ladies and gentlemen! You will now witness the most nerve-racking, breath-taking, heart-stopping act ever put on in defiance of all laws of animal nature. Red Cullen, cowboy from the cactus-infested bad lands of Arizona will cheat death astride his famous diving horse, Demon.

“Pals they were in the Indian wars of this country and Mexico. Together they have dove from the lofty rims of bottomless canyons, into the raging torrents of flood-tossed rivers, to escape from the treacherous Yaquis, Apaches, and Sioux.”

Red had always wanted to laugh at the Barker’s impossible speeches, but today there was no laughter in the cowboy’s heart. He was about to launch Demon, his beloved Demon, into that seething ocean which dashed and slashed against the pilings of the quaking pier.

As he rode onto the chute’s cleated incline Red surveyed the situation from his saddle. His eyes met those of Ike
Spearman, the manager, and Ike flashed him a wicked look which said, as plainly as words could have: “I hope you drown!”

Then Ike turned and took a cautious step from the pier onto one of two short springboards which flanked the diving platform on either side. On one of the springboards stood Nell O’Byrne, on the other Bill Prentiss. They were to dive as soon as Red and Demon struck the water, and convey the horse and rider shoreward.

The board Ike chose was the one occupied by the girl in her flaming-red bathing suit, with “Lady Life Guard” in white stenciling on the breast. Ike gripped the pier railing tightly with one hand; he was taking no chances on being blown off by the hurricane wind.

Ike said something to Nell, and Red thought she threw a lot of contempt into whatever it was she said in reply. Then big Bill Prentiss shouted: “Get back there, you dirty little runt!”

Red Cullen had always liked Bill Prentiss. He was such a husky, clean-cut athlete. He had been at Nell’s house every time Red was asked there.

“Kind of a son for Mrs. O’Byrne and a brother for Nell,” Bill had explained in his pleasantly humorous way.

Judging by Ike Spearman’s scowl Red judged that Bill’s rash insult would mean loss of his job. Ike stepped back, growing angrier as the crowd laughed.

Bill Prentiss cupped his hands and called up to Red, who was now on the platform. The words were lost in the howling wind, but Bill’s warning was conveyed when he pointed down.

Red dropped his gaze, and the thirty feet seemed three hundred. He found himself looking into as wicked a tide rip as ever chose for its course a spot in the ocean where it was least wanted.

Like a racing river the current, hurled back from the shore by tons of incoming combers, tore back to sea. Bits of flotsam and jetsam, everything from picnic lunch boxes to orange peelings, were swept out on the rip in spite of the incoming waves.

Into that racing current Red Cullen and Demon were about to dive.

Tony, the Greek, approached Ike Spearman apprehensively, but the pier manager shoved him aside roughly. Ike willed that the act should go on even at risk of life for a girl, two men, and a horse.

Ike held the purse strings on that pier, and those who relied on his payroll checks for bread and butter must obey him or take the consequences.

Tony looked up at Red and tried to throw encouragement into his grin. The cowboy waved back and swept his Stetson to the crowd. Red aimed to be a showman, since they paid him for it.

Thousands of eyes turned upward toward Red Cullen and his diving horse as the band’s trumpeters started to blare forth the notes that announced the leap.

Demon, well attuned to that signal, arched his neck and snorted. His hoofs pounded the boards beneath them as he danced and half reared on the narrow platform. Some of the strained eyes in the crowd had to turn away.

Red soothed Demon with a master’s hand. Steady, boy! Easy, Demon! I’m all with you now; don’t get nervous. We got a mean deal to see through, and we’re forgettin’ all about women and other storms.”

A sudden commotion on the pier gave Red an inkling that the police were launching a belated interference with the inhuman program insisted on by Ike Spearman. Out of the corner of his eye the cowboy caught the red glint of a police car that was dashing out onto the pier from shore, its siren shrieking. But the police came too late.

At Ike Spearman’s signal a bass drum and two snares tried to outboom the storm, their final crash emphasized by the explosion of a giant firecracker.

“Now, Demon!” Red commanded, his
knees pressing against the horse's heaving ribs.

Like a comet the gallant sorrel leaped from the platform. Red, even with death lurking in that tide rip below, swept his Stetson.

"Eee-ah!" he shouted, as he had been coached for the act. "Ride him, cowboy! Eee-ah!"

CHAPTER V.

MAN, ANIMAL, AND OCEAN.

A TERRIFIC push of wind struck them in mid-air, and the horse was swerved half around. The same brutal gust made Nell O'Byrne sway and struggle to regain her balance on the end of her springboard; and finally to dive too soon.

Bill Prentiss, his jaw set rigidly, saw her danger; and Bill dove immediately.

Straight as an arrow he shot from the board, and his course seemed to take him immediately beneath the leaping horse and rider.

Demon struck the water so soon after Nell and Bill that the crowd thought the pair must be crushed. Because of the twist the wind had given him, the horse struck partly on one side, not with forelegs first.

Red Cullen felt the jar of it as the wind was knocked out of his mount, and a stab of pain shot up the cowboy's right leg. Then the Pacific Ocean, at its worst, engulfed them all.

Bill Prentiss came up first. He had turned upward in the water like a seal. He made for Nell as soon as her bobbed head appeared; but a giant comber covered both instantly with foam.

The most thrill-crazed hanger-on in that crowd on the pier thanked Heaven when, the sea's welter clearing for a moment, both swimmers appeared to be unhurt. But they were twenty-feet farther out than they had been when they struck. The tide rip was sucking them relentlessly seaward, as though it were some monster python determined to swallow them.

Not a trace of Red Cullen and his diving horse! Had they gone clear to the bottom? Could man or beast live so long without a breath of air?

A black blotch showed on the surface. The crowd cheered with frenzied relief. Then they groaned; the blotch was an empty keg, derelict from the shore.

Another giant wave crashed, and then the crowd shouted. "There they are!"

In the welter appeared a broad sombrero. Was there a man's head in it, or was it just another bit of flotsam, grim relic of a man who had gone down too deep to return until some current tossed his body back on the shore.

But, no! That was Red's face coming up beneath the soggy sombrero. And immediately Demon's sorrel head broke through the milling water. Horse and man gasped frantically.

Another of the relentless combers submerged them again immediately, but they weathered it. Out to sea they swept as though drawn in a net of the devil's own fishermen. Nell O'Byrne and Bill Prentiss, both swimming with the strong strokes of professionals, made for them. But the horse, dazed and choked, was exerting his great swimming strength in the wrong direction, heading with the current out to sea.

A crash of splintering wood heralded the wrecking of the pier lifeboat when a wave battered it against the pilings while the men were lowering it.

Ike Spearman, who had wanted a thriller of the sort newspapers would feature with banner lines, shouted and cursed like a madman. Stark death, grim tragedy, for which he himself would be held responsible, were stalking down upon Ike.

Swimming gallantly, Nell and Bill strove to overtake the bewildered horse and the rider who, his cowboy outfit water-soaked and heavy, was being carried farther and farther from the shore.
which he could never reach through any swimming ability of his own.

As he came up from each smothering wave, Demon would raise his sorrel head and prick his ears, as though straining every sense to discover a safe landing place for the master he loved so loyally.

They were two hundred yards beyond the pier's end before the tide rip, as such currents will, at last dissipated its strength and gave up the sortie against an entire ocean. Free of its grip the sorrel raised his head again, and seemed to recover his sense of direction.

He turned shoreward, and a mighty shout went up from the pier when Demon started his heroic battle to recover the lost distance.

The waves, now, aided the distressed swimmers. Each comber bore them yards in the direction of safety.

They had drifted a quarter of a mile from the pier when they swept past, and seemed mere bobbing specks in the ocean. The crowd stomped to the shore, where life guards from every near-by station waited with ropes, life-cans, and buoys.

When at last Demon felt bottom with his hoofs and stood on weary legs, Red Cullen made a final showman's gesture. He took off his wet Stetson and exposed a crop of hair that matched his horse's for glowing fire which even tons of salt water could not quench.

Red did not sweep his sombrero to the hushed, waiting crowd, however. He crushed it against his chest, and then reached over and patted Demon's neck. Thus the master paid tribute to the horse which had saved him.

Then the cowboy dismounted, and he limped a little from his strained right leg. But he walked all the way back to the stable beside Demon.

The horse was munching hay contentedly while Red fussed over him with towels and things when Nell O'Byrne showed up.

Out of the corner of his eye Red saw her, and he started to rub Demon with feverish energy.

"Dawg-gone all wimmens!" the cowboy exclaimed inwardly, biting his salt-swollen lips. He had to keep from saying aloud anything so impolite and against all the traditions of Arizona's manhood. "I don't want me no wife no more'n what a jellyfish wants a jack-knife! But I got to make a bluff."

Slowly the cowboy turned his head to face his destiny. And then, still slowly, he started to grin at a change of scene which had taken place.

Big Bill Prentiss had entered quietly, and Nell O'Byrne—— Great ocean-goin' heifers! Nell was in Bill's husky arms, returning Bill's husky kisses.

"Hey, you two!" Red shouted. There was joy and relief in his voice mixed with natural embarrassment.

As though suddenly wakened from a sweet dream the lovers separated. Bill Prentiss blushed, but Nell laughed.

"You thought I was stuck on you, Red, now didn't you?" she demanded. "Don't deny it, you lovable, misplaced son of a sand dune! Well, you can cut out the worry now; you don't have to propose to me. 'Cause the only two I'm in love with, Red, are Bill here and Demon."

Lightly she went over and kissed Demon's nose.

For a long time after they had gone, Red sat on the edge of the manger, Demon's soft nose caressing him. In Red's mind were visions of the broad Arizona ranch he would buy some day.

He tried to include a woman in his picture of bliss, but couldn't seem to make a go of it. In the ranch kitchen he himself made the flapjacks, though Tony, the Greek, seemed to share this domestic labor quite definitely.

"Anyway," Red muttered contentedly, "Nell was far ahead o' the rest o' her sex. A mighty fine girl! She loved my horse."
CHAPTER I.
SUSPICIOUS TRACKS.

OLD! The two men could almost smell it, so confident were they that it was there. The face of the smaller man was taciturn as he squatted beside the muddy water hole and shook the gold pan with a slow, easy rotating motion.

His jaw was a little set, his mild gray eyes were faintly gleaming. Otherwise he showed no excitement. This was an old story to “Shorty” Metcalf; he had sought the elusive color in a thousand pans of dirt.

The manner of the tall, rangy young man beside him was in sharp contrast. The other was excited and made no attempt to conceal the fact. His blue eyes were wide and eager. His tanned face was flushed.

He shifted nervously from one foot to the other and from time to time ran an unsteady hand through his thick mop of light-brown hair. This was a new story to John Barry, and an exciting story.

“Sho’ty, I know she’s theah!” Barry exclaimed. “We cain’t miss this time. I feel it in my bones.”

Shorty’s tone was casual. “We’ve missed it before, ‘Tex.’ Been huntin’ for that old river bed for better’n three months now. We may miss her ag’in.”

“But you said——” The younger man began eagerly.

“Yeh, I know what I said,” Shorty Metcalf nodded imperturbably. “I said it looked like we’d hit it. But a feller can’t nowise tell. I’ve made mistakes before, plenty of ’em. Maybe I’ve made another.”

Lowering the pan until its edge was below the surface, Shorty carefully admitted more water and resumed the patient circling motion. The younger man pulled out his bandanna and wiped the perspiration from his face. It was hard work, waiting.
"Gosh! you’re slow, Sho’ty," he said at last. "Cain’t you speed up a li’le bit?"

Metcalf’s gray eyes lifted from the pan; he regarded his companion coldly. "Yeh, speed up an’ let the colors slide out o’ the pan. Huh! A fine minin’ man you are!"

"I’m not a minin’ man," Barry returned with a genial grin. "I’m a cowman, turned mineh in the hope of mak-nin’ my evahlastin’ fo’tune."

Shorty grunted disdainfully. "And if yuh do, yuh’ll buy cows with it."

"Possibly," Barry grinned.

He wiped his face again, nervously, and squatted down beside his partner. The circles described by the pan were becoming smaller. And Shorty’s practiced movement was growing more careful. Not more than a tablespoon of dirt was left. It slid back and forth, gradually diminishing.

Barry was breathing faster now; his blue eyes were dancing. Shorty, too, was not as calm as he tried to appear. Tiny beads of moisture stood out on his forehead. His short, thick body was tense, motionless save for the slow, rhythmic movement of his right arm.

Suddenly a cry of triumph burst from Tex Barry’s lips. He leaped wildly to his feet.

Shorty did not move. He gave the pan one final twist and squatted there looking into it, his eyes dilating a bit as he stared at the long streak of color. He laid the pan carefully aside at last and rose slowly from his cramped position.

"Say, Sho’ty, you ol’ son-of-a-gun!" Barry cried jubilantly. "It’s rich as blazes! We’re made! We’re made, damn it!"

He grasped the older man about the waist and swung him into an impromptu jig beside the water hole. Shorty fought free.

"Lemme go, you locoed kid!" he growled in pretended anger.

That was Shorty Metcalf, trying to take it all calmly and as a matter of fact. However, he couldn’t hide the triumphant grin that twisted the corners of his mouth. He couldn’t conceal the gleam of happiness that shone in his mild gray eyes.

Fulfilled dreams! Awakened ambitions! It had been a long time coming, this strike. Thirty years and more he had chased the will-o’-the-wisp of fortune across the desert. And now, try as he would, he couldn’t quite hide the feeling of elation that warmed his tired old body like a flame.

"Yeh, she’s rich, all right!" Shorty admitted, striving to keep his voice steady. "She’s rich, Tex, damned rich! Don’t know when I ever saw a pan o’ dirt show colors like that. I sampled her fair, too. Didn’t cheat nary a bit." He brushed the sweat from his forehead. "Whew! I’m excited."

"Me, too, Sho’ty. Let’s go back up the canyon and git another pan o’ that theah dirt," Barry suggested eagerly.

Shorty glanced quizzically at the low-hanging sun, almost ready to dip below the black buttes to the west.

He shook his head. "It ain’t necessary, Tex. We found the old river channel, all right. Ain’t no doubt about that. Time enough to prospect her thoroughly when we git her located. We been working hard all day. Let’s knock off and git supper."

Barry’s face fell, but he showed no inclination to argue with his partner. After all, when he came to think about it, his muscles were pretty weary.

Though he had been working with Shorty for more than three months in the quest of this ancient river bed, ten hours on the business end of a pick still found him more than ready to knock off.

"I’ll write out the location notices tonight," Shorty said. "Don’t even need to go back up the canyon to do that.
I can see the whole layout like it was on a map in front of me.

"One of us can take 'em in to Caliente to-morrow and file 'em. It don't pay to monkey around with a rich claim in this country less you got out that theah gold."

Barry nodded. "Reckon you're right, Sho'uty," he said, and then added wistfully, "Wish we'd brought down mo' dirt, though. It sho' is a thrill, watchin' you pan out that theah gold."

Shorty smiled indulgently. "'Just you wait, Tex. Wait till we git water on the claims. Wait till we git the sluice boxes built and we make a real clean-up. If you're lookin' for thrills, you'll get one then. Sweepin' free gold out of the ripples with a broom. There's a thrill for you."

Barry took a deep breath. "Sho'uty, you pinch me. I'm sho' I'm dreamin'!"

Shorty reached over and pinched his arm. Barry winced, and grinned.

"Still reckon you might be dreamin'?"

Shorty demanded.

"No, not a chance." Barry rubbed his arm.

"All right, it now bein' settled that you ain't dreamin', suppose you haul a bucket of water over to the camp and I'll start the fire. I'm powerful hungry."

Barry watched the little man as he strode off toward the camp, a hundred feet away. Not a very handsome figure of a man, Shorty. His right leg, shattered years ago in a mine explosion, was badly twisted.

When Shorty walked, which was rarely, it was with a pronounced limp. He was stooped a little, as though years of fiery desert heat had bowed his back. His clothes were shabby. There was a long tear in the crown of his old Stetson. No, nothing very prepossessing about Shorty.

And yet Barry's heart warmed as he watched him limping across the flat to the camp. For thirty years Shorty had been combating the mighty forces of nature that are allied against the prospector.

To-day was the culmination of that struggle. And Barry was glad that he had been able to help.

Oh, it hadn't been much. A few hundred dollars for a grubstake, a couple of saddle horses and a pack horse. Faith in the golden vision of an old man.

It had been enough, however. The streak of color in the gold pan proved that. And Barry was happy.

Turning away at last, he picked up the bucket, waded out into the water and filled it. He started toward the camp and then halted.

At the edge of the water hole, at a point where neither of them had walked, there was a large, fresh footprint. Barry stared at it, puzzled. They had had no visitors that day. None, at least, who had declared himself.

Barry sensed vaguely that something was wrong. The only persons he ever heard of who used that water hole were cowboys from the Lazy B, who occasionally drifted by the camp.

Always in the past, however, they had ridden up the canyon to pass the time of day with Shorty. They had known the little prospector for years, they liked him and they realized that their visits broke the monotony of desert life.

Of course, they laughed at him a little. They were cowmen and they had never been able to take him seriously. Five years, off and on, he had been working there in the neighborhood of Phantom Canyon, searching for an ancient river channel that he believed carried gold.

This, the cowmen had long ago decided, was queer. "They ain't been no river in this desert country fo' a million years. And even if they was one, it wouldn't have no gold in it, nohow."

This was the cowmen's verdict.
Shorty, however, had persisted in the face of their good-natured jibes. He had a theory and he was going to prove it correct if it took the rest of his life.

So the years had passed, and Shorty had gophered into a hundred hillsides in the neighborhood of Phantom Canyon. He had prospected when he had a grubstake and when he ran out of money he had gone to work in the mines at Kingman.

His meeting with Tex Barry, first-class cowhand, had taken place in Kingman just the day before Shorty had been scheduled to go to work in the Louisiana mine. Shorty hadn't gone to work. Instead, he had mounted one of Tex's horses, packed another with grub, and the two had set off for Phantom Canyon and another joust with Dame Fortune.

Barry stared at the footprint for several moments. Then it dawned upon him that it had never been made by a cowboy. The heel was too large and too flat. None of the Lazy B boys was foolish enough to go riding around the desert country in flat-heeled boots.

Something funny here. Barry didn't like the look of it. Who had been prowling around their camp? And why?

CHAPTER II.
AN UDESIABLE INTRUSION.

HEY, you!” came a hoarse bellow from Shorty. “You goin' to stand there moonin' all day?”

"Be right with yuh, Sh'oty," Barry answered, and hurried over to the camp with his bucket of water.

He found a fire burning briskly in front of the tent. Shorty was busily peeling potatoes.

"Slip that pot o' beans on the fire to warm up," he ordered. "Then wash off these spuds an' slice 'em. I heard a couple of quails calling up the gulch there. If we're lucky, we won't have to eat bacon for supper."

Shorty disappeared into the tent for his ancient ten-gauge shotgun.

When he came out, Barry began, "Sho'ty, I saw somethin' down theeah at the watah hole. I was thinkin'—"

"Tell me about it when I git back," Metcalf cut him off, and started up the gulch at a limping dogtrot.

The younger man smiled to himself. Shorty certainly had a one-track mind, he mused. He went about the preparations for supper with alacrity.

His thoughts, for a time, were on the footprint down by the water hole. But not for long. A man couldn't keep his mind on a thing like that when there was a million dollars a short distance up the canyon to dream about.

Shorty had said that if he found the phantom river and it ran anything like he expected, there would be millions in it. Yes, sir, millions, boy! And Shorty had found it that very morning.

He had taken samples from half a dozen prospect holes. The dirt had proved rich beyond their fondest hopes.

Plenty to dream about there. Plans to be made. Money to be obtained, from what source they did not know, for development of the claims. Water to be flumed in over miles of desert. Prospect holes to be dug. Test runs to be made.

Work—yes, plenty of work before they could hope to make a dollar.

Still, it was nice to dream, though by nature Tex Barry was far from a dreamer. Since his folks had died in the big cloudburst at Chehalis, nine years before, he had been altogether too busy making a living to do much dreaming. He had been seventeen then. A lanky, ungainly kid who seemed always in his own way save when he was in the saddle. Then he had a grace of carriage and an ability to hold his seat that couldn't be surpassed in the Texas panhandle.

Because he knew cattle, and little else
but cattle, he had gone to work as line rider for the Circle Bar outfit. Four years of that, four years spent in the saddle, four years of summer heat and winter blizzard, and he had saved enough to buy a few head of stock, take up a homestead and build himself a little shack.

For four years he had fought the bitterly hard fight of the homesteader. Then a dry year had come along. Or, more to the point, for all years in that country were dry, a year in which virtually no rain at all fell. It had been followed, as perverse fate would have it, by the worst winter in years.

And spring had found Tex Barry, along with hundreds of other homesteaders, practically bankrupt. His few head of cattle that had survived the winter had been sold for what they would bring.

When he had paid his debts and took stock of things, he found himself possessed of Ladybug and two other horses. He, also had two or three hundred dollars in cash, an unquenchable belief in the future of the cattle business and the State of Texas, and a body that could bear up for sixteen hours in the saddle without protest.

Tex Barry wasn’t a handsome man. He was a little too tall and rangy. His features had been hewn on too rugged lines. His mouth was wide and generous. His blue eyes were normally mild and twinkling, though they could become as hard and cold as flint under the stress of anger.

He was handy with his fists and equally handy with a six-shooter. A man couldn’t have a better friend than Tex Barry—not a harder and more implacable enemy.

When the potatoes were a golden brown in the frying pan and the beans and coffee were giving off their appetizing aroma, Shorty Metcalf hobbled back to the camp. His brown, weathered face was long.

“No luck,” he announced. “They was quite a covey of ’em, but they must have heard me comin’ and skinned out. Reckon we’ll eat bacon for supper. I wish one o’ the Lazy B boys would drop into camp with a chunk o’ fresh beef for us.”

Mention of the Lazy B cowboys brought back the mysterious footprint to Barry’s mind. He did not mention it at once, however.

When the bacon had been fried, the beans and potatoes dished up, the coffee poured, he turned thoughtful eyes on his partner.

“Shorty, I saw a footprint down at the watah hole when I was fillin’ the bucket. It was fresh. The sun must have been low when it was made, ’cause it wasn’t dried hardly at all.”

Metcalf glanced up from his plate. “One o’ them cowboys dropped by, I reckon. Wonder he couldn’t have left us a chunk of meat.”

“No, it wasn’t left by no cowboy. It was made by a low-heeled hobnailed boot. No cowman would evah weah sech a thing.”

Shorty’s face clouded. “You’re sure about it bein’ low-heeled?”

“Sho as shootin’. It’s plain as the whiskahs on yo’ face!”

Shorty cursed softly. “Now who do yuh suppose has been foolin’ around our camp? An’ what business have they got here?”

“That’s exactly what I was wonderin’.”

The little prospector went on with his meal. But Barry could see that he wasn’t enjoying it greatly. He was moody and preoccupied.

The younger man’s attempts at conversation fell flat. He began to feel vaguely worried. It didn’t seem natural, after the great discovery they had made that day, for Shorty to hold such a taciturn silence.

When the meal was over and the dishes washed, the two men lighted
their pipes and sprawled out on the ground in front of the tent. The sun had just set behind the great black buttes to the westward.

The sky was brilliant in its evening dress of lemon-yellow and rose and crimson. The sage was turning to purple and the distant mountains were shading off to twilight blue. Even the water hole, usually muddy and uninviting, had taken on the glowing, brilliant shade of the sky.

It was pleasant to lie there and relax and dream a little, when one was healthily tired. It was Barry's favorite hour. The fiery winds that blew through most of the day had died. The heat and the dazzling gleam of the sunlight were forgotten.

The chill of night had not yet descended. The desert, so hard and relentless during the day, was showing another and better side of its nature: A peacock preening its brilliant tail.

It was pleasant to lie there and dream and puff a pipe and think of the golden future.

"Tex, you sure that wasn't no cowboy's track. Shorty's voice was worried.

"Jest as sho' as yo' a foot high, Sho' ty."

"H'm. I don't like it. They's been rumors that 'Hefty' Hogan was back in this country."

"Hefty Hogan?" Barry's voice was mildly curious.

"Yeh. I was tellin' you about him a few days ago. He and his gang got away with a good part of the Lazy B cattle. Put old Frank Landsdowne on the bum for fair. Pretty tough hombres, them boys!

"Rustlers, bandits, gamblers, gunfighters, or what you got? A couple o' years ago Hogan got sent up. Little matter o' beatin' out a greaser's brain with a billiard cue.

"Wasn't much, o' course, an' he only got two years. Now they say he's back in these parts again, and spoilin' for trouble."

"But they ain't no way he can harm us, is theah?"

Shorty pursed his lips. "Them claims ain't recorded yet," he reminded quietly.

"No, but they will be to-morrow."

"Yeh, an' I've seen the time when to-morrow was a long time comin'. Of course, everybody in this country knows what we're up to. And if Hogan and his gang should have been keepin' tabs on us——" Shorty broke off, shaking his head.

"No, that ain't logical. If he drifted in here to-day, it was just luck. Luck and a nose that can smell gold further than a mountain sheep can smell a hunter. Anyway, we ain't goin' to do any worryin' about it. We got enough on our minds as it is.

"First off, after we locate them claims, we got to git water on 'em. That may be a tough job. Financin' a ditch line, I mean. I reckon we can git the water, all right.

"Landsdowne has all the riparian rights around here. And with what little ranchin' he's doing now, I reckon he's got more'n enough water. He'll be glad to sell us all we want.

"Fine old gentleman, Frank Landsdowne. They don't make 'em any finer, though they do make 'em a lot more practical. He's a cattleman first, last and all the time. Been in the business all his life. Started in in the early days out here, when a man could ride all day in one direction and never be off his own property.

"But times changed. And Frank Landsdowne didn't. The old days of big ranches and hundreds of cowboys and horse wranglers and peons have gone. The cow business ain't run that way any more, which is somethin' that Frank ain't never seemed to have found out.

"But he's a gentleman, Frank is, and he's got one of the smartest little
daughters in the country." Shorty grinned knowingly at his companion.
"Wait'll you see her. You'll be spendin' half your time at the Lazy B."

Barry shook his head hastily. "Don't you believe it, Sho' ty! If they is one thing in the world I ain't interessed in now, it's women."

"But you never seen this woman?"
"An' I reckon it won't make no differ-ence when I do," Barry chuckled.
"Gimme an ancient rivah channel in preience to a woman every time."

Shorty laughed dubiously. "Yeh, that's easy enough to say now, because the river channel is close at hand and mighty rich and the little woman is four or five miles away. But you just wait, my lad, till you see her.

"Then, if the firm of Metcalf & Barry don't lose a second-rate shovel monkey, which is about as high as I can class you, then I don't know a gold nugget from a chunk of pyrite."

"Jest you wait and see yo'self, Sho'ty," Barry grinned confidently.
"And by the way, if yo' going' to write out those location notices, you'd bettah do it befo' dakh."

"Right you are, Tex. I'll get at it pronto."

For half an hour Shorty busied himself filling in the printed forms of the location notices. Barry reclined on one elbow and marveled at the remarkable memory of his old partner.

The old river channel which they had found crossed the canyon half a mile away from their camp. No stakes had been driven on the claims and there wasn't a great deal to fix that section of the country definitely in a man's mind. And yet Shorty wrote out the notices as accurately as though the claims were already staked and he were on the ground describing them.

"Now if you'll sign these here notices, Tex, you can stick 'em in your pocket an' take 'em into the courthouse at Caliente to-morrow. The clerk there will show you how to record 'em and all that business."

Barry took the notices and, barely able to make them out in the waning twilight, scrawled his name at the bottom of each.

"Writin' a letter home, Bud?" asked a drawling, half sneering voice.

Tex's head jerked up. A huge, unkempt man had strolled up to the tent, walking so quietly that neither of the partners had heard him.

He stood there negligently, regarding the two men with his close-set, sharp black eyes. His very manner was an insult, a challenge.

Barry quietly folded the location notices and thrust them into his pocket. Then he rose to his feet.

"My name ain't Bud, strangeh," he said in a low voice. "And it is none of yo' damned business what I was writin'."

The big fellow blinked and his leerimg smile faded. He took a step forward. "Say, kid, do you know who you're talkin' to?"

"No, I don't know," Barry answered steadily, "and I can assuah you I am not pahticularly interessed in findin' out."

The stranger was plainly taken back. He was not cowed by any means; men of his type and build are not easy to frighten. Rather, he was greatly surprised. It was apparent that he was not used to being addressed in such a manner.

"Say, kid——" the big man began.

"That's just about enough," Shorty interposed.

No one had seen the little prospector get to his feet. But they realized his presence now. The steady hand that rested on the butt of his six-shooter spoke plainly enough.

"Sit down, stranger," Shorty invited, in none-too-good humor. "My pardner here don't like to be startled. He's kind o' quick on the trigger."
"Yeh?" sneered the newcomer. "Well, I'm quick on the trigger myself. What yuh think o' that?"

Barry took a step forward, his eyes gleaming angrily. There were not many men who rubbed him the wrong way. This one did. The very sight of him, standing insolently there by the fire, made his blood boil.

Shorty stepped between them. "Sit down, Tex," he ordered gruffly. "You ain't got no argument to settle with this man. Keep your shirt on, will yuh?"

Barry grinned, suddenly realizing that his manner had been little short of childish. He was ashamed, in a way, and made haste to offer his apologies, if not his hand.

"Sorry, strangeh. You took me by surprise. Startled me, I reckon. Set yo'self down. We've finished suppeh, but I reckon they is plenty left if you're hungry."

The newcomer regarded him dubiously. Then he shrugged. "All right, Bud. Don't mind if I do take on a little grub. Ain't had anything to eat since breakfast." He seated himself negligently on the upturned water bucket.

In a silence that was somewhat tense, Barry heaped up a plate of beans and broke off a chunk of baking powder broad.

"I'll have to have that bucket you're sittin' on," he said, finding it an effort to keep his voice civil. "They ain't no watah fo' coffee."

The stranger rose with mock politeness. "Allow me," he smirked, and picking up the bucket, ambled off toward the water hole.

Barry's face was white as he watched him go. "Talk about yo' nerve," he said in an undertone to Shorty. "How does he get that a way, sneakin' up on us like he done?"

"I don't mind feedin' the man. That's part o' the game in this heah country. But I'll tell you right now I won't take any of his back talk. I never saw the man befo' in my life, but it didn't take me ten seconds to find out that I don't like him and I don't care who knows it."

Shorty shook his head sagely. "You just keep your shirt on, Tex. That feller —"

"Wait a minute!" the younger man exclaimed suddenly. He was staring at the path the newcomer had taken. "That's the same fellah who left the track down at the watah hole. I reco' nize the pattern of his hobnails."

"Sure it is," Shorty agreed. "An' that's only half of it. Know who that hombre is, Tex?"

"Not —"

"Yeh. Hefty Hogan. As no-good a scoundrel as ever wore shoe leather."

The old prospector spat thoughtfully into the fire. "Somehow, I wish them location's was filed."

CHAPTER III.
LURKING DANGER.

BARRY took a deep breath and his fists clenched. "Sho' ty, do you reckon he suspects we've found something?"

"I wouldn't be surprised, Tex," Shorty answered quietly. "He's a pretty keen hombre. He ain't near as dumb as he looks. An' then he must have seen that them papers you were signin' were location notices."

"Yes, I reckon he did. Do you think he'll try to start somethin'?"

"That all depends on how much he knows, or suspects. If he gets the idea that we've struck it rich, you can lay your last dollar that he'll cause trouble. Plenty of it. But our cue is to take things easy an' let on like we hadn't struck it yet. And whatever you do, don't go pickin' no fight with him. That hombre would chew you up in one mouthful."

Barry bristled. "You think so? Well, I'll jest —"
"No, you won't do nothin' of the kind. You keep your shirt on, see? Them's orders from headquarters. See that you mind 'em. No more gab now! Here he comes."

Hogan ranged into the circle of firelight, the bucket of water in his hand. "Here yuh are, Bud. Now let's see if you know how to make coffee."

The man's manner was so antagonistic and overbearing that Barry found it difficult to restrain a hot retort. He remembered Shorty's admonition, however, held his tongue and went about the task of preparing Hogan's supper.

The stranger wolfed his meal in silence. He was a huge, beefy individual, unkempt and unclean. He was altogether too engrossed in his supper to do any talking. But from time to time as he ate, his close-set, beady eyes roved calculatingly about the camp.

Barry felt the tension mounting; it wasn't often that a person affected him as this man did. Shorty, however, seemed quite undisturbed by the presence of Hogan.

After a time the little prospector caught his partner's eye and winked broadly. "I'm goin' to take a little barley down to the horses," he announced. "We ain't give 'em any for a couple o' days. Be back in a few minutes."

This was unusual. The care of the horses had always been one of Barry's self-appointed tasks. Besides, the animals were a quarter of a mile away, in a little meadow which caught the overflow from the water hole. And Shorty did not like to walk.

The younger man said nothing, however. Shorty's wink had told him that he had something up his sleeve.

"While you're at it," Hogan spoke up, "you might give my old nag a little barley. He's down there in the meadow with your horses."

Shorty nodded. "I'll do that," he said, and limped out of the circle of firelight.

Hogan went on with his meal, glancing up from time to time at Barry. At last, when his plate had been wiped clean with a piece of bread, he demanded:

"You fellers prospectin'?"

"Yes."

"I thought so. I seen a lot o' your prospect holes up the canyon(546,139),(975,193). Say, you got the whole country pock-marked with them damn' gopher holes. What do yuh figger to find up there, anyway?"

"We've been lookin' fo' gold," Barry answered coolly.

"Yeh? Find any?"

"No."

"No?" Hogan laughed heartily, a sneering laugh that put Barry's already jangling nerves on edge. "You sure about that, Bud?"

"Barry is my name," the other said quietly.

"Aw right. Have it your own way." Hogan laughed again. "You sure you ain't found anything, Barry?"

"Quite shuah. Though I don't know what business it is of yo's, one way or the othah."

"No business at all. Only I was just wonderin'. You know how it is. A feller gits to wonderin' now an' then. And the partic'lar thing I was wonderin' about is how come there's a streak o' color in that gold pan down by the water hole. Course, I ain't sayin' you fellers struck anything. I was just wonderin'."

The cowboy shrugged and met Hogan's leering gaze. "You may go ahead and do all the wonderin' you please," he answered steadily.

Hogan lifted his bulk from the ground with a litheness that was almost unbelievable. He took a step or two toward Barry, his great fists doubled up and looking hard enough to fell an ox.

"Say, Buddy, I might as well tell yuh that I ain't used to being talked to like
THE FEUD OF PHANTOM CANYON

that. What’s more, I don’t mind sayin’
that I don’t like yuh.”

Barry did not retreat an inch. “I can
assuah you that the feelin’ is mutual,”
he retorted calmly.

Hogan’s loose jaw set and he took
another step toward Barry. Then
Shorty’s calm voice broke the tension
as the little prospector limped into the
circle of firelight.

“Well, I gave the hosses their bar-
ley,” he remarked, apparently oblivious
to the two tense figures. “Guess it’s
about time we turned in, eh, Tex?”

Barry relaxed, though the ominous
gleam in his blue eyes did not fade.
Hogan favored the cowboy with one
contemptuous glance and then eased his
big frame to the ground.

“Your pardner tells me you’re pros-
pectin’,” he remarked.

“Yeh. We been lookin’ this part o’
the country over a bit,” Shorty
admitted.

“Strike anything?”

“Not so’s you could notice it.”

Hogan was grinning again; to all ap-
pearances he was enjoying a capital
joke. “Yeh, that’s what your pardner
was sayin’. And I was wonderin’ how
come that streak o’ color in your pan.”
The big man chuckled amiably.

“Color!” It was Shorty’s turn to
chuckle. “You mean that pan down
there by the water-hole?”

“That’s the one, mister.”

Shorty laughed heartily. “Say now,
that’s a good one. Fooled you just like
it did my pardner here. He ain’t a
miner, yuh know. He’s a cowboy.

“He’s one o’ the best cowhands in
the country but what he knows about
minin’ you could put in yer eye. I
reckon maybe you’re a good cowhand
too, stranger.”

Hogan glared at the little prospector,
“Jest what do yuh mean by that line o’
talk, mister?”

“Why that wasn’t no color you seen
in the pan at all. It was fool’s gold.

Yeh. Known technically to us members
of the perfession as mica. Color! Ha-
ha! That’s a good one!”

“Huh!” Hogan sneered. “Any
damned fool can tell mica from gold.”

“Well, that proves you ain’t a fool,”
Shorty returned with a grin. “’Cause
you weren’t able to tell the difference.”

“Yeh? Who said I was a fool?”

Shorty, who had dropped down be-
side the fire, got slowly to his feet.
There was a firm, hard line about his
mouth, a menacing gleam in his usually
mild gray eyes. He dropped his right
hand meaningly to his six-shooter.

“Now you listen to me, stranger,”
he ordered tersely. “I ain’t pickin’ a
fight with nobody, ’cause I ain’t a fight-
in’ man. But me an’ my pardner have
stood about all of your lip we’re goin’
to stand.

“We’ve taken yuh into our camp,
we’ve fed yuh, we’ve fed your hoss.
We’ve treated yuh like a white man,
which I’m blamed sure you ain’t.
You’ve had your supper now an’ we
ain’t obligated to do no more. You
can clear out an’ clear out pronto!”

Hogan clambered to his feet, staring
at the old prospector incredulously; he
seemed hardly able to credit his ears.

“Say now, you little half-pint. just
repeat that.”

“Vamos!” Shorty snapped, and
whipped out his gun.

Hogan sobered. For a long moment
he stared into the black muzzle of the
little man’s gun. The fingers of his
right hand twitched. Then he backed
away.

“Now listen,” he began. “I didn’t
mean nothin’. I was just kiddin’ you
gellers along.”

Shorty stared at the big man thought-
fully. Then his features relaxed and
he slipped his gun back into its holster.

“Aw right, stranger!” he said, with
a little chuckle. “I was jest kiddin’
you along. So we’re even. If you
want to sleep by our fire here to-night,
you're welcome. Me an' my pardner are goin' to turn in now. We sleep in the tent. 'Come on, Tex.'

Shorty casually turned his back and walked into the tent. Barry followed him, puzzled a bit. In the first place, they had never made a habit of sleeping in the tent, though they had always put their blankets in it during the day to keep them out of the dust.

The younger man, too, was disappointed. He had expected Shorty to make good his bluff and run Hogan out of the camp.

As they slipped off their boots, Barry asked in an undertone: "Shorty, you pain an' sur'prise me. What fo' did yuh back down? Why didn't you kick that skunk out of our camp?"

"Because I'd rather have him here. That hombre knows too much. He's wise to us."

"Yuh reckon so?"

"Sure of it. He wouldn't be hangin' around like he is unless he was wise. That stuff about the fool's gold never fooled him for a minute. I thought maybe it would when I sprung it, but it didn't.

"He knows we've made a strike. He knows, too, that we haven't located the claim because he saw you signin' the notices."

"And that's why yuh didn't kick him out of the camp?"

"Yeh. He's safer right here. I wouldn't have done anything, only he made me sore an' I lost my temper. Fool thing to do, under the circumstances. But that bird certainly rubs a feller the wrong way."

"Don't I know it! I've been on the point of swingin' on his ol' jaw half a dozen times."

"Don't ever do it, son. You'll only bust up your knuckles. Use your gun butt on him if you have to, and even then you'd prob'ly bust it."

"Do you reckon he'll make trouble fo' us?" Barry asked.

"If he can, he will. Yuh see, everybody in this country knows what I been lookin' for. They know, from old stories of the early days, that there's an ancient river bed around here somewhere that carries free gold.

"This feller Hogan, like everybody else, knows that I been lookin' for it and he's got a pretty strong hunch right now that we've found it. The only thing that saves us is the fact that he don't know where it is. Otherwise we might be in for a bad time."

"You don't reckon he can find it?"

"Not to-night, he can't. And it might even take him a couple o' weeks to locate it. I wouldn't be easy to find. We've got prospect holes scattered all the way from here to the head of the canyon."

"That's five miles. There hasn't been a rain since we started work and the old holes wouldn't look much different from the new ones. The only way he could find the rich ground would be to pan samples from all them holes. And that would take a week."

"Besides, I'll have the locations filed by noon to-morrow," Barry pointed out, "and then, we won't have nothin' to worry about."

"You'll have the locations filed before noon, Tex," the older man whispered. "You're goin' to leave here some time after midnight. And you're goin' to be in town when the courthouse opens in the morning."

"That's a right smart idea, Sho'ty. I hadn't thought o' that."

"No?" Shorty laughed softly. "What did yuh think I was takin' that barley down to the hosse for?"

"I was wonderin' about that."

"Well, I saddled your mare and took her out of the meadow. I wasn't takin' any chances of that hombre runnin' off our hosse."

"Another bright idea, Sho'ty," the cowboy commended.

"You'll find her in the second gulch
on your right, after you leave the meadow. You can't miss her. And when yuh go, yuh want to go quiet.

"Don't rouse Hogan, or he's liable to start somethin'. Now you roll up in your blankets and git to sleep. You got a long ride ahead of you an' you'll need some rest."

"Ain't you goin' to bed down?"

"With that jailbird out there by the fire? Not much. I'll jest keep my eye peeled till midnight. Then I'll wake you up and start you off. I can sleep after that, because I won't be worried none. With you on your way to town, there'll be nothin' to be afraid of."

Tex obediently rolled into his blankets. His mind, however, was far too active for sleep. The day of days, the day which Shorty Metcalf had been looking forward to for so many years, hadn't ended so sweetly. Unless all the signs failed, there was trouble in the offing. That afternoon the road ahead had seemed straight and smooth. Now there was no telling where it would lead.

It wasn't that Barry was afraid. He was too new to this lawless country in which he found himself to recognize any great danger.

There might be trouble, yes. He'd even welcome it a little. It would break the monotony of the endlessly torrid days. Some time, too, he would settle matters with Hefty Hogan. He wasn't afraid of him, not for a minute.

And yet, as these thoughts went through his mind, he was conscious of an unaccountable feeling of oppression. It had settled upon him with the coming of Hefty Hogan and had persisted throughout the evening. It wasn't a pleasant feeling. It had put his nerves on edge, made him restlessly eager to be away to town.

He heard Shorty moving after a time and a moment later a low whistle of surprise. Barry sat up hastily.

"What's wrong, Sho'ty?"

The old prospector was standing up at the front of the tent, staring out through the parted flaps. "Our uninvited guest has flew the coop," he answered.

"The devil!"

"I'll say."

"You reckon he's up to somethin' crooked?" Tex asked.

"He shore is, son." Shorty's voice was cold with apprehension. "And the sooner you git them location notices into town, the better off we'll be. I'm right worried, boy."

CHAPTER IV.

SHOTS IN THE NIGHT.

ROLLING out of his blankets Barry started to pull on his boots. His fingers trembled a little. Shorty's tone had startled him as much as his words. Though he had known the old prospector but a short time, he knew that he was not one to exaggerate danger. Shorty was far more likely to minimize it.

"But what can he do?" Tex asked.

"After all, we ought to be old enough an' big enough to take care of ourselves. I ain't afraid o' the likes o' him."

"He may not do nothing," Metcalf answered patiently, "and on the other hand, he may raise the dickens with us. One thing is sure, though. If he gets hold o' them location notices, our goose is cooked."

"Why? The claims belong to us, whether we file on 'em or not. We can prove that we were the first to work 'em."

"Yeh, an' who'll we git fer witnesses? You an' me. That's all. Hogan could git together a dozen men who would lie a lot more plausible than we'd tell the truth. He's tied up with his old gang again, yuh know.

"Not only that, but folks round here
say that the county courts and the sheriff's office are with him hand an' glove. Course, that may be only talk.

"But I've found that in this country a man gits along better if he fights his own battles, and lets courts an' sheriffs an' all them kind of people alone."

Barry silently buckled on his chaps and spurs, slipped his holster around his waist and walked out of the tent. He glanced at his watch. In the dim light of the dying campfire he saw that it was eleven o'clock.

"Ought to be in town befo' two," he told Shorty. "That li'l Ladybug will rattle off those fourteen miles like nothin'."

"And you'll take good care o' them notices?" the older man queried anxiously.

"You bet! Best care in the world!"

"I really think I ought to come with yuh. If it wasn't fer that Pete hoss bein' lame I'd shore do it. But I wouldn't ride no lame hoss fourteen miles. An' the pack hoss would never keep up if we got in a tight place."

"Don't you worry, Sho'ty. I won't git into any tight place. And if I do, that li'l Ladybug will snake me out. She's about the fastest thing on fo' feet in this country. You can look fo' me back heah about noon to-morrow."

"All right, boy. Go to it and good luck. I got a pretty strong hunch you're goin' to need it."

"Yo' talkin' foolish, Sho'ty. Now you go bed yo'self down and don't worry. So long."

"So long, Tex!"

There were lines of apprehension in the old man's face as he watched Barry walk out of the circle of light and disappear into the darkness. He didn't like this business. Not by a jugful. He knew too much about Hefty Hogan and his gang of rustlers and desperadoes.

If the man had been a moron, he wouldn't have worried much. But he knew that Hogan was clever.

Hefty had run roughshod over the country for a good many years and had never been caught. Not even had he been implicated in a single unlawful act—unless you counted that little affair with the greaser. And that, of course, had just been a slight error of judgment.

This new sheriff, too, wasn't a man who could be trusted very far, in Shorty's opinion. He was too blamed handsome. Take a man as handsome as he was and there was usually something wrong with him. Still, what could a fellow expect with the women voting? Trust them to help elect the best-looking man, regardless of his qualifications.

Shorty was worried as he pulled his blankets out of the tent, tossed more wood on the fire and prepared to turn in. He hoped Tex found his horse and got away all right.

The young fellow had a cool head and a fast mount. He was a good hand with a six-shooter, too. Really, when a fellow came to think about it, there wasn't a great deal to worry over. Thus Shorty tried to reassure himself, without great success.

He rolled into his blankets at last, on the leeward side of the fire, and tried to sleep. Time enough to worry when something actually happened. He listened for a time, his ear close to the ground. Finally he heard the swift beat of a horse's hoofs. He listened until they faded into the distance.

"Well, I reckon that's that," he told himself. "Them hombres will have to be mighty good to git that boy."

Shorty drifted off to sleep.

He was awakened by a healthy kick in the ribs. He sat up, blinking. The fire had burned down a little, but there was still enough light for him to see the muzzle of a six-shooter. Furthermore, he recognized the big man who bulked behind it. Hogan had come
back, and he had brought another man with him.

"Get up!" the ex-convict snapped.

"Who the devil do yuh think yuh're talkin' to?" Metcalf demanded.

"I'm talkin' to you, you little rat!" And Hogan emphasized his words with another hearty kick.

Shorty got to his feet, trembling with anger. "Yeh, yuh're brave enough, now that yuh got the drop on me, ain't yuh? Yuh weren't quite so cocky here a few hours ago when I ordered yuh out o' my camp. If I had a gun——"

"Never mind the palaver," Hogan cut him off. "And just reach under them blankets an' pass me yer six-shooter. An' hold it by the barrel, see? My trigger finger's mighty nervous, mister."

"Yeh? Trigger finger me eye!" Shorty snarled. "A lot you got to be talkin' about trigger fingers when you had to use a billiard cue to git the best of a pore little greaser."

Hogan choked audibly. Then he burst forth with a string of vituperation that would have put a cavalry sergeant to shame. "Gimme that gun, yuh little shrimp!" he bellowed at last. "An' never mind no back talk. A little more o' your lip an' I'll put some daylight through yuh."

Shorty complied with the order in silence.

"Now we want to know where yuh found them colors," Hogan growled.

"What colors?" the prospector came back guilelessly.

"Now jest cut it right there," the big man snapped. "I ain't goin' to argue with you about that. I know gold when I see it, an' there was gold in that pan down by the water hole. Where'd yuh find it?"

Metcalf shrugged, nodded in the general direction of Phantom Canyon, and replied: "Up there."

"Where up there?"

"Oh, up there about a mile."

"Aw right. Git yer shoes on. You're goin' up there."

"To-night?"

"No, yuh damned little fool. Some time next month. Put yer shoes on or go bare-footed. We don't care."

Shorty sat down on the ground and slowly drew on his boots. He laced them with great care, conscious all the time that Hogan was chafing at the delay.

"Won't do you no good to take me up there," said Shorty as he finished the task. "I couldn't find the place in the dark. What do yuh think I am, a cat? I can't see in the dark. Better wait till the moon comes up. Otherwise I'm liable to show yuh the wrong place."

"Don't yuh worry about that. Yuh won't show us the wrong place if yuh know what's good for yuh. It'll take us just about ten minutes to find out if you're stringin' us. I know how to pan gold jest as good as you do. And if there ain't gold in the first dirt you show us, it'll be curtains for you. Now jest think that over."

Shorty thought it over, to some length. Of course, he had no intention of pointing out their claims to Hogan. It wouldn't do the man any good, anyway. Tex, by this time, was well on his way to Caliente. There was nothing particularly to worry about, save possibly a long walk up the canyon.

Shorty didn't like to walk. Though he would never have admitted it, his twisted leg pained him severely if he walked more than a few hundred yards at a stretch. Why beat around the bush with this Hogan? Might as well let him know now where he stood.

"Listen, Hogan. There's no use doin' a lot of arguin' and walkin' and stewin' around to-night. I'm tired an' I crave my sleep. So I might jest as well tell yuh that my pardner is on his way to town right now with them loca-
tion notices. You couldn't catch him if yuh tried.

"At eight o'clock to-morrow mornin', when the courthouse opens, them claims will be placed on record. So what intarnation is the use o' doin' all this stewin' around? Answer me that one, will yuh?"

Hogan laughed heavily and turned to his companion. "That's a good one, ain't it, Joe?"

"You bet. Say, your pardner has about as much chance o' recordin' them claims as you have o' goin' back to sleep."

"Yeh? Why not?"

"Why not?" Hogan demanded, laughing. "What do yuh think I've been doin' all night? Poundin' my ear like you? Not much. I got my boys together an' prepared a little reception for that fresh pardner o' yours. They're waitin' for him down the trail a piece."

"You're lyin'," Shorty cried half-heartedly.

The old prospector felt suddenly ill. He knew they weren't lying. He knew about what was in store for Tex Barry somewhere down along the Caliente trail. Oh, why hadn't he thought of something like that? Why hadn't he used his head?

"You're lyin'!" he repeated.

"Yeh? Yuh think so? Well, tomorrow morning, if yuh live that long, you——"

Hogan broke off. From far across the desert many shots broke the stillness of the night. Shorty winced. To have seen him, one might have thought that he had been hit.

Hogan chuckled. "Think I was lyin', eh? Think I never fixed up a little reception for your pardner, do yuh? Well, just lend your ear to that shootin'. If he ain't a dead boy now, then I don't know the men that fired them shots. Now git up on yer hind legs, you, an' lead us to them claims."

CHAPTER V.

METHODS OF A BRUTE.

SHORTY, who had been halfway to his feet, dropped back onto the blankets. The sound of those shots had taken the heart out of him. Somewhere out on the desert Tex Barry probably lay wounded, maybe even dead, for the firing had ceased. And it was Shorty's fault. If only he hadn't dragged him down into this forsaken country!

"Well, yuh goin' to git up?" Hogan growled. "Or do we have to drag yuh?"

Something snapped in Shorty's brain. Here was the man who had plotted Tex Barry's death. Here was the man who was to blame. Well, curse him, he'd show him that he knew how to fight, even if he was a little shrimp with a twisted leg.

The old prospector got to his feet slowly. Then, like a frightened rabbit, he dashed toward his tent. For all his game leg, he moved swiftly.

"Stop, damn yuh!" Hogan bellowed.

Shorty dove between the flaps just as Hogan took a snapshot at the fleeing figure. The light was bad and the big man missed.

"Over there!" Hogan snapped to his companion. "Out of the light, Joe. Pot him soon's he shows his head."

The two men leaped for the shadows at the far side of the fire. They were just in time. Shorty's ten-gauge shotgun roared. The tent flaps twitched and there was a small dark hole in the white canvas. The gun roared again, in the general direction of Hogan's fleeing footsteps.

The big man paused, and showed suddenly that he was a quicker thinker than Shorty. He spun on his heel and leaped toward the tent. He was there in half a dozen strides, jerking the flaps aside and bellowing tersely:

"Come out of it, you little devil! I
know you haven’t got another shell in that gun. Git out here, damn yuh!”

Shorty fought like a cornered rat. He swung his heavy ten-gauge at Hogan’s head with all his might. But the barrel caught against the roof of the tent and glanced harmlessly off of the ex-convict’s shoulder. Then Hogan’s left fist shot out and the old prospector went down.

He was up again in an instant, sobbing with anger and futility as he rained futile blows against the huge man who charged him from the doorway. Hogan swung again, viciously this time.

Shorty shot back against the far wall of the tent.

There was a splintering of wood as the pole broke. Then the whole structure collapsed on the heads of the two men.

For a time Shorty struggled in the darkness against the huge malletlike fists that flailed his thin ribs. Then he lost consciousness, mercifully. When he came to, he was being half carried and half dragged toward the fire. Hogan’s companion was laughing uproariously.

“Say, you two birds shore cut some funny doides fightin’ under that tent. Cripes, I wisht you could have seen it, Hefty. Funniest thing I’ve looked at fer a long time.”

“Funny, huh?” Hogan growled humorlessly. “Well, it wouldn’t have been so funny if this little rat had been clawin’ at your face. Say, he blamed near clawed my eyes out.”

Hogan’s companion saw at once that he had missed his cue. “Well, that was mighty clever of you, Hefty, divin’ in like that before he had a chance to reload his gun. How’d you know it wasn’t a pump gun or an automatic?”

Hogan expanded a little as he dropped his burden by the fire. “How’d I know? Well, you knew it was a ten-gauge, didn’t yuh?”

“Yeh, I guess I did. The report was loud enough to wake the dead. Sure sounded like a cannon to me.”

“Well, did yuh ever hear of a ten-gauge automatic?”

“By gosh, Hefty, that’s right. You sure are the speedy thinker.”

“Blamed right I am!” Hogan admitted, with pardonable pride. “If I wasn’t, I’d have been pushin’ up the daisies a long time ago.”

He prodded the limp bundle at his feet. “Hey, you! Snap out of it now! Don’t think you can play possum with me. You ain’t hurt.”

Shorty sat up rather dazedly. His head was ringing and his eyes were half-blinded from a cut on his forehead. He wiped them clear. He wasn’t licked yet, he told himself. Not by a jugful.

Still, he knew that he’d never get any place by further fighting. Hogan had outwitted him once. Or, more to the point, he had foolishly fired both barrels of his shotgun and left himself open to attack.

He gave credit where credit was due, however. Hogan had been smart enough to see his opportunity and take advantage of it. No mean opponent was this ex-convict and cattle rustler.

“How yuh feel?” Hogan demanded.

“Rotten!” Shorty returned.

“Well, that’s jest too bad,” the big man grunted. “’Cause you’re goin’ to do a little walkin’.”

“Yeh?”

“You heard me. You’re goin’ to take us up the canyon an’ show us where that pay dirt is.”

“Yeh? Try an’ make me!” the little man snarled.

Hogan dropped to one knee beside the prospector. He doubled up his huge fist and swung it to within an inch of Shorty’s nose. The latter did not flinch.

“See that?” Hogan demanded.

“Not bein’ blind, I see it. But if yuh think I’m scared of it, or scared o’ you, you got another think comin’.
Now paste that in yer old brown derby, you jailbird!"

Hogan swung. His fist did not travel more than six inches. Yet it caught Shorty on the point of the chin and bowled him over like a tenpin. The little man lay where he fell.

The blow had not hurt particularly; he was too angry to feel pain. But it did bring realization that there was nothing to be gained by persistent resistance.

Enough of this sort of thing! If he was to get the upper hand over Hogan it must be by guile. He'd have to outwit the other. He'd have to outthink him, and that would take time. And he couldn't do much thinking when his head was ringing with the blows from Hogan's huge fists.

He rose feeblely to his feet, presenting a thoroughly cowed figure of a man.

"Well, yuh goin' to be a good dog now?" Hogan demanded. "Yuh goin' to show us that pay dirt?"

Shorty nodded weakly. "Yeh, I'll show yuh."

"Good. And mind yuh, no tricks now!" the big man warned sharply. "You try to pull anything on me, an' I'll beat the livin' daylights out of yuh!"

"I won't try to pull nothin'," Shorty promised.

"Aw right, let's go! Lead the way. Joe, you git our hosses. We ain't goin' to walk up there."

"How about me?" Shorty demanded. "You're goin' to walk, little feller. We only got two hosses, an' me an' Joe are goin' to ride 'em."

"I got a hoss down there in the meadow."

"No you ain't. I run 'em off. And if you hadn't been so all-fired smart, movin' that other hoss, your pardner might be alive right now.

"When I went down there in the meadow an' found one of 'em gone, I decided that I'd better git my boys to-gether an' fix up a little trap. Well, you heard the shootin'.

"They got him, all right. Right now they're ridin' into town with the location notices that he was goin' to file. They'll be filed in my name in the mornin'."

"Then why make me show yuh where the claims are? The location notices will show that."

"Jest because I ain't takin' no chances. That pardner o' yours might have got away. He won't file them notices, though, because the boys will be layin' for him in town. They'll tend to that part.

"Then of course, there's the chance that them notices didn't describe the right claims. That kid might have been goin' to change 'em when he got to town. See? I'm givin' yuh credit for havin' brains an' bein' clever, like me. Though it's a ten-to-one bet that you ain't."

Hogan's companion rode up to the fire, leading a second horse. The big man mounted. "Let's go, Half-pint! Lead the way."

Shorty started up the canyon, his brain whirling in a daze of uncertainty. What should he do now? How could he get away from his captors? It was almost a certainty that Tex Barry needed him, whether he were hurt in the desperadoes' attack or had escaped and gone on into town.

Tex needed him, but how was he to escape when there were only two horses and Hogan and his companion were riding them?

Then, too, what was he going to do about the claims? He had no intention of pointing out the pay dirt to Hogan: But if he didn't, how was he to escape another beating?

He wasn't afraid of the big man's fists. He could bear a little pain as well as the next fellow. But he knew that a few more blows would temporarily incapacitate his thinking apparatus.
And, next to a gun, that was the one thing he needed if he was to win clear of this dangerous situation.

It was a hard nut to crack. And the more his tired mind revolved the problem, the more difficult of solution it seemed to become.

He walked slowly, for he was very weary. The beating he had taken in the tent had sapped much of his vitality. His twisted leg hurt him, too, more than his aching jaw and throbbing head. But worse than any physical pain was the mental anguish that beset him.

Where was Tex? Was he lying out there beside the trail wounded, his pockets turned inside out? Was he dead? Good Heavens, Shorty upbraided himself, why had he been such a fool as to send the boy off on an errand like that alone?

He should have known that Hefty Hogan would outwit them. Wasn't the man noted throughout the State for the cleverness that had enabled him to get away free after a hundred crimes?

"There's no fool like an old fool," Shorty murmured to himself, "and I'm gittin' old an' weak in the head."

Of course, he reasoned, there was always the possibility that Tex had been able to elude Hogan's bandits. There wasn't a faster horse in the country than Ladybug.

Tex could hit a pretty small target with his six-shooter from the back of a fast horse. Shorty had seen him do it on more than one occasion; he knew that his partner was probably without a peer at snapshooting from the saddle.

But even if he had succeeded in getting away from Hogan's men, what then? He'd go into town, secure in the belief that he was reasonably safe from assault. But Shorty knew that he wasn't.

With a crooked sheriff in office—though this was merely an assumption—Hogan's gang could get away with almost anything up to and including murder.

Shorty had seen such things arranged before. A quarrel on some trivial pretext, a quick shot, and a dozen witnesses to swear that the victim had been the first to draw.

Of course, Tex wasn't any greenhorn. He was a cowman and he knew his way about the desert country. The young man knew how to handle a gun and how to take care of himself. But did he realize the ruthless power of Hefty Hogan? And, realizing it, could he successfully combat it?

Shorty was harassed by doubt. One thing alone stood out clearly. Tex needed him. He must in some way contrive to get away from Hogan, obtain a horse and ride to town as fast as possible.

By the time Shorty's aching brain arrived at this conclusion, they had traveled almost a mile up Phantom Canyon. It was a wide canyon, not particularly steep, and barren of vegetation save for scattered clumps of sagebrush, mesquite and greasewood. The slopes on either side were gentle and, in daylight, looked like the home of a colony of giant gophers.

Shorty's prospect holes, dug over a period of many years, extended over an area probably five miles long and more than a mile in width. Small wonder that Hefty Hogan wanted to make sure in which one of these holes the old prospector had found pay dirt.

"Look careful, Half-pint," Hogan called from time to time. "If yuh give us the wrong steer, I swear it'll be curtains fer yuh."

Shorty plodded on, unmindful of the jibes and admonitions. At last, when they had covered nearly a mile, he turned to the right and started up a long draw, calling over his shoulder:

"I reckon this is the draw that the diggin's is on. But in the dark like this, I can't be nowise sure. You
ought to wait till daylight, or at least till the moon comes up."

"Never you mind about waitin'," Hogan growled. "You know this country like yuh know yer right hand. You can't go wrong, 'less yuh do it on purpose. An' yuh know what'll happen to yuh if yuh pull anything like that. Now are yuh sure yuh're right?"

"Pretty sure," Shorty answered, without too much conviction.

"Well, I'm hopin' fer your sake that yuh ain't made no mistake," Hogan returned pointedly. "We're busy men an' we got no time to play hide an' seek with yuh."

Shorty plodded up the draw. At last he stopped, scratched his head and peered around in the dim starlight. Near by one of his gopher holes showed black against the lighter unbroken soil.

"Well, I reckon we're here," he announced.

"Is this the place yuh got that dirt this afternoon?"

"This is the place."

"Yuh sure yuh ain't made no mistake?"

"Pretty sure."

Hogan cursed angrily and dismounted. His face was working and his fists were clenched as he walked over to the little prospector.

"Say, Half-pint, jest what kind of a game are you tryin' to pull? I told yuh once that we won't stand for no beatin' around the bush. Now are yuh sure this is the right hole?"

"I'm as sure as I can be in the dark," Shorty shot back.

"H-m. Well, we'll see."

Hogan pulled a flashlight from his pocket and shone it about the prospect hole. It was some five or six feet wide and about as deep.

"Don't look to me like yuh been workin' here lately. Where's yer tools?"

"We take 'em into camp every night." And then, quite innocently: "They's a lot o' thieves in this part o' the country."

"Yeh? Yuh don't say!" Hogan sneered. "Joe, yuh got that sack?"

"You bet. Here yuh are, Hefftly." The man known as Joe tossed a barley sack to his companion, who leaped down into the hole.

Hogan filled the bag partially full of the loose dirt in the bottom of the hole and climbed out, hauling it after him. When he had tied the sack behind his saddle he turned to his companion.

"Joe, you stay here an' ride herd on the shrimp. If yuh let him get away, it'll go hard with yuh. Jest remember that. Stay on yer horse an' keep yer eye peeled fer tricks. I'm goin' down to the water hole an' pan this dirt. And if yuh've given me a hum steer, Half-pint, I'll smash yuh to hell!"

The second installment of this novel of the West will appear in the next issue of TOP-NOTCH dated and on the news stands March 15th.

A Slight Oversight

NOTICING an ambulance going by, a man peered in to see who was injured. To his surprise, it was an old friend of his—a man almost famous for his bad luck.

"Why!" he cried. "What's happened to you?"

The man lifted himself up on his elbow.

"It's my new job—too much for me!" he said.

"New job? Why, I thought you were unemployed."

"So I was until a few weeks ago. Then I got a job at last. But"—here he gave a deep sigh—"it was too much for me."

"Was it very trying work?"

"Well, it wasn't that exactly. You see," he explained, "my job was in an amusement park. I had to dive into a tank from a great height—and they forgot to put the water in!"
A TALK WITH YOU

News and Views by the Editor and Readers

MARCH 1, 1928.

(Get in the habit of reading the advertisements in this magazine! Notice, right now, the ad at the end of this department. You'll find there a brief description of some of the stories in our next issue. Read that ad, then tell your news dealer to put aside a copy of this publication for you.)

It's odd that more people fail to realize that there are only twenty-four hours in a day! This statement may not strike you as being startlingly original or new. It isn't. It's just one of those things that every one knows, and most people ignore.

Look at it this way. What do you do with those twenty-four hours?

"Time out for sleep!" you say.

All right, eight hours off for sleep. Probably you could do with less than eight hours, unless you're a youngster who's busy growing. Napoleon Bonaparte spent fewer hours in slumber; Thomas Edison says he gets along with four. But if you use eight hours that way, how about the sixteen left?

"I must eat," you remark. "Can't live indefinitely without food."

That's true. Say you devote three hours of every day at the table. You should be able, in that time, to fortify the inner man. Which leaves you thirteen hours of sixty minutes each.

What are you doing with them?

In the words of the old rhyme, "rich man, poor man, beggar man, thief"—all have thirteen hours, every day. Most of us devote most of these thirteen hours to the job of making a living. Some are compelled by necessity to spend more time at it than others, but few work over ten hours each twenty-four.

That leaves three hours. And three hours every day!

The three hours "left over" are important. Some should certainly be spent in seeking amusement, relaxation. A man who devotes most of his time to the necessary things in life—such as sleeping, eating, working—ought to be allowed some time in which to be entertained.

In those three "left-over" hours a man may adventure afar, though never leaving his own comfortable chair. He can follow dim trails to strange places, and meet clear-eyed heroes whose courage has never faltered. He can dip into the past, leap into the future, find out more about the present-day world in which he lives.

By means of the printed page, he can grow mentally, can enlarge his horizon, can understand and sympathize with his fellow men. No matter what his occupation may be, he can learn more about it.

Suppose you devote two hours and a half of each day, then, to amusement and relaxation. How about the half hour that's left?

In a six-day week, thirty minutes a day totals three hours. And these three hours are by far the most important of all. Just three hours, every week, devoted to actual, downright thinking will affect you more than all the time expended in other ways.

Those three "extra" hours make one man rich, another poor, a third a beggar, a fourth a thief. What is your ambition? What is it you want to be? Spend half an hour daily in thinking about ways and means to accomplish
your ambition. Take thirty minutes to-day in figuring out how you can be what you want to be!

Check up on the previous twenty-four hours. What wise, intelligent things have you done or said during that time? Were they really wise and intelligent?

How about the mistakes you made? Did you speak when you should have held your tongue? Can you correct those errors? How?

It's the “extra” thirty minutes a day that makes or mars a man. “Rich man, poor man, beggar man, thief”—all have those thirty minutes.

But most people, it seems, “can't find the time” to spend in real constructive thinking.

You see, they don't realize that there are only twenty-four hours in a day.

Likes the Indian Detective

Dear Editor: The January 15th issue of your magazine was better than the one before it. “Reels of Roguery,” by Roland Ashford Phillips, in my opinion compares favorably with anything that Conan Doyle or E. Phillips Oppenheim ever wrote.

Very truly yours,

J. Tucker Percy.

Cheshire, Connecticut.

(That's high praise. We'll have more stories about “Moccasin” Charley in forthcoming issues of this magazine.—Ed.)

Wants Airplane Stories

Dear Editor: That serial by E. Whitman Chambers, called “Don Coyote,” was interesting right up to the last page. I think he's a writer well worth while.

I suggest that you print more aviation stories. They're up to date and I like ’em. Hope you don't mind my making this suggestion.

Sincerely yours,

H. E. Turpin.

Warren, Indiana.

(Are you enjoying the Chambers' serial we're printing now? About aviation stories—we've discovered a new writer, who knows airplanes, for he's an aviator, and who can write an exciting yarn. His name is George E. Powers. We'll publish his first story soon.—Ed.)

Among other stories the March 15th issue of Top-Notch will contain another Seward of Sacatone story

"THE HOLE IN THE POCKET," a long novel
by William Wallace Cook,
featuring Seward and his shrewd work in bringing criminals to justice.

Vic Whitman

has crashed through with another of his peppy jazz-band stories. This time it is "Throw Him Out," a yarn about a bouncer in a dance hall in Florida.

For those who have enjoyed following the adventures of that rogish stenographer, Maisie, Nell Martin contributes

"DIAMOND CUT DIAMOND"

This time Maisie has the Judge at his wits' end.

Those who are interested in horse racing will find

"CALL OF THE TRACK," by John Miller Gregory,
an intense story of The Sport of Kings.

Furthermore, the issue will contain other short stories and generous installments of the serials,

"THE LIGHT BURNERS," by John Mersereau, and
"FEUD OF PHANTOM CANYON,"
by Whitman Chambers.
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