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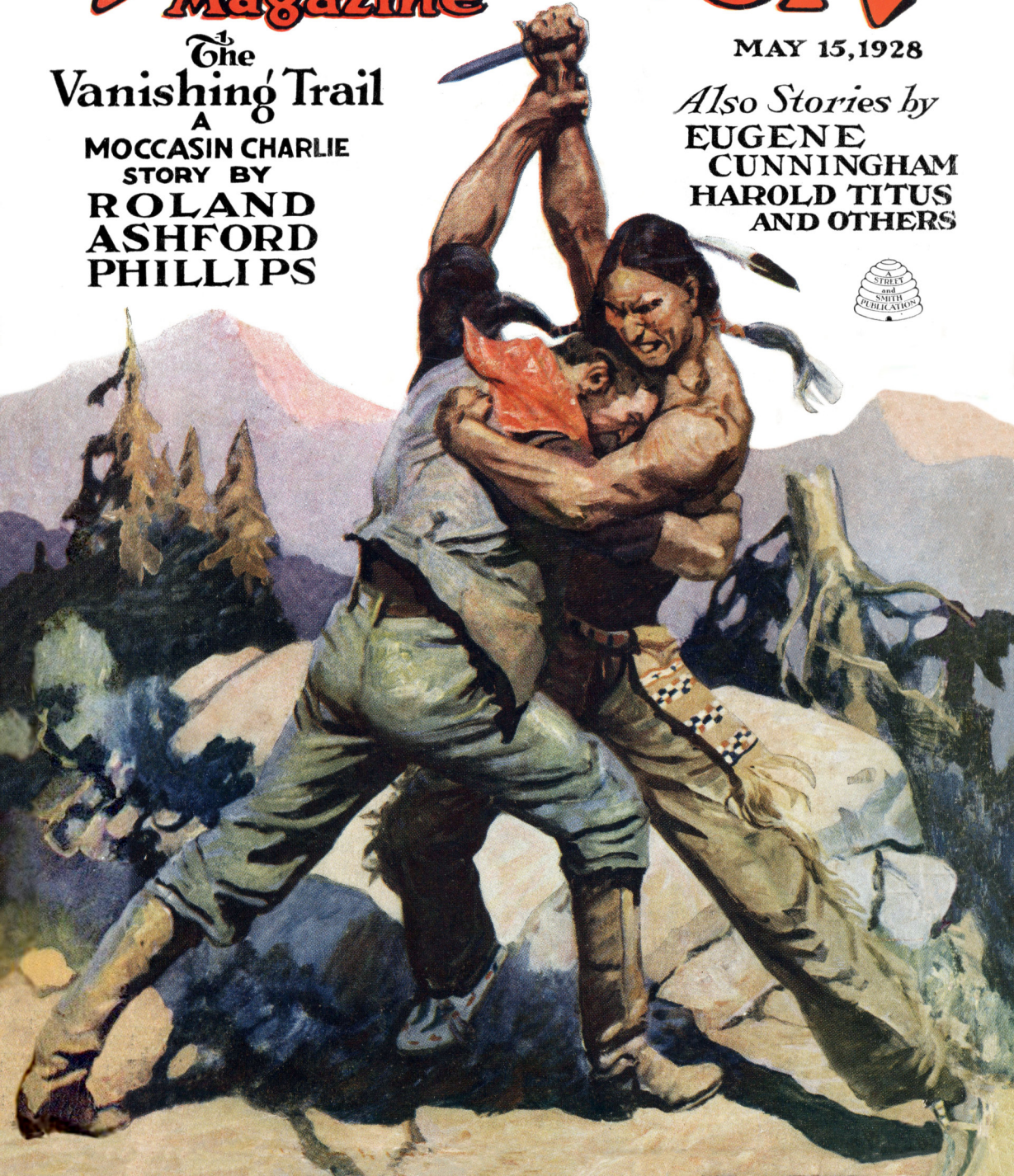
Magazine

The
Vanishing Trail

A
MOCCASIN CHARLIE
STORY BY
**ROLAND
ASHFORD
PHILLIPS**

MAY 15, 1928

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**EUGENE
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TWICE-A-MONTH

MAGAZINE

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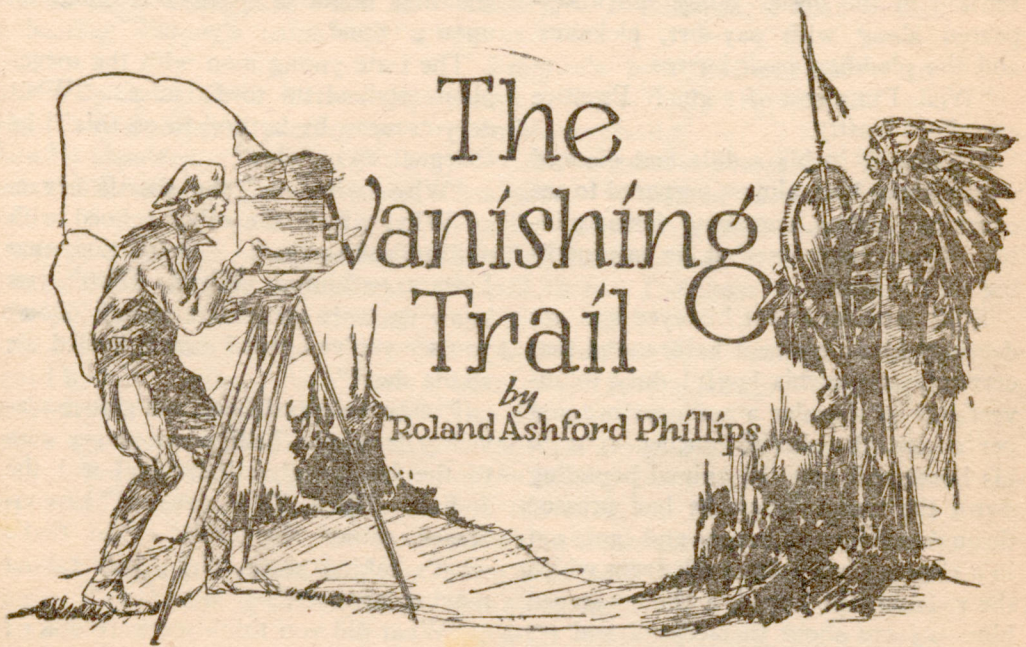
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TOP-NOTCH MAGAZINE

VOL. LXXIV

Published May 15, 1928

No. 2



The Vanishing Trail

by
Roland Ashford Phillips

(A COMPLETE NOVEL)

CHAPTER I.

OUT OF THE PAST.

RIDING along the trail that wound up from the scorching sandy wastes to the cool summit of a pine-crested elevation, Ben Prentice, sheriff, suddenly stiffened in his saddle. An exclamation escaped him. He drew rein so sharply that his horse reared in fright and all but fell back on its haunches.

Not a great distance beyond, Prentice's eyes fixed themselves upon what had been responsible for both his exclamation and his sudden action. Just

below him, snaking over a flat rock in the full glare of the sun, he saw an Indian—unmistakably an Indian.

As the sheriff watched, the redskin got slowly upon his feet. The man possessed a lithe, stalwart figure. He was bareheaded and his half-naked body gleamed like bronze.

For a second the Indian stood poised and then leaped nimbly into space. And so far as the amazed sheriff could determine, the redskin vanished somewhere below.

Confounded for a moment and rubbing at his eyes as if half convinced they were playing tricks with him, Prentice remained rigid in his saddle, staring at

the deserted rock from which the gleaming figure had leaped. It was amazing enough to be a witness to such an act, but the fact that the actor was an Indian made it all the more startling.

Although this was of the wide, open spaces, the heart of the golden West where amazing things happened in fact and fancy, Prentice was unable to recall, in years, of having looked upon a redskin in the flesh. They had disappeared along with pay-dirt, pickaxes, and the plodding pack burros.

"Well, I'm a son of a gun!" Prentice exclaimed softly.

He turned in his saddle and glanced warily about him, almost prepared to see other half-naked, menacing forms gliding among the trees; but he saw nothing of the kind.

Still, convinced that his eyes had not deceived him a moment before, and that certainly it was his lawful duty to investigate so singular a performance and performer, the sheriff touched spur to his horse and sent the animal bounding down the trail. When he had pressed through a fringe of aspens and came out in a clearing below the rock from which the redskin had leaped, a shout escaped him—a lusty shout that echoed and re-echoed in the silence.

He slipped from his saddle and dashed forward on foot, whipping out a revolver as he ran. He had not been mistaken, for again he beheld the Indian, this time at close range, who was in a fierce hand-to-hand encounter with a tall, bearded white man.

They were struggling desperately, breathing hard, their faces contorted. A knife glittered in the redskin's uplifted hand and seemed about to descend when Prentice let out a second warning shout.

"Hold up there!" he roared. "Drop that knife! I've got you covered."

The combatants stopped, fell apart, and wheeled to face the sheriff, who, gun in hand, came charging upon them.

"What in thunder's going on here?" Prentice demanded, addressing the white man.

Before the man could respond, a new voice sounded behind the sheriff and he wheeled alertly. Wheeling, he met with other surprises, among them a man in puttees brandishing a megaphone and who advanced threateningly upon him, and back of that individual, another man standing beside a black box mounted upon a tripod.

The irate young man with the megaphone stalked up to Prentice. "What do you mean by butting in on this?" he charged resentfully.

"Why—why——" the sheriff began.

"Why, why!" the other echoed with undisguised sarcasm. "That's just what I want to know. Why? Didn't you know we were shooting a scene? Don't you see you've horned in and spoiled the whole shot?"

Prentice stepped back, his glance traveling from the belligerent young man to the bewhiskered individual and the Indian. "Well, I'll be danged!" he confessed rather sheepishly. "So that's what's taking place, eh? Just taking moving pictures."

"What did you think we were doing? Playing marbles? You're certainly dumb! Walking right into the camera! After an hour of rehearsal and with everything clicking in perfect order—and you have to queer it. Say, I've a notion to punch that hooked nose of yours!"

Prentice scowled a little at that. "Don't go flying off the handle," my friend," he returned. "I'm sorry I messed you up, but how did I know what was taking place?"

"Got eyes, haven't you? Or did you leave your glasses at home?"

"Yes; I got eyes, and good ones," the sheriff rejoined. "If I didn't have I wouldn't be here. I saw this Indian creeping along and saw him jump; and the next thing I see him battling with

this other fellow, flourishing a knife. I didn't see any camera and wasn't looking for any."

"Your alibi won't help us any," the other retorted. "It just means a lot of ruined film and retakes. Time is money with us. We're not out here on a vacation. Now you clear out and stay out! Hear that?"

"I can hear as good as I can see, young man," Prentice stated soberly. "Guess I put my foot in it and I'm sorry. But I never calculated to find any moving-picture troupe in this territory. My name's Prentice—Ben Prentice—and I'm——"

"Never mind that," the other broke in. "I'm not craving an introduction. You're simply a John Buttinsky to me. Beat it!"

"And I'm the sheriff," Prentice concluded, ignoring the interruption.

"Sheriff?" The attitude of the man with a megaphone changed at once. "Why didn't you say so in the first place? Excuse me, Mr. Prentice, I didn't know who I was bawling out."

"You didn't give me any time to declare myself."

"No; I guess I didn't. I'm sorry. You see I was all worked up over the scene we're shooting and when you spoiled it I simply boiled over. My name's Ransome. I'm directing for the Superba people. Brought up some of my cast on location."

"So long's we're both sorry I guess there's no damage done," Prentice remarked more amicably. "But you should have let me know you were in the district."

"We just reached Sapphire yesterday and they told us you were out of town," the director explained. "Shake hands with Mr. Kluger, sheriff," he went on, nodding toward the bearded individual. "And this is Charley Glade," he added, indicating the Indian.

Prentice shook hands with both actors, smiling at Kluger's elaborate make-up

and forbidding crape-hair whiskers. Then his glance rested upon the Indian.

"You sure fooled me," he confessed. "When I saw you snaking over that rock above here I took you for the real thing."

"Oh, Charley's the real thing," Ransome assured him. "One of our vanishing Americans, sheriff. His complexion's guaranteed not to rub off. Just step up and inspect it."

"I ain't seen a redskin in these parts for a dozen years," Prentice said. "Not dressed up like this. Speaks English, does he?"

Ransome chuckled. "Occasionally—when he's hungry. Most of the time he uses signs. Go ahead and make some signs for us, Charley."

Both Ransome and Kluger laughed heartily and the Indian smiled.

"Don't let them kid you, sheriff," he spoke up.

"I was just figuring that was what they were doing all the time," Prentice said, grinning. "You don't look so dumb."

"All joking aside, sheriff," Kluger announced, "this is 'Moccasin Charley' himself—in the flesh. You may have seen him on the screen, or read about him in the papers."

"Seems like I remember the name," the sheriff replied. "Only, we don't get to see many moving pictures in Sapphire. How long do you folks aim to be in my district?"

"Just long enough to shoot our stuff," the director told him. "We came up here for some special backgrounds. Probably take us a week or two. Our location man picked this place, and except for one thing, it's perfect. Country around here fits out story to the dot. I didn't count on any one objecting to our shooting close-ups; but we ran into a snag yesterday at the Bluebird Mine." He frowned as he spoke.

"The Bluebird?" repeated the sheriff. "What happened there?"

"We were told to travel while the traveling was good."

"Didn't they give any reason?"

"Not in my hearing. I offered to pay for the privilege, but the operators let us understand they weren't interested in our cinema endeavors. It was a disappointment to me because our scout told me the place was abandoned. Either our location finder is cuckoo, or these men had dropped in and taken possession within the last two weeks."

"That's what's happened," said Prentice. "Less than two weeks ago. I don't know anything about the operators, and haven't seen them except at a distance. None of us can figure what they want with the property. It used to be one of the richest producers in the district, but the vein pinched out years ago and the mine shut down."

"I was counting on you to help us out," Ransome said. "Sort of smooth things over. If I don't get a chance at that background, I'll be stumped."

The sheriff pondered a moment. "I'll do what I can," he agreed. "When do you want to go back there again?"

"This afternoon, if possible."

"All right. I'll see you at the hotel about two," Prentice said. "Give me time to wash up and get a bite to eat."

With that he climbed stiffly into his saddle, nodded, and rode off.

CHAPTER II.

PLAIN TALK.

WHEN the sheriff had taken his departure, Ransome ordered Charley and Kluger to go through the business of the scene again. On this occasion there were no interruptions. The camera ground steadily, the white man and red once more staged their thrilling hand-to-hand encounter in the open against a background of primeval pines. The director barked through his megaphone and urged the perspiring combatants to make things snappy.

In the end Charley died dramatically upon the flower-carpeted clearing and Kluger, registering victory, staggered off to wherever the continuity sent him.

"Nice work," Ransome declared. "I never saw you die so beautifully before, Charley. You ought to get the notices of the piece."

"I don't know yet what it's all about," the Indian replied, picking himself out of the daisies, "but I hope the scene registered."

Some time afterward, a dilapidated flivver, whose driver awaited his passengers half a mile from where the scene had been shot, carried camera man, director, and actors over an apology for a road into Sapphire.

No broad highway led in or out of the town. In fact there were no highways leading anywhere. Sapphire was far off the beaten tourist trails and lay a dozen tortuous miles from the nearest railroad junction.

A few venturesome cars managed to navigate the stretch of deep sand and rock-rutted hills that led into Carbondale, a bus among them. The bus, barring accidents and inclement weather, was scheduled to meet the through trains.

It brought back the mail, express, and passengers. Sometimes all of them, often nothing at all. Most of the trucking was still done by teams.

Altogether, the town and its environs offered an ideal setting for the picture Ransome had in the making.

Ransome's outfit, joined by Drummond, who was to appear in future shots, all of them in make-up and wardrobe, ate lunch in the dining room of the nondescript hotel, the cynosure of all eyes. Actors of the silent drama were curiosities in that remote spot and the inhabitants viewed them as creatures of another world, peering through the windows and exchanging comments, favorable and otherwise, between themselves.

True to his word, Sheriff Prentice

showed up at the appointed hour, this time at the wheel of a rusty and complaining automobile whose top was gone and whose fenders threatened to fall apart. What was termed a good road led to within a short distance of the Bluebird property, a relic of the bygone days when creaking ore wagons hauled their cargoes from mine to stamp mill. The stamp mill long since had disappeared.

The sheriff, it appeared, was equally at home in the saddle or behind the steering wheel, both being used in the pursuit of his official duties. Where gas refused to carry him, horseflesh did; and where both failed, which was seldom, his own legs had to be depended upon.

Three miles from town, perched on the slope of a mountain that towered high above its forest-clad companions, clung what remained of the Bluebird buildings—a sagging, weather-beaten cabin and a heavily timbered structure at the mouth of the tunnel being those in the best repair. A number of other buildings, evidently once used for bunk houses and ore sheds, stood roofless and windowless, their frames askew, mere skeletons of a former prosperity.

At a point within a quarter of a mile from the property, the road that once led to the mine had been washed away, making advance by car impossible. A trail wound up from the road, however, and this the men took. Drummond and Hardy remained below with the camera until the hoped-for negotiations had been completed.

When they reached the premises, it was to find the cabin untenanted. The windows and door stood open, but no one responded to their call or knock; and finally, peering into the single big room that answered for living, sleeping, and kitchen quarters, they found it empty.

"They must be working in the drift," said Prentice. He had no sooner made the remark when a dull rumble sounded,

jarring the earth beneath them. "That's what they're doing," the sheriff added. "They've just set off a charge."

The men walked around the cabin and reached the door of the shed that concealed the mouth of the main tunnel. As they were about to enter they were met with fumes of powder and a haze of smoke.

A big man, bearded, his face stained with muck, suddenly appeared out of the haze. He stood in the doorway, his eyes fixed upon the visitors beyond.

"What's wanted?" he demanded sharply.

The sheriff acted as spokesman. "What's your objection to Mr. Ransome using your place for taking a few pictures?" he asked.

"Just don't want any trespassing, that's all," the other returned. "This is private property and we don't crave visitors."

"We're not visitors," Ransome put in quickly. "We won't make you any trouble. I simply want to use your buildings for a background. I expect to pay for the privilege."

The man in the doorway regarded the director narrowly. "You were around here yesterday, weren't you?"

"Yes," said Ransome.

"I told you to move on, didn't I?"

"Yes; but I thought we might——"

"Well, what I said yesterday stands," the other interrupted. "Bringing the sheriff along don't help none. Clear out, the bunch of you!"

Another figure, evidently his partner, equally tall, bearded and begrimed, loomed up behind the speaker. In the shadow of the doorway, with the smoke from the recent blast curling about them, their muck-stained faces were forbidding and at times partly obscured.

"Now see here, boys," Prentice remonstrated, "why can't you be a little reasonable in this matter? Taking a few pictures and wandering about your premises ain't going to put you to no

trouble that I can see. Mr. Ransome's come all the way from Hollywood and——"

"You heard what I said!" the nearer of the partners cut in. "That stands."

"What's your objections?" the sheriff wanted to know.

"We're paying strict attention to our own business and we'll thank you to do the same," the man returned.

"That's final, is it?"

"You bet it is. Clear out!"

The sheriff scowled. "I guess that settles it, then," he observed. "If you're set on being downright ornery there's nothing to stop you."

"I guess you're right," the man responded grimly.

Ransome attempted further argument, but it was useless. The partners were unmoved. They remained within the smoke-filled shed, apparently indifferent to the powder fumes. Having talked himself out, the director turned on his heel and strode off, his companion following.

"What in thunder's the matter with those chaps?" he grumbled, once they were descending the trail. "They act as if they were afraid we were likely to jump their claim."

"Our make-up must have scared them, remarked Kluger.

"From the look of the pair it would take something more than grease paint and crape hair to scare them," said Ransome. "They're about as tough-looking as a couple of revolutionists."

"And they weren't any too eager to show themselves," observed Charley.

Prentice walked on for some distance without speaking. "Well, I'll have a talk with Nesbit," he said at length. "He seems to be the only one in the community who's on speaking terms with these miners. Maybe, if you have a little patience, we can fix things."

"Patience is something I haven't a whole lot of," the director reminded him. "I hope you make it snappy."

CHAPTER III.

THE BLUEBIRD BACKGROUND.

IN the car, rattling back to Sapphire, Prentice revealed something of his thoughts.

"It's got me figuring," he declared. "Not so much because these men don't want you around their place, but that they're working the Bluebird. There isn't a pinch of color in it. Any expert in the country will vouch for that, and plenty of them have inspected it."

"There's plenty of color in it for me," Ransome stated. "That's all I'm interested in."

By the time the sheriff had left the movie outfit at the hotel, the afternoon was too far gone to permit of working. Moreover, storm clouds began to gather, and by five o'clock it had started to rain.

"More grief," the director grumbled, looking across the wet and deserted street. "Something tells me the overhead of this story is due to make an altitude record."

While they were at the dinner table that night a telegram came for Ransome. "It's from Lonny," he announced to the company. "She says we can expect her on here shortly to visit her brother."

"Her brother?" cried Kluger. "In this place?"

"It would seem that way." The director read on through the long message. "His name's Hugh Allen," he resumed. "I remember she often spoke of him. Worried a lot, too. She'd lost all trace of him for years. Now he pops up in this spot, of all places."

"Does she say what he's doing?" Drummond queried.

"He's a mining engineer and has been prospecting through the Southwest. Wants us to look him up."

Charley spoke quickly. "Wasn't Allen the name of one of the pair working the Bluebird?" he ventured.

"Jove, I believe you're right!" Ran-

some brightened instantly. "Allen. Sure that's the name. Allen and Varney the men are, the sheriff said. Wonder if it could be the same? Say, that would be luck. Lonny's brother! What do you know about that!"

Laura Allen, a member of the Superba Company and known as "Lonny" among her coworkers, was one of the most popular leads under Ransome's direction. In fact she had figured in some of the earlier scenes in the present story. That her brother could be one of the unhospitable men at the Bluebird both amazed and delighted the director.

"Say, we'll cop that prize location yet," he declared. "A lucky break for us. I'm going out to make inquiries."

Charley accompanied him and they walked through a drizzle toward the big general store, apparently the town headquarters. Under its roof one bought toothpicks and tractors, claimed their mail and telegrams and listened to gossip and a static-blighted radio.

"Hugh Allen?" repeated Nesbit, the storekeeper, when Ransome questioned him. "Sure; that's the name of one of the Bluebird men. He and his partner, Varney, was just in here. Varney got a letter and Allen a telegram. It come in just as they was leavin'."

"Good enough!" Ransome exclaimed jubilantly. "We've just learned that Allen's a brother of a girl in our company. That ought to change the complexion of things around here considerably."

"How's that?" Nesbit wanted to know.

The storekeeper was a thin, wiry man with sun-faded hair and mustache. His left cheek bore a scar. His eyes were hard and penetrating, and they played rather persistently upon the Indian.

"The Bluebird pair objected strenuously to our setting up a camera on their lot," the director explained.

"That so?" Nesbit's eyes strayed to the speaker, but it was evident he was

still more interested in Charley than in what the director had to say. "Why?"

"Search me," returned Ransome. "Just naturally suspicious of picture folks, I guess. But I'll see Allen the first thing in the morning. This wire from his sister ought to smooth our way now. I've an idea the message he received to-night was from Lonny."

Unexpectedly, Nesbit nodded. "That was the name signed to it," he stated. "You see, I'm the operator here and I have to write out all the messages that come in."

"I see," said Ransome. "You're postmaster, too, aren't you? And you wait on trade between times, eh? Quite a handy man on the job. Guess you know about everything that goes on in town, don't you?"

Nesbit smiled faintly. "That ain't much," he admitted.

"I was just wondering, since Lonny signed my wire as well as the one to her brother, and both coming in about the same time, if you mentioned the fact to Allen?"

The storekeeper hesitated a moment. "No, I didn't say nothin' about it," he replied. "None of my business."

When the visitors walked to the door, Nesbit followed.

"You look a lot different from what you did in your war paint," he remarked, eyeing the Indian. "I'd hardly take you for a redskin now. Somebody was sayin' you was Moccasin Charley who we been readin' about in the Los Angeles papers. Is that right?"

"Just about," Charley admitted, smiling.

The men ducked through the door and ran to their hotel. Before the open fire in the lobby they dried their wet clothes, and with Drummond, Hardy, and Kluger to keep them company, smoked and talked until bedtime.

Charley's room on the second floor overlooked the rear of the low, false-

front buildings in the adjoining block, and from the window he had an unobstructed view along the alley back of Nesbit's premises. It was still raining when he went to bed, but some time later, awakened by a sound, he found the moon shining brightly.

His watch proclaimed a few minutes after one o'clock. Wondering at what had disturbed him, he got up and peered from the window. The sound he heard must have been the thud of hoofs, he concluded, for it was repeated, and now he saw a horseman, crouched low in his saddle, gallop off, apparently leaving from the alley door of Nesbit's store.

The man seemed to be in a great hurry and the Indian watched him disappear at the end of the street. No lights were visible in the buildings below. He opened the window and leaned out. No further sounds came to his alert ears, but suddenly he saw Nesbit. The storekeeper stepped from the shadows into the moonlit street; then vanished again.

What Charley had witnessed made little impression upon him, and he went back to bed, cheered by the prospect of a fair to-morrow. He was downstairs early, to find Ransome at breakfast. The director was bound for the Bluebird Mine, armed with Lonny Allen's message, which he hoped would be an open sesame for him, and Charley volunteered to accompany him.

When the hired flivver showed up, the men climbed in and were driven to the road's end below the Bluebird property. There they alighted and walked up the trail toward the cabin.

"I hope no one takes a pot shot at us before we can declare ourselves," the director remarked, glancing warily about him.

No one did. The cabin door was closed. The vivid morning sunlight flooded the premises with gold. Except for a flock of blue jays that set up a

tremendous clatter at the approach of the visitors, silence prevailed. There was no smoke from the broad chimney and no signs of life about the place.

"Guess they're not up yet," said Ransome.

The men reached the door and knocked, waiting expectantly; but no one answered the summons. Later, they walked to the tunnel. The shed built at the mouth of it was open and they went in. The place was deserted. As evidence that the miners were not at work beyond earshot in the drift, the crude door of heavy logs, spiked together, that barred the entrance, was closed and secured with a padlock and chain.

"Funny," said Ransome. "If Allen and his partner aren't asleep in the cabin they've gone into town."

"There is one of their horses," Charley announced, pointing to a corral some distance above. "I noticed two horses were picketed there yesterday, so both men can't be gone."

Ransome nodded and stood looking about him. The Indian retraced his steps to the cabin and peered through one of the windows; then swiftly, without a word to his companion, he turned to try the door. It opened at his touch and the big room was flooded with sunlight.

The room was in disorder, the table and chairs overturned; and sprawled on the floor lay one of the partners. Ransome, coming in behind the Indian, fell back with an exclamation and remained in the open doorway. With a swift glance about him that took in the whole of the room, Charley stepped across the floor and knelt beside the prostrate form.

He realized, even as his fingers sought the man's wrist, that life was extinct, had been for some time. He could not detect the slightest flutter of a pulse. The man's shirt was crimson stained and on the floor beside him, almost touching his hand, was a knife.

CHAPTER IV.

SILENT TESTIMONY.

AS Charley stood up, Ransome's voice sounded behind him—hesitant and wavering.

"What is it?" he asked. "What's happened? Is the man dead?"

The Indian nodded, his eyes fixed upon the crumpled body. "Been dead for several hours," he said.

"Murdered?"

"Yes; I'd say so."

The director backed out through the door, his face stricken. "Good heavens!" he exclaimed in a whisper. "Let's fade out of this picture, Charley. Don't touch anything!"

"We'd better get word to the sheriff." The Indian spoke quietly. "The man down in the car will know where to find him. You hurry along. I'll wait here."

"Don't do it. You come on with me," Ransome urged, as Charley followed the director outside. "I don't like the idea of you staying here alone. If anything should come up——"

"I'd rather stay," the Indian broke in. "One of us should. Don't look so scared, Ransome. Nothing's going to come up."

"Oh, I'm not scared," Ransome answered. "It's just hit me hard. A thing like this happening! Why did we have to get mixed up in it? Let's go back to town and say nothing about this; let some one else do the discovering. We can say we were up here this morning but failed to arouse any one. That would be all right, wouldn't it?"

Charley shook his head. "No reason in the world for lying about it," he returned. "You get on and bring up the sheriff, Ransome. Telling the truth is always the safest thing to do."

The director hesitated, glanced back at the cabin and finally started down the trail. Charley watched as the man reached the car and climbed into it.

Left to his own resources, the Indian stepped into the cabin again and made a second inspection of the premises. Then he went outside, circling the cabin, but at a distance from its walls. From there he walked to the corral. The horse, back of the rails, whinnied loudly at his approach as if anticipating its usual breakfast.

Leaving the corral behind he mounted the slope, traveling beside a worn trail, his eyes busily recording impressions. He followed the trail to the crest of the hill some distance beyond, saw that it led directly west. To follow it farther, he decided, would be a waste of time. There was no haste in that respect, and presently he retraced his steps, came back to the cabin and sat down on the doorstep to await the arrival of the sheriff.

Long before he caught sight of the returning car he heard the labor of its engine as it pounded up the steep grade. Three men alighted at the end of the road and came running toward the cabin. Ransome had found Prentice. The third man, Charley saw, was Nesbit, the storekeeper.

Without a word being exchanged between them, the sheriff swept past the Indian and stepped into the cabin. There he glanced swiftly about and knelt beside the dead man.

Nesbit was at his heels. "It's Varney!" he cried, leaning over Prentice's shoulder.

The sheriff, finished with his inspection, got to his feet and looked at Charley, who had followed the men into the room.

"You moved anything?" he asked.

"Nothing," the Indian assured him.

"Everything just the way you found them when you came in?"

"Yes. I simply made sure the man was past help; then I sent Ransome down to bring you here."

"You didn't know it was Varney, did you?" Nesbit inquired.

Charley shook his head. "I didn't know whether it was Varney or Allen."

"You noticed this on the floor?" Prentice asked, pointing to what seemed to be fresh scratches in the wood.

"Yes; right away."

The storekeeper turned to look down. "What is it?"

"It's printing," the sheriff replied. "Come around back of me and you can read it plain enough."

Nesbit did so, getting down on his knees.

"Can't you make out what it says?" Prentice queried.

"Sure." The storekeeper read aloud the three significant words that had been cut deeply into the pine board. "It says 'Allen—did—this.'"

"That's exactly what it says," corroborated the sheriff.

"Allen!" It was Ransome, standing back in the doorway who spoke. "You mean Hugh Allen, Varney's partner?"

Prentice look around. "Who else? Varney gives it to us right here—in print." A hard, troubled look stamped itself on the sheriff's countenance.

Nesbit studied the battered features of the dead man. "Say, they must have had it hot and heavy," he remarked. "Allen finished him off with a knife."

"In the back," supplemented Prentice. "Didn't reach the heart, though; and Varney lived long enough to carve these words in the floor."

"We don't need that extra evidence, I'm thinkin', to convict Allen of the job," said Nesbit. "He's took to his heels."

Between them, presently, the body was lifted from the floor and deposited upon one of the cots. Neither of the cots had been slept in—evidence, it seemed, that the fight had taken place early the night before. Prentice remarked upon that, and the storekeeper nodded.

"The men were in my place about eight o'clock," he declared. "Just be-

fore you two came in," he added, looking toward Ransome and the Indian.

"And you told us Allen had received a wire from his sister," the director reminded him.

"Yes; that's right. He got the message and read it, and stuck it in his pocket—like he didn't want Varney to see it."

"What did it say?" the sheriff asked.

"Something about comin' to Sapphire to see him."

"Allen's sister? Coming here?"

"I had a wire from her at the same time," Ransome spoke up, and told how he and Charley had visited the store later to make inquiries, learning from Nesbit that the Hugh Allen referred to was one of the Bluebird partners. "That's what brought us up here this morning," he concluded.

"The pair were quarrelin' last night," Nesbit volunteered. "I heard 'em out back of the store. Then Varney rode off alone and Allen came back, lookin' mad as the devil. He set around smokin' and then left."

"Was that the last you saw of him?"

"The last of either of 'em."

Charley, listening attentively to the testimony of the storekeeper, recalled what he had seen from his window later on that evening. Not only had he caught a glimpse of Nesbit, but he was positive that the horseman he had seen riding off so hurriedly had left from the rear of the store.

"What time did it stop raining last night?" he asked casually.

"Can't say," said Nesbit. "I turned in half an hour after you left and didn't wake up till daylight."

"The rain stopped about one o'clock," the sheriff testified. "I was still awake. I thought I heard some one riding along the street in front of my place. I got up and looked out the window, but I didn't see any one. The moon was shining bright at that time."

"I woke up about the same time,"

Charley said. It did not escape him that Nesbit turned his head and seemed to be watching him alertly; but he did not add to his remarks and the subject was dropped.

The sheriff methodically went through the dead man's clothing, emptying the pockets one after another, bringing out a miscellany of personal articles. The search produced a wallet that contained a few bank notes, some papers and receipts bearing Varney's name and a letter.

"I think that's the letter Varney got last night," said Nesbit, peering over the sheriff's shoulder. "Yes, it is," he affirmed. "Postmarked San Francisco, isn't it?"

"It may give us a line on something," said Prentice, and removed the inclosure from the envelope. He read it through and passed it to Nesbit.

"Signed by J. M. Bellamy," the storekeeper declared. "He says he is interested in the property and expects to be on in a few days. I suppose this Bellamy is referrin' to the Bluebird Mine."

"No doubt," agreed the sheriff. "He may know Varney and give us some information."

Charley glanced at the letter and envelope which Nesbit placed on the table, and later picked up the knife that Prentice had been inspecting. It was a commonplace hunting knife with a single cutting edge recently honed, and bore no stains.

"Evidently not the blade that killed Varney," the Indian observed.

"No; of course not. Varney's property, I take it," the sheriff said. "Allen probably used his own knife. Carried it off with him, too."

The storekeeper took the weapon and examined it closely. "You're right. It's Varney's knife. I sold it to him a few days ago."

He tossed it upon the table. "Say, hadn't we better be findin' Allen? Seems

like he's gettin' a long start on us, Ben."

"It don't matter so much about the start," the sheriff answered. "He can't get far. Guess he didn't figure that, being new here. The desert's to the south and east of us, the hills to the north where there's precious little water, and Carbondale to the west."

"His trail leads west," announced Charley. "I followed it half a mile or so."

Prentice's eyes flickered with surprise. "You did? How'd did you stumble across it?"

"I didn't stumble across it," Charley answered. "I looked for it—found it exactly where I expected to find it. Leading out from the corral. One horse is still there. I suppose it belonged to the dead man."

"Oh, you've been looking around, have you? Investigating? Well, what else did you discover?"

"Several things that may interest you. After killing his partner the fugitive left the cabin by the rear door. He wasn't in any great hurry, and it must have been some time after one o'clock this morning."

Nesbit started a laugh, but checked it. "Say, how'd you guess all this?" he demanded.

"I didn't guess at it," the Indian returned quietly. "I didn't have to. To begin with, there are deep footprints in the clay leading from the rear of the cabin to the corral above here. The sheriff tells us the rain stopped about one o'clock, so if the fugitive had left before then, his trail would have been partly or wholly obliterated. That's evident enough, isn't it?"

"From the clear-cut impressions in the clay it can readily be determined that the man walked, not ran. Moreover, to prove he was not alarmed or in any haste to get away, after leading his horse from the corral, he carefully replaced the bars. The hoofprints leading from

the corral are also clear-cut and distinct in the wet earth, indicating that he walked his animal for the first mile at least."

"I'll just have a look at these things," Prentice said. Both his tone and manner conveyed the fact that he was impressed by the Indian's statements.

Outside, Charley speedily pointed to the evidence by which he had reached his conclusions: the trail leading from the cabin and the one higher up the slope, leading away from the corral. And after scrutinizing footprints and hoofmarks, the sheriff nodded in approval; nor was he at all hesitant about declaring himself.

"You got sharper eyes than I have," he confessed. "Guess it's natural, though. Allen headed for Carbondale, all right," he went on. "No other place for him to head, unless he knew the back country like a native, and that ain't likely. No train through the junction till noon, so we got plenty time to wire down and have our man arrested."

"And he won't count on our learnin' of the murder so soon as this," said Nesbit. "Nobody is in the habit of visitin' here and nobody would think it queer if the partners weren't seen in town for a couple days. Just lucky these picture people happened up here."

"You better get back to the store," the sheriff instructed. "Wire Carbondale right off, describe Allen and have him picked up. I'll be down there myself soon's possible. And send out a warning to all the mines and ranches that's got phones, in case our man's struck off into the hills."

"No danger of that, I'm thinkin'," commented Nesbit, glancing at his watch. "He's likely sittin' around the station now, waitin' to hop the noon train."

Prentice nodded. "I wish you'd pick my car at the house and drive it back here," he said. "Don't waste any time."

The storekeeper turned on his heel and hurried off toward the road below where Ransome's car and driver waited.

CHAPTER V.

THE POINT IN EVIDENCE.

WHEN Nesbit had gone, the sheriff led the way back to the cabin, and assisted by Charley, made a thorough search of the premises. Nothing of interest was found, nothing that would throw light upon the history, past or present, of the Bluebird operators.

"Guess we'll be kept in the dark for a while," Prentice observed. "Do you think Allen's sister will be showing up?"

"We're expecting her," Ransome answered. "I wish she wasn't coming—now," he added. "This is going to be a shock to her."

"I'll want to see and talk with her when she arrives," the sheriff said. "All the more so if we don't get Allen."

"She hasn't seen her brother for five years," Charley stated. "So it is doubtful if she'll be in a position to give us much information."

"Can you get in touch with her to-day?"

"I suppose so," the director answered. "If she's still at the studio. But I sure dread to, sheriff."

"She'll have to hear, soon or late."

"Yes; I know. But I hate to be the one to break the news. Couldn't we hold off for a time?" Ransome asked. "Wait until she gets here. Maybe by that time something unexpected will turn up. We may find Allen didn't murder his partner after all."

Prentice shrugged. "With all this evidence staring us in the face? I'm afraid not."

He and Ransome went outside to await Nesbit's return, but Charley remained in the cabin.

Half an hour later the storekeeper was back. He informed Prentice that no one answering to Allen's description

had been seen in Carbondale, but the local authorities were watching all trains.

"He ought to have shown up before this," the sheriff remarked. His watch marked half an hour of noon.

"Oh, he'll probably hide out until train time," said Nesbit.

When Prentice turned and entered the cabin again it was to find the Indian down upon hands and knees, apparently studying the roughly cut inscription in the floor.

"What you trying to find?" the sheriff inquired.

"I've been trying to put two and two together," Charley replied, smiling a little. "But in spite of all I can do, it makes five."

"A problem in addition?" Ransome asked.

"No; in deduction."

"What do you mean by that?" Nesbit demanded.

"Well, to begin with," Charley said, looking past the storekeeper to Prentice, "does it seem plausible to you, that under the circumstances Varney would have had the strength to cut these words in the floor?"

"Don't suppose it took a lot of effort."

"Granted that he would have had the strength," the Indian continued, "don't you think the effort was unnecessary?"

"Not exactly. He wanted to be sure we got the guilty man."

"But wouldn't you naturally have suspected Allen? Here were two men, partners, living under the same roof, ostensibly working the same piece of property: a pair who kept strictly to themselves and seldom ventured into town. One of them is found murdered, the other missing. Would there be any question of placing the guilt?"

"Maybe not; but evidently Varney wasn't taking chances."

"We may consider Allen a reasonably intelligent man, don't you think? It

would look, from the evidence, that he planned the crime, accomplished it, and knew in advance just how he was to make a get-away?"

"Sure. He seemed to have taken his own sweet time about leaving. Knew there was no sense in him getting down to the junction before daylight."

"Nevertheless, he knew the moment he left here he was a fugitive," Charley persisted. "Not a very pleasant thing to have hanging over one's head, is it? Wouldn't it have been much simpler for him, instead of running off and apparently convicting himself, to have concealed his partner's body? Not a difficult thing to do. No one in the community, from what I gather, was interested in the pair, and no one would have concerned himself particularly over Varney's abrupt disappearance. It seems to me, in that way, Allen would have saved himself a great deal of trouble."

The sheriff shrugged. "What's the sense of making up all these fool conundrums? What's been done is done, and that's an end to it."

"It's been done, Prentice," the Indian conceded, "but perhaps we haven't reached the end of it. To get back to where we started a moment before," he went on, "you don't believe this message on the floor was wholly unnecessary? If you had found Allen, wouldn't you have suspected and arrested him just the same, message or no message?"

"I probably would, but——"

"So really this message has had little or nothing to do with placing the guilt on Allen's shoulders?" Charley interrupted.

"Well, it makes it all the more conclusive."

The Indian again inspected the crude printing. "This floor is of unusually hard pine," he said at length. "The knife must have been sharp and keen-pointed to bite so deeply, don't you think?"

"It was that," the sheriff corroborated.

Charley ran his finger nail along the lines of printing, following them slowly, deliberately. "Notice any peculiarity in these lines?" he inquired.

Both Prentice and Nesbit looked down; both shook their heads.

"Notice how thin and distinctly cut the lines that spell out the words 'Allen did,' and how much broader the lines of the last word 'this?'" Charley queried.

The sheriff stooped lower, squinting. "Why, yes," he admitted after a moment of study. "I see now, since you called my attention to it. How would you account for it?"

"Probably the way the knife was held," volunteered Nesbit.

"No; not that." Charley shook his head. Then he drew a small penknife from his pocket and ran its blade along the lines that formed the last letter of the word "did." There, with little effort, he succeeded in prying out of the wood a bit of metal.

He held it out on the palm of his hand—a polished bit of steel, perhaps a quarter of an inch long, shaped like a wedge.

"What does this look like to you?" he asked of Prentice.

The sheriff picked it up in his fingers. "Why, it's a broken knife point," he declared promptly.

"That's what I judged it must be when my fingernail ran against it a moment ago. The point of a knife blade. It was broken off at the finish of the word 'did.' So when the last word 'this' was being cut, the blunted point naturally left a broader line in the wood. That would account for the difference in the lines, wouldn't it?"

"Why, I guess it would," Prentice agreed, still unimpressed by the discovery. "Sure. You couldn't cut so deep with a blade whose point was missing," he added.

Charley looked inquiringly from the sheriff to Nesbit, a smile hovering about his lips. Neither of the men had changed expression.

"Doesn't this start you thinking?" he asked.

"Thinking?" Nesbit repeated. "What do you mean? Any point is likely to break off in this hard pine if you twist the blade wrong."

"That is obvious," Charley answered. "That is precisely what did happen." He continued to smile. "The point broke off. But how about the knife we found beside Varney?"

The sheriff turned and picked up the knife that had been placed, among the other exhibits, upon the table. A low exclamation escaped him. The blade was undamaged, the point of it intact.

Confronted by the evidence, indisputable evidence at that, Prentice's scowl deepened and he looked questioningly at the Indian.

"What do you make of it?"

"The knives must have been switched," Nesbit put in quickly.

"But who by?" Charley asked. "Not the dead man. If Varney left this inscription in the floor we would have found a blade with a broken point beside him. We didn't. We found a whole blade."

"Then Varney couldn't have used this knife," agreed the sheriff.

"I don't think he used any knife," Charley returned emphatically.

"You mean you don't think he cut these words in the floor?"

"I do not."

The sheriff pondered a moment. "How'd they come to be here, then?"

"That is something for us to discover," the Indian replied.

"A blind!" exclaimed Ransome. "Jove, that's something to think about! You've hit it, Charley," he ran on enthusiastically. "You've given us a new lead. The carving was done by some one—after Varney was dead! Say, I

had a hunch all along you'd upset the dope."

The sheriff seemed bewildered. "Allen certainly didn't do the carving," he said.

"Allen? Signing his own death warrant?" Ransome laughed. "Of course not. I'm beginning to think he doesn't figure in this at all."

"You're crazy," scoffed Nesbit. "If he wasn't guilty he wouldn't have made a get-away. His disappearance is his death warrant, if you ask me!"

"Nobody's asking you. Something's happened here we can't grasp—yet. We will, though." Ransome was jubilant and took no pains to conceal it. It must have occurred to him now, that with Allen's guilt a matter of doubt, it would not be so difficult to face Lonny.

"You've got a mystery on your hands, sheriff," he ran on. "You ought to solve it, with Charley's help. A mystery don't last as long as a dollar bill in a night club, when he spots it."

"Before you crow too much," the storekeeper put in, "let's get back to where we was a minute ago. Speakin' of this knife. How do we know it was here in the first place?"

"First place?" the sheriff repeated. "What do you mean? I know it's the one I picked up when I came in here."

"I'm not questionin' that. I don't say it ain't the knife you found. I mean how do you know it wasn't switched before you got on the job?"

"You're intimating that Ransome and I might have done that?" Charley asked.

"You were here first, weren't you? Maybe half an hour before Ben showed up? You were here alone, the two of you?"

"Yes. But nothing was touched."

"You touched Varney, didn't you?"

"His wrist. Merely to be certain he was beyond help."

Nesbit shrugged and glanced significantly at Prentice. "Is that all? You sure you didn't—"

"Hold on, now!" Ransome broke in. "That'll be enough from you! Charley's told you the truth. What possible motive would we have in lying about things? We found a man murdered and judged him to be one of the pair operating this property. Whether he was Varney or Allen, we didn't know."

"You could have found out easy enough," said Nesbit.

"Perhaps; but it wasn't our place to investigate. And what if we had known? It wouldn't have changed matters in the least. And as for us substituting one knife for another, why, that is absurd. What would have been our object? The murdered and murderer were strangers to us. Certainly we weren't interested in placing the guilt or removing it."

"Except that you'd heard something about Allen," the storekeeper reminded him, "and might have figured—"

Ransome flushed and moved threateningly upon Nesbit, who broke off in the middle of his sentence and stepped back.

"You make another dirty crack like that," the director growled, "and I'll knock you through the window."

The sheriff intervened. "Keep your temper, boys," he remonstrated. "No use flying off the handle, either of you. If there's any talking to be done, I'll do it. You hold your tongue, Nesbit."

"All right, Ben," Nesbit responded. "I'll shut up. Just felt like sayin' what I thought, that's all. This bunch of picture actors seem to be set on makin' a mystery out of this affair and monkeys out of us. Looks like we can run things without any help."

CHAPTER VI.

HOPELESS SEARCH.

ONLY a warning glance from the Indian prevented Ransome from making a quick retort. Nesbit shrugged and turned away, apparently content to

let the sheriff take up from where he had left off. But to all appearances Prentice saw fit to remain neutral.

"We better be getting back to town," he said quietly, "I'll get a jury and have everything regular. I'm acting as coroner just at present, so there won't be no delay. You'll both have to testify," he added, addressing Ransome and the Indian. "It won't take long."

A blanket was found and the body wrapped in it, a duty that the sheriff performed with Nesbit's help. The four men made a light job of carrying their burden down the trail to where the car awaited them.

As they were preparing to leave, a dog came in sight. It trotted part way down the trail, sat back on its haunches, pointed its nose skyward and let out a prolonged, mournful howl.

"That's Varney's pet," Nesbit announced. "Guess it knows what's happened, all right. You can't fool a dog."

Prentice walked toward the animal, calling it, but the dog growled and trotted off, to be lost among the timber.

"You'll have a hard time makin' up to that pup," Nesbit remarked. "He's a one-man dog."

The sheriff turned and came back. "I'll wait a couple days and maybe bring it into town. Don't want to leave it here to starve."

Since the news of the tragedy had preceded them, the sheriff and his companions found the town agog with excitement and speculation. The serenity of the camp had been disturbed. Murder and sudden death were rare occurrences in Sapphire, and while both principals were strangers, the affair stirred the community.

The news had spread rapidly, and the majority of the men on the streets were armed. Prentice addressed the crowd that gathered about the little building that served the purpose of jail, office, and court room; gave them a summary of the facts, warned them to behave,

and, later, picked from among their number sufficient for a coroner's jury.

Before the jury, Ransome and Charley testified to the finding of the body and unhesitatingly answered all the questions put to them. Both the sheriff and the storekeeper contributed their share of information. Prentice explained briefly about the message cut in the cabin floor, how the point of a knife blade had been found embedded in one of the letters, a discovery that, in view of the undamaged knife found beside the victim, seemed to indicate Varney had not been responsible for the inscription.

Despite that testimony, it was evident from the first that the minds of the jury already were made up. The disappearance of Allen seemed to overshadow all that Charley had brought to light. The verdict, therefore, was that Varney had come to his death by a knife-thrust at the hands of his partner, Allen, whose whereabouts were unknown.

"Of all the blockheads!" Ransome exclaimed, once they were outside. "A wonder they couldn't give Allen a decent break."

"Never mind the verdict," said Charley. "We'll do a little investigating on our own hook. By the time Allen's found, we may be in a position to produce some new evidence."

Immediately after the verdict had been rendered, Sheriff Prentice gathered a posse and set off toward Carbondale, confident that before nightfall the fugitive would be apprehended.

Although Nesbit was a deputy and should have accompanied his superior, it was judged better for him to remain close beside the telegraph key, in order to pick up any further and perhaps important messages that might come over the wire.

"Suits me," he remarked to Ransome and Charley, watching the posse ride off. "Don't fancy takin' an excursion in this heat."

At the store where he took leave of the men, he grinned significantly at the director. "Guess you won't find trouble up at the Bluebird now. You can take all the movin' pictures you want. Kind of lucky for you, after all, wasn't it?" he added.

Walking on without response, Ransome glanced at his companion. "I wouldn't trust that Nesbit from here across the street. He knows something and he isn't taking a lot of pains to conceal it."

The Indian nodded, and mentioned what he had seen from his window the night before. "And Nesbit just claimed he slept straight through the night."

"Huh," returned the director. "Judging by the attitude he's taken to-day, we can't think Allen was his visitor."

"Not unless he's experienced a sudden change of heart," Charley answered.

Upon his return to the hotel, and to the profound relief of those who awaited him, Ransome declared a holiday. The company had, of course, heard the gist of the news and were anxious to learn the details.

Contemplating the unpleasant fact that Lonny Allen's brother was a fugitive, charged with murder, none of the Superba cast was in a mood to don make-up or go out on location. They sat about, gloomily, on the hotel veranda, with few words between them, as depressed as if Lonny herself had been implicated.

Several times during the afternoon, Charley and Kluger visited the store to make inquiries, but nothing, it seemed, had come over the wire. Each time the Indian appeared the storekeeper met him with a provoking smile and a shrug of his shoulders.

"Guess Allen's given 'em the slip," he declared upon the occasion of the third visit. "Don't see how he's done it."

Later on at the hotel, the company

discussed the advisability of sending Lonny a wire. It was the thing to do, of course, but Ransome held off.

"I'll wait till morning," he said. "Maybe something will happen."

"Heaven knows I don't countenance murder," Kluger remarked; "but I wouldn't feel badly if Allen disappeared for good. No matter what kind of an alibi he's got, he'll get rough treatment in this community."

Kluger obviously echoed the unspoken sentiments of the others, and all of them seemed visibly relieved when, shortly before dusk, the sheriff and his posse rode into town, minus a prisoner, but bringing along a riderless horse.

A crowd immediately gathered in front of the store, joined in all haste by the cinema outfit, to listen to the report Prentice made. Allen had given them the slip. The fugitive's horse had been found in a Carbondale stable. The liveryman described Allen perfectly and said the man had ridden into town shortly after daybreak. He had left his mount to be fed and disappeared.

Then it was learned that a freight had rolled through town less than an hour afterward. A rancher at the station had seen a man answering to Allen's general description swing aboard. This fact was not learned, however, until the middle of the afternoon. By that time the train, a fast freight bound through to the coast, had traveled several hundred miles.

Prentice had sent wires to all the stations, warning the authorities, but the fugitive had not been seen. Apparently he had dropped off somewhere along the line hours before the messages had been received.

The news of Allen's escape provoked much discussion and argument, although it could not be considered a reflection on the efficiency of Sheriff Prentice, who looked as crestfallen as his companions. In fact the fugitive must have been well on his way out of Carbondale before

the murder of his partner had been discovered.

"Come to think of it," Nesbit spoke up, "I remember Allen inquirin' about the trains last night."

"Why didn't you mention this before?" the sheriff asked.

"Forgot it. Anyhow, I didn't know about that fast freight, no more than you did, Ben," the storekeeper came back almost resentfully. "I'm not supposed to know everything."

By dark the crowd had dispersed, grumbling among themselves. Ransome and his companions returned to the hotel and ate their dinner.

"So far, so good," remarked Kluger. "Let's see what the next twenty-four hours bring."

Varney was buried the next morning in the little cemetery overlooking the town. The victim's personal property—a wallet containing papers, receipts, and some money, a watch and a gold ring—were taken and kept by the sheriff, to be turned over to relatives in case any should be found. The ring was not inscribed, but the watch, apparently of an expensive make, bore its owner's monogram.

That same morning, Ransome took his actors and camera to the Bluebird Mine, where a number of scenes were shot. They worked steadily and to good advantage. The sun was just right, the setting ideal, and fortunately there were no interruptions.

Varney's dog was seen at intervals, but only at a distance, and no one attempted to make up with it.

While they were still grinding, the sheriff rode up, apparently having ridden across country on horseback instead of taking his flivver along the road below. He stood to one side watching the operations with undisguised interest.

When the last of the scenes had been shot, he slipped from his saddle to talk with Ransome. The sheriff had brought

no news, and upon learning that, Charley moved away. Kluger and Drummond strolled off with the camera man.

Presently the director and Prentice joined the Indian, who stood looking across the slope to where the dump, spilling fanlike below the tunnel mouth, made a splotch of color against the green of the underbrush.

"I was just wondering," Charley spoke up at once, "if we could learn anything by visiting the tunnel?"

"Learn what?" the sheriff asked.

"About what the partners were up to; why they seemed to have been wasting time on a pinched-out vein. You say they've been working here for a week or more, didn't you? And we heard them put off a shot yesterday. But I notice there's no fresh rock on the dump."

"That's so," the sheriff declared, squinting at the weathered, weed-covered mound. "Doesn't look as if they had been taking out anything."

"The tunnel door is locked," Charley said. "We were up there yesterday; but no doubt we can get in, if you say so, sheriff."

CHAPTER VII.

TRACKING.

THEY found, upon inspection, the chain and padlock still in place; but with the aid of a bar and the combined efforts of the three men, the chain was twisted free from its staples. A breath of cold air greeted the men when the door was thrown open.

They peered speculatively into the black mouth of the tunnel, but when Charley picked up a lantern and lighted it, the sheriff followed his example. Thus armed, they pressed forward, following the rails that wound into the heart of the mountain.

An empty dump car stood at the far end of the drift. It did not look, upon inspection, as if it had been used recently—certainly not within the past

few days. There was no loose muck below the breast, no clean drill holes, no tools of any description, nothing to indicate work having been done.

Several laterals branched off from the main drift, showing that in the past other promising veins had been followed in hope of tapping the mother lode. Each of them were explored in turn, but none gave evidence of having been freshly worked.

The main drift, much larger than the laterals, was cribbed in one place with heavy logs, done to prevent the roof and sides from caving in. The whole workings, however, were remarkably dry.

After an hour later the men were outside again, grateful for the fresh air and the warm sunshine. Prentice, his eyes clouded, stared meditatively at the rusty rails that, emerging from the tunnel, ran along the top of the ancient, weed-covered dump. Certainly no wheels had traveled over them recently. That added to his confoundment.

"It beats me," he confessed. "I don't know what these men have been up to. Whatever it is, it don't show. They put off a shot yesterday, all right enough. We'll swear to that. But we can't find any evidence of the rock it brought down."

"They've been making a bluff at working the property," Ransome declared. "You can't deny that."

"I can't deny it," acknowledged Prentice. "But why have they gone to all the trouble—bluffing, I mean? Nobody was interested, one way or another."

Neither Charley nor the director volunteered an answer, and in silence the men walked down toward the cabin. Before they reached it, Nesbit came into sight.

"Been lookin' all over for you, Ben," he called, getting out of his saddle. "Just got word through Carbondale that one of the freight crew booted a man off his train yesterday near Hilltop—late in

the afternoon. I figure it must have been Allen."

"At Hilltop, you say?" The sheriff frowned. "Why, that's a good two hundred miles from here."

"Yep; all of that," the storekeeper confirmed. "I wired the authorities there to be on the watch. Maybe they'll pick him up yet. Anyhow, I thought it was the thing to do."

"Glad you did," said Prentice. "Looks sort of helpless now—Allen getting that far off."

Nesbit agreed with him. "He sure traveled fast. Anything new here?" the storekeeper inquired, his eyes shifting to the Indian.

The sheriff told him they had taken a trip through the workings.

"There hasn't been a lick of work done on the property," he stated. "Don't look as if any one's been in the tunnel for years."

The storekeeper scowled and rubbed his chin reflectively. "That's sure queer," he admitted. "Can't figure what the men have been up to."

"Don't seem we're likely to figure it out, either," said Prentice. "Not with one of the pair dead and the other missing. Maybe if we could, we'd get a new slant on the killing."

"Yes, we might," Nesbit agreed.

The men walked on to the cabin. While the others were talking, Charley stepped through the open doorway and surveyed the interior of the big room. Apparently nothing had been disturbed since his last visit. He crossed the floor and again fell to studying the inscription carved in the hard pine. The letters of the three words were as fresh and distinct as ever and a prolonged study of them told him nothing new.

Presently he lifted his eyes and let them wander about the log walls of the cabin. On a shelf against the far wall some object caught and reflected the sunlight that streamed through the open window. It was, he discovered an in-

stant later, taking it from the shelf, a piece of colorful rock. It was brilliant with blues and green, and a close inspection revealed many fine threads of dull yellow among the other shades.

While he was examining his find, the sheriff loomed up in the doorway and came toward him.

"Isn't this a piece of quartz?" Charley asked.

Prentice nodded. "Peacock ore," he declared, identifying it readily. "As pretty a specimen as I've ever seen."

Nesbit showed up to peer over the sheriff's shoulder. "Where'd you find it?" he queried.

"Up there on the shelf."

"That so? Wonder where it came from?" The storekeeper inspected the ore, and Charley fancied his hands trembled. "Say, a vein of this stuff would run close to fifty thousand a ton, wouldn't it, Ben?"

The sheriff nodded and for a moment his eyes gleamed. "Takes me back to the old days when they were digging color like this all around here. I guess this is a specimen the Bluebird pair were lugging with them, trying to match."

Nesbit laughed. "They sure strayed into the wrong territory. About forty years too late."

Charley dropped the bit of rock into his pocket, aware that Nesbit's eyes were upon him.

The sheriff, learning that Ransome had shot all the scenes he wanted, suggested closing the cabin windows and locking the doors. That was done, Prentice pocketing the key.

A few minutes later Prentice and the storekeeper rode off. Ransome's outfit traveled back to town in their flivver, removed make-up and wardrobe, and ate lunch.

On his way downstairs, Charley, minus buckskin, beads, and other trappings judged necessary for the correct portrayal of a redskin, cinema style,

suddenly recalled his find of an hour before. He went back to the room to search the pockets of his costume.

It did not come as a great surprise to discover that the peacock specimen had vanished, nor did it require any great amount of thought to suspect who had been responsible for the theft.

Without mentioning his loss, Charley joined his companions at the table. Afterward, he strolled outside. But when Ransome went to look for him, the Indian had disappeared. One minute he had been sitting with his feet cocked on the veranda rail, a pipe between his teeth and his hat pulled over his eyes; the next minute he was gone.

"Now you see him, now you don't," remarked the director.

"The vanishing American," Kluger observed, grinning.

Half an hour later, Charley was threading his way, on foot, through the heavy timber high above the town. When he emerged at length, it was to find himself at the corral on the Bluebird property, precisely the spot toward which he had headed.

The dog was not in sight. The bars of the corral were down and the horse gone. Doubtless the sheriff had taken charge of both animals. But as that did not immediately concern him, Charley struck off along the trail he had followed for some distance the morning before.

The hoofprints, obviously those of the animal ridden by the fugitive, were still clear-cut and distinct in the wet earth. When he reached the crest of the slope and the trail turned westward—a spot beyond which he had not ventured yesterday—Charley pressed on, his eyes fixed upon the telltale prints and upon the ground on either side of them.

Less than a hundred yards beyond, lying openly beside the trail, he came upon a knife. He saw at once that the point of its blade was missing and the

blade bore unmistakable stains. The moment his fingers touched it, Charley knew it was the evidence he had been looking for—the knife used to cut the inscription in the cabin floor. And the stains upon it indicated more sinister uses.

Somehow, he was not greatly surprised at his find. Even when he quickly fitted the bit of steel dug from the floor to the end of the blade, and found the edges joined perfectly, his face remained unchanged. It was almost as if he had anticipated what had come to pass.

He pocketed both blade and point and started on again, this time at a brisk trot. Before he had covered any great distance, the trail grew fainter, owing to the rock and gravel underfoot, and at length, to the ordinary eye, vanished completely.

Charley dropped upon hands and knees and moved forward slowly, but with a certainty born of long experience. When, some minutes later, he was again on his feet, he found himself facing south. The all but indiscernible trail he had been following now led in that direction. South instead of west! A new trail!

He stood a moment, his eyes fixed thoughtfully upon the wooded slopes beyond; then, smiling as if at the confirmation of a theory long entertained, he turned and walked away. Apparently the trail of the fugitive no longer interested him.

CHAPTER VIII.

PLANS OF THEIR OWN.

IT was dusk when Ransome, with Kluger at his elbow, tapped on the door of the Indian's room on the second floor of the hotel. They were asked to enter. At sight of Charley standing by the window and gazing upon the fast darkening roofs below, the director gave a grunt of surprise.

"Oh, here you are! We were won-

dering where you'd gone. Been taking a snooze this afternoon?"

"Not all afternoon," Charley returned, smiling a little at his openly curious visitors. "Why? Has anything startling happened?"

"Did anything startling happen?" Ransome countered, his eyes searching the Indian's countenance. "Suppose you tell us. I've a suspicion you didn't waste much time taking a nap."

In place of answering, Charley switched on the light in the room; and almost at once Kluger uttered an exclamation, staring at an object on the table.

"Where'd you find that?" he demanded.

"Where it was dropped."

"Great guns! The missing knife, isn't it? The point of it gone, too. Does the point you dug out of the floor this noon fit?"

"No question about it," the Indian replied. He produced the wedge-shaped fragment and promptly confirmed his statement.

"Whew!" exclaimed Ransome. "Talk about luck! How in thunder did you stumble upon this choice exhibit?"

"I didn't stumble upon it," Charley corrected; "and luck hadn't anything to do with the case. This piece of evidence was meant to be found precisely where I did find it. The discovery of the knife didn't surprise me. In fact I would have been surprised if I hadn't found it. I hope my remarks aren't too cryptic," he added.

"You'd better run in an extra caption or two," suggested Ransome.

The Indian obliged, touching in a few high lights of his afternoon excursion.

"So you went along the trail looking for the knife, and you found it," Kluger said. "Found it lying in plain sight, eh? I suppose it must have slipped, unnoticed——"

"Wrong," Charley stated. "It was dropped there, intentionally."

The men scowled. "What for?" Kluger demanded.

"To help along the set-up. Don't you grasp it yet? Well, see here," the Indian pursued. "Wouldn't you say those were stains on the blade and handle of the knife?"

"They look to be," conceded the director. "I suppose it can be established definitely, if necessary."

"All right. In that case we are to judge that the weapon was used by the murderer. Correct?"

"I wouldn't doubt it."

"Can you make out the letters cut in the handle?"

Ransome held the knife nearer the light. "Yes; I can read them. There are two letters: 'H' and 'A.'"

"Hugh Allen!" confirmed Kluger. "It's his knife, then!"

"It would seem to be," Charley agreed. "At the same time," he added, "because of its broken point we know positively it is the blade that was used to cut those words in the floor. Now do you see what I'm getting at? Don't you see something amiss?"

"Good gosh!" Ransome exclaimed softly. "I'll say I do. If this is Allen's knife and he used it on his partner, he certainly didn't carve that message in the floor. That goes without saying."

"But we know this knife was used for the cutting of that message," said Kluger. "We've proven that."

"Then we can't believe Allen ever handled the thing," declared Ransome. "And if he didn't, it's just about sure he didn't murder Varney."

"Still, the knife seems to have been used for both purposes," maintained Charley. "For the killing of Varney and the message."

"Then that would leave Allen out of the affair altogether, wouldn't it?" queried Kluger.

"It would," Charley asserted, smiling into the mystified faces of his companions. "At any rate, that is the theory

I am working on. I'm satisfied that this so-called evidence against Allen is a frame-up."

"There seems to be plenty of it," Ransome said.

"Too much. That's why I can't swallow any of it. Let me sum this up briefly," Charley went on. "To begin with we'll say Allen wasn't on the scene. Varney was murdered by a knife thrust in the back; that much we know. The condition of the room, as we found it, seemed to indicate that a struggle had taken place. More trumped-up evidence. A man isn't stabbed in the back under those circumstances. The murderer, in an attempt to clinch suspicion against Allen, cut the message in the floor, using the same knife.

"There's where he tripped himself, for apparently he wasn't aware he had broken off the point of the blade in the wood. In leaving the premises he left a trail that could readily be followed. More bait. And not far beyond he dropped the knife, which bore Allen's initials, certain it would be found. More bait again."

Ransome nodded. "Yes, I see now," he admitted. "It sounds plausible enough. The only flaw in the theory is this, Charley: what's become of Allen?"

"That remains for us to discover. He may have left unexpectedly on a trip, or he may have returned to the cabin after the murder, realized his position and the difficulty he would have in establishing his innocence, and fled."

"You couldn't blame him much for that," upheld Kluger. "It would have been suicide to stick around and hope to get by with the truth. Still, if that's what did happen, it looks to me as if he'd destroyed that message."

"He might not have seen it," said Ransome. "Too dark, perhaps, or he was in too big a hurry. Having decided on flight, he naturally would have struck off toward Carbondale; and that's where his horse was found. Then he

was seen hopping the freight. Things seem to hook up all right," the director concluded.

"So far they do," the Indian conceded.

"Wonder how this unknown got hold of Allen's knife?" asked Kluger.

"That's another thing for us to determine."

"Whew!" voiced Ransome. "We seem to be getting deeper and deeper."

"The only way to touch bottom," Charley asserted, "is to go deep."

"How about that trail you followed? It wasn't Allen's. Still it led to Carbondale. Do you want to think both Allen and this unknown reached there?"

"The trail I followed seemed to head toward Carbondale. I took it for granted yesterday; but this afternoon I learned differently. About half a mile from where I picked up the knife, the trail turned south."

"South?" the director repeated. "Why, that would be right back toward here—Sapphire."

Charley nodded. "Correct. Once the rider hit hard going and he figured his trail couldn't be picked up, he turned back to Sapphire."

Ransome started. "And you told me, didn't you, that you saw a horseman that same night from your window, back of Nesbit's store? Afterward you caught a glimpse of Nesbit himself?"

"That is precisely what I told you."

"And later, at the cabin and in the presence of the sheriff, he told us he had slept soundly all that night, didn't he?"

"He did. That's the first lie I caught him telling."

"Good gosh!" cried Kluger. "What more proof do we need? That store-keeper's at the bottom of this funny business, Charley! No doubt of it. He pulled off the job and baited a trail to hook Allen."

"It doesn't surprise me none," Ransome chimed in. "Why, he's been dead

set against Allen from the first. Resented it when you found that knife point in the floor; flared up when you mentioned your suspicions. He tried to get back at us by intimating we were mixed up in the affair. Jove, it's as obvious as day. No wonder he's getting scared of us—of you in particular, Charley."

"We ought to give the sheriff an earful," declared Kluger. "It'll sure change the complexion of things. Say, if you tell Prentice just what you've told us, he'll have Nesbit locked up at once."

But Charley shook his head. "Better wait," he advised. "Our evidence isn't conclusive. We can't hang this on Nesbit—not yet. And it won't do to let him know we're hot on his trail. We'll take our time and perhaps dig up something more. No use letting Prentice in on our plans either. Maybe if we give him rope enough, Nesbit will hang himself."

Kluger looked disappointed. "I hate to mark time," he grumbled. "Like to clear things up before Lonny arrives. Seems to me you've got enough dope to start the fireworks."

"We could start them all right," Charley responded; "but I'd rather wait until I'm sure of a spectacular finish."

Ransome was inclined to agree with the Indian and said he could see no disadvantage in postponing what was bound to be inevitable; so in the end, Kluger calmed down. It was decided, among them, that none of the recent developments should be mentioned, either to the sheriff or to the other members of the company. Charley was to proceed as he saw best.

CHAPTER IX.

UNPLEASANT DUTIES.

THREE uneventful days passed. Because the weather held fair and much remained to do, Ransome kept his organization working industriously in

and about Sapphire. Sheriff Prentice managed to see and chat with the men, sometimes on locations, often enough at the hotel.

Nothing new, it seemed, had come up. He had kept the wires hot, but no word concerning Allen drifted back. The authorities in Hilltop, where Allen last had been reported, failed to trace the fugitive. Local interest in the affair died away. The buildings on the Bluebird property stood alone and deserted, as they had stood for so many years before, and Sapphire went on about its business.

Nesbit seemed to have lost something of his animosity, and whenever Charley or Ransome happened into his store, he treated them civilly enough. If suspicion or mistrust still rankled in his heart, he managed to conceal them admirably.

On the fourth day, when the director had gone off on location with Drummond and Kluger, for some shots remote from town, leaving Charley to his own devices, Nesbit appeared at the hotel with a wire for Ransome.

"It's from that Allen girl," the storekeeper announced. "She's arriving in Carbondale, and she's due on the three o'clock train."

"It lacks an hour of that time now," Charley stated, after a glance at his watch. "I'd like to meet her. Wouldn't want her to take the bus back alone."

"Guess the sheriff's goin' down," Nesbit said. "He was in the store when the wire come. Shouldn't wonder if he'd accommodate you."

The Indian lost no time in finding Prentice; and a few minutes later, after leaving a note for Ransome, Charley, sitting beside the sheriff, was jolting toward Carbondale.

The driver seemed as eager to reach their destination as was his passenger, and managed to cover the dozen miles of ruts, deep sand, and formidable grades with surprising speed, although

the flivver threatened to fly apart or blow up at all too frequent intervals.

They drew up at the station a few minutes before the train was due and climbed out to straighten the kinks in their limbs. Charley realized that his was an unpleasant duty, but unavoidable as well. He would have preferred to meet the girl alone, to make what explanations were necessary, and break the disagreeable news without Prentice being on hand. But that was denied him.

It was evident the sheriff had made it his business to be on the scene and that no other errand had brought him so swiftly from Sapphire. Undoubtedly, Charley reasoned, Nesbit had read the wire to Prentice before seeking to deliver it.

The Indian was at the steps of the car when Lonny Allen appeared upon them; and at sight of him she called and waved gayly.

"Hello, Charley!" she greeted. "Awful glad to see you again. Where are the others?"

"All working," he told her. "We only received your wire an hour ago. Ransome and the others were out on location."

"My fault. I was going to surprise you. Then I thought I'd better not." The girl looked eagerly about, her eyes searching the faces of the men on the platform. "I guess Hugh didn't get my message," she concluded, her disappointment obvious.

The sheriff, standing beside the Indian, watched the girl intently, and Charley introduced him. "This is Mr. Prentice," he said.

"You—you're Hugh's partner?" Lonny inquired eagerly.

The sheriff shook his head and glanced meaningly at the Indian, as if waiting for him to break the news.

"Hugh's gone away, Lonny," Charley said.

"Gone away?" the girl echoed. She

stopped and looked into the unsmiling faces of her escorts. "Why, he knew I was coming. I don't understand. It must have been sudden."

"It was," the sheriff affirmed.

"There's been a little trouble," Charley explained.

"We've been looking for him these last four or five days," Prentice supplemented, watching the girl narrowly. "It's important that I find him. I'm the sheriff."

The girl stiffened, her hand on the Indian's arm. "What are you trying to tell me? What has happened?"

"You ought to have known before this," the sheriff returned. "He's charged with murder."

Miss Allen blanched, but instantly recovered herself. "I won't believe it," she said.

Prentice shrugged. "That doesn't alter things. But the evidence we have points to it. He killed his partner, Varney. And he disappeared the same night."

When the girl insisted upon hearing some of the details, the sheriff obliged her, touching briefly upon the circumstances, but omitting much that Charley considered essential. Still, he did not interrupt. His account would come later, and in private.

The girl, listening to what Prentice had to reveal, bore up bravely; and when she spoke again, her voice was surprisingly steady. "Hugh never did this terrible thing," she said. "Never!"

"Maybe not," answered Prentice. "It isn't for me to say. All I'm interested in now is finding your brother. According to reports he headed west. The last we heard he was in or about Hilltop. When was the last you seen him, Miss Allen?"

"Almost five years ago—in Arizona."

"And when did you last hear from him?"

"About a week ago. It was the first word I had had in months. Hugh has

always been a wanderer. I've never known where to write him. Then he wrote me from Sapphire. I sent a wire to him, also one to Mr. Ransome. I told them both I would be here as soon as possible."

"You haven't had word since then—nothing?" Prentice insisted.

"No. I didn't expect to have word from him."

"Do you recall what he said in the letter he wrote you?"

"He told me he and his partner were working a mine near Sapphire," the girl answered quietly; "that prospects were bright, after so many years of hard luck, and that he hoped I could come to visit him."

"I see," said Prentice, nodding.

They were beside the sheriff's car now, and Charley helped the girl into the rear seat. Prentice was just climbing in behind the wheel, when a tall, well-dressed man wearing glasses and carrying a suit case, addressed him.

"You'll pardon me," he began in a deep voice, "but I believe I overheard you say something about a Mr. Varney."

The sheriff eyed the stranger sharply. "Yes; I did say something. Why?"

"I'm a friend of his," the other responded. "I'm on my way to visit him in Sapphire. Perhaps you could direct me."

"Your name Bellamy?" Prentice demanded quickly.

"Yes. J. M. Bellamy," the other acknowledged, looking a little surprised. "I'm from San Francisco. No doubt you——"

"I'm glad you showed up," the sheriff interrupted. "We found your letter in Varney's pocket the other morning, so we've been expecting you. I don't suppose you know Varney's dead."

Bellamy fell back a step and for a moment seemed too shocked for speech. "Dead?" he gasped at length. "Varney?"

"Murdered. Four or five days ago at his mine. We're charging his partner, Allen, with the killing."

"Murdered?" Bellamy echoed in a stricken voice. "Why, this is horrible! We—we were old friends. I've known him for years," he went on, distressed. "I came here at his request, to inspect some property. The Bluebird, I think the name is. Mining's my business."

"Know his partner, Allen?"

"Not so well. Met him several times in Arizona. I never liked him and I guess the feeling was mutual. He——"

"This is his sister," Prentice broke in, nodding toward the girl in the rear of the car. "She just came on, expecting to meet Allen. Didn't know what had happened."

Bellamy colored swiftly and bowed, apparently regretting what he had just said. Miss Allen nodded. The sheriff ran on.

"This is Mr. Glade," he said, "one of the outfit taking moving pictures in our neighborhood. My name's Prentice. I'm sheriff. If you're coming our way, Mr. Bellamy, I'll be glad to have you ride with us."

"Thank you." Bellamy hesitated. "I really don't know what to do," he confessed. "Suppose I might as well go on to Sapphire for a day or so."

"Can't get a train out till to-morrow," said Prentice. "Besides, I want to have a talk with you."

Bellamy got into the seat with Prentice, while Charley sat with the girl. Without more delay they were off, leaving Carbondale behind.

During the twelve-mile journey, while the sheriff and his passenger seemed to be holding a prolonged and, owing to the clatter of the engine, an inaudible conversation, Charley found the opportunity to acquaint Miss Allen with another version of the recent tragedy, mentioning the newer developments, and assuring the girl that, despite the evidence and the trend of opinion against

Allen, he was far from convinced of her brother's guilt.

He was so optimistic that the girl seemed immensely comforted, although now, giving away a little to her feelings, there were tears in her eyes.

"Hugh couldn't have done this dreadful thing," she protested. "He is headstrong and hot-tempered and often in trouble, but I won't believe he would kill."

"I haven't thought so from the moment of finding that knife point in the cabin floor," Charley declared. "None of us do. None of our crowd, I mean. And before we're through, Lonny, we'll prove it."

"But Hugh—disappearing like this," she faltered. "It counts so against him. I can't understand. Something must have happened."

"Perhaps it was the only thing he could do," Charley ventured. "I believe we'll hear from him shortly. Once we have established his innocence, I feel sure he'll show up. He must realize how you feel."

"He might have written—just a line—anything," the girl wavered. "It would have helped so."

She touched a ring on her finger; explained that Hugh had given it to her years before. The sight of it, apparently stirring old memories, brought fresh tears.

Charley patted her hand. "Come now, Lonny," he urged. "We'll get to the bottom of this mystery in short order. Why, Hugh wouldn't have dared write you. It would have been too great a risk. That brother of yours may be a lot smarter than you give him credit for."

"I feel I can depend on you, Charley," she spoke at length, smiling a little. "So I'll try not to worry—not too much."

They traveled the last few miles in silence. The men on the front seat continued to talk, but Charley made no effort to catch their conversation.

CHAPTER X.

THE HELPING HAND.

IN front of the hotel, Ransome and the others of the company were on hand to welcome Lonny. The men, all smiles and brimming with cheerfulness, gathered about the car, fairly lifted the girl from the tonneau and carried her off, leaving the Indian to bring along the baggage.

Bellamy got out and shook hands with the sheriff, promising to see him later. "I'd like to do all I can," Charley overheard him say. "Call on me if I can be of any assistance."

The newcomer registered and was assigned to a room. He appeared at meal time, eating at a table by himself. Later that night, when Charley was sitting alone on the veranda, smoking, Bellamy approached him.

"The sheriff's told me a lot of what's happened," he began. "Says you have turned up some new evidence that's got him guessing. It hit me the same way, what little I heard. I just want a chance to declare myself," he went on earnestly; "to show you where I stand. To begin with, I'm sorry I spoke of Allen as I did this afternoon, right in front of his sister. I wouldn't have done that for the world, if I had known. I want to apologize the first chance I get."

Charley said he did not think it necessary, and felt sure Miss Allen had not taken offense. A man was entitled to his own opinions.

"Yes, I know," Bellamy resumed; "but under the circumstances it puts me in a bad light. I haven't anything against Allen—nothing except a fool prejudice. We simply didn't hit it off together, that's all. I suppose you think that will warp my opinion, especially when Varney and I were friends. But it doesn't. I hope I haven't a one-track mind.

"Now a good friend of mine has been murdered, and some one is guilty," the

man continued. "I'm anxious to see the criminal caught and punished. Things look black for Allen. At the same time there may be something in what you've uncovered. I don't know. If there is, we're up against a mystery. If there's a chance in the world that Allen isn't guilty, I want to give him the benefit of the doubt."

"I'm glad you feel that way about it," Charley responded, a little surprised by the man's unexpected frankness. He added that while he and his associates were friends and admirers of Lonny Allen, none of them had known Allen. "We all feel as you do, Mr. Bellamy," he concluded. "If there is a chance to clear Allen of the charge against him, we're not passing up the opportunity."

Bellamy nodded, his eyes shining back of his glasses. "Good. I guess we pretty well understand one another, then. Now I don't pretend to know anything about mysteries, and I'm afraid I haven't what you'd call an analytical mind when it comes to solving them; but I hope you'll count on me to do my share toward the finding of Varney's slayer. I'll stay here indefinitely, if necessary. I owe that much to the dead man."

As the conversation went on, Charley learned that the sheriff had revealed most of what had taken place following the tragedy. Charley answered all the questions that Bellamy put to him, but did not confess to his movements of the previous day. The finding of the knife on the trail and the discussion that had grown out of it were matters not yet ready for publication.

"Got any theories?" Bellamy wanted to know presently.

"A few," Charley admitted. "Haven't enough evidence yet to back them up, so I'm keeping them to myself."

Later the men left the hotel and walked leisurely along the quiet street. The town seemed to be asleep and few lights were showing. Bellamy remarked

upon it and said it was always a relief to him to get away from the big cities.

When they passed the general store, it was to find Nesbit and the sheriff sitting outside, the chairs tilted back against the wall. It was at once noticeable to the Indian that the storekeeper eyed Bellamy sharply, almost suspiciously. Charley was on the point of introducing the newcomer, when the sheriff relieved him of the formality.

"Shake hands with Nesbit, Bellamy," he spoke up. "This is the man we was expecting, a friend of Varney's."

The storekeeper acknowledged the introduction with a brief nod. "Ben was just tellin' me he brought you up to-night. We been wonderin', seein' you was a friend of Varney's and his partner, if you knew anything about the property they'd been workin'."

"Nothing at all," Bellamy replied. "Varney's letter was rather vague, as I recall. He said, I believe, that he thought he had something good in sight and wanted me to stop off on my way to Salt Lake and take a look at the property."

"We haven't been able to fathom things out in connection with the Bluebird," Prentice stated. He went on to explain about the mine, its years of abandonment, how the newcomers, strangers in the district, had taken possession and appeared to be working it.

"They didn't show themselves much and weren't at all sociable," the sheriff added. "The day we found Varney dead, we explored the drifts. There wasn't a speck of evidence to show the pair had been taking out any rock. It had us puzzled."

"Well, that is singular," Bellamy admitted. "I can't account for it. Perhaps, given a chance to look over the property, I might venture some opinion."

"Do you suppose Varney had something he was tryin' to keep from his partner?" Nesbit queried. "If he was,

and Allen found it out, we could account for the consequences."

"Oh, you mean to establish a motive for the crime?" asked Bellamy.

"Something like that. The last night they were here I felt there was something—some trouble between them. You say you knew them both, didn't you? What you think of Allen?"

"Personally, I didn't like him. However, that's of no consequence," Bellamy stated. "He and Varney were partners for a number of years, so that would indicate they got on fairly well, I should say."

"Until the other night," Nesbit remarked.

Bellamy eyed the storekeeper for a moment in silence. "No question in your mind but that Allen's guilty, eh?"

"Of course he's guilty."

"The sheriff was telling me a little of Mr. Glade's activities," Bellamy said, nodding toward the Indian. "About the knife point he found in the floor. You thought, at first, that Varney left that message, didn't you? But afterward it didn't look that way, because the knife found beside him didn't have a broken point."

Nesbit shrugged. "I got my own opinion about that."

"And you haven't found the other knife?" Bellamy asked, ignoring the remark. "The one with the point missing."

"Not yet," Prentice answered.

"It would look as if the man who'd cut that message in the floor took the knife away with him."

"Got rid of it, more than likely," observed the sheriff.

Bellamy nodded, apparently lost in thought. "From that you must judge the knife was the one used by the murderer?"

"It must have been. I don't think the one we found beside Varney was the one that finished him. Not unless it was well cleaned afterward. And I don't

think the murderer would have gone to all that trouble. There wasn't a stain of any sort on the blade. Besides, it was Varney's knife. Nesbit identified it as the one he sold the man."

"Then we'll have to conclude that the missing knife was the weapon used by the slayer," agreed Bellamy. "In that case——" He stopped, his brows knitting. "Hold on! That don't sound logical, does it?" he went on. "The idea of a murderer cutting a message in the floor beside his victim? A message accusing himself of the crime? Why, that's preposterous."

"We ain't found the knife yet," Nesbit said. "Seems to me you're all quick to jump at conclusions. It's just guesswork on your part, expectin' to find this blade with a broken-off point. You don't know."

The sheriff agreed with him. Charley, in a position to dispute the statement, remained silent.

"I can see where you might figure something amiss, if you did run across a blood-stained knife with a broken-off point," the storekeeper resumed, "providin' the point we pried from the floor fit the blade. It might throw some doubt on Allen's guilt. But if you happened to find a whole knife that was stained, you'd think different, wouldn't you?"

"Yes, more than likely we would."

"Then why don't you wait till some knife's found? You'll have something definite to work on."

"Don't suppose there's much chance of finding it," remarked Bellamy. "Like looking for a needle in a haystack."

"Ben hasn't done much lookin'," Nesbit returned. "None of us have, for that matter. Didn't think it was necessary, with all the other evidence against Allen."

"You wouldn't think Varney's slayer would want to keep the knife on him," said Bellamy. "Not for long."

"I'll make it my business to look

around to-morrow," the sheriff declared. "Finding that evidence may put us on the right track. We don't seem to be getting very far as it is." He got up from his chair. "Guess I'll turn in."

Prentice nodded to the others and started off, only to stop abruptly and turn back, as if something had occurred to him. "Suppose you come along with me in the morning, Bellamy," he suggested. "Like to have you look over the property. That's what brought you here in the first place, wasn't it?"

"I'll be glad to," the other responded.

"Maybe you can tell us what Varney and Allen were up to," the sheriff said. "That's been a sure enough mystery to all of us."

Once Prentice had gone the others left the store, bidding Nesbit good night. After walking a block in silence, Bellamy addressed the Indian.

"What do you know about that storekeeper?"

"Very little," Charley answered.

"Too little, eh?" Bellamy eyed his companion speculatively.

"Perhaps."

"He knew both Allen and Varney?"

"Seemed better acquainted with them than any of the others in the community," Charley said.

Bellamy remained silent until they reached the hotel. "You told me you had a few theories," he remarked presently. "I'm not asking any questions or making any statements, but maybe I've one of my own."

With that he smiled and went upstairs. The Indian remained alone on the veranda until he had finished a pipeful of tobacco. Then he went up to his room.

CHAPTER XI.

ONE TOO MANY.

WHEN Charley came downstairs early the next morning it was to find Bellamy at breakfast. He took a chair at the same table. Ransome and

the others appeared presently and the Indian introduced his companions. Later the sheriff strolled in.

Charley had a few minutes of private conversation with his director, learned that his services would not be required that morning, and when Bellamy and Prentice were climbing into the latter's car, bound for the Bluebird Mine, the Indian asked permission to accompany them.

"Jump in," the sheriff invited promptly. "We may be needing a keen pair of eyes."

When the property was reached, and Bellamy, walking up the short trail to the cabin, surveyed the premises, he shook his head. "Doesn't look as if it's been worked in years," he asserted with the conviction of an expert.

"About ten of 'em, to be exact," declared Prentice.

Bellamy frowned. With the others he went into the cabin, interesting himself at once in the message cut into the floor. He had nothing to add to the conclusion already expressed.

Presently the three were at the tunnel mouth. Armed with lanterns they began an exploration of the workings, the newcomer registering more and more bewilderment as he scanned the breasts of the drifts.

"No vein in sight," he stated. "Nothing. There hasn't been a lick of work done in here recently."

"Varney and his partner seemed to be busy at something," the sheriff returned. "A shot was set off the day we were here—the day before the murder. We know that much. Heard it; besides, the smoke was curling out of the main tunnel so thick you could hardly see the pair."

"And they ordered us off the property," Charley said, explaining what had occurred.

Bellamy listened, amazed. "I'll be hanged if I can get it! Don't see why Varney wanted me to stop off here for.

I thought, the way he wrote, he had struck something good."

Puzzled, the three men began to retrace their steps toward daylight. Bellamy, it seemed, had been unable to solve the mystery. He and the sheriff were walking ahead, talking, with Charley following some distance behind them.

As he reached the cribbed section of the drift, Charley's foot stumbled and he tripped, throwing out a hand to catch himself. His hand collided with the log wall. The lantern he carried was extinguished. He lay a moment on the rock floor and in utter darkness. The fall had not hurt him.

He scrambled to his feet again, found a match and relighted the lantern. His companions had stopped.

"What's the trouble?" Prentice called, starting back.

"Took a spill, that's all," Charley answered. "No damage done."

Presently he was walking along with the others, his mind working at a lively rate and wholly oblivious to the conversation that ensued.

Out in the daylight again, the sheriff set off, announcing his intentions of making a thorough search of the premises. Bellamy started to join him, but when the Indian remained beside the mouth of the tunnel and did not seem particularly interested in the sheriff's undertaking, the man retraced his steps.

"Anything the matter?" he asked, scanning Charley's face.

"I don't know yet," the Indian responded.

"You've found something!" Bellamy exclaimed sharply. "Something in there!" He nodded toward the tunnel. "Right?"

"I may have. In that cribbed section of the drift. When I stumbled and put out my hand, it seemed to me the log I touched moved."

"Moved?" the other echoed incredulously.

Charley nodded. "Sounds foolish, doesn't it?" He reached for the lantern he had put down a moment before. It was still burning. "Suppose we investigate?"

Bellamy seemed only too eager to accompany him. "How about the sheriff?" he queried.

"We can call him if necessary."

The men disappeared into the tunnel. Reaching the cribbed section of the drift, Charley held up his lantern and inspected the heavy logs.

"Don't know which one it was," he stated, pressing against each of them in turn. "Right along here, though."

Bellamy followed the Indian's example, testing log after log, throwing his weight against them. They moved slowly along the wall until the entire section had been covered.

"These logs are as solid as the rock itself," Bellamy declared at length. "Guess you were mistaken about any of them moving."

"I must have been," Charley conceded.

"After years in here I suppose a log or two might work loose," said Bellamy. "Either from pressure or dry rot. Nothing singular in that, do you think?"

Charley shook his head. "I suppose not. I don't suppose Varney and Allen had anything to do with this cribbing, did they?"

"Certainly not. It was put in by the original developers."

"I don't pretend to know anything about the mining game," Charley admitted. "Couldn't tell pay dirt from pyrites, but I suppose, in pushing through a tunnel like this, the operators simply follow the vein, no matter which way it leads."

"Of course. The main drift. Occasionally the vein is lost and drilling is started in other directions, to pick it up again. That accounts for the laterals. A big gamble," Bellamy declared. "You never can tell if a vein will increase or

diminish in size; never know from one shot to another whether it'll vanish entirely or show twice as rich."

"What would you say happened here?" Charley asked, as the men retraced their steps.

"The vein's been lost completely. That's my opinion."

"So that brings us right back to where we started, doesn't it? Why were Varney and Allen working—or making a bluff at working—this mine?"

Bellamy shook his head. Ask me something easy. I'm not good at riddles."

Joining the sheriff, without accounting for their tardy appearance, they found him working his way slowly up the slope back of the cabin. So far, he had discovered nothing. The three men were able to cover more territory now, spreading out, scrutinizing every foot of ground over which they passed, they moved toward the ridge above the corral.

"You been along here before?" Bellamy asked.

"Yes; both of us," Prentice responded. "We followed a plain trail, evidently left by the fugitive. It headed due west, so we were pretty certain even then it wound up in Carbondale."

"Not going to follow it all the way there now, are you?" Bellamy protested. "Not on foot!" Apparently he did not relish the prospect of a twelve-mile hike that morning.

"May as well keep on for a mile or so," Charley suggested. "If the fugitive tossed anything away it would probably be within that distance."

But they had covered no more than half a mile when the Indian, well in the lead, halted. His sharp eyes had discerned, a dozen feet beyond, an object lying on the grass beside the trail.

The sheriff, coming up beside him, let fall an exclamation and moved forward to pick up a knife. The blade was stained, but undamaged.

"Guess this is what we've been looking for," Prentice said, turning the weapon over deliberately in his fingers. "The point's intact, and I'd say these were bloodstains." He peered closely at the handle. "It's marked with a couple of initials," he added, thrusting the knife toward the Indian. "Can you make them out?"

Charley could, without the slightest difficulty, for the two letters were cut deep into the bone handle. "'H. A.," he read aloud.

"Allen's initials?" Bellamy cried.

The sheriff nodded. "His name's Hugh Allen," he confirmed.

Charley's countenance betrayed none of the surprise he experienced, even though the discovery had not been wholly unanticipated. The knife the sheriff had found certainly had not been lying beside the trail two days before. That much he knew. Any one riding along the trail would have seen it.

The suspicions that filled his mind had, so far as he was concerned, adequate evidence to support them. He was at no loss to account for the presence of the second knife, or of the means taken to bring about its discovery.

The men retraced their steps in silence, walked back to the cabin and, when Prentice closed the door, continued on down the slope to where the car had been left.

With the sheriff at the wheel, they drove back to town, still without words between them. They drew up in front of the store and got out. Nesbit, spying them, came to the door.

"Could you identify Allen's knife if you saw it?" Prentice asked abruptly.

Nesbit shook his head. "Don't think so. He didn't buy it from me. Why?"

"I found this along the trail a few minutes ago," the sheriff stated, extending the knife for inspection. "It's got Allen's initials cut in the handle, and J—"

"Point's not broke off!" Nesbit exclaimed, interrupting. "Looks like bloodstains on it, too. I'd say this was all the evidence you needed, Ben, wouldn't you?"

"It's good evidence, all right," Prentice agreed.

"No question about this bein' the knife to be accounted for," the sheriff said. "The one we found beside Varney didn't cut that message in the floor."

Nesbit shrugged. "Why bother with that? Allen killed his partner and made a get-away. That's all we need to know, ain't it?"

The sheriff pondered a moment, made as if to speak, changed his mind, and went back to the car. Something, apparently, was on his mind. The storekeeper looked after him, puzzled.

Charley and Bellamy walked on to the hotel. Ransome and Lonny were on the veranda, and when the Indian joined them, Bellamy promised to see him later and went inside.

Charley revealed, in a few words, the developments of the morning. The finding of the knife brought a laugh from the director.

"You know the answer, don't you?"

"Of course."

"About the crudest piece of work I ever heard of," said Ransome. "Did it fool the sheriff? I suppose so. Unless you told him of the knife you found."

"I didn't tell him of my discovery," Charley returned. "It isn't time for that yet. But there's something on his mind."

What that something was did not long remain a mystery, for while they were discussing it, Prentice stopped his car in front of the hotel and beckoned to the Indian.

"Just wanted a word with you in private," the sheriff began, when Charley reached the car. "About that knife we found this morning. It was dropped there since yesterday."

The Indian did not betray himself.

"Why do you think so?" he asked quickly.

"Because I rode over the trail yesterday morning," Prentice answered. "Never said anything about it. Maybe my eyes aren't so keen as they used to be, but I sure couldn't have overlooked that piece of evidence. Not when it was laying there in plain sight."

"I've been thinking the same thing," Charley affirmed.

"You been along the trail, too?" Prentice asked quickly.

"Yes; day before yesterday. And the knife you picked up this morning wasn't there." He did not add that the knife he had been looking for had been found.

The sheriff stared thoughtfully through his wind shield. "Maybe you remember, last night, that Nesbit was the one to suggest us searching for the knife," he said at length.

Charley nodded. "He must have made sure we would find it."

Again the sheriff was silent, his eyes troubled. "Will you come over to my office this afternoon?" he asked presently. "Alone."

"I'll be glad to," the Indian told him.

CHAPTER XII.

PEACOCK COLORS.

PRENTICE was in his office, tilted back in a chair, his feet cocked up on his desk, when Charley visited him. His sanctum was a barren little room tucked in one corner of the building, a single window overlooking the street.

A narrow corridor led from the office to a low stone structure in the rear, whose barred doors and windows advertised it as a jail. On one side of the building was a yard, barren and unkept, surrounded by a high wooden fence. In it, unprotected by a roof, stood the sheriff's car.

"I been meaning to have a talk with you," the sheriff began. "Kept putting

it off until now. What happened this morning don't set so well with me. Guess you see as well as I do what we're up against; and maybe you're willing to help."

"To the limit," Charley responded.

"The more I've thought back over things, the more I'm getting to believe Nesbit's concerned in this affair," Prentice went on. "I hate to suspect him. I've known him for several years—known him well, I mean. Always seemed straight enough. But this knife business is something I can't overlook. I can't come right out and charge him with anything. At the same time I want to get at the bottom of what's been done. So what would you suggest doing?"

"Have you changed your opinion about Allen?"

"Not entirely. He must be guilty of something or he wouldn't have made a get-away. He's gone, so just now we can't get at the truth. But Nesbit's here, and we might succeed in getting something out of him, if we go about it right. I don't know how to begin.

"I've an idea you've found out more than you're telling. Maybe you've got a reason for keeping things to yourself. But I want you to know how I stand. I want to clear up this mystery and I don't care where the guilt falls. Just because Nesbit's a friend of mine, and a deputy as well, you needn't hesitate to tell me what you've learned. I'd arrest him as quick as I would Allen."

"I haven't hesitated on that account," Charley told him. "I've simply been waiting to get something more conclusive against him. The affair this morning—the discovery of the knife that we feel must have been planted—convinces me we are on a warm trail. Just where it will lead us is still a matter of conjecture. However, it confirmed some of my earlier suspicions and——"

"What were they?" Prentice broke in.

"Well, to begin with, on the night of the murder—or rather about one o'clock

that morning—saw a man on horseback gallop away from the rear of Nesbit's premises, and a moment later, I saw Nesbit himself. And you may recall that on the following morning, during our conversation at the cabin, the storekeeper told you he had slept soundly all night."

"Yes; I remember him saying that. I heard some one riding along the street myself. About that same hour."

"I wouldn't have given another thought to what I'd seen, particularly in connection with the murder, if Nesbit hadn't deliberately tried to lie out of it. Almost got away with it, too."

The sheriff nodded. "That's so. He doesn't want us to know he was out at that hour or entertained company. Any suspicion who the visitor could have been?"

"Not yet. It couldn't have been Allen. If he had been abroad at that hour, Nesbit would have been quick to let you know. He wouldn't have lied about the thing."

"I guess not. Well, Nesbit has plenty of friends," the sheriff said meditatively. "Men from outlying mines and ranches. Some of them don't bear any too great reputations."

"It's possible one of them murdered Varney," the Indian stated. "With Nesbit a party to the crime. That would explain his present activity—his efforts to keep us following the wrong trail."

"But it wouldn't account for Allen's disappearance," Prentice countered promptly.

"Perhaps, so long as we're airing theories——" Charley began, and stopped. "Guess we had better confine ourselves to more definite matters," he resumed. "Do you remember the bit of quartz I found in the cabin the other morning?"

"The peacock specimen? Yes."

"I dropped it into my pocket upon leaving; but it wasn't there when I reached the hotel."

"Wasn't?" The sheriff looked up quickly. "Think Nesbit lifted it?"

"I wouldn't accuse him of it—just now," Charley replied. "But strictly between ourselves, I think he did."

"But why? It wasn't worth anything."

"Not in itself, perhaps. Still Nesbit seemed flustered when I showed him the ore, and I noticed his fingers were a bit unsteady while he was inspecting it. And he saw me put the specimen in my pocket."

"Can't see what he'd want with it," maintained Prentice.

"Did you ever see a specimen of that nature before?"

"Sure, plenty of it. Right around here. Why, come to think of it," the sheriff added, "it's exactly like the stuff the Bluebird once produced. The prettiest peacock in the district."

"And could it have been the same?" Charley asked. "A specimen left in the cabin all these years?"

"Well, I don't know. Possibly."

"You don't imagine, by any chance, it has been taken out recently? Say within the last week?"

Prentice shook his head. "Of course not. You could see that the day we explored the workings. The vein's pinched out long ago."

"Still these men, Varney and Allen, took hold of the property again, didn't they? Seemed to be busy at something. Kept their mouths shut and issued a warning against trespassers?"

"Yes, they did all of that."

"And didn't Nesbit say that that peacock ore was worth fifty thousand a ton?" the Indian persisted.

"Worth every bit of that," the sheriff declared. "What you getting at?" he asked. "All this ore business. Seems like you're wandering off the subject we were discussing. I don't see where you can hook it up with the murder."

"I don't either—just at present," Charley admitted. "But it occurred to

me that since Nesbit was so interested in the specimen and evidently didn't want me to keep it, it might be to our advantage to learn why."

"How do you intend to find out? If we start asking questions, he'll get suspicious."

"Don't ask questions. I've an idea Nesbit has seen some of that peacock before—recently. Could you prowl about the store—poke into corners—discover if by any chance he has other specimens on hand?"

"Why, yes; I suppose I could." Although the request must have puzzled him, the sheriff did not ask questions. "I'm in the store a lot of the time, even when Nesbit isn't around."

"Good. Do your investigating as soon as possible, will you? And now would you mind letting me look over Varney's personal effects?" Charley asked, abruptly switching to another subject.

Prentice opened a drawer in his desk. "There you are," he said. "Everything we've found is there."

The Indian lifted out the articles one after another, depositing them on top of the desk. The sheriff eyed him speculatively. The ring, the watch, the wallet and its contents, the letter—Bellamy's letter—all were subjected to a careful and deliberate examination.

That done, Charley sat back, his face as inscrutable as ever, his eyes apparently fixed upon the wall. Finally he spoke. "What became of Varney's horse and dog?"

"I brought them down here," Prentice said. "Had a hard time getting the dog to come. It still won't make up to me none. Let's see if it's still in the yard."

The two men went along the corridor and the sheriff opened a door that led into the inclosed yard. The dog, stretched out in the shade, pricked up its ears expectantly as the men appeared; but just as quickly its ears drooped again.

Charley went over to pat it; found the animal unresponsive.

Some one from the front of the building called, and the sheriff went to investigate. The Indian, remaining in the yard, heard the faint mumble of voices, but was unable to identify their owners.

Who Prentice's unexpected visitors might be and what had brought them to the premises, did not at first interest him, for other and more disturbing thoughts occupied his attention; but suddenly he turned and went back to the office.

He found Ransome, Bellamy, and Kluger talking with the sheriff. The newcomers looked at his entrance.

"Hello! What have you been doing?" the director queried. "Inspecting the jail?"

Charley nodded and smiled. "Thought I'd give it the once-over," he replied. "Nice quarters, all right. All they need is a boarder."

"Hasn't had one for six months," Prentice declared.

"Don't get discouraged," Kluger spoke up. "You're likely to have one or more before long. Charley's a great hand for finding guests."

"Permanent ones," supplemented Ransome. "I saw you streaking off in this direction right after lunch and wondered what was up. Are we butting in on a conference or something?"

"Not at all," Charley returned. "You can take the sheriff's word for it, we've been up to nothing of great importance. But," he added, "we may get down to something later."

After talking together for a few minutes, the guests left, Charley accompanying them. But halfway down the block he excused himself and retraced his steps to the office.

"Wish you'd visit the store this afternoon," he said to the sheriff. "Pry into all the dark corners. And to-night, about eleven, I'd like to meet you here again."

"All right. I'll do my prying and I'll keep the appointment," Prentice promised.

"If you're good at walking, we may take a little trip."

"I'm a little out of practice," the sheriff confessed, endeavoring to read the other's thoughts; "but I guess I can keep up with you."

CHAPTER XIII.

LIGHTS OUT.

AFTER dinner that evening, Charley and Miss Allen, escaping from the others on the veranda, strolled through the quiet, dimly lighted streets of the town. They talked together earnestly, Charley questioning the girl in detail regarding her brother. She was still worried and filled with anxiety, although she strove hard not to give way to her feelings.

When they passed the store during their walk, they saw Prentice sitting out in front. He spoke to them, but they did not stop. By nine o'clock they were back on the hotel veranda.

In another hour the veranda was deserted and most of the lights in the town were out. The night life of Sapphire was not particularly thrilling, so far as surface indications went.

The Indian went upstairs with his companions, apparently ready to turn in, but in considerable less than an hour he was moving silently through the shadows in the rear of the hotel. And presently, without mishap, he reached the sheriff's office.

The premises were dark, but when he tapped on the door, Prentice let him in at once. Once inside, the sheriff led the way into a back room that apparently served for his living and sleeping quarters, and after pulling down the shades, lighted a lamp.

He was perceptibly excited, and his announcement did not come as a surprise to his visitor.

"I found it," he broke out. "A sack of peacock ore tucked under the counter. I brought along a couple samples."

When the samples were produced, Charley inspected them. "Do you think these are similar to what I found in the cabin?" he inquired.

"Absolutely. From the identical same vein."

The Indian nodded and seemed lost in thought a moment. The sheriff eyed him expectantly.

"I don't know what to make of this," he took up, when Charley had no comment to pass upon the discovery. "Nesbit's got maybe a hundred pounds in his store. I stumbled upon it without much trouble while he was out. I guess maybe you're right about him taking that specimen from your pocket. But the thing's still a riddle to me."

"One thing sure," Charley stated: "there's a vein of this near by. Nesbit knows it, of course, and it is evident he he doesn't want the fact to become public. The Bluebird operators must have been in on the secret. We find a bit of this rich peacock in their cabin, and we find considerably more in Nesbit's store. I believe we've struck a warm trail, sheriff."

Prentice frowned and shook his head. "Maybe I'm a little dense," he admitted, "but somehow I haven't been able to hook up these things the same as you do, or see any trail."

"It leads straight to the Bluebird," the Indian declared. "It must."

"But there's no color in that property. Haven't we been through it twice?"

"Will you follow me again?" Charley asked, getting upon his feet.

"I sure will," the other returned promptly. "I'll follow you anywhere." He reached for his hat and extinguished the lamp. "I'm ready."

More than once on their way to the mine, Prentice expressed his amazement at the Indian's unerring course. There was no moon and the stars were none

too bright. Charley avoided the road, struck off into the shadows and headed for the wooded slopes back of the town. On the slopes among the timber it was pitch dark and the going difficult. Yet the guide never once hesitated or retraced his steps.

He pushed forward briskly with the confidence of one who trod a long, familiar trail—a beaten path from which it was impossible to stray. The sheriff stumbled along behind him, apparently unable to sense the direction in which they were going and doubtless marveling that a stranger could be so nimble and surefooted. Darkness seemed to be no handicap to the swift and silent figure he followed.

When at length they stopped and the sheriff, considerably out of breath, looked about him, recognizing the dim outlines of the Bluebird cabin and corral, he gave voice to his feelings.

"Never seen the beat of this. How do you do it? Why, I couldn't get up here myself, the way you came, and I been in this district for fifty years. And I'm dog-goned if I'd try it, either."

Charley accepted the compliment with a laugh, and after Prentice had rested a moment, he led the way to the tunnel. Presently, their lanterns lighted, they were walking into the heart of the mountain.

When they reached the cribbed section of the drift the Indian halted. "I believe this is the end of the trail," he said.

Half an hour later, almost too stunned for words, the sheriff followed his guide back to the mouth of the tunnel.

"Hadn't we better lock the door this time?" Charley asked.

"It—it would be a good idea," the other acknowledged, mopping at his damp brow.

They returned to town the way they came, so far as Prentice knew. He still seemed dazed and paid little attention to

the course they covered, merely keeping at the Indian's heels. And presently they were letting themselves in at the office, walking through it to the living quarters beyond.

Once the lamp was relighted, Charley emptied his pockets, placing several peacock specimens beside those the sheriff had found concealed in Nesbit's store.

"Just the same, aren't they?" he queried.

"Of course. Out of the same lode." Prentice stared down at the glistening blue-green quartz. "By thunder, Charley!" he went on. "You've got brains. Doping things out the way you have! I'm flabbergasted."

"I think we've made a fair start," the Indian observed. "At any rate we have something definite to work on."

"A fair start?" the sheriff echoed. "That's putting it too mild. I'd call it a bang-up start. It's the biggest thing that ever happened in my career. And it all grew out of your finding that specimen and figuring Nesbit got it away from you. Right?"

"It helped."

"Nesbit will have a lot of questions to answer to-morrow. And if I don't wring something out of him about Varney's murder, I'm a poor guesser."

Charley smiled. "I want to be here when the questioning begins," he said. "I'll probably have a few of my own to ask."

"Expect you to be. You're entitled to handle the whole affair. Make it nine o'clock. That suit you?"

"Perfectly. The earlier the better. I'd like to get here a little before that hour—to set the stage."

The sheriff curbed the questions that seemed to be on his lips. "Go ahead. I'd like to have Bellamy over here, if you don't mind. He's a mining expert and I want him to take a squint at these specimens. They're so rich he'll probably jump out of his hide. Why, it's

enough to start another gold rush in this district."

"Perhaps that was the reason Nesbit stole the specimen from me. Didn't want it shown around."

"Shouldn't wonder. Say, if that piece of color was exhibited on the streets, and the localites suspected it came from a near-by property, there'd be a stampede."

"And if the circumstances were known——" Charley began and stopped.

At the same instant he leaned over and blew out the lamp; then he stepped to the window and ran up the shade.

"What's the matter?" Prentice demanded, at once alert.

"I heard something outside," the Indian answered.

The sheriff joined his companion and peered out into the yard, whose confines were barely revealed under the faint starlight. The sound Charley heard was not repeated.

"It must have been the dog," Prentice said at length.

"I hope so. I wouldn't want to think any one was eavesdropping. It might upset our plans."

For another five minutes the men watched and waited in silence, their eyes fixed upon the distant shadows. Nothing moved beyond; no sound reached their ears. Finally Prentice relaxed.

"Guess it was a false alarm," he concluded.

Somewhat reluctantly, Charley agreed with him. "I'll go back to the hotel," he said later, moving toward the door. "I'd keep my lights off and my ears open for the rest of the night, if I were you."

"I'll do that," the sheriff responded. "I won't be caught napping. I'll shoot first and ask questions afterward. Any one snooping around these premises at this hour is showing entirely too much interest for his own good."

Charley reached the street through the office and struck off quietly, keeping

well within the deeper shadows and never once relaxing his vigilance. He wanted to think he had been mistaken, but was still unable to shake off the feeling that some one had been trespassing.

Then abruptly, as he moved through the gloom, he collided with some one. A startled cry fell from the lips of the unknown. Charley's arms went out instinctively in an effort to hold the man. As he did so, a blow caught him on the chin. He staggered back, but recovering himself, closed with the mysterious assailant who seemed bent on fight instead of flight. Neither spoke—Charley, because he considered it unnecessary, his opponent, perhaps because he did not wish to be identified.

The encounter that followed was spirited, brief, and decisive. The unknown, despite his courage and determination, proved a poor match for the Indian once the encounter got fairly under way. After a lively exchange of blows, Charley's fist thudded twice against his adversary's jaw—good, solid thuds they must have been, although launched more or less blindly—and the man toppled.

With his back against the wall, still alert, Charley waited. No further sounds reached him. Striking a match, he knelt, and cupping the light in his hands, let it fall upon the face of the worsted man. Then an exclamation of surprise escaped him. It was Ransome.

Astounded by the discovery, Charley picked up the limp form of the director and bore him off toward the hotel.

CHAPTER XIV.

REDSKIN MAGIC.

SHORTLY after nine the following morning, Nesbit strolled into Prentice's office. The sheriff sat hunched over his desk, busy with pen and paper. Over one corner of the desk was spread a newspaper. At the window, hands

thrust into his pockets and a pipe between his teeth, stood Charley, apparently interested in watching those who passed along the street.

The storekeeper, hesitating a moment just inside the doorway, looked swiftly from Prentice to the Indian; and when neither of the men appeared to be aware of his presence, he spoke.

"I was told you wanted to see me," he began. "I wasn't able to get away till now."

"Yes," the sheriff said, giving him a brief glance. "I sent for you. Sit down. I'll talk with you in a minute."

Nesbit walked toward the nearest chair and sank upon it, apparently a little disturbed at his abrupt reception. The Indian's back was toward him. Prentice kept on writing. His pen, scratching across the paper, was the only sound in the room.

Perhaps five minutes later, the storekeeper grew impatient. "Can't stick around here all mornin', Ben," he protested. "You got any talkin' to do, come on with it."

"I got a lot of talking to do," Prentice returned quietly, pushing aside his work. "You needn't be in a hurry. I'm expecting some others to come in. This is a sort of get-together party, Nesbit. We've been floundering around enough; now we hope to make some headway." He smiled a little. "I'm depending on you."

The sheriff's frank statement did not seem to clear the atmosphere so far as Nesbit was concerned. "When did you decide on all this?" he asked quickly.

"I think it was some time last night," the sheriff responded. "It was decided on all of a hurry."

Further questioning on Nesbit's part was interrupted by the appearance of Kluger and Lonny Allen. Behind them came Bellamy and Ransome, the latter wearing a strip of courtplaster across his jaw. They sat against the wall, the sheriff nodding to each of them.

"Better close the door, Charley," he instructed. "We don't want any visitors while we're in session."

The Indian obeyed. The girl, sitting nearest the door, saw him turn the key in the lock. She glanced into his face, but was unable to read an answer to her unspoken question.

Prentice leaned forward in his chair, reached out and lifted the newspaper from the corner of his desk. His act revealed several specimens of peacock ore. Having revealed them, he looked at the storekeeper. "This stuff familiar to you?" he asked sharply.

Nesbit appeared to stiffen in his chair, but beyond that slight movement displayed remarkable self-control. "Can't say it does," he answered.

"You don't remember a piece of this that Charley found at the Bluebird cabin the other morning?" the sheriff queried.

"Oh, yes; that's so," the other admitted.

"And you've never seen any more of it?"

"Where'd I be seein' more of it?" Nesbit returned challengingly.

Prentice surveyed him a moment in silence; then turned abruptly toward Bellamy, who already was upon his feet, peering at the quartz.

"You know something about mineral," the sheriff remarked. "What's your opinion of these samples?"

Bellamy stepped forward to inspect them. "The richest-looking stuff I've seen in years," he pronounced unhesitatingly. "Where'd you get it?"

"From the Bluebird," Prentice answered.

"The Bluebird?" the other exclaimed. "Impossible! Why, we explored all the workings and——"

"These samples came from that property," the sheriff repeated. "Charley and I brought them down with us last night."

"But I can't understand," Bellamy

gasped. "There wasn't a vein in sight—nothing."

"No; it wasn't in sight," Prentice explained deliberately. "Nevertheless it was there—at the end of one of the laterals, the entrance having been cribbed up. There's a door concealed in the cribbing—a door very neatly fitted and camouflaged. It opens readily enough, providing you know where to look for it."

Bellamy seemed thunderstruck. "A concealed drift!" he exclaimed.

"At the spot where I thought my hand came in contact with a loose log," Charley said. "Remember?"

"Why—yes; I do now. But we went back to inspect the cribbing—and didn't find anything."

"The sheriff and I had better luck last night," Charley declared. "The drift isn't deep, but the vein it followed is wide—and rich. Our discovery seems to throw a light on the activities of Allen and Varney. We know now why they did not welcome visitors and why they have been so secretive concerning their operations.

"It was evident from the sacked ore and the tools lying about, that the pair had been working the vein. It is also evident that they did not cut this drift themselves, or crib it up. That must have been done years before."

"And been concealed all this time?"

"Obviously. I am unable to account for it, unless in the past some workers, finding the rich vein, deliberately set about to conceal it, hoping to return later and open it again. If that was so, their plans miscarried, but in some manner Allen and Varney learned of the secret and came here to resume operations."

"Good Heavens!" cried Kluger. "What a piece of luck for them."

"But if this pair had a lease on the property, why were they so mysterious in their operations? Why didn't they open up the drift and start producing?"

"They didn't have a lease," Prentice answered. "I've looked into that. The property, abandoned, reverted to the State. Those men took possession without much trouble, but lacking ready cash to pay off the back taxes and other fees, I suppose they had to dig out some ore and dispose of it on the quiet. They didn't want their find to become known until they had a clear title."

From a drawer of his desk the sheriff took out several other specimens of peacock ore and handed them to Bellamy. "Would you say these were from the same lode as the samples you've just examined?"

"Unquestionably," the other answered.

"Will you show them to Nesbit?"

The storekeeper, frowning, accepted the specimens. "What's the idea of this?" he demanded.

"Don't they look familiar to you?"

"Why should they?"

"They come from your store," Prentice answered. "From a sack under one of your counters. I found them myself, yesterday."

Nesbit leaped to his feet, his face darkening. "What you tryin' to make out?" he cried.

"I'm tryin' to make you tell the truth," the sheriff said. "Want me to have that sack of quartz brought up here? Come on, Nesbit. No more lies. It's past that. You have the stuff. It seems to me you ought to account for having it in your possession."

For a moment the storekeeper hesitated; then, as if realizing his predicament and the folly of denial, shrugged and broke into a weak laugh.

"All right, Ben," he confessed. "You got me cornered. That quartz came from the Bluebird. The partners let me in on the secret of the hidden vein because——"

"How did they get hold of the secret?" Prentice demanded.

"A chap they met a while back was

one of three who worked the property years ago," Nesbit explained reluctantly. "They run across the lode and cribbed it up. The owners didn't get wise and had to shut down. The men planned to come back and open the drift, but two of 'em died and the last man was just ready to cash in when he tipped off Varney and Allen. I offered to help 'em out by disposin' of a little stuff. That's all I done. Nothin' wrong in that, was there?"

"Not particularly; but after what happened, seems to me you should have explained. It would have cleared up a little of the mystery."

Nesbit squirmed uneasily. "Well, you see—see, after Varney was murdered I figured I'd better keep quiet. I didn't want to get mixed up in the trouble. And so long's it didn't have nothin' to do with the killin'—"

"Didn't it?" Prentice broke in. "Careful now! I've caught you in one lie. Tell me," he went on, "why you planted that knife beside the trail for me to find?"

"Planted?" Nesbit cried. "You think I did?"

"Pretty sure of it. I remember it was your suggestion we hunt for the knife. We found it just as you wanted us to. You might have fooled me, except for one thing. You didn't know that the day before I'd been over the same ground and found nothing. I wouldn't have missed seeing that piece of evidence."

"It—it must have been there just the same," Nesbit stammered. "This is some of your schemin'," he charged, wheeling upon the Indian. "You're aimin' to clear Allen. You—you're tryin' to frame me."

"I admit I'm trying to clear Allen," Charley returned quietly; "but it wasn't necessary to frame you, as you charge, to accomplish it. Getting back to where Prentice left off," the Indian resumed, "weren't you a little disturbed because

—so far as you knew—the other knife wasn't found?"

"What other knife?"

"The one originally dropped beside the trail—the blade with its point broken off, the one that carved that message on the cabin floor."

"Don't know if there ever was such a knife," Nesbit came back.

"There was one," Charley stated. "I found it the day after the murder, close to where, later, the sheriff found the other knife. I said nothing of my discovery to Prentice, until this morning, but waited to watch developments. I was sure the knife was meant to be found. So when it didn't turn up, as expected, another one was dropped in its place."

The Indian took the knife from his pocket and placed it upon the desk. Then he produced the point and fitted it to the blade. The sheriff looked on interestedly, but the storekeeper merely glowered.

"Doesn't it seem strange to you, Nesbit," Charley continued, "that we should find two knives, both apparently stained, both bearing Allen's initials and both found, although at different times, at approximately the same spot along the trail? Wouldn't it look, to you, like too much evidence? So much, in fact, as to defeat its purpose?"

Nesbit remained silent, his hostile eyes fixed upon the Indian, apparently at a loss, or unwilling, to account for the singularity.

"And another thing," Charley went on. "The night of the murder I saw from my window, some one ride off from the rear of your store; and shortly afterward I saw you. Yet the next day you claimed to have slept soundly throughout the night. What was your object in lying?"

"I don't remember anything about it," the storekeeper replied.

"You may see fit to, later," Charley observed. "Perhaps I've neglected to

tell you that the trail taken by the fugitive, although it started off west, toward Carbondale, turned abruptly south after a few miles and headed straight for Sapphire. So I've been wondering if perhaps the man I saw riding away from your establishment left that trail."

Unexpectedly the storekeeper broke into a harsh laugh. "Want to think Allen came to my place that night after he'd killed his partner?"

"I haven't mentioned any names," the Indian countered.

"Well, you say you seen me in town. Guess that'll put a stop to your thinkin' maybe I was concerned in the affair," Nesbit retorted.

Charley, looking beyond the speaker, did not seem to hear. "I've felt for some time," he began, addressing the sheriff, "that perhaps we have been following a phantom trail—a trail ending nowhere. To begin with, has it occurred to you that we seem to have pinned a great deal of faith in Nesbit? Accepting his statements as final when none of them has been verified? And in view of the lies we have caught him in, would you consider his assertions in the past unquestionably the truth?"

"Can't say I would—now," Prentice admitted.

"If you stop and think back you'll remember it was Nesbit who identified Varney, who reported the quarrel between the partners, and who, rather belatedly, recalled that Allen had made inquiries about the trains out of Carbondale."

The sheriff nodded. "Yes; that's so. Still he seemed to know the pair better than the rest of us. We had to look to him for information."

"Isn't it true," Charley asked, "that if Nesbit hadn't identified the murdered man, you wouldn't have known whether it was Varney or Allen?"

"Wouldn't have, right off," the sheriff agreed. "I didn't know which was which. But of course when we read

that message on the floor and looked over the things in Varney's pockets, his identity was established."

"Beyond all reasonable doubt?" Charley persisted.

"Don't you think so?"

"If in the message you had read Varney's name instead of Allen's, if Nesbit had identified the body as that of Varney's partner, and if the contents of the dead man's pockets seemed to confirm it, wouldn't you have been just as ready to think Allen had been the victim?"

"Why, yes; I suppose I would, since you put it that way," the sheriff conceded.

"So all we've had to work on, from the beginning, has been Nesbit's word? Isn't that correct?"

Prentice nodded, his frown deepening.

"And we know now that his word isn't to be depended upon?"

"But—but what we found on Varney's person," the sheriff declared. "The watch and letters and——"

"Let me see them again, please," Charley requested.

Prentice brought out the murdered man's effects, spreading them upon his desk. From the articles the Indian picked up the ring.

"You removed this from the victim's finger?"

"Yes, myself," the sheriff answered.

Charley turned and held the ring toward Miss Allen. "Do you recognize this, Lonny?" he asked quietly.

The girl swayed to her feet, staring at the ring, her face suddenly white. "It—it's Hugh's!" she cried. "Hugh's!"

"Are you sure, Lonny?" the Indian asked. "Positive? Remember what this means."

"Of course—I'm sure," the girl answered. "I gave it to him. Look! It's a duplicate of the ring I am wearing. The one he—he gave to me."

Her voice wavered and broke as the dread truth must have reached her.

Kluger, jumping up, put an arm about her.

The sheriff had struggled to his feet. "You mean—mean it was Allen who was murdered?" he demanded bewilderedly.

Charley nodded. "Beyond a doubt. And it must be Varney," he added, "who is the fugitive."

CHAPTER XV.

THE FADE-OUT.

THE astounding climax that followed Miss Allen's identification of her brother's ring, a situation deftly brought about by the Indian's stage direction, seemed to leave the auditors dumfounded. At the moment, however, Charley's concern was all for the stricken girl.

"I'm sorry, Lonny," he said, his hand on hers. "I wished I could have spared you this. I couldn't. It had to come out."

"This—this seems incredible," Prentice gasped, first among the others to break the silence.

The Indian shook his head. "Not so incredible, sheriff. It was merely a clever ruse to deceive us, shield the guilty man and leave behind, as I said before, a phantom trail. I've had suspicions for some time, but could not verify them until yesterday when, among other things, I had an opportunity to examine the belongings of the dead man.

"I had seen the ring on Miss Allen's finger, noticed it particularly the day she arrived, because she said her brother had given it to her. The instant I saw this ring, which you had removed from the fingers of the murdered man—saw it to be identical to the one Miss Allen wore—I realized what must have happened."

The sheriff seemed still confounded. "You think Varney planted his own watch, wallet, and this letter on his partner?"

"I do," Charley responded.

"And he carved that message in the floor?"

"Yes. All of these things were merely steps in his plan. And since the men were practically strangers here, the plan might have succeeded—except for two things. First, Varney neglected to remove Allen's ring; and second, he failed to notice he had broken off the point of Allen's knife while carving that message. Little things, perhaps, but they seem to have led to his undoing."

"I'm beginning to see that now," the sheriff said. "You must have known this, Nesbit," he charged, turning upon the storekeeper. "You knew! You've been helping along this plot. You've kept us following a blind trail. You planted the knife I found to keep suspicion fastened on Allen. That's all true, isn't it?"

Nesbit shrank back, aware that every eye in the room was upon him. It was with a perceptible effort that he spoke. "I didn't know——" he began.

"Stop bluffing!" Prentice broke in swiftly. "I want the truth out of you!"

Nesbit clung to the back of his chair, his face, robbed of color, beginning to show the strain under which he was laboring. "All—all right, Ben," he struggled. "I admit it. I knew Allen had been murdered."

"Then it was Varney I saw riding away from your store that night?" Charley asked.

"Yes. It was Varney." Nesbit's voice was a husky whisper. "He told me what he had done. Said he and Allen had quarreled. Told—told me about the evidence he'd left behind—the game he was playin'."

"You played the game with him, didn't you? Identified Allen as Varney! Planted that knife!"

The storekeeper nodded. "Yes; I done that. I—I had to, Ben. I had been disposin' of the ore. Varney threatened to implicate me if I didn't help him out."

"Sounds pretty thin to me," the sheriff returned grimly. "So you let Varney get away, did you? Know where he is now?"

"He promised to get in touch with me. We—we'll nab him, Ben. I'll work with you now. I'll help you."

"Maybe you will and maybe you won't," Prentice answered. "But one thing sure; you're going to stay locked up till Varney's found. After that we'll be——"

"I had nothin' to do with the killin'," Nesbit cried, his voice touched with panic. "I swear it, Ben. You—you can't hang that on me."

"I'm not so sure of that. I'm taking nothing for granted where you are concerned. You seem to be in this as deep as Varney, and even if we don't get him, you'll have plenty to answer for."

"We'll get Varney," Charley announced confidently. "He never intended to disappear for good. Don't forget what the Bluebird holds!"

"That's right," said Prentice. "Don't look as if he'd give it up, does it? A fortune. He'll scheme to get it back, thinking we don't know the facts. If we sit tight and wait and keep mum about what we're discovered we ought to trap him."

Charley nodded, moved to the desk and picked up the letter that had been found in Allen's pocket. After he had removed the inclosure from the envelope and scanned both, he looked up at the sheriff.

"Notice anything peculiar about this exhibit?" he inquired.

"In what way?"

"The writing on the envelope does not correspond with the writing on the inclosure," the Indian stated.

Prentice scanned the writing. "That's so. Hadn't noticed it before. Entirely different. You wrote this letter, didn't you, Bellamy?"

Bellamy who had remained quietly in the background until now, stepped for-

ward to glance at the message. "Yes; that's mine. I wrote it to Varney ten days ago."

"But this isn't the envelope it was mailed in," Charley said.

The man seemed to hesitate. "No; it's not the envelope," he admitted reluctantly.

"Why do you suppose Varney put this letter in it?"

"I couldn't say."

"Do you suppose there ever was an envelope?"

"There—there must have been."

"Why wasn't it found?"

"I couldn't say," the man repeated.

Charley, searching his face narrowly, smiled. "Well, we'll let that pass for a moment. Isn't it evident, however, that Varney wanted this letter found on the body? That, besides helping along his ruse, helping to establish the identity of the victim, he wanted us to know a Mr. Bellamy was expected to arrive here?"

"Why, I don't see——" the other began uncertainly.

"You don't!" Charley cut him short. "Think now! You do see."

The man was obviously confused by the Indian's abrupt tone and manner. "What do you mean?" he wavered.

"You know what I mean!"

The men faced one another, Charley grimly confident, the other wavering, his face ashen.

"Varney himself wrote this letter," the Indian charged. "Wrote it and signed the name of Bellamy to it! He wanted to pave the way for his return. He planned to come back as Bellamy!"

"What—what are you saying?" the man cried.

"You are Varney!" Charley answered. "You can't deny it! Varney masquerading as Bellamy. You murdered your partner, contrived to have him identified as yourself. Nesbit has already testified to that, but didn't figure we would expose you."

"As one step in your plan you wrote this letter and put it in an envelope that had contained another letter—an envelope addressed to yourself and bearing a San Francisco postmark. You counted on it being found and read, which would anticipate the arrival of a Mr. Bellamy. But you didn't anticipate our noticing the difference in the writing.

"The whole scheme looked relatively simple, didn't it? Both you and Allen were strangers in the community, few knew you by sight and apparently none, except Nesbit, knew you apart. And the storekeeper proved himself an able confederate—for a time."

The accused, back against the wall, broke into a stammered denial; but the Indian ran on heedlessly:

"You cut that message in the floor, using the knife with which you committed the crime, dropping it later beside the trail for us to find—Allen's knife, stained and bearing his initials. You didn't realize the point of it was missing; didn't find that out until you reached here. Apparently the knife hadn't been found, and it must have puzzled you. But by that time you didn't want it found—not the damaged blade. Finding it would weaken your case against Allen. So you and Nesbit contrived to drop another knife.

"Posing as a friend of Varney, in new clothes, clean shaven, and wearing glasses, you came back here after making your get-away on that early freight, confident none would recognize you. None did, of course. Then to ward off any possible suspicion, you appeared eager to help us solve the mystery; but all the time you were trying to learn what we had discovered from our investigations.

"The day we explored the drifts and I thought I had made a discovery, you attempted to throw me off the trail. That door in the cribbing can be seen, if you look closely enough. I saw it;

so did you, Varney. I waited for you to discover it.

"When you passed it by, I first began to suspect you. I felt sure, then, that you knew more about the Bluebird than you wanted us to think. I tried to figure out why Varney wanted you to stop off here. He certainly didn't want any expert advice. He knew what he had, and I failed to see where you fitted in at all."

"This—this is absurd!" the accused protested, making a desperate attempt to get hold of himself.

Undeterred, Charley continued. "Last night you were on these premises," he asserted. "I heard you, but something must have frightened you off. Later, when I left, I collided with Ransome in the dark, and unaware of his identity, treated him roughly. Still later, I learned from him that he had trailed you from the hotel.

"I think I know what brought you here last night, Varney. You wanted to be rid of a new danger, a thing you hadn't counted on in the beginning—a situation that threatened to ruin your plans and bring disaster to yourself. But your mission failed, so now——"

Without finishing his sentence, Charley wheeled, stepped to the end of the short corridor, and opened the door. As he did so, the dog, which had been standing outside, sprang in. It stood a moment, ears pricked forward, its alert eyes scanning the faces of those confronting him.

Then swiftly, uttering a joyous bark, it leaped across the floor and flung itself upon the man who called himself Bellamy, pawing, whimpering, barking in a perfect frenzy of happiness.

And Varney, livid with rage, cursing, struggling desperately to fight off the animal, found himself an instant later in the grip of the sheriff.

"Guess this is enough," Prentice cried jubilantly. "You can't fool your own dog, Varney."

The fugitive, unmasked, and in face of the overwhelming evidence, slumped against the wall, incapable of speech.

"The dog gave you away once before, Varney," Charley declared, making himself heard above the babble of excited voices. "I was out in the yard yesterday afternoon when you and the others came into the office. I didn't recognize your voice among the others, but your dog did.

"It was instantly at attention. A one-man dog, so Nesbit assured us. So when I found you in the office, all my suspicions were confirmed. I might have exposed you then, but I preferred to wait until we had cleared up some of the other mystery and had Nesbit on the scene."

"It looks like a big finish," Kluger spoke up, his eyes fixed admiringly upon the Indian.

The sheriff, with both Varney and Nesbit in charge, nodded.

"Killing two birds with one stone is

what I call a neat day's work," he announced. "There was considerable I didn't understand when Charley sort of fixed the stage for the surprise party this morning; but I let him go ahead and didn't ask too many questions. He ought to have a reward coming—something besides thanks."

The Indian shook his head and smiled. "That doesn't interest me, Ben," he said, looking across to where the stricken girl sat beside Ransome. "I was just wondering, now that Varney is out of the picture, and provided there are no other claimants, why isn't Lonny entitled to her brother's share in the Bluebird?"

"No reason why she isn't," upheld the sheriff, starting away with his prisoners. "Maybe more. You can depend upon it, I'll do all I can."

"That'll be a splendid tag for this drama," approved Ransome. "And we'll manage to remain on the scene until it's shot," he added.



FOR THOSE WHO SMOKE

WHEN tobacco was first introduced into Europe, after explorers had brought it from the New World, it was credited with wonderful healing powers. It was called "herba panacea," for instance. Tobacco is now cultivated in localities scattered over almost the entire world.

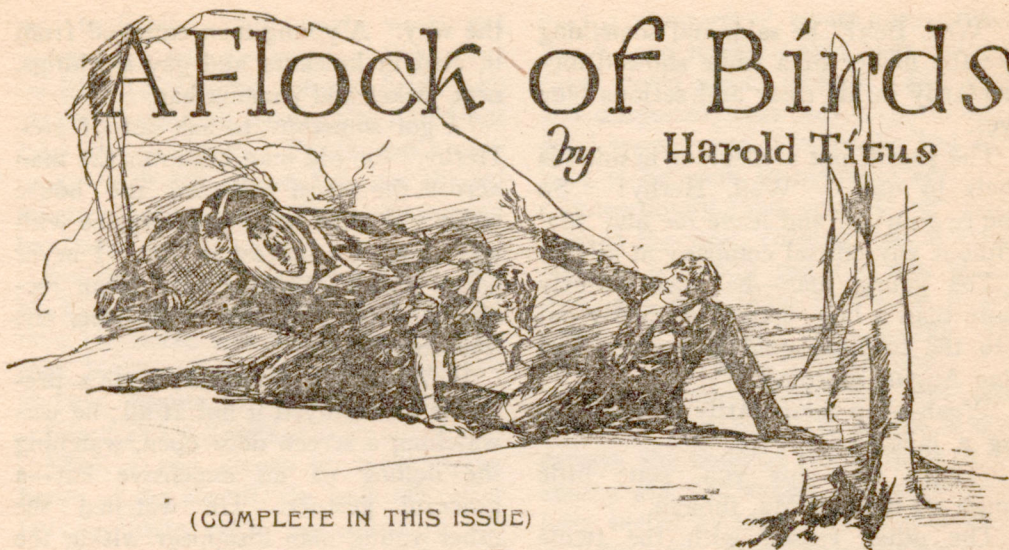
If the climatic conditions are suitable, the type of tobacco produced is determined mainly by the soil. Generally speaking, clay soils retentive of moisture produce tobaccos which cure to a dark-brown or bright-red color. Sandy soils produce tobaccos with a thin leaf, curing to a somewhat yellow color. In the same locality, different soils will produce tobaccos of different kinds.

In the United States, the seed is usually set out in nursery beds, and the plants set out in the field later. These seeds are very small, and it is estimated that there are from three hundred thousand to four hundred thousand to an ounce. About one quarter of these seeds fail to germinate. Due to other causes—loss in transplanting, weak and backward plants, et cetera—one ounce of seed usually yields about forty thousand plants.

After the leaf is cut, important changes take place before it is ready for consumption. It must be cured, fermented, and manufactured into the form in which you purchase it.

A Flock of Birds

by Harold Titus



(COMPLETE IN THIS ISSUE)

CHAPTER I.

OUT OF BONDAGE.

THE sheriff of Twin Lakes County, Bob McIver, sat in the jail office in his clean shirt and the cool of a Sabbath morning, scanning the many pages of a Sunday newspaper. The edition he perused with his mild, gray eyes had been printed on Wednesday and received in this up-State town on Friday. Aside from the many advertisements, it was mostly filled with the hashed-over news of last week. Still, reading the Sunday paper on Sunday morning, when official duties did not interfere, was a custom which approached the seriousness of a rite with old Bob.

From time to time he glanced into an adjacent room which contained a cot, a washstand and a lean young man who was shaving a somewhat protruding chin before a warped mirror.

When the shaving was nearly finished, Bob became interested in a revamped account of the latest attempted pay-roll holdup in the States metropolis. He read this with considerable interest, particularly those paragraphs which set forth the suspected record

of the two bandits involved who, after being foiled, had escaped the police.

The outlaws were referred to by the colloquial names of "Frank the Jew," and "Ruby Dan," and it was indicated that they had been thorns in the sides of the police for long. They—the police—were convinced that they—the highwaymen—had had a finger or two in a score of robberies within the year, but not once, in many attempts, had the police been able to convince a court that they—the highwaymen—were guilty. And, although the prosecuting attorney now seemed certain that at last he could prove to a jury that the two should go legally to prison, they were nowhere to be found.

Accompanying the story were the rogues' gallery portraits of the two young men and Bob studied these carefully, with a little frown coming between his brows. Suddenly he lowered the paper and stared hard at the wall before him as if abruptly tensed by the clarifying of a memory which proved to be surprising, and just as he was about to grasp this recollection and put it to use in wiping out those wrinkles on his forehead, the young man who had been shaving stepped into the room.

"Well, Bob?" he said, and something like the flicker of a smile showed momentarily in his clear and serious blue eyes.

The sheriff put a cuspidor beside his chair to use. "Well, Herby! So you're goin' off and leave me and 'Ma' without any official company at all!"

The young man—he was scarcely more than a boy—looked somberly out into the brilliant gold and green and blue August morning.

"Yeah—I'm temporarily through being a jailbird."

"That's nice for you, son; little tough on me and Ma, though."

The other fussed with the twine which was binding into a bundle a few articles of clothing.

"Darned good of you," he said without looking up, "to let me sleep in yonder instead of in a cell."

The sheriff knew, from the slight, slight tremor in that voice that Herb Winters had been indifferent neither to the circumstance of being in custody nor the kindness which had turned the edge of his initial experience as a prisoner.

"That's nothin'," he declared. "Even if you was a real tough one, you'd still be your daddy's kid. There was enough between him and me to make me go a long ways to help out anybody he liked while he was alive. Guess he kinda liked you. So do I; would, no matter whose you happened to be. Sit down a minute, Herby."

He shoved out a chair with his foot. Winters hesitated, reluctant to stay, but after a moment he seated himself and stared out across the street, and the sheriff swung himself about so that he, too, gazed through the window.

For an interval he sat there, eyes slightly narrowed, pondering just how to say what was in his mind. A car slid down the street, a long, lean, gray car, nickel work glittering, and stopped before the maple-shaded house across

the way. A young man emerged from it, clad in knickers and gay stockings, neat jacket and panama hat.

"I got somethin' to ask out of you, Herby," the old man began as the man across the street mounted the house steps. "I allus tried to be square with you; I got an int'rest in you. I never asked nothin', though, that I can recollect. Now I'm a-goin' to—this one time anyway."

If Winters had interest in this preamble he betrayed it not at all; he was watching a screen door open, watching the doffing of an expensive hat—a graceful gesture. He watched the other young man disappear within the house, there. As the door closed he stirred and spoke.

"Yeah? What, Bob?"

"I don't want you to go out of here thinkin' 'bout Herby as a jailbird. That's all I'm a-goin' to ask out of you."

After a moment Herb said, "Oh," flatly, almost as if disappointed.

"Yup. That's what I'm askin' out of you. Y' see, you've done time for killin' a deer out of season. Shucks! That ain't nothin'. What of us who've lived up here ain't took our meat when we liked, law or no law? Everybody knows about that an', on top of it, knows why you done it. Old man Ransom's been in bed a year; he wanted a taste of wild meat; you got it for him, but you happened to do it just when th' chief game warden was bearin' down on his deputies to stop what we've allus winked at up here.

"You was unlucky, done what you done openlike, got pinched, didn't lie and took your medicine. Now you've served your five days in jail and you c'n go back to drivin' these resorters around in your taxi and not take chances of comin' to live with me 'nd Ma again. And you c'n hold up your head, son"—leaning forward earnestly. "You didn't squawk when you got

caught 'nd you've paid for what you broke."

Young Winters gave no evidence that this plea moved him at all, except for swallowing—just once, and as if with effort.

"Sure," he remarked. "I don't give a hang what folks think."

"Course not!" But Bob knew the boy *did*. "You'll come in for some joshin' I expect!"

"I'll give 'em as good as they send. I'm all right, Bob," he said, turning a slow gaze on the sheriff. "Just out of luck on this; that's all."

The old man stirred uncomfortably in his chair. He was not accustomed to sitting down for a frank talk and having the other say just the opposite thing from that which was in his mind.

He knew young Herb would shrink from the banter that was bound to be turned on him; he knew, too, that he was out of luck in this matter because he was so completely without luck on most things. The deputy game warden had singled Herb out because he happened to be down without influence.

The boy was down. Those words recurred in McIver's mind and seemed to carry added significance.

"Yup; that's it: out of luck." He tried to rally to the occasion as he had planned. "And you were out of luck losin' the garage, too. But then any feller can go good on a pavement; shows what a man's wound on to travel a hard trail."

"Oh, things might be worse with me. I've got my taxi and—and——"

His voice trailed off as other voices floated to them from across the street: a man's voice and a girl's, as the driver of that glittering car emerged from the doorway yonder, with a trim, radiant girl beside him.

Yes, he had his taxi, an old ruin of a car, which barely made him a poor living—and things were not so bad with him. But a year ago he had had

the beginnings of a splendid business and a year ago it was he who called for Mamie Rutledge, yonder, and took her driving on fine Sunday mornings. Then came the break between them, some trivial thing, the sheriff felt sure, but which had stung pride and goaded high spirits.

The stubbornness of youth did the rest and the bank had finally taken over the garage because his break with Mamie had battered through the courage indicated by that goodly jaw, broke up his concentration, dampened his enthusiasm and assurance. Business slipped away, and to be fair with his backers, he had been forced to surrender any chance of a future for himself in that particular enterprise.

Failure hurt; hurt became cumulative; he grew a bit shabby, had come to have a tint of bitterness in his face, had grown uncommunicative and aloof. The good opinion of the community soured and from the respected place he had held such a short time before he was relegated to the inconsequential.

In the opinion of the growing town, he was easily whipped, judged wanting of the best qualities of citizenship. And so he had been a fair mark for a warden who wanted to make an example of some one and yet create no enemy of influence.

Bob, watching Herb as the lad watched that light-hearted couple step into the luxurious car, thought again that things were mighty bad for him; worse, though, were the potential disasters hovering about.

"That's a great car," he said and the sheriff thought he spoke so only to change the subject. "Great car, the Rex Ninety."

"Yup. Must cost a pile of money!"

"Three thousand. Brand-new model, too. That job's only been on the market two weeks."

Bob sighed. "Seems like folks are goin' to get along without legs a-tall

pret' soon," he surmised. "Old cars keep on bein' used; new ones come along. Why, just now I was readin' in the paper that they sold out the first million license plates middle of July! Over a million cars in this State!"

The car breathed away, bearing the slim, white-clad girl and her companion who smiled down into her face as he shifted gears. Bob watched it go and as he did so he leaned forward. He moved but slightly; still, it was a quick shifting of his position and his lips made soundless syllables as though repeating something he wanted to remember.

"Better than going off for Sunday in a flivver!" the boy said, and laughed oddly.

CHAPTER II.

THE SHERIFF BEGINS OBSERVATIONS.

HE rose, then, and turned away, Bob thought, to hide the swift stab of misery that swept his face. He picked up his bundle.

"Thanks, Bob, for everything," he said simply and started for the door.

"Herb!"

He stopped. "What, Bob?"

"'Member what th' Salvation Army says: 'A man may be down, but he's never out.' Lots of truth in it."

For a moment the lad faced him; then he swung almost savagely out of the room without another word.

The sheriff shook his head dolefully. A year ago, of course, Herb Winters would not have served as an example; still, had he, by any stretch of the imagination, been held in jail for five days he would have tossed the circumstance off lightly. Now, Bob knew, it weighed on him, ate away the remnant of assurance so shaken by Mamie and the loss of his garage. Something had gone out of the boy, who looked so much like his fighting father.

Why, old man Winters had weathered many an adversity, been down

time and again, wiped out by fire, by falling lumber markets, by one thing and another; he had been down when he died, but he was not out. Not much! His fine old courage, his belief in himself were intact! Now this boy was a living image of his father—Something, though was missing, the sheriff knew, and thought for a time in an attempt to trace it down.

Not in speech, manner, looks. Looks? Surely, that was it! The look in his eye had changed; the old glint showing love of a fight was not there. It had been once, but now that reflection of an indomitable spirit which had carried the elder Winters through thick and thin was missing.

McIver sighed. He turned to the paper again, searching for the automobile section. There it was: Rex Ninety—"A Fortnight Old and Captor of a Nation's Heart." Two weeks, eh? With the stub of a pencil he scrawled a number on the back of an envelope: No. 555-666.

Then he returned to the story of the latest known adventure of Frank the Jew, and Ruby Dan, and scanned once more the faces of the suspected men. So the city police could not bring them to account for their crimes even though satisfied that they were guilty. Well, such matters made up a phase of law enforcement that was a closed book to the old sheriff.

A city and its conditions was a far cry from Twin Lakes with its green, hardwood forests, its trout streams, its cool lakes, but its old, peaceful roads were being turned into broad highways. City people were coming in droves during summer and perhaps he would have their sort of lawlessness to contend with some day. If he did, he'd bet himself his eyes would be open. For instance, if this pair of young fellows who were camped up on Mad Cat and came to town only after dark and were surly and secretive, happened

to be up to anything that would give his county trouble.

Bob was not going to be asleep when they started their trouble, whatever it might be. He nodded to himself and walked across the hallway to tell his wife to delay dinner until evening, anyhow.

Before noon he was far up Mad Cat in his little car. He had gone in a roundabout way, taking old tote roads through the slashings and rocking over a wagon track that twisted for two miles through standing timber. On a piece of corduroy in an alder thicket he stopped, shut off his motor, listened a few moments, got down, removed the spare tire, cached it carefully under a balsam, opened a blade of his knife, punctured a front tire, removed it and drove on, running on the rim.

After a half hour of slow, rough going the road he followed swung close to the river and, at a short distance, the gleam of a tent showed through poplars. A faint and rather new car track turned in toward the camp and Bob took this, emerging at a high landing where the river swirled against a sandy bank.

A disreputable-looking flivver stood there. A young man was beside it, another before the tent, watching his approach. Bob shut off his clattering motor, spat, nodded and remarked: "Howdy, boys."

One responded with a word that lacked any suggestion of welcome; the other said nothing, only stared suspiciously. Bob kicked open the door of his car, picked up the punctured tube and dismounted. "Got myself in trouble," he explained. "Seen your camp and thought mebby you had some patches."

Some of the hostility which had marked the two was dissipated by this and they approached, examining the tube.

"Sure, we got a repair outfit," one

remarked, produced it and helped in the mending.

The process required long because Bob bungled. His fingers were all thumbs; he was more than careful in the pains he took with the patch and, with the rubber once cemented, he gave it a full half hour to set before he attempted to leave.

He drove away, finally, retrieved his good tire, and trekked toward town. On the way he ruminated: the campers had boasted of the fish they were catching but from the appearance of the pike tackle some dealer had sold them, they were loaded with good fortune if they killed even the simplest minded of trout.

They had told of annual fishing trips, but if they ever had camped before they had not learned the rudiments of the life and Frank the Jew—if the tall one were he—had grown a mustache while his companion—if he happened to be Ruby Dan—had shaved his.

Before he went to bed that night, Bob stood a moment in the front window, looking across the street. The long, low car was before the Rutledge house and from it, occasionally, came the sound of a girlish voice: "Really!" "Oh, how thrilling!" And a tinkling laugh that made Bob, old as he was, understand how young Herb's heart might have gone flippity-flop at its sound, and later cold with hunger for it.

Shortly before noon the following day Bob sat with Manwaring, cashier of the bank, in the latter's private office.

"A man may be down," the sheriff was observing, "but he's never out until th' last spark in him's been tromped black. That's what frets me; how many sparks of th' old stuff has he got left?"

The banker polished his spectacles and whistled softly.

"Too bad, Bob, that we had to take over his garage. He was willing, though. The boy's got a conscience—or had, anyhow—and when things commenced to get out of hand he was crazy to save us a loss. I don't know what got into him. He started out with a heavy debt, but he certainly promised to put it over. Then, just as he was coming out of the woods, he seemed to lose his grip. I've wondered what got into him."

The door opened and Mamie Rutledge, cool and slim, entered with typed letters. She spoke to Bob and smiled and disappeared again.

"Yes, sir," Manwaring repeated. "I've wondered what got into him. There's something wrong."

"Or out of him," the sheriff added, eyes following Mamie back to her desk. "Would you ever consider givin' him another chance in the garage?"

"I've wished we could. I'd like to do it for him—and for us. The man we've got there isn't doing what Herb did. If he could take hold with his old vim he'd relieve my mind and have a nice thing for himself again before long. But, you see, I can't take him off the street, the down-and-out driver of a rattle-trap taxi, a fellow the whole town thinks has gone to the dogs, and feel right. But if——"

"All right; now we're gettin' somewhere. What you 'ifin' about, 'Manny?'"

The other smiled and thought a moment. "If I could see him as I used to see him, with that look of his dad's in his eye, that come-what-may, I'm-as-good-a-man-as-you-are look, I'd take a shot with him in a minute. But until that I can't do much. I've my stockholders to think about."

"I see," Bob commented grimly. "I know what you mean; I know the look. Now if somethin' could happen to bring it back——" He rose, picking up his hat. "Oh, yes, Manny," he said,

pausing by his chair. "This here vault of yours a good tight one?"

"None better."

"And your burglar alarm works?"

"Tested Tuesday."

"Got guns in your cages?"

"Every man clerk has a revolver. Why, Bob?"

"Oh, nothin'. Just be'n thinkin' with all these city folks comin' in and bringin' city ways some adventurous young fellers might show up and try to get a thrill. That's what they call killin' folks and stealin' their money nowadays: a thrill."

He went out, then, and on the steps met Mamie, bound homeward for dinner.

"Hello, Mamie!" he exclaimed, jerking at his coat lapels, falling in beside her. "I cert'nly was surprised to see you round so early in th' day."

She turned on him a wide stare from gentle, brown, unsophisticated eyes.

"Why, Uncle Bob!"

"But, see, you couldn't 've got out of that swell car before——"

She turned away with an explosive laugh and flushed charmingly.

"Who is this swell resorter who's took such a hanker to you, Mamie? Tell me 'bout him."

"You're stretching things, Uncle Bob. I *was* driving with Mr. Nicholson yesterday and we did visit rather late. But he's—he's not as interested as all that!"

"So? Well, who's Mr. Nicholson?"

"Why, he's a young man from the southern part of the State who plans to open an office up here?"

"What kind of office?"

Mamie was hazy on this. "Bonds or something, I think," she said. "He's studying the country now. A good deal depends, I think, on what he finds out about the size of the pay rolls and such things. He says he doesn't want to locate in a poverty-stricken country."

CHAPTER III.

THE UNCOMPLAINING MAN.

AT the gate to the Rutledge home, Bob stopped and looked long and closely into the girl's face. His gaze had an intimate, penetrating quality and what he asked whipped a quick flush to her cheeks, as a father's pointed question might cause confusion to a daughter.

His question was: "Mamie, you're a good girl, aren't you?" And it was put so seriously that after the flush the girl laughed and suspicious moisture sprang into her eyes.

"You didn't think——"

"No, I didn't think!" he interrupted with the kindest of smiles. "And if anybody did, they'd have a good answer in your look, Mamie. I think a lot of you. You know, not havin' any younguns of our own, Ma and I've watched you almost like we would ours—you 'nd Herby."

He thought a shadow of trouble fell across her face at that.

"Herby's a good boy," he added when she made no response. "He's a mite down in his luck just now, but—— Well, he's a good boy; and you're a good girl, and we used to wish, Ma 'nd me, that you two'd be what you might call pret' good friends."

Mamie tossed her head. "We used to be," she remarked, an edge to the tone. "We used to be, but Herb Winters has a temper, Uncle Bob. You don't *know* what a fierce temper he has, either!"

"Lots of young fellers has," he agreed. "Th' more they amount to, th' more temper they're likely to have."

He walked away, leaving her to watch him with an expression which indicated that she would have welcomed more talk. And perhaps a chance to explain; or to try to explain a matter which might not have been too easy of explanation.

A swell car, that Rex Ninety, Bob

told himself as he saw two of the town's young bloods looking it over enviously before the hotel that afternoon. A brand-new car, property of a man who, from his appearance, made a point of being up to date. He looked again at the license plate: No. 555-666 on that brand-new car.

Herb Winters rattled down the street toward the depot in his rummy old taxi. He was slumped dispiritedly over the wheel, and Bob saw the two who were inspecting the Rex look up, observe him, and a nasty sort of superiority showed in their faces. Well, that was the way most of the townspeople looked on Herb. He certainly was down, and Twin Lakes knew it.

The sheriff was unusually silent during the first part of his supper, but finally he paused, looked up at his wife, and asked:

"Ma, what does every girl want her beau to be?"

"Handsome, wealthy, and wise, in the order named," the keen-eyed little woman replied promptly.

"I ain't any of them and never was," the sheriff said simply.

"Serious?"

"Awful!"

She thought a moment: "I expect, then, it's to have him a hero," she finally said.

He thumped the table smartly with the handle of his knife. "Right! You're allus right, Ma!"

Things were quiet enough in the county. No term of court was due until next month. Everything running smoothly in the towns and the company camps out in the timber, and so Bob had plenty of opportunity to ponder on this matter of Herb Winters being down, and Mamie, perhaps, not being so sure of the undesirable quality of his temper as she thought she was. In fact, the problem of Herb occupied about all the time that the sheriff did not spend watching and

wondering about the campers upon Mad Cat.

Early one forenoon later in the week he observed Herb stop his taxi before the hotel and sit waiting. Bob ambled across the street and engaged him in talk.

"Customers?"

"Couple of resorters. Up here without a car and want to fish."

"Any particular place?"

"Nope. Thought I'd run 'em out to Mad Cat."

"H'm. Might 's well put 'em in at Pest House Landing, mightn't you? Gonna wait for 'em?"

"Pick 'em up to-night."

"See you 's evening, then. Remember what you see up th' river."

They talked some minutes further until two men emerged from the hotel, carrying their fishing outfits. The sheriff's keen eyes held on the young man's face as they talked. It was clean enough, strong enough in line; but something surely was lacking; and, as surely, it was that fire in the eye which was the best heritage come to him from his pioneering father.

As Herb pulled away with his passengers the sheriff stood on the walk, shoulders drooped, feeling old and weary. He had, in fact, watched that boy as closely as he would have watched a son. He had been happy for him in achievement and now he was wretched and heartsick over the ill fortune that had followed early success.

He knew the sensitiveness beneath Herb's dogged assurance that he could take what the fates might send; he knew the boy was down and he was not so certain that a man can never be out.

The passing of Mr. Nicholson's glittering car roused him. It swept silently down Main Street, stopped before the bank and let Mamie Rutledge

out. She laughed as she turned toward the steps and looked over her shoulder with cheeks glowing.

"Ma's right," Bob told himself. "And I expect *he's* a sort of hero to her."

He withdrew a telegram from his pocket. It was a much-folded blank, though it had come but yesterday. He read it again, carefully, clear to the signature, which was the State's Motor Vehicle Registration Bureau.

That evening Bob found Herb Winters eating a late supper in the Northland Café.

"Keep my eyes open," the boy said with a grin. "What do you make of 'em?"

"That's what I'm askin' you, Herby."

They conversed for a time, the lad telling of what he had observed in that camp on the river.

"I've seen them before," he concluded. "They've been in town twice that I know of. They came in late, did some buying and beat it right out again."

"Yup. That's what they do. They don't hang around to look us over at all!" the sheriff said, as though provoked or puzzled.

Then Bob produced a newspaper clipping from last Sunday's paper and spread it on the table. "Ever see them mugs before?" he asked.

Winters leaned over the rogues' gallery pictures and whistled softly.

"They sure look like 'em!" he whispered.

"An' act like 'em."

"And you're waiting for the police from down State?" The boy showed some sign of excitement.

Bob shook his head as he refolded the clipping. "Nope. No good turnin' 'em up now. Them city police've tried to jail these fellers a good many times and ain't done it. If they're only hidin' out up here, there's plenty time to give th' city folks another chance at a trial.

But if they're plannin' anything smart I'd sort of like to be round when it takes place.

"I calculate to have some of this newfangled trouble sooner or later 'nd I figure that if when th' first of it starts th' parties responsible find 'em-selves in a fix this here county's goin' to be considered unhealthy territory by others like 'em. By catchin' a coupla tough ones an' sendin' out a right vigorous warnin' to others, a man would be doin' what you might call killin' two birds with one stone."

They went outside and stood on the curb.

"Gettin' much business?" Bob asked.

"My share, I guess," the young man answered rather sourly.

The sheriff paused and then said: "Herby, I be'n thinkin' you ought to be back in that garage."

He heard the boy swallow.

"No, Bob, I don't want the garage again," he said, but the old man knew his heart was crying out for another chance—for another chance at the favor of the community, another chance at belief in himself. And it takes such trivial happenings to change the opinion of people, to restore the confidence of youth! "I got my taxi," he said. "I'm satisfied."

Lies! Brave lies; Herb Winters would not whine regardless of being down!

"Ma," began Bob later, as he pulled off a shoe, "if a real good girl is awful wrong in her judgment and finds it out, she's likely to admit bein' wrong, ain't she?"

"A real good girl, Robert? Yes; of course, she will."

"And if she's be'n wrong in two-three places, she'll keep on admittin' it until her mistakes are all what you might call cleaned up?"

"If she's *real* good, she will."

"Well—I guess she is. Gonna be a great night to sleep."

CHAPTER IV.

ONE SHOT—FOUR BIRDS.

FOR ten days the sheriff stalked that pair on Mad Cat. He even crawled through the brush one night and tried to listen to their talk as they rolled on uncomfortable beds. But it was cautious, low talk and he only ascertained that they were weary of camping, waiting to be gone from the bush. Another matter he was not so certain about: they *seemed* to be waiting for a definite day.

A definite day now. And he had once seen a lineman's climbing iron peeping from beneath the wall of their tent and he had lain awake nights trying to connect that with something and to put himself in the place of two young ruffians who like thrills and might get them by outrageous practices. He had expected to hear of cars being stolen and find the camp thereafter deserted; he had been ready to respond to news of tourists being held up; but no such things had happened.

He had no fear of the bank's vault and other than wealthy resorters, and the money in that safe place there was only one worth-while interest for bold thieves in that region. But they had stayed in camp; they had not looked the town over. If they were up to any of their metropolitan mischief and were adept at the game of breaking laws and endangering lives, they surely would not make a move until they knew how the land lay. Now and again he re-read that telegram from the Motor Vehicle Registration Bureau.

It was early on a Saturday forenoon that Bob walked down the street and loitered before the hotel. That Rex Ninety, newly washed and polished, was waiting and before long Mr. Nicholson emerged from the doorway, carrying a bag. A bell boy followed, lugging two others. These were care-

fully tucked away in the trunk on the rear of the car.

"Leavin' us, Mr. Nicholson?" Bob asked.

"Just for the week-end, sheriff," the other replied genially, more genially than he had ever addressed Bob before. "Have a cigar? No? I've got to be down-State for a conference Monday, but I'll be back soon. I'm likely to be a permanent resident before long."

"That's somethin' to hope for," McIver commented and moved away.

He went briskly back to the jail and appeared again, rifle under his arm. He walked down Main Street to the pool room where Asa Tims had a counter and his stock of fishing tackle, guns and ammunition. Asa was by way of being a gunsmith.

"Asy, this ejector don't work like it ought," Bob said gravely. "I'd like to get you to look it over some time. But until you get time, which won't be 'til afternoon, just leave her settin' here. So. She's loaded, so don't let anybody fool with it."

Asa looked closely into the sheriff's gray eyes, suddenly bleak and without their usual good humor. He nodded and scratched his head. Bob had placed the gun in the show window, where it could be reached handily from across the counter.

That was at ten. McIver loafed in the pool room until eleven. His palms were sweating a bit.

A car drove up to the bank across the street and two men got out, each carrying a hand bag. These were clerks from the company's office, ready to make up the monthly pay roll and take the currency out to the logging camps that afternoon. Bob went across and looked into their automobile. On the back seat lay a shotgun.

At eleven thirty McIver was strolling slowly up and down the sidewalk visiting casually with an acquaintance

now and then. He kept wiping his palms on a red bandanna. A man in a speckled blue shirt emerged from the entry to upstairs offices of the telephone exchange and mounted a truck at the curb. He was frowning when Bob approached.

"Cross to-day, Sam?"

"Darn right. Wire trouble south and my crew all broke up by vacations and things." He looked at the bright sky. "Funny thing; must've been a big blow below us. Telegraph wires out, too."

Bob turned away abruptly. He stepped into an office and telephoned the drug store where Herb Winters made his headquarters. In five minutes the boy pulled up at a corner and Bob opened the taxi door.

"Herby, your eye good as ever?"

"Meaning just what?"

"You allus be'n a good shot. Could you hit an automobile tire that was movin' right lively?"

"Might. What you driving at, Bob?"

"Mebby a wild goose. By th' way, you're a deputy now. Hold up your right hand. Good. I'd like for you to get out south, 'bout to th' big bend. Take your rifle and get under cover out there. Don't you mind anybody who comes *toward* town and don't pay attention to anybody leavin' town who's just joggin' along. But if anybody comes along, travelin' south, *an'* bustin' any speed laws, *an'* you don't know *all* about 'em, then you just let a little air out of a tire 'nd see what happens. But you do it and you see it from cover. That's orders."

"What the dickens is up, Bob?"

"I said, mebby a wild goose migratin' early. On your way, son."

Noon. The mill whistle bellowed the hour. People in Twin Lakes still go home to dinner at noon and many of them lock offices and stores and so Main Street is rather well deserted a few moments after that whistle sounds.

So it was now, as old Bob stood against Asa Tims' counter. The company pay-roll car was still at the curb. In the bank, he knew, the money was being checked by the company's cashier and tucked into traveling bags. In a few minutes now.

The bank door opened and a man emerged, carrying a heavy bag; another, similarly laden, was behind him. From a side street where a motor had been smoothly idling came the whine of gears and a flivver, occupied by two young men, whirled into the sheriff's view.

The car stopped in a puff of dust and McIver, grasping his rifle, spat savagely. Asa Tims whimpered as the driver of the car rose to his feet, pulling a pistol while his companion, jerking a weapon from his pocket, leaped to the ground and ran toward the bank steps, cursing sharply.

"Plug 'em! Plug 'em, Bob!" Tims croaked.

But the sheriff, rifle stock against his cheek, brows drawn, did not shoot. Those pistols were leveled on no target. They remained held aloft in gestures of warning.

The company clerks stopped in their tracks. On the rear seat of their car, twenty paces away, lay a shotgun, but otherwise they were unarmed. They dropped their bags and fell back. The youth who ran toward them, seeing their hands lifted in surrender, shoved his pistol into his belt, grabbed up the heavy bags and floundered back to his car under their weight.

"Plug 'em, Bob! It's a holdup!" Tims cried again.

The sheriff moved his rifle ever so slightly to keep the bandits covered, but he did not move his trigger finger; not even when the bags were dropped into the flivver and gears screamed and the car leaped ahead.

"Fer Heaven's sakes, Bob, it's a holdup!" Asa squeaked.

"So I'd say," McIver responded and was gone on a run.

The flivver had turned the corner when Bob began snapping orders. The company men were dismayed and unnerved and could not act without bungling and so the fugitives had, perhaps, four minutes' start before Bob, rifle across his lap, was whirling away on their trail which led southward along the main highway.

At that, he should have sighted them when his car climbed the long hill and he had a view of the pike, traversing a mighty stretch of uninhabited timber, for no flivver could have topped the next rise in that time.

"Turned off!" the driver cried. "They've got off into some of these old tote roads, Bob!"

"Dah!" the sheriff said, and spat. "Prob'ly turned off—and on again. They'll be a-waitin' for us! Let's keep a-goin' and see!"

Six miles out of town young Herb Winters' car parked in a spruce thicket, stood in tag alders to his chin and watched the road. It seemed that he had been there with rifle ready for hours. His heart was fast and mouth dry. Now and then a car passed him, but it was either traveling at a moderate rate or else carried familiar faces. He commenced to think that this was, indeed, a wild-goose chase when to his ears came the distant thrum of a mighty motor. It was not in sight, for he was at the foot of a long, gentle grade, just where the road banked for a sharp curve, but when the oncoming car burst over the ridge he muttered to himself in chagrin. It was a lean, low, glittering car: a Rex Ninety, he knew from the radiator.

He could not stop this car! Why, he could not make a monkey of himself and endanger a man's life because he was speeding. And this man. Why, the whole town would say he was jeal-

ous, waiting a chance. The town would say that, but old Bob had said to stop any car speeding who carried people he did not know all about and—

Something queer there! Something was thrown from the speeding roadster into the brush and a man was standing up, wriggling into a white shirt which streamed behind him. Three men were in that car; two of them were changing their clothing. He caught a fair view of a face, the face of one of the campers on Mad Cat.

Many a time he had shot at a more difficult target than that big balloon tire. His rifle spat, its crash smothered by the sound of the motor. The man at the wheel threw his weight on it. One of the others screamed as the Rex Ninety swerved. They took the ditch with a bounce and a hollow crash and when they came up, one plastered with muck, another dazed by the fall, Nicholson crawling painfully from beneath the wheel, they were looking into the muzzle of a rifle, held by a lanky young man with very steady eyes in which played a peculiarly convincing light.

"The first one who makes a crooked move gets his," Herb said steadily. "There'll be a reception committee out from town directly."

Even as he spoke he heard the reassuring though faint squall of a car far up the road. He stood motionless, paying no attention whatever to the curses poured on him by the trio.

Mamie Rutledge took down what the two men who would talk had to say. Nicholson refused to say anything, except to repeat again and again that he had been held up and forced to aid the escape of the other two. Bob McIver finally told him grimly that the tote road where he had waited was known, the flivver had been found and that, anyhow, Frank the Jew and Ruby Dan were ready to tell all about

it. It was then that the sheriff asked Manwaring to get a stenographer, surmising, and rightly, it proved, that the banker would call on Mamie.

And when the two told of how Nicholson had evolved the scheme and familiarized himself with the pay-roll routine, Mamie winced. But she set her jaw and took her notes. She was a good girl; it might cost her something to admit how wrong she had been, but then—Herby had been through a lot, too. Such were the sheriff's thoughts as he watched her.

When it was over and the three locked up, the prosecutor, the banker, and the sheriff moved to the window to watch the excited crowd which tromped the jail lawn.

"Bob, you sure figured it well to get all three of them," Manwaring said. "How in the world—"

McIver shifted his chew.

"Well, Herby Winters first called my 'tention to a brand-new car with a license plate on it that must've be'n issued in the spring. That meant th' owner 'nd occupant wasn't what you might call 'n upright man; he had somethin' to evade somewhere.

"Then the' was these two, ready for somethin' but not makin' any move to look over th' town. 'T wouldn't do so much good to get them 'nd leave the brains of th' gang free, would it? They figured we'd be lookin' for that flivver and not for a swell car, with three swell-dressed resorters into it. I wanted to kill two birds with one rock, might say. Wanted, besides, to sort of warn other smart young fellers 'bout this locality. That'd make three birds at one crack."

"Smart work," the prosecutor said.

"Smart boy, Herby." Bob thought he heard Mamie stop gathering her things on those words. "Yes, sir; smart boy." He turned to Manwaring. "Notice anything about him 's afternoon? Any change?"

The banker rubbed his chin and grinned.

"I noticed that he'd become a town hero all of a sudden."

"That all?"

"No—I guess it's there ag'in, Bob."

"It sure is. His dad's old fightin' look! Bein' there, with him bein' what you might call a hero, I guess it'll stick."

The door slammed on Mamie, then and just in time, McIver thought, to cover the sound of a stifled sob.

"That makes—let's see—four birds," the banker said with a twinkle in his eye.

Bob tolled them off on his fingers. "Yeah, four."

Mamie was running down the jail steps. She held her head low as she went through the crowd and when she crossed the street it was with an increasingly fast pace, as though she wanted to be safe in that house under the maples where she could cry a bit and be ever so sorry that she had been wrong.

"Yeah, four," the sheriff repeated, watching her. "But I dunno, either." He cleared his throat. Mebby me 'nd Herby got a whole *flock* of birds with one rock!"



GHOST LIGHTNIN'

By Edgar Daniel Kramer

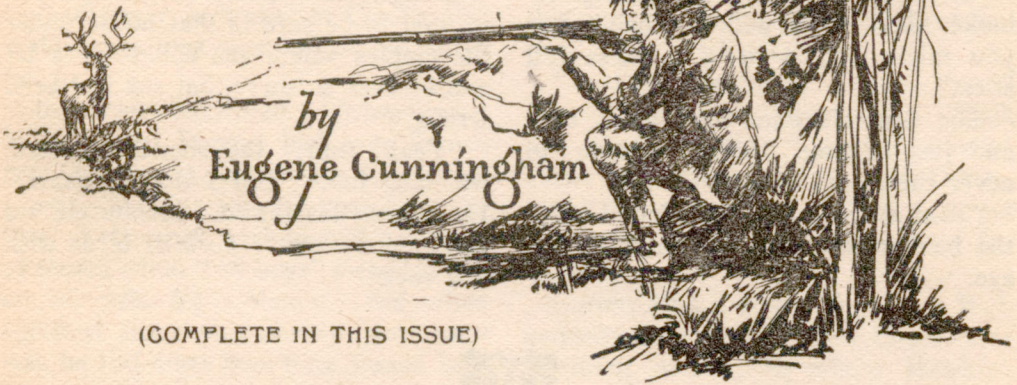
IF you're wise to Oklahoma,
 Then you know just what I mean,
 When I talk about ghost lightnin',
 As it flings its spooky green
 From th' edges of th' mountains
 With no semblance of a sound,
 Save th' whisperin' of shadows,
 As they run along th' ground.

It's so dark you can't be seein'
 Your own hand before your face,
 When, hell's bells, th' light is liftin'
 To illuminate all space,
 Makin' trees an' rocks an' cactus,
 That you figure you know well,
 Shape up into awful creatures
 From th' realms where devils dwell.

Though I'm looked upon as gifted
 With a mighty lot of sand,
 Though I've met th' acid testin'
 An' corraled th' O. K. brand,
 I'm herewith an' now declarin',
 When my pony shies an' leaps
 From th' stuff of th' ghost lightnin',
 Lord, it's givin' me th' creeps!

Mountain Men

by
Eugene Cunningham



(COMPLETE IN THIS ISSUE)

CHAPTER I.

POACHER'S LUCK.

THE squeezin'est man in Lincoln County!" snarled "Bud" Ranger to himself.

He peered downhill between slim oak saplings, through the spaced trunks of great pines and junipers and mountain ash to the canyon floor. There the little Ruidoso split a smooth, green level—exactly as if a polished bowie knife lay across a billiard table.

"The squeezin'est man!" Bud repeated, aloud, with "Old Ben" Lingo's still, red face in mind.

Then, in a sudden burst of fury born of every petty irritation, all the troubles, caused by the brand-new Lingo-Ranger feud, Bud forgot his need for caution—here on Lingo's Ranch, hunting unlawfully in the dawning. He spat out his opinion of Old Ben, of "Red Ike" Ranger, his own father; of the plain orneriness of the two together.

"Bud!" came "Brother" Ranger's anxious whisper from behind him. "You tryin' to raise the country or somethin'? They could hear you in Roswell! Any-

way, quit talkin' through your hat. You're sayin' a lot o' things you don't mean.

"You're sore, 'cause this feud has split up the families an' you can't see Sudie May. You know blame' well Ben Lingo ain't half so bad as he's painted. Ben wants what's due him an' a little interest—an' he gets it! An' the reason folks talk against him is because they're like pa—plumb jealous of a rich man!"

Bud shrugged his shoulders impatiently, squatting on heels, a slender, muscular statue, with keen, aggressive brown face outthrust. With Savage .250-3000 across his knees, ancient gray Stetson pushed back upon his flaming hair, he stared with narrowed blue eyes up and down the canyon, alert for sight of Lingo cowhands.

"Nobody in sight. Reckon we can cross over," he growled finally.

But he made no move to go down the slope. Instead, he stared at the green canyon bottom, starred with daisies. He knew it all so well! Upon the trail along the little river, he and Sudie May Lingo had ridden stirrup to stirrup since they were kids.

There was Deep Hole, below Monu-

ment Rock, where many and many a time they had whipped rainbows from water to frying pan, almost. Sudie May—there wasn't a girl in Lincoln County—in all New Mexico—fit to be mentioned in the same breath with her, to Bud Ranger's notion. And now Red Ike, his father, had had to fall out with her father over some petty money matter. Beaten in a trade, he was furious and had promised to shoot Ben Lingo on sight.

Behind Bud, Brother waited sympathetically. Before the dawn, they had come across the hills from the poverty-stricken little Ranger Ranch against the Mescalero Reservation fence. Crouched on the ridge above the Ruidoso's canyon, they had watched Ben Lingo and some Easterner mounting in the dooryard. Like Bud, Brother had seen Sudie May's pink dress flashing past the door and he could guess the bitterness that filled Bud now.

"Goin'?" he inquired softly.

He moved slightly, to ease the cramp in a thigh—and forgot, abruptly, to sympathize with Bud. For the carpet of pine needles and dry oak leaves beneath him shot forward. As on a toboggan he slid downhill with his old Winchester waving. Came a crash from beyond the boulder on Bud's right. They had reached the thicket noiselessly, being woodsmen as much as cow-punchers; the buck springing up was only now alarmed.

Bud's Savage flicked up. There were two swishing sounds, almost together, as he pressed trigger twice. The buck staggered, came to his knees, then somersaulted and went stumbling down the steep slope—fifty, seventy-five yards, until the carcass was stopped by a juniper trunk.

Bud grinned boyishly:

"There's Aunt Sary's beef for you! Told you! If pa can't afford to butcher a steer for her, I can get meat for the kids as long's I've got a gun. This one

shore shoots where you hold it, Brother!"

Brother's reply was a groan of agony. Bud's blue eyes came flushing round again. He had a glimpse of Brother's head and shoulders. The head rocked as he stared; Brother's face showed like a sheet of paper against the greenery. Bud sprang up with an oath and scrambled downhill.

"Foot——" breathed Brother, between hard-clenched teeth. "Blame thing's jammed—into some rocks! Gosh!" Then he fainted.

Frantically, Bud dived into the thicket and with his big pocketknife began to hack away the branches about his brother's feet. The sight of Brother's predicament nearly turned Bud's healthy stomach. For his left leg—sickeningly twisted—was jammed between two big boulders.

Desperately, he heaved at the massive rocks, but they were fragments of the mountain, seemingly as immovable as the hills themselves. Gently, then, he caught hold of Brother's thigh and tugged. But the only result was a groan wrung from the prisoner, who returned to consciousness only to faint again.

But studied the crevice into which the leg was jammed like wedge into ax head. Tentatively he chipped at the edges. It *could* be cut, but slowly—all too slowly! He needed a pick or crowbar. But it was ten miles back to their house and this was enemy country. Ben Lingo's was the nearest house and—there in plain sight on the slope below them was the deer, evidence to damn them.

If the Ranger boys were caught and brought before their father's enemy, Justice of the Peace Ben Lingo—well, they would shortly occupy a jail cell, Bud decided grimly. For himself, he did not care so much, but he knew that his mother would be heartbroken at the disgrace falling upon Brother, her baby.

"I'm goin' to steal me a crowbar out

o' Ben Lingo's tool house!" Bud said grimly to himself. "But first—got to get that buck out o' sight. Somebody might come up the canyon——"

There was a tiny sound from somewhere up the hill. Bud glared fiercely, but it was not repeated. After a moment, he lowered the Savage—a steer, maybe. But still, he wondered. Then he shrugged. No time to go investigating now.

He moved swiftly downhill to where the buck lay against the tree. He could butcher it in a thicket and hang it up until there was opportunity to come back and carry it to their poor relation, his father's sister Sary. Bud stuck his knife point into the jugular.

From behind a boulder a gray, flannel-clad arm came stealthily. A strong, brown hand closed upon the Savage and lifted it noiselessly, while Bud worked away all unaware. Then a lean youngster in Stetson to match Bud's own; in overalls jammed hit or miss into high-heeled boots, rose like a cat. Bud's ear caught the tiny sound the man made; he whirled, his hand raking the pine needles where the Savage had been.

"It's gone," the other remarked in a conversational drawl. "I figgered you might make some break like that."

On his haunches, Bud glared up at the other. He was a stranger, but on the buttonless vest was a shiny badge—a deputy sheriff. Imperceptibly, Bud's wiry muscles tightened. He was like a rattler coiling. But before he could launch himself at the deputy's throat, the youngster had made a twinkling motion; a long, blued Colt appeared in his hand, the muzzle pointing at Bud's chest.

"Answer is—don't try it! For a fella couldn't miss, this close!"

Bud's lips curled back in a snarl of impotent fury. He was caught red-handed—literally, just that, for his hands were covered with the buck's blood. He considered flashingly. Here

was help. This fellow could give him a hand to release Brother. But that would mean that Brother would be a prisoner, too. Yet, if he said nothing of his brother's presence, that would leave the boy imprisoned until he could come back—which might not be at all soon.

"These Maxim silencers are quite some contraptions, now, ain't they?" grinned the deputy. He was examining the Savage expertly. "But you hadn't ought to go shootin' deer right over a surveyor's head, fella. Bothers him, when he's busy like I was. Why, that dam' buck mighty nigh sat down in my lap. Well—pick her up an' let's high-tail it."

"Where to?" But Bud knew well enough that it was to Ben Lingo's. He was merely sparring for time, hoping for the chance to come to grips with this efficient-seeming youngster. Bud felt that he might settle him.

"Why, down to Lingo's. He's the only justice o' the peace I know of around here. Would you rather give somebody else your trade?"

Bud stood up, looking vaguely about him. Brother was not in view. If he could only knock that staring pistol muzzle down and make it a battle of fist and skill——

The deputy watched quietly, still with his little mocking smile: "Reckon you won't!" he said after an instant. "I used to be in the Texas Rangers, fella, before they cut down the force. I've handled quite a corralful o' bad hombres an'—none o' the outfit ever got away. I don't aim to have you nominate yourself No. 1. Rattle your hocks!"

CHAPTER II.

BROUGHT TO TRIAL.

THERE was a snap to his voice now that jerked Bud into obedience. Sulkenly, he shouldered the buck and they moved down the slope to the trail along

the river. Turning stealthily once or twice, Bud found the deputy's Colt muzzle covering him almost as if it possessed a mind of its own, no matter how the deputy seemed to stare. In Bud began to grow a very real respect for this lean, brown ex-Ranger. He was such a one as Bud himself.

Moving leisurely, because of Bud's burden and the deputy's high-heeled boots, they came after a couple of miles to the dooryard of Ben Lingo's ranch house—and not once had Bud glimpsed the slightest chance of escape.

As he let the buck slip to the ground, for an instant Bud saw—framed in a window—Sudie May's white face, the hazel eyes widened as she stared. Then it vanished and in the doorway appeared Mrs. Lingo. Her beady old eyes gleamed malevolently at sight of Bud and the deer.

"Well!" she cackled. "If 'tain't that Bud Ranger! Never heard, I reckon, about Herefords havin' white faces. Just got all mixed up an'—"

Suddenly she whirled upon the silent deputy:

"Where's Brother? Brother Ranger? Didn't you get him, too? Oh, you dumb nitwit! You missed this fellow's brother? Why, they trail together all time. Any idiot'd have known that! You just wait, Mr. Hawkins; the judge'll have a few things to say to you. You—"

"Excuse *me*, Mis' Lingo!" the deputy interrupted her stiffly, with lean cheeks reddening. "If the judge has got anything at all to say to me, he can shore say it. Anybody can say anything they want to say. I'll listen. O' course, if I don't like it—"

"Somebody lookin' fer me?" came a level, drawling voice from the house behind Mrs. Lingo.

"It's that Bud Ranger!" shrilled Mrs. Lingo, whirling upon Old Ben. "I thought you was still up the hill. Bud killed a buck this mornin' an' Hawkins

caught him—somehow. But he never caught Brother! I told him—"

"Excuse *me*, Mis' Lingo!" Hawkins interrupted her once more. "It's sort o' more officiallike if a peace officer makes his own report. Keeps the record a lot straighter, too, lots o' times—"

"We'll look into the business, Sally, don't you worry!"

There was no change in Ben Lingo's broad, red face as he turned small, round blue eyes upon Bud Ranger.

"We just come in over the back trail," he explained to Hawkins. "Bring the prisoner into the front room, will you? We'll hold court there."

With face grim-set, Bud preceded the deputy into the familiar room—where in the days before the feud he and Sudie May had sat so many, many times. As if his thought of the girl were infectious that—

"Where's Sudie May, Sally?" inquired Ben Lingo. "No, no! Needn't mind huntin' her. I got somethin' to tell her, that's all. Find her after while."

He rolled out, was gone for perhaps five minutes. By his bearing—which was all that one might ever judge by—he was thoughtful when he returned to the "court room." Bud shot at him a half-curious, half-defiant stare. Then the *clip-clop* of shod hoofs in the dooryard drew Bud's eyes mechanically to the front window. He stiffened, where he sat upon the piano bench.

Past the window rode Sudie May on her black pony—the very pony which Bud had gentled for her a year before, taking vast pride in his work, putting into the taming of the little black outlaw all that he knew of horse-breaking.

Nor rode the girl alone, now. Her companion—if Bud might trust his brief view of the man—was none other than the too-smooth-tongued, too-hand-some, "Slim" Thorne, Ben Lingo's foreman. Bud had cut him out a year ago. Sudie May had promised faithfully, months before, that she would never be

alone with him again. It *might* have been one of the punchers, but Bud had no illusions. He thought he knew Slim Thorne's gaudy silk shirt, his Stetson, entirely too well.

Sudie May was headed upriver, pushing the black pony to a swift jog trot. Her expression, from the one brief glimpse Bud had had of it, appeared by no means so troubled or sad. It should have been, with him sitting there in her father's courtroom, waiting to be convicted and slammed the limit. It seemed to Bud that her face had been oddly intent, as she stared straight ahead—at Slim Thorne.

Bud swore viciously under his breath. There was no light in the brilliant sunshine. There was a bad taste in his mouth, as in other days when he had tanked up on Bart Black's bootleg. The days before Sudie May had straightened him out, waked ambition and hope in him, with the simple declaration that she cared—cared enough to marry him.

Sullenly, he turned back to face the room like a trapped animal. He was ready for anything, however desperate. Ready to snatch Hawkins' long, blue six-gun and start hell popping there in the quiet room. Entered now that portly Easterner whom Bud had marked in the Lingo dooryard, as he and Brother crouched on the ridge above the Ruidoso's canyon.

He was a flabby-bodied, pig-eyed "foreigner" in blue-serge coat, gaberdine riding breeches, and shiny tan boots with ridiculous little brass spurs. He was fat-faced, too, this foreigner, and he had an arrogant trick of thrusting out his swollen chin as if in contempt of the whole world. Instinctively, Bud hated him. He found a savage pleasure in wondering just how far his hard, bony fist would sink into that jellylike paunch.

"What's this? What's this, Lingo?" boomed the foreigner, with that note in his voice that told his expectation—cer-

tainty, rather—of a quick, respectful answer. "Holding court, eh? Well, well! What's the charge? Who's this—ah—character?"

"Just a plain violation o' the game laws, Mr. Carter," Ben Lingo explained in his level, emotionless drawl. "Hawkins, here—you know Hawkins—is surveyin' the lines in that west section I'm sellin' you. He caught this boy a-butcherin' a buck——"

"Butcherin' a buck! On *my* land!" Ferociously, Carter whirled upon Bud, who returned his glare with pawnbrokers' interest. "The rascal! He looks a tough customer, all right! Killing my deer. Why——"

Somehow, he managed to make it clear that his ownership of the land made the offense far more serious than it could possibly have been otherwise.

"*Your* deer!" snarled Bud, jerked from the silence he had intended to maintain. "Who the hell gave 'em to you? Your deer! Suppose you figure to round 'em up ever' spring an' brand 'em? Ah, the devil!"

"Order in the court! Order in the court!" Ben Lingo rapped with his knuckles upon the center table. "Order in the court!"

His red face was without change; he looked neither at Bud nor the foreigner, but instead stared blankly at the white-washed adobe wall. But there was a telltale twitching of the throat muscles. Bud began to wonder just how popular this Carter might be, on the Lingo Ranch.

CHAPTER III.

MOUNTAIN JUSTICE.

OYEZ! Oyez! Oyez!" droned the judge. "I hereby declare this justice court open. Hawkins, state your case against the prisoner."

"Well, suh, I was runnin' a line two mile west o' here. Heard two sort o' *swishes!* From uphill. Knowed 'em to be gunshots muffled by a silencer.

Looked up an'—here comes a fat buck just a-swappin' ends, straight at me! I squatted down in the bushes an' waited an' purty soon along come this fella an' begun butcherin' the buck. So I gethered him in an'—here he is an' yonder's the buck. Reckon it'd be better off in the ice house, judge, pendin' settlement o' the case."

"Not much settlin' needed!" snapped Carter, authoritatively. "Killing game out of season, on my land! Too bad the old ventry laws don't hold nowadays. By George! They hung riff-raff like this, in England and France, not so long ago!"

"Shore did!" nodded Hawkins, the deputy, blandly. "I read about that in my li'l red school books, too. All it took to hang a commoner was just the testimony o' some—uh—*noble*. Funny old times, wasn't they? Funny how lots o' names, to-day, show just about where our great-great-grandfathers stood in the world.

"Take the name 'Bowyer,' just for instance: nowadays, it's just anybody's name. But them times, it was the name o' fellas that made bows. 'Carter,' too—that was a pore devil that drove a cart for some rich man——"

"Look here!" snarled Carter, his heavy jowls empurpling like an irate turkey gobbler's, Bud thought amusedly. "Are you insinuating——"

"Suh," interrupted Hawkins, very softly, but with a steel-blue eye hard upon the foreigner, "I never insinuate anything. I just don't do such. I speak my piece right out in meetin' for the good o' the congregation's soul."

"Order in the court! Order in the court!" droned Ben Lingo, staring hard at the wall again, with that telltale twitch of the throat muscles. "Well, Bud? Anything to say for yourself?"

But stared stonily straight ahead. Lot of use to say anything in this court! With the judge his father's bitter enemy, his verdict was sure enough. But, in

addition, this fellow Carter would be satisfied with nothing less than the harshest penalty of the law, and Ben Lingo, wanting to unload a section of mountain land upon the foreigner, couldn't afford to cross him.

"Let's see that Savage, Hawkins," commanded the judge, when Bud made no reply. "H'mm—mighty purty gun. This silencer gadget is shore keen. Well, Bud, there's a mighty foul barrel, here—what about it?"

"Nothin' to say!" snarled Bud. "I ain't admittin' an' likewise I ain't denyin' a thing. But I'm remindin' you that this fella never saw me kill that buck. For all he knows, I might just've heard the shots, same as he did, an' come down just to grab the meat for Aunt—just to grab the meat."

"Yep," nodded the judge, without change of expression. "Yep."

Hawkins grinned at Bud, entirely without malice. Carter snorted.

"Likely lie, isn't it?" he snapped. "I think we aren't to be taken in by it, Lingo. He's guilty as hell!"

"It's the best judgment o' this court that you killed that buck, Bud," droned Lingo. "With a rifle like this here, you sure wouldn't miss. Lincoln County knows you ain't much on missin', anyhow. Shootin' an' horse bustin' are the two things nobody in this neighborhood can touch you at.

"No—you wouldn't be over here, packin' a high-powered rifle with a silencer, except to kill a deer—unless 't was to take a shot at *me*, mebbe?"

He stared very straight and hard at Bud.

"Listen! Any time I take a shot at you, it'll be fair an' square!" cried Bud hotly. "It'll be in the open. Anyhow, you an' me got no row, Ben Lingo—not yet!"

"Then 't was the buck you was after," nodded Lingo. "H'mm—it's this court's judgment that you're guilty as charged. The lawr says the first offense shall be

punished by a fine o' fifty dollars or by appropriate term o' imprisonment. Take charge o' the prisoner, Hawkins. Take the deer to my ice house, too. Lawr says it has got to be destroyed or give to the pore. I reckon we can find some pore family that'll be glad to have it——"

Inquiringly, he looked at Carter, who nodded vigorous approval of the heavy fine.

Bud was white-faced. He was going to jail. No Ranger had ever known that shame. He had always known, of course—for this was by no means the first, or the tenth, buck he had killed out of season—that "the lawr" provided fine or jail term for violation. But when old Bart Black was deputy game warden, he had more than once loaned Bud a horse to pack home venison; had himself taken each time a quarter of the kill.

Game laws were hardly considered by these mountain men, descendants of the independent pioneers who had tamed the hills. A deer was to them, as it had been to their grandfathers, *meat* and that was all. When the deer fed upon their pastures, it was pretty hard lines if a fellow couldn't kill one, occasionally.

To make matters worse for Bud, there was Brother, still imprisoned on the mountain. No chance to get away from this efficient ex-Ranger lounging behind him, to release Brother. No—there was nothing to do, now, but throw himself and Brother into the enemy's hands; to tell of Brother's predicament. That meant two of them going down to jail.

Bud glared at Ben Lingo. The slick old devil! Sitting up there holding that fat face of his straight as a preacher's—just as if he weren't tickled stiff at this chance to hit Red Ike Ranger through his son.

"Couple of months in the cooler is just what he needs!" Carter said emphatically. "I tell you, Lingo, civilization is certainly coming to this section!

I intend to show these people that I, for one, don't mean to tolerate their wild western ways for one minute. I——"

"Judge Lingo!" Bud interrupted the lecture with a cold-toned call. "'T ain't in the deal that I have to be talked to death, is it? An' if we can get out o' this wind a minute, or stop it, or some-thin', I got to tell you that——"

"Lots o' time, Bud! Lots o' time!" interrupted Lingo, impatiently. "Talk to you after while. Take him outside, Hawkins, will you? Now, Mr. Carter, about them deeds—— Will you get the papers out o' your room, ready for us to go over?"

Carter, after a wrathful glare at Bud, nodded and went out. Ben Lingo came waddling outside, to where Hawkins stood easily alert and not too close to Bud's clenching and unclenching fists.

"Brother——" Bud began again.

"Ne' mind! I'll do a little talkin', before you start!" grunted Ben Lingo. "Now, you're owin' the State an' this here justice court the sum o' fifty dollars. Got it?"

"Got nothin' but the rifle, here. But that's worth more'n the whole fine."

"Don't want the rifle. H'mm—well, looks like you got to work the fine out, Bud. H'mm. It's jail, or else—— You want to bust some horses for me? Five dollars a day till the twenty-five's worked out?"

"Twenty-five?" repeated Bud, stupidly. "What d'you mean? The fine was fifty."

"Why, as justice, I take half the fine for my fee. I don't have to collect it unless I want to an'—I don't want to, offn you, Bud. Five dollars a day, until the twenty-five dollars are worked out an' then——"

"If you ain't takin' your pa's war talk too serious—he'll ca'm down after a spell—how about sixty-five a month an' house an' board, as my foreman? You see, Bud, it's like this: I had to let Slim Thorne go. Sudie May, she never

liked him an' he was no hand with horses. Besides, he was beginnin' to hit the old red-eye too frequent. So Slim, he went down Roswell way, day before yeste'day——"

Bud gaped at the still, red face, the twinkling little blue eyes: "Well, I—well, if you really mean it, I—I shore live up your street, judge! But now, I got to get upriver, hellbent! Brother is——"

"First thing you do is to get you a horse out o' my corral an' ride up toward Monument Rock. You see, Bud, I was on the ridge above there, this mornin'. Seemed to me like there'd been somebody—well, trespassin'. I'm so blame' fat, these days, I made a noise slippin' in the bushes, I reckon. Any-

how, you look into it, Bud. I told Susie May an' Rod Kendall to ride up that a way, a while ago, to see about it. If you should happen onto 'em——"

He turned and waddled hurriedly back to the house. Bud was racing toward the log corral when Ben Lingo's hail halted him. The fat figure was framed in the doorway, like a great, benignant Buddha:

"Hey, Bud! About that deer—lawr says it has got to go to some pore family. Try to be thinkin' o' somebody as really needs it, will you, Bud?"

"An' say, Bud! If—if you should happen to stumble onto Sudie May an' Rod Kendall, why, tell Rod I want that he should hightail it back here *right now*, will you, huh?"



BANDIT DOGS

DOGS' usefulness to man is not questioned. Men who, in the autumn, take to the field and woods with a gun feel confidence when they have a good setter or pointer ranging before them. Lovers of duck hunting swear by the aquarian antics of the retriever, as does a fox hunter by the deep baying of a good pack of hounds.

During the Great War, the police dog proved his usefulness in carrying messages. Other dogs have done the same. In the Alps, the great shaggy St. Bernards bring succor to those unfortunates lost in heavy snows.

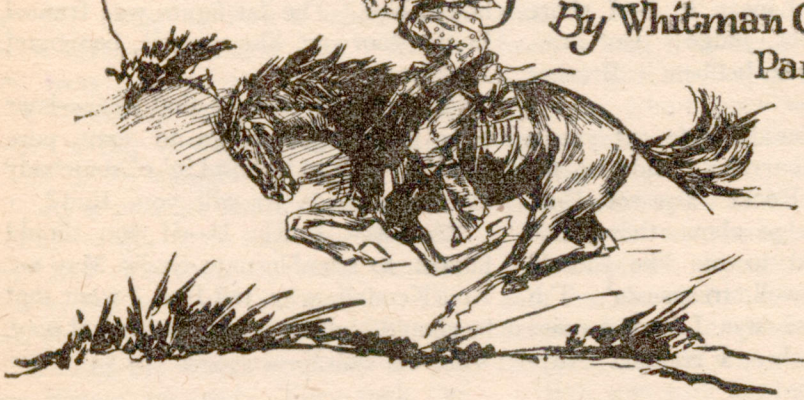
The Far Northern wastes also feel the necessity of the dog as a friend of mankind. Huskies, Siberians, and Malemutes, hitched to sleds, carry people to safety, or haul supplies into districts when other means of transportation fail. Only a short while ago, two women lost their way while on a cross-country trip. When they abandoned hope, the lead dog of their team brought them to safety.

However, the most unusual case of the dog's serving man to his own ends was recently discovered in Transylvania. In the mountain fastness of this country, a band of bandits trained a number of police dogs to aid them in their unlawful practices.

The dogs were trained to give the alarm if they saw civilians. They would then rush forward and surround the interlopers, never injuring them unless they attempted to escape. When their masters appeared to complete the robbery the dogs would watch out for police or soldiers, which they had been taught to recognize. These dogs have even held up caravans with as many as ten carriages by jumping at the horses. Though they appeared vicious they were trained never to molest women or children.

Feud of Phantom Canyon

By Whitman Chambers
Part VI



CHAPTER XXIX.

AN INVINCIBLE WEAPON.

THE danger of their situation was brought home to Tex and Shorty an instant later as a concerted fire was opened from the bunk house. The powerful stream of water, though it had been on the building but a moment, had apparently opened a dozen cracks in the walls. spurts of flame were coming from all across the front of the structure.

Bullets were thudding into the wooden platform on which they stood. Other slugs were whistling off the rocks around them.

"We gotta turn that water on," Shorty cried hoarsely. "An' we gotta git it on before it gits light if we don't want a bullet between our ribs."

Tex peered down the canyon. Its walls were reverberating with the sounds of the shooting. The boys on either side, having sensed that something had gone wrong, were pouring a steady stream of lead into the bunk house.

It seemed hardly likely that, with

dawn but a few minutes away, the outlaws would venture from their shelter. Instead, they would be more likely to trust that the water would not be turned on again until it was light enough to drop the man at the nozzle. If anything was to be done, it must be done fast.

"I'll go up the hill, Sho'ty," Tex said quickly. "I'll turn that watch on. You stay heah. Get behind a rock or somethin' wheah yuh can keep out o' the way of those bullets."

"No, you let me go," Shorty pleaded. "One o' Hogan's men is up there. Maybe more of 'em. Half a dozen of 'em could 'a' sneaked up there in the dark. Yuh don't know what yuh're going to run into. Let me go an' you stay here an' handle the stream."

"You go to hell, Sho'ty!" Tex returned promptly. "They ain't a second to waste an' you know I can make it up theah in half the time it would take you. Stay out o' sight a few minutes now, an' then get ready to knock the whole gang into kingdom come."

Shorty was still pleading as Tex leaped off the platform and started up

the hillside toward the pressure-box at the head of the pipe line. He had covered only a hundred feet or so when he realized that it would be sheer folly to approach the intake from below.

If it was guarded—and inasmuch as the water had just been turned off there was no reason to think that it was not—he'd be throwing himself right into their hands.

He cut off to the right in a wide circle, intending to swing around the pressure box and come upon it from above. He had little fear that they would hear him coming. The echoing reverberations of the shooting would effectually drown his footsteps.

Dodging between clumps of sagebrush and mesquite, he fought his way up the steep hillside. It was hard going, for the soil was largely shale and the footing was uncertain. He did not spare himself, however.

The eastern sky was gray. It was already growing light. Though it was still too dark for accurate shooting at a distance, he knew that daylight would come fast. There wasn't a second to spare.

Barry's lungs were on fire and his legs felt weak and shaky when he at last gained the summit of the ridge. He did not stop to get his breath, however. Unlimbering his revolver, he braced northward until he was directly above the pressure-box.

He could see it quite plainly. The gate at the end of the ditch had been opened and the water was rushing over the spillway and pouring down into the canyon. He'd have to close that gate and then open the valve at the top of the pipe line. He rushed down toward it with great striding leaps.

Two figures rose from a clump of mesquite near the intake. Tex caught the glint of blue steel. He fired once and leaped wildly to one side just as twin stabs of fire cut through the faint light of early dawn. His foot caught

on a sagebrush root and he fell headlong. Possibly it saved his life.

He was on his feet in an instant, crouched behind a big clump of sagebrush. The light was bad. He could see the figures of the men only very vaguely.

They, too, apparently could not see exactly where he had fallen, for after those first quick shots they had held their fire. That faint light was deceiving. It was hard to see a man against the mottled, sage-covered hillside.

Tex knew that if he held himself motionless for a few minutes Hogan's men would think he had been hit. He could leap up then and get the drop on them. But he realized that he could not waste the time.

Every passing moment made it more dangerous for Shorty to mount the platform and direct the stream of water. If their plan was to succeed, Shorty would have to have his water immediately.

Barry steeled himself, took a deep breath and then leaped up with leveled gun.

"Throw 'em up!" he shouted.

He felt the wind of a bullet on the side of his face. It couldn't have missed him by half an inch. He fired four shots as fast as he could pull the trigger. One of the men screamed and pitched forward on his face. The other turned and leaped off down the hillside with a great crashing of brush.

Tex leaped to the pressure-box. His only emotion was a vague surprise that he had not been hit. He closed the heavy gates that had diverted the water into the spillway and then spun the valve at the head of the pipe line. He heard the familiar roar of the water as it raced down the long pipe. Then he raised his voice in a triumphant bellow.

"Sho'ty! Yo' watch's on the way!"

He realized suddenly that the man he

had hit might not be badly hurt, might be a source of danger. Swinging around, he leaped over two or three intervening clumps of sagebrush and dropped to his knees beside the fallen outlaw.

He turned him over with an effort. The man had been hit in the left breast and killed instantly.

Tex got to his feet. He was a little shaky now, as he began to realize how close a call he had had. Looking down at the still figure of the outlaw, he shook his head slowly and sadly.

"You tried hard, boy," he said softly, "but I jest reckon Heaven knew you was on the wrong side o' the fence."

Tex turned away and gazed down the hill. It was by this time fairly light and Barry could see that stirring events were taking place in the canyon below.

Crouching behind the big nozzle, taking advantage of what scant shelter it afforded against the hail of bullets directed toward him, Shorty was turning the full force of the powerful stream on the bunk house.

Tex could see the building trembling before the onslaught of the tons of water that hurtled against it. The roar was deafening. He expected to see the structure collapse at any instant. Then three figures leaped out the door and headed diagonally across the canyon.

Shorty swung the giant. The huge stream followed the three figures and caught them. It bowled them over as effortlessly as though they had been blades of grass and ground them, beaten, into the sand and gravel of the canyon.

Then Shorty swung the nozzle and the mighty stream moved back to the bunk house. Again the giant assailed it with a thousand pounding hammers that threatened each moment to crush it into a mass of splintered, flying wood.

"Them felleh's had better get out while the gettin's good," Tex mur-

mured. "If they're in theah when the bunk house goes, they'll sho' get themselves killed. Lawdy, what a sight.

"I knew that stream was powerful. I've seen it wash out banks o' gravel in five minutes, that it'd take a crew o' men two weeks to shovel out. But I neveh dreamed it was as powerful as that. Fellehs, you better haul out the ol' white flag. Yo' goose is sho' cooked!"

Almost as though they had heard his words, half a dozen men leaped one by one out of a side window of the bunk house and headed for the hill, their hands high above their heads.

"Wise boys," Tex commended. "Anotheh minute or two an' that roof'd been on yo' heads."

The men raced up the hill, away from the roaring, irresistible behemoth that threatened their lives. They made it plain by their motions that they surrendered. But Shorty had too many wrongs heaped upon his head to be satisfied so easily.

The stream moved after the fleeing outlaws. It almost caught them, then overshot them. Shorty lowered the giant a fraction of an inch.

The mighty stream hit the outlaws and hurled them rolling and fighting and clawing down the hillside. Its force was irresistible.

Tex's face was a little grim as he imagined the emotions those men were undergoing. They were so utterly helpless, so at the mercy of a power that could not be combated.

That roaring water was nothing that could be fought with a gun or with fists. The brawniest man in the crowd was as helpless as the weakest.

They were hurled, fighting and struggling but none the less helpless, onto the floor of the canyon. They were rolled along it as a boy might roll a handful of pebbles with the stream of a garden hose.

Tex chuckled. "Well, it won't kill

'em, anyway. They're prob'ly too tough even to get badly hurt. But they're takin' punishment, believe me. I bet each one o' those fellehs feels like he was bein' hammered by a hundred fists.

"They'll be black an' blue from 'end to end. Boy, what a beatin'! When ol' Sho'ty gits through with them fellehs, they sho' ain't goin' to have much fight left in 'em. Sho'ty, go get 'em, boy! Give 'em hell!"

CHAPTER XXX.

A FAKE REPORT.

THE little prospector did not relent until the outlaws had been rolled out of range of his stream and Lansdowne and his men had rushed forward to cover them with their guns. There wasn't much need of that, however, for the half-drowned desperadoes had had enough of fighting for a long time to come.

Tex methodically closed the valve and opened the gates to let the water flow over the spillway. Then he started down the hill toward Shorty.

So far as he knew, only one man had got away—one of those who had been guarding the pressure-box. And none of his own men, he was almost certain, had been hurt. A mighty good average.

He found Shorty bending over an injured man beside the platform. With some surprise Tex saw that the man was Hogan. Shorty glanced up. The little man looked tired.

The lust and hatred that Tex knew had been in his eyes when he was directing the stream against the outlaws had disappeared. He was just a weary old man who had fought and won and was tired of fighting.

"It was him we plugged," he told Tex, nodding toward the prostrate outlaw. "He had the same idea we had. He was goin' to clean us out with the

water. Both our bullets got him. He's a goner. Can't live more'n a few minutes. I been tryin' to git him to confess."

Hogan did not seem to be in any great pain. He lay on his back quietly, staring at the two men. He did not speak.

"Better come clean, Hogan," Shorty advised. "It ain't goin' to do your soul no good to pass out with a dirty conscience. Yuh might as well admit that Tom Kent was mixed up in this business."

The outlaw did not speak. A few moments later Lansdowne came hurrying up. "We have them all collared," he announced. "Shorty, you certainly pounded those boys almost to death."

Shorty grunted. "Jest so's I didn't kill 'em, it's all right. Tex an' me had to plug Hogan here. I been tryin' to git him to admit that Tom Kent was in on their game."

Lansdowne looked down at the outlaw. He shook his head a bit sadly. In an undertone he said, "You and Tex walk off a ways. I want to talk to him alone."

The two partners walked over to the bunk house. Though it was thoroughly soaked, it did not appear to be badly damaged. A day's work would put it in first-class shape again.

"I guess we ain't lost much outside o' the first clean-up," Shorty said. "An' we may even git that back if Hogan confesses before he passes out. They haven't been workin' long enough to make a second clean-up."

Tex did not answer. He felt nervous and vaguely worried. There wasn't anything to worry about, he told himself over and over.

They were sitting pretty now. The Black Butte gang had been cleaned up, not one of their own men had been injured in the process and the future appeared to be clear sailing.

And yet he could not shake off that

feeling of depression and restlessness. He kept thinking he ought to be doing something, when he knew that for the time there was nothing to do.

Maybe it was caused by the nervous strain he had been under all night, he thought. Maybe lack of sleep and undue physical exertion. And yet he didn't feel particularly tired. He was just on edge. His nerves were jumpy.

After a time Lansdowne called Tex and Shorty back. "Hogan is going to talk," the old cattleman said quietly. "I'll take his confession down. I want you for witness."

"There ain't much to tell," the outlaw said in a low voice, quite in contrast to his usual bellowing tone. "You know jest about everything we've done against yuh."

"A little slower, please, Hogan," Lansdowne suggested. The cattleman was writing with a stub of pencil on the back of an envelope.

"Tom Kent was in on the whole business," Hogan went on, more slowly. "He tipped us off that you were going to clean-up. I guess he heard about it from Miss Lansdowne.

"He got up that fake bill o' sale an' forged your names to it. An' he took the clean-up. It's in his safe in town. I guess that's all. I'm kind o' tired."

Half an hour later, after his men had departed for town under guard, Hefty Hogan died.

The depression that had come over Tex Barry heightened. It was not the first time he had seen men die. And surely no man deserved his end more than Hefty Hogan. It was something else that brought that feeling upon him, something that he couldn't put a hand to.

"I'm goin' down to the meadow an' get my höss," Tex told Shorty and Lansdowne after a time. "I'm feelin' kind o' low. Maybe I'll perk up when I git astride ol' Ladybug.

"If you're goin' back to the Lazy B,

I'll meet yuh on the ridge. You can lead the hoss I rode oveh, if you will."

Tex walked down the canyon to the water hole where they had first made their camp when they started to prospect Phantom Canyon. The place looked dreary and deserted now. It fitted his mood. Beyond was the meadow. He found Ladybug grazing there. She was fat and sleek and seemed glad to see him.

"Good ol' Ladybug." He stroked her shining neck. "Did you think yo' ol' pardneh had deserted you? How they been treatin' you, girl?" He surveyed her critically. "H'm. No spur cuts. You look like you ain't had a work-out since I left. Want to go fo' a li'le run? Says yes?"

In an arroyo he found his saddle and bridle where he always kept them cached under a heavy canvas. He saddled the mare and rode up the ridge. It felt good to be in the saddle again, with Ladybug under him. Four days he had been away. It seemed like years.

His spirits rose a little. And yet that feeling of depression didn't wholly disappear. He'd be glad when he got back to the Lazy B.

Esther must be worried, with both her father and her lover away on a perilous mission. She'd be happy when she learned that they were both safe and that the claims had been regained. Somehow, he wanted to be the one to tell her.

Tex gave the mare her head. Shorty and Lansdowne had just gained the top of the ridge when Tex met them.

"Hoggy's gone to work in the cook house," Shorty grinned. "The rest o' the boys that ain't gone to town with them outlaws are goin' to stay to break-fast. They got a hunch Hoggy's goin' to spread himself.

"Frank and me are goin' back to the Lazy B. Soon's we git cleaned up an' rested a little we'll go on into town. We got a busy day ahead of us. We'll

hook Hogan's men on a charge o' robbery an' kidnagin'. An' we ought to be able to hook Tom Kent, too, with this confession we got. It'll be a hard day, Tex."

Tex wasn't greatly interested in "hooking" people. In fact, now that it was all over, he wasn't greatly interested in anything but Esther. There had been so much to say to her and there had been so little time to say it.

"Reckon I'll ride on ahead," Tex declared at last. "Ol' Ladybug needs a work-out."

Shorty grinned. "Give her our regards, Tex," he shouted as the younger man rode off.

Barry waved his hat, smiled a bit sheepishly and let the mare run as fast as she wished. Both were breathless when they drew up before the Lazy B ranch house.

Mrs. Lansdowne was standing by the gate. Tex did not dismount. A cold premonition told him that something was wrong.

"Why, Tex!" Mrs. Lansdowne's face was white. "You're not hurt!"

"No, ma'am. Not a bit. Why?"

The little woman swallowed. Tex knew his premonition had been right. "What's happened, ma'am?" he asked.

"Tom Kent came here a little after midnight. Esther and I had not gone to bed. We were worried. Tom said that you had been hurt and had been taken into town. He said you wanted Esther. And——" Her voice broke. She dabbed at her eyes with a small handkerchief and then said brokenly:

"Esther rode away with him. I haven't heard from them since."

CHAPTER XXXI.

INTO THE DESERT.

DURING the last three days Esther Lansdowne had been under a heavy strain. They had been hectic, nerve-racking days. Starting with the

disappearance of Tex and Shorty and culminating in the wild scene in Caliente, they had left her in a state bordering on collapse.

The last straw—or so she thought at the time—had been the sight of her father and Tex and Jimmy Soanes riding away to Phantom Canyon in the cold, unfriendly darkness.

The three men she loved best in the world, riding away toward danger and possible death. She had said no word against their going, for she had been raised in the West and knew that such missions were a part of their lives. But after they had gone she went into the living room, sat down at the big table and buried her head in her arms.

The reaction had set in and she sobbed softly for a while. Her mother sat across the table from her and made no attempt to console her. A quiet, undemonstrative little woman was Mrs. Lansdowne. But she was wise in the ways of human nature and knew that tears alone would bring relief to Esther's tightly strung nerves.

At last the girl raised her head, wiped her eyes with a handkerchief and smiled feebly. "I've been acting like an awful baby, haven't I, mother?"

The little woman across the table smiled wanly and shook her head. "I can hardly blame you, Esther, after all that has happened. I think I'd cry, too, only I don't happen to be the crying kind.

"Sometimes I wish I were. It does a woman good to have a good cry occasionally."

Esther was feeling more herself already. "It has done me good," she nodded. "I feel a lot easier."

"Shall we go to bed now, dear?"

"Oh, no! I couldn't think of going to bed until we hear—how things come out. I'm so worried about dad—and Tex and Jimmy."

"I'm worried, too, dear. Just as much as you are. Only I learned a

long time ago that it doesn't pay to brood and fret and make your life miserable about something over which you have no control."

"You're so philosophical, mother. You're always calm and self-possessed. I'm not. I couldn't think of going to bed now. Won't you sit up with me until we hear?"

"Of course. We'll put some more wood on the fire and stay right here until the boys come back. And I'm sure they'll come back with good news. Your father and Shorty and Tex are level-headed. They aren't going to take any unnecessary chances."

"Oh, I hope they don't!"

They put more wood on the blaze in the big fireplace and settled themselves comfortably to wait. Esther took up a book and tried to read but found she couldn't keep her mind on it. So she moved her chair nearer to the fire and threw her head back and relaxed. The warmth and her own weariness acted as a narcotic. In half an hour she was asleep.

She was awakened by the swift beat of a horse's hoofs and sat up quickly.

"I've been asleep!" she exclaimed. "What time is it, mother?"

"Just twelve, dear. And some one has just ridden up to the front gate."

They went to the door together. Neither spoke when they saw Tom Kent striding up the walk to the porch. He mounted the steps and removed his hat. He seemed older, somehow, and very tired. There was a dead, weary light in his eyes as he spoke.

"I suppose you are surprised to see me out here, after all that has happened." His voice was contrite. "I won't attempt to make any apologies or excuses, either. I've done some pretty rotten things in the last few weeks, and all the apologies in the world wouldn't square accounts.

"However, possibly my future actions will show me in a little better light.

That's why I am here. To do what little I can to help a man I have wronged. Tex Barry wants to see you, Esther. He's in town. I told him I'd get you."

A low cry came from the girl's lips and she caught the door jamb for support. "Tex is hurt!" she gasped.

"Yes."

"Badly?"

"The doctor doesn't know yet, but seems to think he'll pull through all right. Barry wants to see you. Will you come?"

"Yes."

"I'll saddle your horse for you."

Kent turned and hurried down the steps. The girl seemed dazed as she watched him go. Her mother's arm was around her and a small hand was gently stroking her arm. Dry-eyed, Esther stared out into the night.

"You mustn't take it so hard, Esther," her mother consoled her. "He may not be hurt badly."

"Yes, I know," Esther said feebly.

"And you must have courage. You have a long ride ahead of you. You don't want to give out before you get to town."

"I won't."

Esther turned, kissed her mother and walked down the stairs and along the walk to the gate. She stood there waiting and as she thought of Tex and of his need for her, new power seemed to flow in her veins.

Her shoulders came erect and her chin came up. No time now for hysterics. No time for womanly weakness. Tex wanted her and she had need for all her strength.

Her mother came down the walk. "Your coat, Esther."

"Yes." She slipped into the garment.

Kent rode up, leading her horse. She mounted swiftly, managed a smile and a wave of her hand to her mother at the gate and rode down the road.

The sheriff made no attempt to engage her in conversation. For eight miles no word was spoken between them. So wrapped up in her own thoughts had the girl become that she had almost forgotten Kent's presence.

She cried out in surprise and bewilderment, then, when he suddenly rode alongside her, grasped the bridle out of her hand, and pulled the two horses to a halt.

"This is as far as we go along the road," he announced in an odd, husky tone.

Her eyes were blazing as she stared at him in the darkness. "Tom! What do you mean?"

"I mean that we're going south from here." The words were ground out with an effort. "We're heading over the border."

For a long moment she met his gaze. When his eyes fell, she demanded: "Was Tex really hurt?"

"I don't know. And I care less."

"And that was just a ruse to get me away?"

"Exactly."

"Tom, you have lost your mind," the girl pronounced steadily.

"Very likely I have. What happened to-night was enough to drive any man crazy. A man could hardly love you as I have loved you, and almost have you and then lose you, and still keep his senses. I have lost my mind.

"Put it that way if you wish. Or say I am crazy for love of you. It makes no difference. We are going over the border."

"And if I refuse?"

"I shall take you if I have to carry you. Only I warn you that it will do you no good to try to fight me. I am far stronger than you. I'd rather not have to use force. But if you compel me to, I shall.

"And I also warn you that it will do you no good to try to break away from me. My horse is much stronger than

yours and I could easily run you down."

"Tom, surely you don't realize what you're doing," Esther insisted in a small voice. "Have you any idea what Tex and my father and Jimmy Soanes will do to you if they catch you?"

"They can't catch me. I'll see to that. We're heading due south, into the wildest desert in this section of the country. We may come out on the other side of it and land in some Mexican town, and again we may not.

"I know the country fairly well and the odds are good. But no man will ever be able to trail us where we are going. Once we get well south of the line the country becomes too rough and too rocky. And a man who doesn't know the water holes would perish in a day."

Esther had no answer for him. She realized that further argument was useless. Though she had never before seen Tom Kent in such a mood, she knew that it would be a waste of time and strength to bandy words with him.

The sheriff leaped off his horse and, leading both animals by their bridles, went over to the side of the road. From behind a rock, where they had been cached, he drew out a saddlebag and two canteens.

He tied the saddlebag and one canteen to his own saddle; the other canteen he tied to Esther's. Then he mounted again and, leading the girl's horse, turned off the road and headed due south into the black, barren waste lands that extended, unbroken and uninhabited by man, all the way to the border and fifty miles or more beyond.

Esther glanced back at the road with a sinking heart. It was the last thing that linked her with the people and places she knew. And soon it had faded from sight in the darkness. She faced forward and stared at the broad shoulders of Tom Kent.

This was a different Tom Kent than she had ever known. She found it hard to believe that he was the man she had been about to marry early that evening.

Maybe he really was demented. Maybe the disappointment and chagrin he had suffered had unbalanced his mind.

The very thought made her tremble a little, setting out into that vast, unknown desert with a man who had lost his mind. Strangely, however, she did not feel frightened. Possibly because her mind was too dazed by the events of the night, by the weariness of her body.

She rode mechanically, hour after hour, with never a word from the man who rode ahead of her. At last, when she seemed ready to drop from fatigue, Kent halted, dismounted and helped her from the saddle.

"We'll rest a while," he said. "It's almost daylight."

She would have fallen had it not been for his supporting hand. She looked around, for the first time in hours. They had stopped at a dry, level wash. There was sand under her feet and sand all around her. It was the most barren desert she had ever seen. Even the sagebrush had disappeared; there was no sign of life of any kind.

"Where are we?" she asked feebly.

"We are in Mexico. We crossed the border about an hour ago."

CHAPTER XXXII.

TRAPPED IN A SAND STORM.

ESTHER caught hold of Kent's coat. Her voice was pleading. "Oh, Tom! Surely you're not going through with this madness! Won't you please, please take me home?"

He looked away. He seemed almost a stranger to her. "No."

"But you know I could never love you now. And you know Tex and my

father will track you down and kill you."

"No. They will never find us. We have too much of a start. They probably don't know even yet that you are gone. They may not discover it for hours. And if they try to look for us in this desert they will only perish. They don't know the water holes."

"But they will run you down if it takes a lifetime."

"They'll never find us. I have friends in Mexico. Please lie down and get some rest now. I'll give you the saddle blankets. They're the best I can offer."

Esther went to sleep, too weary for further talk.

She awoke with a throbbing headache, opened her eyes and saw that the sun was already hours high. She threw off the saddle blanket that had covered her and sat up. Kent lay some distance away, his head pillowed on his saddle, his hat over his face. He was sound asleep.

Esther got slowly to her feet and looked around. Barren desert met her gaze on every hand. It stretched away for miles in every direction. Rocky ridges and arroyos and sand dunes scattered in mad array.

No sign of life. No sign of vegetation. It was the most forbidding view that had ever met her gaze.

Though it could not have been more than eight or nine o'clock in the morning, the desert was already simmering under the merciless sun. The brilliance of it dazzled her. The air was lifeless and searing on her lungs.

She glanced again at Kent. He was still sound asleep. A few rods beyond him there was a small water hole filled with muddy, stagnant-looking water. The two horses were standing near it, their heads hanging dispiritedly in the stifling heat.

Esther looked from the horses to Kent and back again. Opportunity

was beckoning. She might never get another chance so good. She went swiftly to her horse, found a bridle and slipped it over his head. She dared not take time to saddle. Picking up a canteen, which felt almost full, she slipped its strap over her shoulder and mounted bareback.

For an instant she eyed Kent's big black. No, she decided, she wouldn't take his horse and leave him afoot in that bleak wilderness. She couldn't do that, despite all the wrongs she had suffered at his hands.

With a last glance at the sleeping figure of the sheriff, she rode off. Her horse's hoofs made no sound in the yielding sand.

For possibly a quarter of a mile she walked her horse, retracing the path they had traveled earlier in the morning. Then she breasted a rise. A glance over her shoulder assured her that Kent still slept. Touching her heels to the buckskin's flanks, she rode swiftly down the slope.

Esther had no idea how far they had penetrated into the desert. The tracks she followed, however, led due north, judging from the sun. And it was due north she would have to go if she was to win free of that wilderness of desert.

She anticipated little difficulty on that score. The sun would guide her and, given time, she could get away. But she had no means of knowing how long Kent would sleep. Any moment he might awaken and start after her.

"I shan't dare to follow those tracks," she told herself. "I'm leaving too plain a trail. I'll have to swing off to the east or west for a mile or two and then head north again. And I'll have to do it some place where my tracks won't show."

A few minutes later she found such a place. A long ledge of splintered rock cut across the desert from east to west. The tracks she had been fol-

lowing disappeared where they crossed it. A good tracker might have followed them, given plenty of time. But Kent, she suspected, was not a particularly good tracker and, besides, he had little time if he were to overtake her.

Accordingly, she turned her horse toward the west, chosing that direction because it would put the sun at her back, and rode along that wide, broken ledge. It was not easy going. The country was badly broken up.

Several times, when she was compelled to pick her path across a deep arroyo, she doubted the wisdom of the course she had taken. It might have been better to have headed due north and depended on the speed of her horse to carry her through.

Then, when she had covered nearly a mile and was about to turn north again, she heard the clatter of horse's hoofs behind her. Her heart stilled. She did not turn to look back.

She did not even increase her pace, for she knew that without a saddle she would not stand a chance of outriding Kent's big black.

The hoofbeats came to within a few yards of her and stopped. Kent did not speak. Esther turned wearily. A low gasp escaped her lips. The big black was riderless. She realized instantly that Kent's horse had taken it into his head to follow her buckskin—a perfectly normal thing for a horse to do.

"Go back, Blackie!" she ordered, waving her hand. "Go back! Go back!"

The big black turned around, galloped a few yards and then returned.

"No, no, no! Go back, Blackie! Go back!"

The horse did not move. He seemed to be laughing at her. Esther shrugged.

"Very well. Tom can walk. It won't hurt him. And we surely didn't come so far this morning that he can't walk out before dark."

Esther rode on, heading toward the north. The black horse followed along

a few paces behind. The girl did not hurry now. Kent could not follow her. There was plenty of time.

The sun was very hot. The air was motionless and oddly hazy. She could not see more than a mile in any direction. The desert on all sides was dancing in the shimmering heat waves. Due to the broken nature of the country, she could not pursue a straight course. She was compelled to glance frequently at the sun to get her direction.

As the morning wore on she realized that the sun was becoming less and less brilliant. Whereas at first it had been dazzling almost beyond endurance, it had now become a great brass ball that was slowly shading off to copper.

It was odd, she thought. There was dust in the air—she knew enough about the desert to know that. But there was no wind. It didn't seem logical. Dust obscuring the sun and no wind to raise the dust.

She was growing apprehensive. She didn't like the feel of the air. It was stifling. She pulled frequently at her canteen, certain in spite of her anxiety that noon would see her out of the desert and in sight of the Caliente-Lazy B road.

Then it was on her. A roaring rush of wind. Clouds of stinging, blinding dust. She cried out in terror at the suddenness of it.

The world about her faded out of sight. The sun was obscured. The flying sand beat against her uncovered face. The screams of a thousand devils rang in her ears.

Terror-stricken and helplessly bewildered, the girl dug her heels against the buckskin's flanks and pleaded with him to take her out of that mad inferno of heat and flying sand. The buckskin, frightened too, broke into a run, stumbled and dropped back to a trot and then to a walk.

The girl looked up, sought to get her direction from the sun. She could see

nothing in that mad welter of dust. She could not tell north from south.

She was lost, hopelessly lost. Her canteen was almost empty. She realized that she could not live long in that hell of flying dust without more water and without shelter. But there was not a drop of water to be had and there was no shelter.

With a pitiful little cry she rested her head down against her horse's neck and pulled her coat over her face. She made no attempt to guide her buckskin, for she had no way of obtaining her bearings. And the buckskin, as bewildered as his rider, wandered aimlessly.

Hope died in Esther's breast as the gale increased. Only a miracle could save her. And the day of miracles was past.

So this was the end, she kept telling herself over and over again. So this was the end of all her dreams and hopes and plans! Oddly enough, she felt more sorry for her mother and father and Tex than she did for herself.

And she even found pity in her heart for Tom Kent, afoot in that hell of howling wind and flying sand.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

TRAILING.

SOMEHOW, Tex Barry was not greatly surprised when he heard Mrs. Lansdowne's announcement that Esther had gone away with Kent. For hours he had an instinctive feeling that all was not well.

He should have known, he told himself bitterly. He should have known that Tom Kent would not give up so easily, particularly after the humiliation he had suffered at Tex's hands.

Barry glanced back up the hillside. Shorty and Lansdowne were just coming in sight over the ridge. He wished Jimmy Soanes were with them. Jimmy was a good trailer and knew the coun-

try. But Jimmy had gone to town with Hogan's men.

It would be himself and Shorty who would take the trail. Lansdowne was too old for such work, after a night of fighting.

Tex showed no haste. Kent and Esther had some six hours' start on him. A few minutes more or less would make no difference.

"We'll go right afteh 'em," he told Mrs. Lansdowne. "They cain't get so far. I got a good hoss heah an' I can follow a trail. Me an' Sho'ty'll get 'em. You don't need to worry."

Mrs. Lansdowne had been through too many crises to lose her head now. She was as calm and practical as ever, despite her white face and the worried, helpless look in her eyes.

"You'll want breakfast," she said.

"I reckon it wouldn't hurt us none," Tex nodded, and forced a smile.

"I'll get you something."

Tex watched her hurrying up the walk and a mist came into his eyes. "Brave li'le woman," he murmured. "Theah's yo' true pioneer o' the West."

Lansdowne and Shorty rode up and he told them briefly what had happened. Lansdowne made no comment. Only the twitching of the muscles of his white face showed the shock Tex's news had been. Shorty cursed with quiet vindictiveness.

"We'll hang that skunk when we ketch him," the little prospector vowed. "An' we'll git him, too, if we have to track him to Mexico City."

"That is probably the direction he has taken," said the old cattleman. "Kent has spent considerable time in Mexico and he has undoubtedly headed for the border." His voice broke. "And I don't see how—they can make it. They've got nearly eighty miles—of the worst desert in the southwest to cross."

"They'll neveh cross it," Tex vowed. "We'll get 'em befo' they're halfway."

They went into breakfast. It was a silent meal. No time for talking now. No time for conjecturing. Eat and get on the trail.

Lansdowne wanted to go with them and Tex had difficulty in dissuading him. "You'll jest hold us back, seh. You ain't as young as you used to be, if you'll pahdon my sayin' so. An' I assuah you that me 'n' Sho'ty can handle this thing by ouahselves."

The cattleman at last gave in. He stood in the gateway, his arm about his wife, and watched them mount their horses. With tears in his eyes, he waved an encouraging hand as they rode away.

The trail was easy to follow in the dust of the road. Tex knew the tracks of Esther's buckskin and he soon picked out the tracks of Kent's black.

He was not greatly worried. He felt confident that in time he could run down Esther and her abductor. He prayed that the girl would be safe when he found her.

They rode in silence, this rangy cow-puncher and the diminutive prospector. There was little to talk about. Little to think about, either, save what was going to happen to Tom Kent when they had finally ridden him down.

"Whoah, theah!" Tex exclaimed sharply. "Kent got off his hoss heah. See the tracks?"

"Yeh," Shorty muttered. "An' went over behind that rock, leadin' the hosses. Guess he had somethin' cached there."

"He sho' did," Tex nodded. "Two canteens, from the looks o' things, an' somethin' else."

"Our three thousand in gold," Shorty growled.

"Of cou'se? What else? An' see, they turned off the road right past heah. Headed due south."

Shorty swore. "He's headin' for the border, all right. An' that means hell for all of us. She's shore rough coun-

try down there, son. 'Bout the roughest country I ever seen.

"Dry, too; almost no water. It ain't easy to follow tracks in that country, either. Too much rock. Our job is cut out for us, Tex."

"Then let's get it oveh with," Barry said shortly.

They turned south. After an hour's ride Tex began to realize the difficulties they faced. They had only a canteen of water apiece and no food. The very nature of their errand demanded fast traveling and the very nature of the country made speed almost impossible. The prospect was indeed discouraging.

The sun was unbearably hot and most of the time the trail was so rough that their horses could not travel faster than a walk. Several times, too, they lost the trail on rocky ledges. Precious minutes were consumed in finding it again.

The sun mounted higher and higher and the temperature rose until it seemed that living beings could not bear up under the weight of its stifling heat. Yet the two men pressed doggedly onward.

Patiently they searched for the trail when they lost it, which they did more and more frequently as the country grew rougher. They spoke rarely and then only when necessary; conserving their water and their mounts.

They both of them knew enough of the ways of the desert to realize the hugeness of the task they had taken upon themselves. Men of less sturdy stock would have turned back while there was yet time. For they realized that before much longer it would be too late to turn back.

They depended on Kent's trails leading them to water. If it did not, if the sheriff had contrived to carry enough water to last him all the way across the desert, well—Shorty and Tex would never get out of the trap they were rushing into. Neither horse

nor man could last long in that torrid country without water.

As they plunged deeper and deeper into this wild, forbidding, waste land, Tex realized that the success of their mission was going to depend more and more upon luck, upon eventualities over which they had no control.

They must be able to keep the trail. They must find water. Their mounts must hold up under the strain of the heat and a rough trail.

Then Shorty spoke and his words took the heart out of the Texan.

"See that sun, Tex?" the little man asked in a husky voice.

"Yeh. It looks dull."

"It means a sand storm. They have 'em all the time in this desert country. They're bad, Tex, damned bad. Many's the man that's been caught in 'em an' never pulled through."

Tex pulled up his horse. His face was haggard. "What you reckon we betteh do, Sho'ty?"

The old man found it hard to speak; his voice seemed choked. "I hate to say it, Tex. But we'd best go back. We'd best run for it while there's time."

Tex shook his head quietly. "I ain't goin' back, Sho'ty."

"Tex, once that sand storm hits us, it means the end o' the trail we been followin'. It'll be wiped out by the shiftin' sand in ten seconds.

"An' without no trail to follow, we wouldn't have a chance in the world o' findin' Kent an' Esther in this desert. We'd never find water, either. An' we can't go much further without water, Tex."

Again the Texan shook his head, slowly and with finality. "I ain't goin' back."

"Tex, if I didn't think it was our only way out I'd never suggest it," Shorty pleaded. "Once that storm hits us, we wouldn't have a chance.

"We not only wouldn't find Kent,

but we'd prob'ly lose our lives in the bargain. You never been in one o' these sandstorms, Tex. Yuh don't know what they can do."

"I reckon I'll go on, Sho'ty," Tex declared quietly.

Shorty ground his teeth. "Damn it all, Tex! Yuh'll jest be throwin' away yer life. Please, Tex! Don't do it."

"I got to go, Sho'ty. Theah's jest a chance that I'll be able to find 'em afteh the storm is oveh. If I don't—well—nothin' much will matteh then anyways."

Shorty wiped the beads of moisture from his forehead. He looked at his partner, swallowed, and gazed off toward the yellow haze that blanketed the desert to the southward.

"All right, Tex. If you're goin', I'm goin', too."

"No." Barry's tone was final. "There ain't no use o' both of us riskin' ouah lives. You get out o' this, Sho'ty. You head north and get back to the ranch as fast as you can. You can make it, if you go easy on yo' watch. You can get the boys togetheh and organize a real search.

"We went off half-cocked, Sho'ty, thinkin' we could follow their trail. We'd 'a' done it, too. We'd 'a' caught 'em with any kind o' luck. Now, with this storm comin' to wipe out the trail, we're goin' to need help. You get it. I'll go on."

Shorty swallowed again, audibly. "I can't desert yuh, Tex. Damn it all, we're pardners."

"I know it, Sho'ty. But I got to go on. An' you got to get the word back that we need help an' lots of it."

It was no time for argument and Shorty knew it. He knew, too, that once Tex made up his mind there was no hope of changing it. He held out his hand. "Good-by, Tex," he said hoarsely. "An' good luck, boy!"

They shook hands swiftly. "Good-by, pardneh. Take care o' yo'self."

Tex clucked to the mare, touched her flanks. Without looking back, he rode swiftly toward the great bank of yellow haze that was sweeping northward.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

A GOOD HORSE ACTS.

BARRY rode as swiftly as the nature of the country would permit, his mind already busy with his plans. The trail was plain before him. He would follow it as long as he was able, until the coming sand storm either blotted it out or made it impossible for him to see.

Then he would sit tight just where he was, wait until the storm passed and attempt to pick up the trail again. If the shifting sand had effectually erased it, as Shorty had said it would—well, time enough to think of that later.

And yet there was no wind. But the sky was darkening and the grayish-yellow cloud to the southward was sweeping nearer with incredible swiftness. Tex urged Ladybug forward at a breakneck pace, heedless of the dangers of the rough ground.

His eyes were ever on the tracks left by the black and the buckskin. He raced southward, dashing through arroyos and washes, over dunes of sand, around outcropped ledges, taking advantage of every second of grace.

Then, without warning save from the darkening sky, the wind swooped upon him. It seemed to come from every direction at once, roaring, growling, beating at him with its talons of flying sand.

The tracks he had been following disappeared in the welter of swirling dust. Ladybug stopped short. Her sleek flanks trembled. She pawed the ground and whinnied softly.

"Steady, girl!" Tex adjured. "Take it easy. They ain't nothin' to be afraid of. Jest sit tight an' it'll be passin'."

The mare pranced nervously. Tex

buttoned his shirt tightly about his neck and dismounted. The flying sand was worse close to the ground. It stung his face like hot cinders. It was almost unendurable. Tex stood it for a time, while he strove to calm his frightened horse, and then mounted again.

As the storm grew in violence, Tex realized how sensible Shorty had been in urging him to head north and get as near the edge of the desert as possible before the storm struck. The tracks he had been following were obliterated now. Even if they still existed, he could not see them in the murk of dust.

No hope now of trailing Esther further. No hope, either, of heading north until after the storm passed, for he had nothing to guide him. Almost impossible, too, to stay in one place, for the mare insisted on moving.

Hope died in Tex's heart. He gave up. He could combat a man, or a horse, or an ugly steer. But when the elements assailed him he was lost. He dampened his handkerchief, tied it over his mouth and gave Ladybug her head.

"Girl, it's up to you," he said in a muffled voice, while the flying sand smote him cruelly. "I don't know no'th from south. I'm lost, Ladybug, an' this is a mighty pore place to get lost in. If you can't help us, girl, I reckon we're out o' luck."

Ladybug whinnied, and broke into a trot, and stopped short and then went ahead at a walk. Head down and ears laid back against her head, she stumbled through the storm blindly, it seemed to Tex. Just a frightened horse, in a strange country, buffeted about by the roaring wind.

Barry's heart was dead in his breast. Somewhere out in that welter of heat and beating sand and misery was Esther. A frail young girl on a buckskin, following blindly behind a big man on a black, a man as blind and futile and helpless as Tex himself.

Where were they? Safe across the desert? Secure in some village over the border? Or had they been trapped, as he had been, in that wild fury of driving sand and dust?

He prayed that they were safe, that they had traveled fast enough through the night to be out of that mad wilderness. Despite all that that might mean, he prayed that they had gained a haven before the storm struck.

And Shorty? Where was he? Was he riding aimlessly through those whirling dust clouds? Or had he instinct enough, or had his horse instinct enough, to keep a true course to the north and safety?

Now, when it was too late, Tex regretted the action he had taken in pushing southward on that forlorn trail.

The storm, instead of abating, was growing in violence. His water was almost gone and his parched throat was crying for moisture. Ladybug, too, was tortured. She stumbled frequently, as a horse that is almost spent. Even when the storm passed, and it might continue for hours, how could he hope to get out of that wilderness? He had come too far.

Ladybug was too near gone. Without water they would be helpless in that burning, strength-sapping desert. And there was no water. None, at least, that he would be able to find.

They drifted, buffeted by the scorching wind and the welter of sand, for hours it seemed. Tex drank the last of his water. His tongue began to swell. His lips cracked until they bled. His eyes were red slits.

And still the mare drifted along, moving more and more slowly. Barry moved the saddle with difficulty. Consciousness, with its torture of doubts and uncertainties and misgivings, was gradually slipping away. Lungs parched by the hot dust, throat burning, mouth as dry and hard as the bare rocks of the desert, Tex rode on.

What an end to all his dreams and hopes and plans! That was the thought that kept recurring again and again. What an end! What a way to die! What a futile, needless death!

But a few short hours before life had meant so much: Esther; the claims in Phantom Canyon; Shorty; his friend; life and love and the fulfillment of dreams. And now all these had been swept away by a lone man and by a a desert sandstorm. Little things, taken alone. Now, together, they were to exact their toll: his life.

Then, through the daze of semi-consciousness, Barry realized that Ladybug was no longer moving. The discovery did not seem of great importance. Poor ol' Ladybug. Couldn't blame her much. She was as near gone as himself.

Without opening his smarting eyes, Tex reached out an unsteady hand toward the mare's neck. He felt nothing. He realized, dazedly, that her head was down, very low. Poor ol' Ladybug. Almost ready to drop.

Then a sound, barely audible above the whine of the now dying wind. It was as sweet a sound as ever came to the ears of a weary, thirsty man. The lapping splash of a spent horse drinking.

Barry slid out of the saddle and pawed the sand from his eyes. He realized now that the wind was abating. He could see for a dozen feet or more. And his smarting, bloodshot eyes beheld a water hole.

It was covered with floating dust. It was muddy and warm and uninviting. But Tex fell on his stomach on the damp ground and drank his fill.

Strange what a little muddy water can do to a man! Tex was laughing when he got to his feet. Laughing softly and happily, and maybe a bit hysterically. He threw his arm over Ladybug's neck.

"Good ol' girl! Good ol' Ladybug!

An' then they say that hosses are dumb crittens. Jest show me the man that could smell out watch like you've done. Lady, I won't neveh fo'get this.

"You saved ol' Tex's life to-day. Saved it when he was about ready to give up the ghost. An' ol' Tex is grateful, Ladybug. He won't fo'get."

The wind was rapidly abating. Tex washed his face, soaked his dust-caked hair with water and looked about.

He started. Not twenty feet away, where they stood regarding him and the mare curiously, were two horses. A black and a buckskin. They were saddleless and riderless.

The air hissed suddenly between Barry's clenched teeth. He knew those horses. He started to turn around. A hoarse voice behind him ordered tersely.

"Stand right where you are, Barry. I have you covered."

CHAPTER XXXV.

RETRIBUTION.

FOR a long moment Tex did not move. What a fool he had been! He might have known he would find Kent near water. And here he was, hitting a water hole through the grace of Heaven and Ladybug's keen nose, and promptly forgetting all about Kent in his eagerness to lap up the life-giving water.

Barry turned slowly, his sand-blasted eyes blazing with anger and chagrin.

A dozen paces away stood Tom Kent. A different Tom Kent than Barry had ever known. The sheriff was covered with dust. His eyes were red and his face was drawn and pale.

His shoulders sagged and there was a dispirited tilt to his head. And, strangely, he held no gun in his hand.

"I spoke as I did so as not to startle you into shooting," he said, in an odd, hollow tone. "I have no intention of fighting with you, Barry. If you want

to kill me, you may do so. I'm through. I'm beaten."

Barry's hand jerked spasmodically. If ever he had wanted to kill a man, this was the time, and the man. But there were other things that came first.

"Wheah is Estheh?" he demanded abruptly.

Kent nodded toward a jumble of boulders at the far side of the wash. "She's over there."

"Hurt?" Tex cried.

"Practically unconscious. From exhaustion. But I think she'll pull through."

Barry started in the direction Kent had indicated. The sheriff fell into step beside him.

"We rested here early this morning," Kent explained in a weary, dead voice. "I dropped off to sleep. She woke up and got away on her horse. Mine followed—I couldn't go after her.

"Then the storm came. Half an hour ago the horses drifted back here. Must have smelled water. Esther was nearly dead. I've been reviving her."

Tex might not have heard the dull voice of the sheriff for all the heed he paid him. He found Esther lying on a blanket in the shade of the pile of rock. Kent had been bathing her face.

It was parched and swollen. Barry dropped to his knees beside the still form. The girl was breathing evenly. Her eyes were closed, but now and then her lips moved.

"Just the sight of her, the realization that I almost caused her death, has taken the heart out of me," Kent said brokenly. "I don't believe I realized what I was doing until a little while ago when she came into view out of the storm. She collapsed in my arms. I've done all I can for her."

Tex raised his head. There was fire in his eyes now. His voice was hoarse with accusation.

"Yeh, you've done all you can fo' her! Kidnapin' her like this! Bringin'

her down into this hell! Kent, as suah as they's a Heaven, I ought to kill you wheah you stand."

Kent's chin descended to his chest. "I'll never raise a hand to stop you. Barry. I've done wrong and I know it. I've risked Esther's life, almost caused her death.

"I deserve killing and worse. But you love Esther. You realize, maybe, what a man will do when he loves a woman."

"Yeh, that's like a skunk! Offerin' excuses! Jest as though they was any excuse fo' this kind o' thing."

"No, Barry. I'm not offering excuses. There is no excuse for what I have done. I know I was a little drunk when I did this and I think it quite possible that I was a little crazy. But when I saw Esther, when she collapsed in my arms—well, I'm no longer crazy. I realize perfectly well what I've done and I'm willing to take the consequences."

Tex glanced at Esther. She was murmuring something now and her eyes were opening a little. She would be all right before long; there was little doubt of that. Barry glanced up at the drawn face of the sheriff.

"Kent, you know what those boys'll do when we get back?"

"I can imagine," Kent nodded wearily.

"They'll string you up to the nearest tree."

"I deserve it," said the sheriff with a hopeless shrug.

"Want to go back?"

"That's up to you."

Tex thought a moment while his eyes rested on the still form on the blanket. Esther was safe. Hefty Hogan was dead. His band of outlaws was in jail.

The claims were secure. The future, for all the hell of the past, was rosy-tinted. Perhaps he could afford to be magnanimous.

"Kent, theah's yo' hoss. Take one

canteen an' clear out. You can head no'th or south. I ain't particular. If yuh head no'th, you'll find a noose waitin' fo' yuh. If yuh head south yuh may get clear. Take yo' choice."

"I'll head south."

"Suit yo'self."

"Thanks, Barry." The sheriff turned away, a weary, beaten man. Then he paused. "That gold that Hogan took. You'll find it in a saddle-bag by the water-hole."

He passed on, out of sight around the rocks. And out of the lives of Esther and Tex Barry.

The girl came to slowly. Tex bathed her face, forced water carefully between her parched lips and talked to her softly. Her eyes opened. The light of understanding came into them. Tex's heart was gladdened.

"Tex!" she murmured. "Dear old Tex! Is it really you?"

"No one else but, girl," Barry grinned happily. "How you feelin', honey?"

She forced a smile. "Not too good. And not too bad. What has happened? Where are we, Tex?"

"We're at a watch hole down in the desert. Across the line, I reckon. But the storm is oveh an' we won't have no trouble gettin' back.

"We'll head due no'th an' we cain't miss. That is, when yo' feelin' betteh and are able to sit a hoss. Now you jest rest a while an' take it easy."

Esther raised herself to one elbow and looked around. "Why, this is where we stopped this morning. How did I get back here?"

Tex grinned broadly and shrugged. "Reckon yuh was ridin' a wise li'le hoss, honey."

"And Tom?"

"He's headin' south."

The girl's eyes widened. "You don't mean——"

"No, nothin' like that. I mean head-in' south literally. I let him go. Which is mo' than a lot o' our friends would have done. Don't know but what I got right soft-hearted."

"I'm glad, Tex. I wouldn't want any man killed on account of me. He didn't harm me. And after all, he couldn't have been in his right mind. I'm glad you let him go."

Esther lay back on the blanket and gazed up into the blue eyes of the man who bent over her. She was silent for a time, and when she spoke her voice was low, reverent.

"Tex, it must have been fate that brought me back to the water hole. And brought you to me here."

Tex grinned into her eyes and stooped and kissed her gently.

"Honey, I reckon it was."

Fate—it sounded nice and romantic. And yet Tex was more inclined to give the credit to the instincts of two thirsty, frightened, wind-buffed horses—a buckskin gelding and a chestnut mare.

THE END.



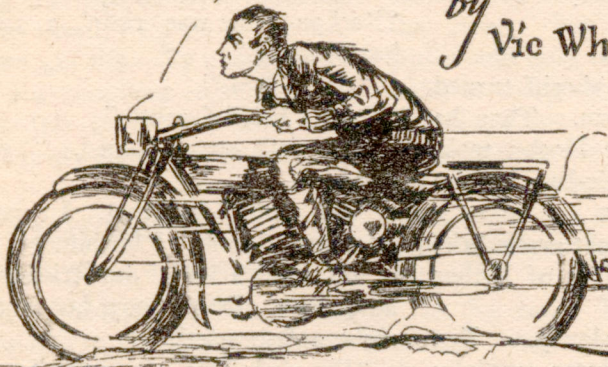
JUST BY CHANCE

THE telescope, it is said, was invented by accident. A spectacle maker, in Holland, happened to hold two lenses, one in each hand, parrallel with each other. Just by chance he looked through both lenses at the steeple of a near-by church. Much to his surprise, the weathercock on the steeple appeared nearer and more distinct.

He fitted the lenses in a tube, in order to keep them the same distance apart. The result, of course, was a telescope.

Call A Cop

by Vic Whitman



(COMPLETE NOVELETTE)

CHAPTER I.

"PULL OVER THERE!"

AROUND the corner and onto one of the city's main avenues roared a tan motorcycle of the police department. The machine was slanting at an angle that looked dangerous as it took the corner, but such a way of doing things was quite characteristic of its driver. Anything that savored of risk was meat and drink to Officer Bill Prince, the youngest, hardest-riding, most devil-may-care man on the force.

Many of the motorcycle police are not particularly impressive as they ride their machines, appearing merely as efficient units of the service. But Bill Prince was distinctly individual. To find a single descriptive word to fit him one would rack his brains and inevitably select "rakish."

The snug-fitting, olive-tan uniform, the gleaming tan puttees and wide belt, the uniform cap cocked on one side of the head—these things set off to perfection the rangy, graceful physique. They served to emphasize the carefree look in the level gray eyes. Well might Officer Bill Prince have been a modern

cavalier as he gave the throttle another twist in pursuit of the big limousine ahead of him.

The limousine was not going too fast, but Prince followed it because he knew who was in it. He was hoping that the driver might do something to warrant rebuke. That would be good sport, and Prince's white teeth showed in a broad grin as he thought of it.

For six blocks he trailed the car and then the something happened. The driver swung onto an arterial highway without slowing for the big "stop" sign. The grin on Officer Prince's smooth face broadened as he fed more gas into the carburetor. The driver, he knew, was nearsighted.

He sped alongside the car and waved an autocratic hand. "All right in there!" he called gruffly. "Pull over to the curb!" The driver, a well-preserved, authoritative looking old gentleman, peered over his glasses, frowned, and obeyed. Prince stopped, kicked down the guard rest of his machine, and sauntered over to the car, tall and debonaire.

"Got any brakes on this hack?" he inquired casually.

The old gentleman recognized him

—his own son—and greeted him with an angry roar. "You young cub! Of all the infernal impudence I ever saw!"

Officer Prince had all he could do to keep from grinning. "Not impudence, dad, but duty," he replied. "You went over that 'stop' sign back there at full speed ahead. Mustn't do things like that or we'll have to spank."

His glance went past his irate parent to the beautifully dressed girl sitting in the front seat. In repose her expression was somewhat haughty, although just now she was having a hard time to restrain her laughter. Officer Prince winked at her, and looked briefly at the young man with the restless eyes who sat in the back seat. To him he gave a curt nod.

"Stopping me just for a thing like that!" snorted the elder Prince. "You never did have a grain of sense in your head, and I don't think you ever will have! I've a mind to report this to headquarters!"

Bill Prince removed his goggles and began wiping the dust from them. "Report away, dad," he said cheerfully. "And let me add that the next time I see you cut a 'stop' sign you'll have a chance to report it in person. You never were a good driver, but I think you're getting worse every day."

The dapper young man snickered; then subsided and grew very red in the face under Bill Prince's cool stare. Prince had never tried to conceal his dislike for Rankin, the cashier in his father's bank. There was something too suave about Rankin.

The girl laughed as she regarded the motorcycle officer. "How perfectly killing!" she exclaimed. "Bill Prince dictating to his own father! Bill, you're positively funny!"

He smiled slightly. "So I've heard you say before, Carol," he replied. "I'm getting used to it now."

He looked appreciatively at the cool beauty of her face. There was a vague

understanding that some day he would marry Carolyn Mercer, and that understanding suited Prince's father perfectly. Carolyn would make the ideal wife for a man of affairs such as the elder Prince had reckoned on his son's being. Carolyn was deliberate and had exquisite poise. Already she was marked as a social leader. She would be just the one to curb the younger Prince's headlong spirit.

Although Bill Prince thought a lot of her, he had never gone by the rules his father made for him. Democratic to the point of being a roughneck and always ready for anything that offered in the way of diversion, his life through school and college had been made up of one scrap after another—things that tried the hectic old gentleman's temper and check book.

Out of college he had refused the various offers of bond salesman, brokerage alliances, and banking positions produced by his football reputation and his father's influence. He had jumped at the chance to get on the police force as a motorcycle man. Police Chief Ditmar and Commissioner Grady, both football enthusiasts, had talked the matter over before speaking to him.

"He's a wild lad," said Grady doubtfully, "but I guess there's good stuff in him."

"Darn right there's good stuff in him!" Chief Ditmar asserted vigorously. "There's got to be in anybody who can smash a line the way he can. As for the wildness, it's all good, clean and healthy, and I wouldn't give two snaps of my fingers for the young chap who didn't have a touch of it. Makes more substantial men out of 'em. I think we can get him because he wants an outdoor life of action. And we need a little young stock in the department."

There had been quite a flurry when the son of Gerald Prince became a cop. Society stood aghast, and then laughed tolerantly. It was just another of Bill

Prince's escapades. He was just doing it for a joke; he had taken the job to ease his let down from four years of hard athletic training. He was, of course, too irresponsible to make an officer of the law.

The city papers all carried columns about him, and one of them ran his picture under the caption: The Society Cop. Instantly the name was taken up by all who knew Bill Prince and he met it wherever he went.

Carolyn Mercer had laughed with the rest at first, then had sobered. In the course of a few weeks she found out that Bill Prince was taking his work almost seriously, and that his desire was to stay in the service and work up from the ranks. Learning this did not destroy her interest in him, but it brought on some coolness. A common policeman! It was just a bit too much.

Yet as she looked out at him now she had to admit that he certainly did look stunning, sun-browned and husky.

"Give me a call soon, Bill," she said; adding mockingly: "That is, if you're not too busy arresting people. And don't arrest any one in our bunch for Heaven's sake, or it will all come back on me."

"I won't trouble them if they behave themselves, Carol," he grinned. But despite the grin her remark grated on him a bit.

CHAPTER II.

COP—WOP—KID.

HIS father cut in again. "Seems to me that you might do something useful instead of stopping people in this asinine way. But I imagine it would be impossible for you to do anything useful."

Officer Prince laughed. He enjoyed getting his father riled. That the old gentleman considered him something of a black sheep he knew, but he suspected that there was a fondness beneath the gruff surface.

"I'm being useful right now," the young officer said, "particularly when I'm dealing with such a menace to the pedestrian as you are, dad. Now remember, the next time you come to a street intersection give your brakes a work-out."

The angry whir of the big car as it shot away from the curb answered him. Sitting his motorcycle with unconscious grace, leaning on one handlebar, Bill Prince watched the car out of sight. The old boy sure was mad, but that wouldn't hurt him any. He wondered where they were going. Probably out to the country club for golf.

Bill Prince sighed. He rather envied them. It had been some time since he'd felt the tingle of smacking a ball far down the fairway. And Carol—he'd have to see her soon. It seemed that Rankin, the rat, was hanging around her.

As the big limousine passed from sight, Bill Prince turned his machine and rode down to River Street. It was the tenement section of the city and it was squalid. Ramshackle buildings of splotched red brick occupied one side of the narrow street, buildings of dismal windows, dark, rickety stairs, and dingy fire escapes on which were stretched innumerable clotheslines.

"A tough life, that," soliloquized Officer Prince as his eyes recorded the details. "Glad I don't have it."

He was sorry for the people who lived in those dirty tenements, but his pity was not deep. One cannot appreciate poverty unless he has known it.

A well-laden fruit cart caught his eye and he stopped. "Hello, Tony," he said. "How much for those apples?"

"Five da cent to mos'," grinned the olive-skinned proprietor. "I guess to da s'ciety cop ten da cent—hey?"

"I guess not," retorted Prince good-naturedly. "Tony, you're a born price raiser. You ought to be in the pants business."

He removed a gauntlet and fished in his pocket for some money. Grinning, Tony picked out the biggest apple, rubbed it on a piece of cloth until it glistened, and held it out. Prince took it, bit into it, and shook his head.

"I don't like it," he said gravely. "How's chances to swap it for an orange, Tony? There's only one bite gone."

The Italian laughed in the quick, convulsive manner of his race. "Ha!" he chuckled. "I t'ink you be boss da pants business, Mist' Prince."

Bill Prince laughed. "You win, Tony," he said. "On the strength of that I'll take another apple."

It appeared that Tony had eyes in the back of his head. Of a sudden he whirled and clutched at something down over the other side of the cart.

"Ha, you li'le da bum!" he jabbered. "Dis time I raisa da devil!" Around the cart he hauled a shrinking, ragged boy who was trying to squirm away.

"He steala da fruit!" Tony chattered on angrily. "One, two, t'ree, four time, and now I nab heem! Li'le da bum! You peench heem, Mist' Prince?"

Officer Prince inspected the boy. He was somewhere around thirteen or fourteen, he judged, but because he was a product of the slums he was no bigger than a boy of ten. Grimy, pale, wearing stockings that had many holes and shoes that were the cast-offs of some one much larger, he looked down at the sidewalk and said nothing.

"Wait a minute, Tony," said Prince. He addressed the boy: "What's the idea, sonny, trying to get away with the fruit?"

The boy shook his head sullenly, but made no reply. "Do you know what happens to boys who do that?" asked Prince sternly.

Still no answer other than that barely perceptible movement of the head. Prince bit his lip. This urchin was a

tough little egg. He'd have to be to attempt a theft with a policeman almost within arm's length. In River Street they hardened early and stayed that way until the jail softened them up a little.

A crowd started to gather around, and Prince glanced up and down the street for a patrolman. It was a matter for the man on the beat to handle, if possible. He'd turn the matter over to the patrolman and let him take the kid to the Children's Court.

Through the group of curious loungers came a girl. Officer Prince watched her, interest in his eyes. She was simply dressed, but she wore her clothes with natural, easy grace. Clear blue eyes that were always ready to shine with laughter spoke of the honesty, nerve, and sweetness that went hand in hand with the physical health evidenced in the color of her cheeks.

She looked briefly at Tony and Prince; then addressed the boy: "Jimmy, you haven't been taking things that don't belong to you, have you? Tell me!"

No answer, but a restless shuffling of the worn shoes. "Way, Jimmy!"

The urchin's stolid reserve melted before her low, reproachful tone. Defensively he burst out: "Well, pop ain't been workin' for a week, an' I ain't had nothin' to eat since yesterday noon."

Officer Prince rubbed at his strong jaw. That was tough. He'd have to look into the matter. And what a little queen this girl would be if she were dressed in the clothes of Carolyn Mercer.

"But, Jimmy, why didn't you come around and see me?" the girl asked quietly. "Don't you know I'm there to help you?"

She put an arm around his thin shoulders. Tears appeared in his eyes, and suddenly he was sobbing convulsively.

"Aw, gee, Miss Gilbert," he choked,

"whaddye wanna go an' make a guy feel like a nickel for!"

She patted his shoulder comfortingly, and looked up at Officer Prince.

"Will you turn him over to me?" she asked. "Please!"

He appeared to consider. "You're a settlement worker?"

"Yes."

Inexperienced as he was in such things, common sense told Bill Prince that a settlement worker could do far more good in this case than he could.

"It's all right with me," he agreed.

Tony began to splutter. "Who pay for da fruit dis keed he peench?" he demanded excitedly. "Five, seex, nine, ten apple he swipe."

Prince dug for more money. "Ought to make it an even dozen while you're at it, Tony," he observed, tossing a coin to the Italian. "Here's four bits. Keep your shirt on, now, or I'm liable to ask you for your license."

"See that, Jimmy?" said Miss Gilbert, quick to take advantage of the incident. "The officer is paying for the apples, and making you a present of them. And you never liked policemen, either. Now what do you think?"

The urchin hesitated, his eyes wandering with some suspicion over the rangy figure of Bill Prince. Obviously such benevolence on the part of the law was new and strange to him.

In a stage whisper, intended for the ears of Miss Gilbert alone, he hissed: "Any cop that'll do that must have crossed wires in his roost."

Officer Prince choked over his apple and turned his head away that he might cough the better. And Miss Gilbert bit hard on her lip as she noted the red creeping into the sun-browned cheeks.

"Jimmy!" she reproved. "That's not a bit nice!"

Prince felt that it was time for him to speak. "Young man," he said with mock severity, "I firmly believe that you and I were destined to be buddies.

What do you say we shake on it and agree not to pinch any more apples?"

The urchin pondered this, still not knowing what to make of it. But it was hard for man, woman, or child to resist Bill Prince.

A slow grin appeared on the wide mouth. "Say, I guess you're pretty reg'lar at that," he exclaimed, and put out a grimy hand.

Miss Gilbert smiled. "Now run along home, Jimmy," she directed. "Get a basket and come right down to the house with it, do you understand?"

The boy nodded, grinned once more at Prince, and started happily for the shabby room or two that he called home. Miss Gilbert turned bright eyes of gratitude upon Officer Prince.

CHAPTER III.

A SOCIETY "PINCH."

"It was wonderful of you to do that," she declared. "They seem to think that all officers are their natural enemies. Jimmy will remember your shaking hands with him for a long, long time."

Prince reddened. "Oh, that's all right," he said hastily. "I used to be a holy terror when I was a kid, and that's why I was easy on him. Pinched everything I could lay my hands on, I guess."

Miss Gilbert laughed. "Don't let Jimmy know that," she warned, "or he'll think he can, too. But you never had to steal for food the way he did."

Prince's grin died away. "No, I never did," he agreed. "That sure must be tough. Are there many families like Jimmy's that don't have enough to eat?"

She glanced at him as if surprised that he should ask such a question. "Too many," she replied briefly.

"And you feed 'em all?"

She shrugged. "We do the best we can on what money we have. Sometimes we have to scrape to make both

ends meet, but we usually do it somehow."

"H'm." Officer Prince became thoughtful. "Do you like your work?"

"I adore it," she said simply. "There's something about doing for people like these that—well, I can't explain it, but it seems to bring contentment. Just a short while ago I saw a girl driving along in a big limousine. She was beautifully dressed, and apparently used to the best of everything, but I don't believe she's half so happy as I am."

Bill Prince nodded. "I don't either," he said with conviction. "You're refreshing."

Her red lips curved amusedly. "Thank you," she said half mockingly. "That's quite a compliment, coming from Mr. William Prince."

Bill groaned. "Oh, heavens!" he muttered. "I thought I was getting away with it!"

Miss Gilbert smiled. "Certainly not. I read the papers."

Officer Prince sighed. "Well, go ahead then. Get it over with."

"Get what over with?"

"Aren't you going to spring something about the society cop?"

She inspected him frankly. "No, I don't think I am. I'll admit that when I read of your becoming an officer I thought you were doing it for a joke, and I rather resented it as making light of the police department. You see, we try to cooperate with the police all we can. But now that you've been so nice about Jimmy, I've changed my opinion." She glanced at her watch. "I must be running along, or I won't meet Jimmy."

An idea came to Bill Prince. "Say, how about seeing you ag—ah—is there any chance of me going around with you sometimes when I'm off duty? I'd like to look over the conditions in this district."

"I'd love to have you," said Miss

Gilbert. "It might be a revelation to you."

"It would," nodded Bill Prince. "Would to-night be all right?"

"Well, yes, about eight o'clock."

"Fine! Where'll I find you?"

"At the Community House," she told him. "Just ask for Miss Gilbert, Patsy Gilbert." With a bright little nod she left, hurrying down the street.

Patsy! Bill Prince repeated the name to himself as he started his motor cycle and rode on through River Street. He liked the sound of it, and it seemed to fit her to perfection. Patsy! He tried mixing it with the name Carol, but the two didn't seem to jibe. He shook his head. Undoubtedly he thought a lot of Carol, but it was fun to talk with the spirited, philosophical little Patsy Gilbert.

And she, too, had wondered about the society cop—whether or not he took his work seriously. Well, perhaps he hadn't, but from now on he sure would. If the occasion ever developed he would show a lot of people that he could handle it adequately.

His father didn't think he could do anything useful. Prince nodded rather grimly. His father might have another think coming one of these days. Too, Chief Ditmar was confident that he had the makings of a good service man in him, and he couldn't violate that confidence.

With a rush and a roar a long, stripped-down roadster shot by him, its cut-out wide open.

From one of the low bucket seats a blond head protruded and a girl shrieked: "Wahoo, Bill Prince! Try and catch us!"

Then the car was well down the road and going a mile a minute. Into Bill Prince's gray eyes came the light of battle.

"Young Tommy Mercer driving wild again," he muttered. "Well, this is the last time, sister or no sister."

He twisted the throttle and the motorcycle seemed trying to shoot out from under him. Sitting the machine like a centaur, Prince raced after the roadster. Despite his anger at the young driver ahead, the thrill of the chase seized him. Speed! action!—it was a man's life, and he loved it. Never would the spirit of the daredevil be quite suppressed in Bill Prince, and it rose to the surface at moments like this when he could feel the sweep of a seventy-mile wind in his face.

It took him two miles to overhaul the roadster, but overhaul it he did. Laughing, young Tommy Mercer saw the motorcycle draw abreast, and still laughing he slowed by the side of the road.

"I'll hand it to you, Bill," he called. "You did it, but you had to go some."

Prince's mouth was set grimly as he went over to the car. "Yes, I did, didn't I, you blithering young idiot!" he snapped. "You'll have to go some, too, to get out of what I'm going to give you! I've warned you three times and that's twice too much for anybody nineteen years old.

"This time you're going in to pay your fine for speeding and reckless driving. Not only that but I'm going to recommend that you have your license taken away from you."

Tommy Mercer's grin became sickly. "Have a heart, Bill!" he pleaded. "I was only kidding."

Prince nodded unsmilingly. "Well, I'm not. In you go."

The girl, a slip of a thing with tousled bobbed hair, became scornful of eye and lip. "Oh, don't bother with him, Tommy!" she flared. "He's just like all cops—forgets his friends just as soon as he gets a little power! The society cop! Blah!"

That appellation was beginning to get irritating. But Bill Prince smiled sweetly at her. He knew her to be the daughter of a prominent architect, a

girl who had always had her own way in everything.

"Try growing up, Dot," he advised calmly. "It's lots of fun, really."

As if her words had given him a new thought, Tommy Mercer went on reproachfully: "You used to drive like the devil, Bill, and you know darned well you did."

"Sure I did," Bill Prince agreed. "But I never used to whine about it when a cop took me in." He wrote rapidly on a ticket, and handed the motorist's half to Tommy. "Now, after this, whenever I tell you a thing three times, maybe you'll believe it."

He mounted his motorcycle, kicked back the starting pedal, and rode away with the girl's angry "Bunk!" in his ears. He'd hated to give young Tommy that ticket, but it was the only way the kid would ever get to realize he didn't own the road.

Bill Prince knew. He'd thought he'd owned a few roads himself, until a half dozen motorcycle cops taught him that he didn't. Funny how things worked out. Not so long ago he looked at things from the speeder's standpoint. Now that he saw them with the eyes of the department they looked entirely different.

CHAPTER IV.

WHERE POVERTY ABIDES.

HE anticipated increased coolness from Carol on account of Tommy, but he didn't anticipate the phone call he got from his father when he went off duty that night and was shaving in the police barracks. Some time ago he had decided to live at the barracks. If he stayed at his father's mansion the men might think he considered himself above them, and he wanted to be on comradely terms with them all.

"Hear you pulled young Mercer in for speeding," came his father's gruff voice over the wire. "What the devil's got into you, anyway?"

Bill grinned into the transmitter. "Nothing much, dad," he answered. "Why? Trying to get him out of it?"

His father snorted. "Me? Hell's bells, no! Just wanted to confirm what I heard. Carol just phoned me. She'll probably call you in a few minutes. She's wild. So you did take that young roustabout after all? Humph! Must be that a grain of sense is trickling into that head of yours! You always were such a dog-goned fool, though, that it's hard to believe."

"Maybe I'm the son of my father," grinned Prince. "How's everything at the bank, dad?"

"Rotten," snapped the elder Prince. "Signs of a business depression in sight. May not break for some time, and may break next week. Drop around and see me some time. I can't believe that you're making good as a cop, but I'm beginning to have hopes. That's all!"

No sooner had Prince hung up the receiver than the phone buzzed again imperatively. "Now for it," he thought, adding aloud into the mouthpiece, "Hello?"

"I want to speak to Officer William Prince," came the answer in a voice of ice.

"This is Officer William Prince speaking," said Bill. "What's on your mind, Carol?"

"Oh, it's you! Kindly explain what your idea was in arresting Tommy."

"Kindly explain what Tommy's idea was in going by me at sixty miles an hour," countered Bill Prince.

"Oh, don't talk that way!" she said impatiently. "It's all right to joke about it, but the joke has gone far enough. Please do whatever is necessary to be done so that Tommy won't have to go to court."

Oddly, just then, a picture of a ragged urchin stealing fruit for food came into Officer Prince's mind. His tone into the transmitter grew silken.

"No, Carol, I'm not going to do anything about it."

"What!"

"Not a thing."

A pause, and then the click of a receiver. Bill Prince hung up thoughtfully. It rather hurt to have Carol take on that attitude.

"You hate that phone, don't you?" grumbled Motorcycle Officer John Heeney who had been waiting to use it to call his sweetheart out at the Four Corners. "What you'd oughta been is a chorus girl."

Abstractedly, Prince rumpled the little officer. "Take it back," he insisted. "Take it back or I'll put you under the shower, clothes and all."

"I take it back," chuckled Heeney, panting. "What you'd oughta been is two chorus girls."

"Hey, you guys!" called an irate patrolman who was trying to get a few winks before he went on the night shift. "Whaddye think this is, a bull pen? Pipe down, will you?"

"Shut up, Johnny!" said Prince reprovingly. "Can't you see that Officer O'Leary wants to sleep?"

"Shut up yourself!" retorted Heeney. "'Tis you who're making all the noise and keepin' Officer O'Leary awake."

Intent to kill was in the eyes of the patrolman as he reached over the side of his bunk for his heavy boots, but before he could wind up, Heeney and Prince fled grinning down the stairs.

Prince's mood changed after he had made several visits in River Street with Patsy Gilbert. He had heard about cases of extreme poverty, but now he was seeing them first hand. A family of seven, for example, living in two small, close, dirty rooms—that was something he had seen only in the movies.

The mother of the family was thin and scrawny from years of unceasing toil, and her vision was restricted by

the four walls of work that encompassed her and always would encompass her. Yet she was not entirely hopeless.

"We'll be movin' into a bigger place soon," she told Patsy, while wide-eyed children stared unwaveringly at Bill Prince. "The Reillys on the second floor are leavin' the first of the month, and we're goin' in there. They've got three rooms." She sighed with anticipation. "It'll be lots better when we've got three rooms," she finished.

Bill Prince stared. From the way the woman spoke it seemed that those three rooms were the complete measure of her happiness. Slow shame coursed through the listening officer as he recalled the elegantly appointed suite he had had through college.

"Won't that be fine!" enthused Patsy. "Then perhaps you'll let me come to see you once in a while and help with the cooking, Mrs. Annis."

A tired smile of appreciation lighted the woman's lined face. "You're so good," she sighed. "I don't know what we'd do without you, Miss Gilbert."

Two doors down the hall a young widow was living with her baby of two years. One old chair, a bed, a bureau that looked to be falling apart, and a portable stove comprised the furniture.

Miss Gilbert cooed carefully over the sleeping infant, and took from her bag a toy.

"From Aunt Patsy, Mrs. Flynn," she said, putting a comforting arm around the widow. "And if you want to call at Mr. Douglas' store I think he'll have work for you. I'll be glad to stay with the baby while you're gone."

A tear appeared in the young mother's eyes, and she clung to Patsy Gilbert, unable to talk.

"All right, honey," soothed Patsy, mothering the woman. "Things are going to be a lot nicer for us from now on."

It occurred to Bill Prince that he was

seeing life for the first time, really seeing it. It was service that Patsy Gilbert was giving and getting happiness in return. Queer, when most of the people he had known tried to avoid giving whole-hearted offerings of good will. But then, were they happy? That was the question; were they happy?

A bag of food came next for a destitute family of four, and the wistful, famished looks on the faces of the little group brought a lump into Bill Prince's throat. And when Patsy Gilbert served them, the while laughing and joking with them, Prince turned his head away.

"I didn't know it was like that," he told her afterward, as they strolled back toward the community house.

She glanced appraisingly up at him. "Not much like society, is it?" she said quietly. "Perhaps you think I'm foolish to be doing what I can for them."

"Foolish! I think you're an angel!"

Patsy laughed lightly. "Oh, heavens, no. Anything but that."

He was silent for a moment, then: "Don't those people have any money at all?"

Patsy nodded. "Oh, yes. Those were extreme cases we saw to-night. A good many of the people here in River Street have small accounts with the City Trust Co. It's never very much but it's all they have."

Prince pursed his lips thoughtfully. The City Trust was his father's bank. Before, he had regarded it merely as an establishment where people borrowed and deposited money, but now it took on new significance. In a way it had become the guardian of the people of River Street.

"H'm," he said, his eyes on a group of half-clad children who were trying to play hide and seek in the dusty street. "I wonder what it's all about, anyway."

He left Patsy Gilbert at the commun-

ity house steps. "Honestly, I appreciate this," he told her earnestly. "I'd like to come down again if you'll let me. You know, somehow, just going around to those places made me realize that there's a lot of responsibility to my job. Sort of as though we cops were protectors instead of officials. Funny way to put it, but——"

"I understand perfectly," said Patsy quietly. She gave him one small hand. "I'm glad, too, awfully glad, and you certainly may come down again, any time you care to."

CHAPTER V.

DISTURBING NEWS.

HE stood there by the steps until Patsy had gone in the door. Then with a sigh that was half-unconsciousness he turned away.

Going by a small shop he glanced in, stopped suddenly, and looked more closely. Rankin was in there and he was buying something. Prince saw what it was, and whistled softly.

"Now that's blamed queer," he muttered, frowning. "Why should he come down here for that? He must be up to something. Humph! I wouldn't trust that guy as far as I could throw him."

Some instinct told him that the cashier hadn't better see him there, so he passed on, musing. Rankin might be a crack financial man and all that, but he had queer ways of doing things.

It was about a week later that he saw Rankin just getting out of Carol Mercer's car in front of the City Trust Co. Carol saw Prince and waved, beckoning him over. So he circled about and drew up alongside her car, as Rankin went into the bank.

"Bill," she said reproachfully, "you haven't phoned me in a long time, do you know it?"

He shut off his motor and leaned on the handlebars. "I thought you were off me for life, Carol."

"Oh, that." She laughed. "Bill, I'm truly sorry about the way I acted. But at the time I *did* think you might do something for Tommy."

Officer Prince shook his head. "Sorry, Carol, but I thought he needed the lesson." His glance went to the wide doors of the bank. "Waiting for the bozo?" he inquired casually.

"The bozo?"

"Rankin. I see he just got out of the car."

Carol colored slightly. "Oh, no, I've just been driving him around a bit on some business calls. They were quite important, I believe."

Bill Prince pricked up his ears. He happened to know that his father handled all the important business calls of the bank himself.

"That so?" he said casually. "Who were the men?"

"Don't be curious, Bill."

"Oh, I'm not," he answered. "I was just wondering how important they were, that's all."

"Why, he talked with Crane and Griffith and one or two others. They're big enough men, aren't they? They ought to satisfy you!"

Prince nodded. Crane and Griffith were two of the bank's biggest depositors. He was sure that his father would have dealt with them himself. Of course, though, there was the possibility that his father had been hindered in some way from attending to them personally. He shrugged.

"Yes, they're big enough," he replied. "Quite."

His eyes strayed over her. Expensively dressed, beautiful to look at, Carol Mercer would make a wife to be proud of so far as things social were concerned. He wondered.

"Carol," he said suddenly, "what are you doing for the next few minutes?"

She looked at her dainty wrist watch. "Nothing particularly, Bill," she answered. "Why?"

"Trail along behind me, will you?" he requested.

"Where to?"

"I'm going down through the River Street district."

Her eyes widened. "River Street! What in the world do you want me to go down there for!"

"I'll tell you some time. Will you come?"

She smiled, and Prince knew she was thinking that it was merely another prank of his.

"Yes, I'll go," she said.

He rode slowly so that she could follow him easily. In River Street he stopped not far from Tony's fruit cart. Behind him, Carol Mercer drew her car in to the curb, her nose wrinkled in disdain at the surroundings.

"Don't like it, do you?" observed Officer Prince calmly, sauntering over.

"Of course I don't like it!" she retorted. "It's very disgusting."

He nodded. "I don't suppose for a minute that you'd consider working in a place like this, would you, Carol?"

She shuddered as she looked about her. "Work here among these cattle!" she exclaimed. "Don't be ridiculous, Bill!"

He smiled. "Cattle, you say," he murmured. "Did you ever stop to think that they are people like you and me?"

She stared as though she thought him crazy. "What on earth is the matter with you! Did you get me here just to ask me that?"

"I sure did, Carol," he nodded. "That's the exact reason." A hand tugged at his sleeve, and he turned to see little Jimmy, as dirty and as grimy as ever, grinning up at him.

"Well, well, if it isn't my buddy," said Bill Prince. "Carol, this is Jimmy, a very personal friend of mine."

The boy grinned up at the beautiful lady, quite ready to worship at the shrine of his big friend, the cop. But the lady's nose was held high in the air.

"Bill Prince, you're getting to be positively impossible!" she declared heatedly. "Making a friend of a little brat like that—ugh! Really, I'm afraid you're going lower in the scale every day!"

She started her car and left precipitately. Bill Prince's hand tightened on the shoulder of little Jimmy.

"She may think that we're going lower," he confided to the boy, "but we know we're going higher, aren't we, Jimmy?"

Jimmy nodded vigorously. He didn't know what it was all about, but whatever this big cop said was all right to him.

"You bet," he said, and hesitated. "I guess she ain't very reg'lar, is she?" he asked finally.

Officer Prince sighed. "No, Jimmy, I guess she's not," he said. "I'm afraid she's not a bit regular." He sighed again. "But that doesn't prevent us from putting away a good big ice cream, does it?"

Jimmy glowed and wriggled. "Ice cream! Say, you ain't kiddin'? Honest, I ain't had no ice cream for so long that I've forgot what it tastes like."

And as Bill Prince watched the boy's delight over the heaping dish of ice cream that the clerk in the little delicatessen store put before him, he became positive that he was going higher in the scale of things.

It was perhaps an hour later that he met Officer John Heeney.

"Your father just went into headquarters," he said quickly. "He was lookin' as white as a sheet. Thought you'd like to know."

Something had gone wrong at the bank. Prince's mouth became grim. "Thanks, John," he said. "I'll go right up."

He made headquarters in record time. Inside, his father was talking frantically with Chief Ditmar.

"Here's your son," the chief said as

Prince appeared in the doorway. "I could spare him to go."

"Him!" roared the elder Prince. "He'd never do! Sure as the devil he'd get side-tracked!"

"What's the trouble, dad?" demanded Bill Prince, seeing instantly that something was wrong. His father was pale and shaking like a leaf.

"Trouble enough!" groaned the banker. "Somebody spread the rumor that the City Trust was getting shaky, and the people are running on it now. Our cash reserve isn't as large as usual, and the other banks here won't help me because they're afraid of a run, too."

"I've wired to Hilford of the National in Manchester and he's ready to let me have fifty thousand cash which will tide us over. Right now we can hold out for just about two hours, and after that"—he spread his hands despairingly—"after that we'll be forced to close our doors."

CHAPTER VI.

A WILD-RIDIN' COP.

BILL PRINCE'S jaw sagged. The first thought that flashed into his head was that the people of River Street had money in that bank, money they had slaved for over many hot hours in sweat shop or mill.

He glanced at his watch. Exactly one o'clock. Two hours in which to make the trip to Manchester and back—two hours in which to cover a distance of one hundred and thirty miles. His eyes gleamed to the bulge of his face muscles.

"I'll go, dad, if it's all right with the chief," he said quickly.

The chief's nod gave him permission. It was irregular, but the chief knew that this would be the test. Old Chief Ditmar knew men, and he could size up situations instantly.

The elder Prince groaned. "I suppose I'll have to let you," he muttered.

"It's my only hope." He drew a check from his pocket and handed it to his son.

"Take off that coat and headpiece, lad," directed Chief Ditmar. "Too much curiosity would be aroused by the sight of an officer tearing through those little towns. There's a big, wide money belt in the top drawer of my desk. Put on that blue sweater there and strap the belt under it. Hustle. That's it. Now go ahead and good luck."

With a leap Bill Prince was out the door and on his motorcycle. He knew he had plenty of gas, enough to carry him to Manchester, for the machine had an oversize tank and he had filled it not a half hour before. A cough, a roar, a tan flash, and he was away down the road.

"Old girl," he muttered, "if you ever traveled, travel now!"

He hit the State road through to Manchester going at sixty miles an hour. Grimly he bent over the handlebars, his hair streaking back in the wind, his eyes riveted to the road. Sixty-five, it wasn't fast enough. Seventy, and still more speed. Beside him the landscape became a blur that he could see only out of the corner of his eye.

Far down the road a curve twined, not a bad curve but dangerous at that speed. An instant later and he was upon it. With a prayer that no driver was taking the curve on the inside coming from the opposite direction, he leaned to the bank of the road and shot around. Ahead a hay wagon was making its slow, plodding way and Prince missed it by inches, whizzing by it so fast that it seemed to be standing still.

"Criminy crickets!" gasped the farmer, his eyes bulging to the danger point as Prince became a speck. Then again: "Criminy, cracklin' crickets!"

Speed and more speed with the wind rushing back into his face and tugging at his body. Through a narrow wood-

land road that slowed him for two miles; then out on the smooth pavement and twisting at the throttle. Five miles covered, ten miles, and still fifty miles to Manchester. Speed and more speed with the nerves tingling and his hands white-knuckled on the grips. Ruin for his father and no food for the people of River Street if he didn't make it.

Fifteen miles and into the town of Rocksburg at a rate of speed only slightly reduced. There would be traffic there, but he couldn't stop for that. He couldn't stop for anything. A red light gleamed at a street intersection halting all vehicles going his way. It was madness to go through with that light staring him in the face, but he set his jaw and went, roaring into a space of four feet between a truck and a roadster, causing the hair of an astounded traffic officer to prickle on the back of his neck. Speed and more speed, dodging, weaving, shooting into openings that seemed only inches wide. Insane riding—but there were the people of River Street.

Through Rocksburg and out on the open road again, with the gas flowing free and the needle on the speedometer creeping up. Head bent forward, gray eyes narrowed to bits of steel, he prayed that his tires would hold. Not that he was thinking at all of his own safety. Carol Mercer had called them cattle.

Like a streak the sturdy tan machine flashed into distance, its engine roaring and crackling. Houses appeared ahead marking the little city of Milton. Thirty miles covered and not half an hour gone by.

Out of a side road came a motorcycle driven by an officer of the Milton department. He heard a roar and a swish, had a startled glimpse of a rigid, blue-sweatered form, and gripped at his throttle. But before he could get fairly under way the machine was out of sight.

"The devil!" muttered the officer dis-

gustedly. "Ain't no use chasin' lightnin'!"

Through Milton while the inhabitants stopped and turned and stared. He came near smashing on the outskirts. A befuddled driver was trying to turn his car around in the road and another car was approaching, completely blocking the way. There was nothing but the sidewalk left. A convenient drive leading into a residence eliminated the curbstone and Bill Prince took it at fifty miles an hour, slanting wickedly to make the bend. Down the sidewalk for fifty yards; then over the low curb. A twist, a lurch, a frantic jerk on the bars, and he kept the motorcycle on its wheels. More gas, while a half block down the sidewalk a pop-eyed gentleman emerged cautiously from behind a tree and cursed nervously.

Speed, speed, speed, with arms growing tired, and mouth growing dry. Ten minutes, fifteen, twenty, and the big "Welcome" sign of the Manchester Chamber of Commerce. Into the city he flashed, took a cut down a side street, and leaped from his machine in front of the National Bank.

He had made the sixty-five miles in fifty-four minutes. He shook his head as he bounded up the steps. It wasn't enough.

They had wired that he was coming, and President Hilford had the cash ready for him, a man with a can of gasoline, and sandwiches and coffee.

"You'd better take a few minutes to eat, my boy," advised Hilford kindly, noting the burning eyes and signs of strain. "You're tired."

Bill Prince relaxed enough to grin. "Mighty nice of you, Mr. Hilford," he said gratefully, "but if you don't mind I'd rather not take the time. Just a glass of water if I may have it."

The water was brought and he gulped it down, after placing the money in his belt and strapping it securely back in place. He shook hands hastily with

Hilford, and hurried out. Two motorcycle officers offered as escort to the city limits through the courtesy of the Manchester Police Department, following a wire from Chief Ditmar, rolled up as he started his machine.

"Well, this sure is service!" he exclaimed. "All right to let her out?"

"The town's yours, Jack," said one. "Just follow me."

With a roar he was off, riding ahead of Prince to clear the way while the other machine came close behind. Prince's heart warmed. What system, what coöperation between the police departments of the country! And every man gave his best for wages that were none too good.

At the city limits they stopped and waved him on.

"Go to it, Jack!" yelled the leader as Prince shot past him. "Give 'em thunder, and good luck!"

Back on the road again with the hand of his watch already past the hour mark. Speed and more speed. Racing into space against time.

Thoughts began to speed through Bill Prince's head with the swiftness of the whirling wheels. Perhaps he was getting overtired. Patsy Gilbert and Carol Mercer—he wondered what they were doing at that moment. Patsy would be happily engaged in River Street; very possibly she was tending the Flynn baby while the young mother called at Douglas' store for work. And Carol—she would be at some tea or other, or else sitting on the wide veranda of the country club, talking languidly with languid young women.

CHAPTER VII.

CASHIERING A CASHIER.

HIS father—he'd be worrying his head off. A good old scout, his father, even if he was as gruff as they came. He'd have to make it in time. It would not only save the old boy, but

it would be a source of joy to him to know that his son had come through in a pinch. The society cop!—he had come to hate that term. He gritted his teeth and the machine leaped under him.

Eighty-five miles an hour—ninety. Frightful speed that kept one's nerves as taut as a bowstring. Those tires; such a strain would be wearing them; they'd be burning hot from the friction of the pavement. Jimmy and his ice cream. He'd have to give him another. Through Milton, past blurring white faces, and on the way to Rocksbury Minutes marked by the flashing of poles and the passing whir of cars. Through Rocksbury with luck favoring him on the green traffic lights, and patrolmen yelling things that he could not hear but could imagine.

Speed, speed, speed—the strip of narrow, woodland road appeared and he slowed reluctantly to fifty. Around a corner and he came upon two big cars that were purposely blocking the road. Instantly he realized the situation. Word had gone forth somehow over the "grapevine" telegraph that he was bringing back cash to the bank. Get through! Get through!

All this flashed through his mind, and then he was upon the cars. Two men leaped out of one of the cars, one of them yanking at his hip pocket. On one side of the road was a deep ditch, on the other was a bank. Nine out of ten men would have stopped, but Bill Prince couldn't stop. He spun his throttle and the motorcycle raced for the bank. Up the bank it went on a terrific slant, zigzagging crazily, wobbling, yet managing to stay upright on ground that was solid.

Back into the road farther on, feeling his spine creep. That the men were shooting at him he knew, although the bark of the guns was lost in the roar of his motor. Head ducked, he was tense with the expectation of a bullet in the

back. It seemed years to the next bend in the road.

Tearing on faster and faster with the time at ten to three. His eyes were glinting coldly now. In the flash of a glance he had sent at the men in the road his eyes had rested on one of the guns, and the weapon had stamped its image in his mind.

"Fine business!" he muttered grimly. "May not be the same gun, but I've a hunch it is."

Eight minutes to three. Going at ninety-five miles an hour, and wanting to go faster. The thrill of tremendous velocity, like a dropping planet. Got to make it by three.

Into the outskirts of the city he shot. Around corners at reckless speed, slanting, swerving, avoiding the main thoroughfares where the traffic was thickest. The people of River Street must be spared.

At three minutes to three he slammed to a stop in front of the City Trust Co., kicked down the guard rest, and hurled himself through the crowd of people jamming and pushing to get in the doors. Behind the line of cages his father, white and haggard, was pacing the floor. His eyes lighted with a joyous, unbelieving light as they fell upon the disheveled figure of his son.

"Got it?" he demanded, hardly daring to speak above a whisper.

Bill Prince grinned wearily. Unless one has maintained a consistent rate of terrific speed on a motorcycle for many miles, he can never realize the strain. "Got it?" he repeated. "Well, that's what I went after, isn't it?" He yanked off the money belt and opened it to display the crisp bills. Of a sudden his father's eyes became very misty.

"You young devil!" he choked. "You—you——"

But the moment of weakness passed, and he became once more the banker, cool and efficient as he hurried around directing his employees. Bill Prince

slumped down in a chair. He realized suddenly that he was completely exhausted. Yet before he could rest, there was one more thing to be done. Presently he called his father.

"Dad," he requested, "take me to Rankin."

Surprised, the elder Prince led him to where the cashier was stacking and counting bills. Bill tapped him on the shoulder.

"How's things, Rankin?" he asked quietly.

The cashier looked up, incredulity in his eyes. "For Heaven's sake!" he gasped. "I didn't think you'd make it."

Bill Prince nodded coldly. "I know blamed well you didn't!" he snapped. "What I want now is to take a look at the gun you bought one night in River Street."

Rankin grew white. "That?" he stammered. "Why, I—I took it home with me last night."

Bill Prince smiled dangerously down on him. "Oh, you did! Funny I should have it staring me in the face out on the Parkwood road, isn't it? Rankin, a gun like that with special engraving on the handle and a target sight can be spotted a mile. It's just the kind of a gun that would appeal to a rat like you. But you made the mistake of your life when you bought it."

The elder Prince interceded. "What's all this?" he wanted to know. "What are you talking about? What's Rankin got to do with guns?"

Bill turned to his father. "Here's the leak in your outfit, dad," he said, pointing to the cowering cashier. "He sent men out to get me on the road, letting one of them take this gun I mentioned. And you'd better find out what business he had with Crane and Griffith. I've an idea that he started the run on this bank, so that he could engineer the holdup. Society seems to have gone to his head, and he wants quick money."

"Him!" ejaculated the banker. "You're crazy!"

"Maybe," nodded young Officer Prince, "and then again, maybe not." He called to one of the patrolmen stationed at the door. "Tom," he said, "do you mind taking this man in? I want about an hour's rest before I move."

"Shure, ye deserve it," declared the patrolman, drawing out his handcuffs. "'Twas a great ride ye must o' had, Bill."

"It was a pip," said Bill Prince simply. He went back to his chair, dropped into it, and sighed.

His father followed him, bewildered by events, and not quite over the shock of seeing his cashier arrested. Too, he was proud of this son of his, the tall, whimsical, gray-eyed Bill Prince, but not for worlds would he have shown that pride. Instead he spoke of other things.

"Carol wants to see you to-night," he said. "She's having a big party and she wants her society cop to be there with bells on."

Officer Bill Prince smiled grimly. "Is that so?" he said. "Well, I'm afraid her society cop won't be there. I'm going to have another date to-night if I can arrange it."

His father frowned down on him. "Now who?" he demanded.

"You might meet her to-night if you care to."

Father inspected son closely. "By the Lord Harry, I believe you like this girl!" he exclaimed.

Bill Prince nodded. "I'll say I do," he answered.

"Humph," mused the elder Prince. "Something is wrong with you certainly, and if she's responsible for the sense you seem to be getting I'd like to see her. Bring her around to the house to-night." His hand descended for a brief moment on his son's shoulder, and there was just a trace of anxiety in his voice. "I hope she's good enough

for you. You're such a fool about women——"

Bill Prince, plain cop, grinned as he closed his eyes.

Almost None

A REPORTER was interviewing an actress, who was cuddling a tiny dog.

"Is that your dog?" he asked.

"It is," she replied.

"Is it the only dog you have?"

"It is."

"Well," said the reporter, "all I can say is, you are darn near out of dogs."

A Clever Animal

ROBINSON had met an acquaintance and was singing the praises of his dog, which he declared had an amazing sense of smell.

"But why is he pointing now at that man across the road?" asked his friend.

"Go and ask the fellow what his name is," suggested Robinson.

The other did so, and in a few moments returned with the reply: "He says his name is Partridge."

Very Simple

Two men were discussing golf courses in general and a little nine-hole course in particular. Eventually the conversation turned to a certain eighteen-hole course.

"I always think," said one, "that the little nine-hole course is far more difficult than the eighteen-hole course."

"Well, one would expect it to be so," exclaimed a friend who did not play golf.

"Why?" asked the two men, simultaneously.

"It is obviously easier to get a little ball into one of the holes when there are eighteen. It would be twice as hard when there are only nine."



Caught in the Net~

By

Lawrence Wm. Pedrose

(COMPLETE IN THIS ISSUE)

CHAPTER I.

IN SEARCH OF POACHERS.



WITH his oars muffled with a pair of wool socks, Johnston rowed silently up the murky Duwamish, following a course midway between deep shadows which indicated the shore lines. It was nearing dawn, and a mist rose from the estuary in tiny spirals that spread and blended a few feet overhead, forming a thin fog which seemed to blanket the wide valley. Behind the oarsman a faint, milky glow reared like a ghostly palisade, marking the harbor lights on the Seattle water front.

The rower came to a bend in the waterway and skirted a field of marsh grass as dense as a wheat field. The silken rustle of the current as it slipped along the planking of the boat was broken by a light thumping sound, and he glanced overside. A line of discus-shaped cork floats extended out some hundred feet from the shore and pointed downstream at an angle of forty-five degrees.

As his craft slid over the obstruction, the man heard a bell-like note which sounded at some distance back in the grass. He paused and listened for a moment, suspiciously, then reassured, continued on. A few rods farther along, he discovered a score of other seines, also identified by lines of bobbing floats. He pulled up one, cautiously, and found several large silvery fish hanging by the gills in the coarse web.

There was a break in the mist. The light in the waterway was becoming brighter. Johnston glanced toward the eastern horizon. The gray chargers of dawn were advancing over a distant range of white mountains. He looked about him. A stone's throw upstream was a dense thicket of willows. He rowed round the cluster of nets and found an old ditch which penetrated the thicket. Donning his boots, he pulled his boat deep into the willows.

From across the marsh came the call of a loon, answered by a similar cry from a short distance upstream. Day was breaking fast now. Johnston donned a blanket-lined canvas parka and

thrust into the pockets of the voluminous garment two pairs of handcuffs and an automatic pistol. Next he unrolled a tarpaulin and spread it over the boat. Then having made sure his retreat was safe from discovery, he sat down on the gunwale of the craft, silent, watchful.

A soft, splashing sound up the blind ditch told of industrious muskrats setting out on their hunt for breakfast. A purling of the water, black with silt of glacial streams which flowed into the Duwamish, revealed that the long winter outrun of the tide had begun.

A faint rumble, instantly detected by the waiting man, heralded the approach of footsteps on the bog. Then, as the owners of the trudging feet drew near, he could hear the suck of boots and the swish of oilskins. Peering from his hiding place, he discerned several figures that loomed strangely large and bulky above the waist-high marsh grass, magnified out of all sense of proportion by the mist hugging the field. He counted the men. There were ten of them, all dark foreigners.

"Whew, what a hard-boiled-looking bunch!" he muttered, fingering his pistol. "I bet they'd split a man as quickly as a fish. Steady, Dave, old boy, if you don't want to feed the sharks this morning!"

The men, with the exception of one, advanced boldly to the bank of the waterway. The little man was peering, ferretlike, up and down the stream.

"I hear de bell on my shore line," he said suspiciously. "I think some one been here."

"Aw, go on," chided another. "A muskrat trips over the rope and you begin to see ghosts. Take it from me, the game wardens are snoozin' in their warm beds this time of the morning."

Each fisherman took hold of a net and began hauling it in, hand over hand. Johnston in the thicket waited patiently. He gritted his teeth as he saw the poach-

ers disengage scores of dead fish from the webbing and toss them into a pile.

Some of the fish were as long as a man's leg and bright as a silver dollar, indicating they had just come in from the sea on their migration to spawning grounds in the hills. The poachers were in high spirits and joked as they toiled. They had reason to be good-natured. Each would realize from twenty to thirty dollars from his morning hour's work, the watcher calculated.

When the last of the nets had been hauled in and the fishermen were folding them, preparatory to carrying them away with their catches, Johnston drew his automatic and stole forward. He was upon the busy poachers before they discovered him. At a cry from the one who remained back, they wheeled, saw the weapon leveled from his hip, and slowly put up their hands.

"You're under arrest!" he said. He glanced down the line of scowling faces and recognized one of them. It belonged to a tall, burly fellow who had handsome features and black, curly hair. "You, Jezernic," he said, "take this rope at my feet and tie the other men's hands!"

"Ah, you catch me again, hey, Johnston?" The man smiled starkly as he advanced. "Maybe you got better sense this time. We give you hundre' dollars you forget about this!"

The officer's lip curled in scorn. The fisherman read rejection of the bribe in the other's face and his dark eyes flashed. He was now quite close. His hand went to his sou'wester in a natural gesture, then he flipped his wrist, the stiff-brimmed, heavy hat struck Johnston across the eyes, and the poacher closed in upon him with a leap.

Instantly the other fishermen sprang forward. Johnston tried to use his gun, but it was torn from his grasp. He struggled in the crushing grip of his powerful captor and managed to free his right arm. Up came his fist, with

all his weight behind it, and crashed into Jezernic's jaw.

The ruffian staggered. But as the officer swung again, something wet, heavy and clinging was thrown over him, and he was borne down, helpless in the tangle of a stout gill net. To complete his subjection, the poachers merely rolled him over a few times, and he found himself hopelessly enmeshed in the web.

CHAPTER II.

AN ANGEL WITH A SHOTGUN.

I THINK we should slit his throat and throw him in the drink!" said the little foreigner callously.

"No, fool!" spoke up another, a pock-marked man with the almond eyes of an Oriental. "The better way would be to heave him into the water, net and all. When they find him, they will think he fell overboard while trying to lift the net and got tangled in the web!"

Johnston lay quiet, realizing the pirates were debating how best to dispose of him. He had blundered, and probably would pay for the mistake with his life. He should have contented himself with locating as many seines as possible and returned to town for help in rounding up the gang.

"How do you know there ain't more deputies on the waterway?" queried Jezernic. "If you want to get rid of this bird, do it quick! He's probably got a car over there at the edge of the valley. If we bump him off, we'll have to get rid of the car. See if he's got any keys."

One of the men searched the prisoner, finding easy access to his pockets through the web of the net. Johnston happened to have a ring of keys with him.

"Hey," cried the searcher, "look, he's got a couple pair of irons. Shall we put them on him, too?" He held up the handcuffs.

"Blockhead!" hissed Jezernic. "Are

you itchin' for a rope around your neck? Take the keys off the ring and put it and those irons back in his pockets!"

Johnston realized that at least two of the men were disposed to heave him into the river. He knew argument was futile, and only hoped something would occur to change the men's plans. If they did throw him in the stream, he had about one chance in a million of escaping. He cautiously worked his right hand under his parka and unhooked a small watch-chain knife fastened to his belt.

If he could hold his breath long enough under water, he might cut through the net before it dragged him to the bottom. And if he failed, there was one thing the poachers had overlooked. That was his boat, concealed in the willows. It would offer a clew to his disappearance and might eventually fasten the crime upon them.

The poachers drew aside and held an animated discussion for a few moments. They seemed to reach an agreement. Johnston, watching the men out of the corners of his eyes, hopefully, felt a sinking sensation as Jezernic and the Oriental-looking man strode toward him with determined steps. The men grasped the net at his head and feet and turned him broadside to the water. But as they swung him off the ground, there was a crash in the willow thicket and a girl's voice rang out:

"Stop—or I'll shoot!"

Johnston heard the click of a weapon being cocked as the poachers let him fall.

"Aw, can it, Marcel," protested Jezernic. "We was just going to carry this guy back in the marsh. We can't leave him here. It's broad daylight and we must be getting our fish home."

The girl came forward.

"How many steelhead did you find?" she asked.

"'Bout a hundred and twenty. Put that gun down, kiddo!"

Johnston could not repress a smile at Jezernic's nervousness. Twisting on his side, he bent back his head to see what his deliverer looked like. He drew in his breath sharply. She was so small that at first glance he took her to be a child.

Then, as he noted the contour of the body wrapped in an oiled yellow slicker, he realized she was a grown woman. She had an oval face, clear white skin and large, black eyes. In a very businesslike manner she held a repeating shotgun of small bore, its muzzle pointed at Jezernic's midriff.

"Didn't you promise me you wouldn't take any more steelhead?" she demanded crisply.

"Aw, I had to get up my nets," he evaded. "There's a hundre' dollars' worth of web there. I meant to give you the money from the fish for a wedding present." He watched her to see what effect the words would have. "You ain't sore, are you, kiddo?"

The girl pointed to Johnston with a gesture of impatience. "Let the other fellows take care of the fish," she instructed. "You pack *him* up to my house."

"No, you go with the men," countered Jezernic. "I'll turn this guy loose and see that he beats it downstream."

"Do as I tell you!" snapped the girl, and Johnston, with a feeling of relief, saw her thumb caress the safety catch on the gun.

Jezernic grunted savagely, gathered up Johnston, net and all, and slung the burden over his shoulder. For the first time, the deputy realized the tremendous strength of the poacher. With the girl following at his heels, Jezernic struck off across the swamp.

"Don't think I'm going to let you go," hissed the fisherman in Johnston's ear. "That Marcel, my girl, and she ain't no angel. She'll cut your throat quicker'n me!"

Johnston digested this statement, and

cold perspiration broke out on his forehead. It appeared as though he was escaping a possible death by drowning only to meet a more terrible fate. That the stunningly pretty girl had saved his life at the river just to torture him, was difficult to believe. Yet, he realized, she was one of the outlaws.

She, like the men, must look upon him the same as on any other minion of the law, as an instrument endeavoring to rob her people of their illicit means of livelihood. She was probably a southern European, a person of quick passions and subtle ideas on revenge.

Very uncomfortable minutes passed for Johnston as he was borne through the swamp. Nor did he experience any sense of relief as Jezernic entered an alder grove, turned up a dry slough, swung to the left into another brushy area, and finally came to a small clearing. In the center of the opening stood a low, dilapidated, one-story house which no one in passing would think tenanted.

Johnston, in desperation, was debating his chances of escape if he cut down the giant with his penknife and slashed himself free from the net. If the girl had left him alone with Jezernic on the river bank, that would have been a possible way out. Neither the girl nor the man seemed to know he had a knife concealed in the sleeve of his parka.

If the girl would only leave him with his captor for a moment, he would make the attempt. But she stayed close behind, and he knew she could let daylight through him with her shotgun before he could cut his way out of the net.

Jezernic pushed open a door of the house, entered, and dumped his burden on the floor. Johnston glanced round and noted that the interior of the dwelling was quite habitable. He was lying in the kitchen. Adjoining was a living room fitted with rustic furniture. Everything was neat and clean.

The girl bent over Johnston and her black eyes burned down into his.

"Spy!" she spat at him. She drew back her foot and kicked him in the ribs, and her companion laughed roughly.

Johnston frowned. The jolt in the ribs was not nearly so bad as it appeared. It seemed that the girl was just making a play for the benefit of the fisherman. Taking his cue, he squirmed as if in great pain and showed his teeth in a well-simulated snarl.

"Go get your fish," said the girl to Jezernic. "I'll take care of this pig. We'll figure out later what to do with him. Give me your knife—and get out!"

The poacher handed her a heavy clasp-knife and left the house, chuckling hugely.

CHAPTER III.

THE FIGHT.

THE girl, moving as gracefully as a panther, followed the fisherman to the door. When he had gone out, she closed the door and turned to face Johnston.

"You sneak!" she said in a voice that rose almost to a shriek. "I ought to cut you to ribbons and feed you to the crows! Spy on my people, will you, and get them in jail just because a bunch of fools make a law on fishing one month and change it the next!"

Johnston was startled, unable to believe he had heard right. Then he caught a sound at the front door and smiled. Jezernic, suspicious of the girl, had stolen round the house. He was listening to make sure she was not friendly toward the prisoner. Johnston growled.

"Do you river rats think you can get away with this?" he retorted, making sure his voice carried to the eavesdropper outside. "I suppose you intend to make away with me, but if you do, every one of you will stretch rope!"

The girl laughed at him. It was an eerie laugh, scornful and so genuine Johnston glanced up at her sharply.

Could he be mistaken? he asked himself. Wasn't she playing a part after all? He had heard of women bandits, slips of girls who could be soft and feminine one day and ruthless killers the next.

Her face was a study. If her feelings were not real she had a remarkable gift of pantomime. She had thrown off her oilskin, and her slender body seemed to shake with the intensity of her passion.

"I've longed to get hold of one of you guys!" she hissed. "All my people have been thrown in jail. You have taken away their boats, their fishing gear. Do you wish us to starve?"

"No!" gritted Johnston, now genuinely angry. "I would make you birds go to work! I'd make you earn a decent living! In the fall when fishing is easy, you go out when the salmon are so thick a blind man could catch them with his bare hands. You make big money. Then in the winter you lay around the streams like slimy river rats and steal the fish that mean other people's daily bread.

"For your own selfish gain, you would destroy all the spawning fish. In a few years there will be no more steelhead. Then you can go back to your countries and live like bourgeois on the earnings of your piracy. Come on, you little foreigner; do your stuff with that sticker if you've got the nerve!"

The girl sprang to his side, and he thought she would pounce down upon him and begin work with her wicked-looking knife. He strained at his bonds in an endeavor to get his own weapon into action, but the blade had caught in his sleeve, where the stout fabric held it securely.

The girl did not strike. He noticed she was listening intently. There was a soft thumping of footsteps that told Jezernic was departing. She glided noiselessly into the adjoining room and peered out a window. Satisfied, she returned to Johnston's side.

He could not repress a shudder as she dropped on one knee and ripped the bonds across his chest with the clasp-knife. Back and forth and up and down she slashed, then threw the mutilated web off him, grasped his hand, and assisted him to his feet.

He rose, bewildered. She looked up into his face and her features were wreathed in a smile.

"Don't you think the little foreigner would make a good actress?" she murmured.

As he stared at her, comprehension came to him. She had been playing a part after all. With a sudden, boyish impulse, he grasped her by the shoulders. Her eyes were laughing now. But his were serious.

"Say," he demanded, with a new interest, "what is that hulk Jezernic to you?"

She sobered instantly. A worried look replaced her bantering smile.

"He thinks he is going to marry me," she said angrily. "He went up with my brothers to work in the Alaska canneries last summer. My folks got jobs as watchmen over the winter, and Jezernic came back alone. He's been pestering me ever since. He says if he don't get me, nobody will. He promised yesterday he would not poach any more steelhead, but I was suspicious and followed him down to the river. That's how I happened to be in the thicket. I think Jezernic and the other man were going to drown you when I interfered."

"Would you have shot if they threw me in the water?" demanded Johnston admiringly.

There was a twinkle in the girl's eyes as she replied: "I don't know. I'd see first what you could do with that knife you have in your sleeve. If you couldn't slash your way out of the net, I'd have made them go in and get you. I can shoot straight, and they know it."

Johnston threw back his head and laughed. "Well," he said, dropping his

hands, "the question now is—how to get out of here."

The girl darted to the door and studied the clearing. "Road's clear, but the men will be along soon," she declared. "Come on!" She picked up her shotgun as she went out.

She ran in the direction of the bushes, and Johnston bounded out of the house and followed. She avoided the dry slough and led him by a circuitous route to the ditch in which he had concealed his boat. Swift as a wild fawn, she pressed along the edge of the thicket, and it required all of his speed to keep up with her. They came to the end of the blind ditch without seeing any of the poachers.

"Here's your boat," she whispered, parting the bushes. "I discovered it when I was spying on the men. Oh!"

Her exclamation was caused by a rustle of the willows. Out of the thicket sprang Jezernic, scowling ferociously.

There was murder in the pirate's eyes. He brushed the girl aside with a rough sweep of his arm and faced the deputy. Johnston, startled, calmed his panicky nerves and measured the young giant. With a quick leap backward, he deftly slipped out of the canvas parka, realizing that the heavy garment would impede his movement and he must call upon every ounce of his strength and all the skill and agility he possessed to contest the issue with the poacher.

Jezernic came at him like a great ox, with flailing arms. Johnston drove swiftly for the man's chin and staggered him. A second blow landed on Jezernic's mouth, while two others caught him under the ribs. He went down, heavily, and seemed to shake the marsh. But he was up again like a tiger. Johnston dodged his bull-like rush, and found himself with his back to the waterway. Now the pirate advanced more cautiously, arms tensed and out at his sides, intent on driving the other man into the water.

"Don't let him get you in the river!" screamed the girl. "He's been a deep-sea diver and he'll drown you!"

Johnston struck at the surly mask of the giant, one-two-three, and twisted out of a crushing grip. The man grunted and drove out an arm that was like a pile driver. The blow caught Johnston under the shoulder and sent him spinning. With a leap, the giant had him.

"Now you go under!" roared Jezernic, raising the dazed officer above his head.

But as he was about to hurl his victim into the waterway, something hit him with stunning force in the back of the head, and he staggered and fell, releasing Johnston and clutching at the grass on the bank. The blow had been administered by the girl, who had turned her shotgun end for end and struck him with the steel butt-plate.

Johnston recovered from his daze, got up, and made sure the poacher was not dead, then turned to the girl. She indicated his boat with a gesture and, crossing to it, grasped one of its gunwales. He took the other. The tide had receded several feet, but they launched the craft without any difficulty. As the boat splashed into the water, they heard running footsteps. Jezernic had scrambled to his feet and was racing for the woods. The officer shouted for him to halt, but he ignored the command. In another moment he was lost from sight among the willows.

The girl held out her hand to Johnston. Her cheeks were warm and the bantering look had returned to her eyes.

"Will you take with you a kind thought for—a little foreigner?" she asked softly.

He ignored the hand and looked down at her sternly, shaking his head. She flushed at the apparent rebuke. The next instant he swept her up in his arms, placed her in the stern sheets of the boat, then climbed aboard himself with a kick that sent the light craft far out in the waterway.

She watched him, puzzled, as he picked up the oars. He bent to the shafts, and the boat fairly leaped down the stream.

Only when she saw they were headed toward the city did the girl divine his purpose. Her eyes met his, he laughed, and she dropped her gaze.

"You are so forceful," she sighed. "Am I to consider myself kidnaped?"

"You may," he returned. She simulated fright, and he rested on his oars and explained. "I have an aunt, a Mrs. Snowdon, who runs a dramatic school uptown. I am going to take you to her as a protégée. She'd love to have you."

The girl's long lashes veiled her eyes. "Whose protégée?" she murmured.

He chuckled. "Hers, of course. But look here—I hold a discovery claim, as mining men say, and I refuse to relinquish that right to any one else."

She nodded acquiescence, and he applied himself again to the oars.

CHAPTER IV.

A CHANGE OF DRAMA.

IT was a foggy night. As Dave Johnston swung up the pavement he thought of that other misty night, nearly six months ago, when he rowed his boat up the silent Duwamish, bent on reaching the poachers' grounds before day broke. He was again keeping a rendezvous, but this night it was not with a menace that lurked in the fog.

It was pleasure and not stern duty which caused him to fare forth. He had not seen Marcel since that morning when he took her to his aunt and turned her over to the older woman's care.

Business matters—the settling of an estate which permitted his resignation from his State job—had called him East the next day, and he had returned home only that afternoon. Marcel had written while he was in the East, and so had his aunt. The girl was progressing splendidly with her studies, he was told.

By a coincidence which, however, was not mere happenstance, to-night, his first night home after his long period of absence, was to mark Marcel's initial public appearance.

The Snowdon Little Theater, situated in the quiet residential section on the First Hill, was a modest little place, a mere bandbox of a show house. It had a high rating professionally. It catered to no particular class. It charged no admission. It did not pander to the æsthete, and its clientele came from all walks of life.

Here lovers of drama—the student, the shop girl, the business man, the dock worker, and the scouts from the theatrical agencies, rubbed elbows and reveled in art that was as unostentatious as it was genuine. Out on the "Big Time" circuits of the country were many players who boasted of the Snowdon school as their Alma Mater.

Dave had not written Marcel he would be home to-day. He did not wish to distract her from her work. He arranged for a florist to deliver a beautiful bouquet of red roses, which was to be presented to her on the stage.

He wanted to be seated in the orchestra circle when she received it and read his card. These whimsical thoughts revolved in his mind as he strode up the misty street, and he whistled to himself a gay little tune.

When he neared the theater, he caught up with a group of four men who appeared to be bent on the same destination as himself. They were big fellows, roughly dressed. Boots and sou'westers identified them as fishermen.

He attached no particular significance to their presence until they entered the milky glow of the theater's illuminated lobby and paused to read a small electric sign on the marquee. Emblazoned there were the words:

Marcel Del Rio
in
THE POACHERS.

He caught the profile then of one of the men and gave a start as he recognized it. It belonged to Jezernic, the outlaw.

Johnston held back until the fishermen had entered the theater, then quickly followed. There were only two hundred seats in the building, and most of these were occupied. The fishermen selected vacant chairs near the stage, and Dave seated himself a few rows behind them. A concealed orchestra was playing an overture.

In a few moments the room was darkened. The curtain was raised to the dulcet strains of a Hungarian gypsy song, and Dave straightened in his chair as he beheld a hazy moonlit scene.

It was of a marsh beside a river, fringed with dark woods. His interest quickened as he recognized the setting. It was a clever duplication of the Duwamish. He had witnessed many plays on that little stage, but none that had held him with the fascination this one exerted over him.

Then a finger of light reached out from the balcony and came to rest in an ivory circle at the edge of the stage. He felt a thrill. That was his aunt's ingenious way of introducing her embryo stars, and she used the device only when she had a pet attraction to offer.

A murmur of expectancy from the audience, then Marcel stepped into the spotlight, smiling shyly, and was greeted by vociferous applause. She was dressed as Dave had first seen her, in a snug yellow oilskin and boots, and with a sou'wester set jauntily on her head. Her color was heightened by make-up, but this served only to enhance her Slavic beauty.

The applause sank, then swelled again as a messenger boy darted down the aisle and passed over the footlights to the girl a huge bouquet of red roses. She picked a card from the fragrant sheaf of nodding buds, and gave a start of surprise and pleasure as she read the

name of her admirer. Her dark eyes opened wide, and she appeared a bit confused as she bowed and withdrew into the shadows.

The curtain was lowered, then raised again, and the play got under way. Dave, enthralled, saw three uncouth fishermen appear and presently begin to haul in a net with its harvest of silver fish. He saw a passable likeness of himself step out of the bushes and hold up the poachers at the point of a pistol.

Again was enacted the incident with Jezernic, and the officer, after scorning the outlaw's bribe, was tricked, overpowered, and wrapped in the illicit net. The poachers decided to heave him into the river, entangled in the web.

But at the crucial moment the girl appeared, shotgun in hand, and defeated their plans. The scene ended with the girl compelling her countryman to shoulder the prisoner and carry him to her house.

Scene Two was the kitchen of the girl's home. The actual happening in which Johnston had played the victim was given in detail. Jezernic's part was also portrayed faithfully, but the scene was dominated by the acting of the girl. She was superb.

Dave leaned forward in his chair, spellbound. He heard his own words, defying the outlaws, repeated, and he felt he once more was the man lying there on the kitchen floor, helplessly enmeshed in the net, so realistic was it all. His denunciation of the poachers for destroying the spawning fish brought a ripple of applause from the audience. Then when the girl, after a tense moment of uncertainty, slashed her prisoner free it brought down the house. He watched the curtain fall on the second scene with real reluctance.

Scene Three was the river bank again. The girl and the escaping officer came out of the woods, but as they were about to pull the hidden boat from the thicket, Jezernic appeared. There was

brilliant word play for a moment, then began the fight between the men.

It was compelling in its dramatic unfolding, so real in action and in its high points of suspense that Dave felt perspiration break out on his body. All too suddenly the battle ended with the girl striking down her countryman as he was about to heave into the stream the defeated officer.

At this point alone was there a deviation from the true happening. The officer turned to the girl and asked why she had struck down a man of her own people to aid an alien. She faced the audience with shining eyes and proudly raised her head.

"I did it," she said bravely and with the proper dramatic tempo, "because—because I love you!"

Thunderous applause marked the curtain. Dave, in something of a daze, did not wait for the curtain call. He sprang to his feet and dashed from the building. Round to the rear entrance he darted. He bounded into the wings just as Marcel, flushed with triumph, returned from a second curtain call. He confronted her suddenly and captured her hands.

"You didn't stick to the original lines," he charged. "Why did you change them?"

She looked up at him with a timid smile. "I didn't—until that moment," she confessed, swaying toward him. "Maybe—the roses—had something to do—"

She didn't finish. She did not have a chance to. But what does it matter, when his arms closed about her, what she was going to say?

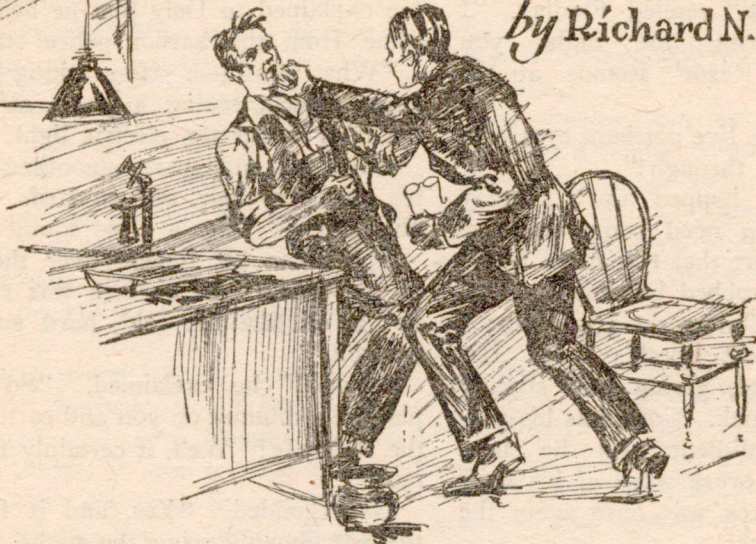
A Clever Canine

"Is your dog clever?"

"Clever! I should think he is. When I say, 'Are you coming or aren't you?' he comes or he doesn't."

A Hound for News

by Richard N. Donelson



(COMPLETE IN THIS ISSUE)

CHAPTER I.

NOSE TO THE GROUND.



WITH a bang that jerked up the head of the grizzled desk sergeant, "Speck" Sentinel, reporter for the San Francisco *Enquirer*, let slam the screen door of the harbor police station. He walked jerkily to the desk and flung an open letter before the blue-coated officer.

"Physically unfit!" he cried. "Read that, Findlay, and then gaze upon a perfect specimen of the tea hound!"

Findlay stroked his broad blue jaw as he read. Then he folded the official letter and handed it back to Speck.

"So the examining board turned you down! Physically unfit to be a cop!" commented Findlay. "Well, Speck, them eyes of yours—you know."

Speck pulled off his horn-rimmed glasses and polished the lenses carefully. He blinked his weak eyes and gazed angrily at the misty face of his old friend.

"What if my eyes are weak? There are a lot of cops running around with poor hearing. Judging by the rank cigars some of you smoke, your sense of smell must be a lost art. Why pick on a fellow's eyes? Sensitive touch and acute hearing are just as important."

Fred Sentinel, or Speck, as he was known since a gasoline explosion had nearly blinded him, had set his heart on being a flatfoot. To overcome the handicap of dim eyes he had developed the rest of his senses to extraordinary efficiency.

His sharp hearing and sensitive nose, trained to catch the slightest sound or odor, had helped run down more than one baffling police case. So sensitive were the nerves in Speck's fingers that he could tell within a degree the heat of a dove's body or the number of minutes that had passed since the recent firing of a revolver.

"Well, why don't you say something?" demanded Speck as he carefully adjusted his glasses. "Are you

asleep, like the rest of the police force?"

"I was remembering back a couple of years, Speck," replied Findlay. "I was remembering the night you knocked out 'Razor' Remus at the Dreamland."

"And because I've got bum eyes, you cops think I'm through!"

"You're all hopped up," Findlay growled. "You need some exercise. Just got a report that the Atela Drayage office was robbed last night. Run down there. You might get a story."

The anger left Speck's face. His nostrils flattened, giving him slightly the look of a hawk. Gone was his personal disappointment. As he bent closer to catch every word of his bluff old friend, Speck was once again the born news writer.

"Any of the boys on the case, yet?" he asked.

"Only the patrolman. Most of the boys are out trying to get a lead on them recent dock robberies."

"Findlay, if I find a clew, can I run it down?"

Findlay laughed. "Who'll stop you?" he demanded.

"Well, you know how it is. They'll tell a reporter just so much. A detective can demand information."

"I get you," Findlay grinned. "So long as you don't try impersonating an officer, you can say you came from here."

Speck swung about and started for the door.

"Speck!" Findlay called him back. "I'm sorry about you not making the force, lad."

Speck looked into the gray eyes of the grizzled old sergeant. He saw Findlay's outstretched hand and clasped it warmly.

"Thanks, Finny." He swallowed hard. "It's tough to be told you're a misfit. I'd like to show 'em I'm not!"

He let the screen door slam again.

Five minutes later he was talking to Daly and Marvick, owner and clerk, respectively, of the Atela Drayage Co. He explained to Daly that he had just come from the harbor police station.

"What was it—a safe-cracking job?" asked Speck, seeing a black safe on the floor under the electric light.

Daly, tall and spare, smoothed back his thin gray hair, and snorted. "You blind, too? Take a close squint!"

Speck ran his fingers over the top of the safe. The surface was rough, not at all like the cold, hard surface of iron.

"Wood!" he exclaimed. "So they planted a dummy on you and carted off the real safe? Well, it certainly fooled me."

Daly nodded. "Yes, and it fooled the patrolman during the night, when he tried the door and peered through the window."

Speck strolled to the rear of the office, where a door led to an alley. The lock had been sawed from the door. It was not hard to picture the thieves substituting the dummy and carting off the real safe between the patrolman's rounds.

Speck's nostrils twitched. Keyed to every significant factor, now, he thought he detected a rich Havana odor. He climbed to the counter and inhaled the warm air above. The faint, fragrant odor of a very fine cigar was still perceptible.

"Any one been smoking here this morning?" he asked.

Daly shook his head. "We just opened up. I threw my cigar away before I came in. Marvick never smokes."

Speck nodded. He jumped down from the counter and knelt before the wooden doors of the dummy safe. He stuck his head inside the empty box and sniffed deeply. His sensitive nostrils tingled with the rich bouquet of tea leaves.

"Oolong tea," he commented. "This fake safe was built out of boards from an old tea case that had been damaged by kerosene."

"An old tea case!" exclaimed Daly. "Bah! You cops are all alike!"

Speck looked at Daly curiously. Evidently the owner of the Atela Drayage Co. had little faith in the police. Absently, Speck ran his hands over the top of the dummy safe. Just below the disguising black paint, which he identified as common stenciling ink, he felt a smooth tracery of lettering. He peered closely, but not a sign of the old lettering could he see.

Sentinel pulled off his specs and wiped the lenses. He rummaged through a pile of papers in drawers and shelves. He could feel the eyes of Daly and Marvick upon him. He knew that they were skeptical that he could recover the money.

He glanced at the clock on the wall. The sharp ticking was disturbing to one of Speck's sensibility to the slightest sound. He immediately attributed the harsh ticking to the fact that the clock was fastened loosely to the hard concrete wall.

Then Speck discovered an order book lying on the counter. He ran through the carbon copies in the book, noting that there was but a page or two unused. The last two entries called for the delivery of four bales of silk from the T K K dock to Security Warehouse. Immediately his interest was aroused.

"Nothing but cash stolen?" he asked Daly.

"So far as I know," replied Daly. He turned to Marvick. "Did the driver pick up those silk delivery orders last night?"

Marvick's mouth dropped open.

"By George, I put them in the safe, last night!"

Daly grabbed the phone and called the T K K dock.

"Hello, the receiving clerk? This is the Atela Drayage. I want to stop delivery on two hauling orders of silk to go to Security Warehouse . . . What? You're sure? Yes, I'll hold the line, but stop them if you can!"

CHAPTER II.

THE WARNING.

NERVOUSLY, Daly turned to Speck. "Two Chevy trucks just picked up the silk! If we can only—" He turned again to the phone. "Gone? Good heavens! Those orders were stolen! Did you get their license numbers?"

Daly scribbled the numbers and handed them to Speck.

"Here's the truck numbers. Now do something quick!"

Speck ceased running through the delivery order book and examined closely one of the tissue carbon copies calling for the delivery of a quantity of damaged cases of tea to half a dozen different salvage companies. The largest quantity, six cases, called for delivery to Hyde Point Warehouse.

"You have quite a few deliveries to Hyde Point Warehouse?" Speck asked.

"They and the C P C are our biggest customers," Marvick volunteered. "But hadn't you better trace those trucks?"

"I'll be off as soon as I call up headquarters."

Speck seized the phone and called Douglas 20. "Hello, Findlay? Say, Finny, better tell the captain of detectives to send some men down here. Those thieves carted off the office safe and planted a dummy safe to fool the patrolman. Two delivery orders for baled silk were in the safe. The thieves picked up the silk from the T K K dock a few minutes ago. Finny, we're on the trail of the gang that's been pulling off those wholesale dock robberies! I'm going to . . ."

"You'll jump out of this case right now, or you'll get burned plenty!" howled Findlay. "I'll send . . ."

But that was all Speck heard. He had no intention of quitting when he had such a fair lead. It was barely possible that he had stumbled upon the trail of the dock thieves. What a story it would make for his paper! And what a chance to prove that eyesight is not the most important of man's senses!

Speck pulled out his watch and wound it carefully, comparing the time with the clock that ticked noisily on the wall.

"Eight thirty," he said, putting the watch back with aggravating slowness. "Daly, I'll try to have your silk back by ten this morning. Now I'll light a cigar——"

He felt in his vest pocket, then puckered his brow. "Know of a cigar store near here?" he asked.

Daly ran his fingers through his graying hair with exasperation. He dragged a bandless, tightly wrapped perfecto from his pocket and thrust it into Speck's hand.

"For Heaven's sake," he cried, "get going!"

The phone rang again. Speck, certain that the call was from Findlay, stepped into the street.

Bum eyes, huh? Not physically fit to be a flatfoot? Well, the dicks from headquarters would be turning the drayage office inside out before long. Speck doubted that they would learn as much with good eyes as he had with a bum pair of lamps.

Straight to Hyde Point Warehouse Speck walked. He wasn't at all certain that he would learn anything here. But his brief investigation in the drayage office convinced him that the stolen silk would be linked with damaged cases of tea.

Speck opened the screen door to the warehouse office and confronted "Mig"

Gaffney, an ex-stevedore who had recently bought the warehouse. Biting off the end of Daly's cigar, Speck lit the weed and blew the fragrant smoke into the air.

"I'm looking for damp-proof storage space," he said.

Gaffney started to reach toward a cigar box on his desk. Then he withdrew his hand and studied Speck's aromatic cigar curiously.

"What's your line?" demanded Gaffney, squinting one eye and rubbing the end of his thick nose with a finger.

"Flour," replied Speck tersely.

"Can you come back later?" asked Gaffney.

Speck canted an ear toward the street door. His heart beat a little faster as he detected the unmistakable explosions of a four-cylinder Chevy. He studied Gaffney's squat face.

"I could, but I might not," Speck replied.

He heard the Chevy stop at the side of the warehouse. Gaffney cleared his throat, as though about to speak. Then a second machine, with the same identifying explosions, passed in front and stopped in the alley beside the warehouse.

"Stick around two minutes and I'll show you about," said Gaffney, swinging his big frame from the chair at his desk and lumbering across the room to a rear door. "Some goods are coming in, and I got to see 'em stowed right."

Speck agreed. The big warehouseman slammed the door. A faint grating in the lock told Speck that a key had been turned. He smiled to himself. He felt sure that he was about to learn something startling.

Quietly Speck stole across the floor and put his head to the keyhole of the door. His keen ears picked up every sound and reported far more than his eyes could have seen in that gloomy building.

He heard Gaffney ask if there had been trouble. Another voice replied that everything was "jake." The clanking of light chains and the rumbling of metal told Speck that a steel roll-up door was being raised. The faint thud of a bundle dropped on a solid floor and the squeaking of automobile springs informed him that the Chevy trucks were being unloaded. Then a pivot-wheeled hand truck rumbled across a concrete floor.

He listened to the bump of a flat wheel on the hand truck. He pictured its movements in the open warehouse floor, then down a corridor, around a corner, and its sudden halt.

To any one with ears less acute than Speck's, the course of the truck would have been a mystery. But Speck knew that the flat wheel of the truck had clicked forty-one times. As the circumference of such a wheel is thirty-nine inches, the truck must have traveled a hundred and thirty-three feet. The squeak of the pivot wheels and the sudden shading in sound outlined the direction the truck had taken.

Suddenly the phone on Gaffney's desk jangled an alarm. Speck backed hastily away from the door. A moment later the lock clicked and Gaffney shot into the office. For a man of such big bulk, Gaffney moved with astonishing quickness.

"Hello, hello!" Gaffney called into the mouthpiece.

Straining his ears, Speck barely distinguished the words of the party at the other end of the line.

"Gray suit, brown hat, and big, round specs," he heard. "Nose slightly hawked. Doesn't look like a dick. Watch him, and don't let him inside the warehouse."

Speck's pulse increased five beats to the minute. His nostrils flattened against the side of his nose. There was no doubt in his mind that some one was describing him to Gaffney.

"I get you," Gaffney drawled. "Three tons. I'll have it picked up this afternoon."

And then came the barely audible rejoinder, "Keep everything under cover till this blows over. Can't say anything more, now. But watch out for that guy with the specs!"

Gaffney's breathing, suddenly sharp and whistling, warned Speck to be alert. He knew that Gaffney recognized him in that telephone description. But Gaffney couldn't know that Speck's acute ears had overheard the warning. The chances were that Gaffney would merely try to get rid of him.

"Well, are you ready to show me about?" Speck asked.

"Not yet. This call interrupted me. Wait right here. I won't be gone half a minute."

Gaffney closed the door. The lock clicked. Outside, the Chevy trucks started their motors. Speck dashed to the street in time to read their license numbers. Comparing them with the numbers Daly had given him, he was disappointed to find that they did not agree. But he was not dismayed. License numbers can be changed quickly.

CHAPTER III.

DEATH BY ACCIDENT.

SPECK looked down the side street. He saw that the roll-up door of the warehouse was still open. Cautiously, he peered into the gloomy interior, then darted inside. The warehouse was as silent as a deserted dungeon.

At first it struck Speck as being queer that the warehouse was in total darkness. It suggested the idea of concealment. It looked very much like Gaffney preferred darkness to hide his activities.

Recalling his mental pursuit of the hand truck while he had listened be-

hind the locked door, Speck paced off the distance. He kept close to the bales and boxes, turning as nearly as he could recall where he had heard the truck turn. Presently he paused and studied a glow of light that came from a vault just ahead.

Certain that more than stolen silk was in the vault, Speck leaped across the lighted area. A few feet beyond, in a recess made by a post supporting the floor above, he hid.

Workers rustled inside the lighted room. Speck hoped they would leave the vault and give him a chance to investigate. Then his sharp ears caught a sound of breathing. The sharp, whistling sound seemed to come from overhead. He looked up, but in the darkness, could see nothing.

Uneasily, he started to leave his post. A breath of wind fanned his cheek. He squatted suddenly, and flung himself sideways; but too late. A heavy form bore down upon him and Gaffney's breath whistled in his ears.

"I been watching you!" cried Gaffney. "I seen you sneak past the light from the vault, you lying snooper!"

Speck, knocked flat to the concrete, was half dazed. He struggled with Gaffney, but the heavy man, dropping from a dozen feet overhead, had knocked all the wind out of Speck.

Before Speck had really begun to fight, two of Gaffney's helpers had laced his arms and legs with stout cords. Unable to move hands or feet, he was carried into the recess between high stacks of cased goods, and dumped on the concrete floor.

"This dick knows too much," Gaffney whispered to his assistants. "If he gets out of here alive, we're cooked."

"But we can't just bump him off," came the reply.

"Who said bump him off?" demanded Gaffney. He pulled out a flash light and ran the rays over the cases

above Speck. "That canned goods isn't piled any too well. A fellow, prowling about, might easily knock a whole stack on top of himself."

"But the dicks might think it wasn't an accident."

"Let 'em think! Let 'em search everything in the warehouse. They won't find anything incriminating. I'll see to that. All right, you two fellows, climb up there and do your stuff. Make a good job of it."

Speck's blood curdled as the import of Gaffney's instructions sank in. He tugged at his bonds helplessly. Panting with exertion, he let his head sink back to the cold floor. Above him he could hear the two warehouse stackers moving cautiously.

A case creaked and grated. Speck knew that the case was heavy, weighing at least sixty pounds. Dropped upon his head, from twelve feet above, he would be mashed.

Again he heard the squeak and grate of the case as it was shoved over the edge of the narrow aisle. He heard the sharp grunts as the men gave a final heave.

Desperately, Speck lunged in a backward somersault. Up went his trussed feet. For a moment a thrill of hope shot through him. Then, instead of completing the somersault out of danger, his uptilted body came to rest against the post at the end of the recess.

In this uncomfortable position, legs in the air and standing on his head, he heard the slight whistle of wind as the heavy case shot downward. *Crash!* The wooden case splintered on the concrete floor, so close that some of the cans spilled out and thudded against his back.

Above him, Speck could still hear the men working. Perspiration rolled into his eyes and off his forehead as he wondered if their haphazard aim in the dark would be better this time. Then

the second case crashed to the floor, just forward of the first. Three more cases toppled downward, the last rolling partly over Speck.

Then the wind was suddenly knocked from his lungs. The last case had bounded off the one resting against him, and both cases weighted him between the post and the floor.

Grimly he waited, wondering if the next moment would bring the end of all things to him.

But the men must have thought their job well done. Speck heard them crawl along the cases and leap to the cement. Their footsteps receded. A door, probably the door to the office, opened. Distinctly he heard Gaffney phoning to some one.

"—an accident when we report it to the police," Gaffney was saying. "But I've got to have trucks . . . I don't care where you get 'em! You know what it means if they find all that stuff in the vault!"

A click told Speck that Gaffney had hung up.

"All set, Gaffney," one of the men reported.

"I'll take a look," replied Gaffney.

The blood was pounding in Speck's ears. The top of his head seemed to be boring a hole through the concrete floor. He struggled to throw himself forward again, and succeeded in shifting to a less strained position. But in turning over, two of the heavy cases rolled on top of him. To make matters worse, an iron strap that had broken from one of the cases, gouged him cruelly in the elbow.

Speck gritted his teeth. He dared not change his position any further. He could hear the footsteps of several men. If they found him still alive—

The men stopped before the aisle, now cluttered with broken cases of canned goods. A ray of light played into the crevices. Sprawled beneath the cases that had rolled over him when

he shifted, Speck must have appeared to be in a bad way. He heard Gaffney's whistling breath. Then the warehouseman grunted.

"We'll have to unleash him and stack those cases about him again. But first we've got to clean out the vault."

The light snapped out. Speck took a deep breath. He heard the men open the vault door. Then commenced a frenzied battering and bumping that told him the vault was being emptied.

Speck wriggled a few inches. The sharp piece of strap iron gouged his elbow again. Hope seized him. He shifted till he could rub the lashing on his arm against the sharp strap iron. It was slow work. To Speck, it seemed that hours passed. Trucks stopped at the loading platform outside. Hand trucks rumbled endlessly through the dark warehouse, bearing away goods. But at last the tight cord snapped. One hand was free!

Three minutes later Speck sawed loose the bonds on his other arm. He untied his legs and shoved the cases of canned goods from his body. He listened intently. The hand trucks had ceased carrying out goods from the vault. The warehouse seemed deserted.

Speck rubbed the circulation back to his arms and legs. He peered down the corridor. It was too dark to tell if any one were in watch. He thought of his glasses and felt about on the cold cement. Jammed against the cases, where he had struggled with Gaffney, he found them—unbroken.

Noiselessly, Speck darted down the corridor. He turned into another aisle. The light grew stronger. He could hear a clanking of chains and the rumbling of metal rollers just ahead. He came to the end of a great pile of baled goods and peered into a flood of daylight around the corner.

Pulling at the chains that lowered the roll-up door, stood Gaffney.

Too late! The trucks were gone. Speck was too late to follow the stolen goods to their new hiding place.

As the metal door dropped to the floor, the gloomy warehouse seemed darker than ever. Speck climbed a few feet up the baled goods and listened.

Gaffney started toward the office, then retraced his steps and approached the goods where Speck lay hidden. Speck held his breath. But Gaffney continued toward the vault in the rear section of the warehouse.

CHAPTER IV.

THE TEN O'CLOCK CLEW.

AS the footsteps receded, Speck jumped lightly to the concrete floor and ran to the office door. He turned the key in the lock and poked the door open an inch or two. The office was vacant. Quickly he slid into Gaffney's seat and called Douglas 20.

"Hello—Finny? This is Speck. Send some one to the Atela Drayage. Look at their delivery order book. I think you'll find an order sending eight or ten trucks to Hyde Point Warehouse. Find out where those trucks went after they left Hyde Point and you'll find the T K K silk and a whole flock of stolen goods."

Speck's quick ears detected the sound of running feet. Quickly he shut off Findlay's questions.

"And send a cop down here! There's going to be a . . ."

The door burst open. Gaffney, his lips drawn back from his teeth, sprang into the office. Fred stripped his specks from his eyes. He dropped almost to his knees as Gaffney bore in. He swung his knotted fists hard into Gaffney's chest. *Thud! Thud! Thud!* And a grunt each time from Gaffney!

Speck's pulse quickened in the glory of combat. It had been two years since he had stepped out of the ring, two long years since he had exchanged

blows with an antagonist. His eyes, which had blasted Speck's hope for fame as a leather pusher, cleared during that brief fight. As he landed hard and fast on Gaffney's face, it seemed to Speck that he could see as good as ever.

Gaffney plowed in, head down, swinging his muscular arms. For an instant the warehouseman's chin was uncovered. Speck whipped up his arm, leaned his whole body into that blow, and socked Gaffney's head clean back to his coat collar.

"No use counting *him* out," Speck said to himself grimly, as he bent over the sleeping warehouseman.

He blinked his weak eyes. The whole room seemed misty. Speck pulled out his glasses and glared at them belligerently.

"If only I didn't have to wear cheaters!" he mumbled as he put them on again.

He remembered that Gaffney had reached toward a box of cigars. He opened the box and compared the handmade perfectos with the stub of his own, which was still lying on the floor.

"The same," he mused. "I thought Gaffney acted strange when he smelled the smoke from the cigar Daly gave me."

He stuck one of Gaffney's cigars in his pocket. Then the outer door burst open and a cop bustled in. In a few words Speck explained the situation.

"Tell Findlay I'll prepare charges against Gaffney as soon as I come back from the Atela Drayage office."

But at the drayage office disappointment awaited Speck. Two plainclothes men greeted him with sneers.

"What kind of a bum steer are you handing us?" they asked.

"Did you run down the hauling order?" asked Speck.

"Sure. There it is—the last order in the book."

Speck studied the carbon copy. Just

as he had suspected, nearly a dozen trucks had been sent to Hyde Point Warehouse.

"Did you search Pendleton Warehouse—where these goods were sent from Hyde Point Warehouse?"

"We checked up on the stuff. None of it was stolen."

Speck puckered his brow. He knew he was in for a hearty roasting from Findlay because of his luckless attempt to run down this case by himself. Had he turned all his information over to the proper authorities, Gaffney's stolen goods might even now be in the hands of the police.

Speck turned to Daly. "This is the last order in the book. Haven't you issued any orders since?"

"Here's the new book," Marvick volunteered.

Speck studied the orders in the new book. They were all for minor deliveries, not at all suspicious in themselves. Speck picked up the old book and compared the serial numbers.

"There's a gap of a hundred numbers between the two books, Daly," he said suddenly. "Where's the missing book?"

"I noticed that, too," Marvick offered. "I've looked high and low, but can't find it."

"Then we'll look a little further," replied Speck.

"It's queer," said Marvick at last, when search failed to divulge the order book. "Another one of those baffling cases—eh, Mr. Sentinel?"

Instead of replying, Speck pulled Gaffney's cigar from his pocket.

"That was a mighty fine cigar you gave me, Daly. Must have cost you plenty."

"Not so much," Daly smiled. "I believe they escaped duty."

Speck's mouth hardened the least bit.

"I'd like to know where they came from, Daly."

"You'll have to ask Marvick. He bought them."

"I'm sorry, Mr. Sentinel," replied Marvick smoothly, "but I can't tell you. A fellow in your business could make trouble——"

The clock on the cement wall commenced slowly to count ten. Speck raised his eyes to the clock and smiled ruefully.

"I promised to have your silk located by ten, Daly," he began. Then he stopped and listened to the ticking of the clock. Instead of a sharp, harsh note, the sound was soft and gentle.

Speck leaped to the counter, felt in back of the clock and drew out a book. Immediately the clock beat hard and noisily.

"The missing book!" cried Speck. He turned back the first page and showed Daly the carbon copy.

"That's where you'll find your silk—at Cotton Warehouse!"

Marvick suddenly vaulted over the counter. The two detectives were alert, however, and hauled him back. Daly, red with anger, sprang toward Marvick.

"None of that!" Speck warned him. "You're lucky that Marvick admitted buying those cigars. Whoever broke in here during the night was smoking that brand. Gaffney had a box in his office. I wouldn't want to be connected with his stolen goods."

"But this second set of delivery orders lays my clerk wide open!" exclaimed Daly.

"It does," agreed Speck. "It wasn't at all necessary, with both Gaffney and Marvick believing I was dead. But I'm of the opinion that Marvick, once he got the stolen goods in your trucks, attempted to double cross Gaffney and hide them for himself. Sending legitimate goods into Pendleton was just a blind."

Speck nodded curtly to the listening detectives, and strode to the street.

Five minutes later he reached the harbor police station.

"Hello, Finny. I want to phone my paper."

"Help yourself," replied Findlay gruffly. He eyed Speck belligerently. "You're a fine little butt-in-ski!"

The phone on Findlay's desk rang. The sergeant listened for half a minute, his eyes growing bigger and bigger. Finally he hung up. He rubbed the blue stubble already beginning to show under his freshly shaven chin. He gazed sternly at Speck.

"I take it back," he growled. "I just got the dope from the boys down at Cotton Warehouse. Some haul, believe me!" He pounded his desk. "But what I don't get, you four-eyed sleuth hound, is how you picked on Hyde Point Warehouse!"

"That was easy. There's been a lot of deliveries there."

"And to a lot of other warehouses, too!"

"Yes," agreed Speck. He pulled off

his glasses and wiped the lenses with a smooth rotary motion. "But the dummy safe was made from old tea boxes that had come from Hyde Point Warehouse."

Findlay shook his head.

"Come again, Speck. The dummy safe was painted with thick stenciling ink. You couldn't see an address on it."

"No, you couldn't read the old address," Speck agreed. He put his glasses back on his thin nose and took up the phone.

"How in thunder did you know the tea cases came from Hyde Point Warehouse!" demanded Findlay, his face purple.

"I could feel the old address under the paint," said Speck quietly. "You know, Findlay, if you train your fingers to extreme sensitiveness——"

Findlay gazed at Speck in wonder. He wagged his head sadly. "And they wouldn't let you on the force," he mumbled, "because you've got a bum pair of lamps!"

TWELVE MILES A SECOND

ACCORDING to experts, the solar system is going through space at the rate of twelve miles a second. This is not at all alarming news, for there's a lot of room all around us.

The sun's nearest neighbor is separated from it by about two hundred and seventy thousand times the earth's distance from the sun. It would take light four years to travel that far. We on this planet can sleep peacefully, for it's extremely doubtful if a collision of that sort will ever happen.

BIRD APARTMENT HOUSES

ANY one who has, as a boy, climbed a tree at the risk of his neck in order to get a bird's nest, knows how marvelous these winged creatures construct. About the most wonderful nests of all, however, are those made by the so-called sociable grosbeak.

These nests are composed wholly of grass. They are joined together, until there are over two hundred in one place. These collections of nests usually take the form of a gigantic mushroom. At a distance, they are often mistaken for a native hut, with its grass room. Many of these nests have been seen and described by travelers in South Africa. They are, in effect, enormous apartment houses, built by birds, and lived in by birds.

Lost Millions

by George E. Powers
O Part I



(SERIAL)

CHAPTER I.

A FALLING PLANE.

THE clenched fists of Frank Blake rammed down into the pockets of his flying coat. "Bob! Bob! Get that nose down!" he muttered between set teeth. He bent his body forward as if motion could force ahead the stick in the plane he watched from where he stood in the crowd.

Blake groaned. And well he might, forced as he was to stand there a helpless witness to the most flagrant piece of air work he had seen in many a day. "Oh, why didn't I yank the crazy fool out of the cockpit when I had the chance?" he moaned inwardly. Each fleeting second lessened his scant store of hope that the inevitable crash somehow would be averted.

The "crazy fool" was Bob Staley, three years younger and partner in a barnstorming tour of the small towns in the great valley lying inland from San Francisco. A scant two minutes before, Staley had roared off down the field with one cylinder of the motor cut-

ting out every other second. In spite of the fact that the motor failed to pick up the faulty member after a reasonable period, he had not turned around and taxied back to the starting point.

The miss had been detected when the motor was tested on the blocks. When a new spark plug failed to solve the trouble, Blake pronounced it valve trouble, motioned Staley to cut the ignition and walked around to the rear cockpit to assist the passenger, a girl, to alight.

Staley, however, had stood up and in a slight display of vexation shoved Blake's hand off the cowling. "She'll shoot on all eight when I give her the gun all the way," he protested, bending over and replacing across the girl's lap the safety belt Blake had disconnected.

"Don't let him scare you," Staley went on to the girl. Then whirling back and flopping into his seat he met Blake's rebuking eyes with a frown of displeasure. "Look out!" he said warningly. "I'm going!"

Stick and throttle went ahead with a snap. Blake anxiously watched the old Jenny gather speed. During the first twenty seconds, fear and relief played in

his mind by turns as the motor hit now on eight, now on only seven cylinders.

Fear came to the surface and stayed, however. After what would have been a doubly long run with a smooth motor, Staley eased back on the stick and the wheels lifted.

It was then Blake jammed his hands into his pockets, for Staley, heading into a stiff wind had, on lifting off the ground, deliberately kicked right rudder. With the nose pointed far too high the younger man had brought the stick over to the right—a steep, banking take-off with a brisk wind pushing under his upraised left wing.

The ship, motor still at its intermittent firing of seven, then eight cylinders, nose still pointed high, began to come out of the bank and head cross wind as Staley brought the left wing down. But still he was merely mushing along. The laboring motor, and what little forward speed remained after that zooming take-off, could not sustain him in air long—not at the angle he was attempting to climb. Disaster was not far off then.

The ship appeared to stop dead still and hang in the air for an instant by the propeller. Then it sank, with a lazy, floating motion, wings wabbling but still fairly level.

To the frenzied Blake a quarter of a mile away, it seemed as if Staley had at last thought of relieving the impossible angle of climb and was bringing the nose down with the stick. He allowed himself a breath of relief. The relief was short-lived.

The nose, on coming down to level, lost none of its downward speed but continued swiftly into the making of a nose dive. The right wing dipped lower than the left and as the nose got past flying level, suddenly shot around as if under normal flying speed conditions full right rudder had been kicked on.

The plane could not answer to any control now. The two-hundred-foot gap between it and the ground below,

Blake thought would never close. His eyes trailed off instinctively to where the crash would come. A ray of hope swept over him. He caught sight of a telegraph line that seemed to lie about under the ship, low poles with four rows of wide cross arms strung with a network of wires.

"Hit those wires! Hit those wires!" Blake cried out unconsciously. Anything to break that two-hundred-foot, nose-first impact against hard ground, would give Staley and his girl passenger at least a slender chance to cheat death, or possibly serious injuries.

As if in obedience to his commands, the ship plunged nose first into the top row of wires between two poles. It smashed through that and two more rows, poised just a second on the bottom row. When the tail and fuselage came swishing on down and struck the ground, it broke through and crashed.

When Blake arrived at the scene a few yards in advance of the excited crowd one glance told him the ship was a total wash-out. But most important of all to him was that neither Staley nor the girl was injured, or even scratched. Staley had helped her out of the cockpit the minute they hit. They were standing off to one side, looking dazedly at the wreckage.

The ship lay flush with the ground, tail skid and landing gear crushed flat underneath the fuselage, oak motor bed snapped off at the splice on top and motor bolts twisted out of their holes. It was a well-wrecked plane, all over.

Staley looked up at Blake guiltily.

"Motor didn't get down to the ground, Frank," he said hopefully. "Isn't hurt much, I guess."

Blake had to laugh.

If his partner had climbed into the lopsided cockpit and yelled, "Contact!—we'll try it once more!" the remark wouldn't have been more absurd.

"Not, not much, Bob," Blake said dryly. "Outside of a chewed-up crank

case and crank shaft twisted out of shape, not to mention half a dozen 'con' rods snapped off, she's in pretty fair condition. Of course, wings or under-carriage don't cut any figure." Then he turned to the girl and said regretfully: "I'm sorry this happened, but——"

"Oh! I'm not!" she interrupted him happily. "I wouldn't have missed it for the world. If I'd paid for the ride, I wouldn't even think of wanting my money back!"

"Oh, so it was a free ride?" Blake said slowly, not addressing either one particularly. "Well, Bob always goes the limit to please his guests—especially the ladies." He threw Staley a baleful look. "Come on, Bob, let's see if we can get a lift to town with somebody and make arrangements to haul this mess off the road."

Neither spoke during the short ride to town. When they got to the hotel and up to their room, Staley said in a very humble tone: "Frank, I'm sorry! I sure pulled a bloomer, but even yet I can't for the life of me figure out what happened."

"What happened was exactly what I kept telling you would happen if you didn't cut it out trying to make a Jenny zoom off the ground in a climbing bank with the nose aimed at the moon. I told you that you can't make the motor perform like a Liberty. And not only that, you only had seven cylinders when you took off."

"Instead of keeping our nose in the wind and climbing slowly, you had to get a wing down and stick the nose straight up. That's great stuff if you've got a ship that's got the pull to do it, but a Jenny hasn't."

"After this, when somebody tries to tell you something he's learned maybe from experience himself, perhaps you'll listen." He walked over to the window and stood looking down into the street.

When he turned around, Staley was slumped down in the only chair the room

contained, elbows propped up on his knees, his mournful face resting in his cupped hands.

"Come on, Bob, snap out of it!" Blake cried, shaking him gently. "I didn't mean to rub it in. I was mad, I guess, to see our chance to make a killing this summer slip through our fingers like that. The way things started yesterday, it looked like we'd clean up enough in three months to buy a real crate. But it's all done now and there's no use crying about it."

"The best thing we can do is find a junkman, if the town has one, and sell him the ship for what old metal there is in it. Then beat it back to San Francisco and look for a job. We won't be able to save enough money to get a good ship, but it's a cinch we can get another Jenny."

At a quarter to twelve that night, they passed through the ferry terminal at San Francisco. Ten minutes later they turned into the lobby of the hotel they had left in such high spirits two days before. The night clerk greeted them in surprise. "Thought you fellows wouldn't be back till this summer?" he said.

"We had trouble with the ship," Blake spoke up carelessly. "Can't do the work we want it for. We're going to stick around here till we find something we can use. If room 417 is still open, we'll move back in for a week or two, any way. And you can have the bell hop bring up that trunk we left in the store-room."

The room was available. A few minutes after they got upstairs, the bell boy wheeled the trunk inside.

"Take a run out and get a morning paper, Bob, and we'll give the want ads the once-over," Blake said, as he began unropeing the trunk. "Counting the fifty bucks we got from the junkman, we've got a little over a hundred dollars capital. That won't pay rent and feed us

forever. One of us has to get a job quick."

About five minutes later Staley came rushing in, waving a crumpled paper. "Drop everything!" he cried. "Come over here—quick!" He spread the classified advertising section out on the dresser. "Read that! Then tell me we're not two lucky bozos!"

The advertisement Staley had become so excited about headed the "Help-wanted" column and led off in capital letters with the words "AVIATORS WANTED," then continued:

A wonderful opportunity to make a fortune in a few weeks' time is open to two competent pilots. Must be under thirty, single, unencumbered and willing to leave United States. This is a strictly commercial enterprise. Student aviators, government air-reserve flyers and flyers of limited hours and without extensive cross-country experience not considered. For appointment phone Ky 8600, room 607, this morning between ten and eleven and no other time. Do not call in person.

Blake gave the paper a contemptuous flip when he finished reading. "You'll have to find something better than that," he said.

"Say!" Staley began to splutter. "That's a swell chance, believe me. I'll bet a thousand dollars it's down in Nicaragua!"

"I'll add another thousand of the same kind of money that you're right," Frank said quietly.

All the exasperation possible to crowd into a single glance was in the one Staley shot at his partner. "For the love of Mike, look at the fun there'd be down there—and pay for it!"

When Blake glanced up there was an amused look on his face. "If you had listened to me, you wouldn't have cracked up this afternoon, would you?"

"Why bring that up?" Staley countered, flushing. "I guess I did get so cocky I figured a ship didn't have a chance in a million of getting away from me. But what's that got to do with it?"

"Experience. It was experience that made me know all along that sooner or later you'd crack-up if you persisted in ignoring advice. Experience is what's talking when I tell you to get Nicaragua out of your head, or any of those banana republics down there.

"The glamour of aërial warfare in Central America takes on a mighty dull finish when you once land there. You never know where you stand, a quarter of the time—unless you happen to find yourself backed up against a white wall looking into gun barrels. Then you know where you'll stand, or rather lie, for a long, long time.

"To-night you go to bed a respected colonel in, maybe, General Zapato's triumphant army, with a salary of a thousand pesos a month. In the morning you wake up to find the administration has changed and you've been demoted—if not ordered shot—to the rank of private in General Medina's forces, with a salary of about fifteen centavos a month, if any.

"The best thing those gold-braid babies down there do is ride good horses out into the middle of the river, then jump off and swim ashore to hop onto the backs of worse ones.

"This ad probably belongs to some ambitious revolutionist that's aiming at the presidential chair. He's here to buy up all the condemned rifles and dud ammunition that happens to be kicking around. While he's here, he's probably figuring to recruit himself a two-man air force.

"The commercial ring in that ad sounds bogus to me. You don't have to advertise in the papers nowadays for commercial pilots—the woods are full of 'em. Some of them don't know much about flying, but that doesn't hold them down from thinking so."

Staley was silent for a spell, then he suddenly jumped up and walking over to the telephone took down the receiver.

"Hey! what's the idea?" Blake asked quickly. "You're not going to call that outfit up, are you? The ad said in the morning. Anyway, it won't do you any good. I won't mix up in that kind of stuff. Come on, use your head."

"There'll be plenty of guys calling them up then and—outside call, please—and I've made up my mind to find—Operator? Well, get me Kearney 8600, in a hurry, please. That's right, yeh—I've made up my mind to find out just what there is to it. You don't know, it might be a darn good deal—what? . . . Kearney 8600, Room 607.

"What's that? Sure I know the name of the party in 607 or I wouldn't be calling—shut up, Blake." Staley held his hand over the mouthpiece and shouted fiercely at the other's attempted interference. "I said I wouldn't be calling, if the general wasn't expecting me to call.

"I just got in from Nicaragua and am supposed to call him the minute I get here. Yeh, very important." He looked over at the frowning Frank and winked. "This is Colonel Garcia—yeh, Garcia, G-a-r-c-i-a, from—from Nicaragua. Yeh? Well, you'd *better* ring the room!" As he waited he turned and spoke to Frank. "That's the way to put it across on these wise switchboard operators," he said, smiling all over, as if perfectly satisfied with himself.

"She must be wise," Blake scoffed, "unless she thinks Nicaragua is a county in Ireland and Garcia sounds like Murphy. Hang up that receiver now wh—"

"Sh!" Staley hissed. "She's ringing the room. I'll kid him along and find out what the deal is. If it sounds good, I'll make a date for both of us— Oh, hello! Is this room 607—the fellow that had the ad in the— Hello! Well, what do you know about that! He hung up on me!" Chagrined, Staley turned around.

"What do you think he'd do, getting

him out of bed at one o'clock in the morning? Ask you to come up and have tea?"

"Well, he wasn't a foreigner," Staley ignored the sarcasm. "I could tell that from the way he said, 'None of your business!' when he slammed the receiver down. So that spreads a wet blanket on your revolution idea. He sounded to me like a hard-boiled truck driver. I've got a hot hunch his proposition is worth going after."

"Why not call him on the phone again?" Blake suggested, amused at his younger partner's seriousness and enthusiasm.

"Say, listen here!" Staley cried, "I'm dumb, I'll admit. I kicked away our chance of getting away with a flying start toward a new ship, but that ad's got the Indian sign on me. If we let it slip by without at least finding out what it's all about, I'll always think it was one big mistake. It won't do any harm to see what the proposition is, and I'm going to try again."

"Oh, all right," Blake agreed good-naturedly. "You can call him up when the ad says in the morning, but forget it now and come on to bed."

"When the ad says—nothing!" Staley flared up. "What do you suppose I called him up for now? Between ten and eleven there'll be twenty hungry pilots and would-be pilots on his trail. That bird in 607 is going to talk to me to-night yet—you wait and see if he doesn't!"

CHAPTER II.

A MYSTERIOUS PROPOSITION.

NOW what?" Blake asked sharply. Staley's earnestness kindling a spark of interest in him at last.

"Let's see your fountain pen," Staley replied. "I want to write a telegram."

Curious now as well as interested, Blake handed him the pen and watched him plump down at the writing table.

"Give that the once-over" Staley got

up after a few minutes and handed over the telegraph blank. On it he had written:

MR. J. J. GREEN,
Room 607 Palace Hotel,
City.

You just hung up on two of the best commercial pilots on the whole coast stop And you made a big mistake stop We want fifteen minutes of your time between eight and nine this morning and we will prove we are the men you want stop What we cannot fly has not been built yet stop Cross-country hopping is our specialty stop Both of us are footloose and free and do not care where we go.

BLAKE AND STALEY.
Hotel Graystone, Room 417.

"You're not crazy enough to send that nonsense!" Blake protested, wadding the sheet into a ball and tossing it at the wastepaper basket. "Let's cut out the fooling and see if we can line up something to go after to-morrow. Hand me the paper. I'll look through the ads myself."

Ignoring the request, Staley walked over and picked up the blank.

"That fellow's going to give us a ring on that," he said confidently, "or I'm way off my base."

"Why, you poor dub, you haven't even got his name on it! What's the idea of that 'Green' on there? Anyway, I told you we're not going to mix up in it."

"I only put the 'Green' there to fill up the space," Staley came back quickly. "Don't worry. Before I go to the telegraph office, I'll meander into the hotel and get the right name off the register; or kid the room clerk into giving it to me. Well, I'll be back pretty quick—so long!"

When his "pretty quick" had stretched into an hour, Blake decided to wait up no longer. Putting in a call for seven o'clock, he went to bed.

The next thing he was conscious of was the jangling of the telephone bell. He jumped out of bed and ran across

the room. Lifting the receiver he heard a gruff voice say: "Hello! Who is this speaking?"

"Why—why, Blake—Frank Blake. Who did you want?" He found himself just a little confused at the sound of a strange voice. He had expected to hear the familiar morning call of the clerk.

"That's all right, you'll do," the gruff voice went on. "I'm taking you fast-workers up on that fifteen-minute crack in your telegram. Be over here at eight sharp and show your stuff!"

Bang! Blake heard the receiver at the other end fall on its hook. It wasn't until he next heard the operator's "Number, please?" that he finally came to himself, and remembered what it was all about.

For a moment after he hung up, Blake stood there, trying to steel himself to obey a temptation that flitted into his mind—say nothing about the call, let Staley think his brash telegram had brought no response. One glance, however, at the frank, boyish face of the figure curled up under the covers brought a feeling of shame. The next instant, Blake was bending over the bed shaking him roughly.

"Get up!" he cried. "It's nearly seven. If you want to go over and meet that fellow you sent the telegram to at eight, you can't stay in bed all day."

Staley was out on the floor like a shot. "Did he call—honest?" he almost shouted.

Blake repeated word for word what the stranger had said, adding: "Now you've fixed it all up, what kind of a sales talk are you going to put up in that fifteen-minute inning?"

"Oh," Staley replied, not in the least taken back, "I figured on you for that; I can't get mixed up in it. I got the hearing; now it's up to you to bring home the bacon. If he finds out all the flying I've done has been in a Jenny; and all the cross-country experience I've

had has been right around here, what a chance I'd have!"

"So this becomes my party, after all?" Blake retorted. "'All we want is fifteen minutes of your time and we'll show you we're the answer to all your prayers,' you say to this fellow. Then, when time for a show-down comes, the 'we' becomes singular and I'm the goat.

"All right, old boy, as long as you're so anxious to reach out and pick some fruit in the dark I'll bend a limb down so you can grab it. But if you get a sour plum instead of a peach, don't blame me for it! Come on, get dressed. We'll eat first."

It was still quarter to eight when they finished breakfast. Though they fairly poked along the two blocks down Market Street to the hotel where the mysterious advertiser was, they arrived five minutes ahead of the appointed time.

Blake had to laugh as they turned in at the hotel entrance. It was a far different Staley at his side now than the one who launched and carried through the bluff to win an interview.

"Not getting cold feet, are you?" he asked, as they approached the row of elevators.

"Cold feet—nothing!" Staley denied hotly. "It's diplomacy. I just went as far as I figured it was safe for me to go. From this point on, I'm a good listener. You do the talking for both of us."

Directly opposite the elevator at their floor was room No. 607. Blake stepped up and gave the door a rap. A minute went by in silence. Then they heard a key turn in the lock. The door opened.

"You fellows don't stand much on ceremony, do you? Why the deuce didn't you stop at the desk and phone up?" There was no mistaking the booming voice that had come over the phone.

The word "hard" described Gregory Dean aptly. From the soles of his heavy black shoes to the few wisps of

reddish hair strewn across his bald head, he personified the word. He was about forty-five. His hundred and eighty pounds were well distributed over a five-and-a-half-foot frame. He was chunky, thickset.

His face was big and square and homely. There was that something, however, in his large faded-gray eyes that told of a sense of humor, of a disposition more lenient than his usual attitude denoted. He revealed these genial characteristics when he motioned his callers to a chesterfield and said, "Sit down," and drew up a chair in front of them.

He gazed at them both for a full minute before speaking, first one, then the other. "Good thing I didn't stipulate twenty-one in my ad," started in abruptly, "or I'd have drawn a couple of sixteen year olds. How old are you?" He snapped the question at Staley.

"He's twenty-three—and I'm twenty-six," Blake put in before Staley could answer.

Dean chuckled. "I'll bet if you hadn't chipped in, he'd have told the truth and said twenty-one. How about it, kid?" He gave Staley a thrust with his thick finger.

Staley threw Blake a questioning look that drew another chuckle from Dean. "I win," he said, smiling, and adding: "But what's a year or two, eh?"

His bantering mood passed. The half dozen deep furrows that indicated the smile on his face vanished. When he spoke again it was quite a different Dean that settled down to talk business with them.

"You fellows asked for fifteen minutes to sell me your merchandise—and by merchandise I mean yourselves. It shouldn't take a third of that time. My requirements are not many, but it is not easy to find them all combined in one man. One requirement is youth—you fellows have that, of course.

"Another is plain, everyday nerve,

and right along in line with it tact, initiative, an aggressive spirit. You've got those things, too, I think, or you wouldn't have followed me up the way you did. I think you're sincere. I think you mean business. But—can you fly?"

As if he had divined that very question was coming, Blake had taken a card out of his pocket a moment before and was holding it in his hand. He now tendered it to Dean. "Transport pilot's license from the department of commerce," he explained. "You don't get one of those with just conversation."

Dean glanced swiftly at the photograph in the upper right-hand corner then back at Blake. "I'm frank to say I don't know much about airplanes or rules and regulations of the government, but it would seem a license like that would establish a man's competency," he said, handing the card back.

"Do you want to see mine?" Staley broke in suddenly, making a play of digging into his inside pocket. When Dean shook his head, he withdrew his hand, relieved, but careful to express none of it on his face.

"Fellows, I suppose the logical thing to do would be to interview some of the applicants that are going to phone in here this morning, but to be real candid, you two have got under my hide. Dog-gone both of you! I can't get over your bluffing your way through the desk at one o'clock this morning."

"They had the strictest kind of orders not to ring my room after eight o'clock. Garcia, Colonel Garcia, from Nicaragua! That was good! And then rushing a telegram up here when you fell flat over the phone. Say, where did you get that Nicaragua idea?"

"Blake thought from the ad that you were from down there somewhere," Staley answered. "Naturally, if you were, and somebody called up on the phone that late and said they had just got in from Nicaragua and had to talk

to you, the girl on the board wouldn't smell a mouse."

"Yes, that's just what I thought from the ad," Blake remarked. "Before we go any further, if this proposition is connected with any military or revolutionary expedition, it's just a waste of your time and ours to go on. One experience along that line is enough."

"Oh, so you've been down there?" Dean exclaimed, his eyes lighting up. "No, this is a strictly business enterprise. Not exempt from danger, I will admit; but then, neither is the post of teller or cashier in a bank. I can give you in mighty few words all that I am at liberty to tell about this proposition, until you have enlisted with us and are hundreds of miles away from San Francisco.

"I cannot reveal the destination as yet. Too much is at stake to risk even that much information leaking into interested channels running parallel with our own project.

"Your work will be to fly two very large, modern airplanes, which are now dismantled and stowed in the hold of a ship that is ready on two hours' notice to lift anchor. The country you are to fly over is wild, mountainous. Your landing field at one terminus of the course is small and treacherous. At times you may be forced to fly into it and out again in the dark, all in a few hours.

"The length of time your services will be required depends entirely upon the success of our enterprise. It might be three months, six, a year. Your salary will be one hundred and fifty dollars each per week, two thirds of each week being retained and placed in a bank in San Francisco, dependent upon the completion or termination of your services.

"That is the only condition imposed, but it is necessary. While not in conflict with the law, the enterprise is hazardous. Interests are working against us, but we are positive to be on

the ground at least three weeks before they are. Therefore, we must create some inducement for the men we choose to stay with us when danger of any character arises.

"And in addition to the deferred salary of one hundred dollars a week held in reserve, if the enterprise winds up successfully, each of you will receive a bonus of ten thousand dollars.

"I regret that I am compelled to ask you to accept the proposition on the strength of what little I have told you, without knowing even the elements of risk you'll incur." He paused, groping in his mind for words to carry on more of his thoughts.

Staley jumped up quickly at that juncture, crying out eagerly: "It's good enough for me! I'll take a chance on it just as things stand. How about you, Blake?"

"You're the doctor. If you're satisfied, I'm with you."

"All right," Dean said, rising. "You can plan on sailing this afternoon, about five o'clock. If you have a trunk or other baggage you want to take with you, have it ready in your room. An expressman will call for it not later than one o'clock.

"Between four fifteen and four thirty a taxi will call at the hotel for you and take you to an appointed place. You perhaps have a little running around to do before leaving, so——" His gesture plainly indicated they were to go. They got up and started for the door.

"Just two things before you leave—a request and an admonition," said Dean. "Please consider yourselves honor-bound not to discuss any phase of what has passed here this morning. Do not permit curiosity or impatience to tempt you to anticipate in advance where you will be driven this afternoon. Don't follow the man who comes for your baggage. Until this afternoon, then!" He opened the door.

They departed.

CHAPTER III.

THE SECRET BARED.

AT a quarter to five that afternoon Blake and Staley, occupying lobby chairs that gave them a commanding view of the entrance and desk, saw a taxi driver come in and approach the clerk.

"That's him looking for us now!" Staley said, getting up and walking over.

It was—five minutes later they were making painfully slow progress down through the tangle of traffic in Mission Street, headed for the water front. Soon they emerged into the Embarcadero and cut diagonally across the wide thoroughfare to the entrance of a tug-boat company's wharves.

When they got out, Dean came rushing up to meet them. "Come on, we're late now," he said, leading the way down a flight of steps to a landing float, at the side of which rode a large sea sled.

"Ship anchored out in the bay?" Staley asked, when the pilot had started the motor and they began to move off.

Dean shook his head. "We'll board the ship somewhere between here and the Golden Gate," he replied. "She got under way some time ago. You may appreciate the importance of secrecy in this undertaking, when we go to this extreme of caution in making our departure."

Soon they overtook their vessel, which was some distance outside the narrow entrance to the Gate.

The boat, except that it rode higher above the water line than was usual for a freighter clearing port for foreign waters, was just a counterpart of scores of small-tonnage tramp steamers plying up and down the coast.

Dean led the way up the side. Immediately they were on deck, he hurriedly conducted them to their quarters amidship, which were fairly comfortable.

"We will be upward of two weeks

in reaching our destination," Dean said, "so you might as well unpack your trunk and suit cases. Anyway, just make yourselves at home for the next half or three quarters of an hour.

"I will be back by then; but until I do, please do not come out on deck. I am not giving that in the form of an order, though I might do so without imposing, for, as you perhaps know, your salaries began this morning and you are in our employ. There is a good reason for this." With that he vanished.

"Say, this is a kind of a rum deal, isn't it?" Staley said. "I wonder if he figures we might jump overboard and swim back home?"

"I don't know. It's kind of got me going around in circles. The only thing I can think of is that we are to keep under cover till we get clean out of sight of land. But what's the difference? We've got a hundred and fifty bucks a week coming in and no place to spend it."

Dean came back in about an hour, bringing with him another man about his own age, but dark-complexioned and wearing glasses with unusually thick lenses. His gray-shot black hair was short and bristly and added to the grotesque appearance of his fat face.

"General," Dean said, "this is Mr. Blake and this Mr. Staley. The general will fly with one or the other of you considerably, so it's natural he wanted to see what kind of pilots I had picked out for him to risk his neck with."

"Yes-s." The general puckered his face into a grimace. "I fly wi' you mooch. You fly ca'ful, hey? Not fly downside-up—so?" He laughed uproariously, as he endeavored to portray with a number of gestures his idea of a plane floundering in air. "I am mos' please I have know you. To-morrow—maybe nex' day we get better acquaint." He bowed gravely and went out.

Blake started to say something, but Dean cut him short.

"I know what's in your mind, but you are wrong. I told you this is no military or revolutionary expedition, and it isn't. General Somoza is one of the four surviving members of the cabinet of President de Pineda. You, of course, remember reading about three years ago of the uprising and massacre in San Ardo. It is true we are headed for San Ardo right now, but for no belligerent purpose. On the contrary, we wish to avoid conflict, to keep our return secret.

"Now it is no longer necessary to keep you in suspense. The general is agreeable, inasmuch as we are now well out to sea that you be informed of those certain conditions that I referred to this morning.

"In about two weeks we will drop anchor in a little cove on the seaward side of St. Argua Island—a barren, low-lying outcropping some twenty miles off the coast of San Ardo. San Ardo, however, is our object point; but as we dare not enter the country openly, the island will have to serve as a base of contact.

"General Somoza's purpose in returning unheralded to San Ardo is not political. It is for another reason. I will sketch over as briefly as I can some events that transpired both before and after Pineda's deposal.

"For five generations back, the Pineda family ruled San Ardo, that rule only terminating three years ago. Ten years prior to that time, it ceased to be a kingdom. Faced by an uprising that threatened to sweep his throne out from under him, Alfonso Pineda fostered, instead of opposed, the inauguration of a republic to succeed the monarchy. He was himself elected president. At the expiration of his term he was chosen to serve a second term.

"During this second term in office, however, the political pot began to boil over. A people incited to point of insanity by the propaganda of a disgruntled opposing faction, made the streets of the capital, Elcatra, run red.

"Pineda, four members of his cabinet, of which General Somoza is one, and a mere handful of servants contrived to escape, and eventually reached San Francisco. They succeeded in taking with them but little wealth. The new régime had confiscated their properties, so their prospects for the future were not so bright. The money nearly gone, all, save Somoza, deserted Pineda.

"Not long after that Pineda took to his bed, a broken man in spirit and heart alike. Until he died recently, the general faithfully remained by his side.

"Just before he died, Pineda intrusted to Somoza a secret that had been handed down from one reign to another since the first Pineda, more than a hundred and fifty years ago.

"This Peneda, Philip Alonzo, in conducting a campaign of warfare against a great tribe of natives in central San Ardo, discovered a mammoth cavern, a secret temple of the ancient Aztecs. The entrance to the cavern was but a mere fissure at the base of a bare wall of rock. It was fitted with an ingeniously arranged slab of rock that could be swung into place or out again only by applying pressure in a certain place on it that was no longer than your thumbnail.

"Inside the cavern, on an elaborately carved dais of stone, was a massive shrine, or sun idol, cast from pure gold.

"Harsh as it may seem to tell, Pineda promptly put to death every soldier that was with him when he chanced upon the cavern. He closed the stone door, and—that door has never been opened since that day, one hundred and fifty years ago!"

"Aw, I'm not crazy enough to believe anybody is going to let maybe a ton of solid gold lie idle for a hundred and fifty years," Staley interrupted Dean to say scoffingly.

"That does seem hard to believe," Dean went on, "but it's true. When old Philip Alonzo found that wealth of

gold, he evidently began to look far into the future. Either that, or he already had so much wealth that he couldn't be bothered with transporting the idol through miles of rugged mountain country.

"At any rate, when the expedition against the Indians came to an end and he returned to the palace in Elcatra, he proceeded to make a very detailed map of the region where the cavern was situated. In addition, he scrawled off four lengthy pages directing how to find the secret entrance and the manner of manipulating the sensitively balanced rock barricade. This map and pages of instructions he placed within a heavy parchment scroll and sealed with great care. On the outside of the scroll he inscribed, in substance, these words:

"To the next De Pineda in line succeeding, and the next after him, and so on throughout the ages: Cause not this seal to be broken and the contents committed to your knowledge unless you stand in the presence of great peril, unless the safety of your kingdom demands the immediate raising of vast riches. May the wrath of Heaven, the curse of hell envelop the man who breaks this seal, his motive in so doing be avarice, a mere greed for gold.

"Seal unbroken, that scroll passed from Pineda to Pineda until it came into the hands of Alfonso Pineda. He, as his predecessors, left the seal intact. It remained intact until after his death.

"On his deathbed Pineda told General Somoza that he had brought that scroll to San Francisco with him. He told him where it was hidden in the very house in which they were living, saying: 'When I am gone, my friend, the last Pineda is gone. Then you may break the seal and learn the secret I was not destined to learn. Fear not the curse of the first Pineda that you will find written on the outside, for as I die, so must it die, too. The riches it may bring to you is only fitting reward for your undying devotion. I could not

have opened it, immune from its curse, for having fled my country I was not in deadly peril, nor could the gold it might bring have brought safety to San Ardo.'

"The general opened the scroll after Pineda's death and read about the cavern of treasure. He was the next thing to penniless, yet even if he could have scraped up the money to buy passage to San Ardo he dared not go. The moment he appeared in the country, his enemies would have pounced upon him. To try to make a secret visit and secure the gold would have been as futile an act.

"The cavern lies three or four days' journey on horseback from Elcatra, and from this city lies the sole trail into that portion of the mountains. A pack train was necessary to make the trip, and such a train would have aroused immediate suspicion, for Pineda's death was known to the party in power."

"Did they know anything about the scroll, that such a thing was in existence?" Blake asked.

Dean nodded. "The existence of the scroll has never been a secret, but the scroll itself has always been closely guarded, its hiding place more or less of a mystery. The general belief was that it was hidden in some obscure section of the country.

"Pineda was at first believed to have taken it with him when he fled. But after he had spent more than a year in San Francisco in abject poverty, that belief changed and it was thought he left it behind him.

"Every precaution was taken to prevent Pineda's return to San Ardo. On several occasions his quarters in San Francisco suffered a careful ransacking at the hands of agents of the new government. When these efforts availed nothing and more than a year had gone by without departure from his meager way of living, search was shifted to San Ardo.

"That search is still being carried on. It is thought possibly that Pineda, on dying, confided the hiding place of the scroll to his faithful ally, General Somoza. Ever since Pineda's death, San Francisco has fairly bristled with secret agents. The general could hardly turn around without them knowing it.

"I happened by chance to meet him; and that acquaintance culminated in my willingness to gamble a few thousand dollars on an expedition to recover the treasure. Things for a while went on smoothly. Avoiding contact entirely with General Somoza, so as not to incur suspicion from the small army of shadowers, I went about working out a plan of action. Then we ran into an unlooked-for complication.

"One of the three cabinet members that had deserted Pineda in his hour of want, Alfredo Corejo by name, paid Somoza a visit. He informed him that he was aware Pineda had brought the scroll to San Francisco, and suggested they form a partnership to fit out an expedition and return to San Ardo, promote a revolution, get control of the government, and recover the treasure.

"Somoza denied the scroll had been removed from San Ardo, much less that Pineda had bequeathed it to him at his death. Carejo professed to be satisfied with the denial and went away. He was, however, firmly convinced to the contrary.

"He undertook a spy system of his own, single-handed. While he learned nothing of signal importance, he did learn some things that led him to believe that plans for an expedition were in the making. He immediately promoted financial backing for one of his own, a sort of hijacking affair to loot our expedition if it is successful.

"As soon as we found out about it, I decided upon a ruse. General Somoza openly took passage on a boat, day before yesterday, for Panama. A fast tug, however, put out of Monterey Bay

and took him off that boat. He came back to San Francisco late last night and secretly boarded this vessel, the *Snapper*, which an agent of mine had purchased in San Pedro two weeks ago and sent up here under his own name. The planes were loaded aboard down there.

"The one big bobble made was the ad I put in the paper for aviators," Dean continued. "Fortunately, however, I rectified it. Soon after you men left me it dawned on me the very nature of the ad would surely link me with the San Ardo affair. Instead of informing applicants who began to phone in, that the places were filled, I invited every one to call.

"There were about forty altogether, and out of that bunch I positively know there were half a dozen spies. I had one story for all. I said I was interested in getting two flyers to make a tour of Borneo in the interest of a large oil company that was engaged in research work.

"Every man interviewed was told that if he were decided upon he would hear from me within a week. I think this cured suspicion.

"There's the whole story before you. There's plenty of work ahead of us, and a lot of plans to be made. There are millions at stake—how many, nobody knows—and I think between us all we ought to be able to grab that antique mass of yellow metal!"

"You said it!" Staley spoke up quickly. "If wings can't turn the trick, nothing can—I wish this old tub had 'em. I'm sure r'aring to go!"

CHAPTER IV.

NEW WINGS.

DURING the next ten days Staley and Blake were left pretty much to their own devices. Dean and General Somoza spent the greater part of the time in the latter's cabin.

About noon on the twelfth day out, however, Dean came to them and said: "According to the skipper we are due to make the island either late to-night or in the morning. The planes stowed away below deck are under your supervision now. I am leaving entirely to you fellows the matter of getting the planes ready to unload and put together for flight."

When the cover was hoisted off the forward hatch, the excited Staley beat Blake down into the hold by a few feet. He let out a cry of despair when he saw in the dim light what appeared to be two flying-boat hulls.

"For the love of Mike!" he cried. "Look at those things!"

At first glance at the huge hulls Blake's face lengthened, too. He said nothing, however, until he had walked forward. Then his exclamation of relief brought Staley over on the run.

"Amphibians. Retractable landing gear jobs!" Blake cried, pointing to a metal-shielded slot in the hull just aft of the power plant.

"Some crates!" cried Staley, beaming.

Blake's face, however, suddenly lost its relieved look. "You can't fly one of these with what Jenny time you've had. Besides, it begins to look like a water job."

"They're amphibians, aren't they?" Staley protested. "They've got wheels."

"That's just the point—they're amphibians because this happens to be a job calling for that type of ship. Unless I'm way off my base, it's going to be necessary to hop from the water on this end and wind out the wheels at the other. Don't worry, it isn't all land work or they wouldn't have sunk as much money as these ships cost."

"Maybe he got 'em cheap," Staley suggested hopefully.

"Now I'll tell one!" Blake replied scornfully. "Nobody's giving away the latest type amphibians equipped with four-hundred-and-fifty horse-power, in-

verted motors. I'll bet if the truth was known, Dean had to pay a bonus to get immediate delivery on them."

"Hey! Look!" Staley called out suddenly. He had ripped away the covering from the forward cockpit and was beckoning Blake to climb up beside him. "They're dual-control, side by each. You can give me a couple of hours' time and everything will be jake. How about it?"

"I guess I could, all right," Blake said, stepping down and walking over toward the tiers of crated wings.

All that afternoon and half the night the two aviators worked, preparing one of the two powerful planes to be hoisted on deck for assembly next morning. The wings had come in knocked-down condition. It was no small amount of work sorting out the four that belonged to one particular hull, then locating the cases of struts and various metal fittings and laying them out in order.

Some time before daylight the *Snapper* slipped into the sheltered cove on the seaward side of St. Argua Island. At the first sign of dawn Dean routed the airmen out of their berths.

"Think you can get the planes out and set up and tested so we can make a flight over the mountains by dark?" Dean asked a few minutes later, as they were eating breakfast in the galley.

Blake shook his head. "We may get the wings assembled and hung on, and be ready for a trial hop by dark; but it's out of the question to think of starting out on a long flight over the mountains without a reasonable test. We don't want to crack the ship.

"I suppose we'll have to launch the hulls in the water off the deck, won't we?" he went on. "You didn't say so, but judging from the fact that you bought amphibians, you didn't figure to use the island as one landing field."

"Hardly. The island is one continuous stretch of jagged rocks. There isn't a foot of sandy beach anywhere, even

along this sheltered cove. Now, for Heaven's sake, Blake, don't tell me when we get way down here that you can't fly a seaplane?"

"I can fly off the water, all right," Blake declared assuringly. "I only asked to make sure what the planes were. I hardly thought you'd bought amphibians for straight-land flying."

Throughout that day Blake and Staley worked away without a let-up, and just at dark had one of the big amphibians set up, rigged, and in the water.

"We'll fill the gas tanks to-night after supper and maybe taxi around in the cove to get the kinks out of the motor," Blake told Dean. "Unless there happens to be a mighty bright moon, I'm not going to chance hopping her.

"I want to know a little about this water field before I go prowling around in the dark. There duralumin hulls are built to stand rough work; but I don't care to get riding up in the water and ram into a submerged reef or rock, or bounce off one on coming down to land, either."

"Well, I'll tell you what we'll do, then," Dean announced suddenly. "The general and I have been talking it over quite a bit. He's opposed to taking both planes over the mountains. Though we cross the mountain fifty miles down the coast away from the settled area, we think it better to use only one plane for a while."

Blake could have shouted with joy at the words, but he held himself in check. That course, he knew, would give him the chance to instruct Staley in handling the big ship.

"That same idea had occurred to me," he told Dean, "but I didn't want to say anything for fear you'd get the idea we wanted to double up on one job. I will say, though, that Staley is going to be mighty disappointed."

Which was no lie, for Staley had been looking forward to handling one of the

ships all by himself. When he learned of the sudden decision to operate with one plane only for the time being, he eyed Blake with suspicion and accused him of being the sponsor of the idea.

"No, I didn't, Bob," Blake denied the accusation patiently. "It came as a big surprise to me. It's going to give you a chance to get in time enough to make it safe for you to solo one of the big brutes without cracking up. I'm not worrying about your air work so much; it's landing and taking off, and especially on the water end of the run.

"And another thing you've got to think about is that valley up there in the mountains, five or six thousand feet above sea level. Boy, you sure move in that light air. You think when you level off you're never going to stop gliding."

Instead of a moon that night the darkness was so intense not even the outline of the low island, three hundred yards inshore, was visible. Blake decided to put off until morning the task of filling the gas and oil tanks.

By sunup the contents of a fifty-gallon drum had been distributed evenly between the two wing tanks, oil reserve filled, and Blake was in the flying pit shooting a priming charge into the twelve cylinders with the dash injector.

Then, Staley beside him at the dual control, Dean and the general occupying two of the five chairs in the passenger compartment behind, Blake gave the starter a twirl. Finally the big motor took hold with a roar.

"It's too smooth in here," Blake shouted. "We'll have to get out where there's rougher water before she'll come up on the step."

He cruised around the glassy surface of the cove until the motor warmed up, then advancing the throttle and heading the nose for the open water, the real test began.

By the time they struck the ripples, Blake had the throttle almost open, and

the last few notches went on as the hull began to rise out of the water and ride on the step.

"Whee!" Staley cried joyfully, a minute later as they took to the air and began to climb. He leaned over and shouted in Blake's ear: "Let me have the stick!"

Blake shook his head.

When they had climbed to a thousand feet, he cut the throttle to cruising speed and pushed the nose down to level. Then he motioned Staley to take the stick and bank around and go back toward the island, let go his hold, and turned around in his chair to see how Dean and the general were getting along.

CHAPTER V.

TREASURE BENT.

AT cruising speed, close to a hundred miles an hour, the big biplane maneuvered with surprising ease. Staley, elated to know he had the controls all to himself, came around in a wide bank. It was a revelation to him now, for the first time, to direct this tremendous power.

The four-hundred-and-fifty-horse-power engine dragged the big ship through the rough air as never in his life had he seen it done before. Bumps and treacherous down drafts that swept in over the distant mountain ranges were ironed out as if they didn't exist at all.

By the time Staley got back over the anchored vessel he had climbed up to nearly three thousand feet. He decided to go into a vertical bank and revolve round and round in a tight circle.

In blissful ignorance, Staley kicked right rudder and whipped the stick over, just as he was accustomed with the loggy old Jenny.

Instead of the gradual, lazy response he anticipated, the right wing shot down like a flash. He found himself in the tightest vertical bank he had ever imagined, whirling so fast he actually be-

gan to feel dizzy. In that vertical position, stick became the rudder and rudder became the stick, as he well knew; but the suddenness of it for the moment left him at the mercy of an inrush of panic.

Instead of using the controls now for what they really were, he worked them as if he were in horizontal position.

The next thing he knew, the nose was shooting up at alarming rate.

The whole ship began to tremble. The wing struts started a veritable shimmy. If Blake hadn't taken the stick away from Staley when he did, an amphibian would have earned for itself the distinction of performing a brand-new aëro-batic.

Staley couldn't let go his grip on the stick or release the rudder bar fast enough when he felt Blake's tug at the former. After it was all over and they were on even keel once more, he flashed a look back at Dean and the general, sick at heart at thought of their probable opinion of his glaring blunder.

The sight that met his eyes would have made him laugh had he been any less scared than they. Both gripped the arms of the wicker seats till their knuckles shone white. They sat up straight and stiff as iron rods. Their widened eyes, that saw nothing.

Aware then that both had been too busy with their own frantic thoughts to have noticed Blake's coming to the rescue, Staley turned and gave Blake a grinning look.

Blake, to his surprise, grinned back at him, retarded the throttle to the idling notch as he nosed down into a steep glide and said: "Follow me through on the landing and watch everything carefully."

Blake leveled off and dropped the wide hull on the smooth surface of the cove, porpoised along some distance. As the speed lessened, the tail sagged, and the hull sank to its normal level.

Before they taxied back to the *Snap-per* Blake leaned over to Staley again

and said in a low voice: "You threw such a scare into them they don't know what it was all about. Just act surprised if they think it was anything out of the ordinary."

When they drifted up to the boat, the general cut loose with a flow of excited Spanish. Dean started to express his sentiments, but Blake's air of surprise abashed him.

"Why, Staley was simply giving the ship a thorough stability test before we start out for the mountains," he said. "There wasn't the slightest danger. You're not used to it, that's all."

"Well, if that sensation goes with testing ships, I'll stay out next time," Dean growled. "I expected any minute to go bouncing out into space."

The general, as he started to walk along the rubber runway to reach the ladder, sputtered a medley of Spanish and English, but about all Blake could make out was:

"You say no fly downside-up! Fly ca'ful! Bah! Not for ten hundred thousand pesos weel I fly some more!" By the time they cast off the anchors and got on deck, he was nowhere to be seen.

"He's pretty well burned up," Dean said. "We'd better not molest him till we are all ready to start. Let's get loaded up and be in the air just as quickly as possible. How much gas do you think we ought to carry? According to our calculation from the map, it's a hundred and ten miles to Encanto Valley by air line."

"Another twenty-five gallons will be ample," Blake said. "The tanks hold just a hundred, but there's no use of carrying that much excess weight."

"Every pound is going to count if that little valley lies right down between two high ridges, as the general describes it. We're not going to come up out of there, starting at an altitude of somewhere around six thousand feet, as easy as we pull the nose up and walk off the water down here."

While they poured in the surplus gas, Dean and a crew of helpers loaded in the food supplies, four rifles, axes and saws and a rolled-up tent. A moment or so after Dean had arranged himself comfortably in the back cockpit, the general came to the rail and peered down fiercely. Blake, just clamping the lid to the gas tank down, looked up at him inquiringly.

The general smiled and shook his finger threateningly. "I have decide to go," he called down.

"All right, general," Blake returned. "This trip, we'll fly straight as an arrow; you won't have a thing to worry about. We're all ready to go."

Following the general's instructions, interpreted through Dean, when Blake set a course down the winding coast, but keeping well out to sea. About fifty miles down, he got the signal to come in closer to land. They struck the shore some twenty miles farther on.

Turning then and heading away from the shore toward the mountains Blake had no difficulty in recognizing, from Dean's description, the high range he was to follow along.

The moment rugged peaks and ribbons of canyons began to loom up underneath, he kept the stick back a trifle farther. When he glanced at the instrument dash, twenty minutes afterward, the altimeter read twelve thousand feet.

In another five minutes they skimmed by a scant thousand feet the summit of the high peak that had been their objective from the start. Below, nestling in between two parallel spurs of lesser mountains and blocked at either end by still lower stretches of upheavals coming in at cross angles, was Encanto Valley. Blake felt a tap on his shoulder and, turning, saw Dean pointing down.

Turning the stick over to Staley, and signaling him to fly around in a wide circle, Blake got out a pair of field glasses. He saw a flat, wedge-shaped plateau, some two miles long, and vary-

ing in width from nothing at the apex to probably a mile at the base.

Though the surface was perfectly flat and free of trees or even patches of brush, a network of small creeks and gulleys cut it up into a maze of various sized and shaped pieces of ground. Of them all, there was just one that appeared large enough to serve as a landing place.

It began at the apex of the valley and extended back about half a mile, attaining at the point where a lateral gully cut across it a width of probably three hundred yards. It was a one-way field pure and simple. An overshot coming in to land meant certain disaster. There wasn't half enough room to bank around and dart away to prepare for another try.

There was just one way—fly in low and fast and drop the wheels just over the ditch and trust the thick carpet of grass to compensate for lack of air resistance at that elevation of five or six thousand feet.

Around and around in a gradually tightening spiral, Blake brought the big amphibian down into the wide end of the valley and to within a thousand feet of the ground. Roughly, he judged, the distance to where he wanted to set down was a mile and a half.

To stretch his glide that far was out of the question. So, diving fairly steep with half motor, by the time he had got down to within fifty feet of the ground nearly a mile of the distance was eaten up. Then he cut the gun entirely and sped on, foot by foot, with slight forward motions of the stick, decreasing the gap between wheels and earth.

It seemed to him that speed from the dive he had started would never diminish, that in this light air the ship would streak on forever. He had just about made up his mind to kick on full rudder and "fishtail" some of the speed down when he sensed the feel that a plane gives back when it can glide little far-

ther without the nose going down for more speed, or the motor prodded into life.

With a little tilt of the stick, Blake dived the remaining ten feet, slid over the lateral gully and felt the wheels strike bottom—eighty miles an hour on smooth ground, thin air to help maintain the speed, and the narrow runway getting narrower every instant.

Half of it was covered, and still they rolled, without speed seeming to have slackened a bit. The steeply rising walls on either side appeared separated from the wing tips by mere yards.

"Oh, boy!" Staley's shout of relief roused Blake from his dire thoughts more so than the sudden letdown of speed, as they tore into a high, rank growth of grease-grass.

"It's sure a good thing there happens to be four of us here," Blake said, when they all climbed out and stood looking at the ship, "or she'd never get turned around and headed for a take-off."

Plowing through the barrier of high grass, the big amphibian had hurled on for another hundred feet. It had come to a stop so far into the narrow wedge of a valley that scarcely six feet of clearance was left.

General Somoza cocked his head on one side and studied the situation for a moment. Before he had a chance to express himself, however, Blake, half-way suspecting what he was going to complain about, said:

"This was the one place in the valley it was possible to land in, general. And I don't care to try it again.

"If it's going to be necessary to come in here again, we're going to connect this chunk of ground with the one across the ditch, by laying a bridge of small tree trunks about a hundred yards wide. Perhaps we'll have to do it, anyway, before we can get run enough to get out."

The general said something to Dean in Spanish.

"General Somoza can't get it through his head why you didn't land up at the other end of the valley," Dean explained. "Now we'll have to pack all this stuff back there and pitch camp. According to his interpretation of the old map, the hidden cavern lies a short distance up that big ravine that comes down into the other end."

Still puzzled, the general loaded himself with supplies and led the way to the place from which search for the secret temple of the golden Aztec idol was to begin.

CHAPTER VI.

UNFRIENDLY WINGS.

IT was just noon when, on coming to a little grove of trees at the head of the valley, the general called a halt and began to shed his burdens. "Thees fine place for eat," he said in English, then went on talking to Dean in Spanish.

"The general plans to start out just as soon as he has had something to eat," Dean explained shortly. "I am going with him. For the present you two remain here and get camp arranged. It is not likely we will be back much before dark, so do not become concerned and start out to look for us."

"Whatever you say," Blake replied. "It is a good idea to get things around here fixed up before dark. Staley and I want to run back to the ship and cover the motor and radiator for protection at night."

The general and Dean, when they had eaten lunch, struck off up the steep, rocky canyon, each carrying an ax and a rifle.

"Now, what's eating those guys?" Staley said. "The axes were logical enough, but why take guns along?"

"I was thinking the same thing," Blake confessed. "Still, maybe if we were wandering around in a country where the penalty of our presence was a firing squad, we might be a little cautious, too."

"Aw, he's a pain in the neck, anyway. Can you imagine a dumb egg like him falling heir to a couple of millions in gold?"

"Dumb or not, old kid, if he hadn't, where'd we be right now? Probably plugging away in Frisco at thirty-five a week and worrying our heads off trying to lay half of it away as a stake."

"All right. Let's set this tent up and get ready to pull out of here. As long as the old hot tamale won't have us along when he's working the combination on the treasure cave, I'd just as soon fool around the plane."

A few minutes later, after putting things in shape, Blake picked up one of the two remaining rifles and started out.

"What are you carting that along for?" Staley protested. "Leave the blamed thing here."

"No, I'll take it along. We may not need it, but it's not heavy to carry. Grab a couple of those hand axes and we'll get going. As long as we have all afternoon to kill, we might as well cut down a few pine saplings and get a few feet of runway started across that ditch." Staley picked up the axes and fell in behind Blake.

Following close to the mountain on the left, they had gone about halfway down the valley when suddenly Staley stopped still.

"Listen!" he commanded. "Did you hear it, too?"

As one, their eyes swept the vault of clear sky above.

"There it is, by gosh! Looks like a blamed old Jenny!"

It was Staley who first saw the circling plane whose motor drone his keen ears had caught.

"Looks more like a Curtiss H," Blake replied, after watching for a moment. "Sure it's an H," he said presently, when the ship sailed directly overhead at four thousand feet. "Who do you suppose it can be? Somebody followed

us in here from the coast and waited till we landed and went away before taking a chance on coming in?"

"Search me," Staley returned absently, absorbed in watching the strange plane maneuvering for a landing in the valley. "Say, look at that! That's a slip that is a slip! That bozo sure knows his onions!"

The pilot, at a point overhead just about in the center of the valley, nose headed toward the narrow end, had suddenly gone into a side-slip that brought him straight down for about two thousand feet even as they stood watching.

"Yes, he knows his stuff—like thunder he does!" Blake spat out in disgust. "If he had a lick of brains, he wouldn't slip a Hisso motor down like that and take a chance on warping a whole bank of valves from the rush of cold air. Why didn't he spiral down and keep his motor hot in case he had to give it the gun again when he got ready to set down? Oh! the crazy coot! What's he trying to do, slip clear down?"

Obviously that very thing was the thought the newcomer had in mind. He planned to slip straight down on top of the ditch that marked the base of the field where the amphibian lay, until a hundred feet or so off the ground, then pull out and nose down to a slow landing.

He either misjudged distance or, in the hectic descent, the cut-up pattern of the valley had confused him. He came out of the slip, at two hundred feet, a good quarter of a mile too far away to make the field with a dead stick. He gave the cold motor the gun, but all the response he got was a sputtering and spitting.

Underneath was a space about two hundred yards long between two gullies. Holding the nose well up, he pancaked down. He hit just a trifle wheel-high. The ship bounced straight up ten or fifteen feet like a mammoth grasshopper. With no motor to buff the come-back,

it settled hard, left wing first. As far off as they were, Staley and Blake heard the sound of splintering struts and wing beams snapping in two.

"There's a wash-out, and I don't mean maybe! I guess that guy doesn't know so much after all," Staley cried. "Shall we breeze over and shed a tear or two with 'em?"

"Wait here a minute or so," Blake returned. "Nobody's hurt, so we can't help out any by rushing over there. Let's see who gets out, and what they're up to."

After a few seconds a figure in coveralls appeared, to be joined immediately by two more men. Sight of these two drew a sharp ejaculation from Blake, for both were in uniform and both came up with rifles in their hands. The pilot stepped out of his coveralls, exposing to view a third uniform.

Apparently not concerned in the least about the damaged ship, they remained on the scene until the pilot got his rifle out of the cockpit. Then they set off in the direction of the amphibian at a fast pace.

"That," said Blake, pointing to the hurrying men, "I have a mighty strong hunch, is the air force of the Republic of San Ardo. They were sent out in their now-defunct Curtiss H to try and throw a monkey wrench into General Fernando Somoza's gold-producing machinery."

"Yes," agreed Staley. "And if we stick around here under a lilac tree chewing our thumbs, before we know it they'll be on top of our ship, knocking the devil out of the motor with said monkey wrench. That's where they're headed."

"We'd better get there ahead of them and be ready if they try to pull off anything rough. We can slip along the foot of the cliffs here and make better time than they can out there in the high grass. Kind of sorry now you didn't bring the gun, aren't you?"

"This'll do in a pinch," Staley returned, swinging the hand ax around his head recklessly. "Let one of those babies put his mits on the amphib' and I'll plug him like he was a wooden Indian."

Quickly they drew abreast of the three armed men, off on their right about a quarter of a mile. The two Americans forged on ahead and were sitting out of sight in the rear cockpit when the sound of voices came nearer.

Staley, in spite of Blake's tugging at his sleeve to keep him down, persisted in peeping over the cowling and getting a view of the men at close range.

"Three Spaniolas!" he whispered, ducking out of sight. "And they're all jabbering away in their own lingo. What do you suppose they're up to, anyway? Guess I'll have another look."

He thrust his head up cautiously till his eyes were on a level with the cowl. Then, like a flash, he tore loose from Blake's hold.

A loud whoop came from his mouth as he got to his feet. His arm drew back, poised to hurl one of the short-handled axes at the man who was deliberately sighting along his gun barrel at one of the magnetos on the big motor.

The next installment of this novel of the air will appear in the following issue of TOP-NOTCH MAGAZINE, dated and on the news stands June 1st.

Not Allowed

THE night clerk at a small hotel was astonished to see the figure of a man in pajamas descending the stairs in the early hours of the morning.

Tapping him on the shoulder, the clerk said abruptly: "What are you doing here?"

The man turned and said, in a dazed way: "I beg your pardon. I am a somnambulist."

"Well, sir," was the reply, "you can't walk about here like that, no matter what you do in your own country."

A TALK WITH YOU

News and Views by the
Editor and Readers

MAY 15, 1928.

Who is your favorite author? Look now, and see if he's going to appear in our next issue. You'll find an announcement at the end of this department.

YOU'RE worth about ninety-eight cents. Perhaps, if you weigh over a hundred and fifty pounds, you're worth a dollar, or even a dollar ten.

Now don't dig down in your pockets and count your loose change. Even if you've got a yellowback in your purse, that doesn't increase your value. For "on the hoof," at drug-store prices, ninety-eight cents is what you're worth.

That is, estimating you from the chemical viewpoint. The chemical constituents of the average human body can be purchased cheaply. A hundred-and-fifty-pound man contains enough lime to whitewash a fair-sized chicken coop. He'll analyze sufficient sugar to fill a small shaker. Of iron, there's enough to make a ten-penny nail. Of course, water is another constituent, but that's not expensive.

IF you were to purchase these things at a drug store, you could get them for ninety-eight cents. But what you couldn't buy there—or anywhere else—is the spirit, the soul, the divine something that makes man a master of his environment, a fighter and a dreamer.

Every man is a miracle. If you were just ninety-eight cents worth of chemicals, you couldn't be a fighter and a dreamer. But every man has within him something that drives him on, whether it's to the perfect accomplishment of

some humble task, or to the intense determination to achieve an apparent impossibility.

How much, then, are you worth? Chemically speaking—ninety-eight cents. But what price courage? And honesty? And ambition? Or how would you value that unknown something—spirit, soul, or whatever you want to call it?

IN this issue, there's a long novel about "Moccasin Charley," the Indian detective. The author of this story, who has written many times for this magazine, was told: "You're a pretty interesting fellow yourself. Where have you been and what have you done—and why?"

Here's Roland Ashford Phillips' answer:

To begin with I was born in the wide-open spaces, but the only weapon I ever carried was a typewriter. It wasn't so deadly then, for I aimed at advertising and failed to hit the bull's-eye. Later, I parked my machine for a box of grease paint and toured the tanks with a rollicking "rep" company. When the ghost failed to walk, we did. I don't remember the bills, but I do know we would wildcat the popular New York successes.

No one mistook me for John Barrymore, so I floated a loan and decided to visit the Big Stem, crashing into New York about the time of the panic. I landed a job with one of the first movie outfits, when all exteriors were shot indoors and backdrops were popular. But I supported Mary Pickford, and knew right away that one of us would be famous in the flicker world.

As I had the evenings to myself, I began writing stories, and by some miracle sold them. So from that day on I ceased to work, leaving the stage and screen to shift for themselves. I stepped from a hall bedroom into the hall of fame.

I wrote Western tales on West Forty-fifth Street, and Broadway yarns in mining camps. I wrote sea stories in the desert, and desert stories at sea. I've never worked on a newspaper and never—cross my heart—wrote a play.

I wrote scenarios in Manhattan, but I was

a flop in Hollywood. I went across the continent once in a flivver. I tried to become a millionaire overnight during the Florida boom. Anything, you see, to keep from working.

At present I hold friendly bouts with a type-writer while sequestering in a lodge—rustic, romantic and mortgaged—on a dazzling white beach with the Gulf of Mexico beyond. Palms rustle along with the rum runners, mocking birds sing at midnight, tropic flowers, breezes and sunlight gladden my eyes.

I see "Moccasin Charley" at intervals. I'm

a hanger-on around the baseball camps throughout March. I don't play golf any more because I've learned the game; besides, it's hard work. A pound of tobacco will usually see me through a novel, but it takes a box of matches to a chapter.

My favorite wife is a brunette, but she refuses to read my stories. From Thanksgiving to May I'm a beach comber, but from May to Thanksgiving I'm a Man-About-Town amid the Roaring Forties.

ROLAND ASHFORD PHILLIPS.

ANNOUNCING IN THE JUNE 1st ISSUE OF TOP-NOTCH

A new baseball-mystery serial

SAFE AT SECOND

By Burt L. Standish

Depicting life in Florida training camps made doubly interesting by a novel mystery running throughout.

THE BORDER HOPPERS, a complete novel by H. H. STINSON, deals with a new problem for the United States government agents, caused by an original and reverse order of smuggling across the Line.

Shorter stories by Vic Whitman, Seaburn Brown, Nell Martin and others.
Another installment of LOST MILLIONS, an air serial, by George E. Powers.

Statement of the Ownership, Management, etc., required by the Act of Congress of August 24, 1912, of TOP-NOTCH MAGAZINE, published semimonthly, at New York, N. Y., for April 1, 1928.

State of New York, County of New York (ss.)

Before me, a Notary Public, in and for the State and county aforesaid, personally appeared Ormond G. Smith, who, having been duly sworn according to law, deposes and says that he is President of the Street & Smith Corporation, publishers of TOP-NOTCH MAGAZINE, and that the following is, to the best of his knowledge and belief, a true statement of the ownership, management, etc., of the aforesaid publication for the date shown in the above caption, required by the Act of August 24, 1912, embodied in section 411, Postal Laws and Regulations, to wit:

1. That the names and addresses of the publisher, editor, managing editor, and business managers are: *Publishers*, Street & Smith Corporation, 79-89 Seventh Avenue, New York, N. Y.; *editor*, George Briggs Jenkins, 79 Seventh Avenue, New York, N. Y.; *managing editors*, Street & Smith Corporation, 79-89 Seventh Avenue, New York, N. Y.; *business managers*, Street & Smith Corporation, 79-89 Seventh Avenue, New York, N. Y.

2. That the owners are: Street & Smith Corporation, 79-89 Seventh Avenue, New York, N. Y.; a corporation composed of Ormond G. Smith, 89 Seventh Avenue, New York, N. Y.;

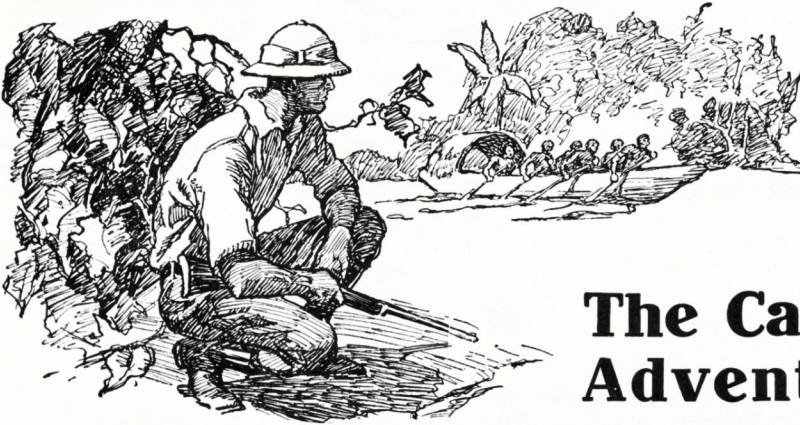
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3. That the known bondholders, mortgagees, and other security holders owning or holding 1 per cent or more of total amount of bonds, mortgages or other securities are: None.

4. That the two paragraphs next above, giving the names of the owners, stockholders, and security holders, if any, contain not only the list of stockholders and security holders as they appear upon the books of the company, but also, in cases where the stockholder or security holder appears upon the books of the company as trustee or in any other fiduciary relation, the name of the person or corporation for whom such trustee is acting, is given; also that the said two paragraphs contain statements embracing affiant's full knowledge and belief as to the circumstances and conditions under which stockholders and security holders who do not appear upon the books of the company as trustees, hold stock and securities in a capacity other than that of a bona fide owner; and this affiant has no reason to believe that any other person, association, or corporation has any interest direct or indirect in the said stock, bonds, or other securities than as so stated by him.

ORMOND G. SMITH, President,
Of Street & Smith Corporation, publishers.

Sworn to and subscribed before me this 23rd day of March, 1928. De Witt C. Van Valkenburgh, Notary Public No. 184, New York County. (My commission expires March 30, 1928.)



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Strange Timber

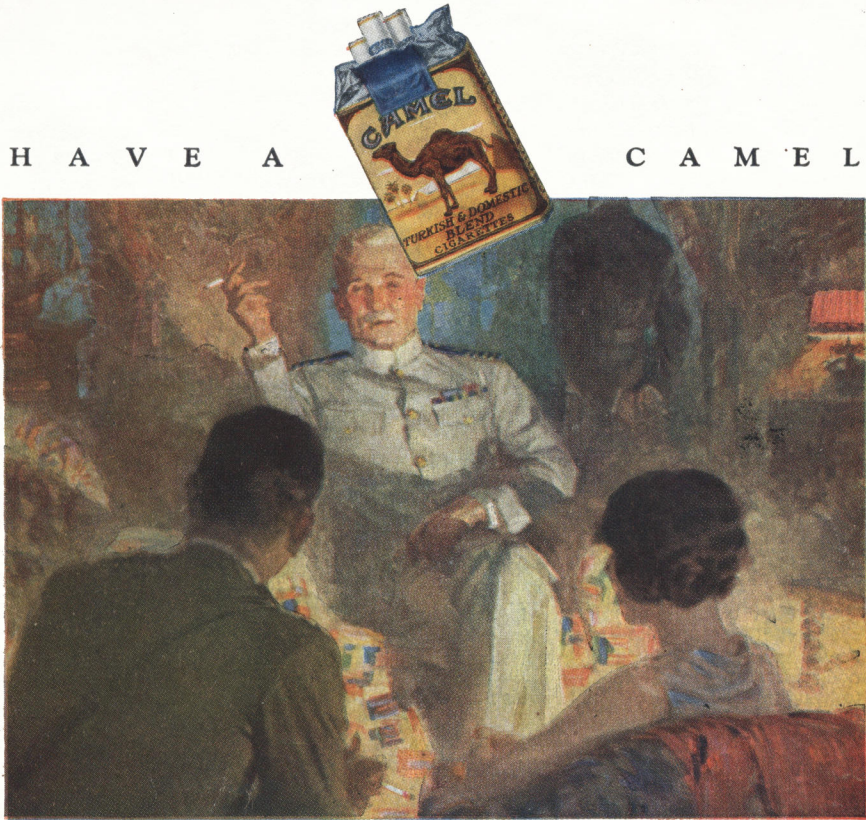
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